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Beit Ishah Zonah, Jewish Dwelling in the House of the Harlot: Judaism and Sex Work

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Ordination

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New York

March 15, 2022

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Abstract and Introduction

This thesis seeks to help clergy understand the political, social, and spiritual issues Jewish sex workers face, and encourage them to offer their pastoral and communal support to these individuals. To that end, this work presents information about the challenges faced by sex workers, voices of Jewish sex workers, analysis of biblical texts, and pastoral perspectives.

My research shows that Jewish sex workers generally do not feel safe to be their full selves in mainstream Jewish communities, to the point that many do not try to engage with them at all. For those who *are* part of Jewish communities, most choose to keep their identity as a sex worker secret. The stigmatization that they feel from within Jewish communities is rooted in religious conservatism. Patriarchal attitudes toward women, and especially against women who mainstream society deems as promiscuous, has existed since the beginning of civilization. However, these patriarchal attitudes have been, and can be, challenged by modern religious and secular scholars, feminist thinkers, researchers— and, especially, by sex workers themselves. Many sex workers today are aching for Jewish community, learning, and connection that is affirming and safe. Judaism and Jewish identity often come up in their work in positive ways– they form community with other Jewish sex workers, and many celebrate commonality and shared culture with Jewish clients. It also comes up in negative ways, especially with antisemitism within their field, and the stigma that they face in their work from Jewish communities and families. I offer Jewish clergy, most of whom report they do not currently know sex workers in their communities, ways that they can begin to be more open and inclusive, address pastoral needs, and signal that they are, or want to be, allies for sex workers in their wider communities.

In Chapter One, I share how I define sex work, including its general history and context. I explore the often-stigmatized symbol of the sex worker in Abrahamic religious history, and how this symbol has contributed, to this day, to the stigmatization and criminalization of women and sex workers in Western society. I also share published research and data in discussion of the political and social issues that sex workers are facing today.

In Chapter Two, I share the results of two surveys. Jewish sex workers or former sex workers completed the first survey. The data from this survey shows how issues of Jewish identity and connection come into the lives of Jewish sex workers in their work, and what they hope the Jewish community will do to best support them. Jewish clergy completed the second survey. The data from this survey portrays the extent to which Jewish clergy feel they can - or cannot - confidently address the political, social, and pastoral needs of Jewish sex workers in their communities.

In Chapter Three I synthesize the data and information explored in Chapter One and my ethnographic research in Chapter Two, with the goal of helping clergy engage and support Jewish sex workers in their communities. I include pastoral care approaches, examples of the challenges clergy may face, and offer ideas about how they can address them to provide support for sex workers and embrace them as members of their community.

In Chapter Four I analyze four texts from Torah and Prophets, each of which portrays women whose actions and roles embody what we might understand today as sex work. I explore how these women may have been understood from various points through history: Talmudic rabbis of late antiquity (third-sixth century). classical commentators such as Rashi (eleventh century), Radak (twelfth century), and the Malbim (nineteenth century), and

modern commentators of the twenty-first century, such as Robert Alter, Judith Plaskow, Tikva Frymer-Kensky, and others. I explore why certain women or symbols such as the "harlot" or the "whore" were sometimes vilified, sexualized, heroized, or thought about in other ways through these periods, and how modern feminist thinkers may give them a new voice in ways that are more uplifting of their identities. I compare the traditional understandings of how the classical rabbis through antiquity felt about these women, to how they may have felt themselves and their work in prostitution – often incorporating modern commentary and my own interpretation. Based on my surveys and research, I offer insight into how these texts are related to sex work, and how sex workers may grapple with these texts. I explore how the modern-day patriarchal attitudes and injustices that sex workers face may be rooted, challenged, uprooted, and overcome through these texts.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my thesis advisor, Rabbi Kim Geringer for your thought, feedback, dedication, and encouraging me to be my best through this past year. Thank you for helping me to create structure and building blocks so I could succeed. I could not have done this without your support, care, partnership, and mentorship.

Thank you to those who participated in the *Jewish Sex Workers Survey*. I'm so grateful for your honest, real, and insightful words. I'm also thankful for my friend who added their voice as a Jewish educator and sex worker, in an interview. I'm honored to have been able to write on this topic and share your voices in it. Thank you for challenging all of us to do better, and may we see a more inclusive, accepting Jewish world, and entire world, which uplifts you and recognizes that sex work is work.

To the clergy who participated in the *Jewish Clergy and Sex Workers Survey*– thank you for your honesty, curiosity, and generosity in sharing where you are in this important work. Thank you also to Rabbi Margaret Moers Wenig for your insightful words on how clergy can address the political issues sex workers face, publicly.

Thank you to Rabbi Michelle Lenkin, Rabbi Yael Romer, Rabbi Danny Burkeman, Rabbi Jordi Battis, and Cantor Hollis Schachner for your mentorship, encouragement, spiritual guidance, and believing in me.

Thank you to my colleagues Rabbi Emily Aviva Kapor-Mater and Rabbi Rachael Pass, for being incredible *chevrutot,* study partners, at points through this process.

Thank you to my friend Zoe Belinsky, for encouraging me to bring out my own voice, engaging with me in productive writing sessions, and for your thoughtful and wise feedback on my biblical research and analysis.

Thank you to George Altshuler, our amazing peer writing tutor, for his astute advice and helping me to stay organized.

Thank you HUC librarians, especially Eli Lieberman and Abigail Bacon for helping me access an incredible amount of online and physical documents, and for giving helpful advice on citations.

Thank you to my classmates and friends who've checked in on me and have been a shoulder to lean on.

Thank you to my family: my fiancée Jessica Dell'Era, for your love, care, and presence. Thank you for being a sounding board as I talked through my ideas, and for being so grounding and understanding through this entire process (even as I became nocturnal). Thank you to my parents, Karen and Victor, and my brothers, Danny, and Jared for your unconditional love, support, and for cheering me on through this process.

This thesis could not have happened without the wide and caring community that surrounds me. Thank you, thank you, thank you!

Chapter One: Social and Political Challenges to Sex Workers

What is sex work?

The definition of Sex work is an "exchange [of] sexual services for money, housing, food, drugs, healthcare, or any other resource"[1], according to Nina Luo, a development and communications strategist, and Deputy Political Director of the Working Families Party.[2] Luo authored an extensive report and platform on pressing policy issues that affect sex workers, called *Decriminalizing Survival: Policy Platform and Polling on the Decriminalization of Sex Work*." published by Data For Progress, a progressive thinktank. In introducing readers to the diversity of what sex work is and can be, she explains:

> "Sex work can be legal or criminalized, short-term, or long-term, serve as primary or supplemental income, and be conducted independently or with other people. Like with other forms of labor, people trade sex for reasons that exist on a spectrum of choice, circumstance, and coercion. Most sex workers trade sex out of circumstance to meet economic needs such as healthcare, housing, or childcare. They may experience explicit discrimination in the formal economy because of disability, gender identity or immigration status and rely on sex work to meet basic needs. They may find parts of the sex industry to have low barriers of entry, allowing them to immediately access income for a short period of time in the industry before exiting. They may find that the freelance or independent nature of the work allows them more time flexibility to caretake families or pursue other interests[3]."

Even though some sex workers are coerced, which may categorize them as victims of sex trafficking, the majority of sex workers are not trafficked. Luo writes: "Human trafficking is a serious, urgent, and multi-faceted problem that requires an informed, comprehensive, and rights-based response. However, most participants in the sex trade are not victims of

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[1] Nina Luo. Rep. *Decriminalizing Survival: Policy Platform and Polling on the Decriminalization of Sex Work*. Data for Progress, 2020. https://www.filesforprogress.org/memos/decriminalizing-sex-work.pdf.
[2] Nina Luo. Timeline [LinkedIn page]. Retrieved February 22, 2022, from https://www.linkedin.com/in/ninaluo/
[3] Nina Luo, Decriminalizing Survival

trafficking as the term is defined, so the concepts should not be conflated."[4] The notion that all sex workers are victims of trafficking continues to have grave consequences for the safety and wellbeing of sex workers– for those who choose sex work, those who are coerced, and all those in between. To avoid such conflation, I have chosen to focus my own research on sex workers who are not victims of trafficking. I will include further research on the negative consequences of the conflation of these in the sub-section of this chapter, *Sex Work and Its Conflation with Sex Trafficking,* and elsewhere throughout this thesis.

Sociological/Religious

Amin R. Yacoub, a PhD candidate and international lawyer, in his study of sex work and Abrahamic religions, claims that in our Western society, "Sex work does not only raise human dignity issues, it is often perceived as an affront to human dignity in itself. Further, a person who sells sex is widely perceived by the public has having no dignity."[5] Sex workers are also widely stigmatized and dehumanized: "A simple analysis reveals the contradictory moral approach of humankind towards women's sexual dignity. The same sexual act can be perceived as holy (marriage under religions), acceptable (monogamous relationships), less acceptable (casual sex), and stigmatized (sex work)."[6] Despite the fact that sex workers are participating in the same acts of sex as other human beings in relation to one another, they are often treated in society with disdain. The perceived indignity and stigmatization of sex

[4] Nina Luo, Decriminalizing Survival, 14
[5] Amin R. Yacoub, Consensual sex work: An overview of sex-workers' human dignity in law, philosophy, and Abrahamic religions, Women's Studies International Forum, Volume 76, 2019, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2019.102274, 2
[6] Amin R. Yacoub, Consensual sex work 2

workers makes them prone to "discrimination, violence, and rejection related to their work."[7]

Yacoub questions:

> "Why is society concerned with a sex worker who is providing sexual services in a private bedroom that neither hurt anyone nor touch the public sphere? There is only one unconvincing answer to this question: that such [a] private act hurts the public morals of the society. In my view, these public morals are highly associated with sexual shame, a kind of shame that runs in our veins as a result to social programming."[8]

Many argue that sex work's origins date back to the beginning of society. William Wallace Sanger, a New York physician, wrote a groundbreaking, and extensive study of the history of prostitution, The *History of Prostitution: Its Extent, Causes, and Effects Throughout the World,* published in 1858. He writes:

> "Our earliest acquaintance with the human race discloses some sort of society established. It also reveals the existence of a marriage tie, varying in stringency and incidental effects according to climate, morals, religion, or accident, but everywhere essentially subversive of a system of promiscuous intercourse. [...] Accordingly, prostitution is coeval with society. It stains the earliest mythological records. It is constantly assumed as an existing fact in Biblical history. We can trace it from the earliest twilight in which history dawns to the clear daylight of today, without a pause or a moment of obscurity. Our most ancient historical record is believed to be the Books of Moses. When Tamar, the daughter-in-law of Judah, desired to defeat the cruel Jewish custom, and to bear children, notwithstanding her widowhood, she 'put her widow's garments off from her, and covered her with a veil, and wrapped herself, and sat in an open place.... When Judah saw her he thought her a harlot, for she had covered her face' (Genesis 38:14). The Genesiacal account thus shows that prostitutes, with covered faces, must have been common at the time."[9]

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[7] Kate Blomquist, Fact Sheet: Minority Stress & Sex Work, Swop USA, https://swopusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/FACTSHEET-MINORITYSTRESSSEXWORK_KBLOOMQUISTNewLogo.pdf citing Deering, et. al, 2014.

[8] Amin R. Yacoub, Consensual sex work, 8

[9] William Sanger, *History of Prostitution: Its Extent, Causes and Effects throughout the World*. New York, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1858.

As evidenced by this record, "prostitution" or "sex work" is often considered one of the oldest professions. I will be exploring the story of Tamar more extensively in Chapter Four. However, during these ancient times language for "sex work" but rather being an *ish zonah,* or "whoring woman." The language used to describe what we call sex work has been developed over the centuries. In her 2014 book, *Playing the Whore,* journalist, activist, and former sex worker Melissa Gira Grant, referring to sex work, writes, "Controlling the sale of sex is not as timeless as we might imagine it to be. Commercial sex—as a practice and an industry—as well as the class of people within it are continuously being reinvented."[10] She explains that the English word "whore" originated in the twelfth century BCE, in "old English or old German, possibly derived from a root that's no longer known." Then, "The word 'prostitution' emerged in the sixteenth century "as a verb—to prostitute, to set something up for sale."[11] She contends:

> "The person we call "the prostitute," contrary to her honorific as a member of 'the world's oldest profession,' hasn't actually been around very long. The word is young, and at first it didn't confer identity. There were countless people whose lives prior to the word's invention were later reduced by historians to the word whore, though their activities certainly varied. Contrary to King James, there was no whore of Babylon. There were no prostitutes in Pompeii. No one, not in old or new Amsterdam, worked in a red-light district until they were named as such toward the end of the nineteenth century. It's the nineteenth century that brings us the person of the prostitute, who we are to understand was a product of the institution that came to be known as prostitution but was actually born of something much broader. Prior to this period, anthropologist Laura Agustín explains in Sex at the Margins, there was no word or concept which signified exclusively the sale of sexual services … "Whoring" referred to sexual relations outside of marriage and connoted immorality or promiscuity without the involvement of money, and the word "whore" was used to brand any woman who stepped out of current boundaries of respectability."[12]

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[10]Melissa Gira Grant. *Playing the Whore: The Work of Sex Work (Jacobin)*. Verso Books, 2014. Kindle edition, 20

[11] Melissa Gira Grant, *Playing the Whore,* 20

[12] Melissa Gira Grant, *Playing the Whore,* 20

In the Tanakh, being a *zonah*, which can sometimes be translated as "prostitute," "whore," or "harlot," has many meanings in terms of how it was practiced, and the activities that were associated with it. Whether it was an economic, moral, or idolatrous role largely depended on the context. Sometimes these roles overlapped, and sometimes they were distinct. Even when the roles are distinct, the connotations of the language to refer to them often registered at both moral and economic levels. The sages who expounded on the Tanakh may have been simultaneously aware of the specific economic, social, and communal role that characters such as Rahab played, while also using language that is easily conflating of economic and moral connotations—or worse yet, they may have been caught up in the same linguistic confusion.

To make matters even more complicated, the term "sex work" originated in the 1970s; it transitioned from a "state of being, to a form of labor."[13] It can be difficult to unpack whether a rabbi would have understood "sex work" as a kind of economic status, as sexual immorality, or as sexual idolatry-- or more than one at the same time. As such, the task of relating Jewish texts to the modern concept of sex work, as a kind of labor, requires critical and intentional interpretation, as well as close reading of the text.

Despite differences of language, patriarchal social programming has been long rooted in society and religion. The stigma around sex work in secular society has traditional and religious roots, including those in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Patriarchal attitudes that have developed about sex workers are intricately connected to patriarchal ideas about women. In 1969, Kate Millet, a feminist, activist, and influential figure in the women's liberation movement, claims in her book *Sexual Politics* that *"*the connection of women, sex,

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[13] Melissa Gira Grant, *Playing the Whore,* 20

and sin"[14] originated in the story of Adam and Eve. Eve is often traditionally understood as the "sexual type" who causes the male – and thus humanity – to "fall." Millet argues that this "constitutes the fundamental pattern of western patriarchal thought thereafter."[15] Even today, though much of Western society has become more rationalist, giving up a literal belief in this "central myth of the Judeo-Christian imagination," its "emotional assent [remains] intact"[16]

The persisting patriarchal values of women representing sex and sin, which Millet alludes to, have affected the way sex workers are perceived in society today. Hanne Blank, in her essay *The Sex of Work, the Work of Sex* writes:

> "Patriarchies [...] have tended to limit women's sexual behavior in the interest of easing tensions among men about sex, property, and inheritance. This pattern clearly holds true within both traditional and much of contemporary Judaism [...] The deep seated suspicion of how women use their sexual agency presents itself in numerous ways. We see it reflected in traditional rules and customs, many of which are not exclusively Jewish [...] We see it in mainstream culture in stereotypes that get applied to sexually assertive women (e.g. that they are sluts, nymphomaniacs, or gold diggers), and those that get applied to sex workers (e.g. that they are sexually indiscriminate or habitual criminals)."[17]

The traditional Jewish rules and customs that Blank mentions which, she argues, limit women's sexual agency, have been around for an exceptionally long time. Danya Ruttenberg, in her essay, *Toward a New Tzniut,* describes how the Talmud deals with the idea of women needing to cover their bodies in modesty:

> "Tractate Brachot discusses the aspects of a woman's body (from her little finger to her hair and voice) that might be considered *erva,* a word that can be translated, variously, as 'nakedness,' 'sexually forbidden,' or 'intimate.' The Talmudic

[14] Kate Millet, Sexual Politics, 54
[15] Kate Millet, Sexual Politics, 54
[16] Kate Millet, Sexual Politics, 52
[17] Hanne Blank. "The Sex of Work, the Work of Sex." Essay. In *Jewish Choices, Jewish Voices: Sex and Intimacy*, edited by Elliot N. Dorff and Danya Ruttenberg. Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2010. 92

> commentator Rashba, explains why this would be the case in his comment on Rav Hisda's statement, 'A woman's leg is erva,' explaining that it is specifically forbidden 'to men because of sexual thoughts.' A woman's leg is not problematic in and of itself, but the thoughts it arouses in men are problematic—to the men. Therefore, according to the halakha derived from this passage, women need to cover up."[18]

This talmudic understanding of modesty has affected current Jewish practice and attitudes. In many Orthodox Jewish circles today, there are limits to a woman's ability to do art, play instruments, dress "immodestly" or stand out in any way in front of men, lest she sexually excite them.[19] There is an obsession with "revealing or covering disparate female body parts, keeping women (individually or as a collective) neatly packaged, compartmentalized, and, perhaps, more easily controlled."[20] Patriarchal attitudes– those that seek to control what women wear or don't wear, or how outwardly they behave in society– include control of sex workers, especially if they choose to wear less clothing. Sex workers are often under the spotlight of the patriarchy, shamed and policed for the way that they dress and exist. Like the talmudic women whose legs are deemed problematic, sex workers' bodies bear the weight of social scrutiny.

While Jewish communities today have various opinions on sex work, and many views have evolved which challenge these notions, patriarchal ideas and problematic ideas about sex work still affect even the most liberal Jewish communities. However, several Jewish scholars and thinkers have offered new ways to view sex work and prostitution in our Jewish texts, which challenge some of these patriarchal notions in the biblical or talmudic texts. Phyllis Trible, in her work *Depatriarchalizing the Bible* writes: "We shall be unfaithful

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[18] Danya Ruttenberg, "Toward a New Tzniut." *The Passionate Torah: Sex and Judaism*. NYU Press, 2009. Kindle edition. 204

[19] Danya Ruttenberg, "Toward a New Tzniut." 204

[20] Danya Ruttenberg, "Toward a New Tzniut." 205

readers if we neglect biblical passages which break with patriarchy or if we permit our interpretations to freeze in a patriarchal box of our own construction. For our day we need to perceive a depatriarchalizing principle, to recover it in those texts and themes where it is present, and to ascend in our own translations. Therein we shall be explorers who embrace both old and new in the pilgrimage of faith."[21] Chapter Four of this thesis explores not only the medieval and traditional readings of Jewish texts that include "whores" or "prostitutes," but also modern feminist interpretations that shed a more progressive lens on sex work, and challenge the patriarchal norms that have affected sex workers past and present.

Theologically Based Stigma in Christianity and Judaism

Both religious and secular salvific attitudes toward sex work contribute to sex workers' stigmatization, both today and in centuries past. In the Prophetic book of Joshua, for example, a prostitute named Rahab saves several Israelite spies, converts to Judaism, and leaves her past life behind, coming closer to God. This is celebrated in talmudic and rabbinic Jewish texts. This story and phenomenon will be explored further in Chapter Four. A parallel salvific approach has become common in Christianity, with Christian missionaries seeing Jesus as the way sex workers will come to their religious senses and exit the industry. While modern Judaism does not usually take a conspicuous "missionary approach," Jews are not immune to these popular attitudes that a sex worker should exit the industry and be saved from its corruption. Christian researcher Lauren McGrow, in her work *Doing It (Feminist Theology and Faith-Based Outreach)*, writes that "the problem-solving approach should be

[21]Phyllis Trible. "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 41, no. 1 (1973): 30–48. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1461386. 48

interrogated because the power and status of Christian ministries, especially their stance on conventional sexuality, remains unquestioned" She adds:

> "To presuppose that all sex workers, in every circumstance, are passive victims of deep suffering who lack agency is a dehumanizing judgment, which does not help to create a mutually enriching space for creative, humane connections or understanding. Furthermore, sex workers are seen by Christians as deficient in value, especially spiritual value, because they do not fit the ordered scheme of decency. They must be saved because we are uncomfortable with their part in the sexual economy; they must be transformed because of their brokenness; and the industry must be eliminated because of its abuse. For faith-based programmes, this salvific potential is entwined with middle-class morality and the fear and shame that has been traditionally associated with sexual women."[22]

The idea that sex workers must be saved, beyond and including this religious approach, appears in today's laws and policies, most notably the policing and criminalization of sex work, partially, in a so-called effort to "help them."

