

# **GLJC Learning Circle: Bible Folk in Analysis**

## **Rabbi Anna Gerrard**

This is a four-sessions course for adult learning programmes. Each session consists of a Biblical text and an accompanying article. The sessions work best if time is given to discussing the psychological aspects of the Biblical texts, in the views of the group, before moving on to reading and discussing the article. Each text and article have been chosen to illustrate a different aspect of psychological readings of scripture.

### **Session One: Torah as Archetypal Mythology (Genesis 3)**

- Genesis 3: Adam and Eve
- 'Adam and Eve: Infancy', Norman J. Cohen

### **Session Two: Torah as Family Saga (Genesis 22)**

- Genesis 22: The Binding of Isaac
- 'Take Your Son: Psychoanalytic Interpretation of the Akeidah', Henry Abromovitch

### **Session Three: Psychotic Ramblings in Tanakh (Ecclesiastes 9)**

- Ecclesiastes 9
- 'Ecclesiastes Was Depressed', Farah Mizrahi

### **Session Four: Therapeutic Use of Scripture (Esther 2)**

- Esther 2: The Choosing of a Queen
- 'Re-Framing Esther', Rabbi Anna Gerrard

### **GENESIS, CHAPTER 3**

<sup>1</sup> Now the serpent was the shrewdest of all the wild beasts that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say: You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?" <sup>2</sup> The woman replied to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the other trees of the garden. <sup>3</sup> It is only about fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said: 'You shall not eat of it or touch it, lest you die.'" <sup>4</sup> And the serpent said to the woman, "You are not going to die, <sup>5</sup> but God knows that as soon as you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like divine beings who know good and bad."

<sup>6</sup> When the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable as a source of wisdom, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave some to her husband, and he ate. <sup>7</sup> Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they perceived that they were naked; and they sewed together fig leaves and made themselves loincloths.

<sup>8</sup> They heard the sound of the Lord God moving about in the garden at the breezy time of day; and the man and his wife hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. <sup>9</sup> The Lord God called out to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" <sup>10</sup> He replied, "I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid." <sup>11</sup> Then He asked, "Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat of the tree from which I had forbidden you to eat?" <sup>12</sup> The man said, "The woman You put at my side — she gave me of the tree, and I ate." <sup>13</sup> And the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this you have done!" The woman replied, "The serpent duped me, and I ate."

<sup>14</sup> Then the Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you did this, more cursed shall you be than all cattle and all the wild beasts: On your belly shall you crawl and dirt shall you eat all the days of your life. <sup>15</sup> I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers; They shall strike at your head, and you shall strike at their heel."

<sup>16</sup> And to the woman He said, "I will make most severe your pangs in childbearing; in pain shall you bear children. Yet your urge shall be for your husband, And he shall rule over you."

<sup>17</sup> To Adam He said, "Because you did as your wife said and ate of the tree about which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed be the ground because of you; By toil shall you eat of it all the days of your life: <sup>18</sup> Thorns and thistles shall it sprout for you. But your food shall be the grasses of the field; <sup>19</sup> By the sweat of your brow shall you get bread to eat, until you return to the ground — for from it you were taken. For dust you are, and to dust you shall return."

<sup>20</sup> The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all the living. <sup>21</sup> And the Lord God made garments of skins for Adam and his wife, and clothed them.

<sup>22</sup> And the Lord God said, "Now that the man has become like one of us, knowing good and bad, what if he should stretch out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever!" <sup>23</sup> So the Lord God banished him from the garden of Eden, to till the soil from which he was taken. <sup>24</sup> He drove the man out, and stationed east of the garden of Eden the cherubim and the fiery ever-turning sword, to guard the way to the tree

FROM 'ADAM AND EVE: INFANCY' IN VOICES FROM GENESIS BY NORMAN J. COHEN, JEWISH LIGHTS, 1998

***Content and Protected in the Garden of Our Infancy***

Adam was overwhelmed that this was the place God had prepared for him. By choosing Eden for Adam, God had displayed the love that most devoted parents have for their children in preparing the world for the arrival of their newborn. God not only made sure that Adam and Eve had enough food to eat, but also created a space in which the first human beings would be happy and secure. Jacob heard Adam's voice, a voice full of contentment and pleasure:

All that I need is right here in the Garden. I can eat whenever I am hungry. I can swim and bathe in the waters of the streams that irrigate the Garden. I can spend wonderful hours luxuriating in the beauty of the many plants, which thrill each of my five senses. I never feel bored. And I feel utterly safe here, since the Garden is hedged by huge trees, which prevent the animals outside from ever intruding upon me. The only animals I ever see are some harmless Garden snakes, who seem more interested in the fruit that falls from the trees. Adam was placed in a nursery of green in which to work and play to his heart's content amid the wonders of God's creation. Sheltered, cared for, and coddled, he was able to curl up when he became tired and to fall into a deep, comforting sleep. Like all newborns, Adam was not afraid of ever being disturbed.

