Voicing a New Midrash: Women’s Holocaust Writing as Jewish Feminist Response

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Abstract

This paper explores women’s Holocaust writing as feminist Midrashic post-Holocaust response. Emil Fackenheim’s argument that Midrash is a potential form of response to the Holocaust is a springboard for thinking critically about Jewish feminist responses to the Holocaust. Reading women’s Holocaust writing in this way exposes themes that mark Jewish feminist post-Holocaust response while also extending and enhancing that response. Three key examples of women’s Holocaust writing are read as Midrash: Judith Isaacson’s Seed of Sarah, Cynthia Ozick’s “The Shawl,” and Ilona Karmel’s An Estate of Memory. Spanning fiction and memoir, these familiar narratives highlight key themes of gender, embodiment, maternity, relationality, sexual vulnerability, and violence.

The Shoah demands to be assimilated into the collective memory of the Jewish people, into forms and norms, rituals, stories, interpretations. This time, for the first time, women and men bear equally Judaism’s ancient obligation to shape memory and to let ourselves be shaped by what we remember.1 –Rachel Adler, Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics

A striking phrase occurs four times in the Babylonian Talmud: “They also participated in the Miracle.”2 The phrase explains and justifies anomalies; instances where women are obligated to observe a commandment that they otherwise would not be responsible for.3 They are commanded to “also” observe because they “also” were present when the historical experience that grounds

2 Many thanks to Marla Mitchell for her invaluable feedback and advice.
3 These four instances address three obligations. Each are tied to a particular festival. They include lighting the Chanukah Lights, drinking the four cups of wine at the Passover Seder, and hearing the reading of the Book of Esther on Purim.
those commandments occurred.\textsuperscript{4} The obligation is incumbent on both women and men because they share the same history.\textsuperscript{5} It is the exception that proves the rule; the exception must be mentioned because it is not the norm. Specifying that women also participated exposes how “at some level the Bavli recognizes that, as a rule, women’s history is not men’s history.”\textsuperscript{6} More pointedly, highlighting women’s inclusion underlines the naturalized androcentric perspective that frames the Bavli’s account.

Opening with this example sets the stage for thinking about historical narratives and the ways in which our communal lives are deeply marked by the construction of those narratives. What is most striking about the above example is how historical narrative, communal memory, identity and halakha (Jewish law) are intertwined in this dance where gender is normatively veiled and disconcertingly unveiled. This veiling of gender is also at play in Holocaust discourses; it is veiled when male experiences normatively frame our accounts of the Holocaust. Its exposure through the highlighting of particular themes in women’s Holocaust writing complicates and enriches post-Holocaust response while drawing out attention to the gendering of post-Holocaust discourses.

This question of gendered history raises important challenges for Jewish feminist thought. Its particular concerns for speaking to gender in the Jewish tradition opens up a critical opportunity to interrogate and reframe post-Holocaust discourses by voicing Jewish feminist responses to the Shoah. Emil Fackenheim’s

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{4} Women are not normally responsible for positive time-bound commandments. Shab. 23a (Chanukah), Pes. 108b (Passover), Meg. 4a and Ar. 3a (Purim). Cited by Shaye Cohen as part of her analysis of women’s membership in the covenant. Her question resonates powerfully with this project in thinking about how women are present/absent in memory of the Shoah and how that presence/absence informs the constitution of Jewish community after the Holocaust Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Are Women in the Covenant," in \textit{A Feminist Commentary on the Babylonian Talmud: Introduction and Studies}, ed. T. Ilan (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 25.
\textsuperscript{5} Cohen translates this phrase as “Even Women Participated in the Miracle” Ibid., 25.
\textsuperscript{6} The Bavli is the Babylonian Talmud. When people simply refer to the Talmud they are generally referring to the Babylonian Talmud. Ibid., 25
\end{footnotesize}
work suggests an intriguing strategy for such a project. One of Fackenheim’s more compelling movements is his turn to the traditional rabbinic method of Midrash as a model for philosophically and theologically responding to the Holocaust. Constructively reading his understanding of Mad Midrash, I explore how women’s Holocaust writing might be read as Jewish feminist midrashic responses to the Holocaust. 

Thinking about women’s Holocaust writing as Jewish feminist midrashic post-Holocaust response draws together multiple and sometimes conflicting accounts of Midrash. It also reveals pressure points, aroused by continuities and divergences that push up through multiple narratives. The first half of this article will bring together these linked narratives and make a case for developing Jewish feminist response in this way. As I move through a brief overview of rabbinic, contemporary, and Jewish feminist midrash, I will survey how Fackenheim’s understanding of midrash—especially “Mad Midrash”—sets the stage for such a reading. Throughout, I will draw attention to pressure points that push through these accounts of midrash and imprint reading women’s Holocaust writing as Jewish feminist post-Holocaust midrash. The second half of this article will take up the task of reading three particular works by Cynthia Ozick, Judith Magyar Isaacson, and Ilona Karmel as midrASHic response. Reading women’s Holocaust writing in this way exposes themes that necessarily mark Jewish feminist post-Holocaust response while also extending and enhancing that response.

Part One: Midrashic Thinking

RABBINIC AND CONTEMPORARY MIDRASH

For Scripture saith, God hath spoken once, twice have I heard this, that strength belongeth unto God. One Biblical verse may convey several teachings, but a single teaching cannot be deduced from different Scriptural verses. In R. Ishmael's School it was taught: And like in

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7 Midrash is a rabbinic exegetical method that often takes the form of narrative. Definitions of midrash are discussed below.
Voicing a New Midrash:
Women’s Holocaust Writing as Jewish Feminist Response

hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces: i.e., just as [the rock] is split into many splinters, so also may one Biblical verse convey many teachings. –Sanhedrin 34a

The term Midrash may be used broadly to refer to a rule-based process of rabbinic biblical exegesis, an interpretive commentary on a particular verse or book, or the genre of rabbinic works that, along with other rabbinic texts, began to be written down in the 2nd century C.E. and collected these commentaries.8 Midrashic commentaries address the problem of interpretation occasioned by the terse and sometimes opaque biblical text. Whether addressing lexical provocations, providing a missing piece of the narrative, fleshing out a biblical character’s motivations through narrative elaboration (as in the case of non-legal homiletic Midrash Aggadah), or explaining or clarifying a law (as in the legal and authoritative Midrash Halakha), midrash is driven by the need to interpret the biblical text.9 Midrashic (non-legal) narrative is most central to this discussion as it is, by and large, the most common form of contemporary and feminist midrash, provides the mode for Fackenheim’s thinking about midrashic existence and midrash as Holocaust response, and is suggestively congruent with women’s Holocaust writing as interpretive narratives.

Midrashic interpretation is intertextual and dialogical. Intertextuality, as Julia Kristeva outlines, presumes that “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another.”10 In the

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9 The three dominant modes of midrashic interpretation are exegesis (generally close textual reading of words, verses or an entire book or chapter), homily (usually structured around sermons relating to the week’s Torah reading) and narrative (including legends and stories about biblical characters and famous sages that often elaborate upon the original biblical narrative). Aggadah, adj. agгадic, refers to the non-legal homiletic and exegetical texts in rabbinic literature, especially Talmud and Midrash. It is contrasted with Halakha, adj. halakhic, which refers to legal texts.
10 Julia Kristeva, building on Mikhail Bakhtin’s work on dialogism, argues “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another.” Julia Kristeva, Desire in
context of Midrash, Daniel Boyarin explains that the “biblical narrative is gapped and dialogical. The role of the midrash is to fill in the gaps.” As a positioned interpretive discourse, Midrash is always in conversation with what has come before. As an intertext, Midrash responds to both textual and existential gaps in the biblical text. The text may beg for further explanation, or simply provide imaginative space to explore further. Existentially, the narrative may provide an entry point into explaining contemporary traumatic events (such as the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem) within the context of sacred story. Midrashic intertextuality – its dialogical relationship to Jewish traditional texts and history and its situated capacity for interpretively responding to contemporary catastrophe – is central to Fackenheim’s theological interest in midrash and will necessarily echo and reverberate through a Jewish feminist midrashic reading of women’s Holocaust writing.

In contrast with rabbinic Midrash, contemporary (or modern) Midrash is almost wholly aggadic and is generally inattentive to the rules that structure classical midrashic exegesis. Including but not limited to feminist Midrash, contemporary Midrash is almost exclusively devoted to imaginatively responding

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Daniel Boyarin’s Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash carefully and eloquently applies intertextuality to midrashic texts. As he notes, many scholars apply this now mainstream and uncontroversial literary theory to rabbinic texts. Every text is dialogical because no literary text is a self-contained entity; all texts are produced and situated in relations to previous and ongoing discourses. Jacob Neusner is highly critical of the ways in which intertextuality is applied to rabbinic sources. Boyarin argues that he misunderstands intertextuality in important ways. For more on Neusner and intertextuality see Jacob Neusner, Canon and Connection: Intertextuality in Judaism (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987) and Daniel Boyarin, Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 12-14.
11 Boyarin, Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash.
Voicing a New Midrash: 
Women’s Holocaust Writing as Jewish Feminist Response

to canonical texts in the narrative mode. By proffering an alternative— if sometimes startling—new narrative, contemporary midrash is frequently aimed at constructively re-imagining and/or interrupting the original traditional text in order to expose an ethical, theological and/or political contested issue in the original text and/or the contemporary context. This function is central to a contemporary definition of Midrash as constructively engaging traditional texts through imaginative narrative. For example, a queer Midrash by Andrew Ramer juxtaposes the conflicted experience of same-sex desire across urban rooftops

