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**Sexual Stereotyping and the Manipulation of  
Female Role Models in Jewish Bible Textbooks:  
A Study in the History of Biblical Interpretation  
and its Application to Jewish School Curricula**

by

**Phyllis Silverman Kramer**

**A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
and Research in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**Department of Jewish Studies  
McGill University  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada**

**March, 1994**

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Biblical Women, Jewish Bible Exegesis, and  
Jewish School Curricula

## Abstract

Having been a male dominated pursuit, Bible interpretation has long reflected a male bias and encouraged sexual stereotyping in the study of biblical characters. The history of Jewish Bible interpretation and the traditional Jewish emphasis on works of specific exegetes have, in turn, colored the educational materials used in Jewish school curricula and stereotypes have been perpetuated as elementary school children study the Bible. This thesis focuses on eight women in Scripture. After examining the Bible, selected rabbinic exegetical works are studied to see how this literature reflects or changes the Bible's image. A review of textbooks and teaching tools used for Bible study follows to see how these educational materials present the biblical women, whether or not they mirror classical Jewish perspectives on biblical women, and if they offer a varied portrait of the figures.

## Sommaire

L'interprétation de la Bible, parce qu'elle a longtemps été une discipline exclusivement masculine, a été entachée de préjugés mâles et a maintenu les stéréotypes sexuels dans l'étude des personnages bibliques. Ce passé d'interprétation mâle ainsi que l'importance accordée par la tradition à l'oeuvre d'exégètes toujours masculins ont, à leur tour, influencé les outils pédagogiques utilisés dans les écoles juives, de sorte que les stéréotypes sexuels ont été transmis aux écoliers qui étudiaient la Bible pendant leurs études primaires.

Cette thèse se penche sur huit personnages féminins des Saintes Écritures; après une étude du texte biblique, certaines interprétations rabbiniques sont étudiées pour établir à quel point elles sont fidèles ou non à la lettre du texte. Suit une inspection des outils pédagogiques utilisés pour l'étude de la Bible pour découvrir comment on y présente les femmes de la Bible et déterminer se l'on s'y inspire de l'interprétation juive traditionnelle ou d'une perspective différente.

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## Abbreviations

### Midrashim:

C. J.	Chronicles of Jerahmeel
Deut. R.	Deuteronomy Rabbah
Eccl. R.	Ecclesiastes Rabbah
Est. R.	Esther Rabbah
Ex. R.	Exodus Rabbah
Gen. R.	Genesis Rabbah
Lam. R.	Lamentations Rabbah
Lev. R.	Leviticus Rabbah
Mekh.	Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael
M. T.	Midrash Tanhuma
Num. R.	Numbers Rabbah
P. R.	Pesikta Rabbati
P. R. E.	Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer
P. R. K.	Pirke de-Rab Kahana
T. E.	Tanna debe Eliyyahu

### Babylonian Talmud Tractates:

Ab.	Aboth
Ber.	Berakhoth
B. B.	Baba Bathra
B. K.	Baba Kamma
B. M.	Baba Metzia
Hor.	Horayoth
Meg.	Megillah
Ned.	Nedarim
Pes.	Pesaḥim
R. H.	Rosh Hashonah
San.	Sanhedrin
Yeb.	Yebamoth

### Miscellaneous commentaries:

M. D.	Meşudat David
M. Z.	Meşudat Zion

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Because Scripture is the primary guiding spiritual force that regulates and influences the entire Jewish people and is taught to females no less than to males (indeed, in some Orthodox Jewish circles females study it much more than males), one might suspect that educational texts about the Bible would project both male and female role models in a relatively balanced way. Yet this does not appear to be the case. Subjective interpretation has played an important role in virtually all Jewish understanding of the Hebrew Bible throughout the past twenty-five centuries and remains a meaningful factor in contemporary efforts to fathom the text. Until the late nineteenth century, virtually all known Jewish biblical exegetes were male, and virtually all Bible scholarship reflected a male-oriented bias that re-affirmed and elucidated the patriarchal society of biblical times. In fact, one of the functional tasks of religious commentaries and educational texts is to insure that the Bible is used as a model for an exemplary lifestyle and is taught in culturally acceptable ways, not necessarily in ways that reflect the ancient Near Eastern contexts in which the books were originally composed or the authors' original purposes.

## A. The History of Jewish Interpretation of the Bible

The first of five major periods in the history of Jewish Bible interpretation is the biblical period itself. No extra-biblical interpretative documents from this time are extant, but the Bible contains many passages commenting on earlier biblical passages. Editorial contributions to the text also provide important attempts at explanation; textual duplications, word changes or omissions, and additions from one part of the text to another are indicative of scribal arts.<sup>1</sup>

The Greco-Roman Period commenced in the fourth century B.C.E. Some exegetes of this time built their interpretations around the use of allegory; others rewrote the Bible in the light of their individual needs and the interests of their followers. This was a prolific period and included the writings of Philo and Josephus, the Dead Sea Scrolls (Genesis Apocryphon is studied in this paper), and many of the interpretative texts now found in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha such as Pseudo-Philo and The Book of Jubilees.

Later antiquity has also left a rich legacy of Jewish Bible commentary. The targumim, talmudim, and midrashim form a corpus of literature with enormous influence and breadth. Its component parts present and clarify the oral traditions that rabbinic Judaism often equated with the Sinaitic revelations and also expound the laws, practices, ideals, and philosophy of the Bible. The literature from this period encompasses both practical exegesis and theoretical hermeneutics, as well as

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<sup>1</sup> See chapters 1-4 on scribal arts, transmission, and revisions in Michael Fishbane, Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

their application to many aspects of biblical law. Targumic sources explicate primarily through the medium of translation. Midrashic literature explicates the Bible in two major categories, ethical and legal. Corpora of materials have been written either proceeding systematically through Scripture, or emphasizing a particular book, or stressing the theme of holidays and festal days. Much of what has been written is a mixture of "creative philology and creative historiography."<sup>2</sup> The pivotal midrashic texts used here include: Genesis Rabbah, Leviticus Rabbah, Song of Songs Rabbah, Lamentations Rabbah, Esther Rabbah, and Pesikta de-Rab Kahana.

Roughly the seventh century marks the beginning of medieval Jewish history, which, for our purposes, extends to the sixteenth century. The biblical scholars of this era were heirs to the talmudic legacy, and they both augmented and developed previous interpretations. During this time, the Bible received the attention of Hebrew philologists who vocalized the text and added the cantillation signs, which further defined and clarified the Bible's meaning.<sup>3</sup> Medieval times also saw the initiation of important philological works, including a number of dictionaries, grammars, and linguistic essays.<sup>4</sup> This was also the epoch during which formal commentary writing began, and eminent schools of interpreters developed in many

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<sup>2</sup> For a full discussion, see Issak Heinemann, Darkhei Ha'aggadah (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1970) Book One, pp. 15-94, and Book Two, pp. 95-163.

<sup>3</sup> See A. Dotan, "Masorah," Encyclopaedia Judaica, Vol. 16, cols., 1401-1482.

<sup>4</sup> See further Nahum Sarna, "Hebrew and Bible Studies in Mediaeval Spain" in The Sephardi Heritage. Essays on the History and Cultural Contribution of the Jews of Spain and Portugal. Vol. 1, ed. by R. D. Barnett (London: Vallentine, Mitchell, 1971) pp. 323-366.

of the European and oriental centers inhabited by Jews: Spain, North Africa, Syria, Babylonia, Egypt, France, Germany, and Italy. Exegetical contributions were made by philosophers and mystics, also. Kabbalistic thinking developed at this time. The basic work of this movement is the Zohar, written in Aramaic in Spain in the thirteenth century. The worlds of Ashkenaz and Sepharad influenced Bible commentary. Global exegetical issues during this period included: reason versus revelation, the relationship between rabbinic thought and tradition, and between exegesis and halachah. Exegetes whose works will be studied include: Saadiah, Rashi, Abraham Ibn Ezra, Radak, Ramban, Hizkuni and Abravanel.<sup>5</sup>

The Pre-modern Period began in the sixteenth century and flowed into the Modern Period, and its biblical exegesis is of a highly eclectic nature. Mysticism and kabbalistic philosophy rose in prominence and dominated much Bible interpretation into and past the eighteenth century. Complementary supercommentaries became an interpretative vogue. The period also witnessed an acceptance and amalgamation of rationalistic and universalist points of view which included the humanities, science, philosophy, and the legacy of previous centuries of rabbinic learning.

The modern period saw the rise of the Haskalah or Enlightenment, which encouraged a return to the more intellectually based interpretation of medieval times and integration of more liberal approaches to religion in general. It later included the scientific study of the Bible, archaeological contributions, and the multi-faceted

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<sup>5</sup> Colette Sirat, A History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

criticisms of the twentieth century. Below, commentaries of Meir Leibush Malbim, and David Altschuler will be examined as well as writings of Neḥama Leibowitz and Adin Steinsaltz..

Despite the clear evolutionary trend in Bible interpretation, many of the interpretative works of previous eras still dominate most Jewish presentations of the text, particularly those in synagogues and schools. The compositions from talmudic and medieval times are particularly important in this respect; the Babylonian Talmud, Genesis Rabbah, and Rashi have been especially popular. It is far from accurate to assume that all contemporary spokesmen for the Jewish religious tradition are followers of the enlightened approach that characterizes much modern interpretation. Indeed, one can argue that the contemporary religious community is more reactionary than many of its recent rabbinic predecessors, even to the point of discounting the more enlightened contributions of many earlier religious writers.<sup>6</sup>

Surfacing since the late nineteenth century has been an increasing concern by women regarding biblical interpretation and scholarship. Through their work,<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> B. Barry Levy forcefully articulates this opinion in the following works: "On the Periphery: North American Orthodox Judaism and Contemporary Biblical Scholarship" in Students of the Covenant. A History of Jewish Biblical Scholarship in North America, ed. by S. David Sperling (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992) pp. 159-204; "Our Torah, Your Torah, and Their Torah: An Evaluation of the Artscroll Phenomenon" in Truth and Compassion: Essays in Memory of Rabbi Solomon Frank (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1982); and Planets, Potions and Parchments. Scientific Hebraica from the Dead Sea Scrolls to the Eighteenth Century (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> The following books and collections of essays are examples of seminal works written by modern feminists: Adela Yarbro Collins, ed., Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1985); Gerda Lerner, The Creation of

feminists have tried to explore positive examples of women's positions in Scripture, to find role models among the biblical women, to conduct critical studies of the Bible text that avoid sexist language and perspectives, and even to offer their own style of midrash that embellishes the Bible from a feminist point of view as earlier male writers did from a masculine one. In truth, the work of modern feminist hermeneutics is a continuation of biblical interpretation that has gone on through the centuries. While it is important to recognize that this scholarship is emerging and evolving, it is outside the purview this thesis, as will be explained below.

#### B. The Educational Literature

Since the Jewish application of Scripture assumes that its heroes and heroines should serve as role models for contemporary Jews, a good deal of creative manipulation of the characters, their deeds and their images, has resulted. While both male and female characters are affected in this way, the above mentioned bias in male biblical scholarship and exegesis causes a deep concern about the images of biblical women.

Viewed from a predominantly male perspective, biblical women appear only when they enter man's perception--as mothers, wives, or harlots. They are literally not born, nor do they experience that passage from birth through

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Patriarchy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Carol Meyers, Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Letty M. Russell, ed., Feminist Interpretation of the Bible (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985); and Phyllis Trible, "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," in Journal of the American Academy of Religion, Vol. 41:1 (March, 1973) pp. 30-48. Additional articles and books are found in the Bibliography.

childhood to maturity essential for an appreciation of the fullness of female experience.<sup>8</sup>

Worry exists about possible imbalanced biblical interpretation, and whether biblical females are seen and presented as models with which to identify, except in light of how they are related to the males. Shapiro observes: "Yet, while pupils learn the midrash of how a spider once saved David in a cave, they rarely are taught that without Michal, he would never have gotten to the cave."<sup>9</sup> "Women are beginning to clamor for the introduction of the proper female roles in the teaching of history, ritual and Bible. The greatest area of need is curricular materials. Unless the textbooks are changed, little will be accomplished."<sup>10</sup> Another issue involves the teaching of what might be considered explosive issues:

Many schools or teachers have difficulty with some of the more openly sexual passages in the Bible such as the Garden of Eden or the stories of Judah and Tamar or David and Bathsheba. Should they be skipped, or should they be presented on the levels of the children to whom they are being taught?<sup>11</sup>

Evaluating the educational material demands a cognizance of a male-centered history, the implications of male dominated thinking, and prejudices that may be evident in education and educational literature. The yardstick by which this can be

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<sup>8</sup> Roslyn Lacks, Women and Judaism. Myth, History and Struggle. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1980) p. 88.

<sup>9</sup> Miriam Klein Shapiro, "Eliminating Sexism from Jewish Education" in Jewish Education, Vol. 48, No. 1 (Spring, 1980) p. 44.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> B. Barry Levy, "Teaching the Bible: Some Questions, Suggestions and Guidelines" in Canadian Jewish Educator, Vol. 2, 1984, p. 4.



measured is the educational literature produced by Jews for use in their religious schools. Shevitz posited:

Should one read through any history series bearing the question in mind 'what role did women have?' one meets disappointment when, upon completing the texts, one has not even a hint at the answer. The functions ascribed to women in the numerous societies which Jews lived in are not mentioned. Yet any student who has done the work can describe to you, albeit in the generalized and romantic style of the texts, the life-style of the men...From what the reader is told, it can only be assumed that either women had no roles or that their roles were the same no matter which societies and cultures are being studied...Both conclusions are invalid. Books dealing with the Biblical period...do not attempt to explain the role of the woman in the ancient Near East, or deal with how, in the development toward monotheism, the female elements which were so common in the dominant Mesopotamian and Egyptian cultures were stricken from Judaism (and how this may have affected the subsequent portrayal of women in the Bible). Our students come to see women only in their roles of mothers and wives. And although these functions **did** occupy women, a sensitive portrayal of history would reveal the additional functions, problems and limitations of women in different cultures and times.<sup>12</sup>

This condemnatory critique spotlights a serious problem young girls face in the study of the Bible. The reader of Shevitz's article should be aghast at her assertion and try to ameliorate the grossly inequitable situation. The article, written in 1973, has not had the impact it should. Daum, in writing ten years later said:

The traditional imagery of Jews as 'People of the Book,' venerating education, has been shattered by Jewish

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<sup>12</sup> Susan Rosenblum Shevitz, "Sexism in Jewish Education," in Response, No. 18 (Summer, 1973) p. 110.

feminists who have uncovered an uncomfortable reality. Women are missing from the People of the Book. The 'Book' is largely about men, has traditionally been interpreted and translated by men, taught by men to other men. As taught in Jewish religious schools today, Bible stories are even more sexist than the original source. The religious school has been revealed as one of the last bastions of male supremacy.<sup>13</sup>

This necessitates careful comparison of the available biblical passages with those regularly taught in Jewish schools to determine if existing curricula are offering a typical and balanced selection of texts that depict women. In fact, the government of Québec demands "the elimination of sexism from educational materials and practices is an integral part of the initiatives of the Ministère de l'Éducation in the area of the status of women."<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, "to be approved, a textbook must...avoid sexist or racial stereotypes and offer the children a balanced presentation of models."<sup>15</sup> Shapiro said: "Sensitivity to the role of women must be built into curriculum planning. It is not enough to include a unit on 'women in Judaism' or 'famous Jewish women in history.'"<sup>16</sup>

Kotler also advanced multi-interpretations in the teaching of the Torah and attempted to show the limitless amount of commentary available and necessary in

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<sup>13</sup> Annette Daum, "Sexism in Jewish Religious Education" in Jewish Frontier, No. 8 (537) (October, 1983) p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> Québec, Ministère de l'Éducation, Teaching Non-Sexist Attitudes Through Pedagogical Practices and Activities, (Québec, 1991) p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Québec, Ministère de l'Éducation, The Schools of Québec Policy Statement and Plan of Action, (Québec, 1979) p. 105.

<sup>16</sup> Shapiro, p. 44.

order to try to comprehend the Torah:

This is how we must learn and teach a parsha in the history of the Ovot--not chass v'sholom with marketplace concepts but with the understanding and the cumulative knowledge that come from penetrating study of the words of Chazal and rishonim. Let it be clear, however, that all our comprehension, even after such penetrating study, is no more than a drop in the ocean of meaning and significance the Torah wishes to convey in these narratives.<sup>17</sup>

Judaism assumes the Bible to be a major source from which moral and ethical conduct is learned and biblical figures to be appropriate role models. "The intrinsic moral and artistic worth of these stories must be set forth, and the student's mind opened to appreciate them."<sup>18</sup> In teaching Bible stories, "the primary objective is to present our hero or event in such an effective way that it will leave lasting impressions upon the child."<sup>19</sup> Their personality traits--both positive and negative--provide frames of reference for young children and adults. A study of biblical personages shows students that "each of these personalities is unique. Thus the child has an opportunity to explore different traits and characters...Through these figures the child receives his/her first impressions of Jewish history."<sup>20</sup> Furthermore,

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<sup>17</sup> Ahron Kotler, How To Teach Torah (New York: Beth Medrash Govoha, 1972) p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> Moshe Greenberg, "On Teaching the Bible in Religious Schools" in Modern Jewish Educational Thought. Problems and Perspectives (Revised), from an article in Jewish Education, Vol. 29, No. 3 (1959) p. 83.

<sup>19</sup> Jerome L. Hershon, Teaching the Narrative of the Bible, unpublished paper (Silver Springs: Board of Jewish Education, n. d.) p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> Howard Deitcher, "The Child's Understanding of the Biblical Personality" in Studies in Jewish Education. Educational Issues and Classical Jewish Texts, ed. by H. Deitcher and A. J. Tannenbaum (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1990) p. 168.

"children are quite interested in the picture of the human condition emerging through the Biblical narratives shared with them in class. They accompany Biblical protagonists through good times and bad times and seem to accept the notion that the heroes and heroines they encounter do not live happily ever after."<sup>21</sup>

The biblical personalities viewed in Scripture reflect human nature on a grand scale. "Biblical figures and events are symbols and form a part of the national mythos that expresses and reinforces the inner world of the nation and the individual. This fact increases the weight of the biblical story's impact on the development and consolidation of the child's emotional world."<sup>22</sup> The people mirror life in its breadth and depth, providing role models as their multi-faceted behavior and characteristics are examined. These individuals thus become critical as a link of kinship, and as a retrospective view of destiny. Deitcher stated:

We thereby encourage the child to engage in a deliberation on motivating forces behind a particular character's behavior. The reader examines these questions in consultation with the classical and modern biblical commentaries that have offered varied and divergent theories throughout Jewish history...The reader is thereby engaged in an ongoing dialogue which has continued for thousands of years.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Edna Ora, A Way of Teaching Bible to Primary School Children, Ph. D. dissertation (Ann Arbor: University Microfilm International Dissertation Information Service, 1989).

<sup>22</sup> Koubovi, Dvora, "The Application of Mental Health Considerations in the Teaching of Bible" in Studies in Jewish Education. Educational Issues and Classical Jewish Texts, Vol. 5, ed. by H. Deitcher and A. J. Tannenbaum (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1990) pp. 217-218.

<sup>23</sup> Deitcher, pp. 170-1.

The goals of teaching Scripture are inspirational as well as educational:

Moral and religious education is inevitably more than the teaching of prescribed units of knowledge. It also involves attitudes and skills. As such it aims to create an atmosphere of caring and sharing and of recognizing each person's self-worth and society's worth. It is hoped that the programme will help the child to begin to develop a value structure of his own and to begin to acquire skills helpful to life in a rapidly changing world.<sup>24</sup>

It is imperative that biblical history be presented in a clear and balanced manner, so that those who would like to identify with its contents are allowed an unbiased look at it. Greenberg posited: "The object of teaching the Bible in a religious school is, I submit, to make the student aware of the spiritual issues raised by the Bible, and to delineate the manner in which these issues are answered or otherwise dealt with."<sup>25</sup> The validity of this critique and the perspectives it suggests may ultimately enable children to learn about more of the tradition in a more cogent and complete way. "We cannot be idle bystanders; we must be active readers of the text and thereby confront many of the religious conflicts which face the biblical personages."<sup>26</sup> In writing about religious education, Goldman emphasized: "For the Bible is a narrative of men's experiences in their varying relationships with God. When we

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<sup>24</sup> Curriculum Guide. Elementary School. Protestant Moral and Religious Education. Level 1, (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, Ministère de l'Éducation, 1986) p. 7.

<sup>25</sup> Greenberg, p. 79.

<sup>26</sup> Deitcher, p. 169.

teach we intend to convey the truth of which the Bible speaks."<sup>27</sup> Of course, when Goldman speaks of "men's experiences," he must include women's experiences, too!

Bible instruction in the elementary school is taught not only as a purely academic subject, but also as moral and religious education. In teaching Bible stories, "moral teachings should be personified wherever possible. The child is a natural hero-worshipper, and we need to stimulate this tendency Jewishly by directing it toward our Jewish heroes."<sup>28</sup> A strong connection exists between the text itself and its role in serving as a model for leading a moral and ethical life. "The story is not so much an end in itself as an illustration of a moral or religious teaching. But the moral purpose should not be stressed or made obtrusive. The stories should be told simply naturally, and made intelligible; then the child himself will draw the moral conclusions."<sup>29</sup>

It has been asserted that "the living world and word of the Bible can deepen the meaning and value of living in our generation."<sup>30</sup> Studying this world enables us to link back to forebears and to see them as human beings with the positive and negative characteristics people possess. Children should see the Bible heroes as "human beings, subject to the same temptations as we are, not remote, abstract saints

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<sup>27</sup> Ronald Goldman, Readiness for Religion. A Basis for Developmental Religious Education (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965) p. 72.

<sup>28</sup> Hershon, p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> Jack D. Spiro, To Learn and To Teach. A Philosophy of Jewish Education (New York: Philosophical Library, 1983) p. 89.

of divine perfection. The bad, however, should never be emphasized; it must be introduced incidentally."<sup>31</sup> Kotler put the biblical figures into post-biblical historical perspective even if he ignored or fantasized about them: "Moreover, the deeds of the Ovos were the foundations upon which the Jewish People--and the whole world--was constructed."<sup>32</sup>

Koubovi wrote about the impact of teaching Bible stories:

The importance of applying mental hygiene principles in the teaching of literary texts in general, takes on special emphasis in the teaching of biblical texts, primarily because of the considerable influence that Bible stories have on the developing personality of the student. This fact...is based essentially on the literary power of the biblical story...to involve the reader emotionally because of the realistic and impressive presentation of human nature in its texts.<sup>33</sup>

It is this human dimension with which the children in the classroom will identify and from which they will learn. As a matter of fact, **"the first guideline...in helping children experience the Bible, is to enable them to 'feel into' the text.** When they can feel the same emotions as those felt by the persons in the story, they are well on their way to understanding the story itself."<sup>34</sup> To be taught successfully, the teachers must see that pupils can "identify the feelings of the Bible characters."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Hershon, p. 3.

<sup>32</sup> Kotler, p. 6.

<sup>33</sup> Koubovi, p. 217.

<sup>34</sup> Dorothy J. Furnish, Living the Bible With Children (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979) p. 26.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

Deitcher forcefully claimed "the unique qualities of these figures and their importance for the child's religious, developmental and psychological growth."<sup>36</sup>

Koubovi is insistent about the deep effect Bible instruction and learning have on pupils:

Children are exposed to Bible stories in kindergarten, at home, during religious services and on numerous other occasions. In Israeli schools, a considerable portion of the curriculum is devoted to Bible studies and certain biblical texts are studied several times during the student's scholastic career. This very fact in itself can help explain the tremendous impact the Bible has on the child's emotional development. For many children, some biblical heroes are very real figures; they seem almost alive and resemble important relatives who, though never encountered in the flesh, are so often referred to that they become identification objects and play a prominent part in the molding of the children's personalities.<sup>37</sup>

Children should be encouraged to identify with the Bible text as they study, not only as an exercise for the present, but as a well-spring for their future.

We want children to think of the Bible as their book, not as just a book for their adult future. In order for this to happen, the stories must come alive in such a way that children will feel they have actually participated in the events along with the people of the Bible.<sup>38</sup>

Nilsson stressed "the important role of religious narrative and story. Students gain access to the complex world of religion through an exploration of the stories that are

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<sup>36</sup> Deitcher, p. 180.

<sup>37</sup> Koubovi, pp. 217-8.

<sup>38</sup> Furnish, p. 15.



important to religions...[S]tudents are better prepared for a meaningful life."<sup>39</sup>

Names and relationships are important to the understanding of the biblical stories and incidents. For example, in the story of Hagar's expulsion (Gen. 21:9-20), the pupil must be made aware of the different reactions to Ishmael: by God, Hagar, Sarah, and Abraham.<sup>40</sup> Were a teacher to present the story at the **peshat** level, the likelihood is the pupils would derive a skewed idea of Hagar. Even if only one interpretation were studied, students would not garner enough information to make them aware of the four reactions to Ishmael and furthermore, Ishmael's own reaction. The parameters are broad for this story as for others and it is imperative that the pupil, the teacher, and the educational materials combine to present a fulsome picture.

As the Bible must be submitted and studied in a replete presentation, so, too, the child must be regarded as a rounded individual. Furnish posited:

Bible teaching need not be a bore. But if it is to be a dynamic, life-renewing experience for children, it must treat the child as a whole person. The first step is to prepare the soil by helping the children feel the emotions inherent in the Biblical story or passage to be taught. The second step is to plant the seed--to present the text as accurately and as effectively as possible, so the children will feel that they themselves were participants in the event. The third step is to reap the

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<sup>39</sup> Christopher Nilsson, "Teaching Religion in the Public School: Discovering Personal Meaning in a Pluralistic Society" in Dissertation Abstracts International. The Humanities and Social Sciences, Vol. 53, No. 8 (February, 1993) p. 2755-A.

<sup>40</sup> Nehama Leibowitz, "How to Read a Chapter of Tanakh" in Studies in Jewish Education. Educational Issues and Classical Jewish Texts, Vol. 5, ed. by H. Deitcher and A. J. Tannenbaum (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1990) p. 44.

harvest by encouraging and accepting the children's responses to the Bible text.<sup>41</sup>

As the pupils come to Bible study with intellectual curiosity and emotional preparedness, the more information they are given, the deeper will be their responses. Boys as well as girls must be presented with the richness of female and male figures with whom to identify and from whom to learn principles and traits. "Children are not born with attitudes toward races, sex-role opinions, and positions on family relationships; these are learned behaviors. Children literally learn what they live; it is also possible that children learn what they read."<sup>42</sup> Hershon presented a most disturbing assertion when he posited that in teaching the Bible, "for boys one should choose stories of adventure, loyalty, bravery, patriotism, strength, trial, difficulty, etc."<sup>43</sup> and "for girls, more weight should be laid on domestic stories, such as those of Sarah, Rebecca, Miriam, Ruth, Hannah, etc."<sup>44</sup> It is archaic to believe anyone engaged in fostering pupils' growth could advocate what would result in further stereotyping and biases.

As mentioned earlier, the study of the Bible is inextricably tied with biblical interpretation--commentary written by those in the past as well as in our own time, as we grapple with the text. Daum remarks: "Teachers were advised to teach Bible

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<sup>41</sup> Furnish, p. 35.

<sup>42</sup> Abbie S. Prentice, "Stereotyping in Text and Illustrations in the Caldecott Award Books for Children," in Dissertation Abstracts International. A. The Humanities and Social Sciences Vol. 47, No. 7 (January, 1987) p. 2930-A.

<sup>43</sup> Hershon, p. 4.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

from the source, since the Bible storybooks little children are so fond of frequently mix legend, more sexist than the Biblical material, with authentic stories. Biblical translations should be **accurate** and as devoid of gratuitous sexist language as possible."<sup>45</sup> Children and adults must study commentaries in order to extract the richness and diversity of the text.

Though we will present biblical content, whenever we teach the Bible we are guided first and foremost by our interpretations or understandings of the Bible. In the presentation of biblical content, we propose and set forth some way of regarding the Bible, some way of making sense of it, and some way of interpreting it. Whenever we teach the Bible, our understanding of it and its content are inseparably bound together.<sup>46</sup>

The teacher must, therefore, in order to be true to the text, teach a variety of commentaries, and allow the students to do further interpretation on their own within the context of the time in which they are living. "The biblical stories, rich and magnificent in and of themselves, invite, encourage, and evoke different interpretations. Those stories are able to bear, to carry many different interpretations without being destroyed."<sup>47</sup> This will indeed elucidate to the students that biblical interpretation is an ongoing phenomenon, one in which each pupil should be encouraged to play a part.

It is essential for educators to learn the extent to which the child can be initiated into the world of contradictory

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<sup>45</sup> Daum, p. 13.

<sup>46</sup> A. Roger Gobbel and Gertrude G. Gobbel, The Bible--A Child's Playground (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986) p. 35.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

interpretations without causing utter confusion or disillusionment. No less important, the teachers' readiness to engage their students wholeheartedly in analysis and interpretation needs to be examined, for without their cooperation, students will never truly study the biblical text.<sup>48</sup>

Because the nature of the biblical narratives is terseness of language, amplification and interpretation become an essential component in the reading and studying of the text. "If the biblical text is studied together with various classical and modern commentaries, it provides the youngster with a spectrum of Jewish scholarship throughout history."<sup>49</sup> Pupils should then begin to see, after having been schooled to recognize the process of biblical interpretation, that they themselves can add to the continuum of the commentary tradition.

### C. Method

A basic premise of this thesis is that varying images of each biblical female emerge from Scripture and from the rabbinic literature. The peshat, the straightforward (usually literal) meaning of the Hebrew text, offers glimpses of the females, yet these images are altered or, in some cases, rewritten, through the centuries by exegetes. The educational materials, therefore, have two or more figures before them as these women are presented for classroom study. The text books can

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<sup>48</sup> Marla Frankel, "A Typology for Biblical Literacy" in Jewish Education. Educational Issues and Classical Jewish Texts. Vol. 5, ed. by H. Deitcher and A. J. Tannenbaum (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1990) p. 199.

<sup>49</sup> Deitcher, p. 179.

mirror the Bible, and/or reflect a vast rabbinic literature, and/or find or create some other perhaps more contemporary image for the individual woman.

In the following chapters I study eight females in Scripture and selected rabbinic commentators to see what image or images emerge of these women. I then examine educational materials used for Bible study to see how they present the same females, whether or not they present them as in Scripture, mirror classical Jewish perspectives of them, or present varied portraits of them.

### 1. The women and Hebrew Scripture

Eight women, found in various sections of Hebrew Scripture, were selected for study. They represent different periods in biblical history, diverse backgrounds and genealogies, and varying positions within the societies in which they lived. They are described and interpreted in the light of a straightforward reading of the texts, and the implications of the texts for re-creating full pictures of the women are developed. The list of women includes three matriarchs (Sarah, Leah, and Rachel), one working woman (Rahab), two prophetesses (Miriam and Deborah), the wife of a king (Esther), and the unnamed daughter of Jephthah, a biblical judge. All have been interpreted by dozens of generations of classical interpreters eliciting many facets and dimensions of exegesis. All of these women appear in texts that children study in religious school, thereby providing the impetus for their inclusion in this study.

Each woman is the subject of one chapter below with the exception of Leah and Rachel who are examined together. The first section of each chapter examines

key sentences and episodes relating to each figure. Where possible, the physical appearance and position of the women are included, as well as principal actions in which they engaged or for which they were catalysts. Other criteria wherever applicable include: the woman's name or identification; her role, i. e., mother, wife, sister; description of her; action of which she is a part. The chapters follow Scriptural order.

At the outset I must point out that no complete lives of women--that is, from birth to death--are recorded in the Bible. This deficiency imposes limits in examining and re-creating a full and balanced picture of the figures and has a powerful impact on the ultimate image that emerges. With the exception of Miriam, each female is seen during a fairly limited period in her life. While changes in their development and maturity may occur, no longitudinal scope to their personality is evident. It is as though each person is frozen in time. Was she ever a young child? Did she grow old gracefully? What personality differences might she have exhibited during various periods in her life? What consequences did key incidents have upon her and how might these events have effected her relationship with others? How were life's lessons assimilated? Generally, when reading about characters, what happens to them during the procession of the years of their life is vital to the understanding of their nature and influences the portrait they present. The Bible denies the reader this opportunity.

## 2. The women and rabbinic literature

The second section of each chapter focuses on the history of interpretation of the characters. Targumim, the Babylonian Talmud, key midrashim, and standard rabbinic Bible commentaries, including the Rabbah Midrashim, The Chronicles of Jerahmeel, Pesikta Rabbati, The Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael, Tanna debe Eliyyahu, Midrash Tanhuma, Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer, and Pesikta de Rab Kahana, Saadiah, Rashi, Abraham Ibn Ezra, Radak, Ramban, Hizkuni, Abravanel, and Malbim are examined.

These exegetes, reflecting a broad range of backgrounds and eras, bring to their interpretation a depth of historical and social perspective and further enhance students' learning. It is also important to recognize the influence of earlier works on later exegetes. The richness of the initial midrashic works, for example, resounds through the centuries and becomes the springboard for new interpretation. It becomes increasingly evident that multiple interpretations must be studied to acquire a more coherent and unprejudiced picture of each woman. Relying only one commentator may be counterproductive. Only by contrasting and comparing commentaries will the reader be able to see what images emerge from the rabbinic literature in the case of each woman.

## 3. The women in Jewish educational materials

The third section of each chapter is an examination of Jewish Bible textbooks, workbooks, and supplementary materials to discern how biblical women are

presented. These materials are available in school libraries and in Jewish educational resource centers and are accessible to teachers. Books written in English and Hebrew by women and men are included. Some of the materials are part of a series, some are individual books. They include reproductions or re-tellings of the Bible narratives. Many of the Hebrew workbooks were prepared for the day school population; the other books seem to be written for afternoon schools or Sunday schools, or as supplementary materials in various day schools. An examination of the book publisher usually indicates the religious orientation of the particular book.

In evaluating their presentations, textual criteria are used in a two-fold manner. The first search is to see how the woman's personality and character traits are presented in the educational materials, her relationship with her husband and/or other significant men in her life, and her connection with other females. The importance of siblings and concubines will be scrutinized. Secondly, the woman's active and passive roles will be studied as well as her effect on others. The foregoing criteria will be probed as mentioned on two levels: the first is how they are written in the texts, i. e., as Bible text duplication, or a re-telling of the Bible narrative or selected verses. School texts written both in Hebrew and/or English are used.

The second level includes the study of the women through textbook and workbook exercises: completion sentences, multiple choice questions, true-false statements, matching exercises, and other creative exercises such as thought questions. Analyzing the exercises is imperative because the types of questions can highlight or downplay the author's interpretation of the Bible and influence the learning process,



i. e., true-false questions and multiple choice responses force pupils to give a formulaic answer based on what the author wants them to remember; fill-in exercises and other open-ended questions allow pupils to explore a wider range of thoughtful answers. The contents of clusters of questions can also focus on what the author prefers. If, for example, students are studying about Abraham and Sarah and all but one or two of many questions deal with Abraham, students will feel less connected with Sarah and she will seem less significant.

Attention is also given to the illustrations: how is the woman portrayed (clothing, position); who is in the illustration with her; who is the focus of the illustration; is the illustration in harmony with the description in Scripture? Evaluating art work as a form of biblical interpretation becomes a vital part of studying educational materials, since artistic renderings provide images and clues to how a biblical person will be visualized and remembered.

Some of the selected verses referred to in section A of each chapter are taught in the schools, some are not. If key passages are consistently omitted in teaching materials, this is significant. One must be suspicious about the omitted verses: are they primarily related to a particular theme? Are they felt to be too controversial for study by young pupils? Should either query evoke a positive reply, the question still begs for the inclusion of the verses in Bible study.

As biblical commentaries are presented and consensus is found between Rashi and other commentators, the teaching of Rashi alone may be considered representative of the commentators. This harmony in interpretation should be

pointed out to the students. If, however, the secondary sources follow a tradition of allowing for a flow and diversity in the interpretation of the verses, then attention to the results should be demanded of those who teach Bible, in the hope that an overhaul in the curriculum--setting standards, guidelines, and the inclusion of key texts--would be forthcoming.

Textbook presentations are compared with both the Bible's presentation and those that derive from a selection of the popular, classical Jewish Bible interpreters. General patterns are noted and compared as I analyze variations in the treatment of individual books and specific biblical women. In examining the educational materials, it important to note which sections of Scripture are taught and which are not. The question to be answered here is whether the school curriculum includes available female biblical role models, how it portrays those it does include, and do the ensuing images reflect the Bible, the rabbinic literature, or a new model.

There are two other aspects of biblical study that deserve mention but are not treated in this thesis. The first is contemporary critical-historical studies of the biblical women, the second is contemporary feminist interpretations of them. Despite the importance and potential contributions of these literatures, they have had virtually no impact on the issues being discussed. Both are irrelevant to the rabbinic literature that preceded them; both are irrelevant to the educational materials because they have not yet made an impact on it. Since the rabbinic sources and the educational books do not include or respond to these issues, I find it necessary to treat them in the same way.

A systematic study like this one has not been undertaken yet, but seems pivotal for understanding and updating educational goals and practices. In our society, more and more women are expected to pursue goals similar to, even identical with, those of men. This also holds true in the sphere of academic research and scholarship. Is it any less proper in the area of religious values? Women engaged in biblical research may open up new possibilities in feminist biblical exegesis. Their investigation of the Bible should logically reflect their view of women in the ancient world and perhaps shed new light on the women of that period. If feminist exegetes are successful in offering new insights (and not merely projecting their distinctively feminine prejudices on the texts), then their findings could prove of value in educational practice. The fruits of such exegesis could be used in the Jewish school system. While my study does not determine the extent to which this is being done, it does offer suggestions for how it can be facilitated in the hope that students can learn to feel a passion for Scripture, in addition to having their Judaic tradition broadened and intensified.

## Chapter 2

### Sarah

#### A. Sarah in the Bible

##### 1. The character of Sarah and 2. Her relationship with Abraham

The life of Sarah the matriarch was intertwined with and mirrored some of her husband Abraham's strengths and weaknesses and, because presented in a number of scenes and episodes, reflects her role as both a public and private person.

As a married woman, she was the victim of societal pressures causing her to be deceptive on at least two occasions, to suffer adversity herself, and to inflict hardship on another person. As a public figure travelling with Abraham and finding herself in threatening situations, the beautiful Sarah (Gen. 12:11 and 14) deferred to her husband and lied to protect him (12:13 and 20:2). Despite personal risk to herself when they encountered Pharaoh and Abimelech, these hazardous situations benefited Abraham with material gains. Again, as a public person who was to be the first matriarch of a new nation, she became belligerent toward her maidservant and husband's concubine/wife and had her cast out (21:10-14) thereby assuring her own son's future legacy. The public aspect of her life as a matriarch was the justification for her actions.

Within the confines of her household, Sarah took an activist's position in

providing Abraham with a desired child. Married and barren, in a society where bearing and caring for children was the role to which every female aspired, she lived in a tenuous position and must have been a deeply sad person. It is engaging to note that the text never actually says this. In ameliorating the problem in a culturally viable way, she demonstrated negative traits causing suffering both to Hagar and Abraham (21:9-14). Her actions resulted in difficulties with Hagar whom she treated abusively (16:6) and eventually had banished (21:10-11). The strength and power of her personality was evident as she directed Abraham alone to banish his concubine/wife and son. The affirmation of her request was provided by God who told Abraham to listen to Sarah's words (21:12-13).

Although Sarah's story was told in Genesis, one more reference is found in Isaiah where the prophet referred to Abraham and Sarah as parents of the nation (Is. 51:2) thus affirming their ancestral roles in a later epoch.

### 3. Sarah and Hagar

Within the confines of her household, Sarah was not an acquiescent female. As a barren woman in a society that looked askance on a childless union, faulting the woman for not bearing a child, Sarah resorted to an acceptably legal solution to her problem within her society, demonstrating an assertive quality, spurning another human being, and displaying the trait of jealousy. In effecting a solution for her childlessness, Sarah beseeched Abraham to take her handmaid Hagar and have a

child with her.<sup>1</sup> Thus far Sarah had been a subservient woman, risking her physical being to save her husband; now she asserted herself, exposing qualities of bitterness and resentment. These negative traits would surface again when her son Isaac was weaned and she demanded the expulsion of Hagar and her son Ishmael. However, a subtle difference was then evident, as Sarah compelled Abraham to banish (21:10) his concubine/wife and first-born child. Abraham performed this agonizing act alone, but with assurance from God that he must listen to whatever Sarah told him to do (21:12, 14). It should be considered that Sarah may have had an additional motivating drive, namely, ridding herself totally of Hagar. The undercurrent between these two women could not possibly have been other than a gnawing, dissenting influence in their lives. Now, in one momentous act, Sarah could banish both mother and son.

The Sarah-Hagar theme pointed up contrasts between the two females. The biblical account's succinctness added a unique depth and force to the narrative's tension. No physical description was given for Hagar, yet Sarah's beauty was acknowledged by both her husband (12:11) and foreign princes (12:14). The omission of any reference to Hagar's appearance made Sarah's physical demeanor seem more striking. Or, perhaps, as Sarah's beauty was paramount, Hagar was to be visualized as being far less attractive. While previously Sarah had selflessly lied to protect and

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<sup>1</sup> See the law related to the concubine slave and her bearing her master's child in the Code of Hammurabi, item 146, in James B. Pritchard, ed., The Ancient Near East. Vol. 1. An Anthology of Texts and Pictures (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1958) p. 154.

save Abraham, she was acrimonious and hostile toward Hagar when protecting her own and her son's position. Sarah selfishly manipulated the passive Hagar, never considering Hagar's feelings, only treating her negatively as a slave with a slave mentality.

Sarah's outrage against Hagar was unmistakable through her abusive treatment of her handmaid (16:7) and her causing Hagar to flee the first time and be expelled on the second occasion. This second experience in the desert was a graphic scene, stark in its scenery and vivid in its depiction of Hagar. The narrative terseness was accompanied by a well-spring of emotion. Yet Hagar was the recipient of God's first theophany with a female, and it was God who sheltered her even though she fled from bondage and returned to servitude. A fascinating comparison and contrast between the two women emerged: God shielded Sarah when she abetted Abraham, but Hagar had two theophanies as a result of Sarah's embittered conduct toward her.

One other similarity and one difference were evident in the Bible. The sons born to Hagar and Sarah were each named by Abraham; however, while Abraham sent his servant to seek a wife for his son Isaac, it was Hagar who chose a wife for her son, allowing Ishmael to fulfill God's prediction that he would become the ancestor of a great nation (21:18). This exiled woman alone with her son, raised him as a single parent, and fended for herself. Solitary in the wilderness, she must have been daunted by the elements, yet survived.

#### 4. Barren Sarah and the three guests

In Genesis, chapter 17, God altered the names Abram and Sarai to Abraham and Sarah and prophesied that she would be the matriarch of a nation (17:15-16). Sarah was the sole biblical female to have had her name changed by God, perhaps indicating a unique relationship between them, a public recognition of God's favor, and a connection of lasting import. Abraham laughed at God's prediction and challenged God's prognostication promising two such old people would have a child (17:17-18), jointly to be forebears of a nation. Sarah laughed at God's prediction, but was severely chastised by God (18:12-15). When she dissembled about her reaction, God countered her denial and challenged it. Why Sarah was reproached by God, and Abraham (17:17) was not, both of them having reacted similarly to the prophesy, is difficult to comprehend.

Sarah was found at the tent opening, behind the angels and Abraham, listening to their conversation (18:10). Perhaps Sarah could be alleged to be eavesdropping; however, I think the public and private roles are illustrated here to explain why she acted as she did. As a woman in a patriarchal society, she displayed modesty by remaining in the background, inside her home. However, as mistress of her home, she had been called upon to provide food for her guests (18:6), and now she wanted to learn the purpose of their visit; simply, she was curious, perhaps too much so. Such knowledge would help the smooth functioning of her household.



## B. Sarah in Jewish Interpretation

The richness of Genesis Rabbah (circa 5th century C. E.),<sup>2</sup> and its seminal influence on later midrashim and commentaries, requires that it be studied intensively. Aspects of Sarah's personality, the theme of childlessness, and the relationship between Hagar and Sarah received particularly important amplification.

Sarah's life will be divided into incidents or vignettes reflecting the numbered sections above and allowing more accurate means of comparison between the biblical interpreters and facilitating analogies between the exegetes and the educational materials.

### 1. The character of Sarah

The Babylonian Talmud contains numerous references to Sarah's beauty and personality. One said that comparing human beings to Sarah was like comparing monkeys to human beings (B. B. 58a). Another involved a comparison with the exceptionally beautiful Abishag who never was half as beautiful as Sarah (San. 39b). Sarah was cited as one of the world's four women of unsurpassed beauty, the others being Rahab, Abigail, and Esther (Meg. 15a), and her beauty was referred to also in Sanhedrin 69b. (In section 2, Sarah's appearance will be spoken of again as a factor in her relationship with Abraham.)

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<sup>2</sup> Information for the parenthetical notations giving dates and places of works and exegetes were gleaned from the Encyclopaedia Judaica and Hermann L. Strack and G. Stemberger, Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash (Minneapolis: Augsburg/Fortress, 1992).

Sarah possessed the quality of modesty. The visiting angels asked where Sarah was even though they knew she was in her tent because doing so highlighted her modesty and made her more beloved to Abraham (B. M. 87a).

Sarah was counted among the Hebrew Bible's seven prophetesses (Meg. 14a). The assertion of Sarah's ability to foresee things (San. 69b) was gleaned from R. Isaac who posited that Yiscah (here associated with the root meaning to be clear or to foresee) is really Sarah, who foresaw things because of the holy spirit or inspiration (Meg. 14a). In order to keep peace in her home when Sarah had uttered words of reproof about Abraham (18:12), God protected her by changing her words (B. M. 87a).

Sarah's beauty (12:11) was likened by Abraham to that of other women seen in their travels, and he found Sarah's beauty excelled them all. Also, her comeliness had not been diminished through the rigors of travel. As a result of her attractiveness, and because the people in the land into which they were entering were ugly and dark-skinned, Abraham asked her to say she was his sister so it would be well with him (Gen. R. 40,4). So she could not be seen, Abraham hid her in a box. When the custom's officers opened it, all Egypt was aglow because of her beauty, which was said to be superior to Eve's (Gen. R. 40,5).

The Genesis Apocryphon of Qumran Cave I Commentary,<sup>3</sup> a translation plus paraphrasing and midrashic augmentation of parts of Genesis, provided a replete

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph Fitzmyer, The Genesis Apocryphon of Qumran Cave 1. A Commentary. 2nd Rev. Ed. (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1971).

description of Sarah in seven verses (20:2-8). Sarah's face was depicted as "splendid and beautiful"; she had "soft hair," "lovely" eyes, and a "pleasant" nose. In addition to portraying other body parts, such as her breasts, arms, hands, and legs in glowing terms, the text read "how beautiful is all her whiteness" (20:4). Assuming that this whiteness referred to her being fair-complexioned, Abraham's fear for her when among the dark-skinned people on their travels, became understandable. The Genesis Apocryphon continued: "There are no virgins or brides who enter a bridal chamber more beautiful than she. Indeed, her beauty surpasses that of all women...Yet with all this beauty there is much wisdom in her; and whatever she has is lovely" (20:6-8).

Sarah's qualities were equated with the years she lived. In counting the one hundred twenty-seven years of her life, the one hundred years were likened to twenty in terms of sin, and the twenty years to seven in terms of beauty (Gen. R. 58,1). A connection was made between Sarah's one hundred twenty-seven years and her descendant Esther later becoming queen over one hundred twenty-seven provinces (Gen. R. 58,3). Sarah was likened to the hadar (Lev. 23:40) where the root hiderah or "honored" was seen as God honoring her with a ripe old age (Lev. R. 30:10).<sup>4</sup> No comment was made about Abraham weeping for or eulogizing Sarah in this midrashic text.

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<sup>4</sup> The following "Rabbah" titles were quoted from Midrash Rabbah 'al Hamishah Humshei Torah Ve-hameish Megillot, arranged by Issachar ben Naphtali HaCohen (New York: Horeb, 1924): Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Song of Songs, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Ruth.

Among the popular images of Abraham and Sarah is one that portrays them as travelling missionaries, Abraham converting the men and Sarah the women (Gen. R. 39,14); later she, too, was called a proselyte (Num. R. 8,10). Analogously, R. Huna said in the name of R. Hiyya b. Abba, that the matriarch Sarah went down to Egypt and enclosed herself away from the lewdness she found there. As a result, all women were fenced in as merit of Sarah's actions (Lev. R. 32,5 and Song of Songs R. 4,24).

The ingenious and creative midrashim of Genesis Rabbah have been echoed and elaborated upon by other classic midrashic works. Pesikta de-Rab Kahana depicted Sarah as a paragon of chastity as evidenced by her conduct in Egypt:

she took pains to hedge herself in against unchaste conduct of any kind; thereafter, all Israelite women, inspired by her example, also took pains to hedge themselves in against unchaste conduct of any kind<sup>5</sup> (P. R. K. 11,6, p. 205).

Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael praised her by averring that her name was changed from Sarai to Sarah "when she performed good deeds".<sup>6</sup> The Midrash on Psalms praised Sarah and Abraham saying: "The two of them observed the Torah from 'alef to tav."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Pesikta de-Rab Kahana. R. Kahana's Compilation of Discourses for Sabbaths and Festal Days, trans. by William G. Braude and Israel J. Kapstein (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1962) p. 205.

<sup>6</sup> Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael. Vols. 1-3, trans. by Jacob Z. Lauterbach (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1933). This quote is from Tractate Amalek 3, Vol. 2, p. 165.

<sup>7</sup> The Midrash on Psalms. Vol. II, trans. from the Hebrew and Aramaic by William G. Braude (New Haven: Yale University, 1959) p. 210.

A compliment given to Sarah by Bar Kappara stated that even the text made a prevarication for the sake of peace: in repeating what Sarah had said, the text said she faulted herself for their childlessness, not Abraham, as in fact she had done (Gen. R. 48,18). God protected Sarah from her own words so that household harmony would be maintained between herself and Abraham: when she said Abraham was old, "God revised her words, having her say **old as I am**, in order that no bad feelings should rise between Abraham and Sarah because of her calling him old."<sup>8</sup> Subsequently, Rashi (Solomon ben Isaac 1040-1105, Troyes, France) and Ramban (Moses ben Nahman 1194-1270, born in Catalonia, Spain and died in the land of Israel) both based their thoughts on Genesis Rabbah 48,18, where it said God protected Sarah and said she had spoken only of herself as being old, not of Abraham.

Midrash Tanhuma said that Abimelech conferred royal status upon Sarah as a protection so men "would hear that she was a queen and be afraid to woo her."<sup>9</sup> Agreement existed about the cause of Sarah's death. When Isaac returned from the akedah, his mother asked what had happened. After he explained God had saved him from death at the hands of his father, Sarah, realizing the import of what could have transpired, died (P. R. K. 26,3, p. 398). Similarly, the cause of her death was

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<sup>8</sup> Pesikta Rabbati. Discourses for Feasts, Fasts, and Special Sabbaths, Vol. II, trans. by William G. Braude (New Haven: Yale University, 1968). This quote is from Vol. 2, pp. 849-850.

<sup>9</sup> Midrash Tanhuma. English. (S. Buber Recension). Vol. I Genesis, trans. by John T. Townsend (Hoboken: Ktav, 1989) p. 114.

Satan's telling her that Abraham had given Isaac as a burnt-offering.<sup>10</sup>

Radak (David Kimchi 1160?-1235?, Narbonne, Provence) offered a fascinating explanation about Sarah's name change which gave a glimpse into the society in which she lived and the relationship between different strata of people. God told Abraham to change her name from Sarai to Sarah, because it was his honor as a superior person to refer to her by her new name. Antithetically, within the hierarchy, she called Abraham master, but he called her by her name (17:15).

## 2. The relationship between Sarah and Abraham

A midrashic insert in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan emphasized Sarah and Abraham's modesty when they visited Egypt. When needing to disrobe to cross the river approaching Egypt, Abraham saw Sarah's flesh and remarked upon her fairness, asking her to say she was his sister and thereby protecting him. The Jerusalem Targum included what seemed to be a list of grievances given by Sarah, levied against Abraham. In the charges against him, past and future events were included. She spoke of having left her father's home to journey with Abraham and having joined him in a new type of worship. She told how she saved him by lying to two kings and spoke of her difficult relationship with Hagar. Sarah, a strong and willful woman who felt she had suffered injustices, was expressing her emotions. Her words were a summary or amalgam of several incidents.

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<sup>10</sup> Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer, trans. and annotated by Gerald Friedlander (New York: Hermon, 1965) p. 234.

Sarah's deceiving Abimelech resulted in a curse to her seed. The biblical mention of a covering of the eye (Gen. 20:16) was meant as a symbolic covering of the truth, later manifesting itself as blindness and effecting Sarah's son, Isaac (B. K. 93a and Meg. 28a). To me, this comment is unusually harsh and unfair because Abraham was not faulted for his role in the deception, and Isaac was considered to be only Sarah's seed.

The rabbis sought to defend Sarah from being called a fabricator by asserting that, when Abraham said she was his sister he did so against her will and welfare (Gen. R. 52,4). Concomitant with defending Sarah, was the realization that the rabbis placed Abraham in the position of having instigated a situation wherein both he and Sarah committed an act of deception that placed Sarah in a delicate and dangerous situation. Sarah's commanding persona was referred to twice when R. Aḥa said Abraham was adorned and ennobled by Sarah, but she was not likewise crowned by him. Further, the rabbis said she was master over him because God told Abraham to listen to all she said (Gen. R. 47,1 and 52,5. Cf. Abraham's dream in Genesis Apocryphon 19:14-25).

The issue of Sarah's beauty surfaced early in the story of her life when she and Abraham were travelling to Egypt and Gerar. As Abraham assessed each new situation, in which he and Sarah found themselves, his thinking and planning related specifically to her beautiful appearance. Saadiah (882-942) disagreed with other commentaries, citing as his proof text Baba Batra 16a, where it was averred Abraham did not know Sarah was beautiful. Yet, Saadiah said, Abraham was apprehensive for

when the Egyptians would see Sarah (12:12). Likewise, Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089-1164) said since the women in the place from which they had come were beautiful, Abraham had not been aware of Sarah's beauty before; however in Egypt, where the hot climate did not produce beautiful women, Sarah's beauty would be evident (12:11). Rashi, pointing out that Sarah's beauty had not been adversely affected through the hardships of travel, based his explanation on Genesis Rabbah 40 (12:11).

Ramban simply questioned why Abraham was more frightened at this point than he had been before, and conjectured that he was afraid he would be unjustly killed so that his beautiful wife would be given to the king. Ramban asserted it was not unusual for Abraham to say she was his sister; he had done so more times than just the two which are recorded in the text. Since nothing untoward happened on other occasions, no record exists of them. Ramban had praised and respected Sarah who, even when taken into Pharaoh's house, remained silent, never divulging her marital relationship with Abraham, and never saying she was his sister, either. She was not chastised for keeping silent, because it was deemed fitting that she not contradict her husband (12:11 and 13). By way of an apology, Radak said (12:12) that, had Abraham known or anticipated this situation beforehand, he would not have come to Egypt; rather he would have suffered the famine. Once in Egypt, however, Abraham feared for himself because the corrupt Egyptians would kill him in order to have Sarah. If she lied and said she was his sister, he could try to arrange a dowry price so high it could not be met.

Malbim (Meir Loeb ben Jehiel Michael 1809-1879, Volhynia, Poland)



suggested an alternate interpretation: since a woman of exceptional beauty was thought of as being divine, and the only mortal who could marry her would be a king, Abraham could be killed for having touched Sarah (12:11-16).

