

Looking Back, or Re-visioning: Contemporary American Jewish Poets on “Lot’s Wife”

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Anat Koplowitz-Breier,

"Looking Back or Re-visioning: Contemporary American Jewish Poets on 'Lot's Wife'"

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Abstract: Anat Koplowitz-Breier discusses in her "Looking Back or Re-visioning: Contemporary American Jewish Poets on 'Lot's Wife,'" midrashic poems relating to Lot's wife by Jewish American women. Enabling exegesis of the text via elaboration, filling in missing details, and evoking emotions, motives, etc., midrash serves as a method for resolving crises and reaffirming continuity with the traditions of the past. Midrashic poetry is thus a particularly apt vehicle for Jewish feminists seeking to access Scripture. While some Jewish American poets follow the midrashic tradition, others employ the biblical text as a springboard for their own ideas. The eight poets discussed herein, all of whose poems on Lot's wife were published between the 1980s and 2010s, draw on the biblical narrative in Genesis 19 as a way of dealing with contemporary issues or contextualize the story within the modern period.

Anat KOPLOWITZ-BREIER

Looking Back or Re-visioning: Contemporary American Jewish Poets on "Lot's Wife"

The androcentric nature of the Hebrew Bible and Jewish world of learning has led many feminist Jewish American women poets, writers, and thinkers to devote great efforts to gaining access to it. Addressing traditional exegesis and midrash, Alice Ostriker humorously refers to the Biblical texts as the "Old Testicle" ("Enid Dame" 64). More mundanely, though no less forcefully, Adrienne Rich speaks of the feminist reading (and reworking) of the Bible as a form of "re-visioning": "We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us" (19).

It should be noted, that when referring to modern midrash as a whole, and on feminist midrash specifically, critics frequently make no distinction between the different genres, midrashic poetry (or midrashic verse) existing alongside midrashic prose and midrashic drama.¹ As David C. Jacobson notes:

Modern midrash ... maintains much of the plot and characterization on which it is based, but it takes great liberty in adding and subtracting aspects of narratives' content and imaginatively retells the narratives in a more contemporary style. It also takes the form of short stories, novels, plays, ballads, or lyric poems, which, from aesthetic point of view, have more in common with works of related genres by modern western writers than with the traditional narratives on which they are based. (8)

The poetic midrash composed by Jewish American poets thus forms part of contemporary feminist midrash. The question nevertheless arises whether they are heirs of the rabbinic Sages—interpreting Scripture by elaborating the text, filling in missing details, and evoking emotions, motives, etc.

Discussing the term "midrash" as employed in contemporary feminist discourse, Deborah Kahn-Harris provides us with a working definition of the genre:

These works are, in general, creative re-imaginings that are rarely based in anything that would be familiar as a midrashic hermeneutic. Many of these works address lacunae in the biblical text and occasionally these works employ a particular linguistic detail as a jumping off point, but classical midrashic hermeneutics go far further than these two, rather basic, starting points. (303)

In her view, contemporary feminists are thus *not* midrashists; although adopting the Bible as their launching point, their hermeneutical reading of traditional midrash differs greatly in form and perspective from the ancient tradition: "The authority of midrash is derived from the authority of the Bible – that the Bible is the word of the living God. All midrashic polysemy derives from the belief that multiple, sometimes contradictory, readings all have their basis in God" (301).

Contra Kahn-Harris, the majority of scholars who study contemporary and feminist midrash believe it to be the direct successor of the rabbinic midrashic tradition. Modern midrashists nonetheless approach the Biblical text from a very different perspective. As James L. Kugel observes, the Sages viewed both Scripture and their interpretation of it as divinely revealed: "Those who were to do the interpreting were very much the successors of the prophets—the new bearers of the divine word—and like prophets depended on something like divine inspiration in order to receive God's words" (83).

Modern proponents of the genre, in contrast, espouse precisely the opposite stance, taking all hermeneutic and exegetical authority into their own hands (Cushing Stahlberg, *Sustaining Fictions* 99). The divergence is elegantly summed up in Ari Elon's distinction between the *rabbani* and the *ribboni*—the rabbinic exegete and the independent thinker/writer. While the former "sees Israel's Torah as a source of authority," the latter "cannot relate to this Torah as a source of authority, for that person is the source of authority [ribbon] for himself or herself" (36). As Selinger notes, the flexibility of the latter position enables poets to engage with tradition in radical, explicitly fictive, ways (137).

Making a similar claim and suggesting that "echoing the current perception of the term, the meaning of "midrash" is now capacious and fluid ... And in fact, midrash, from the verb *darash*—to search or investigate—is simply the ancient Hebrew word for 'interpretation'" ("Midrash" 320), Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg defines four types of midrash—classical, theoretical, creative, and literary. Of literary midrash—in particular in its Jewish American form—she remarks:

In every generation, midrash has been a site for the investigation of the relationship between Jewish tradition and contemporary Jewish identity—particularly the question of how the contemporary Jew (of any era) stands

¹ For midrashic prose, see, for example, Brenner 2004; Diamant 1997. For midrashic drama, see, for example, Yerushalmi and Itim Ensemble 1995, 1998.

in relation to Judaism (and particularly the text of ancient Judaism). This latter concern has been especially central in the Jewish American literature of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, which is often described as midrashic. (321)

In her discussion of midrash, Alicia Ostriker contends that "Jewish tradition has been a tradition not of stasis but of continual reinterpretation of Torah in response to changing social and political needs and realities" ("Back to the Garden" 73). In this sense, midrash serves as a method for resolving crises and reaffirming continuity with the traditions of the past (Holtz 179). It thus serves as a particularly apt vehicle for Jewish feminists seeking to reform the patriarchal system rather than abandon or destroy it (Walton 116). As Jody Myers observes: "Women who produce new midrash or who repackage the old midrash have grasped the crucial role that it plays in Jewish life ... they turn to midrash as the mode of religious and artistic expression best suited to explore their own identity, their relationship to others, and their encounter with the sacred" (119). Many thus regard the reclaiming of the ancient rabbinic genre as a means of asserting authenticity for their reworking of Biblical texts and embedding themselves within Jewish tradition (Kahn-Harris 295–96).

