LIBRARY COPYRIGHT NOTICE

www.huc.edu/libraries

Regulated Warning

See Code of Federal Regulations, Title 37, Volume 1, Section 201.14:

The copyright law of the United States (title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material.

Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specific conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be “used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research.” If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excess of “fair use,” that user may be liable for copyright infringement.

This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law.

AVIGAIL AND MICHAL:
THE MANY LAYERS OF BIBLICAL FIGURES

REBECCA ONEA SABIN HECHT

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
School of Rabbinic Studies
New York, NY

Date: March 1, 2022
Advisor: Rabbi Dr. Lisa Grant

Table of contents:

Acknowledgements

I began this text immersion with the desire to immerse myself in centuries of literature and discover more about two female characters whose stories continue to live on past their biblical narratives. I feel enormously grateful to have had the opportunity to delve into the many texts that complicate and nuance these biblical figures. My deepest gratitude is extended to my advisor, Rabbi Dr. Lisa Grant, for helping me structure my learning, for reading endless pages of translations, notes, and drafts, and for unfailingly providing astute guidance and care.

My initial close readings of Michal and Avigail in the Bible owe much to my chevruta learning with my friend and classmate Jill Rubin as we embarked on our text immersions together. I had the opportunity to teach some of these texts at Columbia/Barnard Hillel's Wednesday Night Learning Program, and thank the staff and students for embracing this study of Avigail. I am grateful to Rabba Wendy Amsellem for inviting me to share some of my work in two sessions of her Talmud II class, for which I serve as a Teaching Assistant; it was a joy to discuss Avigail's treatment in the Bavli with my second-year classmates. Rabbi Dr. Wendy Zierler, Dr. Sharon Koren, and Rabbi Jerome Davidson all provided me with invaluable material to deepen my study of Michal and Avigail. Eli Lieberman at the HUC New York library indefatigably scanned, located, and discussed resources with me, and also added wonderful new novels to my library check-out pile to keep my reading balanced.

Thank you to my family for inculcating a deep love of books from an early age. I will always be grateful for our childhood visits to the New England Mobile Bookfair, for long car trips with even longer audiobooks, and for a home overflowing with stories. Finally, I want to express my endless thanks for my partner, Dan Shaffer, who has read almost every essay and sermon I have written during our nearly ten years (and counting!) together, including much of this text immersion.

Text Immersion Paper #1

Avigail: "You Will Remember Your Servant"

Avigail enters the biblical narrative in the midst of the ongoing saga of Saul and David. The first verse of 1 Samuel 25 announces the death of the prophet Samuel, and Avigail appears in the following verse alongside her husband Naval. While initially Naval presents as a possible main character, Avigail quickly dominates the entire chapter, and seems to be a potential successor to the wise prophet and king-maker Samuel.[1] Yet, as quickly as she enters David's story, she disappears from the pages of the Bible. In 1 Samuel 25, Avigail has the longest speech of any woman in the Bible, but she never speaks again. In fact, following this dramatic sequence, she only appears in five scattered verses, without narrative cohesion.

Despite her disappearance from the biblical narrative, Avigail continues to grow as a character in the interpretations and commentaries of later generations of readers. This essay uses a framework based on the *PaRDeS* exegetical approach, using the four stages of *PaRDeS* creatively to journey through four layers of Avigail's story and explore its ongoing expansion through the intervention of its readers. These rabbinic, medieval, and modern voices add to Avigail's story as part of the ongoing interaction between reader and text, continually reimagining our characters and enlarging their narratives.

In the *PaRDeS* model, *P'shat* is the straightforward or "simple" reading of the text. For this essay, *P'shat* focuses on the initial, biblical layer of Avigail's narrative. Avigail appears in the Book of Samuel in the midst of the Davidic saga. David, a young shepherd, becomes King Saul's favored musician, slays the Philistine giant Goliath, and weds Saul's

[1] My gratitude to Rabba Wendy Amsellem for making this connection between Samuel's death and Avigail's appearance.

daughter Michal. However, the king quickly becomes threatened by the young man's popularity among the masses, and David flees into the wilderness. At the beginning of 1 Samuel 25, David and his followers encamp near Avigail's family's holdings.

Avigail enters the biblical narrative as the wise foil to her foolish husband, Naval (whose name literally means boor). In the terseness characteristic of so much of biblical prose, Avigail is captured by a short phrase: וְהָאִשָּׁה טוֹבַת־שֶׂכֶל וִיפַת תֹּאַר (v. 3). Avigail's physical depiction is not unusual among biblical figures, though it does place her among a small group of particularly attractive and appealing characters. The Bible uses similar language to describe two prominent objects of frustrated desire in the Book of Genesis: Rachel is יְפַת־תֹּאַר וִיפַת מַרְאֶה (Genesis 27:19) and Joseph is יְפֵה־תֹאַר וִיפֵה מַרְאֶה (Genesis 39:6). The beautiful Avigail will also quickly become a character whose "physical attractiveness will stir [..] matrimonial interest," much like Rachel for Jacob, and whose desirability catches the eye of a person of power, as Joseph does for Potiphar's wife.[2] Avigail, like Rachel and Joseph, is part of a household-centered drama with broader political ramifications. The captive woman of Deuteronomy 21:11 is another person described as יְפַת־תֹּאַר, and so too is Esther, the "winner" of the empire-wide beauty contest for queenship (Esther 2:7).

However, the first part of Avigail's characterization is unique. She is the sole biblical character described as possessing טוֹבַת־שֶׂכֶל, which Robert Alter translates as "a good mind" and JPS as "intelligent." The distinctiveness of this phrasing is indicated by a commentary of the Ramban's on Genesis 24:14. When Abraham's servant prays to discover the woman he seeks for Isaac's wife, the Ramban explains that the correct woman will be טובת שכל ויפת מראה. When Rebekah duly appears at the well, however, she is טֹבַת מַרְאֶה מְאֹד, without mention

[2] Alter, Robert. *The Hebrew Bible: Volume 2: Prophets. A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 279.

of her intellect or good sense (v. 16). Notably, Rebekah receives a depiction of physical beauty, like Rachel and Joseph, while Avigail is accorded both a physical and an intellectual portrayal from the moment of her introduction.

The language of שֵׂכֶל טוֹב appears primarily in the wisdom literature. Psalm 110:10 explains חָכְמָה as the fear of God and שֵׂכֶל טוֹב as the result of all those who act accordingly. Proverbs 13:15 maintains that שֵׂכֶל־טוֹב יִתֶּן־חֵן, "good sense wins favor" or "good produce earns grace." These usages indicate that the phrase may be about the wisdom inherent in quick and prudent understanding; its possessor knows how to act wisely and sensibly. Following this unusual introduction, Avigail promptly disappears from the next ten verses. Perhaps her unique characterization is a foreshadowing of her upcoming acts of שֵׂכֶל טוֹב, priming the reader to pay attention upon her return to the narrative.

Once Avigail reappears in 1 Samuel 25:14, she springs into action. The verb "to hasten" or "to hurry" features three times in the Avigail story, in a close parallel to Rebekah's whirlwind activity in Genesis 24. Both women act rapidly and seemingly decisively, and extended verb sequences underscore their purposeful motions, both of which end with the women acquiring new spouses, journeying to new homes, and moving into the Israelite narrative.[3] Two other similarly extended verb sequences capture the actions of Manoach's wife in Judges 13:10 and the witch of Endor in 1 Samuel 28:24. These women's undertakings change not only their own lives but also the futures of the nation; Manoach's wife becomes the mother of Samson, scourge of the Philistines, and the witch of Endor summons the ghost of the prophet Samuel, who pronounces doom upon King Saul.

Avigail, too, acts with intention and rapidity. Having understood her servant's concerns about Naval's snub to the angry and rapidly approaching David, she moves to

[3] See Genesis 24:18 and 24:20.

circumvent the upcoming narrative of retribution and bloodshed. In just two verses, she undertakes seven actions - she sees David, she hurries, she dismounts from her donkey, she falls down before him, she prostrates herself, she remains fallen in front of him, and then, the final and most courageous in this sequence of verbs: she speaks (v. 23-24). Robert Alter sees this series of physical actions as a deliberate prelude to her words: "Her first move in this highly dangerous situation, before she speaks a word, is to demonstrate her absolute submission to David through these extravagant gestures of obeisance."[4] These efforts appear to pay off, as David does not intervene until she has completed her speech, the longest single address by any woman in the Tanakh. Tikva Frymer-Kensky writes that

> Abigail knows that she doesn't have the luxury of time [...] now she will have to get her point across quickly. David has stopped his advance to talk to her, but she cannot expect infinite patience from this general on the warpath. She must choose her words carefully. Her speech is a masterpiece of biblical rhetoric. In very few words, Abigail rescues her household from David, she prevents David from committing a sin, and she ensures her own future.[5]

Avigail deftly employs what Frymer-Kensky terms "a rhetoric of humility," as she immediately placates David as "my lord" thirteen times in the course of her speech.[6] She calls herself "your servant" another five times, firmly establishing a power dynamic that must be pleasing to the angry and offended man before her. From her first words of humbleness and submissiveness, her words appear astutely crafted. Alter views her first word as a clever pun: When she takes the blame upon herself, בִּי־אֲנִי אֲדֹנִי הֶעָוֹן, "the word *bi* ("mine," "in me") in other contexts can mean "I beseech you," so she initiates her address to David with what sounds like a term of imploring."[7]

---

[4] Alter, 282.
[5] Frymer-Kensky, Tikva. *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories.* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 319.
[6] Frymer-Kensky, 319.
[7] Alter, 282.

Yet despite this language of humility and self-reproach, Avigail manages to make it quite clear that Naval, not she, is responsible for David's outrage. First she calls her husband worthless, and then says that "he is what his name is," foolish and boorish (v. 25). Just a single verse after she throws herself before David with cries of self-blame, she goes on to share that "your servant did not see the young men whom you, my lord, sent" to her home; she is innocent through her ignorance of the demands made by David's men (v. 25). Both Alter and Frymer-Kensky note that Avigail, like Jacob before Esau, offers a tribute (literally *the blessing*, הַבְּרָכָה) to mollify an angry, potentially dangerous man. However, Frymer-Kensky suggests that her words and actions more closely parallel those of other biblical women: "Taking on the guilt is the rhetoric of persuading women," as Rebekah does when she convinces Jacob to risk tricking Isaac in Genesis 27:13.[8] Further, by speaking disparagingly of Naval, she plays into an "insult strategy" used by the midwives in Egypt, creating distance and self-protection through words of scorn.[9]

Beyond humility and disparagement, Avigail's lengthy speech is notable for its use of metaphor, as she invokes the image of David's life as secure in "the bundle of the living," in contrast to his enemies' lives, which will be cast aside as "from the hollow of the sling" in her appeal to David (v. 29). Through these techniques of repetition (particularly of servant and lord language), persuasive tactics, and metaphoric imagery, Avigail's address acts to mollify the dangerously angry David.

Avigail bolsters the rhetorical prowess of her speech by showing attentiveness to the political and theological ramifications of David's next steps. As Alter notes, Avigail "deftly pitches her argument to David's political self-interest."[10] After her extended self-abasement,

[8] Frymer-Kensky, 319.
[9] Frymer-Kensky, 319.
[10] Alter, 284.

critique of Naval, and praise of David, she finally speaks to him about his political destiny and how poorly "your spilling blood needlessly" (וְלִשְׁפְךְ־דָּם חִנָּם) will reflect upon his kingship (v. 31). She interweaves her verbal offering of food for David's men with statements about how God has kept David from unnecessary bloodshed. Bringing together her actions of peace-keeping with her plea for David to exercise restraint; she declares that "Adonai will surely make for my lord a firm house, for my lord fights the battles of Adonai and evil is not to be found in you" (v. 28). Frymer-Kensky notes the persuasive suggestion that "spilling blood would be a stumbling block" in David's trajectory to sovereignty; Avigail "convinces David to *save himself* from that error."[11] David is convinced, and responds by blessing Avigail as a messenger from God (שְׁלָחֵךְ הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה לִקְרָאתִי), acknowledging that without her intervention, he would have indeed killed Naval and all of his men (v. 32-34).

Crisis averted, Avigail returns home to a drunk and merry Naval. She waits until he has slept off the alcohol before informing him of her actions. While earlier the narrative spared no detail in relaying her encounter with David, here the reader only learns that "his wife told him all the things which had happened," without exact details of her speech (v. 37); her words still take effect, for Naval is immediately petrified (though whether he freezes out of miserly shock at the loss of so much good food or out of terror at the bloodshed his wife has averted is not precisely clear). God strikes him down just ten days later; the reader never hears of a word spoken from Naval to Avigail, nor any specific words which she utters to him. Instead, the final words spoken by Avigail are her response to David's marriage-seeking messengers, when she engages in a sort of reverse rendition of her previous extended sequence of actions: after bowing low, humbly offering to wash the messengers' feet, she "hastens and rises and rides on a donkey" (וַתְּמַהֵר וַתָּקָם אֲבִיגַיִל וַתִּרְכַּב עַל־הַחֲמוֹר), this time

[11] Frymer-Kensky, 321.

escorted by five of her young women as she rides out once more (v. 42). This time, she leaves home to become David's wife.

After this extensive tale, Avigail virtually disappears from the narrative. As Frymer-Kensky writes, "in another world this wise woman could have become his trusted adviser and perhaps his official seer. But Abigail, having appeared to predict David's destiny and ensure it, disappears into his household and is not heard of again."[12] When she and her fellow wife Achinoam are captured by Amalekites, the biblical author devotes no time to their experiences or reactions; the narrative is entirely centered upon David's military maneuvers, and the women are but nominally mentioned (1 Samuel 30). Avigail and Achinoam are frequently paired, but where Achinoam is generally described by her origins as a Jezreelite, and other wives are identified in relation to a father, Avigail remains "the wife of Naval the Carmelite." She is forever in relation to her first spouse whom she saved from one gruesome death, only for him to die of divine action and release her to become a king's bride (1 Samuel 27:3, 30:5, 2 Samuel 2:2, 3:3). Avigail bears David a son, named in 2 Samuel as Chilav and in 1 Chronicles as Daniel; the latter is the only place in Tanakh where Avigail is described as "the Carmelite" in her own right, rather than as "the wife of Naval the Carmelite (3:3). Both this discrepancy in the name of her child and his absence from the succession struggle among David's sons will be addressed by later readers and interpreters of Avigail's story.

Moving from the *P'shat*, the direct and initial layer of Avigail's narrative, we enter the world of the Rabbis, which I label the *Remez* level in my creative framing of the *PaRDeS* model. The *Remez* stage of exegesis seeks "hints" and allegories, searching for the symbolic or hidden meanings behind the primary text. In their exploration of Avigail's story, the

[12] Frymer-Kensky, 323.

Rabbis examine intriguing words and themes, make connections to other biblical characters, and weave their own theological and social impulses into the text.

Avigail's treatment in rabbinic literature is hardly uniform. Her intelligence, the characteristic which first jumps off of the biblical page, is cast both as a great virtue and as a moral threat. She is variably a prophetess, a beauty, and a self-motivated schemer. The wide-ranging rabbinic interpretations and embellishments of her story are the beginning of her post-biblical life as a dynamic, ever-changing character. Without venturing too far into psychological analysis or historical hypotheses, the Rabbis' treatment of Avigail appears to speak to their own social context, their understanding of women's abilities and desires, and an uncertainty about the agency of intelligent, complex women.

In a Mishnaic discussion about the number of wives a king may have, Avigail appears as the prime example of an ideal wife. In a discussion of Deuteronomy 17's statement that "he shall not have many wives," the Mishnah affirms that this includes "even those like Avigail (Sanhedrin 2:4). The implication seems to be that Avigail is a virtuous wife, one who will not "change the devotion of his heart," which the Rabbis view as among the theological and political dangers posed by a king's wife. In the Tosefta, this risk is made more explicit; Rabbi Yehuda asserts that a king should not have many wives "like Jezebel" of idolatrous fame, "but those like Avigail - he is permitted" (Sanhedrin 4:3). While the Bavli rejects the possibility of a king having many wives, even those like Avigail, she remains an example of the ideal type of spouse for a monarch in both Bavli Sanhedrin and Bavli Bava Metzia's treatment of this Mishnah. In his commentary on B. Sanhedrin 21a, Adin Steinsaltz describes Avigail as a woman who was "righteous and prevented David from transgression."