Commentators restricted their remarks to what may be construed as Abraham's selfishness in having asked Sarah to imperil herself by lying for him (Rashi 12:13, Ibn Ezra 12:13, Radak 12:16, Malbim 12:14-16, and Obadiah ben Jacob Sforno c. 1470-c. 1550, Cesena, Italy, 12:13).

The second recorded incident finding Sarah lying to save Abraham involved his telling Abimelech that Sarah was his sister. Rashi asserted Abraham compelled Sarah to let him lie, that is, Sarah would not willingly agree to duplicate the dangerous situation in which she had been placed earlier with Pharaoh. A midrash opined that Sarah, Abraham, and their entourage all told Abimelech that Sarah was Abraham's sister (P. R. 42,3, Vol. 2, p. 742). Radak asked if it was possible that Sarah was so beautiful at age ninety that people would kill for her out of jealousy. Malbim indicated Sarah was taken by force (20:2). When the text said Sarah was "taken" to Abimelech, Ibn Ezra (12:19) referred to the case of Pharaoh not being clear as to whether he believed Pharaoh "took" Sarah sexually or simply "took" her into his home. Further, Abimelech was punished by God "in order to clear Sarah of suspicion" (P. R. 42,3, Vol. 2, pp. 740-741). The lack of a sexual relationship between them was understood when "Abimelech became impotent" (P. R. E. 26, p. 191).

The Genesis Apocryphon described an expression of emotion not found in the Bible relating to Sarah and Pharaoh: "she feared very much within her, lest any[one]

should see her" (19:23). This text also was clear in disclaiming the possibility of any sexual misconduct on Sarah's part when she was with Pharaoh: "And I wept and talked to no one...God Most High sent him a pestilential spirit to afflict him...an evil spirit that kept afflicting him...He was not able to approach her, nor did he have intercourse with her, though he was with her(?) for two years" (20:16-18). Later, in the same chapter, a reiteration of the foregoing occurred: "and the king swore an oath to me that [he had] not [touched her?]" (20:30).

The pureness of the first matriarch was consequential in exegetical sources. It was quite clearly asserted that Sarah and Pharaoh did not have any sexual relationship: "Pharaoh rose up early in the morning confused because he had not approached her..." (P. R. E. 26, p. 190). When Sarah was in his house, he loved her and "wrote in her marriage document (giving her) all his wealth, whether in silver, or in gold, or in menservants, or land, and he wrote (giving) her the land of Goshen for a possession" (ibid. 26, p. 190).

The final incident spoke of Sarah's death and burial, and Abraham's reaction. Rashi based his interpretation on Genesis Rabbah 58, the point of which was she had lived a life free from sin and remained beautiful all her years. Rashi also agreed her death was caused by the trauma she had when she heard about the aborted sacrifice of her son. He did not comment on Abraham weeping for nor eulogizing her (23:1).

Ibn Ezra said Abraham cried for Sarah (23:2). Radak (ibid.) wrote Abraham gave her eulogies and lamentations, crying as though he himself had died, or as a father cries for a deceased son (ibid.). Ramban, Sforno, and Malbim, said Sarah was

a righteous woman. Sforno augmented his interpretation saying Sarah died only after Abraham had knowledge that Rebekah was born, for the sages taught one righteous person must replace another before the latter dies (Yoma 38b and Eccl. R. 1,5,1). In calling her righteous, Malbim meant each year of her life was equally as good as every other year (23:1). Further Malbim disagreed with Genesis Rabbah (45,6) which said Sarah died earlier than she should have because she berated Abraham about Hagar. Malbim asserted she lived the years God gave her; no punishment connected with this incident was received. The only relevant reference to Sarah by Leibowitz (20th century, Israel) was Sarah died and Isaac brought Rebekah into his mother's tent (23:2). There was no discussion of Sarah's marriage, barrenness, or Hagar.

### 3. Sarah and Hagar

The relationship between Sarah and Hagar was explored and richly developed in the midrashim where these women of disparate backgrounds, living in the same household, effectuated tension and discord. Examining the dynamics between them offered more interpretive clarification about Sarah.

Pharaoh's daughter, Hagar, was given by him to Sarah, because he felt Hagar would be well off in the home of the woman who received such positive treatment in his own house. Pharaoh said it would be better if his daughter was a maid in Sarah's house than a rich woman somewhere else (Gen. R. 45,1). Midrashic suggestion created the following idea: dissension between Hagar and Sarah was evident when Hagar, in speaking with the women, alleged that Sarah was not as

righteous as she outwardly appeared; if she were righteous she would not be barren for so many years while she, Hagar, had immediately conceived after lying with Abraham (Gen. R. 45,4). Centuries later, Malbim echoed this idea (16:3-6). In the section on Sarah in the Bible, I wrote of a public and a private Sarah. This midrash reinforced the public and private nature of Sarah's personality as the rabbis asserted Hagar viewed them.

After Hagar conceived, her attitude toward Sarah changed and she made life intolerable for her mistress. Sarah prevented Hagar from fulfilling her marital duty. She slapped her face with a low shoe, and finally, she made Hagar carry pails for her to the bath (Gen. R. 45,6).

Another discrepancy between the two women involved whether they received a theophany. R. Judah b. R. Simon and R. Jonathan in R. Eleazar b. R. Simon's name held that Sarah was the only woman with whom God spoke directly, referring to the time when she denied having laughed (Gen. R. 20,6 and 63,7). Two other instances described Hagar's encounter with the Divine: the rabbis stated God's angel spoke to Hagar (Gen. R. 45,7) and a second opinion avowed that God did speak directly to Hagar (Gen. R. 48,20). Another approbatory remark about Sarah said she was a righteous woman who had an extraordinary singular event, especially for a woman, namely, God speaking to her (Gen. R. 48,20).

The next group of verses described the plight of a barren woman and her efforts to ameliorate her unhappiness within the confines of her society. The story of Hagar and her relationship with Sarah was the key element in this section. Rashi

based his interpretation completely on Genesis Rabbah 45 and added that Sarah perpetrated the evil eye on Hagar's pregnancy, causing the maidservant to suffer a miscarriage (16:5). Furthermore, Hagar was made to do very onerous work (16:6). Other commentators added their own explications, enriching Sarah's personality. Radak said Sarah had no hope of becoming pregnant at her age, but someone else would have to bear the child. She said it would be good for her to give her servant to Abraham and the resulting child would be as her own (16:1). Sarah's hopelessness could be mitigated, Radak asserted, by her being built up (**banah**), namely, the son who would be born would be the building of the father and mother and the son would be regarded as her own (16:2-3). Sarah, feeling as though dead because of her barrenness, thought one had to have been destroyed (barren) in order to be built up again; this was her reasoning in giving Hagar to Abraham (Gen. R. 45,2) and so she gave Hagar to him as a wife, not a concubine (ibid. 45,3). God wanted to show Sarah the miracles that would accrue from living with Abraham, namely, conceiving at age ninety (Radak 16:2).

Ramban opined that Abraham did not go to Hagar on his own; rather, he waited until Sarah gave her to him. That Sarah gave Hagar to him as a wife, not a concubine, showed Sarah's moral behavior (16:2-3). In other words, Sarah was praised for her moral judgment and for the respect and honor she accorded him.

Ramban and Radak did not condone Sarah's behavior toward Hagar; they felt Sarah had a choice in how to treat Hagar and was to be condemned for her choice of action. Ramban had a strong comment on verse 16:6, saying Sarah sinned by her

harsh conduct toward Hagar, and Abraham was also guilty because he allowed her to do so. As a result of Hagar's reaction, God heard her and she gave birth to a son who would oppress the descendants of Sarah. Radak agreed with Ramban and averred that Sarah's behavior was inappropriate toward Hagar and disrespectful to Abraham.

Sforno (16:2) offered another variation of Sarah's thinking. When Sarah said she hoped to be built up through Hagar, she hoped her jealousy of Hagar would awaken her strength and ease her to produce a child. This seems to be a medical notion or perhaps has a trace of superstition. When Abraham listened to Sarah, he agreed with her suggestion and took Hagar into his tent, not for pleasure, but rather to have a child.

Nehama Leibowitz, interspersed her own insights while citing other biblical commentaries. She posited that, as Sarah and Abraham aged, and Sarah had not borne a son as God had promised Abraham, "Sarah took matters into her own hands."<sup>11</sup> Sarah was an activist, not waiting for the future to unfold, but, on the contrary, finding a solution and implementing it. Leibowitz spoke of "the peerless character of Abraham and Sarah, their unselfishness and respect for each other."<sup>12</sup> By forcing Abraham to take Hagar, Sarah was "making a supreme sacrifice to

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<sup>11</sup> Nehama Leibowitz, Studies in Bereshit (Genesis) In the Context of Ancient and Modern Bible Commentary, 4th rev. ed., trans. and adapted by Aryeh Newman (Jerusalem: Department for Torah Education and Culture in the Diaspora, 1981) p. 153.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

overcome the natural feelings of jealousy and egotism..."<sup>13</sup> Hagar was painted in a highly negative light after becoming pregnant. "Hagar's mockery had a poisoned sting in it."<sup>14</sup> Leibowitz offered a moral, perhaps to justify Sarah's actions, when she hypothesized: "Perhaps the Torah wished to teach us that before man undertakes a mission that will tax all his moral and spiritual powers he should ask himself first whether he can maintain those same high standards to the bitter end."<sup>15</sup> A thought question was offered by Leibowitz:

Had Sarah not wished to suppress her instincts and overcome every vestige of jealousy for her rival, had she not dared to scale these unusual heights of selflessness, she would not have fallen victim to the sin of 'Sarah dealt harshly with her'--and there may not have been born that individual whose descendants have proved a source of trouble to Israel to this very day. Who knows?<sup>16</sup>

The dynamics between the two women were commented on and allowed for a range of interpretative remarks. While comments varied, they primarily faulted Sarah for her actions. Radak moralized about Sarah's actions by emphasizing that this story was written in the Bible to teach that people must exercise good qualities and distance themselves from bad traits (16:4). Radak posited that Sarah, in expressing her anger toward Abraham, said she had exemplary motives in giving Hagar to him; now that she felt she was loathsome in Hagar's eyes, she felt that it

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 154-155.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 156.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 157.

was a reflection on Abraham's honor (16:5). Sarah's treatment of Hagar may have included cursing and hitting; she did not act sympathetically to her or give her a lesson to correct her behavior. Radak then was very harsh in his evaluation of Sarah by averring that she was not a good soul nor did she demonstrate qualities of righteousness. What Sarah did was not good in God's eyes. She should have exhibited forgiveness; Abraham also did not behave ideally, for he did not prevent her from acting badly. It was actually Hagar to whom the angel listened and who received a blessing (16:6).

Sforno said Sarah's abusive treatment of Hagar was twofold. First, Sarah demonstrated to Hagar her subservient position in Sarah's household. Second, she wanted Hagar to refrain from her contemptuous attitude (ibid.).

A serious question arose when Hagar fled and was in the wilderness: did she receive a theophany? Only three commentators of those included in this paper interpreted this verse's contents, which I think is significant. The interpreters either thought the peshat was self-evident, or they ignored the possibility of affirming a theophany for the matriarch of an enemy people. Rashi asserted an angel found her (16:7). Sforno said she had been praying, as a result of which God felt she was primed for a vision and an angel spoke with her (ibid.). Hagar, having rested from her weariness, was seen by Malbim as having been ready for a revelation and clearly an angel of God spoke to her (ibid.).

Antagonism between Hagar and Sarah resurfaced and Sarah initiated drastic action, coercing Abraham to banish Hagar and her son. Sarah praised Isaac and



used him as a standard of what a good man is, thereby contrasting him with Ishmael. Ishmael was engaged in strange worship (Targum Pseudo-Jonathan and Jerusalem Targum 21:12). When Sarah complained to Abraham about Ishmael, she did so because Ishmael "shot an arrow at him [Isaac] to slay him" (P. R. E. 30, p. 215). Sarah stated Ishmael could not share an inheritance with Isaac (Rashi 21:10). Sarah exiled Hagar and her son, her rationale being Ishmael made fun of Isaac and, moreover, God's covenantal promise was to Isaac (Radak).

Ramban (21:9) had sympathy toward and praise of the matriarch. His interpretation was that, since Ishmael was mocking his father and his father's ways, Ishmael was worthy of death; however, Sarah demanded he only be cast out, and not inherit anything. Hagar was included in the expulsion because Ishmael would not be able to survive alone in the wilderness. A commentary condemning Sarah's action said she caused Abraham grief when she demanded the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael (P. R. E. 30, pp. 215-216).

When the anguished Abraham complained to God, he was told that Sarah spoke the truth: "Dost thou not know that Sarah was appointed to thee for a wife from her mother's womb? She is thy companion and the wife of thy covenant; Sarah is not called thy handmaid, but thy wife; neither is Hagar called thy wife, but thy handmaid; and all that Sarah has spoken she has uttered truthfully" (*ibid.*, p. 216). In referring to Kiddushin 66b, Sforino stated that Sarah indicated Ishmael was not truly Abraham's son, but rather took his genealogy from his mother who was considered to be inferior (21:10). Malbim avowed that, when Sarah saw Ishmael

laughing, scorning, and gossiping that Isaac's father was Abimelech, she blamed Hagar and demanded their expulsion. She referred to Isaac's birth as a miracle; he was their heart and treasure (21:9-10). Abraham's profound feeling toward Hagar was seen when, after Sarah's death, he married her, and his paternal attachment to Ishmael was manifested (P. R. E. 30, p. 219).

#### 4. Barren Sarah and the three guests

Sarah, the first matriarch, was barren, a pattern prevalent among the matriarchs. Amplification of such an unhappy state of being, within the society in which these matriarchs lived, occasioned comments in the Talmud and midrashim. "Rabbi Nahman said in the name of Rabbah ben Abbuha: Our mother Sarah was incapable of bearing a child for it was said, 'And Sarai was barren, had no child, and did not even have a womb'" (Yeb. 64b). She was one of seven barren women (P. R. K. 20,1, p. 331). Barren at the outset of their marriage, God remembered Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah on New Year's day (Yeb. 64b, R. H. 10b and 11a, and Ber. 29a).

The motif of barrenness appeared in Genesis Rabbah and also served to reinforce the relationship between Hagar and Sarah and Sarah's affinity with Abraham. Why were the matriarchs barren? Various responses highlighted Sarah's personality and relation to her husband. Some of the reasons given are: 1. God desired eagerly the matriarchs' prayers and meditation. 2. God wanted the women to cling to their husbands. 3. Since women were ugly during their pregnancy, Sarah

would not have been pleasurable to Abraham. Thus, by having no children for ninety years, she was like a bride under the bridal canopy (Gen. R. 45,4).

When subsequently learning she would bear a son, Sarah was incredulous. She no longer menstruated and questioned how she could have pleasure or rejuvenation. God rejuvenated Sarah, returned youthful days to her, and engendered all mothers with fear of Sarah so they would not call her a barren one (Gen. R. 53,5). Additionally, the rabbis were protective of her: she was remembered because, when she exited from the houses of Pharaoh and Abimelech, she was still chaste (Gen. R. 53,6).

When old and white-haired, Abraham and Sarah become black-haired and young again.<sup>17</sup> One of the seven wonders of old was Sarah giving birth at age ninety (P. R. E. 52, p. 420) after having been barren for so long (P. R. 43,5, Vol. 2, p. 762). Sarah had no womb and God constructed one for her so she could bear a child (Gen. R. 53,5 and P. R. 42,4, Vol. 2, p. 744). Because of her trust in God, and her fulfillment of the commandments, she was rewarded by having a child (M. T. 4,31 and Gen. R. 53,5).

Praise for Sarah was given for her placing the onus of not having children on herself. For acting this way, she was rewarded by later bearing Isaac (P. R. 42,1 Vol. 2, p. 737). Because of Sarah, "all barren women everywhere in the world were remembered together with Sarah and were with child at the same time; and...all of

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<sup>17</sup> Tanna debe Eliyyahu. The Lore of the School of Elijah, trans. by William G. (Gershon Zev) Braude and Israel J. Kapstein (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981) p. 104.

them gave birth to children at the same time she did" (*ibid.* Vol. 2, 42,4, p. 744). Pesikta de Rab Kahana echoed Genesis Rabbah 53,8 and spoke of the miracles of restoration of health for the deaf, blind, mute, and madmen in addition to the barren women being remembered at the time of Isaac's birth (P. R. K. 22,1, p. 344). Sarah was referred to as "a joyful mother of children" (Ps. 113:9). Since the Bible only alluded to one child, the plural word children meant that she nursed the children of many nations. This was a physical explanation. A philosophical rationale was that many of the people converted to become children of Israel having been nursed by her (P. R. 43,4, Vol. 2, p.759).

After Isaac's birth, Sarah was able to suckle the children of matrons who were in awe of having their children nursed at the breast of such a righteous woman. All who came in the name of heaven became God-fearing, and their babies imbibed Sarah's righteousness. Her breasts were as two fountains as she nursed all the children in her village (B. M. 87a and P. R. E. 52, pp. 420-421). In the same midrash, Sarah's modesty was again stressed by underscoring that she would not bare her breasts to nurse the children until Abraham told her it was not time for modesty but rather time to show people God was performing miracles (Gen. R. 53,9, P. R. 43,4, Vol. 2, p. 759, and P. R. K. 22,1, p. 345). Extra evidence of her being praised was when both Sarah and Abraham were told by God they were righteous (Num. R. 2,11).

In speaking about the birth of Isaac, Radak (21:2) speculated that, since the pregnancy and birth were recorded at once, as had been done in the case of Eve

(Gen. 4:1), Sarah may not have gone through a normal length of pregnancy. For this reason, people did not believe she had given birth. Sforno said the blessing for Sarah was contrary to the curse Eve received in Genesis 3:16; Sarah would have a trouble-free pregnancy, delivery, and child-rearing. Sforno also pointed out that having a son was unusual; most old women give birth to a female (17:16 and 21:1). Malbim stated Sarah would receive a double blessing: she would have a son and nations would descend from her (17:16).

Translating Genesis 21:1, where the Bible said, "And God remembered Sarah," Onkelos agreed with the Bible text, and Pseudo-Jonathan and Jerusalem Targum said God performed a miraculous event for Sarah. Rashi said "God remembered Sarah" meant she became pregnant (21:1). Ramban disagreed with Rashi, positing God fulfilled the words promised to her, as was done in the case of all the barren women who later conceived and gave birth (ibid.).

Another facet of Sarah's personality emerged during the visit of three men/angels to her home. In interpreting the incident where Sarah stood in the tent entrance, comments about her personality were varied with no particular theme emerging. The explanation given by the rabbis about the significance of the dotted letters in Gen. 18:9, was that the angels asked Sarah where Abraham was, as well as having asked Abraham where she was (Gen. R. 48,15). If the angels had spoken to Sarah, as alleged here, they had to know where she was. How could the rabbis have looked askance at her standing in the tent entrance and faulted her for eavesdropping (Deut. R. 6,5)? If the angels came to tell Sarah the news of the

pregnancy, how could she not be part of the scene and not be considered extraneous to the center of the action?

Divergent opinions surfaced about Sarah standing at the tent entrance (18:10). One comment emphasized her modesty by stipulating she stood with Ishmael so as not to be alone with the angel. After Abraham greeted the guests, the men inquired about Sarah. The significance of their inquiry about her was to illustrate her modesty to Abraham, and to exemplify that guests must inquire of the host about the welfare of the mistress of the household (Rashi 18:9). Radak amplified Rashi's commentary and added that Sarah was in the tent where a modest woman would be. The lesson to be learned, according to Radak, was that it was nice for modest women to be seen thus before her guests (18:9)!

Contrary to the theme of modesty was a negative supposition: the rabbis charged that women possess, among other negative personality traits, those of eavesdropping and laziness. Both were attributed to Sarah who eavesdropped during the visit of the three angels; she needed to be told to hurry in preparing food for them (Gen. R. 45,5).

Ibn Ezra recognized a problem in explaining what "behind" (Gen. 18:10) meant, and where Sarah's tent and Sarah were as she listened (ibid.). Radak posited Sarah came to the tent opening to learn what was being said. The angel did not see her because the tent opening was behind him (ibid.).

Sforno averred that since Abraham had already been told he would have offspring, this visit from the angels was to tell Sarah she would have a child. In this

way, she would rejoice and offer thanksgiving to God, and her pregnancy would be more complete. Since the angels spoke to her **through** Abraham, this was not really a theophany (18:9). (This incident may be compared to Hagar's direct dialogue with the angel.) When the angels came to bring the good news, they spoke to Abraham as an intermediary, further highlighting her modesty (based on B. M. 87a.) The angel did not speak directly to Sarah because her tent entrance was behind him (Sforno 18:10). Ibn Ezra raised the question as to whom the angels came to speak and resolved that while they spoke to Abraham, the import of their words was for Sarah (18:13). The angel communicated directly to Abraham, but, knowingly, Sarah could hear from her tent entrance just behind the angel (Malbim 18:10).

When the guests arrived, Sarah was the recipient of Abraham's haste and behest regarding food preparation (Malbim, 18:6). Sarah was in her tent for two reasons. First, she was busy with hospitality for guests. Second, she had started menstruating while kneading the bread, meaning her youthfulness had returned, her barrenness had been cured, and she was restricted to her tent because she was a menstruant (Malbim, 18:9).

Not all comments about Sarah were positive. When Abraham asked Sarah to prepare food for the three guests, he asked her to use the finest or choicest flour (18:6). R. Isaac offered a scathing comment praising men and faulting women, by asserting women were more grudging toward guests than men (B. M. 87a). He understood Abraham's instructions to have been directed to counter this trend.

Her hospitality was demonstrated when she baked three different items for the

guests: cakes, pudding, or custard, and other cakes made with honey (Gen. R. 48,12). The reason she did not serve the guests herself was because she had begun menstruating (P. R. E. 36, p. 275). The rabbis extolled her: as long as she lived, her doors were wide open, her kneading was blessed, and a candle burned from Sabbath eve to Sabbath eve (Gen. R. 60,16). Such laudatory statements about the matriarch show the regard in which she was held. The discrepancy between the two views illustrates the richness and variety of the rabbinic tradition.

Sarah's response to the guests' prediction was laughter and incredulity. Saadiah said she laughed in her heart, questioning whether she had heard the truth (18:12-13). Rashi said Sarah regarded her body and questioned how she could give birth or nurse (18:12). Ibn Ezra said Sarah asked how she and Abraham, in their old age, could have pleasure and delight (18:11)? Radak gave a discourse on the cessation of menstruation which had occurred to Sarah, making the conceiving of a child impossible (ibid.).

Sarah laughed because she thought, since she and Abraham were both old, the prophesy would come to naught, and what the angel predicted would resemble a revival of the dead. Only God or a special prayer to God would effectuate such a prophesy (Sforno 18:12). It was not clear to Ramban and Sforno whether God or Abraham had accused her of having laughed earlier. Whereas it was their impression Hagar had received a theophany, it was not equally apparent in Sarah's case.

Malbim had a different idea about Sarah's laughter: her body was rejuvenated and her menstrual cycle had begun. Her laughter and joy were because she would



not need a great miracle any longer in order to conceive (18:12).

Sarah's denial of laughter to God (18:15) raised questions about whether she lied or dissembled. Radak said Sarah denied her laughter because she was afraid, but God countered that she really had laughed. Ramban was surprised that Sarah, a righteous prophetess, did not believe God's angels and denied what God had told Abraham. In trying to excuse her, Ramban said perhaps she did not realize they were angels, or perhaps she did not see them. When God accused her of denying her laughter, Abraham firmly criticized her and asked her if anything was too difficult for God. Her denial of laughter was because she saw Abraham feared God and had received a prophesy.

Sforno averred Sarah was frightened to admit having laughed, but repented in her heart. His explanation was that Abraham did not believe Sarah at all when she said she did not laugh. Since he knew God would not lie, it was clear Sarah had dissembled (18:15).

God, having sent angels as emissaries, asked Abraham why Sarah had laughed (Malbim 18:13-14). Frightened, Sarah said her laughter was joy, not ridicule, which the word **ṣāḥaqtī** usually implied. God agreed that her laughter did not imply derision (Malbim 18:15).

None of the commentators spoke of a theophany (18:15). On the contrary, they resolved the ambiguity by asserting that the patriarch, not Sarah, had a dialogue with God. Abraham was viewed as the intermediary. Saadiah, Rashi, and Ibn Ezra did not comment on this verse.

## 5. General Observations about Sarah in Rabbinic Literature

Talmudic, midrashic, and targumic sources all agreed about Sarah's exceptional beauty. Comments about her modesty, especially during the three guests' visit, was accented. She was a model of virtue who, along with her husband, observed an ethical life. Not only a prophetess, she was favored by God with a name change. Midrashim were very protective of her chasteness after being with Pharaoh and Abimelech and did not blame her for having lied to save Abraham; rather they asserted that Abraham had coerced her. The Jerusalem Targum was the only source that pictured an irate Sarah berating Abraham for having changed her lifestyle and having coerced her to behave in ways uncomfortable for herself.

Laudatory remarks were made in the midrashim indicating that God, to keep peace in Sarah's home, changed her negative words about Abraham being old. God not only told Abraham to listen to Sarah, but had a dialogue with her as well. Contrarily, the Babylonian Talmud impugned her for a lack of hospitality when she had visitors, generalizing that all women behaved similarly. This deprecatory comment is anger-provoking and misogynistic. As the midrashim posited that God did speak with Sarah, the Talmud opined that there was no theophany; rather, God spoke with Abraham as the intermediary.

Later exegetes also acknowledged Sarah's beauty. They recognized that she was the only female whose name God had altered. Upon her death, she was a righteous woman, free from sin. In speaking about the incidents with Pharaoh and Abimelech, some exegetes said it was Abraham's fault that she was made to lie; yet

others whitewashed his actions and professed that, had he anticipated the danger to which she would be exposed, he would have journeyed on an alternate route. Further, opinion was mixed that he prevaricated to protect her as well as himself.

Comments about the relationship between Sarah and Hagar were not favorable to the matriarch. It was unquestionably delineated that she sinned in her behavior toward Hagar. Yet, it was avowed, she showed honor to Abraham by giving Hagar to him.

The controversial aspects of the three guests' visit received attention by the later commentators who said that while they spoke directly to Abraham, their message was really for Sarah. Because of the logistics of where the tent door was, she was behind them, meaning she did not eavesdrop. Modesty and menstruation kept her in the background. Interpreters also tried to lessen the import of her laughter and disbelief by asserting that she did not think the guests were angels.

The basic thrust of the earlier rabbinic literature was to idealize Sarah both in terms of her physical appearance and her personality traits. Stress on her beauty sets up a mental image which enhances her personality characteristics as well. By guarding her chasteness or purity, Sarah becomes an untouchable model of righteousness. Exegetes such as Ramban and Radak did condemn her actions toward her maidservant. By not condoning her actions, they allowed negative traits to be addressed and therefore Sarah becomes a person who is real and with whom we can identify. However, while implying that Sarah exhibited the foible of being inhospitable, it is disturbing to read a universal declaration that all women possess

this same fault. Biblical characters are seen as role models, but their strengths and weaknesses cannot fairly be generalized on a universal level. In short, by being painted in the rabbinic literature as a mainly pristine woman, Sarah becomes the image of an unattainable personality; the necessity of seeing her as the Bible presented her with her negative traits is imperative to the true understanding of this very real woman.

### C. Sarah in Jewish Educational Materials

The figure of Sarah appeared in all the educational materials, often as an adjunct to Abraham. A heterogeneity of presentations was found: questions on content, fill-in responses, full or partial Hebrew text citations with English commentary on the bottom of the page or marginal notes, vocabulary lists and exercises, Hebrew synonyms or English translations, and thought-provoking questions.<sup>18</sup>

#### 1. The character of Sarah

Sarah's beauty, focused on in the Bible and commentaries, was not emphasized in the educational materials. Even where illustrations were included in the texts, no mention was made of her physiognomy or of Abraham's startled recognition of her beauty. Pupils learned about her personality traits by inference, namely, through the incidents in her life and Abraham's reaction to her death.

The changing of Sarah's name was mentioned in several of the educational

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<sup>18</sup> The translations and paraphrasing of the Hebrew educational materials is mine.

materials. Pollack simply related that Abraham and Sarah had their names changed.<sup>19</sup> Two texts, in citing Rashi's commentary, stated Sarah's name alteration reflected a change from her personal or private relationship with Abraham to a universal one.<sup>20</sup> Sarah's name change reflected the universality of her person as the future would unfold.<sup>21</sup> In addition to saying Sarah means princess, one storybook said it also "means a great lady..."<sup>22</sup> In asking a question about Sarah's name, a connection was made between **sar** and **Sarah**, that is, students were asked the interpretation of the two words and to determine if there was a link.<sup>23</sup> One source combined Sarah's change of name with her laughter at hearing the news she would bear a son.<sup>24</sup> Another book, combining a re-telling of Bible stories with midrash from Genesis Rabbah, said: "Sarai's name will be changed. From now on she will be called Sara, meaning, a queen over the whole world. Just as you are a king over the world, so she is a queen over the world. Although Sarai is too old to have a child,

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<sup>19</sup> Y. H. Pollack, Humosheinu. Genesis Part 1 (New York: Hebrew Publishing, 1943) p. 43.

<sup>20</sup> Mordecai H. Lewittes, ed., Humash La-talmid. The Student Bible. From Bereishit--Hayei Sarah (New York: Hebrew Publishing, 1950) p. 85, and Shimshon A. Isserof and Abraham Etkin, Sidrah Lekh Lekhah. Workbook (New York: Board of Jewish Education, 1955) p. 23.

<sup>21</sup> Elias Persky, ed., Humash Meforash. Part 1 (New York: Ktav, 1965) p. 81.

<sup>22</sup> Louis Pulver, First Bible Stories for Little People (London: Shapiro, Vallentine, 1930) p. 25.

<sup>23</sup> Zvi Scharfstein. Humash Le-mathilim Bereishit 1 (New York: Shilo, 1939) p. 36.

<sup>24</sup> Elias Persky, Haver La-Torah. 2. (New York: Ktav, 1964) p. 23.

she will give birth to a son when she will have her new name, Sara."<sup>25</sup>

When Sarah's name was changed, it embodied "the letter heh [which] is sometimes used as a shorthand for the name of God."<sup>26</sup> It was explained that her transition from being Abraham's princess to a more universal person, was "because of her goodness and many mitzvot...Sarah was now...a special blessing to the whole world."<sup>27</sup>

Sarah's death was included in a number of texts. Abraham weeping for and eulogizing her was pointed out by asking pupils to select the Bible verse speaking of Abraham's sadness at her death. The story stressed the honor accorded to Abraham by the children of Heth.<sup>28</sup> Abraham's sadness was recorded with a moral about her death: "It was only Sarah's **body** that was buried in the cave, not Sarah **herself**...God took Sarah to Himself, to be happy with Him forever."<sup>29</sup>

A perfunctory re-statement of Sarah's death was that she was old and died, and Abraham wept, eulogized, and wanted to bury her.<sup>30</sup> She died, and Abraham

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<sup>25</sup> R. Weissman, The Little Midrash Says. Bereishis (New York: Benei Yakov Publications, 1986) p. 75.

<sup>26</sup> Miriam Lorber and Judith Shamir, Gateway to Torah. Part 1. Book of Bereshit (New York: Ktav, 1991) p. 63.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Tamar Fish, Torah Orah. Bereishit. Workbook (Jerusalem: S. Zak, 1974) pp. 48-50.

<sup>29</sup> Pulver, p. 35.

<sup>30</sup> A. Davinsky, Mavoh Le-lilmud Ha-humash Le-yeladim. From Genesis through Harei Sarah (New York: Behrman, 1947) p. 53.

purchased a cave and buried her.<sup>31</sup> After Sarah's death, "Abraham was very sad because he loved Sarah his wife very much. Abraham sat on the ground and wept."<sup>32</sup> A curious comment said Machpelah was purchased, but nothing was written about either Sarah's death or Abraham's reaction.<sup>33</sup> One book re-told the episode and had no commentary about Abraham's reaction; yet the follow-up page spoke of "a devoted wife and mother who observed Jewish law and tradition to the letter."<sup>34</sup> Finally, one source said Abraham eulogized Sarah as follows: Sara served Hashem all her life. She constantly prepared food for guests and taught them to believe in Hashem as well.<sup>35</sup>

A workbook that focused on parashat Hayei Sarah began with an exercise asking students what they know about Sarah from a given list of statements. Pupils must put a mark before the applicable answers. The marks are to be put next to: "She was the wife of Abraham; she went with Abraham to the land of Canaan; she caused women to believe in God; she thought about the future of the family; at first she had no children; she worried about Isaac's education; she received guests

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<sup>31</sup> Melanie Berman and Joel Grishaver, My Weekly Sidrah (Los Angeles: Torah Aura, 1965) p. 19.

<sup>32</sup> Persky, Haver La-Torah. 2, p. 46.

<sup>33</sup> Elias Persky, Ani Lomeid Humash. 2 (New York: S. Rabinowitz, 1953) p. 57.

<sup>34</sup> Lorber and Shamir, p. 83.

<sup>35</sup> Weissman, p. 110.

nicely."<sup>36</sup> These statements form a summary of what students have learned about Sarah, but show her only in a positive light.

A challenging question was posed following the definition of the word eulogize: What do you think Abraham said about Sarah?<sup>37</sup> Students, in responding, could call to mind all they have gleaned about Sarah and weigh and balance what they felt should be said in a eulogy. While recognizing that a eulogy meant praise of the deceased, pupils would have to ponder the full scope of her traits and treat her fairly but honestly.

Two tales were told in another book about Sarah's death. The first showed Satan, frustrated by his attempts to fault Abraham, turning his attention to Sarah and telling her about Abraham's aborted sacrificing of Isaac. In recounting the incident suspensefully to her, he reached the point where Abraham took the knife to kill Isaac and, before he could continue, Sarah fell dead from fright.<sup>38</sup>

The second tale related that Abraham, upon returning home, found the doors and windows of his tent shut, and no candle burning. Upon learning from his neighbors that Sarah had died when hearing that he had killed Isaac, Abraham sorely wept, as did the neighbors. While he was weeping, he said the following about his beloved Sarah: She was a good mother, a merciful woman who gave food to widows and orphans and clothing to the poor, and a woman who helped the weak and tired.

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<sup>36</sup> Shahrar Yonay and Rina Yonay, The Book of Bereshit. 5. Parashat Hayei Sarah (New York: Shai, 1991) p. 5.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 9.



He called Sarah a great righteous woman of good deeds and prayer. The neighbors said such a righteous woman as Sarah had not existed since the time of the creation.<sup>39</sup>

Some miscellaneous thoughts expand the students' knowledge of Sarah. For example, Sarah and Abraham trusted in God<sup>40</sup> and were proselyzers, she "teaching the women to believe in God."<sup>41</sup> A comment by Rashi, cited by Lewittes, proffered that Sarah and Abraham taught the women and men respectively. "They created 'new souls' by persuading the people around them to worship God instead of idols."<sup>42</sup> A personality quality attributed to Sarah was that of righteousness.<sup>43</sup> Although stressing their faith, pupils were introduced to the fact that "Abraham and Sarah had moments of doubt about God's promise to provide them with a son in their old age."<sup>44</sup> Pupils explored God's relationship with Abraham and Sarah, and learned that their faith overrode their questioning of the seemingly impossible

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., pp. 15-16.

<sup>40</sup> Harry Araten, Bible Stories to Read and Color (Maryland: Kar-Ben Copies, 1991) p. 10.

<sup>41</sup> Chaim Arye Stamm, Bereishit. Mivaer Chumash. Vol. I (New York: Mivaer, 1983) p. 400. This book gives an orthodox slant because of the commentaries on which it relies which include Rashi, Malbim, Sforino, Hirsch, and Radak, and the phraseology it employs.

<sup>42</sup> Lewittes, p. 76.

<sup>43</sup> Persky, Haver La-Torah. 2. Workbook, p. 16.

<sup>44</sup> Morris J. Sugarman, The Rabbi's Bible for Volume I: Torah. Student Activity Book. Part 1 (New York: Behrman, 1978) p. 26.

promise made to them.<sup>45</sup> Fascinating and singular was another comment avowing "Sarai realized that the problem (of no children) was hers."<sup>46</sup> The guilt she felt could almost have been palpable as the pupils learn this commentary.

Finally, two of the texts referred to a midrash where Rebekah was said to have carried on Sarah's tradition of baking challah and lighting Sabbath candles.<sup>47</sup> Reflected likewise was an image of Sarah's hospitality as symbolized by the Sabbath candles' light lasting from Sabbath to Sabbath.<sup>48</sup>

## 2. The relationship between Sarah and Abraham

The presentations of Sarah's lying to protect Abraham were scantily represented in the educational materials. One source said when Abraham called Sarah his sister to Pharaoh, "this is the first 'WIFE-SISTER' story,"<sup>49</sup> and, in recounting the Abimelech episode, said this was a re-enactment of the wife-sister story.<sup>50</sup> In relating the wife-sister stories, Sarah's beauty was either emphasized or

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>46</sup> Stamm, pp. 400-401.

<sup>47</sup> Joel Lurie Grishaver, Bible People. Book 1 (Genesis) Workbook (Denver: Alternatives in Religious Education, 1980) p. 37 and Lorber and Shamir, p. 83.

<sup>48</sup> Joel Lurie Grishaver, Torah Toons. 1 (Los Angeles: Torah Aura, 1983) p. 16.

<sup>49</sup> Grishaver, Torah Toons 1, p. 8.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

inferred.<sup>51</sup> One source treated the deception scenes more fully and relied on major biblical interpreters such as Rashi, Sforno, Radak, and Malbim. Abraham realized the Egyptians "sinned with women and were (possibly) use[d] to murder. Had Avrom known this from the start, he (Avrom) would not have gone to Egypt. Avrom would rather have suffered from hunger than leave Sarai so unprotected."<sup>52</sup> The point made here was Abraham did not fear for his own life; he feared if he were killed "the Egyptians would have sinned terribly with Sarai, and her (Sarai's) life would be one of continuous suffering."<sup>53</sup> Since "Sarai was very modest (A PERSON WHO DOES NOT THINK OR TALK BIG ABOUT HIMSELF OR HERSELF)"<sup>54</sup> she was not afraid anything bad would befall her. Therefore, Abraham thought up a plan whereby he could protect her and, at the same time, gain personal wealth. Stamm reiterated that Abraham's concern was strictly for Sarah, the proof of this being that, when Sarah was discovered in the box by the custom's officers, "all the Egyptians who saw Sarai's beauty had sinful thoughts towards her."<sup>55</sup> Similarly, the purpose of this story was "so that Avram and Sarai would become famous as Hashem's special friends."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 12 and Aaron Falk, Di'taot Le-parshiot Ha-shavua. Part 1--Genesis and Exodus (Jerusalem: Olam Ha-sefer Ha-Torani, 1988) p. 10.

<sup>52</sup> Stamm, p. 312.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 313.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 315. Stamm frequently used upper case letters for explanatory emphasis.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 316.

<sup>56</sup> Weissman, p. 63.

Some exercise questions about these incidents were: "Why did Abraham say Sarah was his sister? Who took Sarah to his house?"<sup>57</sup> "What did Abraham say to Sarah when they approached Egypt? Why did they take her to Pharaoh's house?"<sup>58</sup> In a who said to whom exercise, the following appeared: "Say you are my sister; Behold, I now know you are a beautiful woman." I will live because of you; and, Here is your wife--take her and go."<sup>59</sup>

All information associated with Sarah's lying to protect Abraham, and her deception of Pharaoh and Abimelech, was omitted from Kom's workbook series. The sections of verses about her encounter with the kings was systematically excluded from these materials.<sup>60</sup> Yet, a full workbook chapter is devoted to the incident with Abimelech in Yonay and Yonay. Exercise questions pointed up Abimelech's anger at Abraham, and Abimelech's taking Sarah to his house.<sup>61</sup> The chapter on the birth of Isaac contained a simple re-telling of the midrash about the miracles which occurred when Isaac was born, and connected the miracles of the healing of the barren, sick, blind and deaf to the marvel of Sarah giving birth, and her resulting happiness.

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<sup>57</sup> Shimshon A. Isserof and Abraham Etkin, Sidrah Vayera'. Workbook (New York: Board of Jewish Education, 1954) p. 21.

<sup>58</sup> Isserof and Etkin, Sidrah Lekh Lekhah Workbook, p. 5.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> See also Lorber and Shamir who re-told the Bible and skipped from Gen. 12:5 to 13:1 (pp. 48 and 50) and from 19:29 to 21:8 (pp. 70 and 74).

<sup>61</sup> Shahr Yonay and Rina Yonay, The Book of Bereshit 4. Parashat Vayera' (New York: Shai, 1991) pp. 34-38.

Two consecutive drawings provided the only depiction of Sarah and Pharaoh. In the first, Sarah was seen in a frontal view where her pretty young face peered out of a shawl-like head covering, and in the second picture she was being led to Pharaoh as she held the hand of an Egyptian. The latter portrait showed her in a rear view, fully garbed, and appearing to be much older than in the first drawing. Rarely in drawings of biblical figures does one find physical contact between males and females; thus, it is most surprising to see Sarah's hand being held by the Egyptian especially since no sense of coercion was evident in the contact.<sup>62</sup>

### 3. Sarah and Hagar

Realizing the significant role Hagar played in the life of Sarah and her household, it should be imperative that Hagar appear in the school materials in several scenes: as the barren Sarah's maid who was given to Abraham; as the woman who fled from Sarah and received a theophany; and, as Ishmael's mother who was expelled from Sarah's household. Many of the materials omitted mention of her; none of the others gave a fulsome characterization of her.<sup>63</sup> One book placed the

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<sup>62</sup> Uriel Ofek, Ha-tanakh Sheli Be-temunot. Avraham Ve-Sarah, Vol. 3 (Ramat Gan: Revivim, no date) p. 5.

<sup>63</sup> Seymour Rossel, A Child's Bible. Lessons From the Torah (New York: Behrman 1988); Sugarman, Nahum Gabrieli and Baruch Avivi, Torah La-yeled. Sefer Rishon. Bereishit (Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1973); Ruth Samuels and Sol Scharfstein, Torah and You. Part 1. A Value Clarification Text (New York: Ktav, 1987); Persky (Haver La-Torah. 2 and Haver La-Torah. 2. Workbook); Berman and Grishaver, Max Raitskin and Gerald Raitskin, Sefer Ha'avot (New York: Ktav, 1958); Falk, Solomon Rabinowitz, Genesis in Dialogue Form with Exercises (no publication information, 1968); Araten, Davinsky, and Iona Zielberman and Dalia Korah-Seger, Bereishit

akedah incident immediately after the weaning of Isaac, having omitted all reference to the banishment of Hagar.<sup>64</sup> One text, recounting only that Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham and Hagar gave birth, had no reference to the dynamics between the two women, Hagar's fleeing and later being banished.<sup>65</sup> In one of his books, Grishaver only spoke of stress increasing between the women and "God tells Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael off."<sup>66</sup> While the re-told Bible text read "Sarai punished her,"<sup>67</sup> the complementary explanation showed Sarah in glowing terms as she gave Hagar to Abraham: "Sarai loved Avram and wanted so much for him to be happy that she said to him, 'Avram, take my maidservant, Hagar, as your wife. Perhaps she will have the child we want so badly.' Sarai loved Avram so much that she was willing to share his love with another woman."<sup>68</sup> This interpretation was unique in that God, not Sarah, directed Abraham to banish Hagar.

Some texts raised the pupils' consciousness about the relationship between the two women, expressed the discord between them, and exposed Sarah's foibles regarding her cruelty to her handmaid. After Hagar became pregnant, "Sarai did not

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Sheli. Student Workbook (Jerusalem: S. Zak, 1974).

<sup>64</sup> Lorber and Shamir, pp. 74 and 76.

<sup>65</sup> Persky, Ani Lomejd Humash. 2, p. 17.

<sup>66</sup> Grishaver, Torah Toons 1, p. 11.

<sup>67</sup> Lorber and Shamir, p. 58.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

look so important to Hagar anymore."<sup>69</sup> Relying on traditional sources, the author repeated that Hagar stated Sarah was not righteous, because she had no child. "Because Sarai spoke with bad intentions against Hagar, God caused the baby inside of Hagar to die."<sup>70</sup> When Sarah complained to Abraham of Hagar's attitude toward her, he was not going to punish Hagar, but rather let Sarah handle the matter. Sarah "made her suffer"--by doing work that was not usual for maids. But Sarai did not torture her (MAKE HER SUFFER GREAT BODY PAIN, SUCH AS BY BEATINGS)."<sup>71</sup> When Hagar "became proud"<sup>72</sup> after becoming pregnant and insulted Sarah, "Sarah punished Hagar for such haughty words. She made Hagar work hard."<sup>73</sup>

Elaboration on Hagar's and Sarah's actions was given when Hagar "teases" Sarah, and Sarah is "cruel to Hagar."<sup>74</sup> The companion to the foregoing book expanded on their dynamics by asking pupils to explore, in diary form, Sarah's thoughts and how she felt giving Hagar to Abraham.<sup>75</sup> A subsequent comment showed Sarah's perception of the situation: "After Hagar gave birth to her son, she

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<sup>69</sup> Stamm, p. 405.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 407.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 408.

<sup>72</sup> Weissman, p. 74.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Joel Lurie Grishaver with Jane Ellen Golub et al, Being Torah. A First Book of Torah Texts (Los Angeles: Torah Aura, 1985) p. 79.

<sup>75</sup> Grishaver with Golub, Being Torah, p. 40.

began to make fun of me."<sup>76</sup>

A simple re-telling of Sarah's giving Hagar to Abraham and Hagar's bearing Ishmael omitted details about the women's connection. In the exercises, attention was given to Sarah and Abraham's name change, and the role Hagar played for both Sarah and Abraham; nothing was included about the friction between the women.<sup>77</sup> A condensation of Hagar's dismissal was followed by five questions, four of which related to Sarah. These four questions could possibly foster discussion about her feeling toward Hagar (Example: Why was Sarah angry at Ishmael?), explore their association, and also keynote why God told Abraham to listen to Sarah.<sup>78</sup>

Problems developed in Abraham's house as a result of Hagar's becoming his wife. Hagar "was so proud that she did not behave nicely to her mistress; and this made Sarai angry, and she said unkind things to Hagar."<sup>79</sup> Thought questions about the relationship between the two women were posed in the following way: "Why did Sarah begin to torment Hagar? Why did Hagar return to Sarah after having fled? What would you do in Hagar's place? Why did Sarah request that Abraham banish Hagar and Ishmael? In your opinion, why did Abraham not want to fulfill the request?"<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Lewittes, pp. 83-84.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>79</sup> Pulver, p. 24.

<sup>80</sup> Amira Barzilai, Sipurei Ha-Torah La-talmid. Sefer Bereshit (Jerusalem: Seforim Ahi'ezer, 1981) pp. 61 and 80.



One educational source implied that Sarah's negative actions toward Hagar were thought out and acceptable for she had consulted in advance with Abraham: "Before punishing Hagar, Sarai consulted with her husband Avram. Sarai wanted another opinion before taking action."<sup>81</sup> The exercise with this statement gave pupils real life situations and asked to whom they should go for advice.

A fill-in exercise focusing on Sarah giving Hagar to Abraham, and Hagar conceiving and bearing Ishmael, asked pupils to find equivalent Bible verses but made no mention of Sarah's harsh treatment of Hagar.<sup>82</sup> In the section of questions, more room for thought and discussion emerged. The dynamics between the two women could be examined as students answered: Why did Sarah tell Abraham to take Hagar as his wife? Why was Sarah angry with Abraham? Why did Hagar flee?<sup>83</sup> Such questions should form the basis of a frank exchange about the role of the woman in the ancient Near East, and raise ideas about how each woman treated the other. Since nothing was included about Hagar's treatment of Sarah, awareness should be fostered about the mutuality of the situation. Thought questions also searched the encounter between God's angel and Hagar.<sup>84</sup> That such an incident occurred to a maidservant should be underscored when looking at Hagar, who is usually seen in a negative light.

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<sup>81</sup> Lorber and Shamir, p. 61.

<sup>82</sup> Isserof and Etkin, Lekh Lekhah, p. 19.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

The drastic culmination of the tension was the banishment of Hagar and her son. Sarah's demand that Abraham perform this abhorrent act was reflected in many of the texts, and generally Sarah is **not** presented in a negative light. Pulver asked: Why did Sarah request that Ishmael and Hagar be banished? "Sarah saw Ishmael mocking, and she was afraid that if he stayed at home there would be a great deal of quarrelling and trouble in the tent."<sup>85</sup> Pliskin asserted that Abraham was unhappy listening to Sarah telling him "to send Ishmael and his mother Hagar away"<sup>86</sup> but God told him to heed Sarah.

A very compassionate picture was painted of the way Hagar felt as she looked at her dying son. The author asked the reader: "Would not **your** mother cry, if she thought you were dying, and she could not do anything to help you?"<sup>87</sup> To make a moral point about God's omnipotence, Hagar was rebuked for having "forgotten God when she thought her son would die."<sup>88</sup>

In a chapter entitled "Isaac and Ishmael," the introductory statement said there was no peace between Sarah and Hagar. In questions about the banishment, Sarah's request appeared in one query; nothing was asked about Hagar's feelings.<sup>89</sup>

In a workbook chapter entitled "The Birth of Isaac," Sarah and Hagar were

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<sup>85</sup> Pulver, p. 30.

<sup>86</sup> Jacqueline J. Pliskin, The Bible Story Activity Book (New York: Shapolsky, 1990) p. 24.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Fish, p. 41.

referred to in five explanations of a total of twenty vocabulary words, and were mentioned in each of four fill-in sentences. In another exercise of twelve questions, six related to Hagar, and two to Sarah.<sup>90</sup> This same source presented a story with a moral, signifying Sarah's fear of Isaac associating with the wicked Ishmael and her need to banish him and his mother from her home. A question was asked: "Why did Sarah not want Isaac to be friends with Ishmael?"<sup>91</sup> In a story book, emphasis on Ishmael's behavior at Isaac's feast showed "Abraham and Sarah were very much ashamed of him...Sarah told Abraham that Ishmael must be punished. So the next day Abraham told Ishmael that he must go away, and his mother, Hagar, would go with him."<sup>92</sup> The rationale given for Sarah's demand was her fear Ishmael would influence Isaac badly. Another provocation by Ishmael was that "he was joking about the birth of a baby, Isaac, to Sarah, an old woman."<sup>93</sup> The reason Sarah banished Hagar with her son was that Sarah felt Ishmael learned his negative behavior from his mother.<sup>94</sup>

Included in another exercise was the following: "Now today we had this party and showed our son Isaac off to the whole world. All day I kept thinking \_\_\_\_."<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Isserof and Etkin, Sidrah Vayera'. Workbook, pp. 23-25.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>92</sup> Addie Richman Altman, The Jewish Child's Bible Stories told in simple language (New York: Bloch, 1952) pp. 31-32.

<sup>93</sup> Persky, Humash Meforash. Part 1, p. 114.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>95</sup> Grishaver with Golub, Being Torah, p. 40.

This answer could either be related to Sarah's joy or her jealousy of Hagar and Ishmael.

The banished Hagar wandered in the desert. A number of educational materials made reference to her predicament and/or spoke of the angel of God speaking to her.<sup>96</sup> The importance of God or God's angel having spoken twice to Hagar should be highlighted in every text, but it is not.

Poignant, vivid interpretations were found in illustrations. One drawing showed Hagar in the foreground, wearing a long, draped dress with elbow length sleeves and a head covering. Crouching on her knees, hands to her head, she seemed to be in anguish. Ishmael lay on his stomach in the background, under a leafless tree, crying or calling to his mother.<sup>97</sup>

A second sketch depicting Hagar and her son showed her in a frontal view wearing an ankle-length dress with one elbow length sleeve and the other shoulder bare. Her below-the-shoulder length hair was not coiffed but was covered on top by a flat round hat, and a circular earring adorned her right ear. Her feet were not seen but she had laces strapped around her lower legs. Her facial expression was one of pleasure or elation. She was in the foreground bending over the top of a well. A short distance behind, Ishmael lay stomach down under a bare tree, the water pitcher

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<sup>96</sup> Gabrieli and Avivi, Grishaver (Bible People. Book 1), Lewittes, Persky (Humash Me-forash. Part 1), Altman, Pollack, Pliskin, Pulver, Stamm, and Grishaver with Golub (Being Torah), and N. Yadlin and A. Gundelman, Sipurei Ha-Torah Le-yeladim. Bereishit. Class 2 (Tel Aviv: Joshua Chachik, 1967) p. 48.

<sup>97</sup> Yadlin and Gundelman, p. 48.

on the ground out of his reach.<sup>98</sup>

In a book of simple illustrations for children, seven drawings portrayed Sarah and Hagar. Sarah was seen dressed in the identical garb in all of the pictures. In the depictions with Hagar, her face was not as beautiful as it appeared earlier in the book. In three of the sketches, her face was harsh as she regarded Hagar; in another, following Hagar having given birth, she seemed almost sinister.<sup>99</sup>

Two other drawings on facing pages showed Hagar pulling a little child in the direction to which Abraham was pointing, and then, left to right, a weeping, frightened Hagar lying on the ground, leaning against a rock, while a flying angel approached her. She was weeping and looking frightened. Ishmael lay on the right under a bare bush.<sup>100</sup>

Another set of pictures was revealing in its presentation of the women. In one scene, where Hagar was pregnant, Sarah somberly stared at her; in another, Hagar's head was bowed as an angry Sarah looked at her. In the five renderings of Hagar alone in a forest (!), three pictures show her weary face and tired body, and the remaining two show her in a rear view walking back to Sarah. In three of the drawings, an eight pointed gold star with a red center appeared to approximate a theophany. The accompanying text emphasized the women's discordant

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<sup>98</sup> Gabrieli and Avivi, p. 50.

<sup>99</sup> Ofek, Vol. 3, pp. 24-25, and 28.

<sup>100</sup> Y. Weingarten, Torah Le-mathilim. Bereishit. Bible Textbook for Beginners, Book 1 (New York: Kerem, 1954) pp. 44-45.

relationship.<sup>101</sup>

In the Kom series, Sarah's story began with the birth of Ishmael (Gen. 16). In level 1, Sarah's giving Hagar to Abraham became the jumping off point for concepts and exercises: Sarah's being built up through Hagar's having a child, Abraham's listening to Sarah's voice, and her mistreatment of Hagar are all explored.<sup>102</sup> Focus on Hagar included a clear picture of the angel speaking to her. Unique in this workbook was an analysis of the feelings of Hagar, Sarah, and Abraham: Sarah's feelings when she could not give birth and Hagar humiliated her, and when Ishmael was born. An analysis of Hagar was a unique feature of this workbook series; it examined her when she was pregnant, when she was oppressed by Sarah, and when Ishmael was born.<sup>103</sup>

Level 2, an upgraded version of level 1, contained illustrations which added to the students' more complete understanding of the Bible. A brief description of some drawings will expand on incidents as well as clarify emotions. Drawing 1 depicted Sarah giving Hagar to Abraham. Hagar's head was downcast in a modest or subservient position.<sup>104</sup> Picture 2 showed a side view of a modestly dressed, pregnant Hagar looking off into the distance to a tent outside of which stands an

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<sup>101</sup> Ofek, Vol. 3, p. 24-25.

<sup>102</sup> Matiah Kom, Parshat Lekh Lekhah. Birth of Ishmael, chapter 16, workbook, level 1, (Jerusalem: Office of Education and Culture, 1988).

