

**Shadow Stories: Midrashic Meditations**

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

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סיפורי הצל: מדיטציות מדרשיות

הצעת מחקר לתיזה בכתיבה יוצרת

המחלקה לאנגלית

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## **Table of Contents**

Introduction.....	3
Aims and General Description.....	6
Conceptual Background.....	8
Shape of Project.....	12
Bibliography.....	15

## INTRODUCTION

מבשרי אֶחְזֶה אֵלֹהִים (איוב פרק יט)

From within my flesh, I will gaze upon God (Job 19:26)

The roots of this project go back at least as far as a Passover Seder I attended in March, 1994, while working and studying in Jerusalem for a year. Our hostess had gathered eight women, all of us either students or teachers at institutions of Jewish learning around Jerusalem.

Born forty years before me, Ms. H. had been given what was considered a traditional Jewish woman's education, at that time. It included little beyond the rudimentary skills of reading a Hebrew prayer book. By contrast, I had spent my high school years learning Talmud, Bible, Jewish Law, history and philosophy. I spent a gap year after high school, studying at one of the institutions for Jewish women's learning about which Ms. H. had become passionate after her move to Israel. And that post-high-school year had set me on a trajectory of life-long Jewish studies.

I felt flattered to be included in the group seated around Ms. H's table. At the same time, I was hesitant, conjecturing two possible scenarios for the evening. Either this would be a gathering of mild-mannered, pious women reciting traditional *divrei torah*. Or, it would be an evening of defiance, steeped in feminist rhetoric. Neither extreme appealed to me.

In reality, I don't recall which direction the Seder discussion took; I imagine it was far more balanced than either of those possibilities. But in hindsight, I see that my suspicions were really a mask for a more profound discomfort. A self-accusation of sorts. To be honest, I was uncomfortable around Ms. H.'s energy and enthusiasm, because it forced me to take a look at myself. Ms. H. was someone who had fought to create the institutions in which my Jewish learning took place at the same high level as my secular learning. I'm not sure she had any particular investment in the actual substance of the evening's conversation. By gathering us together to celebrate Passover, her implicit demand was simply, "Will you create a space of integrity for *women's* voices within the world of Jewish learning – whatever form that takes?" I wasn't sure I had an acceptable answer.

For many years, *Shadow Stories: Midrashic Meditations* has been a wishful dream for me. By way of explaining this, and the difficulty of Ms. H's challenge for me, I will describe an earlier memory.

When I think of my high school years, I recall long afternoons spent in Talmud class. I often felt bored – back-and-forth discussions about rarified and arcane matters of Jewish law did not capture my imagination as readily as the nineteenth-century novels my teachers sometimes discovered among the pages of my Gemara. My attention would usually perk up, however, when we reached narrative or philosophical passages in the Gemara, which often included potent images and conflicted characters.

On the one hand, this memory speaks to my nonchalance regarding Jewish learning: I took for granted my inclusion in a classroom traditionally reserved for boys. On the other hand, this memory demonstrates my early literary inclinations.

I have long felt conflicted about these inclinations. Based on their erudition in areas of Jewish law, some of my peers have been at the forefront of the battle for women's inclusion in areas of leadership within the Orthodox Jewish community. Yet, as much as I might try to apply myself to what was viewed as more 'serious,' or rigorous legal scholarship, it was always literary and poetic texts that called to me. From a young age, I was drawn to British and American novels. I wrote poetry and short stories as a teenager, and majored in English as an undergraduate.

Alongside this perpetual interest was a more complicated relationship with Jewish tradition. As a woman, I often felt alienated by the communal experience of Judaism. But the literary texts fascinated me and drew me in. Reading my British novels, any passing reference to, or re-envisioning of a biblical text or character immediately triggered my curiosity. In synagogue, I was drawn to the beauty and intricacy of the prayers. During my gap-year after high school, I was first introduced to the literary and psychological dimensions of biblical characters. And several years spent in a Jewish Studies graduate program, specializing in the study of Midrash, further enlightened me to the historical and cultural complexity surrounding the Jewish literary tradition.

I have read many contemporary works seeking to explicate or interpret traditional Jewish texts. I have read other works that have creatively and imaginatively re-written the sources. Rarely have I encountered works that do both.

*Shadow Stories: Midrashic Meditations* attempts to fill this space, *and* respond to Ms. H's demand. Finding a space of integrity for *this* woman's voice means reading biblical and rabbinic texts with sensitivity to the literary nuances of language, imagery, plot, and character. But even more than this, it means finding the places that inform and echo within my *own* narratives -- stories of a young girl, woman, mother and wife who has been simultaneously captivated, and challenged by Jewish tradition.

