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# SEEKING GOD'S FACE THROUGH THE EYES OF WOMAN: A REVIEW AND APPRECIATION OF THE ENGLISH EDITION OF *DIRSHUNI: CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S MIDRASH*

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Midrash is many things—creative exegesis, a search for meaning in our most sacred texts, a means of addressing pressing theological questions, and more. It is also a search for the self. For those of us for whom the Torah is a guide to life, it is important that we find ways in which it speaks to us personally. We want to find ourselves in the stories that the Bible tells. We want to be guided but also represented.[1]

I find the story of Ruth a useful metaphor for the practice of midrash. Ruth goes on a journey of self-discovery, in the process of which she seeks and finds a new identity which she embraces as her true one. This is expressed in the question asked of her by Boaz and then by Naomi, "Who

[1] See Elizabeth Shanks Alexander, *Gender and Timebound Commandments in Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 246–263, 272–273, and especially 251.

are you?" (Ruth 3:9, 16). Ruth transforms herself from a Moabite to an Israelite, a foreigner to a native, the wife of an expatriate to the progenitor of royalty. Yet her journey brings about change not only for her but for those around her as well. The barren Mara ("bitter," the name Naomi—whose name means "pleasant"—adopts for herself in the wake of the tragedies that best her; see Ruth 1:20) becomes Naomi once again and is granted progeny through Ruth. Boaz—who, according to one midrashic tradition, lost his wife the day Ruth arrived in Bethlehem, having already suffered the death of all sixty of his children (see Bava Batra 91a)—is rejuvenated through his marriage to her. As the result of their marriage, the people of Israel are vouchsafed their future king, *David ha-Melekh*.

This is the nature of midrash. We seek to understand the biblical text and to be instructed by it, but through the process of midrash we also transform the face of the text. We find meanings of which the authors themselves were unaware and which at times subvert their intentions. We give ourselves new life through Torah study, and we give Torah new life by fashioning for it a *panim hadashot*, a new visage.[2] Every midrash draws upon the breath of the Torah and then returns that breath with renewed vigor.

When we fashion a new visage for the Torah, we need to be able to see our own faces reflected in it. When we cannot, we feel invisible.[3] Midrash empowers us to scrape away that which conceals our presence in the text. Midrash is sacred archeology; we seek to discover that which was there all along.

The midrashic canon was composed entirely by men. As a consequence, although portraits of biblical and post-biblical women

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[2] I am borrowing this phrase from the *halakhah*, found in Ketubot 8a, that at the celebratory meals that take place during the week following a wedding, all seven of the blessings that were recited under the *huppah*, the *sheva berakhot,* are recited once again only if a *panim hadashot*, someone who did not attend the wedding, is present.

[3] This issue arises at times in the realm of *halakhah.* In her book *Menstrual Purity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), Charlotte Elisheva Robert reflects on the ways in which rabbinic discussions of the laws of *niddah* reflect a tension between giving voice to women's participation in the formulation, or at least application, of these laws, and the attempt to exclude them from that process. See, for example, 117–127.

appear in midrash, women themselves did not have the opportunity to paint these portraits in accordance with their own self-perceptions. Moreover, some midrashim reflect male assumptions about the secondary role of women in religious contexts. A prime example of this bias is the midrashic commentary on Genesis 25:22. We are told that when Rebecca felt a struggle in her womb, "she went to seek God," ותלך לדרוש את ה'. Genesis Rabbah (63, 4) understands this to mean that Rebecca sought counsel in the study hall of Shem and Eber, and concludes, "From this we learn that one who goes to see the face of an elder is considered to have appeared before the Shekhinah."[4] In other words, the author of this midrash cannot imagine that Rebecca had direct contact with God, unlike the Patriarchs; therefore, the verse must be referring to contact with a human authority.[5]

Similarly, the sages assert that Moses died by means of a Divine kiss. This is derived from Deuteronomy 34:5: "And Moses the servant of the Lord died there in Moab על פי ה'," which means "in accordance with God's word" but can be translated literally as "through God's mouth"—in other words, by means of a Divine kiss (see Midrash Tanna'im Deuteronomy 34:5). We are told that Miriam also died by means of a Divine kiss, but the phrase על פי ה' is not used in connection with her death (see Num. 20:1) "because it would be unseemly" (b. Mo'ed Katan 28). This fastidiousness makes sense only if one sexualizes the relationship between a male God and a human female, an assumption that problematizes the possibility of women having an intimate relationship with God. Of course, the rabbis are comfortable understanding Song of Songs 1:2, "Let Him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth" as referring to a feminized Knesset Yisrael,[6] but this image is based primarily on the rab-

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[4] Pesiqta Zutarta/Leqakh Tov (Toledot, 25, 22) understands this verse to mean that Rebecca offered a sacrifice.

