



Midrash for Renewal and Repair: Feminist Retellings of Biblical and Rabbinic Stories

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**Midrash for Renewal and Repair:
Feminist Retellings of Biblical and Rabbinic Stories**

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Introduction

Standing Again, Under Sinai

Let me tell you a story about a story about why we write stories. This, in my opinion, is a very Jewish thing to do.

When I was in college, I read a short story called “Miriam Under the Mountain.” It came from a larger anthology by Rabbi Jill Hammer titled *Sisters at Sinai: New Tales of Biblical Women* (2001). In this story, Hammer wrestles with a question that has long plagued Jewish feminists.¹ Where were Jewish women when the Torah – the sacred text of our tradition, read weekly in Jewish communities around the world – was delivered on Mt. Sinai? Were women (and anyone outside the gender binary) included in this pivotal moment with the divine?

In Exodus 19, Moses tells the people, the *am* in Hebrew, how to prepare for this communion with God. He instructs them to wash their clothes and bodies. He also tells them: “Do not go near a woman” (Exodus 19:15).

This verse implies that women were not considered part of the *am*, the people, who participated in the revelation at Sinai. While Moses and Aaron are mentioned as key players in this interaction with God, their sister Miriam goes unmentioned. It’s a text that hurts to read. Exclusion from the theophany at Sinai, along with other selections from sacred texts that dismiss or denigrate women, have long been used to justify patriarchal traditions within Judaism.

When I picked up Hammer’s book, I was a college student who had, quite unexpectedly, fallen in love² with biblical and rabbinic texts. After stumbling into a religious studies class on

¹ Feminist theologian Judith Plaskow in particular. See Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*.

² During this time in my life, I also read Daniel Boyarin’s piece “Justify My Love,” which resonated with me as I re-encountered Jewish sacred texts. In this article, Boyarin struggles with how to reconcile his love for the Talmud with its patriarchal and misogynistic elements.

the Book of Genesis, I became enchanted with biblical stories, examining them for the first time since my *bat mitzvah* through a new lens: the academic study of religion. At the same time, I was discovering my identity as a queer Jewish woman. I started asking questions about how intersectional feminist thought could transform spiritual communities, including the ways we understand sacred texts.

Hammer's subversive version of Exodus 19 felt like an opening. As Hammer tells the story, when the Israelite men approach Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah, Miriam the prophetess is simultaneously brought into the earth, to a beautiful cavern under the mountain. There, she receives a gift from a mysterious woman: "all the empty places in the Torah...every place there is no ink, every place there is no word."³ When Miriam protests that this is no great gift, she is reminded that musical instruments need hollow chambers to make sound, and rivers need channels to flow. She is told that when the world was created, it began with a space.

"Miriam Under the Mountain" is a midrash, or perhaps a meta-midrash. In her book, Hammer references the Talmudic teaching that the Torah was written in black fire on white fire.⁴ According to Jewish tradition, each letter of the text, and every empty space between the letters, is a holy site of possibility. Hammer's story reminds me of lyrics from a wonderful song by Ezra Furman, a transfemme Jewish artist: "They'll tell about your system as a system with no teeth / The histories will name us as the people underneath / The emptiness you only heard about was one we intimately knew / But emptiness is turned into a tunnel when a train comes through."⁵

Hammer's story and Furman's song call on us to fill, transform, and sanctify empty space, the places we know intimately because of our experiences and identities. These pieces of

³ Hammer, *Sisters at Sinai*, 133.

⁴ This teaching comes from the Jerusalem Talmud, PT Shekalim 6a.

⁵ From "Train Comes Through," on Ezra Furman's fantastic album *All of Us Flames*.

art ground my writing, and the larger project of modern feminist midrash. But let's back up. What do I mean by modern feminist midrash?

