

“Revelation Belongs to Us All”

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Fifty years ago, this past Monday, a Charlottean named Franklin McCain sat down with three friends at a lunch counter at the Woolworth five-and-dime in Greensboro. That simple act of sitting at a counter defined his life, McCain explained, even more than the birth of his first son.

Because he and his fellow freshmen classmates at N.C. A & T University were not served at that “whites-only” counter, he returned the next day and the next and the next. By the fifth day, 300 protestors took turns sitting with him. Sit-ins spread to four other Carolina cities – ultimately leading to the desegregation of lunch counters for our community and country.

Sitting at a table where you are uninvited, unwelcome, or unwanted is difficult. As Jews or as homosexuals or as African Americans some in this sanctuary may know well what that’s like. Sitting at the table of our Rabbinic and Torah texts, there are times when those of us who are women also feel unheard and not responded to. That reality becomes all the more painful in this week’s parashah.

Today we experience the most monumental moment of our people’s history. In our Torah we stand at Sinai. For the first time, God reveals Godself to us as a people. Prior to this moment, God’s revelations were personal and addressed to individuals. God spoke to Noah. God spoke to Abraham. God spoke to Jacob. But now at Sinai, God speaks to our entire people.

Yet when Moses guides us and prepares us for this ultimate and awe-filled moment of revelation, Moses speaks only to the men saying, “Be ready for the third day, do not go near a woman.”

Somehow at the most profound moment of revelation, women are invisible in the Torah. We are absent from this narrative. We are missing from the monumental moment of Sinai.

Judith Plaskow, the theologian notes:

“Were this passage simply the record of a historical event long in the past, the exclusion of women at this critical juncture would be troubling, but also comprehensible for its time. The Torah is not just history, however, but also living memory. The Torah reading, as a central part of Sabbath and holiday liturgy, calls to mind and recreates the past for succeeding generations. When the story of Sinai is recited as part of the annual cycle of Torah readings and again as a special reading for Shavuot, women each time hear ourselves thrust aside anew, eavesdropping on a conversation among men and between men and God..” (pg. 26 Standing At Sinai)

The Rabbis of old through a genre of literature called the midrash rewrote history. They answered unanswered questions. They painted texts that were lacking in sufficient illustrative details. They challenged the text. They argued its meaning. They envisioned anew what was experienced. They rewrote what was written.

This is the premise of Judith Plaskow's groundbreaking theology that formed the basis of her book, Standing again at Sinai. "Jewish feminists must reclaim Torah as their own... We must reconstruct Jewish history to include the history of women, and in doing so alter the shape of Jewish memory. (p. 28)

As women, we must imagine that we were at Sinai, just as Merle Feld imagined that she, too, was there through the following poem explaining why her words and the words of other women were not included in our Torah.

"My brother and I were at Sinai," she wrote
"He kept a journal
of what he saw
of what he heard
of what it all meant to him

I wish I had such a record
of what happened to me there
It seems like every time I want to write
I can't
I'm always holding a baby
one of my own
or one for a friend
always holding a baby
so my hands are never free
to write things down
holy time
Sparks flying"
...If we remembered it together
We could recreate

Like Franklin McCain for centuries women were not permitted at the "men only" counter of Jewish spirituality and study.

Last week, another seat at the metaphoric lunch counter of Judaism was occupied. Last week in the Jewish world, an Orthodox women rabbi received the official title of Rabbi, "Rabbah", in the feminine. While last year, Sarah Hurwitz, achieved the learning that led to ordination and has been performing rabbinical duties at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale in New York City, she was now given the title Rabbah, by the Senior Rabbi of that shul, activist Rabbi Avi Weiss.

- An Orthodox women Rabbi - with the same training and knowledge as her male counterparts.

- An Orthodox woman Rabbi with many of the same tasks... interpreting law, teaching Torah, visiting the sick, accompanying the deceased to their final resting place.
- An Orthodox woman rabbi, still apart as she cannot take part in minyans or serve as a witness, but still she standing beside her male counterparts.
- An Orthodox woman rabbi, paving the way for women's voices of Torah not just to be heard professionally in liberal settings but in all settings.

In changing her name from Maharat Hurwitz to Rabbah Hurwitz, Rabbi Weiss wanted to make it crystal clear to everyone that "Sara Hurwitz is a full member of our rabbinic staff, a rabbi with the additional quality of a distinct woman's voice."

Here's the reality... today Franklin McCain can sit at the lunch counter anywhere in our country. Today, in most communities, Jewish women can sit at the table studying sacred texts alongside men. Yet while we can sit at the table of our tradition far too many of us do not. Far too many of us have squandered the privileges for which we fought so hard to attain.

The seat at the table of Jewish learning and leadership is open. May you pull up your chair, take a seat and savor the sacred texts that have been bequeathed to us by previous generation of scholars. May you enjoy the menu of meaningful opportunities that our faith has to offer.

Amen.