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THE TEXTUAL IS POLITICAL: DISRUPTING JEWISH ECOLOGY EAST OF EDEN[1]

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> *"And He stationed east of the Garden of Eden the cherubs and the fiery ever-turning sword* (Gen 3:24)."[2]

The first thing I remember Tamar Biala saying was: "What do you mean I wasn't there?" It was a decade ago, in February of 2015, at Congregation B'nai Jeshurun, a nondenominational synagogue on New York's Upper West Side, which was packed with mostly American Jews. I was attending "Meet Me at Sinai: Day of Learning," an event commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of Judith Plaskow's *Standing Again at Sinai.* "Meet Me at Sinai" gathered representatives of many feminist "tribes" Plaskow had inspired. There were those who had fought battles over women's ordination, formulated new liturgies with feminine God-language, invented new rituals to honor

[1] I am grateful for the feedback I received on this article, especially from the anonymous reviewers, as well as Nechama Juni, Mara Benjamin, and Laura Levitt. I want to also thank Joshua Garoon for his invaluable insights: without our conversations this article would not have become what it became.

[2] Tamar Biala, "The Ever-Turning Sword," in Tamar Biala and Tamar Ḳadari, *Dirshuni: Contemporary Women's Midrash* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2022), 18.

women's life cycle events, written Jewish feminism into scholarly and popular conversations, performed social and political commentary in art or comedy, given voice to multiple intersectional identities, and led nonprofits or synagogues. Its list of influential speakers included Second-Wave feminist icon and *Ms.* magazine's founding editor Letty Cotton Pogrebin; recently ordained Orthodox clergywoman Rabba Sara Hurwitz; openly transgender professor at Yeshiva University Joy Ladin; performance artist "the Hebrew Mamita" Vanessa Hidary; *New York Times* correspondent and author Jodi Kantor; and Tamar Biala, a writer and editor of a modern kind of classical midrash written in Hebrew.[3]

I sat at "The Textual Is Personal," a session featuring Biala, as she recounted the moment when she first read Plaskow's landmark work of Jewish feminist theology and it "clicked." Though she spoke softly, her story struck like a boom, as if the audience could hear the shockwaves of a powerful collision. The Jewish experience of presence at Sinai, foundational to knowing God, smacked against the feminist experience of absence, the recognition that women were not included.[4] Biala's click moment was an echo of the one Plaskow experienced a quarter century prior, when she identified Sinai as the origin of a theological crisis. Yet Biala did not want to dismantle the rabbinic "master's house,"[5] but rather, to imagine a more expansive and experimental way of inhabiting the rabbinic ecosystem, "ecoing" the rabbinic process.[6]

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[3] Midrash is a rabbinic genre of biblical interpretation. Canonical classical midrash were produced between 400 and 1200 CE.

[4] Plaskow has described this as a "yeah, yeah experience," her own formulation of the feminist "click" moments featured in *Ms.*, in which women suddenly were struck by the recognition of their own oppression. Judith Plaskow, "The Coming of Lilith: Toward a Feminist Theology" in Judith Plaskow and Donna Berman, *The Coming of Lilith: Essays on Feminism, Judaism, and Sexual Ethics, 1972–2003* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005), 25, 221n.6.

[5] Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Crossing Press, 2007 [1984]), 110–114.

[6] I am deploying "ecoing" to capture the active, evolutionary rather than human-managed elements. I am also capitalizing on its likeness to "echoing," the effect of which is a repetition with movement rather than a continuity as such.

In the normative rabbinic imagination, Moses initiated a patriarchal order for the study and perpetuation of Torah, which not only delineated a succession of heirs but also conceived of the male Torah community as a household where men would gather to drink up Torah. The rabbis amplified women's exclusion from their houses of worship and study, fearing conversation with women would cause sexual temptation, distracting from intercourse with Torah and perverting their inheritance.[7] The economy, literally the management of the house (*oikos*), required tight control.[8]

The rabbinic system, which inscribed, reinforced, and returned to the foundational event in its law and liturgy, continually rubbed salt on the feminist's wound, but Plaskow also presented the substantial omission of "women's experience" as an "invitation to experiment,"[9] to break free of the rabbinic reins. Plaskow called Jewish feminists to join her, to "stand again at Sinai" in order to establish an alternative order, firmly grounded in women's presence.

The diversity of participants in "Meet Me at Sinai" was a testimony to the veritable explosion of Jewish feminist activity that had emerged over the previous quarter century. In my ad hoc classification of those assembled "at Sinai," I had been so taken with their difference, including age and generation, country of origin and mother tongue, and religious affiliation and observance, that I did not initially recognize how much

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[7] Biala does not herself reference the rabbinic origin story, but I am reading in *Pirkei Avot* 1:1–5.

8 *Oikos* is the shared Greek root of both economy and ecology. The root links the late nineteenth century imagination of management of the natural world and the household. While I recognize the risk of reinscribing the fantasy of management imposed on the natural world in the image of the household, I show that the binary of order and disorder is a false one. My model presumes that human life is not outside of nature, but rather is embedded within ecosystems. To think of rabbinic systems ecologically is to reimagine their systems of regulation as relational, a negotiation among organic and inorganic constituents.

[9] Judith Plaskow, *Standing again at Sinai: Judaism From a Feminist Perspective* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 1.

Biala's and Plaskow's projects seemed to share.[10] Specifically, Biala's work to "fill in the missing half of the bookshelf"[11] sounded similar to Plaskow's argument that "[r]emembering and inventing together [can] help recover the hidden half of Torah."[12] Furthermore, though I never heard Biala claim the self-identity of theologian as Plaskow proudly did, she understood theology to be a tool to "picture the world differently," which could help to transform ethics and behavior.[13] At the most basic level, Plaskow and Biala both harnessed the "ontological dimension of storytelling"[14] to create feminist midrash, which, to quote Plaskow, was an "utterly traditional" tool to make the textual personal for twentieth and twenty-first century women.[15]

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[10] On the problem of classification, which amplifies certain similarities at the expense of others, see, for example, John S. Wilkins and Malte C. Ebach, *The Nature of Classification: Relationships and Kinds in the Natural Sciences* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

[11] Tamar Biala, "Filling the Missing Half of the Sacred Bookshelf." *My Jewish Learning.* January 22, 2015. https://www.myjewishlearning.com/2015/01/22/filling-the-missing-half-of-the-sacred-bookshelf/.

[12] Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*, 56.