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12 Contemporary Midrash may also take the form of poetry, music, or visual arts, and is frequently promoted as an exercise for personal development. Poet and self-described midrashist Alicia Ostriker advises readers of Reform Judaism magazine how to write their own Midrash and reassures those that feel that it is somehow improper to appropriate the midrashic method by reminding her readers, “Yet Torah is a Tree of Life, and a tree can stay alive only if it grows. So it is with all tradition — it stays alive by growing and changing. To reinterpret Torah is to add new twigs and leaves to the Tree of Life, which is why we have the saying that there is always another interpretation. To write midrash is to offer another interpretation, with the understanding that no single interpretation can ever be final and complete” Alicia Ostriker, "White Fire: The Art of Writing Midrash," Reform Judaism Magazine, 1999, 58. http://www.reformjudaismmag.net/1199ao.html (accessed June 20, 2011). Also see Boyarin, Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash. While this is a text-based project, visual mediums suggest alternative and equally complex and provocative midrashic responses. A number of Jewish artists have turned to midrash as a mode of representational expression that is both traditional and creative, interpretive and responsive. For example, artist Renata Stein describes her work as Visual midrash. Renata Stein, "From Word to Image: Visual Midrash," Bridges: A Jewish Feminist Journal 14, no. 2 (11/04/09, 2009): 24. Notable male midrashic artists include painter and sculptor Tobi Kahn and Archie Rand. Ruth Weisberg, "Afterword: Creating Midrash: An Artist's Perspective," in Objects of the Spirit : Ritual and the Art of Tobi Kahn, eds. Emily D. Bilski and others (New York: Avoda Arts; Lanham, Md.: Hudson Hills Press; Distributed in the U.S. through National Book Network, 2004). Most recently, the Internet has become a dynamic frontier for developing and disseminating modern midrash by students, artists, and scholars alike. For example, MikraNet (Mikra for Bible in Hebrew) an online site devoted to Bible study was developed by the Israeli Center for Educational Technology (CET) for students studying Bible in Israeli state mamlachi schools. In addition to all of the bible-study resources one might expect, Mikranet also allows users (teachers and students) to post and respond to multimedia content. These include materials that might be described as Midrash such as rap music, comic strips, videos, poetry, and other forms of narrative http://www.mikranet.org.il/. Also see Matt Bar’s Bible Rap project which develops midrashic raps by reading biblical texts against hip hop culture and young Jewish culture http://www.bibleraps.com/index.html. For an example of Jewish feminist Midrashic poetry see “The Secret Jew” where Gottlieb weaves together the historical account of Marrano women identifying with Queen Esther as secret or hidden Jews with her own questions about Jewish identity and the gendering of tradition Lynn Gottlieb, "The Secret Jew: An Oral Tradition of Women," in On being a Jewish Feminist: A Reader, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), 274-277.

13 And it should be noted that classical Midrash also seem to interrupt the original text through novel narratives that distance the “simple” or “plain” meaning of the text. See Daniel Boyarin’s discussion of the problem of meaning and interpretation in Midrash Boyarin, Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash, “Introduction.” The feminist incarnation of contemporary Midrash takes a similar critical stance vis a vis women, gender and sexuality.
with the biblical accounts of David’s relationship with Bathsheba and Jonathan. In doing so, the author opens up a space for homosexual desire within traditional Judaism’s constraining heteronormativity and thus stands in critical relationship not only to contemporary Judaism, but also to the traditional texts that ground Jewish life.

In developing new critical narratives, Modern Midrash has the potential to throw into sharp relief the imprint of historiography, memory, tradition and textual heritage in the original text. It also has the capacity to lay bare the theological, philosophical and social frameworks that produce both the original and the midrashic text. Reading women’s Holocaust writing as new midrash inverts this process in purposely framing Holocaust writing against Jewish feminist thought, modern Jewish thought, Holocaust narratives, classical midrash, contemporary midrash and Jewish feminist midrash and then invites a critical reading of a new hybrid text as Jewish feminist post-Holocaust response.

**JEWISH FEMINIST MIDRASH**

Feminist Judaism begins with the presupposition that women as well as men define Jewish humanity. It assumes that Jewish women's experience is an integral part of Jewish experience, and that no account of Jewish experience is complete unless it considers fully and seriously the experience of Jewish women. — Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*

Jewish feminist Midrash consolidates and refines many of the critical tools necessary for this project. The roots of Jewish feminist Midrash can be traced to the theological questioning that emerged in second wave (mostly Christian)  

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Voicing a New Midrash: 
Women’s Holocaust Writing as Jewish Feminist Response

feminist circles in the early 1970s. Early Jewish feminists sought to reclaim a canon that both marginalized women’s presence in sacred history and prescribed and constrained women’s status in the contemporary context. The essay “The Coming of Lilith,” which concludes with a short two page midrash, is Judith Plaskow’s earliest contribution to this conversation and is one of the first examples of Jewish feminist midrash. Characteristically, Plaskow positions herself in critical relationship to Judaism while still deeply rooted in the tradition through the texts that she chooses to engage. Plaskow’s brief Midrash is explicitly feminist and theological; emphasizing women’s original equality in creation, Adam’s privileged relationship with God as patriarchal collusion that alienates Eve from intimacy with the divine and ultimately discomfits God, how women abet their own oppression, and finally how feminist community is theologically transformative. While reading for women’s absence has always been central to feminist midrash and often takes centre stage in popular contemporary feminist midrash, Plaskow demonstrated in this early essay that reading for gender as a system is also critical. Such a reading recalls it is insufficient to merely look for or add in women; the androcentric and patriarchal frameworks in which women appear (or disappear) must also be interrogated. Jewish feminist post-Holocaust midrash similarly calls for a radical, rich reading for gender—not only in particular literary texts, but also in the converging disciplinary narratives that populate and shape responses to the Holocaust.


Voicing a New Midrash: Women's Holocaust Writing as Jewish Feminist Response

In the over four decades since Plaskow’s early essay Jewish feminist midrashists have been inspired/provoked by the experience of “waiting patiently to be revealed, to rise out of the white spaces between the letters in the Torah and be received.”18 Contemporary feminist midrashists most commonly retell, or otherwise illuminate through visual or performing arts, biblical or Talmudic stories from the point of view of women. Feminist midrashists look for women’s voices and experiences and declare, “‘failing to find it in the text, we will place it in the text ourselves’.”19 In doing so, these midrashim “redefine a space initially created by other hands,” and claim an alternate territory where women (and often other marginalized groups) are integral to Jewish life and thought.20

19 Elyse Goldstein, ReVisions : Seeing Torah through a Feminist Lens (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1998), 29. Also see Ellen Umansky for her advocacy of feminist Midrash as the solution to the quandary experienced by the Jewish woman who finds her “spiritual experiences as a woman/feminist and as a Jew” incompatible and finds herself forced “to decide which voice to listen to: her own voice or the voice of Jewish tradition.” Ellen M. Umansky, “Creating a Jewish Feminist Theology,” in Weaving the Visions (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 89. Miriam and the matriarchs remain popular subjects, as are other biblical and extra-biblical women. Well known examples of feminist Midrash highlight these common subjects and approaches: Judith Plaskow and Donna Berman, The Coming of Lilith: Essays on Feminism, Judaism, and Sexual Ethics, 1972-2003 (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005).(discussed in detail above); Chava Weissler’s poem “Standing At Sinai” that juxtaposes a subversive anachronistic account of being a woman at Sinai with learning to chant Torah Chava Weissler, “Standing at Sinai,” Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion 1, no. 2 (09/01, 1985): 91-92.; Marla Feldman’s “Miriam’s Fringes” describing Miriam’s experience of being exiled to the fringes of the community where she suffered leprosy for seven days as punishment for her and Aaron’s confrontation with Moses, Marla J. Feldman, Miriam’s Fringes, Vol. XL, 1993), 37-40.; and Ellen Umansky’s “A Re-Visioning of Sarah” that describes the binding of Isaac from Sarah’s perspective Umansky, Creating a Jewish Feminist Theology, 187-198.. The most well known popular example of feminist Midrash would be The Red Tent by Anita Diamant. Anita Diamant, The Red Tent (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

20 Judith A. Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer, Reading Ruth : Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story, 1st ed. ed. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), vii.. It is worth noting that different feminist thinkers approach the question of authority and legitimacy in distinct ways. Consciously framed as an educational resource to companion the weekly Torah readings, The Women’s Commentary, edited by (Rabbi) Elyse Goldstein is driven both by feminist questions and the traditional aggadic model of responding to the biblical text in a systematic way. Written exclusively by female rabbis, the authority of these midrash as a communal educational resource is directly tied to the ordination of women rabbis and the status of the contributors as rabbis. This public, communal, and inarguably top-down project is in contrast with Ellen Umansky’s highly personal method which invites women to pay “attention to fantasies and dreams that seem to emerge out of our own experience of tradition” Umansky, Creating a Jewish Feminist Theology, 195. Beginning with the individual experience of encountering a provocative text, Umansky’s midrashic method also relies on retelling a biblical narrative from a female perspective. For Umansky, midrash harmonizes the voices and experiences of historical women in canonical texts (biblical, rabbinic etc) with the those of contemporary
It is not only women’s presence or absence in canonical text that is of concern. If classical rabbinic Midrash seek God’s will through a particular hermeneutic logic, Jewish feminist Midrash seek God’s will through a series of feminist lenses. It is worth underlining that identifying something as Midrash signals (implicitly or explicitly) theological import, moral seriousness, cultural value, and connection to tradition. Framing something as Midrash necessarily appeals, even in a very attenuated way, to the traditional authority of Midrash, which is derived from Sinai. It is important to think carefully about the function of traditional authority when it is wielded on behalf of radical critiques.