Defining Midrash: In Short, It's Complicated

Midrash is a Hebrew word that comes from the verbal root⁶ *dalet-resh-shin*, which means to seek, interpret, or inquire. Jewish studies scholar Tamar Biala specifies that midrash entails “searching out and exploring sacred scripture.”⁷ For Jews like me, this means deep study and reflection on the Hebrew Bible or Tanakh.⁸

But midrash can be a hard term to define further because it contains multitudes. Religious historian Annette Yoshiko Reed writes that “midrash” actually refers to several related phenomena: “its semantic field encompasses the process of classical Rabbinic biblical interpretation, the distinctive worldview therein and thereby described, and the various products of the process, including interpretations (midrashim), the texts in which they are preserved (midrashic collections), and the totality of these interpretations (‘the Midrash’). Most concur that ‘midrash’ consists of more than a group of methods and the products of their application. Almost all agree that it is difficult, if not impossible, to define.”⁹

To summarize Reed, midrash is the act of interpreting biblical texts in conversation with the rabbinic tradition. Midrash is also the discrete texts and teachings that this interpretation

⁶ Words in Hebrew (as well as other Semitic languages) have three letter “roots,” known as the *shoresh* in Hebrew. Many roots are linked to a verb as well as nouns. This feature of the Hebrew language leads to a lot of interesting wordplay, and layered meanings are often encoded by choosing words with the same or similar roots in a narrative.

⁷ Biala, *Dirshuni*, x.

⁸ Tanakh – the term typically used in Jewish communities for the collection also known as the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament – is not a Hebrew word *per se* but an acronym for its components: Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy), Nevi'im or Prophets, and Ketuvim or Writings.

⁹ Reed, “Reading Augustine and/as Midrash,” 69-70.

produces. And midrash is also a little something extra.¹⁰ Rabbi Rachel Mikva concurs that while midrash often refers to a body of rabbinic literature, midrash can be understood “as a way of reading, purposefully elastic as it searches out possibilities of meaning in the Hebrew Bible.”¹¹ Here, Mikva invokes the “spirit” of midrash – a willingness to employ creativity and imagination in the work of exegesis, to bend time and space to make new meaning out of ancient words.¹² Biala too sees midrash as “an exercise in creativity, with an element of play and pleasure in which sweep and imagination are conjoined.”¹³

This spirit of play has made midrash beloved, dynamic, and enduring. Midrash-making has a long history, beginning with rabbis living in the first five centuries CE. Their scholarship, debates, and teaching practices produced the texts referred to as classical rabbinic literature today, including the Mishnah and Talmud. Rabbis and scholars created midrashic works throughout the medieval period as well, such as *The Alphabet of Ben Sira* and *The Zohar*. Midrash has continued to attract and inspire Jewish thinkers into the present day because of the meaningful way it calls on each generation to reinterpret sacred text.

Defining Modern Feminist Midrash

Starting in the 1970s, Jewish feminist thinkers began to recognize the liberatory potential of midrash. Theologian Judith Plaskow was one of the first to do so. After meaningful

¹⁰ *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* defines midrash as “something between interpretive and creative writing” (Rouzer, 600). Pretty vague if you ask me, but I like that they bring in creative writing as an important facet of midrash-making.

¹¹ Mikva, “Midrash,” 12.

¹² I am borrowing the idea of a midrashic spirit from eminent scholar David Stern, who argues that the post-Enlightenment emphasis on *peshat* or “plain reading” is a blip in the history of Jewish biblical interpretation. In his essay “Midrash and Jewish Exegesis” Stern writes, “if there has been a dominant mode of Jewish reading of the Bible, it has been more in the ‘spirit’ of midrash...with its imperative to connect to the biblical text, its irrepressible playfulness, and its delight in multiple, polyvalent traditions of interpretation” (“Midrash and Jewish Exegesis,” 1874). I recommend the whole essay for a deeper dive into the history of midrash.

¹³ Biala, *Dirshuni*, xiii.

consciousness-raising experiences with the Jewish feminist collective B'not Esh,¹⁴ Plaskow published a short story called “The Coming of Lilith” in 1972. I regard this text – which reimagines the relationships among Eve, Adam, God, and the midrashic figure Lilith¹⁵ in the Garden of Eden – as a foundational document in the history of modern feminist midrash.

