How the Rabbis Imagined Sarah: A Preliminary Study of the Feminine in Genesis Rabbah

Gary G. Porton

I always introduce myself to those who ask about my education as Jacob Neusner’s second PhD. I do so with a great sense of pride and even now with some amazement. Given my background, Jack might well have not accepted me into his graduate program. Despite my training as an undergraduate at UCLA and my introduction to rabbinic texts at HUC-JIR in California, I came to Brown University with much less of a background than the JTS graduates who were my fellow students. I needed remedial work, and it is only the extra attention Jack paid me, including reading Talmud with me during my first semester at Brown, that allowed me to succeed. But this is perhaps what has always been so unique about Jack Neusner. He understood what his students needed and was willing to give as much of himself as it took for them to achieve what he believed they were capable of.

Alongside this, and equally important, Jack understood the American university better than anyone else engaged in training graduate students in the study of Judaism. He taught us the skills we would need to engage in significant research. But he also understood that our research would be important, and our careers would take off, only if we knew how to speak within the larger world of the secular university, often as the only scholar of Judaism on campus. In my case, Jack took a Jew from a twelve member Jewish community in central California and gave him the knowledge, skills, and confidence to become a teacher and scholar at one of the major research institutions in America. What I accomplished, I owe to him. I will always be grateful not only for his training but also for the risk he took on me and for his continued faith in me and support of my work throughout my entire career.

I want to express my thanks to Alan Avery-Peck for his careful reading of previous drafts of this essay. His comments have made this version much better than the earlier drafts.
Studies of women in Judaism, dating to well before the rise of feminist interests in the late 60s, have yielded virtual agreement that we do not find women’s voices in the rabbinic collections from late antiquity, or for that matter in Jewish texts through the medieval or pre-modern periods. In studies of Jewish women in the rabbinic collections of late antiquity, most scholars reveal women as standing on the borders of rabbinic thought. For the rabbis of late antiquity, the ideal Israelite was a male over the age of thirteen who had two Israelite parents, or at least an Israelite mother.

What is lost in these analyses is the fact that, from late antiquity through the modern period, feminine entities actually predominate in the Jewish symbolic system. With the exception of God, feminine nouns pervade the symbolic system of Judaism. For example, in addition to God’s presence on earth, Shekhinah, Torah, Shabbat, Halakhah, and Aggadah are feminine nouns. The problem is to work out the significance of this fact, to determine what it means for Judaism that the male Jew continually relates to and interacts with these female symbols. Are they actually female entities or merely female nouns with no feminine traits in a linguistic structure that does not contain a neuter form? The following comprises a first step in answering this question: to determine if the feminine symbols in Judaism have feminine traits. We begin here by examining how the rabbis imagined women and their roles in society.

With the exception of legal materials, there are few studies of how the rabbis constructed women. While much has been written on the rabbis’

---