[5] It should be noted that Sarah is described in midrashic literature as superior to Abraham in prophecy (Tanhuma Shemot, 1). However, compare Megillah 14a, where it is stated only that she was inspired by the Holy Spirit, a step down from prophecy.

[6] See, for example, Deuteronomy Rabbah (ed. Lieberman), Parashat Devarim, 11.

binic conceit that one can cast the people of Israel as a whole, including its men, as being feminine and therefore submissive in relationship to their master, the God of Israel. In effect, the "woman" kissed by the divine "man" is also (primarily) a man.[7]

The authors of the midrashim in the *Dirshuni* collection seek, through the learned and creative use of midrashic methodology, to uncover new facets of the biblical text, particularly those that bring the feminine to the fore, in both its human and divine manifestations. This is a daunting task, and it involves several steps.

1. The first is to make clear that the voices of the Tanakh and the sages are limited and limiting. Limited, in that their teachings and narratives are written from a male perspective and, as a direct consequence, limiting because room is not made for a female one. Even more problematic—as mentioned above—to the extent that women appear in these texts, they are portrayed as men perceive them. Thus, they are denied the opportunity to present themselves in accordance with their own ways of seeing themselves and the world around them—including how they

[7] It is worth noting that in the literature of the *tkhines*, Yiddish-language supplicatory prayers written for and by women, there are occasionally midrashim that empower women in a manner not found in traditional rabbinic texts. See the discussion of the depiction of a women's paradise that appears in the *Sheloyshe She'orim* (=*The Three Gates*) authored by Sore bas Toyvim (18th c.), in which women study Torah, in Chava Weissler, *Voices of the Matriarchs* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 77–84. Note also the comparison of the lighting of Shabbat candles and the High Priest's lighting of the candelabrum in the Temple in some *tkhines*; see Weissler, *Voices*, 100–101. For a discussion of the possible relevance of *tkhine* literature for, in Weissler's words, "valorization of the women's sphere," see Weisler, 177–184, and her discussion of *tkhines* and *thkine*-like prayers emanating from American feminist circles, 163–171. See also Shanks Alexander's remark (*Gender*, 249) about the possibility of using *tkhines* as a tool for appropriating the traditions of Torah study for women. (Please note that I am using the term midrash here to include narrative that is not explicitly anchored in textual exegesis.) Mention should also be made of the so-called "Women's Bible," the Yiddish-language *Z'enah Ur'enah*, authored by Jacob ben Isaac Ashkenazi (1550–1625). Organized around the weekly Torah and haftarah readings, the work is a paraphrase of the biblical text mixed with midrash, aggadic narrative, and interpretations by the medieval Bible commentators. Although written by a man and containing only material written by men, it did introduce women to the midrashic tradition.

perceive the attitudes and actions of men. They are also denied the opportunity to present the perceptions that grow out of their own understanding and experience.

A midrash written by Rivkah Lubitch, "And Your Desire Will Be for Your Man" (p. 9),[8] identifies the male-oriented character of a verse in Genesis. The first woman is cursed as follows, "Your desire shall be for him, and he shall rule over you" (Gen. 3:16). In Lubitch's midrash, it is reported that in Beruriah's version of the Torah the reverse is stated: it is men who are ruled over by women because men desire them.[9] The Shekhinah, a feminine manifestation of the Godhead in kabbalistic tradition, explains that "The Torah speaks in the language of men." In other words, each desires the other, and so both statements are true. The official biblical text, however, privileges the male perspective, according to which men hold the power and women are subject to them.

