

WRJ CENTENNIAL



# D'var Torah

Women's Voices Deepen Our Jewish Legacy

Deborah and *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*  
Haftarah for B'Shalach (Judges 4:4 – 5:3)

The prophetess and judge Deborah appears in the Book of Judges which is not part of our Torah, but of the Prophets section of our Bible, and is read annually as Haftarah. Because of the visionary, inclusive nature of *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, which offers commentaries on each portion within the Five Books of Moses, the writers and editors nonetheless refer to Deborah several times. Though her song of success is not sung in Torah, she is thoughtfully and intentionally remembered. Deborah was a *shofet*, a judge. Like Miriam, she is considered a prophetess. How was that possible in ancient days? She was a woman!

Various commentaries and notes in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* mention Deborah as follows:

- “While presumably women were excluded from such leadership positions, Judges 4 – 5 records that Deborah served as a judge and prophet.” (p. 411, note on Exodus 18:21))
- “While no one is designated to succeed their (Moses and Aaron’s) sister Miriam, Deborah would be a fitting choice. Deborah, like Miriam (Exodus 15:20) is called a prophet (Judges 4:4); and she is praised as “Mother in Israel” (Judges 5:7), a title that most likely indicates her role as a leader during the period of the Judges. Also, just as Miriam sings a song of victory and praise after crossing the Sea of Reeds... so too does Deborah sing a song of praise after the defeat of Sisera.” (Judges 5) (p. 1239, note on Deuteronomy 31:7)
- As a named female prophet, “Deborah... (is) praised as prominent and influential. Deborah leads the Israelites to victory and is the only chieftain in that period of Israelite history who is also a prophet. (Judges 4:4) The poem attributed to Deborah refers to her as a “mother in Israel” (Judges 5:7), a title that probably designates her position as the people’s protector rather than a biological maternity.” (p. 1284, “Another View”, by Tamara Cohn Eskenazi)

Just as *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* remembers and honors Deborah, this WRJ Centennial d'var Torah reveres her with respect and acclaim. At this moment, we choose to recognize and honor the Deborahs of our day who critically studied the Five Books of Moses and declared that it was time to hear the other half of the story, the missing voices of our female ancestors. One

modern day Deborah, Cantor Sara Sager, challenged WRJ to consider publishing a women's commentary, a revolutionary thought in 1993.

And so, hundreds of twentieth century Deborahs began a process of revelation, collaborating to create a commentary that voiced women's responses to Torah. Lay leaders and professionals knowledgeable in Torah, Jewish history, archeology, and so forth dreamed together. An educational process started! An Editorial Board was named. Editors were appointed. Colleagues reached out to other colleagues. Assignments were made to authors. An organization evolved. The digital age enhanced communication. And, for WRJ lay leaders, the fundraising efforts began! The visions of many women enabled this enormous project to reach fruition.

Many, many women engaged in this project, making a kernel of an idea become a reality. WRJ past Presidents Judy Hertz, Judy Rosenkranz, Judy Silverman, Helene Waranch and Rosanne Selfon slowly moved the project along. WRJ Board members like Elaine Merians and Davna Brook spoke passionately. WRJ Executive Directors Ellen Rosenberg and Shelley Lindauer implemented plans. It was Shelley Lindauer who, upon becoming WRJ Executive Director in 2004, asked, "Are we going to take this project out of the drawer and really make it happen?"

Shelley's diligent guidance along with URJ Press Editor, Rabbi Hara Person, Editor Dr. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, and Associate Editor Rabbi Dr. Andrea L. Weiss, orchestrated myriad voices into a volume of great renown. They and their team of more than 200 Jewish women around the world are the Deborahs of our day! The tireless work of their minds and hearts became the words of *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*. These contemporary Deborahs gave voice to those previously unheard. Women of Reform Judaism moved Jewish women from the margins of our history to the center of the page.

This did not happen overnight. It took fourteen years of vision, determination and patience. The process started with a concept at the 1992 NFTS District 3 District Biennial. It was followed by a challenge to the entire WRJ delegate body in 1993 at the San Francisco Assembly, and was completed with the debut of *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* at the 46<sup>th</sup> WRJ Assembly in 2007 in San Diego. It is now in its third printing and offers complimentary study guides on the WRJ website ([www.wrj.org](http://www.wrj.org)).

At its debut, Executive Director Shelley Lindauer wrote, "*The Torah: A Women's Commentary* has been a labor of love for the many women associated with this project from its inception to publication. Those of us who are fortunate to have been a part of the process in any way know that we are indeed blessed to have had this opportunity. Special thanks must go to Rosanne Selfon, WRJ President, who has steadfastly and selflessly worked to ensure the funding for *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*. The dedication of all involved in this publication will leave a lasting impact on our daughters and granddaughters, our sons and grandsons, and all future generations."

This was a visionary accomplishment of Women of Reform Judaism and like the Song of Deborah found in Judges, so many words of praise have been sung about *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* and Women of Reform Judaism. The Jewish world saluted *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, awarding it the 2008 Everett Family Foundation Jewish Book of the Year.

At an event honoring WRJ, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, URJ Immediate Past President, commented, "... [WRJ] just completed what may be their most significant accomplishment of all: the creation of *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, a pioneering work of scholarship that showcases our Movement's best teachers and affirms, by its very being, the equality of women in Reform Jewish life."

During one interview, while looking back at the visionary accomplishment that had taken years of efforts and determination, WRJ Executive Director Emeritus Ellen Rosenberg said, "An explosion of emotion, intelligence and purpose was displayed, with dignity and passion, during this celebration. Indeed a very proud moment."

In her 2009 Executive Director's report, Shelley Lindauer proudly proclaimed, "If the primary goals of first wave feminism... were equal access, enfranchisement, and property ownership, in this realm of Torah study, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* marks the accomplishment of these goals. It is clear, at this point, that Jewish women now own Torah."

*The Torah: A Women's Commentary* was the culmination of thousands of hours of research, writing, creating and fundraising by many Deborahs. It was and is a *Stronger Together* WRJ accomplishment... one of many that has been lauded in our first one hundred years. May all the Deborahs of our future — women who choose to become part of WRJ — embrace the living, sacred work of WRJ with the same *Stronger Together* passion as those who gave life to *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*. Amen!

*This d'var Torah was written by WRJ executive committee member Cynthia Roosth Wolf for adaptation and use by sisterhoods/women's groups during the 2013 WRJ Centennial year. We are grateful to Cynthia and Michael Wolf and Family for generously sponsoring this Centennial project.*