

Article

Commemorating the Nameless Wives of the Bible: Midrashic Poems by Contemporary American-Jewish Women

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Abstract: A proper name individualizes a person, the lack of it making him or her less noticeable. This insight is apt in regard to the nameless women in the Hebrew Bible, a resolutely androcentric work. As Judaism traditionally barred women from studying, many Jewish feminists have sought access to the Jewish canon. Much of American-Jewish women's poetry can thus be viewed as belonging to the midrashic-poetry tradition, attempting to vivify the biblical women by "revisioning" the Bible. This article examines two nameless wives who, although barely noted in the biblical text, play a significant role in their husbands' stories—Mrs. Noah and Mrs. Job. Although numerous exegetes have noted them across history, few have delved into their emotions and characters. Exploration of the way in which contemporary Jewish-American poets treat these women and connect them to their own world(s) is thus of great interest to both modern and biblical scholars. Herein I focus on five poets: Elaine Rose Glickman ("Parashat Noach"), Barbara D. Holender ("Noah's Wife," and "Job's Wife"), Oriana Ivy ("Mrs. Noah," and "Job's Wife"), Shirley Kaufman ("Job's Wife"), and Sherri Waas Shunfenthal ("Noah's Wife Speaks," "The Animals are our Friends," "Time," and "Arc of Peace").

Keywords: literary midrash; American-Jewish poetry; women's poetry; biblical women characters; Noah's wife; Job's wife

1. Naama/Ĕmzârâ and Sitis—Who in the Name of the Bible Are They?

According to ancient midrashic tradition, they are, respectively, Noah's and Job's wives—women who remain nameless in the biblical text.¹ The view that a figure who does not bear a name is not a full person reaches far back into history (Feldman 1959). More recently, Adele Reinhartz (1998) has adduced four roles proper names play in the Hebrew Bible: (a) they carry meaning in and of themselves; (b) they serve as a peg on which the other traits and features of the character may be hung, unifying disparate pieces of information under one rubric; (c) they consolidate characters identifying the traits out of which they are constructed, thus functioning as a convenient way of referring to specific characters; (d) they distinguishes one character from another.

A proper name individualizes a person, the lack of it making him or her less noticeable. Customarily, unnamed biblical individuals do not play a sufficiently prominent role in either the narrative or the history of the community to warrant specific identification (Revell 1996).²

¹ Noah's wife is called Naama in Genesis Rabbah 23—an Amoraic midrash on Genesis compiled between the fourth and sixth centuries CE, which preserves two opinions regarding her identity: the sister of Tuval-Cain (Gen 4:22) or another Naama. In Jubilees, she is called Ĕmzârâ. The Testament of Job—a pseudepigraphical work from the first century BCE/first century CE—refers to Job's wife as Sitis (Hebrew: Utzit).

² The theory of character appears to be as equally conspicuous for its absence in the modern study of midrash as it is in modern literary history and criticism: see, for example, (Weststeijn 2004).

This insight is even more apt in regard to nameless women in a work so resolutely androcentric as the scriptural text. Herein, the reverse ratio of female/male figures appears to reflect un/conscious social norms: even when indispensable to the narrative framework or active within it, the women in the Hebrew Bible are most often simply “configurations of a certain extratextual ‘reality’” (Brenner 1993, pp. 11, 13).³ Reading the biblical text from a feminist point of view, Brenner associates the fact that most of the women who appear in Judges are anonymous with the position they hold/are assigned within biblical culture (cf. also Myers 1988). In some cases, this status is explicable. Manoah’s wife’s superiority, for example, prompts the narrator to highlight Manoah’s position (Amit 1993; Reinhartz 1992; Simon 1990). As Adrienne Rich (1972) argues, feminist reading (and reworking) of scripture should thus take the form of “re-visioning”: “We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us” (p. 19).

In contrast to the rabbinic sages, who viewed both scripture and their interpretation of it as divinely revealed (Kugel 1986), modern feminist midrashists take hermeneutic and exegetical authority into their own hands (Cushing Stahlberg 2016, p. 327).⁴ While the *rabbani* exegete within the “normative, rabbinic” tradition regards the Torah as a source of authority, they act as *ribbonot*—self-determining, free-thinking, autonomous women (Elon 1996).

Arguing that “Jewish tradition has been a tradition not of stasis but of continual reinterpretation of Torah in response to changing social and political needs and realities,” Ostriker (1996) contends that midrash serves as a method for resolving crises and reaffirming continuity with the traditions of the past (p. 73; cf. Holtz 1984). It thus constitutes a particularly felicitous vehicle for Jewish feminists seeking to reform rather than abandon or destroy a patriarchal system (Walton 2011). Many modern women poets consequently seek to reclaim the ancient rabbinic genre as a way of validating their reworking of biblical texts and embedding themselves within Jewish tradition (Kahn-Harris 2013).

According to Ostriker (1997a), modern women poets engage in three, frequently overlapping, hermeneutics of biblical revisionism—suspicion, desire, and indeterminacy:

With the first of these we are . . . quite familiar; sceptical critique is the feminist’s stock in trade. Its opposite, the hermeneutic of desire—the discovery in a text of what we need to discover, the citing of what we love and wish to find sacred, the bending [of] a text to our own will—is equally important for the woman writer . . . Lastly, the hermeneutic of indeterminacy depends on the recognition that, as the rabbis say, “there is always another interpretation” (pp. 165–166).

Although at first glance the three principles appear to be independent, they blend into one another in most of the poems discussed in this essay. I thus suggest that the “hermeneutics of indeterminacy”—which Ostriker (1993) herself regards as “most significant for the future”—already contain the other two, allowing other interpretations and/or ways of reading. Some are nevertheless more prominent than others (pp. 66–67).⁵

³ See also (Fiorenza 1995; Sakenfeld 1985). Some feminist commentators, however, argue that feminine sources can be identified beneath the patriarchal surface of the biblical texts: see, for example, (Pardes 1992; Brenner 1996).

⁴ For the history of modern female Jewish midrash, see (Myers 2001). For rabbinic midrashic treatments of biblical women, see (Hyman 1997; Baskin 2002; Bronner 1994; Cohn Eskenazi 1992). Myers classifies modern midrashists on the basis of whether or not they accept the Torah and midrash as divine. In this article, I shall focus exclusively on poetic midrashists, who generally view the Bible and midrashic stories as “simply good sources from which to spin out a contemporary literary genre” (p. 134).