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[8] This and all future page references are to Tamar Biala, ed., *Dirshuni: Contemporary Women's Midrash* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2022). Additionally, I wish to correct a statement made by Tamar Biala on page xxxix of the editor's introduction of the reviewed volume. She mistakenly states that in May 2020, senior rabbinical students were completing a year of studying *Dirshuni* with me. In fact, as has been the case for some time, the students studied a text of their choosing, in this case *Dirshuni*, on their own in ḥevruta over the course of the year and then gathered for a communal siyyum. Tamar may have thought that I was the organizer of the year-long study because I am the author of the Hadran that was used at the siyyum—and to correct another misunderstanding, it was not composed specifically for that occasion. Some years back I decided that a new version of the traditional Hadran was necessary, one that reflected an appreciation of the many sources from which Torah and wisdom flow. This Hadran is now the one generally used for siyyumim that take place at Jewish Theological Seminary, as well as at a small number of Conservative synagogues. I had no idea that Tamar thought that I was facilitating the study of *Dirshuni*; I only discovered this misunderstanding when I read the introduction. I hope that I did not inadvertently say something that caused Tamar to misinterpret my role, and if I did so, I apologize.

[9] This is a sly reference to—and subversion of?—the rabbinic tradition that in the Torah scroll of R. Meir, Beruriah's husband, Genesis 1:31 read והנה טוב מות, "and behold, death was good," rather than the traditional version, והנה טוב מאד, "and behold, it [=all of creation] was good"; see Genesis Rabba 9, 5. Lubitch is implicitly positing that Beruriah, no less than her husband, had access to variant versions of the biblical text (or the authority/audacity to change it?).

The brilliance of this midrash lies in the use of the rabbinic principle דברה תורה כלשון\בלשון בני אדם, usually translated as "the Torah adopts human modes of speech." This means, for example, that the Torah can speak of God experiencing regret even though God is actually incapable of such an emotion (Midrash Lekah Tov, Genesis 6). At other times, this principle is used to explain why the Torah employs language that is seen as unnecessarily verbose (see, for example, b. Ketubot 67b). As the principle is employed by the Sages, בני אדם refers to humanity generally—as opposed to God—and not specifically to men. Moreover, the principle is invoked to explain why at times the language of the Torah seems at variance with its divine nature. In Lubitch's midrash, בני אדם is given a gendered reading; the phrase refers specifically to men. The principle is used to argue either that God decided to write the Torah in a way that reflects a male perspective or, more radically, that male writers recorded divine narratives and teaching through the lens of their own biases. The irony inherent in Lubitch's reading is that while in its original context this phrase describes the ways in which the Torah is written to make it more accessible, Lubitch uses it to identify a (presumably representative) instance in which the Torah's language makes it less accessible to women.

Similarly, in her midrash "And He Will Rule Over You" (p. 12), Dana Pulver, by playing on the dual meaning of the root *m-sh-l*, "to rule" and "to offer a parable," reads the aforementioned curse placed on Eve, "[Your husband] shall rule over you" (Gen. 3:16), as "He will curse you through the use of parables." She then catalogues a number of insulting metaphors used in rabbinic literature to describe women; they are cups from which to imbibe, flesh to be cooked and consumed, containers of filth. Underlying Pulver's midrash is the centrality of language to biblical and rabbinic Judaism. Language shapes ideas and images; whoever controls speech controls the framing of reality and the ordering of social, political, and religious arrangements. Men metaphorize

women; women learn to reflect the metaphors men have created. The degree of hegemony afforded by control over language is magnified in a culture in which status is achieved through the ability to interpret existing texts and produce new ones.[10]

2. The second step is to identify narratives in which the absence of a feminine voice is particularly egregious and, in time-honored midrashic tradition, find linguistic irregularities and ambiguities that may serve as a platform for a midrash that reflects a feminine perspective and problematizes the male viewpoint found in the biblical (or rabbinic) text.

   We have already seen how Rivkah Lubitch posits the existence of a counter-text that did not find its way into the biblical canon. In a different midrash, "Sarah and the Sacrifice of Isaac" (p. 32), Lubitch goes further by arguing that the existence of such a counter-text—and counternarrative—is alluded to in the canonical narrative itself. The second verse of the Akedah narrative reads, "And God said: Take your son, your favored son, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah; there you shall offer him as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I will point out to you" (Gen. 22:2). Lubitch notes that in v. 1 we are told that this takes place אחר הדברים האלה, "after these things"; the specific referent is not stated.[11] She proposes that God's command to Abraham followed a previous command to Sarah to do the same—testing Sarah as God would subsequently test Abraham, and using the same imperative language addressed to Abraham in v.