Criminalization and Policing

In many countries, including the United States, sex work is criminalized. Luo explains:

> "In the United States, a mix of city, county, state and federal-level laws and policing and prosecution practices fully criminalize sex work, except in certain counties in Nevada where prostitution is allowed within regulated brothels. Penal codes criminalize the sale, purchase, and facilitation of sexual exchange. Charges can include 'patronizing prostitution,' 'soliciting,' 'promoting prostitution,' 'pandering,' 'brothel-keeping,' 'loitering for the purposes of prostitution,' 'permitting prostitution,' and more."[23]

Sex workers are subject to high rates of interactions with law enforcement, and police-inflicted abuse and violence. Luo describes these issues in detail:

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[22]Lauren McGrow. "Doing It (Feminist Theology and Faith-Based Outreach) With Sex Workers – Beyond Christian Rescue and the Problem-Solving Approach." *Feminist Theology* 25, no. 2 (January 2017): 150–69. https://doi.org/10.1177/0966735016673258. 153

[23] Luo, *Decriminalizing Survival*, 6

> "Police, sometimes in dedicated vice units, spend weeks, sometimes years, posing as clients and setting up undercover operations. In stings, undercover officers approach people in public or online spaces and solicit them for sex to build a case for arrest. Law enforcement officers also engage in abusive and coercive conduct, including forcing sex workers to expose themselves, verbally harassing and misgendering them, grabbing their breasts and buttocks, engaging them in sex acts before arresting them, and contacting them following their arrest. In other instances, officers coerce sexual favors from sex workers in exchange for not arresting them—behavior that constitutes sexual assault. In some states, it's even legal for police officers to have sex with people in custody if they claim the person 'consented.' Sex workers are often undocumented, women of color and/or young LGBTQ+ people who have little to no access to the justice system. Their additional "criminality" as a result of engaging in sex work entirely discredits them as "victims" when they report rape or violence to police."[24]

Grant describes in further detail how these police stings incite fear:

> "To produce a prostitute where before there had been only a woman is the purpose of such policing. It is a socially acceptable way to discipline women, fueled by a lust for law and order that is at the core of what I call the 'prostitute imaginary'—the ways in which we conceptualize and make arguments about prostitution (...) "The sting itself, aside from the unjust laws it enforces, or the trial that may never result, is intended to incite fear. "[25]

Grant reported that "70 percent of sex workers working outdoors surveyed by the Sex Workers Project reported near daily run-ins with police, and 30 percent reported being threatened [by them] with violence."[26] It is also an issue globally: "In West Bengal, the sex worker collective Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee surveyed over 21,000 women who do sex work. They collected 48,000 reports of abuse or violence by police—in contrast with 4,000 reports of violence by customers, who are conventionally thought of as the biggest threat to sex workers."[27]

When sex workers who are in danger call the police, they are also often ignored: "Sallman (2011) interviewed fourteen sex workers in the Midwestern US who reported

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[24] Luo, *Decriminalizing Survival,* 6
[25] Melissa Gira Grant, *Playing the Whore: The Work of Sex Work,* 3
[26] Melissa Gira Grant. *Playing the Whore,* 3
[27] Melissa Gira Grant. *Playing the Whore,* 5

receiving poor treatment from the police and felt dispensable by them. After reporting a rape, one sex worker stated a police officer said she deserved it and that it was good it happened."[28] Thus, sex workers do not trust that police will help sex workers. Luo writes: "People in the sex trades keep each other safe via whisper networks and blacklists, because there is (rightfully) no expectation the justice system or the public will keep them safe from gender-based violence."[29] The combination of patriarchal attitudes, violence, and criminalization of sex workers leads to great danger for sex workers at the hands of law enforcement, employers, and clients.

According to Yacoub, the decriminalization of sex work would increase sex workers' autonomy: "Under decriminalization, the sex worker is free to join and free to quit. Further, sex workers would have adequate access to police and justice as safeguards to her safety against clients' abuse, and a safeguard for her general autonomy. They would also be able to establish workers' unions similar to any other profession."[30] Yacoub's position concurs with data driven studies such as *A Systematic Review of the Correlates of Violence Against Sex Workers (2014),* which found that "Policing practices as enforcement of laws, either lawful (e.g., arrest) or unlawful (e.g., coercion, bribes, violence) are a critical means for measuring how criminalization and regulation of sex work may have a negative impact on risks of violence against sex workers. (...) There was consistent evidence of an independent link between policing practices (e.g., arrest, violence, coercion) and elevated rates of physical or

[28]Eric Sprankle, Katie Bloomquist, Cody Butcher, Neil Gleason, and Zoe Schaefer. "The Role of Sex Work Stigma in Victim Blaming and Empathy of Sexual Assault Survivors." *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 15, no. 3 (2017): 242–48. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-017-0282-0.
[29] Nina Luo, Decriminalizing sex work, 10
[30] Amin R. Yacoub, Consensual sex work, 7

sexual violence against sex workers."[31] Prostitution and sex work between client and sex worker on their own, are not dangerous; very rarely do clients perpetrate violence. More often, the "central cause of violence is institutional alienation of sex workers from law enforcement protection and a justice system that leads most sex workers to distrust and fear law enforcement officials"[32] Luo adds: "A systematic review of 33 countries by the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine found that sex workers are 3x more likely to experience sexual and physical violence in countries with criminalization policies (including the Nordic Model) as compared to decriminalization approaches." The Nordic Model describes an approach to decrease sex work by criminalizing those who purchase sex, rather than sex workers themselves. It was "inspired by a 1999 Swedish law that first penalized the purchase of sex rather than its provision."[33] The Nordic model has also been criticized by sex workers for its conflation with sex trafficking, how it pushes sex work further underground, making it more unsafe, and how it "creates and sustains barriers to essential health services for sex workers."[34]

Sex Work and Its Conflation with Sex Trafficking

Crystal A. Jackson discusses the consequences of conflating sex work with sex trafficking in *Framing Sex Worker Rights: How U.S. Sex Worker Rights Artists Perceive and*

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[31] Kathleen N Deering et al. "A systematic review of the correlates of violence against sex workers." *American journal of public health* vol. 104,5 (2014): e42-54. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2014.301909. e42

[32] "Learn about Sex Work." Sex Workers Outreach Project, February 14, 2019. https://swopusa.org/learn-about-sex-work/.

[33] Zoe Bulls, and Victoria Watson. "Three Ways the Nordic Model Falls Short." Ms. Magazine Blog, December 17, 2018. https://web.archive.org/web/20181217192936/http://msmagazine.com/blog/2018/12/17/three-ways-nordic-model-falls-short/.

[34] Zoe Bulls and Victoria Watson. "Three Ways the Nordic Model Falls Short."

Respond to Mainstream Anti-Sex Trafficking Advocacy. She writes: "Anti sex-trafficking advocacy efforts posit that (1) prostitution is responsible for sex trafficking, (2) prostitution and sex trafficking are synonymous, and (3) prostitution is a form of violence by men against women and girls."[35] Anti-trafficking activists, in a "neoliberal" attempt to protect women and girls, have caused two phenomena:

> "One is what Elizabeth Bernstein refers to as 'carceral feminism' and the turn to criminalization as the answer to women's experiences of violence. The other is institutionalization of a 'rescue industry,' a mix of nonprofits, government agencies (including criminal justice agencies), and nongovernmental organizations that receive substantial funding to assess, address, and eliminate sex trafficking"[36]

On the other hand, for sex workers:

> "'Rights based frames' are rooted in an activist ideology of worker rights within (and challenging) a neoliberal economic structure. The right to work, and to work safely, and the sociocultural struggle to refute stereotypes are cornerstones of a rights-based frame—and this is at odds with a victim frame of a rescue, rehabilitation, and protection. For example, sex workers want the right to find other work outside of the sex industry, without having to embody a victim who renounces prostitution as inherently violent and bad—largely because the process of renouncing prostitution takes someone through the criminal courts and court-mandated rehabilitation (...) Wanting the right to work safely—free from arrest, police harassment, and violence; free to report violence or theft; free to remain as a primary caretaker for a child/children; and other issues salient to people who engage in sex work—reflects the ways in which antiprostitution frames are embedded in many social institutions from criminal justice to the family. Women's economic behavior and sexual behavior are at the core of protectionist politics, and this is what sex worker rights-based frames must counter. Sex worker rights activists argue that criminalization of sexual labor is a social justice issue, a direct challenge to the normative approach to sex work as a social problem."[37]

Jackson refers readers to Audacia Ray and Emma Caterine, of the *Red Umbrella Project (REDUP),* a Brooklyn peer-led, sex worker advocacy organization, who discuss sex

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[35] Crystal A Jackson. "Framing Sex Worker Rights: How U.S. Sex Worker Rights Activists Perceive and Respond to Mainstream Anti–Sex Trafficking Advocacy." *Sociological Perspectives* 59, no. 1 (2016): 27–45. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26340166.
[36] Crystal A. Jackson. "Framing Sex Worker Rights" 28
[37] Crystal A Jackson. "Framing Sex Worker Rights"

workers' challenging experiences going through in a criminal justice system that targets trafficking, in their report *Criminal, Victim, or Worker: The Effects of New York's Human Trafficking Intervention Courts on Adults Charged with Prostitution-Related Offenses*. They write:

> "Though based on an intention to help people who are in exploitative situations or working in the sex industry when they would prefer doing another job, the blanket assumption that all people in the sex trades are victims does us a grave injustice. The victim narrative grays the line between consent and coercion, making it more difficult for people in the sex trades who are victimized– by clients, pimps, police, and courts– to seek justice and move forward with our lives in ways that we determine."[38]

Mental Health

While many sex workers do face challenges to their mental health, sex work is not inherently damaging to sex workers; it is the external stressors such as criminalization and stigma that affect their mental health the most. If it were legal, and less stigmatized, sex workers would face fewer challenges to their mental and physical wellbeing. Katie Blomquist of the *Sex Workers Outreach Project* published a fact sheet on *Minority Stress and Sex Work: Understanding Stress and Internalized Stigma.* According to this report, "Sexual minority health disparities can be explained in large part by stressors induced by a hostile, homophobic / transphobic (whorephobic) culture, which often results in a lifetime of harassment, maltreatment, discrimination, and victimization and may ultimately impact access to care." Bloomquist notes further:

> "There are three main internal stressors which can occur from experiences with rejection, prejudice, & discrimination applied to sex workers: 1. Identity concealment: passing as non-sex worker, concealing job from friends, family. 2. Internalized stigma: internalized whorephobia, believing sex work is not 'real' work. 3. Expectation of rejection: anticipation which results in fewer close bonds with

[38] Audacia Ray and Emma Caterine. Rep. *Criminal, Victim, or Worker? The Effects of New York's Human Trafficking Intervention Courts on Adults Charged with Prostitution-Related Offences*. Brooklyn, NY: Red Umbrella Project, 2014. 3

> people, difficulty making new friends, isolation, being frequently guarded or defensive, etc."[39]

Criminalization leads to greater rates of mental health challenges for sex workers. A report titled *Associations between sex work laws and sex workers' health: A systematic review and meta-analysis of quantitative and qualitative studies* contends:

> "We found few studies that focused on [sex workers'] emotional health, but these show detrimental associations with repressive policing and criminalisation. Qualitative and quantitative studies demonstrate that police enforcement and its threat is a major source of anxiety, whereas working in indoor, decriminalised environments is associated with improved mental health outcomes. A recent critical literature review demonstrates that criminalisation, stigma, poor working conditions, isolation from peer and social networks, and financial insecurity have negative repercussions for sex workers' mental health."[40]

Despite struggling with mental health, it can be challenging for sex workers to be able to find trusted community and mental health professionals who can provide them care and support. Because of the need to be discrete, sex workers are often afraid to tell their family or support system about their role as a sex worker. According to a research report titled *Consequences of Policing Prostitution:*

> "Familial support is often crucial to coping with trauma and moving on to maintain stability. Some women's family members knew about their past and were unsupportive. This led to strained, or in some cases fractured, relationships with parents, siblings, partners, and children. However, more clients reported not telling their families about their victimization; as a result, they lived in constant fear of their family members, particularly their children finding out, and how they would react."[41]

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[39] Katie Blomquist, SWOP USA Board of Directors, Fact Sheet | Minority Stress and Sex Work Understanding stress and internalized stigma, 2019 https://swopusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/FACTSHEET-MINORITYSTRESSSEXWORK_KBLOOMQUISTNewLogo.pdf

[40] Lucy Platt, Pippa Grenfell, Rebecca Meiksin, Jocelyn Elmes, Susan G. Sherman, Teela Sanders, Peninah Mwangi, and Anna-Louise Crago. "Associations between Sex Work Laws and Sex Workers' Health: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Quantitative and Qualitative Studies." *PLOS Medicine* 15, no. 12 (December 11, 2018). https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1002680.

[41] Meredith Dank, Jennifer Yahner, and Lilly Yu. Rep. *Consequences of Policing: Prostitution An Analysis of Individuals Arrested and Prosecuted for Commercial Sex in New York City*. Justice Policy Center, April 5, 2017.

Accessing affirming and safe therapy can also be challenging for sex workers. Academics Anna C. Pederson, Madeline R. Stenersen, and Sara K. Bridges, created *Toward Affirming Therapy: What Sex Workers Want and Need from Mental Health Providers.* This report is a qualitative study of the sex workers' desired standards of mental health care, based on a series of conversations with eight sex workers, finding where they reached consensus on their own mental health care needs. Their findings included, that "All participants endorsed a strong emphasis on collaboration in therapy and in a therapeutic environment where the client (i.e., the sex worker) is considered the expert on their own experiences, life, and occupation."[42] They also found that "At the core, participants indicated that they want therapists to understand that sex work is valid work, individuals enter into sex work for a diverse range of reasons, and that experience both benefits and risks from their work. However, these attitudes are not often reflected in the current literature-related work in the sex trade industry."[43]

The researchers found that sex workers came to consensus on desired standards for their mental healthcare in several categories:

1) Attitudes: **"**These results largely reflect a view by participants that therapists should not make assumptions about reasons why their clients entered into sex work. Furthermore, participants indicated that therapists should not pathologize sex work, whether through viewing sex work as a symptom of a larger mental health issue or through viewing sex work as an indication that the client is inherently 'damaged.'"[44]

2) Knowledge: "All participants agreed that therapists should know that participation in sex work is not a pathology but a valid career choice, which may be accompanied by

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https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/89451/consequences-of-policing-prostitution.pdf.

[42] Anna C. Pederson, Madeline R. Stenersen, and Sara K. Bridges. "Toward Affirming Therapy: What Sex Workers Want and Need from Mental Health Providers." Journal of Humanistic Psychology, (August 2019). https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167819867767.,3

[43]Anna Pederson et. al. "Toward Affirming Therapy" 15

[44]Anna Pederson et. al. "Toward Affirming Therapy" 13

benefits such as being your own boss or having a flexible schedule. Furthermore, statements emerged regarding participants' desire for therapists to know that sex work can be both enjoyable, while also requiring skill and emotional labor, and involving risks. Regarding experiences in therapy, participants agreed that therapists should know that sex workers seeking services will likely be concerned about their therapists' opinions and the possibility of pathologizing of their work. Finally, participants mentioned multiple times a desire for therapists to know that sex workers do not fit into one mold and, instead, are a diverse group of individuals with different intersecting identities."

3) Disclosure and therapy: "All but one participant [...] indicated that they would tell their therapists that they do sex work. However, several participants noted that it would be easier to disclose if their therapists had previous experience working with sex workers or exhibited pro-sex work attitudes (e.g., pro-sex work pamphlets in the office, listing "sex work" as an occupation option on intake paperwork). Perceptions of the therapists' attitudes also influenced the decision of whether to disclose their occupation. Participants felt that they would easily be able to tell if a therapist did not have a positive opinion of them and that they would discontinue therapy if they felt that their therapists was judging them for being a sex worker."[45]

As many aspects of care work in mental health and spiritual care overlap it is important for Jewish clergy too to begin to understand these ways in which sex workers demand to be cared for with dignity and respect.

[45] Anna Pederson et. al. "Toward Affirming Therapy" 13

Chapter Two: Survey Results

Jewish Sex Workers Survey

Introduction

To get qualitative results for this research, I created an anonymous survey titled *Jewish Sex Workers Survey* in order to hear first person accounts of Jewish sex workers' relationship to Judaism and Jewish space. I also sought to gain insight into whether these workers feel safe in Jewish spaces, and what they think that Jewish communities and leaders could do to better support them. All respondents self-identified as Jewish, and as either a current or former sex worker. They understood that they might be quoted, but that I would not use any identifying information in the report. I posted a summary of the survey with a link on social media, and it was also shared by others on social media, group chats, and private messages. It was also embedded within a separate survey that I shared with Jewish clergy, so that they could send it to anyone for whom it would be relevant. The response I received was well beyond what I had expected– a total of twenty-seven respondents between February 15th and February 22nd, 2022. The survey contained two demographic related questions, and eight open-ended questions. Most respondents reported that they reside in the United States, with diversity in region. Two respondents live in Canada, one lives in Scotland, and one lives in New Zealand. I did not ask the respondents their gender but did ask about pronouns.[46] Nine included they/them pronouns or neo-pronouns, and the rest used she/her, indicating that the respondents likely identify as non-binary or as women, though this cannot be completely certain.

[46] I added this question part-way through the survey, so I do not know the pronouns of seven of the twenty-seven respondents.

Jewish Identity

When I asked about whether there were any Jewish teachings, ideas, or stories that have either challenged or inspired participants as a sex worker, the majority of sex workers reported positive connections to Jewish values and texts, with both biblical characters that were inspiring, or generally feeling their Jewish values aligned with or inspired their work and/or activism. However, over a third reported a variation of "No" "Not that I can recall" "No. my practice is my own" or left the question blank.

Additionally, I asked whether respondents' Jewish identity comes up in their work. While a few of the respondents reported that their Jewish identity doesn't come up, many more reported bringing Judaism into their work with both positive outcomes (cultural connection with Jewish clients, connecting with other Jewish sex workers, and negative outcomes (Jewish stereotypes, antisemitism).

Jewish Values

Several respondents reported that their Jewish identity has played a role in their work or activism with responses including: "[Judaism] has played a big role in my SW[47] activism, incorporating Jewish values such as social justice and charity into my work in community building and law reform, and my experiences as a Jewish sex worker in regards to anti-racism and building up others from ethnic or religious minorities," "A lot of Jewish teachings inspire the way I live in general, I definitely bring that to my work, but I can't think of anything super specific at the moment. I have done some *mussar* and recently read an

[47] SW is shorthand for "Sex Worker"

awesome illustrated version of the *pirkei avot*. So I guess mostly things from that?" and "I wouldn't say [Jewish texts or teachings] inspired me, but I would definitely say that my identity as a Jew plays a huge role in my work. The closest I would get to inspiration is my work name, [...] named after a total badass biblical babe![48]"

Another respondent deeply resonated with a Jewish teaching: "I kind of think *pikuach nefesh* applies to me. I'm disabled and can't work most jobs. Sex work has very literally saved my life many times over, giving me the money/resources necessary to keep my disabled body safe and alive."

Inspiring Biblical Women

Many respondents mentioned that they were inspired by biblical women. Several reported Judith was an inspiration: "The story of Judith has definitely been a weird inspiration to my work– kind of using the body to reclaim and fix the torments of an oppressor. I've had abusive relationships and I kind of enjoy seeing, in a sense, women taking back their place with their body and also fighting heroism through their sexuality or sexual expression." Several others mentioned Tamar, with responses including "I love Tamar!!!" and "I remember learning about Yehuda and Tamar and how she took payment for sleeping with him and even as a child the story resonated with me." Other responses include: "Na'ama and other succubus characters,""I always felt like Ruth and Naomi scoping out Boaz and getting Naomi with him to ensure their security was SW adjacent," and "I always loved the idea of *pilegshim*," the Hebrew term for concubine. Other inspiring biblical women mentioned were Yael, Lilith, and Esther.

[48] Name redacted for anonymity

Connecting with Clients: Positive Jewish Experiences

Many of the twenty-seven Jewish sex workers who responded to the survey said that their Jewish identity helped them connect with clients, especially those who are also Jewish. Several shared that they enjoy attracting Jewish clients and/or seek to find more. One individual shared: "I work with a lot of older Jewish men. We discuss our families' practices, upcoming holidays. There's a deeper level of trust and humor that I notice my clients take on when they know I'm Jewish." Another respondent shared: "I advertise as a Jewish sex worker so that I can hopefully attract Jewish clients. I find things so much easier when the client is Jewish too. A shared cultural background and history makes everything better." Several others shared similar sentiments about being able to connect with Jewish clients.

Furthermore, several respondents said that their identity could also enhance their conversations with non-Jewish clients in a positive way. For example, one person said: "It's something I discuss at times with clients, that I grew up in the ultra-orthodox community. Most find it fascinating." Another respondent enjoyed Jewish humor with her non-Jewish client: "A client once told me his safe word was "bacon" and laughed when I told him I was Jewish (so I'd definitely want to stop too)." There were also those who named specific Jewish themes that they brought up in their work with clients, ranging from offering Jewish holiday themed sessions, to performing an orthodox Jewish persona, to using the time to help their Jewish clients cope with religious trauma. One respondent said that during their Jewish-specific sessions, they like to "play with taboos [...] [such as] incorporating menstrual blood, coed touching outside of wedlock, etc. Also, the story of the golem has inspired kink scenes." Another shared that she would make Jewish holiday related posts, and has offered sales for

Hanukkah, Shavuot, and once for her Hebrew birthday. Additionally, there was one respondent who shared that she prefers to use her Judaism to "help all those with religious 'issues' (trauma, thoughts, etc.)."

Connecting with Clients: Negative Jewish Experiences and Antisemitism

Respondents also reported some negative interactions regarding Jewish identity. One of the survey respondents who discussed the positive aspects of connecting with Jewish clients, shared that, on the other hand, "It's literally the worst and most uncomfortable thing when [Jewish] clients talk about their wives or families during sessions. [In speaking to us,] men feel comfortable to degrade their wives (...) It's gross."

In the survey several sex workers shared about antisemitism, or fear of antisemitism, which affects them in their work. One talked about "fear of judgment, beauty standards, self-consciousness about having a Jewish nose," while another shared that "I am visually Ashkenazi, so I get comments from members about that." Another respondent mentioned that some of her clients think she "looks" Jewish but didn't share whether she felt that judgment was antisemitic.

Aside from those who faced microaggressions related to physical stereotypes, there was also at least one respondent who was worried about harm. The same person who shared with some of her clients that she grew up in the Hasidic community, also shared: "There was a time I was scared to say I was Jewish because of antisemitism and fear that someone would book me to do me harm as a Jew. It stopped being a concern for a while and I rebranded as Jewish, but with it on the rise again, I regret the decision at times."

Antisemitism and Otherness in Work Environment

There were two sex workers who discussed the general sex work environment, and that they have felt at times discomfited. One respondent shared about antisemitism in the break rooms, and said she would like to see sex work spaces (such as dungeons or brothels) become safer for Jews. Another respondent wrote more specifically, that, "I feel unsettled in the sex work space as an openly Jewish sex worker as it relates to the Israel/Palestine conflict."

