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Inventing Tradition or Talking our Way In: Poetry as Midrash
(Exodus 19:7-19; Leviticus 10:1-3)

Early in my senior year of college, my secular Irish Catholic philosophy professor suggested that I become a rabbi. I laughed. Although two women had already been ordained as rabbis, neither of us knew that.

“Could I actually do this?” I wondered. The possibility played in my mind, often returning, unbidden. I understood that changing ancient beliefs, innovating tradition was a perilous path. As I applied and was accepted to rabbinic school, I was haunted by a recurring dream. Scowling men with white hair and white beards would point at me scornfully. Not only in my dreams, but also in my texts I found cautionary signals.

The very first sermon I preached in the sanctuary of my seminary concerned the troubling story of the mysterious deaths of Aaron’s sons, a flashing neon sign, if there ever was one...

“Now Aaron’s sons, Nadav and Avihu, each took his firepan, put fire in it and laid incense on it and they offered before the Eternal strange fire, which God had not enjoined upon them. And fire came forth from the Eternal and consumed them, thus they died before the Eternal.” The Torah, not known for descriptions of psychology or emotions, speaks only two words. “*Vayidom Aharon.*” “And Aaron was silent.”

But the rabbis of the Midrash were not. They try valiantly to understand what sin could warrant such a swift and irreversible judgment. Balancing between tradition and change, they offer a variety of justifications. Nadav and Avihu were upstarts—undermining the power of their uncle Moses and their father Aaron. Or perhaps they did the right thing, but they didn’t ask permission first. Or, noticing that there is a prohibition against drinking a few verses later, they conjecture that the young men came to the altar drunk. My favorite Midrashic speculation is that it was not their presence at this altar, but rather their absence at that other altar that accounts for their fate—they were of marriageable age, but thought they were too good for any of the women in the community.

What I noticed in studying this difficult story was not the timing of their sacrifice or who they did or didn't ask or their state of mind or the their state of matrimony; it was what they placed upon the altar—*esh zara*—strange fire. As a young woman wanting to embrace tradition, to teach and, by my very presence, to bridge the past and the future, how might I understand *esh zara*?

Some of the words I preached in that first sermon guide me still, nearly four decades later: “If we try to offer our own fire without regard to the problems and needs of our society, if we try to offer our own fire while neglecting our history and our heritage, if we try to offer our own fire with only part of our being, then we too are offering *esh zara*, strange fire. For our fire to be accepted, for our spark to kindle sister sparks in others, we need to make our offerings from the whole of our being.”

Even in those early years when women didn't know what to wear on the pulpit or when or whether to use our authority, I recognized that I couldn't teach, live and embody the Judaism those men in my dreams represented. That for me would have been strange fire. Rather than strange fire, I wanted to kindle native fire. My native fire was not only Judaism, but also feminism, not only personal spiritual practice but also social justice, not only tradition but also reform.

Fortunately, I was not alone. Inside the seminary and beyond it, the words, “religious feminism” stopped being an oxymoron. Catholic feminist theologian Mary Daly challenged orthodoxy in her path-breaking book, *Beyond God the Father*. Protestant biblical scholar Phyllis Trible re-examined traditional interpretations of the creation and fall of Adam and Eve. Rachel Adler, the wife of an orthodox rabbi who studied Talmud at their kitchen table delivered a radical critique of the formative moment in Jewish theology—the revelation at Sinai. She had been stopped in her tracks when she read Moses' directions for entering into the covenant with God, “Be ready against the third day; go not near a woman.” This exclusion, in the midst of the holiest moment the Jewish people shared with God prompted her to ask, “Were women present at Sinai?” And if that were not a difficult enough question, she asks a corollary, “Are women Jews?” Are women Jews? ¹

When Rachel Adler's friend, Merle Feld, read her article with a group of Jewish feminist scholars, academics and rabbis, who were persuaded by Adler's argument, Feld, a poet, could hardly control her passion. “I refuse to entertain the notion that we weren't there. I won't hear of it...Maybe we have no account of it in our voice, maybe we have to recall or reconstruct or imagine

what that moment was for us, but for me, the premise that we were present is unshakable, nonnegotiable”ⁱⁱⁱ And so she wrote a poem.

“We all stood together”

For Rachel Adler

My brother and I were at Sinai.
He kept a journal
of what he saw,
of what he heard,
of what it all meant to him.

I wish I had such a record
of what happened to me there.

It seems like every time I want to write
I can’t—
I’m always holding a baby,
one of my own,
or one for a friend,
always holding a baby,
so my hands are never free
to write things down.

And then
as time passes,
the particulars,
the hard data,
the who what when where why,
slip away from me, and all I’m left with is
the feeling.

But feelings are just sounds
the vowel barking of a mute.

My brother is so sure of what he heard—
after all he’s got a record of it—
consonant after consonant after consonant.

If we remembered it together

we could recreate holy time
sparks flying.ⁱⁱⁱ

Feld noticed something that Adler and the other scholars missed—Moses innovates. It is Moses who includes, “Go not near a woman” in his instructions to the people. God doesn’t mention it. And so, both textually and viscerally, Feld asserts, “We all stood together.” In her humorous and intimate way, Feld reminds us to revisit the text, to notice that the received record has gaps, that consonants without vowels cannot communicate meaning, that holiness and energy is ignited by inclusion, by widening memory.

What does it mean for women to remember, to imagine, to place oneself at the pivotal moment of covenanting? It is to care enough, to identify enough, to be committed enough to talk one’s way in, or, as in the case of another poet, to insist upon claiming and celebrating the place on which she already stands.

