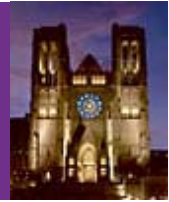


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Saving the Scriptures from Sexism

an interview with
Rabbi Shoni Labowitz

Rabbi Shoni Labowitz is a nationally known lecturer, spiritual guide, and creator of healing rituals in the Jewish Kabbalistic tradition. She draws from various mystical traditions in her work developing LivingWaters, a spiritual health spa. Labowitz hosts the radio program, Spiritual Focus, and is also the author of [God, Sex and Women of the Bible: Discovering Our Sensual, Spiritual Selves](#) and [Miraculous Living: A Guided Journey in Kabbalah Through the Ten Gates of the Tree of Life](#). With her husband, Phillip Labowitz, she serves as co-rabbi of Temple Adath Or in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

Kristen Fairchild: You had a dream that inspired you to write "God, Sex and Women of the Bible." Tell me about it.

Shoni Labowitz: Back in 1979, I was leading a prayer group for women studying the Bible. I was in a quandry because I had been steeped in Bible study for many years, but I felt it didn't speak to me as a woman. How can I tell a story where Eve is the first woman, and she's evil and sinful, and God is man and all good? Here I was in this prayer group attempting to bring women back into religion, back into spirituality, back to God, and I knew I would cut them off if I really told them what I had learned in the Bible.

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So I knew that I had to do something else, but I didn't know how to, and books were not written at the time that explained anything along these lines. But very often, when I have a problem, I fall asleep. I don't evade it or avoid it, I just let it cook in me. And I had a dream. It was a dream of an ethereal presence that came towards me, and that held an inaudible scream in her hand, if you could picture what a scream would look like in someone's hand. I just knew it was a scream. And it had no sound. She handed it to me and said that this was the scream of women of all times, and I was to give it voice, and I could do it through the Bible. I got up, probably in a cold sweat, and thought, "What is this? This was arrogant, maybe it was self-fulfilling prophecy, maybe I pushed the dream. What is this all about?" I thought, "I can't retranslate the Bible!" Just the thought of it made me feel that I was inadequate! How could I question what Rabbis of so many centuries had given forth as Bible commentary and translation?



So I got nervous and I did what we do, women, when we get nervous. We either eat or we clean. That was one of the fortunate times I opted to clean! I was cleaning out a linen closet, and in-between the embroidered napkins, a paper fell off the shelf. I am a compulsively neat person and in my home, everything has its place. I know I didn't have this paper, and not in a linen closet! I looked at this paper, and it was a term paper my mother wrote in college entitled, "Psychoanalysis in the Bible." My mother, Kristen, had died several years before this occurrence. She was, God bless her memory, a classic Rebbetzin--a dutiful Rabbi's wife. But she always loved studying. And on that first page, in the first paragraph, she said that it's important for us to retranslate the Bible and make it relative to our emotional needs today. And then she quoted author Dorothy Zelig, "But we must start with our minds as a 'tabula rasa'." If you understand Buddhism, that's a beginner's mind, when you just start with an empty piece of paper, an empty slate.

I started studying the Scriptures as though I had never studied them before, with a beginner's mind. What I found is that the Bible does not denigrate women, only the way in which it has been translated. In my book I don't change the original Hebrew text, I only change the translation. When you open a Torah scroll, what you find are Hebrew letters without vowels, without punctuation. In the Talmud, the Rabbis teach that it's up to every generation to bring their own interpretation to the text, and since 400 B.C.E. (Before the Common Era) people have been translating and commenting on the Scriptures. This is the first time, to my knowledge, that as a woman, I've given voice not just to the spaces in-between the words, not just to Midrash, but to the actual translation of the words.

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In the course of your book you profile eight different women from the Old Testament and show how they are archetypes for the different stages of a woman's life. Let's start with the most familiar woman of the Old Testament: Eve. How is your interpretation of Eve different than our traditional understanding of her?

