A publication of the New York State Association for Bilingual Education

Journal of Multilingual Education Research

Volume 11 *Socio-cultural and Educational Aspects of Multilingual Multicultural Learners and Communities*

Article 5

2021

"It Kind Of Shows the Terrible Morality of This Scene": Using Graphic Novels to Encourage Feminist Readings of Jewish Hebrew Texts with Religious Significance

Talia Hurwich
New York University, th1425@nyu.edu

“It Kind Of Shows the Terrible Morality of This Scene": Using Graphic Novels to Encourage Feminist Readings of Jewish Hebrew Texts with Religious Significance

Cover Page Footnote

About the Author:

Talia Hurwich, PhD, is a former middle school Hebrew language teacher. Her research examines how graphic novel adaptations of classic texts motivate conversations critical of gender in society. Other areas of interest include comics and graphic novels in the classroom, Hebrew education, game design and role playing in education, gender and education, and Jewish education.

"It Kind of Shows the Terrible Morality of This Scene": Using Graphic Novels to Encourage Feminist Readings of Jewish Hebrew Texts with Religious Significance

Talia Hurwich
New York University

This study considers whether and in what ways graphic novel adaptations of traditional Jewish Hebrew texts can encourage adolescent Modern Orthodox girls to adopt autonomous critical responses when encountering narratives that present women in unequal roles vis a vis men. According to scholars, Jewish literacy should teach students to read traditional Hebrew texts reverently while forming autonomous interpretations and opinions. Instead, Jewish educators teach normative readings posed by approved rabbinic authorities. This is particularly the case when teaching issues relating to gender among Modern Orthodox Jews, a conservative Jewish denomination, strives to synthesize tradition with the values of modern, secular society. I therefore explore through think-alouds and semi-structured interviews to explore graphic novel adaptations of Jewish texts' potential to give adolescents opportunities to voice autonomous, critical interpretations. Findings show that adolescents, through graphic novel adaptations of traditional Jewish texts are able to engage in critical readings of the source material. Participants admitted that while they inherently imagined scenes to unfold in a certain way, they never spent time deeply considering the assumptions such imagined details led them to make. Thus, reading graphic novel adaptations did not lead participants to uniformly challenge their understood rabbinic metanarratives, but instead generally made them question their own personal imaged narratives.

Keywords: graphic novels, Jewish education, feminism, critical literacy

Literacy practices among American Jews represent a unique microcosm of reading communities, where scholars have noted a tension between literacy education's proposed goals and observed teaching and reading practices. In theory, Jewish literacy should be an ongoing interaction between reader and traditional Jewish texts, where the reader respects what the text offers while he or she also struggles to determine his

or her own personal understanding of it (Holtz, 1999; Rosenak, 2003). However, researchers observing the practice of teaching Jewish literacy generally do not see educators teaching a dynamic engagement with the text—only respect for the texts and their authority (Hassenfeld, 2017; Lehmann, 2008).

Tensions between encouraging individuals' autonomy when understanding Jewish religious texts and enforcing rabbinic authorities and their readings is particularly visible when considering teaching gender-related issues related to Modern Orthodox Jews. Modern Orthodox Judaism, a conservative Jewish denomination striving to synthesize rabbinic tradition with the values of modern, secular society (Krakowski, 2017), has been struggling to contend with feminist values for several decades (Trencher, 2017). Students are instead initiated into discourses raised by the rabbinic patriarchy, reinforcing gender roles, making inequalities appear less problematic, and suppressing pro-women readings.

I investigate whether and in what ways graphic novel adaptations of traditional Hebrew, Jewish texts can encourage adolescent Modern Orthodox Jewish girls to adopt critical responses when encountering narratives that present women in unequal roles vis a vis men. It is specifically a case study of three Modern Orthodox girls ages 14-15, comparing how they read and make sense of excerpts from graphic novel adaptations of Jewish holy texts based on their personal and religious backgrounds. Particularly through think-alouds and short semi-structured interviews, I look at the different ways the medium of the graphic novel helped readers consider narratives and texts they are very familiar with in new and novel ways.

This article begins with a review of scholarship of Jewish literacies and the role graphic novels can play. I then describe my research methodology and present findings. The discussion considers the impact and ways that graphic novels do and do not encourage participants' critical readings, and I conclude by considering the implications for teaching and future research.

Literature Review

This literature review opens by sketching the population being studied—Modern Orthodox Jews—followed by an exploration of different literacies in Judaism, noting the tension between the theory and the practice. I then describe how the topic of the study—feminism—has become a point of contention in Modern Orthodox Jewry. Also, I describe the dual pull of modernity and tradition and explain how that affects Jews' ability to navigate gender issues. Finally, I examine the literacy medium used in this study, graphic novels and, specifically, their adaptations of classic Jewish texts.

Modern Orthodox Jews

Modern Orthodox Judaism is considered among social scientists to constitute a more religiously liberal branch of an otherwise religiously conservative denomination of Judaism (Cashman, 2015; Lehmann, 2008; Lipsky, 2016). Philosophically, Modern Orthodoxy encourages individuals to live a traditional Jewish life that strictly adhere to rabbinic and Biblical laws while actively engaging with the general secular society (Krakowski, 2017; Waxman, 2019). This means that Modern Orthodox Jews pray several times a day, believe that the Bible was written by God, and that rabbinic law

https://doi.org/10.5422/jmer.2021.v11.59-77

also is of divine origin, yet they do not hesitate to interact with non-Jews in the professional (if not social) sphere, and they generally believe in evolution and the scientifically derived age of the universe (Trencher, 2017). Recent research has uncovered that the dichotomy of Jewish life and civic life leads to Modern Orthodox Jews navigating—at times with difficulty—between a desire for autonomy as well as readily submitting to the authority of normative traditional Jewish religious values (Bieler, 1986; Lehmann, 2008).

Brill (2004) suggests that the bifurcation of faith and (U.S.) culture is in fact a Protestant division (namely, a division that places faith in conflict with culture instead of embedded within culture). In fact, the encounter between U.S. culture and Jewish faith have led to several outcomes. First, the vast majority of Modern Orthodox Jews approach tradition as practitioners rather than intellectuals (Bechhofer, 2011; Waxman, 2019), and they separate their religious and modern lives in one of three ways: (a) they are particularistic and seem to reject modern culture; (b) they separate their Jewish lives from their secular lives; and (c) they approach secular culture as a handmaiden to Judaism, selecting certain elements of it to enrich their Jewish practices (Brill, 2004). Second, there is a smaller, intellectual, and arguably elitist group that tries to minimize compartmentalization between modernity and Judaism, exploring through study and practice how the two can better fit together (Bechhofer, 2011).

