

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

Transformations of a Feminine Ideal:

How *Eshet Hayil* has been Interpreted and Applied in Rabbinic Texts

Lisa A. Rosenberg

This thesis is comprised of four chapters, in addition to the Introduction and Conclusion. It contributes a close reading of one edition of *Midrash Eshet Hayil*, a minor midrash based on Proverbs 31:10-31 (the "Woman of Valor"), in the context of other interpretations and applications of this biblical text. It is divided into an exegesis of the biblical poem itself; application of Proverbs 31 in rabbinic literature; a survey of midrashim on Proverbs 31; and a study of this particular midrash. Chapter Four, *Midrash Eshet Hayil*, includes the Hebrew text, my translation of the midrash, and a verse-by-verse commentary on the work. Most of the materials used were primary sources, as secondary literature on this particular midrash is relatively scarce. Important secondary works include "Midreshei Eshet Hayil," a doctoral dissertation by Yael Levine Katz of Bar-Ilan University, and the various works of Dr. Burton Visotzky on *Midrash Mishle*. The most significant primary materials in this thesis are the various versions of midrashim on *Eshet Hayil*, particularly the anonymous Yemenite version found in Wertheimer's *Batei Midrashot*. In addition, I drew on classical midrashic works such as *Genesis Rabbah*, *Midrash Tanhuma*, and *Pesikta d'Rav Kahana*, as well as the Babylonian Talmud.

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Contents

Introduction.....	iii
Chapter One: Proverbs 31: Biblical Text and Exegesis.....	1
A. Hebrew text	
B. Translation	
C. Notes on translation	
D. Exegesis	
Chapter Two: <i>Eshet Hayil</i> in Rabbinic Literature.....	19
A. Thematic Summary	
B. Chronological Summary	
Chapter Three: <i>Midrashei Eshet Hayil</i>.....	30
A. A Metaphor for Torah and Her Students	
B. In Praise of Sarah	
C. Alphabet of Biblical Women	
Chapter Four: <i>Midrash Eshet Hayil</i>.....	61
A. Introduction to the translation and commentary	
B. Hebrew text	
C. Translation	
D. Verse-by-verse commentary	
Conclusion.....	119
Notes.....	123
Bibliography.....	127

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Introduction

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

During the period in which I was deciding upon and refining my thesis topic, two very different classes affected my choices. Rabbi Bernard Mehlman, in his course "Certain Women in the Midrash," introduced lesser-known midrashim, including *Midrash Eshet Hayil*, to provide a richer perspective on biblical characters, particularly the women of the Exodus. The second course, "Art in Jewish Education," inspired my thesis choice in a more indirect way. Throughout the semester, Hagitte Gal-Ed guided us to choose themes that both intrigued and challenged us. I continue to find myself drawn to biblical narratives about women, still hoping to find something redemptive in stories that too often brim over with pain and danger, or with the subtle cruelty of invisibility and anonymity.

The classical midrash has, at times, helped me become reconciled to difficult biblical texts, literally offering names to the nameless and voices to the voiceless. Midrash can also provide another perspective to a one-sided story. At other times, though, midrash can be reductionist, by oversimplifying problematic or ambiguous characters and situations. Whether by fleshing out a story or completely reversing the biblical depiction of a particular figure, midrash can shape our perception of the biblical narrative. Fanciful tales that might seem to be simply "the whimsy of the rabbis" hint at broader themes in subtle and sometimes surprising ways.

Because midrash reflects such a diversity of viewpoints, it is possible to find the same character or set of characters described in radically different ways. I wanted to know which biblical women are depicted as strong characters in their own right, active shapers of their own destiny and that of the Jewish people. However, I did not want to do a "women in midrash" overview, because I prefer close analysis of a particular text to

broad surveys of the literature. At the same time, I did not want to be confined to midrash on a single biblical character. *Midrash Eshet Hayil* is an exegetical midrash based on the biblical acrostic *Eshet Hayil*, usually translated as "A Woman of Valor," which is found at the conclusion of the Book of Proverbs, chapter 31:10-31. In the midrash, each of the 22 verses of the biblical poem is associated with a different biblical woman. Thus, this midrash provides a framework in which a single midrash discusses a wide range of biblical women, offering a project of manageable scope that still yields opportunities for comparison among different midrashic traditions.

Midrash Eshet Hayil is all the more interesting because the biblical text on which it is based, *Eshet Hayil*, has been a lightning rod for discussion of the role of women in Jewish life. I am interested in a broader study of *Eshet Hayil*—beginning with the biblical passage and tracing how this text has been used and interpreted midrashically, liturgically, and politically in Jewish history and culture. While the focus of this thesis is midrash, I have also included significant biblical exegesis on Proverbs 31.

Chapter One deals with the biblical text of *Eshet Hayil*, Proverbs 31:10-31. It begins with my own translation of the biblical text, along with my comments on my translation choices. Formal elements of the passage, such as its structure and genre, further advance the author's intent. For example, I will argue that the poem is similar in style to a hymn in praise of a warrior for God, and that the militaristic images—subtle and overt—contribute to an overall image of a female character that is more aptly termed "heroine" than "housewife."

Chapter Two examines how Proverbs 31 has been utilized in rabbinic literature generally. Before turning to the midrashim that treat *Eshet Hayil* as a unit, we will

determine how the rabbis have applied verses from *Eshet Hayil* elsewhere in the midrash. This survey enables us to establish the extent to which the interpretations found in *Midrashei Eshet Hayil* are consistent with or depart from earlier uses of *Eshet Hayil*. In preparing this review, I looked up each citation, and then grouped them both thematically and chronologically to demonstrate any shifts in the rabbis' application of a particular verse or of *Eshet Hayil* in general.

Chapter Three introduces *Midrashei Eshet Hayil*. The edition of *Midrash Eshet Hayil* that I am focusing on, found in A.J. Wertheimer's *Batei Midrashot*,¹ is one of several midrashim that interpret Proverbs 31 as a list of notable biblical women. This chapter gives some background to these midrashim, placing our text, the Wertheimer version, in relation to the other *Midrashei Eshet Hayil*, and offering some comparisons among these versions.

Chapter Four, which is the heart of the thesis, contains a translation of *Midrash Eshet Hayil*, a commentary on each verse, and an overall analysis based on evidence drawn from the verse commentaries. The verse-by-verse commentary includes the Hebrew text, the translation, and parallels from other versions of *M. Eshet Hayil* and from the greater corpus of rabbinic literature, as well as my discussion on that verse. This is not intended as a critical edition, as one already exists. Yael Levine Katz completed a critical edition of *Midrashei Eshet Hayil* in 1992, using the Parma 3122 manuscript as her base text and noting variants from eleven other manuscripts in the critical apparatus.²

The Conclusion will comprise the major conclusions of my research and suggestions for further study, as well as my personal reflections on the process and the substance of the thesis.

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Chapter One

Proverbs 31:10-31 Biblical Text and Exegesis

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A. A Heroic Woman:
Proverbs 31:10-31

- לא. **אִשֶּׁת חַיִּל מִי יִמָּצָא וְרוּחַק מִפְּגִינִים מְכָרָה:**
- יא. **בֵּטַח בָּהּ לֵב בַּעֲלָהּ וְשָׁלָל לֹא יִחָסֵר:**
- יב. **גִּמְלָתָהּ טוֹב וְלֹא־דָע כֹּל יָמֵי חַיֶּיהָ:**
- יג. **דִּרְשָׁה צֶמֶר וּפְשָׁתִים וַתַּעַשׂ בְּחִפָּץ כַּפְּיָה:**
- יד. **הִיָּתָה כְּאִנִּיּוֹת סוֹחֵר מִמֶּרְחָק וַתָּבִיא לַחֲמָה:**
- טו. **וַתִּקֶּם | בָּעוֹד לִילָה וַתִּתֵּן טָרֶף לְבֵיתָהּ וְרוּחַ לְנַעֲרֹתֶיהָ:**
- טז. **זָמְמָה שָׂדֶה וַתִּקְחָהּ מִפָּרִי כַּפֶּיהָ נָטַע [נִטְעָה] כָּרִם:**
- יז. **חֲגָרָה בַּעֲזֵי מְתָנֶיהָ וַתֹּאמֶץ זְרוּעֹתֶיהָ:**
- יח. **טָעְמָה כִּי־טוֹב סִחָרָה לֹא־יִכָּבֵה בְּלִיל [בְּלִילָה] יָרָה:**
- יט. **יָדֶיהָ שָׁלְחָה בְּכִישׁוֹר וְכַפֶּיהָ תִּמְכּוּ פָלָךְ:**
- כ. **כִּפְּהָ פָרְשָׂה לְעֵנִי וַיָּדֶיהָ שָׁלְחָה לְאַבְיוֹן:**
- כא. **לֹא־תִירָא לְבֵיתָהּ מִשָּׁלַג כִּי כָל־בֵּיתָהּ לִבָּשׁ שָׁנִים:**
- כב. **מִרְבָּדִים עָשְׂתָה־לָּהּ שֵׁשׁ וְאַרְגָּמָן לְבוּשָׁה:**
- כג. **נוֹדַע בַּשָּׁעָרִים בַּעֲלָהּ בְּשִׁבְתָּהּ עִם־זִקְנֵי־אַרְץ:**
- כד. **סִדִּין עָשְׂתָה וַתִּמְכֹּר וַחֲגוּר נָתַנָּה לְפִנְעָנִי:**
- כה. **עוֹזֶז־הָדָר לְבוּשָׁה וַתִּשְׁחַק לְיוֹם אַחֲרוֹן:**
- כו. **פִּיהָ פִּתְחָה בְּחִכְמָה וַתּוֹרֶת־חֵסֶד עַל־לְשׁוֹנָה:**
- כז. **צוּפִיהָ הִילָכוֹת [הִלִּיכוֹת] בֵּיתָהּ וְלֶחֶם עֲצָלוֹת לֹא תֹאכַל:**
- כח. **קָמוּ בָנֶיהָ וַיֹּאשְׁרוּהָ בַּעֲלָהּ וַיַּהֲלֵלָהּ:**
- כט. **רַבּוֹת בָּנוֹת עָשׂוּ חַיִּל וְאֵת עֲלִית עַל־כַּלְנָהּ:**
- ל. **שָׁקַר חֲמוֹן וְהֶבֶל הִיפִּי אִשָּׁה יִרְאֵת־יְהוָה הִיא תִתְהַלָּל:**
- לא. **תִּגְוֶלָּהּ מִפָּרִי יָדֶיהָ וַיַּהֲלִלוּהָ בַּשָּׁעָרִים מַעֲשִׂיהָ:**

B. Translation of Proverbs 31:10-31

- 10 א A heroic woman—who can find one?
Her worth is far beyond rubies.
- 11 ב Her husband's heart trusts in her,
and he lacks no spoils.
- 12 ג She bestows good on him, not bad,
all the days of her life.
- 13 ד She seeks out wool and linen
And engages in the business of her hands.
- 14 ה She is like a merchant ship,
Bringing her bread from afar.
- 15 ו And she gets up while it is still night,
and gives food to her household,
a ration for her maids.
- 16 ז She considers a field and buys it,
from the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.
- 17 ח She girds her loins with strength
and braces her arms.
- 18 ט She perceives that her business is good;
her lamp does not go out at night.
- 19 י She extends her hands on the staff,
and her palms support the spindle.
- 20 כ Her palm spreads open to the poor,
and her hands extend to the needy.
- 21 ל She does not fear for her household because of snow,
for her whole household is doubly clothed.
- 22 מ She makes covers for herself,
her clothing is fine linen and purple.
- 23 נ Her husband is known at the gates,
as he sits with the elders of the land.
- 24 ס She makes and sells linen garments,
and delivers belts to the trader.
- 25 ע She is clothed in strength and dignity,
She laughs to the final day,
- 26 פ She opens her mouth in wisdom,
and the *torah* of lovingkindness is on her tongue.
- 27 צ She keeps watch over the goings-on of her household,
and does not eat the bread of idleness.
- 28 ק Her children rise and declare her happy,
her husband, and praises her:
- 29 ר "Many young women have done heroically,

But you—you have triumphed over them all.”

- 30 **W** Grace is a lie, and beauty ephemeral,
a woman who fears God—it is she who is praiseworthy.
- 31 **n** Celebrate her for the fruit of her hands,
and her works will praise her in the gates.

C. Notes on Translation

Verse 10: A Heroic Woman... The traditional rendering "woman of valor" is unnecessarily unwieldy. The use of the Hebrew noun combination form (*smichut*) where an adjective would be used in English is well attested throughout the Tanakh. For example, *anshei hayil*, "capable men," (Gen. 47:6 and Ex. 18:25); *eshet yafet-toar*, "a beautiful woman," (Dt. 21:11), or, in the context of Proverbs itself, *eshet ksilut*, "foolish woman," (Prov. 9:13) and *eshet hen*, "a graceful woman" (Prov. 11:16). The New Jewish Publication Society translation renders this phrase "a capable wife."

Verse 11: he lacks no spoils. Most English translations shy away from the literal sense of this term in favor of euphemisms such as "good thing" (NJPS) or "material gain." In the dozens of times this noun appears in the Jewish Bible, it refers only to spoils or booty gained in war.³ The verbal form in Ruth has a more general sense of "material gain."

R.N. Whybray, who translates it as "gain," notes the literal meaning and adds, "Thomas rejected this interpretation and suggested the meaning 'wool,' and Driver 'progeny,' both citing supposed Arabic cognates; these suggestions, however, are speculative and unnecessary."⁴ I propose that the militaristic lexicon of the poem is not accidental, and thus retain the more literal translation.

Verse 13: Engages in the business of her hands. More common renderings are "sets her hand to them with a will" (NJPS), "works with willing hands" (NRSV), "worketh willingly with her hands" (King James). These translations read *be-hefetz* as an adverb (e.g., "willingly"); however, the phrase is more logical when reading the term as a noun, as in Brown-Driver-Briggs: "in the business of her hands."⁵

Verse 15: ...and gives food to her household... Although the usual meaning of *teref* is "prey," the sense of "food" for humans is well attested in other late works, such as Malachi 3:10, Psalm 111:5, and Job 24:5.⁶ Its use in Psalm 111 is perhaps most interesting, because Psalms 111 and 112 have many semantic and stylistic similarities to our passage, as will be discussed on page 11. **...and a portion to her maids.** This third line does not fit the rhythm of the poem, the rest of which is arranged in couplets. Roland Murphy remarks, "The extra line in this verse is suspicious, especially in view of [Proverbs] 27:27." His comparison is apt: "*And enough goats' milk for your bread, and the bread of your house, and for the livelihood of your maids.*"⁷ At first glance the term *hok*, "portion," appears to mean "instruction" or "task" for the servants; however, the secondary meaning of "prescribed portion" is the preferred choice of most popular and scholarly translations (NRSV "portion," NJPS "daily fare," see also BDB p. 349), particularly in light of the verse that Murphy highlights. Certain midrashim, as we will see in Chapter Four, deliberately choose the reading "instruction" instead.

Verse 17: She girds her loins with strength, and braces her arms. In general I prefer using the English vernacular, but in this case only the old-fashioned phrase "gird one's loins" connotes the intended sense of "to prepare oneself for a test of one's readiness, strength, or endurance" (Webster). In the Tanakh, the loins are generally described as the seat of strength; characters human and metaphorical gird their loins in preparation for action, and battle in particular. The apparently redundant translation of "girds her loins *with strength*" is necessary, because the term *hoger motnayim* is frequently found without the added emphasis *b'oz*, "with strength." It is not insignificant that this is the *only* case in the Jewish Bible in which the term "loins" is used with reference to a woman. As I

will argue later in this chapter, the use of militaristic and stereotypically masculine descriptions is an essential element of the poem's intent.

Verse 18: She senses... Lit. "tastes."

Verse 19: staff...spindle... both these terms (*kishor* and *pelekh*) are *hapax legomena* in the Tanakh. Their precise meaning is uncertain, but both appear to be objects used in spinning wool. The terms "distaff" and "spindle," respectively, are generally applied to these terms, although Al Wolters demonstrates at length that the word usually translated as "distaff" is probably best translated as "doubling spindle."⁸

Verse 21: ...for her whole household is doubly clothed. The Masoretic text reads *shanim*, scarlet: thus, "*for her whole household is clothed in scarlet.*" The verse presents a logical difficulty: how does having the whole household dressed in scarlet relate to not fearing snow? There are three possible resolutions: a) "scarlet" indicates a high-quality garment: "It is the quality of the clothes they wear which keeps them warm" (McKane); b) this phrase and the next (*she makes covers for herself*) should be reversed, yielding one couplet about warmth against the snow and a couplet about colored garments (Crawford Toy); c) this word should be re-vocalized as *shnayim*, "two," or "double," that is, her household is clothed in garments of double thickness. Both the Septuagint and the Vulgate read the text this way, and I think it is the most logical choice. Rabbinic literature is divided on the reading of this verse, as will be demonstrated in Chapter Three and in the verse commentary in Chapter Four.

Verse 24: ...delivers belts to the trader. Literally, "Canaanite." Traditional and modern biblical commentators agree that this term refers, by extension, to an occupation

rather than a national or ethnic identity. Similarly, note the use of *kasdim*, “Chaldeans” as “magician” or “diviner” throughout Daniel; for example, in 2:2, 2:5, 2:10, 4:4, and 5:7.

Verse 25: ...she laughs to the final day. There are great disparities on how this verse is rendered: “She looks to the future cheerfully” (NJPS), “she shall rejoice” (King James), “she greets the future with a smile” (Clifford), “She laughs at the time to come” (Toy). The midrash, as will be seen in Chapter Three, speculates on whether “*the final day*” refers to the end of life or the World to Come. The two other uses of the phrase in the Tanakh are in Nehemiah and in Isaiah, where they have dramatically different meanings: In Nehemiah 8:18, the phrase “from the first day until the last day” simply indicates a measure of several actual days, whereas in Isaiah 30:8 it has an eschatological sense.

Verse 27: She keeps watch... Hebrew *tzofiya*. Al Wolters sees a play on *sofia*, the Greek personification of wisdom. Whybray notes that this would necessitate a very late date for this poem.⁹

Verse 30: A woman who fears God... The Septuagint reads *nebona*, understanding. As in Proverbs 8:13, many scholars suggest that this is a later pious emendation. Others warn against casual substitutions based on the Septuagint text and argue that the theological tone is an integral element of the poem’s message; Wolters, for example, suggests that the explicit description of the Heroic Woman as fearing God is a two-fold polemic: first, against the erotic depiction of women in Ancient Near Eastern literature, and second, against the Hellenistic intellectual ideal of “abstract theoretical wisdom rooted in impartial rationality.”¹⁰

Verse 31: Celebrate her... Scholarly consensus appears to be to read it as *tannu*, derived from *tana*, "recount," "extol," and the like (cf. Jg. 5:11, 11:40), rather than from *natan*, "give."

D. Exegesis

Proverbs is one of a group of books called Wisdom literature, which also includes Ecclesiastes and Job, and, for those who view the category more broadly, Esther, Daniel, and parts of the Book of Psalms. The Book of Proverbs contains several literary genres, including instructions, sayings, poems, and riddles, the most common of which are instructions and sayings. Roughly one-third of Proverbs comprises longer poems, including those in chapters 1-9. Although the passage about the Heroic Woman is found in the Book of Proverbs, it is not, in terms of genre, itself a proverb—a term that properly refers to didactic epigrams that are self-contained and generally shorter than our passage.

