

An Earthly Bellow

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

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Aims and General Description

My thesis will be a collection of poems that use biblical representations of “wife” and “mother” as context for a personal struggle with the roles that make claims on a woman’s identity. Specifically, I will explore the many identities of Leah, the biblical Jewish matriarch and her experience as a mother, wife, daughter, and sister. Often ignored in Jewish literature, I feel that she is an important example of a woman who struggled in silence. My work seeks to give her a voice, and to use her struggle as a jumping-off point for my own experiences as a newlywed, daughter, and friend.

Conceptual Background

In her introduction in Genesis, Leah is mentioned first as the older sister, and then with *eynaim rakot* or “soft eyes,” when compared to Rachel’s “beautiful complexion” (Genesis 29:16-17). Curious about this somewhat odd description, Jewish sages offer the explanation that Leah had cried her eyes red, and therefore was described with “soft eyes” (Gen. 29:17). Further investigation into why she had cried her eyes soft explain that she cried for one of two reasons: *Medrash Rabbah* suggests that her eyes were soft, or weak from crying over being destined to marry Jacob’s brother, Esau, betrothed because they were each the oldest of their families (Bereshit Rabbah. 70:16). However, *Medrash Tanchuma* elaborates and suggests that she was weak from crying and fasting (Medrash Tanchuma 4:2). That Leah had cried out to G-d in her affliction, and therefore she merited not only to marry a righteous man, but also to give him sons first (Sefaria).

Throughout Genesis, Leah is the only matriarchal figure that merits a child in her own right. Rebecca, the matriarch before her, does not merit to have children through her own beseeching, but through her husband’s, as it is written, “Isaac pleaded with the Lord on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord responded to his plea, and his wife Rebecca conceived.” (Gen. 25:21). While Rebecca’s twins are credited to Isaac, Leah merits to have children of her *own* accord, . Later, Leah’s sister Rachel, instead of asking G-d directly for children herself, demands children from her husband Jacob, and is scolded in return (Gen. 30:1). Jacob answers, incensed, “Can I take the place of G-d who has denied you fruit of the womb?” (Gen. 30:2). Using the Medrash Tanchuma’s exegesis to contextualize these scenes, it seems that Genesis and its stories suggest it is a woman’s

connection to G-d, and specifically her connection through prayer that brings immediate fertility in biblical history (or G-d's will, as in the case of Abraham and Sara).

Leah's name echoes in a related word, 'Lea,' middle English word meaning, a "tract of open ground; either meadow, pasture, or arable land" (OED). Though the term ordinarily refers to grassland, the idea of Leah as open and fertile ground resonated with my understanding of her character in light of the Bible's description. Mother of seven, six of which became the tribes of Israel, Leah was the fertile mother. More than that, she was the open ground upon which Laban, Jacob, and Rachel worked. Laban gives Leah to Jacob as a wife, without the Bible's mention of her desire to be married to him. Genesis describes the feast Laban prepared for Jacob and Rachel's marriage, saying, "when evening came, [Laban] took his daughter Leah and brought her to [Jacob]..." and then, "when morning came, there was Leah!" as if it came as a surprise to both of them that they had slept together (Genesis 29:23-24). It's not clear that Leah is ever consulted about marrying Jacob, but is forced to carry the burden of being the woman who married her sister's husband.

Finally, after she is married to Jacob, Leah is described as the less loved than Rachel, then as pregnant, because "the Lord saw that Leah was hated and he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren" (Genesis 29:31). Without close to as much fanfare as the Jewish community gives to Rachel, it seems that Leah is both running the show and without any agency—except her prayer. This collection will use the metaphor of working the land as a form of Leah's prayer, but also more generally will use the metaphor of the "worked land" as a woman without agency. Often, marriage threatens one's own sense of personhood. One is no longer asking, *who am I in relation to myself, to my own family, to my own culture, to my totally unique worldview*, but now *who am I in relation to my partner*. In creating

something totally new—combining two souls, two bodies, two homes, two sets of cultures, two families, even two bank accounts into one, at the same time, we destroy something deeply familiar—one’s sense and dedication to the individual self. Leah’s complicated relationship with her husband is relatable even in contemporary marriages.

