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The Red Tent a Case Study for Feminist Midrash

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THE RED TENT

A CASE STUDY FOR MODERN FEMINIST *MIDRASH*

by

KAREN J. FLAGG

Under the Direction of Dr. Kathryn McClymond

ABSTRACT

This thesis puts forth the argument that two contrasting models of modern feminist *midrash* evolved in the late nineteenth century. Both models successfully bridge Jewish tradition and modern experience. *The Red Tent* serves as a primary text and a case study in this discussion of modern feminist *midrash*.

INDEX WORDS: Feminist *midrash*, Modern *midrash*, Jewish feminism, *The Red Tent*, Anita Diamant

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KAREN J. FLAGG

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2009

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May 2009

IN MEMORY

of the relatives I have lost since I began taking classes at GSU

Richard Philip Flagg, uncle
December 20, 1944 – February 8, 2006

Frances Patricia Murphy, grandmother
November 16, 1917 – March 2, 2006

William Robinson Flagg, grandfather
May 19, 1911 – October 31, 2007

and special teachers

Elizabeth Peare, Latin teacher
died September 2003

Mrs. Roy H. Burgess, piano teacher
March 10, 1897 – February 22, 2004

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my clients for being flexible. Thanks to Tammy Cohen for my job at Infomart and enabling me to have a flexible work schedule. Thank you to Dr. Kathryn McClymond for her patience, suggestions and helpful criticism through many drafts. Thank you to Dr. Timothy Renick for encouraging me to expand a paper for his class into this thesis and other constructive feedback. Thank you to Dr. Michael Galchinsky for sharing his expertise in literature and for suggesting additional reading. Thank you to Brian Kooy for his research help and his expertise on footnotes and citations. Thank you to Tippi Hyde (GSU manuscript reviewer) for her help in formatting this document to specification, especially her persistence in solving Mac glitches. Thanks to Julie De Jong for recommending *The Red Tent* and lending me her copy many years ago. Thanks to Anita Diamant for writing *The Red Tent* and for answering my questions via email. Thanks to my father, Allan Flagg, for listening and being supportive.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Red Tent, a popular novel by Anita Diamant,¹ is an emotionally rich saga based on characters in the Torah. The novel, which retells biblical events from a female perspective and emphasizes women's experiences, is an excellent example of what Ellen M. Umansky is urging Jewish women to create in her essay, "Creating a Jewish Feminist Theology, Possibilities and Problems."² Umansky encourages Jewish women to create *midrash*, that is, to imagine alternate and supplementary versions of Jewish myths from the perspective of the women in biblical stories.

Umansky never mentions *The Red Tent* explicitly in her essay; however, *The Red Tent* fits Umansky's description of her interpretation of *midrash*. I will use *The Red Tent* as a case study to discuss what I argue are the two major models of feminist *midrash* emerging in the second half of the twentieth century and to explore issues concerning feminist *midrash*.

Feminist *midrash* is one response to a major challenge for the Jewish feminist theologian. How do Jewish women reconcile their modern experience with patriarchal elements entrenched in the Jewish tradition? Umansky asserts, "One major problem, I believe, in creating any Jewish feminist theology reflects the inherent tension between personal experience and tradition."³ Traditional practice is essential to Judaism, and feminist theology cannot ignore five thousand years of Jewish practices. Modern Jewish feminists argue that the traditional practices are patriarchal. According to Umansky, the

¹ Diamant, Anita, *The Red Tent* (New York: Picador USA, 1997).

² Umansky, Ellen M., "Creating a Jewish Feminist Theology, Possibilities and Problems" in *Weaving the Visions*, ed. Judith Plaskow and Carol Christ, 187-198 (San Francisco: Harper, 1989).

³ Umansky, 189.

modern Jewish woman may find that “if her spiritual experiences as a woman/feminist and as a Jew are not compatible with one another, she would have to decide which voice to listen to: her own voice or the voice of Jewish tradition.”⁴ Umansky’s approach “attempts to redefine the scope of a Jewish feminist theology through a reinterpretation of the word theology and a broadening of that experience that can be identified as legitimately Jewish.”⁵ According to Umansky, the Jewish feminist theologian should resolve the tension between the two voices, but must accomplish it through a process that is “legitimately Jewish.”⁶ While some feminists do choose to abandon the Torah as too patriarchal, other women continue to accept the entire Jewish tradition and texts, and they construct apologetics that reconcile apparent conflicts between the text and a feminist perspective. For Umansky, creating modern feminist *midrash* reconciles women’s modern experiences and Jewish tradition in a legitimately Jewish process.

What is at stake in this discussion is what is legitimately Jewish and who gets to decide. *The Red Tent* became a popular example of *midrash* in certain Jewish communities. Some Jewish readers see *The Red Tent* not as *midrash* from God, but as a modern parallel to *midrash* produced from a very human perspective. The interpretation exemplifies a modern understanding of authority in which the Jewish people themselves have a right to decide what text is authoritative. Portions of the Jewish community deem *The Red Tent* a sacred text, not in an infallible sense, but in the sense that it speaks to them. This journey from popular novel to sacred text is a transparent example of the creation of a modern midrashic sacred text, which differs from the traditional understanding of *midrash*.

⁴ Umansky, 189.

⁵ Umansky, 187.

⁶ Umansky, 187.

This essay includes a description of traditional *midrash* and descriptions of two major contrasting models of modern feminist *midrash*. Many feminists have written modern versions of *midrash*, but scholar Umansky describes a specific process for writing feminist *midrash*. I will use Umansky's work as a general model for modern feminist *midrash* and will outline criteria for creating *midrash* as prescribed in one of her essays. Umansky's brand of *midrash* is similar that of other contemporary feminists, but a contrasting form of feminist *midrash*, that of Rabbi Elyse Goldstein, also emerged in the late twentieth century. Goldstein edited *The Women's Torah Commentary, New Insights from Women Rabbis on the 54 Weekly Torah Portions*, which was first published in 2000. Goldstein presents different criteria for writing modern *midrash*.

Goldstein shares Umansky's view that Jewish women creating *midrash* bridges the gap between experience and tradition. She writes, "It is precisely this process [writing *midrash*] that now promises to be a vehicle for the incorporation of women's wisdom into Judaism."⁷ Yet Goldstein also notes that "perhaps the most significant tension" that the essays in her compilation represent is "the paradox of being agents of change who still maintain tradition."⁸ Goldstein's compilation of *midrash* breaks radically from the personal feminist *midrash* of Umansky and others. Goldstein has a distinctly different set of criteria for her brand of modern feminist *midrash*. This essay will include the criteria for feminist *midrash* as suggested in her book, and discuss how Goldstein's model of modern feminist *midrash* differentiates itself from Umansky's model.

⁷ Umansky, 22.

⁸ Goldstein, Rabbi Elyse, ed. *The Woman's Torah Commentary: New Insights from Women Rabbis on the 54 Weekly Torah Portions* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2000), 33.

So, Umansky and Goldstein agree that the Jewish feminist must be held accountable to the five thousand years of Jewish tradition and that modern feminist *midrash* reconciles modern experience with Jewish tradition. The ultimate question is, who has the authority to decide what is and is not legitimate modern *midrash*?

2. TRADITIONAL RABBINIC *MIDRASH*

Before discussing modern *midrash* and the characterization of *The Red Tent* as *midrash*, an explanation of traditional rabbinic *midrash* and the process of creating it will provide a helpful context. The interpretation of biblical stories through elaboration, a process known as *midrash*, is a traditional form of rabbinic commentary. This section will present a brief history of rabbinic *midrash* and explain the importance of *midrash* to the Jewish tradition, including a description of the rabbinic concept of the “Oral Torah.” This section will also explain the difference between Midrash as a collection of commentaries and *midrash* as a genre. Finally, this section will explain some of the elements in the genre of traditional rabbinic *midrash*.

The “Oral Torah”

The Jewish view of Torah is essential to an understanding of rabbinic *midrash*. The “Written Torah” is the twenty-two books of the Hebrew Bible,⁹ but according to the rabbinic tradition, this written material is complemented by unwritten information, called the “Oral Torah.” The Written Torah is often elliptical or brief to the point of being difficult to understand. The Oral Torah fleshes out material that is missing, confusing or contradictory in the Written Torah. The ancient rabbis, experts in the study of Torah, used methods of exegesis to derive additional biblical content and compiled their commentaries into the Oral Torah.

⁹ The term “Torah” can mean the five books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, collectively called the Pentateuch), but “Written Torah” refers to all the books of the Hebrew Bible, also called the Tanakh. The other books of the Hebrew Bible are: Joshua, Judges, 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 2 Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Psalms, Proverbs, Job, The Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, 1 Chronicles and 2 Chronicles.

The Oral Torah was codified in three forms. The first form of the Oral Torah to be codified was the Mishnah, which was compiled around 200-220 C.E. It is a systematic, thematic commentary on the Written Torah. Judah ha-Nasi, or Judah the Prince, collected the oral traditions of other rabbis and organized the material by topic rather than by Biblical passages.¹⁰ The format usually begins with a question, followed by answers, and the answers include the majority opinion, the minority opinion and sometimes other opinions which address special circumstances.¹¹ The second form of the Oral Torah to be codified was the Talmud. There are actually two codified Talmuds. Primarily due to the diaspora, there were two separate rabbinic academies and each produced a Talmud. The Talmud is commentary on the Mishnah and so the text contains the Mishnah and rabbinic commentary on over half of the tractates in the Mishnah. The Palestinian Talmud was codified around 400 C.E. and the Babylonian Talmud was codified around 500 C.E. The third category of Oral Torah texts falls under the general category of Midrash. The Midrash was codified oral material that commented on the Bible. (Midrash with a capital “M” is the title of this collection of commentaries. The term, *midrash*, with a lower case “m” and italicized as a foreign word in this paper is a genre of biblical commentary.) Midrash was codified between the third and sixth centuries C.E. All this material—the Mishnah, the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds and the Midrash—is commentary on the Hebrew Bible, primarily the Torah, and is considered Oral Torah.

¹⁰ The Mishnah consists of six sections, or six sedarim, which are: Zera'im, which means “seeds” and deals with agriculture; Mo'ed, which means “appointed seasons” and deals with the Sabbath and festivals; Nashim, which means “women” and deals with marriage and divorce; Nezikin, which means “damages” and deals with civil, criminal, and administrative law; Kodashim, which means “holy things” and deals with Temple issues and sacrifices; and Tohorot, which means “purifications” and deals with ritual purity and impurity. Each of these has sub sections called tractates and there are sixty-three tractates in all.

¹¹ The decisions of the United States Supreme Court are recorded following this general model.

Why is it called Oral Torah? According to rabbinic tradition, YHWH gave Moses the Oral Torah on Mount Sinai along with the Written Torah. This sacred tradition of Torah commentary was passed orally from Moses through the priests to the Pharisees and then the rabbis. This rabbinic understanding of the origin of the Oral Torah and its lineage appears in a section of the Oral Torah.¹² The claim that Moses imparted the Oral Torah on Mount Sinai is significant in the development of rabbinic sacred texts because it places the Oral Torah on the same authoritative level as the Written Torah.

The rabbis traced the Oral Torah back to Moses; however, scholars argue that the concept of the Oral Torah developed as the basis for rabbinic authority after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E. Prior to 70 C.E. Temple priests had maintained the highest religious authority. The combination of the loss of the Second Temple and forced diaspora contributed to the ascendance of rabbinic concepts and the creation of a new form of Judaism, rabbinic Judaism.

Rabbinic *Midrash*

The rabbinic teachings and interpretations, including the Oral Torah, addressed the problem of how the Jewish people could live as Jews without a physical Temple.

Detailed discussion about proper Temple sacrifice still existed; however, rabbinic

¹² Mishnah Nezikin Avoth 1.1 explains the lineage, “Moses received the law [The Hebrew word for Torah is often translated as “law,” “instruction” or “teaching.” Here it refers to the Oral Torah.] from Sinai and handed it down to Joshua and Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets handed it down to the men of the Great Assembly.” This establishes that the oral teaching passed in a direct line from God to Moses to the Great Assembly, or the sages. M. Avoth 1.2 continues that thread, “Simon the Just was one of the last survivors of the Great Assembly.” Thus the lineage continues with the name of a specific man. Then in M. Avoth 1.3 the lineage continues, “Antigonus of Socho received [the tradition] from Simon the Just.” The lineage continues into M. Avoth 1.4, “Jose ben Joezer of Jeredah and Jose ben Jochanan of Jerusalem received [the tradition] from them.” Here “them” refers to the whole lineage behind them. So, the first five mishnayoth provide the direct lineage the oral tradition (the authority to interpret the Written Torah and create Oral Torah) passed through from YHWH to the rabbis.

knowledge of Temple sacrifice replaced actual priestly practice gradually, over the next two centuries (in the Age of the Tannaim). The Oral Torah explained how to celebrate holidays without the Temple. The study of Torah and daily prayers became increasingly important. Worshiping in the home and practicing rituals involving food and communal eating were emphasized. Synagogue worship became common, and the rabbis, who emerged as the authoritative scholars and interpreters of Torah, replaced the Temple priests as the primary religious leaders.¹³

As the Mishnah, the Talmuds and the Midrash were codified and accepted by the Jewish people as authoritative, a new form of Judaism, rabbinic Judaism, was established. This new form of “portable” Judaism allowed the Jewish people to remain faithful to their tradition wherever they lived and to continue their tradition without the Temple in their Holy Land. *Midrash*, or rabbinic commentary, was essential to rabbinic Judaism, and *midrash* was an integral part of this transformation in Jewish history.

The root word for *midrash* literally means "search" or "investigation." This reflects the fact that the rabbis searched for the clarification of biblical passages. The rabbis' investigations yielded creative commentary. That commentary is broadly divided into two types of *midrash*, *halakhah* and *aggadah*.

Halakhah means “law” and *halakhic* writings set limits on human activities through rules and laws; *halakhic midrash* delineates appropriate behavior for Jewish people. *Aggadah* means “story,” and *aggadic midrash* is often in the form of a narrative,

¹³ Around 1000 B.C.E. modern day Israel was Palestine and it was ruled by King David. David's son, King Solomon, built the First Temple and it was the center of religious, civil and political life. The empire was divided into the Northern and Southern Kingdoms. In 722 B.C.E. the Northern Kingdom was destroyed by the Assyrians and the Ten Tribes of Israel were dispersed. The Southern Kingdom which included Jerusalem, was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E. The Babylonians, with Nebuchadnezzar as their king, destroyed the First Temple. The destruction is alluded to such as in Second Kings 25:9. In 538 B.C.E. the Jews returned to Judah under Cyrus, a Persian, and defeated the Babylonians. They built the Second Temple. The Second Temple Period began in 538 B.C.E and ended in 70 C.E.

but it encompasses more than distinct stories. Both types of *midrash* began as oral traditions that were later recorded in written form. A retelling of Jacob's story (or Dinah's story), for example, would fall under *aggadic midrash*.

Aggadic midrash is difficult to define and is often described as all biblical commentary other than that concerned with law. Lawrence Schiffman defines *aggadah* as "That portion of Rabbinic literature and tradition which consists of stories about biblical or rabbinic figures, ethical teachings or interpretations of Scripture which teach the principles of Jewish thought and theology. The *aggadah* includes also the reasons for the commandments, but not the law (*halakhah*) itself."¹⁴ In short, *aggadic midrash* generally fills in perceived gaps in the written Torah whereas *halakhic midrash* explains rules that the Jewish people should follow. Modern feminist *midrash* is modeled on the *aggadic midrash*.

An essential concept in rabbinic *aggadic midrash* is textual provocation. It is also an important concept in feminist *midrash*. The creation of rabbinic *aggadic midrash* is inspired by a provocation, or a tension in the Written Torah. Rabbinic tradition holds that there are no mistakes or accidents in the Bible. YHWH had a reason for everything included and omitted from the Written Torah. The rabbis believed that it was their responsibility to resolve biblical tensions or provocations. The two types of provocations are outside provocations and lexical provocations. An outside provocation comes from outside the text. For example, how does one make an offering when there is no longer a temple? A modern example is how to reconcile archaeological evidence with the biblical account. Lexical provocations are in the text itself. Lexical provocations include textual

¹⁴ Lawrence H. Schiffman, *From Text to Tradition, A History of Second Temple & Rabbinic Judaism* (Hoboken: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1991), 271.

problems such as grammatical irregularities and verses which seem to contradict each other. Other lexical provocations include a word or phrase that does not seem appropriate for its context, irregular syntax, peculiar word order, an odd word, an abnormal spelling of a word or a pleonasm (the use of more words than necessary).¹⁵ All of these unusual instances in the text prompted the rabbis to study the text and construct explanations. The rabbis addressed apparent discrepancies in the text through creative interpretation, or *aggadic midrash*.¹⁶

The rabbis used *aggadic midrash* in homilies in the synagogue and they designed *aggadic midrashim* (plural of *midrash*) so that the listener would remember the story when he or she read or encountered the passage again. As James Kugel puts it, “foreverafter, one cannot think of the verse or hear it recited without also recalling the solution to its problematic irritant.”¹⁷ The rabbis sought to make a lasting impression so that the *aggadah* and the Torah would be fused in the listener’s mind.

Although the traditional rabbinic *midrashic* canon was closed around 640 C.E. and the traditional lineage of Oral Torah commentary ended, *midrash* continued as a genre to the present.¹⁸ The impulse for feminists to look at the Torah and fill in the blanks or to resolve apparent contradictions is legitimately Jewish because these methods of commentary have been an integral part of Jewish tradition for almost two thousand years. This process of textual commentary, which reconciles the biblical teachings with and adapts the Jewish religion to new circumstances is the thread of tradition to which

¹⁵ James L. Kugel, “Two introductions to Midrash” in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick, 94 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

¹⁶ See Appendix A for an example of the process of creating rabbinic *midrash*—Kugel’s step by step explanation of the creation of rabbinic *midrash* on Psalm 81.6.

¹⁷ Kugel, 95.

¹⁸ An example of authoritative *midrash* written after the canon closed is *midrash* by Rashi (1040-1105 C.E). An example of modern male-written *midrash* is that by R. Lawrence Kushner (he was Anita Diamant’s rabbi in Sudbury, Massachusetts).

modern feminists are connecting. However, as feminists, they allow women to write *midrash*, and many women are doing it from the perspective of their own personal experience. Thus many women are sensing new and different provocations than ancient male rabbis did. In summary, the creation of *midrash* has always been and continues to be an integral element of rabbinic Judaism. The creation of *midrash* did not cease when the canon closed and now women are offering their perspectives to the traditionally male-written genre.

