Ep #24: In Miriam's Footsteps

Full Episode Transcript

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Hebrew College

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Jessica: 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, Hebrew College faculty, alumni, and students discuss how Torah can help us navigate the most pressing issues of our time. Together, we explore the ways Torah can help us approach the world with creativity, healing, and hope.

This year, Hebrew College launched a renewed and expanded set of adult learning programs under the name Tamid. The Hebrew word Tamid means perpetual or eternal, and we chose it because we believe that lifelong Jewish learning connects us to an enduring sense of meaning and purpose. It honors our past, uplifts our present, and inspires us to face the future with a spirit of creative possibility and hope. In this season of the podcast, we are focusing on some of these experiences.

This week, we are pleased to share a Tamid of Hebrew College adult learning lunch and learn session with Dr. Judith Rosenbaum, CEO of the Jewish Women's Archive. Judith earned a PhD in American Studies from Brown University with a focus on women, gender, and social movements. As a Fulbright fellow, she studied women's collective communities in Israel. An educator, historian, and writer, she teaches, lectures, and publishes widely on Jewish studies and women's studies.

JWA is one of Hebrew College's shared campus partners and a pioneering digital archive that documents Jewish women's stories, elevates their voices, and inspires them to be agents of change.

In this session entitled, "In Miriam's Footsteps: Jewish Women's Leadership and the Pursuit of Justice," Judith not only takes us into Miriam's world, but also asks us to consider the Jewish women who have followed in her footsteps as spiritual leaders, visionaries, and voices for justice. She explores models for Jewish women's activism, leadership, and creativity in different historical contexts. Together, we're invited to ask, what can we learn from these foremothers? And what is the legacy we inherit from them? How does taking their stories into account expand our

understanding of individual and collective liberation? Now, let's listen in to the Lunch and Learn session with Judith and the adult student attendees.

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So, I want to start with somebody who is a figure who is very much owned by Jewish history, although she is really known for only one part of a much larger career and impact that she had. And that's Henrietta Szold. Szold, of course, is most famous as the founder of Hadassah, which she founded in 1912. But of course, she has a much bigger story than that. She was born in Baltimore in 1860. She was the oldest daughter of a rabbi who had only daughters, so he educated her as he would a son. And that's a whole other course I could teach on the daughters of fathers who had no sons and what happens in that situation. But she became an educator with the population that was very present at that time, which was the refugee population from Eastern Europe. She also became a writer who published essays on the Jewish issues of the day from the issues of immigration and the kinds of complexity around the large growth of the Jewish community and the refugee population. Also on Zionism, she published her first essay on Zionism in 1896, one month before Theodore Herzl published his first Zionist writings. She became the head of the Jewish Publication Society and as an editor and translator, influenced Jewish scholarship there.

She was also a special student at the Jewish Theological Seminary under the condition that she would not try to seek rabbinic ordination. That was the deal by which she was allowed to study there. And she became a really active member of the intellectual community there, also helping many professors with editing and translating and writing.

She traveled to Palestine for the first time in 1909 when she was 49 years old. She was really shocked by the poverty and disease there and returned to the US with a determination to organize Jewish women in America to help. And that led to the founding of Hadassah, which of course, through Hadassah, she built the medical, educational and social services infrastructure of the state of Israel. She made aliyah to Palestine in 1920 when she was 59. She faced sexism in Palestine as she did in the US, but

there was more opportunity for women in a place where there was a building happening. She was a really creative person and she had a lot of ideas about what the state of Israel should be. She supported a binational state, a piece of her legacy which is sort of on the down low these days. She was also a founder of Youth Aliyah and as such saved thousands of children from the Shoah. I think it's important to know her fuller story so that we can understand more about the social context of the time. But today we're going to look at a more private moment of her leadership. And that is a letter that she wrote in 1916 after the death of her mother when a male friend offered to say Kaddish on her behalf because of course, it was not accepted practice at the time for women to say Kaddish on their own. I'm hoping someone will volunteer to at least start us off with the letter from Henrietta Szold to Haym Peretz.

