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"WHO BUILT UP THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL": REPRODUCTIVE POWER PLAYS IN THE BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Ordination and in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Master of Arts in Religious Education Degree

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Thesis Summary
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"Who Built Up the House of Israel":
Reproductive Power Plays in the Biblical Narrative."

My thesis provides an in-depth analysis of three biblical stories in which women used their limited resources to assert themselves in difficult situations and achieve their goals in spite of tremendous obstacles. My research shows that one of the primary goals of both women and men in the biblical narrative was the "building up one's house" (*livnot bayit*) by having children, especially sons. By accomplishing this goal, one ensured the status, productivity, and continuity of one's household. Because bearing children was essential to the members of this society, women gained power in various situations due to their exclusive control over, and access to, the reproductive sphere.

I made use of several new resources for interpreting the Bible through both literary-critical and sociohistorical lenses. These included Robert Alter's *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004); the Jewish Publication Society's *Torah Commentary* series (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989-1996, 5 vols); Adele Berlin and Marc Brettler's *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Tamara Eskenazi and Andrea Weiss's *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (New York: URJ Press, 2007). Along with these and other modern and feminist biblical commentaries, the research of Dr. Carol Meyers (Duke University) also contributed heavily to my understanding of these texts.

I conclude my thesis with a section on implications for teaching these texts in an Adult Education setting, as well as a three-part Adult Education module. For these sections of the thesis, I made use of Barry Holtz's book, *Textual Knowledge: Teaching the Bible in Theory and in Practice* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary, 2003) and *Women's Ways of Knowing*, by Mary Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1997).

This thesis contains five chapters. Each of the three central chapters contains an annotated translation of one of these texts (Genesis 30:1-24, Genesis 38, and Exodus 1:15-22), an analysis of the essential questions of these texts, and the implications for teaching these texts in an Adult Education setting. The chapters are divided as follows:

1. Introduction (2-11).
2. Big Love—The Birth of the Twelve Tribes of Israel (12-44).
3. I Won't Take This Lying Down—The Story of Tamar (45-86).
4. Desperate Midwives—How Two Women Saved a People (87-117).
5. Conclusion, pp. 118-129.
6. Appendix A: A Three Part Adult Education Module (130-147).
7. Appendix B: A Ritual for the Midwives (148).
8. Bibliography and Afterword (149-154).

Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis grew out of my passionate interest in the story of the midwives in Exodus 1. I found it fascinating and empowering that two women would be the source of salvation for the entire male infant population, not to mention that the biblical narrative would actually give them credit for their heroism. If women could take risks and effect change in the ancient Near East, where women often appear to be relegated to the margins, how much the more so could the members of our communities today—both female and male—stand up for the weak and the vulnerable and work to bring about change in their own communities.

I noticed that—in spite of the heroism of the midwives—this text is often overlooked in Jewish text study and the observance of the Passover *seder*. Even feminist *seders* glossed over the heroic acts of the midwives in order to focus on Miriam, Yocheved, and women in our own time. As part of Dr. Wendy Zierler's class, "Exodus and the Passover Haggadah: Feminist and Literary Revisions" (Spring of 2007), I examined the biblical text and various *haggadot* in order to create a ritual for recognizing the midwives at the *seder* table. This ritual, which I created as a final project for Dr. Zierler's class, appears in an Appendix to this thesis.[1]

I then began to look for other stories in which women went to extreme measures to achieve a reproductive goal. Under the direction of Dr. Ameira Meir in her class, "Sibling Stories in the Bible" (Spring 2007), I studied the story of Tamar in Genesis 38. While the behavior of the heroine in this story is not quite as unilaterally exemplary as

[1] See Appendix B, p. 148.

that of the midwives, this story too presented a woman who took an enormous risk to protect her own future and the future of her people.

Although I chose the story of Leah and Rachel last, the Genesis 30 narrative provides an introduction to the situation of women in the ancient Near East. Genesis 30 lays out a more general example of the lengths to which women went to create families and preserve their own socioeconomic status. Through this story, I was able to explore why it was so important for women—and men—to bear sons and continue their family lineage. Even when disguising oneself as a prostitute or defying the king of Egypt were not called for, it was often necessary for women to go beyond the basic reproductive act in order to accomplish their goal of building up their family's house, and thus, the house of Israel.

During my studies at HUC-JIR, I was fortunate enough to work at the URJ Press, where I was an intern on a project entitled, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, edited by Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss (New York: URJ Press, 2007). Working on this commentary opened up my eyes to how the process of studying Torah has evolved over the last few decades to include the perspectives and voices of female scholars. By reading the text with new eyes, and analyzing it through the lenses of literary analysis and the social sciences, these scholars have helped the modern reader to understand the experiences of women in the Bible and the ancient Near East.

Another work that inspired my research was *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken, 2004) by Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *z"l.* Her comprehensive readings of Genesis 38 and Exodus 1-2 focus on how the stories about women in the biblical narrative reflect the patriarchal society in which they arose, but also how the

women in this era responded to the demands and limitations that society placed upon them. One of her main theses is that women were able to triumph in oppressive situations precisely because they were never in a position of outright power, and thus had learned to work behind the scenes, and under the radar, when necessary.

My thesis research made use of sources that examine both the literary artistry and the sociohistorical context of each biblical text. In addition to many traditional sources used for biblical interpretation—including the *Anchor Bible* series,[2] the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992, 5 vols), the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*,[3] and various biblical dictionaries and concordances—I made use of several contemporary line-by-line commentaries when preparing annotated translations of these texts. These included Robert Alter's *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004); the Jewish Publication Society's *Torah Commentary* series (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989-1996, 5 vols); Adele Berlin and Marc Brettler's *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); and material from *The Torah: A Women's Commentary.*

The oldest of these works, the Genesis and Exodus volumes of the JPS *Torah Commentary* series, both of which were written by Nahum Sarna, provide the traditional rabbinic interpretations of various terms and verses as well as more modern interpretations based on contemporary academic study of archaeology, history, language, and religion as it is found in the Bible and the ancient Near East. The other three works

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[2] William H. C. Propp. *The Anchor Bible: Exodus 1-18* (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1998) 137-142; and E. A. Speiser. *The Anchor Bible: Genesis* (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1964).

[3] G. Johannes Botterweck, Heinz-Josef Fabry, and Helmer Ringgren, eds. *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, translated by John T. Willis and David E. Green. 15 vols (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974-2006).

have only become available in the last decade. *The Jewish Study Bible* examines the biblical text through the lens of modern academic scholarship, while also recognizing the millennia of interpretive traditions that preceded it, such as intertextual references, early translations, and the words of ancient and medieval commentators.

Although it too makes reference to both the rabbinic tradition and the historical context as means of interpreting the Bible, Robert Alter's *The Five Books of Moses* focuses more heavily on the literary artistry of the text, examining key words, motifs, and speech patterns. Finally, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* provides both a literary reading of the text and an explanation of its historical context. However, in this commentary, these interpretive tools are used specifically to inform the reader about the lives and roles of women in the Bible and the ancient Near East.

Several other resources were used in this thesis to help shed light on the experience of women in the Bible and the ancient Near East. These include *Women's Bible Commentary*, by Carol Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998); M. Stol's *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible: Its Mediterranean Setting* (Groningen: Styx Publications, 2000); *Life in Biblical Israel* by Phillip King and Lawrence Stager (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001); *Life and Culture in the Ancient Near East* by Richard Averback, et al. (Bethesda: CDL Press, 2003); and *Harper's Encyclopedia of Bible Life* by Madeleine Miller and J. Lane (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1978). The writings of Karel Van Der Toorn illuminate the meaning of various roles and symbols that appear in Genesis 38.[4]

[4] Karel Van der Toorn. "Female Prostitution in Payment of Vows in Ancient Israel." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108, 2 (1989): 193-205; and "The Significance of the Veil

In addition, feminist literary analyses of various biblical narratives appear in Athalya Brenner's *The Feminist Companion* series (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993-1994); Mieke Bal's *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987); Nechama Aschkenasy's *Woman at the Window: Biblical Tales of Oppression and Escape* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998); Alice Ogden Bellis' *Helpmates, Harlots, Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994); *Gender, Power and Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First Story* by Danna Nolan Fewell and David Gunn (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), and Alice Bach's *Women in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

Some of the most valuable of these resources, however, are the writings of Dr. Carol Meyers. A professor of Religion at Duke University, Dr. Meyers reads the Bible through the lens of biblical archaeology, ethnography, and anthropology. For this thesis, her writings that were most useful to me were *Exodus: The New Cambridge Bible Commentary* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005) and *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000). While the former provides a chapter-by-chapter analysis of the book of Exodus, with various insets about contemporary scholarship on various related topics; the latter provides a collection of articles about female characters in the Bible as seen through the lens of contemporary feminist biblical scholarship. Meyers' various books and

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in the Ancient Near East." *Pomegranates and Golden Bells*, edited by David Noel Freedman, Avi Hurvitz, and David P. Wright (Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1995) 327-339.

articles also give the reader insight into the life of the "average" Israelite woman, her role in the household, and her relationships with other women.

Meyers stresses the importance of understanding the roles of women in ancient Israel and the ancient Near East in order to counter the modern reader's assumption that women are portrayed in the Bible as weak, subservient, or dispensable. Drawing on her students' initial preconceptions about women in biblical literature, Meyers enumerates three "overlapping problems" in how her students perceive the women of the Bible: invisibility, meaning that women were invisible either in terms of the narrative or in terms of actual society or both; that the status of women dictated that they would be "subservient and submissive, if not oppressed," and finally, a general "ignorance of what women did and how their roles were valued in their Iron Age context."[5]

Providing readers of the Bible with historical background about the lives and roles of women in the era in which the Bible emerged paves the way for a new understanding about the value of women in ancient Israelite society. Meyers' challenge to educators is summed up in the following question: "How can we provide information about biblical and Israelite women that will create a more accurate and less demeaning picture of women's lives in the period of the Hebrew Bible?"[6]

Meyers uses the example of bread production as a means of using archaeological and ethnographic information in order to better understand the value of women in ancient

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[5] Meyers, Carol. "Where the Girls Are: Archaeology and Women's Lives in Ancient Israel." Moreland, Milton, ed., *Between Text and Artifact: Integrating Archaeology in Biblical Studies Teaching* (Boston: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004) 32.
[6] Meyers, "Where the Girls Are" 32.

Israel.[7] Bread production was almost exclusively a female activity, one that may have taken up to three hours each day. It was also a task that was done in groups, because of the sheer amount of labor involved in grinding grain and kneading dough, and also because cooking facilities might have been shared across households.

Therefore, using a few simple facts about bread production, one can determine that a) women engaged in arduous and time-consuming tasks that were essential to the survival of each household and b) women within a community spent extended periods of time together in what Meyers calls "informal social networks." Through these networks, women may have been able to share information about the various households, transmit cultural knowledge to the younger generation, and form alliances between households for various purposes. Both of these facts counter the assumption that women were not valued in ancient Israelite households.[8]

Furthermore, even if one were to make the assumption that a woman's role in the ancient Near East was "only" to bear children, this too, cannot be underestimated as a source of female power. Children were necessary in order to perform household chores, maintain the security of the household and its landholdings, and to convey to the outside world that both parents were virile and thus the recipients of divine favor. While the patriarchal system could encourage and even coerce women to fulfill the role of wife and mother, a woman's exclusive access to the world of reproduction and childbirth gave her a certain amount of power in the ancient world.

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[7] See, for example, Meyers' note on Exodus 16:3 in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*. 394.

[8] Meyers, "Where the Girls Are" 40-42.

My thesis utilizes contemporary academic scholarship and literary analysis in addition to translation and traditional interpretive methods to examine the stories of three biblical women who, through their roles in the reproductive sphere, exercised control over a situation in which they might otherwise have been powerless. The essential questions of my thesis are as follows:

1. What roles do women play in each of these biblical stories? What are their goals and limitations?
2. How does knowledge about Israelite and ancient Near Eastern culture inform our understanding of these women in the Bible?
3. Conversely, how does our reading of these stories provide a window onto the lives of women in ancient Israel and the ancient Near East?
4. How do the women in these biblical narratives use their given roles to accomplish their goals and assert themselves in a situation in which they might otherwise have been powerless?
5. Finally, how do we teach about biblical women in a way that is relevant and meaningful to women—and men—today?

This thesis covers three biblical stories. First, we examine Genesis 30, where the wives of Jacob engage in a competition to bear sons for their shared husband. By reading this story in its historical and literary context, we learn that women were able to make decisions that affected their own reproductive lives. They could own other women as property, present these women to their husbands as sexual and reproductive surrogates, and even determine the sexual schedule of their shared husband. They also may have had some knowledge of medicinal herbs and other fertility treatments, although the biblical text emphasizes that these remedies are no substitute for the favor of God. We also confront the assumption we discussed earlier: that women were valued primarily for their ability to give birth to sons. While it is clear that both Leah and Rachel believe this assumption to be true, all of the sons that Leah produces cannot make Jacob love her more than he loves her barren sister.

Second, we address the story of Tamar, Judah's daughter-in-law, which appears in Genesis 38. Denied her rights as a levirate widow, Tamar dresses as a prostitute and seduces her father-in-law in order to obtain the one thing that will ensure that her late husband's family will provide for her in the future: a son. Because of the various counts of sexual impropriety that it mentions, this story is rarely presented on the *bimah* or in the classroom. However, within this story the reader encounters a woman who, marginalized by patriarchal society, formulates and executes a plan that ensures that her husband's family will no longer ignore her. By learning more about the institution of levirate marriage, as well as the sexual mores of the society in which Tamar was living, the reader can better understand the position, and the desperation, of the story's heroine.

Finally, we discuss the midwives that appear in the first chapter of Exodus. Although it is unclear whether the heroines of this story bear children themselves, as midwives they find themselves responsible for the lives of an entire population. Commanded by Pharaoh to murder Hebrew male infants during the birth process, the midwives instead let all Hebrew infants survive. The midwives use their exclusive access to the process of childbirth to deceive Pharaoh by claiming that Hebrew women give birth differently than Egyptian women. Pharaoh—who, as a man, is not privy to any detailed information about the process of childbirth—believes them.

Although these stories differ greatly from each other, each narrative ends with a similar outcome: the proliferation of male offspring. In each of these narratives, this goal of producing sons is achieved at great personal risk to the women themselves, whether it is the life-threatening process of childbirth itself in Genesis 30, committing a crime punishable by death in Genesis 38, or defying the king of Egypt in Exodus 1. In Genesis

30, these offspring become the twelve tribes of Israel; in Genesis 38, one of Tamar's twins becomes the progenitor of King David, who is believed to be the progenitor of the Messiah; in Exodus 1, the sons saved by the midwives become the generation of Israelites that will leave Egypt, one of which must have been the infant Moses.

One assumption we often confront when studying the women in the Bible is that women are mentioned only in reference to or in service of a male character. They are "wives of" and "mothers of," rather than people in their own right. Although Leah, Rachel and Tamar are also known as wives and mothers of important male figures in Genesis—and the midwives act in order to save all the men of Exodus—these biblical narratives showcase women who make their own decisions, using whatever resources they have at their disposal to accomplish their goals, in order to secure a future for themselves, their families, and their people.

Chapter 2: Big Love—The Birth of the Twelve Tribes of Israel

I. Annotated Translation of Genesis 30:1-24:

1. When Rachel[9] saw that she had not borne children[10] to Jacob, Rachel became jealous[11] of her sister. She said to Jacob:[12] "Give me sons; for if I don't have any I will be a dead woman."[13]

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[9] *Rachel*: Both Rachel and her sister are named after animals. The name Leah may come from the Akkadian word *littu*, meaning "cow." Her name may also be related to the word *le'utu*, meaning "strength" or "power" or *alittu*, meaning "birthgiver." The cow was a major symbol of fertility in Mesopotamia. Rachel comes from the Hebrew word *rahel*, meaning "ewe." That Laban named his two daughters after livestock says something about what he expected of them. From the text, the reader can see that Laban saw it fit to "sell" them to a man as wives in exchange for 14 years of service. In Jacob's household, they see themselves as being valued primarily for their ability to produce offspring, although Jacob's affection for Rachel is an exception to this rule (Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "Leah," and "Rachel," in *Women in Scripture* 108-9, 138).

[10] *yaldah*: The root *yud-lamed-dalet* is used frequently in geneaologies. A similar word is found in Ugaritic, where it means "to bear." When used in the *hifil* form in reference to a male parent, it is taken to mean "begot," whereas when the subject is female, an appropriate translation is "to bear children." It is also the root of the word *toledot*, meaning "lineage," which is often used to introduce the history of a person's family. Unlike ancient Near Eastern myths in which a king or hero comes from a divine origin, here birth is described as a human endeavor. However, frequent mention of God in barrenness and birth narratives remind the reader that fertility is a divine gift (J. Schreiner and G. Johannes Botterweck, "*Yalad*," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. 6. 77-9). For the use of this root in reference to the mother's role in birth narratives, see Genesis 4:1, 25; 16:15; 21:2; 25:2; 29: 32-35; Exodus 2:2; Judges 13:24; I Samuel 1:20.

[11] *vat'kaneh*: The root *kuf-nun-aleph* means "to become intensely red" and refers to an intense emotional reaction, usually jealousy (Francis Brown, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* [Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc, 2004] 888). Jealousy between siblings and wives is a recurring theme in the Tanakh, especially in the patriarchal narratives of Genesis. For instance, Joseph's brothers become upset (*vayikan'u*) when Joseph relays his dreams of grandeur (Genesis 37:11). The instance of a barren wife being jealous of a fertile one occurs in the story of Hannah, although there the emotion described is anger (*ka-as*) (I Samuel 1:6).

[12] *vatomar el-Yaakov:* "Perceiving the limits of her own authority, she turns to a person with immediate authority over her—her husband, Jacob" (Rachel Havrelock, "*Vayeitzei*," in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* 165).

[13] *hava li banim v'im-ein metah anochi*: Here Rachel expresses her frustration at being infertile, but she also makes a profound statement about her situation as a woman. She may mean that her frustration is so great that she feels it will kill her. She may also state, as Nahum Sarna suggests, that, "life without children would not be worth living" (Sarna,

2. Jacob was furious[14] with Rachel, saying: "Am I in place of God,[15] who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?"[16]

Genesis 207). More practically, she may mean that, without sons, there will be no one to take care of her and support her financially in the event of Jacob's death. For this reason, Robert Alter's translation, "Give me sons, for if you don't I'm a dead woman," works better than the Jewish Publication Society's more general rendering of, "Give me children, or I shall die" (Alter 158). Rachel Havrelock writes:

> Rachel equates her inability to give birth with death, implying that her story will never be told if not condensed in the name of a child . . .. she protests not only the state of barrenness, but also the limits that her society sets on female autonomy . . .. Rachel speaks to the threat of her negation should she not reproduce (Havrelock 165).

[14] *vayichar af*: Literally translated as "the burning of the nose," *haron af* is an indication of either divine or human anger. In this case it refers to the latter. The word *h-r-h* probably comes from the Ugaritic *hrr* or the Arabic *harra*, both meaning "to burn" or "to scorch", though it could also be related to the Canaanite word *hre*, which means "angry" (David Noel Freedman and J.R. Lundbom, "*Hara*" in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. 5. 171). David Noel Freedman and J.R. Lundbom write:

> Anger is frequently expressed when someone has heard something—either firsthand or through a report—that makes him very displeased. It can also erupt quickly in conversation. It is a spontaneous response to a threat of some sort directed at the individual or a group to which the individual belongs. But threats to one's sense of justice, truth, or right behavior can also evoke anger. Jacob becomes angry with Rachel because she has blamed him for her barrenness (Freedman, Lundbom, "*Hara*" 172).

Although *haron af* is often used to describe God's anger, in the following situations it describes the fury of a human, such as Potiphar's anger towards Joseph (Genesis 39:19); Balaam's anger towards his wayward donkey (Numbers 22:27); and Balak's anger towards Balaam for blessing the Israelites instead of cursing them (Numbers 24:10).

[15] *hatachat Elohim anochi*: This is the first place in this passage where God's role in reproduction is mentioned. Jacob reminds Rachel that it is God, not him, who makes reproduction possible. Coincidentally, Rachel's son Joseph will make the same statement in response to his brothers' fear of retaliation for selling their brother into slavery. With this phrase, Joseph reminds his brothers that only God can administer punishment and, in this case, their behavior was part of God's ultimate plan to save everyone from famine (Genesis 50:19-20).

[16] *asher-mana mimech pri-beten*: The word *beten* is found in Hebrew, Arabic, Aramaic and South Canaanite, where it means "belly." Belly may be used in both digestive and reproductive contexts, and can also generally refer to innards (David Noel Freedman and J.R. Lundbom, "*Beten*," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. 2. 94-5). *Pri beten* can refer to the offspring of a man or a woman, a human or an animal. In Psalms 132:11, the phrase refers to David's offspring, who will succeed him on the throne. The phrase is often used when the offspring in question are seen as a divine reward for good behavior, such as in Deuteronomy 7:13; 28:4, 11; and Psalms 127:3.

3. Then she said: "Here is my slavewoman;[17] have intercourse[18] with her. Then she can give birth on my knees,[19] that through her I too may have a son."[20]
4. So she gave Bilhah, her slavewoman, to him as a wife,[21] and he had intercourse with her.

Again emphasis is placed on God's control over the opening and closing of the womb. It is also important to note that women, not men, were typically blamed for infertility (M. Ottosson, "*Harah*," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. 3. 460). The phenomenon of a sterile male is mentioned only in Deuteronomy 7:14, where God promises that no male animal or human being will be sterile in the Israelite community, provided that the Israelites adhere to the covenant. That Rachel is the infertile one is a logical assumption in this situation, as Jacob has successfully had children with another woman.

[17] *amati*: Four words are used to describe Bilhah in the book of Genesis: *shifcha, amah, isha* and *pilegesh*. The former two terms refer to the relationship between a woman and her servant; the latter two terms refer to a sexual relationship between a man and his wife's servant. These women were considered property rather than employees, therefore Robert Alter translates *amah* and *shifcha* as "slavegirl." See p. 31 for further discussion of the use of these different terms.

[18] *bo aleha*: This term comes from the root *bet-vav-aleph*, meaning, "to come in, enter" (Brown-Driver-Briggs 97). This is one of several terms used for sexual relations in the Tanakh, amongst them *shachav*, "sleep with," *karav*, "come close to," and *yadah*, "know." *Yadah* is used for the sexual relations between Adam and Eve (Genesis 4:1, 25) and between Hannah and Elkanah (I Samuel 1:19). *Shachav* is used in Genesis 34:2 and II Samuel 13 to refer to rape (vv. 11, 14) and illicit sexual relations in Genesis 39:7, 12 and II Samuel 11:4. *Karav* is used in Isaiah 8:3 to describe relations between the prophet and his wife.

Bo is used in the story of Sarah and Hagar, another biblical surrogacy narrative (Genesis 16:2, 4). Jacob's sexual relations with his wives, both primary and secondary, are predominately described by the verb *bo* (Genesis 29:21, 23, 30; 30:3, 4). The only other word for intercourse used in this passage is *shachav*, which is used when Leah purchases a night with Jacob for her son's mandrakes (Genesis 30:15-16). Similarly, in Genesis 38, Judah's first relations with Tamar are categorized by the word *bo* (vv. 16, 18), while at the end of the chapter the word *yadah* is used to indicate that they had no further relations (v. 26). That *bo* is used for the first act of intercourse, and *shachav* for a later one, might indicate that *bo* was the word used for the consummation of a sexual relationship. Sexual relations described by the word *bo* typically result in conception in the biblical narrative.

[19] *v'teled al bircai*: See p. 28 for a discussion of this term and its use in situations of surrogacy and adoption.

[20] *v'ibaneh gam anochi mimenah*: *Ibaneh* can be understood in two different ways. First, because it is a play on the word *ben*, it can be understood as a wish for children, specifically sons. Second, *ibaneh* comes from the word *banah*, which means, "to build." Therefore Rachel's words might indicate that she sees the birth of sons as a means of building up her own worth or that of her husband's household. See p. 118 for a discussion of how the verb *banah* is used in reproductive contexts.

5. And Bilhah became pregnant[22] and bore Jacob a son.
6. Then Rachel said: "God has judged me favorably[23] and also has listened to my voice[24] and given me a son." Therefore she called his name Dan.
7. Again Rachel's slavewoman Bilhah became pregnant and bore a second son to Jacob.
8. Then Rachel said: "I have engaged in an awesome struggle[25] with my sister and I have prevailed."[26] So she called his name Naftali.

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[21] *l'isha*: Although literally *isha* translates as wife, this presentation formula does not raise Bilhah to the same status as her mistress. She would be considered a secondary wife. See p. 35 for an explanation of the this term.

[22] *vatahar*: This root appears in ancient Hebrew, Ugaritic, Aramaic, and Akkadian texts, where it means "to conceive" or "be pregnant." Each pregnancy and birth in this passage, with the exception of that of Dinah and the sons of Zilpah, follows the same pattern of "begetting, pregnancy, and birth" that is indicated by the words *bo, harah,* and *yaldah* (M. Ottoson, "*Harah*" 458).

[23] *danani*: The word *din* is found in all Semitic languages, and in most cases it means "judgment." In Akkadian, the word *dananu* means "to be mighty." In Ugaritic, the King *Dan'l* "executes judgment for widows and orphans" just as the biblical Daniel has a "special role of judging" (G. J. Botterweck and V. Hamp, "*Din*," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament,* Vol. 3. 187-90). Robert Alter adds, "The verb *dan* suggests vindication of a legal plea" (Alter 159). This is consistent with the word's use in Psalm 54:3-4, where the psalmist begs God to "vindicate" (*t'dineni*) him.

[24] *shama b'koli*: Literally, "listened to my voice." Rutersworden writes that this phrase describes: "The proper conduct of Israel toward God . . . of children toward their parents, of a disciple toward the (wisdom) instructor, of people of equal status toward each other (brother and sister, husband and wife), of God toward human beings or Israel, of a superior toward subordinates" (U. Rutersworden, "Shama," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament,* Vol. 15. 265). In Genesis 21:12, God instructs Abraham to listen to his wife (*sh'ma b'kolah*) and cast out Hagar and Ishmael; in Genesis 27, Rebecca demands that Jacob listen to her instructions using the words *sh'ma b'koli* (vv. 8, 13, 43); Moses expresses concerns that the Israelites will not listen to him (*v'lo yishm'u b'koli*) (Exodus 4:1); Jethro implores Moses to listen to him (*sh'ma b'koli*) (Exodus 18:19). Using this phrase to describe the act of listening implies that the listener is expected to follow certain instructions and obey the speaker. Here, it is God who has listened to Rachel and obeyed her demand for a son.

[25] *naftulei Elohim niftalti:* Coming from the root *pey-tav-lamed*, meaning "tortuous" or "twisted," the word *naftulei* means "wrestlings." Naphtali's name can thus be taken to mean "my wrestlings" (Brown-Drivers-Briggs 836). The imagery of struggling or wrestling draws a thematic connection between Rachel and her husband, writes Robert Alter: "It is noteworthy that Rachel chooses an image of wrestling for her relationship with her sister that marks a correspondence to the relationship of Jacob, the 'heel-grabber,' with *his* older sibling" (Alter 159).

The use of the word *Elohim*, a name for God, in this phrase indicates the gravity of the struggle. Nahum Sarna suggests that *naftulei Elohim* be translated as "fateful contest," based on "the occasional use of *'elohim*, 'God,' as an intensifying or superlative

9. Then Leah saw that she had stopped bearing children.[27] So she took Zilpah, her slavewoman, and gave her to Jacob as a wife.[28]
10. And Zilpah, Leah's slavewoman, bore Jacob a son.
11. And Leah said: "Fortune has come!" So she called his name Gad.[29]
12. Then Zilpah, Leah's slavewoman, bore a second son to Jacob.

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element. The phrase could also mean 'a contest for God,' that is, divine favor" (Sarna, *Genesis* 208). The latter translation is consistent with the theme of fertility as a divine gift. E.A. Speiser writes that *naftulei Elohim* indicates something.

> extraordinary or numinous . . ..What Rachel would thus be saying is approximately as follows: I have been entangled in a contest with my sister, which only celestial powers could resolve, and I have emerged victorious from the ordeal (Speiser 231).

[26] *y'cholti:* The root *yud-lamed-chaf* is translated in various ways as "be able," "succeed," "be allowed," "be superior," "be victorious over," "grasp," "bear," or "endure" (J.A. Soggin, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, "*Yakol*," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. 6. 72). The word is used occasionally in the context of a military victory, such as in Jeremiah 1:19, where God promises Israel that her enemies will not be able to overtake her (*v'lo yuch'lu*) and in Judges 16:5, when the Philistines convince Delilah to discover the secret of Samson's power so that they can overpower him (*nuchal lo*). This word is also found in Genesis 32, where it refers to Jacob's victory when wrestling with the angel (vv. 26, 29). Rachel Havrelock writes:

> As she engages in sibling rivalry, Rachel also struggles with God in order to win the ability to give birth. Her naming of Naphtali is verbally linked with God's later renaming of Jacob as Israel: 'for you have struggled with God and with human beings, and you have prevailed (*vatuchal*) (32:29). Both Rachel and Jacob prevail in contests doubly waged with people and with God (Havrelock 167).

[27] *ki amda miledet*: The reader is aware of Leah's condition a statement by the narrator after the birth of Judah that "then she stopped bearing" (*v'ta'amod miledet*) (Genesis 29:35). Rachel Havrelock writes, "Leah is never called barren, but she does experience a period of infertility" (Havrelock 167).

[28] *vatiten otah l'Yaakov l'isha*: The same formula is used here as in Rachel's presentation of Bilhah to Jacob.

[29] *ba gad . . . Gad*: Although in the Masoretic text, Gad's naming statement is a single word, *bagad*, scholars typically break the word in two to yield the phrase *ba gad*, "Good luck has come" (Alter 159).The name of Leah's first son through Zilpah literally means "fortune" or "good luck" (K. D. Schunk, "*Gadh*" in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament,* Vol. 2. 383). However, the name may have been drawn from the surrounding Near Eastern cultures, many of whom had a deity named Gad, considered to be the god of fortune, comparable to the Greek Tyche or the Roman Fortuna (Sarna, *Genesis* 208). In Isaiah 65:11, the word *gad* is paralleled with the word *meni*, which means "destiny." Isaiah criticizes the Israelites "Who set a table for Luck (*Gad*) / And fill a mixing bowl for Destiny (*Meni*)" instead of trusting in the Eternal. Meni is also the name of an ancient Near Eastern deity (K.D. Schunk, "*Gadh*" 383-384). Nahum Sarna insists that Leah is not invoking this deity when she names her son, rather, "it is simply an abstract noun, 'luck,' just as one would refer to 'Lady Luck' in English (Sarna, *Genesis* 208).

13. And Leah said: "Happy am I, for women will call me happy." So she called his name Asher.[30]
14. During the wheat harvest, Reuben went out and found mandrakes[31] in the field. He brought them to his mother, Leah. Then Rachel said to Leah: "Please give me some of your son's mandrakes!"
15. She said to her: "Was it not enough[32] that you took[33] my husband, that you also want to take my son's mandrakes?" And Rachel said: "I assure you,[34] he will sleep[35] with you tonight, in exchange for[36] your son's mandrakes."

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[30] *b'ashri . . . Asher*: Asher's name means "to make someone happy," sometimes by transfer of property (Henri Cazelles, "*Ashre*," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. 1. 445). This would be appropriate in this context, where Leah declares ownership over Zilpah's sons. It also shares its root with the word *osher*, "good fortune," and therefore creates a parallelism with the name of his brother Gad (Alter 159). In many places where the word *asher* is used, especially in the Psalms and in wisdom literature, "*'ashre* is a liturgical cry . . . points to an act in which believers seek happiness . . .. The desire for happiness is different from the blessing in that it demands that the believer do certain things" (Henri Cazelles, "*Ashre*" 446).

For instance, in Isaiah 30:18, those who "wait for [God]" are made happy. In Psalm 127:4-5, the act that makes a man happy is the siring of sons, as it is written, "Like arrows in the hand of a warrior/ are sons born to a man in his youth. / Happy (*ashrei*) is the man who fills his quiver with them;/ they shall not be put to shame/ when they contend with the enemy in the gate." Leah's happiness is also conditional: she relies on the opinion of others to make her happy. In Song of Songs 6:9, one sees a similar formula to that which Leah uses. In describing the beauty of his lover, the narrator says that "maidens see and acclaim her" (*ra'uha vanot v'ashru'ha*). Leah hopes that she will be similarly acclaimed for producing so many sons for Jacob.