Several sex workers reported facing either antisemitism or feelings of "otherness" in situations where they did not celebrate non-Jewish holidays as Christian sex workers did. One respondent shared that her Jewish identity comes up "mainly around major Christian holidays (Christmas, Easter, etc.) when I don't participate in themed content," and another shared that, "I have been put in very odd situations in the online space with other sex workers who assume you will be doing Christmas online content etc. and passive aggressive antisemitic statements made when in the [specific sex work app] groups."

Safety in Jewish Spaces

When asked the questions, "Do you feel safe as a sex worker in Jewish spaces? Do you feel supported in Jewish community as a sex worker?" the overwhelming majority of sex workers reported that they do not feel safe as a sex worker in Jewish spaces. Many answered, "no," while most others indicated that they did not but reflected further. A selection of those responses included: "I feel about as safe in Jewish spaces as I do in any other space, which is to say not very safe. I don't automatically feel that other Jews will support my job more than non-Jews," "I know a lot of Jewish SWs but I don't talk about it with my rabbi if you know

what I mean haha," "No. There isn't a liberal Jewish community where I live in [conservative southern state] and being out with my job would not work within this Jewish space."

Several shared that they had Jewish friends or family members that they shared their identity with, but that they did not feel safe disclosing to wider circles of Jewish friends or community: "Amongst my Jewish friend/family/partner yes. In the wider Jewish community, not sure," and "I've never told any of my close Jewish friends that I do it except for my best friend of five years."

Within the survey, a former sex worker and now Jewish professional wrote that "People view SWers as immoral. I'm now a Jewish professional and I don't know how I could disclose about my past as a SWer without that stigma/judgment. If I do see it talked about it is only in terms of survival sex work or human trafficking, not voluntary SW. Similarly, I spoke to one sex worker who preferred not to fill out the form but wished to speak to me on the phone. I asked similar questions as those from the survey. This individual is a Jewish educator, with students of all ages. They shared:

> "I [also] want to be a Jewish tantra[49] educator. It's kind of complicated, because I don't want to lose my access to teaching in the Jewish community. I feel like if I'm too loud about what I do, about tantra or being a pro-dom, that will limit my ability to teach Torah. I don't so much feel stigma in that I can't talk about it with people necessarily, but I just have to be really careful about who I talk to about it. I don't want it to affect my future in a way that's negative. I'm not going to talk with my co-workers [in Jewish education] about it when they ask what else I do."

A few of the respondents of the survey said they did feel safe in their specific Jewish communities: "I mean, there are different kinds of Jewish spaces, and the Jewish community covers a lot of territory. But at my home synagogue, and my friends' synagogue in [city], I

[49]Tantra is massage and body work that is meant to lead to spiritual, emotional, and sexual healing.

feel pretty safe and supported being open about the fact that I have made a significant portion of my living by making porn in the past and am open to doing so again in future." Another responder wrote "In my specific Jewish community, yes." One participant shared that she's not a member of a synagogue but is part of a Jewish recovery community where she's been open about her work and felt supported by clergy there. Only one participant responded that she more generally and fully felt safe in Jewish spaces: "I never felt a lack of support in Jewish spaces."

De-stigmatization

One of the questions in the survey was: "Do you have ideas on how Jewish spaces can be made safer for Jewish sex workers?" Many of the respondents wanted to see Jewish spaces humanize and destigmatize sex workers. One respondent challenged the misconceived invisibility of sex workers due to stigma: "I think Jewish spaces, like non-Jewish spaces, have so much stigma against SWers, like they don't think it exists in their communities." Similar responses on how sex workers would like to see this issue addressed included: "Normalizing sex work," "Speak[ing] more positively about sex workers," "It comes down to education and humanizing the work, differentiating between the job and a person," "Simple respect and treating sex workers as one would treat anyone else from any other field of work," "Destigmatizing sex work generally would probably go a long way," "If people are more open to talking about [sex work], to listening, and being receptive to it, it can make a lot more places safer," and "If I ever heard clergy [sic] say anything positive or understanding about SWs, or heard anyone else talk about doing SW without fallout it would make a big difference."

Another question on the survey was, “Is there anything that you wish you could safely talk about or that others would talk about in a Jewish space (or even with Jewish family/friends) related to your work?” Several of the respondents discussed stigma in response to this question. Responses of this nature included appropriate responses to disclosure: "Absolutely, just being able to disclose my profession without fear would be a lot," and “Just to not have to have a cover story would be amazing. Just to be able to be myself and be low key straight forward about my story.” Several others wished that those in Jewish communities wouldn’t be shocked or repulsed by their presence: “I just want to know that me mentioning I'm a SW won't result in people making shitty faces, negative comments behind my back, etc.,” and “I wish it wouldn't be such a shock for non-SWs to learn that there are sex workers sitting next to them in shul. They just don't expect it. We need to normalize the fact that Jewish sex work is a reality from biblical times to now. And it's holy work!” An additional response about stigma included, for one respondent, the importance of the community believing “...that I’m not broken or destroying my soul (my dad’s words)” and another respondent who shared that, “There is still a major stigma, so I don’t feel comfortable discussing it, but I’m hopeful that in the future it will be more widely accepted.”

One respondent wrote about how Jewish communities and leadership could combat some of the anti-sex-work attitudes of the Christian majority in the United States: “SWers are targeted so immensely by the Christian Right and to have Jewish leadership vocally advocate and support us really would mean everything for my morale when the SWERFs[50] start to get to me.”

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[50] According to dictionary.com “*SWERF* is an acronym standing for *Sex Worker-Exclusionary Radical Feminist*, a label for a woman who supports mainstream feminism but opposes sex work, believing it is ultimately oppressive.”

One sex worker expanded in detail how she hopes stigmatizing attitudes will change about sex work in Jewish spaces, including the understanding that sex workers have autonomy. She hopes Jewish communities could learn:

> "...that it's not all embarrassing. In a sense, I don't see the body as a highly sexual objectable thing, and I think [for] sex workers in society, it's seen as [us] objectifying ourselves or making ourselves out to be a thing without a soul or self-awareness. I think for people who've experienced trauma, sex work does the opposite of what society sees sex work to do. We have self-respect, we have self-awareness, we have self-care. And I think by sort of reclaiming the body after something that's happened, through sex work, it's (...) almost weirdly therapeutic in some ways."

Lastly, the sex worker and Jewish educator who I spoke to over the phone shared:

> "I would like to see clergy talk to their boards and talk to their HR departments. And have a real discussion about, not barring someone who's done sex work, or barring people who talk about sex. If I wanted to work in the synagogue as an adult educator, I would like to be able to have this on my resume and be proud of it. And not have to worry that I'll get blacklisted. […] I just want to be able to bring my whole self to the process, and not have to worry about the fact that people might get scared off because I'm talking about how Tantra is something important."

Community Representation

Returning to the question that explored respondents' ideas of how Jewish spaces can be made safer, several individuals wished for more representation of sex workers, both in the community in general, and in conversations about inclusivity. One respondent wrote, "I think having more former or current sex workers in positions of power in the community is vital. The more queer, female-led, open Jewish spaces we have, the more everyone will feel more comfortable." Another emphasized that "including us in conversations about inclusivity" was important.

Affinity within sex work groups

Closed community or affinity spaces for Jewish sex workers was something of immense value to several of the respondents. One sex worker wrote: “I would love to have a very specific space that was like: Jewish SW only.” Several other respondents wrote that Jewish sex work community spaces, most of which have formed online, have been positive for them. One individual shared that they “desperately miss” talking about being Jewish in sex work spaces, now that the social media platform Tumblr banned porn, where they had in the past found this community. Another respondent wrote, “I would not feel safe in a Jewish space or any space that is not sex worker led,” as they aren’t out to friends or family and live a “dual life.” An additional person wrote, “Sex work twitter has been amazing, and it has actually become a little community of Jewish sex workers which I love.”

Decriminalization and Safety

Many respondents wrote about the importance of Jewish communities’ support of decriminalization and anti-police measures within Jewish spaces. Similar responses include: “It must be made abundantly clear that the space is anti-carceral in values, and that at no point will clergy or members contact police,” “Decriminalizing prostitution is the #1 way to make us safe, but the knowledge that a Jewish space is actively in support of that goal (maybe having a ‘decrim SW’ or ‘sex work is work’ sign up, etc. would definitely make me more willing to engage with that space,” “Being loud about the need to decriminalize, destigmatize and decarcerate sex workers could be a start” and “I think supporting decrim & loudly saying that you support SWers is the best thing you can do.”

Safety in the form of anonymity and discretion was also of concern, with one respondent sharing, “If I disclose to one person (i.e., a rabbi) (...) they [should] understand that is not permission for them to out me to anyone else.”

Jewish Clergy and Jewish Sex Workers Survey

Introduction

I created a second qualitative anonymous survey titled *Jewish Clergy and Jewish Sex Workers* in order to assess rabbis’ views on sex work. I sought to gain insight into whether the rabbis surveyed knew any sex workers in their communities, whether they felt comfortable supporting and including these workers in community, whether they knew about the political and social issues they face, and the extent to which they had addressed these issues publicly. To recruit respondents, I shared the survey on the *Jewish Women’s Clergy* Facebook group, a colleague shared it with the Central Conference of American Rabbis (“CCAR”) Facebook group, and I personally sent it out to several additional colleagues. All respondents self-identified as Jewish clergy and understood that the survey would be voluntary and anonymous. I received a total of twenty-five responses between February 16th and February 20th, 2022. The survey contained two demographic-related questions on pronouns and denomination, and five open-ended questions. One respondent included they/them pronouns and one accepted any pronouns. Of the rest, about half of those surveyed said that they used he/him pronouns and half used she/her pronouns. Nineteen respondents wrote that their denomination is Reform, two wrote that they are Conservative, two respondents belong to multiple progressive Jewish denominations, and one respondent wrote that they are unaffiliated.

Results

Few of the clergy surveyed knew Jewish sex workers personally. About three quarters of the respondents self-reported that they did not know anyone in their community who is or has been a Jewish sex worker, while about quarter said that they did. Of those who did say they knew a sex worker, several said that they knew only one person. One respondent answered, “Owners of strip club,” indicating a possible misunderstanding of how a sex worker is defined – usually strip club owners hire sex workers; they are not sex workers themselves. One rabbi reported, “Yes, a 20-something trans person at our synagogue has been a sex worker. They are regular at Shabbat services and Torah study, a kind soul always willing to help out. Also, a Jewish friend of mine from high school became a stripper.”

The majority of clergy respondents said that they did not have any personal or religious challenges around including sex workers in their community, officiating their lifecycle events, or relating to sex workers pastorally, with a few exceptions. Responses included several “No’s” to the question as well as, “I’ve never thought about it. I don’t have a problem with welcoming them to the community. Regarding officiation, I don’t have a problem officiating a life-cycle event for a sex worker” and “I have no problems including sex workers in all aspects of community.”

One respondent wrote that while she does not have personal challenges including sex workers or officiating for their lifecycle events, that “due to the stigma around sex work, I do not feel comfortable discussing sex work with congregants whose attitudes I do not know about the subject. I assume (perhaps incorrectly) that it would be upsetting to a significant

percentage of my community. For that reason, I only tend to mention sex work if there is a biblical or Talmudic passage about prostitution."

One person shared that while they do not face personal or religious challenges in including sex workers, their "current lack of knowledge about the experiences of sex workers might be an impediment to my work with folks who do this work in ways I'm not currently aware of." Another similarly shared, "For pastoral care I would probably want some additional training."

As for those who did share personal or religious challenges, one rabbi expressed hesitation about sex workers working with Jewish children: "Upon learning of the community member's profession, I might pause about their inclusion in youth education or related initiatives, but would not bar their presence outright." Another hesitated about marriage ceremonies: "I do not know how I feel about sex work in the context of monogamy, or whether I would officiate at a wedding of people who explicitly say they are not planning to be monogamous."

When asked if they were familiar with any of the political or social issues that sex workers face (such as those addressed by the SESTA/FOSTA[51] legislation, criminalization, and stigma), about three quarters of clergy reported that they were either familiar with these issues, or that, while they did not know about SESTA/FOSTA legislation specifically, they were familiar overall with the issues. The rest reported that they had vague or limited awareness, or that they had no familiarity at all.

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[51] SESTA/FOSTA is short for "Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act" and "Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act," which several years ago closed down websites like Backpage in an effort to stop sex trafficking. The legislation was opposed by many sex workers and advocacy groups. Contrary to the anti-trafficking goals of the legislation, sex workers were then left without a safe network to verify their clients and could no longer report those who were sex traffickers. It pushed online sex work farther to the margins.

Despite the significant amount of self-reported awareness, about two thirds of clergy surveyed reported that they have not spoken publicly or taught about the issues that sex workers face. Even for those who *were* familiar with the social and political issues that sex workers face, well over half said that they have not taught or spoken about these issues publicly.

Half of the clergy surveyed said that they did not have any ideas about how Jewish communities could be more inclusive toward Jewish sex workers, or they simply didn't respond to that question. Within the other half, several shared ideas of teaching about sex work in a Jewish context, with responses including: "Teaching about sex work in the context of Jewish sex education curricula (Confirmation/post-Confirmation)," "Teach the texts of sex workers/harlots in our tradition. Particularly Rahab and Tamar. Explore the images (albeit negative in Amos)," and lastly, "Perhaps setting up a nation-wide event (like HIAS' Refugee Shabbat) to talk about sex trafficking the Shabbat after Purim (since King Ahasuerus basically traffics the young women in his kingdom). This last event could be contrasted with another event the week after that talks about the difference between sex trafficking and voluntary sex work (getting to the freedom themes of Passover)." Several respondents talked about inviting sex workers to share their stories or creating space for congregants to hear sex workers' stories, with responses including: "I think talking about the life experiences and political causes of sex workers could probably be a helpful start. And creating space for sex workers to be able to speak for themselves and be heard by the community," "Public story sharing to evade stigma," and "Inviting sex workers to speak to the congregation about their experiences, creating a film about very personably Jewish sex workers to show at a Jewish film festival across the country (with a discussion guide for Jewish leaders to use after the

screening)." Some clergy were interested in addressing stigma on both the communal and pastoral level: "I think until society normalizes sex work, people will continue to have misconceptions and harsh judgments. The most we can do is try to normalize it on a smaller scale," "Accept people as they are," "I think the best start is to educate leaders, particularly rabbis, about not shaming," and "If it were the position you [sic] of the community that sex work should be de-stigmatized then addressing it publicly in a positive way." Two respondents mentioned wanting to demonstrate that the community is a safe space for sex workers: "I have not really thought about this issue. I wonder if speaking about the issue would be helpful, or if there are ways to demonstrate that our community is a safe space," and:

> "I think it is important for Jewish communal leaders to make clear that sex workers are welcome as members and visitors in Jewish communities. How this is done would be entirely context dependent. The main issue appears (to me) to be on the side of the sex workers - i.e. I would imagine there is a (mostly false) impression that Jewish communities do not want them and would judge them for their profession. How we combat that once again would be context dependent. I imagine while obviously very different, some of the ways in which we made it clear to other marginalized communities that we want them would be relevant."

Lastly, one clergyperson shared, "I would love an organization that could help us, give us resources, assist clergy in these tough conversations, like Keshet does for LGBTQIA+ resources or JACS for Jewish recovery etc."

Chapter Three: How Jewish Communities Can Support Jewish Sex Workers

As shown in my research, very few Jewish sex workers are open about their work within Jewish communities. Similarly, very few of the Jewish clergy I surveyed knew Jewish sex workers in their communities personally. Many sex workers who are part of mainstream Jewish communities hide their work identities. Many others choose not to engage in Jewish communities because they don't feel safe there as sex workers, or they have had negative experiences when they disclosed their work. The fact that many sex workers are not open about their identities in Jewish settings indicates, in part, that the Jewish community overall has a lot of work to do in becoming more understanding and accepting of sex workers. It also may be a sign of the broader societal stigma against sex workers in any setting, Jewish or otherwise.

Whether or not they are open about their identity, Jewish sex workers are part of *klal Yisrael*. Many are unaffiliated, but some are affiliated with synagogues and established Jewish communities. Even though they may not be visible in Jewish settings does not mean that sex workers are uninterested in Jewish community. My research has shown that many in this population connect strongly to their Jewish identity, have positive (and negative) experiences with Jewish clients and fellow sex workers, engage with Jewish texts, and are interested in seeing the wider Jewish community become more supportive of them so that they may one day feel safer being in Jewish environments. The fact that within twenty-four hours I received eighteen responses to my survey indicates that Jewish sex workers are aching to have their stories heard.

The data in my survey about Jewish sex workers' feelings about stigmatization, as well as the conclusions from *Toward Affirming Therapy* by Pederson et. al, show that that stigma is a large barrier for sex workers' access to care (including mental health care and spiritual/pastoral care), and community. Stigmatizing views of sex workers have historically been pervasive in Jewish communities, as many traditional texts and law do not see Jewish sex workers as legitimate. With this historical context in mind, Jewish clergy may be challenged to humanize and validate sex workers. Other clergy see sex work as valid work and are familiar with the justice issues that sex workers face, but struggle with how to address these issues or care for sex workers pastorally within their communities. With some exceptions, most of the liberal Jewish clergy surveyed reported that they would like to include sex workers in Jewish community. Most reported that they want to reduce stigma, and many had ideas about how to reduce stigma that were very similar to the ideas that sex workers had to accomplish the same goal. Yet most didn't know any Jewish sex workers, have not spoken about sex work publicly, and many were seeking more training in caring pastorally for Jewish sex workers. Similarly, Jewish sex workers reported that by enlarge they have never witnessed Jewish leadership or clergy addressing sex work. All of these results indicate that many clergy are struggling to reach sex workers pastorally and address the issues and stigma they face within their larger communities.

The first step that clergy and Jewish community can take is to acknowledge and challenge their own biases and attitudes about sex workers. This thesis serves as a starting point. For additional education, clergy can learn from books written by sex workers as well as from sex-worker led organizations and websites such as SWOP, the Sex Workers

Outreach Project which has many links to further resources and reading.[52] In addition, there is a fantastic training for clergy of all faiths called *Religious Leaders and Sex Workers in Southern Africa: A training manual for the upskilling of religious leaders for the accompaniment of sex workers.*[53] While its target audience is clergy in Southern Africa, so much of the material is relevant to clergy across the world, especially in countries such as the United States where sex work is still criminalized. It contains many discussion questions that can help clergy confront their own biases and learn deeply about issues that affect sex workers globally. A training participant wrote: "I (as well as my pastor colleagues) learnt so much! We now realise that the church must support sex workers, uphold the dignity of sex workers and recognise that sex work is a profession like any other. We need to accept this reality and not regard sex workers as outcasts or people to be suppressed. My mandate now is to train other ministers to extend the ministry with sex workers. (training participant, Botswana)."[54] Self-facilitating the training, perhaps with colleagues of other faiths, could provide an opportunity for personal growth, interfaith connection, and reflection on bias and religiously based stigma toward sex workers.

Patriarchal views of sex workers are often publicly perpetuated by Christian missions and the Christian right, and these views also affect Jewish sex workers. McGrow's study critiques many Christian ministries' mission to "rescue" sex workers, to help them "come to

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[52] "Learn about Sex Work." Sex Workers Outreach Project, February 14, 2019. https://swopusa.org/learn-about-sex-work/.

[53] *Religious Leaders and Sex Workers in Southern Africa: A Training Manual for the Upskilling of Religious Leaders for the Accompaniment of Sex Workers.* Fontainebleau, Randburg, South Africa: Inerla+, 2021. https://aidsfonds.org/assets/resource/file/Layout-report-web-final.pdf

[54] "Training Religious Leaders on Becoming Agents of Change to Empower Sex Workers." Aidsfonds.org, May 12, 2021. https://aidsfonds.org/news/training-religious-leaders-on-becoming-agents-of-change-to-empower-sex-workers.

Jesus," and to facilitate their exit from sex work, returning them to "normal lives."[55] She claims this attitude perpetuates the idea that sex workers are doing something immoral and, therefore, must be restored[56]. Similar attitudes about saviorism are present in traditional understandings of sex work in several Jewish texts including the story of Rahab, which will be examined in Chapter Four. Rather than further perpetuating societal patriarchal ideas, Jewish clergy are in a unique position to challenge the notion that being the sex worker is morally wrong and in need of change. With the notion of a "living Torah," Jewish clergy can think critically about Jewish texts and any traditional salvific interpretations of them. In study with their communities, for example, clergy can embrace feminist interpretations, by, for example, reinterpreting some biblical characters like Rahab and Tamar as women with agency and value as sex workers of their day.

Furthermore, Jewish leaders who support and care pastorally for sex workers can embrace sex workers as full human beings created in God's image and practice proper pastoral care that meets them where they are. When clergy meet with Jewish sex workers pastorally, they should not attempt to save them or persuade them to exit their work. Here it is important for communities and their leaders to not conflate consensual sex work with sex trafficking. I also strongly caution clergy against assuming their congregants and community members who are sex workers are helpless victims. According to Carrie Doehring in *The Practice of Pastoral Care,* a significant role of the pastoral caregiver is to be "the respectful guest who steps into the lived and intentional theologies of the care seeker's stories. Together they can dwell in and begin to trace the outlines of these lived and intentional theologies in a

[55] Lauren McGrow. "Doing It (Feminist Theology and Faith-Based Outreach)" 151
[56] Lauren McGrow. "Doing It (Feminist Theology and Faith-Based Outreach)" 151

collaborative way."[57] With a present and listening ear, Jewish clergy should give Jewish sex workers the opportunity to lead the pastoral conversation about their own lived experience and feelings related to their work. While sex workers may choose to go into the industry by choice or by circumstance, my research indicates that they hope that they can be seen as full human beings who have agency and free will like any other person.

Clergy should learn about the importance of and support the decriminalization of sex workers. Those who would ever report community members to police for their work in the sex industry for any reason without their explicit consent, or those who feel they would disclose to any other individual that someone in their community is a sex worker, are not currently safe to be in pastoral relationships with sex workers; such actions could very well put sex workers in legal and physical danger. In addition, Jewish clergy who do not morally support decriminalization themselves, are unlikely to be able to establish a safe environment for Jewish sex workers. Any clergy person who falls in this category should work to challenge these moral standings, as they can harm and stigmatize sex workers.

