

WBW panel on feminist commentaries, 11/25/2013

“GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN”—OR, “AND YOU SHALL TELL YOUR DAUGHTER” [AS WELL]

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Draft

Haifa, Israel is my hometown and I've spent a large part of my life there. It's a mixed town, Jews and Arabs (mostly Christians) coexist in it, peacefully if not always lovingly. The local University has an Arab constituency of over 20%.

At the end of 1973, after the Yom Kippur War, Women's Liberation (for this is how it was called; "Women's Rights" came later) came to Israel, Haifa first, with several new Immigrants, Jewish-American women of academic training who came to teach at Haifa University. They started by consciousness raising and community activities. Courses and lectures and meetings were followed by the founding and financing of the first Israeli shelter for battered women, Arab and Jewish; the first hotline for rape and sexual harassment victims; an eventually successful fight for legal definitions of gender and sexual violence and regulations about the transgression of the new laws; and political demonstrations against the continued Israeli presence in the occupied Palestinian territories, among other activities. Despite the rancor and initial resistance of society at large, including women, the activist nucleus grew into a movement. In 1983, ten years later and after the Second Lebanon War (1982; I mention wars as a roadmap because women and particularly feminists become more socially active at times of war and strife), the first chapter of the first feminist organization in Israel was officially inaugurated in Haifa. It was named *Ishah l'Ishah*, "Woman for/to Woman", and from here, together with its varied and ever-growing activities, in education and in community matters, the message and organization spread to the rest of the country. This group of, initially, about

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ten new immigrants with funny accents and broken Hebrew changed, nay, revolutionized the social reality of modern Israel, and from a provincial town and with meager means. *Ishah l'Ishah* has supplied a home from home and practical help to all women who asked for it, of any nationality or class or age or origin, and still does. It has meanwhile acquired some establishment support and funds, but is still mostly voluntary. And, this October, we celebrated its thirtieth anniversary and its great achievements.

During the celebrations a film was shown in the local Cinematheque. The film was made by Lilly Rivlin, a Jewish American filmmaker born in Israel. Here is its description, copied from the IMDB site:

In 1975 Esther Broner and Naomi Nimrod wrote the first Women's Haggadah, leading the way for modern Jewish feminism. For the next 36 years, Esther Broner led the Feminist Seder in NYC with a core group of women. This film documents the evolution of Jewish feminism through the Feminist Seder. We use archival footage and interviews with leading Jewish feminists who attended the Seder such as Letty Cottin Pogrebin, Gloria Steinem, and Canadian feminist/author Michel Landsberg. At the same time it tells the story of Esther Broner, described by the NY Times as a writer who explored the double marginalization of being Jewish and female. She was "intensely concerned with Jewish spirituality, and with carving out a place for women in a faith tradition that had long seemed not to want them." (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3038424/>)

The "Seder" is the traditional, Jewish, family ritual celebrating of the exodus from Egypt. It is celebrated every year at the beginning of Passover, on the eve of the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the month Nissan, once in Israel, once more the following night in the so called Diaspora. It consists of reading a text, the *Haggadah*, which is based on biblical passages mainly from Exodus and Deuteronomy and on postbiblical midrashic texts, in which a patriarch tells his son[s] how God effected liberation for the Hebrews, and this should be remembered for all generations. The ritual and text are near identical for all Jewish communities, at least from the 10<sup>th</sup> century CE. Traditionally, men tell men [and incidentally the women present] what happened and what should be

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remembered; women listen and prepare the food accompanying the ritual.

Women's absence from the ritual text, notwithstanding their role as facilitators of the appropriate food, is indeed glaring. Let me add that even "secular" Jewish households celebrate Passover traditionally by reading the *Haggadah* and re-enacting the ritual, certainly as a marker of tribal identity if not of faith or ideology.

