



Biblical Women

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Introduction



INTRODUCTION

Seventy Faces

"There are seventy faces to the Torah" is an often-quoted rabbinic expression that conveys the openness of Jewish tradition to the interpretation of its canon. No single reading is definitive or absolute. Throughout generations, Jews have been addressing questions that arise from their lives and contexts to their sacred texts. Their faces and voices contribute to the richness and relevance of Torah study. These sessions continue this rabbinic approach through a new discourse among women. This international project enables you to engage your perspectives and experience with the study of the biblical text. We are not expecting to resolve contradictions or achieve true meanings, but rather to participate in an ongoing process of study that admits, even celebrates multiple simultaneous meanings and enables us to discern our own.

Provocative Possibilities

These sessions create an evolving discourse that queries the text and, as a consequence, our lives, with sensitivity to gender. There is no pretension about comprehensive coverage of the vast territories of biblical interpretation - the aim is to introduce select elements of the landscape. These sessions raise challenging questions and issues. Traversing traditional domains and edgy contemporary ones, the sessions invite you to explore possible readings and meanings, suggesting ideas and materials to evaluate. I encourage you to take an active, critical, and responsible role in the study process, evaluating the sources, commentaries, and links, and inquiring about your own interpretations.

Naming the Divine

Hebrew is a highly gender-specific language; it assigns a gender to every noun and verb. There is no grammatical neuter form. Interpreters of the biblical text sometimes presume that the masculine form includes the feminine, sometimes that it excludes it. The English translations are my modified versions of the Jewish Publication Society translation of the Hebrew bible, the *Tanakh*. I render divine names and significant elements of the language in forms that reflect gender inclusivity. The divine pronoun is explicitly male and female, *S/He*. While at first these forms might appear unusual or awkward, they present an opportunity to become more conscious of the gender implications of language. The Hebrew is included so that you will be able to refer to it more as you hone your study skills.

Notes about Session Format

Each session begins with "Background", an introduction to the biblical character in her context.

At the end of each "Biblical Sources" section, there is a guiding question that



frames the inquiry.

The "Links for Inquiry" section suggests further areas for exploration, some of which deepen perspectives on issues that arise in the session, some raise new issues. These websites are not my production, nor am I responsible for their content. Therefore, they ought to be approached with intellectual circumspection and a critical eye.

The "Methodology Matters" will develop opportunities to reflect about the process of study itself over the course of the sessions.

I Male and Female S/He Created Them

Background

In the first chapters of Genesis, the Torah records two versions of the creation of humankind. These two narratives have stood in dramatic tension with one another throughout the generations of biblical interpretation. Some view them as irreconcilable, proof, therefore, of the incoherence of the text; others, neatly seam them together as facets of a unified story. At the nexus of the tension is the figure of woman - female. She is in one chapter an equal partner created with man - male; in another, Eve derives from Adam, and, ultimately, is subordinated to him. Of these two versions, the latter story is the one that is foundational to Christian culture, captures the imagination of Western artists, and dominates conceptions of the biblical creation. It is time to attend to the differences between these two versions, and to interpret the significance of female who is created with male in the divine image.

Nachmanides, the Ramban, an influential 13th century Spanish interpreter, teaches, "There is a great need to begin the Torah with the story of Creation, for it is the *shoresh ha'emunah*, the very root of our belief" (on Genesis 1:1). As the Torah begins, we begin with the story of the Creation, a foundation of our humanity and spirituality.

Biblical Sources

Human Creation Version 1

God said, "Let us make *Adam* in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth." God created *Adam* in Her/His image, in the image of God S/He created her/him; male and female S/He created them. God blessed them and God said to them, "Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth." (Genesis 1:26-28)

כּו וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ; וַיְרִדוּ בְדִגְתַּי הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבַבְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל-הָאָרֶץ וּבְכָל-הַרֹמֵשׁ הָרֶמֶשׂ עַל-הָאָרֶץ. כִּז וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ: זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם. כח וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ וּכְבִשְׁתֶּהּ; וַיְרִדוּ בְדִגְתַּי הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבְכָל-חַיַּי הָרֶמֶשׂ עַל-הָאָרֶץ. (בראשית א)

Human Creation Version 2

7 The Lord God formed Adam from the dust of the earth. S/He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the Adam became a living being. 8 The Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the Adam whom