Avigail is also listed among the "four very beautiful women in the world" along with Sarah, Rahav, and Esther (B. Megillah 15a). However, this characterization is not entirely positive. The passage immediately goes on to list four women whose allure "caused promiscuity." Sarah and Esther vanish from this list, but Avigail remains, along with Rahav, and joined by Yael and Michal. According to the baraita, these women incited lust through differing means: "Rahav by her name," "Yael by her voice," and "Michal the daughter of Saul by her appearance." Avigail, who has just been described as among the most beautiful women on earth, is deemed to cause promiscuity "by remembering her," rather than by a specific physical attribute. Perhaps there is a wordplay here with the conclusion of Avigail's speech to David, where she invites David to "remember your servant" (1 Samuel 25:32). Avigail's power is in her words and the tempting suggestions that they invite, and the Rabbis do not seem to find that possibility entirely welcome.

In the hands of the Rabbis, Avigail's speech becomes not only a political and interpersonal plea, but also prophecy. In another baraita, the Talmud lists "forty-eight prophets and seven prophetesses prophesied for Israel," including Avigail (B. Megillah 14a). Their proof text is Avigail's journey towards David, "as she rode upon the donkey, and was coming down in the hidden place of the mountain" (1 Samuel 25:20). The Talmud seizes upon בְּסֵתֶר הָהָר, "in the hidden place of the mountain," proposing that "it should have said" מִן הָהָר, "from the mountain" instead. From this strange use of language, Rabba bar Shmuel understands that the text holds an additional meaning: Avigail approaches David "about matters of blood that come from the hidden places" (הַסְּתָרִים), showing him niddah blood for his ruling. In this telling, David asks reproachfully, "And is blood shown at night?" Avigail promptly replies, "And are capital law cases judged at night?" Taken aback, David protests

that Naval "is a rebel against the kingdom, and there is no need to judge him" in a proper trial, so vigilante justice is acceptable. However, in this rabbinic expansion Avigail responds yet again, insisting that "Saul still stands and your coin has not yet gone out in the world," gracefully reminding him that he is not yet the recognized king and does not have the authority to condemn Naval as a rebel against the kingdom (B. Megillah 14a-b).

Rabba bar Shmuel concludes his creative interpretation of בְּסֵתֶר הָהָר with David's response to Avigail's speech: "Blessed is your judgment and blessed are you who have restrained me [this day] from coming into blood[shed]" (1 Samuel 25:33). Seizing on the plural usage, בְּדָמִים, in David's reply to Avigail, the Talmud continues by noting that this use of language "indicates two" types of blood, which Rashi identifies as "the blood of niddah and the spilling of blood." This lengthy Talmudic passage thus casts Avigail as using menstrual blood to halt another type of bloodshed.

The analysis of Avigail's prophecy continues by explaining that Avigail "revealed her thigh" and thus incited David's desire. However, she then warned him, "Do not have this (זאת) be for you a stumbling" (1 Samuel 25:31). While the biblical context is about David's impulse towards violent retribution against Naval, the Rabbis interpret זאת to mean "that there is someone else" who will cause David to stumble, "and what is this? The act of Batsheva, and the final result was so," a great blow to David's moral and political authority (B. Megillah 15a). As Rashi explains in his commentary, "so it is confirmation that she was a prophetess whose prophecy was valid," for she foresaw that David would stumble through his encounter with Batsheva.

It is not immediately obvious how the reader should view this depiction of Avigail's prophetic feat. Alice Bach writes that "it is understood by the rabbis also that Abigail's moral

goodness and self-control cools David's ardor, thus distinguishing her from Bathsheba. The mere sight of Bathsheba enflames David to sin, whereas encounter with Abigail cools David's fervor to kill Nabal."[13] As Bach reads it, Avigail remains the virtuous wife of Mishnah Sanhedrin, who provides David with calm and appeasing words. In contrast, Elisheva Baumgarten sees the Talmudic tale as rather less flattering:

> While this portrayal can be read as a tribute to Abigail's wisdom, it is not altogether complimentary: as a married woman who tries to entice David and discusses discreet matters related to menstrual blood with him, albeit for a just end, she falls short of her untarnished depiction in the Bible.[14]

For Baumgarten, the depiction of Avigail in this extended passage reveals a certain discomfort with her abilities to persuade David. She is recast not as a woman who uses well-chosen words and generous refreshments to broker peace, but as one who deploys sexually questionable tactics alongside her clever language.

As the passage concludes, this more negative depiction becomes all the more clear. After a reminder of Avigail's concluding words to David - "and when Adonai does well by my lord, you will remember your servant" - Rav Nachman declares: "this corresponds to what people say - a woman with talk there is the spindle. There are those who say a duck bends down as it goes, but its eyes observe" (B. Megillah 14b). Rashi understands this oblique pronouncement as understanding that "while she is speaking with him about her husband, she is reminding him about herself, that if he [Naval] dies, he [David] should marry her." While a duck's head might be lowered, its eyes scan for future prospects, and so too does Avigail. Baumgarten affirms that

---

[13] Bach, Alice. *The Pleasures of Her Text, Feminist Readings of Biblical and Historical Texts*. (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1990). Accessed from online edition: https://www.religion-online.org/book-chapter/chapter-3-the-pleasure-of-her-text-by-alice-bach/

[14] Baumgarten, Elisheva. "Charitable like Abigail: The History of an Epitaph." *The Jewish Quarterly Review* (Volume 105, Number 3, Summer 2015), 317.

> The talmudic conclusion concerning this encounter is undeniably pejorative [...] Here Abigail's request that David remember her when he becomes successful is interpreted as a negative comment on women who look out for their own interests, scheming for a future spouse while still married, much as geese gaze sideways while walking in a straight line. Overall, this is not an especially positive portrayal of Abigail, despite the credit she receives for wisdom and foresight.[15]

Avigail is thus transformed in the Mishnah and Talmud into a somewhat transgressive figure, whose wisdom is entrancing but not wholly welcome. While the Rabbis call her a prophetess, her gift of foresight is entangled with her self-interested motivation; though she keeps David from deadly violence, her intervention is inseparable from her use of niddah blood and sexual wiles. All of these rabbinic additions to Avigail's story complicate the biblical character, as she is cast as both the virtuous wife and the scheming social climber, the peace-keeping prophetess and the alluring temptress of words and "hidden parts."

In the homiletic midrashic compilation of Midrash Tanchuma, Avigail returns as a righteous and upstanding woman, but there is perhaps a hint of apologetics to the portrayal. Rabbi Yitzchak intones that "there is no generation without scoffers in it" (Toldot Siman 6). From there, the midrash explains that after Avigail was brought to David, he separated from her for three months "in order to know if she was pregnant from Naval or not," and only had sexual relations with her following that time period. Despite this caution, however, when Avigail then conceived, "the scoffers of the generation scorned and said: From Naval she is pregnant." The midrash explains that in response, God ordered "the angel appointed upon the creation of infants" to "go and form him in the likeness of David his father, in order that everyone would testify that David was his father." This is the midrashic explanation for the name of Avigail's son, Chilav, as reported in 2 Samuel 3:3. This name, "like father," served

[15] Baumgarten, 317.

as proof that "he was entirely like his father, so that all who saw him said, David is this one's father."

This midrash seems to seize upon both the odd name of Chilav and the discrepancy with his name as recorded in Chronicles (Daniel), though the later fact is not directly addressed. The midrash takes care to present Avigail and David's relationship as beyond reproach, so much so that divine forces intervene to ensure that their son's paternity cannot be questioned by cynics and scoffers. At the same time, the midrash reveals a certain defensiveness about Avigail's virtue and David's fatherhood, which Rashi addresses in his commentary on the Tanakh and contemporary Israeli novelist Meir Shalev exploits in his searing modern retelling of the Avigail narrative.

Kohelet Rabbah, a relatively late aggadic collection, adds a new theological component to Avigail's speech. In this midrash, rather than predict David's ascension to the monarchy or his stumbling with Batsheva, Avigail's words have another prophetic portent, as she speaks "with the holy spirit" about the afterlife (3:21). The midrash states, "one of the lives of the righteous and one of the lives of the wicked, all of them ascend on high, but the lives of the righteous are placed in the treasury, and the lives of the wicked are ripped apart on earth." Avigail's pronouncement that "then the life of my lord will be bound up in the bundle of life" is the initial prooftext for this theological statement, evidence that a righteous person's life will be safeguarded after their mortal body has expired (1 Samuel 25:29). Since "I might have thought that even those of the wicked" are also bound up in the bundle of life, Avigail immediately goes on to say, "But the lives of your enemies [God] will hurl from the hollow of the sling," which substantiates the eternal fate of the wicked (1 Samuel 25:29).

This midrash adds theological wisdom to Avigail's character, casting her speech as the prooftext for this notion of reward and punishment after death.

In the *PaRDeS* model, *Drash* is the third stage of exegesis, understood as the midrashic approach. I use *Drash* to refer to my examination of a third stage in Avigail's story, that of medieval additions and interpretations. These medieval voices build on the Rabbis' work through commentaries, late midrashic material, and epitaphs, filling in gaps and possibilities in the biblical text and sometimes taking it in unexpected directions in the process.

In Rashi's commentaries on Avigail's story, he notes the cleverness of her opening salvo of self-reproach to David, observing that "at first she said thusly in order that he would incline an ear to her words" (Rashi on 1 Samuel 25:24). He adds, without explicit ethical assessment, that "at the end she said the truth to him" when she deftly shifts the blame away with "I did not see the youths of my master." Rashi echoes the diverse rabbinic interpretations of Avigail in his different comments. Following the rabbinic view of Avigail as a prophetess, he explains that she "prophesied with the Holy Spirit that [Naval's] days would not be lengthy" (Rashi on 1 Samuel 25:26). He also repeats the concepts of B. Megillah about Avigail's efforts to prevent David from reaching the throne bloodied and tainted, adding these words to Avigail's speech: "Do not let evil be found within you, so it is not becoming for you to that which is not the law, to bring forth evil talk upon (to discredit) your reign" (Rashi on 1 Samuel 25:28).

In contrast to the ambivalent, sometimes complimentary and sometimes reproving elaborations of the Rabbis, the medieval Rabbeinu Bachya depicts Avigail in glowing terms. In his commentary on Miriam's musical leadership in Exodus 15:20, he writes that "you will

find great essences (or foundations) that are in the Torah interpreted by women, like the subject of the world to come which is called "the bundle of life" by Avigail," followed by other important endeavors by biblical women. For Rabbeinu Bachya, like Kohelet Rabbah, Avigail's speech contains critical theological insights. Further, he correlates the seven prophetesses to the seven "receiving middot" in order of his listing, which would connect Avigail to *hod*, glory or splendor - a statement of high praise.

Avigail appears in another Rabbeinu Bachya commentary on Deuteronomy 33:1, in which he examines verses from Proverbs 31 about the qualities of a woman or wife of valor. When in the course of this process he reaches the final verse of Proverbs, "Give her the fruit of her hands and may her deeds praise her in the gates" (31:31), the medieval commentator concludes,

> It is fitting that they give her honor for the fruit of her hands, from what she gathered and gained, that people praise her in the gates for the beauty of her deeds and the skill of her work, as in the known matter of Avigail, who in her industry and her good insight saved her husband and all the people of his household from the sword of David and his men.

By ending his praise of the woman of valor with Avigail, he perhaps connects her to the feminized Wisdom of Proverbs, in addition to casting her as the epitome of a righteous and industrious wife.

The late midrashic compilation of Midrash Tehillim also describes Avigail as a model of wifely perfection. The midrash quotes Proverbs 18:22, "one who found a wife found happiness" to insist that "there is no end to a good wife" (Midrash Tehillim 53). Avigail is the midrash's representative case: "Avigail was better for David than all the sacrifices in the world. Whereas he had done the deed that he thought of, if he could have sacrificed all of the offerings that were in the world, he could not have had atonement, but she came to him and

rescued him." Through her intervention against David's vengeful approach, Avigail not only preserved an earthly throne for him, but also provided for his spiritual and ethical wellbeing. The midrash gives her new language, allowing her to act as David's moral counselor: "Do not hesitate and do not say, because I am king, there is no one who rebukes me. Rebuke yourself." Despite these wise words, the midrash does not seem entirely confident giving Avigail full agency over her own wisdom and guidance; the text's David reminds her that God is the true source of her insights: "This is not from you, do not boast to yourself. The Holy God Blessed be God sent you to me," though he does go on to say "and also you need to be blessed" alongside God. As in Rabbeinu Bachya's Torah commentaries, Avigail appears unexpectedly in this midrashic exploration of Psalms in a mostly positive role as a virtuous and wise woman who acts to improve his condition politically and spiritually, saving David from himself in this world and the next.

15th century Portuguese commentator Abarbanel also largely views Avigail positively. Abarbanel explains the Bible's description of Avigail's physical and intellectual attributes as "meaning to say that she was complete in soul and in body" (commentary on 1 Samuel 25:3). He disagrees with Rashi's characterization of Avigail's opening gambit to David as a strategy to "enter with him into words," but instead understands that "she deserves to speak because of the punishment and the wickedness which David would do to the house of Naval, she will bear it and it will be upon her," and she must thus act to prevent it (commentary on 1 Samuel 25:24). Abarbanel's Avigail shows herself to be keenly self-aware of both her words and her image. She is also very cognizant of David's injured feelings, and acts with delicacy and adroitness: In Abarbanel's words, she coaxes David by asking, "who is this worthless one that the king of Israel should be activated by his words?" She makes it

clear to David that Naval is so far below him in status that seeking out vengeance is likewise beneath him. Abarbanel also plumbs Avigail's psyche upon her return home, writing "behold Avigail of her wisdom, when she came to her house, she did not say all to her husband, in order to not disturb the happiness [...] and also maybe she feared because Naval was drunk" (commentary on 1 Samuel 25:36). Abarbanel casts Avigail's caution and delay in disclosing her actions to Naval as wisdom rather than scheming.

The impulses towards a more virtuous rendition of Avigail in the late midrash and medieval commentaries is also evinced in the social fabric of medieval and early modern Germany, a development that eventually led to several centuries of women's funerary epitaphs featuring the phrase "charitable like Avigail." Elisheva Baumgarten proposes that "the selection of Avigail as a model served to ease the social and religious tensions concerning women's charity [...] she became a prototype for charitable women."[16] As Baumgarten notes, this choice is not immediately obvious, for though Avigail is "depicted in positive if not effusive terms" in the Bible, she does not engage in charitable efforts in the biblical narrative.[17] However, in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, Avigail begins to emerge in halakhic debates about the permissibility of a person accepting charity from a married woman without the consent of her husband. Baumgarten explains that in *Sefer Hasidim*, the triangle of Avigail, David, and Naval is offered as a proof text, for "just as David went against Nabal's decision by accepting food from Abigail, so too charity collectors can go against a husband's will, since a recalcitrant husband owes that money to communal charity."[18]

[16] Baumgarten, 313.
[17] Baumgarten, 314.
[18] Baumgarten, 323.

This rendering developed in a context where "legal authorities were making it increasingly difficult for married women to contribute money independently," and yet leadership was "reluctant to surrender charitable revenue," so Avigail, a biblical figure, was deployed to "trump the Talmud's more restrictive ruling" on women's charitable giving.[19] Eventually, Avigail was reborn as the emblem of charitable women, regardless of their husbands' approval, and references to her appeared on women's epitaphs from early modern Germany until the mid-nineteenth century. In Baumgarten's words, "the image of Abigail was transformed into a role model that met a particular cultural need" and she "served as a convenient tool for redefining the forms of charity that women could contribute."[20] In the process, her character was transformed, adding an additional dimension to her biblical and rabbinic portrayals. As Baumgarten writes, "if this recasting of the story of Abigail is seen as one case among many, it highlights the tremendous richness of this cultural repertoire of reworking biblical narratives." While her article focuses on medieval and early modern Ashkenaz and its social and legal developments, a similar impulse can be seen in the modern interpretations of Avigail's story, which bring our own context and values into conversation with the existing layers of narrative and character.