Interestingly, unlike other Jewish religious denominations, Modern Orthodoxy has no central authority and is, as a result, less coherent (Bechhofer, 2011; Waxman, 2019). There is no rabbinic body that defines Modern Orthodox Jews' religious practices, but instead Modern Orthodox Jews rely on rulings from individual rabbis—who may or may not have conflicting opinions with his peers and colleagues. Note that although there is no central governing body of Modern Orthodox rabbis, the authority of the rabbinate as a ruling and administering class in Modern Orthodox Judaism remains indisputable. Waxman (2019), for example, notes that while there is often variations between how different Modern Orthodox Jews practice their religion, these decisions are generally framed as matters of choice instead of framing older traditions as faulty. Waxman reflects that, considering this, Modern Orthodoxy is fairly open except for "what it considers to be deviance through the rejection of its rabbis" (p. 100). As will be explained when discussing Jewish literacy below, the importance of rabbinic authority leads to reading practices that are unique to American Jews, standing in opposition to both reading practices taught in English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms as well as widely held philosophical goals of Jewish literacy education.

Jewish Literacy and Education

Jewish literacy has been defined both objectively as well as subjectively. The objective approach defines Jewish literacy as familiarity with and ability to engage with a corpus of Jewish texts and ideas (Hassenfeld, 2017; Telushkin, 1991). These texts broadly cover Jewish theology, ethics, culture, and history (from ancient to modern). Within this framework, researchers identified skills required to be literate in Jewish texts, including (a) asking critical questions about Jewish texts (Sigel et al., 2007), (b) seeing everyday events through a specifically Jewish lens (Jacobs, 2013) and

(c) comfortably reading and communicating in Biblical and Modern Hebrew (Avni, 2012).

With the dissemination of New Literacy Studies and scholars noting that there are different socially embedded practices when reading, suggesting that literacy is not as straightforward as teaching an objective set of skills to students (Brandt & Clinton, 2016; Gee, 2011; B. Street, 1997, 2003; B. V. Street, 2005), Jewish literacy has become to some scholars the Jewish reading practices that identify the readers as people who belong within a general or specific group of Jews (Cashman, 2015; El-Or, 2002; Lehmann, 2008). These scholars hold that being literate in Jewish texts is not simply an ability to read texts at a certain level of proficiency, but to read them in a way that specifically engages the student with other Jewish readers.

From the perspective of envisioning literacy as a subjective cultural practice, researchers find that Modern Orthodox Jewish students in the U.S. experience a tension between secular literacy practices taught in ELA classrooms and Jewish literacy practices taught in courses such as the Bible or Rabbinics (Hassenfeld, 2016; Lehmann, 2008). Whereas ELA courses encourage students to adopt autonomous interpretations, creating a direct connection between reader and text, Jewish courses teach students to submit to interpretations posited by pre-approved classical, medieval, and upon rare occasion a handful of Modern Rabbinic authorities. This difference in literacy pedagogy is rarely explicitly discussed with students and contributes to students' beliefs that Judaic studies are less academically rigorous (Lehmann, 2008). Just as troubling, if not more so, most scholars writing about the goals of Jewish education from a theoretical perspective believe that Jewish literacy education should train students to adopt autonomous readings of Jewish texts that are both respectful to what the text represents while also being able to articulate how they personally react to and relate to the text (Brinker, 2003; Holtz, 1999; Shkedi, 1997; Twersky, 2003). For example, Rosenak (2003) writes that an educated Jew is a Jew familiar with "foundational literature that establishes Jewish culture or Judaism in the world" (p. 184) and while Jewish educators will "feel obligated to pass [tradition] on to children…The educated Jew will wish to articulate criticism to others who are significant to him or her." (p. 188). Thus, there is an ongoing disconnect between theory and practice in teaching traditional Jewish Hebrew texts. This disconnect has several ramifications in Jewish education and Jewish life in the US; this article focuses on its ramifications in grappling with gender equality among Jews.

The Ramifications of Reading Authoritatively and Jewish Feminism

There are many ramifications of Jews' navigation between authority and autonomy to be found within Jewish education. However, Modern Orthodox feminism proves to be a scenario where the tensions of authority and autonomy appear to be in play. As Modern Orthodoxy encourages Jews to live traditional Jewish lives alongside modern secular ones, is perhaps not surprising then that Modern Orthodoxy continues to struggle with determining the role that women play in society, where they are encouraged to be men's equals in secular life, but then are given statuses unequal to men in Jewish issues such as ritual practices, educational opportunities, marriage, and particularly divorce law (Fishman, 1995; Trencher, 2017). In fact, Waxman (2019)

https://doi.org/10.5422/jmer.2021.v11.59-77

notes, "One outstanding issue over which [the major factions of American Orthodox Jewry] divide is the role and status of women in Judaism and in society." (p. 30).

While the Jewish feminist movement had existed decades earlier (Fishman, 1995), the Modern Orthodox feminist movement was started by Blu Greenberg (1981) and her text *On Women and Judaism*. Since then, the Modern Orthodox feminist movement has made great strides in increasing the visibility of women's issues, created greater opportunities for women to study Jewish topics and practice in Jewish prayers and rituals, and other issues (Cashman, 2015). In general, the goal of Jewish feminism has not been to abandon tradition, but to reinterpret tradition in ways that replace misogynist practices and readings with ones that increase women's opportunities and place them on a more even ground with men (Avishai, 2008; El-Or, 2002; Hauptman, 2019; Zion-Waldoks, 2015).

At the same time, there remains significant pushback from Modern Orthodox authorities. For example, Hartman (2007), writing from a feminist perspective, notes how readily reforms were made in science education in contrast to questioning patriarchal authority and putting it in jeopardy. She reflects that ultimately, those in power portray feminism as irreconcilable with Modern Orthodoxy, suggesting that to accept feminist thinking would undermine Modern Orthodox Judaism at its foundation.

Modern Orthodox Jewish educators, consciously or otherwise, tend to teach authoritative, normative understandings of how women and men are expected to behave in Jewish life (Cashman, 2015; Gorsetman & Sztokman, 2013). When teaching a Jewish text that depicts genders as unequal, educators explicitly choose to adopt an authoritative teaching stance—generally one that is apologetic to the text (Beliak, 2013). In Beliak's study, many teachers voiced hesitancy in allowing students to voice their own critique due to a concern that if they do not offer a consistently positive view of traditional Jewish texts, heroes, and morality, students will feel that Judaism itself is less rich, and leave the religious community. Unfortunately, by reinforcing traditional readings around gender, educators make inequality seem less apparent or problematic and suppresses pro-women readings.

