

## The Origins of the “Arbaat Yamim” - The Four Days

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### Abstract

[1] *This modern feminist midrash has its roots in the biblical narrative of Jephthah’s daughter. It projects into the future an ideal of Jewish women ritualizing in a four day celebration commemorating this biblical account. It envisions a wholly new Jewish women’s ritual. Though the narrative element of this new exegesis and practice can stand alone the accompanying commentaries are essential to an appreciation of the text.*

### Introduction

#### [2] On Reading Torah and *midrash*:

“There are seventy faces [interpretations] of the Torah,” the Sages say. We do not pretend to know even a small part of them (Kolitz viii). Turn it over and over again, for everything is in it [the Torah]. . . . Contemplate it and grow old and grey over it . . . (*Mishnah Avot 5:22* as cited in Goldstein, D. 5).

The expanding upon and continuous augmenting of Torah through commentary, exegesis, and different forms and varieties of interpretive techniques is integral to apprehending the holistic nature of Jewish hermeneutics. <sup>1</sup> As de Lange points out, the study of the Torah and all biblical texts is “inseparable from their interpretation, and the Jewish tradition of interpretation is embodied in a large mass of writings going back to antiquity” (50). Many of these interpretations and writings form narratives which Judaism calls *aggadah*, literally ‘telling.’ These narratives (*aggadot*) can

. . . fill in the details of a Biblical story, reconcile apparent contradictions, answer questions (and pose them too!), incorporate tales from other sources, make moral deductions, add contemporary historical allusions, discuss relevant theological topics, indulge in biographical anecdotes, and it can even make remarks of a legal character which properly belong to the realm of halakhah [rabbinic law]. The *aggadah* can be pithy and opaque. It can also ramble, moving from one story to another, and from one theme to another . . . . The *aggadah* can be serious and philosophically profound, and at the next moment lend itself to irrational fantasies or appear irreverently comic (Goldstein 7, 8).

[3] The oldest collections of legends “evolved from the expositions of the Bible given by rabbis in the synagogues of Palestine from the earliest centuries C.E.” (Goldstein 9). They comprise what Judaism describes as *midrash* (pl. *midrashim*) meaning ‘to seek or enquire.’ Based on an interpretation of the Torah text, these stories (*midrashim*) generated and continue to generate new narratives and interpretations of the scriptures. The words and ideas of the authors are a “a two-way exercise . . . both inspiration and justification” (Goldstein 9) of Torah text. Indeed, as Gerald L. Bruns notes; “the Bible always addresses itself to the time of interpretation” (627). He explains the use of allegory and narrative as the taking of “the text in relation to ourselves, understanding ourselves in its light, even as our situation throws its light upon the text, allowing it to disclose itself differently, perhaps in unheard ways” (633).

[4] It is in the voices of women in the past three decades that we are discovering new disclosures of Torah in newly heard ways. Feminists are adding women’s points of view to the cornucopia of male-centered interpretations. Not only are they doing so in the area of exegesis, but also in the area of allegory and story-telling. E. M. Broner’s *A Weave of Women*, Kim Chernin’s *The Flame Bearers*, and Anita Diamont’s *The Red Tent* are examples of novels whose themes reflect revised fictional tales of Jewish women in the past, present, and future. These feminist stories empower contemporary Jewish women through their fictional rendering of Jewish heroines and their creative visions of meaningful Jewish women’s ceremonies and ritual all within the context of Jewish tradition and Torah narrative.

[5] “*Origins of the Arbaat Yamim - The Four Days*,” the legend I have created below is within this genre of Jewish feminist legend and story-telling (feminist *midrash*). <sup>2</sup> It is an original utopian and imaginative tale of a revised women’s Judaism. It contains references to tradition and Torah text as well as new women’s rites, liturgies, and theological understandings. Using the technique of gapping, and imaginative commentary (*midrash*), this original feminist tale concerning a fictional ‘descendant’ of the daughters of Israel who are mentioned in the book of Judges. In order to better comprehend the context of this new *midrash* I shall consider at this point the biblical narrative from which it is based and very briefly critique the problematic in the narrative itself and in traditional rabbinic exegesis of the text.

#### [6] On the Biblical Narrative and Rabbinic Exegesis of Judges 11: 38-40 (the story of Jephthah’s daughter and the ‘four-days’ custom):

“*Origins of the Arbaat Yamim - the Four Days*” refers to the following narrative in the book of Judges:

. . . let me alone two months, that I may go and wander on the mountains, and bewail my virginity, I and my companions. And he said, “Go.” And he sent her away for two months; and she departed, she and her companions, and bewailed her virginity upon the mountains. And at the end of two months, she returned to her father, who did with her according to his vow which he had made. She had never known a man. And it became a custom in Israel. That the daughters of Israel went year by year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in the year [Judges 11:38-40] (R. S. V. 198).

