
Hidden Voices: Women's Haftorot

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A YEAR AGO, RABBI MIRIAM SENTURIA LED A TORAH DISCUSSION AT DORSHEI DEREKH WHICH LAUNCHED AN EXPERIMENT IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN'S HAFTORAH READINGS AND BLESSINGS. Miriam suggested that the time had come to bring women's historical experiences and wisdom into the sacred part of the Torah service with a "new" Haftorah and appropriate blessings.

Dorshei Derekh [path seekers] is a large, well-established *havurah* [alternative congregation], which gathers weekly for Saturday morning services in the Germantown Jewish Centre in Mt. Airy, Philadelphia. Although our group is technically egalitarian and liturgically progressive, a place where men and women alike lead services, read Torah, and facilitate Torah discussions, the *sanctified* voices of the tradition are relentlessly—and we wondered if inevitably—patriarchal. Torah speaks with masculine authority, sometimes assuming a male audience. Week after week, we happily recite blessings over the open Torah scroll, affirming its centrality to us before we carefully read from it and comment on its meanings.

The traditional Haftorah consists of supplemental readings drawn from the Prophets to complement the weekly Torah portion. Our minyan does not ordinarily recite a weekly Haftorah, though occasionally we do, for example, for a bar or bat mitzvah. The experiment, entrusted to five of us who constituted a volunteer feminist liturgy committee, was to develop a women's Haftorah which we might include, say, once a month in our Shabbat service.

Our committee established some ground rules. The selections had to be relatively brief and composed by Jewish women. And we had to achieve

a consensus among the five of us that our choices met a standard of appropriateness for our worship service. We then proceeded to collect the best writing we could find, mostly midrashic poetry but also other kinds of short writing by women, and shared it with one another around Dr. Ellen Frankel's dining room table. Surrounded by Ellen's formidable library, we sat before a large looseleaf binder divided into the year's Torah portions, and into each section we slipped the relevant readings on which we agreed. Some selections we cross-referenced; the sections for some weeks remain empty still.

Blessings

We composed the following blessings which can be chanted to the melody of the classic Haftorah blessings:

BLESSINGS BEFORE THE READING

Blessed are You, Yah our God,
Spirit of the Universe, who
hovers over the face of the
waters and replenishes the well
of Miriam the prophet.

בְּרוּכָה אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ רוּחַ הָעוֹלָם
אֲשֶׁר מְרַחֵף עַל פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם
וּמְמַלֵּאת אֶת בְּאֵר מִרְיָם הַנְּבִיאָה.

Blessed are You, Yah, Source of
Life, who with abundant
compassion draws words of
Torah from the living waters.

בְּרוּכָה אַתָּה ה' עַיִן הַחַיִּים
אֲשֶׁר מוֹשֶׁה דְּבָרֵי תוֹרָה מִמַּיִם חַיִּים
בְּרַחֲמִים רַבִּים.

Brukhah at Yah, eloheinu ruach ha-olam, asher m'rachefet al pnei ha-mayim u-m'maleit et b'eir Miriam ha-n'viah.

Brukhah at Yah, ein ha-chayim, asher moshah divrei Torah mi-mayim chayim b'rachamim rabim.

BLESSINGS AFTER THE READING

Blessed are You, Yah our God,
Heart of the Universe, who
attends to us and hears the
voice of our hearts; have
compassion on us and make
audible the still, small voice.

בְּרוּכָה אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ לֵב הָעוֹלָם
אֲשֶׁר שָׁמָה לֵב אֱלֵינוּ
וְשׁוֹמֵעַת קוֹל לְבֵינוּ
רַחֲמֵי עֲלֵינוּ וְיִשְׁמַע קוֹל דְּמָמָה יְדָקָה.

Blessed are You, Yah, Joy of
the Universe, who awakens
our spirits that we may sing
a new song.

בְּרוּכָה אַתָּה ה' שִׂמְחַת הָעוֹלָם
אֲשֶׁר מְעוֹרְרֶת רוּחֵינוּ לְשִׁיר שִׁיר חֲדָשׁ.

Brukhah at Yah, eloheinu lev ha-olam, asher samah lev eileinu v'shoma'at kol libeinu; rachami aleinu v'yishama kol d'mamah dakah.

