

Floral Torah: Toward a Theory of Femme Torah

Rabbi Avigayil Halpern

When our foremother Rachel committed to the monotheistic family that would one day become Judaism, she was given jewelry.

After she gives Abraham's servant/messenger and his camels ample water to drink, the man — who is called Eliezer by rabbinic tradition — seems to realize that she is the answer to his prayer: “Let the maiden to whom I say, ‘Please, lower your jar that I may drink,’ and who replies, ‘Drink, and I will also water your camels’ — let her be the one whom You have decreed for Your servant Isaac. Thereby shall I know that You have dealt graciously with my master.” (Genesis 24:14) Eliezer has been sent to find a spouse for Abraham's son Isaac and has promised to find a bride who is “from the land of [Abraham's] birth.” But he is not sure how — enter this prayer.

Then: “When the camels had finished drinking, the man took a gold nose-ring weighing a half-shekel, and two gold bands for her arms, 10 shekels in weight.” These gifts seem to convey gratitude and perhaps also an offer of betrothal. But Rashi cites a midrashic tradition that gives different meaning to these accessories:

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<p>“And two bracelets on her [Rivkah's] hands, like the two Luchot. “Ten shekels in weight,” like the ten commandments.</p>	<p>וּשְׁנֵי צְמִידִים עַל יָדֶיהָ, כְּנֶגֶד שְׁנֵי לוחוֹת. (בראשית כד, כב): עֲשֶׂרָה זָהָב מִשְׁקָלָם, כְּנֶגֶד עֲשָׂרֹת הַדְּבָרוֹת.</p>
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This midrash casts Eliezer as offering Rivkah the Torah, represented both by the two Tablets and the 10 commandments that were inscribed on them. And Rivkah accepts. The midrash is sparse, but perhaps it means to suggest that Rivkah anachronistically “converted to Judaism” in this moment or at least signed on to Abraham's familial project of ethical monotheism.

But this image of Torah represented by jewelry can do more for us. It asks us to imagine: What does it mean for the Torah to be a stack of clinking bracelets sparkling on our wrist? This is an image of Torah as over-the-top, as decorative, as shining. This is a femme Torah.

Torah is not, in the most basic sense, necessary for justice work. Torah itself, as we see so painfully and repeatedly, can be mobilized toward any political end, and no application of Torah is an inherently worse reading on its own terms. And even if Torah could be proven to be a canon that somehow provides backing only for social goods, the work of bettering the world does not take place primarily in the realm of texts and canons; rather, it is material, and ideas alone cannot suffice. And I would hope that no reader of this article is motivated to “do the work” only because they believe that Torah or God calls them to do it. While the commitments and obligations that our Judaism creates and amplifies may help us show up to do justice work, they do not independently create our moral universes. Rather, Judaism is part of a patchwork of experiences, texts, relationships, and beliefs that push us to act. We see this very clearly in the masses of people committed to building a more just world who have no connection to Judaism!

But “necessary” is a grim and unmotivating benchmark. Torah is not necessary, but it is wanted. It is not necessary, but it is joyful. It is not necessary, but it is sustaining. For those of us who love Torah, we want Torah to be a part of all our thinking and all our work. That is where the notion of the femme comes in.

The queer notion of femme is not the same as a gender-conforming femininity. A relatively recent [piece by Sam Manzella](#) describes it as:

...an identifier used by LGBTQ+ people who purposefully present in a feminine manner. ‘Purposefully’ is the operative word here — a hallmark of femmeness is its deliberate subversion, exaggeration, and/or blatant rejection of patriarchal femininity. Femmes don’t cater to the cisgender, heterosexual male gaze, and that’s by design.

