Ep #15: The Women Are Waiting for Us To Speak

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Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal: Welcome to *Speaking Torah*. I'm your host, Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal, spiritual leader of Temple Beth Shalom in Melrose, Massachusetts and 2019 graduate of Hebrew College. In this podcast, Jewish leaders from around the world read essays from Hebrew College faculty, alumni, and students about how Torah can help us navigate the most pressing issues of our time. Together, we explore the ways Torah could help us approach the world with creativity, healing, and hope.

This week, we are pleased to share a d'var by 2022 alumna, Rabbi Genevieve Greinetz, as well as her teacher, Hebrew College faculty member Rabbi Jane Kanarek's thoughts on the piece.

Genevieve explores the difficult reality of women's silence in our textual tradition. In her d'var, she finds new ways to give voice to the voiceless.

Rabbi Genevieve Greinetz Assistant Rabbi and educator at Peninsula Temple Beth El in San Mateo, California. Rabbi Jane Kanarek is Associate Dean and Associate Professor of Rabbinics at Hebrew College. She is the author of Biblical Narrative and the Formation of Rabbinic Law and the co-editor of Learning to Read Talmud: What it Looks Like and How it Happens, and Motherhood in the Jewish Cultural Imagination, both of which were finalists for the National Jewish Book Awards.

Read more about our speakers on the Speaking Torah webpage at hebrewcollege.edu/podcast. And now, here's Genevieve reading her d'var, The Women Are Waiting for Us to Speak.

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Rabbi Genevieve Greinetz: During my last year of rabbinical school, I got to spend the whole year studying specially Jane-curated aggadots, or Talmudic stories, in Massechet Sotah, the section of the Talmud called Sotah for my Capstone project. I wanted to learn Talmud l'shma, just for its own sake, and to read some parts where the rabbis had appropriated voices and customs from women and folk traditions. My goal was to establish a sustainable practice of learning on my own.

Ep #15: The Women Are Waiting for Us To Speak

Language was a major theme in the Dapim, or pages of Talmud that I studied. So, I'll start by looking at two Midrashot that highlight some of the language learnings and then I'll reflect a little on the process. Thanks for listening in.

I started my learning of Massechet Sotah on the 9th daf, or page, which comments on Mishnah 1:8 and 9 in Sotah. So, chapter one of the Mishna, numbers eight and nine. Those Mishnayot reference Shimshon and retributive justice. The Mishnah has many examples of eye-for-eye-type justice and the Talmud launches into an analytic discussion of Shimshon's story in Judges.

On page 10a, the Talmud explores half of line 14:1 in Judges, the text quotes: "And Shimshon went down to Timnah."

As it does, the Gemara, another word of Talmud, begins associative thinking, and it recalls that Timnah is mentioned in the Tamar story, so inside of its analysis of the story of Shimshon, the text probes the story of Tamar, which is where we find a short midrash I'd like to discuss here.

In Breshit 38:14 we learn that Tamar sat, "B'petach Eynaim, which is by the way to Timnah." This mentioning of Timnah is what beckons Tamar into the conversation, but the rabbis digress, if there was something to digress from, and they begin to wonder what this means, "Petach Eynayim." One rabbi says this must have been at the entrance to Avraham Avinu's place, where all eyes, eynayim, hope to see.

Another said, this was actually the name of a place, a place called Petach Eynayim. And then Rabi Shmuel b Nachmani says something odd. He says that it means "She gave eyes, eynayim, to her words."

What a strange phrase, giving eyes to words. The Gemara explains that Nachmani meant that she gave openings for Judah to pursue her in her words to him. But I felt so taken by this line. And honesty, so dissatisfied with its interpretation, but, on the following page, in my reading, an imaginative scene illustrates the phrase, giving eyes to words.

Ep #15: The Women Are Waiting for Us To Speak

So, on the next page, 10b, the Gemara retells the final scene in Tamar's story. You may recall, from the Tanakh that she has been brought out to be burned because she is unmarried and pregnant. In the scene in the Tanakh, Tamar beseeches her onlookers, including Judah who had unknowingly impregnated her, to examine three objects that she has brought with her; the signet, staff, and cord of the man who's child she is pregnant with.