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Matiah Kom, Parshat Lekh Lekhah. Birth of Ishmael, chapter 16, workbook, level 2 (Jerusalem: Office of Education and Culture, 1989) p. 8.

indiscernible figure. Her hair was covered, and her dress and shawl were attractively decorated.<sup>105</sup> The third drawing was of Hagar lying against a rock looking toward the sun (representing a theophany). An accompanying question was: "Why do you think the angel told Hagar to return to Sarah and to be abused by her?"<sup>106</sup> In the fourth picture, all three figures were happy because Hagar had given Ishmael to Abraham.<sup>107</sup> Picture 5 depicted a back view of Hagar and Ishmael, the latter waving to Abraham and Sarah who were standing in the distance outside of their tent. Abraham had both arms outstretched toward them as Sarah stood erect. Hagar's hand rested on her son.<sup>108</sup> The final drawing was of a maternal Hagar seated with her arms around her son.<sup>109</sup> Illustrations 5 and 6 depicted a young, caring Hagar, concerned for her son.

Levels 2 and 3 continued the concept of Sarah's being built up through Hagar, and further explored each character's emotions. Important thought questions were: Why was Sarah angry at Hagar? Why did Hagar show disrespect to Sarah and humiliate her?<sup>110</sup>

Another focus was Sarah's anger at Ishmael and the expulsion of him and his

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

mother.<sup>111</sup> In an illustration of the banishment of Hagar and her son, Sarah, seen speaking with Abraham, seemed to have a happy visage as, in the distance Hagar solicitously helped her son.<sup>112</sup> If Sarah was smiling as she spoke to Abraham, with her arm extended in Hagar's direction, the message pupils received was very damaging, namely, Sarah the matriarch expressing her joy in the banishment into the wilderness of her handmaid and Abraham's son. Such a picture should evoke much discussion about Sarah's overt reaction and Sarah as a role model! When this picture of Sarah was compared to a drawing of Hagar having a theophany,<sup>113</sup> not only will Sarah appear wanting by comparison, but Hagar's distinctive experience should raise numerous questions about her worthiness in meriting God's speaking with her.

When God blessed Ishmael, he was alluded to as Abraham's son, no mention being made of Hagar. In referring to this prophesy prior to Ishmael's birth, the workbook read: "Do not forget all this was said to Hagar."<sup>114</sup> This recognition of Hagar's role was singular among all the materials. The summary articulated Abraham's sadness at the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael and his anger at Ishmael's actions; nothing was said about Sarah's demand to have Hagar and her son banished. Perhaps the drawing referred to earlier, in which Sarah seemed happy, was mirroring

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<sup>111</sup> Matiah Kom, Birth of Isaac. Chapter 21. Workbook (Jerusalem: Office of Education and Culture, 1989) pp. 16-17.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>114</sup> Matiah Kom, Abraham, Ishmael and Isaac (Jerusalem: Office of Education and Culture, 1984) p. 5.



truly how she did feel!

At the beginning of each chapter in the Yonay and Yonay workbooks, definitions were given in English or Hebrew for Bible vocabulary and phrases. Since the process of translating involves interpretation, the pupils' understanding of a word or phrase would be colored by the author's definition. An interesting example of such a procedure was the definition given for va-teiqal gevirtah be-'eineha (Gen. 16:4). The usual translation of Hagar's attitude toward Sarah entailed Hagar's treating her with contempt, or of having Sarah lowered in Hagar's eyes. The Hebrew explanation presented in the workbook was that Hagar did not speak nicely.<sup>115</sup> However, when Sarah's reciprocal approach to Hagar was defined, the accepted translation was given, namely, Sarah "dealt harshly with her."<sup>116</sup> Perhaps the workbook's authors felt pupils could understand the word "harshly" but would have difficulty with the word "contempt!"

Yonay and Yonay interspersed Rashi's commentary in the workbooks. Rashi's comment about Hagar's genealogy and her father's decisions were cited.<sup>117</sup> Questions prompt pupils to think about the relationship between the two women, as does the request that they draw a picture of the two women together.<sup>118</sup> In a tale about Sarah and Hagar, feelings and raw emotions surfaced. Hagar, now pregnant,

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Yonay and Yonay, Bereshit Lekh Lekhah, p. 58.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

described Sarah as a dried up tree with no fruit while she, Hagar, considered herself the mistress of Abraham's household and mother of his son who will receive Abraham's inheritance. The tale continued with Sarah's weeping at hearing Hagar's words and lashing out at her husband saying she no longer wanted Hagar around.<sup>119</sup>

A full set of exercises investigated what happened to Hagar when she fled to the desert. A fascinating question pupils were asked to respond to was: What would you do if you were in Hagar's place? Would you return to Abraham and Sarah's house?<sup>120</sup>

In a chapter about Isaac and Ishmael, in which a tale was told of Ishmael trying to get Isaac to worship idols, Sarah observed what Ishmael was doing and told Abraham to banish him.<sup>121</sup> An excellent thought question was: If Hagar was listening to Sarah telling Abraham to expel Hagar and her son, what would Hagar have said?<sup>122</sup> An illustration showed Hagar and Ishmael in the wilderness. Ishmael lay in the foreground looking heavenward, and Hagar sitting dejectedly a distance away, her head in her cupped hands, the water pitcher overturned. The starkness of the scenery reinforced the loneliness and abjectness of mother and son.<sup>123</sup> A thought-provoking exercise challenging pupils to use their imagination

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>121</sup> Yonay and Yonay, Bereshit, p. 43.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

was: Write a conversation between Sarah and Hagar before Hagar left Abraham's house.<sup>124</sup> While students could comprehend why Sarah had Hagar and Ishmael banished, sympathy towards Hagar was engendered through the single drawing and exercises. I find it baffling that, while Hagar and Sarah are seen as opposites, Hagar often receives sympathy, yet Sarah is the role model pupils are taught to emulate.

One other issue about Hagar was addressed in only one text, that is, the issue of the concubine. Lorber and Shamir posed questions about the concubine in the Sarah story: "What is a concubine? Does she have the same position as a wife? Was Hagar a wife or a concubine?"<sup>125</sup> In a subsequent chapter about Leah and Rachel, they asked: "In this story once again we find wives giving their maid-servants to their husbands as concubines. Do you think these concubines were ignored as people? Give evidence from the story to support your answer."<sup>126</sup>

#### 4. Barren Sarah and the three guests

Occasionally a text referred to Sarah's not having borne a child; however, very few sources gave a fulsome discussion of the issue. One book had a summary of Sarah's barrenness leading to Hagar bearing Ishmael;<sup>127</sup> another said the barren Sarah first appeared after Abraham and the covenant had been noted. She "wanted

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>125</sup> Lorber and Shamir, p. 60.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>127</sup> Gabrieli and Avivi, p. 36.

Abram to have a family...She asked Abraham to take Hagar as a secondary wife."<sup>128</sup>

An explanation of this same motif appeared in another publication by Grishaver. In a chapter entitled "Understanding Sarah," six illustrated sections highlighted Sarah's sadness and her attempt to solve her problem. In explaining Sarah's predicament, the text read: "When Sarah lived, a woman could only be a wife and mother."<sup>129</sup>

When three guests in her home predicted she would bear a son, she, being ninety years of age, responded with laughter. This visit of the three men or angels appearing in most educational materials, revealed information about the visit, the hospitality of Abraham and Sarah, and Sarah's reaction to the good news ranged from a duplication of the Bible<sup>130</sup> to a cartoon face of Sarah saying "Ha!"<sup>131</sup>

Abraham's request for Sarah to take three measures of fine flour, knead it, and make cakes, was duplicated in several sources.<sup>132</sup> Information about Sarah's food preparation was elicited through exercises: Persky questioned what Abraham said to Sarah when he asked her to prepare cakes for the guests,<sup>133</sup> and Davinsky asked where Sarah was and from what she made the cakes?<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Grishaver with Golub, Being Torah, p. 79.

<sup>129</sup> Grishaver, Bible People. Book 1, pp. 24-25.

<sup>130</sup> Gabrieli and Avivi, pp. 39-40.

<sup>131</sup> Grishaver, Torah Toons 1, p. 12, and Bible People 1, p. 58.

<sup>132</sup> Fish, p. 32; Davinsky, p. 41; Grishaver and Golub, p. 88; Samuels and Scharfstein, Torah and You. Part 1, p. 29; and Zielberman and Korah-Seger, p. 72.

<sup>133</sup> Persky, Ani Lomeid Humash 2, p. 21.

<sup>134</sup> Davinsky, p. 41.

Variations on the Bible were seen as well. When the angels arrived, Abraham and the guests had a dialogue in which he said he would go and call his wife. "He told her to come and **she spoke** and welcomed them, going off then to make cakes."<sup>135</sup> When the guests came, "Abraham and Sarah made a hot meal..."<sup>136</sup> Mentioned also was Abraham preparing food alone.<sup>137</sup> Another workbook included no references to Sarah in the exercises about food preparation which asked for twenty word explanations; only three biblical word equivalents related to her in another exercise.<sup>138</sup> Another book that asked students to comment on Abraham as a host had no remark about Sarah. This same source confusingly asked students to draw a picture of Abraham telling Sarah to prepare food!<sup>139</sup> One book emphasized that both Abraham and Sarah were known for their "kindness and hospitality."<sup>140</sup> Another book, which gave Torah ethics lessons, adapting the Bible to the pupils' daily living, said:

He and Sarah were always welcoming travellers who passed by the large tent which was their home...Warm welcome was given to all by Abraham and Sarah and they came to be known far and wide for their kindness. When their guests would thank them for their hospitality

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<sup>135</sup> Rabinowitz, pp. 63-64.

<sup>136</sup> Rossel, A Child's Bible. Lessons From the Torah, p. 57.

<sup>137</sup> Persky, Haver La-Torah, 2, p. 28; Isserof and Etkin, Sidrah Vayera', p. 1; and Raiskin and Raiskin, Sefer Ha-'avot, p. 53.

<sup>138</sup> Isserof and Etkin, Sidrah Vayera', pp. 1-2.

<sup>139</sup> Grishaver and Golub, p. 35.

<sup>140</sup> Samuels and Scharfstein, p. 30.

they would answer by saying that God was to thanked...<sup>141</sup>

Comments and exercises sometimes stressed only Abraham's hospitality.<sup>142</sup> Illustrations of the visit were revelatory in showing artists' interpretations of this vignette. One simplistic child's drawing showed, left to right, Abraham, Sarah, and the three guests standing under a tree. The four men were bearded and old. A beautiful, young Sarah was the focal point, dressed in an ornate, long, draped, long-sleeved dress, and wearing a halo-like head covering over her long dark hair. She carried a tray on which food and drink were extended to the guests.<sup>143</sup> Picturing what the Bible character did and how the child now can mirror the trait, an elementary level book used favorable qualities of Bible heroes and heroines for students to emulate. Sarah and Abraham exemplified the attribute of hospitality. The drawing depicted, left to right, Sarah standing next to the seated Abraham as they welcomed three approaching visitors. The tent was set under several heavily laden date palms. A youthful and pretty Sarah was wearing a heavily draped dress with elbow length sleeve dress, a shawl head covering, and sandals. She was holding a tray on which were breads.<sup>144</sup>

Other texts rendered Abraham serving the guests, Sarah not seen in the

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<sup>141</sup> Elias Persky, Haver La-Torah.2. Workbook (New York: Ktav, 1964) p. 30.

<sup>142</sup> Lorber and Shamir, pp. 66-69 and Mayerowitz, Bereishit, p. 23.

<sup>143</sup> Araten, p. 11.

<sup>144</sup> Ann Eisenberg, Bible Heroes I Can Be (Maryland: Kar-Ben Copies, 1990) p. 5.

picture.<sup>145</sup> Or, Sarah was seated looking out from a darkened tent while Abraham greeted the guests.<sup>146</sup> A workbook picture depicted Sarah, seen from a rear view, in the lower right in her tent, watching Abraham running with food to feed his three seated guests. The related question asked: "what did Sarah do to fulfill the mitzvah of hospitality?"<sup>147</sup> Finally, another source said that when the three angels arrived, Abraham hastened to Sarah to ask her to prepare bread. The accompanying illustration showed the three guests being served by Abraham who was being assisted by Ishmael.<sup>148</sup>

The second segment of the visit concerned their prophesy, that is, Sarah will have a son. Having heard the news from her tent doorway, Sarah responded to the wondrous news by laughing. Almost without exception, the educational sources mentioned Sarah's laugh and/or had exercise questions asking why she laughed.<sup>149</sup> Several authors wrote about Sarah's laughter, giving additional interpretations. When she laughed at the news, "God heard her laugh and said, 'Isaac means laughter. You will have a son and call him Isaac.'"<sup>150</sup> Pupils were asked a riddle: "I laughed in my

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<sup>145</sup> Davinsky, p. 42.

<sup>146</sup> Yadlin and Gundleman, p. 38.

<sup>147</sup> Falk, p. 13.

<sup>148</sup> Weissman, pp. 84-85.

<sup>149</sup> Persky, Haver La-Torah. 2, p. 29; Persky, Haver La-Torah. 2. Workbook, p. 25; Persky, Humash Meforash Part 1, p. 94; Persky, Ani Lomeid Humash. 2, p. 23; Samuels and Scharfstein, p. 29; Araten, p. 10; Rabinowitz, pp. 68-69; Grishaver, Bible People 1, p. 25; Grishaver, Torah Toons 1 p. 11; and Barzilai, p. 69.

<sup>150</sup> Pliskin, p. 20.

heart. Who am I?"<sup>151</sup> A fill-in question concerned Sarah saying people would laugh with her because, in her old age, she had given birth and was able to nurse children.<sup>152</sup> In a re-telling of the angel's visit, Sarah laughed because "she could hardly believe that God was going to make her so happy at last; perhaps she did not believe that God **could** send her a child."<sup>153</sup> In the books from which these exercises were gleaned, students received an impression of the wonderment and joy that Sarah felt. The emphasis was on the word laugh which echoed the peshat.

Pollack commented about Sarah's laughter: when God questioned Abraham about Sarah's laughter and re-iterated the prophesy, no mention of her defending herself was included. In a series of seven questions, one related to Sarah querying why she had laughed. Finally, a direct link was made between her laughter and Isaac's name. Sarah said God played a joke on her and everyone would laugh at her for giving birth in her old age.<sup>154</sup>

A True and False question read: "At different times, Abraham and Sarah both laughed at the prediction that they would have a son in their old age."<sup>155</sup> A page devoted to "What kind of laugh did Sarah laugh?"<sup>156</sup> asked students to interpret

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<sup>151</sup> Fish, p. 33.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>153</sup> Pulver, p. 26.

<sup>154</sup> Pollack, pp. 48, 49, and 57.

<sup>155</sup> Sugarman, p. 25.

<sup>156</sup> Grishaver, Being Torah, p. 36.



her laugh. In a set of fifteen exercise questions, only two related to Sarah: why did she laugh, and why did she deny doing so.<sup>157</sup> No reaction to news of the miraculous birth was given. When God told Abraham he would have a child, no mention was included of the guests' prediction nor of Sarah's laughter.<sup>158</sup> Another text had no comment about Sarah's response but did ask two questions: "Why did Sarah laugh [and] If you were Sarah, would you have laughed at the idea of an old woman having a child?"<sup>159</sup>

Several illustrations about the guests enhanced texts. In one drawing, light-haired Sarah, wearing a long sleeved dress decorated with a bib-like trim, stood in the doorway saying "Ha! Ha! Ha!" Her right hand rested on her hip as though in a stance of derision. When the visitors came, the text said Abraham "feeds them and gives them a place to rest."<sup>160</sup> A second depiction, drawn in cartoon fashion, showed a young Sarah with her left hand up to her ear, in a position of eavesdropping from her tent. This most negative portrayal of Sarah has a statement with it: Sarah laughed because "it was hard for her to believe the news."<sup>161</sup>

One of the educational materials was a book presented in the style of comics. A simple re-telling of the Bible accompanied each of five drawings related to the

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<sup>157</sup> Raiskin and Raiskin, Ha-'avot, p. 54.

<sup>158</sup> Rossel, p. 57.

<sup>159</sup> Lorber and Shamir, pp. 66-68.

<sup>160</sup> Berman and Grishaver, My Weekly Sidrah, p. 15.

<sup>161</sup> Zielberman and Korach-Seger, pp. 73-74.

three guests' visit: 1. Abraham's hand was seen carrying a bowl and pitcher, and Sarah's hands were kneading dough. The text said Sarah prepared cakes for them. 2. A pregnant Sarah was drawn. The caption related the guests' blessing for the birth of a son. 3. A picture of Sarah's laughing mouth. 4. Sarah's head was downcast. Her hair was covered and she wore hooped earrings. A partial head with a beard and a pointed index finger was seen explaining something to, or admonishing, Sarah. The caption read: But Abraham knew God was able to do everything. 5. Sarah held an infant, born a year after the guests' visit. The exercise question, accompanied by the above picture of Sarah laughing, was: Who laughed?<sup>162</sup>

A disturbing workbook presentation of the three guests' vignette focused only on Abraham's role--his hospitality in greeting the guests and providing food and drink for them. Furthermore, pupils were asked to draw a picture of Abraham's tent.<sup>163</sup> Even when the Bible verses in which Abraham told Sarah to prepare food quickly (18:6-8), were quoted, the emphasis was on verbs indicating how rapidly Abraham acted. Nothing was said about Sarah's having prepared victuals! When finally the text read Sarah prepared cakes from three measures of flour, the pupil was asked to concentrate on the measure of flour and what the quantity was; Sarah's work was not included. In addition, scant information was related about Sarah's being old and no reference was alluded to about her hearing the guests' prediction from her tent. One completion sentence read: Sarah laughed because \_\_\_\_; another sentence said she

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<sup>162</sup> Falk, p. 16.

<sup>163</sup> Yonay and Yonay, The Book of Bereshit 4, pp. 5-9.

did not laugh because \_\_\_\_.<sup>164</sup> It is shocking that, given the modern format and the recent date of publication of the book, the details of the incident were omitted. An illustration showed Abraham and the three guests under a tree with a tent in the background. While other books portrayed Sarah in the tent opening, she did not appear at all in this drawing.<sup>165</sup>

## 5. General Observations about Sarah in Jewish Educational Materials

Portions of Sarah's life were included in all educational materials in the form of Bible excerpts, full or partial citations with English commentary on the bottom of the page, vocabulary giving Hebrew synonyms or English translations, and re-tellings of the narrative. Thought-provoking questions, fill-in responses, and other exercises tested pupils' comprehension of the biblical material.

In assessing the presentation of Sarah in the educational materials, it seems as though some of the authors worked in a vacuum with little regard to the peshat and the rabbinic literature. I must question whether these authors actually were familiar with the rabbinic literature or whether they opted to disregard this corpus of material thereby not exposing pupils to unseemly qualities that a matriarch might possess. Texts and illustrations did not particularly reflect Sarah's beauty. Even though many drawings were simplistic, they presented her in an ordinary rather than beautiful way. Primarily the drawings of Sarah focused on her during the visit of the

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

three guests. This scene allowed artists to depict her preparing food or eavesdropping. While her name change reflected her development from a private to a universal person, no point was made that the change was a singular experience for a biblical female.

The wife-sister theme was used to explain the stories of Sarah and Abraham having deceived Pharaoh and Abimelech. No fault was levied at Abraham; rather his role was viewed as protecting Sarah. The irony was that his having reaped material benefit each time was seen as acceptable.

A variety of opinions about their hospitality was expressed through questions: Who prepared the food? Who served the food? The answer was that Abraham did both. Finally, Sarah's laughter and doubt about God's prophesy did not emerge as being fearful and challenging.

Since Sarah's barrenness motivated many of her actions, the assumption was made that a number of issues would be dealt with including the following: 1. the issue of barrenness would be explored within the context of the ancient Near East; 2. attention would be directed toward how the childless Sarah felt; and 3. she could make decisions to ameliorate her situation. Material was sorely lacking in giving an historical context to the story. In addition Sarah's feelings were not explored; rather her actions were emphasized.

Abraham's grief upon Sarah's death implied opinions about her life. Her wonderful deeds were extolled and her righteousness was lauded. She was praised because she influenced others to believe in God. On the other hand, she was seen

as a sad woman because she was barren. The barrenness theme, as presented in the educational materials, exposed both positive and negative aspects of her relationship with Hagar. When Sarah's negative behavior was described, however, adjectives were tempered so that she did not appear to be evil to her handmaid.

A key issue that should have been in the educational materials was how Abraham felt at having to banish Hagar and Ishmael, since she was the mother of his first born and had been part of his household for a long time. His sadness at having to do this deed at Sarah's command, would expectedly color his feelings toward both women. These emotions should be discussed by pupils who could infer his sorrow for Hagar and his anger at Sarah.

#### D. Conclusions

Sarah acted in concert with Abraham and in opposition to him and her maidservant Hagar. Biblical vignettes showed her as an accommodating wife, risking her own safety to protect her husband. Her compliance meant potential danger to herself, but God became her protector and no harm befell her. The reader must question whether or not Abraham took cognizance of the danger to which his wife could be subjected and fully ponder his motives in light of the rewards from which he personally benefitted.

Notwithstanding her beautiful physical appearance and her comfortable life with her husband, Sarah's barrenness caused her to be an unfulfilled woman. The measure she took to solve the problem of her childlessness, caused disharmony

between herself and Abraham, and dissension and strife with Hagar. The fertile maidservant became the object of Sarah's scorn and jealousy, resulting in the expulsion of Hagar and her son, and Abraham's unhappiness. Her friction with Hagar exaggerated negative personality traits, mitigating against her as an ideal woman, yet she became a more real human being.

Sarah's hospitality was seen as she prepared food for three guests; her inner self-doubt found her contesting them and God as she laughed and disbelieved their prediction that she would bear a son in her old age. In examining her connection with God, the question must be raised as to why she was punished for her laughter while Abraham was not. Her advice was sought by Abraham, was given unsought to him, and God even commanded him to listen to her.

Rabbinic literature often made Sarah into a dichotomized female. On one level, as a matriarch, she was a paragon of virtue as she exhibited righteousness and proselytized so that others would be persuaded to believe as she did. On another level, she became the model of inhospitality for all women, because she was understood to be stingy in food preparation for guests. Her virtue was essential for the earlier exegetes, who avowed she lived a life free from sin even after being in the palace of two kings. Sympathy was expressed for her barrenness, and her unkind treatment of Hagar was acknowledged. Early and late biblical commentators agreed that her actions were untoward to a woman whom they said was worthy of receiving a theophany.

Commentaries emphasized that Abraham's greed motivated him to endanger

Sarah's life. An implied question was raised as to whether a woman in her society could in fact have thwarted and denied her husband's request. Commentators, recognizing Abraham's selfishness, even though they did not use the word, and acknowledging the peril to which this greed subjected Sarah, affirmed her helplessness and/or her complete trust in her husband!

The educational materials provided an enriched breadth of knowledge about Sarah, notwithstanding the romanticization of her portrait. An essential part of her history entailed the occasions when she lied to protect Abraham and thus deceived Pharaoh and Abimelech. While biblical commentators grappled with the issues of her falsehoods, these two episodes were systematically excluded from many educational materials. Is it because the character traits exhibited were damaging to the role model image a student has of a matriarch and a patriarch? Was it because Sarah might be thought to have been compromised by the kings? Could it be because Bible interpreters could not handle Abraham's doing this to her? Could a protective environment, that is, not confronting the issue, keep pupils from exploring volatile issues? Would a violated Sarah mitigate against her being respected as the first matriarch of her people? It would seem that, as the biblical commentators found ways to preserve Sarah's chastity by writing excuses for her, the educational books kept her pure by omitting all references to these episodes. The question to be addressed is: why are the writers of the school books unwilling to make these Bible sections available and why do they disregard the richness of the rabbinic tradition?

Have these scenes been rejected for pedagogical or philosophical reasons in the Kom series? As these books continue to be printed sequentially, will difficult sections of a sexual nature continue to be missing? If so, pupils will not be introduced to major singular female characters in the Bible such as Dinah and Tamar. An opportunity for teaching about a vast spectrum of human experiences will have been lost.

Whitewashing or eliminating Sarah's encounter with Pharaoh and Abimelech, especially in the upper elementary grades, begged a major issue in the lives of Sarah and Abraham, and also God's role in their lives. Abraham was seen in an apologetic way that guarded his stature and painted him as a hero.

As seen in the Bible and commentaries, a major part of Sarah's portrayal can be recognized when she was seen with Hagar, their appearance and actions providing an embellishment of their individual personalities. Seeing each woman as part of a pair, allowed for more exploration of character traits and reaction, and added a fullness and multi-dimensional aspect that was most valuable. The juxtaposition of their actions created momentum in the episodes as they were contrasted with each other. The underlying tension between the women added immeasurably to the story and made the characters more credible and more authentic as human beings. Therefore, it is discouraging that very little appeared about the two women generally, and no depth of character was explored. Sarah's treatment of Hagar was minimized or de-emphasized. Only rarely were pupils asked to consider the situation from Hagar's point of view and reflect about her feelings. In drawings Hagar appeared to



be younger and lovelier than Sarah, and in a tenuous position. I wonder if teachers do actually teach about Sarah's position of power and how she used it against Hagar, perhaps sadistically, or whether they perpetuate Sarah's pristine image garnered because she was a matriarch? Pupils should be able to react to the dissension and draw conclusions about Sarah's varied personality characteristics.

While Hagar received sympathy in the educational readings and illustrations, in reality she is known as the servant who became the mother of an enemy people. Stereotypes would necessarily be perpetuated of the role model matriarch. With teachers' guidance, pupils' pity would be more apt to be bestowed on Sarah. Again, while rationales were given for Hagar's banishment, and Sarah was not blamed for her action, Hagar was the one who earned the educational materials' tacit sympathy. In addition, texts and illustrations reinforced Hagar's having received a theophany, raising the question of Hagar's worthiness in God's eye.

Sarah was depicted as an incredulous barren woman who had been told she would bear a son. Her role as a hospitable person was also emphasized. These aspects provided pupils with dimensions of and insight into her personality and allowed for moral lessons to be gleaned. In the scene about the visit, the educational materials either re-told the Bible or excerpted selected verses. Even when the scene was recounted in detail, the dialogue where God chastised Sarah for having laughed had been omitted. Questioning why this was so, raises several points. Did the authors of the educational books regard this section as being unimportant? Did the writers not want to raise the possibility of Sarah's having had an encounter with God?

Did they feel Sarah's role as food provider, listener/eavesdropper, and laughter was sufficient in portraying her?

Through the interpretation of these vignettes, Sarah was seen as beautiful of appearance, not only on a personal level but also by comparing her with the people in surrounding cultures. The comments depicted her as selfless and having great faith. The Bible and rabbinic literature highlighted Sarah's beauty; the educational books did not. Rather, the illustrations interpreted her as modest or humble. When, in the illustrations, she was presented as a young woman holding her baby, her youthful appearance was incongruous, curious, and misleading to the pupils. Considering her chronological age, the birth of Isaac was miraculous, and the drawings should certainly have reflected the Bible text. Sarah's having been rejuvenated so as to bear a child at age ninety is difficult enough to comprehend, notwithstanding midrashic explanations; a complete change in physiognomy may be stretching the imagination too much!

The possibility of exploring the shift from the private Sarai to the universal princess, Sarah, should appear in thought-provoking questions so students can try to predict what lay ahead for Sarah. God's instructing Abraham to heed her was also not stressed.

To summarize: characters in narratives are learned about in different ways, that is, through their own behavior and through their actions with others. When they act alone, the reader gets insight into the character's thought processes and learns how the person perceives the world. When studying about the character in

connection with other people, personality traits surface in response to the dynamics of the interaction. It is in this context that we learn how a figure copes with others and reacts towards them. Harmonious relationships elicit the emotions of love, friendship, compassion, etc.; discordant relationships evoke enmity, antagonism, and tension among other negative reactions. When studying the Bible, there is a vast array of interpersonal dynamics; therefore, when Bible scholars or authors of educational materials choose to ignore sections of Scripture, a tremendous disservice is levied against the richness of both the overall episode and the individuals who are featured. For example, when the incidents about Sarah in the palaces of Pharaoh and Abimelech are omitted in the school books, pupils do not learn a number of things about Sarah: first, she was beautiful; second, Abraham asked her to risk her life for him; third, she lied and complied with his request; and fourth, he gained material wealth as a result of her deceptive action. The point is that the dynamics of request, acquiescence, and endangering one's life are missing from the classroom learning process; pupils have been denied a valuable opportunity to explore Sarah's thinking process. Concomitantly, they are deprived of learning about Abraham and how he felt toward Sarah. When her actions toward Hagar are omitted or minimized, an unfair picture is painted of the suffering maidservant.

Clearly, teachers need to present more than one commentator to the students in order for them to come away with a complete idea of the biblical person as developed by the rabbinic tradition. After a student has been presented with a variety of commentaries, questioning and meaningful discussion can ensue.

Supporting and thought-provoking workbook materials would enhance children's inquiring minds. Classroom instructional sources could pose penetrating questions, i. e., whether the end justifies the means, and how pupils feel about Sarah's lying and saying she was Abraham's sister. It can be pointed out that this same situation occurred two times at least. How does the student perceive Sarah as she heard the angels' prophesy about her bearing a child? The students can be introduced to the concept of a theophany and asked to whom has one occurred. What qualities are possessed by a person who has received a theophany? How does one view Hagar's and Sarah's relationship? How does one explain the theophany that Hagar has? These questions should lead to an examination of the figure of Hagar as well.

## Chapter 3

### Leah and Rachel

#### A:1. Leah in the Bible

Scattered through the pages of Hebrew Scripture are references to and descriptions of same sex sibling relationships. Sometimes the actions of the siblings were violent (Cain and Abel), heinous (Lot's daughters), related to legal claims (Jacob and Esau, and the daughters of Zelophehad), or rivalrous in love (Merab and Michal). Tension in the sibling relationship between Leah and Rachel incorporated some of these themes.

#### 1. The character of Leah

While Rachel was described as very beautiful, Leah was the possessor of weak or tender eyes (Gen 29:17). The words used to describe Rachel (yefat to'ar veefat mar'eh) were clearly positive, denoting her shapeliness and beauty; the word rakot used for Leah's eyes had a semantic range offering both positive and negative connotations. Because of the disparate descriptions of the two sisters' appearances, and because the story would see contrast between the two women, Leah's eyes were not seen as attractive although the word rakot (29:17) also connoted lovely and

tender. Leah was viewed as being in negative juxtaposition with Rachel, presenting an untoward sense of tension in relation to her sister and eliciting little if any compassion from the reader. The Bible characterized her in parallel situations to Rachel, thereby re-affirming the contrast between the two sisters. Perhaps, since the eyes are the soul of the body, Leah's eyes were really indicative of a tender and lovely personality.

Dissimilarities and tension between the sisters focused on their physical appearance, their barrenness, and child-bearing. Personality differences emerged when Rachel berated Jacob for her childlessness, while Leah, on the other hand, prayed to God when she stopped bearing children. Strife between the sisters continued through the conception and birth of Jacob's twelve sons. Ironically, the definition of both sisters' names relate to symbols of fecundity, Leah meaning cow and Rachel meaning ewe.

## 2. A triangular love relationship

While Leah, the elder sister, was deceptively substituted for Rachel on the latter's wedding night, allowing Leah to be married before her younger sister as was the cultural norm, Leah was ever the less loved of Jacob's wives. God had compassion for the unloved Leah, and she conceived and bore a son. Throughout the ensuing years, she and her handmaid Zilpah were to bear a total of seven sons and one daughter. Each son's name reflected Leah's insecurity, sense of inferiority, and feelings about her relationship to Jacob. Examples of her emotions, as depicted

in her sons' names, were as follows: she named the first born Reuben meaning God had seen or recognized her torment and she hoped her husband would love her (29:32). In naming Simeon, Leah revealed how she was treated by Jacob, namely, she felt hated, but God gave her another son (29:33). Again, Levi's name expressed her feeling that now Jacob would be joined with her as she had borne a third son (29:34). By the time her sixth son was born, she was still wishing for her husband's love. She called him Zebulun signifying God had given her a good dowry and now that she had borne six sons, she hoped Jacob would live with her (30:20).

Leah's unhappiness would surely have been obvious to the people in Jacob's home. There was also a public side to the stressful situation, which manifested itself in what might be a devastating way for Leah. The reference is to the time when Jacob left Paddan-Aram to return to Canaan. As Jacob arranged his caravan, he put the handmaids and their sons at the beginning, followed by Leah and her children, and Rachel and Joseph at the rear. This lineup meant the further back you were placed, the safer was your life in the case of an enemy attack. Therefore, all of Jacob's people would understand by this placement that Rachel was Jacob's favorite wife.

### 3. The relationship between Leah and Rachel

Leah's feelings of jealousy surfaced during the incident with the mandrakes (30:14-16). Rachel had wanted the mandrakes and was willing to give Jacob up to Leah for the night; however Leah balked at the proposition saying Rachel had taken

her husband from her and now wanted to take her son's mandrakes, also. This was the only time the narrative portrayed Leah showing her feelings overtly toward Rachel. Nevertheless, Leah complied with the request and, as a result of the promised night with Jacob, Leah again conceived and bore a fifth son. The pathetic pattern of her situation augured well for the reader's response of compassion. Pity and sympathy were reasonable reactions to her plight. Living in the home where she was cognizant of the negative feelings toward her must have made the situation unendurable year after year. A parallel to this situation is found in 1 Samuel 1 in tension between Elkanah's two wives.

#### A:2. Rachel in the Bible

Rachel was inextricably linked with her sister, and together they are one of the pairs of Bible figures, compared and contrasted with each other. In reading the Bible, these women presented a picture of polarized good and bad, positive and negative attitudes. These dissimilarities were evident in their physical miens, marital relationship with Jacob, and child-bearing capabilities.

##### 1. The character of Rachel

Rachel was described as, or assumed to be, a daughter, cousin, niece, sister, bride, wife, mother, and mistress of a handmaid. She was a shepherdess, tending her father's flock. Her cousin Jacob fell instantly in love with Rachel who was shapely and of beautiful appearance (29:17). Despite the agreement made by her father



Laban, that Rachel would wed Jacob after a seven year period of service, Rachel had to wait an additional length of time to wed him because Leah, the elder sister, was substituted for her on the wedding night.

Outside the pages of the Pentateuch, Rachel was mentioned in two other places in Scripture and Leah in one. Jeremiah wrote of Rachel's voice weeping for her children and not being comforted because they had died (Jer. 31:15). Rachel and Leah are found in the Scroll of Ruth, where the women were both emulated as builders of the House of Israel, cited in the context of the forthcoming marriage of Ruth and Boaz (Ruth 4:11).

## 2. A triangular love relationship

The Bible emphatically stated Rachel was the more loved wife of Jacob (Gen. 29:30), yet she was very unhappy because she was barren. Showing jealousy toward Leah, and rather than praying to God for help in bearing a child, she angrily told Jacob to give her children or she would die (30:1). Jacob's angered response (30:2), was followed by her giving her handmaid Bilhah to him and, following the birth of their two sons, Rachel named them.

## 3. The relationship between Rachel and Leah

The highlights of their relationship, envy and jealousy, have been treated above. What was not observed was that no known effective relationship between the sisters existed before they became co-wives. Nothing is known about their childhood

or their growing up years.

#### 4. Rachel steals the teraphim

Rachel's rashness manifested itself when she stole her father's teraphim (31:19) and feigned menstruation so as to avoid being discovered as the thief (31:35). The one time one of the women acted independently and unconnected with anything to do with her sister, was when Rachel stole her father's idols. Her motivation for this act was completely separate from any attitude or feeling that she might have had toward Leah. Some time later she died in childbirth (35:16-19). It is ironic she who had prayed so hard for a child and had interpersonal difficulties as a result of envy related to her barrenness would die giving birth to her son, Benjamin. She was buried on the way to Ephrath where Jacob erected a pillar in her memory (35:20).

### B. Leah and Rachel in Jewish Interpretation

#### 1. The characters of Leah and of Rachel

Commentators had the opportunity to compare and contrast Leah and Rachel, as well as to regard each independently. Rachel, according to Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, became a shepherdess following a sheep plague and Laban's firing of his shepherds (29:9). It was she who met her cousin Jacob at the well and brought him to her home, setting the stage for the sibling rivalry which would dominate her own and Leah's life.

Interpretations were made about the physical appearances of both sisters

(Gen. 29:17). The Book of Jubilees described the sisters and attributed a connection between Jacob's love for them and their demeanor: "For Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah because the eyes of Leah were weak, but her appearance was very beautiful, and Rachel (had) good eyes and good appearance and she was very beautiful."<sup>1</sup> Onkelos wrote about Leah's beautiful and graceful eyes, and Rachel's pleasing figure and beautiful appearance. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan (29:17) contrasted Rachel's favorable image with Leah's eyes which were weepy and wet as a result of her woeful prayer not to marry the wicked Esau (see also Gen. R. 70,16 and 71,2). The Babylonian Talmud, stating Rachel possessed the quality of modesty, portrayed Leah as righteous and opined Scripture would not be unkind in depicting her in an unfitting manner. In speaking about her eyes, R. Eleazar defined rakot as indicating Leah had a benevolent personality. Rav agreed with the definition of weak, elaborating that she wept so profusely, thinking she would have to marry the wicked Esau, her eyelashes fell out. The rationale was if her eyes were weak, it was from a noble cause (B. B. 123a).

When Rachel the shepherdess was introduced, a maligning statement was made about women, linking Rachel and gossiping, and asserting women at a well were apt to engage in gossiping (Gen. R. 70,11).

Numerous comments related to the physical appearance of Leah and Rachel. Unanimity existed in agreeing Rachel was beautiful. Her complexion was lustrous

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<sup>1</sup> James H. Charlesworth, ed., The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1985) p. 109.

(Rashi). Each of her organs was drawn (cf. Josh. 15:9) or formed in a beautiful way (Ibn Ezra). She was exceptionally beautiful in form, face, and stature, and had white skin, a fine complexion and black hair (Radak). She was as pretty as a painting, her complexion and skin color pure and clear, making her favorably perceived by all who saw her (Sforno). A high bride price would be asked for her because of her comeliness (Malbim).

Negative opinions were garnered regarding Leah's mien: her eyes, based on the word **rakot**, were weak (Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Malbim). Surprisingly, other interpreters had a contrary opinion: her eyes were beautiful and dainty (Saadiah). A citation by Ibn Ezra, referring to R. Ephraim who said an aleph was missing from rakot, attributed to Leah long eyes, not weak ones, effectively effacing a negative connotation. Radak remarked Leah had weepy eyes, but beautiful ones nevertheless.

The picture gotten from the Bible about Leah and Rachel was of a contrast in physical appearance and personality. As examined, many biblical interpreters certainly did not reinforce the stereotype of Leah as the unappealing or unattractive sister. Coupled with the assumed physical contrast was Jacob's love for each of the women (Gen. 29:30). Rachel had been depicted as the beautiful sister who was not allowed to marry Jacob as had been promised, yet Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah. The prevalent feeling was Jacob loved both women; the grammatical presentation using the comparative, made it clear Leah was in fact loved, but Rachel was loved more (Saadiah, Ramban, Radak, Sforno).

The matriarchs were likened to the hadar (Lev. 23:40) or "goodly tree" (Lev.

R. 30:9; P. R. 51,2, Vol. 2, p. 858; P. R. K. 27,9, p. 422). Aspects of each woman were compared to the hadar's component parts. Leah resembled the myrtle, i. e., an abundance of leaves as indicative of her many children. Rachel corresponded to the willow. "The willow in the lulab cluster wilts and dries up before the other three plants do, so Rachel died before her sister" (P. R. 51,2, Vol. 2, p. 858). Leah was a model of a virtuous woman because she demanded her conjugal rights, namely, that Jacob spend the night with her, but she did not insist that mutual pleasure be achieved (Ned. 20b). The rabbis remarked that a wife may do the former but not the latter.

Several comments seemed to manifest sympathy toward Rachel and put the consequences of her life into historical perspective. Regarding Rachel's barrenness, R. Isaac said "Rachel was the chief of her house" (Gen. R. 71,2). In explaining why Rachel's name was mentioned before Leah's when the matriarchs are listed, Ruth Rabbah (7, 13) stated: Do not read 'aqarah (barren) but rather 'iqarah (the chief one). Another laudatory comment read: "Because so many matters of moment in Israel's past go back to Rachel, therefore the children of Israel are called by her name" (P. R. K. 20,2, p. 332). In the same vein, R. Johanan said Rachel's descendants underwent miracles and were great people (Est. R. 7,7). A footnote indication in Genesis Rabbah (70,15) revealed Rachel was the ancestress of Joshua, Saul, and Ephraim, while Leah's descendants included Moses, David, and Solomon.

From time to time in midrashic sources, comments were made connecting women's body parts with the creation of Eve. Such remarks provided negative

edification as to why God did not choose certain organs. Leah and Rachel were spoken about: God did not choose the foot from which to create Eve because the foot was related to the quality of Leah's being a gadabout, and also did not select the hand which symbolized thievery as exhibited by Rachel when she stole her father's teraphim (Deut. R. 6,5).

Post-midrashic commentators added to the depiction of Leah and Rachel by broadening descriptions of the women's personalities, actions, and interactions. A flow in the narrative was felt as the two sisters evolved within their family structure.

Rachel, the first sister to be introduced, whose youth allowed her to do the tending and to work alone, was her father's only shepherd (Ramban). She knew the work of sheep tending (Sforno) and was an example of young women customarily doing shepherding, as did Jethro's daughters (Radak). What was unusual was Rachel's coming alone to the well, unafraid of the shepherds. Normally a shepherdess worked with others as Jethro's daughters who tended sheep together (Malbim). Rachel watched the sheep despite being a young girl, for her father was poor and had no hired shepherds (Malbim).

In contrast with Rachel, Leah could not be a shepherdess. Her eyes were weak and could not be exposed to the elements. Also, her older age mitigated against her performing such a task (Ramban and Hizkuni 13th century, Provence) since she was of marriageable age (Hizkuni). Was the subtle implication that it would not have shown a sense of propriety for Leah to be alone with the sheep because of her age, since she might then meet alone with the shepherds?

Sforno praised Rachel as he discussed Jacob's love for her. He suggested Jacob loved Rachel for herself and her deeds, not only because she was his wife. Normally the first wife was more loved (Yeb. 63b) but, in Jacob's case, this was not so. His hatred for Leah stemmed from his thinking she knew of her own barrenness and deceived him in order to be married. Praise and condemnation such as found here, made Rachel loved and esteemed and further heightened the discrepancy between the two sisters.

A distinctive interpretation of why Rachel died was given by Malbim, the only commentator on a number of verses: prior to the giving of the Torah, it was not unlawful for a man to be married to two sisters at the same time. After receiving the Torah, Rachel would not have been allowed to marry Jacob, he already being married to Leah. Once Jacob received the prophesy of his role in history, it would have been wrong for him to have wed both sisters. Therefore, Rachel, who had served a necessary purpose in helping to give birth to some of the twelve tribes, now died in childbirth and was not interred in the Cave of Machpelah with the other ancestors.

Rachel's righteousness was lauded and exemplified by her concern, not with herself during parturition, but with the welfare of the newborn. She therefore named him son of my strength because she gave him her strength and died for him (Malbim). Other commentators averred the child was named son of my sorrow or trouble (Rashi, Radak), or son of my mourning (Saadiah, Ibn Ezra, Ramban). Finally, according to Malbim, the place where Rachel was buried on the road to

Ephrath, was a site giving her posterity, recalling her life for all times.

## 2. A triangular love relationship

Jacob's love for Rachel, and Leah's ensuing unhappiness became a commanding motif in the lives of both sisters. The Book of Jubilees (28:12) affirmed Jacob's hatred of Leah and love for Rachel. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan spoke of Jacob's being duped at his wedding, and agreed Leah was not loved by Jacob. The Babylonian Talmud, explaining Rachel's modesty and her complicitous role in deceiving Jacob on the wedding night, recounted how Rachel told Leah what her special signals with Jacob were, so Leah could dupe Jacob and be married to him (B. B. 123a). As a reward for her modesty and the help she gave Leah, Rachel became an ancestress of Saul (Meg. 13b). The reason given for attributing modesty to Rachel was she prevented Leah being shamed by Rachel's marrying first.

Because Jacob was deceived at his wedding, he did not love Leah and considered divorcing her. When she bore a child, he changed his mind. Not only Jacob found fault with Leah; the neighboring women did, also. The townswomen said she sometimes appeared to be righteous, and sometimes she did not. If she were honorable, then how could she have deceived her sister (Gen. R. 71,2)? God had taken pity on her and she bore children (P. R. E. 36, p. 272).

Antagonism and tension between the sisters played a pivotal part during their child-bearing years. At the outset, Rachel was barren (P. R. K. 20,1, p. 331 and 20,3, p. 331) and Leah bore sons. The Book of Jubilees correlated Rachel's barrenness



with Jacob's feelings towards his two wives: "But the womb of Rachel was closed because the Lord saw that Leah was hated, but Rachel was loved" (Jub. 28:12). Targumic and midrashic commentaries primarily focused on Leah's naming her sons as a means of expressing her deep-seated unhappiness because she felt unloved. An element of prophesy also existed in her thinking:

Leah conceived and bare a son, and called his name Reuben: for she said, My affliction was manifest before the Lord, therefore now will my husband love me...And she conceived again, and bare a son. And she said, Because it was heard before the Lord that I was hated...And she called his name Shimeon. And she conceived again, and bare a son, and said, This time will my husband be united to me, because I have borne him three sons...therefore she called his name Levi. And she conceived again, and bare a son, and said, This time will I give praise before the Lord; for from this my son kings shall come forth and from him shall spring David the king, who shall offer praise before the Lord; therefore she called him Jehudah.<sup>2</sup>

The death of Leah and Rachel, commented on in the sources, provided penetrating insight into Jacob's feelings towards Leah and Rachel. Although earlier the Book of Jubilees had spoken of Jacob's hatred toward Leah (28:12), after her death this work read:

And Leah, his wife, died...And all of her children and his children went out to weep with him for Leah, his wife, and to comfort him concerning her because he was lamenting her. For he loved her very much after Rachel, her sister, died since she was perfect and upright in all of her ways, and she honored Jacob. And in all of the

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<sup>2</sup> J. W. Etheridge, The Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan ben Uzziel on the Pentateuch with the Fragments of the Jerusalem Targum from the Chaldee. Genesis and Exodus (New York: Ktav, 1968) pp. 258-259.

days which she lived with him he never heard a harsh word from her mouth because she possessed gentleness, peace, uprightness, and honor. And he remembered all of her deeds which she had done in her life, and he lamented greatly for her because he loved her with all his heart and all his soul (Book of Jubilees 36:21-24, p. 125).

R. Johanan explained the effect of Rachel's death on Jacob: her death affected him more than any other sorrowful or tragic event in his life (Gen. R. 97; Ruth R. 2,7; and P. R. 3,4, pp. 75-76). He buried her in Ephrath prophesying that Rachel could pray for mercy for the exiles who would one day pass her tomb (Gen. R. 82,10 and 97). Again, there was reference to Jeremiah 31:15.

Several other comments about Jacob's love enhanced the total picture of the jealousy and even enmity in the ensuing years. In explaining Genesis 29:31, Ramban referred back to the contents of verse 30 and was not sympathetic to Leah. He did not compliment her for having obeyed her father and deceived Jacob, but felt she should have let Jacob know who she was. When Jacob wanted to divorce Leah, God had pity on her and gave her children causing Jacob to change his plan. Ramban said Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah rather than having hated Leah, the comparative preposition mem allowing for such an interpretation. The reason God had compassion on Leah was because she was ashamed of what she had conspired to do. Malbim's interpretation (29:30) was, I think, harsh and somewhat contorted, avowing that, because of Jacob's hatred for Leah, his love for Rachel became more pronounced.

From the observation that Rachel was more loved yet barren, it became

understandable that the envy and antagonism would grow. However, commentators did not all agree on the exact nature of the jealousy. Rachel's resentment was a result of thinking Leah must be more righteous than she since Leah had borne children (Rashi, Radak).

While Rachel was the more beloved wife, she was barren, and sought to correct the situation. She asked Jacob specifically to pray for her to have children (Saadiah, Ramban). When Rachel said she would die if she did not bear children, Rashi's interpretation caused the reader to feel how severe were the feelings of a barren woman within the society in which Rachel lived. Another assertion about the theme of Rachel's jealousy was made by Hizkuni. Rachel's fierce envy surfaced after Leah's fourth pregnancy, when Rachel began to feel the burden of bearing her portion of the ancestry of the twelve tribes.

Malbim (30:1) offered some penetrating comments relating to Rachel's barrenness as well as to her jealousy of her sister. First, she blamed Jacob for her barrenness. Secondly, she thought God was withholding children because Jacob loved her so excessively. Her envy of Leah was because Leah, the hated one, had borne children, and Rachel would rather be hated now and have children. This was a way in which she further blamed Jacob for her childlessness.

Malbim's respect for Rachel was seen in his unique interpretation of Genesis 29:31. He professed that, in God's scheme, each matriarch was barren to force her to pray to God for a child. Thus, Leah would have been barren as well (P. R. K. 20,1, p. 331). However, because she was hated by Jacob, God showed compassion

and gave her children.

Due to Scripture's narrative conciseness, many textual gaps exist, implying that all incidents were not recorded. The main confrontation between Leah and Rachel, however, was included, complete with dialogue, and involved the mandrakes Reuben had picked for his mother, Leah (Gen. 30:14-16). When Rachel asked Leah to give the mandrakes to her, Leah wanted to know when Rachel would stop trying to take her husband from her (Saadiah). Rashi rebuked Rachel in his commentary. Because Rachel gave Leah the opportunity to spend the night with Jacob, thereby choosing not to do so herself, Rashi considered this an affront on Rachel's part toward the righteous Jacob, and therefore Rachel was not buried with him. Ramban's comment, on the other hand, was positive about Rachel, stating she wanted the mandrakes for amusement and enjoyment, not for its ability to induce pregnancy, for prayer would be the way to her becoming pregnant.

Leah's jealousy of Rachel was a result of Jacob's spending more nights with Rachel, which he did in order to appease her for her barrenness (Radak). Another reason for Leah's resentment and anger was because Rachel had married Jacob following Leah's marriage, causing trouble for Leah (Hizkuni). In a similar vein, Leah castigated Rachel for marrying Jacob, for once Leah had married him, her sister should never have done so. This was a reference to Leviticus 18:18, namely, a man may not marry his wife's sister for she was considered a rival (Sforno).

### 3. The relationship between Leah and Rachel

A sympathetic portrait was presented of Rachel as not being envious of Leah, but rather aiding her on the wedding night by sharing her secret signs with Jacob in order to dupe him, and hiding beneath the marriage bed to impersonate herself for Leah. As a result of Rachel's kindness to Leah, God promised to restore Israel (Lam. R. Introduction 24). There was frequent reference to "Rachel weeping for her children" (Jer. 31:15) in this midrashic source.

Rachel effectuated a change for the people of Israel as a result of not being jealous of her sister. She justified her actions when Leah was substituted for her and insisted she was not jealous of Leah. When God was angry with Israel, Rachel said: "If I, who am mortal, did not mind the wife who was my rival, will You mind the rival who is no more than an idol?" (T. E. p. 365.) As a result of this pleading, God's mind was changed and Israel was restored. A new reading, based on the foregoing dialogue, was found for Jeremiah 31:15: "read not...**Rachel weeping for her children**, but rather 'It was she who caused the spirit of God (Ruah 'El) to weep for her children'" (T. E. p. 366).

Leah's unselfishness was lauded in Targum Jonathan as well as in the Babylonian Talmud. The former source (30:21) stated when Leah was pregnant for the fifth time and prayed Rachel would be able to give birth to a son, God heard her prayer and switched children and wombs--Dinah from Rachel to Leah and Joseph from Leah to Rachel. The reason Leah prayed for a girl was so Rachel would have a chance to equalize the number of sons she and her handmaid would bear as

ancestresses of the Twelve Tribes (Ber. 60a). Midrash Tanḥuma echoed Leah's wish (7,19). Jacob's hatred of Leah abated when she began bearing children, and she gained a feeling of pride (Gen. R. 71,1). At one point, Leah left off bearing children; later she resumed (P. R. K. 20,1, p. 331).

With what seems to be tongue-in-cheek, the Talmud explained that Jacob's hatred was posited to be the basis for her temporary barrenness; however, when God opened her womb, it was because she was rewarded for hating Esau's actions. It could not be Jacob's hatred toward her, for such a righteous person as she could not be hated (B. B. 123a)!

God finally remembered Rachel, rewarding her for having let Leah marry Jacob without her protestations (Gen. R. 73,4). A similar sentiment had been expressed earlier when Rachel named Naphtali (ibid. 71,8). Rachel had been silent during the deception, thereby giving her tacit compliance (ibid. 71,5). Further praise was given to Rachel when it was interpreted she was not envious of her sister's child-bearing, but rather of her conduct, that is, meaning her good deeds and righteousness (ibid. 71,6).

The incident concerning Reuben's mandrakes (Gen. 30:14-16) occasioned comment: R. Eleazar said Rachel and Leah each lost and gained something. Leah lost the mandrakes and gained two tribes and burial (with Jacob). Rachel gained the mandrakes and lost the other two items Leah gained. R. Samuel made a variant assumption by stating Leah lost mandrakes and birthright, but gained tribes. Rachel gained mandrakes and birthright, and lost the tribes (Gen. R. 72,2 and Song of Songs

R. 7,18).

According to Malbim (30:15), Leah berated Rachel for wanting Reuben's dudaim. Leah was angry because Jacob's tent was nearer to Rachel's and he spent his time with her, and chastised Rachel for employing devious means to try to become pregnant. She also reprimanded her for not having faith in God, and challenged her to pray. However, Rachel disregarded Leah's comments, figuring the basis of Leah's wish was to lie with Jacob, and so she allowed Leah to do so. However, Malbim continued, Leah's motives in wanting to spend the night with Jacob were well-intentioned and not motivated by sexual passion.

God's treatment of Rachel was seen when she became pregnant. Rachel was remembered by God (Gen. 30:22) and rewarded for having abetted Leah in duping Jacob (Rashi). She was remembered only after all the other women had given birth (Radak). By remembering Rachel, God turned from being a righteous and exacting God to being one of mercy (Hizkuni). God remembered her after she had tried to solve the problem of her barrenness on her own, first by giving her handmaid to Jacob, and secondly by bargaining for the mandrakes (Sforno). Her becoming pregnant proved the efficacy of prayer and God's intervention (Malbim 30:22).

#### 4. Rachel steals the teraphim

A plethora of miscellaneous comments about the two sisters offered more insight into how older sources viewed these matriarchs. Most of the interpreters concentrated their remarks and ideas on the figure of Rachel. Onkelos (31:19), in

trying to keep an idyllic portrait, stated Rachel hid (kasi'at) her father's idols instead of stole them. She was not castigated for having stolen her father's teraphim; rather, the excuse was given that her action was "so that they shall not tell Laban that Jacob had fled, and...to remove idolatrous worship from her father's house" (P. R. E. 36, p. 274). Although the general idea was Rachel had died as a result of having stolen the teraphim, the prior source did not fault her for doing so but rather opined she died as a result of Jacob's proclamation that anyone who had stolen the teraphim would die (P. R. E. 36, p.p. 274-275).

Jacob took his family away from Laban's house and, as they were leaving, Rachel stole her father's idols (Gen. 31:19). Saadiah used the word took instead of stole. Other commentators agreed with the Bible text but gave rationales for why she had stolen the teraphim: Rachel had wanted her father not to worship idols, and therefore she stole them (Rashi, Ramban). She did not want the teraphim to tell her father Jacob had fled (Hizkuni, Malbim).