The role of feminist Midrash in the landmark *Standing Again at Sinai* by Judith Plaskow remains one of the most influential explorations of the use of midrash for Jewish feminist thought and prefigures many of the critical issues around memory and history raised by this project. Plaskow examines the challenges posed by women’s history within the context of a constructive theological project. Searching for a usable women’s religious history, Plaskow raises the problem of traditional texts being authored by men. She explores and acclaims the promise of feminist historiography, but concludes (on several bases) that historiography provides only a “fragile grounding for the feminist transformation of Torah.”21 Citing Yerushalmi’s influential work on memory and Jewish history, Plaskow argues that memory, not history, is key to the transformation of contemporary Jewish life and that “historiography recalls events that memory does not recognize.”22 Turning towards Midrash, which she identifies as a “more traditional [strategy] for Jewish remembrance,” Plaskow

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21 Plaskow, *Standing again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*, 52.
22 Ibid., 52; Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor, Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982).
highlights those key features of Midrash which lend themselves to a process of remembering/knowing that is “authentically Jewish” and “feminist” (and which will also be critical to Fackenheim’s argument for midrash as Holocaust response). Two dimensions are of particular importance: First, Plaskow reminds us that the “rabbinic reconstruction of history was not historiographical but midrashic.”

Midrash interprets an ancient text as containing eternal truths that are relevant to the contemporary questions and experiences of the rabbinic interpreter. Second, Midrashic appreciation of the “infinite meaningfulness of biblical texts,” provides the theoretical basis for the “open-ended process of writing Midrash – simultaneously serious and playful, imaginative and metaphorical.” Both of these features, Midrash as a traditional method of interpretation and its “open-ended process,” will be key to the development of Jewish feminist post-Holocaust midrashic response.

The turn to Midrash as a feminist strategy is not without its critics. In “Engendering Jewish Religious History,” Miriam Peskowitz raises several critiques that are particularly on point and worth rehearsing. She charges, “Plaskow’s feminism is radical in intent but constrained by her unarticulated loyalties to Enlightenment categories through which “modern Judaism” has been imagined and practiced.” Opposing Midrash with history, and forcing the choice of “honouring or ignoring” either, “severely limits Jewish feminist thought.” For Peskowitz, the problem arises from Plaskow uncritically following Yerushalmi’s opposition between history and memory and directs attention to the need to examine the gendered production of memory as “social

23 Plaskow, Standing again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective, 53.
24 Ibid., 53.
26 Ibid., 27.
and cultural products." Peskowitz disputes that Plaskow’s move from history to Midrash (or memory) is merely augmentative rather than substitutive, especially in light of Plaskow’s opposition of memory as “selective” against history as “complex and nuanced.” Peskowitz is particularly helpful in critically exposing the underlying assumptions of such an account of memory versus history. History, as Peskowitz points out, is specific, messy, complex and always framed and selective. The new gendered historiographies that Plaskow sees as holding limited, but still relevant, promise for the feminist project in fact “critique the terms of the conversation and the authority of inherited frameworks.” Finally, Peskowitz draws attention to the limits of focusing on, locating, and creating spaces for women’s voices. Acknowledging the historical and ongoing importance of this strategy, Peskowitz warns of the dangers such a strategy holds in potentially essentializing women, conflating or erasing difference between women, and obfuscating questions of authority and the social construction of voice.

While Peskowitz’ critiques complicate Plaskow’s use of Midrash in important ways, they do not foreclose the use of midrash as a Jewish feminist strategy-they point towards enriching midrash with historical accounts that are more “thick”. Focusing on narrative as Midrash –as opposed to developing midrashic narratives-evades many of the problems Peskowitz targets. Still, these

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27 Ibid., 28.
28 Ibid., 28; Plaskow, Standing again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective, 52.
30 Ibid., 29.
31 Here I am extending Geertz understanding of a thick description of culture to get at the idea that Jewish feminism needs a complex and rich account of all of the disciplinary narratives that converge in its thought. Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in The Interpretation of Cultures; Selected Essays (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3-30. Jewish feminist thought becomes more nuanced and compelling when it draws deeply from Jewish historiography and Jewish feminism’s other cognate disciplines. See my argument in regards to developing a “thick” Jewish feminist ethics in Deidre Butler, "Disturbing Boundaries: Jewish Feminist Ethics with Buber, Levinas, and Fackenheim," Journal of Modern Jewish Studies (2011).
Voicing a New Midrash: Women’s Holocaust Writing as Jewish Feminist Response

critical issues of memory, history, voice and authority also emerge in a feminist consideration of Fackenheim’s development of Midrash as a framework for Holocaust response and will need to be foregrounded in thinking through women’s Holocaust writing as feminist midrashic response. A midrashic reading of Holocaust writing recognizes that, given the real threats posed by Holocaust deniers, the historical fact of Nazi efforts to conceal their crimes against Jews and others, and the feminist historiographic critique of Holocaust memory being selected and constructed by masculinist perspectives, responses to the Shoah cannot privilege memory over history, or oppose the two. Holocaust responses must be congruent with the best historiography available. Whereas feminist Midrash may be charged with inserting into the biblical (or other canonical texts) the authors’ “own needs and concerns in the biblical text without claiming them” as their own, this project consciously seeks to hear the needs and concerns of the author/writer/artist as one of many voices participating in midrashic response.32

Driven by contemporary feminist critiques of essentialist, monological accounts of gender that obscure the gendered constructions of authority and voice, a midrashic reading of Holocaust writing selects sources that interrupt and complicate received Holocaust narratives. Responses to the Holocaust are cultural products, and thinking about response as Midrash makes that production and formation categorical.

FACKENHEIM, MIDRASH AND RESPONSE TO THE HOLOCAUST

The Midrashic Word is story. It remains story because it both points to and articulates a life lived with problems and paradox –the problems and

32 Gubkin who follows Peskowitz closely on most points develops Peskowitz’s argument about voice (discussed earlier) to problematize Midrash as a feminist tool. Gubkin retreats from her negative view of midrash as feminist tool in a footnote that describes an encounter with Plaskow where Plaskow provides a compelling argument in favour of “midrash’s democratic potential.” Jennifer Gubkin, If Miriam Never Danced...A Question for Feminist Midrash, Vol. 14, 1995), note 3, 59.
Voicing a New Midrash:  
Women’s Holocaust Writing as Jewish Feminist Response

paradox of a divine-human relation. This life is midrashic existence.\textsuperscript{33} Emil Fackenheim, \textit{The Jewish Return Into History}

My constructive reading of Fackenheim’s use of Midrash focuses on his central question of how Jews after the Holocaust respond to the Holocaust and how Midrash provides a viable model for such a response. Early in his thought, Fackenheim turns to Midrash as the model that is most capable of authentically responding to the Holocaust. Although his engagement with midrash changes over the course of his work, Midrash remains an important strategy within his overall thought and, especially in light of his development of midrashic existence, midrashic thinking, and Mad Midrash, suggests promising insights for the development of Jewish feminist responses to the Holocaust.\textsuperscript{34}

Perhaps more than any other philosopher, Fackenheim has shaped the debates around how we think about the Holocaust and understand its relation to history, memory and response.\textsuperscript{35} For Fackenheim, the Holocaust poses a continuing threat to the religious foundations of Jewish life. Only an open, vulnerable, encounter with history has any hope of addressing this continuing crisis. A vulnerable encounter with history depends on the necessary restructuring of religious and philosophical categories. This restructuring inheres a critical

\textsuperscript{33} Emil L. Fackenheim, \textit{The Jewish Return into History: Reflections in the Age of Auschwitz and A New Jerusalem} (Schocken Bks, 1978), 263-264.
\textsuperscript{34} See Robert Eisen’s argument that Fackenheim’s use of midrash shifts over the course of this thought Robert Eisen, "Midrash in Emil Fackenheim’s Holocaust Theology," \textit{Harvard Theological Review} 96, no. 3 (07/01, 2003): 369-392.
engagement with questions relating to Jewish faith, belief, and practice, and ultimately Jewish existence itself. The events of the Holocaust thrust the Jewish people “back firmly, inescapably, irrevocably, back into history: not into sacred history, but rather into the flesh-and-blood history of men, women, and children…” and command response.\(^{36}\)

Midrash for Fackenheim is more than a model for response; it is a model of existence where the bond between God and the world is complex and paradoxical. Midrash internalizes this paradox through confrontation, and in “the very act of confrontation reaffirms the bond.”\(^{37}\) The tensions occasioned by this paradox are seemingly untenable, yet they have been endured throughout Jewish history—until the rupture of the Holocaust. Traditional midrashic existence is meant for an imperfect world; the world after the Holocaust is not merely imperfect, it is the anti-world that Fackenheim calls “Planet Auschwitz.”

The Midrash sees the Messiah come when men are either wholly righteous or wholly wicked. On Planet Auschwitz the Messiah failed to come even though both conditions were fulfilled…\(^{38}\)

What follows the Holocaust can only be “Mad Midrash,” as exemplified in the work of Elie Wiesel. Mad Midrash is the “impossible togetherness” of a “relentless self-exposure to the Holocaust” and a “Jewishness steeped in tradition.”\(^{39}\) To illustrate, Fackenheim turns to Wiesel’s “The Madman’s Prayer.” Here, Mad Midrash is a proof-text against death of God theologies. Fackenheim juxtaposes the Mad Midrash of Wiesel’s “pious Jew who was slightly mad—for

\(^{36}\) Fackenheim here uses “The Midrash” to indicate classical midrash, but his definition, as we shall see is quite broadly inclusive to include midrashic narratives that may or may not be included in the rabbinic canon of Midrash. Emil L. Fackenheim, *To Mend the World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 33.