[7] Though the above quotation speaks of a ritual which “daughters of Israel” celebrated “four days in a year,” this tale from

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the book of Judges and the above women, the “daughters of Israel” participate? What were the words of the lament? Did they recite them within a prescribed ritual or ceremony? Are these three verses evidence that women in ancient Israel had the autonomy and the right to perform their own rituals exclusive of their male counterparts?

[8] Though we know that the vow refers to the oath Jephthah made that, if God allowed him a victory in the battle against the Ammonites, he would sacrifice as a thanksgiving offering “whatsoever comes forth of the doors of my house to meet me” (R.S.V. 198), there are sketchy rabbinic commentaries to explicate the above section of the narrative. Although the rabbis invariably filled their interpretation of the Hebrew Bible with stories and commentary (*midrash*) to expand upon what Tikva Frymer-Kensky describes as the “gapping, the leaving out important details of the story” (25), they did not do so in this text of terror. <sup>3</sup> In this case, though the redactor left these verses in the narrative for what one would presume was a particular reason, the rabbis give little discussion and do not answer, let alone pose, any of the above questions. Rather, their commentary lies in two different areas of concern. First, in the area of exegesis, in what may be an apologetic in response to the underlying question of how Jephthah could kill his daughter when Yahweh’s injunction condemns human sacrifice, the rabbis suggest that he did not keep this vow. Rather, Jephthah, according to this commentary, “built a house for her [his daughter] in which she lived a solitary life until she died” (Cohen 299).

[9] Second, in the area of semantics and sentence structure, the rabbis were concerned with the phrasing of the verses themselves. To which phrase, they asked, does the clause “and it was a custom in Israel” belong: the first phrase, relating back to Jephthah’s vow, or the second phrase, referring to the custom of the daughters of Israel? As A. Cohen notes in his commentary to the text:

Some commentators prefer to take the noun ‘chok’ in its literal sense of statute and explain that a decree was ordained making the deed [the deed being human sacrifice] illegal for the future. Others join the clause with the next verse (259).

If we are to follow the latter grammatical suggestion, that is, the joining of the clause to the next verse, the portion would then assert that there was a custom of women’s coming together in ritual remembrance of Jephthah’s daughter’s fate. If this is the case, then the rabbinic silence on this annual women’s practice of commemoration is deafening. In fact, if Frymer-Kensky’s claim is correct, that the nameless daughter of Jephthah was “known in ancient Israel . . . and remembered in cult and story” (29), then the commentators’ silence is an example of a rabbinic, patriarchal stance which understood women’s activities as insignificant and, thus, unworthy of comment. Thus, the purpose of my *midrash* is to reclaim not only the nameless daughter of Jephthah and her companions “the daughters of Israel” but, as well, to present a new Jewish women’s legend and propose through metaphor a future annual four-day festival for Jewish women.

#### [10] Background Explication for the Reading of “The Origins of the *Arbaat Yamim* - The Four Day:”

Though, as can be seen below, the narrative element of this new legend can stand alone as an example of Jewish feminist story-telling (*midrash*), the accompanying commentaries are critical to an appreciation of the text. I have included in the design of this tale two specific types of commentaries, which, in both content and printed format, imitate traditional Jewish exegesis. Thus, I have configured the pages of the story as an adaptation of the customary format of the annotated texts of rabbinic bibles. <sup>4</sup> The column in large italicized type is the text of the story. Both the narrower left hand column and the box below the large type text are commentaries on the story.

[11] Both of these sections are integral to a complete understanding of the symbols and allusions within the narrative. These interpretations are to be understood within the rabbinic mnemonic *pardes*. <sup>5</sup> *Pardes* is an acronym for four types of biblical exegesis: *peshat*, *remez*, *derash*, and *sod*. *Peshat* is the literal meaning of the text. In the case of the story below, it can be understood as an appreciation of the narrative as is, with no further interpretation or discussion of deeper meanings and allusions to the Torah text. *Remez* refers to the hints or veiled allusions in the text. The notes in the left hand column of the page includes this type of commentary and the literal meaning of the Hebrew vocabulary and names which are in the main text. Both *derash*, the homiletic explanation of the text, and *sod*, the esoteric interpretation, are within the boxed commentary below the narrative. Though the area of *remez* often includes the *gematria* (the system of giving numerical equivalents to Hebrew letters, Jewish numerology) of particular words and phrases, I have chosen to include the explication of Jewish numerology within the bottom section of commentary. <sup>6</sup>