3. ELLEN UMANSKY'S MODEL FOR *AGGADIC MIDRASH*

In her 1989 essay, “Creating a Jewish Feminist Theology, Possibilities and Problems,”¹⁹ Ellen Umansky, then an Associate Professor of Religion at Emory University, identified and addressed the problem of reconciling modern experience with Jewish tradition by offering *midrash* as a useful tool for meeting Jewish feminist needs. According to Umansky, the goal of the Jewish feminist theologian is to “harmonize personal experience and tradition”²⁰ for the modern Jewish woman. Umansky suggests that one way to do this is to radically re-imagine Jewish texts from a female perspective. This re-imagining of the texts is necessary because the existing Jewish literature was written almost exclusively for and by men. Umansky points out that the feminist theologian must acknowledge this, then she must find the feminine voice in Jewish history and express that voice. Umansky asserts,

Moreover, all of the sources of Jewish theology: the written and oral Torah, philosophical and mystical texts, and traditional liturgy were largely (if not exclusively) created by and for men. Thus, the first task of the Jewish feminist theologian is to recognize that the visions we have received are incomplete. Before the feminist theologian can reform or transmit Judaism’s traditional visions, she needs to receive these visions herself. She needs to hear her own voice and feel her own presence within the sources of Jewish tradition. Before the feminist theologian can shape the context of religious expression, she must discover what women’s religious experience has been. To do this may require reading between the lines, filling in stories, writing new ones, making guesses. Consequently, Jewish feminist theology can be described as “responsive theology.”²¹

For Umansky, *midrash* arises specifically as a personal response to a traditional Jewish text. For example, Umansky describes Judith Plaskow’s process of writing a new version

¹⁹ Umansky, 187-198.

²⁰ Umansky, 193.

²¹ Umansky, 194.

of the story of Adam, Eve and Lilith.²² Umansky explains, “Plaskow’s myth emerges out of her own response to the traditional narrative.”²³ Plaskow “remythologizes,” and in this process she retains the images in the myth that resonate with her own experience and then rejects others. In Plaskow’s version, Lilith is expelled from the garden of Eden, but later Eve and Lilith meet and become friends. Both God and Adam fear the friendship.²⁴ Consequently, Plaskow reworks the elements of the myth that she does not like and creates a new version of the myth that is more “compelling” to herself and to other women like her.

Umansky also describes her own reworking of a traditional Jewish story. She describes it as similar to Plaskow’s “remythologizing,” but her model also involves being attentive to unconscious responses to the Jewish tradition. Umansky encourages Jewish women to pay “attention to fantasies and dreams that seem to emerge out of our own experience of tradition.”²⁵ She describes her own “re-visioning” of the Genesis story of Abraham and Sarah and the near sacrifice of their son, Isaac. According to Umansky, she was once celebrating the new moon, or Rosh Hodesh, with a group of Jewish women and they were all sitting silently in a circle when, “quite suddenly I began to feel my voice become the voice of the Biblical Sarah.”²⁶ She spontaneously took on Sarah’s persona and began to tell a new version of the story from Sarah’s perspective. Umansky actually screamed as she physically felt Sarah’s pain. Umansky described the scene of Abraham and Isaac’s return and expressed Sarah’s thoughts and emotions as the men approached.

²² Lilith is said by the ancient rabbis to be Adam’s first wife, a character in traditional Jewish *midrash* who is not named in the Bible. The traditional rabbinic *midrash* on Lilith offers an explanation for the two versions of the creation story in Genesis.

²³ Umansky, 195.

²⁴ See Appendix B for Plaskow’s *midrash*, “Our Story: the Coming of Lilith” in its entirety.

²⁵ Umansky, 195.

²⁶ Umansky, 196.

She ended her story just before the men reached Sarah.²⁷ Umansky had a spontaneous reaction to the text. Her response was literally to give a female biblical figure a voice, and Umansky viewed this process as “legitimately Jewish.”

Criteria for Umansky’s Model of Feminist *Midrash*

Umansky writes about her process for creating *midrash* in her essay, “Creating a Jewish Feminist Theology, Possibilities and Problems.” I draw four characteristics of Umansky’s method of *aggadic midrash* creation from her essay. First, a modern *midrash* retells a story from a Jewish text from a female character’s perspective. Umansky wrote of her own experience, “I began to feel my voice become the voice of the Biblical Sarah.”²⁸ Second, a *midrash* originates as a response to the biblical text, especially a spontaneous response to some inconsistency or tension that the modern woman senses in the Jewish text. There is something that is troublesome to the modern woman in the text and there is an immediate reaction, a need to resolve the particular tension in the text. Umansky mentions, “Plaskow’s myth emerges out of her own response to the traditional narrative,”²⁹ and Umansky’s own spontaneous reaction to Sarah’s story was to give voice to Sarah’s emotions. Third, the process of developing *midrash* must work towards reconciling the ancient voices and the modern voices of Jewish women. As mentioned earlier, Umansky writes that the goal of the Jewish feminist theologian is to “harmonize personal experience and tradition.”³⁰ The two examples of feminist *midrash* Umansky provides—on Lilith and on Sarah—reconcile the traditional patriarchal voice with

²⁷ Umansky, 196. See Appendix C for Umansky’s entire *midrash* on Sarah.

²⁸ Umansky, 196.

²⁹ Umansky, 195.

³⁰ Umansky, 193.

modern women's experience by altering biblical storylines in such a way that undermines the dominant status of male biblical characters. Lilith and Eve become friends and Eve becomes less subservient to Adam. Sarah questions Abraham's interpretation of God's wishes and mentions that God also talked to her. Demonstrating the strength and power of female biblical characters lessens the disparity between the agency of men and women. Fourth, the new work, or new *midrash*, must be "legitimately Jewish." Umansky makes a clear distinction between Jewish feminists who aspire to remain within their tradition and those who do not. She writes,

Any feminist theology that identifies itself as Jewish acknowledges an *a priori* commitment to Jewish tradition.... What distinguishes a Jewish feminist theologian from a feminist theologian who sees herself as post-Jewish or Jewish raised, is that the latter can open herself to all forms of religious experience and self-expression, but the former, by choosing to identify herself and her visions as Jewish, attempts to place her experiences of the Divine within a specifically Jewish framework.³¹

Umansky provides an example of feminist work that she does not consider to be legitimately Jewish in Rita Gross's work. Rita Gross suggests reimagining divine images from other traditions to include the feminine. Umansky questions whether it is possible to incorporate Hindu or other non-Jewish images into the Jewish understanding of the Divine as Gross advocates.³² Umansky also refuses to accept Plaskow's attempt to incorporate early Jewish references to feminine divine images into modern Judaism. Although Umansky acknowledges that the ancient Israelites worshiped both gods and goddesses, she disagrees with incorporating the names of goddesses in modern Judaism. Umansky ultimately rejects both Gross and Plaskow's approaches because they contradict the majority of Jewish tradition. Specifically concerning Plaskow's suggestions, Umansky reasons,

³¹ Umansky, 187-188.

³² Umansky, 188-189.

Yet before one can authenticate this claim, one needs to take into account the connection between Jewish history and Jewish vision. Although theologically, one may be justified in imagining the Divine as Goddess, the fact remains that Judaism clearly prohibits such worship. Even if it is possible to overcome this prohibition, to simply ignore it reflects an ignorance of the Hebrew language and of the notion of *Klal Yisroel* ["all Israel"].³³

Umansky continues, "*Klal Yisroel* refers to the Jewish people as members of a historical community that claims continuity with its own religious past, present and future."³⁴

Umansky struggles with the question of what is legitimately Jewish and what is not.

Umansky adds that "to worship the Divine as Goddess is tantamount to idolatry."³⁵ She offers several suggestions for names for God which would be could acceptable to feminists. But she admits that her understanding of *Klal Yisroel* prohibits her from accepting any contortion of a name or meaning of a name for God. So Umansky has to question any call to return to an ancient form of the religion because it cannot include the last several thousand years of Jewish history and therefore cannot be considered "legitimately Jewish." This last criterion for modern *midrash* proves to be the most controversial.

In summary, for Umansky legitimate feminist *midrash* includes the reimagining of a biblical story from a female character's perspective, which was spawned by a response to a tension in the text, and which reconciles the experience of the modern Jewish woman with Jewish tradition as well as being a legitimately Jewish process.

³³ Umansky, 190-191.

³⁴ Umansky, 192.

³⁵ Umansky, 191.

5. A CASE STUDY – *THE RED TENT*

The Red Tent is an excellent case study of modern feminist *midrash* because of its unique transformation from being a secular novel to achieving a status akin to a sacred text. This fascinating phenomenon has placed the book into a broader conversation concerning what modern *midrash* is, who has the authority to define it, and who has the authority to create it.

Summary of *The Red Tent*

Published in 1997, *The Red Tent* by Anita Diamant is a fictional novel based on characters in Genesis 29:1-50:26 and some events in Exodus. The story follows the lives of Jacob, his wives and his children. In *The Red Tent* version, Jacob had four wives (all sisters)—Leah, Rachel, Zilpah and Bilhah. Leah bore him seven sons, Reuben, Simon, Levi, Judah, Zebulun, Naphtali and Issachar. Leah also bore him a daughter, Dinah. Rachael bore Joseph and Benjamin. Zilpah bore Gad and Asher. Bilhah bore Dan.³⁶ Jacob had twelve sons in all, but only one daughter, Dinah. Dinah narrates the story in *The Red Tent*. Diamant weaves a narrative around events recorded in Genesis and describes how events affected Dinah and the other women in her family.

The Red Tent is divided into three parts entitled ‘My Mother’s Stories,’ ‘My Story’ and ‘Egypt.’ In the first section, ‘My Mother’s Stories,’ Dinah describes details of the lives of Jacob’s four wives including their courtships and weddings. Dinah begins her tale with the arrival of Jacob at the home of his future wives. According to the Bible (but not mentioned in *The Red Tent*), Jacob left his home because he and his mother,

³⁶ See Appendices D and E to compare the biblical genealogy with the genealogical chart in *The Red Tent*.

Rebecca, had schemed for Jacob to receive his blind father Isaac's blessing instead of his older brother, Esau. Jacob received the blessing and then, at the urging of his mother, fled to live with her brother, Laban. It is here that the tale in *The Red Tent* begins. Jacob arrives at Laban's dwelling and falls in love with Rachael, Laban's daughter, at first sight. Jacob works as a servant for Laban as a bride price for Rachael. Jacob ends up taking all four of Laban's daughters as wives. Jacob works for Laban and prospers. Laban is lazy, but Jacob works hard and increases the flocks of sheep, cattle and sheep dogs. Jacob's wives spin, weave, cook, tend the garden and bear him children. The women spend time in a "red tent" when they are sick, menstruating or giving birth. The women have their own customs, goddesses and rituals. For the most part, the women thrive in their own realm. Then Jacob's god calls him back to the land of his father.

In the second part of the book, 'My Story,' Dinah tells the story of her girlhood from her own perspective. Here Diamant moves further beyond the biblical story. As the only daughter, Dinah is permitted to enter the red tent, where she hears stories from her "four mothers." Dinah reveals the lives of the women, their relationships, their emotions, their personalities and their daily lives. During her childhood, the tribe prospers. As Dinah matures she learns midwifery from her aunt, Rachael. Dinah attends a birth at a palace where she meets a prince, Shalem. They fall in love and live as husband and wife, before the king, Hamor, offers a bride price. Jacob is offended, but agrees to a bride price which includes the circumcision of all the males in Hamor's kingdom. Some of Jacob's sons insist that Dinah was raped. Dinah's brothers, Simon and Levi exact revenge; they take advantage weakened state of Hamor's men (due to the circumcisions) and kill Shalem, Hamor, and all but one of the grown males in Hamor's kingdom.

In part three of *The Red Tent*, ‘Egypt,’ Diamant invents a life for Dinah that parallels the events in the Bible. There are no details of Dinah’s life in the Bible after Levi and Simon kill the prince; however, her name appears once more and there is some evidence that Dinah was alive when the tribe traveled to Egypt.³⁷ In the novel, Dinah leaves her family and travels to Egypt with the prince’s mother, the queen, Re-nefer. They live with Re-nefer’s brother, Nakht-re. Dinah gives birth to a son whom the queen claims as her own son and names him Re-mose. He knows that Dinah is his birthmother. Dinah serves as his wet-nurse and spends time with him until he goes away to school to become a scribe. Dinah begins to practice midwifery again with her friend, Meryt, and their skills become well known. Dinah meets a master woodworker, Benia, in the market, and she eventually marries him and leads a contented life. Then Dinah attends the labor of As-naat, the wife of Zafenat Paneh-eh, who is the king’s vizier in Thebes. She bears a healthy son. Dinah discovers that the vizier is actually her brother, Joseph. Later, when Jacob is dying he calls for Joseph. Joseph decides to go to his father and brings his two sons for Jacob’s blessing. Joseph insists that Dinah and her husband go also, so Dinah anonymously observes her family and the growth of the tribe. Dinah does not see Jacob, but sees many of her brothers and their offspring. Dinah assumes no one has recognized her, but as they leave, her brother, Judah, acknowledges her and gives her the ring that Jacob had given Rachael on their wedding night. (Leah had told him to give

³⁷ Dinah is not mentioned as having a future when Jacob addresses his sons on his deathbed and foretells their futures (Genesis 49:1-27). But Dinah’s name appears in Genesis 46:15 in a list of Jacob’s descendants who went to Egypt, “Those were the sons whom Leah bore to Jacob in Paddan-aram, in addition to his daughter Dinah. Persons in all, male and female, 33.” (*Hebrew-English Tanakh*, 100). Deceased members are mentioned as dead. Dinah’s name appears, but she is not listed as dead, so Dinah may have still been alive when the tribe traveled to Egypt. Dinah seems to be counted as one of the 33 members of the tribe, if Jacob is counted and the two dead grandsons are not.

it to Dinah someday.) Dinah enjoys her last days and dies in her house with Benia, her kind husband, and Kiya, her midwife apprentice, at her side.

Diamant's Research for *The Red Tent*

Diamant's extensive research of the appropriate historical period gives her novel depth and added to its popular appeal. She enhances the book with rich depictions of the women's work, such as spinning, cooking and making beer. There are wonderful details such as Dinah's joy at the taste of cucumbers in Egypt: "Even in the heat of the sun, a cucumber kissed the tongue with the cool of the moon.... My mother would love this fruit, I thought the first time I bit into its watery heart."³⁸ Another example is the description of the meal Leah prepares for the Jacob shortly after his arrival. Leah attempts to impress him. Dinah recites her mother's menu: "Lamb flavored with coriander, marinated in sour goat milk and a pomegranate sauce for dipping. Two kinds of bread: flat barley and raised wheat. Quince compote, and figs stewed with mulberries, fresh dates. Olives, of course. And to drink, a choice of sweet wine, three different beers, and barley water."³⁹ Diamant's vivid depiction of scenes connects the modern reader with biblical times to the point that the reader feels himself or herself in the biblical setting. As one reader (Diane Higgins, the senior editor of St. Martin's) commented, "You feel the dust."⁴⁰ Diamant's details draw the reader into the story and the biblical world.

This level of detail is due to Diamant's experience as a non-fiction writer and her research for *The Red Tent*. Diamant earned a bachelor's degree in comparative literature

³⁸ Diamant, *The Red Tent*, 222.

³⁹ Diamant, *The Red Tent*, 18.

⁴⁰ Judith Rosen, "Anita Diamant's Tent Turns to Gold" *Writer* 114 no. 4 (2001): 30.

from Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri,⁴¹ and a master's degree in English from State University of New York at Binghamton.⁴² Before writing *The Red Tent*, Anita Diamant published articles that were often about her life as a contemporary Jewish woman. Diamant also wrote Jewish "how-to" books that roughly corresponded to events in her life such as her wedding, her husband's conversion to Judaism, the birth of her daughter and the death of her father.⁴³ When Diamant reached age forty she decided she "needed a new career challenge after writing nonfiction for 20-plus years, and turned to the most venerable source for story ideas: the Bible."⁴⁴ Her first work of fiction was *The Red Tent*.

Diamant wrote *The Red Tent* in three years; during that time she was a visiting scholar for a year at Brandeis University through the Women's Studies Department. Diamant also had a fellowship at Radcliffe College, which provided her with a research assistant⁴⁵ and allowed her access to the Harvard library system.⁴⁶ Diamant extensively researched the nature of daily life in Canaanite, Mesopotamian and Egyptian culture around fifteen hundred B.C.E. Diamant says that she "tried not to make historical mistakes."⁴⁷ Diamant "researched female medicine – midwifery, birth control, and

⁴¹ Diamant, Anita, "About Anita Diamant," Anita Diamant, www.anitadiamant.com/about.asp?page=about (accessed November 29, 2007).

⁴² Joan Gross, "Jacob's Daughter Hits the Bigtime in 2001" *The Jewish News Weekly of Northern California* 105, no. 13 (2001): 40.

⁴³ Diamant's non-fiction books are: *The New Jewish Wedding* (1985); *The New Jewish Baby Book* (1988); *Living a Jewish Life: Jewish Traditions, Customs and Values* (1993); *Bible Baby Names* (1996); *How to Be a Jewish Parent: A Practical Handbook for Family Life* (1997); *Saying Kaddish: How to Comfort the Dying, Bury the Dead and Mourn as a Jew* (1998); and *Pitching My Tent: On Marriage, Motherhood, Friendship, and Other Leaps of Faith* (2003) is a collection of her non-fiction essays.

⁴⁴ Diamant, Anita, "The Red Tent Frequently Asked Questions," Anita Diamant, www.anitadiamant.com/about.asp?page=about (accessed November 29, 2007).

⁴⁵ Diamant, Acknowledgements, *The Red Tent*. (Diamant mentions her research assistant, Rebecca Wand.)

⁴⁶ Diamant, Acknowledgements, *The Red Tent*.

⁴⁷ Vicki Cabot, "Speaking Volumes: Woman's Voice; 'Red Tent' Tells Other Side of Story" *Jewish News of Greater Phoenix* 52, no. 19 (2000): 34.

abortion.”⁴⁸ She especially sought details of birthing practices such as the tools used by women. The birthing “reeds and flat bricks” were historical.⁴⁹ She continues, “I wanted to know how they made cloth from wool, what the sleeping arrangements were, what their furniture and clothes looked like.”⁵⁰ Diamant even read an unpublished dissertation on the road system in ancient Canaan.⁵¹ Diamant also studied Sumerian religion and ancient goddess worship.⁵² Diamant wrote, “During the three years it took to write and research the food, clothes, midwifery, family arrangements, and funeral customs of the ancient Near East, I thought I was writing historical fiction.”⁵³ So, *The Red Tent* was thoroughly researched.

Because of Diamant’s careful and thorough research, it is difficult for the reader to distinguish historical accuracy from poetic license. For example, the “red tent” was not actually a part of common cultural practice for women in biblical times. Diamant clarifies on her web site that the term “red tent” is her own fabrication. She writes, “I did not find any evidence that women in this period of history in this place (ancient Iraq/Israel) used a menstrual tent. However, menstrual tents and huts are a common feature in pre-modern cultures around the world, from Native Americans, to Africans.

⁴⁸ Faith L. Justice, “An Interview With Anita Diamant,” *The Copperfield Review*, <http://www.copperfieldreview.com/interviews/diamant.html> (accessed November 29, 2007).

⁴⁹ Joan Gross, “Jacob’s Daughter Hits the Bigtime in 2001” *The Jewish News Weekly of Northern California* 105, no. 13 (2001): 40.

⁵⁰ Vicki Cabot, “Speaking Volumes: Woman’s Voice; ‘Red Tent’ Tells Other Side of Story” *Jewish News of Greater Phoenix* 52, no. 19 (2000): 34.

⁵¹ Cynthia Dettelbach, “Entering The Red Tent With Anita Diamant” *The Cleveland Jewish News* 74, no. 2 (1999): 4.