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[10] In this connection, it is appropriate to mention George Lakoff's "conceptual metaphor theory," according to which metaphors are not merely linguistic devices but conceptual constructions that influence how we think about a broad range of issues; see for example, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

[11] NJPS translates this phrase as "some time afterward," in which case it is simply being indicated that this narrative follows temporally the previous one, Abraham's establishing a covenant with Abimelech.

2, but in the feminine—but Sarah refused, saying, "No. Because a mother does not slaughter her child." The midrash posits that Sarah understood what Abraham did not: that "one who slaughters his son in the name of God will be left in the end without a son or without God."

In Lubitch's view, it is Sarah who passes the test, not Abraham. She therefore appends to v. 12, in which the angel states in God's name that "I now know that you [=Abraham] are God-fearing," the words "even though you did not withhold your son." In other words, Abraham is described as God-fearing despite his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, not because of it. Lubitch's midrash concludes with a citation of Genesis 21:12: "Whatever Sarah tells you, heed her voice, for in Isaac your seed will have a name." This citation is preceded by the commonly used rabbinic formula וזה שאמר הכתוב, "and thus Scripture states," indicating a further anchoring of the counternarrative in the traditional text. By expanding the referent of "whatever Sarah tells you" beyond its contextual meaning—that Abraham should defer to Sarah and expel Hagar and Ishmael from his household—Lubitch has found a prooftext that anchors her claim that there is a story parallel to the recorded Akedah narrative in which Sarah shows greater wisdom that Abraham.[12]

3. Finally, the midrashists of *Dirshuni* imagine into existence a transhistorical women's study hall known as Beruriah's Beit Midrash.[13] A beit midrash is a semi-public space that serves as a venue for a voluntary association of masters and disciples who study and produce Torah. The rabbis only opened up such spaces for men. A women's beit midrash was unthinkable because

[12] Lubitch is presumably drawing on the rabbinic tradition that Sarah's prophetic powers were greater than Abraham's, a claim based on the verse cited by Lubitch; see Exodus Rabba 1, 1.

[13] This idea originated with Rivkah Lubitch and has been appropriated by other writers as well; see the introduction to *Dirshuni*, xxiii.

women were not part of the world of Torah study. Women would gather and speak to each other, but it was imagined by the rabbis that their conversation consisted mainly of gossip, "spinning thread by the light of the moon and discussing their neighbor's behavior" (see m. Sotah 6, 1). A women's beit midrash creates space, in the full sense of that term, for a publicly sanctioned and valued forum for women's Torah study. In such a space, it becomes possible not simply to study the Torah produced by men and create midrash that is in effect a commentary on male exegesis; the door is opened to new genres of midrash informed by feminine sensibilities. The women's beit midrash that is at first a literary creation inspires and reflects the creation of an actual women's beit midrash, one that reaches full fruition in the pages of *Dirshuni*.

Beruriah's beit midrash plays a role in midrashim created by Rivkah Lubitch and Hila Una. Beruriah, the wife of the tanna R. Meir, is the perfect choice to lead such a beit midrash. She is famously the only woman to appear in halakhic dialogue with other rabbinic figures; moreover, her view is favored over the others (see Tosefta Kelim, Bava Mezia, 1, 6). Her beit midrash is imagined to be a forum for debate (p. 106), scriptural exegesis (p. 151), and a radical halakhic pronouncement (pp. 176 and 183).