⁵ See also (Ostriker 1997b). Although Zierler (2004) notes that “Ostriker’s terminology and analysis are very useful . . . I have elected, however, to use my own terms, in an effort to delineate some of the distinctive aspects of Hebrew women’s poetry in comparison with women’s poetry in other languages” (p. 300), the present article deals with Jewish-American rather than Hebrew poetry. I thus regard Ostriker’s hermeneutics as more appropriate than Zierler’s herein. Nevertheless, in some cases Zierler’s terms will be used as well.

In focusing on Jewish-American women's midrashic poems on Noah's and Job's wives, this article discusses figures who, playing virtually no role in the biblical text, are also primarily treated therein as "sidekicks" to their husbands by traditional exegetes. In the Hebrew Bible, Noah's wife's cameo appearance consists of accepting the idea of the coming flood (quite likely in the face of great social pressure and scorn) and following her husband into the ark. While, like Noah's wife, Job's is merely a sidekick to her spouse, she is given a minor speaking part, Job's trials being partly hers as well—her children die and she loses her property and social status along with him. The biblical text rarely attributes any emotions to her, however. These are only adduced in later midrashim, wherein she is treated as a person in her own right. What, then, do Jewish-American women poets "make of" these two wives?⁶ I will concentrate herein on five who address one or both biblical figures: Elaine Rose Glickman, Barbara D. Holender, Oriana Ivy, Shirley Kaufman, and Sherri Waas Shunfenthal—their poems all being published between 1990 and 2011.

2. Noah's Wife

Noah's wife only gets the barest mention in the biblical story. When God tells Noah to build the ark, he says: "and you shall enter the ark, with your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives." (Gen 6:18).⁷ After the flood has commenced, Noah enters the ark "Noah, with his sons, his wife, and his sons' wives, went into the ark because of the waters of the Flood . . . That same day Noah and Noah's sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, went into the ark, with Noah's wife and the three wives of his sons" (7:7, 13). When God brings the flood to an end, he orders Noah to exit, "Come out of the ark, together with your wife, your sons, and your sons' wives . . . So Noah came out, together with his sons, his wife, and his sons' wives" (8:16, 18). His wife is thus merely an appendage, on a par with the wives of his [*sic*] three sons, her position not changing from entrance to exit. Nothing singles her out, she has no emotions—neither upon hearing God's words to Noah or in reaction to his response to the divine communication.

Through the years, her figure has nonetheless preoccupied numerous exegetes and writers. Listing over 100 names that have been given to her, Francis Lee Utley (1941) observes:

When the writers of those ageless authorities, the Bible and the Koran, failed to provide either her name or the names of her daughters-in-law, they opened the way for endless theorizing on the matter. What was either the caution or negligence of the holy books did not find itself duplicated in later times. (p. 426)

Following (in) the midrashic tradition, Utley only addresses the legends regarding Noah's wife's name, not treating her story or place in the flood narrative. Many of the early exegetes take the line in the midrash preserved in Genesis Rabbah 23:3:⁸

. . . And the sister of Tubal-Cain was Na'amah. Rabbi Abba bar Kahana said: Na'amah was Noah's wife. Why was she called Na'amah? Because all of her deeds were pleasant (*ne'imim*). The Rabbis said this is a different Na'amah. Why was she called Na'amah? Because she beat on a drum to draw people to idol worship.⁹

Noting that the only woman mentioned by name in Cain's genealogy is called Na'amah, Tubal-Cain's sister, Rabbi Abba bar Kahana links her with the "new Eve" after the flood, regarding her as too important to remain nameless. In seeking a reason for her survival, he asserts that her "deeds were pleasant" (*ne'imim*)—thereby making her a suitable spouse for Noah. Some Sages, however,

⁶ While these Jewish-American poets also deal with other nameless biblical women—Lot's wife and Jephthah's daughter, for example—these act within the biblical text rather than simply being adduced in the text as female spouses. They are also the subject of numerous classical midrashim and modern midrashic poetry: see (Koplowitz-Breier 2019, 2020a, 2020b).

⁷ Biblical quotations follow the JPS 1985.

⁸ The Genesis Rabbah English translation is from Sefaria.org: https://www.sefaria.org.il/Bereishit_Rabbah.23?lang=en.

⁹ This reflects the midrashic principle of the "conservation of biblical personalities".

objected to the idea that the new humanity descended from Cain, thus contending that Noah's wife was not this Na'amah (Bar Maoz 1996).

As Cushing Stahlberg (2000) notes, over time and through diverse traditions, a considerable corpus of literature surrounding Mrs. Noah has arisen. While the earliest texts that treat her seek to identify her origin and background rather than invent a new character, textual interpretation has gradually yielded to literary imagination, more popular views of Mrs. Noah thus beginning to emerge. One of the most famous is her incarnation as a shrew in medieval English mystery plays (pp. 108–112). At the same time as revealing intimate knowledge of earlier legends, these also reflect contemporary conceptions of women (pp. 103–104).

Herein, she traces "a movement . . . from nought to aught to other to author to authority" (p. 104). Moving from absence or lacuna to a desire—or imperative—to "fill in the blanks" and give the silenced a voice, this progresses to authorial intention and finally recognition (authority)—twentieth-century works serving as a "reflection of modern views of the Bible" (Ibid, p. 113).

One of those who participates in this tradition is Barbara D. Holender (b. 1927–). Born in Buffalo, New York, she still lives there, defining herself as someone who has "given of myself to the Jewish community in my role as writer, program coordinator, and performer" (Holender 2000, p. 285). Although as a child her family belonged to a conservative synagogue, she and her family are members of Beth-Zion, a Reform temple. Many of her poems deal with Jewish themes.

"Noah's Wife" was published in *Ladies of Genesis* (1991)—a "book of midrash" she herself defines as being a direct outgrowth of her interest in Torah: "In reading Genesis, I realized how little had been said about the women, these remarkable, influential women. I felt that I knew them, that I had lived long and deep enough to put myself in their places. And I began to write the stories hidden in the white spaces" (Holender 2000, p. 289). Writing an introduction to each piece, she explains how "Noah's Wife" relates to the biblical source:

Genesis VI, ff.

