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# Gender, Sexuality and Derekh Eretz: A #MeToo Midrash

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Educator's Guide

## Introduction:

People talk about #MeToo in terms of patriarchy, of power and sexuality.

But these are actually outgrowths of a deeper, more profound problem, and that is objectification of another human being - turning someone from a three-dimensional subject with needs, wants, and feelings, into an instrument for my use. What Immanuel Kant called "treating humanity as *only* a means rather than an end-in-itself."

In situations of sexual harassment or assault, this line is crossed. We instrumentalize people for our own needs, whether sexual or power gratification. And it's tricky line to tow precisely because people do actually serve one another's needs and desires. But how do we stop objectifying each other? We all know that this is a problem, but even as we know it, we fail at it.

This class addresses the dynamics of objectification through the lens of a medieval midrash (See Source #2). In this midrash, objectification is addressed in three ways: 1) through identity and relationships, 2) through circumstances and structures, and 3) through the composition of the midrash itself. At each and every Act, aspects of this discussion appear.

The protagonist of this midrash is a female survivor of serial rape attempts. It is a play in 4 acts. The Leader's Guide provides Biblical intertexts for each act: the midrash in each section is riffing on significant Biblical scenes in ways that actually subvert the stories somewhat by putting our female protagonist in the role of male Biblical heroes. In this sense, the medium contributes to the message.

## Where is this Midrash from?

This midrash is from *Otsar HaMidrashim*, a collection by Judah Eisenstein in New York City in 1915. This collection incorporates many *midrashim* which are not printed anywhere else, and are often of late provenance. The *#MeToo Midrash* was first found in manuscript form in 13<sup>th</sup> century France. It bears significant resemblance to a Muslim folktale preserved in the *Arabian Nights* collection, known as *The Jewish Cadi and His Pious Wife*. (English translation [here](#))

**Some of the big questions worth asking in reading this midrash are:**

What possible identities are open to women today?

What is the role of sexual desire in people's identities and relationship?

What is the interplay between steadfast and stubborn individuals and corrupt systems?

What are the ethics around revenge and forgiveness?

**Notes for Reading through the midrash**

**Act I: A Woman and Her Brother-in-Law (paragraphs 1-2)**

**Biblical Intertexts:**

Bereshit (Genesis) 39:1-20; Bereshit 27:34; Devarim (Deuteronomy) 22:22-27

**Questions:**

How is the female protagonist treated as an object in this act? How and when does she become a subject?

What is the role of the court here, the structure which is meant to preserve safety and justice? How does it impact the female protagonist's agency?

How do the parallels to the Joseph story inform the message of this midrash?

Who is this woman? What kind of person is she?

How do you understand her arguments against her brother-in-law's advances?

**Act II: A Woman Turned Bible Instructor (paragraphs 3-4)**

**Biblical Intertexts:**

Bereshit (Genesis) 28:1-2, 10-19; Ruth 3:6-18; II Samuel 13:1-22

**Questions:**

What does it mean for a woman's voice to be the parallel to the voice of God in Jacob's dream?

The Ruth intertext is about a man and woman spending the night together for the man to ultimately marry the woman. Yet in this act the man and woman spend the night together but they will not have a sexual relationship. How does this inform the message of the midrash?

In this act, the woman is able to become a Bible teacher. How does this possibility of who she can be impact her options? Compare this to the Jerusalem Talmud aggadah (story) in source #1. Why is she able to become a teacher here, but not in the Jerusalem Talmud? (see #5 which describes religious possibilities for women in Christian communities in the Middle Ages. Is it possible that this idea of a religious leadership possible self for women in Christian communities may have impacted the imagination of the writers of this midrash?)

This Act engages the issue of possible selves (see source #3 for an explanation of this concept.) How do the possibilities of who a person can be impact her ability to survive? How does it impact how we hear all people, not only women?

What does the innocent bystander death of the child add to the message of the midrash?

### **Act III – A Woman Turned Healer (paragraph 5)**

#### **Biblical Intertexts:**

Yonah (Jonah) 1:3-16; 2:11

#### **Questions:**

How does the comparison to Yonah, the Bible's most effective prophet (5 words to transform Nineveh!) impact your understanding of who this woman is?

