STANDING AGAIN AT SINAI

Judaism from a Feminist Perspective

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then, is to articulate one version of this vision and to foster its growth. If feminist theologies help to reanimate the connection between practice and belief in the Jewish world more generally, they will have made another important contribution to Jewish religious life.

2. Torah: Reshaping Jewish Memory

Entry into the covenant at Sinai is the root experience of Judaism, the central event that established the Jewish people.[1] Given the importance of this event, there can be no verse in the Torah more disturbing to the feminist than Moses' warning to his people in Exodus 19:15, "Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman." For here, at the very moment that the Jewish people stands at Sinai ready to receive the covenant—not now the covenant with individual patriarchs but with the people as a whole—at the very moment when Israel stands trembling waiting for God's presence to descend upon the mountain, Moses addresses the community only as men. The specific issue at stake is ritual impurity: An emission of semen renders both a man and his female partner temporarily unfit to approach the sacred (Lev. 15:16–18). But Moses does not say, "Men and women do not go near each other." At the central moment of Jewish history, women are invisible. Whether they too stood there trembling in fear and expectation, what they heard when the men heard these words of Moses, we do not know. It was not their experience that interested the chronicler or that informed and shaped the Torah.[2]

Moses' admonition can be seen as a paradigm of what I have called "the profound injustice of Torah itself."[3] In this passage, the Otherness of women finds its way into the very center of Jewish experience. And although the verse hardly can be blamed for women's situation, it sets forth a pattern recapitulated again and again in Jewish sources. Women's invisibility at the moment of entry into the covenant is reflected in the content of the covenant which, in both grammar and substance, ad-

dresses the community as male heads of household. It is perpetuated by the later tradition, which in its comments and codifications takes women as objects of concern or legislation but rarely sees them as shapers of tradition and actors in their own lives.

It is not just a historical injustice that is at stake in this verse, however. There is another dimension to the problem of the Sinai passage without which it is impossible to understand the task of Jewish feminism today. Were this passage simply the record of a historical event long in the past, the exclusion of women at this critical juncture would be troubling, but also comprehensible for its time. The Torah is not just history, however, but also living memory. The Torah reading, as a central part of the Sabbath and holiday liturgy, calls to mind and recreates the past for succeeding generations. When the story of Sinai is recited as part of the annual cycle of Torah readings and again as a special reading for Shavuot, women each time hear ourselves thrust aside anew, eavesdropping on a conversation among men and between men and God.[4] As Rachel Adler puts it, "Because the text has excluded her, she is excluded again in this yearly re-enactment and will be excluded over and over, year by year, every time she rises to hear the covenant read."[5] If the covenant is a covenant with all generations (Deut. 29:13ff), then its reappropriation also involves the continual reappropriation of women's marginality.

This passage in Exodus is one of the places in the Tanakh where women's silence is so deeply charged, so overwhelming, that it can provoke a crisis for the Jewish feminist. As Rachel Adler says, "We are being invited by Jewish men to re-covenant, to forge a covenant which will address the inequalities of women's position in Judaism, but we ask ourselves, 'Have we ever had a covenant in the first place? Are women Jews?'"[6] This is a question asked at the edge of a deep abyss. How can we ever hope to fill the silence that shrouds Jewish women's past? If women are invisible from the first moment of Jewish history, can we hope to become visible now? How many of us will fight

for years to change the institutions in which we find ourselves only to achieve token victories?[7] Perhaps we should put our energy elsewhere, into the creation of new communities where we can be fully present and where our struggles will not come up against walls as old as our beginnings.

Yet urgent and troubling as these questions are, there is a tension between them and the reality of the Jewish woman who poses them. The questions emerge out of a contradiction between the holes in the text and the felt experience of many Jewish women. For if Moses' words come as a shock and affront, it is because women have always known or assumed our presence at Sinai; the passage is painful because it seems to deny what we have always taken for granted. Of course we were at Sinai; how is it then that the text could imply we were not there?

It is not only we who ask these questions. The rabbis too seem to have been disturbed at the implication of women's absence from Sinai and found a way to read women's presence into the text. As Rashi understood Exodus 19:3—"Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel"—"the house of Jacob" refers to the women and "the children of Israel" refers to the men. The Talmud interprets Exodus 19:15 ("Do not go near a woman") to mean that *women* can purify themselves on the third day after there is no longer any chance of their having a discharge of live sperm.[8]

Apparently, women's absence was unthinkable to the rabbis, and this despite the fact that in their own work they continually reenact that absence. How much more then should it be unthinkable to us who know we are present today even in the midst of communities that continue to deny us? The contradiction between the Torah text and our experience is crucial; for, construed a certain way, it is a potential bridge to a new relationship with the tradition. To accept our absence from Sinai would be to allow the male text to define us and our connection to Judaism. To stand on the ground of our experience, on the other hand, to start with the certainty of our membership in

our own people is to be forced to re-member and recreate its history, to reshape Torah. It is to move from anger at the tradition, through anger to empowerment. It is to begin the journey toward the creation of a feminist Judaism.

Give Us Our History

Jewish feminists, in other words, must reclaim Torah as our own. We must render visible the presence, experience, and deeds of women erased in traditional sources. We must tell the stories of women's encounters with God and capture the texture of their religious experience. We must expand the notion of Torah to encompass not just the five books of Moses and traditional Jewish learning, but women's words, teachings, and actions hitherto unseen. To expand Torah, we must reconstruct Jewish history to include the history of women, and in doing so alter the shape of Jewish memory.

The idea that Jewish feminists need to reenvision the Jewish past requires some explication, for it is by no means generally accepted. There are many Jewish feminists who feel that women can take on positions of authority, create new liturgy, and do what we need to do to create communities responsive to our needs in the present without dredging around in sources that can only cause us pain or lifting up little sparks of light as if they were sufficient to guide us. As the simple daughter asks in Esther Broner's Passover Seder, "If Miriam lies buried in sand,/ why must we dig up those bones?"[9] On this view, we need to acknowledge and accept the patriarchal character of the Jewish past and Jewish sources and then get on with issues of contemporary change. Studying our past can only cause us bitterness. "Mother, asks the wicked daughter,/ if I learn my history,/ will I not be angry?"[10]

But while the notion of accepting women's past invisibility and subordination and attending to the present has some attractiveness, it strikes me as untenable. If it is possible within

any historical, textual tradition to create a present in dramatic discontinuity with the past—and I doubt that it is—it certainly seems impossible within Judaism. For the central events of the Jewish past are not simply history but living, active memory that continues to shape Jewish identity and self-understanding. In Judaism, memory is not simply a given but a religious obligation incumbent on both Israel and God.[11] "Remember this day, on which you went free from Egypt, the house of bondage, how the LORD freed you from it with a mighty hand" (Ex. 13:3). "I will remember my covenant which is between me and you and every living creature among all flesh" (Gen. 9:15). "We Jews are a community based on memory," says Martin Buber. "The spiritual life of the Jews is part and parcel of their memory." Many versions of the past feed and sustain Jewish existence, but memories expanded and slightly reshaped with each generation have for centuries been handed down from parent to child, and with them a certain set of attitudes toward the past and toward the world.[12] It is in telling the story of our past as Jews that we learn who we truly are in the present.

Perhaps the best example of the significance of memory in Jewish life is the Passover Seder. On this most widely celebrated of Jewish holidays, families gather together not to memorialize the Exodus from Egypt but to relive it. As the climactic words of the Seder say (slightly transformed!), "In every generation, each Jew should regard her or himself as though she or he personally went forth from Egypt. . . . It was not only our ancestors which the Holy One redeemed from slavery, but us also did God redeem together with them." But even this reliving would be pointless, or simply a matter of momentary experience, were it not meant to shape our wider sense of identity and obligation. Indeed, the experience and memory of slavery and redemption are the very foundations of Jewish religious obligation. "You shall not wrong or oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Ex. 22:20, altered). "I the LORD am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage" (Ex. 20:2). All the commandments fol-

low. In the modern era, the memory of slavery in Egypt has also taken on more specifically political meaning. It has fostered among some Jews an identification with the oppressed that has led to involvement in a host of movements for social change—and has fueled the feminist demand for justice for women within Judaism.[13]

The past as depicted in Jewish sources can be used not simply as a warrant for change, however, but also as a bulwark against it. If we need any further proof of the power of memory in Jewish life, we need only consider the ways in which the past is used against the possibility of innovation. Arguments against the ordination of women as rabbis, for example, are rooted not so much in any real legal impediment to women's ordination as in the fact that historically rabbis have been men. The notion of a woman as rabbi feels "un-Jewish" to many Jews because it is perceived as discontinuous with a Jewish past that makes certain claims upon its present bearers. On question after question, the weight of tradition is thrown at women as an argument for keeping things the way they are.

It is because of the past's continuing power in the present that, when the rabbis profoundly transformed Jewish religious life after the destruction of the second Temple, they also reconstructed Jewish memory to see themselves in continuity with it. So deeply is the Jewish present rooted in Jewish history that changes wrought in Jewish reality continually have been read back into the past so that they could be read out of the past as a foundation for the present. Again and again in rabbinic interpretations, we find contemporary practice projected back into earlier periods so that the chain of tradition can remain unbroken. In Genesis, for example, Abraham greets his three angelic visitors by killing a calf and serving it to them with milk (Gen. 18:7–8), clearly a violation of the laws of kashrut which forbid eating milk and meat together. As later rabbinic sources read the passage, however, Abraham first served his visitors milk and only then meat, a practice permitted by rabbinic law.[14] Not only did Abraham and the other patriarchs observe the law given at Sinai, according to the rabbis, they actually founded rabbinic academies. *Genesis Rabbah* interprets Genesis 46:28, "And he sent Judah before him unto Joseph, *to teach* the way," to mean that he prepared an academy for the teaching of Torah.[15] The point is not that such rereadings were a conscious plot to strengthen rabbinic authority—though certainly they would have served that function—but that it was probably unimaginable to the sages that the values they lived by could not be taught through the Torah. The links between past and present were felt so passionately that any important change in the present had to entail a new understanding of history.

All this has an important moral for Jewish feminists. We too cannot redefine Judaism in the present without redefining our past, because our present grows out of our history. The Jewish need to reconstruct the past in the light of the present converges with the feminist need to recover women's history within Judaism. Knowing that women are active members of the Jewish community in the present, even though large sectors of the community continue to define themselves in male terms and to render women invisible,[16] we know that we were always part of the community—not simply as objects of male purposes but as subjects and shapers of tradition. To accept androcentric texts and contemporary androcentric histories as the whole of Jewish history is to enter into a secret collusion with those who would exclude us from full membership in the Jewish community. It is to accept the idea that men were the only significant agents in Jewish history when we would never accept this (still current) account of contemporary Jewish life. The Jewish community today is a community of women and men, and it has never been otherwise. It is time, therefore, to recover our history as the history of women and men, a task that will both restore our own history to women and provide a fuller Jewish history for the Jewish community as a whole.[17] Again to quote from Broner's Seder, "Mother, asks the clever daughter,/ who are our mothers?/ Who are our ancestors?/ What is our history?/ Give us our name. Name our genealogy."[18]

History, Historiography, and Torah

It is one thing to see the importance of recovering women's history, however, and another to accomplish this task in a meaningful way. First of all, qua historian, the Jewish feminist faces all the same problems as any feminist historian trying to recover women's experience: Both her sources and the historians who have gone before her record male activities and male deeds in accounts ordered by male values. What we know of women's past are those things men considered it significant to remember, seen and interpreted through a value system that places men at the center.[19] The Bible, for example, focuses on war, government, and the cult, all male spheres.[20] It describes women and their activities primarily as they aid or hinder the plans of men or, in rare cases, as they perform roles usually reserved for men.[21] The Talmud records the discussions of male rabbis in male academies, discussions that touch on women mainly as they pose some problem for male control.