Noah's wife is mentioned only in passing, and never named. We are told she entered the ark and departed with Noah. But she must have done something all that time. Perhaps she was a poet, and spoke in rhymed couplets, two by two. (Holender 1991, pp. 4–5)

She then proceeds to elaborate upon this proposal, the poem being replete with puns, word plays, and biblical allusions in line with Ostriker's principle that laughter constitutes the "most revolutionary weapon in literature's arsenal" (Ostriker 1993, p. 29).

The first two strophes address husband and wife, respectively. The first depicts Noah's wife, portraying her as associating herself with the animals:

I memorized the whole menagerie.
It kept me sane those dismal days at sea to learn
by name, by claw or paw or hoof every living
thing beneath our roof.

Noah didn't know his beasts from Adam. He'd just
count by twos until he'd fed 'em and sweetly
simplify the grand design: Wife, get those
whatchamacallits in line.

While Adam was charged with identifying each species—"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 man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that would be its name." (Gen 2:19)—it is Noah's wife who has the wit to preserve them. Representing the poet, she herein partakes of the

"project of creating a feminist Judaism [that] fits into a larger project of creating a world in which all women, and all people, have both the basic resources they need to survive, and the

opportunity to *name* and shape the structures of meaning that give substance to their lives . . . [a] re-forming [of] every aspect of tradition so that it incorporates women's experience"—a religion that includes all Jews—i.e., a Judaism of "women and men". (Plaskow 1990, p. xvii; my emphasis)

Identifying the menagerie is also a way of keeping herself sane. Here, too, language enables Mrs. Noah to redefine her nature:

While women's self-experience is an experience of selfhood, it is not women's experience that is enshrined in language or that has shaped our cultural forms. As women appear in male texts, they are not the subjects and molders of their own experiences but the objects of male purposes, designs, and desires. Women do not name reality, but are rather named as part of a reality that is male-constructed. (Ibid, p. 2)

In contrast to her sensitivity and thoughtfulness, Noah is a man of work rather than words. The third strophe joins husband and wife together, highlighting the differences between them that complicate their communication:

Since I was elegant and he was plain
there wasn't much to talk about but rain,
and whether it would ever stop for good,
and whom to choose to scout the neighborhood.
I said the lark, but he, being pragmatic,
sent forth the homing pigeon from the attic.

Reversing their sartorial roles Noah becomes "Plain Jane and no nonsense" and his wife the image of Brooks Brothers here. Reduced to discussing the weather (whether), she leans towards a lark in the park, he to the homely pigeon. The lark is also a symbol of joy and good omens and sometimes the poet. It also represents an activity performed for enjoyment or amusement (Lark n.d.). The pigeon embodies hope and peace (Ferber 2007, pp. 61–63, 107–108). Also known as a homing bird (Blechman 2006, p. 8), which is why it is more likely to return than the more free-spirited lark.

The final last two strophes again highlight the disparities between husband and wife:

Noah, look, we're going from ark to arc
but he was herding critters off the dock.

Then everybody settled down to breed,
and there were all those extra mouths to feed;
and once the generations were secure,
who cared that I had kept the language pure?

In her new-found status, Mrs. Noah revels in her wit/sanity. While all he could see were "critters" descending the ramp, she relishes the fact that the ark has served its purposes and from now on they will live under the the rainbow's guarantee: "When I bring clouds over the Earth, and the bow appears in the clouds, I will remember My covenant between Me and you and every living creature among all flesh . . ." (Gen 9:14–15). God's Noah continues his 'down-to-earth' practices, taking the animals off the dock and commencing breeding, thus ensuring the future of humankind. His wife, who narrates the poem (as a representative of the poet), adopts a humorous stance, in contrast. Her attempt to "keep the language pure" thus goes hand in hand with a form of whimsy ("Noah didn't know his beasts from Adam," etc.).

The poem is structured as rhymed couplets that emphasize the biblical couples that enter the ark on the one hand—"They came to Noah into the ark, two each of all flesh in which there was breath of life." (Gen 7:15)—and Noah and his wife on the other, who stand at the core of the poem as two

separate people. Perhaps it is precisely this fact—their difference, expressed in his practicality and her sensitivity—that makes them suitable to be the regenerators of humanity.

As part of her desire to “fill the space” of the place women hold in Genesis, Holender seeks to explain their absence from the story. In this poem, she thus contrasts practical Noah—a man who knows his role is to restart the world—with his sensitive but impractical poet wife. Hereby, she places Noah’s wife in her own shoes: “... I, too, was a conventional homemaker, in a sense that I did not work outside the home. I certainly worked hard learning my craft as a poet, studying, writing, and illustrating stories for my children” (Holender 2000, p. 285). While the polarity she adduces between Noah and his wife appears to reflect her own perception of gender difference, her transformation of Noah’s wife into a poet constitutes a “hermeneutics of identification.” This is “a form of biblical revision that places special emphasis on the stories of biblical women artists and poets ... with which modern women poets can personally *identify*” (Zierler 2004, p. 49; original emphasis).

Sherri Waas Shunfenthal (b. 1956) is a North Virginia poet and liturgical writer. Author of three books to date, she is part of Adat Reyim, a Progressive Conservative congregation (Shunfenthal 2003, p. 138). Her cycle of four poems (“Noah’s Wife Speaks,” “The Animals are our Friends,” “Time,” and “Arc of Peace”) forms part of her book *Sacred Voices: Women of Genesis Speak* (Shunfenthal 2000, pp. 13–20). As she observes in the introduction to this volume, her goal is to “breathe life into the souls of the Biblical women” and provide a “new understanding of their stories” (Ibid, p. 2). At the end of the book, in a chapter entitled “Explanation and Commentary about the Women of Genesis,” Shunfenthal notes that “Although the Bible says that Noah was a man righteous in his time, Mrs. Noah must also have been righteous to have been saved from the flood.” She sums up the story’s importance as a narrative of recreation in the words: “It is a new beginning” (Ibid, pp. 79–80).

In the first poem—“Noah’s Wife Speaks”—the wife recounts the building of the ark from her perspective. In the first two strophes, she paints a portrait of Noah:

Noah, my man of the soil
walks with God.
He is a quiet man
faithful, dependable.
...
Noah is different from the wild
men of town. He is loyal, constant
like the sun and moon. Noah
senses weather patterns. Our fields
flourish. We are never hungry.

