

**Wisest Women Wonder Wearily: A curriculum guide for women in
their 20's and 30's looking at everyday topics through the eyes of
biblical women.**

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Abstract

This thesis takes the form of a curriculum guide there are 12 lesson plans. Each of the text-based lesson plans has the same components. The lessons may be taught consecutively, in a Rosh Hodesh format, or may be taught out of order, or even as a one lesson workshop. It is not expected that all the components will be fully used each time. Rather, this guide offers a variety to choose from.

Each lesson plan has a creative title, followed by a biblical verse that relates to the topic. The biblical verses are not the same as the ones being studied in the lesson, and, therefore, may be used to introduce a topic or discussed at the end, either by drawing conclusions, or contrasting similarities and differences.

Each lesson is given an introduction; most of the introductions have 21st century material embedded in them to show the topics' relevancy. The introductions can be used by the group of women to study alongside the biblical material, or may be assigned as suggested reading prior to the group meeting.

Next, each lesson plan contains a short "Set Introduction" section to create the mood and draw the women's attention to the topic at hand.

Following the "Set Introduction," there are four different biblical texts to look at. These texts and additional background information are offered so the group will better understand how the stories relate to the topic, as well as how scholars view these stories. After each biblical section, the author has provided discussion questions for the group, in addition to some suggested answers for the instructor's benefit.

Each lesson contains one group activity and one Sacred Time section which ties the topic to a holy day within the Jewish calendar.

Lastly, there are conclusion questions to connect the 21st century topic with the biblical material. Many of these questions are designed to help the women see the relevancy of the topic to their own lives.

Also accompanying each lesson is a text sheet that includes biblical verses from each of the four biblical stories looked at within the lesson. These are the “juicy” verses from the sections, and are expected to generate a great deal of discussion and debate. These verses are translated, and annotations are given to help inspire the women of the group.

If this curriculum spans a period of months, the instructor might consider using only some sections each time. With this approach, the same students can return the next year and relook at each lesson using different sections of the curriculum, thus making the experience spiral and providing enough material for several years of study.

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What is Rosh Chodesh?

Introduction

Rosh Chodesh literally means "head of the month" or "head of the moon." The Jewish calendar is arranged according to the phases of the moon. Two Jewish festivals occur on a full moon, such as Pesach and Sukkot. Yet most occur during the "new" moon at the beginning of the month such as Rosh Hashanah, meaning "head of the year." In biblical times, Rosh Chodesh, the first of every month, is a festival marked by joyous sacrifice, feasting, and trumpets. Later, in rabbinic times, bonfires were lit on the mountains to announce the arrival of the new moon. Today, Rosh Chodesh is not celebrated with sacrifice or festive meals. Instead, it is celebrated in religious services by adding a blessing, *Birkat HaChodesh* on the preceding Shabbat, and reciting a special musaf service on the day of Rosh Chodesh. Some communities also include *Kiddush Levanah* ("sanctification of the moon") ceremonies that take place outside, under the moon. Rosh Chodesh is celebrated for two days when it follows a 30-day month; it is only celebrated for one day when it follows a 29-day month. The lunar cycle is 29 days, 12 hours, and 793 *halakim* (3 and 1/3 seconds); the renewal of the moon, when the moon begins to show its light after a dark period, is a day for Jews to celebrate their own renewal.

In Jewish lore and mysticism, as in other cultures, the moon is a symbol for feminine principles.¹ Today, Rosh Chodesh is a holiday celebrated by women around the world.

There are a number of reasons. First, according to legend, the holiday was a reward given to the women of Israel because they refused to surrender their jewelry for the

¹ http://www.ritualwell.org/holidays/roshchodeshnewmoon/index_html/overview_view

creation of the golden calf. Because of their righteousness, the women were exonerated from working on Rosh Hodesh. Second, many people have pointed out that the menstrual cycle is similar to the monthly cycle of the moon. Third, Penina Adelman, author of the first modern Rosh Hodesh ritual guide for women, points out that the words Roshei Hodshim, heads of the months, contain the same letters that form the word ReHeM, womb. Fourth, the status of the moon has often been compared to the status of women. The Talmud recounts a legend that the moon and the sun were originally of equal size and brightness, but the moon asked how two could rule equally; God responded by making the moon smaller. In ancient texts, woman likewise has a lesser status and is subservient to man.²

Our study will be set up according to a lunar calendar. There are 12 lesson plans, one connected to each month; ten of the lesson plans are text based lessons, each containing 4 texts which highlight females in the Bible as they relate to current topics. Ten is a special number for women; it signifies wholeness and completeness, since a pregnancy lasts ten lunar months. The first lesson plan focuses on what Rosh Hodesh is all about, and the last lesson plan will help the group draw closure, tie up loose ends, and look at women in the Bible comparatively with women in the 21st century.

Note to Instructor

Each of the text based lesson plans has the same components, but there is probably not enough time to use each of the components fully in any one teaching session. The lessons may be taught consecutively, in a Rosh Hodesh format, or may be taught out of order, or even as a one lesson workshop.

² Leora Tanenbaum and Carol Diament, ed., *Moonbeams: A Hadassah Rosh Hodesh Guide*. (Jewish Lights Publishing, 2000).

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Also accompanying each lesson is a text sheet that includes biblical verses from each of the four biblical stories looked at within the lesson. These are the “juicy” verses from the sections, and are expected to generate a great deal of discussion and debate. These verses are translated, and annotations are given to help inspire the women of the group.

If this curriculum spans a period of months, the instructor might consider using only some sections each time. With this approach, the same students can return the next year and relook at each lesson using different sections of the curriculum, thus making the experience spiral and providing enough material for several years of study.

Set Induction for each session

1. Go around the room and have everyone introduce themselves and tell why the course interests them.
2. If the group is meeting regularly, the number one goal of the program is to foster a sense of community among the participants. One way to accomplish this might be to brainstorm different minhagim, customs that could be used in the first five minutes of each lesson to start off the month. For example, say the mishaberach together, share burning issues in people’s lives, have a designated person bring snacks (possibly sharing a family recipe), or relate favorite quotes.
3. Otherwise, if this is a specific group of women studying together for only a single session, configure an exercise to meet their needs.

Torah

Rosh Hodesh is mentioned in Numbers 10:10, as follows: “And on your joyous occasions- your fixed festivals and new moon days-you shall sound the trumpets over your burnt offerings and your sacrifices of well-being. They shall be a reminder to you before your God: I, Adonai, am your God.” The key elements of the Rosh Hodesh ritual are described as 1) Rosh Hodesh should be a joyous occasion, 2) trumpets should be sounded, and 3) both burnt offerings and sacrifices of well-being should be included.

A burnt offering, also known as an *olah* offering, is the most common type of offering. This sacrifice is presented daily, in the morning and evening, at the Tent of Meeting. This offering is given entirely to God and is burnt completely on the altar. In addition to being performed daily, these offerings are conducted on special occasions and on Shabbat; they are gifts to God to get God’s attention through the smoke that consumes the animal.

The sacrifice of well-being is similar to the burnt offering, except in this case, only parts of the animal are burned on the altar for God and the majority of the animal is actually prepared as a sacred meal to be eaten by both the priest and the Israelite who brings the sacrifice. This ritual is not done for any specific purpose; it is the accepted way for people to slaughter an animal prior to eating it.

Combining these two offerings for Rosh Hodesh, a “joyous occasion,” makes sense. In order for Rosh Hodesh to be festive and joyous, the people want to partake in a special meal; therefore, there needs to be an offering of well-being. In biblical times, this would be the

only sanctioned time to be eating meat. This burnt offering makes Rosh Hodesh not just a celebration among the people, but also a sacred occasion in biblical Israel.

Midrash

A midrash comments on the story of the Golden Calf, when the Israelites melt their gold to make an idol, and then worship it while Moses is receiving the Torah on Mount Sinai:

The women heard about the construction of the Golden Calf and refused to give their jewelry to their husbands. Instead, they said to them: 'You want to construct an idol and mask, a molten form which is an abomination? We won't listen to you!' And the Holy One, rewarded them in this world that they would observe the new moons more than men, and in the next world they are destined to be renewed like the moons (Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer, 45).

In his interpretation, Rabbi Eliezer says the women are rewarded with the holiday of Rosh Hodesh because of their independence, wisdom, and piety in the face of temptation.

Additionally, Rosh Hodesh is a celebration of women's commitment to God.

Talmud

Rabbi Shimon ben Pazzi cites a contradiction about the creation of the sun and the moon. One verse says, “God made the two great lights” (Genesis 1:16), and immediately, “the greater light... and the lesser light.” The moon said to God: “Sovereign of the Universe, is it possible for two kings to wear a single crown?” God replied: “Go and make yourself smaller.” “Sovereign of the Universe,” the moon said to him, “because I made a proper claim before you, now I must make myself smaller?” God said to the moon, “Go, and you will rule by day and by night.” And the moon said, “What good is a lamp in broad daylight?” He said, “Go! Israel shall use you to count the days and the years.” The moon went on complaining... On seeing that the moon could not be consoled, God said “Bring an atonement for me for making the moon smaller.” Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish taught, “Why is a male goat offered on the new moon? There it is written concerning it “unto Adonai” (Numbers 28:15)? It is because God said, “Let this male goat be an atonement for Me for making the moon smaller.”

—Babylonian Talmud, Chullin 60b

In this story, the moon questions God about the equality between the moon and the sun, since they are initially the same size. Upon hearing this question, God rectifies the situation by making the moon smaller. The moon complains and complains about God’s unjust solution; the moon views the solution as punishment for asking a question. God finally admits guilt by making an atonement offering of a male goat. According to legend, the moon will be restored to her full size in the time of the Messiah⁵, so too, many women hope to achieve full equality when society is transformed.³

³ http://www.ritualwell.org/holidays/roshchodeshnewmoon/index_html/overview_view- *Jill Hammer*

Activity

1. After reading through the historical evolution of Rosh Hodesh, why do you think this holiday is so important for women today?
2. If you could create your own ritual for women to perform on Rosh Hodesh, what would it be? Where would it take place? What symbolism would be behind it? (This can be done in small groups or individually)

Conclusion

1. Give each participant a piece of paper. Allow them 1-2 minutes to list as many male characters in the Bible as they can.
2. Next, have participants list as many female characters in the Bible as they can.

Mostly likely, there are more male characters remembered than female characters, but we should know more of our Biblical sisters than we do. Let's study them together throughout the year!

**From Tears of Sorrow to Shouts of Joy
(and back again!)**

“Those who sow in tears will reap with shouts of joy” (Psalm 126:5).

Introduction

July 6, 2008

MODERN LOVE

A Support Group Is My Higher Power

By JULIE SCHUMACHER

THE object of the Jewish women’s support group I belong to (even though I’m not Jewish) is camaraderie of a particular kind: each of us has a child, a teenager, who has fallen apart.

I’m referring here to the dark constellation of parental nightmares: alcoholism, drug abuse, self-starvation, depression, suicide attempts. Most of our children have been hospitalized; all but one at the time of our first meeting were away from home in long-term treatment.

None of us saw the nightmare coming...

The first time I showed up at a support group, invited by the mother of a girl my daughter had met in treatment, the women were talking about their synagogues and rabbis and about upcoming bar and bat mitzvahs.

“So,” I said, struck by what I assumed was an interesting coincidence, “is everybody here Jewish?”

After a brief silence, one woman said, “You aren’t?”

“No.”

Although I had 16 years of Methodism securely behind me, my husband once remarked that I was the least spiritual person he had ever met. “I guess I misunderstood,” I said. “I can leave.” The woman who had invited me shook her head as if emerging from a dream and insisted I stay: “But I thought you were Jewish. Isn’t your daughter Jewish?”

She is. Years earlier, after returning from a friend’s bat mitzvah, my daughter announced, “I want to do that.” She was 11 and not yet showing signs of the illness that would barely allow her to survive to 18.

I assumed her interest was a fad. Would she really want to learn Hebrew, attend regular religious services and make up for everything else she'd missed during her previous decade of leisurely weekend mornings at home?

Apparently, she would...Maybe I would have felt differently had I known that her faith would later help her survive more than 20 months in the abyss of severe depression. Ironically, agnostic that I was and still am, I sometimes found myself arguing during those terrifying months that she should cling to her belief in the divine, to any slender hint or reassurance that, during her darkest, most dispiriting moments, she was not alone...

The miseries of the other mothers turned out to look remarkably like mine, and within 15 minutes we had become a sort of congregation, united not primarily by belief, but by sadness and confusion and a common shame.

...Still, we had to field questions when the children were gone. Send a child out of state for treatment and you open the door to dire warnings about "boot camps" and the astonished disapproval of family and friends. "You sent her away?"

Yes, we did. Because after we locked up the cough syrup and the razor blades; after we removed her bedroom door, hid the car keys and poured the vodka down the sink; and after we shortened our work hours and met with her teachers and therapists and the police, there was nothing left but a series of soul-destroying phone calls to arrange the transfer of the troubled, beloved child into the care of strangers 1,000 miles away in the hope that she would, maybe 6 or 10 or 18 months later, be able to live at home without endangering herself or others...

Perhaps my daughter's attraction to Judaism came from a need to satisfy a similar hunger. But during the planning for her bat mitzvah, several problems arose. Prayers had to be offered during the service, and I was told that, given my status as non-Jew, those could not come from me.

The rabbi turned to my husband, a third-generation secular Jew whose parents and grandparents were atheists, and whose brother and sister were raising their children to enjoy hunting for Easter eggs in spring.

He wouldn't be offering the prayers, either.

My daughter was told to enlist some students in her Hebrew class, who acquitted themselves very well.

I don't remember what they said; most of the prayers were in Hebrew. But if I had prayed for my daughter myself — if I were a person who prayed — I'd have asked that whatever she chose to believe in would last and sustain her, and that, no matter the identity of her God, she believe in herself.

BRINGING children into the world and raising them is an act of optimism relying on obstinate hope for the future despite grim prognostications: melting ice floes, unbreathable air, poverty and a panoply of violence and unreason. New parents are often stunned by their abruptly altered view of the world as a dangerous place...

My daughter graduated from treatment as well as high school and is in college, where she continues — successfully, for the most part — to battle her demons. Occasionally we talk about her difficult times. More often we talk about her studies; she is majoring in religion...

Although I still don't believe in God, I have come to believe in support groups. When I joined the Jewish women's group, I worried that our monthly lunches might involve tears, handholding and episodes of recrimination and regret. They do in fact involve all of those. And I have found that the company of people who share the particular content and form of my unhappiness is a balm I cannot do without.

Fortunately, our meetings aren't only about commiseration. They are also — Christian metaphor here — about rebirth. One woman in our group has decided to reinvent herself professionally. Another gives PowerPoint presentations to highlight the topic of Jewish families in crisis. All would probably describe themselves as shellshocked but stronger

In banding together to tell the truth about our own and our children's suffering, we have found resilience; and we have kept the terrible vacant loneliness at bay. Our belief in ourselves as parents has been compromised, but that's probably all right. Most of us aren't looking for certainty anymore so much as a complicated acknowledgment of what is.

All but one of our children — may he rest in peace — are still alive. Our hope for the others: That they outlive us. That they find something to hold on to, and hold on hard.”¹

This story not only shows the painful consequences of Clinical Depression and other mental health issues within our community, it also shows the healing power of having support through difficult times. Maybe not all of us had to deal with a mental health issue ourselves, but each of us has a mother, sister, aunt, cousin, or friend who has. Hopefully, all of us have experienced times of jubilation, but without the times of sorrow or the mundane times, the times of pure joy would not be so sweet. It is impossible to diagnose biblical characters with

¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/06/fashion/06love.html?_r=1&pagewanted=print

mental disorders, but by looking at experiences of despair and loss closely we can benefit a great deal. Therefore this lesson deals with both the sweetness of joy and the bitterness of sorrow together as one. There is a significant difference between Clinical Depression, with a capital “D” and feeling depressed with a lower case “d” due to different circumstances. Please be aware of the distinction throughout the lesson and in your discussions.

Set Intro

- 1) Have all the participants close their eyes, and imagine...

Imagine you are standing at the edge of the sea, behind you is the Egyptian army perusing you, with chariots horses and riders. God seems to be there too, somewhere, in a pillar of fire and cloud. Then your leader, Moses, holds out his arm over the sea just as God instructs, and the sea miraculously parts, creating two walls of water. Suddenly, you find yourself in the sea of Israelites rushing through the two walls of water. The Egyptians are closing in and so you move even faster. Once you are across, Moses holds his hand up again and the sea returns to normal, covering with water all of Pharaoh’s army that followed; none of them survived. In this moment you realize the enormous power that God wielded against the Egyptians. You feel...(leave a few minutes of silence)

- 2) Ask if anyone wants to share what they feel.
- 3) Point out that even though they all just experienced the same guided meditation each person has very distinct emotions. Here’s how the Bible describes this experience,
“And when Israel saw the wondrous power which God had wielded against the

Egyptians, the people feared God, they had faith in God and in God's servant Moses”
(Exodus 14:31).

Miriam (Exodus 15)

In Exodus 14 there is an account in prose depicting the parting of the Sea of Reeds and the deliverance of the Israelite people from slavery in Egypt. Exodus 15 recounts this story in a poem. “Most scholars understand the poetic celebration of Israel’s miraculous rescue from the Egyptians to be a very ancient poem, dating to the late 12th or early 11th century BCE, much older than the somewhat different prose account that precedes it.”² The first line of the poem exclaims that Moses and the Israelites sang this song to Adonai, yet “many modern scholars conclude that the song was created and performed by women.”³ This text is often referred to as the Song of Miriam, even though the text states that Miriam only sang the first line; a midrash “has it that Miriam and the women actually recite the entire song.”⁴ The song or poem goes on to show great emotion while singing God’s praises for delivering the Israelite people. The song depicts in detail how God performed miraculous acts in order to save the people. Then, in verse 11, the question is posed, “who is like you, Adonai, who is like you among all the holies?” “This proclamation of the incomparability of God is expressed in a resounding rhetorical question that has become part of our daily liturgy and is known as the Mi Chamocha. The uniqueness of God flows from the divine might be exemplified by the deliverance at the sea.”⁵ Then at the end of the song, Miriam, the prophet, picks up a drum or tambourine and all the women follow her with drums and Miriam sings, “Sing to Adonai, for God has triumphed gloriously; Horse and driver God has hurled into the sea” (Exodus 15:21). In this verse we see women singing and dancing. It is

² Carol Meyer, *The Torah: A Woman's Commentary*. ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss (New York: URJ Press, 2008), 387.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary* (New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 82.

⁵ Carol Meyer, *The Torah: A Woman's Commentary*. 388.

customary in ancient Israel for women to sing and dance during times of extreme happiness, as when they are welcome home victorious soldiers (see the stories of Judges 11:34 and 1 Samuel 18:6-7).

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Does this story suggest that women have a special capacity to respond and express joy? If so is that true of sorrow?
- 2) If the women of the Bible organized musical and dance practices for joyous occasions in the community, how might this have contributed to the women's morale within society?
- 3) How do danger or despair relate to joy?

Tamar (2 Samuel 13:15-22)

Amnon, the son of King David, becomes infatuated with Tamar the daughter of David (Amnon's half sister). Amnon pretends to be sick and asks David to have Tamar bring him something to eat. David sends a message asking Tamar to prepare food and take it to Amnon. Tamar goes to Amnon's room and prepares food in front of him, but when he goes to eat, he orders everyone out of the room except Tamar. Once everyone left the room, Amnon grabbed Tamar and said, "Come lie with me, sister" (2 Samuel 13:11). Tamar says to him, "Don't brother! Don't force me, such things are not done in Israel. Don't do such a vile thing. Where will I carry my shame?" (13:12). "Tamar the social importance of remaining a virgin. A sexual act with Amnon will bring disgrace upon her."⁶ She begs him to stop. If not she says, "And you will be like any of the scoundrels in Israel! Please speak to the King; he will not refuse me to you." But Amnon does not listen and he over powers her and lays with her by force (13:12-14). "Tamar's experience has been one of total degradation. And it is about to become even worse."⁷ Immediately afterwards, Amnon feels loathing for her and tells her to "get out" "Tamar tries to answer him, but her speech betrays her shock and pain...she cannot speak a grammatical sentence...she expresses partial thoughts but her meaning is clear...she realizes the rape is an act of subjugation, and that by sending her away, Amnon could continue to act out his dominance over her. She pleads with him not to strip her of her last shred of power."⁸ Tamar begs, "Please don't commit this wrong to send me away would be even worse than the first wrong you committed against me"(13:16). Amnon tells a servant to

⁶ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of their Stories*. (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 161.

⁷ Ibid., 163.

⁸ Ibid., 164.

throw her out of his room and bar the door behind her (13:15-17). By using “that thing” he refers to her as not “woman” or “Tamar” and thus dehumanizes her even more. Tamar goes screaming through the halls. She puts dust on her head and rents the ornamented tunic she is wearing; she puts her hands on her head, and walks away, screaming loudly as she goes. This description is the same as those who see utter ruin as in (Ezekiel 27:30). Frymer-Kensky suggests, “Tamar is ‘crying out’ yelling and making a loud sound. She may be lamenting, ‘woe to me,’ and she is probably crying, ‘rape!’”⁹ When Absalom, Tamar’s brother, finds out that Amnon is the man who defiled his sister, he tells Tamar to be silent about the matter, not to brood over it and to come stay at his house. “by not naming the offense as rape, Absalom belittles Tamar’s pain, he denies her outrage, and compounds her tragedy. ‘Pay no attention to this matter,’ (13:20) he says to her, as if ‘this matter’ were something trifling that she could forget or ignore...and she will be denied the satisfaction of retribution and revenge.”¹⁰ When King David hears about this he is deeply upset but does nothing. As for Absalom, even though he doesn’t speak to Amnon about this, he hates him. (13:22) (Two years later, Absalom kills Amnon).

Tamar goes to stay with her brother for the rest of her life. The text describes her condition as “forlorn” (desolate). Elsewhere, this is a sign of a ruined person. “Lamentations tells us how Zion became ruined, faint all day as God rained fire upon her (Lam 1:13)... she is desolate in both senses of the word; ruined and miserable.”¹¹

⁹ Ibid., 166.

¹⁰ Ibid., 167.

¹¹ Ibid.

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Tamar is victimized twice. First she is victimized by Amnon when he rapes her and then she is victimized by Absalom, David, and the community when they silence her. Which do you think is worse and why?
- 2) What effect do you think these victimizations have on Tamar's emotional well being?
- 3) How does such a story in the Bible help us gain a perspective on women's experience?

Song of Songs (1:2-4)

In the introductory section of the Song of Songs the woman desires her lover's kisses and by the end of the piece her desires are fulfilled.¹² The woman yearns for her man's kisses proclaiming that his love is better than wine (1:2). She describes his scent as a delicious fragrance, which pours out of him so that the other maidens must smell it and fall in love with him (1:3). This woman wants her lover to take her and run away together. Together in her lover's palace they will be glad and rejoice together. They will remember their love even more than one remembers wine. How awesome it is to love you! (1:4). This out pouring of complements for her lover is just one expression of over joyous love that the woman expresses.

Discussion Questions:

- 1) How do you respond to the sensual description of emotions of the woman in this section of the Song of Songs?
- 2) How can one make the joy felt at the beginning of a romance last throughout the relationship?
- 3) The rabbinic sages read Song of Songs as a love story between God and Israel and recommend reading it on Shabbat. How does this view contribute to your enjoyment of the Song or of Shabbat?

¹² Phyllis Trible, *The Cyclic Design of Song of Songs*.

Naomi (Ruth 1:14-22)

In the first chapter of Ruth, Naomi pleads with her daughters-in-law to return to their mothers' houses in Moab. This language is striking because typically in the Bible is male centered, and therefore it should not have been "your mother's house" but rather "your father's house." However, Reimer suggests that this language is "fitting because the 'mother's house' to which Ruth refuses to return represents the culture of conventional expectations that Ruth rejects."¹³ But Naomi replies, "Turn back, my daughters! Why should you go with me? Have I any more sons in my body who might be husbands for you? Turn back, my daughters, for I am too old to be married. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I were married tonight and I also bore sons, should you wait for them to grow up? Should you on their account debar yourselves from marriage? Oh no my daughters! My lot is far more bitter than yours, for the hand of Adonai has struck our against me" (Ruth 1:11-13). Orpah listens to Naomi. She kisses her mother-in-law and we can assume that she does as she has been told and returns to her mother's house. We do not hear about her again. Conversely, Ruth chooses the unknown option of staying by Naomi's side. The book is then named after her. Reimer argues that this is more convincing to Ruth and that is why Ruth switches the language in her response to her commitment to Naomi and Naomi's people.¹⁴

But Ruth replies, "Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (1:16). After Naomi's plea we have Ruth's long pledge of loyalty,

¹³ Reimer, Gail Twersky. . Ed. Judith A Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer. "Her Mother's House." *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 97.

¹⁴ Ibid., 99.

using the formula of an oath. This beautiful oath in 1:16-17 is poetic and heartwarming. However, many scholars argue over Naomi's next response to this pledge of loyalty. The text only states that Naomi was silent in response. Fewell and Gunn pose the question, that if this oath "can melt the hearts of a myriad of preachers and congregations down the centuries, why not Naomi's heart?"¹⁵ It is clear that Naomi is incredibly emotional at this point. Naomi along with her husband and sons left Bethlehem years before because of a famine, and they went in search of food. When they left Bethlehem they might have been hungry but they had one another. In the interim years Naomi's husband dies and then her sons. She and her daughters-in-law are all that she has left. now as Naomi is about to return to the land of her people whom she deserted during hard times, she is, unfortunately, coming back with nothing to show for it. Naomi is returning to the land she once deserted without a husband or sons. She must have been completely embarrassed, just like a dog with its tail between its legs. Actually, she is even worse off than having lost her blood relatives; some scholars argue that Naomi wants Ruth to return to her people because if Naomi were to show up in Bethlehem with a Moabite daughter-in-law, this would be an even bigger cause for embarrassment than simply showing up having lost everything.¹⁶ Fewell and Gunn also conclude that Naomi was in some way probably resentful of the Moabites, maybe even blaming her daughters-in-law for the loss of her sons. According to a biblical passage in the Torah, Moabites are to be excluded from the community. See Deuteronomy 23:4. Naomi sees Ruth staying with her on her journey as an inconvenience and a menace. The way that Naomi responds to Ruth the

¹⁵ Fewell, Dana and David Gunn. "A Son is Born to Naomi"

¹⁶ Ibid.

first time is with politeness; however, all of these internal feelings (scholars argue) are the reason for Naomi's silence.

Coxen is one scholar who disagrees with this interpretation of Naomi's silence. He argues that Naomi is not really silent at all; rather, the narrator adds this piece of information to show the reader that she ceased to argue the point with Ruth any more. Coxen further clarifies by saying that there was no need for words or embrace again since right before this Naomi had kissed and hugged both Ruth and Orpah¹⁷.

Ruth is a strong character, although one would have to wonder why she didn't want to return to her mother's house. One can imagine that she must have been upset by the death of her husband, brother-in-law, and father-in-law. Not to want to return home puts her mother's house into question. Did Ruth look to Naomi as more of a mother than her own? Had Ruth had a falling out with her family when she decided to marry an Israelite, or was Ruth a completely selfless person who, out of loving kindness, did not want Naomi to travel or reside by herself? Could Ruth see how depressed Naomi was and therefore, being the caretaker that she was, felt the need to take care of Naomi? Was this need to care for Naomi out of the lack of having children? Was Ruth a natural mother?

When Naomi comes back home to Bethlehem, together with Ruth, the town's women meet her. She says to them: "I went away full, and Adonai has dealt harshly with me, when Shaddai has brought misfortune upon me!"

Discussion Questions:

¹⁷ Coxon, Peter. "Was Naomi a Scold?" and responses by Dana Fawell and David Gunn's "Is Coxon a Scold"

- 1) How would you describe Naomi's mental state during her journey back from Moab?
- 2) How would you describe Naomi's mental state once in Judah?

Additional thoughts and Questions for the Instructor about the Discussion Questions

Miriam (Exodus 15)

- 1) Does this story suggest that women have a special capacity to respond and express joy? If so is that true of sorrow?
- 2) If the women of the Bible organized musical and dance practices for joyous occasions in the community, how might this have contributed to the women's morale within society?
- 3) How do danger or despair relate to joy?

“It was apparently customary in ancient Israel for women to welcome victorious armies with victory songs (see Judges 11:34; 1 Samuel 18:6-7). Accomplished female musicians would have earned the esteem of their community. Also, groups of female performers likely would have met together to practice their instruments and compose songs for specific occasions, which would have provided opportunities for female bonding and for women to exert organizational skills and mentor younger performers.”¹⁸

Tamar (2 Samuel 13:15-22)

- 1) Tamar is victimized twice. First she is victimized by Amnon when he rapes her and then she is victimized by Absalom, David, and the community when they silence her. Which do you think is worse and why?

I think that the second victimization is worse. If Tamar had received emotional support from her family and community she might have been able to recover from the rape and lead a normal life, even though no one ever fully gets over being abused. Yet she is essentially punished for Amnon's actions by living unmarried at Absalom's house.

- 2) What effect do you think these victimizations have on Tamar's emotional well being?

¹⁸ Carol Meyer, *The Torah: A Woman's Commentary*. 392.

- 3) How does such a story in the Bible help us gain a perspective on women's experience?

Song of Songs (1:2-4)

- 1) How do you respond to the sensual description of emotions of the woman in this section of the Song of Songs?
- 2) How can one make the joy felt at the beginning of a romance last throughout the relationship?
- 3) The rabbinic sages read Song of Songs as a love story between God and Israel and recommend reading it on Shabbat. How does this view contribute to your enjoyment of the Song or of Shabbat?

Naomi (Ruth 1:14-22)

- 1) How would you describe Naomi's mental state during her journey back from Moab?

Naomi's actions show a severely depressed individual who is suffering from a great deal of grief. This grief is due to the loss of her sons and husband; a grief that she will never be able to fully recover from. When Naomi tries to push Ruth and Orpah away, she is simply alienating all the people around her that care about her; another sign of her depression. She is also running away from the land of heartache and back to the land that she probably reminisces about, Bethlehem. Although she once left there because of a famine, she probably has wonderful childhood and newlywed memories of the land, as compared to the land of Moab, filled with memories of the tragic deaths of her family.

- 2) How would you describe Naomi's mental state once in Judah?

Once in Judah, Naomi is still filled with grief and this overrides everything else. Upon entering the city, Naomi responds to the women of the town by saying: “Do not call me Naomi,” she replied. “Call me Mara, for Shaddai has made my lot very bitter” (Ruth 1:20). With this abrupt response she changes her name to Mara, meaning bitterness. This is a cry for help; a lashing out, a declaration of her pain. This encounter is also an attempt for Naomi to change her fate, maybe even a bit superstitious in the sense that the bad luck might not find her under a different name. She seems to withdraw from everyone, does not attempt to find a job, collect grain for herself, or contact any of her old friends or kinsman. It seems as though Naomi thought that by returning to Bethlehem she would automatically be taken care of. She acts as if she returned to Bethlehem alone, she even says she is empty, when it is clear from the text that Ruth is by her side as she returns.

Activity

Have each participant make a mandala. Choose one of the Biblical women we learned about today, or fit all of the biblical women onto a single mandala. If you choose to put all four women on the mandala, make sure to be thoughtful as to the placement of the women and connections you are making between the women and their stories. The mandala is an ancient Hindu symbol.

The **modern usage of the mandala** comes largely from **Carl Jung**, a Swiss psychiatrist who worked with many patients in the middle part of the 20th century. He started with his own experience with drawing circles, or circular shapes and designs, and noticed they somehow corresponded to his inner situation, feelings, impressions, and thoughts. Further, he concluded after some study of the matter with his own drawings and also the drawings of his patients, whom he encouraged to also make their own mandalas, that these **circular drawings were therapeutic**, first to draw, then to look at.

Mandala means center in *Sanskrit*, the ancient Indian language. Other meanings include circumference, and magic circle. Jung finally arrived at the conclusion that the Self, the wholeness of the personality, is reflected in the mandala, or circular drawing. Jung felt also that the mandala that a person spontaneously drew in any given moment was a gentle reminder, or urge to live out that person's potential, something he called the person's total personality. He called this process individuation. He felt that attention to the symbols the unconscious gave in response to queries for deeper meaning could enhance and speed personal growth and understanding.

Jung wrote that the mandala points to a center of the personality, a central psychic point to which everything else is related, arranged, a sort of source for the being. Since *everyone longs to fulfill their potential*, to be all that they are meant to be in this life, seeing visually the center or source of their being or personality can be a very powerful and **healing experience**. In

fact, according to Jung, a mandala can catalyze an individual towards faster realization of their potential.¹⁹

- 1) Have participants explain their mandalas to the group. Discuss the placement of each woman on the mandala.
- 2) How do these mandalas present the ancient women and their journey?

Sacred Time

Shabbat celebrates the seventh day of creation. The day after God created the world, the day that God rested, and, therefore, the day we rest as well. Traditionally, the world-to-come is the world after the Messiah has come. The world to come is the messianic ideal of a peaceful and joyous time towards which we are living. In Reform Judaism we talk about a “messianic age” a messianic age will not come when a specific person comes, it will come when all people are working together in harmony with God, the earth, and each other.

According to the Rabbinic sages of antiquity, Shabbat is a glimpse of this perfect world. In order for one to appreciate the Joy in life or the sweetness of Shabbat, it must be placed in dialogue with the hardships that life brings or the mundane of the rest of the week. The Song of Songs is a love song between God and Israel. When reading this book in its entirety one will experience the tears of sorrow and the laughter of joy. Even at our Shabbat table as we celebrate the happiness of the day with wine, candles, and festive challah, we use salt to represent the tears of the Israelites when the Temple was destroyed as well as the sorrows of the world around us, intertwined like the braided challah.

- 1) How could Shabbat be used as a tool to combat depression and other mental illnesses and aid in the recovery process?
- 2) What is the role of support groups and Jewish communal structure while dealing with Joy and Sorrow?

¹⁹ <http://sublime-dezine.com/mandala.htm#soul>

3) What are other connections between Shabbat and the stories we looked at today?

How do we balance between mundane/stress/depression and Joy/celebration/ delight?

3a) Miriam, Ruth and the woman of Song of Songs all have a community aspect to the story where Tamar is completely alone. How do you think this effects these women?

Conclusion

1) Some of the Biblical characters are accused post-biblically of suffering from mental illness, e.g., Saul with bipolar disorder, or Naomi with depression. Yet the Bible never names these illnesses. Do you think that identifying and labeling mental illness is helpful or harmful?

2) Do the vivid emotions of the biblical characters make them seem more human and/or more relatable to you?

3) The daily prayer that quotes Miriam's words at the shore of the sea of Reeds reminds the Jewish community of the journey from despair to celebration. What do we have that can help us daily to move from sorrow to joy?

From Tears of Sorrow to Shouts of Joy

Miriam (Exodus 15:20-21)

כ ותקח מרים הנביאה אחות אהרן את התוף בידה ותצאן כל הנשים אחריה בתופים ובמחלות:

Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, picked up a hand drum¹ and all the women went out after her dancing with hand drums.

כא ותען להם מרים שירו ליהוה כי גאה גאה סוס ורכבו רמה בים:

"Sing to Adonai, because Adonai has triumphed gloriously. Horse and driver have been thrown into the sea."

Tamar (2 Samuel 13:19-20)

יט ותקח תמר אפר על ראשה וכתנת הפסים אשר עליה קרעה ותשם ידה על ראשה ותלך הלך וזעקה:

Tamar put dust on her head and rent² her ornamented tunic³ she was wearing; she put her hands on her head⁴, and walked away, screaming in anger loudly as she went⁵.

כ ויאמר אליה אבשלום אחיה האמינון אחיה הנה עמך ועתה אחותי הקרישלי אחיד הוא אל תשיתי את לבך לדבר הזה ותשב תמר ושמה בית אבשלום אחיה:

Her brother Absalom said to her, "Was it your brother Amnon who did this to you? For now, sister, keep quiet about it; he is your brother. Don't take this matter to heart. And Tamar remained in her brother Absalom's house.

Song of Songs (1:2-4)

ב ישקני מנשיקות פיהו כי טובים דדיך מין:

"Kiss me with Kisses from your mouth, because your love⁶ is better than wine.

ג לריח שמניך טובים שמן תורק שמך על כן עלמות אהבוך:

Your oils have a good fragrance, your name is like the fines oil, therefore girls love you.

ד משכני אחריך נרוצה הביאני המלך חדריו נגילה ונשמחה בך נזכרה

1. Carol Meyers in *The Torah: A Woman's Torah Commentary (TAWC)*, uses hand drum since it is the only percussion instrument in the Bible. Many other translations use timbrel or tambourine, but there is no evidence these instruments existed until the Roman period. p. 392.

2. These are actions of mourning in the Bible.

3. This ornamented tunic in the same term used for Joseph's "coat" as it is known. Tamara's tunic is part of her royal attire as a princess, and Joseph's is a symbol of the love from his father. Both of these garments are ripped and at the same time in the story their status is severely changed forever.

4. This is another gesture of mourning.

5. This outward expression of emotion is a shattering point in the story.

6. This phrase "your dodim." In Hebrew *dodim* is a comprehensive term for love making, kisses and caresses, and intercourse. Bloch and Bloch in *The Song of Songs: A New Translation*. p. 137.

דִּדְיָךְ מִלֵּין מִישָׁרִים אֶהְבֹּד:

Pull me after you, Let us run! The king brought me here into his chambers⁷, Let us delight and rejoice in you. Savoring your love making more than wine, Like new they love you!”

Naomi (Ruth 1:21-22)

כֹּא אָנִי מְלֵאָה הִלְכֹתִי וְרִיקָם הָשִׁיבֵנִי יְהוָה לָמָּה תִקְרָאנָה לִי נָעָמִי וְיְהוָה
עָנָה בִּי וְשָׂדֵי הִרְעָ לִי:

I went away full, Adonai has brought me⁸ back empty⁹, Why do you call me Naomi¹⁰? When Adonai has answered me harshly, when Shaddai has brought evil on me.

כִּב וַתָּשָׁב נָעָמִי וְרוּת הַמּוֹאבִּיָּה כִלְתָּהּ עִמָּהּ הַשָּׂבָה מִשָּׂדֵי מוֹאָב וְהָמָּה בָּאוּ
בֵּית לָחֶם בְּתַחֲלֵת קָצִיר שְׁעָרִים:

And Naomi returned from the country Moab, and Ruth the Moabite returned with her.¹¹ They came to the Bethlehem¹² at the beginning of the barley harvest.

7. This term is thought by Bloch and Bloch to be a sign of the make believe nature of this story. Since this tale takes place out doors, this symbol might allude to the hidden places the lovers run off to. p. 138.

8. Here Naomi describes her self as being alone, She left and She was brought back.

9. Naomi refers to herself as empty (above). Yet it is clear from the text that Ruth is with her.

10. The name “Naomi” in Hebrew means pleasant.

11. Yet here we see the Naomi did not physically return alone. Rather she returned with her daughter-in-law Ruth by her side.