Plaskow's Eve scales an apple tree to escape the confines of the garden and eventually finds companionship with Lilith on the other side. The presence of a tree in this story is fitting. Like many Jews, I grew up singing songs and reading texts that describe the Torah as a tree of life. Hammer asserts that the life-giving tree of Torah must grow in order to survive. She sees modern feminist midrash as an example of this crucial process:

The great flowering of midrash by women since the 1970s is a case in point of how midrash helps the Torah grow. The experiences of women have been shut out of the textual and historical consciousness of the Jewish people until very recently, and midrash is one way that women and others who have been excluded from the tradition can reclaim the tradition for themselves, by telling stories that weave their experiences into the communal sense of revelation. Through this activity, they neither reject the text nor accept a position of silence. Rather, they find a way to honor themselves and the tradition through creative action. By writing in the margins, they become no longer marginal.¹⁶

I see my midrash collection – this one in your hands! – as a part of the transformative “flowering” Plaskow began and Hammer and others continued. I believe in midrash as a tool for renewal and repair,¹⁷ especially for people who have been marginalized from their spiritual communities due to their gender identity or sexual orientation.

Creative re-interpretation of biblical stories allows me to wrestle with Jewish texts that trouble me rather than pretending they don't exist or dismissing them as irreparably patriarchal.

¹⁴ Meaning “Daughters of Fire” in Hebrew. Needless to say, they were pretty badass.

¹⁵ For more on Lilith, keep reading until you reach my story “Lilith and the Angels”!

¹⁶ Hammer, *Sisters at Sinai*, xiv.

¹⁷ I was raised in the Reform Jewish tradition, which enshrines *tikkun olam* – the idea that our world contains brokenness but can and should be repaired – as a central Jewish value.

New ways to read between the lines emerge when I consider surprisingly imaginative classical midrash, as well as modern midrashic work. The “spirit” of midrash gives me license to bring a feminist lens to my biblical retellings, and to play with anachronism and magical realism as I offer unexpected twists on old stories.

I read myself into the biblical text by depicting figures who share my identities, struggles, and big questions. This is still a radical act. I am keenly aware that if I had been born just a couple of generations earlier, my gender (and sexuality) would likely have barred my access to learning Torah, Talmud, and skills for Jewish ritual leadership. I feel deeply grateful to the Jewish feminist scholars and activists who came before me and work beside me.

There is also a special place in my heart for those who have built the small but growing bookshelf of modern feminist midrash. Prominent works include: “The Coming of Lilith” (1972) by Judith Plaskow, *The Five Books of Miriam* (1996) by Ellen Frankel, *Biblical Women Unbound* (1996) by Norma Rosen, the aforementioned *Sisters at Sinai* (2004) by Jill Hammer, *A Bride for One Night* (2014) by Ruth Calderon, *Womanist Midrash* (2017) by Wilda Gafney, the anthology *Dirshuni* (2022) edited by Tamar Biala, and *Biblical Women Speak* (2023) by Marla Feldman.¹⁸

Thinking of these authors, I offer a definition of modern feminist midrash:

Modern feminist midrash is creative interpretative work from the mid-20th century onwards that elaborates on biblical texts and engages rabbinic literature while centering women and other marginalized figures. This work often employs the imaginative and playful midrashic spirit to explore gender, sexuality, and embodiment in sacred stories. Modern feminist midrash brings the lived experience of midrashists into conversation with the biblical text and classical rabbinic literature.

¹⁸ I would also include *The Red Tent* by Anita Diamant in this list, but the author has insisted many times that her bestseller is a novel, not a midrash. I want to respect Diamant’s view of her creative work, and hope that she might reconsider in light of my new definition of modern feminist midrash!

Additionally, though the bookshelf I describe above is mostly prose, modern feminist midrash can take the form of poetry, visual art, music, theater, and more. Examples include early Jewish feminist Merle Feld's poem "We All Stood Together" (1999), and J. Sylvan's *Beloved King: A Queer Bible Musical* (2020). Whatever its final form, modern feminist midrash must begin "with textual exegesis, with finding a point of text on which to hang a new idea."¹⁹ With the following stories, I offer my own contribution to this growing body of art and literature. So, what exactly should you expect from the midrash to come?