Against these well known facts: having seen the film, I can vouch that its description as cited is not accurate. The feminist, all-women Seder that was conceived in Haifa has indeed been celebrated widely in NYC and in other American cities, as well as in Israel. Annually. It still is. But the film itself uses the Seder as a backdrop for celebrating Esther Broner's life (she died in 2011) and her vivid personality.

What did shine through, and was discussed after the film was shown, were nevertheless certain aspects that seem to me important. The discussion panel consisted of Naomi Nimrod, one of the two authors of the *Women's Haggadah*, a friend of mine for many years and a friend of Esther Broner; Lilly Rivlin, the film's director, an admirer and friend of Broner; and Marsha Friedman, a member of the original Haifa group and then a member of the Knesset, the Israeli parliament, for many years now back in the US. The audience, many who witnessed the birth of the movement in real time, others babies at the time or not yet born, joined the discussion. So here are the main points, as well as my impressions of the film.

- The elation the women felt while participating in the all-female ritual shines through the film. The joy seems to go beyond naïve appropriation of a basically male text.

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- Here is how Rivlin describes it, referring to Esther Broner's vision:

In essence, Broner asked this question of Jewish women: "Do you want to be inside the tent or outside the tent?" She spoke eloquently of a singular, pointed choice for us to be either secular and separatist (outside of the patriarchal tent) or construct a new tent in which women devise their own version of tradition rituals.

([http://www.jewishfilm.org/fiscal\\_sponsorship\\_weave.htm](http://www.jewishfilm.org/fiscal_sponsorship_weave.htm))

In other words, there is joy in occupying the Master's house, even if for a short while, and in using his tools, to refer to Audre Lorde's famous dictum.

- The *Women's Haggadah* text achieved certain recognition beyond being used for women's ritual celebration: for instance, it was written about in Ms. Magazine in 1977 and published by Harper San Francisco in 1994, and is still available from Amazon and other venues.
- The religious/non religious divide among the participating women was less important than the question of identity and appropriation or manufacturing of communal gender identity/memory and beyond it. The participants are consistently called "Seder sisters".
- The *Haggadah* is a story of remembered liberation. Putting aside for the moment the weighty question, Liberation for whom and at whose expense?, the participants/discussants emphasized that substituting "daughter" and "daughters" for "son" and "sons"--for instance in the call for the patriarch to "tell/explain" the matter to his "son" (*we-higgadeta le-bincha*, Exod. 14.8), or in the transposition of the "four sons" to "four daughters"—constituted a serious liberation, if only for the occasion. It signified real participation in the ritual, beyond the accepted norms. Let us remember that the biblical passage quoted and taken over in the traditional *Haggadah* is certainly exclusive of "daughters". Of the major translations, only the *NRSV* translates here inclusively, "child"; so also is

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the translation in *The Women's Torah Commentary* (ed. Eskenazi and Weiss 2008: 370); however, let's face it, the wish to be inclusive in translation comes at the expense of linguistic accuracy.

- Naomi Nimrod, the co-author, originally of a religious home and who rebelled against tradition in her teens, was astounded by the wealth of early Jewish, postbiblical materials that she and Broner discovered while writing the *Women's Haggadah*. She emphasized that the need to check the sources, and to interpret and reinterpret them, enabled her to deal with her identity and heritage in a way that was impossible beforehand, ever since her rebellion days.
- Finally: it was established that, for its participating "sisters", the women's Seder never supplanted the traditional Jewish family Seder. It was always, notwithstanding geographical locations, celebrated at the beginning of Nissan. On the actual date, the 14<sup>th</sup> of the month Nissan, the woman participants celebrated traditionally with their families, vertical and horizontal, husbands and children and parents and guests and adjuncts, with the traditional *Haggadah* text. However, as they reported, once they got there, they felt empowered and better equipped to participate from a position of parity rather than of only listening and performing the usual domestic chores incumbent on women in general, and for Passover in particular.

