

THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

Finding Strength From Women in the Bible

BY DOUG BRUNK
San Diego Bureau

In the early 1990s, Dr. Shera M. Aranoff began studying the Hebrew Bible in her spare time and became struck by how often she read about the instrumental role of women in the history of the Jewish people.

"Most people think of the Bible as very patriarchal and that women didn't have much of a say or much of a place," said Dr. Aranoff, a dermatologist who practices in New York 3 days a week. "But if you read the stories, the men were busy fighting with their neighbors and talking to God. The women really determined the course of their nation's history; they propelled the religion to the next generation."

For example, she said, the great lawmaker and prophet Moses was constantly being saved by women—when a pharaoh demanded that all newborn Hebrew males be killed, Moses' mother, Jochebed, weaved a basket that transported him to safety down the Nile River. An Egyptian princess, Batya, rescued the infant downstream.

Later in life, God became angry at Moses for not having circumcised his youngest son. His wife, Zipporah, stepped in and performed the circumcision.

The impact of these and other women are the subject of a weekly "Women in the Bible" class that Dr. Aranoff teaches every Thursday morning during the academic school year at Kehilath Jeshurun, a synagogue in New York. Dr. Aranoff spends 10-15 hours every week preparing for each hour-long class, including reading the Bible chapter being studied and reading



Dr. Shera M. Aranoff teaches a weekly class on the role of women in the Bible.

commentaries from ancient biblical and Talmudic texts about the relevant chapter, as well as outlining her own thoughts. She presents the information in a lecture format followed by an open discussion.

About 35-40 women from all walks of life attend the class, including physicians, psychologists, lawyers, publishers, homemakers, social workers, and real estate agents. "It's a way of looking at life and a way of living your life, because you can identify with these women in what they've gone through and what the really important things in life are," said Dr. Aranoff, who has conducted the class free of charge for more than 15 years. "The superficial things fade away; they just seem meaningless. It helps you keep your priorities straight."

Four years ago, her scholarship for the class resulted in "The Passions of the Ma-

triarchs" (Jersey City, N.J.: Ktav Publishing House Inc., 2004), a book that describes the women of Genesis—Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah—based on traditional Jewish sources. Her more recent book, "Moses' Women" (Ktav, 2008), is a commentary based on traditional sources about the women in the book of Exodus, the second book of the Hebrew Bible.

In these books and in her classes, the women of the Bible "come alive in their commentaries as we enter their private lives to understand their innermost emotions," Dr. Aranoff explained. "Their thoughts, words, and actions are fleshed out and they become complex human beings exhibiting a full array of human passions—love, tragedy, and strength, as alongside their husbands, the Jewish patriarchs, they build the house of Israel."

Dr. Aranoff sets the tone for a friendly atmosphere that pairs intellectual rigor with a quest for spiritual meaning. "There's a feeling there that we're all seeking together, we're all learning together and trying to understand God and religion in the world and in ourselves," said Dr. Barbara A. Kapelman, who practices gastroenterology in New York.

She said that studying the main character in the Bible's Book of Ruth resonated with her. The story tells of Elimelech, his wife, Naomi, and their two sons, who move from Bethlehem to the nearby country of Moab to escape a famine. Once they settle in Moab, Elimelech dies, Ruth marries one of the sons, and Orpah marries the other.

The sons subsequently die and Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem. She instructs her daughters-in-law to return to

their own mothers and to remarry. Orpah leaves, but Ruth remains loyal to Naomi and utters the line, "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God."

"The eventual story is that Ruth becomes the great-grandmother of King David," Dr. Kapelman said. "So she is blessed for her loyalty and kindness to her mother-in-law by becoming the ancestress of King David. There's a beauty and gentility about that story that I like."

For her part, Dr. Aranoff said that all of the work she has poured into the class has led her to conclude that many things in life "are predetermined—if you're a religious person you'll say by God, if not you'll say by your DNA. [But] the only attribute that makes us truly human are the choices that we make. Those choices make us who we are, not whether you're rich or poor, or whether you're born brilliant or blind. What you get credit for are the choices that you make in your own life. Those choices determine who you are."

By Doug Brunk, San Diego Bureau

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