The historian, scholar, and activist Joan Nestle, founder of the Lesbian Herstory archives and editor of the 1992 anthology “The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader,” writes that “if the butch deconstructs gender, the femme constructs gender. She puts together her own special ingredients for what it is to be a ‘woman,’ an identity with which she can live and love.”¹

My favorite description of queer femme experience is by Temim Fruchter in their novel “City of Laughter.” Describing Shiva, the book’s protagonist, Fruchter writes:

Femme, when she first put it on, became a name for the lush excesses with which Shiva had always brimmed. She had always laughed loud and talked loud,

¹ “Introduction,” *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*, ed. Joan Nestle, 1992

and even when she wasn't feeling particularly bold, she could call boldness to the surface by wearing a bright lip or hang-ing faux gemstones from her ears. Every new month of queer, she'd brimmed a little fuller. She'd stretched vaster, more expansive, ever more accommodating of that fullness.

For years, she had been so quiet, keeping herself and her desire contained. Her inheritance was the kind of withholding that came from stinginess, not erotic lavishment. Femme meant more. Ever more. Femme in the face of scarcity. It meant sartorial power and aesthetic largesse; it meant volume and texture. It meant hyperbole and gossip and bighearted intimate friendship and steamy low-lidded backroom flirtation. It meant accessories and never saving anything for a special occasion. It meant abundance.

Femme Torah, then, is abundant. It is a cup that overflows. Femme Torah sparkles like a tiara plucked from a dress-up bin and tells a story like a set of scarlet-painted nails emphasizing the gesticulations of a speaker. Femme Torah is over the top, joyful, glorious, and playful. Femme Torah looks at what is necessary and says, no, this is not nearly enough.

This approach to Torah and justice work says, maybe Torah is not needed for justice work — but that is the wrong question to be asking anyway. Torah is wanted, Torah is delighted, Torah is sustaining and energizing and opens our souls ever wider.

The Torah that Rivkah accepts midrashically, then, is a Torah of delight and of pleasures. This is the Torah that the rabbis evoke in Shir HaShirim Rabbah. This midrashic work — quoted heavily by Rashi in his commentary on Shir HaShirim — attempts to take the sensual and erotic poetry of this megillah and transform it into a love story between not a man and a woman, but God and the Jewish people.

This can read as rabbinic prudishness, an attempt to pivot from the graphic צָרוּר יָלִין: "My beloved to me is a bag of myrrh lodged between my breasts" (Shir HaShirim 1:13) to "בֵּין שְׁנֵי בְדֵי הָאָרוֹן," "between the two poles of the Ark" (Rashi ad loc). But if we read this commentary seeking the femme, we see a perspective on Torah that treats it as a delight.

For example, the sensual "נֹפֶת תִּטְפְּנָה שְׁפִתֹתֶיךָ כֶּלֶה," "Sweetness drops from your lips, O bride,"(4:11) becomes, in Rashi's quotation of the midrash, "טַעְמֵי תוֹרָה," "tastes or reasoning of Torah." And similarly, Rashi interprets the description in Shir Hashirim 3:11 of "מֶלֶךְ שֶׁלֹּמֹה בְּעֶטְרָה שֶׁעָטְרָהּ לּוֹ אִמּוֹ חֲתָנָת", "King Solomon wearing the crown that his

mother gave him on his wedding day,” as representing the day of Matan Torah, when God crowned the Jewish people with the tiara that is Torah.

The metaphor of Torah as a crown becomes more clearly readable as the crown qua tiara, a sparkling, glorious accessory, in the context of Shir HaShirim. In Pirkei Avot 4:13, Rabbi Shimon describes the Torah as a tiara:

Rabbi Shimon says: There are three crowns: the crown of Torah, the crown of priesthood and the crown of monarchy - but the crown of a good name outweighs them all.	רבי שמעון אומר, שלשה כתרִים הם, כתר תורה וְכַתֵּר כְּהֵנָּה וְכַתֵּר מַלְכוּת, וְכַתֵּר שֵׁם טוֹב: עוֹלָה עַל גְּבוּיָהּ
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Do we read Torah, here, as a “crown” in the sense of a source of power, or as a tiara, a point of pride that glimmers and delights and adds on? Femme Torah invites us to ask how we can engage with Torah as the latter — Torah as the strings of beads we pull out of the dress-up box, Torah as nourishing and alive and playful and thereby sustaining. This opposes another kind of engagement with Torah: as a force for domination.