The fourth and final layer of *PaRDeS* is *Sod*, the "secret" stage of exegesis that searches for the mystical and esoteric meanings within the text. In my creative framework, *Sod* is the layer of contemporary additions to the Avigail narrative.. While not necessarily mystical in nature, these modern writings create possibilities and make connections which

[19] Baumgarten, 324, 326, 327. Baumgarten adds that medieval Christian writing indicates a parallel "transformation [of Avigail] into a figure worth emulating." "Bede presented Abigail as a significant counterimage to Nabal, particularly in relation to David, who is understood to prefigure Jesus. In this reading, Abigail is portrayed as the ''true synagogue'' (synagoga fidelis), parallel to Jews who believed in Jesus rather than spurning him. While Bede and his followers did not develop the link between Abigail and charity, Bede made note of her righteousness, as did earlier Jewish and Christian commentators who explained that her father rejoiced in her deeds" (327).
[20] Baumgarten, 337.

might be surprising to earlier readers and interpreters of the story. They are all revelatory, inviting a *sod* in their own way, as they bring the voices and perspectives of women, Israelis leftists, Hebrew priestesses, and fiction writers into conversation with the preceding layers of Avigail's story. Some valorize her, others castigate her, and all add new dimensions to the story which enrich and complicate the character.

In her retelling of the early monarchy period, *The Secret Book of Kings*, Israeli writer Yochi Brandes engages with the Bible as a carefully edited and politically motivated document, exploring in a novelized form the erased possibilities, unwritten secrets, and alternative versions that might have disappeared from the history it purports to relay. Therefore, Brandes' Jonathan reports to his sister Michal, David's first wife, that "when Naval died of too much food and wine during one of the sheep-shearing festival, Abigail came to David in the desert in the middle of the night and asked him to take her as a wife."[21] When Michal clarifies, "she proposed to him?" Jonathan responds, "That's what they say [...] you know that he's attracted to strong, independent women."[22] Brandes plays with the nature of inherited stories; the Bible portrays David as the one who sends messengers to Avigail, but the novel opens up different possibilities for agency and action. Michal muses to herself that she

> might have taken comfort in Abner's spies' version of the story, which, as always, was completely different from the one told by our agents, but that alternative version was so shocking that I preferred to imagine my husband in the arms of a beautiful and independent woman like me than to believe he'd become a ruthless villain who would murder a rich landowner in cold blood [...] and would take his wife by force as a deterrent for others.

[21] Brandes, Yochi. *The Secret Book of Kings*, trans. Yardenne Greenspan. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2016), 191.
[22] Brandes, 191.

For Brandes, the Bible only offers one of many plausible variations, and it is left to the reader to decide whether the biblical version - the story rejected by Brandes' Michal because it is so unflattering to her beloved David - is more or less compelling than the idea of Avigail, "the pretty, brave widow heading alone into the dark desert" in pursuit of David.[23] Through the eyes of Michal, Brandes creates new interpretations of Avigail's character and narrative, adding an additional layer to the biblical account through a combination of source criticism and expert storytelling.

In her collection *Listen to Her Voice*, Miki Raver situates her endeavors within the midrashic tradition, "the interpretive process [that] gives the Bible its vitality and makes it a living, giving vessel."[24] Her work is consciously "rebellious, contemporary," as she brings to the forefront of her writing an exhilarating discovery: "I could feel the power of these women. I could feel their heat. Sexuality, spirituality, and strategy were the themes of their tales."[25] Her Avigail is neither a femme fatale nor a helplessly appealing victim, but instead a survivor of domestic abuse who knows that there is strength in her choice to "operate very softly from your core of inner strength."[26] Raver adds a new dimension to Avigail's story, arguing that what might appear as submission to the reader is self-protection, diplomacy, and patience in a world of angry, dangerous men; in her carefully crafted humility lies power, and ultimately triumph.

Jill Hammer reads Avigail through the frame of the *sefirot* in her *Omer Calender of Biblical Women*, where Avigail represents *yesod she'beHod*, connection within glory, echoing Rabbeinu Bachya's designation of Avigail with the middah of *hod*. For Hammer,

---

[23] Brandes, 191-192.
[24] Raver, Miki. *Listen to Her Voice: Women of the Hebrew Bible*. (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2005), Kindle location 61. Kindle Edition.
[25] Raver, Kindle location 59.
[26] Raver, Kindle location 1339.

Avigail is successful not because of her humility, her hospitality, or her appeal to David's future political prospects, but "because of her deep ability to connect," a gift whose potential is within each of us.[27] This too is a recasting of Avigail, as a different type of role model than she might have been to women in medieval and early modern Ashkenaz, but still as a figure to admire and emulate in a form appealing to a contemporary audience interested in a spiritual Omer practice.

Avigail is a main character in Geraldine Brooks' *The Secret Chord*, which is narrated by the prophet Natan. Brooks sketches out Avigail's appearance, going far beyond the terseness of the Bible or the ambivalent admiration of the Talmud for her beauty. She is described as green-eyed, tall, with a "low and quick" voice, and noticeably older than the youth David.[28] At her first meeting with the child Natan, she tells her story as a warning:

> I am Avigail of Carmel, third wife of our leader, David. I am his wife because my first husband, Naval, who was a drunkard and a fool, refused to send supplies for David's men when he requested them of us. We could afford it—we had three thousand sheep. I knew what the cost of that denial would be to us, so I saw to it myself, and met David on the road with the supplies before he and his band reached our village. Tell your father this: David is no ordinary outlaw, no ordinary man. When my husband died, I came to be his wife, even though I left behind a rich household to live as you see me here, among outlaws, begging for supplies. Boy, tell your father this is no small thing. Don't let him make the same mistake my foolish husband made.[29]

Natan and the reader thus encounter an Avigail who is fully aware of David's distinctiveness, appeal, and danger, and tries to alert others. She is wise and beautiful, just as she is in earlier tellings, but she is also deeply aware of the challenges of being aligned with David, not just the potential future benefits.

---

[27] Hammer, Jill. *Omer Calendar of Biblical Women*. Ritualwell: Accessed from https://www.ritualwell.org/ritual/omer-calendar-biblical-women
[28] Brooks, Geraldine. *The Secret Chord.* (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2015), 21. Kindle Edition.
[29] Brooks, 22.

Much later, she tells Natan that David "looked beautiful that day [...] And angry—you know how he is, in anger. I could feel it. Feel the heat of it coming off him. The sense of purpose in him, the coil of it, how tightly he held himself in, but how ferocious he might be, unleashed. The self-command."[30] For a woman married to a husband she "despised," the young and vibrant David presents a compelling contrast. She has learned the hard way to be patient, conciliatory, and perceptive, forced to "listen to [Naval] boast that he'd stood up to the ragtag outlaws, knowing that if it weren't for me he'd be dead in his own blood."[31] She dances in joy when David asks for her hand. These details, which enrich and complicate Avigail's character, are a modern *sod* on the preceding centuries of primarily male interpretation and commentary, a secret finally "revealed" by a woman writing about a woman.

In her writing on the Bible narrative, Tikva Frymer-Kensky laments in that "in another world this wise woman could have become his trusted adviser and perhaps his official seer. But Abigail, having appeared to predict David's destiny and ensure it, disappears into his household and is not heard of again."[32] Brooks creates that other world where Avigail's voice can be heard. Natan understands their union not only as a "love match," but also as a relationship between ruler and trusted counselor.[33] Notably, she uses her emotional intelligence and interpersonal insights to guide him, which feels both true to the biblical account and to a celebration of how feminism can expand and improve our understanding of leadership and advising. David tells Natan, "she understands how to read

[30] Brooks, 158.
[31] Brooks, 158.
[32] Frymer-Kensky, 323.
[33] Brooks, 66.

men's hearts," and she acts as "more than a wife [...] like a sister and, in some measure, a mother also," giving David the balance of emotional support and keen judgment he needs.[34]

Brooks creates a fuller picture of Avigail's pregnancy as well. While earlier writings spend little time on Avigail's life with David, apart from the divergent names of her son, Brooks focuses on her pregnancy "with the child that would be David's second born."[35] In her telling, Avigail is already stricken with the "wasting disease" that will consume her, a creative addition to a biblical story that never mentions her death.[36] Yet Avigail still understands her pregnancy as a "blessing. More than that. It is a miracle," explaining that she and Naval had no children in five years of marriage.[37] This new storyline connects Avigail to her biblical sisters who struggle with fertility in a world that appraises them for their capacity to bear children, while simultaneously challenging that narrative, as Avigail has clear value to David for her place among his "wisest advisers."[38] She is no sycophant or credulous worshipper, but instead a clear-eyed companion, who tells Natan "we may love him and yet not be blind to what he is. I've come to understand that he is what he is because of his faults."[39] Her character remains true to the impression given by the terse words of the Bible - wise, beautiful, intuitive about men's egos, shrewd about her own situation - but becomes richer, more nuanced, through this rendition which gives her powerful voice a bigger stage.

In sharp contrast to Brooks' glowing portrayal, Israeli writer Meir Shalev takes a much more critical view of Avigail's actions and intentions. In his essay "Protection in Carmel," Shalev interprets David as "a charismatic gang leader" rather than a "war hero" and

---

[34] Brooks, 67-68.
[35] Brooks, 141. In Brooks' novel, Avigail and David's son Daniel dies as a child, "mourned grievously" by David as "the living reminder of Avigail" (167).
[36] Brooks, 157.
[37] Brooks, 157.
[38] Brooks, 200.
[39] Brooks, 166.

persecuted king-to-be, in a story of "money, violence, and love."[40] In a tone that might be grudgingly admiring, shocked, or both, he writes about "the intervention of this cunning woman" who "goes forth on the way without saying a word to her husband. There are two reasons for this: first she recognized his wicked personality and his eruptive anger, and second, at that same hour Avigail is already concocting in her heart a complex plot many times over."[41] Avigail is the protagonist of Shalev's story of protection money and gang violence, "a more dangerous personality many times over than the two men combined."[42] While the Rabbis might have found her agency and determination alarming in a woman, Shalev seems to be almost tickled by the sheer audacity he discovers in Avigail's actions.

Shalev sifts through Avigail's "speech of eight verses, of which each one is more substantial and craftier than the former," identifying all of the careful rhetoric and persuasion noted by other readers of the text.[43] However, he finds something heretofore unmentioned or unnoticed by his predecessors: "an astonishing proposal" hidden within the "alluring packaging" of the long address: "In the words of Avigail an explicit proposal is hidden, on the matter of the elimination of Naval by her own hand."[44] For Shalev, Avigail's "May your enemies and those who seek evil upon my lord fare like Naval" is eerily similar to Yoav's messenger announcing Avshalom's death to David in 2 Samuel 18:32, after Yoav's men have killed the rebellious young prince. When Avigail warns David that killing Naval would be "a stumbling and a faltering" for the future "leader over Israel," Shalev understands an implicit suggestion that "it's preferable [...] he be eliminated by someone else, in a more secretive and elegant way, obviously by the hand of Avigail herself."[45] This would-be murderess "in the

[40] Shalev, Meir. *Tanakh 'Akhshav* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1985), 19. All translations are my own.
[41] Shalev, 21.
[42] Shalev, 21.
[43] Shalev, 22.
[44] Shalev, 22.
[45] Shalev, 22.

world of protection" goes further, and "stipulates her price: "And when Adonai has done well by my master, then you will remember your servant," by recompensing her with a new marital alliance with the future king.[46]

Shalev finds further evidence of this deadly plot in the terse biblical description of Naval's death. He chuckles as Rashi's "humorous outburst" of a suggestion that the stingy Naval died of a heart attack when he heard how many gifts Avigail gave to David's men: "Even a novice detective wouldn't buy a story like that."[47] Instead, Shalev posits that Naval's "becoming like a stone" sounds like the "general paralysis" of poisoning by hemlock, "a deadly plant grown also on Mount Hebron."[48] Shortly after this unexpected death, David does indeed "remember his servant" and marry Avigail, further proof for Shalev of a murder plot. Avigail is no longer the peace-seeking and virtuous woman of some earlier interpretations, nor the mere shrewd opportunist of other tellings, but instead a cold-blooded poisoner who casts hardly a backward glance as she rides away to her new life with her accomplice in murder.

Shalev cannot resist concluding with a "very spicy matter in the margins," the question of Avigail and David's son.[49] After recounting the midrashic interpretations of his two names, he asks about his absence in the "inheritance wars" among David's sons, and proposes that "there was something in the suspicions of those scoffers of the generation. The non-lucidity about the identity of his father disqualified him from being an inheritor."[50] While Brooks' Daniel dies as a child and therefore disappears from the succession battle, Shalev's carries the taint of questionable paternity. Avigail, then, is firmly stripped of the virtuous

[46] Shalev, 22.
[47] Shalev, 22.
[48] Shalev, 22.
[49] Shalev, 23.
[50] Shalev, 23.

mantle wrapped around her by the medieval commentators and midrashists. Shalev depicts a ruthless woman who is willing to do whatever necessary to achieve her ends.

These wildly divergent depictions of Avigail in contemporary writing demonstrate the richness and depth of the texts (biblical, rabbinic, and medieval) on which they draw, and the ongoing opportunities for new discoveries within the story of Avigail. From her introduction as a wise and beautiful woman and her psychologically and politically astute speech to David, In the rabbinic imagination, Avigail becomes a prophetess and the epitome of a virtuous wife, while she is simultaneously portrayed as a source of sexual temptation and an example of feminine scheming. Medieval thinkers depict her both as a model of charity for other women to emulate and as a person of deep theological insight. Contemporary interpreters have seen her as King David's wise counselor, a husband-poisoner, and the pure and good young woman of a biblical fairy-tale. Each of these possibilities draws on deep engagement with the stories that come before them. Through these layers of Avigail's narrative, the reader experiences the creativity, anxieties, and yearnings of successive generations of interpreters, and the immense range of possibilities within Avigail's narrative, and within every biblical story and character.

Text Immersion Paper #2

Michal: From Love to Disdain

While the Bible has a small number of well-known love stories - Rebecca and Isaac, Rachel and Jacob, the unnamed lovers of the Song of Songs - tere is only one named woman in the entire Tanakh who is depicted as loving another person romantically: Michal, daughter of King Saul, loves David.[51] She is thus a unique figure in the Tanakh, her characterization particularly striking in a text that tells the reader when men who love women romantically (Isaac and Jacob) and mothers engage in acts of love and care for their children (Rebecca and Yocheved). In Michal, the Tanakh gives us a window into a woman's expectations of romance.

Despite her distinctive emotional depiction, Michal's tale is not a love story. The object of her affection, David, is never described as loving her, and her own feelings turn sour over the course of the narrative of 1 and 2 Samuel. Finally, at a moment of great victory and celebration for David and Israel, Michal castigates her husband at great length. As Shulamit Valler notes, "Michal is an independent and daring woman. She is the one who initially falls in love with David. She later dares to despise and criticize him when she does not like his actions."[52] Her twice remarked-upon love, so unusual for a woman in Tanakh, is no more, but she ends her narrative with the same emotional boldness with which she began.

Michal's story continues beyond the confines of the biblical tale as successive generations of readers have intervened to create new meanings and possibilities. This paper will assess the ongoing creation of Michal's character. I will begin with an analysis of the

[51] While the female figure in the Song of Songs loves someone romantically, her romance is prose, rather than a narrative arc, and she remains nameless.

[52] Valler, Shulamit. "King David and 'His' Women: Biblical Stories and Talmudic Discussions." *A Feminist Companion to Samuel and Kings*, ed. Athalya Brenner. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 130.

Biblical text and then draw on key rabbinic, medieval, and contemporary depictions to examine Michal's presentation in different eras of Jewish literature. In my analysis, I apply a framework that makes creative use of the traditional *PaRDeS* model of exegesis; my paper understands each of its four levels as adding to and deepening our understanding of and engagement with the character of Michal, and ultimately, with Jewish interpretive tradition itself.

P'shat is the first level of *PaRDeS*, traditionally understood as the "simple" or "plain meaning of the text. In my creative framing, *P'shat* means the biblical layer of Michal's story, the initial, fundamental text upon which all further layers build. In contrast to the lengthy and intact narrative of Avigail, another prominent wife of David, Michal's story emerges in bits and pieces, scattered in small sections throughout 1 and 2 Samuel.This analysis therefore, examines the entirety of Michal's presentation in the Bible.