In the third strophe, God’s command to build an ark interrupts their existence:

Noah listens. He hears God
tell him to build a house
that floats. Waters will come
cover the land. It is hard for me
to understand. Noah is told to build a
floating house, called an ark.

While Noah heeds the instructions “to build a house that floats,” his wife has doubts: “It is hard for me/to understand.” These grow stronger in the fourth strophes, as the ark’s details become clear:

Who has ever heard of a floating
house? Who has heard of a house
with three floors?

In the fifth strophe, the wife's skepticism appears to be echoed in the mockery of the townspeople, whose behavior justifies their reputation as wild: they point at Noah and his sons and steal wood, their laughter piercing "like arrows/ aimed at our hearts." The last strophe suggests that Noah's wife must convince herself to trust her husband, overcoming her pragmatic reservations regarding the construction of the ark:

I trust Noah. I must.
 There is nowhere for a woman to go
 alone with three sons. I stay,
 watch, work the fields
 trying to imagine a floating house.
 I must trust Noah. I must.

The final line—"I trust Noah. I must"—once again highlights the fact that such faith does not come easily.

The title of the second poem of the cycle "The Animals are our Friend" hints at the family's circumstances during the building of the ark: alienated from society, they befriend the animals. The poem commences with the statement that Noah's sons and wife are "doing work he once did" because he is "busy building." The second strophe explains their status:

We are isolated, alone
 My boys wander the forests
 befriending wounded animals.
 I bind the creatures' wounds with leaves,
 cloth and mixtures of healing salts.
 It comforts me to comfort the animals.

In their isolation, they turn to the animals for company. As Noah communes with God, both sons and wife learn to communicate with nature. In the third strophe, his wife claims:

I learn their language in the same way
 I understood my boys' shrieks and sighs
 when they were babies. The animals
 respond to me when I call.

In the seventh strophe, the boys are depicted as communing with the animals:

My sons instinctively communicate
 with the animals too. The animals
 respond with long strings of singing
 sound.

The three intervening strophes portray various animals—foxes, geese, and rabbits—interacting with the wife. Communicating with the animal world is not sufficient to allow them to understand God's command to Noah, however. Only in the last strophe, when women who "wander the forests"—connecting with nature rather than human society—join them, marrying the sons and becoming part of the household, do they begin to comprehend their role as the nucleus of the new humanity:

Together, we live happily under one roof-
 my sons, their wives, the animals,
 Noah and me. Noah's ark will be
 large enough for us with all the
 animals. We help build Noah's ark-
 singing, sweating, shaping our future.

The final strophe portrays the extended unit as a big happy family that lives together with the menagerie. Helping Noah build the ark, they turn the undertaking into a mutual task, “singing, sweating, shaping our future.” Attuning themselves to nature, they begin to grasp what God has asked Noah to do.

The third poem—entitled “Time”—further illustrates the differences between Noah and his family. As the time approaches to enter the ark, his wife and sons interact with the animals, speaking “soothing sounds” to them, coaxing and comforting them. Here, their acts are delineated in great detail (the 16-line second strophe). Noah’s only responsibility—to “keep an accounting of all who enter”—is evident from the opening lines of the third strophe. When the flood starts (strophes three and four), everyone appears to be petrified, however:

We are then sealed into safety.
 One window overhead lets us watch
 darkening clouds forming above us.
 Heaven bursts open. Raging rains
 pound the earth. Violence outside
 shakes the ark making us shiver.
 We are lifted into the air
 as if we are clouds. The ark moves
 onto the waters as floods fill the floors
 and valleys of once dry land. Our ark tilts,
 tosses. We tumble upon one another.
 Stench of fear fills the ark.

We sway on giant swells of water.
 We are like one large leaf
 staying aloft in the midst of the rising ocean.
 We move further, rising up on
 raging waves then falling swiftly
 but never going under.
 Many of the animals get sick.
 We are dizzy with fear.

The two strophes present a detailed picture of the flood, each concluding with a line summarizing the feelings of the ark’s inhabitants, animal and human: “Stench of fear fills the ark” (strophe 3) and “We are dizzy with fear” (strophe 4).

The fifth strophe again indicates the differences between Noah and his wife. The former’s rationality focuses his attention on keeping “track of days and night” (strophe 5) while his wife objects that she “cannot tell morning from evening.” This disparity is magnified by the fact that she and the remainder of the family are preoccupied with everyday tasks—cleaning, cooking, and taking care of things—from which Noah seems to be excluded. Perhaps due to the fact that the story is told by the wife, Waas Shunfenthal employs a feminine metaphor to describe the ark as a cradle, the old world gone:

We are rocked gently
 in the cradle of the ark. Waters
 swirl around us slowly now.
 We work, worry, wait.
 ...
 We are sheltered within the
 safety of our ark.

It thus serves as a womb that gives refuge to its inmates—about to be reborn (as in the biblical account of Moses' retrieval from the Nile by Pharaoh's daughter) into a new creation.¹⁰

The last poem of the cycle, "Arc of Peace," depicts the end of the flood. Here, too, we find a play on ark/arc and hints of the birth process, when the amniotic water breaks, in the "The waters spill away":

Winds blow over the earth.
The waters spill away.
On the seventeenth day
of the seventeenth month our ark
comes to rest on Mount Ararat.

While God tells Noah "to come into light," he only starts the process by removing the ark's cover. His wife and sons take care of the practical aspects—"coax[ing]/each set of animals to descend/into sunlight." As in "Time," they are thus responsible for "delivering" the animals from the ark, Noah's work being condensed into a single logistical act: "Noah keeps track of all who leave" without any investment in their wellbeing or survival.

The final three strophes depict the new beginning:

God's bow is set into the sky
forming an arc of bright
dazzling colors above us.
The animals walk through the arc
being born onto the land.

This world is ours.
Each time it rains, we see
the colorful arc of peace
between heaven and earth.
We remember.

We must protect the land.
Noah, my man of the soil
plants a vineyard.
We begin.