But second, beyond these large issues, the Jewish feminist faces additional problems raised by working with religious sources. The primary Jewish sources available to her for historical reconstruction are not simply collections of historical materials but also Torah. As Torah, as sacred teaching, they are understood by the tradition to represent divine revelation, patterns of living adequate for all time. In trying to restore the history of Jewish women, the Jewish feminist historian is not only trying to revolutionize the writing of history but is also implicitly or explicitly acting as theologian, claiming to amplify Torah, and thus questioning the finality of the Torah we have. Indeed, to rewrite Jewish history to include women is to alter the boundaries of Torah and thus to transform it. It is important, therefore, in seeking to recover women's history in the context of a feminist Judaism to confront the view of Torah that this implies.

I understand Torah, both in the narrow sense of the five books of Moses and in the broader sense of Jewish teaching, to be the partial record of the "Godwrestling" of part of the Jewish people.[22] Again and again in the course of its existence, the Jewish people has felt itself called by and accountable to a power not of its own making, a power that seemed to direct its destiny and give meaning to its life. In both ordinary and extraordinary moments, it has found itself guided by a reality that both propelled and sustained it and to which gratitude and obedience seemed the only fitting response.

The term "Godwrestling" seems appropriate to me to describe the written residue of these experiences, for I do not imagine them à la Cecil B. deMille as the boomings of a clear (male) voice or the flashing of tongues of flame, publicly visible, publicly verifiable, needing only to be transcribed. I imagine them as moments of profound experience; sometimes of illumination but also of mystery, moments when some who had eyes to see understood the meaning of events that all had undergone. Such moments might be hard-won, or sudden experiences of clarity or presence that come unexpected as precious gifts. But they would need to be interpreted and applied, wrestled with and puzzled over, passed down and lived out before they came to us as the Torah of God.[23]

I call this record partial, for moments of intense religious experience cannot be pinned down and reproduced; they can only be suggested and pointed to so that readers or listeners may from time to time catch for themselves the deeper reality vibrating behind the text. Moreover, while moments of revelation may lead to abandonment of important presuppositions and openness to ideas and experiences that are genuinely new, they also occur within cultural frameworks that can never be escaped entirely, so that the more radical implications of a new understanding may not even be seen. I call Torah the record of part of the Jewish people because the experience and interpretation found there are for the most part those of men. The experience of being summoned and saved by a single power, the experience of human likeness to the creator God, the experiences of liberation and God's passion for justice were sus-

tained within a patriarchal framework that the interpretation of divine revelation served to consolidate rather than to shatter.[24]

There is a strand in the tradition that acknowledges this partialness of Torah and that thus indirectly allows us to see what is at stake in the recovery of women's past. According to many ancient Jewish sources, the Torah preexisted the creation of the world. It was the first of God's works, identified with the divine wisdom in Proverbs 8. It was written with black fire on white fire and rested on the knee of God. It was the architectural plan God consulted in creating the universe.[25] For the Kabbalists, this preexistent or primordial Torah is God's wisdom and essence; it expresses the immensity of God's being and power. Our Torah of ink and parchment is only the "outer garments," a limited interpretation of what lies hidden, a document that the initiate must penetrate more and more deeply to gain momentary glimpses of what lies behind. A later development of the idea of a secret Torah asserted that each of the 600,000 souls that stood at Sinai had its own special portion of Torah that only that soul could understand.[26] Obviously, no account of revelatory experience by men or women can describe or exhaust the depths of divine reality. But this image of the relation between hidden and manifest Torah reminds us that half the souls of Israel have not left for us the Torah they have seen. Insofar as we can begin to recover women's experience of God, insofar as we can restore a part of their history and vision, we have more of the primordial Torah, the divine fullness, of which the present Torah of Israel is only a fragment and sign.[27]

What is the connection, however, between recovering Torah and recovering women's history? Retrieving primordial Torah is a large task to ask "history" to perform. And in fact, in the foregoing discussion, I have been slipping back and forth between different meanings and levels of the term "history." The rabbinic reconstruction of history, which I used as an example of rewriting Jewish history, by no means involved "doing history" in our modern sense. On the contrary, it was anachronistic and ahistorical. Taking for granted the historical factuality of the momentous events at Sinai and their essential congruence with their own religious perspective, the rabbis turned their attention to mining the eternal significance of these events. As they expanded Scripture to make it relevant to their own times, they clothed later traditions with authority and connected them to the original revelation. Reshaping Jewish memory did not involve discovering what "really happened," but projecting later developments back onto the eternal present of Sinai, and in this way augmenting and reworking Torah.[28]

Recovering women's history through modern historiography, that is, through a careful and critical sifting of sources, is a second meaning of history I have used implicitly. It is not just different from rabbinic modes of thinking but in many ways in conflict with them. Modern historiography assumes precisely that the original "revelation," at least as we have it, is not sufficient, that there are enormous gaps both in tradition and in the scriptural record, that to recapture women's experiences we need to go behind our records and *add* to them, acknowledging that that is what we are doing. As Yosef Yerushalmi points out in his book on Jewish history and Jewish memory, historiography stands in a radically different relation to the past from the kind of remembering rabbinic thought represents. Modern historical writing "brings to the fore texts, events, processes, that never really became part of Jewish group memory." It challenges and relativizes those memories that have survived.[29] It is not explicitly concerned with creating a living history for a particular people but rather with correcting memory to achieve a broader view of "what happened" in the past. While Yerushalmi's discussion of modern Jewish historiography takes no note of feminist history, it is especially the purpose of the feminist historian to challenge tradition in the way he describes. Surfacing forgotten processes and events, nameless persons and discarded sources, the feminist calls Jewish memory to the bar, accusing it of partiality and distortion, of defining Jewish women out of the Jewish past.

Insofar as feminists use the techniques of modern historiography, the tensions between feminist and traditional approaches to Jewish history are important and real, and the theological

relevance of feminist history is not immediately obvious. And yet, like the rabbis, feminists too are not simply interested in acquiring more knowledge about the past but in uncovering what has been revealed—this time, to women. We want to incorporate women's history as part of the living memory of the Jewish people, and thus create a history that functions as Torah. Information about women's past may be instructive and even stirring, but it is not transformative until it becomes part of the community's collective memory, part of what Jews call to mind in remembering Jewish history. Historiographical research is crucial to a new understanding of Torah because it both helps recover women's religious experiences and relativizes the Torah we have, freeing our imaginations to consider religious possibilities neglected or erased by traditional sources. Historiography is not sufficient, however, to create a living memory. The Jewish feminist reshaping of Jewish history must proceed on several levels at once. Feminist historiography can open new questions to be brought to the past and can offer a broader picture of Jewish religious experience. It must be combined, however, with feminist midrash and feminist liturgy before it can shape the Jewish relationship to God and the world and thus contribute to the transformation of Torah.

Feminist Historiography and the Recovery of Women's History

Historiography as one aspect of the feminist reconstruction of Jewish memory challenges the traditional androcentric view of Jewish history and opens up our understanding of the Jewish past. In the last two decades, feminist historians have demanded and effected a far-reaching reorientation of the presuppositions and methods of historical writing. Questioning the assumption that men have made history while women have stayed home and had babies, they have insisted that women and men have lived and shaped history together. Any account of a period or civilization that does not look at the roles of both women and men, their relation and interaction, is "men's history" rather than the universal history it generally claims to be.[30] The great silence that has shrouded women's history testifies not to women's lack of historical agency but to the androcentric bias that has shaped historical writing. In seeking to recover women's history, feminist historians have mined androcentric sources for clues to women's lives and leadership, and interpreted and filled in the gaps and silences that erase women's activity. They have made gender a central category of historical analysis, seeing it not just as a biological given but as itself subject to historical development and change.[31] Feminist historians have moved from writing the history of women's oppression or women's contributions to significant movements or events as men define them to trying to understand women's history in women's own terms. Looking at history from a woman-centered perspective, they have tried to reconstruct independent women's cultures developed within or over against the prevailing assumptions of patriarchal society. They have tried to shift our view of the past, to enable us to see how the past changes when "seen through the eyes of women and ordered by the values they define."[32]

All the issues raised by feminist historians are relevant to Jewish women's history; yet their insights and methods have just begun to be applied. Whole areas of our past remain entirely unexamined, and there is scarcely a question on which there is not important work left to do. At this point, not only is it impossible to give a comprehensive account of the changes in Jewish women's roles, status, and experience over time and in different communities, even the interpretation of data from specific periods is incomplete and disputed. My primary interest in historiography, however, is theological rather than historical. I am concerned with the ways in which feminist historiography can open up our understanding of Torah by offering as Torah a new range of sources. Insofar as my focus is on the *implications* of women's history for reconstructing Jewish memory and the sense of God's presence in Jewish life, it is possible, through a few concrete examples, to raise some questions about what it

might mean to recover women's history, both as this recovery would affect our present and our view of the past.

Traditional apologetic accounts of the role of women in Judaism often begin with Miriam, Deborah, or Huldah as luminous examples of Jewish womanhood proving the dignity and equality of Jewish women throughout the ages.[33] Feminist historians too are concerned with the significance of these women in biblical history; but for feminists, the existence of female judges and prophets proves both less and far more than the apologist would allow. On the one side, while the activities of women leaders tell us little about the lives of ordinary women during the same historical periods, accounts of exceptional women indicate the accessibility to women of charismatic leadership roles. Women may have been barred from established, inherited religious office, but when, in the biblical period, "the mantle of the Lord" fell upon a particular woman, she could judge or prophecy with authority, and was accorded communal recognition and respect.[34] While women's "Otherness" is the norm in biblical writing, important religious roles were sometimes available to individual women.

On the other side, however, whatever they tell us of women's religious power, the stories of exceptional women also allow us to glimpse a process of textual editing through which the roles of women are downplayed and obscured. Miriam, for instance, is called prophetess. As the one who leads the women in a victory dance on the far shores of the Red Sea (Ex. 15:20–21), she is clearly an important religious figure in the preconquest Israelite community.[35] During the sojourn in the wilderness, she and Aaron challenge Moses' authority, claiming that the Lord speaks through them as well as through their brother (Num. 12:2). When Miriam is punished by God for her temerity and is shut out of the camp for seven days, the community waits for her before continuing on its desert journey (Num. 12:15). Moreover, the Torah records the place of her death and burial (Num. 20:1), another attestation to her communal significance. The same passages that hint at Miriam's importance, however, at the same time undercut it. The dance at the Sea

links Miriam with a foundational event of Israelite history, but she appears in the narrative with no introduction and no account of her rise to religious leadership. This surprising silence suggests that there were other Miriam traditions that were excluded from the Torah.[36] In the incident in which Miriam and Aaron speak against Moses, God strikes Miriam white with leprosy and forces her to remain outside the camp, while Aaron is simply reprimanded (Num. 12:5–15). Moreover, although the later midrashic tradition assumes the greatness of Miriam alongside Aaron, the actual narrative space accorded Miriam in the Torah is only a fraction of what Aaron receives.[37] The Torah leaves us, then, with tantalizing hints concerning Miriam's importance and influence and the nature of her religious role, but she is by no means accorded the narrative attention the few texts concerning her suggest she deserves.[38]

The example of Huldah similarly illustrates the scant attention important women receive in the Bible. In her case, 2 Kings offers only a brief and isolated account of an obviously influential prophetess. In the time of King Josiah, Hilkiah, the high priest, discovers an important scroll in the Temple (identified by scholars as the book of Deuteronomy). At the king's instruction, his servants bring the scroll to the prophetess Huldah to inquire about its implications and significance. When she tells them that the book is indeed the word of God and that the kingdom of Judah will be destroyed because its prescriptions have gone unheeded, Josiah immediately accepts her words and calls for general repentance and rededication (22:8–23:3). The question then becomes why we know nothing else of a prophet who was sufficently well-known and respected that the king's servants would turn to her at this critical juncture. Why is there no book of Huldah along with the books of the other prophets? What was her word of God to the people of Israel? Can it be because she was a woman that she left no school to record her prophecies and pass them on to succeeding generations?