## 5. General Observations about Leah and Rachel in Rabbinic Literature

While a reader's initial impression of the sisters' physical appearance was of a contrast, rabbinic literature was varied in interpreting their mien and figures. Rachel was described uniformly as attractive, but the depictions of Leah were more diverse; even her personality was interpreted when describing her physical qualities, almost as though to make up for something lacking in her demeanor. Even if she was less appealing than Rachel, she still possessed favorable personality traits. The



inference might have been that the rabbis had to hold her in esteem given that she was one of the matriarchs of her people. Therefore, even if she was less physically attractive than her sister, in their eyes, she would have been of beautiful character! A balance in Rachel's favor was evident when her barrenness and her descendants were explained with laudatory rationalizations.

Even in the triangular relationship existing between Jacob and the two sisters, Rachel again surfaced as a heroine. She not only was the preferred and more loved woman, but she also was modest and righteous for having given Leah the secret wedding night signals she and Jacob had agreed upon. While the sources generally were apologetic toward Leah, using the grammatical comparative and saying she was the less loved of the two, not all sources agreed that Jacob loved her. The antagonism between the sisters was explicated, and, despite the sympathy garnered for Rachel because of her barrenness, compassion was felt for Leah as she named her sons. Ramban (29:31) was unique in castigating Leah for having duped Jacob.

The issue of righteousness surfaced in the rabbinic literature connected to Rachel's conspiring to dupe Jacob on what was to have been her wedding night. It reared itself again when the barren Rachel envied Leah for her fecundity, attributing her ability to bear children to her righteousness. Leah, too, received a plaudit for her concern that Rachel be able to give birth to a son. Additionally, commentators used the incident of Reuben's dudaim both to fault and to praise the sisters.

Finally, biblical interpreters showed how uncomfortable they must have been with the biblical verse saying Rachel **stole** her father's teraphim, as they found other

words to describe her actions, and rationales for what she had done. A non-confrontational translation helped them interpret what they must have viewed as something unfathomable for a matriarch to have done.

### C. Leah and Rachel in Jewish Educational Materials

#### 1. The characters of Leah and Rachel

The presentation of Leah and Rachel in the educational materials is skewed toward the sisters' physical appearance and relationship to Jacob, stressing his love for Rachel. While it would be expeditious simply to footnote a list of student texts and workbooks describing Leah and Rachel, I deem it superior to quote from a variety of sources showing the scope of the comments contributing to reinforcing the stereotypes of the sisters. All but two of the texts remarked about their physical appearance.

Raiskin and Raiskin wrote of Laban's daughters, the elder being Leah and the younger Rachel. Only Rachel was described and the description was the one appearing in the Bible. In addition, students learned that time passed quickly for Jacob when he served for her because of his love.<sup>3</sup> An accompanying illustration showed Jacob and his bride under a wedding canopy.<sup>4</sup> Newman's comments mirrored those of Raiskin about Rachel's beauty, Leah's lack of attractiveness, and

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<sup>3</sup> Max D. Raiskin and Gerald Raiskin, Sefer Ha'avot I, Haver Le-historiah. 1 (New York: Ktav, 1958) p. 79.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

Jacob's love for Rachel making time pass as he worked.<sup>5</sup> Samuels and Scharfstein had a description of both sisters: Rachel "was very beautiful, and he loved her at once...[and] Laban had an older daughter named Leah. She was not as pretty as Rachel, and her father was afraid she might not find a husband."<sup>6</sup> Mor's workbook had a fill-in exercise indicating Laban had two daughters. A completion sentence said Rachel was beautiful, but had no information or question related to Leah.<sup>7</sup> Students were asked: "Who was prettier, Leah or Rachel?"<sup>8</sup>

Hollender, in a very simplistic re-telling of the story in two pages, merely recounted the meeting at the well, Rachel's announcing Jacob's arrival to her family, and called her a "beautiful girl."<sup>9</sup> Hollender had a child-like illustration depicting Jacob straining to remove the lid from the well as Rachel stood nearby with one sheep watching him. Rachel, wide-eyed and smiling, was dressed in an elbow length tunic, her hair covered by a scarf knotted below her neck.<sup>10</sup> Rossel simply wrote of an elder and younger daughter, the latter of whom was loved by Jacob.<sup>11</sup> In

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<sup>5</sup> Shirley Newman, A Child's Introduction to the Torah (New York: Behrman, 1972) p. 69.

<sup>6</sup> Samuels and Scharfstein, pp. 52-53.

<sup>7</sup> Hadassah Mor, Workbook. Torah Lessons 2 (Jerusalem: Department of Education and Culture for the Diaspora, 1974) p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> Lorber and Shamir, p. 126.

<sup>9</sup> Betty R. Hollender, Bible Stories for Little Children, Vol. I, Rev. ed. (New York: UAHC, 1986) p. 30.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>11</sup> Rossel, A Child's Bible. Lessons from the Torah, p. 90.

Fish's workbook, students were asked to write an opinion about several statements related to Jacob meeting Rachel, for example, Jacob saw Rachel coming with the flock and he kissed her and wept. Also, a chart needed to be completed comparing the sisters.<sup>12</sup> There was nothing about the relationship between Leah and Rachel, their childbearing, and the mandrake incident. Since the aforementioned chart appeared in the workbook immediately after the meeting between Jacob and Rachel, the chart offered no opportunity for responses other than the appearance of the sisters, and information about Jacob's love for Rachel. Similarly, another source had no physical depiction of either sister. Rachel was acknowledged as a shepherdess and the one Jacob loved. As in the previous book, no reference was made to their lives as a wife, their jealousy as sisters, or their giving birth.<sup>13</sup>

In depicting the two sisters, Daniel said: "Leah had a very sweet face, but Rachel was far more beautiful and Jacob had loved her from the first moment he saw her by the well."<sup>14</sup> The deception of Leah was detailed,<sup>15</sup> but nothing else about the two sisters. An illustration showed Rachel, surrounded by her flock near the wall, watching while Jacob removed a stone from the well's top. He was barefoot, clean-shaven, bareheaded, and wearing a knee length garment with short sleeves. Rachel

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<sup>12</sup> Fish, pp. 69 and 71.

<sup>13</sup> A. Davinsky, Mavoh Le-lilmud Ha-humash Le-ye'ladim. Part 2 (New York: Behrman, 1949) pp. 14-16 and 56.

<sup>14</sup> David Daniel, The Jewish Beginning from Creation to Joshua. Part 1 (New York: Ktav, 1971) pp. 68-69.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

was tall, slender, and pretty. Her long dress was intricately draped, her hair covered, and she carried a pitcher on her shoulder. Some dwellings were in the distance, but they were buildings, not tents.<sup>16</sup>

Another illustration of Rachel and Jacob showed him removing a stone from the well's opening as he looked at her. She stood looking at him, her flock nearby, and other shepherds in the distance. Both were drawn in a frontal view, she from the thighs up, he from the chest up. Her long-sleeved, dark colored dress was covered by a light colored shawl covering her hair and shoulders, and falling down to her waist. She held the latter garment closed with her left hand. Some dark, curly hair escaped from under her shawl. Jacob's garment was almost sleeveless, His dark hair was bare and he had a beard and mustache.<sup>17</sup> I am certain children would find this a romantic drawing.

The last picture of Rachel and Jacob at the well portrayed Jacob lifting the stone as Rachel watched from a short distance away, and three other shepherds watched from afar. A swarthy, bearded Jacob wore a knee length belted tunic that had sleeves reaching to his elbows, and sandals laced up to his calves. His head was covered by a round covering resembling a large skull cap. Rachel wore a long tunic with elbow length sleeves and sandals similar to Jacob's. A headband adorned her long, dark hair. She, too, was swarthy complexioned.<sup>18</sup> Jacob's portrayal seemed

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>17</sup> Baruch Avivi, Torah La-yeled Le-mathilim. Bereishit (Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1988) p. 38.

<sup>18</sup> Gabrieli and Avivi, p. 84.

to indicate he was working very hard, struggling to lift the stone, as an attractive, smiling Rachel looked on.

Rossel's drawing depicted Jacob in an idyllic scene crouching under a tree, petting one of the flock. Seen from the rear, he wore a knee length, belted tunic over a long sleeved shirt. His hair had a head band going across his forehead, and he was wearing sandals. A youthful Rachel stood to his left, also petting the same sheep. She wore a white blouse belted over a long, dark skirt, sandals on her feet, and had uncovered long hair. She held a water sack over her left shoulder.<sup>19</sup> Since the story line was not definable in the drawing, the student might not know the two people were Rachel and Jacob other than having the pagination synchronized with the story. This was the only source depicting the two figures together without the well. One other variation of Jacob at the well did not present Rachel, but rather Jacob was seen removing the large stone while sheep were seen nearby.<sup>20</sup>

The most extensive coverage of the story of Leah and Rachel was found in a workbook by Isserof and Mosel. The entire resource was devoted to the chapters about the women. Therefore, the expectation was for the full story to be presented and for pupils to be able to answer direct queries as well as be challenged by thought-provoking questions.<sup>21</sup> Exercises such as word fill-ins and sentence

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<sup>19</sup> Rossel, p. 88.

<sup>20</sup> Fish, Torah Orah. Bereishit, p. 70.

<sup>21</sup> Shimshon A. Isserof and Nahum Mosel, Sidrat VaYetze'. Workbook (New York: Jewish Education Press, 1962). The cited information and exercises are on pages 12-43, and 48-49.

completions helped students study verses about Jacob's meeting Rachel, Leah and Rachel's physical description, and Jacob's desire to marry Rachel. No initiative was demanded on the students' part in answering the exercises; rather they were to find the answers from the biblical verses. Three of fourteen comments by Rashi gave a glimpse of the women, especially regarding Leah's eyes. An interesting composition topic to write about was a conversation between Leah and Rachel before Leah's wedding.<sup>22</sup> Such a theme could elicit the emotions and thoughts of the protagonists and make students explore the women's feelings.

Leah's eyes were defined in some educational materials. Only one book, in translating the Torah, said "Leah had lovely eyes..."<sup>23</sup> No explanatory comments were given about her eyes. One text which had Bible excerpts said rakot meant halashot or weak.<sup>24</sup> Elisur's simple dialogue, re-telling of a midrash explained Leah's eyelashes fell out as a result of her weeping in fright that she would have to marry the wicked Esau. Accompanying the midrash was an illustration showing Leah sitting hunched over, both hands shielding her eyes. Her short dark hair looked unkempt; her general demeanor was unattractive.<sup>25</sup> Cohen used the same midrash and included fill in exercises about Leah and Rachel.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>23</sup> Lorber and Shamir, p. 124.

<sup>24</sup> Gabrieli and Avivi, p. 85.

<sup>25</sup> Rivka Elisur, 'Al 'Avot Le-yeladim. 'Agadot Hazal Be-levush Qal (Jerusalem: Department of Education and Culture for the Diaspora, 1980) p. 32.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Cohen, Tov Li Torat Pikhah. Workbook 2 (Israel: M. Cohen, 1983) p. 31.

Leah's actions in deceiving Jacob were questionable and raised ethical issues. For a matriarch of a people to have participated in an overt act of duplicity should elicit queries from young pupils. One particularly arresting midrash was proffered to explain a reaction to Leah as a result of this incident. When Jacob berated her for responding to the name Rachel, she countered he had done so earlier with his father. Leah was troubled and left the house whereupon, in sequential order, the sailors, women weavers, and shepherds of the town all were angry with her for having stolen Jacob from Rachel. As Leah wept, God took pity on her and gave her sons. Jacob thereby became reconciled with her and she was honored in her household.<sup>27</sup> The conclusion to be extracted from this midrash was God had pity on Leah. Rather than punish her for her duping Jacob, God had compassion for an unloved and unfavored woman.

A peculiar sketch accompanied this midrash. Of the four sailors in the foreground, one was drawing up a fishing net, two were jeeringly pointing at the fleeing Leah, and the fourth also looked in her direction. She was running off to the left of the drawing. Seen from a back view, she wore a knee length dress and had long hair.<sup>28</sup> The caricature faces of the scoffing men added a sinister aspect to the scene. No opinion of Leah's image may be formed because she was only seen from the back; however, her haste was suggestive of the taunting behavior to which she was being subjected.

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<sup>27</sup> Elisur, p. 33.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.



Pulver had a chapter called "Jacob at His Uncle's House" which focused mainly on Jacob and Laban, and only minimally on Leah and Rachel. No descriptions whatsoever of their physical appearance or their relationship together and with Jacob were included. The re-telling dealt with Jacob's being cheated at his marriage, and how Jacob made Laban wealthy. The moral lessons to be learned by the pupils related to Jacob's diligence in his work and his honesty, as contrasted with the greedy Laban.<sup>29</sup>

## 2. A triangular love relationship

Isserof and Mosel gave indications of Leah's position within her household when students answered questions such as why did God give Leah a fifth son, and why then did she think Jacob would live with her?<sup>30</sup> More feelings of familial dissension became apparent when the students pondered the answer to the following:

1. Jacob castigated Rachel for blaming him for her barrenness, when it was God who had withheld children from her.<sup>31</sup>
2. Why was Rachel jealous of Leah?<sup>32</sup>
3. Why did each sister give her handmaid to Jacob?<sup>33</sup>
4. What emotion did Rachel express when Joseph was born, and what was hinted or alluded to in her naming the infant

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<sup>29</sup> Pulver, pp. 48-53. See also Lorber and Shamir, pp. 124-127, where the explanatory notes focused on Jacob and Laban, not on Leah and Rachel.

<sup>30</sup> Isserof and Mosel, p. 26.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

Joseph?<sup>34</sup> The reply to the last question would point up two factors, namely, her humiliation was now ended, and secondly, she hoped to bear another son. In discussing the answers to all of these questions, pupils would learn about the position of a barren woman during the time of the matriarchs, and how the sisters tried to adapt to societal patterns.

As a result of Isserof and Mosel relying on Rashi's commentary for some of their questions, students become aware of Rachel's envy of Leah's righteousness and of Rachel's demand for Jacob to pray on her behalf as his father had done for his mother (30:1-2). Jacob's retort pointed up a harsh reality to Rachel, that is, he had sired children and therefore she was to blame for their having no children (30:2). God's showing favor to Rachel for her having transmitted secret signs to Leah on the night of her wedding, resulted in her conceiving and bearing Joseph.

Cohen presented a chart listing the names of the twelve sons of Jacob and students were asked to fill in the mother's name in one column and the reason for the son's name in the adjacent column.<sup>35</sup> In effecting this exercise, students would recognize the dynamics between Jacob, Leah, and Rachel as they existed in a triangular relationship. When asked why Leah named her sons as she did, perhaps a class discussion could focus on her feelings as the lesser loved wife, and her feelings towards her sister.

At the time of Rachel's death, students learned that "Yaakov loved Rachel

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Cohen, p. 33.

very much...In the doing of mitzvot she was his right hand, and also in teaching the idol-worshippers about the Supreme Being."<sup>36</sup> Earlier, in this same text, pupils were asked: "How do we know that Yaakov loved Rachel?"<sup>37</sup> Although this text devoted eleven pages to the story of Leah, Rachel, and Jacob, no commentaries were given about the tension between the sisters, their barrenness, and the incident with the dudaim.<sup>38</sup> In a section entitled "Ideas to Explore" the dynamics of the triangle love relationship were brought to the foreground as pupils had to ponder the following two questions: "1. Obviously Leah and Rachel considered child-bearing a way to gain Yaakov's love. Is that a crazy notion today? Have times changed? 2. Having children was certainly important to the growth of the Jewish people, but even though Rachel had fewer children than Leah, Yaakov always preferred Rachel. How do you explain this?"<sup>39</sup>

### 3. Rachel steals the teraphim

Two events received minimal attention. The first was the stealing of the teraphim by Rachel, and the second pertained to her death. In several exercises, Isserof and Mosel recognized that Rachel stole her father's teraphim.<sup>40</sup> The

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<sup>36</sup> Lorber and Shamir, p. 144.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., pp. 120-131.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>40</sup> Isserof and Mosel, pp. 41, 42, 48, and 50.

exercises were based on Rashi's apologetic commentary, namely, she stole them so her father would no longer be able to worship them. An illustration depicted a demure-looking Rachel seated in her tent, with downcast eyes, while Laban was on a path outside, ostensibly checking in each tent for his teraphim.<sup>41</sup>

Other textbook writers did not speak about this incident. Even Cohen, in giving a fill-in exercise relating to Laban's words upon learning Jacob was fleeing, suggested Jacob stole the idols and no mention was made of Rachel's having committed the deed!<sup>42</sup> Gabrieli and Avivi omitted the verse about the stolen idols, as earlier they had excluded all verses about the sisters' antagonism toward and jealousy of each other.<sup>43</sup>

#### 4. The death of Rachel

Several sources included information about Rachel's death. When the educational material told a simple version of the text, the death of Rachel was not included; however, in the more comprehensive texts, her death was noted. Elisur recounted a midrashic tale: Jacob, having wanted to bury Rachel in the Cave of Machpelah, was visited by Rachel in a dream where she beseeched him to bury her on the road to Bethlehem. When he asked why, she responded she wanted to be in a position to offer help to the dispersed oppressed Israelites and also to pray to God

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<sup>41</sup> Matya Kom, Parshat VaYetze'. Chapter 31, Jacob Leaves Laban's House. Workbook. Level 1 (Jerusalem: Office of Education and Culture, 1982) p. 31.

<sup>42</sup> Cohen, pp. 37-38.

<sup>43</sup> Gabrieli and Avivi, pp. 86-87. See also Lorber and Shamir, pp. 132-133.

on their behalf so they would be able to return to their country. When Jacob awakens, he did as Rachel had requested in his dream.<sup>44</sup>

Fish had a drawing of the Cave of Machpelah and two completion sentences related to the grave.<sup>45</sup> Gabrieli and Avivi simply stated Rachel died, was buried on the road to Ephrath, and Jacob erected a monument over her grave.<sup>46</sup> Isserof and Mosel gave the most extensive workbook activities, the exercises eliciting information about Rachel's death and burial, Jacob's reaction and what he did, and aspects of burial and mourning.<sup>47</sup> Lorber and Shamir, in commenting about Rachel's death, had some unique information to impart to pupils. In speaking about her grave they avowed that Moslems "consider[ed] Rachel a sacred person."<sup>48</sup> In addition, when telling that Jacob erected a monument over Rachel's grave, the authors taught about tombstones and the practice of unveilings.<sup>49</sup> Elisur had an illustration of Rachel in a partial frontal bust. Her facial expression was difficult to read but it may have been one of anguish or beseeching. Pupils subsequently learned that, when her son Joseph was on his way to Egypt with the Ishmaelites, he asked for permission to visit his mother's grave. At her gravesite, he heard her voice predicting great and wonderful

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<sup>44</sup> Elisur, p. 40.

<sup>45</sup> Fish, p. 82.

<sup>46</sup> Gabrieli and Avivi, p. 100.

<sup>47</sup> Isserof and Mosel, Sidrat VaYishlah, pp. 40-44, and 46-48.

<sup>48</sup> Lorber and Shamir, p. 144.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

things for him in Egypt.<sup>50</sup>

#### 5. General Observations about Leah and Rachel in Jewish Educational Materials

By and large, once the introductory verses have been commented on in the educational sources, the presentation of the two women tapered off, resulting in scant information being imparted to the pupils about the internal personality struggles and household contentiousness. Some educational materials dealt with the sisters' difficulties, but most did not. Isserof and Mosel were an exception. They also were the only authors who spotlighted the incident involving Reuben and the mandrakes, done by an exercise asking the students to fill in the missing verb where indicated, referring to Genesis 30:14-16.

In addition, the omission of the episode when Rachel stole the teraphim does no justice to pupils as they learned either about both women or even just about Rachel. Since the biblical figures are representations of people with strengths as well as weaknesses, with perfections as well as foibles, commentaries must include the positive and negative characteristics. Not to do so presents an imbalanced and dishonest view of the figure. When two figures are seen in the pair situation, as Leah and Rachel were, it becomes even more imperative for the reader to have a complete interpretation; otherwise, the contrast between the two people is more unfairly exaggerated.

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<sup>50</sup> Elisur, p. 47.

#### D. Conclusions

Seen as contrasting figures in the Bible, both in physical appearance and personality, Leah and Rachel presented tension and discord within their household. Leah was unattractive, unloved, and fecund; Rachel was beautiful, beloved, and barren. For each of them, these three factors motivated their own endeavors and sparked the responses of others towards them. The only occasion when an independent action was performed, was when Rachel stole her father's teraphim.

The Scroll of Ruth put aside individual differences between the two sisters by citing them both as builders of the house of Israel and ideals to which a bride should aspire; yet even here Rachel was named first, perhaps indicating a preference for one matriarch over another.

Rabbinic literature essayed strongly to find a balance between Leah and Rachel. Using verb root definitions and the comparative preposition mem, for some exegetes Leah became attractive and loved, even though less loved than Rachel. In cases where commentators agreed that her eyes were weak or unsightly, they gave a reason that reflected Leah's rich personality and praised her motives resulting in her weak eyes and her eyelashes having fallen out. Compassion was imparted to her when the naming of her children was commented upon.

Instead of faulting Rachel for having duped Jacob when marrying Leah, commentators praised her modesty and righteousness saying she prevented Leah from the shame of not being married first as was customary for the elder daughter. One of the highest compliments stated she died when knowing it would be against

the Torah for a man to be wed to two sisters simultaneously (Malbim).

Leah, too, was praised for being virtuous and unselfish as she prayed, according to the Talmud and Targum Jonathan, that Rachel would bear a son and she herself a daughter, so that Rachel could be an ancestress of the Twelve Tribes.

After having studied the educational materials, pupils will perpetuate the stereotype of Leah and Rachel. Learning about the two sisters, primarily from the vantage point of their physical appearance, will infer the weakness or unattractiveness of Leah, and the beauty of Rachel. Reiterating Jacob's love for Rachel, will add to the idea of Rachel's goodness and Leah's deceptiveness. Only in those materials where a more fulsome presentation was made of the matriarchs, was the idea promulgated that antagonism and jealousy existed between the two women. Only by exploring how Leah named her sons, and how Rachel pleaded for Jacob to give her children and for Leah to give her Reuben's mandrakes, would pupils learn of the multi-dimensional personality problems existent in Jacob's household.

When the study of Leah and Rachel is relegated to a brief page or two, students will detect a meager tale and not be aware of the richness and plenitude in the story of two matriarchs. They will thereby be deprived of exploring why Leah and Rachel were worthy of being key ancestresses of their people, and their significance as role models will thus be lost. Through the textual and visual approach, Leah will continue to remain the lesser favored, and Rachel will be perpetuated as the beautiful heroine.



## Chapter 4

### Miriam

#### A. Miriam in the Bible

Miriam, who appeared in isolated scenes scattered throughout Moses' life, was the most important female figure in the books of Exodus and Numbers, but the actual number of verses in which she appeared was limited to seventeen in the Pentateuch, and one each in Micah and 1 Chronicles. Scripture described her as daughter, sister, leader, prophetess, and sister-in-law; her role in the history of the Exodus experience was appreciable, and she lived and acted with foresight at a pivotal time in her people's history.

The Bible contains no physical description of Miriam; her personality emerges only through her actions. As a girl (Ex. 2:4, 7-8), she appeared to be a dynamic individual who acted with alertness and swiftness when her brother Moses needed a nurse. Some eighty years later (according to the biblical chronology), she took a leadership role in the crossing of the Red Sea (ibid. 15:20-21). Often she is linked to what her brothers were doing. She helped save Moses, and later, after Moses had led the people across the Red Sea, she led the women in song. This latter role was enriched by a further description of her joining the women in music and dance, a

unique combination for a pentateuchal female. Her integral connection with her brothers was seen again when she was punished with a skin affliction because of disparaging remarks she and Aaron levied against Moses (Num. 12:1-5, 9-15). The critical nature of her remarks showed her to be antagonistic toward Moses' Cushite wife and jealous of Moses to whom God spoke; because of this latter resentment, she challenged God (ibid. 12:2). Sarah also had doubted God and her reaction was expressed through laughter at a divine prediction, which may have been an expression of incredulity or derision. Miriam expressed her bitterness verbally.

While Miriam was usually called by her name, she was also known as the sister of Moses and Aaron, as when she saved Moses at the bank of the Nile. Even though the text (2:4) reads 'ahoto' (his sister), the omission of her name from this passage may suggest she was denigrated and not the focus of the event, albeit she was the motivating force behind it.

Miriam had several crucial experiences at the water's edge. At the bank of the Nile, she proposed to bring her mother to Pharaoh's daughter so Moses could be nursed; years later, she led the women in song and dance at the edge of the Red Sea. This symbol of water connected her with a natural force that gave life to Moses and the Children of Israel. The verse following the death of Miriam (ibid. 20:1) indicated a lack of water for the people (ibid. 20:2). While there was not necessarily a cause and effect relationship between the two events, the proximity of the two verses raises the possibility that, as Miriam was associated with water during her lifetime, after her death water was lacking. Just as her life and actions were

connected with life-giving water, her death was associated with the lack of this vital essential. This link indicates the high regard and deep esteem the Pentateuch held for her.

Micah counted Miriam as one of the people's three leaders during the Exodus experience, along with Aaron and Moses (Mic. 6:4). Her being honored by such a description showed the key position she had earned, and her reputation was carried down through biblical tradition. Such esteem was accorded her despite her having sinned and her having been punished severely by God. And yet, because Micah's work might be construed, in a broad sense, to be an interpretation, questions arise as to how he has elected to list the three siblings. Since they are not listed in their order of birth (Moses, Aaron, and Miriam), has he listed them in a hierarchical order of his own choosing? In 1 Chronicles 5:29 Miriam's paternal parentage was noted, although the children were not listed in order of birth (Aaron, Moses, and Miriam). Miriam, the first born, was recorded last.

## B. Miriam in Jewish Interpretation

### 1. Miriam as a young girl

The targumim translated the stories about Miriam literally and hence added little or nothing to the Bible story when describing her early life; midrashic texts regularly amplified the biblical verses. Some sources put forth an explanation for Miriam's name, saying it meant bitterness (associating the first element in her name with the Hebrew mar), and referred to how the lives of the people were embittered

with hard work designed to break their spirits, if not their bodies (Ex. R. 26,1; Song of Songs R. 2,24; P. R. 15,11, Vol. 1, p. 322; C. J. 44,1, p. 108; and P. R. K. 5,9, p. 105).

Epithets for Miriam, such as Pu'ah, Azubah, Jerioth, and Ephrath, gave an indication of her personality and physical appearance (Sot. 11b and 12a; Ex. R. 1,21; and P. R. E. 45, p. 353). A wide range of qualities emerged from the descriptions, resulting in a portrayal of her beauty, her gift of arousing passion in men, her paleness of color because she was an invalid, and her being forsaken by men because she was an invalid. This was certainly not the image the Bible presented. These characterizations might be a response to the Bible's failure to mention Miriam's husband or her children, if she had any.

Exodus Rabbah emphasized the word ha-'almah as a description of a personality quality, and a play on words of the root ayin-lamed-mem resulted: when Miriam ran to get her mother to suckle the infant Moses, the word ha-'almah meant haste. Samuel opined she concealed (he'elmah) her identity (Sot. 12b and Ex. R. 1,30). Midrashic amplification also suggested that Miriam was one of the midwives, i. e., Puah, assisting her mother, Shifrah (Ex. R. 1,17). Miriam would have been five years old at that time, Aaron was two, and Moses would be born the following year (cf. Ex. 7:7). Miriam assisted her mother at births. The sages said she used to escort her mother Yocheved, when delivering babies, attending to all her wants. She was very fervent in helping her mother; this was an early indication of her character (Ex. R. 1,13). Miriam was also identified as Puah and further personality traits were

elucidated: she was called Puah because she cried out (po'ah), and mothers gave birth. She also wept for Moses when he was put in the water. She disclosed (hofi'ah) Moses' future leadership (Eccl. R. 7,3). Sotah 11b identified Miriam as one of the midwives in Exodus 1--Puah, because she cried out through the Holy Spirit saying: My mother will bear a son who will be Israel's savior.

Miriam's role as prophetess was evident early in her life when she challenged her father for having divorced his wife (Ex. R. 1, 17) to avoid having any children, and Amram capitulated and took Yocheved back. Miriam and Aaron accompanied their wedding procession, she "carrying castanets and marching" (P. R. 43,4). Miriam challenged her father's actions and said he was wrong to abstain from a conjugal relationship with his wife. She reminded him of Pharaoh's edict intended to kill only male infants, and by his abstaining from sexual relations with his wife, he was not allowing for the possibility even of females to be born (Sot. 12a and P. R. 43,4, Vol. 2, p. 760). When Miriam predicted the birth of a son who would be a savior, her father praised her; when the infant was put into the Nile, the father chastened her and was skeptical about the prophesy (Sot. 13a and Meg. 14a). Actually, Miriam's prophesy was twofold: first, the birth of a son, and second, the son would redeem Israel (Meg. 14a, C. J. 42,8, p. 106 and 44,2, p. 109, and Mekh. Tractate Shirata 10, Vol. 2. p. 81). As a result of this prophesy, she was listed as one of seven prophetesses, the others being Sarah, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Huldah, and Esther (Meg. 14a).

Calling Miriam the sister of Aaron (Ex. 15:20) related to this time when she

was, in fact, only Aaron's sister, prior to Moses' birth (Sot. 12b-13a, and Meg. 14a). It was understood that she and he were born before their parents separated in fear of Pharaoh's edict; Moses was born after their reunion entreated by Miriam.

Similarly, The Chronicles of Jerahmeel (compiled not later than the 6th or 7th centuries, and augmented c. 10th century), in speaking of Miriam's prophesy, attributed her abilities to "the Spirit of God" (C. J. 44,2, p. 109)<sup>1</sup> This was a singular theophanic description, connecting Miriam directly with the Divine. This same section stated: "Amram begat a son and daughter, Aaron and Miriam" (C. J. 42,8, p. 105). Since Miriam was the elder child, one would have expected her name to be listed first! (Cf. 1 Chron. 5:29.)

Miriam was commented about as a young girl who saved Moses, and as a mature woman who sinned by slandering him. After having prophesied that her brother would one day save Israel, Miriam watched him while he was in the river to learn his fate (C. J. 42,9, p. 106; Mekh. Tractate Beshallah 1, p. 177 and Mekh. Tractate Shirata 10, p. 81).<sup>2</sup> Miriam stood at a remove so she would not be seen, thereby making it appear as if the baby had been forsaken (Sarna, JPS Exodus). When the baby was discovered by Pharaoh's daughter, Miriam responded by offering to find a nurse to suckle him. Malbim interpreted Miriam's actions in speaking with

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<sup>1</sup> The Chronicles of Jerahmeel; or, The Hebrew Bible Historiale, trans. by M. Gaster (New York: Ktav, 1971).

<sup>2</sup> The Book of Jubilees 47:4 offered a fascinating reason for Miriam's being at the river bank when it read during "the day Miriam, your sister, guarded you from the birds," in The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha. Vol. 2, James Charlesworth, ed. (New York, Doubleday, 1985) p. 138.

Pharaoh's daughter as God-inspired, and said she had no dread of punishment. Her words to the princess offered insight into Miriam's astuteness. Cassuto (Moses David Cassuto 1883-1951, born in Florence, Italy and died in Israel) said Miriam questioned the princess about calling a Hebrew to nurse the child, trying "to give the impression that she is making the suggestion only for the sake of the princess."<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Miriam the leader

The targumim, when speaking of Miriam leading the women at the crossing of the Red Sea, echoed the biblical text and included a picture of Miriam with a chorus (Onkelos) and the women dancing while playing musical instruments (Targum Pseudo-Jonathan); however, the implied image is varied. Dancing, choral singing, and the accompaniment of musical instruments, gave a variety of possibilities to the mental image of the women's role at the Red Sea.

Midrashim averred Miriam's righteousness, along with that of the other women, as a result of their having prepared musical instruments in advance of the departure from Egypt. The timbrels used during the Song were brought from Egypt. Implied was that the women knew such an item would be necessary during the Exodus, and they had planned for it almost intuitively, having faith a miracle might be forthcoming (P. R. E. 42, p. 333 and Mekh. Tractate Shirata 10, p. 83).

In describing the presentation of Miriam's Song, it was posited she began the

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<sup>3</sup> Umberto Cassuto, A Commentary on the Book of Exodus, trans. from the Hebrew by Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967) p. 20.

song to, and in praise of, God, and the women joined her (P. R. E. 42, p. 33). As Moses had led the men with a song, Miriam then led the women (Mekh. Tractate Shirata 10, Vol. II, p. 83). Later, Rashi said Moses sang his song to the men who then answered him; and Miriam sang the song to the women (Ex. 15:21). Considering the midrashim understood her role in the event at the sea to have been a major focal event in Miriam's life, and this was the first song in Scripture by a woman, it is shocking that some commentators did not comment on Miriam's singular role in these two verses (Ex. 15:20-21).

Ibn Ezra said Miriam was known as Aaron's sister in Egypt in order to distinguish her from other women named Miriam. Therefore, when she sang her song, she would not be confused with anyone else. Ramban had no comment about Miriam and her song; rather he interpreted Aaron's relationship with Miriam as being one of honor, since he was the elder of her two brothers, and a prophet. Ramban clearly considered the honor as bestowed upon Aaron. Rashbam's (Samuel ben Meir c. 1080-85-c. 1174, Ramerupt in northern France) interpretation was that Miriam took the timbrel while still in the water, and sang her song. As Moses had been commanded by God to sing his song, Miriam was adjured to do likewise.

Sarna (20th century, U. S. A.) commented similarly about the Red Sea episode, averring female musicians were recognized as being special in using the timbrels. Speaking specifically about The Song of Miriam, he wrote:

This popular English title is somewhat misleading since the text states that Miriam recites only the first line of the **shirah**. However, a midrash has it that Miriam and the women actually recite the entire song. These verses



affirm the custom, chronicled in Judges 11:34 and 1 Samuel 18:6, of women going forth with music and dance to hail the returning victorious hero, although in the present instance, it is God and not man who is the victor.<sup>4</sup>

Saadia and Sforno added nothing about Miriam at the Red Sea crossing.

Miriam, enjoying equality with her two brothers, was counted as one of Israel's three redeemers, and merited the respect of the people who waited for her when she suffered from leprosy, as the Shekhinah lingered (Lev. R. 15,8). Their waiting for her was reciprocal to her having waited at the Nile's banks to learn the fate of the infant Moses (Sot. 9b and 11a; and Mekh. Tractate Beshallah 1, Vol. 1, pp. 177-178). R. Joshua likened the vine in the chief steward's dream (Gen. 40:10) to the Torah, and the three branches to the three siblings: Miriam, Aaron, and Moses (Hul. 92a and Gen. R. 88,5). R. Berekiah stated that God said to Israel: I sent you three messengers, Moses, Aaron, and Miriam (Lev. R. 27,6). Miriam was referred to as a pedagogue, as were her brothers, and she was credited with having merited the well accompanying the people in their wanderings. She was equated with her brothers concerning her leadership, the gift of the well bestowed upon Israel because of her merit, and the well being taken away upon her death (Palestinian Targum). In each of these instances, Miriam was treated identically with her brothers (Ta'an. 9a).

Some of the comments were tinged with midrashic augmentations. R. Eleazar said Miriam's death by divine kiss was the same as Moses' (M. K. 28 and Song of Songs R. 1,16). In Onkelos, Aaron asked Moses to plead before God for Miriam

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<sup>4</sup> Sarna, Exodus, p. 82.

since she had been with the people all through the difficulties in the wilderness, and Aaron wanted her to be able to complete the journey into the Promised Land.

Commentators further affirmed her equality and elaborated on her specific role when interpreting Micah 6:4. Rashi said she was to be a light for the women. Malbim averred she would be the person to teach the women about the good path of life. Abravanel said the three siblings were leaders, redeemers, and teachers, Miriam's responsibility being to teach the women. He also referred to Miriam's Well having been given to the people because of her merit. Ibn Ezra stated she would prophesy to the women about what God had spoken to Moses. Radak avowed she was one of the three prophets, while Altschuler (David, 18th century, Galicia, M. D.) called her one of three worthy, respectable leaders.

Exegetes viewed Miriam as a woman, a righteous leader, and a prophetess. In Exodus 15:20, she was mentioned both as the prophetess and the sister of Aaron. Explanations were given by Rashi and Epstein as to why she was called both prophetess and sister of Aaron echoing earlier talmudic statements (Sot. 12b-13a and Meg. 14a). She was specifically called Aaron's sister because it was he who, despite the possibility of incurring God's wrath and jeopardizing his life, pleaded for Miriam when she was stricken with leprosy, showing feelings from his soul (Rashi 15:20). Sarna defined Miriam's two titles in a variant way. He posited she was a prophetess like Deborah, Huldah, and Noadiah, and further explained the reference to being Aaron's sister reflecting a system of patriarchy, where the eldest brother was in a position of authority.

### 3. Miriam slanders Moses

Commentaries about her grievous act of slander against Moses said: "Miriam is consistently seen as the prototype of the slanderer."<sup>5</sup> God's punishment of her was to be an example so others would learn not to engage in public or private slander, or of uttering malicious statements against anyone. Even though she was stricken with leprosy, the people did not journey onward, but rather waited for seven days while she was quarantined outside the camp. (The connection between her having waited at the banks of the Nile to see what Moses' fate would be, and the people now waiting for her was examined earlier.)

According to many midrashim, Miriam's well was an important guiding sign in the travels of the people. Its placement showed the Israelites the position they were to take in the camp (C. J. 53,17, pp. 154-155). The well waters became rivers reaching all parts of the encampment. "But do not think that they obtained nothing from the waters, because they produced all kinds of dainties similar to those of the world to come" (*ibid.*, 53,17, p. 155).

References to Miriam's Well permeated the talmudic comments about her. Mentioned twice in Pesahim 54a, this well which travelled with the people in the wilderness, was one of the ten items created on the sixth day of creation.

Who effected Miriam's punishment by deeming she had leprosy and sending her outside the camp? Reasoning that Moses and Aaron could not have done it, The

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<sup>5</sup> Sifre. A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy, trans. by Reuven Hammer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986) p. 479. This quote was in a footnote for Piska 275.

Holy One must have bestowed great honor upon Miriam in that moment, declaring: I am a priest; I will shut her away, declare her a leper, and free her (Zeb. 101b-102a). While Miriam had leprosy and was detained, the people waited for her.

Generally, midrashic sources were concerned with the adult Miriam, the woman who sinned and was punished severely, yet who merited the respect of her people and was rewarded with illustrious descendants, but the volume of material was not as replete as for her youth. Comments about her adult life focused indirectly on her when Moses prayed to God to heal her in Numbers 12:13 (P. R. E. 53, p. 434). Deuteronomy Rabbah stressed the aspect of Miriam's slander, yet recognized her piousness. The congregation was warned not to slander as Miriam had done. She was smitten with leprosy for having told a lie, and, despite her being considered faithful (Deut. R. 6,4), she was nevertheless punished as an example to future generations. Earlier, when God created Eve, he did not make her from Adam's mouth; nonetheless, Miriam exhibited slander (Deut. R. 6,5). Further, while Miriam sinned by using her mouth in slandering Moses, God punished her whole body (Eccl. R. 5,3). The Midrash recognized that Aaron also had spoken against Moses (P. R. E. 53, p. 430), but nothing was raised about the unjust punishment Miriam received (Deut. R. 6,5 and P. R. E. 53, p. 434).

A connection was made between Miriam and the well because of the verse following the announcement of her death (Num. 20:2), stating there was no water for the assembled congregation (Num. R. 1,2). The well was rich in its gifts to the people, producing enjoyments, herbs, vegetables, and trees. The well discontinued

providing water upon Miriam's death (Song of Songs R. 4.26).

As a woman travelling through the wilderness with her people, Miriam exhibited controversial behavior and was punished by God. She voiced her disgruntlement, vehemently protesting that Moses was not the only person with prophetic puissance. Rashi said the sense of the word dabber (Num. 12:1) was that they used stern language. Miriam's having been mentioned first indicated she initiated the words, casting a disparaging remark against Zipporah, Moses' wife. Further, she questioned why God spoke only to Moses, and not to them, given they were not divorced and Moses was.

When God's relationship with Moses was explained, and Miriam and Aaron did not capitulate, God became angered, departed, and left Miriam stricken with leprosy, saying she deserved this humiliation (P. R. E. 53, p. 434). A collection of sources, commenting on Miriam's transgression, showed that "commentators differ regarding the exact content of Miriam's offensive utterance which is not recorded for us in the Torah."<sup>6</sup>

Rashi posited Miriam was left leprous and white as snow, and quarantined outside the camp for seven days (also P. R. E. 53, p. 434). He further said the period of seven days was a concession on God's part. According to law, she could have been quarantined for fourteen days (Rashi on Num. 12:14). Extrapolating from this adjustment on God's part, a reverence developed toward Miriam: that God would

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<sup>6</sup> Neḥama Leibowitz, Studies in Bamidbar (Numbers), trans. and adapted from the Hebrew by Aryeh Newman (Jerusalem: The WZO Department for Torah Education and Culture in the Diaspora, 1976) p. 129.

bestow special favor on her implied her singularity as a person and, despite her having sinned, remarkable care from a metaphoric surrogate parent!

Miriam's famous descendants helped to increase her stature in later generations: God made Bezalel who attained wisdom and understanding, part of her lineage (Ex. R. 40,1). Other descendants included King David (Ex. R. 1,17) and the Davidic dynasty. Through her seed, Miriam was associated, with wisdom (Ex. R. 48,5).

In examining seminal works suggesting a variety of interpretations, it became apparent that many commentators did not comment on numerous verses. For example, Ramban, Sforno, and Leibowitz did not comment on any of the Exodus verses. The Babylonian Talmud contains no references to Miriam at the Red Sea. Similarly, Ramban and Epstein (Baruch Ha-Levi, 1860-1942, Bobruisk, Russia) offered nothing on the verses in Numbers. Leibowitz, while not considered a feminist Bible interpreter, was the only female synthesizer/commentator. I was disappointed that she did not comment about Miriam at the Red Sea crossing, recognizing the singular position Miriam played as a leader and a female.

Although there might be unfairness in Miriam being the one who was punished, and not Aaron, exegetes were in agreement in their praise of Miriam since the people waited for her when she was banished from the camp. Her importance was again emphasized when, upon her death, the people had no water. In addition, because of the proximity of the verses about the Red Heifer and her death (Num. ch. 19 and 20:1), as the Red Heifer had died to expiate Israel's sins, so too did

Miriam's death atone for Israel's sins (P. R. K. 26, p. 407).

#### 4. General Observations about Miriam in Rabbinic Literature

The Bible and commentaries presented Miriam as a multi-dimensional personality. She was a strong willed individual, unique in undertaking responsibilities as a young girl caring for her brother, and as a young woman leading the women of Israel in song at a key moment in history. She was also a rebellious sister and sister-in-law when she cast aspersion on her brother Moses and her Cushite sister-in-law.

By not commenting on a number of verses, and by emphasizing others, the commentators left a somewhat incomplete and inaccurate picture of Miriam. They seemed concerned primarily with her youth and her actions related to Moses, rather than her rebelliousness and subsequent punishment. She was lauded for her alert and mature actions and thoughts at the river bank, extolled for her suggestion to Pharaoh's daughter, and praised for bringing her mother to nurse her infant brother Moses.

Miriam's qualities as a leader and prophetess commanded less attention in the commentaries. A glaring omission was the reference to her song at the crossing of the Red Sea. While explication was found about her defiance against Moses and his wife and, one could also say, against God in a broader context, and her ensuing punishment, little was interpreted about how she led the women in the Exodus.

Miriam was faulted for her slanderous words and punished in an understandable way. Most commentators admitted not knowing what Miriam's words

of dissension and aspersion were (they expressed the feeling the comments were negative because of the semantic import of the word db with the preposition b- meaning spoke against), and sources were not emphatic in ascribing specific words to her.

### C. Miriam in Jewish Educational Materials

#### 1. Miriam as a young girl

With rare exception, each of the educational materials included the episode of Miriam standing at a distance from where Moses was placed in the river, waiting to learn his fate, and then offering to help Pharaoh's daughter by seeking a nurse for the infant. The Bible offers no specific information on the length of her wait, and Sotah 11a states Miriam waited at the water's edge for just a short time. Weissman, in a child's version of the story, said she "faithfully waited for about twenty minutes."<sup>7</sup> Miriam's presence at the water's edge was not emphasized; Moses' birth and his being saved subsequently by Pharaoh's daughter became the focus both of the thought questions and illustrations. Only one book included information about both Miriam and Aaron at the time of Moses' birth by saying they warned their mother that soldiers were approaching and the baby would have to be hidden.<sup>8</sup>

Pulver provided an embellished re-telling of the story. When Pharaoh's

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<sup>7</sup> R. Weissman, The Little Midrash Says. Sh'mos (New York: Benei Yakov Publications, 1987) p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> Samuels and Scharfstein, Torah and You, p. 85.



daughter discovered the baby, "Miriam came forward...She might have been afraid at any other time to speak to the king's daughter, who was a great princess; but she only thought of saving her baby brother."<sup>9</sup> Echoes of Malbim's interpretation were evident here.

The educational materials showed Miriam as a brave, bright, and obedient daughter. She was alert while watching her brother, and responded with dispatch, suggesting that her mother be brought to nurse the baby. Samuels says she watched the basket and offered to get a nurse.<sup>10</sup> Panitsh's<sup>11</sup> text was presented as a sequence of excerpts with synonyms for key words. Miriam was spoken of in the usual way: standing at a distance to learn her brother's fate, offering to find a nurse, and bringing her mother to Pharaoh's daughter. A key question focused on why Miriam called her own mother to nurse the child.

Some challenging thought questions appeared in one workbook.<sup>12</sup> The first query was: as Moses' sister stood at the Nile, what did she think would happen to her brother? The second question would elicit sensitive thinking on the students' part: how do we learn that Miriam loved her brother very much? Question three was a singular one among the educational books: Miriam stood as though she were waiting

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<sup>9</sup> Pulver, p. 98.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 88-89.

<sup>11</sup> Avigdor Panitsh, Ha-sedrot Shemot. Sefer 'Ezer Lilmud Ha-humash (New York: Feldheim, 1981) pp. 13-16.

<sup>12</sup> G. Bergson and Y. Weingarten, Bible for the School. Exodus/Leviticus. Workbook (Israel: Sifriyat Poalim, 1977) no pagination available.

to leave Pharaoh's daughter. Do you think this was her intention?

One multiple choice completion exercise based on Exodus 2:7, concentrated the response on Miriam's courage, independence, and vigilance, rather than on any feeling of fright or jealousy.<sup>13</sup> Kom's<sup>14</sup> emphasis was on Moses' infancy and the role his frightened mother played in making a basket and hiding him. When referring to Moses' sister who "guarded him,"<sup>15</sup> Miriam's name was omitted. She further appeared standing at a distance from the basket, then offering to get a Hebrew nurse.<sup>16</sup> Persky,<sup>17</sup> Pulver,<sup>18</sup> and Pliskin<sup>19</sup> presented the standard version of Miriam at the water's edge and her role in bringing her mother to nurse the infant son. Chubara<sup>20</sup> wrote an idyllic narrative in which Miriam admired the "pretty dresses" worn by the Egyptian women and the "beautiful lady" (referring to Pharaoh's daughter), all of whom were happy and smiling.

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<sup>13</sup> Iona Zielberman and Dalia Korach-Seger, Shemot Vayikra' Sheli. Students' Workbook (Israel: Modan, 1988) p. 33.

<sup>14</sup> Matiah Kom, Moses. Exodus Chapter 2, Verses 1-22. Workbook. Level 1 (Jerusalem: Office of Education and Culture, 1989) pp. 4-14.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 21-22.

<sup>17</sup> Elias Persky, Humash Meforash. Part 3 (New York: Ktav, 1930) p. 11.

<sup>18</sup> Pulver, p. 98.

<sup>19</sup> Pliskin, p. 49.

<sup>20</sup> Yona Chubara, Miriam P. Feinberg, Rena Rotenberg, Torah Talk. An Early Childhood Teaching Guide (Colorado: Alternatives in Religious Education, 1989) pp. 194-195.

In Lewittes' book, the exercises did not focus on Miriam, but on Yocheved and Pharaoh's daughter. The sole reference to Miriam was a sentence completion from a choice of two answers (Yocheved and Miriam), asking who stood at the water's edge to see what would befall the child.<sup>21</sup> None of the included comments by Rashi mentioned Miriam. Another educational material containing the Bible text, had a thought question about her: "How did Moshe's sister show her love for her baby brother?"<sup>22</sup>

Many illustrations of the infant Moses being discovered by Pharaoh's daughter appeared in the educational materials. The pictures depicted Miriam and provided the opportunity for comparing her with Pharaoh's daughter and her maidens. In all but one of the drawings, Pharaoh's daughter appeared with two maidservants. Each wore a short sleeved garment, and their heads may or may not have been covered. When not presented as a caricature or stylized drawing, these Egyptian women were of beautiful visage, reacting toward the infant with joy. A varied portrayal emerged from the vignettes of Miriam. In the Hollender drawing,<sup>23</sup> she did not appear to be a child, but rather older than Pharaoh's daughter and her maids. A severe head covering in the Doney portrayal<sup>24</sup> also made her appear as a mature adult.

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<sup>21</sup> Mordecai H. Lewittes, ed., Humash La-talmid. The Student Bible. Part 3. Exodus-Leviticus (New York: Hebrew Publishing, 1962) p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> Arthur Chiel, trans. and comm. and Sol Scharfstein, exercises, Gateway to Torah. Part 2. Shmot, Vayikra, Bamidbar, Devarim (New York: Ktav, 1992) p. 12.

<sup>23</sup> Hollender, pp. 60-61.

<sup>24</sup> Meryl Doney and Malcolm Doney, Moses. Leader of a Nation (London: Grosvenor House, 1980) p. 17.

Eisenberg,<sup>25</sup> whose aim was to teach young readers a moral lesson using Miriam as a role model, depicted her watching over and caring for her younger sibling. Gutman<sup>26</sup> had a two-page picture with a severely garbed and draped Miriam crouching near tall vegetation, presenting a frightened look, and holding an unidentifiable bundle in her arms. Miriam appeared alone in one picture<sup>27</sup> as she placed the basket into the Nile. In most of the portrayals, her head was covered with a shawl or draped fabric. One cartoon-like representation entitled Moses showed a modestly dressed girl with a hat on, carrying a little basket among the bulrushes.<sup>28</sup>

Ofek<sup>29</sup> had several drawings of Miriam: one depicted a rear view of her standing near her frightened mother who held an infant. Another picture showed her from a side view with her head covered, standing at the Nile watching a floating cradle. Another set of pictures showed Miriam running home to get her mother, and then returning with her to Pharaoh's daughter. Miriam's face, in the second scene, presented her as older than when she waited at the Nile's bank.

Another drawing portrayed a sad Yocheved holding her baby, as well as a

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<sup>25</sup> Eisenberg, pp. 10-11.

<sup>26</sup> J. Gutman, Shearim La-Torah. Part 3 (Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1973) pp. 8-9.

<sup>27</sup> Aratan, p. 19.

<sup>28</sup> Grishaver, Bible People. Book 2, p. 9.

<sup>29</sup> Uriel Ofek, Ha-Tanakh Sheli Be-temunot. Yisrael Be-Misraim. Vol. 6 (Ramat Gan: Revivim, no date) pp. 4 and 6.

frontal view of Miriam's worried face.<sup>30</sup> In dialogue form, the accompanying text had Yocheved telling Miriam to watch over her brother while he was in the Nile. The following page had a tune sung by Miriam and her mother, indicating their concern about the baby and affirming that he would live because God would guard him. The text was enhanced by a picture of the covered basket in the water, and Miriam watching from amidst the bulrushes.<sup>31</sup> Miriam had a pretty face, as in the previous drawing, and she held a shawl over her head. In the former illustration, her head was bare.

Gabrieli,<sup>32</sup> Yonay,<sup>33</sup> Zielberman,<sup>34</sup> Mayerowitz,<sup>35</sup> and Pulver<sup>36</sup> depicted the hidden Miriam, also. Raiskin<sup>37</sup> portrayed Miriam at the side of Pharaoh's

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<sup>30</sup> Tova Shimon, ed., Ha-'afikomen. Me-'avdut Le-herut. Level 2 (Montreal: Tal Sela, 1984) p. 27.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>32</sup> Nahum Gabrieli, Torah La-yeled. Shmot, Vayikra. Workbook (Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1980) p. 7.

<sup>33</sup> Shahr Yonay and Rina Yonay, Sefer Shemot. Workbook. Shemot and Vaeira, (Brooklyn: Shai, New York, 1991), p. 16.

<sup>34</sup> Yona Zielberman, Sipurei Ha-Torah Be-temunot. Student Workbook (Israel: Modan, n. d.) p. 29.

<sup>35</sup> Moshe Mayerowitz, A Heir Far Dem Kind. Part 2. Shemot (Bois Briand, Quebec: Eizer L'Yeled, 1990) p. 7.

<sup>36</sup> Pulver, p. 98.

<sup>37</sup> Max D. Raiskin, Sefer Ha-'avot. Part 2 (New York: Ktav, 1965) p. 17.

daughter as she discovered the infant, and Daniel's illustration<sup>38</sup> seemed to have Miriam in a similar position. In this latter scene, it was ambiguous whether the figure in the foreground with Pharaoh's daughter was Miriam or a handmaid. Usually it was easy to recognize Miriam and the princess because of their ages. Often they were recognizable because of their garb. However, while Miriam sometimes appeared to be more modest due to her head covering and longer sleeve length, this was not always the case. Sometimes Miriam also wore a sleeveless tunic. In another drawing by Raiskin,<sup>39</sup> Miriam's dress and coiffure were similar to that of the princess as she led her mother to the baby in the palace, subsequent to the discovery of Moses. In a child's version of the Bible with terse explanatory notes and definitions in the margin,<sup>40</sup> pictures presented an interesting contrast. While the text related that Moses' sister stood by to learn his fate, and later brought his mother to nurse him, the accompanying etching by Doré, portrayed Pharaoh's daughter finding the baby; Miriam was not present!

One Hebrew book, midrashic in content, and devoting parts of several chapters to the figure of Miriam, contained the usual incident at the Nile, and included Miriam's name in two chapter titles, one describing her as ha-hakhmah<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> David Daniel, The Jewish Beginning from Joshua to Judah Maccabee. Part 2 (New York: Ktav, 1971) p. 108.

<sup>39</sup> Raiskin, Sefer Ha-'avot. Part 2, p. 19.

<sup>40</sup> B. and M. Rechavi, Sipurei Ha-Torah. Shemot U-Vayikra' La-yeled (Tel Aviv: Arn Oved, 1975) pp. 12-13.

<sup>41</sup> Elisur, p. 62.

(the wise one) and the second as ha-nevi'ah<sup>42</sup> (the prophetess).

Some educational materials did not include treatment of Miriam's early life. One workbook<sup>43</sup> omitted all references to Miriam as it recounted Moses' birth, genealogy, and early infancy. An illustration presented Pharaoh's daughter and two individuals at the water's edge, one of whom was handing up the baby to Pharaoh's daughter. Miriam was not in this drawing.<sup>44</sup> All mention of Miriam was excluded from another textbook, which gave selections from the Bible, vocabulary, and comments on excerpted phrases or verses.<sup>45</sup> Two modern workbooks proceeding sequentially through the Pentateuch, omitted mention of Miriam as a young girl in her role at the Nile.<sup>46</sup>

It is important to recognize that when Miriam was partially hidden by the bulrushes or other types of vegetation, the eye of the reader was drawn to find her. While works of art usually have one focus of action, in these drawings there are two. In other words, Miriam's hiddenness makes the viewer's eye rove to find her, thereby finding a resolution to the action in the foreground--the discovery of Moses.