According to Ostriker, modern women poets engage in three, frequently overlapping, hermeneutics of Biblical revisionism—suspicion, desire, and indeterminacy:

With the first of these we are ... quite familiar; sceptical critique is the feminist's stock in trade. Its opposite, the hermeneutic of desire—the discovery in a text of what we need to discover, the citing of what we love and wish to find sacred, the bending a text to our own will—is equally important for the woman writer. ... Lastly, the hermeneutic of indeterminacy depends on the recognition that, as the rabbis say, "there is always another interpretation." ("A Triple Hermeneutic" 165–66)

Although at first glance the three principles appear to be independent, they all in fact blend into one another in most of the poems discussed in this essay. I thus suggest that the "hermeneutics of indeterminacy"—which Ostriker herself regards as "most significant for the future"—already contain the other two, allowing other interpretations and/or ways of reading. Some are nevertheless more prominent than others (*Feminist* 66–67).

In Ostriker's view, (female) re-readings of Scripture do not contravene the Biblical text, the Jewish Sages asserting that God intended "all the meanings that He has made us capable of discovering." Female truths are thus present in this text as both sacred comedy and sacred tragedy (*Nakedness* xiii). Revising the Biblical text, they add new insights in direct continuation of the midrashic tradition. In support of this assertion, she quotes Gerald Bruns, who argues: "We take the texts 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-of ways" (Ostriker, "Whither Exodus" 633). In considering various examples of Jewish women's midrash, Jody Myers also notes that they exhibit some "shared concerns":

First and foremost, all authors present a perspective drawn from their experiences as women. ... Second, women midrashists generally ignore theology and are unconcerned with establishing a rationale for the commandments—matters that preoccupied premodern midrashists. Instead, they focus on articulating the dynamics of social relationships. ... Finally, while the writers employ different strategies and manifest diverse and competing ideals of womanhood, they all use midrash to raise the self-esteem of contemporary Jewish women. (119–20)

This article focuses on Jewish American women's midrashic poems that address the theme of Lot's wife. Although barely mentioned in the Biblical text, this nameless Biblical character has received extensive treatment in traditional midrash and modern poetry. The Biblical text only mentions her twice—firstly as one of those whom the angels rescue from Sodom (Gen. 19:17) and again when she disobeys the command not to look back and is turned into a pillar of salt (Gen. 19: 26).

These two brief references provide the basis—and license—for the filling out of her character. The traditional midrashim seek to explain why she chose to disregard the instructions she was given and the nature of her punishment. In doing so, they follow two principal directions, representing her a) negatively as a wicked sinner, a Sodomite who acted as such even before disobeying the divine decree not to look backwards—thus linking her disobedience with her intrinsic character (e.g., curious, greedy, inhospitable, faithless); or b) positively as a loving mother and daughter (Aminoff 11–43).

Contemporary midrashic poetry very rarely takes the first route, almost always highlighting Lot's wife's positive—female—aspects. As Jody Myers observes, this approach is characteristic of women's midrash:

The reader is hard-pressed to find new midrashim that display women in a negative light. Obvious shortcomings of particular women in the Bible are explained sympathetically as a function of the narrow constraints within which women then lived and the double standard of behavior in ancient societies. The reluctance of contemporary women midrashists to criticize the women of the past speaks of a feeling of loyalty across the centuries and of a need for validation. (120)

The fact that Lot's wife's behavior and her status as the only woman in the Hebrew Bible—apart from Eve—who disobeys an explicit order in the face of disaster and is punished for doing so, in sharp contrast to her husband's righteousness raises questions that touch directly on gender relations, thereby stimulating the poetic imagination of a significant number of Jewish American women poets.

While some follow the traditional midrash, others rather use the Biblical text as a springboard for their own ideas. In this article, I address those who draw on the Biblical text in order to deal with contemporary issues or contextualize it in the modern period. The fact that the Biblical story takes place during the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah enhances its relevance for contemporary women poets in light of the human and natural disasters the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have witnessed. This trend is evident in the emergence of Ecofeminism, which grew out of various social movements—such as feminism, peace, and ecology—in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Mies et al. 13). This promotes acknowledgement of the "innate connection between women and nature. By positing an inherent tendency of women to be attuned to nature ... cultural ecofeminists recognize the value of actions and characteristics typically devalued by the dominant (patriarchal) culture" (Vakoch 4). The poems under discussion thus presents Lot's wife not only as a woman in a patriarchal world but also in some cases as representing nature's resistance to masculine destructive powers.

While Jewish women poets such as Shirley Kaufman published poems on Biblical women—including Lot's wife—as early as the 1970's (Koplowitz-Breier 2019), the poems discussed herein can be argued to form part of the Jewish feminist midrash that, according to Rivkah Walton, has "seen a bold, rapidly accelerating renaissance" over the past thirty years as North American short story writers, poets, playwrights and novelists have "returned to the biblical text to struggle with contemporary issues in Judaism" (116). I thus focus on eight American Jewish poets from the 1980s until 2015, analyzing their treatment of Lot's wife chronologically in order to contrast and compare their contextualization within contemporary cultural, literary, and ecological movements. Why do some choose to highlight her personal emotions and others, as it were, identify her as an ecofeminist precursor?

Celia Gilbert's (b. 1932) long poem "Lot's Wife" was published in *Bonfire* in 1983. Drawing an analogy between the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah with the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it combines citations from documents relating to the dropping of the atom bomb and its consequences with the Biblical story, narrated by Lot's wife. In her review of Gilbert's book, Linda Gregson writes: "Insofar as Gilbert casts a skeptical eye on the shared, dismaying status of the chosen servants of the God of Wrath, this juxtaposition is a mobile and suggestive one" (40).