Thus as important as references to exceptional women are in allowing us to reconstruct the range of women's roles, they are equally important clues to the silences in our sources. Stories

of powerful women point to a history of women's participation in Jewish life that is much richer and fuller than extant sources imply. The same texts that indicate that women were religious leaders at various points in the biblical period, and that suggest that they too encountered God and responded to that encounter, also point to the fact that the Bible's writers and redactors were ambivalent toward or simply lacked interest in women's leadership and insights. As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has demonstrated for the New Testament, biblical traditions concerning women are "selected, redacted, and reformulated" by men living in a patriarchal world and sharing its mentality. The disparagement of Miriam's authority and the brevity of the narrative concerning Huldah suggest an androcentric selection process that saw traditions about women as either threatening or unimportant. Thus scarcity of information about women's leadership cannot be assumed accurately to reflect women's actual influence or importance in a particular period. On the contrary, the fact that centuries of androcentric sifting and editing left any traditions concerning women suggests that these may represent only a fraction of what we have lost.[39]

Recovering the stories of exceptional women, however, even where this is done not in an apologetic spirit but with full attention to the complexities of both the androcentric transmission process and of women's relationship to a wider patriarchal religious context, is only part of the task of the feminist historian. Stories of outstanding women are important to our understanding and appreciation of women's religious agency, but they can also distract attention from the fate of ordinary women and from seemingly undramatic but far-reaching changes in gender relations. Feminist scholars, mindful of the paucity of clues resulting from a long and interested editing process, have nonetheless sought in religious texts evidence of shifting patterns and ideologies of sex roles, evidence that might shed some light on the social and religious situation of the mass of women in a given time.

Archeologist Carol Meyers, for instance, has begun to reconstruct the roles of women in early Israel through a combination

of biblical and archeological evidence. Although the details of her model are speculative, she asks important new questions about the changing roles of women in biblical society, questions that point to the social construction of gender in biblical culture. She points out that skeletal remains from the period of early Israelite settlement reflect the presence of both endemic disease and periodic plague. This suggests, she argues, that the ancient Israelites would have desperately needed large families to offset the effects of a high death rate, particularly since they were also trying to cultivate newly acquired territory and subdue part of the population. In this precarious situation, women's biological contribution would have been very important and highly valued, as would have been their contribution to agricultural production. Meyers speculates that the exclusion of women from other roles—that is, the priesthood—might have been rooted in the exigencies of this early period when women's energies were required for agricultural work and childbearing. Initially, the restriction of women's roles might have been practical and carried no opprobrium. Indeed, given the importance of women in reproduction and production, Meyers thinks early Israelite society may have been relatively egalitarian. Later, however, in the very different cultural context of the monarchy, a functional restriction became the basis for "ideologies of female inferiority and subordination."[40]

Other feminist scholars, focusing more narrowly on biblical narrative, have found in the accounts of origins and in the family stories of Genesis evidence of shifts in patterns of social organization from matrilineal descent and matrilocal residence to patrilineal/patrilocal social forms.[41] According to this view, the early Israelite period, however egalitarian compared to later times, was a period in which patriarchal structures were being consolidated and older cultural patterns destroyed. In her imaginative and speculative book, *Sarah the Priestess*, Savina Teubal argues that many puzzling features of the patriarchal narratives can be explained by the assumption that the matriarchs were struggling to maintain traditions and customs different from those of their husbands. Sarah's "incestuous" marriage to Abra-

ham, for example, becomes comprehensible in a matrilineal system in which siblings with different mothers would not be considered blood relatives.[42] Rebekah's concern that Jacob marry according to the matrifocal traditions of her homeland reflects her attempt to maintain her own customs against the profound changes symbolized by Esau's Hittite wives (Gen. 27:46).[43] The creation narratives in Genesis 2–3, as ideological justifications for patriarchy, reflect both a protest against these old ways and acknowledgment of a once different order. Eve, seeker of wisdom and the "mother of all the living," is created from Adam's rib in a clear "patriarchal inversion" of biological reality.[44]

The Bible provides fragmentary evidence not just of women's leadership and of changing family patterns but also of women's religious lives outside of "normative" structures. Biblical evidence suggests that polytheistic worship, for all that the prophets called it idolatry and whoredom, was nonetheless attractive to large numbers of Israelites. Indeed, if one reads the prophetic accounts carefully, it seems clear that an indigenous polytheism flourished in Israel up until the exile.[45] The biblical material supporting this position is buttressed by startling ninth- to eighth-century B.C.E. inscriptional references to "Yahweh and his Asherah," as well as by archeological discovery of numerous female images in Israelite houses over centuries of settlement.[46]

While such worship was attractive to Israelites of both sexes, a specific connection between women and goddesses is mentioned in the Bible on several occasions. When Jeremiah, after the destruction of the Temple, harangues the exiles in Egypt for worshiping the Queen of Heaven, the text specifically mentions women's involvement five times (Jer. 44). "Thereupon they answered Jeremiah—all the men who knew that their *wives* made offerings to other gods; all the *women* present, a large gathering" (v. 15, emphasis mine). Ezekiel, in a vision of the Temple's defilement, sees in the corner of the courtyard "women bewailing Tammuz" (8:14). Tammuz, son of the goddess Ishtar, was a Babylonian god of vegetation whose death each summer was ritually mourned by women.[47]

If polytheism had a particular hold on women, this might be partly explained by the numerous roles open to women in the polytheistic rites of the pre- and non-Israelite Ancient Near East. Women functioned as singers and dancers, diviners, and dream interpreters, mourners and priestesses.[48] With the prophetic rejection of pagan deities and the consolidation of the all male priesthood of Yahweh, women were barred from any leadership role in Israelite worship. Their involvement in worship was voluntary and limited by menstrual taboos that would have rendered them unclean a good part of their adult lives. It would not be surprising, then, if women showed special reluctance to abandon polytheistic worship, particularly devotion to goddesses. Perhaps they were unwilling to accept a conception of deity that excluded them from full participation in religious life. While the prophets, of course, condemned polytheistic practices as "whoring after false gods," such traditions remained a significant part of Israelite devotion—especially women's devotion—through the end of the monarchy.

Women's religious leadership, the biblical construction of gender, and women's participation in polytheistic rite could all be explored at far greater length. Yet even the briefest consideration of these topics serves to indicate that women's experience is obscured and erased in biblical writing and that such writing is selected and edited from a highly tendentious perspective. Women of power are downplayed or disparaged, and we are left wondering about the actual roles and teachings of numerous women who flit through biblical narratives. Patriarchal prerogatives are spelled out as divine commands in biblical legislation, but the shifts they represent from older forms of gender relations must be reconstructed from subtle clues. Polytheistic worship is condemned as utterly foreign and other, when the very span and passion of the condemnations bespeak the tenacity of that worship in the history of Israel. Through all this, we see a larger Torah behind the Torah, a Torah in which women's experience is rendered visible, and the social and religious forms to which they adhered are depicted in their complexity and power.

Looking at ancient Israel through feminist lenses thus entails a shift in perspective with potentially profound religious implications. A feminist perspective opens up the Tanakh, revealing both its historical/cultural context and the religious possibilities its editing conceals. A feminist approach widens our historical and religious vision by bringing to the fore material concerning women's religious history and experience that previously had gone unnoted. More important, it introduces another standard of *value* by which we might judge and appreciate what we see.[49] Feminism forces us to look at who defines certain developments as normative, to what end and with what implications. Insofar as feminism is characterized by concern and sympathy for women's experience, it demands we take seriously the religious forms that have spoken to women and attempt to reevaluate their place in, and relation to, the wider tradition.

It is not just Torah as traditionally understood, moreover, that can be sifted and mined for information about women. Feminist work expands the concept of Torah further by finding material on Jewish women's lives far outside the traditional canon. The process of reevaluation so fruitful in studies of the Tanakh has also been carried out in relation to other sources and periods. Bernadette Brooten's work on the inscriptional evidence for women's leadership in the ancient synagogue underscores issues that emerge from the biblical material and raises new problems and questions. Brooten has uncovered information on women's roles in the rabbinic period that challenges traditional rabbinic sources. She has also shown how androcentric scholarship can interpret material to fit its presuppositions, writing women out of history even where their presence is clear.

Her material is nineteen Greek and Latin inscriptions, ranging in date from the first century B.C.E. to the sixth C.E., that refer to women as "president of the synagogue," "leader," "elder," "mother of the synagogue," and "priestess."[50] A number of these inscriptions have been known to scholars for some time, but they have generally interpreted the titles as honorific when applied to women. Researchers have reasoned that since women could not have played a leadership role in the synagogue, such titles must belong to them as leaders' wives. As one scholar puts it, "Rufina herself bears the title *archisynagogos* [leader, head of the synagogue] which in the case of a woman is, of course, just a title."[51]

Brooten claims that there is absolutely no internal evidence supporting this much-argued position. Aside from the fact that honorific titles may not even have existed in the ancient synagogue, a number of women leaders are mentioned without reference to husbands, and other wives of synagogue leaders are mentioned without being given titles. Brooten, therefore, assumes that the titles were functional and tries to reconstruct the nature of each role. Heads of synagogues, she says, are amply attested in the literary sources as important functionaries. They seem to have been responsible for seeing to the reading of the law, inviting people to preach, collecting money from congregations to be sent to the patriarch, and helping in synagogue building and restoration.[52] While the women mentioned in the inscriptions may have been exceptional—some were possibly women who owned property and were able to make donations to synagogues—the inscriptions challenge the view that women were a priori excluded from leadership in Jewish religious life.[53]

Shaye Cohen, another scholar who accepts the functional significance of these titles, argues that they demonstrate the "pluralistic nature of ancient Judaism." Archeology, he says, "allows us to see the full range of Jewish expression in late antiquity," better than literary sources. But Cohen also argues that, since modern Jews accept rabbinic authority, and these women came from communities that were not under rabbinic authority, the titles are not a useful historical precedent.[54] I would contend, however, that if we assume that the history of Judaism is the history of women and men, we cannot dismiss women's leadership as simply a historical curiosity. The importance of the titles is precisely that they lead us to question rabbinic authority as the sole arbiter of authentic Judaism. Just as certain biblical

materials force us to reevaluate received judgments about Israelite religion, in this case too, women's participation in what came to be defined as nonnormative worship must lead us to question how normative practice came to be defined and who had the right to do the defining.[55]