While it is clearly a poem, opinion differs as to whether it fits within any defined paradigm of biblical poetry. The sub-genre with which it is most consistent is that of a hymn, a song of praise to a deity or hero: "Its structure is similar to a hymn: an announcement of praise and the naming of the subject, the body, or central praise, and the concluding exhortation to the audience to join in the praise. Like hymns to Yahweh the Warrior [sic] such as Ex. 15 and Judges 5, it extols the subjects' strength, wisdom, and success or 'victory.'"¹¹ Al Wolters, in arguing that *Eshet Hayil* belongs in this category, notes that people casually refer to the unit as "the hymn of the capable woman," a term that applies not only informally but in "the technically precise sense...the Song of the Valiant Woman in fact displays most of the formal characteristics of the hymnic *genre*."¹² In addition to the structure, which will be outlined below, Wolters indicates also other details of style and language that support this view, including the use of militaristic images and vocabulary. A comparison among this poem and two others, one

acknowledged as a hymn and another sometimes described as a "wisdom psalm,"

demonstrates Wolter's argument:¹³

	Psalm 111 Hymn to God	Psalm 112 The Righteous Man	Proverbs 31:10-31 Hymn to Heroic Woman
Fear of God	"The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom" (111:10)	"Happy is the man who fears God" (112:1)	"A God-fearing woman—it is she who is to be praised" (31:30)
Trusting Heart		"His heart is firm, trusting in God" (7)	"Her husband's heart trusts in her" (11)
emphasis on deeds/actions/works (ma'aseh)	"The works of God are great" (2); "his powerful works," (4); "his handiwork is truth and justice" (7).		"Celebrate her for the fruits of her hands, and her works will praise her in the gates" (31).
wealth		"Wealth and riches are in his house" (3)	"He lacks no spoils" (11)
generosity to poor		"He gives freely to the poor" (9)	"Her palm spreads open to the poor, her hands extend to the needy" (20)
attitude toward future		"He is not afraid of evil tidings" (7); "His heart is resolute, he is unafraid" (8)	"She does not fear for her household because of snow" (21); "she laughs to the final day" (25)
Concluding antithesis to the character		"The wicked man shall see it and be vexed; he shall gnash his teeth; his courage shall not fail. The desire of the wicked shall come to nothing." (10)	"Grace is a lie, and beauty ephemeral; A God-fearing woman—it is she who is to be praised (30)
Other vocabulary	<i>teref natan</i> , gives food (5); "splendor and dignity" (3)		<i>va-titen teref</i> , gives food; "strength and dignity" (25)

In terms of structure, the most prominent feature of Proverbs 31:10-31 is the simple alphabetic acrostic. The Heroic Woman is the only acrostic in the Book of Proverbs, although this form also is found in the first four chapters of Lamentations and several times in the Psalms, including Psalms 111 and 112; and, perhaps best-known, Psalm 145 (*Ashrei*). Psalms 111 and 112 are particularly noteworthy because of the parallels in language and imagery discussed above.

Early biblical scholars on Proverbs 31 held that the content had been subordinated to the rigidity of the acrostic form. For example, C.H. Toy wrote in 1899, "This arrangement... mnemonically useful, is often rhetorically bad, including an unnatural diction and order of couplets."¹⁴ More recently, R.H. Whybray comments,

As with other examples of the [acrostic] form, the necessity of observing this *formal* sequence has resulted in a lack of *thematic* sequence. Within the constraints of the general theme, the topics dealt with, although they all contribute to the picture, are arranged in no thematic order, and there are repetitions. Only the first and concluding verses give the poem a basic structure.¹⁵

However, other scholars have argued convincingly that the poem is more than a loose collation of epigrams, as Benjamin Segal writes, "The writing reflects the skilled hand of an author who is master, not prisoner, of forms. Our working assumption must be that this author leads us to a clear message. Indeed, the use of terminology and form accomplishes precisely that."¹⁶

The three most prominent structural elements found in the passage are the chiasm based on the words "hand" and "palm" in verses 19-20; the inclusio, in which the words "heroic" and "husband" at the beginning (vv. 10-11) and near the end (vv. 28-29) form a "frame" to the poem; and, most importantly, the extent to which the author utilizes verbal repetition. While different authors vary in their tallies, I have found that in the 22-line,

150-word poem, there are no fewer than 22 words or roots that are repeated at least once, even excluding repetition of such words as “all,” “not,” pronouns, and the like (see the list below). Some words are particularly noteworthy because of the sheer number of times they are found (*ba'it*, house, four times); others are significant because of their prominent placement in the middle (*shlach*, extend; *yad*, hand) or the end (*hallel*, praise). Other words appear only once, but form a group or category of words: body language: *heart, palms (repeated), hands (repeated), loins, arms, tastes, mouth, tongue*; food: *bread, food, ration, fruit, taste, eat, bread*; and textiles: *wool and linen; staff and spindle; clothed (repeated); covers; clothing; fine linen; linen garments; belts*.

Repeated words in Proverbs 31:1-31:

רִיחִיק-- <i>far</i> (10, 14)	בַּעֲלָה-- <i>her husband</i> (12, 23, 31)
עֲשֵׂה-- <i>do, make</i> (13, 22, 24, 29, 31)	כַּף-- <i>palm, hand</i> (13, 16, 19, 20)
לֶחֶם-- <i>bread</i> (14, 27)	לַיְלָה-- <i>night</i> (15, 18)
בֵּית-- <i>house</i> (15, 21, 21, 27)	פֶּרִי-- <i>fruit</i> (17, 31)
חִגִּיר-- <i>gird, belt</i> (17, 24)	עֹז-- <i>strength</i> (17, 25)
טוֹב-- <i>good</i> (13, 18)	סִיחִי-- <i>business, merchandise</i> (14, 18)
יָד-- <i>hand</i> (19, 20, 31)	שִׁלַּח-- <i>extend, send</i> (19, 20)
לִבְיָשׁ-- <i>clothed</i> (21, 22)	יִירָא-- <i>fear</i> (21, 30)
שַׁעֲרִים-- <i>gates</i> (23, 31)	הִלֵּל-- <i>praise</i> (28, 30, 31)
נָתַן-- <i>give</i> (15, 24)	קִיּוּם-- <i>rise</i> (15, 28)
מִכֹּר-- <i>buy/sell</i> (16, 24)	יּוֹם-- <i>day</i> (12, 25)

Murray Lichtenstein, in his 1982 article “Chiasm and Symmetry in Proverbs 31,”¹⁷ points out that these elements of chiasm, inclusion, and repetition, which many previous scholars had noted more or less in isolation, come together to form a coherent structure. He divides the poem into a main body of 20 verses, followed by a 2-verse coda. The main unit is in turn comprised of two nine-verse units (verses 10-18 and 21-29), separated by the two-verse chiasm on the words “hands” and “palms” in verses 19-

20. The two nine-verse units are unified by two factors: the inclusio at the beginning and end ("heroic" and "husband"), and the fact that the two units have 14 words in common, the most important of which are noted in the illustration:

I. Main unit: 31:10-29 (letters *alef* through *resh*)

A. Nine-verse unit (vv. 10-18, letters *alef-tet*):

- Opening of inclusio:

A **heroic woman**—who can find one?

Her worth is far beyond rubies. (v. 10)

Her **husband's** heart trusts in her,

and he lacks no spoils. (v. 11)

- other words found in both units:

ba'it (house), *hgr* (gird), *yom* (day), *lechem* (bread), *mkr* (buy/sell),

aseh (do, make), *natan* (give), *oz* (strength), *kum* (rise)

B. Two-verse chiasm (vv. 19-20, letters *yud-kaf*)

She extends her **hands** (*yadeiha*) on the staff,

and her **palms** (*v'khapeiha*) support the spindle.

Her **palm** (*kapah*) spreads open to the poor,

and her **hands** (*v'yadeiha*) extend to the needy.

C. Nine-verse unit (vv. 21-29, letters *lamed-resh*):

- Closing of inclusio:

her **husband**, and praises her: (v. 28)

"Many young women have done **heroically**,

But you—you have triumphed over them all." (v. 29)

- other words found in both units:

ba'it (house), *hgr* (gird), *yom* (day), *lechem* (bread), *mkr* (buy/sell),

aseh (do, make), *natan* (give), *oz* (strength), *kum* (rise)

II. Two-verse postscript: 30-31 (*shin-taf*)

Grace is a lie, and beauty ephemeral,

a woman who fears God—it is she who is **praiseworthy**. (v. 30)

Celebrate her for the fruit of her **hands**,

and her works will **praise her** in the gates. (v. 31)

Roland Murphy, in his discussion of the repetition, the chiasm, and the coda, writes:

Coincidence cannot explain such minute symmetry in these various levels: verbal, structural, and thematic. One is confronted by a highly articulated poetic work. It is often said that an acrostic pattern infringes on poetic expression. Obviously it is not true in this case.¹⁸

Al Wolters, in his description of this unit as a heroic hymn, characterizes the structure slightly differently. He describes the poem as being divided into three units:

- I. Introduction (vv. 10-12):** Announces the subject of praise, the *Eshet Hayil*
- II. Body (vv. 13-27):** Recounts the deeds and attributes of the woman
- III. Exhortation (vv. 28-31):** Conclusion in which woman is praised, and then others are exhorted to join in praise as well.¹⁹

In addition to examining the structure of the poem itself, a brief look at its place within the larger structure of the Book of Proverbs may be instructive. The passage on the Heroic Woman is the conclusion of the 31-chapter book. Though details vary, most modern scholars of the Book of Proverbs outline the book in much the same way:

- Chapters 1-9 are longer, introductory poems on the themes of wisdom and foolishness;
- Chapters 10-30 (or, perhaps, 31a) are collections of sayings, which are then further subdivided in various ways;
- Chapter 31, or 31b, our focus, is a “bookend” which is structurally distinct from the rest of the book, but is closely linked to the early chapters, 1-9, in theme and lexicon.²⁰

The context and literary setting of the poem vis-à-vis the early chapters of Proverbs heavily influences how it is understood throughout Jewish history. Its placement at the end of the Book of Proverbs, coupled with the repetition of feminine imagery and language found in Proverbs 1-9, lend weight to the most popular view of this text among modern scholars: that *Eshet Hayil* is an allegory for the feminine personification of wisdom (in some ways equivalent to the Greek Woman Wisdom, Sophia), and finding

her is the happy consequence of leading the moral and balanced life described in the Proverbs. Claudia Van Camp, in *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs*, explains how *Eshet Hayil* functions in this context, and suggests that, to a certain extent, Proverbs 1-9 and 31 are a "literary solution" to a "literary problem:" the lack of coherence of form and content in a collection of proverbs.

The use of the poems in Proverbs 1-9 and 31 helps to remedy this situation in two ways. Stylistically the repetition of female imagery in poetic form at the beginning and end of the collection creates a literary framework that sets the boundaries of the book, making it, in Ricoeur's terms, 'a finite and closed whole.' Thematically, there is also an interweaving of the beginning, middle, and end of the book by virtue of a web of subsidiary images connected both with female imagery and with wisdom...²¹

While the parallels between Proverbs 1-9 and *Eshet Hayil* are unmistakable, interpreting this poem *only* as Wisdom personified is premature. The character described in Proverbs 31 equally represents the *human* ideal described throughout the book. Andre Caquot, in "Israelite Perceptions of Wisdom and Strength in Light of the Ras Shamra Texts," writes:

The union of wisdom and strength in one person seems to represent for the Israelite the equivalent of what is for the Greek, the very image of a human ideal. Biblical portrayals of the accomplished man are not numerous, but they are explicit and consistent...The perfect woman, described in Proverbs 31, and who is rather virile, unites *hokma* (vs. 26) and strength (*oz*, vs. 17)²²

Both Caquot and Wolters mention the dimension of physical strength or "virility" in the depiction of *Eshet Hayil*. While there is a rather pointed de-emphasis on physical *appearance*, the text does stress the *physicality* of the protagonist: she has hands, arms, loins, a mouth, and a tongue. Her whole body is involved in her activity, whether it is her hands reaching out to the needy or her mouth opening to speak words of wisdom. Her

twice-mentioned strength is directed toward only those things that Proverbs has declared good and important.

The unit that immediately precedes *Eshet Hayil* provides another indication that *Eshet Hayil* represents Proverbs' embodiment of the human ideal. The first part of Chapter 31, immediately preceding the Heroic Woman, is a pericope that begins, "The words of Lemuel, King of Massa, with which his mother admonished him:" and continues with her instructions to him:

2. No, my son!
No, O son of my womb!
No, O son of my vows!
3. Do not give your strength to women,
your vigor, to those who destroy kings.
4. Wine is not for kings, O Lemuel,
Not for kings to drink,
Nor any strong drink for princes,
5. Lest they drink and forget what has been ordained,
And infringe on the rights of the poor.
6. Give strong drink to the hapless,
And wine to the embittered.
7. Let them drink and forget their poverty,
And put their troubles out of mind.
8. Speak up for the dumb,
For the rights of the unfortunate,
9. Speak up, judge righteously,
Champion the poor and the needy.²³

Lichtenstein notes structural parallels between the structure of this unit and the Heroic Woman unit that follows, in which "symmetry is achieved through verbal and stylistic repetition."²⁴ The two units also share some vocabulary, including the keyword *hayil*; the mention of "the poor and the needy;" and the parallel phrases "Open your mouth [speak up], judge righteously" (31:9) and "she opens her mouth in wisdom" (31:26). In fact, in

many ways the Heroic Woman seems to embody the behaviors of strength and righteous leadership that the mother of Lemuel is advocating for her son.

By rushing to allegorize the *Eshet Hayil* as Woman Wisdom, it is easy to lose sight of the radical nature of this poem: *Eshet Hayil* is not only the woman we want to marry; she is the better man we are supposed to become.

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

Chapter Two

The Uses of Proverbs 31:10-31 in Rabbinic Literature

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

Prior to the composition of midrashim about *Eshet Hayil* itself, the rabbis of the classical midrashim employed verses from *Eshet Hayil* to further their arguments on numerous topics and characters. In this chapter, we will examine how verses from this biblical passage have been applied, confining this study to midrashim that precede *Midrash Eshet Hayil*. Most of the texts described here were identified by looking up the citations listed in *Torah Ketuvah U'mesorah* for every verse of Proverbs 31:10-31;²⁵ others were gleaned from Yael Levine Katz's doctoral dissertation on *Midrashei Eshet Hayil*.²⁶ Citations from midrashim on *Eshet Hayil* will be discussed in the next chapter.

I will first discuss midrashic uses of *Eshet Hayil* according to theme, followed by a chronology of the uses of *Eshet Hayil* in the classical midrashim.

A. Thematic Summary

1. *Eshet Hayil* is Torah and Her Students.

The rabbis frequently use a verse from Proverbs 31 to describe Torah and her students. The opening verse, *A heroic woman—who can find one? Her worth is far beyond rubies*, is often used in this metaphorical sense, as in this midrash on the Song of Songs:

A heroic woman—who can find one? Her worth is far beyond rubies:
The Torah is compared to a woman...to teach that, even beyond what the *Eshet Hayil* does for her husband, so the Torah will do for her 'husband.'
(*Midrash Shir Ha-Shirim* 3:11)

Verse 14, *She is like a merchant ship, bringing her bread from afar*, may also refer to Torah study, as in *Numbers Rabbah* 13:4, where it is used to teach that one may have to

travel far to study Torah at the feet of great scholars. Proverbs 31:15, *She rises while it is still night, and gives food to her household, a ration for her maids*, is used as a metaphor for Torah study in a well attested dispute between two famous third-century Palestinian Amoraim, R. Yohanan and Resh Lakish. R. Yohanan says that night is optimal for Torah study; Resh Lakish holds that day and night are equally suitable. When Resh Lakish reaches our verse, *she rises while it is still night*, he acknowledges R. Yohanan's position, saying, "Yohanan has taught me well." This midrash is found in Exodus Rabbah 47:5, Leviticus Rabbah 17:1, and in numerous other sources.

2. Eshet Hayil is Righteous Israel.

The female character represents the Jewish people and her husband symbolizes God, not unlike the midrashim on the Song of Songs. A midrash based on verse 21, *She does not fear for her household because of snow, for her whole household is doubly clothed [or: clothed in crimson]*, appears in more than 10 sources,²⁷ including in *Pesikta d'Rav Kahana*:

She does not fear for her household because of snow, for her whole household is doubly clothed: This is Israel. Israel is not afraid of the snow of Gehinnom, because they carry out the commandments repeatedly.
(10:4)

In this midrash, the "snow" refers to the snow of Gehinnom, which according to tradition alternates between six months of fiery heat and six months of freezing cold. The house of Israel need not fear, however, because they are "clothed" in *mitzvot*. Some versions of this midrash, such as that in Midrash Tanhuma Buber, *Lech Lecha* 41b, read according to the Masoretic text *shanim*, crimson, and interpret it as the blood of commandment of circumcision, the observance of which protects the Jewish people from Gehinnom. Other parallels read *shnayim*, two, in which "two" refers to two particular

commandments, usually circumcision and Shabbat, as in Tanhuma Buber *Bereshit* 12a. Still others, like the midrash quoted above, understand *shnayim*, "two," to mean "repeatedly," while many parallels suggest that *shnayim* refers to the "double language" in which many commandments are given: *natan titen*, "you shall surely give," *patuach tiftach*, "you shall surely give." According to yet another version found in Tanhuma Buber, this "double language" was a warning from Moses to the people of the "double" punishment of fire and snow in Gehinnom (*Re'eh* 12a).

Not only does the House of Israel not fear eternal punishment, it will be rewarded, according to a midrashic interpretation of 31:25: *She is clothed in strength and dignity, she laughs to the final day*. The phrase *l'yom acharon* is difficult: does it mean "the future," "the end of life," or "the Hereafter?" This ambiguity is, as we might expect, addressed in the midrash: According to Midrash Tanhuma, "the final day" is the Hereafter, and this verse demonstrates that one receives the reward for studying Torah in the World to Come, and not necessarily in This World (Tan. *Bereshit*, top). Other parallels to this midrash include Genesis Rabbah 62:1, Exodus Rabbah 52:3, and Tanhuma Buber *Pekudei* 11:7.

3. Eshet Hayil is Moses.

While several verses of Proverbs 31 are applied to male biblical characters, Moses is by far the most frequently mentioned. This phenomenon is most apparent in the early and middle period midrashim, and generally occurs in connection with the last few verses of the poem. *Many young women have done heroically, but you—you have triumphed over them all* (v.29), is understood as Moses in comparison to the generations of the patriarchs. In Midrash Tanhuma Buber (*Z'ot Ha-Bracha* 26b), Moses was superior to his

predecessors with respect to the blessings he gave. In each previous generation, the blessing of the dying leader was followed by diminishment or strife (between Noah and his sons; between Jacob and Esau; between Joseph and his brothers), whereas the blessing bestowed by Moses was not followed by such tension. The midrash adds a lovely grace note: "Whence did they learn to bless at all? From none other than the Holy One who is Blessed, as it says, *And God blessed them, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply'* (Gen. 1:22)." Other versions of this midrash include Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:3 and Midrash Tanhuma Z'ot Ha-Bracha 1.

In connection with the next verse, which concludes: *A God-fearing woman—it is she who is praiseworthy*, R. Yosi b. Jeremiah asks the question that's been on our mind: Why does the text refer to the prophets (here, Moses) in feminine language? The answer: "Just as a woman fearlessly demands from her husband the needs of her household, so the prophets are not ashamed to demand the needs of Israel from the Holy One, Blessed be He." (PdRK 12:1) Occasionally Proverbs 31 will be cited in connection with another man or men, but not with the same frequency as for Moses.

4. *Eshet Hayil* is a Biblical Woman

In the earlier midrashim, this category is not as common as one might expect. I assumed that in the older exegetical midrashim, a verse or verses from *Eshet Hayil* would be applied to many female characters under discussion, and that the applications in *Midrash Eshet Hayil* were a synthesis of those older citations. However, I have not found widespread early- to middle-period application of verses from *Eshet Hayil* to a broad range of biblical women. There are some cases in which Proverbs 31 verses are associated with biblical women in the classical midrash, but unlike the allegories to Torah

or righteous Israel, in which several verses might be applied to the same theme, most biblical characters are connected only to a specific verse. The exception to this general trend is the midrash on Sarah; in Midrash Tanhuma *Chaye Sarah* 4 and Midrash Tanhuma Buber *Chaye Sarah* 5, the entire poem is interpreted as Abraham's eulogy for Sarah, as will be mentioned in the next chapter.

My favorite use of this poem as a proof-text for a biblical woman is in the very elegant application of *She senses that her reward is good/ Her lamp does not go out at night* (v. 18) to Bityah, daughter of Pharaoh:

R. Abun said in the name of R. Judah b. Pazzi, How did Bityah escape [the plague of the first-born]? Because of Moses' prayer for her, as it says, *Her lamp does not go out at night*. (PdRK 7:6)

This midrash incorporates a double wordplay. First, the *ki-tov* (good) of the verse refers to Moses, who is described as *ki-tov* in Ex. 2:2. Therefore, *ki-tov* was her protection, and as a result, *her lamp does not go out at night* [*leil* is written in the biblical text], the night in question being the *leil shmurim* (Ex. 12:42), when the first-born of the Egyptians were slain just prior to the Exodus.

In addition to the version from Pesikta d'Rav Kahana cited here, parallels to this passage are also found in Pesikta Rabbati and *Midrash Tehilim*; however, in *Midrashei Eshet Hayil*, the alphabetic midrashim that apply each verse to another biblical character in turn, this verse is not correlated with Bityah! Rather, a less elegant but nonetheless adequate connection is made to the Proverbs verse, *She rises while it is still night...*(14). Other biblical women who are cited include Hagar for 31:27, *She watches the goings-on of [angels in] her household...*, in Genesis Rabbah 45:7, and the midwives for *A God-*

fearing woman—it is she who is to be praised (31:30) in Exodus Rabbah 1:22; however, these women do not appear in *Midrash Eshet Hayil*.