Basically the textbooks and workbooks portrayed the young Miriam

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>43</sup> David Shiffman and Zvi Arieli, Netivot Ha-mikra' Shmot. Workbook (Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1965) p. 5.

<sup>44</sup> Lewittes, ibid., p. 7.

<sup>45</sup> Elias Persky, Humash Meforash. Part 3 (New York: Ktav, 1966).

<sup>46</sup> Grishaver, Torah Toons 1, p. 38 and Bible People 2, p. 10. (See the latter book, p. 9, where a female is carrying a basket at the bank of the Nile. It is possible that she is Yocheved, not Miriam.)

simplistically, yet her strength was almost of fairy tale dimension. Given the perilous situation into which the child Miriam was placed by harboring her infant brother, she displayed inordinate bravery. Her fear was never portrayed in the illustrations. While the consequences of her action of placing the baby in the Nile River were suspenseful, the scenes at the water's edge were rather idyllic. Students should be made at some point to confront how she must truly have felt as she waited. Further, when they have learned about the remainder of her life, they should be made to reflect back to this childhood time and consider how the young Miriam resembled the mature woman--the leader of the people.

## 2. Miriam the leader

Miriam was called a prophetess because, "according to the Rabbis, [she] prophesied to her mother that Moses would be born to her."<sup>47</sup> As the sister of Moses and Aaron, she "led the women in song and dance."<sup>48</sup> Another source said: "The women sang and danced separately,"<sup>49</sup> not singling Miriam out as their leader. Still another picture surfaced in connection with the Red Sea crossing: "Moses' sister Miriam was happy! She loved to dance and to play the tambourine. She called, 'All you women, go and get your tambourines. Let's play them together and dance. It's

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<sup>47</sup> Aaron Kirschenbaum, translated and adapted by, Humash Me-forash. Part III (New York: Ktav, 1966) p. 98.

<sup>48</sup> Grishaver, Torah Toons 1, p. 48.

<sup>49</sup> Weissman, p. 103.



wonderful to be free."<sup>50</sup>

One artistic depiction of this joyful experience has been found<sup>51</sup> along with a simplified version of Exodus 15:20. A cartoon drawing entitled "Miriam, Nachshon, the Tribe of Judah, and All of Israel," showed Miriam, with hair uncovered, playing a drum in the upper portion of the sketch, and leading the women in the bottom portion.<sup>52</sup> Another illustration was of Miriam's face and hand holding a timbrel as she sang her song: "Miriam was leading the people in song."<sup>53</sup> Connected with this drawing, was a question: "For what does Miriam praise God in her song?"<sup>54</sup> A two page board game of the Egypt and Exodus experience had a caption saying "Miriam and the People sing."<sup>55</sup>

One children's Bible spoke of Miriam taking "her hand drum...[and] all the women danced with her."<sup>56</sup> Two sentences of Moses' song were then quoted as having been sung by everyone and no acknowledgement was made of a song sung by Miriam. Hunt stressed the role of God in the deliverance: "Miriam, Moses' and Aaron's sister, and all the other women took up tambourines and danced and sang

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<sup>50</sup> Chubara, p. 235

<sup>51</sup> Mordecai I. Soloff, A. Soloff, and Tamar Soloff Brower, Torateinyu Alef. Bereishit-Shemot (San Diego: Ridgefield 1982) p. 141.

<sup>52</sup> Grishaver, Bible People. Book 2, p. 18.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 20

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>55</sup> Grishaver, Bible People 2, p. 68.

<sup>56</sup> Rossel, A Child's Bible, p. 10.

in praise of God who had delivered them from their enemies."<sup>57</sup> Another workbook, which re-told selected stories in very modern colloquial language with which pupils could identify, read: "Tambourine bells jingled, and the clay drums began to pound. Miriam, the sister of Moses, was leading a happy, stamping dance of thanks to God"<sup>58</sup> the text of which was included. When, at the Red Sea, the women danced and played instruments, Miriam answered them by singing before them.<sup>59</sup>

In a coloring book<sup>60</sup> depicting the joy of having safely crossed the Red Sea, I had a sense that the drawing was divided into two parts, the main section being on the right side showing men dressed as hasidim. Those in the foreground, whose happy faces were drawn, were dancing in a circle, surrounded by male children. A multitude of men stretched into the distance walking between two walls, symbolizing the wall of water, with only the outline of their heads visible. On the left side of the drawing, in the background, were the women, none of whom was seen frontally. One woman in front of the group was holding a timbrel. Little girls walked along side the women or were being carried by their mother. As the women are seen off in the distance, they do not seem to be exiting from the same area as the men. It is almost as if they had crossed the sea in a different place. The accompanying text indicates

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<sup>57</sup> Patricia Hunt, Children's Favorite Stories from the Old Testament (London: Ward Lock, 1984) p. 28.

<sup>58</sup> Chaya M. Burstein, The Hebrew Prophets. A Story-Workbook (New York: UAHC, 1990) p. 14.

<sup>59</sup> Avigdor Panitsh, Hasedrot Beshallah. Yitro. Sefer Ezer Lilmud Ha-humash (New York: Feldheim, 1981) p. 17.

<sup>60</sup> Mayerowitz, Part 2, p. 38.

that the woman with the instrument is Miriam.

Lewittes included the complete quote of Exodus 15:20-21.<sup>61</sup> Rashi was cited for an explanation about why Miriam was known as Aaron's sister, i. e., she was his sister first at the time when she prophesied about Moses as a savior of the Israelites.<sup>62</sup> Persky echoed Rashi's comment, and went on to clarify why the women had timbrels: it was due to their "strong faith in God."<sup>63</sup> A translation of Miriam's song spoke of the instruments and had related exercises in which she was referred to twice as a prophetess.<sup>64</sup> Miriam's singularity was that she was known as one of the "three great leaders."<sup>65</sup>

While thought questions have been sparse, Panitsh<sup>66</sup> incorporated four of twenty-two questions about Miriam and these queries could certainly form the basis for discussion about her deeds and personality: "1. Why was Miriam called a prophetess and what was the beginning of her prophetic experience? 2. Why was she called Aaron's sister, not Moses' sister? 3. Why did the women take timbrels out of Egypt? 4. How did Moses sing to the men and Miriam sing to the women?"

Several sources omitted mention of Miriam at the Red Sea. In one, her song

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<sup>61</sup> Lewittes, Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>63</sup> Persky, Humash Meforash. Part 3, p. 99.

<sup>64</sup> Chiel and Scharfstein, pp. 62-64.

<sup>65</sup> Grishaver, Torah Toons 1, p. 5.

<sup>66</sup> Panitsh, Ibid., p. 19.

was not included, but that of Moses was partially quoted.<sup>67</sup> In another, she did not appear in an illustration of the crossing of the Red Sea.<sup>68</sup> In a summary of the Exodus from Egypt, pupils were asked to put sixteen sentences into chronological order, not one of which related to Miriam.<sup>69</sup> Another text contained two pages devoted to the Song of Moses and no reference to Miriam's Song.<sup>70</sup>

### 3. Miriam slanders Moses

The final aspect of Miriam's portrait personified her as a challenging and defiant female. Weissman, through recounting the story of Miriam's punishment, used the incident to teach a moral lesson. Miriam had sinned by speaking "lashon hara about Moses."<sup>71</sup> The strict punishment was to teach her a lesson because she "was a great tzaddikes."<sup>72</sup> Her reward was that the people remained at the campsite until her punishment was ended. Only then did they resume their journey.

In the question section following the text about Miriam's slanderous comment, Harduf<sup>73</sup> had eight of seventeen questions relating to Miriam: what she said, God's

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<sup>67</sup> Uriel Ofek, Vol. 6, and Samuels, Torah and You.

<sup>68</sup> Zielberman, p. 29.

<sup>69</sup> Shimon, p. 34.

<sup>70</sup> Rechavi, p. 26.

<sup>71</sup> Weissman, p. 94.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> D. M. Harduf, Humash La-yeled. Bamidbar (Toronto: Siphriya Pedagogith, 1965) p.41.

reaction, her punishment, Moses' prayer for her to be healed, and the community's response to her isolation. Pollack<sup>74</sup> placed the emphasis on the jealousy of Miriam and Aaron toward Moses, and Miriam's punishment. In one of Grishaver's books, in the chapter on Beha'alotekha, mention was made of Miriam: "At the end of the sidra, Moshe marries a Cushite woman (a black woman) and Miriam criticizes him. She gets leprosy, and then Moshe prays for her and the leprosy is taken away."<sup>75</sup> In a different book, Miriam's punishment did not appear.<sup>76</sup> As Lewittes excerpted portions of Beha'alotekha, he omitted all reference to Miriam's sin of slander,<sup>77</sup> as did Chiel and Scharfstein who skipped from Numbers 6 to Numbers 13 in the writing of their book.<sup>78</sup>

Only one other educational source contained the incident of the slander as Miriam spoke out against Moses: "Miriam is mentioned first because she instigated the hostile talk."<sup>79</sup> Persky gave two reasons for Miriam's and Aaron's sin: "They had spoken against God's servant. Secondly, they had attacked a man of Moses' stature--

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<sup>74</sup> Y. A. Pollack, Humash Le-talmidim. Part 3. Bamidbar-Devarim (New York: Hebrew Publishing, 1934) p. 18.

<sup>75</sup> Grishaver, Torah Toons 1, p. 113.

<sup>76</sup> Grishaver, Bible People. Book 2.

<sup>77</sup> Mordecai H. Lewittes, ed., Humash La-talmid. The Student Bible. Part 4, Numbers-Deuteronomy (New York: Hebrew Publishing, 1965).

<sup>78</sup> Chiel and Scharfstein, pp. 132-134.

<sup>79</sup> Elias Persky, Humash Meforash. Part 3, p. 193.

a sinful act even were he not a servant of God."<sup>80</sup> God was said to have had pity for Miriam, even though afflicting her with leprosy. This was seen when God left before Miriam became leprous, not being able to stay and see her suffering. Persky explained why the people waited for Miriam during the time she had the affliction: "Miriam was greatly beloved and respected by all the people, and they would not think of marching onward without her. Miriam was rewarded by God with this honor, for many years before she had waited patiently by the Nile River to look after her brother."<sup>81</sup>

#### 4. General Observations about Miriam in Jewish Educational Materials

The primary focus of the educational materials was Miriam's childhood. Understandably, young children will identify best with those who are about their own age, yet, in studying Tanakh, one must look at all available information about the characters' lives. The terseness of biblical language leads to a sketchy picture of biblical figures; as a result, every word becomes even more important and must be examined. Therefore, it is disappointing that the period of Miriam's womanhood was presented in an imbalanced way compared with her youth.

From the illustrations, pupils can understand the uplifted feeling of the people at the Red Sea and fathom the exultation of the women in their dancing; however, it is not clear if students perceived that the women's leader was Miriam. While

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 195.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 197.

Moses' role was that of unchallenged leader in the Exodus experience, questions must be asked to elicit what Miriam's position entailed. If Miriam is not clearly portrayed as the women's leader, and if she is faulted as the only slanderer of Moses, an unfair picture or image of her will be perpetuated as youngsters learn about a unique biblical female.

#### D. Conclusions

The biblical Miriam was presented as a responsible young girl at the Nile's bank, a dynamic leader of song at the Red Sea crossing, and an inciteful woman slandering her brother Moses and challenging God. In none of her recorded episodes, did she ever function alone; each of her actions related to an aspect of Moses' life: his infancy at the Nile's bank, his leadership at the crossing of the Red Sea, his marriage, and his singular relationship with God.

The portrait emerging from the rabbinic literature was of a very strong-willed young girl, capable of foresight and prophesy, and, according to midrashim, able to persuade her parents to effectuate a renewal of their conjugal relationship resulting in the birth of Moses. Her qualities of patience, astuteness, and bravery, were uniformly agreed upon by commentators. Section B above examined explanations for the word ha-'almah (Ex. 2:8) based on different meanings for the word's verbal root. No explanation was tendered for the possible root of ayin-lamed-mem meaning lame. Thus, the emphasis on her alacrity, as seen in the commentaries, rather than on Miriam's acting in a lame or faulting manner, may be interpreted as a positive

characteristic.

One way to interpret Miriam's role at the Red Sea is to take the verses at face value, picture her only as a woman leading other women in song, and give no further exegetical elaboration. A second way to explicate these verses is to recognize that Miriam's major leadership experience was actually related to this one particular time when she led the women in song.

The absence of interpretation about Miriam at the Red Sea seems blatantly unfair given that her maturity and spiritual development combined to allow her to have reached such a key position among the women of her people. Even Ramban, in giving an accolade to Aaron for being Miriam's brother, was concentrating on Aaron, who otherwise was not conspicuous during the Red Sea crossing; he was not speaking of Miriam alone at this moment of her glory.

The general sense of the rabbinic literature was not strictly in accord with the grammatical significance of the phrase va-tedabber Miryam ve-Aharon (Num. 12:1). The verb is third person feminine singular, indicating that Miriam was the one who spoke. However, I question the conjunction connected to Aaron's name and wonder if he, too, did utter a slanderous remark as well, or if she spoke with him. In any case, the grammar makes her the responsible person and Aaron, with no verb attached to his name, would be guiltless of having spoken. That he got off unscathed may reflect an understanding of the text as if it read: va-tedabber Miryam le-Aharon, i. e., she did the talking and he did the listening. This interpretation would make him an accomplice for having heeded her, but certainly not as guilty as she for her words.



In addition, because God dispensed punishment for Miriam and not for Aaron, the commentators mirrored this difference, impugning and reproving only her. This was most inequitable<sup>82</sup> and biased, if not sexist!

No educational material asked why Miriam was punished as a result of the slander incident and Aaron was not. Was the assumption necessarily correct that she spoke first? Did Aaron, in fact, speak, or did he only listen? What responsibilities does a listener have? Was Aaron guilty? Why would God have treated her so severely and not punished Aaron at all? If Miriam was a righteous woman and needed to be punished in order to set an example for others, what might be assumed about Aaron's qualities if he went unpunished? What was God's relationship with Miriam so that the length of her punishment was lightened?

Questions such as the foregoing need to be posed to children in order to further discussion about a major female Bible figure. It might be asserted that, if children learn about Miriam's punishment and do not raise speculations, the interpretation of her character may be said to be biased and/or slanted.

Students must explore and try to imagine how Miriam achieved and

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<sup>82</sup> The volumes of Torah Shelemah that included verses about Miriam were studied. The predominant number of interpretations depicted Miriam as the one who had committed slander and was punished. Understanding the literalness of the grammar of va-tedabber, the implication here was that Aaron was totally guiltless. While there was room for thinking that Aaron was an accomplice in the act of slander, Miriam alone was held culpable. This schema reflected a pattern in the biblical interpretations seen in this portrait of Miriam, namely a dearth of explications about Miriam in her positive role at the Red Sea, and an emphasis on her sinning through an act of slander. (In addition to the commentaries included in this paper, Torah Shelemah included other midrashim and individual interpreters.)

effectuated her leadership, and what her rapport was with the women. While following behind the men, the women formed their own nucleus and had their own dreams. What was Miriam's position at their head? Students should explore the role she played with her brothers in the exodus from Egypt. While Aaron's position was missing from the text, Miriam's name appeared as she shared the spotlight, in song, with Moses. It was striking and unusual for a woman to be in this position.

If the richness of her personality is only seen as she watched her baby brother at the water's edge and responded by seeking his mother to nurse him, then pupils have been deprived of seeing Miriam as a multi-faceted daughter/sister/leader/prophetess whose actions and reactions should provide modelling for qualities and values. The intensity of the Bible message and Miriam's position as a role model will have been weakened considerably if not lost. It is vital for the forthright presentation of Miriam that students learn the verse in Micah (6:4) where she was included equally with Moses and Aaron as one of the three leaders. Students should discuss the variations in leadership between the three siblings and focus on how each demonstrated individual strengths. In assessing what they did, qualitative distinctions may arise indicating the varied facets leadership may take, and the importance of each type. Furthermore, classical exegesis must be combined with the first-hand study of the Bible text in the educational process, in order for a full and honest portrait of Miriam to emerge.

The rabbinic tradition seemed open to a more positive and autonomous role for Miriam as a child, because she was a child, preferring to have the woman Miriam

closed off, hidden as it were, perhaps because she was an adult female. If the educational materials reflect the rabbinic tradition, rather than the Bible, Miriam's total portrait and contribution, and her positive and negative personality traits, will have been lost, and a distorted picture of her will have been garnered.

## Chapter 5

### Rahab

#### A. Rahab in the Bible

##### 1. The character of Rahab

Appearing early in the book of Joshua is Rahab, the first post-Pentateuchal female. Although not an Israelite, she was unique in deeds of bravery, aiding two Hebrew spies in need of help. In nineteen verses, the reader learns of her heroic, benevolent deeds and her reward. Rahab participated in extensive dialogue by giving instructions to the spies and beseeching them to save her family, and by speaking with the king who had summoned her.

##### 2. Rahab's heroism

Two spies, sent by Joshua to scout out Jericho found lodging in the house of Rahab, an innkeeper and/or a harlot. When the king of Jericho demanded Rahab bring the spies to him, she hid them, lied to the king saying they had left at night when the city gates were being locked, and suggested they be pursued quickly (Josh. 2:1-7).

Surely Rahab is to be classified as a heroine who acted independently,

endangering her life three times for the spies: she first hid them among the flax on her roof (2:4), then deceived the king of Jericho by having him think he was pursuing the spies when actually they were still in her home (2:5-7), and finally helped them escape over the city wall (2:15). Rahab's deception followed a motif seen in the books of Genesis and Exodus, where women lied in order to save someone. An example from each book was Sarah pretending to be Abraham's sister, and Shiphras and Puah telling Pharaoh the Hebrew women delivered their babies before their arrival.

In choosing to be civilly disobedient, Rahab demonstrated strength and judgment, betraying her people in order to abet another nation. Perhaps her recognition of the spies' powerful God, and the miracles wrought for them (Josh. 2:9-11) mitigated against a response from her that would have cost them their lives. Therefore, she not only aided them, but spent the rest of her life among the Israelites. As she had protected the spies earlier, she later resided peacefully among them. Rahab's residence, having been located inside the city wall, could symbolically have been construed as her having been poised or caught between her own people and outsiders.

Rahab's acts of kindness to the spies were two in number and had a paired or balanced aspect to them. First, she hid the men (2:6) and then facilitated their escape to safety (2:15). Thus, two acts of kindness and two acts of rescue were evident. So, too, when the spies returned to conquer her town, the Israelites performed two acts of benevolence. First, they saved Rahab's family from danger

(6:23), and then she was able to reside with the Israelites (6:25). Another example of symmetry in Rahab's story involved the rope. Rahab expedited the spies' flight by having them climb down a rope from her window (2:15). Subsequently, a rope was placed back in the window to facilitate keeping the spies' promise to rescue Rahab and her family (2:21). The balancing of Rahab's heroism and humanity with her being able to have her family rescued, augured well to confirm the magnanimity of her deeds, and garnered respect for the significance of what she had done.

### 3. Rahab's request to save her family

For her part in having saved the spies, Rahab asked that her entire family be rescued and kept safe when the Children of Israel would capture her city. She did not request that any material wealth be saved. Setting forth rescue conditions with Rahab before being let down on a rope from her window, leading outside the wall, the spies escaped. Subsequently a red rope was hung from her window indicating where her family would be when the victorious enemy arrived. When Joshua conquered Jericho, the spies' promise was kept: Rahab and her entire family were saved whereupon she lived out the remainder of her life among the Children of Israel.

A discrepancy was noted in the Bible text. In three different verses, there was mention of who was to be saved in Rahab's family. The first verse stated Rahab asked that her father, mother, brothers, sisters, and all belonging to them be saved (2:13). The spies then told her of a plan to rescue her father, mother, brothers, and

all of her father's house gathered together in the designated place (2:18). Finally, at the time of the conquest, her father, mother, brothers, Rahab herself, and all of her families (kol mishpehotekhah) were rescued (6:23). The question being raised is why Rahab's sisters were accounted for only in the first verse cited, whereas the other immediate relatives were listed individually in all three verses. Rahab acted alone and was not portrayed as part of a family which included a husband or children; only her extended family was mentioned. Given the emphasis on the domestic role of biblical females, this omission is unusual.

## B. Rahab in Jewish Interpretation

### 1. The character of Rahab

Rahab was introduced as a zonah (2:1). Commentators translated this word as harlot or innkeeper, or a combination of the two definitions. While "harlot" had negative connotations, the innkeeper explanation depicted Rahab as a moral person to whom the spies went for succor. Targum Jonathan used the euphemistic translation of zonah, an innkeeper, and Radak later opined that zonah, which meant harlot, was also an innkeeper, one who dispensed food as well as provided other services, sexual in nature. Abravanel (Isaac ben Judah 1437-1508, Lisbon/Venice) said both the literal and euphemistic denotations of the word were correct. The Babylonian Talmud referred to her as a harlot (Zeb. 116b), as did midrashim which were more expansive than the targumic and talmudic sources, calling her a harlot and implying immorality (Num. R. 3,2 and 8,9; Ru'ah R. 2,1; T. E. 32, p 509; P. R. 40.3/4,

Vol. 2, p. 706; P. R. K. 13,5, p. 256; Mekh. Tractate Amalek 3, Vol. 2, pp. 163 and 176; and Mekh. Tractate Shirata 3, p. 28). Rashi and Altschuler (M. Z.) agreed with the targum, i. e., Rahab was an innkeeper providing all types of food. Zonah (harlot) and mazon (food) were connected midrashically to make such a translation feasible.

Rahab was noted as one of the world's exceptionally beautiful women, along with Sarah, Abigail, and Esther. When Rahab's name was mentioned lust was enkindled in men (Meg. 15a). R. Yitzchak said by saying "Rahab, Rahab" a seminal discharge would immediately ensue. R. Nahman responded that such an incident did not happen to him. R. Yitzchak countered, saying the sexual response would come from one who knew her. Another condemnation of her sexual puissance was the assertion she had been possessed by every prince and ruler (ibid. 15a).

After being a harlot for forty years, at age fifty Rahab became a proselyte (Zeb. 116b and Mekh. Tractate Amalek 3, Vol. 2, p. 164). Her seeking forgiveness was a result of her having saved the spies by lowering them through her window (Zeb. 116b). Her praises were sung when she was called a proselyte (Ex. R. 27,4; Song of Songs R. 1,63 and 4,2; Eccl. R. 8,13), and a righteous person (Num. R. 8,9; and Eccl. R. 5,14). The reasons for her having become a believer were because she saw God's miracles (Ex. R. 27,4) and because of Joshua. The latter argument meant she was not chosen by God to become a proselyte; rather another person influenced her (Eccl. R. 8,13). Rahab had strong faith in God (Mekh. Tractate Shirata 9, Vol. 2, p. 74 and Mekh. Tractate Amalek 3, Vol. 2, pp. 163 and 176). In her perception, she placed God in the heaven and on earth (Deut. R. 2,28). There was also praise



for Rahab who turned from being a prostitute to a believer so God did favor her with descendants who included prophets and righteous men (P. R. 40,3/4, Vol. 2, p. 706). Eight prophets, who were also priests, descended from Rahab. The prophetess Huldah was descended from Joshua and Rahab, who married following Rahab's conversion to Judaism (Meg. 14b). Jeremiah was also of her lineage (P. R. K. 13,5, p. 256).

A number of commentators wrote how she became a convert, the key issue being whether or not she converted on her own recognizance: she heard about the Israelites and their God, came, and cleaved as a proselyte (Ex. R. 27,4). She drew near but was not chosen (Num. R. 3,2). Rabbi Isaac stated Rahab was an example of vanity because she did not become a proselyte on her own; rather Joshua caused her to become converted, and R. Aḥa said it was not vanity (Eccl. R. 8,13). Finally, Rahab repented, as a result of which her descendants included seven kings and eight prophets. "She was called Rahab...because her merit in repentance was so substantial (rehobah)" (T. E. 37, p. 509).

An early comment, citing proof texts from the Book of Joshua about Rahab's actions and contrasting them with Israel's actions, offered a unique interpretation about Rahab and concluded: "You find that all those words of Scripture which are used in tribute to Rahab contain a reproach to Israel" (P. R. K. 13,4, p. 255). God's favor was bestowed upon her because she had the foreknowledge the spies would have to hide for three days; she knew the time because she saw the Divine Spirit

(Ruth R. 2,1 and Sifre Devarim 24<sup>1</sup>).

## 2. Rahab's heroism

Rahab's heroism was twofold, saving both the spies and her family. For having allowed the spies to enter her home and rescuing them, God rewarded her, blessing her with special descendants, daughters who married into the priesthood and whose sons served in the Temple and blessed Israel (Num. R. 8,9).

Rahab saved not just her own immediate family, but those related in an extended familial pattern (Ruth R. 2,1; Eccl. R. 5,4). She exhibited an act of lovingkindness in having saved the spies and her family, and saved the spies without thought of recompense. However, when she realized that, by saving the spies she had saved their fathers' house, she asked for her father's house to be safeguarded likewise. This reciprocal arrangement assured the lineage of her father's house (Radak).

Post-Talmudic commentators gave insight into Rahab's actions in a verse by verse pattern, some verses eliciting varying opinions. Rahab hid the spies two times. Initially, she hid them (va-titzpeno) (2:4) in a place where they would be safe from searchers, and later, she hid them (va-titmeneim) (2:6) by covering them (Malbim). Altschuler (M. D.) had a different interpretation showing how careful Rahab was in protecting the spies. In the first instance (2:4), she hid each man in a special place because it was easier to hide them singly. The second time (2:6), she hid them in a

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<sup>1</sup> Malbim Bamidbar. Wilno: Romm, 1922.

better location.

### 3. Rahab's request to save her family

In asking that her family be rescued, Rahab asked for a sign of truth from the spies to enable her to trust their word. The sign agreed upon would indicate her life would be spared (Rashi 2:12). She asked for a sign so as not to be deceived (Radak). Radak, Ralbag, Altschuler (M. D.), and Malbim also wrote about Rahab's deed of exceptional kindness to the spies which would later recompense her by saving her father's house. Abravanel commented she asked for her family to be saved, meaning her father, mother, and siblings (Josh. 2:13) because, being a harlot, she had no spouse or children. In interpreting the same verse, it was averred that, when Rahab asked for their lives to be saved, she was implying a spiritual salvation and the thought of becoming a proselyte (Malbim).

Commentaries on verse 2:21 explained Rahab's thought processes as she worked out her plans with the spies. One opinion was that she placed the scarlet thread in the window right after the spies left. In order for her not to call attention to herself when the victors would return, and neighbors think she was signalling to the enemy, she put the thread in her window immediately and left it there (Abravanel and Malbim). The second view was that she put the scarlet thread in the window at a later time when Israel came to conquer (Radak and Altschuler M. D.).

#### 4. General Observations about Rahab in Rabbinic Literature

Rahab was seen as a woman of extraordinary beauty, exuding lust. Her profession (zonah) was explained as a duality in an attempt by exegetes to present a more pristine image, that is, they tempered her role as immoral harlot with her being an innkeeper. The combination of the two aspects would thereby lessen or soften the negative "harlot" interpretation.

Biblical interpreters seemed to have held Rahab in esteem for the part she played in connection with the Israelite spies. Not only was she protected by the exegetes in connection with her "profession," but she was credited with a revered lineage. For her part in saving the two spies, and for her faith in God, she was rewarded with marriage to Joshua and illustrious descendants. She had shown protectiveness and lovingkindness in having safeguarded the spies with no initial thought of recompense, and for saving her family as well. She was extolled as a proselyte and may even have had communication with God, enabling her to know how long it would take before the spies would return with their nation to conquer her people.

#### C. Rahab in Jewish Educational Materials

Rahab's story is exciting for young girls and boys to learn. The tale was action packed, suspenseful, and fast paced; the hiding of two spies, the deception of the king's soldiers, the promise, escape, and eventual rescue mission are told tersely and exhilaratingly and have great appeal to children who are captivated by her bravery

and heroism.

### 1. The character of Rahab

Introducing the character of Rahab to young children presents a problem to educators who must translate the word zonah. Bible commentators interpreted the word to mean either prostitute or innkeeper; the educational books seem to skirt the issue and concentrate on what they perceive were Rahab's personality traits. She was called "a kindly woman who ran an inn."<sup>3</sup> The spies "stopped at an inn, owned by a kind woman named Rahab."<sup>4</sup> The students learn about "Rahab, a woman of Jericho, and Rahab gave them a place to sleep."<sup>5</sup> The trait of kindness was further amplified by her being referred to as "a very kind and friendly woman."<sup>6</sup> She was also spoken of as a woman who "can be trusted."<sup>7</sup> Another book of tales said: "A woman by the name of Rahab owned the inn. She gave them food and drink."<sup>8</sup> The

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<sup>3</sup> S. Skulsky, trans by I. M. Lask, Legends of Joshua. Retold for Jewish Youth (New York: Shulsinger Brothers, 1961) p. 39.

<sup>4</sup> Ruth Samuels, Bible Stories for Jewish Children from Joshua to Queen Esther (New York: Ktav, 1973) p. 4 and Samuels, Prophets, Writings and You, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Shirley Newman, A Child's Introduction to the Early Prophets (New York: Behrman, 1985) p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> David Daniel, The Jewish Beginning from Joshua to Judah Maccabee. Part 2 (New York: Ktav, 1971) pp. 11-12.

<sup>7</sup> Christine L. Benagh, Joshua and the Battle of Jericho (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986) p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> Lenore Cohen, Bible Tales for Very Young Children. Book 2 (New York: UAHC, 1936) p. 13.

spies gratefulness for Rahab's kindness was also recognized.<sup>9</sup> Another text book containing the Bible text, included commentaries by Rashi and Altschuler. Student learned Rahab was an innkeeper (Rashi) and sold food (Rashi and Altschuler M. Z.).<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Rahab's heroism

The primary focus both in text explanations and workbook exercises was the elucidation of Rahab's relationship with the spies. In one exercise, a question was posed: why did the spies go to gather news at Rahab's house rather than in the center of the town, the gate of the town, or on the streets?<sup>11</sup> I believe the answer to this question could involve discussion of the sociology of the town and society in which Rahab lived and also the position of a woman innkeeper. Were only women innkeepers? What power might Rahab have possessed considering the king's soldiers came quickly to the inn searching for the spies? What role did the inn, in fact, play in the life of the town? One other biblical reference to beit zonah, found in Jeremiah 5:7, could be referred to as clearly alluding to a harlot's house where prostitution is committed.

The hiding of the spies and their subsequent escape with her aid was a suspenseful part of Rahab's story. In one workbook, thirteen pages were devoted to

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<sup>9</sup> Samuels, Prophets, Writings, and You, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> David M. Harduf, Nevi'im U-ketuvim. Sefer Yehoshua Le-talmud Torah (Union City, New Jersey: Gross Bros., 1982) pp. 4-5.

<sup>11</sup> Yona Zielberman and Dalia Korach-Seger, p. 21.

an examination of Rahab's narrative. There were many questions about her abetting the spies: her words to the king's messengers and why she deceived them, how she hid them, and what the danger was she encountered in her home. Thought exercises included writing a paragraph about a punishment the king would give to Rahab for having disobeyed him and drawing a picture of Rahab and the spies.<sup>12</sup> Pollack asked two salient questions: 1. "what did Rahab do to save the spies from death?" and 2. why did Rahab save the spies from death?"<sup>13</sup>

Insight into Rahab's character was seen in an introduction to a composition students were to write where it said she was prepared to sacrifice her own life in order to save the spies. The children of Israel recognized her goodness, and saved her and her family when they became the conquering nation.<sup>14</sup> Other questions in this same book related to how Rahab helped the spies escape, that is, her request to them, and her need to be given a sign they would be truthful with her. Attention was focused on Rahab's belief in the God of Israel, and a question was raised about how the spies felt when they heard Rahab's words.<sup>15</sup>

In a "who am I" exercise, students must identify the comment "I hid the

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<sup>12</sup> Shazar Yonay and Rina Yonay, Sefer Yehoshua (New York: Shai, 1989) pp. 22-34.

<sup>13</sup> Y. C. Pollack, Nevi'im Rishonim La-talmidim. Yehoshua (New York: Hebrew Publishing, 1934) p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> Chaim D. Shevell, Joshua. Workbook (New York: Jewish Education Committee, 1953) p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> Yonay and Yonay, Yehoshua, p. 28.

spies."<sup>16</sup> In helping the students interpret how Rahab hid the spies and helped them escape, there were both exercises and drawings. Rahab was described as having lied to the two soldiers and hidden "the two spies under the bundles of flax..."<sup>17</sup> The examination of this vignette could engender valuable exchange regarding the kinds of lies people tell in differing circumstances, and asking the students if lying is ever justified. When the king's soldiers demanded she give the spies to them, "Rahab did not do what the king wanted."<sup>18</sup> She dissembled, saying the spies did not even stay at her inn, but had left the city at nightfall. She then hid them under a covering of flax on her roof. Another version of this scene was Rahab, when the soldiers came to her inn, telling the spies quickly to "climb up to her roof and hide under the stalks of flax."<sup>19</sup> An illustration of the roof scene appeared in this same text showing Rahab, hair covered, pointing to where the spies might have escaped. She holds flax in hand, presumably with which to cover them.

Another book, presenting the Bible text and Rashi, had questions and exercises for the student to complete. The prepared summary highlighted Rahab's saving the spies, her request of them, and their plan to save her. In the lesson, pupils were asked what Rahab told the spies, and what she did to save their lives. Thought questions were why did she safeguard them, and why the spies commanded Rahab

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<sup>16</sup> Tamar Fish, Hufshah Ne'imah. Workbook 4 (Jerusalem: S. Zak, 1975) p. 6.

<sup>17</sup> Samuels, Prophets, p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> Newman, A Child's Introduction...Early Prophets, p. 13.

<sup>19</sup> Daniel, p. 12.



to gather her family at her house?<sup>20</sup>

Grishaver<sup>21</sup> asked students to pretend they were interviewing Rahab and to complete the blanks or circle answers Rahab would have given. The responses emphasized where Rahab's house was located, her motive for helping the spies, how she helped them, what deal she made with them, and what her future plans were after the destruction of Jericho. While some of the multiple choices were straightforward answers, others involved the pupils thinking about Rahab's position. She was spoken of as being "one of many non-Jews in the Bible";<sup>22</sup> others were listed and students were asked to "describe how each of these people treated the Jews."<sup>23</sup>

Many drawings of Rahab appeared in educational materials. One workbook had three illustrations of her. In each she differed physically in terms of her attractiveness and hair color, thereby causing confusion to pupils. In the first drawing, she was blonde-haired and pretty. Dressed in a long dress with short sleeves, matching trim on sleeve and headband, and wearing bracelets on her arms, she was seen saying good-bye to the two spies.<sup>24</sup> The second depiction showed an unattractive, dark-haired Rahab, covering the spies with flax. Her long dress had

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<sup>20</sup> Pollack, Nevi'im Rishonim..., p. 14.

<sup>21</sup> Joel L. Grishaver, Bible People Book 3 (Prophets and Writings) (Denver: Alternatives in Religious Education, 1982) pp. 12-13.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>24</sup> Yonay and Yonay, Yehoshua, p. 26.

capped sleeves, her neck was adorned with beads, and her hair was uncovered except for a beaded headband.<sup>25</sup> In the third drawing, her visage was identical to the first of these drawings; however she was seen here from the waist up in her window, with a rope in her hand.<sup>26</sup> Two additional drawings mirrored this third scene. Both showed Rahab peering through her window, watching the spies lowering themselves down from the roof.<sup>27</sup> In the Yonay text a blatant disparity existed between the two successive presentations. It would be difficult to rationalize to the pupils what the authors had in mind by allowing such differences to be included within one text. In the Samuels' texts also, where the author was the same in each book, it was curious that such an incongruity existed.

Cohen depicted the two spies rushing up the stairs as Rahab opened the door for the king's soldier. She was ornately clothed: fancy head covering, wide decorative fringed sash/belt, sandals, an embellished covering over her ears, and jewelry including bracelets, a necklace, and a ring. The caption under the drawing read: "Run upstairs to the roof,' Rahab quickly whispered."<sup>28</sup>

Fish showed a young, pretty Rahab, seen in a side view, looking at the two spies she has hidden. A ladder was seen indicating they were on the roof. Rahab

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>27</sup> Samuels, Bible Stories, p. 5 and Samuels, Prophets, p. 5.

<sup>28</sup> Cohen, p. 15.

was modestly dressed with a long shawl covering her long hair.<sup>29</sup> Grishaver included a full page illustration showing Rahab having tied a red cord from her window, saying: "For we have heard how the Lord dried up the waters of the Sea of Reeds for you when you left Egypt, and what you did to the two Amorite kings..."<sup>30</sup>

A series of drawings was seen in another book.<sup>31</sup> Rahab was first seen hiding a man on the roof of her house. Only her arm was visible as she pulled a blanket over the man. The area on which she stood was one of many such roof areas. While seen from the rear, her head was covered by a cape reaching almost to her knees and she wore a floor length dress. The next two drawings showed her in a situation of protecting the hidden spies. However, in the first depiction, she had a lovely visage; in the second, she was quite unattractively portrayed as she told the king's messengers she did not know of the spies whereabouts. The final of these pages had four scenes: 1. Rahab returning to the roof of her home. Two and 3 showed her directing the spies to escape, and 4 depicted her lowering the spies down a rope from a mountainside. This was a unique picture in that Rahab was seen helping them down a mountain, rather than lowering them down a rope from a window. The text for this illustration described her home in the wall, but the picture did not seem in concert with the text.

To summarize: several portrayals have been found showing Rahab helping the

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<sup>29</sup> Fish, Hufshah Ne'imah Workbook 4, p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> Grishaver, Bible People Book 3, p. 11.

<sup>31</sup> Uriel Okef, Ha-Tanakh Sheli Be-temunot. Yehoshua Kovesh Yeriho, Vol. 13 (Ramat Gan: Revivim, no date) pp. 6-8.

spies. It is interesting to see, from her visage and clothing, how her age has been interpreted differently. In one sequence, she began as blonde, beautiful, and young, and then changed to an older, far less attractive woman. Other pictures portrayed her as older and not particularly pleasant looking.

### 3. Rahab's request

In one Hebrew text, a chapter title was the covenant or pact between the spies and Rahab. She was presented as a heroine in five terse sentences. A completion exercise asked what the spies had promised to do for her.<sup>32</sup> Another source said that when the spies asked how they could reciprocate for Rahab, she responded: "If you come and conquer our city, I beg of you to spare my family and me, and let this house stand."<sup>33</sup> The red cord, to be placed in the window of her home, was recognized as a sign of her being saved "when the Children of Israel march into Jericho..."<sup>34</sup> While God's role in leading the spies to Rahab's inn was acknowledged by them, the spies also said: "If it had not been for that woman's kindness we would both be dead now."<sup>35</sup>

A section of workbook exercises was devoted to the pact between Rahab and the spies. Details highlighted what she must do to have the pact effectuated: students

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<sup>32</sup> Zielberman and Korach-Seger, p. 21.

<sup>33</sup> Daniel, p. 12.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

had to complete two squares by writing what Rahab and the spies had done, that is, balancing their reciprocal good deeds. Students were asked how they knew Rahab was a wise woman, and had to respond when asked who saved Rahab and her family, and why she was saved. A dialogue was to be written between Rahab and the spies after they saved her.<sup>36</sup> After having been saved along with her family, Rahab's fate was spoken about, and it was avowed "they joined the Tribes of Israel."<sup>37</sup> A question was posed querying what the spies did following the fall of the wall.<sup>38</sup> The final page of another book stated God spared Rahab and her family to reward her for her good help.<sup>39</sup>

A unique and very modern pictorial adaptation of Rahab's story presented her helping a young girl and boy on an archaeological dig. Depicted as a flirt, she tried to get information in order to assist the young people. "She strolled along the top of the walls twirling her bright scarf...and approached a sentry...She flashed a friendly smile...She gave a playful flick with the end of her kerchief...Rahab stayed to flirt a while longer."<sup>40</sup> Could this image be construed as resembling the harlot interpretation of zonah?

Artistic interpretations of Rahab were centered primarily on Rahab at her

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<sup>36</sup> Yonay and Yonay, Yehoshua, pp. 30-32.

<sup>37</sup> Skulsky, p. 47.

<sup>38</sup> Pollack, p. 29.

<sup>39</sup> Okef, Vol. 13, p. 47.

<sup>40</sup> Benagh, p. 28.

window as the spies escaped. Only one source included a rendering of her at the time she and her family were saved.<sup>41</sup> In the top drawing, Rahab and twenty women, her mother, and her sister were seen leaving a door in the wall. Presumably it was the sister who had no head covering. Age cannot be ascertained from the portrayal. Rahab, whose arm was held by one of the rescuing men, wore a sleeveless, draped dress. In the next picture, she was showing the red cord to Joshua.

#### 4. General Observations about Rahab in Jewish Educational Materials

Students learned that Rahab ran an inn and dispensed food and drink. The semantic range of the word zonah was absent from the materials; rather her personality characteristics were inferred from her actions and her suspenseful relationship with the spies, namely, how she hid them and how they reciprocated by saving her family. Her personal risk in saving the spies was appreciable. She and her family were saved because of her goodness. Rahab was lauded as a heroine and praised by the spies who recognized that her bravery and courage saved their lives.

No clear visual image emerged from the drawings of Rahab because she was not presented in a uniform way. Discrepancies in her appearance and her age were evident. The illustrations stressed her concealing and saving the spies, and her placing the rope in her window.

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<sup>41</sup> Okef, Vol. 13, p. 26.

#### D. Conclusions

The portrait culled from Jewish interpreters mirrored the Hebrew Scriptures and glorified Rahab for her bravery. She was described as a heroine who showed kindness without thought of gain, and saved not only her own family from a warring nation, but also two members of the hostile Israelites.

Rabbinic literature presented a balanced understanding of her, taking into consideration the multiple definitions of zonah and recognizing the role she played with both negative and euphemistic explanations. Only the Babylonian Talmud expanded on a theme of lust which arose because of her beauty. She was lauded in midrashim for having become a proselyte and praised because of her descendants.

The idea of Rahab's harlotry was downplayed and tempered with her being an innkeeper, albeit one who might dispense sexual favors. She was praised for her role in hiding the spies twice and later helping them escape to safety. The expedient and cautious manner in which she hid them occasioned favorable comments, as well as her care in placing the scarlet thread out of her window. It became almost idyllic to speculate on her having become a proselyte, and even the wife of Joshua, thereby becoming the ancestress of prophets. To have praised her simply for her acts of bravery might have been sufficient; to have conjectured she became a proselyte added to her stature as an ideal person. To have accorded all of these characteristics and qualities to a non-Israelite female makes Rahab a biblical role model, a woman worthy of respect.

The educational resources presented a modified approach when depicting her,

keeping in mind that young children might need a measure of protection when Rahab was described. The materials avoided any reference to the translation of zonah as prostitute and defined the word as a seller of food. In other words, the spies went to her to get food, and to be among others from whom they might learn if the men in Jericho were afraid of the Israelites. Her request of the spies to reciprocate and save her family was emphasized.

A summary of Rahab's personality may be seen in the following quote: "When the spies left her, they told her how she would be safe from the Israelite soldiers when they would later march into Jericho. They said: 'they will know that in this house lives a brave woman who helped Israel.'"<sup>42</sup> On the basis of the educational materials, students will glean a narrower view of her than was presented in the Bible and in Jewish interpretation. Nevertheless, her heroism and self-sacrifice will surface and be remembered.

Perhaps more significance could have been laid on a non-peshat issue which is less likely to be presented in educational books, namely, Rahab's conversion and her subsequent lineage. Such information would reinforce a positive picture of her. Commentators stressed names of her descendants, and it would be fruitful for this knowledge to be imparted to children. Not only did she successfully save her family, but she counted as her descendants many important individuals in Israel's history.

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<sup>42</sup> Samuels, Bible Stories..., p. 4.



## Chapter 6

### Deborah

#### A. Deborah in the Bible

The Book of Judges contains two unique female portraits, the first of a married woman, the second of a young, virgin daughter. The first had a personal name, the latter did not. The dissimilarities are noted because of variations they presented to the biblical sketches. These females are Deborah and Jephthah's daughter.

##### 1. The character of Deborah

The introduction of Deborah immediately depicted her in a unique way. Usually, a biblical female was presented in her relationship with an important male figure in her life, as for example, Sarah, Abraham's wife, or Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron. Deborah, however, was first characterized as a prophetess and only subsequently her position as Lappidoth's wife was noted (Jud. 4:4). This sequence recognized her distinctive personal achievement before her marital status, setting the stage for her to act independently of her spouse and placing her apart from other women of her day.

Deborah was a prophetess who also judged Israel (4:4). When she sat and judged, she did so out-of-doors under a palm tree (4:5). The tree under which she sat, called the palm of Deborah, would likely have been in a prominent location, and designating where she could be found.

In comparing Deborah with the foregoing biblical females in this study, she was a prophetess as was Miriam, a wife as were Sarah, Leah, and Rachel, and a woman of independent action as was Rahab. While married women prior to Deborah acted alone, their deeds related to their husband. Sarah's treatment of Hagar was connected to her barrenness, and Rebekah's coercing Jacob to impersonate his brother related to Isaac's legacy. Rachel's stealing of the teraphim was a singular event of a married woman in the Pentateuch. Actually, Deborah was the first post-Pentateuch Israelite woman who, on a sustained basis, comported herself autonomously from her husband, Lappidoth, who was cited only once, when she was introduced. Nothing was known about her relationship with him nor whether she bore children or raised a family. However, the relationship between them may be inferred from the meanings of their names. Deborah means "bee" and Lappidoth means "torch" or "flame." Perhaps, being incisive and sharp, as well as inciting and fiery, she embodied both the characteristics of herself and her husband. She differed from Miriam the prophetess in that her prophesying was combined with being a judge. Also, Deborah's ventures had nothing to do with her spouse. She seemed responsible to God whose Name she used as propelling her advice giving and ability to prophesy.

## 2. Deborah the warrior

Deborah's fame and influence spread to her concern with the warriors of her people. In commanding a leader named Barak to go into battle as God had instructed him to do, the leader responded he could not fight without Deborah's presence. She agreed to accompany him, stating, in her prophetic wisdom, a woman would be victorious in slaying the enemy (4:6-9).

## 3. Deborah's Song

When a woman named Jael killed Barak's enemy, Deborah and Barak sang a victory song (5:1-31). This was the second song sung by a woman in Scripture, the first one having been sung by Miriam. Deborah's Song is lengthy, including praise to God, accolades to Jael for her brave action in having murdered Sisera, and a reference to herself as a mother in Israel (5:7).

A most poignant vignette was painted at the conclusion of Deborah's Song (5:28-30). She spoke vividly of Sisera's mother who was at home staring out through the window awaiting the arrival of her son, visualizing his popularity and the spoils of battle that would be his. While concerned he seemed long in reaching home, she contented herself with her son's having succeeded in battle. The discrepancy between the fact that Sisera was already killed and his mother's longing for him made Deborah's words all the more piercing and moving. The intimacy of the portrait in the closing verses of Deborah's Song, made the reader readily accept the female authorship of this song. It seems fully likely the ideas and emotions expressed were

those of a woman, and Deborah would have been able to share her feelings this way.

## B. Deborah in Jewish Interpretation

### 1. The character of Deborah

Deborah emerged as a fascinating and striking woman in the works examined. In the Babylonian Talmud, several references described her personality. She was portrayed as a woman exhibiting modesty by meeting those whom she judged out-of-doors under the Deborah palm. Her modesty was evident on two accounts. First, according to Rabbi Simeon b. Abishalom, she sat under the tree in public view, thereby averting the likelihood gossip would ensue were she to meet with men inside her home. Also, the tree under which she sat was sparsely covered with leaves, keeping her highly noticeable as she judged. This again related to her not meeting alone in doors with men coming for judgment (Meg. 14a). "She instructed multitudes in Torah [out-of-doors] knowing it is not proper for a woman to be alone in a house with a man" (T. E. p. 156). Altschuler (M. D.) speculated further she was always found under the particular tree. I assume the public nature of her location added to her quality of modesty, and men could come to her for judgment and leave with no sense of shame or secrecy. This would also emphasize the legitimization of her being a judge, affirming there was nothing to hide in having a female in this position.

Because of the singular nature of Deborah's role as a female judge, the possibility of whether a woman could in fact have been a judge was questioned in a footnote to Megillah 14a: "Perhaps she was only instructing the nation in the laws of

the Torah, not actually adjudicating disputes. Or, perhaps, her case was an exception, for the people had accepted her as a judge over them, since they perceived that the Divine Presence rested upon her."<sup>1</sup>

Targum Jonathan expanded on the Bible, describing her wealth and property. She owned palm trees in Jericho, gardens in Ramah, olive trees in the valley, troughs in Bethel, and white dust in the mountain (4:5). A profile emerged of a rich city woman who could judge fairly because she had no reason to covet any gains. A talmudic statement, made independently of any reference to Deborah, asserted every prophet possessed wealth, and only a rich person could receive the Divine Presence. A connection was made between Deborah the prophetess who possessed wealth and therefore had no need for personal gain in her judgments and her being the recipient of the Holy Spirit (Ned. 38a; T. E. pp. 152-153). She was also counted among the "disciples of the wise" (T. E. p. 156).

Radak said that when Deborah was called a prophetess it meant she prophesied for Israel about the time in which she was living; her prophesy was not about the future. Ralbag had an unusual comment about Deborah's prophesying by stating when she had a prophesy, one could see a fire in that place (as seen in the case of Moses in Ex. 34:29-30). I wonder if this comment is based on Deborah's being 'eishet Lappidoth (Jud. 4:4). Through her judging, she brought the people back from their evil ways to God.

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<sup>1</sup> Talmud Bavli. Tractate Megillah, edited by Hersch Goldwurm (New York: Mesorah, 1991) section 14a, footnote 46.

Comments on Deborah's relationship with her husband Lappidoth were based on the meaning of his name, i. e., flames. She made wicks for the sanctuary on his behalf (Meg. 14a). Because her husband was illiterate and unable to engage in Torah study, she suggested he make wicks for the Temple at Shiloh thereby gaining merit because those who studied could do so by means of the light provided by his wicks. And he did so, successfully. For presenting the idea to him, God rewarded her through her descendants. God said to her "I will enhance you in Israel and in Judah both--indeed throughout Israel's Twelve Tribes" (T. E. p. 153). Furthermore, she was credited not only with Lappidoth's finding a position of worth during his lifetime, but also of his having a place in the world-to-come (*ibid.* p. 153).

Further favorable comments were offered about Deborah and Lappidoth by post-talmudic exegetes: Ralbag described her as an energetic woman, her vigor being akin to a torch. Abravanel spoke of two dimensions of Deborah, first, as a woman of prophesy and second, as a valorous woman when, as Lappidoth's wife, she prepared torches. Altschuler (M. D.) labelled her a woman of valor, industrious in making the receptacle which held the torch.

Not all exegetical comments were complimentary. R. Nahman called Deborah haughty because she sent for Barak to come to her rather than her going to him (Meg. 14a). Steinsaltz (20th century, Israel) followed Rashi's interpretation of the word and stated she was not haughty but rather was a woman who "stressed her own

importance."<sup>2</sup> Either word connoted a negative quality, a trait which was disapproving, not to be emulated. The proof text was Judges 4:6, describing how Deborah summoned Barak to her rather than having gone to him herself. This was also tied up with the characteristic of pride.

Another negative trait she possessed, alleged by Rab Judah in Rab's name, was boastfulness. The Talmud (Pes. 66b) stated that when a prophet was boastful, the individual lost the ability to prophesy. The proof of Deborah's vaingloriousness was explained in the following way: Deborah exhibited boastfulness when she called herself a mother in Israel (Jud. 5:7). As a result of self-praise, the Divine Spirit left her during her Song, and she lost her gift of prophesy which had to be reawakened subsequently (*ibid.* 5:12). The reference to her uttering a song really meant her ability to give prophesy (Pes. 66b). One other quality spoken of in the Talmud (Meg. 14b) involved a reference to Deborah's name which was said to be repulsive. Deborah means "bee" and was considered to be an unflattering name.

The Bible's image of Deborah as a mother was missing in Targum Jonathan (5:7). That this Targum had Deborah speaking of her own prophetic power, rather than portraying her as a maternal figure, is noteworthy: "I Deborah--I was commissioned to prophesy in the midst of the house of Israel."<sup>3</sup> The change in pronoun from the Bible "you" to the targumic "I" was significant as Deborah asserted

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<sup>2</sup> Adin Steinsaltz, Biblical Images. Men and Women of the Book, trans. by Yehuda Hanegbi and Yehudit Keshet (USA: Basic Books, 1984) p. 102.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel J. Harrington and Anthony J. Saldarini, trans., The Aramaic Bible. Vol. 10. Targum Jonathan of the Former Prophets (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1987) p. 67.

she was directed to prophesy. A grammatical enigma exists with the word saqamti since it could mean "I" or "you."<sup>4</sup>

Ralbag averred Deborah spoke of herself as a leader. Abravanel (5:7) focused on the mother image and said Deborah worked to bring salvation to Israel, as a mother who had pity on her children. Altschuler (M. D. 5:7) presented another impression of Deborah positing she spoke in the first person and said her victory would have two consequences. The first was foreign nations would tremble before God, and the second was that Israel would be able to live securely in the unwallled cities, as they had done before.

## 2. Deborah the warrior

In affirming Deborah's positive role in and influence on the lives of her people, the Babylonian Talmud recognized that the Holy Spirit favored her when she was at war with Sisera, explaining this as a response to her having uttered a Hallel prayer. The Holy Spirit's response happened only during unique moments of fear in the history of the Israelites. Another parallel moment occurred when Esther and Mordecai recited the hallel as they were confronted by Haman (Pes. 117a). Another elaboration on the role of God in Deborah's life, described Deborah and Barak as "hungry for the word of God" (P. R. 18,3, Vol. 1, p. 385) and said that Esther and Mordecai had been in the same position (*ibid.* p. 385). Deborah and Barak "took Sisera's power away not with weapons nor with a shield, but with prayer and

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Exodus 2:10 for the word mišituhu which is usually translated "I drew him out."



supplication to the Lord" (*ibid.* p. 385, and P. R. K. 8,2, pp. 158-159).

Radak (4:9) postulated she went with Barak, not for his glory but for hers, for she had told him the people would be saved by God through herself; the victory would be hers. Malbim (4:9) avowed Deborah went to battle, notwithstanding her telling Barak a woman would kill Sisera. Deborah performed a miracle when she and Barak worked together (Mekh. Tractate Beshallah 6,25, Vol. 1, p. 234).

### 3. Deborah's Song

There were ten songs in Scripture, one of which belonged to Deborah and Barak (Mekh. Tractate Shirata 1, Vol 2, p. 2). In commenting on Judges 5:3, an interesting difference appeared between the Bible text and Targum Jonathan. The Bible stated Deborah and Barak **sang**; Targum Jonathan said they gave **praise**. To emphasize the word sang, the Bible uses two different verbs, i. e., ashirah and azamer. In Targum Jonathan, Deborah spoke, prophesying before God: shabhah, modah, and mevarekhah, that is, she sang, gave thanksgiving, and blessed the God of Israel (Jud. 5:3). This translation was an amplification of the Bible, broadening her role, her importance, and the magnitude of her position. Whereas the Bible stressed the singing aspect, as observed above, the Targum emphasized these various other verbs.

Genesis Rabbah (40,4) lauded Deborah as being more important than Barak, the justification for this supposition being that her name was cited first in the introduction of the song (Jud. 5:1). Ecclesiastes Rabbah (3,17) asserted Deborah

effected one of six miracles, night turning into day, which transpired when the battle against and death of Sisera occurred. Radak said her singing was the essence as deduced from Numbers 12:1 where Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses, and Miriam was punished more severely because her name was mentioned first.