Evidence like these inscriptions is not simply material on the periphery of tradition waiting for an interpretive framework that can bring it in. Information on women's roles gleaned from literary and nonliterary sources may help us understand the social context of "normative" Jewish literature and thus allow us to challenge its world-construction. Indeed, feminist historians have come to recognize that religious, literary, and philosophical works setting forth women's nature or tasks are often prescriptive rather than descriptive of reality. So far from giving us the world "as it is," "normative" texts may reflect the tensions within patriarchal culture, seeking to maintain a particular view of the world over against social, political, or religious change.[56] Thus, in our own time, the rise of a strong and vocal "pro-family" lobby in both the political and religious spheres must be understood as a reaction to profound changes in women's roles and in the nature of family life. But if religious texts can be reacting against social and religious innovation, no particular religious system can be said to give us an accurate view of women's roles until it is set against careful analysis of other available materials from the same time.[57] In Brooten's words, "Non-literary materials should be a challenge, and not a simple complement, to the view of reality emerging from literature." Evaluation of the range of sources for Jewish women's history will make it "impossible to mistake male Jewish attitudes toward women for Jewish women's history."[58]

The material Brooten has studied, both these inscriptions and other documents, may shed light on the context of the Mishnah, a second-century code of Jewish law that forms the basis of the Talmud, the central text of rabbinic Judaism. Jacob Neusner, in his monumental work on the Mishnah's Order of Women, points out that the Mishnah does not reflect the reality of what women did or experienced but the relationship of women to men as men defined it. The Mishnah's focus is the regulation of those potentially dangerous moments when a woman leaves the house of one man to enter into a relationship with another.[59]

If the Mishnah is accepted as normative and perceived simply as "Torah," then its definition of women as Other is incorporated into Jewish life, and its patriarchal perspective is assumed to reflect the divine will. Any changes in women's situation with regard to marriage and divorce must then be worked out within the framework of a system that assumes men are at the center. If, however, we ask *why* the authors of the Mishnah created this particular system, taking the code in its social and religious context, the Mishnah is opened up as we see it against the background of other worldviews current at the time.[60] For, as the inscriptional evidence indicates, in the same period the Mishnah was written, the women it depicts as entirely under male control were taking on religious leadership in a number of corners of the Jewish world. Moreover, as Brooten makes clear in another article, these inscriptions are not the only materials that throw into question the view of women the Mishnah provides. While the Mishnah depicts women as unable to divorce their husbands, other evidence suggests that some women exercised the right of divorce. A number of documents from the first centuries C.E. indicate that, while the right of women to initiate divorce may have been controversial, individual women did divorce their husbands or reserve the option to do so in their marriage contracts.[61] Recovering women's history, then, both puts "normative" works into a context that may help us to understand their preoccupations, and at the same time expands our sense of Jewish religious possibilities.

But if ancient documents and artifacts provide us with important materials for reconstructing women's history, none that we know of comes directly from women's hands. Women's experience must be deduced from works that are filtered through a male perspective or that are largely impersonal so that we always stand at some remove from the reality of women's lives.

In the modern period, however, we have Jewish texts that actually come to us from women, giving us a more intimate view of women's perceptions and spirituality. While these sources often have been dismissed as "women's literature" or relegated to casual reading, in fact they give us important glimpses of women's religious experiences. In offering us access to the religious lives of women in the past, such texts provide resources for a contemporary women's spirituality. Yet they also pose problems arising from the relation of women's experience to its larger patriarchal framework.

Chava Weissler's work on the *tkhines*, or petitionary prayers of Eastern European Jewish women, provides a fascinating glimpse of the rich spiritual world of Ashkenazic (Eastern European) women in the early modern period. While not all the *tkhines* were written by women, some did have female authors and reflect both the constraints and color of women's lives. The *tkhines* by and large convey a spirituality structured by private events and experiences. While the prayers in the *siddur* (prayerbook) are written in Hebrew and address God in the collective voice of Israel, the *tkhines* are written in the Yiddish vernacular and speak in the singular, each woman addressing God in her own name. The subjects of many of the *tkhines* are private rituals or moments: women's three special commandments—lighting the Sabbath candles, taking the hallah dough, and ritual immersion; Rosh Hodesh, the celebration of the new moon on which women were exempted from work; important biological events in women's lives like pregnancy and childbirth; visiting the graves of the dead and personal or family problems and occasions.[62] The titles of a few of the *tkhines* convey their intimate nature: "A prayer for an orphan to say on her wedding day," "A prayer to say when a child is ill, God forbid," "A prayer to say after giving birth," "A prayer for a woman to bring up children well."[63]

What emerges from the *tkhines* is a sense of the emotionality and intimacy of women's piety, its concreteness and relation to everyday. The God of the *tkhines* is a God who is very near to women, a God involved in the trials and tribulations of ordinary

family life. The *tkhines* make clear that at the same time women participated in the established cycle of the Jewish year, they also sought and discovered God in domestic routines and in the biological experiences unique to women. Women were obviously able to find great meaning in their limited number of commandments. They were deeply involved with their families, a sphere of connection that extended to the dead. They also felt deeply connected to the matriarchs, whose experience and merit they invoked.[64] The *tkhines* testify to the importance of relationship in women's spirituality. They provide models for celebrating many areas of women's experience the male tradition has ignored, filling in some of the gaps in the Hebrew blessings that sanctify aspects of everyday life but do not include important turning points in the lives of women.[65]

But the *tkhines* also suggest the limits of the range of women's concerns. Cynthia Ozick says they "reflect exactly the religious situation of women. . . . Half of them are biological; the other half concern themselves with the limited religious space offered to women." She compares them to the songs of a bird written in a steel cage in the middle of a desert.[66] The image is a bit dramatic, for the *tkhines* also reflect acquaintance with a considerable range of Jewish literature, and occasionally transform traditional sources in ways that affirm women's power and dignity.[67] The strengths and weaknesses of the *tkhines*, however, are two sides of the same coin. In giving vivid expression to the concrete realities of women's lives, they also reflect the confines of those lives. Thus they make clear the extent to which patriarchal boundaries affect women's religious expression even when those forms of expression are woman-made. Before we can adapt past forms of women's spirituality for ourselves, we must be aware of the subtle interplay between the ways women have found to express themselves within and against patriarchy and the ways patriarchal religion shapes and defines women's religious expression.

These glimpses of Jewish women's past are not meant to restore to us our history or to offer a particular reconstruction of

Jewish women's past, but to indicate the potential contribution of feminist historiography to the feminist reconception of Torah. That contribution has two aspects. First, reclaiming women's history reveals another world around and underneath the textual tradition, a world in which women are historical agents struggling within and against a patriarchal culture. The existence of this world does not alter the fundamentally androcentric perspective of "normative" texts or prove that Judaism is really egalitarian. It does, however, show that patriarchy had a history, that it developed in relation to demographic, economic, and religious factors, and that women resisted its encroachment in both the social and religious spheres. In the matriarchal period, women may have tried to maintain matrilineal and matrilocal social customs, resisting the new patrilineal descent associated with Abraham. During the monarchy, women worshiped goddesses and performed rituals to them. In antiquity, individual women functioned as leaders of synagogues, and others reserved the right to divorce their husbands, despite rabbinic teaching that this right was reserved for men. In the modern period, texts by women shed light on women's spirituality as it expressed itself within a patriarchal tradition. This world of women's experience is part of the Jewish world, part of the fuller Torah we need to recover.

Second, awareness of this neglected world "opens up" and challenges so-called normative texts. By this I mean that, in the light of women's history, we cannot see the Torah, the Tanakh, the Mishnah, or any Jewish text simply as given, as having emerged organically from an eternal, unambiguous, uncontested religious vision. We cannot see traditional sources simply as revelation, as representing the full Jewish experience of either the nature or commands of God. "Normative" sources reflect the views of the historical winners, winners whose victories were often achieved at the expense of women and of religious forms that allowed women some power and scope.[68] Insofar as women's religious and social self-expression and empowerment are values we bring to these texts, the texts are relativized, their

normative status shaken. We see them against the background of alternative religious possibilities, alternatives that must now be taken seriously, because without them we have only the Judaism of a male elite and not the Judaism of all Jews.

This challenge to normative sources is as important, perhaps more important, than the particular contours of women's experience in any given time. It is true that groups of Jewish feminists, placing themselves in solidarity with the women of our history, have sought in the practices of our foremothers direct models for their own spirituality. The proliferation of Rosh Hodesh groups is an important example of an attempt to ground contemporary feminist spirituality in forms used by women in the past. So are rituals of casting circles, invoking the names of goddesses, or practicing ancient prayer postures, all of which—some feminists argue—our mothers may have done. But the simple fact that certain forms of religious expression were practiced by women does not make them intrinsically more appropriable than forms practiced by men. Some of women's past beliefs and traditions may prove meaningful to contemporary women. Others may not, either because of their embeddedness in a patriarchal tradition, or because of a changed social, economic, and religious situation. To sort out the historically interesting from the enduring will require deliberation and experimentation.

One benefit of recovering women's experience is indisputable, however. Reconstructing women's history enables us to see that "Judaism" has always been richer, more complex, and more diverse than either "normative" sources or most branches of modern Judaism would admit. It permits us to see that Torah embraces many patterns and variations of religious experience, that its boundaries are far broader than traditionally allowed. Awareness of women's presence and participation in Jewish history within and outside of mainstream Jewish forms frees us to explore our own experiences, even in directions that may extend the limits of contemporary Jewish theology and practice. Laboring to find our own voices in a patriarchal religion, we

know we do so in solidarity with the women who went before us—women whose full Torah we have yet to recover.

Reshaping Jewish Memory

Reclaiming women's history is integrally connected to rebuilding contemporary Jewish life. We seek the history of Jewish women out of our need for a Jewish community in which women are present. In expanding Torah, in writing women into Jewish history, we extend the realm of the potentially usable Jewish past, grounding a Jewish community that can be a community of women and men. Women's experiences increase the domain of Jewish resources on which we can draw in recreating Judaism in the present, inspiring us to find our own forms of expression as the women and men of the past found theirs.

But historiography by itself cannot reshape Jewish memory. The gaps in the historical record alone would prompt us to seek other ways of remembering. However sensitively we read between the lines of mainstream texts seeking to recapture the reality of women's lives, however carefully we mine nonliterary and non-Jewish materials using them to challenge "normative" sources, many of our constructions will remain speculations and many of our questions will go unanswered. The androcentric bias of our sources and the patriarchal nature of the cultures from which they sprang means that much important information about women has simply been lost or was never recorded. Part of what we need to know we may with skilled probing recover, but the rest will need to be imagined.

But even if it were not the case that the sources are sparse and unconcerned with our most urgent questions, feminist historiography would still provide only a fragile grounding for the feminist transformation of Torah. For as I suggested earlier and the historical examples underscore, historiography recalls events that memory does not recognize.[69] It challenges memory, tries to dethrone it; it calls it partial and distorted. History provides a more and more complex and nuanced picture of

the past; memory is selective. "We were slaves in the land of Egypt. The LORD our God with a mighty hand and outstretched arm. . . ." How do we recover the parts of Jewish women's history that are forgotten, and how do we then ensure that they will be *remembered*—incorporated into our sense of communal identity?