Eve is so often associated with sin. In Genesis 5, Verse 2, it says, "God created man and woman in God's image." And, "God called them their name, 'Adam.'" Meaning that in the beginning, it was a male and female joined at the hip called Adam. You know, four legs, four arms, and two heads, hobbling around the garden! Then, as the story goes, God came in and split them into two people. Traditional Old Testament interpretation says that the split came from Adam's rib. However, if you look at the translation, it could also mean from the hip. Genesis 2:17 is traditionally translated, "If you eat of the Tree, you will certainly die." I looked at the Hebrew and I retranslated it using the same letters, and it says, "When you will eat of it, you will die a certain death." A big difference! Anytime we eat of any kind of knowledge, we absorb knowledge and something must die. Interestingly, the word in Hebrew for knowledge is the same word as to know someone intimately, as in intercourse: "Yada." So what was Eve doing? She was taking that fruit of God to become like God. But what does it mean to become like God? You get to know yourself, you get to know God. And so she, like many women today, offered it to her partner, Adam, so that he could eat it. We want our men, we want our partners, to be able to eat of the same kind of knowledge that we have. We want to be known and we want to know them. Intercourse is more than just an act. Intercourse has to do with intercouring with the essence of life within each other--intercouring with life itself.

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How do your interpretations of Old Testament women correspond with matriarchal

images and practices in other indigenous traditions?

Well, let's take menstruation as an example. I use Rachel as an archetype for menstruation. Rachel (as well as Leah, Sarah and Rebecca) was a woman that lived in two different cultures. She lived in the Mesopotamian culture, which was a goddess-oriented culture, and she also lived in the Biblical culture, the growing patriarchal culture. So we need to see these Old Testament women for where they come from and how they tried to preserve their own culture amidst the emerging patriarchy. Take Sabbath, for instance. Do you know every religious tradition has some kind of day in which humans are to rest? Ishtar or Asherah, the same goddess known by two different names, is said have had her period on the full moon. In Babylonian times, the period is called "Sabattu," which is a derivative of the Babylonian word "Sa-bat" which means literally "heart rest." Every time Asherah had her period on the full moon, it was Sabat or Sabbath. This day of rest went from the full moon, to the new moon, to every quarter moon. So before you knew it, once a week they were having what we now observe as Sabbath. *Teraphim*, the goddess figurines of Asherah, are not only found in Genesis with the story of Rachel but also in Kings and Judges where other women risked death to take these goddess figurines when they left from one homeland to the next. This is related to the tradition of candlesticks in Judaism. Candlesticks are very important to hand down from mother to daughter in Jewish tradition, and when our people went from country to country and were persecuted, one of the few possessions they took with them were their candlesticks. Candlesticks were symbolic of Sabbath. So here in the story of Rachel, taking the goddess figurines is her way of giving women the legacy of the Ashera, the menstruating goddess.

How do you respond to critics who object to the Old Testament being retranslated and reinterpreted in this way?

The Talmud says that each generation should come to Torah in its own way, on its own. Rabbi Zecharia of Yereslov said, "When people innovate new ideas in Torah, they're creating jewels for the divine presence." This is what is so beautiful about the Kabbalistic tradition which teaches you how to question, to ask why, to understand the depths and the many layers. I think it's my training in Kabbalistic thinking that enables me to go back into the Torah and glean new translations. We make a blessing when we study Bible in Hebrew: "Blessed are you, holy one of the universe, who guides us to immerse ourselves in the word." That means I'm not just reading the text literally. I'm immersing myself in it. Those words are swimming through me and I'm swimming through them and I'm creating a dialogue with God. The Kabbalists describe the Torah as God's wedding contract. And if, indeed, it is God's wedding contract, then it has to have a woman's experience, a woman's point of view in it. An 18th century rabbi once said that everything that was, is and will be is in the Bible. In that case, women have got to be in there somewhere. I mean, how would I, as a woman, have a wedding contract without my name on it?

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