The Talmud offers a different monologue where Tamar beseeches the public not to examine haker nah, the objects, but to look at her. The text imagines her asserting, "Look at me! Recognize the face of your Creator and do not take your eyes, eynayim, off me." She powerfully demands visual attention, "Look at me and remember your Creator," she says.

I think the scene is magnificent, in a certain way, and it's also really complicated, possibly problematic in other ways. At any rate, I read it as an explanation of, "She gave eyes to her words."

She demands that the people keep their eyes open, peytach eynayim, and recognize God in her. Also, her speech was incomplete without her physicality. Whereas the rabbis claim the language of observation, Tamar claims the language of physicality.

We only hear the rabbis in the passive, disassociated from their finite bodies. But in their description of Tamar, her language is null without her body. She needs to be seen to be heard, and the rabbis, on the other hand, claim language that can be transmitted outside of themselves.

In other words, this scene shows a divide in language where certain language users are able to observe, are beyond the need to, "Give eyes to their words." Certain folks are able to be the neutral, the bodiless narrator, the observer, the keeper of passive speech, unlimited to physicality; an almost super-human ability in language to express the "self" beyond the limits of body.

The other party of language users in the aggadot or stories that I read, which would be all creatures and elements that are not men, communicate

solely when their language and their body are in the same place. Their language is not separate from their physical presence.

In the Sotah ritual, the men communicate in words while the woman's body speaks, she has no voice, but her physique shows her innocence or her guilt. Who has the power to assume "observer;" where the Latin prefix "ob" means toward, against, to, who gets to exist in that linguistic territory that would allow them the concept of a spaciousness between themselves and what they are commenting on? Who gets to be objective, to ob-jectify, to speak not as subject of the elements or world, but as a linguistic separate?

At first read, I thought this was obviously a gendered divide, where male characters in the stories assumed separate, observant, objective abilities in language while women, creatures, and elements are all described as speaking in language that is necessarily object-bound, body bound, that their speech must have eyes associated with it to be coherent.

This is what I thought upon first reading, but when I read the story inside of the story of Shimshon, it became more complicated. Before it's brief dive into Tamar, the Gemara discusses Shimshon's name. At a certain point, Rabbi Yochanan says, "Shimshon can be called by the name Ha Kadosh Baruch Hu, as it's written, For God is sun, shemesh, and shield." If that is so, from now on, Rabbi Yochanan says, his name should not be erased."

Yochanan wildly suggests that Shimshon and God have enough attributes in common that Shimshon could be called by God's name. If Shimshon's name is the same as God's name, then his name should never be erased, just like other sanctified names are not erased. Eventually Yochanan's case is refuted and while there is a ton to say about the remark, I'd like to think of it as it pulls us back to the Mishnah.

In questioning Yochanan's statement the Gemara says his name shall lo yimacheh, not be erased, which is the same language used in Mishnah 1:4 where we learn about the part in the Sotah ritual where the priest writes God's four-letter name on a scroll and if the suspected woman is innocent, the water he immerses it in will lo yimacheh, not erase the Name of God.

This thought of erasure and non-erasure, the Talmud reminding us that sanctified names are never erased, and the Mishnah showing that a guilty woman would cause the waters to erase letters from God's name. This speaks to written versus spoken language.

In the context of, "Giving eyes to words," the consciousness of written language reminded me that the Talmud itself required eyes for its words to be spoken for hundreds of years. I mean this was a spoken document for some time. So, the idea of a divide in language is much more complicated because in the scene featuring Tamar, she is empowered and portrayed as heroic, for problematic reasons, but that is another story.

The point is that her version of language, one that is tied to physicality is uplifted. Could it be that the Talmud too wanted to have eyes associated with its words, that it wanted to resist being bound to written speech? Does the Name of God remain intact as it's immersed into the waters of black ink and type pressed onto pages, away from the bodies and mouths that had carried it?

I just briefly want to visit The Phaedrus with you, where Plato ironically writes on the invention of writing. In the story there, Socrates says, "For this invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practice their memory. Their trust in writing, produced by external characters which are no part of themselves, will discourage the use of their memory within them. You have invented an elixir not of memory, but of reminding, and you offer your pupils the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom, for they will read many things without instruction and will therefore seem to know many things, when they are for the most part ignorant and hard to get along with, since they are not wise, but only appear wise."