The answer to these questions is partly connected to the wider reconstruction of Jewish life. We turn to the past with new questions because of present commitments, but we also remember more deeply what a changed present requires us to know. The issue of reinterpreting the past is preamble to but also follows from issues of contemporary Jewish women's experience. Significant changes in contemporary Jewish communal and religious structures cannot but affect our perceptions of the past.

Midrash

Yet Jewish feminists are already entering into a new relationship with history based not simply on historiography but also on more traditional strategies for Jewish remembrance. The rabbinic reconstruction of Jewish history, after all, was not historiographical but midrashic. Assuming the infinite meaningfulness of biblical texts, the rabbis took passages that were sketchy or troubling and wrote them forward. They brought to the Bible their own questions and found answers that showed the eternal relevance of biblical truth.[70] Why was Abraham chosen to be the father of a people? What was the status of the law before the Torah was given? Who was Adam's first wife? Why was Dina raped?[71] These were not questions for historical investigation but imaginative exegesis and literary amplification. The sages gave the meaning of a text for the present and declared that meaning its meaning in all times.

The open-ended process of writing midrash—simultaneously serious and playful, imaginative, metaphoric—has easily lent itself to feminist use. Feminist midrash shares the uncomfortable self-consciousness of modern religious experimentation: elaborating on the stories of Eve or Dina, we know the text is

partly an occasion for our own projections, that our imaginative reconstructions are a reflection of our own beliefs and experiences. But if its self-consciousness is modern, the root conviction of feminist midrash is utterly traditional. It stands on the rabbinic insistence that the Bible can be made to speak to the present day. If it is our text, it can and must answer our questions and share our values; if we wrestle with it, it will yield up meaning. Listening to the traditional sources, we wait for the words of women "to rise out of the white spaces between the letters in the Torah" as we remember and transmit the past through "the experience of our own lives."[72]

Together and individually then, orally and in writing, women are creating poetry, exploring and telling stories that connect our history with present religious experience. Perhaps the favorite subject for feminist midrash is Miriam. The courage she showed in saving her brother from Pharaoh's decree that all newborn Hebrew males must be killed, her ecstasy by the shores of the Sea, her eager presence at Sinai, the agony and injustice of her punishment with leprosy have all become subjects for feminist reflection. The feminist Miriam is the woman we glimpse through the gaps in the biblical story, the one who refuses to be "a forgotten flute, a broken harp." This is the Miriam who "dared be like a man, a prophet," who stands on the shores of the Red Sea singing forever "until the lands/ sing to each other." This is the Miriam who knows the validity of her own revelation. It is the Miriam who insists to her brother, "We have both been chosen./ What you witness on the mountain/ cannot live without the miracles/ below."[73]

Other feminist midrashim deal with a range of biblical and extrabiblical women.[74] My retelling of the Eve and Lilith story attempts to mine the ambiguity of the traditional midrash that, seeking to reconcile the creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2, describes Lilith as Adam's first wife.[75] I retain the rabbinic idea that Lilith was banished for demanding equality with Adam but refuse to judge her an evil demon, perceiving in that label the whole history of male naming of women who refuse to yield to

male authority. My story seeks to expose the patriarchal perspective of the midrash, at the same time exploring the question it leaves open: What would happen, what is happening, as women's power begins to be freed and defined by women? Ellen Umansky, retelling the story of the sacrifice of Isaac from Sarah's perspective, explores the dilemma of a woman in patriarchal culture trying to hold on to her sense of self. Isaac was God's gift to Sarah in her old age. She has no power to prevent Abraham's journey to Moriah; she can only wait wailing and trembling for him to return. But she is angry; she knows that God does not require such sacrifices. Abraham cannot deprive her of her own religious understanding whatever demands he may make upon her as his wife.[76] Lynn Gottlieb, in dance, song, and story, combines traditional midrashic themes with her own religious experience in order to "find the female voices of the past and receive them into our present."[77] Miriam seeking healing in the wilderness, Esther whose experience as a secret Jew in the court of King Ahasuerus was lived by Marrano women—an endless litany of names and voices comes to life and dances before us as she reaches back into the past and "give[s] us our name[s]. Name[s] our genealogy."[78]

While midrash can float entirely free from historiography, as it does in some of these examples, the latter can also feed the former so that midrash plays with historical clues but extends them beyond the boundaries of the fragmentary evidence. When this happens, feminists expand Torah not just through midrash on the five books of Torah, but through midrash on history understood as Torah. In her midrash on the simple verse, "And Dina . . . went out to see the daughters of the land" (Gen. 34:1), Lynn Gottlieb explores the possible relations between Dina and Canaanite women based on the presumption of Israelite women's historical attachment to a plurality of gods and goddesses.[79] A group of my students once used the same historical theme to write their own midrash on the sacrifice of Isaac as experienced by Sarah. In their version, Sarah, finding Abraham and Isaac absent, calls to Yahweh all day without

avail. Finally, almost in despair, she takes out her small image of Asherah and prays to the Goddess, only to see her husband and son over the horizon wending their way home.[80]

Moving from history into midrash, Jewish feminists follow the advice of Monique Wittig in her mythic novel *Les Guérillères:*

> There was a time when you were not a slave, remember that. You walked alone, full of laughter, you bathed bare-bellied. You say you have lost all recollection of it, remember. . . . Make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent.[81]

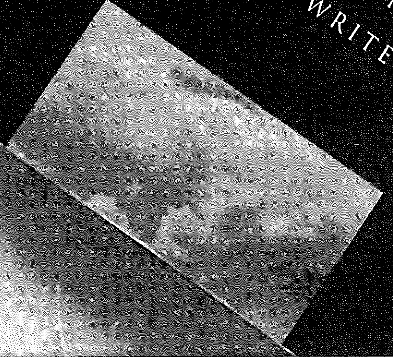
This passage, evocative and haunting, names a distinction to be both honored and ignored. Certainly there is a difference between an inscription about Yahweh and his Asherah or an ancient Aramaic divorce document written by a woman, and a modern midrash on Miriam or Sarah. The first provides us with information that can be ignored or variously interpreted, but that also confronts and challenges, inviting us to find a framework for understanding the past broad enough to include data at odds with selective memory. The second is more fully an expression of our own convictions, a creative imagining based on our own experience, albeit developed in dialogue with traditional texts. To be sure, all historical reconstruction also involves conviction and imagination, but still it tries to accommodate itself to data that midrash feels free to skip over or reshape.

Yet, in the realm of Jewish religious expression, invention is permitted and even encouraged. Midrash is not a violation of historical canons but an enactment of commitment to the fruitfulness and relevance of biblical texts. It is partly through midrash that the inscription or document, potentially integrable into memory but still on the periphery, is transformed into narrative the religious ear can hear. The discovery of women in our history can feed the impulse to create midrash; midrash can seize on history and make it religiously meaningful. Remembering and inventing together help recover the hidden half of Torah, reshaping Jewish memory to let women speak.

Liturgy

There is also a third mode of recovery: speaking/acting. Historically, the primary vehicle for transmission of Jewish memory has been prayer and ritual, the liturgical reenactment and celebration of formative events. Midrash can instruct, amuse, edify, but the cycles of the week and year have been the most potent reminders of central Jewish experience and values. The weekly renewal of creation with the inauguration of the Sabbath, the entry of the High Priest into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement, the Exodus of Israel from Egypt every Passover—these are remembered not just verbally but through the body and thus doubly imprinted on Jewish consciousness.

Liturgy and ritual, therefore, have been particularly important areas for Jewish feminist inventiveness.[82] Feminists have been writing liturgy and ritual that flow from and incorporate women's experience, in the process drawing on history and midrash but also allowing them to emerge from concrete forms. The celebration of Rosh Hodesh as a woman's holiday, for example, one of the earliest and most tenacious feminist rituals, represents both a restoration of a traditional women's observance and an opportunity to experiment with new spiritual forms. The association of women with the moon at the heart of the original ceremony provides a starting point for exploring women's symbols within Judaism and cross-culturally. At the same time, the simplicity of the traditional ritual leaves ample space for invention. Penina Adelman's *Miriam's Well* provides a compendium of Rosh Hodesh rituals developed by feminists over the last twenty years. Suggesting a theme for each month that emerges out of the Jewish calendar, the book offers recipes for combining the stories and life events of contemporary Jewish women with those of Jewish women of the past. The month of Sivan, for example, coming in the late spring at the time of the biblical barley harvest, includes the festival of Shavuot on which the book of Ruth is read. Linking the themes of human fertility and fertility of the earth


AMIA LIEBLICH
TRANSLATED BY
Naomi Seidman
[CONVERSATIONS WITH]
Dvora
AN EXPERIMENTAL BIOGRAPHY OF THE FIRST MODERN HEBREW WOMAN WRITER
the first day

Fradl

Charming but sad was the woman Fradl in Chana's shtetl, whom fate had dealt with harshly and she struggled long and hard against it.

She was the daughter of one of the best of the local families and she had a large house in the community alley that she had inherited from her parents, who had died when she was young, and her relatives who had raised her were the ones who, when the time came, found her a mate—an educated boy from the next town who was also of good family. And the two were engaged and the dowry remitted, and after the wedding they came to live in the big house that was in the community alley.

A few elegant pieces of furniture were brought from the provincial capital, and the woman also had clothes made up in the big-city style, and in them she walked from room to spacious room, in which reigned order and cleanliness and a frozen stillness.

The lacy curtains here bestowed a pale light, something like the afterimage of snow, and even the silver bowls in the cupboard glinted with a frosty whitish shine, and the woman, as she gazed out every once in a while at the alley, which was darkened by poverty but radiated the joy of life, seemed as if she were warming herself in that radiance.

A school for the children of the poor had been founded at that time, and her husband—Avraham-Noach was his name—volunteered to teach arithmetic there. Aside from that he also had some business, commercial matters, which he had taken up at that time, and he spent most of the hours of his day buying and selling. And when he came home for the meal, he would look into the newspaper or some book, an activity best done quietly. And so nothing could be heard here other than the clink of silverware and china as they ate. Afterward the tablecloth was carefully shaken off and the woman went off somewhere, to her embroidery, or else she stepped out at dusk to the bench beside her house and sat here, her kerchief bound modestly around her head, a young woman of charm and goodness, but without that secret joy one sees in a woman's face in the first flush of married love. And when the neighbor women around noticed this, their hearts went out to her, but the rebbetzin, an intelligent woman, said:

"She is still 'empty,' which is why she is sad; when her hands are 'filled' she will find peace."

And it would be impossible not to mention here the widow Sarah-Leah and her son Chaim-Raphael, who also lived in that alley, and whose vegetable garden bordered on Fradl's yard.

They also had a spacious house, with a grassy yard where

wildflowers grew in abundance in the summertime. And Fradl, when she was young, had often come to play there. The kind-hearted Sarah-Leah had fed her sugar cookies with cherry jam and had embraced her tenderly, with a wistful sorrow, since she herself had not been blessed with a daughter. And her son Chaim-Raphael, already past his bar mitzvah then, had also attached himself to her, the little girl, during the hours he was out of school, swinging her in the swing in the corner of the garden, or pushing the doll carriage that had been brought for her from the city. He would loosen one of the screws and send the carriage flying down the paved path, while they, her little hand in his palm, ran after it laughing so brightly and merrily that even the mother, Sarah-Leah, would momentarily forget the sorrow of her widowhood at the sight and laugh right along with them.

