

Local authors invite women to the table of Torah study

By Robert L. Cohen
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For editors Judith A. Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer, the premise of *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim A Sacred Story*, (Ballantine Books, 1994), was that, in the words of their introduction, "it is interpretive traditions"—the history of almost entirely male study and interpretation of Biblical texts—"rather than [the] biblical texts [themselves] that leave women feeling excluded."

They write beautifully of the traditional edition of the Scriptures, the *Mikraot Gedolot*—whose pages literally surround the Biblical text with diverse commentaries—as like a room of study filled with "intense conversation..., disagreement [and] excitement," but all of whose voices heretofore have been male.

In inviting women—poets and writers, rabbis and educators, psychiatrists and a psychologist—to become part of the "interpretive tradition" relative to the Book of Ruth (there are almost 30 pieces in the collection, most of them specifically written for it), Kates and Reimer were not only seeking to give women places at the interpretive table, however. Rather, they believed that women's distinctive points of view, growing out of women's life experiences, professional competencies, and family relationships, would enrich that tradition—would add something new.

The results, to them, were gratifying, not only on account of attention from the general publishing and feminist communities as well as the Jewish world—both Barnes & Noble and the Feminist Bookstore Network have highlighted the book in their promotional material—but because *Reading Ruth*, they think, not only enlarges our understanding of the Book of Ruth but shows promise of inspiring future generations of women interpreters as well.

They were struck, to begin with, by the almost universal way in which their contributors saw the Ruth-Naomi relationship as central to the text—not that between Ruth and her eventual husband, Boaz,

which is highlighted, they say, in many traditional commentaries and, Kates notes, in the iconography of Western artwork on Ruth as well.

For some of their contributors, the Ruth-Naomi bond is an important model, a la David and Jonathan, of women's friendship; for one, committed to an "imaginative reconstruction" of the text, it models a lesbian relationship.

At the same time, Kates and Reimer were pleased at the diversity evident in the pieces they received—the multiplicity of viewpoints, styles, and approaches. (Aside from the editors, none of the contributors were shown each other's pieces before publication.)

There is in the collection an edited transcription of a traditional *shiur*, or oral learning of a text, given in Jerusalem by educator Avivah Zornberg; a verse-by-verse commentary (by Rabbi Ruth Sohn) in the style of Rashi, the classic medieval Jewish Bible commentator; and speculative, free-wheeling interpretations of the text in the tradition of *midrash* (what Kates calls "imaginative literature")—along with original poetry (by Marge Piercy and others), dramatic narratives, excerpts from a novel (by Nessa Rapoport), and a memoir (by *Jewish Advocate* writer Sylvia Rothchild).

And the contributions to *Reading Ruth* exhibit diversity in viewpoint as well. ("There is no one 'women's point of view,'" the editors emphasize.) Thus, some contributors see Ruth's embrace of the God of Israel ("Your God [shall be] my God") as subordinate to and growing out of her bonding to Naomi; Cynthia Ozick, on the other hand, celebrates Ruth's declaration as "far more than a ringing embrace of Naomi" but, rather, as an abandonment (like Abraham's) of childish idolatry in favor of monotheism.

Editor Reimer, in her own essay, sees Ruth (based both on the language of the text and on what is *not* said) as a reluctant, even indifferent mother who undermines traditional Jewish notions of women as primarily fulfilled through motherhood; Rabbi Sohn's commentary celebrates Ruth's son as a vehicle of

immortality and, hence, an ultimate blessing.

And writer Vanessa Ochs, reflecting, perhaps, normative feminist values, finds the Book of Ruth troubling on account of its apparent endorsement of women's self-effacement—whereas Orthodox educator Tamar Frankiel, in a striking interpretation, sees the text as celebrating "egolessness" and humility on the part of *both* Ruth and Boaz.

But the editors—Kates teaches Jewish Women's Studies and Bible at Hebrew College and elsewhere; Reimer is Associate Director of the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities—find these *machlokot* (disagreements, in the Talmudic tradition) exhilarating; they see their contributors as engaging in an implicit dialogue not only with traditional rabbinic interpretation but with the spectrum of feminist thought as well.

They have been gratified to hear that their book is not only a favored *bat mitzvah* present (in part because it treats women and girls as potentially serious students of Torah) but has also been given as a gift to some prospective non-Jewish daughters-in-law; it is apparently, for some future mothers-in-law, a way of saying "We can continue to have a relationship."

And they have been heartened, too, to gather that the sophistication of some of the essays has not been off-putting. Gail Reimer, reporting that the Religion Editor of the *Dallas Morning News* identified as her favorite piece one that Reimer considered somewhat opaque, remarks: "People are excited by the difficulty of study; that's not pushing them away, it's drawing them in."

Above all, Kates and Reimer are delighted—as was at least one rabbi/reader—that the deliberate inclusiveness of their book ensured that the contributors span, and transcend, traditional denominational boundaries of observance and affiliation. "We can be on a page of *Mikraot Gedolot* together even if we can't *daven* together," rejoices Judith Kates. "Talmud Torah—the study of a Jewish text—can unite us."