

Our Torah portion for today, P'kudei, depicts the Israelites preparing for the completion and consecration of the Tabernacle, or tent structure, called Mishkan, in Hebrew. The Israelites are now a free people, who are building a sacred space for God to inhabit, as the wilderness journey continues.

The story contains everything you ever wanted to know and then some, about how to construct and decorate a Mishkan. It details the brightly colored embroidery, the special cloth, the precious jewels and elaborate metals to be employed as functional decoration, including patterns of the designer garments for the clergy, complete with headdress and turbans.

P'kudei, which means "the accounting," provides a finely detailed blueprint for building the Mishkan, down to the last socket, and the weight of gold and silver used. We have clearly defined rows of jewelry and border trims for priestly robes, and the word "linen" appears 7 -- that magical number which will come up again.... 7 times in one sentence. This suggests the importance of this fine linen cloth for priestly garments.

Now the preceding parashat, Vayak'heil, explicitly refers to women's role as spinners and weavers, -- "and the skilled women spun," it reads. It also tells us that women were the first to donate their precious possessions - jewelry and mirrors - for the building of the tent. There are references to both genders and their generous gifts of wood and metal for the Tabernacle. But in P'kudei, I search in vain for the women, who remain invisible. In P'kudei neither women nor men appear, but for architect, contractor, craftsman, and Moses.

Now through archaeological evidence, we know that creating cloth required careful carding and weaving, procedures usually done by women. Exodus in prior portions tells us "women performed the skilled work of spinning, preparing the yarn and weaving fabrics." And further evidence reveals that female graves included weaving equipment, while male graves had none. Yet, P'kudei omits this vital role that women would have played in the construction of the Mishkan and its elaborate decorations. I search in vain for these invisible women. Which provides me with this opportunity to share with you the good news in a few moments.

I have always responded to unfairness, rooted for the underdog, felt sorry for the loser. Growing up in Florida, I witnessed racial segregation with all of its inequities. As a young professional, I experienced the double standard of less pay for working women in similar positions as working men. And I saw the huge discrepancy between men's sexual freedom and women's sexual victimization. So when I approach Torah, Bible study and God talk, I recoil from references to God as a "king" "lord" or the "almighty". I have trouble with the view of Eve as a temptress who led Adam astray. And when reading Midrash, I lament the story of Lilith, whom, when she refused to be subservient, was banished as an evil spirit. Lilith became an example of what was in store for an "uppity" woman, from a patriarchal viewpoint.

According to the Jewish scholar Judith Baskin, "female voices are not heard in rabbinic literature and, if they are mentioned, rabbinic assumptions are made of women's lesser intellectual, spiritual and moral capacities."

Where, in our Bible, were woman perceived and valued: as mother and child-bearer; wife and lover; daughter and child? Where is the Queen on a throne; or the honored sister who protects her younger sibling, as Miriam did? What was Sarah's reaction to the sacrifice of her young son Isaac, that her husband Abraham was prepared to make? What did she feel when she learned of this event from her son? How could she trust Abraham after this incident? Did she think of him as a God-crazed old man, or was she proud of him and his willingness to obey God's order? And what about Mrs. Noah, who was she? Imagine what she had to put up with on that crowded and smelly ark!

Well, at long last my search is over, the good news is here. Today we celebrate *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, recently published by Women of Reform Judaism. Women rabbis, cantors, scholars, historians, poets and songwriters - in fact, about 150 - collaborative minds now give voice to these silent or sometimes absent heroines. In this new volume, which improves upon Plaut's and other commentaries -- in its side by side and line for line -- Hebrew to English translations, we find varied comments from the distaff side. Contemporary women from all 4 branches of Judaism offer interpretive analyses. And in fairness, references to source material from men are also included.

Here between the lines of P'kudei, we get connections to the women: For example Bezalel, the chief architect of the Mishkan's design and construction, was thought to be the great grandson of Miriam. Miriam was considered the wise woman, and her house was called a "house of wisdom." It was Miriam's wisdom that was thought to be passed down to her talented great grandson.

Rabbi Lisa Grushcow notes that as the world was created in 7 days, so the structure was built in 7 days, beginning on the first day of the first month, in the 2nd year, or on Rosh Chodesh. Rosh Chodesh was a woman's holiday, and Grushcow suggests that this link recognizes women as the first to contribute their possessions for the Tabernacle, as told in last week's Parashat. She further notes that "women...were...able to discern when a cause is worthy of their generosity." p. 561

p. 562: Rabbi Noa Kushner calls the Mishkan "a home for God, an earthly residence; and, a meeting tent for Israel too; we now have a place to experience God."

vii And from Rabbi Laura Geller: "There is a Torah of our lives, as well as the Torah that was written down. Both need to be listened to and wrestled with: both unfold through interactive commentary." (*Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Spirituality*.)

pg vii The feminist theologian Judith Plaskow has written: "Jewish feminists must "reclaim Torah as our own"; ...to "make visible the presence, experience and deeds (of) women erased." (Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective)

Here, finally, Women of Reform Judaism has done just that.

I close with the last few lines from poet Debbie Perlman's

Psalm 32: A Song of Endings and Beginnings
Every season casts away its jagged edges. Rubs away the torn moments

To rejoice in the realignmentOf old ways made straight.

Inside each refitting, We renew again Your Creation,
Pulling it taut against us, A firm bound shield of Your affection.

Let us sing of our completions. . Your hand hovers, blesses,
Bids us move to new beginnings. ... Your hand moves us forward,
Toward unimagined completions.

Dr. Sherry Blumberg "AT THE TENT OF MEETING" Exodus 40:33-34

Finally, after long work, physical and mental // I come to the opening of the tent.

I know, God -- but do You know -- // what this work means?
You have always been in my thoughts // always in my mind
and even sometimes in my aching back
as I worked and struggled on Your behalf.

Let the opening of the tent, // encourage the opening of the text
and let me, Your humble daughter, // enter and not hold back.