In the sixth strophe, "God's bow is set into the sky" as a symbol for the beginning of a new world (the animals "walk through the arc/ being born onto the land"). The birth process thus concludes when the animals exit the ark as if re-born. The final two strophes connect nature and the human beings charged with protecting it. As in the biblical story the natural phenomenon of the arc serves as a memory of the past and a symbol for a new harmony "between heaven and earth" in the seventh (Gen. 9:12–13; cf. Ber. 59a). As part of this new beginning, Noah resumes his former guise as "man of the soil," planting a vineyard. Although the epithet "man of the soil" circles back, the cycle ends with the words "We begin." Hereby, we are reminded that, while Noah returns to his origins, these represent a new reality.

This narration of the story of the flood from Noah's wife's perspective transforms the ark experience into a 'delivery.' By presenting the story from a female perspective, Waas Shunfenthal thus reads the biblical text in what Alicia Ostriker (1982) describes as "revisionist mythmaking": "the

¹⁰ The idea that Moses returns emerges as a recurring tradition in post-biblical thought: see, for example, (Lierman 2004, pp. 194–98; Jeffrey 1992, pp. 517–21).

figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine" (p. 72). This change of focus engenders a midrashic reading of the text that exemplifies Ostriker's "hermeneutics of desire," a device whereby the poet-interpreter finds in the story what she, as a woman, seeks to discover. The fact that it is a woman who has given birth who recounts the tale heightens the use of the "womb" metaphor to portray the ark and the rebirth it enables. The whole event is remembered via the punning homonym ark/arc.

Recollecting in order to start anew is a feminine trait Waas Shunfenthal frequently adduces in her poetry. The last poem of the book, "Affirmation of Our Stories," for example, contains the stanza:

We move forward even as
we reach back in time
bringing forth knowledge
of centuries past
to the present.

—
Be born anew.

A reform Rabbi, Rabbi Elaine Rose Glickman (b. 1971) has published numerous books on Judaism, Torah learning, and parenthood from various aspects and various articles and poems in anthologies, magazines, and blogs. Her poem "Parashat Noach"—part of *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*—also makes Noah's wife the narrator (Cohn Eskenazi and Weiss 2008, p. 57). In contrast to Holender and Waas Shunfenthal, however, who adduce Mrs. Noah's general point of view, Glickman addresses her emotions before the flood. This two-part poem thus makes us privy to Noah's wife's thoughts and feelings. In the first section, she learns that God has given precise instructions for the construction of the ark:

My mothers and sisters—
there would be no room for them.
God had been very specific,
my husband said, on this point
as on all the others—
how long, how tall, how deep
how many windows (one)
how many animals (lots)
how everyone else would die.

Although Noah's wife does not express her feelings, in this regard, her sense of anxiety is conveyed by the use of the anaphora "how" and the distension of the sentences—expanding from two words ("how long" etc.) to four ("how many windows (one)/how many animals [lots]"), and finally five ("how everyone else would die"). The long concluding line excludes all else, returning us to the first lines ("My mother and sisters—/there would be no room for them") and Noah's wife's devastation over the perishing of her mother and sisters.

In the second part, she rebels, insisting she will not leave without her youthful younger sister:

At nine, my youngest sister is brown-haired,
plain, eyes quick and curious,
lips filled with laughter and secrets.

This depiction underscores Noah's wife's attempt to revolt. As she speaks, however, "trying to sound fierce and certain," she understands that the forces she faces—symbolized by the power of nature ("the darkening sky and the gathering wind" and "thunder") are too strong for her to resist. Not openly expressing her emotions, the poem reveals her desperation through her submerged voice:

trying to sound fierce and certain
 against the darkening sky and gathering wind,
 but I can hear my voice betray me,
 high-pitched, cracking, muted by thunder
 not so very far away.

The rumbling evinces the pointlessness of her act. Eclipsing her voice—which serves as witness to the trauma and evidence of the survivor’s guilt—she becomes complicit in the attempt to annihilate the cosmos. Hereby, this destruction assumes the dimensions of the Holocaust, the vivid young girl finding her end as her sister’s voice in the coming flood. In contrast to the other poems on Noah’s wife discussed herein, Glickman focuses on the end of the old rather than the beginning of the new one.

Published in the *Cosmopolitan Review* in 2011, Oriana Ivy’s “Mrs. Noah” completely re-visions the biblical story (Ivy 2011). Born in Poland, Ivy immigrated to the United States when she was 17. Her poems, essays, book reviews, and translations have been published in diverse journals and magazines. A former journalist and community college instructor, she leads the online San Diego Poetry Salon and authors a poetry-and-culture blog. Although defining herself as secular, she has a love of Bible stories and a strong connection with Jewish rituals—lighting the candles, for example (Ivy 2019a), (e-mail message to author, July 20).

Narrated by Noah’s wife, this poem opens inside an ark permeated by the food stuffs and spices she has thought to bring aboard—Noah simply assuming: “We’ll just catch fish.” As it continues, it becomes clear that it is his wife who has both predicted and prepared for the flood:

After all I was the one
 who’d asked, “Sweetheart,
 shouldn’t we be prepared?”
 And kept him awake with my dream
 of salvation in a houseboat, plied
 him with reasons, sulks,
 his favorite honey cake.
 and got what I wanted:
 three stories of gopher wood—
 a large ark is easier to keep clean.¹¹

Mrs. Noah also relates to the animals they took into the “ark”—their domestic menagerie. The final strophe explains the biblical version as a legend or a myth: “Legends grow. Legends grow into myths./Noah said he’d heard the voice of God./Perhaps.” The true story is thus her own: “But we know whose voice/nagged him and cheered him” through the process of building the ark and the flood. Herein, Ivy transforms Noah’s nameless wife into an *heilsgeschichte* “agent of change”—acting the part of God himself by driving Noah into (constructing) the “houseboat.”

In her midrashic reading, Ivy makes use of Zierler’s “*hermeneutic of displacement*, offering readings of the text that displace male figures . . . from their position of centrality, often consigning the forefathers to the wings while shifting the foremothers to center stage” (Zierler 2004, p. 49; original emphasis). Rather than merely displacing Noah as the biblical narrative’s protagonist, however, she substitutes the nagging wife’s voice, telling the “true story,” for God’s. Employing a humorous tone, she recalls Ostriker’s observation that laughter constitutes the “most revolutionary weapon in literature’s arsenal” (2003, p. 29). This revisioning thus turns the story “upside down,” Noah’s spouse being transformed from an anonymous voiceless woman into the redeemer of the world. His-story hereby becomes her-story, replacing the canonical version of Scripture.