And so the years passed and the little girl, who went off to live in her relatives' house after her parents died, became a young woman and went out for walks with Liebka, the daughter of her uncle Isser Levin, and with Reyzl, the daughter of her aunt Chana, and dressed as they did in skirts and cotton-knit shirts. And Chaim-Raphael also matured and grew tall and was already doing business with agents and landowners, since he, too, like his father, Yerucham-David, was in the grain trade.

Fradl he only saw from time to time—on the market square or in the linden avenue, and then he would incline his head to her politely, and while at such moments his cheeks would flush red with excitement, her face remained closed and cold.

And his friends, who saw into his heart, would go off with him on summer Sabbaths toward the Countess's wheat fields,

where—they knew—the girl would be walking during those hours. But she, when they happened upon her on one of the trails, would flutter by as if she had not seen them; and the scent of her perfume, mingled with that of the field, would make the boy dizzy. And he finally decided in his own heart that he would no longer even set foot beyond the bounds of the town. And he also distanced himself from his friends, who had witnessed his weakness, and began to spend more time with the agents and dealers in the marketplace. From them he acquired a sharp and joking tongue—something a sensitive person wields, in most cases, only to hide a wounded heart—and on the Sabbath, while the Torah was being read in the synagogue, he would go down to where they sat behind the pulpit to talk. And his mother, as she saw from behind the lattice how he stood there exposed and small among his peers, most of whom were wrapped in the prayer shawls worn by married men, her heart wept within her.

The old man Shmuel-Meir, who was a longtime friend of the widow's family, for years would come over there after Sabbath had ended for a glass of tea.

In the past, when Yerucham-David was still alive, a pleasant sense of well-being would suffuse those evenings, along with that special mood in which the sacred and the profane mingle.

People were still dressed in their Sabbath finery, but steam from the simmering samovar was already rising over the table, and the host and his guest, over glasses of tea, played chess on the checkered board that was set into the middle of the table. Their combat was good-natured, without the storminess of war, punctuated by rabbinic proverbs or jokes, and in the meantime

Sarah-Leah, a strand of pearls around her throat, was preparing the post-Sabbath meal in the kitchen, or else she was arranging the Sabbath goblets in the glassed-in breakfront amidst a silvery tinkle that set the heart at ease.

Now there was gloom in the house.

Sarah-Leah's pearls were tucked away in the moneylender's strongbox, and the breakfront, without the glitter of the silver vessels, stood cold and shadowy, and only the luster of the friendship of the old man Shmuel-Meir had not dulled. And he, diligently stirring the watery tea he was served, just as if it had been sweetened, as before, with a generous hand, would ask Chaim-Raphael how his business was going and pass along some advice—he was a man of experience with a good sense for such things—and then, in order to raise their spirits, he would talk about what he had seen and heard in the course of the week. And they, out of respect for him, would listen attentively and even contribute a few words from time to time, although their minds, as could be seen from the expressions on their faces, often drifted far off from such matters.

And once, after such a tea party, during which the old man had heard more of the surging of their hearts than he did of their words, he went into the shop of Isser Levin, the man in whose house Fradl had been raised, and made the suggestion that to his mind seemed perfectly appropriate.

For the person in question, Chaim-Raphael, was a good sort, and the families on both sides have long and distinguished pedigrees—the match would be like a graft of two strong grapevines.

But the proud grocer answered with such an emphatic no that the old man recoiled, as if someone had thrown a stone at

him, and walked out without saying good-bye, and he carried that humiliation in his heart for a long time.

It was different with Sarah-Leah, who showed no signs of anger when word of the story reached her, and who continued to speak with members of the Levin family with as good a temper as before, and she also treated Fradl warmly when she returned to live next door—although Fradl, actually, seemed somewhat estranged—and would bring her from time to time homemade pastries or preserves. And the neighbor women, who saw this, were amazed at her good nature, and some of them noted that although she was named after two of the biblical matriarchs, by her deeds she was equal to all four of them together.

In the third year of her marriage Fradl gave birth to a son, and the dark house, which had always seemed to be shadowed by a cloud, rang with joy.

Aunt Chana closed her millinery shop and arrived to tie on Fradl's apron, and very soon the smell of cinnamon and warm honey suffused the house.

On the line, in the yard, all the infant clothes that had been tucked away for a long time were hung for all to see, and in the evening the nighttime prayers of the little boys from the cheders rang out, and Mirl, the child of Chana's old age—she was as young as they were—passed out sweets with an embarrassed smile.

It was a great moment when the child, during the circumcision ceremony, was named for his mother's father, Barukh-Leyb, who was called "the Strongman" for the bravery of his heart, and who had passed away in his prime.

When the weakened Fradl's cries joined those of the infant, Avraham-Noach looked at her with eyes moist with pardon and trembling, and the rebbetzin, who was among the invited guests, said that now the break had been set right and the bond between the two of them would henceforth be solid.

Now came days that were like a holiday for those to whom an eldest son has been born.

The fancy tablecloth had not yet been removed from the table, and relatives and friends who stopped in were treated there to wine and pastries, amid preparations for the celebration, when the infant would be a month old, of the "redemption of the firstborn son."

The custom of the Levin family was to celebrate this ritual with a great banquet and invited guests, and so the large pots were taken down from the kitchen shelves, and from the nearest town the woman Toybe, a seasoned cook, was brought over —and then the child fell ill.

In the evening the sound of women cooking up a storm in the kitchen could still be heard and by the morning Avraham-Noach was already seen running to the doctor with galoshes on his bare feet, and then the sound of weeping echoed through the rooms and the house was plunged again into shadow.

When an infant dies before he reaches his first month, there are no elaborate mourning customs—and so the rooms were cleared of everything with which they had been filled. The servant girl took down to the poor people in the gulch all the appetizers and cakes, which now would not be needed, and Avraham-Noach began to go out in public again. He worked at his business and went to the community house for a little conversation, or else he would go down to the town garbage

dump, to Zanvil Elke's, who had recently returned from yeshiva and was always ready for a game of chess.

From a square of cardboard they cut out the pieces that would represent the pawns, the knights, and bishops, and sent forth these troops against each other with the cool poise of seasoned military commanders, and sometimes they sat over the board so far into the night that the footsteps of the butchers rang out as they walked to the slaughterhouse after midnight, at which point Elke, the mother, would wake up and start grumbling about how they were wasting her kerosene and then the guest would get up, unwillingly draw on his coat, and go.

"Mixed-up" Gitl, Fradl's neighbor on the kitchen side, once saw him steal into the house through the back entrance, and then from inside came the sound of words and a moaning cry, and the next day she told the women about it at the community bench, where the relations between the couple was by now a frequent subject, and little Chana, who was playing there, listened to the story.

In that place, in those days, they did not believe in shielding the eyes of a child by throwing an elegant prayer shawl over life's nakedness, and so, along with the song of sun-dazzled birds and the scent of dew-drunk plants, she also absorbed impressions of daily life, bits of local color, of heartache and heart joy, which in the course of time—when they had been refined and illuminated by the light of her intellect, and experience had bound them into life stories—became for her, in the solitary nights of her wandering, a source of pleasure and comfort.

In those days Fradl was no longer as beautiful as she had once been, the light in her shining light-blue eyes had been dimmed,

and her body, like a plant that has not been watered for many days, had gone slack and lost its flexibility, and one could see from her knitting, as she sat on the bench outside, that she kept it up only for the sake of appearances, for the stitches did not match up and the spool of yarn grew no smaller.

In the afternoon hours Aunt Racha would sometimes come by, the wife of Isser Levin—a woman as intelligent and tough as he was. And then the two of them would go into a small side room, and they would stay there for a long time, and Fradl, when she came out to see her visitor to the front gate, her face looked as if it had been washed after a cry.

Once Avraham-Noach's sister came to visit for a few days from the district capital.

She was elegantly tall with uncovered blond hair she wore in thick curls—at her side her brother's face glowed, as if it were reflecting her radiance.

On the Sabbath the two of them sang the Sabbath hymns together, as they had in their parents' house, he in a deep bass and she in the tones of a harp.

For the first time since the man had come to live in that house, the sound of singing emerged from there, and the neighbors, in the course of their Sabbath strolls, drew near and saw, standing at the front door, Fradl, still and cold in a dark kerchief that cast a pall across her face—a shadow.

Aunt Chana, who knew the visitor a little, as she often traveled to the provincial capital on store business, came by the next day, since she had heard that the woman was getting ready to leave. And when she saw Fradl lying down, flattened with melancholy, a bandage tied to her aching forehead, she drew the city woman into the next room and asked her, speaking

laconically because of the constraints of time, if she had done something to help her, for surely she could see what was becoming of the woman.

But she, fixing her with her intelligent eyes, responded with another question:

"What could she do? When things had come to such a pass," she said, "could anyone ever really take responsibility for another person in affairs of the heart?"

And after a slight hesitation she added with a sigh, very seriously, that in her opinion it would be better if they were to separate. "Neither he nor she had any other real alternative," she pronounced, and with that she walked out and went her way, for her carriage had arrived.

After that it became perfectly clear to the members of the family that there was no hope left for the woman, and Aunt Racha, her confidante, made no attempt to shield Fradl from that fact. But she, like a sick person whom the doctors had given up on, tried a number of other various remedies: She had a few dresses made up, as people did then, in fiery colors, although they only accentuated her pallor, and she, when she was told that a man likes a woman with some meat on her bones—began to fill herself up with fattening cereals and thick cream soups.

On the step, at the entrance to the kitchen, was where she usually sat, swallowing slowly from the full bowl with such a grimace of distaste that whoever saw her would be unable to touch that particular food again.

It was especially difficult to see her obsequiously hurry to bring him, her husband, his coat or umbrella because it had begun to rain—which he waved away in protest, by the way—

or when she squeezed herself to the side to make room for him when she saw him coming as she sat on the step.

The post or the door against which she was leaning would then become a depression into which she pressed to make herself yet a little smaller and more insubstantial, and at those moments, as those who watched shook their heads, there remained no compassion, only scorn, the emotion aroused in everyone by the despised one in the Bible, like Leah who degrades and humiliates herself by chasing after a little husbandly affection.

Those whose hearts were no longer touched by the fate of the woman watched her struggles only out of curiosity, the way one might follow a character in a novel. And there were some among them who really found in it the stimulation and spicy plot of a romance. For after all, did they not also have before their eyes the figure of Chaim-Raphael the neighbor, with his "deafness" toward everything that touched upon the matter of marriage. He, whose afflicted face made him seem like a person for whom life was an uncharted wilderness.

With what careless abandon he stood on the dilapidated bridge, at the very height of the breakup of the river ice, and how eagerly he pursued every opportunity, as a member of "Hospice for the Poor," to care for precisely those sick people afflicted with the most contagious conditions.

During a fire, he was seen jumping into a burning building in order to save a few petty household items, and his mother, Sarah-Leah, when she saw that he was taking his time inside, climbed up herself onto the ladder that led to the opening.

She stood afterward on the nearby grassy field and wrung out the places on his clothes that were still smoking, and then the old man Shmuel-Meir approached them and rebuked him, the young man, angrily, which was not his usual way.

"Have you forgotten the commandment 'And you shall guard your own souls'?" he said.

And he, his mouth twisting, looked at him and laughed a strange laugh, like Crazy Chaim-Zelig during a heat wave.

Once, it was in the summertime, Avraham-Noach suddenly fell ill in the middle of the night.

It seemed to him as he slept that someone was stabbing him in the side with a knife, and when he awoke he felt as if that entire part of his body were about to split open, and he was seized by a choking sensation, and deathly terror.

