



Suspicious Stuff

After all, these women seemed just to be doing what women naturally did: suspicious stuff. There was no real way to stop that. – Dr Eleanor Janega, *The Once and Future Sex: Going Medieval on Women's Roles in Society*

We are in the midst of a series of parshiyot about miracles and sorcery. Last week, we read about how the magicians in Pharaoh's court were recreating the miracles brought by God through Moses and Aaron. It is a very male-centric story at this point: our rebellious miracle-workers are men; the powerful societal force is a man; the court sorcerers are all men.

However, it's folded between two distinctly feminine stories: the midwives and mothers of the very beginning of the Book of Exodus, and the singing and dancing at the sea.

How interesting, then, that it's specifically the story of magic-weaving that is left to the men. How different might this story have looked, had Miriam stepped forward to create a plague of blood? If the court sorcerers had been old crones? In a way, I'm glad for the reprieve – the last thing women have needed historically is more accusations of witchcraft – but the gender dynamics do stand out to me. Women rebel through childbirth and midwifery; women worship through song and dance. Here, for some reason, it's only the men who are involved in great acts of supernatural power.

There is a near-invisible thread that takes us through history of women's worship. Sometimes, they're front-and-centre in the text. More often, they're either conspicuously absent or described doing... well, "suspicious stuff".

On the next three Wednesday evenings, we're going to make an attempt at unearthing some of what ancient and medieval women might have been doing in their religious lives. What are academics suggesting about the glances we have into women's worship and women's rebellion? How might it have reflected their own questions and ideas about divinity? How does understanding the context of these texts change our views of what biblical authors deem suspicious at best?

We'll be meeting in the NLS building at 7.30pm on Jan 24th, Jan 31st, and Feb 7th. I do hope you will join me.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Natasha