Sherry: Letter from Henrietta Szold to Haym Peretz, September 16, 1916. It is impossible for me to find words in which to tell you how deeply I was touched by your offer to act as Kaddish for my dear mother. I cannot even thank you. It is something that goes beyond thanks. It is beautiful what you have offered to do. I shall never forget it.

You will wonder then that I cannot accept your offer. Perhaps it would be best for me not to try to explain to you in writing, but to wait until I see you to tell you why it is so. I know well and appreciate what you say about the Jewish custom. And Jewish custom is very dear and sacred to me. And yet I cannot ask you to say Kaddish after my mother. The Kaddish means to me that the survivor publicly and markedly manifests wish and intention to assume the relation to the Jewish community which his parent had. And that so the chain of tradition remains unbroken from generation to generation, each adding its own link. You can do that for the generations of your family. I must do that for the generations of my family.

I believe that the elimination of women from such duties was never intended by our law and custom. Women were freed from positive duties when they could not perform them, but not when they could. It was never intended that if they could perform them, their performance of them should

not be considered as valuable and valid as when one of the male sex performed them. And of the Kaddish, I feel sure this is particularly true.

My mother had eight daughters and no son. And yet never did I hear a word of regret pass the lips of either my mother or my father that one of us was not a son. When my father died, my mother would not permit others to take her daughter's place in saying the Kaddish. And so I am sure I am acting in her spirit when I move to decline your offer. But beautiful your offer remains nevertheless, and I repeat, I know full well that it is much more in consonance with the generally accepted Jewish tradition than is my or my family's conception. You understand me, don't you?

Judith: Thank you so much, Sherry, for reading that. Okay, so any initial thoughts about this letter?

Sherry: I could just say the strength of commitment and clarity of her conviction.

Judith: She's very clear. Kim, go ahead.

Kim: Yeah, I was just going to say this really resonates for me personally because we lost my dad, a family of all girls just a few weeks ago and my sister's ex-husband offered to say Kaddish on our behalf and we appreciated the offer but not necessary. So I feel like even today this is resonant for me.

Judith: There is a really long history of the experience of wanting to say Kaddish or trying to say Kaddish or not being allowed to say Kaddish as a kind of awakening moment for Jewish women to feminism. And we hear that through today, right? And so I always think about, I mean this is 1916, right? So what would it mean for the feminists in the 1970s and 80s and 90s and 2000s and 2025 who might be encountering the same thing to know that this is not just their story, right? That this is an experience that Jewish women have had forever and that in fact there have been Jewish women over many decades and probably even centuries who have spoken up and been very clear about their right and their need to say Kaddish for themselves.

What are the arguments that Szold is making here?

Evelyn: I like that she sort of referred to traditional law but reinterpreted it in a way that said, this is not forbidden if we can do it. So it was sort of paying attention to what the history was, but seeing it in a different way so that it could be used in the way that she wanted to. So the reinterpretation, I thought was really beautiful.

Judith: Right, engaging with the Jewish law and also with what it means to her and kind of bringing those two pieces together. Sarah, I see your hand is raised.

Sarah: Well, she obviously knew biblical history. She knew about the daughters of Zelophehad and the decision that they should inherit because their father had no sons. I mean it's a, but she doesn't go the step of saying women are equal to men. It's only that because there are no men. The argument, in other words, she doesn't publicly take it to the next step that women are actually the equivalent of men. She may have thought that, but it's not explicit in what she wrote.

Judith: Right. That is interesting. And I think there's something that goes along with that which has to do with the kind of tone that she takes too. Sherry, did you have your hand up?

Sherry: Yes. I want to comment on the tone. The tone is completely respectful. There's no anger at all, at least that comes through. She justifies it by her own family's tradition. In the case of their father's death, when their mother encouraged the daughters to say Kaddish apparently, which I had not known before. But there's no anger in this.

Judith: Yeah, and there's a very inclusive tone even, right? Like you understand me, don't you? This kind of welcoming him into her perspective as opposed to making it combative in a different, a different way. I've actually had a couple of educators who I've taught this text to who have actually used it with their students to talk about how you write a letter and respectful tone and how you build an argument in a way that will invite somebody into it, which I thought was really, was really interesting. It's

interesting also that one could see in some ways this letter as burying the lead, right? In some ways, the final point she makes is that this was what her mother had requested from her daughters when the father died, right? So she's in some ways, one could imagine that she could write the letter and say, I'm doing this because I know this is what my mother wants and that's really the only thing I need to say, right? But she puts that last. Why might she not lean on that argument more heavily?

