

National Jewish Book Award Talk (3.5.09)

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Women have been interpreters of our traditions from the very beginning. Thus Genesis portrays Eve as the one who bestows meaning on experience. It is Eve, not Adam, who speaks in Genesis when they leave the garden. First she names her first born as an expression of her relationship with Go. Next, she records the family history when she names the third son Seth, saying, “God has provided me with another offspring in place of Abel, for Cain had killed him” (Gen 4:25).

Then, at the other end of the spectrum of biblical narrative, there is Huldah, the female prophet who, according to 2 Kings 22, authenticates the book of the Torah as a legitimate message from God and whose authority is unquestionably recognized by King Josiah, who then launches reforms based on Huldah’s authentication.

Although few in numbers, extraordinary women sparkle throughout the Bible like so many precious jewels. But ordinary women also stand out, sometimes unnamed, sometimes in the shadows, waiting for us to discover them and reclaim their stories.

Our book, *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary* aims to bring the voices of women back into the Jewish dialogue, both the women in the biblical text as well as the women in our world today. The *Commentary* was conceived by Cantor Sarah Sager, who listened to the voice of Sarah the matriarch; but she also listened to the silence, which motivated her to challenge the Women of Reform Judaism to bring about a Women’s Torah commentary.

This commentary has a cast of thousands, all of them are with us in spirit – and some are here in body - as we accept this award: the women in the Bible, together with the scholars, clergy, poets, and the Women of Reform Judaism.

The *Commentary’s* contributors come from around the world and from the broad spectrum of the Jewish community: they include Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist, and unaffiliated Jews; they constitute a sisterhood committed to mainstreaming Jewish women’s voices as an authentic part of our shared tradition.

Like the five biblical sisters known as Zelophehad’s daughters, namely Mahlah, Milcah, Noa, Hoglah and Tirzah, who demanded from Moses and the leadership in the wilderness a rightful share of their ancestral heritage, so too the Women of Reform Judaism were determined to get their rightful share of our heritage.

But these modern sisters did not appeal to any outside authorities; instead, they relied on the strong leaders in their midst, such as Judith Hertz, Elaine Merians, Rosanne Selfon, Shelley Lindaur, Joanne Fried and the many others who tirelessly sustained the project.

And here we are. So what’s in this Commentary? Our commentary examines each Torah portion through five different lenses – biblical, rabbinic, contemporary, and poetic - systematically showing what the Torah meant in its earliest settings, what the Torah has come to mean to our people through time, and what it can mean for us now and for those who will come after.

In utilizing the multi-voiced approach to the Torah, we perpetuate the quintessential Jewish interpretive tradition of the sages, embodied in the Talmud, midrash, and Miqraot G'dolat -- with one key difference: in our commentary all the sages are women.

It has been questioned recently whether it is possible to embrace the Torah with integrity, with all that the term Torah encompasses, and also hold to rigorous biblical scholarship that challenges so many biblical claims.

Our Commentary demonstrates that the answer is: yes.

This award tells us that we succeeded in making our case. And so we thank the Everett Family Foundation and the Jewish Book Council for the recognition you have bestowed upon all of us, for your recognition of what Jewish women have achieved.