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INTRODUCTION

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This issue of the *Journal of Textual Reasoning* celebrates the 2022 publication of *Dirshuni: Contemporary Women's Midrash*.[1]

This book is an adaptation of a two-volume set published in Israel, known as דרשוני: מדרשי נשים. For decades, Orthodox women in Israel had been writing midrashim for themselves, generally without an eye towards publication. Tamar Biala began to collect these midrashim and to teach them in various spaces of Jewish study, when she met Nehama Weingarten-Mintz, another collector of women's midrash. Upon comparing their varied collections, they realized how expansive this genre was. When they publicized their interest in collecting more, they received hundreds of women-authored midrashim. The first Hebrew-language volume was published in 2009, and the second in 2018.

The English publication of *Dirshuni* features a selection of fifty midrashim from the Hebrew volumes that have been translated by Yehuda Mirsky. *Dirshuni* goes beyond translation, however, by introducing a layer of commentary authored by Tamar Biala and translated by Ilana Kurshan. This commentary expands the deeply

[1] Tamar Biala, ed., *Dirshuni: Contemporary Women's Midrash* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2022).

sedimented layers of meaning—so characteristic of classical midrash—that comprise these women's midrashim, providing context, unpacking some of the hermeneutic moves of the midrashists, and articulating aspects of their *hiddushim* (innovative contributions).

In its translation and commentary, *Dirshuni* makes the rich and creative texts of women midrashists accessible to an anglophone audience. Its publication marks an opening of possibilities—for religious and academic study alike. We at the *Journal of Textual Reasoning* are incredibly excited to present the following journal issue in which scholars of different disciplines reflect on the value and contributions of the *Dirshuni* project as a whole.

Cara Rock-Singer's "The Textual Is Political: Disrupting Jewish Ecology East of Eden" opens this issue with an ethnographic and ecological reading of Tamar Biala, the *Dirshuni* project, and Biala's own midrash, "The Ever-Turning Sword." Presenting scenes in which Rock-Singer studied with Biala, she brings the human face of the *Dirshuni* project into its academic discussion. Rock-Singer argues that *Dirshuni* enacts a new kind of feminist politics, one that opens a space for "curious encounter." Using an ecological lens, she argues that *Dirshuni* expands the field of Jewish possibilities "not only through the messages of individual *midrashim* but by adding fertile new members to the extant yet reproductively dormant population of the kind/*min* of classical midrash." This allows both the authors of *Dirshuni* and Rock-Singer herself to move past entrenched binaries of normative/subversive, original/copy, authentic/fake and to imagine other kinds of relationships among the holy texts of the Jewish tradition and their interlocutors.

The second essay, "*Dirshuni* and Classical Midrash: Form, Language, Contents, and Purpose," by Aaron Koller conducts a thorough comparison between *Dirshuni* and Talmudic midrash to find commonalities between the two in content, language, and form. Koller shows how the midrashists of *Dirshuni* successfully deploy the form and language of classical midrash in their writings. Even their content, which is far more focused on women's concerns and critiques than classical midrash, dovetails with the goals of the latter. As Koller writes of Rivka

Lubitch's midrash on the *Akedah* (The Binding of Isaac): "This is a brilliantly creative and original midrash, packed into just a few lines. And yet methodologically and even thematically, it can be seen as continuous with the ways that ancient readers responded to the text. A textual conundrum is solved by an ideological one, and the text hums happily along." Koller concludes that on these three counts, the midrashim in *Dirshuni* are expert renditions and expansions of the classical form. In doing so, he makes the case for why these should be studied alongside classical midrashim

"Engaging *Dirshuni* as a Collective Women's Enterprise: A Translation, Commentary, and Analysis of the Story of Yehudit," coauthored by Chaya Halberstam and Marjorie Lehman, is a reflexive exploration of what it is like to read *Dirshuni* as two accomplished women scholars of rabbinic literature. Using an auto-ethnographic method, they document their *havruta* study of the midrash "Cup of Barrenness," authored by Ruth Kara-Ivanov Kaniel and originally published in the first volume of דרשוני. This midrash tells the story of Yehudit, wife of Rabbi Hiya, who rendered herself barren in order to keep studying Torah. Through their study, Halberstam and Lehman explore their own positions as women scholars in a male-dominated field and Jewish women in a patriarchal tradition. They find solace and a hope for building a better future through Kaniel's Yehudit, who discovers a community of women that can support her in her lone endeavor. In this way, they show how *Dirshuni* has fostered a community of women that can support each other, braving institutional hierarchies to create new possibilities.