Fradl, who had also awakened, got out of bed and stood over him in alarm, and so as not to be oppressed with her questions, he tried to restrain himself and swallow the pain, but when it grew stronger he asked for a doctor to be called, and she—the maid was sleeping in her own house at the outskirts of the shtetl that night—went outside and looked in both directions, mentally weighing which way to turn. But since the nearby houses all stood closed and shuttered, as if estranged from her, she turned and climbed the porch steps of the factory owner's house, and as she had before in the time of the catastrophe, when her mother and father had left her, she knocked softly on the glass door there. And the man there, inside—as if he had been awake and waiting for the knock—immediately dressed, took up his stick to defend himself against the dogs of

unfamiliar streets, and went to get the doctor, and also went to the pharmacy to buy the medicines, and then he sat by himself in the big room and waited, in case he should be needed for something else.

The servant girl, when she came in at daybreak, was amazed to see the strange neighbor sitting, absolutely still, eyes closed as if he were dreaming, and she walked over and extinguished the lamp that was burning at one side of the room, at which point the man turned gray, awoke, arose, and walked out.

And Fradl, as her husband rallied, and he could take something to eat from her hand, her spirits were revived.

She herself swept and scrubbed his room, and drew aside or raised or lowered the curtain on the window as he wished, walking about in light house-slippers to keep down the noise, looking as if she were floating on air.

From the attic she took down the folding chair, in which one could both recline and lie down, and as soon as the patient could get up and stand on his legs she took this reclining chair out to the side of the yard where the climbing vines from the widow's garden cast their shade, and she also brought out one of the little ottomans, so that the man could eat his meals on it as on a table.

But as soon as the man got a whiff of fresh air, he stood up and crossed the synagogue square at a diagonal and, to the astonishment of the people watching him, walked down toward Zanvil Elke's room at the edge of the garbage dump.

He was still unsteady on his feet, but his chess partner, who came out to greet him, supported him as the two of them walked over to the shack where the wild dogs emerged to circle

him, and a dust cloud from the community garbage whirled around him in the breeze.

Now the servant girl could put the dishes back in their places and walk around the rooms in her nailed shoes without fear of disturbing anyone's rest.

At that time Aunt Chana was about to leave for the village of Kaminka for an engagement party at the house of one of her relatives, and Fradl went to help her with the preparations for travel, and in the course of that day she was not seen in the alley, until the neighbors were sure that she too had gone off with her aunt. But later that evening, when Mixed-up Gitl approached the shared fence, she saw a kind of housedress lying there on the other side, and thinking that a piece of laundry had been left there, she stooped and was about to pick it up, and then the dress moved, and what revealed itself from within it convulsed before her like someone in the spasms of death. Then the God-struck woman clapped her hands together and ran quickly to the community house, where a few Talmud students were passing a friendly hour, and called out in a horrified voice:

"Come and look how he butchered her now."

And she gestured toward Avraham-Noach, who was among the group seated there.

And the rebbetzin, who understood that the woman had been "visited by the spirit," called to her in soothing tones:

"Gitl, Gitl."

And she drew her behind the partition of the women's section and soothed her until she calmed down.

But the people there, around the table, could not find the thread of their conversation again and so, one by one, they got up and left, as if in shame.

At about that time Mordechai Katz bought the tar furnaces in the Kochticzy Forest from the Zarczya farm, and invited Avraham-Noach to be his manager and bookkeeper. And he accepted.

A house had not yet been set up for a family, and so the man prepared to go out there on his own for the present, and he packed up everything he thought he would need, and Fradl stood by his side and helped him.

It was something of a shoal this, amidst the angry waves surrounding them, and they, exhausted from their struggles, both took their rest on it.

For in his mind's eye he already saw himself in the refuge of the abundant fields of Zarczya and felt the contact of men with whom he shared a bond of affection.

Fradl passed the pressing iron over his linens and in a special basket prepared all sorts of pastries as snacks for him, and on the day of his departure she accompanied him to the hotel at the edge of the town, where the farm's carriage awaited him. And this time the two of them walked together, abreast, not as on their holiday visits, when he would race ahead of her or dawdle, following far behind.

While the driver was dealing with the horses in the yard of the hotel, he loaded his suitcases in and prepared himself a place to sit, and when the carriage finally departed toward the high road he turned toward the place where she stood and waved his fine handkerchief at her, and this noble gesture was engraved within her as a token of goodwill, a sort of waving of the white flag to signal a bid for peace.

As one among the many women whose husbands were off somewhere, in distant regions, she began to live, from this point, a "paper life": she waited for the postman or for the carriage drivers who passed by the Kochticzy Forest, where the tar furnaces were.

The letters she received were short, but she valued them, and she read their lines and between the lines, in an attempt to find something there which could resonate with the feelings in her own heart.

In the autumn he moved to the new place and he promised to come home for Passover, but the road happened to be blocked due to a flooded river and the visit was postponed to the Shavuot holiday. And then the man who was supposed to take over for him fell ill and now again he was unable to set a date for his arrival.

In any case the house was neat and always stood ready. The pantry was full of all sorts of food that could keep and the furniture was draped with holiday covers, and to keep the other rooms tidy she ate her meals in the kitchen, at the edge of the table—a provisional eating, as on the eve of a holiday, when the important meal is reserved for later on, for the anticipated celebratory hour.

At the same time she dressed in her good clothing and was found more and more at the market—in Isser Levin's store or at her aunt Chana's, places that had a good view of the high road and where one could see every passing carriage.

And one day the carriage of the Zarczya farm indeed appeared, with the man and his traveling case inside.

Leybl, the child of Isser Levin's old age, was the one who noticed it first, and he ran ahead of the horses to pass along the news, and there, in the house, Fradl was already appearing at the front door, her brushed silk headkerchief glistening on her head like a halo.

The master's carriage was brought into the yard, and the practical and efficient Aunt Chana could be seen making her way among the curious and turning toward the community house.

For the woman, who had not purified herself according to Jewish law before her husband's arrival, was forbidden to him, and so the aunt had been sent by her to the rabbi on some matter regarding her ritual immersion, and the response came that she would be permitted to immerse. And then, after the visitor had eaten a little something and rested and gone off to take care of his business, she went out, a small package in hand, to the end of the alley, where the bathhouse stood open, one of its sections heated.

About this commandment, and how the daughters of Israel in the shtetls fulfilled it, it's worth writing a special section.

They, these shy women, who concealed themselves within their kitchens, would make their way, when the time came, through the alleyways to the bathhouse before the eyes of the curious, each of whom knew them by name.

The kerchief was too small to obscure their flushed, shamed faces, and the ground beneath was stiff and unforgiving and so slippery that it was easy to trip.

And behind them, had they not left a house in disorder, a goat waiting to be milked, hungry children crying for their supper, and an unperturbed husband who paid them no mind? He was a moody man, who did not pamper his household or speak softly to them, and against him the heart swelled with rage. And indeed it was not the desire for a little lovemaking that propelled these women, but rather the holy duty, the inheritance of their mothers, the commandment of life itself.

And these were the women who raised clear-eyed sons, weaned them, and fed them on suffering. The sons were washed not with water but in their mother's tears, and they were sated, in the absence of bread, on the sorrow of her love, which they absorbed like nectar of the gods.

There were some among these sons who were overtaken and slaughtered by violent gentiles, but there were also some among them who went out at such times with an outstretched hand and were a shield and savior to their brothers, or else, with the redeemers of their homeland, prepared themselves to work the soil and provide a place to settle for the rest of their nation, who were perched, wherever they were, at the edge of an abyss.

And so Fradl, after she too had taken the tortuous road described above, and then come out again after her immersion, fingernails clipped and her hair dripping wet—and there was still some light left in the day—she turned to walk along the winding path through the gardens, whose owners had already gone inside by this hour.

And meanwhile at the house, the maid had wisely provided bread and meat for the carriage driver and water for the horses and set the table neatly and tastefully, as she assumed her

mistress would have done—and then the man came in from the street in a flurry and asked that he be given his suitcases, because he was going to have to leave. And he had already ordered the driver to harness the horse and also gone out himself, wrapped in his overcoat, and Fradl appeared at that instant as she arrived home. Then he told her he had something to take care of in the village of Kaminka, and that there were businessmen waiting for him there, and shortly after that the carriage left with a hurried trot through the alley.

Through the clouds of dust the faces of the dumbstruck people peered as if through a fog, and an anticipatory stillness settled there, as after a murderous blow had fallen on someone, while those who stood around listened for the groan in reaction, which is the sign of life.

Mixed-up Gitl, who was standing beside the shared fence, called out in her piercing voice:

"You see, I told you he was a murderer, and now he's really spilled her blood."

And she pointed toward the window where the red of the sunset was reflected, and then the maid appeared and pulled at the cords and the curtain fell.

And Aunt Chana, who had been called by one of the neighbors, came and could be heard there, inside, her words falling on deaf ears, for the woman, as later was told, just paced back and forth in her room groaning little truncated groans, from between clenched lips, like someone trying to overcome their pain, and every time the aunt tried to come near her she gently pushed her aside, politely, until the woman, exhausted with grief and the day's exertions, finally went over to one of the couches, reclined at one end of it, and fell asleep. When she

later awoke, in the morning light, something happened that at first frightened her, as she told it, because she found her niece sitting at the table that was still laid out from the day before, hungrily eating everything that had been prepared there. But after she noticed her bright face and the clarity of her mind the woman understood that something had taken shape within her niece in the course of that night, the thing that her enlightened daughters later called a turning point, but which in her opinion was nothing more than the little common sense the Lord had put in her heart.

The members of Isser Levin's household were surprised then to see Fradl come in, wearing, unusually enough, a simple dress, one she had saved from her girlhood days, and she, going off into a side room with her aunt and confidante, spent a long time in there with her. And when they finally emerged the two of them announced together, cheerfully, that it was time to go about arranging a divorce. And Uncle Isser was commissioned to act as intermediary in the negotiations with "the other party."

While her uncle was involved with handling the divorce, Fradl slowly but surely "purified" the house. She cleared out everything that had been purchased for his comfort, sold the dresses in which she had gussied herself up to attract him or gave them away to poor women, and then took his letters out of the desk drawers, those he had sent during their engagement and those he had written afterward, and sent them all up in flames. She piled up the kindling and twigs so the flames would reach high, and she stood and watched his deceit, his empty tokens of love, and his broken promises go up in smoke. And her face, with her pale blue eyes, shone at that moment like the face of her

father when he, in his time, went out to avenge himself against the gentiles up the mountain who oppressed him continually through no fault of his own.

And then the day came when she stood in the community house, before the eyes of all who had assembled for the ceremony, and received her divorce. She was dressed simply, as in her girlhood, and now that she had regained her recognition of her own worth, she stood straight and tall once again. And people said that she was more beautiful than on her wedding day.

After all this the events came to pass that many had long anticipated:

Isser Levin went into old Shmuel-Meir's house and settled the matter that he had suggested to him years before.

And with that the fence that separated the lots of Fradl and the widow was taken down, and the two large houses at the center of the alley became as one.

Sarah-Leah, whose face regained the radiance it had once held in good times past, now lavished treats on Fradl even more tenderly than she had in her childhood, and she was the one who raised for her Yerucham-David, her son, a beautiful child who even when he was very young showed signs of the strength of his maternal grandfather, and when some fight broke out between the gentile urchins and the little cheder boys, he was always at their head. And Chana, who in the meantime had gone off to distant regions, was told that he was the one, when he grew up, who taught the young men of the town the tactics of self-defense.