⁵² Terry Wright, *The Genesis of Fiction* (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), 123-125. (Wright draws parallels between the religion of the women in *The Red Tent* and the historical research of Frymer-Kensky on the Goddess and the Sumerian pantheon. Wright shows that Diamant draws heavily from Kansky’s research. For example Inanna – Innana in *The Red Tent* – is the most important goddess in ancient Sumeria.)

⁵³ Anita Diamant, *Pitching My Tent: On Marriage, Motherhood, Friendship, and Other Leaps of Faith* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 207.

The rendering of what happened inside that tent is entirely my own creation.”⁵⁴ Using historical cultural information and her own imagination, Diamant wove rich detail into her retelling of the lives of Jacob’s womenfolk, and Diamant’s embellishments in *The Red Tent* align with Umansky’s model of modern feminist *midrash*.

Elements of Umansky’s Feminist *Midrash* in *The Red Tent*

Umansky does not apply her ideas of feminist *midrash* explicitly to *The Red Tent*; nevertheless, her criteria for creating feminist *midrash* are unmistakably represented in *The Red Tent*. This section will describe how each element of Umansky’s feminist *midrash* manifests in *The Red Tent*.

Dinah is the first person narrator of *The Red Tent* and so the story unfolds from the perspective of a woman in the Bible. This fulfills Umansky’s first criterion of a modern woman (Diamant) retelling a biblical story from a female character’s perspective (Dinah). For example, Diamant’s Dinah narrates in the prologue, “There was far more to tell. Had I been asked to speak of it, I would have begun with the story of the generation that raised me, which is the only place to begin. If you want to understand any woman you must first ask about her mother and then listen carefully.”⁵⁵ Dinah also explains that women welcome daughters to help with the women’s chores, “But the other reason women wanted daughters was to keep their memories alive.”⁵⁶ As the only daughter, Dinah is barraged with stories and she says, “My mother and my mother-aunties told me endless stories about themselves. No matter what their hands were doing – holding

⁵⁴ Diamant “Frequently Asked Questions,” Anita Diamant, www.anitadiamant.com (November 29, 2007).

⁵⁵ Diamant, *The Red Tent*, 2.

⁵⁶ Diamant, *The Red Tent*, 3.

babies, cooking, spinning, weaving – they filled my ears.”⁵⁷ Dinah continues, “In the ruddy shade of the red tent, the menstrual tent, they ran their fingers through my curls, repeating the escapades of their youths, the sagas of their childbirths.”⁵⁸ And so Diamant begins Dinah’s story with the story of her “four mothers”; the first chapter of *The Red Tent* begins, “Their stories began with the day that my father appeared.”⁵⁹ Dinah’s voice is not complete without her mothers’ voices. After relating her mothers’ tales, Dinah tells her own story from her own perspective. And so, Diamant gives Dinah a voice in *The Red Tent*, which is in stark contrast to Dinah’s silence in the Bible.

In the Bible, the story of Jacob runs through about twenty-five chapters, Genesis 25:19-50:12. Jacob’s twelve sons form the twelve tribes of Israel and are prevalent in the narrative, but his daughter, Dinah is not. The Bible notes that after birthing six sons of Jacob’s, “Last, she [Leah] bore him a daughter, and named her Dinah” (Genesis 30:21).⁶⁰ Apart from her birth and one mention in a list of Jacob’s descendants in Genesis 46:15, Dinah appears in only one other chapter, Genesis 34, and Dinah does not beget a tribe of Israel as each of her brothers does. The only description of Dinah’s life appears in Genesis 34:1-31. This is Genesis 34 in its entirety:

¹Now Dinah, the daughter whom Leah had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the daughters of the land. ²Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, chief of the country, saw her, and took her and lay with her by force. ³Being strongly drawn to Dinah daughter of Jacob, and in love with the maiden, he spoke to the maiden tenderly. ⁴So Shechem said to his father Hamor, “Get me this girl as a wife.”

⁵Jacob heard that he had defiled his daughter Dinah; but since his sons were in the field with his cattle, Jacob kept silent until they came home. ⁶Then Shechem’s father Hamor came out to Jacob to speak to him. ⁷Meanwhile Jacob’s sons, having heard the news, came in from the field. The men were distressed and very angry, because he had committed an outrage in Israel by lying with Jacob’s daughter—a thing not to be done.

⁵⁷ Diamant, *The Red Tent*, 3.

⁵⁸ Diamant, *The Red Tent*, 3.

⁵⁹ Diamant, *The Red Tent*, 7.

⁶⁰ *The Jewish Study Bible Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 62.

⁸And Hamor spoke with them saying, “My son Shechem longs for your daughter. Please give her to him in marriage. ⁹Intermarry with us: give your daughters to us, and take our daughters for yourselves: ¹⁰You will dwell among us, and the land will be open before you; settle, move about, and acquire holdings in it.” ¹¹Then Shechem said to her father and brothers, “Do me this favor, and I will pay whatever you tell me. ¹²Ask me for a bride-price ever so high, as well as gifts, and I will pay what you tell me; only give me the maiden for a wife.”

¹³Jacob’s sons answered Shechem and his father Hamor—speaking with guile because he had defiled their sister Dinah— ¹⁴and said to them, “We cannot do this thing, give our sister to a man who is uncircumcised, for that is a disgrace among us. ¹⁵Only on this condition will we agree with you; that you will become like us in that every male among you is circumcised. ¹⁶Then we will give our daughters to you and take your daughters to ourselves; and we will dwell among you and become as one kindred. ¹⁷But if you will not listen to us and become circumcised, we will take our daughter and go.”

¹⁸Their words pleased Hamor and Hamor’s son Shechem. ¹⁹And the youth lost no time in doing the thing, for he wanted Jacob’s daughter. Now he was the most respected in his father’s house. ²⁰So Hamor and his son Shechem went out to the “public place” of their town and spoke to their fellow townsmen, saying, ²¹“These people are our friends; let them settle in the land and move about in it, for the land is large enough for them; we will take their daughters to ourselves as wives and give our daughters to them. ²²But only on this condition will the men agree to dwell among us and be as one kindred: that all our males become circumcised as they are circumcised. ²³Their cattle and substance and all their beasts will be ours, if we only agree to their terms, so that they will settle among us.” ²⁴All ^{b-}who went out of the gate of his town^b heeded Hamor and his son Shechem, and all males, ^{b-}all those who went out of the gate of his town, ^{b-}were circumcised.

²⁵On the third day, when they were in pain, Simon and Levi, two of Jacob’s sons, brothers of Dinah, took each his sword, came upon the city unmolested, and slew all the males. ²⁶They put Hamor and his son Shechem to the sword, took Dinah out of Shechem’s house, and went away. ²⁷The other sons of Jacob came upon the slain and plundered the town, because their sister had been defiled. ²⁸They seized their flocks and herds and asses, all that was inside the town and outside; ²⁹all their wealth, all their children, and their wives, all that was in the houses, they took as captives and booty.

³⁰Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, “You have brought trouble on me, making me odious among the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and Perizzites; my men are few in number, so that if they unite against me and attack me, I and my house will be destroyed.” ³¹But they answered, “Should our sister be treated like a whore?”⁶¹

a-a Lit. “gate.”

b-b I.e., all his fellow townsmen.

Dinah’s name appears six times in Genesis 34, and five of those six times her name is accompanied by an epithet referring to her relationship to the men in her family; Dinah is referred to as a daughter or a sister. In the account of Dinah’s life, Jacob speaks, Dinah’s brothers speak, Hamor speaks, Shechem speaks, but Dinah never speaks. Diamant says in an interview, “The drama and her total silence (Dinah does not utter a single word in

⁶¹ *Hebrew-English Tanakh, The Traditional Hebrew Text and the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999), 70-72.

the Bible) cried out for explanation, and I decided to imagine one.”⁶² Diamant’s compulsion to give the silenced Dinah a voice meets Umansky’s second criterion for feminist *midrash*: that the new story originate as a response to the biblical text, especially a spontaneous response to some inconsistency or tension that the modern woman senses in the Jewish text.

Diamant described another unsettling inconsistency she perceived in the Torah. "The Biblical story that pits the two sisters against one another never sat right with me. The traditional view of Leah as the ugly and/or spiteful sister, and of Jacob as indifferent to her, seemed odd in light of the fact that the Bible gives them nine [seven] children together... As I re-read Genesis over the years, I settled on the story of Dinah, their daughter.”⁶³ In Genesis 29:17, “Leah had weak eyes.”⁶⁴ In Diamant’s version, Leah has two different colored eyes. Diamant turns Leah’s perceived deformity into an asset, a source of strength for Leah. Dinah explains, “Leah’s vision was perfect. According to one of the more ridiculous fables embroidered around my family’s history, she ruined her eyes by crying a river of tears over the prospect of marrying my uncle Esau.... But my mother’s eyes were not weak, or sick, or rheumy. The truth is, her eyes made others weak and most people looked away rather than face them—one blue as lapis, the other green as Egyptian grass.”⁶⁵ Dinah says that the superstitious custom at that time was to drown a baby like Leah, but Leah’s mother, Adah, insisted on keeping her. Diamant’s Leah is strong and capable. Leah is the oldest daughter of Laban and she runs the

⁶² Picador USA, “About the Author,” *The Red Tent: A Novel*, <http://www.picadorusa.com/rgg/files/0312195516.htm>. (accessed November 29, 2007).

⁶³ Picador USA, “About the Author,” *The Red Tent: A Novel*, <http://www.picadorusa.com/rgg/files/0312195516.htm>. (accessed November 29, 2007).

⁶⁴ *The Jewish Study Bible Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 60.

⁶⁵ Diamant, *The Red Tent*, 11.

household. Jacob did not look away from Leah's eyes as most men did. Jacob is attracted to Rachael's beauty, but he was also attracted to Leah's physical fitness, personality and knowledge of business affairs. Therefore when Jacob thought he married a veiled Rachael, but lifted the veil to find Leah, he was not disappointed and spent seven days in the marriage tent with her and enjoyed as many different sexual positions as possible.⁶⁶ (In *The Red Tent*, Rachael asks Leah to replace her as Jacob's bride because Rachael fears sex, but in Genesis 29:22-26 it is Laban who decides to switch his daughters. In Genesis 29:26 Laban explained to Jacob, "It is not the practice in our place to marry off the younger before the older."⁶⁷) So, Diamant addresses the tension between Leah's physical ugliness implied in the Bible and the large number of children Jacob had with Leah.⁶⁸ In summary, Diamant wrote *The Red Tent* in response to at least two provocations in the Bible: she explains an apparent contradiction in Leah and Jacob's relationship as well as giving Dinah a voice.

Diamant uses Dinah's voice to communicate with modern female readers in a way that fulfills Umansky's third criterion for modern feminist *midrash*: the process of creating *midrash* must work towards reconciling the ancient voices and the modern voices of Jewish women. Dinah is clearly passing her story on to the modern generation and Diamant signifies the passing of the story to the next generation by dedicating the book to her daughter: 'FOR EMILIA, MY DAUGHTER.' The first words of *The Red Tent* are Dinah's and directly address modern women. Diamant begins the prologue with a soliloquy by Dinah:

⁶⁶ Diamant, *The Red Tent*, 33-34.

⁶⁷ *The Jewish Study Bible Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 60.

⁶⁸ A complication to this provocation is that the text of the Bible seems to indicate that God decided who became pregnant and when, rather than merely Jacob's lust for one wife over another (Genesis 29:31-34).

We have been lost to each other for so long.

My name means nothing to you. My memory is dust.

This is not your fault, or mine. The chain connecting mother to daughter was broken and the word passed to the keeping of men, who had no way of knowing. That is why I became a footnote, my story a brief footnote between the well-known history of my father, Jacob, and the celebrated chronicle of Joseph, my brother. On those rare occasions when I was remembered, it was as a victim. Near the beginning of your holy book, there is a passage that seems to say I was raped and continues with the bloody tale of how my honor was avenged.

It's a wonder that any mother ever called a daughter Dinah again. But some did. Maybe you guessed that there was more to me than the voiceless cipher in the text. Maybe you heard it in the music of my name: the first vowel high and clear, as when a mother calls to her child at dusk; the second sound soft, for whispering secrets on pillows. Dee-nah.⁶⁹

Dinah ends this prologue:

And now you come to me—women with hands and feet as soft as a queen's, with more cooking pots than you need, so safe in child-bed and so free with your tongues. You come hungry for the story that was lost. You crave words to fill the great silence that swallowed me, and my mothers, and my grandmothers before them.

I wish I had more to tell of my grandmothers. It is terrible how much has been forgotten, which is why, I suppose, remembering seems a holy thing.

I am so grateful that you have come. I will pour out everything inside me so you may leave this table satisfied and fortified. Blessings on your eyes. Blessings on your children. Blessings on the ground beneath you. My heart is a ladle of sweet water, brimming over.

Selah.⁷⁰

[Selah is an ancient Hebrew word of unknown meaning and uncertain grammatical status that appears in some books of the Bible and is therefore, when included in English translations, left untranslated. It is used to perform a punctuating function between verses.]⁷¹

Diamant, using Dinah's voice, is clearly speaking to modern women, the "women with hands and feet as soft as a queen's, with more cooking pots than you need, so safe in child-bed and so free with your tongues."⁷² Dinah's stories connect modern women to the daily lives of the ancient women. Diamant creates a direct dialogue between Dinah and modern women, which meets Umansky's requirement that modern feminist *midrash* facilitate the reconciliation of the voices of biblical women and the experience of modern women.

⁶⁹ Diamant, *The Red Tent*, 1.

⁷⁰ Diamant, *The Red Tent*, 3.

⁷¹ *Encarta World English Dictionary* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 1624.

⁷² Diamant, *The Red Tent*, 3.

The last words of the novel are also Dinah's. Diamant concludes the book:

Egypt loved the lotus because it never dies. It is the same for people who are loved. Thus can something as insignificant as a name—two syllables, one high, one sweet—summon up the innumerable smiles and tears, sighs and dreams of a human life.

If you sit on the bank of a river, you see only a small part of its surface. And yet, the water before your eyes is proof of unknowable depths. My heart brims with thanks for the kindness you have shown me by sitting on the bank of this river, by visiting the echoes of my name.

Blessings on your eyes and on your children. Blessings on the ground beneath you. Wherever you walk, I will go with you.

Selah.⁷³

Dinah is grateful for the opportunity to tell her story to modern women. She does not blame men for failing to relay her story because biblical men did not know much about the lives of women. The modern women's craving for the forgotten stories and Dinah's desire to for them to revisit her story frames the entire book as an attempt by Diamant to reconcile the experience of biblical women and modern Jewish women. The quotations above clearly address modern women, but they also include elements of a sacred Jewish text.

These elements of a sacred text align with Umansky's requirement that feminist works must be legitimately Jewish. The Jewish blessings at the beginning and end of *The Red Tent* set the tone of a religious text, and Dinah says that remembering her life seems a holy thing. The last quotation evokes the process of creating *midrash*. Dinah speaks of a river of unknowable depths, and her audience sees only a small part of it. She thanks her listeners for sitting by the river and visiting the echoes of her name. The river Dinah describes is a metaphor for *midrash*. The words of the Jewish text are on the surface of the river, but it is understood that there is more to a river than its surface. Below the surface is deeper meaning which has to be drawn out and revealed. Dinah's name is on

⁷³ Diamant, *The Red Tent*, 321.

the surface; her name is an echo in the text, but there is more to her story. Seekers can peer into the depths below by creating and sharing *midrash*.

In summary, *The Red Tent* meets Umansky's criteria for feminist *midrash*. First, *The Red Tent* is the retelling of a biblical story from a female character's perspective. Second, Diamant wrote *The Red Tent* in response to tensions she perceived in the biblical text. Third, *The Red Tent* reconciles ancient voices in the Bible with the experiences of the modern woman.⁷⁴ Fourth, Diamant did what Umansky is asking Jewish women to do—giving the women of Jewish texts a voice and re-imagine their experience, which is a legitimately Jewish process according to Umansky.

Of course, whether or not they read Umansky, many Jewish people labeled *The Red Tent* *midrash*. Book reviews, articles and study guides refer to *The Red Tent* as *midrash*. This raises broader questions. Who has the authority to decide what is *midrash*? Who has the authority to define *midrash*? Who has the authority to create *midrash*? Is *The Red Tent* really *midrash*? One aspect of the problem is how to limit the creative retelling of biblical stories. How much imagination and poetic license is allowable? For example, Diamant does deviate from the biblical account at times in the first two sections, and Diamant's depiction of Dinah's life in Egypt is utter fabrication in the third section. One reader feels that *The Red Tent* confuses people about what is actually in the Bible; Dr. Lifsa Schachter, director of the Center for Jewish education at the Cleveland College of Jewish Studies, commented, "I am troubled first and foremost about the way the author changes the Bible for her own literary purposes. She confuses

⁷⁴ Terry Wright agrees, he describes *The Red Tent* as "a highly significant work of fiction performing a similar function for its modern feminist audience as the misogynistic midrash of the ancient rabbis. That function, of course, is to make sense of the biblical text in its new context." (Wright, *The Genesis of Fiction*, 131).

the reader about what is biblical and what is not biblical.”⁷⁵ How do these deviations factor into the label of *midrash*?

Contradictions Between *The Red Tent* and the Bible

In part one of the novel, Diamant does not stray far from the plot in the Genesis account; however, Diamant does invent a significant character, Ruti. In Diamant’s novel, Ruti is Laban’s slave and bore him two sons, Kemuel and Beor.⁷⁶ Laban is incredibly cruel to Ruti. He beats her daily. Diamant describes details of Ruti’s life, but there is no Ruti in Genesis. There are also direct contradictions between the genealogy in *The Red Tent* and the family tree in Genesis. Diamant gives Leah seven sons including Naphtali, who is presented as a twin to Issachar, whereas the Bible attributes six sons to Leah and states that Bilhah bore Naphtali.⁷⁷ Another example of a contradiction with the biblical account involves the plot to replace Rachael with Leah on Rachael and Jacob’s wedding day. In *The Red Tent*, Jacob loves Rachael at first sight and she loves him, but young Rachael is afraid of her wedding night. Rachael’s sister, Zilpah, feeds the fear until Rachael begs Leah to take her place under the bridal veil. Leah does and becomes Jacob’s first wife. As mentioned earlier, in Genesis 29:22-26, Laban switched the girls.

In part two, or ‘My Story,’ Diamant follows the general plot of the biblical story of Jacob’s tribe and its journeys, but there are a few striking exceptions. For example, Diamant describes Dinah and the prince in a loving relationship, which radically

⁷⁵ Cynthia Dettelbach, “Entering The Red Tent With Anita Diamant.” *The Cleveland Jewish News* 74, no. 2 (1999): 4.

⁷⁶ In Genesis Laban has no sons. The names do appear elsewhere. In Genesis 22:20-21 Kemuel is a son of Nahor, Abraham’s brother. In *midrash* in the Zohar Beor is the son of Laban the Aramean, “Laban the Aramean was the father of Beor, and Beor was the father of Balaam” (Zohar tractate Sanhedrin 105a).