Sherry: It was more powerful that she was making the argument from Jewish tradition and Jewish law and some accepted Jewish custom.

Judith: Right. That she's building a case and she's also making it her own in some way, which is part of the piece I think about legacy here about Kaddish. She could be commenting on sort of what Kaddish is for. Is Kaddish for the mother? Is Kaddish for her? She's engaging with that, I think a little bit too.

One of the things I love about this piece is that it is also a favorite text of another outstanding Jewish woman leader and that is Ruth Bader Ginsburg. In writing about her own Jewish heritage, RBG listed this as one of her primary influences. And in fact, in a piece that she wrote for JWA, this is a quote from a piece she wrote for JWA. She said, "Szold's plea for celebration of our common heritage while tolerating, indeed appreciating the differences among us concerning religious practice is captivating. I recall her words even to this day when a colleague's position betrays a certain lack of understanding."

She adapted that statement slightly in her book, "My Own Words." And she added a little bit of a question to it. She said, "Szold's plea for celebration of our common heritage while tolerating, indeed appreciating the differences among us concerning religious practice is captivating. Don't you agree? Can you imagine a more perfect put down or words more supportive when a colleague's position seems to betray a certain lack of understanding?"

So we can see that not only is she inspired by this, but she has adopted a little bit of Szold's style here, right? The you can understand me, don't you?

But imagining that as a strategy that is both a way of inviting somebody in and as she also identifies a way of potentially putting them down because you're giving them the credit that you should be able to understand this and if you're not understanding this, then, what might you be missing here? So there's something that is very strategic but also creative with the use of language here that I see both Szold doing and RBG adopting a little bit here.

I want to move on to the next piece, which is also a letter. This is a letter that came to JWA through our exhibit on Jewish Women and Feminism and it was actually given to us by the letter writer's daughter, Sally Gottesman. It was a letter that her mother, Paula Gottesman, wrote. And this piece is a more of a communal plea to her own community. It was written by Paula Gottesman in 1975. She was the mother of Sally as well as three other daughters. She was a leader in her synagogue, a conservative synagogue in New Jersey, and she was writing this letter to back up her oldest daughter's request that she be allowed to have her Bat Mitzvah on Shabbat morning instead of on Friday night as was the custom in their synagogue at the time. Sally wrote her own letter, but Paula wrote this one to back it up. So let's take a look at this letter. Who would like to read for us?

Sherry: Dear ladies and gentlemen of the Ritual Committee. In June 1975, my daughter Sally will celebrate her 13th birthday and expects that she will be a Bat Mitzvah. She would like to have her service on Saturday morning rather than on Friday night, and I believe it only proper that she be permitted to do so. The religious education that girls receive today is equal to that of boys. Girls and women are leaders of your organization, of your organizations, religious schools, countries and everything else that virtually affects our lives and the very existence of Judaism.

Although I recognize the irrational emotional bases to religious practices, I believe that we as conservative Jews must change those traditions which are odious to large segments of our people and which have no rational moral justification for their continuation. The girls in Montclair are keenly aware of the options allowed the decision makers at their synagogue. They are critically watching to see if the religious rituals at their synagogues are

ruled by those who will not relate either to the times or to them or by those who are willing to perhaps suffer some temporary strangeness during a service in order to promote a general good, a greater good.

To be sure, Sally will celebrate her Bat Mitzvah, be it on Friday or Saturday. However, this dispute will doubtless continue until women have prevailed. I have three younger daughters and if this is not resolved now, I'm fairly certain that I will be compelled by conscience as well as by them to continue this battle.

I respectfully request that the members of the Ritual Committee openly look at all aspects of the question, not merely at their reaction based on years of tradition. Above all, ask what effect this is having upon our young girls who so often hear the comment, Judaism is outdated and has no meaning for my life today. Admittedly, calling girls to the Torah will not change everything, but it will certainly help to show that our religion is living, adaptable and subject to modification where basic moral laws are not jeopardized.