Plato records his teacher problematizing written speech and saying that not only will it produce forgetfulness in learners' minds, but that it will transmit foolishness; that students learning words unassociated with eyes, words apart from bodies will actually be following after their own folly.

Ep #15: The Women Are Waiting for Us To Speak

This does relate back to the scenes we looked at, but I want to consider this thought and return to my overall project this year. The goal, again, was for me to create a sustaining personal study practice. I wanted to do exactly what Socrates cautions against.

I wanted to build a practice between myself and the pages, one where words would not have physical eyes. While I see what Socrates is saying and do think it is quite the thought, I also do not wholeheartedly agree. At baseline, I can't agree or disagree because I can't fathom a world without written language, but further, I actually condone, to a certain effect, the practice of following after folly.

Part of what drove my learning this year was to listen for the voices of women and folk traditions inside of the Gemara. I wanted to reach into the written words and find the physical qualities, the women and all kinds of folks whose bodies could only speak while they were living and whose language perished when they did.

The rabbis live, we remember them because of their bodiless privilege to communicate on the pages, but it takes folly to seek and find the voices who didn't make it onto the page. It takes imagination, intuition, and trusting the relationship between the self and the daf, the page.

I think the foolishness not to follow after would be to think that we ever were actually learning alone when we are one-on-one with the daf. It is thinking in us, articulating itself in our pronunciations.

There is a scene in Samantha Hunt's novel, The Seas, where the unnamed, female protagonist goes to prison after a mysterious event. In her cell, she hears women's voices coming from the wall.

When she first hears the murmuring, Hunt describes, "I rest my forehead on the wall. 'Shh,' one voice says. 'She's thinking,' as though she could see me or as though the walls were not just a conduit of voices, but a conduit of thoughts as well. I begin to wonder about all the voices. Were they all coming from inside the prison? Were they in my head? Or is the wall a repository? Maybe it holds onto the echo of old voices. Maybe some of

these voices had already been released from the prison or died and the wall is still reverberating with the sound of them. In that way the wall gave me no fear but rather comfort, because the wall felt like my house; old and haunted. I push my ear against the wall. The women are waiting for me to talk."

I like to imagine listening to Talmud like this. Resting my head on the daf and hearing its storehouse. What are all the voices? Are they on the daf? In my head? Is the page a repository, holding, as Hunt writes, the echo of old voices?

Maybe some of the voices were never in the Talmud, maybe they'd wanted to be, but the page is still reverberating with the sound of them. At a certain point in the semester, Jane and I talked about the difference between texts that come at the reader, asserting an imagination onto them, versus texts that ask the reader if they want to come in and wade in wondering; texts that invite imagination.

For me, Talmud is one of those texts, and I don't know who is in the repository is inviting me to imagine. But at times, when I am brave, I trust the imaginings and I know, as Hunt wrote in her novel, that the women are waiting for me, for us, to talk, to put language where they could not.

Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal: How did you end up writing this piece?

Rabbi Genevieve Greinetz: So, the idea for this piece came out of conversation with Jane. I, at the beginning of the semester, just approached her and said, "I just want to study Talmud. I don't really have a preference what it is, but I want to study a piece that will kind of reveal places where the Rabbis maybe appropriated women's voices or preexisting customs."

And she gave me three options, and this option of Sotah just – I wanted it to be close to her too, and she was spending the year studying Sotah. And so, I thought, this is where I want to go.

Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal: What was it like to study so closely with Jane.

Ep #15: The Women Are Waiting for Us To Speak

Rabbi Genevieve Greinetz: Jane is a master gardener. I feel like she wants you to learn the technique and the very specific way to do. Like, how do you study the daf? How do you do this?

And we made really precise cuts. While I was studying, it was like, we wanted me to be a precise reader. But then, once those skills are there, she's like, all the ideas came because she trusted me. After she was like, "Alright, you're reading in a skillful way, go ahead," then I was like, "Really?" And she's like, "Really. Go and read." And so, it just was a really trusting a relationship where I felt like she was leaning into my ideas and helping them blossom.

Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal: Part of your Capstone journey is to learn how to develop a solo study practice. Did you achieve that goal?

Rabbi Genevieve Greinetz: Actually, I do feel like I did achieve the goal. So, the Capstone project gave me a structured way to do that, where I had to study certain sections because I would be checking in with Jane at intervals and having to talk about them. So, of course, I wanted to prepare.

And it pushed me into this rhythm of studying on my own and feeling into that and gaining a skill for it. Because all of the learning in rabbinical school, most of it takes place in khaverte which is also wonderful.

But I wanted to develop this skill. And so, yes, I do have a personal study practice. And I love it, and I also love to have khaverte because I do find and I'm aware that, in my personal study practice, there is a lot of folly, like I said, that comes up because I'm not in conversation with anybody except for dictionaries and sometimes translations. But there's a lot of room for me to make a wild claim out of something.

But I actually love it for that reason because it helps me open my imagination when I study on my own because it is unchecked and I can make any kind of assumption I want. And it's not messy because I have a skill for reading. But I could take a certain idea and be wowed by it in an imaginative way, where the interpretation or the translation it'd give would be like, "Well, this is actually a logical lahkh thing."

But for me, it's like, no, this is outrageous and amazing. So, I like studying on my own because there's something there that I feel like I can get – I don't know, maybe I'm just introverted. But I feel like I can access my imagination in a different way.

Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal: I love when you talk about your relationship with the text, how you rest your head on the page and listen to the voices in the words. Tell me more about that.

Rabbi Genevieve Greinetz: Sometimes I do rest my head. But I also see it is – you know if you're on a walk in the forest or something and you just tap into your tree-loving self and maybe you rest your head on a tree or something. It's like, you can feel that that still thing is living. You can just sense it.

It's not like you know it somehow intellectually but you're leaning your head on something living and you know. And I feel like, in a certain way, resting your head on anything, like literature or Talmud, I do feel like it's living and I feel like there is an exchange.

With a tree, you're getting oxygen. And with the Talmud, that's something – there's a certain thing about studying alone for me where I'm like, at a certain time, only sometimes, I'll feel like there's something coming up for me, "There's something in my imagination that's coming up for me right now. Can I rest into that too? Can I trust that that's a breath coming from the Talmud?"

Because I don't know, I wonder if there is any regret at the rabbinic table for voices that weren't invited at the time. And I like to give the benefit of the doubt that there's an invitation that can come through now.

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Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal: You studied and worked with Genevieve all year, what did you think of her d'var?

Ep #15: The Women Are Waiting for Us To Speak

Rabbi Jane Kanarek: I simply thought this d'var Torah was creative, thoughtful, rich. Genevieve just put together so many different worlds, the worlds of the Babylonian Talmud, the Bavli, Plato, Socrates, contemporary literature, and then her own voice.

And I just thought it was a powerful way of trying to say, "How do we find women's voices in the Bavli?" And that Genevieve actually found her own voice as well in such a powerful way, as she was writing this d'var Torah.

The important background to this is that Genevieve and I spend the entire academic year together studying tractate Sotah one on one. So, we met about every three weeks together to talk about what Genevieve had been learning. We would choose what she would prepare and then she would prepare it over those three weeks.

And so, over the year together, it was really a matter of we'd sit, we'd read Talmud together, she'd translate and really tell me what she was thinking. And I'd try and notice, what were the themes that she kept coming back to? What was she pulled to? And then, we'd really talk together about it.

And the wonderful part about studying one on one is there's not a fixed goal of something that we're building to. Genevieve had a goal of building a practice of Talmud study for herself so that she would be able to do that when she left rabbinical school. So, that was one goal.

But then the other goal was just, let's play with these ideas. And so, the process of just playing with ideas with Genevieve is wonderful. She's just a wonderful associative, creative thinker. So, there was a lot of, I'd say, joy in it for me of just hearing, what did she see? What was she reading? What excited her about the project?

And then, the d'var Torah was just this wonderful surprise for me of her bringing together this idea of language, which is something that she kept going back to during our time of study together.