⁷⁷ “When Leah conceived again and bore Jacob a sixth son...” (Genesis 30:19) Bilhah bore Naphtali. (Genesis 30:7-8). (*The Jewish Study Bible Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 62 and 61).

contradicts the rape of Dinah by Shechem in Genesis 34:2.⁷⁸ Diamant's account is significantly different from the traditional rabbinic *midrash* concerning Dinah and Shechem.

The rabbinic *midrash* repeatedly blames Dinah for the rape because she “went out to visit the daughters of the land” (Genesis 34:1). For example, Rabbi Judah b. Simon warned, “‘Boast not thyself of tomorrow’ (Proverbs 27:1), yet you [Jacob] have said, ‘So shall my righteousness witness for me tomorrow’ [Genesis 30:33]! Tomorrow your daughter will go out and be violated. Thus it is written, ‘And Dinah the daughter of Leah went out’ [Genesis 34:1]”.⁷⁹ According to Rashi, Dinah is referred to as the daughter of Leah and not the daughter of Jacob in Genesis 34:1. Rashi explains the origin of the proverb “like mother, like daughter” in Ezekiel 16:44; he explains, “because of her ‘going out’ – she is called ‘the daughter of Leah,’ – for [Leah], too, was one who would go out, – as it says, ‘Leah went out to meet him.’ – Of her they coined the aphorism ‘Like mother like daughter.’”⁸⁰ Dinah was violated because she went out; she brought the rape on herself by going out and Leah is chastised for “going out” to meet her husband. The traditional *midrash* seems to be an attempt to justify restrictions on women's freedom. Another *midrash* concerning Dinah explains how easily a woman is corrupted, “‘He took her’ – he spoke seductively to her, as the word is used in ‘take with your words’ (Hosea 14:3); and ‘he lay with her’ – in natural intercourse and ‘he humbled her’ – in unnatural

⁷⁸ Diamant, *The Red Tent*, 189-190.

⁷⁹ Naomi Mara Hyman, *Biblical Women in the Midrash, A Sourcebook* (Northvale: Jason Aronson Inc., 1997) 67-68.

⁸⁰ *Rashi Commentary on the Torah Vol. 1 – Bereishis / Genesis* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 1994) 382-383. See Appendix F for a copy of Rashi's commentary on Genesis 34 including the Hebrew. The Written Torah is in a larger font and Rashi's *midrash* is in a smaller font. Often Rashi is written in the margins close to the spine of the book because Rashi's commentary is considered so important that it should not risk being smudged or damaged.

intercourse.”⁸¹ Once a woman goes out and is lured into corruption, she does not want to return. As Rabbi Hunia explains, “when a woman is intimate with an uncircumcised person, she finds it hard to tear herself away.”⁸² These commentaries all emphasize that the home is the safest place for women and they put themselves at risk by venturing out.

As opposed to blaming Dinah for her own rape, Diamant reworks the story so that there was no rape; she replaces rape with romance. In *The Red Tent*, Shalem is a prince and Dinah is summoned to the palace because of her midwifery skills. When Dinah and Shalem first see each other, there is instant mutual attraction.⁸³ Shalem’s mother senses this and arrange a second encounter between the two. Diamant is clear about Dinah’s consent before intercourse with Shalem. Dinah narrates, “He looked into my face to discover my meaning, and seeing only yes...”⁸⁴ This is a radical departure from the traditional interpretation of the rape story.⁸⁵

It could be argued, however, that Diamant’s version is not such a radical departure from the biblical text. In Genesis 34:3 Shechem is clearly in love with Dinah and wants to marry her: “Being strongly drawn to Dinah daughter of Jacob, and in love with the maiden, he spoke to the maiden tenderly. So Shechem said to his father Hamor, ‘Get me this girl as a wife’” (Genesis 34:3-4). The king, Hamor, also mentions his son’s feelings for Dinah, “And Hamor spoke with them saying, ‘My son Shechem longs for your daughter. Please give her to him in marriage. Intermarry with us: give your

⁸¹ Ecclesiastes Rabbah 10:8, in *The Midrash* ed. and trans. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon et al. (London: Soncino Press, 1951) in Naomi Mara Hyman, *Biblical Women in the Midrash, A Sourcebook* (Northvale: Jason Aronson Inc.,1997) 67-68.

⁸² Genesis Rabbah 80:11 in *The Midrash* ed. and trans. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon et al. (London: Soncino Press, 1951) in Naomi Mara Hyman, *Biblical Women in the Midrash, A Sourcebook* (Northvale: Jason Aronson Inc.,1997) 67-68.

⁸³ Diamant, *The Red Tent*, 183-184.

⁸⁴ Diamant, *The Red Tent*, 190.

⁸⁵ Diamant also changes the spelling of the prince’s name. In *The Red Tent* his name is spelled ‘Shalem’ and his city is ‘Shechem,’ but in translations of the Hebrew Bible the prince’s name is ‘Shechem.’

daughters to us, and take our daughters for yourselves” (Genesis 34:8-9). Shechem tells Dinah’s father and brothers that he will pay whatever they ask as a bride-price, “Then Shechem said to her father and brothers, ““Do me this favor, and I will pay whatever you tell me. Ask me for a bride-price ever so high, as well as gifts, and I will pay what you tell me; only give me the maiden for a wife”” (Genesis 34:11-12). They reply that Shechem and all the males in his kingdom must get circumcised and then Shechem will be allowed to marry Dinah. Shechem is not deterred by their request; he is willing to be circumcised as an adult for Dinah’s hand in marriage, “Their words pleased Hamor and Hamor’s son Shechem. And the youth lost no time in doing the thing, for he wanted Jacob’s daughter” (Genesis 34:18-19). Would a man agree to circumcision for a woman who did not care for him? The biblical text alludes to more of a relationship between Dinah and Shechem, at the very least more to the story than a rape.⁸⁶

Another striking departure from the biblical narrative is Diamant’s account of the circumstances of Jacob’s name change to Israel. In *The Red Tent* Jacob is ashamed that his sons murdered the circumcised men and Jacob changed his name to distance himself from his tribe’s blemished reputation: “Jacob cowered and took a new name, Isra’El, so that the people would not remember him as the butcher of Shechem. He fled from the name Jacob, which became another name for ‘liar,’ so that ‘You serve the God of Jacob’ was one of the worst insults one man could hurl at another in that land for many generations.”⁸⁷ In the biblical account, Jacob spent night alone across the river Jabbok. He fought with a man all night long. The man wrenched Jacob’s hip from its socket. The

⁸⁶ Other interpretations of Genesis 34 include *midrash* by Naomi Graetz. In her modern feminist *midrash*, Graetz voices Dinah’s suffering as a rape victim. See Appendix G for Graetz’s entire *midrash* on Dinah. Graetz draws attention to the irony of punishment for rape – cutting the penis, the instrument used in the rape.

⁸⁷ Diamant, *The Red Tent*, 208.

man claimed to be a divine being and he changed Jacob's name to Israel after the physical struggle: "Said he, 'Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human and have prevailed'" (Genesis 32:29).⁸⁸ In the Bible, the name Israel is a reward from a divine being, but in *The Red Tent* the name Israel was taken due to shame. This change in the narrative weakens the superiority of the male character, Jacob. This echoes Plaskow and Umansky's treatment of Adam and Abraham in their *midrash*. (Despite Adam's lies about Lilith, Lilith and Eve become friends and Adam fears their powerful sisterhood. Sarah emphasizes that God spoke to her as well and questions Abraham's ability to interpret what God wants.) Another example from *The Red Tent* is Diamant's description of Laban as a lazy, abusive man and the women as hardworking contributors to the prosperity of the tribe. Alterations in the biblical plot such as these may be offensive to some people and are a source of controversy in the discussion of the limits of modern *midrash*.⁸⁹

In part three, or 'Egypt,' Diamant continues the story of Dinah's life through old age, whereas Dinah's life story in the Genesis account ends with her rape and her brothers' violent revenge. Part three of the novel is fabrication. There is evidence in Genesis 46:15 that Dinah may have traveled with her family to Egypt, but all else is Diamant's creation.

There are many other conflicts between *The Red Tent* and the Hebrew Bible. These contradictions raise an important issue in the discussion of modern feminist *midrash*. How much embellishment is too much? How much can *midrash* stray from the

⁸⁸ *The Jewish Study Bible Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 68.

⁸⁹ See Appendix H for a chart of contrasting passages in *The Red Tent* and the Bible.

biblical account? Diamant's deviations from the biblical story are one reason that Diamant herself avoids the label of *midrash* for *The Red Tent*.

Diamant's View on *The Red Tent* as *Midrash*

Diamant herself says, "*The Red Tent* is not a translation but a work of fiction. Its perspective and focus—by and about the female characters—distinguishes it from the Biblical account, in which women are usually peripheral and often totally silent. By giving Dinah a voice and by providing texture and content to the sketchy Biblical descriptions, my book is a radical departure from the historical text."⁹⁰ Despite obvious parallels between her book and modern *midrash*, Diamant avoids referring to *The Red Tent* as *midrash*.

When asked in an interview, Diamant claimed that her intent when writing the book was not to align with the traditional process of creating *midrash*. Diamant clarified, "I did not set out to explain or rewrite the biblical text, but to use Dinah's silence to try to imagine what life was like for women in this historical period."⁹¹ Diamant offers her own explanation of traditional *midrash*, "Historically, the rabbis used this highly imaginative form of storytelling to make sense of the elliptical nature of the Bible – to explain, for example, why Cain killed Abel...The compressed stories and images in the Bible are rather like photographs. They don't tell us everything we want or need to know.

⁹⁰ Picador USA, "About the Author," *The Red Tent: A Novel*, <http://www.picadorusa.com/rgg/files/0312195516.htm>. (accessed November 29, 2007).
<http://search.barnesandnoble.com/booksearch/isbninquiry.asp?ean=9780312195519&z=y>

⁹¹ Bonny V. Fetterman, "Significant Jewish Books," *Reform Judaism Online Union for Reform Judaism*, (accessed November 29, 2007) <http://reformjudaismmag.net/599bf.html>.

Midrash is the story about what happened before and after the photographic flash.”⁹²

Diamant defended her stance on *midrash* again and again. Diamant reiterated her opinion over several years, yet people continued to associate her book with *midrash*.

For example, on October 8, 1999, Cynthia Dettelbach wrote an editorial in *The Cleveland Jewish News*, “Entering The Red Tent With Anita Diamant,” arguing that what interested Diamant as a writer was “the retelling and handing down of a familiar story - i’dor v’dor from generation to generation. But this time, from the women’s perspective.”⁹³ When Diamant spoke to one hundred and sixty women at a Lion of Judah dinner, she said, “Dinah is one of the silent women of the Bible. Her silence intrigued me...gave me a window. Where there was silence, I created three-hundred pages.”⁹⁴

Dettelbach writes:

The author does not create midrash the classical way of trying to make sense of or explain the biblical text on its own terms. “That was not my intent,” says Diamant who set out instead to write historical fiction, using Dinah as the narrator. “I pillaged a plot from the Bible and with all due respect I wrote a piece of literature and embroidered a story around it,” Diamant told me on a phone interview from her home outside Boston.⁹⁵

So, Diamant denied that *The Red Tent* is *midrash*.

On January 14, 2000, Vicki Cabot published a book review of *The Red Tent*, “Speaking Volumes: Woman’s Voice; ‘Red Tent’ Tells Other Side of Story,” in the *Jewish News of Greater Phoenix*.⁹⁶ She writes, “But Diamant makes clear that she used the Biblical text only as a starting point and historical context simply as a setting. After

⁹² Picador USA, “About the Author,” *The Red Tent: A Novel*, <http://www.picadorusa.com/rgg/files/0312195516.htm>. (accessed November 29, 2007).

⁹³ Cynthia Dettelbach, “Entering The Red Tent With Anita Diamant” *The Cleveland Jewish News* 74, no. 2 (1999): 4.

⁹⁴ Cynthia Dettelbach, “Entering The Red Tent With Anita Diamant” *The Cleveland Jewish News* 74, no. 2 (1999): 4.

⁹⁵ Cynthia Dettelbach, “Entering The Red Tent With Anita Diamant” *The Cleveland Jewish News* 74, no. 2 (1999): 4.

⁹⁶ Vicki Cabot, “Speaking Volumes: Woman’s Voice; ‘Red Tent’ Tells Other Side of Story” *Jewish News of Greater Phoenix* 52, no. 19 (2000): 34.

that she let her imagination take over, crafting a powerful novel of love and loss.”⁹⁷

Again she writes, “Diamant insists that she did not write a Biblical midrash” and Cabot quotes Diamant, “I looked at the commentary and turned away.”⁹⁸ Although Diamant did read some biblical *midrash*, she was not trying to imitate or write it. Diamant was familiar with traditional rabbinic *midrash*.⁹⁹ Diamant believes that her work breaks through the confinements of *midrash* by straying too far from the original text and therefore going beyond what can authentically be called *midrash*.

On March 30, 2001, Joan Gross published an article, “Jacob’s Daughter Hits the Bigtime in 2001,” in *The Jewish News Weekly of Northern California*. Gross writes that Diamant, in a lecture to more than two hundred at Peninsula Temple Beth El at San Mateo, California, tells of a Catholic priest’s reaction to *The Red Tent*. A chaplain at Mount Holyoke College had confronted Diamant after a lecture not long after the book was published. The priest asked Diamant, “How do you have the audacity to do this to the Bible?”¹⁰⁰ Diamant gave her answer to the crowd, “It is my birthright. My audacity is the Jewish approach to Scripture. I approach the Bible as heir to this tradition of Midrash.”¹⁰¹ Diamant continued, “Every word of Torah has seven-hundred faces and six-hundred meanings. There is no one correct interpretation as Jews have made up stories

⁹⁷ Vicki Cabot, “Speaking Volumes: Woman’s Voice; ‘Red Tent’ Tells Other Side of Story” *Jewish News of Greater Phoenix* 52, no. 19 (2000): 34.

⁹⁸ Vicki Cabot, “Speaking Volumes: Woman’s Voice; ‘Red Tent’ Tells Other Side of Story” *Jewish News of Greater Phoenix* 52, no. 19 (2000): 34.

⁹⁹ Diamant was well aware of the existence of *midrash* when she was writing *The Red Tent*. In her acknowledgements she wrote, “Thanks to Larry Kushner, who introduced me to Midrash.”

¹⁰⁰ Joan Gross, “Jacob’s Daughter Hits the Bigtime in 2001” *The Jewish News Weekly of Northern California* 105, no. 13 (2001): 40.

¹⁰¹ Joan Gross, “Jacob’s Daughter Hits the Bigtime in 2001” *The Jewish News Weekly of Northern California* 105, no. 13 (2001): 40.

contradictory for centuries.”¹⁰² For Diamant, this way of reading the biblical text was perfectly legitimate for someone in the Jewish tradition. Diamant defended her right to use biblical material and “make up stories” under the aegis of the Jewish concept of *midrash*, but this is different than claiming that her creation is *midrash*; she remained clear that it is not. She continued to argue that *The Red Tent* should not be labeled *midrash*.

Then in 2003 Diamant published *Pitching My Tent: On Marriage, Motherhood, Friendship, and Other Leaps of Faith* and in it she included an essay, ‘Midrash – or Not.’ What follows is the entire essay:

During the three years it took to write and research the food, clothes, midwifery, family arrangements, and funeral customs of the ancient Near East, I thought I was writing historical fiction. But from the moment *The Red Tent* was published, Jewish readers and writers labeled it “midrash.”

The word means “to search out” and refers to an ancient, imaginative form of biblical commentary—much of it written in the form of sermons. The rabbis who created this literature (400-1200 C.E.) were seeking to resolve inconsistencies and solve mysteries in the Torah—the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. They filled in the blank spaces between the written words, not primarily to entertain their audiences, but to support the divine authority of the text. That’s why the rabbis created ingenious tales that explain why Abraham abandoned his father’s ways and set off on his own; what transpired between Cain and Abel before the first biblical murder; why Moses was not permitted to set foot in the Promised Land. These tales, often wildly inventive, sometimes took on a life of their own; a few have even assumed the authority of the Torah itself.

Midrash was once the soul purview of rabbis and scholars, but it’s broken loose from its traditional moorings and becomes a populist tool and a creative doorway into sacred texts. It is sometimes described as a mirror in which regular Jews may find themselves in Torah, a notion not so far removed from the classical purpose of midrash, which was to bind oneself ever closer to God’s word.

But midrash has gone much farther afield. I’ve heard people call the movie *Shakespeare in Love* a midrash on Bard of Avon’s work. In a book about Mary, mother of Jesus, a Catholic feminist described the extra-scriptural stories attached to Mary (such as her immaculate conception and assumption into heaven) as midrash, too.

Given the loosey-goosey use of the word, I’ve got to wonder what midrash has come to mean. Is any kind of improvisation on classical themes a midrash? Is it midrash if I insert new characters into the biblical tale? Was the animated film *Prince of Egypt* a midrash, or a cartoon, or a cartoon of a midrash?

Most Jewish readers dismiss my misgivings. Some tell me that after reading *The Red Tent*, they can finally remember who’s who in Genesis. Some have said I redeemed their daughter’s name—Leah as well as Dinah.

¹⁰² Joan Gross, “Jacob’s Daughter Hits the Bigtime in 2001” *The Jewish News Weekly of Northern California* 105, no. 13 (2001): 40.

Saying I didn't write *The Red Tent* as Bible commentary does not satisfy Jews or Christians who are furious at me, like the reader who concluded his review on Amazon.com by writing, "My only dilemma is to what to do with this book... I shudder to donate it to the library, lest someone else be inspired by such desecration. Well, trash day is Wednesday."

According to one definition, a midrash is any story that answers a question posed in the Torah. One reader told me that because *The Red Tent* explained why the Egyptian midwives refused to kill the Hebrew babies, it was midrash.

So does function define the form? And who decides what is midrash and what isn't? Would the rabbis who wrote *Midrash Rabbah*, the great classical compendium of the form, recognize *The Red Tent* as midrash? Would their answer make any difference to a contemporary Jew who is convinced that's what it is?

Some Jews have come up with the category "modern midrash" to distinguish *The Red Tent* and other contemporary works from the rabbinic commentaries of the past. Is modern midrash a whole new food group, or just watered-down soup?

Right there on the cover it says, "A Novel." But I'm ready to stop arguing. *The Red Tent* may have come out of my head, but it's out of my hands.¹⁰³

Thus, after about six years of public debate over whether or not *The Red Tent* is *midrash*, Diamant stopped arguing with her readers. By 2003 Diamant, although maintaining she did not set out to write *midrash*, conceded that for some readers her book functions something similar to *midrash*, possibly "modern *midrash*." Diamant did not believe she had the authority to declare what is *midrash*, and she questioned who does. Instead she admitted that she did not have the power to keep her book from being understood as new form of *midrash*. Acknowledging that the book had taken on a life of its own, Diamant ceased her attempts to control the conversation and let the book go "out of her hands." The book had become known as an authentic version of the biblical story for some readers, and thus took on a religious significance of its own.

The Role of Marketing in the Characterization of *The Red Tent* as *Midrash*

An interesting twist in the life of the novel is that even before *The Red Tent's* readers classified it as *midrash*, the marketing strategies for the novel contributed to the

¹⁰³ Diamant, *Pitching My Tent: On Marriage, Motherhood, Friendship, and Other Leaps of Faith* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 207-210.

characterization of the book as *midrash*. This section will follow the book chronologically through its publishing life.