***Becoming Aware of the Other***

Adam was one with the earth, the *adamah*, and he was one with all creation. But he was also alone—solitary and single. As wonderful as his garden-like nursery was, God knew that it was not good for Adam to be alone. If he could relate to another creation similar to himself, he would better recognize who he was and the purpose of his life. He would also better understand his relationship with the Other in the universe, the Divine. Adam needed a mate, and Jacob remembered how it came to be.

Adam was lonely and longed to have a partner like himself. And as he slept that night he dreamed of a creature like himself. He conceived of a being that would complement him—it would, in a sense, be a side of himself. He awakened in the morning to find the very creature of which he had dreamed: a wo(man). And he cried out in amazement, "This one is like me: she is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh." By finding his partner, Adam recognized even more the creative power of God, the One Who had created both of them.

***The Need for Guidance and Limitations***

When God placed Adam in the Garden, it was made clear that Adam could not simply enjoy the fruit of the Garden. Adam was given the responsibility of caring for it, and he wasn't pleased about this: It wasn't easy for me to tend to all the plants and trees. Just to keep track of which needed watering and which needed fertilizing was enough to make my head spin. And the workload was immense. But it got worse. I don't understand how God, after saying that all of the trees in the Garden were given to us for food, could then command us not to eat the fruit of the tree in the middle of the Garden. It was clear that God had an important stake in setting this prohibition

Yet, in presenting the human being with the permitted and the forbidden, God also gave Adam the gift of choice. The moment that Adam was told that he could not eat the fruit of the tree that was in the middle of the Garden was the instant that Adam became independent of God. Adam, like every child, now had the power to do what he wanted to do, irrespective of what had been told to him.

***Testing the Limits: The Beginning of Growth***

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Eve and Adam were like all children who begin to doubt their parents' rules while striving to be like them. They had to test just how far they could assert themselves while they were learning about their own power. Jacob did not find this surprising at all, since they were created in the image of their parent, God, who is unique and all-powerful.

And so Eve extended her hand toward one of the limbs. Ever so delicately, she removed a piece of fruit, trying not to disturb the branch at all—as if that would guarantee that God would not realize what she had done. She smiled as she enjoyed the delicious fruit, and she couldn't wait to share it with Adam.

***Hiding from Responsibility***

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When God asked who told them that they were naked, or whether they had gained such knowledge by eating from the tree that was forbidden to them, Adam replied, "The woman made me do it," and Eve claimed, "The serpent duped me." It was so typically childlike to cast blame on others and not take responsibility for what they had done. It was much easier for Adam and Eve to say that the snake had been culpable, to project onto him their own desire (even if it was an unconscious desire) for independence and power, which could be attained by eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

***Recognizing the Other in Us***

Eve soon found Adam, and the two of them now ate the fruit. But they both sensed that something had changed. From the first moment they had gazed at each other, they knew that they were similar to each other and very different from all the other creatures they had seen lurking outside the Garden. Though in many respects they were absolutely naive as they witnessed each other's nakedness, now they saw each other through different eyes. Eve couldn't take her eyes off Adam, but she didn't want to be caught staring at him. I can't believe how wonderful it is that our bodies seem to match; the parts complement each other. I wonder if Adam's body is as sensitive to touch as mine seems to be. I want to caress him and warm him with my body.

Eve was ashamed to think such thoughts and looked for something with which to cover herself. Adam suggested they use fig leaves, remembering how he had tried to clean himself with these leaves after his own creation. Eve ran and brought back a handful of leaves, which she quickly sewed together into cloths to cover the parts of their bodies that represented their uniqueness.

Shame occurs when someone is totally exposed and conscious of someone else's gaze. Before eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, Adam and Eve had no self-consciousness. They did not fully know each other; in a way, they did not even know themselves. Only when they became totally visible to each other did they truly comprehend who they were. Only when they could share the totality of their being with each other could Adam and Eve develop their full individuality. They had finally become the helpmate for each other that God had spoken about by proclaiming, "It is not good for the human being to be alone; I will find a fitting helper for him."

***Leaving the Garden—the Womb***

Jacob knew that God had searched through the Garden for Adam and Eve. Finally, God asked, "Aiyeka," "Where are you?" Things seemed to have changed so much. God could no longer be sure of the creatures of creation, asking them not so much "where they were" but rather "who they were." It was almost as if the Divine, like all parents, no longer completely knew the very creatures that God had produced. God was dealing with growing progeny, who were developing personalities and wills of their own. As Adam and Eve began to assert their independence from the Divine, perhaps God also understood that it was time to withdraw from them. Parents also consciously contract somewhat, so they can give their children the space they need to fully develop.

