**Women in the Book of Samuel: Is There a Different Politics?**

In the following presentation, I aim to think about the possibility of women functioning as political subjects within the narrow and limited scope of action allotted to them in the Book of Samuel. First, I will address the construction of their characters as eternal victims of male political theology. Then, through the characters of Hannah and Rizpah bat Aiah, I will propose viewing their actions as a resource for an alternative political theology.

Elhanan Nir’s book *He That is Under the Rubble* (2014) includes a section of six poems related to the book of Samuel, under the heading “A Woman from Samuel.” Even though three out of the six poems do not deal with female characters, the title of the section invites the adoption of a feminine voice or perspective in looking at the book of Samuel, from the unconventional angle of a male poet, a rabbi at the Siach Yitzchok yeshiva in Jerusalem. A prominent poem in the section is “The Women from the Book of Samuel are Screaming”:

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| *The Women from the Book of Samuel are Screaming* | **הנשים מסֵפר שמואל צורחות** |
| From our bedroom windowWe hear them, night after night—The women from the Book of Samuel screaming.Ein Karem stretches out below, and Tamar,Michal, and BathshebaCross the “Paz” gas station,Walking beneath the Swedish village, lowering their gaze.Black cars honk at them with malice/ viciously,Their heart/s torn,The beauty of their land trampled under the tread of the snake/hammering of the serpent Amnon,And smothered/stifled/suppressed sobbing/weeping envelops the criesThat only a woman knows in the Jerusalem nights.In the adjacent yeshiva they study aloud:‘Whoever says that the man sinned is nothing but mistaken’… *he* *is mistaken.*We don’t fall asleep, we leave/leaving the children alone for a momentAnd run after them. Tamar suddenly looks back,Narrows her gaze,Ablaze with afflictions that brook no forgivenessAnd says to us:You too are among the wickedAnd she ponts to our hands that have not shed bloodNow, they continue to the spring. | מֵחַלּוֹן חֲדַר הַשֵּׁנָה שֶׁלָּנוּאֲנַחְנוּ שׁוֹמְעִים לַיְלָה לַיְלָהאֶת הַנָּשִׁים מִסֵּפֶר שְׁמוּאֵל צוֹרְחוֹת.עֵין-כָּרֶם פְּרוּשָׂה מִתַּחַת וְתָמָר, מִיכַל וּבַת-שֶׁבַעחוֹצוֹת אֶת תַּחֲנַת הַדֶּלֶק שֶׁל 'פָּז',הוֹלְכוֹת מִתַּחַת לַכְּפָר הַשְּׁוֶדִי וּמַשְׁפִּילוֹת מַבָּט.מְכוֹנִיּוֹת שְׁחֹרוֹת צוֹפְרוֹת לָהֶן בְּרֹעַ,לִבָּן קָרוּעַ,יְפִי אַדְמָתָן רָמוּס תַּחַת הַלְמוּת הַנָּחָשׁ אַמְנוֹןוּבְכִי כָּבוּשׁ עוֹטֵף אֶת הַיְּלָלוֹתשֶׁרַק אִשָּׁה יוֹדַעַת בְּלֵילוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַיִם.בַּיְּשִׁיבָה לְיָד לוֹמְדִים בְּקוֹל:כָּל הָאוֹמֵר גֶּבֶר חָטָא אֵינוֹ אֶלָּא טוֹעֶה ט וֹ עֶ ה .אֲנַחְנוּ לֹא נִרְדָּמִים, מַשְׁאִירִים אֶת הַיְּלָדִים רֶגַע לְבַדוְרָצִים אַחֲרֵיהֶן. תָּמָר פֶּתַע מַבִּיטָה לַאֲחוֹרֶיהָמְצַמְצֶמֶת מַבָּט,רוֹשֶׁפֶת יִסּוּרִים שֶׁאֵין מֵהֶם מְחִילָה,וְאוֹמֶרֶת לָנוּ:גַּם אַתֶּם מֵהָרָעִיםוּמַצְבִּיעָה עַל יָדֵינוּ שֶׁלֹּא שָׁפְכוּעַכְשָׁו הֵן מַמְשִׁיכוֹת אֶל הַמַּעְיָן |

Tamar, Michal, and Bathsheba appear here not as a group of women figures but as “*the* women from the Book of Samuel.” The reference to the biblical work within which they are placed invites us to think about the general nature of this book, which is completely immersed in power struggles between men, within patriarchal structures. Elhanan Nir changes the prism of the reference to the book by moving the heart of the struggle from the inner-male arena—among the fighters of the various armies in the many wars, among the royal struggles of Saul and David, between the institution of prophecy and the institution of the monarchy, among the sons of David in the succession struggles, among the military leaders, or between God and the king—they are all struggles “between men” (as Anne Kosofsky Sedgwick calls it)[[1]](#footnote-1) into the arena of the struggle between the sexes. In this struggle, the women are trampled.