[31] *duda'im*: Scholars believe that this wild plant was what is known today as the mandrake. The mandrake was thought to have medicinal powers, especially as an aphrodisiac. However, here Rachel believes that it has fertility-inducing power. In the Tanakh, the word *duda'im* appears only here and in Song of Songs 7:14. See p. ? for more on the medicinal and magical powers ascribed to the *duda'im*.

[32] *ham'at*: The definition of *ma'at* is "little," "few" or "trifling" (Holladay 205). When accompanied by an inquisitive *hey* (*hey ha-she-elah*), this word could be translated "Was it too little?"

[33] *kachtech*: The verb *lakach* means "taking away, carrying off"; "seizure or acquisition for oneself" (H. Seebass, "*Laqah*," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament,* eds. G. Johannes Botterweck, Heinz-Josef Fabry and Helmer Ringgren. Vol. 8. 19). It is also the technical term for marriage that is used throughout Genesis (4:19; 11:29; 20:2; 24:3). Typically, only men can engage in the "taking" of a spouse, either for oneself or for one's son. The only power that these women have in regards to arranging marriages is the power to give their maidservants to their husbands as secondary wives (H. Seebass, "*Laqah*," 19).

[34] *lakhen*: A derivative of the word *ken*, meaning "yes," the word *lakhen* can be used to indicate cause and effect. It can function similarly to the word "therefore" or, in this

16. When Jacob came in from the field in the evening, Leah came out to meet him, saying: "You shall have intercourse with me, for I have paid a wage[37] for you with my son's mandrakes." So he slept with her that night.
17. Now God heeded[38] Leah and she became pregnant and bore Jacob a fifth son.[39]
18. Leah said: "God has given me a reward for giving my slavewoman to my husband." So she called his name Isaachar.[40]
19. Once again, Leah became pregnant and bore Jacob a sixth son.
20. Leah said: "God has given me a good gift.[41] Now my husband will give me my wedding gift, for I have borne him six sons." So she called his name Zebulun.[42]

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passage, "for this" (Holladay 117). In is used often in prophecy, where it is often translated as "assuredly" (see 2 Kings 19:32 and Isaiah 61:7).

[35] *yishkav*: Here a different word for intercourse is used. See above for a discussion of the different uses of *bo, sh'chav,* etc.

[36] *tachat*: Earlier, Jacob uses this word to indicate that he does not function "in place of" God. Here the word *tachat* indicates a more basic exchange: a bunch of mandrakes for a night with their shared husband.

[37] *s'chor s'charticha*: The Hebrew word *sachar* refers to payment, whether as a reward for good behavior or as part of a transaction (Avraham Even-Shoshan, *Concordancia Hadasha L'Torah Nevi'im u'Ketuvim* [Israel: Ha-Malon He-Hadash, 2000] 1145). In v. 16, Leah uses the word *sachar* to indicate to Jacob that she has hired his services in exchange for Reuben's mandrakes. In turn, when Leah conceives, she names the resulting son Isaachar, not because she "purchased" his father from his other wife, but because she viewed him as payment, or more delicately, as a reward, for having given Zilpah to her husband for the purpose of bearing more children.

[38] *vayishma Elohim*: Once again, God's role is mentioned in a story of conception and birth.

[39] *ben chamishi*: The sons of Zilpah do not "count" in the narrator's tally of Leah's children. While the sisters declare their ownership of the children by naming them, they never cease to be recorded as the children of their slavewomen.

[40] *s'chari . . . Isaachar*: More so than any of his brothers, Isaachar's name tells the story of his conception. While Leah declares that he is a "reward" (*s'chari*) for the righteous act of giving her maidservant to her husband, the reader cannot help but notice the connection to the word for the "wages" (*s'chor*) that Leah paid to Rachel in order to sleep with Jacob.

[41] *zavadni . . . zeved tov*: *Zavad* comes from the root meaning "to bestow upon, endow with" and is sometimes associated with a gift or a dowry, although this is the only place where this meaning is used (Brown-Driver-Briggs 256). *Zavad* appears as a name throughout the book of Chronicles and the book of Ezra (I Chronicles 2: 36; 7:21; 11:41; 2 Chronicles 24:26; Ezra 10:27, 33, 43).

[42] *ha-pa'am yiz'b'leni . . . Zebulun*: *Zaval* may be taken to meant either "exalt," "honor," or "dwell" (Brown-Driver-Briggs 259). Because the name *Zebulun* and the word *zebed* only share two consonants as opposed to an entire root, Robert Alter posits that the name of Leah's sixth son actually comes from the word *zabal*, meaning "exalt." Therefore he

21. Afterwards, she bore a daughter, and she called her name Dinah.[43]
22. Then God remembered[44] Rachel; God heeded her and opened her womb.[45]

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translates *yizbeleni* as "this time my husband will exalt me" (Alter 161). The word is used here and in the book of Kings, where it describes the house that Solomon builds for God (I Kings 8:13).

E.A. Speiser suggests that this name could come from the Hebrew *zebul*, "eminence," the Ugaritic *zbl*, "prince," or from the Akkadian *zubullu*, "bridegroom's gift" (Speiser 231). Zebulun's name may thus express the hope that Jacob will dwell with Leah instead of, or at least in addition to, his more beloved Rachel. Its link with the Akkadian for "bridegroom's gift," may indicate that Leah is simply hoping for a sign of affection from her husband. In *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, *yizbeleni* is translated as "now my husband will [finally] give me the [wedding] gift due me." Rachel Havrelock writes: "In this naming ceremony, Leah utters a pious word of thanks, which hints at the name Zebed. But then she expresses her true wish. The name Zebulun reflects her focus on improving her marriage" (Havrelock 168).

[43] *Dinah*: Several of the components of the typical birth narrative are missing here. Instead of the traditional formula "she conceived and bore" (*vatahar v'teled*), Dinah's conception is not recorded, only her birth. There is also no naming speech giving the etymology of Dinah's name, although Rachel Havrelock declares that it means "judgment that leads to justice" (Havrelock 168). Robert Alter suggests that this lack of information is due to the fact that Dinah will not be the leader of a tribe, therefore the details of her birth and the etymology of her name are considered less important (Alter 161).

[44] *vayizkor*: "Remember persons to their advantage" (Brown-Driver-Briggs 269). "God remembered Noah" (*vayizkar*) following the flood (Genesis 8:1). God remembers (*vayizkor*) Abraham and therefore spares Lot during the destruction of Sodom (Genesis 19:29). Joseph asks the Pharaoh's cupbearer to remember (*z'chartani*) Joseph when he is restored to his position so that Joseph might be redeemed from prison (Genesis 40:14). Likewise, Abigail asks David to "remember your maid (*v'zacharta*)" when God shows favor on him and on his military campaign (I Samuel 25:31). When Hannah prays to God at Shiloh, she asks that God "remember (*u'zchartani*)" her and grant her request for a son (I Samuel 1:11). Samson uses the same formula to beg God for one last burst of strength, saying "remember me (*zachreni*)" (Judges 16:28). Jeremiah asks God to "remember me (*zachreni*)" and thus help him take vengeance on his persecuters (Jeremiah 15:15). This mention of God's remembrance is particularly significant in light of the mandrakes incident. While Rachel may have thought that mandrakes would put an end to her infertility, the narrator reminds the reader that only God can "remember" Rachel and thus "open her womb."

[45] *vayiftach et rachma*: In the Bible, narratives about fertility and infertility serve to emphasize that it is God who opens and closes the womb. In Genesis 20, God afflicts the king Abimelech and his people with many afflictions because of the king's actions while under the impression that Sarai was Abram's sister. One of these afflictions is that God had "closed fast (*atzur atzar*) every womb of the household of Abimelech" (Genesis 20:18). Likewise in the story of Hannah, it is twice mentioned that God had "closed her womb" (*sagar rachma*) (I Samuel 1:5-6).

23. She became pregnant and bore a son. She said: "God has taken away[46] my shame."[47]
24. So she called his name Joseph, saying: "My God add on[48] another son for me."

II. Analysis

A. Introduction

In the world described in the Bible, the primary goal of a woman—and indeed, of a man—was to bear children. Children, especially sons, were necessary for the following reasons: "productivity (more hands to work the farm), protection (safety in numbers), and prestige (as a sign of virility and prosperity and thus power."[49] Daughters were also valued, though less so than sons, for their ability to assist with household tasks and also

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In Ezekiel 37:12-13, God "opens" (*poteach*) the graves of the people of Israel in order to restore them to Zion. Like the opening of the womb, the opening of graves serves to send an important theological message: "by opening things that normally cannot be opened, Yahweh shows himself to be the true God . . .. In a reverse fashion, no one can open what God has closed . . .. The simple use of the oppositional pair "open/close," like other comparable antitheses or antinomies, circumscribes in a theologically succinct fashion God's universality and, here, especially, his omnipotence" (R. Bartlemus, "*Patah*," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. 12. 182).

[46] *asaf*: The root *aleph-samech-fey* means "gather, remove" (Brown-Driver-Briggs 62). Therefore it is root of both *asaf*, "remove" and *yosef*, which means "add" or "increase" (Brown-Driver-Briggs 414-5). Rachel's naming statement therefore reflects on both the end of her shame and her desire for more children.

[47] *herpati*: *Herpati* comes from the word *haraf*, "reproach." In this form and context it refers to shame or disgrace, in this case that which results from barrenness (Brown-Driver-Briggs 358). Barrenness is only one of the many conditions that can result in such shame. For instance, in 2 Samuel 13:13, "shame" refers to that of a ruined virgin. In this passage, David's daughter Tamar begs her brother Amnon not to molest her, asking "Where will I carry my shame (*herpati*)?" Likewise in Isaiah 47:3, *herpatecha* refers to the shame of Babylon, who is compared to a ruined woman. In Proverbs 6:33, *herpato* is listed as a consequence of adultery.

[48] *Yosef. . .yosef*: Nahum Sarna writes "The two Hebrew verbs *'asaf* and *yosef*, 'taken away' and 'add,' provide a double etymology for the name, the first looking back to the past years of shame and anguish, the second looking forward to an even greater measure of joy. . ..With the announcement about Joseph, the birth narrative is completed. It opens and closes with the use of the divine name YHVH (29:31, 30:24)" (Sarna, *Genesis* 210).

[49] Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, "The Way of Women," *Gender, Power and Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First Story* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993) 69.

for their potential to earn a monetary betrothal gift for their family. Because women neither owned property nor inherited from their husbands or parents in the Israelite community, it was important for women to bear sons who could inherit the family estate and care for them in their old age. A woman's worth, and her socioeconomic status and security, was thus measured by her ability to give birth to sons. In fact, the need to bear sons to continue the family name—described in many biblical passages as the building up of one's house—and inherit the family's estate, was one reason that a man might take a second wife or a concubine.[50]

In Leviticus 18:18, biblical law forbids the practice of marrying two sisters as rivals to one another. It may have been this very story that served as a demonstration of why such a practice was prohibited. Married to the same man, the sisters Leah and Rachel engage in an intense competition to bear sons for their husband Jacob. The names of their children tell the story of this rivalry. Rachel, the more beloved of her husband, endures a long period of infertility before she finally gives birth. Leah, on the other hand, gives birth to several sons and a daughter, but cannot earn the love of her shared husband.

The sisters employ a variety of tactics in order to help themselves to conceive. They employ their slavewomen Bilhah and Zilpah as surrogate mothers. This may have served two different purposes. First, the act of surrogacy provided each sister with a legal, if not biological, son. Second, the sisters may have meant to stimulate their own reproductive organs by means of sympathetic magic. Rachel also employs a medicinal plant, the *duda'im* or mandrake, in hopes that it will serve as a fertility aid. The narrator of this text frequently reminds the reader that it is God, not any of these homegrown

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[50] See Deuteronomy 25:5-10; Genesis 16:2; Ruth 4:11. See p. 118 for a discussion of building imagery associated with bearing children.

remedies, who opens the womb. Throughout the Bible, barrenness narratives serve to remind the reader of God's role in human reproduction.

While the race to give birth to sons takes its toll on the relationship between the sisters, the contest benefits Jacob greatly. By the end of the narrative, Jacob has eleven sons and one daughter by four different women. These sons, as well as Benjamin, who will be born later, make up the twelve tribes of Israel, making their father the patriarch of the "great nation" promised to his grandfather Abraham.[51] However, it is the women in this story, not Jacob, who take initiative and direct Jacob's reproductive activities in order to make this large family possible.

It is important to understand the various roles that women could play in the ancient Israelite community in order to understand the role of each of the four women in this text. It is also helpful to discuss the methods that women may have employed to cure infertility in ancient Israel and the ancient Near East, in order to provide a context for Leah's and Rachel's responses to periods of barrenness. Knowledge about fertility treatments in the ancient Near East also serves as background for the overall theological message of the Genesis text. The actions performed by Leah and Rachel show that they have a certain amount of responsibility and control over their own sexual and reproductive lives. However, only God can ultimately provide them with children. The relevant questions that arise in this text, therefore, are as follows:

- What is the purpose of the motif of barrenness in the Bible?
- For what purpose was surrogate motherhood employed in the ancient Near East?
- What is the difference between the terms *shifcha, amah, isha* and *pilegesh*? What does this tell us about the status of Bilhah and Zilpah, and their children, in Jacob's household?

[51] See Genesis 12:1-3.

- What was thought to be the medicinal or magical powers of the *du'daim*, or "mandrake" plant, in the ancient Near East?
- How do the names of Jacob's children reflect the competition between his wives?

B. The Motif of Barrenness in the Bible

The barren woman is a recurring motif in the Bible. All four of the matriarchs experience a period of infertility, although Leah's does not occur until after she has given birth to several sons. Stories of infertility also occur in the stories of the *Nevi'im*: Hannah begs for a son at the temple at Shiloh before giving birth to Samuel the prophet; the wife of Manoah meets an angel of God who informs her that she will give birth to the warrior Samson; the prophet Elisha promises a son to a Shunnamite woman as a reward for her hospitality towards him.[52]

From a literary perspective, the motif of barrenness serves to heighten the suspense leading up to a birth, and it lends auspiciousness to the birth of a future hero. In some cases, this auspiciousness is enhanced by the use of an annunciation type-scene, where a prophet or an angel of God appears to the infertile woman or couple, prophesies that a son will be born and, sometimes, announces what role that son or sons will play in the ensuing story. An annunciation type-scene occurs in all of the barrenness narratives except for this one, Genesis 30.[53]

In addition to its literary effect, there is also a theological motive behind the use of the barrenness motif. In barrenness narratives, the infertile woman or couple might employ various tactics in order to conceive. Sarah, Rachel and Leah employ their slavewomen as surrogate mothers; Isaac prays on Rebecca's behalf; Hannah prays for

[52] See I Samuel 1-2, Judges 13, II Kings 4:8-17.
[53] See Genesis 16:7-12; 18:1-15; 25:19-23; as well as the aforementioned verses.

herself. In this narrative, Rachel even employs an herbal fertility aid, which will be discussed below. However, in all of these situations, it is God, and not any of these measures, that makes childbirth possible by opening and closing the womb.

In the legal texts of the Bible, fertility is promised to the Israelites as a reward for adherence to the covenant. This reward includes the fertility of land, livestock and human beings. Recalling the promises made to Abraham,[54] God promises the Israelites that, if they obey the covenant, "God will favor you and bless you and multiply you; God will bless the issue of your womb."[55] Conversely, if the Israelites do not obey the covenant, "Cursed shall be the issue of your womb and the produce of your soil, the calving of your herd and the lambing of your flock."[56]

When infertility occurs in the narratives of Genesis, there is no recorded sin or reason for it. However, throughout the narrative of Genesis 30, the reader is reminded that it is God's opening of the womb, and not human action, which results in the birth of sons. When Rachel begs Jacob to give her children, Jacob angrily reminds his wife that it is God who has "denied you the fruit of the womb."[57] In v. 17, Leah conceives because God "listens" (*vayishma*) to her, while in v. 22, Rachel conceives not because of her various home remedies for infertility, but because God "remembers" (*vayizkor*) her. This language is often used in the barrenness narratives: God "remembers" Hannah (*vayiz'k'reha*) in I Samuel 1:19; while God "takes note" (*pakad*) of Sarah in Genesis 21:1. Rachel Havrelock writes:

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[54] See Genesis 12:2 and 15:4-5.
[55] Deuteronomy 7:13. See also Deuteronomy 28:4.
[56] Deuteronomy 18:18.
[57] Genesis 30:2.

> Genesis acknowledges that conception ensues from sexual relations. But the subtext of the female journey cycle indicates that its success requires intimacy not only between a man and a woman but also between a woman and God.[58]

Mary Callaway claims that the Genesis 30 narrative, as well as the story of Sarah's infertility in Genesis 16, is a later addition by the Yawhist or "J" redactor of the biblical narrative, although it clearly contains earlier material.[59] According to Callaway, this narrative and other barrenness narratives helped the Yahwist to convey an important theological message. She explains that in the tenth century B.C.E., monotheism was still a new—and not yet widely accepted—concept. As a result, she writes:

> [I]t was difficult for the Israelites to accept that Yahweh, whom they had known as a liberator God, was also the Lord of fertility in the new land of Canaan. The stories of women whose wombs were opened and closed according to Yahweh's will were part of the monotheizing of the Yahwist . . .. [that] functioned to show that the gift of life came from Yahweh alone.[60]

Contrary to the belief held by many scholars that the motif of barrenness serves to emphasize the "heroic nature" of the future offspring, Callaway asserts that this motif served to remind the reader that "birth was a gift from Yahweh and part of his unfolding plan for Israel."[61] The motif of barrenness thus falls under a more general motif of "obstacles to the promise" writes Callaway:

> [T]he Yahwist edited much of the ancient saga material so that it would heighten the suspense of how Yahweh would overcome these obstacles to fulfill his promise. The stories of the barren matriarchs functioned not only as an important part of the obstacle theme, but also as a graphic illustration of the integrity of Yahweh in fulfilling his promise . . .. The Yahwist presupposed that any dreadful state, no matter how irredeemable in human eyes, could be used by Yahweh in the fulfillment of his promise.[62]

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[58] Havrelock 157.
[59] Callaway, Mary. *Sing, O Barren One: A Study in Comparative Midrash* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986) 26.
[60] Callaway 32.
[61] Callaway 32.
[62] Callaway 32-33.

According to Callaway, the barrenness narratives that occur in Genesis 16 and 30 show that none of the fertility remedies available to the matriarchs actually brought about a son of their own, rather:

> In both stories, the schemes of the women fail to bring the desired results, and the solution comes only when Yahweh intervenes and opens their wombs . . .. the long desired pregnancy occurred because of divine plans rather than because of human maneuvering.[63]

Although the Yahwist emphasizes that it is God who opens and closes the womb, the human actions that will be discussed below show that women had a certain amount of control over their reproductive lives, as well as knowledge about ancient Near Eastern magical and medicinal remedies.

C. The Purpose of Surrogacy in the Bible and the Ancient Near East

Although the narrator of this story goes to great lengths to emphasize divine control over human reproduction, the "human maneuvering" employed by Leah and Rachel cannot be ignored. Over the course of these verses, each sister presents her slavewoman to Jacob as a means of bearing more children. Mary Callaway points out that in many ancient Near Eastern myths, it is usually men who seek to sire children outside of their primary relationship. However, in the surrogacy narratives of Genesis 16 and 30, it is the women who take initiative and offer their maidservants to their husbands.[64]

Although the legal codes of the Bible do not discuss surrogacy, ancient Near Eastern legal documents mention alternatives for women who are unable to conceive. In the Code of Hammurabi, a man who is married to a hierodule—a cultic priestess who is

[63] Callaway 28.
[64] Callaway 16.

not permitted to bear children—may marry a lay priestess; otherwise, his wife may provide him with a female slave so that he can produce offspring. A marriage contract in the Nuzi tablets indicates that a woman who is unable to bear children must provide her husband with a woman who is so able. The barren wife, in this situation, is not permitted to send the sons of the second woman away. An Egyptian text from the 11th century B.C.E. similarly states that a barren woman may provide her husband with a slave who can bear him children, and that his original wife may adopt his children by another woman. It was thought that this practice was common in both Egypt and Mesopotamia.[65]

Infertility is one instance in which polygyny, marriage to more than one wife, may have benefited women in ancient Israel. In a situation where having children was imperative to family survival, such an arrangement may have protected a barren woman from being cast out by her husband so that he might marry another, more fertile, woman. Rachel would not, however, have been required to provide a surrogate for her husband, as Jacob already had one fertile wife and several sons.[66] Her desire was not, therefore, to keep her husband by helping him to preserve his name, but rather to outdo her sister and have sons that belonged exclusively to her.

While the sisters compete for Jacob's love and the privilege of motherhood, their primary concern is the production of male children who will inherit their father's estate and support them in their old age. Athalya Brenner writes:

> Within the world of these women, it is possible to achieve personal security only through an abundance of sons. Love is secondary to a personal need that goes far and beyond a "natural" maternal urge, and which is never wholly fulfilled.[67]

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[65] Callaway 13-14.
[66] Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "Bilhah," in *Women in Scripture* 61.
[67] Brenner, *The Israelite Woman* 94.

Rachel therefore presents her slavewoman, Bilhah, to her husband so that she can "give birth on her knees" (*v'teled al-bircai*).[68] In many ancient Near Eastern cultures, such as the Hittites, as well as in ancient Greece and Rome, placing a child on one's knees is a symbolic gesture signifying legitimacy of a genetic heir or adoption of a non-biological child. This may be because in these ancient cultures the knee was seen as "the seat of generative power."[69] In the Akkadian language, the word "knee" is used as a euphemism for genitals, and an impotent man called "one who has no knees."[70]

This gesture of adoption and recognition of legitimacy appears in Genesis 48:12 and 50:23, where Joseph places his sons Ephraim and Manasseh on his knees, and in Job 3:12, when Job laments his own birth, saying, "Why were there knees to receive me/ Or breasts for me to suck?" In these texts, it is the man who recognizes the legitimacy of a child by placing it on his knees, as was common in these ancient societies. Here, however, it is Rachel who wishes to perform this gesture of adoption. E.A. Speiser writes that here "it is of primary interest to the adoptive mother who is intent on establishing her legal right to the child."[71] In order for Bilhah's offspring to be recognized as Rachel's, this symbolic gesture needs to take place.[72] While there is no scene depicting such a ritual in this narrative, Rachel expresses ownership over Bilhah's two sons by naming them.[73]

When Rachel presents her slavewoman to her husband, she says *v'ibaneh gam anochi mimenah*.[74] This can be translated in several ways. First, there is the imagery of

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[68] Genesis 30: 3.
[69] Sarna, *Genesis* 207-208.
[70] Sarna, *Genesis* 208.
[71] Speiser 230.
[72] Sarna, *Genesis* 208.
[73] Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "Bilhah" 61.
[74] Genesis 30:3.

"building up" that is common to the three stories discussed in this thesis. Although Robert Alter translates this phrase as "so that I, too, shall be built up through her," he also acknowledges that *ibaneh* is a play on the word *ben*, or "son."[75] Chaim Stern, the translator of Genesis in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, makes use of this play on *ben* by translating this phrase as "so that I too may have a son, through her."[76] The Jewish Publication Society translation renders this phrase more broadly as "that through her I may too have children."

All of these translations suggest that Rachel's request is, on the surface, for Bilhah to act as a surrogate so that Rachel can provide her husband with more sons. However, it is possible that she also is attempting to perform an act of sympathetic magic. Just as many ancient cults engaged in sexual rituals in order to encourage their deities to likewise fertilize the earth, Rachel may be hoping that offering her slavewoman to her husband will cure her own infertility. Rachel Havrelock writes:

> By employing her slave, Bilhah, as a surrogate, Rachel performs a kind of imitative magic in which she plays the Deity—causing a woman to conceive in the hopes that the Creator will likewise fertilize her . . .. Rachel relies on surrogacy also to bypass the obstacles to conception more directly. She achieves her goal by claiming the body of another woman as an extention of her own.[77]

Medieval commentators such as Sforno, probably trying to suppress the idea that the matriarchs engaged in fertility cult rituals, suggested that Rachel was hoping that this act would serve as a cure for her own infertility in a more psychosomatic way, and that "Rachel's *ibaneh mimenah* expresses her wish that the jealousy she expects to feel for

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[75] Alter 159. For an in-depth discussion of when building imagery is used in a reproductive context, see p. 118.
[76] Havrelock 166.
[77] Havrelock 166.

Bilhah will stimulate her reproductive system."[78] This argument is somewhat stymied by the fact that Rachel is already jealous of Leah for giving birth to multiple sons, and that has not resulted in a pregnancy of her own.

Samson Kardimon, a physician writing in the 1950s, posits that it would not have been illogical for Rachel to think that adopting Bilhah's child would stimulate her own reproductive system. Turning to modern medical reports, Kardimon notes that many women thought to be "functionally sterile," i.e., infertile without medical reason, were able to conceive after adopting a child. Doctors suggest both psychological and physiological reasons for this, namely that the anxiety over being able to conceive often hinders conception itself. One doctor adds that the experience of taking care of an adopted child might also overcome and "unconscious opposition to childbearing."[79] Another doctor suggests that this phenomenon is a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is common enough that a childless couple conceives after adopting a child that infertile couples may actually expect to conceive after they adopt.[80]

Kardimon thus suggests that Rachel may have witnessed this phenomenon and thus gave Bilhah to her husband in order to stimulate her own reproductive system. While having a child through Bilhah most likely eases some Rachel's anxiety about her own infertility, Kardimon's theory imposes modern scientific sensibilities on characters who were most likely thinking in spiritual terms. More likely is Rachel Havrelock's

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[78] Elizabeth Wyner Mark, "The Four Wives of Jacob: Matriarchs Seen and Unseen," *The Reconstructionist* 63, 1 (1998): 29.
[79] Samson Kardimon "Adoption as a Remedy for Infertility in the Period of the Patriarchs," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 3, 2 (1958): 125.
[80] Kardimon 125.

explanation that Rachel hoped her fertility would be stimulated by this act of sympathetic magic.

D. The Status of Women as Reflected by the Terms *shifcha, amah, isha* and *pilegesh*

That Leah and Rachel can provide their husband with a reproductive surrogate shows that, as the primary wives of Jacob, these women had the power to make such arrangements within their household. However, these actions paint the surrogates themselves as having no voice and little control over their own bodies. What was the status of Bilhah and Zilpah, that Rachel and Leah could order them to bear children with Jacob?

Bilhah and Zilpah play similar roles in the Jacob cycle: Laban presents each woman to one of his daughters as a *shifcha*, at the time of their wedding. When each of these sisters is unable to bear children biologically, she presents her slavewoman to her husband as *isha*, although Rachel refers to Bilhah as an *amah* during this presentation. Bilhah and Zilpah each bear two of Jacob's twelve sons. However, the use of these different relational terms for the two women makes it difficult to determine what their status was in Jacob's household.

The words *shifcha* and *amah* are used somewhat interchangeably throughout the Tanakh, where they are thought to refer to a female servant or slave. It is important to remember, no matter how the phrase is translated, that both of these terms referred to a woman who was the property of another person, not to a paid servant. That Laban is able to give Zilpah and Bilhah to his daughters as wedding gifts is proof of their status as

property. Robert Alter translates both *shifcha* and *amah* as "slavegirl."[81] He writes that a traditional translation that renders *shifcha* as "maid" or "maidservant" "imposes a misleading sense of European gentility on the sociology of the story " and ignores the fact that such a woman was property of her mistress and was thus completely at her mistress' disposal.[82]

Slaves were most likely procured from households where parents were forced to sell their children or even themselves in order to pay off a debt or otherwise cover household expenses. In fact, women were usually the first to be sold in such situations, probably because male children were seen as essential to maintaining productivity at home.[83] Slaves might also have been acquired from amongst prisoners of war and violators of the law, who were sold into slavery as punishment for various crimes. As slaves were usually allowed to marry and reproduce, many children were born into slavery.[84] Some persons were abducted in order to be sold into slavery.[85] The duties of a slavewoman may have been to fetch water, wash the feet of servants, and to grind grain.[86] It was also common for female slaves to serve sexual or procreative purposes.[87]

One way of examining the distinction between *shifcha* and *amah* is to look at their use in Genesis 16 and 21, where Sarah employs Hagar as a surrogate mother. In Genesis 16:2, 3, 5 and 6, Sarai refers to Hagar as *shifcha*. The angel who encounters Hagar in the wilderness in v. 8 also refers to her as *shifchat Sarai*. In Genesis 21, however, the

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[81] Alter 159.
[82] Alter 77.
[83] E. Reuter, "*Sipha*," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. 15. 408.
[84] Muhammad A. Dandamayev, Slavery (ANE), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Vol. 6. 59.
[85] Dandamayev, Slavery (OT), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Vol. 6. 63.
[86] E. Reuter, "*Sipha*" 408.
[87] Susan Niditch, "*Lech Lecha*," in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* 71.

language changes. Sarah, God, and the narrator all refer to Hagar as *amah* in vv. 10, 12, and 13. This may indicate different authorship, or it may suggest that Hagar's status has become lower now that Sarah has given birth. The Jewish Publication Society translation makes a distinction between the two words, typically translating *shifcha* as "maid" or "maidservant" and *amah* as "slave."

The word *amah* appears throughout the legal sections of the Torah, where it refers to female slaves. Such slaves could be procured from the neighboring nations and from resident aliens, but not from among the Israelites.[88] An *amah* who is gored by an ox is not subject to *lex talionis*, the law of equal retribution, rather her master shall be paid 30 shekels of silver and the ox stoned to death.[89] This is further proof that an *amah* is considered property, and is not treated as an independent human being.

However, the female slave is not completely without rights. One who acquires a female slave cannot sell her at will: he must provide her with food, clothing, and conjugal rights, or else set her free.[90] They are to participate in sacrificial celebrations.[91] An *amah* is also commanded to rest on Shabbat, although these commandments appear alongside the commandments that one's livestock.[92]

Shifcha is also used in legal texts regarding the treatment of female slaves.[93] It typically refers to a situation in which a woman is property of another woman. A *shifcha* may have been given as a part of a woman's dowry, as Bilhah and Zilpah were for Rachel and Leah. However, although the *shifcha* was considered the property a man's household,

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[88] Leviticus 25:44-45.
[89] Exodus 21:32.
[90] Exodus 21:7-11.
[91] Deuteronomy 12:12.
[92] Exodus 20:10; Deuteronomy 5:14.
[93] Leviticus 19:20.

she technically belonged to his wife. Therefore, an arrangement like this, brokered by the man's wife, would not have been unheard of:

> If no son is born or the number of sons is deemed insufficient, the primary wife gives "her" *sipha* to the patriarch as a wife. The formula of transfer, using *ntn* and *lqh*, normally assigned to the bride's father, is here pronounced by the primary wife. The status of the *sipha* with respect to the primary wife does not change . . .. a child conceived under such an arrangement is considered the mistress' child. The mistress often chooses the child's name. The natural children of the primary wife, however, are treated preferentially.[94]

The use of the word *isha*, normally translated as "wife," raises the question of what status Bilhah and Zilpah have now that they have slept with Jacob and produced offspring. Many translations of this text render *isha* as "concubine." However, it is notable that the word *pilegesh*, the word for "concubine," is not used here. In Genesis 16 also, the presentation of a maidservant is done with the language *titen l'isha*, giving as wife. The Jewish Publication Society translation renders this expression as "concubine," while Robert Alter and Chaim Stern both translate the expression as "wife."

Bilhah is only referred to as *pilegesh* in Genesis 35:22, when Reuben is intimate with her. The use of this word is probably meant to diminish the gravity of Reuben's offense, as sleeping with one's father's concubine was considered quite different than sleeping with one's father's wife. Both Bilhah and Zilpah are referred to as wives in 37:2, when Joseph helps his half-brothers with their flocks. However, in Genesis 31:33 both are referred to again as *amahot*, when Laban searches their tents for his household idols. Here they are portrayed as each having their own tent, although it is unclear whether this is an indication of status or not. It should be noted that it was not uncommon for slaves

[94] E. Reuter, "*Sipha*" 407-8.

and free persons to marry and bear children, and that these children were considered free persons.[95]

The above-mentioned "formula of transfer" indicates that the position of the maidservants has changed due to this transaction. No longer a slavewoman, Bilhah and Zilpah may be thought of as concubines, because their relationship with Jacob is sexual, or as secondary wives. Elizabeth Wyner Mark argues that by using the aforementioned presentation formula, Bilhah and Zilpah became wives of Jacob rather than concubines. Because their children were never legally adopted by Rachel and Leah, Mark suggests that Bilhah and Zilpah should be listed amongst the matriarchs in the recitation of the *Avot v'Imahot* in daily Jewish worship.[96]

It is difficult to draw a distinction between concubine and secondary wife, as both refer to relationships in which a woman is presented to a man by his primary wife for the purpose of sexual enjoyment or reproduction. While she is to be protected in this situation, as the later legal texts prohibit a man from reselling or dismissing an *amah* after he has been intimate with her, there is no bride-price paid or dowry given. Carol Meyers refers to this arrangement as polycoity, in which a man "takes an additional wife, beyond his primary wife, who is of lower status than the primary wife."[97] Meyers writes:

> [T]his secondary wife is usually a concubine or a handmaid, whose role within the family unit is either to bear children in order to build up the husband's lineage or to provide sexual enjoyment for the husband. The distinction between a primary and a secondary wife is based on economic considerations: marriage to a primary wife is established on the basis of a conjugal fund property to which both spouses contribute and which becomes the foundation of the economic and legal rights of

[95] Dandamayev 61.
[96] Mark 22-35.
[97] Naomi Steinberg, "Zilpah," in *Women in Scripture* 169.