[13] This is based on interviews with each thinker. Plaskow recounted that her dedication to theology remained intact *despite* being told on her first day of graduate school at Yale by the formidable rabbinicist Judah Goldin that "there is no such thing as Jewish theology." Plaskow recalled that Goldin had dismissed her counterexamples, saying, "Martin Buber was a poet, and Rosenzweig was something else"—probably a philosopher, but she couldn't quite recall. This shaped Plaskow's use of Protestant theology as a model, which was also influenced by American Christian feminist theologians such as Carol P. Christ and Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, who were also at Yale at the time. Biala, aware of the way theology serves as a delegitimizing discourse in some Jewish circles, explained that she shied away from explicit theological work in the first volume of *Dirshuni* but became more confident to engage with and about God or to contend with post-Holocaust theological questions in subsequent work.

[14] Rosalyn Diprose and Ewa Plonowska Ziarek, *Arendt, Natality, and Biopolitics: Toward Democratic Plurality and Reproductive Justice* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 292–295. I want to suggest that for Biala, as well as for Plaskow, as Mara Benjamin argues, "theology [i]s foundational and ontologically prior to halakha." Mara H. Benjamin, "Tracing the Contours of a Half Century of Jewish Feminist Theology," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 36, no. 1 (2020): 13 n.6.

[15] Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*, 54. For a critical analysis of this project, especially the essentialism of the category "women" and the "unarticulated loyalties to Enlightenment

It was this deeply personal nature of the textual that had attracted me, too, to *Dirshuni* and then to the gathering of Jewish feminists "at Sinai." After Biala's panel "The Textual Is Personal," I approached her and told her how meaningful her Hebrew collection of *midrashim*[16] had been to me as I encountered rabbinic Judaism in a serious way for the first time the previous year, which I had spent in a yeshiva in Jerusalem.[17] *Dirshuni* had helped me feel there was a place for me in the *beit midrash*, where I had learned classical texts that Biala's resembled, but which I felt did not resemble me. Biala explained, tongue in cheek, that she was now living "in *galut*," or exile, in Boston where her husband had taken an academic job. We made plans to meet up when I was in town doing ethnographic research for my doctoral dissertation at Mayyim Hayyim (literally, "living waters"), a community mikveh (ritual bath) and education center. There I investigated how the mikveh project redeployed and repurposed natural and spiritual resources like water and liturgy, filling a niche in the contemporary Jewish ecosystem and meeting the needs of twenty-first century American Jews. I had thought: The perfect analog to feminist midrash: another iteration of the water of Torah, that originary substance of life flowing and cycling together, I had thought.

For nearly a decade since then, working and thinking transnationally between the United States and Israel, where religious and political traditions fill differently shaped formulations of public and private life, I have been grasping for ways to make sense of meaningful distinctions in how Jewish feminist work functions in the world, cooperating, competing, and combining with other projects in ways that likenesses and analogies

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categories through which 'modern Judaism' has been imagined and practiced," see Miriam Peskowitz, "Engendering Jewish Religious History," in Miriam Peskowitz and Laura Levitt, *Judaism Since Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 25–30.

[16] The plural of midrash.

[17] Nehama Weingarten-Mintz and Tamar Biala, *Dirshuni: Midreshe Nashim*, Yahadut Kan Ve-'akhshav (Tel-Aviv: Yedi'ot aharonot: Sifre hemed: ha-Sokhnut ha-Yehudit, ha-Mahlakah le-hinukh Tsiyoni, Kol koreh, 2009).

fail to capture.[18] I've sat with these problems, witnessing the growing cracks in the political systems in our increasingly hotter, wetter world and feeling the ever more urgent need to experiment with other ways of thinking our way out of seemingly intractable positions in our current climate, political and otherwise. It feels increasingly urgent to explore a feminist politics beyond its liberal conceptions, which rely on and reproduce a certain formulation of the person that is recognizable in relation to systems of governing power, whether figured as a self, state, or deity.[19]

If "the textual is personal," as Biala's session was called, and "the personal is political," as Second Wave Feminists argued, the transitive property would suggest that the textual is political. When I first began to play with this formulation, I worried it was infelicitous to both feminist politics and the spirit of aggadic midrash, which "speaks" to a person and allows Torah to serve immanent needs.[20] How could I let the "personal," that joint between text and politics, recede while remaining steadfastly Jewish and feminist? What else might Jewish feminist politics be?

A few months after "Sinai," Biala and I met again, in Framingham, Massachusetts, just west of Boston. The meeting, outside the orbit of Sinai's presumed shared "women's experiences," took place at Sisters Café, a name whose poetic irony did not escape us—and in a back room that I quipped looked strikingly like the bomb shelter in my Jerusalem apartment the prior year, albeit without the washing machine. This was a

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[18] Janet R. Jakobsen, "Queers Are Like Jews, Aren't They? Analogy and Alliance Politics," in *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question*, ed. Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz, and Ann Pellegrini (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

[19] Laura Levitt, *Jews and Feminism: The Ambivalent Search for Home* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

[20] David Weiss Halivni, *Peshat and Derash: Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 161–2; Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 16–17.

joke that reinforced a disjointed connection. I had lived in her world for a year, as she now did in mine: we were not only Jewish women, feminists, and mothers, but had been transplants, trying to integrate ourselves into new cultures and become a piece of other worlds.

It was not only national origin, but the Jewish textual homeland, that we inhabited differently: Biala was textually educated and halakhically committed in ways I had never been. Over the course of two lengthy *ḥavruta* (partner study) sessions, where we talked and learned texts from *Dirshuni*, Biala brought me deeper into her life, telling me the stories behind the stories we learned together in the *midrashim* she helped bring to life. *Dirshuni*'s texts fed and supported our growing connection, which transcended our personal stories and allowed something new to emerge that was more than either of us. This essay tells a textual story of evolution, the growth of something *im*personal.[21]

Biala's *Dirshuni* dares to participate in the rabbinic reproductive process, though in doing so, it evolves new political relations that relax the claws of mastery and provide breathing room for curious encounter. Biala not only subverted the hierarchical rabbinic knowledge economy by consuming its knowledge but also by becoming a producer: she decided to construct a new space for women in the abode of rabbinic texts, as she put it, the "missing half of the Jewish bookshelf."[22] To help Jewish tradition withstand the challenges of feminism, she remodeled the house, as the rabbis had done before her.[23] Her goal was not to dismantle the master's house: rather, she felt bound to repair it and make it habitable for the entirety of the Jewish people. Biala took up the "master's tools" and tried her hand at adding onto its foundation, building it out to make room for a proliferation of collective forms that she could nurture, but would not tightly control. Her house would not only be bigger but would leave the

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[21] Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Washington: Zero Books, 2022), 28.

[22] Biala, "Filling the Missing Half."