5. *Eshet Hayil* is the Ideal Jewish Woman, Real or Imagined:

This type of reference is not common in the classical midrash; however, there a few examples do appear in varied rabbinic sources. BT *Pesachim* 60b details whether a man may subsist on his wife's income, and, if so, from what types of industry:

One who relies on his wife or a mill [for income] will never see a sign of blessing. But this only means if she sells wool by weight [i.e., trade]. If she makes and sells [her own products], Scripture praises her, as it is said, *She makes and sells linen garments, and delivers belts to the trader* (Prov. 31:24).

One particular post-biblical woman is described as an *Eshet Hayil* in the classical midrash: *Mishrash Mishle*, on the opening verse of the poem, tells the poignant story of R. Meir's wife concealing the news of the death of their sons until the Sabbath has departed, and helping him become reconciled to their loss.

B. Chronological Summary

1. Early Period.

Verses from Proverbs 31:10ff are cited in Genesis Rabbah, Leviticus Rabbah, Lamentations Rabbah, *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana*, and in Songs Rabbah.²⁸ In Genesis Rabbah, verses from *Eshet Hayil* are generally used as a proof-text for midrashim about individual characters. For example, verse 31:25, *She is clothed in strength and dignity; and she laughs to the final day* is applied to Abraham's old age: he is clothed in the strength and dignity of Torah, and rejoices because he has been shown the reward of the

World to Come (Gen. R. 59:2). Some of the ideas and images that are applied here to individual characters will be applied in later midrashim to other characters, or to the character of righteous Israel as a whole: this verse applied to Abraham is later expanded to refer to all students of Torah.

Hagar, according to Genesis Rabbah 45:7, is the subject of verse 27, *She keeps watch over the goings-on of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness*, meaning that "seeing" (prophetic seeing) was the custom of Abraham's household, and that she was thus more accustomed to seeing angels than someone in Lot's household.

The two references to *Eshet Hayil* in *Leviticus Rabbah* are to students of Torah: one is the discussion mentioned in the thematic summary between R. Yohanan and Resh Lakish about the time for study (Lev. R. 17:1), and the other is about God sitting among the Sanhedrin as they judged (Lev. R. 11:8). In *Pesikta d'Rav Kahana*, several uses of Proverbs 31 appear. These references are among the most widely attested in later rabbinic literature, including the previously-mentioned examples of Bityah, daughter of Pharaoh (7:6); Israel protected from the snow of Gehinnom (10:4); and Moses demanded the needs of Israel (12:1). The most prominent use—both in number and in laudatory tone—is with reference to Moses. One of these examples explains that Moses knew that he would not enter the Promised Land:

She sees the ways of her household (31:27): Moses "[fore]saw," because *seeing is the way of his household*, that he would not enter the land. Thus he said [at the Song of the Sea], *You will bring them and plant them in Your own mountain* (Ex. 15:17): "them" and not "us." (5:4)

Proverbs 31 appears approximately seven times as a prooftext in the Babylonian Talmud, representing six tractates.²⁹ None of the references are among those that appear frequently in the midrash. Instead, three are applied to the contemporary life of the

rabbis: for example, one verse is used in a story about R. Eleazar's separation from his wife:

R. Eleazar was separated from his wife. He applied to himself this verse: *She is like a merchant ship, bringing her bread from afar* (31:14). He said to his daughter, tell your mother that our wealth is greater than theirs. (BT *Baba Metzia* 84b)

2. Middle Period

While most of the references to *Eshet Hayil* are similar in content and form to those in the earlier midrashim, we begin to find greater use of the passage as a unit. For example, in both Tanhuma ha-Nidpas and Tanhuma Buber we find a systematic application of the entire work to a single topic: the midrash, in *Chaye Sarah* (4 and 5, respectively), presents *Eshet Hayil* as Abraham's eulogy for Sarah, applying each verse in turn to a facet of her character or to an incident in her/their life. The piece is rather moving, in somewhat the same way as *Petirat Moshe* or *Petirat Aharon*, in that it depicts Abraham, whose emotions are largely hidden in the biblical narrative, as mourning a life lived in partnership.

During this period, *Midrash Mishle* was written, which includes a comment on Proverbs 31. Its general theme is the merit and reward of *Talmud Torah*, but also includes material such as the tale of R. Meir's wife. The second unit about *Eshet Hayil* in *Midrash Mishle* is a version of *Midrash Eshet Hayil* appended later.

Apart from the material that treats Proverbs 31 as a unit, I traced 22 other references, most of which are similar to, or expansions of, those that had appeared in the earlier midrashim. For example, 31:25, *She is clothed in strength and dignity, and laughs to the final day*, which in an earlier midrash (Gen. R. 59:2) had been used to describe

Abraham's joy at being given a glimpse of the World to Come, is broadened in Midrash Tanhuma Buber (*Pekudei* 11:7) to apply to the reward of all of the righteous of Israel.

Moses is the predominant biblical figure mentioned in the midrashim of this period. One powerful midrash, found in Deuteronomy Rabbah 2:28, characterized the end of *Eshet Hayil* as God's own words of praise for Moses:

Celebrate her for the fruits of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates (31:31): This is Moses, who said, *The Eternal alone is God, in heaven above and on earth below, there is none else* (Deut. 4:39). "There is none else"—this refers to the intervening space [between heaven and earth]. Because Moses made a greater declaration about God that all others had, God rewarded him with the words *Celebrate her for the fruits of her hands...*

3. Late Period

The material in the midrashic anthologies is markedly different from the earlier material. First, in *Yalkut Shimoni* and *Yalkut Makhiri*, there are fewer uses of *Eshet Hayil* used as prooftexts in remote contexts: instead, connections to *Eshet Hayil* are "gathered" in the commentary on Proverbs 31. In the midrash on Proverbs 31, the Yalkutim do preserve the connection between *Eshet Hayil* and Righteous Israel/ students of Torah, and likewise preserve the "Moses as *Eshet Hayil*" material, but depart from the earlier midrash in that they also incorporate midrashim that treat Proverbs 31 as a discrete unit.³⁰ In addition to the midrashim that interpret all of *Eshet Hayil* to Sarah, the late midrashic period is characterized by the proliferation of midrashim that describe *Eshet Hayil* in terms of a roster of different biblical women. These midrashim were circulated in a number of different forms, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

C. Overall Observations

Until the creation of midrashim that relate *Eshet Hayil* to the life of Sarah, and, later, to a sequence of biblical women, references to Proverbs 31 in rabbinic literature reflect no consideration of the biblical poem as a coherent whole. Instead, individual verses are applied as prooftexts for a number of characters and ideas, as described above. Some verses refer to specific characters, like Adam, Hagar, or Pharaoh's daughter,³¹ while others are employed to explain concepts like Gehinnom or the Sanhedrin.³² While the range of topics is broad, the application of any given verse is not very fluid from midrash to midrash, or even from the earlier to the middle periods. Many verses have one "standard" application: *all* of the early uses of 31:18, *She senses that her reward is good; her lamp does not go out at night* refer to Bityah, daughter of Pharaoh.³³ Others, such as *She sees the goings-on of her household* (31:27) have just two or three topics to which they are applied. The anthologies, particularly the Yalkutim, collect both these earlier, fixed uses of these verses as well as incorporating the alphabetical model.

Some of the references to biblical women in the early rabbinic literature will become the source material for *Midrash Eshet Hayil*. Other citations will be reshaped, as in the case of Bityah daughter of Pharaoh, and some, like Hagar and the midwives, will be left out altogether.

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

Chapter Three

Midrashei Eshet Hayil

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

There are several midrashim that treat Proverbs 31:10-31, the unit colloquially known as *Eshet Hayil*. These midrashim can be grouped in three general categories: 1) midrashim that read *Eshet Hayil* as a metaphor for Torah and her students, or more generally, the Jewish people; 2) midrashim that interpret *Eshet Hayil* as Abraham's eulogy for Sarah; and 3) midrashim that associate verses of *Eshet Hayil* with different biblical women. This category is sometimes referred to as *Midrashei Eshet Hayil*, and is the type on which I will focus. First, however, it is worthwhile to briefly discuss the other two types of midrashim on Proverbs 31—*Eshet Hayil* as metaphor for Torah and her students and *Eshet Hayil* in praise of Sarah. Then I will introduce *Midrash Eshet Hayil* in greater detail.

A. *Eshet Hayil*: A Metaphor for Torah and her Students

The first part of *Midrash Mishle* on Proverbs 31 is the best example of a midrash of the first type, allegorizing *Eshet Hayil* as Torah and her students.³⁴ The midrashim that read *Eshet Hayil* as a metaphor for Torah and her students tend to have a less rigid structure than those of the other two categories. Such a midrash might closely parse the first few verses, for example, then skip down to the middle of the biblical chapter for a single verse, then jump to the conclusion, as demonstrated by this outline of *Midrash Mishle* (printed edition). The Hebrew letters indicate which Proverbs verses are being explicated.

- I. נ. א *A heroic woman...Her husband's heart trusts in her...Torah*
- II. נ. א *A heroic woman...another interpretation: Tale of R. Meir's wife (long)*
- III. ה. א *She is like a merchant ship...Disciples of Torah*
- IV. ו. א *She rises while it is still night...Disciples of Torah*
- V. ז. א *She does not fear for her household because of snow, for her whole household is doubly clothed. The Jewish people will not face the snow of Gehinnom, because of their observance of the commandments.*
- VI. ו. א *Many women have done heroically, but you have triumphed over all of them. The Jewish people were given all of the commandments.*
- VII. ש. א *Grace is a lie, and beauty ephemeral...Noah and Adam*
- VIII. ש. א. ה *A God-fearing woman—it is she who is praiseworthy. Celebrate her for the fruit of her hand, and let her works praise her in the gates. Moses*

Other versions of this style are included in the later anthologies, including *Yalkut Shimoni* and *Yalkut Makhiri* on Proverbs 31. In general, the midrashim that allegorize *Eshet Hayil* in this way utilize a significant number of early midrashic traditions, which read *Eshet Hayil* as Torah or Moses more often than as any particular biblical woman. Note, for example, that *M. Mishle* incorporates the well-attested midrash about the snow of Gehinnom, as well as R. Yosi's question about why the prophets are compared to women: just as a woman is not afraid to demand the needs of her household from her husband, so, too, the prophets are not afraid to advocate before God on Israel's behalf.

B. *Eshet Hayil* in Praise of Sarah

The second category, *Eshet Hayil* in praise of Sarah, generally represents Proverbs 31:10-31 as Abraham's eulogy for Sarah. Versions are found, *inter alia*, in Midrash Tanhuma, *Chaye Sarah* 4; Tanhuma Buber *Chaye Sarah* 5; and Aggadot

Bereshit 34. Each verse or phrase corresponds to an episode in Abraham and Sarah's life together:

She considers a field and buys it (31:16): Thus, while she was alive, she had set her mind on obtaining the cave of Machpelah, *and buys it*, for here, she is buried in it....*She girds her loins with strength, and braces her arms (31:17):* when Abraham said to her, *Quick, with three seahs of fine meal (Gen. 18:6)* (Tan. B., *Chaye Sarah* 5:3)

Whereas within each of the other two categories there are significant differences among the midrashim, all of the midrashim within this category are quite similar. The first section of the *Yalkut Shimoni* on *Eshet Hayil* is also drawn from this model, but does vary somewhat, in that it includes biblical material that refers only to Abraham. For example:

She rises while it is still night (31:15): And Abraham arose early in the morning [Gen. 21:14, the expulsion of Hagar] ...and gives food to her household: and took bread, and a flask of water.

C. *Midrashei Eshet Hayil*: Alphabet of Biblical Women

Midrashei Eshet Hayil refers to a more diffuse group of midrashim that interpret each verse as a different biblical heroine. Burton Visotzky, in his brief article on *Midrash Eshet Hayil* in *Conservative Judaism* magazine, concisely presents an introduction to this group of midrashim:

Rabbinic expansions of the poem exist in a number of versions, all of which build on the assumption that each verse represents a different biblical heroine. These versions of *Midrash Eshet Hayil* are preserved in a variety of contexts. Most often, the midrash is tacked on to the end of *Midrash Mishle*, where it offers a second exegesis to *Midrash Mishle*'s reading of Prov. 31:10-31. Elsewhere, the midrash stands alone and independent of *Midrash*

Mishle, and yet other times it is embedded in a larger compilation. Most of these recensions include a brief introductory passage followed by a line by line allegorization of *Eishet Hayil*.³⁵

These midrashim, unlike those in praise of Sarah, do differ from each other, sometimes markedly, in length and language, and even occasionally in the biblical woman attributed to a particular verse. For the most part, though, the different versions of *Midrashei Eshet Hayil* are consistent with respect to the women named. Yael Levine Katz, in her abstract to *Midrashei Eshet Hayil*, notes that almost all of the women who are mentioned are praised in connection with a man, mainly sons and husbands, whom they gave birth to or saved from death.³⁶ It is true that the midrash differs dramatically from the Proverbs texts itself—while the biblical text focuses on the woman operating largely independently, the midrash describes women almost exclusively within the context of family. One could conclude that the midrash simply reaffirms the idea that women's primary worth derives from their capacities as wives and mothers. However, the introduction to *Midrash Eshet Hayil* in an early manuscript of *Midrash Mishle* suggests a more nuanced explanation for the emphasis on the men in these women's lives:

Know that on the moment the woman misled Adam, the ministering angels said to the Holy (One): Master of the Universe, why did You create woman? It is on her account that death has come into the world. Not only that, but women cause men to stumble and lead them away from revering You!

The Holy (One) immediately answered them, 'You don't know what I know, how many beautiful sprouts are planted among them.' Then the Holy began to recount to the ministering angels. What did He say to them? "A heroic woman..."³⁷

In this light, the midrash becomes nothing less than a justification for the existence of Woman. Further, because the midrash is framed as God refuting the angelic charge that "women cause men to stumble and lead them away from revering You," it tends to emphasize women in relation to men: women who saved men; women who fed or otherwise sustained men; women who led men to righteousness; women whose faith or conviction led to their giving birth to extraordinary men.

The list of female characters in the Bible who could be described as righteous or heroic includes dozens of women; with only twenty-two letters available in the poem, there are necessarily many noteworthy women absent from *Midrash Eshet Hayil*. Prominent biblical women who are absent from The List include Eve; Shifra and Puah; Tzipporah (who is included only in our version, as an alternate explanation); Zelophechad's daughters; and Deborah. In light of the passage from the Parma manuscript mentioned above, in which Woman is described as bringing Death into the world, Eve's exclusion is not surprising. There and elsewhere, the rabbis tend to judge Eve harshly. While her beauty is frequently praised, her character is more often condemned. The midwives' absence from *Midrash Eshet Hayil*, by contrast, is unexpected. They are mentioned in earlier rabbinic lists of righteous women, including that found in BT *Sotah* 11b-12b. This *sugya* expands on a statement of R. Avira: "Because of the merit of the women of that generation, Israel was redeemed from Egypt." Then, in turn, the merit of the women of the Exodus are discussed: Shifra and Puah, Yocheved, Miriam, Pharaoh's daughter, and Tzipporah. In that passage, though, there is some speculation that Shifra and Puah are actually Yocheved and Miriam, or perhaps Yocheved and Elisheva, who are found in our midrash.

At first glance, Deborah's absence is striking. After all, she is surely a more noteworthy character than "the wife of Obadiah" or Elisheva, daughter of Amminadav and wife of Aaron, who is mentioned only once in the Tanakh. But a closer study of the midrashic discussion of Deborah reveals that the rabbis in fact are sharply critical of her. She is described as arrogant and rude,³⁸ and both her legitimacy as a judge and her powers of prophecy are questioned.³⁹ Leila Leah Bronner, in her article "Valorized or Vilified?," argues that Deborah's judgeship presented a challenge to the political and social order—not of the biblical period necessarily, but of the conventions of the sages.⁴⁰ Yael, by contrast, is praised for her modesty, beauty, loyalty, and piety, as will be discussed in the verse commentary on *yud* in Chapter Four.

As Visotzky mentioned in the passage above, there are three contexts in which *Midrashei Eshet Hayil* are found: tacked on to the end of *Midrash Mishle*; embedded in a larger compilation; or as an independent midrash. To demonstrate some differences in style and content, I have created a chart comparing a representative text from each of these settings. The chart, which is found at the end of this chapter, compares the independent version found in Wertheimer's *Batei Midrashot*, which is the text this thesis will be examining, with the version appended to *Midrash Mishle* in the printed edition and with the version embedded in *Midrash ha-Gadol*.

Stylistically, *Midrash Eshet Hayil* is much shorter than the others, and offers very little in the way of prooftexts or rabbinic attributions. Each "entry" in *Midrash ha-Gadol* tends to be a little longer than those in either *M. Eshet Hayil* or *M. Mishle*, and includes what we might consider less germane material (e.g., a discussion of the identity of the spies in the verse about Rahav). *Midrash ha-Gadol* mentions women possessing the

prophetic spirit more frequently than does *Midrash Mishle*. Leah, for example, is described as “seeing” that the priesthood would come from her lineage; likewise, Pharaoh’s daughter foresaw that she would raise the boy who would become the savior of Israel. *Midrash Mishle* also includes an extended dialogue between Ruth and Naomi that has parallels in earlier rabbinic literature.⁴¹

In terms of content and character attribution, there are several differences among the texts. The commentaries on the individual verses will discuss some of these variations in greater detail:

- 1) *Midrash ha-Gadol* includes Noah’s daughters-in-law along with Noah’s wife for Proverbs 31:10, *A heroic woman—who can find one? Her worth is far beyond rubies.*
- 2) *Midrash Eshet Hayil* lists Tzipporah in addition to Rebecca for verse 13, *She bestows good on him, not bad, all the days of her life.* Tzipporah is not assigned to any other letter. All the other midrashim have only Rebecca, and do not list Tzipporah at all.
- 3) Likewise, *Midrash Eshet Hayil* lists Tamar as an alternative to Hannah for 31:18, *She senses that her business is good.* As in the case of Tzipporah above, the others list only Hannah, and do not mention Tamar.
- 4) All three handle the verse *Her palm spreads open to the poor/ and her hand extends to the needy* (verse 20) in slightly different ways. *Midrash Mishle* assigns only the Tzarfati widow who fed Elijah to this verse. *Midrash Eshet Hayil* sub-divides the verse, assigning the phrase *Her palm spreads open to the poor* to the Tzarfati widow and *Her hand extends to the needy* to the Shunnamite woman who fed Elisha. *Midrash ha-Gadol* also sub-divides the verse, assigning the first half to the Tzarfati widow and the second half to Naomi, who is otherwise conspicuous in her absence from these midrashim.

5) *Midrash Eshet Hayil* applies the verse *She makes covers for herself, her clothing is fine linen and purple*, to Hazlelponit, whereas the other midrashim associate this verse with Batsheva. This creates another case in which *Midrash Eshet Hayil* assigns two verses to a single character, while excluding another entirely.


6) Toward the end of the alphabet, the tight structure begins to fray somewhat, the primary reason being that the earliest versions of this midrash only extend to Proverbs 31:29, and do not treat the last two letters of the alphabet. Another reason for the variation among versions is that the verse for *shin*: *Grace is a lie, and beauty ephemeral; A woman who fears God—it is she who is praiseworthy* is frequently sub-divided in some midrashim, and this subdivision tends to be preserved. *Midrash Mishle* extends the praise of Ruth from the previous verse (31:29, *resh*), incorporating a well-attested midrashic dialogue between Ruth and Naomi. *Midrash Ha-Gadol* and *Midrash Eshet Hayil* both read the *grace...* verse as highlighting the contrast between Vashti and Esther, but *Midrash Eshet Hayil* adds the possibility that *grace* and *beauty* also refer to Adam and Noah.

As we will see in the verse commentaries, much of the material about the women mentioned in *Midrashei Eshet Hayil* is attested elsewhere in rabbinic literature, without a connection to Proverbs 31. Thus, these midrashim draw on popular midrashic material about various women, but place it in a new framework. This is very different from the style of the *Yalkutim*, which collect and list the received midrashic connections without creating a new structure.


The next chapter will focus on the Wertheimer version of *Midrash Eshet Hayil*, including a verse-by-verse commentary in which we will assess each line in turn, asking:

why did the rabbis make this match? Is it a good "fit?" To what extent do they try to "prove" their case? We will also note the source material, or lack thereof, for each verse. Occasionally, there is a strong rabbinic tradition of associating a particular character with a verse of *Eshet Hayil*. We will note the cases where our midrash either follows or deviates from those trends.