For in those days the surrounding gentiles sought pretexts against the townspeople and their thirst for Jewish blood grew.

And when they gathered and came here with their weapons of destruction, those brave boys went out to meet them, with Yerucham-David, Fradl's son, at their head, and they chased them away and the town was quiet.

Bill of Divorcement

Of all the people who came before my father's rabbinic court, the women who were about to be sent away from their husbands' homes seemed to me the most afflicted.

Certainly there were others who had been robbed of justice: workers whose bosses had exploited them or peddlers who had been cheated, but those people stood some chance of seeing their situations rectified.

The arguments were laid out and the witnesses testified and the ones found culpable were obliged to pay. The law was on the side of those who had been wronged.

But for these women, refugees of the heart, as they were called, the judgment was harsh.

"If a man takes a wife," it is written, "and she fails to please him, he writes for her a bill of divorcement."

And really, what remedy can there be for the absence of love?

It is a terminal illness and whomever it afflicts will never recover again.

For five or ten years the woman kept her home and watched over the man's peace and comfort. She laundered, she darned, she patched. With industrious hands she ironed out the complicated and smoothed down the rough.

She gathered a few sticks for fuel at building sites, she collected kitchen scraps from backyards as compost for her vegetable bed, where she grew beans, carrots, and radishes, and from these poor ingredients she whipped up a vegetable soup or a fruit compote. From nothing, she created something.

And when the man came in, sat down at the table she had set, cut himself a slice of bread with his strong hands, and gulped down the soup she served him, and through the steam rising from the bowl he would cast a glance in her direction in which a hint of contentment or gratitude flickered—this would be her reward.

But it sometimes happened that, one day, all of it fell apart. Whether under the influence of members of his family, who harbored hateful thoughts toward the woman, or because he had found "another, more suitable woman"—his feelings were turned on their head. And without that special ingredient that can turn the bitter sweet, everything became flat and tasteless.

The bread was suddenly deemed scorched, or half-baked, and the main dish was overcooked and smelled off—and the argument broke out. At first it was hushed, because they were embarrassed in front of the neighbors, and then later, when the bitterness had accumulated in their hearts—it raged and thundered like those heavy clouds that, when lightning strikes, disintegrate into a frenzied storm.

If there were children there, they huddled like chicks in a downpour that threatens their nest. They were overcome with pity for their mother, terror at their father's wrath.

That man, in the madness of his rage, knowing that this was a way to wound her, sometimes lashed out at them too, beating them mercilessly.

One of the neighbors would intervene and bring them into their house, where they would sit unclaimed the whole day through like objects abandoned by their owner until night fell, and only then would they gather up their nerve to go home. They felt their way in the darkness to their beds and crept under the covers in mute terror, and then the mother would sit up where she was and understand that things couldn't go on this way, someone would have to put a stop to it. And soon the day would come when she stepped out her door and made her way toward the community house.

How did she feel, walking this road of sorrow, at whose end lay her expulsion from her house?

The grocer at the corner of the community-house alley went out to stand at his door to sneak a look at her, and from the bakery stoop, further down the alley, the woman, his wife, came down to greet her.

They had never been very close friends, but now she came and scrutinized her with that look that, to a stricken person, feels like fingers probing a wound.

The beadle in the yard of the rabbinic courthouse, a familiar face, was now pretending not to know her. He was in his official role now, and the building itself, when she entered it, felt like a bridge with no railings for support, a dizzying walk over the terrifying abyss.

The scribe's implements on the table; the sharp, opened penknife glinting among them; the judge's bench, just as she had always imagined the Heavenly Court before which she was destined to stand when her time came; and the icy chill that came from the corner where he sat, fortified by the members of his family, who formed a wall around him now.

Those people—if there was any enmity between them and the woman, they could not hide their satisfaction now. The man was a link that had been ripped from its chain, and now he was back where he belonged, linked up with them again.

They had already slipped a bottle of water into his pocket early that morning, so that he could wash his hands the minute he had handed over the divorce decree and thus "be the first to grab the good luck," and then one of them disappeared to bring liquor and cake, stepping behind the wooden partition to our part of the house to ask for glasses and a tray.

My mother, who was ordinarily so gracious and even-tempered, would simply refuse.

"That cupboard is just too hard to reach," she would reply. And instead, as the preparations for drawing up the divorce decree came to an end, she would bring the woman into her own part of the house.

The meadow opened out here beyond the window, and over the sofa where she had seated the woman she could see it, in the summer, with its lush grass, stretching out into the ample expanses with an innocent serenity, not identifying in the least with the twisted paths of the human heart or its troubles:

The water-filled ditches that lay so calmly there, bordering the gardens, with the reflected radiance of the sky flickering within them, and the solitary linden tree beside them, the sight

of which might arouse encouraging thoughts, since undoubtedly the stormy gales had unleashed their fury upon it more than once, and nevertheless there it was, still standing.

Mother, seeing the thoughtful expression the woman was wearing, disappeared from the room.

The place where a person communes with their heart is holy—she believed—and no stranger should approach it.

But now the silence had finally ended there, on the other side of the partition, and the final hour had come, heavy with fate and the full severity of the law.

The Hebrew words were read aloud, the witnesses arose to affix their signatures, and the man, standing with a quorum of men around him, handed his wife the bill of divorcement, explicitly pronouncing her divorced and cast off from him, and now the circle opened around her and she was pushed out of it and stood isolated, and she stumbled about a little this way and that before she found her way out the door.

My mother—if it was already after nightfall—set the lantern out on the windowsill, but the ray it cast across the path outside was empty. She dropped out of sight and was swallowed by the darkness.

And then there would be a sequel. A few women, either because they felt sorry for her or because their own marriages were less than entirely happy, decided to do something to improve her situation. They supplied her with some dry goods or foodstuffs and she set out to peddle this merchandise, but there was nothing that could really set things right again.

Her hands grew tired from holding up a home that had lost its central pillar, and everything began to seem vacuous:

The dining table on Sabbaths and holidays, the bedside of a sick child and the bench outside, where they had taken the breeze on summer evenings.

And then, of course, there were the dreams, recurring images, echoes of what had once been:

A warm gaze through the window as she came back in the morning from market. Bathing a child together, shoulder to shoulder in the hot steam rising from the basin, and his loyal shudder at the sound of the stifled cry of her pain.

With the fragments of such reflections still within her she stood the next morning by her basket and haggled with customers, her eye caught by every thread of smoke rising from his chimney, every half-shadow in which she'd see his figure.

And sometimes, in some nearby alley, bending over to look at their child, she would see him and, for a moment, they'd be united by a common love.

"So not everything has been cut off," she would stop short, excited. "So why, then? Why has it come to this?"

But it also sometimes happened that, among the people coming and going in the streets, she would see a small child one day with a face just like his, and he—looked just like the son who was walking with her, at her side, and then the child would be told:

"Look, it's your brother. Go give him a nice kiss," and the earth would crumble beneath her feet.

There was yet another kind of woman who was sentenced to divorce: the women who had been with their husbands for ten years without having children. For these women, the amputation scar never healed.

Among these women I remember the peddler Zlateh who lived in the gulch—a brave soul who was always in good spirits.

At one time she had married someone from the neighborhood, Isser Ber was his name, an unemployed bookbinder.

For years she had pursued him—they said—and finally she had won her heart's desire, and after that she was fueled by the same spirit with which the biblical Jacob rolled the heavy boulder from the mouth of the well.

She easily hoisted her two baskets, filled to the brim with fruits and vegetables.

Between buying and selling, she washed strangers' laundry by the riverbank, and at night she kneaded rye dough at the baker's, earning, in addition to a few copper coins, a small loaf baked from the remnants of the dough, and this she ate afterward with her Isser Ber (in the summer, under the pear tree outside), passing him slice after slice, and the scent of love arose from there, mingling with the smell of the meal she had cooked overnight in the baker's oven.

The people who lived in the neighborhood, as they came and went, would rest their gaze on them with the same radiant faces with which they would look at a blossoming tree or at a garden drunk with sunlight and dew.

But here, in the meantime, the years were passing, and the still childless woman had no idea that their limit had already been set and was rapidly approaching.

Her body was worn out and she was also a few years older than the man, and the other members of his family looked and saw now that the family tree—one of its limbs was in danger of withering.

When the tenth year came, the designated one, his relatives came from the village of Kaminka and took him home with them, and she, in her naïveté, was happy about that.

"Let him get a little fresh air," she said.

And she would send him challahs every Sabbath with a braid of dough on top, the kind he liked, and also—to stimulate his appetite—some herring, which was hard to come by over there in the village.

On the day he was supposed to come home she happened to find, in the market, a few cherries from the Countess's garden, and her eyes shone as brightly as the dewy fruit she was carrying home.

I'll boil them for my Isser Ber, she thought; he loves cherry jam.

And as she was boiling them later, standing over the stove with her cheeks flushed, she was surprised to see her two brothers-in-law from Kaminka enter, their faces as hard as someone about to execute a sentence, with Isser Ber himself walking behind them, his eyes averted and his face quivering like a flame exposed to a blast of chilly air.

I saw the woman on the morning of her divorce, as she stood waiting to come into the courtroom inside our house.

The scribe, at the community table, was just beginning to sharpen his knife at that moment, and she lurched like a bull being led into the slaughterhouse, when he gets his first whiff of warm blood.

"No, no," she said.

And my mother, who was standing in the doorway of the room, took a step backward and quickly turned her face aside.

A young girl had already been arranged for the man, a girl

whose sisters were fertile women who had borne many sons, and he was quickly brought to the wedding canopy with her. And before the year was out, she was sitting on the bench beside their house—she was the daughter of Jonah the carpenter, from our alley—a sturdy baby boy on her lap.

People remembered for a long time afterward the commotion in the synagogue the Sabbath she came to services for the first time after the birth.

She was wearing a new dress she had sewn herself, which all the women took notice of, since she was a seamstress who knew what sorts of things they were wearing in the city, and suddenly from the corner where the peddler woman was sitting a strange cough could be heard, and then the sobs broke out—the kind of wailing that wells up from the depths and repels all attempts at consolation and subduing and makes everyone who hears it doubt that the world is truly as it should be.

They tried to go over to the woman afterward and soothe her. She was offered a prime spot in the market, and then the baker from her neighborhood wanted to hire her as his regular housekeeper, but when she did not respond—they left her alone, the way people let a house in flames burn itself out once it no longer poses a threat to others—and she continued to flicker until she was finally extinguished.

It happened on a summer morning, the rasp of the saw and sander and a trill of song broke forth from the carpentry shop, and now along came someone from the gulch and went into the workshop and the ruckus stopped, and after that the funeral procession passed through the alley, a loner's funeral, with no eulogy and no tears.

The people, those who were busy working, came and stood

in their doorways while others came out and walked with the procession until the crossroad, and after that a silence fell, in which, like static in a telegraph line, thoughts hummed and throbbed.

The peddler woman's neighbor, Esther the bagel seller, finally put the essence of these thoughts into words, turning either to the carpentry shop or to the community house to ask why they hadn't just killed that woman right then and there? Why the agony of a long, slow death?

"If you cut off someone's head," she said angrily, the tears flowing, "then do it, at least, with one stroke."