There are those who have written memoirs as a form of apologetics for traditional Judaism. There are others who have left traditional, orthodox lifestyles, using memoir as a way to explain and cope with this rejection. My spiritual journey encompasses attraction *and* alienation. My stories dwell at the periphery, just *within* the shadow of tradition.

## AIMS AND DESCRIPTION

I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD (Exodus 20:2): When He spoke, each and every person of Israel said: The Divine Word has been with me alone. R. Jose bar Hanina said: It was according to the capacity of each and every person that the Divine Word spoke with him. (Midrash Tanhuma, Yitro 5.17)

*Shadow Stories: Midrashic Meditations* will be a case study in unpacking Rabbi Jose bar Hanina's liberating declaration. Bar Hanina understood that, once uttered, God's words became the property of each individual witness, reverberating in the imagination of each listener. This potent Midrash helps me see that when I search for meaning in the biblical narratives that have beckoned and whispered to me over the years, I bring my own stories to bear - stories that span my early childhood, adolescence, undergraduate years, the searching years of my twenties, and my later journeys as wife and mother.

*Shadow Stories: Midrashic Meditations* will be a collection of personal narratives, interwoven with my own creative expansions of biblical narratives, as well as meditations on rabbinic, classical and Hasidic biblical commentaries. References to works of Western literature will add further complexity to the pieces.

Each section will make use of a specific constellation of traditional Jewish sources as a backdrop against which I will attempt to come to deeper understandings of some of my own stories. Certain themes will emerge throughout these prose pieces: the ways that family dramas play out – biblical and personal --, in terms of parent-child relationships, sibling relationships, romantic and spousal relationships; the problematic development of a specifically *female* self in a world and in a tradition that often expresses hostility toward the feminine. And at the deepest level, my evolving relationship with an ever-elusive God, the invisible author of all narrative -- biblical and personal.

In biblical literature, as well as Midrashic and Hasidic commentaries, these kinds of relationships and themes are portrayed as unapologetically problematic. Often, they remain unresolved. This reflects my own reality. It is comforting to me, on some level, to know that the lack of resolution in my own relationships and stories is legitimized by traditional texts that reflect this condition back at me. Hasidic texts, in particular portray

the questions, doubts and paradoxes of biblical characters. This turmoil frees me to articulate my own simultaneous reverence for, and defiance against tradition.

My pieces will be informed by the fragmentary nature of Midrash. Rabbinic literature, generally, represents the immobilized collection of many different voices and perspectives, arguing, competing, and countering each other. To look at Midrash, to really see it, is to understand that these voices are not seeking harmony. Like Midrash, *Shadow Stories: Midrashic Meditations* will convey the energy of struggle, of searching for meaning but not necessarily finding resolution or harmony.

## CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

All biographies like all autobiographies like all narratives tell one story in place of another story. (Helen Cixous)

It wasn't until quite recently that I was introduced to a literary-critical theory that articulates what I had felt instinctively for so many years. Traditional readers of the Bible seek to find meaning within the text itself. Their underlying assumption is that the *text* is the repository of meaning. According to "Reader Response Theory," however, elucidation of a literary text is to be found not merely within a seemingly autonomous text, but rather, in the space that exists *between* text and reader. Texts acquire meaning at the point of intersection between the words of the text and the reader's experience. This is why so many valid interpretations lend themselves to a given text: what a reader finds within a text reflects that which she brings to it.

To further describe the conceptual background of *Shadow Stories: Midrashic Meditations*, I must delineate the textual background of the project: over thirty years of engaging with Jewish sources, in both traditional and academic settings in the U.S. and Israel; as many or more years of reading and studying English literature and literary criticism; and my more recent delving into Hasidic sources and the theoretical structures surrounding these texts -- from these experiences, I derive the most concrete layers of text at the basis of this project.

Equally important are the 'immaterial texts': my stories, my memories.

To describe the subjective process that takes place, when all of these texts interact, it is important to describe a fundamental intellectual struggle that defines me.

*Shadow Stories: Midrashic Meditations* exists in a place of tension between "modern" and "traditional" modes of self-perception. Mircea Eliade pointed to this conflict in his groundbreaking work, Myth of the Eternal Return. According to Eliade, "modern man" seeks meaning in the historical moment, in the creative freedom and particularity of his own experience, in his ability to "make history by making himself." By contrast, "traditional man" finds little, or no meaning in his own particularity. His own life is significant, only insofar as he is able to "transcend time and live in eternity." By participating in and identifying with cosmic and cyclically repeating dramas,



traditional man reaches beyond the limitations of historical time and participates in a cosmic reality.