Diamant spent three years researching and writing *The Red Tent*, then had trouble finding a publisher. *The Red Tent* was rejected several times before St. Martin's agreed to publish it. Diamant's original title was *The Book of Dinah*, but *The Book of Ruth*¹⁰⁴ was already on Oprah's list. A male editor thought of the title *The Red Tent*.

St. Martin's published *The Red Tent* in hardcover in 1997. "Not many" copies sold,¹⁰⁵ only eleven thousand.¹⁰⁶ *Publisher's Weekly* and *Kirkus Reviews* gave *The Red Tent* favorable reviews, but otherwise the press did not give the book much attention.¹⁰⁷ St. Martin's marked the unsold hardcover copies for destruction. They were stored in a warehouse awaiting the shredder when Diane Higgins became the senior editor of St. Martin's. Diamant approached Higgins about a "word of mouth sales campaign in the Jewish community" where Diamant was already known for her non-fiction books. Diamant requested that St. Martin's send the unsold hardcover editions to female Reform rabbis in the United States. Diamant acquired addresses for over one thousand rabbis.¹⁰⁸ In the fall of 1998 St. Martin's mailed hard cover copies to almost fifteen hundred female Reform rabbis along with a cover letter by Rabbi Liza Stern that suggested that the rabbis use the book to teach women "to see themselves as central to the story, not as marginal two-bit players in a story about men."¹⁰⁹ In her letter of recommendation Stern also

¹⁰⁴ *The Book of Ruth* by Jane Hamilton has nothing to do with the Bible. It is about a fictional woman named Ruth Grey who leads a tough life in post World War II times in a small town in Illinois. *The Book of Ruth* was an "Oprah Book Club® Selection" in November 1996.

¹⁰⁵ Susannah Meadows, "Meeting Under A Big 'Tent'" *Newsweek* 137 no. 6 (2001): 61. (a book review)

¹⁰⁶ Judith Rosen, "Anita Diamant's Red Tent Turns to Gold" *Writer* 114 no. 4 (2001): 30.

¹⁰⁷ Judith Rosen, "Anita Diamant's Red Tent Turns to Gold" *Writer* 114 no. 4 (2001): 30.

¹⁰⁸ Faith L. Justice, "An Interview With Anita Diamant," *The Copperfield Review*, <http://www.copperfieldreview.com/interviews/diamant.html> (accessed November 29, 2007).

¹⁰⁹ Susannah Meadows, "Meeting Under A Big 'Tent'" *Newsweek* 137 no. 6 (2001): 61. (a book review)

encouraged the female rabbis to teach women “to embellish the Bible themselves.”¹¹⁰

The book became extremely popular among Jewish readers largely due to this word of mouth campaign.

In addition to the marketing campaign, independent booksellers also helped by recommending *The Red Tent*.¹¹¹ Diamant spoke at local bookshops, especially to book groups and she spoke to Jewish women organizations. In the summer of 1999 *Reform Judaism* named *The Red Tent* a significant Jewish book; *Reform Judaism*, a magazine then distributed to three-hundred-fifty-thousand houses, published an article on *The Red Tent* including an interview with Anita Diamant.¹¹² Book sales rose further. Then Martin’s sent another fifteen-hundred “mailing” to female ministers, reading group leaders and coordinators at Borders and Barnes & Noble.¹¹³ *The Red Tent* became popular in book clubs. Mickey Pearlman, author of *What to Read: The Essential Guide for Reading Group Members and Other Booklovers* (1999), “frequently praises *The Red Tent* during her in-person and online talks.”¹¹⁴ St. Martin’s created a study guide for *The Red Tent* and published it on its web site. St. Martin’s also offered discounts to bookstores which ordered ten or more copies in the fall of 1999.¹¹⁵ In January 2000, St. Martin’s bought a full page ad in *The New York Times Book Review*. The publisher also sent Diamant on tour to promote *The Red Tent*.¹¹⁶ *The Red Tent* was on the New York

¹¹⁰ Susannah Meadows, “Meeting Under A Big ‘Tent’” *Newsweek* 137 no. 6 (2001): 61. (a book review)

¹¹¹ Susannah Meadows, “Meeting Under A Big ‘Tent’” *Newsweek* 137 no. 6 (2001): 61. (a book review)

¹¹² Diamant “About Anita Diamant,” Anita Diamant, <http://www.anitadiamant.com/about.asp?page=about> (accessed October 12, 2008).

¹¹³ Judith Rosen, “Anita Diamant’s Red Tent Turns to Gold” *Writer* 114 no. 4 (2001): 30.

¹¹⁴ Emily Dwass, “A Biblical Woman’s Tale That Won Readers’ Hearts” *Los Angeles Times* (2000): E-1. (*The Red Tent* is not actually recommended in *What to Read: The Essential Guide for Reading Group Members and Other Booklovers* by Mickey Pearlman – contrary to what Judith Rosen wrote in “Anita Diamant’s Red Tent Turns to Gold” *Writer* 114 no. 4 (2001): 30.)

¹¹⁵ Judith Rosen, “Anita Diamant’s Red Tent Turns to Gold” *Writer* 114 no. 4 (2001): 30.

¹¹⁶ Judith Rosen, “Anita Diamant’s Red Tent Turns to Gold” *Writer* 114 no. 4 (2001): 30.

Times paperback best-seller list in December 2000 and was number one on the Los Angeles Times's book list in February 2001.¹¹⁷ *Newsweek* reviewed *The Red Tent* in February 2001 and in it mentions a reader who "likes to think of the book as a midrash."¹¹⁸ Thus, before many readers even picked up the book, they associated it with *midrash*.

Speaking in 2007, a full decade after *The Red Tent* was published, Diamant said that women were still having conversations about the book.¹¹⁹ As of November 2007, over three million copies of *The Red Tent* had been sold. It has been published in twenty-five countries and translated into over twenty languages.¹²⁰ The book has become hugely popular in the United States and abroad. It may be that the successful marketing strategy fed the widespread association of *The Red Tent* with *midrash*. Targeting female rabbis in the marketing campaign and the content of the cover letter seemed to reinforce a link between *The Red Tent* and modern feminist *midrash*.

If Not *Midrash*, What is *The Red Tent*?

There is a broad spectrum of modern Jewish feminist writings beyond modern *midrash* that serves the purpose of reconciling the Jewish religion with the experience of modern women. In the overall spectrum of the Jewish feminist genre, some writings reject the Torah altogether as hopelessly patriarchal and attempt to construct a Jewish practice without it. The authors of these writings abandon both the patriarchal writings and traditions. On the other end of the spectrum, Jewish women write about applying

¹¹⁷ Susannah Meadows, "Meeting Under A Big 'Tent'" *Newsweek* 137 no. 6 (2001): 61. (a book review)

¹¹⁸ Susannah Meadows, "Meeting Under A Big 'Tent'" *Newsweek* 137 no. 6 (2001): 61. (a book review)

¹¹⁹ Molly Ritvo, "A Look Inside the Tent With Diamant" *The Jewish Advocate* 198 no. 46 (2007): 3.

¹²⁰ Molly Ritvo, "A Look Inside the Tent With Diamant" *The Jewish Advocate* 198 no. 46 (2007): 3.

their religion to their modern daily lives. Some feminist approaches include writing new religious literature and creating new rituals. Examples include the rewriting of prayers in *The Book of Blessings, New Jewish Prayers for Daily Life, The Sabbath and the New Moon Festival* by Marcia Falk. Falk describes what she does as “developing liturgy”¹²¹ and she rebuffs criticisms concerning her authority to do so; she answers the assertion that all prayer books are written by committees by saying that hers was written with the assistance of a committee¹²² and she proceeds to list and thank dozens of scholars and editors for their feedback. Other forms of feminist expression include poetry, such as several poems in *The Tribe of Dina* (1986), a compilation of feminist writings.¹²³

Another important genre, in contrast to *The Red Tent*, is the novel about Jewish women reconciling their religion and their modern life, which describes personal daily struggles of Orthodox Jewish women. Novels by Naomi Ragen provide popular examples. Ragen’s female characters grapple with seeing the beauty and feeling of pride in their Orthodox world and living with the challenges posed by aspects of their religious practices that stifle the need for individuality and limit choices for women in life. For example, in *Sotah*, Ragen follows the lives of three sisters as they each react to and succumb to the pressures of arranged marriages. Two of the sisters adapt to marriage with strangers.¹²⁴ After initial doubts and many heart-wrenching struggles, all three women find happiness in their marriages. Novels such as this provide insights into how different women cope with modern daily life and educate non-Jews on the dilemmas

¹²¹ Marcia Falk, *The Book of Blessings, New Jewish Prayers for Daily Life, The Sabbath and the New Moon Festival* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), xxii.

¹²² Marcia Falk, *The Book of Blessings, New Jewish Prayers for Daily Life, The Sabbath and the New Moon Festival* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), xxi.

¹²³ Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz and Irena Klepfisz, ed. *The Tribe of Dina, A Jewish Women’s Anthology* (Montpelier: Sinister Wisdom Books, 1986).

¹²⁴ Naomi Ragen, *Sotah* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1992).

Orthodox Jewish women face. So, one purpose of categorizing Jewish feminist genres is to observe the ways different genres fulfill different needs in the struggle to adapt to the modern world. *The Red Tent* fits into this spectrum of feminist writings because it fulfills a need for Jewish women. But does *The Red Tent* fit into other genres?

Elements of Umansky's modern feminist *midrash* exist in *The Red Tent*, but *The Red Tent* could also be viewed as a historical romance, a genre which revises well known myths. A historical novel combines historical material and persons with imagined situations and additional fictional characters and, of course, incorporates a love story with plenty of romantic details. *The Red Tent* has romance. However, Dinah's character develops through the novel more than the typically "flat character" of the historical romance heroine. *The Red Tent* also fits the genre of the ghost story. Dinah is a ghost; she narrates her own death in the book's conclusion. She is speaking from beyond the grave. The idea of Dinah as a ghost in the context of Jewish feminism is fascinating because Dinah's story haunts modern Jewish women similarly to the way a ghost haunts a building.¹²⁵ A ghost exists because of an injustice or an unresolved issue. Dinah seeks to tell her version of the story and correct mistakes in the tale of her family. For example, she corrects "ridiculous fables embroidered around my family's history."¹²⁶ In the prologue of the book Dinah says, "Near the beginning of your holy book, there is a passage that seems to say I was raped."¹²⁷ As a ghost, Dinah is able to communicate and clear up these misconceptions. So, *The Red Tent* is an amalgamation of genres and, from a literary perspective, it is a much more complicated and sophisticated form of modern feminist *midrash* than the one Umansky describes.

¹²⁵ The ideas of Dinah as a ghost and *The Red Tent* as a historical novel are from Dr. Michael Galchinsky.

¹²⁶ Diamant, *The Red Tent*, 11.

¹²⁷ Diamant, *The Red Tent*, 1.

4. GOLDSTEIN'S MODEL FOR FEMINIST *MIDRASH*

Rabbi Elise Goldstein's model for feminist *midrash* contrasts with Umansky's model, which gives any woman the authority to write her own *midrash* as a response to sacred Jewish texts. In Umansky's model, creating *midrash* is a legitimate individual experience. In contrast, Goldstein's model is grounded in the Jewish community. For Goldstein legitimate *midrash* must benefit not only the individual feminist, but also the entire Jewish community of both men and women. Beyond the specific case of *The Red Tent*, what is at stake is the definition of modern feminist *midrash* and who has the authority to shape the boundaries of new forms of *midrash*.

Goldstein links female authority to create *midrash* with the ordination of female rabbis. According to Goldstein, the Jewish community is ready for female perspectives. Goldstein writes that the ordination of female rabbis in all three non-Orthodox forms of Judaism is

an invitation to all women throughout the country to step forward and enter into a new encounter with Judaism, to claim their new-found equality and develop it, with responsibility, with commitment, and with creativity. Only then will the decision to ordain women truly bear fruit. Only then will we see the ways in which Judaism will be interpreted, reappropriated, and transformed as, for the first time, it becomes a tradition that fully incorporates the particular insights and life experiences of women. In order for this to happen, *all Jewish women* must take upon themselves the responsibility to open the books of Judaism and to study them afresh [emphasis mine].¹²⁸ In short, women must engage in the most ancient and most modern Jewish act, the process of exegesis, of *midrash*. This process has always been the way in which our ancient tradition has maintained its continuing vitality throughout the centuries, as successive generations have opened and reopened the texts, rereading, reinterpreting, and appropriating old material for a new Jewish world. It is precisely this process that now promises to be a vehicle for the incorporation of women's wisdom into Judaism.¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Goldstein, 21.

¹²⁹ Goldstein, 22.

This quotation from the foreword to her book indicates that Goldstein agrees with Umansky that all Jewish women have the right and obligation to write a personal form of *midrash*. However, in the rest of the book Goldstein lays out and implies criteria for a model of feminist *midrash* that excludes all women except female rabbis from writing public feminist *midrash*.

In *The Women's Torah Commentary*, Goldstein and other female rabbis are writing public *midrash* to educate others and to share the insights they have gained from the unique perspective of a female rabbi. In her introduction, Goldstein describes her vision for the book:

I hope dear reader, that you will use this book. Bring it to synagogue or church with you as you hear the Bible read and explained. Write your own *divrei Torah*¹³⁰ quoting the women within, their scholarship and their personal insights. Use it for your bat mitzvah or bar mitzvah as you try to tackle the portions you read on your special day. See this as a treasury of the Torah you have inherited—the traditional Torah—together with a new Torah, or teaching. Then together we can sow the seeds of a truly egalitarian Judaism where, as Abraham Geiger said in 1837, “our whole religious life will profit from the beneficial influence which feminine hearts will bestow upon it.”¹³¹

The essays in Goldstein's book are to be used as a reference, an educational tool for understanding Torah, as opposed to Umansky's *midrash*, which provides examples of personal experiences for other women to imitate in creating their own personal experience. The essays in *The Women's Torah Commentary* are meant to be used in the setting of the community. This compilation is a companion to the Torah, similar to traditional rabbinic *midrash*. Goldstein links the essays to traditional rabbinic *midrash*, but rather than forging a general conceptual link to rabbinic *midrash*, as Umansky does, Goldstein creates the link through the use of many specific traditional techniques.

¹³⁰ A *dvar Torah* (plural, *divrei Torah*) is a homiletic explanation of the Torah portion (which is similar to a sermon). At *bat mitzvahs* and *bar mitzvahs* the girl or boy stands up and explains a portion of Torah.

¹³¹ Goldstein, 35.

Therefore, Goldstein's criteria for choosing the essays in her book reflect strong parallels to elements present in traditional rabbinic *midrash*.

Criteria for Goldstein's Model of Feminist *Midrash*

Goldstein establishes a new form of feminist *midrash* with narrower boundaries than Umansky. Goldstein edited *The Women's Torah Commentary* and in her introduction she mentions specific criteria for her feminist *midrash*. One can infer other requirements from common characteristics in the essays themselves. The three criteria Goldstein specifies are, first, that the *midrash* in *The Women's Torah Commentary* must be written by female rabbis; second, that the commentary must be written in the form of a *dvar Torah*, a homiletic explanation of the Torah portion (which is similar to a sermon); and third, that this *midrash* must serve a feminist cause. In addition, several characteristics in most of the essays in her volume are strikingly different from other feminist *midrash*, and so I believe that these unique characteristics should also be included as criteria for Goldstein's brand of modern feminist *midrash*. For example, almost every author included in Goldstein's volume demonstrated her knowledge of Torah and knowledge of the Hebrew language; this demonstration of knowledge and expertise is a fourth criterion for Goldstein's form of *midrash*. Another recurring theme in the essays is the furthering of the larger causes of "inclusion" and "egalitarianism," a fifth criterion for Goldstein's modern *midrash*. Each of these criteria needs further discussion, but first, what is the difference between Goldstein's use of the term "Torah commentary" and her use of the term "*midrash*?"

In her introduction, Goldstein often uses the term *midrash* interchangeably with the word “commentary;” the distinction seems to be that rabbis create commentary, which is a type of *midrash*.¹³² Goldstein discusses and defines *midrash*. “As modern midrashists the authors of these essays look deeply into the biblical texts, and, failing to find women’s voices or women’s experience, may invent them. Like the classical midrashists, we may wander far from the original to get back to it. We fill in the details of women’s lives, their thoughts, hopes, and dreams.”¹³³ Then she writes, “Any Bible reader needs tools to ‘unpack’ the text. Midrash is one such tool. Commentary is another. Since it is nigh impossible to ever know the original ‘intention’ of a biblical text, *the rabbis* began to build a pyramid of interpretations, assumptions, and meanings based on their understanding of the Torah text” [emphasis mine].¹³⁴ Here she characterizes *midrash* and commentary as two different tools to interpret the Bible. Goldstein continues, “Torah was explicated from various points of view: the literal, the homiletic, the mystical, the legal. *The rabbis* who systematically wrote such interpretations are called the commentators, and their works, the commentaries” [emphasis mine].¹³⁵ According to Goldstein, the commentator is a rabbi and the rabbi interprets Torah based on his or her deep knowledge of the text. Although lay feminists react to the text, the rabbis do it in a more sophisticated way. Only rabbis can be commentators; their work includes systematic interpretation and *midrash* is a tool they use to interpret. The writings in Goldstein’s compilation are not mystical or legal; they

¹³² Goldstein includes a list of quoted midrashic compilations and commentators. In the list there is no distinction between *midrash* and commentary. The two genres seem blurred if not interchangeable in the list.

¹³³ Goldstein, 38.

¹³⁴ Goldstein, 39.

¹³⁵ Goldstein, 39.

are homiletic. Goldstein's modern midrashic commentaries seem to be in their own category. She writes, "Finally, we, the essayists, offer our own brand of homiletic, our own feminist sensibility and sensitivity, and our own list of questions. Like the rabbis of old, we innovate while trying to stay true to the text."¹³⁶ Goldstein's "own brand of homiletic" seems to be her own form of modern feminist *midrash*.

Returning to the five explicit criteria Goldstein describes, first, her brand of legitimate feminist *midrash* must be written by female rabbis, as evident in the title of her edited volume, *The Women's Torah Commentary, New Insights from Women Rabbis on the 54 Weekly Torah Portions*. Ordained female rabbis are the authors of the fifty-four Torah commentaries included in her collection and they include female rabbis from the Reform, Reconstructionist and Conservative movements. The first woman to be ordained by each movement is included as an author in this compilation.¹³⁷ Goldstein writes that learned Orthodox women have much to teach us, and she adds, "But for my specific purposes I present only ordained women who have been working as rabbis in the Jewish community."¹³⁸ A rabbi has unique experiences and responsibilities.¹³⁹ The perspective of the ordained female rabbi is very important to Goldstein.

¹³⁶ Goldstein, 39.

¹³⁷ Rabbi Sally Priesand, the first woman ordained in the Jewish Reform movement (in 1972), wrote the epilogue "Looking Backward and Ahead" (Goldstein, 405-409). Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, the first woman ordained by the Reconstructionist movement (in 1974), contributed a commentary on the Vayetze Torah portion, "Wrestling on the Other Side of the River" (Goldstein, 79-84). Rabbi Amy Eilberg, the first woman ordained by the Conservative Jewish Movement (in 1985), wrote the foreword, "The Different Voice of Jewish Women" (Goldstein, 15-22).