This study explores the use of graphic novel adaptations of traditional Jewish texts as a pedagogical intervention. Some effort thus needs to be placed on understanding the potential that the medium has to offer. That is the focus of the final section in this literature review.

Graphic Novel Adaptations and Their Potential

Graphic novels, a subset of the comics medium, uses both verbal and visual languages (McCloud, 1993; Sousanis, 2015). While graphic novels themselves have only existed since Will Eisner's *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories* (1985), comics adaptations of the Bible have existed as early as the 1950s (Graham & Nodel, 1956). Today, there are numerous graphic novel adaptations of the Bible written from Jewish, Christian, as well as interfaith and atheist perspectives (Freeman & Rosenzweig, 2010; Russell, 2016; Smith, 2011; Wolverton & Geissman, 2009). While there are fewer adaptations of rabbinic texts or other traditional Jewish texts, a handful exist (e.x., Deutsch, 2017; Eisner et al., 2014).

Through visual and verbal means, graphic novels create explicit and implicit messages on how men and women should look and behave. Through content analysis, scholars have theorized how comics can undermine ideas of gender in classic texts (Chute, 2018). Other qualitative studies have charted how activists, students, and others have used comics to engage in gender-based discussions (Chattopadhyay, 2017; Dallacqua & Low, 2019a). Additionally, scholarship on comics in the educational sphere has found that graphic novels both motivated students and led to greater complexity and creativity in students' analysis (Brenna, 2013). Thus, researchers have noted that graphic novels provide rich opportunities to have serious conversations with students about gender (Dallacqua & Low, 2019b). Additionally, graphic novel adaptations are hypothesized to encourage readers to adopt reading practices that are more personal and creative from those typically observed when reading the source material in a classroom environment.

However, as an often-marginalized and "low-brow" medium ensconced in popular culture (Sabeti, 2011), less is done understanding how readers weigh the importance of the messages found in graphic novels in comparison to potentially conflicting messages found in their everyday lives. Students have previously noted that they do not see graphic novels as classroom texts (Moeller, 2016). This could mean that graphic novels, being more accessible and less high-brow, may open students up to voicing criticism. At the same time, however, the critiques found in the graphic novel adaptation may be seen as less valid than authoritative readings done in the original text. These critiques and others form the foundation of my study, explained in the Methodology section below.

Methods

Research Questions

I looked at Jewish literacies and discourses used (and not used) when reading graphic novel adaptations of traditional Jewish texts with specific interest in the following questions:

1. How do adolescent girls respond to graphic novels adaptations of Jewish texts that cast women in an unequal role vis a vis men?
2. In what ways do students conceptually frame graphic novels adaptations of Jewish texts in order to understand, and discuss them?
3. In what ways does the graphic novel medium allow students to engage in autonomous understandings of Biblical and rabbinic texts?

Theoretical Framework

This study was theoretically framed on multimodality theory and Gee's (2011) discourse theory. Multimodality theory argues that "meanings are made (as well as distributed, interpreted and remade) through many representational and communicational resources, of which language is but one" (Jewitt, 2008, p. 246). Multimodality theory thus enables a nuanced and detailed understanding of how the adapter re-tells traditional Jewish texts across different modes, piecing apart the written text largely copied from traditional Jewish texts and the visual text created by

https://doi.org/10.5422/jmer.2021.v11.59-77

the adapter (Bazalgette & Buckingham, 2013). Additionally, it allows me to focus on the elements of the text that readers are noticing and commenting on and pinpoint whether these are illustrated, written, and whether they originate from the text being adapted or are unique to the graphic novel.

Discourse theory more explicitly moves the focus from the artifact (here, the graphic novel) to its reception, providing a means to understand how readers contextualize graphic novel adaptations within the multiple literacies and ideologies available to them (Gee, 2011; Lehmann, 2008). Within research of Jewish education, discourse theory has allowed researchers to distinguish and identify how literate Jews navigate between modernity and tradition, Judaism and the secular world through the way that they talk about texts (Cashman, 2015; Lehmann, 2008; Lipsky, 2016). I drew on discourse theory to identify under what frameworks students situate and make sense of graphic novel adaptations of traditional Jewish texts.

Design and Data Collection

This study adopted the research design of Gottlieb and Wineburg's (2012) study on how individuals employed religious ideologies when reading historical documents. Data was primarily collected through think-aloud of selections from three texts: *The Book of Genesis Illustrated* by Robert Crumb (2009), *Megillat Esther* by Jeffery (JT) Waldman (2005), and *The Illustrated Pirkei Avot* by Jessica Deutch (2017) (See "Materials" section for the rationale behind selecting each text). I met with each participant three times, covering one text per meeting, and followed the think-aloud with a semi-structured interview to probe the reading experience (Rubin & Rubin, 2011) more thoroughly. Prior to think-aloud and semi-structured interviews, participant completed a demographic survey for triangulation purposes (Greene et al., 1989).

Each think-aloud and interview, lasting up to 45 minutes, was doubly recorded and transcribed by the researcher. During transcription, I attempted to capture both the exact words used in the conversation as well as speech patterns, affectations, and idiosyncrasies. All participants used Hebrew and, at times, Yiddish loan words, which I included in the transcript. When transcribing each think-aloud, I noted when characters' Hebrew names were used instead of the English version of the characters names (generally used by the adapters).

Participants

I met with three girls who self-identified as Modern Orthodox and attending a Modern Orthodox Jewish day school in the New York metropolitan area (i.e., a private school that includes both a general studies curriculum traditionally found in secular public schools and a Jewish studies curriculum that covers subjects such as Bible, Rabbinics, and the Hebrew language). The three girls – Layla, Ronnie, and Avigayil (all pseudonyms) – were 14-15 at the time of the interviews and identified as belonging to three different subsections of Modern Orthodox Judaism, with Layla being the most liberal and Avigayil the most conservative. All three reported studying Jewish topics at least several hours each day in and out of school and all continued their Jewish education during the summer at Jewish camps. More specifically, all three had previously read and formally studied the Biblical texts in co-educational classes (i.e.,

boys and girls attended the same classes) being adapted in graphic novel format and all had familiarity with some of the rabbinic writings. Of the three, only Ronnie had also studied the rabbinic text adapted into graphic novel format.