> the primary wife. A secondary wife is a woman without economic standing in her husband's household.[98]

Due to a marriage arrangement known as "sororal polygyny," the marrying of two sisters, Rachel and Leah hold equal status, at least economically.[99] This may have been one reason for their competition: it was unclear who was the dominant wife. One was betrothed first; the other married first. One was more beloved; the other produced more sons.

Although all of the sons resulting from these unions share somewhat equally in Jacob's inheritance, and each becomes the head of a tribe of Israel, it is clear that there is still a hierarchy in place. When Jacob prepares to confront Esau in Genesis 33:2, he strategically places his most beloved wife and child in the most secure position. He places Bilhah and Zilpah and their children in the front of their caravan, with Leah and her children behind them and Rachel and Joseph last.[100] One should note that while Jacob places his secondary wives in front of Leah and Rachel because they are lower in status, Jacob also places Rachel and Joseph behind Leah and her children because they are his most beloved family members. However, there is also the possibility that this was a more practical consideration, because Joseph was the youngest at that time, therefore his brothers went before him because they could protect him and his mother. Later in the Joseph cycle, however, the reader will see that Jacob favors the biological children of Rachel, Joseph and Benjamin, over all of his other sons.[101]

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[98] Steinberg 169-170.
[99] Steinberg 170.
[100] See Genesis 33:1-2.
[101] See Genesis 37:3; 42:38.

E. The Medicinal and Magical Purposes of *Du'daim* in the Ancient Near East:

Although Rachel has been able to produce offspring by presenting her slavewoman to her husband, she is clearly still hoping to have her own biological child, preferably a son. She is therefore quite eager to partake of the *duda'im* that Leah's son Reuben finds during the wheat harvest.

Ancient Near Eastern texts show that persons from that era were aware of the medicinal effects of certain plants. In Babylonian texts there are references to plants that would aid pregnancy or prevent it, as well as plants that would be helpful in case of a difficult labor. One of these plants was known in the biblical text as *duda'im*, which can be translated as "love apples" and may correspond to the mandrake plant.[102] There is some controversy amongst scholars, however, as to what these plants were and what effect they were expected to have.

Mandrakes are a wild plant that produces small, yellow fruit that resembles a tomato. This fruit becomes ripe in March or April.[103] The idea that a mandrake was thought to be an aphrodisiac or even a fertility aid is linked to shape of its root, which has been said to look like various parts of the human body; the face, the torso, or the entire human form. According to Nahum Sarna, chemical analysis of the plant species *mandragora officinarum* reveals that the plant contains:

> emetic, purgative, and narcotic substances, which explains its widespread use in ancient times. Because the fruit exudes a distinctive and heady fragrance, and its sturdy, forked or intertwined root has torsolike features, the mandrake appears as a widely diffused folkloristic motif associated with aphrodisiac powers.[104]

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[102] Marten Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible: Its Mediterranean Setting* (Groningen: Styx Publications, 2000) 56.
[103] Sarna, *Genesis* 209.
[104] Sarna, *Genesis* 209.

References to *duda'im* appear only in this chapter and in Song of Songs 7:13-14, where it is used as a play on the word *dod*, meaning "beloved." There is no indication here that the consuming the plant might result in increased fertility. In ancient Greek and Roman communities the mandrake was used purely for "aphrodisiac and narcotic" purposes rather than as a fertility aid. In fact, Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, was sometimes referred to as "Lady of the Mandrake."[105] In modern-day Eastern cultures, the mandrake is still used as an aphrodisiac.[106] Some scholars, both medieval and modern, suggest that this was the plant Eve gave to Adam in the Garden of Eden.[107] Nevertheless, there is little historical evidence that would suggest that the surrounding cultures used the mandrake to cure infertility, nor is there scientific evidence that the mandrake plant be used in this way.

In these narratives, the role of the mandrakes in Rachel's pregnancy is downplayed, as it is God who "remembers" her and enables her to conceive.[108] Medieval commentators clearly wanted to dismiss the notion that our matriarchs needed to employ fertility aids or aphrodisiac potions, therefore Rashi translates *duda'im* as "jasmine," suggesting that Rachel simply wanted a nice, fragrant flower to give to her husband.[109]

That Rachel is desirous of the *duda'im* would suggest that she believes the plant to be a potential fertility aid, not an aphrodisiac. That Leah is willing to part with them, albeit reluctantly, might suggest the same thing. Had Leah thought them to be the basis of a "love potion," she may not have agreed to give them to her sister. The reader will see in

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[105] Sarna, *Genesis* 209.
[106] Speiser 231.
[107] Stol 56-57.
[108] Stol 56.
[109] Rashi to Genesis 30:14.

the exchange that follows that Leah's primary concern is earning the love of her husband. Leah therefore trades her *duda'im* for a night with her husband, producing another son in the process.

Regardless of what purpose the *duda'im* were thought to accomplish, they fail. Once again the reader is reminded that it is God, not a magical herb, which enables conception. Nahum Sarna writes:

> While the text is silent on the reason for the intense interest in the mandrakes on the part of both sisters, the underlying folkloristic associations are undoubtedly present. It is significant that the subsequent narrative tacitly, but effectively, neutralizes this aspect, dismissing the notion that such superstitions have any validity. Leah, who gives up the mandrakes, bears three children; Rachel, who possesses them, remains barren for apparently three more years. Further, both sisters, as well as the Narrator, repeatedly emphasize that all events are by the will of God and under His control. It can hardly be coincidental that God is mentioned seven times in all[110]

In this particular narrative, the *duda'im* serve another purpose; they allow a rare glimpse into the emotional lives of the matriarchs. While it was mentioned in Genesis 29:30 that Jacob loves Rachel more than Leah, and in Genesis 30:1 that Rachel is jealous of her sister's fertility, the sisters rarely speak directly to each other about these issues. From the exchange between the sisters, one learns that Rachel has near-exclusive control over Jacob's sexual activities, and that Leah believes that such control should rightfully be hers as the original wife. Jon Levenson writes:

> The bitterness of Leah's tragic position as the wife Jacob never wanted and never loved is especially poignant in vv. 15-16. She has to bargain with her sister to hire her husband just to sleep with her.[111]

F. Naming as a Means of Telling One's Story

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[110] Sarna, *Genesis* 209.

[111] Jon D. Levenson, "Genesis," in *The Jewish Study Bible* 61.

Because the mandrake incident is one of the few moments in which the wives of Jacob speak to each other, or even out loud, most of the reader's insight into the plight of these two sisters comes from the names of their children. Naming was, and is, an important task following the birth of a child. A child's name was thought to be both a record of the past and a wish for the future. Madeleine Miller and J. Lane write that:

> To them a name was not just a label provided for convenience in distinguishing one person from another. A name was an essential part of the person so named. Names should be appropriate, for he person's name was regarded as a sort of duplicate or counterpart of its bearer; there was a mystical relationship between name and thing named. The name was conceived as influencing its bearer, and the name revealed something to a person who was told it. This was not a unique approach to naming, but one that prevailed among many Near Eastern peoples.[112]

It is significant, therefore, that women in the household often carried out the role of naming. In this text, Leah and Rachel name their own children and the children of their servants. Eve, the first woman, provides names for her children that tell the stories of their births.[113] Hannah names her son Samuel as a reminder that she asked God for a child and was answered.[114] Rachel Havrelock suggests that in these situations "following the birth of a child, the mother encodes the memory of her specific path from barrenness to fertility in the name that she bestows as a legacy to her child."[115]

In spite of the fact that Leah married Jacob first, and would therefore be considered the top of the marital hierarchy, this does not mean that she can expect to receive the love and affection that Jacob gives to Rachel. One learns through the names that she gives to her sons that she hopes to earn Jacob's love through the birth of sons. Her first son is named Reuben, from the root *resh-aleph-hey*, meaning "to see," and the

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[112] Miller 92.
[113] See Genesis 4:1, 2, 25.
[114] See I Samuel 1:20.
[115] Havrelock 157.

word *ben* or "son." One might simply translate Reuben's name as a cry for attention, i.e. "Look, a son!" However, the biblical text provides an additional etymology, saying that God saw her suffering (*on*), and gave her a son so that Jacob would love her.[116]

Her second son, Simeon, also makes use of the word *on*, this time more directly and with the root *shin-mem-ayin*, meaning "to hear." The added etymology is somewhat more straightforward than that attached to Reuben's name, as Leah says that God has heard her suffering and provided her with another son.[117] The name for her third son, Levi, is derived from the root *lamed-vav-heh*, meaning "to accompany." Leah uses this name to express her hope that Jacob will become attached to her following the birth of her third son.[118] Likewise, when Leah gives birth to her sixth and final son, she names him Zebulun, a play on the word *zeved* or "gift," or perhaps the Akkadian *zubullu*, "bridegroom's gift," expressing her hope that Jacob will give her a wedding gift as a reward for her fertility.[119]

In most of her naming statements, Leah invokes God. Although she is constantly calling out for Jacob to recognize her by naming her sons using words such as "look" and "listen" in her son's names, she is also recognizing that the children are a gift from God in themselves. She does not, however, invoke God when naming the sons of Zilpah, her slavewoman. Leah's plaintive tune changes slightly with the birth of her fourth son. Instead of using the naming process to cry out for attention, Leah names her fourth son Judah, from the root *yud-dalet-hey* meaning "to give thanks or praise."[120] The sons that

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[116] Genesis 29:32.
[117] Genesis 29:33.
[118] Genesis 29:34.
[119] Genesis 30:20.
[120] Genesis 29:35.

Zilpah bears for her are called Gad, meaning "fortune," and Asher, meaning "happiness."[121] Her son Isaachar is so named because he is seen as a "reward" (*s'chari*) for having given Zilpah to Jacob in order to bear more children.[122] However, his name is also a play on how he was conceived, as Leah had "hired" (*s'chor*) Jacob for one night, using the *duda'im* as payment to Rachel.[123]

The names Rachel gives to Bilhah's children, and ultimately, to her own, also tell a story. Unlike Leah's names for her slavewoman's sons, Rachel does invoke God when naming Bilhah's children. Instead of a lament at being unloved, the names of Rachel's children record her rivalry with her sister. Rachel Havrelock writes:

> As Bilhah twice gives birth, Rachel has the opportunity to thrust her own jabs at her sister through the names of sons: Dan (a pun on "judge") because "God has *judged* me and has also listened to my plea"; and Naphtali (a pun on "struggle") because a mighty *rivalry* have I waged with my sister."[124]

Likewise, when Rachel finally gives birth to her own biological son, she names him Joseph. The name has a dual etymology. One of its root words, *asaf*, refers to the past, as Rachel says, "God has removed my disgrace [of being barren]" (*asaf Elohim cherpati*).[125] However, Joseph's actual name, *Yosef*, is more closely linked to her second statement "May God add another son for me" (*yosef YHVH li ben acher*).[126]

Over the course of this narrative, Leah also bears a daughter, whom she names Dinah.[127] Rachel Havrelock suggests that the name means "judgment that leads to

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[121] Genesis 30:11, 13.
[122] Genesis 30:18.
[123] Genesis 30:16.
[124] Havrelock 166.
[125] Genesis 30:23.
[126] Genesis 30:24
[127] Genesis 30:21.

justice."[128] This may foreshadow the violent acts and retaliations that will occur in Genesis 34. Unlike her brothers, this child's name has no accompanying etymological statement, although Dinah's name shares its root with that of her half-brother, Dan. This is yet another reminder that the birth of a daughter was not valued as highly as the birth of a son.

The act of naming also reminds the reader of the low status of Bilhah and Zilpah. Although there is never a formal adoption ceremony, where their sons are received on the knees of their adoptive mothers, by naming the sons of the maidservants, Leah and Rachel declare their ownership over the children of their slavewomen.

The names given to Jacob's sons serve several purposes. They record the circumstances of each son's birth. They provide an outlet for each sister to voice her frustration at the other sister's successes and her hope for more children and more success of her own. They also remind the reader that God is present at the conception and birth of a child, and that none of this would be possible without God's opening and closing of the womb. J. Schreiner writes:

> In the names they give their children, Jacob's wives proclaim that Yahweh has seen their misery and heard their prayer, that God has brought justice, bestowed riches and reward, and taken away their shame.[129]

G. Conclusion: Why Teach Leah and Rachel?

More so than the characters discussed in the subsequent chapters, Leah and Rachel regularly appear in Bible study because of their role as Jacob's wives and matriarchs of Israel. However, studying this particular narrative gives the learner insight

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[128] Havrelock 168.
[129] J. Schreiner and G. J. Botterweck, "Yalad," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. 6. 78-9.

into the lives of women in ancient Israel and the surrounding cultures, opening the learner's eyes to their priorities, their status, their struggles and their beliefs. In this sense, studying Genesis 30 provides a good introduction to the study of biblical women.

In this passage, the reader may learn about the various methods that women in ancient Israel or the ancient Near East might have employed in order to combat infertility, bear sons, and thus gain status in their husband's household. These remedies included surrogacy, sympathetic magic, and medicinal herbs. This text also illustrates the various positions a woman might have had in an ancient Israelite household as both primary and secondary wife, female slave and concubine, as well as the rights and responsibilities that went with each position. In this passage, women assert themselves over other women, and also over men, as they attempt to increase the size of their family. When Leah and Rachel are successful, they record their struggles and their triumphs in the names of their children.

Genesis 30 also provides an introduction to one aspect of biblical theology: that of God's promise of fertility and God's control over the reproductive sphere. Although barrenness narratives in the bible are similar to mythologies from the surrounding cultures—in which a period of infertility lends auspiciousness to the eventual birth of a hero—here the miraculous nature of birth is more than a sign of the importance of the child. Rather, it is a message that, although humans play an active role in reproduction, it is God that hears, remembers, and opens the womb.

Chapter 3: I Won't Take This Lying Down—The Story of Tamar

I. Annotated Translation of Genesis 38:1-30

1. At that time,[130] Judah went down[131] from his brothers and fell in with[132] an Adullamite man whose name was Hirah.[133]
2. There Judah saw the daughter of a Canaanite[134] man--whose name was Shua—and he took her as a wife[135] and had intercourse[136] with her.
3. She conceived and bore a son and [he] named[137] him Er.[138]

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[130] *Vayihi ba-et ha-hi*: "At that time," i.e. the same time that Joseph was sold into slavery (E.A. Speiser, *Anchor Bible: Genesis* [New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc, 1964] 297). Robert Alter suggests that the formula for indicating the time is purposefully vague (Alter 214).

[131] *Vayered*: "Went down," meaning from the hill country of Hebron mentioned in Genesis 37:12, 14, 32 (Sarna, *Genesis* 265). It is also possible that "going down" is one way of referring to travel to Egypt, as it is used to describe Joseph's descent into Egyptian slavery in the previous chapter (Alter 214). Commentators note the contrast between Judah going down, away from his brothers, in verse 1 and going up, to the sheepshearing, in verse 11.

[132] *Vayet*: "Bend" or "turn towards" (Holladay 235). It is used in I Samuel 2:3, when the sons of Samuel are "bent" on gain and accept bribes; it is also found in Psalm 119:112, where the psalmist pledges to "turn" his heart towards the observance of God's law. In both a positive and negative sense, it can indicate following a particular way, in this case the ways of Hirah the Adullamite. JPS translates this word as "camped near," while Robert Alter suggests "pitched his tent by," although neither the verb for setting up camp nor the noun for tent appear in this passage (Alter 215). *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* renders this word as "fell in with," which seems most consistent with the connotation of turning towards (Athalya Brenner, "*Vayeshev*," in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* 215).

[133] *Adulami u'shmo Hirah*: Adullam was a Canaanite royal city in the Judean lowlands, northeast of Beit Guvrin. It was captured by Joshua and became part of the "tribal inheritance of Judah," thus it is associated with the Davidic line (Sarna, *Genesis* 265).

[134] *Canaana'i*: Some traditional commentators found Judah's having a Canaanite wife problematic, and thus translated this as "merchant" (Sarna, *Genesis* 265).

[135] *vayikach Yehuda isha*: Literally meaning "to take a wife," this phrase is used in connection with marriage throughout Genesis, which takes place in a society where fathers typically selected wives for their sons (Sarna 266). The word is used throughout the narrative in which Abraham sends his servant Eliezar to find a wife for Isaac (Genesis 24:3, 48; 25:20), as well as in Isaac's instructions to Jacob to take a wife from the daughters of Laban (Genesis 28:1-2). Here it is used both in Judah's marriage and in the marriage he arranges for his son, Er.

[136] *Vayavoh aleha*: As discussed in the previous chapter, *yavoh* is one of several biblical terms for sexual intercourse. This one is used frequently to refer to the act of intercourse that consummates a marriage.

[137] *Vayikra*: While in many biblical narratives, women name their children (See Genesis 4:1-2; 29:32-35; 30:5, 8, 11, 13, 18, 20, 21, 24), here the verb for naming appears in the

4. She conceived and bore another a son and [she] named him Onan.[139]
5. Once again she bore a son and named him Shelah. She was in Chezib when she bore him.[140]
6. Judah took a wife for Er, his firstborn.[141] Her name was Tamar.[142]
7. But Er, Judah's firstborn, was displeasing in the eyes of the Eternal,[143] and the Eternal took his life.

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masculine. Later in the passage, when Onan and Shelah are named, the verb appears in the feminine. This use of pronouns makes it difficult to determine who is doing the naming.

[138] *Er*: Tikva Frymer-Kensky posits that each of Judah's sons has a name that indicates both his potential and his ultimate end: "Er, whose name could have meant 'the energetic one' (from *ur*, 'arise, be awake'), instead does evil (*ra'*) and becomes 'the one who has no issue' (from *'rr*, 'be barren') (Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* 266).

[139] *Onan*: Tikva Frymer-Kensky writes of Onan's name: "Onan, whose name could have meant 'vigor' (from *'wn*, 'manliness, vigor'), becomes instead 'nothingness' (from *'awen*, 'nothing)" (Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* 266). Onan's name is the origin of the word "onanism," a derogatory term for masturbation.

[140] *Shelah*: Tikva Frymer-Kensky draws a connection between Shelah's name and his birth place: "The name of the third son, Shelah, could indicate that he should be her next mate, from *selah*, 'hers,' but the story tells us that he was born in Kezib, from *kzb*, 'false'" (Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* 266). Speiser suggests that this might be the town of Achzib referred to in Joshua 25:44 and Micah 1:14 (Speiser 297).

[141] *b'choro:* "Firstborn." In the ancient Near East it was customary for the firstborn to inherit a double portion of his father's estate (M. Tsevat, "*Bekhor*," in in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. 2. 125). The word *bachor* is a *leitwort* in the narratives of Genesis, where the rights of the firstborn are often subverted by a younger, but supposedly more worthy, candidate (See Genesis 21:1-10; 27:1-40). Here the mention of Er's status may indicate what Onan stands to lose by impregnating his brother's widow. Were Onan to perform the levirate duty, the child he produces would inherit half of Judah's estate. Alternatively, if Er remains without male heirs, Onan might usurp the rights of the *bachor*, and thus inherit two-thirds of the estate (Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women in the Bible* 267).

[142] *Tamar:* The name Tamar, found twice in the *Tanakh*, is used only in the Davidic line (Sarna, *Genesis* 266). *Tamar* is the Hebrew word for date palm, a symbol of the potential for fertility. Tikva Frymer-Kensky notes, however, that "the fertility of the date palm is not assured; it must be pollinated by direct human action" (Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women in the Bible* 266).

[143] *ra b'einei YHVH*: Two of Judah's three sons, Er and Onan, are killed as a divine punishment. The phrase common to these two deaths is *ra b'einei YHVH*, evil or displeasing in the eyes of the Eternal. This phrase, when used to describe a human being in relation to God, describes "conduct that is inherently wrong both religiously and morally" (C. Dohmen and D. Rick, "*Ra*," in in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. 13. 564). It appears in this way in Numbers 22:34, in which Balaam offers to turn back from his mission to curse the Israelites should this be "displeasing" to

8. Judah said to Onan, "Have intercourse with your brother's widow and perform the levirate duty[144] for her, and raise up the seed of your brother."
9. But Onan knew that the seed would not be his, so when he had intercourse with his brother's widow, he wasted [the seed] upon the ground.[145]
10. What Onan did was displeasing in the eyes of the Eternal, and the Eternal took his life also.
11. Then Judah said to Tamar, his daughter-in-law, "Dwell as a widow[146] in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up."[147] For he said: "He might also die like his brothers."[148]

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the Eternal, and in Genesis 28:8 when Esau stops taking Canaanite women as wives because he sees that they are "displeasing" in his father's eyes (See p. 61).

[144] *vayavam otah*: See p. 55.

[145] *shichet artzah*: Although it is often used in a military context, in other instances where human beings are responsible for such acts of destruction, *shachat* "refers exclusively to culpable actions contrary to the divine will." [145] In I Samuel 26:9 and 15, and 2 Samuel 1:14, David uses this word to refer to killing one anointed by God. In Exodus 21:26, it refers to the destruction of the eye of a slave, a condition upon which he must be set free. In Leviticus 19:27, the word is used in the commandment against trimming one's sidelocks, a practice forbidden in Israel. In Proverbs 6:32, it is included in the warning against adultery, a practice with which a man might "destroy" himself, while in Proverbs 11:9, destruction is inflicted upon one's neighbor with evil speech. *Shachat* can also refer to personal corruption, as in Malachi 2:8, where it refers to the corruption of the Levites. Mary Shields writes: "The narrator could have used a word meaning simply to spill or to pour out, and we would have filled in the rest. Instead, the narrator chose the verb *shachat*, which in most of its contexts has connotations of destruction or corruption" (Mary Shields, "'More Righteous than I': The Comeuppance of the Trickster in Genesis 38" in *Are We Amused? Humour about Women in the Bible*, edited by Athalya Brenner [New York: T&T Clark International, 2003] 37).

[146] *shvi almanah veit-avicha*: At this juncture in her adult life, having been married twice already, returning to her father's house as a widow is a form of "social disgrace" (Alter 215). As a levirate widow, Tamar was not free to remarry and remained under Judah's jurisdiction, though not his protection (Richard Kalmin, "Levirate Law," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman. Vol. 4. [New York: Doubleday, 1992] 296). Athalya Brenner adds, "As with Joseph in the previous episode . . . Judah rids himself of a person whose presence vexes him" (Brenner, "*Vayeshev*" 216).

[147] *ad yigdal Shelah b'ni*: It is not clear how old Shelah is at this time or how old he would have to be in order to marry Tamar. Middle Assyrian law dictates that "any surviving brother over ten years old should perform the levirate" (Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* 267). One would also assume that in order to serve as a levirate, he must have reached puberty. Frederick Greenspahn points out that now that Shelah is the sole surviving son of his father "heightens our awareness of Shelah's vulnerability and poses a threat to the whole of Judah's line" (Frederick Greenspahn, *When Brothers Dwell Together: The Preeminence of Younger Siblings in the Hebrew Bible* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1994] 104).

12. A long time passed, and the daughter of Shua—Judah's wife—died. And Judah's mourning period came to an end,[149] and he went up to Timnah[150] to the sheepshearing together with his neighbor Hirah the Adullamite.[151]
13. And Tamar was told:[152] "Look, your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to sheer his sheep."
14. So Tamar removed from herself the clothes of widowhood[153] and covered herself with a veil,[154] and she wrapped herself up and sat at the entrance of *Enayim*[155]—

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[148] *pen yamut gam hu*: The word *pen* means "prevention of a theoretically possible event" or "lest, so that . . . not" (Holladay 293). This word is used in Genesis 3:22, when God banishes Adam and Eve from the Garden so that there will no longer be the possibility for them to eat from the Tree of Life. Here *pen* indicates that Judah is trying to prevent the loss of yet another son.

[149] *vayinachem*. While JPS translates this word as "when his period of mourning was over," *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* uses the more literal translation "and Judah was consoled" (Brenner, "*Vayeshev*" 217). This word refers to either "actual feelings or the simple end of the prescribed period of mourning" (Alter 216). Robert Alter notes that "Judah, who invented the lie that triggered his own father's mourning for a dead son, is bereaved of two sons in rapid sequence" (Alter 215). Alter contrasts the lack of grief in this narrative, comparing it to that of Jacob in the previous chapter, and suggests that this mention of mourning may simply be a device to alert the reader, and Tamar, to Judah's mounting sexual needs (Alter 216).

[150] *Timnah*: Probably a location in the hill country of Judah, which is mentioned in Joshua 15:10, 57 during the conquest of the land (Sarna, *Genesis* 267).

[151] *Al gozzezi tzono*: Mesopotamian documents indicate that the shearing of sheep occurred in the spring and required a massive labor force. The entire process would take as long as a week and a half, during which time the men involved may have been away from their homes (Sarna, *Genesis* 216). When the task was completed, there would be "elaborate festivities." The combination of intense physical labor, the absence of spouses, and excessive feasting and drinking might have explained the presence of prostitutes at a sheepshearing. The fact that Judah has chosen to participate in both the labor and its subsequent festivities "indicates that he is done with the rites of mourning and is perhaps in a holiday mood" (Alter 216).

[152] *Vayugad*: This verb is also used in v. 24, when Judah is told about Tamar's pregnancy. The text does not reveal who delivered these reports to Tamar and Judah. Carol Meyers suggests that women exchanged information during communal tasks such as bread production (See p. 7).

[153] *bigdei almnuta:* The word "widowhood" in the biblical narrative connotes a position of vulnerability. In II Samuel 20:3, David puts several of his concubines into a state referred to as "living widowhood" in which he provides for them but does not cohabit with them, keeping them in a guarded place. In Isaiah 54:4, words of comfort include the promise that, following its restoration, Israel will "remember no more/The shame of your widowhood." The garments worn by a widow are also mentioned in Deuteronomy 24:17, where the Israelites are instructed not to "take a widow's garment in pawn" because a person in such a vulnerable state may not have other clothing to wear.

that is on the road to Timnah—for she saw that Shelah had grown up and she had not been given to him as a wife.

15. And Judah saw her and thought that she was a prostitute,[156] for she had covered her face.
16. So he turned aside[157] on his way and said: "Here, please, let me have intercourse with you" (For he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law).[158] And she said: "What will you give me in exchange for having intercourse with me?"[159]

The biblical narrative does not describe these garments in detail, and there are no specifications as to how long the garments were worn. Nahum Sarna suggests that Tamar may have continued to wear widow's clothing beyond the prescribed period because her levirate obligation had not been fulfilled. Sarna contrasts this extended period of mourning with the brief, or absent, period of mourning that Judah observes for his wife and sons (Sarna, *Genesis* 268).

[154] *Vat'kas b'tzaif v'titalef:* See p. 73.

[155] *Petach Enayim*: The phrase *petach enayim* can be translated either as "the eye opening" or "the entrance to the two wells." Nahum Sarna believes that this name refers to Enam, a village in the territory of Judah (Sarna, *Genesis* 268). For a more in-depth discussion of the significance of this name, see p. 81.

[156] *L'zonah*: The verb *zanah* means "to fornicate," referring to "any sexual relationship of a woman outside the marriage bond or without a formal union" (S. Erlandsson, "*Zanah*," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. 4. 100). *Zonah* is also used to refer to a woman who is unfaithful to her husband, "since she has 'turned away' from her lawful spouse" (Athalya Brenner, *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative* [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985] 79). Tikva Frymer-Kensky adds, "A wife or daughter who misbehaves sexually (or any other way) is said to be *znh* (faithless); but a prostitute, *zonah*, is one who always acts without constraint" (Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* 270). The word *zonah* is used to describe Tamar, Rahab (Joshua 2:1; 6:17, 22, 25) and the mother of Jepthah (Judges 11:1), as well as nameless *zonot* that appear in 1 Kings (3:16; 22:38), and throughout the book of Proverbs (6:26; 7:10; 23:27; 29:3) (S. Erlandsson, "*Zanah*," 99). This term is applied to Israel's own infidelity in both the Pentateuch and the prophets. One example of this is found in the book of Hosea, when God commands the prophet to take himself a "wife of whoredom," *eishet z'nunim*, in order to understand the impact of the Israelites' own infidelity to God (Hosea 1:2). For more on the role of prostitutes in the ancient Near East, see p. 68.

[157] *Vayet*: At the beginning of this passage, Judah "turned aside" in order to establish his own family. Here, though he is unaware of it, he is turning aside to ensure that his family will be continued. Conversely, Mary Shields suggests that this verb "has the connotation of deviating from a path of loyalty or righteousness" (Shields 42). Mieke Bal posits that this is a pattern in Judah's life:

> The deviation from the path is itself a sign of the deviation that Judah, already guilty of *selling* his brother, is going to endorse: the *buying* of his daughter-in-law. We will have to follow this specialist in family business (Bal 96).

[158] *ki lo yada ki kalato hi*: The narrator mentions twice that Tamar covered her face, and twice that Judah did not recognize Tamar. It was important to the narrator to emphasize that Judah, the progenitor of David, did not engage in forbidden sexual activity. In

17. And he said: "I will send a kid from my flock."[160] And she said: "Only if you give me a pledge until you send it."
18. And he said: "What pledge should I give you?" And she said, "Your seal, cord, and the staff that is in your hand."[161] He gave them to her, and he had intercourse with her, and she conceived by him.
19. Then she rose, and went on her way, and took off her veil, and dressed in her widow's garments.[162]
20. Then Judah sent the kid from his flock via his neighbor the Adullamite, [in order to] take back the pledge from the hand of the woman. But he could not find her.
21. So he asked the people of that place, saying: "Where is the 'public woman'[163] in Enaim, by the road?" And they said: "There is no 'public woman' there."

Leviticus 18:17, sexual relations between father-in-law and daughter-in-law are prohibited.

[159] *ma-titen-li ki tavo alai*: This is the first time Tamar speaks in this narrative (Johanna W. H. Bos, "Out of the Shadows: Genesis 38; Judges 4:17-22; Ruth 3," *Semeia.* 42 (1988): 43). This places emphasis on the significance of the transaction, and imbues her question with a double meaning. Mary Shields writes:

> The question itself is ironic in two senses . . . Judah is seeking only to take rather than give at this moment and . . . it is a subtle reminder to the reader that Judah has not *given* Tamar the sexual partner she was due (Shields 43).

[160] *gadei-izim*: Nechama Aschkenasy posits that the goat is also a symbol of what Tamar really wants from Judah: a child that will be recognized as his heir. She writes, "Judah's 'kid from the flock' is literal, Tamar's metaphorical" (Nehama Aschkenasy, "Tamar at the Crossroads." *Woman at the Window: Biblical Tales of Oppression and Escape* [Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998] 88). See p. 80 for more about the symbolism of the goat in the Joseph cycle.

[161] *hotmecha u'p'tilcha u'matteh*: See p. 77.

[162] *vatakam . . . v'tilbash*: The use of these four verbs in quick succession is what Mary Shields refers to as the "telescoping of time" (Shields 36). While the negotiations with Tamar are drawn out, the actual act is accomplished quickly. The same is true of the earlier story of Tamar's marriage and widowhood. She is taken in marriage, her husband dies, she is given as a levirate wife to his brother, he is displeasing to God, and he dies.

[163] *kedesha*: This is possibly the most difficult word in the passage to translate. JPS translates this as "cult prostitute" and Robert Alter as "cult-harlot," indicating that the prostitute for which Hirah is looking is part of a ritual cult or temple. Some scholars suggest that Tamar was mistaken for a hierodule, another word for a temple functionary who may have performed sexual tasks for ritual or financial purposes. However, as there is little evidence that sacred prostitution existed in ancient Israel, it is also possible that Hirah was just using a more polite word, thus *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* translates *kedesha* as "courtesan." Tikva Frymer-Kensky suggests "public woman," as most sexually unavailable women would not be found on the side of the road. She notes that public women could be hired for many female duties, not just sexual intercourse (Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "Tamar 1," in *Women in Scripture* 162). For more about the differences between a *zonah* and a *kedesha*, see p. 68.