12. Bethlehem is Naomi’s home town. Yet it can also be read as Beit Lechem in Hebrew meaning the house of Bread. This is only one of the many word plays found in the book of Ruth. Here it alludes to the place being a refuge where Naomi and Ruth would both be fed.

From Rags to Riches

**“Repute is preferable to great wealth, Grace is better than silver and gold.
Rich person and Poor person meet; Adonai made them both” (Proverbs 22:1-2).**

Introduction

The beginning of the twenty first century has become a time of an economic crisis that has been compared to the great depression. During this recession, the economic landscape significantly changed. With this economic crisis, there has been devastating implications for many Americans. The impact from this crisis will not be understood for many years to come, Steven Windmueller, wrote the following in his article, “The Unfolding Economic Crisis: Its Devastating Implications for American Jewry.”

Economic Impact within the Jewish Community:

A complete inventory of the impact of this economic transition is still to be determined, yet the number of positions eliminated and the announced budgetary and programmatic reductions are particularly striking. There is substantial evidence that major structural reconfiguration is occurring at both a rapid rate and across the institutional spectrum within the Jewish communal and religious system. Downsizing has been evident everywhere, with profound implications for the ability of institutions to deliver critical services.

Correspondingly, charitable institutions with more restricted resources will be forced to curtail vital services and specific programs and reprioritize their organizational focus. Such downsizing may have a significant impact on the most vulnerable populations in the society. As charitable institutions compete for shrinking resources, there will be increased attention to the quality and scope of services being offered, as

donors prioritize their giving options. With restricted resources, organizations often select programs or services with high PR impact, as a way to promote their value to donors. The current environment is affecting organizational memberships and donor support as individuals and families need to make critical choices pertaining to the use of available financial resources. Institutions without multiple streams of funding have been most directly imperiled. In the midst of this upheaval, organizations have been exploring alternative and creative models to manage their resources as they strip away significant elements of their infrastructure in order to gain economic viability.

In these difficult and unsettling times, many new realities can be felt both on the personal and institutional level. In this context, American Jews are experiencing fundamental life-style changes where the “givens” and expectations once central to their lives, are no longer present. In such an environment, anger and fear take on a heightened dimension, as people seek avenues for their expression of frustration. The psychological and social impact is being felt by many at all levels of the economic strata; the level of uncertainty creates a heightened concern of one’s financial welfare and social well-being. As a result, emotional paralysis can overpower individuals, in addition to the presence of increased medical problems and/or physical symptoms. Depression, and even family violence, is certainly a potential outcome.¹

Impact on Individuals and Families:

Similarly, this economic crisis may well have specific implications for Jewish families and individual Jews, as a result of the prevalence of Jews employed in the financial markets, real estate, and allied fields. Particular segments of the Jewish population will be adversely affected by these adverse market conditions. The poor and near-poor, especially those on fixed incomes, may face particularly difficult times over the course of the months and even years ahead. Students will face rising tuition expenses, while at the same time confronting shrinking job prospects. In such cases, young people may elect to live for longer periods at home with their families or delay marriage or having children until they feel more secure economically.

¹http://www.jwi.org/site/c.okLWJ3MPKtH/b.4904213/k.DC4A/Feb_9_2009_The_Impact_of_Our_Economic_Down-turn_on_Domestic_Violence_and_Homelessness.htm This study, conducted by Jewish Women International, looks at the impact of economic stress on family violence.

As in previous periods of such social and economic stress, new vulnerable populations will likely emerge. These “new poor” may well include families and individuals whose businesses are being adversely impacted or whose investment portfolios no longer provide a basic safety net. In addition, there will be families who are unable to maintain their mortgage payments, due to the loss of income as unemployment increases.

As Jews are proportionately older than other sectors of the American population, retirement planning may need to be readjusted to account for the loss of investment income, delaying or altering retirement or forcing individuals and families to make difficult choices. Similarly, those who are a part of the Baby Boomer Generation who are preparing for their future face the possibility of needing to work beyond their planned retirement. In a recent AARP Poll, Americans were asked to evaluate the impact of the recession on their plans; for individuals between the ages of 55 and 64, the following data was recorded²:

- 27% postponed their plans to retire
- 16% reported having lost employment
- 19% indicated a pay cut
- 24% noted reductions in health care benefits
- 24% referenced that their employers had stopped contributions to their 401 (k) retirement plans

For some, this particular crisis may permanently impair their ability to recover. Educational choices set aside, lost income, and displaced careers represent the types of scenarios that may define the new generation of younger Jews.

The economy of Ancient Israel is difficult to understand. There are many aspects that, to this day, scholars merely speculate about, especially with regard to the roles women played in the economy. We know that women made garments, which in some cases probably provided a source of income. We know that Zelophehad’s daughters made a great impact on inheritance law for future generations. We know that the poor widow in 2 Kings 4:1-7 is left with her late husband’s debt, but scholars cannot say for sure that all women were left with their husband’s property or debt or if this was simply her misfortune. We know that the wealthy woman in 2 kings 4:8-16 had great economic mobility; she was even able to build an

² The Poll, Job Scene, AARP Bulletin, June 2009, Volume 50, No. 5, page 4

extension onto her house for the visiting prophet Elisha. Then there is the striking story of the woman of Endor whose unusual career provides her with wealth and flexibility.

Set Introduction

- 1) Give each participant a piece of paper.
- 2) Have each participant write one of their male relative's name on a piece of paper.

This person's name is now person x.
- 3) Write down person x's son or sons.
- 4) If person x has no sons, write down person x's brother.
- 5) If he has no brothers, write down person x's father's brothers.
- 6) If his father had no brothers, write down the nearest relative.
- 7) These were the laws of inheritance before Zelophehad's daughters... There were no women on these lists.

Malah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah (Numbers 27:1-11)

The story of Zelophehad's daughters appears three times in the Bible. The first time they are mentioned is in Numbers 26 but their story begins in Ch. 27. The story introduces us to the daughters of Zelophehad of the Manasseh family. The names of the daughters were Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. All five daughters are named here in Numbers 27 as well as in Numbers 36 and Joshua 17. These daughters come forth and stand before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the chieftains, and the whole assembly, at the entrance of the tent of meeting. They proclaim that their father has died in the wilderness. They assure the assembly that their father was not part of Korah's faction, hence not a rebel. By stating this they "legitimize themselves in at least two ways. First, they explain that their father did not forfeit his inheritance (by being part of Korah's faction 26:11). Second, they distance themselves from suspicion of illegitimate challenge to authority."³ The daughters also assure the assembly that their father had no sons, since by law any property their father had when he died would be passed to his sons if he had any. The women go on to ask the assembly not to let their father's name be lost to his clan just because he had no son. The preservation of a man's name through his property and legacy is a "venerable obligation in the Bible (see the Levirate Laws of Deuteronomy 25:5-10). The women thus cleverly frame their request in the shared language of communal, especially male, concern."⁴ They plead to everyone present, Moses, the chief priest, the leaders and the entire congregation, to "Give us a holding among our father's kinsmen!" (27:4). This public demand is absent of any polite, petitionary language, yet relays their desire to remain part of the community and family. This desire adds

³ Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, *The Torah: A Woman's Commentary*. ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss (New York: URJ Press, 2008), 972.

⁴ Ibid.

a moral force to the request.⁵ After the women make their plea, Moses takes the case in front of God. God tells Moses that, “The plea of Zelophehad’s daughters is just: you should give them a hereditary holding among their father’s kinsmen; transfer their father’s share to them. Further speak to the Israelite people as follows: ‘If a household dies without leaving a son you shall transfer his property to his daughter. If he has no daughter, you shall assign his property to his brothers. If he has no brother, you shall assign his property to his father’s brothers. If his father had no brothers, you shall assign his property to the nearest relative in his own clan, who shall inherit it.’ This shall be the law of procedure for the Israelites, in accordance with God’s command to Moses” (Nub 27:6-11). With this statement God does three important things. First, God states that these women are just in their request. Second, God not only gives the women their father’s land so that his name is not lost, God actually gives them their father’s land as a hereditary holding; they not only receive the piece of land, but they are also allowed to give the land to their offspring as an inheritance. Thirdly, in addition to helping these five women, God makes this decree a law for securing the same for other women through all generations. Frymer-Kensky explains that

most women marry outside their kin and go live with their husband’s family. The only women required to marry within their own tribe are the “daughters of Zelophehad.” As the book of Numbers relates, the five daughters of Zelophehad approached Moses toward the end of the period in the desert and asked for a change in Israelite inheritance law. Only sons could inherit land, but there were five daughters and there were no sons. They petitioned that since their father did not deserve to have his lineage and his name completely die, they should be allowed to inherit his property and perpetuate his name. Upon consultation with God, Moses issued the provision that whenever a man died without sons, his daughters could inherit (Num. 27:1-11). Later, upon petition by the tribal elders not to allow tribal lands to be lost, Moses issued a further decree that the daughters of Zelophehad must marry within their father’s tribe (Num 36: 1-12). From then on, a woman who had no brother’s

⁵ Ibid.

owned her land for her lifetime and married within her father's extended family...

Discussion Questions:

- 1) What does Zelophehad's daughters' plea tell us about the value of holding land in this society?
- 2) If there were no restrictions put on this new law allowing women to inherit land, what would possible consequences look like for the economy of their kinsmen?
- 3) The women are audacious. In what ways might the fact that there are 5 of them empower them to confront /approach the leaders with such a demand?

The Poor Widow of a Prophet (2 Kings 4:1-7)

This story begins with an unnamed woman; she is identified as the wife of one of the disciples of the prophets. Women who are unnamed in the Bible are often identified by their father's or husband's name. Here we do not have her father's or husband's name, but we are told that her husband was one of the disciples of the prophets. This unnamed widow cries out to Elisha, "Your servant my husband is dead, and you know how your servant revered God. And now a creditor is coming to seize my two children as slaves" (2 Kings 4:1). Many scholars believe that this widow's husband was probably Elisha's disciple. Therefore, going to Elisha for assistance with paying her late husband's debt is ingenious. She goes straight to the "boss", Elisha, and asks for help with her unfair situation. Elisha thinks of a way to help this poor widow out of her predicament. He asks the widow, "What can I do for you? What do you have in the house?" and the widow replies, "Your maidservant has nothing at all in the house except a jug of oil" (2 Kings 4:2). Elisha tells the widow to go and borrow empty vessels from her neighbors. Once she has done this, she should go inside her house and shut the door behind her and her children. Elisha then tells the widow to pour oil into each of the empty vessels, and remove each one as it is filled (2 Kings 4:4). The widow does as she is told for the oil, miraculously continues to flow. She goes away and shuts the door behind her and her children. They keep bringing her vessels and she keeps pouring. When the vessels are full she says to her son, "bring me another vessel" The oil stops when there are no more vessels (2 Kings 4:5-6). Elisha tells the widow, "Go sell the oil and pay your debt, and you and your children can live on the rest" (2 Kings 4:7).

This is one of many stories in the Bible where Elisha the prophet helps a widow. In fact, Elisha's acts often parallel those of his mentor, Elijah.⁶ This story is similar to the story in 1 Kings 17:8-24, "in which Elijah responds to the needs of a destitute widow in Zarephath by increasing her supply of meal and oil, and later reviving her dead son. In the Elisha story, the widow is in debt, but not impoverished, and her children are in danger of servitude, not death... In general, widows are part of a socially marginalized group in ancient Israel."⁷

Discussion Questions:

- 1) What does this story tell us about a Biblical woman's livelihood in the event of her husband dying?
- 2) Elisha does not just give this poor widow a handout, he gives her means to make money. Why is this important?
- 3) How do widows fare in our society? Are single women at a similar disadvantage or, on the contrary, better able to function in a competitive economic work environment?

⁶ Carol Meyers, *Women in Scripture: A dictionary of named and unnamed women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuteronomical Books and New Testament*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 274.

⁷ Ibid.

The Wealthy Woman of Shunam (2 Kings 4:8-16)

One day Elisha visited the city Shunem. In the city there lived a wealthy woman. She urged Elisha to have a meal in her house whenever he passed by (2 Kings 4:8). Even if the text did not explicitly tell the reader that the Shunammite woman is wealthy, we would know this because she is able to provide meals for Elisha and probably his servant as well without her husband's permission. This wealthy woman is unnamed in the story; moreover, she is not identified by her father or husband, either. Frymer-Kensky suggests this is because these relationships do not define her destiny or her role in the story.⁸ Rather, she is identified as a woman from Shunem, because she is particularly attached to this city and the people there. Consequently, most scholars refer to her as the Shunammite Woman.

She tells her husband, "I am sure it is a holy man of God who comes this way regularly. Let us make a small enclosed upper chamber and place a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp stand there for him, so that he can stop there whenever he comes to us" (2 Kings 4:9-10). Both Carol Meyers and Tikva Frymer-Kensky point out that the Shunammite woman does not ask her husband for permission to make this addition onto their house, but instead tells him what they are going to do.^{9 10} One day Elisha came to her house and retired there in the upper chamber (2 Kings 4:11). He said to his servant Gehazi, "Call that Shunammite woman."

So Gehazi called her and she stood before him. Elisha said to Gehazi, "Tell her, 'You have gone to all this trouble for us. What can we do for you? Can we speak on your behalf to the king or to the army commander?'" She replied, "I live among my own people." He asked, "What then can be done for her?" and Gehazi said, "she has no son, and her husband is old." Elisha said, "Call her."

⁸ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of their Stories*. (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 65.

⁹ Meyers, *Women in Scripture*, 274.

¹⁰ Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 64.

Gehazi called her and she stood in the doorway (2 Kings 4:15). And Elisha said, "At this season next year you will be embracing a son." She replied, "Please, my lord, man of God, do not delude your maidservant" (2 Kings 4:16).

The Shunammite woman's response to Elisha's offer is hard to decipher. When asked what Elisha could do for her she says, "I live among my own people" (2 Kings 4:13).

This response does not seem to be an answer to the question. However, Frymer-Kensky says that this response actually sheds light on the Shunammite woman's wealth. The Shunammite lives among her own kin, and her land belongs to her. ... Owning her own land she is not dependent on men for her sustenance... and she does not have to rely on a son to allow her to live on her husband's land or support her from her husband's patrimony should she be widowed. This may explain why the woman of Shunem, alone among other barren women in the Bible, did not actively seek a child.¹¹ She Basically says: I don't need anything.

Discussion Questions:

- 1) How does the Shunammite's economic situation contribute to the story?
- 2) How does this woman's economic situation and women's economic situation in general contribute to her identity?

¹¹ Ibid., 72.

The Wise Woman of Endor (1 Samuel 28:3-25)

Samuel the prophet who had given the divine message of kingship to Saul had died and been buried. And Saul had forbidden necromancers (people who communicate with the spirits of the dead in order to predict or influence the future) and other professionals who summon ghosts from working in the land. The language found here is confusing, but *ovot* and *yidanim* are generally paired, and both refer to the spirits of the dead. The ghosts and familiar spirits are linked with the necromancers who call them up. Robert Alter explains that biblical views of afterlife differ and sometimes the dead are imagined as continuing a kind of shadowy afterlife in the underworld...necromancy in the ancient Hebrew world is not viewed as hocus pocus, but rather an effective way of communicating with spirits. However, God does not want humans doing this, and King Saul outlaws this profession from the land.

Saul gathers all of Israel and they camp at Gilboa, but Saul sees that the Philistines are camped at Shunem and he is afraid. His heart trembles (1 Samuel 28:4-5). Saul inquires to God, as to the battle's outcome, but God does not answer him. Not by dreams nor by *Urim* nor by prophets. So Saul sends his servants to find a "ghostwife" (a spirit of someone who has died, believed to appear as a shadowy form or to cause sounds, the movement of objects, or a frightening atmosphere in a place) that he can go to and inquire through her. And his servants tell him about a ghostwife at Endor that he can go to (1 Samuel 28:6-7). So Saul dresses in different clothes, and goes with two men at night to the Woman of Endor (1 Samuel 28:8). Here, Saul must disguise himself because he is the one that outlawed conversing with the spirits. He

probably dresses as a commoner and takes only two men with him so the woman will not know he is King Saul.

Saul says to the woman of Endor, "Conjure me, pray, a ghost, and summon up the one I say to you." The woman says, "Look, you yourself know what Saul did, that he cut off the ghosts and the familiar spirits from the land, and why do you entrap me to have me put to death?" To ease her fears Saul swears to her by God, "As God lives, no blame will befall you through this thing." So the Woman of Endor agrees to conjure up a spirit for Saul and so she asks, "Whom shall I summon up for you?" (1 Samuel 28:11). and He tells her, "Samuel summon up for me." And the woman of Endor saw Samuel and she screamed in a loud voice, and the woman said to Saul, "Why did you deceive me, when you are Saul?" And the king said to her, "Do not fear. But what do you see?" And the woman said to Saul, "A god do I see rising up from the earth" (1 Samuel 28:11-13). And he said to her, "What does he look like?" And she said, "An old man rises up, and he is wrapped in a cloak." And Saul knew that it was Samuel, and he bowed to the ground and did obeisance. And Samuel said, "Why have you troubled me to summon me up?" and Saul said "I am dire straits, and the Philistines are fighting against me and God has turned away from me and no longer answers me, neither through prophets nor dreams, and I called to you to let me know what I should do." And Samuel said, "And why do you ask me, when God has turned away from you and become your foe? And God has done to you as God spoke through me, and God has torn the kingship from your hand and given it to your fellowman, to David. Inasmuch as you did not heed the voice of God and you did not carry our God's burning wrath against Amalek, therefore has God done this thing to

you this day. And God shall give Israel, too, together with you, into the hands of the Philistines. And tomorrow- you and your sons are with me. The camp of Israel, too, shall God give into the hand of the Philistines” (1 Samuel 28:14-19).

After hearing about his impending death, Saul hastens and flings himself on the ground and is frightened by Samuel’s words. He has little strength because he has not eaten all day or all night.¹² The woman of Endor comes to Saul and sees that he is very distraught, and she says to him, “Look, your servant has heeded your voice, and I took my life in my hands and heeded your words that you spoke to me. And now, you on your part, pray heed the voice of your servant, and I shall put before you a morsel of bread, and eat, that you may have strength when you go on your way” (1 Samuel 28:21-23). Yet Saul refuses and says, “I will not eat.” His servants press him, and the woman of Endor presses him, and he finally heeds her voice and arises from the ground and sits upon the couch. And the woman of Endor has a calf that has been stall-feed in the house. So she hastens to fetch it and butchers it and takes flour and kneads it and bakes it into flat bread, and sets it before Saul and before his servants, and they eat, and they rise and go off on that night (1 Samuel 28:24-24).

Discussion Questions

- 1) What clues in this story shed light on the woman of Endor’s financial situation?
- 2) The woman of Endor is a medium by profession, what does this say about the ancient world’s economic options for women in that time? What advantages

¹² Robert Alter, *The David Story: A translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 177.

and disadvantages does an “off beat” profession such as hers present to working women?

Additional thoughts and Questions for the Instructor about the Discussion Questions

Malah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah (Numbers 27:1-11)

- 1) What does Zelophehad's daughters' plea tell us about the value of holding land in this society?

Clearly, in Ancient Hebrew society, land is the key to economic security and, subsequently, independence for women, and keeping a family name alive. One of the only ways for a woman to not be reliant on a man (her father, husband, or son) for security was for her to have financial freedom; owning land was one way to obtain this financial freedom.

- 2) If there were no restrictions put on this new law allowing women to inherit land, what would possible consequences look like for the economy of their kinsmen?

If the women were allowed to marry outside of their kinsmen this would allow the land to be transferred to other clans. Since this was a patriarchal society, this would be problematic.

"The relatives are concerned that the marriage of any of the daughters outside their own tribe will lead to diminution of Manasite landholdings."¹³ Therefore, there is a limitation placed later on this new law. Moses announces that God does not want land to be transferred among tribes and therefore the daughters must marry among their father's clan. The daughters do marry within their clan (Num 36:10-12) and eventually receive their inheritance (Josh 17:3-6).¹⁴

- 3) The women are audacious. In what ways might the fact that there are 5 of them empower them to confront /approach the leaders with such a demand?

¹³ Meyers, *Women in Scripture*, 221.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 221.

Community support, possibly finding strength within each other (such as girls who go to an all girls school)

The Poor Widow of a Prophet (2 Kings 4:1-7)

- 1) What does this story tell us about a Biblical woman's livelihood in the event of her husband dying?

This story addresses social concerns in its portrayal of a woman whose livelihood is threatened by her husband's death. Presumably, a widow might not be financially secure after her husband passes away if her husband has money. The widow would probably be reliant on her son to take care of them since the husband's property would be left to his sons, and, if he has no sons, his daughters. This story shows that a widow, whose husband dies while in debt, passes the debt along to his children and his widow. Since this is the only instance of this in the Bible, we are not able to definitively say this is the norm in Ancient Hebrew society. But it clearly shows a widow's vulnerability.

Frank S. Frick says, "Her family unit was probably a simple nuclear one, not an extended farm family, which would more likely have provided for her. Her husband was a "salaried professional - a member of a prophetic guild."¹⁵

- 2) Elisha does not just give this poor widow a handout, he gives her means to make money. Why is this important?

¹⁵ Ibid., 274.

Elisha not only sees that this widow is in need of money to pay for her husband's debt, but also that she would have no means to support herself after the debt is repaid. Therefore, he provides enough oil for her to sell so that she can pay off the debt as well as continue to support herself.

Elisha does two important things by not just giving a handout. He has this woman go to all of her neighbors to borrow vessels, which requires the widow and her family to reach out to the community and hopefully develop ties with her neighbors. Then, he provides enough oil to both pay off the debt, and leave seed money for the widow to start a home industry.

Presumably, through the exercise of selling the oil, the widow learns the basics of running a home industry; it would then be plausible that she could use the excess money as seed money for a home business to sustain her family.

- 3) How do widows fare in our society? Are single women at a similar disadvantage or, on the contrary, better able to function in a competitive economic work environment?

The Wealthy Woman of Shunam (2 Kings 4:8-16)

- 1) How does the Shunammite's economic situation contribute to the story?

It illustrates her sense of security and ease. She does not need anything and does not ask for anything in return if the Shunammite woman had not been financially fortunate and philanthropic, She would be asking for something. The prophet Elisha is continuously trying to repay the Shunammite's generosity, although there are instances of kindness bestowed upon prophets without the benefactor being repaid.

- 2) How does this woman's economic situation and wineb's economic situation in general contribute to her identity?

Frymer-Kensky writes, "Her location remains her identity in a way that most women's do not. It is her village, the village of her father's household and the one where she lives as an adult woman, the site of the land she owns. She is a woman of place and, by contrast, shows how significant the lack of such place is to most women's history. The limitation of women's property rights is the economic linchpin of patriarchal structure; it made women dependent, first on their fathers, then on their husbands, and ultimately, on their sons. Even the humanitarian injunctions of the ancient world to care for widows and the fatherless were an outgrowth of this male monopoly; if widows could inherit land, there would be no need for humanitarian injunctions to care for them. The characteristic determination and boldness of the Shunammite may be a lesson on the freedom that property bestows. It is also a window into the way at least some women successfully negotiated with prophet and king (the male power structure) despite their lack of official autonomy or authority."¹⁶

The Wise Woman of Endor (1 Samuel 28:3-25)

- 1) What clues in this story shed light on the woman of Endor's financial situation?

The woman of Endor is independent; with her career outlawed, she lives on the outskirts of the land. Even with her business being banned, she seems to have sufficient funds to live on.¹⁷ The story tells us that she has servants and that she is able to make an elaborate meal on short notice. She is also unnamed, but her status is neither tied to a father or a husband. She has a calf.

¹⁶ Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 73.

¹⁷ Alice Ogden Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*. (Louisville London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 125.

- 2) The woman of Endor is a medium by profession, what does this say about the ancient world's economic options for women in that time? What advantages and disadvantages does an "off beat" profession such as hers present to working women?

It is surprising that this medium is so financially set even though her profession is outlawed. This means that other mediums at the time are too scared to practice, or she is a better medium, or there is plenty of business to go around. Clearly, this occupation is a good source of income in the ancient world.

Activity

It is a custom during Sukkot to invite guests for a meal or shelter into your sukkah. If you could invite any woman into your sukkah who would it be and why. (The woman can be dead, alive, famous, fictional, biblical.)

Sacred Time

The holiday of Sukkot is celebrated in temporary dwellings, Sukkahs. These dwellings only have three sides, and a roof that is constructed with branches. The Rabbis tell us that the Sukkah must be newly constructed each year and it may not be made from a previously standing structure. These regulations help to remind us of the fragility of our situation and the temporariness of security that we too often take for granite. Structurally, our houses are pretty safe, just as the comforts of health and wealth often feel; conversely, the Sukkah's walls and roof are very tenuous to remind us that our situation is always in a state of fragility.

- 1) What other similarities between Sukkot and Economics can you find?
- 2) Why would Jews today find the harvest holiday of Sukkot meaningful when most of us are unaffected by the harvest times?

Conclusion

- 1) In the 21st century, is a woman's independence tied to her economic situation?
How so?
- 2) Zelophehad's daughters made great strides for the women of their time. What women today have made similar strides?

Rags to Riches

Numbers (27:4;8)

ד למה יגרע שם־אבינו מתוך משפחתו כי אין לו בן ותנה־לנו אחזה בתוך
אחי אבינו:

Why should the name of our father be lost to his family because just because he has no sons.
Give us a property among our father's family.

ח ואֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל תִּדְבֹּר לֵאמֹר אִישׁ כִּי־יָמוּת וְבֶן אֵין לוֹ וְהֵעֲבִירָתֶם
אֶת־נַחֲלָתוֹ לְבָתוֹ:

And tell the Israelite children saying, "If a man dies without leaving a son, you shall transfer his property to his daughter.

The Poor Widow (2 Kings 4:1; 4:3-4)

א וְאִשָּׁה אַחַת מִנְּשֵׁי בְנֵי־הַנְּבִיאִים צָעָקָה אֶל־אֵלִישָׁע לֵאמֹר עֲבָדְךָ אִישִׁי מֵת
וְאַתָּה יָדַעְתָּ כִּי עֲבָדְךָ הָיָה יְרֵא אֶת־יְהוָה וְהַנְּשָׂה בָּא לִקְחֹת אֶת־שְׁנֵי יְלָדָי לָּו
לְעֲבָדִים:

And a certain woman from the wives of the sons of the prophets¹, cried out to Elisha saying,
"Your² servant, my husband is dead. And you know how your servant revered God. And
now a creditor is coming to take my two children as slaves."

ג וַיֹּאמֶר לָּהּ שְׁאֵלִי־לְךָ כֵּלִים מִן־הַחוּץ מֵאֵת כָּל־שְׁכֵנֶיךָ [שְׁכֵנֶיךָ] כֵּלִים רַקִּים
אֶל־תִּמְעִיטִי:

And he said, "Go and borrow vessels from outside, from all your neighbors, empty vessels,
as many as possible.

ד וּבֹאת וְסָגַרְתְּ הַדֶּלֶת בְּעַדְךָ וּבְעַד־בְּנֶיךָ וַיִּצְקֶתְ עַל כָּל־הַכֵּלִים הָאֵלֶּה
וְהִמָּלֵא תִסִּיעִי:

And go in and shut the door behind you and your children, and pour³ into all these vessels,
removing each one as it is filled."

The Shunammite Woman (2 Kings 4:13)

יג וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ אָמַר־נָא אֵלַיְךָ הֲלֵנָּה חֲרִדָּת | אֵלֵינוּ אֶת־כָּל־הַחֲרָדָה הַזֹּאת מֶה
לַעֲשׂוֹת לָךְ הִישׁ לְדַבֵּר־לְךָ אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ אוֹ אֶל־שָׂר הַצָּבָא וְהִיאֲמַר בְּתוֹךְ עַמִּי
אָנֹכִי יֹשֶׁבֶת:

1. Disciple of the prophet.

2. The use of pronouns in this verse highlight the relationship between the prophet Elisha, the poor widow, and the dead man. The woman's language is cleaver and articulate in expressing her husbands service to Elisha. She attempts to assert a sense of responsibility in Elisha as "boss" to financially help her.

3. Oil

And he said to him, “tell her, ‘you have been careful⁴ with all this care for us. What can we do for you? Can we speak in your behalf to the king of to the army commander?’” She replied, “I sit among my people.”⁵”

Woman of Endor (1 Samuel 28:24-25)

כד וְלֹאֲשָׁה עֶגְל־מֶרְבֶּקֶת בַּבַּיִת וַתְּחַהֵר וַתִּזְבַּחַּהּ וַתִּקַּח קֶמַח וַתֵּלֶשׁ וַתַּפֶּהוּ
מִצּוֹת:

And the woman has a stall fed calf in the house⁶, and she hurried and she slaughtered it and she took flour and kneaded it, and baked it into flat bread.⁷

כֹּה וַתִּגֶּשׁ לִפְנֵי-שָׁאוּל וּלִפְנֵי עֲבָדָיו וַיֹּאכְלוּ וַיִּקְמוּ וַיֵּלְכוּ בַּלַּיְלָה הַהוּא:

And she set it before Saul, and before his servants, and they ate and they got up and they went⁸ in that night.

4. The verb *h-r-d* can mean “tremble.” Deciding to translate this verb consistently in the verse poses problems with making the verse understandable. Other translations say, “You have gone to all this trouble for us.” This verb is used differently all over the Bible but here the term “care” really speaks to the attention to details and needs that this woman shows through her actions.

5. This response does not directly answer the question. Presumably she is happy where she is in life.

6. To have a stall fed calf on hand and to be able to make such a feast in a hurry would have required a significant amount of wealth.

7. Robert Alter says that it would have taken several hours to accomplish this slaughtering, preparing and baking. “One must imagine Saul sitting in the house at En-dor, brooding or darkly baffled or perhaps a little catatonic. It is an odd and eerie juncture of the story. David has already twice been saved, from death and then from blood guilt, by women. Saul is now given sustaining nurture by a woman-but only to regain the strength needed to go out to the battlefield where he will die.” Alter 178.

8. In Gen 22:3 Abraham rose early and set off for the place God had spoken of to him. Here Saul and his servants eat, rise, and go out into the night. Presumably this is a parallel verse, Abraham goes early in the morning when there is light to do what God has instructed. Abraham is subsequently rewarded. Here Saul and his men are rising and going off in the night when it is dark, fleeing from raising Samuel’s spirit from the dead and heading off to Saul’s death.

The Unspoken Secrets

“Adonai is close to the brokenhearted; those crushed in spirit Adonai delivers”

(Psalms 34:19).

Introduction

Abuse comes in many different forms; there is physical, sexual, and emotional abuse to name a few. Here are some recent statistics on different types of abuse.

Physical:

One in four women (25%) has experienced domestic violence in their lifetime.
(The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and The National Institute of Justice, Extent, Nature, and Consequences of Intimate Partner Violence, July 2000. The Commonwealth Fund, Health Concerns Across a Woman's Lifespan: 1998 Survey of Women's Health, 1999)

Estimates range from 960,000 incidents of violence against a current or former spouse, boyfriend, or girlfriend to 3,000,000 women who are physically abused by their husband or boyfriend per year.

(“U.S. Department of Justice, Violence by Intimates: Analysis of Data on Crimes by Current or Former Spouses, Boyfriends, and Girlfriends,” March 1998. The Commonwealth Fund, Health Concerns Across a Woman's Lifespan: 1998 Survey of Women's Health, 1999)

Women account for 85% of the victims of intimate partner violence, men account for approximately 15%.

(“Bureau of Justice Statistics Crime Data Brief, Intimate Partner Violence, 1993-2001,” February 2003)¹

Sexual:

1 in 6 women and 1 in 33 men will be sexually assaulted in their lifetime.

College age women are 4 times more likely to be sexually assaulted.

In 2001, there were 248,300 victims of sexual assault.

Every 2 minutes someone in the U.S. is sexually assaulted.

60% of sexual assaults are not reported to the police.

Reporting has increased by 1/3 since 1993.

¹ <http://www.dvrc-or.org/domestic/violence/resources/C61/#rap>

Approximately 73% of rape victims know their assailants.

Only 6% of rapists will ever spend a day in jail.²

Emotional Abuse:

Abuse is any behavior that is designed to control and subjugate another human being through the use of fear, humiliation, intimidation, guilt, coercion, manipulation, etc. Emotional abuse is any kind of abuse that is emotional rather than physical in nature. It can include anything from verbal abuse and constant criticism to more subtle tactics, such as repeated disapproval or even the refusal to ever be pleased.

Emotional abuse is like brain washing in that it systematically wears away at the victim's self-confidence, sense of self-worth, trust in their own perceptions, and self-concept. Whether it is done by constant berating and belittling, by intimidation, or under the guise of "guidance", "teaching", or "advice", the results are similar. Eventually, the recipient of the abuse loses all sense of self and remnants of personal value. Emotional abuse cuts to the very core of a person, creating scars that may be far deeper and more lasting than physical ones; in fact, there is research to substantiate this. With emotional abuse, the insults, insinuations, criticism and accusations slowly eat away at the victim's self-esteem until she is incapable of judging the situation realistically. She has become so beaten down emotionally that she blames *herself* for the abuse. Her self-esteem is so low, she clings to the abuser.

Emotional abuse victims can become so convinced they are worthless, they believe that no one else could want them. They stay in abusive situations because they believe they have nowhere else to go. Their ultimate fear is being all alone.³

Yet biblical scholar Tikva Frymer-Kensky points out,

the abuse and battery of women in all strata of our society, from welfare mothers through 'soccer moms,' society matrons, and celebrity wives, say something about where power continues to reside, and speaks to the poisonous social demand that men be powerful and show their power somewhere, if not in the world, then at least in their home.

The constantly shocking abuse of children testifies to a home situation in which parents still reign unchecked, one in which they can treat their children as chattel and demonstrate their power over them with actual (if not legal) impunity.

The many instances of rape, both the rape of strangers and the 'date rape' of noncompliant women, is a tear in our own social fabric, a glimpse at the rage and resentment barely beneath the surface of those who fear that they are losing control

² <http://www.rainn.org/statistics>

³ <http://eqi.org/eabuse1.htm#What is Emotional Abuse?>

and privilege. All of these contemporary 'aberrations' show that our world is not as categorically different from the ancient world as we would like to believe. The stories do speak to issues in our society. When there is nothing in reality that corresponds to the biblical victim stories, then these stories (in their revealed state) will have done their job and the old metaphors will cease to have power.⁴

Set Intro:

- 1) Ask participants to raise their hands if they have ever had to sit through any sexual harassment, or sensitivity training?
- 2) How many of you know someone who has been abused physically?
- 3) How many of you know someone who has been abused emotionally?
- 4) How many of you know someone who has been abused sexually?
- 5) Even though this is an incredibly difficult topic to discuss, it is important that we not ignore it within the Jewish community. For decades, the Jewish community has tried to disregard any unpleasant events, but it has become evident that there are cases of abuse within the community. Furthermore, since we are integrated members of the larger society, we also come into contact with others whom this topic affects. Statistically speaking, this subject probably hits home for more than one of us in this room as well.
- 6) Please feel free to check out these Jewish sources for more recent information on abuse in the Jewish community.

<http://www.jofa.org/social.php/community/sexualabuse>

<http://www.associated.org/page.aspx?id=208341>

<http://www.jsafe.org/>

⁴ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of their Stories*. (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 354.

Dinah (Gen 34)

At the beginning of Genesis 34 Dinah goes out to see local women, and Shechem, the local Hivite prince, sees her; he takes her and lays her and violates her (Gen 34:2). Then Shechem is captivated by her and falls in love with her. Shechem asks his father to "Obtain this girl for me as wife."

Jacob (Dinah's father) hears about it while his sons, Dinah's brothers, are in the field tending to the livestock, but Jacob keeps quiet at this time. Shechem's father, comes to speak to Jacob. When Jacob's sons return from the field and hear that Shechem has raped their sister, they are extremely angry because, "he had committed an outrage against Israel by lying with Jacob's daughter- such things were not done in Israel" (Gen 34:7).

At this time Shechem's father says to Jacob's sons and Jacob, "My son Shechem has set his heart on your daughter; pray give her to him to be his wife. Make marriages with us- give us your daughters and you yourselves take our daughters. Live among us and the land will be before you; settle and trade here and acquire property here." Then Shechem pleads with Jacob and his sons, "Let me but find favor in your sight, and I will give whatever you ask. Exact from me bridal money and gifts to excess, yet I will pay whatever you demand of me; only give me the girl to be my wife" (Gen 34:8-12).

Because Shechem had defiled Dinah, Jacob's sons answer deceptively and tell him they cannot give their sister to an uncircumcised man. If Shechem and all the men in town be circumcised, the Israelites will give their daughters to the town's men and take their daughters, and settle among them and become one people. Conversely, if the men do not become circumcised, the brothers will take Dinah and leave.

So and Shechem and his father speak to their town's men, saying, "These people are peaceably disposed toward us; they will settle in the land and trade here; plainly, the land is open wide on every side before them. We will take to wife their daughters and give our daughters to them. But only on this condition have these people; every male among us must be circumcised as they are circumcised. Their livestock and their possessions all their animals will be ours; let us consent to them, that they may settle among us" (Gen 34:21-22). All of the able bodied men in the town are circumcised. On the third day following the circumcision, when the men of the town are in the greatest pain, Simeon and Levi, two of Dinah's brothers, go and kill every male including Shechem. They take Dinah from Shechem's house and leave.

When Jacob hears of this, he says to his sons, "You have made trouble for me by making me odious to the land's inhabitants- the Canaanites and the Perizzites. Since I am few in number, they will gather themselves against me and strike at me, and I and my household will be destroyed" (Gen 34:30). Jacob's sons respond, "Should he then have been allowed to treat

our sister like a whore?” (Gen 34:31). This final statement of the chapter is extremely powerful. It sends a clear message that sexual assault among the tribes of Israel will not be tolerated. Jacob’s sons make it clear that they view the “offer of money in compensation for Dinah’s virginity is unacceptable.”⁵ In many ancient cultures the women are blamed in these situations, but here the brothers’ narrative make it clear that Dinah is not held responsible for the assault, but is an innocent victim who has to be avenged. Some interpreters, however, criticize the brothers for their deception and for taking Dinah back from the one who loves her.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Whom do you see as the villains of this story? Shechem, Levi, Shimon, or Jacob?
- 2) Do you see this as a story as a description of a rape or an illicit sexual but perhaps consensual relationship?
- 3) Some interpreters argue that this is not a rape story but rather a case of an illicit and perhaps consensual relationship. They point to Shechem subsequent love of Dinah and his wish to marry her. What do you think of such an interpretation?

⁵ Shawna Dolansky and Risa Levitt Kohn, *The Torah: A Woman’s Commentary*. ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss (New York: URJ Press, 2008), 195.