Materials

I chose selections from three different graphic novels: when Abram and Sarai go down to Egypt in *The Book of Genesis Illustrated* (2009, Chapter 12: 10-20), the Vashti narrative from JT Waldman's *Megillat Esther* (2005, pp. 14–24), and *mishnayot* 1-12 in *The Illustrated Pirkei Avot* (Deutsch, 2017, pp. 10–19). These selections all had at the very least, an unabridged English translation of the text and the writers had to deal with potentially misogynistic readings and interpretations of the texts. The unabridged translation added a layer of authenticity to the adaptation and allowed me to piece apart when participants reacted to the graphic novel itself and when they reacted to the Biblical and rabbinic narratives and texts. A summary of each text and how they contributed to answering my research questions can be found in an appendix to this article.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). While collecting data, I was writing memos reflecting both on my findings, theories, and methods. This allowed me to subsequently identify themes with which I could compare the nine think-aloud texts and semi-structured interviews, using matrices to better allow me to see overarching themes as well as particular details (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This process was iterated until theories were fully formed.

Findings

Graphic Novel #1: Crumb

Before the think-aloud, participants were asked to summarize the events in Genesis to the best of their memory, along with a description of the main characters – Abram, Sarai, and Pharaoh. After the think-aloud, I asked how the characters' portrayal in the graphic novel adaptation was similar or different to their initial beliefs. I then compared the two-character descriptions, asking to what degree did readers adopt a traditional or a critical reading. As discussed in the methods section, traditional Jewish understanding of the story places Abram and Sarai as heroes while Pharaoh is the antagonist. A critical feminist discourse places Sarai as a victim, Abram's decision as dubious, and Pharaoh's moral status as unclear—it is questionable whether or not Pharaoh would have killed Abram to wed Sarai had he known that the two were married (McKinlay, 1998).

Students' opinions of the three characters in the Genesis narrative – Abram, Sarai, and Pharaoh – were influenced by their reading of Crumb's adaptation and they all changed their opinion of at least one of the characters after reading the graphic novel. Avigayil became increasingly critical of Abram, initially saying that Abram was an "amazing figure" and, after the think-aloud, reported, "[Abram] just didn't seem amazing to me" in the adaption. She additionally recognized in the adaptation that Sarai may not have been happy to help Abram the way she did. Whereas Avigayil previously

https://doi.org/10.5422/jmer.2021.v11.59-77

described Sarai as someone who "goes along with everything," she noted during the think-aloud that Sarai "looked mad in every picture."

Ronnie and Layla initially placed almost all of the blame on Pharaoh and, after the think-aloud, became increasingly critical of Abram's choices. Layla had the most extreme change of opinion. While she initially shared, "Maybe it was acceptable then, but it seems wrong [for Pharaoh] just to, like, kill someone 'cause their wife is pretty," she later reported that Pharaoh "doesn't seem too bad because he didn't realize that she was someone else's wife." Regarding Abram, Layla noted, "Well he doesn't seem like such a good person. Because he's, like, forcing his wife to marry [Pharaoh]- I mean, I guess because he wants to save his life so she would- if she actually loved him she would probably agree, but what if she didn't?" Ronnie maintained during and after the think-aloud that Pharaoh's actions were reproachable, sharing, "[Pharaoh] just takes whatever he sees he feels is beautiful." However, she also reported after the think-aloud that Abram behaved in a "weird" way, complicating and challenging the traditional narrative.

Overall, participants' changes of opinions were generally more critical of Abram, and while they never saw Sarai as a victim in the narrative, they noted that her depiction suggested she was dissatisfied with the way her husband and Pharaoh treated her. This suggests that Crumb's graphic novel adaptation increased student's awareness of, if not allowed students to adopt, interpretations of the Biblical narrative that are more critical of the gender imbalances found therein.

Graphic Novel #2: Waldman

Before the think-aloud, participants were asked to summarize the events in the first chapter of the Book of Esther to the best of their memory, along with a description of the main characters – Achashverosh and Vashti. After the think-aloud, I asked how the characters' portrayal in the graphic novel adaptation was similar or different to their initial beliefs. In my analysis, I compared their descriptions of the characters and narrative to their comments during the think-aloud and their reflections during the semi-structured interview that followed.

Students' opinions of Achashverosh remained unchanged as they all were initially critical of the demands he placed on Vashti, thus already sharing Waldman's opinion of Achashverosh. However, all participants after reading Waldman's adaptation were more aware of Vashti's agency, power, and generally thought more positively of her after reading the adaptation. Ronnie particularly praised Waldman's adaptation for being a feminist representation of the narrative:

Ronnie	I like [Waldman's adaptation because Waldman] kind of shows the more feminist side of the story…
Researcher	Might I ask for clarification? Um, you said that the Megillat Esther is a bit of a more feminist -?
Ronnie	Yeah.
Researcher	Can you explain what you mean by that?

https://doi.org/10.5422/jmer.2021.v11.59-77

Ronnie	Well, we read, we looked through the scene where Vashti is being asked to come before Achashverosh. And that's always been a very unsettling scene, but I like the way she [Waldman] depicted her [Vashti] as a strong person and not just as, like, Achashverosh's servant.
Researcher	Okay. How has it been unsettling?
Ronnie	Um, well, like with the midrashim [Hebrew: Rabbinic exegesis] where she's covered in boils or whatever and he's disgusted by her but also wants her to par- wants her to come naked and parade before men. That's just upsetting.

Before the think-aloud, Ronnie described Vashti as someone "played with [by the king] and then leaves so is a symbol of [the king's total] power." Note that this change not only allows Ronnie to see Vashti as someone with power, but Ronnie also wholeheartedly accepts and appreciates this interpretation.

While Avigayil and Layla were not as explicit about seeing Vashti as a feminist, they shared similar reactions to Ronnie. Avigayil noted, "[Before reading the adaptation] I thought, like, oh obviously it's horrible. Like, [Achashverosh] wanted [Vashti] to come just for her crown. But I never pictured her like also she's doing her own thing as a queen." After reading the adaptation, Layla reported, "When I first learned [Vashti's story in the Book of Esther] I thought 'Oh, Vashti. She did something wrong.' But now I realize maybe she didn't do something wrong."

Graphic Novel #3: Deutch

Because Pirkei Avot is a series of ethical mantras and more difficult to remember in its entirety, participants were not expected to have prior opinions about the text's instruction that all who speak with women will inherit hell. Instead, their reactions to the mantra as well as their reactions to the adapter explicitly calling the mantra "shocking" were explored and recorded. This distinction was made because disagreeing with a text and critiquing a text are two different actions. Deutch's adaptation created an opportunity to consider this distinction.