S/He had formed. 9 And from the ground the Lord God caused to grow every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and bad.. . . 15 The Lord God took the Adam and placed him in the garden of Eden, to work it and care for it. 16 And the Lord God commanded the Adam, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat; 17 but as for the tree of knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of it; for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die." 18 The Lord God said, "It is not good for the Adam to be alone; I will make a fitting help-mate for him." 19 And the Lord God formed out of the earth all the wild beasts and all the birds of the sky, and brought them to the Adam to see what he would call them; and whatever the Adam called each living creature, that would be its name. 20 And the Adam gave names to all the cattle and to the birds of the sky and to all the wild beasts; but for Adam no fitting helper was found. 21 So the Lord God cast a deep sleep upon the Adam; and, while he slept, S/He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that spot. 22 And the Lord God fashioned the rib that S/He had taken from the Adam into a woman; and S/He brought her to the Adam. 23 Then the Adam said, "This one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. This one shall be called Woman, for from man she was taken." 24 Hence a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his woman, so that they become one flesh. 25 The two of them were naked, the Adam and his woman, yet they felt no shame.

ז וַיִּצַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם עֹפֶר מִן-הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים; וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה. ח וַיִּטֵּעַ יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים גֶּן-בְּעֵדֶן--מִקְדָּם; וַיִּשֶׂם שֵׁם אֶת-הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר יָצַר. ט וַיִּצְמַח יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים מִן-הָאֲדָמָה כֹּל-עֵץ נְחֻמָּד לְמִרְאָה וְטוֹב לְמֵאֲכָל--וְעֵץ הַחַיִּים בְּתוֹךְ הֶגֶן וְעֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וְרָע... טו וַיִּקַּח יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם; וַיְנַחֲהוּ בְּגֵן-עֵדֶן לְעִבְדָהּ וּלְשִׁמְרָהּ. טז וַיִּצַּו יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים עַל-הָאָדָם לֵאמֹר: מִכָּל-עֵץ הֶגֶן אָכַל תֹּאכַל. יז וּמֵעֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וְרָע--לֹא תֹאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ: כִּי בְיוֹם אֲכָלְךָ מִמֶּנּוּ--מוֹת תָּמוּת. יח וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים לֹא-טוֹב הָיִיתָ הָאָדָם לְבַדְּךָ; אֲעֲשֶׂה-לּוֹ עֶזְרָה כְּנַגְדְּךָ. יט וַיִּצַּר יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים מִן-הָאֲדָמָה כֹּל-חַיֵּי הַשָּׂדֶה וְאֵת כָּל-עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיָּבֵא אֶל-הָאָדָם לְרִאוֹת מֶה-יִקְרָא-לוֹ; וְכָל אֲשֶׁר יִקְרָא-לוֹ הָאָדָם נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה הוּא שְׁמוֹ. כ וַיִּקְרָא הָאָדָם שְׁמוֹת לְכָל-הַבְּהֵמָה וְלְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וְלֹכֵל חַיֵּי הַשָּׂדֶה; וְלֹא-מָצָא עֶזְרָה כְּנַגְדּוֹ. כא וַיִּפֹּל יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים תְּרִדְמָה עַל-הָאָדָם וַיִּישָׁן; וַיִּקַּח אֶחָת מִצְלַעְתָּיו וַיִּסְגֹּר בָּשָׂר תַּחְתָּנָהּ. כב וַיִּבֶן יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הַצֶּלַע אֲשֶׁר-לָקַח מִן-הָאָדָם לְאִשָּׁה; וַיְבָאָהּ אֶל-הָאָדָם. כג וַיֹּאמֶר הָאָדָם זֹאת הִפְעַם עָצָם מֵעַצְמִי וּבָשָׂר מִבָּשָׂרִי; לְזֹאת יִקְרָא אִשָּׁה כִּי מֵאִישׁ לְקַחָהּ זֹאת. כד עַל-כֵּן יַעֲזֹב אִישׁ אֶת-אָבִיו וְאֶת-אִמּוֹ; וְדָבַק בְּאִשְׁתּוֹ וְהָיוּ לְבָשָׂר אֶחָד. כה וַיְהִיו שְׁנֵיהֶם עֲרוּמִים הָאָדָם וְאִשְׁתּוֹ; וְלֹא יִתְבַּשְׁשׁוּ. (בראשית ב)

Genesis 5 returns to the mode of Version 1.

