

WRJ CENTENNIAL



Devar Torah

Women's Voices Deepen Our Jewish Legacy

Eve, Light unto the World
Parashat B'reishit (Genesis 1:1 – 6:8)

Throughout 2013, we will be celebrating the legacy of the first 100 years of WRJ. In so doing, it is important to celebrate the first steps of our NFTS journey as documented by Norma U. Levitt, WRJ Honorary President, in the tribute journal celebrating our 90th birthday in 2003. In “Mountains to Climb” Norma wrote:

“We look back on our history with pride and wonder. 1913 – the cherished memory of our beginning. When were we captured by the bonds of Sisterhood? Who showed us the excitement of acting together for causes larger than ourselves? When did we feel the warmth and wonder of women together strengthened by faith?”

“On January 21, 1913, in Cincinnati, Ohio, 156 delegates representing 5,000 women in 51 Sisterhoods met together to found a national women’s organization of Reform Judaism, the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods (NFTS). In America it was a time of horse-drawn carriages and home-made root beer, of an average family income of \$1000 a year. The world of women was about to explode out of an era of complacency. The challenge they faced demanded strength to leave their homes and families, to stand shoulder to shoulder with men. For women it was a period of advancing struggle for recognition and equality.”

“In his opening address to the first meeting to organize NFTS, Rabbi David Philipson said, “The movement to be inaugurated today is possible because the Reform Movement placed the Jewish woman on a plane of religious equality with men.” He prophesied well when he added, “The meeting will prove of momentous significance in the organized religious life of American Jewry.”

We can hear echoes of Parashat B'reishit (Genesis), in the unfolding story of NFTS. We know that with each addition to the world that God made, “God saw how good...” (*The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*, p. 5, note 4). And, at the seminal moments of NFTS, our founding fathers and mothers too, “saw how good!”

We also know that in this same parashah, after first woman Eve and first man Adam transgressed in the Garden of Eden, God too underwent a transformation and these words of commentary are important:

“Genesis 3, one of the most controversial passages in the Bible, seeks to explain why a wholly good world, created by a caring God, is nonetheless rife with hardship and inequality. It resolves the problem by placing responsibility on humankind. In this drama, woman plays a leading role. Yet she and her mate are equally held responsible.” (*The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*, commentary on Genesis 3:1-24, p. 13)

The Reform Movement has embraced humanity’s equality since the beginning of our NFTS days. God created us all as partners in spreading light and made us responsible for our world.

In the beginning, God created the phenomenon of light vs darkness. Then God realized that creating light also meant that we would become ‘*Or Ami*’ - lights among all peoples. God had created humans for a purpose far beyond the Garden of Eden. We salute and thank Eve for being a woman who was both courageous enough to take that first bite, and, in so doing, became the first mother of humanity. Eve dealt with her transgressions and their unintended consequences. She became a light for future generations. She became a survivor.

In 2013, we continue the climb that our sisters started in 1913. And like Eve, we handle life’s happenings and also dare to make a difference. Through ten decades, the women of NFTS, now WRJ, have grown in commitment and collaboration to find and embrace ways to fix the imperfections of our world. God placed the responsibility on Eve for all generations, not as a burden, but as a way of spreading light. And *Stronger Together*, we will continue forward.

Therefore, basing the following prayer on Norma U. Levitt’s thoughtful words: As we deliberate today, may we continue to “look back on our history with pride and wonder” and may we continue to look forward “with pride and wonder” at our world. May 1913 be “the cherished memory of our beginning” and may 2013 be our “cherished memory” of our beginning anew. May we continue to be “captured by the bonds of Sisterhood” and may we continue to welcome other women into our local sisterhoods and into the broader world of Reform Judaism. May we continue to act “together for causes larger than ourselves.” May we continue to “feel the warmth and wonder of women together strengthened by faith.” May we continue to be stronger together as women and as bearers of light for all humanity. May it be God’s will. 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.