Michal first enters the biblical narrative in a list of King Saul's children, alongside Jonathan, Ishvi, Malchishua, and Merav (1 Samuel 14:49). Throughout much of the story that follows, she continues to be defined through her relationship to her father Saul, the first king of Israel, and her husband David, the second king; rarely does her name appear without a clause reminding the reader of her connection to these men. However, Amy Kalmanofsky contends that Michal must also be read through her link to her sister, Merav. When Michal is introduced, she is described as the younger of Saul's daughters, alongside the older daughter, Merav, and in much of the story that follows, they "appear interchangeable in their narrative. One sister can and does replace the other."[53] Later generations of readers and interpreters

[53] Kalmanofsky, Amy. *Dangerous Sisters of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 38. Kindle Edition.

must contend with Michal and Merav's "interchangeability" in their own portrayals of Michal.

In 1 Samuel 18, a threatened and jealous Saul offers Merav to David in return for dangerous military service; he hopes that David will die at the hands of the Philistines before this exchange can be fulfilled. At the appointed time, Merav has already "been given as a wife" to Adriel the Meholathite, and is thus not free to marry David (1 Samuel 18:19). However, Saul has another daughter, and the text reports that "Michal daughter of Saul loved David," a fact which is "pleasing in Saul's eyes" (1 Samuel 18:20). Saul therefore determines to offer Michal instead of Merav, indicating that he sees his daughters as equivalent.[54] He tells himself that Michal can be "a snare" for David by leading him into perilous battle for a bride-price of one hundred Philistine foreskins (1 Samuel 18:21).

Multiple scholars have noted the parallels between the Rachel-Leah sister relationship and that of Merav and Michal, beginning with their father's decision to switch them as bride for Jacob or David. Robert Alter observes that "in both stories the young man is a candidate to marry two sisters and gets the one not at first intended; in both stories he must provide a bride-price he cannot pay for from material resources; in both stories he must "count out" (literally "fill") payment to a devious father-in-law."[55] Kalmanofsky, focusing on the sister relationship in these two narratives, comments that "neither Rachel nor Leah reacts when their father substitutes one sister for another. Similarly, Merav expresses no preference for David or for Adriel and registers no reaction upon her marriage. It is her sister Michal who introduces emotion into the narrative."[56] The text provides none of Michal's thoughts or

[54] Kalmanofsky notes, "Even the similar meaning in their names reflects their interchangeability. They are Merav, 'from plenty,' and Michal, 'from all' " (40).
[55] Alter, Robert. *The Hebrew Bible: Volume 2: Prophets. A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 255.
[56] Kalmanofsky, 39.

reactions to this plan, nor a word about her physical or moral description; her only defining feature is her love for David. In fact, despite the terse nature of biblical prose, the text reports Michal's love for David two times in 1 Samuel 18. This marks her singular characterization as a woman in love, to the exclusion of physical or mental attributes.

David succeeds in obtaining the grisly bride-price for Michal, and the pair are wed. While Saul intended to use his daughter to entrap his erstwhile champion, Michal's love for David soon proves dangerous to her father. In 1 Samuel 19, the threatened Saul instructs his son Jonathan and his servants to kill David, but Jonathan warns his beloved friend. Ultimately, Saul sends "messengers to David's house to guard him and to kill him in the morning" (1 Samuel 19:11). Then Michal speaks for the first time: "If you do not escape tonight, tomorrow you will die" (1 Samuel 19:11). Notably, she is described here as "Michal his wife," rather than "Michal daughter of Saul." She has cast her lot with David, in an act of loyalty that irrevocably sets her apart from her father. She lowers David down by the window so that he can evade Saul's messengers, and he flees, leaving Michal behind to face Saul.

In the scene that follows, the parallels between Rachel and Michal grow more pronounced. Rachel takes her father's teraphim when she flees his home with Jacob, and then sits on them to hide them from Laban. In her own home, her husband having run away from his father-in-law, Michal "took the teraphim, put it on the bed, put the net of goat's hair by its head, and covered it with cloth (1 Samuel 19:13). For Kalmanofsky, this connection indicates how "sisters weaken their fathers' homes to support the Bible's designated patriarchs."[57] Michal tells her father's messengers that David is sick, while Rachel repels her father through claims of being a menstruant. Both women appear to make a mockery of a household idol, and dupe their angry and dangerous fathers through their subterfuge.

[57] Kalmanofsky, 42.

As Alter notes, Michal's act of deception also evokes Jacob's trickery towards his own father, Isaac, because Michal's use of "the cloth of garment [...] to cover the dummy recalls the repeated association of garments with deception in the Jacob story."[58] This parallel intensifies when Saul's messengers uncover the teraphim lying in the bed instead of the supposedly ill David, and immediately contact the king: "Saul said to Michal, 'Why did you deceive me so and send away my enemy to escape?' Then Michal said to Saul, 'He said to me: Send me away or I will kill you' " (1 Samuel 19:17). Alter comments that Saul's incredulous question echoes Laban's words to Jacob in Genesis 31:26-27.[59] Michal thus acts not only as the beloved Rachel, defiant as she takes her father's idols, but also as Jacob, the passionate trickster who loves Rachel at first glance. This verse makes no reference of their familial relationship, only referring to them by name instead of "his daughter" or "her father," which once again emphasizes the emotional separation between parent and child. Saul has no response to Michal's claim, whether because he believes his daughter to be truthful and to have just escaped death, or because he knows that she is lying and has transferred her loyalty to her beloved husband. The encounter ends with Michal's words, and she disappears from the story while David roams the wilderness in flight from Saul.

Following David's marriage to Avigail, Michal briefly reappears for a single verse, a tantalizing mention of her whereabouts in David's absence. The reader learns David married two women, Avigail and Achinoam, before going on to state laconically that "Saul had given Michal his daughter, wife of David, to Palti son of Laish who was from Gallim" (1 Samuel 25:44). Kalmanofsky points out that Michal is still described as

> Saul's daughter and David's wife, capturing Michal's on-going marginal position in both houses. Although her father determines her fate and effectively annuls her

[58] Alter, 257.
[59] Alter, 258.

> marriage with David, Michal still remains caught between her first husband and her father, between the house of David and the house of Saul.[60]

As the only woman in Tanakh who is said to love a man romantically, Michal could be assumed to have strong feelings about this state of events. However, we read nothing of her emotions; the text does not give her a voice with which to react either to David's new marriages or her own "transfer" to another man.

Michal does not reappear in the narrative until Saul is killed and the ascendant David orders that she be returned to him. David first describes her as "Michal daughter of Saul" in his demand to the general Avner, which suggests that his marriage to the royal daughter Michal bolsters his claim to the throne; he gains authenticity through her relationship to the previous king (2 Samuel 3:13).[61] Accordingly, Michal is "taken from her husband, from Paltiel son of Laish" (2 Samuel 3:15). Though Paltiel weeps as he walks alongside Michal, once again the text does not share Michal's own reaction; later commentators and interpreters are left to fill in this gap in her story. *The Jewish Study Bible* comments that "nothing is said about Michal's or David's feelings - their reunion being purely political. Michal is a pawn in the struggle between the House of Saul and the House of David."[62] The biblical text, focused on the Davidic narrative, furthers this sense that Michal is a mere pawn, first by omitting any of her own words and emotions and then by removing her once again from the story for three chapters of David's exploits.

Michal's final full scene in the Books of Samuel is perhaps her most dramatic and most bitter. Where before she loved David enough to risk her angry and threatened father's

---

[60] Kalmanofsky, 45.
[61] In his second statement, directed to Saul's son Ish-boshet, David designates her as "my wife Michal, who I betrothed to me by one hundred foreskins" (2 Samuel 3:14).
[62] Bar-Efrat, Shimon, revised by Marc Zvi Brettler. *The Jewish Study Bible*, 2nd Edition, ed., Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 610.

wrath, this time she shows disdain for her once-beloved husband. As a triumphant David enters the city with the recovered Ark, "Michal daughter of Saul looked down from the window and saw King David leaping and whirling before Adonai, and she despised him in her heart" (2 Samuel 6:16). This one verse contains a multitude, and I will touch on three elements: Michal's position by the window, her designation as "daughter of Saul," and her disdain for David.

When Michal watches David's victorious entrance from the window, there is an echo of the previous episode in which she has agency - the moment when she lowers David from their window and saves him from Saul's murderous intentions. Now she watches, seemingly alone, from the inside while David celebrates outside with the adoring public. They are once again separated, but this time, the separation is emotional as well as physical. Kalmanofsky comments that "as openings to the home, windows and doors mark the places where the home is most vulnerable and are associated in the Bible with individuals who exist on the margins of their families and are themselves vulnerable."[63] It might seem strange to label the royal Michal as vulnerable and marginalized, but indeed that is what her story has shown: her father has used her as a pawn to be moved wherever he wishes and her husband David treats her only as a prize for legitimization.

Michal is now firmly the "daughter of Saul" again, despite her restoration to her husband David. As David Wolpe observes, this language underscores that "Michal is not, primarily, the wife of David."[64] Instead, she is associated with the previous king's tenure instead of the current reign of David. She has come full circle in her spheres of connection and belonging, returning to her original position as Saul's daughter. Multiple commentaries

[63] Kalmanofsky, 46.
[64] Wolpe, David. *David: The Divided Heart* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 24. Kindle Edition.

note the potential class elements of this royal daughter disdaining a gauche parvenu, and this is underscored by her identification as "daughter of Saul" instead of "wife of David."

When David arrives home, "Michal daughter of Saul went out to meet David," removing herself from the marginal and passive position of window-gazing to go forth herself, but remaining apart from her husband through her identification as solely Saul's daughter (2 Samuel 6:20). She receives him with the words, "How has the King of Israel made himself honored today, who revealed himself before the eyes of the maid-servants of his subjects, as one of the worthless would reveal himself!" (2 Samuel 6:20). Alter writes that "the social thrust of the comparison is evident: she is a king's daughter, whereas he has now demonstrated that he is no more than riffraff" through his public, indecorous cavorting.[65] Where before Michal spoke to save David, now she gives voice only to her disdain for him; her love has turned to scorn.

David rebukes Michal by invoking God's choice to replace Saul. Michal is given no rejoinder, and the scene ends with the statement that "and for Michal daughter of Saul there would be no children until the day of her death" (2 Samuel 6:23). This implies a relationship between their angry conversation and Michal's childless state, though the precise correlation is not clear. The *Jewish Study Bible* proposes that "Michal's childlessness may be a punishment by God or the result of David's abstaining from sexual relations with her. There is thus no possibility of uniting the house of Saul and the house of David through a child of David and Michal."[66] Once again, Michal's own experience of this situation is absent, leaving later readers to fill in her voice.

[65] Alter, 332.
[66] Bar-Efrat, 616.

Michal's story largely ends here, with judgment and recrimination on all sides, but there are two more whispers of her in the Tanakh. There is a later episode in which David arranges the deaths of Saul's descendents, among them "the five sons of Michal, daughter of Saul" (2 Samuel 21:8). The Septuagint, Targum, and some Hebrew texts label these children as *Merav's* sons, which is the logical understanding, given that Merav's husband Adriel is the father. However, enough manuscripts write *Michal* to necessitate later commentary.[67] Rabbinic interpreters in particular are very intrigued by the contradiction between this verse and the proclamation of Michal's childlessness, and add greater depth and possibility to Michal's story through their interpretations and additions. David Wolpe opines that

> even if the insertion here of Michal's name is a scribal error, it is also a final insult to the memory of a woman who suffered from being trapped between a powerful, vengeful father and a powerful, vengeful husband. An unhappy fate [...] She who was born of a king and is the first woman in the Bible said to love a man, she who once saved David's life, ends up discarded and alone. In a book rife with candidates for the harshest fate, Michal's is surely as bitter as any.[68]

The final mention of Michal in Tanakh only adds to Wolpe's assessment. She appears one more time in 1 Chronicles 15:29, which repeats the story of David's victorious entry with the Ark. However, the story is truncated. Michal does not confront David; she is reduced to watching him and despising him without explaining her rationale; "it is Chronicles' way of saying that Michal resented David's immense joy in attending to the Ark, which indicates that Saul's disregard for the cult was shared by other members of his family, continuing the theme of Saul's illegitimacy."[69] In her last appearance in Tanakh, the passionate, once-loving Michal does not even have the opportunity to voice her feelings.

---

[67] The *Jewish Study Bible* chooses to insert Merav's name, not Michal's: "So two Heb. mss., many Septuagint mss., and Peshitta; and cf. Targum, Sanhedrin 19b, and 1 Samuel 18:19. Most mss. and the printed editions read 'Michal.' " (643).
[68] Wolpe, 25.
[69] Rothstein, David. *The Jewish Study Bible*, 2nd Edition, ed., Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1738.

Commentators step into this void, filling in some of Michal's silence. The second level of narrative I examine is rabbinic literature, drawn from the Babylonian Talmud and the midrashic compilations Genesis Rabbah and the Mekhilta deRabbi Yishmael. Some of the rabbinic texts about Michal seem to directly respond to ambiguities or challenges in the text, while others go in unexpected directions. All, however, speak to how the Rabbis react to a woman exercising agency, power, and strong emotion. In my creative framing of the *PaRDeS* exegesis practice, this layer of analysis is *Remez*, the allegorical meanings of the text. *Remez* takes us from the simple, straight-forward biblical material and adds on new possibilities.

Kalmanofsky's observation about the "interchangeability" of Merav and Michal plays a primary role in rabbinic discussion about Michal. The biblical Saul's willingness to exchange one of his daughters for another to tempt David into military danger resurfaces in a halachic discussion in Bavli Sanhedrin, where David is reported to have actually married *both* sisters. The rabbis review a baraita that David married "suitable women for him from the house of the king. And who are they? Merav and Michal" (19b). This understanding is based on Saul's initial "offer" of Merav for David and his ultimate bestowal of Michal. Rabbi Yosei's students are concerned about David marrying "two sisters while they were living," but their teacher assures them that "he married Michal after the death of Merav," making the situation acceptable. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Karcha, however, explains that David's "betrothal to Merav was an error" and did not nullify David's later marriage to Michal, citing David's demand for the return of "my wife Michal whom I betrothed to me for one hundred foreskins."

Shulamit Valler characterizes this discussion as part of a "trend of changing David into a devout man," concerned about the legal status of his marriage.[70] It is important for the

[70] Valler, 132.

Rabbis to assert that David and Michal's relationship was valid in their own terms, and the discussion is also a starting point for the rabbis to consider the legal components of betrothal more broadly. Though they do not belabor the point, focusing on the halachic details of betrothal, Valler's assessment underscores that this wedding needs to be "kosher" because Michal is also the bridge between the reigns of Saul and David, a source of legitimacy for the newcomer David. Her marriage must be valid to authenticate and lionize David.

The Rabbis also work to untangle the biblical text's references to Merav and Michal with regards to children. As I noted above, 2 Samuel 21:8 relays how David ensured the deaths of Saul's line, including the five sons of either Michal or Merav, depending on the manuscript. An earlier biblical verse reports that Michal had no children until her dying day. For the Rabbis, the seeming contradiction between "the five sons of Michal" and Michal's childlessness calls out for interpretation: "But did Michal bear? But didn't Merav bear? Merav bore and Michal raised. Therefore, they were called by her name, to teach you that anyone who raises an orphan within his house, the text ascends upon him as if he bore him" (B. Sanhedrin 19b). The Rabbis harmonize the textual confusion by assigning Michal the role of adoptive parent, who did not birth the children but did raise them. In so doing, they give her an important and honorable role. The discussion of Michal and Merav leads into an extended list of other examples of women who raised children who were not their own, like Naomi and Bat Pharaoh, who raise children destined to change history and improve the world.[71] Michal is therefore part of a formidable ensemble of women who claim an alternative motherhood in a society that values them by their reproductive capacities, which seems a marked rebuttal of the biblical statement of her childlessness.

[71] Obed son of Ruth and Jesse, of course, is David's own grandfather, and the forebear of the Messiah!