Brukhah at Yah, simchat ha-olam, asher m'oreret rucheinu la-shir shir chadash.

Commentary

The blessings, like the classic Haftorah blessings, fit a pattern: God is named by particular attributes and praised for particular gifts and actions, renamed, and praised again. After the reading, naming and praise are followed by petitions and praise, in a movement from grateful remembrance of past miracles to the hope for a more comprehensive redemption. We bless God in the feminine and name Her with the biblical designation *Yah*, first assigning God the attribute "Spirit of the Universe," a formula resonant from contemporary liturgy, such as the blessings and songs composed by Shefa Gold.

"Spirit," *ruach*, also means wind, and we recall with a quotation from the second verse of Genesis, the Divine Spirit "hovering" or "shimmering on the face of the waters," as God does over the firmament during the creation of the world. From these waters we imagine that God endlessly replenishes the legendary well of Miriam, the well that medieval rabbinic midrash asserts miraculously accompanied the prophet Miriam in the desert to quench the thirst of the Israelites, a complement to the miracle of divine manna raining

from heaven. Miriam, whose name contains the word *yam* or “sea,” is biblically connected to water miracles, and the well has become one of the symbols of renewal in the Jewish women’s movement, as exemplified in the title of Penina Adelman’s collection of *Rosh Hodesh* (“New Moon”) ceremonies, *Miriam’s Well*.

*From these waters we imagine that God endlessly
replenishes the legendary well of Miriam*

In the second blessing we sustain the image of water as God is renamed “the Source of Life” with the word *ein*, a source like a water source, who draws words of Torah from the living waters. The Hebrew for the verb “draw” is *moshah* which resonates with the name of Moses, *Moshe*, the giver of Torah. Moshe’s name in turn means “drawn forth,” in memory of his having been miraculously drawn forth from the Nile River with the help of an astonishing conspiracy of women that crosses boundaries of religion, class, and age and includes his mother, his sister Miriam, and the daughter of Pharaoh.

In our blessing the Source of Life draws forth “words of Torah” (in Hebrew, *divrei Torah*)—a phrase which also has sermonic connotations—from “living waters” with “abundant compassion.” In Jeremiah 2:13, God is named as the source of “living waters.” The rhyming phrase, *mayim chayim*, also reminds us that ritual purification occurs in “living” or fresh rain water and that like living waters, revelation is an ongoing, living process. The following alliterative rhyme phrase, *rachamim rabim*, which means “abundant compassion,” is liturgically familiar, and in Hebrew *rachamim* [compassion] etymologically contains the word *rechem* [womb]. In Hebrew, the womb is the origin from which compassion—a feminine attribute—flows (as by contrast, in Greek, the womb or *hyster* is the originary site of hysteria).

In the third blessing, which follows the Haftarah reading, we move north in the body of the universe, and God is named as the “heart” or *lev* of the world. In Hebrew, to “pay heed” or attend may be more literally rendered as to “put heart to” [*sim lev*]. We express gratitude to God for attending to (putting heart to) the “voice of the heart.” Here we are remembering the

heroine Hannah whose fervent prayers described in the first chapter of I Samuel came from within her heart. We ask God to have compassion upon us too (*rachami aleinu*), continuing to make audible the “still small voice,” a reference to Elijah’s vision in the wilderness that heard the divine in the *kol d’mamah dakah*, the still small voice [1 KINGS 19: 11-12].

From praising God as spirit, source, and heart, we praise God in the fourth blessing as “the Joy of the world,” and we express our gratitude for the spirit—echoing the divine spirit of the first blessing—that Yah awakens in us, a spirit that in the classic formula of the psalmist is enabled to sing a new song (*la-shir shir chadash*).

WE INAUGURATED OUR EXPERIMENT ON PARSHAT NOAH, AND WE CHANTED these blessings before and after a presentation of Marge Piercy’s poem “Ark of Consequence,” our first Haftarah. Before we returned to our seats, we said the *Shehechyanu*—the blessing of gratitude for life and renewal.



The members of the Dorshei Derekh Women’s Haftarah Group are: Ellen Frankel, Elizheva Hurvich, Lori Lefkowitz, Miriam Senturia, and Rivkah Walton. We thank Ayala Guy and Alicia Ostriker for sharing their expertise.

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