Gilbert also elaborates the Biblical story by retelling it from a feminine point of view. The poem opens with a dictionary entry explaining the Japanese word *hibakusha* (hi bak' sha), coined after the bombing to signify those exposed to the radiation. The first poetic strophe deals with the angels' visit to Lot's house. Here, Gilbert not only compares the nuclear and Biblical catastrophes but also contrasts Lot with his wife. While she is afraid of the angels—who, with "hard and polished" faces, were tasked with a mission and "didn't care for us"—Lot welcomes them because he is "impressed by their authority, / he loved authority, loved / to use it." As the first strophe already intimates, he in fact resembles the cold angels in various ways.

The second documentary piece Gilbert incorporates relates to "Sweeny," the pilot who dropped the Nagasaki bomb. This argues that bombardiers can only remain sane by thinking of in terms of targets instead of people. In the following poetic strophes, Lot and his wife are again contrasted. This part falls into two sections. In the first, Lot and the angels engage in a philosophical dialogue regarding good and evil, comparing "God-fearing" Lot with his evil neighbors. In the second, his wife speaks to her neighbors in concrete terms: "Women like myself, going to the well, / weaving and spinning, / raising a family." While she approaches them as equals, Lot again resembles the angels and pilots in the previous documentary paragraph—an abstract, inanimate figure.

The third documentary passage quotes testimonies regarding some of the young girls affected by the blasts. The graphic depiction they provide—"their skin peeled off as well"—is combined with a religious metaphor: "I thought: should there be a hell, this was it - Buddhist hell."

The fourth passage, which follows the next poetic section, continues the description of the survivors of the bombing. Here, Gilbert focuses on their eyes, depicting them as both empty and full of an expectation of help. This double gaze is also an appeal that looks "at me" and "right through me,"

combining helplessness with hope. The survivors' eyes recall the vacuity of the angels' faces in the intervening poetic lines—"They simply looked but did not see"—on the one hand and the human observation of the "dumb brutes," which also contains an element of "helplessness" on the other.

The next poetic strophes fall into three sections. The first again contrasts Lot—who believes the city to be wicked because of the "unclean" homosexuality practiced therein—with his wife, who opines that "our city was like any other city." While gangs rape people within it, its most problematic aspect is not homosexuality but the fact that although men raping men "seemed to many/ especially horrible," the rape of women had "no special horror to it."

This strophe leads into a lengthy quotation of Gen. 19:5–8, in which the Sodomites ask Lot to let them "know" the men who come to his house—Lot offering them his two virgin daughters instead. In the following strophe, Lot's wife supports his decision to protect their guests but objects to giving the girls to the mob. While her explanation of Lot's deed again emphasizes her conviction that, as a man, Lot naturally sides with the angels, here she adds another thought: perhaps in this case he is also aligning himself with the men outside. She thus asks whether his behavior is ethical (the angels are his guests) or part of the unethical attitude the city adopts towards women.

The next documentary passage relates to Sweeny's plane. The fact that this is named "The Great Artiste" in reference to his unique technique both as a bombardier and with respect to the "opposite sex" hints at the Biblical story as recounted by Lot's wife—i.e., the immoral way in which women are treated by the Sodomites. The comparison between Sweeny's bombing technique and his way with women is stressed even further when Lot's wife claims in the following strophe: "we were chattels and goods. / We women were his animals to breed." Lot treats women in the same way Sweeny bombed Nagasaki—as targets rather than human beings. As the strophe continues, this analogy is heightened by the reversal of the Biblical account of creation; rather than God making humankind in his image (Gen. 1:27), Gilbert suggests that "God was created in the image of man, / him only." Hereby, men become gods, sanctioning the rape of women and children.

The next documentary passage again depicts the *hibakusha*—the "walking ghosts"—via the testimony of a witness. This scene is directly linked to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in a short strophe that portrays Lot and his family escaping from the city: "the blinding / light that tore / and shattered and broke in a rain of fire and ash"—a description that just as easily fits the blasting of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

This is followed by the shortest of the documentary passages. Here, too, Gilbert adduces a witness, who, while climbing up Hijiyama, saw how "Hiroshima had disappeared."

The final strophes (1–4) deal with Lot's wife's end. Rather than viewing Sodom and Gomorrah as places, she thinks of the people—her neighbors—whom she remembers not in the wickedness the angels impute to them before Lot but as caring and compassionate. While Gilbert intimates her crystallization into a pillar of salt, this is not imposed as a punishment for her turning back but reflects an inner feeling: "With every step my blood / congealed with ushered tears; / my body thickened."

The image of "turning back" occurs twice—once in the second strophe in the final section of the poem, where it represents ignoring and forgetting the slaughter that has taken place in the city, and once in the last strophe, where Lot's wife literally turns back toward the city, the consequences of which hints at the Biblical figure: "and will my body, transfixed by grief, / to rise in vigil / over the ashen cities." In contrast to the Biblical text, this does not serve as a punishment but represents Lot's wife's desire to commemorate the ruined cities (both the Biblical and modern ones?).

The third strophe focuses on Lot's wife's resentment towards God—"the knowledge / of what power rules our lives, / the evil that knows but does not care." Her anger against God, who not only allows evil but "values men at nothing, and women less, / behemoth in love with death," is bad in itself, leading to the end of the poem when the narrator—Lot's wife as a modern woman, who survives "the second flash," which leaves her "Seared and defiled, scorched/ and silenced"—decides to take action against "God's lies," turning back in order to become the commemorator: "to rise in vigil."