Judith: Thank you. And you'll see she signs her name both Paula Gottesman and Mrs. Jerome Gottesman. Okay. Any thoughts? What are her arguments for change here?

Evelyn: She's looking at the future and engaging the next generation as a beginning argument, the idea that Judaism is dynamic and adaptive and that engaging the next generation, you know, is something we have to pay attention to and really do intentionally. It's such a Paula Gottesman letter, by the way.

Judith: I love to tell some of the stories of when you look at the history of Bat Mitzvah, mothers were actually really important in the history of Bat Mitzvah. Daughters too, of course. Daughters in large part advocating for themselves, but also pushing their mothers and their mothers recognizing the kind of role that they believe they have to play there, both in terms of the authority and power that they might be able to wield and also the

responsibility they have to their children if their children in fact want to carry on this legacy. I see a hand raised, Paula.

Paula: I think the other point is that if I, if I heard correctly was that men and women are receiving the same education, so why shouldn't they have the same abilities to move forward? And I think this touches personally for me because the temple that I belong to growing up was one of the first temples that made it really clear that they were going to Bat Mitzvah women on Saturday. And so, but it's equal opportunity if they're doing just as much and they're doing all the work, why shouldn't they have that? And I also really appreciate her saying, this isn't the first time you're going to hear from me. Like if you deny me now, get ready because I have more girls that are going to be coming up and I'm going to ask for the same thing. And I, and she does it in such a gentle, like forceful way. I was laughing when you read that.

Judith: Right, exactly. Sherry and then Sarah.

Sherry: This letter is a little more combative and including the threat that Paula just mentioned, if you don't give it to me this time, you'll hear from me again. But the rationale was the you're going to lose the girls otherwise.

Judith: Exactly. This is being written in the mid 70s. There's a beginning to be a really big emphasis on this question of Jewish continuity. How are we going to get, you know, the next generation to care? How will this continue? And one of the really powerful arguments of feminists in this period, and I don't need to tell many of you because I know that some of you were those who were articulating this, but was pointing out like if you are concerned about Jewish continuity, how about you don't write off half of the Jewish population and you think about the people who actually are asking to be included. We're not the ones who are, you know, not there and you're trying, you're bemoaning like how do we find you?

You're the, we're the ones who are actually here and saying, hi, hello, I'd like to participate. And then the argument also about education, right? That we actually if there's a hypocrisy here that if we know the same things, why

would we not have the same rights to use that knowledge? Sarah and Evelyn.

Sarah: Well, looking at this from the perspective of having been a radical feminist in the late 1960s, I'd have to say that there's an aspect of moderation in this letter, which I find kind of remarkable. She identifies herself both as her individual person, but also as her status as a married woman with the name of her husband, giving her an authenticity. In other words, using that in perhaps a strategic way, what she thought about it, I have no idea. But in addition to that, it is a real challenge to the definition of Judaism in terms of the tradition doesn't change, it's the same, it was given, it's the way it is, and raises a real theological issue, I think, that becomes evident, you know, over time in other strands of Judaism, you know, until the present day. So it's a challenge to that.

Judith: Well, I think that your points about the authority here that she's wielding are really important. Both wielding this very traditional authority of like, hi, I'm a macher in this community. And also being willing to engage in what is the theology of the conservative movement. You claim that you believe in, you know, tradition and change and let's see what that actually looks like. Here's an example of that. So there's a, I think a strategic and creative way of wielding authority there. Evelyn.

Evelyn: It's also recognizing a trend that has continued to this day that it's largely women who are involved in the day-to-day administration of many Jewish organizations including temples.

Judith: Absolutely. And that right, increasingly true now, but even beginning then. And right, that's another piece of authority saying if we are the ones who show up, we have a voice in making these kinds of decisions. But also speaking very much as a mother and saying, I'm speaking on behalf of my daughters who I have brought into this community.