Of the three adaptations, participants' reactions to Deutch's adaptation were the most varied among the three participants. Avigayil was not critical of the original text, sharing her belief that "[Judaism is] just not an egalitarian religion." She therefore felt Deutch's admonishment inappropriate. Ronnie, while disagreeing with the separation between genders called for in Pirkei Avot and saying, "I'd like to think that everybody does consider women and men to be equally valuable," was aware of the plurality of opinions among Modern Orthodoxy and was thus uncomfortable with Deutch's critique:

> I mean, she's saying 'our society,' but like, which part of our society? I don't think - that's a very broad statement… So she could say, like, 'This was like the norm back then and it's kind of changed.' But jumping to that and saying, like, women and men weren't equally valuable then - I don't know if that's so true.

https://doi.org/10.5422/jmer.2021.v11.59-77

Unlike Ronnie and Avigayil, Layla both disagreed with the original text and was comfortable with Deutch's critique.

Layla	Like, you know, like this [points to Mishna 5] part?
Researcher	Okay, let's talk - let's talk about this.
Layla	No one will actually. I mean, HOPEFULLY no one will actually do that.
Researcher	Right, yeah.
Layla	Like - and the fact that the author of the book notes that it's the shocking thing. Shows something about-
Researcher	Yeah. If you - I'm curious would you have - what would you have done if you had to do an adaptation of this, like regardless of-
Layla	I mean, obviously we would have to put it in.
Researcher	Right.
Layla	Because yeah. And you have to think what do they mean by that, though? Like, do - do they actually think that talking to women will just distract you and it only can lead to bad things? Do they actually believe that?

In short, all three participants had different opinions of the validity of the *mishna* as well as the appropriateness of Deutch's critique. The effectiveness of this particular graphic novel, therefore, is particularly unclear.

The Medium's Effect on Participants' Readings

In this section, I explore the impact that the medium itself had on participants' critiques. Effectively: would participants have made the same observations and critiques had they simply re-read the narrative in their respective source texts?

Many of their reactions during the think-aloud were specifically to Crumb's illustrations, suggesting that the medium itself and Crumb's interpretation of the Biblical text is what influenced their understanding of the Biblical narrative. For example, Avigayil noted in her think-aloud her discomfort with Abram and Sarai leaving people to starve in Canaan:

> [Reading:] "And it came to pass as he drew near to the border of Egypt that he said to Sarai his wife, 'Look here now I know that my wife is beautiful to behold!'"… I never really thought about – like, this kinda struck me. These people [pointing to starving beggars in background as Abram as Sarai are traveling out on camels] because I never thought about, like, whenever I see the word 'famine,' I only just picture the main characters like [Abram]. Like, okay they're leaving. So I [didn't] actually think that there are people dying and – like, in a famine and that's really cool.

Ronnie makes note of the way Crumb chooses to depict the ill and bed-ridden Pharaoh, noting, "It's like the first we see him, and he looks awful and very old and wrinkled and, like, kind of shows the terrible morality of this scene. That, like, he just takes whatever he sees he feels is beautiful." Note the emphasis she places on the

visuals in sharing the moral messaging behind the story: this is not the first time we hear about Pharaoh in the narrative, but it is the first time she sees Crumb's detailed illustration of him. The fact that it "shows" the terrible morality is to be taken literally. Reflecting generally on graphic novel adaptations of traditional texts, Ronnie notes, "When you go and, like, give a drawing to an event you, like, change it - change how people look at it."

Unlike Ronnie and Avigayil, Layla's comments during the think-aloud were almost entirely in response to the written instead of drawn elements of the adaptation. Like Avigayil, she noted that the images were different from what she expected, but she found images to be subjective and thus somewhat unimportant: "So sometimes I don't think - like, I don't imagine the people to look like what they look like in the pictures? And I mean, it doesn't really matter all that much because no one really knows what they look like. And so it's just artists' interpretations." Instead, when asked about what makes images useful—if at all, Layla responds, "I like the illustrations because sometimes it helps people to look at, you know, pictures of what's going on?" and in a later think-aloud and interview shares that pictures are useful because, "Well, they give an example." Considering the graphic novel from Layla's perspective, it allowed her to engage in a critique of the text by making the text both more accessible and understandable than would she have read it in the original.

Discussion

Adolescents, through graphic novel adaptations of traditional Jewish texts are able to engage in critical readings of the source material. During the various think-aloud texts and interviews, all three participants mention and allude to their past imaginings of these narratives and the characters found therein. The imagined narratives included details not mentioned in the source text and include women's fashion and modesty, the way characters looked and gestured, and characters' engagement with society at large. Participants further admitted that while they inherently imagined scenes to unfold in a certain way, they never spent time deeply considering the assumptions such imagined details led them to making.

While reading the three graphic novel adaptations, participants experienced moments of tension and dissonance when the adaptation disagreed with rabbinic narratives taught in formal and informal settings of Jewish education as well as imagined narratives that participants took for granted. Perhaps unsurprisingly, when in conflict with rabbinically sanctioned narratives, such as Deutch's critique in *The Illustrated Pirkei Avot*, graphic novels were less successful at generating critique from the readers themselves. It is notable that the only person who fully accepted Deutch's critique of *Pirkei Avot* – Layla – self-identified as the most liberal of the three participants within Modern Orthodoxy Jewry on her survey upon entering this study. However, graphic novels were considerably more successful at having participants challenge their previously imagined and implicitly accepted narratives.

When experiencing dissonance between graphic novel adaptations and the way they imagined these holy texts and narratives, readers all enacted their own agency by either agreeing with the adaptations' criticism of gender inequality or, despite disagreeing, recognizing the validity of having an interpretation of traditional texts that

https://doi.org/10.5422/jmer.2021.v11.59-77

is respectful yet critical such as the adaptations they read. As such, graphic novels provide a successful means of encouraging autonomous understandings of texts—even when such understandings ultimately conform with Jewish authorities.

Implications

For educators such as those interviewed by Beliak (2013), afraid to give students the independence to make their own conclusions, the findings of this study suggest that at the high school level, readers are able to successfully navigate critical readings of traditional Jewish texts while maintaining a positive Jewish identity. Graphic novel adaptations effectively exposed readers to modern feminist critiques, which readers in turn partially or entirely accepted or rejected based on their own beliefs about Judaism's place in modern society. Educators considering ways to increase students' autonomy in their analyses of Jewish texts are encouraged to consider graphic novels.