Midrashei Eshet Hayil¹

		<i>End of Printed Edition of Midrash Mishle</i>	<i>Independently Circulated Midrash (Wertheimer, Batei Midrashot)</i>	<i>Incorporated into Larger Anthology (Midrash Ha-Gadol, Margulies ed.)</i>
				Which are the 22 righteous women, those whom Solomon praised in chapter <i>A heroic woman—who can find one?</i>
	<i>A heroic woman—who can find one?</i>	As Scripture says, "They shall still bear fruit in old age...." this corresponds to Abraham and Sarah, who are considered as one in righteousness and good deeds, and who were a good sign forever; thus proper women are not excepted from [the category of] the righteous who were paired up with them, as we find with the wife of Noah. Her actions were equal to his, therefore she was meritorious and was saved from the flood.	This is the wife of Noah, who did not have sexual relations in the Ark	This is the wife of Noah, who justified her husband, as God said to him, "For I have seen a righteous one <i>with you [itcha]</i> " (re-reading Gen. 7:1, <i>For you [otcha] I have seen to be righteous.</i>)


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	<i>...her worth is far beyond rubies</i>			That she and her daughters-in law---their actions were <i>far</i> from those of the flood generation.
ר	<i>Her husband's heart trusts in her</i>	this is Sarah our mother, that Abraham became rich because of her, as it is said, <i>and it went well for Abraham because of her</i> (Gen. 12:16)	This is Sarah, as it is said, <i>And [Pharaoh's courtiers] praised her to Pharaoh</i> (Gen. 12:15).	This is Sarah, in whom the heart of Abraham trusted, that he said, <i>Say about me, 'he is my brother'</i> (Gen. 20:13).
	<i>and he lacks no spoils.</i>			For she brought the guests under the wings of the Shechina.


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	<p><i>She bestows good on him, not bad, all the days of her life.</i></p>	<p>This is Rebecca our mother, who bestowed on Isaac at the time of the death of Sarah his mother.</p>	<p>This is Rebecca, for by her hand the blessings came to Jacob. Another explanation: This is Tzipporah. And why is she called Tzipporah? To teach that she foresaw (<i>tzaftah</i>) and bore Moses two sons, Gershom and Eliezer. "Eliezer" to teach that the Holy One who is Blessed saved [<i>azru</i>] him from Pharaoh until he married Tzipporah, and "Gershom" to teach that [Moses] banished [<i>girshah</i>] Tzipporah from Egypt.</p>	<p>This is Rebecca. What good did she cause for Isaac? At the time when Abraham sent his servant, and they said, <i>We will call the girl and inquire from her own mouth</i> (Gen. 24:57). The way of the world is that a man marries off his daughter, even to a slave, and she would be too embarrassed to say anything, but Rebecca, when they said to her, <i>Will you go with this man?</i> She said, <i>I will go</i> (Gen. 24:58). Another explanation: Her actions were similar to the actions of Sarah, as it says, <i>Isaac brought her into the tent of Sarah his mother</i> (Gen. 24:67).</p>

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7	<i>She seeks out wool and linen and engages in the business of her hands.</i>	This is Leah, who received Jacob in a welcoming manner, as it is written, <i>Jacob came from the field in the evening, and Leah came out to meet him, saying, "You are to sleep with me tonight, for I have hired you with my son's mandrakes." And he lay with her that night</i> (Gen. 30:16), therefore she merited that kings, prophets, and princes would descend from her.	This is Leah.	This is Leah, for she saw through the prophetic spirit that in the future a son would come from her who would permit something prohibited for Israel. Who was this? Levi. For Israel it is written, " <i>Do not wear shaatnez, wool and linen together,</i> " (Deut. 22:11) but with respect to Aaron [Levi's descendant] it is written, <i>They shall make the [woolen] ephod of gold, of blue, and of purple, scarlet, and twisted linen</i> (Ex. 28:6). She was eager to marry Jacob, and persuaded her sister, and was successful.

		<i>End of Printed Edition of Midrash Mishle</i>	<i>Independently Circulated Midrash (Wertheimer, Batei Midrashot)</i>	<i>Incorporated into Larger Anthology (Midrash Ha-Gadol, Margulies ed.)</i>
ה	<i>She is like a merchant ship, bringing her bread from afar.</i>	this is Rachel, who was embarrassed each and every day [because of her barrenness]. Therefore she was meritorious and a son came from her who was like a ship, in that it is full of all the good things in the world, such as Joseph. The world was preserved because of his merit, and he fed the world during the famine years.	This is Rachel. Why Rachel? Didn't she only bear two, while Leah bore six sons? But Rachel said, "God will give me another son," and it was so, as it says, <i>God does the will of those who fear Him</i> (Ps. 145:19).	This is Rachel, for she said to Jacob, "Give me sons, and if not, I will die." Jacob said to her, "Am I in the place of (<i>ha-tachat</i>) God...?" <i>Tachat</i> is the language of shame, as it says, <i>hatu va'voshu, they were shamed and humiliated</i> (Isa. 37:27). The Holy One said to him, "Isn't it [bad] enough that you did not pray for mercy on behalf of this righteous woman, but that you humiliated her as well? Upon your life! I will remember her and give her a son, and your name will not be mentioned, as it says, <i>And God remembered Rachel</i> (Gen. 30:22) and not "Jacob."


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ר	<i>And she gets up while it is still night, and gives food to her household, a ration for her maids.</i>	This is Bityah daughter of Pharaoh. She was a non-Jew and became a Jew, and her name is mentioned among the upright women because she involved herself with Moses. Therefore she merited entering the Garden of Eden while still alive.	This is Bityah, daughter of Pharaoh	This is Bityah, daughter of Pharaoh, who saw through the prophetic spirit that in the future she would raise the savior of Israel. She and her maid-servants arranged to walk by the River, and when Moses came to her hands, she rejoiced greatly that God had given her what she asked for, as it says, <i>And she opened it and saw the boy</i> (Ex. 2:6).
י	<i>She considers a field and buys it; from the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.</i>	This is Yocheved, for Moses came from her, and he is equivalent to all Israel, who are called "vineyard," as it is said, <i>For the House of Israel is the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts</i> (Isa. 5:7).	This is Yocheved, daughter of Levi, who was born "between the walls," which is to say, the walls of the land of Egypt and the walls of the land of Canaan.	This is Yocheved, for by her hands Israel was called "The vineyard of The Holy One," as it says, <i>For the House of Israel is the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts</i> (Isa. 5:7). And why was she called Yocheved? Because her face was like the Radiance of Glory (<i>ziv ha-kavod</i>).

		<i>End of Printed Edition of Midrash Mishle</i>	<i>Independently Circulated Midrash (Wertheimer, Batei Midrashot)</i>	<i>Incorporated into Larger Anthology (Midrash Ha-Gadol, Margulies ed.)</i>
	<i>She girds her loins with strength, and braces her arms.</i>	<p>This is Miriam. Before Moses was born, she said, "Mother, in the future you will bear a son who will save Israel!" When he was born and the yoke of slavery was heavy upon them, her father stood and struck her on the head, saying, "What happened to your prophecy?" He stood and spit in her face, but despite all this, she stood firm in her prophecy.</p>	<p>Don't read <i>b'oz</i>, rather <i>b'az</i>. This is Miriam. And why has [the reference to] Miriam been joined to [that of] her mother Yocheved? To teach that [just as] Yocheved saved her two sons, and Tzipporah with her two sons, so, too, Miriam with the tribes, and she raised them higher. Another explanation: <i>She girds her loins b'oz</i>: Just as a goat (<i>ez</i>) has strength to leap through both mountains and valleys, so, too, did Miriam prophesy both in the land of Egypt and in the desert.</p>	<p>This is Miriam, who said to her father when he divorced her mother, "Your decree is harsher than Pharaoh's! He decreed only upon the males, but you on the females and the males! Because he is wicked, there is doubt whether his ruling will come to be, but you, who are righteous—there is no doubt: <i>You decree a thing, and it shall be established for you</i> (Job 22:28). What's more, I saw that in the future the savior of Israel will come from you!" Immediately he restored his wife to him. But when Moses was born and was sent to the River, her mother smacked her across the face and said, "Where is your prophecy?" Whereupon <i>she stationed herself at a distance</i> (Ex. 2:4), for she was standing[firm] by her prophecy.</p>


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	<i>She senses that her business is good; her lamp does not go out at night.</i>	This is Hannah, who tasted the "taste" of prayer. Therefore she merited having a son come from her who was a partner to Moses and Aaron in enlightening those generations for Israel, as it is written, <i>Moses and Aaron among the priests, and Samuel and those who call upon the Name; they called to the Eternal and He answered them</i> (Ps. 99: 6)	This is Hannah. And what is Hannah's business? This is Samuel, "for I asked him of God" (I Sam 1:20). Another explanation: <i>that her business is good</i> : this is Tamar.	This is Hannah, who tasted the "taste" of prayer, as it says, <i>I am pouring out my soul</i> (I Sam 1:15). <i>Her lamp does not go out at night:</i> [this refers to Samuel himself:] <i>and the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel lay down in the Temple of the Eternal</i> (I Sam. 3:3)

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;	<i>She extends her hand on the staff, and her palms support the spindle.</i>	This is Yael, who did not kill with male instruments, but with a tent-peg in the strength of her hand. And why didn't she kill him with a male instrument? To fulfill what has been said: <i>Do not have the instruments of a man on a woman, and a man shall not wear a woman's dress</i> (Deut. 22:5).	This is Yael, wife of Hever, as it is said, <i>She extended her hand to the tent peg</i> (Jg. 5:26). The sages said, "Bityah sent a maid, but Yael extended her own hand to the tent peg." If you were to say that the box is dependent on the peg, I should rather think that if it weren't for the box, the peg would not remain.	This is Yael, into whose hands Sisera came, as it says, <i>Sisera fled by foot...and she opened the bottle of milk and let him drink</i> (Jg. 4:17-19), to ascertain whether his mind was right or not. He got drunk and lusted to sin with her. Immediately <i>she drove the tent peg into his temple</i> (Jg. 4:21). It is also written, <i>She extended her hand to the tent peg</i> (Jg. 5:26), therefore she is blessed in the tents of Torah in synagogues and study-houses, as it is said, <i>Most blessed of women is Yael</i> (Jg. 5:24).
	<i>Her palm spreads open to the poor,</i>	This is the widow woman from Tzarfata, who fed Elijah with bread and water.	This is the widow woman of Tzarfat who fed Elijah, as it is said, <i>I have designated a woman there to feed you</i> (I Kgs 17:9).	This is the Tzarfatit, to whom Elijah said, <i>Give me a little water</i> . What was her reward for this? <i>Her jar of flour did not run out and her flask of oil was not lacking</i> (I Kgs 17:4)

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ו	<i>Her palm spreads open to the poor,</i>	This is the widow woman from Tzarfata, who fed Elijah with bread and water.	This is the widow woman of Tzarfat who fed Elijah, as it is said, <i>I have designated a woman there to feed you</i> (I Kgs 17:9).	This is the Tzarfatit, to whom Elijah said, <i>Give me a little water.</i> What was her reward for this? <i>Her jar of flour did not run out and her flask of oil was not lacking</i> (I Kgs 17:4)
	<i>and her hands extend to the needy.</i>		This is the Shunnamite, as it is said, <i>Let us make a small upper room and place a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp [for him, so that he can stop there whenever he comes to us]</i> (II Kgs 4:10).	This is Naomi, who brought Ruth under the wings of the Shechina, as it written, <i>When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she stopped talking to her</i> (Ruth 1:18).

		<i>End of Printed Edition of Midrash Mishle</i>	<i>Independently Circulated Midrash (Wertheimer, Batei Midrashot)</i>	<i>Incorporated into Larger Anthology (Midrash Ha-Gadol, Margulies ed.)</i>
	<i>She does not fear for her household because of snow, for her whole household is dressed scarlet (shanim).</i>	This is Rahav. At the time when Israel came to destroy Jericho, she did not fear, because they had given her a sign: <i>this cord of scarlet thread</i> (Josh. 2:18).	This is Rahav, who hid Pinchas and Caleb. She said to them, <i>Give me a true sign</i> , and they gave it to her, as it is said, <i>Here, when we invade the country, you tie this cord of scarlet thread to the window</i> (Josh. 2:18). She merited having prophets and priests come from her, and they are: Jeremiah; Elkanah; Seraiah; Baruch, son of Neriah; Hanamel; and there are those who say, also Ezra; Ezekiel; and Huldah, the prophetess.	This is Rahav, who hid the spies. And who were [the spies]? R. Yosi said that this is Caleb and Pinchas, but there are those who say it was Peretz and Zerach, because when she requested a sign from them, Zerach said, <i>"Tie this cord of scarlet thread in the window</i> (Josh. 2:18). This is the one that my mother tied on me in the womb, as it is written, <i>she tied a scarlet thread on his hand</i> (Gen. 38:28). Therefore Rahav merited that 10 priests would come from her, and they are: Hilkiyah; Jeremiah; Seraiah; Mahsaya; Baruch; Neriah; Hanamel; Shalom; Bozi; and Ezekiel. Others say, even Huldah the prophetess, as it is said, <i>The wife of Shalom son of Tikvah son of Herhes</i> (2 Kgs 22:14), and elsewhere [regarding Rahav] it says, <i>The cord of scarlet thread [tikvat hot ha-shani]</i> (Josh. 2:18).

		<i>End of Printed Edition of Midrash Mishle</i>	<i>Independently Circulated Midrash (Wertheimer, Batei Midrashot)</i>	<i>Incorporated into Larger Anthology (Midrash Ha-Gadol, Margulies ed.)</i>
מ	<i>She makes covers for herself; her clothing is fine linen and purple.</i>	This is Batsheva, for Solomon came from her. He was clothed in fine linen and purple and ruled from one end of the earth to the other.	This is Hatzlelponit, mother of Samson, for she would spin and trade in the marketplace while raising her son. Not only that, she also sat and interpreted until the Torah became clear (hitzlilah).	This is Batsheva, who saw through the prophetic spirit that in the future a son would come from her who would utter 3000 proverbs, as it says, <i>For he was wiser than all men</i> (1 Kgs 5:11).
נ	<i>Her husband is known at the gates, as he sits with the elders of the land.</i>	This is Michal, who saved David from death.	This is Michal, daughter of Saul.	This refers to Michal, who saved her husband David from death when Saul sent messengers to keep watch on David's house, to kill him (1 Sam. 19:11) and she said to them, "He's sick." And when the matter became known, her father said, "You lied to me!" She said, "In order to save you from [the sin of spilling] innocent

		<i>End of Printed Edition of Midrash Mishle</i>	<i>Independently Circulated Midrash (Wertheimer, Batei Midrashot)</i>	<i>Incorporated into Larger Anthology (Midrash Ha-Gadol, Margulies ed.)</i>
 <i>cont'd.</i>				blood, as it says, <i>for who can stretch out his hand against God's anointed and be guiltless (1 Kgs 26:9)?</i>


		<i>End of Printed Edition of Midrash Mishle</i>	<i>Independently Circulated Midrash (Wertheimer, Batei Midrashot)</i>	<i>Incorporated into Larger Anthology (Midrash Ha-Gadol, Margulies ed.)</i>
d	<i>She makes and sells linen garments, and delivers belts to the trader.</i>	This is Hazlelponit, for Samson came from her, and Israel was rescued by his hand.	This is the mother of Samson, for he was a permanent Nazirite.	This is Hazlelponit, who is the mother of Samson. As it is written about the sons of Peretz the son of Judah: <i>and these are the sons of Itam: Jezreel, Yishma, and Yidvash, and the name of their sister was Hazlelponi</i> (1 Chron. 4:3), from the region of Tzara. It says there, <i>These are the families of the Tzorati.</i> Twice the angel was revealed to her and not to her husband, and thus she said to her husband, <i>If he wanted to kill us, he wouldn't have accepted our offerings</i> (Jg. 13:22). <i>..and delivers belt to the traders...</i> that she would weave and sell in the market, as it is said, <i>whose traders are the honorable men of the earth</i> (Isa. 23:8).

		<i>End of Printed Edition of Midrash Mishle</i>	<i>Independently Circulated Midrash (Wertheimer, Batei Midrashot)</i>	<i>Incorporated into Larger Anthology (Midrash Ha-Gadol, Margulies ed.)</i>
ע	<i>She is clothed in strength and dignity; she laughs to the final day.</i>	This is Elisheva, daughter of Amminadav, who saw four joyous occasions in one day: her husband became a priest; her brother a prince; two of her sons became deputy priests; and her brother-in-law became a king.	This is Elisheva, who saw four joyous occasions on the very same day: Her husband became high priest; her brother-in-law, a king and prophet; her two sons were anointed to the priesthood; and her brother became a prince.	This is Elisheva, who saw four joyous occasions in one day: her brother-in-law became a king; her husband, high priest; her brother became a prince; her two sons, deputy priests.
פ	<i>She opens her mouth in wisdom, and the Torah of loving-kindness is on her tongue.</i>	This is the woman who spoke to Joab, who saved the city through her wisdom—this is Serach, daughter of Asher.	This is Serach, daughter of Asher, who did not experience the taste of death.	This is Serach, daughter of Asher, who said to Joab, <i>I am of the peaceful and faithful of Israel; [you wish to murder a city and a mother in Israel]</i> (2 Sam. 20:19), for she was the equivalent of a city and mother of Israel.


		<i>End of Printed Edition of Midrash Mishle</i>	<i>Independently Circulated Midrash (Wertheimer, Batei Midrashot)</i>	<i>Incorporated into Larger Anthology (Midrash Ha-Gadol, Margulies ed.)</i>
נ	<i>She keeps watch over the goings-on of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness.</i>	This is the wife of Obadiah, who saved her son and did not serve idolatry with Ahab.	This is the wife of Obadiah, who hid 100 prophets in two caves, <i>fifty men to a cave</i> (I Kgs 18:13), which is like the courtyard of the Tabernacle, which was 50 <i>amah</i> .	This is the wife of Obadiah, as it is written, <i>and a woman, one who the wives of the prophetic disciples, cried out to Elisha</i> (2 Kgs 4:1). Whom shall I go to but Elisha? She went to him and said, Master, are you not one of the prophetic group that his my husband Obadiah in a cave? He said, Yes, what do you want? She said, "Pray for mercy on me, that I may support myself through the work of my own hands and not depend on others. Immediately Elisha blessed her and she was able to support herself. That is why it says "The bread of idleness she does not eat." A miracle inside a miracle was made for her.

		<i>End of Printed Edition of Midrash Mishle</i>	<i>Independently Circulated Midrash (Wertheimer, Batei Midrashot)</i>	<i>Incorporated into Larger Anthology (Midrash Ha-Gadol, Margulies ed.)</i>
ק	<i>Her children get up and declare her happy; her husband, he praises her:</i>	This is the Shunnamite, who was called "a great woman." Why did she merit this? Because she urged Elisha to eat.	This is the Shunnamite woman, as it is said, <i>At this season next year you will be embracing a son</i> (2 Kgs. 4:16).	This is the Shunnamite woman, who said to her husband, "Behold, I perceive that this is a holy man of God..." R. Yosi b. Hanina said, "From here [we learn] that women are more welcoming to guests than men are. [followed by long discussion between Rav and Shmuel about how she knew that he was a holy man] A miracle occurred and she bore a son, but the boy died and Elisha resurrected him..."
ר	<i>"Many young women have done heroically..."</i>	This is Ruth, the Moabitess, who came under the wings of the Shechina.	This is Ruth, the Moabitess.	This is Ruth, who merited that David and his worthy sons would come from her. R. Yohanan said, "What is 'Ruth?'" That David came from her, and praised her [sharuha] to the Holy One with songs and praises.