Sotah (Numbers 5:11-31)

A *sotah* is the rabbinic word for a married woman who is suspected of adultery by her husband. The word can also be used for the ritual that accompanies a woman accused of adultery. In *sotah* situations a husband suspects that his wife has committed adultery, but doesn't have any proof. "Because there are no witnesses to the alleged adulterous behavior, the case must be brought directly to God. It is resolved through the performance of a ritual intended to expunge both guilt and suspicion."⁶ In Numbers 5, the *sotah* ritual is explained in detail, and, in 5:12-15, there are actually two scenarios described. First, it says that if any wife actually betrays her husband's faith and enters into sexual relations with another man, and she keeps these relations a secret, and she defiles herself without being forced, but there are no witnesses against her, then her husband may bring her to the priest. Second, if the woman does not defile herself, but a fit of jealousy comes over her husband, the husband may bring his wife to the priest. "The text refers to the lack of evidence supporting the husband's allegations in four separate phrases in v.13 ('hidden,' 'undetected,' 'no witness,' and 'not caught in the act.'), and it scrupulously avoids the technical term for an adulterous."⁷

When the husband brings the accused wife to see the priest, he brings a specific offering. Numbers 5 specifies that the *husband* brings his wife's offering. This contrasts with Leviticus 12 when a new mother herself brings an offering for the purpose of purification. Perhaps in the case of the *sotah*, the fact that the husband's jealousy, which may not have been triggered by any real impropriety by his wife, necessitates the ritual, it was important to emphasize his responsibility to bring the offering.⁸ The offering itself is also very telling of the narrator's views. Although the Bible is very clear that the woman may not be guilty, the *sotah*'s offering is one connected to guilt or sin.⁹ Dvora Weisberg suggests, "Moreover, the language of the Torah focuses on the possibility (or probability) that the woman has in fact sinned, stating not just, 'it is a meal-offering of jealousy,' but 'a meal offering of remembrance which recalls wrongdoing' (5:15). Although the Torah acknowledges that the wife may in fact be innocent of adultery, the prescribed offering might imply¹⁰ she is, on some level, guilty; this presumption of guilt, at least of indiscrete behavior if not adultery, is reflected in rabbinic traditions about *sotah*."¹¹

The priest then forwards her before God, takes sacrificial water and earth from the ground and offers it to the wife (at a later point we learn that the water also includes some written

⁶ Carol Meyers, *Women in Scripture: A dictionary of named and unnamed women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuteronomical Books and New Testament*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 216.

⁷ Ibid., 217.

⁸ Dvora Weisberg, "Initial Observations on the Minha Offering," (unpublished notes, 2010)

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Eskenazi points out that "might imply" better represents the biblical text than "suggests."

¹¹ Weisberg, "Initial Observations on the Minha Offering,"

curse). He bares her head, which further humiliates.¹² When the woman ingests this substance of holy water mixed with holy earth taken from the tabernacle, “the possibly impure woman ingests a pure and holy liquid to see if her body rejects it.”¹³ The priest then says to the wife,

“If no man has lain with you, if you have not gone astray in defilement while married to your husband, be immune to harm from this water of bitterness that induces the spell. But if you have gone astray while married to your husband and have defiled yourself, if a man other than your husband has had carnal relations with you...may God make you a curse and an imprecation among your people, as God causes your thigh to sag and your belly to distend; may this water induces the spell enter your body, causing the belly to distend and the thigh to sag.”

Then the wife says “Amen amen” (5:20-22)

The priest makes the woman drink the water. It is claimed that if she has been faithful to her husband she will still be able to retain a pregnancy, but if she has not been faithful, her belly will distend and other physical symptoms will ensue. The section concludes by relating two possible scenarios that could result from this humiliating and degrading ritual in front of a priest. One scenario describes a wife that is unfaithful, and the other scenario recounts a wife who is faithful, but subject to a fit of jealousy that overcomes her husband. 5:31 states that “The husband shall be clear of guilt; but that wife shall suffer for her guilt.” This means that if the husband’s accusations turn out to be false, he does not suffer any consequences for putting his wife through this humiliating ordeal. *Women’s Torah Commentary* suggests that the lack of repercussions for the suspicious husband also may protect his wife by convincing him to initiate the ritual. Assuming the “bitter” waters are humiliating but harmless, it may be better for the wife to undergo the trial than to live with a jealous husband.”¹⁴ However, if the wife is guilty, she is not executed for the adultery, because, for an execution, there would have to be a witness; therefore, she “suffers for her guilt”; God will punish her instead of the court.

Discussion Questions

¹² Amy Kalmanofsky, *The Torah: A Woman’s Commentary*. ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss (New York: URJ Press, 2008), 823.

¹³ Ibid., 824.

¹⁴ Ibid., 825.

- 1) In this system, the husband has much less than the woman to lose either way. If a system does have strict consequences for a husband who wrongfully accuses his wife, it should discourage husbands from irrationally going into fits of jealousy. Would you rather live with a jealous husband or go home with your husband only after you are proven to be faithful by being humiliated in front of the community?
- 2) Is there anything in this process that would be helpful to a woman?

Women of David (2 Samuel 16:21-22, 2 Samuel 20:3)

Absalom, the son of King David, attempts to usurp his father's kingdom. When David and his household flee from Jerusalem, David leaves behind ten concubines to look after the house (2 Sam 15:16). Upon entering the city, Absalom asks the advice of David's former advisor, Ahithophel. Ahithophel tells Absalom, "Have intercourse with your father's concubines, whom he left to mind the palace; and when all Israel hears that you have dared the wrath of your father, all who support you will be encouraged" (2 Sam 16:21). Absalom's men put up a tent for Absalom on the roof of the palace and Absalom has sex with his father's concubines so all of Israel will hear about it (2 Sam 16:22). "This act seems to have been an attempt to shame David and increase Absalom's prestige. In addition it fulfills an oracle given to David by the prophet Nathan, which states that, because of David's adultery with Bathsheba, Uriah's wife, God will cause another man to lie with David's wives "before all Israel" (2 Sam 12:12).¹⁵ It harks back to the fact that David is on the roof of his palace when he first sees Bathsheba, and now his son lays with his concubines on the same roof, providing a sense of continuity between these two stories. Frymer-Kensky states, "Though unfair to the wives, such measure for measure retaliation for male misdeeds is a feature of ancient law, and the Middle Assyrian laws even call for the rape of a married rapist's wife. There is poetic justice here: David stopped to see Bathsheba from the rooftop, and Absalom slept with the women on the roof. And the person who suggested that Absalom do this? It was Ahithophel, David's sage counselor, who sided with Absalom in his revolt against David, Bathsheba's grandfather."¹⁶ "Ahithophel's shrewd counsel especially addresses the effect on public opinion of the action proposed: after it, no one will be able to imagine a reconciliation between Absalom and his father, and so the hand of Absalom's supporters will be strengthened, for no one will hedge his support, thinking that David and Absalom will somehow come to terms."¹⁷ This clearly shows that the act of sleeping with the wives of others is viewed as a serious offense, one that will likely not ever be accepted.

Once David regains control, he returns to his palace in Jerusalem, takes the ten concubines that he had left there, puts them in a guarded place, provides for them, but does not cohabit with them. The women remain in that place in seclusion until the day they die, in a living widowhood (2 Sam 20:3). Even though David regains control of his kingdom it is taboo to continue marital relations with the concubines once Absalom has cohabitated with them, as well.

Discussion Questions

¹⁵ Meyers, *Women in Scripture*, 264.

¹⁶ Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 156

¹⁷ Robert Alter, *The David Story: A translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 295.

- 1) If David knows his city and palace are being taken over by his son, why would he leave women to watch his house?
- 2) These women are clearly used by Absalom as pawns in the battle between him and his father. What are the specific aspects of this form of abuse and what views about women do they express?

Ezekiel (16:35-32)

Chapter 16 of Ezekiel is one of two very disturbing oracles that depict a city, Jerusalem, as God's adulterous wife. "Ezekiel 16 tells the story of Jerusalem, an abandoned infant rescued by God. After she grew to sexual maturity, Yahweh married her, lavishing on her beautiful clothes and fine food. But Jerusalem betrayed her husband, constructing phallic images from his silver and gold (the masculine pronoun is, in this context, appropriate), sacrificing God's children to these images and offering her sexuality to strangers- Assyrians, Babylonians, and Egyptians- at every crossroad."¹⁸ In verse 35, Ezekiel treats the "woman" as a harlot and threatens to gather all of her lovers to whom she has given favors, along with everyone she rejects and everyone she accepts. God, as a jilted husband threatens that she will be exposed in her nakedness to all of these people. Then he will punish her with the punishments of an adulterous and murderer in a bloody impassioned fury (16:38). She will be striped, pelted and stabbed, and her house will be burned. After which God will be angry no more (16:40-42). "She was worse than common prostitutes, Ezekiel charges, because she paid her lovers rather than being paid by them (16:34). Therefore, Yahweh threatens, her lovers will gather a mob to stone her, stab her, and burn her houses (the metaphor slips a bit)."¹⁹ Despite of all this God still will someday restore all of her former fortune (16:55). As Darr explains, "Beyond her mutilation and murder, however, lies restoration. Jerusalem will be filled with shame, but Yahweh will reunite with her in an eternal covenant."²⁰

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Here Ezekiel is clearly using a female harlot as imagery to portray a city. We know that metaphors always come from somewhere. How do you think this metaphor portrays women in society or influences attitude towards women?
- 2) Do you think the vivid descriptions of female abuse used in this section speak about abuse that went on in the days of Ezekiel?

¹⁸ Katheryn Pfysterer Darr, *The Women's Bible Commentary*. ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ring, (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1998), 188.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

Additional thoughts and Questions for the Instructor about the Discussion Questions

Dinah (Gen 34)

- 1) Who do you see as the villains of this story? Shechem, Levi, Shimon, Jacob

Danna Fewell and David Gunn do not see Levi and Simeon as heroes; they believe the narrator elicits sympathy for Shechem after he falls in love with Dinah. They believe that Jacob's slow response and reluctance to act are not passivity, but prudence. He waits until his sons return home so they can consult with each other; Jacob cannot do as much alone as he can with his sons by his side. Fewell and Gunn read the brothers' angry reaction as a selfish male outburst whose honor has been tarnished. They view the Shechem's proposal as good; they believe that Jacob agrees to the deal because it is the best possible outcome in the situation, and that Jacob is unaware of the impending deceit by the brothers. Furthermore, killing the town's men is way out of proportion to the crime that Shechem commits, in their opinion.

Meir Sternberg believes that Levi and Simeon are heroes who serve to execute justice in the unfortunate story of the rape of a defenseless girl. It is clear by the last line of the chapter that the brothers feel their actions are justified. They appear to be teaching a lesson to all other men; sexual abuse of their women will not be tolerated.

- 1) Do you see this as a story as a description of a rape or an illicit sexual but perhaps consensual relationship?

There are scholars who argue that this is undoubtedly a story of rape while others argue it is actually just a story about an illicit sexual relationship. Lyn Bechtel argues that rapists do not fall in love with their victims, and that this is actually a story about two mutually consenting adults whose relationship is frowned upon. She uses the last line of the chapter as proof, "Has he made our sister like a Harlot?" Bechtel writes, "Harlots engage in sexual relations for business purposes, so there is mutual consent. Harlots are not raped. There are women with no bounding or obligation to a family unit; they do not fit into the central social structure. By saying that Dinah has become like a harlot, Simeon and Levi show that Dinah has not been raped. Instead she has crossed the tribal boundary and acted like a harlot without bonding or responsibility to the family community."²¹

Shawna Dolansky and Risa Levitt Kohn explain that the root of the verb used here is *innah*, which means "violate"; it can be interpreted as a downward movement in social status, meaning to debase or humiliate. "Though an affront to the woman's family, the term does not carry with it the psychological and emotional implications for the woman that the

²¹ Alice Ogden Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*. (Louisville London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 75-76.

contemporary notion of rape suggests. In this particular text, the woman has no voice, and the narrator has no interest in whether or not she consented to the sexual act.”²² However, the text tells us that Shechem sees Dinah, takes her, lays with her, and humiliates/violates her. “To us this screams rape. The assumption made by most interpreters is that Dinah did not consent to the sexual act.”²³

Sotah (Numbers 5:11-31)

- 1) In this system, the husband has much less than the woman to lose either way. If a system does have strict consequences for a husband who wrongfully accuses his wife, it should discourage husbands from irrationally going into fits of jealousy. Would you rather live with a jealous husband or go home with your husband only after you are proven to be faithful by being humiliated in front of the community?

It seems that neither option is good. This system is unjustly weighed to accommodate to the man’s ability to accuse his wife of adultery without any proof. He is allowed to bring her to the priest, and force her to undergo a humiliating ritual designed to try to prove her innocence. However, there may be another way to think about this. “Thus, while lending a tongue and cheek dignity to male paranoia, the law ultimately provides an almost transparent charade to pacify the distraught husband. The terms of the ordeal virtually ensure that the fertility, health, and reputation of a suspected woman will be preserved intact.”²⁴ The most troubling part of this section seems to be the narrator’s acceptance of the faithful woman being wrongly accused because of her husband’s fit of jealousy.

The thought of returning home with a man who just accused you publicly of being unfaithful to the entire community, even if you are exonerated, seems to be a horrible outcome. You might still have a man to clothe you, feed you, and provide security, but do you think these women ever wanted to look at their husbands again?

- 2) Is there anything in this process that would be helpful to a woman?

Women of David (2 Samuel 16:21-22, 2 Samuel 20:3)

- 1) If David knows his city and palace are being taken over by his son, why would he leave women to watch his house?

David clearly knows that women in this day are used as pawns of war and that men assert their power and authority by taking the women of the cities they conquer. It seems that David should have realized the possibility that these concubines might be

²² Shawna Dolansky and Risa Levitt Kohn, *The Torah: A Woman’s Commentary*, 192.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Carol Meyers, *Women in Scripture*, 217.

sexually taken by his son or his son's men. I think David is aware of this, which is why he left concubines behind instead of any of his named wives. If David wants his palace protected, he is better off leaving a few men as long as they don't turn on him and join forces with his son. The women are not there for protection. They are dispensable to him and left to keep house.

- 3) These women are clearly used by Absalom as pawns in the battle between him and his father. What are the specific aspects of this form of abuse and what views about women do they express?

In this situation, Absalom's use of women as sexual pawns is a form of shaming the man to whom they belong. For the biblical writer, it is not about them but about getting back at David. In case, it is a form of emotional abuse; these women must feel doubly abandoned and hurt when they are left behind like mere possessions after all the people important to David are able to flee to safety.

Ezekiel (16:35-32)

- 1) Here Ezekiel is clearly using a female harlot as imagery to portray a city. We know that metaphors always come from somewhere. How do you think this metaphor portrays women in society or influences attitude towards women?

"Nevertheless, his use of female imagery is problematic, for he depicts female sexuality as the object of male possession and control, presents physical abuse as a way to reclaim such control, and then suggests that violence can be a means toward healing a broken relationship. It is true, of course, that in chapters 16 and 23, the women are representative of all cities' inhabitants, male and female."²⁵

"Finally one suspects that female sexual imagery and the violence that so often accompanies it- imagery that clusters around cities in Israel and Judah's history, reflect both unease with female sexuality and concomitant desire to keep it under male control."²⁶

- 2) Do you think the vivid descriptions of female abuse used in this section speak about abuse that went on in the days of Ezekiel?

Activity

²⁵ Darr, *The women's Bible Commentary*, 188.

²⁶ Ibid.

Every few years, *The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles* does a piece on Abuse in the Jewish community. In Volume 25, Number 39 in November 19-25, 2010 an article was published entitled “The Ugly Secret: The Power of Emotional Brutality in Jewish Domestic Abuse”. The article featured a few stories of Abuse, but headlined Marcia Burman a well know philanthropist who suffered emotional abuse throughout a 41 year marriage. The article states, “Jewish women according to a 2004 study by Jewish Women International (JWI), often delay seeking help and are less likely to utilize shelter services, preferring instead to rely on family and friends for refuge and private therapists for help. Often, that means they don’t get tied into the full network of domestic violence services.”²⁷ The article goes on to address the progress and needs of the community. The article suggests that education and funds are among two of the strongest ways the community can combat violence. “Education is vital. Last year, JWI designated a Shabbat in Washington DC, area where 10 rabbis delivered sermons about domestic violence. “Within the next two weeks, the Jewish domestic violence programs saw a surge of very high numbers of Jewish women” – around 20 women in two weeks- “who came forward because their rabbi had spoken out,” said Deborah Rosenbloom, JWI’s director of programs.... Since Congress passed the 1994 Violence Against Women Act, the rate of nonfatal intimate partner violence against women has decreased by 63 percent and the number of women killed by an intimate partner has decreased 24 percent, according to the National Network to End Domestic violence (NNEDV) And yet, nearly 1,000 women were killed by intimate partner in the United States in 2008.”

At the end of this article there is a resource list provided.

National Domestic Violence Hotline: thehotline.org, 800-799-SAFE.

Jewish Family Service 24-hotline: jfsla.org, 818-505-0900.

National Council for Jewish Women Talkline:
ncjwla.org/community_services/women_helping_women, 323-655-3807 or 877-655-3807.

Batterers Intervention Program: openpaths.org/our-services/domestic-violence-anger-management, 310-691-4455.

Jewish Women International: jwi.org.

- 1) How do you think the Jewish Community can connect with the victims in our community?
- 2) If money is no object, what do you see as the best way to combat abuse? Think BIG!

²⁷ Julie Gruenbaum Fax, “The Ugly Secret: An increase in domestic Abuse spotlights the role of verbal violence” *The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles*.

Sacred Time

Survivors of abuse can use Hanukkah as an illustration of hope for their recovery; Hanukkah is ultimately a story of rededication after abuse.

The story of Hanukkah begins in the reign of Alexander the Great. Alexander conquers Syria, Egypt and Palestine, but allows the lands under his control to continue observing their own religions and retain a certain degree of autonomy. Under this relatively benevolent rule, many Jews assimilate much of the Hellenistic culture, adopting the language, the customs and the dress of the Greeks, in much the same way that Jews in America today blend into the secular American society. But they do not attempt to neglect their Jewish traditions.

More than a century later, a successor of Alexander, Antiochus IV is in control of the region. He begins to oppress the Jews severely, massacring Jews, prohibiting the practice of the Jewish religion. In a dramatic moment, he arranges the desecration of the Temple by requiring the sacrifice of pigs (a non-kosher animal) on the altar. Two groups oppose Antiochus: a basically nationalistic group led by Mattathias the Hasmonean and his son Judah Maccabee, and a religious traditionalist group known as the Chasidim, the forerunners of the Pharisees (no direct connection to the modern movement known as Chasidism). They join forces in a revolt against both the assimilation of the Hellenistic Jews and the oppression by the Seleucid Greek government. The revolution succeeds and the Temple is rededicated, so that its purity as a holy place is restored.

Hanukkah celebrates reclaiming the temple in Jerusalem from those who had spoiled it. In particular, it highlights the purification, rededication, and re-sanctification of the Temple. Similarly, abuse recovery involves the reclaiming of dignity, purified after having been spoiled. The tradition about the pure oil that lasted miraculously 8 days instead of one is about the ritual or purification and rededication.

Conclusion

- 1) Is it surprising to you to learn about these stories of abuse found in the Bible?
- 2) Do you feel the Bible gives too much or too little attention to the subject of abuse?
What does this say about the ancient biblical societies' views of abuse?
- 3) What does it mean to you that these stories of abuse are found in the Bible?
- 4) What rituals or processes might help abused women reclaim their sense of worth or purity, allowing them to experience purification, rededication and sanctification?

The Unspoken Secrets

Dinah (Gen 34:1-3)

א וַתֵּצֵא דִּינָה בִּתְ-לֵאָה אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה לְיַעֲקֹב לְרֵאוֹת בְּבָנוֹת הָאָרֶץ:

And Dinah the daughter of Leah, whom she borne to Jacob¹, went out to see the daughters of the land.

ב וַיֵּרָא אֹתָהּ שָׁכֶם בֶּן-חָמוֹר הַחִוִּי נָשִׂיא הָאָרֶץ וַיִּקַּח אֹתָהּ וַיִּשְׁכַּב אִתָּהּ וַיַּעֲנֶה:

And when Shechem the son of Hamon the Hivite, the prince of the land, saw her, he took her, and lay with her by force²³.

ג וַתִּדְבַּק נַפְשׁוֹ בְּדִינָה בִּתְ-יַעֲקֹב וַיֶּאֱהַב אֶת-הַנַּעֲרָ וַיְדַבֵּר עַל-לֵב הַנַּעֲרָ:

And he became attracted to Dinah the daughter of Jacob, and he loved the girl⁴, and spoke coaxingly to her.⁵

Sota (Num 5:19-21)

יט וְהִשְׁבִּיעַ אֹתָהּ הַכֹּהֵן וַאֲמַר אֶל-הָאִשָּׁה אִם-לֹא שָׁכַב אִישׁ אִתָּךְ וְאִם-לֹא

שָׁטִית טְמֵאָה תַּחַת אִישׁךָ הַנָּקִי מִמִּי הַמָּרִים הַמְאֲרִים הָאֵלֶּה:

And the priest shall have her take an oath⁶, and say to her, “if no man has lain with you, and if you have not gone astray into impurity, while married to your husband, you will be immune⁷ to this water of bitterness that brings a curse.

כ וְאִתָּךְ כִּי שָׁטִית תַּחַת אִישׁךָ וְכִי נְטִמָּאת וַיִּתֵּן אִישׁ בְּךָ אֶת-שְׁכָבְתּוֹ מִבְּלַעַדְךָ אִישׁךָ:

And if you have gone astray while married to your husband and have defiled yourself, if a man other than your husband has had sexual relations with you...”

כא וְהִשְׁבִּיעַ הַכֹּהֵן אֶת-הָאִשָּׁה בְּשִׁבְעַת הָאֵלֶּה וַאֲמַר הַכֹּהֵן לָאִשָּׁה יִתֵּן יְהוָה

אוֹתָךְ לָאֵלֶּה וּלְשִׁבְעָה בָּתוֹךְ עֵמֶךְ בְּתֵת יְהוָה אֶת-יָרְכֶךָ נָפְלֹת וְאֶת-בִּטְנְךָ

צָרָה:

Now the priest shall administer the curse of adjuration to the wife, as the priest goes on to say

1. Sarna in the *JPS Commentary of Genesis* suggests that Dinah's parentage is repeated here to clarify that Simeon and Levi are her full brothers. p. 233.
2. The Hebrew term used here is *innah*, *The Torah a Women's Commentary* (191) chooses to translate it as “rape” saying that the meaning of other verbs here are affected by the translation of this verb. In Deuteronomy this verb is better translated as “violate” yet here this translation would not give a sufficient description of the situation.
3. Sarna in the *JPS Commentary of Genesis* says that these three verbs, took, lay, and force underscore the brutality of Shechem's assault on Dinah. p. 234.
4. The term “girl” here is used to stress Dinah's young age.
5. Literally: “spoke to her heart.”
6. Amy Kalmanofsky, in *The Torah a Women's Commentary* explains that the priest is presenting two possible outcomes, which indicates that the woman is neither presumed innocent or guilty at this stage. p. 824
7. Amy Kalmanofsky, in *The Torah a Women's Commentary* says, “This verb, literally “be cleansed,” appears elsewhere as a legal term for innocence (Exodus 21:19; 23:7).

to the wife, “may Adonai make you a curse and an imprecation among you people, as Adonai causes your thigh to sag and your belly to distend...”⁸

Ezekiel (16:37-38)

לֹא לָכֵן הִנְנִי מְקַבֵּץ אֶת-כָּל-מֵאֲהָבֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר עָרַבְתָּ עֲלֵיהֶם וְאֶת כָּל-אֲשֶׁר
אָהַבְתָּ עַל כָּל-אֲשֶׁר שָׁנְאָת וְקִבְצָתִי אֹתָם עָלֶיךָ מִסָּבִיב וְגִלְתִּי עֲרוּתְךָ אֲלֵהֶם
וְרָאוּ אֶת-כָּל-עֲרוּתְךָ:

I will therefore assemble all the lovers to whom you gave your favors, along with everybody you accepted and everybody you rejected. I will assemble them against you from every quarter, and I will expose your nakedness to them, and they shall see all your nakedness.

לח וּשְׂפָטֶיךָ מִשְׁפָּטֵי נָאֻזוֹת וְשִׁפְכֹת דָּם וַיִּתְּתִיךָ דָּם חֲמָה וְקִנְיָה:

and I will inflict upon you the punishment of women who commit adultery and murder, and I will direct bloody and impassioned fury against you.

Women of David (2 Sam 16:20-21)

כ וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְשָׁלוֹם אֶל-אַחִיתָפֶל הֲבִי לָכֵם עֲצָה מֶה-נַּעֲשֶׂה:

Absalom then said Ahithophel, “what do you advise us to do?”

כא וַיֹּאמֶר אַחִיתָפֶל אֶל-אַבְשָׁלוֹם בּוֹא אֶל-פִּלְגֶשֶׁי אָבִיךָ אֲשֶׁר הֵנִיחַ לְשֹׁמֵר
הַבַּיִת וְשָׁמַע כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי-נִבְאֲשָׁתָה אֶת-אָבִיךָ וְחִזְקוּ יָדַי כָּל-אֲשֶׁר אֲתָד:

And Ahithophel said to Absalom, “Have intercourse with your father’s concubines whom he left to mind the palace and when all Israel hears that you have dared the wrath of your father all who support you will be encouraged.”⁹

2 Samuel 20:3

ג וַיָּבֹא דָוִד אֶל-בֵּיתוֹ יְרוּשָׁלַם וַיִּקַּח הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת עֶשֶׂר-נָשִׁים | פִּלְגֶשֶׁים אֲשֶׁר
הֵנִיחַ לְשֹׁמֵר הַבַּיִת וַיִּתְּנֵם בֵּית-מִשְׁמָרָת וַיְכַלְכֵּלֵם וְאֵלֵיהֶם לֹא-בָא וַתִּהְיֶינָה
צָרוֹת עַד-יוֹם מָתָן אֱלֻמָּנוֹת חַיּוֹת:

David went to his palace in Jerusalem, and the King took the ten concubines he had left to mind the palace and put them in a guarded place. He provided for them but he did not cohabit with them. They remained in seclusion until the day they died in living widowhood.

8. Amy Kalmanofsky, in *The Torah a Women's Commentary* suggests that this curse causes a guilty woman to lose her ability to be fertile since an innocent woman will remain fertile. The “thigh” here is probably a euphemism for female genitals since it is often used as a euphemism for male genitals. p. 824.

9. Robert Alter in *The David Story*, suggests that Absalom’s supporters will be strengthened by his actions because after such an aggressive move by Absalom no one would ever think they would somehow come to terms again. p.295.

Womb Worries Woes and Wonders
“Be fertile and increase” (Genesis 1:28).

Introduction

Many women in their 20's and 30's have great anxiety over pregnancy. This anxiety is triggered by multiple fears; the fear of getting pregnant at the wrong time, and the fear of not getting pregnant at the desired time.

Typically, women spend the majority of their fertile years trying to avoid becoming pregnant. Women contemplate the pros and cons of different birth control methods; some women even experience missing a menstrual cycle, causing them great anxiety over the possibility that they are pregnant. The thought of becoming pregnant when she is not expecting it can be one of the scariest things a woman can imagine. Then comes a time when the opposite is true and a woman worries about not getting pregnant as planned. Toni Weschler has this to say to women:

“If you're like most people trying to get pregnant, you probably remember the years of hassling with birth control and all that entailed-the diaphragms that flew across the room when you attempted to insert them, the condoms that broke at the peak of lovemaking, or the Pill that caused you to balloon in weight. In fact, you may have even experienced sleepless nights worrying about whether you had accidentally become pregnant, even though you used birth control consistently. Yet here you are, years later, perhaps bemoaning the fact that you spent so much time and energy trying to avoid pregnancy, only to discover that it may not have been so easy to get pregnant after all. For some couples, getting pregnant may indeed be difficult. But for many, it can be simple as learning how to optimize their chances of conception by identifying when your combined fertility is at its greatest. Surprisingly, the chances of a typical couple of proven fertility conceiving in any one menstrual cycle is thought to be no higher than about 25%. And for couples in their 30s and older, the chances decrease substantially. But you can increase the chances dramatically by identifying the optimal time to try.”¹

¹ Toni Weschler, MPH, *Taking Charge of Your Fertility*. First Collins Edition Publishing 2006, p. 145.

Many women in their early adult lives do switch gears at some point and begin to try to achieve pregnancy; for a considerable number of women, this process is also packed with anxiety. Often, the fear that she will not be able to conceive for one reason or another strikes a woman even before she tries to conceive. While these fears are unsubstantiated in most cases, there are still many occurrences where the process of trying to achieve pregnancy is fraught with delays and difficulties, leading to more anxiety.

Pregnancy is always a big issue for women. Even our biblical sisters are anxiety-ridden about pregnancy; many of them are described as being barren. For example, Sarai (Gen 16-21), Rebekah (Gen 25:21), Rachael (Gen 30:1), Hannah (1 Samuel 1), and Samson's mother (Judges 13). While others have children at unexpected points in their lives, e.g., Sarai and the Shunammite woman (2 Kings 4:8-17) are past the typical childbearing age. Furthermore, the Bible places such a high emphasis on reproduction, and women are often identified with their children, that infertile couples frequently pray to God for fertility.

Set Introduction

- 1) Ask participants to name 5 women who have been in the spot light in any way related to fertility.
- 2) Ask participants to identify 5 women in the Bible whose fertility is discussed.

Pharaoh's Daughter (Exodus 2:5-10)

Pharaoh's daughter spots a basket in the Nile, sends her slave girl to fetch it, looks inside, and discovers a baby. She assumes that this baby is a Hebrew because of her father's decree. As a result of the intervention of Miriam, she takes the baby and has Miriam find a Hebrew nursemaid (Jochebed) for the baby whom she names Moses.

This arrangement that Pharaoh's daughter makes is common in the ancient world.

Mesopotamian legal documents show that wealthy women often hired a nursemaid to nurse their baby. If the baby was a foundling once the baby was weaned it was returned to the person who found it to be adopted.² Indeed, at the end of this episode, Pharaoh's daughter names the child in what looks like an adoption ceremony.

In this episode Pharaoh's daughter takes pity on the Hebrew child, and Miriam seizes the opportunity to imply that Pharaoh's daughter can adopt the baby and to suggest that she can go and get a Hebrew nurse to suckle the child for her. Pharaoh's daughter's eagerness to accept the proposition and to ultimately adopt the child might suggest that she is not able or willing to have one of her own. Since we know that a woman's status is linked to her providing heirs, Pharaoh's daughter might be deciding to adopt baby Moses to alleviate the pressure she feels to procreate.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think that Pharaoh's daughter is willing to adopt baby Moses?

² Nahum M. Sarna, *JPS Commentary Exodus* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), p. 10.

2. How do you think people today view adoption? Is it different for Jewish people? Do you think this story may help alter people's perception about adoption?

Samson's Mother (Judges 13)

When we are initially introduced to Manoah's wife, she is a barren woman who has born no children (Judges 13:2). Later, an Angel of God appears to her and tells her that she will bear a son, and that she should "be careful not to drink wine or other intoxicants, or to eat anything impure." For you are going to conceive and bear a son; let no razor touch his head, for the boy is to be a nazirite to God from the womb on. He shall be the first to deliver Israel from the Philistines" (Judges 13:4-5). These instructions are important for the child's destiny, which is to be consecrated to God (a "nazirite" being a term for a person specially dedicated to God). When the woman tells her husband, Manoah, what she has been told, he prays for God to send this "man of God" again to give them instructions on how to raise their son. God grants Manoah's request and the "man of God" reappears to the wife. The wife promptly runs to fetch Manoah, and when Manoah comes out to speak with the Angel of God, the Angel repeats the instructions he gave to Manoah's wife. Manoah requests the Angel to stay so they can prepare a meal for him. The Angel says he will not eat it, but suggests that Manoah, instead, offer the as a sacrifice to God. Manoah still does not understand that this man is an angel, and asks for his name. The Angel responds, "You must not ask for my name; it is unknowable" (Judges 13:18). Manoah does make an offering to God, and later his wife bears a son who they name Samson.

Manoah is often interpreted as being foolish for not realizing right away that the man who tells his wife they will bear a son is actually an angel of God.

Manoah, however, seems to be excited at the prospect of having a son. He immediately wants to know the Angel's name so they can honor him, and he also gives an offering to God, perhaps to thank God for providing him a son. Manoah's wife, on the other hand, does not say or do anything to reflect her feelings about the news, nor does she give the child a name that suggests her delight or thanks for his birth.³ Because of her quickness of perception, she is viewed as a strong human character who appears wise.⁴ Yet there is no evidence to support or deny that she wants a child, that she is upset she is barren, or even that she is excited when she learns she will bear a son. Her emotions are hard, if not impossible, to read. In contrast, when other women in the Bible are excited about the birth of their sons, the narrators make a point of depicting their heightened emotions through their words, actions, and the names they give their children. One might argue that if Manoah's wife is to be understood as excited, then the narrator would not leave out such a detail.

Discussion Questions

1. How do you think Manoah's wife feels about having a child?
2. What is the impact of the silence about her feelings, both before the announcement of a forthcoming pregnancy and after?
3. Why doesn't the narrator in the Bible tell us Manoah's wife's name?

³ Many commentators connect the name with the sun. Shimshon, Samson, Shimesh (sun). Jewish Study Bible, p. 541.

⁴ Alice Ogden Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*. (Louisville London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), p. 123.

Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11)

While out on a late afternoon stroll on the palace rooftop, David sees Bathsheba bathing. She is beautiful and David inquires about her. He soon learns her name, who her father is, and that she is married to Uriah the Hittite. After learning this, David sends someone to fetch her, she comes to him and he lies with her (2 Samuel 11:2-4).

Bathsheba conceives and sends word to David, saying “I am pregnant.” Upon hearing this, David arranges for her husband, Uriah the Hittite, to return home from the battlefield. David asks Uriah how the troops are doing but his main purpose is that Uriah, upon returning home, will have relations with his wife Bathsheba so that her pregnancy will be associated with him. Uriah, however, does not go home to his wife but sleeps at the entrance to the palace instead (2 Samuel 11:7-9). David tries, unsuccessfully, two more times to get Uriah to go home to sleep with Bathsheba. Finally, David asks Uriah why, after a long journey, he doesn’t go home to his house. Uriah tells David that he cannot go home to eat, drink, and sleep with his wife while the King’s men are camped outside. As a last resort, David even tries to get Uriah drunk, hoping that once Uriah is drunk enough he will go home to Bathsheba, but Uriah still sleeps outside the palace. The next morning David writes a letter to his general, Joab, asking him to place Uriah in the front line and then fall back so Uriah will be killed. David sends this letter with Uriah to be delivered to Joab (2 Samuel 11: 14-15).

Bathsheba hears about Uriah’s death in battle and mourns for him. After her mourning period is over, David sends for Bathsheba to come to the palace to make her his wife (2 Samuel 11:26-27). Bathsheba becomes David’s wife and bears him a son, but God is upset by what David has done so the child falls ill and dies (2 Samuel 12:18). After their first son dies, David goes and lies with Bathsheba and she conceives a second son. Bathsheba names the second son Solomon. God favors this second son, who becomes the next king] Solomon is also Jedidiah, meaning “beloved of God.”

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think the story of David producing an illegitimate child is included in the Bible?
2. How do you think Bathsheba feels about this pregnancy when she first finds out?
What about later in life, after she becomes queen?

Hannah (1 Samuel 1:1-28)

Hannah is one of several examples of women in the Bible who are described as barren but who later becomes pregnant and gives birth to an important person; her story, however, is unique. We read that Elkanah has two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. Peninnah has children, but Hannah does not. Because of Hannah's barrenness, Peninnah taunts her relentlessly. Hannah is desperate for a child. When the family goes to the House of God every year, Hannah weeps and does not eat. Elkanah is incredibly sensitive and says to her, "Hannah, why are you crying and why aren't you eating? Why are you so sad? Am I not more devoted to you than ten sons" (1 Samuel 1:8)? So Elkanah reassures her of his love, as well as assures her that he will take care of her and that being a mother may not be the most important thing.

Hannah goes up to the House of God and prays to God while weeping. She makes a vow, "O God of Hosts, if you will look upon the suffering of your maidservant and will remember me and not forget your maidservant, and if you will grant your maidservant a male child, I will dedicate him to God for all the days of his life; and no razor shall ever touch his head" (1:11). "Vows like this were voluntary but binding, typically arose from a situation of distress, involved a petition or request of the deity, and were fulfilled contingent on the petition being answered."⁵ She is praying so deeply that her mouth is moving yet there is no sound coming out. When Eli the priest sees this, he thinks she is drunk and rebukes Hannah for being drunk, but she explains that she is not drunk rather she is pouring her heart out to God.

⁵ Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 170.

That year Elkanah and Hannah conceive a son. When the son is born, Hannah takes complete control. She names the child by herself; there is no question of the father asserting dominance over the child.⁶ For a few years, when it is time to go up to the House of God, Hannah stays back with her son, because once her son is weaned she will need to take him before God and leave him there for good.

After Hannah weans her son, she takes him to the House of God along with a sacrifice. She introduces the boy to Eli the priest and says “. . . I am the woman who stood here beside you and prayed to God. It was this boy I prayed for; and God has granted me what I asked. I, in turn, hereby lend him to God. For as long as he lives he is lent to God. And they bowed low there before God” (2 Samuel 1:26-28). The child, Samuel, grows to be a major prophet in Israel.

In describing Hannah’s pregnancy, 1 Samuel 1:19 states that God “remembers” Hannah and she conceives a son. It is clear that through this remembrance Hannah’s womb is opened.

In this story the noun womb (rehem) is a physical object upon which the deity acts. Control of it belongs neither to women nor to their husbands, neither to the fetus nor to society. Only God closes and opens wombs in judgment, in blessing, and in mystery.⁷

It is evident within this story how much Hannah wants to bear a child. The narrators tell us how another woman mistreats her because of her barrenness. She is so sad that she fasts, prays, and cries. Even when her husband tries to comfort her, she is inconsolable. The Rabbis

⁶ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories*. (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), p. 305.

⁷ Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), p. 35.

see Hannah in a very positive light, and use this story within the Talmud to discuss petitional and private prayer. From this story, the Rabbis take four prayer characteristics; they say to pray in a low voice, with lips moving, with concentration, and not when drunk.⁸

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think this story tells the reader about the ways a woman might experience barrenness?
2. How does the husband's comment help or hinder dealing with barrenness?
3. Do you think this story would be helpful to a woman who is having difficulty achieving pregnancy? If yes, how; if not, why

⁸ Leila Leah Bronner, *From Eve to Esther: Rabbinic Reconstructions of Biblical Women*. (Kentucky: Westminster John/Knox Press, 1994), p. 95.