But it is not easy for parents—or for God—to withdraw. This usually is done with great ambivalence. On one hand, God wanted them to live and flourish, and as a result they were not immediately stricken with death when the Divine realized that they had disobeyed the commandment against eating from the tree. Yet, God punished them for asserting their own independence. Doing this showed them the difficulty of childbearing and childrearing: "I shall make most severe your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring children into the world." God realized that Adam and Eve had to leave the Garden where they had been protected, since they could not grow in the confines of the womb. This is no different from children's need to leave the safety of their parents' house. However, as God was about to banish them, God reacted like every loving parent:

Wait! Don't go so fast. You cannot go like that: Without garments to protect you, you will not survive outside the Garden. The cold can be very biting; thorns and branches will tear at your skin; animals may sting or scratch or bite you. You have no idea what you will encounter out there. Please, put on these coverings, which I have sewn together from skins that the serpents have shed. In this way, I will be with you, protecting you at every step.

As God breathed in, Eden contracted like a womb and expelled Adam and Eve into the world. They could never return to the place where everything that was necessary for life had been provided. But the irony was that their lives were only now really beginning. By leaving the Garden, they took their first steps toward determining who they were, their first steps toward choosing freely their own path in the world.

After taking a few steps, Adam turned to gaze at the place where he and Eve had felt at one with the Divine—the place where he had been secure and at peace. As he turned, something in him wanted to run back, almost as if he had left a part of himself there. One part of him, indeed, would always dream of that place of his infancy and of the time that was so simple, so clear, so certain.

But there was no going back. Cherubim and a fiery sword prevented Adam and Eve from returning. They were destined to live in exile outside the Garden, in a place where creativity and hope would always have to battle limitation and anxiety. At best, all they could carry with them was the memory of Eden. This became their road map for an eventual return. The garden of their infancy became their dream of utopia and fulfilment.

Adam and Eve now began their journey to the wholeness and completeness they had known in the Garden. Much later, Jacob would long for this wholeness his entire life. As Adam and Eve remembered deep in their psyches the time when they were at one with God in the all-enveloping womb of Eden, they were already on their way back to the Divine, Whom they would encounter as adults in the garden of their maturity.

## GENESIS, CHAPTER 22

<sup>1</sup> Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test. He said to him, "Abraham," and he answered, "Here I am." <sup>2</sup> And He said, "Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you."

<sup>3</sup> So early next morning, Abraham saddled his ass and took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. He split the wood for the burnt offering, and he set out for the place of which God had told him. <sup>4</sup> On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place from afar. <sup>5</sup> Then Abraham said to his servants, "You stay here with the ass. The boy and I will go up there; we will worship and we will return to you."

<sup>6</sup> Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and put it on his son Isaac. He himself took the firestone and the knife; and the two walked off together. <sup>7</sup> Then Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he answered, "Yes, my son." And he said, "Here are the firestone and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?" <sup>8</sup> And Abraham said, "God will see to the sheep for His burnt offering, my son." And the two of them walked on together.

<sup>9</sup> They arrived at the place of which God had told him. Abraham built an altar there; he laid out the wood; he bound his son Isaac; he laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. <sup>10</sup> And Abraham picked up the knife to slay his son. <sup>11</sup> Then an angel of the Lord called to him from heaven: "Abraham! Abraham!" And he answered, "Here I am." <sup>12</sup> And he said, "Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me."

<sup>13</sup> When Abraham looked up, his eye fell upon a ram, caught in the thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son. <sup>14</sup> And Abraham named that site Adonai-yireh, whence the present saying, "On the mount of the Lord there is vision."

<sup>15</sup> The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, <sup>16</sup> and said, "By Myself I swear, the Lord declares: Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your favored one, <sup>17</sup> I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore; and your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes. <sup>18</sup> All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants, because you have obeyed My command."

<sup>19</sup> Abraham then returned to his servants, and they departed together for Beer-sheba; and Abraham stayed in Beer-sheba.

FROM 'TAKE YOUR SON: PSYCHOANALYTIC INTERPRETATION OF THE AKEIDAH (GENESIS 22), A LECTURE GIVEN TO THE MOSCOW ASSOCIATION OF ANALYTICAL PSYCHOLOGY CONFERENCE IN JUNE 2011 BY HENRY ABROMOVITCH

My topic is the psychodynamics of father-son conflict but I want to begin with a guided meditation. "Please put down your pens. Relax. Sink into your chair. Shut your eyes. Imagine that you are a child again, playing happily in your room...Suddenly, the door opens and it is your father. He tells you that together, you are going on a journey... You start walking for a long time in silence together, through the countryside...You are wondering where you are going. Finally, you ask, "Where are we going?" and are told, "We will know when we get there." You continue walking, climbing up a mountain. When you reach the top, father says," Stand against that rock and do not move." He then pulls out a gun and aims it at you..." You wake up from this nightmare.

This guided meditation is inspired by the terrible story of the binding of Isaac, told in Genesis 22:1-19 known in Hebrew as the *Akeidah*, and that is how I shall refer to it. When one first considers the Akeidah, it seems the act of a madman: a psychotic, psychopath, senex personality, who is possessed by an inflated/grandiose "God complex". It is a nightmare, like a dagger held to your throat; a horrible, religious perversion and yet Jewish, Christian and Moslem traditions, all herald it as a supreme moment of faith, for which Abraham and all his descendants, including all of us here in the room, are blessed: "All the nations of the earth shall be blessed through your seed. (22:18)

Abraham is most often understood as Knight of Faith and the Prince of Obedience. God the Father tells Abraham, to kill the thing he loves and he obeys with fear and trembling. The Supreme Divine Authority demands submission and obedience, or in Jungian terms an all-powerful Self dictates to an overpowered, subjugated Ego. Many interpretations of the *Akeidah* from Kierkegaard to Bob Dylan are based on this view.