		<i>End of Printed Edition of Midrash Mishle</i>	<i>Independently Circulated Midrash (Wertheimer, Batei Midrashot)</i>	<i>Incorporated into Larger Anthology (Midrash Ha-Gadol, Margulies ed.)</i>
	<i>...but you—you have triumphed over them all."</i>			<i>As Boaz said to her, My daughter, you have shown more kindness in the end than at the beginning (Ruth 3:10).</i>

		<i>End of Printed Edition of Midrash Mishle</i>	<i>Independently Circulated Midrash (Wertheimer, Batei Midrashot)</i>	<i>Incorporated into Larger Anthology (Midrash Ha-Gadol, Margulies ed.)</i>
	<i>Grace is a lie,</i>	<p>For she left her mother and her father and her wealth, and came with her mother-in-law and received all of the commandments:</p> <p>[Naomi:] “[We observe] Shabbat boundaries”</p> <p>[Ruth:] “Where you go, I will go.”</p> <p>[N:] It is forbidden to be alone with a man.</p> <p>[R:] Where you lodge, I will lodge.</p> <p>[N: We have] 613 commandments.</p> <p>[R:] Your people, my people.</p> <p>[N:] Idolatry [is forbidden] [R:] Your God, my God.</p>	<p>This is Vashti. Another interpretation: this is Noah, as it is said, <i>But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Eternal</i> (Gen. 6:8).</p>	<p>This is Vashti.</p>

		<i>End of Printed Edition of Midrash Mishle</i>	<i>Independently Circulated Midrash (Wertheimer, Batei Midrashot)</i>	<i>Incorporated into Larger Anthology (Midrash Ha-Gadol, Margulies ed.)</i>
		<p>[N:] The court imposes 4 types of death penalties. [R:] As you die, I will die, and there will I be buried.</p> <p>These are the two graveyards established for those executed by the court, stoning and burning in one, strangling and sword in the other.</p> <p>Therefore she merited have David come from her. He sang of her to God in songs and praises,</p>		
	<i>and beauty ephemeral,</i>		This is the beauty of the first man.	
	<i>a woman who fears God—it is she who is praiseworthy.</i>			This is Esther: <i>So he placed the royal crown on her head and she ruled instead of Vashti</i> (Esther 2:17)

		<i>End of Printed Edition of Midrash Mishle</i>	<i>Independently Circulated Midrash (Wertheimer, Batei Midrashot)</i>	<i>Incorporated into Larger Anthology (Midrash Ha-Gadol, Margulies ed.)</i>
	<i>Celebrate her for the fruit of her hands, and her works will praise her in the gates.</i>	Therefore it says, "Let the fruit of her hands praise her."	This is Esther, to teach you that she is placed [with this verse] because she dwelled in the spice-house for 6 months.	To all of the rest of the many righteous and kosher women in the world. Another explanation: This is the congregation of Israel, who are all called righteous, as it says, "Your people—they are all righteous."
		The one who is strong in tradition—the Torah will guard him and will be protected from the evil inclination.		

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

Chapter Four

***Midrash Eshet Hayil:* Translation and Verse-by-Verse Commentary**

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

A. Introduction to the Translation and Verse Commentaries

As mentioned previously, this thesis is based on the version of *Midrash Eshet Hayil* found in A. Wertheimer's *Batei Midrashot*. The Hebrew text of the midrash begins on the next page, followed by my own translation. Within the translation of the midrash, biblical verses are set in italics for ease of recognition. I have chosen this style because I believe that the presence or absence of biblical citations in any given verse or cluster of verses may be significant (italicized quotations are also used in the Soncino translations, among others). Translations of the biblical Proverbs verses are my own, except where a more traditional rendering is necessary to understand the midrashic connection. For example, line 44 requires the standard "her whole household is clothed in crimson," rather than my "her whole household is doubly clothed." I have translated other biblical verses according to the New Jewish Publication Society translation. Wertheimer's Hebrew text generally includes the first half of each biblical verse; in the translation and commentary I have supplied the rest of the verse in brackets.

The verse-by-verse commentaries, which immediately follow the translation, include noteworthy parallel texts and other related midrashic material, as well as my own comments about the passage. As previously mentioned, this commentary is not intended as a critical edition. Those seeking a critical edition should consult *Midreshei Eshet Hayil* (Hebrew), by Yael Levine Katz, the abstract of which is available in English.

B. Midrash Eshet Hayil

אֵשֶׁת חַיִּל מִי יִמָּצָא וּגּוֹ'. זוֹ אִשְׁתּוֹ שֶׁל נֹחַ, שֶׁלֹא שִׁמְשָׁה בְּתִיבָה.
בֶטַח בָּהּ לֵב בְּעָלָהּ. זוֹ שָׂרָה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (בר' יב:טו) וַיַּהֲלֵל אֹתָהּ אֵל פְּרָעָה.
גִּמְלָתָהּ טוֹב וְלֹא דָעָה. זוֹ רַבֵּקָה שֶׁעַל יְדֵהּ בָּאוּ הַבְּרִכּוֹת לִיעֲקֹב. דָּבָר
אֲחֵר, זוֹ צִפּוֹרָה. וְלִמָּה נִקְרָא שְׁמָהּ צִפּוֹרָה, מִלְּמַד שֶׁצִּפְתָּה וּרְאִיתָה
וְהוֹלִידָה שְׁנֵי בָנִים לְמֹשֶׁה, גֵּרֶשָׁם וְאַלְיָעֶזֶר, אֲלִיעֶזֶר מִלְּמַד שֶׁעֲזָרוּ הַקַּב"ה
מִפְּרָעָה עַד שֶׁדָּבַק בַּצִּפּוֹרָה, וְגֵרֶשָׁם מִלְּמַד שֶׁגֵּרְשָׁה אוֹתָהּ צִפּוֹרָה
מִמִּצְרַיִם.

דִּרְשָׁה צָמָר וּפְשָׁתִים. זוֹ לֵאָה.

הִזְקָתָה כְּאִנּוּת סוֹחֵר. זוֹ רַחֵל, וְלִמָּה רַחֵל, וְהִרִי לֹא יִלְדָה אֶלֶּא שְׁנַיִם
וְלֵאָה יִלְדָה שֵׁשׁ בָּנִים, אֶלֶּא אִמְרָה רַחֵל יוֹסֵף יִי לִי בֶן אֲחֵר וְנִיתֵן לָהּ,
שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (תה' קמה: יט) רָצוֹן יִרְאוּ יַעֲשֶׂה.

וִתְּקַם בְּעוֹד לִילָהּ. זוֹ בְּתִיָּה בֵּת פְּרָעָה.

זִמְמָה שָׂדֶה וְתִקְחָהּ. זוֹ יוֹכֶבֶד בֵּת לֹוי שֶׁנִּלְדָה בֵּין הַחוֹמוֹת, וְהִן: חוֹמוֹת
אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וְחוֹמוֹת אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן.

חִגְרָה בְּעוֹז מְתַנֶּיָּה. אֵל תִּיקְרִי בְּעוֹז אֶלֶּא בְּעֹז. זוֹ מֵרִים. וְלִמָּה נִסְמְכָה
מֵרִים לֵאמֹה יוֹכֶבֶד. מִלְּמַד [שִׁכְשָׁם] שִׁיּוֹכֶבֶד הִצִּילָה שְׁנֵי בָנִים, כֵּן צִפּוֹרָה
עִם שְׁנֵי בָנִים, כָּל מֵרִים עִם הַשְּׁבָטִים, וְהִרִימָה אוֹתָם לְמַעַלָּה. דָּבָר אֲחֵר,
חִגְרָה בְּעוֹז מָה הֵעִז יֵשׁ לּוֹ כֹּחַ לְקַפֵּץ בַּהֲרִים וּגְבָעוֹת כִּךְ מֵרִים נִתְנַבְּאָה
בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וּבַמִּדְבָּר.

טֶעָמָה כִּי־טוֹב סִתְרָה. זוֹ חַנָּה, וְמָה סִתְרָה שֶׁל חַנָּה זֶה שְׁמוּאֵל, כִּי מִי
שֶׁאֵלְתִּיו (שְׁמוּאֵל-א א: כ).

יִדְיָה שְׁלָחָה בְּכִישׁוֹר. זוֹ יַעֲלֵ אִשְׁתּוֹ חֵבֶר, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (שׁוֹפְתִים ה:כו) יִדְּהָ
לִיתֵד שְׁלָחָה תִּשְׁלַחנָה. אִמְרוּ חֲכָמִים בְּתִיָּה שְׁלָחָה אִמְתָּהּ, וַיַּעֲלֵ שְׁלָחָה
יִדְּהָ אֵל הִיתֵד. אִם תֵּאֱמַר שֶׁהִתִּיבָה טְפִילָה לִיתֵד, שׁוֹמֵעַ אֲנִי אֵלֹהִים לֹא
הִיתָה הִתִּיבָה, לֹא עָמַד הִיתֵד.

כִּפָּה פֶּרֶשָׁה לְעֹנִי. זוֹ אִשָּׁה אֶלְמָנָה הַצְרִפִּית שֶׁכִּלְכְּלָה אֶת אֱלִיהֶן,

שנאמר (מלכים-א יז:ט) הנה צויתי שם אשה אלמנה לכלכלך.
וַיְדִיקָה שְׁלָחָה לְאֶבְיֹון. זו השונמית שנאמר (מלכים-ב ד:א) נעשה נא
עלית קיר קטנה ונשים לו שם מטה ושלחן וכסא ומנורה.

לֹא-תִיָּדָא לְבֵיתָהּ מִשְׁלָג. זו רחב שהטמינה פנחס וכלב, ואמרה להם
תנו לי אות אמת ונתנו לה, שנאמר הנה אנחנו באים בארץ את תקות
השני הזה תקשרי בחלון. וזכתה עד שיצא ממנה נביאים וכתנים, והם:
ירמיה, ואלקנה, ושריה, וברוך בן נריה, וחנמאל, ויש אומרים אף עזרא,
ויחזקאל, וחולדה הנביאה.

מִרְבָּדִים עֲשֵׂתָהּ-לָהּ. זו הצללפוניית אמו של שמשון, שהיתה טווה
ומוכרת בשוק ומגדלת את בנה, ולא עוד אלא היתה יושבת ודורשת עד
שהצלילה התורה.

נֹדַע בְּשַׁעְרִים בְּעֵלָהּ. זו מיכל בת שאול.

סָדִין עֲשֵׂתָהּ. זו אמו של שמשון שהיה נזיר עולם.

עֹזֶן-הָדָר לְבוּשָׁהּ. זו אלישבע שראתה ארבע שמחות באותו היום,
אישה כהן גדול, אחי בעלה מלך ונביא, שני בניה משוחים לכהונה,
אחיה נשיא.

פִּיָּה פִּתְחָה בְּחֻמָּהּ. זו סרח בת אשר שלא טעמה טעם מיתה.

צֹפִיָּה הִילְכוֹת [הִלְכוֹת] בֵּיתָהּ. זו אשת עובדיהו שהטמין מאה נביאים
בשתי מערות, חמישים איש במערה (מלכים-א יח:יג) והוא כמו חצר
המשכן שהיה חמישים אמה.

קָמוּ בְּנֵיהָ וַיֵּאָשְׁרוּהָ. זו השונמית, שנאמר (מלכים-ב ד:טז) כעת היה
את חובקת בן.

רְבוֹת בָּנוֹת עָשׂוּ חֵיל. זו רות המואבית.

שָׁקָר הַחֵן. זו ושתי. דבר אחר זה נח, שנאמר (בר' ו:ח) ונח מצא חן
בעיני יי.

וְהָבֵל הִיפִי. זה יופיו של אדם הראשון.

תָּנוּ-לָהּ מִפְּרֵי יָדֶיהָ. זו אשתר, ללמדך שנסמכה לה וישבה בבית
הבסמים ששה חדשים.

C. Midrash Eshet Hayil: Translation

- 1 **⌘ A heroic woman—who can find one? [Her worth is far beyond rubies.]** This is
2 the wife of Noah, who did not have sexual relations in the ark.
- 3 **⌚ Her husband's heart trusts in her [and he lacks no spoils.]** This is Sarah, as it is
4 said, *And [Pharaoh's courtiers] praised her to Pharaoh* (Gen. 12:16).
- 5 **⌘ She bestows good on him, not bad [all the days of her life.]** This is Rebecca, for
6 by her hand the blessings came to Jacob. Another explanation: This is Tzipporah.
7 And why was she named Tzipporah? To teach that she foresaw (*tzaftah*) and bore
8 Moses two sons, Gershom and Eliezer. "Eliezer" to teach that the Holy One who is
9 Blessed saved [*azru*] him from Pharaoh until he married Tzipporah, and "Gershom"
10 to teach that [Moses] banished (*girshah*) Tzipporah from Egypt.
- 11 **⌘ She seeks out wool and linen [and engages in the business of her hands.]** This is
12 Leah.
- 13 **⌚ She is like a merchant ship, [bringing her bread from afar.]** This is Rachel. Why
14 Rachel? Didn't she only bear two, while Leah bore six sons? But Rachel said, "God
15 will add to me another son," and it was given to her, as it is said, *God does the will of*
16 *those who fear Him* (Ps. 145:19).
- 17 **⌘ And she gets up while it is still night, [and gives food to her household, a ration**
18 **for her maids.]** This is Bityah, daughter of Pharaoh.
- 19 **⌘ She considers a field and buys it, [from the fruit of her hands she plants a**
20 **vineyard.]** This is Yocheved, daughter of Levi, who was born "between the walls,"
21 which is to say, the walls of the land of Egypt and the walls of the land of Canaan.
- 23 **⌚ She girds her loins with strength [and braces her arms.]** Don't read *b'oz*, instead
24 read *b'az* [without the *holem*]. This is Miriam. And why has [the reference to]
25 Miriam been joined to [that of] her mother Yocheved? To teach that [just as]
26 Yocheved saved her two sons, and Tzipporah with her two sons, so, too, Miriam with
27 the tribes, and she raised them higher. Another explanation: *she girds her loins b'oz*:

28 Just as a goat (*ez*) has strength to leap through both mountains and valleys; so too did
 29 Miriam prophesy both in the land of Egypt and in the desert.

30 **וְשֶׁהָשֵׁנָה שֶׁהָעֵשֶׂה יָשָׁר; [הָלָאֵשׁ לֹא יֵצֵא בַּלַּיְלָה.]** This is
 31 Hannah. And what is Hannah's *business*? This is Samuel, for "I asked him of God"
 32 (I Sam. 1:20). Another explanation: *that her business is good*: this is Tamar.

33 **וְיָדָהּ יִשְׁעֵי הַמַּדְבָּע, [וְיָדָהּ יִשְׁעֵי הַמַּדְבָּע.]** This is Yael,
 34 wife of Hever, as it is said, *Her hand reached for the tent peg* (Judges 5:26). The
 35 sages said: "Bityah sent out her maidservant, but Yael reached out her own hand to
 36 the peg. If you were to say that the box is dependent on the peg, I should rather think
 37 that if it weren't for the box, the peg would not remain.

38 **וְיָדָהּ יִשְׁעֵי הַמַּדְבָּע לַפְּנִי...** This is the widow woman of Tzarfat who
 39 fed Elijah, as it is said, *I have designated a woman there to feed you* (I Kings 17:9).
 40 **...וְיָדָהּ יִשְׁעֵי הַמַּדְבָּע לַפְּנִי.** This is the Shunnamite, as it is said, "*Let us*
 41 *make a small upper room and place a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp [for him, so*
 42 *that he can stop there whenever he comes to us*" (II Kings 4:10).

43 **וְשֶׁהָשֵׁנָה שֶׁהָעֵשֶׂה יָשָׁר, [לְכָל הַבֵּית.]** This is Rahav, who hid Pinchas and Caleb. She said to them,
 44 *is clothed in crimson.*] This is Rahav, who hid Pinchas and Caleb. She said to them,
 45 *Give me a true sign*, and they gave it to her, as it is said, *Here, when we invade the*
 46 *country, you tie this length of crimson cord to the window* (Josh 2:18). She merited
 47 having prophets and priests come from her, and they are: Jeremiah; Elkanah;
 48 Seraiah; Baruch, son of Neriah; Hanamel; and there are those who say, also Ezra;
 49 Ezekiel; and Huldah, the prophetess.

50 **וְשֶׁהָשֵׁנָה שֶׁהָעֵשֶׂה יָשָׁר, [לְכָל הַבֵּית.]** This is
 51 Hatzlelponit, the mother of Samson, for she would spin and trade in the marketplace
 52 while raising her son. Not only that, she also sat and interpreted until the Torah
 53 became clear (*hitzlilah*).

54 **וְשֶׁהָשֵׁנָה שֶׁהָעֵשֶׂה יָשָׁר, [לְכָל הַבֵּית.]** This is
 55 Michal, daughter of Saul.

56 **Ⓚ** *She makes [and sells linen garments, and delivers belts to the trader.]* This is the
 57 mother of Samson, for he was a permanent Nazirite.
 58 **Ⓝ** *She is clothed in strength and dignity, [she laughs to the final day.]* This is
 59 Elisheva, who saw four joyous occasions on the very same day: Her husband became
 60 high priest; her brother-in-law, a king and prophet; her two sons were anointed to the
 61 priesthood; and her brother became a prince.
 62 **Ⓚ** *She opens her mouth in wisdom, [and the torah of lovingkindness is on her*
 63 *tongue.]* This is Serach, daughter of Asher, who did not experience the taste of death.
 64 **Ⓝ** *She keeps watch over the goings-on of her household, [and does not eat the*
 65 *bread of idleness.]* This is the wife of Obadiah, who hid 100 prophets in two caves,
 66 *fifty men to a cave* (I Kgs 18:13), which is like the courtyard of the Tabernacle, which
 67 was 50 *amah*.
 68 **Ⓚ** *Her children rise and declare her happy, [her husband, he praises her]* This is
 69 the Shunnamite woman, as it is said, *At this season next year you will be embracing a*
 70 *son* (II Kgs 4:16).
 71 **Ⓚ** *"Many young women have done heroically, [but you—you have surpassed them*
 72 *all.]"* This is Ruth, the Moabitess.
 73 **Ⓚ** *Grace is a lie...*this is Vashti. Another interpretation: This is Noah, as it is said,
 74 *But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Eternal* (Gen. 6:8).
 75 *...and beauty ephemeral...*this is the beauty of the first man.
 76 **Ⓚ** *Celebrate her for (Give her) the fruit of her hands [and her works will praise her*
 77 *in the gates.]* This is Esther to teach you that she is placed [with this verse] because
 she dwelled in the spice-house for 6 months.

E. Verse-by-Verse Commentary

אֵשֶׁת חַיִּל מִיִּמְצָא וְגוֹ' כֹּל מִנְּסֵפֶצֶק רֶשֶׁת

Hebrew:

אֵשֶׁת חַיִּל מִיִּמְצָא וְגוֹ'. זוֹ אִשְׁתּוֹ שֶׁל נֹחַ, שֶׁלֹּא שִׁמְשָׁה בְּתִיבָה.

Translation:

- 1 *A heroic woman—who can find one? [Her worth is far beyond rubies.]* This is the
- 2 wife of Noah, who did not have sexual relations in the ark.

Parallels:

Genesis Rabbah 31:12

BT *Sanhedrin* 108b

PT *Ta'anit* 1:7

Pirkei d'R. Eliezer 23

Midrash ha-Gadol to Genesis 6:18

Other Related Material:

Genesis Rabbah 23:3

Commentary:

Overall, rabbinic discussion of the wife of Noah is minimal. Genesis Rabbah 23 identifies her as Na'amah, the sister of Tubal-Cain, who is mentioned in Genesis 4:22

among the descendants of Cain. This identification is contested, however; the Rabbis conclude that Noah's wife was a different Na'amah than Na'amah, sister of Tubal-Cain:

And the sister of Tubal-Cain was Na'amah: R. Abba b. Kahana said: Na'amah was Noah's wife. And why was she called Na'amah? Because her deeds were pleasing [*ne'imim*]. But the Rabbis said: This was a different Na'amah. Why was she [this Na'amah, the sister of Tubal-Cain] called Na'amah? Because she would sing to the timbrel in honor of idolatry. (Gen.R. 23:3)

While the idea that Noah and his wife abstained from marital relations aboard the Ark is well attested, those sources do not attribute merit to Noah's wife based on that abstinence. The midrash is based on the difference between God's instruction to Noah on entering the Ark and the instruction for leaving the Ark. In the former, the men are mentioned first and their wives are listed second—you, *and your sons, and your wife, and your sons' wives* (Genesis 6:19)--while upon leaving the ark, they are listed in pairs: Noah and his wife, his sons and their wives (Genesis 8:15). From this change, the rabbis conclude that the separation in word order indicated physical separation; marital relations were permitted to resume after leaving the ark, as described in Genesis Rabbah:

You, and your sons, and your wife... R. Judah b. R. Simon and R. Hanan in the name of R. Samuel b. R. Isaac said: As soon as Noah entered the Ark, cohabitation was forbidden to him, thus it is written: *And you shall come into the Ark, you, and your sons—apart—and your wife, and your son's wives—apart.* When he went out, God permitted it to him, as it is written, *Go out from the Ark, you and your wife* [Gen. 8:15]. R. Abin quoted: *They are lonely in want and famine* [Job 30:3]: when want and famine visit the world, regard your wife as though she were "lonely" [i.e., menstruous]. R. Muna said: It is written: *And two sons were born to Joseph* [Gen. 41:50]...when? *before the year of famine came.* [*ibid.*] (Gen. R. 31:12)

The passage is paralleled in BT *Sanhedrin*, in which Noah is depicted as responding to the angry words of the raven, who insinuates that Noah desires the raven's

mate. It also differs in that the deduction that cohabitation was prohibited is attributed to R. Johanan, unlike the text above:

"Evil one! Even that which is [usually] permitted to me has been forbidden—how much more so that which is [always] forbidden to me!" And whence do we know that they [marital relations] were forbidden? From the verse, *And you shall come into the Ark, you and your sons, and your wife, and your son's wives...* while further on it is written, *Go out from the Ark, you and your wife...* Therefore R. Johanan observed: From this we deduce that cohabitation had been forbidden. (BT *San.* 108b)

Both of these versions and the parallel texts in the Palestinian Talmud (*Ta'anit* 1:7) and Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer 23 mention Noah exclusively as having been commanded to abstain; as mentioned above, none attach any particular merit to his wife for her abstinence. The only exception—other than the midrashim about *Eshet Hayil*, of course—is the very late version of the same midrash in Midrash Ha-Gadol. Virtually the same text found in Midrash Ha-Gadol's exegesis of *Eshet Hayil* is used in its discussion of the Noah passage:

And come to the Ark, you and your sons and your wife and your son's wives: From here [we learn] that marital relations had been forbidden aboard the Ark, for note that women are separate and men are separate: *your wife and your son's wives*. About *them* [feminine, emphasis added] Solomon said: *Who can find a heroic woman?* This is the wife of Noah, who caused her husband to be righteous. *Her worth is far beyond rubies*, that she and her daughters-in-law—their deeds were "far" from those of the Flood generation. (MhG to Gen. 6:18)

The text in *Midrash Eshet Hayil* mentions only Noah's wife, without any evaluation of the relative merit of Noah and his wife. By contrast, *Midrash Mishle* and *Midrash ha-Gadol* discuss them together: *Midrash ha-Gadol* reads, "...this is the wife of Noah, who caused her husband to be righteous, when the Holy One said to him, *For you*

have I seen righteous before me (Gen. 7:1),” and goes on to include her daughters-in-law: “*her worth is far beyond rubies*: she and her daughters-in-law: their actions were *far* from those of the flood generation.”