By merging the modern and Biblical disasters, Gilbert provides us with a unique way of looking at both. The cities' destruction can be viewed through the lens of both the victim and the perpetrator. This duality is evident in the documentary passages, which fall into two categories: those that deal with the *hibakusha* and those that deal with the bombardiers, perpetrators, and victims. The poetic strophes also appear to address both sides—the victims (who include the people of Sodom and Gomorrah and women in general) and the perpetrators (God, the angels, and Lot). At the end of the poem, however, Lot's wife appears to change her position: although a woman—and thus one of the victims who survived thanks to the compassion shown by the perpetrator—she rebels, looking back and offering herself as a monument for the ashen cities. Hereby, she is transformed from a passive victim-woman into an active protagonist.

Enid Dame's (1943–2003) two poems on Lot's wife—"Lot's Wife Revisited" and "Ms. Lot Makes a Political Statement"—were published together in *The Tribe of Dina: A Jewish Women's Anthology* (1986). Although both appear to deal with the same Biblical figure, they differ sharply, the divergence serving as a "landmark" distinguishing between the two approaches to the Biblical text adduced above. As in most of her midrashic poetry, both poems are dramatic monologues, narrated by Lot's wife. "Lot's Wife Revisited" drawing primarily on traditional midrash (a modern version of which stands as the poem's epitaph), I shall focus here on "Ms. Lot Makes a Political Statement." Although the Biblical story lies in the background of the poem, the title also alluding to it, without the latter it might be understood as addressing some modern disaster.

The poem falls into two sections. The first (strophes 1–4) deals with the destruction of the city, the second (strophes 5–7) contemporizing the disaster. The poem contrasts the narrator with the world of men—most noticeably in the second strophe. The shortest—all of three lines—this stands out against the long first and third strophes (thirteen and fourteen lines):

That's when
I stopped fooling myself
about men and their gods.

The destruction of the city, depicted in three stages—fire, the explosion of flowers, and "finally ashes"—in the first strophe, parallels the three women in the third strophe, whose life is "chopped / off in the middle." Both events are the consequence of "men and their gods." The fourth strophe concludes the first section of the poem. Although "That city / was stupid and ugly / and hard on its women," it "cradled" the narrator's world and many others.

Despite the negative terms in which the city is depicted, the narrator exhibits positive feelings towards it, as demonstrated in the final metaphor of the strophe: "as a basin of water / holds millions of lives / in each drop." The water/lives image stands in complete opposition to the city lying in ruins in the first strophe, which portrays "people crowding the pools / for a last taste of water, of blood, / or dying choked in their bathtubs." Here, again, the city's ugliness and ignorance, which lead to its destruction, are compared with the feminine image—the basin of water holding life serving as a symbol of the womb (Cirlot 365–66).

While the first part of the poem is associated with the first half of the title—"Ms. Lot"—and is a continuation of sorts of "Lot's Wife Revisited," the second section is linked to the other half of the title—i.e., forms the "political statement." The fifth strophe opens with the word "Today," transferring us from the Biblical period into the present. Although claiming "I'm not political," the narrator implies that the technological progress to which she is witness but for which doesn't "care much," "mumbles" around her, endangering the planet. She compares the city with the earth: "That was / the city. / This is / a planet."

Here, the Biblical story is only hinted at in the final strophe, in the narrator's comment: "Having outlived / husband and daughters and neighbors." While this may allude to Lot's wife's crystallization as a pillar of salt that still exists, the Biblical story merely functions herein in the service of a "political statement" regarding the planet's fate in the face of technology. It is only the poem's title that associates the allusions throughout the poem with the Biblical account of Lot's wife.

In her article "Art as Midrash: Some Notes on the Way to a Discussion," published posthumously in *For Enid with Love* (2011), Enid Dame adduces her poem "(Lot's Wife)" as an example of a midrashic artifact. Like much of her midrashic genre, this is a dramatic monologue—a piece, she observes, in which "characters from Jewish mythology (particularly women) explain or reinterpret their experiences, often from a modern sensibility" (150). In the poem, Lot's wife tells her story post-ossification, as intimated in the final strophe: "*now* I don't feel/ anything at all" (italics mine). The piece opens with a remark regarding her eventual fate: "I'm not surprised / this happened." The remainder of the poem—which contains no punctuation marks until the last strophe—serves as an explanation of this statement: i.e., why her pillarization does not bewilder her.

The answer is given in the fourth line: "I / was always numb." This insensibility informs the poem from the outset, characterizing her everyday life as a woman ("standing before the stove"), mother ("braiding my daughters' hair"), and Jewish wife ("in the ritual bath"). It is explicated in a later strophe.

As a mother, it is "hard to raise daughters / in that city / where men loved each other / or / entertained angels." Here, Dame draws on the Biblical account of the Sodomites' request of Lot to "know" the guests/angels in order to explain how difficult it is to bring up girls in a masculine city in which walking around is hazardous ("always suspected / movement / was dangerous"). Rather than confront this challenge, she makes herself numb.

As a Jewish wife, her experience of ritual immersion resembles that of a stone. She becomes "numb as a rock" because attending the *mikveh* is the precondition for engaging in sexual relations with her husband. These are depicted in the sixth strophe as a rote, mechanical act:

in bed
I'd feel him
knocking against me
like someone opening
a window
in another room

The draft allowed in by the opening of the window chills their intimacy, the fact that she experiences everything as though occurring in another room further highlighting her sense of alienation and detachment. Once again, this conveys her feeling of becoming "numb as rock."

In the final strophe, two periods make their appearance. The former, at the end of the second line, cuts the strophe in two, the first half—which starts with "now"—indicating that, after her crystallization as per the Biblical story, she does not "feel / anything at all." The latter, at the denouement of the second part, draws the poem to an end, thereby relating to the summation of the poem's message: "It isn't so different." Lot's wife's state as living soul and pillar of salt does not diverge in any significant sense, both circumstances being characterized by numbness. As Dame herself observes in relation to this particular poem:

What interested me here was not her act of rebellion (looking back at Sodom) but her numbness, her survival. ... Is numbness a metaphor? I wondered. Do women numb themselves as a way of coping, of managing to remain unhurt? Did my mother do this? Do I? Is this a female response to a puzzling, demeaning, often violent world? Mrs. Lot survives marriage, loss of children, exile, holocaust of her city, but at the price of being a permanent statue. In a way, she's heroic, though crippled. (157)

Dame thus clearly adduces the Biblical account of Lot's wife in order to raise a social gender issue that plagues the female existential condition.