22. So he returned to Judah and said: "I could not find her, and the people of the places said, 'There was no courtesan there.'"
23. And Judah said, "Let her take them, so that we do not become a laughingstock.[164] Look, I sent the kid and you did not find her."
24. About three months later, Judah was told: "Your daughter-in-law Tamar has prostituted herself, and what's more, she has become pregnant by prostitution."[165] And Judah said, "Take her out to be burned."[166]
25. As she was being brought out, she sent [a message][167] to her father-in-law, saying, "I am pregnant by the man to whom these belong." She added. "Please see if you can recognize[168] these: whose seal, staff and cord are these?"

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[164] *labuz*: The Jewish Publication Society translates *labuz* as "laughingstock," as does Robert Alter (Alter 218) and *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (Brenner, "*Vayeshev*" 218). However, in nearly all other places where this word is used it is translated as "contempt." In II Kings 19:21, the prophet Isaiah condemns King Hezekiah, saying, "Fair Maiden Zion despises (*bazah*) you." A verse in Proverbs warns that, "A twisted mind is held up to contempt (*labuz*)" (Proverbs 12:8). In this book, a foolish man is known as *bazu* (Proverbs 1:7). Conversely, the narrator of Proverbs warns the reader not to "speak contemptuously" (*baz*) about those around him (Proverbs 11:12) or "despise" (*baz*) one's fellow (Proverbs 14:4). In Psalms 31:19, the psalmist hopes that God will silence those who speak against the righteous "with arrogance and contempt (*vabuz*)." Therefore the word *labuz* has some connotation of looking down upon or scorning one's neighbor with speech, a connotation slightly stronger than being the butt of a joke. Robert Alter suggests the reader interpret Judah's concerns as, "Lest it become known that I have given such valuable objects for such fleeting pleasure" (Alter 218). Although here the translation defers to that of respected biblical commentators, one could translate *labuz* as "an object of scorn or contempt."

[165] *Zantah. . .zinunim*. Unlike the previous paragraph, where Hirah goes out of his way to avoid using the term for common prostitute, here it is used twice. Writes Robert Alter, "The very term that Hirah fastidiously avoided is twice thrust into Judah's attention" (Alter 218).

[166] *Hotzi'u-ha v'tisraf*: While in English this appears as a full sentence, in Hebrew this death sentence is only two words long. Robert Alter suggests that this displays "the precipitous speed of Judah's judgment, without the slightest reflection or call for evidence" (Alter 219). He adds that the punishment of burning was reserved for only the "most atrocious crimes" (Alter 219).

[167] *shalcha*. The verb *lishloah*, "to send," is used throughout this narrative in reference to the transaction between Judah and Tamar. Judah offers to "send" Tamar a goat from his flocks in verse 17; he "sends" Hirah the Adullamite to make good on his pledge in verses 20 through 23; and finally, Tamar "sends" Judah his own staff, seal and cord, with a message asking him to identify them as they belong to the man who impregnated her. Earlier in the Joseph story, Judah and his brothers "send" Joseph's bloodstained coat to their father in order to make Jacob think his beloved son has died (Genesis 37:32).

[168] *haker-na*: The verb *l'haker* means "to recognize." It is used in Genesis 37:32, Jacob's sons ask him to look at a torn garment to determine whether or not it belongs to his son.

26. And Judah recognized [them] and said, "She is more righteous than I,[169] because I did not give her my son Shelah." And he was not intimate with her again.[170]
27. When it came time for her to give birth, behold, there were twins[171] in her womb!
28. During her childbirth, [one child] put out his hand and the midwife took [his hand] and tied a red [thread] to his hand, saying, "This one came out first."
29. But then it pulled back his hand and, behold, out came his brother, and she said, "What a breach you have made of yourself!" And he was called by the name Peretz."[172]

This same verb is used in the next verse in the passage above, when Judah recognizes that the staff, seal and cord belong to him.

[169] *tzadka mimeni*: Tikvah Frymer-Kensky suggests two possible translations of this phrase, the usual translation "She is more righteous than I," or "She is righteous. It is from me," "it" referring to her pregnancy and her child (Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* 274). The word is probably not be referring to Tamar's character, but rather the fact that she was "right" in forcing Judah to recognize and fulfill his obligation to her. Robert Alter adds:

> The verb used, *tsadaq*, is a legal term: it is she who has presented the convincing evidence. But in the next clause Judah also concedes that he has behaved unjustly toward Tamar, so that in a sense her taking the law into her own hands, however unconventional the act, is vindicated by his words (Alter 219).

Johanna Bos adds that this the use of the word *tzadka* is "high praise for one whom he once sent home as a jinxed barren wife" (Bos 47). Only three persons are called by this epithet in the Genesis narrative: Tamar, Abraham (Genesis 15:6, where it is translated as, "God reckoned it to his merit") and Noah (Genesis 6:9, the translation reads "Noah was a righteous man"). Mary Shields writes:

> Here a woman, and a mere widowed daughter-in-law at that (a figure with very little rights in society), is accorded the same designation as the central recipient of the divine promise, Abraham (Shields 44).

[170] *Lo-yasaf od l'da-tah*: One should note that the verb *l'da-at*, meaning "knowledge" and often referring to sexual intimacy, appears only here and in v. 16, where it is used to let the reader know that Judah was unaware of his daughter-in-law's identity. Throughout this narrative, the verb used for sexual intimacy is *lavoh*, literally, "to come." *Lavoh* is used for Judah's relationship to his wife and for his sons' relationships to Tamar. It is used to describe Judah's sexual encounter with Tamar. Johanna Bos writes:

> The use of the root *yda* for sexual intimacy in v. 26, and for the first time in a story rich in descriptions of sexual activity, is striking. Judah did not know Tamar; now that he knows her, the need for further knowledge is over (Bos 47).

[171] *t'omim*: From the word *ta'am*, meaning "to be double" (Brown-Driver-Briggs 1061). Another instance of twins appears in Genesis 25:24. That set of twins, born to Isaac and Rebecca, also engages in an intrauterine battle to be born first.

[172] *partzah . . . Peretz*: "Breach" or "rupture" (Holladay 298). While here this refers to a breach made during childbirth, elsewhere *peretz* refers to a military breach, as in 2 Samuel 5:20, where David's victory over his enemies is compared to the "breach" of a dam. I Kings 11:27, when Solomon repairs a "breach" made on the city of his father.

30. Afterwards, his brother came out—the one with the red thread on his hand—and [he] called his name *Zerach*.[173]

II. Analysis

A. Introduction

Throughout the Torah, the Israelites are enjoined to care for the widow, the orphan and the stranger. In Exodus 22:21, the Israelites are commanded: "You shall not ill-treat any widow or orphan," while in Deuteronomy 24:17, the commandment reads: "You shall not subvert the rights of the stranger or the fatherless; you shall not take a widow's garment in pawn." These commandments most likely came into being because such persons were considered unable to protect themselves from exploitation. Women had no rights of inheritance; only through giving birth to a son could a woman secure her economic socioeconomic status in case of her husband's death. The childless widow was especially vulnerable, as she was dependent on her late husband's family for support.

This may have been the reason for the institution of levirate marriage, in which another man from the late husband's family, usually a brother, would marry his brother's widow. The sons, or at least the first son, would be named for the deceased brother and would inherit his father's portion of the family estate. This would guarantee a secure socioeconomic position for the widow, and also had some economic advantages for her husband's family (see below). The act of levirate marriage is also referred to in Deuteronomy 25:9 as "building up his brother's house."

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[173] *Zerach*: The color red is indicated in this passage by the word *shanee*, meaning "crimson" or "scarlet" (Holladay 379). The root *zrh*, meaning "to shine," is used throughout the Tanakh to refer to sunrise, as in Judges 9:33; 2 Samuel 23:4; Jonah 4:8; Job 9:7; and Ecclesiastes 1:5. *Zerach* may have thus gotten his name because the color of the thread was similar to that of the rising sun.

It is when this institution fails that a heroine, Tamar, emerges. In an "interlude" in the midst of the Joseph cycle, Joseph's brother Judah takes Tamar as a wife for his son Er. Er dies without having fathered a son; yet his brother, Onan, refuses to perform the levirate obligation. Judah sends Tamar back to her father's house, promising that one day he will give her his youngest son, Shelah, as a husband. Neither party is offered the option of being released from the levirate obligation. Therefore, Tamar is not permitted to marry outside of Judah's clan.

After some time Tamar, perhaps noting the insincerity of Judah's promise, conspires to make her father-in-law fulfill the levirate obligation himself. Covering her face with a veil, Tamar places herself in Judah's path. Unable to recognize her as his daughter-in-law, Judah propositions Tamar for sexual intercourse. She agrees to do so in exchange for several items that she can later identify as belonging to Judah so that, when Tamar becomes pregnant by this act, she will not be punished for her perceived indiscretion. The story ends with Tamar giving birth to twin sons.

While the reader may believe that Genesis 38 is simply a digression from the greater Joseph narrative, there are several linguistic and symbolic threads that run through this story that are also present throughout the later chapters of Genesis, reminding the reader that this narrative serves an important purpose. It is from Judah's tribe that the Israelite monarchy will emerge, and it is through this narrative that one learns of the birth of Peretz, an ancestor of King David.

It is remarkable that this childless widow, who was probably not an Israelite, through deception and manipulation of her more powerful father-in-law, is able to assert her rights as a levirate widow. Although he is initially prepared to burn his daughter-in-

law for being indiscreet, upon learning that her intention was to make his family fulfill their levirate obligation to her, Judah himself calls her *tzadka*, "righteous."[174] Generations later, Tamar is included in the list of women in the Book of Ruth who "built up the house of Israel."[175]

In order to better understand Tamar's actions, it is important to provide some background about the plight of the childless widow, the purpose of the levirate obligation, and the role of prostitutes in ancient Israel and the ancient Near East. These are the questions that guide the analysis of this text:

- What was the purpose of levirate marriage and how was this practice carried out in the ancient Near East?
- What did Er and Onan do that was displeasing to God?
- What is the significance of speech patterns in this narrative?
- What is the difference between *zonah* and *kedesha*? How was prostitution practiced in the Israelite community and the ancient Near East? Did the institution of cultic prostitution exist?
- For what purpose did women wear veils in the ancient Near East?
- What is the significance of the staff, seal and cord that Judah gives to Tamar in pledge?
- What are the motifs and symbols that connect this story to the greater Joseph narrative?

B. The Practice of Levirate Marriage in the Bible and the Ancient Near East

When Er dies without leaving a legitimate heir, Judah instructs his younger son, Onan, "Go to your brother's wife and perform your duty by her as a brother-in-law (*v'yivam otah*) and provide offspring (*v'hakem zerah*) for your brother."[176] The root *yud-*

[174] Genesis 38:26.
[175] Ruth 4:11.
[176] Genesis 38:8.

bet-mem may come from the Ugaritic for "in-law," which in some cases also means "progenitor."[177]

Although Leviticus states twice that brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law may not marry,[178] an exception is made in Deuteronomy for the case of levirate marriage:

> When brothers dwell together and one of them dies and leaves no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married to a stranger, outside the family. Her husband's brother shall unite with her: he shall take her as a wife and perform the levir's duty (*yayibmah*). The first son that she bears shall be accounted to the dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out in Israel.[179]

In the case of a childless widow, the deceased husband's brother must step in and produce children on behalf of his brother.

The institution of levirate marriage was not an Israelite invention. The custom may have been adopted from the Canaanites, although comparable arrangements are mentioned in Hittite, Nuzi, Ugaritic, and Middle Assyrian legal documents. Aside from producing legitimate heirs to the deceased, the purpose of this institution in these cultures may have been to "maintain the investment" that the patriarch had made in paying a bride-price for this woman. By giving her to another of his sons, he would not have to purchase another bride for that son. The levirate marriage also provided protection to the woman, who by herself had no social standing or rights of inheritance.[180]

Levirate marriage might also have served to maintain the landholdings that belonged to the patriarch, which may explain why the Deuteronomic law states that this

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[177] E. Kutsch, "*Ybm*," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. 5. 370.
[178] See Leviticus 18:16; 20:21.
[179] Deuteronomy 25:5-6.
[180] Jeffrey Tigay, *Deuteronomy: The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996) 483.

practice was followed specifically when two brothers dwell together.[181] In the Hittite community, there was the additional concern of keeping inherited landholdings in the family as, in contrast to Israelite society, widows were allowed to inherit their husband's property. If a widow could inherit her husband's property and then remarry at will, the patriarch stood to lose a considerable amount of his landholdings.[182]

In early Hindu laws, levirate unions were meant to produce an heir, and did not have to result in a permanent union.[183] Although it is not explicitly stated in Genesis 38 that the two would marry as opposed to simply producing an heir for the deceased, it is made clearer in the Deuteronomy passage, and also later in this passage in reference to Shelah, that the brother would take the widow as his wife, and that only the first child would be considered that of the deceased.[184]

In addition to maintaining family property and providing care for the levirate widow, levirate marriage served a spiritual function. Jeffrey Tigay writes:

> In biblical times it was believed that dead people's spirits continue a kind of shadowy existence in Sheol (the netherworld, beneath the earth), and that the living could assist them in various ways. Many of these methods involved keeping a deceased man's name present on earth, thus perpetuating his spirit's contact with the living.[185]

One way of keeping a man's name alive was through bearing children, who in one way or another would preserve the "name" of their father. While in the Bible there are no instances in which the child of a levirate union is given the actual name of the deceased, there was a belief that the name would be preserved and repeated whenever the child was

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[181] Tigay, *Deuteronomy* 483.
[182] E. Kutsch, "*Ybm*" 372-3.
[183] Tigay, *Deuteronomy* 483.
[184] E. Kutsch, "*Ybm*" 371.
[185] Tigay, *Deuteronomy* 482.

called "so-and-so son of X."[186] The transmission of property to a male heir also perpetuated the use of one's name, as the property would be called "property of so-and-so son of X."[187]

Because usually only a son can inherit his father's wealth, a childless widow could potentially end up destitute. Therefore, in addition to preserving the name of the deceased, a son produced by a levirate union would ensure the economic security of his mother. It is unclear in the biblical passages whether *yibum* would need to be performed in a case in which a couple had given birth only to daughters, although the right of females to inherit is discussed both in the Bible and Rabbinic literature.[188]

The institution of levirate marriage also helped women to live up to societal expectation by enabling her to have a child in her widowhood, as Richard Kalmin writes:

> Society allows a young woman only two proper roles. She is either an unmarried virgin in her father's house or a faithful, child-producing wife in her husband's home or her husband's family's home. Through the levirate, society avoids a sociological misfit, the young childless widow. The levirate not only continues the line of the deceased, it reaffirms the young widow's place in the home of her husband's family.[189]

Conversely, levirate unions helped the deceased to avoid a category equally unacceptable among men of this time and place. Men were also valued by their ability to procreate,

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[186] Tigay, *Deuteronomy* 482.
[187] Tigay, *Deuteronomy* 482.
[188] In Numbers 27:1-11; 36:1-12, the daughters of Zelophechad appear before Moses and challenge the notion that women are not permitted to inherit their father's landholdings. God decides that because Zelophechad had no sons, his daughters may inherit his property. However, they must marry within their father's clan so that the tribe of Manasseh will not lose any of its landholdings. In the Babylonian Talmud, having either a son or a daughter with one's husband makes the levirate obligation unnecessary (B. Bava Batra 109b).
[189] Richard Kalmin, "Levirate Law," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 4. 297.

especially their ability to father sons. A situation in which a man died without having children was perhaps just as awful as that of a woman who lived without having them.

Biblical incidents of levirate marriage occur only in Genesis 38 and in the book of Ruth. The Deuteronomy and Ruth passages offer an alternative to levirate marriage, should the deceased man's brother refuse to fulfill the obligation. It is in this loophole that one finds another example of the importance of the concept of *banah bayit*, the building of the ancestral house:

> But if the man does not want to marry his brother's widow, his brother's widow shall appear before the elders in the gate and declare, 'My husband refuses to establish a name in Israel for his brother; he will not perform the duty of a levir.' The elders of his town shall then summon him and talk to him. If he insists, saying, 'I do not want to marry her,' his brother's widow shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, pull the sandal off his foot, spit in his face, and make this declaration: Thus shall be done to the man who will not build up his brother's house (*asher lo yivneh et bayit achiv*).[190]

This procedure is carried out in the book of Ruth, when Boaz approaches a more immediate redeemer and asks him to release himself from his levirate obligation so that Boaz can marry Ruth. The man agrees, because he does not want to jeopardize his own estate by taking a new wife.[191] However, for whatever reason, neither Onan, Shelah, nor Tamar was given the option to absolve themselves from their levirate obligations in Genesis 38. The option for release from the levirate obligation may have been a later amendment to the original law.

Unlike a widow with children, the levirate widow is not permitted to remarry outside of the clan, unless the *levir* performs a ritual that releases her. This state of attachment is called *ziqa*, and its rules differ from that of a single or betrothed woman or

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[190] Deuteronomy 25:7-9. For a discussion on what it means to build up one's house in biblical literature, see p. 118.
[191] See Ruth 4-10.

a widow with children.[192] However, children produced during a union that violates the levirate marriage are not considered illegitimate.[193]

The levirate obligation may have been passed on to the next brother in order of birth, although Frederick Greenspahn argues that there is no evidence for this as a requirement, as it was simply important for the widow to remain in her husband's family.[194] In Middle Assyrian laws, the widow's father in law may marry the widow himself, give her to another son, or give her to her husband's son by another wife.[195] A widow in the Hittite community could marry her late husband's brother, father, or nephew, even though these relations were considered incest in all other circumstances. If there was no brother available, the widow's father-in-law was also an acceptable candidate for fulfilling the levirate obligation, according to Hittite laws.[196]

Knowledge of how the levirate obligation was fulfilled in ancient Israel and the ancient Near East helps the reader to understand how the various characters in this story might have felt about fulfilling it. While it may have been in Judah's best interest to have Tamar marry one of his other sons instead of releasing her to marry outside of his family, it was Tamar who stood to lose the most if the levirate obligation was not fulfilled. That the levirate union would produce an heir for Er also explains why Onan may not have wanted to impregnate Tamar, as with Er gone, Onan stood to inherit a larger portion of his father's property. When Tamar comes to realize that the surviving men of her husband's family do not have her best interests at heart, she decides to take matters into

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[192] Kalmin 296.
[193] Kalmin 296.
[194] Greenspahn 52.
[195] E. Kutsch, "*Ybm*" 372-3.
[196] Sarna, *Genesis* 266.

her own hands, in order to ensure that she will not remain in the vulnerable state of a childless widow indefinitely.

C. *Ra b'einei YHVH*: "Evil in YHWH's Eyes"

Both Er and Onan die as a result of a divine punishment; both are called *ra b'einei YHVH*, evil in the eyes of God.[197] While Er's sin is not made explicitly clear to us, Onan's death occurs after he commits the sin of *shichet artzah*, spilling his seed on the ground, during intercourse with Tamar. The impact of this act is, in part, indicated by the use of the word *shichet*, which literally means "to destroy," and may also have connotations of corruption, ruin, or spoilage.[198] Over the centuries, both Jewish and Christian commentators have looked upon this as the first recorded instance of masturbation and—because of the disastrous results for Onan—they interpret this act as a sin against God. In fact, one term used for this behavior is "onanism."

However, both medieval and modern commentators suggest that Onan's crime was not masturbation in itself. In *Genesis Rabbah*, the Rabbis suggest that Er and Onan are guilty of the same sin, of "threshing within and winnowing without," i.e. the practice of *coitus interruptus*.[199] In the Babylonian Talmud, Rabbi Eliezer counters that in certain situations *coitus interruptus* is permissible, and therefore the sin of Er and Onan must have been that of "unnatural intercourse," presumably oral or anal sex. While their sin may have been the same, the Talmud records different motivation for the spilling of seed.

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[197] Genesis 38:7, 10.
[198] Holladay 366.
[199] *Genesis Rabbah* 85:5.

Whereas Onan did not want to produce a son that might jeopardize his own inheritance, Er simply did not want to mar Tamar's beauty by impregnating her.[200]

Gale Yee suggests that the fatal consequences of non-procreative sex appear Genesis 38, and its related commentaries, as a means of maintaining the social order. Just as it was important to glorify women's household and reproductive roles to maintain the social order, it was also important to denigrate the act of masturbation, so that men would not become sexually self-reliant and thus neglect their own reproductive, familial and societal obligations.[201]

However, many contemporary commentators now argue that Onan's sin was neither masturbation nor the spilling of seed during intercourse; rather it was his refusal to fulfill the levirate obligation as he was commanded by God and by his father. Robert Alter suggests than Onan refuses to fulfill the levirate obligation because he is "troubled by the role of sexual proxy, which creates a situation in which the child he begets will be legally considered his dead brother's offspring" as is made clear by the reason given for his spilling of seed in v. 9.[202] He also may not wish to be obligated to provide financial support to Tamar and the child.[203] Whatever his reasoning, his refusal to engage in procreative intercourse with Tamar transforms any sexual contact they may have had into an inappropriate relationship, since their intercourse was not in service of the levirate obligation.[204]

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[200] Babylonian Talmud *Yevamot* 34b.
[201] Gale A Yee, " 'Oooooh, Onan!': *Geshlechtsgeshcicte* and Women in the Biblical World," *Are We Amused? Humour about Women in the Bible*, ed. Athalya Brenner (New York: T&T Clark International, 2003) 109.
[202] Alter 215.
[203] Levenson, "Genesis," in *The Jewish Study Bible* 77.
[204] Sarna, *Genesis* 267.

While the reader knows that Er and Onan died as a divine punishment, Judah does not have this valuable piece of information. He therefore makes the assumption that Tamar is the cause of his sons' deaths. It is possible that Judah believes Tamar is a "black widow," and that it is her actions, and not those of his sons, that resulted in their deaths. Johanna Bos writes:

> Judah holds Tamar responsible or at least is suspicious of her responsibility for the deaths of his sons. When he sends her home, he thinks to act in the best interest of his family and of himself, if not in that of Tamar.[205]

Whatever his intentions, it is Judah's failure to act in Tamar's best interest that leads her to formulate her plan to deceive him and thus force him to fulfill the levirate obligation. That Onan and Judah both act selfishly puts Tamar's later behavior in context, making it clear that Tamar acted as she did because she did not trust anyone else to provide for her needs.

D. Patterns of Speech, Thought and Action

The above discussions of the institution of levirate marriage and the sin of Onan shed light on the traditional roles that men and women were expected to fulfill in the event of the death of one's husband, brother, or son. The patterns of speech found in this narrative show the reader how each character in this narrative responded to his or her prescribed role. Speech and actions are portrayed in this narrative in such a way that communicates the passage of time, the importance of specific actions, and who has control over the situation.

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[205] Bos 44.

For instance, the setup to this story unfolds: Judah leaves his brothers, sets up camp, sees the daughter of Shua, marries her, and cohabits with her. Judah initiates all these actions. The daughter of Shua, in turn, conceives and bears three sons in quick succession. Judah's unnamed wife is referred to only in regards to her parentage, marriage, childbirth and death. Mary Shields adds, "In patriarchal culture women are esteemed primarily for their ability to produce male children. Since the daughter of Shua fills that function, nothing more need be said of her."[206] The descriptions of both Judah's marriage and the marriages of his sons clearly portray Judah as the patriarch of his family. Having successfully arranged his own marriage, Judah also arranges Er's marriage to Tamar and, later, to Onan. When these two actions result in tragedy, Judah orders Tamar to return to her father's house. Tamar is the object and not the subject of these three transactions. According to Nechama Ashkenasy, this objectification of Tamar suggests not only the power and influence of Judah's family, but also the weakness of the family from which he has taken Tamar:

> Tamar is not 'given' in marriage by her father, but is 'taken' by Judah as a bride for his son, as if the woman has no father or family to negotiate for her. Tamar's father is referred to only when it befits Judah, and when his home becomes an attractive solution to Judah's problem. Judah thus accomplishes two goals: by sending Tamar away to a paternal home that never represented strong authority, Judah still has a tight grip over the woman. At the same time, the looser structure of Tamar's original family might lead the young woman astray and thus eventually offer Judah an alternative course of action, more desirable to him than giving Tamar as wife to Shelah.[207]

Judah is the only person who speaks in the first part of this narrative. His words are all in the form of commands. He orders Onan to perform the levirate obligation and then orders Tamar to return to her father's house. Like her two husbands, Tamar allows

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[206] Shields 35.
[207] Aschkenasy 82.

Judah to speak for her and act on her behalf. Even when Tamar arranges to be in Judah's path when he goes to Timnah for the sheepshearing, it is Judah who initiates the sexual transaction.

It is at this moment Tamar speaks for the first time. She makes three crucial statements in which she requests a fee, she demands a pledge, and she indicates what she would like that pledge to be. Through these statements, Tamar ensures that if she becomes pregnant, she will be able to identify Judah as the father of her child and thus save herself from punishment. When her pregnancy is discovered, Tamar responds to Judah's death sentence—another command—by making him aware of his responsibilities towards her, both as a father-in-law and as the father of her child.

While both death and sexual intercourse are major events in this narrative, the narrator uses neither extra time nor extra words to discuss these occurrences. Judah and his wife follow the familiar pattern of marriage, cohabitation, conception and birth. Tamar and her husband's have the opposite pattern of marriage, displeasing behavior, and death. Judah's wife dies and his period of mourning ends, enabling him to engage in a sexual encounter with Tamar, the negotiations for which are more drawn out than the years of activity that precede them. However, once the nature of the transaction has been agreed upon, the encounter itself progresses very quickly: he gives her the items she requested (*vayiten lah*), he sleeps with her (*vayavo aleha*), and she conceives by him (*vatahar lo*), she gets up (*vatakam*), goes on her way (*vatelech*), she takes off her veil (*vatasar tzaifah*), and puts on her widow's garments (*vatilbash bigdei al'm'nutah*).[208]

[208] Genesis 38:18-19.

Likewise, when Judah discovers Tamar's pregnancy, he sentences her to death in two words: "take [her and let her be] burned" (*hotziuhah v'tisraf*).[209]

A unique element of this narrative is that the reader is made aware of the thoughts and motivations of the major characters. Onan spills his seed because he "knows" (*yadah*) that the seed will be counted as Er's, not his.[210] Judah sends Tamar back to her father's house because he "says to himself" (*amar*) that Shelah will also die if he cohabits with Tamar.[211] Tamar concocts a scheme to cohabit with Judah because she "sees" (*ra'atah*) that Shelah is grown and yet has been withheld from her as a levirate spouse.[212] Twice the narrator emphasizes that Judah's perception of Tamar is altered because she has covered her face: first, he "thinks" (*vayech 'sheveha*) that she is a prostitute; then he "does not know" (*lo yada*) that she is his daughter-in-law.[213] Finally, before Judah states that Tamar is right in her actions, he "recognizes" (*vayaker*) his staff, seal and cord, and thus, his own culpability in the matter.[214] This emphasis on motivation may be necessary in order to assure the reader that none of these reprehensible behaviors—spilling seed, failing to protect a levirate widow, and seducing one's father-in-law— are without good reason.

It is significant to note how Tamar is referred to throughout this passage. In v. 6, she is referred to as *isha*, "a wife," for Er before we learn her name, Tamar. In vv. 8 and 9, Judah and Onan refer to her as *eshet achicha/ achiv*, "your/his brother's wife." In v. 11, the narrator refers to Tamar by name but also as *kalato*, reminding the reader that she

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[209] Genesis 38:24.
[210] Genesis 38:9.
[211] Genesis 38:11.
[212] Genesis 38:14.
[213] Genesis 38: 15-16.
[214] Genesis 38: 26.

is Judah's daughter-in-law. The narrator continues to refer to her as *Tamar* while describing her return to her father's house and her plan to remind her father-in-law of his obligation to her, because she has not been offered to Shelah as *isha* in v. 14.

When Judah comes across Tamar's path in v. 15, he thinks she is a *zonah*, a prostitute, and addresses her only as "you" throughout their negotiations. The narrator reminds the reader that she is indeed Judah's *kalato*, "daughter-in-law" in v. 16. During the sexual exchange, neither party is referred to by name. Hirah the Adullamite knows he is looking for an *isha* in v. 20, and when he does not find her he refers to her as a *kadesha*, rather than a common prostitute, in v. 21. When he reports back to Judah, he simply calls the woman "her," as does Judah when he advises Hirah to let the matter go and avoid further embarrassment. Perhaps this drawing out of Hirah's search for the local prostitute, as well as his report back to Judah, shows that either Hirah is more thorough in his investigations than Judah or that Judah and his friend care more about the honor of a prostitute—or more likely, getting his pledged items back—than Judah does for the honor of his own daughter-in-law. Hirah's role in the narrative is also to answer the reader's question: how did Tamar hold on to such important items as Judah's staff, seal and cord for three months?

Another crucial question that is answered by a supplementary character is: how did Judah learn of Tamar's pregnancy? The anonymous voice that informs Judah of his daughter-in-law's indiscretion refers to Tamar as *Tamar kalatecha*, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar." This is the first time Tamar's name is spoken aloud in this passage, and in response, Judah continues to refer to Tamar only by pronoun as he orders her to be burned. She in turn, refers to him as "the man," *ish*, when she explains that it is the owner

of the staff, seal and cord she possesses that is the father of her child(ren). She does not display the items publicly where they can be identified as Judah's, rather she sends them to him directly and depends on his conscience. Even when Judah recognizes the rightness or righteousness of her actions, he still fails to refer to her by name.

Thus, the patterns of speech in this passage show Tamar's transition from a passive character to an active character. At the beginning of the passage, her silence and inaction portray her as a piece of property, one that can be taken in marriage, passed from one son to another, and disposed of at will. Over the course of the narrative, Tamar finds her voice and demands what is rightfully hers. Judah can only respond to Tamar's assertiveness by calling her "righteous" (*tzadka*).[215]

E. Sacred and Secular Prostitution in the Bible and the Ancient Near East

Although by the end of the narrative Tamar is able to verbally confront her father-in-law, she first ensures her survival through a dangerous course of action. Knowing that Judah will be attending the upcoming sheep shearing, Tamar places herself in his path, where he mistakes her for a prostitute and arranges to sleep with her. It may be shocking to the modern reader that Tamar and Judah engage in such behavior and still, ultimately, find their place in the tribes of Israel and the lineage of King David. It is only as a prostitute, however, that Tamar is able to achieve what she cannot achieve as a levirate widow: a son to continue Judah's line.

Two words are used for prostitute in this passage: *zonah* and *kadesha*. *Zonah* refers to prostitution as one might understand it today—a women who exchanges sexual

[215] Genesis 38:26.

favors for goods or services. Elaine Goodfriend writes, "Israelite society's attitude towards prostitution was decidedly negative; yet despite legislation intended to outlaw this institution . . . the prostitute seems to have been tolerated."[216] In fact, it is primarily in legal texts related to Temple worship that prostitution is explicitly prohibited. In Leviticus 21:7, priests are forbidden from taking prostitutes as wives, while in v. 9, the daughters of priests who engage in prostitution are "put to the fire." Even the wages of a prostitute are considered unclean, as one is forbidden to bring the "fee of a prostitute" (*etnan zonah*) into the Temple for the purpose of fulfilling a vow.[217] However, it is clear from various biblical texts that Israelite men did make use of common prostitutes and that the women in their community engaged in this profession.[218]

The word *kadesha*, which Hirah the Adullamite uses when searching for Tamar in Enayim, has sparked some controversy amongst modern translators and commentators of the Bible. Its correlation with the root *kuf-dalet-shin*, which means "sacred," has led many to understand *kadesha* as a "cult prostitute."[219] This behavior is strictly forbidden in Deuteronomy 23:18; and is targeted for eradication in Second Kings, where King Josiah tears down the "cubicles of the male prostitutes" (*ha-k'deshim*) as part of the reforms he instituted during his time as king.[220] It is unclear, however, whether *k'deshim* or *k'deshot* actually committed ritual sexual acts as cultic prostitutes thought to function elsewhere in the ancient Near East did.

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[216] Elaine Adler Goodfriend, "Prostitution (OT)," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 5. 505.
[217] Deuteronomy 23:19.
[218] See Joshua 2, 6; Judges 16:1; I Kings 3:16.
[219] This is how the Jewish Publication Society translates *kadesha*, while Robert Alter translates it as "cult harlot" (Alter 218).
[220] See II Kings 23:7.