Sally, as I mentioned, wrote her own letter, making some of these same points about, you know, I've been educated in the same way and so I'm not sure why I can't use that education. And she was allowed to have a

Saturday morning Bat Mitzvah and that was a real source of pride for her. And she in a piece that she wrote for JWA around these documents said, this event had profound personal significance, teaching me that I could influence Judaism and make a difference among Jewish people. So I think that sense of understanding that the communities that we are part of, we also have a responsibility and an ability to change and that is part of not only changing the specific instances of our own lives, but really affecting what Jewish community looks like and therefore what it means to be part of the Jewish people.

So I think that often my, as I think Kim mentioned in my introduction, my own background is on social movements. And I also love looking at these pieces that are very personal one-on-one interactions because I think sometimes we have this sense of how social change happens that is very large and powerful and wonderful and I certainly am a big believer in collective action and what we can accomplish when we act together. And I think it's also really important for us to understand what those individual actions that we each take that all become part of those larger movements and that are often inspired by movements and then also inspire others to see themselves as part of something larger. So I think that relationship is important. And of course, I think it's important for us to not only celebrate the known leaders like Szold, but also the, you know, everyday people who are part of communities and doing their work as daughters, as mothers, as individuals who are just showing up day-to-day in various ways. They may not be the ones who are out front.

The next pieces that I wanted to look at are very different and I actually was inspired to bring these because I was talking to my kids about TikTok and social media and activism on social media and sort of satire and change. I am a little bit too old to appreciate TikTok. I have found social media to be powerful in some ways, certainly for the Jewish Women's archive. It is a way that we reach millions of people a year with all kinds of content and images and messages about Jewish women who the Jewish people are that are very powerful. So I don't sneeze at its power. But I think there's also a lot of interesting questions right now about and certainly we see the

impact that social media has had on politics and on polarization. So it is absolutely powerful. And I also not only would like my children to take their eyes off their phones sometimes, but I have a lot of questions about what the relationship is between online activism and in-person activism and political activism of different kinds. So I was thinking about what are some of the other precursors maybe of some of the kinds of activism that we see online today. And then that brought me to thinking about a guerilla protest group that started in the late 90s and was active through the early 2000s and that's Jewish Women Watching.

Jewish Women Watching was an anonymous guerilla protest group that fought against sexism, racism, economic inequality, hypocrisy in the Jewish community. This was their mission statement. Jewish Women Watching rouses the public to challenge and change sexist and oppressive practices in the Jewish community. We use satire and factual evidence to criticize the narrow-minded priorities of the Jewish establishment. We draw attention to issues that would otherwise be whispered about and to voices that are silenced. Jewish Women Watching remains anonymous to focus attention on these issues, not ourselves.

So they did a lot of different actions often around holidays. Their first action was against sexism specifically. It was a card and an ad around Rosh Hashanah in I think 1999 that said sexism is a sin. They put out, for those of you who have noticed in the New York Times that Lubavitch has an ad that gives the Shabbat lighting candle times that starts Jewish women girls. They did a fake one of those that said Jewish women girls, hold your community accountable, sexism is a sin, Jewish women watching. They did an act on an action on Purim distributing these labels that said drown out sexism.

There was another action. I think this one was in 2002. They mailed condoms to the offices of about 3,000 Jewish leaders to advise safe sex within the strange bedfellows relationships between some Jewish and right-wing evangelical Christian leaders. I thought this seemed relevant for this moment as well. There was a postcard that had a condom attached. It said, why is the Jewish community in bed with Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell and

Ralph Reed? And then they explained that these folks had expressed anti-semitic sentiments, but nevertheless were praised and in some cases even given honors by Jewish organizations.

So you can see from these different examples that they were focused not only on so-called women's issues, but really were trying to create a more intersectional, what we would might call an intersectional feminist critique, looking at the relationship between these different kinds of questions and inequities around power within the Jewish community.

I want to take a look at the text that I brought in addition to these images is the Purim 5760 statement that they put out with those grogger labels.

