

We are “OfThem,” Too: Rethinking the Matriarchs in Light of “The Handmaid’s Tale”

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A few weeks ago in our Shabbat morning Torah Study class, when we were discussing the spiritual meaning of Jacob’s dream, one of our participants, Terri Levin, courageously spoke up to say that she was feeling agitated by the discussion.

“I had hoped that today we would talk about the women in the story,” she said, rightly pointing out that the parashah we were studying that day includes a whole chapter about the rape of Jacob’s daughter, Dinah.

Terri expressed deep frustration that, despite this very disturbing story about the treatment of women in our own ancient Jewish culture, here we were again, talking about Jacob’s tired old dream for probably the upteen-thousandth time.

My response to her was inadequate: “Well, maybe we can study that story next year,” I said.

My intention was to keep the discussion on track with what I’d prepared. But I realize now that my answer was dismissive and insensitive to the feelings she was expressing—and to the frustration and disrespect many women (and men, too) feel because of the inarguable fact that women’s voices and stories are marginalized in the Torah and quite frequently overlooked in the study of our tradition.

Although I have studied feminist theory and heard my female rabbinic colleagues talk about this phenomenon for years, it never really hit home the way it did as I reflected on what Terri said in Torah Study that day.

I found myself thinking about what she had said in the days that followed.

I was in bed with the flu and, maybe because her comments were on my mind, I decided to binge-watch the first couple seasons of *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

I’m guessing many of you have seen it or know the story, but in case you haven’t...

It’s a dystopian story by the novelist Margaret Atwood set right here in America in the not-too-distant future.

A fundamentalist Christian sect has led a revolution overthrowing the U.S. government and established a theocratic state in its place called the Republic of Gilead.

Gilead’s laws are based on radical and very literal interpretations of the Bible.

The main plotline is based on a passage from *Genesis*—ironically, in the same parashah we were studying that morning when Terri asked why we weren’t talking about the women in the story.

In that passage, Jacob’s wife, Rachel, is unable to have children, so she tells Jacob:

"Here is my handmaid Bilhah. Cohabit with her that she may bear on my knees and that through her I may have children."¹

Based on this biblical verse, many of the fertile women in Gilead are enslaved and used as incubators to bear children for powerful elite couples who aren't able to conceive on their own.

The handmaids live as slaves in the home of the family they're assigned to. Once a month, they have to participate in what's called "The Ceremony," a perverse reenactment of Rachel's instructions to Jacob.

The handmaid lies on her back with her head literally on the knees of her mistress while the man of the house—having just read the biblical passage aloud as a kind of sick ritual sanction for what is about to happen—rapes her in an attempt to impregnate her.

If she does become pregnant, she carries the child to term and then is obligated to turn the child over to the elite mistress, who will raise the child as her own.

The handmaid is then removed from the house and reassigned to another family, where she'll be forced to go through all this again as their slave surrogate.

The main character of the story is a handmaid who is called by the name Offred. This isn't her real name, but in Gilead the handmaids are denied all individual identity and human dignity.

She is called Offred because she belongs to a powerful government official named Fred—she is "of Fred." Other handmaids are similarly called Ofglen, Ofwarren, Ofdaniel.

These nameless women bear children for these families and for the Gilead nation, but they are quite literally erased from the history of both.

It is a grim and terrifying picture of the extremes to which a patriarchal state could go.

Though imagined by Margaret Atwood, many of Gilead's horrors have been realized in the real world—for example, in the fundamentalist Islamic Republic of Iran and Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

It really makes you think: If it could happen in those places, could it happen here, too?

In any case, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a poignant and highly effective modern midrash on the Bible—probably the most powerful I've ever seen—because it makes you think about how passages we tend to casually gloss over, and rarely read, or ignore altogether actually reflect a vile and deeply disturbing suppression and objectification of women in our sacred texts.

And because the Hebrew Bible has played a central role in shaping Western culture—the ways we structure our societies and our families; the ways we think and talk about gender roles and capabilities, even if subconsciously; the ideas and principles we hold sacred; and the spiritual vocabulary we use in prayer and the sanctification of life—we should seriously ask: To what extent have we internalized the misogyny of the Bible, and what will it take to overcome it?

In this week's parashah, Vayigash, we find another mention of Rachel's handmaid Bilhah and Leah's handmaid Zilpah, who also bore children for Jacob. It's buried in one of those long genealogies we tend to skip over.

Bilhah is identified as the mother of two of Jacob's sons, Dan and Naphtali,² and Zilpah is listed as the mother of Gad and Asher.³ Meaning that four of the 12 Tribes of Israel—fully one-third of them—are descended from these women who were enslaved as handmaids.