[23] Lorde, "The Master's Tools," 110–114.

doors and windows open, not cutting the house off but rather implementing divisions that promote wholeness rather than constraint.[24]

It is as an experiment with a less constrained order that I write this critical essay in an interspecific form, the consummation of our generative textual and personal connection. It is an ethnographic *derash* (interpretation) of Biala's *derash*, her midrash "The Ever-Turning Sword." Since Biala welcomed me into her text, "The Ever-Turning Sword" and my ethnographic observations have recombined, helping me to dissect the political-theological field in which *Dirshuni* emerged, as well as the political-theological responses it offers. *Dirshuni* is making a mark on the Jewish ecosystem 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.[25] To think in these ecological terms not only bypasses an ideological claim that authorship is the definitive difference in constituting the kind midrash, both as a matter of gender and historical period, but also offers more flexible ways of imagining the relationships among texts and their humans than the ruled list of the "canon."[26] Ecological thinking not only demands inclusion of broader kinds of animate and inanimate interactions but also extension beyond the categories of public and private in political thinking. Furthermore, it imagines a model of changing tradition in which the modes of textual reasoning of religious authorities, past and present, are also subject to the stochastic processes, the unpredictable and happenstance, that occur in every ecosystem.[27]

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[24] My imagination reflects the ethos of Jewish environmentalists described in Adrienne Krone, "Farming on the Front Lines: Jewish Environmentalisms and Kinship in the Chthulucene" *Worldviews* 26 (2022): 148–161.

[25] *Min* is the Hebrew word for species but refers to more than species, as in the biblical creation of "kinds." Rafael Rachel Neis, *When a Human Gives Birth to a Raven: The Rabbis and the Reproduction of Species* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2023), 8.

[26] Rafael Rachel Neis, *When a Human Gives Birth*, 6–9.

[27] On the "discursive tradition," see Talal Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," *Qui Parle* 17, no. 2 (2009): 1–30. Like Asad, I imagine changes through the reproduction of textual logics, though my evolutionary-inflected model of change emphasizes the less-than-orderly,

The evolutionary and ecological story this essay tells is not predicated on stable, fixed identities, whether of persons or species, nor on sovereign conceptions of selves who produce texts in their image or interests.[28] This essay, like the collection of *midrashim* with which it cohabitates, carries ancestral sequences of text and traces of the environments and persons that have shaped it and continue to live in relation to it. In its writing, I have drawn on the ideas of ecologists and evolutionary biologists who study how organisms, impacted by constraints and proclivities in their genetic profiles, live in relation to resources, not only of water and nutrients but also of space and time. During reproductive processes, random recombination and mutation can create an organism particularly well suited for its environment, and high fitness means increased survival and reproduction, causing shifts in the frequency of certain patterns or traits.

This essay, a political-theological ecology,[29] demonstrates the analytic usefulness of scientific tools for situating theology and thinking politics anew. In troubled times, I find hope that biological mechanisms, whether recombination through reproduction or mutation, can offer possibilities for radical change. Modern scientific tools and theories, such as

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creative elements of adaptation that occur through happenstance encounters among situated subjects and knowledges.

[28] On the problem of the "sovereign self," which is "empowered and volitional and that is acted upon by external forces," that it is "subject *to*…but not constituted *by*…" the social, see Ari Y. Kelman, Tobin Belzer, Ziva Hassenfeld, Ilana Horwitz, and Matthew Casey Williams, "The Social Self: Toward the Study of Jewish Lives in the Twenty-first Century," *Contemporary Jewry* 37 (2017): 65.

[29] In deploying this tripartite term, I am suggesting that *Dirshuni* needs to be understood as a disruptor of Jewish power relations in ways that exceed what liberal models of politics can offer analytically. Political ecology is the study of the relations among economy, environment, and power. See Jason Roberts, "Political Ecology," in *The Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, ed. Felix Stein, 2023. Facsimile of the first edition in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. Online: http://doi.org/10.29164/20polieco. I recognize that this term could be deployed to investigate the role of theologically imbricated politics on classical ecological concerns, such as the effects of human interventions on the environment and the allocations of natural resources. My invocation of ecology, however, is more, though not entirely, metaphorical.

classification and evolution, have rightfully been critiqued for their political uses—most notably, for eugenic projects—and for their dominating epistemologies, which has sparked broad calls for decolonizing knowledge. Likewise, I find inspiration in the creative possibilities of religious texts, the same texts that have been painted as the cause of our environmental crisis.[30] Yet, as this experiment with ecological and evolutionary ideas deployed ethnographically to augment textual reasoning will show, there are productive ways to use modern science and Jewish religion for feminist thought.[31]

As the essay proceeds, it will follow an evolutionary process in which Biala and *Dirshuni* move from a hierarchical order of power in the Jewish textual home, an economic model, to an experiment in "ecoing"[32] that reflects the spirit of the ever-turning sword. If read for the *peshat,* the plain meaning of the text, "The Ever-Turning Sword" describes the mirrored relationship between God and Adam, the man God created in the divine image. God, recognizing Adam's loneliness, makes a partner for Adam by splitting him with a fiery sword; seeing Adam's fulfillment by companionship, God then feels the pain of being alone, and waits, longing, for Adam and Eve, now gone from Eden, to return to divide God in *their* image.

Biala's story echoes the text of "The Ever-Turning Sword," which frames each section of this essay and helps drive its development. The midrash is not simply an allegory about an ever-turning sword guarding the purity of the textual canon, causing a never-abating pain of exclusion. It is a *petiḥta,* an opening. The structure of a midrashic *petiḥta* begins elsewhere, in this case, in Psalms: "*For I am nearly limping on my side, and my pain is with me always* (Ps. 38:18)."[33] The "target" verse, Genesis 3:24,

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[30] Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203–1207.

[31] On the feminist uses of scientific thought, see Elizabeth A. Wilson, *Gut Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

[32] On "ecoing," see note 6 above.

[33] Biala, "The Ever-Turning Sword," 18. In the original version that I learned with Biala in our *ḥavruta* sessions, she cited her linage: "Tamar bat Esther and Yigal."

which serves as this essay's epigraph, is not the starting point but rather the midrash's destination, and once you arrive to it, the verse no longer means what it once did. The midrash begins with an ever-present, debilitating pain causing a doubling-over, but winds a path through other stories to arrive at the edge of Eden, to a changed God: "How can I, alone and by myself, meet My other side? Let the one created in My image come and do all that I did, draw the sword and slice me in half and bring the other side to me."[34] The cherubs stand armed with an instrument, now primed to deliver relief to a God longing to become whole.