I feel no need to provide examples of the uses of Torah for domination; anyone wishing to see them can consult news reports out of Israel on the actions of right-wing parties. But I wish to emphasize that Torah can easily be used to seek power and evil, as Rabbi Aharon Shmuel Tamares wrote in 1906:

We still have no assurance that the unnatural evil of a person’s falsifying intellect will not snatch the Torah first, toss it into its valise, and make of it another weapon for destruction and murder. For this is the standard method of the evil-minded murderer: to take the fruits of enlightenment and intelligence, intended to enhance life on this earth, and turn them into their opposites, tools for the angel of death.²

Torah as a crown is Torah that competes for domination and for control. Torah as tiara insists that Torah must create a different kind of world: one of play and celebration and

² Delivered on Shabbat Hagadol in 1906. Published in the volume Musar Hatorah v'Hayahadut (Vilna 1912). Introduction and translation below by Rabbi Everett E. Gendler. Published by Rabbi Gendler in multiple locations in the 1960’s and distributed by the Jewish anti-war movement who opposed the war in Vietnam. This version is an excerpt of the original d’var torah, first published in Judaism; New York, Vol. 17, Iss. 2, (Spring 1968): 203 with updating to gendered language by Yosef Berman. The full sermon in translation along with additional Tamares Torah can be found in A Passionate Pacifist: Essential Writings of Aharon Samuel Tamares, Translated & Edited by Everett Gendler with contributions from Ri J. Turner & Tzemah Yoreh, 2020. My gratitude to Rabbi Yosef Berman for sharing this source with me!

difference, one where struggle and competition are not over who can control others the best but over SOMETHING ELSE.

My friend and teacher Lexi Kohanski, writing for Halakhic Left last year, writes that:

Halakhic work matters, not because ideas will stop the genocide, but because of the possibilities that work opens up in our relationships.

A halakha grounded in the dynamics of intellectual domination leaves no room to realize the selves within the objects of our thought. If we are to achieve a halakha of pleasure and play, we must begin ...by repenting that we have failed to see the self within the monster. As we labor in the Torah, we must dream of one day playing together, God, Leviathan³, and us. That day “is today, if you will hear My voice”⁴ speaking within each and every life, from the olive trees and poppy flowers to the Palestinians whose lives we have twisted into something monstrous.

In other words, halakhah — and I would expand this to Torah more broadly — is a tool for domination if we let it be. Drawing on rabbinic texts about Iyov and about the Leviathan, that great sea monster who God is described as playing with, Kohanski is arguing that play and pleasure can replace domination in our approach to halakhah. And even more so, that replacement of domination with play and pleasure can be a microcosm that we strive to expand ever outward.

If we instead approach Torah as a playful, experimental force, an abundant and overflowing well of ideas to splash in, this can keep us moving toward a world without domination.

There is a widely taught idea that the origin of the custom to decorate houses and synagogues with flowers on Shavuot comes because God decorated the smallest mountain — Mount Sinai — with flowers when the mountain seemed perhaps too small to properly be the site of receiving the Torah. This midrash, so popular among educators of youth and beloved by many, has very weak textual hooks. But it speaks to a deep desire to have the Torah be covered in flowers: to link the giving of the Torah not with might and power, but with beauty and delight.

We might not need beauty, strictly speaking, to motivate our ethical actions. And we might be able to continue bettering the world without play. But I want, ultimately, to live

³ Kohanski is referencing texts that refer to God playing with the Leviathan.

⁴ See Sanhedrin 98a.

in a world to come where joy is abundant, where Torah delights rather than controls. I want to live in a world that celebrates the femme. To get there, we need a femme Torah.

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