



SHALOM HARTMAN INSTITUTE מכון
OF NORTH AMERICA שלום הרטמן

On the Jewish Canon and Male Privilege

Elana Stein Hain

In this class, Elana Stein Hain addresses how to bring female voice and perspective to a Jewish canon which privileges male voices and perspectives. The goal of the class is ultimately to consider how people who are committed to Judaism can weave together the past, the present and the future. She offers four approaches:

- 1- **Dualism:** In this approach, the reader distinguishes between what God wants for humanity and what humanity is capable of. This approach suggests that while the Jewish canon may be gendered male in many ways, this is an expression not of an ideal but of Divine accommodation to human limitation. She notes that this approach is simultaneously comforting and unverifiable.
- 2- **Reading Midrashically:** In this approach, the reader invests “old” texts and practices with new meanings which may better reflect women’s experience today. She notes that people can use this strategy to uphold or to undermine received wisdom.
- 3- **Amplifying Precedent:** In this approach, the reader finds the examples of women’s leadership and heroism in the Jewish canon and holds it up as precedent for what is possible today. She notes that this approach is significant in its authenticity but may also continue to “exceptionalize” great women rather than to normalize them.
- 4- **Redefining Categories:** In this approach, the reader understands the category of man in the Jewish canon as human being. This allows reader to feel addressed by the Jewish textual tradition, while also presenting the challenge that for some this created a gap between the way they read and the way they practice.

At the end of the session, Elana discusses why, if each of these strategies has both positives and negatives associated, it is worthwhile to continue to use them.

Questions for Discussion:

In this session, Elana offers four general approaches to responding to the male privilege of the written Jewish corpus. She accentuates both the advantages and the challenges of each approach, asserting that being conscious of the gap between the Jewish canon and women’s experience in today’s world and trying to respond to it using these or other approaches is essential to Jewish education today.

Some questions for further consideration:

- 1- Do you think this endeavor of adopting new approaches to reading is worthwhile? Why or why not?
- 2- Is there an approach that particularly speaks to you, or one that does not? Are there other reading strategies that you use?
- 3- Beyond ways of reading, what are the other variables which impact the presence or absence of women’s voices in studying Torah?