On the Origins of Feminist Midrashic Species: Limbs and the Pain of Loneliness

> Tamar said: For I am nearly limping on my side, and my pain is with me always (Ps. 38:18).[35]

There were serial ecological disturbances, changes in the climate caused by the introduction of secular feminism into Israeli society, during the period Biala was coming of age in the 1970s and 1980s. Secular feminism, like a mining operation, had provided resources for growth and expansion but had also "exposed the patriarchal nature of Judaism," the effects of which reverberated as they were released and surfaced in her environment. Biala encountered the poison of patriarchy like a heavy metal that had leached into the soil and water, more intensely in certain places. At age thirty, while studying at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, for example, Biala read a section of Mishnah and realized that the rabbis valued the physical life of women less than that of men. It was another click, adding a thick layer of grief onto what had already accumulated. Biala recounted, "Maybe I finally felt like a woman," or, to put it

[34] Biala, "The Ever-Turning Sword," 19.

[35] Biala, "The Ever-Turning Sword," 18.

differently, a member of the "second sex."[36] It was as if the textual chasms might swallow her embodied existence.[37]

"Recognizing the trivial but painful fact that my tradition, my love, my identity, was defined by men, for men, reflecting male life experience, interest and needs, made me very confused and left me with a strong sense of betrayal and abandonment,"[38] Biala reflected in a post on the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance's blog *The Torch.* Judaism was not merely a religion: it was the ecosystem in which she lived, which felt ever more inhospitable. The crippling pain accumulated with each additional disruptive event, as the world became more and more off-kilter. Like Plaskow before her, Biala decided she needed to create feminist midrash, creatures with wings that could take flight to relieve the pressure on their limping limbs.

In her landmark work, Plaskow traced the far-reaching imbalances and toxicities in Jewish tradition back to the androcentric event at Sinai. "[T]he central event that established the Jewish people," Plaskow wrote in *Sinai*, was also occasion for the Torah's most "disturbing [verse] to the feminist" because Moses introduced and inscribed "the Otherness of women [at] the very center of Jewish experience." Moses descended with God's message directing the Israelite people to prepare to receive the divine (Exod. 19:10), yet Moses warned the Israelite *men*, "Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman" (Exod. 19:15). In Plaskow's reading, Moses's insertion of the female bodily threat of impurity into God's message had cut women out of the divine encounter, setting in motion a "silence" that subsequent generations of Judaism's fathers perpetuated.[39]

Feminists were not the first to recognize an anomaly when it came to women at Sinai. The preeminent commentator Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo

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[36] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974).

[37] This feeling reflects something of the profundity of text in a culture that has inherited a hermeneutic system in which language and the body are inseparable. Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture*, 9.

[38] Biala, "Filling the Missing Half."

[39] Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*, 1–24.

Yitḥaki, d. 1105), for example, recognized that the plain meaning of the Exodus text implied women's absence, which contradicted what he knew to be the case, namely, that women had also been at Sinai. To resolve the textual problem, he mobilized a classic hermeneutic technique, using superfluous language (*lashon yeterah*) as the indicator of both men's and women's presence. Specifically, in Exodus 19:3, God directed Moses to address the "children of Israel" *and* the "house of Jacob," and thus, Rashi explained, the former referred to the men and the latter to the women.

Plaskow saw Rashi's solution as evidence of rabbinic hypocrisy. Rashi was "disturbed by the implication of women's absence from Sinai and found a way to read women's presence into the text" but dismissed his hermeneutic technique for retrofitting the house: If rabbis recognized the absence was "unthinkable," how could "they continually reenact that absence"? For Plaskow, a house tainted by patriarchy, committed to marginalizing and controlling women, could not stand: "To accept our absence from Sinai would be to allow the male text to define us and our connection to Judaism. To stand on the ground of our experience, on the other hand, to start with the certainty of our membership in our own people is to be forced to re-member and recreate its history, to reshape Torah."[40] Her project of "reshaping Jewish memory" required a fresh foundation, designed by women, that would set up Jewish life to unfold differently. Such a project, she argued, could not be adequately accomplished by historiography, but required feminist midrash to fill the "gaps" in the ancient record. Such feminist midrash could take different shapes, including poetry, storytelling, and performance, while remaining akin to their precedents in the ancient world: though they had "modern" "self-consciousness," contemporary feminist midrash were performing the same function as those produced by the ancient rabbis, who wrote new iterations of the Bible's message.[41]

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[40] Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai,* 25–28.

[41] Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*, 53–55.

In the image of rabbinic silence about women, Plaskow asserted an emptiness to rabbinic "orthopraxis," which had lost "contact with the experiences at its roots." It was on that very "territory" or "terrain" of "silence,"[42] a mythically empty ground, that Plaskow called feminists to return to remediate Jewish history and to populate it with new forms inspired by feminist "conviction and vision."[43] That was why we had gathered there, again, at Sinai. But, Biala insisted, we were not there alone.

When Biala looked to midrash, a tool for hermeneutic shift, she met the rabbis. She explained, the rabbis "change[d] Judaism theologically, morally, [and] technically halakhically." When "the rabbis read the Bible, which they didn't identify with in all these aspects … they invented loops." She sounded tentative, finding herself momentarily out of her element because English was not her first language. "Loopholes," I offered, feeding her the word she was looking for. "All these loopholes! All these techniques, to say that the meaning is of course just the opposite of what the *peshat* is of the Bible." In *midrash halakha*, which focused on clarifying Jewish law, the rabbis flipped meanings, changed patterns, foraged for different prooftexts; in narrative-driven aggadic midrash, however, "they changed the agenda," moving the very ethical, metaphysical, or theological grounds on which they lived. "The *midrashei aggadah* … they picture the world differently, so of course now everything has to change. You understand what it is to be a woman in a different way, what it is to be a human being in a different way, what is God, what is Torah. So of course it has implications for how to behave," Biala explained. The rabbis had created a model for disruption and change, which she could use to reshape her environment.

While I had been familiar with the narrative that Israeli feminism trailed behind American Jewish feminism,[44] and it had at first seemed only

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[42] Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*, 1–21.

[43] Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*, 22–24. On the critique of Plaskow's use of history, see Peskowitz, "Engendering Jewish Religious History," 25–30.

[44] Marcia Freedman, "Theorizing Israeli Feminism, 1970-2000," in *Jewish Feminism in Israel: Some Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Kalpana Misra and Melanie S. Rich (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, Published by University Press of New England, 2003), 4–9.

natural that Biala's Hebrew midrash were a new generation emerging from those that Plaskow and other Jewish feminists wrote in the 1980s and 1990s, evolutionary biology is cautious about drawing conclusions about descent from observations of similarities. It is easy to mistake analogous for homologous structures, those features that evolved to perform a similar function from separate origins versus from a recent common ancestor. The latter, like the limbs of cats, humans, and whales, share common ancestry and perform related tasks; the former, like the wings of birds, bats, and butterflies, by contrast, converged in function from different recent ancestry. If Plaskow's American kind of midrash were like bats, Biala's and the rabbis' kind of midrash were like birds.[45] They shared deep roots, but occupied different branches on the evolutionary tree of Torah.