In the last instance, "Moses Visits Beruriah's Beit Midrash," Lubitch models her narrative along the lines of a rabbinic tale that describes Moses' visit to the beit midrash of Rabbi Akiva (b. Menahot 29b). In that story, Moses is initially dismayed by the fact that he is unable to understand Rabbi Akiva's lecture but is comforted when R. Akiva explains that all of his teachings are הלכה למשה מסיני, oral traditions handed down to Moses at Sinai and then transmitted throughout the generations. In Lubitch's narrative, Moses is distressed because he realizes that according to the rabbinic definition of *mamzerut*, he, the product of a relationship between Amram and his aunt Yocheved, is a *mamzer* and may not marry into the community of Israel (see Lev. 18:12,

> Num. 26:57–59, and Deut. 23:3). He then is transported to the beit midrash of Beruriah, in which he hears a woman ask why the law of *mamzer* was not being practiced. The answer given is that "we do not receive testimony on a *mamzer*, because it has already been decided that the entire community are presumed to be mamzerim and are permitted to one another." Hearing this, Moses's mind is put at ease. Lubitch is doubling down on the radicality of the passage in Menahot. There, Moses must accept that the true meaning of the traditions he has received can only come to light through to the brilliance of his rabbinic successors. In Lubitch's retelling, the very legitimacy of Moses—the lawgiver par excellence—as a full member of the community of Israel needs to be validated by halakhic reasoning emanating from a women's beit midrash.

In the remainder of this article, I wish to engage in detail two of the midrashim that appear in the *Dirshuni* volume. Of course, the volume itself already includes insightful commentary for each midrash. Nonetheless, as our sages say, אין בית מדרש בלא חידוש, which I will translate idiomatically as "Every engagement with the visage of Torah inevitably uncovers a new facet." I regard this as an opportunity to sit, like Moses, at the feet of Beruriah and her spiritual descendants and imbibe and savor their words of Torah.

## Tamar Biala, "Miscarriage and Creation" (p. 3)

In the volume's very first midrash, Biala imagines a female God who sees the worlds She has created disintegrate. She is eventually able to create a sustainable world, but only after Her human creations join Her in a prayer that the world should not falter:

> "At the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was *tohu va-vohu*, darkness over the face of the deep, and the spirit of God hovering over the face of the waters" (Genesis 1:1).
>
> "He brings everything to pass directly in its time" (Ecclesiastes 3:11). Rabbi Abahu said that we learn from here that The Holy Blessed One was

> building worlds and destroying them, creating worlds and destroying them, until he created these (Kohelet Rabbah, Vilna edition, sec. 3)
>
> And God saw all Her worlds falling at Her feet, and She said to Herself: I will just let My heart fall along with them, "and I will sit in darkness, like those long dead" (Lamentations 3:6). Here tears and blood were scattering in space, searching for land that would absorb them, and they wept to fragments and pieces, until all of existence was the cloud and the fog of the great deep. God tried again to look at the ruin of Her worlds, and just couldn't. She covered Herself with this great deep, as is written, "You made the deep, covered it as a garment" (Psalms 104:6), and She beat Her chest and wailed, "for I shall be a desolation forever" (Jeremiah 51:26).
>
> What did She think at that moment, when She could no longer bear to look on those worlds? She remembered that it is said of Her, "You brought forth the earth and the world" (Psalms 90:2) "and her womb, eternal" (Jeremiah 20:7). And She felt her sons and daughters straining to be born so that they could say in gratitude, "for I was not killed in the womb" (Jeremiah 20:17). She closed Her eyes, swallowed the pain in Her throat, and pleaded for Herself, that She might find more loving-mercy, and faith, as is written, "I declare, a world of loving-mercy will be built, Your faithfulness will be established in the heavens" (Psalms 89:3).
>
> When the heavens and earth stood, in wonderment and bewilderment, *tohim uvohim*, She took off the garment of the deep with which She had been covering Herself, and that deep of cloud and fog, made of Her blood and tears, went and gathered into living waters, and She hovered over them back and forth, as is written "when the earth was *tohu vavohu*, darkness over the face of the deep, and the spirit of God hovering over the waters (Genesis 1:1).
>
> And what was she saying at the moment? "That it should not totter and fall, forever" (Psalms 104:5). And Her sons and daughters joined their prayers to Hers, and they themselves said: "That it should not totter and fall, forever; that it should not totter and fall, forever" (Psalms 104:5)

Biala uses as foundation for her midrash about creation an existing and oft-quoted midrash that speaks of God building worlds and destroying them. Building on the verse, "God created everything in its proper time" (Ecclesiastes 3:11), the existing midrash imagines God as a

serial builder and destroyer, constructing and deconstructing different configurations of the cosmos until the universe takes its present shape. God is depicted as a deliberate, emotionless architect, experimenting until he finds an acceptable version of the world. The crucial criterion, according to this midrash, is enunciated by God in a statement not cited by Biala: "These please me; the others did not." Thus, the universe is an object which functions primarily as a source of divine satisfaction.