The version in *Midrash Mishle* is even more dramatic: Noah and his wife are described as equal in righteousness, mentioned alongside the paradigmatic example of the righteous pair, Abraham and Sarah. Noah’s wife, the midrash continues, was saved from the flood because of the righteousness of her own actions, in contrast to some midrashim that suggest that Noah’s family was saved not because they, too, were righteous, but only as a courtesy to Noah.

As for how Noah’s wife was chosen for this verse, the strongest explanation is that the compiler of this midrash shaped a list that, at least at the outset, is more or less chronological. The second verse, *her husband’s heart trusts in her, and he lacks no spoils*, is already strongly associated with Sarah, as we will see in the discussion of that verse. Therefore, the first verse must be assigned to a biblical woman who precedes Sarah, the most viable candidates being Eve and Noah’s wife. Eve, however, generally meets with harsh treatment at the hands of the rabbis. Indeed, in the version of *Midrash Eshet Hayil* found in the printed edition of *Midrash Mishle* discussed in Chapter Three, the alphabet of righteous women are presented as a foil to Eve, who is depicted as “bringing death into the world.”⁴³

Midrashic wordplay is not generally a dominant feature of this work, as will become apparent. In the verse on Noah’s wife, one semantic link is the word *far*, as *Midrash ha-Gadol* makes explicit: “Their actions were *far* from those of the flood generation.” *Midrash Eshet Hayil*, however, does not attempt to use

wordplay to justify the selection of Noah's wife, instead only citing the behavior that qualifies her to be included among the most righteous of women.

אברהם וזחתי כל מנסע פצקרת

Hebrew:

בְּטַח בָּהּ לֵב בְּעֵלָהּ. זו שרה, שנאמר (בר' יב:טו) ויהללו אותה אל פרעה.

Translation:

- 3 *Her husband's heart trusts in her [and he lacks no spoils.]* This is Sarah, as it is
4 said, *And [Pharaoh's courtiers] praised her to Pharaoh* (Gen. 12:16).

Related Material:

Genesis Rabbah 47:1

Numbers Rabbah 18:21

Aggadat Bereshit 34

Tanhuma Buber, Chaye Sarah 5

Midrash ha-Gadol to Genesis 23:1

Commentary:

The application of this verse to Sarah is one of the most natural in this midrash, based both on chronology and plot. In two instances in the Sarah-Abraham saga (Gen. 12 and Gen. 20), Abraham asks Sarah to pass as his sister when they travel in foreign territory. In both cases, the king seeks Sarah as his own wife and bestows valuable gifts on Abraham to win his good will. In both Egypt and Gerar, divine intervention makes the truth of the situation known to the king, and Sarah and Abraham are escorted out of

the region bearing their new riches. This is the clearest biblical example of the case described in Proverbs 31:11, in which a husband obtains financial gain through trusting in his wife. All of the midrashim on *Eshet Hayil* associate this verse with Sarah; more significantly, all use the same incident as evidence, in contrast to examples such as Rebecca, in which the different versions offer varying explanations (see the next commentary). As noted in Chapter Three, one group of midrashim on Proverbs 31 explain the whole chapter with respect to Sarah, correlating each verse with a different episode in her life.

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

Hebrew:

גְּמָלָתָהּ טוֹב וְלֹא־רָע. זוֹ רִבְקָה שֶׁעַל יְדָהּ בָּאוּ הַבְּרָכוֹת לִיעֲקֹב. דָּבָר
אֲחֵר, זוֹ צִפּוֹרָה. וְלָמָּה נִקְרָא שְׁמָהּ צִפּוֹרָה, מִלְּמַד שֶׁצִּפְתָּה וְרֵאתָה
וְהוֹלִידָה שְׁנֵי בָנִים לְמֹשֶׁה, גֶּרְשֹׁם וְאֵלִיעֶזֶר, אֵלִיעֶזֶר מִלְּמַד שֶׁעֲזָרוּ הַקַּב"ה
מִפְרַעָה עַד שֶׁדָּבַק בַּצִּפּוֹרָה, וְגֶרְשֹׁם מִלְּמַד שֶׁגִּרְשָׁה אוֹתוֹ צִפּוֹרָה
מִמִּצְרַיִם.

Translation:

5 *She bestows good on him, not bad [all the days of her life.]* This is Rebecca, for by
6 her hand the blessings came to Jacob. Another explanation: This is Tzipporah. And
7 why was she named Tzipporah? To teach that she foresaw (*tzafiah*) and bore Moses
8 two sons, Gershom and Eliezer. "Eliezer" to teach that the Holy One who is Blessed
9 saved [*azru*] him from Pharaoh until he married Tzipporah, and "Gershom" to teach
10 that [Moses] banished [*girshah*] Tzipporah from Egypt.

Related Material on Rebecca:

Onkelos to Genesis 24:67

Genesis Rabbah 60:16

Related Material on Tzipporah:

Sifre to Numbers *Piska* 99

BT *Sotah* 11b

Exodus Rabbah 1:32

Commentary:

In contrast to the uniform association among verse, character, and incident in the previous example, here *Midrashei Eshet Hayil* differs on two levels: first, our version of *Midrash Eshet Hayil* applied the same verse to two characters; second, the various versions of *Midrash Eshet Hayil*, in referring to Rebecca, diverge in their opinions about the “him” referred to in the Proverbs verse. Is it Isaac, Rebecca’s husband, as in *Midrash ha-Gadol* and *Midrash Mishle*, or Jacob, her son, as *Midrash Eshet Hayil* says? Even the midrashim that assume “him” is Isaac disagree about what “good” it was that Rebecca bestowed upon him: *Midrash Mishle* explains that it was the comfort that she provided after Sarah’s death, while *Midrash ha-Gadol* mentions her alacrity in speaking up to her family and going with Abraham’s servant to marry Isaac.

The suggestion here that Rebecca’s “good” is bestowed on Jacob is interesting to me in two respects: first, it highlights the actions that serve God’s plan in a dramatic and tangible way—had Rebecca not interfered, perhaps Jacob would not have seized the blessing. Second, it emphasizes Rebecca’s firsthand awareness of her children’s destiny, and builds on a small midrashic tradition of Rebecca as a full-fledged prophetess. Portraying biblical women as receiving divine prophecy is a hallmark of Yemenite midrashim such as this one. In fact, this version of *M. Eshet Hayil* differs from other versions in its repeated allusions to the power of prophecy.

This is even evident in the description of Tzipporah, whom *Midrash Eshet Hayil* names as an alternate explanation, one of two times in this midrash that this occurs. Her mention appears based on a plot connection, rather than wordplay or chronology. She

“bestowed good” on Moses in that she saved his life through circumcision, in the “bridegroom of blood” incident (Ex. 4:24-26). According to other, later midrashim, she also saved Moses from being killed in Midian by a suspicious Jethro.

Interestingly, the explanations given for Tzipporah’s name and those of her sons are not the same explanations found elsewhere in rabbinic literature. Explanations for Tzipporah’s name more often play on the bird (*tzippor*) image, as in this example from Exodus Rabbah: “And why was she called Tzipporah (bird)? Because she ran like a bird (*ke 'tzippor*) to welcome Moses.” *Sifre* to Numbers, *Piska* 99, plays on the term *tzofeh*, to look, but in a different sense than our midrash does: “R. Eliezer, son of R. Yossi the Galilean, says: Tzipporah: they looked (*tzafu*) and saw how pleasant the woman was.” The text goes on to describe her as more beautiful than all other women. *Midrash Eshet Hayil*, by contrast, emphasizes Tzipporah’s insightfulness.

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

Hebrew:

דָּרְשָׁה צֹמֶר וּפְשָׁתִים. זוּ לֵאמֹר.

Translation:

¹¹ דָּ She seeks out wool and linen [and engages in the business of her hands.] This is

¹² Leah.

Related Material:

Genesis Rabbah 70:15-16

BT *Baba Batra* 123a

Commentary:

The text gives no explanation at all. Wertheimer, in his notes on *Midrash Eshet Hayil*, offers a few possible rationales, the best of which draws on the clever version in *Midrash ha-Gadol*. Drawing on the phrase *wool and linen*, which is the combination both specified for the priestly garments and explicitly prohibited for ordinary Israelite clothing, the midrash says that Leah foresaw that what was forbidden to Israel would be permitted through the line of her son Levi. A similar theme is found in *Genesis Rabbah* 70:15:

The name of the great one [usu. trans. "the elder"] was Leah (Genesis 29:16). She was great in her gifts, receiving the priesthood for all time and royalty for all time [through her sons Levi and Judah]. And the name of the small one

[usu. "the younger"] was Rachel (*ibid.*): small in her gifts, Joseph but for a time, and Saul but for a time.

Likewise, in BT *Baba Batra* 123a, R. Eleazar explains that the seemingly disparaging remark, *Leah's eyes were weak [rakkot]*, actually means that "her bounties were extensive [*arukkot*]," perhaps referring to the priesthood of Levi and the kingship of Judah.

Wertheimer offers another possible explanation for associating Leah with this verse, focusing on the aspect of sorting or distinguishing: that Leah distinguished between the righteousness of Jacob and the wickedness of Esau. Wertheimer's suggestion is bolstered by the treatment of this verse in Midrash Tanhuma (Chaye Sarah 4), which renders Eshet Hayil as Abraham's eulogy for Sarah. There, the phrase *She seeks out linen and wool* refers to Sarah's sorting or distinguishing between Isaac and Ishmael. With respect to Leah's judgment between Esau and Jacob, this possibility is substantiated by earlier midrashim in that vein: Leah's "weak eyes" are explained to her credit, for when she learned that it was arranged for her to marry the wicked Esau instead of gentle Jacob, she cried until her eyes went weak. One version of this midrash is the continuation of the *Baba Batra* text cited above:

Rav said, Her eyes were indeed actually weak, but that was not a disgrace to her, rather a credit, for at the crossroads she heard people saying, Rebecca has two sons, Laban has two daughters--the elder to the elder, and the younger to the younger. And she sat at the crossroads and inquired, "The elder one--what are his deeds?" "A wicked man, a highway robber." "And the younger?" "A quiet man dwelling in tents (Gen. 25:27)." And she wept until her eyelashes dropped off. This accounts for the biblical text. (BT BB 123a)

A similar account is found in Genesis Rabbah 70:16, concluding, "She used to weep and pray, 'May it be Your will that I do not end up with that wicked man.' R. Huna said, Great is prayer, that it annulled the decree, and she even took precedence over her sister." These explanations and possible wordplays, however, appear to be secondary to chronology, which is the dominant connection in this passage.

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

Hebrew:

קָוִיתָהּ פְּאֻנִיּוֹת סוֹחֵר. זוֹ רַחֵל, וְלִמָּה רַחֵל, וְהִרִי לֹא יִלְדָּה אֶלָּא שְׁנַיִם
וְלֵאָה יִלְדָּה שֵׁשׁ בָּנִים, אֶלָּא אָמְרָה רַחֵל יוֹסֵף יִי לִי בֶן אַחֵר וְנִיתֵן לָהּ,
שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (תה' קמה: יט) רָצוֹן יִרְאִיו יַעֲשֶׂה.

Translation:

- 13 *She is like a merchant ship, [bringing her bread from afar.]* This is Rachel. Why
14 Rachel? Didn't she only bear two, while Leah bore six sons? But Rachel said, "God
15 will add to me another son," and it was given to her, as it is said, *God does the will of*
16 *those who fear Him.* (Ps. 145:19)

Parallels:

The citation of this type of proof-text, the only instance in this midrash, coupled with the apparently tangential mention of Joseph, suggests that there is a direct parallel that I have not uncovered, though Wertheimer does not cite one. Margulies, in the notes on the somewhat different version in Midrash ha-Gadol, simply notes, "The source has disappeared."

Related Material:

Genesis Rabbah 72:6

BT Berachot 60a

Lamentations Rabbah, Proem 24

Commentary:

As in the last several homilies, chronology is the primary connection between verse and character. At the same time, however, Burton Visotzky points out that a wordplay on the word *oni* advances the midrash.⁴⁴ Rachel gave her second son the name *ben-oni*, "son of my anguish," and is here compared to *oniot sokher*, "merchant ships."

There are some midrashim that address Rachel's statement "God will add to me another son," including the remarkable passage in BT *Berachot* 60a that describes Rachel praying that Leah's pregnancy result in a daughter. According to this midrash, it was destined that Jacob would father twelve sons. If Leah bore a seventh son, that would complete the twelve, leaving Rachel with only one son.

Said R. Hanina b. Pazzi, "The matriarchs were prophetesses, and Rachel was one of the matriarchs. It is not written, '*The Lord add to me other sons*,' but '*another son*,' she said, 'He is destined to father one more—may it be from me!' R. Hanina said, "All the matriarchs assembled and prayed: 'We have sufficient males. Let her be remembered.'"

As a result of their prayer, the child was changed into a female *in utero*. In the parallel account in *Berachot* 60b, it is Leah's own prayer that causes the fetus to be changed into a girl:

Rav said, "After Leah had passed judgment [*din*] on herself, saying, 'Twelve tribes are destined to issue from Jacob. Six have come from me and four from the concubines. If this child will be a male, my sister Rachel will not even be equal to one of the concubines! Thereupon the child was changed into a girl, as it says, *And she called her name Dinah* [playing on *din*, judgment].

Another poignant description of the power of Rachel's plea is found in Lamentations Rabbah, Proem 24. She is depicted as rebuking God for being jealous of the people's inconstancy:

...My father planned to substitute another for me, to wed my husband for the sake of my sister. It was very hard for me, because I knew of the plot and I told my husband. I gave him a sign so he could distinguish between my sister and me, so that my father should not be able to make the substitution. After that I relented, suppressed my desire, and had pity upon my sister, that she should not be exposed to shame [and told her the sign]....I did her a kindness, was not jealous of her, and did not expose her to shame. And if I, a creature of flesh and blood, formed of dust and ashes, was not envious of my rival and did not expose her to shame and contempt, why should You, a King who lives eternally and is merciful, be jealous of idolatry in which there is no reality, and exile my children and let them be slain by the sword, and their enemies have done with them as they wished!"...Thus it is written *A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children, because they are not* (Jer. 31:15).

Midrash Eshet Hayil, then, is consistent with the midrashic tradition emphasizing the power of Rachel's prayer, with respect to her own children and their descendants.

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

Hebrew:

וַתִּקַּם בַּעֲוֹד לַיְלָה. זוּ בַּתִּיָּה בֵּת פַּרְעֹה.

Translation:

17 *And she gets up while it is still night, [and gives food to her household, instruction*
18 *for her maids.]* This is Bityah, daughter of Pharaoh.

Related Material:

BT *Sotah* 12b

Exodus Rabbah 18:3

Pesikta d'Rav Kahana 7:6

Pesikta Rabbati 17:5

Commentary:

In earlier rabbinic literature, Bityah is strongly associated with another verse in this passage: *She perceives that her reward is good; her lamp does not go out at night* (Proverbs 31:18). As discussed in Chapter Two, those midrashim draw an elegant connection based on multiple literary elements, including the terms *ki-tov* and *leil*.

Although the author does not offer any justification, the aspects of “night,” “food,” and “instruction to her maids,” all neatly link this verse to the Bityah’s actions at the riverbank as described in Exodus 2:5-10. The parallel account in Midrash ha-Gadol,

however, does not emphasize the wordplay element. This has happened a few times, raising the possibility that the Midrash ha-Gadol compiler did not always see the connections to which the author of *Midrash Eshet Hayil* might have been alluding, or saw an opportunity to incorporate other, sometimes more widely circulated, midrashim on the same theme.

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

Hebrew:

זְמַמָּה שָׂדֶה וַתִּקְחָהּ. זו יוכבד בת לוי שנולדה בין החומות, והן: חומות
ארץ מצרים וחומות ארץ כנען.

Translation:

- 19 *She considers a field and buys it, [from the fruit of her hands she plants a*
20 *vineyard.]* This is Yocheved, daughter of Levi, who was born “between the walls,”
21 which is to say, the walls of the land of the land of Egypt and the walls of the land of
22 Canaan.

Related Material:

BT *Hullin* 68b

BT *Baba Batra* 120a

BT *Sotah* 12a

Tanhuma Buber 4:16

Commentary:

Elsewhere in rabbinic literature, Yocheved is described as being born just as the caravan arrived in Egypt, as in this passage from *Sotah* 12a: “...This refers to Yocheved, whose conception occurred during the journey [to Egypt], and her birth between the walls, as it is said, *Who was born to Levi in Egypt* (Num.26:9).” Wertheimer suggests that the author of our text links this element of Yocheved’s midrashic biography to the Proverbs verse by means of the term *field*, which, in tractate *Hullin*, is synonymous with

"an area outside the boundaries" (68b). The versions in *Midrash Mishle* and *Midrash ha-Gadol* play on "vineyard:" Moses came from Yocheved, and Moses is equivalent to all Israel, as it is said, "For the House of Israel in the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts."

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

Hebrew:

חָגְרָה בְּעוֹז מְתִנֶּיָּהּ. אֶל תִּיקְרִי בְּעוֹז אֶלֶּא בָּעֹז. זֹו מְרִים. וּלְמָה נִסְמַכָּה מְרִים לְאַמָּה יוֹכֵבֵד. מִלְמַד [שְׁכַשֵּׁם] שְׁיוֹכֵבֵד הִצִּילָה שְׁנֵי בָנֶיהָ, כֵּן צְפוּרָה עִם שְׁנֵי בָנֶיהָ, כָּל מְרִים עִם הַשְּׁבָטִים, וְהָרִימָה אוֹתָם לְמַעַלָּה. דְּבַר אַחֵר, חֲגָרָה בְּעוֹז מָה הָעוֹז יֵשׁ לוֹ כַּח לְקַפֵּץ בַּהֲרִים וּגְבְעוֹת כִּךְ מְרִים נִתְנַבְּאָה בְּאַרְץ מִצְרַיִם וּבַמִּדְבָּר.

Translation:

- ²³ חָ *She girds her loins with strength [and braces her arms.]* Don't read *b'oz*, instead
²⁴ read *b'oz* [without the hole]. This is Miriam. And why has [the reference to]
²⁵ Miriam been joined to [that of] her mother Yocheved? To teach that [just as]
²⁶ Yocheved saved her two sons, and Tzipporah with her two sons, so, too, Miriam with
²⁷ the tribes, and she raised them higher (*harimah otam*). Another explanation: *she*
²⁸ *girds her loins b'oz*: Just as a goat (*ez*) has strength to leap through both mountains
²⁹ and valleys; so, too, did Miriam prophesy both in the land of Egypt and in the desert.

