

## Midrash: Janet Shafner's Quest for Meaning in the Sacred Texts

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Janet Shafner says of her art, "This is my way of learning." This statement indicates how deeply Shafner has absorbed the process of *midrash*- creative interpretation in the Jewish tradition- into her artwork. The word "*midrash*" literally means "seeking." *Midrash* is a way of reading text in which the reader uses gleaned hints, scholarship, personal experience, and creative extrapolation to interpret the sacred narrative and even add to its content. By doing this creative work, interpreters enlarge the tradition and wind their own voices into it. While much ancient and modern *midrash* is written, textual interpretation can and does take place in all artistic media. Painting is a particularly vivid way to make new meaning out of a text, as painters throughout Western history amply demonstrate, because the artist can create the world of the text as he or she sees it. Shafner's art uses biblical narrative, traditional *midrash*, and the artist's own dark yet profoundly striking vision to form a new body of modern *midrash* - a series of paintings that, like a medieval illuminator, lights the sacred in an utterly new way.

Women in this generation have a particular interest, and even a mission, to reclaim the process of *midrash* because women's voices have been most excluded from the traditional corpus of religious literature. Scholars from Phyllis Trible to Athalya Brenner to Judith Plaskow to Elliott Wolfson have written about the impact of this exclusion on biblical, rabbinic, and mystical literature. Because women's voices are absent, the reader does not feel the reality of women's lives. While the original exclusion cannot be remedied, *midrash* offers an extraordinary hope- the possibility of retroactively claiming the Bible through retelling its words and images in new ways sensitive to women's experience.

Shafner is one of those modern female artists who have seized on this hope. Her paintings as well as her commentaries on her own work both give a rich voice to once obscured figures. Shafner's depictions of Lot's wife and the veiled Leah stand for more than the silent biblical characters they represent. They stand for a world of silent women who are now able to tell their stories. The crusted salt has cracked, the veil has fallen away- a live woman can now emerge and become real.

Midrashists - ancient or modern, male or female - seek to answer questions about the text and explicate ethical problems. For example, the ancient rabbis explicate Lot's wife's curious demise, which is virtually passed over in the Bible, by explaining that she turned back to look for her missing daughters (Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer 25)- or, alternatively, the rabbis say that she

refused to give her angelic guests salt for their meal and was punished by becoming salt herself (Genesis Rabbah 51:5). Shafner explicates these legends and others as her creative sources, then shows us Lot's wife as a mysterious dark form meditating on the destruction of Sodom, her face and thoughts obscured. Shafner's art reminds us that even when commentary tries to answer our concerns, there are always questions that remain.

Readers also impact the text through bringing to it a contemporary lens. Outrageously, one ancient sage responds to a query about what happened to Isaac after his near-sacrifice at Abraham's hands by making the anachronistic claim that he went to yeshiva, to an institution of Talmudic learning (Genesis Rabbah 56:11). The sage brings his own historical experience to the text. So too, in a more tragic way, Shafner brings her consciousness of history to her understanding of the story of Queen Esther by surrounding Esther's courtyard with the empty shoes of genocide victims. Every midrash begins with a question, but the answer may not come from the text- it may come from the lived experience of the interpreter.

Shafner, like many of her contemporaries, is particularly interested in reclaiming the lives of women. Her paintings ask continual, haunting, questions about the mythic women who populate the Bible. To this end, Shafner mines rabbinic legends for characters and ideas. As part of her work on Genesis, Shafner paints Cain and his twin sister together in the womb. Though Cain's sister is never mentioned in the text, rabbinic legends, seeking to find mothers for the next biblical generation, claim that sisters were born with both Cain and Abel (Genesis Rabbah 22:7; Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer 21). Shafner seizes upon this fragment of story to meditate on the birth of the first daughter and what it might mean to honor that birth. The uterine depiction of both children has a mystical feel, as if Cain and his sister are universal souls and not only fetuses. The painting is not a mere depiction of tradition- its eerie quality allows us to meditate on the weird, incestuous nature of the legend that Cain marries his sister, and on the strange and sometimes eerie twinhood we feel with our own sexual partners. Through these archetypal figures, Shafner is attempting to get at the dark and mysterious details of our own lives.

Further on in the collection, Shafner continues this mystical and midrashic approach. She paints Miriam, not as a young dancer at the Sea of Reeds, but as an older woman. She sits in a waterfall, recalling the legend that Miriam was associated with a miraculous well of

water (cf. Bava Metziah 17a; Taanit 9a), and the falling water obscures her form so that Miriam becomes virtually triangular- an image recalling God, the Torah, and Israel, the siblinghood of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, or even the triune divinity of maiden, mother, and crone. There is a coarse, primordial quality to Miriam, as if to remind us that she is older than Western culture. Above Miriam's head is the red heifer, a biblical symbol of purity and atonement. Shafner not only repeats the traditional symbols associated with Miriam, but transforms the prophetess into a kind of directional arrow pointing toward compassion and forgiveness. Like other Jewish feminists such as Lynn Gottlieb, Alicia Ostriker, and Merle Feld, Shafner reclaims the biblically marginalized Miriam as a source of authentic spiritual inspiration.

Yet women are by no means the only subjects of this work. Shafner also chooses texts, like the tower of Babel, the battle of Jacob and the angel, and the vision of Ezekiel, in order to shed light on modern problems of ethics and meaning. Shafner's depiction of Noah's ark, for example, shows a nuclear explosion in the background- a powerful commentary on destruction and punishment. This potent, reflective work parallels rabbinic use of the story of Jacob and Esau to comment on policies of the Roman government (cf. Genesis Rabbah 78:14), as well as modern use of the story of Sarah and Hagar to illuminate the sources of the Arab-Israeli conflict (cf. Ostriker, Alicia. "The Opinion of Hagar," in *Nakedness of the Fathers*, p. 73-74)). Through her midrashic art, Shafner is able to read her own questions and moral crises back into the biblical text.

Jewish tradition teaches that God consulted the Torah as a blueprint while forming creation (Genesis Rabbah 1:1). Shafner seems to draw directly from this ancient understanding. Her paintings have a primordial look to them, as if they are inhabited by kabbalists- as if they indeed are blueprints for a new mythic universe. Her biblical women and men seem to be blessed with the opportunity to remake themselves in thicker, blacker lines. Shafner's art assumes and demands that biblical texts come alive in the present moment- and that understanding is the touchstone of midrash.

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