Carol Moldaw (b. 1956) published her short poem "Lot's Wife" in 1987. Narrated by the protagonist, it contains two strophes, each five lines long. In the first, she explains why she looked back and became a pillar of salt according to the Genesis account. In the second, she addresses God, seeking to generalize the deed by representing it as an act performed by every woman.

The poem elaborates on the Biblical text by adducing Lot's wife's emotions: the fact that she "didn't want to go" meant that she "turned mid-step then stared." Moldaw then details how she felt at the precise moment of turning into a pillar of salt:

... stunned by the knife-
sharp blast, the sting of wind, as God withdrew
my breath, drew back my blood—depleting life
till salt was all the body I had left

By expatiating on the process of her ossification, the poem turns the terse Biblical reference into a vivid description. In the second strophe, however, her confession of acting wrongly—hesitating, disobeying the command—becomes a new reading rather than a (mere) expansion of the Biblical text. Here, Lot's wife directly addresses God, claiming that she is only doing what any other woman would. This transforms her behavior into a generic female trait:

... what woman doesn't look behind
her as she walks, what woman doesn't shift
her level gaze and know her life consigned
to crystallize in dread?

Rather than being punished by being turned into a pillar of salt, she looks back because she knows that she will always be paralyzed by fear that she is being followed.

The poem ends with Lot's wife's acknowledgement of her sin. This is not her violation of a divine command, however, but the fact that she fears men more than God. Moldaw thus identifies Lot's wife first and foremost as a woman in a man's world, framing the poem in the context of the Biblical story in order to address the apprehension women always experience when walking on their own. Hereby, she inverts the Biblical text: instead of Lot's wife looking backwards and thus being turned into a pillar of salt, the paralyzing fear she feels makes her turn back.

Barbara D. Holender's (b. 1917-) poem "Lot's Wife" was published in her book *Ladies of Genesis* (1991). Writing an introduction to each piece, she explains how this poem relates to the Biblical source: "Everyone knows how Lot and his family was saved from the burning city of Sodom, and how, forbidden to look back, Lot's wife disobeyed and was turned into a pillar of salt. But not everyone knows *why* she did" (10).

The short poem—six lines divided into three strophes—sets out to answer this question by identifying Lot's wife as an ordinary woman: "Something told me the girls had left the stove on / I just turn back to see." In the following lines, the Biblical story recedes further and further into the distance. The second strophe retains the Biblical framework, the family proceeding onwards without her. At the same time, however, it follows the everyday life of the family depicted in the first strophe, when the family members "bicker about whose fault it was." The text does not explain the precise issue at stake—the stove left on or the mother left behind after turning back (hinting at the Biblical consequences of her looking backwards?).

The last strophe removes us even further from the Biblical text. Here, Lot's wife regards the fact that she has been left on her own (as a pillar of salt?) not as a punishment but as a positive experience: "I tell you it's a blessed relief— / best vacation I've had in years."

In Holender's hands, the dark Biblical account becomes a humorous anecdote of a woman/mother who stays behind in order to have some free time for herself. The transformation of the Biblical catastrophe into a holiday recalls Ostriker's argument that laughter constitutes the "most revolutionary weapon in literature's arsenal" (*Feminist* 29). Taking the bare bones of the Biblical text—a family on the move—it transmutes Lot's wife into a hot and bothered mother who would rather stay home and, in looking back, in fact achieves her wish. She thus represents the constant burden being a mother and wife places on women.

Susan Litwack's (b. 1954-) poem "Lot's Wife in the Twentieth Century" was published in the *Sagarin Review* in 1994. As its title indicates, here the Biblical story serves as a metaphorical base. Although the narrator appears to be Lot's wife, she is in fact a contemporary woman. Litwack employs the Biblical material in various ways. In the first strophe, she reverses the text. Instead of gazing behind her, the narrator announces: "I never look back." This embodies a mental voyage into the past rather than a physical turning round. In the second strophe, the city similarly changes from a concrete place into a metaphorical inner metropolis: "Once, I held a dangerous city / inside. It had to burn." The deadly place that deserved to go up in flames was not the mean streets but her emotional turmoil.

In the third strophe, the narrator asserts that, despite her freedom of speech, her body is defined by the past. Here again, the poem hints at the Biblical scene of Lot's wife turning into a pillar of salt: "history has defined the shape of my body as it turns, the curve of my defiant chin, the shadow of my spine." Rebelling against the Biblical prohibition, she appears to look back.

The fourth strophe brings us back to a general question regarding existence. This is only linked to the Biblical narrative by its intimation of the destruction awaiting the narrator. The fifth strophe then returns directly to the Biblical story once more, again translating it into a series of metaphors. The salt symbolizes the narrator's ability to cope with reality: "Life will taste salty for a while." The sinful Sodomites similarly become an inner torment: "hell / is not the sinners of Sodom, / or the fires of Gehenna" but "the self / stuck in its shell, / struggling not to detonate." In contrast to Sartre's allegation that "Hell is—other people!," the narrator feels it to exist within her. The poem thus draws on the Biblical narrative in order to portrait the inner mental and emotional angst of a contemporary woman dealing with existential issues in a universe of distress and suffering.