Some acts of prostitution in the ancient Near East may have been related to some form of goddess worship. In Assyria, prostitution was part of the worship of the fertility goddess Ishtar. Both male and female prostitutes were a part of Canaanite worship.[221] Jeffrey Tigay adds that in ancient Mesopotamia, women may have taken part in a hierogamy or *hieros gamos* ceremony. This ceremony was a reenactment of the sacred marriage between the goddess Inanna and Dumuzi, a "god or deified king," which was meant to secure the welfare and the fertility of the land.[222] According to Karel Van Der Toorn:

> the sexual intercourse with strangers was more than the businesslike exercise of the 'oldest profession in the world'; it had a cultic character and was meant to promote fertility. By way of sympathetic magic it was to heighten the chances of human offspring, the increase of flocks, and an abundant harvest. [223]

Prostitution and religion were also practiced in tandem according to ancient Greek and Latin sources, dating back to the 5th century B.C.E. Temples dedicated to certain goddesses housed brothels in which hierodules engaged in prostitution to raise money for that particular temple. While such behaviors technically were performed in service of a deity, it is believed that their primary motive was financial, and that their patron's primary motive was sexual.[224] According to Van Der Toorn, this would have been consistent with the practices of the surrounding cultures, as:

> Neo-Babylonian records from the Ishtar temple of Uruk show that the temple hired out certain members of its lower female personnel as concubines to private citizens. The relations between the hierodule and the man were conducted at the

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[221] Miller 232.
[222] Tigay, *Deuteronomy* 481.
[223] Karel Van Der Toorn, "Female Prostitution in Payment of Vows in Ancient Israel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108, 2 (1989): 202.
[224] Tigay, *Deuteronomy* 481.

> home of the latter, and nothing indicates that he had any higher designs than to have a good time.[225]

Prostitution of the cultic variety may have thus been either a form of ritual observance, probably a means of promoting fertility, or a very successful fundraising technique.

Jeffrey Tigay argues that, while cultic prostitution may have taken place in the surrounding Near Eastern cultures, there is very little evidence for any type of cultic prostitution in ancient Israel. Rather, ordinary prostitutes were hired in conjunction with the general "debauchery" that occurred during festivals and sacrificial feasts.[226] In this context, it makes sense that Judah would seek out the services of a prostitute during the sheep shearing, as "sexual excesses were part of the expected ritualized behavior at festivals and belonged as such to the popular culture of the time. The same could be said of fraternity parties, New Year's parties, and the like in our own secular religion."[227]

The word *kadesha* appears alongside the word *zonah* again in Deuteronomy 23:18-19, where the former practice is forbidden and the latter is described as abhorrent to God. The proximity of these two words leads Tigay to conclude that they are simply two terms for the same abhorrent behavior. He notes that because the Temple was a place of festivity and public gathering, prostitution may have been prevalent in the near vicinity of the Temple.[228] However, one could argue that the slight variation in response to these two terms belies a difference between them. In Deuteronomy 23:18, Israelites are prohibited from being *kadeshot*; in 23:19, Israelites are prohibited from using the funds from a *zonah* in the Temple. It is possible that those coming to the Temple to make a

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[225] Van Der Toorn, "Female Prostitution in Payment of Vows in Ancient Israel" 204.
[226] Tigay, *Deuteronomy* 481.
[227] Van Der Toorn, "Female Prostitution in Payment of Vows in Ancient Israel" 203.
[228] Tigay, *Deuteronomy* 216.

sacrifice might have mistakenly believed the local prostitutes to be part of a fertility cult rather than simply enterprising young women, and that this parallelism was used to convey the message that neither type of prostitution was part of Israelite Temple worship.

According to Tikva Frymer-Kensky, an appropriate translation of *kadesha* might have been "public woman," a woman who could be found in public places where virgins and married women were not permitted. While such women could be hired for sexual purposes, as Tamar was, they may have also performed various female tasks such as wetnursing and midwifery.[229]

Another explanation for the use of the loaded term *kedesha* is that it was meant to be a euphemism. It is possible that Hirah is either being polite in referring to the woman as *kadesha* and not *zonah*, and also that Hirah used the word *kadesha* because of his own Canaanite understanding of sexual commerce as part of a ritual observance, whereas an Israelite would have used the less ambiguous term *zonah*.[230]

Tamar's choice of disguise, while functional, also provides commentary on her place in society. Like the prostitute, the childless widow is outside of the accepted family system. The legal codes of the Bible made an effort to eradicate both of these positions by prohibiting prostitution and providing the levirate marriage as an alternative to widowhood. The difference between the two roles is that, as a prostitute, Tamar now has control over her situation. She can negotiate this sexual exchange with Judah and receive what is due to her: a child that will inherit her husband's portion and earn her the protection of Judah's family during her lifetime.

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[229] Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "Tamar 1," in *Women in Scripture* 162.
[230] Sarna, *Genesis* 269.

F. The Use of Veils in the Ancient Near East

An integral part of Tamar's plan is the covering of her face. This prevents Judah from discovering her identity and thus refusing to sleep with her. However, because Tamar's head covering leads Judah to the assumption that she is a prostitute, the reader might assume that a veil was part of the prostitute's dress. This assumption is faulty, as will be shown in the discussion below.

The act of veiling oneself appears only in Genesis 38 and in Genesis 24, when Rebecca first meets Isaac. The text reads, *vatikach hatzaif vatitkas*, "So she took her veil and covered herself."[231] It is understood here as a gesture of modesty appropriate to a betrothed or married woman. However, the veil had many practical and symbolic usages in the ancient Near East, making it difficult to determine what functions it serves in Genesis 38. A veil was not a piece of gauzy fabric covering the entire face but rather a "piece of cloth covering the head and partially concealing the face; they eyes and the cheeks were usually left exposed . . . in its effect the veil could suggest invisibility."[232] In addition to its disguising capabilities, it could serve three symbolic purposes: to indicate social standing, to advertise one's level of sexual availability, or to ornament oneself.[233]

Middle Assyrian laws dictate that veils were to be worn by both married and unmarried women of the upper class, as well as by concubines, while slaves, and prostitutes were prohibited from wearing them.[234] The veil was therefore a "standard part of the attire of better-situated women . . .. It was worn by wealthy and respectable women

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[231] Genesis 24:65.
[232] Van der Toorn, "The Significance of the Veil in the Ancient Near East" In *Pomegranates and Golden Bells*, eds. David Noel Freedman, Avi Hurvitz and David P. Wright (Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1995) 328.
[233] Van der Toorn, "The Significance of the Veil in the Ancient Near East" 338.
[234] Van der Toorn, "The Significance of the Veil in the Ancient Near East" 328-9.

who could afford a leisurely life."[235] A veil may also have offered some protection from the sun, although this would not explain why some women in the community were permitted to wear veils while others were not.

The veil also served as an important ceremonial symbol in rituals of marriage and divorce. A central part of many ancient wedding ceremonies was when the groom covered his bride with a veil, as Van der Toorn explains, "veiling or clothing the woman can either initiate the marriage with her, or reaffirm or renew it."[236] Although a wedding veil is not explicitly mentioned in Genesis 29, Van Der Toorn suggests that this is probably what enabled Laban to substitute one daughter for the other.[237]

In most ancient Near Eastern cultures, veiling often took place immediately after the betrothal, when the *mohar* or bride-price was paid, even if the marriage had not yet been consummated. In Babylonia, a young woman might continue to live in her parents' home even after this transaction had taken place. However, the veil "implied that a woman fell under his authority; she was not free to dispose of her body at will."[238]

At a wedding ceremony, brides would wear veils both as a symbol of chastity and as an ornament.[239] Unveiling in the presence of a potential sexual partner may thus indicate "readiness to undress as a prelude to sexual intercourse."[240] The veiling, or sometimes, the covering of the bride with another piece of clothing such as one's hem,

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[235] Van der Toorn, "The Significance of the Veil in the Ancient Near East" 330-338.
[236] Van der Toorn, "The Significance of the Veil in the Ancient Near East" 332.
[237] Van der Toorn, "The Significance of the Veil in the Ancient Near East" 331.
[238] Van der Toorn, "The Significance of the Veil in the Ancient Near East" 338.
[239] Van der Toorn, "The Significance of the Veil in the Ancient Near East" 332.
[240] Van der Toorn, "The Significance of the Veil in the Ancient Near East" 339.

indicated that the groom had acquired the bride and would therefore be responsible for her care.[241] Van der Toorn writes:

> In the ancient Near East, both in Israel and Mesopotamia, the bride was veiled or otherwise clothed by her husband to publicly demonstrate her entry into his family, with all the ensuing rights and duties.[242]

Although there are no explicit biblical examples in which a bridegroom covered the bride as a part of a formal wedding ceremony, there are several places where covering or uncovering a woman is a symbol of her status and protection. In Ruth 3:9, Ruth asks Boaz to cover her with his robe in order to assume the role of her redeeming kinsman. The prophet Ezekiel employs this symbol as part of a metaphor for God's relationship to Israel, in which God puts a robe over Jerusalem to cover "her" nakedness when she reaches sexual maturity.[243] In contrast, the prophet Hosea—using a marital metaphor to describe the relationship between God and Israel—threatens to strip his wife naked when she is unfaithful to him.[244] Isaiah threatens to replace the ornaments of the daughters of Jerusalem with sackcloth and uncovered heads.[245] Van der Toorn therefore concludes that "the idea behind each of these rites seems to be that clothes are a symbol of appurtenance, while nakedness is a symbol of social ejection."[246]

The veil in a marital context thus sent two messages to the outside world: that the veiled woman was the property of another man, and thus ineligible for intercourse, and that the family of the man who had veiled her was responsible for her care. In none of these cultures, however, does Van Der Toorn find an instance in which a veil would label

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[241] Van der Toorn, "The Significance of the Veil in the Ancient Near East" 335.
[242] Van der Toorn, "The Significance of the Veil in the Ancient Near East" 338.
[243] See Ezekiel 16:8.
[244] See Hosea 2:5.
[245] See Isaiah 3:18-24.
[246] Van der Toorn, "The Significance of the Veil in the Ancient Near East" 335.

its wearer as a common prostitute. Instead, the veil served as a disguise on two levels: First, the veil was ornamental and therefore in stark contrast to the clothing worn by a widow.[247] Second, the veil enabled Tamar to cover her face and hide her identity. However, the veil does not send the clear message that Tamar is a prostitute. Phyllis Bird writes:

> The narrator does not say that Tamar dressed as a harlot. That is the inference that Judah makes—and is intended to make—but the narrator leaves it to Judah to draw the conclusion.[248]

As mentioned above, Judah initiates the sexual transaction with Tamar, not the other way around. It is he who makes the assumption that Tamar is a prostitute, she does not convey this with her words or with her dress. It was most likely her location that influenced Judah's assumption, as Bird writes, "Tamar's position is probably just as telling as her garb. A lone woman sitting by the road without apparent business would probably be enough to suggest the wares she was selling."[249]

While covering her face helps Tamar to outwit Judah in this particular narrative, it also weaves Tamar's character into the greater narrative. There is a recurring theme in Genesis of people disguising themselves in order to accomplish their goals. Abram and Isaac pass their wives off as their sisters to avoid death at the hands of a foreign king. Rebecca disguises Jacob as Esau in order to ensure that her favorite son will receive Isaac's blessing. One might infer that Laban disguised Leah somehow so that Jacob would think he was marrying Rachel. According to Nechama Aschkenasy, these

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[247] Van der Toorn, "The Significance of the Veil in the Ancient Near East" 330.
[248] Phyllis Bird, "The Harlot as Heroine: Narrative Art and Social Presupposition in Three Old Testament Texts," *Women in the Hebrew Bible* 102.
[249] Bird 103.

disguises do not serve a theatrical purpose, rather "the women dissemble mostly to fool male authority and outwit the existing system."[250]

G. The Significance of the Staff, Seal, and Cord

While at the moment of intercourse, Tamar's top priority is to be disguised, she also has the foresight to prepare for the day on which her actions would become known. It was fortunate for her, therefore, that Judah was unable to provide immediate payment for her services, as this would have foiled Tamar's plan. What Tamar needs from Judah is some way of identifying him as the father of the child(ren) she is about to conceive. A goat will not serve this purpose. Nahum Sarna writes:

> The fact that Judah carried nothing at that moment with which to pay for the woman's services proves that he acted on impulse . . . another example of the biblical motif of God using human frailty for [God's] own purposes.[251]

Through these items—his seal, cord, and staff—Tamar will later be able to prove that Judah is the one who impregnated her.

The *hotem*, or seal, was a hard, hollow cylindrical object that would have been worn on a cord around one's neck. The seal was engraved with specific markings so that, when rolled over soft clay, it could serve as a signature, used for "identifying personal possessions and of sealing and legitimating clay documents."[252] Nahum Sarna writes that the seal "was a highly personal object that performed the function of the signature in modern society, a kind of extention of the personality."[253] The *petil* might thus have been the cord on which the seal was worn or the belt or girdle around Judah's waist, as it is

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[250] Aschkenasy 80.
[251] Sarna, *Genesis* 268.
[252] Sarna, *Genesis* 268.
[253] Sarna, *Genesis* 268.

understood in the pseudepigrapha.[254] The *matteh*, a "staff" or "scepter," would also have had some kind of identifying mark on it. Many scepter "heads"—such as bronze lion heads excavated in Syria—had the names of their owners inscribed on them.[255]

The *matteh* is a symbol of leadership as well as a form of identification. In Numbers, God commands that each of the chieftains of each ancestral tribe have a staff with his name inscribed on it, and that Aaron, also should have a staff, even though the Levites have no tribal landholdings.[256] In Isaiah, the victory of the Israelites is foretold to include the breaking of the "staff of the wicked," while in Ezekiel, the prophet claims that it is Israel's *matteh* that will be destroyed.[257] In Psalms, the power of the Israelites is once again described in terms of its possession of a *matteh*.[258]

This is perhaps the first recorded case of identity theft. Robert Alter writes that "taking the instruments of Judah's legal identity and social standing is something like taking a person's driver's license and credit cards in modern society."[259] Both the fee Judah offers and the pledge Tamar requests indicate that this was a major transaction. Sarna suggests that this is a sign of Judah's personal wealth, as:

> Judah must have been willing to part with these valuable identifying items temporarily only because he was a man of substance; for him the payment of a kid was inexpensive and could have been accomplished with ease in a very short while.[260]

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[254] Testament of Judah 15:1-5, in James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha Volume 1: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments* (New York: Doubleday, 1983) 799.
[255] Sarna, *Genesis* 268-9.
[256] See Numbers 17:17.
[257] See Isaiah 14:5, Ezekiel 19:11-14.
[258] See Psalm 110:2.
[259] Alter 217.
[260] Sarna, *Genesis* 269.

Mary Shields counters that the "seriousness of the pledge" shows the reader "Judah's desperation and unwillingness to wait."[261]

This exchange between Tamar and Judah gives the reader insight into the nature of both characters. Judah makes a rash decision because of his sexual needs, while Tamar mounts a calculated scheme to take advantage of those needs to fulfill her own. This shows her cleverness and her ability to think ahead, as the items she collects will protect her from certain death in the future.

H. Symbolic Connections to the Greater Genesis Narrative

While Tamar ultimately achieves her goal of having a child and secures the future of Judah's lineage, she does so in a very underhanded way. One needs to view the story in context in order to better understand her actions. The story of Tamar may be viewed by some readers as a mere interlude that takes place between Joseph's sale into slavery by his brothers and the incidents that occur during Joseph's service to Potiphar in Genesis 39. Some even perceive this story as a means of building suspense about the outcome of Joseph's narrative.[262] However, there are many symbolic threads that run through the entire Joseph cycle, tying the entire literary unit together. The main literary motif—that of deception—is accomplished by the use of several key words and symbols: the word

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[261] Shields 44. Both ancient and medieval commentators expound on the seriousness of Judah's pledge. In *Genesis Rabbah*, the seal, cord, and staff are meant to be symbols of the kingdom, the Sanhedrin, and the Messiah, respectively as all three of these will descend from Tamar's offspring (Genesis Rabbah 85:9). The pseudepigraphical *Testament of Judah* claims that these items stood for the stability, power, and glory (Testament of Judah 15:1-5, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha Volume 1* 799. Abraham Ibn Ezra remarks that, "in his great lust, he gave three precious things for a trivial thing" (Alter 218).

[262] Alter 214.

"recognize" or *haker*; the use of a goat or a garment to deceive an authority figure; giving oneself or one's goods as a pledge; a tryst that takes place by a well; the birth of twins; and the color red.

Clothing plays a major role in the narratives of the Joseph cycle. In the previous chapter, Judah and his brothers use Joseph's torn coat to deceive his father and make him believe that Joseph has been torn apart by a wild beast.[263] This may suggest that Tamar's actions are some kind of cosmic payback for Judah's dishonesty. Deception by clothing also serves to connect this chapter to the one that follows, where Potiphar's wife uses Joseph's garment to accuse him of rape and have him imprisoned.[264]

The goat that Judah offers to Tamar as payment for sexual intercourse also echoes the previous story. Judah and his brothers use the blood of a goat in order to make their father believe that Joseph is dead. Both medieval and modern commentators suggest that this is meant to pick up on a motif of deception by goat. Some commentators go so far as to suggest that the use of a goat indicates some kind of restitution for having deceived someone else. Jacob and Rebecca deceived Isaac by preparing goat meat for him to eat, Judah and his brothers deceive Jacob with the blood of a goat, Tamar deceives Judah by requesting a goat.[265]

In Genesis 38 and the surrounding chapters, trickery is also indicated by the use of the phrase *haker-na*, "please recognize." Tamar uses these words in this narrative to force Judah to recognize that he is responsible for his actions and her care.[266] In Genesis 37, Joseph's brothers ask their father to look at Joseph's torn and bloodsoaked tunic,

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[263] See Genesis 37:31-4.
[264] See Genesis 39:11-18.
[265] *Genesis Rabbah* 85:9, Alter 217. See Genesis 27:9. 37:31-33, 38:17.
[266] Genesis 38:25-26.

saying, "Please examine it (*haker-na*); is it your son's tunic or not?"[267] Later in the Joseph cycle, the theme of recognition resurfaces. Joseph is able to deceive his brothers because, although Joseph can recognize his brothers, they are unable to recognize him (*vayaker Yosef et achiv v'hem lo yakiru*).[268]

The pledge that Tamar takes from Judah in lieu of the promised goat also serves to foreshadow the role that Judah will play in the resolution of the Joseph story. When Joseph accuses his brother Benjamin of theft, Judah offers to go into prison in Benjamin's place—*anochi e-ervenu*, "I myself will be surety for him"—so as not to devastate their father a second time.[269] Aviva Gottleib Zornberg writes:

> Judah stands surety for Benjamin: just as previously, in the context of his children's deaths, he had left with Tamar—twice widowed of his two sons—a pledge (*eravon*), in lieu of payment for sleeping with her. The pledge that Judah had left was his seal, his cord, and staff: the emblems of his leadership. Symbolically, Tamar demands his *self* in pledge.[270]

The events having come full-circle, this time Judah takes the righteous path and stands in place of his brother.

Another motif that is found throughout the Genesis and Exodus narratives is that of betrothal beside a well. Although Nahum Sarna suggests that Petach Enayim, the location of Tamar's encounter with Judah, is actually the village of Enam in the territory of Judah, many commentators posit that this place was fictional and its name symbolic.[271]

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[267] Genesis 37:32.
[268] Genesis 42:8.
[269] See Genesis 43:9.
[270] Aviva Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis* (New York: Doubleday, 1995) 326.
[271] Sarna, *Genesis* 268.

One understanding of the phrase *Enayim* is "Twin Wells."[272] Because betrothals often occur at a well in the biblical narrative, Johanna Bos describes such betrothals as a "type-scene," one which occurs in the stories of Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel, and Moses and Zipporah. This particular encounter by a well, in which the encounter results in conception rather than betrothal, is therefore called a "counter-type-scene."[273] Robert Alter describes Tamar's encounter with Judah as a "wry allusion to the betrothal type-scene: the bridegroom encountering his future spouse by a well in a foreign land."[274] Alter also suggests that the two wells might symbolize two unsuccessful marriages or, on a more positive note, foreshadow the two twins she will give birth to at the end of the story.[275]

Discussing the word *petach*, which means "opening" or "gate", Nechama Ashkenasy writes that Tamar "is making herself available for sexual intercourse and thus literally 'opening' herself, or turning herself into a gate (and here again we are reminded of the age-old identification of women with spatial openings such as doors, gates or windows)."[276] On a more basic level, this *petach* may have been an actual gate or entrance to a city, a place where one might likely find a prostitute. Phyllis Bird adds, "Tamar's position is probably just as telling as her garb. A lone woman sitting by the

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[272] Alter 216.
[273] Bos 39. See Genesis 24:10-27, 29:1-14; Exodus 2:15-22.
[274] Alter 216.
[275] Alter 216.
[276] Aschkenasy 86.

road without apparent business would probably be enough to suggest the wares she was selling."[277]

Enayim can also be translated as "eyes", which plays into the motif of seeing and recognizing in this narrative. Nechama Aschkenasy writes that this emphasizes "Tamar's clear sight, her 'eyes' that are constantly open and alert."[278] Tikva Frymer-Kensky suggests that the symbolism of *enayim* is much more complex:

> Sitting at 'the eye-opening,' Tamar is playing a dangerous game. She must close Judah's eyes in the present, or else he won't sleep with her, but she must provide a way to open them in the future, or she will be in serious trouble.[279]

She accomplishes this first goal by disguising herself as a prostitute; the second by demanding a pledge that will ultimately identify Judah as the father of her children.

In *Genesis Rabbah*, the rabbis make a connection between Rebecca and Tamar that goes beyond their presence at a well. This correlation is based on their choice of clothing and the ultimate result: "Two covered themselves and gave birth to twins, Rebekah and Tamar."[280] The use of the veil, whether for the purposes of modesty or for a disguise, is therefore seen as a praiseworthy behavior, as each veiling results in the birth of not one, but two sons. These twins are also connected to those borne by Rebecca by the use of the color red. Nelly Furman writes: "The two sets of twins form a chiasmus.

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[277] Phyllis Bird, "The Harlot as Heroine: Narrative Art and Social Presupposition in Three Old Testament Texts," in *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Alice Bach (New York: Routledge, 1998) 103.
[278] Aschkenasy 86.
[279] Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* 271.
[280] *Genesis Rabbah* 85:7.

The 'red hairy mantle' which distinguishes Esau, the oldest, becomes the red thread around the youngest's wrist."[281]

Thus, in response to the claim that Tamar acts dishonestly, one need only look at the surrounding narratives of Genesis to see other examples of women, and men, using trickery in order to accomplish a greater goal. Jacob and Rebecca deceive Isaac in order to ensure that Jacob receives the blessing designated for the firstborn;[282] Laban disguises Leah as Rachel in order to marry off his older daughter before the younger one;[283] Abraham and Isaac pass off their wives as their sisters in order to protect themselves from the whims of foreign kings.[284]

Even within the Joseph cycle, Judah himself engages in deception. He sells his brother, Joseph into slavery and then convinces their father, Jacob, that Joseph has died. The rabbis suggested that this deception alone justifies Tamar's behavior in their discussion of the phrase *haker-na* as it is used in Genesis 37 and 38: R. Johanan said: The Holy One, blessed be God, said to Judah: 'You said to your father, *Please see if you can recognize this* (Genesis 37:32); as you live, Tamar will say to you, *Please see if you can recognize this.*[285]

The need for deceptive tactics contributes to one's understanding of the roles of women in the biblical narrative. First, it shows that women were often in difficult situations in which they could not address the problem directly. They may not have had the recourse to directly confront the person oppressing them or to take them to a third-

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[281] Furman, Nelly, "His Story Versus Her Story: Male Genealogy and Female Strategy in the Jacob Cycle," in *Women in the Hebrew Bible* 123.
[282] See Genesis 27:1-40.
[283] See Genesis 29:15-30.
[284] See Genesis 12:10-20; 26:1-11.
[285] *Genesis Rabbah* 85:11.

party for arbitration. Second, it shows that women were able to use their resources—in this case, one's body—in order to beat the system. That a woman had more control over her life as a prostitute than she did as a childless widow speaks volumes about the society in which this story emerged.

I. Conclusion: Why Teach Tamar?

The story of Genesis 38 is not without controversy. Because of the deviant sexual behaviors that appear in this narrative, religious schools and synagogues often skip over this story in order to continue the Joseph narrative uninterrupted. Therefore, many liberal Jews reach adulthood without ever having studied this story. Learners might be surprised to learn that our religious ancestors, indeed the progenitors of King David and the Messiah, openly engaged in prostitution, incest, and *coitus interruptus*, or that God executes unworthy human beings at will.

However, when taught in its literary and historical context, Tamar emerges as an admirable heroine. Recognizing the importance of fulfilling the levirate obligation—both for her own security and for the security of Judah's line—Tamar goes to great lengths, and puts herself at great personal risk, in order to get what she is owed. Like many of her biblical sisters, Tamar uses what resources she has--in this case, her sexuality--to accomplish her goals. While she, herself, is in one of the most vulnerable states, that of a childless widow, she manages to play on the vulnerability of her more powerful father-in-law, Judah.

The above discussion of levirate marriage provides the reader with a better understanding of the plight of the childless widow and the institution that was designed to

protect her. A conversation about Onan's sin is necessary, not only to counter the notion the Bible portrays masturbation as a sin against God, but also to show how Onan and Judah, thinking only about saving their own skin, leave Tamar out in the cold. The failure of the levirate institution sets the stage for Tamar to transition from a passive to an active character, as one can see in an analysis of the speech patterns found in this text manipulating her father-in-law in order to give birth to a son. A discussion of the purpose of veils in the Bible and the ancient Near East shows that Tamar did not actually dress as a prostitute, rather she disguised herself and allowed Judah to jump to conclusions. Once he does, her choice of pledge shows her own cleverness and foresight in protecting herself from Judah's execution order.

Tamar's story fits nicely into the Bible's theme of reversal. In many biblical stories the natural order of the society is reversed: a younger son becomes the inheritor of his father's tradition;[286] a barren woman gives birth to a heroic son;[287] one who is sold into slavery and thrown in prison becomes the vizier of the king of Egypt.[288] Tamar, too, takes part in a story of reversal, as Mary Shields writes:

> In the end it is Tamar—woman, childless widow, victim of deception, Canaanite, one who is marginal in many ways—who becomes a crucial figure for the future of Israel by taking it into her own hands to do what is necessary to establish Judah's line. It is due to her playing upon Judah's mistaken assumptions and her ultimate unmasking of Judah and his ulterior motives that David's line is begun. This is no small role to play in the history of ancient Israel.[289]

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[286] See Genesis 27:1-40.
[287] See Genesis 16:7-12; 18:1-15; 25:19-23;I Samuel 1-2; Judges 13, II Kings 4:8-17.
[288] See Genesis 41:37-46.
[289] Shields 51.

Chapter 4: Desperate Midwives—How Two Women Saved a People

I. Annotated Translation of Exodus 1:15-22

1. Then the king of Egypt[290] spoke to the Hebrew[291] midwives.[292] The name of one of them was Shifrah[293] and the name of the other was Puah.[294]

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[290] *Melech Mitzrayim*: In this passage Egypt's ruler is called both *melech mitzrayim*, the "king of Egypt" in verses 15, 17, and 18 and *paroh*, the Pharaoh, in vv. 19 and 22. In both cases, it is significant that redactors of this text chose not to record the name of the story's highest-ranking official while recording those of the midwives. For more on the significance of naming, see p. 93.

[291] *Meyalledot*: The word *meyalledet* or "midwife," is very closely linked to the words for both childbirth and children. Both the noun *meyaledet* and the verb *yaldechen*, "to assist in delivery," are derived from the root *yud-lamed-dalet*, which is also the root of the word "child." Permutations of this root are found in this passage in vv. 16, 17, 19 and 20.

The word *meyalledet* is used with the Hebrew word for "labor," *lid'tah*, in reference to Rachel in Genesis 35: "When her labor (*blid'tah*) was at its hardest, the midwife (*ham'yaledet*) said to her, "Have no fear, for it is another boy for you'" (Genesis 35:17); and for Tamar in Genesis 38 "While she was in labor (*blid'tah*), one of them put out his hand, and the midwife (*hamyaledet*) tied a crimson thread on that hand, to signify: This one came out first" (Genesis 38:28). For the role of the midwife in the ancient Near East, see p. 93.

[292] *Haivriot*: See p. 96.

[293] *Shifra*: While it is unclear as to whether the midwives themselves were Hebrew, their names are Semitic in origin. Some scholars offer this fact as proof that the midwives were not, in fact, Egyptian, while Moshe Greenberg points out that many Egyptian characters, including Hagar and Pharaoh's daughter, were given Semitic names by the narrator of the story (Moshe Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*. The Melton Research Center Series: The Heritage of Biblical Israel [NY: Berman House, Inc., 1969] 26). Shifra's name may come from the Hebrew root meaning "to be beautiful," while in Arabic the root means "to shine" (Edwin C. Hotstetter, "Shiphrah," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol 5. 1221). Rashi adds that Shifra comes from the word *meshapheret*, meaning to make a newborn presentable (Michael Carasik, ed., *The Commentators' Bible* [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2005] 6).

[294] *Puah*: The translation of Puah's name is slightly more complex than that of her associate, although there is some consensus that its origins are Ugaritic. Moshe Greenberg links Puah's name to that of Pagat, the daughter of Danel, the hero of a Ugaritic epic (Greenberg 27). Like Shifra, Puah's name is associated with symbols of beauty and femininity. Nahum Sarna suggests that the name comes from the Ugaritic meaning "fragrant blossom" or "young girl" (Sarna, *Exodus: The JPS Torah Commentary* [Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991] 7). There are also some interpretations of Puah's name that are linked to her role as midwife. Tikvah Frymer-Kensky connects Puah's name to the word for "pant," a sound associated with childbirth (Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* 25). The medieval commentator Rashi also suggests that Puah's name is onomotopaeic, as the word *po'ah* was associated with

2. And he said, "When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birth bricks:[295] if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live."
3. But the midwives feared God,[296] and did not do what the king of Egypt said. They let the children[297] live.[298]
4. And the king of Egypt summoned[299] the midwives, saying to them, "Why did you do this thing, letting the boys[300] live?"
5. And the midwives said to Pharaoh,[301] "It is because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women,[302] they are like animals,[303] before[304] the midwife comes to them, they have delivered.

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the whispering and murmuring sounds made to soothe a crying baby (Carasik 6). For more on the role of naming in the story, see p. 93.

[295] *Ovnayim*: Sometimes translated as "birth stones" or "birthstool," this word appears only twice in the *Tanakh*, here and in Jeremiah 18:3, where it refers to ceramic equipment. In both places, it is understood as an object consisting of multiple stones. Different translations and interpretations of this word indicate that the Pharaoh could have been commanding the midwives to execute the infants during delivery, immediately after the birth, or during a prenatal examination. See p. 100.

[296] *vatiren hameyaledot et ha'Elohim*: See p. 109.

[297] *hayeladim*: See p. 107.

[298] *Va't'chayen*: When used in the *piel* form as it is here, this verb means "to let live" or "to keep alive" (Holladay 102). The latter understanding of the phrase led the Rabbis to suggest that the midwives did more than just assist with delivery, "providing the indigent mothers with food and shelter in addition to obstetric services" (Sarna, *Exodus* 7).

[299] *Vayikra*: When the verb *qara* is followed by a direct object, it is typically meant to imply the "elimination of distance," i.e. that the subject called and the object subsequently came (F.L. Hossfeld and E.M. Kindl "*Qara*" in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol 13. 116). This verb can be used to describe a call from one person—usually of a high status--to another, or from God to a human being (F.L. Hossfeld and E.M. Kindl "*Qara*" 111). This verb is used in relation to the king of Egypt throughout the narratives of Genesis and Exodus. It is often used when a pharaoh summons one of the Hebrews, such as Joseph in Genesis 41:14 and his brothers in 46:33. This is the verb used many of the times that Pharaoh summons Moses and Aaron to negotiate following some of the plagues (Exodus 8:21; 9:27; 10:16,24; and 12:31). In Genesis 12:18, a different Pharaoh uses the word *vayikra* in a similar fashion to summon Abram and call him to account for his deception of the ruler, as Pharaoh is doing here to the midwives.

[300] *Banim*: See p. 107.

[301] *Paroh*: in ancient Egyptian, *paroh* was a derivative of the word *par* meaning "great house," "palace," or "temple" (Harry A. Hoffner, "*Bayith*," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. 2. 108).

[302] *Ki lo kanashim hamitzriyot ha'ivriot*: Once again, *ivriot* is used to distinguish between the Hebrews and another people (See pp. 97).

