

National Jewish Book Award Ceremony
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In a poem called "Torah," Barbara Holendar writes:

Even when you hold it in your arms,
you have not grasped it.
Wrapped and turned it upon itself
the scroll says, Not yet.

Even when you take them in your eyes,
you have not seen them; elegant
in their crowns the letters stand aloof.

Even when you taste them in your mouth
and roll them on your tongue
or bite the sharp unyielding strokes
they say, Not yet.

And when the sounds pour from your throat
and reach deep into your lungs for breath,
even then the words say, Not quite.

But when your heart knows its own hunger
and your mind is seized and shaken,
and in the narrow space between the lines
your soul builds its nest,

Now, says Torah, now
you begin to understand.

This poem captures the challenge and the potential of Torah study, the way Torah eludes easy explanations, yet yields rich rewards for those who *laasok b'divrei Torah*, those who immerse themselves in its words. Because of the "not yet" nature of Torah, we are the inheritors of an immense legacy of Jewish biblical interpretation, the wisdom of generation after generation of Jews who have grappled with Torah, asking: What does this ancient, sacred text mean? And what does it mean for us today? Torah summons us to turn it and turn it again, to keep reading and keep wrestling. As a result, we need as many resources as possible to help us unpack the *p'shat*, the plain sense of the text, and to uncover the endless, timeless layers of meaning. Tonight's award recognizes what an important addition *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* is to our collective Jewish library, a valuable new resource for women and men, Jews and non-Jews alike.

Renowned Jewish feminist theologian Judith Plaskow emphasized the importance of this project when she called the publication of *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* "a watershed event," perhaps as significant, she surmised, as the ordination of the first woman rabbi. Since the Commentary's debut, I have traveled to communities across the country, collecting anecdotes that affirm Judith Plaskow's assertions, some of which I would like to share with you now:

- A sisterhood group in Ann Arbor, Michigan conveyed to one of our contributors how studying with *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* made them feel that they were no longer by-standers, listening in on a conversation aimed at someone else; instead, they now sensed that the text was speaking to and about them as Jewish women.
- A woman in a Conservative synagogue in suburban Philadelphia noted that the Commentary made her realize that she was part of Jewish tradition, linked through her knitting to the skilled women who spun yarns to make tapestries for the Tabernacle, something she had never learned before.
- A woman in Los Angeles admitted to me that growing up in an Orthodox Jewish day school, she had often wondered what women might have said about the issues addressed by the classical Jewish commentators; delightedly, she declared: "And now I can find out."
- A man in a Reform congregation in Houston confided to me recently that while he has been going to Shabbat morning Torah study for several years, he only started feeling comfortable contributing to the conversation once the group began using *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* this fall.
- A Christian friend in emailed me just the other day, eager to share that he has been bringing the Commentary to Bible study at his Manhattan church.
- At a lecture last year at The Jewish Theological Seminary, scholar Judith Hauptman marveled at this book helped her to discover new things in the Torah as she made new connections, as she sensed new sparks.

Perhaps this is what Barbara Holendar means when she describes how "in the narrow space between the lines your soul builds its nest." And perhaps this is why the Commentary merits the 2008 Everett Family Foundation Jewish Book of the Year Award. With tremendous gratitude, we thank the Jewish Book Council and the Everett Family Foundation for the honor of this esteemed award.