Sherry K. Park's poem "Lot's Wife Speaks in the Tradition of Lilith" appeared opposite Susan Litwack's in the same edition of the *Sagarin Review*. Here, too, while the narrator seems to be the Biblical character, Park engages in a revisionary reading. Like Lilith, Lot's wife becomes a rebel in her hands, objecting to God's decision to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah because, as "his reflection," this seems to her to be an act of "self-hatred." The second strophe contains a metaphorical portrayal of Lot's wife and her relation with the universe, opening with a metaphorical depiction of the narrator's heart:

My plump red heart
floats on scentless salt,
frozen in milky curved clouds

The contrast between the red heart and white salt and clouds in which it is frozen is one between life and death. Although her heart is frozen and appears incapable of affection, however, love speaks to her from the "world's materials":

the half-shell of a

hatched robin's egg,
the dried brown rose petal.

The shell symbolizes new life, the dried petal death. This depiction of Lot's wife as one of the "living dead" is explained in the third strophe. Here again, Park transmutes the Biblical disobedience and punishment into an act of autonomous self-preservation. Lot's wife decides to stay behind as a pillar of salt, looking back at the destroyed cities, rather than "go forth / cynical in a flawed / God's work." The decision to stay behind is her own, preferring to exist as a "living dead" person watching the destruction of human beings ("instinctual flesh") to forming part of God's works.

In the last strophe, as a pillar of salt Lot's wife speaks of herself as a force of nature, her status as "sown with salt" giving her strength. In contrast to God's imperfect creation, she possesses a "powerful sterility," the salt symbolizing purity and preservation. In a reversal of the Biblical story (and many traditional midrashim), in which she is depicted as a sinner, Park portrays Lot's wife in a positive light, holding God responsible for the failings of the universe. Her decision to remain behind "salty" and gaze upon the destruction constitutes an act of benevolence that earns her the world's love.

Anna Akhmatova's "Lot's Wife" (1924) is one of the most well-known poems dealing with this subject. Margaret Kaufman's (b. 1941-) piece by the same name (2002: 70) is a tribute to Akhmatova. It can thus be analyzed as reading the Biblical story through a double lens, both the Bible and Akhmatova's poem serving as its intertexts.

In Akhmatova's poem, Lot's wife appears to yearn for Sodom as a symbol of the past—pre-revolutionary Russia. As Roberta Reeder observes, "turning to Biblical imagery, she takes on the persona of a woman looking back—on the realistic level, to the familiar locales of her native city. But these specific places become metonymic symbols for 'the past' that must be let go if one is to make peace with the future, no matter how terrifying it may be" (112).

The memories in the poem are thus primarily of the view of the city, mixed with some private ones:

At the red towers of your native Sodom,
At the square where you sang, at the courtyard where
you spun,
At the empty windows of the tall house
Where you bore children to your beloved husband. (273)

At the end of Akhmatova's poem, Lot's wife is remembered principally for her gazing upon the city she has left behind. The narrator answers the question: "Who will weep for this woman?" by asserting that "my heart will never forget the one / Who gave her life for a single glance." As Elise Riggins notes: "Faced with the turmoil and emptiness of Russia's present state, Akhmatova became disillusioned with the vision of the revolution. Similarly, Lot's wife experiences a loss of physical and symbolic vision when she turns to take one last painful glance at her beloved homeland" (68).

For Akhmatova, the importance of Lot's wife lies in her symbolic looking back towards the past. Despite the tribute to her predecessor(s), Kaufman's Lot's wife differs greatly, being first and foremost a woman. Like Akhmatova, she opens her poem with Lot's departure from the city. In contrast to Lot in Akhmatova's poem, however, who merely follows God's messengers, here he hurries after them. Likewise, Lot's wife's "quick feet" become slow, dragging her down as she "lagged behind / ... arms heavy with useless things, / heart heavier still." This mournfulness ("grieving") affects her whole body. *Contra* Akhmatova's Lot's wife's memories of the city views, Kaufman's are weighted down by personal issues: "She couldn't recall if she'd shut the door, / turned off the iron." She is full of guilt for the things she has left behind, all of which are linked to the female cycle of life: "she'd left behind the baby pictures, / her mother's ring, her wedding quilt."

The third strophe continues to focus on the intimacy of her thoughts, the "turning around" also being associated with her own life:

One arm raised to gather
her whole life in that embrace,
tears blurring the view,
without much thought she turned her face,
became what she shed.

Immersed in her grief over her past life, she turns back without thinking. Here, Kaufman assumes her readers' familiarity with the Biblical story and God's instructions not to look back, hinting at it in describing Lot's wife as turning her face "without much thought." The Biblical consequence is also intimated in the line "became what she shed," which suggests that her tears turn her into a pillar of salt.

The last strophe echoes Akhmatova's final stanza: "Who will weep for this woman? / Isn't her death the least significant?" posing a question of its own: "Who grieves / for this nameless woman, Lot's reflective wife?" Although the answer is given by the narrator, it turns in a very different direction from Akhmatova's thought. While Akhmatova highlights the importance of the gaze as a memory of the past, Kaufman's assertion: "I know holding on can cost a life" can be read in two ways. In the first, "holding on" may refer to clinging onto the past—a dangerous act that "can cost life." According to the second, it implies going forward—a similarly fraught endeavor because it involves relinquishing one's (past) life.

Both readings standing contrary to the essence of Akhmatova's poem, Kaufman's poem's tribute to the latter is thus quite indirect. Her "Lot's wife" is a modern woman ("turned off the iron"; "baby pictures"), who has to leave "whole life" behind her, turning back almost by mistake. Even her Biblical end is only hinted at. Kaufman's reading of the Biblical story thus differs both from the Biblical text and Akhmatova's revisioning of it.