A few pages later, the Rabbis introduce David's wife Eglah and decide that she is actually Michal: "But wasn't there Michal? Rav said: Eglah, this is Michal, and why is her name called Eglah? That she was beloved to him like a calf [*eglah*]" (B. Sanhedrin 21a). This identification seems to be a method of limiting the number of David's wives, to ensure that he has an appropriate number for a king. This rabbinic reading is striking in its insistence that Michal was actually beloved to David; the Tanakh only describes Michal's love for David, not the other way round. By making Michal and Eglah the same wife, Michal finally receives the love for which she yearns.

An alternate variation of this motherhood possibility appears in a midrash which compares Michal to Rachel: "There were three for whom it went hard in the hour of their bearing and they died when they were living, and these were they: Rachel, and the wife of Pinchas, and Michal daughter of Saul" (Genesis Rabbah 82:7). The midrash explains that Michal died in childbirth, thus fulfilling the biblical statement that "she had no child until the day of her death" with a tragic and deadly explanation. Genesis Rabbah also understands Michal to be Eglah based on a grisly interpretation that David called Michal by the name Eglah *not* because she was "beloved to him like a calf" but rather because "she emanated like a calf and died" in childbirth. This variation strips Michal of David's love and makes her death shocking and horrific. Her "punishment" of childlessness is heightened by the interpretation that she *had* a child, but died bearing him.

Back in Bavli Sanhedrin, the Rabbis turn from the question of Michal's motherhood to that of her relationship with Palti son of Laish. Like the biblical text, the Bavli focuses on Palti's experiences rather than Michal's. The Rabbis seek to clarify the inconsistency between "Palti" and "Paltiel," to which Rabbi Yochanan explains "that God (El) rescued him

(שפלטו אל) from the transgression" of having sex with Michal, who was still married to David (B. Sanhedrin 20a). According to the Rabbis, Palti placed a sword between himself and Michal in the bed, saying that "anyone who engages in this matter, may he be pierced by this sword." Palti is transformed, in Shulamit Valler's words, into Michal's "guardian," stringently maintaining her pristine marriage to David.[72] The Rabbis still have to grapple with the fact that he is described as "her husband" when Michal is brought back to the victorious David, which is contrary to laws of divorce and remarriage in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. The Bavli forestalls this problem by explaining that Paltiel "went with her and he wept" not because of the grief of losing a beloved wife, but instead because of "the mitzvah that left from him" when he no longer had to refrain from sexual relations with Michal. The Rabbis do not invite speculation about Michal's feelings during this episode in her life; they remain focused on her permissibility as a wife for David, and acclaim Palti for ensuring this.

In contrast to these discussions of her marital suitability and motherhood status in Sanhedrin, both Megillah and Eruvin portray Michal in a different light. Michal is included in a list of women who incite adultery: "Michal through her appearance" (B. Megillah 15a). This is particularly noteworthy because Michal is never described in Tanakh, yet she appears here as someone whose physical attributes lead to male transgression. Avigail, another of David's wives who features in this list, apparently incites adultery through "remembering her," even though she *is* described as both beautiful and wise. The Rabbis do not explain their terse assessment of Michal's temptations, but her inclusion here marks a striking contrast with the Sanhedrin depiction of a woman primarily defined by questions of marital eligibility and parenthood.

[72] Valler, 133.

In Bavli Eruvin, Michal is described as a woman who wears tefillin, apparently without any male protestations. She is mentioned alongside Jonah's wife, who would go to Jerusalem for the pilgrimage festivals, as women who take on male commandments (B. Eruvin 96a). The Mekhilta deRabbi Yishmael also includes Michal as someone alongside those who are not obligated in a certain mitzvah but still fulfill it (13:9). In both texts, this act of wearing tefillin is noted without particular comment or judgment; the tone seems matter-of-fact and unsurprised. This anachronistic assigning of a rabbinic practice to biblical characters is not atypical, but it is notable that Michal, a daughter, wife, and political pawn of kings, is recast as a woman with unusual freedom and agency in her religious life.

My third section is termed *Drash*, in reference to the third layer of *PaRDeS*. *Drash* is the midrashic approach to exegesis, which "seeks" (*lidrosh*) the gaps and unsaid possibilities in the biblical text; here I use the term to cover medieval interpretation writ large. I cover the late midrashic compilations Midrash Tehillim and Bamidbar Rabba, as well as the commentators Rashi and Radak, who continue to expand on the gaps in Michal's story and take it in new directions.

Midrash Tehillim sees similarities in the love that Michal and her brother Jonathan possess for David. 1 Samuel 18 conveys both the assertion that "Yonatan loved David as his own being," and the twice-repeated statement of Michal's love for the same man, a parallel later revived by modern interpreters who see romantic love between Yonatan and David (1 Samuel 18:1). For Midrash Tehillim, the siblings' love for the handsome young warrior-poet is evinced by their efforts to save him from their father's clutches: "Two are good. This is Michal daughter of Saul and Yonatan, they two loved David and rescued him from Saul their father [...] Michal rescued him from the house and Yonatan from the street. Two are better

than one" (Midrash Tehillim 59:1). This midrash originates in an exploration of Psalm 59, David's plea for divine rescue "when Saul sent forth and they watched [David's] house to kill him," which is an evocation of the episode in which Michal lowered him from their window (59:1). However, the midrash changes the focus from David (and his hopes that God will deliver him), to Michal and Yonatan, the ones whose actions save him. The siblings, who act out of courageous love and save the future king of Israel, are the heroes in this interpretive text.

Midrash Tehillim goes on to celebrate Michal's love of David and her bravery in standing up to her enraged and dangerous father. Quoting Proverbs 18:22, "one who found a wife has found goodness," the midrash asserts that "this is Michal daughter of Saul who loved David more than her father" (59:3). Where the Rabbis see a parallel between Michal and Eglah that either centers David (for loving Eglah) or a tragic death in childbirth (moaning like a cow, an *eglah*, as she expires), the midrashist here continues to concentrate on Michal's agency and courage: "And why does it read her name Eglah [...] this is Michal. Just as this calf does not accept a yoke upon her neck, so Michal did not accept the yoke of her father but rather vexed him" (Midrash Tehillim 59:3). In this midrash, Michal deliberately chooses to agitate against her father in order to support the man she loves. She is thereby restored as an agent of her own destiny instead of the pawn of the men around her.

Another late midrashic collection, Bamidbar Rabba, further expands Michal's agency by giving her greater voice in her altercation with the dancing and cavorting David. The midrash expands her speech:

> She said to him, 'Today the honor of my father's house was revealed: Come and see between you and between the house of my father, all those of my father's house were modest and holy' [...] and so Michal said to him that the house of her father was so

> very modest, and you stand and reveal your disgrace like one of the worthless ones (Bamidbar Rabbah 4:20).

The text makes even more explicit the class tensions between the royal Michal and the newcomer David, and emphasizes modesty as a central value that defines status. The text does not promote Michal's critique here; David's expanded midrashic response strongly underscores God's rejection of Saul. However, the midrash still gives Michal her voice, as representative of a fallen royal house that will not disappear quietly. Where Midrash Tehillim seems to honor Michal's brave and dangerous love earlier in her story, Bamidbar Rabba emphasizes that Michal is punished for saying these daring words to the specially-chosen David: "And since Michal said thus, she was punished" with longstanding childlessness and ultimate death in childbirth (Bamidbar Rabbah 4:20).

Eleventh-century commentator Rashi provides an illuminating perspective on 1 Chronicles 15:29, which omits Michal's condemnation of the triumphantly dancing David. Rashi explains that the Chronicler removed Michal's fiery objection "because the Book of Chronicles is for the honor of David," written with a strong pro-David stance. But Rashi goes further: "It was a disgrace for David that a woman said thusly to him." Michal's words had to be erased from Chronicles to maintain the emotional comfort of men, from David on through the ages, who could not tolerate women critiquing powerful and beloved men. In her disappearance, she still lingers; her absence requires commentary that acknowledges the power of her disapproval.

Where Rashi comments on the gender dynamics between Michal and David, 12th-13th century scholar Radak focuses on the question of class. In his commentary on 2 Samuel 6, he writes that Michal "despised him in her heart because she thought it was not in

the honor of the king to behave like a commoner behaves, even before the Ark." It is this class-based repugnance that compels her to voice her outraged critique out loud.

Radak also offers a fascinating addition to the textual confusion between Merav and Michal in 2 Samuel 21:8, the verse where manuscripts variously attribute Adriel's sons to the two sisters. Radak creates a parallel between siblings Merav and Michal and siblings Moses and Aaron: "They were the sons of Merav, but Michal raised them and they were called by her name [...] and so it is written 'these are the generations of Aaron and Moses' (Numbers 3:1) and not reminded only as the sons of Aaron. Rather, Moses raised them and taught them as if they were his generations" (Radak commentary on 2 Samuel 21:8). In this comparison, Radak places Michal in the position of Moses himself, as a sibling who raises nephews with powerful parental love. Michal's childlessness is reimagined as comparable to the preeminent Moses' care for his brother's sons, offering her a highly respectable role to play in the family circle.

Modern commentators have seen great potential in Michal's story. I call this last section the *Sod* layer of interpretation, after the "secret" or mystical piece of exegesis in *PaRDeS*. As contemporary readers, particularly women, draw out new layers of Michal's story, they expand her narrative and character to reflect experiences and understandings either unknown to or neglected by traditional male commentary. In so doing, they bring to light the secret possibilities of this, and every other, biblical narrative.

The *Dirshuni* collection of modern Israeli women's midrashim offers multiple interpretations of Michal's story. Ayala Tzruya, for example, compares Michal to Aaron, as the "two who were silent from the end of the world till its end."[73] Aaron is famously silent

[73] Tzruya, Ayala. *Dirshuni: Midrashei Nashim*, ed. Nechama Weingarten-Mintz and Tamar Biala (Tel Aviv: Yediot Acharonot, 2009), 103. All translations are my own.

when his sons Nadav and Abihu are consumed by divine fire in the Book of Leviticus. Michal, on the other hand, is not explicitly described as silent in the Bible, but Tsarviyah reads her silence into the scene of separation from Palti. He weeps upon her return to David, the text tells us, and Tzruya adds, "and she was silent."[74] This modern midrash transforms the absence of Michal's voice into a deliberate and powerful choice, like Aaron's silence when Moses opines on Nadav's and Abihu's deaths. The classical commentators may not have seen or been interested in this interpretive possibility for a female character, but a modern woman's view can understand silence as an act of agency, one which Tzruya claims for Michal as well as Aaron.

In the same collection, Miri Westreich focuses on the parallels between Michal and Rachel. She notes that they are younger sisters, have an episode with teraphim, and rebuke their husbands. However, a seemingly straightforward analysis takes a sharp turn when she concludes: "And she didn't know that she was not like Rachel, that of Rachel it is said, 'And Jacob loved Rachel' (Genesis 29:18), and about her it is said, 'and Michal daughter of Saul loved David' (1 Samuel 18:20)."[75] Despite some of their similarities, Rachel receives her husband's love, while Michal does not. Where God takes note of Rachel in her childlessness and gives her sons, Michal is unseen and unaided. Westreich draws these two textual threads together to underscore Michal's travails, and obliquely remind the reader of the inherent impossibility of comparing two disparate lives and stories.

In her novel *The Secret Chord*, Australian author Geraldine Brooks embraces Michal as a figure of tragedy, not only because David does not love her, but because the object of his desire is her own brother. As the character Avigail tells the young Nathan, " 'if there is a

[74] Tzruya, 103.
[75] Westreich, Miri. *Dirshuni: Midrashei Nashim*, ed. Nechama Weingarten-Mintz and Tamar Biala (Tel Aviv: Yediot Acharonot, 2009), 105. All translations are my own.

child of Shaul's that excites jealousy in me,' she said softly, 'it is not Mikhal [...] no, not her. Not that poor girl."[76] The love David possesses for Jonathan does not leave room for Michal, or any other wife. At the same time, Brooks' Michal does fall in love with her second husband, Palti, which adds even more import to her forced return to David. Avigail laments, " 'I thought Mikahl would feel the same way [about David]. How was I to know that she loved this man Palti?' "[77] Brooks provides Michal with both further emotional development and even greater tragedy, as she is taken from a husband she loves for a man she has come to disdain.

Julia Yocheved Knobloch also draws on Michal as a tragic figure in her poem "Michal at the Well." Over the course of several stanzas, Michal compares herself to other biblical women who pray for a child and try to find their place in a harsh world. However, she sees herself as mistreated and disregarded, in contrast to these other women whose kindnesses are well-met and whose prayers are heard: "Rivkah, like you, I offered my jar / drew water, stepped up like other women [...] Ruth, I thought I found my people, / I promised them: I go where you go, / I slept at their feet. / When I woke, they had disappeared."[78] The childless Hannah bears a child, while she, Michal, does not. To a fellow royal wife, she rues that "I, too, bathed on roofs, Batsheba / I was passionate and smart. / I felt safe in my king's arms, / wanted to dance and sing with him. / Cut from his heart, I watched him leap down another path." However, despite the sorrows she enumerates, and the sharp sense of alienation she feels from the women whose prayers are heard, Michal ends on a note of strength: "God did not remember me. And yet my name lives on in Israel." This modern take

[76] Brooks, Geraldine. *The Secret Chord.* (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2015), 73.. Kindle Edition.
[77] Brooks, 159.
[78] Knobloch, Julia Yocheved. "Michal at the Well." RitualWell: Accessed from https://ritualwell.org/ritual/michal-well

on Michal asserts that she refuses to stay silent or be forgotten, even though the typical pathways of love and children granted to women were closed to her.

Michal receives approbation instead of pity in Jill Hammer's Omer Calendar of Biblical Women, where she is associated with the middot of *Gevurah she'beMalkhut*, Strength within Majesty. Hammer sees Michal's "pride" as an "untouchable" and admirable quality: "The Talmud records that she put on tefillin, and the sages did not stop her from doing so. She chose to perform a ritual normally denied women, and no one dared to tell her she should not."[79] She shows deeply rooted strength and conviction in her own ritual actions, as well as her willingness to stand up to both her husband and her father, and is thus for Hammer a model for us "when we are willing to question the improper behavior of the powerful." This reframes Michal's disdain for David as a desirable interrogation of authority. Instead of a snobby princess judging a parvenue, she is reclaimed as a figure of righteous courage.

The Israeli writer Yochi Brandes places Michal center-stage in her *Secret Book of Kings*. Brandes explains in her acknowledgements that she wanted to reveal multiple biblical "storytelling traditions claiming that David methodically and purposefully annihilated the House of Saul."[80] Her Michal is central to this effort as one of the two main characters and narrators, serving as the voice of "the destruction of the House of Saul."[81] In a story set twenty years after David's death, she is a survivor and witness to the past. Michal is first introduced as the Mad Princess of the Palace of Candles, a "legendary beauty" once "given in marriage to a young warrior of Judah as a prize for the killing of a giant Philistine," and

[79] Knobloch, Ritualwell.
[80] Brandes, Yochi. *The Secret Book of Kings*, trans. Yardenne Greenspan. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2016), introduction. Kindle Edition.
[81] Brandes, introduction.

whose "passionate love for her husband was also the stuff of legend."[82] However, "she slowly faded away into bitterness, living her life in an isolated wing of the palace," where she "sits still as a statue" all day and then "after sunset, she comes alive and fills the palace with hundreds of candles, screaming unintelligibly all the while."[83] When Yeroboam, the other main character, finally meets her, she is elderly and "vacant," but remains "noble and impressive."[84]

This seeming characterization of Michal as tragic and broken eventually collapses. Yeroboam discovers that she has been feigning insanity for decades, a trick learned from David himself, because "people who are mad threaten no one [...] they see but are not seen."[85] She proceeds to tell the young man her story. In Brandes' retelling, Michal remembers Saul as "a brave and wise king" with a "pure heart," who was unconcerned by Judean lies and slander, believing that the truth would always prevail.[86] Michal was loved by her parents and by the people. She also fell in love twice, "at first sight" both times.[87] At the age of fourteen, her first love is Paltiel, whom she meets *before* David enters the story. A year later, she sees David, and like her brother Jonathan, finds him "irresistible."[88] As she reads Paltiel's love letters from the battlefield, she is at war with herself over her attraction to her father's handsome young musician. Merab alone is suspicious of David, and tries to warn her besotted sister. When Saul decides to offer his eldest daughter to David (in this rendering, the bloody bride price is not to entrap David, but to affirm his daughter's value), the sisters

[82] Brandes, 72.
[83] Brandes, 73.
[84] Brandes, 82.
[85] Brandes, 99.
[86] Brandes, 112.
[87] Brandes, 113.
[88] Brandes, 118.

decide on their own initiative to trade roles; with Jonathan as the go-between, Merab marries Adriel and Michal marries David.