[12] Disciples of Hasidic masters recorded their masters’ oral stories, as well as stories of the masters’ miraculous powers, and interpreted them “often [with] divergent interpretations of what he had said” (Buber 16). Indeed, followers of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav (1711-1811), the Hasidic master who was the great grandson of the founder of Hasidism, the Baal Shem Tov, continue to this day to interpret and reinterpret his thirteen tales of allegory and parable to find the hidden meanings and portents concealed within the stories themselves (*sod*). <sup>7</sup> I have also written the boxed framed commentary in the informal, conversational, indeed, affectionate tone of what I imagine disciples of Hasidic masters used when discussing the parables attributed to their beloved rabbis.

[13] It should be understood that, though the story I have created is original, the symbols and allusions embedded in the text do refer to actual Jewish lore. I have incorporated these allusions to scripture, historical events, and traditional Jewish symbols purposefully in order to add an element of veracity to the narrative. The accompanying commentaries, particularly in the left-hand column, elucidate these references. Lastly, I would recommend that the reader first read the entire larger text narrative and then return for a second reading using the two commentaries as a guide to understanding the various allusions and points of view within the narrative and better to appreciate the nuances of the story.

#### [14] Midrash: Origins of the *Arbaat Yamim* - The Four Days

[Please follow the different fonts for continuity, or refer to the PDF format.]

***1: Take care you who read these words, for they do not speak of all that there is nor all that there will be. 2: This story is but one of many.***

***3: A story is, after all, but a story . . . .***

***4: Others will dream and their dreams will invigorate the totality. 5: Others will see, and their sight will revision the whole. 6: And like a rock in the eddy of the ocean wave, this story too will change and alter, reconfigure and renew, but the essence will remain the same.***

***7: Four days within the month of Av, the beginning of new growth and fecundity, on the outskirts of our towns and cities, in the mountains and the hills, in the fields and the valleys, amidst the trees and by the running waters, we tell our stories.***

***7: four days:*** this refers to the four days within the year that the daughters of Israel lamented the fate of Jephthah’s daughter (Judges 11:40). ***the month of Av:*** the month of Av is the fifth month of the Jewish year. It is connected etymologically to the

Hebrew word for spring, *Aviv*, although it falls in the calendar year in late July and August. The zodiac sign for the month of Av is a lion. *in the mountains*: this is a reference to Jephthah's daughter who went to the mountains with her friends to "bewail her virginity" (Judges 11:38). These same daughters of Israel yearly commemorated her.

“. . . Av” There is great significance to the month of Av. Av denotes both mourning and rejoicing. On the ninth day of Av we mourn the destruction of the two temples.

**8: From daughter to daughter, woman to woman, in the semiotics of song, the motion of movement, mouth to mouth, ear to ear, body to body, we share these tales. 9: And, as my dream has instructed me, I, M'eera Yael, a daughter of Israel, daughter of Dinah and Joseph, descendant of Arielle, Amnon, and Iscah, record on this the fifteenth day in the month of our annual celebrations the story of Arielle the Kahina and her legacy.**

**9: as my dream has instructed me:** M'eera's understanding of her own and others' dreams relates to Joseph's interpretation of dreams (Genesis 40-42). **M'eera:** literally, she who brings lights. **Yael:** literally, mountain goat. **Iscah:** though mentioned only once in the Scriptures (Genesis 11:29) Iscah is thought to be another name for Sarai (Sarah) the matriarch. **kahina:** in Arabic *kahin* (or *kahina*) means magician and fortune-teller. Arab tribes referred to Deborah, the prophet, as a *kahina*. **daughter of Israel:** (note verse 7 commentary) this refers to the women who annually lamented the fate of Jephthah's daughter (Judges 11:40). **Arielle:** lion(ess) of God.

On the fifteenth of Av, however, the Talmud tells us that our foremothers dressed in white garments and gathered to dance and sing in the vineyards in a festival of celebration and renewal. How wondrous that this was the very day of women's celebration: a day lost in antiquity yet revisioned, revived, and revitalized by her. How apt that M'eera chose this day of celebration to follow the instructions of her dream/vision and record the story of the origins of our four-day festival. How marvellous the *gematria* for the date, Av 15. For the numerical value of Av

Note the connection between the name Arielle and the sign for the month of Av.