Carol Dine's (c.1943–2020) poem "Lot's Wife, Another Look" was published in *Orange Night* (2014), a joint collaboration with the internationally acclaimed artist and Holocaust survivor Samuel Bak. The poem was also published in an article in *Lilith* in which Dine remarks on the book-writing process. Evoked by Samuel Bak's painting "Draped" rather than being ekphrastic—a literary description of, or commentary on, a visual work of art—Dine gives her imagination free rein in interpreting it, understanding the figure as "bundled in cloth and tied with ropes ... I saw the chess piece – a pawn – as female. I felt her powerlessness, her imposed silence. At first I didn't know who this figure was, but then I remembered Lot's wife, who was nameless – another indignity – and centered the poem around her" (39).

Although the poem draws on the painting, it more accurately bursts out from it. Here, too, the Biblical story is read through a double lens—the original text and Bak's image. For Dine, Lot's wife lies on the boundary between woman and inanimate object. She is portrayed at the heart of her punishment, the last strophe describing "God's punishing eye" hanging "above her forehead."

Right from the beginning of the poem, she is treated as an object:

She's bundled
for storage
then left,
upright,
disgraced.

In the flight from Sodom, Lot's wife's wishes are totally ignored, her existence being no more than that of an object to be tidied up and stored away. This makes leaving her behind a very easy task. The second strophe reinforces this idea, her face being "shrouded in gray cloth" and thus hindering any looking back. Here, her punishment is not directly linked to her gaze, as in the Biblical text, being unprovoked by any specific act.

As Dine notes, in the poem she "explore[s] the terrible price of defiance." While she does not make the cause of this explicit, she does allude to the Biblical punishment of turning into a pillar of salt in the third strophe:

Her breast is the mouth
of an earthenware jar,
weighted with salt.

Even before this element, however, Dine's primary association between the painting and Lot's wife lay in her namelessness. As Adele Reinhartz notes, "The centrality of the proper name to the perception and construction of identity implies the converse: that the absence of the proper name contributes to the effacement, absence, veiling, or suppression of identity" (9). The veiled figure in the painting is anonymous, lacking any concrete identity. This fact undergirds her status as an inanimate object—even before her crystallization.

In conclusion, the Jewish American women poets whose poems I have discussed in this article approach Lot's wife from new perspectives. Although reading the Bible as traditional midrashists—filling in the gaps and making us privy to the Biblical character's emotions and thoughts—the poems employ the Biblical story as a springboard from which to address their authors' own days and contemporary issues. In creating modern midrashim by adding their own insights to the Biblical text, however, they nonetheless continue the midrashic tradition. As David Curzon observes in his discussion of modern poetical midrash, modern poets engage in something very similar to midrashic writing: "Whether the poets knew it or not, and some of them did, they were writing midrash. Their reactions to Biblical texts are both strikingly modern and within an ancient genre" (3).

Daniel Boyarin makes a similar point, asserting that: "The relation between the midrash and the Bible provides not only a model of the relation between text and interpretation but [also] between the present and the past ... midrash realizes its goal by means of a hermeneutic of recombining pieces of the canonized exemplar into a new discourse" (37–38).

Contending that, in their creative process, the midrashists combine and recombine Biblical verses into new texts, he posits that the Biblical past becomes alive in the midrashic present (128). Judith Plaskow similarly notes in relation to modern women midrashists that, when they elaborate on the stories of Eve or Dina, for example, "we know the text is partly an occasion for our own projections, that our imaginative reconstructions are a reflection of our own beliefs and experiences" (54). Hereby, they recreate Biblical text in a way that corresponds to Rich's and Ostriker's principle of "re-visioning."

Celia Gilbert's lengthy poem "Lot's Wife" juxtaposes the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah with the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It also adds to the Biblical story by retelling it from a feminine point of view. The poem combines excerpts from documents relating to the bombing/its consequences with the Biblical story as narrated by Lot's wife. In merging the modern and the Biblical disasters, Gilbert provides a unique view on both, suggesting that catastrophes can be perceived from the perspective of either victim or perpetrator. This dualism is evident in both the documentary passages, which can be divided into those dealing with the *hibakusha* and those dealing with the pilots, and the poetic strophes, which identify the victims (the people of Sodom and Gomorrah in general and the women therein in particular) and perpetrators (God, the angels, and Lot). At the end of the poem, Lot's wife appears ready to transform herself from passive survivor into active rebel. Turning back and deciding for herself, she thus becomes a monument for the ashen cities.

Like most of her midrashic poetry, both of Enid Dame's poems analyzed in this article are dramatic monologues, narrated by Lot's wife. "Ms. Lot Makes a Political Statement" falls into two sections. The first deals with the historical destruction of the city, the second with today. The poem contrasts the female narrator with the world of men, attributing the city's downfall to "men and their gods." Its razing, depicted in the first strophe through fire, an explosion of flowers, and "finally ashes," parallels the three women in the third strophe, whose life it brings to an end.

The first part of the poem is linked to the first part of its title ("Ms. Lot"), the second to the "political statement." In the latter section, the Biblical story is only hinted at in the final strophe, in which the narrator asserts that she has outlived her family and neighbors—a possible allusion to the still-existing pillar of salt. Here, the Biblical text serves as a framework for Dame's "political statement" regarding the fate of the planet in the face of the current wave of technological advance. Both Gilbert and Dame (in this poem) can be connected to ecofeminism which started to raise in the 1980's and which links the feminine sensitivity to what is happening in the world and the dangers expected by human (and masculine) behavior in it. Gilbert connecting the atomic bombing on Hiroshima and Dame's connecting the technological advancement that endanger the future of the planet with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. For both of them, Lot's wife as a woman is opposed to this destruction which they link with men's world.

The rest of the poems I analyze accentuate the gender difference in the Biblical story—in particular, Lot's wife as a (contemporary) woman. In "(Lot's Wife)," Dame's female protagonist is an insentient pillar of salt. Her feeling of numbness pervades every area of her life—cooking, mothering, and intimate relations. Here, the Biblical story forms a vehicle for illustrating the difficulties women face in living in a masculine world—their best way of coping with them being paralysis. Lot's wife's alive and crystallized states in fact differ very little. Dame thus makes use of the Biblical character to raise a social gendered issue that remains part of the female existential condition even today.