1 This is the record of Adam's line, when God created Adam, S/He made her/him in the likeness of God; 2 male and female S/He created them. S/He blessed them and called their name Adam when they were created.

א זֶה סֵפֶר תּוֹלְדֹת אָדָם: בְּיוֹם בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים אָדָם בְּדְמוּת אֱלֹהִים עָשָׂה אֹתוֹ.
ב זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בְּרָאָם; וַיְבָרַךְ אֹתָם וַיִּקְרָא אֶת-שְׁמֵם אָדָם בְּיוֹם הַבְּרָאָם.
(בראשית ה)

Compare and contrast the two versions of the creation of woman. What are



the differences? - relate to image, status, role, and life-purpose.

Questions for Discussion

In Version 1, I render the biblical nouns referring to God in a two-gender form in order to emphasize one of the exceptional aspects of the narrative: both Creator and created are plural. Adam, the first creature, is male and female. Insofar as Adam is created in the divine image, what does his/her two-gender aspect indicate about God's gender(s)? In what ways might resemblance of the divine affect our understanding of our humanity, particularly female-ness?

How do the attributes "female" and "male" referred to in Version 1 correspond with the gendering of people as woman and man?

The first creation narrative indicates a divine intention to make an earthly counterpart; as God is ruler of all, the new being will rule the new creation. Adam is created in the image of God. How does this divine-human parallel affect the theoretical and actual status of female?

How is reconciling these two versions of woman akin to reconciling ideal with "actuality"? What changes in both realms are desirable in order to make them compatible, if compatibility is desirable?

Links for Inquiry

Robert Graves and Raphael Patai introduce some ancillary sources about the creation of Adam and cognate narratives in Gnostic traditions. Chapter 10, "Adam's Helpmeets," in *Hebrew Myths*, roughly paraphrases some rabbinic sources. The authors' comments are helpful.

<http://www.webcom.com/~gnosis/lillith.html>

For a discussion of parallels between the biblical creation and the Babylonian creation story, *Enuma Elish*:

http://faculty.gvsu.edu/websterm/Enuma_Elish.html#Nelinks

See this annotated web bibliography on Lilith with links to many online sources:

<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/~hummm/Topics/Lilith/lilith.html>

Often we encounter biblical passages that seem troublesome, disagreeable, even outrageous in relation to our values and views. Please see my essay on "Difficult Texts":

<http://www.shma.com/apr01/haberman.htm>

Tamar Ross, an Israeli feminist has recently published, *Expanding the Palace of Torah: Orthodoxy and Feminism* (Waltham MA: Brandeis University Press, 2005). Review:

<http://www.forward.com/articles/3183>



Also recently published, a controversial argument against views of biological-sex determinism, *Same Difference: How Gender Myths Are Hurting Our Relationships, Our Children, and Our Jobs*.

http://www.bcfwp.org/Same_Difference.html

Summary of Issues

Version 2 of the creation of humankind has had a formidable impact on gender identity, roles and power relations in religious communities and, derivatively, throughout the West; the Garden of Eden is one of the fundamental narratives of Western culture. By contrast, relatively less attention has been devoted to Version 1 according to which female and male are created equal. Demonic traits have even been attributed to the female, Lilith, who is often characterized as unsubmitive. How do these selective interpretations of biblical materials affect socialization and institutions of society?

In Version 1 of creation, the Torah challenges normative practices of the subordination of women, at the same time as legitimizing them in Version 2. The complex interaction of these apparent contradictions in the text, in the interpretive mind, and when we express them in society, provokes and challenges.

The extent to which gender is a hard-wired determinant of behavior or a social construction has been the subject of critical debate as long as the nature - nurture question. Biblical Version 1 proposes the equal dignity of female and male as an initial quality of the human condition, one that derives from the divine being in whose image Adam is created.

Methodology Matters

There are apparent contradictions between these biblical passages in their account of the creation of humanity. Traditional interpreters find in these passages opportunities to inquire more deeply about possible divine intentions and insight, integrating them into a coherent whole. For some readers, this type of material suggests incoherence of the text and opens the conversation about the plausibility of the divine source and the integrity of the text. This approach has fueled what has come to be known as "critical" scholarship, suggesting theories of multiple human authorship traditions.

Each reader interprets according to her/his assumptions. Examining our beliefs and expectations about the Torah is an ongoing process that is particularly poignant in relation to difficult passages.

Contact

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