Additional thoughts and Questions for the Instructor about the Discussion Questions

Pharoah's Daughter (Exodus 2:5-10)

1. Why do you think Pharaoh's daughter is willing to adopt baby Moses?

Pharaoh's daughter could have been willing to adopt a baby because she did not have one of her own. Although she is probably not eager to disobey her father's decree, she takes pity on baby Moses. She could also be willing to take the child out of compassion, and because she could afford to.

2. How do you think people today view adoption? Is it different for Jewish people? Do you think this story could help alter people's perception about adoption?

Oftentimes, because of the rather small cultural diversity among American Jews it is difficult for adopted children of other races to fit in. Today, many Jewish people who are not able to conceive opt to adopt, and some adopt children who visibly belong to other cultural groups - [I am not sure the word "race" is good here]. However, there is still uneasiness about adoption, and especially adoption outside of one's culture. In many cases these children feel ostracized by the Jewish community at one time or another while growing up.

Samson's Mother (Judges 13)

1. How do you think Manoah's wife feels about having a child?

It is hard to say how Manoah's wife feels about conceiving a child. We don't know if she is shocked, excited, anxious, or upset. We know Manoah is definitely very excited and

thankful, since he wants to honor the Angel who brings them the news and later gives an offering to God. However, there is no evidence to support his wife feeling one way or the other. Perhaps we should conclude that she is not elated about having a baby since we do not read about her excitement or thankfulness. She also does not choose a name that makes the reader believe she is grateful. If there is any evidence that she has positive feelings about the pregnancy, the narrators have omitted it.

On the other hand, when she is told about her pregnancy she is given special guidelines to follow to insure her child's destiny of being consecrated unto God. We assume she adheres to these guidelines, so we might at least infer that she cares about the well-being of her unborn child.

2. Why don't the narrators of the Bible tell us Manoah's wife's name?

After Manoah's wife bears a son, she names him without her husband's approval.

Another point to note is that a woman typically yearns to bear children **for** her husband, but Samson is to be consecrated to God. Through the story of Manoah's wife, we learn that the woman who bears for herself is not the ideal woman. However the story of Hannah might be used to contradict this point. . If the narrators wanted Manoah's wife to be a respected figure within the narrative, she would be named. It is much more difficult to make a heroine from a character with no name, and it is impossible to name a child after a biblical character that is not named.

On the other hand, by not having a specific name, she can be "every woman" or "any woman," – a more universal figure. The silence allows us to imagine her in more ways than one.

Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11)

1. Why do you think the story of David producing an illegitimate child is included in the Bible?

This story is possibly included as a lesson against illegitimate relations. It shows that not even a king is above the law. God does intervene and punish David for his actions by making the child sick and letting the child die. Ultimately, God forgives David and grants him a second son who goes on to be the next King.

2. How do you think Bathsheba feels about this pregnancy when she first finds out?

What about later in life, after she becomes queen?

Bathsheba is probably very scared when she first realizes she is pregnant. Her entire message to David is, "I am pregnant." David could easily abandon her, and let her be punished when Uriah realizes the child could not possibly be his.

After their first son dies, David goes and lies with Bathsheba and she conceives a second son. Bathsheba names the second son Solomon. God favors this second son, who becomes the next king] Solomon is also Jedidiah, meaning "beloved of God."

We might wonder whether or not later, after Bathsheba sees how everything turns out, she is not glad for her indiscretions since they in turn make her a queen and her second son by David is beloved by God and inherits the throne.

Hannah_(1 Samuel 1:1-28)

1. What do you think this story tells the reader about barrenness?

This story gives the impression that barrenness, like many other situations in the Bible, is only a temporary state. Here Hannah prays long and hard for many years, and ultimately makes a bargain with God to grant her a son that she, in return, will dedicate to God's service. This story illustrates the power of heartfelt prayer. It also shows that one must be persistent when praying to God, and never give up.

2. Do you think this story is helpful to women having difficulty achieving pregnancy?

I think this story could potentially be harmful to a woman who is having difficulty conceiving. She might read this story and conclude that she is not praying hard enough or in the right fashion. She might also be angered by this story because, unlike the story of Hannah, not everyone is eventually blessed with fertility. On the other hand, barrenness is not a punishment from God, but a biological condition that can sometimes be resolved.

Activity

Some of the women in the Bible who we least expect to get pregnant, do so and miraculously give birth to children... with the exception of Rebekah, whose children struggle in her womb, and Hagar, who grows proud with her pregnancy, there is no mention of these women's emotions during their pregnancies. As we know, the ten lunar months of pregnancy are also a time of extreme anxiety. Some women are worried about all of the new aches and pains, while some are worried about the impending delivery, what kind of mother they will be, how their child will fare, and a thousand other things. Surprisingly, we don't see these stories in the Bible.

Choose a biblical woman and create your own *midrash* about her pregnancy...

Sacred Time

Tu B'Shevat, also called "The birthday of the Trees," is an annual celebration where Jews around the world celebrate by planting trees, and eating fruit and nuts. Tu B'Shevat has a renewed significance now that there is a Jewish State. Due to wars and fires, Israel is constantly in need of reforestation, which the Jewish National Fund has made their mission. They have likened the symbol of the rebirth of the trees to the rebirth of hope for the land and the people of Israel. This theme of renewal is also prevalent throughout the holiday of Tu B'Shevat as we are reminded of the natural cycle of life. The Talmud gives us a great story about reproduction and trees. In Ta'anit 5a-6a it says, "Once, a woman was traveling in the

desert. She was hungry, tired, thirsty, when she came upon a tree. She rested under its shade, ate of its fruit, and drank of the spring water that flowed beside it. As she was about to continue her journey, she said, “Tree, how shall I bless you? Shall I say, ‘may your shade be pleasant?’ It is already so. Shall I say, ‘May your fruit be sweet?’ It is sweet already. Shall I say, ‘May a stream of water flow next to your branches?’ A stream of water already flows beside you. Therefore I say, ‘May it be God’s will that all of the shoots taken from you shall be just like you’”

Discussion Questions

- 1) How does the blessing for the tree offspring mirror the blessing of the women we discussed today?
- 2) How else does Tu B'Shevat connect to pregnancy and rebirth?
- 3) Are there other ways beside pregnancy and childbirth through which women can express their “fruitfulness”?

Conclusion

- 1) Are 21st century women’s status linked to their fertility? Is there still a stigma associated with women who choose not to have children?
- 2) The Bible does an excellent job depicting the anxiety felt by barren women. Although some important women (like Esther or Huldah) are not connected to having children,

there are no specific stories about women who choose not to have children. Why would this be the case in the ancient world? Is that something important for us today?

- 3) How do these Biblical stories make you feel about our faith's stance on pregnancy (proud, embarrassed, outraged...)?
- 4) Are there other ways that the Bible or we recognize and respect women who do not have children?

Womb Worries Woes and Wonders

Pharaoh's Daughter (Exodus 2:9-10)

ט וַתֹּאמֶר לָהּ בַת־פַּרְעֹה הִלֵּכִי אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד הַזֶּה וְהִנֵּקְהוּ לִי וְאֲנִי אֶתֶּן
אֶת־שְׂכָרְךָ וְתִקַּח הָאִשָּׁה הַיֶּלֶד וְתִנְיִקְהוּ:

And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take¹ this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed² him.

י וַיִּגְדַּל הַיֶּלֶד וְתִבְאָהוּ לְבַת־פַּרְעֹה וַיְהִי־לָהּ לְבֵן וְתִקְרָא שְׁמוֹ מֹשֶׁה וַתֹּאמֶר
כִּי מִן־הַמַּיִם מָשִׁיתִהוּ: [שלישי]

When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. And she named him³ Moses⁴, and said, "Because I drew him out of the water."⁵

The Wife of Manoah (Judges 13:7-8)

ז וַיֹּאמֶר לִי הִנֵּנִי הָרָה וְיִלְדֶּנִי בֵן וְעַתָּה אֶל־תִּשְׁתֵּי | יַיִן וְשֹׁכָר וְאֶל־תֵּאכְלִי
כָּל־טֶמְאָה כִּי־נָזִיר אֱלֹהִים יִהְיֶה הַנֶּעַר מִן־הַבֶּטֶן עַד־יוֹם מוֹתוֹ:

And he said to me, "behold you are pregnant⁶ and will give birth to a son, and now do not drink wine or strong drink, and do not eat anything impure, because the boy will be a Nazir⁷ of Adonai, from the womb until the day of his death."⁸

ח וַיַּעֲתֵר מְנוּחַ אֶל־יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר בִּי אָדוֹנָי אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר שָׁלַחְתָּ
יְבוֹאֲנָא עוֹד אֵלֵינוּ וַיֹּרְנוּ מִה־נַּעֲשָׂה לְנֶעַר הַיּוֹלֵד:

And Manoah made supplication to God, and said, "Please, Adonai, the man of God whom

1. Nahum Sarna in the *JPS Commentary of Exodus* points out that this is a very unusual verb choice, which might have been chosen to intensify the ironic effect. The play of language here might signify, "here, it is yours" which would be an unconscious acknowledgment of the true mother (Sarna, *Exodus*, 10). The verb itself means to make someone go or walk.
2. Sarna suggests that this term not only acknowledges that she would be nursing Moses but that she would also have to act as the child's guardian. They suggest that Moses' mother "nurtured his mind and character and instilled in him the values and traditions cherished by his people" (Sarna, *Exodus*, 10).
3. Sarna in the *JPS Commentary of Exodus* states that in the ancient world infant mortality was so high that the formal adoption and naming process was postponed until after the child had been weaned.
4. Sarna says the word "Moses" is of Egyptian origin meaning "to be born" (Sarna, *Exodus*,)*The Torah A Women's Commentary* says it means to "give birth" (312).
5. Sarna adds, "The narrator puts a Hebrew origin for the name into the mouth of the Egyptian princess; unbeknown to her, it foreshadows the boy's destiny. By means of word play, the Egyptian Mose is connected with Hebrew m-sh-h, "to draw up/out (of water)" (Sarna, *Exodus*, 10).
6. Most translations use will conceive. However the Codex Vaticanus reads in the present "you are pregnant" and the Old Latin version reads, "you will conceive." See Susan Niditch, *Judges*. Old Testament Library.
7. The nazir, "an individual who dedicates herself or himself to God... Because the laws of the nazir pertain to prohibitions, they reveal little about whether or how the nazir functioned within the community." Amy Kalmanofsky, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*. ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss (New York: URJ Press, 2008), 826.
8. Here the woman repeats the instructions given to her, which emphasizes the importance of Samson's status.

you sent, may he come, pray, again to us⁹, and teach us what we should do for the lad to be born.”

Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11:4)

ד וַיִּשְׁלַח דָּוִד מַלְאָכִים וַיִּקְחֶהָ וַתָּבוֹא אֵלָיו וַיִּשְׁכַּב עִמָּהּ וְהִיא מִתְקַדְּשֶׁת
מִטְּמֵאתָהּ וַתָּשָׁב אֶל-בֵּיתָהּ:

And David sent messengers and fetched her, and she came to him¹⁰, and he lay with her, she having just cleansed herself of impurity¹¹, and she returned to her house.

Hannah (1 Sam 1:10-11)

י וְהִיא מְרֵת נַפְשׁ וַתִּתְפַּלֵּל עַל-יְהוָה וּבְכָה תְּבִכֶּה:

And she was deeply embittered, and she prayed to Adonai, crying all the while.

יֵא וַתִּזְדָּר לִדְרֹךְ וַתֹּאמֶר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת אִם-רָאָה תִרְאֶה | בְּעֵינַי אֲמַתְךָ וּזְכַרְתִּנִּי
וְלֹא-תִשְׁכַּח אֶת-אֲמַתְךָ וְנִתְּתָה לְאֲמַתְךָ יָרֵעַ אֲנָשִׁים וְנִתְּתִיו לַיהוָה כָּל-יְמֵי
חַיָּיו וּמוֹרָה לֹא-יַעֲלֶה עַל-רֹאשׁוֹ:

And she vowed¹² a vow and said, “Adonai of Hosts, if you really will look on your servant’s suffering and remember me, and forget not your servant and give your male servant seed, I will give him to Adonai all the days of his life¹³, and no razor shall touch his head.¹⁴”

9. Here Manoh asks for the Angel to appear again to “us” however, the Angel appears again only to his wife.

10. In the middle of a string of masculine verbs is a feminine one. The grammatical subject here is Bathsheba coming to David. Robert Alter suggests that this verb choice could designate “a first act of sexual intercourse. One wonders whether the writer is boldly toying with this double meaning, intimating an element of active participation by Bathsheba in David’s sexual summons. The text is otherwise entirely silent on her feelings, giving the impression that she is passive as others act on her. but her later behavior in the matter of her son’s succession, explains her behavior here as well.” Robert Alter in *The David Story*. 251. Of course, in contrast to Alter’s view, her behavior in support of her son’s rise to the throne can be understood less in terms of what she does here and more as a result of what happens in the years that follow. Bathsheba begins as a passive woman but learns from David and others that it is necessary to be proactive in the palace, which is what the prophet Nathan tells her when they work on securing her son’s future-in 1 Kings 1.

11. By stating that Bathsheba cleansed herself of impurity tells the reader that she had just finished menstruating and could not be pregnant by her husband who was off fighting.

12. Most translations say simply “made a vow.” However, here the vow intensity is emphasized by the use of the same verb. She vowed a vow.

13. Robert Alter suggests that Hannah’s logic here, that if God will give her a son she will in turn give him back to God is simplistic. However, her language is a beautiful repetition of petitionary prayer to God begging to be remembered. This out pouring of Hannah’s touches so many because of its relatability of sorrow.

14. This means he is not allowed to shave.

Working Women or Woman's Work?

“And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God ceased from all the work of creation that God had done” (Genesis 2:3).

Introduction

In 1897, Charlotte Perkins Gilman stated: We have so arranged life, that a man may have a home and family, love, companionship, domesticity, and fatherhood, yet remain an active citizen of age and country. We have so arranged life, on the other hand, that a woman must 'choose'; must either live alone, unloved, un-companioned [sic], uncared for, homeless, childless, with her work for sole consolation; or give up all world-service for the joys of love, motherhood, and domestic service.

Kathleen Gilbert cites Marcia Clark, who prosecuted O.J. Simpson for the murder of his wife, as an example. After the trial was over, Clark's husband sued for custody of their two children. He argued that '[Clark] spent all her time at work.' 'Like all moms, Marcia Clark can't have it all,' concluded an article in the Detroit News, glossing over the fact that fathers have always had both jobs and children. Men do not have to choose between career and family. So why should women have to choose?¹

Even today, women are put in positions that cause them to make more dramatic compromises than men, or so they feel. Nevertheless, more than ever before some men are choosing to stay home, and women are choosing to remain in the workforce. Whether a woman's job forces her to choose, or whether she simply feels pressured to do so, women are subjected to compromising decisions. Women often struggle to find balance between work and family. Even women without traditional nine to five jobs must find a balance between responsibilities outside of the home and family duties; when it comes to life choices, women with and without children find themselves forced to make difficult decisions.

With the downturn in the economy, the percentage of women in the workforce has increased to over 50% for the first time, and yet, most women have not given up their duties at home.

¹ <http://www.tendertidings.net/2008/February/Do-we-have-to-choose-between-career-and-family-.htm>

According to a National Survey of Families and Households from the University of Wisconsin, on average, women spend 28 hours a week on housework, compared to men, who only spend 16.² The increase of women in the workforce has a direct correlation to women's increasing anxieties about balancing work and home. These issues are not new; even our biblical sisters find they must deal with the delicate balance between "career" and family.

Achsah is an example of a woman in the Bible who demonstrates an astute judgment as she uses family connection to establish her place in the public sector. Although she is given in marriage as a reward to the best warrior, she ultimately negotiates for, and is granted, property. This shows her ambition to be more than just a "prize" wife (Judg 1:12-15).

Leah is depicted as a woman deeply devoted to family. She celebrates each of her early births by giving her children names imbued with hope that her husband will love her, and later turns to names filled with thanks. She is the model of a woman who primarily focuses on household duties and does not stray into the public realm (Gen 29:31-35).

Huldah is an excellent illustration of a high-powered woman in the public sphere. She is the most authoritative woman in the entire Bible; her career oriented character gains the respect of others. We know nothing about her family life other than the fact that she is married (II Kings 22:14-20).

Esther is portrayed as a woman able to manage both a family role as well as a highly political role. To use modern imagery, she maneuvers equally well between the bedroom and the boardroom; she utilizes her sexuality as a vehicle to open doors to change the outside world (Esther 4:12-17).

² <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/20/weekinreview/20parkerpope.html>

Set Introduction

1. Ask participants to make a list of the last 5 decisions they needed to make.
2. Use the board to compile the decisions into 2 categories: column A) either/or decisions (i.e., Do I take a shower first or brush my teeth first?), and column B) not either/or decisions (i.e., How long should I exercise for?).
3. Count how many decisions are in each column.
4. Ask participants if decisions from column A are harder/easier/ or equally difficult to make as decisions in column B. For many women work and family is a juggling act similar to the decisions in column B, yet some women find choosing to devote most of their time to either work or family more beneficial to them. Making their decision more similar to the ones in column A.
5. How do you view work-family decisions? (no need to discuss these now, come back to them at the end!)

Achsah (Judg 1:12-15)

Achsah is Caleb's daughter, whom he promises in marriage to any man who attacks and captures the town of Kirathsepher (Judg 1:12). Othniel captures Kirathsepher and consequently wins Achsah's hand in marriage. Achsah tells Othniel to ask her father for some property, but, ultimately, goes directly to her father herself. When Caleb asks her what is wrong, Achsah replies, "Give me a present, for you have given me away as Negeb-land; give me springs of water." So Caleb gives her Upper and Lower Gulloth (Judg 1:15; see also Josh 15:16-17).

This story depicts just how sophisticated a woman Achsah is. She is given in marriage as remuneration to Othniel for being a good warrior. She does not argue with her father about her destiny or show any unhappiness about taking on a domestic role, but she does make her voice heard and successfully negotiates for property for her new family. Frymer-Kensky describes Achsah as neither pawn nor victim, because she is married off to her uncle, and even though her father is not obligated to give her anything, he does. Achsah complains that she is given away for dry land, and then bargains for water sources as well. Frymer-Kensky believes that Caleb is a good man; he understands the predicament he's made for his daughter and gives her the water sources she requests. Frymer-Kensky states that, "Achsah is more fortunate even than Israel's matriarchs". Unlike Rachel and Leah. Their bride price is 7 years of service. whereas Laban never shares the profit of this service with his daughters, Caleb does share the winnings of the battle with Achsah.³

Discussion Questions

³ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of their Stories*. (New York: Schocken books, 2002), 100-101.

1. What does Achsah do and how is she able to balance between family and the outside realm?
2. Is there anything the modern day reader can learn from Achsah's story?

Leah (Gen 29:31-35)

In the story of Leah we learn that her husband Jacob does not love her. When God realizes this, God opens her womb. Leah conceives and bears her first son whom she names Reuben. Leah then translates the name in two ways: first, that God has seen my affliction, and, second, that “Now my husband will love me.” Leah conceives a second time and bears a son whom she names Simeon; another declaration of hope that her husband will love her because, as she explains, God has heard her plight. Levi is the third son she conceives and bears, and with this name she hopes her husband will become attached to her because she has given him three sons. Leah conceives and bears a fourth son whom she names Judah; no longer a name that no longer portrays hope that her husband love her or be attached to her, but rather a name that gives thanks to God, as she declares, “This time I will Praise God” (Gen 29:31-35).

Discussion Questions

1. Where would you place Leah on a scale with career and family at polar ends?
2. What can we tell about Leah’s life’s goals and her feelings towards family by the names she gives her sons?
3. Why are children important to Leah? Does she focus on them or on her husband?
4. Why does Leah thank God with the birth and naming of her fourth son?

Huldah (II Kings 22:14-20)

Huldah's story is that of the last important woman in the book of Kings. She is a prophet who lives during the same time as Jeremiah. She is the wife of Shallum son of Tikvah, son of Harhas.

At the beginning of 2 Kings 22, King Josiah arranges for renovations of the Temple in Jerusalem. At this time, Hilkiyah the High Priest tells Shaphan the scribe, "I have found a scroll of the Teaching [*torah*] in the House of God." And Hilkiyah gives the scroll to Shaphan.

Shaphan reports to King Josiah that Hilkiyah has given him a scroll and he reads it to King Josiah. When Josiah hears the words of the scroll he rends his clothes and tells Hilkiyah, and other leading royal officials: "Go inquire of God on my behalf, and on behalf of the people, and on behalf of all of Judah, concerning the words of this scroll that has been found. For great indeed must be the wrath of God that has been kindled against us, because our fathers did not obey the words in this scroll to do all that has been prescribed for us" (2 kings 22:13).

We learn that, in response, these men go the prophetess, Huldah responds, "Thus said Adonai, the God of Israel: Say to the man who sent you to me: Thus said Adonai: I am going to bring disaster upon this place and its inhabitants, in accordance with all the words of the scroll which the king of Judah has read. Because they have forsaken Me and have made offerings to other gods and vexed Me with all their deeds, My wrath is kindled against this place and it shall not be quenched. But say this to the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of Adonai: Thus said Adonai, the God of Israel: As for the words which you have heard because your heart was softened and you humbled yourself before Adonai when you heard what I decreed against this place and its inhabitants- that it will become a desolation and a

curse- and because you rent your cloths and wept before Me, I for My part have listened- declares Adonai. Assuredly I will gather you to your fathers and you will be laid in your tomb in peace. Your eyes shall not see all the disaster which I will bring upon this place” (2 Kings 22:15-20). Tikva Frymer-Kensky says that these men go to Huldah the prophetess to validate the discovery.

It is unclear why they choose Huldah rather than Jeremiah for this task. It is possible that Jeremiah has yet to receive his calling or is not yet well known.⁴ Frymer-Kensky also suggests that the men might already know what Jeremiah will say and they are hoping Huldah will have better news for them.⁵ After Huldah authenticates the scroll, King Josiah immediately, and without question, implements the book’s laws (2 Kings 22:8-23:3 and 2 Chronicles 34:18-33).

Many modern scholars believe that the scroll that Huldah authenticates, which King Josiah subsequently puts into law, is actually Deuteronomy, or at least portions of it. “If so, we owe the binding authority that Deuteronomy holds to none other than Huldah, whose own words confirmed and thus made possible the preservation and transmission of these teachings to us.”⁶

⁴ Alice Ogden Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*. (Louisville London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 175.

⁵ Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 325.

⁶ Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea Weiss, eds., *The Torah, A Women's Commentary*. (New York: URJ Press, 2007), 1248.

Huldah is successful as a prophetess. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi points out that most prophets' messages fall on deaf ears during their lifetime, yet Huldah's authority is unquestioned and her prophecy is heeded instantly.⁷

"Some feminist scholars point out, however, that the narrator appears to accept the existence of an influential female intermediary as a matter of course. This suggests that powerful women may have been more numerous in ancient Israel than the biblical record suggests."⁸

Although Huldah, the prophetess or intermediary, is presented in the Bible as having undisputed authority, later rabbis express unease with her story and belittle her somewhat.⁹

Huldah is the most authoritative woman in the Bible; we know she must be very well respected because King Josiah's men approach her as God's emissary and King Josiah listens to her. Oddly enough, the only thing we know about her in terms of family is her husband's name and profession. We do not know if she has children or not, and we have no other narratives that provide information as to her character in her personal life.

Discussion Questions

1. What does Huldah do and how is Huldah different than most other women we learn about in the Bible?
2. Even though Huldah's story is brief, why do many scholars consider her a very important woman in the Bible?

⁷ Eskenazi and Weiss, eds., *The Torah, A Women's Commentary*, 1248.

⁸ Kathryn Pfisterer Darr, *Far More Precious than Jewels: Perspectives on Biblical Women*. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 41.

⁹ Eskenazi and Weiss, eds., *The Torah, A Women's Commentary*, 1248.

3. Compare Huldah's profession and her husband's. What strikes you about them in terms of stereotyped profession in the ancient world and the modern one?

Esther (Esther 4:12-17)

At the beginning of the Book of Esther, King Ahasuerus orders that Queen Vashti be brought before the King, wearing a royal diadem to display her beauty to the peoples and the officials, for she is a beautiful woman (1:11). Queen Vashti refuses and, therefore, King Ahasuerus lets a royal edict be issued that Vashti can never enter the presence of King Ahasuerus (1:19).

Esther starts out as a common, gentle girl who is chosen by the King to become queen because of her beauty and (presumably) some talent. After Esther becomes queen, her uncle Mordecai informs her of a plan to execute all of the Jews in town (4:8). Furthermore, Mordecai tells Queen Esther that she must go to the King to appeal to him and plead with him for her people (4:8). When she refuses because of the danger that such a step entails, Mordecai tells her: "Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the King's palace. On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father's house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis" (4:13-14). Esther then consents to undertake the task. She requests that all of the Jews in town fast as she prepares to go speak to the King and acknowledges that this might cost her life (4:1-16). We then read, according to one translation, that "On the third day, Esther put on royal apparel and stood in the inner court of the king's palace" (5:1; JPS). A more accurate translation of this verse would read that Esther "put on royalty and stood in the inner court . . . " She is subsequently convinces the king to let her save her people and to punish Haman who plotted against them.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the difference between Vashti's behavior and Esther's? And what does it suggest about women's ability to achieve their goals?
2. Given what happens to Vashti at the beginning of this story, is there really room for women in this society to play any part other than one inside the bedroom? -
3. What difference does it make whether we understand Esther in 5:1 to be putting on royal apparel or royalty?
4. Do you think Esther is a good role model for balancing family and career?
5. What really prompts Esther to act and how do we respond to this? What is it that allows women to risk?

Aishet Chayil/ Woman of Valor (Proverbs 31:10-31)

Aishet Chayil, often translated as “woman of valor,” is the woman described in a beautiful poem about the ideal wife. The items described in the poem enumerates in detail many possible responsibility associated with a woman, from rising while it is still night (31:15), to giving generously to the poor (31:20).

Beatrice Lawrence writes about Proverbs 31 in an essay entitled *Gender Analysis: Gender and Method in Biblical Studies*¹⁰. The essay points out that in an early tradition in the Septuagint, the description of the woman comes after what is now chapter 29, with 31:1-9 preceding chapter 25. Lawrence suggests the possibility exists that there is no link between these two texts, but she goes on to suggest that the choice of Masoretic Text (the traditional Jewish version of the Bible) to place them side by side could mean that 31:10-31 is Lemuel's mother's warning against not choosing the right wife. Therefore, Lawrence suggests that this text might be a great way to conclude and summarize the rest of the Book of Proverbs as, choosing wisdom over folly.

Lawrence highlights a few Hebrew words used in the text for a woman whereas elsewhere they typically describe a man, i.e., valor, girding of loins. She views the text as problematic because it depicts the man's role as a public figure head, while the woman's role is to provide everything else.

Traditionally, the poem is recited by the husband to his wife on Friday night. “Perhaps modern communities have outgrown a family model in which one partner male or female

¹⁰Beatrice Lawrence, "Gender Analysis: Gender and Method in Biblical Studies." In *Method Matters: Essays on the Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David L. Petersen*. Joel M. Lemon and Kent Harold Richards, eds., (Society of Biblical Literature, 2009)

handles the entire domestic sphere while the other provides the public face of the family. Perhaps analysis of this text can encourage modern readers to craft a new sense of what it means to be a woman or man of valor."¹¹

Others comment that this smorgasbord of qualities is included as a way of providing some elements that every woman can relate to. Rather than it being a list of qualifications that only a superwoman could live up to, it is a list of all the good characteristics one might possess. Moreover, the use of virtues elsewhere associated with a man's valor, can be regarded as honoring the domestic sphere and recognizing that managing it requires as much wisdom, skill and courage as the work of heroic males.

Although the text does not mention Shabbat, many find the tradition of singing this text to the women in the room on Shabbat very meaningful. Often, after a long week of work, following which the woman has just made all of the Shabbat preparations, this is a nice way to recognize her for work that might otherwise be taken for granted.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some qualities that the poem recognizes and celebrates?
2. After reading this poem, do you feel that this "woman of valor" exemplifies a good balance between family and career? Do you see this "woman of valor" as attainable?
3. If someone sang this poem to you would you feel honored or offended?
4. What qualities would you choose to celebrate in a woman?

¹¹ Ibid.

Additional thoughts and Questions for the Instructor about the Discussion Questions

Achsah (Judg 1:12-15)

1. How is Achsah able to balance between family and external demands?

Achsah does a good job of balancing family and external demands; On the one hand, she does abide by societal norms by not questioning her father's method of choosing a husband for her; on the other, she is also able to speak as her own advocate for her economic needs within the same societal system. Although she first follows protocol and goes through her husband to request land, she eventually negotiates directly with her father for part of the battle winnings.

2. Is there anything the modern day reader can learn from Achsah's story?

One might learn that they should first attempt to "work within the system" in order to accomplish what they want, and one must be able to quickly assess the situation and change strategies as required. Achsah first goes through her husband, but after trying to work through him, she acts independently and uses her bond with her father to get what she needs. Additionally, we are taught that there are specific battles worth fighting. Achsah chooses to fight for financial stability, but does not challenge the arrangement her father makes for her to marry the best warrior.

Leah (Gen 29:31-35)

1. Where would you place Leah on a scale with career and family at polar ends?

The reader has no knowledge of Leah working outside of the home or being involved in anything other than typical household duties. The narrative tells us that Leah is a devoted wife and mother; she is portrayed as someone whose sole focus is family. Note that her sister is a shepherdess! The only woman in the Bible to hold this position.

2. What can we tell about Leah's feelings towards family by the names she gives her sons?

It is clear how much Leah values family by the pride and exhilaration she exhibits over her children. It is also obvious that all Leah desires is the love of her husband, which she does not have. With the first three children, she chooses names that show her hope for love to build between her and her husband. By the fourth child, she appears to either give up hope or to have fulfilled it (i.e., she now feels that she has what she needs), and merely thanks God..

Huldah (II Kings 22:14-20)

1. How is Huldah different than most other women we learn about in the Bible?

Most women in the Bible are discussed in terms of their family status, and their narratives typically revolve around domestic life. Huldah is as close as we get to an example of a career woman; she is a prophet. We do not know if Huldah has any children, if she is barren, or even if she desires children. Although these are typically very important elements included in discussions about women in the Bible, we are

only told that Huldah is married. We do know that King Josiah's men respect her authority and value her expertise enough to come and ask for her help, and once Huldah authenticates the scroll, King Josiah unquestionably implements the scroll's laws.

2. Even though Huldah's story is brief, why do many scholars consider her a very important woman in the Bible?

Huldah is considered a very important female character because she is taken so seriously by the narrator and the others in the story. It is significant that the King's delegation goes to her to authenticate a scroll found at the Temple mostly based on her strong reputation. They and the king himself recognize her authority and authenticity as a spokesperson for God and do not question her authority. Once Huldah authenticates the scroll, its content is immediately placed into law, making her the most authoritative woman in the Bible. She may even be the most successful prophet, as most other prophets' commentaries are ignored while they are still living.

Esther (Esther 4:12-17)

1. What is the difference between Vashti's behavior and Esther's? And what does it suggest about women's ability to achieve their goals?
2. Given what happens to Vashti at the beginning of this story, is there really room for women in this society to play any part other than one inside the bedroom?

- A. Yes. Having a character that pushes back against male domination written into the story proves that women in this time do perform roles other than just those of sexual objects.
 - B. No. Vashti is clearly included in this story only as a warning to all women against speaking in opposition to societal norms. It proves that women of this time are not supposed to play any roles except ones inside the bedroom.
 - C. The story of Vashti serves as a guide to Esther on how best to act; Esther learns from Vashti's experience, and adapts her behavior accordingly to help her be successful. She saw that direct confrontation did not work with this particular man and went about her business in an indirect manner. Does this story suggest that women should prefer this mode?
- 3. What difference does it make whether we understand Esther in 5:1 to be putting on royal apparel or royalty?
 - 4. Do you think Esther is a good role model for balancing family and career?

We have no knowledge that Esther ever has children; we do know she is a wife and has other family, such as Mordecai, with whom she is close. We also know that at some point, she stands up for what is right and speaks to her husband to save herself and the Jewish people; this shows bravery. Esther is an important example of balancing career (as a queen who has some access to public power) and family that we have. Her family commitments make it possible for her to know what is going on

and to have some guidance. Her life in her profession as queen in the palace teaches her how to be effective with the king.

5. What really prompts Esther to act and how do we respond to this? What is it that allows women to risk?

Aishet Chayil/ Woman of Valor (Proverbs 31:10-31)

1. After reading this poem, do you feel that this “woman of valor” exemplifies a good balance between family and career?

This poem portrays both a woman who is powerful within the household, as well as one who is very powerful outside of the household. She possesses good character traits and performs goal- oriented tasks. If a woman were to possess all of these traits, she would necessarily be very diverse. We can surmise that this poem gives examples from both realms so that a housewife, a career woman, or someone who tries to balance between both worlds can relate.

2. Do you see this “woman of valor” as attainable?

I do not think it is realistic to try to emulate to a high degree each and every one of the qualities discussed in the poem. Most women probably only possess some of the characteristics or possibly all of them to a lesser degree. The poem offers no measure of magnitude for the responsibilities and traits that are outlined; consequently, Aishet Chayil speaks to a broad range of women. The poem also breaks stereotypes; it describes the woman as supplying provisions for the household, acquiring land, planting vineyards, and making her business thrive, all typically male stereotypes.

The “woman of valor” is also praised for her vigor, generosity, wisdom, grace, and beauty; the average woman is generally praised for only some of these characteristics. Beatrice Lawrence believes,

"This model is damaging, to say the least, because of its sheer untenability. Carol R. Fontaine calls the woman of valor a ‘Super Mom,’ a picture of efficiency and approved domestic values to which few real human women are able to live up," and asks pointedly about her work ethic: ‘is this a virtue or a symptom of dysfunction? Does she, like the Hebrew God (ps121.4) suffer from sleep deprivation? Is her sleeplessness a sign of something to which we should be paying more attention?’ A gender-critical lens provides the reader with the sense that something is wrong with this poem, that its expectations are too high, that its values are rooted in outdated gender roles, and that a modern reader should not accept it too willingly.’

Others argue conversely that praising all of these qualities does not mean that every woman is expected to combine them. The poem is obviously an idealization from A to Z. But the fact that women’s virtues are celebrated is already important. She is not praised for being merely a vessel for producing sons. On the contrary, she is praised for being a productive, effective manager of a complex household that is the foundation of society. She, not her husband, is praised. Her beauty is not an issue; her strength is the result of generosity, efficiency etc. It is an important counter point to valorizing women for superficial, trivial virtues.

3. If someone sang this poem to you would you feel honored or offended?

Activity

1. In one column, ask participants to list three women in high powered positions and three women in more family oriented roles. (e.g., Hillary Clinton, Sarah Palin, Oprah Winfrey, Carol Brady, Martha Stewart, “Stepford wife”)
2. In the next column, ask participants to list facts they know about each character they wrote down. (e.g., Hillary Clinton- married to Bill, has a daughter, Chelsea; Martha Stewart- made herself a name, has her own show, started a magazine, and started a cooking line.)
3. Ask participants to comment on whether or not the examples they came up with are what they would consider “balanced”.

Sacred Time

On Purim, many women dress up as Queen Esther. However, there is a growing movement to dress up as Queen Vashti. Queen Vashti puts her foot down for what she believes is right, but is excommunicated from the palace for her actions. Queen Esther uses her position of power to save the Jewish people, yet some see her as possibly compromising her true identity and almost fully assimilating.

There are strong arguments for each woman. Break the participants into two groups “team Vashti” and “team Esther” and have them debate who is a better character and why.

Conclusion

1. Can women achieve success in both realms? Are decisions about family and career decisions that fit into column A or B on the board from the set introduction?
2. What elements or priorities among the issues of family and career do people find most challenging? Is it important for everyone to find a balance, or is it acceptable to be more involved with family or career? Is it important for you to find a balance? Does it matter what society thinks is best?

Working Women or Woman's Work?

Leah (Genesis 29:34-35)

לד ותהר עוד ותלד בן ותאמר עתה הפעם ילונה אישׁי אלי כי ילדתי לו
שְׁלֹשָׁה בָּנִים עַל־כֵּן קָרָא שְׁמוֹ לֵוִי:

Again she conceived again and bore a son, and said, "This time my husband will become attached¹ to me, because I have borne him three sons." Therefore he was named² Levi³.

לה ותהר עוד ותלד בן ותאמר הפעם אוֹדֶה אֶת־יְהוָה עַל־כֵּן קָרָאָה שְׁמוֹ
יְהוּדָה וַתַּעֲמֹד מִלֵּדָתָהּ:

And she conceived again and bore a son, and said, "This time I will give thanks⁴ God." Therefore she named him Judah. Then she stopped bearing.

Achsah (Judges 14:15)

טו ויהי | בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי וַיֹּאמְרוּ לְאִשְׁת־שַׁמְשׁוֹן פִּתִּי אֶת־אִישׁךָ וַיַּגֵּד־לָנוּ
אֶת־הַחִידָה פֶּן־נִשְׂרֹף אוֹתְךָ וְאֶת־בֵּית אָבִיךָ בָּאֵשׁ הַלִּיךְ־שָׁנוּ קִרְאָתָם לָנוּ
הָלֹא:

And on the seventh day, and they said to the woman of Samson, "Seduce⁵ your husband to provide us with the riddle; else we shall put you and your father's household to the fire; have you invited us here in order to impoverish us?"

Huldah (2 Kings 22:14-15)

יד וַיֵּלֶךְ חִלְקִיָּהוּ הַכֹּהֵן וְאַחִיקָם וְעַכְבּוֹר וְשַׁפָּן וַעֲשִׂיָּה אֶל־חִלְדָּה הַנְּבִיאָה
אִשְׁת־ | שָׁלֹם בֶּן־תְּקוּהָ בֶּן־חֲרָחַס שֹׁמֵר הַבְּגָדִים וְהִיא יֹשֶׁבֶת בִּירוּשָׁלַם
בְּמִשְׁנֶה וַיְדַבְּרוּ אֵלֶיהָ:

So the priest Hilkiah, and Ahikam, Achbor, Shaphan, and Asaiah went to the prophetess Huldah- the wife of Shallum son of Tikvah son of Harhas, the keeper of the wardrobe- who was living in Jerusalem in the Mishneh, and they spoke to her.

1. With each name given there is a Hebrew pun used. Here the Hebrew root y-l-h meaning "attached" is a pun on the name Levi which is given to the son. Rachel Haverlock, in *The Torah a Women's Commentary*, 165.
2. The Hebrew here literally translates to "he named him." however this cannot refer to Jacob because the impersonal subject has the force of passive. Sarna in the *JPS Commentary of Genesis*, 207.
3. Sarna in the *JPS Commentary of Genesis* states that the name is given a purely secular twist, for it articulates the mother's yearning for her husbands companionship. 207.
4. Here the name Judah, Yehudah, is a pun on the "thanks" that Leah gives to God. Rachel Haverlock, in *The Torah a Women's Commentary*, 165.
5. The root is related to the word "to open up." The woman pries open her man psychologically and sexually. Susan Niditch, *Judges*, 153.