In Carol Moldaw's poem "Lot's Wife" (1987), the narrator is again Lot's wife. The poem contains two strophes. The first depicts the Biblical story, explaining the act of turning back and becoming a pillar of salt. By adding a detailed description of her crystallization, the poem turns the terse Biblical references to Lot's wife into a vivid description. In the second strophe, however, her acknowledgement of wrongdoing in hesitating and looking back in violation of the clear instruction not to, take the Biblical text into a totally new direction. Addressing God, Lot's wife seeks to explain her act by generalizing it into something every woman does in a man's world. Rather than disobedience to God, her sin lies in the fact that she fears men more than God. The poem thus turns the Biblical account on its head, the crystallizing fear she experiences causing her to turn around instead of being the outcome of her looking backwards.

Lot's wife is again the narrator in Barbara D. Holender's poem "Lot's Wife." Herein, Holender transforms the Biblical tragedy into a human comedy. Initially addressing the question of why Lot's wife turns back, she suggests that the answer lies in the lives ordinary woman live. The final strophe removes us even further from the Biblical text. Here, Lot's wife regards her being left behind (as a pillar of salt?)

as a relief, giving her some time on her own. Holender's depiction of Lot's wife as a modern woman happy to be left behind free of maternal and conjugal responsibilities liberates her from her Biblical confines.

Susan Litwack's poem "Lot's Wife in the Twentieth Century" (1994) draws on the Biblical story as a source of metaphorical material. Although here, too, the narrator appears to be Lot's wife, she is in fact a contemporary woman. The poem thus uses the Biblical narrative in order to portray the inner thoughts of a contemporary speaker dealing with existence in a universe full of suffering. Litwack employs the Biblical components in several ways. The "looking back" becomes a mental move towards the past. The concrete burning of Sodom and Gomorrah represents an emotional conflagration. The salt symbolizes a way of coping with reality, while the sinful Sodomites negate the narrator's inner hell. Hereby, the "realistic" Biblical narrative becomes a metaphorical structure.

In "Lot's Wife Speaks in the Tradition of Lilith," Sherry K. Park compares Lot's wife with Lilith. Objecting to God's determination to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot's wife believes that, the city being a reflection of God, his destruction of it is an expression of self-hatred. In a reversal of the Biblical story (and many of the traditional midrashim), in which Lot's wife is depicted as a sinner, Park turns Lot's wife into a positive figure, God's acts being contemptible. The Biblical disobedience and punishment is also reversed, Lot's wife autonomously deciding to stay behind as a pillar of salt in order to look back at the destroyed cities because she prefers to exist as a "living dead" person observing the destruction of human beings than participate in God's handiwork.

Margaret Kaufman and Carol Dine approach Lot's wife through a "double lens," re-reading the Biblical text through a literary/artistic work. Margaret Kaufman's "Lot's Wife" (1994) is a tribute to Anna Akhmatova's 1924 poem. While Lot's wife's importance for Akhmatova lies in her symbolic looking back and remembering the past, however, Kaufman represents her first and foremost as a modern woman who must leave her whole life behind her, thus turning back almost unwittingly. For Kaufman, her mistake lay precisely in *clinging* to the past—even her Biblical end only being hinted at. Kaufman's re-visioning of the Biblical story thus differs from both the Biblical text and Akhmatova's reading.

Carol Dine's poem "Lot's Wife, Another Look" was inspired by Samuel Bak's "Draped." Dine associates the veiled figure this portrays with Lot's wife, fated to be nameless and thereby lacking concrete identity. Such a person bordering on the lifeless, Dine's Lot's wife ekes out a liminal existence between woman and inanimate object, caught in unending punishment.

In re-visioning Lot's wife and portraying her through contemporary lenses—creating new *ribboni* midrashim—these Jewish American women poets recreate the Biblical figure of Lot's wife. Drawing on her faintly-outlined character, they flesh it out while raising contemporary issues. Whether adopting a political or psychological focus, they treat Lot's wife first and foremost as a contemporary woman in a man's world.

From a panoramic perspective, the poets discussed herein appear to be intrigued by the fact that Lot's wife defies a divine prohibition (in contrast to her husband) and the bizarre form of her punishment. While the poems that focus on the gender difference and treat her above all as representing a modern woman in a patriarchal world refer primarily to the way in which she differs from Lot, the two that look at her through an ecofeminist lens elaborate on the fact that the city's destruction was due to men's deeds, her punishment coming in response to her resistance to its fate. The latter thus reflect the ecofeminist stance that women are tasked with opposing the devastation of the world by the male species. On this reading, Lot's wife's saline gaze serves as an eternal reminder of the havoc humans have wreaked and continue to inflict upon the planet.

By giving her a voice, addressing her, or transforming her into a modern woman, they give her a place of her own. In the process, they also make a "place of their own" for themselves amongst a long line of male exegetes. As Marge Piercy observes in this respect:

Midrash is the entrance into the canon through the back door. In the patriarchal world of the texts, we miss the voices and ideas of women. So we put them back in. ... We women who write midrashim are putting our truths into the ongoing oral Torah that is remade, reinterpreted, and added to generations after generation so that Judaism remains alive, and not fossil or relic. (quoted in Schneider 61)

The diverse ways in which these poets re-write Lot's wife embody Ostriker's three types of hermeneutics. The frequent subsuming of these under the hermeneutics of indeterminacy exemplifies the contemporary wave of Jewish-American women poets and scholars who seek to find their own niche on the "Jewish bookshelf"—from which they have been excluded for such a long time. In employing the Biblical story to deal with issues concerning contemporary women and current issues, they also turning

our gaze back towards Lot's wife herself, rescuing her from history and perpetuating her status as a witness and commemorator.

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