Poetry and prayer have been intricately connected as long as language has been used to connect to the divine. In times of great joy and struggle, we cry out to G-d, or when there is no G-d to cry out to, we scream or speak softly into the void, giving shape to our emotion with our words. This, in its essence, is poetry. This connection with prayer—both shout and a whisper—as a force that alters our physical reality (as it the case in the Bible) has intrigued, challenged, and inspired me since I was a child. I will write poems from Leah’s perspective imagining her prayer, a space where she can divulge her inner conversations about her sister, husband, and children. The more I learn about Leah, the more I realize how much she had to cry about. It is this that I plan to explore in my collection.

One of my inspirations of how to relate to prayer-as-poetry is Robert Creeley’s “A Prayer:”

Bless
something small
but infinite
and quiet.

There are senses
make an object
in their simple
feeling for one.

Creeley’s short sentences and simple language give space for something as meaningful and reaching as prayer. Creeley has an ability to suggest so much with so little, and I am

inspired by his model of often leaving out more than he includes. Like the Bible, so much can be assumed about a passage, or interpreted about a passage when the full explanation is held back. Sappho, too, uses brevity to her advantage, often leaving her reader with more of a feeling than a narrative. In Mary Barnard's translation of Sappho's "It's no use/ Mother dear..." she writes,

It's no use

Mother dear, I
can't finish my
weaving

 You may
blame Aphrodite

soft as she is

she has almost
killed me with
love for that boy

While the reader is missing much of the context, who the boy and girl are, what their relationship is, etc., Sappho is successful in describing a passion that supersedes even filial obligation, the speaker "can't finish/[her] weaving," almost killed with love for a boy. Sappho leaves us with a feeling of great hunger and distraction, using only 28 short words. Following the example of these great poets, in some of my poems I will include some biblical context for the work, but in many poems in this collection, I will take a note from Creeley's book, and Sappho's papyrus; where less is more, and leave most of the interpretation to the reader.

Marie Howe, though her verse is not Sapphic, creates a similar sensation with her poetry. However, she does this by giving her readers all the detail. Her work describes

everything, including the minutia of her adolescence, her marriage (and subsequent separation and divorce), and where and how she finds the divine in the mundane, using the characters of her very real world to transcend her circumstance. She forces her readers to ask themselves, why can't I write my poetry plainly? Her bravery has given me the courage to "name names" in my work, to avoid pretentious language in favor of a more authentic communication. I plan to explore this transparency in my thesis, specifically when writing about my own experiences.

In essence, my intention is to expose the inner life of the wife and mother, in poetry, or prayer. What do women say when all is quiet? What can women reveal when no one is listening? How do they feel about their husbands? Their children? Their friends' husbands? I hope to explore the unspoken, inner life of women as mothers, wives, and women. The aim of the project is to give voice to quieted voices and overlooked characters. To provoke conversation or introspection about home-life, and to expose the less idyllic, uncomfortable, and even messy parts of what is culturally romanticized using both contemporary personal experience and historic literature.

Shape of Project

My project will consist of sixty poems. These works will be loosely divided into two major stories, each exploring marriage and motherhood, and the journey out of maidenhood from a women's perspective. One story will follow the biblical matriarch, Leah, and her fraught marriage with Jacob, her competition for his love, her relationship with his children, and her own personal "wandering in the desert" as their famous caravan makes its way from her father's home to the one that Jacob will make for them in the land of Canaan. It will follow her loss, jealousy, growth, passion, and prayer as she navigates her new life as the matriarch of what will become the foundational family of the Bible. The collection will focus on her inner life, her personal journey as a woman notoriously unloved, and yet desperate for affection and status as beloved.

The second story will explore a more personal journey through marriage, child-bearing, and motherhood from my own perspective. It will discuss a fraught childhood, complicated by the absentee mothering and fathering of my own parents, the responsibility as the oldest daughter to mother my own siblings (and subsequent mothering of friends and lovers) in the absence of responsible parenting, and eventually the early stages of my own marriage, and the struggle to feel whole, heard, and understood in a partnership.

In order to explore these themes, I will be drawing on biblical text, using exegesis concerning Leah's story as well as my own personal stories of 'motherhood,' daughterhood and parenting.

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