In Brandes' telling, Michal is not barren; David refuses to have sex with her at her most fertile times of the month, ostensibly to avoid pregnancy while he is on the road. Michal's love falters as it becomes clear that she will always come second to the nation, as David drags her on endless military tours until she insists on returning alone to the palace. Eventually, she comes to realize that David sees love as "nothing but a tool" to achieve "complete and total loyalty," and he finds it in the masses rather than in her.[89] Yet in the eyes of the people, she remains "the princess most deeply in love. That is the only trait of yours they see."[90] Brandes plays with the Bible's repeated assertion of Michal's love for David; the biblical Michal may be reduced to her emotion, but it is not her whole story.

In *The Secret Book of Kings*, Michal witnesses David's cunning rise to power, accumulation of wives, and death, and lives to foment two rebellions against his dynasty. The first is a political revolt, in the form of Yeroboam's founding of the northern Kingdom of Israel, which is much maligned by biblical writers. Michal's second act of resistance to the Davidic ascension is her "battle against the stories of Judah."[91] By inserting her own scribes among the king's staff, she weaves "subversive voices" and the story of the House of Saul into the official record.[92] As "the last remaining descendant of the House of Saul," Michal "realized that this war was a war like any other, and that the stories of Judah could be fought only with counter-stories of our own."[93] Brandes plays with the multivocality of the biblical text and sees Michal as a powerful voice of dissension and possibility, a secret player in a

[89] Brandes, 176.
[90] Brandes, 177.
[91] Brandes, 139.
[92] Brandes, 139.
[93] Brandes, 112.

war of creating history and documentation. She is not only an unloved wife, a political pawn, a woman in a patriarchal system, but a calculating and strategic shaper of biblical geopolitics and textual traditions.

Michal journeys a long distance from her origins in the biblical narrative, through rabbinic explorations, the medieval interpretations, and modern feminist reimaginings. She is variably a courageous and daring partner, a loving adoptive parent, a symbol of class consciousness, a tragic pawn, and more. Her passionate nature winds its way through each depiction, as the only named woman in Tanakh who loves a man, but different layers of commentary and interpretation create more nuanced and sophisticated understandings of her love, her agency, and her interior world. Through their interrogation of Michal's character and their own experiences, questions, and aspirations, these different generations of interpretations illuminate the ever-present creativity and possibility of engagement with the biblical text.

Text Immersion Paper #3

Avigail: The Many Layers of A Biblical Figure
A Lesson Plan for Teaching Avigail

Core concept: A study of Avigail in the biblical text and its rabbinic, medieval, and contemporary interpretation demonstrates how biblical characters and narratives grow and expand as each generation of readers explores and engages with the texts that come before them.

Class #1: "You Will Remember Your Servant" - Avigail in the Bible

Class #2: Avigail: Peacemaker, Prophetess, Profiteer? - Rabbinic, Medieval, and Modern Interpretations

Avigail in the Bible: "You Will Remember Your Servant"
Class #1 Lesson Plan: 60 Minutes

Opening (5 minutes)

- Today we are going to embark on our exploration of the story of Avigail, which can be found in the first book of Samuel, early in the section of the Hebrew Bible called Prophets. She bursts into the story of David, who has not yet become King of Israel - he is on the run from the current king, Saul, and living in the wilderness with his band of followers. Avigail has the longest speech of any woman in the Bible, but it's easy to miss her narrative because it's not in the Torah or in any of our haftarah portions. Tonight, we'll have a chance to get to know this fascinating character together.
- Prayer for Torah study
- Anchor: What inspired you to come learn with us tonight? (*Italics = possible responses*)
    - *I come to every class at the shul/JCC/etc!*
    - *I've never heard of Avigail and I wanted to know more*
    - *I've vaguely heard of Avigail as King David's wife, but I don't know much else*
    - *I remember that Avigail was one of the ushpizot at a Sukkot gathering we had last year, but I don't know why*
    - *I come to everything that has to do with women and Jewish learning*
    - *Isn't she a prophet? That sounded cool!*
- Thank you so much for sharing your different reasons for joining the class tonight. I'm excited to dive into Avigail's story with each of you.

Avigail's Introduction: 1 Samuel 25:2-3 (10 minutes)
Context:

- Avigail enters the biblical narrative at a time of uncertainty for David, who has been anointed as king of Israel by the prophet Samuel but who has fled from his former patron, King Saul. Saul wants to kill his former musician and military hero who now threatens his reign. The first verse of chapter 25 tells us that the prophet Samuel has

just died, and now David has fled into the wilderness with his followers. Our scene begins right after this.

Read:

- Invite a reader for 1 Samuel 25:2-3

2: There was a man in Maon whose stock was in Carmel, and the man was very great; he had three thousand sheep and a thousand goats. At the time, he was shearing his sheep in Carmel.
3: And the man's name was Naval, and his wife's name was Avigail, and the woman had a good mind and lovely looks, but the man was hard and evil in deeds, and a Calebite.
(Translation adapted from Robert Alter)

Add:

- You might have heard these names as Nabal and Abigail, which are common renderings into English. The word *naval* literally means "boor" or "fool," which is quite a striking name.
- These locations are in a hilly part of the land, a ways south of Jerusalem.

Questions/Apply: (*Italics = possible responses*)

- How is Avigail introduced? What is her initial characterization? [What does the text say?]
    - *The text sets up a strong contrast between husband and wife here, with Avigail's characterization apparently totally positive, and Naval's completely negative*
    - *We learn about Avigail's physical and mental character, not just one or the other*
    - *The text mentions Avigail's mental abilities before noting her physical traits, which might suggest that her intelligence is either unusual or highly valued*
- Based on this introduction, who would you anticipate will be the main character of the upcoming narrative? [What does the text mean?]
    - *Naval is introduced first and with a lot of detail, so it seems like he is the primary focus*
    - *Naval is a male character in a text that mostly focuses on men, so it seems likely that he will be the main character here*
    - *The fact that the text even tells us Avigail's name and a bit about her indicates that she will be the main character, because otherwise why would the narrator take the time to introduce her in (relative) detail?*

Assessment/Summary:

- Thank you for all of your thoughts about Avigail's introduction. We have been able to bring so much out of these two short verses!
- As we discussed, Avigail enters the biblical narrative as a wise foil to her foolish and evil husband. Her introduction contains both unique and more common elements in the Bible. The description of her physical qualities is similar to the language used to describe the beautiful Rachel and Joseph in Genesis, and Esther in the Book of Esther - all three of whom are objects of desire. This language is not completely atypical;

Avigail is part of a small group of particularly attractive and appealing characters. However, the first part of her characterization is unique - she is the only biblical character described as possessing טוֹבַת־שֶׂכֶל, "a good mind" or "intelligence."
- Following this unique introduction, Avigail disappears from the next ten verses, but when she reappears, let's keep her characterization as intelligent and beautiful in mind.

Transition to Avigail's Intervention: To make sure that we have enough time to read Avigail's whole speech, I'm going to summarize the next ten verses. David sends messengers to Naval, requesting sustenance for his large group of followers, seemingly as a gift of gratitude for David "protecting" Naval's shepherds and sheep during the shearing season. Naval refuses and insults David, and David responds by arming four hundred of his supporters to march on Naval's household in retribution. As we read the next part of Avigail's story, let's think about her motivations and her actions in this fast-paced and uncontrolled situation.

Avigail's Intervention: 1 Samuel 25:14-23 (10 minutes)
Read:
- Invite a reader for 1 Samuel 25:14-19

14: And to Avigail the wife of Naval one of the lads told, saying, "Look, David sent messengers from the wilderness to greet our master, and he pounced on them.
15: And the men have been very good to us and we were not humiliated and we missed nothing the whole time we went about with them when we were out in the field.
16: They were a wall around us both night and day the whole time we were with them tending the sheep.
17: And now, mark and see what you must do, for the evil is resolved against our master and against all his house, and he is such a scoundrel no one can speak to him."
18: And Avigail hurried and fetched two hundred loaves of bread and two jars of wine and five dressed sheep and five *seah*s [a measure] of parched corn and a hundred raisin cakes and two hundred fig cakes, and she put them on the donkeys.
19: And she said to her lads, "Pass on ahead of me and I'll be coming right after you." But her husband she did not tell.

Questions/Apply: (*Italics = possible responses*)
- How does Avigail react to the news about Naval and David? [What does the text say?]
    - *She springs into action and immediately gathers food to bring to mollify David*
    - *She does not question the messenger or seem surprised that Naval would do such a thing - she clearly understands that this is the kind of thing he would do*
    - *She seems to grasp the severity of the situation immediately, and knows how to respond without hesitation*
    - *She reacts with a series of verbs, indicating action and determination and urgency*

- Why do you think that Avigail does not speak to Naval? [What does the text mean?]
    - *The lad tells Avigail that "no one can speak" to Naval because he is such a scoundrel; she probably knows this better than anyone*
    - *If Naval refused David food earlier, he probably will not respond kindly to the idea that his own wife is giving David food now*
    - *She doesn't want to lose time talking to him in this dangerous situation*

Read:

- Invite a reader for 1 Samuel 25:20-23

20: And so she was riding on the donkey coming down under the cover of the mountain and, look, David and his men were coming down toward her; and she met them.
21: And David had said, "All in vain did I guard everything that belonged to this fellow in the wilderness, and nothing was missing from all that was his, and he paid me back evil for good!
22: Thus may God do to the enemies of David and even more, if I leave from all that is his until morning a single male!"
23: And Avigail saw David and hurried and got down from the donkey and flung herself on her face before David and bowed to the ground.

Add:

- In the Hebrew, David's language is a bit more vulgar; his phrase "מַשְׁתִּין בְּקִיר" literally means "one who urinates against a wall," referring to all the men of Naval's household. Scholar Robert Alter translates it as "a single pisser against the wall," noting that "the phrase, of course, is a rough and vivid epithet for 'male,' and one that occurs only in curses. Its edge of vulgarity seems perfectly right for David's anger."[94]
- "Leave from all that is his" is a euphemism for sparing their lives; David intends to kill the men of Naval's household.

Questions/Apply: (*Italics = possible responses*)

- What is the situation that Avigail encounters here? [What does the text say?]
    - *Avigail rides into a group of armed and angry men who are prepared to kill every man in her household*
    - *David's words were not meant for Avigail's ears, and it's not clear if she heard them or not, but she certainly sees this very large group of armed men headed towards her household*
- How do you understand Avigail's initial actions when she sees David? [What does the text mean?]
    - *Just like before, she moves into action, with a rapid sequence of verbs that leave her prostrate before the angry David*
    - *She employs physical gestures of submission and respect first*

Transition to Avigail's Speech: Robert Alter sees Avigail's series of physical actions as a deliberate prelude to her words: "Her first move in this highly dangerous situation, before she

[94] Alter, Robert. *The Hebrew Bible: Volume 2: Prophets. A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 282.

speaks a word, is to demonstrate her absolute submission to David through these extravagant gestures of obeisance."[95] We are now going to move into chevrutot, pairs or small groups, to read Avigail's speech to David, and David's response. Your source sheet includes questions to discuss with your partner.

Avigail's Speech: 1 Samuel 24-35 (20 minutes in chevrutot)
Read:

- Read 1 Samuel 25:24-31

24: And she flung herself at his feet and said, "Mine, my lord, is the blame! But let your servant speak in your ears, and hear the words of your servant.
25: Pray, let not my lord pay mind to this scoundrel of a man, to Naval, for just like his name he is, his name means Base and baseness is with him. And as for me, your servant, I never saw my lord's lads whom you sent.
26: And now, my lord, as Adonai lives and as you live—Adonai Who kept you from coming into bloodguilt [being liable for punishment for shedding blood] with your own hand rescuing you—and now, like Naval may your enemies be who seek evil against my lord.
27: And now, this gift that your servant has brought to my lord, let it be given to the lads who go about in the footsteps of my lord.
28: Forgive, pray, the crime of your servant, for Adonai will surely make for my lord an enduring house, for my lord fights the battles of Adonai and no evil will be found in you all your days.
29: And when a person rises to pursue you, to seek your life, my lord's life will be bound up in the bundle of the living with Adonai your God, and the lives of your enemies God will sling from the hollow of the sling.
30: And so, when Adonai does for my lord all the good that God has spoken about you and God appoints you prince over Israel,
31: this will not be a [cause for] stumbling and for faltering of the heart to my lord, to have shed blood needlessly and for my lord to have carried out his own rescue, then will Adonai do well with my lord, and you will remember your servant."

Add: (will be on their source sheet for chevruta time)

- Avigail's language in verse 29 might sound familiar, as the phrase בִּצְרוֹר הַחַיִּים - "the bundle of the living" or "the bonds of life," depending on the translation - can be found in El Malei Rachamim, a prayer for the dead, which is said at the graveside and memorial services. Here, Avigail states that God will ensure David's life while bringing death to David's enemies.

Questions/Apply: (*Italics = possible responses*)

- What are Avigail's main points? [What does the text say?]
    - *She begins by blaming herself, but then quickly shifts the blame to Naval and says she did not know about the situation - the implication is that she would not have insulted David like Naval did*
    - *She tells him that God is acting to prevent violence on David's part; it is better for him to not sully himself with bloodshed*

[95] Alter, 282.

    - *She has now brought him the food he requested, as a gift for his followers*
    - *She tells David that he will be victorious and virtuous*
- What elements might be particularly appealing to David in this speech? [What does the text mean?]
    - *She calls herself "your servant" five times, establishing a power dynamic that must be pleasing to the angry and offended man before her*
    - *She brings him the food he sought for his followers*
    - *She gives him an "out" where he does not need to kill Naval's men in order to massage his own wounded ego*
    - *She tells him that he will be the leader of Israel, supported by God as a virtuous and victorious ruler - very appealing to a man currently in hiding in the wilderness to be cast in such a positive and optimistic light*

Read:
- Read 1 Samuel 25:32-35, continuing in chevrutot

32: And David said to Avigail, "Blessed is Adonai, the God of Israel, Who has sent you this day to meet me.
33: And blessed is your good sense and blessed are you, for this day you held me back from coming into bloodguilt with my own hand rescuing me.
34: And yet, as Adonai, God of Israel, lives, Who kept me from harming you, had you not hurried and come to meet me, there would not have been left to Naval by morning's light a single male!"
35: And David took from her hand what she had brought him, and to her he said, "Go up in peace to your house. See, I have heeded your voice and granted your petition."

Questions/Apply: (*Italics = possible responses*)
- How does David respond to Avigail's speech? [What does the text say?]
    - *He blesses God for sending Avigail, seemingly as a messenger to keep David on the right path*
    - *He blesses her for restraining him from violence*
    - *He reminds her that he has the physical power to inflict great violence and bloodshed upon both her and her household, but that he will not do so*

Transition to Avigail's Return Home (5 minutes)
- Let's come back together. Would any groups like to share their thoughts about Avigail's speech and David's response?
- Let's now turn to the final part of this chapter, where Avigail returns home after her intervention to a husband who has no idea what she has done to keep their household safe.

Avigail's Return Home: 1 Samuel 25:36-42 (10 minutes)
Read:
- Invite a reader for 1 Samuel 25:36-37

36: And Avigail came to Naval, and, look, he was having himself a feast in his house like a king's feast, and Naval's heart was of good cheer, and he was exceedingly drunk. And she told him nothing, neither great nor small.
37: And it happened in the morning when the wine was gone out of Naval that his wife told him these things and his heart died within him and he became like a stone.