Many sex workers feel that Jewish settings would feel safer for them if the community's or clergy's support for sex workers was explicitly stated or shown, and they assume that it is not a safe space for them if this is not done. Clergy who support sex workers, support decriminalization, have challenged their personal and religious biases, and have good self-awareness, should affirm their support and activism toward sex workers in explicit ways. One subtle but straightforward way that they can do so is by putting in their office a pamphlet or sticker that says "Decrim," "Sex work is work," or images that represent

[57]Carrie Doehring. *The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Postmodern Approach*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015. 5

a commitment to sex workers rights, such as a red umbrella.[58] Clergy may already have rainbow stickers up in their office to support LGBTQ community. Adding sex work-supportive content to their office would help indicate that they are safe(r) for sex workers to be open with too.

Beyond visual imagery, clergy might choose to publicly speak out about issues that sex workers face - in communal study, in conversations with other congregants, or in sermons. This is something that many clergy might find challenging to navigate in communities that are less accepting or knowledgeable about the genuine issues that sex workers face. One clergy member shared in my clergy survey that she wasn't sure that her community, because of their own stigmatizing attitudes, could respectfully hear her if she tried to publicly support sex workers, so she hasn't spoken publicly about them. Similarly, one of the Jewish sex worker respondents said that she felt that many Jewish communities aren't yet ready to tackle sex work– that they're just beginning to focus on issues like sexual assault - and that communities need to work in baby steps. The clergy may already be supportive, but the community may not yet be. It is indeed often difficult for clergy to share views that may be challenging for their communities to hear, yet sometimes it is necessary to take a moral stand. Rabbi Margaret Moers Wenig is a widely published preacher and liturgist

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[58] Red umbrellas have become a symbol of commitment to sex workers rights since 2001: Slovenian artist Tadej Pogacar used red umbrellas in a Venice Biennale sex worker piece. "Prostitute Pavillion" and the CODE: RED art installation featured artists and sex workers walking the streets carrying red umbrellas to draw attention to precarious work conditions human rights abuses sex workers face. Not long after, the Red Umbrella was adopted by sex worker activists and organizations as a symbol of sex workers' beauty, vulnerability, and need for protection, first in Europe, and then overseas. By the mid-2000s, the red umbrella was being used around the globe as a unified and unmistakable symbol of the sex worker rights movement" (https://swopusa.org/blog/2017/02/01/red-umbrella-and-sex-worker-rights-call-for-submissions/)

known for her pioneering work on LGBTQ inclusion in synagogues in the 1990s. In her document, *Ethics of Preaching,* she writes, "Our congregants' questions and concerns are at least as important as ours. Our sermons should not ignore their questions and concerns, but rather address them." I asked Rabbi Wenig about how she might address the social justice issues that sex workers face in her community, especially if she were in the shoes of a rabbi who was unsure of where her congregants stood. She shared:

> "Were I still a congregational rabbi, I would have no fear of raising the subject of the current bills before the New York state legislature, but I would not present myself as an expert on them. I'd invite guest speakers to address the pros and cons of those bills. I'd invite at least one sex worker (or more) to speak and also someone from the ACLU perhaps. I suspect that folks in my [...] congregation would be curious to hear the guests speak. I'd probably ask some congregants, who'd more likely to be 'in the know,' if they had guest speakers on the subject to recommend. I can't imagine anyone would object to my inviting the guests to address us (It's possible that some congregants might choose to be absent the night the guests came to speak to us. I'd be surprised, however.) I am pretty sure that there would be a wide range of views in the congregation about the pending legislation and about the morality and safety of sex work. And diverse views would be freely expressed. I have not (yet!) studied any Jewish texts that would be relevant and would have to do so! [...] I would have to explain why this issue ought to be important to my congregation at this time in the midst of so many other pressing issues."[59]

An initiative like the one which Rabbi Wenig proposes, for a liberal community in New York, could have positive outcomes in that the congregation might feel more knowledgeable about the issues that sex workers are facing, and those who aren't already could begin to become better allies. The fact that Rabbi Wenig would first do research on Jewish texts that would be relevant is a crucial step, as she could help the congregation explore why this issue is important as Jews.

A potential challenge that could arise is that consequent to criminalization and stigma, sex workers may not feel safe speaking publicly. It might be especially risky for a sex

[59]Margaret Moers Wenig, Personal Communication, Email Exchange, March 2022

worker if there is anyone in law enforcement present; yet, even without law enforcement, sex workers may not know if they can trust every member of a community that is otherwise unknown to them to not report them. Certainly, if there are members of the Jewish community, or wider community, who are sex workers known to the clergy or to a congregant connecting them, who wish to share their story in this capacity, they should be invited to speak. Should they decline, their decision should be supported. Should they accept, clergy should talk through with them any concerns, share with them any expectations of how the wider community might react, and be ready to support them in whatever ways they need. Instead of having a speaker, clergy might also share sex workers' perspectives through writing or media. Most recently, on February 27, 2022, there was segment on *The Daily Show with John Oliver* that confronts many of the current issues that sex workers face in the United States[60]. This twenty-five-minute discussion centers sex workers' perspectives, uses accessible language for those who are just beginning to learn about these justice issues, and is on a platform that may be familiar to congregants who are consumers of liberal media. It has been praised by sex workers across social media[61]. As for other sources, clergy should be wary of media that portray sex workers only as victims or as criminals. The Sex Workers Outreach Project's Brooklyn chapter currently has on their website an extensive list of

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60 Oliver, John. "Sex Work: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (HBO)." YouTube. Last Week Tonight, February 27, 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-gd8yUptg0Q&ab_channel=LastWeekTonight.

61 "Lady Vi" commented on YouTube: "On behalf of sex workers everywhere, thank you for this segment. There is an outpouring of love and appreciation for you. Thank you for broadening the audience as to why we support decriminalization, the common incorrect narrative that we are all 'forced' into this line of work, and highlighting the injustices we face…" February 28, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-gd8yUptg0Q&ab_channel=LastWeekTonight.

media[62] and academic resources[63] that accurately reflect sex workers today. These sources may help clergy contextualize the issue for congregants, and further conversation can help clergy understand any concerns that they share. An event such as this can open up the conversation so that congregants can begin to think about the issues that sex workers face, have conversations about sex work with a more informed perspective, politically and religiously, and know that their clergy wish to stand in support of sex workers. An initiative like this begins to reduce stigma within the community, collectively making it safer for Jewish sex workers to exist and be fully present there.

Hiring or otherwise allowing police presence in the synagogue, while intended to mitigate risk of antisemitic violence, could put sex workers in danger and could indicate to sex workers that they are not welcome. Jews of Color, especially Black Jews, have been discussing similar concerns for years, in that police presence can make them feel unsafe and unwelcome. In the 2020 article, *Calls to Defund the Police Put Jewish Institutions in a Tough Position,* Rabbi Capers Funnye, an African American rabbi, writes: "If I go to a synagogue where I'm not a guest speaker and they don't have my picture and have it advertised, I would be very uncomfortable going into a synagogue with armed policemen." His synagogue, Beth Shalom B'nai Zaken Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation in Chicago, "relies principally on a network of close relationships across the neighborhood to create a feeling of security,"[64] rather than the police. Like Rabbi Capers Funyye's synagogue, other synagogues and houses

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[62] "Media Resources." SWOP Brooklyn. Accessed March 12, 2022. https://www.swopbrooklyn.org/resources-for-media.

[63] "Academic Resources." SWOP Brooklyn. Accessed March 12, 2022. https://www.swopbrooklyn.org/academic.

[64] Ben Sales. "Calls to Defund the Police Put Jewish Institutions in a Tough Position." Jewish Journal. JTA, June 13, 2020. https://jewishjournal.com/news/317380/calls-to-defund-the-police-put-jewish-institutions-in-a-tough-position/.

of worship must commit to alternatives to policing if they aim to be safer spaces for Jews of Color, trans and queer Jews, and Jewish sex workers alike. In 2018, the non-profit organization, Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, published a *Jewish Safety Pledge,* to guide synagogues toward this goal. In the pledge's introduction, it says:

> "People targeted by state-enforced violence in our country have had to do this work for centuries, and we are grateful to learn from the wisdom that's been built. The strategies include interfaith collaboration or crisis de-escalation, as well as long-term interventions such as creating alternative safety teams, rapid response networks, and broader cultural education around antisemitism and white supremacy. Increasing police presence, bringing guns into our spaces, and expanding formal security forces will likely increase tensions and issues, not lessen them, in many cases. We don't have all of the answers and systems that we need yet, but we are called to have unending creativity about what they could look like. We are committed to building these alternatives alongside community partners and allies who have deep experience building systems of safety and communal protection beyond police."[65]

Congregations that feel a need for security at a time when antisemitism is heightened while still trying to maintain a welcoming environment, must begin to have conversations about who they are excluding from their communities, including Jewish sex workers. To make their congregations safer for Jewish sex workers, they should discuss and implement plans for alternatives to policing.

Even those who make efforts to make their community more welcoming to sex workers will need to accept that there may be, and are, sex workers in their community who do not feel ready to be open about their work. This should not be too discouraging, as there are other factors like safety at play, and change in synagogue culture often happens slowly. Because of the nature of its criminalization and stigma, being "out" as a sex worker is often risky, which is part of why so many respondents in my survey tended to keep this

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[65] Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, Community Safety Pledge, 2018, https://www.jfrej.org/assets/uploads/Community-Safety-Pledge.pdf

information to themselves and have no intention of sharing at this time within Jewish community.

Jewish sex workers have also experienced microaggressions and antisemitism in their workplaces or from clients because they are Jewish. Jewish sex workers may not have the same access to Jewish communal support when they are being targeted, as other community members do. The Anti-Defamation League explicitly works with law enforcement.[66] Even though they have been victims of antisemitism, reporting crimes against Jewish sex workers to the Anti- Defamation League might force workers into encounters with the police, thus risking arrest and incarceration. Based on the data in my survey that many Jewish sex workers found safe community in online Jewish sex work networks, Jewish sex workers may instead lean on other Jewish sex workers for support. However, if they could safely be open about their work in Jewish communities or with trusted Jewish clergy who treated them with respect and discretion, they might have additional avenues of support in navigating the antisemitism that they face. This is only one of the many reasons why it is so important for Jewish communities to become safer for sex workers.

[66]"Partnering with Law Enforcement." Anti-Defamation League. Accessed March 1, 2022. https://www.adl.org/who-we-are/our-organization/signature-programs/partnering-with-law-enforcement.

Chapter Four:

Biblical, Rabbinic, and Modern Understandings of Women and Sex Work

The rabbis of the Talmud, and classical commentators, were overall unafraid to engage with the topic of sex work and prostitution. Despite viewpoints that strike many of us who are in support of sex workers today as bigoted or prejudiced, their willingness to actively engage in discussion in themes of prostitution in Tanakh and Jewish texts stands in stark contrast to the reluctance of many Jewish clergy and rabbis today to actively engage in such discussion. As such, their frank discussion remains a resource for Jews today in talking about sex work and Judaism, even if only as a point of departure or critique, and a counter to the silencing taboo when it comes to discussing sex work overall in Western society.

In this chapter, I offer a close reading of four Jewish texts that have themes of sex work and/or prostitution: Tamar (Genesis 38), Rahab (Joshua 2), Hosea 1-2, and Ezekiel 16. I summarize each biblical text, review and analyze the talmudic, classical, and modern commentators' views on the biblical texts. I then put these views in conversation with one another, and with modern understandings of sex work. In so doing, I will show the diversity of views and interpretations of themes of sex work within Jewish texts. I offer insight into how sex workers may grapple with these texts. I explore how the modern-day patriarchal attitudes and injustices that sex workers face may be rooted, challenged, uprooted, and overcome through these texts.

Rabbinic Attitudes and the Origin of Patriarchy

In this section, I give context for the talmudic and classical commentators' viewpoints on women in biblical text, which will lay a foundation and come into play in my later discussion of Jewish texts on sex work and prostitution.

According to Noam Sachs Zion, in his book *Prostitutes, Rabbis and Repentance,* "Mastery (conquest) is for the Rabbis characteristic of males. Masculinity in rabbinic imagination has various dimensions: (1) conquest, accumulation and defense of women as symbols of his honor; (2) repetitive conquest without accumulation: (3) fear of being conquered, of loss of control, and of being cuckolded."[67] The idea of mastery of men over women originated in rabbinic understandings of Genesis 1:28, within the story of creation: "וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם֙ אֱלֹהִ֔ים וַיֹּ֥אמֶר לָהֶ֖ם אֱלֹהִ֑ים פְּר֣וּ וּרְב֗וּ וּמִלְא֤וּ אֶת־הָאָ֙רֶץ֙ וְכִבְשֻׁ֔הָ וּרְד֗וּ בִּדְגַ֤ת הַיָּם֙ וּבְעֹ֣וף הַשָּׁמַ֔יִם וּבְכָל־ חַיָּ֖ה הָרֹמֶ֥שֶׂת עַל־הָאָֽרֶץ: God blessed them and God said to them, 'Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth.'"[68] Through grammatical explanations, Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, Northern France, 1040-1105) interprets וְכִבְשֻׁהָ, "Master it" as a male mastering or subduing the female: "The word lacks a ו after the ש so that it may be read as meaning: and subdue her" (i.e. the woman). The male masters (conquers) the female, so that she should not be a gadabout (a woman going out on her own at will). It is a man's way (his disposition) to master, so it is he – not the woman – who is commanded concerning procreation."[69] An earlier work, Midrash Tanchuma, (500-800 CE), also incorporates this idea to which Rashi may refer: "R. Yohanan contended that it was enjoined upon both sexes, since it is said: *And*

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[67]Noam Sachs Zion. *Prostitutes, Rabbis and Repentance*. 3. Vol. 3. Cleveland, OH: Zion Holiday Publications, 2018, 332

[68] Genesis 1:28

[69] Rashi on Genesis 1:28. (Translation based on Noam Sachs Zion, *Prostitutes, Rabbis and Repentance.* 332, and A.M, and M. Rosenbaum, *Pentateuch with Rashi's Commentary*, https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Genesis)

God blessed them and said to them: And fill the land and subdue it. However, the singular form of *subdue* is written in this verse, thus indicating that man and not woman subdues the earth. Therefore, it follows that man is commanded to *increase and multiply* and not the woman."[70] However, Rashi imposes limits on the extent to which men can control women. Genesis 3:16 states: "And to the woman [God] said, "I will greatly expand your hard labor—and your pregnancies; In hardship shall you bear children. Yet your urge shall be for your husband, And he shall rule over you." Avraham Grossman explains in *Jewish Women's Archives:*

> "Medieval sages interpreted Genesis 3:16— "Yet your urge shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you"—as grounds for a man's right to control his wife. In accord with this verse, some described the new relationship between them as a wife's servitude toward her husband. Unlike these sages, Rashi deprecated the importance of these texts; he restricted a wife's punishment to one small area only, the husband's additional right to sexual relations, and ruled out completely all the statements about mastery versus servitude and the husband's general control over his wife. The written language of Genesis 3:16 contains no preference whatever for the interpretation he proposes. Rashi understood very well the power arising from the phrase "and he shall rule over you," but sought to negate it in his commentaries and to limit considerably the husband's control over his wife."[71]

This interpretation is one of many in which Rashi advocates for "innovative exegesis" to improve the status of women[72]. However, as Ruth Roded explains, Rashi's interpretation of Genesis 3:16 is often ignored by later exegetes. For example, Abraham Ibn Ezra, who "dedicated himself to ascertaining the 'straight' meaning of the text," interprets וְהוּא יִמְשָׁל־בָּךְ׃,

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[70] Samuel A. Berman, trans. "Midrash Tanchuma." Sefaria. Accessed March 12, 2022. https://www.sefaria.org/Midrash_Tanchuma.
[71]Avraham Grossman. "Rashi." Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women. 31 December 1999. Jewish Women's Archive. (Viewed on March 2, 2022) <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/rashi>.
[72] Avraham Grossman, "Rashi"

"He shall rule over you," as "requiring the woman to listen to everything the man commands her, because she is under his authority to do his bidding."[73] Even stronger, in the thirteenth century, Ramban (Nachmanides, 1194-1270), states:

> "… that a wife must not only obey everything that her husband commands, but the relations between a husband and wife are like those of a master and a slave woman. A wife differs, however, from a slave, in that a slave does not want a master and will run away from him, while a wife 'desires' her husband. This was a commensurate punishment, Ramban added: Since she had ordered the man to eat of the tree, the wife would no longer be able to command him, but he would command her to do whatever he wished."[74]

Grossman discusses that Rashi often takes a more positive view of women than his later medieval counterparts, often choosing not to cite midrashim that are critical of women. Grossman adds:

> "His interpretation of the account of the creation of man and woman in Genesis is similar. The midrashic account of creation contains many statements that reproach the woman, her creation from man's rib serving as the basis for this negative attitude. Jewish biblical commentators in the Middle Ages appropriated this story and the anti-woman commentaries, exploiting them for their own purposes to prove woman's inferior status. Man was created first, his body coming from the earth and his soul from God. Not only was woman created after man, but she was even crafted from his rib, proof that she was essentially subordinate. These ideas are common to all three monotheistic faiths. As noted, they are written in the midrash and are widespread in the writings of the medieval sages, as also in those of contemporary Christian scholars. No ideas of this sort can be found in Rashi's commentaries on the creation story."[75]

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[73] Ruth Roded. "Jewish and Islamic Religious Feminist Exegesis of the Sacred Books: Adam, Woman and Gender." *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues*, no. 29 (2015): 56–80. https://doi.org/10.2979/nashim.29.56. 64

[74] Ruth Roded, "Jewish and Islamic Religious Feminist Exegesis of the Sacred Books," 64

[75] Avraham Grossman, "Rashi"

According to Grossman, Rashi is more conservative when it comes to issues of women's modesty. Rashi accepts stances in the Talmud and Midrash that "'Women are light headed' and easily tempted. Therefore, husbands and society in general are obliged to be very strict regarding women's modesty."[76] For example, one of Rashi's positions includes Midrash Rabbah's critique that Dinah was raped because she had gone out "to visit the daughters of the land." He also commented in Ecclesiastes 7:28, "I also searched for one who is pure among women and did not find her, since they are all light-headed."[77] However, unlike Jewish sages in Muslim lands who limit women's freedom of movement to preserve their modesty, Rashi's philosophy doesn't restrict such movement.[78]

According to Roded, two modern commentators also take a patriarchal stance on men's control of women based on Genesis 3:16: David Zvi Hoffman (Verbo, Slovakia, 1842 – Berlin, 1921), and Moshe David Cassuto (Italy, 1883 – Jerusalem, 1951):

> "Hoffman stated that [*he shall rule over you*] "does not necessarily mean the subjugation of the woman to her husband as is customary in the eastern lands; rather, it means the natural relationship between the two sexes, in which the weak and dependent woman willingly submits herself to the superiority of her husband'" [...] His definition of woman as naturally weak and dependent reflected the European mobilization of the natural sciences to bolster patriarchal gender relations."[79]
>
> "Like Hoffman, Cassuto's commentary describes Eve's punishment as measure for measure. 'You influenced your husband and caused him to do what you wished; from now on, you and your daughters will be dependent on your husbands. You will yearn for them; but they will head families and rule you'"[80]

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[76] Avraham Grossman, "Rashi"
[77] Avraham Grossman, "Rashi"
[78] Avraham Grossman, "Rashi"
[79] Ruth Roded, "Jewish and Islamic Religious Feminist Exegesis of the Sacred Books," 65
[80] Ruth Roded, "Jewish and Islamic Religious Feminist Exegesis of the Sacred Books." 65

Modern feminist commentators like Rachel Adler, however, challenge the prescriptive nature of this text. Adler argues that the text should be used only to explain the nature of the origins of patriarchy, not to become a normative way to view women:

> "Rachel Adler, in Engendering Judaism, interrogated the power that was granted to Adam—power to rule over nature and living things, including women. Power granted as a blessing is positive if it is used properly, declared Adler; if power is abused, however, it can lead to sin. In the context of the gender relations described in Genesis, power causes suffering both for the man who wields it and for the subaltern woman. Adler also argued that this verse describes the origins of patriarchy and is not a normative prescription. 'We can invent ways of coexisting without dominating one another,' she concluded."[81]

Sachs Zion also discusses Adler's notion that these rabbis, from medieval times to the twentieth century, fear loss of control:

> "...conquering males [...] are motivated by fear of engulfment, of loss of autonomy, and of dissolution of their egos in the face of strong women. Just as sons struggle for individuation from strong mother figures, so many grown men continue to fear that any violation of their bodily boundaries will dissolve their fragile personhood. Men must penetrate, but never be penetrated. When rabbinic men speak of maintaining purity or overcoming sinful thought, Adler, as a feminist object-relations theorist, sees through this superstructure to a subtext, the dynamic of male individuation: 'Feminist object relations theorists view the primal severing of identification with mother as the precipitating event in the construction of oppositional masculine iden-tity. Because the man did not differentiate by learning to regard woman as another independent subject with whom interrelation is possible, he both craves and fears the infantile merger that would heal his estrange-ment by obliterating his autonomy.'"[82]

The rabbis' patriarchal tendencies and use of biblical texts to justify control over women, as well as their fear of losing control, impositions of modesty, and saviorism become apparent

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[81] Ruth Roded, "Jewish and Islamic Religious Feminist Exegesis of the Sacred Books," 68
[82] Noam Sachs Zion, *Prostitutes, Rabbis and Repentance*, 334, referencing Rachel Adler, Engendered Judaism, 123

in their interpretations of texts that include prostitution, or what we might understand today as sex work. However, like Adler, modern feminist commentators often critique, challenge, and complicate these notions.