My Midrash Collection and Writing Process

This collection consists of seven short stories in the tradition of modern feminist midrash. Each story is centered around a woman from the biblical narrative and/or rabbinic imagination, namely Lilith ("Lilith and the Angels"), Rebekah ("The God of Rebekah"), Serach bat Asher ("Serach Who Endures"), Yocheved ("Conversations at Night"), Miriam ("Seven Days"), a female companion of Jephthah's daughter ("The Book of Yetzirah"), and Batsheva ("Batsheva and the Raven"). The stories are arranged according to the order in which these figures appear in the Hebrew Bible.

Excerpts from the texts that served as the imaginative jumping-off points are featured on the first page of each story. Often, my writing process began with the desire to transform a troubling text, one with elements of sexism or cruelty that didn't sit well with me. This is the case with "Seven Days," based on the Numbers 12 passage where God strikes Miriam with disease, seemingly for questioning Moses' authority. Grappling with Judges 11, a "text of

¹⁹ Hammer, *Sisters at Sinai*, xv.

terror”²⁰ in which a father kills his daughter to fulfill a holy oath, led me to write “The Book of Yetzirah.”

At other times, discovering a thought-provoking piece of classical midrash inspired me to explore a specific figure or set of stories. “Serach Who Endures” was sparked by a Jewish feminist blogger’s Instagram post²¹ discussing Serach bat Asher, who has a rich life in the rabbinic imagination despite only two mentions of her name in the Hebrew Bible. “Batsheva and the Raven” emerged when I stumbled upon a midrash from the Babylonian Talmud that brings a bird into the first encounter between Batsheva and King David. I also sought to expand the scope of modern feminist midrash by writing about women whose stories have been less explored by other authors. For example, when considering the matriarchs of Genesis, I focused on Rebekah because she tends to get less play than Sarah or the sisters Leah and Rachel.

Sometimes reimagining sacred stories allowed me to explore broader questions. How did my ancestors find healing? What does it mean to repent? What would it be like to live forever? How can people sustain themselves through structural oppression and personal loss? What does a loving relationship look like? The process of writing each midrashic story was deeply enriching, a journey of its own.

When crafting these stories, I started by reading the biblical narratives I hoped to understand more deeply, at first in English and then in Biblical Hebrew. Next, I read other biblical passages connected to relevant figures and events. I sought out classical rabbinic midrash and commentary on the interrelated texts, plus any modern feminist interpretations of the

²⁰ Term coined by groundbreaking feminist biblical critic Phyllis Trible. “Texts of terror” are stories in the Hebrew Bible which depict intense violence and cruelty towards women.

²¹ Unfortunately, the post that I remember about Serach bat Asher, the immortal *bubbe*, has disappeared into the ether of the internet. It might have been created or shared by @jewitches, whose content on Jewish folklore I deeply enjoy!

episodes that interested me. Then I compared the varying accounts and explications, selecting ones that resonated with me or served my feminist purposes.

Midrash is intertextual²² and multivocal. I purposefully cite and allude to the interpretations of other thinkers in my writing. I love this aspect of the midrash-making process, how vast distances in time and space collapse. Seeking insights into a biblical story, I am suddenly in conversation with sages from the Ancient Near East, medieval commentators, and the first generation of women ordained as rabbis, all at the same time. Maybe we have similar ideas about how to solve a problem or fill a gap in the story. Maybe I disagree with one interpretation or feel touched by another. I try to imagine the lives of women, girls, and queer people in the ancient world, but the stories I tell are equally informed by my life as a bisexual Jewish woman living in 21st century America.

Here then, is my basic recipe for modern feminist midrash: biblical texts, rabbinic midrash, modern midrash, wisdom drawn from personal experiences, some scholarly sources, a healthy dose of radical imagination, a dash of humor, and boom: a new story.

As you dive into this collection, you will likely notice that the characters express themselves like 21st century American Jews, or just a touch more formally. I made this stylistic choice because anachronism and fantastical storytelling elements are in line with the longer history of midrash,²³ and a feature of most modern midrash. I hold that historical accuracy is not really the point of feminist midrash, or even midrash in general.