Questions/Apply: (*Italics = possible responses*)

- Why doesn't Avigail tell Naval what she has done right away? [What does the text mean?]
    - *She doesn't want to risk telling him when he is drunk, because there is no knowing how he will respond*
    - *She waits until he is sober enough to understand*
    - *She waits until he has a hangover and then adds to the hangover with her news!*
- How do you understand Naval's reaction? [What does the text mean?]
    - *He freezes out of miserly shock at the loss of so much good food*
    - *He freezes out of terror at the bloodshed that she has narrowly averted*
    - *He feels completely emasculated by his wife saving saved the household from disaster while he was partying and drinking*

Read:

- Invite a reader for 1 Samuel 25:38-42

38: And it happened after about ten days that Adonai struck Naval and he died.
39: When David heard that Naval had died, he said, "Blessed is Adonai Who has taken up my cause of insult against Naval, and God's servant God has withheld from evil, and Naval's evil Adonai has brought down on his own head." And David sent messengers to Avigail to take her as wife.
40: And David's servants came to Avigail at Carmel and spoke to her, saying, "David sent us to you to take you to him as wife."
41: And she arose and bowed, her face to the ground, and said, "Look, your servant is but a slavegirl to wash the feet of my lord's servants."
42: And Avigail hurried and rose and rode on the donkey, her five young women walking behind her, and she went after David's messengers, and she became his wife.

Add:

- Avigail engages in a sort of reverse rendition of her previous extended sequence of actions: after bowing low, humbly offering to wash the messengers' feet, she "hastens and rises and rides on a donkey" (וַתְּמַהֵר וַתָּקָם אֲבִיגַיִל וַתִּרְכַּב עַל־הַחֲמוֹר), this time escorted by five of her young women as she rides out once more. This time, she leaves home to become David's wife.

Questions/Apply: (*Italics = possible responses*)

- Why do you think that David decides to marry Avigail? Why might it be to David's political advantage to marry Avigail? [What does the text mean?]

    - *She is introduced as both wise and beautiful, and David may want to marry her for one or both of these reasons*
    - *She kept him from a messy, violent situation once already, and he wants to have her wise counsel again*
    - *She spoke to his wounded ego once already, and he wants to have her comforting, deft presence with him again*
    - *She knows how to feed a big and hungry group of men*
    - *He sees Naval's death as a sign that Avigail's "you shall remember your servant" means that he should marry her, God's messenger*
- Why do you think that Avigail decides to marry David? [What does the text mean?]
    - *He is an escape from a widowhood stuck in Carmel*
    - *David is young, handsome, and exciting, and Avigail has proven that she knows how to respond to danger and "adventure" already*
    - *She sees that his star is on the rise - even though he is still a fugitive in the wilderness, she foresees greatness in him and wants to "hitch her star" to his wagon*

Conclusion (5 minutes)

- Closing question/Away: After learning Avigail's story, what do you think about her? How do you see her? [What does the text mean to you?]
    - *She seems brilliant and strategic*
    - *She seems wiley and scheming*
    - *She seems to know how to turn a dangerous situation into its best possible outcome*
    - *I feel a bit mixed - she seems to be both a peacemaker and a profiteer*
    - *I'm so delighted and surprised to learn that the Bible contains this fascinating character who was new to me!*
- After this extended and detailed narrative, you might imagine that Avigail takes her place by David's side, a wise counselor or a beloved spouse. Instead, she almost disappears from the Bible and is only mentioned in a few scattered verses.
- However, Avigail reemerges as later generations read her story and create new possibilities and interpretations. In our next session, we'll explore how they add to Avigail's character and narrative, and how she, like other biblical figures, continues to grow and become even more complex with each additional interpretation and addition to her story. Later interpreters have seen Avigail as a peacemaker, as a prophetess, and as a profiteer, and the story we studied together can hold all of those possibilities and more.

Avigail: Peacemaker, Prophetess, Profiteer?
Rabbinic, Medieval, and Modern Interpretations

Class #2 Lesson Plan: 60 Minutes

Opening (8 minutes)

- Following our study of Avigail's story in the Bible, today we are going to look at some of the rabbinic, medieval, and modern interpretations that add to her narrative. We won't be able to cover all of the texts where she can be found, but we will study a sampling that shows us how wide-ranging these different responses to Avigail are.
- Prayer for Torah study
- If there are newcomers, add 5 minutes here to invite volunteers to summarize the biblical story and some of the questions we discussed in the last session
- We left off last time having said that various interpreters have seen Avigail as a peacemaker, as a prophetess, and as a profiteer, and I want to jump off by asking you if any of these descriptions seem particularly compelling or surprising to you.
- Anchor: How do you respond to the idea of Avigail as a peacemaker, a prophetess, or a profiteer? Or are there other titles that you would give her? (*Italics = possible responses*)
    - *I don't see any prophecy in her biblical story - she references God, but it seems like it's strategic and rhetorical, not a moment of divine inspiration*
    - *She's totally a prophet - she predicts that David will be king!*
    - *Avigail the peacemaker makes a lot of sense, because she stops David from a bloody rampage*
    - *She's not profiteering, she's acting to prevent violence; it's just the twists and turns of the story/history/destiny that lead her to become David's wife*
    - *She's definitely profiteering - she tells David that he will remember his servant, aka her, and he does - and she becomes the wife of a king*
    - *She combines multiple of these characteristics*
    - *How about Avigail the political consultant? She gets David to calm down by reminding him that violence won't be good for his political career*
    - *How about Avigail the psychologist? She seems to understand David's (and Naval's) mental state very well, and be thoughtful about how to use a psychological approach*
- I want to frame our learning with a quotation by Miki Raver, who has written modern midrashim, the Jewish creative effort that seek to fill in the gaps and mysteries in our biblical text. Raver writes, "The Torah is layered with many levels of understanding, each word holding a vast number of meanings, all of which are true. The interpretive process is what gives the Bible its vitality and makes it a living, giving vessel."[96] Let's see how some readers throughout history have interpreted Avigail's story and continued to keep it vibrant and compelling.

Avigail in the Bavli (20 minutes)

Context:

- When I say rabbinic interpretations, I mean ideas and responses that are collected in rabbinic literature like the Mishnah, the Talmud, and other literature written roughly from 200 to 600 C.E., though it contains material that is earlier than that as well.
- There is no unified image of Avigail in this body of literature, which contains the voices of many thinkers in different generations. These wide-ranging rabbinic interpretations and embellishments of Avigail's story are the beginning of her post-biblical life as a dynamic, ever-changing character.

[96] Raver, Miki. *Listen to Her Voice: Women of the Hebrew Bible*. (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2005), 13.

- The Rabbis' treatment of Avigail appears to also speak to their own social context, their understanding of women's abilities and desires, and an uncertainty about the agency of intelligent, complex women.

Read: Mishnah and Tosefta Sanhedrin

- Our first texts come from the Mishnah and Tosefta, texts from the land of Israel, in the context of a discussion about the number of wives that a king may have.
- Invite a reader for Mishnah Sanhedrin 2:4 and Tosefta Sanhedrin 4:3

Mishnah Sanhedrin 2:4:
"He shall not have many wives" (Deuteronomy 17:17), but eighteen. Rabbi Yehudah says: He can have many wives, as long as they do not [change/alter] the devotion of his heart. Rabbi Shimon says: Even one [wife], [were she to change] the devotion of his heart, here he should not marry her. If so, why is it said "He shall not have many wives?" Even those like Avigail.

Tosefta Sanhedrin 4:3:
"He shall not have many wives" like Jezebel, but those like Avigail, he is permitted - the words of Rabbi Yehudah.

Add:

- The Mishnah and Tosefta have different responses, which is not uncommon in rabbinic literature - it's normal that they don't agree. The Mishnah suggests that having many wives is never acceptable for a king, while the Tosefta seems to think that having many wives is permissible if they are wives of a certain type - wives like Avigail.
- In the rabbinic imagination, Jezebel is the epitome of a dangerous woman - in the Bible, she is the wife of King Ahab of Israel, and leads him and the kingdom away from the worship of Adonai before meeting a gruesome end.

Questions/Apply: (*Italics = possible responses*)

- For a king, what is the danger of having too many wives? [What does the text say?]
    - *Unclear! Maybe just the general chaos of too many spouses?*
    - *They might alter the devotion of his heart, leading him away from his spiritual responsibilities as leader of the kingdom - and the more wives you have, the greater the risk of having a wife who leads you astray*
- Why is Avigail mentioned in this discussion? [What does the text mean?]
    - *She is an example of a wife that will not alter the devotion of the king's heart, but even if you have only wives like Avigail, you still cannot have many of them*
    - *She is the counterexample to Jezebel, the dangerous wife who alters the devotion of a king's heart and leads the kingdom to disaster - Avigail is the virtuous wife*
    - *Avigail stopped David from violence and bloodshed, so she is a good example of a righteous wife*

Transition: So even though the Mishnah and Tosefta do not agree about the kingly wife question, they agree that Avigail is the prime example of an ideal wife, a virtuous woman who will not "alter the devotion" of a king's heart and lead to theological and political disaster, like Jezebel.

Read: Bavli Megillah

- So we have a presentation of Avigail as a particularly virtuous or desirable type of wife. In our next text, we see a somewhat different presentation.
- Invite a reader for Bavli Megillah 15a

B. Megillah 15a:
Our sages taught in a baraita: There were four very beautiful women in the world - Sarah and Avigail, Rachav and Esther [...] Our sages taught in a baraita: Rahav by her name caused promiscuity, Yael by her voice, Avigail by remembering her, Michal the daughter of Saul by her appearance.

Add:

- A baraita is a piece of rabbinic material that is not included in the Mishnah but is still remembered and passed down. In this excerpt, we are looking at two different baraitot that are preserved in the Babylonian Talmud.
- There are a lot of names listed here! If you're curious, here is a quick rundown: By Sarah, they are referring to the matriarch Sarah, Abraham's wife and Isaac's mother. Rahav appears in the Book of Joshua as a Jericho prostitute who helps the Israelites capture the city. Esther is the heroine of the Purim story, the beautiful hidden Jew who marries the Persian king and saves her people from annihilation. In the Book of Judges, Yael kills the Canaanite military leader Sisera. Michal is the daughter of King Saul and David's first wife, and we're going to learn about her story in more detail in a later class. While there's a lot to think about with all of these women, we will continue to focus on Avigail for this class.

Questions/Apply: (*Italics = possible responses*)

- How would you assess the characterization of Avigail in the first baraita? [What does the text mean?]
    - *It seems like a good thing to be among the most beautiful women in the world*
    - *She is in good company - Sarah and Esther are Jewish heroines!*
    - *It isn't clear if beauty has a moral valence or is just a statement or observation*
- The phrase "remembering her" is a bit confusing! The implication seems to be that people are tempted into promiscuity when they remember Avigail. Based on that, how would you assess the characterization of Avigail in the second baraita? [What does the text mean?]
    - *The Rabbis seem to view her as not just beautiful, but dangerous - Sarah and Esther are beautiful, but they don't incite men to promiscuity*
    - *Inciting men to promiscuity sounds like women-shaming; it's not her fault that men blame her for their own actions*

- *It is interesting that she incites adultery not through her beautiful appearance, but by remembering her*

Transition: While Avigail is listed among the most beautiful women in the world, her characterization is not entirely positive, as the second baraita lists her as a woman whose allure leads men to promiscuity. It's intriguing that it is not her beautiful appearance that leads men into temptation, but instead the act of remembering her. Perhaps there is a wordplay here with Avigail's "you will remember your servant," suggesting that Avigail's power is in her words and the tempting suggestions that they invite - the Rabbis do not seem to find that possibility entirely welcome.

In the hands of the Rabbis, Avigail's speech becomes not only a political and interpersonal plea, but also prophecy. Let's look at one more rabbinic text that focuses on that aspect of Avigail's story.

Read: Bavli Megillah

- Invite a reader for Bavli Megillah 14a-b

B. Megillah 14a-b:
Our Sages taught in a baraita: Forty-eight prophets and seven prophetesses prophesied for Israel [...] Seven prophetesses - who? They are Sarah, Miriam, Devorah, Hannah, Avigail, Huldah, and Esther. [...]
She [Avigail] revealed her leg/thigh, and he [David] walked by the light [of his desire for her] three parasangs. He said to her, "Listen to me." She said to him, "Do not have this (זאת) be for you a stumbling" (1 Samuel 25:31). "This (זאת)," by implication, that there is someone else, and what is this? The act of Batsheva, and the final result was so.

Add:

- After the Rabbis name the seven prophetesses, they start going through the list and explaining each woman's prophecy. To keep our focus on Avigail, I'm giving you just a taste of their explanation of her prophecy. Before the passage we just read, the Rabbis also have Avigail telling David not to shed blood without a due legal process, and reminding him that he is not yet king, more powerful than all other inhabitants of the land.
- Suddenly, they suggest that she acts alluringly towards David, causing him to move towards her with what has to be hyperbolic language - a parasang is a Persian unit of distance comparable to 3 miles, so the image is that Avigail is so desirable that David journeys 9 miles towards her upon gimpsing her leg! He then tells her, listen to me, meaning, pay attention to me and have sex with me. If you're feeling surprised, that is a reasonable reaction! This episode is not at all in the biblical story that we read last time!
- Batsheva, to whom the text refers, was the wife of David's general Uriah, once David became king. David spotted her, had her brought to him, and had sex with her. When Batsheva became pregnant, David arranged for Uriah to die in battle and then married Batsheva himself. In response, God sends the prophet Nathan to rebuke King David when he son from Batsheva dies, and he sees his surviving sons fall into a civil war as a divine punishment. This is a grim story and I can imagine that some of us have

reactions to both the story and its rabbinic insertion into Avigail's story; let's focus on Avigail's part for this session, and perhaps return to David and Batsheva for another class.

Questions/Apply: (*Italics = possible responses*)

- According to this text, what was Avigail's prophecy? [What does the text say?]
    - *Avigail foresaw that this particular episode would not be the cause of David's stumbling*
    - *Avigail foresaw that David would "stumble" through his relationship with Batsheva*
- How does this prophecy change Avigail's speech to David? Remember, the original context of "let this not be a stumbling block to you" refers to David killing Naval and his household. [What does the text mean?]
    - *The Rabbis cast Avigail's prophecy as one that foretells a far-off disaster for the Davidic rule, rather than a more "minor" episode whie he is a fugitive*
    - *The Rabbis see Avigail's prophecy as one about women and temptation, rather than about men and violence*
    - *The story is now less about Avigail's wise and well-planned words and more about her sexual appeal and knowledge of how to use it strategically*

Summary [adapt/shorten based on actual conversation]: In reading Avigail's speech to David in the Bible, there are multiple elements that seem possibly prophetic: She tells him that his enemies will fare like Naval, and Naval quickly dies. She tells him that he will be king, and he does become king. She tells him that he will remember his servant, aka her, and he does remember her and marry her. However, this rabbinic text views her as a prophetess for a different reason, seeing her as foreseeing David's illicit relationship with Batsheva, which leads to much bloodshed and grief. The passage we just studied concludes with a folksy saying, that when a woman is engaged in conversation, she also holds a spindle - she is both talking to you, and weaving for the future. The medieval commentator Rashi explains that this means that while Avigail is talking to David, she is also planning for her own future, that David should "remember his servant" and marry her.

The rabbinic view of Avigai seems complicated here: on the one hand, she is a peacemaker who convinces David to refrain from violence towards her household, and a prophetess who warns him about a future error he will commit. On the other hand, she schemes about her future and acts in sexually tempting ways that the Rabbis don't seem to entirely admire, both here and in their description of her as one of the women who incite promiscuity. Avigail is transformed into a somewhat transgressive figure, whose wisdom is entrancing but not wholly welcome. She is both the virtuous wife and the scheming social climber, the peace-keeping prophetess and the alluring temptress in both word and body.

Avigail in medieval literature (12 minutes)

Context:

- Let's see how our medieval interpreters further add to Avigail's story and character.
- We will start by looking at a passage from Rabbeinu Bachya, a 13th-14th century Spanish commentator. He is commenting on the verse in the Exodus story where

Miriam, explicitly called a prophetess, leads the women in song and dance on the edge of the Sea of Reeds.

Read: Rabbeinu Bachya
- Invite a reader

Rabbeinu Bachya commentary on Exodus 15:20:
And further you will find great foundations that are in the Torah interpreted by women, like the subject of the world to come which is called "the bundle of the living" by Avigail. [In her speech to David, Avigail says: "And when a person rises to pursue you, to seek your life, my lord's life will be bound up in the bundle of the living with Adonai your God, and the lives of your enemies God will sling from the hollow of the sling."]