But this interpretation has a serious flaw. It is based on a mistranslation of the Biblical Hebrew. In most translations, God says to Abraham, "Take your son..." But the Hebrew says: "kakh na". "Take" would involve "*kakh*" alone; so what is "*na*" doing there? "*na*" is an untranslatable term indicating polite request that may be translated "Please take" or "Will you take" but certainly **NOT** a command. In Genesis alone, there are 25 examples of "na". Each is a request, often an unusual request as when Abram asks his wife to pretend to be his sister; or when God asks Abraham to look up toward the night sky and count the stars. Whatever Akeidah is, it is not about an Abraham possessed by authoritarian great father complex demanding submission. Rather, Abraham is asked to make a choice. To choose between two things that he loves best.

Why does God need to test Abraham? And what is being tested? To understand the nature of the test, I must make a detour to the "psychology of revolutionary". Normally, family life is based on kinship continuity, the ongoing bond between parent and children who in turn become parents to next generation. True, children need to symbolically distance themselves from their parents and their values in order to begin their own journey toward individuation, even symbolically to kill them, but typically after adolescence there is a *rapprochement*.

Revolutionaries, in contrast, reject biological kinship and instead substitute an elective kinship based on a spontaneous communion of kindred souls and total identification with a common mission and ideology. Solidarity among comrades is intense; relatives and friends who do not share this ideological commitment become outsiders, even strangers. Revolution is based on a dramatic break with the past to create a new order, a new heaven on earth. This is true at the outset of Christianity when it was still a sect of Judaism. When members of his family come to visit Jesus, he replies: "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?" And stretching out his hand toward his disciples he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. Anyone who does the will of my Father in heaven; he is my brother and sister and mother. (Matthew 12:46-50)

The same rejection of family is true of Zionist Socialists who founded the egalitarian Kibbutz in Israel, or the Bolsheviks who founded Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Once successful, every revolutionary faces the dilemma of continuity: how do I pass on the spirit of the revolution to the next generation? How do I know my 'sons' will not do the same as me?

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Abraham is a spiritual revolutionary. When an Unknown Voice sends him on a journey to an unknown destination - rather like analysis, it is a classic revolutionary call for a sharp break from father-bound identity and toward one's destiny. Even the Hebrew phrase, *lech lecha* translated as "leave" or "go-you-forth" is literally "Go to yourself" as if initiating journey toward individuation. (Significantly, the Text hides the fact that Abraham is abandoning his elderly father.) He feels he has begun something new and precious that must be passed on. But first he must leave his father's gods. This conflict is expressed in best known Midrash, a kind of Rabbinic active imagination, about Abraham's early life. Abraham's father made and sold idols of wood and stone. One day, the father left the young Abraham in charge of the store – a rite of passage. Abraham picked up his father's hammer and proceeded to smash and destroy all the statues except the largest one in whose hand he placed the hammer. When his father returned, he saw the terrible damage and asked his son what had happened. Abraham calmly told his father that the "gods" started arguing among themselves as to who was more powerful and started fighting and so destroyed each other until only one was left. His father said: "Don't you know they are only blocks of wood and stone?" Young Abraham replied: "If so, why do you worship them?"

Now we are in a position to understand how the Akeidah resolved the revolutionary's crisis of continuity by recreating for the son the spiritual journey of the father. The poetic cadence of the first call: "Leave/go-you-forth your country, your family, your father's house, to the land I will let you see." (12:1) parallels exactly the rhythm of the call to akeda: "Pray take your son, your only-one, whom you love, Yitzhak, and go-you-forth to the land of Moriyya/Seeing, and offer him up there as an offering-up upon one of the mountains." (22:1); in both cases he is told to go to an unknown location, - unknown destination is central to any spiritual quest or deep analysis- if you know where you are going, it is not the right place; in taking Isaac and two lads, he is literally taking Isaac away from the world of women into the world of masculine. Their journey recreates Abraham's earlier journey throughout Canaan as a pilgrim to the Self. Later, father and son, separate from the lads in a further stage of individuation. Most dramatically, Abraham recreates the situation in which he challenged Divine authority at Sodom – Isaac questions the situation clearly showing he has learned the tradition of asking questions and challenging authority. Abraham's ambiguous, creative response is similar to God's and teaches something profound about trusting the Process: "God will see for himself to the lamb for offering-up, my son" (22:8). But most of all, the Akeidah is how Abraham introduces Isaac to the divine, to prophecy, the promises, and to the transcendent; he gives him away and gets him back and then leaves him to work things out for himself alone – rather like the vision quest of Sioux Indians – or the long periods of intense solitude characteristic of the great philosophers.