Biala's midrash describes a different God and a different process. It is not a male God who controls the acts of creation and destruction but rather a female God who witnesses the spontaneous disintegration of all the worlds She has created. God Herself undergoes a degree of disintegration, shedding blood and tears. What is striking in this depiction is that Biala employs female imagery in a way that veers close to embracing stereotypical representations of women: passive, emotional, blood-filled creatures. In one of their most brutal characterizations, the Sages describe women as "a sack of excrement, and her 'mouth' [=vagina] is full of blood" (b. Shabbat 152a).

And yet this is a risk worth taking. By conceiving of God as a woman, Biala is able to reimagine the creation of the world as childbirth, an image which indeed can be found in Tanakh, as in Psalm 90:2 (a verse that Biala incorporates into her midrash): "Before the mountains were born, before You birthed the earth and the world." Childbirth is radically different from material construction: one's child is part and parcel of oneself, the process of creation is messy, and there are risks to both mother and child that cannot be absolutely eliminated. Thus, to think of God as the world's birth mother is to imagine creation as an act full of risk and uncertainty in which a creator is subject to some of the same contingencies facing one's creation. God's vulnerability is further emphasized by Biala having God pray that the world "should not totter and fall" (Psalm 104:5) and by having Her prayer echoed by Her human creations.

While we could attribute gendered motives to Biala's description of God as vulnerable and emotional, she has taken inspiration from the midrashic genre that humanizes God. In innumerable midrashim, God has a human face and consciously adopts the behaviors of His creations.

In Lamentations 2:17 we are told that in allowing the Temple and Jerusalem to be destroyed God "carried out the decree that He ordained long ago." Based on a wordplay, the midrashist translates the words meaning "carried out His degree" as "tore His garment" (Lamentations Rabbah 1, 1). God is imagined as imitating human mourning practices, performing *keri'ah*, ritual rending of a mourner's clothing, remaining mute, and sitting in the manner of mourners and crying. Thus, we can think of the image of a vulnerable, humanized God as one that transcends gender.

Nonetheless, Biala goes beyond conventional midrash in imagining a more embodied version of God. The God of her midrash does not merely experience human emotions; She exudes blood and tears, beats Her chest and wails. Moreover, unlike the God of the midrash in Lamentations Rabbah, the God of Biala's midrash does not merely follow the example of humans; it is part of Her divinity to experience and express emotion.

## Einat Ramon, "Four Daughters" (p. 223)

Ramon's midrash is written as a counterpoint to the "Four Sons" midrash that appears in the Haggadah and other rabbinic sources:

> The Torah addressed itself to four daughters:
>
> One wise-hearted, one a rebel, one sincere, and one who cannot ask.
>
> Wise-hearted, this is Miriam—what does she say?
>
> "Father, your decree is harsher than Pharaoh's … Evil Pharaoh, perhaps his decree endures, perhaps not, but you are righteous and yours certainly will endure." Her father went and followed his daughter's counsel.
>
> So we will follow after her, with dance and tambourines, and spread her prophecy among the nations.
>
> A rebel, this is Tamar—what does she say? "Examine these, please" (Genesis 38:25), the ways of enslavement and oppression in the rule of one person over another. Though she rebelled against authority, it is written: "She is more in the right" (Genesis 38:26) than he [=Judah] and we have no freedom until we repent of our ways.

> Sincere, this is Ruth—what does she say?
>
> "Where you go, there I will go, and where you sleep, I will sleep, your people shall be my people, and your God shall be my God" (Ruth 1:16).
>
> So we will strengthen her in her holding fast to those she loved, and say to her: "May God render the woman entering your home as unto Rachel and Leah who together built the House of Israel" (Ruth 4:11).
>
> And the one who cannot ask, this is the beautiful female captive taken in war.
>
> Only her silent weeping is heard, as is written: "And she will weep for her father and mother" (Deuteronomy 21:13).
>
> We will begin for her. We will be her voice and she will be our judge. We will return her to her mother's house and the home where she was born, and will "[p]roclaim freedom in the land for all who live in it" (Leviticus 25:10).