¹³⁸ Goldstein, 34. Writings from Orthodox women are not included because Orthodox Judaism does not allow women to become rabbis. Goldstein explains, "Because this volume includes only the voices of women who have sought ordination, it necessarily privileges the thinking of the reform (broadly defined) rather than tradition. It is not to suggest either that fewer women than men care about traditional *halachah* or that Orthodox/traditional women do not struggle with the implications of Jewish feminism. It is only to point out what is perhaps the most significant tension that these essays represent: the paradox of being agents of change who still maintain tradition" (Goldstein, 32-33). According to Goldstein, even if an Orthodox woman is an academic, she cannot completely provide the perspective of a female rabbi (Goldstein, 34).

The female perspective from the *bimah* (the platform rabbis stand on during services) is developing into a normal part of liberal Jewish experience, yet Goldstein emphasizes the “firsts” in the history of female rabbis.¹⁴⁰ Goldstein includes these “firsts” so that future generations will have them as role models.¹⁴¹ Goldstein believes that female rabbis aid the feminist cause by incorporating “women’s issues” into their sermons and making them issues for the entire Jewish congregation. Goldstein hopes her three sons, Noam, Carmi and Micah, will inherit a different Judaism. She writes, “I live with the conviction that, one day, my boys will have a Judaism filled with the insights of women as part of the ‘normative’ experience of just being Jewish.”¹⁴² The “firsts” concerning female rabbis will cease and then, Goldstein believes, female rabbis will be a normal part of modern Judaism.¹⁴³ For Goldstein, the proliferation of female rabbis and their influence through sermons is a valuable asset to Jewish feminism. Including commentary only by female rabbis in *The Women’s Torah* acknowledges female rabbis’ authority, honors them with respect and places them firmly on the same level of the classical rabbis. In other words, these pioneering women are to the contemporary Jewish community what the classical rabbis were to the Jews of their time. So, Goldstein’s first criterion is that the *midrash* in her compilation must be written by ordained female rabbis, which links the essays to the authority held by the ancient rabbis.

¹³⁹ Goldstein, 34.

¹⁴⁰ *The Women’s Torah Commentary* highlights “firsts” such as the first woman to hold a rabbinic title (Regina Jonas studied at a liberal seminary in Berlin and received a special diploma “to hold rabbinic office” in 1935 and she served people in the Terezin concentration camp), the first woman ordained as a rabbi (R. Sally Priesand was granted *smichah*, or official ordination, on June 3, 1972), the first women ordained in each of the three movements in Judaism, the first married rabbi (R. Sandy Eisenberg Sasso and R. Dennis Sasso, in 1977), the first rabbi to give birth to a child (R. Sandy Sasso) and the first female rabbi to serve in Jerusalem (R. Karyn Kedar was ordained in 1985 and soon afterwards served for ten years in Israel).

¹⁴¹ Goldstein, 35.

¹⁴² Goldstein, 24.

¹⁴³ Goldstein, 35.

Goldstein's second criterion is that the essays in *The Women's Torah* must be written in the form of a *dvar Torah*, which is similar to a sermon: "Each contributor to this anthology has presented a *dvar Torah*, a homiletic explanation of the weekly Torah portion, from a feminist viewpoint."¹⁴⁴ The essays are also similar to short sermons in length, usually six or seven pages long. Goldstein mentions that the reader should quote these essays when writing his or her own *dvar Torah*, and in the context of public ceremonies such as at one's bat mitzvah or bar mitzvah.¹⁴⁵ So, she encourages the reader to use her book as a resource, not to write *dvar Torah* completely on one's own.

The third criterion for Goldstein's *midrash* is that the *midrash* should serve a feminist cause. Goldstein writes, "Each contributor to this anthology has presented a *dvar Torah*... from a feminist viewpoint."¹⁴⁶ The essayists often use feminist language and emphasize feminist subjects. Goldstein even uses a birthing metaphor for her creation of her book. She writes, "When I discovered that indeed no one had yet put together an anthology of female rabbinic interpretations of the weekly Torah portions, I knew immediately that this would be my chosen task. It has been a complete and utter joy, and a 'labor of love' only in the most positive sense of labor, that which brings forth birth."¹⁴⁷ Birth is a recurring theme in the commentaries. Other recurring themes include emotion, sexuality, gender, control, abuse and rape. Goldstein writes, "They [the contributors] are trying to teach you something new that comes from within their

¹⁴⁴ Goldstein, 34.

¹⁴⁵ Goldstein, 35.

¹⁴⁶ Goldstein, 34.

¹⁴⁷ Goldstein, 23.

experience of being female.”¹⁴⁸ Goldstein wants the female perspective to address and benefit an entire Jewish congregation, both men and women. She writes,

The ordination of women has completely changed the face of organized Jewish life, in all the synagogue denominations, and in many facets of the Jewish community unrelated to the synagogue. Female rabbis often bring their feminist concerns into their work, along with a collective responsibility as women. What were once considered solely women’s issues, belonging to the Sisterhood or women’s auxiliaries, are now discussed from the *bimah* and at conferences of major mainstream Jewish organizations. In sermons and study groups, the female characters of the Bible are studied, examined, and dissected as never before. The issues of sexual harassment and power hierarchies in organized Jewish life have come to the forefront. Gender stereotyping in textbooks is being analyzed and corrected. All this might have come about anyway, with the advances of feminism into Judaism. But there is no doubt that the presence of women in positions of religious and communal authority, influence and decision-making has pushed what have been previously identified “marginal” issues into the consciousness of the mainstream.¹⁴⁹

The feminist perspective of the female rabbi, heard from the *bimah* by both men and women, is effectively benefiting not only the feminist cause, but enriching the experience of all Jews.

A fourth criterion for Goldstein’s brand of modern feminist *midrash* is that the authors’ extensive knowledge of the ancient Hebrew language should be apparent in the commentary. Goldstein does not explicitly specify these linguistic elements as criteria for her brand of feminist *midrash*; however, their prevalence indicates approval. Nearly all the essays in *The Women’s Torah Commentary* include Hebrew words and roughly half (twenty-six of fifty-four) of the commentaries explain Hebrew grammar in order to support a point the rabbi is making. The essayists include references to the tense of a word, the root of a word; they list similar passages elsewhere in the Torah and compare or contrast them to the passage they are discussing. They list the number of times a word appears in the Torah or a portion of it. They call attention to unusual grammar or unusual use of a word and ask what the Jewish community can learn from it. They include

¹⁴⁸ Goldstein, 34.

¹⁴⁹ Goldstein, 28-29.

alternate definitions of words. They mention the numbers of the letters of a Hebrew word. These are all strategies classical rabbinic midrashists used, and the female rabbis in Goldstein's volume used the traditional techniques to develop feminist readings of the biblical text.

One example of the importance of Hebrew grammar in the discussion of a Torah passage is in Rabbi Lia Bass' essay, *No Means No*. Bass explains Bilhah's sexual encounter with Reuben in Genesis 35:22. According to Bass, the Hebrew grammar implies that Bilhah was not a willing partner. She explains that there are two other instances in Torah which use the same grammar, Tamar in Samuel 13:14 and Dinah in Genesis 34:2. Rape is assumed in both of those cases. In these three passages the three women are being *vayishkav et*, or "laid," as opposed to *vayishkav im*, being "laid with."¹⁵⁰ The latter is used throughout the Torah to indicate consensual sex. In the former phrase, the word *et* indicates that the next word is the object of the verb. The grammar provides evidence that Bilhah, Tamar and Dinah were all "laid" as direct objects in contrast to other obviously consensual instances of sexual intercourse that include the preposition *im*. Bass adds that the motivation for rape in the Torah is not desire but power, and each of the three men paid a hefty price for his act of rape. According to Bass, the biblical message is that men use women on the road to power and that the Torah supports the woman by eventually punishing the rapist.¹⁵¹ Bass uses her knowledge of Hebrew to compare the Hebrew in different verses of the Bible and, again, uses her findings to support her interpretation of a particular biblical passage.

¹⁵⁰ Rabbi Lia Bass, "No Means No" in *The Woman's Torah Commentary: New Insights from Women Rabbis on the 54 Weekly Torah Portions*, ed. Rabbi Elyse Goldstein, 86-87 (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2000).

¹⁵¹ Bass, 87-88.

A fifth criterion for Goldstein's model of feminist *midrash* is that the commentary must align with an egalitarian message, implying that the audience for the *midrash* is not just women, but also men. In the last sentence of her introduction Goldstein writes, "together we can sow seeds of a truly egalitarian Judaism." All Jews will benefit from women's participation and influence: "Jews of every denomination—as well as anyone interested in the Bible at all—ought to be learning from them."¹⁵² The authors of the commentaries echo and expand this theme; the influence of women will extend egalitarianism to other groups. For example, Rabbi Sharon Sobel reminds her readers that we need to remember it is not a sanctuary or "physical space that evokes God's presence in our midst. Rather it is we who will bring God's presence into our midst by making sure we include everyone – men, women and children – in the sacred acts in which we participate."¹⁵³ Everyone should be included. Rabbi Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer mentions a Jewish homeless mentally ill woman who sometimes wandered into the Saturday services. Fuchs-Kreimer writes, "She was there to test us; to mock our pious pronouncements if we could not welcome her and to force us to grow into the people we claimed we already were."¹⁵⁴ There are other examples of including anyone who wants to participate in the religious community. Women must also stretch their comfort zone and accept even a disruptive homeless woman into their Jewish services, to actually practice what they preach. The feminist perspective should benefit males and females as well as other marginalized groups.

¹⁵² Goldstein, 23.

¹⁵³ Rabbi Sharon Sobel, "Community as Sacred Space" in *The Woman's Torah Commentary: New Insights from Women Rabbis on the 54 Weekly Torah Portions*, ed. Rabbi Elyse Goldstein, 159 (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2000).

¹⁵⁴ Rabbi Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer, "What Must We Do" in *The Woman's Torah Commentary: New Insights from Women Rabbis on the 54 Weekly Torah Portions*, ed. Rabbi Elyse Goldstein, 152-153 (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2000).

In summary, Goldstein's model for feminist *midrash* includes female ordained rabbis writing *divrei Torah*, which further a feminist cause as well as demonstrate the authors' deep knowledge of Hebrew and evoke egalitarianism. These criteria contrast with Umansky's criteria for modern feminist *midrash* because they generally demonstrate an intellectual or scholarly approach to the biblical passages as opposed to Umansky's more emotional or intuitive approach. Umansky claims that Jewish women have the right to write *midrash* because men traditionally wrote it and now women should be given a voice. Goldstein claims that women not only have the right to take authority for themselves, but the Jewish community as a whole gives women the authority to create *midrash* because the Jewish community has ordained female rabbis. The role of the female rabbi has already evolved from imitating male rabbis to incorporating traditionally female characteristic strengths into the rabbinate. For example, synagogue life today requires the talents of women leaders. According to Goldstein, some of the problems in Jewish congregations include lack of participation and lack of interdependence among members in the community; according to Goldstein, women are by nature "oriented toward helping others to grow, can have an important role to play in encouraging congregants to take responsibility for their own religious lives."¹⁵⁵ Goldstein also points out that there is a clear link between "women's psychological orientation and the particular kind of work that is called for in religious life today."¹⁵⁶ There is a need for women's perspective in the *bimah* and in *midrash* and according to Goldstein the Jewish people have given female rabbis the authority by ordaining them.

¹⁵⁵ Goldstein, 20.

¹⁵⁶ Goldstein, 21.

There are some similarities between the two models of feminist *midrash*. For example, both models involve women reacting to a catalyst in the Torah, women attempting to reconcile tensions they find in Torah, and women addressing feminist issues. Still, there are also striking differences between the two approaches.

Goldstein's provocations are generally more academic than Umansky's emotional reactions to Torah. Goldstein's criteria for her public *midrash* include that it must be written by female rabbis, in homiletic form, and by an author who has expertise in Hebrew and Torah study. These criteria exclude the majority of women from creating Goldstein's form of *midrash* and Goldstein writes that the female rabbis offer their own "brand of homiletic,"¹⁵⁷ but she reminds the reader that every Jew must grapple with Torah:

Never was a Jew commanded to read the Bible only as an academic, intellectual exercise or as a proof of blind, unquestioned, unchallenged faith in the literal word. The words "why," "how," and "what if" were never forbidden in the academies of Torah study. And never was reading the text allowed only to the scholar. Learning Torah has always been an act of devotion, a spiritual practice, a holy act. Studying the Bible in a Jewish context has always been a democratic affair. Now, that democracy finally, blessedly, includes all its citizens.¹⁵⁸

Goldstein's form of *midrash* is somewhat elitist with regards to who creates it, but Goldstein seems to be consciously attempting to be more inclusive concerning its audience. Only essays by ordained female rabbis are included in her compilation, but the authors' unique perspectives allow them to use their education to echo ancient rabbinic explanations of Hebrew grammar, and the female rabbis' experiences allow them to address the entire Jewish community in their commentaries. Both models of modern feminist *midrash* fill a need. Umansky's model helps reconcile the female Jews' modern experiences with the Torah and Jewish tradition on a more individual and personal level,

¹⁵⁷ Goldstein, 39.

¹⁵⁸ Goldstein, 39-40.

while Goldstein's model helps reconcile Jewish feminism with the Torah based on textual evidence and is intended for use in the community as opposed to the individual. After reading *The Women's Torah* straight through, one may momentarily forget the patriarchal nature of the Bible and close the book with a sense that the story of women permeates the Torah.

In the spectrum of Jewish feminist *midrash* the strictly scholarly *midrash* of Goldstein is one extreme and Umansky's *midrash*, the spontaneous, intuitive and emotional reaction to biblical text, falls at the opposite end of the spectrum. *The Red Tent* falls near Umansky's end of the spectrum. However, Diamant disagrees; she usually denies that *The Red Tent* is *midrash* based on the fact that its plot deviates too far from the biblical text. Diamant seems to feel that modern *midrash* should be closer to the style of the traditional *midrash* and therefore closer to Goldstein's form of *midrash*.

6. CONCLUSION

To review, this essay has briefly explained traditional rabbinic *midrash*, described two models of modern feminist *midrash* and considered *The Red Tent* as a case study of modern *midrash*.

The case study, *The Red Tent*, does not fall neatly into only one existing literary category. It is a historical novel, romance novel and even a ghost story. The novel is definitely not traditional rabbinic *midrash*; however, it fits the criteria for Umansky's modern feminist *midrash*, and *The Red Tent* is referred to as *midrash* in many Jewish settings. Many women view *The Red Tent* as *midrash* and use the book to re-imagine the lives of biblical women and connect with them. *The Red Tent*, as an example of modern *midrash*, offers a reconciliation between Jewish tradition and the life experiences of modern Jewish women.

All religious traditions encounter a changing world and each tradition must either adapt to new outside influences or its members must actively attempt to block changes from affecting them. For scholars, what is interesting is that all religious traditions change over time. Overriding a tradition's sense of permanence or changing its truths threatens the foundations of a tradition. Interesting situations arise when a religious tradition justifies change, resists change or undergoes change despite resistance. The phenomenon of *The Red Tent*—a journey from novel to modern *midrash* with a status akin to a sacred text for some people—represents one reaction to tension between Judaism and the change in women's status in the modern world. Goldstein's model for *midrash* by female rabbis is another response to that tension.

As society's views on gender roles change, tensions arise in both private and public religious spheres. Umansky's model for modern feminist *midrash* provides an individual experience that connects a woman in an unmediated way with biblical characters; it is an emotional reaction to the Bible and is, for the most part, shared with and appreciated by other feminists and like minded people. In contrast, Goldstein's model is constructed for the benefit of all Jewish people. Goldstein believes that the psychological orientation of women is well suited to address modern problems facing Jewish communities, such as lack of participation and lack of interdependence in the community. Goldstein's *midrash*, created from the perspective of female rabbis, addresses modern tensions for the entire community, not just for women. In Orthodox Judaism, novels emerged (*The Romance Reader* and *Sotah*) that highlighted struggles Orthodox Jewish women face in the modern world as well as stories of women who are happy without any personal struggle against Orthodox tradition. These are responses to specific tensions in Judaism, which shifts in gender roles created.

Umansky's type of feminist *midrash* encourages women to honor and develop their own personal reactions to the stories in the Hebrew Bible. Goldstein's form of feminist *midrash* nourishes the modern Jewish woman with insights from the unique perspective of female rabbis on Torah. As the world changes, fresh dilemmas and choices arise; Jewish women adapt and create genres to express themselves and meet their changing needs.

For the religious studies scholar examining modern Judaism, what matters is recognizing the diversity of content and purpose in modern feminist *midrash*. It is important for religious studies scholars of Jewish feminism to note differences between

forms of feminist *midrash* and to have a framework to aid in evaluating those differences. This essay provides specific criteria for two contrasting categories of modern feminist *midrash*. *The Red Tent* served as a case study here, but there is plenty of other material to evaluate.

For Jewish feminists, what is at stake in this discussion is who has the authority to decide what is modern *midrash* and who has the authority to create the *midrash*. The problem Jewish feminists face is that they do not wish to break from Jewish tradition. They strive to reconcile their experience as modern women with perceived patriarchal aspects in their religious tradition and they view the creation of modern *midrash* as a legitimately Jewish process for achieving this. The answer to the question of authority depends on the audience. Umansky asserts that any Jewish woman has the authority to create personal *midrash*. Goldstein provides a model for *midrash* created only by female rabbis for public use in the Jewish community. *The Red Tent* functions as *midrash* for certain readers and they deem it *midrash* by their own authority. Each addresses the discrepancy between modern lives and ancient Jewish tradition.

Jewish religious practices radically changed in the centuries following the destruction of the Second Temple. *Midrash* and the concept of Oral Torah enabled the Jewish tradition to adapt. It seems that history is repeating itself with respect to the twentieth century world. Modern Judaism is being confronted with changes, which include the women's equality movement. The rabbinical tradition replaced Temple worship and now the patriarchal rabbinical tradition is being infused with feminine voices. As the changing world impacts the Jewish tradition, Jewish feminists face a challenge similar to that of the first century Jews—whether to end their religion when

confronted with seemingly irreconcilable circumstances or to modify their religious practices creatively. The Jewish people did not turn away from the Torah after the destruction of the Second Temple; they regarded the Torah as even more holy and essential. Many Jewish feminists are reacting similarly to changes wrought by contemporary times. They are exercising their “birthright” to create *midrash*, perceiving themselves as delving more deeply into the richness of the Torah and, in the process, viewing themselves as enriching their tradition for the entire Jewish community.

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Appendix A: RABBINIC MIDRASH ON PSALM 81.6

The rabbis used *aggadah* to reconcile provocations in Psalm 81.6. There are four examples of lexical provocations in the three short lines of Psalm 81.6 which James L. Kugel describes in his essay, “Two Introductions to Midrash.”¹⁵⁹ Psalm 81.6 follows.

He imposed it as a decree upon Joseph (Jehoseph)
when he went forth from the land of Egypt;
I heard a language that I knew not.