My project reflects the anxiety of someone caught in the middle: the autobiographical, “modern” urge seeks to find meaning in my own story. But soon, the “traditional” instinct chastises, “There is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9) – i.e. *my* story has no real significance. How to deal with this dilemma? Seeing hints of my own narratives within biblical, rabbinic and Hasidic sources, I find an uneasy comfort: on the one hand, my dilemmas, my stories are “nothing new.” But if they are nothing *new*, then they are also familiar and resonant.

The underlying tension between the universal and the particular takes on additional meaning, when seen in light of T.S. Eliot’s classic essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” Eliot details the process through which the individual imbibes tradition, and then responds to and creatively resists it. Of great significance is Eliot’s description of the “traditional artist,” who has “a sense of the timeless and of the temporal together.” Situating herself within a “timeless” tradition, the contemporary artist introduces the “temporal” (what is current) into the stream of tradition. When this is successfully accomplished, according to Eliot, then “the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered.”

The pieces in *Shadow Stories: Midrashic Meditations* are located within Eliot’s description of the contemporary artist’s encounter with tradition. When I immerse myself in traditional texts and sources, I find a source of inspiration in them for reaching my own particularity. In this way, the traditional sources themselves are then transformed for me. I see them, and myself differently.

### **The Forms**

A conversation about the conceptual background of *Shadow Stories: Midrashic Meditations* must include some explanation of the literary forms that will inspire me. These include Memoir, Lyric Essay and Midrash.

Memoir seeks to find meaning and coherence within an individual life. It seizes upon individual moments and elements of a life, and fashions them into a story with themes, and subtexts. Through life-writing, the author finds coherence.

But before there is coherence, or a plot, there are the elements that must be unearthed. The fragments. This is where the “Lyric Essay” form is helpful. In its associative and fragmentary nature, the Lyric Essay can be reflective of the author’s process of meaning-making. Many of the experiences I will write about are unresolved for me. The lyric essay form allows me to portray the contradictory, and often evolving nature of my self-reflections. Deborah Tall offers a helpful way to frame this:

The lyric essay sets off on an uncharted course through interlocking webs of idea, circumstance and language – a pursuit with no foreknown conclusion, an arrival that might still leave the writer questioning... it leaves pieces of experience undigested and tacit, inviting the reader’s participatory interpretation. *(The Lyric Essay)*

The lyric essay form has revolutionized my understanding of Midrash as a genre. While the heavy, serious-looking volumes of rabbinic literature *appear* to be finished works, in fact, their current form is a betrayal of their origins. The earliest Midrashic texts were, according to at least one scholar of Midrash, simple notebooks. They may have been used by itinerant preachers as bare-bones outlines for oral sermons. Throughout centuries of editing, these notebooks have been turned into official-looking compendiums, such as “Midrash Rabbah,” or “Tanhuma.” But a quick perusal of these collections reveals that are really “anthologies” – collections of rabbinic statements. Fragments.

What this conception of Midrash allows me to do is to be in conversation with the multitude of voices found within rabbinic literature. A repeating image, a suggestive phrase, an interesting contradiction – all are fertile ground for my imagination.

Another recent experience further refined my thinking about Midrash, and how it relates to this project. Professor Linda Zisquit’s thoughtful exposition of Rainer Maria Rilke’s “Archaic Torso of Apollo” helped me to see that what is absent is often even more potent than that which is readily visible. It is the spaces, and voids that fire the imagination of the poet. Midrash mines the voids and synapses, listening for silenced voices – most often, those of the reader herself.

## Some Literary Models

### 1) Modern Hebrew Poetry

Modern Hebrew poetry provided my first exposure to the kind of literary appropriation of biblical imagery that will inform many of the pieces in *Shadow Stories: Midrashic Meditations*. Poems such as Jacob Fichman, “The Shulamite”; Uri Zvi Greenberg, “On a Night of Rain in Jerusalem” Amir Gilboa, “And My Brother Said Nothing,” and “Isaac”; Hayim Gouri, “Heritage” lurk around the edges of my pages. Each of these poets inhabits a biblical character’s voice and story, in order to express something intensely personal, and contemporary.

### 2) Personal Essays

A) I am inspired by William Kolbrener’s essay collection, Open Minded Torah: Of Irony, Fundamentalism and Love. Weaving strands of personal experience with images and concepts from both Western and traditional Jewish learning, these essays push me beyond the simple narrative re-envisioning of Jewish literary tropes, toward the activity at the root of the “essay” form – the working through, the *effort (essai)* underlying the form.