טו וַתֹּאמֶר אֲלֵיהֶם כֹּה-אָמַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲמַרוּ לְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-שָׁלַח
אֶתְכֶם אֵלַי

And she said to them, "Thus said Adonai, the God of Israel: Say to the man who sent you to me:"

Esther (4:14; 5:1a)

יֵד כִּי אִם-הִחְרַשׁ תִּחְרִישִׁי בַּעֲת הַזֹּאת רִנָּח וְהַצֹּלָה יַעֲמֹד לַיהוּדִים מִמָּקוֹם
אַחֵר⁶ וְאֶת וּבֵית-אָבִיךָ תֵּאבְדוּ וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם-לָעַת כָּזֹאת הִנָּעַתָּ לַמְּלָכוֹת

On the contrary, if you keep silent in this time, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father's house will perish. And who knows, if it is not for a time like this that you have come to the kingdom?"⁷

א וַיְהִי | בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וַתִּלְבַּשׁ אֶסְתֵּר מַלְכוּת וַתַּעֲמֹד בַּחֲצַר בֵּית-הַמֶּלֶךְ...:

On the third day, Esther put on royalty⁸ and stood in the inner court in the King's house...

6. רִנָּח וְהַצֹּלָה יַעֲמֹד לַיהוּדִים מִמָּקוֹם אַחֵר this phrase literally means "will relief and deliverance arise for the jews from any other place?" Bush states, "two problems with the translation and understanding of this clause have precluded a coherent understanding of vv13-14. The expression makom acher, "another place," has been understood by both ancient and modern commentators as a surrogate for or veiled allusion to God. Recent discussion, however, has demonstrated that this interpretation can no longer be maintained. ...Hence, another place must refer to some other human source of deliverance. Ruth/Esther. *Word Biblical Commentary*, Fredric Bush, 396.
7. This is in the form of a rhetorical question, that Esther's appeal is the only hope for the jews is highly emphatic. Consequently, the "who knows?" of this question does not express doubt or skepticism about the providential purpose of her position as queen. On the contrary, it expresses a confident hope. (cf. Jonah 3:9; Clines, 302; see the role of God in the story in Theme and Purpose in the Introduction to Esther). *Word Biblical Commentary*, Ruth/Esther. Fredric Bush, 397.
8. Literally "clothed herself in royalty [i.e., 'royally']". Rudolph (VT4 [1954] 89, followed by Bardtke; cf Moore, 55; BHSn.a) argues that a word is missing before, "royalty," but the use of a substantive as an adv acc of manner is acceptable Hebrew. Bush, 402. Perhaps this means that for the first time Esther really took on her royal status as queen. Although she must have worn her royal garments many times before this time she imbued them with her own royalty.

Ancient Social Networking

“Two are better off than one, in that they have greater benefit from their earnings. For should they fall, one can raise the other; but woe betide him who is alone and falls with no companion to raise him. Further when two lie together they are warm; but how can he who is alone get warm?” (Ecclesiastes 4:9-11).

Introduction

With the advent of social media, women and men alike are forced to interact with the world differently today than in prior generations. These new methods of communication make different challenges and experiences possible. Although not inherently negative or positive, these new experiences create opportunities that did not exist until now.

February 15, 2008, 1:18 pm

Is MySpace Good for Society? A Freakonomics Quorum

By STEPHEN J. DUBNER

Two little words — “social networking” — have become a giant buzzphrase over the past couple of years, what with the worldwide march of Facebook and headline-ready stories about Web-assisted suicides. So what’s the net effect of social networking?

We gathered a group of wise people who spend their days thinking about this issue — **Martin Bailly, Danah Boyd, Steve Chazin, Judith Donath, Nicole Ellison, and William Reader**, — and asked them this question:

Has social networking technology (blog-friendly phones, Facebook, Twitter, etc.) made us better or worse off as a society, either from an economic, psychological, or sociological perspective?

Nicole Ellison, assistant professor of Telecommunication, Information Studies and Media at Michigan State University:

I believe the benefits provided by social network sites such as Facebook have made us better off as a society and as individuals, and that, as they continue to be adopted by more diverse populations, we will see an increase in their utility. Anecdotal evidence of positive outcomes from these technologies — such as political activities organized via Facebook or jobs found through LinkedIn — is well-known, but now a growing corpus of academic research on social networks sites supports this view as well.

Over the last three years, our research team at Michigan State University has examined the use of Facebook by undergraduate students. **Charles Steinfield, Cliff**

Lampe, and I have used surveys, interviews, and automated capture of the MSU Facebook site to try to understand how and why students use Facebook. Our original motivation was to better understand why individuals would voluntarily use a site that, based on media reports, offered them only a way to disclose information they shouldn't disclose, collect hundreds of "friends" they didn't know, and waste time better spent studying. What we found surprised us. Our survey included questions designed to assess students' "social capital," a concept that describes the benefits individuals receive from their relationships with others. Undergraduates who used Facebook intensively had higher bridging social capital scores than those who didn't, and our longitudinal data show that Facebook use preceded these social capital gains. Bridging social capital reflects the benefits we receive from our "weak ties" — people we don't know very well but who provide us with useful information and ideas. These students were using Facebook to increase the size of their social network, and therefore their access to more information and diverse perspectives. Our interview data confirmed these findings, with participants commenting on how the affordances of Facebook helped them maintain or strengthen relationships: they used the site to look up old high school acquaintances, to find out information about people in their classes or dorms that might be used to strike up a conversation, to get contact information for friends, and many other activities. These aren't the kinds of Facebook activities you are likely to read about in the media, which have encouraged widespread public concern about Facebook use by young people. Yes, there have been cases in which students have shown poor judgment regarding their profile disclosures. However, tools that enable us to engage in online self-presentation and connect with others will be increasingly part of our social and professional landscape, as social network sites continue to be embraced by businesses, non-profits, civic groups, and political organizations that value the connections these tools support. IBM, for instance, has created an internal social network site, "Beehive," to encourage more collaboration and communication across teams. In India, Babajob harnesses social networking tools to pair employers with those who seek work. We will continue to see these trends grow as social networking features are employed for fun, profit, and social good. Social technologies never have predictable and absolute positive or negative effects, which is why social scientists dread questions like these. In considering the effects of social network sites, it is clear that there are many challenges to work through — the increasing commercialization of this space, the need to construct strong privacy protections for users, and safety issues — but I believe the benefits we receive as a society provided by these tools far outweigh the risks.

William Reader, professor of psychology at Sheffield Hallam University and social networking site researcher:

From a psychological point of view, it is difficult to answer the question with any degree of certainty; the technology is simply too new and the research too equivocal. However some (such as **Barry Wellman**) have suggested that social capital hasn't really declined, but has simply moved online. As our social networks are becoming

increasingly more geographically fragmented, social network sites are a useful way for us to keep in touch and seek social contact with our friends.

Some doom-mongers have suggested that social networking technologies will eventually lead to a society in which we no longer engage in face-to-face contact with people. I don't see it. Face-to-face contact is, I believe, very important for the formation of intimate relationships (and most of us crave those). The reason for this is that friendships represent a considerable burden on our time, and our physical and emotional resources. Friends are, therefore, a big investment, and we want to be pretty sure that any friend is prepared to invest as much in us as we are in them. We therefore monitor potential friends for signals of their investment in us, and some of the best indicators of people's investment in us are those that we experience face to face.

Shared attitudes are important for friendship. We know that people like to associate with people who are like them, a predilection termed "homophily" (love of the same). The more similar we are to our friends, the less room there is for conflicts of interest. This is why I believe that social networking will never replace face-to-face communication in the formation of close friendships. Talk is cheap. Anyone can post "u r cool" on someone's "wall," or "poke" them on Facebook, but genuine smiles and laughs are a much more reliable indicators of someone's suitability as a faithful friend.

To return to the notion of social capital, we know that people are increasingly "meeting" people on social network sites before they meet them face to face. As a result of this, when many students begin university, they find themselves with a group of ready-made acquaintances. Given people's preferences for people who are like them, it could be that friendship networks become increasingly homogeneous. Is this a bad thing? It might be if, by choosing potential friends via their Facebook profiles, it means that folk cut themselves off from serendipitous encounters with those who are superficially different from them, ethnically, socio-economically, and even in terms of musical taste.

So has social networking technology made us better or worse off? My view is neither utopian nor dystopian: social networking technologies are doubtless changing society. But like anything — apart from motherhood and apple pie — whether this is good or bad depends upon what kind of society you value.¹

Social networking via the internet brings dating, and reconnecting with old friends and foes to a whole new level. With everything at one's fingertips, it seems almost impossible to hide anything, or, perhaps, in today's world, people simply don't want to hide their digital

¹ <http://freakonomics.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/02/15/is-myspace-good-for-society-a-freakonomics-quorum/?scp=2&sq=benefits%20of%20social%20networking&st=Search>

footprint. With the general population becoming increasingly more technologically savvy, we often expect both instantaneous responses and gratification. Social networking is an incredible resource to find employment, locate family members, secure one's position in society, and build community. The women of the Bible use their networking skills for all three.

While the technology of today may present new incarnations of social networking, the concept itself is ancient. The Bible provides several examples of women who work with the people around them to gain access and power in predominantly male dominated societies. Leah and Rachel start off as competitors for Jacob's affection, but once they learn to work together, they are able to give each other what they both deeply desire (Gen 30:15). Through this connection, they learn to value their husband and their respective situations, and are later able to join forces to help their family fight back against their father (Gen 31: 14-16).

In Exodus, the example of Miriam, Moses' mother, and Pharaoh's daughter all working together is a key illustration of the use of networking in order to succeed at a task (Exodus 2:1-10). Without any one of these three women, Moses' life would not be spared; their wit and skill enable them to overcome Pharaoh's decree and in this manner make the exodus from slavery in Egypt possible.

In the Book of Ruth, the women of the story work within the male oriented culture to move from famine and futility to fullness and fertility. Together, Ruth and Naomi are able to weave their way into the community to acquire food, a husband for Ruth, safety and security, and, ultimately, a son (Ruth 3-4).

Lastly, Abigail provides us with an excellent example of networking. When we first meet her, she is successfully convincing David not to kill her family and pillage their property. She stuffs him with food, butters him up with clever words, and charges him to remember her when he rises to prominence. Through her cleverness and cunning Abigail is saved, and David eventually takes her for his wife (1 Samuel 25:18-35).

These Biblical women are excellent at “leveraging relationships”; even more extraordinary is their ability to exercise power in situations not conducive to that approach. Today, however, the tools of social networking completely democratize the ways we use power and reach the masses.

Set Introduction

Ask the group...

1. Before the age of technology, how was social networking accomplished? (singles events, family connections, work conferences, meet and greets)
2. Now that technology has taken over, how do we social network today? (Start off by making a list of all the different social networking opportunities, i.e., Facebook, JDate, Gchat, Smartphones, etc.)
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of these new methods of communication?

Even though Facebook and Twitter do not exist in biblical times, many of the women prove to be great social networkers; they are able to gain access to people and events that are typically off limits to them in order to accomplish their goals. With this in

mind, we will now analyze 4 different biblical situations to determine how these women are able to accomplish so much.

Leah and Rachel (Genesis 30:14-24)

After falling in love with Rachel at first sight, Jacob makes an arrangement with her father to work for seven years in exchange for her hand in marriage. When the time comes, Rachel's father, Laban, tricks Jacob into marrying Rachel's older sister Leah's instead. Jacob has to work another seven years until he is given Rachel (Gen 30).

Rachel is loved, but is barren; her barrenness reminds us of our other matriarchs, Sarah and Rebecca. Leah, on the other hand, is very fertile, and gives Jacob several sons soon after marriage. Rachel and Leah do not get along because they are jealous of each other's lot in life. Rachel is jealous of Leah's fertility and her many sons; Leah covets the love that Jacob feels for Rachel (Gen 29:30- 30:1). "Rachel enjoys Jacob's love but for a long time lacks the one thing her society requires for a woman to gain respect."² Both sisters want what the other possesses, and this generates great tension between the two. Biblical scholar Alice Bellis suggests that even though the women show hostility towards one another, they finally unite against their father because they both hold him accountable for putting them in the problematic situation of being married to the same man³ The text also shows that Rachel and Leah are upset because they believe their father regards them as outsiders; after he sells them, he uses up their share in the family resources, leaving them with nothing (Gen 31:14-16).

This is another story in the Bible that depicts the theme of moving from barrenness to fertility. *The Torah: A Woman's Commentary* suggests that the "male heroes of the Bible seek to conquer, claim and sanctify land, whereas the female heroes strive to inscribe their

² Alice Ogden Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*. (Louisville London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 72.

³ *Ibid.*, 72.

memory on the bodies of their heirs; the acts of birthing and naming function as the counterpart to those of inaugurating and settling territory.”⁴ The story is also about competition between women which differs from that among the men in Genesis in that it produces life rather than leads to attempted murder.

One day, barren Rachel tries to acquire Leah’s son’s mandrakes, a plant that is known as an aphrodisiac as well as an aid to conception⁵. At first, Leah objects and explains why: She accuses Rachel of stealing Jacob’s heart. But then Rachel offers to give up her night with Jacob in exchange, something that Leah (who longs for Jacob’s affection) apparently values (Gen 30:14-16). The mandrakes are critical to Rachel because of the mysterious power they appear to possess. It is at this point in their networking that both sisters choose to help one another to achieve their individual goals, which later leads to them working together to reach a shared goal.

Discussion Questions

1. What do these women do that enables them to begin to work together to achieve a common goal?
2. Is this an example of positive or negative social networking?
3. What similarities to your everyday life can you draw from this story of communication and networking?

⁴ Rachel Haverlock, *The Torah: A Woman’s Commentary*, ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss (New York: URJ Press, 2008), 164.

⁵ Ibid., 167.

Miriam (Exodus 2:1-10)

Before Moses' birth, Pharaoh makes a decree that all male Hebrew babies be killed. Even though it takes three women to insure Moses' survival, they are still faced with many obstacles. The three women who act to save his life are his mother, who is first introduced as a Levite woman and later called Jochebed, his sister, who is later called Miriam yet only referred to here as his sister, and Pharaoh's unnamed daughter.

Susan Niditch points out that the liberation of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt begins with the saving acts of women. She says that, "Deeply wise in fundamental, life sustaining ways, these women understand instinctively that Pharaoh should be disobeyed, and with initiative, they act on this knowledge. ... Thus, from these women filled with a power rooted in moral reason, an ethical concern for life, and the capacity to empathize, we learn a valuable lesson in political ethics: the very weakest in society can contribute to liberation by judiciously engaging in acts of civil disobedience."⁶

After three months, when Jochebed can no longer hide her son Moses, she puts him in a wicker basket, caulked to make it waterproofed, and places it among the reeds of the Nile (Ex 2: 3). Miriam, Moses' sister, stations herself by the Nile to see what will happen to Moses (Ex 2:4).

When Pharaoh's daughter spots the basket, she sends her slave girl to fetch it. She looks inside and discovers the baby, and, due to her father's recent decree, assumes the abandoned child must be a Hebrew. Previously, some scholars believed that Pharaoh's daughter declared

⁶ Susan Niditch, *The Torah: A Woman's Commentary*. ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss (New York: URJ Press, 2008), 324.

baby Moses to be a Hebrew because he is circumcised. This may not be the case, however, because it is a common practice for Egyptians of this time to also circumcise their sons. Then the baby's young sister asks Pharaoh's daughter if she wants her to find a nurse maid for the child. This young girl (Miriam) is so assertive she initiates the conversation and then asks a persuasive question.

At this point, Pharaoh's daughter rescues the baby and provides safety for him while Miriam locates a Hebrew nursemaid, Jochebed, (the biological mother) to care for the baby; later, she names him Moses. The name Moses means "take out." The act of taking Moses out of the water is a compassionate act that inevitably saves his life.

J. Cheryl Exum, a biblical scholar, points out the absence of male characters in this story. Moses' father is not even named and disappears from the scene, yet this is the birth story of one of our greatest biblical characters. Bellis adds that it is important for women to play a dominant role in this story, because, typically, women are seen primarily as child bearers.⁷

Discussion Questions

1. What does each of the women contribute to the survival of the baby, and how are these women able to work together to achieve a common goal?
2. Are these women's ethnic, religious and class backgrounds important for showing how diversity influences social networking?

⁷ Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes*. 90.

3. What similarities to your everyday life can you draw from this story of communication and networking?

Abigail and David (1 Samuel 25:18-42)

Abigail is one of the most forward acting women in the Bible. She not only knows what she wants, but also is unwilling to let an opportunity pass her by. David has demanded payment for protection from her wealthy husband. Abigail is introduced as a beautiful, wise woman. When her husband's servants tell her that her husband has made a devastating mistake by turning down David's request, she realizes this decision will inevitably destroy their household. She jumps into action by quickly preparing a feast to take to him and his men. Scholars believe that the fact that she has food on hand is not only a sign that she is very wealthy, but also that she understands men. After she prepares the food, she rapidly saddles up and goes out to meet David, which is important because it symbolizes her swiftness to act, and her willingness to go and meet David rather than waiting for him to come to her. When Abigail meets up with David, every word she speaks is carefully chosen and eloquently stated.

First, Abigail lowers herself to the ground (1 Sam 25:23), demonstrating a tremendous amount of respect for David. Following this overt show of honor, she asks permission to speak to David. She then assumes the blame for her husband having denied David's request; she continues by both insulting her husband and, ultimately, apologizing for him, suggesting her that David forgive this unworthy man.

Afterwards, Abigail offers presents to David for his young followers, and then immediately strokes his ego with sweet words; she alludes to his divine purpose of doing God's work, fighting God's battles, and ultimately ruling over Israel (1 Sam 25: 27-30). She concludes this extensive outpouring of political flattery by asking David not to forget her (1 Sam 25:31). Rabbinic sources call Abigail a prophet because of her seemingly prophesying knowledge of David as a divinely chosen King over Israel. As readers, we are already aware that David will be the future king, but we are confused as to how Abigail knows this when no

one else in the story does. This, however, is not so much prophecy as an astute understanding of a man like

David. Apparently Abigail is able to recognize David's own ambition (depicted in earlier chapters) and is able to speak to that side of him.

Abigail is the ultimate political expert in this scenario; she sees leadership traits in David and lets him know that she believes he will rise to the top, so she places herself in good standing with him. Fearing for her life and the wealth of her household, Abigail initially approaches David only to secure these things, but further ensures her safety and position in society by asking David to "remember her"(1 Sam 25:31).

In the end, Abigail's husband is struck down by God and dies (1 Sam 25:38). The suddenness of this event leaves the reader to believe that Nabal's death is God showing His favor for David. David not only remembers Abigail but also woos her and makes her his wife.

Discussion Questions

1. How is Abigail able to make herself "heard" by David?
2. Is this an example of positive or negative social networking?
3. What similarities to your everyday life can you draw from this story of communication and networking?

Ruth (Ruth 3:1-13)

Naomi leaves her home in Judah and goes to Moab along with her husband and sons to avoid the famine. In Moab, her husband dies and both of Naomi's sons take Moabite wives, Ruth and Orpah. After her sons also die, Naomi heads back towards home (Ruth 1:7); she tells both daughters-in-law to return home. Naomi's home in Judah is unknown to both daughters-in-law, and may possibly hold prejudices against them for being Moabites. On the other hand, returning to their mothers' homes will likely be familiar, with welcoming families and new prospects for marriage. Orpah listens to Naomi and returns to her family, but Ruth is seen as a hero for staying by her mother-in-law's side. Neither of them knows what is in store for them if they travel to Naomi's home, which makes Ruth's actions even more daring and a meaningful show of devotion to Naomi. Once there, Ruth is the one who goes out and finds food and completely takes care of Naomi and her needs (Ruth 2:2). Naomi seems too passive and too bitter (as she explains in 1:20-21) to act on her own behalf beyond returning home.

Only after Ruth comes home with news that she has been kindly received by a leading man, Boaz, does Naomi begin to revive and show interest in their fate (2:19-22).

In Chapter 3, Naomi finally takes the initiative and helps Ruth by telling her how to get close to Boaz. Naomi says to Ruth, "Daughter, I must seek a home for you, where you may be happy." Interestingly, Naomi uses the Hebrew term *menoach*, which literally means "rest," not "home." Naomi believes that in order for Ruth to have a home and peace of mind, and find comfort, she must have a husband. Naomi tells Ruth that her kinsman, Boaz, who had already shown kindness to Ruth, will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor that night

(3:2). Naomi instructs Ruth, “Bathe, anoint yourself, dress up, and go down to the threshing floor. But do not disclose yourself to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, note the place where he lies down, and go over and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what you are to do” (3:3-4). These directions are very clear and precise. But also surprising. Ruth is to get dressed up and sneak into the threshing room. She is not supposed to let herself be detected until after Boaz eats, drinks, and falls asleep. To make sure she lies at the right man’s feet, she is supposed to make a note of where Boaz goes to sleep, and, so she will not be seen by the other men, she is to go lie at Boaz’s feet and wait for his instructions. After listening to Naomi’s guidance, Ruth replies, “I will do everything you tell me” (3:5); she seems to understand that a close relationship with Boaz will provide a steady source of food and security. Ruth goes to Boaz, waits for him to eat, drink, and finally lie down, in a cheerful mood, beside the grain pile (3:7). After he falls asleep, Ruth sneaks over, uncovers his feet, and lies down. In the middle of the night, Boaz gives a start and pulls back- there is a woman lying at his feet (3:8). The text leaves some of the actual events of the evening ambiguous; we do not know what did or did not take place between the two; perhaps Ruth’s gesture of sleeping at his feet is enough for Boaz to take action on her behalf; perhaps more happened between them. In any case, Ruth requests of Boaz that he help her because he is a relative with responsibilities as a redeemer. He Boaz agrees. The next day he offers Ruth marriage, and secures for her a home, peace of mind, and comfort.. As a result of these actions, Ruth gives birth to a son who becomes King David’s grandfather (Ruth 4:16-22).

Consequently, all the women in the town say to Naomi, “Blessed be God, who has not withheld a redeemer from you today! May his name be perpetuated in Israel! He will renew

your life and sustain your old age; for he is born of your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons” (4:14-15). We further read that Naomi then took the child and held him to her bosom becoming his foster mother and the women gave him a name saying, “A son is born to Naomi!” (4:17).

Discussion Questions

1. In this story, there are three main characters that network with each other. What do Naomi’s instructions tell us about the nature of Ruth’s action?
2. Is this an example of positive or negative social networking?
3. What similarities to your everyday life can you draw from this story of communication and networking?
4. What role does Naomi play in this scenario and at what point does she act?

Additional thoughts and Questions for the Instructor about the Discussion Questions

Leah and Rachel

1. How are these women able to work together to achieve a common goal?

Both Leah and Rachel put their own needs first, but in order to do this they must help the other sister. Leah wants her husband to love her; Rachel wants to conceive a child. Leah gives up her mandrakes in exchange for a night of pleasure with Jacob, hoping to gain his affection or perhaps just for the pleasure of his company, while Rachel gives up her evening with Jacob to take advantage of Leah's mandrakes in the hopes of becoming pregnant. Up to that point, Leah and Rachel compete and do not get along. There are different ways to understand the scenes between them. On the one hand, perhaps Rachel does not want Jacob to spend more time with Leah, especially since Leah has already conceived so many children. Leah probably does not want Rachel to conceive since it is the only thing she has that her sister does not. Therefore, it is only out of desperation for personal goals that Leah and Rachel come to this arrangement.

On the other hand, it is possible that only when they speak directly to each other, and when Leah is able to express her feelings and sense of frustration, that the two women begin to understand each other's needs and predicament and are able to compromise and give each other what they can.

2. Is it also possible that they finally listen to each other?

This is the only place in the story where Leah and Rachel actually speak to each other; this is where Leah expresses her grievance for the first time, aside from the

names she chooses for her children. Facing each other to talk through differences, as well as the children's names chosen by Leah expressing her wants, are excellent examples of how these women work together to achieve individual goals.

Additionally, both women work together to achieve a common goal for the good of their family; they fight against their father, Laban, because he is not allowing them to advance financially.

3. Is this an example of positive or negative social networking?

Miriam

1. How are these women able to work together to achieve a goal?

Three women, Miriam, Jochebed, and Pharaoh's daughter come together for a common goal, prevent baby Moses from being killed. By doing so, they are able to achieve personal goals, as well. Everyone seems to get what they want... to some degree... by working together and operating with the bigger picture in mind.

Pharaoh's daughter is a rescuer; she takes pity on baby Moses and shows compassion for him. These character traits are evidenced by the name she gives the baby, Moses. By taking him in and naming him she saves his life. Miriam's assertiveness and coaxing use of language helps persuade Pharaoh's daughter to become Moses' foster mother. Miriam shows us that she is full of courage and *hutzpah*. She stays close to her brother to discover what his fate will be, and to possibly have some impact on that fate. Miriam does this at a young age with no parents telling her what to do or giving her advice; she does this even after everyone else gives up. Next, Miriam approaches

Pharaoh's daughter and persuasively suggests how she can keep this child. Miriam's heroic actions allow Moses to not only survive, but also to grow up knowing his birth family and his true heritage. Jochebed is shown as a woman who does as much as she can; she does not want to have her firstborn die, so she hides him for as long as possible.

2. What similarities to your everyday life can you draw from this story of communication and networking?

This is a great example of how social networking, when done properly, can bridge huge boundaries by creating unlimited opportunities for diverse people to build common threads and accomplish big things. Facebook provides the space for mothers to connect with other mothers in the area; it is also great for promoting community events at synagogues, keeping up with people, and raising money for charities. These women come from different ethnicities, religion and class, just as the people who connect through facebook.

Abigail

1. How is Abigail able to make herself "heard" by David?

In this setting, Abigail is a successful politician and persuasive speaker. She does not start the conversation with David by begging for security or even her own life.

Rather, she strengthens David's ego by speaking about God being on his side; she even goes so far as to say that he will rule over Israel one day.

Abigail could never secure herself a place in the palace by merely asking for it. She is able to talk her way out of David killing her household and ravaging their commodities by working quickly to provide him with a delicious meal and treats, and then sweet talking him with visions of his enemies falling before him and his eventual role as King of Israel.

Abigail artfully speaks to David's emotions by telling him he will be great, which boosts his ego; she also feeds him and his men, and asks him to remember her. Whether or not Abigail has anyway of foreseeing the future, her technique is one we can all learn from. She has no idea that David will really rule over Israel, but she encounters a charismatic man who could possibly be king one day, so she covers all of her bases, strokes his ego, and asks him to remember her. She understands his ambition, understands who she is dealing with, so she knows exactly how to address him; like any good speaker, she knows her audience.

2. Is this an example of positive or negative social networking?

Ruth

1. In this story there are three main characters that network with each other. What do Naomi's instructions tell about the nature of Ruth's action?

Ruth follows specific instructions to set the stage for Boaz to notice her. Once Ruth get's Boaz's attention, she deviates from Naomi's plan and does not wait for Boaz to tell her what to do. Instead, she takes the initiative and speaks to Boaz, eloquently and

with courage, and tells him what to do. She directs Boaz to spread his cloak over her, and then she even has the *hutzpah* to remind him that as kinsman, he has the obligation to redeem her; lastly, Ruth makes the request that he redeem her.

Scholars are unsure of what generally occurs on the threshing floor, whether this is a common place for prostitutes or if it is only for men. However, the text is rather clear that Ruth needs to be sneaky and not be caught going or coming. Frymer-Kensky concludes that it is imperative that Ruth not be caught because whatever happens there is inappropriate. If Ruth is seen, the gossip about her around town will ruin the chances of her status being redeemed.⁸

2. Is this an example of positive or negative social networking?

Ruth and Naomi both get what they are looking for; they have food on the table, Ruth is married off, and Naomi receives a child who is expected to provide for her old age and whose lineage is linked to King David. However, these goals are reached through very questionable means. Some might say the end justifies the means, while others would clearly disagree.

3. What role does Naomi play in this situation?

Naomi is the matchmaker in this situation. She tells Ruth who to approach and how to approach him in order to obtain what she wants. Naomi gives advice about getting all

⁸ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of their Stories*. (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 248.

dolled up, and about sneaking around, but there is no way for us to know whether or not this is the only way for Ruth to achieve the same result. We are also left to wonder why Naomi did not send Ruth to her closest relative (who remains unnamed). Did Naomi know about him? Did she know he would not redeem them? It is important to see that Naomi herself needed some encouragement before she could become active in looking out for Ruth. This she gets from Ruth who comes back with food in chapter 2. In other words, the women strengthen each other along the way.

In the beginning of the story, Naomi does not play an active role leading Ruth to Boaz; for some reason, Naomi is not helpful until after Boaz first notices Ruth.

Activity

If time permits, have participants make a social networking tool for one of the women in today's discussion. This could be a facebook site, a twitter post, or any other social networking tool they are familiar with. The process of making the tool will help assess how much of the story they internalize and can retain after the class.

Sacred Time

Passover revolves around the story of Exodus. The Talmud- the oral law written by the Rabbis, actually states that the most important part of the Passover Seder is to entertain the children so that they learn the story of the Exodus. By participating in the Seder, one symbolically relives the Exodus from Egypt. The Exodus story really begins with women networking and ends with women dancing in ecstasy after crossing the sea (Exodus 15:20-21).

Place some of the social networking women's names around the room and have participants write leadership characteristics under each name. Some examples of names are Moses' mother (Jochebed), Miriam, and Pharaoh's daughter.

Reflecting on Passover, ask if there are other women in history or the present who are associated with liberation of their people and compare what they did. Some women's Haggadahs include such names.

Conclusion

1. Bring the participants back together to share their answers to the discussion questions, and the social networking sites they create.
2. Ask them who they believe is the best example of social networking? The worst? The most controversial?

Ancient Social Networking

Miriam (Exodus 2:4;7)

ד וַתִּתְצַב אַחֲתוֹ מֵרֶחֶק לְדַעַה מֶה־יַּעֲשֶׂה לוֹ:

And his sister¹ stationed herself at a distance², to learn what would befall him.

ז וַתֹּאמֶר אַחֲתוֹ אֶל־בֵּת־פַּרְעֹה הַאֵלֶּךְ וְקִרְאתִי לָךְ אִשָּׁה מִיִּלְּקֶת מִן הָעִבְרִית וְתִינֵק לָךְ אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד:

Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a Hebrew nurse³ to suckle the child for you⁴?"⁵

Leah and Rachel (Genesis 30:15;23)

טו וַתֹּאמֶר לָהּ הַמַּעֲטָה קִחְתִּיךָ אֶת־אִישִׁי וְלָקַחְתָּ גַם אֶת־דֹּדְאִי בְנִי וַתֹּאמֶר רָחֵל לָכֵן יִשְׁכַּב עִמּוֹ הַלַּיְלָה תַּחַת דֹּדְאִי בְנִי:

15 But she said to her, "Was it not enough for you to take away my husband, that you would also take away my son's mandrakes⁶?" Rachel replied, "I promise⁸, he shall lie with you⁹

1. Named Miriam in 15:20.

2. Sarna in the *JPS Commentary of Exodus* suggests this distance is important so as to be inconspicuous and not arouse suspicions that the child was not really abandoned. p. 9. Adele Berlin in *The Torah: A Women's Torah Commentary (TAWC)* states that there is no evidence that her parents sent her to watch over the baby. Rather it is her audacity and ingenuity that drives her actions (Berlin, *TAWC*, 311)

3. Moses's sister offers to go find a wet nurse for the baby, because she knows that her mother will be able to do it, and then they will be able to raise the baby a little longer. She also plants the idea in Pharaoh's daughter's head that she can keep the child because someone will be found to nurse him.

4. This "you" is very important it is a strategic emotional ploy to build a connection in Pharaoh's daughters mind between the baby and herself.

5. Sarna points out that Pharaoh's plot is thwarted by his own daughter. Not only does she save the man who will one day redeem the Israelites but she also pays his birth mother to nurse her own son. This arrangement that Pharaoh's daughter makes is common in Mesopotamian legal documents where once the baby is weaned it will be returned to the person who found it to be adopted (Sarna, *Exodus*, 10).

6. Mandrakes have been identified as wild fruit that grows in the fields. Chemical analysis shows that this plant contains emetic, and narcotic substances, with a heavy fragrance that made it an aphrodisiac. This would explain why both sisters valued the Mandrakes so much, However the narrator shows the reader that even though Rachel receives the mandrakes she remains barren, yet Leah bears three more children before "God remembers Rachel," and she conceives. This is to show that everything is in Gods control. (Sarna, *Exodus*, 209).

7. Sarna suggests that pairing "mandrakes" and "my husband" was used to induce Jacob to resume his conjugal duty. p. 209. *Jewish Study Bible* suggests that the bitterness of "Leah's tragic position as the wife of Jacob never wanted and never loved is especially poignant. She has to bargain with her sister to hire her husband just to sleep with her" (*JSB*, .61).

8. The Hebrew translated as "promise" here is *lakhen*, "therefore." This verb is first used in the book of Exodus in 4:15 referring to the promise to Cain that even though he is being punished he will remain under God's care. Here the promise is between Leah and Rachel, but by using this verb perhaps it implies that God is witness to the promise and will insure it will be followed through. (Sarna, *Exodus*, 35.)

9. The Hebrew verb used here is sh-k-v, which when used in Genesis with sexual nuance, never connotes a relationship of marital love but is invariably used in unsavory circumstances. (Sarna in the *JPS Commentary of Exodus*, P 209.)

tonight, in return for your son's mandrakes."¹⁰

כג וַתֵּהָר וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַתֹּאמֶר אֶסְף אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הַחֲרָפָתִי:

23 She conceived and bore a son, and said, "God¹¹ has taken away my disgrace."¹²

Abigail (1 Samuel 25:28;31)

כח שָׂא נָא לִפְשֵׁעַ אֲמָתְךָ כִּי־עָשָׂה יַעֲשֶׂה יְהוָה לְאֲדֹנָי בֵּית נַאֲמֹן כִּי־מִלְחָמוֹת
יְהוָה אֲדֹנָי נִלְחָם וְרָעָה לֹא־תִמָּצֵא בְּךָ מִיָּמֶיךָ:

28 Please pardon your hand maid's misdeed. For Adonai will grant my lord an enduring house¹³, because my lord is fighting Adonai's battles and no wrong is ever¹⁴ to be found in you.

לא וְלֹא־תִהְיֶה זֹאת | לְךָ לְפִיּוֹקָה וּלְמַכְשׁוֹל לֵב לְאֲדֹנָי וּלְשֹׁפֵךְ־דָּם חַנּוּם
וּלְהוֹשִׁיעַ אֲדֹנָי לוֹ וְהִיטֵב יְהוָה לְאֲדֹנָי וְזָכַרְתָּ אֶת־אֲמָתְךָ:

31 Do not let this be a cause of stumbling and of faltering courage to my lord that you have shed blood needlessly¹⁵ and that my lord sought redress with his own hands, And when God has prospered my lord¹⁶, remember¹⁷ your maid."

Ruth (Ruth 3:3;9)

ג וּרְחַצְתִּי | וְסָכַתִּי וְשָׁמַתִּי שְׂמִלַּתִּיךָ עָלַי וְיִרְדָּתִי [וְיִרְדָּתִי] הַגֶּרֶן
אֶל־תְּנוּדַעִי לְאִישׁ עַד כִּלְתּוֹ לְאַכֹּל וּלְשִׁתּוֹת:

3 So bathe and anoint yourself, dress up¹⁸, and go down to the threshing floor. But do not

10. Rachel used Leah's emotional response as a starting point for negotiations. Because she saw how vulnerable her sister was she was able to negotiate up from "some mandrakes" to presumably all of her son's mandrakes.

11. Sarna in the *JPS Commentary of Exodus* points out that the announcement about Joseph, the birth narrative is completed. It opens and closes with the use of the divine name YHVH (29:31; 30:24) P. 210.

12. Names in the Bible are always used to enhance the story. Here Rachel uses the name Joseph to request another child from God. Joseph means "may God add on another child for me" This request is nicely balanced by a pious statement from Rachel, "God has removed my disgrace." She saw her bareness as a disgrace that was removed when she bore a son. Adele Berlin in (TAWC), P. 168. 13. Jewish Study Bible states that Abigail knows that David will be king and that his dynasty will endure, because he is fighting the "battles of God." The battles of God are also referred to in 18:17 and could be know as the battles of Israel. p. 609.

¹⁴. Literally, "all your days."

15. Refraining from blood shed is in David's best interest. It is a political decision on David's part to not have unnecessary blood on his hands.

16. When David is made king by God.

17. To remember Abigail would be to reward her in some fashion. David rewards her by wooing her and making her his wife (2 Sam 25:40-42).

18. Rashi, following b Shabbat 113b, comments that Ruth reversed the order of preparation that Naomi had proposed. First she went to the threshing floor and then beautified herself, lest passersby believe her to be a harlot. According to Rashi, following Peah 8.7, Ruth's preparations related directly to the steps she took for her conversion. purified herself from her past idolatry, anointed herself with the commandments and dressed herself in Shabbat attire to abide by the laws of Shabbat.

disclose yourself to the man until he has finished eating and drinking.

ט וַיֹּאמֶר מִי־אַתָּה וַתֹּאמֶר אֲנֹכִי רוּת אִמְתְּךָ וּפְרִשְׁתָּ כְנָפְךָ עַל־אִמְתְּךָ כִּי גֵאֻלֶּה אֶתָּה:

9 And he said, "Who are you?" he asked. And she replied, "I am your hand maid Ruth. Spread your wings¹⁹ over your hand maid, for you are a redeeming kinsman."²⁰

19. The Hebrew term kanaf, used here, usually means "wing(s)." It can also refer to "robe" and is understood in Ezekiel 16:8 as reference for espousal, which is how some translators render it here see JPS and the note there). Boaz wished that Ruth find protection under God's sheltering wings (2:12); now she uses his words to inspire him to offer protection.

20. A redeeming kinsman in the Bible is obligated to help a relative in distress. Tribble believes that this bold language used by Ruth is actually a foreign woman calling an Israelite man to responsibility, by reminding Boaz of his same blessing which he bestowed upon her in the field in 2:12 when he said, "under whose wings you have come to take refuge." In the field Boaz was referring to God, However, Ruth reminds Boaz on the threshing floor that he is capable of fulfilling this blessing upon Ruth by marrying her, which as a redeemer her has an obligation to perform (*God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*. p.184).

The Original Dilemma

“God then surveyed all that [God] had made, and look- it was very good!”

(Genesis 1:31).

Introduction

Human sexuality has been around since the beginning. The lines of sexuality are often blurred, and not regularly talked about. Sexuality, however, can no longer be (and probably never really was) defined by relationships between men and women. The New York Times *Modern Love* column seems to follow the cultural pulse on sexuality. In the New York Times entry, Gili Warsett writes about struggles in relationships dealing with transgender issues...