Biblical Views on Prostitution

The Torah deals with prostitution in the story of Tamar and Judah in Genesis 38.[83] In this story, prostitution is not condemned explicitly by the biblical characters, the biblical narrator, nor a Divine voice. Yet, in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, when biblical law was prescribed, "The law forbade fathers to employ their daughters as prostitutes:"[84] "Do not profane your daughter by making her a prostitute; lest the land fall into prostitution and the land become full of depravity"[85] and "None of the daughters of Israel shall become a cult prostitute (*kedeisha*), nor shall any of the sons of Israel be a cult prostitute."[86] Biblical prostitution also becomes a metaphor for the "defilement of Israel as a sacred community."[87] This begins with Genesis 34:31, when Simeon and Levi are vindictive and angry that their sister, Dina, was raped, and their father chose not to take any action. They exclaim: "Should our sister be treated like a whore?" The brothers are worried about losing their family's honor.[88] In addition, a priest, in Levitical law, "could not marry a prostitute without compromising his sacred status."[89] However, the Torah prescribes no capital punishment for prostitution unless the daughter of a priest became a harlot,[90] as stated in Leviticus 21:9:

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[83] Genesis 38 will be explored further in this chapter
[84] Noam Sachs Zion, *Prostitutes, Rabbis and Repentance,* 8
[85] Leviticus 19:29
[86] Deuteronomy 23:18
[87] Noam Sachs Zion, *Prostitutes, Rabbis and Repentance,* 9
[88] Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, 130
[89] Noam Sachs Zion, *Prostitutes, Rabbis and Repentance,* 9, referring to Leviticus 21:6-8, and Leviticus 19:29
[90] Noam Sachs Zion, *Prostitutes, Rabbis and Repentance*, 9

"When the daughter of a priest defiles herself through harlotry, it is her father whom she defiles; she shall be put to the fire."[91] The legal inscriptions in Leviticus and Deuteronomy associate the symbol of prostitution with the "desecration of the holy land and the holy people. It is associated with idolatry as a sexual betrayal of the covenant of God."[92] As will be explored further in this thesis, this symbol of prostitution remains distinctly present throughout the Book of Prophets, including in Hosea and Ezekiel.

Rabbinic Views on Prostitution

Centuries earlier than medieval rabbinic commentators, talmudic commentators discuss many accounts of prostitution and harlotry and commented on cases of prostitution in the Tanakh. The views of the talmudic commentators are sometimes surprising in that the sages are often frank and matter of fact in their understanding of the roles of prostitutes, and it is later commentators who bring a more moralizing perspective to bear on the text. The sages' ideas about prostitution are complex– overall, they frown upon it, but not because it was promiscuous in and of itself. Instead, for example, many rabbis are concerned that sex with non-Jews, which they called prostitution, might lead to idolatry. Additionally, there are no profound consequences for participating in prostitution, as the john, or as the sex worker. Sachs Zion explains:

> "Apart from Rabbi Elazar[93], most rabbinic commentators constrict the category of prostitute only to a Jewish woman who has intercourse with someone whom she is

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[91] Leviticus 21:9

[92] Noam Sachs Zion, *Prostitutes, Rabbis and Repentance*, 8, referring to arguments of Simcha Fishbane

[93] A footnote in Noam Sachs Zion's, *Prostitutes, Rabbis and Repentance*, p. 9, states: "The halakhic definition of the zonah (harlot) who is forbidden to marry a kohen is debated in rabbinic literature. Rabbi Judah says a zonah is an *ilonit* who is biologically incapable of having children (Sifra Emor 1[7]), while the Rabbis assert that the category of *zonah* applies

> forbidden to marry, and if she did so, the match would be considered adulterous or incestuous. Otherwise, an unmarried Jewish woman who has sex with a Jewish man whom she *could* legally marry (even as a second wife) is not considered a prostitute, even if she practices promiscuous sex with anyone and even if she sells her body for money (Maimonides, Laws of Prohibited Intercourse 18:1-2). In short, for many halakhic authorities, occasional sexual promiscuity, not involving adultery or incest, is not a crime at all, though it is considered inappropriate social behavior and morally depraved. Those who dedicate their professional life to the sex trade are only minimally punishable, while the john employing the prostitute is exempt from legal sanctions. During the medieval era rabbinic authorities might well flog men and women involved in prostitution if they felt it was undermining public morals, but that was an extra-judicial police act, not a legal crime punished within the system. By contrast, the Rabbis do speak pejoratively of intercourse with a non-Jewish woman as prostitution, even when there is no financial remuneration for her services and no cultic prostitution involved. But the rabbinic prohibition, attributed to the Hasmonean courts, still warranted only a minimal punishment. The Hasmonean rationale is most likely designed not to prohibit non-normative sex for its own sake, but to prevent fraternization with the national enemy as part of the battle against Hellenists and Hellenism. The Rabbis later applied that rationale to all sexual relations with Greco-Roman idolaters. Nevertheless, the rabbinic courts use minimal coercion to penalize such acts of intercourse even though they are concerned lest these sexual liaisons lead to apostasy, rather than merely to sexual impropriety."[94]

The Talmud thus contains many stories of rabbis who see prostitution as a metaphor for idolatrous conquest. In their account of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem, the rabbis consider the Roman conquest and their brutal rape of women as *zonah*, or prostitution – with the caveat explained by Rabbi Julia Watts Belser that "prostitution" "may not capture the

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to anyone forbidden to a kohen. Their definition includes three categories of women: converts, manumitted slaves, and a woman who engaged in a forbidden act of intercourse. By contrast, Rabbi Elazar maintains that even when a single man engages in intercourse with an unmarried woman to effect marriage, the woman is defined as a zonah."

[94] Noam Sachs Zion, *Prostitutes, Rabbis and Repentance*, 9

stigma associated with zonah" and zonah may not represent a professional status the same way that "prostitute" might.[95]

If anti-sex work sentiment among Jews is no longer rooted in concerns about idolatry, which is seldom, if ever, brought up as the main objection today, then existing religious anti-sex work sentiment today must be rooted in concerns about sex work as a kind of work, and its legitimacy as such. In other words, if the rabbis of the Talmud were concerned with prostitution as something that leads to sin, many people today talk about sex work as something inherently sinful. This differing source of the moral objections to sex work in the rabbinic era and today is important to keep in mind when reading these texts.

Case Study 1: Tamar

Introduction

Genesis 38 traces the origins of the Judahite clans. The beginning of this chapter concerns the biblical sanction of "levirate marriage," in which, if a man dies without any children, his widow is obligated to marry his living brother. The practice in Genesis 38 predates the law in Deuteronomy which allows the surviving brother instead to enter *halitzah* and release the widow from marriage.[96] Judah is married to a Canaanite woman, the daughter of Shua, and together they have three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah. Judah marries Er to a woman named Tamar. But Er "was displeasing to the Lord, and the Lord took his life."[97] Because of the laws of levirate marriage, Tamar must then marry the next younger brother,

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[95] Julia Watts Belser. "Sex in the Shadow of Rome: Sexual Violence and Theological Lament in Talmudic Disaster Tales." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 30, no. 1 (2014): 5–24. https://doi.org/10.2979/jfemistudreli.30.1.5.

[96] Jon D. Levenson. "Genesis." In *The Jewish Study Bible: Torah, Nevi'im, Kethuvim*, edited by Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, 2nd ed. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014. 71

[97] Genesis 38:7

Onan. But Onan, "knowing that the seed would not count as his, let it go to waste whenever he joined with his brother's wife, so as not to provide offspring for his brother."[98] God takes Onan's life too. Perhaps Judah fears that the same fate would fall upon his third son, Shelah, and he tells Tamar: "Stay as a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up."[99] Soon, Judah's wife dies, and Tamar realizes that Shelah has already grown, and she has not been called upon as his wife. After his mourning period, Tamar takes notice that Judah would be shearing his sheep up at Timnah. She "took off her widow's garb" and disguises herself as a prostitute, covering her face with a veil, and "sat down at the entrance to Einaim,"[100] a place she knows Judah would pass on his journey. Then, "When Judah saw her, he took her for a harlot; for she had covered her face."[101] He asks Tamar to sleep with him. But Tamar, now disguised as prostitute, asks for payment. Judah replies that he would pay her with a kid from his flock. Tamar agrees but asks for collateral in the form of his cord and staff he was carrying with him, to which Judah complies– they exchange the cord and staff, and sleep with one another. Tamar conceives. Afterwards, Judah goes on his way, and asks his friend the Adullamite to bring a kid from the flock in exchange for his cord and staff, but his friend could not find Tamar. Three months later, Judah is told that Tamar is pregnant: "'Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the harlot; in fact, she is with child by harlotry.' 'Bring her out,' said Judah, and 'and let her be burned.'"[102] But when Tamar is brought out, she shows Judah the staff and cord that were his, proving she was pregnant by Judah, the man to whom they belonged. When Judah recognizes them, and what he had done, he says: "'She is

[98] Genesis 38:9
[99] Genesis 38:11
[100] Genesis 38:14
[101] Genesis 38:15
[102] Genesis 38:24

more in the right than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah.' And he was not intimate with her again."[103]

Rabbinic Commentators

Although he does not comment on levirate marriage specifically in this story, Rashi is known to want to protect the childless widow. In other works that include *halitza,* (the ceremony releasing her from *yibbum*, levirate marriage[104]) he supports the idea that a "childless widow must not be forced into *yibbum*, and any reason she gives against it should be accepted and followed by *halitzah.*"[105] Because of his circumspection about *yibbum,* Rashi might empathize with Tamar, who is forced unsuccessfully several times through *yibbum* with Er's brothers.

Classical commentators disagree on what Onan did when he *shechazit arza,* commonly translated as "wasted his seed." Rashi interprets it as, "He threshed inside and winnowed outside."[106] This is an agricultural metaphor for *coitus interruptus,*[107] or sexual intercourse in which the penis is withdrawn before ejaculation[108]. Ibn Ezra writes that he was shocked by Adoniyahu ben Tamim Ha-Mizrachi, a grammarian and Bible commentator who lived in Iraq, who "preposterously" thought that Judah had anal sex with Tamar, causing him

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[103] Genesis 38:26
[104] Avraham Grossman, "Rashi"
[105] Avraham Grossman, "Rashi"
[106] Rashi on Genesis 38:9 (Silberman, A.M., and M. Rosenbaum, trans. *Pentateuch with Rashi's Commentary*. London: Shapiro, Valentine and Co, 1929. https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Genesis)
[107] Gigi Santow. "Coitus Interruptus and the Control of Natural Fertility." *Population Studies* 49, no. 1 (1995): 19–43. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2175319.
[108] *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 20 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989. Continually updated at http://www.oed.com/.

to *shehazit arza,* "corrupt her ground."[109] Rather than anal sex, Ibn Ezra believes that Judah poured his semen on the ground next to her.[110] If Ibn Ezra interprets from Genesis 3:16, "He shall rule over you" as "requiring the woman to listen to everything the man commands her, because she is under his authority to do his bidding,"[111] why would he be so shocked at the idea that Onan could have anally penetrated her, if it were his will? It is possible that Ibn Ezra is grappling with the harsh implications of male control over women. Perhaps, as a man of his era who cares about the protection of the patriarchy and male control, he wants to protect Onan's legacy, showing that Onan is in control in his physical violation of Tamar, rather than uncontrollably tempted to perform an atypical kind of sex.[112] About a decade after Ibn Ezra's death, Rabbi Avraham ben David (Raavad, 1120-1198) writes in *Ba'alei HaNefesh*, *Gates of Holiness*:

> "And the 'overturning of the table [anal sex] that they allowed, I say that this is only when he is not compelling her and she does this willingly, with her agreement, and he has appeased her. But if he forces this upon her, with such an act of compelling [one's wife,] a man is definitely not free from sin, and I say about him in this verse 'Even without the knowledge (i.e., without his wife's agreement), the soul is not good."[113]

Ibn Ezra is disgusted by the idea that Onan may have had anal sex with Tamar unwillingly. Ibn Ezra may wish to see Onan in a better light, not wanting to interpret his spilling of seed as anything but avoidance of pregnancy. If he didn't believe it was anal sex, Ibn Ezra would

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[109] Ibn Ezra on Genesis 38:9 (Strickman, H. Norman, and Arthur M. Silver, trans. *Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Pentateuch*. Menorah Publishing, 2004. https://www.sefaria.org/Ibn_Ezra_on_Genesis.)
[110] Ibn Ezra on Genesis 38:9 (Strickman, H. Norman, and Arthur M. Silver, trans)
[111] Ruth Roded. "Jewish and Islamic Religious Feminist Exegesis of the Sacred Books: Adam, Woman and Gender." *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues*, no. 29 (2015): 56–80. https://doi.org/10.2979/nashim.29.56. 64
[112] See Kiddushin 22b:18
[113] Rahel Berkovits, "Sexuality and Sanctity: Consent," Source Sheet, Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies, 2021

have struggled with the fact that Onan's mere avoidance of impregnating Tamar leads to his death.

What these commentators have in common in these arguments, however, is that Tamar is in some way wronged – she is trying to get pregnant, perhaps to preserve the seed of Judah, but Onan refuses this. To Rashi, who believes that "Judaism obligates the husband not only to honor his wife, but also to live with her in love and fellowship, and great is the reward of anyone who thus behaves toward his wife,"[114] the idea that Onan "threshed inside and winnowed outside" could have gone against his standard of upstanding behavior. Unlike Ibn Ezra, who may have struggled with God's decree, Rashi might more readily accept that Onan's death could be justified.

When Judah tells Tamar to stay as a widow in her father's house, Rashi calls this a "lame excuse:" "That is to say, he pushed her off with a straw (i.e., he put her off with a lame excuse) because he never intended to give her to him in marriage."[115] Rashi believes it to be wrong that Tamar is subject to sexism and is punished as if all the deaths of Judah's sons are *her* fault, and not the shortcomings of the men whose own actions led to their own deaths by God. The fact that Rashi defends Tamar in this way is consistent with the notion that Rashi generally advocates for "improving the status of women, introducing innovative exegesis to support his views" as Grossman claims.[116] Rashi, in his commentary on Malachi 2:15, refers to women as "godly folk:" "When one of the couple [the husband] unjustly seeks to accuse his wife of sin–his partner, she who is a godly folk. What does he demand, that he should

[114]Avraham Grossman, "Rashi"
[115] Rashi on Genesis 38:11 (Silberman, A.M., and M. Rosenbaum, trans.)
[116] Avraham Grossman, "Rashi"

thus scorn her?!"[117] Rashi believes that because women are godly, they should not be blamed or accused by men unjustly. To be consistent, he is invested in defending Tamar.

When Judah and Tamar sleep together, Tamar becomes pregnant "and she *conceived by him, v'taher lo* וַתַּהַר לֽוֹ."[118] Rashi, citing midrash, interprets *lo* לֽוֹ – as *to him* or even *like him* – "She conceived men who were strong, similar to himself, and men who were righteous, similar to himself (Genesis Rabbah 85:9)."[119] Rashi centers the prescribed masculine characteristics of Judah alone to their just-conceived child, not including characteristics that he would gain from Tamar. Likewise, later commentator, Sforno (Obadia ben Jacob Sforno, Spain, 1470/1475-1550), comments on the items that Tamar gave for collateral: "The items Tamar chose as pledge were all things which testified to the superior standing of its owner in society. We know from Job 38:3 that a sash is evidence of someone's manhood, i.e., someone's superior status. She wanted to own such trinkets reminding her constantly of Judah's status so that her child would be influenced by the thoughts she entertained during her pregnancy and would grow up to be like its father."[120] Both Rashi and Sforno in these cases seem to be concerned for the status of the man, and do not pay heed to any way that the child could grow up to be like his mother. These rabbinic commentators are more concerned with Tamar's role as a woman conceiving a child than they are with her act of sex work.

In addition to being called a *zonah,* often translated as "whore," Tamar in hiding is understood by Judah as a "*kadeisha.*" In his search for the anonymous veiled woman (who

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[117] Rashi on Malachi 2:15 (Avraham Grossman, "Rashi," trans)
[118] Genesis 38:18
[119] Rashi on Genesis 38:18, (Avraham Grossman, "Rashi," trans.)
[120] Sforno on Genesis 38:18 (Eliyahu Munk, trans. *HaChut Hameshulash*. Lambda Publishers, 2003. https://www.sefaria.org/Sforno_on_Genesis.)

we know is Tamar), Judah asks the people of the town "Where is the *kadeisha,* the one on Einaim, by the road?"[121] Jewish Publication Society translates *kadeisha* as "cult prostitute"[122] and Robert Alter, in his work *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary,* translates *kadeisha* as "cult-harlot."[123] Several medieval commentators' understanding of *kadeisha* do not connect harlotry to the holiness (*kadosh),* of cultic function. Rashi interprets *kadeisha* using another word that shares the root *k.d.sh*, *mekudeshet* מקדשת, meaning "devoted to" -- as in devoted to illicit intercourse. Rashi could have chosen the more redeeming and simple translation that would have connected Tamar's work as a prostitute to holiness. In fact, a supercommentary on Rashi, Mizrachi (Constantinople, 1455-1525), translates it to "holy," and explains: "Why, then, is this called a *kadeisha*, coming from the root קדש, meaning holy or consecrated?"[124] He proposes that it is similar to why we say a woman is betrothed-- "*kiddushin*-- that they become consecrated property to the man and are forbidden to everyone else. But for these holy prostitutes, they become consecrated property to the heavens (and therefore are always available for sex), as she is betrothed to the heavens."[125]

There could be a few reasons for Rashi's choice of words. Rashi is someone who believes in marriage as a covenant: he values the "essence of marriage and the power of connection and commitment it creates between husband and wife."[126] Mizrachi suggests that sex outside of marriage could still be holy, in that the woman could be "betrothed to the

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[121] Genesis 38:21
[122] Genesis 38:21
[123] Genesis 38:21 (Robert Alter, trans. *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019.)
[124] Mizrachi on Genesis 38:21, Personal Translation.
[125] Mizrachi on Genesis 38:21, Personal Translation.
[126] Avraham Grossman, "Rashi"

heavens," yet for Rashi, God acted as a partner in the marriage covenant, not as the sole husband. Rashi was more invested in the ways in which holiness could be procured *through* marriage, so he could not perceive sex work as potentially holy or worthy of discussion: he had ruled that "if the husband behaves fairly toward his wife through her he acquires the World to Come."[127]

Modern Commentators

Feminist scholar Tikva Frymer-Kensky writes that *kadeishot* "have long been considered to be 'sacred prostitutes' [but that] considerable contemporary scholarship demonstrates that there is no reason for this belief."[128] Rabbi Dr. David Sperling, noting this more recent development, says that *zona* and *kadeisha* are synonyms.[129] Frymer-Kensky says, however, that a *zonah* with the title "*kadeisha*" like Tamar might have indeed had other functions: "In the only biblical passage that offers a glimpse of their activity, the [*kadeishot*] weave garments for the *asherah*. The *qadištu*-priestess in Mesopotamia was involved in childbirth and probably other matters relating to female biology."[130] She says that both the *zonah* and the *kadeisha* were societally outside the typical family system. They were not exactly synonymous (though one could be both, as Tamar may have been), but rather a *kadeisha* had more economic freedom to say no because they had other functions."[131] The fact that Tamar, in her disguise, may have had some perceived economic power to say no affirms that her plan to sleep with Judah was one that she wanted. Her actions are carefully

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[127] Avraham Grossman, "Rashi"
[128] Tikva Frymer-Kensky. *Reading the Women of the Bible*. New York, NY: Schocken Books, 2002. 271
[129] David Sperling, Personal Communication, Term Paper Notes, 2017
[130] Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 271
[131] Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 271

planned. Judah is confused in his understanding of Tamar's true agency, calling her both a *zonah* and a *kadeisha*. Even if we are to understand the cult-prostitute as something special and significant, women like Tamar are still considered something "other" outside the typical family roles in the society.

Tikva Frymer-Kensky explores the feminist power in an "otherness" identification of Tamar as a *zonah* – a "designated whore" or prostitute. She reads Tamar's anonymity as like that of prostitutes: "[Tamar] masquerades as precisely the kind of woman whose behavior male control prevents wives and daughters from emulating."[132] Frymer-Kensky argues that those who are attached to family structures "will be punished for breaking their bonds. They are liable to be called 'whores' in a pejorative rather than a technical sense, and their action is called 'harlotry' even when it is not sex for hire."[133] Tamar is considered a "*zonah*" or a prostitute, as an identity-label that embodies this particular role in society, as opposed to "a wife or daughter who misbehaves sexually (or any other way), [who] is said to be *znh* (faithless)." [...] Designated whores, outside the family structure, are not punished, and men are not condemned for sleeping with them. After all, that is the purpose of the institution."[134]

Discussion

Several modern writers and thinkers make direct parallels between sex work and Tamar's work as a disguised prostitute. Nancy Nam Hoon Tan, in her study of Christian sex workers' views on biblical texts, writes, "Tamar negotiating with Judah in vv.16b–18 is an example of what a transaction for sexual services looks like. In fact, the sex workers were

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[132] Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 270-271
[133]Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 270-271
[134]Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 270-271.

quick to commend Judah for his integrity in honouring the promise he made to the woman he believed to be a prostitute."[135] Judah does make a fair attempt to compensate Tamar appropriately for her sexual act, which could help us to understand what they did as within the realm of transactional sex work, even though the notions and understandings of "sex worker" are more modern. Amin Yacoub writes that the "Torah makes it clear that sex workers deserve respect and self-worth despite being sinners. One might ask a rhetorical question, if God had not undignified or morally judged Tamar [...], do we really have the capacity to morally judge them as we judge current sex workers? The answer is definitely in the negative."[136] Both Frymer-Kensky and Yacoub's perspective encourage us to look at our Torah text and find within in it a more positive view of sex workers than society may ascribe today.