Isaac offered up as Abraham's son is reborn as prophet of Abraham's God.

The next time, we meet Isaac, he is walking and meditating in the field. The Akeidah has clearly broken his maternal symbiosis and forced him to come to grips with the destiny and survivor mission he has inherited. He synchronistically meets his future wife Rebekkah who comforts him from the death of his mother. For Isaac, this traumatic encounter with death, made him into a survivor, much as Abraham had come away from the smoking furnace of Sodom, with a sense of having been saved, chosen for some special purpose.

## ECCLESIASTES, CHAPTER 9

<sup>1</sup> For all this I considered in my heart even to declare all this, that the righteous, and the wise, and their works, are in the hand of God: no man knows either love or hatred by all that is before them. <sup>2</sup> All things come alike to all: there is one event to the righteous, and to the wicked; to the good and to the clean, and to the unclean; to him that sacrifices, and to him that sacrifices not: as is the good, so is the sinner; and he that swears, as he that fears an oath.

<sup>3</sup> This is an evil among all things that are done under the sun, that there is one event unto all: also the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead.

<sup>4</sup> For to him that is joined to all the living there is hope: for a living dog is better than a dead lion. <sup>5</sup> For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not anything, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten. <sup>6</sup> Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy, is now perished; neither have they any more a portion for ever in anything that is done under the sun.

<sup>7</sup> Go your way, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God now accepts your works. <sup>8</sup> Let your garments be always white; and let your head lack no ointment. <sup>9</sup> Live joyfully with the wife whom you love all the days of the life of your vanity, which he has given you under the sun, all the days of your vanity: for that is your portion in this life, and in your labour which you take under the sun. <sup>10</sup> Whatsoever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave to whence you go.

<sup>11</sup> I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happens to them all. <sup>12</sup> For man also knows not his time: as the fishes that are taken in an evil net, and as the birds that are caught in the snare; so are the sons of men snared in an evil time, when it falls suddenly upon them.

<sup>13</sup> This wisdom have I seen also under the sun, and it seemed great unto me: <sup>14</sup> There was a little city, and few men within it; and there came a great king against it, and besieged it, and built great bulwarks against it: <sup>15</sup> Now there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city; yet no man remembered that same poor man.

<sup>16</sup> Then said I, Wisdom is better than strength: nevertheless the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heard. <sup>17</sup> The words of wise men are heard in quiet more than the cry of him that rules among fools. <sup>18</sup> Wisdom is better than weapons of war: but one sinner destroys much good.

FROM 'ECCLESIASTES WAS DEPRESSED', [HTTP://WWW.JS.EMORY.EDU](http://www.js.emory.edu), FARAH MIZRAHI, 2002

“Of all the psychiatric disorders, the depressive disorders have been most closely correlated with the core spiritual task of finding meaning” (Blazer 1178). According to Dr. Dan G. Blazer if one wishes to encounter old age favorably and to thus avoid “a prolonged and terminal dark night of the soul” he or she must first find meaning in life (1178). Taking Dr. Blazer’s statement into consideration, with Kohelet’s search for meaning in life as the central theme of the book of Ecclesiastes, it is probable to assume that Kohelet was suffering from depression while writing this canonical work. “In depression, the meaninglessness of every enterprise and every emotion, the meaninglessness of life itself, becomes self evident. The only feeling left in this loveless state is insignificance” (Solomon 15). The meaningless described by Solomon as depression is identical to the meaninglessness Kohelet describes in Ecclesiastes. However, unlike severely depressed patients, Kohelet suffers from dysthymia, a mild form of depression.

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In order to determine if Kohelet is suffering from depression it is essential to define depression and determine how it affects the elderly. Depression can be roughly divided into two categories: major depression and mild or dysthymic depression. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV), a person suffering from dysthymic disorder must fulfill eight requirements. Firstly, the person must exhibit a depressed mood for most of the day or for more days than not for at least two years. The DSM-IV next gives a list of six symptoms for which the depressed must present with at least two. These include low self-esteem, poor concentration or difficulty making decisions, and feelings of hopelessness (Gwirtzman). Other common symptoms of dysthymic disorder are social withdrawal, generalized loss of interest or pleasure, pessimistic attitude toward the future and brooding about past events (Billig 57). The DSM-IV criteria also states that the disturbance must be absent of psychotic features such as delusions and that the symptoms are not due to the direct psychological effects of a substance or a general medical condition. The description concludes by stating that symptoms of dysthymic disorder must cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social occupational or other important areas of functioning. Furthermore, studies for risk factors of dysthymia have shown that social class has no relationship with vulnerability to the disorder (Gwirtzman Table 21-15).

