

You Are What You Hang

By Vanessa L. Ochs

This past summer, I was invited to speak at a conference in Jerusalem on "The Impact of Women's and Gender Studies on Jewish Studies." The conference was sponsored by the Schechter Institute (associated with the Israeli Masorti, or Conservative, movement) and by the Fanya Gottesfeld Heller Center for the Study of Women in Judaism at Bar-Ilan University. Early on in the conference, there was a fiery debate: Was feminist interpretation of Bible all drash (interpretation) or could it be peshat (new understandings of original meanings)? At one point in the debate, a speaker claimed that there are certain questions one would certainly ask about the biblical text (those resulting in peshat) and others that one would not ask because they were irrelevant. The example given of the latter was this: If you were studying the narrative of Potiphar's wife attempting to seduce Joseph, you would not ask, "What was the color of Potiphar's wife's rug?"

What a glorious and utterly relevant question, I mused to myself, probably because I am a cultural anthropologist who studies religion from the perspective of material culture. But an archaeologist would have been just as excited: imagine, digging up the carpet Joseph ran from! How much knowledge would have been discovered-the aesthetics of the time, the symbolic language, the weaving skills.... Throughout the conference, I could not get this question, which the speaker had considered as coming out of left field, out of my head.

Then, when it was my turn to sit on the dais while waiting to give my own presentation, I noticed that the right wall of the little auditorium we were using at the Schechter Institute was hung with photographs of scholarly looking Jewish men, many with white hair and beards. Having not paid much attention during the Hebrew high school class when we studied the great figures of Conservative Judaism, I could not tell you who was who in this Conservative Who's Who. Since this auditorium doubled as the library and Beit Midrash (a place to study together), I imagined the rationale behind placing these photos on the wall. Seeing these faces of great scholars, a student might think, "Ah-these are the great Torah scholars who have come before me, and if I study with as much devotion as they, I might one day be joined in their ranks." Or something like that. But looking out into the audience, I noted that with the exception of Professors Moshe Greenberg and Yochanan Muffs, the prominent Torah scholars who were sitting in the audience and on the dais were, for the most part, women and their students, mostly women as well. "Hmmm," I thought.

I then recalled one of the most memorable sessions of CLAL Faculty Development, a monthly gathering when we are all in town and learn together. It was back when we were at 99 Park Avenue, sharing office space with UJA. We held our study session downstairs in a UJA boardroom. I sat in that room for a

full day each month for over two years, and I can't say I consciously noticed that on the prominent wall there was a display of head shots of notable UJA men and, on a less noticeable side-wall, there were photos of the notable UJA women. One day, I walked into the boardroom for Faculty Development, and immediately saw the cunning handiwork of our colleague David Kraemer, a Talmudist with an uncanny appreciation of how sacred space is constructed.

David had mixed up the photos. No longer was there a "guys' wall" and a "girls' wall," but both walls had both men and women. We all noticed the mix-up immediately, meaning that while no one ever spoke about the male and female walls before, on an unconscious level we must have noticed it. We began to talk about why Jewish organizations tend to categorize Jewish leaders by sex, and how male and female Jewish leaders are perceived in different ways, and so forth....It led us to question how we, on the CLAL faculty, consciously or unconsciously treat Jewish male and female leaders differently. We were curious to see how long it took for the folks at UJA to notice the photo switch, and we were curious to see if they would return the photos to their original, sex-segregated walls.

Returning to the Israeli conference...remembering David Kraemer's switcheroo, I prefaced my remarks by pointing to the Conservative Judaism's Men's Hall of Fame photographs that surrounded us. I explained that to me, the question raised earlier about the rug of Potiphar's wife was indeed a valid question, for the objects that are in one's world play a role in constructing that world, and are thus meaningful. I asked, what did it mean for us to hold a conference on the impact of Women's Studies on Jewish studies in a room in which only men's faces symbolized Jewish scholarship? What did it mean for the women who studied in this room, week after week? There are books by Jewish women scholars on the shelves, but not women's faces. I challenged the audience: if you were to change the photos on the wall at the Schechter Institute by including the pictures of women, who would they be? Not surprisingly, everyone had ideas. Bruria! The Maid of Ludomir! Judy Hauptman! Alice Shalvi! I am eager to return to the Schechter Institute in the near future, and to check out the wall of the Beit Midrash.