We can understand Tamar's role, and perhaps also the role of sex workers in Western society today, as those that are radically powerful in dismantling the patriarchal structures that have harmed and continue to harm Western society. Women who stay within the heteronormative and cisnormative bounds of what is societally "acceptable," like Frymer-Kensky's biblical understanding of the acceptable "wives and daughters," do not threaten the patriarchy the same way that prostitutes and sex workers might: "men can sleep with [Tamar] without weakening the social system that forbids married women to say yes to anyone but their husbands."[137]

Frymer-Kensky's reading of *zonah* vs. *znh*, prostitute vs. sinful promiscuous woman, might be problematic within a a modern concept of sex work: The dichotomy between

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[135] Nancy Nam Hoon Tan. *Resisting Rape Culture: The Hebrew Bible and Hong Kong Sex Workers*. Abingdon, Oxon, England: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2021.
[136] Amin R. Yacoub, Consensual sex work, 11
[137] Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 270-271

"*zonah*" -- a woman whose role it is in society to be a prostitute, and a "*znh*" woman-- one with a traditional family role who is "whoring" or acting promiscuously, is a false one. Today, for example, two people can be in a loving marriage where one or both partners are sex workers. While a patriarchal dominant narrative may see a female sex worker in a loving marriage as one who has gone astray, these sex workers may not see themselves in that way. This type of relationship structure might still be seen as queering or challenging to the patriarchy, closer to how Frymer-Kensky described the *zonah*. Punishment and degradation of women for their work in the sex trade is wrong, regardless of whether their family is structured "traditionally" and regardless of how much of their time is committed to sex work. Even if some sex workers are not seen in their daily lives as embodying the sex worker persona or career, as Frymer-Kensky describes Tamar as *zonah*, sex workers can and do often challenge patriarchal norms.

Case Study 2: Rahab

Introduction

The story of Rahab in Joshua 2 begins when Joshua secretly sends two Israelite spies from Shitttim, to go to the region of Jericho: "They set out, and they came to the house of a harlot *[beit ishah zonah]* named Rahab and lodged there."[138] The King of Jericho catches word of the spies and inquires of Rahab where they were. But Rahab hides the two spies under flax on her roof. She lies to the inquiring king's men, saying the spies had come and gone, and sends them off, shutting the gate behind them. Back in the house, the two men had

[138] Joshua 2:1

not yet fallen asleep. Rahab comes up to them and says she heard that they were spies. She declares to them:

> "I know that the Lord has given this country to you, because dread of you has fallen upon us, and all the inhabitants of the land are quaking before you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the waters of the Sea of Reeds for you when you left Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two Amorite kings across the Jordan, whom you doomed. When we heard about it, we lost heart, and no man had any more spirit left because of you; for the LORD your God is the only God in heaven above and on earth below. Now, since I have shown loyalty to you, swear to me by the LORD that you in turn will show loyalty to my family. Provide me with a reliable sign that you will spare the lives of my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and save us from death."[139]

Nili Wazana in the *Jewish Study Bible* writes, "A foreign prostitute, the most dangerous trap according to wisdom literature, is here presented as being well acquainted with the typical acts of salvation God has bestowed upon His people.[140] Positive attitudes about prostitution and womanhood in the story of Rahab indeed stand in stark contrast to the critical lens inherent to Levitical and Deuteronomic law, such as Deuteronomy 7:3[141] which states, "You shall not intermarry with them: do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons."[142] As Sachs Zion explains, "There and in the book of Joshua, the Divine command is to exterminate all Canaanites as pagans rather than taking their women as spoils of war, lest they become a temptation to the holy people of Israel to prostitute itself to idolatry."[143] However, Rahab, originally a Canaanite prostitute, becomes a heroic icon who saves the Israelite spies and draws closer to God.

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[139] Joshua 2:9-13
[140] Nili Wazana, "Joshua." in *The Jewish Study Bible: Torah, Nevi'im, Kethuvim*, edited by Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, 2nd ed., 1131–53. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014.
[141] Noam Sachs Zion, *Prostitutes, Rabbis and Repentance* 26
[142] Deuteronomy 7:3
[143] Noam Sachs Zion, *Prostitutes, Rabbis and Repentance* 27

Rabbinic Commentators:

Rashi translates *zonah* in Rahab's context, to "a lady innkeeper (...) who sold various kinds of foodstuff."[144] Rashi may have avoided thinking of Rahab's profession as a prostitute in order to portray her as more virtuous, glossing over how she has widely been understood as a prostitute by other commentators. It is possible that because Rashi values modesty, he would think Rahab's profession of prostitute to be something immodest, and to better honor her as a woman he feels he has to produce an alternative explanation. While Rashi avoids mention of her appearance and role as a prostitute, talmudic rabbis "acknowledge the ordinary meaning, prostitute."[145] *Zevachim* 116a-b tells an aggadic story behind Rahab's role as a prostitute in the Exodus from Egypt. As the Israelites approach the Jordan, there is a different feeling from the splitting of the Sea. The *Gemara* asks what was different about it, to which it answers: "**'Neither was there spirit in them anymore," and what is different here,** i.e., in the statement of Rahab, **where** the verse **states: "Neither did there remain [*kama*] any more spirit in any man** (Joshua 2:11)."[146] *Kama* refers to "rising," and Rahab uses this phrase euphemistically, to say that the men could not become erect, as they were so afraid. The *Gemara* then asks, "And how did Rahab know this? The *Gemara* replies: **As the Master said: You do not have any prince or ruler** at that time **who did not engage in intercourse with Rahab the prostitute"[147]**. According to the Talmud, in her professional role as a prostitute, Rahab knows how truly deep the princes' and rulers' fear was because it affected them sexually. The talmudic rabbis elevated Rahab's status as

[144] Rashi on Joshua 2:1
[145] Nili Wazana, "Joshua." 443
[146] B. Zevachim 116b
[147] B. Zevachim 116b

prostitute, as a role that would help her become a hero. Because she was privy to the vulnerability of those in power, she could better hide the Israelite spies.

The Talmud continues:

> "The Gemara added that the Sages said: '**[Rahab] was ten years old when the Jewish people left Egypt, and she engaged in prostitution all forty years that the Jewish people were in the wilderness. After** that, when she was **fifty years** old, she **converted** when the two spies visited her. **She said: May** all of my sins of prostitution **be forgiven me as a reward** for having endangered myself with the **rope, window, and flax,** by means of which I saved Joshua's two spies. Rahab first concealed the spies in stalks of flax, and later assisted them in exiting her home by lowering them from the window with a rope."[148]

The Sages believe that Rahab was very emotionally knowledgeable about those around her, something that they seem to honor. Yet they also celebrate her conversion, where she distances herself from her "sins of prostitution." They feel that what she does professionally is sinful, even though her heroism is only possible due to her professional expertise as prostitute in the community.

Talmudic rabbis praise Rahab's beauty and even sexualize her: BT *Megillah* 15a says that Rahab was one of the most beautiful women in the world: "To complete the discussion about the three prophetesses, the *Gemara* cites a *baraita* in which **the Sages taught: There were four women of extraordinary beauty in the world: Sarah, and Abigail, Rahab, and Esther**."[149] The sages also fantasize about her: "**The Sages taught** in a *baraita*: **Rahab aroused impure thoughts by her name,** i.e. the mere mention of her name would inspire lust for her."[150] They recount the banter between the rabbis about the mention of her name, and their sexual response:

> "**Rabbi Yitzḥak said: Anyone who says Rahab, Rahab, immediately experiences a seminal emission** due to the arousal of desire caused by Rahab's great beauty. **Rav**

[148] B. Zevachim 116b
[149] B. Megillah 15a
[150] B. Megillah 15a

> **Naḥman said to him: I say: Rahab, Rahab, and it does not affect me.** Rabbi Yitzchak **said to** Rav Naḥman: **When I said this,** I was specifically referring **to one who knows her** personally **and recognizes her** beauty. Only for one who has met Rahab in person is the mere mention of her name capable of arousing lust."[151]

The rabbis were matter of fact about their fantasies of Rahab, and how they related to her as a sex worker. The fact that the Talmud includes this description demonstrates how sex work may have been less taboo, or at least more readily discussed within Jewish commentary, than it is today.

Modern Commentators

Unlike Rashi who originally interprets Rahab as an innkeeper, modern scholars tend to agree with the rabbinic sources which suggest Rahab is a prostitute. They too discuss the extent to which her classification as *zonah* or prostitute may positively affect her ability to hide the spies. Robert Alter writes about Joshua 2:1:

> *The house of a whore-woman… and they slept there.* "Sometimes biblical usage adds 'woman' in this fashion to the designation of profession.' Whore,' in turn, seems to be used neutrally, not as a term of opprobrium. Though she may merely be providing the two men lodging, the narrative coyly plays with the sexual meaning of the verb *shachav,* which also means simply to lie down, to sleep, or to spend the night. Similarly, the verb 'come to' used in verses 3 and 4, also has a sexual meaning when the object of the preposition is a woman. In fact, Rahab in answering the king's inquiry may be saying that the two men were merely her customers, and hence she had no idea they might be spies."[152]

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[151] B. Megillah 15a
[152] Robert Alter, "Joshua," *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, 11

Tikva Frymer-Kensky in *Reading Rahab* agrees with Alter that Rahab is a prostitute, taking it one step further in her claim that being a prostitute may have helped her hide the spies, like the *Gemara's* claim in Zevachim 116b: "Why did the spies go to Rahab's house? Is it because a prostitute's establishment is a good place to blend in unobserved and listen to people, or is it because men who have been out in the wilderness all their lives immediately head to the bordello for soft beds and soft women? The narrator doesn't say; the reader can decide."[153]

Rabbi Pamela Wax in *The Women's Haftarah Commentary* also discusses how Rahab's particular career as a prostitute gave her a unique ability to protect the Israelites: "Rahab means 'broad' or 'wide.' Her profession gave her the opportunity to meet a lot of people, and Rahab's ability to see broadly, to be open to possibility, and to entertain the unknown in her thinking may be what enabled her to see the merit of the spies' mission."[154] In addition, "Rahab lives directly inside the city walls. Rather than making her a true insider, however, one suspects that by profession and by residence, Rahab is, in fact, an outsider even in her own community, thereby making her alliance with Israel a bit less surprising."[155]

Wax celebrates Rahab's knowledge, a result of her profession and her connection to God: the spies' "reconnaissance mission to a brothel, which might have turned comic is, instead, a brilliant move; it is the spies' good fortune to happen upon Rahab, a Canaanite prostitute who bolsters their resolve and teaches them about faith in YHVH. It is she who

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[153] Tikva Frymer-Kensky. "Reading Rahab." Essay. In *Tehillah Le-Moshe: Biblical and Judaic Studies in Honor of Moshe Greenberg*, edited by Mordechai Cogan, Barry L. Eichler, and Jeffrey H. Tigay, 57–67. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997. 60

[154] Pamela Wax, Essay. "Haftarat Shelach Lecha" In *The Women's Haftarah Commentary: New Insights from Women Rabbis on the 54 Haftarah Portions, the 5 Megillot and Special Shabbatot*, edited by Elyse Golstein. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2004. Kindle Loc. 2997

[155] Pamela Wax, "Haftarat Shelach Lecha." Kindle Loc. 3000

shows them the inevitable worthiness of their mission.[156] Wax also offers two understandings of Rahab's status as prostitute which may have affected her motivation for hiding the spies:

> "If we think about Rahab's economic status, we can imagine that she was poor with few choices other than prostitution, or the opposite, that she was a woman of independent means, unbeholden to others. If the former, we might view her dalliance with the Israelite spies as a necessary and convenient means of pulling herself and her family out of poverty. If the latter, we might view her choice as an unselfish act of righteousness and vision, rather than as an act of economic necessity."[157]

While Alter suggests that it is possible that Rahab may have had no idea they were spies, Frymer-Kensky writes that, "Some suspicious readers have suggested that Rahab herself sent word so that she could demand *hesed*. The story contains length, not by narrative detail, but by the inclusion of three dialogues, each of which is vitally important in understanding the significance of this story to Israel."[158] The possibility that Rahab herself sent word about the spies, is also posed as a question by Wazana: "The passive verb does not indicate who told, but considering who stood to gain the most, Rahab is the immediate suspect, yet the spies remain deaf and dumb to this as everything else."[159]

Frymer-Kensky and Wax draw parallels with the liberation of Egypt to the story of Rahab, honoring her heroism as one might honor that of Moses's mother or the midwives. Frymer-Kensky writes:

> "There is [a] subtle allusion to a biblical woman who hides: when Rahab hides the spies, the author uses the relatively rare word וַתִּצְפְּנֶהָ *vatitzp'no* 'and she hid him.' The knowledgeable reader will think immediately of the story of Moses' birth, when Moses' mother saved him by hiding him: *vatitzp'no* 'and she hid him.' This phrase occurs only twice in the whole Bible, and the reader, alerted by the manifold allusions to Moses in Joshua 1–5, may catch the resonance: as the "hiding" of the infant Moses started the Exodus events, so Rahab's "hiding" of the representatives of the infant Israel begins the process of the conquest."[160]

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[156] Pamela Wax, "Haftarat Shelach Lecha." Kindle Loc. 2969
[157] Pamela Wax, "Haftarat Shelach Lecha." Kindle Loc. 2984
[158] Tikva Frymer-Kensky. "Reading Rahab." 60
[159] Nili Wazana, "Joshua." 444
[160] Tikva Frymer-Kensky. "Reading Rahab." 59

Referring to Joshua 2:4-5, Frymer-Kensky also compares Rahab to the midwives in Egypt: "Rahab is smart, proactive, tricky, and unafraid to disobey and deceive the king. She reminds us of two other women who are portrayed in this way, the two midwives in Egypt who defy the Pharaoh's orders to slay the Hebrew children. Once again, the beginning of the conquest echoes the beginning of Exodus."[161] Lastly, "In regards to Rahab being told to stay home, with a scarlet cord in the window, while the city is in destruction,"[162] it reminds us of the passage in Exodus, where "Rahab's family is to be rescued from Jericho, as the Israelites were from Egypt. This resourceful outsider, Rahab the trickster, is a new Israel."[163]

Likewise, Wax points out Rahab's connections to the midwives and Yocheved: "Rahab makes another exodus possible for the Israelites themselves and for her own family, as well. Additionally, she saves her family with the use of the crimson cord, which is reminiscent of the blood on the doorposts of the houses when the angel of death passes over. Perhaps most significant of all is Rahab's willingness to lie to the king about the whereabouts of the Israelites and do what she can to save them, just as the midwives did in Exodus 1:15–21."[164] Wax concludes:

> "That Rahab cites the Exodus from Egypt and the crossing of the Reed Sea as things she knows of YHVH's might adds to the sense that she is herself significant as an actor in yet another exodus story. Just as the midwives received 'houses' from God for their efforts, so does Rahab get rewarded. Rahab teaches us about faith, kindness, loyalty, and about not judging a person by her profession. She also makes us aware of the permeability of the boundaries between Israelite and non-Israelite, a permeability with which we live daily in contemporary Jewish society."[165]

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[161] Tikva Frymer-Kensky. "Reading Rahab." 60
[162] Tikva Frymer-Kensky. "Reading Rahab." 61
[163] Tikva Frymer-Kensky. "Reading Rahab." 60
[164] Pamela Wax, "Haftarat Shelach Lecha." Kindle Loc. 3026
[165] Pamela Wax, "Haftarat Shelach Lecha." Kindle Loc. 3031

Discussion

Wax's reading of Rahab highlights a counter-reading to anti-sex work attitudes in Judaism, rooted in fear of intermarriage or promiscuity with non-Jews. The text shows how Rahab's sex work created concrete interpersonal and even political possibilities for the Israelites that would not have existed if Rahab had not been a non-Jewish sex worker. We also see these possibilities highlighted by some of the earlier rabbinic commentators who were able to recognize and celebrate her skills and expertise in the realm of professional prostitution.

Rashi may have seen Rahab as an innkeeper rather than a prostitute because he simply did not see this possibility in the *pshat* of the text. However, it is also possible that it was difficult for Rashi to perceive the heroic Rahab as a prostitute because of negative societal views about prostitution. For many sex workers today, calling oneself a sex worker is something that they keep private. Friends and family of sex workers are often careful not to reveal their loved ones' identity as a sex worker for fear of information about them being publicized with malicious intent. In addition, Rashi may have felt ashamed of himself for finding the thought of her attractive or sexualizing her, like other men may have at his time. Or, he may have been trying to paint Rahab as an innkeeper to make her heroism seem more palatable to those who would deem prostitution unheroic or unacceptable. While the language of the earlier talmudic rabbis about Rahab may seem objectifying, the fact that their full discussion was recorded as such the Talmud shows that prostitution was seen to them as something worth celebrating and was a natural role within society. Rashi had a somewhat moderate view about Rahab and Tamar, and women in general compared to other commentators soon after his time. Thus he may have been trying to think more broadly about

Rahab. Yet by ignoring Rahab's profession, Rashi is missing something important about her insight and understanding of the events of the narrative, as a sex worker.

The fact that Rahab was able to use her profession and her background to help Israelite society is something that may resonate with sex workers, who take a unique role in understanding their society through their work in the private, intimate, and often sexual sphere. It is significant that within this text we can see a positive view of sex workers. Rahab has such powerful insight into the individuals and communities she interacts with, both Israelite and non-Israelite. She has her own house of the harlot, the *beit ishah zonah,* to be able to shelter the spies when they are in need. She use her skills and expertise as a sex worker keep them, and herself, out of harm's way. Their ability to shelter there, also reminiscent about how sex workers are often there to support others from marginalized communities, with solidarity between those who are oppressed. As one sex worker shared in my survey "My Jewish identity […] has played a big role in my SW activism, incorporating Jewish values such as social justice and charity into my work in community building and law reform, and my experiences as a Jewish SWer in regards to anti-racism and building up others from ethnic or religious minorities." It is powerful that Rahab uses her role and her ability to cross public and private boundaries to do something heroic for the Israelite people. As someone who was ten years old when the Red Sea split, and who wandered alongside the Israelites as a prostitute all forty years,[166] Rahab may have had a particular empathy for the cause of the Israelites and their journey toward the Promised Land. Rahab was able to use her power as a prostitute to gain reward for herself and to help the Israelite spies. This may be

[166] B. Zevachim 116b

similar to how sex workers today use their own authority and unique insight to help their communities, their clients, and themselves.

It is exciting, too, that Rahab has been compared with heroes like Yocheved and the midwives. Each of these women was marginalized in society yet used her knowledge and strengths coming from that marginalized place to make thoughtful and wise choices that helped their communities and loved ones survive and move forward.

Looking with a contemporary lens, one critical piece of this story is a midrashic idea that Rahab gave up her past life as a prostitute to convert to Judaism and marry Joshua.[167] If that is something that she chose once she saw that she had other options economically, that might have been part of her story, as it is for some sex workers who wish to leave the industry but cannot do so until they have other options. But no sex worker should have their Judaism pitted against their work. If a sex worker might come to a Jewish community wanting to convert to Judaism, their career should not be a barrier or a point of conflict.

Case Study 3: Ezekiel 16

Introduction

As Tova Ganzel in *The Jewish Study Bible,* explains, The Book of Ezekiel, in the Prophets, "spans a critical twenty-two year period in Jewish history: from 593 BCE, the fifth year of exile of King Jehoiachin, to 571 BCE, twenty seven years after Jehoiachin was exiled and fifteen years after the destruction of the First temple."[168] She continues, "Two unprecedented circumstances confronted the Judeans: the coexistence of two separate

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[167] B. Megillah 14b

[168] Tova Ganzel, "Ezekiel." In *The Jewish Study Bible: Torah, Nevi'im, Kethuvim*, edited by Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, 2nd ed., 1131–53. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014. 1033

communities, one in Judah and the other in Babylonia, each with its distinct identity; and the destruction of the Temple and exile, which challenged the exiles to preserve their national identity outside the land of Israel, without a Temple, its sacrificial worship and the leadership of the priests, and without a Davidic king."[169] The Prophet Ezekiel is delivering his response from Babylonia to the exiles who accompanied Jehoiachin there, and he is reporting on the events that had happened in the Land of Israel. Ezekiel wanted to show the people how Jerusalem had already been defiled even before the destruction of the Temple, and God had already left the city. He sought to describe the sins of the people, not so that they would repent - as he didn't think his words would be accepted - but rather as a "watchman."[170] Chapter 16 predates the destruction of the Temple and can be characterized as "an allegory of Jerusalem as God's adulterous wife."[171] This is a common metaphor within the Prophets, where God is represented as the husband and Israel or Jerusalem as the bride.

Ezekiel 16 begins with an image of an abandoned baby, representing Jerusalem, the child of non-Israelite idolaters. Nobody washed the baby or cut its umbilical cord. It was left there to die. Ganzel summarizes:

> "God cared for her and raised her to adulthood, fell in love with her and married her, and bestowed upon her the finest clothing, jewelry, and food. She was beautiful, but she misused her beauty to seduce other men, and misused God's gifts to entice them. Her harlotry, representing idolatry, led her to despicable pagan acts. As punishment, God will gather her lovers (the other nations) against her. They will shame her and destroy her. Ultimately, though, God will honor His covenant with her and restore her, but as elsewhere in Ezekiel, it will be for God's sake, not because Israel is deserving."[172]

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[169] Tova Ganzel, "Ezekiel." 1033
[170] Tova Ganzel, "Ezekiel." 1035
[171] Tova Ganzel, "Ezekiel." 1033
[172] Tova Ganzel, "Ezekiel." 1057

Robert Alter, in *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation and Commentary,* explains that Ezekiel is describing the biblical prophetic trope whereby the covenantal marriage between God (as groom) and Israel (as bride), becomes disturbed by the "bride Israel's dalliance with the pagan gods, [and this] is figured as adultery or whoring."[173] God, in the form of a prophet, is punishing the "bride," a symbol of Israel, for going astray.