\(^{37}\) Fackenheim, *The Jewish Return into History: Reflections in the Age of Auschwitz and A New Jerusalem*, 263.

\(^{38}\) Ibid.

\(^{39}\) Ibid.

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all pious Jews were by then slightly mad,” against Nietzsche’s madman who announced the death of God. Wiesel’s madman rushes into a synagogue in Nazi occupied Europe where a group is praying. Pausing and realizing what he is hearing he entreats them: “Shh, Jews! Do not pray so loud! God will hear you. Then He will know that there are still some Jews left alive in Europe.” The “terrible Midrash” of Elie Wiesel’s madman is the crucible of post-Holocaust Jewish life. Because Jews cannot “disconnect God from the world,” because Jewish existence is so utterly bound up with the experience of God’s presence in history, the madness of the Holocaust cannot be met by Nietzsche’s death of God narrative.

Midrashic existence after the Holocaust calls for a new direction for Midrash. In contrast with “old midrash, new midrashim have been born. They are still being born. They will continue to be born.” Following his consideration of Mad Midrash in God’s Presence in History, Fackenheim again returns to this theme in The Jewish Return Into History where he again points to several other “new midrash” that are characteristic of midrashic thinking. Fackenheim proffers three instructively linked examples: The first is a well-known scene from Elie Wiesel’s Night that describes a hanging of a child at Auschwitz. When the crowd asks, “Where is God?” the narrator responds, “Where is He? Here He is –He is hanging on this gallows.” A survivor returning to Bergen Belsen in 1970 proffers the second midrashic narrative. He observes that every time he returns to

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41 This is the beginning of the idea of “Mad Midrash” that will be so important in Fackenheim’s future thought and especially in To Mend the World.
42 Ibid., 69.
43 Fackenheim, The Jewish Return into History: Reflections in the Age of Auschwitz and A New Jerusalem, 124.
44 Elie Wiesel, Night (New York: Avon, 1972), 75-76.
Voicing a New Midrash: 
Women’s Holocaust Writing as Jewish Feminist Response

the camp it rains, because God “weeps for the sins he has committed against his people Israel.” The third Midrashic narrative is jarringly contrasted with the concentrationary world, where we learn of a survivor who celebrates daily. When asked “What Simcha can last weeks and weeks?” The survivor explains that a Cohen invokes the blessing at specific points in the year, but in Jerusalem may do so daily. As a survivor who is also a Cohen, it is his “duty, privilege and joy” to celebrate each day as though it were a wedding or a holiday. These Mad Midrash testify to that obliged madness where one is condemned to be sane in an insane world.

For Midrashic existence points to an existence in which the madness is transfigured. Midrashic madness is the Word spoken in the anti-world which ought not to be but is. The existence points to acts to restore a world which ought to be but is not, committed to the faith of what ought to be must and will be, and this is its madness...Without this madness a Jew cannot do—with God or without him—what a Voice from Sinai bids him to do: choose life.

Responses to the Holocaust are midrashic (and here we must hear Fackenheim signalling that this is also what makes them authentic and authoritative) through the conjunction of absolute protest against the anti-world and an absolute affirmation for Tikkun Olam, the passionate determination to mend the world.

In developing the midrashic model, Fackenheim is clearly arguing for a multiplicity of responses to the trauma of the Holocaust. Two of his complimentary proffered responses, the “614th commandment” (from The Jewish Return into History), and the retrieval of the kabbalistic concept of mending the world, Tikkun Olam (from To Mend the World), are both midrashic. The 614th commandment commands that “the authentic Jew of today is forbidden to hand

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45 Fackenheim, The Jewish Return into History: Reflections in the Age of Auschwitz and A New Jerusalem, 125.
46 Ibid., 125-126.
47 Ibid., 269.
Hitler yet another, posthumous victory.”48 The retrieval of the category *Tikkun Olam*, is similarly proffered as a “moral necessity” for the post-Holocaust Jew.49 Individually these responses are, in and of themselves, inadequate, incomplete—signifying more in their narrative form than they can ever discursively express. That there is more to be said, that more must be said in a variety of ways, is integral to the very notion of midrashic response. 50

Although reading women’s Holocaust writing as Jewish feminist post-Holocaust Midrash relies on a focused reading of Fackenheim (who himself already relies on a strategic reading of midrash), it is worth foregrounding issues a feminist reading might target in working with his understandings of Midrash.51 While the features of Midrashic thinking are helpful in considering the ways in which a post-Holocaust Jewish feminist response might proceed; they raise questions as well. Fackenheim is uncritical in his idiosyncratic account of traditional Midrash. His functional reading of Midrash is largely disinterested in the object of classical Midrash (namely interpretation of the inarguably patriarchal biblical texts) or the gendered practices that produce those texts. 52 Asserting that Midrash responds to root experiences and epoch-making events underscores the

48 Ibid.
49 Fackenheim, *To Mend the World*, 300..
50 For an overview of the significant development of Midrash in Fackenheim’s thought see Eisen, *Midrash in Emil Fackenheim’s Holocaust Theology*, 369-392.. In the interest of working constructively with these categories in this project I am not specifying all of the different incarnations of midrash that Fackenheim develops over the course of his thought.
51 It is notable that one of Fackenheim’s more vocal feminist critics, Melissa Raphael, hails Fackenheim’s use of midrash “the best of Jewish theology,” because its use of conflicting midrashim to develop response does not seek to develop an “explanatory system.” Melissa Raphael, *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz: A Jewish Feminist Theology of the Holocaust* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 28. Raphael does however strongly criticize Fackenheim for the content of his midrashic responses (especially the Commanding Voice of Auschwitz and its linked 614th Commandment. Her larger argument about the development of Holocaust theology in general shares considerable parallels (she admits) with Fackenheim’s own notion of *Tikkun Olam* as theological response. For more on her critique of *Tikkun Olam* see especially pages 138-139.
ways in which such experiences shape and structure Jewish tradition. For feminists that concur with Plaskow’s call that, “we cannot redefine Judaism in the present without redefining our past, because our present grows out of our history,” insisting on that critical relationship is key to any transformation of Jewish life and tradition.53 Stressing that women are historically and contemporarily present in those root experiences and epoch-making events requires a critical evaluation of how women have systematically been marginalized, silenced or excluded from that tradition. Fackenheim’s insistence that Midrash be judged at least in part, on a “Jewishness steeped in tradition” and a “relentless self-exposure to the Holocaust” begs the linked questions “What tradition?” and “Which account of the Holocaust?” The midrashic examples that Fackenheim offers are highly gendered, overwhelmingly voiced by men, reify male cultic privilege, exclusively portray men as doing the theological work of Midrashic thinking, and portray a Holocaust and post-Holocaust world where women’s absence is unremarkable. Still, one can imagine Jewish feminist contributions to the fragmentary midrashic responses that Fackenheim outlines that do sustain paradox and tension and which as take place among multiple, often mutually conflicting Midrash. Such responses would not only takes seriously the theological rupture of Treblinka, but also–without any invidious comparisons of scale or import–take seriously Jewish feminist experiences of alienation, attenuation, and marginalization that result from the gendered, androcentric, heteronormative narratives that are embedded in Judaism in general, and Holocaust narratives in particular. We can already begin to hear them in the texts that follow.

Part Two: Reading for Midrash

WOMEN’S HOLOCAUST WRITING

We are not as we were. It is not unnatural that mass loss should generate not only lessons but legacies. An earthquake of immorality and mercilessness, atrocity on such a scale, cannot happen and then pass us by unaltered. The landscapes of our mind have shapes, hollows, illuminations, mounds and shadows different than before. For us who live in the aftermath of the cataclysm, the total fact of the Nazi “selection” appear to affect, to continue to affect, all the regions of our ideas….—Cynthia Ozick, “Notes Towards Finding the Right Question.”

Women’s Holocaust writing is a diverse body of literature that includes memoir, wartime diaries and journals, fiction, drama and poetry. Not all of the writers are Jewish or identify as such, and not all identify as feminist or provide resources for feminist thought. Holocaust writers and their texts are marked by and bound to the Holocaust in importantly different ways. Some of the texts come to us from the war years themselves, preserved as an echoing indictment and lament for what was devoured. These include the intimate wartime diaries and journals that draw the reader into the private fears, uncertainties and often doomed hope of the war years, as well as the poetry, drama and fiction that even when they do not speak directly to Nazi oppression can only be read against that terrifying history. Still other texts, like Charlotte Delbo’s trilogy *Auschwitz and After*, come to us from the years after the war, sometimes delayed for decades, and continue to be produced in the contemporary period. Also including poetry, drama, and fiction, but moving from diaries to memoirs, post-war writing is written by both survivors and those who, because they were born later or lived outside the grasp of the Nazis, did not suffer the persecutions themselves. Within this group are the

Voicing a New Midrash: 
Women’s Holocaust Writing as Jewish Feminist Response

children of survivors, dubbed “1.5” generation” by Susan Rubin Suleiman, who like herself, were very young children during the war years and thus have little direct memory of that time but who were raised by adult survivors after the war. More popularly, the term “second generation survivors” is used to indicate authors who, as the children of survivors, also feel compelled to respond to that trauma either through fiction, their own memoirs, or writing their parents’ stories. Female writers from this group, like Fern Schumer Chapman and Helen Epstein, often explore how the genocide shaped their own childhoods and relationship to their survivor mothers. Still others have no direct biographical connection to the war, but who, like Cynthia Ozick, find the Holocaust “invades” their work.