Related Material:

BT *Sotah* 12a-13b

Pesikta Rabbati 43:4

Exodus Rabbah 26:1, 9

Commentary:

This *drash* builds on both the biblical text, in which Miriam's watchfulness and quick thinking result in Moses' rescue, and the midrashic tradition that Miriam

successfully argued against her father's plan that all the Hebrew men should divorce their wives, so that no babies would be born and killed. She prophesied that Yocheved would bear a son who would redeem Egypt; when it became clear that Moses would have to be given up, her father slapped her (other versions say he spit in her face) and declared, "Where is your prophecy now?" Yet she remained steadfast: *She stationed herself at a distance, to learn what would befall him* (Ex. 2:4).

What intrigues me most about this unit is the middle phrase: "And why has [the reference to] Miriam been joined to [that of] her mother Yocheved? To teach that [just as] Yocheved saved her two sons, and Tzipporah with her two sons, so too Miriam with the tribes, and she 'raised them higher' (*harima otam*)."

The phrase "raised them higher" may be a sound-play on Miriam's name, one I have not found in other midrashim about Miriam. Moreover, this passage reminds us that a woman need not be a mother to save a life and serve her people, a message not often conveyed by either the biblical narratives or the midrashic tradition.

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

Hebrew:

טַעֲמָה כִּי־טוֹב סְחָרָהּ. זו חנה, ומה סחרה של חנה זה שמואל, כי מי

שאלתיו (שמואל-א א: כ).

Translation:

³⁰ ט *She senses that her business is good; [her lamp does not go out at night.]* This is

³¹ Hannah. And what is Hannah's *business*? This is Samuel, for "I asked him of God."

³² (I Sam. 1:20). Another explanation: *that her business is good*: this is Tamar.

Related Material:

BT *Berakhot* 31a-b

Midrash Samuel 1:48-49

BT *Rosh Hashana* 11a

Commentary:

This verse of Proverbs is one of only a few that had a strong early association with a righteous biblical woman, Bityah, daughter of Pharaoh. *Midrash Eshet Hayil* associates Bityah with 31:15, *She rises while it is still night* instead. Beginning by assigning this verse to Hannah, the author departs from the chronology of the Tanakh.

Most of the remaining verses are connected to their respective biblical characters not by chronology, but by plot similarity, and occasionally through a wordplay; this passage incorporates an element of both. The term *skhar*, business, can also mean “gain” or “profit;” it is also a homophone of שכר. *skhar*, which means “reward,” particularly in the sense of “divine recompense.” Thus “She perceives that her reward is good”—her reward [for her faith and prayer] is Samuel “for I asked for him from God.” However, this could apply not only to Hannah but to numerous women who had thought themselves barren and yet conceived. *Midrash ha-Gadol* fleshes out an appealing word-play, in which the second half of the verse, *her lamp does not go out at night*, is paralleled with I Sam. 3:3: *The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was sleeping in the Temple where the Ark of God was*. The lamp that does not go out is used here as a metaphor for Samuel himself.

Midrash Eshet Hayil itself reinforces the sense that “her business” or “her reward” could apply to numerous women in various situations, by offering an alternate possibility, the second of two times that this occurs. “Another explanation *for her business is good*: This is Tamar.” No further explanation is given, but it appears straightforward enough: Tamar finally got children, albeit by deceptive means. Both Hannah and Tamar were wrongly suspected—one of drunkenness, the other harlotry—but are themselves confident that they are doing rightly, and are ultimately vindicated.

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

Hebrew:

לְדִיָּה שְׁלָחָה בְּפִישׁוּר. זוֹ יַעַל אֶשֶׁת חֶבֶר, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (שׁוֹפְתִים הֵכוּ) יִדָּה לִיתֵד תִּשְׁלַחנָה. אָמְרוּ חֲכָמִים בְּתִיָּה שְׁלַחָה אִמָּתָהּ, וַיַּעַל שְׁלַחָה יִדָּה אֶל הִיתֵד. אִם תֹּאמַר שֶׁהִתִּיבָה טְפִילָה לִיתֵד, שׁוֹמֵעַ אֲנִי אֱלֹהִים לֹא הִיתָה הִתִּיבָה, לֹא עֶמֶד הִיתֵד.

Translation:

- 33 *Her hands reach for the staff, [and her palms support the spindle.]* This is Yael,
34 wife of Hever, as it is said, *Her hand reached for the tent peg* (Judges 5:26). The
35 sages said: "Bityah sent out her maidservant, but Yael sent her own hand to the peg.
36 If you were to say that the box is dependent on the peg, I should rather think that if it
37 weren't for the box, the peg would not remain.

Related Material:

Targum Judges 5:24ff

Genesis Rabbah 4:2

Genesis Rabbah 48:15

BT *Nazir* 59a

BT *Horayot* 10b

Commentary:

The association of Yael with this verse is truly inspired. While on its surface the Proverbs verse seems quite benign, it actually has a strong militaristic undercurrent, picked up by the creators of this midrash. Elsewhere in the Tanakh, the phrase *shlach yad b'...*, "extend one's hand toward," is used in violent contexts, including in I Samuel 24:7, where David declines to kill Saul when he has the opportunity: "God forbid that...I should raise my hand against him..." Of course, the phrase appears in Judges 5:26, as Yael's actions are celebrated: "Her hand reached for the tent peg/ her right hand for the workmen's hammer/ She struck Sisera, crushed his head/ Smashed and pierced his temple."

Throughout rabbinic literature, the rabbis are untroubled by what modern readers might perceive as the moral ambiguity of Yael's actions. She single-handedly (or, to be precise, with both hands) executes the most dangerous of Israel's enemies, and for that she is to be heralded. In the closest parallel to our text, the rabbis heap extravagant praise upon her, declaring her to be among the most righteous of all women, as in this passage from Genesis Rabbah 48:15:

R. Eleazar said, [about the verse *Above women of the tent shall she be blessed* (Jud. 5:24)] It means, above the women of the generation of the wilderness. They gave birth to children, yet but for [Yael], they would have been destroyed... "R. Samuel b. Nachman said, 'Above the matriarchs. They gave birth to children, yet but for her they would have been destroyed.'

This midrash also yields another layer related to gender roles. Elsewhere in rabbinic literature, including the Targum and the Talmud (BT *Nazir* 59a) Yael is praised for her knowledge of *halakha*—she knows that women are prohibited from using men's weapons. Therefore, she chooses a tent peg as her weapon, a

tool that was permitted to, and frequently used by, women (albeit for other purposes, like anchoring a tent). In this Proverbs verse, the woman is extending her hand to a more conventional women's tool: in fact, the pun works as well in King Jamesian English, in which "distaff" means both "a spinning tool" and "female:" *She puts her hand to the distaff.*

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

Hebrew:

כַּפָּה פָּרְשָׁה לְעֹנִי. זוֹ אִשָּׁה אֶלְמָנָה הַצְרַפִּית שְׂכַלְכְּלָה אֶת אֱלִיהוּ,
שֵׁנָאמֵר (מַלְכִּים-א יז:ט) הִנֵּה צוִיתִי שֵׁם אִשָּׁה אֶלְמָנָה לְכַלְכֵּל.
וְיָדֶיהָ שְׁלָחָה לְאֶבְיֹן. זוֹ הַשּׁוֹנְמִית שֵׁנָאמֵר (מַלְכִּים-ב ד:א) נַעֲשֶׂה נָא
עֲלֵית קִיר קִטְנָה וְנָשִׁים לוֹ שֵׁם מִטָּה וְשִׁלְחָן וְכִסֵּא וּמִנּוּרָה.

Translation:

- 38 כ *Her palm spreads open to the poor...* This is the widow woman of Tzarfat, who
39 fed Elijah, as it is said, *I have designated a woman there to feed you.* (I Kings 17:9)
40 ...and her hands extend to the needy. This is the Shunnamite, as it is said, "*Let us*
41 *make a small upper room and place a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp [for him, so*
42 *that he can stop there whenever he comes to us].*" (II Kings 4:10)

Related Material on the widow woman of Tzarfat:

This passage, like many associated with the women in the books of Samuel and Kings, is essentially a paraphrase of the biblical text, causing Yael Levine Katz to conclude:

Many derashot, especially in the second part of Midrash Eshet Hayil, are paraphrases of biblical verses and also contain verification from verses. There derashot often have parallels in midrashic literature, and it cannot be determined whether the author of the Midrash composed them on the basis of biblical verses, on whether he borrowed from Midrashic sources.⁴⁵

PT *Sukkah* 5, 55a

Pirkei d'R. Eleazar 33

Genesis Rabbah 50:11

Related Material on the Shunnamite:

BT *Berachot* 10b

Leviticus Rabbah 24:6

Commentary:

In this interpretation, the connection is based on plot, providing prominent examples of women whose primary act was feeding the poor or needy. The printed edition of *Midrash Mishle* does not mention the Shunnamite in this context, juxtaposing her instead to a later verse, *Her children rise and declare her happy* (30:28). In our edition, she appears in both places. While it is unusual to “split” a verse and assign two biblical women to it, in this verse the rationale is obvious—the two biblical cases are so similar, the biblical verse seems so apt for each of them, and the biblical verse is readily divisible into two parallel halves. No sophisticated wordplay is apparent, and the chronology has begun to break down (chronologically, the first righteous woman from the Prophets is Rahab, who will not appear in *M. Eshet Hayil* until the next verse, having been preceded by women from Judges and Kings).

Midrash ha-Gadol divides the verses differently, assigning the first half to the widow of Tzarfat, and the second half to Naomi, who is excluded altogether from our version. The Shunnamite remains in the later verse. Margulies, in his notes to Midrash ha-Gadol, comments, “*This is Naomi*—this is absent in Midrash

Mishle, and Naomi is similarly absent in Midrash ha-Hefetz, which generally follows in the footsteps of Midrash ha-Gadol. And in the entire chapter, there are no other verses aside from this that are interpreted as [corresponding to] two righteous women." Likewise, he notes the problem in the text of *Midrash Eshet Hayil* whereby two verses are assigned to the Shunnamite.

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

Hebrew:

לֹא־תִירָא לְבֵיתָהּ מִשָּׁלֵג. זוֹ רַחַב שֶׁהִטְמִינָה פִּנְחָס וְכֵלֵב, וְאָמְרָה לָהֶם
תֵּנוּ לִי אוֹת אִמֶּת וְנִתְּנוּ לָהּ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר הִנֵּה אֲנִיחֵנוּ בָּאִים בָּאָרֶץ אֶת תִּקְוֹת
הַשְּׁנִי הַזֶּה תִּקְשְׁרִי בַחֲלוֹן. וּזְכַתָּה עַד שִׁיצֵא מִמֶּנָּה נְבִיאִים וְכֹהֲנִים, וְהֵם:
יִרְמְיָה, וְאַלְקָנָה, וְשֵׁרִיָּה, וּבְרוּךְ בֶּן נְרִיָּה, וְחַנְמָאֵל, וְיֵשׁ אֹמְרִים אֵף עֲזָרָא,
וְיִחְזְקָאֵל, וְחוּלְדָּה הַנְּבִיאָה.

Translation:

- 43 *She does not fear for her household because of snow, [for her whole household is*
44 *clothed in scarlet.]* This is Rahav, who hid Pinchas and Caleb. She said to them,
45 *Give me a true sign, and they gave it to her, as it is said, Here, when we invade the*
46 *country, you tie this length of scarlet cord to the window* (Josh 2:18). She merited
47 *having prophets and priests come from her, and they are: Jeremiah; Elkanah;*
48 *Seraiah; Baruch, son of Neriah; Hanamel, and there are those who say, also Ezra;*
49 *Ezekiel; and Huldah, the prophetess.*

Related Material:

Sifre to Numbers, Piska 78

BT Megillah 14b

Numbers Rabbah 8:9, 16:1

Ruth Rabbah 2:1

Commentary:

In terms of literary allusions, the application of this verse to Rahab is one of the finer in this midrash. The connection is built on the word *shanim*, scarlet, from the Proverbs verse, alluding to the *scarlet (shani)* thread that the spies gave to Rahab as a sign, in order that she and her *household* would be spared the coming destruction (Josh. 2:18ff).

Several midrashim describe Rahab as the progenitrix of prominent priests and prophets, the list varying from source to source. Midrash ha-Gadol also adds a tangential speculation on the identity of the spies: Were they Caleb and Pinchas, a logical assumption based on their prominence in the wilderness narratives, or was it Peretz and Zerach? The latter option is suggested based on another "scarlet" connection: the thread that the spies gave to Rahab was the same scarlet thread that Tamar tied around her son's wrist when he was born (Gen. 38:28).

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

Hebrew:

מַרְבִּידִים עֲשֶׂתָּהּ-לָהּ. זו הצללפונית אמו של שמשון, שהיתה טווה ומוכרת בשוק ומגדלת את בנה, ולא עוד אלא היתה יושבת ודורשת עד שהצלילה התורה.

Translation:

50 *She makes covers for herself, [her clothing is fine linen and purple.]* This is
51 Hatzlelponit, the mother of Samson, for she would spin and trade in the marketplace
52 while raising her son. Not only that, she also sat and interpreted until the Torah
53 became clear (*hitzlilah*).

Related Material:

BT *Baba Batra* 61a

Numbers Rabbah 10:5

Aggadat Bereshit 43, 3

Commentary:

The commentary on this verse is one of the most noticeable points of variation between the Wertheimer *Midrash Eshet Hayil* and the other related midrashim. The others all link this verse to Batsheva; the justification for this interpretation is the phrase “fine linen and purple,” clothing associated with royalty. In both the Midrash ha-Gadol version and a fragmentary edition found in

Ginze Shechter, Batsheva is described as knowing through divine foresight that she would bear King Solomon; in fact, according to the Shechter text, this knowledge leads her to actually tempt King David, first through her fine clothing and fragrance, and finally by bathing on the rooftop.⁴⁶ Our text instead assigns Samson's mother to two verses: first to this verse and then to *samech*, Proverbs 31:24, *She makes cloth and sells it...*, the verse to which she assigned by the other *Midrashei Eshet Hayil*.

In this verse she is named, while in verse 24 she is not; however, in verse 24 of the other versions, she *is* named. Numbers Rabbah 10:5 explains her name as follows:

And because she saw an angel, she was called by the name of Tzlelponi, which signified that she turned her face [*ponah*] to look at the angel. *Tzlal* refers only to angels, as we read, *for they [the angels] have come under the shadow [tzel] of my roof* (Gen. 19:8)...the angel came to her because she was righteous. This is the reason why she was called Hatzlel. Why does it say *Hatzlel* instead of *Hatzel*? Because the angel appeared to her twice [therefore, she was given an extended name].

Like the explanations of the names of Tzipporah and Yocheved, the explanation offered here, that she explicated Torah until it became clear, is striking in its departure from the reasons cited in earlier rabbinic literature. Likewise, its source is not readily apparent. The two parts of this passage—the first, that she sells in the marketplace, and the second, that she teaches Torah—present two quite different images of this woman. The midrash does not attempt to explain this contrast.

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

Hebrew:

נודע בפועלים בעלה. זו מיכל בת שאול.

Translation:

⁵⁴ נ Her husband is known at the gates, [as he sits with the elders of the land.] This is

⁵⁵ Michal, daughter of Saul.

Related Material:

Genesis Rabbah 82:7

Leviticus Rabbah 37:4

Midrash Psalms 59:3-4

Midrash Samuel 22:4

Midrash ha-Gadol to Numbers 16:32

Bereshit Rabbati 23:1

Commentary:

As with some of the earlier interpretations, no justification is offered for this connection, yet Michal is an appropriate choice, as she is a woman with a well-known husband.

According to other versions of *Midrash Eshet Hayil*, Michal's righteousness was demonstrated by saving David's life from her own father, Saul (1 Sam. 19), and Midrash ha-Gadol recounts the biblical passage at length. However, the midrash is based entirely

on the biblical text, without allusions to related midrashic traditions about Michal and David.

According to certain midrashim, Michal did not die childless as described in 2 Samuel 6:23; she either had children previously or died in childbirth. In fact, the midrash associates her with David's wife Eglah, who bore him a son named Iream (2 Sam. 3:5). Genesis Rabbah 82:7 explains:

Three women experienced difficult labor and died: Rachel; the wife of Pinchas; and Michal the daughter of Saul...Michal, as it is written: *And Michal the daughter of Saul had no children until the day of her death* (2 Sam. 6:23): this shows that she *did* have one after death [i.e. she died in childbirth]. Thus it is written, *And the sixth, Iream, of Eglah David's wife* (2 Sam. 3:3). And why is she called Eglah? R. Judah said, "Because she lowed like a calf [*eglah*] and died.

Midrash Samuel 22:4, though, connects the name "Eglah" to the occasion of Michal saving David's life, explaining that she trembled "like a calf" before her father after helping David to escape.

Although earlier midrashim do not specifically link Michal to this verse of *Eshet Hayil*, Midrash Psalms 59:3 describes Psalm 59 as written in Michal's honor. This association is particularly apt: The psalm's introduction reads: *...when Saul sent men to watch his house in order to put him to death*, and continues, *Save me from my enemies, O my God, secure me against my assailants...*(Ps. 59:1-2). According to the same midrash, Proverbs 18:22, *He who finds a wife has found happiness, and has won God's favor*, also refers to Michal.

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

Hebrew:

סדין עשתה. זו אמו של שמשון שהיה נזיר עולם.

Translation:

⁵⁶ *She makes [and sells linen garments, and delivers belts to the trader.]* This is the

⁵⁷ mother of Samson, for he was a permanent Nazirite.

Related Material:

BT *Baba Batra* 61a

Numbers Rabbah 10:5

Aggadat Bereshit 43, 3

Commentary:

All the versions link this verse to Samson's mother; only *Midrash Eshet Hayil* does not name her. As discussed previously, she *is* named when she is mentioned two verses earlier. *Midrash Eshet Hayil*'s rendering of this passage is typically elliptical, while *Midrash ha-Gadol* makes the association a little more specific. Both verses are about making garments, as Visotzky explains, "The idea that Samson's mother worked in the market place explains how the angel could twice appear to her when she was not with her husband. If she did not work outside the home, such contact would be unseemly."⁴⁷

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

Hebrew:

עֲזֻזָּהָ דָּר לְבוּשָׁהּ. זֹאת אֵלִישֶׁבַע שֶׁרָאֲתָהּ אַרְבַּע שְׂמֻחוֹת בְּאוֹתוֹ הַיּוֹם,
אִשָּׁה כֹּהֵן גָּדוֹל, אַחִי בַעֲלָהּ מֶלֶךְ וְנָבִיא, שְׁנֵי בָנִים מְשׁוּחִים לְכַהֲוֹנָה,
אַחִיהָ נָשִׂיא.

Translation:

- ⁵⁸ **ע** *She is clothed in strength and dignity [she laughs to the final day.]* This is
⁵⁹ Elisheva, who saw four joyous occasions on the very same day: Her husband high
⁶⁰ priest, her brother-in-law king and prophet, her two sons anointed to the priesthood,
⁶¹ her brother a prince.

Related Material:

Seder Olam 7

BT Zevachim 102a

Ecclesiastes Rabbah 2:2:2

Tanhuma Buber, Shemini, 3

Leviticus Rabbah 20:2

Commentary:

At first, this was the most surprising *drash* to me. First, it is the only Toraitic character mentioned out-of-order; the chronological list of women from the Torah ended with Miriam in verse *het*, 31:17. Second, Elisheva is mentioned only once in the Tanakh,

where she is identified as the daughter of Amminadav and the wife of Aaron. Research into the sources of the midrash, though, indicated that this midrash is among the most broadly circulated of any of the midrashim included in our text, with literally tens of near parallels. However, our text alters the midrash slightly, resulting in a radically different message, as we can see by comparing the version in *Midrash Eshet Hayil* with this version from Song of Songs Rabbah:

Who is this that comes up from the wilderness like a column of smoke? (Song 3:6) The text refers to Elisheva, the daughter of Amminadav. They said: Elisheva, the daughter of Amminadav, experienced five joys in one day. She saw her brother-in-law become a king, her brother a prince, her husband high priest, her two sons deputy high priests, and Pinchas, her grandson, the priest anointed for war. But when her sons went in to offer incense, they were burnt, and her joy was turned to mourning; therefore she became *like a column of smoke*.

This story is most frequently applied to verses about the futility of celebration, like Ecclesiastes 2:2: *Of laughter I said, "It's mad!" Of merriment, "What good is it?"* In these midrashim, Elisheva's rejoicing turns out to be premature; her laughter is replaced by grief at the loss of Nadav and Avihu. In *M. Eshet Hayil's* rendering, by contrast, the story is applied to a verse that tells only of celebration, and the tragic ending is truncated.

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

Hebrew:

פִּיָּהּ פְּתָחָה בְּחֶקְמָה. זוֹ סֵרַח בַּת אֲשֵׁר שֶׁלֹּא טַעְמָה טַעַם מִיָּתָהּ.