This study considered three students from a particular Jewish day school and, because it was set outside of a classroom environment, was unable to assess the effect of their enrollment in this particular school. My study has since expanded to include two other Jewish Modern Orthodox schools, one of which is an all-girls school. This expansion will allow across-school comparisons to highlight any potential biases certain schools have with regards to openness to engage in critique. Additionally, worth considering are Modern Orthodox adolescents who do not attend Jewish Day Schools, or adolescents who attend Jewish Day School that do not identify as Modern Orthodox Day Schools and measure any differences therein.

Considering the graphic novel as a medium that engages in visual literacy—a skill which is often not explicitly taught—further attention can be given to considering the degree to which participants' ability to read images affects their ability to engage in critique. To do so would require a study that initially measures participants' ability to engage in graphic novels as multimodal devices. Some tools to measure such skills have been created (e.x., Jaffe & Hurwich, 2018) and should be brought into future research on the impact of graphic novels.

In summation, graphic novels did not drastically change readers' opinions about gender in traditional Jewish texts but instead provided moments of dissonance that readers experienced while reading. These moments had to be navigated by readers drawing from their backgrounds, prior knowledge, and experience. As a result, critiques and texts readers enacted were personally meaningful and more closely reflected the goals of Jewish literacy education previously not observed in practice.

References

Adelman, R. (2014). "Passing Strange"—Reading transgender across genre: Rabbinic midrash and feminist hermeneutics on Esther. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion, 30*(2), 81–97. https://doi.org/10.2979/jfemistudreli.30.2.81

Alter, R. (2009). Scripture picture. *New Republic*, *240*(19), 44–48.

Avishai, O. (2008). "Doing religion" in a secular world: Women in conservative religions and the question of agency. *Gender & Society, 22*(4), 409–433. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243208321019

Avni, S. (2012). Hebrew as heritage: The work of language in religious and communal continuity. *Linguistics and Education, 23*(3), 323–333. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2012.06.004

Bazalgette, C., & Buckingham, D. (2013). Literacy, media and multimodality: A critical response. *Literacy, 47*(2), 95–102. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-4369.2012.00666.x

Bechhofer, S. (2011). Day schools in the Orthodox Sector – a shifting landscape. In *International Handbook of Jewish Education* (pp. 729–747). Springer https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-0354-4_41

Beliak, T. (2013). Teacher planning: Biblical texts, gender and the young adolescent {Doctoral dissertation, Yeshiva University}. Retrieved from https://search.proquest.com/docview/1323357163/abstract/6B64E3CB7FC44A49PQ/1

Bieler, J. (1986). Integration of Judaic and general studies in the Modern Orthodox Day School. *Journal of Jewish Education, 54*(4), 15–26. https://doi.org/10.1080/0021642860540403

Brandt, D., & Clinton, K. (2016). Limits of the local: Expanding perspectives on literacy as a social practice. *Journal of Literacy Research, 34*(3), 337–356. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15548430jlr3403_4

Brenna, B. (2013). How graphic novels support reading comprehension strategy development in children. *Literacy, 47*(2), 88–94. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-4369.2011.00655.x

Brill, A. (2004). Judaism in culture: Beyond the bifurcation of Torah and Madda. *The Edah Journal, 4*(1), 1–26.

Brinker, M. (2003). Jewish studies in Israel from a liberal-secular perspective. In S. Fox, I. Scheffler, & D. Marom (Eds.), *Visions of Jewish education* (pp. 95–105). Cambridge University. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511615214.010

Cashman, R. M. (2015). Conflict and creativity in Jewish Modern Orthodox girls' education: Navigating tradition and modernity (Doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto (Canada)). Retrieved from https://search.proquest.com/docview/1758131720/abstract/F5D570B9DDDE4420PQ/1

Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). SAGE.

Chattopadhyay, D. (2017). Can comic books influence consumer awareness and attitude towards rape victims and perpetrators in India? The case of Priya's Shakti. *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2017.1412992

Chute, H. (2018). Feminist graphic art. *Feminist Studies, 44*(1), 153–170. https://doi.org/10.15767/feministstudies.44.1.0153

Cohen, J. M. (1996). Vashti—Un unsung heroine. *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, *24*(2), 103-106.

Crumb, R. (2009). *The Book of Genesis illustrated*. W. W. Norton & Company.

Dallacqua, A. K., & Low, D. E. (2019a). Cupcakes and beefcakes: Students' readings of gender in superhero texts. *Gender and Education*, 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2019.1633460

Dallacqua, A. K., & Low, D. E. (2019b). "I never think of the girls": Critical gender inquiry with superheroes. *English Journal, 108*(5), 76–84.

Deutsch, J. T. (2017). The illustrated Pirkei Avot: A graphic novel of Jewish ethics. Print-O-Craft.

Eisner, W. (1985). *A contract with God and other Tenement stories.* Titan.

Eisner, W., Kirschen, Y., Pekar, H., Robbins, T., Rudhal, S., Spiegelman, A., Stanleigh, Q., Bergson, S. M., & Meth, C. (2014). *Jewish comix anthology: Volume 1: A collection of tales, stories and myths told and retold in comic book format.* (S. M. Bergson, Ed.). AH Comics.

El-Or, T. (2002). Next year I will know more: Literacy and identity among young orthodox women in Israel. Wayne State University Press.

Fishman, S. B. (1995). *A breath of life: Feminism in the American Jewish community*. University Press of New England.

Freeman, A., & Rosenzweig, S. (2010). *The comic Torah: Reimagining the very good book.* Ben Yehuda Press.

Gee, J. P. (2011). *Social linguistics and literacies ideology in discourses*. Routledge.

Gendler, M. (1976). The restoration of Vashti. In *The Jewish Woman* (pp. 241–247). Schocken Books.

Gorsetman, C. R., & Sztokman, E. M. (2013). *Educating in the divine image: Gender issues in Orthodox Jewish day schools.* Brandeis University Press. https://doi.org/10.26812/9781611684599

Gottlieb, E., & Wineburg, S. (2012). Between veritas and communitas: Epistemic switching in the reading of academic and sacred history. *Journal of the Learning Sciences, 21*(1), 84–129. https://doi.org/10.1080/10508406.2011.582376

Graham, L., & Nodel, N. (1956). *The Ten Commandments*—Classics Illustrated Comics special issue #135A. Gilberton Company.

Greenberg, B. (1981). *On women & Judaism: A view from tradition.* Jewish Publication Society of America.

Greene, J. C., Caracelli, V. J., & Graham, W. F. (1989). Toward a conceptual framework for mixed-method evaluation designs. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 11*(3), 255–274. https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737011003255

Hartman, T. (2007). Feminism encounters traditional Judaism: Resistance and accommodation. University Press of New England.