[303] *ki hayot hena*: Some translations render *hayot* as "vigorous" or "lively." This word may also denote health or strength (Even-Shoshan 361). The literal translation of *hayot*, however, is "they are beasts/animals" (David A. Clines, ed. *Dictionary of Classical*

6. And God did good[305] for the midwives, and the people increased[306] and became very numerous.[307]
7. And behold, it was because the midwives feared God that [God] established households/families[308] for them.

Hebrew, Vol. 3. [Sheffield Academic Press, 1996] 207). Usually, this refers to a wild, untamed animal rather than a domesticated one (Holladay 102). Robert Alter points out the linguistic connection between *hayot* and *hayah*, the verb meaning "to let live" (Alter 310).

[304] *Beterem*: Meaning "before," this word is sometimes associated with labor and birth (Clines, *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*. Vol 3. 375). In Jeremiah 1:5, the word *b'terem* is used when God tells the prophet: "Before I created you in the womb, I selected you." In Isaiah, this word is used in the context of a quick and effortless delivery: "Before she labored, she was delivered/Before her pangs came, she bore a son" (Isaiah 66:7). This word may thus contribute to the reader's understanding of the midwives' statement that Hebrew women give birth quickly and without the assistance of a midwife.

[305] *Vayetev*: From the same root as the word *tov*, meaning "good," this verb appears here in the causative form, the *hiphil*, which indicates an "active intervention," in this case, by God. The use of this word may also contribute to an understanding that the midwives' reward was children and families. When used in reference to agriculture, *tov* also has a connotation of fertility. Such references appear throughout Genesis 41, when Pharaoh dreams of "healthy" cows and ears of corn (Genesis 41:5, 22, 24, 26) and in Deuteronomy, where it refers to the fertility of the land and the divine gift of rain (Deuteronomy 28:12), as well as the specific blessing of having children (Deuteronomy 28:11; 30:9) (I. Hover-Johag, "*Tob*," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. 5. 304-15).

[306] *vayerav:* Once again, the motif of rapid growth and reproduction surfaces. *Rav* means "abundant" or "great in number" and often refers to a population, as it does in Genesis 50:20 and I Samuel 2:5 (Holladay 330).

[307] *vaya'atzmu m'od* means "be mighty, vast, or numerous" (Holladay 280). It is used to refer to numerical size, as in the reference to the Reubenites' and Gadites' numerous cattle in Numbers 32:1. It can also be used to refer to physical strength, as it is in Daniel 8:8, 24, and 11:23. It is utilized in Genesis 18:18 as part of the fertility promise made to Abraham. When used by an outsider, *vaya'atzmu* may have a negative connotation. In Genesis 26:16 Abimelech says to Isaac "Go away from us, for you have become far to numerous for us." This foreign ruler, like Pharaoh, is threatened by the increase of a potential enemy.

[308] *vayaas lahem batim*: When used with the verb *aseh*, *batim* can be taken to mean "household" or "family . . . to which one belongs to or from which one is descended, sometimes including slaves and territory (Clines, *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, Vol. 2. 151). Moshe Greenberg translates *batim* as "enduring progeny" (Greenberg 31). Because the word *lahem* is used instead of the feminine *lahen*, there is a question of whether God provided households for the midwives or for the Hebrews. If the latter is true, however, vv. 20 and 21 become redundant. Therefore, it makes sense to look at v. 20 as referring to the Hebrews and v. 21 to the midwives.

8. And Pharaoh commanded to all his people:[309] "Every son that is born you will throw[310] into the Nile, but every daughter you will let live."

II. Analysis

A. Introduction

The book of Exodus opens with an act of civil disobedience, without which the rest of the Exodus narrative would not have been possible. Frightened by the prolific reproduction of Israelites, a nameless pharaoh attempts to exert control over the rapidly growing--and potentially dangerous—people who have come to inhabit his land. He first attempts to subdue the Israelites by subjecting them to harsh labor. When this fails to stem the population growth, Pharaoh resorts to a covert mission of infanticide. He employs two midwives to discreetly murder the male children as they assist the Hebrew women with their deliveries.

These midwives—who may or may not have been Hebrews themselves—bravely defy Pharaoh's order. Motivated by *yirat Elohim,* the fear of God, they allow all Hebrew infants—male and female—to live. They then cleverly cover up their act of disobedience

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[309] A.B. Erlich, a 19th century German commentator, offers this phrase as proof that the midwives were Egyptian. While in the first verse of the passage, Pharaoh addresses the midwives, i.e., some of "his" people, here he addresses "all his people" regarding the slaughter of all Hebrew male infants (Greenberg 26). Robert Alter takes the opposite stance, writing that, "despairing of cooperation from the Hebrew midwives in his genocidal project, Pharaoh now enlists the entire Egyptian population in a search and destroy operation" (Alter 311).

[310] *tashlichuhu*: When used in reference to a child, this word means "to abandon." It is used in this way in Genesis 21:15, when Hagar leaves Ishmael under a bush so she will not have to watch him die of thirst; and in Ezekiel 16:5, when God tells the prophet, "On the day you were born, you were left lying, rejected, in the open field." It was not drowning that Pharaoh sentences male infants to, but death by exposure. This practice was common in ancient Greece, where unwanted female infants were left to die on hillsides (Adele Berlin, "*Sh'mot,*" in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, eds. Tamara Eskenazi and Andrea Weiss. 310).

by constructing a lie that plays on Pharaoh's own stereotypes about the Hebrew women. Already convinced that the Hebrew women are animal-like in their ability to reproduce, the pharaoh is easily convinced that the Hebrew women give birth too quickly for the midwives to assist, thus rendering their mission impossible.

The midwives are not only spared the wrath of Pharaoh; they find themselves the recipient of the ultimate divine reward. In a world where women are valued primarily for their ability to "build a house" by giving birth to male children, God "establishes households" for both Shifra and Puah, providing them with their own families.

For Pharaoh, however, the problem of Israelite fertility has not yet been solved. The chapter ends with a command to throw all male children into the Nile river, while female children are permitted to live. Once again, while Pharaoh seeks to deter the growth of this potential military threat by killing males, it is the females—even those in his own house—who betray him.

In order to fully grasp the heroism of the midwives, it is important to understand the role they played and the situation in which they were working. In order to do this, one must look closely at the status of a midwife in ancient Near Eastern society, as well as the ethnic tensions that may have existed in ancient Egypt. This chapter will attempt to answer several questions about the midwives' and their situation, through an analysis of the text itself and the historical context in which it emerged. The answers to these questions will reveal how the midwives' used both their exclusive access to the reproductive sphere and Pharaoh's negative perception of the Hebrews to their advantage:

- How do literary devices and motifs contribute to our understanding of the story?

- What was the role of a *meyalledet*, a midwife, in the Bible and the ancient Near East?
- Were the midwives Hebrew themselves or members of another ethnic group? How does this influence our understanding of their role in this story of salvation?
- What is the meaning of *ovnayim*, translated here as "birth stones", and how does this influence our understanding of Pharaoh's command?
- How do racial, ethnic and gender stereotypes play a role in both Pharaoh's command and the midwives' deception and defiance?
- What does it mean that the midwives feared God? How do we understand the reward that God gives to the midwives in exchange for their role in the story?

B. Literary Devices and Motifs:

The book of Exodus begins with a description of the Israelites' fertility under Egyptian rule. This fertility is underscored by the repeated use of the word *rav*, which means "to be or become many or much."[311] According to Carol Meyers, the word *rav* is used throughout the first chapter of Exodus (1:7, 9, 10, 12, 20) to emphasize the fertility of the Israelites. The word *rav* is used to describe fertility in Genesis 1:28, when God commands Adam and Eve: *pru u'rvu*, "be fertile and increase," and in a similar charge from God to Noah and his family after the flood in Genesis 9:1. Meyers writes, "Repetition establishes a theme, in this case the increase of Israelites and the concomitant escalation of the Egyptians' strategies to deal with the perceived threat."[312] While the Israelites see their increased fertility as a blessing, Pharaoh finds it threatening. Therefore, the word *rav* and its parallel *atzum* show both the Israelites prosperity and Pharaoh's reaction to it, as Meyers writes:

> In vv. 7, 9, and 20, *rav* appears alongside its synonym *atzum*, which also refers to increase in size. Like its parallel word, *vayerav, vaya'atzmu* echoes earlier promises of fertility. The description of the Israelites as *rav v'atzum* is first mentioned by the narrator, who refers to the prolific reproduction of the descendents of Jacob. The word pair is then used with a negative connotation as

[311] Brown-Driver-Briggs 912.
[312] Meyers, *Exodus* 33.

> Pharaoh laments the increasing size of this sojourning people. This was the motivation for the king's oppression of the Israelites as well as his command to the midwives. Finally, the two words create an ironic end to the narrative that began with Pharaoh's concern that the Israelites were *rav v'atzum* in verse 1:9. Instead of decreasing their numbers, however, the Israelites continue to grow and become numerous.[313]

Having set the stage by describing the Israelites' proliferation in a foreign land, the narrator then introduces several characters: a nameless Pharoah and the named midwives, Shifra and Puah. The very fact that the midwives have names at all speaks to their importance. First, they are given the dignity of names even though their husbands are either unnamed or non-existent, a rarity in biblical narrative. The appearance of these two apparently independent women was such an anomaly to the Rabbis that they created a midrash that suggests that Shifra and Puah were aliases for Miriam and Yocheved, who were genetically linked to men in the narrative.[314] Medieval commentator Abraham Ibn Ezra suggested that Shifra and Puah were the names of the heads of two separate midwifery "guilds," or perhaps the names of the guilds themselves.[315]

Second, while the midwives have names, Pharaoh does not. Carol Meyers writes that "by not having a specific name, the pharaoh who subjugates the Israelites can represent all such oppressors" or that, alternatively, "denying him a name may serve to demean him."[316] The naming of the midwives may foreshadow a shift in the balance of power, as the named midwives will later outwit the nameless Pharaoh.

C. The Role of the Midwife in the Bible and the Ancient Near East

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[313] E. Blum, "*Rab*," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. 13. 284.
[314] Carasik 6.
[315] Carasik 6.
[316] Meyers, *Exodus* 34.

The use of the term *meyalledet* both here and in the Genesis narratives suggests that midwifery was a common practice in the ancient Near East and the Israelite community specifically. Few formalized professions were practiced by women in the ancient Near East, among them prostitution, wise women or prophets, musicians, and mourners. Carol Meyers explains:

> Midwifery is among the earliest and most ubiquitous specialized functions in human society. It virtually always is a woman's profession: it involves women assisting other women in a natural biological process. As a profession, it involves the instincts and emotions of the practitioners as well as technical knowledge and clinical skill. The care of a midwife tends to be holistic, providing emotional as well as physical support and assistance.[317]

More specifically, a midwife would have been responsible for many basic tasks during childbirth: positioning the woman on the aforementioned stones or bricks that function as support during childbirth, puncturing the amniotic sac, assisting with delivery, cutting the umbilical cord, and rubbing ointments on both the mother and the newborn.[318] After the birth, an infant might have been washed and rubbed with oil salt, which was thought to harden the skin. The midwife would have been responsible for ensuring the unobstructed breathing of the newborn by massaging the chest with oil, removing the phlegm from its mouth, and turning the child upside down.[319]

The book of Ezekiel offers a portrait of what a midwife typically did after a birth. In Ezekiel 16, the prophet refers to Jerusalem as an abandoned infant and enumerates all the standard acts of compassion that were not done on the day of Jerusalem's birth. God declares, "As for your birth, when you were born your navel cord was not cut, and you

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[317] Carol Meyers, "Midwife," in *Women in Scripture* 183.
[318] Stol 171.
[319] Stol 177.

were not bathed in water to smooth you, you were not rubbed with salt, nor were you swaddled."[320] Swaddling an infant was thought to "give form to the child."[321]

In addition to performing these tasks, the midwife would be well-versed in "delivery techniques, medications given to women in labor, and also prayers to be uttered at childbirth."[322] The midwife might have suggested an appropriate name for the child at whose birth she assisted, as is suggested by the speech Tamar's midwife makes in Genesis 38:29-30.[323] Meyers suggests that there were informal networks of midwives who transmitted their knowledge about childbirth from one generation to the other through written and oral traditions as well as apprenticeship. Because it required both knowledge and training to be a midwife, and because midwives interacted with many of the women in their community at difficult moments in their lives, the profession gave its practitioners high status. Meyers asserts, "The status of midwives—and their power to transform childbirth from what might be a negative experience to a positive one—did not erode until the advent of modern, male-dominated medicine."[324]

One important role that midwives were thought to play is that of witnessing the childbirth itself. The demand for the testimony of witnesses to childbirth appears in ancient texts from both Babylon and Rome. In the latter community, it was also required that the childbirth location be well-lit, so that another child could not be substituted for the newborn. As a witness to the birth, a midwife could be called upon to testify to the

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[320] Ezekiel 16:4.
[321] Stol 177.
[322] Meyers, "Midwife" 183.
[323] Meyers, "Midwife" 183.
[324] Meyers, "Midwife" 183.

lineage of a child.[325] She might also take part in establishing the child's paternity by placing the child on its father's knees, as was done in Hittite cultures.[326]

That the midwife could be called upon to establish a child's paternity speaks to both the power of the midwife and the privacy of the birth process. Only the midwives, and perhaps a few other women in the community, had access to this very private moment. This may have been one reason that Pharaoh was obliged to believe the midwives when they insisted that Hebrew women give birth differently than Egyptian women; there was no one who could offer conflicting testimony.

D. The Ethnicity of the Midwives:

One reason that the midwives in Exodus 1 are able to do what they did is because their profession puts them in a unique position. They have a conversation with the king of the Egyptians; they witness the births of Hebrew babies. Their ability to function in both of these realms raises the question of whether the midwives themselves were Hebrew or Egyptian.

For centuries, scholars have debated whether *meyalledot haivriot* should be translated as "Hebrew midwives" or "midwives to the Hebrews." The former translation would suggest that the midwives were Hebrew women who dared to defy their oppressor, while the latter translation allows for the possibility that the midwives were righteous gentiles, either Egyptians who disobeyed their own king or members of another subservient ethnic group. Abarbanel suggests the latter understanding of the text, saying,

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[325] Stol 173-176.
[326] Stol 178.

"How could Pharaoh expect Hebrew women to kill Hebrew babies?"[327] Rashbam, on the other hand, insists that the midwives were Hebrews. His emphasis on the point that they were not Egyptians implies that the opposing tradition did exist amongst the rabbis.[328] The current vocalization of the text presents the phrase as "Hebrew midwives," although Moshe Greenberg suggests that this is simply a reaction to the rabbinic tradition that the midwives were actually Miriam and Yocheved.[329]

The term *ivri* is used for the Israelites prior to the Davidic monarchy, at which time it was replaced by the term *Yisrael*.[330] The authors of *Genesis Rabbah* posit that the term *ivri* might come from the name of Noah's grandson Eber. It might also have been related to the word *ever* or "beyond." This could mean one of two things: first, that the people with that name came from "beyond" the Euphrates river; second, that the patriarch Abraham's beliefs placed him on the opposite end of the spectrum from his polytheistic counterparts.[331]

The term *ivri* is frequently used in biblical narrative to make a distinction between the Hebrews and another people. The term distinguishes Abraham from the Amorites among whom he dwells in Genesis 14:13. Throughout the legal codes of Exodus and Deuteronomy, it creates a separation between Hebrew and non-Hebrew slaves.[332]

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[327] Carasik 6.
[328] Carasik 6.
[329] Greenberg 26.
[330] Greenberg 28.
[331] Sarna, *Exodus* 7. Genesis Rabbah 42:8 states: "R. Judah said: [*Ha-'Ibri* signifies that] the whole world was on one side (*'eber*) while he was on the other side (*'eber*) [i.e. He alone of all mankind believed in the true God]. R. Nehemia said [It denotes] that he was descended from Eber. The Rabbis said: It means that he came from across the river; further, that he spoke in the language of the dwellers across the river" (H. Freedman, trans. *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, Vol. I. [New York: Soncino Press, 1992] 350).
[332] See Exodus 21:2; Deut. 15:12; Jeremiah 34:9, 14.

Throughout First Samuel, the use of the word *ivri* in the text serves to distinguish between Saul's men and the Philistines.[333] It sets Jonah apart from the foreign sailors with whom he attempts to escape to Tarshish.[334]

Throughout the Joseph cycle, the term *ivri* is frequently used to distinguish Joseph from his Egyptian counterparts. First, Potiphar's wife uses the term *ivri* in her sexual allegations against Joseph.[335] Joseph is also referred to as *ivri* when he is in prison and when he is removed from prison to interpret Pharaoh's perplexing dreams.[336] Finally, when Joseph encounters his brothers at the end of Genesis, he takes on the identity of an Egyptian and forces his brothers to eat separately from his Egyptian colleagues, as "the Egyptians could not dine with the Hebrews, since that would abhorrent to the Egyptians."[337]

From this, the reader can suppose that the word *ivri* was used by the Egyptians to refer to Joseph, his family and, later, their descendents. In Exodus 1 and 2, the term *ivri* distinguishes between Egyptians and Hebrews, both in this narrative and when Moses witnesses the beating of a Hebrew slave.[338] Throughout Exodus, Moses and Aaron refer to the God of the *ivrim* in their entreaties to Pharaoh to let the Hebrews go to worship God in the wilderness.[339] While *ivriot*, the feminine plural of *ivri* is used throughout Exodus 1 and 2 to refer to the heroic women who save Moses and his male infant counterparts, it does not appear elsewhere.

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[333] See I Samuel 4:6,9; 13:3,7,19; 14:11, 21; 29:3
[334] Jonah 1:19.
[335] Genesis 39:14,17.
[336] Genesis 40:15; 41:12.
[337] Genesis 43:32.
[338] Exodus 2:11, 13.
[339] See Exodus 3:18; 5:3; 7:16; 9:1,13; 10:3.

From all of these instances, the reader can infer that the term *ivri* is used by non-Hebrews to refer to Hebrews as "other," often in a derogatory sense. It is the use of this word, and all of its negative connotations, which enables the midwives to deceive Pharaoh and allow the male infants to survive.

There is a discussion amongst scholars of the Bible as to whether there is any correlation between the biblical word *ivri* and the Akkadian word *habiru* or *hapiru*, which is used to describe fugitives and outlaws in many ancient Near Eastern texts. This would explain why the Egyptians used *ivri* as a derisive term for the Israelites who took refuge in Egypt, as *habiru* was typically used to describe runaway slaves and refugees. The *habiru* were thought to have taken part in a movement of social upheaval in the Late Bronze Age, which may or may not have had some connection to the narrative of the Israelite escape from slavery.[340] Like the word *ivri*, it is thought to come from the root *'br*, which means to "pass by" or "trespass," a word that would have been appropriate for foreigners residing in one's community.[341] The word *hapiru*, on the other hand, comes from the Akkadian *'pr* meaning "dust" and may have thus been an indicator of "low social standing."[342] The word *habiru* or *hapiru* appears in various ancient Near Eastern sources from the second millennium B.C.E. Those sources that came from Egypt depict the *habiru* or *hapiru* as members of an unskilled labor force that was used for public building projects.[343]

The above discussion of the *habiru/hapiru* theory enables the reader to see the various ethnicities from which the midwives could have come. They may have been

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[340] Niels Peter Lemche, "Hebrew," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 3. 95.
[341] Niels Peter Lemche, "Habiru, Hapiru," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 3. 7.
[342] Lemche 7.
[343] Lemche 8.

Hebrews, but they may also have come from another group of foreigners that resided in Egypt. Either way, they were part of a group that had the opportunity to pass between Egyptians and Hebrews, as they appeared both before the king of Egypt and in the tents of the Israelites. Carol Meyers, who believes the midwives to be Hebrew, posits that both the term *ivri* and the term *habiru* have a connotation that goes beyond ethnicity. She writes, "In calling the midwives Hebrews, the narrator acknowledges their marginal social status in Egypt and also connects them to the ancestors of Genesis."[344]

Tikva Frymer-Kensky provides an apt summary of this discussion in her book, *Reading the Women of the Bible*:

> The Hebrew *lmyldt h 'bryt* is ambiguous: it could mean 'to the Hebrew midwives' or 'to the midwives who serve the Hebrew women.' The Masoretic vowels *lammeyalledot ha'ibriyyot* opt for the former, the Septuagint leaves the question open, and Josephus relates that they were Egyptian (Antiquities II, 206-7). The women were most probably Hebrews, for midwives usually come from the community they serve. Their names can have meaning in Hebrew. . .. On the other hand, the names are not the usual form of Hebrew names. They may have come from another subject people. Now, however, they cast their lot with Israel and defy Pharaoh's order to kill.[345]

Throughout the centuries, rabbis and commentators have used this story to attribute merit either to their own people, linking Shifra and Puah to Miriam and Yocheved, or to their Gentile neighbors, by translating *meyalledot ha'ivriot* as "midwives to the Hebrews." Regardless of their ethnicity, however, the midwives answer to Pharaoh, and therefore the act they committed was a bold act of deception and defiance that could have resulted in their own imprisonment, torture or death.

E. The Meaning of *Ovnayim*

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[344] Meyers, *Exodus* 37.
[345] Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* 25.

When the midwives are commanded to murder the Hebrew male newborns, they are told to do so when looking at the *ovnayim*. Thus, it is important to understand the potential meanings of *ovnayim* and how each meaning influences the reader's understand of when the infanticide was supposed to take place.

The literal translation of *ovnayim* is "two stones," possibly referring to a set of stones or bricks that women used as support during childbirth. In the ancient Near East, women gave birth in a squatting or kneeling position. The position of squatting or kneeling on a stone or brick structure allowed for an easier delivery and gave access to the midwife, who would sit facing her. A picture of a kneeling woman was the Egyptian hieroglyphic sign for birth.[346]

Kevin McGeough suggests that the *ovnayim* were bricks on which the child was placed after birth, so that the umbilical cord could be cut. He points to the Westcar papyrus as evidence for this theory. In this document, the word *dbt*, meaning "brick," is used to describe both the supports used for women in labor as well as the bricks on which a child would have been placed after birth. [347]

McGeough argues that it would be fitting for the midwives to determine the fate of the infant when it was resting on actual bricks. This would correspond to Egyptian mythology as recorded in the Westcar papyrus. McGeough argues:

> In the Westcar papyrus it is while the baby rests on the bricks that its fate is determined (to be the king of Egypt) and Khnum [an Egyptian god] breathes life into it. So it is fitting from a literary perspective that the king of Egypt orders that the life or death of the Hebrew children be determined while on this brick.[348]

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[346] Nahum M Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Origins of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1996) 24-5.
[347] Kevin McGeough, "Birth Bricks, Potter's Wheels, and Exodus 1,16." *Biblica* 87, 3 (2006): 314.
[348] McGeough 315.

Actual birth bricks have been located in some ancient Near Eastern archaeological sites. They can be identified as "birth bricks" by images of childbirth engraved on their surfaces. McGeough describes such a brick that was discovered in 2000 during excavations of a mayor's residence in Abydos. The brick, found in the quarters of the mayor's daughter, displayed the following birth imagery:

> The center of the image is a seated woman, holding a child. . . . The seated woman has two attendant women, perhaps midwives. . . .The entire scene is framed by two standards, each bearing the head of the goddess Hathor. The presence of this goddess, who is associated with birth, female sexuality, and the female creative principle further points to this object's childbirth connection.[349]

While birth bricks sometimes had childbirth-related deities depicted on their surfaces, the deities themselves were sometimes depicted in artwork as a brick with human features. The Egyptian goddess Meshkenet, commonly linked with birthing equipment, was often represented as a brick with a human head.[350] In the Mesopotamian story known as "Enkie and the World Order," the goddess Nintu uses a brick when acting as a midwife.[351]

McGeough points to these myths as evidence that "childbirth and clay production activities were, at least semiotically, related."[352] Further evidence for this symbolic connection between ceramics and childbirth can be found in an examination of the use of the word *ovnayim* in the Tanakh. The word *ovnayim* appears only in Exodus 1:16 and in Jeremiah 18:3, where it refers to ceramic production:

> The word which came to Jeremiah from the Eternal: Go down to the house of a potter, and there I will impart My words to you. So I went down to the house of a

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[349] McGeough 316.
[350] McGeough 314.
[351] McGeough 310.
[352] McGeough 305.

> potter, and found him working at the wheel (*al-ha'ovnayim*). And if the vessel he was making was spoiled, as happens to clay in the potter's hands, he would make it into another vessel, such as the potter saw fit to make. Then the word of the Eternal came to me: O House of Israel, can I not deal with you like this potter?—says the Eternal. Just like clay in the hands of the potter, so are you in My hands, O House of Israel! (Jeremiah 18:1-6).

Here Jeremiah depicts God creating humanity in the same way that a potter creates a vessel. Similarly, in Genesis 2:7, the God of Israel is referred to as *yatzar*, a term also used for potters: "The Eternal God formed (*vayitzar*) man from the dust of the earth. God blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and he became a living being."

This metaphor is found in many ancient Near Eastern cultures, where deities were thought to play the role of a potter in each individual conception and birth. In the Mesopotamian story of Atrahasis, the goddess Mami's role in the creation of human life is "described in terms of ceramic production."[353] Likewise, the Mesopotamian *shumma ibzu* omen uses the metaphor of ceramic production when discussing childbirth.[354]

In Egyptian mythology, it is the male god Khnum, the patron god of potters, who is said to form human beings out of clay, using a potters' wheel.[355] Khnum, who was responsible for conception and fetal development, would

> mold and shape each human being at conception upon his wheel, with the potential child being granted the physical and psychological traits that would define it as an individual—obviously including the characteristics of gender.[356]

In light of these metaphorical associations between fetal development and ceramic production, Scott Morschauer argues that Pharaoh's command was to kill the male infants while they were still *in utero*. Morschauer points to Egyptian medical texts from

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[353] McGeough 309.
[354] McGeough 310.
[355] McGeough 310.
[356] Scott Morschauer, "Potters' Wheels and Pregnancies: A Note on Exodus 1:16," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122, 4 (Winter 2003): 732.

that era that include both means to determine the sex of the unborn child and the means to terminate a pregnancy. Therefore, Morschauer understands Pharaoh's command as "When you look/determine 'upon the potter's wheel' [i.e., when you undertake a prenatal examination], if it is a son, then terminate him; if it is a daughter, she shall live."[357]

According to Morschauer, this would explain why the king accepted the midwives' excuse for not murdering the Hebrew males. Morschauer suggests that the Pharaoh's acceptance of the midwives' excuse indicated that there was a certain statute of limitations on when the male children could be murdered, "Apparently, their order had been to eliminate the *males prior to their birth*, but *once delivered, they were permitted to survive.*"[358]

There is also a possibility that Pharoah used *ovnayim* as a euphemism for genitals, so that the midwives could determine the gender of the baby and therefore whether or not it should be killed.[359] William Propp believes this to be the most likely explanation, as there is little evidence for the theory that infants were placed on *ovnayim* after birth, and that if *ovnayim* referred to a birthing stool, Pharaoh would have instructed the midwives to look "between the two stones."[360]

An understanding of the meaning of *ovnayim* is important to this discussion for several reasons. First, it gives the reader insight into the role of the midwife in Israelite culture as well as the tools she may have used while assisting with childbirth. Second, it shows how the process of fetal development and childbirth was portrayed in Near Eastern

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[357] Morschauer 733.
[358] Morschauer 732.
[359] Sarna, *Exploring Exodus* 24-5.
[360] William C. Propp, *The Anchor Bible: Exodus 1-18* (New York: Doubleday, 1998) 139.

mythology. Finally, it enables the reader to better understand the Pharaoh's command and also how the midwives might thus be able to get away with disobeying it. Several of the meanings of *ovnayim* place a time limit on when the infant could be murdered: before, during, or immediately after birth. These time constraints made it possible for the midwives to formulate an acceptable reason for not carrying out Pharaoh's request: that by the time they had reached the tents of the Hebrew women, their opportunity to discreetly commit infanticide had lapsed.

F. The Role of Racial, Ethnic and Gender Sterotypes in the Midwives' Deception of Pharaoh

Much of this narrative rests on the pharaoh's confrontation of the midwives, where the midwives deceive the pharaoh about why they have not completed their task of murdering the Hebrew male infants. In his book *Civil Disobedience in Antiquity*, David Daube points to this denial as the single flaw in the midwives' otherwise heroic act of civil disobedience. Perpetrators of such acts "must be prepared to admit their acts and face the ensuing punishment."[361] Daube justifies this transgression, however, because unlike the actions of other literary heroines such as Antigone, the behavior of the midwives is not a one-time act of defiance. Rather, they are involved in continuous disobedience of the pharaoh's order, so that "if they confessed, they would deprive themselves of all possibility of further saving activity."[362]

Perhaps more remarkable than their willingness to defy Pharaoh is the clever way in which the midwives cover up their deception. They contrast the Egyptian women with

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[361] David Daube, *Civil Disobedience in Antiquity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1972) 4.
[362] Daube 9.

the Hebrew women, something Pharaoh has already done in his own mind. Because even Pharaoh is not privy to the processes of childbirth that take place in the female domain, and because he already thinks the Hebrews are animal-like in their ability to reproduce, the midwives simply tell him just what he already believes: that the Hebrew women give birth so quickly that they do not need, or cannot wait for, a midwife.

Some translators suggest that *hayot*, the word the midwives use to describe the Hebrews, should be translated as vigorous, lively, or healthy.[363] Tikva Frymer-Kensky argues that such translations are inaccurate given the situation. Standing before Pharaoh, it would not have made sense to compliment the Hebrew women on their physical strength. They more likely refer to the women as "animals" in order to make an "ethnic slur" and play upon Pharaoh's understanding of the Hebrew as "other."[364]

This is the strategic key to the midwives' deception of the king of Egypt. The king treats the Hebrews like animals; therefore it is easy to convince him that they give birth in an animalistic way. Renita J. Weems writes that the midwives' use of language:

> cleverly arrogates the Pharaoh's assumption about Hebrew difference to their own advantage. That is, since the Egyptians believe that the Hebrews are different from Egyptian anyway, they are sure to believe that even in labor, a common female drama, Hebrews are different: Hebrew women deliver before the midwife comes to them.[365]

Some biblical scholars suggest that the midwives are actually telling the truth, and that their response is a result of the strength of the Hebrew women rather than the craftiness of their midwives. Robert Alter suggests that "the fact that *hayot* as a noun means 'animals' may reinforce the strong connection between the Israelites and the

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[363] Even-Shoshan 361.
[364] Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* 26.
[365] Renita J. Weems, "'The Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women': the ideology of race, gender, and sexual reproduction in Exodus 1." *Semeia* 59 (1992): 29.

procreative forces of the natural world: like animals, the Hebrew women need no midwife."[366] Nahum Sarna adds that *hayyah* was used in later Hebrew as a word for midwife, implying that the Hebrew women, animalistic or not, acted as their own midwives.[367]

Looking at the interpretations of Alter and Sarna, one might argue that the Hebrew women indeed gave birth differently than the Egyptians. This would explain their rapid reproduction under Pharaoh's oppressive rule. However, it is more likely "the quick-witted and evasive answer to a Pharaoh who wanted to know why his orders were not being carried out."[368] Pharaoh does not question the midwives' explanation in part because "of a universal human tendency to dehumanize victims—especially women—as a prelude to depriving them of basic civil rights, their reproductive freedom, and ultimately their very lives."[369]

Just as the midwives use Pharaoh's own language to outwit him, the use of language also reveals the midwives' attitudes towards the Hebrew infants. While Pharaoh makes a distinction between *ben*, son, and daughter, *bat*, the midwives only use the term *yeladim*, referring collectively to "children," both male and female. Jopie Siebert-Hommes writes that while "Pharaoh draws a sex distinction with regards to the newborns...the midwives make no such distinction."[370] Pharaoh's daughter makes a similar statement when she draws Moses from the water, saying, "One of the Hebrews

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[366] Alter 310.
[367] Sarna, *Exodus* 8.
[368] Miller 91.
[369] Mayer I. Gruber, "Puah," in *Women in Scripture*, ed. Carol Meyers. 137-8.
[370] Jopie Siebert-Hommes, "But if she be a Daughter. . ." in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994) 67.

children is this!" in Exodus 2:6.[371] These women are concerned primarily with the safety and health of the helpless newborns in front of them while Pharaoh is concerned with military threat the males may pose as they grow into men.

Siebert-Hommes suggests that the king of Egypt uses the word *yeladim* as opposed to *banim* when he confronts the midwives in order to show that he has taken note of their "lack of distinction" between male and female.[372] However, he accepts their response and moves quickly on to an alternative plan for annihilating the Hebrew males. In effect, the Pharaoh makes the same mistake twice. He tries to maintain his own power by eliminating the male population, when it is the female population that is working to overthrow him.