¹¹ I have combined the *Cosmopolitan Review*’s version of the poem with the strophes and line division of a later version of the poem sent to me by the author (Ivy 2019b. e-mail communication to the author. 4 July 2019).

3. Job's Wife

Job's nameless biblical wife also plays no real role in her husband's story (van der Horst 1989). Only appearing in the prose frame story, she "prefigures or perhaps even generates the impatience of the dialogues" (Pardes 1992, p. 147). She only finds a voice in the sole verse in which she emerges from the shadows: "You still keep your integrity! Blaspheme God and die!" (Job 2:9). Rebuking her: "You talk as any shameless woman might talk! Should we accept only good from God and not accept evil?" (Job 2:10)—Job effectively deletes her from the narrative. Even at the end of the book, when God gives Job more children, we are not told whether they are born to the same wife or another (Scholtz 2013).¹²

Mrs. Job has assumed various guises over the centuries in post-biblical Jewish and Christian texts and other media—art, literature and film (Burnette-Bletsch 2015). Although rabbinic midrash identifies her with Dinah, Jacob's daughter, it elaborates no further (Gen. Rab. 57:4; Gutman 2000). She has also been "condemned by interpreters through the ages as an unthinking fool, irritating nag, heretic, temptress, unwitting tool of the devil—or even the devil himself" (Seow 2007, p. 351).

Others regard her in a more positive light. The Greek translators of the Septuagint (second–third centuries BCE), for example, insert a gloss to the effect that she is a mother who also provides for her suffering husband, whose misfortunes compel her to "lower her own status to that of a domestic worker" (Low 2013, p. 6). While calling her Sitis (after the Land of Austits/Uz), the Testament of Job (first century BCE/first century CE) laments the relentless labor her husband's condition imposes on her, her loss of 10 children, and humiliation by Satan—who cuts her hair in exchange for loaves of bread. All these facts prompt her to bewail her husband:

"Job! Job! Although many things have been said to me, I speak to you in brief: In the weakness of my heart, my bones are crushed. Rise, take the loaves, be satisfied. And then speak some word against the Lord and die. Then I too shall be freed from weariness that issues from the pain of your body" (T. Job 25:9–10). (Spittler 1983, p. 850; Gravett 2012)

This dual approach—treating her as either a negative or positive character—addresses her relationship with Job: was she a satanic tool or a supportive spouse? Only in some contemporary interpretations of her do we find her emotions adduced (Magdalene 2006).

All the three contemporary Jewish women poets who address her, focus on her feelings. Written in 1990, Oriana Ivy's poem is entitled "Job's Wife" (Ivy 2019c).¹³ Herein, the protagonist laments the death of her children. In addition to Jemima—the name of one of Job's second set of daughters (Job 42:15)—Ivy also gives the nameless offspring (three girls and seven boys) (random Jewish) names. In choosing a lament as the framework in which to present Job's wife's feelings, Ivy follows the example set by her husband in the biblical text (Job 3). A passionate expression of human grief or mourning occasioned by deep loss and feelings of sorrow, lament can be expressed in song, music, words, ejaculations, or inarticulate cries. Embodying the moment of confrontation with death and its ineffability, at its deepest lamentation is an attempt to articulate our grasp of the ineffable (Farber 163).

The poem opens with the exclamation: "Gone—gone—they are all gone, my children, my bright doves" then relating to each in turn (strophes 1–2 and the last four lines of 6). In the third strophe, Mrs. Job asks the Levite—who claims Job's suffering forms a test—"What about the mother's/grief? The Levite shrugged." Unanswered questions being characteristic of lament, its language lying on the seam between the spoken-revealed and unspoken-symbolic language (Barouch 2010), silence is the only possible answer repudiating the very possibility of providing a response (Farber 2013).

Other queries follow in the wake of this question—they, too, being unanswerable:

And the lives of my children,
crushed like insects,

¹² According to a midrash in Gen. Rab. 57:4, Job marries Dinah, Jacob's daughter: see (Legaspi 2008).

¹³ My thanks go to Oriana Ivy for sending me her unpublished poem.

before they could taste their prime?
 And the lives of the servants?
 Do they too count for nothing
 before the Lord who tests our faith
 because he's made of fire
 and has no human heart?

In contrast to her husband (Job 3), Job's wife places the blame for her children's death squarely at God's door: without a "human heart," he has stepped on them like insects. In the tradition of Rachel lamenting over the Israelites' exile—"weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted. For her children, who are gone." (Jer 31:15), she thus cannot be consoled: "I cannot be comforted/weeping for my children/ because they are not." Nor can she give solace to her husband:

I'd gladly suffer
 a disease twice as loathsome
 if only my children would live.
 Three times as loathsome,
 if even one had survived!

In the final strophe, her lament ends, with an agonized plea that resonates in modern ears with the death camps' crematoria:

I say, let no altar smoke
 defile the heavens, rising toward
 a god who mocks human love.

As a second-generation Holocaust survivor, the "altar smoke" metaphor reflects the importance attached to Job in much Jewish discussion of the Holocaust and contemporary Jewish identity (Berger 1997, p. 6). Job's wife's anger towards God thus also form part of the post-Holocaust Jewish tradition. While she still regards him as Lord (with a capital letter) in the fourth strophe, by the final stanza he has become reduced to god (lowercase) in her estimation. Lacking a human heart and made of fire (strophe 4), He deserves to be punished "measure for measure": no more sacrifices can be offered because her innocent children have already been taken. In contrast to Abraham, who while willing to place Isaac on the altar when God similarly tested his faith (see the third strophe: "his faith was being tested, as our father Abraham/ was tested on Mount Moriah"), was spared from doing so, Job is faced with a fait accompli. Under such circumstances, his wife—not part of the deal—cannot honor a God "who mocks human love." This may be human love for God or parental love for one's offspring. In Job's wife's eyes, (a) god scorns both. The poem ends by hinting that Job's wife's rebellious protest against him is due to her psychological state of mind, in which she hears the voice of her dead son.