Beginning with the structure of the book of Ecclesiastes, it is clear that Kohelet does not present his thoughts in a logical manner as a sensible author would do. He constantly repeats and contradicts himself and fails to present his message in a clear or systematic fashion. From the opening line of the book, Kohelet introduces the reader to his pessimistic view of life. Throughout his many experiences he has reached the conclusion that life is ultimately empty and meaningless: “Futility of futilities! – said Kohelet – Futility of futilities! All is futile! What profit does man have for all his labor for which he toils beneath the sun? I have seen all the deeds done beneath the sun, and behold all is futile and a vexation of the spirit” (Eccles. 1.2-3, 12). According to Kohelet man’s accomplishments and struggles in life are pointless reminiscent of a breath or a chasing of the wind. Eventually all men will be presented with the same fate; ultimately everyone will die regardless of their achievements or failures. This theory is evident in Kohelet’s comparison of humans with beasts: “For the fate of men and the fate of beast – they have one and the same fate: as one dies, so dies the other, and they all have the same spirit. Man has no superiority over beast, for all is futile. All go to the same place; all originate from dust and all return to dust” (Eccles 3.19-20).

Kohelet makes the same comparison with the wicked and the righteous. Although society would like to believe that the righteous get rewarded and the wicked get punished accordingly, Kohelet warns that this is untrue: “All things come alike to all; the same fate awaits the righteous and the

wicked, the good and the clean and the unclean, the one who brings a sacrifice and the one who does not. As is the good man so is the sinner, as is the one who swears, so is the one who fears an oath. This is an evil about all things that go on under the sun: that the same fate awaits them all..." (9.2-3). Thus, according to Kohelet's logic, there is no value to ethical behavior in the universe since both the righteous and the wrong-doer die the same death. Since all men ultimately die regardless of their struggle in life, whether to achieve wealth, wisdom, or piety, both their past actions as well as their future actions are fruitless. "Once more I saw under the sun that the race is not won by the swift; nor the battle by the strong, nor does bread come to the wise, riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the learned; but time and death will happen to them all" (Eccles. 9.11). Kohelet's feelings of hopelessness, his brooding over the past, and his pessimistic attitude toward the future are clear symptoms of dysthymic disorder. His inability to control his destiny adds to his sense of helplessness and pulls him further and further away from finding purpose in life.

Furthermore, as a patient suffering from dysthymia, Kohelet suggests that death is more valuable than life: "So I consider more fortunate the dead who have already died, than the living who are still alive; but better than either of them is he who has not yet been..." (Eccles. 4.2-3). However, unlike severely depressed patients, Kohelet is not making an argument for suicide. In fact, even in all the meaninglessness of life, he encourages the exact opposite of suicide. While Kohelet understands that everything in life is a "chasing after the wind" he still advises the youth to enjoy the days of their existence: So I praised enjoyment, for man has no other goal under the sun but to eat, drink and be joyful; and this will accompany him in his toil...Enjoy life with the wife you love through all the fleeting days of your life that He has granted you beneath the sun, all your futile existence...Whatever you are able to do with your might, do it. For there is nether doing nor reckoning nor knowledge nor wisdom in the grave where you are going...Even if a man lives many years, let him rejoice in all of them, but let him remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is futility. (Eccles. 8.15, 9.9-10, 11.8)

Throughout his "experience-guided" account, Kohelet maintains truthfulness and presents the youth with facts of life as melancholy and distressing as they may be. "One must learn to live with what cannot be altered and to submit to the inevitable. What is cannot be changed by man's efforts, and man does not now, and will never know, why God acts the way He does. In other words, the world keeps moving, regardless of our wishes and our feeble efforts to intervene" (Marcus 242). However, despite the uncertainty and the emptiness that results at the end of man's life, Kohelet never advocates suicide. Instead, he encourages dedicating oneself to striving after joy in life because "the search for joy is the only sensible goal considering the frustrating, tragic, and fundamentally futile nature of existence" (Marcus 248).

As a sufferer of mild depression, Kohelet exhibits symptoms of helplessness, indecisiveness; he perceives the future in a negative light, and ultimately fails to find any sense of meaning in his life. He writes Ecclesiastes to share his wisdom and experience and impart messages of truth. Kohelet's encounters have taught him to accept his incapacity and vulnerability and to understand that he will forever live a meaningless life. It is this comprehension of the eternalness of his vain existence that characterizes Kohelet's depression as dysthymic. Using physical pain as a metaphor for dysthymia, Andrew Solomon, in his atlas of depression, describes suffering similar to that of Kohelet: Like physical pain that becomes chronic, it is miserable not so much because it is intolerable in the moment as because it is intolerable to have known it in the moments gone and to look forward only to knowing it in the moments to come. The present tense of mild depression envisages no alleviation because it feels like all knowledge. It is this acute awareness of transience and limitation that constitutes mild depression. Similarly, Kohelet's depression stems from his frustration with the workings of the world and more importantly, his recent realization of this fixed perpetual reality.