Rabbinic Commentators

Because of its gruesome imagery, especially of battered women, Ezekiel 16 can be difficult to encounter. Even early rabbinic figures could not bear to hear it, debating whether they should read it publicly. Dating around 100 C.E, *Mishnah Megillah* 4:10 states: "Eliezer says: One may not conclude with section from the Prophets beginning with: 'Make known to Jerusalem her abominations,'[174] because it speaks derogatively of the Jewish people. But Rabbi Judah permits it."[175] Ezekiel's ruling was not accepted, however, and "Maimonides read it as the *haftarah* for *Shemot,* and the Yemenites follow this custom."[176] Yet the *Gemara* also describes a time when it was read in Rabbi Eliezer's presence:

> "The *Tosefta* continues: The section of: 'Make known [*hoda*] to Jerusalem her abominations' (Ezekiel 16:2) is read and translated. This is obvious? It excludes Rabbi Eliezer's opinion, teaching an incident regarding someone who read for the *haftara* in the presence of Rabbi Eliezer, 'Make known to Jerusalem her abominations.' Rabbi Eliezer said to him: Before you examine the abominations of Jerusalem, go and examine the abominations of your mother. So they examined this fellow's lineage and found him to have a stain of illegitimacy."[177]

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[173] Robert Alter, "Ezekiel." *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* 1051
[174] Ezekiel 16:2
[175] Mishnah Megillah 4:10
[176] Tova Ganzel, "Ezekiel." 1057
[177] B. Megillah 25b

Rabbi Eliezer is concerned that by reading the abominations of Jerusalem, the people would have to face or uncover their own sins and abominations.

Baby Jerusalem is left abandoned. Ezekiel 16:4 states, "As for your birth, when you were born your navel cord was not cut, and you were not bathed in water to smooth you; you were not rubbed with salt, nor were you swaddled."[178] The Talmud, *Sotah* 11b, references this *pasuk*, after describing a ritual performed by righteous Israelite women in Egypt. These women would go to the river to draw water, and at the water, God would "materialize for them small fish that would enter into their pitchers."[179] They would come home and put one pot on the fire to wash their husbands and one pot to cook and feed them fish. They would then anoint and bathe their husbands and have sex with them "'between the sheepfolds' or between the borders and fences of the fields."[180] The women would then become pregnant and give birth in the field under the apple tree. Then:

> **"The Holy One, Blessed be He, would send from the heavens above** an angel **who would clean and prepare** the newborns, **just as a midwife prepares the newborn, as it is stated: 'And as for your birth, on the day you were born, your navel was not cut nor were you washed with water for cleansing;** you were not salted at all, nor swaddled at all' (Ezekiel 16:4)."[181]

Rashi in interpreting this talmudic passage says that this indicates that there were no midwives to take care of the Jews born in Egypt."[182]

The Talmud is referring to righteous women like Yocheved, Miriam, Batya, Tzipporah, Elisheva, and other Israelite women who would thwart Pharoah's plan to forbid

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[178] Ezekiel 16:2
[179] B. Sotah 11b
[180] B. Sotah 11b
[181] B. Sotah 11b
[182] B. Sotah 11b

them from sex and procreation[183]. Even though they were enslaved, they developed the clever strategy of gathering the fish and the water for bathing and found a way to procreate. Yet because they had to give birth as enslaved women, in undesirable conditions in the field, there were no midwives to take care of them. They instead received God's help. God's angels took the place of midwives, cleaning the babies and cutting their cords.

Radak also comments on this verse:

> **"As for your birth-** Now begins the parable: He likened the congregation of Israel to a young woman, who was in labor, in the place where there were there couldn't be found someone merciful to watch over her child, to do to unto her like the custom of a midwife, but rather with her birth, with revulsion and blood, she would be sent out to the opening of the field, just like they would banish out of the city something revolting/trash. Until a merciful person passes her and sees her baby wallowing in blood and in the field and has mercy on her, so that she would not die because of this revulsion, but rather she would live and would become yet like the plant of the field to tens of thousands [meaning, procreate extensively]. And she would be comforted by the merciful person, because she was unwashed, and the blood was not rinsed off of her. And he set her down, just as she was, until this girl grew up and reached '*adei adayin*- the age of womanhood' (to have children), which means that she grew to point of adolescence where she could be married to a *ba'al*, husband, and when the merciful person saw it was her time of love and she could take a husband, he 'put his wing over her' (see vs. 16:8), meaning, he could promise to acquire her as a wife and swear to her about this, and enter a covenant. Everything is as it goes and says. Behold we have clarified the meaning of the poem, and the essence of the parable is clarified!"[184]

Radak takes a savior approach to this text, explaining that a "merciful person" comes by to save the woman and her bloodied child, only so that the child could grow up, find a husband, and have many babies. He reduces the worth of a woman to being able to marry and procreate. Unlike the talmudic commentators, he does not mention her as part of a tradition of the biblical women in Exodus who masterfully saved the Jewish people.

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[183]Maurice M. Mizrahi, Congregation Adat Reyim, Torah discussion on Shemot: The righteous women of the Exodus, 10 Jan 2015 https://images.shulcloud.com/618/uploads/PDFs/Divrei_Torah/therighteouswomenoftheexodusshemot.pdf

[184] Radak on Ezekiel 16:4, Personal Translation with Rabbi Emily Aviva Kapor-Mater, 2022

The talmudic rabbis return to Ezekiel 16:4 in Tractate Shabbat:

> **"And Rav Naḥman said** that **Rabba bar Avuh said** that **Rav said: Everything stated in the passage of rebuke** (Ezekiel 16) **one may perform for a woman in childbirth on Shabbat. As it is stated** there: **"And as for your birth, on the day you were born, your navel was not cut, and you were not washed in water for cleansing, and you were not salted, nor were you swaddled"** (Ezekiel 16:4)."[185]

Rashi adds: "Since that chapter speaks of the dangerous birth of an abandoned child, for all other children, these issues should be addressed."[186] This is where the talmudic rabbis first introduced the idea that a baby being born on Shabbat, and the mother giving birth, should be properly taken care of even if it means that the laws of Shabbat would be broken. The talmudic rabbis must have been horrified to learn that a woman and child were so neglected, that the child's umbilical cord was not cut, and that they were left wallowing until someone (or God) came by to save them. The rabbis believed that their safety had to be prioritized, as matters of life and death, or *pikuach nefesh.* This talmudic verse sparked later laws which expanded on the need to prioritize women's safety. Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* states:

> "A woman giving birth is surely in mortal danger when she bends down to give birth, and [so] we profane the Shabbat for her. We call a learned midwife from one place to [another] place and we cut the umbilical cord and tie it. And if she requires a lamp at the time that she yells out from her birth pangs, we light a lamp for her – even if she is blind, as her mind is put at ease by the lamp even if she does not see. And if she requires oil and that which is similar to it, we bring it to her. And anything that can be altered [from its usual way], we alter while it is brought. For example, her friend should bring [the item] hanging in her hair. And if [this is] impossible, she should bring it in its [usual] way."[187]

> "We profane the Shabbat for a birthing woman and execute all of her needs from when the blood starts to flow until she gives birth and for three days after she gives birth – whether she says, 'I need [it],' or whether she says, 'I do not need [it].' And from three to seven [days]; if she says, 'I do not need [it],' we do not profane the Shabbat for her. But if she was quiet – and there is no need to say if she said, 'I need [it]' – we profane the Shabbat for her. And from seven to thirty days, she is surely

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[185] B. Shabbat 129b
[186] Rashi on B. Shabbat 129b
[187] Mishneh Torah, Sabbath 2:11

> like an ill person that is not in [mortal] danger. And [so] even if she says, 'I need [it],' we only do forbidden work for her through gentiles."[188]

Modern Commentators

Many modern commentators are shocked by the language and attitude expressed toward women in Ezekiel 16, just as the classical commentators were. Robert Alter writes that, "Among the themes of Ezekiel's prophecies, the most striking expression of neuroses is his troubled relation to the female body. Real and symbolic bodies become entangled with each other."[189] Alter notes that Ezekiel was grossly preoccupied with the female body, promiscuity, purity, and impurity.[190] He continues:

> "It is of course possible to link each of these sexual details with the allegory of an idolatrous nation betraying its faith. But such explicitness and such vehemence about sex are unique in the Bible. The compelling inference is that this was a prophet morbidly fixated on the female body and seething with fervid misogyny. What happens in the prophecy in chapter 16 is that the metaphor of the lubricious woman takes over the foreground, virtually displacing the allegorical referent. Ezekiel was clearly not a stable person. The states of disturbance exhibited in his writing led him to a series of remarkable visionary experiences [...]. There is much in these visions that reminds us of the dangerous and dark side of prophecy. To announce authoritatively that the words one speaks are the words of God is an audacious act. Inevitably, what is reported as divine speech reaches us through the refracting prism of the prophet's sensibility and psychology, and the words and images represented as God's urgent message may sometimes be distorted in eerie ways."[191]

Judith Plaskow writes about this trope, quoting Renita Weems, in Weem's book *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets*. Weems argues that in Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, the prophets use this explicit language and "provocative female sexual imagery" to "direct the attention of their male audiences to the inevitability of divine judgment. Exploiting what were widely held attitudes toward marriage, they chose

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[188] Mishneh Torah, Sabbath 2:13
[189] Robert Alter, "Ezekiel." *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* 1051
[190] Robert Alter, "Ezekiel." *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* 1051
[191] Robert Alter, "Ezekiel." *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* 1053

metaphors of promiscuity, lewdness, and shamelessness to cast Israel's religious misbehavior in the strongest possible moral terms.[192]

Diane Cohler-Esses and Rachel Jacoby Rosenfeld in *Jerusalem as Women in the Book of Ezekiel* raise similar issues and pose related questions to those of Weems: "The idyllic model of female union and intimacy with God is replaced by sullied, perverted imagery. The reader feels betrayed. The text turns on her. Does this betrayal in fact delegitimize the powerfully positive and intimate image of a female relationship with God? Or can we still reclaim this text despite the lethal turn this relationship takes?"[193] Cohler-Esses and Rosenfeld "reclaim" this text by showing how in our modern day, our community recites the words from Ezekiel, "In your blood you shall live, in your blood you shall live"[194] when a baby boy is circumcised. Ironically, the biblical text is being used to describe an infant girl. They discuss how the rabbis who adapted it for circumcision "appropriate the rare Divine address explicitly to a woman concerning her covenantal development. [...] In this blood the baby boy is reborn as a member of the covenant."[195] To Cohler-Esses and Rosenfeld, the woman thus embodies the covenant, because she gives blood in birth and in menstruation, parts of "'nature's bleeding,' unrelated to history, and unacknowledged in Jewish life as it relates to covenant. [...] In other words, without a Jewish womb (or womb

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[192]Plaskow, Judith. "Preaching Against the Text." Essay. In *The Coming of Lilith: Essays on Feminism, Judaism, and Sexual Ethics,* edited by Judith Plaskow and Donna Berman. *1972-2003*. Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 2005. Kindle Loc. 2380

[193] Dianne Cohler-Esses and Rachel Jacoby Rosenfield. "Jerusalem as Women in the Book of Ezekiel." Essay. In *The Women's Haftarah Commentary: New Insights from Women Rabbis on the 54 Weekly Haftarah Portions, the 5 Megillot & Special Shabbatot*, edited by Elyse Goldstein. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2004. Kindle Loc. 6313

[194] Ezekiel 16:6

[195] Dianne Cohler-Esses and Rachel Jacoby Rosenfield, "Jerusalem as Women in the Book of Ezekiel." Kindle Loc. 6327

substitute), a child is simply not Jewish. A woman thereby embodies covenant."[196] To their earlier question, these commentators later conclude: "Even in its graphic portrayal, Ezekiel 16 offers women a unique opportunity to explore the nature and meaning of our covenantal relationship with God. This text is still worth claiming and using for our own religious lives."[197] In fact, according to the Talmud, male genitalia need a cut to receive the covenant, but women are already "circumcised"- "their genitalia being open to a relationship with God."[198] Cohler-Esses and Rosenfeld's ability to reclaim the text in this way is especially important if put in conversation with T. Drorah Setel, in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible,* explaining:

> "In the centuries before the prophetic writings, female sexuality was at first viewed primarily as the power to give birth. This power is then constricted by placing the status of motherhood within the confines of the system of ritual purity. In addition, the worth of women's procreative capabilities became a property valuation transferred from father to husband. Female sexual activity that diminished the property value of a woman's body was discouraged; that which challenged the paternity of a husband was strongly prohibited. Sexual activity that did not disrupt the paternity system was tolerated."[199]

Sharon Moughtin-Mumby also attempts to reclaim the text in *Sexual and Marital Metaphors in Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel*. She begins by describing the "pornographic" nature of the text:

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[196] Dianne Cohler-Esses and Rachel Jacoby Rosenfield, "Jerusalem as Women in the Book of Ezekiel." Kindle Loc. 6341

[197] Dianne Cohler-Esses and Rachel Jacoby Rosenfield, "Jerusalem as Women in the Book of Ezekiel." Kindle Loc. 6320

[198] Dianne Cohler-Esses and Rachel Jacoby Rosenfield, "Jerusalem as Women in the Book of Ezekiel." Kindle Loc. 6342

[199] Setel, T. Drora. "Prophets and Pornography: Female Sexual Imagery in Hosea." Essay. In *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, edited by Letty M. Russell, 86–95. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985. 90

> "Ezekiel 16 is somehow more offensive than the same metaphor in Hosea and Jeremiah. The metaphor occurs in many forms in the Hebrew Bible, but only Ezekiel 16 was banned from public reading (*Meg*. 4:10). Darr insists: 'Ralph W. Klein is simply incorrect when in his recent book he remarks that Ezekiel's indictment 'proves almost to be vulgar!' It *is* vulgar.' Indeed, many are adamant that *Ezekiel* 16 and 23 should be exposed as 'pornography.' Sexually explicit phrases proliferate through these narratives."[200]

She gives an analysis of "the abrupt change in 16:15, [when] Jerusalem emerges from her passive state to seize control of the situation."[201] Previously,

> "… the prophet depicts 'female sexuality' as the object of male possession and control, [and then] the mature Jerusalem does *not* see herself as an 'object,' inferior to YHWH; nor does she sense a lasting obligation to the male who has taught her all she knows. Seeking independence, Jerusalem follows faithfully the model set for her by her teacher as she sets out to take command of the situation, using her sexuality and resources to assume the role of 'prostitute' in what we could call a business-like manner [...] If YHWH's statements about Jerusalem are accurate, one would expect that he would be flattered that she had learned the technique from him!"[202]

She says that feminists might find this appealing. Yet, unfortunately, "the internal logic of this narrative is almost certainly that Jerusalem has seriously misunderstood her relationship with YHWH."[203] She adds:

> "We are perhaps in danger of romanticizing this 'business,' particularly with the belief that the female remains in control. We could argue that [earlier in Ezekiel 16] Jerusalem has actively chosen 'prostitution' but this narrative is, after all, from YHWH's perspective. Ultimately, the idea that life as a 'prostitute' might appear to be an improvement for Jerusalem perhaps only underscores the deeply problematical nature of this prophetic narrative. Yet, despite its problems, this perhaps remains the most fruitful ground for resistant reading within the troubling [Ezekiel 16]."[204]

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[200] Sharon Moughtin-Mumby. "Ezekiel 16 and 23." Essay. In Sexual and Marital Metaphors in Hosea, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel, 157–205. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008. 173.
[201] Sharon Moughtin-Mumby. "Ezekiel 16 and 23." 174
[202] Sharon Moughtin-Mumby. "Ezekiel 16 and 23." 175
[203] Sharon Moughtin-Mumby. "Ezekiel 16 and 23." 175
[204] Sharon Moughtin-Mumby. "Ezekiel 16 and 23." 175

Discussion

It is possible that the images of Israel's "promiscuousness" and "whoredom" are solely metaphorical and cannot be compared to how society today views sex workers or even women whom society deems to be whores. Yet, another approach may be to compare any person who "goes astray" and is stigmatized within a patriarchal society, such as sex workers and women in general, to the plight of Israel in Ezekiel. Whichever view is taken, one can say that while not all sex workers have been victims of violence in the same way, it may be painful and harmful for someone who has experienced abuse to read this story. As I explore in Chapter One, in mainstream Christian society in the Unites States, sex workers may also be seen as anti-religious, in the sense that they challenge the Christian ideal of modesty and family culture. This culture is also pervasive in traditional Judaism. We had seen this notion in the story of Rahab, as well; it is only once Rahab converts to Judaism that she finds her path away from whoredom, just one example of how sex workers have not been understood to function as typical religious Jews throughout history.

The fact that the rabbinic and medieval rabbis struggled with reading the text publicly, and that modern day congregations rarely read it publicly too,[205] may indicate that they and their communities would also be repulsed by it. The images of battered women in this text are very graphic. It could be that the rabbis wouldn't want to share it out of embarrassment on behalf of the Jewish people that the text is so graphic and misogynistic, and also for the fact that it could be exceedingly difficult for any woman to hear, especially if they have a history of abuse, as many women do. Yet the desire to ignore or push away a text

[205] Ezekiel 16 is not listed as a public Haftarah reading in *The JPS Bible Commentary: Haftarot* (2002), or *The Women's Haftarah Commentary* (2013), or the Sephardic and Ashkenazic Haftarot listed on *Jewish Virtual Library, https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/weekly-torah-readings*

that is difficult to digest allows us to miss an opportunity to look at it critically, as modern commentators like Plaskow do.

In B. *Megillah* 25b, when Rabbi Eliezer warned his community against reading Ezekiel 16 publicly, he may have declared this a warning: had they read it aloud, they too may have faced the consequence of examining their own sins. Classifying sex work as a "sin" becomes problematic since it is the position of this thesis that, neither now nor then, should consensual sex work be considered shameful or sinful. Of course, there are transgressions that sex workers and non-sex-workers alike can examine in their own lives and relationships through the process of *teshuva* - but society's collective *teshuva* should not be at the expense of shaming women or mothers who act outside of patriarchal familial norms, nor at the expense of sex workers for their careers.

Case Study 4: Hosea 1-2

Introduction

The beginning of the Book of Hosea starts with God's word to Hosea,"a prophet from the past."[206] According to Ehud Ben Zvi, the themes that arise through this story are "Israel's abandoning of the Lord, the Lord's punishment of Israel for that abandonment, calls for Israel's repentance, and hope for an ideal future of reconciliation between YHVH and Israel."[207] Like Ezekiel, and other books of the Prophets, it uses sexual and familial metaphors for God, Israel, and their relationship; the beginning of Hosea contains "passages built around images of 'whoredom' and '(proper) marriage,'"[208] in order to show the contrast

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[206] Ehud Ben Zvi, "Hosea, Introduction and Annotations" in *The Jewish Study Bible*, eds. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1131

[207] Ehud Ben Zvi, "Hosea, Introduction and Annotations." 1131

[208] Ehud Ben Zvi, "Hosea, Introduction and Annotations." 1132

between "Israel's reported abandonment of the LORD and the future reconciliation between the two."[209] In the metaphorical story, "the deity takes the role of an angry husband who condemns, severely punishes, and publicly dishonors his unfaithful wife, who fails to recognize how good he has been to her. After his violent and shaming punishment is conducted, he will be willing to accept her back. This imagery is reflective of the society that produced the prophetic books (see Ezek. chs 16, 23)."[210] After God commands Hosea to marry a prostitute, she will "continue to be unfaithful to her husband in order for him to experience first-hand how God feels about living in a covenant with an adulterous Israel drawn astray to the idolatry of neighboring countries."[211]

Rabbinic Commentators

Hosea 1:2 states: " תְּחִלַּת דִּבֶּר־יְהוָה בְּהוֹשֵׁעַ {פ}וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־הוֹשֵׁעַ לֵךְ קַח־לְךָ אֵשֶׁת זְנוּנִים וְיַלְדֵי זְנוּנִים כִּי־זָנֹה תִּזְנֶה הָאָרֶץ מֵאַחֲרֵי יְהוָה: When the LORD first spoke to Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea, "Go, get yourself a wife of whoredom and children of whoredom; for the land will stray (lit. whore away) from following the LORD."[212] The question that arises amongst the talmudic and medieval commentators is: why does God tell Hosea in the first place to marry a whore? Radak, Maimonides, and Ibn Ezra take the view that this account was prophetic, while Rashi and talmudic commentators offered a more literal reading.[213]

Ibn Ezra suggests God's words to Hosea were not spoken literally: " והנה לא מרה פי השם חלילה חלילה– "Here we don't have the bile of God's mouth moving back and forth."[214]

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[209] Ehud Ben Zvi, "Hosea, Introduction and Annotations." 1132
[210] Ehud Ben Zvi, "Hosea, Introduction and Annotations." 1131
[211] Noam Sachs Zion*, Prostitutes, Rabbis and Repentance,* 86
[212] Hosea 1:2
[213] Ehud Ben Zvi, "Hosea, Introduction and Annotations." 1132
[214] Ibn Ezra on Hosea 1:2, Personal Translation

Likewise, Radak writes: "מצאנו לשון דבור שהוא ענין נבואה קשור עם בי"ת השמוש. We will find the words spoken that are a matter of prophecy, connected with the use of the letter ב *bet.*"[215] Radak is referring to the "ב" *bet* in "בְּהוֹשֵׁעַ" when God first spoke "to" or "through" Hosea. Radak then gives several examples of other points in the Tanakh where God spoke "ב" or "through" so-and-so, to better understand our verse at hand: "Has the LORD spoken only through Moses במשה? Has He not spoken through us (בנו) as well? (Numbers 12:2). The spirit of the LORD has spoken through me (דבר בי) (Samuel 23:2). With him (אדבר בו) I speak mouth to mouth" (Numbers 12:8)."[216]

Radak continues: "It might have been that the words 'God spoke' דבר ה' could've been in the past tense. This is to say, 'When God first spoke 'to' Hosea (בהושע),' this is when he would say 'Go, get yourself a wife of whoredom.' Otherwise, there would have been a דבר there, like "והדבר אין בהם" "For the Word is not in them" (Jeremiah 5:13).[217] Radak infers that the grammar of דַּבֶּר־יְהוָה בְּהוֹשֵׁעַ implies that these words were prophetic and visionary. It does not mean that Hosea concretely took her as a wife, as the past tense might have suggested – Radak believes God's words were meant merely to show Hosea a vision of the future to "sympathize with God's disappointment and [be] prepared to deliver the prophetic message."[218]

A third classical commentator and *halakhist*, Maimonides, believes God's words should be assumed to be a "dream or a vision," as he writes in *Guide for the Perplexed:*

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[215] Radak on Hosea 1:2, Personal Translation
[216] Radak on Hosea 1:2
[217] Radak on Hosea 1:2
[218] Rachel Leila Miller, "Haftarat Bamidbar." *The Women's Haftarah Commentary: New Insights from Women Rabbis on the 54 Haftarah Portions, the 5 Megillot and Special Shabbatot*, ed. Elyse Goldstein, (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2004) Kindle Loc. 2766.

