

Alumni Study Session
November 13, 2014

A large group of MTEI alumni joined a teleconference study session led by Professor Amy Kalmanofsky, Associate Professor of Bible at JTS. Amy's recent book *Dangerous Sisters of the Hebrew Bible* (Fortress Press, 2014) was the focus of her study session. We asked Amy to present at this particular time because the story of sisters dominates the narratives about Jacob and his two wives, particularly in Parashat VaYetze, the Torah reading coming up on November 29th.

Amy's session places this Torah reading in the larger context of sister narratives in the Hebrew Bible. The role of "sister" is one that has not been explored by most biblical scholarship. As Amy pointed out, when we think of "family" stories in the Bible not surprisingly we tend to think first of "brother" stories: Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his many brothers, Moses and Aaron, etc. Yet at the same time there are significant sister figures as well in the Bible: most obviously, Rachel and Leah; but also examples such as Miriam who is first and foremost a sister of Moses (indeed, as Amy pointed out we have no indication in the Bible that Miriam ever married) and who really saved his life when he was launched into the Nile as an infant. Even Sarah is seen as a sister in the peculiar stories in which (two times!) Abraham passes Sarah off as his sister not as his wife. The two daughters of King Saul, Michal and Merav, also play a significant role in the conflict between Saul and his successor David.

Amy presented her original thesis that viewing the various sisters in the Bible we can see two different "types": on the one hand there is the "ideal" sister. This paradigm serves the needs of the patriarch in their family of birth and strengthens the family bonds. In Genesis, for example, Rebecca is such a figure. In marrying the wealthy Abraham's son Isaac, Rebecca enriches her family and stabilizes its future. It is no accident that when she leaves to join Isaac in marriage her family blesses her by saying "Our sister, may you grow into multitudes." In her role as a sister, she has benefited her birth family.

But it is the other paradigm of sister that dominates Amy's research and her presentation to our MTEI alums. This type is called the "dangerous" sister and her role in these narratives challenges the patriarchal authority and destabilizes the essential family unit. Many, if not most, of the sister narratives in the Bible, Amy shows, represent the "dangerous" model but the "ideal" sister is actually implicit as the very opposite of what the dangerous sister does! Thus at the same time we focus on the dangerous one, we are given an insight into what the Bible views as the ideal type. Miriam, Amy points out, is a particularly interesting example because at the beginning of the Moses story she is absolutely the ideal sister—the one who saves the offspring and insures the future not only of the family unit but the future of the people Israel. Yet later on Miriam becomes a dangerous sister when she challenges Moses's authority in the wilderness.

Amy looked more specifically at the Rachel and Leah story in our session. This is the most extensive sister narrative in the Hebrew Bible. Her analysis of the story in the book is well worth reading since she goes into much greater depth than she was able to in our

short session. Just to summarize one of the main points, Rachel and Leah are both dangerous sisters according to Amy's definition because they destabilize what she calls the "natal" household (natal, obviously, means the family of one's birth). But what they have done in undermining their father Laban's household is to establish the dominance of their husband's household! As Amy puts it, "The house of Jacob is built at the expense of the house of Laban." But sadly and ironically Rachel never gets to play a role in her husband's household—she dies in childbirth.