To borrow from *The Handmaid's Tale*, we might say that we are Ofthem, too.

This fact does not go unnoticed by the Sages, who state in midrash that "Six [are] the matriarchs, and they are: Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah."⁴

As you hear that litany, you might have a sense of where I'm going with this.

Think about the Amidah prayer in our daily liturgy.

The ancient rabbis who wrote it chose to describe God as the "God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob," period.

It seems not to have occurred to them to include the matriarchs, even though, as the midrash indicates, they clearly saw these six women as the mothers of the Jewish people.

Perhaps their omission can be chalked up to typical rabbinic patriarchy: When it came to the covenant with God, they just didn't see the women as being on the same level as the men. So, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, and their handmaids Bilhah and Zilpah are each given the same treatment liturgically: They're all excluded.

But what about us in Reform Judaism?

For the last 30 years or more, we have included Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah in our Amidah, in the name of gender egalitarianism and affirming the equally important role of the matriarchs in the Jewish story.

But after watching *The Handmaid's Tale*, it seems to me that this effort may yet be incomplete.

That is to say, why don't we include Bilhah and Zilpah in the list of "*imahot*"—the matriarchs of the Jewish people? *Should* we?

This question was asked of the CCAR Responsa Committee—the Reform rabbinate's halakhic advisory group—20 years ago, as our most recent prayer book, *Mishkan T'filah*, was being finalized.

The committee replied that "We single out the names Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel...because each of them plays a pivotal role in the Biblical narrative: in their relationship to their families, husbands, and children and in their influence upon the events that shaped the course of Israelite history.

"Each of these four women, in other words, appears to us as a personality in her own right, not simply as the wife of a patriarch. The...tradition, in fact, regards them as prophets, recipients of divine revelation.

"This suggests that it is possible to view Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel as partners with their husbands in the establishment of the covenant. ...

“By contrast, none of these characteristics apply to Bilhah and Zilpah, who simply do not occupy such an exalted position in the Biblical narrative and in the religious memory of the Jewish people.”⁵

In other words, it seems that “matriarch,” as the Responsa Committee understood it, is not a biological category but, rather, a *formative* one—the implication being that while Bilhah and Zilpah may have *given birth* to four of Jacob’s sons, it was Rachel and Leah who actually formed them as human beings and shaped their Jewish identity.

It’s a reasonable explanation, as far as it goes.

But I think *The Handmaid’s Tale* might argue for a reconsideration—because the same argument could be made regarding the role of the handmaids in Gilead.

True, the handmaids only *gave birth* to the children of the elite; they did not raise them or participate at all in forming their character or personality or identity as human beings. But that’s not because they didn’t *want* to; it’s only because they were forbidden by the twisted and oppressive law of the state to have anything to do with the children they bore.

Under that law, the handmaids were treated exclusively as walking incubators to be utilized for their reproductive capacity and then discarded. They were not accorded any human dignity or rights beyond their pure biological function.

Was it the same in Jacob’s time? The text gives us reason to think that it very well may have been.⁶

If so, what should we make of our contemporary liturgical choice to exclude Bilhah and Zilpah from the matriarchs on the grounds that they didn’t participate fully with the men and their official wives in nurturing the covenantal community?

Are we unwittingly validating and sanctifying a social structure that enslaved certain women, allowed them to be used as child bearers for the elite class, and then forcibly severed their relationship with the children they carried?

It feels doubly exclusionary and morally wrong to say (as it were) to Bilhah and Zilpah: “Only the women who raised the children can be considered matriarchs, so, because the patriarchal/classist society you lived in denied you the right to raise your own children, you don’t count as a matriarch.”

Clearly, when we put it that way, none of us would want to say, “Yes, that’s what we believe.”

But that begs the question: Do we want to change our liturgical practice?

Naturally, we are very attached to the words we say in prayer. There is a certain comfort in familiarity.

And our friends in Orthodoxy and in some Conservative communities don’t include the matriarchs at all, so adding Bilhah and Zilpah would separate us even further from them.

Maybe that’s a good thing. Or maybe not.

And maybe I'm just overstating all this because I was creeped out by *The Handmaid's Tale*.

But, then again, I think that's the point of good fiction—and, indeed, of religion at its best: to make us uncomfortable, to challenge our basic assumptions, and to make us want to rethink them.

1 Gen. 30:3

2 Gen. 46:25

3 Gen. 46:18

4 Num. Rabbah 12:7

5 [CCAR Responsa Committee 5763.6, "Matriarchs in the Tefilah"](#)

6 See Targum Onkelos to Gen. 30:3