No one theme, disciplinary approach, or literary strategy unites this corpus, and there are many commonalities between these texts and those written by men. What does mark these works is the presence of women. As many scholars have noted, women are often absent from, or marginal to, Holocaust narratives written by men.

If one is more familiar with the work of male writers

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60 Our memory of the Holocaust is very much the memory of men. Canonical descriptions of Holocaust experiences are overwhelmingly male and, as Sarah Horowitz notes, the scholarly literature is much less likely to cite and integrate female survivor testimony in their analyses. Sara Horowitz, "Women in Holocaust Literature: Engendering Trauma Memory," in *Women in the Holocaust*, eds. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 364-377. Also see Zoë Waxman, "Unheard Testimony, Untold Stories: The Representation of Women's Holocaust Experiences," *Women's History Review* 12, no. 4 (12, 2003): 661-677 for her consideration of the ways in which female testimony is
like Primo Levi or Elie Wiesel, it is not only the female viewpoint that is striking; the contrasting presence of women reconfigures the parameters of Holocaust narrative. The centrality of women and girls is striking in the short stories gathered in *A Scrap of Time* by Ida Fink (where the mundane details of every day life are rendered surreal in contrast with the staccato-like assault of violence and grief), Isabella Leitner’s memoir *Fragments of Isabella* (where sisterhood is paradoxically a deep well of strength and terrifying vulnerability), and the elegaic poem *Yizkor 1943* by Rachel Auerbach (which mourns those lost through a litany of male and female characters who were “swept away in the flood.”). Such diverse works open up the cast of stakeholders and sets of experiences that frame Jewish feminist Holocaust response. The experiences that make up these narratives are often quantitatively gendered whether because the concentrationary world was often dominantly segregated by gender, due to the social constructions of gender that shaped how women were treated and how they responded, or because of the myriad ways the female body becomes central to women’s Holocaust experiences.

We can already hear examples of feminist Holocaust midrashic response in the narratives that have emerged after the Holocaust. In particular I hear examples of what Fackenheim calls Mad Midrash; those Midrash that respond to the anti-world, to Planet Auschwitz. This article offers three particular texts as a case study for such an approach. Ultimately the selection of texts is driven by thematic considerations – which texts contribute to a Jewish feminist Midrashic response to the Holocaust? The selection of texts also illuminates the analytical

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framework of this project. Consciously constrained, incomplete, and asymmetrical, this triad of texts interrupts assumptions about which texts can or should be read in this way, highlights how certain narratives have been privileged in Holocaust literature or silenced, and anticipates future Midrashic readings. Where one might expect a privileging of authors with personal biographies in Shoah, these three texts confirm how Midrashic thinking may be at play in sources by authors with quite different relationships to the history of the Holocaust. For example, the first selected text is the short story *The Shawl* where Cynthia Ozick (who was born in the United States where she lived during the war years) painfully and lyrically speaks of the violence that is done to humanity and human relationship in the quest for survival and the aftermath of survival.62

Given the imaginative modes of modern and traditional Midrash, and concerns about representation of the Holocaust, one might question how memoir might be read Midrashically. Yet the second text points to the ways in which midrashic thinking – already announced by Fackenheim – push up against our readings of such texts. *Seed of Sarah* by Judith Magyar Issacson is a memoir of her experiences as a Hungarian Jewish teenager sent to Auschwitz and other forced labour camps. Her self-consciously discursive prose lays bare the taboo of sexual violence during the Holocaust against histories of violence against Jewish women and powerfully connects to other histories where Jewish women faced such violence. The final piece, *An Estate of Memory* by Ilona Karmel, draws on her own experiences in the Krakow ghetto and forced labour camps. The novel uncompromisingly exposes the impact of brutality and terror on the relationships between four women bound together in the concentrationary world. Given the terse, encapsulated character of Fackenheim’s examples of Mad Midrash,

Karmel’s work demonstrates that midrashic readings can be sustained through longer works and provide rich resources for Jewish feminist thought.

Crucially, these texts move beyond what Peskowitz identifies as the “additive logic” of being satisfied with a mere addition of women’s voices into the canon and demand critical interrogation and response. Individually, and read in conversation, these texts illustrate how women’s Holocaust writing of different genres and modalities may be read midrashically when they are mutually rooted in Jewish women’s experiences of the Holocaust, Jewish history, thought and tradition.

CYNTHIA OZICK: THE SHAWL

But the shoulder that carried Magda was not coming toward Rosa and the shawl, it was drifting away, the speck of Magda was moving more and more in the smoky distance. Above the shoulder a helmet glinted. The light tapped the helmet and sparkled it into a goblet. Below the helmet a black body like a domino and a pair of black boots hurled themselves in the direction of the electrified fence.  

—Cynthia Ozick, “The Shawl”

Hearing any narrative as a Jewish feminist Midrashic response to the Holocaust is already to select it and construe its intertextuality in a particular way. Including a range of narratives that focus on women and their bodily experiences is key to Jewish feminist efforts to re-place women in Holocaust discourses, subvert essentialist and universalist accounts of women, uncover the gendering of Holocaust narratives, and develop responses that embody and engender radical self-exposure to the Holocaust. Focusing directly on the gendered embodied experiences of women and the murder of their children, the short story “The Shawl” by Cynthia Ozick is the clearest example of how such a text might be read

63 Peskowitz, Engendering Jewish Religious History, 32.
64 Ozick, The Shawl, 5.
as a Jewish feminist Midrashic response to the Holocaust. In its brevity, intensity, and unbearable tensions, this compressed seven-page short story provides perhaps the clearest parallels with Fackenheim’s examples of Mad Midrash. It is a compelling and devastating work—a radical self-exposure to the Holocaust that allows no respite.

“The Shawl” opens with Rosa Lublin, her concealed baby daughter Magda, and her adolescent niece Stella on a death march between concentration camps. In contrast with the Musulmammer, Rosa is “like someone in a faint, in trance, arrested in a fit, someone who is already a floating angel, alert and seeing everything, but in the air, not there, not touching the road.” Despite this dreamlike state, she enjoys no detachment from the peril that faces her and her child. If Magda stays with her, there is the risk the child might starve to death. Even if she might endure without food a little longer, there is the constant risk that discovery would condemn them both to death at the hands of the guards. She worries over whether to pass the child to some stranger along the road. Such a

65 Over the last twenty years, a handful of literary scholars have read Cynthia Ozick’s The Shawl as Midrash literature. The Shawl is an edition that combines both the short story “The Shawl” and the novella “Rosa.” Although these readings are distinctly tangential to this project, it is worth noting that they too appreciate something about the intertextuality of the text. It is useful to summarize their various iterations here. Pointing towards the midrashic practice of filling in textual gaps in the biblical text, Joseph Lowin describes “Rosa” as a midrashic gloss on “The Shawl.” Joseph Lowin, Cynthia Ozick (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988), 109. Joseph Alkana disputes this reading, emphasizing the complex relationship between the two texts particularly in terms of how “Rosa” displaces the “tangled set of inconsistent beliefs that include the importance of remembering history, the distortions of her own and Magda’s histories, and a sense of alienation from others in her community.” Joseph Alkana, “Do We Not Know the Meaning of Aesthetic Gratification?”: Cynthia Ozick’s The Shawl, the Akedah, and the Ethics of Holocaust Literary Aesthetics,” MFS Modern Fiction Studies 43, no. 4 (12/01/97, 1997): 970. Instead Alkana reads “The Shawl” as a female Midrash on the Akeda (Binding of Isaac) using the midrashic mode of reading biblical sources in light of recent historical trauma. Meisha Rosenberg rejects these readings as well and argues for reading Ozick’s work as midrash by positing midrash as a “mode” or entrance point “in to a Jewish literature that thrives on dialectics and multiple interpretations” Meisha Rosenberg, “Cynthia Ozick’s Post-Holocaust Fiction: Narration and Morality in the Midrashic Mode,” Journal of the Short Story in English 32, no. Spring (1999), http://issreveues.org/index184.html (accessed June 21, 2011). Ozick herself takes up the question of midrash in her own work but does so as a potential literary response to the challenge of negotiating of traditional Jewish and Western Enlightenment aesthetic forms. She concludes that midrash is inadequate to that task. Cynthia Ozick, Metaphor & Memory : Essays, 1st ed. ed. (New York: Knopf : Distributed by Random House, 1989), 238.

66 Ozick, The Shawl, 3-4.
transfer would be dangerous; to do so means stepping out of the file and exposing Magda in the moment of offering the child to a stranger.

Despite her intense and despairing love for her child, Rosa’s maternal feelings for Magda are hideously distorted by the horror of her situation. Signalling the violence of the child’s conception, Rosa wonders at Magda’s blue-eyed, yellow-haired appearance, “You could think it was one of their babies.” Rosa marvels at how good a baby Magda is despite her hunger. Her breasts empty, nipples cracked, “duct-crevice extinct, a dead volcano, blind eye, chill hole,” Rosa has nothing to offer her starving child. Wrapped in the shawl that becomes the central symbol of the story, Magda seems protected and even sustained by its magical qualities as she suckles on a frayed corner. The shawl also calls to Rosa’s niece Stella, both as symbol of the nurturing care that she yearns for as well as the physical warmth it promises. Rosa describes the fatherless teenager as “ravenous,” like “a young cannibal” who gave no food to the baby, who hungers to “devour” baby Magda, who “was waiting for Magda to die so she could put her teeth into the little thighs.”