According to Moshe Greenberg, Pharaoh's plan must have been that "Israel would have been gradually reduced entirely to females . . . Insurrection would have been impossible, the people would have been dissolved, leaving to Egypt their women-power and reproductive capacity."[373] This tactic was also used in Genesis 34:25, when Dinah's brothers slay the men of the city of Shechem; in Numbers 31:7 when the Israelites do battle against the Midianites; in Deuteronomy 20:13, when God explains the laws of battle; in Judges 21:11, when the Benjaminites slay the men of Jabesh-gilead in order to obtain wives for themselves; and I Kings 11:15, when David battles the Edomites.

Unlike the centuries of Jews who claimed their heritage matrilineally, in this environment nationality is determined patrilineally. Tikva Frymer-Kensky adds that therefore, from Pharaoh's perspective, "girls are insignificant. Without men, they are not

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[371] Siebert-Hommes 67.
[372] Siebert-Hommes 67.
[373] Greenberg 29.

even Israel. Their wombs have not yet been claimed and branded. If married by Egyptians, they will produce Egyptian children."[374]

However, there is a flaw in Pharaoh's plan, as it is the women, members of the gender group that he has permitted to survive, who eventually get the best of him: first by refusing to murder the Hebrew babies, then, in the next chapter, by saving the life of the infant Moses.[375] Frymer-Kensky writes, "Just as he took no heed of daughters, daughters take no heed of him...subversive daughters have foiled the plans of men and shaped the destiny of the world."[376]

G. The Midwives' Fear of God (*Yirat Elohim*)

The narrator gives "fear of God" as the midwives' motivation for disobeying Pharaoh at great risk to themselves and their patients.[377] *Yirah* is one of the earliest terms for describing piety in Hebrew and other Semitic languages, and as such *yirat Adonai* or *yirat Elohim* is a "central concept of [Old Testament] religion."[378] The word *yirah* appears 435 times in the Hebrew Bible, where the use of the phrase *yirat Adonai* is also common.[379] However, the term *yirat Elohim*, which is used in this passage, does not appear quite as frequently.

Moshe Greenberg points out that these phrases describing awe and reverence of a divine being are often used to describe the goodness and moral behavior of a pagan.[380]

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[374] Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* 25.
[375] See p. 96 for argument on whether or not midwives were Israelites.
[376] Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* 26-28.
[377] Exodus 1:17.
[378] H.F. Fuhs, "*Yare*," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. 6. 297.
[379] H.F. Fuhs, "*Yare*" 292.
[380] Greenberg 30.

This usage occurs during Abraham's encounter with Abimelech in Genesis 20:11. This contributes to the argument that the midwives are righteous gentiles rather than Hebrews, an argument which is found in the Septuagint as well as the writings of Josephus, Abravanel, and Judah he-Hasid. These writers maintain that because the motive given for the midwives is "fear of God rather than loyalty to their people," they must not have been Hebrews themselves.[381] However, this argument cannot be completely substantiated, as *yirah* is also used in reference to the behavior of Israelites.

When used in reference to Israelites, *yirat Elohim* can refer to a qualification for leadership and service to God. God uses the phrase to describe Abraham following the near-sacrifice of his son and Job prior to his many trials and tribulations.[382] David and Nehemiah use the phrase to describe themselves, while Jethro suggests that those men selected to assist Moses by becoming judges be capable men who are also *yirei Elohim*.[383]

This brings the reader to the larger question: What does it mean to fear God? This adjective was used consistently to refer to the faithful and devoted of both the Israelites and their neighbors. Jeffrey Tigay suggests that the midwives' fear of God was actual fear, an "awareness that murder would bring divine retribution."[384] Nahum Sarna provides a slightly more complex understanding of the term:

> Faced with a conflict between the laws of God and those of the pharaoh, the midwives follow the dictates of conscience. Their defiance of tyranny constitutes history's first recorded act of civil disobedience in defense of a moral imperative. It is stated that they were actuated by 'fear of God,' a phrase frequently associated with moral and ethical behavior. 'Fear of God' connotes a conception of God as

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[381] Jeffrey Tigay, "Shemot," in *The Jewish Study Bible* 108.
[382] See Genesis 22:12; Job 1:1, 8; 2:3; 28:8, respectively.
[383] See II Samuel 23:3; Nehemiah 5:9; and Exodus 18:21, respectively.
[384] Tigay, "Exodus" 108.

> One who makes moral demands on humankind; it functions as the ultimate restraint on evil and the supreme stimulus for good.[385]

Drorah Setel adds that the midwives are able to put their fear of God over their fear of Pharaoh because of their exclusive control over the reproductive sphere, saying that, "within what appears to be an exclusively female sphere of birth and childrearing, women act without male authority."[386]

The Israelites are commanded to "fear God" in Leviticus 19:14, which reads, "You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind. You shall fear your God, I am the Eternal." This commandment to fear God is set in the context of not taking advantage of the vulnerable. Like the deaf and the blind, the woman in childbirth depends on the kindness and care of others to survive a difficult ordeal. All three of these persons could easily be deceived and manipulated without knowing who or what is to blame. They thus rely on human beings who fear God, even when they may never be apprehended by human beings. Regardless of their own religious affiliation, writes Carol Meyers, "divine authority seems to be more important than the word of the powerful pharaoh; because they 'feared God,' they refuse to do the king's bidding."[387]

Because they fear God more than they fear a human ruler, even an extremely powerful one, the midwives receive a reward directly from God. The narrator states that God *vaya-as lahem batim*, often translated as "established households for them."[388] Modern commentators understand *batim* to mean "family." The *bayit* in ancient Israel consisted of all of the dependents of the family patriarch: his wife, his children, and his

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[385] Sarna, *Exodus* 7.
[386] Drorah O'Donnel Setel, "Exodus," in *Women's Bible Commentary* 33.
[387] Meyers, *Exodus* 37.
[388] Exodus 1:21.

servants. [389] However, *batim* can be understood as stretching beyond the current generation to encompass the dynasty of a particular person or family, as it does in the case of King David in Second Samuel.[390] Moshe Greenberg therefore translates *batim* as "enduring progeny."[391]

The medieval commentators varied in their definitions of *batim*. Nahmanides interprets *batim* as abundant offspring, in return for the life they gave to the offspring of the Israelites, while Rashi understands *batim* as priestly, levitical, and royal dynasties.[392] Conversely, Saadia Gaon states that *batim* should be understood literally as houses, ones built by God built in order to hide from Pharaoh's wrath. There is also a possibility of reading "he" as Pharaoh, as the Rashbam does, meaning that Pharaoh somehow secluded the midwives in *batim* so that they could no longer disobey him by tending to the Hebrew women.[393]

Presuming that in this context *bayit* is understood as "family," many commentators wonder how it came to be that the midwives' did not previously have families of their own. Ancient Anthenian law dictated that midwives were to have given birth themselves and be past the age of childbirth. Mayer Gruber writes that "the fact that [the midwives] are rewarded with progeny indicates that they may have been barren and especially that they were young enough to begin a family," a supposition that runs counter to the notion that midwives were usually older, had previously given birth, and

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[389] Hoffner, "Bayith," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament,* Vol. 2. 114.
[390] See 2 Samuel 7:1-16.
[391] Greenberg 31.
[392] Carasik 7. Rashi is following the midrash that Shifra and Puah were actually Yocheved and Miriam. He states that the priestly and levitical dynasties came from Yocheved's children Aaron and Moses, while the royal dynasty of David is descended from Miriam, according to a midrash found in B. Sotah 11b.
[393] Carasik 7.

were even in some cases post-menopausal.[394] This description of the midwife as an older, more experienced woman would be consistent with the aforementioned description of a midwife as one who had undergone training and apprenticeship. However, one need only look to the story of Sarah's pregnancy to note that even menopause would not have prevented conception in the case of divine reward.[395]

Cheryl Exum argues that the entire story of the midwives serves to keep women in their place, that is, the reproductive sphere, by offering them a narrative in which their role in childbirth is part of a tale of rescue and redemption. Rather than emphasizing the resourcefulness of the midwives, she sees the narrative as denigrating to women:

> God (behind the scenes, in this case) uses the weak and lowly to overcome the strong and powerful. The inferior, but clever, women successfully defy the powerful Egyptian pharaoh. If there is a positive side to this characterization, there is also a negative one. This particular pharaoh . . . is exceedingly foolish—so foolish that even women can outwit him![396]

Their reward, too, is merely a bone thrown to women by the existing patriarchy, Exum argues. Like the barrenness narratives, this story ends with the midwives having children of their own. Exum writes:

> Motherhood is not only patriarchy's highest reward for women, it is also presented as something women themselves most desire . . . and this . . . is a powerful ideological strategy . . .. The story praises women in the spirit of the old adage that the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world. In essence, its message to women is: stay in your place in the domestic sphere; you can achieve important things there. The public arena belongs to men; you do not need to look beyond motherhood for fulfillment.[397]

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[394] Gruber, "Puah," in *Women in Scripture* 138.
[395] See Genesis 18:11-14.
[396] Cheryl Exum, "Second Thoughts about Secondary Characters," in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus—Deuteronomy* 79.
[397] Exum 81.

There is validity to Exum's reading, insomuch as the text does reinforce the traditional roles of women in the ancient Near East. However, if that were the goal of the authors of this text, they could have simply started the story with Moses' rescue, which was carried out by a wife and mother. Shifra and Puah, described as neither wives nor mothers, carry out an act of defiance that only women, and only midwives, would have had the power to accomplish.

One might posit that it is precisely because the midwives were female, and thus in a marginal position, that they were able to succeed in such a dangerous mission. Tikva Frymer-Kensky argues that the dominant patriarchy is exactly what enabled the women of Exodus 1 and 2 to succeed even under harsh circumstances:

> Certainly oppression intensified their suffering, but it did not turn their experience of reality upside down. Because women have rarely had authority, negotiating with authority has been their normal mode of existence. Women are used to ignoring outside events and regulations, use to maneuvering through the system to follow personal imperatives: helping their husbands, protecting their children, and being loyal to their God. . . .. Under conditions of capture and oppression, men may be debilitated by the loss of their 'natural role'. But the culturally defined personal imperatives of women to help their husbands and protect their children do not disappear. In fact, they may become even more important when external oppression magnifies the dangers of facing their families. Women in such dire circumstances feel the importance of using the skills of the powerless to succeed as protectors of life.[398]

H. Conclusion: Why Teach the Midwives?

The story of the midwives is unique in the fact that these women "made a name for themselves" while functioning independently of a husband or son. While many other biblical women function as the woman behind the man, known as "wife of X," "mother of Y" and "daughter of Z," these women are in the foreground of this narrative.

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[398] Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* 33.

This story is also unique in that the women it celebrates may or may not have been Hebrews. As discussed in the above conversation about the word *ivriot*, the midwives could have been Hebrew, Egyptian, or members of a third ethnic group. Each of these understandings of their ethnic origin allows the reader a different way of understanding their heroism. Either they were a subservient ethnic group helping their own people to survive a campaign of infanticide, brave Egyptian women standing up to their own king, or righteous gentiles standing up for what they believed to be right, even when their own people were not in immediate danger.

Although Exum suggests that this story of heroism within the female sphere was constructed to keep women in their place, it is remarkable to see what the midwives accomplished from that place. Knowing what we do about the practice of midwifery, we can suppose that these women were both skilled and knowledgeable. Their position was one of status and power, as much as either of these could be conferred upon a woman. They made use of what Carol Meyers calls "informal social networks" both in their training and their assistance in actual births. These networks would have provided them with avenues of communication not open to men. even Pharaoh.

The ability of the midwives to achieve such an act of defiance from such a marginal place could be inspiring to learners today. One venue in which one could study and celebrate the heroism of the midwives in Exodus 1 is the Passover *seder*.[399] The traditional *haggadah* downplays the role of human characters in order to emphasize the might and power of God and that God has exclusive control over our redemption. Over the past few decades, however, liberal *haggadot*, especially those geared towards women,

[399] See Appendix B, p. 148 for a possible ritual on how to include the midwives in the Passover Seder.

have evolved to celebrate more of the story's human characters, namely Miriam. In this context, it is interesting that the midwives are still underrepresented. David Arnow writes:

> The heroic deeds of these five women should speak volumes to us about what it takes to fix our world. They display the courage for decisive action, but they act in concert with others. They take risks because they know there are never guarantees. They don't wait for signs and miracles. They also demonstrate the capacity for maintaining concern about the welfare of others when it might seem smarter to save your own skin. Through these women's actions, Moses becomes the leader God chooses to confront Pharaoh. The rest, so to speak, is history. God plays a role in the story but only well after human beings have acted decisively to transform their world.[400]

The story of the midwives may also serve as a microcosm for the redemption that is about to take place. Just as the midwives assisted in the birth and protection of individual Israelites, so does God later guide and protect the newborn Israelite nation as it passes through the waters of the Reed Sea. E.M. Broner, in the first Women's Haggadah, writes: "Shiphrah, Puah, brave women / midwifed a nation / by disobeying Pharaoh. / The Jewish children/ were born in rebellion."[401]

This narrative has relevance not only in regards to our telling of the Passover story, but also as a call to action today. These verses were used as a call to action during World War II, when an itinerant preacher known as "Fritz the Wanderer" stood on the pulpit of a Calvinist church in Eibergen, Holland, read Exodus 1:15-22, and gave the following sermon:

> Who is Pharaoh today? The Nazis! Who are the babies that have to be hidden? The Jews! Who are the midwives today? We are! It is our job to outsmart the

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[400] David Arnow, ed., *Creating Lively Passover Seders: A Sourcebook of Engaging Tales, Texts and Activities* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2004) 171.
[401] E. M. Broner, *The Women's Haggadah* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994) 43.

> Pharaohs, to have the courage of the midwives and to protect the Jews and all those being persecuted.[402]

The legend continues to say that, following this speech, the preacher immediately got off of the pulpit and went to the next town. His words were credited with inspiring Dutch Christians to take Jews into their homes during the Holocaust.

The midwives may thus become a symbol for all acts of redemption, and, to borrow a phrase from author Diane Ackerman, "radical acts of compassion."[403] If the midwives, who had power only within the female, domestic and reproductive sphere, were able to participate in the overthrow of a powerful king, how much the more so could those who read this story today take part in the redemption of the oppressed. The midwives provide a powerful example of using one's own moral compass, and one's own skills and resources, to affect change in a corrupt world.

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[402] David Dishon and Noam Zion, *A Different Night: The Leader's Guide to the Family Participation Haggadah* (Jerusalem: Shalom Hartman Institute, 1997) 49.
[403] "Book Chronicles Warsaw Zoo as Refuge in WWII." *Talk of the Nation: Science Friday*. Host Ira Flatow. Dir. Charles Berquist. National Public Radio. WNYC, New York. 18 Jan. 2008.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

I. "Who Built Up the House of Israel"

In the course of my research on this topic, I searched for a thread that might bind the three stories together. I found it in the Hebrew phrase *livnot bayit*. While this phrase literally means, "to build a house," in many places throughout the Bible, the phrase or some equivalent is used to refer to the building of a family, a household, or a dynasty. Used throughout the Bible in stories of, and laws about, the reproductive practices of the ancient Israelites, this phrase indicates the importance of giving birth for both women and men.

In ancient Israel, *bayit* was understood on a basic level to mean the family patriarch and all of his dependents: his wife, biological and adopted children, dependent relatives, and household servants.[404] It also indicated those for whom he was responsible. For instance, while a married woman was under the protection of her husband's *bayit*, a divorcee or a childless widow returned to the shelter of her father's *bayit*, a shifting of responsibility that occurs in Genesis 38 with Tamar as well as in the book of Ruth.[405]

However, the building of a house did not simply refer to the birth of children or the acquisition of servants during one's lifetime. Throughout the Bible, the verb *livnot*, "to build," is used "to figuratively denote the 'building of a family, people, dynasty, or individual, and to describe the creation of the world in theological contexts."[406] The "house," therefore, did not refer to a physical structure, but rather to one's current family

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[404] Hoffner, "Bayith," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. 2. 114.
[405] Hoffner, "Bayith" 114.
[406] Siegfried Wagner, "Banah," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. 2. 168.

unit or to his or her descendants. Moshe Greenberg therefore translates *batim* as "enduring progeny."[407]

In the story of Ishmael's birth, Sarai offers Hagar to Abram in order that *ibaneh mimenah*, literally "that I may be built up through her" (though the Jewish Publication Society translates this phrase as "I shall have a son through her").[408] The words here have a double meaning: the verb *livnot*, meaning "to build," as in a household, is also understood here as the root of the word *ben*, meaning "son," and by extension *bat*, meaning "daughter."[409] Similar language is used when Rachel employs the reproductive services of her handmaid in Genesis 30:2. She hopes that, by employing a surrogate, she will have children either by adopting those of her handmaid or by stimulating her own fertility through an act of sympathetic magic. When making this proposition to Jacob, she describes the result as *ibaneh gam anochi mimenah*, a phrase that can be translated either as "that through her I may too have children," or as "that through her I may too be built up."

Although the exact phrase *livnot bayit* is not used in the story of Tamar as it appears in Genesis 38, it is clear that she is also concerned with the building up of her husband's house. The phrase used instead is *hakem zerah*, literally "raise up the seed" of his brother. The phrase *livnot bayit* does appear in the commandment to fulfill the levirate obligation, however. When a man refuses to perform the levirate obligation, as Onan did, his brother's wife is to remove his sandal, spit in his face, and proclaim, "Thus shall be

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[407] Greenberg 31.
[408] Genesis 16:2.
[409] Siegfried Wagner, "*Banah*" 167.

done to the man who will not build up his brother's house!" (*kacha ya'aseh l'ish asher lo-yivneh et bayit achiv*).[410]

Jeffrey Tigay's discussion of levirate marriage introduces the notion that the building up of one's house also had a spiritual component, as the most dire spiritual circumstance was to have one's name blotted out from memory on earth and thus be limited to a "shadowy existence in Sheol."[411] In the book of Ruth, Boaz articulates this fear when he agrees to fulfill the levirate obligation for Ruth, saying,

> I am also acquiring Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Mahlon, as my wife, so as to perpetuate the name of the deceased upon his estate, that the name of the deceased may not disappear from among his kinsmen and from the gate of his home town.[412]

In providing a child for the deceased, the name of the deceased would continue to be used both as the surname of one's son ("so-and-so-son-of-X") and in the labeling of family property ("property-of-so-and-so-son-of-X").[413]

The most curious usage of this phrase within the context of this thesis is found in the story of the midwives in Exodus 1. As a reward for their heroic actions, God shows favor to the midwives and, in v. 21, "establishes households for them" (*vaya-as lahem batim*). Nowhere in this text does the narrator suggest that the midwives desired children of their own or that they ultimately gave birth to sons, or daughters, at the narrative's end. In fact, the medieval commentators debated whether or not *batim* referred to the children of the midwives or to an actual house that God built in order to protect the midwives from Pharaoh's wrath.

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[410] Deuteronomy 25:9.
[411] Tigay, *Deuteronomy* 482.
[412] Ruth 4:10.
[413] Tigay, *Deuteronomy* 482.

Shalom Paul suggests that this phrase, which he translates as "to found a family," comes from an Akkadian idiom found in a letter from King Samsi-Addu, in which the king encourages his son to "establish a homestead and found a family," as well as in a love poem between the deities Marduk and Ishtar, in which the former asks the latter to "create a family for your husband."[414] Paul points to its appearance in Second Samuel, when the prophet Nathan foretells that although David will not be the one to "build a house" (*tivneh bayit*) for the Eternal, the Eternal will "establish a family, i.e. a dynasty" (*bayit ya'aseh l'cha*) for David. This next generation, David's *bayit*, will physically build, *banah*, a house for God.[415]

The establishing of one's house can be seen as the ultimate reward for both women and men in the biblical narrative. This reward can function in two very different ways. Either one can look at this reward as a means of keeping women in their place, and encouraging both men and women to follow the traditional path of marriage and childbearing. Alternatively, one can see this reward as something in which women played an indispensable role: as women who give birth themselves; as primary wives who negotiate surrogacy arrangements in order to increase the size of their families; and as midwives who assist in the dangerous process of giving birth.

Understanding *batim* as "enduring progeny" or "dynasty," one can view the actions of the women discussed in this thesis on a much larger scale. Leah and Rachel's children become the twelve tribes of Israel, a dynasty that is only able to continue with the assistance of the midwives of Exodus 1. Had the midwives carried out Pharaoh's

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[414] Shalom M. Paul, "Exodus 1:21: 'To Found a Family' A Biblical and Akkadian Idiom," *Maarav* 8 (1992): 140. See 2 Samuel 7:1-16.
[415] Paul 142.

order instead of defying it, it is likely that Moses himself would not have survived his own birth and thus would never have led the Israelites from slavery to freedom and covenant with God.

Finally, one of Tamar's twins, Peretz, is later listed in the genealogy of King David. Also part of this lineage is Ruth the Moabite who, through a daring and aggressive maneuver, fulfills the levirate obligation through marriage to Boaz, a descendant of Peretz. The child of this union, Obed, is listed as the grandfather of King David. When Ruth comes to the city gate to be joined in marriage to Boaz, the townspeople offer her husband the following blessing:

> May the Eternal make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built up the House of Israel (*banu sh'teheim et beit Yisrael*)! Prosper in Ephrathah and perpetuate your name in Bethlehem! And may your house (*beitecha*) be like the house of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah—through the offspring (*ha-zerah*) which the Eternal will give you by this young woman.[416]

Thus, one can view the building up of one's house, and the house of one's people, as a praiseworthy activity that women in the Bible could aspire to and, in certain circumstances, pursue aggressively with all the resources they had at their disposal.

II. Implications for Teaching

One purpose of this thesis has been to counter the assumption that many students of the Bible might make: that female characters are marginal and therefore women in ancient Israel and the ancient Near East must also have been viewed as marginal. Although the Bible portrays women as active primarily when childbirth is involved, these three stories show women asserting themselves and pursuing their goals somewhat

[416] Ruth 4:11-12.

independently of their husbands and their sons, often without their knowledge or their consent.

In fact, each of these stories shows a woman openly defying the orders of a man. Rachel pursues alternative fertility remedies even after Jacob reminds her that only God can open and close the womb.[417] Tamar leaves her father's house and sheds her widow's garments in order to seduce Judah, even after Judah has commanded her to "stay as a widow in your father's house" (*shvi almanah veit-avicha*).[418] The matriarchs mentioned above, however, merely defy the orders of the household patriarch. The midwives defy the king of Egypt, then proceed to lie to his face when questioned about their actions. Given that women did not have the same rights to self-determination as men in this era, the bravery of these actions increases tenfold.

Unfortunately, these stories are often skipped in regular study: the story of Leah and Rachel is often cut off after the story of Laban's deception of Jacob; the story of Tamar is cut out of the greater Joseph narrative, either because of its content or because teachers see it as a digression from the larger story; the midwife narrative of Exodus 1 becomes a mere prologue to the birth of Moses in Exodus 2.

One can only understand the behavior of these women, however, by examining the roles women typically played in ancient Israel and the ancient Near East. It is only through an exploration of the Bible's historical context that one might comprehend the risks these women were taking and the motives behind them. This is what Barry Holtz calls the "Contextual Orientation."

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[417] Genesis 30:2.
[418] Genesis 38:11.

Holtz's book, *Textual Knowledge: Teaching the Bible in Theory and Practice*, provides nine different textual orientations to teaching Bible. These orientations are an expansion of Pamela Grossman's three fundamental perspectives: text-oriented, in which one examines the text at face value, using methods of decoding and modern literary criticism; context-oriented, in which the reader examines the social and historical context in which this text emerged; and reader-response-oriented, in which the reader examines how the text speaks to one's own life and experiences.[419]

Holtz expands these three orientations to provide nine of his own conceptual "maps" for teaching Bible. The "Contextual" orientation provides historical context for the text at hand using the social sciences. The "Literary Criticism" orientation applies the tools of modern literary criticism to the Bible. The "Reader-Response" orientation, while it uses many of the same tools as the literary-critical approach, "focuses on the experience of the reader in encountering the text." The "*Parshanut*" orientation relies on the study of the words of classical interpreters of the Bible such as Rashi and Nahmanides. In the "Moralistic-Didactic" orientation, learner search for the messages or lessons found in the biblical text.[420]

The "Ideational" orientation encourages learners to find the "big" moral, philosophical, and theological ideas of the biblical text, both in its own historical context and in the way it speaks to readers today. The "Bible Leads to Action" orientation aims to use the study of Bible as a jumping off point for "character education." The "Decoding,

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[419] Barry W. Holtz, *Textual Knowledge: Teaching the Bible in Theory and Practice* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2003) 61.
[420] Holtz 93.

Translation, and Comprehension" orientation focuses on the study of the "facts" the text: what words mean, who the characters are and what happens to them in each story.[421]

Many learners and teachers are familiar with the "Personalization" orientation, in which the learners discuss how the text relates to their own lives, whether in the psychological, spiritual, or political realm.[422] Some educators warn that this orientation is overused, and may not speak to learners who come to text study in search of a more rigorous study of biblical texts. I have noticed this especially in my teaching of women's study groups. When planning a session for one women's *Rosh Chodesh* group, the coordinator of the group reminded me, "Don't worry about having enough material. Just ask one or two good questions and we'll take over."

Those who plan lessons for *this Rosh Chodesh* group usually select a specific topic relevant to the women in the group, such as motherhood or the competition between siblings. The leader guides the learners through a few biblical or rabbinic texts about the topic, then the women in the group talk about their own experience with that topic. While this is meaningful for the women in the group, and fosters deep interpersonal relationships between the learners, it is important that the teachers of these groups learn multiple ways to read text in addition to the Personalization orientation.

The lessons that follow make use of multiple orientations in order to encourage a deeper understanding of the text and its context before applying the text to one's own experience. Lesson #1 uses the Literary Critical method to study Genesis 30, notably the tool of intertextuality, or determining the meaning of a word or phrase by examining its use in biblical texts. In this case, the phrase discussed is *livnot bayit*. A discussion of

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[421] Holtz 94.
[422] Holtz 94.

what this phrase means in its literary context can open up into a discussion of the text's historical context: namely, what did it mean to "build up one's house" in the ancient Israelite community, what role did women play in this task, what challenges did they face, and what methods did they use in order to overcome them? This lesson concludes with an exercise from the Personalization orientation, in which learners discuss their own goals as Jewish women and the challenges they face in achieving them.

Lesson #2 begins with the Contextual orientation, discussing the institution of levirate marriage before jumping into a literary analysis of the text. Using the Literary Criticism orientation to analyze Genesis 38 accomplishes two goals. First, by examining the speech patterns Genesis 38, one can see Tamar's transition from a passive character to an active character. Second, by looking at the motif of deception as it appears in other Genesis narratives, one might find oneself being more sympathetic to Tamar, even though her tactics for achieving her goal are less than admirable. This leads into a discussion of when less than admirable means can be used towards just ends. This conversation can be viewed through the Personalization lens, but also through the Moralistic-Didactic or Ideational lenses, which both encourage learners to look for the major moral and theological messages in the biblical text. If time permits, an additional set of questions makes use of the Bible Leads to Action orientation, encouraging learners to think about the vulnerable groups in today's society and how we might "recognize" them as Judah finally "recognizes" his responsibility to Tamar.

Lesson #3 also uses the Literary Criticism method of intertextuality to explore the meaning of a single word, *ivri*, as it is used in Exodus 1 and throughout the Genesis and Exodus narratives. Incorporating the *Parshanut* and Contextual orientations, both

Rabbinic and modern scholarly texts are used to contribute to an understanding of *ivri*. These texts unpack the word *ivri* and portray it both as a descriptor of our biblical ancestors and as a term for one who crosses boundaries. This leads into a discussion about how we can be *ivriot* in our own time, a conversation that is makes use of both the Personalization and Bible Leads to Action orientations.

III. The Teacher as Midwife

While the midwives in Exodus 1 can provide admirable role models for adult learners, they can also provide role models for teachers. In their book, *Women's Ways of Knowing*, Mary Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger and Jill Mattuck Tarule promote the idea of the "midwife-teacher." The midwife is used as a metaphor the constructivist model of teaching and learning, in which the teacher provides the tools, environment, and guidance with which learners can formulate ideas and come to their own understanding of a particular concept. In an adult education setting, particularly one involving women, learners are expected to come to the table with a certain amount of "latent knowledge" waiting to be drawn out, rather than an emptiness waiting to be filled.[423]

The midwife-teacher model is thus the opposite of the banker-teacher model, because "while the bankers deposit knowledge in the learner's head, the midwives draw it out. They assist the students in giving birth to their own ideas, in making their own tacit knowledge explicit and elaborating it."[424] Belenky also makes a distinction between a

[423] Mary Field Belenky, et al., *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (New York: BasicBooks, Inc, 1997) 217.
[424] Belenky 217.

midwife and an obstetrician. She argues that when doctors anesthetize a woman during childbirth, or use other types of new childbirth technology, they are usurping that woman's role in the birth of her own child. Likewise, a banker-teacher "anesthetizes" the learner and thus robs them of the opportunity to give birth to their own understanding of the subject matter.[425]

While a lecturer might focus on one's own knowledge, a midwife-teacher focuses on the developing knowledge of the student. Midwife-teachers

> support their students' thinking, but they do not do the students' thinking for them or expect the students to think as they do . . .. midwife-teachers assist in the emergence of consciousness. They encourage the students to speak in their own active voices.[426]

This does not mean that every thought and idea shared with the class is relevant or even accurate. The midwife-teacher must therefore take an active role in ensuring that the knowledge born to each woman is "born with their truth intact."[427] Once this is accomplished, midwife-teachers can move towards helping with the development and nurturing of the student's learning, encouraging their students to apply the knowledge they have acquired to their everyday lives, and at all times remembering that "the baby is not theirs but the student's."[428] Belenky writes:

> The cycle is one of confirmation-evocation-confirmation. Midwife-teachers help students deliver their words to the world, and they use their own knowledge to put the students into conversation with other voices—past and present—in the culture.[429]

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[425] Belenky 217.
[426] Belenky 218.
[427] Belenky 218.
[428] Belenky 218.
[429] Belenky 218.

By incorporating a variety of methods for understanding the biblical text, the teacher can provide learners with different tools with which to make meaning of the text. Learners need not be dependent on the textual analysis provided by scholars—ancient, medieval, or modern—when they themselves can look at a text and use these methods to come to their own understanding of the meaning of the text.

When adult learners come to Torah study, it is often because they hope to use the text in front of them as a mirror. They wish to find themselves in the most ancient story of the Jewish people. By using tools of contemporary biblical scholarship, we can show our learners how the women of the Bible made the best use of their limited resources in order to overcome obstacles, accomplish goals, and even engage in heroic acts. In doing so, we provide our learners not only with characters to which they can relate, but with portraits of bravery and perseverance to which they can aspire.

Appendix A: Curriculum

"Who Built Up the House of Israel": Reproductive Power-Plays in the Biblical Narrative

A three-lesson Adult Education module

Core Concept for Unit: Although women were often relegated to marginal positions in ancient Israelite society, female characters in the biblical narrative often used their limited resources within the reproductive sphere to exert control over their situation, accomplish their goals, and even perform heroic acts.

Goals for Unit:

1. Challenge the assumption that women are portrayed only as powerless and/or subservient in the biblical narrative.
2. Make learners aware of the various roles that women played in Israelite society, what their priorities were, and what tools they employed to accomplish their goals.
3. Make learners familiar with different orientations for the study of bible: contextual, literary criticism, personalization, etc.

Essential Questions:

- What roles do women play in each of these biblical stories? What are their goals and limitations?
- How do the women in these biblical narratives use their given roles to accomplish their goals and assert themselves in a situation in which they might otherwise have been powerless?

Why I Want to Teach This: These three stories show biblical women acting in their own right. Even though some of these characters are included in the narrative because they are "wife of" or "mother of," in these stories they take control of their situation in order to accomplish their goals. Sometimes those goals are self-serving, such as securing one's future by giving birth to a son; some goals serve one's family, such as giving birth to multiple children; and some goals unselfishly serve the greater good. Although it is important to understand these women in their own context, their assertiveness, resourcefulness and their eye toward the future of the Jewish people is something that we can hope to emulate today.

Who I am Teaching: These classes were designed for women's adult study groups, although they could also be used in a mixed group with some adjustments. The women's groups I have worked with meet monthly and have a consistent group of "regulars." Most of the learners are middle-aged or older, most have been married and have had children.

Length of Sessions: 3 Sessions of 1 hour 30 minutes each.

Location: Ideally someplace where all students can sit comfortably around a table.

Lesson #1
Big Love—The Birth of the Twelve Tribes of Israel
Genesis 30:1-24

Core Concept for Lesson: Because giving birth to sons secured a woman's socioeconomic status and "built up the house" of her family, in the biblical narrative women would go to great lengths to conceive. However, the biblical narrative reminds the reader that only God can open and close the womb.