Rebecca Epstein-Levi's "Woman as Metaphor: Mashal and Epistemic Control" welcomes *Dirshuni* into the halls of academic Talmud study, a place where it surely belongs and where it promises to make further inroads. Engaging Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor*, Epstein-Levi explores the literary and ethical implications of the ways that women function as metaphors in the rabbinic tradition. Through an analysis of Dana Pulver's midrash on the biblical verse in Genesis 3:16 "And he will rule over you," Epstein-Levi shows how the act of turning women—or indeed any gendered people—into metaphors is an act of power that can

easily turn into domination. She concludes that women midrashists taking up the tools of midrash allows then to "grasp the multivalent power play in the act of likening one thing to another, and use it to grasp back . . . reveal[ing] the possibilities for making better, more just epistemic frameworks."

In "Seeking God's Face through the Eyes of Woman," Eliezer Diamond reflects on the value and contributions of the *Dirshuni* project. Exploring parts of the midrashim in more detail, Diamond illuminates the skillfulness of the craft of midrash present in *Dirshuni*. He argues that "seeking God through the eyes of woman" reveals unique faces of God that are now open to human imagination.

Brought together, these essays explore questions about the aims and accomplishments of *Dirshuni*. Rock-Singer shows we can move past the yardstick of authentic/imitation, a measure by which any women's enterprise will inevitably be reduced, in employing an ecological lens. This lens allows us to see the ways *Dirshuni* gives rise to new species of Jewish textual reasoning. Though Koller's essay might be read as raising the specter of authenticity by comparing *Dirshuni* to classical midrash, another reading is preferable in my view: in showing how *Dirshuni* successfully employs the craft of classical midrash, Koller's essay initiates a dialogue about why authors would employ tools of classical midrash in the first place. If, as Rock-Singer shows, *Dirshuni* is successful beyond its replication of the midrashic genre, why would women want or need to place themselves within this genre, which explicitly excluded them? One answer comes from Diamond's essay: *Dirshuni* midrashists are contributing to Torah by thinking out of their unique perspectives. They enrich the Jewish people and the Jewish textual tradition by revealing new faces of God. Halberstam/Lehman and Epstein-Levi offer another answer. Recalling the famous quote from Audre Lorde about masters' tools and houses, both of these essays position *Dirshuni* as imminent critique: the act of speaking from within the community in a language and style the

community can recognize.[2] Halberstam and Lehman show how Yehudit uses rabbinic reasoning to bolster her pursuit of Torah over and against her expected role of mother. Epstein-Levi argues that women "grasping back" the tools of metaphor can deconstruct and create openings in unjust epistemic frameworks. In both cases, women scholars and textualists use imminent critique to both deconstruct hegemonic gender logics and make space for people of all genders around the study table.

This issue also features Bettina Bergo's intricate review and analysis of Elliot Wolfson's 2025 book *Nocturnal Seeing: Hopelessness of Hope and Philosophical Gnosis in Susan Taubes, Gillian Rose, and Edith Wyschogrod* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press). This volume is an exploration of gnosticism through the works and lives of the three titular women philosophers. Bergo's essay draws out Wolfson's own voice in his presentation of the three thinkers, showing how Wolfson seeks a "holy and practical" midpoint between hope and hopelessness. Bergo brings her characteristically impressive insight and deftness to this essay, revealing the depth of Wolfson's book while also making it more accessible.

Although Mark James, my co-editor, will be bringing our next issue to publication, it will be his final act as editor of this journal; and so it is with sadness and happiness that I bid an early farewell to Mark James as co-editor of JTR; sadness for the end of our years of rich intellectual collaboration and happiness for Mark that he has found his calling in the priesthood. Mark and I met by chance at the annual AJS conference in 2014 when he was a dissertating graduate student and I was just finishing applications to graduate school. In what felt like a rare act of academic generosity, Mark and Deb Barer (our previous co-editor) continued a conversation with me, a pre-graduate student, that had begun as a post-panel question. I now know that this act was both unusual and utterly ordinary; unusual because so many of us fixate on our own pursuits to the point of blindness to others but ordinary because of who Mark is. He embodies the twin academic virtues of learning from all he encounters and

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[2] Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988).

being able to hold a good conversation. After that fateful half hour, we spoke periodically until Mark drew me in to the JTR enterprise. In this, Mark, Deb, and the JTR community enact what Halberstam and Lehman point to as a collaborative community of learners. I am sad to say goodbye to Mark even as I am excited to see where JTR goes next.