So, one of the things I did was even look at my notes that I'd taken in our conversations to just try and say, "Where was Genevieve's mind going?" so

that I could reflect back to her as she was trying to think about what struck her most. But mostly, I'd say it was just fun. It was just fun and playful and creative.

Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal: Is it typical to study alongside a faculty member for a Capstone project?

Rabbi Jane Kanarek: Yes, it is a regular thing of a Capstone to work one on one with a faculty member. In fact, we changed the format of it about two years ago to emphasize one-on-one studying and that act of studying and relationship-building with a faculty member, rather than the final project itself.

So, in its earlier iteration, students had spent really a year thinking about the final project and meeting with the faculty member. But it didn't really emphasize the act of study together. And now, we've really switched it to emphasize the students studying with the teacher and the relationship that's built through that act of studying one on one with a teacher over the course of a year.

Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal: In her d'var, Genevieve talks about text that comes at the reader versus text that invites the reader in. What do you think about that idea?

Rabbi Jane Kanarek: I think the Bavli can be both a text that comes at the reader and locks the reader out. That's in a sense what I'm guessing Genevieve meant by talking about texts that come at the reader. But the Bavli can also be a text that invites the reader in.

And by that, I mean a text that invites the reader to enter inside of it and add their own voice to it. Not a text that says there is one way to read it and one way to understand it and you have to accept it as it is. But rather, a text that says, "I want to create a conversation."

And what I feel really strongly about in my job as a teacher is to help students feel that the Bavli is a text that invites them in and not a text that comes at the reader, to impose its will on the reader.

And so, part of my way of thinking about teaching Talmud and then again working with Genevieve in chavruta enabled us to talk a lot about this, is that our job is to create a two-way conversation between ourselves and the Talmud.

And by that, I mean that we need to learn to let the Bavli speak to us with its ancient wisdom and as a transcendent text of our tradition. But we also need to learn to speak back to the Bavli from who we are and from our contemporary world and put the two of those in conversation.

So, I hope that's part of what Genevieve meant when she was talking about the Bavli as a text that invites the reader in, that she felt it both speaking to her from an ancient world, and her speaking to it from her place as a contemporary Jew and now Rabbi.

Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal: Like you, Genevieve has concerns about hearing women's voices in our ancient texts. Where do we need to listen for those voices?

Rabbi Jane Kanarek: The question of women's voices is something that's near and dear to my heart. It informs so much of my scholarship. It informs my teaching.

Too often, we start from an assumption of women's absence. And what I would like to ask is, how do things change if we begin with an assumption of women's presence rather than an assumption of their absence?

Because of course, we were there. There's no way, just on a very basic level, you can't have babies if women weren't there. So, of course we were there. And once you shift the question to, as you said, how do we listen, or an assumption of presence, then the question switches from becoming a negative question of why weren't women there, to a positive question of, women are there, and now how do we see them?

What tools of imagination do we need to use in order to find them? What tools of imagination do we need to use to imagine women into presence?

And that's, in essence, what Genevieve also did in her d'var Torah, was imagining women into presence.

I think a lot of the question about women's presence is learning to shift our lenses. And I think when we shift our lenses to actually see what's there, it's pretty amazing how present women are in the pages of the Talmud.

In many ways, I think we've become so inured or so accepting about the assumption of absence that we've actually forgotten to notice what is there. And once one starts to notice what is there, my experience is that it opens up into these much wider worlds of women's presence.

And I can give lots of examples of places where women are present in the Talmud, but I think most of all, what I'd like to push people to start from is that assumption of presence. And then, once you start with that assumption, all of a sudden, you can start to see, and then you can start to imagine a world.

Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal: Thank you for joining us for this episode of *Speaking Torah*. We want to thank Emily Hoadley for our logo and Hebrew College Rabbinical Student and composer Jackson Mercer for our theme music Esa Einai. To learn more about Hebrew College, please visit hebrewcollege.edu/podcast and remember to subscribe, like, and rate *Speaking Torah* wherever you listen to podcasts.

We'll leave you this week with Hallelujah, sung by Hebrew College alumna Cantor Dara Rosenblatt. I'm your host Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal. Thank you for joining us on *Speaking Torah*.