Creating (Not Quite) In the Image

> The Holy Blessed One planted Adam in the Garden of Eden and said: Let the one created in My image come and do all that I did; work it, as is said of Me: *And God saw all that He had made* (Gen 1:31); guard it, as is said of Me: *God protects the simple* (Ps 116:6); let him not eat of the Tree of Knowledge, so that he not die, as it is said of Me: *And the Lord God truly is a living God* (Jer 10:10). At the moment that The Holy Blessed One said to him: *do not eat of it* (Gen 2:17)—that Adam not feel—so that he not die. Adam fell silent, and his soul fell silent too.[46]

Rabbinic midrash's tremendous "spiritual authority," Biala explained, was inextricable from the fact that it is not an "active genre": there would be no further reproduction, and all that anyone was supposed to do was to conserve and preserve this precious resource. Humans were planted in the garden of Torah, to partake of it as sustenance and shelter,

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[45] Both creatures have wings that appear similar and perform similar functions, but the wings are products of convergent evolution, meaning they have different ancestors who faced similar environmental pressures that favored the development of flying capabilities. See George R. McGhee, *Convergent Evolution: Limited Forms Most Beautiful* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011).

[46] Biala, "The Ever-Turning Sword," 18.

but also to be its guardians. To work it was a duty, but to create it? To compose classical midrash was to dare to occupy a niche reserved for God and God's spokesmen: the rabbis. Or so many heirs of Moses claimed.

She took a bite. At "The Textual Is Personal," Biala presented a midrash in its original Hebrew and then her own English translation in which a young woman, listening to the Torah being read in her synagogue, realized for the first time that the commandments were not directed at women like her. Biala described how the young woman's tears welled up, drowning her pain like the Egyptians who perished in the Red Sea as the Israelites achieved liberation from Pharaoh. From her seat in the synagogue, the midrash's protagonist called out to God to ask *why*: Why had Moses separated the women from the men who would receive the Torah? God responded angrily, as the God of the Torah so often did when disobeyed, charging Moses with misrepresenting His will. God declared: "From a *beit midrash* [house of study] that has no woman, nothing whole will emerge." The pronouncement ended the debate over women's places within the Jewish intellectual and ritual community. God, playing the Bat Kol (heavenly voice), makes a declaration of how the world should be, and uncharacteristic of the rabbinic tradition, the pronouncement cleared up dispute. No rabbis asserted "the Torah is not in heaven"; they simply acceded.[47] God had made a compelling point.

Biala told the assembled crowd that she had come to regret this early midrash, written in the spirit of revenge. She had allowed her pain to pin blame on Moses for sins of his heirs, excluding those who she felt had excluded her. It was "the poison of patriarchy," Biala explained, that compelled her to denigrate Moses rather than "erasing gendered power structures and humanizing everyone together." Blaming Moses was too simple. She reproduced the same structures of power. Nothing had evolved.

Biala's choice to share a midrash she felt no longer reflected her thought was itself a performance of the kind of Torah she wished to

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[47] The story to which I refer is the famous "Oven of Akhnai," found in b. Bava Metzia 59A–B.

engender: she neither wanted to mine the past for what was usable[48] nor erase or forget the elements that she found problematic. She needed to partner with the texts. She was an ever-changing subject, and the Torah was part of a continuous living process: her intercourse with text was necessarily ongoing, and the *midrashim* she had laid to rest and let fossilize over years carried lessons that testified to a past that had wisdom to teach. Biala heard the outcry from the missing half of the bookshelf, invoking God's call to the Israelites in Amos 5:4: *Dirshuni*, "Seek me." So, she continued to try. Even rabbis in her early midrash had agreed that something needed to change so that the rabbinic ecosystem could grow more complete.

In Search of Companionship

> The Holy Blessed One said: *It is not good for Adam to be alone; I will make a helping match for him* (Gen 2:18). God fashioned from the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the sky and said: Let the one created in my image come and do all that I did, and give them names, as is said of Me: *And he declared their name Adam on the day they were created* (Gen 5:2). Adam declared names but did not find a helping match for himself, and he spiraled downward and downward into silence until he found himself in a great crater, alone.[49]

Like Adam, Biala was lonely. She searched out partners and models but was left frustrated and feeling alone. Many feminists, especially Americans, had introduced a range of new species into the Jewish ecosystem, but Biala recognized they were not flesh of her flesh. While American Jews often spoke of any kind of interpretive, artistic, or creative endeavor as midrash, Biala felt these other interpretive forms did not have the aura of midrash, which was supposed to feel as if it called out from the heights of Sinai. Biala explained that Americans treated the text with reverence, "pure *kavod* [respect]." It was a statement that pointed to a

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[48] Paula Hyman, "The Jewish Family: Looking for a Usable Past," in *On Being a Jewish Feminist: A Reader*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), 19.

[49] Biala, "The Ever-Turning Sword," 18–19.

disconnect born of differences in literacy but also implicitly invoked the logic of taboo in both its senses: they treated the texts like they were too holy to touch *and* like they were forbidden by a power structure that feminists also wished to subvert. In her quiet, careful, to-the-point-of-seeming-tentative way, she got to the heart of a matter even as she searched for the right English expression: American feminism often struck her as "vulgar," which described not only the vernacular language but also a style of argument. In Biala's opinion, American midrash sacrificed complexity for the sake of forcefulness, telling you "the last line" rather than leaving it "ambiguous or complicated."

She found it particularly frustrating that so many feminists tried to depict an aspirational world—for example, by replacing a transcendent God with an immanent and nurturing God—but she felt that just reinforced an idealized, and suffocatingly limited, femininity. As she wrote: "I did not feel I could discard the entire tradition and create new [texts and] rituals from scratch … because I felt that the Torah is a mirror of reality, a mirror that calls us to contend with reality in order to make it better."[50] Midrash was supposed to be difficult. Easy resolution is a fantasy, not a well-adapted tool to reckon with the realities she faced. Every relationship involves elements of alienation, of hierarchy, and of struggle and discomfort, and the texts were supposed to be tools to meet those challenges. Unlike in the secular academy, where "you critique the text," in a religious approach, "the text criticizes you." A simplistic likeness might offer momentary comfort or relief, but it did not spur adaptation. Midrash was not a gentle poke and prod; it was *meant* to be sharp, to make surgical cuts that created new openings in the text, so that the children of Israel and the house of Jacob could live as complementary wholes.