In the final scene we share Rosa’s horror as she watches Magda run from her hiding place in the camp into the square in full view of the guards. Magda makes laughing sounds, the first she has ever made, as she searches for the shawl that Stella has usurped to warm herself. Rosa is momentarily paralysed as she is torn between rushing forward to grab the child (who she knows will howl ceaselessly without the comfort of the shawl), and running to the barracks to secure the shawl to entice her back into hiding. Frantically rushing for the shawl, she returns too late to see Magda slung over a guard’s shoulder moving

67 Ibid., 4.
68 Ibid., 4.
69 Ibid., 3-5.
inexorably towards the electrified fence. The final sentence of the story describes the agonizing aftermath,

Rosa only stood, because if she ran they would shoot, and if she tried to pick up the sticks of Magda’s body they would shoot, and if she let the wolf’s screech ascending through the ladder of her skeleton break out they would shoot; so she took Magda’s shawl and fill her own mouth with it, stuffed it in and stuffed it in, until she was swallowing up the wolf’s screech and tasting the cinnamon and almond depth of Magda’s saliva; and Rosa drank Magda’s shawl until it dried. 70

Although there is nothing explicitly Jewish in this text in terms of overt references to Judaism; Jewish motifs pervade the work. Each example resonates with familiarity. The shawl itself is a particularly powerful Jewish symbol. With its corners and fringes, the shawl evokes the tallit, the prayer shawl traditionally worn by men. It is a highly gendered ritual object that highlights the absence of Jewish men in this narrative.71 Read as a ritual object the shawl also draws attention to the ways in which the anti-world is denuded of Jewish life. Magda working at the fringes of the shawl calls to mind the prayerful manipulation of the prayer shawl’s fringes in solitary and communal prayer. What prayer, communal or otherwise can take place on a death march or concentration camp? In contrast with the prayer shawl that is often used as a wedding canopy, the shawl mutely speaks to the Jewish weddings that will never take place. One is ultimately left with the most sorrowful connection of all; how the traditional use of the tallit as a shroud speaks of those lost to the destruction. While her decision to pursue the shawl might have been pragmatic (and clearly futile in any case), these readings provocatively suggest theological interpretations of Rosa’s choice in attempting to secure the shawl rather than move directly towards Magda. Read as a talisman that is symbolic of Jewish ritual and religious life, pursuing the shawl is

70 Ibid., 10.
71 Many non-Orthodox women do wear the tallit, but it is traditionally only worn by men.
powerfully hopeful and tragic. As Mad Midrash, choosing the shawl first – whether for theological reasons or because choosing the baby first was futile – enacts excruciating theological questions about God’s absence/inaction that continue to haunt Jewish life today.

As post-Holocaust midrashic response, “The Shawl” echoes mournfully with the stories of women from the Hebrew Bible. Unlike the biblical Yocheved who had the hope that her child Moses would be saved from Pharaoh’s genocidal decree, in the anti-world this Jewish mother can have no such confidence in any universal impulse to save a child. Her relationship to baby Magda becomes the site for multiple intersecting paradoxes that cannot be resolved. Maternity is horrifically distorted where breasts bear no milk, children are the product of rape, motherless children are like cannibals, and mothers cannot save their children.72

Where countless Holocaust narratives (including the two that follow here) speak of women’s bonding as a female survival mechanism, and Biblical narratives present women’s bonds as central to the sacred history of the Jewish people, as Midrash “The Shawl” presents us with bonds in ruins. While Naomi and Ruth’s choice in affirming their kinship is one of the most powerful images of female solidarity in the Hebrew Bible, Rosa and Stella’s tortured kinship is raw, frustrated, wounded. Their bond leads only to tragedy, and in the sequel extended short-story “Rosa,” even more alienation and suffering.73 Cutting against the redemptive tropes of popular Holocaust narratives, as well as feminist Midrash that imagine gender justice in a biblical theological framework, “The Shawl”

72 It is possible to extend the Exodus metaphor further with Stella as an anti-Miriam character.
73 For an intriguing feminist reading of the Ruth story, see the chapter on Ruth in Lori Hope Lefkovitz, *In Scripture: The First Stories of Jewish Sexual Identities* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 191. Note especially her discussion of how female bodies represent the whole body politic / land (154).
speaks of the damage that is done, not only to us as individuals, but as persons in relationship, and to the Jewish community as a whole. 74

As Midrash, this story draws attention to the body as a deeply gendered site of victimization. The trauma of the mother is a specific visceral bodily experience. It holds in tension the female body as a site of terror with the ideal Jewish woman’s body as fecund and nurturing. This tension is laid out in a biblical framework of gendered violence in service to aligning patriarchal and theological agendas. For example, Tamar is victim of rape by her half-brother but is mother of the line of messianic descent (2 Samuel 13:1-22). Sarah faces the risk of sexual violence in Pharaoh’s house due to Abraham’s deception yet she holds high status as first matriarch and mother of one of the patriarchs (Genesis 12:10-20). Lot’s daughters are offered by their father to a rapacious mob to protect male guests from sodomy, yet the messianic line will descend from the union of Lot with one of those daughters (Genesis 19:6-8). 75 Reading “The Shawl” as feminist Mad Midrash refers back to such formative biblical narratives but also ricochets through the historical intersections of violence, sexuality, reproduction, and notions of national identity that mark the history of the Holocaust (Nazi notions of racial purity, prostitution and sexual slavery, eugenics programs, forced sterilization and abortion, experimentation on men and women’s reproductive systems). Such an intertextual approach announces a Jewish feminist response to

74 Here I am thinking of films Schindler’s List (1993), Life is Beautiful (1997) and The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas (2008). This characteristic of “cutting against” redemptive interpretations is critical. Lori Hope Lefkovitz argues that there is a real danger that feminist midrash will “masquerade as scholarship” and through “wishful thinking” replace critical analysis with their own positive re-readings Lefkovitz, When Lilith Becomes a Heroine: Midrash as a Feminist Response, 5.

the trauma of the Shoah that is more richly grounded in the interconnecting texts, traditions and histories that contribute to Jewish women’s identities.76

JUDITH MAGYAR ISAACSON: SEED OF SARAH

Do women inherit memories of rape?
I recalled the myth of the Sabine women and the tale of Hunor and Magor and their abducted mates, the legendary ancestors of Huns and Magyars. ‘My plight is not unique,’ I told myself, ‘I’m caught in an ancient rite of sex and war’.77 –Judith Magyar Isaacson, Seed of Sarah: Memoirs of a Survivor

The themes of gender, embodiment, and sexual violence are taken up again and refocused in Seed of Sarah. Jewish feminist responses to the Holocaust have an interest in targeting how sexual violence (against both women and men) has been excluded from Holocaust narratives. According to Zoe Waxman, while “Writing about rape should have the potential to write the victim back into the world,” and writing rape out of the Holocaust has had the consequence that sexual violence is “underexplored and increasingly hard to uncover.”78 Identifying Seed of Sarah for a Midrashic reading reflects these concerns for writing sexual assault into the centre of Jewish feminist responses to the Holocaust and for redressing the ways in which sexual violence have so inadequately been integrated in Holocaust historical narratives.79

77 Judith Magyar Isaacson, Seed of Sarah: Memoirs of a Survivor (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 90.
79 See the editors’ Introduction to Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust for a concise overview of the slow move to integrate sexual violence in Holocaust narratives. Hedgepeth and Saidel, Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women during the Holocaust, 1-10.
Stories of rape and fear of sexual assault are woven through the narrative of Isaacson’s memoir. Through a chronological narrative that illustrates gendered perceptions, anxieties, and experiences, Isaacson paints a portrait of Jewish life in Hungary as Jews lose civil rights, are evicted from their homes, concentrated in ghettos, and are ultimately deported to Auschwitz Birkenau II in the Spring of 1944. Isaacson’s focus on rape appears early in her narrative and demonstrate how rumours about sexual violence and fear of rape informs both their thinking about what is happening to them and how they can best respond.

Isaacson’s heightened awareness of her and other women’s sexual vulnerability continues to structure her narrative as she describes her arrival at Auschwitz. She is traumatized by the process of being stripped and shaved like animals and shocked by being naked in the presence of (those she believes to be) male prisoners. During a massive in-camp selection by an officer who she now believes was Dr Mengele, Judith and her aunt and mother are marched naked around the camp with thousands of women. Her fear escalates as she realizes that the weak and invalid were being pushed to the left, presumably to executions, and young attractive women are being selected to go to the right, presumably to forced prostitution transports. When Mengele’s cane sweeps her to the right, Judith

80 The First Jewish Law passed in 1938 restricted Jewish participation in liberal professions, public administration, and commercial and industrial enterprises to 20%. The Second Jewish Law passed in 1939 further restricted Jews to a maximum of 5%. Whereas the First Jewish Law included a definition of Jew both in terms of religious affiliation and birth (i.e. converts after 1919 or children of Jewish parents), the Second Jewish Law moved fully to a racial definition. Hungarian Jews were first ghettoized in the spring of 1944, by May 1944 deportations to Auschwitz had begun.

81 Her mother frets about the risk of Judith being assaulted by the German soldiers swarming the streets after the occupation. Isaacson, Seed of Sarah: Memoirs of a Survivor, 38. Rumours of transports of Jewish girls as forced prostitutes prompt a spate of hasty (real and pro forma) weddings when it was believed that married women would be exempt. Ibid., 44 Fearing “rape more than death,” the women of the family secure poison from a kindly pharmacist before their transport. Ibid., 47-48. Rumours about cattle cars of Jewish girls sent to the Russian front as prostitutes, warnings from her uncle who witnessed women who, after mass rape, were forced to dig their own graves and were then buried alive underscore her sexual vulnerability. Ibid., 46-47, 53.

82 The prisoners are in fact shaved-headed emaciated women. Ibid., 60-67.
instead follows her mother, later wondering, “Was it the terror of rape that emboldened me, or was it the hope of staying with my mother?”