Translation:

⁶² *She opens her mouth in wisdom, [and the torah of lovingkindness is on her*

⁶³ *tongue.] This is Serach, daughter of Asher, who did not experience the taste of death.*

Related Material:

I Samuel 20

Genesis Rabbah 94:9

Exodus Rabbah 5:13

Midrash ha-Gadol to Gen. 45:26

Targum Pseudo-Jonathan Gen. 46:17

Pesikta d'Rav Kahana 11:13

Commentary:

Serach bat-Asher is a minor biblical character with a remarkable midrashic biography. According to Genesis 46:17, the sons of Asher and their sister Serach are enumerated among the tribes of Jacob who descend into Egypt; in Numbers 26:46 and in I Chronicles 7:30 she is mentioned in the census of those who left Egypt some 430 years later. The rabbis use this opportunity to create a human link between the death of Jacob

and the rise of the next great leader, Moses;⁴⁸ *Targum Jonathan* recounts an incident in which she gently conveys to Jacob the startling news that Joseph is alive in Egypt; she is also described as helping Moses find Joseph's bones as the Hebrews leave Egypt. The two most pertinent midrashic traditions manifest here are the association between Serach and the wise woman of Abel of Beth-ma'acah from II Samuel 20, and the idea that Serach bat-Asher was among those few who entered paradise alive.

In the biblical account, David's general Joab was attacking the Israelite city of Abel of Beth-ma'acah in pursuit of an insurgent Benjaminite, Sheva ben-Bikhri. A wise woman from within the city spoke up to rebuke Joab for not asking the city to yield before laying siege, saying, "I am of the peaceful and faithful in Israel; you wish to murder a city and a mother in Israel." (II Sam. 20:19) When he made it clear who he sought, they killed the enemy general and the city was saved. According to *Genesis Rabbah* 94:9 and *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* (Genesis 46:17) this woman is Serach bat Asher. *Pesikta d'Rav Kahana* not only tells us that Serach did not die, but that she continues to communicate with the living, much as Elijah does. Interestingly, Serach may be unique in that the rabbis of the midrash do not attempt to provide her a husband or children.

אבגדה וזחטיכל מנסעפצקרשת

Hebrew:

צופיה הילכות [הליכות] ביתה. זו אשת עובדיהו שהטמין מאה נביאים בשתי מערות, חמישים איש במערה (מלכים-א יח:יג) והוא כמו חצר המשכן שהיה חמישים אמה.

Translation:

- ⁶⁴ צ *She keeps watch over the goings-on of her household, [and does not eat the*
⁶⁵ *bread of idleness.]* This is the wife of Obadiah, who hid 100 prophets in two caves,
⁶⁶ *fifty men to a cave* (I Kgs 18:13), which is like the courtyard of the Tabernacle, which
⁶⁷ was 50 amah.

Related Material:

Josephus, *Antiquities*, 9, 4.2

BT *Sanhedrin* 39b

Exodus Rabbah 31:4

Commentary:

The most intriguing aspect of this passage is the analogy to the Tabernacle; I have not uncovered any near parallels to this idea. As with the explanation about Noah's wife in 31:10, most of the classical midrashim only discuss Obadiah's righteousness, with no mention of his wife. For example, BT *Sanhedrin* 39b:

R. Isaac said: Why did Obadiah merit the gift of prophecy? Because he hid a hundred prophets in caves, as it is written, *For it was so when Jezebel cut off the prophets of God that Obadiah took a hundred prophets and hid them, fifty in each cave* (I Kgs 18:4). Why just fifty?—R. Eleazar said: He learned this lesson from Jacob, as it is written, *Then the camp which is left shall escape* (Gen. 32:9). R. Abbahu said: It was because the one cave could not hold more than fifty.

Margulies, in his notes to Midrash ha-Gadol, suggests that the connection between the wife of Obadiah and this verse is the word *lechem*; that is, a reference to the bread which Obadiah and, here, his wife, supplied to the prophets in hiding.

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

Hebrew:

קָמוּ בָנֶיהָ וַיְאָשְׁרוּהָ. זוֹ הַשּׁוֹנְמִית, שְׁנֵאמַר (מלכים-ב ד:טז) כַּעַת הִיא
אֶת חֹבֶקֶת בֶּן.

Translation:

⁶⁸ *Her children rise and declare her happy, [her husband, and he praises her]* This is
⁶⁹ the Shunnamite woman, as it is said, *At this season next year, you will be embracing*
⁷⁰ *a son.* (II Kgs 4:16)

Related Material:

BT *Berachot* 10b

Leviticus Rabbah 24:6

Commentary:

This is the second mention of the Shunnamite in this version of the midrash. This location, though, is the one that corresponds with the other editions. Whereas the earlier discussion emphasized hospitable behavior toward Elisha, this verse is centered on the outcome of her actions. She is rewarded for her graciousness with the promise of a son (2 Kgs 4:16); despite her disbelief, it comes to pass. This same child dies and is revived by Elisha later in the same chapter, providing a rather literal case in which “her sons rise up.” Like many of the explanations of biblical women from the prophets, this passage

does not allude to other midrashic traditions, instead relying on the biblical text itself.

For further discussion, see the discussion of this character earlier, in the commentary to *yud*.

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

Hebrew:

רַבּוֹת בָּנוֹת עָשׂוּ חַיִּיל. זוֹ רוּת הַמּוֹאֲבִית.

Translation:

71 *"Many young women have done heroically [But you—you have surpassed them*

72 *all."] This is Ruth, the Moabitess.*

Related Material:

Ruth 3:11

BT *Berachot* 7b

BT *Baba Batra* 14b

BT *Yebamot* 47b

Commentary:

Ruth is aptly assigned to this verse, and, indeed, all the versions of *Midrash Eshet Hayil* do so. The connection is based directly on Boaz's words to Ruth in the biblical text itself: *And now, my daughter, have no fear. For all the elders of my town [lit. "gate of my people"] know what an Eshet Hayil you are* (Ruth 3:11). The language of Ruth is in general similar to that of Proverbs 31, and here the references to "daughter," "gates," and, of course, "*Eshet Hayil*" are most prominent. Not incidentally, Boaz's declaration is the only other time the phrase *Eshet Hayil* appears in the Tanakh outside of the book of Proverbs.

Some of the other midrashim on this verse incorporate other popular midrashic material about Ruth. In the printed edition of Midrash Mishle, for example, the author introduces a passage from the Babylonian Talmud (*Yebamot* 47b), which describes a sort of *beit din* conversion interview between Ruth and Naomi. Naomi details a sample of the commandments, interpolated into Ruth's famous speech of 1:16-17:

"There are limits to traveling on Shabbat." *"Where you go, I will go."* "It is forbidden to be alone with a man." *"Where you lodge, I will lodge."* "We have 613 commandments." *"Your people shall be my people."* "Idolatry is prohibited." *"Your God, my God..."*

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

Hebrew:

נֶשֶׁקֶר הַחַן. זוּ וּשְׁתִּי. דָּבָר אַחֵר זֶה נֹחַ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (בֵּר' ו'ח) וְנֹחַ מָצָא חֵן
בְּעֵינֵי יי.
וְהָבֵל הָיָפִי. זֶה יוֹפִיו שֶׁל אָדָם הָרִאשׁוֹן.

Translation:

⁷³ *Grace is a lie...this is Vashti. Another interpretation: This is Noah, as it is said, But*

⁷⁴ *Noah found grace in the eyes of the Eternal. (Gen. 6:8)*

⁷⁵ *...and beauty ephemeral...this is the beauty of the first man/Adam.*

Related Material:

Aggadat Esther 2:17

Pesikta d'Rav Kahana 12:1

BT Baba Metzia 84a

Commentary:

After the disciplined form that this midrash has taken throughout, the structure begins to break down in the final two verses. This is probably a result of an *ad hoc* extension of the midrash, as the earliest manuscripts of *Midrash Eshet Hayil*, only discuss twenty verses of the biblical passage. Later editions attempted to "correct" this lack, possibly explaining the variations at the end of different *Midrashei Eshet Hayil*. Midrash

ha-Gadol, for example, applies the first half of this verse to Vashti, and the latter half to Esther.

While the author of this midrash has occasionally opted to ignore a strong midrashic tradition with respect to a particular verse in favor of his own method, here the author chooses a usage of the Proverbs verse that is widely attested in earlier midrashim.

According to, *inter alia*, Pesikta d'Rav Kahana 12:1, the "grace" that Noah found in God's eyes (Gen. 6:8) proved to be false, as evidenced by Noah becoming drunk after being delivered from the flood; likewise, Adam's physical beauty was belied by his disobedience and dissembling.

Exodus Rabbah 1:16 applies this verse to the midwives, connecting the phrase "because the midwives feared God" (Ex. 1:17) with the second half of this verse, "A God-fearing woman—it is she who is to be praised." Especially given that the midwives are frequently named in earlier lists of righteous woman (BT *Sotah* 11b and following, for example) and are not mentioned elsewhere in *M. Eshet Hayil*, this verse would have been a fine opportunity to include them among the 22 righteous women.

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

Hebrew:

וְתִנְּנֶנָּהּ מִפְּרֵי יָדֶיהָ. זוֹ אֶשְׁתֶּר, לְלַמֶּדךָ שֶׁנִּסְמְכָה לָהּ וַיֵּשֶׁבֶה בְּבֵית
הַבְּסָמִים שֶׁשָׁה חֲדָשִׁים.

Translation:

⁷⁶ ת Celebrate her for (Give her) the fruit of her hands [and her works will praise her

⁷⁷ in the gates.] This is Esther; she is placed her because she lived in the spice-house
for six months.

Related Material:

Aggadat Esther 2:17

Commentary:

As in the previous verse, versions of *Midrash Eshet Hayil* vary on the final letter of the acrostic. *Midrash ha-Gadol*, which included Esther in the second half of the previous verse, dedicates the final verse to the rest of the proper women of the Jewish people, or even the entire congregation of Israel. *Midrash Mishle*, in a segue from the previous verses on the conversion of Ruth, ends with a line of praise for the Torah and the protection afforded to those who cling to her. Likewise, *Yalkut Shimoni* continues its discussion of Ruth and does not mention Esther at all.

The inclusion of Esther is reasonable and well placed, primarily because it is juxtaposed with the false beauty of Vashti. Also, placing a late biblical heroine at the end of the work restores an element of the chronological framework established at the beginning of the midrash. However, the author's explanation is less than clear: how is her six-month preparation to enter the king's palace linked to her righteousness? To what extent does the author intend a literary link to the Proverbs verse? Midrash ha-Gadol, in its treatment of Esther, only quotes a biblical verse: "And he placed the royal crown on her head and she ruled in place of Vashti."

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

Conclusion

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

Midrash Eshet Hayil represents an important period both in the representation of women in Midrash and in the history of *Eshet Hayil* as a living part of Jewish tradition. By interpreting *Eshet Hayil* as referring to biblical women, the author of the midrash deviates from the early midrashic tradition of allegorizing the text as Wisdom, Torah, the Jewish people, or its male leaders. While some modern commentators who favor allegorical interpretation suggest that the biblical author is being radical by describing such hallowed concepts in feminine terms,⁴⁹ it is even more radical to insist that an actual woman or women are intended. For the author of *Midrash Eshet Hayil*, this ideal image of a female character *is* a woman; in fact, many women.

The midrash, to be sure, refers primarily to mothers and wives. However, it is not that aspect of their identities alone that the midrash describes. Whether it is Miriam, prophesying both in Egypt and in the wilderness; Rahav, securing her own safety while aiding the scouts' mission; or Serach, instructing an army general about the ethics of war, *Midrash Eshet Hayil* depicts biblical women not by role, but rather, by behavior. Echoing the Proverbs text that serves as the framework for the midrash, they are themselves active characters—praying, feeding, rescuing, arguing, even killing.⁵⁰

Chapter Two, *Uses of Eshet Hayil in Rabbinic Literature*, traced some of the contexts in which Proverbs 31 appears, while the verse commentaries in Chapter Four described the relationship between the depiction of each biblical woman in *M. Eshet Hayil* and how she is characterized elsewhere in the midrash. In continuing research on this topic, there are several avenues I would choose to pursue. First, it would be instructive to compare *Midrash Eshet Hayil* to earlier midrashic and aggadic lists of righteous women, for example, BT *Sotah* 11a-12b, which discusses the righteousness of

the women of the Exodus generation. In comparing these texts, I would be interested in their depiction of specific characters, as well as the overarching message each text conveys about who a righteous woman is and how she acts.

While my study of *Midrash Eshet Hayil* provided me an opportunity to study a lesser-known use of Proverbs 31, I am still interested in comparing and contrasting this midrash with later uses of *Eshet Hayil* in Jewish life. Its use in philosophic and kabbalistic literature seems to represent a shift away from literal interpretation of Proverbs 31 as a woman or women, but as metaphor for Shabbat or perhaps a feminine aspect of the Divine. Although Proverbs 31 entered the Shabbat home liturgy as a metaphor for Shabbat, it quickly came to be directed not as praise for the Sabbath, but as a paean to the matriarch of the family. This usage as representing the ideal Jewish housewife heavily colors modern understandings of the term *Eshet Hayil*, in turn prompting its widespread rejection among modern Jews.

Many modern Orthodox and Conservative rabbis have argued that the depiction of womanhood in Proverbs 31 is compelling even in a modern, egalitarian household: Orthodox feminists Rabbi Irving and Blu Greenberg each describe the experience in glowing terms; she writes:

It think it's beautiful and romantic and my only complaint is that while he's singing he's also getting the wine ready. Instead, he should be looking in my eyes. Without undue modesty, I can say there is always some wonderful part that applies especially to me that week...⁵¹

Recently, modern liturgists have acknowledged that Shabbat is an ideal time for showing appreciation for one's partner, and have produced alternative texts as substitutions for *Eshet Hayil*. Marcia Falk, for example, includes a blessing based on

Song of Songs in her *Book of Blessings*,⁵² but only few feminist writers have proposed “reclaiming” *Eshet Hayil* as a positive portrayal of a independent, resourceful woman who is both powerful and caring. The Jewish Women’s Archive uses the Woman of Valor as a framework for its ongoing recognition of notable women in Jewish history, and has created lesson plans for the biblical text that emphasize such characteristics as physical ability and business acumen.⁵³ The overall scarcity of feminist advocates for reclaiming *Eshet Hayil*, particularly in a religious or liturgical context, raises the question of whether it is at all possible to salvage the biblical text while rejecting the many layers of traditional interpretation, or whether such an attempt is little more than an apologetic for a text that reinforces an image of a woman who can do great things—as long as it is in service of husband and household.

This thesis has challenged me to re-examine texts that I knew and thought I understood, beginning with the Proverbs 31 but also including much of the biblical and midrashic material on some of the characters mentioned in the midrash. My interest was piqued by discovering traditions of which I had been previously unaware, and I remain hopeful that further study of *Eshet Hayil* in a variety of traditional and modern contexts will produce fruitful results, demonstrating that the interpretations of *Eshet Hayil* are as multi-dimensional as our images of what constitutes the feminine ideal.

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

Notes

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

Introduction

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Chapter One: Proverbs 31:10-31: Biblical Text and Exegesis

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⁴ R.N. Whybray, *Proverbs, New Century Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 426.

⁵ Brown, Driver, Briggs, *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 343.

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⁷ Roland Murphy, *Proverbs*, vol. 22 of *World Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 244.

⁸ Al Wolters, "The Meaning of *Kishor*," *HUCA* 65 (1994): 90-104.

⁹ Al Wolters, "Tzofia as Hymnic Participle and Play on *Sophia*," *JBL* 104 (1985): 577-87; Whybray, *Proverbs*, 430.

¹⁰ Al Wolters, "Proverbs XXXI 10-31 as Heroic Hymn," *VT* 38 (1988): 456-457.

¹¹ Clifford, *Proverbs*, 242.

¹² Wolters, "Proverbs XXXI 10-31 as Heroic Hymn," 447.

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¹⁴ C.H. Toy, *Proverbs, International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1899) 542.

¹⁵ Whybray, *Proverbs*, 426.

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¹⁷ Murray H. Lichtenstein, "Chiasm and Symmetry in Proverbs 31," *Catholic Bible Quarterly* 44, 2 (1982): 202-208.

¹⁸ Murphy, *World Bible Commentary*, 245.

¹⁹ Wolters, "Proverbs XXXI 10-31 as Heroic Hymn," 449.

²⁰ See, for example, Clifford, 44; Claudia Van Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs*, vol. 11 of the Bible and Literature Series, ed. David Gunn. (Sheffield: Almond/JSOT Press, 1985), 188.

²¹ Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine*, 204.

²² Andre Caquot, "Israelite Perceptions of Wisdom and Strength in Light of the Ras Shamra Texts," *Israelite Wisdom*, ed. John G. Gammie, et. al. (Scholars Press, 1978) 26.

²³ NJPS translation.

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Chapter Two: Proverbs 31 in Rabbinic Literature

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²⁶ Katz, *Midreshei Eshet Hayil*, 35-43.

²⁷ Other examples include Midrash Tanhuma *Re'eh* 13; Midrash Tanhuma Buber *Bereshit* 12, *Lech Lecha* 41b, *Re'eh* 12a.

²⁸ Genesis Rabbah 45:1; 45:7; 62:1; Leviticus Rabbah 11:8; 19:1; Lamentations Rabbah 1:33; *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* 7:6; 10:4; 5:4; 11:1; 12:1; Songs Rabbah 5:11.

²⁹ *Berachot* 10a; *Baba Metzia* 84b; *Pesachim* 50b; *Sukkah* 49b; *Ta'anit* 26b; *Sanhedrin* 20a.

³⁰ *Yalkut Shimoni* to Proverbs 31.

³¹ Noah: 31:30, according to *Pesikta d'Rav Kahana* 12:1; Hagar: 31:27, according to Genesis Rabbah 45:7; Pharaoh's daughter: 31:18, according to *Pesikta Rabbati* 17:5.

³² *Pesikta d'Rav Kahana* 11:4; Leviticus Rabbah 11:8, respectively.

³³ Exodus Rabbah 18:3; *Pesikta d'Rav Kahana* 7:6; *Pesikta Rabbati* 17:5; Soher Tov 136.

Chapter Three: Midrashei Eshet Hayil

³⁴ The second part of the discussion on Proverbs 31 in the printed edition of *M. Mishle* is not originally part of *M. Mishle*. Rather, it is a version of *Midrash Eshet Hayil*, clearly appended to *M. Mishle* by another hand, and, in fact, is not even included in Burton Visotzky's critical edition of the work. It will be treated in the discussion of *Midrashei Eshet Hayil*.

³⁵ Burton Visotzky, "Midrash Eishet Hayil," *Conservative Judaism* 38, 3 (Spring 1986): 21.

³⁶ Katz, *Midreshei Eshet Hayil*, p. 8.

³⁷ As translated by Visotzky, "Midrash Eishet Hayil," 21.

³⁸ BT *Megillah* 14b.

³⁹ BT *Niddah* 50a, BT *Pesachim* 66a.

⁴⁰ Leilah Leah Bronner, "Valorized or Vilified?" *A Feminist Companion to Judges*. ed. Athayla Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993) 78-86.

⁴¹ See, for example, BT *Yebamot* 47b.

⁴² This translation of *Midrash ha-Gadol* is largely based on that of Burton Visotzky, "Midrash Eishet Hayil," 21-25. The translations of the other two texts are my own.

Chapter Four: Midrash Eshet Hayil: Translation and Verse-by-Verse Commentary

⁴³ See page 32.

⁴⁴ Visotzky, "Midrash Eishet Hayil," 25.

⁴⁵ Katz, *Midreshei Eshet Hayil*, p. II.

⁴⁶ Louis Ginsberg, ed. *Ginze Shechter* vol. 1 (1928), 166-167.

⁴⁷ Visotzky, "Midrash Eishet Hayil," 25.

⁴⁸ Marc Bregman, "Serach Bat-Asher: Biblical Origins, Ancient Aggadah, and Contemporary Folklore," The Albert T. Bilgray Lecture, The University of Arizona Tucson (March 1996).

Conclusion

⁴⁹ See, especially, Claudia Van Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs*.

⁵⁰ Respectively, Hannah (31:18); the widow of Tzarfat (31:20); Bityah (31:16) and Michal (31:23); Miriam (31:17); Yael (31:19).

⁵¹ Blu Greenberg, *How to Run a Traditional Jewish Household* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983) 68; see also Irving Greenberg, *The Jewish Way* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988) 168-169.

⁵² Marcia Falk, *Book of Blessings* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 48.

⁵³ Jewish Women's Archive, "The History and Concept of the 'Woman of Valor'" (online lesson: www.jwa.org/resources/LessonPlans/lessonwov.htm).

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