Barbara D. Holender (1991) also treats "Job's Wife" in her *Ladies of Genesis* (p. 43). In her introduction to the poem, she observes:

Job's wife is another unnamed woman. Of her we learn only that she could not bear to watch his suffering and urged him to blaspheme God so that he would be struck dead. The patience of Job is legendary and fictitious: he complained bitterly of his trials, insisted on his innocence, demanded to be told the reason for his suffering. His wife's suffering may be imagined. (Ibid, p. 42)

In the first strophe, Job asks unceasing questions, insisting on being given answers: as a "practical man, he wants a practical answer, a palpable truth" (cf. Job's rhetorical questions in Job 3). In the second, Mrs. Job relates to Job's discovery that his children are gone:

Funny, he never asked why the children died. He was so strong—a wall
 I hurled my grief against.
 I don't care what they say,
 you never get over losing a child.
 But we shared it. Now his life's complete
 with his body and his question.

Hereby, he becomes “a wall” against which she “hurl[s] my grief.” Job's strength enabling her to mourn. The contrast between them make them partners, Job's acceptance of the children's death not preventing their shared sorrow: “I don't care what they say, you never get over losing a child.”

At the end of the strophe—which treats the physical afflictions God/Satan visit upon Job (cf. Job 2)—their bond begins to break apart: “Now his life's complete/ with his body and his question.” Focusing on his own problems, Job fails to acknowledge his wife's emotions. As in the biblical text, his friends (who appear in the third strophe [cf. Job 2]) also disregard her existence and suffering: “*It's not your fault, they tell him, you're a good man. It's not his fault . . .*” She thus cannot stop herself from mocking them: “They're fortified with answers/so they don't catch anything mysterious from him.”

In exculpating Job, are they in fact insinuating that *she* is to blame, she wonders. This thought leads to the fourth strophe, which alludes to the only biblical verses in which Job's wife explicitly appears (Job 2: 9–10). Here, she expresses her emotions to explain why she speaks to her husband as she does:

Sometimes I get so tired;
 I don't want to think about it,
 I don't want to watch it any more.
 That's when I scream at him,
Curse God, Job, curse God.

Her call to Job to surrender and forfeit his claim to righteousness issues from a state of exhaustion. This feeling of enervation is underscored by the anaphora “I don't want.” In effect, it thus represents an appeal for an end to her suffering rather than his life. Although in the introduction Holender attests that she cannot acknowledge Job's suffering, this being the reason why she wishes “he would be struck dead,” the poem itself suggests that she is at the end of her tether. In contrast to the biblical text, which focuses exclusively on Job, Holender addresses his wife's emotions, giving her a voice to express her own pain. Her emotionally drained scream reflects Ostriker's hermeneutics of desire, offering a new reading of the biblical scene.

Shirley Kaufman (1923–2016) was born in Seattle and lived in Israel between 1973 and 2011 then moving back to California. Describing herself as an American-Israeli poet, her poetry has been published primarily in the USA (Koplowitz-Breier 2019). Although she did not consider herself religious, she sought to root herself in Judaism: “What I really want is to find a spiritual home in my own heritage” (Levin 1997, p. 4).

“Job's Wife” was published in two versions. In the first (1996), which forms part of *Dreaming the Actual: Contemporary Fiction and Poetry by Israeli Women Writers*, the final line reads: “at the rancid sky” (Glazer 2000, p. 371). In *Threshold* (2003), this is replaced with “at the unrelenting sky” (p. 114). As we shall discuss, although ostensibly minor, the alteration is of some import (Kaufman 2003).

Kaufman depicts the biblical episode from Job's wife's perspective. The first line adduces the way she feels about his suffering: “She has to pity him after what happened.” The second stanza gives her side of the story, Job being so immersed in his own agony that she is brushed aside:

And if she staggers out of the dark
 to hound him when he is busy
 with his own grief, surely he'll speak
 for her too, three daughters, seven sons,
 aren't they in this together?

As bereaved parents so often blame one another, silence looms between them. Mrs. Job thus ponders the right moment to approach her husband, hoping that he will understand that all the family has been affected and must be taken into consideration. Apparently assuming that Job will speak with God, she finally makes a move in the third stanza. Feeling she has nothing more to lose, “She begs him to damn God and die.” The word “begs” exposes the depth of her grief: in “damning” God on both their behalf, she will perish alongside her husband.

The fourth stanza conveys her feelings towards Job and their situation:

He’s all that’s left, beyond what they
used to be for each other, abuse
or solace. He scratches his scabs
and tells her she’s foolish. She stares
at the rancid sky (1996)/at the unrelenting sky (2003).

“In sickness and in health,” their relationship is all that remains. Even before their troubles began, however, it had already become rocky, oscillating between “abuse or solace.”

Kaufman makes Job more opprobrious than the biblical figure, omitting his explanation regarding accepting both evil and good. His wife reacts by staring at the sky. In the 1996 version of the poem, Kaufman describes this (representing Heaven/God) as “rancid,” hinting at Job’s wife’s anger and resentment towards God (and her husband). The “rancid” sky may be a metaphor for the sky as mirroring Job’s scabs, the cause and the effect thus reflecting each other, and her anger is directed at both. In the 2003 version, it becomes “unrelenting,” adding a measure of desperation to the mix in the face of God’s hiding of his presence and the shutting up of Heaven. In the later text, all her hope appears to have vanished.

At the end of the poem, the wife appears to be angry at both Job and God. Her principal gripe is with Job, however, whom she feels should have let her take part in his trials—which are hers also. Instead, he shuts her out of his sorrows and (thus his) story. In reading the text from the wife’s perspective, Kaufman centers the story around the broken communication between the couple. While she hints that its roots may go deeper (“abuse or solace”), it is exacerbated in times of trouble. Through this “hermeneutic of desire,” she hereby re-visions the biblical text, finding in it ideas that may be connected to our own time.

4. Conclusions

Judith Plaskow (1990) identifies two approaches Jewish feminists should adopt in order to “reclaim Torah as our own” (p. 28). The first is by creating a new historiography, reconstructing Jewish memory by challenging “the traditional androcentric view of Jewish history” and thereby opening up our “understanding of [the] Jewish past” (p. 36). This involves recovering stories of exceptional women, employing archaeology or an archaeological reading of the Bible in order to re-surface the way in which biblical women lived, believed, and acted, and re-reading historical texts composed by Jewish women—such as *tkhines* (petitionary prayers). The second is midrash—a traditional strategy of “imaginative exegesis and literature amplification” which “has easily lent itself to feminist use” (p. 53). Continuing (in) the ancient tradition, this act embodies a “creative imagining based on our own experience, albeit developed in dialogue with traditional texts” (p. 56).

