

What is Torah?: Hearing the Voices of Jewish Women

Source Sheet by Danielle Kranjec

What is Torah?

What are our ways of knowing and being, Jewishly?
How are these ways of knowing and being valued? How are they transmitted?

Questions for each text:

What is the text saying?
What does the text mean?
What does the text mean to me?

Is the author asking something from the reader? If so, what?
What essential truth is the author attempting to transmit?
How does the genre of the work impact the message and how it is received?

Becoming Eve, Abby Stein (memoir, NYC, 2019)

I hope in these pages you will find a portrait of a life that every human being can relate to: the vulnerability and the glory, the frustrations and the revelations, the shedding of one identity and growing into another. No agenda, just my story.

The Small Country
Ellen Bass (USA, 2015)

Unique, I think, is the Scottish *tartle*, that hesitation
when introducing someone whose name you've forgotten

And what could capture *cafuné*, the Brazilian Portuguese way to say
running your fingers, tenderly, through someone's hair?

Is there a term in any tongue for choosing to be happy?

And where is speech for the block of ice we pack in the sawdust of our
hearts?

What appellation approaches the smell of apricots thickening the air
when you boil jam in early summer?

What words reach the way I touched you last night—
as though I had never known a woman—an explorer,
wholly curious to discover each particular
fold and hollow, without guide,
not even the mirror of my own body.

Last night you told me you liked my eyebrows.
You said you never really noticed them before.
What is the word that fuses this freshness
with the pity of having missed it.

And how even touch itself cannot mean the same to both of us,
even in this small country of our bed,
even in this language with only two native speakers.

Salome of the Tenements by Anzia Yeziarska (semi-autobiographical/polemical novel, NYC, 1923)

It came to her with a ghastly shock that she was like one who had been at a gay party, the center of light and color and song. Suddenly the lights had been switched off and she found herself in the dark, alone.

"I had in my two hands everything I once dreamed and longed for when I was in the Essex Street tenement by Mrs. Peltz. I had everything -- husband, house, beautiful clothes. Why did I have to leave it all?"

She paused in her thought and then answered herself: "Because I really had nothing. Even my love for him was only a lie, because you can't love a man that drives you to be different from what you are. Never with him was I me, myself!

"From him I wanted beauty, and I lost even the little beauty that was in me, because I lived a lie with him. There is no beauty for me unless I can express myself, unless I can be in the open what I am."

....

. . . Now everything she did pulsed with reality.

"Tell me," she pressed with impersonal affection. "Is there anything in the world so real, so thrilling, as *real* work?"

. . . "Love!" breathed Hollins, triumphant conviction in his voice. "The thing that makes work so real for us is love."

To be of use

BY MARGE PIERCY (USA, 1973)

The people I love the best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shallows
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.
They seem to become natives of that element,
the black sleek heads of seals
bouncing like half-submerged balls.

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.

Memoirs of a Grandmother, Pauline Wengeroff (Minsk, 1898)
translated by Dr. Shulamit Magnus (Oberlin, 2010)

In earlier times, of course, dress had the task of differentiating certain groups of people from each other. Parisian fashion had not yet effaced all fine and gross nuances. Each people, each clearly differentiated class, had its own dress. People did not want to be lost in the great mass of humanity, but rather to be immediately recognized for what they were. Thus, dress represented tenacity, stability, and tradition, and the halo of the sacred bathed in its glow.

Only with this background can one understand how the *ukase* published in the year 1845 by the Russian government affected Russian Jews, how it compelled them to give up their old garb and accommodate themselves to the modern.

The effect on the great masses was as terrible as a catastrophe. The result was fierce anger and only the feeling of their own powerlessness, their defenselessness -- the anxiety of *golus* -- prevented this exasperation from intensifying into a raging fury. If the Jews had been strong, organized, [and] powerful, then the change of garb would have led to insurrections and revolutions. As it was, however, things remained at painful resignation. People mourned the old garb like a deceased loved one.

More discerning minds quickly grasped that the change to modern clothing was to be just the first step on the road to more comprehensive assimilation, which must reshape not just the forms of life but also the cultural outlook and the transmitted teachings of a specific religion: the customs and manners of the Jewish race

Thus, the Jewish population had to give up the garb that had become dear to it.

Things Haunt

Joshua Jennifer Espinoza (California, 2018) [note: this author is not Jewish but I felt the themes of her poem connected so deeply to the previous texts that I must include this as a post-script]

California is a desert and I am a woman inside it.
The road ahead bends sideways and I lurch within myself.
I'm full of ugly feelings, awful thoughts, bad dreams
of doom, and so much love left unspoken.

Is mercury in retrograde? someone asks.
Someone answers, *No, it's something else
like that though.* Something else like that.
That should be my name.

When you ask me am I really a woman, a human being,
a coherent identity, I'll say *No, I'm something else
like that though.*

A true citizen of planet earth closes their eyes
and says what they are before the mirror.
A good person gives and asks for nothing in return.
I give and I ask for only one thing—

Hear me. Hear me. Hear me. Hear me. Hear me.
Hear me. Bear the weight of my voice and don't forget—
things haunt. Things exist long after they are killed.