Because Deborah's name was mentioned first in the song's introduction, it was conjectured she wrote this ode, Barak being of secondary importance. He was to agree to join her in a victory song, and she would join him in battle. He was to understand the song would not be his solo; rather, she would sing first and he would join her (Gen. R. 40,4).

#### 4. General Observations about Deborah in Rabbinic Literature

Targum Jonathan depicted her as a woman who was a propertied landowner, wealthy enough to judge fairly because personal gain was not necessary. A strong spiritual component surfaced in the targumic translation, stressing as well Deborah's prominence as a prophetess. What was omitted was the maternal image found in the Bible.

Deborah's image in the Babylonian Talmud imbued her with strengths and weaknesses, positive and negative character traits. Some comments questioned the possibility of a female being a judge and also defined Deborah's prophesy in a special way, namely, that she did not prophesy about the future but rather about the time in which she lived.

Unanimity was evident among the commentaries in respect to Deborah's key

role in the song of victory. Because her name was written first (Jud. 5:1), each commentator stated she was the primary figure of importance, Barak taking a lesser status. Even though Targum Jonathan and the Talmud presented differing verbs describing what Deborah did, her essential eminence was affirmed.

A modern accolade about Deborah sums up the positive aspects of her character and position: "Deborah is revealed as a great historical personality, much more than a local judge or leader...She fulfilled a role of great historical scope and, in so doing, not only justified her title of 'mother in Israel' but also the description of her age as the 'age of Deborah.'"<sup>5</sup>

In concluding this section about Deborah, an addendum is necessary to highlight the figure of Jael, the murderess of Sisera who opposed Barak. The Babylonian Talmud remarked strongly about her as she was lauded for having committed murder: her sin was considered worthy of merit because she did it with a positive intent (Hor. 10b and San. 105b). The Bible had called Jael a woman blessed above women in the tent (Jud. 5:24), those women understood by the Babylonian Talmud to refer to the four matriarchs. It seems to me the matriarchs are being used as a measure of comparison with Jael who superseded them. She demonstrated the stellar quality of blessedness, thereby ranking supreme in this quality. I deduce that Jael's greatness and her heroic actions should be heralded. Her presentation in the commentaries is deserving of study in order to discern whether rabbinic tradition through the centuries has followed a tradition of

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<sup>5</sup> Steinsaltz, p. 105.

praising her, or if there has been opposition to making her into a heroine.

### C. Deborah in Jewish Educational Materials

#### 1. The character of Deborah

Unique in her role as prophetess and judge, and participating on the battlefield, Deborah appeared in a number of texts and workbooks. The primary focus for the students' learning about her centered on her prophetic quality and her role as judge. The pupil learned she was "a very brave prophetess and judge...[who] used to sit under a palm tree near her home and sing about the glory of God and judge."<sup>6</sup> In a book of Bible tales, pupils learned that "there was a woman called Deborah, to whom the people went for help."<sup>7</sup> Her voice "was soft and low, and people found comfort in her words."<sup>8</sup>

In introducing Deborah, one author wrote: "One of the very best of the judges"<sup>9</sup> was a woman, and her name was Deborah. Her receiving people and judging their quarrels, while seated out of doors under "Deborah's Palm"<sup>10</sup> was compared to the manner in which Abraham sat at the opening of his tent. In coming to her for advice "all the people, even if they lived many, many miles away, knew that

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<sup>6</sup> Samuels, Bible Stories..., p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> Cohen, Bible Tales..., p. 36.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>9</sup> Addie Richman Altman, The Jewish Child's Bible Stories Told in Simple Language (New York: Bloch, 1952) p. 89.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

they could always find Deborah sitting there. They knew that Deborah was good and wise, and they knew whatever she told them to do, would be the right thing."<sup>11</sup>

In the same book, there was an illustration depicting Deborah in the foreground seated alone on a boulder with one bare tree behind her. Wearing a heavily draped dress and head covering, she was shielding her eyes with one hand as she stared into the distance to where her upraised arm and finger were pointing.<sup>12</sup> The darkness of her garment and her posture gave the prophetess a commanding appearance. Because no other figures were in the drawing, and the viewer's eyes were rivetted only on Deborah, she seemed to be a very authoritative person.

Fish<sup>13</sup> illustrated Deborah seated on the right side of the drawing. Two men stood before her; in the middle background many people stood--either listening to her judgment or awaiting their turn to go before her. She was young and pretty, wearing a long-sleeved, long dress, with sandals and a hair covering. Accompanying questions focused on her background.

"Deborah was a poor woman...She firmly believed in the one God..."<sup>14</sup> Also, she would "tell her people how to act. People came from all parts of the land. They told her their troubles. She gave them advice. Deborah taught them to trust in

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Fish, Hufshah Ne'imah, 4, p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> Cohen, Bible Tales..., p. 36.

God."<sup>15</sup> Judging in righteousness and wisdom, she taught the Hebrews to believe in God and observe the Torah commandments. "They brought her questions they could not answer and arguments they could not settle, and she tried to help them."<sup>16</sup> Rossel posits: "The Book of Judges tells the story of twelve leaders. Deborah was the only woman, but she was one of the three most important judges. The other two were Gideon and Samson. From first to last, the judges were favorites of the people, ruling because the people wanted them to rule."<sup>17</sup> A thought question was asked in a workbook: Imagine that two people come to Deborah with a serious problem and they asked her to judge.<sup>18</sup> The pupils were to respond. I feel in trying to solve such a question, the students would be able to explore, not only Deborah's role, but some issues within her society. The child's imagination could be tested as to the types of problems encountered in a long ago society, and begin to think about the responsibility going along with the role of judge and arbiter. A leap forward would then be to recognize how much more difficult it was for a female to be a judge than it was for a male. Deborah's strength and power could be assessed, as well as her quality of modesty.

In a fine workbook which incorporated maps, archaeological information, and

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<sup>15</sup> Samuels, Prophets, Writings and You..., p. 16.

<sup>16</sup> Newman, pp. 44-45.

<sup>17</sup> Seymour Rossel, A Child's Bible. Lessons from the Prophets and Writings (New York: Behrman, 1989) p. 34.

<sup>18</sup> Shahr Yonay and Rina Yonay, Sefer Shofetim (Brooklyn: Shai, 1989) p. 48.

geographical views, a lengthy section was devoted to Deborah.<sup>19</sup> While following the peshat in eliciting information about her, some excellent thought questions go beyond the Bible text and asked students "how is Deborah different from other prophets up until her time"<sup>20</sup> Students were to write a sentence about Deborah's qualities.<sup>21</sup>

Yonay and Yonay have included two different illustrations depicting Deborah as a judge.<sup>22</sup> The discrepancies between them provided the pupils with an opportunity to see, within one text, how art work is a medium of biblical interpretation. In the first of these drawings, there seemed to be twenty-one adult figures, five females and the rest men. The people were in groups, yet the viewer's eye focused on the center of the picture where Deborah was seated under a palm tree. Most of the figures were in the foreground, although several surrounded her and some were behind where she sat. Deborah was seen in a frontal position, swathed in a scooped-neck, voluminously draped dress reaching the ground. Her arms were bare to her elbows, her feet were bare, and her head was covered by a typical Middle Eastern drape of fabric which fell from the head piece down her back. She held a staff vertically in front of her, and an unfurled parchment hung off her lap. She was facing to her right with a stern or intent look, seemingly judging a case

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<sup>19</sup> Aviva Tirosh and Binah Talitman, 'Im Hashofetim u-Baladeihem. Workbook (Israel: Yavneh, 1990) pp. 22-35.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>22</sup> Yonay and Yonay, pp. 49 and 76.

involving a man in her line of vision. The other individuals in the artistic rendering were either paying heed to Deborah as she judged, or were otherwise engaged among themselves within their groups.

The second of the drawings, by Gustav Doré, included eleven men each of whom was facing Deborah seated on a pedestal in the center of the picture, with three slab steps below her. The men, off on either side, made the viewer's eyes focus immediately on her commanding appearance and position. She wore a long, flowing robe-like dress, a necklace of beads, a wide bracelet, and bead-like adornments on her head covering which flowed down past her shoulders. She gazed down at the nearest man on her right side, her right arm raised above her head, and her index finger pointing upward. The toes of her right foot peeked out from under her dress. Because of the vertical pull of her garments and her raised arm, it seemed as though Deborah might be standing, although the curve of her legs indicates she was in a sitting pose. A brightness of light surrounded her, bouncing off the wall behind her, lending a further aura to her importance. (Tirosh also included this painting.<sup>23</sup>)

In viewing art as biblical interpretation, it would surely be of value for students to compare and contrast the two pictures. In making the comparison between these two renderings, both drawings showed Deborah's prominence. Students should be encouraged to describe how Deborah was portrayed and recognize her authoritative stance. The power emanating from the art work was a forceful commentary on how this judge and leader was viewed by the artists.

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<sup>23</sup> Tirosh, p. 32.



Other available art works show students richness and variety: Persky<sup>24</sup> had a work showing Deborah seated beneath a palm tree, dressed severely all in black, looking at a man on his knees before her. He was clad all in white, his head encased in a nomad's type head cover. Eighteen other figures clad in black were in the background. To Deborah's right in the foreground, was a woman dressed in white who, along with the man who was kneeling, may be having a case judged by Deborah. One picture depicted a contemplative Deborah seated alone under the palm. Heavily draped and swathed in modest dress, she appeared to be more heavysset and older than in the other illustrations.<sup>25</sup>

Another picture found in a book of children's Bible lessons by Rossel,<sup>26</sup> was a horizontal two page drawing with half of the space devoted to scenery, including sparse trees and mountains, and spotlighted Deborah seated on a slab or stone next to a tree trunk, staring at a woman standing in front of her. Both have their feet planted on a long narrow rug covering one of the two pages. Two men, standing as sentries and holding a spear in their hand, were in the near distance. The standing figure with her profile showing, wore a long, dark skirt and a white, long-sleeved overblouse. Her hair seemed to be concealed beneath dark fabric. Deborah was seated on the right hand side of the drawing, draped in a long, dark dress, with her arms bare to her elbows. Her hair was covered in a severe fashion. As was her

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<sup>24</sup> Persky, Haver Le-Nevi'im, p. 20.

<sup>25</sup> Newman, A Child's Introduction...Early Prophets, p. 44.

<sup>26</sup> Rossel, A Child's Bible...Prophets and Writings, pp. 30-31.

guest, she was wearing sandals. Her hands rested gently in her lap and her face was contemplative as she looked at the woman standing before her. A tent was in the distance behind her. There was a serenity to this scene which was missing in the other art works.

In another source,<sup>27</sup> Deborah was portrayed as a prophetess who was a good and wise woman, honored by all the men, and judging in righteousness and wisdom. She taught the Hebrews to believe in God and guard the Torah's commandments. The additional speculation about the contents of her teaching might have made Deborah's life more relevant to young children.

In a story-workbook, Burstein<sup>28</sup> attempted to portray Deborah as a real life person by using familiar situations with which pupils were able to identify. At the outset, her sternness as a judge was contrasted with her warmth and softness as a grandmother. Obviously, the author had taken liberty with the Bible text by presenting Deborah in the latter role. Speaking in the language of children, this author continued: "Dvora the judge was tough. Nothing scared her, and she took no nonsense from anybody...except her six grandchildren."<sup>29</sup> In her actions with her grandchildren, she was pictured as a loving grandmother, busy with her family when she was not judging.

The following was a depiction of Deborah the judge in modern day language:

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<sup>27</sup> Elias Persky, Haver Le-Nevi'im Rishonim. Part I (New York: Ktav, 1967) pp. 18-19.

<sup>28</sup> Chaya M. Burstein, The Hebrew Prophets. A Story-Workbook (New York: UAHC, 1990) p. 18.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

Each day she sat under her palm tree on Mount Ephraim while thieves and other law breakers were brought before her to be judged. Sometimes quarrelling villagers came, shouting and shoving one another. Dvora listened closely to each person. When she had heard enough, she raised her hand and stared down at the arguer with her black brows drawn close over her piercing eyes. He gulped his final words and shrank down on his stool. Then, with a thump of her stick, Dvora announced her judgment."<sup>30</sup>

An illustration accompanied this material showing Dvora seated under a palm tree on a low stool, dressed modestly in a long dress with mid-arm length sleeves, head covered except in the front, and leaning on a stick with her two hands and her chin.<sup>31</sup>

The infusion of God's spirit into Deborah was implied in another source. After calling Deborah a prophetess, and affirming "all the people loved her,"<sup>32</sup> Rossel said: "The rabbis taught: It makes no difference if a person is a man or a woman--God's spirit enters the person who follows God's ways."<sup>33</sup> This idea followed a careful re-telling of the Bible and examined the lesson learned from Deborah's story.

In a chapter entitled "Deborah: The Woman Who Knew What God Would Do,"<sup>34</sup> she was described as "a brave and wise woman [who] grew to be more than

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Rossel, A Child's Bible...Prophets and Writings, p. 33.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Hannah Goodman, The Story of Prophecy (New York: Behrman, 1965) p. 47.

a judge: the time came when she was to speak for God."<sup>35</sup> Continuing with a spiritual motif, this book offered: "While Deborah taught no great new understandings, she was able to bring the Israelites a message from a source greater than herself. The mystic knowledge of what to do, and the strange ability to do it came to her. She, too, had that absolute assurance that inspires others to deeds of greatness."<sup>36</sup>

In vivid language, Deborah's encounter with the Divine was encapsulated: One night "she needed to walk on the mountain, to think and worry and talk to God. She had a decision to make--such an important decision, she could not make it by herself."<sup>37</sup> The struggle was described between the Israelites and the Canaanite king and Dvora's quandary as to how to guide her people. Her emotions were described as she stood on the mountain top, and cried out to God for guidance. "Out of the swirling wisps of fog she heard a voice."<sup>38</sup> Dvora returned home and told her husband "God spoke to me!"<sup>39</sup>

Two additional arresting ideas were presented about Deborah. One asserted that, while the reader knew she was a judge and prophetess, "we know nothing of her

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>37</sup> Burstein, p. 19.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

Judgments."<sup>40</sup> Also of note is a lesson we can glean from her, namely, "that a woman could fulfill total leadership roles within the Jewish community."<sup>41</sup>

## 2. Deborah the warrior

Various exercises appeared in a student workbook demonstrating the range of activities in which Deborah engaged, ranging from military exploits to singing the victory song. A strong emphasis on the warrior aspect was found in Yonay and Yonay. Deborah was cited, along with Barak, regarding military exploits and maneuvers. The war was referred to as the war of Deborah and Barak.<sup>42</sup> Goodman posited when she commanded Barak to go to war "Deborah must have been very sure of the outcome, to be willing to send the poorly-armed Israelites against the united armies of all Canaan. And the people must have sensed something mighty behind her. Barak would go to battle only if she went with him, and she was able to revive the old courage and faith of the Israelites."<sup>43</sup>

Cohen also wrote about Deborah and her relationship with Barak, asserting that, after advising Barak about what he should do, and after his responding that he would only go if she did also, "she cried in anger.: 'Aren't you ashamed to have a woman lead the men to war? Do you want it said that women have more courage

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<sup>40</sup> Joel Grishaver, Teacher Guide. Bible People. Book 3. (Prophets and Writing) (Denver: Alternatives in Religious Education, Inc., 1982) p. 13.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>42</sup> Yonay and Yonay, Shofetim, p. 58.

<sup>43</sup> Goodman, p. 48.

than men?"<sup>44</sup> By Deborah going to war herself, "no man refused for fear the people would say his courage was less than that of a woman."<sup>45</sup> This book presented the story in a manner in which it appeared as if Barak and his men killed or defeated Sisera. There was no mention of Jael. An illustration was included showing a happy Deborah whose head was superimposed in a circle (almost halo-like) clashing a set of cymbals.<sup>46</sup> She looked similar to the picture of Rahab found earlier in the book.

A number of specific exercises highlighted facets of Deborah's participation in the war. For example, pupils had to refer to four specified verses showing how Deborah believed God would help Israel be victorious.<sup>47</sup> Students had to write a letter of apology to Deborah from the head of a tribe, explaining why their tribe did not participate in war against the Canaanites.<sup>48</sup> A query was made asking how the women of Israel felt and what they thought about what Deborah and Yael had done in the war.<sup>49</sup>

Pupils were made cognizant of the specific orders Deborah gave to Barak.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Cohen, Bible Tales..., p. 39.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>50</sup> Tirosh, p. 23.

They were also requested to study Radak's dual comments (Jud. 4:9) and decide for themselves if, when Deborah spoke to Barak and predicted the battle's outcome, she was prophesying that Jael would be the heroine, or if she herself would be credited with the victory.<sup>51</sup>

One illustration showed Deborah on the battlefield.<sup>52</sup> Seen in the foreground in a frontal view, looking over her right shoulder, she was wearing a long, full, belted dress/tunic and her long, dark hair was partially covered by the same dress fabric. Her raised arms were bare just up to the elbows. She had a young, pretty face seen from a partial view. Behind her were three warriors engaged in battle. Another war picture showing Deborah and three warriors gave the viewer a different feeling about her.<sup>53</sup> The warriors were looking at her as she turned to gesture to them signifying, I think, that they are to follow her. (Her face is a caricature and reminds me of some of the drawings seen earlier of Rahab.)

One particular book of children's stories was very disturbing in the attitudes it fostered and encouraged. The chapter on Deborah "The Woman Judge"<sup>54</sup> had a condescending tone in the opening paragraph: "Our stories have been only about boys and men, but there were many good and wise women in those days, and the

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>52</sup> Samuels, Bible Stories. Joshua to Queen Esther, p. 13.

<sup>53</sup> Samuels, Prophets, Writings and You..., pp. 16-17.

<sup>54</sup> Altman, p. 88.

Bible tells some pretty stories about them, too."<sup>55</sup> The word "pretty" might be a mistranslation of yafah which should probably mean "nice." Disparagement of the heroine's abilities was seen as her task in amassing an army was accomplished "just as easily as the boys in the street form a little company of make-believe soldiers, only Deborah's men were really soldiers."<sup>56</sup> On reflection, perhaps this metaphor was offered to give young children an idea of what it was like to raise an army; however, the tone could also be perceived as belittling the children's intelligence and losing an opportunity to explain how awesome a task it truly was for Deborah to have raised an army! Notwithstanding the presentation, Deborah did not amass the army, but rather Barak did. Thus, according to the words of the Bible, two errors have been introduced to the pupils. In the more than three pages devoted to Deborah, further remarks were written not in keeping with the intent of the Bible. For example, in posing the question why Barak would go to battle only if Deborah accompanied him, the answer was "Not because Barak was afraid, but because he knew how wise and good Deborah was, and he wanted her there to help the soldiers and cheer them up."<sup>57</sup> Burstein again showed a different aspect of Deborah: Dvora spoke to Barak and tried to convince him to fight against the Canaanites. He was adamant in insisting he could not go unless she went with him. "Me?" Dvora stared at him. 'A grandmother! What do I know about fighting? I raise my stick only when I

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., pp. 89-90.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 90.



announce a judgment or when I'm chasing the goats out of my vegetable patch."<sup>58</sup> Barak insisted God listened only to Dvora, and therefore forced her to go. In what was presented as a singular effort, Deborah's messengers mustered the reluctant people to fight.<sup>59</sup> A parallel thread to the story was that of Dvora's young grandson pleading with his grandmother to be allowed to go to war, also. As the troops were poised to fight, Dvora kept beseeching God to give her a signal as to when her people should begin. Her concern for her grandson who was with her was also part of the scene.<sup>60</sup> Torrential rain began, and Dvora interpreted this as God's signal for the attack to begin. She praised God "And she felt like a little girl again, safe under God's protection."<sup>61</sup>

### 3. Deborah's Song

After gaining a full picture of Deborah as judge and prophetess, comments centered on her role in the battle of her people. One simple re-telling of her story recognized she was a prophetess, judge, and uniter of war forces of the tribes. The victory song she wrote was a "shir yafeh,"<sup>62</sup> a nice song. Deborah did not refer to God's command to Barak about going to fight. She did predict a victorious outcome,

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<sup>58</sup> Burstein, p. 22.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Y. H. Pollack, Historia La-talmidim. Part 1 (New York: Hebrew Publishing, 1946) p. 39.

but said nothing about a woman doing the victorious deed. After the victory, "Deborah commanded the bugler to sound the bugle call that brought the soldiers together...She sang a song of praise and thanks to God..."<sup>63</sup>

Samuels referred to Deborah's singing a song, but did not include any specific contents: "When the battle was over Deborah and Barak sang a great song of praise to God."<sup>64</sup> In referring to Deborah's song, pupils had to think about what her curse was to Israel's enemy and her blessing to the lovers of Israel.<sup>65</sup> Lastly, the pupils were to draw a picture showing the soldiers of Israel, including Deborah and Barak on Mount Tabor, and the Canaanites with their chariots in the valley below.<sup>66</sup> Throughout the many pages devoted to Deborah were scattered comments by Rashi and exercises related to them.

A version of Deborah's victory song, wherein her theme was praise to God, was followed by two thought questions: "Was Dvora a proud or a modest person? [and] Would Dvora win any popularity contests? Some sages of the Talmud thought Dvora was too proud and uppity. What do you think?"<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Altman, pp. 90.

<sup>64</sup> Samuels, Prophets, Writings..., p. 17.

<sup>65</sup> Yonay and Yonay, Shofetim, p. 68.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>67</sup> Burstein, p. 26.

#### 4. General Observations about Deborah in Jewish Educational Materials

The scrutiny of the educational materials about Deborah points up her major contributions to her people. In her dual role as judge and warrior, she was depicted as being respected and powerful. The illustrations reinforced her authoritative personality. In only one educational book, where the Bible text was supplemented by a vocabulary list and definitions appeared at the bottom of each page, was there no interpretation or analysis of Deborah.<sup>68</sup>

While on one hand, she had immeasurable strength and power as a prophet and judge, on the other hand adjectives described her as a real person in terms students could understand: good, righteous, respected, honored, and dispensing advice and help. She was also said to have spoken directly to God.

#### D. Conclusions

A careful examination of the Bible, followed by a reading of seminal biblical interpretations, pointed up differences needing to be addressed as a varying portrait of Deborah emerged. The Bible presented a very strong, independent woman who was unique in the time in which she lived--a prophetess, wife, judge, warrior, and mother. Given her private and public influencing of others, she seemed to be larger than life; however, the commentaries took what might have been seen as an ideal and made her into what they may have felt was a more credible individual by skewing the Bible verses and making her positive traits distorted into negative ones. For example,

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<sup>68</sup> Travis, pp. 12-21.

her quality of modesty had a reverse side of self-centeredness; her asking Barak to come to her since she was a judge sitting in a specific locale at the service of her constituents, was interpreted as haughtiness. Even her name which means "bee" was found to have had negative connotations. Furthermore, her gift of prophesy was interpreted by exegetes as relating to the time in which she lived. How does one **prophesy** about the present, and why would commentators negate her role as indicated in the Bible? Investing her with negative qualities may have stemmed from a biased interpretation of a female in the text.

As presented in the educational materials, Deborah was a woman of wisdom, modesty, goodness, and credibility. She, by force of her personality and responsibilities, could be viewed as a model of life's possibilities for pupils both in a practical and ideological way. For example, Deborah's influence was so great that her presence on the battlefield would mean men would have to follow her, and not timidly refrain from joining the battle. Even Barak recognized her authority and wanted her at the battlefront both for her control and for her goodness. If teachers would expand upon the role Deborah played during the war, students would garner an image of Deborah making female students have a role model, and the male students gain a rich understanding of the contribution a female made in the time of the judges.

Of all the women portrayed as adults by artists, Deborah seems to be unique in her force of character emanating from the easel, rather than the usual concern with physical appearance and attractiveness or lack thereof. The illustrations showed

a commanding and self-assured woman judging her people, and fiery in battle. No effort seems to have been expended to picture her as femininely beautiful or particularly pleasant in appearance; the stress was rather on her strength and authority. The number of people in some of these illustrations, both as she judged and was on the battlefield, enhanced and affirmed her power.

In addition, in the educational sources, character traits such as modesty and haughtiness were not stressed as they had been in talmudic and midrashic literature. She was said to have had a theophany, and also tried to convince people to be observant and to have faith in God.

Almost no attention was paid to Deborah's Song of Victory. Since her song is chanted in synagogues annually and compliments Miriam's Song, pupils become deprived when its contents and its richness have not been singled out for elucidation. Even though the Hebrew text is difficult, manageable excerpts could be studied. If not, an essential contribution made by Deborah has not been highlighted and taught; therefore students have been denied a fulsome sketch of her contribution to the Bible.

My overall sense is that the parts about Deborah emphasized in the educational materials mirrored the Bible text more than the rabbinic literature. Her power and wisdom were viewed as positive, allowing her to be the harbinger of her people's subsequent era of peace. She was used as a role model so that females can aspire to their dreams and try to effectuate their hopes realistically.

## Chapter 7

### Jephthah's Daughter

#### A. Jephthah's Daughter in the Bible

Appearing in the Book of Judges is one of many unnamed females in Scripture, a young girl known only by her kinship with her father and called simply "Jephthah's daughter." Her story, one of the saddest in the Bible despite its narrative terseness of seven verses, still offers a description of her, insight into her personality, her acceptance of her destiny, and the development of a custom arising from her circumstance and memory.

Jephthah had made a vow to God that, if he returned home victorious from battle, he would offer as a sacrifice whatever exited first from his home to greet him. It was his only child, the unnamed daughter, who came out with timbrels and dances to meet him. In anguish, he chastised her for the grief she caused him, because of his irrevocable pledge to God. In innocence or respect or compliance, she did not challenge him to save her life; rather she was acquiescent and affirmed the necessity of executing his oath. Jephthah's daughter had only one request, a two month period of time to go off with her friends to the mountains to bewail what appears at first glance to be her virginity. Her father granted her wish and upon her return from the

mountains, Jephthah fulfilled his vow.

Jephthah's daughter was an example of a biblical female known only by her relationship to her male parent. Two other instances of men's unnamed daughters bear a striking resemblance to this one. In Gen. 19:8, Lot's two virgin daughters were offered to the men of Sodom instead of Lot's male house guests, and Judges 19 told of a Benjaminite who proffered his virgin daughter and guest's concubine to be abused by the men of the city, rather than the Levite guest who was demanded. In these three episodes, young virgins were sacrificed by their father, either wittingly or unwittingly. These young women were abused and harmed through no fault of their own.

Jephthah's promise to God and the resulting death of his daughter, recalls another episode in Genesis, where Jacob swore that whoever stole Laban's teraphim would die as a consequence (31:32). As Jephthah did not have the foresight to think his daughter's life could be in peril because of his rash vow, so, too, Jacob never thought his beloved wife Rachel would be guilty of theft and die as a result of his promise. While Jephthah's daughter did exit from the house first, and while Rachel had stolen the teraphim, their actions were not commensurate with the punishment inflicted indirectly upon them. Could Jephthah, when he made the vow, not have cared what the sacrifice would be? Was he more concerned with victory than the object of his vow?

Jephthah's daughter, subject to her father's vow, mirrored other women studied above: Sarah, who took physical risks as Abraham's "sister," and Rachel, who

watched as her father substituted Leah for her at her wedding. These incidents are examples of females being manipulated, the results of which are unhappiness or death. These examples embroiled females as victims.

One other story contrasted sharply with the foregoing incidents and also involved both an oath and a potential child sacrifice (1 Sam. 14:24-45). King Saul had taken an oath to curse any man who would eat before he had retaliated against his enemies. Jonathan, his son, unwittingly ate honey, and would therefore be expected to die. While Jonathan was prepared to have his father carry out his vow and to kill him, the people arose in unison and would not allow Saul to fulfill his oath. A father's oath and a son's unintentional action did not result in the execution of the father's promise. Although Saul was prepared to discharge his oath, the community defied him and Jonathan did not die. The incidents raise the question of why, in the case of each woman, sacrifices were performed effecting death or physical damage, while Jonathan remained unscathed.<sup>1</sup> Could this reflect the power of patriarchy or sadism levied against females?

A personality trait Jephthah's daughter demonstrated to an exaggerated degree was acquiescence. Having learned she was to be a human sacrifice, she did not beseech her father to save her nor offer an alternate plan. Why did she not counter her father when he blamed her for the tragic circumstance? She was to be sacrificed, yet he castigated her!

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Gen. 22:6-13, where God would not permit Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac as a burnt-offering.



Jephthah's vow raises serious questions. Was the pledge foolish for him to have made? Did he think about the possible consequences? While his intentions might have been honorable, did he consider the probability of his promise being untenable since it could, by the wording, include a living person? If one stopped to ponder the consequences, it was most likely a person would exit upon his return. Might Jephthah have inquired of a judge about a possible alternate sacrifice? It was ironic that no judge was sought to offer counsel for the life and death predicament of a young and innocent female!

In this episode, the vital importance of bearing a child was evidenced when Jephthah's daughter took time to bewail her maidenhood. She could have made any reasonable request to delay her day of death, but her focus was to mourn the fact she would never have a child. It makes no sense that her virginity is the issue, that she would want to go off and bewail her virginity, which could be easily rectified. The real concern seemed to be that her unhappiness was due to her having to die childless. She did not choose to go off in solitude, but rather to solemnize the tragic circumstances with her companions who would offer her compassion and support. The power of her prayer was to be shared with her friends in a location conducive to a theological or faith experience. Then, having gone to mourn her maidenhood with her friends and knowing she would die a virgin, she was prepared to give up her life.

## B. Jephthah's Daughter in Jewish Interpretation

### 1. Jephthah returns home (verse 34)

Pseudo-Philo<sup>2</sup> presented an expanded, scintillating version of the Bible story, added accessory people, supplementary information, and more emotional descriptions, and he named Jephthah's daughter Seila. The fulsome inclusion of Pseudo-Philo<sup>3</sup> is to show an expanded story which also presented a picture of the time in which Jephthah lived in an unusual way. The taciturn reaction of the community to the vow, and the young daughter's priorities, add to the understanding of how such a travesty could have happened in light of the time in which the incident transpired.

When Jephthah returned, said Pseudo-Philo, not only his daughter came out to greet him but "women" (vs. 40:1) also came. It was specified that his daughter was the first to exit to greet him. While numerous people would assumedly greet and honor the victorious warrior, only the presence of his daughter was noted.<sup>4</sup> Josephus wrote that when his daughter exited her home to greet him, Jephthah "chid his

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<sup>2</sup> All references will be found in James H. Charlesworth, The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha. Vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1985) pp. 353-354.

<sup>3</sup> While many elementary school teachers have no familiarity with Pseudo-Philo's works, his rendition of Jephthah's daughter influences The Chronicles of Jerahmeel, is evident in Louis Ginsberg's Legend of the Jews, Vol. IV, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1913) pp. 43-47, and mitigates for being incorporated here.

<sup>4</sup> It was a natural occurrence for women to rejoice in song at victorious moments in the history of the Israelites: cf. Ex. 15:20 where Miriam led the women after the Israelites' victorious crossing of the Red Sea, and 1 Sam. 18:6-7 where women feted David after he arrived home triumphant.

daughter for her haste in meeting him, seeing that he had dedicated her to God"<sup>5</sup> (Josephus, *Antiquities*, Vol. 5, p. 119) and described her as being compliant, "for she without displeasure learnt her destiny, to wit that she must die in return for her father's victory and the liberation of her fellow-citizens" (*ibid.*).

## 2. The reactions of Jephthah and his daughter (verses 35-36)

In responding to his daughter's salutation, wrote Pseudo-Philo, Jephthah did not tear his garments; rather, he expressed his anguish by swooning and addressing her by name: "Rightly was your name Seila, that you might be offered in sacrifice. And now who will put my heart in the balance and my soul on the scale? And I will stand by and see which will win out, whether it is the rejoicing that has occurred or the sadness that befalls me" (40:1). In other words, he had to fulfill his vow.

Seila, countering her father's reaction by saying his victory for his people was of primary importance, asked if he remembered that, in the history of the ancestors, a son willingly was offered "as a holocaust, and he did not refuse him but gladly gave consent to him, and the one being offered was ready and the one who was offering was rejoicing" (40:2)? So, too, must her father do to her.

Commenting on verse 35, Pseudo-Philo painted Jephthah's anguished reaction to his daughter's greeting: he tore his garments as, into the middle of his joy grief came, turning public victory into personal disaster. What the enemy did not achieve,

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<sup>5</sup> Josephus. *Jewish Antiquities*, Vol. 5, Books V-VIII, trans. by H. Thackeray and Ralph Marcus (London: Heinemann, 1966).

his daughter now had accomplished by depriving him of joy and causing him disaster (40:1). Jephthah's reaction to his daughter's welcome was the interpretive focus of this verse. He berated her for the grief he now experienced, feeling he could not renege on his vow for it was made with good intention. Malbim took an unusual stance on verse 36 as he castigated Jephthah's daughter for having encouraged her father to do as he had vowed.

### 3. A request is made and granted (verses 37-38)

The Bible indicated she went to the mountains for the prescribed time period; Exodus Rabbah (15,5) claimed she went to the elders to show them she was a pure virgin.<sup>6</sup> Rashi also stated, based on Tanhuma (Beḥuqotai 5),<sup>7</sup> that Jephthah's daughter went to the Sanhedrin on the mountain to see if a different solution could be found for her father's promise. She wished to go away in the company of her friends so she could talk about the pain of not having borne a child. Radak, reiterating what Rashi said about the Sanhedrin, was concerned with the geographical location of the mountains, not with her personal needs, request, and emotions.

In Pseudo-Philo's version, Seila asked to be allowed to go to the mountains

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. harim found in Shir HaShirim 2:8 means mountains; however, as is evident from midrashim and exegetes, the word has a range of unrelated connotations, allowing for multiple interpretations. Micah 6:2, in using harim, alluded to the Sanhedrin while Zechariah 6:1 meant idol worshippers. In Rosh Hashanah 11b, mountains and hills refer to the Patriarchs and Matriarchs, respectively. Targum Jonathan asserted that the mountains which were leapt and skipped over referred to years lessened in servitude for the Children of Israel in Egypt.

<sup>7</sup> Midrash Tanhuma, (Jerusalem: Lewin-Epstein, 1964).

with her "virgin companions" (40:3); however, she did not specify a length of time.

Pseudo-Philo amplified the text at this point, having Jephthah's daughter express her feelings very emotionally:

I will pour out my tears there and tell of the sadness of my youth. And the trees of the field will weep for me, and the beasts of the field will lament over me. For I am not sad because I am to die nor does it pain me to give back my soul, but because my father was caught up in the snare of his vow; and if I did not offer myself willingly for sacrifice, I fear that my death would not be acceptable or I would lose my life in vain (40:3).

Pseudo-Philo proposed the most extraordinary comment about what happened to Seila on the mountain. He suggested she had a theophany during which God

thought of her by night and said, "Behold now I have shut up the tongue of the wise men of my people for this generation so that they cannot respond to the daughter of Jephthah, to her word, in order that my word be fulfilled and my plan that I thought out not be foiled. And I have seen that the virgin is wise in contrast to her father and perceptive in contrast to all the wise men who are here. And now let her life be given at his request, and her death will be precious before me always, and she will go away and fall into the bosom of her mothers (40:4).

Pseudo-Philo's assertion that Jephthah's daughter was spoken to by God was unique; his intimation that God was the motivating force behind her death was astonishing. To think that God, recognizing her wisdom and perceptiveness, could orchestrate the wise men and be the primary mover in causing a needless death, is cause for serious study.

While on the mountain, Seila offered a lengthy soliloquy in which she lamented, not about her specific fate, but about what she would be missing as a result

of her untimely death:

the white robe that my mother has woven, the moth will eat it.  
And the crown of flowers that my nurse plaited for me for the festival, may it wither up;  
and the coverlet that she wove of hyacinth and purple in my woman's chamber, may the worm devour it.  
And may my virgin companions tell of me in sorrow and weep for me through the days.  
You beasts of the forests, come and bewail my virginity, for my years have been cut off (40:6-7).

The last lines of this soliloquy form a vignette of images and emotions reminiscent of the dreaming of Sisera's mother (Jud. 5:28-30).

Jephthah's daughter also received attention in midrashim, the focus being speculation about her request to go away for two months. In a key midrash, the author posited she wanted to go off with her companions to "shed my tears and thus soften the grief of my youth" (C. J. 59.4, p. 177). She was acquiescent about her father's vow, but felt she herself might not be worthy. God gave her assurance "her death shall be very precious in My sight" (*ibid.* 49.6, p. 178). At this point, an attitude change by Jephthah's daughter surfaced: Seila "fell upon her mother's bosom" (*ibid.*, p. 178) and went to lament her faith. This commentary offered a singular approach about the daughter's feelings, positing she showed antagonism toward her father. In crying to her mother, she shared heart-breaking descriptions of her sadness, and evoked compassion and mourning from her companions as well as from the trees (cf. Pseudo-Philo 40:6-7). This source said she went to lament her faith rather than the usual phrase of lament her fate.

Verse 37 was a request made in the first person by Jephthah's daughter. In

asking her father to grant her two months to go to the mountains with her friends, Rashi interpreted the word ve-yaradeti not simply as lamenting, but rather as tremendous sadness, as though one's body was breaking. In putting the word ve-yaradeti into the context of mourning, he explained she went down to the emotion of crying, citing a proof-text where people went on the roof tops and out on the streets wailing with tears streaming. Their bodies would break because their sobbing was so hard (Isa. 15:30).

Verse 38 offered a closure on verse 37, Jephthah granting permission to his daughter to leave. Of the commentators included here, only Rashi commented on this verse, stating her maidenhood was proclaimed. Given the several component parts of this verse, it was disappointing not to find more interpretive focus on Jephthah's daughter. No discussion was included about why he acquiesced and allowed her to go away; neither was there any examination nor speculation about who her friends were and what they actually did during the time they were absent. The closest remark about the daughter's needs was that she wanted to be away from her father, yet not alone; therefore, she asked friends to accompany her as she sought to gain a measure of peace before her death (Altschuler, M. D.).

#### 4. The vow is fulfilled; a custom is established (verses 39-40)

After the sojourn on the mountain, Pseudo-Philo wrote that Jephthah's daughter "returned to her father, and he did everything that he had vowed and offered the holocausts" (40:8). She was wept for and buried by the virgins, and "the

children of Israel made a great lamentation and established that in that month on the fourteenth day of the month they should come together every year and weep for Jephthah's daughter for four days. And they named her tomb in keeping with her name: Seila" (ibid.). In this reading, not only the maidens of Israel carried on the yearly tradition of mourning for Jephthah's daughter, but the more inclusive term children of Israel participated. It is unclear whether this is an intentional change in the grammatical person, or rather an innocent confusion of a possible abbreviation of Beit Yod which could signify either B'nai Yisrael or B'not Yisrael. A singular picture of Jephthah's daughter fighting for her life was apparent in Midrash Tanhuma where she argued with her father, citing biblical proof for his not being compelled to sacrifice her. She specified Genesis 28:20-22 where Jacob vowed to give a tithe of all he had to God, yet never sacrificed any of his children, and remarked about 1 Samuel 1:11 where Hannah vowed to dedicate her son to God and did not sacrifice him.<sup>8</sup> It was in Midrash Tanhuma where "the comparison of the daughter's Torah knowledge and her father's offers a clear picture of what the compilers of Tanhuma felt about both of them, and the emphasis on God's rejection of human sacrifice condemns Jephthah's actions."<sup>9</sup>

Commenting on verse 39, Targum Jonathan exhorted Israel never to give a child sacrifice. An explanation was also given faulting Jephthah for not having gone

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<sup>8</sup> Midrash Tanhuma, Sefer Vayikra (Williamsburg: Me'ein Ha-Torah, 1963) p. 139.

<sup>9</sup> Deborah Abecassis, "Jephthah's Daughter in the Jewish Exegetical Tradition" (unpublished Master's thesis, Jewish Studies, McGill University, 1993) p. 51.



to Phineas the priest, who would have found a substitute for sacrificing Jephthah's daughter. This scathing commentary attested to the wrongness of Jephthah's act, as well as to the personality flaws he displayed.

Josephus was unequivocal in castigating Jephthah and stating he "sacrificed his child as a burnt-offering--a sacrifice neither sanctioned by the law nor well-pleasing to God; for he had not by reflection probed what might befall or in what aspect the deed would appear to them that heard of it" (Josephus, Ibid., p. 121).

A fulsome indictment of Jephthah's deed was found in the Babylonian Talmud (Ta'an. 4a), that is, he should never have sacrificed his daughter. Scriptural proof texts were cited to show God would never demand nor expect a human sacrifice. The biblical citations upholding the opinion that Jephthah erred dreadfully were: the aborted sacrifice of Isaac by his father Abraham as recorded in the Book of Genesis, God's extreme wrath against Mesha, King of Moab, who offered his son as a burnt offering (2 Kings 3:27), and finally a reference to Jeremiah 8:22 and 19:5, where human sacrifice was condemned by God who had never commanded, spoken, or even thought about such a heinous deed. Ta'anit 4a also included the opinion that the life of Jephthah's daughter's could have been saved, had Phineas been asked to judge the situation. Additionally, God was angered because Jephthah did not go to Phineas to absolve him from his vow and annul it. Castigation against Jephthah and Phineas was rife in both Genesis Rabbah (60,3) and Leviticus Rabbah (37,4). Both texts were nearly identical; however the difference between them further underscored the power Phineas had to interpret the vow, thereby saving the life of Jephthah's daughter. The

midrash indicated that, had Jephthah gone to Phineas the High Priest for advice, Phineas would have told him not to sacrifice his daughter. However, Jephthah would not approach the High Priest, and Phineas would not deign to go to Jephthah to give him counsel, and so Jephthah's daughter was sacrificed. The implication was they were held accountable and responsible for her death. Both men suffered as a result of their stubbornness and egocentric nature.

The midrashim (Gen. R. 60,3 and Lev. R. 37,4) record dissenting opinions about the sacrifice. Resh Lakish said money and a sacrifice should have been offered on the altar in place of the daughter. R. Joḥanan posited only fit animals may be presented on the altar; no unfit sacrifices may be given, the implication being that, since Jephthah's daughter was not a fit sacrifice, nothing should be given in her place, not even money. Both the midrashim were the same up to this point. The final sentence in each offered a slight variation. Knowing that all modifications might be significant, the nuances of the alteration were examined: If Phineas was there to annul his vow, why did he not do so (Gen. R. 60,3)? Why, since Phineas could annul the vow, did Jephthah not go to him (Lev. R. 37,4)? The import of these queries was to implicate the two men in being the indirect if not direct cause of the death of Jephthah's daughter.

Tanna debe Eliyyahu agreed that both men were faulted for their behavior:

Woe unto self-pride which buries those possessed by it!  
Woe unto false pride which does no good in the world!  
When Jephthah the Gileadite made a vow that was  
utterly improper--a vow to offer up his daughter on an  
altar... For his part, however, Phineas neither intervened  
nor did he release Jephthah from his vow (T. E., pp.

Two opposing views, relating to verse 39, exist about how Jephthah fulfilled his vow. The first was that he actually put his daughter on the altar as a burnt offering (Ta'an. 4a, Gen. R. 70, and Josephus, as above). Jephthah had promised to sacrifice what turned out to be his daughter and he did as he had promised. She was the same status at her death as she was when the vow was made. There seemed to be an implication here that, if she had married during the two months she was gone, she would no longer be sacrificed, that her husband could have legally prevented her fate (Altschuler, M. D.). A decree arose as a result of Jephthah having sacrificed his daughter saying no one would ever again do such a deed (Rashi).

The second point of view was that Jephthah did not sacrifice his daughter. This interpretation of what transpired was a fascinating variant, differing drastically from targumic and midrashic thinking, which judged Jephthah harshly for the terrible sacrificial act he had performed. A convincing opinion said no vow on a son or daughter could have been made (Ramban); rather Jephthah made a special house for his daughter and put her into solitary confinement (Radak, Ralbag, and Abravanel). She spent the rest of her life in seclusion, dedicated to the service of God (Radak). The idea of women going off to lament over Jephthah's daughter, taught of the existence of cloisters or places of abstinence where women lived without ever seeing any male (Ralbag and Abravanel). Her situation was likened to the Pharisees who remained secluded (Radak).

Two opinions were tendered as to the times of the friends' visits. One said the girls tarried for four days each year for the rest of her life (Altschuler, M. D.), the other that they went four times each year, every three months (Naz. 4b and 5a). The girls went to converse with Jephthah's daughter so she could talk about what was on her heart, easing her tensions and pain, and being joyful. The girls went to cry with her about her virginity and comfort her because she was all alone the rest of the year (Radak and Altschuler, M. D.). Radak, in having offered a unique commentary, facilitated successor "exegetes to fill up their interpretation of the narrative without really dealing with the story at all; they could concern themselves with proving or disproving Radak's theory!"<sup>10</sup>

#### 5. General Observations about Jephthah's Daughter in Rabbinic Literature

Emerging from the commentaries was an imbalance and unfairness in the study of the two protagonists, Jephthah and his daughter. In terms of apologetics, attention was primarily rivetted on Jephthah. When scrutinizing the seven verses of this episode, the text certainly was weighted heavily by the actions and dialogue of the daughter. She was both active and reactive. In many commentaries she was respectful toward her father in insisting he fulfill his vow, and insightful in comprehending that he must honor his pledge as God had already made him victorious; in some she challenged her father, citing biblical text proofs, for him not to take her life. Primarily, she surfaced undaunted by her fate, and had support from

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

her friends who accompanied her so she could prepare for her death. Harsh moral issues were raised regarding Jephthah and the horrid enactment of his vow, but nothing was written about his daughter's role, her emotions, and her thoughts.

The text itself posed problems in trying to understand Jephthah's daughter's temperament. For example, while Jephthah's rending of his garments (vs. 35) illustrated his grief, there was no comparable action on the part of his daughter to signify her passion. Rather she was presented as a rational, stable young woman who was perceptive but not emotional. Her dialogue, while showing thought and clarity, did not make the reader understand what was in her heart. However, even with the information provided in the verses, more interpretation should have been forthcoming about Jephthah's daughter. Perhaps the challenge of biased interpretation could be levied at later exegetes for their failure to consider Jephthah's daughter as an independent female with her emotions and strengths.

In comparing earlier works, especially Pseudo-Philo and The Chronicles of Jerahmeel, with the later biblical commentaries, an inequity surfaced that is unreasonable and unjust. Later commentators focused on Jephthah's grief, noting his daughter's compliance and giving her no sympathy. What was lacking was the intensity and depth of emotion lucidly expressed by Pseudo-Philo, as well as his positing that she had a theophany. Also absent was the tenor of The Chronicles of Jerahmeel, where Jephthah's daughter questioned her own worthiness in being a sacrifice. The fact that she bewailed her fate in an antagonistic way rather than a compliant one was missing. No commentator repeated the Chronicle's mention of

Jephthah's daughter having had a mother, even though it might be argued that the reference to "her mother's bosom" was figurative rather than literal. The image of a mother added a measure of pathos toward the daughter, and accented the helplessness of mother and daughter as well. While the Bible text had no direct reference to her mother, or to Jephthah's wife, a commentator could reasonably have inferred that a mother did exist. It would also be plausible that the young daughter would be the eager first person to exit at Jephthah's return.

### C. Jephthah's Daughter in Jewish Educational Materials

#### 1. Jephthah's daughter greets him (verse 34)

Yonay and Yonay presented the fullest coverage of the story of Jephthah's daughter, starting with questions examining verse 34 and asking why she went out to meet her father with timbrels and dancing. Interestingly, the words be-tuppim and bi-meholot were in bold type face, indicating the stress on what she did, rather than her emotions and excitement in rushing to greet her returning, victorious parent.<sup>11</sup> An accompanying painting by Gustav Doré depicted the jubilant Jephthah's daughter and her friends greeting him.<sup>12</sup> A parallel occurred in a workbook where pupils had to answer "who am I" to the statement: "I went out to greet my father with timbrels

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<sup>11</sup> Yonay and Yonay, Shofetim, p. 160.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 163.

and dances."<sup>13</sup> A correct/not correct (true/false) statement read: "Jephthah knew his daughter would come out to greet him."<sup>14</sup> This statement might be the most explosive and frightening comment for pupils to discuss, and could lead to hypothetical debates about Jephthah's intentions and God's role in the story. Another workbook encouraged the pupils to examine Jephthah's feelings when his daughter came out to welcome him,<sup>15</sup> thereby prodding pupils to think about what the characters were experiencing. In a thought question appearing subsequently, the authors asked: "this story evokes different feelings. What are your feelings? Are you able to express and articulate them in different ways?"<sup>16</sup> An illustration showed Jephthah holding his hand to his head in a pose of sadness, as his pretty young daughter held a timbrel in her hand. Pupils could easily discern the contrast of joy and anguish.<sup>17</sup>

## 2. The reactions of Jephthah and his daughter (verses 35-36)

Jephthah berated his daughter saying she had brought a great curse upon him,<sup>18</sup> had broken him, and had caused him considerable trouble and anguish.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Zielberman, p. 161.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>15</sup> Tirosh, p. 79.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>17</sup> Yonay and Yonay, Shofetim, p. 161.

<sup>18</sup> Tirosh, p. 79.

This text, with comments at the bottom of each page, cited Joshua 7:25 as a proof-text.<sup>20</sup> Another comment, offering her reaction to the news of her father's vow, was that "she told him God heard his promise and made him victorious over his enemy; he must now fulfill his vow."<sup>21</sup> After replying to the query of what she said to her father when she heard about his vow,<sup>22</sup> an ensuing correct/not correct statement read: "Jephthah's daughter did not want her father to fulfill his vow."<sup>23</sup> For this response, students would simply have to return to the Bible and read verse 36 to ascertain that the statement is false. However, this question could be a starting point for teachers to ask pupils how they would feel had they been Jephthah's daughter, and to define her personality traits as a result of her willingness to die. A value-laden query could be: Should one be bound by someone else's commitment? Perhaps the question of whether she should be a role model should be raised.

Acquiescence on her part was contrasted with her fighting for her life in two educational materials. In the first exercise, students had to underline a response showing Jephthah's daughter acting courageously rather than frightened.<sup>24</sup> The second, based on Midrash Tanhuma, portrayed a non-compliant daughter imploring

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<sup>19</sup> Travis, Shofetim, p. 46.

<sup>20</sup> This is the story of the stoning and killing of the deceitful thief Achan.

<sup>21</sup> Travis, Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>22</sup> Yonay and Yonay, Shofetim, p. 160.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>24</sup> Zielberman, Ibid., p. 26.



for her life and using biblical history to support her plea:

Jephthah's daughter tried to reason with her father. She said: "It is written in the Torah that if a man wishes to make a sacrifice, then he should take from his herds or flocks."

Jephthah answered, "My daughter, I did swear!" "Remember Jacob," she said. "He promised to give the Lord a tenth of all he should gain. He had twelve sons but did not attempt to sacrifice one of them." But Jephthah would not heed her.<sup>25</sup>

Students, now having both sides of the issue before them, can engage in debate about her possible responses, or write a composition about their feelings as well as those of Jephthah's daughter.

### 3. The request of Jephthah's daughter (verses 37 and 38)

Two workbooks asked pupils what request Jephthah's daughter made of her father before he would have to fulfill his vow.<sup>26</sup> "She wanted to go to the mountains to be calmed or be set at ease and weep about the days of her youth."<sup>27</sup> She desired to bewail her virginity and cry because she would die a virgin, not having married or borne any children.<sup>28</sup> One illustration showed four very young girls about six years of age, seated on a mountain top weeping. Each wore a different

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<sup>25</sup> Solomon Simon and David Bial Morrison, The Rabbi's Bible. Vol. 2. Early Prophets (New York: Behrman, 1969) pp. 54-55. This text does not cite from where the idea for this dialogue came.

<sup>26</sup> Tirosh, p. 79, and Yonay and Yonay, Shofetim, p. 160.

<sup>27</sup> Travis, Shofetim, p. 37.

<sup>28</sup> Tirosh, p. 79.

model long dress with long sleeves and high necks. Their various hairstyles included curly and long, a pony tail, and bangs. It was not clear which girl might be Jephthah's daughter.<sup>29</sup>

Even though resigned to her fate, Jephthah's daughter was clear-headed enough to make a request of her father. The reasons given for her need to be away were presented succinctly and widened the educational horizon for studying about the role of a young woman at that time. It would be beneficial to find other art work about this episode to ascertain how Jephthah's daughter and her friends were characterized by additional artists. While Yonay and Yonay included the Doré painting of the daughter and her friends greeting Jephthah, it is unfortunate that they did not also include his other depiction of her on the mountain with her friends. This latter painting is a sobering one and would generate interesting discussions.<sup>30</sup>

#### 4. Jephthah fulfills his vow and a new custom develops (verses 39 and 40)

One workbook posed questions based on Rashi's commentary. After reading Rashi's interpretation about the custom of the daughters of Israel, and the failure of Phineas to prevent the disaster, students had to indicate the correct answer to: "1. Bible commentators said it was forbidden ever to vow such a vow again; and 2. Rashi thought if Jephthah had gone to Phineas, Phineas would have released him

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<sup>29</sup> Zielberman, *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>30</sup> The Doré Bible Illustrations, introduction by Millicent Rose (New York: Dover, 1974) p. 61.

from his vow."<sup>31</sup> Another educational material recognized that Jephthah's daughter had been sacrificed and posited that a decree and a custom were firmly fixed for the daughters of Israel to go to eulogize and ponder the destiny of Jephthah's daughter for four days each year.<sup>32</sup>

In contrast to the Bible text, one educational source presented Radak's interpretation of what happened to Jephthah's daughter. In answering how it was possible for a father to kill his daughter, the interpretation was that Jephthah fulfilled his vow by making a house of seclusion for her. The custom arose for the daughters in Israel to visit and comfort her for four days yearly because she was alone all year. This custom was to be observed for the rest of her life. Pupils were to explain why they do or do not agree with this interpretation.<sup>33</sup>

Yonay and Yonay also presented students with Radak's explication, directing pupils to read a paragraph giving the commentator's view and then answer a multiple choice question: "According to the commentator's view, what happened to Jephthah's daughter? 1. She was offered as a sacrifice. 2. She was sanctified to the service of God. 3. She spent the rest of her life in the mountains. 4. She returned to her father's house."<sup>34</sup> This source also asked: What finally befell Jephthah's

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<sup>31</sup> Yonay and Yonay, Shofetim, pp. 163-164.

<sup>32</sup> Travis, p. 47.

<sup>33</sup> Tirosh, p. 80.

<sup>34</sup> Yonay and Yonay, Ibid., p. 161.

daughter?"<sup>35</sup> Pursuant to this question were correct/not correct statements: "Jephthah's daughter did not marry and did not have children. Also, four days annually the daughters of Israel wept for her."<sup>36</sup> Pupils had to write a composition, from the following topics: "1. Jephthah's daughter; 2. How did the daughters of Israel remember every year what happened to Jephthah's daughter? 3. Imagine that Jephthah's daughter wrote a song or poem before her father carried out his vow. What would she have written?"<sup>37</sup>

It was disappointing and baffling that one textbook mentioned only Jephthah, speaking of him as the judge who brought salvation to his people after fighting against Ammon. No mention of his daughter was made.<sup>38</sup>

##### 5. General Observations about Jephthah's Daughter in Jewish Educational Materials

The section about the reaction of Jephthah and his daughter, as reviewed in the educational materials, had the most intense portrayal of Jephthah's daughter as a young woman who was not benign in her actions or her desires. While students can easily understand her father's anguish, they might question the fairness of the text in highlighting so stringently how his daughter was the object of such reprimand by him. While emphasis was frequently placed on her submission to her horrifying fate,

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>37</sup> Yonay and Yonay, Shofetim, p. 162.