Thus, the American kind of midrash were not helping matches. They did not carry enough weight to look, sound, and feel like rabbinic midrash in the holy tongue. Biala needed midrash to be compatible and conversant with their classical counterparts. They had to be a real partner, carrying the burden of evidence to hold the tradition accountable from within. For

[50] Biala, "Filling the Missing Half."

Biala, American midrash felt more like a genetic engineering project, using new materials and cultivated in a petri dish by creators who handled Torah as if through rubber gloves.

Was Biala merely performing the role of gatekeepers, declaring "authentic and inauthentic they created them"[51]? The question hit me personally, as an English-speaking Jewish feminist. Yet observations of difference, so often accusations of deviance,[52] need not be. American midrash were analogs to the classical kind/*min*, whereas Biala sought homologs. Americans produced the medicine they needed, but what Biala sought was refuge in her environment by forging new relationships with the textual tradition, getting her hands dirty in the garden of Torah, drawing on the extant material and reforming it.[53] Biala wanted to work the texts, aerating the soil with women's subjectivities and making room for women's voices as an organic growth of Torah.[54]

Finding herself down in a crater, Biala could have become a paleontologist, trying to dig down to the deep history where the patriarchy first took root. This was what many feminists before her had done: excavating down through Deuteronomic histories, Levitical laws, and the covenants of Exodus and Genesis, hoping to find the feminine that *was* there, in search of signs of agency or models of identity.[55] She could

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[51] A nod to Genesis 5:2.

[52] Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 106.

[53] Krone, "Farming on the Front Lines," 154–156.

[54] Building on Howard Eilberg-Schwartz's argument that God's power to name and classify in the act of Creation in Genesis 1–2 undergirds the rabbinic idea that "human consciousness can shape reality," Balberg adds depth to the rabbinic theory of the "mental mechanism" by which this occurs: "The piece that is missing from Eilberg-Schwartz's explanation is that the ability to render an artifact susceptible to impurity is a prerogative not of all of mankind vis-à-vis all material objects, but rather only of an owner of an object vis-à-vis what he or she owns." Mira Balberg, *Purity, Body, and Self in Early Rabbinic Literature* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2014), 88–9.

[55] In addition to Plaskow, see, for example, Rachel Adler, "The Jew Who Wasn't There: *Halakha* and the Jewish Woman," *Response* 7, no. 22 (1973); Tamar Ross, *Expanding the Palace of Torah: Orthodoxy and Feminism* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, University Press of New England, 2004); Susannah Heschel, "Gender and Agency in the Feminist

have burrowed further and further, rearranging the fossilized stories of biblical first humans, hoping to impress new models onto Jewish culture that could also be legislated into *halakha*.[56] She could have dug, in search of Eden, before the "sacraliz[ation of] a gender schema in which difference is conceptualized primarily in terms of physiology rather than in terms of moral virtues or mental abilities,"[57] before humans had corrupted the perfection of a God-made natural world. However inspiring these ideas felt, she was not in a wild wilderness of endless possibilities; she was in a deep crater, among bones of the dead. So, she dug herself out, to toil in the topsoil exposed to the elements, to find ways to live.

It was a familiar position for an Israeli, Biala explained. "Israel is not the Promised Land. People don't talk about fantasy." She continued: "Americans, like [her] husband's family who had made aliya, have fantasies about Israel, hiding their eyes from the ugly parts, but in actuality, Israelis 'live in the dirt.'" She dealt in hopes and compromises, not in ideals and expectations of revolution. "Feminism, the real hard-core feminism, is a struggle against powers that don't want you. No one will give you a hand; you need to get it through *koakh* [strength], to take it from them."

Rough Cuts

> The Holy Blessed One could not bear to witness His own suffering reflected back to Him. The Holy Blessed One brought sleep down upon Adam. Once Adam's limbs relaxed, the Holy Blessed One took an ever-turning sword and cut him along his side. He brought the female side to the male side and stood from afar to see what would become of them.

Historiography of Jewish Identity," *The Journal of Religion* 84, no. 4 (2004); Aviva Cantor, "The Lilith Question," *Lilith Magazine* 1, no. 1 (1976).

[56] See, for example, Plaskow and Berman, *The Coming of Lilith*, 31–32; Mijal Bitton, "'And He Shall Rule over You': The Genesis of #Metoo," *The Forward*, October 19, 2017. https://forward.com/life/faith/385625/the-genesis-of-metoo/; Ross, *Expanding the Palace of Torah*, 38–39, 103–120.

[57] Susan Sered, *What Makes Women Sick?: Maternity, Modesty, and Militarism in Israeli Society* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 2000), 4–5; Alice Shalvi, "Gaining: Ground for Israeli Women," *NCJW Journal* 30, no. 1 (2007).

> And God was left, alone. And the male side turned to the female side and said in relief and wonder: *This one is it, bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh … this one will be called woman* (Gen 2:23–24). And they became one flesh.[58]

Either as an act of God or as a mere coincidence, Biala explained to those gathered "at Sinai," she discovered a little book containing several *midrashim* that spoke differently to her.[59] These *midrashim looked* like they had been written two thousand years ago by the rabbis but they were actually written by her contemporary, Rivka Lubitch, a *Talmida ḥakhama* and *To'enet Rabanit*, a scholar learned in the Jewish textual tradition and legal expert who served as an advocate in rabbinical court. Seeing that a woman had produced midrash of a classical rabbinic genre offered Biala a model of how she could "challeng[e] the patriarchy and injustice from within a deep knowledge and love of the texts, and rabbinic culture." This discovery breathed new life into her: it inspired her.

She began the arduous work, taking the body of the textual tradition into her arms, mastering and subduing it so she could make her cuts. I could hear the weight in her voice as she explained the sense of responsibility she felt to the biblical, rabbinic, and kabbalistic canons: "It is easy to throw the Bible into the garbage and begin anew, but it will be very lonely, at least in Israel. I need to *schlep* the whole history with me, to have my friends and family with me." She described her process as "play[ing] with the text," working in small changes, subtly altering the ending or switching the power relations between characters. It was slow, careful, precise work, which entailed layers of research, cross-checking, writing, and revising. The results not only created classical midrash suffused with women's stories but also disruptions to gendered structures of power. In "The Ever-Turning Sword," for example, Eve is no longer linked to sin, nor dominated by Adam. It was an alternative story that could live alongside, rather than replace, other versions. Each midrash

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[58] Biala, "The Ever-Turning Sword," 19.