**10: This then is the story of the origin of our festival of the Arbah Yamim. 11: In the seventh year in the cycle of seven, in the year of shemita, on the 15<sup>th</sup> day in the month of Av, in the lunar calendar 5761, in that space between the drawing inward and the pushing outward of cosmic breath, beneath the branches of the oak of Moreh, a vision came to the daughter of Iscah.**

**11: in the seventh year in the cycle of seven of shemita:** this refers to the sabbatical year during which land is not cultivated and debts are canceled according to rabbinic law and Torah (Exodus 23:10). **12: 5761:** this corresponds to the year 2000. **13: oak of Moreh:** the oak where the patriarch Abraham first stopped after he entered the land of Canaan (Genesis 12:6). Some say it was here that the binding of Isaac took place.

Av is 3, which when added to the number 15 equals 18. Eighteen is the numerical equivalent of the letters in *chai* life and good fortune. Once again, the deeper meaning and the importance of the date of our yearly festival can be deduced. For, in fact, the celebration of the *arbah yamim* reconnects us to the very life source of our womanhood and revitalizes each of us. We must not, as well, ignore the words of M'eera Yael, the visionary *maggid* (preacher), recorder of this tale. She is, as she notes, a descendant of Arielle. She reminds us with her humble words that her story is but one of many stories we can relate and expand upon. Our rituals and stories are not written in stone for, as M'eera suggests, like rocks buttressed by the ocean waves, they are supple and fluid. Indeed, this commentary is but one ripple amid a sea of explanations. As at Sinai, where each soul heard and understood in his/her own way the message given, so, too, does each one of us hearing this story understand its message in our own unique way.

**12: And behold the spirit of her ancestors entered into her, permeable, impermeable, apart and yet as one. 13: And in that moment of immeasurable passage and non-passage of time, she assumed the gift bestowed upon her. 14: And she took a stone and placed it in that place as an offering, a token of thanksgiving, and she exclaimed, "How awesome is this place."**

**15: And so, Arielle, a daughter of Israel, descendant of Daniel, the seer, and Deborah, the prophetess, arose and went down the hill named Moriah and took her place within the world.**

**14: and placed it in that place as an offering:** this refers to Jacob who erected a pillar to the Divine in the place he named Beth El (Genesis 28: 18, 19). **How awesome is this place:** Arielle repeats the same phrase as Jacob when he awoke from his vision of the ladder and divine beings ascending and descending it (Genesis 28:17). **15: hill of Moriah:** there is evidence that this is the hill upon which Solomon erected the temple (2 Chronicles 3:1).

“. . . in that space between the drawing inward and the pushing outward of cosmic breath” What is the mystery hinted at within this phrase? Can we presume to explicate that which is inexplicable? There are those amongst us who say that it is akin to the infinitesimal point of the entrance of the soul at birth and its departure at death. But who amongst us truly comprehends? Some attempt to grasp its meaning by studying esoteric texts, looking for clues and answers. They investigate the teachings of the Kabbalists who spoke of the *Ein Sof*, the undifferentiated in a changeless unity. Others meditate and breathe the holy names. Still others

16: *And as the days and months passed, and the seasons changed, Arielle became known in the lands and women traveled to her.*

17: *Separately and in groups they crossed the threshold of her home and sat with her.*

18: *Each spoke her story.* 19: *Each shared her thoughts and dreams.* 20: *Some in silence, some in tears, and all in laughter.* 21: *And Arielle moved within and around the women, listening to their words and the spaces between the words.* 22: *She taught them to see the old and sense the new.* 23: *She taught them the new and how to add it to the old.*

24: *She took them to the mountain streams and like their foremothers helped them to celebrate all that they were.* 25: *She instructed them to erect booths from the trees around them.*

17: *separately and in groups they crossed the threshold of her home*: like Abraham and Sarah's home in the desert who welcomed strangers (Genesis 18:2), Arielle's home was open to all who called.