The first lexical provocation is a different spelling of Joseph; in Psalm 81.6 Joseph’s name is spelled “*Yehosef*” instead of “*Yosef*.” There is an extra letter in the Hebrew, which is equivalent to an “h” in English. The second lexical provocation is an anomalous use of a Hebrew preposition, the preposition is the first word in the Hebrew line, but it is unusual to begin with a preposition; the preposition does not fit because it is not the word that would be used in Hebrew. The third lexical provocation is the phrase, “he went out over” which has two prepositions. The fourth provocation is the statement, “I heard a language that I knew not” that raises questions such as the identity of the “I” and what the language is.

The rabbis came up with extremely creative reasons for the four lexical provocations. Kugel provides a metaphor for the process – “the text’s irregularity is the grain of sand which so irritates the *midrashic* oyster that he constructs a pearl around it.”¹ Kugel illuminates the winding path of rabbinic logic step by step as the rabbis creatively weaved all four provocations into one cohesive story or *aggadah*.

For the rabbis, the odd spelling of Joseph is not an accident or a non-contracted form of the name, it is a jumping off point for creative exegesis. The rabbis looked at the text realized that there were other instances where the names of patriarchs had changed at important points in their lives. The rabbis decided that there must have been a similar turning point in Joseph’s life even if the Written Torah did not provide it. They tie the second provocation, the unusual preposition, into the new scenario which they are beginning to envision. The rabbis noticed that the phrase “a testimony in Joseph” (rather than using “to” or “for”) makes more sense in the new context because the testimony is in the name Joseph, meaning the extra “h” in his name. God changed Joseph’s name as a testimony at some point. The next lexical provocation enters the scenario. The phrase “when he went out over the land of Egypt” is puzzling because if God was referring to “during the time when Joseph was in Egypt,” He would have used the Hebrew verb for “to go out” and would not have used a preposition. The rabbis looked for reasons Joseph would have gone both “out” and “over.” The rabbis decided that the Egyptian Pharaoh let Joseph out of prison in order to become ruler over the land. So Joseph “went out” of prison and ruled “over” the land.¹ The rabbis also saw this as a major occasion in Joseph’s life which must have prompted the name change. It followed that God or one of his angels must have made the name change because the extra letter, “h,” was also in the name of God, Yahweh; the tetragrammaton, or four lettered Hebrew name for God is YHWH (or JHVH/Jehovah). Yet another twist which confirms the scenario for the rabbis

¹⁵⁹ James L. Kugel, “Two introductions to Midrash” in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick, 95-97 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

is that the phrase “set it as a testimony in Joseph” can also be read as “he set it” and the *samô* can be pronounced *semô* which would change “it” to “His Name,” therefore God’s name was inserted with divine intent as a testimony at an important instance of Joseph’s life, the moment he was let out of prison. Then the final lexical provocation, the problematic phrase “a tongue I did not know I hear,” enters the plot and the story gets even more interesting. The rabbis reasoned that when the Pharaoh said that Joseph should be vizier, or a high official, over Egypt because Joseph had correctly interpreted the Pharaoh’s dream, the Pharaoh’s courtiers must have objected and voiced opinions that Joseph did not know the seventy languages of the world and could not even speak proper Egyptian. This led to the Pharaoh’s decision to test Joseph’s language skills in the morning. The rabbis filled in the details of the *aggadic midrash*—an angel appeared during the night and gave Joseph the ability to speak all seventy languages and changed his name to mark the occasion. Then in the morning Joseph was able to say, “The tongues I did not know I now understand.” The four lexical provocations in Psalm 81.6 triggered the rabbis’ investigation and creativity, which led them to a new interpretation of the biblical passage.

**Appendix B: MODERN FEMINIST *MIDRASH* ON LILITH
(ON GENESIS 1 AND 2) BY JUDITH PLASKOW**

Our Story: The Coming of Lilith¹⁶⁰

In the beginning, the Lord God formed Adam and Lilith from the dust of the ground and breathed into their nostrils the breath of life. Created from the same source, both having been formed from the ground, they were equal in all ways. Adam, being a man, didn't like this situation, and he looked for ways to change it. He said, "I'll have my figs now, Lilith," ordering her to wait on him, and he tried to leave her the daily tasks of life in the garden. But Lilith wasn't one to take any nonsense; she picked herself up, uttered God's holy name, and flew away. "Well, now, Lord," complained Adam, "that uppity woman you sent me has gone and deserted me." The Lord, inclined to be sympathetic, sent his messengers after Lilith, telling her to shape up and return to Adam or face dire punishment. She, however, preferred anything to living with Adam, decided to stay where she was. And so God, after more careful consideration this time, caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam and out of one of his ribs created for him a second companion, Eve.

For a time Eve and Adam had a good thing going. Adam was happy now, and Eve, though she occasionally sensed capacities within herself that remained undeveloped, was basically satisfied with the role of Adam's wife and helper. The only thing that really disturbed her was the excluding closeness of the relationship between Adam and God. Adam and God just seemed to have more in common, both being men, and Adam came to identify with God more and more. After a while, that made God a bit uncomfortable too, and he started going over in his mind whether he may not have made a mistake letting Adam talk him into banishing Lilith and creating Eve, seeing the power that gave Adam.

Meanwhile Lilith, all alone, attempted to rejoin the human community in the garden. After her first fruitless attempt to breach its walls, Adam worked hard to build them stronger, even getting Eve to help him. He told her fearsome stories of the demon Lilith who threatens women in childbirth and steals children from their cradles in the middle of the night. The second time Lilith came, she stormed the garden's main gate, and a great battle ensued between her and Adam in which she was finally defeated. This time, however, before Lilith got away, Eve got a glimpse of her and saw she was a woman like herself.

After this encounter, seeds of curiosity and doubt began to grow in Eve's mind. Was Lilith indeed just another woman? Adam had said she was a demon. Another Woman! The very idea attracted Eve. She had never seen another creature like herself before. And how beautiful and strong Lilith looked! How bravely she had fought! Slowly, slowly, Eve began to think about the limits of her own life within the garden.

One day, after many months of strange and disturbing thoughts, Eve, wandering around the edge of the garden, noticed a young apple tree she and Adam had planted, and saw that one of its branches stretched over the garden wall. Spontaneously, she tried to climb it, and struggling to the top, swung herself over the wall.

¹⁶⁰ Judith Plaskow, "Our Story: The Coming of Lilith" in *Biblical Women in the Midrash, A Sourcebook*, ed. Naomi Hyman, 11-13 (Northvale: Jason Aronson Inc., 1997).

She did not wander long on the other side before she met the one she had come to find, for Lilith was waiting. At first sight of her, Eve remembered the tales of Adam and was frightened, but Lilith understood and greeted her kindly. “Who are you?” they asked each other, “What is your story?” And they sat and spoke together, of the past and then of the future. They talked for many hours, not once, but many times. They taught each other many things, and told each other stories, and laughed together, and cried, over and over, till the bond of sisterhood grew between them.

Meanwhile, back in the garden, Adam was puzzled by Eve’s comings and goings, and disturbed by what he sensed to be her new attitude toward him. He talked to God about it, and God, having his own problems with Adam and a somewhat broader perspective, was able to help out a little—but he was confused too. Something had failed to go according to plan. As in the days of Abraham, he needed counsel from his children. “I am who I am,” thought God, “but I must become who I will become.”

And God and Adam were expectant and afraid the day Eve and Lilith returned to the garden, bursting with possibilities, ready to rebuild it together.

**Appendix C: MODERN FEMINIST *MIDRASH* ON SARAH
(ON GENESIS 22) BY ELLEN UMANSKY**

Re-Visioning Sarah: A Midrash on Genesis 22¹⁶¹

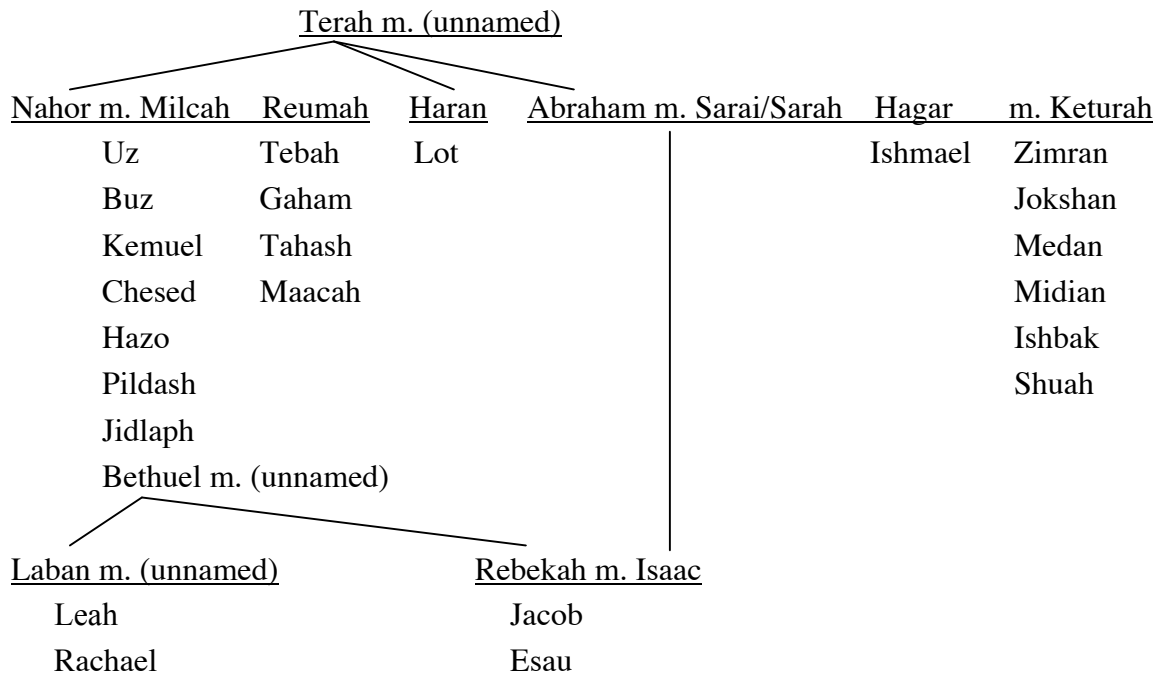
It was morning. Sarah had just awakened and reached over to touch her husband, Abraham, to caress him, but Abraham wasn't there. Neither, she discovered, was Isaac, her only son, Isaac, whom she loved more than anyone or anything in the world. She quickly dressed and went outside, hoping they'd be nearby. But they were gone, and so was Abraham's ass and his two young servants. It wasn't unusual for Abraham to take Isaac somewhere, but never this early and never without saying goodbye. And so she waited, and wept, and screamed.

Hours passed. It was hot and Sarah thought about going inside to escape the heat of the sun. But what if I miss them, she thought. I want to make sure I catch the first glimpse of them, even if they're far away. And so she stood and waited . . . and waited . . . and waited. She felt anxious, nervous, upset. "Where could they be?" "Where has Abraham taken my son?" The sun began to set. She started to shiver, partly from the cold, mostly from fear. Again she cried, and wailed, and moaned. Isaac had been God's gift to her, a sign of His love and a continuing bond between them. She had laughed when God told her she was pregnant. She was old and no longer able to bear a child. But God had given her Isaac and filled her breasts with milk and for the first time in her life Sarah was happy.

She looked around her and saw the fields, now empty, and in the distance saw the mountains, sloping upwards into the sky. And then she saw them . . . Abraham walking with his ass and his servants and Isaac far behind, walking slowly, his head turning from side to side, his hands oddly moving as though he were trying to make sense of something; and Sarah knew in that instant where Abraham and Isaac had been and why they had gone. Though she could barely make out the features of Isaac's face, she could tell from his movements and his gestures that he was angry, that he wanted nothing to do with his father who had tried to kill him. Abraham was almost down the mountain by now and soon would be home. He'd try to explain, to make her understand *his* side of the story. But Sarah wanted no part of it. She was tired of hearing Abraham's excuses and even more tired of hearing what *he* thought God demanded. And so Sarah turned and went inside and prayed that if only for one night, Abraham would leave her alone.

¹⁶¹ Ellen M. Umansky, "Re-Visioning of Sarah: A Midrash on Genesis 22" in *Biblical Women in the Midrash, A Sourcebook*, ed. Naomi Hyman, 28-29 (Northvale: Jason Aronson Inc., 1997). This is a written version of Umansky's *midrash* on Sarah, but in her previously mentioned essay, "Creating a Jewish Feminist Theology, Possibilities and Problems," which was published in 1989, Umansky provides a description of the circumstances in which she spontaneously created this *midrash* in Sarah's voice.

Appendix D: GENEALOGICAL CHART OF JACOB'S FAMILY AS DESCRIBED IN GENESIS



THE CHILDREN OF JACOB*

<u>Jacob/Israel m. Leah</u>	<u>m. Rachael</u>	<u>Bilhah</u>	<u>Zilpah</u>
Reuben (1)	Joseph (12)	Dan (5)	Gad (7)
Simeon (2)	Benjamin (13)	Naphtali (6)	Asher (8)
Levi (3)			
Judah (4)			
Issachar (9)			
Zebulun (10)			
Dinah (11)			

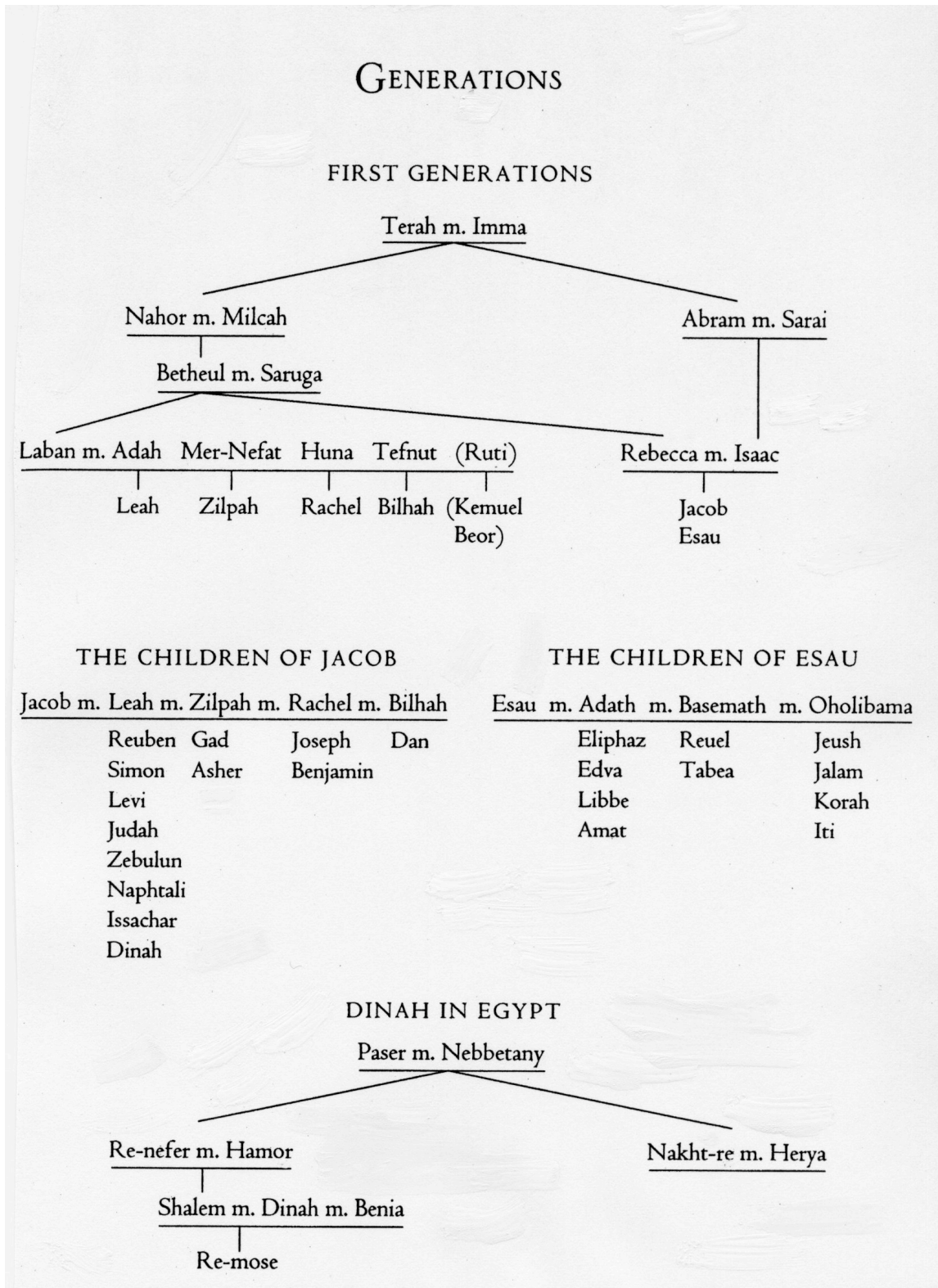
THE CHILDREN (SONS) OF ESAU**

<u>Esau m. Adah</u>	<u>m. Oholibamah</u>	<u>m. Basemath</u>
Eliphaz	Jeush	Reuel
	Jalam	
	Korah	

*The order of birth is in parentheses.