[59] In an interview, Biala explained that Lubitch had published these texts in a small book through a feminist center at Bar Ilan University, but it was not widely publicized.

was a small step toward increased biodiversity within the species of classical midrash.

Biala soon discovered other growing populations of contemporary classical midrash. She joined forces with Nehama Weingarten-Mintz, another Israeli woman who had also begun to gather women's *midrashim* in Hebrew. Together they decided to not only write but also collect and edit. After a few advertisements in the papers, *midrashim* flooded in from all sectors of society: "Conservative, Reform and avowedly secular, of all political stripes and ethnic backgrounds, from cities, *kibbutzim*, small towns, and suburbs." [60] Each woman who contributed to this project brought her own experience, expertise, and frame of reference.

Most of the *midrashim* that people sent in, Biala reflected, "felt like they sat on a wound," the knife-cuts of patriarchal systems that had left damage not only to individuals, but to structures, like women's education. If women had felt the pain of erasure and absence from daily and yearly jabs at their sexed bodies, whether from medical treatments or ritualized exclusion, some now approached the cherubs at the gates of redemption, picked up the sword, and made their own cuts.[61] One religiously observant gynecologist, Etti Rom, for example, wrote a challenge to a system that would rather adjust a woman's ovulation cycles with hormones than bend a rabbinic law that rendered her *de facto* infertile. Rom wrote about Tanya, a name of a patient but also a name rich with religious symbolism, who had suffered from "halakhic infertility."[62] Rabbinic strictures, like pesticides applied to protect crops, sacrificed women's health.[63] The midrash, like a voice for a silenced spring of Torah, brings Tanya directly to

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[60] Biala, "Filling the Missing Half."

[61] Sarit Katan Gribetz, *Time and Difference in Rabbinic Judaism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 135–187.

[62] This term refers to women who cannot conceive because their ovulation occurs during the period they are still in *niddah*, menstrual impurity, so they cannot have sex. In the biblical law, the period of *niddah* was seven days, but rabbinic law added an extra seven days to ensure women were pure before intercourse.

[63] Etty Rom, "Midrash Shivah Neki'im," in *Dirshuni: Midreshe Nashim*, ed. Nehama Weingarten-Mintz and Tamar Biala (Tel-Aviv, 2009).

God, the creator of just biblical law. Rom's call was not for the elimination of rabbinic interventions, but mitigation measures. Rabbinic law could be applied more moderately, and with the awareness of areas that might cause reproductive harm downstream.

Biala and Weingarten-Mintz's call for submissions was generative. It invited women to join a religious ecology that had limited their involvement, whether because of gender, observance, or education. Unlike Lubitch, whose intensive halakhic learning allowed her to produce a collection of midrash that "you can't believe is not traditional," Biala recalled that many women sent in work she characterized to be more like Hebrew-language theological poems: transgressive creations of a different kind than classical midrash.[64] Biala offered herself as a helpmate to women who wished to transform their creations into midrash.[65] She worked via email with women across Israel, some of whom she had never even met, checking textual references and pushing for a bolder social commentary, sometimes going back and forth with fifteen or more drafts. I imagined Biala, like the spindle fibers inside dividing cells, making sure homologous material was properly lined up. She also played the role of the enzyme ligases that facilitate crossing-over, the precise cutting, exchanging, and reattachment of genetic materials between chromosomes.[66] Biala's slow, arduous process of cross-referencing with

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[64] Zohar Weiman-Kelman, *Queer Expectations: A Genealogy of Jewish Women's Poetry* (SUNY Press: 2018), 27–31.

[65] I am suggesting that these writings are kind/*min*-fluid, moving trans-genre. See Neis, *When a Human Gives Birth*, 11.

[66] To prepare for sexual reproduction, a parent cell undergoes meiosis, the kind of cell division that produces gametes (sperm or egg), reducing the total number of chromosomes in half so that upon fertilization, the embryo will have genetic material in equal parts from the two parents. Crossing-over is possible in cell-division that happens in all cells but is very rare.

classical sources was to guard against mistakes, whether improper insertions[67] or duplications of content that had already been written.

For a period, a small panel of learned scholars helped Biala with her enzymatic work. The experts tried to rewrite texts or propose their own stories to fix problems they identified with the submissions, but Biala "wouldn't compromise" her vision of nonexpert women writing with the support of experts. It was Biala's intent to work with contributors as partners rather than editors from on high. One by one, Biala explained, the scholars left, frustrated by the slow pace. She was left alone.

Time is not merely "a measuring stick" that, like the ever-turning sword, slices our movement around the sun into months, minutes, and milliseconds and guards the past against our return.[68] Time is "a resource … [that] we intuitively understand … is in limited supply."[69] In one sense, Biala had time on her side. The concurrence of women's education that created enough expertise and interest in contemporary midrash by women facilitated a radical ecological event: the creation of classical midrash late in time relative to the ancient cohort. Yet the arduous process meant that the expenditure of time was so great, and the rate of production so slow, that it limited growth.[70] She told me, "I just knew I wanted to have one holy religious scripture book by women on the Jewish bookshelf before I die." A book on the shelf felt like it could not simply be "whited out." Soon after its publication, Biala got to work creating again, working on a second, even bolder volume, which is now in the world, too.[71]

Publication was a triumph; the process felt decidedly less triumphalist. While working on *Dirshuni*, Biala felt like she lived in an

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[67] Biala recounted an example of a prosecutor of sex crimes against children in Israel who drafted a text that claimed that Mordechai had a sexual relationship with Esther; without textual evidence, it did not meet her standard of airtight argumentation.

[68] Eric Post, *Time in Ecology: A Theoretical Framework* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 5.

[69] Post, *Time in Ecology*, 44.

[70] Post, *Time in Ecology*, 43–51.

[71] She explained the second volume was bolder because she was willing to engage in direct conversations with God and to craft more post-Holocaust theology.

"atmosphere of sin," as if "someone would catch [her]." People constantly told Biala that her work "took *chutzpah*"; others "told [her she] was doing something wrong, heretic[al]." Early in the generation of *Dirshuni*, she went to teach a class to a group of elderly religious Israelis. She worried she might give someone a heart attack, which was only half a joke. She brought her mother with her, who was both a nurse—trained in resuscitation—and a woman who looked "so decent it would cover [up her daughter's radicalism]." Biala's *midrashim* didn't kill the old fellows, but the men chipped away at her: they told her they loved the material but that she overstepped by calling it midrash. They treated her as if she was on the verge of becoming Dr. Frankenstein, the creator of an unnatural chimera.