Questions/Apply: (*Italics = possible responses*)
- How would you assess Rabbeinu Bachya's characterization of Avigail? [What does the text say?]
    - *Very positive! He brings her into a conversation about a woman who is explicitly named a prophet in Torah, as another example of a divinely inspired woman*
    - *Very positive! He sees her as an example of a woman who has important insights into theology and spirituality*
    - *Very positive! Avigail was an interpreter of eschatology*

Context:
- Rabbeinu Bachya also brings Avigail into another commentary, when he discusses the woman of valor in the Book of Proverbs, which ends with the verse "Give her the fruit of her hands and may her deeds praise her in the gates" (Proverbs 31:31).

Read: Rabbeinu Bachya
- Invite a reader

Rabbeinu Bachya commentary on Deuteronomy 33:1:
It is fitting that they give her honor for the fruit of her hands, from what she gathered and gained, that people praise her in the gates for the beauty of her deeds and the skill of her work, as in the known matter of Avigail, who in her industry and her good insight saved her husband and all the people of his household from the sword of David and his men.

Questions/Apply: (*Italics = possible responses*)
- Why does Rabbeinu Bachya connect Proverbs' woman of valor with Avigail? [What does the text mean?]
    - *She, like the woman of valor, is hard-working and wise*
    - *She, like the woman of valor, provides "the fruit of her hand" - i.e. all the food she gives to David and his men*
- How does Rabbeinu Bachya's description of Avigail compare with the rabbinic texts we studied? [What does the text mean?]
    - *He seems uniformly positive about her, while they were more ambivalent*

- *He is focused on her hard work and her wisdom rather than her beauty or allure*
- *He sees her as a peacemaker, not a profiteer*

Add:

- This impulse towards a more virtuous rendition of Avigail in the medieval commentaries is also evinced in the social fabric of medieval and early modern Germany, a development that eventually led to several centuries of women's funerary epitaphs featuring the phrase "charitable like Avigail." Elisheva Baumgarten suggests that Avigail became a model of feminine charity because of "social and religious tensions concerning women's charity" in medieval legal disputes about women disbursing charity without their husband's permission.[97]

Questions/Apply: (*Italics = possible responses*)

- How does the word "charitable" figure into your understanding of Avigail in the biblical text? [What does the text say?]
  - *Yes - she gives food David and his men*
  - *No - she gives them food so that they won't kill her household; that's not charity, that's either a bribe or a plea*

Transition: Baumgarten writes that "the image of Abigail was transformed into a role model that met a particular cultural need" for that time - which means that her character was once again transformed to meet the realities of the time period.[98] As we move into some modern responses to Avigail, we will once again see that same impulse of bringing our own time's context and values into conversation with the existing layers of narrative and character.

Avigail in modern literature (15 minutes)

Context:

- Modern readers of Avigail's story add interpretations which would have been surprising to earlier generations. These writers bring in the perspectives and experiences of modernity, feminism, and academic scholarship to create new possibilities in the text.
- Today, we'll look at some excerpts from a 2015 novel by Geraldine Brooks, in which Avigail is one of the main characters. The story is narrated by the prophet Natan, who meets Avigail in David's camp when he is still just a child, after David has asked Natan's father for supplies.

Read: Geraldine Brooks, *The Secret Chord*

- Invite a reader

The Secret Chord:

[97] Baumgarten, Elisheva. "Charitable like Abigail: The History of an Epitaph." *The Jewish Quarterly Review* (Volume 105, Number 3, Summer 2015), 313.
[98] Baumgarten, 337.

This woman was very handsome, but she was some years older than the youth I had just met. In my village, a commonplace thing was for the wife to be much younger than her husband, never the reverse.

She seemed to understand my confusion. She dropped her veil so that I could see her face. A slight smile played about her lips, which were very full, but already scored with the fine lines of her maturity. Her skin, a pale olive, was gently weathered like my mother's from many summers in the unforgiving dryness of the Land. But her wide green eyes had a level, intelligent gaze, and the lines that framed them seemed to me more likely etched by amusement than by hardship. "I am Avigail of Carmel, third wife of our leader, David. I am his wife because my first husband, Naval, who was a drunkard and a fool, refused to send supplies for David's men when he requested them of us. We could afford it—we had three thousand sheep. I knew what the cost of that denial would be to us, so I saw to it myself, and met David on the road with the supplies before he and his band reached our village. Tell your father this: David is no ordinary outlaw, no ordinary man. When my husband died, I came to be his wife, even though I left behind a rich household to live as you see me here, among outlaws, begging for supplies. Boy, tell your father this is no small thing. Don't let him make the same mistake my foolish husband made."[99]

Questions/Apply: (*Italics = possible responses*)

- How does Brooks' Avigail characterize the biblical story we read? [What does the text say?]
    - *She says that David's request was not beyond Naval's abilities, suggesting that Naval was at fault for refusing David*
    - *She knew that David would respond with violence*
    - *She "saw to it" herself, emphasizing her own pragmatic, action-oriented nature*
    - *She does not explain Naval's death*
    - *She casts herself as choosing to"come to be David's wife," rather than being brought to him*
    - *She warns Natan's family not to make the same mistakes as Naval, seeing a recurring pattern in David's actions*
- According to this interpretation, why did Avigail choose to marry David? [What does the text mean?]
    - *Despite his current precarious life style, she sees something greater in him - he is "no ordinary man"*
    - *She prefers the extraordinary David to the ordinary, if rich, household she left*

Add:

- Later in the novel, Avigail fills in more of the details for Natan. Let's see how Brooks' interpretation adds more complexity to the biblical story.

Read: Geraldine Brooks, *The Secret Chord*

- Invite a reader

The Secret Chord:

[99] Brooks, Geraldine. *The Secret Chord.* (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2015), 21-22. Kindle Edition.

I despised my husband Naval. I despised his drunkenness and his folly, long before I ever saw David. But after . . . after I'd seen David—Natan, he looked beautiful that day, when I met him on the road. He was dressed for battle, the hair bound back, skin oiled. And angry—you know how he is, in anger. I could feel it. Feel the heat of it coming off him. The sense of purpose in him, the coil of it, how tightly he held himself in, but how ferocious he might be, unleashed. The self-command. And then, the way he softened to me, when he understood what I was doing. His kindness and his blessing as he sent me home. Home. Home to that stinking ass who had almost had us all killed. I had to go back to my house and sit with Naval and endure one of his drunken feasts. Had to look at him, his beard crusty with food, wine and spittle staining his tunic. Had to listen to his foul, stupid jokes and watch him put his greasy hands all over the serving women. Listen to him boast that he'd stood up to the ragtag outlaws, knowing that if it weren't for me he'd be dead in his own blood. And wishing, in my heart, that he was dead.

The next day, when he'd sobered up, I went to him and told him. Told him what I'd done, and what a fool he was. He got up, and staggered to the bowl and vomited. You know how violently a drunk vomits—his eyes were bloody when he'd done. And then he fell in a fit. They say I caused it with my words. It's not true. He caused it. He'd ruined his body. I am sure he would have had the selfsame fit that day from his excess whether I'd spoken truth to him or no.

But I was glad. And gladder still when day following day, he did not wake up. Then, on the tenth day, he died, leaving David free to ask for me. I had to keep my countenance when they came to inquire whether I would or no. But the moment I was in private, I danced around my room for the joy of it.[100]

Questions/Apply: (*Italics = possible responses*)

- What does Avigail find appealing in David? [What does the text say?]
    - *David is vibrant and alive, filled with emotion*
    - *David is fiercely self-controlled, in contrast to the greedy and selfish Naval*
    - *David is kind, in contrast to the cruel Naval*
- What does David's appeal indicate about Avigail's situation and her character? [What does the text mean?]
    - *Avigail is stuck with a husband who is cruel, selfish, and disinterested, and she is drawn to this man who presents a polar opposite*
    - *Avigail sees great potential in David, who is self-controlled, passionate, and kind, and wants to be part of that story*
- Do you empathize with Brooks' Avigail more or differently than you do with the biblical Avigail? [What does the text mean to you?]
    - *No - it was already clear in the biblical story that Avigail's situation was difficult and that she acted shrewdly to create a new life for herself. This doesn't change that story*
    - *Yes - this modern version fills in details that make Avigail's story more understandable and sympathetic*

Transition: These details, created by a modern female reader and interpreter of the text, enrich and complicate Avigail's character.

[100] Brooks, 158.

Conclusion (5 minutes)

- Closing Question/Away: As we come to the end of our time today, I want to invite you to share your reflections on our learning. What has surprised, challenged, or intrigued you in reading these different additions to Avigail's story? [What does the text mean to you?]
    - *Wow! Who knew there was so much more to say about this character?*
    - *I feel uncomfortable with later writers changing the "real" story*
    - *I want to learn more about how other biblical characters continue to develop!*
    - *I am firmly convinced by "Avigail the prophetess" or "Avigail the profiteer" or "Avigail the peacemaker" etc*
- Thank you for joining me on this exploration of Avigail's development through different periods of reading and interpreting. I hope this class has given you a taste of the creativity, anxieties, and yearnings of successive generations of interpreters, and the immense range of possibilities within Avigail's - and every - biblical story and character.

Notes on Michal lessons

Class #1:
Michal in the Bible: From Love to Disdain

Class #1 texts and perspectives to include:

- 10 min: Introduction
    - Why learn about Michal?
        - The only woman described as loving someone romantically in all of Tanakh
        - Emotional journey from love to disdain captured in the snippets of her narrative we see woven through the David saga
    - Anchor: What brought you to class today?
    - Provide backstory about David and Saul
- 20 min: Read and discuss 1 Samuel 14:49, 18:20-29, 19:11-17, 25:44
    - Question about how Michal is introduced
        - The younger daughter, in relation to the king, without any descriptors
    - Question about Michal's love as her defining characteristic
        - We only know about her emotional state
    - Question about Michal's actions when she helps David escape Saul
        - Add additional information about the parallel with Rachel and the teraphim
    - Question about why we don't hear Michal's voice when Saul gives her to Palti
        - Her disappearance from the text, now that she is not an active part of the David saga
- 25 min: Read and discuss 2 Samuel 3:13-16, 6:16-23
    - Question about what Michal symbolizes for David

        - He demands her back as a symbol of his authority and authenticity, "the daughter of Saul the king"
    - Question about Palti's weeping and the textual silence about Michal
        - An opportunity to note that later commentators will seize upon this silence and add multiple possibilities for Michal's emotional and physical state
    - Question about why Michal scorns David in the dancing scene
        - Could be about frivolity, the proper comportment of royalty, class status, modesty, her own removal from the triumphant moment
    - Question about why Michal does not have children
        - Is the implication that God punished her for scolding David, or that David refused to have sex with her? The house of Saul and the house of David will not be united
- 5 min: Conclusion
    - Ask for learners' reactions to Michal's character and story
    - Next session will be all about the afterlife of Michal in the imaginations of readers

Class #2:
Michal: Gazing from the Window - Rabbinic, Medieval, and Modern Interpretations

<u>Class #2 texts and perspectives to include:</u>

- 5 min: Introduction
    - Ask learners to recap the biblical story
    - Anchor: What questions do you have about Michal that the biblical narrative didn't answer?
    - Framing about midrash and engagement with the text
- 20 minutes: Rabbinic material
    - B. Sanhedrin: Michal's childlessness and the 2 Samuel 21:8 manuscript confusion about Michal and Merav
        - How does it change Michal's character for her to be a respected adoptive parent?
        - Connects her to other adoptive parents like Bat Pharaoh and Naomi, who play a critical role in Jewish history
    - Genesis Rabbah: The identity of David's wife Eglah and Michal's childbearing situation, about "no children until the day of her death"
        - How does this interpretation change our understanding of Michal's childlessness?
    - B. Eruvin: Michal wears tefillin
        - Why might the Rabbis select Michal as a woman with unusual freedom and agency in her religious practices (as they retroactively apply their practices to her time period)?
- 15 minutes: Medieval material
    - Midrash Tehillim: Michal's courage in standing up to her father

        - How does the midrash cast Michal's character in this episode?
    - Bamidbar Rabbah: Extended Michal speech in the dancing David scene
        - How does the midrash understand Michal's reactions to David?
    - Rashi: Explaining the differences between 2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles
        - We didn't cover 1 Chronicles 15:29 in our first class, but it is a highly abridged version of the dancing David scene, without Michal's speech
        - What do we learn about male discomfort with women critiquing powerful men?
- 15 minutes: Contemporary material
    - "Michal at the Well" poem by Julia Yocheved Knobloch
        - How does a modern female poet view Michal?
- 5 minutes: Conclusion
    - What do you think about Michal after seeing different interpretations of her throughout generations of readers?

Text Immersion Bibliography

Primary sources cited:

Biblical texts:
1 Samuel
2 Samuel
1 Chronicles

Rabbinic and midrashic compilations:
Mishnah Sanhedrin
Tosefta Sanhedrin
B. Eruvin
B. Sanhedrin
B. Megillah
B. Bava Metzia
Genesis Rabbah
Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael
Midrash Tanchuma
Kohelet Rabbah
Bamidbar Rabbah
Midrash Tehillim

Bible commentaries:
Abarbanel
Rabbeinu Bachya
Radak
Rashi

Secondary sources cited:

Alter, Robert. *The Hebrew Bible: Volume 2: Prophets. A Translation with Commentary.* New York: 2019.
Bach, Alice. *The Pleasures of Her Text, Feminist Readings of Biblical and Historical Texts.* Harrisburg, PA: 1990.
Berlin, Adele, ed., and Marc Zvi Brettler, ed. *The Jewish Study Bible*, 2nd Edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014 .
Brandes, Yochi. *The Secret Book of Kings*, trans. Yardenne Greenspan. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2016.
Brooks, Geraldine. *The Secret Chord*. New York: 2015, Kindle Edition.
Frymer-Kensky, Tikva. *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories.* New York: 2002.
Hammer, Jill. *Omer Calendar of Biblical Women*. Ritualwell: https://www.ritualwell.org/ritual/omer-calendar-biblical-women

Kalmanofsky, Amy. *Dangerous Sisters of the Hebrew Bible*. Minneapolis: 2014.
Knobloch, Julia Yocheved. "Michal at the Well." RitualWell: https://ritualwell.org/ritual/michal-well
Raver, Miki. *Listen to Her Voice: Women of the Hebrew Bible*. San Francisco: 2005.
Shalev, Meir. *Tanakh 'Akhshav*. Tel Aviv: 1985 .
Valler, Shulamit. "King David and 'His' Women: Biblical Stories and Talmudic Discussions." *A Feminist Companion to Samuel and Kings*, ed. Athalya Brenner. Sheffield: 1994.
Weingarten-Mintz, Nechama, and Tamar Biala, ed. *Dirshuni: Midrashei Nashim*. Tel Aviv: 2009.
Wolpe, David. *David: The Divided Heart*. New Haven: 2014.

Other works consulted:

B. Bava Kama
Rabbi Yosef Kara
Ralbag
Malbim

Brenner, Athalya. *I Am...: Biblical Women Tell Their Own Stories.* Minneapolis: 2004.
Brenner, Athalya. *A Feminist Companion to Samuel and Kings.* Sheffield: 2000.
Claassens, L. Juliana. "Cultivating Compassion? Abigail's Story (1 Samuel 25) as Space for Teaching Concern for Others." *Considering Compassion: Global Ethics, Human Dignity, and the Compassionate God*, ed. Frits de Lange, & L. Juliana Claassens. Eugene, OR: 2018.
Clines, David J. A., and Tamara C. Eskenazi, eds. *Telling Queen Michal's Story: An Experiment in Comparative Interpretation.* Sheffield, England: 1991.
Garsiel, Moshe. "Wit, Words and a Woman: 1 Samuel 25," in Y. T. Radday & A. Brenner (eds.), *On Humor and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, JSOT Monograph Series, Sheffield Academic Press: 1991.
Halbertal, Moshe, and Stephen Holmes. *The Beginning of Politics: Power in the Biblical Book of Samuel.* Princeton: 2017.
Jacobson, David C. *Modern Midrash: The Retelling of Traditional Jewish Narratives by Twentieth-Century Hebrew Writers.* New York: 1987.