<sup>38</sup> Y. A. Pollack, Historiah La-talmidim, pp. 39-40.

showing her to be very compliant, an alternate opposing view was also set forth showing her to be impassioned about self-preservation and arguing that God did not expect a human sacrifice.

With the exception of the workbook by Tirosh, which asked pupils to examine Jephthah and his daughter in terms of what they were feeling as the story unfolded, nothing was learned about the daughter, but rather the focus was on how Jephthah felt. It could be surmised that her happiness was obvious at seeing her returning father, but perhaps it was necessary for the books to underscore or accent her feelings. Furthermore, when educational materials, assumed to be used as teaching tools in the upper elementary grades, focused on simplistic aspects such as the timbrels and dances of Jephthah's daughter, the essence of the story and its emotions was being subjugated or camouflaged with secondary emphases. While the pictures may be designed simply to reflect the peshat, perhaps other illustrations should be included to show the emotions of Jephthah's daughter as she learned of her fate and her father castigated her. Perhaps some drawings could be shown to interpret some of the midrashim.

#### D. Conclusion

The fact that little is available in the Jewish educational materials about Jephthah's daughter is indeed disappointing and discouraging. Even textbooks and workbooks on Judges that included Deborah, did not always contain information about the unnamed daughter. While the controversial nature of her story made study

about her difficult, it should nevertheless mitigate for her story being analyzed in the classroom unless, that is, people want to avoid the negative image.

Aspects of the story of Jephthah's daughter pointed with clarity at a heinous error charged to her father who was a judge and to a high priest. According to targumim and midrashim she was a victim of the arrogance and obdurateness of these two men. Students should be able to study this story, perhaps in the upper elementary school grades, and be encouraged to raise questions about the incident and the exegetical value of the midrashim.

Students, not being able to assimilate such an occurrence, reject Jephthah's heinous deed, but should be guided to explore personality traits surfacing from the Bible (Jephthah's anger and his daughter's compliance) and from the commentaries (stubbornness and pride). Perhaps students will recognize the exaggerated degree to which these traits were stretched, causing the loss of a life.

While the Bible was clear on the fate of Jephthah's daughter, Radak's interpretation was presented in the educational materials. Because of this tragic and traumatic incident, students should be presented with as wide a range of alternatives as possible while taking care not to obfuscate the Bible text. Since this occurrence in the history of the Israelites was so horrendous, and since Jephthah's daughter could be a role model of a young daughter in a patriarchal society, studying alternate recognized interpretations becomes imperative.

The silent people in this story should be highlighted, for their vocal absence may have contributed to the daughter's death. Where was Jephthah's wife during the

dialogue between Jephthah and his daughter? Why did she not suggest an alternate solution to the fulfillment of the vow? Why did the young girl not seek compassion from her? Similar questions should be posed regarding the returning warriors and all the people in the community. Did no one raise a voice to help Jephthah's daughter? Did the people unanimously accept the execution of the vow and not try to hinder Jephthah from performing the sacrifice? The pupils should try to consider what the community could have done during the time Jephthah's daughter was away with her friends.

The story of Jephthah's daughter is a traumatic one. Perhaps there was wisdom in her being unnamed, thereby making identification with her experience one step removed from reality; yet the inclusion of her story presents challenging instruction for the classroom. It is promising to see that some textbook authors are trying to examine a wider range of questions about the actions and reactions of Jephthah and his daughter. Perhaps more flexibility will ensue in teaching about her fight and her fate.

## Chapter 8

### Esther

#### A. Esther in the Bible

##### 1. The character of Esther

As demonstrated earlier, in the cases of Sarah and Hagar, and Leah and Rachel, the use of female pairs as a literary device, served to compare and contrast the women in regard to both their physical characteristics and deeds. As the Book of Esther began, Queen Vashti incurred her husband Ahasuerus' wrath by refusing to appear before him and his guests as he had commanded her to do. Ahasuerus' wise men faulted her for insubordination, insinuating that she was a bad example to other women who would now find their own husbands despised in their eyes. These advisors counselled Ahasuerus to find a successor to Vashti, one who would be better than she.

The foregoing introduction to the advent of Esther implied that she will be likened to and contrasted with Vashti. Vashti was a beautiful woman (1:11) and Ahasuerus had wanted to exhibit her to his guests. Stereotypically, it was natural to assume any queen would be beautiful. However, the text suggests there might have been an unstated qualitative disparity between Vashti's beauty and Esther's. Vashti



was presented as countering Ahasuerus' request to appear before him at his banquet (1:12). His advisors also cast aspersions on her actions (1:16-19). No favorable comment appeared about Vashti's personality. Esther's physical appearance was noted indirectly as the qualifications were listed for the new queen: a fair and young virgin, a maiden of beautiful form (2:2-4). She was also to be more worthy than Vashti (1:19). This qualitative contrast was significant in the presentation of the two women. Perhaps Vashti's beauty was more striking and harsher, to complement her behavior. If so, Esther would have been of a lovelier countenance, perhaps suggesting a more submissive and/or wholesome personality as well.

The literary scheme of pairing the two women continued when Esther, in a position of power, acted with modesty and reserve, championing her people in trying to rescue them. While Vashti's refusal to appear before the king was regarded as a major violation of protocol and she was ejected from her royal position, Esther's initial balking at Mordecai's command that she go before the king unsummoned, was not highlighted as noncompliance, flagrant, or even a minor infraction. Esther capitulated, did as she was told, and dramatically became the heroine.

## 2. Esther the Jewess and Queen

Esther attracted the favorable attention of Hegai, the keeper of the women, and obtained unsought favors from him as she prepared to meet Ahasuerus. In fact, all who saw Esther found her agreeable and pleasing. Frequently the noun **'ayin** appeared in the text as Esther was described: "If I have found favor in the eyes of the

king" (5:8) and "Esther found favor in the eyes of all who saw her" (2:15). At a most crucial moment in the scroll, as Esther stood unsummoned before the king, "she found favor in his eyes" (5:2). The root 'ayin was further employed at the two banquets Esther tended for the king and his wicked advisor, Haman (5:8 and 7:3). I hypothesize that, whereas Vashti would not appear to be seen by the king and his guests, Esther was seen on numerous occasions. The importance of not granting a request to be seen, was contrasted with the necessity of being seen favorably and having requests granted!

Earlier themes were woven into Esther's story, most notably the motif of obedience and authority. Both Vashti and Esther disobeyed King Ahasuerus, the former by not responding to a summons to appear before him, the latter by going to him unsummoned. It was ironic that Vashti lost her position as queen by her act of insubordination; Esther, risking death, saved her people from extermination by her decision to go to the king unbidden on two occasions (5:1 and 8:4). It would seem Vashti was punished severely because she was a role model to other women in the realm; therefore, when the king's advisors counselled she be dethroned, it was because they were afraid their own wives would defy them. This harsh advice cast a stigma on these men, I think, showing their personal and private insecurity and the possibility that they were misogynists in their outlook. And yet, after Esther came unbidden, she was accepted and welcomed by the king; no disapproval was recorded by anyone in the court.

### 3. Esther and Mordecai

A major element in the relationship between Esther and Mordecai involved the theme of obedience and disobedience. While submission was shown by Esther when she obeyed Mordecai by not divulging to Hegai and Ahasuerus that she was a Jewess, she became the more assertive person, able to prompt the king to solve her people's dilemma. An interesting byplay surfaced when Esther, risking death, went unsummoned to Ahasuerus (5:1). Appearing unbidden, Esther was being insubordinate to the king, yet, at the same time, she was subordinate to Mordecai. This subtle interplay placed Esther in a dual position: obedient to the man who had reared and taught her, and challenging her husband's authority.

### 4. Esther the strategist

Esther's shrewdness was paramount when she chose the psychologically correct moment to reveal Haman's plot to kill the Jews, and to state that her life was also endangered. She also knew, perhaps intuitively, about mob psychology, sensing that if Haman's already dead sons were impaled in public view, the Jews' enemies would feel threatened and not attack.

Esther's respect for Mordecai was deep, and colored her actions in the palace. She obeyed his command not to divulge her genealogy. There was an implication that she kept true to her faith while married, trying to adhere to Mordecai's teachings (2:20). Finally, she had earned the king's trust for he offered her up to one half the kingdom (5:3, 6 and 7:2) when he observed her distress.

## B. Esther in Jewish Bible Interpretation

### 1. The character of Esther

Exegetical comments primarily emphasized Esther's physical appearance, connecting her demeanor with personality traits, and relating both to her effect on Ahasuerus. Josephus stressed that Esther "surpassed all women in beauty, and the grace of her countenance greatly attracted the eyes of all who beheld her"<sup>1</sup> (Josephus' *Antiquities* 6, p. 411). In the Babylonian Talmud, a comparison was made between Vashti and Median and Persian women, each of whom possessed the most beautiful women; nevertheless, Ahasuerus charged that Vashti was the most beautiful (Meg. 12b). If then Esther was to be fairer yet, it must be assumed that her appearance would have been spectacular. Esther found favor in the eyes of all who beheld her (2:15). R. Judah said she resembled a statue viewed by a thousand people all of whom esteemed her. When placed between Median and Persian women, Esther was more beautiful than all of them (Est. R. ch. 6). She manifested the quality of grace (Ex. R. 36,6).

Esther was also known as one of the world's four most exceptionally stunning women, the other three being Sarah, Abigail, and Rahab (Meg. 15a). Rav said she could satisfy Ahasuerus both as a virgin and as a non-virgin (Meg. 13a). "The king loved Esther more than any of the women and he found her more desirable than any

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<sup>1</sup> Josephus. Vol. 6. *Antiquities, Books IX-XI*, edited by Ralph Marcus (London: William Heinemann, 1966).

of the virgins."<sup>2</sup>

That the maiden was beautiful in appearance, was reiterated in The First Targum (2:17) when the impression she made upon the king was vividly understood: Ahasuerus, recognizing her compassion and goodness, loved her more than all his other wives. He replaced the statue of Vashti which was in his bedroom with a statue of Esther, and, by placing a crown on her head, he made her queen. The salient point was Esther's behavior as a queen was the same as it had been when living with Mordecai (ibid. 2:20). A variant comment was that Ahasuerus, when he chose Esther for his queen, recognizing her lineage and virtue, removed Vashti's portrait from his room (Est. R. ch. 6).

Targumic, talmudic, and midrashic sources, and classical exegetes defined her name in terms of her physical appearance and personality traits. The Hebrew word hadas or myrtle signified a righteous individual (Meg. 13a, San. 93a, First Targum 2:7, and Second Targum ch. 7). Her righteousness was further praised: "she remained the same in her youth and in her old age, and never ceased from doing good."<sup>3</sup> Alsheikh (Moses Alsheikh, died c. 1593; born in Greece, resided in Israel) (2:7) elaborated on Esther's name, connecting it with the myrtle, and praising her: as the myrtle was a coniferous tree, always green, so Esther was always a righteous and religious person. As she was raised and acted in Mordecai's home, was how she behaved in Ahasuerus'

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<sup>2</sup> Yaakov Culi, Yalkut MeAm Lo'ez. The Torah Anthology. The Book of Esther, trans. by Aryeh Kaplan (New York: Maznaim, 1978) p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> Bernard Grossfeld, The Targum to the Five Megilloth (New York: Sepher-Hermon, 1973) pp. 126-127.

palace. In other words, whatever qualities she learned from Mordecai, living as an orphan in his home, she continued to exemplify when she became a queen.

Esther, or Hadassah, was likened to a myrtle which smells sweet but tastes bitter, that is, she was sweet to Mordecai but bitter to Haman (Est. R. ch. 6). In this commentary, no other reasons were given for her name. Ben Azzai said the average height myrtle tree connoted she, too, was of average size (Meg. 13a). R. Joshua b. Korcha also compared her to a myrtle, referring to her greenish or sallow complexion, and asserting she was beautiful nevertheless because she had charm and grace. This God-given quality enhanced her beauty in the eyes of the nation and the king (Meg. 13a).

The heroine was known as Esther, because she concealed her origins from the king as Mordecai had enjoined her to do (Meg. 13a). The First Targum's reason differed from the Talmud: "They called her Esther because she was concealed in the home of Mordekhai for seventy-five years where she saw no man's face except that of Mordekhai who became her mentor..."<sup>4</sup> Another reason she was called Esther, according to R. Nehemiah, was to identify her with the beautiful moon (Meg. 13a).

A further comment about Esther's name was: "Probably Hadassah was her Hebrew name, and Esther a Persian name, perhaps given to her when she became queen. Hadassah is derived from the Hebrew word for a 'myrtle'; and Esther is variously derived from the Persian *stara*, i. e. star, or from the name of the

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<sup>4</sup> Grossfeld, The First Targum to Esther. According to the MS Paris Hebrew 110 of the Bibliothèque Nationale (New York: Sepher-Hermon, 1983), p. 45.

Babylonian goddess Ishtar (Hebrew **Ashtoreth**).<sup>5</sup>

Esther's personality traits were evident when she was "forcibly taken and brought to the king's house. And the maiden pleased him and gained his favor"<sup>6</sup> (First Targum 2:8-9). When Esther came before the king "she obtained favor and found compassion in the sight of all who saw her"<sup>7</sup> (*ibid.* 2:15). When brought before the king, he "loved her more than all the wives whom he had taken, and she obtained compassion and favor"<sup>8</sup> (*ibid.* 2:17), grace and love (P. R. E. 49, p. 395). The point being stressed was that all the other young virgins eagerly anticipated their time with Ahasuerus and hoped to be chosen queen, while Esther had to be coerced to go to him (First Targum 2:8). This duress provided a loophole for her having to marry Ahasuerus.

Yosef Lekah (2:8) averred that Esther was forcibly taken to Ahasuerus after she had been hidden from his messengers. Rashi (2:17) stated that virgins as well as married women appeared before the king in order for him to choose Vashti's successor. Therefore, when he loved her more than all the other women, the assumption was that her beauty exceeded that of **all** women, not simply all the virgins.

The Babylonian Talmud had superlative descriptions of Esther's appearance

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<sup>5</sup> A. Cohen, ed., The Five Megilloth (London: Soncino, 1946) p. 203.

<sup>6</sup> Grossfeld, The First Targum, p. 46.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

and personality. She held the distinction of being one of seven prophetesses, the others being Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, and Huldah (Meg. 14a). Further proof for her being unique was her clothing herself in royalty, understood as being equivalent to the Divine Spirit (Meg. 14b).

Esther was endowed with the Divine Spirit, as a result of which she found favor in the eyes of all who beheld her (Meg. 7a). To reinforce the element of the Divine, Mordecai and Esther said the Hallel prayer and God replied to them (Pes. 117a). (As seen earlier, Deborah also was the recipient of the Divine Spirit.)

Esther's ascendancy to queen presented a contrast to Vashti's banishment from the throne. Vashti was certainly beautiful, yet Esther was even more so. In contrasting their personalities, Vashti was an evil woman, descended from Nebuchadnezzar, who was punished, while Esther's lineage was an honored one and she, being virtuous, became a queen and would serve to rescue her people from death (Meg. 10b).

The subtle interplay between Vashti and Esther was missing in Esther Rabbah,<sup>9</sup> and descriptions of the latter woman were paltry. A comparison between Vashti and Esther was made by stressing that Vashti made a feast as Ahasuerus had done. Rabbi Joshua b. Korcha accented that it was to let us know of the great wealth that would become Esther's when she became queen (Est. R. ch. 3). In other words, knowledge of Vashti's wealth as evidenced by the feast she hosted, would be

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<sup>9</sup> The material cited from this source is from Midrash Rabbah 'al Hamishah Humshei Torah Ve-hameish Megillot, Issachar ben Naphtali HaCohen, ed. (New York: Horeb, 1924).



an indication of what her successor would inherit.

Rashi (2:1) did not provide further amplification on Esther's appearance other than by implication, that is, where the Bible said Ahasuerus remembered Vashti's beauty, causing him sadness, the inference was that her successor would have to be at least of equal beauty in order to appeal to Ahasuerus.

Generally, Vashti was presented in a negative light, the first instance being her refusal to appear before Ahasuerus and his guests, thereby inciting his anger. Secondly, she was perceived as a haughty person because of the way she treated her handmaidens, i. e., she made her Jewish maidservants work naked (Meg. 12b) on the Sabbath. A sense of pride motivated her actions implying she did not want the people to think her beholden to Ahasuerus. She had her own feast for the women, equal to his, so she could demonstrate she was of noble lineage and not fully reliant on her husband; perhaps she was even greater than he (Alsheikh 1:11)! When later Esther was chosen to succeed Vashti, the nobleness of Esther's character would be in significant contrast to her predecessor.

When Vashti was ousted from her position as queen, Ahasuerus' advisors suggested requirements for a new queen to possess: she must be a virgin, beautiful, obliging, and must be taken by force so as to exhibit humbleness and contrition (*ibid.*, 2:3). Such requirements set the stage for what Esther's appearance and actions would be. In the course of events, while Ahasuerus' mandate was simply to replace Vashti, when he saw Esther his love for her was immediate and he crowned her at

once (Yosef Lekah 2:22 and 5:3).<sup>10</sup>

A moral lesson was gleaned from the manner in which Esther prepared herself prior to meeting the king. When Esther had left Hegai's care to go before the king, she needed nothing extra to take with her. "This is an important lesson. Esther did not depend on her beauty, but she was able to save an entire nation through it. Vashti, on the other hand, did depend on her beauty, but it could not even save her from death" (Yosef Lekah 2:15).<sup>11</sup>

Malbim spoke in superlative terms about Ahasuerus' love for Esther, and her grace and goodness which exceeded all the competitors for the throne. As Ahasuerus thought about selecting a new queen, he remembered Vashti's favorable characteristics and wondered how he would be able to duplicate them in her successor. He thought Vashti was a beautiful woman of fine pedigree and important (2:2). So, too, the new queen would have to have the same qualities. She would have to be different from Vashti by not disgracing the king but rather being respectful to him (*ibid.*). When Esther went unbidden to the king after her three day fast, her splendor was evident to every one and Ahasuerus' love for her was exceeded by his wonder at her modesty and her deference (5:2).

Targum Shenj posited that Esther was described as a descendant of Sarah because God said: "He will in the future take Esther to wife, who is a descendant of

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<sup>10</sup> The material cited from the writings of Yosef Lekah is from Megillat Esther im Peirush HaGra Ha-shalem im Peirush Rashi Ve-sefer Yosef Lekah, edited by Hanan David Isaac Noble (Jerusalem: Yeshivat Tifereth Ha-Talmud, 1991).

<sup>11</sup> Culi, Esther, p. 64.

Sarah that lived a hundred and twenty-seven years, so she shall rule over a hundred and twenty-seven provinces"<sup>12</sup> (see also Est. R. ch. 1, and Gen. R. 58,3). Esther Rabbah (ch. 10) made a linkage between Esther and Benjamin, averring that she was his descendant. In Jacob's blessing to his son Benjamin, he referred to him as a wolf (Gen. 49:27). Genesis Rabbah (99,3) said that, as a wolf seizes, Esther seized the kingdom.

Esther was compared with Rachel in terms of their keeping quiet under difficult circumstances: Rachel kept silent when Jacob was married to Leah, and Esther kept silent at Mordecai's request, not divulging information regarding her lineage and people (Est. R. ch. 6). Finally, Esther was credited with bringing light to Israel (Ex. R. 15,7) and redeeming Israel (Est. R. ch. 10) as well.

Esther's age at the time she was presented to Ahasuerus, caused speculation among the rabbis. Rab said she was forty, Samuel surmised eighty, and the Babylonian rabbis averred she was seventy-five as did R. Berekiah who, using a gematria based on her name (Hadassah), also posited the age of seventy-five (Gen. R. 39:13).

Other dynamics in the relationship between Esther and Ahasuerus were commented on when Esther went to him without being summoned. Esther fainted when she entered the king's presence, and he showed the utmost solicitousness toward her, assuring her "she, who was a queen, as well as he a king, might be

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<sup>12</sup> Grossfeld, The Targum to the Five Megillot, p. 93.

entirely secure...<sup>13</sup> The import of this statement was that she need have no fear of appearing before him unsummoned. Another accolade he gave was to refer to her as "the partner of my life, and of my dominion..."<sup>14</sup>

When Esther learned of the decree to kill her people, she suffered greatly. The midrash explained her pain as coming from a miscarriage that she experienced at that moment. While some rabbis posited she never had a child after this incident, R. Judah b. R. Simon claimed that she bore Darius to Ahasuerus, and this son inherited purity from Esther and was defiled from Ahasuerus (Est. R. ch. 8). Earlier, when she had seen Mordecai garbed in sackcloth and ashes, "her reaction to this sign of trouble for her people was so intense that she virtually melted inside, causing a physiological eruption of either menstruation or acute abdominal stress."<sup>15</sup>

Yosef Lekah (8:3) spoke of the second time Esther approached King Ahasuerus unbidden, pleading for her people. He used the opportunity to draw a moral from the incident, namely Esther, saying her people's suffering was her suffering, beseeched him to help her people even though she was not worthy of his favors.

Later in the scroll, when Esther received permission from Ahasuerus to write a letter to her people to tell them to join together and defend themselves, the author of Targum Sheni remarked with irony, I believe, that she who was to sanction "that

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<sup>13</sup> Cohen, Five Megilloth, p. 180.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 187.

<sup>15</sup> Mendel Weinbach, 127 Insights into Megillas Esther (Michigan: Targum Press, 1990) p.110.

righteous men should be killed, and much innocent blood should be shed of people who have neither done any evil nor were guilty of death, but were rather righteous...is famous for all virtues...and there is no blemish to be found in [her] nor in [her] people."<sup>16</sup> In addition, Targum Sheni (2:20) averred, she was as humble or modest while she was queen as she had been when Mordecai raised her.

## 2. Esther the Jewess and Queen

The contradiction involved when Esther became Ahasuerus' wife presented Bible interpreters with fundamental questions: How could Esther's marriage and co-habitation with a non-Jew be justified? How did she observe the Sabbath and dietary laws in the palace? To prove she had fealty to her faith, the commentators would necessarily have to give examples demonstrating how she continued to observe her religion's dictates. To accept her marriage to Ahasuerus, they would have to seek a high and noble reason for the union, or they could choose not to deal with these issues, thereby avoiding crucial concerns raised by the Bible.

The First Targum stated: "Sabbaths and Festivals she would observe; during the days of separation she watched herself, cooked dishes and wine of the gentile nations she did not taste and all the religious precepts which the women of Israel were commanded she observed by order of Mordekhai, just as she observed (them) when she grew up with him."<sup>17</sup> In other words, she continued to observe the

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<sup>16</sup> Grossfeld, Five Megilloth, p. 165.

<sup>17</sup> Grossfeld, First Targum, p. 48.

Sabbaths and festivals and kept family purity and dietary laws. Mordecai sat in the courtyard "to see that Esther and maidens should not become defiled by any kind of unclean food" (P. R. E. ch. 50, p. 397).

To help her observe the Sabbath, The First Targum (2:9) averred that Hegai gave her seven handmaidens, each of whom served her on a given day. The implication was, when a particular maid waited on her, she would know it was the Sabbath and behave accordingly (2:9). Rava was more explicit when he said Esther was given seven servants to be able to keep track of the Sabbath (Meg. 13a). The assumption was that her six day a week routine would be varied on the Sabbath.

The rabbis of the Talmud also described how Esther remained an observant Jew while in the palace. To solve the problem of what she should eat, she became a vegetarian: Hegai, the keeper of the harem took special care of Esther, Rav said, by giving her food she could eat, i. e., kosher food that she had been used to eating in Mordecai's house. This type of food, additionally, would maintain her beauty and her health (cf. Daniel 1:8, 11-12, and 16). Others said she was fed pork<sup>18</sup> which she ate under duress (Shmuel) and edible seeds and lentils (R. Yoḥanan) (Meg. 13a).

Rabbi Naḥman of Breslov remarked about Esther's effect on the palace and her observances (2:9): as a result of Esther's finding special favor with Hegai, she "received exceptional privileges from him. He was quick to provide her with cosmetics and diet. The seven handmaidens chosen for her were from the king's

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<sup>18</sup> The talmudic term kadlei dahazirei is subject to different interpretations and may refer to pork or a green vegetable like lettuce.

palace. He lodged her and her handmaidens in the finest accommodations of the harem."<sup>19</sup> When Hegai furnished Esther with special food and the seven handmaidens, the implication was that her religious needs were being accommodated.

Alsheikh also wrote about the unique relationship which Esther had with Hegai. Esther was in Hegai's charge, and he helped her in several ways, having singled her out as the woman most likely to be chosen queen. His actions toward her were as though she already was the king's choice. He catered to her spiritual needs by having allowed her to eat a vegetarian diet without questioning her as to her reasons for doing so (2:7).

Ibn Ezra (2:10) opined that Esther guarded information related to her people because, by remaining secretive, she could practice dictates of her faith without anyone comprehending her actions. If people knew of her background she might be unable to perform her observances.

The rabbis said she observed the rules of **niddah** by going to the Sages to clarify her menstrual situation. Rabbah bar Lima said Esther left Ahasuerus' bed during that period, returned to Mordecai, and immersed herself properly after her menstrual flow. She was permitted to return to Mordecai after having lain with Ahasuerus, because she had been forced to co-habit with him (Meg. 13b).

Esther defended herself and her relationship with Ahasuerus when she told Mordecai: "I have been praying for thirty days that the king should not ask for me

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<sup>19</sup> Yehoshua Starret, Esther. A Breslov Commentary on the Megillah (Jerusalem: Breslov Research Institutem 1992) p. 21.

and cause me to sin; for as I was trained by thee, thou didst say to me, that every woman of the daughters of Israel who of her own free will cohabit with a heathen, has no part among the tribes of Israel" <sup>20</sup> (Targum Sheni 4:11). By expressing her feelings about being the coerced wife of a gentile, the targum writers may have been trying to camouflage the seriousness of her marriage, that is, by praying she would not be summoned to co-habit with Ahasuerus, she was signifying her distaste for being his wife. Her argument to Mordecai was that until now she had fervently hoped not to be summoned; if she went unbidden now, it meant she went willingly. Such an act would truly be a sin. Rashi (4:16) concurred, adding that Esther avowed she would likewise be lost to Mordecai.

Malbim (4:11) offered a variation on the Esther-Mordecai dialogue: when Mordecai urged Esther strongly to go to the king, she replied saying that, since she had not been to the king for some time, he would probably be calling for her soon. She, therefore, wanted to delay going to him for she felt she could better plead her case if she went to him after being invited to do so.

The Talmud proposed two contradictory opinions about Esther's marriage. The first found her faultless because she did not respond to the king's physical overtures (San. 74b). Another tractate conveyed Esther's guiltiness:

R. Zera said: Why was Esther compared to a hind? To tell you that just as a hind has a narrow womb and is desirable to her mate at all times as at the first time, so was Esther precious to King Ahasuerus at all times as at

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<sup>20</sup> Grossfeld, Targum to the Five Megilloth, p. 145.



the first time.<sup>21</sup>

It became very important to interpreters to convince themselves that Esther remained chaste when she became the wife of a gentile. Rabbi Nachman emphasized that

Esther...had to dissociate to the point of numbing her senses. In no way did she want pleasure from Achashverosh, not even "non-desired" pleasure. So by deep yearning for God and complete nullification, she reached a state of total separation (Likutey Halakhot 4:24). And though the Dybbuk remained within Esther's body to please instinctively the sensual Achashverosh, Esther herself...her intentions...her thoughts...her soul...were completely removed and inaccessible to Achashverosh (Etz Chaim, Sha'ar Klipat Nogah 4-5: Ma'amar HaNefesh II:3).<sup>22</sup>

God's name was not used in the biblical text, but translations included Esther beseeching the divinity.<sup>23</sup> Esther fasted along with her people, made preparations to garb herself in royalty, and entered the king's presence. She prayed to God to be the vehicle through which her people would be saved. Recalling events in her people's history during which God's presence was manifested, she beseeched God to help her save her people (Targum Sheni 5:1 and C. J. 80,2, p. 239).

In Josephus' version, too, God was present:

And Esther...supplicated God in the manner of her

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<sup>21</sup> Tractate Yoma (London: Soncino) p. 136.

<sup>22</sup> Starrett, p. 35.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. the Greek Additions to Esther, i. e., Addition C: "The Prayer of Mordecai," "The Prayer of Queen Esther," and Addition D: "Esther Appears Before the King Unsummoned" in The Anchor Bible. Esther, trans. by Carey A. Moore (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1971) pp. 105-108.

country, throwing herself on the ground and putting on a mourner's dress and refusing all food and drink and comforts; and for three days she begged God to take pity on her and grant that, when she appeared before the king, her words might seem persuasive as she pleaded, and her person be more beautiful than ever before in order that she might use both these means to turn aside the king's anger...and be an advocate for her countrymen who were tottering on the brink of disaster (Josephus, *Antiquities*, Vol. 6, p. 427).

The Babylonian Talmud, recognizing that Esther was worthy of God's help, illustrated this point by describing Esther going unsummoned to the king and becoming ridden with fright so that she could not walk. Angels had to intervene and elongate the scepter until it touched her (Meg. 15b).

Esther took on the responsibility of trying to save her people. Frightened because of the edict to kill her people, she dressed in mourning clothes of sackcloth and ashes, fasted, prostrated herself, and prayed to the God of Israel to bless her in her attempt to rescue her people (Est. R. ch. 8 and C. J. 80,1, pp. 238-239).

Adorned in royalty and splendor, she went before the king unsummoned (C. J. 80,4, p. 240). In his presence, her composure slipped and, as she swooned, God changed Ahasuerus' heart from anger to compassion and he rushed to help her and assure her that she need not be afraid (*ibid.* 80,5, p. 240). When questioned as to why she was so frightened, she dissembled and said that, when she saw him and beheld his splendor and majesty, she became alarmed (Est. R. ch. 9). God "added beauty to her beauty and majesty to her majesty" (C. J. 80,5, p. 240), and the king then rushed to help and reassure her, saying she was "the queen, my friend and companion" (*ibid.*, 80,5, p. 240). A very simplistic explanation was given of Esther's

appearing before the king: "On the third day (of the fast) Esther put on the royal apparel, and sent and invited the king and Haman to the banquet which she had prepared" (P. R. E. 50, p. 401).

### 3. Esther and Mordecai

The Bible described Esther as the daughter of Mordecai's uncle, bat dodo (2:7). Some commentators said that the word bat should really be read bayit, as though there was a yod--that the two words had coalesced. This interpretation made a divergent reading, and altered considerably the relationship of the heroine and hero. One Tanna taught that this shift in wording indicated that Esther married and became his wife. The Gemara enjoined the reader to recognize that daughter (bat) can mean home or wife (bayit), the result being that Mordecai took Esther as his home, or wife (Meg. 13a). Rashi later echoed this interpretation.

The First Targum (2:7) augmented the Bible, explaining that Esther's father had died during her mother's pregnancy, her mother died in childbirth, and her cousin Mordecai took her to his house and called her his daughter (also Meg. 13a). Targum Sheni (2:8) described Mordecai's fear for Esther when the king's messengers were searching the land for Vashti's replacement. When he heard that the emissaries were coming, he hid Esther in a summer house hoping she would not be found. When Esther arrived at the palace, she did not divulge her ancestry and her faith, because Mordecai had ordered her to keep this information a secret (2:10). Malbim opined that, by not disclosing her family history, she incurred the ire of both Hegai

and Ahasuerus.

As Mordecai had cared for Esther since her birth, and made her welfare part of his ongoing concern so, too, when she entered the palace, he watched from the gate and kept a daily vigil over her to learn of her welfare, and inquire about her menstrual cycle (Est. R. ch. 6). He pondered how his righteous cousin could have been married to a non-Jew and rationalized that Esther would be in a position to save Israel when a catastrophe would beset her in the future (Est. R. 6, 10, Mekh. Tractate Amalek 2, p. 157). He also was leery about witchcraft being practised on her (Est. R. ch. 6). Rashi, in commenting on verse 2:11, said that there had to be a purpose in Esther's being taken to Ahasuerus' bed, namely, she would arise in the future to bring salvation to Israel.

Rabbi Naḥman of Breslov made an association between Esther's relationship with Mordecai and her maintaining her Judaic practices. He avowed that Esther obeyed "because wherever she went he was with her--if not in body, in spirit, in faith."<sup>24</sup> In writing further of their bond, the Rebbe, relying on Megillah 13b, said: "And in 'Esther'--the Jewish soul--he planted a deep awareness of her greatness, so that even when called by 'Achashverosh,' she remains 'faithful to Mordekhai'--she remains Jewish."<sup>25</sup> Mordecai was credited with providing Esther with an education involving religious practices and the veneration of God (Yosef Lekah 2:7). The strength of their relationship and the depth of education that Esther had received

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<sup>24</sup> Starret, p. 27.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

from Mordecai, was evident when she maintained her Jewish practices in the palace<sup>26</sup> (P. R. 12,8, Vol. 1, p. 233).

The dynamics of authority and obedience between Mordecai and Esther were altered when she became queen. She began to assert her influence and, early during her reign, Mordecai began to sit "among the Sanhedrin which Esther had established for him"<sup>27</sup> (2:21). When Mordecai dictated to Esther that she go to plead before the king on behalf of her people, Esther was able to counter his demand with her own thinking and needs. When she capitulated, it was on her own terms, and Mordecai obeyed her stipulations (Meg. 15a). After receiving instructions, Mordecai proceeded to do everything Esther had commanded.

Esther did not acquiesce immediately when told by Mordecai that she must go to the king in order to save her people. Targum Sheni (ch. 9) included an aggadic supplement that gave a glimpse into Esther's mind, allowing the reader to understand that she was truly cognizant of her position with the king, and how its negative reverberations affected Mordecai and her people. She fully comprehended that, by going unsummoned to Ahasuerus, she would be offering herself to him rather than having been coerced until this time into having a sexual relationship with him.

A variant interpretation read: Esther incurred Mordecai's anger for responding that she had not been summoned by Ahasuerus; she should have immediately told him she would go and he should fast and pray for her. When she changed her mind,

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<sup>26</sup> Grossfeld, First Targum, p. 48.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

Mordecai "acted forgivingly toward her" (T. E., p. 44).

Esther Rabbah contains a dialogue between Esther and Mordecai when she requested of him that her people fast for three days. When challenging her because one fast day coincided with the first day of Passover, she countered by reminding him that, if no Jews were left (should Haman's plan be executed), there would be no Passover. Convinced, Mordecai carried out her commands (Est. R. ch. 8 and P. R. E. 50, p. 401), providing the turning point in their elder/younger and citizen/queen relationship. This pattern of obedience was sustained in the remainder of the scroll.

Esther and Mordecai worked in concert to save their people, the two of them being God's agents who would rescue their people (Meg. 11a). When Esther's ancestry was divulged and Mordecai was recognized as her relative, Esther handed over Haman's estate to Mordecai (Meg. 10b). In speaking about Mordecai and his status under Ahasuerus, a comment using the symbol of a wolf linked Mordecai together with Esther: Haman was referred to a wolf and his spoils were divided up between Esther and Mordecai who had saved their people (Est. R. ch. 10).

Two sources (P. R. K. 5,18, p. 120 and P. R. 15,25, Vol. 1, pp. 339-340) opined that Exodus (12:3) presaged the redemption of Israel by Esther and Mordecai, he from outside the palace and she from inside the palace: "And the Lord brought about that great salvation through Queen Esther and Mordecai" (C. J. 8, p. 241).

A final aspect of the relationship between Esther and Mordecai was their connection with God. An interesting vignette showed Esther's joy at the sight of Haman leading a horse upon which Mordecai sat through the streets. She expressed

her gladness and thanksgiving to God, declaring to Mordecai how God had raised him up. Further, Esther and Mordecai were hungry for God's word, and their religiosity surfaced when they "took Haman's power away not with weapons nor by blocking it with a shield, but with prayers and supplications to the Lord" (P. R. K. 8,2, p. 159 and P. R. 18,3, Vol. 1, p. 385).

#### 4. Esther the strategist

Esther's development through the pages of the scroll was chronicled on two levels: her physical maturity or appearance allowed her to be chosen queen, her mental and emotional evolution enabled her to save her people. Her mental growth provided commentators with the chance to practice the art of mimesis, i. e., filling in gaps or silences inherent in biblical narratives and, by doing this, providing seriousness as expected and levity or humor, also. An example of mimesis involved Esther's machinations, adding levity to the otherwise serious nature of this story. Prior to Haman leading Mordecai through the streets to honor him, Esther had the bathhouse attendants and barbers constrained so that Haman himself had to perform these mundane tasks for Mordecai personally, thereby debasing himself in his own image (Meg. 16a and Est. R. ch. 8). Whether Esther's actions were spiteful or vindictive, they had a most negative effect on Haman, yet provided a jocular ambience.

Esther's reliance upon God, pointed out by the First Targum, was related to her strategy when speaking with the king. In 5:2, her beseeching God found an

instant answer as King Ahasuerus held out his scepter to her. In 7:3, when she used the word melekh (king) twice, the targum posited that each of these times she was really addressing God on high, and God of the Universe. Ironically, Ahasuerus, not realizing this, thought she was speaking to him in glorified language.

Yosef Lekah (7:3) asserted that Esther had two levels of request: first, in order to attract Ahasuerus' attention she'eilati meant she asked that her own life be spared. Secondly, baqashati, a more emphatic way of making a request, was employed to plead for her people. Esther had a hierarchical order in forming her request, the first word being connected to herself and going to the emotional edge, the second entreaty being a step removed, yet linked as well to Esther's fate.

In responding to Mordecai's request that she go before the king, Rashi (4:6) used the Babylonian Talmud interpretation (Meg. 15a) stating that Esther was concerned not so much that she would die, as her being denied to Mordecai thereafter if she went willingly to Ahasuerus.

Again, in Targum Sheni (5:8), the reader gleaned insight into her thinking. In inviting the king to come to a dinner, Esther also included Haman and did so for three reasons. The first reason was an expansion of the Bible text, aggadic in nature: knowing that Haman wished to murder Hatach for having been the messenger from Esther to Mordecai, she hoped to appease Haman with her invitation. Secondly, she hoped to arouse Ahasuerus' jealousy toward Haman as a result of Haman's being the only other person invited to the feast. The third reason was somewhat convoluted, with Esther thinking as follows: "The eyes of all Israel are directed towards me, that



I should request the king to kill Haman; I will therefore invite him to the banquet, in order that the heart of Israel may be changed and directed to the heavenly Father to ask for mercy from him."<sup>28</sup>

The Babylonian Talmud elaborated on Esther's motives positing several alleged reasons for inviting Haman to join the king and herself at her banquet (Meg. 15b). This showed an intelligent woman calculating the best scenario to save her people. A number of rabbis (Meg. 15b) put forth reasons for Esther's actions toward Haman, and the prophet Elijah said he agreed with them all. Some of the suppositions were: R. Eliezer said she tried to entrap him. R. Yehoshua averred that, from her father's house she learned that if your enemy is hungry, feed him bread. R. Meir posited she was afraid lest he rebel. R. Yehudah said she invited him, so as to trick him from thinking she was a Jewess. R. Yose avowed that Esther wanted him near all the time. R. Joshua ben Korcha said she would smile at Haman inferring that they had a liaison, and Ahasuerus would kill them both. R. Gamliel thought she believed Ahasuerus had a changeable mind; therefore, if Ahasuerus became greatly angered at Haman and wanted to kill him, he could do it immediately and not have the opportunity to change his mind. The overriding reason was that Esther wanted the king and all the courtiers to become jealous of Haman. Rashi (5:4) echoed the theme of jealousy.

More reasons were given for Esther's invitation to Haman: first, she did not want Ahasuerus to think she hated Haman; she only wanted the king to help save her

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<sup>28</sup> Grossfeld, Five Megilloth, p. 152.

people. Secondly, she wanted to catch Haman unaware so that he could not easily defend himself (Malbim 5:4). When the king would come to her feast and become inebriated as he was when Vashti was killed, "Perhaps it will be possible to turn his drunken rage against Haman."<sup>29</sup> (Yosef Lekah 5:4). Further, Esther tried to have the king annul the edict to kill the Jews by explaining that the edict was not irreversible; the king had not originated it, rather Haman had (Yosef Lekah 8:5). Esther continued to plead for her own good health and comfort that hinged on Ahasuerus' heeding her request and rescinding the edict. Should he not, she would find no peace because her people would be murdered, or, if left alive, they would be tormented (Yosef Lekah 8:6).

Targum Sheni (ch. 11) amplified Esther's request to have Haman and his dead sons impaled for a length of time on stakes. When Haman's supporters challenged her and faulted her for being inhumane, referring to a law reading that a body may not remain on a tree for the night, Esther countered by citing the biblical incident when King Saul and his sons hung on gallows (1 Sam. 31:10-12). While this targum did not give Esther's reason for having the enemy hang for all to see, my supposition is that her enemy, seeing their leader and his sons impaled, would feel duly chastened and might lessen their own aggression against the Jews. In a similar vein, what Esther really wanted was to unnerve the Jews' enemies (Malbim 9:13). What these commentaries asserted was that Esther thought out and carefully planned her moves so as to achieve her aim and therefore the deliverance of her people.

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<sup>29</sup> Culi, Esther, p. 119.

## 5. General Observations about Esther in Rabbinic Literature

The image of Esther, emerging from Josephus, the targumic and midrashic sources, and the Babylonian Talmud, was a portrait of a beautiful and righteous woman. These two characteristics echoed the Scroll of Esther (2:7,17) and found expression in the interpretation of her name, likening her to the hadassah or myrtle and thereby ascribing various traits to her. Such an interpretive device can become superficial by forcing attributes from one category into another, often making the comparison droll and not substantive.

The exegetical emphasis on Esther's superlative beauty and grace suggested that a queen's primary requisite was her physical bearing. The Second Targum and the Babylonian Talmud wrote of her noble lineage, while Esther Rabbah speculated about her age. The Talmud amplified Esther's traits, highlighting her possession of the Divine Spirit, and her revered status as a prophetess.

Early rabbinic literature presented an apologetic tone for Esther's actions whether it was her marrying a gentile or how, under very difficult and public circumstances, she maintained her integrity in pursuing her religious ideals. Later individual commentators sometimes skirted the issues by relying on previous sources, or focused their attention on Esther's beauty and how King Ahasuerus was effected by her physical appearance and personality traits. Esther Rabbah did not comment on Esther's seven handmaidens, her diet, and the issue of her intermarriage. To whitewash the issue of Esther marrying Ahasuerus, The First Targum stated she was impelled to go to the palace (2:8).

The commentators centered on the relationship between Esther and Mordecai, and addressed the issue of whether Esther was Mordecai's "daughter" or "wife." If she was the latter, problems arose which questioned how she could have been taken from him and given as a virgin to the king. This point was raised and the rationale was that she went unwillingly; therefore, she could return at a later time to Mordecai (cf. 1 Sam. 25:44 and 2 Sam. 3:14-16).

Midrashim filled out textual gaps by writing a dialogue between Esther and Mordecai when he commanded her to go to the king to plead for their people. I believe the interpretation showed her to be an astute thinker and able bargainer.

#### C. Esther in Jewish Educational Materials

Information about Esther was found primarily in educational materials about Purim, whereas books on the other women were limited to Bible-related texts. The plays and musicals depicting aspects of the story of Esther and the customs observed on Purim<sup>30</sup> will not be examined in this paper. Disappointingly, in a popular book

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<sup>30</sup> Ray M. Cook, All Aboard for Shushan. A Purim Musical Revue (Cincinnati: Bureau of Jewish Education, n. d.; Ray M. Cook, "Purim-Ba-Loo." A New Sing-for-Fun Purim Music Review (Cincinnati: Bureau of Jewish Education, n. d.; Ray M. Cook, The Tax Collector of Teplitz. A Purim Comedy (Cincinnati: Bureau of Jewish Education, n. d.; Leah Dornblatt, Tova's Happy Purim, no publication information. This is a story/coloring book about a little girl, living in Jerusalem, who would "love to wear a Queen Esther costume" (p. 5). There is nothing about the story of Esther other than to say that the megillah is read two times on Purim; Rivkah Elisur, Balaylah Ha-hoo (Jerusalem: Ahvah, 1973); Helen Fine, The Shushan Heart. A Purim Operetta in Three Acts (N. Y.: UAHC, 1966; Helen Fine, Supersonic Purim. A Play (N. Y.: UAHC, 1961; Helen Fine, A Wild West Purim (N. Y.: UAHC, 1964); L. Kipnis, lyrics, Ani Purim found in a collection of five dance and songs programs for Hanukah-Purim (Cincinnati: Bureau of Jewish Education, 1942; Elaine Rembrandt,

of rhymes, including four rhymes about Purim, no mention of any character in the Megillah appeared.<sup>31</sup>

#### 1. The character of Esther

While recording an historical event, the Scroll of Esther presented a popular story to young pupils and included fairy tale elements such as a hero, a heroine, a villain, and suspense and resolution. The story had a classic fairy tale dénouement with the victory of the heroine and hero and the punishment of the villain. Esther, the classic heroine who possessed an exemplary physical demeanor and personality qualities, was portrayed as "a young woman so sweet and beautiful that Ahasuerus chose her for his queen."<sup>32</sup> In one simple re-telling of the story, the following description was given: "Long ago and far away there lived a queen. Her name was Esther. She was very beautiful and very brave. Esther lived in a castle with golden halls and silver walls."<sup>33</sup> While Esther was cited as being beautiful, the illustrations showed her to be of normal demeanor--certainly not beautiful, but pensive looking and plain.<sup>34</sup> She was a "beautiful young lady,"<sup>35</sup> "the prettiest girl in the world,"<sup>36</sup>

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Heroes, Heroines and Holidays. Plays for Jewish Youth (Denver: Alternatives in Religious Education, 1981; and Ephraim Sidon and Rony Oren, The Animated Megillah. A Purim Adventure (London, England: Scopus Films, 1986).

<sup>31</sup> Sara G. Levy, Mother Goose Rhymes for Jewish Children (New York: Bloch, 1973) pp. 35-36.

<sup>32</sup> Samuels, Prophets, Writings..., p. 136.

<sup>33</sup> Adam D. Fisher, Purim (New York: Behrman, 1987) p. 4.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp. 4, 6, and 7.

and "a beautiful heroine..."<sup>37</sup> There lived "a beautiful young Jewish girl named Esther."<sup>38</sup> The adjective "lovely" was used, also.<sup>39</sup> A detailed characterization read: "Esther was a very pretty girl. She had two long, thick braids of hair, which hung far down below her waist; she had big black eyes, and the whitest teeth you ever saw."<sup>40</sup>

Personality qualities described her: "Esther was gentle and beautiful."<sup>41</sup> One of King Ahasuerus' officers expressed the opinion that Esther "is sweet and polite."<sup>42</sup> A Bible story book had pupils see Esther through her own eyes allowing them to draw more ideas about her personality. When Esther was told by Mordecai that she had to go to the palace with others who were hoping to be chosen queen,

Esther was bashful, and said to Mordecai:  
"Why should I go? I don't think the king will like me.  
A king wants a tall, splendid girl for his wife, a girl who  
has fine clothes and a girl who is pretty."

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<sup>35</sup> Dori Gerber, Favorite Bible Stories. Creative Activities to Think and Learn About the Bible (Gilbert, Iowa: Contemporary Designs, 1990) p. 40.

<sup>36</sup> Betty R. Hollender, Bible Stories for Little Children. Vol. 4. From Job to Nehemiah (New York: UAHC, 1960) p. 33.

<sup>37</sup> Dorothy K. Kripke, Let's Talk about Jewish Holidays (New York: Jonathan David, 1970) p. 29.

<sup>38</sup> Jacqueline Jacobson Pliskin, My Very Own Animated Jewish Holiday Activity Book (New York: Shapolsky, 1987) p. 62.

<sup>39</sup> Jacqueline Jacobson Pliskin, The Jewish Holiday Game and Workbook (New York: Shapolsky, 1987) p. 61; and Ruth Kozodoy, The Book of Jewish Holidays (New York: Behrman, 1981) p. 139.

<sup>40</sup> Altman, p. 141.

<sup>41</sup> Kozodoy, p. 139.

<sup>42</sup> Altman, p. 144.

"Do you think so?" said Mordecai.

"Yes I do. I am small, and I am not pretty, and I have no fine clothes."

"Esther, my child, all that does not count. If you are small, you will grow; never mind about being pretty, because maybe the king will think you are pretty; and the king will not care anything about your clothes, if you look neat and clean."

"But I am afraid to go to the palace alone," said Esther.<sup>43</sup>

This particular quote could open up dialogue about the qualities of modesty, humbleness, and self-effacement, and the value of personality traits vs. physical appearance.

A Hebrew text said Hadassah meant a fragrant and beautiful flower.<sup>44</sup> Anyone with one of the names given to Esther, i. e., Hadassah, Estelle, Myrtle, "should be very proud because they all were named for Esther, the shining star of her people."<sup>45</sup>

In keeping with her heroic actions, some books linked Esther with a moral lesson which pupils could apply to their own lives. In regard to Esther's bravery, one text read: "Because Esther was brave, she saved our people!...Esther encourages us to be brave."<sup>46</sup> A strong ethical lesson was "Esther was a Jewish woman who became a Queen of Persia. She saved the Jewish people from a wicked man named

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<sup>43</sup> Altman, p. 145.

<sup>44</sup> Y. Amoray, Z. Beharav, and A. Akavyah, Five Megillot with Commentary (Tel Aviv: "Shlomo Sreberk," 1951) p. 106.

<sup>45</sup> Hollender, p. 32.

<sup>46</sup> Laura Kizner Gurvis, Learn and Do Bible Book (New York: Behrman, 1992) pp. 62 and 64.

Haman."<sup>47</sup> Grishaver included girls and boys when he said: "Esther was just one Jew, but she saved the whole Jewish people. Her story teaches us that every person can be a hero. Every Jew is important."<sup>48</sup> In summarizing his re-telling of the Esther story, Grishaver wrote: "Purim is a time to study heroes and heroines. We try to be like Esther and Mordechai. We want to be just like them. We want to be brave and strong, wise and full of faith."<sup>49</sup>

One author re-telling the story in rebus form, used pictures in place of key names and words (ex.: the word Shushan was written as a picture of a shoe + shan), and focused on getting pupils to think about Esther's goals: "Do you think Esther wanted to marry the king? **Of course not!** Do you think Esther wanted to be queen of Shushan? **Of course not!** Do you think Esther wanted to do her own thing? **Of course!** (She wanted to be a doctor.)"<sup>50</sup>

Two other resources offered moral lessons: 1. "I learned something from Esther. It's good to help others. It's good to help other Jews whenever we can."<sup>51</sup> 2. Pupils had to finish this sentence: "I'm like Esther when I -----."<sup>52</sup> 3. An aim was

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<sup>47</sup> Joel Lurie Grishaver, Building Jewish Life. Purim (Los Angeles: Torah Aura, 1987) p. 2.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>50</sup> Harriet K. Feder, It Happened in "Shoe"shan. A Purim Story (Maryland: Kar-Ben Copies, 1988) p. 10.

<sup>51</sup> Raymond A. Zwerin and Audrey Friedman Marcus, A Purim Album (New York: UAHC, 1981) p. 24.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 19.



to make the megillah relevant to children today: as "Queen Esther saved her fellow Jews" so children today can "plead for the lives and freedom of the Russian Jews,"<sup>53</sup> and the text went on to say how to do this. A concluding sentence in another book of stories read: "The people never forgot, that they owed their lives to Esther's bravery."<sup>54</sup>

Surprisingly, of the few exercises found, those related to Esther were varied and even droll. After explaining that "Esther's Hebrew name Hadassah means myrtle, a fragrant flower, and another midrash saying the name Esther is from the word 'nistar' which means hidden,"<sup>55</sup> the subsequent question was: "Why would Esther be called 'hidden?'"<sup>56</sup> Another exercise directed students to: "Be A Detective. How do you know that...Esther was unsure of herself."<sup>57</sup> "If...then: IF Esther had not been beautiful THEN----,"<sup>58</sup> "If Esther had not gone to see the king THEN----,"<sup>59</sup>

Appearing in a young child's activity/coloring book, was an exercise where

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>54</sup> Lillie A. Faris, Old Testament Stories (New York: Platt and Munk, 1934) p. 124.

<sup>55</sup> Shoshana Silberman, The Whole Megillah. The Purim Story. Commentary. and a Play! (Maryland: Kar-Ben Copies, 1990) p. 13.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>57</sup> Rossel: Child's Bible...Prophets, p. 142.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

twelve Hebrew names, including Esther and Hadassah had to be unscrambled.<sup>60</sup> A Hebrew workbook asked: 1. What was the connection, and what was exceptional about Vashti, Esther and Jezebel?<sup>61</sup> and what did the following women have in common: Zeresh, Vashti, and Esther?<sup>62</sup> Finally, a true-false question was posed which should have elicited some laughter from teachers as well as students: "Esther was a television actress."<sup>63</sup>

Frequently, a tie-in was made between Esther's beauty and her being selected queen. Esther was chosen to become queen because "she was the most beautiful."<sup>64</sup>

A full re-telling of Esther's story, presented the following scene:

The king glanced around the room and looked at every girl carefully, but he did not see any one he liked. Then he looked at Esther, standing so bashfully by the window, and said to Haman, who stood besides him:  
"Who is that lovely girl with the long braids of hair? I mean the one in that plain white dress?"  
"Her name is Esther," said Haman. "That is all I know about her. But does your majesty really wish to marry her?"  
"I certainly do," said the king. "She is the only girl in the room that I like, and I want her for my wife and my queen."<sup>65</sup>

A moral lesson was highlighted: "Think of that, children! The great and powerful

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<sup>60</sup> Bas Sheva Frankel, Sha'ashuim Le-Yeladim (Jerusalem: Light, 1976) p. 9.

<sup>61</sup> Tamar Borenstein-Lazar, Hagay Yisroel Purim. Sidrat Shai Le-hag. Workbook (no publication information) p. 18.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>63</sup> Sol Scharfstein, Purim Puzzler (New York: Ktav, 1978) p. 7.

<sup>64</sup> Saypol, p. 5.

<sup>65</sup> Altman, p. 147.

king did not care for any one of the rich and beautiful girls he saw, and the only girl he liked "was Esther."<sup>66</sup>

In a story of Esther, told in simple language by children who are playing various parts, it said: "The king needed a new queen. He had a beauty contest. The king picked Esther. He really liked her."<sup>67</sup> Looks and personality were stressed: "Esther was gentle and beautiful, and King Ahasuerus fell in love with her. He set the royal crown upon her head and proclaimed her queen."<sup>68</sup> In a more advanced book, the author challenged pupils and made them think intensely about Esther: "It is not clear from the text if Esther enters the contest voluntarily. Some view her as a martyr, persuaded to obey the king's request. Others say she was an assimilated Jew who seized the opportunity to become queen."<sup>69</sup> A question was posed: "Do you think Esther wanted to be in the beauty contest?"<sup>70</sup>

No mention was made of Esther's appearance in two sources: 1. "The king loved Esther more than all the other women."<sup>71</sup> 2. "She won the king's heart and was crowned queen."<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 148.

<sup>67</sup> Zwerin, p. 11.

<sup>68</sup> Kozodoy, p. 139.

<sup>69</sup> Silberman, p. 14.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Grishaver, Building..., p. 14.

<sup>72</sup> Araten, p. 28.

Illustrations play a significant part in the understanding of a biblical figure. Esther, appearing in numerous illustrations, was usually not drawn alone, but rather with Ahasuerus, or with him and Haman at the feast she hosted.