September 10, 2010

The Anatomy of a Breakup

By GILI WARSETT

BEFORE we met, my partner had changed names from a female-sounding one to a male one, and by the time we were together, everyone we knew either called him by this new name or spoke of him with male pronouns. He identified himself as a transgender man, woman to man. It wasn't until two years after we began dating that he decided to have his breasts removed.

For him, chest surgery was the next step in transitioning genders, a symbolic and physical gesture of leaving womanhood behind. He wanted to replace his 34-C's with emptiness, a flat manly chest to the outside world and scars to him and me.

Our relationship wasn't perfect. But because he had limited contact with his parents, I was to be his primary caregiver, which entailed escorting him on the day of his surgery and playing nurse (not in a sexy way) for two weeks after the operation.

This was in San Francisco, land of blurry gender identities, where it's common to pass as “other” gendered — neither male nor female but elsewhere on the “queer” spectrum. For my partner, that expression meant a cropped butchy haircut and preppy men's clothing, usually a polo shirt and Banana Republic jeans. If his gender had matched his appearance — had he been born with a male body and joined a fraternity — we never would have followed the same orbits.

He attended a women's liberal arts college and possessed many of the same physical and social qualities of lesbians I had dated. We met in our mid-20s when we worked together, and our courtship quickly followed.

I had never dated a trans man, but for a while, before my partner began his physical changes, his gender identity didn't feel like an obstacle. I had been attracted to women and men all over the gender spectrum. What could be so difficult about dating someone who was transitioning from woman to man?

I had become friends with partners of trans men who insisted that it was rare for a relationship that began early in a person's transition to endure the pressure of physical and chemical changes that happen later. I brushed off their warnings as shallow. My partner will always be beautiful to me, I thought. Our attraction ran deeper than outward appearance; this magnetism stemmed from the mind. I would support him every step of the way. My mind-set could have been a bumper sticker: "His Body, His Choices."

We went to the surgery consultation and the date was set. The surgeon was renowned for transgender operations with impressive results. Our friends who had chosen him showed off their healed wounds, lifting their shirts to show their gender battle scars, faint pinkish, purplish or yellowish curves.

On the day of the surgery we drove to the hospital without talking. I squeezed his hand across the cup holders and privately wished that I had allowed my mother to fly out to be with me as she had offered.

My partner and I exchanged worried glances as the surgeon casually pulled a black marker from his pocket and drew circles and lines on my partner's full-breasted chest. Then he left us to wait for the anesthesiologist. I tried to interpret the blueprint on my partner's chest, but I couldn't decipher its significance for our future.

With the help of anesthesia, my partner fell asleep. I left him for a Starbucks across the street, where I sat for hours, trying to grasp the fact that he would wake up without two body parts. This was one of the sections of San Francisco that my queer friends didn't frequent, and that morning I liked being far from people I knew. Alone, I could pass for straight. I had tattoos and piercings; my hair was cropped. But in San Francisco, my look could have gone either way.

I felt both relieved and guilty to pass for straight in that Starbucks. I wanted to blend in, to escape. The longer I sat there, the more I wanted to drive away and leave my partner.

I didn't. I returned to the hospital and waited for him to wake. Once he did, I rolled him in a hospital wheelchair out to the car and helped him into the passenger seat. Each bump in the road produced a groan from him, an accusation of my carelessness. Had too much of me already broken away? Did I feel betrayed because of his physical change? At his apartment, he immediately fell asleep, and I called my best friend to pick up some videos. I told her to get something mind-numbing.

"Like what?"

"I don't know," I said. "Something girly."

“Like ‘Fried Green Tomatoes?’ ”

Too lesbian, I thought. “No.”

“ ‘Thelma and Louise?’ ”

“Maybe a television show,” I said. “I want something that will keep me occupied for two weeks.” I thought back to sitting at Starbucks. “What about ‘Sex and the City’?”

“You’re going to hate it,” she said.

I started with season one, episode one, the pilot, where we meet Carrie and her friends. For two weeks, my mind was held in a cradle of glamour, fantasy and easy sexuality. The sex on “Sex and the City” seemed as if it could have been on a show from Animal Planet or the Discovery Channel, and I watched with an anthropologist’s eye. Meanwhile, on the bed beside me slept the man I could no longer arouse by stimulating his nipples.

Quicker than most, my partner’s wounds healed and he regained his strength. At dinner parties, he joined the other trans men in lifting his shirt to compare scars. He sunned in the park among his trans friends, shirtless and tan. Once we had bonded as fellow misfits. Now he was part of a gang; he belonged. No more gender blurriness for him. Yet who and what was I?

I had fallen for a different body. No matter how hard I tried to keep up, I couldn’t transition at the same pace. I wanted to go back to the innocence of “Sex and the City,” a show that sheltered me until the credits rolled on the last episode of the final season and I could no longer hide.

He began taking testosterone and his voice deepened. Hair grew on his arms, legs and face. I wanted to be happy for him; after all, he was delighted with the changes. I tried to conceal my grief over the loss of the body I had originally desired.

About a year after my partner’s surgery, we moved to a city in the Midwest where he’d been accepted to graduate school. Largely unknown there, we easily passed for a straight couple, no longer having to explain anything about our identities. Our home was in a lesbian-friendly neighborhood, and when we encountered lesbian couples on the street, they didn’t seem to notice us.

I wasn’t sure I minded. I cycled through feelings of relief and guilt over how we now fit into the straight world. My best friend visited and noted that I was becoming increasingly uncomfortable in queer groups; I hid behind the privilege that being straight afforded me.

Although my partner and I made friends in the local queer community, I realized I was reluctant to be seen with friends who looked “different” when I was around my straight co-workers. I grew my hair long and wore makeup. I waxed my eyebrows. I couldn’t have told you what was happening to me. I had my first girlfriend at 16, and

when I told my parents, they rolled with it. Coming out then was one of the only times I had explicitly proclaimed my sexuality. I was completely unprepared at 26 to come out again.

EVENTUALLY my partner and I broke up, though it would be dishonest to blame his surgery for our split. My complaint to my best friend was that our relationship seemed to have settled into something known and stable and had lost its spark. Again, a contradiction: How had dating someone who was preoccupied with transitioning become stable and even mundane?

After we went our separate ways, new questions arose: What gender was attractive to me? Who would I date? Was I still a lesbian, as I had once decided? Was I attracted strictly to preoperative transgender men? Could I ultimately be straight?

The more I explored dating, the more I felt at odds with the queer community, though I also felt guilty about my failure to sustain love for someone who was transgender.

Now, several years later, my current relationship may seem to be a straight one; my partner is a non-trans man. I've found that there's privilege but also invisibility that comes with passing — an aspect of my life about which I continue to struggle. I will always consider myself queer, recognizing that my sexuality and gender identity resist definition. The conflicting feelings of guilt and relief remain.

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This article illustrates the difference that gender makes in a sexual relationship. In Genesis 1-4 there are four instances of sexuality. Gen 1:25-27 shows male and female created on the sixth day, together, inferring an equal relationship; the next verse mandates that they procreate, which thereby implies sexual relationships. Gen 2:18-24 describes how, from the wholeness of the earthling that is neither male nor female, two sexual beings are formed. Furthermore, the two separate sexual beings come back together again in a sexual union to produce the wholeness of differentiation. In Gen 2:25 the two separate sexes come together in a sexual manner; the two beings are naked, yet not ashamed. Lastly, in Gen 4:1 there is a sexual relationship between two beings that “know” one another for the purpose of procreation.

Sexuality makes a difference in the nature of relationships. And even though the Bible does not explicitly discuss any challenges in this area except between males and females, it offers us insights that apply to other situations/configurations.

One of the most beautiful praises to sexuality exists in the Bible in Song of Songs. This poem is full of magnificent images that celebrate the young bodies of the two lovers. The man rejoices in the woman's breasts, hair, lips, neck, and so on, and she loves his dark hair, fragrant cheeks, lips and strong limbs. Many scholars from the ancient world and beyond interpreted this work as allegory, but at a literal level there has seldom been a more beautiful celebration of sexuality.¹

Set Introduction

1. Give each participant a note card, and ask them to use the next 3 minutes to rewrite the Genesis story of creation [as they remember it or as they wish it to be? – be explicit].
2. Have each member share their story. (Each participant's story will probably be different, some will be the first creation story of Genesis 1 where God creates the world in 6 days and rests on the seventh, and some participants might recall the second creation story that is found in Genesis 2-3.)

¹ Joyce E. Salisbury, *Encyclopedia of Women in the Ancient World* (Santa Barbara/Denver/Oxford: ABC Clio Press, 2001), 321.

Male and Female (Genesis 1:25-27)

This section of the creation story is considered part of the Priestly material, also referred to as the P(riestly) source. “It is the later, more sophisticated story of creation of the world in seven days.”² During this story, Humans are created on the 6th day as the last of God’s creations. During day five, God creates living creatures of every kind; domestic animals and creeping things and wild animals, each true to its type (Gen 1:25). On day six, God says, “Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness; And let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky, over the beasts, over all the earth, over all that creeps upon the earth” (Gen 1:26). The language at the beginning of the passage is tricky, as discussed in the text handout. Furthermore, in the latter part of the passage, God puts human beings in charge of the other animals that God has already created. Lastly, God’s activities are summarized as follows, “So God created humanity in God’s image, in the image of God, God created it; male and female God created them” (Gen 1:27).

Discussion Questions

1. What does the creation of male and female on the sixth day mean to you?
2. How do you feel about male being mentioned before female?

² Alice Ogden Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*. (Louisville London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 37.

Man and Woman (Genesis 2:18-24)

Later, in Chapter 2 of Genesis, Adonai God says, “It is not good that the earthling is alone- I will make him a helpmate for him” (Gen 2:18). Here *ha’adam* is translated as “earthling” to show that it is sexually undifferentiated.³ “Grammatical gender (adam as a masculine word) is not sexual identification. Nor is sexuality assumed here.”⁴ Tribble considers the “earth creature” as neither male nor female until sexuality is created later in the story. Afterwards, God decides that it is not good for the earthling to be alone and vows to make the earthling a helpmate/companion.

Ezer is the Hebrew word that is translated as *helpmate* or *companion*. Tribble is insistent that *ezer* be translated as *companion* to do away with the negative connotation associated with the traditional translation of *helpmate*; specifically, that the female is subordinate or inferior to the male. With her translation of “a companion corresponds to it,” Tribble is emphasizing a mutual relationship. She describes God’s motives for providing the earth creature with a companion as, “one who is neither subordinate nor superior; one who alleviates isolation through identity.”⁵

So God forms the wild animals and birds of the sky out of the soil, and brings them to the earthling (*adam*) to see what he will call each one; and whatever the *adam* calls it, that becomes the creature’s name. The *adam* gives names to every domestic animal and to the birds of the sky, and to all the wild animals, but for [himself] *adam* finds no helpmate (Gen 2:19-20). At the beginning of this section, God promises to make *ha’adam* a companion, but instead goes on to describe the naming process for all of the animals.

³ Ibid., 40.

⁴ Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 80.

⁵ Ibid., 90.

The creation of human sexuality is illustrated in Gen 2:21-24 as follows, “This divine act will alter radically the nature of *ha’adam* and bring about new creatures so that female and male together become one flesh that is wholeness rather than isolation.”⁶

Here, God causes a deep sleep to fall upon *ha’adam*, and during this sleep, God takes one rib. With this rib from *ha’adam*, God builds woman and brings her to *ha’adam* (Gen 2:21-23). The deep sleep is compared to being sedated for surgery, since that is what God ultimately does to *ha’adam*. Once God builds woman, God brings her to *ha’adam*. The rabbis suggest that God is the divine matchmaker, bringing the woman to the earth creature.⁷ This is the first time that the Hebrew words for “woman” and “man” appear in the text.

Trible explains that in this section the man and woman both share common ground, but are not equal. She further explains that the “earth creature is central, prior both in order and in responsibility and power; the plants and the animals are made for its sake so that the earth creature stands over them in a hierarchy of harmony.”⁸ *Ha’adam* is now different than he was before, since part of his being is taken to form woman. “After this intrinsic division, *ha’adam* is no longer identical with its past, so that when next it speaks a different creature is speaking. To be sure, continuity exists in the oneness of humanity, but here stress falls upon the discontinuity that results from sexual differentiation.”⁹ In the ensuing verses, *ha’adam* speaks in the poetry of Eros; in this poetic language, sexuality is defined. Out of *ha’adam*, which is sexually undifferentiated, comes a female *ishah*, and later, *ha’adam* becomes a man (*ish*). Tribble explains that even though female and male are distinguished, the words “bone of

⁶ Ibid., 94.

⁷ Ibid., 96.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

my bone and flesh of my flesh” (2:23) speak of unity, solidarity, mutuality, and equality.¹⁰ In this poem, woman is unique; it isn’t until verse 23 that *ha’adam* is first referred to as *ish*, which is translated into English as *man*. “And the earthling said, ‘this time bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh! Let this one be called woman (*ishah*), for this one is taken from man (*ish*)’” (2:23). Up to this point, the earthling is sexually indistinguishable, yet after the woman is taken from the earthling, the earthling’s sexual status is changed, and distinguished as a man, *ish*.

The last part of this section states that man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his woman; the result of these actions is one flesh. This is a sexual union, yet no children are mentioned. From the wholeness of the earthling, that is neither male nor female, comes two sexual beings. Subsequently, two separate sexual beings come back together in a sexual union to produce the wholeness of our differentiation. “Thus is Eros consummated.”¹¹

Discussion Questions

1. The main story in this section is about God creating a companion for *ha’adam*. How would you explain the diversion (2:19-20) in this story?
2. Why do you think it is significant that God builds woman out of man? Would sexuality be viewed the same if man and woman were created out of separate matter rather than the same matter?

¹⁰ Walter Brueggemann, “Of the Same Flesh and Bone (Gen. 2, 23a),” CBQ 32 (1970); 532-42.

¹¹ Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 104.

The Couple (Genesis 2:25)

Genesis 2:24 describes how man and woman come together in sexual union to create differentiation and wholeness; immediately following this, in 2:25, we read, “Now the two of them were naked, the man and his wife and they were not ashamed.” There is a shift in literary style here. Genesis 2:23 is written in poetic form, speaking of man and woman as one flesh; in 2:24 the poetic quality disappears, but man and woman are still becoming one flesh. Then, in 2:25, man and woman are separate entities; the verse points out this separateness by saying the “two of them,” and then reiterating “the man and his wife.” This differentiation is startling after just reading about such unity, and, for the first time, the woman is not referred to as simply *ishah*, woman; rather, she is *ishto*, his woman or wife (the same word in Hebrew) This designation signifies a connection between the two, even in the midst of separateness. Here, the sexuality is of a different nature. There are two separate beings, man and his wife; both of these sexual beings are naked, yet neither of them is aware of, or ashamed of their nakedness. The focus is solely about the connection between a man and his wife as sexual beings, not even children are mentioned.

Discussion Questions

1. What kind of relationship is described in this verse? (What is the purpose of this sexuality?)
2. What dimensions does this verse add to the notion of sexuality?

Adam and Eve (Genesis 4:1)

In Chapter 4 we learn about a different kind of sexuality; the man is now *intimate* with his wife. The word in Hebrew is *yada*, literally translated as “the *adam* **knew** his woman/wife”; the verse continues, “and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain, saying, both I and God have made a man.” This form of sexual relations is defined by the act of procreation. In 2:25, Man and his wife have a sexual union, yet here, in 4:1, they join together for the purpose of reproducing.

Discussion Questions

1. Here we have the verb y-d-‘ literally translated “he knew.” What does this verb imply about the sexual relationship described here?
2. Does the consummation change the sexual relationship described here?

Additional thoughts and Questions for the Instructor about the Discussion Questions

Male and Female (Genesis 1:25-27)

1. What does the creation of male and female together on the sixth day mean to you?
 - a. In this story, God creates male and female simultaneously. Therefore, “Feminists have long looked to Genesis 1 for affirmation of sexual equality. The verses describing God’s final creative act (1:26-27) apparently place male and female on par with each other.”¹²
 - b. “Other feminists have followed Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s lead. However, in their enthusiasm to find sexual equality in Scripture, they have not properly appreciated the largely biological orientation of these verses in the opening chapter of the Bible. In fact, the parity of male and female in Genesis 1 probably was not meant for anything beyond the pairing of male and female for procreative purposes. The structure and purpose of Genesis 1 simply does not address the social world of humans.”¹³
2. Do you believe that women’s status in today’s society is at all a result of male being mentioned before female?

Man and Woman (Genesis 2:18-24)

1. The main story in this section is about God creating a companion for *ha’adam*. How would you explain the diversion (2:19-20) in this story?

¹² Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 86.

¹³ Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*, 86.

“And God formed the wild animals and birds of the sky out of the soil, and brought the man to see what he would call each one; and whatever the man called it, that became the creature’s name. The man gave names to every domestic animal and to the birds of the sky, and to all the wild animals, but for the *adam* found no helpmate” (Gen 2:19-20). At the beginning of this portion, God promises to make for *ha’adam* a companion and then goes on to describe the creation and naming process for all of the animals. Tribble suggests that this deviation from the original plot is the craft of a skilled story teller building suspense. This anecdote shows that there is no companion found among the creatures. Therefore, God must find another way to make *ha’adam* a companion. Tamara Eskenazi suggests that neither God nor the animals provide a helpmate for *adam* because God is superior to *adam*, and the animals are inferior. She suggests that *adam* needs an equal partner, who is both “other” and “alike” to “provide the necessary dialogue for human maturation, meaning, and joy.”¹⁴

Rachel Adler has a different take on this section of the story. She sees *adam* naming the woman just as he names the other animals, rather than asking her what she calls herself. She says, “Genesis 1 is an account of the Creation, whereas Genesis 2-3 is an account of the creation of patriarchy- a remarkably truthful account. The world brought about by Genesis 2-3 is one in which desire is no longer joyful but oppressive. Even before the disobedience, relations between man and woman and world are commodified and function-based.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*. Eds. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea Weiss (New York: URJ Press, 2007), 12.

¹⁵ Rachel Adler, *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*. Eds. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea Weiss (New York: URJ Press, 2007), 31.

2. How does the man understand the relationship between woman and man? What are the implications?
3. Why do you think it is significant that God builds woman out of the *adam*? Would sexuality be viewed the same if man and woman were created out of separate matter rather than the same matter?

Trible argues that since God builds woman from *ha'adam*'s side, that woman is not weak. God "building" woman took considerable effort. She writes, "No opposite sex, no second sex, no derived sex- in short, no 'Adam's rib.' Instead, woman is the culmination for creation, fulfilling humanity in sexuality. Equal in creation with the man she is, at this point, elevated in emphasis by the design of the story."¹⁶

Eskenazi suggests:

Only after surgery in Genesis 2 do woman (*ishah*) and man (*ish*) appear, marked by gender specific terms. If one understands *ha-adam* ("the adam") beforehand to refer to a non gendered person, then this remark describes the division into two human categories: woman and man. Here *ish* designates 'a male member of the species.' And *ishah*, 'a (female) member of the human species.' Both are fully and equally human. The man's proclamation indicates what the woman means to him; it also serves as an etiology to explain how women and men are related to each other. In addition, the etiology explains why *ishah* and *ish* sound so much alike.

The Couple (Genesis 2:25)

1. What kind of relationship is described in this verse?

¹⁶ Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*. 102.

This verse seems to describe the sexual relations between a husband and wife, or two people who are in a committed relationship. The fact that they are both naked and not ashamed, illustrates their comfort level with one another. To be vulnerable in front of another person and not feel shame implies a great sense of security and connectedness. Also, there is a message concerning the man's longing to reclaim the original unity (we do not know what the woman wishes).

Adam and Eve (Genesis 4:1)

1. Here we have the verb “to know.” What does this verb imply about the sexual relationship described here?

In Hebrew “‘to know’ includes sexual intercourse; fundamentally it expresses intimate knowledge of the other.”¹⁷ The use of such a verb describes a type of sexuality that is not explicitly erotic, or necessarily pleasure driven, yet these are not excluded either. Rather, this sexual intercourse implies a much deeper level of knowing one another and of coming together to form a sacred union. This verb distinguishes this sexual act from the one described in 2:25.

2. Does the consummation change the sexual relationship described here?

¹⁷ Cohn Eskenazi, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*. 19.

Activity

- a) Make a three sentence creation story that demonstrates your unique priorities related to sexuality. For example, creating male and female equally, or not creating gender at all. Be Creative!!
- b) Just as in ancient times, sexuality today is not strictly defined by heterosexual relationships. Create a 5th sexuality section that could fit into the Genesis format, while being more inclusive, or alter one of the existing 4 sections that we studied to make it more inclusive

Sacred Time

Tu B'Av (the 15th day of the summer month, Av) is technically a minor holiday that has recently become a big deal in Israel, where this "Love" holiday is being adopted as the Jewish Valentine's Day. All of the stores sell love cards, bakeries make special red and pink pastries, and love fills the air. This celebrative day goes back to the early centuries of the common era and mentioned in early rabbinic literature. "There were no better (i.e. happier) days for the people of Israel than the Fifteenth of Av and Yom Kippur, since on these days the daughters of Israel/Jerusalem go out dressed in white and dance in the vineyards. What were they saying: Young man, consider whom you choose (to be your wife)?" (Ta'anit, Chapter 4).

"Tu B'Av" - The Fifteenth of Av

Nowadays, on the Fifteenth of Av, we observe a partial holiday; in tradition prayers for the day, we don't say "Tachanun," a daily plea for Divine mercy, on the day itself, nor even in the Afternoon Service of the day preceding the

fifteenth, similar to a full-scale holiday. Bride and groom also do not fast if the fifteenth is the day of their marriage.

These customs commemorate many happy events which are believed to have occurred at various times over the history of the Jewish People. Some of these events were associated with the Temple; in the present temporary absence of the Temple, the degree of observance is (temporarily) somewhat diminished. A partial listing follows:

The last unit in Taanit says, "There were no holidays so joyous for the Jewish People as the Fifteenth of Av and Yom HaKippurim, for on those days, daughters of Yerushalayim would go out dressed in borrowed white clothing (so that they would all look the same).

The King's daughters would borrow from those of the High Priest. Daughters of the High Priest would borrow from the Assistant High Priest's daughters; daughters of the Assistant would borrow from the daughters of the Priest designated to lead the People in times of War, the Kohen Anointed for War's daughters would borrow from the daughters of the Ordinary Priest. And the daughters of the rest of the Jewish People would borrow from each other, so as not to embarrass those who didn't have."

"And the daughters of Jerusalem would go out and dance in the vineyards located on the outskirts of the city. And everyone who didn't have a wife would go there." (Notice the relative lack of concern about controlling the situation when the opposite sexes are mixed, perhaps because the recent fast (in the case of Tu B'Av) and the fast on that very day in the case of Yom Kippur, have triggered a sense of self-control, which would not ordinarily necessarily be present.)

"And what would they say?"

"Young man, lift up your eyes and choose wisely. Don't look only at physical beauty - look rather at the family - 'For charm is false, and beauty is vanity. A God - fearing woman is the one to be praised...' ("Mishlei"/Proverbs 31:30)"

This focus on women and on marriage in the celebration of the day is based on two enactments which were made on the Fifteenth of Av, in favor of women:

The Torah tells us in Parashat Pinchas (Numbers 27:1-11) of the complaint to Moshe of the daughters of one Zelafchad regarding the seeming inequality in Jewish Law, in the case where a man dies without sons, that his daughters seem to be bypassed in the chain of inheritance with regard to acquiring property in the Land of Israel.

This limitation on the marital prospects of Jewish woman was lifted once the Jewish People actually were settled in Israel; and it **was lifted on the Fifteenth of Av**.

Another case where a limitation on Jewish women was lifted on the Fifteenth of Av came in the Period of the Judges, in the wake of a punishment directed against the Tribe of Benjamin.

An account is found in Judges 19-21 of the Tribe of Benjamin . . . a man and a woman traveling in the area of Benjamin were taken in as a neighborly gesture by an elderly man. The Benjaminites acted in a manner indistinguishable from the manner in which the residents of Sodom greeted the guests of Lot, (Genesis 19:1-10) except that in this case, the victims were defenseless human beings and not angels with super-powers. In short, a woman was abused and killed by the men of the Tribe of Benjamin.

The reaction of the other Tribes was to make Civil War against Benjamin, and to enact that none of their daughters would be allowed to marry a man from that tribe.

But the enactment which prohibited an Israelite girl from marrying a man from the Tribe of Binyamin . . . was cancelled at a later time, **on the Fifteenth of Av**.¹⁸

1. Which section of Genesis does Tu B'Av's sexuality coincide with?
2. Could modern celebrations of ancient holidays trigger today's society to look at sexuality differently?

Conclusion

There is sexuality in every section of the Bible, from the erotic courtship poetry of Song of Songs, to stories of rape, prostitution and adultery. Yet this lesson plan deals only with the first female in the Bible. Do you think it should also include the other accounts that exist in the Bible?

1. How do you reconcile the differing views of sexuality in Genesis?
2. Do you see a place for GLBT issues within the sexuality presented in the Bible?

¹⁸ Summary is a revision of Eliyahu Kitov, *The Book of Our Heritage: The Jewish Year and Its Days of Significance*. Vol. 3, p. 1023.

The Original Dilemma

Genesis (1:26-27)

כֹּו וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדִמוּתֵנוּ וַיְרִדּוּ בְדִגְתַּת הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף
הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבַבְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל־הָאָרֶץ וּבְכָל־הָרֶמֶשׂ עַל־הָאָרֶץ:

And God said, "Let us¹ make humanity² [adam] in our³ image, according to our⁴ likeness and let them rule⁵ over the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky, over the beasts, over all the earth, over all that creeps upon the earth."

כֹּו וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים | אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה
בָּרָא אֹתָם:

So God created⁶ humanity [adam] in God's image⁷, in the image of God, God⁸ created it; male and female⁹ God created them¹⁰.

Genesis (2:23-24)

כֹּג וַיֹּאמֶר הָאָדָם זֹאת הִפְעִם עָצָם מַעֲצָמִי וּבָשָׂר מִבָּשָׂרִי לִזְאֵת יִקְרָא אִשָּׁה
כִּי מֵאִישׁ לִקְחָהּ זֹאת:

And the earthling¹¹ said, " This, finally, bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh!/ This shall be called woman¹²,/ for this one is taken from man."

כֹּד עַל־כֵּן יִעֲזֹב־אִישׁ אֶת־אָבִיו וְאֶת־אִמּוֹ וְדָבַק בְּאִשְׁתּוֹ וְהֵיוּ לְבָשָׂר אֶחָד:

1. This plural language is confusing, however it is speaking of the divine entourage that are all subordinate to God. Other uses of this language can be found in Genesis 6:4 and Job 1:6. The Torah a Women's Commentary, p7. This first person plural "evokes the image of a heavenly court in which God is surrounded by His angelic host. Such a celestial scene is depicted in several biblical passages. This is the Israelite version of the polytheistic assemblies of the pantheonmonotheized and depaganized." JPS Commentary Genesis p.12.

2. I translated Adam here as humanity to show that it is being uses as the collective of all of humankind rather than a singular person or only men. (See Genesis 5:1-2)

3. See foot note #1

4. See foot note #1

5. *The Torah: a Women's Commentary* makes it clear that this was not licence to exploit nature, rather this promise comforted those whose lives were at the mercy of the unpredictability of the natural word. p. 8.

6. Here the verb b-r-h is used which is translated as created. This verb is special, it is a creation by God.

7. The Torah a Women's Commentary points out that this notion that all humans were in the image of God was in great contrast to other ancient near east traditions where only kings represent the divine. p.8.

8. Hebrew literally means, "he"

9. The Torah a Women's Commentary explains that this passage explicitly proclaims the co-creation of female and male, both in God's image. p. 8. This verse is essential in establishing gender balance.

10. The shift from singular to plural is explained in *The Torah a Women's Commentary* as that the creation of our humanity proceeds our division into sexual categories. "our humanity comes first; our sexual identity next."

11. The word in Hebrew is ha-adam earlier translated as human beings earlier.

12. With the animals the *adam* naming gave him power over them. Here the terminology is different, he identifies the woman a generic title which is derived from his own. This means he acknowledges woman to be his equal. By calling her *ishah* he calls himself for the first time *ish*. (this relation is folk entomology.) *JPS Commentary Genesis* suggests, "He discovers his own manhood and fulfillment only when he faces the woman, the human being who is to be his partner in life." p. 23.

So it is that a man will leave his father and mother and cling¹³ to his wife, and they become one flesh.

Genesis (2:25)

כֹּה וַיְהִי שְׁנֵיהֶם עֲרוּמִים הָאָדָם וְאִשְׁתּוֹ וְלֹא יָתִבּ שָׁשׂוּ:

Now the two of them were naked, the *adam* and his woman/wife, and they were not ashamed¹⁴

Genesis (4:1)

אֵל וְהָאָדָם יָדַע אֶת-חַוָּה אִשְׁתּוֹ וַתְּהַר וַתֵּלֶד אֶת-קַיִן וַתֹּאמֶר קָנִיתִי אִישׁ
אֶת-יְהוָה:

The *adam* now was intimate¹⁵ with Eve¹⁶ his woman/wife; she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain, saying, "Both I and God¹⁷ have made a man."

13. This Hebrew verb d-b-q "expresses the idea of two distinct entities becoming attached to one another while preserving their separate identities...is often used to describe human yearning for and devotion to God. Sexual relations between husband and wife do not rise above the level of animality unless they be informed by and imbued with spiritual, emotional, and mental affinity." *JPS Commentary Genesis* p. 23.

14. "The Hebrew expresses mutuality. So long as the harmony with God remained undisturbed, the pristine innocence and dignity of sexuality was not despoiled. *JPS Commentary Genesis* p. 23.

15. The Hebrew here is the verb for "know", it implies the couple having great knowledge of one another. This is a deeper relationship than simply physical. "Knowing in the Bible is not essentially intellectual activity, not simply the objective contemplation of reality. Rather it is experiential, emotional, and above all, relational...it can be used of the most intimate and most hallowed relationships between man and wife and between man and God. Significantly, the verb is never employed for animal copulation." *JPS Commentary Genesis* p. 31.

16. Here Eve's proper name is used. Chavah which is the Hebrew for Eve is a play on the word "Life" Chai. The narrator in 2:20 "explains the word play and accounts for the woman's role as child-bearer. The designation confirms the text's positive depiction of the woman's role in Eden and beyond." *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, p.18.

17. Hebrew: YHWH- usually pronounced as Adonai.

Tightropes and the flying Trapeze

“And to the woman, [God] said, “I am doubling and redoubling your toil and your pregnancies;/ with anguish shall you bear children,/ yet your desire shall be for your man,/ and he shall rule over you” (Genesis 3:16).

Introduction

There are many important challenges in today's workplace that are the result of gender differences; women typically face more sexual harassment than men, and are also subjected to promotion and pay obstacles. On March 24, 1986 in an article by Carol Hymowitz and Timothy Schellhardt¹, the Wall Street Journal coined the term "glass ceiling" to refer to the invisible barriers that impede the career advancement of women in the American workforce.

In a 2006 article written on Forbes.com titled “Are Women Happy under the Glass Ceiling?” Hannah Clark describes the situation and introduces a number of contributing factors about women's happiness in the job place. Her evidence includes a study released in 2006 which shows that women earn 77 cents to the dollar compared to men. Additionally, 70% of women and 58% of men believe there is a glass ceiling that exists in the workplace. Globally, 58% of women and men feel they are adequately compensated for their work; however, in the United States, 60% of women and 67% of men are happy with their salaries. Clark identifies several reasons directly affecting this happiness: the number of women who own a business is up significantly, women also work fewer hours, and some choose circuitous careers to have time for family.² “Even ambitious women [do] not measure success in high salaries and elaborate

¹ Baker, B., & Lightle, S.S. (2001). *Cracks in the Glass Ceiling: An Analysis of Gender Equity in the Federal Government Auditing Career Field*. *The Journal of Government Financial Management*, 50(3), 18-26 [1]

² Hannah Clark, *Are Women Happy Under the Glass Ceiling?*, http://www.forbes.com/2006/03/07/glass-ceiling-opportunities--cx_hc_0308glass.html

job titles. Relationships with colleagues and giving back to the community are more important to women than salary,” according to *The Hidden Brain Drain: Off-Ramps and On-Ramps in Women's Careers*, a study by the Center for Work-Life Policy.³ This article states that Carol Gallagher, president of the Executive Women's Alliance and author of *Going to the Top: A Road Map for Success from America's Leading Women Executives*, says that Generation Xers and Yers do not believe they face any barriers getting to the top, but this is highly debated.

Sexual harassment in the workplace is another significant obstacle that women still face. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) describes sexual harassment as a form of gender discrimination that is in violation of Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. In 1998, the U.S. Supreme Court made employers more liable for sexual harassment of their employees. Moreover, the Society for Human Resource Management has reported that 62% of companies now offer sexual harassment prevention training programs, and 97% have a written sexual harassment policy.⁴

According to a telephone poll on sexual harassment in the workplace conducted by Louise Harris and Associates, 31% of women and 7 % of men report sexual harassment suits at work. Of the reported suits, 100% of women claim their harasser to be male, 43% of which are their direct supervisors, while 27 % are in a position higher than theirs.

These problems are not new to women; we see some of the same issues even in the Bible. Although the situations are not exactly the same as the ones facing women today, women in

³ Harvard Business Review 2005.

⁴ <http://www.sexualharassmentsupport.org/SHworkplace.html>

the Bible also struggle with gender obstacles; Sarah, Rebekah, Miriam, and Bathsheba represent biblical women who confront gender related stumbling blocks.

When Sarah (whose name in this particular episode is Sarai, later changed to Sarah) Hagar, her maidservant, she first needs to get permission from Abraham, her husband (whose name in this particular episode is still Abram) in order to do what she wants (Gen 16:6). Only after receiving permission is Sarah able to take action.

Rebekah does not speak directly to God about her barrenness. Instead, Isaac pleads to God on Rebekah's behalf, following which she becomes pregnant (Gen 25:21). In this situation, Rebekah does not even appear to have a voice; it is left up to interpretation whether or not Rebekah even cares about bearing a child. Later in the story, however, it is Rebekah who determines which child will gain the inheritance and with whom the covenant will continue.

Miriam is a very dynamic, female leader in the Bible. As a leadership role model, she is a prophet who struggles with gender obstacles continuously. Miriam and Aaron both commit the same transgression, yet Miriam is punished with a skin disease, presumably because she is a woman, while Aaron is only verbally reprimanded (Numbers 12). Later in the Bible, Miriam is listed among the leaders of the people along with Aaron and Moses (Micah 6:4), but when she tries to claim her leadership role, she is silenced.

Bathsheba's story is an example of sexual harassment. King David sees her, fetches her, and lies with her. There is no text provided describing Bathsheba's feelings towards David or his advances. There is no evidence to support her acceptance or refusal of David's actions.

Set Introduction

1. Ask the group if they believe that a glass ceiling exists today.
2. Follow up by asking if anyone is willing to share examples of glass ceilings that still exist today.
3. Ask the group if they believe that women today have it more or less challenging than women 10 years ago.
4. What about women 25 years ago?
5. How about 100 years ago? 1000 years ago?
6. More challenging than women in the Bible?

Sarai (Genesis 16:1-16)

Abram and Sarai (better known by the later name, Sarah and Abraham) have been in Canaan for 10 years, but they still have not been able to conceive a child. Sarai, who is very upset by this, gives her maidservant, Hagar, to Abram so that she may have a child through her.

However, once Hagar conceives, she regards Sarai with lowered esteem. Sarai, in response to Hagar's disdain, first asks her husband Abram to solve the situation. Sarai gets upset with Abram and he responds by telling Sarai, "Your maid is in your hands. Deal with her as you think right" (Gen 16:6). Once gaining permission, Sarai proceeds to treat Hagar harshly.

Because of her barrenness, Sarai is considered inferior within the economic structure in ancient Near Eastern society.⁵ Due to the importance of being fruitful and providing male heirs, it is common practice in ancient times to have substitute wives to ensure the transmission of inheritance.⁶ When Sarai gives Hagar to Abram, she most likely knows that Hagar will conceive a child. Once Hagar conceives, however, Sarai is upset that Hagar views her as lower than herself. This is probably culturally understandable; and Hagar could even assume the primary wifely role in the household because she is carrying a possible heir, which elevates her status.⁷ Sarai first expects Abram to rectify the situation. She uses very forceful words to persuade her husband that something needs to be done to Hagar. She does this by almost threatening Abram, saying that God will judge between her and him.

⁵ Dan W. Clanton, *Daring, Disreputable, and Devout: Interpreting the Hebrew Bible's Women in the Arts and Music*. (New York: The Continuum International Publishing, 2009), 29.

⁶ E.A. Speiser, *Genesis: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. (The Anchor Bible, Vol. 1, Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1977), 119-21.

⁷ Clanton, *Daring, Disreputable, and Devout*, 34.

Later rabbinic tradition soften Sarai image by retelling this story such that the matriarch, Sarai, is redeemed and not made out to be a villain. One interpretation states that as soon as Hagar notices she is pregnant, she uses the opportunity to disparage Sarai publicly. This midrash gives Hagar a voice, “My Lady Sarah, is not inwardly what she appears to be outwardly. She makes the impression of a righteous, pious woman, but she is not, for if she were, how could her childlessness be explained after so many years of marriage, while I become pregnant at once?”⁸ Midrash Rabbah says that Sarai never physically hurts Hagar; she just forces her to continue working as a slave to lower her status.⁹

Discussion Questions

1. Do you think the narrator in the Bible is portraying Abram in a supervisory position to Sarai, or do you think their positions are equal?
2. Is Sarai asking Abram permission for her actions, or is she simply trying to get him to fix the situation for her?
3. Do you see any glass ceilings in this story?

⁸ Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*. Genesis (Lech Lecha) XLV 1, 380, p. 238.

⁹ Genesis (Lech Lecha) XLV 6, p. 384.

Rebekah (Genesis 25:19-34; Genesis 27)

At the beginning of this story, Rebekah is barren. Without even consulting Rebekah, Isaac asks God for a child; subsequently, Rebekah becomes pregnant with twins (Gen 24:21).

When the children are pressing against one another in her womb, she goes directly to God to ask about her situation. God announces to her that the two children she is carrying will be two nations and that one child will serve the other (Gen 24:22-24). We next learn about her delivery, and that the fraternal twins are very different; the older brother, Esau, has red hair all over, and the younger brother, Jacob, comes out holding onto Esau's heel. The narrator points out that Isaac is 60 when his sons are born, setting the stage to explain how he will later be tricked in his old age (Gen 24:26).

The two boys grow up to be very different; Esau is a hunter and outdoorsman, while Jacob is much more domestic, attending to the tents. Because of these differences, the narrator tells the reader, Jacob is favored by Rebekah, and Esau by Isaac (Gen 24:27).

On one occasion, we learn that Jacob is cooking a stew when Esau returns home famished. When Esau asks to eat some of the stew, Jacob seizes the opportunity and barter the stew for Esau's promise to tender his birthright. Esau agrees, and eats the stew in exchange for his birthright (Gen 24:29-34).