Hassenfeld, Z. R. (2016). Reading sacred texts in the classroom: The alignment between students and their teacher's interpretive stances when reading the Hebrew Bible. *Journal of Jewish Education, 82*(1), 81-107. https://doi.org/10.1080/15244113.2016.1137170

Hassenfeld, Z. R. (2017). Teaching sacred texts in the classroom: The pedagogy of transmission and the pedagogy of interpretive facilitation. *Journal of Jewish Education, 83*(4), 339–366. https://doi.org/10.1080/15244113.2018.1378562

Hauptman, J. (2019). *Rereading the Rabbis: A woman's voice*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429497650

Holtz, B. W. (1999). Reading and teaching: Goals, aspirations and the teaching of Jewish texts. In M. Bar-Lev, *Abiding challenges: Research perspectives on Jewish education* (pp. 401–426). Freund Publishing House.

Jacobs, B. M. (2013). Problems and prospects of Jewish education for intelligent citizenship in a post-everything world. *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education, 7*(1), 39–53. https://doi.org/10.1080/15595692.2012.742054

Jaffe, M., & Hurwich, T. (2018). *Worth a thousand words: Using graphic novels to teach visual and verbal literacy*. John Wiley & Sons. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119548690

Jewitt, C. (2008). Multimodality and literacy in school classrooms. *Review of Research in Education, 32*, 241–267. https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X07310586

Krakowski, M. (2017). Developing and transmitting religious identity: Curriculum and pedagogy in Modern Orthodox Jewish schools. *Contemporary Jewry*, 1-24. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12397-017-9205-x

Lehmann, D. (2008). Calling integration into question: A discourse analysis of English and Humash classes at a Modern Orthodox Yeshiva High School. *Journal of Jewish Education, 74*(3), 295–316. https://doi.org/10.1080/15244110802418336

Lipsky, E. T. (2016). Balancing textual authority with student voice: A collaborative action research study in one Modern Orthodox Humash class (Doctoral dissertation, Loyola University Chicago). Retrieved from https://search.proquest.com/docview/1804048287/abstract/28DDB3762E4D2FPQ/1

McCloud, S. (1993). *Understanding comics: The invisible art*. William Morrow Paperbacks.

McKinlay, J. (1998). Reading with choices and controls: Genesis 12. *Feminist Theology, 6*(17), 75–87. https://doi.org/10.1177/096673509800001706

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. SAGE.

Moeller, R. A. (2016). A question of legitimacy. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 59*(6), 709–717. https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.501

Nadar, S. (2002). Gender, power, sexuality and suffering bodies in the Book of Esther: Reading the characters of Esther and Vashti for the purpose of social transformation*. Old Testament Essays, 15*(1), 113–130. https://journals.co.za/doi/10.10520/EJC85449

Reimer, G. T. (1998). Eschewing Esther / embracing Esther: The changing representation of Biblical heroines. In J. Antler, *Talking back: Images of Jewish women in American popular culture* (pp. 207-219). Brandeis University Press.

Rosen, N. (2010). *Biblical women unbound: Counter-tales*. Jewish Publication Society.

Rosenak, M. (2003). Educated Jews: Common elements. In S. Fox, I. Scheffler, & D. Marom (Eds.), *Visions of Jewish education* (pp. 178–200). https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511615214.016

Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (2011). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data* (3rd ed.). SAGE.

Russell, M. (2016). *God is disappointed in you.* Top Shelf Productions.

Sabeti, S. (2011). The irony of 'cool club': The place of comic book reading in schools. *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics, 2*(2), 137–149. https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2011.599402

Sassoon, I. (2011). *The status of women in Jewish tradition*. Cambridge University. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511976629

Shkedi, A. (1997). The tension between 'ought' and 'is': Teachers' conceptions of the encounter between students and culturally valued texts. *Educational Research, 39*(1), 65–76. https://doi.org/10.1080/0013188970390104

Sigel, I. E., Kress, J. S., & Elias, M. J. (2007). Beyond questioning: Inquiry strategies and cognitive and affective elements of Jewish education. *Journal of Jewish Education, 73*(1), 51–66. https://doi.org/10.1080/15244110601175178

Smith, B. P. (2011). *The brick Bible: A new spin on the Old Testament.* Skyhorse Publishing.

Sousanis, N. (2015). *Unflattening*. Harvard University.

Street, B. (1997). The implications of the 'New Literacy Studies' for literacy education.' *English in Education, 31*(3), 45–59. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-8845.1997.tb00133.x

Street, B. (2003). What's "new" in New Literacy Studies? Critical approaches to literacy in theory and practice. *Current Issues in Comparative Education, 5*(2), 77–91. https://www.tc.columbia.edu/cice/pdf/25734_5_2_street.pdf

Street, B. V. (2005). At last: Recent applications of New Literacy Studies in educational contexts. *Research in the Teaching of English, 39*(4), 417–423.

Telushkin, J. (1991). *Jewish literacy: The most important things to know about the Jewish religion, its people, and its history*. William Morrow.

Trencher, M. (2017). *The Nishma Research profile of American Modern Orthodox Jews*. Nishma Institute. Retrieved http://nishmaresearch.com/assets/pdf/Report - Nishma Research Profile of American Modern Orthodox Jews 09-27-17.pdf

Twersky, I. (2003). What must a Jew study – and why? In S. Fox, I. Scheffler, & D. Marom (Eds.), *Visions of Jewish education* (pp. 47–76). https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511615214.008

Waldman, J. T. (2005). *Megillat Esther*. The Jewish Publication Society.

Waxman, C. I. (2019). *Social change and Halakhic evolution in American Orthodoxy*. Littman Library of Jewish Civilization.

Wolverton, B., & Geissman, G. (2009). *The Wolverton Bible.* Fantagraphics Books.

Zion-Waldoks, T. (2015). Politics of devoted resistance: Agency, feminism, and religion among Orthodox Agunah activists in Israel. *Gender & Society, 29*(1), 73–97. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243214549353

Appendix

I have included below a summary of each text and how they each contributed to answering my research questions.

The Book of Genesis Illustrated: Abram and Sarai's Sojourn to Egypt

Introducing his adaptation, Crumb (2009) noted several details critical in understanding his role as an adapter. First, Crumb approaches the text not out of religious belief but out of academic interest. Instead of using Jewish rabbinic exegesis, he draws from contemporary Biblical scholarship. Additionally, Crumb notes that the gender politics happening during Biblical times and shortly thereafter was a perspective he used to enrich his visual storytelling. Robert Alter, in his review of Crumb's adaptation, notes the story of Lot and his two daughters as one example of Crumb's take on gender politics at the time (Alter, 2009). Another example—one that is less sexually explicit and was therefore used in this study—is that of Sarai and Abram in Egypt.