The poet Zelda was the daughter and granddaughter of the most well-known Hasidic rabbis of their time. But she chose not to be known by their recognizable last name, only by her first. As an ultra-observant woman descended from spiritual royalty, her patrimony included familiarity with classical rabbinic texts.^{iv} But the form she chose in which to express herself was not traditional, but poetic.

I shall not float
unreined in space –
lest a cloud swallow
the thin band in my heart
separating good from evil.
I have no existence
without the lightning and thunder
that I heard at Sinai.^v

Born in Russia and raised in Palestine before Israel became a state, Zelda could not have entertained Adler’s question; unlike Feld, she did not need to refute doubt; she simply embodied Sinai.

I have no existence
without the lightning and thunder
that I heard at Sinai.

For Zelda, it was an article of faith that that not only was she present at the covenant, but that the experience, the tradition, the community, the texts, the history shaped her, tethered her, comprised her very being. Sinai gave her ethics, clarity, guidance with which to approach a complex world.

The French theorist Monique Wittig once wrote,

“There was a time when you were not a slave, remember that... You say you have lost all recollection of it, remember . . . You say there are no words to describe this time, you say it does not exist. But remember. Make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent.” (Monique Wittig *Les Guérillères*)

Poet Zelda remembers. Poet Merle Feld invents. Both memory and invention are in the DNA of text study. The tradition of Midrash, from the root letters *dalet, resh shin*, “to make an inquiry” builds a bridge from the biblical text to the contemporary experience. Not surprisingly, for women, poetry has formed the struts and suspension of that bridge.

In 1993, the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods met in San Francisco. The keynote speaker, Cantor Sarah Sager challenged the assembled women to re-claim Torah by gathering together the scholarship and insights of women around the world. The women in the room and beyond rose to that challenge. They raised funds. They solicited essays. They produced commentary to create *The Torah: A Woman’s Commentary*. In the book, each biblical portion is surrounded by general and specific commentary, a post-biblical interpretation, a contemporary reflection and an assortment of voices, often poetry, reflecting on the text.

The poets may not have lived in biblical times, but they live inside biblical stories. The sentiments these women bring to life are not found in traditional Midrashim, but by adding their voices, struggling with the text, and by extension, with the tradition, they have talked their way in, they have built a bridge not in space but in time. They have created a conversation between antiquity and modernity. They bring new insight to our texts.

“Now Aaron’s sons, Nadav and Avihu, each took his firepan, put fire in it and laid incense on it and they offered before the Eternal strange fire, which God had not enjoined upon them. And fire came forth from the Eternal and consumed them, thus they died before the Eternal.”

Rahel is called the “founding mother” of modern Hebrew poetry. From the biblical prophet Devorah until the 1920s there are virtually no Hebrew poems by women. Rahel writes sensitively of the indelible bond between the living and the dead. She sees in the deaths of the two young men at the altar of God, a glimpse of eternity. Perhaps she is prescient in this. She herself died of tuberculosis at age 41 in Jerusalem.^{vi}

My Dead

(Rahel) trans. Robert Friend

Leviticus 10:1-3

“Only the dead don’t die”

Only they are left me, they are faithful still
whom death’s sharpest knife can no longer kill.

At the turn of the highway,
at the close of day they silently surround me, they quietly go my way.

A true pact is ours, a tie time cannot dis sever.
Only what I have lost is what I possess forever.^{vii}

Absorbing the loss of those who are young, Rahel finds solace, or perhaps offers to her own loved ones solace in the eternity of memory.

Robin Fox, in her poem, *For the Last Time*, sees in the Nadav and Abihu story a reminder of the preciousness of each moment, the shock of sudden loss, the gratitude for each fragile expression of love.

For the Last Time

Leviticus 10:1-3

How do you know when it’s the last time?
The last time to ask,
“how are you?
How as your day?”
The last time to say
“I love you.
Good night...sweet dreams.”

You don't.
And so you must reach out
with love and compassion
at every opportunity
to show those who love you
that you care
you love
and need to be needed...
in a world where you suddenly find yourself
alone once again
in an aching painful way
because someone you love
has left you behind to seek your own paths
and truths
in an uncertain place.

The only thing certain
is that you're not truly alone
because of those who do love you
and for that be thankful
and grateful
and feel blessed
that you were able to say
"Good night...I love you"
one last time.^{viii}

Our religious traditions have been enriched by the questions women bring, the experiences women relate, the insights women have gleaned and lovingly transmit. *Vayidom Aaron*. "And Aaron was silent." Aaron may have been silent, but, fortunately for us, who seek to build a bridge between our received traditions and our contemporary world, fortunately for us, women are silent no longer. Women have begun to remember. Women have begun to invent tradition. Women have begun to talk our way in.

Adonia sefatai tiftach u'phi yagid tehillatecha. Eternal God, open up my lips
that my mouth may declare your glory.

ⁱ Rachel Adler, "I've had nothing yet, so I can't take more, *Moment* 8 (September 1983).

ⁱⁱ Merle Feld, *A spiritual life: exploring the heart and jewish tradition*, p. 243-244

iii Feld, p. 245

iv <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/zelda>

v <http://textandcity.blogspot.com/2014/01/standing-again-three-female-poets-meet.html>

vi <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/rahel-bluwstein>

vii The Torah: A Woman's Commentary, p. 634

viii The Torah: A Woman's Commentary, p. 635