24: *mountain*: this is a reference once again to Jephthah's daughter's friends who lamented her in the mountains (Judges 11:40). 25: *booths*: these remind us of the booths our ancestors built when they left Egypt (Exodus 12:37).

understand that this refers to the Ineffable which is beyond words. Those ones, like M'eera perhaps, have experienced and know. . . . ; those, who have not experienced can only approximate. **“And behold the spirit of her ancestors entered into her”** What are we to make of this phrase? Is M'eera once again

26: *To cover the floor of the booths with their handiwork.* 27: *She shared with them songs which came to her and had them share songs which came to them.* 28: *She shared with them her dreams and they shared their dreams with one another.* 29: *And they exulted in their nakedness and beauty.* 30: *Large and small, round breasted and bellied, lined and unlined, heavy with child, spry with youth, bent with age, they wove into a dance the essence of their lives.* 31: *And they feasted in the splendor of their hands, the bounty of the earth.* 32: *Healing took place within these gatherings.* 33: *And so we too celebrate in old and new ways, as our mothers and their mothers before them, our lovers and their lovers before them celebrated on the fifteenth of Av, the festival Arielle bestowed upon us.*  
*May we grow from strength to strength.*

27: *songs*: like Miriam, the prophetess, Arielle taught the women songs (Exodus 15:20). 30: *wove into a dance*: this refers again to the women who danced at the crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 15:20).

*May we grow from strength to strength*: These are the words sung at the completion of each of the books of the Torah. Thus M'eera ends her narrative with these ancient words.

couching her words in allusion and mystery? No. We know through our experiences that this is meant literally. It is the *peshat*. And so we join in the words of Arielle, the words of Jacob, and sing and chant the melody, “How awesome is this place!” Like Arielle, we, too, make an offering to those who came before us, to those who have visited us, to those who assist us on our life- journey. “. . . she became known” How did she become known? Some say that women saw her in their dreams and thus knew where to find her. “. . . and the spaces between the words” One of Arielle's talents was to apprehend that which was not said, to hear the words imbedded in speech, the meanings behind the words. **“She taught them to see the old and sense the new”** This reminds us that we must unite the joy of learning with the joy of experiencing. As the writer of Ecclesiastes said: “The Divine gives to humanity wisdom, and knowledge and joy” (1:26). “. . . to erect booths” As has become our custom, it is within these booths that we share our songs, our stories, and our dreams. There are those who are more proficient dreamers than others, and those who are more proficient leaders, and those who prefer to remain silent. Yet, as Arielle demonstrated in the first of the *arbaat yamim* festivals, we must, in community, share our roles, listen to one another and heed the messages in each other's words and silences. “. . . with their handiwork” It has been our custom to drape the floors and walls of our booths with our handiwork. Indeed, since the days of Arielle, we have cherished and passed down within our families of choice and families of birth the earliest of these works and continue to create new symbols and new designs from our dreams and our visions. And as with our ever multiplying tapestries, we add new songs for the present and the future while remembering the songs of the past. **“And they exulted in their nakedness and beauty . . .”** Again, how wondrous was the vision of Arielle. No longer do we hide our bodies in shame. Instead, we exalt in the different shapes and varieties of our womanhood!

And so, as in the beginning, during this festival of the four days, we remember, revision, and re-embody the wholeness of our being and the depth of our tradition.

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup>I am referring to Torah in its broadest sense: “the whole religious teaching of Judaism” (de Lange 236). This includes the entire body of Jewish sacred literature: the Five Books of Moses, Prophets and Writings (*tanakh*), the rabbinic laws (*mishnah* and *gemara*), and rabbinic exegesis and commentary, (*midrash*, and *aggadah*).

<sup>2</sup>Although the story is fictional, the references to Biblical and/or rabbinic commentary are factual. However, as I have written this story in a particular rabbinic and exegetical style (note explanation below), I have not included in-text citations. I suggest that the reader refer to the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Hertz's *Pentateuch*, and *The New Smith's Bible Dictionary* to corroborate the various allusions I have made to scriptural accounts and rabbinic interpretation.

<sup>3</sup>I have borrowed this phrase from the title of Phyllis Trible's work *Texts of Terror*.

<sup>4</sup>See de Lange for an illustration and explanation of this format (52, 53).

<sup>5</sup>Rabbis in the Middle Ages constructed this form of exegesis (*E. J.*, Vol. 13: 91).

<sup>6</sup>Space does not permit a thorough discussion of the complex systems of this type of Torah interpretation. See the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* for a concise summary of the meanings and theorems in its various patterns. Simply stated, *gematria* is a way of “explaining a word or group of words according to the numerical value of the letters or of

substituting other letters of the alphabet for them in accordance with a set system" (*E. J.* , Vol.7: 370). There were several schools of *gematria*, particularly within the Jewish mystical circles of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, which sought to elaborate Divine nomenclature and names of angels. They would also interpret entire biblical verses via these computations in order to reveal the Divine mystery (*E. J.*, Vol. 7: 371).

<sup>7</sup>See Arthur Green's brilliant biography of Rabbi Nachman, *Tormented Master* and Howard Schwartz's beautiful translations of his stories in *The Captive Soul of the Messiah*.

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