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At this point you may feel uncomfortable. This is a session on women's commentaries on biblical books. What has the Haifa-originated *Women's Haggadah* but mostly Jewish-American performances of it to do with the present

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topic, beyond my own back-of-the-mind Susan's gentle reminder that my panel submission is due? In my opinion, quite a lot.

Let me now retrace, point by point, to try and express the analogy.

- The commentary genre has always been a privileged genre in biblical studies. Furthermore, commentary series, such as ICC, OTL, AB, Eerdmans, Word and others enjoy automatic prestige, and the number of women who participate in those is relatively small by comparison to their growing number in the Guild. This is no small matter. Expecting woman scholars to deal especially or only with "female" matters seems unwarranted at this time. Sure: there are women's volumes in such series, such as Exum's volume on the SoS, and more. However, the point is that at this time this does not reflect the situation on the ground. Further, size matters. In that sense, the sheer size of the WBC, and in a lesser measure that of the new European commentary series (with Maier and Fischer et al. as editors, in several languages), is important. This also represents a considerable investment by publishers and the possibility of reaching a wider audience than those already "converted".
- The *Women's Haggadah* was influential, more so after it was published. The publication facilitated further interpretation in accordance with the contexts of the participating "sisters", not limited to conventional women's interests. As attested by Nimrod's words, the research as well as publication and performance opened new educational venues. This is equally relevant for women's commentary writing.
- The point is not to occupy "the Master's house". The point, for me at least, is to get a full license to participate fully in the interpretive dialogue about

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biblical texts. Woman scholars may perhaps bring additional questions to the scholarly agenda. To assume that their questions are designed only to topple a certain male hegemony is not convincing.

- Publication, once again, is important. And here I'd like to be quite direct. Collecting articles under various headings, like I've done with the *Feminist Companion* to the HB Series, or A.J. Levine et al. for the *Feminist Companion* to the NT series, is good but not enough. Look the *Women's Bible Commentary* etc.: constraints of space and acceptance limit them in a regretful manner.
- Talking about identity: women's reading of biblical texts can be very painful. In certain cases it can be otherwise; pointing out biblical shortcomings, viewed from afar, may help. But is it true that a commentary has to be "prescriptive", in any sense? Or can it aim at presenting an array of possibilities, certainly limited in scope but broader than older male-gendered commentaries, aiming at a limited diversity rather than mono-authority? This is something we have to think about. This is what can make feminist commentaries worthwhile.
- Knowledge is power. Since Foucault at the very least, this cannot be in dispute. Writing commentaries for biblical texts by women for women and for men, of confessional as well as non-confessional convictions, will sabotage (hopefully) the established hierarchy.
- The *Women's Haggadah* and its usage show how an interpretation of a ritual text (which the bible certainly is, in this or the other tradition) can make a difference for women's lives: not just for scholarship, which is great—but for life.

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What excited me about *The Women's Haggadah* was that it was not offered as an alternative to supplant and substitute for the dominant discourse. At first, though, I did ask myself: is it an addition to calm raw nerves, a decoration to make upholding the old hierarchy palatable? What's this insistence on nevertheless performing the traditional patriarchal Seder on the date prescribed? But on second and third thoughts, I understood that becoming the Master is not what this is about. This is about an attempt to integrate more fully, to introduce another viewpoint, to become.

In the same manner, I would love women's commentaries on biblical books to retain this non-authoritative, pluralistic viewpoint. And yes, once again, the weight of a dedicated series, to distinguish from collections of standalone volumes in series, or standalone volumes, will be much greater.

What remains to be lamented is the fact that even now, anno 2013, for many reasons, a series of such commentaries—be it European or American—retains coy names with “women” rather than “feminist” in their titles. A commercial decision no doubt, in the widest sense of the term. But a great pity.

What it boils down to, and is of the utmost importance for me and I think for many of us: “And you shall tell your son” should absolutely be extended to “And you shall tell your daughter”. This is what's it all about.