Goals:
1. Show learners how the phrase *banah bayit* is used in the Bible, using the method of intertextuality.
2. Make learners familiar with the goals and priorities of the ancient Israelite woman, and the challenges they faced when trying to achieve them.
3. Make learners familiar with various "treatments" for fertility available to the biblical matriarchs.

Set Induction (10 min): Have participants introduce themselves by saying their name, the name of a biblical woman they admire, and why (write names of biblical women on the board).
- What do you see as the goals of these women?
- What challenges did they face in achieving these goals?

Introduction (10 min): Spend a few minutes summarizing (or reading parts of) Genesis 29 in order to put the story in context. Ask learners:
- What do you know about the story of Jacob, Leah and Rachel (Learners will probably know the story of Leah being switched for Rachel on Jacob's wedding night. If not, the class should read the text together).
- How might this arrangement have affected the relationship between the sisters and between each woman and Jacob?

Text #1 (25 min): Distribute copies of Genesis 30:1-24. Have learners break into groups to read the text and answer the following questions (Split the time allotted between *chevruta* study and group discussion):
- What did each of the women in this story most desire?
- What obstacles did each woman face? What methods did each woman employ to overcome these obstacles? What worked/didn't work?
- Why does Rachel say she will die if she doesn't have children (v. 1)?
- What purpose do the names of the children serve in this story?
- What is the role of God in this story?

Texts #2-4 (25 min)—Intertextuality Exercise: Rachel presents her slavewoman to her husband because she hopes to "have a son through her," *ibaneh mimenah*. This phrase can also be translated as "be built up through her." One way of determining the meaning of a phrase is to look at its use in other contexts (*intertextuality*). Look at the text sheet

and answer the following questions (Split the time allotted between *chevruta* study and group discussion):

- What does it mean to "build a house" in these texts?
- What obstacles did women face in their desire to "build up their house"?
- What methods did women employ to accomplish this goal?

Wrap-up/Personalization (20 min):

- What might it mean to build up the house of Israel as Jewish women today?
- What are our goals as Jewish women today?
- What obstacles and challenges do we face? How do we overcome them?

Big Love—The Birth of the Twelve Tribes of Israel
Part I: Leah and Rachel

Text #1: Genesis 30:1-24 (Footnotes are provided below with background information and notes on difficulties translating this text from the Hebrew).

[1]When Rachel saw that she had borne Jacob no children, she became envious of her sister; and Rachel said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I shall die." [2]Jacob was incensed at Rachel, and said, "Can I take the place of God, who has denied you fruit of the womb?" [3]She said, "Here is my slavewoman[430] Bilhah. Consort with her, that she may bear on my knees[431] and **that through her I too may have children (*ibaneh gam anochi mimenah*)**."[432]

[4]So she gave him her slavewoman Bilhah as concubine,[433] and Jacob cohabited with her. [5]Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son. [6]And Rachel said, "God has *vindicated*[434] me; indeed, God has heeded my plea and given me a son." Therefore she named him Dan. [7]Rachel's slavewoman Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. [8]And Rachel said, "A fateful *contest*[435] I waged with my sister; yes, and I have prevailed." So she named him Naphtali.

[9]When Leah saw that she had stopped bearing, she took her slavewoman Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as concubine. [10]And when Leah's slavewoman Zilpah bore Jacob a son, [11]Leah said, "*What luck!*"[436] So she named him Gad. [12]When Leah's maid Zilpah bore Jacob a second son, [13]Leah declared, *"What fortune!"*[437] meaning, "Women will deem me fortunate." So she named him Asher.

[14]Once, at the time of the wheat harvest, Reuben came upon some mandrakes[438] in the field and brought them to his mother Leah. Rachel said to Leah, "Please give me some of your son's mandrakes." [15]But she said to her, "Was it not enough for you to take away my husband, that you would also take my son's mandrakes?" Rachel replied, "I promise, he shall lie with you tonight, in return for your son's mandrakes." [16]When Jacob came home from the field in the evening, Leah went out to meet him and said, "You are to sleep with me, for I have hired you with my son's mandrakes." And he lay with her that night. [17]God heeded Leah, and she conceived and bore him a fifth son. [18]And Leah said,

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[430] A *shifcha* or *amah* is an unpaid servant who is the property of her mistress.
[431] Placing a child on one's knees was a gesture of adoption or recognizing the legitimacy of an offspring.
[432] Some translate *ibaneh mimenah* as "So that I may have a son through her" or "So that I may be built up through her." *Ben* means "son" while *banah* means, "build."
[433] The word used here is *isha*, the Hebrew word for "wife." Even if Jacob's relationship to Bilhah was one of marriage, she was still lower in status than her mistress, Rachel.
[434] Dan's name comes from the word *danani*, meaning "God has vindicated me."
[435] Naphtali's name comes from *naftulei*, literally, "wrestlings."
[436] Gad's name comes from *ba gad*, which means, "Fortune has come!"
[437] Asher's name comes from *ashri*, meaning, "I am happy."
[438] *Duda'im*, or mandrakes, were thought to have aphrodisiac and fertility-enhancing powers.

"God has given me my *reward*[439] for having given my slavewoman to my husband." So she named him Issachar.

[19]When Leah conceived again and bore Jacob a sixth son, [20]Leah said, "God has given me a choice *gift*;[440] this time my husband will *exalt* me, for I have borne him six sons." So she named him Zebulun. [21]Last, she bore him a daughter, and named her Dinah.

[22]Now God remembered Rachel; God heeded her and opened her womb. [23]She conceived and bore a son, and said, "God has *taken away*[441] my disgrace." [24]So she named him Joseph, which is to say, "May the Eternal add another son for me."

Questions for Discussion:

- What did each of the women in this story most desire?
- What obstacles did each woman face? What methods did each woman employ to overcome these obstacles? What worked/didn't work?
- Why does Rachel say she will die if she does not have children (v. 1)?
- What purpose do the names of the children serve in this story?
- What is the role of God in this story?

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[439] Isaachar's name comes from the word *sachar* which means "reward" or "wage." Here it refers to Leah's perceived reward as well as the "fee" she paid to sleep with Jacob in the first place.

[440] Zebulun's name could come either from the word *zeved*, meaning "gift" or the word *zaval*, meaning "exalt." The Akkadian word *zubullu* also means "bridegroom's gift."

[441] Joseph's name is from the word *asaf*, meaning "take away," as well as the word *yosef*, which means "add."

Big Love—The Birth of the Twelve Tribes of Israel
Part II: What does it mean to "build up a house"?

Text #2: Genesis 16:1-2
Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had an Egyptian slavewoman whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said to Abram, "Look, the Eternal has kept me from bearing. Consort with my maid; perhaps I shall be **built up through her** (***ibaneh mimenah***)." And Abram heeded Sarai's request.

Text #3: 2 Samuel 7:1-11 (The prophet Nathan speaking to King David):
"The Eternal declares to you that God, the Eternal, will **establish a house** (***ki bayit ya-aseh l'cha Adonai***) for you. When your days are done and you lie with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, one of your own issue, and I will establish his kingship. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish his royal throne forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to Me. When he does wrong, I will chastise him with the rod of men and the affliction of mortals; but I will never withdraw My favor from him as I withdrew it from Saul, whom I removed to make room for you. Your house and your kingship shall ever be secure before you; your throne shall be established forever."

Text #4: Ruth 4:11-12 (Spoken by the witnesses at the marriage of Boaz and Ruth).
"May the Eternal make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, both of whom **built up the House of Israel** (***asher banu sh'teihem et beit Yisrael***)! Prosper in Ephrathah and perpetuate your name in Bethlehem! And may your house be like the house of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah -- through the offspring which the Eternal will give you by this young woman."

Questions for Discussion:
- What does it mean to "build a house" in these texts?
- What obstacles did women face in their desire to "build up their house"?
- What methods do they employ to accomplish this goal?
- What might it mean to build up the house of Israel as Jewish women today?

Lesson #2
I Won't Take This Lying Down—The Story of Tamar
The Story of Tamar
Genesis 38: 1-27

Core Concept for Lesson: Sometimes our biblical ancestors used less than admirable methods to achieve just or desired ends. In the story of Tamar, a woman in the most vulnerable position, a childless widow, resorts to desperate measures to get what she feels she is rightfully owed.

Goals for Lesson:
1. Discuss the role of levirate marriage in the bible and the ancient Near East.
2. View the Tamar story in the context of other "trickster" narratives.
3. Examine how symbols connect one narrative to another.

Set Induction (5 min): Answer the following questions.
- Who are the most vulnerable people in our society today?
- What laws and institutions have we created to protect these people?
- What do we do when these institutions fail?

Introduction (10 min): In our last session, we looked at why the women of the Bible found it so important to have children:
- What were some of the reasons for needing to have children, especially sons?
- What could be some of the obstacles to having children?
- What might happen if one's husband died before his wife had given birth to sons?

Text #1 (15 min): As a group, read Deuteronomy 25:5-10—the Levirate Law. The authors of biblical law recognized that a widow without sons was in a difficult position, and thus instituted the levirate law, in which the widow would marry her brother-in-law in order to produce an heir for her husband.
- Why would we have needed a law like this in the Bible? Who does this law protect?
- Why might the man's brother not wish to marry his brother's wife?
- What might happen to a childless widow if her husband's family refused to take care of her?

Text #2 (20 min): Genesis 38—Meet Tamar. This story appears in the Bible right after Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery. As if to say, "Tune in next week," the narrative switches to a story about Judah, one of Joseph's brothers.
- Why does Judah refuse to give Tamar to Shelah?
- Why does Tamar trick her father-in-law? What risks does she take in order to do so?
- Why does Judah say that Tamar is "more in the righteous than I"?
- Are Tamar's actions admirable or despicable (or some combination of the two)? Why?

Texts #3 and 4 (15 min in groups, 10 min together): Symbolic Threads: Stories of Deception

- "Jigsaw Exercise": Break learners into groups of 2 or 3 to discuss one of the following texts: Genesis 27:1-29 or Genesis 37:23-36. For each text, ask the following questions:
    - How is the word *hikir*, "recognize," used in these three passages?
    - What other symbols and themes are found in this story and in the Tamar story?
    - In each story, one character deceives another: what is the character's motivation in each story? Is it honorable or not? Why?
- Come back together and discuss the following questions:
    - How do these symbols connect one story to another?
    - How does the theme of deception tie these stories to one another?
    - Does placing the story in context change your opinion of Tamar? Why or why not?

Wrap-up/Personalization (10 min):

- When can we use less than admirable "means" to achieve just or desirable "ends"?
- If time, these questions can be used to discuss various political issues:
    - In v. 26, Judah "recognizes" his error and his responsibilities towards Tamar as a father-in-law. Who are we failing to recognize in our own society?
    - What means can we employ in order to protect those people or empower them to demand recognition as Tamar did?

I Won't Take This Lying Down—The Story of Tamar
Part I: Tamar Deceives Her Father-in-Law

Text #1: Deuteronomy 25:5-10 (The Levirate Law)

5 When brothers dwell together and one of them dies and leaves no son, the wife of the
deceased shall not be married to a stranger, outside the family. Her husband's brother
shall unite with her: he shall take her as his wife and perform the levir's duty. 6 The first
son that she bears shall be accounted to the dead brother, that his name may not be
blotted out in Israel. 7 But if the man does not want to marry his brother's widow, his
brother's widow shall appear before the elders in the gate and declare, "My husband's
brother refuses to establish a name in Israel for his brother; he will not perform the duty
of a levir." 8 The elders of his town shall then summon him and talk to him. If he insists,
saying, "I do not want to marry her," 9 his brother's widow shall go up to him in the
presence of the elders, pull the sandal off his foot, spit in his face, and make this
declaration: Thus shall be done to the man who will not **build up his brother's house (*lo yivneh et bayit achiv*)!** 10 And he shall go in Israel by the name of "the family of the
unsandaled one."

Questions for Discussion:

- Why would we have needed a law like this in the bible? Who does this law protect?
- Why might the man's brother not wish to marry his brother's wife?
- What might happen to a childless widow if her husband's family refused to take care of her?

Text #2: Genesis 38: 1-27

1. About that time Judah left his brothers and camped near a certain Adullamite
whose name was Hirah. 2 There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose
name was Shua, and he married her and cohabited with her. 3 She conceived and bore a
son, and he named him Er. 4 She conceived again and bore a son, and named him Onan. 5
Once again she bore a son, and named him Shelah; he was at Chezib when she bore him.

6 Judah got a wife for Er his first-born; her name was Tamar. 7 But Er, Judah's
first-born, was displeasing to the Eternal, and the Eternal took his life. 8 Then Judah said
to Onan, "Join with your brother's wife and do your duty by her as a brother-in-law, and
provide offspring for your brother." 9 But Onan, knowing that the seed would not count
as his, let it go to waste whenever he joined with his brother's wife, so as not to provide
offspring for his brother. 10 What he did was displeasing to the Eternal, and He took his
life also. 11 Then Judah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, "Stay as a widow in your
father's house until my son Shelah grows up" -- for he thought, "He too might die like his
brothers." So Tamar went to live in her father's house.

12 A long time afterward, Shua's daughter, the wife of Judah, died. When his
period of mourning was over, Judah went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers, together
with his friend Hirah the Adullamite. 13 And Tamar was told, "Your father-in-law is

coming up to Timnah for the sheepshearing."[442] 14 So she took off her widow's garb, covered her face with a veil,[443] and, wrapping herself up, sat down at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah; for she saw that Shelah was grown up, yet she had not been given to him as wife.

15 When Judah saw her, he took her for a harlot; for she had covered her face. 16 So he turned aside to her by the road and said, "Here, let me sleep with you" -- for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. "What," she asked, "will you pay for sleeping with me?" 17 He replied, "I will send a kid from my flock." But she said, "You must leave a pledge until you have sent it." 18 And he said, "What pledge shall I give you?" She replied, "Your seal and cord, and the staff[444] which you carry." So he gave them to her and slept with her, and she conceived by him. 19 Then she went on her way. She took off her veil and again put on her widow's garb.

20 Judah sent the kid by his friend the Adullamite, to redeem the pledge from the woman; but he could not find her. 21 He inquired of the people of that town, "Where is the cult prostitute,[445] the one at Enaim, by the road?" But they said, "There has been no prostitute here." 22 So he returned to Judah and said, "I could not find her; moreover, the townspeople said: There has been no prostitute here." 23 Judah said, "Let her keep them, lest we become a laughingstock. I did send her this kid, but you did not find her."

24 About three months later, Judah was told, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the harlot; in fact, she is with child by harlotry." "Bring her out," said Judah, "and let her be burned." 25 As she was being brought out, she sent this message to her father-in-law, "I am with child by the man to whom these belong." And she added, "**Please see if you can recognize (*haker na*)** these: whose seal and cord and staff are these?" 26 Judah **recognized (*vayaker*)** them, and said, "She is more in the right than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah." And he was not intimate with her again.

27 When the time came for her to give birth, there were twins in her womb! 28 While she was in labor, one of them put out his hand, and the midwife tied a crimson thread on that hand, to signify: This one came out first. 29 But just then he drew back his hand, and out came his brother; and she said, "What a breach you have made for

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[442] The shearing of sheep occurred in the spring and required a massive labor force. The entire process would take as long as a week and a half, during which time the men involved may have been away from their homes. When the task was completed, there would be elaborate festivities. The combination of intense physical labor, the absence of spouses, and excessive feasting and drinking might have explained the presence of prostitutes, cultic or otherwise, at a sheepshearing.

[443] There is no evidence that prostitutes wore veils in this society. This is probably just a disguise.

[444] The seal and the staff both would have had identifying markings on them.

[445] Two words are used for prostitute here: *zonah* and *kedesha*. A *kedesha* may have been a woman employed by a temple that serves a specific deity. While they may have had many different functions, some engaged in prostitution, either as part of a fertility ritual or to raise funds for the temple. It is unclear whether this was practiced in the Israelite community. Hirah may have just been using a more polite word.

yourself!" So he was named Perez.[446] [30] Afterward his brother came out, on whose hand was the crimson thread; he was named Zerah.

Questions for Discussion:

- Why does Judah refuse to give Tamar to Shelah?
- Why does Tamar trick her father-in-law? What risks does she take in order to do so?
- Why does Judah say that Tamar is "more in the right than I"?
- Are Tamar's actions admirable or despicable (or some combination of the two)? Why?

[446] Perez is listed in Ruth 4:18-22 as the progenitor of King David. King David is thought to be the progenitor of the Messiah.

I Won't Take This Lying Down—The Story of Tamar
Part II: Symbolic Threads—Stories of Deception
Genesis 27:1-25 and Genesis 37:23-36

Text #3: Genesis 27:1-25 (Rebecca and Jacob deceive Isaac in order to get the blessing meant for Esau):

1. When Isaac was old and his eyes were too dim to see, he called his older son
Esau and said to him, "My son." He answered, "Here I am." [2] And he said, "I am old
now, and I do not know how soon I may die. [3] Take your gear, your quiver and bow, and
go out into the open and hunt me some game. [4] Then prepare a dish for me such as I like,
and bring it to me to eat, so that I may give you my innermost blessing before I die."
[5] Rebekah had been listening as Isaac spoke to his son Esau. When Esau had gone
out into the open to hunt game to bring home, [6] Rebekah said to her son Jacob, "I
overheard your father speaking to your brother Esau, saying, [7] 'Bring me some game and
prepare a dish for me to eat, that I may bless you, with the Eternal's approval, before I
die.' [8] Now, my son, listen carefully as I instruct you. [9] Go to the flock and fetch me two
choice kids, and I will make of them a dish for your father, such as he likes. [10] Then take
it to your father to eat, in order that he may bless you before he dies."
[11] Jacob answered his mother Rebekah, "But my brother Esau is a hairy man and I
am smooth-skinned. [12] If my father touches me, I shall appear to him as a trickster and
bring upon myself a curse, not a blessing." [13] But his mother said to him, "Your curse, my
son, be upon me! Just do as I say and go fetch them for me." [14] He got them and brought
them to his mother, and his mother prepared a dish such as his father liked.
[15] Rebekah then took the best clothes of her older son Esau, which were there in
the house, and had her younger son Jacob put them on; [16] and she covered his hands and
the hairless part of his neck with the skins of the kids. [17] Then she put in the hands of her
son Jacob the dish and the bread that she had prepared.
[18] He went to his father and said, "Father." And he said, "Yes, which of my sons
are you?" [19] Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau, your first-born; I have done as you told
me. Pray sit up and eat of my game, that you may give me your innermost blessing." [20]
Isaac said to his son, "How did you succeed so quickly, my son?" And he said, "Because
the Eternal your God granted me good fortune." [21] Isaac said to Jacob, "Come closer that
I may feel you, my son -- whether you are really my son Esau or not." [22] So Jacob drew
close to his father Isaac, who felt him and wondered. "The voice is the voice of Jacob, yet
the hands are the hands of Esau." [23] **He did not recognize him (*lo hikiro*),** because his
hands were hairy like those of his brother Esau; and so he blessed him.
[24] He asked, "Are you really my son Esau?" And when he said, "I am," [25] he said,
"Serve me and let me eat of my son's game that I may give you my innermost blessing."
So he served him and he ate, and he brought him wine and he drank.

Questions for Discussion:

- What symbols and themes are found in this story and in the Tamar story?
- In each story, one character deceives another: what is the character's motivation in each story? Is it honorable or not? Why?

Text #4: Genesis 37:23-36 (Adapted from the JPS Translation) (Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery):

23. When Joseph came up to his brothers, they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the ornamented tunic that he was wearing, [24] and took him and cast him into the pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. [25] Then they sat down to a meal. Looking up, they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, their camels bearing gum, balm, and ladanum to be taken to Egypt.

[26] Then Judah said to his brothers, "What do we gain by killing our brother and covering up his blood? [27] Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, but let us not do away with him ourselves. After all, he is our brother, our own flesh." His brothers agreed. [28] When Midianite traders passed by, they pulled Joseph up out of the pit. They sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver to the Ishmaelites, who brought Joseph to Egypt. [29] When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he rent his clothes. [30] Returning to his brothers, he said, "The boy is gone! Now, what am I to do?"

[31] Then they took Joseph's tunic, slaughtered a kid, and dipped the tunic in the blood. [32] They had the ornamented tunic taken to their father, and they said, "We found this. **Please see if you can recognize it (*haker na*)**; is it your son's tunic or not?" [33] He **recognized it (*vayakirah*)**, and said, "My son's tunic! A savage beast devoured him! Joseph was torn by a beast!" [34] Jacob rent his clothes, put sackcloth on his loins, and observed mourning for his son many days. [35] All his sons and daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, saying, "No, I will go down mourning to my son in Sheol." Thus his father bewailed him.

Questions for Discussion:

- How is the word *hikir*, "recognize," used in these three passages?
- What other symbols and themes are found in this story and in the Tamar story?
- In each story, one character deceives another: what is the character's motivation in each story? Is it honorable or not? Why?

Lesson #3
Desperate Midwives—How Two Women Saved a People
Exodus 1:8-15

Core Concept for Lesson: The midwives' story is one of the earliest stories of civil disobedience. Through their access to Hebrew infants, and their willingness to defy Pharaoh, the midwives' make the entire Exodus narrative possible. They therefore set a positive example of taking risks and taking responsibility for the safety of other people in a dire situation.

Goals for Lesson:
1. Examine how the word *ivriot* is used as a *leitwort* throughout the passage.
2. Discuss what *ivriot* meant in that historical and literary context.
3. Discuss what it means to be *ivriot* today.

Set Induction (10 min): Write the word "Hebrew" on the board (if the group is more Jewishly literate, write *Ivri* as well). If doing this lesson separately, or if there are new people in the class, have participants answer one of these questions as part of an introductory exercise.
- What does this word mean to you? Is it a positive word or a negative word?
- What biblical figures do you associate with this word?
- What qualities/characteristics do you associate with this word?
- If you described someone as "Hebrew" (or if someone called you a "Hebrew") what would that say about that person (or you)?

Introduction (10 min): In our past two lessons, we have looked at instances where an individual woman's goal of having children, and thus building up her house, was threatened either by infertility or a husband's death. What happens when the threat is not to one's own child, but to the children of others? In the story we are about to examine, a threat to the entire Israelite people was stopped by two midwives who are described as *ivriot*, meaning they serve the Hebrew women, although it is not clear if they are Hebrew women themselves. In this lesson, we are going to examine what that word means and how the midwives use it to their advantage.

Text 1 (15 min, 5 min for sharing): Read Exodus 1:1-14 as a class in order to set up the story (It is important for learners to understand that this story comes BEFORE Moses' birth but AFTER Egyptian slavery. Point out that this is the beginning of the book of Exodus). Distribute copies of Exodus 1:15-22 in which the word *ivriot* is not translated. Break into groups to answer the following questions:
- If you did not know what this word meant, how would you translate it from the context?
- Imagine you are Pharaoh: what does this word mean to you? What assumptions do you make about the *ivriot*?
- Imagine you are the midwives: what does this word mean to you? How do the midwives use this word in their defiance of Pharaoh?

Text 2 (25 min): Distribute sheet of texts that can help one explore the meaning of the word *ivriot* in this passage. Answer the following questions:

- The word *ivri*, according to *Genesis Rabbah*, can mean "one who crosses over". How does this describe the midwives in Exodus 1?
- In many contexts, *ivri* is used to show a contrast between Hebrew and another people. How do the midwives use this perceived contrast to their advantage?
- Medieval and modern commentators have suggested that an appropriate translation of *meyalledot ha-ivriot* is "midwives TO the Hebrews" not "Hebrew midwives". How does this affect your understanding of the story? What does it mean if the midwives were Hebrews? Egyptians? A third ethnic group?

Wrap-up/Personalization (15 min):

- Look at our list of what it means to be *ivri* from the beginning of class. Has your understanding of the word changed?
- *Ivri* is one of the earliest names for the Jewish people (Abram was called *ivri*). What does it mean for you to be *ivri* today?

Closing Thought:

"One Sunday morning in 1941 in Nazi-occupied Netherlands, a mysterious character rode up on his bicycle and entered the Calvinist Church. He ascended the podium and read aloud the story of the midwives who saved the Hebrew babies and defied Pharaoh's policy of genocide.

'Who is today's Pharaoh?' he asked.
'Hitler,' the congregation replied.
'Who are today's Hebrew babies?'
'The Jews.'
'Who will be today's midwives?'
He left the church, leaving his question hanging in the air.

During the war (1941-1945) seven families from this little church hid Jews and other resisters from the Nazis."[447]

[447] From David Dishon and Noam Zion, *A Different Night: The Family Participation Haggadah* (Jerusalem: The Shalom Hartman Institute, 1997) 51.

Desperate Midwives—How Two Women Saved a People
Exodus 1:15-22
Part I: First Impressions

Exodus 1:15-22:

15 The king of Egypt spoke to the *ivriot* midwives,[448] one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, 16 saying, "When you deliver the *ivriot* women, look at the birthstool:[449] if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live."

17 The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live. 18 So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this thing, letting the boys live?" 19 The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the *ivriot* women are not like the Egyptian women: they are vigorous.[450] Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth."

20 And God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and increased greatly. 21 And because the midwives feared God, God **established households (*vayas lahem betim*)** for them. 22 Then Pharaoh charged all his people, saying, "Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile, but let every girl live."

Questions for Discussion:

- If you did not know what this word meant, how would you translate it from the context?
- Imagine you are Pharaoh: what does this word mean to you? What assumptions do you make about the *ivriot*?
- Imagine you are the midwives: what does this word mean to you? How do the midwives use this word in their defiance of Pharaoh?

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[448] Scholars have debated for centuries whether this should be translated as "*ivriot* midwives" or "midwives TO the *ivriot*."

[449] Also "birth stones" or "birth bricks". This may have referred to a support system used during birth, or stones on which the infant was placed immediately after birth for examination and cleaning. Others suggest that this word have referred to a fetus during a prenatal examination, or it may have been a euphemism for genitals.

[450] The phrase *ki hayot hena* can also be more literally translated as "they are like animals". Other alternatives are "healthy," "lively," and "strong."

Desperate Midwives—How Two Women Saved a People
Exodus 1:15-22
Part II: What does it mean to be *ivriot*?

In the Bible:

Genesis 14 (Abram and Lot): [11] The invaders seized all the wealth of Sodom and Gomorrah and all their provisions, and went their way. [12] They also took Lot, the son of Abram's brother, and his possessions, and departed; for he had settled in Sodom. [13] A fugitive brought the news to **Abram the Hebrew (*Avram ha-Ivri*)**, who was dwelling at the terebinths of Mamre the Amorite, kinsman of Eshkol and Aner, these being Abram's allies.

Genesis 39 (Joseph and Potiphar's Wife): [11] One such day, he came into the house to do his work. None of the household being there inside, [12] she caught hold of him by his garment and said, "Lie with me!" But he left his garment in her hand and got away and fled outside. [13] When she saw that he had left it in her hand and had fled outside, [14] she called out to her servants and said to them, "Look, he had to bring us a **Hebrew (*ish ivri*)** to dally with us! This one came to lie with me; but I screamed loud. [15] And when he heard me screaming at the top of my voice, he left his garment with me and got away and fled outside." [16]

Genesis 43 (Joseph and his Brothers in Egypt): [32] They served him by himself, and them by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves; for the Egyptians could not dine with the **Hebrews (*et-ha-ivrim*)**, since that would be abhorrent to the Egyptians.

Exodus 5 (Moses and Aaron before Pharaoh): [2] But Pharaoh said, "Who is the Eternal that I should heed God and let Israel go? I do not know the Eternal, nor will I let Israel go." [3] They answered, "The **God of the Hebrews (*Elohei ha-Ivrim*)** has manifested Godself to us. Let us go, we pray, a distance of three days into the wilderness to sacrifice to the Eternal our God, lest God strike us with pestilence or sword."

According to the Rabbis:

R. Judah said: [*Ha-'Ibri* signifies that] the whole world was on one side (*'eber*) while he was on the other side (*'eber*) [i.e. He alone of all mankind believed in the true God]. R. Nehemia said [It denotes] that he was descended from Eber. The Rabbis said: It means that he came from across the river; further, that he spoke in the language of the dwellers across the river.[451]

"The phrase could mean 'midwives to the Hebrews' or midwives who were Hebrew. The former interpretation, found in LXX[452], Josephus[453], Abravanel[454], and Judah he-Hasid[455],

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[451] *Genesis Rabbah* 42:8

[452] LXX=Septuagint: An early Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (between 3rd and 1st centuries B.C.E.).

[453] Josephus=a Jewish historian who lived during the 1st century C.E.

understands them as righteous Gentiles; hence their motive is said to be fear of God (v. 17) rather than loyalty to their people."[456]

According to Modern Scholars:

"Their response in 1:19 when interrogated by him about their failure to fulfill their job description is one which cleverly arrogates the Pharaoh's assumption about Hebrew difference to their own advantage. That is, since the Egyptians believe that the Hebrews are different from Egyptians anyway, they are sure to believe that even in labor, a common female drama, Hebrews are different: Hebrew women deliver before the midwife comes to them."[457]

"The Hebrew [phrase] is ambiguous: it could mean 'to the Hebrew midwives' or 'to the midwives who serve the Hebrew women.' . . ..The women were most probably Hebrews, for midwives usually come from the community they serve. Their names can have meaning in Hebrew. . .. On the other hand, the names are not the usual form of Hebrew names. They may have come from another subject people. Now, however, they cast their lot with Israel and defy Pharaoh's order to kill."[458]

Questions for Discussion:

- The word *ivri*, according to *Genesis Rabbah*, can mean "one who crosses over". How does this describe the midwives in Exodus 1?
- In many contexts, *ivri* is used to show a contrast between Hebrew and another people. How do the midwives use this perceived contrast to their advantage?
- Medieval and modern commentators have suggested that an appropriate translation of *meyalledot ha-ivriot* is "midwives TO the Hebrews" not "Hebrew midwives". How does this affect your understanding of the story? What does it mean if the midwives were Hebrews? Egyptians? A third ethnic group?

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[454] Abravanel=a medieval European Jewish commentator on the Bible.
[455] Judah he-Hasid=another medieval European Jewish commentator on the Bible.
[456] Jeffrey Tigay, "Exodus," *The Jewish Study Bible* 10
[457] Renita J. Weems, "The Hebrew Women Are Not Like The Egyptian Women: The Ideology of Race, Gender and Sexual Reproduction in Exodus 1" *Semeia* 59 (1992) 29.
[458] Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "Saviors of the Exodus," *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of their Stories* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002) 25.

Appendix B: A Ritual for the Midwives

A mug is filled with strong tea or coffee. A guest recites:

Moses is not the hero of our story. And Miriam is not the heroine. God is the Hero/Heroine of our story.

The Bible records: "We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and the Eternal freed us from Egypt with a mighty hand." (Deuteronomy 6:21).

The *haggadah* expounds: " 'And the Eternal brought us forth from Egypt'—not by a ministering angel, not by a fiery angel, not by a messenger, but by Godself, in God's glory, did the Holy One, blessed be God, do so."[459]

But we do not only see God in the river flowing with blood, in the parting of waters, in the lightning at Sinai. We see God in the courage of Moses, in the loyalty of Aaron, in the joyful dance of Miriam. We see God in the frustration of Amram, the resourcefulness of Yocheved, and unconditional love of Bat-Paroh for a stranger's child. We see God in people who say "no" to tyranny. We see God in people who say "yes" to life.

Rabbi Akiva explains: "As the reward for the righteous women who lived in that generation were the Israelites delivered from Egypt" (Babylonian Talmud Sotah 11b).

The story of our Exodus begins with the defiant act of the *meyaldot ha'Ivriot*, the midwives to the Hebrew women. Shifra and Puah took a situation in which death was mandated and changed it into one where life was considered sacred. In a place where Hebrews were treated like animals, Shifra and Puah saw them as human beings worthy of the chance to live.

Tonight, in celebration of the midwives' courage and defiance, we place a cup of strong tea or coffee on our Seder table.

Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "A woman is like a tea bag—you never know how strong she is until she gets in hot water."

Many foodstuffs change their own properties when confronted with hot water: vegetables soften; eggs harden. But a tea bag is profoundly different. Not only does it show its strength when plunged into hot water, it changes the property of the water into which it is thrust.

While in the end we had no choice but to flee from the situation that oppressed us, it was Shifra and Puah who strove to make the world better from where they stood, crouched next to the birthstool.

As we celebrate our freedom tonight, let us celebrate those who did not wait for God to act, but rather—through their own actions—made themselves instruments of the Divine.

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[459] Goldberg 14.

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