Every Purim, Jews unite to drown out Haman's name. This year, we suggest a few more reasons to make noise. In the era of the Persian Empire, Esther spoke on behalf of the entire Jewish people. Since then, only one woman has delivered the state of World Jewry address at the 92nd Street Y. Vashti is not the only woman who had to strip to keep her job. Even in the Jewish world, three out of four women endure sexual harassment in the workplace. At a McGilla reading, we'll spin our groggers 50 times to blot out Haman's name. That's more than the number of women on the boards of the Anti-Defamation League and United Jewish communities combined. Rabbis agree that without Esther's intervention, Haman would have murdered all the Jews. With almost no women in the top five executive positions at national Jewish organizations, what might befall today's Jewish community? Vashti spoke for herself. Esther spoke for herself. We too must refuse to be silent. This Purim, drown out sexism, Jewish women watching.

How would you compare this kind of statement or activism to the previous examples of the two letters?

Evelyn: It's much more in your face, much more challenging. Instead of in some ways acknowledging in not a damning way, the traditions and what has been existing as accepted practice. This is really an in your face.

Judith: And demanding something broad, right? Paula, I saw you have your hand up and then Sarah.

Paula: I'm not sure if this is going to come out correctly, but in the first letter, it was really, really well done, but it was almost a soft, gentle, let me adhere to the man. And then we see the letter to about having a Bat Mitzvah that's very strategic in saying, I don't want to sit back and let this be okay and I'm not going to ask for permission. I'm going to basically tell you, if you don't allow me now, I'm coming back at you over and over again. And this one was women wouldn't have had those rights to post things in a newspaper. So it's, it's coming off demanding, but it's coming off factual. And I love how they use Jewish history say, look at the, look at the progression of how these women stood up. So it's like we stand on the shoulders of those before us and now we're going to make our statement. I hope that makes sense.

Judith: Yeah, I mean and I think there's a certain privilege there one could say too of maybe having less to lose in some way, saying like, I know I have the right to speak out, maybe some impatience about the slowness of change and knowing that one could put these greater demands out there. Although it's also different because it's not happening on an interpersonal exchange kind of way. Sarah? And then Toby.

Sarah: Well, it also is written in the 1990s when radical feminism had been around for a long time and there were movements in the art world for women artists to be much more recognized. It uses art, art satire and humor in ways that are just outstanding. I mean, I think I love the strange bedfellows thing. Whatever you think of the people, but there in a way it's because it's anonymous and it appears online, it doesn't pose any threat direct threat, not nowadays might, you know, to the people who wrote it. I think it's fantastic kind of graphic art and political outreach into the rest of, you know, society demanding space.

Judith: Yeah, and I think it's an important point to recognize that this comes out of a context where there's other kinds of guerilla theater and protest kinds of groups. And so that's a really important piece. And it's true for all of

these women, you know, they don't speak in a vacuum. There are movements that are examples for how to kind of bolster us in being able to speak our minds and our truth. Toby and then Sherry.

Toby: Yeah, I actually love the tone of this letter. And personally, as I've gotten older, I haven't mellowed. I just get more irritated by the things that used to irritate me, they irritate me even more. What I am curious about is I assume that the letter to the synagogue ritual committee got a positive response. I mean, she did have a Shabbat morning Bat Mitzvah and that, you know, those kinds of changes took place. And you know, and I have to assume that the fact that she was involved and committed and knew the people she was writing to and had a very, you know, a very nice tone, had a role in getting her what she wanted. I wonder if this kind of letter, if it had any sort of response in terms of the kind of change that was sought.

Judith: Yeah, I think that is a good question. It can be hard to know how to measure that over time. Certainly, as I was looking at this and thinking, oh, some of these things are from almost 25 years ago or more than 25 years ago, it doesn't feel that different. On the other hand, especially the strange bedfellows one, a lot of people were kind of angry about that one. In fact, some people said, why didn't this group just stick to what they originally were talking about, which was sexism? Why aren't they, why are they going off into these other areas of politics? Which I think is always a sign that you've touched on something sensitive. And I think is also a sign of the ways that feminism gets kind of marginalized as like, oh yeah, you're talking about sexism, that's separate from these big communal issues around who our political allies are and sort of asking women to like stay in their place and just worry about women's issues as opposed to understanding that women's issues are part of, quote unquote women's issues are in fact communal issues and that all of the issues that Jewish women watching was addressing around sexism, around, they did some actions on the cost of Jewish communal life and the impact that has on families and on, you know, ability to participate and that these kinds of political questions that these are all of a piece. Sherry, I see you have your hand raised.