Applying this theory to Jewish-American poets’ treatment of two nameless biblical women—Noah’s and Job’s wives—we have seen that, rather than merely giving them names, as per the traditional midrashim, they also grant them a voice and a place in (hi/her)story, thereby answering the question asked by the clever daughter in the *Women’s Haggadah*: “Who are our ancestors?/What is our history?” (Broner and Nimrod 1994, p. 30). Revising the biblical text by adding their own insights, they flesh out the marginalized women via a feminist lens. In this way, they help create a new feminist midrashic tradition, seeking to “harmonize personal experience and tradition” by reimagining Jewish

texts from a female perspective (Umansky 1989, pp. 187–198) and recreating the anonymous biblical characters in correspondence with Rich's and Ostriker's principle of "re-visioning."

Although sharing a nameless identity, each of the two women appears in the biblical text in a different fashion. Noah's wife is barely mentioned, merely forming part of the family. While Job's wife suffers as a result of her husband's trials, the only time she speaks he harshly silences her, whereupon she disappears. Despite experiencing great difficulties and complex situations, their feelings are never adduced. The poets thus re-read the biblical texts to uncover their emotions and characters, suggesting some of the ways in which they dealt with their male partners.

In considering Noah's wife, Barbara Holender lets her narrate her own story. Presenting her as a poet, she is Noah's (*ezer*) *kenegdo* (Gen 2:18), her elegance and sensitivity to animals and language contrasting with his practicality and pragmatism. Ultimately, it is precisely this difference that makes them fit species to renew the human race.

In Sherri Waas Shunfenthal's cycle of four poems, Noah's wife again recounts her version of the flood story. Here, too, she stands apart from her husband and family. Although the family unit as a whole is alienated from human society, Noah is the only one who hears God's voice. This isolates him to an even greater degree from daily life, immersing him in more "metaphysical" acts—such as counting the days and supervising the departure from the ark. His wife and sons, in contrast, become close to nature, communicating with and taking care of the animals, fearing natural forces during the flood, etc. Herein, Noah's wife's perspective as a woman who gave birth transforms the ark experience into a birth process/delivery. The use of the "womb" metaphor to portray the ark that leads to settlement in the New World is enhanced by the narrator's feminine voice. Noah's wife's connection with animals as representing nature links her to what Judith Plaskow (1990) describes as a form of feminist Jewish spirituality in which the "ability to affirm our bodies and their home in the natural world is an important aim" (p. 154). In contrast to the "spiritual" Noah whose connection is with God, his wife partakes of the natural realm, thus forming part of new feminist Jewish theology.

Noah's wife also speaks in Rabbi Elaine Rose Glickman's poem. Here, however, she describes her emotions prior to the flood—the devastation and despair she feels on realizing she cannot save her mother or sisters. In contrast with the other poems relating to Noah's wife, Glickman's thus focuses on the end of the old world rather than the beginning of the new.

Oriana Ivy's "Mrs. Noah" turns the biblical text on its head. Rather than God commanding Noah to build an ark in order to save humanity, his wife nags him to do so. It is thus a woman's dream that serves as the driving force behind his actions—his nameless, voiceless wife becoming the active "agent of change."

Only making an appearance in two verses in the biblical account, Job's wife calls on Job to "bless/curse God." Commentators have thus been divided over whether she is primarily a negative character, siding with Satan, or a supportive wife. Very few refer to her own emotions. The Jewish American poets discussed above address her feelings from a feminine point of view, neglecting the theological aspects of the book of Job and concentrating on its human facets. Alicia Ostriker (1997b) suggests that, in contrast to her husband, Job's wife demands justice for suffering—not only her own but all historical injustice over the generations:

But one day it will be the woman who . . . will need a large recompense because she will be asking: Where are my sons? What about the women executed as witches and whores? What of the beaten wives? What of the massacred Sioux, the deliberately starved Ukrainians? Why do the bones of many millions Africans lie rotting below the Atlantic Ocean? Where are the souls who rose in smoke over Auschwitz? (p. 240)

In Oriana Ivy's poem, Job's wife laments her dead children. While, in contrast to Job's lament, she blames God directly, Ivy's Mrs. Job embodies Ostriker's wife, hinting not only at her own suffering but also at that caused by a "god who mocks human love." In Barbara D. Holender's contribution, Job's wife narrates the three first chapters of the book of Job. Herein, she traces the way in which Job

has been transformed from a husband upon whom his wife could lean and share her feelings into a detached ghost who abandons her in her mourning. Unable to cope with her own suffering, she calls upon him to curse God in order to put an end to both their plights. Here, as in many of Holender's poems, the relationship between husband and wife lies at the center of the poem.

The same is true of Shirley Kaufman's "Job's Wife." Although at the poem's beginning Mrs. Job appears to pity her husband, their bond is put to the test as her agony and his silence grow. When she asks him to bring their suffering—i.e., their lives—to an end by cursing God, he responds abusively. The poem concludes with her staring at the sky/God. While in the earlier version, the latter's "rancid" hue hints at Job's wife's anger towards God, in the later version it becomes "unrelenting," adding despair to her rage.

In re-visioning Noah's and Job's wives, the Jewish American women poets discussed above recreate the biblical figures, fleshing out their faintly outlined characters and giving voice to their feelings. From being merely "the wife of," they assume personalities of their own. In most of the poems (the exception being Oriana Ivy's "Mrs. Noah," which revises the whole story, making it the wife's), the poets make us privy to the wives' private emotions and thoughts, their husbands' trials becoming theirs as well. Hereby, the poets make a "place/Torah of their own" for themselves within a long line of male exegetes.

The diverse ways in which these poets re-write the biblical wives embody Ostriker's three types of hermeneutics. The frequent subsuming of these under the hermeneutics of indeterminacy exemplifies the contemporary wave of Jewish-American women poets and scholars who seek to find their own niche on the "Jewish bookshelf." By commemorating the nameless biblical heroines, letting them tell their own stories, or opening the door onto their private emotions, the poets grant them a status and place of their own.

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