Biala recounted that after *Dirshuni* was published, there were several evening events where they brought Talmud scholars, a few rabbis that agreed to come, and some writers to discuss the book. "The rabbis that came never, ever welcomed us to the party," she said figuratively. "They were all critics, calling the work pretentious and asking nitpicky questions," wielding the sword to cut it down. In America, sympathetic "liberal" American audiences, like the rabbinical students she taught at Hebrew College, Hadar, or the Hadassah Brandeis Institute, loved the spirit, style, and form of her midrash. Even religious communities who she pushed with strong moral and political stands tolerated her; they listened. In America, there were places *Dirshuni* could sit alongside ArtScroll, another contemporary religious innovator working in "old media."[72]

In Israel, however, she was "not used to acceptance." She longed for the ones created in her image, the *midrashim,* to bring about social change: she yearned to feel embraced at home, to arrive in a *beit midrash* with helping matches, in the chairs and on the shelves. Sharp rejection was a double-edged sword, however, professing the disruptive potential of her creations.

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[72] Jeremy Stolow, *Orthodox by Design: Judaism, Print Politics, and the Artscroll Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 178.

Biala showed me a responsum—since removed—posted on the Modern Orthodox Zionist website *Moreshet* about the halakhic status of *Dirshuni*.[73] A person who had encountered *Dirshuni* in the wild asked about its halakhic status. The rabbi who authored the responsum wrote that women, some of whom weren't even Torah-observant, were writing texts dressed up as rabbinic midrash, forming a book that was indecent and unfit to have in the home. Biala decried the responsum and the "theocratic" platform, which presented rulings as authoritative and generalizable despite the absence of context or transparency about process.[74]

Biala knew the plot. In a cultural landscape where women's bodies, voices, and knowledge were often collapsed under the rubric of '*erva* (lewdness), *Dirshuni* was being framed like pornography.[75] Perhaps as dangerous as their authoresses' buxom knowledge bases, unbridled by any rabbinic brasier, was the way *Dirshuni* subverted expectations: *are those real?* The resemblance to "holy words" was uncanny. What if their messages were more pleasing or exciting than what he could offer in his home? The *Moreshet* rabbi recognized that "religious fakes still do authentic religious work."[76] While he considered *Dirshuni* fake by his own authen-ticity standards, he anticipated what allowing new and old classical *midrashim* to mingle might lead to, and it wasn't *just* mixed dancing. The intercourse of texts, their recombination and mutation to make new texts is, in fact, his rabbinic heritage (*moreshet*, literally, heritage).

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[73] Rabbi Baruch Efrati, "Ma haDin shel Sefer Midrashe Nashim bi'inyan Geniza," *Moreshet*, accessed 22 June 2022 at http://www.moreshet.co.il/web/shut/shut2.asp?id=143020, no longer available online.

[74] Matthew Scott Hindman, *The Myth of Digital Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). See also Piotr Konieczny, "Governance, Organization, and Democracy on the Internet: The Iron Law and the Evolution of Wikipedia," *Sociological Forum* 24, no. 1 (2009).

[75] Emmanuel Bloch, "When the Naked Encounters the Sacred: Two Paradigms of the Prohibition to Recite Holy Words in the Presence of *'Ervah*. Diné Israel, 34 (2020) (5781): 141–172.

[76] David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), vii.

The ancient rabbis did not work to conserve the world in a form recognizable to their ancestors, fantasies aside. In the face of loss, they dug through the rubble and put pieces together, rebuilding the house. The *Moreshet* rabbi knew the lesson, handed down from his fathers, that the order of his sacred community needed protection from other women. He stood, in the image of a cherub armed with halakhic weapons, guarding the long-sealed body of Torah from feminist penetration.[77] With his back to the wall, staring inward, he instructed the querier: Throw *Dirshuni* out, but not in a *geniza!* Throw it in the trash, and the sooner the better.[78]

Waiting East of Eden

> And He wailed and beat His heart, *For I am nearly limping on my side, and my pain is with me always* (Ps 38:18). How can I, alone and by myself, meet My other side? Let the one created in My image come and do all that I did, draw the sword and slice me in half and bring the other side to me … *And the Lord God called out to Adam and said: Where are you?* (Gen 3:9). *And He stationed east of the Garden of Eden the cherubs and the fiery every-turning sword* (Gen 3:24). And He Waited.[79]

Dirshuni is in the world. In some places, it is on shelves; in others, in trash cans. It waits for a curious graduate student, or maybe even a *yeshivish* trash-picker, longing for it. Maybe they will each dare to partake.

Unlike feminist interventions focused on *halakha,* or systematic theology that works "against the fragmentation that is a symptom of modernity,"[80] *Dirshuni* does *not* offer a coherent worldview that patches

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[77] On the exclusive male representation within, ownership of, and authority over "the canon," see, for example, Tova Hartman, *Feminism Encounters Traditional Judaism: Resistance and Accommodation* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2007).

[78] Translated and paraphrased from Rabbi Baruch Efrati, "Ma haDin shel Sefer Midrashe Nashim bi'inyan Geniza."

[79] Biala, "The Ever-Turning Sword," 19.

[80] Yonatan Y. Brafman, "New Developments in Modern Jewish Thought: From Theology to Law and Back Again," in *Cambridge Companion to Judaism and Law*, ed. Christine Elizabeth Hayes (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 311; Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998), 88.

the seams of tradition. Rather, it is a humbler creation: *Dirshuni* presents additions to the kind/*min* midrash placed in a space of unsettled disruption and a period of waiting in a long-standing stasis that has the potential to amplify greater change. Its compatibility with the classical kind creates the possibilities, too, for radical recombination, promising—or threatening, depending on your perspective—to cause cascading changes within its ecosystems.

It will take time to see the extent of *Dirshuni's* disruption. How will new classical midrash produce change, and to what effect? It is a political question, one that I have tried to approach differently than many theorists of tradition, who imagine conscious, reasoned processes of acceptance or rejection of new forms.[81] The ecological theological model would suggest that evolution will be partial, unexpected, and uneven. Microevolutionary processes can accumulate over long periods of time such that we can recognize macroevolutionary changes. Yet it is a rare event that leads to the creation of a new species: changes happen in fits and spurts, or in the language of a predominant evolutionary theory, change punctuates the equilibrium of species that had been in stasis. *Dirshuni*, a contemporary cohort of classical aggadic midrash, is not an attempt to force the emergence of a new species, but rather to foster the sort of ecological home or ecosystem in which an existing species can thrive and allow evolution to happen. Only time will tell.

[81] Molly Farneth, *The Politics of Ritual* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023); Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).