The narrative opens with a famine in Canaan, and Abram and Sarai (whose names were later changed to Abraham and Sarah) travel to Egypt where there is still plenty. Abram instructs Sarai to pretend that they are brother and sister because Pharaoh would kill Abram in order to add Sarai—a beautiful but married woman—to his harem. When they arrive in Egypt, this is exactly what happens. Abram tells Pharaoh and his courtiers that Sarai is his sister and Pharaoh, instead of killing Abram, gives him much wealth and takes Sarai. At this point, God intervenes and sends a plague to Pharaoh's house and Pharaoh somehow learns that Sarai is Abram's wife, not sister. Pharaoh confronts Abram about this, returns Sarai to Abram, and expels them from Egypt, alive and wealthier.

From a feminist perspective, this passage is problematic (McKinlay, 1998). Sarai, throughout the narrative, is given no voice. At a more extreme end, one could argue that Abram compelled Sarai to lie, putting her at risk of being raped by Pharaoh, while he received great wealth. While the Biblical narrative provides Sarai with no dialogue, Crumb's adaptation meticulously illustrates Sarai having an opinion and a voice in her facial expressions and reactions. Crumb specifically draws her as confused, sad, and incredulous as the events of the story unfold around her and arguably affect her safety and well-being.

Jewish education has traditionally held Abram and Sarai as unimpeachable figures. Fearful that feminist criticism would deter students from making personal connections with their Jewish identities, educators refrain from sharing such perspectives, and instead teach this story using strategies designed to make patriarchal narratives more palatable (Beliak, 2013). As a result, Crumb's representation of this Biblical narrative serves as a break from the narrative as it is traditionally taught. The primary research question when using *The Book of Genesis Illustrated* was therefore: *would participants become more critical of Abram and sympathetic to Sarai's trial after reading Crumb's adaptation?*

Megillat Esther: The Story of Achashverosh and Vashti

Waldman's work has roots both in Jewish culture as well as the world of comics creators and graphic novelists. Throughout this adaptation, Waldman includes both rabbinic exegesis as well as his own interpretations, generally using techniques found in the comics medium such as thought balloons with images to literally depict individuals' thoughts and motives. The graphic novel includes both the unabridged Hebrew text, an original translation, and interludes drawn from rabbinic exegesis as well as his own creative vision.

All this can be observed in his retelling of Queen Vashti's fall from grace in the first chapter of the Book of Esther. In the story, King Achashverosh and Queen Vashti both hold independent celebratory feasts. During the king's feast, Achashverosh requests that Vashti come to his feast to show off her beauty. Vashti refuses, angering the king. The king turns to his advisors for advice and one of them, Memuchan, notes that Vashti's transgressions must be punished lest all women scorn their husbands. As a result, the king punishes Vashti by exiling her and eventually giving her royal title to a new woman—Esther.

Feminists have championed Vashti's choice to refuse the king, yet as the logical foil to Esther – the Jewish heroine of the Purim story—rabbis are often ambivalent about her (i.e., Adelman, 2014; Cohen, 1996; Gendler, 1976; Nadar, 2002; Reimer, 1998; Rosen, 2010). This tension is not alien to Waldman. Vashti rejects the king with a sneer on her face, while stating, "I'm no stable boy's plaything" (p. 16); she is given gender-positive dialogue but is drawn in an unflattering way.

For the purposes of this study, *Megillat Esther* represents an approach to graphic novel adaptations that are both more religiously traditional, more innovative, and more complex than Crumb's *Book of Genesis Illustrated*. My primary question when using *Megillat Esther* was therefore: *would readers think more positively of Vashti as a feminist role model and more negatively about Achashverosh after reading Waldman's adaptation?*

The Illustrated Pirkei Avot: Does One Inherit Hell After Speaking with Women?

The Jewish text *Pirkei Avot* is not found within the Bible. The text is instead a compilation of Jewish aphorisms on morality created by rabbis around the first century of the Common Era and is generally well-known among Modern Orthodox Jews. In some Jewish communities, it is customary to read from *Pirkei Avot* every Sabbath, and its entire text is included in many Jewish prayer books. *Pirkei Avot* is divided into five chapters, each containing some amount of *mishnayot* (singular: *mishna*), a unit akin to an article in legal documents.

In her adaptation, Deutch helps explain Pirkei Avot using parenthetical asides within her panels. Most of the asides provide background information, such as identifying the texts found in the Torah, or that there were seven women and 46 men who were prophets. Within the entire text, there is only one parenthetical aside that is critical commentary on *Pirkei Avot*—a comment about *mishna* 5.

Deutch's translation of *mishna 5* is as follows:

> Yose son of Yochanan says, let your home be open wide, & let the poor be members of your home. Do not engage in excessive chatter with your wife & certainly not with someone else's wife. From this the wise derive that all who speak too much with women cause trouble for themselves, will be distracted from Torah study, & in the end will inherit 'Gehinom,' hell. (Deutsch, 2017, p. 15)

Jewish scholars have noted that an ongoing tension in Jewish texts is that they appear to fear having men and women—particularly men and women not married to each other—interacting. Some scholars, in an effort to bring rabbinic thought and rulings into a framework more synchronous with modern-day morality, have noted that these rulings and opinions were at the time forward-thinking, making Jewish law more protective of women's rights than previous Biblical laws were (Hauptman, 2019). Other scholars have additionally noted a wide divergence in rabbinic thought and rulings, even among the composers of *mishnayot*, and those voices that disenfranchise women constitute a minority among the opinions (Sassoon, 2011). Still, as the status of women in Modern Orthodox Judaism continues to be debated, this text is closest among my three texts to the controversies experienced today.

Deutch in her adaptation addresses this controversial *mishna* by immediately following the *mishna* writing, "Clearly this passage is shocking! In our society we now consider men & women to be equally valuable." (Deutch, 2017, p.15). This is therefore an adaptation that most explicitly suggests the original text is problematic and potentially outdated. The primary research question when using *Illustrated Pirkei Avot* was twofold, asking: *(1) Do readers, after reading Deutch's adaptation, critique the* Mishna*? and (2) Do readers feel that Deutch's admonishment of the* mishna *is the correct and appropriate thing to do?*

https://doi.org/10.5422/jmer.2021.v11.59-77