In this story, Rebekah plays a huge role, even though she is not the one who directly asks God to help her become pregnant. Once she is pregnant, however, she goes straight to God for advice about the children in her womb. After learning that the older son will serve the younger one, she takes it upon herself to fulfill God's will. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi observes,

“Rebekah runs the family and undertakes the task of determining the destiny of God’s blessings. . . . Rebekah occupies center stage in several key scenes. Energetically, Rebekah ensures that the covenantal blessings will be bestowed on the more suitable son.”¹⁰ With this in mind, she guides Jacob to secure it for himself.

Rebekah intervenes some time later, when Isaac asks Esau to go and make him some tasty dishes to eat so that he may bestow a blessing on him before he dies (Gen 27:4). Hearing this, Rebekah instructs Jacob to impersonate Esau and thus receive his blessing. She devises a plan to make the tasty dishes out of goat kids they already have, and to make Jacob appear as hairy as Esau (Gen 27:8-17). Rebekah does not just tell Jacob how to trick his father, she takes a very active role in the plan; she makes the food for Isaac, dresses Jacob, and wraps his hands and neck with fur (Gen 27:14-15).

Discussion Questions

1. Does Rebekah face any gender obstacles in this story?
2. Do you believe that Rebekah wants a child?
3. Why does Rebekah not pray herself for a child, given that we learn later that she is clearly not shy about talking to God directly?
4. Later in the story, Rebekah plays an important role in shaping the continuation of the covenant. How does her gender influence **the way** she is able to take action?

¹⁰ Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*. Eds. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea Weiss (New York: URJ Press, 2007), 133.

Miriam (Numbers 12)

While the Israelites are on their way from Mt. Sinai to the Promised Land, Moses' leadership is challenged. Not only is it challenged by two of the elders (Num 11:26-29), it is also challenged by his siblings (Num 12:1-2). When God hears Moses' authority questioned, God gets angry with Aaron and Miriam; God calls all three siblings to come out of the tent of meeting and God reprimands Miriam and Aaron in front of Moses. Once God departs, Aaron turns towards Miriam and notices that she is stricken with snow white skin disease, sometimes referred to as scales or (erroneously) as leprosy. This disease renders a person impure and would disqualify her from having access to God's holiness. Aaron pleads to Moses, who in turn pleads to God for Miriam to be healed. After God and Moses negotiate about Miriam's punishment, she is shut out of the camp for seven days as if she is a disobedient daughter who is shamed by her father (Num 12:14-15).

This story is a blatant example of the gender inequality in the Torah. Miriam and Aaron both speak against Moses (on account of his wife) and then claim they are equal to Moses as prophets; still, Miriam is stricken with skin disease and Aaron is not. This difference is explained in commentaries by reference to the verb *spoke* in Numbers 12:1; since the verb is in the feminine form it suggests that Miriam did more of the speaking.¹¹ Masha Turner suggests that "Feminist interpreters often understand this story as an intended rebuke of a woman who aspires to a leadership role equal to a man's reading it as prejudicial to women on a number of levels."¹² However, Beth Alpert Nakhai points out that after the reader is able

¹¹ Ibid., 859.

¹² Ibid., 844.

to get past the initial double standard that the story presents, one notices that Miriam is a very valued member of Israelite society. “Her brothers plead for her, as Aaron beseeched Moses and then Moses prays to God to reverse their sister’s punishment. And the people do not respond by abandoning this victim of God’s great anger. Rather, they ‘[do] not march on until Miriam [is] readmitted’ seven days later (v15), this expressing their solidarity with the woman who in happier times led them in victory song and celebration (Exodus 15:20-21).”¹³

Later rabbis try to explain the inconsistencies within the text in different ways. Midrash *Sifrei B’midbar* 99 suggests that Miriam is the first to raise the issue of Moses’ wife and therefore responsible for initiating the conversation. Consequently, she is the one held responsible, and, therefore, she is punished. The Talmud *Shabbat* 97a argues that actually Aaron is also struck with leprosy even though the text does not state this explicitly; in 12:9 it says “incensed with them” (plural).¹⁴

Discussion Questions

1. In Numb 12:1 it says “Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses.” The verb *spoke* is in the feminine singular form. Does this emphasis justify Miriam being punished while Aaron is not?
2. Why do you think it is important to the rabbis to justify the double standard found in the text?
3. Does the Bible seem to have a problem with Miriam, a female, being a strong leader?
4. Whom do you perceive as being stronger, Aaron or Miriam?

¹³ Ibid., 862.

¹⁴ Ibid., 863.

Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11)

While out on a late afternoon stroll on the palace rooftop, David sees Bathsheba bathing. She is beautiful and David inquires about her. David soon learns her name, her father's name, and that she is married to one of his soldiers who is now in the field fighting on David's behalf, Uriah the Hittite. After learning this, David sends someone to fetch her; she comes to him and he lies with her (2 Samuel 11:2-4).

From this interlude, Bathsheba conceives; she sends word of her pregnancy to David. Upon hearing this, David brings Uriah home from the front. David hopes that Uriah, upon returning home, will have relations with his wife so that her pregnancy will easily be attributed to Uriah. However, Uriah sleeps at the entrance to the Palace instead (2 Samuel 11:7-9). David tries two more times, unsuccessfully, to get Uriah to go home to sleep with Bathsheba. After Uriah sleeps outside the palace instead of going home David asks, "You just came from a journey; why didn't you go down to your house?" Uriah answers David, "The Ark and Israel and Judah are located at Succoth, and my master Joab and Your Majesty's men are camped in the open; how can I go home and eat and drink and sleep with my wife? As you live, by your very life, I will not do this!" (2 Sam 11:13). Finally, David invites Uriah to eat and drink with him. David hopes that once Uriah is drunk enough he will go home to Bathsheba, but Uriah still sleeps outside the palace. The next morning David writes a letter to Joan, his general in the war zone, asking him to place Uriah in the front line and then desert him so Uriah will be killed. David sends this letter with Uriah to be delivered to Joab (2 Samuel 11:14-15). The general obeys and Uriah is killed in action.

Bathsheba hears about Uriah's death in battle and mourns for him. After her mourning period is over, David sends for Bathsheba to come to the palace to make her his wife (2 Samuel 11:26-27). Bathsheba bears him a son, but God is upset by what David has done, so the child falls ill and dies (2 Samuel 12:18).

Discussion Questions

1. Does sexual harassment come to mind as you're reading this story?
2. Many movies, and later, literature, give Bathsheba a voice in a story where she is virtually silent; the voice she is often given is one of a seductress or a manipulative female playing hard to get. Why do you think these rabbis, directors, and artists feel the need to portray Bathsheba as someone controlling her destiny rather than being the victim?
3. Typically, when discussing sexual harassment in the Bible, the example of Joseph being harassed by Potiphar's wife is used because the harassment of males is considered a greater affront than the harassment of a single female. In this scenario, however, David commits a capital crime because Bathsheba is married; David's actions are considered adultery, and therefore carry a very different weight in the Bible. Today, it is more common that the harasser is a male in a superior role, and the victim is a female in an inferior role. Is the Bible's depiction of Joseph a more liberal way of teaching about sexual harassment (i.e., by having a young inferior male being harassed by an older powerful woman), or is it deeply upsetting that the Bible does not more explicitly discuss women being harassed?

Additional Thoughts and Questions for the Instructor about the Discussion Questions

Sarah (Sarai)

1. Do you think the narrator in the Bible is portraying Abram in a supervisory position to Sarai, or do you think their positions are equal?

It seems as though Sarai sees Abram in a supervisory role, since she asks his permission before she takes any action against Hagar. However, the narrator shows Abram in a very passive role, allowing Sarai to do whatever she wants to Hagar. Abram also seems unfazed by Sarai's threat about God judging his actions. Sarai only does what she wants AFTER Abram gives her permission. In the expulsion of Hagar in chapter 21 – Sarah demands that Abram expel Hagar; she does not do it herself. On the other hand, certain parity appears in the larger narrative as Sarai protects Abram (agreeing to pretend she is his sister; see Gen 12:11-12), and he asks her permission, not presumes to undertake this strategy. So is this a story that illustrates “give and take” or a unilateral or hierarchical decision making process?

2. Is Sarai asking Abram permission for her actions, or is she simply trying to get him to fix the situation for her?
3. Do you see any glass ceilings in this story?

It seems as though Sarai is only able to have control within the confines of the societal norms in which she lives. Since Hagar is both her maidservant and Abram's

spouse (since Sarai gave Hagar to him as wife), she needs to first speak with her husband; it is evident that even though Abram tells Sarai that she may do as she wishes, women of that time are under a glass ceiling imposed by the institution of marriage. Due to societal expectations, Sarai believes she needs to provide Abram with an heir, and, therefore, she offers him her maidservant. Once Hagar conceives, Sarai feels her status is lowered. It is not Abram in his supervisory role that is holding Sarai under the glass ceiling. Instead, it is society's status associated with providing an heir that holds Sarai under a glass ceiling, compels her to give her maidservant to her husband, and to ask her husband for permission before taking matters into her own hands. The narrative represents Sarai's giving Hagar to Abram as being Sarai's choice (yet influenced by internalized social pressure to produce a child); so later, when Sarai is upset with Abram because Hagar is pregnant, he reminds her of this.

Rebekah

1. Does Rebekah face any gender obstacles in this story?

Just like Sarai, Rebekah faces gender obstacles associated with the patriarchal society in which she lives. The term "patriarchal" "inevitably and properly surfaces in feminist discussions of both biblical texts and Israelite society.

Those who are concerned with the relationship between men and women in the biblical world tend to assume that a hierarchical situation existed. The apparent domination of females by males is

seen as reflecting the patriarchal orientation of Hebrew scripture. The inferiority of woman is inferred from a multitude of texts, both by those who accept the androcentric tendencies in the Bible as authoritative and normative and also by those who are made uncomfortable or are outraged by them. Liberal feminists and conservative traditionalists share a perception that the Bible portrays women as secondary or inferior to men in fundamental ways.¹⁵

Carol Meyers goes on to argue that this perception about women inferiority in the Bible overlooks important evidence. Her book, *Discovering Eve*, attempts to show the error in such conclusions. Here, however, Rebekah is unable or unwilling to march in and demand that her husband grant their second born the birthright; Rebekah, instead, chooses to deal with it by avoiding confrontation. Is it in order to protect Isaac's fragile ego? Perhaps the direct route is not always the best for men or women. Consider the Book of Esther; Mordechai's direct confrontation creates a crisis, while Esther's indirect approach solves it. Rebekah is in charge of the home and has the ability to develop an intricate plan to deceive her husband with the assistance of her son. She has access to animals, the kitchen, and Esau's wardrobe. Even though Rebekah has to work within certain confines, she is able to achieve her goals. In aother words, even though she has no authority in the matter, she has the power to make the future decisions follow her choices.

¹⁵ Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 24.

2. Do you believe that Rebekah wants a child? Why does she not pray herself, since we learn later that she is clearly not shy about talking to God directly?

Only after she becomes pregnant is Rebekah not shy about going and talking to God, even though she is not the one to ask God to grant her a child in the first place. One might presume that the Bible wants us NOT to suppose that women are only valued by society, or only value themselves, as child bearers. However, this is a unique situation, since fertility is important in the Bible as well as the ancient world. Perhaps Rebekah does want a child, but feels that God will listen more to a male voice, or perhaps Isaac wants a child more, and sooner than Rebekah does. Regardless, Rebekah is bold when she speaks to God about the children in her womb; she questions her role in the process, and in return she is shown God's intentions.

3. Later in the story, Rebekah plays an important role in shaping the continuation of the covenant. How does her gender influence **the way** she is able to take action?

Miriam

1. In Numb 12:1 it says "Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses." The verb *spoke* is in the feminine singular form. Does this emphasis justify Miriam being punished while Aaron is not?

Even though masculine plural is the typical form for a Hebrew verb when speaking about both a male and female, this use of the feminine form of the verb is not substantial enough to explain why Miriam receives such a harsh punishment, while

Aaron is only reprimanded. The verse, even with the confusing verb form, clearly states that both Miriam and Aaron speak. Therefore, one assumes they should receive the same punishment. However, Aaron is being set up to take over the leadership role, and his past must be without incident. As a result, Aaron is not punished with a harsh punishment; he only receives a slight “slap on the wrist.” In spite of this, in Micah 6:4, Moses, Aaron, and Miriam are all mentioned together as Israel’s leaders; Tribble concludes from this that Miriam is “the equal of Moses and Aaron” and that she “undercuts a hierarchy of authority with a male on the top.”¹⁶

2. Why do you think it is important to the rabbis to justify the double standard found in the text?

The rabbis are uncomfortable with Miriam and Aaron committing the same crime and receiving different punishments. It is very important to the rabbis that laws are just and fair. This story undermines the authority that the rabbis are trying to present in the Talmud; therefore, they try to come up with alternative scenarios to explain the inconsistencies. For example, Aaron is punished with scales, and Miriam is the ringleader while Aaron is merely a follower.

It seems that the latter view is equally as problematic, since the future leader of the people should not be seen as a follower, someone without a strong voice of his own.

3. Do you see this double standard tied directly to gender, or is there another reason for Miriam’s punishment?

¹⁶ Phyllis Tribble, “Bringing Miriam Out of the Shadows,” *Bible Review* 5 (February 1989), 23-4.

Bathsheba

1. Does sexual harassment come to mind as you're reading this story?
 - a. Yes. David harasses Bathsheba even after he realizes she is married. Because of his status as King, Bathsheba has no acceptable way of saying "no" to any of King David's advances.
 - b. No. This is not a story of sexual harassment. Many scholars read it as a story of rape. Although neither case is made clear in the text, Bathsheba does not consent to lie with David, so, presumably, this is an example of rape.
2. Many movies, and later, literature, give Bathsheba a voice in a story where she is virtually silent; the voice she is often given is one of a seductress or a manipulative female playing hard to get. Why do you think these rabbis, directors, and artists feel the need to portray Bathsheba as someone controlling her destiny rather than being the victim?

Rabbis in literature, as well as artists who depict biblical stories, oftentimes make Bathsheba liable for the events, or even the aggressor, through their additions to the story in order to lessen David's culpability. We can only assume this is done to wash away David's guilt in this scenario in order to glorify his character as King David the Great.

3. Typically when discussing sexual harassment in the Bible the example of Joseph being harassed by Potiphar's wife is used because it is the most clear cut example given. Today, it is more common that the harasser is a male in a superior role, while the harassed is a female in an inferior role. Is the Bible's inversion of the norm a more liberal way of teaching about sexual harassment, or is it deeply upsetting that the Bible does not more explicitly discuss women being harassed?

Activity

1. Have participants complete the handout comparing and contrasting 21st century gender obstacles with the ones faced by our biblical sisters.

Sacred Time

Yom Ha'atzmaut celebrates Israel's independence. In Israel, Yom Ha'atzmaut is a day of great celebration. On this day, it is customary to visit a local park and BBQ, drink alcohol, listen to loud music, and socialize with complete strangers. Israelis take this *Independence Day* celebration quite seriously because the institution of the State of Israel is still relatively recent, and most citizens serve in the army as young adults to insure that their independence remains intact; no Israeli takes their independence for granted.

Similar to Yom Ha'atzmaut, imagine a day that celebrates women's full equality and an end to all gender obstacles.

1. What celebration rituals do you envision?
2. What would this day look like? What would men's roles be?

Conclusion

1. Have participants share their conclusions from the handouts.
2. Ask participants,
 - a. Who is most affected by being a woman?

- b. Who is the best at using their femininity to their advantage?
- c. Who would be most effective if she did not have to deal with gender obstacles?
- d. Do you believe there is still an active fight against gender obstacles today?
- e. What do you currently do (or could you do) to facilitate the progression of gender equality?

ACTIVITY HANDOUT

Compare and contrast 21st century gender obstacles with the ones faced by our biblical sisters

	Situation with a Glass Ceiling	Situation of Sexual Harassment	Superior Male figure	Female that faces gender obstacles
Story of Sarah/ Sarai				
Story of Rebekah				
Story of Miriam				
Story of Bathsheba				
21st Century Scenario				
Another Biblical example				

1. Is there another Biblical example that you can think of?
2. How do situations that 21st century women face compare to those of our biblical sisters?
3. Would you rather face the situations of today or the ones in biblical times? Why?

Tightropes and the Flying Trapeze

Sarai (Genesis 16:5-6)

ה וַתֹּאמֶר שָׂרַי אֶל-אַבְרָם חֲמָסִי עָלֶיךָ אָנֹכִי נָתַתִּי שִׁפְחָתִי בְּחִיקְךָ וַתֵּרָא כִּי
הָרְתָה וְאַקֵּל בְּעֵינַיִךָ יִשְׁפֹּט יְהוָה בֵּינִי וּבֵינֶיךָ:

And Sarai said to Abram, “the wrong¹ done on me is your fault! I myself put my maid in your bosom; now that she sees that she is pregnant, I am lowered in her eyes. Adonai will judge between you and me.”

ו אַבְרָם אֶל-שָׂרַי הִנֵּה שִׁפְחָתְךָ בְּיָדְךָ עֲשִׂי-לָהּ הַטּוֹב בְּעֵינֶיךָ וַתַּעֲנֶה שָׂרַי
וַתִּבְרַח מִפָּנֶיהָ:

But Abram said to Sarai, “your maidservant is in your hands, do to her what is good in your eyes”. So Sarai mistreated² her, and she fled from her face³.

Rebekah (Genesis 27:8-10)

ח וְעַתָּה בְּנִי שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלִי לֵאמֹר אֲנִי מְצַוָּה אֹתְךָ:

And now, my son, hear⁴ my voice that I command⁵ you.

ט לך-נא אֶל-הַצֹּאן וְקַח-לִי מִשָּׁם שְׁנֵי גְדֵי עֲזִים טֹבִים וְאַעֲשֶׂה אֹתָם
מִטְעָמִים לְאָבִיךָ כַּאֲשֶׁר אָהֵב:

Go to the flock and bring me two choice young goats, and I will make them into a delicacy for your father, that he loves.

י וְהֵבֵאתָ לְאָבִיךָ וְאָכַל בְּעֶבְרָא אֲשֶׁר יְבָרְכֶךָ לִפְנֵי מוֹתוֹ:

Then bring it to your father to eat, so he may bless you before his death.

Miriam (Exodus 12:1-2)

א וַתִּדְבֹּר מִרְיָם וְאַהֲרֹן בְּמִשְׁחָה עַל-אֲדֹת הָאִשָּׁה הַכַּשִּׁית אֲשֶׁר לָקַח כִּי-אִשָּׁה
כַּשִּׁית לָקַח:

And Miriam and Aaron spoke⁶ against Moses on account of the Cushite woman which he

1. *h-m-s* the root used here occurs in the book seven times. It refers to corruption, lawlessness, or no justice such as in Job 19:7. It means in general, the flagrant subversion of the ordered processes of law. Sarna in the *JPS Commentary of Genesis* p.51. Sarai uses a very strong verb here to drive home her anger towards Abram.
2. Here the verb *innah* is used. This verb can be translated in many different ways, all referring to form of coercion.
3. This is a literal translation. Most translations read “and she ran away.”
4. Not only should he listen, but truly hear all of the instructions.
5. Choosing to render this as command, suggests that it was not just a request but rather invokes a sense of urgency. This seems appropriate since we know this trickery was to fulfill Gods words.
6. This verb here is in the feminine singular form. This is surprising since both Miriam and Aaron were speaking. Later scholars and rabbis argue that Miriam could have been the one leading the speech or the one to speak first. This lends itself to explain why their punishments were so different.

married. Because he married a Cushite Woman!!⁷

ב וַיֹּאמְרוּ הָרֶק אֶדְ-בְּמִשָּׁה דִּבֶּר יְהוָה הֲלֹא גַם-בְּנִי דִבֶּר וַיִּשְׁמַע יְהוָה:

And they said, “has Adonai spoken only to Moses? Not also to us?” And Adonai heard this!

Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11:4)

ד וַיִּשְׁלַח דָּוִד מַלְאָכִים וַיִּקְחֶהּ וַתָּבֹא אֵלָיו וַיִּשְׁכַּב עִמָּהּ וְהִיא מִתְקַדָּשֶׁת
מִטְּמֵאֶתָּהּ וַתָּשָׁב אֶל-בֵּיתָהּ:

David sent messengers to fetch⁸ her, she came to him, and he lay with her. (she was purified from her uncleanness),⁹ then she returned to her house.

7. It is unusual that the Bible reiterates that Moses has married a Cushite woman. Perhaps it is repeated for emphasis, or in shock that Moses of all people would marry a Cushite woman.

8. Using the term fetch here implies that Bathsheba had no say in whether or not she went to David. Bones never get a say in being fetched or not.

9. This refers to her having had a period recently, a sign that the pregnancy that follows is by David.

The L Word

“It is not because you are the most numerous of peoples that Adonai set His heart on you and chose you — indeed, you are the smallest of peoples; but it was because Adonai loved you” (Deut 7:7-8).

Introduction

In a May 31, 2005 article in the New York Times titled “Watching New Love as it Searns the Brain,” Benedict Carey writes,

New love can look for all the world like mental illness, a blend of mania, dementia and obsession that cuts people off from friends and family and prompts out-of-character behavior - compulsive phone calling, serenades, yelling from rooftops - that could almost be mistaken for psychosis. Now for the first time, neuroscientists have produced brain scan images of this fevered activity, before it settles into the wine and roses phase of romance or the joint holiday card routines of long-term commitment.

In an analysis of the images appearing today in The Journal of Neurophysiology, researchers in New York and New Jersey argue that romantic love is a biological urge distinct from sexual arousal.

It is closer in its neural profile to drives like hunger, thirst or drug craving, the researchers assert, than to emotional states like excitement or affection. As a relationship deepens, the brain scans suggest, the neural activity associated with romantic love alters slightly, and in some cases primes areas deep in the primitive brain that are involved in long-term attachment.

The research helps explain why love produces such disparate emotions, from euphoria to anger to anxiety, and why it seems to become even more intense when it is withdrawn. In a separate, continuing experiment, the researchers are analyzing brain images from people who have been rejected by their lovers.

"When you're in the throes of this romantic love it's overwhelming, you're out of control, you're irrational, you're going to the gym at 6 a.m. every day - why? Because she's there," said Dr. Helen Fisher, an anthropologist at Rutgers University and the co-author of the analysis. "And when rejected, some people

contemplate stalking, homicide, suicide. This drive for romantic love can be stronger than the will to live. . . ." ¹

The love in the Bible is described with the same amount of vividness as in this article.

Song of Songs is an erotic, sexually charged and passionate love poem filled with unexplainable behavior between two lovers. This love leads the woman to behave irrationally, such as leave her bed and night, and search frantically in the streets. At the other end of the spectrum of lovers, the story of Ruth's loyal love for Naomi demonstrates commitment marked by steady support and sober devotion.

Elsewhere we find the one-sided (perhaps unrequited) love of Isaac for Rebecca, and the unrequited love of Michal for David. This kind of love leads to erratic behavior, as well as causes great anguish. These, and other expressions of love are both ancient and surprisingly familiar in the modern world.

Set Introduction

1. Have each participant close their eyes.
2. Read this parable about love...

Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach created this parable: **Soul Mate**

Imagine you are on a subway and suddenly realize that your soul mate, the one you've been waiting and praying for your entire life, is standing beside you. You're full of love and disbelief; you can't speak.

Then your soul mate is leaving, walking off the train. Frozen, you manage, "What's your number?" You hear only the first three digits. Then the doors close.

¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/31/health/psychology/31love.html>

At the next stop, you run to a pay phone, frantically trying every combination of numbers imaginable. Failing that, you drive through the streets, crying, searching. Overwrought, you drive dangerously, running red lights. You are arrested for reckless behavior.

Imprisoned, brokenhearted , and alone, you await your trial. You prepare yourself, terrified of the possible judgment.

As you enter the courtroom, you see the judge you have feared is your soul mate, the very person you've been seeking and whose absence created the sadness that made you lose your way. You break down. Your soul mate says the words that change your life.

“I know you've made mistakes, but let's not think about that now. Today, I just want to be close to you.”

On Yom Kippur we stand in judgment before God. We beg forgiveness for our mistakes. In Elul, God comes to us. If we listen closely we will hear God's voice, “I know how hard this world can be. I know you long for meaning and sometimes make mistakes. But now, I just want to be close to you.”

When things fall apart, may we be blessed to hear God's voice.

Song of Songs (2:16-3)

“The Song of Songs is a poem about the sexual awakening of a young woman and her lover. In a series of subtly articulated scenes, the two meet in an idealized landscape of fertility and abundance- a kind of Eden- where they discover the pleasures of love².”

For centuries, traditional readers have tended to interpret this book allegorically as referring to the love of God for Israel. Modern scholars suppose it to be about human lovers. Some see the book as one love story, while others, such as Marcia Falk, believe it is a compilation of lyrical love poems.³ Phyllis Tribble sees the book as the redemption of the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden in that it reverses what went wrong in that first garden. She also says that the book, “speaks from lover to lover with whispers of intimacy, shouts of ecstasy, and silences of consummation. At the same time, its unnamed voices reach out to include the world in their symphony of eroticism. This movement between the private and the public invites all companions to enter a garden of delight.”⁴

At the beginning of the book, the woman speaks about her lover. She describes some of their intimate moments and expresses her desires. Once her desire fulfilled, she tells her lover to run away before the day begins (2:17).

Chapter 3 begins a description of the nights. In the nights, the woman longs for her only love; she looks for him but doesn't find him (3:1). The woman tells describes getting out of her bed to go about the city to find her only love, but she doesn't find him (3:2). The watchmen

² Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation*. (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1995), 3.

³ Marcia Falk, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation and Interpretation*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 113.

⁴ Phyllis Tribble, “The Cyclic Design of Song of Songs.” 114.

find the woman and she asks them if they have found her lover (3:3). After encountering the watchmen she does find her lover. The woman tells us that she holds him and will not let him go until she brings him to her mother's house and into her mother's room (3:4). Finally, she implores the daughters of Jerusalem to let love happen according to its own rhythm (3:5). These motifs of the search, the watchmen, and the mother's house surface again in various combinations.

Discussion Questions

1. What type of love is described here?
2. Is the love described equal between partners?

Ruth (1:15-17)

In the first chapter of Ruth there are three distinct sub-sections. The first section (1:1-6) sets the stage for the rest of the story: it laces the story during the time of the Judges, and briefly tells a family history. We learn that Naomi, along with her husband and two sons, leave the land during a famine and goes to Moab and stays there. Her husband, Elimelech dies, their two sons marry Moabite women, and live in Moab for ten years, after which, the sons also die. The Narrator adds that Naomi is left with her widowed daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, her sons' two wives. In the second section (1:7-19a), Naomi, Ruth and Orpah are on the road to Judah. During this journey, there are three separate exchanges between Naomi and her daughters-in-law. First, Naomi pleads with both Orpah and Ruth to return to their mothers' homes, and kisses them farewell; Orpah and Ruth both respond to this plea by weeping and refusing. Next, Naomi once again pleads with her daughters-in-law to return to their homes, but this time, Orpah departs and Ruth clings to Naomi. Finally, Naomi tries one more time to plead with Ruth to return to her mother's house, but instead of obeying, Ruth declares her loyalty to Naomi with an oath of commitment to Naomi, Naomi's people and Naomi's God (1:16-17). This section concludes with Naomi's silence.

In the third section (1:19a-22), we witness Naomi's and Ruth's arrival in Bethlehem, and are told that the town is abuzz with wonder and excitement. There is dialogue between Naomi and a chorus of women in the town during which the chorus of women ask if it is, in fact, Naomi. Naomi explains that her life is full of bitterness, and renames herself Marah. The section ends with the Narrator's conclusion.

Discussion Questions

1. In Ruth 4:15, the women speak about Ruth as “your daughter-in-law who loves you and who is better for you than seven sons.” Is Ruth’s pledge of loyalty in 1:16-17 a sign of love? If so, what kind of love does it portray?
2. What might be behind Ruth’s love and loyalty?

Rebekah (Genesis 24)

In Abraham's old age, he sends his servant on a mission to return to his land and find a wife for his son, Isaac, to prevent Isaac from marrying a Canaanite. When Abraham's servant reaches his destination, he prays to God saying, "Here I am standing at the water-fount, and the daughters of the townspeople are going forth to draw water; the girl to whom I say, 'tip your pitcher and let me drink,' and who replies, 'drink; and let me water your camels, too' let her be the one You have designed for Your servant Isaac; that is how I shall know that You have done a kindness for my master" (24:-13-15). Before the servant finishes praying, Rebekah goes down to the spring to fill her pitcher. When the servant asks for a sip from her pitcher she replies, "Drink Sir!" and then she draws water for his camels as well (24:16-20). The servant stands silent, staring to determine whether or not God is clearing the way for him. He takes out a gold nose –ring, a half shekel in weight, and two bracelets for her wrists, ten gold shekels in weight, and asks her whose daughter she is and if there is room for lodging in her father's house (24:21-23). She says to him, "I am Bethuel's daughter; the son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor . . . We have straw and fodder in abundance, as well as room for lodging" (24:24-25). In sum, she is a member of Abraham's family and a perfect bride for his son. The servant goes to her father's house and explains that he came to find a wife for Abraham's son. He adds: "I praised God, the God of my master Abraham, who had led me on the right path to get the daughter of my master's brother for his son. And now, if you mean to treat my master with faithful kindness, tell me; if not, tell me and I will turn in another direction" (24:48-49). Laban and Bethuel respond by saying "this matter has emanated from God; we cannot answer you one way or another. Look-Rebekah is before you; take her and go, and let her be your master's son's wife as God has decreed" (24:50-51).

Rebekah is asked if she is ready to leave “They called Rebekah and said to her, “Will you go with this man?” And she said, “I will.” (24:58). The next morning, Rebekah leaves with the servant and her nurse (24:59). As they arrive, Isaac, on a stroll in the field, sees camels coming! Rebekah looks up, and upon seeing Isaac she gets off her camel and asks the servant who the man coming to meet them is. The servant says, “He is my master.” Therefore, Rebekah covers herself with a veil (24:60-65). The servant tells Isaac of all that he has done (24:66), and Isaac brings Rebekah into the tent of his mother, Sarah; he takes Rebekah, and she becomes his wife and he loves her. Thus does Isaac take comfort after [the death of] his mother (24:67).

Discussion Questions

1. What kind of love is portrayed in this story?
2. Is the love reciprocated?

Michal (1 Sam 18:20-21)

At the beginning of Chapter 18, we read that Jonathan, Saul's son, loves David as himself.

Robert Alter explains that there is no reason given for this love of Jonathan for David. "One may infer that Jonathan was smitten by David's personal charm and perhaps by the sheer glamour of his victory, which exceeded even Jonathan's own military victory."⁵ We also learn that all the people also loved David (18:16). Then we read that Saul's daughter, Michal, loves David; they tell Saul, and the thing is pleasing in his eyes (18:20). Saul thinks, "I shall give her to him, that she may be a snare to him, and that the hand of the Philistines may be against him." Saul says to David, "Through the second one you can be my son-in-law today" (18:21).

Saul knows that David is not wealthy; he also wants David to get killed. Therefore, he states that the bride price he wants for Michal is one hundred Philistine foreskins. Saul assumes that when David tries to get this very dangerous "bride price," he will fall by the hands of the Philistines (18:26); but David not only brings Saul one hundred Philistine foreskins, he brings him 200; David gets Michal as a wife, and becomes the son-in-law of the King (18:27).

In 18:28, we read that Saul again sees that God is with David, and that Michal, the daughter of Saul, loves him.

Discussion Questions

1. What kind of love is this?

⁵ Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1999), 112.

2. The text never says that David loves anyone. Why do you think that is?

Additional thoughts and Questions for the Instructor about the Discussion Questions

Song of Songs (2:16-3)

1. What type of love is described here?

“The two lovers are recognizably the same throughout, as are the daughters of Jerusalem, the mother, the brothers, and the watchmen. Eros is celebrated as the most powerful of human pleasures; other conceptions of love-as irrational and destructive, say of spiritually improving- are not even contemplated.”⁶ More important is that the love is physically oriented and sensual. It is also a world-embracing love. They interact with each other and with nature.

2. Is the love described equal between partners?

In most of the Bible, women are seen as passive participants in sexual acts. However, in this poem, “lovers take turns inviting one another, desire is entirely reciprocal. Both are described in images that suggest tenderness (lilies, doves, gazelles) as well as strength and stateliness (pillars, towers). In this book the woman is certainly equal of the man.”⁷

Ruth (1:15-17)

1. Is Ruth’s pledge of loyalty a sign of love? If so, what kind of love does it portray?

This pledge of loyalty is a declaration of the ultimate familial love. Ruth is willing to give up everything she knows to accompany Naomi and take care of her. She is willing to accept any future, as long as she is with Naomi.

⁶ Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 19.

⁷ Ibid., 4.

2. What might be behind Ruth's love and loyalty?

Ruth is a strong character, although we have to wonder why she doesn't want to return to her mother's house. One has to imagine that she must be terribly upset by the death of her husband, brother-in-law, and father-in-law; that she does not want to return home puts her mother's house into question. Does Ruth look to Naomi as more of a mother than her own? Does Ruth have a falling out with her family when she decides to marry an Israelite, or is Ruth a completely selfless person who, out of loving kindness, does not want Naomi to travel or reside by herself? Can Ruth see how depressed Naomi is, and therefore, being the caretaker that she is, feels the need to take care of Naomi? Is Ruth's need to care for Naomi due to her lack of having children? Do you believe Ruth is a natural mother?

Ruth specifically says that she does not want to abandon Naomi. Not wanting to abandon someone in need is apparently an incentive.

Rebekah (Genesis 24)

1. What kind of love is portrayed in this story?

Although this is the first mention of spousal love in the Bible, we do read about many men who love women.

“Isaac takes her. But her qualities do not remain hidden to him, for he loves her. She not only takes Sarah's place in the tent, she takes her place in his heart. The biblical idea of marriage may consider the husband the dominant partner, but it nevertheless envisions a love relationship. Modern commentators assume a mismatch between a strong Rivka and a passive Isaac, but the story tells us that he loved her. Isaac's love for Rivka did not prevent him from imitating his father and pretending that Rivkah was his sister when they went to Gerar (Gen 26:6-11). Marriage was patriarchal, and

even a beloved wife could be disposable when the man's life was at stake. But his love for her may have prevented his ruse from succeeding, for Abimelech King of Gerar saw Isaac 'playing' with Rivka and realized that they were married. The marriage of Isaac and Rivka, even though arranged, was a love relationship.”⁸

2. Is the love reciprocated?

The text tells us that Isaac loves Rebekah, but never that Rebekah loves Isaac in return. However, we do read in Gen 25:28 that Rebekah loves Jacob. This is a sad case where Isaac's love is unrequited.

Michal (1 Sam 18:20-21)

1. What kind of love is this?

This is the only case where a woman's love of a man is mentioned in biblical narrative. Although the text gives us no explicit reason for Michal's love of David, there are two other examples of people loving David in the same chapter. First, Jonathan loves David, and second, the people love David. Jonathan and the people presumably love David because of his military victories. This may or may not be the same reason behind Michal's love; Michal may see David's success in battle as an avenue to the throne for herself, or she falls for the charismatic character that is illustrated throughout the David story. Whatever the rationale, it seems obvious that Michal truly does love David based on the help she provides him in 1 Sam 19:11-17, and the fit of jealousy she portrays when David dances naked in the street after returning the Ark to Jerusalem (2 Sam 6:16).

⁸ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of their Stories*. (New York: Schocken Books, 2002) 15.

2. Why do you think the text never says that David loves anyone?

David probably doesn't love anyone other than himself; throughout the story, he continuously makes selfish decisions for political and personal gains. The one instance that possibly shows him in a different light is after Saul's death, when David becomes King over Judah and is offered the opportunity to become King over the northern tribes; this is when David demands Michal back (2 Sam 3:13-16). Here it seems apparent that he wants her back for some reason other than the throne, since he already has that. Could it be love???

Activity

During the month of Elul we are supposed to work on ourselves, and our relationships with God and others. Think of the people whom you love, have you told them lately that you love them? Should you tell them again? It is possible that some of the stories we studied today are ones of unrequited love; however, it is also possible that these characters have feelings that they just don't share. Let's not make the same mistake.

Conclusion

1. What types of love did we not discuss today?
2. Although we might think of "God's love" as being a Christian idea, it is actually found throughout the Bible. How does God's love speak to you?

The L Word

Song of Songs (3:1-2;3:5)

א על־משכבִּי בַּלַּיְלוֹת בִּקְשֵׁתִי אֶת שְׁאֵהֲבָה נִפְשִׁי בִּקְשֵׁתִי וְלֹא מָצָאתִיו:

At night¹ on my couch, I sought the one I love.

I sought him, but did not find him.

ב אֶקוּמָה נָא וְאֶסוּבְּבָה בְּעִיר בְּשׁוּקִים וּבְרַחֲבוֹת אֶבְקֶשֶׁה אֶת שְׁאֵהֲבָה נִפְשִׁי בִּקְשֵׁתִי וְלֹא מָצָאתִיו:

I must rise and go about the city,

through the streets and squares, I must search for the one I love.

I sought him but I could not find him.

ה הַשְׁבַּעְתִּי אֶתְכֶם בָּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם בְּצִבְאוֹת אוֹ בְּאֵילֹת הַשָּׂדֶה אִם־תִּעְיְרוּ וְאִם־תִּעְוְרוּ אֶת־הָאֲהֲבָה עַד שְׂתַחַפֶּץ:

I adjure you, oh maidens of Jerusalem,

by the gazelles, or by the deer in the field,

do not wake or arouse.

love until it please.

Ruth (1:14-18)

יד וַתִּשָּׁנָה קוֹלָן וַתִּבְכְּינָה עוֹד וַתִּשָּׁק עֲרָפָהּ לַחֲמוּתָהּ וְרוּת דָּבְקָה בָּהּ:

And they lifted up their voice, and wept again, and Orpah kissed her mother in law², but Ruth clung to her³.

טו וַתֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה שָׁבָה יְבֻמָּתִי אֶל־עַמָּהּ וְאֶל־אֱלֹהֶיהָ שׁוּבִי אַחֲרַי יְבֻמָּתִי:

And she said, “Behold⁴ your sister-in-law⁵ returned to her people and her Gods⁶, return after your sister in law.”

1. Hebrew literally means in the nights, but it suggests repeated activity in other contexts Ps. 16:17, 92:3, 134:1. The Song of Songs a New Translation by Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch. p. 158.

2. There is no indication in the Hebrew that says that she kissed Naomi Goodbye so I did not include the word “goodbye.”

3. Sasson indicates that this verb conveys a sense of closeness similar to that of a married couple. p28. Evidence for this translation is found in Psalm 63:9.