Sherry: I want to go in a slightly different direction and introduce a little American geography here. I grew up in the Midwest and didn't live on the East Coast until I was in my 20s and married. And I remember when I first came to met the feminist, my feminist friends in New York, being astonished at the degree of anger. Midwest, we're very Scandinavian in Jews in the Midwest and polite. And it wouldn't occur to us and we didn't need to do that. There's a different tone, there was before there was enough change to merit a different tone. And I think it's worth pointing out that my guess is, I don't know who the Jewish women watching were. I didn't don't know that I knew any of them personally, but my guess is they were all from New York and New Jersey and surrounds. Am I right?

Judith: I don't know. I it was a New York-based group, I think. So I don't know how far they recruited from, but I think you're, it's an important point that there are definitely cultural differences in how people express themselves and make demands. And we see that over time in some of the tones of these pieces. Although RBG and Henrietta Szold share something and maybe that has something to do with how far RBG got. But I think you're right that there are a lot of cultural differences there as well. And actually the last, I know we're almost out of time and I we won't have time to talk about the last text, but I want to leave you with it. Maybe sends us off with a little bit of inspiration, but also raises some important questions about how do we kind of gird ourselves and prepare ourselves both to be leaders and also to be part of communities in difficult times such as we are in right now.

And this is a piece that is from Rabbi Rachel Cowan, who herself brings a little bit of a cultural difference here because she was, she is from the Northeast. She was born and raised in New England, but as a Protestant, she was a direct descendant of the Mayflower, trained as a social worker, involved in civil rights, married a Jewish man, Paul Cowan, who was from an assimilated family, but together they kind of, he researched his family history and they became increasingly connected to Judaism, so much so that in 1980, Rachel converted and they did a lot of work with interfaith couples, wrote a book together about that, and she ultimately decided to

become a rabbi. She was ordained in 1989. And she was a leader in many ways, particularly around healing, kind of she's considered sort of the mother of the Jewish healing movement, a lot of work around illness and dying.

She also ran a really important Jewish foundation that helped fund new approaches to spirituality and social justice and interfaith relationships. She is one of the founders of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality. So I know Carol will appreciate this. And Rachel very sadly died in August of 2018 of cancer. But even in her death, she was really teaching her friends about healing and letting go. She was very well positioned to do that work both personally and professionally. So this is advice she gave to new rabbis when she spoke at their ordination in 2011.

She said, "You don't have to be Ben-Gurion or Golda Meir or Gandhi or Martin Luther King. You just have to be your most authentic, courageous, and inspiring self, to trust your heart and keep opening it wider, to be generous, compassionate, patient, collaborative, thoughtful, to be grounded in texts that speak to your lives and those of your people, to speak of God in your authentic way in terms that help your people overcome their alienation and find a Jewish link to the transcendent, to have the equanimity that can embrace paradox and can welcome conflicting opinions, to speak wisely and help others end this dreadful scourge of turning political differences into personal attacks, to be able to hold the terrible grief of those who suffer in your communities without becoming traumatized yourself so you can celebrate with true joy the simchas of others and come home with full attention to your families."

So I think she captures there so many of the things that we need to, you know, cultivate in ourselves and cultivate in each other in order to lead our own lives and to lead others. Harkens back a little bit to Miriam and brings in some of the themes that we talked about in the other examples that we talked about today. And I think also, you know, I began by talking about the dual goals of repairing the tradition by returning absent voices and transforming our understanding of the past and how change has made. These are just a tiny, tiny, tiny sample of Jewish women's voices that we

should be including in the long tradition of leadership and Jewish wisdom and that will hopefully lead to the continuing unfolding of liberation for our people and for the world.

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Jessica: Thank you for joining us for this episode of Speaking Torah. We want to thank Emily Hoadley for our logo and Hebrew College Rabbinical graduate and composer Rabbi 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.

This week, we leave you with Amar Amar from Hebrew College's album Galeh, featuring Rabbi Jessica Kate Meyer. I'm your host, Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal. Thank you for joining us on Speaking Torah.