What do you make of the fact that it seems to be safer for her to be outside of society (graveyard, exiled from home, with pirates (!), on a desert island) than in the societal structure that are meant to offer protection and support (family, court system)?

What are the ramifications of this woman only being able to survive outside of any sexual relationship with men? What does this imply about the ability for people to keep their sexual desires in check?

What new possible self for this woman has been revealed in this Act?

### **Act IV – Healer Turned Judge (paragraphs 6-7)**

#### **Biblical Intertexts:**

II Melakhim (Kings) 5:1-19; Iyov (Job) 24: 13-25

#### **Questions:**

How does the fact that the healer is an outsider (lives far, has exotic knowledge, is thought of as a *matronita*, implying that she may not have been Jewish) influence her relationship with her earlier attackers?

There is a return here to the Joseph story. How has the power balance changed since the earlier parallels to the Joseph story?

In the *Jewish Cadi and his Pious Wife* folktale, the woman forgives her attackers, and yet here in the Jewish version, she does not. Why? What messaging does that offer?

What is the role of God and Divine justice not only in this act but throughout the midrash? What is the relationship between Divine justice and human initiative?

Why does the couple get remarried?

What is your opinion on the take-away about evil speech at the end of the story? And why?

### **Additional Dimension: Jewish-Christian Polemics:**

What we see emerging here is the way she is able to get out of being an object is not only by using her voice, but by being able to inhabit other roles: the role of teacher and the role of healer. And the men who are able to view her as more than a sexual object, are those who are a) touched by Torah or God, OR b) in need of her help (literally “touched” by God).

There are some important Christological elements of this midrash: a) resurrection, especially after 3 days, b) a woman as a teacher of Bible and a healer, and c) healing leprosy specifically. Otsar HaMidrashim is a compilation of midrash that is not from the time of the Gemara. It's later – has medieval materials. A woman who teaches Bible, heals people, is unmarried is monastic. If not a nun, who took a life-long vow of chastity, perhaps akin to the beguines or anchoresses who could live without marrying, devoting themselves to healing and good works for as long as they wished to do so. Doing this was one answer to the question of how to understand the interplay between human sexuality and the higher parts of our nature. The answer was to put aside sexuality, to shun it. And women did this not only out of piety, but to save themselves from men (See source #5). And so our protagonist- who rises after three days, akin to Christian doctrine about Jesus, who teaches Bible and heals leprosy, per Christian images of Jesus, is using a Christian possible self to get away from men's sexual voraciousness. This introduces the question of how new cultures produce new possible selves for men and for women.

But that is not the entirety of this midrash: the midrash begins with our hero saying that she is not married to God, as a nun would be, but to her husband. And all who deny their husbands deny their God. And our midrash ends with her reuniting with her spouse as the happily ever after ending! And so, this is actually a case in which the midrash is negotiating the question of how we synthesize sexuality, desire with our higher natures and in recognition of the higher natures of others. One answer is to deny sexuality, to separate from it by going outside of society, denying sexual union and focusing solely on our “higher” nature.

But this is not the Jewish answer. For, Judaism is dedicated to marriage as the way to synthesize these sides of ourselves. Even Jewish ascetics in medieval times, such as the sefer Hasidim, who really want to deny sex cannot do so (See source #6). And there are many stories in the Talmud which describes rabbis leaving their wives for a time in order to study Torah, but later returning. And so this midrash begins and ends with marriage as a way to address these different sides of ourselves, to help people to continue to be subjects even as sexual desire is a natural part of life.

If this read on the midrash is indeed accurate, it opens an important question for us as moderns, for it presents two poles: denying sexuality, or being safe in marriage. But people in our society interact not only in these ways, but in the ways in between. And so, how do we negotiate these elements of our personhood?

### Basic Lessons:

How do we avoid objectification?

1. The **voice** and the perspective of the other; but you only get used to listening to the voice and the perspective of the other if you normalize their voices in the first place
2. The **possible selves** of the other: how else can you see that other person? What are the other roles that they play besides the one that benefits you?
3. **Structures and relationships**: what are the structures and relationships which allow people to flourish as multiple selves, and where do we get narrowed to instruments for the use of others?