

REMEMBERING OUR COLLEAGUES

TIKVA SIMONE FRYMER-KENSKY (1943–2006)

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I first met Tikva Frymer-Kensky around 1960 when we were both students in the undergraduate school of the Jewish Theological Seminary, although at the time she was still in high school and commuting to the seminary after-hours. Over the years we were classmates both at the Seminary and later in graduate school at Yale, and subsequently we were colleagues and family friends.

Tikva and I first encountered each other in the classes of Yochanan Muffs, then one of the future greats of the Seminary faculty, whose brilliance and passion for the Bible were mirrored in Tikva's, and whose devotion to the study of ancient languages provided a life-long model of grounding one's scholarly enthusiasm in solid linguistic and textual data. His impact on her was so great that she later dedicated one of her books to him. Already fluent in Hebrew, Tikva went on to master Aramaic, Akkadian, and Sumerian, as well as several other ancient languages. She earned a bachelor's degree (A.B.) in ancient world studies from City College of New York in 1965, a bachelor's in Hebrew literature (B.H.L.) in Bible-Talmud from the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1965, a master's in West Semitics from Yale University in 1967, and a doctorate in Assyriology and Sumerology from Yale University in 1977.

In the course of her studies, Tikva was exposed to a veritable who's who of Biblical, Near Eastern, and Jewish scholarship, and I want to mention their names because they meant so much to her: in addition to Muffs there were H. L. Ginsberg, Shalom Paul,

Moshe Held, Abraham Halkin, Avraham Holtz, and Joel Kramer at the Seminary; Jacob Finkelstein, William Hallo, Franz Rosenthal, and Marvin Pope at Yale; and in her postdoctoral days Hebrew University's Moshe Greenberg and Harvard's Thorkild Jacobsen.

Tikva delved deeply into the civilizations of ancient Israel and Mesopotamia as well as a broad range of Judaica, eventually focusing on the areas of law, religion, and literature. She wrote her dissertation on trial-by-ordeal in the ancient Near East, and began to publish a steady stream of articles and books about ancient Mesopotamia and the Bible, and about Jewish theology. One of my favorites is her masterful study of the Babylonian and Biblical accounts of the flood ("The Atrahasis Epic and Its Significance for Our Understanding of Genesis 1-9"), which I have assigned to my students for years.

Over the years Tikva's scholarship was recognized with prestigious awards. She won several postdoctoral research fellowships and in recent years she won both a Koret Jewish Book Award and a National Jewish Book Award for her book *Reading the Women of the Bible* (Schocken, 2002). Just last year the Jewish Publication Society published a collection of her articles, *Studies in Bible and Feminist Criticism*, in its *Scholar of*



Distinction series. A colleague wrote to me that just a week before Tikva died he had worked through this volume trying to formulate "what a Frymer-Kensky 'theology of [the Bible]' might look like . . . and [he] was going to send her a draft to learn if what [he] said rang true to her."

Apart from *Reading the Women of the Bible*, Tikva's best-known work was her other "feminist" book, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (Free Press, 1991). Because of her erudition and meticulous scholarship, the book was unsurpassed for reliability, and one reviewer called it "probably the best factually based survey of [ancient Mesopotamian] religion available today." In it, Tikva explores "what happens in the Bible . . . to the functions and roles once played by goddesses" in Mesopotamian religion, and she argues that "the absence of goddesses causes major changes in the way the Bible . . . looks at humanity, culture, society, and nature." God himself absorbs most of the functions of the

goddesses, including control of fertility, and as a result the divine is sexually neutralized: God is non-sexual; he is masculine only in grammar and metaphor, but not in actual gender. And corresponding to the absence of gender differentiation in the divine is the Biblical concept of humanity that transcends gender. One of Tikva's major insights is that the Bible does not see men and women as being different *in essence*. They are *socially* unequal, and women are subordinate, "but they are not inferior in any intellectual or spiritual way." Misogyny and notions such as feminine wiles and the battle between the sexes are absent. To the extent that such ideas are found in Judaism, Tikva attributes them to Greek ideas that entered Judaism in the Hellenistic period. She sees the Bible's positive evaluation of women as one of the beneficial effects of Biblical monotheism, and considers the challenge of returning to this gender-neutral vision as part of the unfinished business of monotheism. But she also notes negative effects of the Bible's removal of gender from the divine, particularly the fact that the Bible, and Judaism and Christianity in general, have so little to say about such important things as human sexuality and reproduction. In fact, her desire to fill this gap is one reason why she wrote her book *Motherprayer* (Riverhead, 1995), a remarkable anthology of little-known prayers, meditations, and reflections on every aspect of female reproductive life, drawn from ancient Near Eastern, Jewish, and Christian sources.

Reading the Women of the Bible consists of a close reading of more than two dozen Biblical narratives about women. The book is studded with countless fine insights reflecting Tikva's multidisciplinary linguistic, historical, literary-critical, and psychological acumen. But its

most notable feature lies in its methodology and attitude. Modern literary scholarship, both feminist and other types, has sometimes been characterized as operating with a "hermeneutic of suspicion," a view that writers serve ulterior motives and political agendas. Some feminist scholarship is written with a good deal of anger. This was not Tikva's approach, though she did not entirely deny its value. In fact, she insisted that "If we tell the Biblical stories about women *without* taking note of the [inequitable] social system that gives them symbolic value, and [without] naming its inequities, then we unwittingly help to perpetuate the skewed system that the Bible assumes." But Tikva was a lover of the Bible as well as a feminist, and she added to the hermeneutic of suspicion her own "'hermeneutics of grace,' a method of interpretation that recognizes the basic decency and well-meaning character of the Biblical authors." A reviewer noted Tikva's "irenic," anger-free tone and observed that "whether . . . celebrating the women of the Bible . . . or mourning [their victimization]," Tikva's "book . . . enables readers to navigate through the most violent . . . texts of terror in the Bible free from the stranglehold of rage."

This irenic approach was consistent with Tikva's character. She had a notably positive and constructive attitude toward life and people, and I rarely heard her express anger even over things that displeased her. That outlook was surely helpful to her in the past several years. Despite serious illnesses she kept up a pace that would have been impressive even for someone in good health. She continued to teach at the University of Chicago Divinity School (where she had been on the faculty since 1995) and to attend scholarly conferences and completed various publications, including her

last two books. She was active almost to the very end.

The loss of a scholar of such brilliance, erudition, range, and imagination will be felt in all the fields of scholarship in which Tikva was engaged. But the loss goes far beyond the world of scholarship. Tikva was deeply committed to writing for readers beyond her academic peers. As she explained: When I study the Bible . . . I am aware . . . of the impact that my study can have on people, of the possible transformations that it can occasionally cause in Judaism and [in] the spiritual lives of people who might never even hear my name."

Part of our bereavement lies in the fact that Tikva left a large, unfinished agenda of publications. There was so much more that she would have taught us. But for those who knew and cherished her, the loss is deeper and more personal, a gap in our lives. It's been said that you can't make old friends. I knew Tikva for over forty-five years, and I had hoped to know her much longer. May her memory be blessed.

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