In the traditional midrash, the sons are thought of as vessels into which knowledge is to be decanted. Each son's question (or non-question) is described only in order to guide the parent in providing the appropriate answer. Three of the sons—the wise son, the simple son, and the one who does not know how to ask—are to be enlightened in accordance with their perceived levels of intellectual ability and engagement. The *rasha*, variously described by commentators and translators as the evil, mocking, or rebellious son, is seen as an unworthy vessel and is rebuked and excluded from the proceedings. In fact, some understand the version of the midrash in the Haggadah—in which the *rasha* is not addressed directly—as indicating that he is to be ignored entirely. He only overhears the answer given to the son who does not know how to ask, and is meant to understand that the implication of this verse is that by excluding himself from the liberatory narrative of the Exodus, he retroactively removes himself from the community of Israelites who left Egypt—and therefore has excluded himself from participation in the rituals of the Seder.

The daughters of Ramon's midrash are not mere types but actual figures drawn from Tanakh; this adds vitality and a sense of agency to the depiction of each one. Unlike the case of the Four Sons midrash, it is the

questions and challenges of the daughters themselves rather than our responses to them that are the sources of enlightenment. In fact, each of the answers constitutes an acknowledgement through actions as well as through words.

Miriam's challenge is taken from a midrash according to which Miriam chastised her father Amram. Learning of Pharaoh's decree that all male children were to be cast into the Nile, Amram separated from his wife Yocheved. Because Amram was one of the great leaders of his generation, other husbands followed his example and separated from their wives as well. Hearing this, Miriam declared her father's decision to be more evil than Pharaoh's decree; while Pharaoh was willing to spare the female children, her father was ensuring that there would be no Israelite children whatsoever. Humbled by his daughter's words, Amram took Yocheved back into his home.

Ramon elides the gendered character of Miriam's critique as it appears in the midrash. She only cites a specific aspect of Miriam's critique mentioned in the midrash—namely, that her father's decree is more potent than Pharaoh's due to his righteousness and therefore of greater potential harm to the Israelites. However, the educated reader, recalling the original midrash, notes that implicit in Miriam's critique is the accusation that Amram undervalues females; unless there are to be Israelite boys, he is willing to let the girls remain unborn.

Tamar's challenge is an expansion on the phrase *haker na,* "examine these, please" (Gen. 38:25); with these words Tamar is pleading with Judah to acknowledge his ownership of the items he pledged and thereby accept paternity of her unborn child. In Ramon's expansion, what Tamar wants Judah to examine are "the ways of enslavement and oppression in the rule of one person over another." Tamar is circumscribed by societal norms that assign the rights over her marriage to the males in her household. Her father-in-law withholds his third son from her, and so she is left without husband or child after the deaths of Er and Onan. She is reduced to subterfuge, seducing her father-in-law and becoming pregnant by him. Of course, there is an irony in the fact that after his wife's death, Judah may satisfy his sexual desires by visiting a prostitute, while for

Tamar to do so would be a sin that calls for her execution. In Ramon's reading of Genesis, Judah's acknowledgement that "[Tamar] is more in the right" (Gen. 38:26) concedes that men have historically applied a double standard when determining what types of sexual behavior are permitted for men and women respectively.

The last daughter is not one who does not know how to ask but one who is incapable of asking—or protesting—because she is a captive woman. This is a brilliant choice by Ramon. By choosing a woman who is a foreigner, Ramon reminds us that subjugation can take many forms, and that the oppressed can also become the oppressor. By citing Leviticus 25:10, which refers to the freeing of Israelite bond servants in the jubilee year, Ramon urges us to extend the imperative to free enslaved Israelites to all those who experience enslavement in all its forms—including the subjugation of Jewish women.

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As the High Priest is said to have declared to those assembled in the Temple courtyard after reading from Leviticus from a Torah scroll on Yom Kippur, "More than what I have declaimed to you is written here" (m.Yoma 7,1). Even one who reads and absorbs the midrashic gems found in the English *Dirshuni* volume has had but a taste of the profound compendium of midrashim found in the two original volumes written in Hebrew. I hope and pray that the midrashists of *Dirshuni* and those who follow them will continue to fill the void that has existed within the Torah since it was first transmitted to Moses at Sinai.