Although the three survive the selection together to be transported as slave labour for Hessich Lichtenau munitions factory, it would seem Judith is later unable to escape her fate when the Kommandant of the Lager demands that her Kapo find him a “clean girl.” Assuming he is seeking a sexual slave, the blushing but self-preserving Kapo Manci quickly targets Isaacson (whose head covering draws attention) to protect her favourites. As she follows the Kommandant to her presumed fate, Isaacson reflects on the sexual vulnerability of women. An extended internal monologue follows where Isaacson rehearses “as though preparing for an exam,” what she knows of rape and sex from history, literature, her mother, and schoolmates. She fantasizes about getting advice from her father and grandfather on how to escape violation, and imagines pretending to have syphilis. She is brought out of her manic reverie only upon realizing she has arrived. Judith is amazed and overcome when she discovers, upon being presented to the Kommandant’s mistress, that she has merely been selected to clean the house. The closing chapters of the memoir recount her subsequent transport to another slave-labour factory at Leipzig, her experience as a liberated prisoner, her marriage and emigration to the United States, her decision to write the memoir, and her reflections on memory and forgiveness upon revisiting the sites of her former captivity.

Three features particularly recommend this memoir for Midrashic reading: First and foremost, the theme of sexual vulnerability and assault, so imperative to feminist response, complicates and enriches Fackenheim’s understanding of radical self-exposure to the Holocaust by adding an intimately gendered narrative. Second, like many effective Holocaust narratives, Isaacson is clear that her

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83 Ibid., 86.
memoir is constructed, thematically framed, and the product of her own reflections about her experiences over time. The positional quality of representation is further made explicit by the author’s explaining how a question posed to her about her own experiences of rape during the Holocaust establishes the organizing theme of sexuality and sexual vulnerability in her own account. Third, Isaacson’s literary and historical references to Hungarian culture, her ongoing historical and philosophical reflections about Jewish persecutions and the continuity of Jewish culture, together fluently speak to the dialogical and intertextual characteristics that strengthen Jewish feminist Midrashic response. Isaacson unites “a Jewishness steeped in tradition” and a “relentless self-exposure to the Holocaust” that is deeply attuned to questions of gender and sexuality.

The entwined significations of head covering and the “clean girl” in Seed of Sarah are suggestive of how a Midrashic reading functions intertextually to operate at several distinct levels. Isaacson describes her efforts to secure a pretty scarf as a head covering as an act of resistance and affirmation of self but also refers to it as an act of vanity that brings her to the Kapo’s attention and puts her in peril. As Monika Flaschka points out, women in the camps were particularly traumatized by their shaved heads; feeling that it stripped them of their humanity, femininity and individual identity. Although Isaacson is unmarried, as a modesty custom among married observant Jewish women head covering also comes into play through Jewish discourses around modesty, femininity, and

84 Isaacson explains that she began to write the memoir after being asked to speak at Bowdoin College about her experiences during the Holocaust. A student asked if she had been raped. Isaacson explains, “That night I dreamt of Lichtenau, woke at five in the morning, sleepwalked to the typewriter and started to write,” Ibid., xi. I met Ms. Isaacson when she spoke at Northwestern University in 1999 at the Institute on the Holocaust and Jewish Civilization. In her talk she spoke at length about her recognition that, despite the expectable tensions between her memory and history, readers would read her work as history, so she devoted considerable time to researching the context of her experiences through scholarly Holocaust historiography.


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sexual availability. In light of the threat of rape implicit in the search for a “clean girl” for the Kommandant, a Midrashic reading also hears this small act of resistance and feminine vanity against rabbinic interpretations of Dinah’s complicity in her own rape/seduction because she was in the public sphere in going out “to see the women of the land.”

“Did she ask for it?” echoes chillingly through the rabbinic study hall and the camp. The highly charged signifier “clean” also invites analysis of Nazi constructions of a pure/clean Jewish female body who can be used in the home or brothel. Yet another layer is added in conjunction with feminist critiques of tendencies in rabbinic thought and other Jewish discourses that conflate ritual purity, sexual morality, and views of women’s bodies as unclean.

Here “clean” becomes a signifier for multiple intersecting “otherings” of Jewish women that must be negotiated.

Read Midrashically against biblical accounts of sexual violence, focusing on rape draws our attention to sexual violence in different histories where Jewish women’s bodies become the site of warfare and violence against the Jewish people. Seed of Sarah places women’s vulnerability in this broader context while also foregrounding the namelessness of the victims and the ways in which their voices are silenced. She accomplishes this by integrating stories of nameless victims of sexual violence whom she has only heard of within the framework of her own central named and articulate account of her own experience and then reading that sexual violence against Jewish and non-Jewish accounts of rape. A feminist Midrashic response reads Seed of Sarah extends Isaacson’s intertextual account against other biblical accounts of sexual violence. Although Isaacson

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86 Genesis 34:1. For examples of how Dinah is seen as responsible for her rape/seduction see Avoi de-Rabbi Nathan, version B, chap. 3. See Genesis Rabbah 8:12 for rabbinic discussion of danger of women in the marketplace.

does not cite it, the biblical story of the gang rape and torture of an unnamed concubine is particularly apropos (Judges 19). The concubine’s subsequent murder and dismemberment by her husband sets the stage for the decimation of the Benjamite tribe (and destruction of all Benjamite wives) as well as its restitution through the abduction and rape of six hundred Israelite women. This frenzy of violence is directed towards satisfying the Israelite men’s sexual, reproductive, political and religious needs. Correlating biblical narratives with other histories of sexual violence from the Holocaust and Jewish history—pushes through Fackenheim’s account of Mad Midrash, demanding a more nuanced, messy and uncomfortable account that further strains midrashic tensions.

**Ilona Karmel: An Estate of Memory**

Reading Ilona Karmel’s *An Estate of Memory*, as Jewish feminist Midrashic response to the Holocaust further complicates and enriches Jewish feminist response by drawing on an intertextual reading of the concurrent themes of women’s mutual support and reproduction as a mode of resistance. The novel plunges the reader into the chaotic and terrifying Holocaust universe through its...
stark and unflinching presentation of the grinding brutality of the concentrationary world.

At the heart of An Estate of Memory are four women who bond together; at first for mutual survival, and ultimately to bring a hidden pregnancy to term. Karmel offers us clear-eyed characterizations of victims buffeted, hardened, terrorized, and broken by the physical, psychological and spiritual horrors of the world they have been thrust into. We meet nineteen-year-old Tola Ohrenstein in the Plaszow. The unmarried daughter of a well-known and prosperous merchant family, Tola has survived up to this point as a “lone wolf,” but is now drawn to the generous spirited matron Barbara Grünbaum whom she remembers from before the deportations.

Barbara’s kind heart brings about the expansion of their makeshift “camp family,” when the two women are transferred from the Plaszow camp to Skarzysko. There they meet Alinka, a fifteen-year-old orphan who has worked for the Germans since she was thirteen, and her “mother,” Aurelia Katz, whose pessimism and self-indulgence alienates the other inmates. Barbara’s sympathy and empathy for Alinka and even Aurelia unwillingly draws Tola in when they learn that Alinka and Aurelia are not, as they had first imagined, mother and daughter but rather a camp “family” formed after surviving together in a mass grave after a mass execution. The group’s dynamics shift and evolve as the characters experience and respond to the humiliations, deprivations, and dangers that characterize camp life. The women increasingly bond through their efforts to mutually support each other but it is Tola’s discovery of Aurelia’s hidden pregnancy, and the group’s shared conspiracy to bring the pregnancy successfully to term and eventually smuggle the child out of the camp, that truly consolidates the group’s commitment.

Although they attempt to support each other and adhere to a simple moral code prioritizing family survival, their personal integrity is relentlessly battered
by the inhuman conditions and “choiceless choices” available to them in the camps. Tola suffers the deterioration of this code and her sense of personal integrity most acutely. “As Tola succumbs to devastating fear, she transforms from civilized aristocrat, to beneficent peddler, to privileged guard.”90 She accepts the position of Anweiserin –a role that involves the supervision of women in her barracks and possibly responsibility for selections. Motivated by her own desire for “safety and the bread that would come later at night,” she secures the position for her own survival rather than, as Barbara believes, for the group. Although she begins with the intention of acting humanely, and indeed attempts to shelter the weakest in her charge, the inherent tensions of her role and her own terror leads her to increasingly collaboration with the murderers. She becomes alienated from the group and unrecognizable to herself. She is redeemed only in the last days of the camp. During a harrowing night of digging mass graves for the living remnant in the camp, she is reduced to an animalistic predator focused on her own survival. She finally realizes the price of survival is too great and returns to Barbara and Alinka (Aurelia has died of typhus), ready to share their fate, weeping “for what has been done to her and for what she had done to those two with whom she would soon be together.”91 She manages to save Alinka, the only member of the group to survive.

Tola’s moral deterioration and the ongoing assault on the ethical integrity of those who subsist in the concentrationary universe provides a crucial midrashic counterpoint to the novel’s account of female relationship, mothering and childbirth, and mutual support as a mode of resistance. Ultimately, Tola’s redemption is, as Sidra Ezrahi observes, in violation of the novel’s prevailing “psychological logic,” but it functions as a fulcrum point for a Midrashic

90 S. Lillian Kremer, *Women's Holocaust Writing: Memory and Imagination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 62.
reading. Her turning point at the mass grave comes with a realization of her solidarity with the past and those around her “Now she and they were even, now they were coming all together, the dead of the war and those long before”. She is “like the dead”, poised at that liminal moment between life and death, hopeless suffering and liberation, darkness and light. In a slow reconnection to body and self, Tola realizes her hands can still move, she can hear, feel her “swollen mouth” and the “crust of blood on the welts that were her eyes.” While she experiences her epiphany of remorse and regret, that redemptive moment is flawed and incomplete “her face was too numb to feel the tears she was crying.”