> " [The prophet] introduces his prophecy by stating that God spoke to him, or told him to do a certain thing, or speak certain words, but he does not explain that he received the message in a dream or vision, because he assumes that it is well known, and has been established as a principle that no prophecy or revelation originates otherwise than in a dream or vision, and through an angel. Instances of the first form are the following (...) 'The beginning of the word of the Lord by Hosea' (Hosea. 1:2)"[219]

According to Ibn Ezra's, Radak's, and Maimonides' view, "Hosea never really took Gomer as a wife nor suffered her continual disloyalties."[220]

Centuries earlier, the talmudic sages, however, had identified why Hosea was made to suffer and was asked by God to find a prostitute as a wife. The *Gemara* interprets this request as more purposeful than a dream. We read in *Pesachim* 87a:

> The **Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Hosea: Your sons,** the Jewish people, **have sinned.** Hosea **should have said** to God in response: But **they are Your sons; they are** the **sons of Your beloved ones,** the **sons of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Extend Your mercy over them. Not only did he fail to say that, but** instead **he [Hosea] said before Him: Master of the Universe, the entire world is Yours;** since Israel has sinned, **exchange them for another nation. The Holy One, Blessed be He, said: What shall I do to this Elder who does not know how to defend Israel? I will say to him: Go and take a prostitute and bear for yourself children of prostitution. And after that I will say to him: Send her away from before you. If he is able to send her away, I will also send away the Jewish people.**

According to this text, God asks Hosea to take a whore as a wife as he is unable to lead the Jewish people and have mercy on them. God puts Hosea to the test to see if he can take in the whore, have children with her, but then let go of her. Yet, in the continuation of the talmudic passage, once God puts him through this trial, Hosea is himself unwilling to abandon his wife and children, despite their questionable parentage. Through this process, Hosea discovers within himself the ability to understand the Divine qualities of patience (*erekh apayyim*) and mercy (*rachamim*)."[221] The talmudic rabbis see Hosea's marriage to a prostitute as both a

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[219] Maimonides Guide for the Perplexed, Part 2 41:2, translated by Friedlander, 1903.
[220] Rachel Leila Miller, "Haftarat Bamidbar," Kindle Loc. 2766.
[221] Rachel Leila Miller, "Haftarat Bamidbar," Kindle Loc. 2778

punishment and as a way to test him and teach him a lesson, so that he might grow closer to God. This is paralleled in other talmudic tales such as *Menachot* 44a, where rabbis are "tempted" by the charm of a woman, then they are taught a lesson from God or Torah, and lastly, with repentance, are pulled back into God's midst. The next verse, Hosea 1:3, states: וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיִּקַּח אֶת־גֹּמֶר בַּת־דִּבְלָיִם וַתַּהַר וַתֵּלֶד־לוֹ בֵּן: "So he went and married Gomer daughter of Diblaim. She conceived and bore him a son"[222]. Indeed, the talmudic rabbis were charmed and lustful toward Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim, the name of the woman whom Hosea would marry, which later on is quoted and supported by Rashi:

> "'**Diblaim';** the name Diblaim can be taken as the dual form of the word *dibba*, ill repute. It suggests that she was a woman of **ill repute, daughter of** a woman of **ill repute. And Shmuel said:** The name Diblaim is the plural of the word *deveila*, a cake of pressed figs, indicating that **she was as sweet as a cake of pressed figs,** and therefore everyone used her services. **Rabbi Yoḥanan,** based on a similar derivation, **said** the name signifies **that everyone would tread [*dashin*] upon her,** a euphemism for sexual relations, **like a cake of pressed figs. "Gomer;" Rav said** she was so called **because everyone would finish [*gomerim*]** having relations with her and satisfy their desires **with her."**[223]

The sexualized yet conflicted manner in which the rabbis spoke about the Gomer is similar to their accounts of Rahab. They saw Gomer as someone of "ill repute" in the same breath as praising her (or her body) as sweet. The fact that they see her in "ill repute," however, may have nothing to do with her having sex with them for payment. More so, the rabbis would be concerned with idolatry.

Verses 16-25 of Hosea 2 are about "marital reconciliation" [...] The husband will bring the wife (Israel) back. The wife will be faithful forever. She is endowed with attributes such as righteousness and faithfulness."[224] Hosea 2:18 states: "And in that day—declares the

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[222] Hosea 1:3
[223] B. Pesachim 87b
[224] Ehud Ben Zvi, "Hosea, Introduction and Annotations." 1135.

LORD—You will call [Me] *Ishi*, And no more will you call Me *Baali*.[225]" The question arises - why would there be a change in title from *Ishi to Ba'ali*, for both words can be translated as "husband" ? Rashi answers this question by saying, "'You shall call [Me] Ishi, etc.' means 'You shall worship Me out of love and not out of fear. Ishi is an expression of marriage and the love of one's youth;" [226] . Rashi continues: "Baali [is] An expression of mastership and fear. And our Rabbis (*Pesachim* 87a, *Kethuboth* 71b) explained: 'Like a bride in her father-in-law's house, and not like a bride in her father's house.'"[227]

Modern Commentators

Rashi does not explicitly connect *ba'al* to idol worship as later commentators like Malbim (Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel Wisser, Ukraine, 1809-1879) does, taking the metaphor a step further: "Malbim [...] attributes the lapse of Israel into idolatry to the lack of intimacy between God and the feminine *Knesset Yisrael.*"[228] Most contemporary commentators agree with Malbim that the idea of "*ba'al*" connects to idol worship. Ben Zvi, for example, notes that, "The wordplay projects an image of a future rejection of the cult of Baal (i.e. a Phoenician and Canaanite god), and Israel's acceptance of YHVH as her 'Man.'" The chapter is "playing on the meaning of 'Baal' as 'husband' and the related verb meaning 'marry' or 'take a woman as a sexual partner [the active subject here is always the man].' Baals stand for the unidentified 'lovers' mentioned before, and all the terms' connotations

[225] Hosea 2:18
[226] Rashi on Hosea 1.2. https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Hosea.1.2.1
[227] Rashi on Hosea 2.18. https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Hosea.2.18.2
[228] Rachel Leila Miller, "Haftarat Bamidbar," Kindle Loc. 2800

suit the general atmosphere permeating the text.'"[229] Rabbi Rachael Leia Miller, commenting on Hosea 2:18, writes, "The word *ba'al* conveys a sense of mastery, dominion, and ownership. As mentioned before, false gods are called *ba'alim*. One reason for the rejection of the term comes from the next verse: "I will remove the names of the gods from her mouth …" (Hosea 2:19). To refer to her husband as ba'al is too close to pagan imagery."[230]

According to Judith Plaskow in *Preaching Against the Text,* God's declaration at the end of the second chapter of Hosea, "And I will espouse you forever: I will espouse you with righteousness and justice, And with goodness and mercy"[231] is a "magnificent statement of covenant love and faithfulness that seems to express the highest ideals of both marriage and of the relationship between God and Israel."[232] Yet she warns us that we cannot ignore the rest of these chapters with ideas that are fraught with "horrendously misogynist[ic]" messages:[233] "It is intellectually dishonest to focus simply on the positive aspects of tradition."[234] She argues that we must engage with tradition and find the ways it "shapes us for good and for evil."[235]

Unlike the medieval commentators who see God's decision to tell Hosea to marry a harlot as part of a dream or prophesy, Plaskow sees this decision as intentional: "God instructs the prophet to get 'a wife of whoredom' and beget 'children of whoredom,' in order to symbolize Israel's apostasy in worshiping other gods. In speaking in powerful and

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[229] Ehud Ben Zvi, "Hosea, Introduction and Annotations." 1135
[230] Rachel Leila Miller, "Haftarat Bamidbar." Kindle Loc. 2797
[231] Hosea 2:21
[232] Judith Plaskow. "Preaching Against the Text." Essay. In *The Coming of Lilith: Essays on Feminism, Judaism, and Sexual Ethics, 1972-2003*. Judith Plaskow and Donna Berman, ed. Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 2005. Kindle Loc. 2238
[233] Judith Plaskow, "Preaching Against the Text." Kindle Loc. 2238
[234] Judith Plaskow, "Preaching Against the Text." Kindle Loc.2431
[235] Judith Plaskow, "Preaching Against the Text." Kindle Loc. 2433

shocking terms about marrying a prostitute, Hosea dramatizes a trope found in a number of the prophets: he compares Israel's faithlessness to God to a wife's faithlessness in a marriage."[236] Plaskow argues that the explicit female sexual language is used "in order to direct the attention of their male audiences to the inevitability of divine judgment."[237]

Miller's position aligns with that of Plaskow in acknowledging that the text is meant to critique the Israelites for being faithless or worshiping other gods. However, she also acknowledges that Radak's and other classical commentators' claims that it is simply part of a dream or prophecy, are also possibilities: "Each answer suggests that God can be understood through human relationship, whether in prophetic vision or actual interaction."[238]

Plaskow expands on how this metaphor, from a feminist perspective, presents difficulties, including that, "To be effective, the marriage side of the analogy must be taken for granted. Of course women's sexuality is deviant and dangerous, posing a constant threat to male honor and prestige; of course husbands might appropriately respond to a wife's promiscuity with outrage and abuse. What's new and startling about the metaphor is not its view of marriage as hierarchical and abusive, but that it draws a parallel between the religious apostasy of elite men and the disgusting wantonness of women"[239]

T. Drora Setel in *Prophets and Pornography: Female Sexual Imagery in Hosea*, dives even deeper into the problematic nature of using this metaphor, claiming that the text is a form of biblical pornography, with similar consequences to women of the modern day because of the clear "objectification of female sexuality" in the text: "Although feminist

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[236] Judith Plaskow, "Preaching Against the Text." Kindle Loc. 2386
[237] Judith Plaskow, "Preaching Against the Text." Kindle Loc. 2390
[238] Judith Plaskow, "Preaching Against the Text." Kindle Loc. 2759
[239]Judith Plaskow, "Preaching Against the Text." Kindle Loc. 2398

discussion has focused extensively on the nature and effects of objectification in the form of contemporary pornography, examination of biblical texts sows an interesting congruence between ancient and modern depictions of female sexuality."[240] In reference to Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and 12 shorter prophets, Setel claims that "they seem to be the first to use objectified female sexuality as a symbol of evil."[241] She classifies this objectification as a form of pornography, as "There has emerged an understanding of pornography as both a description of and a tool for maintaining male domination of female sexuality."[242]

Expanding on the sexualization and gendered power imbalances in Hosea, Setel points out that "Hosea's metaphor has both theological and social meaning:"[243] "With regard to theological understanding, it indicates that God has the authority of possession and control over Israel that a husband has over a wife. The reverse of the representation is a view of human males as being analogous to Yahweh, while women are comparable to the people, who, by definition, are subservient to Yahweh's will. In a dualistic division between the divine (spiritual) and human (material) spheres of experience, men are categorized as belonging to the former, while women are assigned to the latter."[244]

Plaskow also discusses how one can compare modern day battered women's experiences to that of Gomer. Plaskow writes that, "We can see that [this story] serves only to reinforce the notion that God or the husband is ultimately decent and reasonable, and thus

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[240] Drora T Setel. "Prophets and Pornography: Female Sexual Imagery in Hosea." Essay. In *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, edited by Letty M. Russell, 86–95. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985. 86
[241] Drora T. Setel, "Prophets and Pornography." 86
[242] Drora T. Setel, "Prophets and Pornography." 87
[243] Drora T. Setel, "Prophets and Pornography." 92
[244] Drora T. Setel, "Prophets and Pornography," 92

leaves male power over and aggression against women unchallenged."[245] She credits Rev. Dr. Renita J. Weems for suggesting that "There are at least two aspects of the marriage metaphor that were likely to be shocking to the prophet's listeners. One was the suggestion that Israelite men are in certain respects like unfaithful women; the other was the notion that the betrayed husband might exercise forbearance and forgive his wife. His willingness to overlook her depravity marks him again as the finer one in their relationship."[246] Plaskow continues: "Not only does the husband have social and economic power, he is also morally superior to his wife in that he forgives her rather than having her stoned to death."[247] Plaskow adds that the messages that we get in our society that may be similar to the message Hosea attempted to portray in this gruesome story: "It is difficult for women to leave battering relationships: I promise you, all will be fine now, it won't happen again, I forgive you; and besides, it was all your fault anyway."[248]

Miller, on the other hand, while acknowledging that women may read this patriarchal text differently from men, gives a more hopeful message. She encourages the reader to look at the positive messages of Hosea: "Hosea challenges us to open our hearts to a more passionate experience of God [...] Every weekday, those who wear tefillin quote Hosea's words: 'I betroth you to me eternally' (Hosea 2:21). Yet, it is rare for Jews to imagine themselves as lovers of God. Allowing oneself to develop a joyous attachment to God transforms life into something more vital than rote service to the higher good commanded by the King of Kings. Prayer becomes an ecstatic experience, a love song. Torah study is a

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[245] Judith Plaskow, "Preaching Against the Text." Kindle Loc. 2442
[246] Judith Plaskow, "Preaching Against the Text." Kindle Loc. 2442
[247] Judith Plaskow, "Preaching Against the Text." Kindle Loc. 2426
[248] Judith Plaskow, "Preaching Against the Text." Kindle Loc. 2428

sharing of secrets and the script for a struggle with mutual disappointments and longings. Mitzvot gain immediacy as they become gestures to meet the desires of a Lover one longs to please. Transgression is forgiven in a loving embrace."[249]

Discussion

The three possible answers in the classical and modern commentaries to the question of why Hosea was asked to marry a harlot pose unique issues and questions for sex workers today. First, while Radak's comments about the grammar and prophesy are important, we can wonder what else was behind his, Maimonides, and Ibn Ezra's view that this account was all dream. Could it have been so difficult for them to think that God could possibly have asked Hosea to marry a whore? If we extend the metaphor from "whore" in the biblical account to a modern-day sex worker, we may find it upsetting that this was beyond the imagination of the rabbis. Today, it is not uncommon for sex workers to also be in long term partnerships and marriages. Second, the talmudic idea that Hosea needed to ask for mercy so as to not leave his wife and children is a more charitable response – nobody should be forced to leave their wives and children. Third, harlotry was a metaphor for idolatry. Women's sexuality came to be seen as deviant or dangerous. This is a common trope explored by commentators like Malbim and Plaskow, as well as modern commentators.

As it pertains to sex workers in our modern context, the fact that a "woman's sexuality is deviant and dangerous, posing a constant threat to male honor and prestige"[250] could be seen as an asset; sex workers today can challenge the patriarchal system through their perceived social deviance. Leaving this at face value, isolated from the rest of the text,

[249]Rachel Leila Miller, "Haftarat Bamidbar." Kindle Loc. 2815
[250]Judith Plaskow, "Preaching Against the Text." Kindle Loc. 2398

we could celebrate this deviance. Where this becomes problematic, is in the fact that theologically and spiritually, the text shames the harloting Israel, beating her down and making her change its ways. The overall message of the text is not a positive one for Israel as a sex worker. The hope that is portrayed at the end, the "magnificent statement of covenant love and faithfulness that seems to express the highest ideals of both marriage and of the relationship between God and Israel"[251] is something that may speak to some Jewish sex workers, just as it speaks to any Jew as they return to God each morning and say these words as they put on tefillin, for example. Just as it can give any person hope of becoming closer to God and finding "love and faithfulness," it might also give sex workers hope that they could find more "love and faithfulness" however they interpret that in their lives. Unlike the supposed ideal of turning away from idolatry/promiscuity that occurs in the text, this should not have to mean that a sex worker must leave the sex industry, as the text seems to imply. Sex work is also not idolatry, though the stereotypes of it as such may still stand. Any person's life, including a sex worker's life, may already be full of "love and faithfulness" even when it challenges society's "ideals" and even though their lives may not be perfect.

[251]Judith Plaskow, "Preaching Against the Text." Kindle Loc. 2238

Conclusion

This is the first academic work that seeks to raise awareness of the issues that Jewish sex workers face, by means of ethnographic, sociological, and biblical research. It is my hope that it will not be the last.

The results of my research can help Jewish clergy, professionals, and communities at large understand the pressing social and political issues that Jewish sex workers face. I have challenged some reservations clergy may have about including sex workers in their communities or speaking about sex work. I have highlighted the importance of engaging with Jewish sex workers in ways that are safe, welcoming, and inclusive. I have demonstrated that many Jewish sex workers wish to be part of and more active in Jewish community but feel barred by stigma. I have suggested to clergy ways in which they can work toward the goals of welcoming and understanding sex work as well as ways they can challenge some of the stigma that exists against sex work in Jewish and other religious settings.

Through biblical analysis, I have shown that stigma against sex workers today is rooted in patriarchal ideas about women, from as early as the book of Genesis. Yet, I have also demonstrated that there are many ideas presented in early rabbinic Jewish scholarship, beginning with the Talmud, which show that the sex work was not always as disdained and taboo as it is today. In addition, modern feminist Jewish scholars continue to challenge some of the patriarchal notions within the classical texts and within contemporary Jewish culture.

This work is only the beginning of what I hope will become even more scholarship in this area – hopefully, one day conducted by Jewish sex workers themselves, with the support of the wider Jewish community and academia. I pray for a world in which sex work is

decriminalized, sex work is understood as real work, and Jewish sex workers feel safe and at home in synagogues and all Jewish communities.

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Appendix

Survey Title: Jewish Sex Workers Survey

Survey Facebook Post: I created an anonymous survey for a research project on how Jewish leaders/communities can best support SW'ers — if you are a SW'er (current or former) and Jewish feel free to fill it out!! More info in the form. Share with whomever might be interested.

Survey Introduction:
Shalom! :) My name is Leah Nussbaum (they/them). I'm a final year rabbinical student at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion working on my capstone research project. The title of it is still TBD, but a big part of it is an exploration of of how Jewish spaces can be more inclusive and supportive for Jewish sex workers, and how Jewish spiritual leaders can best support sex workers pastorally and politically.

I'm also working on analyzing and understanding traditional Jewish texts from a feminist pro-sex-work, pro-decriminalization perspective AND critiquing/challenging Jewish texts that have traditionally been read as critical or stigmatizing of sex workers / their rights.

I'm interested in hearing from Jewish sex workers about how/if you're connected to your Jewish identity, and/or Jewish community, and how you think we could do better. I plan to use quotes, data, or info gathered from this survey in my capstone project. This will remain completely anonymous. All questions are optional. If you'd like to stay in touch, be interviewed (can be paid), and/or talk further about my research, feel free to email me at [email]

This survey is for anyone who is Jewish and a sex worker (BIG tent Judaism- all Jews, people with Jewish ancestry, patrilineal Jews, any-denominational-Jews, queer Jews, trans Jews, Jews of Color, active conversion students, those in interfaith relationships, etc etc...all Jews are welcome, there's no such thing as not Jewish enough!). I am happy to hear from those who are currently or formerly Jewish sex workers!

1. Where, broadly, are you located (feel free to be as broad or specific as you feel safe-- I'm mostly interested in if you're in or outside North America!)
2. What are your pronouns?

3. Does your Jewish identity ever come into play in your work? If so, how?
4. Are there any Jewish teachings, ideas, or stories that have either challenged or inspired you as a sex worker? (it's okay if you don't know or can't think of any!)
5. Do you feel safe as a sex worker in Jewish spaces? Do you feel supported in Jewish community as a sex worker?
6. What is (or has been) your comfort level in talking to Jewish clergy, professionals, or spiritual leaders about your work and any challenges that you might face in it?
7. If you're involved in (or have ever been involved or present in) a Jewish community or organization, does the clergy/leadership ever discuss or address the issues that sex workers face publicly? (an example of this could be a sermon about SESTA/FOSTA, or a fact sheet from the Sex Workers Outreach Project on a bulletin board)
8. Is there anything that you wish you could safely talk about, or that others would talk about in a Jewish space (or even with Jewish family/friends) related to your work?
9. Do you have ideas on how Jewish spaces can be made safer for Jewish sex workers?
10. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Survey Title: Jewish Clergy and Jewish Sex Workers

Survey Facebook Post: Hi all-- I have a short anonymous survey for clergy, for my HUC-JIR capstone project. The project will include research on the challenges that Jewish clergy may have faced in supporting Jewish sex workers, and a vision of how Jewish communities and spiritual leaders can best support Jewish sex workers. If you have a moment, I invite you to fill it out in as much or as little detail as you'd like! Thank you!

Survey Introduction: Shalom esteemed colleagues! My name is Leah Nussbaum and I'm a HUC-JIR rabbinical student in NYC. If you're a rabbi, cantor, or other Jewish spiritual leader (or if you are a clergy student and have served professionally as student clergy), I invite you to fill out this form for my capstone project.

The project will include research on the challenges that Jewish clergy may have faced in supporting Jewish sex workers, and a vision of how Jewish communities and spiritual leaders can best support Jewish sex workers.

I plan to use quotes, data, or info gathered from this survey in my capstone project. This will remain completely anonymous. All questions are optional. If you'd like to stay in touch, be interviewed, and/or talk further about my research, feel free to email me at [email].

Lastly, if you know any Jewish sex workers (past or present) or you are/have been yourself -- I have an additional survey, which I'm using to hear this perspective! Feel free to share [link].

Questions:

1. What are your pronouns?
2. Do you know personally anyone in your community who is or has been a Jewish sex worker? (for pulpit: can be members of your synagogue or not- but specify if possible).
3. Do you have any personal or religious challenges around including sex workers in your community, officiating their lifecycle events, or relating to sex workers pastorally? If yes, feel free to share more!
4. Are you familiar with any of the political or social issues that sex workers face? (SESTA/FOSTA, criminalization, stigma, etc) If so, have you ever spoken publicly about these things on the bimah, Torah study, or other space publicly?
5. Do you have any ideas of how Jewish communities could be more inclusive toward Jewish sex workers?
6. Please share your Jewish denomination (or lack thereof!) if you feel comfortable
7. Is there anything else you would like to add?