Only one picture showed Esther leaving Mordecai preparatory to going to the palace.<sup>73</sup> Seen left to right were a palace guard holding a long spear, and a modestly dressed Esther in a young girl's simple unadorned long dress with long sleeves. Her hair was plaited into two braids. Her eyes were downcast. On the right, Mordecai, dressed as a hasid with beard, sidelocks, and a cloche-like head covering, wore a long frock and prayer shawl. He was facing Esther and his right index finger pointed at her in a pose of caution or advice.

Another illustration showed three young women standing in a row in front of the palace. Only the first figure was seen completely. Assumedly, each wore a floor-length dress with long sleeves, and had her hair completely covered. The nearest figure seemed to be Esther, but if so, a contradiction arises with the Bible which implied that Esther, when she went to meet the king, surprised Hegai by refraining to be heavily adorned. In this illustration, the first of the three people was the prettiest yet most flamboyant, with a necklace and a decorative trim at the bottom of her dress.<sup>74</sup>

Two pictures on facing pages showed a vivid contrast between Esther and the

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<sup>73</sup> Moshe Mayerowitz, A Helf Far Dem Kind. Megillas Esther (Union City, New Jersey: Gross, n. d.) p. 7.

<sup>74</sup> Judyth R. Saypol and Madeline Wikler, My Very Own Megillah (Maryland: Kar-Ben Copies, 1976) no pagination.

other young girls who were to parade before the king. Dressed in long, fitted dresses heavily adorned with stitched decorations, they wore jewelry on their wrists, around their necks, and entwined through their hair. The first of these three figures seemed to be vain and flirtatious. The two behind her were staring at Esther on the facing page and might be disdainful to her as they smiled superciliously. Esther, dressed in a totally unadorned floor length dress, appeared wide-eyed yet shy, hands raised to cover her heart. Long black hair fell past her shoulders, and her freckled(!) face gave her the advantage of seeming much younger than the others. She looked straight ahead, not returning the stares of the others.<sup>75</sup>

The next drawing presented a most obese Ahasuerus with his arm around Esther who was wearing the same dress worn in an earlier drawing. The accompanying words indicated Ahasuerus was telling her she was sweet, a wonder, and that he will place the crown on her head. This was one of the very few illustrations in which there was physical contact between a female and male figure.<sup>76</sup> (The only other one found was highlighted under the chapter about Sarah.)

Most pictures of Esther portrayed her with King Ahasuerus: being chosen queen, or seated on the throne with him, or appearing before him to plead for her people. It was obvious from the accompanying text that the following illustration was of Esther being selected queen: the king, seated on the right side of the picture, looked happily up at Esther, both hands covering his heart; two intertwined heart

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<sup>75</sup> Miri Tzallezohn, Sipurim Le-hag Purim (Beersheva: Azriel Nitzni, 1990) pp. 14-15.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

shapes were drawn between them. Esther stood at the left of the picture wearing a long-sleeved dress and a full length veil cascading from a tiara-like head piece. Her eyes were fully closed as she looked demurely down and away from him. Her right hand held her head veil at hip level, her left hand held a mask at neck level. Ahasuerus' Hebrew words to her were: "How beautiful you are. Yes, you will be queen."<sup>77</sup>

A second simply drawn picture showed Ahasuerus seated on his throne, on the right side of the illustration, ostensibly choosing a queen as Esther marched before him. On the left, an attractive Esther stood on a carpet in front of him, wearing a decorated, full length, long-sleeved dress and a long striped cape. A necklace adorned her neck and her right arm was stretched toward the king. Her shoulder length dark hair was uncovered.<sup>78</sup>

Another close-up of Esther and Ahasuerus showed only their crowned heads/faces staring intently at each other. Esther has long dark hair and seems to be child-like, while Ahasuerus was certainly an older man. Their expression implied that they are in love and content.<sup>79</sup> An additional drawing showed frontally, left to right, a young, pretty Queen Esther and King Ahasuerus seated in royal garb. Esther looked forward, hands clasped in her lap, wearing a crown, decorated tunic apron over her long, elbow-length dress, sandals, bead necklace, and gold bracelet. She had

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<sup>77</sup> Hadassah Rubel, Ra Shan Be-Shushan (New York: Bloch, 1965) p. 9.

<sup>78</sup> Araten, p. 28.

<sup>79</sup> Samuels, Prophets, Writings..., p. 136.

long brown hair, and wore cosmetics. Between them in the near background was a young slave with a frond fan.<sup>80</sup>

## 2. Esther the Jewess and Queen

When the Jewess Esther was married to King Ahasuerus, conflict and friction arose centered on how disparate elements could be justified or reconciled. In studying the heroine's actions, it became obvious that rationales were needed to justify the marriage between a Jew and a non-Jew. Such issues at one time could be considered to be outside the parameters of the elementary school curriculum; however, with the sophistication of young pupils, educational materials should acknowledge the early maturity of pupils regarding societal problems such as intermarriage. If this supposition be valid, then teachers could be hoped to highlight what Esther did and not whitewash the biblical text.

After emphasizing her beauty, one book called her "the Jewish girl whom Ahasuerus, king of all Persia, chose to be his own queen."<sup>81</sup> Esther's being a Jewess was mentioned in three books. Two true-false statements read: "Esther was not Jewish" [and] "Esther saved the Jews of Persia."<sup>82</sup> Another thought-provoking exercise asked students to "imagine that you were Esther. How would it feel to be the only Jewish woman in the palace? Act out Esther talking to herself about life in

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<sup>80</sup> Rossel, Child's Bible, Prophets..., p. 135.

<sup>81</sup> Kripke, p. 29.

<sup>82</sup> Bea Stadler and Shirley Simon, Once Upon a Jewish Holiday (New York: Ktav, 1966) p. 75.

Ahasuerus' palace."<sup>83</sup>

Hatach's relationship with Esther was unique. He who had been her servant in Mordecai's house, joined her in the palace. It was he who helped her observe her Judaism and she "could keep the dietary laws of her people without revealing that she was a Jew. For Hatach prepared her meals. He made lentil patties for her to eat, and peas and beans. On the Sabbath, Esther rested. Her maidens so loved her that they rested along with her, not knowing what it was and why it was."<sup>84</sup>

When Esther was preparing to go before the king, Mordecai admonished her not to tell anyone that she was a Jewess. Esther obeyed him.<sup>85</sup> A discussion question was posed: "Mordechai told Esther to hide the fact that she was a Jew. Was this the right thing to do?"<sup>86</sup> In a chapter entitled "Showing Our Jewishness,"<sup>87</sup> verses 2:10 and 2:20 were cited about Esther not divulging her lineage. Students were asked to answer questions about the text: "Why do you think Mordecai told Esther that [and] What do you think was on Mordecai's mind when he told this to Esther?"<sup>88</sup> The author extrapolated from these verses, relating Esther's situation to modern times: "At other times in Jewish history some Jews have decided to hide their

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<sup>83</sup> Grishaver, Building..., p. 14.

<sup>84</sup> Chaikin, pp. 21 and 23.

<sup>85</sup> Grishaver, Building Jewish Life, p. 14; and Kozodoy, p. 139.

<sup>86</sup> Grishaver, Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>87</sup> Kaufner, p. 27.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.



Jewishness...Why do you think those people made that decision?"<sup>89</sup> After stating how lucky we are to be able to demonstrate our Jewishness today, with pride and no self-consciousness, the question was posed: "What things do you do in public that show others you are Jewish?"<sup>90</sup>

In describing Esther's role as queen, her most difficult job was going unbidden to the king. Some of the educational materials addressed this issue by explaining how Esther was feeling and how she prepared to go to the king: "Esther prayed to God and fasted."<sup>91</sup> No mention was made of two feasts; she just told Ahasuerus about the plan to kill her people right then and there. Esther's predominant emotion in going to the king was fear.<sup>92</sup> Esther "was afraid because kings don't like to be bothered."<sup>93</sup> In a rebus pupils learned: Esther "was afraid. How would she be able to help her people and not make the king angry?"<sup>94</sup>

Finally, Esther's fear was paramount after she had clothed herself in beautiful garments and placed her crown on her head:

She began to tremble and cry. Then she said to herself: "It will not do any good to cry. That will not help anyone. I will not cry and I will try to be brave. I will pray to God...to make the king kind to me, and let me

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Pliskin, Jewish Holiday..., p. 62.

<sup>92</sup> Saypol, p. 7.

<sup>93</sup> Zwerin, p. 19.

<sup>94</sup> Carrie Gardiner and Judith Grossbard, Hag Purim. Activity Book (Rhode Island: Bureau of Jewish Education, 1978) p. 15.

help my people..." When she had finished her prayers she was not afraid any more, and went to the king.<sup>95</sup>

A drawing entitled Ahasuerus and Esther showed Queen Esther standing before the seated king, a caricature-like figure whom we view from his right side. His scepter was in his right hand as he gazed up at Esther who was depicted frontally. She wore a full length, plain, belted dress, with a decorative trim on the lower edge of the long, wide sleeves and her long dark hair was decorated with rope-like ornaments. Her beautiful face was serious as she gazed down at the king. This drawing appeared in an activity book and pupils needed to paste in missing items: Ahasuerus' head piece, his scepter, and Esther's crown and necklace.<sup>96</sup>

Two drawings in a coloring book<sup>97</sup> depicted Esther on her way to visiting the king and then at the entrance to the throne room. In the first drawing, she was seen from the back, surrounded on each side by a woman. Elaborately garbed in a long sleeved, floor length dress, her hands are held upward as though in prayer. The second illustration showed a serious faced Esther holding out her right hand and touching the end of the king's scepter. The king, seated in the left foreground, regally dressed, appeared to be considerably older than Esther. This second drawing has a midrashic flavor (cf. Meg. 15b).

A suspenseful illustration depicted Esther going before the king unsummoned.

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<sup>95</sup> Altman, p. 150.

<sup>96</sup> Sol and Edythe Scharfstein, Paste and Play. Purim-Passover (New York: Ktav, 1957) no pagination.

<sup>97</sup> Mayerowitz, A Helf Far Dem Kind. Megillas Esther, pp. 20 and 21.

She stood before the seated Ahasuerus who held a scepter in his hand as he looked somberly at her. Esther, seen in a side view, stood at the left. Drawn from the hips up, she wore a decorated dress with sleeves reaching just above her elbows. Her head and long dark hair were glorified by a crown, her earrings were large, and her arms, with bracelets on them, were raised up beseechingly to her husband. Since Ahasuerus had not yet held out the scepter, four black shapes that may represent guards added a measure of tension and fright to the scene.<sup>98</sup>

Three illustrations portrayed the scene wherein Esther accused Haman of plotting to kill her and the Jews. The first drawing, viewed from left to right, showed Haman, Ahasuerus, and Esther seated at a table laden with food. Ahasuerus looked angrily at Haman who was dressed similar to a jester, his mouth opened in fright, as he held his hands up in a position of self-defense. Esther, seen from her left side, wore a gown, the sleeves of which were decorated with a scalloped design. A very small crown was perched atop her long dark hair. She seemed to be speaking and her left arm was outstretched as her index finger pointed at Haman.<sup>99</sup>

Another depiction was a more sophisticated sketch than the preceding one. Drawn frontally, left to right, were Esther, Ahasuerus, and Haman. Esther stood and Ahasuerus was seated on a canopy-covered throne. An irate king looked on as Esther exposed Haman's treachery. Haman, dressed completely in dark colored garb,

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<sup>98</sup> David Daniel, The Jewish Beginning. from Joshua to Judah Maccabee. Part 2 (New York: Ktav, 1971) p. 274.

<sup>99</sup> Silberman, p. 26.

cringed in fright and anger from Esther's outstretched left arm. Wearing a long flowing dress with long sleeves, her dark hair covered by a long scarf worn behind her tiara, she appeared to be beautiful and, in her anger, seemed strong-willed.<sup>100</sup>

The final artistic rendering was a beautiful, elaborate scene depicting Esther confronting the villain Haman. Seen from left to right under an ornate canopy, were Haman, Ahasuerus, and Esther. A guard stood on each side of the canopy. It appeared that Esther and Haman were seated and Ahasuerus was standing. The king, with eyebrows raised, looked at Haman at whom Esther pointed accusingly. These three central figures were garbed in black, Haman's being the most severe without ornamentation. Esther was regally dressed with heavy, rich attire, her hair covered with a full cap, and her voluminous gown simply embellished. A bracelet adorned her left hand which pointed to Haman.<sup>101</sup>

### 3. Esther and Mordecai

While the Bible was clear about the relationship between Esther and Mordecai, some texts and activity books agreed they were cousins,<sup>102</sup> while other

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<sup>100</sup> Ruth Samuels, Bible Stories for Jewish Children from Joshua to Queen Esther (New York: Ktav, 1973) p. 71.

<sup>101</sup> Miriam Chaikin, Make Noise. Make Merry. The Story and Meaning of Purim (New York: Clarion Books, 1983) p. 38.

<sup>102</sup> Altman, p. 141; Araten, p. 28; Sophie N. Cedarbaum, Purim, A Joyous Holiday (New York: UAHF, 1973) p. 10; Faris, p. 120; Feder, p. 10; Fisher, p. 6; Dori Gerber, Favorite Bible Stories. Creative Activities to Think and Learn about the Bible (Iowa: Contemporary Designs, 1990) p. 40; Laura Kizner Gurvis, Learn and Do Bible Book (New York: Behrman, 1992) p. 62; Hollender, Vol. 4, p. 33; Kripke, p. 29; Rossel, Child's Bible...Prophets, p. 134, and Saypol, p. 1.

books defined Mordecai as her uncle.<sup>103</sup> One source called Esther "the adopted daughter of Mordehai."<sup>104</sup>

Materials about Esther and Mordecai emphasized the theme of authority and obedience. Having been raised by Mordecai, pupils would understand that Esther was obedient to him. Once she became queen, it might be assumed that Mordecai was to defer to her authority. However, this was not a clear-cut situation, as pupils learned: "When Mordecai heard that his people were in danger, he begged his cousin Queen Esther to appeal to the king. For three days she fasted and gathered her courage."<sup>105</sup> It was surprising that "Poor Queen Esther did not know what to do."<sup>106</sup> When Mordecai told Esther to go to the king, her first response was a refutation. Later, "she was shamed by her fear and hesitation..."<sup>107</sup>

In another text, Mordecai berated Esther for hesitating to go before the king:

"Don't think that you will be safer than all the other Jews, just because you live in the palace. And who knows? Perhaps you were made queen just so that you would be able to save your people in a time like this." Esther knew that Mordecai was right. She replied, "Ask all the Jews in Shushan to fast and pray three days for

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<sup>103</sup> Chaikin, p. 14; Kozodoy, p. 139; Pliskin, Jewish Holiday..., p. 61 and My Very Own..., p. 62; Scharfstein, Paste and Play, p. 1 and Purim Puzzler, p. 12; Stadtler, pp. 75 and 79; and Zwerin, p. 14.

<sup>104</sup> Norman Schanin, Tephilah Ve-hag La-talmid. An Introduction to Prayers and Holidays for the Student (New York: Ktav, 1960) p. 121.

<sup>105</sup> Araten, p. 28.

<sup>106</sup> Faris, p. 123.

<sup>107</sup> Chaikin, p. 30.

me. Then I will go to the king; and if I die, I die."<sup>108</sup>

Now the shift in authority occurred. Once "Esther agreed to risk her life to save her people...Mordechai did as Esther commanded him."<sup>109</sup> The same author asked: "Was it fair for Mordechai to ask Esther to risk her life?"<sup>110</sup>

While Esther was generally recognized as being the Scroll's heroine, one book credited Mordecai with both saving the Jews and being a role model for the pupils: "Esther, you're the queen! Do something. Save the Jewish people!" shouted Mordecai. Mordecai liked doing things for people. He always took care of Esther. He saved the king and he helped save the Jewish people."<sup>111</sup> Another book asked a pertinent question: "Why do you think the Megillah is called the Book of Esther and not The Book of Esther and Mordechai?"<sup>112</sup> Both received top billing in another holiday book: "We have always needed, and we will always need, Mordecais and Esthers."<sup>113</sup>

Esther responded to Mordecai's concern as to how she would manage on her own in the palace: "Miriam will take care of me...She has taken care of me since I

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<sup>108</sup> Kozodoy, p. 141.

<sup>109</sup> Silberman, p. 20.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>111</sup> Zwerin, pp. 16-17.

<sup>112</sup> Silberman, p. 27.

<sup>113</sup> Kozodoy, p. 153.

was a baby. The king says she may live in the palace, too."<sup>114</sup> (Miriam seemed to have been a servant who tended Esther, helping her dress and brushing her hair.)

An idyllic picture of Esther emerged during her early years with Mordecai, despite his not having been wealthy: "Esther lived with her cousin Mordecai, who was poor and could not give her any nice dresses to wear...Mordecai was very kind to the little girl and she was happy. She never thought whether her dresses were fine or plain, and she did not care...She loved Mordecai, although she knew he was poor."<sup>115</sup>

#### 4. Esther the strategist

The psychologist/strategist role that I have attributed to Esther on the basis of certain of her actions, was not clearly portrayed in the educational materials. Rather, in dealing with this section, it became necessary to broaden the scope of the title and look at Esther as a heroine. For example, in an exercise asking pupils to select "the REAL Queen Esther" from three different descriptions, the correct answer gave a lucid glimpse into the author's idea of Esther, by having her speak and divulge her own thoughts and motives: "I married the king because I thought that it might be good for our people. When the time came, I was scared. But I did what was needed and saved the Jewish people. After Haman was defeated, I used my position to help

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<sup>114</sup> Hollender, Vol. 4, pp. 35 and 37.

<sup>115</sup> Altman, p. 141.

the Jewish people prosper."<sup>116</sup>

Elsewhere, young students learned that the night before she went to the king, Esther had a dream which dictated to her that she would have to wait two days before telling the king the truth.<sup>117</sup> A simple re-telling of Esther's role, in a chapter entitled "Queen Esther Saves Her People,"<sup>118</sup> informed the students that Esther "must ask the King to save her people"<sup>119</sup> which she did at a dinner she made for Ahasuerus and Haman. Esther's anticipation after she had invited Ahasuerus and Haman to her party, showed she "could hardly wait to tell the king what was on her mind."<sup>120</sup>

No information about Esther was contained in a thirty page book about the holiday of Purim, in which six pages were about the holiday (including illustrations). The focus was on the children's excitement in using their groggers. When speaking about Esther going to the king to try to save her people, it merely read "Esther went to the king."<sup>121</sup>

One book dealt tangentially with Esther as a strategist: "Esther uses her charm

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<sup>116</sup> Grishaver, Bible People, Part 3, p. 72.

<sup>117</sup> Chaikin, p. 31.

<sup>118</sup> Gerber, p. 40.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Feder, p. 17.

<sup>121</sup> Cedarbaum, p. 13.



and beauty to save her people. What do you think of Esther as a role model?"<sup>122</sup> Several pages later another query was posed: "Why do you think Esther invited the King and Haman to two feasts?"<sup>123</sup> After pupils have worked out the question on their own, a teacher familiar with biblical commentaries might refer to the answers given by commentators.

An overall summary about Esther's role in the Purim story was made in several books, giving equal credit to Mordecai for saving their people: Purim is celebrated to commemorate the Jews having been "saved by a Jewish Queen named Esther, and her cousin Mordecai."<sup>124</sup> "Mordechai and Esther proclaimed that the Jews of Persia should observe the 14th and 15th days of Adar every year to remember how their mourning and grief had been turned to feasting and gladness."<sup>125</sup> Praise only for Esther was found in an activity book: "Esther was a brave women who saved the whole Jewish people. She is the hero of the Purim story."<sup>126</sup>

In the materials already examined, Esther was recognized and lauded for her bravery and for saving her people. Disappointingly, other books did **not** give her

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<sup>122</sup> Silberman, p. 23.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>124</sup> Saypol, p. 1.

<sup>125</sup> Silberman, p.30.

<sup>126</sup> Grishaver, Purim Activity Book, p. 6.

credit for having been a heroine.<sup>127</sup> In a young child's activity/coloring book, several pages were devoted to the megillah but there was nothing specific about Esther.<sup>128</sup> Another story told how a family celebrated Purim, i. e., heard the megillah read and baked hamantaschen. Of the twenty-four pages in the book, two pages told the story of Esther enabling children to learn that it was long ago when Esther, Mordecai, and Haman lived.<sup>129</sup> In a different Purim story by this same author, a story was told about children who celebrated Purim by wearing costumes, eating hamantaschen, having a parade, and singing songs. Nothing appeared about the story of Esther.<sup>130</sup> As another book teaching about holidays had nothing about Esther,<sup>131</sup> a book of Jewish holidays re-telling Esther's story, downplayed her role. Part of the concluding paragraph read as follows: "The Jews were saved. The king appointed Mordecai to be prime minister in place of Haman. And Mordecai proclaimed that the 14th of Adar would always be a day of feasting and merrymaking."<sup>132</sup>

##### 5. General Observations about Esther in Jewish Educational Materials

The image of Esther in numerous educational materials presented her as a

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<sup>127</sup> Scharfstein, Paste and Play and Purim Puzzler, no pagination.

<sup>128</sup> Frankel, pp. 11-13, 16.

<sup>129</sup> Norma Simon, Happy Purim Night (New York: United Synagogue of America, 1959) pp. 18-19.

<sup>130</sup> Norma Simon, The Purim Party (New York: United Synagogue of America, 1976).

<sup>131</sup> Nehama Ner-Yaniv, Hagay Yisroel (Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1978) pp. 62-75.

<sup>132</sup> Kozodoy, p. 144.

beautiful young woman both in the written texts and in illustrations. Her character traits included being bashful, polite, modest, and gentle. Other positive attributes such as bravery and strength enhanced her image as a heroine, underscoring her valiant role in Jewish history and identifying her as a role model. Emphasis was placed on how she, as one individual, was able to save her people, teaching that each person can be significant in helping others.

The illustrations depicted her clearly as Ahasuerus' choice as queen. In each picture, her dress had long sleeves, the shortest being elbow-length, indicating a sign of modesty in female dress.

Even when educational resources spoke of Esther the Jewess, little questioning was done about how she adapted to life in the palace. Should the four books dealing with the point not be included for study, the issue of a Jew alone in an alien environment might not be raised in the classroom. Pupils would then have missed a glorious opportunity, early in life, to think about interfaith marriages, and how, or if, an observant Jewess might retain her integrity and faith in a secular setting.

Going before a king would be a daunting experience for a child. Learning about a woman who risked her life to save her people by appearing unsummoned before the king, would surely cause a feeling of suspense and danger in the classroom. This message seems to have been conveyed by many of the texts, which then went on to speak of how her faith in God sustained her, and how her heroic actions did actually save her people from being exterminated.

A surprising finding in defining the familial connection between Esther and

Mordecai was Mordecai being called Esther's uncle in so many of the educational materials. The Bible read (2:7) hi' ester bat dodo meaning "she is Esther daughter of his uncle," denoting that they were cousins. The text books said that Mordecai raised the orphaned Esther; none said anything about Mordecai having married her as was found earlier in Rashi.

#### D. Conclusions

Since the Bible's description of Esther was limited, biblical interpreters augmented and enhanced her personality characteristics by examining her actions with, or in opposition to, others, namely Vashti, Mordecai, and Ahasuerus. Her physical attributes were contrasted qualitatively with Vashti, and appreciated by Ahasuerus. The use of female pairs as a literary device was evident as Esther was contrasted with her predecessor, Vashti. The text seemed to suggest a subtle qualitative disparity between the two women.

Whereas rabbinic literature acknowledged the maturing of Esther's character and recognized her as a many-faceted person, curricula materials for elementary school children glossed over her personal growth. Instead, the school books emphasized her heroic, fairy tale role. For some authors, she became a role model; for other writers, she was not of paramount importance. For some she was non-existent, as her story was overlooked completely in Purim materials or referred to briefly and without substance. After examining the educational materials, the beauty variable seemed to be the most pronounced qualification for Ahasuerus in choosing

Esther to be Vashti's successor; certainly after studying the illustrations, this conjecture became even more evident.

In the rabbinic literature, commentators addressed the issue of intermarriage when speaking about Esther as a queen, and whitewashed her imagined assimilating behavior. The educational materials primarily focused on the beautiful Esther and often avoided the faiths of Esther and Ahasuerus. In the few books that spoke of Esther the Jewess, moral lessons were gleaned and proffered as models for pupils.

The theme of authority and obedience appeared in the educational books and became the focus for the drama and suspense of Esther's story. The somewhat mysterious request of Mordecai, that she not tell who her people were, and her compliance, found resolution only after she demanded certain conditions of Mordecai and her entire people. The tension in the story continued to mount from the time Mordecai commanded Esther, until the time he obeyed her. Only when Ahasuerus held out the scepter to her, could the reader realize that the story would somehow conclude justly and happily. The educational materials echoed the Bible in charting the events leading to its conclusion. As a true heroine, her trepidation had changed to bravery. Some sources treated Esther and Mordecai equally in their role of heroine and hero.

Since the issue of Esther's adaptation is so volatile and timely today, raising philosophical and historical issues such as anti-Semitism and assimilation, textbooks should certainly adapt to societal needs and explore Esther the Jewess more fully. With the shocking rise of assimilation and conversions to Judaism, many pupils know

firsthand about intermarriages. Elementary Jewish schools should be in the vanguard, confronting Esther's problems of the past, and raising concerns for the present and future. Not to do this would be abrogating from an educational opportunity. I hope, therefore, new classroom materials will relate the past to the present in exploring societal situations then and now.

## Chapter 9

### Conclusion

#### I. Motivation for the Thesis

This thesis was motivated by a concern for the pedagogic significance of learning about biblical women. The need was felt to examine whether a gap or a link existed between the Bible, the Jewish interpretations offered through the millennia, and educational materials being used presently in Jewish schools. Further, I was concerned that, because Bible scholarship has long been a male-dominated activity, stereotypes and prejudices echoing the patriarchal society in which the Bible was produced were being perpetuated in the Jewish schools today.

#### II. The Study

##### A. The women

Eight biblical females, who represented various periods in biblical history and differing familial and community roles, were analyzed in scriptural order. They are: Sarah, Leah, and Rachel who were matriarchs; Miriam, a leader, prophetess, and sister of Moses; Rahab, a non-Israelite harlot/innkeeper; Deborah, a judge, prophetess and warrior; Jephthah's young virgin daughter; and Esther, a queen. The

matriarchs were seen confined to the domestic or household arena, and their relationships were primarily demonstrated in their lives as wife and mother. While Sarah's life was similar to Leah and Rachel in terms of domesticity, she was also seen in a broader context as she travelled with Abraham.

#### B. The sources

The Bible. The Masoretic version of Scripture, the basis of virtually all Jewish interpretation and education, has been used.

Rabbinic literature. A broad range of exegetical works--targumim, midrashim, the Babylonian Talmud, and selected Bible commentators--was chosen. The exegetes include Saadiah, Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Radak, Ramban, Abravanel, Hizkuni, Sforno, Malbim, and Altschuler. Writings by Leibowitz and Steinsaltz were examined also. These Bible commentators represent centuries of scholarship emanating from the Middle East and Europe and reflect both the Ashkenazic and Sephardic heritages. In addition, many of them were included in standard Mikraot Gedolot.

Educational materials. A breadth of teaching books has been examined in the educational section: Bible texts, excerpted sections of Scripture, Bible story books, supplementary workbooks, and exercise books. (In the case of Esther, books specifically about Purim were added.) These books were available in educational resource centers and are for use in Jewish day schools, afternoon schools, and Sunday school programs. Criticism might be levied against the relatively non-intellectual discourse content of books used in the afternoon and Sunday schools and the



assumption made that the more useful materials were utilized in the day schools. However, it is imperative to reiterate that this thesis is a study of the educational materials, **not** the schools. While there may be a correlation between types of books and what is used in varying educational systems, I did not evaluate the schools, or teachers; I scrutinized the books.

There was an intellectual scope in the educational materials stretching from the simplistic to the sophisticated. The earlier books were more straightforward in recounting the Bible narratives and many of the exercises in these books were uncomplicated, not asking students to think about a question but rather to focus on the words of the text and reflect them back in answering the questions.

The storybooks were usually replete with illustrations that captivated the child's imagination and could often influence a pupil who has perused the book and seen the drawings before studying the actual text. The nature of Bible storybooks has been to cover a wide amount of material in the book; therefore a story about any particular biblical person was relegated to a few short pages at most, one of which was often an illustration. The story was quite condensed and often superficial, perpetuating popular stereotypes about the figures. In these storybooks, men were featured in the table of contents listings and women were excluded from having chapters named for themselves. This was true of the matriarchs, whose story was tersely mentioned as an adjunct to their husband's life. Miriam was generally seen helping Moses at the Nile. With the exception of Jephthah's daughter, who did not appear in storybooks, the post-Pentateuchal women commanded their own chapters,

and so Rahab, Deborah, and Esther were seen more vividly. While Rahab might not have had the chapter named for her, she was the focal person as she abetted the spies and facilitated their escape. Deborah and Esther were seen fulsomely both in pictures and words; while Barak, Mordecai, and Ahasuerus were included, the women were the focus of the stories.

Miriam and Deborah were women of leadership, prophesy, and song. Their lives were not circumscribed by their hearth, and some of their actions were autonomous and independent of male domination. Rahab and Esther were heroines who saved Jews at critical moments in history. The narrative of Jephthah's daughter presented one of the Bible's greatest tragedies and one of the most exaggerated cases of women's subjugation and helplessness.

A relatively recent phenomenon has developed, where Hebrew workbooks series are meeting a tremendous need for Bible study to be stimulating and challenging. The authors of these materials have attempted to rectify the problems suggested here by providing thought-provoking questions and creative activities that are engaging to children's minds. Isserof and Etkin were the forerunners in the workbook series approach and tried to offer depth and concentration in their questions.

Two more series of workbooks deserve special attention. One was an attractive series of Hebrew workbooks from Israel by Matiah Kom; the second was also a well designed sequence of workbooks by Yonay and Yonay. Individual weekly Torah portions were found in the Yonay and Yonay schedule; the Kom materials

were in chronological order but have omitted certain Bible sections.

In the series from Israel, each workbook was published with three levels of difficulty. Students in the lower elementary grades are placed into homogeneous groups and given the appropriate workbook. Levels 1 and 2 were quite similar to each other; level 3 was more advanced and used Bible commentary more fluidly. The exercises in all three levels were generally interesting and challenging. The chapters commenced with Hebrew vocabulary for which Hebrew synonyms had to be found. Other exercises included sentence completions, putting events into sequential order, interpreting sentences, answering questions using Torah verses as proof texts, and a variety of true/false and multiple choice exercises. Drawings enhanced the workbooks.

The second series of workbooks, written by Yonay and Yonay, was attractively presented and varied in appeal and content. The books proceeded sequentially according to the weekly Torah readings. Individual sections of the workbooks were clearly marked, so pupils could refer back easily to the Bible. This set of materials was more straightforward and more inclusive than the preceding series and the Bible text was interspersed with re-phrasings and the re-telling of the narrative account. Notwithstanding the strides these educational materials are exhibiting, they still have shortcomings in that they consistently excluded controversial issues (to be discussed below).

### C. The methodological pattern

Each chapter consists of a three part study. The initial part examined the women as they appeared in Scripture and an image of each surfaced. The second section scrutinized selected, relatively well known Jewish interpretations to see what image or images emerged. The final portion of each chapter was an investigation of Jewish educational textbooks, workbooks, and supplementary materials with the same purpose as in the earlier sections, namely, to see how the females were presented. Having compared the three groups of impressions, I was able to discern if differences or similarities were evident and to learn what pictures were being perpetuated in the educational books and how they related to the Bible itself and to a part of the traditional interpretative literature.

### D. Evolving images

1. Sarah. The image of Sarah in the Bible was of a multi-faceted woman whose life reflected the needs of her husband Abraham and patriarchal society's stresses on a barren female. Because of her beauty, she lied to protect Abraham; because of her barrenness she abused her maidservant. Her astonishment at the prediction she would bear a child at age ninety caused her to laugh and be chastised by God. The biblical image of Sarah, therefore, was of a woman who possessed traits that might be thought to be incongruous for the first matriarch of her people, namely, submissiveness and imperiousness, and questioning and challenging.

Rabbinic literature glorified this matriarch. Her unusual beauty was

emphasized by targumic, talmudic, and midrashic sources. She was accorded the virtues of modesty demonstrated during the visit of the three guests, was favored by God when her name was changed, remained chaste during two perilous occurrences with two foreign kings, and died a righteous and sinless woman. Disparate comments spoke of her hospitality or lack of it toward the guests. Opinions varied as to whether she had a theophany during this visit and her laughter was minimized. Exegetes recognized her negative behavior toward Hagar. Through the rabbinic literature, Sarah emerged as a real person with foibles and positive traits.

Educational materials included information about Sarah in different presentations: Bible quotes, re-telling of the narratives, and a variety of exercise questions. While illustrations did not portray her as particularly beautiful, she did appear uniformly as young. Educational books echoed the Bible's import of her relationship with Hagar, but employed less harsh adjectives to describe her behavior to her handmaid. By subjugating Sarah's negative behavior, the textbooks allow an incomplete, if not dishonest, picture of her to emerge. At the same time, the reader is unable to understand the depths of Hagar's suffering.

Abraham's hospitality was emphasized during the guests' visit both in words and in illustrations. Sarah was often absent from the pictures, not even seen sitting in the tent entrance. Such an oversight or intentional omission is contrary to the Bible text and removes Sarah from being seen as hospitable.

Rabbinic literature, especially the midrashic tradition, was forceful in its attempt to idealize the matriarch, especially with regard to her experiences with

Pharaoh and Abimelech. She was also protected so that no one would possibly doubt her having given birth at her advanced age. These moral lessons were not found in the educational materials, meaning that students could not be exposed to the protective role that early exegetes assumed toward her and question what justified their interpretation.

Her name change, a singular biblical event for a female, was missing in many books. Some rabbinic influence was seen when Sarah was extolled for her part in proselytizing among the women and persuading them to believe in God.

2. Leah and Rachel. As wives of the same man, the lives of these two sisters were fraught with jealousy, rivalry, and antagonism. Seen physically contrasted with each other, their images reflected opposition in appearance and then action. Rachel was shapely and beautiful; Leah was not always described favorably. Rachel was the more loved wife of Jacob and Leah yearned to be loved. Leah was fecund and Rachel was barren. Jacob was, in a sense, the fulcrum for the sisters' desires and behavior, and bearing his children became the focus of their dreams in this triangular relationship. As Leah bore sons, Rachel had to effectuate a solution for her barrenness and did so through her maidservant. When Leah stopped conceiving she, too, gave her handmaid to Jacob. The rancor between the sisters was the core of this narrative; the only independent action was Rachel's stealing her father's household idols.

Rabbinic literature made positive comments about these two matriarchs. Unquestionably Rachel was known as beautiful; however, because the word raḳot had

a wealth of semantic range, Leah was seen by some interpreters as attractive, and by others as having an attractive personality even if her physical appearance was wanting. In other words, the unattractive sister emerged in rabbinic literature as pleasing in appearance and worthy in her character traits. The barren Rachel was lauded as a righteous woman who abetted her sister in being married to Jacob. Rachel, having stolen her father's teraphim, presented a very difficult problem for the exegetes who found rationales for her unacceptable behavior.

The Jewish educational materials did not present a reasonable picture of the dissension between Leah and Rachel choosing rather to ignore the sibling rivalry. After an introductory verse explaining their physical mien, the re-telling of the narrative was paltry at best. Where the names of the children of Leah and Rachel were explored for their meaning, pupils received an inkling of the domestic life of the two women; otherwise, the daily tension in their domicile was not evident. Much of the richness of the Bible is lost when Leah and Rachel are studied with no mention of Rachel's barrenness, her jealousy of her fecund sister, and her devious plan to barter for Reuben's mandrakes. When students are taught about the sisters giving their maidservants to Jacob in order to have children, a connection should be made with Sarah and Hagar. If the tension between the two sisters is not included in the texts, pupils basically receive an idyllic picture of them. Their lives would seem ordinary and the undercurrent of jealousy which motivates them has not become part of their picture; nor has the opportunity to teach about sibling rivalry been exploited. If the incident of Rachel's stealing the teraphim is likewise excluded from the

educational materials, what results is a totally distorted image from that of the Bible. In the case of their emerging image, it became difficult to determine whether the Bible or rabbinic image was foremost; rather there seemed to be a lacuna.

3. Miriam. A biblical woman of many roles, namely, daughter, sister, leader, prophetess, and sister-in-law, Miriam was the only woman studied who was seen from childhood through adulthood, but her actions were always seen in concert with or in opposition to her brother, Moses. Through it all, the reader learned nothing about her physical appearance. The element of water figured significantly in her life as she watched her baby brother Moses at the Nile's bank, led the women in song after the Red Sea crossing, and was the reason the well followed the people in the wilderness. She was a vocal woman, as she suggested to Pharaoh's daughter that she fetch a woman to nurse her brother, led the women in song, and slandered Moses as a result of which God punished her with a skin affliction. She was the key female figure in the Exodus experience.

Rabbinic literature emphasized positively Miriam's strong-willed and dynamic personality, and commented on her rebelliousness as she slandered Moses. Focussing on her relationship with her parents and Moses when she was a young girl, and sometimes excluding her role at the Red Sea, this literature gave a deficient and inaccurate picture of her life's actions.

Both the educational materials and drawings included Miriam's helpfulness and independent action in tending to her brother's safety when he was discovered in the Nile by Pharaoh's daughter. Since she presented a rare figure because both her



youth and adulthood were seen in the Bible, and her adult life as leader of the women and her slandering of Moses were not often written about, an unfair picture of her life resulted in the educational books. The role she assumed as leader of the women did not shine forth in these materials, either. Pupils were not prodded to question whether Miriam alone was guilty of slander or if Aaron was likewise at fault. As in the rabbinic literature, her youth was glorified and her adulthood was submerged.

4. Rahab. The first post-Pentateuchal female included in this thesis was Rahab the harlot/innkeeper whose heroic feat saved two spies and facilitated their conquering of her own people. She risked her own life, lied to the king's messengers thereby expediting the spies' escape, and was able to extract a promise that her own family would be saved when the spies would return victorious to conquer her people. An action packed narrative was presented in nineteen verses, capturing the reader's imagination. While not an Israelite, she feared the God of the spies and perhaps this emotion propelled her heroism.

The rabbinic literature centered on who Rahab was, that is, the meaning of the word zonah. Diverse opinions questioned her morality: was she a prostitute or an innkeeper dispensing food, or a combination of the two? Midrashic interpretation, linking zonah and mazon, fostered these possibilities. The delicateness of the exegetes in defining the word zonah implied their reverence toward Rahab because of the risk she assumed to herself for the sake of the Israelite spies. Her extraordinary beauty and lustfulness were noted in the Babylonian Talmud. Her

becoming a proselyte was expounded in many sources, and her honored lineage was avowed.

Authors of the educational books were confronted with difficulty when trying to translate zonah. Primarily she was praised for her personality and her bravery, thereby avoiding the word zonah as prostitute; the books took the mazon aspect and said her job was strictly that of an innkeeper. The texts, exercises, and illustrations underscored her bravery and how she effectuated the rescue of the two spies. The drawings concentrated on her hiding the spies and her letting them down through her window. Because of the disparity in the various drawings, no singular image emerged of how Rahab may have actually looked. Additional information involved her having been instrumental in also saving her family. Because educators may have wished to protect pupils from the semantic range of the word zonah, students did not acquire a full image of who Rahab may have been. Perhaps her bravery or her personality might even be seen as greater if all the definitions are open for discussion. To summarize, the biblical image was more prominent than that derived from the traditional literature and the educational materials.

5. Deborah. Uniquely introduced as a prophetess, Deborah also was a wife, judge, and warrior. Usually a woman in Scripture was known as someone's wife or sister or daughter, that is, connected with a male; Deborah was known independently at the outset in her esteemed non-familial role. Her sagacity was highlighted because she was a judge and prophetess; her position as warrior/counsellor was also recognized as she had the power to persuade Barak about military matters. The

Bible did not have anything to say by way of describing her husband, Lappidoth; rather Deborah functioned alone, combining her two roles of judge and prophetess, and she appeared as an extraordinary person.

Deborah's song was a mighty triumphal ode singing praise to God, recognizing Jael's bravery, and calling herself a mother in Israel. A vignette of Sisera's mother awaiting the victorious arrival home of her son was photographic in its imagery.

Rabbinic literature augmented the character of Deborah in both positive and negative ways. She was made a wealthy landowner and had a spiritual side painted of her in the targumim. The Babylonian Talmud said she was modest. Individual exegetes said she was energetic, vigorous, and valorous. Negative comments indicated she was haughty, self-important, and boastful. Her role as a female judge was speculated about since women were not known to hold such an auspicious and responsible position.

Expanded conjectures were made by exegetes regarding Deborah's relationship with her husband and she was praised for helping him achieve community status which he otherwise could not have done on his own. Her role as a warrior superior to Barak and her song of victory which she wrote and Barak joined her in delivering, placed her in a unique position for a female. Her leadership role was recognized in the midrashim where she was also extolled for decisions she made.

The combination of positive and negative traits that were attributed to Deborah were more incisive than those levied toward the other women studied in this thesis. The overall image of Deborah in rabbinic literature was of a vibrant, gifted,

wise woman, who nevertheless showed a selfish, egotistical streak.

The educational materials portrayed her as she was seen in the book of Judges: an influential judge and prophetess who assumed responsibility and exerted authority, and a commanding woman who received respect from her community. She was characterized as a person with whom students could identify in terms of her being a righteous, honored, helpful individual who dispensed momentous advice. In other words, she was seen as a role model whom students could emulate.

Illustrations depicted her as a fiery warrior and a most important judge surrounded by numerous people. It was not physical beauty that was portrayed in the drawings but rather the strength of her personality and her power over others.

The overall impression acquired from the educational materials echoed the Bible and not the rabbinic literature. Her strength and dynamism were seen as traits to be emulated and her role as judge to be highly respected.

6. Jephthah's daughter. This most tragic of biblical figures whose fate was a horror to contemplate was a young virginal girl, acquiescent to her father's wishes and dignified beyond her years. The Bible narrative of seven verses portrayed her as a child who was obedient to and understanding of her father as he felt compelled to execute a vow he had made to God.

Rabbinic literature had difficulty dealing with this traumatic episode and two threads of commentaries evolved to explain the daughter's fate. The first found Jephthah and the high priest to have been proud and obdurate in not approaching each other to offer a solution that could have resulted in saving the daughter's life.

The second maintained that Jephthah could never have sacrificed his daughter; rather he placed her in a solitary place where, once a year, her friends came to visit her. Some exegetes praised her for her compliance and respectfulness to her father; others said she tried to bargain for her life, using biblical text proofs to try to convince him that he was not expected to take her life. The necessity for finding excuses for Jephthah's final solution seemed uppermost among some exegetes.

When the narrative of Jephthah's daughter was taught in the Jewish educational materials, an echo of the rabbinic literature was noted, that is, not all texts presented her as a submissive daughter. The major focus in these books was on Jephthah and how he was feeling, not on his daughter's emotions both at greeting her father upon his victorious arrival home and hearing from him of her fate.

7. Esther. The Bible's Esther was a beautiful young virgin who was chosen queen from among all the most attractive women in Persia to replace the defiant incumbent queen. In becoming queen, Esther the Jewess was to serve a major purpose, namely, saving her people from a villain's plan to annihilate them. Mordecai the cousin who had raised the orphaned Esther watched over her from the courtyard gates and alerted her to her people's fate. Defying the possibility of her own death, Esther appeared unsummoned before Ahasuerus and set in motion the eventual rescue of her people. The overall image Esther presented was of a beautiful heroine, loyal and tractable to Mordecai at the outset, scheming to trap the villain Haman and thereby saving her people, and maturing to acquire her own independence.

The Talmud has given the most illustrative and expansive interpretation of Esther, being concerned not only with her appearance and personality but also with her lineage and spirituality. In order to make her portrait more defensible, the rabbinic literature attempted to make her a more religious person than the Bible had indicated. The rabbis of the Talmud and midrashim must have had great difficulty in dealing with a Jewess going to live in an alien environment and then marrying a non-Jew. Their literature resounded with their need to have her retain her practices, especially in regard to dietary laws, the Sabbath, and laws of family purity. Her marrying a non-Jew was rationalized and justified as she was considered the instrument through which her people would be saved. By using this type of interpretation in the classroom, pupils could become aware of the vast parameters of Bible scholarship.

Textbooks and holiday books either did not refer to her being a Jewess who married a non-Jew or excused her for doing so since, as a result of the marriage, she was able to rescue her people. Parallels between Esther and Rachel surfaced in the educational textbooks, namely, their beauty was stressed and their negative actions were minimized or omitted. Glorification of their characters was evident.

The many drawings showed her modesty through her facial features and attire. Both illustrations and texts, by emphasizing her having risked her life by going before Ahasuerus, contributed to the fairy tale dimension of this story.

As is often true in fairy tales, the heroines do not seem truly to mature as individuals. This was also true of Esther in the educational books and was an

apparent difference between the image portrayed in both the Bible and rabbinic literature. Because educational materials highlighted Esther's physical appearance and positive personality traits and did not present her as a maturing woman, the richness of her character is lost. While the fairy tale dimension of her story might be adequate for the lower elementary grades, the upper levels should study Esther as an evolving, even calculating, woman, queen, and deliverer of her people. By eliminating her tension as a Jewess in the palace, her marriage to a non-Jew, and her role as "strategist," Esther was not studied by children as a multi-dimensional female. The challenges she confronted and surmounted were not portrayed in a balanced way and pupils have missed the essence of her maturity and mission; rather she presented an ideal to pupils of a Jewess, a queen, and a heroine.

#### E. Art as Bible interpretation

The very important place art holds both in Bible interpretation and in education contributes to iconographic representations playing a particularly meaningful role in stories about heroines and heroes. Since pictures are usually looked at before a pupil begins to read a story, the advanced familiarity with the drawings implied that students came to the text with a pre-conceived idea about the major characters. Not only do the figures promote an influential idea, but the color tones and shadings, and the scenic background also provided an atmosphere that reinforced the artist's message. Therefore, it was not enough for the artist to know about the characters themselves; a knowledge of the entire narrative became

imperative. Children's receptivity was acute and biblical art was a potent form of exegesis. The artist's responsibility was to represent the figures in as clear a depiction as possible. This is art as biblical interpretation, assuming a definite knowledge of the Bible text before the art work has been drawn.

In any given Bible narrative scene a dominant figure emerges. Art work must reflect the Bible text as it depicts the key character. As a work of art is viewed, a place of honor or focus of attention is to the right of center. An artist will usually place the dominant figure there. As the viewer's eye travels left to right in the traditional way of viewing a painting, the artist again can show influence and interpretation by the placement of the figures. In handling the background and foreground, and left to right and center and side directions, the artist is able to manipulate the scene. This environment which therefore has been pre-determined by the artist directly reflects his or her personal interpretation and sways the viewer's perception and interpretation as well.

When Sarah was seen in a tent opening off on the side of a drawing, her unimportance was signified. On the contrary, when Miriam was seen hiding behind the bulrushes, the artist skillfully directed the viewer to her so that she sometimes became even more important than Pharaoh's daughter, who was discovering Moses. The force of Deborah's character was seen as she sat in the center of the illustrations, amidst numerous people, judging their cases. The eye of the viewer was drawn past or beyond the other figures in the drawing and rested on her. So, too, did her forcefulness come to the fore in the battle scenes where she was seen in close-up



views and her face showed her strength and animation. Drawings of Esther the lovely young contestant who was in a competition to be chosen queen contrasted with the scenes in which she accused Haman of planning to kill her people. In the latter scene, she was sketched as an angry, threatening person.

Each of these drawings, whether simplistic or highly detailed, made a statement about how the artist interpreted the Bible and enhanced the educational materials. Rachel and the young Miriam were more romanticized, their beauty or loveliness and vigor being expressed through the drawings. I wonder if more protection was given to them as Pentateuchal figures, and more leeway taken with post-Pentateuchal figures, especially one who was not an Israelite. Perhaps the more sacred nature of the Torah mitigated for artists to have enhanced their illustrations and idealized these females, notwithstanding the Bible text.

#### F. Excluded Bible contents in the educational materials and their effect on the learning process

While the educational texts presented the females in scriptural sequence, many incidents in their lives, primarily of a sexual nature, were omitted. In recounting the Bible text, the woman's story before and after the excluded part would be told, leaving a gap where the controversial event had transpired.

Excluded incidents involved engaging in actions where chastity was suspect (Sarah), thievery was involved (Rachel), slander was committed (Miriam), and an interfaith marriage occurred (Esther). Where the Bible and the interpretative

literature attributed positive and negative characteristics to a particular female, pupils must be exposed to both because only then will the figure become an honest reflection of a real persona (Rahab the harlot/innkeeper). Even so called ideal people must be seen as real people with whom pupils can identify in a realistic way, and reality implies that the positive may be tempered with the negative in personal traits and actions.

Three incidents about Sarah illustrate this point, two about her having been taken to the palaces of Pharaoh and Abimelech, and the third, her having Hagar banished. Pupils were denied learning about Sarah's negative behavior when these incidents were excluded from school books, and she became a pristine ideal who lied to protect her husband and who exiled the woman who bore Abraham's first son, along with the child. When Sarah's laughter was not included in textbook commentaries, I wonder if the authors were protecting her image or if they felt the text was self-explanatory, i. e., a ninety year old woman hearing she was to bear a child would, of course, laugh. While it would be wonderful to think that matriarchs were faultless people who always acted fairly and always accepted their fate, this was not a reasonable or realistic goal to set for teaching. The threat to Sarah's physical being, her exiling Hagar, and her laughter of incredulity all synthesize to make her a credible human being with whom students might more easily identify.

When students did not read that Rachel stole her father's teraphim and then would not facilitate his search for them, they acquired a different picture of Rachel than the Bible put forth. So, too, were they denied learning of the varied opinions

of the rabbinic exegetes. In addition, when excuses were made for her action and her motives were praised, her portrait exhibited a glorified physical ideal whose deceptive actions were lauded. It was a glaring error to foster this type of approach. And if, in the same texts, little attention was paid to sibling rivalry and the jealousy between the two sisters, Rachel became a sterile figure. In other words, by whitewashing the educational materials at will, the original image has been altered and has no fealty to the Bible. Where biblical interpreters were also quoted, another problem arose: if, in fact, the exegetes' focal points did not put emphasis on the women, it was akin to rubbing salt into an open wound and his biased interpretation was now the students' legacy.

Various qualities of the women were accentuated in both the illustrations and written texts. Rachel and Esther are pictured as beautiful and romantic figures. Miriam, the only female seen both as a child and adult, was dynamic, and her portrait can compare with that of Rahab and Deborah: each has been called a prophetess in the rabbinic literature, but this was not stressed in the educational books. Sarah and Leah were envisioned with sympathy as they experienced major marital problems. The presentation of Sarah tempered her foibles and praised her kindness to Abraham. Texts said she laughed at God's prediction but do not always include her participation in preparing food for, and displaying hospitality to, the three guests. Jephthah's daughter and Hagar were studied as victims. While the former's fate was not always clear in the textbooks, she nevertheless evoked the pupils' compassion as did Hagar. It was ironic that Hagar, whom children were taught to regard as an

enemy was shown to be close to, and recognized by, God. Because every biblical figure might be expected to teach lessons about life, the implication is that students could find redeeming features in each of the characters.

### III. Suggestions for Educational Material

Often the elements of emotions and reactions were neglected. Sarah, Rachel, and Miriam were prosaic figures, severely different from the Bible portrait. Where sibling rivalry has been excluded, Leah seemed uni-dimensional as well. The women who were activists and vibrant include Rahab, Deborah, Esther, and even Hagar. Other egregious omissions can be recognized when viewing the educational as a corpus: linkage and thematic schemes were sorely lacking. Only one book provided an example of what I mean, namely, the connecting of the concubine theme from Sarah's story to Leah and Rachel. Other examples of associations should include: 1. the significance of water and wells in the lives of Miriam, Hagar, and Rachel; 2. the manipulation of females, i. e., Sarah, Hagar, Rachel, Esther, and Jephthah's daughter; 3. barrenness among the matriarchs; 4. women without children where barrenness was not cited, i. e., Miriam, Rahab, Deborah, and Esther; 5. disobedience on the part of Miriam and Esther; 6. the hospitality of Sarah, Rahab, and Esther; 7. the strength of character of Sarah to whom Abraham was told to listen, and of Deborah who, according to the rabbinic literature, helped her husband achieve the status he was incapable of accomplishing himself; 8. the Bible's highlighting females' beauty, i. e., Sarah, Rachel, and Esther; 9. the import of women, namely, Miriam and Deborah,

and song at victorious moments in the history of their people; and 10. the crucial issue of the rabbis having given generic traits to women based on singular biblical examples such as eavesdropping (Sarah), being a gadabout (Leah), thievery (Rachel), slander and gossip (Miriam), and pride and haughtiness (Deborah). This should be quite an explosive topic for older pupils.

#### IV. Conclusion

If teachers base their teaching only on these educational materials and ignore the Bible text and rabbinic literature, I think it is fair to acknowledge the poverty of Bible study in the schools. Those who rely on the available resources should realize that they are inadequate individually. If, for example, a teacher uses only the story book approach, the pupil receives scanty information about the figure being studied. Should the Bible alone be used, it is incumbent upon the teacher to infuse rabbinic exegesis into the teaching. The ideal situation certainly is to combine the Bible text with a selection of rabbinic literature and then add workbooks and creative exercises.

Unless those who use the books currently available are also doing all sorts of important and undocumented things, they may be stuck in a rut; those who try to correct the situation will have to do so in a creative rather than superficial way. With a knowledge of Scripture and the willingness to study the work of exegetes, educators should be challenged to devise texts that mirror the history of biblical interpretation. If they continue to engage in selectivity in their presentation, the result will be lack of fidelity to the Bible and tradition, and skewed images of biblical females. By

highlighting or modifying biblical scenes and narratives, images become distorted and the implication is that new personalities might conceivably evolve. Rather than developing what the text says, innovations will emerge. This should not be the goal of the educational materials although it must be a creative by-product of the classroom experience. When the Bible presents a span of years in the life of a female, the educational resources must reflect the woman's growth. Sarah's maturity from manipulated wife to matriarch of her people, as seen in the Bible and mirrored in the rabbinic literature, must be forthcoming in the educational texts. Leah and Rachel must be seen as brides and as women raising their children in a divisive atmosphere. It is not adequate to concentrate on Miriam's role at the Nile River to the exclusion of viewing her at the Red Sea and later smitten with a disease. It is not straightforward to present an imbalanced portrait of Esther, neglecting her growth from frightened young girl to the heroic rescuer of her people.

The challenge that confronts educators is clear. Collectively, the educational materials cover most of the relevant narratives. However, each individual text or teaching tool does not provide a good reading of the figures. By itself, each looks far less positive, less informative, less sophisticated, and less useful than the corpus as a whole. Much more can be done and must be done to exploit the riches of the traditional debate about the real life situations, thoughts, and emotions of the biblical characters.

In order to be scrupulous and impartial to pupils and to present the aspects of Bible study that have been ignored and omitted, the challenge is to change the

composite memory or perception of biases that have evolved through centuries of study. Contemporary readers of the Bible who are sensitive to sexist interpretations of previous eras, have made the inappropriate presentation of biblical women a pertinent issue and avow that, since we remember our past selectively and repeat this trend through the generations, the task that lies ahead is to study the personality as depicted in the Bible and offer the full scope of each female in a forthright manner. Study of a range of reconstructions of each character and the implication of each would teach children to do this job themselves and to join the millennia of other readers and interpreters who grappled with these texts. In that way potentially legitimate educational texts will emerge and justice to each figure will be achieved.

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