²² See Daniel Boyarin's *Intertextuality and Reading Midrash* for a more extensive analysis of this element of classical rabbinic midrash.

²³ Don't believe me? There's an imaginative classical midrash about God opening up a time portal so that Moses can visit Rabbi Akiva's study house far in the future (BT Menachot 29b). At first, Moses is distressed when he doesn't understand the material that Akiva and his students are learning. Moses is comforted once he discovers that the teachings were derived from laws that he himself received on Mt. Sinai. It seems this ancient midrashist also believes in the importance of Torah growing and changing. And probably would have enjoyed Doctor Who.

Additionally, you will likely find more joy, sexuality, agency, and pleasure for biblical women in these pages than you imagine, likely more than is historically accurate.²⁴ This is purposeful. It feels powerful to imagine joy, sex, agency, and pleasure in the lives of women I consider my ancestors, rather than simply refracted images of violence and oppression. While one of the great strengths of early feminist biblical criticism was pointing out the horrific misogyny embedded in sacred texts, these works are often distressing to read and absorb (especially for women and queer people). In my writing, I try not to elide narratives about pain, rage, and resistance. Still, I hope that my collection reaches back in time to offer my ancestors some form of comfort, while also stretching into the future, imagining a world where healing is possible. I believe that the same texts can hold deep sorrow and make space for joy.

Finally, you have likely noticed the footnotes appearing in this introduction. These contain connections between my stories and biblical and rabbinic texts, relevant Jewish history, explanations for certain narrative choices, and some decent jokes.²⁵ Though engaging with the footnotes is not strictly necessary to enjoy each story, they serve another purpose apart from providing additional context, if only aesthetically. Extensive footnotes allow me to imitate a page of Talmud, where commentary and rabbinic discussion fill the margins. My footnotes nod to this tradition and honor all the writers, thinkers, and artists who have served as inspirations in my exploration of the Hebrew Bible.

Midrash is best crafted and studied in community. In the 1970s, a feminist consciousness-raising collective nurtured Judith Plaskow's writing. My own work has been shaped by several

²⁴ If reading NSFW midrash about Moses' parents isn't your jam, I'd skip "Conversations at Night." If you want to flip right to the lesbian love story, try "The Book of Yetzirah."

²⁵ I was inspired by the creative footnotes of Douglas Adams (hilarious), Terry Pratchett (hilarious), and Carmen Maria Machado (less so). The footnotes in *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace made me want to throw the book across the room, but that was probably just *Infinite Jest*.

key teachers, *chevrutas* (study partners), friends, and learning communities.²⁶ I am especially grateful for all past and current members of Feminists Making Midrash, a student organization at Harvard Divinity School which I founded with my friend Dani Rader in 2022.

Modern feminist midrash is a manifestation of a very long collective project. Together, we can assist the Torah in growing like a beautiful tree, so that sacred texts remain a vibrant part of our lives and communities.

²⁶ A short list includes Rabbi Jordan Braunig, Prof. Joel Rosenberg, Prof. Ann Braude, Prof. Annette Yoshiko Reed, Chaplain Kerry Maloney, Rabbi Liza Stern, Rabbi Shaul Magid, Prof. Samira Mehta, Prof. Jordan Katz, Chaplain Lynn Cooper, Emily Rogal, Dani Rader, Ezra Levine, Lex Berman, Teddy Alderson, Maya Levine, Shir Lovett-Graff, Julia Wedgle, Josh Kurtz, Kenton Goldsby, Charlotte McAdams, Nirvani Williams, the members of the 2020-2021 DC Avodah Jewish Service Corps, the members of HDS Jews for Liberation, and the people who make SVARA and Lehrhaus possible. And special shoutout to my family, housemates, and girlfriend for loving me even when I'm getting all riled up about Hebrew grammar, or biblically accurate angels, or J.R.R. Tolkien's theological beliefs, or truly anything related to Jewish texts and history.