## **ESTHER, CHAPTER 2**

<sup>1</sup> After these things, when the wrath of king Ahasuerus was assuaged, he remembered Vashti, and what she had done, and what was decreed against her. <sup>2</sup> Then said the king's servants that ministered unto him: 'Let there be sought for the king young virgins fair to look on; <sup>3</sup> and let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom, that they may gather together all the fair young virgins unto Shushan the castle, to the house of the women, unto the custody of Hegai the king's chamberlain, keeper of the women; and let their ointments be given them; <sup>4</sup> and let the maiden that pleaseth the king be queen instead of Vashti.' And the thing pleased the king; and he did so.

<sup>5</sup> There was a certain Jew in Shushan the castle, whose name was Mordecai the son of Jair the son of Shimei the son of Kish, a Benjamite, <sup>6</sup> who had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captives that had been carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away. <sup>7</sup> And he brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle's daughter; for she had neither father nor mother, and the maiden was of beautiful form and fair to look on; and when her father and mother were dead, Mordecai took her for his own daughter.

<sup>8</sup> So it came to pass, when the king's commandment and his decree was published, and when many maidens were gathered together unto Shushan the castle, to the custody of Hegai, that Esther was taken into the king's house, to the custody of Hegai, keeper of the women. <sup>9</sup> And the maiden pleased him, and she obtained kindness of him; and he speedily gave her her ointments, with her portions, and the seven maidens, who were meet to be given her out of the king's house; and he advanced her and her maidens to the best place in the house of the women. <sup>10</sup> Esther had not made known her people nor her kindred; for Mordecai had charged her that she should not tell it. <sup>11</sup> And Mordecai walked every day before the court of the women's house, to know how Esther did, and what would become of her.

<sup>12</sup> Now when the turn of every maiden was come to go in to king Ahasuerus, after that it had been done to her according to the law for the women, twelve months--for so were the days of their anointing accomplished, to wit, six months with oil of myrrh, and six month with sweet odours, and with other ointments of the women - <sup>13</sup> when then the maiden came unto the king, whatsoever she desired was given her to go with her out of the house of the women unto the king's house. <sup>14</sup> In the evening she went, and on the morrow she returned into the second house of the women, to the custody of Shaashgaz, the king's chamberlain, who kept the concubines; she came in unto the king no more, except the king delighted in her, and she were called by name. <sup>15</sup> Now when the turn of Esther, the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her for his daughter, was come to go in unto the king, she required nothing but what Hegai the king's chamberlain, the keeper of the women, appointed. And Esther obtained favour in the sight of all them that looked upon her.

<sup>16</sup> So Esther was taken unto king Ahasuerus into his house royal in the tenth month, which is the month Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign. <sup>17</sup> And the king loved Esther above all the women, and she obtained grace and favour in his sight more than all the virgins; so that he set the royal crown upon her head, and made her queen instead of Vashti. <sup>18</sup> Then the king made a great feast unto all his princes and his servants, even Esther's feast; and he made a release to the provinces, and gave gifts, according to the bounty of the king.

FROM 'RE-FRAMING ESTHER A JEWISH FEMINIST STUDY OF BEAUTY AND SEXUALITY IN THE SECOND CHAPTER OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER AND ITS INTERPRETATIONS', RABBINIC THESIS BY ANNA GERRARD, 2011

My own reading of the second chapter of the Book of Esther will be firmly rooted in the plain meaning of the original text as drawn out in the first chapter of this study. In my mind, the narrative is clear and unequivocal, informing the reader that Esther and the other young women are taken into the King's harem by force and at the King's decree. They were kept there with no deference to their will (if not against their will) and required by pre-determined procedure to spend a night in the King's chamber. Starting with the use of the verb בקש in verse 2, the author continuously places the women in the grammatically passive position, emphasising their lack of consent. While visual beauty is mentioned throughout the text, it is clear from verses 13 and 14 that, as Fox clearly states, the true nature of the competition between the young women is purely sexual. Furthermore, in several places the text indicates that the abuse of the women went beyond the mere fact of them being held there. Parallel uses of the root of תמרוקיהן in the Hebrew Bible suggest that the women underwent an abrasive and painful beauty procedure.

Understandably, the Rabbinic literature struggles with this plain meaning and we can trace a trend throughout Jewish interpretation of the Book of Esther that moves away from the elements of sexual force and abuse. While the early Aramaic translations actually emphasise the issue by adding the word באונסא, subsequent Rabbinic Midrashim detract from this by focusing instead on Esther's modesty and the divine will behind the story line. There are, of course, isolated examples that break this trend. The Babylonian Esther Midrash is 'decidedly ribald' in its criticism of the sexual nature of the text, using exaggerated and tasteless language to highlight Ahasuerus' degeneracies. Midrash Tehillim even has Esther speaking about her own suffering, complaining that she is forced to spend years with this 'lion who catches her and ravishes her like prey'. The broadest trend however is towards non-sexual motifs and the medieval commentators are heavily influenced by the earlier Rabbinic literature, although there are still exceptions to be found. Abraham Saba, author of *Eshkol Hakofer*, offers a particularly avant-garde reading that not only emphasises the coercive nature of the whole procedure but even suggests that Esther might have considered committing suicide to save herself from her situation.