**Daughters are mentioned as present, but not named in Genesis 36:6.

Appendix E: GENEALOGICAL CHART OF JACOB’S FAMILY AS IT APPEARS IN THE RED TENT



**Appendix F: TRADITIONAL RABBINIC MIDRASH ON DINAH
(ON GENESIS 34) BY RASHI¹⁶²**

לד/א – 34/1	382 / בראשית – פרשת וישלח
<p>an altar there and he called it "God is the God of Israel."</p>	<p>שם מִזְבֵּחַ וַיִּקְרָא לוֹ אֵל אֱלֹהֵי לד א יִשְׂרָאֵל: חמישי וַתֵּצֵא</p>
<p>34 ¹Now Dinah — the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne to Jacob — went out to look over the daughters of the land.</p>	<p>דִּינָה בַת-לֵאָה אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה לַיַּעֲקֹב לְרֵאִוֹת בְּבָנוֹת הָאָרֶץ:</p>
<p align="center">אונקלוס – תמון מדבחה ופלח עלוהי קדם אל אלהא דישראל: א ונפקת דינה בת לאה די ולידת ליעקב למחוזי בבנת ארעא: רש"י</p>	
<p>(שמות יז:טו) לא שהמזבח קרוי ה', אלא על שם הגם קרא שם המזבח להזכיר שזכו של הקב"ה, ה' הוא נסי. ורבותינו דרשו שהקדוש ברוך הוא קראו ליעקב אל (מגילה יח.), וד"ת כפטיש יפוזן סלע וירמיה כג:כט) מתחלקים לכמה טעמים (שבת פח:), ואני ליישב פשוטו של מקרא באתי: (א) בת לאה. ולא בת יעקב, אלא ע"ש</p>	<p>חריפים בכל מקום, כגון עובר לסוחר (לעיל כג:טז): (ב) ויקרא לו אל אלהי ישראל. לא שהמזבח קרוי אלהי ישראל, אלא על שם שהיה הקב"ה עמו והגילו קרא שם המזבח על שם הגם, להיות שזכו של מקום נזכר בקריאת השם. כלומר, מי שהוא אל, הוא הקב"ה, הוא לאלהים יו ששמי ישראל. וכן מצינו במשה ויקרא שמו ה' נסי</p>
<p align="center">— RASHI ELUCIDATED —</p>	
<p>comparable to "negotiable" – כגון „עובר לסוחר” – “sharp” in any place, – חריפים בכל מקום currency.”¹</p>	
<p>לא שהמזבח קרוי אלהי – AND HE CALLED IT, “GOD [IS] THE GOD OF ISRAEL.” – ויקרא לו אל אלהי ישראל. אל – Not that the altar is called “God of Israel,” but rather, אלא – but rather, קרא שם שהיה הקדוש ברוך, – and rescued him, – והצילו – because the Holy One, Blessed is He, was with him – להיות שזכו של מקום נזכר – he called the name of the altar after the miracle, – through proclamation of the name of the altar, – as if to say, – מי שהוא אל – He Who is God, הוא – He is a God for me, whose name is Israel.”³ – ויקרא שמו ה' נסי” – And so do we find regarding Moses: “And he called its name ‘HASHEM is my Miracle.’”⁴ – Not that the altar was called “HASHEM,”⁵ אלא – Rather, שם המזבח, – he called the name of the altar after the miracle, – to mention the praise of the Holy One, Blessed is He: HASHEM is my miracle. – ה' הוא נסי. – But our Rabbis expounded it as saying – that the Holy One, Blessed is He, called Jacob “God.”⁶ – And the words of Torah are “as a hammer that shatters a rock,”⁷ – dividing into many lines of reasoning,⁸ – ואני ליישב פשוטו של מקרא באתי – but I have come to resolve the simple meaning of the text.</p>	
<p align="center">34.</p>	
<p>I. אלא על שם – THE DAUGHTER OF LEAH. – וְלֹא בַת יַעֲקֹב – And not the daughter of Jacob?</p>	
<p>1. Above 23:16. 2. The words in braces do not appear in any early printed editions. They appear to have been inserted into the text of Rashi at some later date, for חוקרן does not mean “good, sharp, negotiable” in the language of Targum. It means “sheep,” as we see from Targum Onkelos to 21:28-30 above. In ancient times, it was common to barter with sheep instead of using money. See <i>Mivchar Kesavim</i> by R' Matisyahu Shtrashun, Mossad HaRav Kook, 5729, pp. 25-26. 3. The verse does not mean “and he called it ‘God, the God of Israel.’” If it did, Jacob would have been naming the altar “God.” Rather, it means “God is the God of Israel” (<i>Mishmeres HaKodesh</i>). 4. Exodus 17:15.</p>	<p>5. That is, the verse does not mean “and he called its name ‘HASHEM, my Miracle.’” 6. <i>Megillah</i> 18a. According to this interpretation, ויקרא לו אל אלהי ישראל is read, “And the God of Israel called him ‘God.’” God called Jacob “God” in the sense that He made him master over the earthly realm of Creation (see <i>Gur Aryeh</i>). 7. Rashi borrows this phrase from <i>Jeremiah</i> 23:29. 8. <i>Shabbos</i> 88b, see Rashi there, s.v., מה פטיש. Just as the hammer shatters the rock into many splinters, so, too, does the Torah have many diverse facets, each of them reflecting a different aspect of God’s truth. Rashi makes similar use of this verse in his comments to <i>Exodus</i> 6:9.</p>

¹⁶² *Rashi Commentary on the Torah Vol. 1 – Bereishis / Genesis* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 1994) 382-383.

² Shechem, son of Hamor the Hivvite, the prince of the land, saw her; he took her, and he lay with her, and violated her. ³ He became deeply attached to Dinah, daughter of Jacob; he loved the maiden and spoke to the maiden's heart. ⁴ So Shechem spoke to Hamor, his father, saying, "Take me this girl for a wife."

⁵ Now Jacob heard that he had defiled his daughter Dinah, while his sons were with his livestock in the field; so Jacob kept silent until their arrival.

⁶ Hamor, Shechem's father, went out to Jacob to speak to him. ⁷ Jacob's sons arrived from the field, when they heard; the men were distressed, and were fired deeply with indignation, for he had committed an outrage in Israel by lying with a daughter of Jacob — and such a thing is not done.

ב וַיֵּרָא אֶתָּהּ שָׁכֵם בֶּן־חַמּוֹר הַחִיטִּי
נָשִׂיא הָאָרֶץ וַיִּקַּח וַיִּשְׁכַּב אֶתָּהּ
ג וַיַּעֲנֶנָּה: וַתִּדְבַק נַפְשׁוֹ בְּדִינָה בַת־
יַעֲקֹב וַיֵּאָהֵב אֶת־הַנְּעֹרָ וַיְדַבֵּר עִל־
ד לֵב הַנְּעֹרָ: וַיֹּאמֶר שָׁכֵם אֶל־חַמּוֹר
אָבִיו לֵאמֹר קַח־לִי אֶת־הַיְלָדָה
ה הַזֹּאת לְאִשָּׁה: וַיַּעֲקֹב שָׁמַע כִּי טָמְאָה
אֶת־דִּינָה בָתּוֹ וּבָנָיו הָיוּ אֶת־מִקְנֵהוּ
ו בַשָּׂדֶה וַהֲחָרַשׁ יַעֲקֹב עַד־בָּאֵם: וַיֵּצֵא
חַמּוֹר אָבִי־שָׁכֵם אֶל־יַעֲקֹב לְדַבֵּר
ו אֵתָּו: וּבָנָיו יַעֲקֹב בָּאוּ מִן־הַשָּׂדֶה
כְּשִׁמְעֵם וַיִּתְעַצְבוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים וַיַּחֲרֹ
לָהֶם מְאֹד כִּי נָבְלָה עֲשָׂה בִישְׂרָאֵל
לְשָׁכַב אֶת־בַּת־יַעֲקֹב וְכֵן לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה:

אונקלוס

ב וַיִּזְוֶן יְתֵה שָׁכֵם בֶּר חַמּוֹר חִיטִּי וְרָבָא דְאָרְעָא וּדְבַר יְתֵה וְשָׁכִיב יְתֵה וְעֵנֶנָּה: ג וְאִתְרַעֲיַאת נַפְשָׁה בְּדִינָה בַת יַעֲקֹב וּרְחִים יְת עוֹלָמְתָא וּמְלִיל תְּנַחוּמִין עַל לְבָא דְעוֹלָמְתָא: ד וַיֹּאמֶר שָׁכֵם לְחַמּוֹר אָבִיהִי לְמִימֵר סָב לִי יְת עוֹלָמְתָא הַדָּא לְאַנְתּוֹ: ה וַיַּעֲקֹב שָׁמַע אֲרִי סָאִיב יְת דִּינָה בְּרַתָּהּ וּבְגוּהִי חָו עִם גִּיתוּהִי בְּחַקְלָא וַשְׁתִּיק יַעֲקֹב עַד מִיִּתְיְהוּן: ו וּפְקַח חַמּוֹר אָבִיהִי דְשָׁכֵם לְוַת יַעֲקֹב לְמַלְלָא עַמָּה: ז וּבָנָי יַעֲקֹב עָלוּ מִן חַקְלָא כְּד שָׁמְעוּ וְאִתְנַסִּיטוּ גְבַרְיָא וְתַקִּיף לְהוֹן לְחַדָּא אֲרִי קְלָנָא עַבְד בִּישְׂרָאֵל לְמַשְׁכַּב עִם בַּת יַעֲקֹב וְכֵן לֹא כָּשֵׁר לְאִתְעַבְדָּא:

רש"י

יֵאֵשְׁתֵּה נִקְרָאת בַּת לֵאָה, שֶׁאִף הִיא יֹאֵלֵנִית הִיאֵה שְׁנֵאֲמֵר וְהֵלֵךְ לֵאָה לְקַרְתּוֹ (לְעִיל לְטוֹ) וְעוֹלִיָה מִשְׁלֹה מִשְׁלֹה כְּאֵמֶה כְּכַתְּבָה (ב"ר פ"א): (ב) וַיִּשְׁכַּב אִתָּהּ. כְּדַרְכָּה: וַיַּעֲנֶנָּה. שֶׁלֹּא כְּדַרְכָּה (ב"ר ט"ז): (ג) עַל לֵב הַנְּעֹרָה. דְּבַרִּים הַמְתִּישִׁים עַל הַלֵּב. רֹאִי, אֲנִיךְ בַּחֲלָקַת שְׂדֵה קִטְנָה כְּמֵה מִמּוֹן בְּזוּז, אֲנִי אֲשַׁחַךְ וְתַקִּינִי הַעִיר וְכָל שְׂדוּמִית (ב"ר פ"ז): (ז) וְכֵן לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה. לַעֲנוֹת אֶת הַבְּתוּלוֹת, שֶׁהָאוֹמוֹת גִּדְרוּ עֲלֵמָן מִן הָעַרְוִית עַל יְדֵי הַמַּבּוּל (ב"ר ט"ז):

RASHI ELUCIDATED

יֵאֵשְׁתֵּה נִקְרָאת בַּת לֵאָה – she is called “the daughter of Leah,” וְהֵצֵא, וְהֵצֵא – as it says, שְׁנֵאֲמֵר – for [Leah], too, was one who would go out, וְעוֹלִיָה מִשְׁלֹה הַמְּשָׁלִי – Leah went out to meet him. ¹ – לֵאָה לְקַרְתּוֹ ² – “Like mother, like daughter.” ²

□ AND HE LAY WITH HER – וַיִּשְׁכַּב אִתָּהּ – in a natural manner. ³
□ AND VIOLATED HER – וַיַּעֲנֶנָּה – in an unnatural manner. ³

3. TO THE MAIDEN'S HEART. – Words which settle upon the heart, i.e., which appeal to the heart. He said, – רֹאִי אֲנִיךְ בְּחֲלָקַת שְׂדֵה קִטְנָה כְּמֵה מִמּוֹן בְּזוּז – “See how much money your father expended for a small plot of land! I will marry you, and all of its fields.” ⁴

7. AND SUCH A THING IS NOT DONE. – To violate virgins; שֶׁהָאוֹמוֹת – for the nations of the world restricted themselves from sexual immorality because of the Flood. ⁵

1. Above 30:16.
2. Bereishis Rabbah 80:1.
3. Bereishis Rabbah 80:5.
4. Bereishis Rabbah 80:7.
5. Bereishis Rabbah 80:6. “And such a thing is not done” implies a widely accepted restriction; it cannot refer to a convention that applies to the family of Jacob alone (see Gur Aryeh).
One of the sins for which God destroyed the world at the time of the Flood was sexual immorality; see Rashi to 6:11 above.

The biblical text is written in Hebrew at the top of the page and the midrash, or commentary, is written in below. Rashi is an acronym for Rabbi Shlomo Yizchaki (1040-1105 C.E.).

**Appendix G: MODERN FEMINIST *MIDRASH* ON DINAH
(ON GENESIS 34) BY NAOMI GRAETZ**

A Daughter in Israel is Raped¹⁶³

They are tearing me apart. Will it never end?

When I was much younger than I am today, I was raped. I remember how the pain seared through me and how afterwards, I couldn't stop shaking.

For months I was in a constant state of fear that it might happen to me again and that was when I stopped going out to the fields for they were no longer safe. I still carefully check to see that no one suspicious is lurking around when I go out to tend animals.

I wasn't always a coward. Once I was known as princess Dinah, daughter of Jacob's first wife, Leah. I had six adoring brothers who took me with them wherever they went and who confided their secrets to me. I had many friends who visited me and I in turn visited with them.

One morning I crossed the mountain pass to spend a few days with the girls in the neighboring village. I had plenty of time to pick some wild flowers, which I did. Shechem was out hunting and saw me alone. I had seen him before. I knew who he was. He greeted me. I wasn't afraid. Then suddenly he threw me down and abused me. Against my will, he forced me to lie with him. I screamed and screamed, "Help me!" "Save me!" "Stop!" "Don't do it!" "Leave me alone!" But no one heard. Afterwards he dragged me to his father's home, alleging that he loved me and wanted to marry me.

Why did he single me out? I didn't like him. I didn't lead him on. I was just there. And he thought I wanted him after what he did.

My mother, Leah, came to the town of Shechem to persuade me I had no choice but to marry him after he had carried me off. She tried to console me by saying, "It's not the end of the world. He wants to marry you. His father is the chieftain of his clan. You'll be comfortable here. You will learn to live with him and love him."

She went on and on. I felt only the throbbing pain inside me and a feeling of shame. "Take what you can get. No one else will want you now! Be happy he still loves you," she said.

How could my mother think of marriage? Didn't she remember her own loveless marriage?

I yearned for my old way of life. But my innocence had been stolen. The old me no longer existed and it took an eternity to make peace with the new one. I had become a soiled object, someone to be pitied, to be quickly disposed of in marriage. I was someone who had to be revenged, who was ruined and undesirable, hating my body for its remembrance of what was.

My father, Jacob, was furious. He blamed me. He railed at me, "Why were you out in the fields by yourself?" He kept probing me, "Are you sure you didn't lead him on?" He insulted me by insinuating that I was guilty. But when my brothers discussed revenge he remained conspicuously silent.

¹⁶³ Naomi Graetz, "A Daughter in Israel is Raped" in *Biblical Women in the Midrash, A Sourcebook*, ed. Naomi Hyman, 69-71 (Northvale: Jason Aronson Inc., 1997).

Why did father blame me? I was as innocent as the virgin land we had settled. He had never warned me about the dangers awaiting young girls. How could he think I would invite anyone to forcibly enter my body!

After being raped, my body no longer belonged to me. I was examined to see if I had really been penetrated. To ease the burning, the women smeared salve in my innermost recesses. They looked, they probed, they discussed. Although they wailed and commiserated with me, no one understood me.

My mother and Shechem wanted to solve everything with marriage. My father was impotent with his rage and accusations. My brothers wanted revenge. They all were tearing me apart. My privacy was invaded. I had no place to escape. There was nowhere else to go. No one took my needs into account. I needed to be alone.

They wouldn't let it rest. It rankled and festered like an open wound that would not heal.

My two older brothers Shimon and Levi, came to me full of plans. They explained their strategy. They were doing it for me. "The honor of the family is at stake," they proclaimed.

"Who cares?" I asked. "Will killing bring about absolution? Will it restore my innocence? Will it free me to love? Will it free me of the fear of being hurt again?"

My brothers set their plans in motion. They ordered me, "Agree to marry Shechem so that peace will be made. The bridal price will be his circumcision."

They plotted to kill Shechem's whole family while they were recovering from the circumcision. His family would be too weak to fight back. The marriage would not take place after all. They sought my approval for this plan.

How ironic! I thought. What a fitting punishment! Mutilate the weapon that ripped me apart. Kill the only person I could marry! Would it make me whole again? Would it erase the memory of the pain? I was young then, I had no power; I let them do what they did. My sentence had been passed.¹⁶⁴ My will to fight was gone. My last act of resistance had been in my cry, "Don't do it!"

Their plan succeeded. They avenged my honor. It was over for them, but not for me. I lie awake at night. Was it the right thing to do? So many lives lost! For what! And the child that later they tore from my body—what became of her? They said they destroyed her—left her to die. She could have united our two families. Then at least my sacrifice would have had some value. We would have had peace in this wretched land.

I still dream about her. They go about their business as if I am invisible. They talk around me, don't look me in the eye. I no longer exist for them. When I walk out of my tent, there is a sudden silence. The topics are changed. I embarrass them. They are afraid to touch me, to draw near.

I register every slight, every nuance of speech. I fear that they are planning some dreadful fate for me. I cringe and hope they will not notice me.

"Poor Dinah, what will become of her?"

¹⁶⁴ The meaning of *din* is "sentence" or "judgment," as in *gezar din mavet*, "death sentence"; thus, Dinah can be understood as "her sentence." [footnote by Graetz]

**Appendix H: CONTRADICTIONS BETWEEN *THE RED TENT*
AND THE BIBLE***

page(s)	<i>The Red Tent</i>	verse(s)	Bible
189-190	Diamant is clear about Dinah's consent before intercourse with Shalem. Dinah was a willing partner. Shalem sought consent and Dinah gave it.	Gen 34:2	Shalem "saw her and he took her, and lay her." The Hebrew words for "rape" are used (<i>vayishkav et</i>).
30-33	Zilpah fed Rachael's fear of sex; Rachael begged Leah to switch with her on the wedding day. The women execute their plan to switch the brides.	Gen 29:22-26	Laban switched Rachael and Leah on Rachael and Jacob's wedding day.
11	Leah had two different colored eyes which made people uncomfortable. Men were not able to stare her in the face.	Gen 29:17	Leah had "tender eyes" which were contrasted to Rachael's beauty.
61	Naphtali and Issachar were twins; Leah bore them.	Gen 30:7-8 Gen 30:17-18	They were not twins – Bilhah bore Naphtali and Leah bore Issachar.
66-68	All "four mothers" dreamt about Dinah before she was born. Four paragraphs describe Dinah's birth.	Gen 30:21	There is no mention of a dream foretelling Dinah's birth. The Bible announces Dinah's birth in one line.
62-63: genealogy chart	Laban bought a slave, Ruti, and abused her terribly. Ruti bore Laban two sons – Kemuel and Beor.	nonexistent; Gen 22:20-21	There is no Ruti. Laban had no sons. Kemuel is the son of Nahor, Anraham's brother.
2; 11	Dinah's "four mothers" were four sisters – they shared the same father, Laban, but each had a different mother (2). Leah's mother is named Adah, and she refused to let Leah die because of her two different colored eyes (11).	Gen 29:16	Leah and Rebecca were daughters of Laban, but neither mother is named. (They may have the same mother.) The parentage of Bilah and Zilpah is not given. (In rabbinic <i>midrash</i> the four women are sisters.)
121	Jacob spends a night alone across the river Jabbok. They find him the next day beaten and naked.	Gen 32:23-33	Jacob spends a night alone across the river Jabbok. He fought with a man all night long. The man wrenched his hip from the socket.
208	Jacob takes the name "Isra'El" as a disguise after his sons murders the men in Hamor's kingdom.	Gen 32:29	The man was a divine being who changed Jacob's name to Israel after they physically struggled together.
11; genealogy chart	Diamant names many unnamed biblical women such as Leah's mother, Adah, and Laban's mother, Saruga.	nonexistent; Gen 36:2	The women are mentioned as wives or mothers, but not named. Adah is Esau's wife in Genesis.
30-36	The wedding nights of Leah and Rachael are described in detail.	Gen 29:21-30	Wedding nights are not described in detail.
150	Rebecca is a priestess of a female cult. She is an oracle. People seek her advice. She is attended by ten women.	nonexistent	Rebekah is not an oracle or religious leader.

* This list includes differences that have a feminist spin or differences that might be considered too controversial to be labeled modern *midrash*. Some of Diamant's changes do not alter the overall meaning of a passage, but many of the changes bring about subtle shifts in power. The changes in storylines often strengthen the female characters and weaken the images of the male characters. The rearranging of names and genealogy confuses readers as to what is biblical and what is not. Some of Diamant's "earthy" details may render the story less sacred, such as the racy passages about Jacob's wedding nights.