B) Michael Kramer’s poignant lyric essay, “Nobodies,” surrounding the death of his father, offers a wonderful example of what I will strive to accomplish in *Shadow Stories: Midrashic Meditations*. Kramer alternates between narrative details of his father’s physical demise, explorations of rabbinic and medieval Jewish notions of the Bible’s anthropomorphosis, and an elegy to the history of his relationship with his father, their deep connection and his loss. This is a deeply moving example of the “braided essay.”

## SHAPE OF THE WORK

*Shadow Stories: Midrashic Meditations* will consist of approximately six sections, each one unified by a central theme. Each section will include between two and five short pieces circling around this central theme.

Formally, each individual piece will begin with the Hebrew or Aramaic source from which it springs, followed by an English translation. The sources and translations will be separated from my own creative pieces by page breaks and difference in font. By bracketing the ancient sources in this way, I wish to demonstrate a measure of subservience to, and indebtedness to them; when I use these ancient sources for self-understanding, I am ultimately dependent upon them.

Moreover, by initially establishing this distance and separateness, I am then free to question, appropriate, and adapt. When individual phrases or images are excerpted in my own pieces, the reader will be able to sense the *process* of “Tradition and the Individual Talent” – the reverence and simultaneous iconoclasm.

### INDIVIDUAL SECTIONS

#### **Childhood**

Midrashim surrounding biblical characters such as Abraham, Moses and Ruth will help me to look at the loneliness of my own childhood, spent as an Orthodox girl attending a non-Jewish public school. Figures such as Abraham, Moses and Ruth offer a resonant iconography for me: they, too, come from childhoods spent ‘apart’. In this section, I will also explore the long-term consequences of childhood loneliness for these characters.

#### **Parents and Children**

The stories of Abraham and Isaac; Sarah and Isaac; Rebecca and Jacob; Leah and her brood; and Hannah and Samuel offer rich and diverse ways to explore the complicated parent-child dynamics in my own life, with regards to both my own parents and my children. Abraham’s single-mindedness, at the expense of his son; the protective parenting of Sarah and Rebecca; the woundedness of Leah; and the desperation of Hannah – all of these dynamics reverberate in my own stories.

### **Siblings**

Sibling rivalries are almost synonymous with pairs like Cain and Abel; Isaac and Esau; and Joseph and his brothers. Other dynamics emerge when considering pairs such as Aaron and Moses. Thankfully, homicidal violence is not part of my story. But my stories do resound with sibling rivalry, competition for parental approval and attention, and the struggle to be in respectful relationships with siblings who are unlike me in temperament.

### **Dangerous Girls**

The personae of the Shulamit (Song of Songs) and Bat Zion (Lamentations) will help me frame the thrill of adolescence, when the world was both enticing and exhilaratingly dangerous. This was a time when boys and men were objects of desire. Some of them should also have been objects of fear. Other female characters, such as Miriam, and Tamar (both the Tamar of Genesis and the Tamar of Samuel I) will help me explore the dangers for girls, in societies where uncontrolled, or unruly women can be a source of anxiety, and a magnet for violence or suppression.

### **At the Edges of Society**

Characters, such as Cain; Nadav and Avihu; Lilith; Rahav the Sea Monster; as well as socially isolated types – the Leper and the woman after childbirth -- will help me to explore my ambivalent relationship with a Jewish religious establishment that seems to exclude those deemed threatening to the social order. Religious establishments often find difficulty in accommodating the questioner, or the renegade. Violence lurks as a consequence.

### **The Akedah Cycle**

And then there is the cycle of stories that constitute the Akedah, the Binding of Isaac. This is a narrative that has fascinated me since my youth. Over the years, my perspective has changed, and the biblical story has reflected my own story back at me in various ways. As a young woman, I identified with what I saw as a frightened and angry Isaac, coping with the betrayal and violence of a father blinded by loyalty to a ‘greater cause’. Years later, I identified with Sarah, the wife and mother who was the victim of a narrative she could not control –according to Midrashic tradition, Sarah is the only human victim of the Akedah, dying of despair when she hears what had almost happened

to her son. Difficult moments in my own marriage have caused me to wonder about the lack of communication and *miscommunications* between Abraham and Sarah throughout their relationship. And so, the Akedah is but one example of a biblical narrative that has expanded in its complexity, and has reflected back toward me various elements of my own narrative.

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