4. *hineh* is virtually untranslatable. The word “lo” (TNK), “Behold,” “See” (JPS), among others have been used. A. Berlin, among others (e.g. Sternberg [ck]), considers the term as a focalizer and usually translates it as “look” (see her chapter on “The uses of the Word *hinneh*” in *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* {Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983}, pp. 91-95. This citation was adapted from Dr. Tamara C. Eskenazi, handout “An Invitation to Blossom in Springtime”. This word can be found 519 other times in the TaNaKa, first two listed are Gen 1:29,6:2.

5. Literally means brother’s wife.

6. I rendered this word with a more literal translation of “Gods” I found proof for this translation in Isaiah 21:9. However, Sasson disagrees stating that it should be rendered, “God” just as *Elohim* is translated in the singular. p29. such as in Jeremiah 46:25.

טו וַתֹּאמֶר רוּת אֶל-תַּפְגֵּעִי-בִי לְעִזְבוֹךָ לָשׁוּב מֵאַחֲרֶיךָ כִּי אֶל-אֲשֶׁר תִּלְכִּי אֵלָיו
וּבְאֲשֶׁר תִּלְיִנִי אֵלָיו עִמָּךְ עָמִי וְאִלֶּיךָ אֵלֹהִי:

And Ruth said: “Do not push⁷ me to leave you, to turn back from following you⁸, For wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you lodge, I will lodge⁹, your people are my people and your God my God.

זו בְּאֲשֶׁר תָּמוּתִי אָמוּת וְשָׁם אֶקְבֹּר כֹּה יַעֲשֶׂה יְהוָה לִי וְכֹה יִסִּיף כִּי הַמּוֹת
יִפְרִיד בֵּינִי וּבֵינָהּ:

Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried, May Adonai do whatever (the Eternal) will to me if anything but death parts me from you.”

יח וַתֵּרָא כִּי-מִתְאַמֶּצֶת הִיא לָלֶכֶת אִתָּהּ וַתַּחֲזֹל לְדַבֵּר אֵלֶיהָ:

And Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, and she ceased to argue¹⁰ with her.

Rebekah (Gen 24:67)

סז וַיְבִאָהּ יִצְחָק הָאֵלֶּלֶה שָׂרָה אִמּוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת-רִבְקָה וַתְּהִי-לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה וַיֶּאֱהָבָהּ
וַיִּנָּחֶם יִצְחָק אַחֲרֵי אִמּוֹ:

And Isaac brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah; and he took¹¹ Rebekah, and she became his wife and he loved¹² her. Thus did Isaac take comfort after his mother.

Michal (1 Samuel 18:20-21)

כ וַתֵּאָהֵב מִיכָל בִּת-שָׁאוּל אֶת-דָּוִד וַיַּגִּדּוּ לְשָׁאוּל וַיִּשְׂר הַדָּבָר בְּעֵינָיו:

And Michal the daughter of Saul loved David, and they¹³ told Saul, and the thing was pleasing in his eyes.

7. I choose to use a more active word “push”, in part to achieve the idea of not only the verbal action which many translations express by using the word “urge”, but also to demonstrate the deep emotion of this plea. I believe that the strength in this language illustrates the notion that Ruth is aware of the challenges she will face because of her decision.

8. This means follow also found in Isaiah 30:21.

9. Sasson suggests this is a poetic way of using the same words repetitively expressing that “Ruth was willing to share with Naomi any unsettled future, so long as nothing parted them.” p30.

10. This literally means to “cease to speak to her.”

11. This verb is also used in 24:4 and has legal force, “to possess, marry.” These terms define the marriage institution from the perspective of the groom. “The narrative also reflects the custom of the parent initiating the marriage transaction.” *JPS Commentary Genesis* p. 162.

12. “This is the first time that we read about a man’s love for a woman. Biblical literature only twice mentions women’s love of men (Michal’s love for David in 1 Samuel 18:20 and 28; and the Song of Songs). Men’s love appears more frequently, as for example Jacob’s love for Rachel (Genesis 29:18), Shechem’s love of Dinah (34:3), and Jonathan’s love of David (1 Samuel 18:1,3). In many cases, as in ours, the use of the verb “love” implies a sexual relationship” *The Torah a Woman’s Commentary*, p.124.

13. Here the tenses shift. Michal is the one that loves David, but they both tell Saul about her love.

כא וַיֹּאמֶר שָׁאוּל אֶתְנַנֶּה לוֹ וַתְּהִי-לּוֹ לְמוֹקֵשׁ וַתְּהִי-בּוֹ יָד-פְּלִשְׁתִּים וַיֹּאמֶר
שָׁאוּל אֶל-דָּוִד בְּשָׂתַיִם תִּתְחַתֵּן בִּי הַיּוֹם:

And Saul thought, "I shall give her to him, that she may be snare to him, and that the hand of the Philistines may be against him." And Saul said to David, "Through the second one¹⁴ you can be my son-in-law today."

14. Robert Alter explains: "The Hebrew is quite cryptic, and the text might be defective here. Literally, it says, "through two" (*beshtayim*). This has variously been interpreted to mean: through two daughters (if not one, then the other); through two conditions (vanquishing the Philistines and bringing back their foreskins?); for two reasons (perhaps, "the king desires you" and "all his servants love you"). p. 116.

Baring it All

“Rachel was shapely and beautiful” (Genesis 29:17).

Introduction

In Judaism, people are treated as holy vessels, both physically and emotionally. A person's body is considered so holy that it is treated the same as our holiest object, the Torah. Even when a person passes away, their body is treated with the utmost respect. When anyone visits the deceased or performs the sacred cleansing ritual on them, the person visiting never turns their back on the deceased, even when exiting the room. This is to demonstrate a high level of respect for the person; the same level of respect that we show to the Torah when we continue to turn to face the Torah as it is paraded around the room during the Torah Service.

This practice of not turning ones back on a deceased individual also applies when visiting sick patients in a hospital; many chaplains will exit a hospital room walking backwards while still facing the patient. This custom reminds the chaplain just how sacred every human being is, no matter how old, young, or infirm they may be; it is just another way to raise ones awareness as it relates to the sanctity of humankind.

In today's society, women need to remember that Judaism views the human form as sacred; women must treat their bodies with a level of respect befitting this perspective. A woman should eat right, exercise, think positively, and take time for herself; this does not mean she needs to immediately begin dieting. However, it is important she consistently makes wise food choices, gets regular exercise to sustain physical fitness throughout her life, maintain a

healthy attitude regarding her body and self, and makes sure to spend some time everyday doing something that makes her happy.

The Bible does not explicitly discuss how or that women should take care of themselves.

There are examples of the reverence for elders, an example of a woman who takes great pride in her appearance (2 Kings 9), and discussions about holiness (Lev 19:1); however, dialogue describing care and preservation of human beings is lacking. One could argue that the attention paid to conserving the nutrients of a field by letting it rest every 7 years shows a greater concern for the protection of a field than any biblical text shows for the safeguarding of a woman's or man's well-being. In fact, women in the Bible are often discussed in terms of childbearing; an activity that is normally hard on a woman's body, but even more so in biblical times when women were under pressure to reproduce.

Today, many Jews find a strong correlation between the *kashrut* found in the Bible, i.e., "you shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk," and the new eco *kashrut* practices that deal with the treatment of the land and the animals that are used to produce the food. Therefore, it should be a very short hop to adapt these customs to ones that will specifically benefit women's health; it would be fabulous to have evidence that Sarah is able to reproduce at such an old age because she takes her calcium and iron supplements everyday and uses a treadmill regularly. In lieu of this, we must use the examples we do have, along with the absence of textual evidence, to build our case.

Set Introduction

1. Give each participant paper and coloring supplies.
2. Ask the participants to draw a picture of a beautiful biblical woman of their choosing.
3. Ask the participants to share their picture, and explain what it is about the woman that makes her beautiful.

Food (Leviticus 11:1-8; 11:39-45)

At the beginning of Leviticus “the Israelites have set up the Tabernacle (Exodus 40), received specifications for the sacrifices (Leviticus 1-7), ordained the priesthood (Leviticus 8), and initiated formal worship (Leviticus 9-10). God has assigned the priests their task of teaching Israel to distinguish between the ritually pure and the impure (10:10-11).”¹

In Leviticus 11, Adonai instructs Moses and Aaron to tell the people what variety of land animals they may and may not eat; the people may eat any animal with true hoofs, with clefts through their hoofs, and that chews their cud, but if an animal does not have true hoofs and chews its cud they may not eat it. God goes on to explain that the Camel, although it chews its cud, does not have true hoofs, and, therefore, the people may not eat it (11:4). Adonai continues to explain about damans, hares, and swine which are all impure as food and Israelites may not eat. Adonai not only tells Moses and Aaron that the people may not eat these animals, but also says, “you shall not eat their flesh or touch their carcasses; they are impure for you” (11:8). Adonai goes on to discuss other permitted and forbidden creatures that live in the water, birds, winged swarming things, and life forms that crawl on the earth.

In Chapter 11:39, Adonai further states that if an animal that one is allowed to eat, i.e., a kosher animal (to use later terminology), dies, presumably without being ritually slaughtered, anyone who touches it shall be impure until evening; also, anyone who eats of it shall wash their clothes and remain impure until evening, and anyone who carries it shall wash their clothes and remain impure until evening (11:40).

¹ Lisbeth S. Fried, *The Torah: A Woman's Commentary*, ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss (New York: URJ Press, 2008) 623-624.

Adonai goes on to say that anything that swarms upon the earth are an abomination, and are not to be eaten. In addition to anything that swarms upon the earth, anything that crawls on its belly, or anything that walks on all fours, or anything that has many legs, are abominations. The people shall not draw abomination upon themselves through anything that swarms; they shall not make themselves impure therewith. Once Adonai is finished conveying the rules about impurity and animals, Adonai offers a rationale for these rules.

Adonai says because Adonai is your God; you shall sanctify yourself and be holy. You shall not make yourself impure through any swarming thing that moves upon the earth. Because Adonai is the One who brought you up from Egypt to be your God, you shall be holy, because God is holy.

The reason for keeping the dietary laws is very important; it is to sanctify God's holiness by how and what we eat. Lev 11:45 puts forth parallels between what the Israelite people are allowed to offer to God as a sacrifice, versus what they have to do to strive towards holiness.² This rationale commanding the Israelites to emulate God's holiness is unique. The result: only what is fit as a sacred offering to God is also fit as food for Israelites, because they too must be holy.

Discussion Questions

1. In traditional Judaism, people keep the dietary laws because they believe that keeping *kosher* is a way of emulating God's holiness. Are there any parallels you can draw between your own rules about eating and a sense of holiness?

² Ibid., 629.

2. In verse 45, why do you think that God introduces God's self as, "I Adonai am the One who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God," rather than simply Adonai?

Niddah (Menstruation laws) (Leviticus 15:16-24)

Leviticus Chapter 15:16 discusses the situation where a man has an involuntary ejaculation or nocturnal emission. When semen is released under these circumstances, the man needs to bathe, but will remain impure until the evening. Any clothes or leather that the semen touches must be washed in water, and will also remain impure until evening (15:16-17). Furthermore, after a woman and man have sex, they should both bathe, but will remain impure until evening (15:18).

When a woman has blood discharge, she shall remain in *niddah*, separation, for seven days. Anyone who touches her during these seven days of *niddah* will remain impure until evening. Any object that she lays on or sits on during these seven days will remain impure. Anyone who touches her bedding or anything that she has sat or laid on should wash their clothes and bathe in water, but will remain impure until evening. If a man has sex with a woman during her menstrual separation, he too should observe her separation, and he shall be impure the seven days, and any bedding he lays on will become impure (15:24).

In this text, the laws for male discharge are set out; first for the male, and then for a woman who comes into contact with semen. Then, in a seemingly parallel fashion, the female discharge rules are laid out. First, the rules address a woman during her discharge time frame; next, the rules address what a man should do if he comes into contact with the female discharge. The rules here seem to be very similar with the exception of time; a male's discharge lasts seconds, whereas a woman's lasts days.

Discussion Questions

1. When you compare Leviticus 16:19-24 with 16:16-18, the text immediately prior to it, do you believe the Bible views discharge of males and females differently or similarly?
2. Often, the term *niddah* has a negative connotation associated with it. Here, do you think the term *niddah* is used negatively, positively, or neutrally? Why?

Jezebel (2 Kings 9:30-37)

Queen Jezebel is a distinctive character in the Bible. In 1 Kings 21, Jezebel's husband, King Ahab, wishes to acquire an adjacent vineyard so he can have a vegetable garden. However, the owner of this property, Naboth, refuses to sell the property to him. Naboth will not accept another piece of property or even money for his land; he says, "God forbid that I should give up to you what I have inherited from my fathers" (1 Kings 21:3). King Ahab gets upset.

When Jezebel learns what is making her husband so upset that he doesn't eat, she takes matters into her own hands; she uses her husband's name and seal to write letters to the elders and nobles that live in the town with Naboth.

The letters read, "Proclaim a fast and seat Naboth at the front of the assembly. And seat two scoundrels opposite him, and let them testify against him: 'you have reviled God and king!' Then take him out and stone him to death" (1 Kings 21:9-10). The elders of the town follow these orders and kill Naboth. When Jezebel hears that Naboth is dead, she has her husband take possession of the land he wants. God is very unhappy with this and sends Elijah the Prophet to confront the King. Elijah tells King Ahab that, "in the very place where dogs lapped up Naboth's blood, the dogs will lap up your blood too (1 Kings 21:19), and "the dogs shall devour Jezebel in the field of Jezereel. All of Ahab's line who die in the town shall be devoured by dogs, and all who die in the open country shall be devoured by the birds in the sky" (1 Kings 21:23-24). Upon hearing this, King Ahab rents his clothes, puts sackcloth on his body, and fasts (21:27). When God hears about the King's humbling actions, God postpones the punishment to in the time of King Ahab's son's . Subsequently, at the time of King Ahab's son's reign, Jezebel hears that Jehu is coming for her, presumably to kill her. In

preparation for her death, “she painted her eyes with kohl and dressed her hair, and she looked out the window” (2 Kings 9:31). Furthermore, when he comes she taunts him. He, in turn, calls out to her attendants to throw her down; “her blood splattered on the wall and on the horses and they trampled her” (2 Kings 9:33). He then instructs his servants: “Attend to that cursed woman and bury her, for she was a king’s daughter.”

When his servants go to bury Jezebel, all they find of her is her skull, feet, and hands. Jehu says, “It is just as God spoke through God’s servant Elijah the Tishbite: The dogs shall devour the flesh of Jezebel in the field of Jezreel; and the carcass of Jezebel shall be like dung on the ground, in the field of Jezreel, so that none will be able to say: ‘This was Jezebel’” (2 Kings 9:36-37).

Discussion Questions

1. Why does Jezebel put on makeup before being killed?
2. Why is Jezebel vilified in post biblical literature and culture?
3. What does this story show about Jezebel’s view of herself?

Song of Songs (Song of Songs 4:1-8)

The Song of Songs is composed of a series of metaphors. It opens and closes with the woman's voice, demonstrating equality and mutuality with her lover.³ "It speaks from lover to lover with whispers of intimacy, shouts of ecstasy, and silences of consummation."⁴ The metaphors are packed with rich imagery that describes, in colorful detail, the intricacies of the body. Through this beautiful language, one is able to appreciate the beauty of human beings, as well as that of nature and all kinds of landscapes which the lovers use to describe each other. "Often the language is elusive, holding its treasures in secret for the lovers themselves. Occasionally the identity of the speaker is uncertain, creating a problem for observers."⁵ In this section, the woman's body is portrayed in beautiful detail; eyes like doves, hair like flock of goats, lips of crimson thread, brow like a pomegranate slip open, neck like the Tower of David, breasts that stand upright like two fawns. The woman is described using all five senses, "Such love is sweet in the taste, like the fruit of the apple tree (2:3; 4:16; 5:1, 13). Fragrant are the smells of the vineyards (2:13), . . . the scent of Lebanon (4:11) . . . The embraces of lovers confirm the delights of touch (4:10 ect..) . . . A glance of the eyes ravishes the heart (4:9; 6:13), as the sound of the lover thrills it (5:2). Taste, smell, touch, sight, and hearing permeate the garden of the Song."⁶

Discussion Questions

1. What attributes does the male lover value in the woman?

³ Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 145.

⁴ Ibid., 144.

⁵ Ibid., 145.

⁶ Ibid., 154.

2. What lessons can a 21st century woman learn from this love poem describing a woman?

Additional thoughts and Questions for the Instructor about the Discussion Questions

Food (Leviticus 11:1-8; 11:39-45)

1. In traditional Judaism, people keep the dietary laws because they believe that keeping *kosher* is a way of emulating God's holiness. Are there any parallels you can draw between your own rules about eating and a sense of holiness?

Eco kashrut- kashrut tied to a sense of preserving the planet.

Vegetarian- not wanting to harm animals.

Healthy eating- trying to treat one's body as holy, taking care of yourself as God's creation.

2. In verse 45, why do you think that God introduces God's self as, "I Adonai am the One who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God," rather than simply Adonai?

Possibly, this is God flexing God's muscles. God reminds the people what God is capable of; not only giving the gift of freedom, but also how easily God can take it all away. By magnifying God's power, it heightens the holiness that people should be striving to emulate through observance of the dietary restrictions.

More important perhaps, this is a reminder that they are no longer slaves. They have been taken out of Egypt. As free persons they can and must treat themselves as God's people, which means eating with mindfulness of who they are and who God is

Keep in mind that this is the first time Israel is commanded to be holy. Taking care of the body is the first step towards such holiness.

Niddah (Menstruation laws) (Leviticus 15:16-24)

1. When you compare Leviticus 16:19-24 with 16:16-18, the text immediately prior to it, do you believe the Bible views discharge of males and females differently or similarly?

“Niddah renders a woman impure, just as a man’s seminal ejaculation renders a man impure, and their impurity contaminates whatever they touch or sit on. The major difference, however, between a male’s ejaculation and female menstruation is the duration of impurity: since menstruation lasts longer, the woman is in the impure state considerably longer than the man.”⁷

2. Often, the term *niddah* has a negative connotation associated with it. Here, do you think the term *niddah* is used negatively, positively, or neutrally? Why?

In this case, the Hebrew term *Nidah* seems to be neutral. It merely describes the state of impurity that the woman enters into during her menstruation cycle. It is also used here to refer to the menstruating woman.

“Niddah is used in Leviticus 12 and 15 matter-of-factly, in the midst of details concerning states of impurity for males as well as females, to designate the flow of blood during menstruation. It does not convey a negative attitude toward a menstruating woman.”⁸

⁷ Elaine Goodfriend, *The Torah: A Woman’s Commentary*. ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss (New York: URJ Press, 2008) 657.

⁸ Adriane Leveen, *The Torah: A Woman’s Commentary*. 919.

Another piece of fascinating information is that the term *Niddah* is used in the Bible many different ways: “The noun niddah derives from the root n-d-d ‘to depart or flee, wander’; the causative use of the root Akkadian cognate, ‘to throw, cast down.’ Jacob Milgrom understands niddah as having originally referred to the menstrual blood, which was discharged or eliminated. Niddah came to refer to the menstruate herself, ‘for she too was ‘discharged’ and ‘excluded’ from her society not by being kept at arm’s length from others but, in many communities, by being banished to and quarantined in spate quarters’ (Leviticus 1-16, 1991, p.745). Niddah occurs 29 times in the Tanach, conveying at least three possible meanings; menstrual impurity (the most frequent meaning), indecency, and purification (Numbers 19:9).”⁹

Jezebel (2 Kings 9:30-37)

1. Why does Jezebel put on makeup before being killed?

As the Wikipedia notes, in time and in popular culture, “Jezebel became associated with false prophets and fallen women. In some interpretations, her dressing in finery and putting on makeup before her execution led to the association of use of cosmetics with “painted women” or prostitute.”

However, there are always two ways to read a text. Jezebel could be the type of person who never leaves the house without makeup. Even when facing the execution squad, so to speak, she proudly cares about her appearance; she knows that the end is

⁹ Ibid.

near, and according to the prophecy, none of her remains will be left. But she goes to her death with dignity. Still, she wants to be remembered as looking her best.

2. Why is Jezebel vilified in post biblical literature and culture?

Jezebel is vilified because.....

3. What does this story show about Jezebel's view of herself?

Jezebel clearly cares about her appearance; even though she knows her death is approaching, she takes the time and energy to put on makeup and die with dignity.

"She goes down fighting. Camp reflects that Jezebel shows remarkable strength, pride, and defiance, putting on her best clothes to meet her death, traits that modern readers would not question if the actor were a man."¹⁰

Song of Songs (Song of Songs 4:1-8)

1. What attributes does the male lover value in the woman?

Eyes, flowing hair, white teeth, red lips, nice speech, tall thin neck, perky breasts, sweet smell.

2. What lessons can a 21st century woman learn from this love poem describing a woman?

The world is naturally influenced by the physical. A 21st century woman might argue with 4:7 which states that the woman has no blemishes, but we know that not a woman exists who is flawless. As Tyra Banks on *America's Next Top Model* always

¹⁰ Claudia V. Camp, "1 and 2 Kings." in WBC, 102-16.

says, “beauty is found in the flaws we have.” One might also argue that the physical things described here are superficial compared to the beauty within; when two people are in love, physical attractiveness, as seen through their eyes, is a result of the emotions they share. When one looks at their beloved the physical is of course seen through an emotionally influenced lens. The body of a beloved is a world to explore and celebrate and ALL parts of it are meaningfully delightful.

Activity

Unfortunately, we rarely meet women who truly loves their body just the way it is. But we should love our body! I understand that we often want what others have (curly hair, if ours is straight; and straight if ours is curly, to use a trivial but familiar example); still, our bodies are exceptionally amazing sanctuaries that work in miraculous ways. For example, let's explore our ability to read. The intricate details that each of us goes through just to be able to see the words on this page are amazing; furthermore, we not only see the words, but we understand them to have meaning, and we are even able to analyze that meaning and argue with it! Typically, women complain about aging; our bodies change significantly as we mature. The Bible has a great deal to say about the positives associated with aging, "The righteous shall flourish like a date-palm tree, they shall grow like the cedar in Lebanon. Planted in the house of the Eternal, they shall flourish in the courts of God. They shall still bring forth fruit in old age; they shall be full of sap and richness; to declare that the Eternal is upright." (Psalm 92:13-15). Too often we focus on the things we don't like about our bodies, rather than really appreciating and celebrating the positives.

Write a list of things you appreciate about your body!

Sacred Time

Havdallah, the ritual to end Shabbat, literally means *separation*. Havdalah separates the holiness of Shabbat from the profaneness of the rest of the week; in order to appreciate Shabbat, there must be the rest of the week. During the Havdalah ceremony, there are 4 main

prayers. First, there is a blessing over wine to symbolize the joy of Shabbat and to sanctify the moment. Second, there is a blessing over spices; the spices are there for two purposes: to carry the sweetness of Shabbat into the rest of the week, and to wake-up our senses a little to thrust us into our responsibilities for the week ahead. Third, there is a blessing over the braided candle; it is customary to hold up our hands or fingers to “use” the light of the candle as a formal way of ending Shabbat. This also helps draw a distinction between light and darkness, by using the light of the candle in the darkness of the evening. Lastly, there is a blessing that makes a distinction between Shabbat and the rest of the week. Afterwards, it is customary to extinguish the havdalah candle in the wine.

This beautiful ceremony serves a special purpose; it is both a sad and joyous ritual. We say goodbye to the sweetness of Shabbat, and, at the same time, welcome the coming week with joy. Similarly, we often struggle with the dichotomy between our body and our self or soul. While the body is separate, it is connected to the self. One cannot exist without a body, yet sometimes, the issues that affect the health and well-being of a body make “being” very difficult. Both body and soul are essential, and just like the relationship between Shabbat and the rest of the week, one cannot appreciate the body without getting to know the soul, nor can one get to know the soul without being influenced by the body.

What other similarities can you find between the Havdallah rituals and the text we have discussed today?

Conclusion

1. Imagine yourself at age 90 writing to your great grand-daughter about body issues.

What would you want to say to her? What would be your most important piece of advice?

2. Do you think that women of the Bible have an easier or harder time than 21st century women regarding body image?

Baring it All

Food (Lev 11:44-45)

מד כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וְהִתְקַדְשְׁתֶּם וְהִיִּיתֶם קְדוֹשִׁים כִּי קָדוֹשׁ אֲנִי וְלֹא
תִטְמְאוּ אֶת־נַפְשֵׁיכֶם בְּכָל־הַשָּׂרֵץ הֹרֵמֶשׁ עַל־הָאָרֶץ: [מפטיר]

Because I am Adonai your God: you shall sanctify yourselves and be holy, because I am holy. And you shall not make yourselves impure with any swarming thing that creeps on the earth.

מה כִּי | אֲנִי יְהוָה הַמַּעֲלֶה אֶתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לֵהֵיט לָכֶם לֵאלֹהִים וְהִיִּיתֶם
קְדוֹשִׁים כִּי קָדוֹשׁ אֲנִי:

Because I am Adonai, the one that brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God¹:
You shall be holy because I am holy.

Niddah (Lev 15:19-21)

יִט וְאִשָּׁה כִּי־תִהְיֶה זָבָה דָּם יִהְיֶה זָבָה בְּבִשְׂרָהּ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים תִּהְיֶה בְּנִדְתָּהּ
וְכָל־הַנִּגָּע בָּהּ יִטְמָא עַד־הָעֶרֶב:

When a women has flow/genital discharge of blood in her body, (if a woman has a discharge in her body and it is a discharge of blood) for seven days, she will be in her niddah/menstruation and all that touch her shall become ritually impure until that evening.

כ וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר תִּשְׁכַּב עָלָיו בְּנִדְתָּהּ יִטְמָא וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר־תֵּשֵׁב עָלָיו יִטְמָא:

And all that she sits upon during her menstruation shall be ritually impure and all who sit on it shall be ritually impure.

כא וְכָל־הַנִּגָּע בְּמִשְׁכָּבָהּ יִכְבֶּס בְּגָדָיו וְרִחֹץ בַּמַּיִם וְטָמֵא עַד־הָעֶרֶב:

And anyone who touches her bed shall wash himself in water and its ritually impure until evening.

Jezebel (2 Kings 9:30; 9:36)

ל וַיָּבֹא יְהוּא יִזְרְעֶאלָה וַאֲיִזָּבֵל שָׁמְעָה וַתֵּשֶׂם בִּפְּוֹד עֵינֶיהָ וַתִּיטֵב אֶת־רֹאשָׁהּ
וַתִּשְׁקֹף בְּעַד הַחֲלוֹן

And when Jehu was coming to Jezereel, Jezebel heard about it and she painted² her eyes and adorned her head and looked out the window.

לו וַיָּשֻׁבוּ וַיַּגִּידוּ לוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר דְּבַר־יְהוָה הוּא אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר בְּיַד־עַבְדּוֹ אֵלֶיךָ
הַתִּשְׁבִּי לֵאמֹר בְּחִלְק יִזְרְעֶאל יֵאָכְלוּ הַכֹּלָבִים אֶת־בֶּשֶׂר אִיזָבֵל:

They came back and reported to him and said, "This is the word of Adonai, spoken through

1. This is God reminding the people of God's power. God is reminding the people that God has the power to reverse the good.

2. If the word Kohl is the same as the Arabic kuhl, it is a sulphide of antimony, ground into powder, mixed with oil and applied to the eyelashes, and ancient mascara. Jewish Study Bible 744.

Adonai's servants Elijah the Tishbite: The dogs shall devour the flesh of Jezebel in the field of Jezereel;

Song of Songs (4:3; 4:7)

ג כְּחוּט הַשָּׁנִי שֶׁפָּתַתְתִּיךָ וּמִדְּבָרֶיךָ נְאוֹה כְּפֶלַח הָרְמוֹן רִקְתָּךְ מִבְּעַד לְצִמְתְּךָ:
Your lips are like a crimson thread, and your speech³ is lovely, your temples⁴ behind your veil are like a piece of pomegranate⁵⁶.

ז בְּלֶךְ יָפָה רַעֲיָתִי וּמִיִּם אֵין בָּךְ:
All of you is beautiful, my darling, there is no blemish on you⁷.

-
3. Many translations use the word mouth, but literally it is speech. Therefore the words and language that she uses are lovely.
 4. Temples are often translated as brow.
 5. This image is one of the bright red color that pomegranate seeds contain.
 6. Jewish study Bible suggests that Pomegranate is a common symbol in the Song for color and taste. Here, either a reference to the color or shape of her brow or of the play of light and dark between her skin and her veil.
 7. The idea that the woman has not a single blemish is unlikely, however when in love blemishes fade away in the eyes of the lover.

Conclusion

Over this course we have looked at many women in the Bible. There are examples of diverse types of woman from prostitutes to the most prominent. From cowards to courageous, and from everyday down-to-earth to exceptional women mediums who converse with the dead. Yet each woman in the Bible has much to share with the woman of today. There are layers upon layers to learn from every story. It is up to us to read these stories with an open mind. Before closing the door on one of these women by declaring that they have nothing to teach us, we must instead try looking deep within their story for the greater meaning behind these fascinating women.

Set Induction

- 1) Have participants make a list of as many Biblical women as they can.
- 2) After wards combine the list and see how many the class came up with.
- 3) Compare how many they know now, with how many they knew when the class began.

Activity

- 1) Pass out quote sheets with different quotes dealing with women in the Bible.
- 2) Have participants break into small groups to read through the quotes.
- 3) Assign each group quote to defend with the entire group.

There is an enormous difference between the Bible's assumption that women are socially dependent and vulnerable and today's more egalitarian ideas. There have been many changes in the last two and a half millennia- technological, sociopolitical, biological, and ideological innovations that have contributed to this change of consciousness. But this difference does not make the biblical stories irrelevant. Once acknowledged, it allows us to hold up these stories as a mirror to our own social reality to see if our real situation conforms more to our own perception of the way things ought to be or to the stories' assumptions and the way things used to be. When we use these stories as a mirror, it becomes clear that in many respects, the more things change, the more they have stayed the same.¹

Beginning with daring Eve, resourceful women are central to the book of Genesis. Women are key, not merely because they give birth, but because they shape their families' destiny; there would be no "Israel" without the matriarchs. Their stories belie any claim that Genesis privileges males at the expense of females. Rather the book privileges the ones who secure the continuity of the family and perpetuate God's blessings... Together, these women represent the biblical understanding of humans as God's partners in maintaining God's good world.²

Judaism can be seen as an ongoing dialogue between ever-changing circumstances and Jewish texts invested with enduring authority. This is especially true with respect to our most sacred text, the Torah. The Torah has always been central to the life of the Jewish people. It is embedded within a wide web of interpretations, written and oral, that provided guidance for how to understand it in new contexts. As the Rabbis of the Talmud wisely note, each generation produces its own interpreters (BT *Avodah Zarah* 5a).³

The Bible a product of this patriarchal society, is shaped by the concerns of the men of Israel who were involved in public life. As such, it is a public book, concerned with matters of government, law, ritual, and social behavior. But why, then, does this clearly androcentric text from a patriarchal society have so many stories that revolve around women? The sheer number of their stories demands an explanation: What are they doing here? Why were they written? Why were they

¹ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of their Stories*. (New York: Schocken Books, 2002) 354.

² Tamara Cohn Eskenazi *The Torah: A Woman's Commentary*. ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss (New York: URJ Press, 2008)2.

³ Ibid. xxxi.

included in this compact text?...In this way, the Bible's image of women was an essential element in its self-image and its understanding of Israel's destiny.⁴

The elastic, complex, ambiguous stories continue to provoke readers and interpret them in ways that dramatically illustrate their own agendas. They also challenge us today to read the stories in a way that sanctifies both the Bible and its readers.⁵

⁴ Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, xv-xvii.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 349.

Activity 2

Have participants answer these questions out loud. Depending on time you can have them explain their answers.

Out of all the women in the Bible...

- 1) Who was the strongest?
- 2) Who had the greatest struggles?
- 3) Who was most successful in her time?
- 4) Who's legacy is most remembered today?
- 5) Whose story is misquoted/interpreted the most today?
- 6) Whom do you wish we could throw out?
- 7) Whom do you wish you could be most like?
- 8) Whom would you like to meet?
- 9) Whom would you like to congratulate?
- 10) Whom would you like to berate?
- 11) If you had a daughter which name would you choose?

Conclusion

- 1) Why is it important to learn about women in the Bible? Do you think there is value in learning their stories? If so what is the value?
- 2) There is so much more to learn! We were only able to cover a some of the women in the Bible, but there are so many more. (Pass out list of all the women in the Bible.)

WOMEN IN THE BIBLE: A tentative/partial list. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi

TORAH/תורה

Eve (Gen 1-4)	חוה	
Ada (Gen 4:19-20)	עדה	
Zilla (Gen 4:19)	צִילָה	
Milkah (Gen 11)	מלכה	
Sarah (Gen 11-23; Isaiah 51)	שרה	
Hagar (Gen 16-21)	הגר	
Lot's daughters (Gen 19)	בנות לוט	
Keturah (Gen 25)	קטורה	
Rebecca (Gen 24-28)	רבקה	
Rachel (Gen 29-35; Jeremiah 31; Ruth 4)	רחל	
Leah (Gen 29-35; Ruth 4)	לאה	
Bilhah (esp. Gen 29-30; Gen 35)	בלהה	
Zilpah (esp. Gen 29-30)	זלפה	
Dinah (Gen 34)	דינה	
Ohalibama (Gen 36)	אהליבמה	
Tamar (Gen 38; Ruth 4)	תמר	
Potiphar's wife (Gen 39)	פוט־פֶּר	
Osnath/Asenath (Gen 41)	אוסנת	
Shifrah (Exod 1)	שיפֶּרָה	
Puah (Exod 1)	פועה	
Yochebed (Exod 2 and 6)	יוחבֶּד	
Pharaoh's daughter (Exod 2)	בת פרעה	
Zipporah (Exod 4 and 18)	צפורה	
Miriam (Exod 2-6, 15; Numb 12; Micah 6:4)	מרים	
Women serving at the Tent of Meeting (Exod 38:8)	נשים צובאות	
Shelomith daughter of Divri (Lev 24:11)	שלמית בת דברי	
Kozbi daughter of Zur (Numb (25:15)	כֹּזְבִי בת צור	
Mahlah (Zelopchad's daughter, Numb 27 and 36, Judges 17)	מחלה	
Hoglah (Zelopchad's daughter, Numb 27 and 36, Judges 17)	חגלה	
Tirzah (Zelopchad's daughter, Numb 27 and 36, Judges 17)	תרצה	
Milkah (Zelopchad's daughter, Numb 27 and 36, Judges 17)	מלכה	
Noah (Zelopchad's daughter, Numb 27 and 36, Judges 17)	נעה	

PROPHETS/נביאים

Rahab (Josh 2 & 6)	רחב	
Achsah (Josh 15:16-17; Judg 1)	עכסה	
Deborah (Judg 4&5)	דבורה	
Yael (Judg 4&5)	יעל	
Sisera's mother (Judg 5)	אם סיסרה	
Jephtah's daughter (Judg 11)	בת יפתח	
The Wife of Manoah (Samson's mother) (Judg 13)	אשת מנוח	
Samson's wife (Judg 14)	אם שמשון	
Delilah (Judges 16)	דלילה	
Micah's mother (Judges 17)	אם מיכה	
Levite's "concubine" (Judges 19-21)	פילגש בגבעה	
Shiloh's women (Judges 21)	בנות שילה	
Hannah (1 Samuel 1-2)	חנה	
Peninah (1 Samuel 1)	פנינה	
Eli's daughter-in-law (1 Samuel 4)	בת אלי	
Ahinoam (Saul's wife) (1 Samuel 15)	אחינועם	
Merab (1 Samuel 18)	מירב	
Michal (1 Samuel 18-19; 2 Sam 3 and 6; 2 Sam 21)	מיכל	

Batsheba (2 Samuel 11&12; 1 Kgs 1-2) בת שבע
 Rizpah (2 Samuel 3&21) רצפה
 Maacah (2 Samuel 3) מעכה
 Ahinoam of Jezrael (1 Sam 25) אחינועם
 Haggith (2 Samuel 3; 1 Kgs 1&2) חגית
 Tamar (2 Samuel 13) תמר
 Tamar (daughter of Abshalom) (2 Sam 14) תמר
 Wise woman of Tekoah (2 Samuel 14) האשה החכמה מתקוע
 Wise woman of Abel-Maacah (2 Samuel 20:14-22) אשת אבל בית מעכה
 Abishag (1 Kgs 1) אבישג
 The two prostitutes (1 Kgs 3) שתי הזונות
 Pharaoh's daughter (1 Kgs 9) בת פרעה
 Queen of Sheba (1 Kgs 10) מלכת שבא
 Solomon's wives 1 Kings and Nehemiah 13)
 Jezebel (1 Kgs 16-21; 2 Kgs 9-10) איזבל
 Widow of Zarepath (1 Kgs 17) האלמנה מצרפתה
 The Shunnamite (2 Kgs 4 & 8) אשת שונם
 The little Israelitish maid (2 Kgs 5)
 Athalyah, Queen of Judah (2 Kings 11=2 Chronicles 22-23) עתליה
 Yehosheba (2 Kings 11:2) יהושבע
 Asa's mother (2 Kings 15//2 Chr) אם אסא
 Huldah (2 Kings 22 = 2 Chronicles 34) חולדה
 The young woman (Isaiah 7) העלמה
 The prophetess (Isaiah 8) הנביאה
 (Bat Zion?) (Isaiah) בת ציון
 Worshippers of the Queen of Heaven (Jeremiah 44) מלכת השמים
 Ezekiel's wife אשת יחזקאל
 Magician prophetesses (Ezekiel 13)
 Gomer, Hosea's wife (Hosea 1-2) גומר

WRITINGS/כתובים

Psalms (in superscriptions)
 "Dame Wisdom" (Proverbs 1-9)
 The "strange" woman (Proverbs 1-9) האשה הזרה
 Woman of Valor (Prov 31) אשת חיל
 Job's wife (Job 2) אשת איוב
 Yemimah (Job's daughter; Job 42) ימימה
 Keziah (Job's daughter; Job 42) קציעה
 Keren-Hapuch (Job's daughter; Job 42) קרן הפוך
 Shulamite (Song of Songs 7) השולמית
 Daughters of Jerusalem (Song of Songs) בנות ירושלים
 "Our little sister" (Song of Songs 8)
 Naomi (Ruth 1-4) נעמי
 Ruth (Ruth 1-4) רות
 Orpah (Ruth 1) ערפה
 The women of Bethlehem (Ruth 1&4)
 Esther (Esther 1-10) אסתר המלכה
 Vashti (Esther 1&2) ושתי
 Zeresh (Esther 6) זרש
 King Belshazzar's queen (Daniel 5) המלכה
 Children of the "Sophereth" (Ezra 2//Nehemiah 7) בני הסופרת
 Daughter of Barzillai the Gileadite (Ezra 2//Nehemiah 7) בנות ברזילאי
 Foreign wives (Ezra 9-10)
 Shallum's daughters (Nehemiah 3) בנות שלום
 Noadiah the prophet (Nehemiah 6) נועדיה