As Kremer observes, Tola is ultimately redeemed in the epilogue by sacrificing herself for another; Tola is shot herself when she lunges to save a girl from a soldier’s bullet. We learn details that deepen a midrashic reading second-hand; through one of many letters that tell the tales of the last days. The two women were starving together on a death march. Tola was so weakened, “could barely drag herself,” she was unable to forage for food when the opportunity arose and the unnamed girl risked herself to gather oats for them both. If Mad Midrash commands sanity in an insane world, Tola’s redemption can only be viewed as a response to that command—an utter repudiation of the anti-world. Yet the circle that moves towards closure is fatally broken; Tola is again in a mutually sustaining relationship caring for another, but it ends with her death.

93 Karmel, *An Estate of Memory; a Novel*, 432.
94 Ibid., 433
95 Ibid., 433
97 Kremer, *Women’s Holocaust Writing: Memory and Imagination*. 
Although the novel is primarily concerned with the women’s relationships as a means of survival, the world they live in marks those relationships in painful ways. Karmel’s unsentimental portrait of women’s complex relationships neither romanticizes women’s relationality nor essentializes it. Each character’s weaknesses and flaws are horrifyingly exposed. With the exception of Alinka, neither they nor their relationships survive the camp. Still these relationships are remarkable; “When life itself is a crime, the women’s cooperative efforts are not only feats of bonding and reminders of human dignity in defiance of the dehumanizing goal of the Nazis but also heroic acts of resistance.”

Safely bringing Aurelia’s pregnancy to term and smuggling out the child safely is the group’s “primary act of resistance.”

Tellingly, that resistance is gravely damaged and forbids a redemptive narrative. Fackenheim’s example of wounded resistance in To Mend the World provides a dissonant intertext that highlights the need for feminist interrogation in Holocaust narratives. Here he relates the story of a group of girls at Auschwitz:

Once at Auschwitz a group of girls on forced labour decided, so far as possible, to observe Yom Kippur. Prayer, of course, was out of the question: but fasting, they thought, was not. So they applied to their SS supervisor for permission to fast, and for a lighter work load for that day for which, they hastened to assure her, they would compensate on other days. Furious, the woman denied both requests, imposed overtime work in honour of the holiday, and threatened that anyone lagging in work on account of the fast would be sent to the crematorium without delay. Undeterred, the girls worked and fasted through the long day, exhilarated by the thought of Jews the world over sharing in it. When the day was done, they tasted their piece of black bread, and their ‘satisfaction was full’. Yet this ‘story’ of their ‘victory’ ended with a ‘bitter disappointment’. They had miscalculated. They had fasted on the wrong day.”

98 Ibid., 48.
99 Ibid., 47.
100 Fackenheim, To Mend the World, 322.
Fackenheim’s illustration of resistance is one that does not depend on success. That the girls fasted on the wrong day does not alter Fackenheim’s estimation that their actions constitute resistance. If anything, their “failure” makes for a perfect example of the type of resistance that Fackenheim envisions—one that is not militaristic, which any person can participate in, where intent is the model of resistance itself. This is a powerful narrative that supports Fackenheim’s argument that Tikkun is possible after the Holocaust because such examples of Tikkun existed during the war. Yet its encapsulated presentation, denuded of details, triumphantly (if mordantly) presents the girls as nameless archetypal figures. The story is exquisitely gendered; explicitly contrasting this female resistance with military resistance, as well as relying on the trope of the sadistic SS matron and the religious inexpertise (failure?) of the girls. Tola’s death after surviving so much, embedded in the visceral horror of the last days of the war, remembered incompletely in letters, allows no triumphal bracketing off of an idealized resistance.

As Jewish feminist Midrash, An Estate of Memory disorients and discomforts. If Tola’s redemption can be read as a Jewish feminist morality tale, it is one that repudiates not only the anti-world but redemptive interpretation as well. This is a difficult position for Jewish feminists to inhabit. Rachel Adler’s discussion of why Jewish feminists have not engaged Holocaust theology is helpful here. She identifies Jewish feminism with other Jewish liberal theologies. Jewish feminism is overwhelmingly optimistic, fundamentally not interested in theodicy, and basically conceives of humanity as at least potentially perfectible,
living in a world that is essentially whole and harmonious (except when humans corrupt it).

She asks,

How do theologies that emphasize the need for woman to become full contractors of the covenant justify covenanating with a God who did not save? Having learned how easily normal people can murder and how easily starvation, pain, and terror can dehumanize their victims, can we be so confident of human and social perfectibility? How do we account for disorder, rupture, atrocity?

A Midrashic readings of An Estate of Memory, with its bludgeoning account of senseless atrocity, its relentless insistence on horrific detail and incomprehensibility, and its resistance to any overarching triumphal or redemptive interpretation, provides an entry point for sustaining the tensions that are so central to serious feminist response.

CONCLUSION

I too would like to talk to myself like one mad or drunk, the way that woman did in the Book of Judges who poured out her heart unto the Lord and whom Eli drove from the Temple.

I may neither groan nor weep. I may not draw attention to myself in the street.

And I need to groan; I need to weep. Not four times a year. I feel the need to say Yizkor four times a day. –Rachel Auerbach, Yizkor 1943

Not all Holocaust narratives fall under the category of Fackenheim’s Mad Midrash; not all women’s Holocaust writing fall under the category of Jewish feminist Midrashic response. The three literary sources strategically highlighted in

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103 Ibid., 163

104 Auerbach, Yizkor, 1943, 464. Hannah was not drunk. So overcome by sorrow at not being able to bear a child, she could make no sound and prayed silently with only her lips moving. Eli the high priest misunderstood her silent mourning as drunkenness and condemns her. She defends herself and Eli immediately changes his attitude and offers her blessing instead. Samuel 1:13. Auerbach writes in 1943 in hiding on the Aryan side of Warsaw. She cannot mourn out loud or she will reveal herself.
this analysis intentionally span fiction and memoir, and the episodic to the epic. These are stories that are spoken to the memory of the rupture. They are conscious, intentional, and reflexive. While all of these sources raise questions about gender and embodiment that are basic to the development of Jewish feminist responses to the Holocaust, they also poignantly target key themes of relationality, sexual vulnerability, and maternity that require deeper analysis.

If for Adler, the “theological work of lament is to embody not only grief but indignation, not only acceptance but challenge,” Midrashic readings of these works highlight how feminist theological challenges are entangled in our definitions of Jewish feminism and its role in responding to the Holocaust. Fackenheim has already directed us to that midrashic prayer hall that is only inhabited by men. Thinking about women’s absence in that story directs attention to questions about what a Jewish feminist response looks like if we integrated other frames; not just “woman writer,” but sexuality, ablebodiedness, traditional observance etc. What other frames might be imagined that still combine Fackenheim’s criteria of Midrash steeped in tradition and that include radical exposure to the Holocaust?

At its most incisive, feminist Midrash highlights the intersectionality of multiple systems of oppression and exposes their theological, ethical, and cultural dimensions. Applying these lenses in reading women’s Holocaust writing as feminist Midrash exposes not only gendered Holocaust narratives, but also the interlocking oppressive practices that were at play in the Holocaust and which Holocaust responses must critically engage and repudiate. While the texts read here as midrash may provide limited resources for the diversity of oppressive practices that ought to be addressed, the strategy of midrashic reading may be applied to other narratives—perhaps still unarticulated—that are more on target.

105 Adler, Pour Out Your Heart Like Water: Toward a Jewish Feminist Theology of the Holocaust, 167-169.
Voicing a New Midrash: 
Women’s Holocaust Writing as Jewish Feminist Response

Ultimately a Jewish feminist response to the Holocaust must hold in tension the demands of history and tradition with the exigencies of the contemporary context and concern for the future. Thus a Jewish feminist response is built upon developing midrash that speak to Jewish feminist needs—that expand and deepen Fackenheim’s definition of midrash steeped in tradition and radical exposure to the Holocaust, but which are also sensitive to historical, traditional and contemporary issues.

Reading these texts midrashically—as Mad Midrash—simultaneously cuts against redemptive readings of the bulk of feminist (biblical) Midrash as well as popular Holocaust narratives. Such narratives necessarily elide, in the first instance, the systemic impact of biblical and rabbinic patriarchy and androcentrism, and, in the second, the incalculable damage of the Nazi assault, by pointing to an ultimately hopeful account of human nature or Jewish continuity. Reading women’s Holocaust writing as Midrash de-stabilizes the androcentric privilege that has become embedded in Holocaust narratives and reconfigures the parameters of Holocaust response that proceed from those narratives. It takes seriously Fackenheim’s claim that narrative, unlike philosophical discourses, has a unique capacity to express the “midrashic thinking” that maintains the tensions inherent in post-Holocaust response. It insists that women’s voices (alongside other marginalized voices) also be included for evaluation as to whether they evince this midrashic thinking. It broadens our resources for developing Jewish feminist responses to the Holocaust (and Jewish feminist thought) by listening for those themes and questions that resonate through women’s Holocaust writing, Jewish feminist thought and modern Jewish thought and also pays attention to when they are not raised. Finally, it contributes to an inclusivist, meta-denominational post-Holocaust Jewish feminist response—characteristics that are critical to the future of Jewish feminist thought.
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Voicing a New Midrash:
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Voicing a New Midrash:  
Women's Holocaust Writing as Jewish Feminist Response  


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