Of particular interest is the development of the notion that a beauty contest took place in the Persian court. The first text that suggests a literal gathering of the virgins in one place for visual inspection is found in the Targum Sheni. The somewhat inexplicable second gathering of the virgins found in verse 19 of the Biblical text is interpreted as a ruse by Ahasuerus to make Esther jealous after she had already been selected. This motif continues to appear in the Rabbinic literature and in Esther Rabbah develops into the idea that Esther was placed between Persian and Median women for comparison, another foreshadowing of the 'beauty contest' myth. In Midrash Abba Gurion, all the virgins are paraded before a statue of Queen Vashti to compare their beauty but it is not until Aggadat Esther that we see a fully developed model that, I believe, gives us the fixed idea of an actual beauty contest that remains with us until this day.

Those modern scholars who do manage to approach the Biblical text without being influenced entirely by Jewish traditional interpretation, use an array of strong language to describe what they find. De Troyer writes about the 'procedure' that the girls undergo; Butting describes the Persian court as a 'totalitarian sexist power'; Berman speaks of the virgins being 'conscripted' and Nadar offers perhaps the most uncensored and disturbing image when she describes the 'suffering bodies of used and abused women.' This terminology, in my opinion, aptly describes what is presented in the Biblical narrative and Fox begins to string these ideas together into a cohesive interpretation. He does not however go far enough and does not provide us with what Schnur would call a 'morally defensible re-write'.

It is my strong belief that a responsible reading of the second chapter of the Book of Esther has to incorporate the concept of rape. If we take the Hebrew text at face value and try to forget everything that the Jewish tradition tells us about Esther's modesty, piety and willingness to become the saviour of her people at Mordechai's bidding, we are left with a text that clearly demonstrates that she in no way consented to any stage of the selection process. As Lubitch points out: "The *Megillah* emphasizes [Esther's] passivity by the unusual use of the passive form of certain verbs." (Lubitch: 2003) She does not voice opposition to Mordechai, Hegai or Ahasuerus so one cannot claim that the King, as an individual, raped her at the moment of her being in his chamber. In order to understand the nature of the coercion, we will turn to Brenner who provides us with a very useful definition. "[Rape] consists of bodily sexual violation (including penetration but not limited to it) performed by an active agent on a non-consenting recipient." (Brenner: 1997)

While Ahasuerus is clearly an 'active agent', it cannot necessarily be said that Esther is a 'non-consenting recipient' in her direct interactions with him. She is a 'non-consenting recipient' of the overall procedure and the overall procedure constitutes 'bodily sexual violation' so can we claim that the overall procedure is an 'active agent'? It is my contention that the system, the patriarchal institution of society, represented here by the Persian court, is the 'active agent' that creates a reality in which the women are forced to accept the sexual violation of their bodies without protest. Esther is raped. She is raped by an institution that does not give her another choice. She has to be taken by the King's representatives; she has to spend 12 months in the harem; she has to undergo the prescribed beauty procedures; she has to spend a night with the King when her time comes; and, we can assume, she has to do what he desires. Esther and the other women are victims of what I will call institutional rape. The institution or system in which they exist is set up in a way that allows their bodies to be sexually violated without the possibility of their consent.

With this as a basic premise that arises directly from the Hebrew text itself, I do not think it is appropriate to make efforts to redeem Esther's experience as one of dignified acceptance, pious devotion or feminist bravery. She is a victim who suffers at the hands of an oppressor. I believe that an authentic feminist reading has to accept this as an uncompromising fact. Rather than seeking to draw out an affirmative message from a 'text of terror', we need to think about what we do next with this uncompromising fact. When Berlin calls the Book of Esther an example of burlesque, she is suggesting that it is a comedic, vulgar and exaggerated form of erotica. However, if the narrative describes abuse it cannot be erotica; it can only be pornography. Schnur calls for a 'morally defensible re-write' but to reject the original text in favour of a more palatable version would be both a disservice to the Hebrew Bible and its place in Jewish tradition and a reinforcement of the cultural taboo that surrounds the sexual abuse of countless women throughout history and today.

The second chapter of the Book of Esther is an honest account of an experience shared by so many women. Perhaps, if we really want to give this text a meaningful purpose in a feminist context, it could serve as a taboo-breaking starting point for an honest conversation about sexual violence against women. Used in the framework of Bibliotherapy or Spiritual Counselling, could Esther's story facilitate an otherwise silenced woman to finally find a voice and a vocabulary to talk about her own experience of abuse? Could the concept of institutional rape, as extrapolated from the Biblical narrative, initiate a wider discussion that might give renewed definition and understanding to other comparable cases, such as sex trafficking and arranged marriage? Can we redeem the text, not by finding its intrinsic redeemable elements, but by accepting it as a traditional source that echoes the irredeemable experiences of its readers? These questions provide me with a renewed sense that I can justify the place of the Book of Esther in our holy canon and find authentic and consequential ways to engage with the text when it comes round again in our liturgical reading cycle each Purim.