The planting of the characters within a geographically located and well-identified urban /experience establishes the occurrence as eternal and cyclical, trans-historical, immutable and irreparable. Its persistence is evident in the fact that in the yeshiva, the men who study continue to repeat Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani’s claim that “anybody who says that David sinned is nothing but wrong” (in a convoluted /an elaborate passage in the Babylonian Talmud, b.Shabbat 19a, which deals with the acquittal and purification/whitewashing of sinful male characters from the Bible, from Reuben to Josiah). In other words, the essence of the suffering of the women from the Book of Samuel, emerges from the fact that there is no recognition of the injustice done to them, because the *halakha*/Jewish/rabbinic legal tradition will always side with the man.

The speaker, a resident of Jerusalem, goes out together with his wife to appeal to the tormented ancient women, perhaps to express the lack of recognition of their suffering and to ask for their forgiveness. But the most tormented among them, Tamar, rejects their appeal and blames the modern couple, “You too / are among the wicked,” despite the fact that “our hands did not spill” [blood]. The allusion is to the ceremony of the “broken-necked calf,” which is mandated in a situation where “a slain corpse is found in the land… the identity of the slayer not being known” (Deut 21:1). The association is reinforced through the mention of the spring, the destination of the women’s walk. This is a ceremony of ritual, institutionalized, violence, requiring the sacrifice of a scapegoat as a substitution, as a declaration of the innocence of the hands of the community and of the restoration of order.[[2]](#footnote-2) This allusion paints the figures of women as the eternal victim of male violence, the broken-necked calf, the remnant trampled under the wheels of patriarchal war, a necessary payment in the struggles to establish the monarchy that has no qualms about exploiting women to the fullest.

At the same time, the speaker’s identification with the women’s suffering does not soften the harsh image of rigid traditional stances that continue to be replicated even in his poem, creating what Joan Wallach Scott calls “the appearance of timeless permanence in binary gender representation.”[[3]](#footnote-3) While the men are engaged in study and their voices are raised at a high level, the women’s voice is limited to a non-verbal stratum, to the screaming, crying, howling, and fiery gaze (in an image reminiscent of a serpent, even though, according to the poem, it is Amnon who is the snake). They do appear within the modern city, but this is an appearance of an ancient and ghostly vision that is not assimilated into the present— they are identified with the earth, with the night, and with the water spring. Although the poem exposes the abusive gender politics of the book of Samuel, the women who appear in it are not historical political subjects. They move in circles of time to recall the cruelty with which they were treated, but they do not demand justice, having already despaired of it. Their scope of action is reduced to the scream, which appears here as an intensification of the biblical description of Tamar, “and she walked away, screaming as she walked.”

A “woman from Samuel,” according to Elhanan Nir’s vision, is not a political subject, meaning she is not presented as an individual with a sense of presence and agency who seeks (to borrow from Sara Ahmed) to create an alternative orientation to social reality, the political community, and history, offering an affirmative future horizon and continuity.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The question of political function is a particularly relevant question in relation to the Book of Samuel. Moshe Halbertal and Stephen Holmes describe the Book of Samuel as “The Beginning of Politics,” a literary act of political thought made possible by a revolutionary shift in biblical political theology, a transition from God’s direct and exclusive sovereignty over political events to human sovereignty. The monarchy is created out of the demand of the people; it is not a mythical force but an institution that was created for strategic reasons in historical time. And so, “the semiautonomous sphere of human politics was born ‘between the collapse of the utopian ideology of God's kingship on the one hand and the refusal to deify the king on the other.’”[[5]](#footnote-5) The attitude of ~~the author of~~ the Book of Samuel towards the institution of the monarchy is ambivalent and critical throughout, exposing the fundamentally problematic nature of the human political project, which is based on “the grip of power”: the self-destructive mechanism inherent in the fact that the power granted by the people to the ruler to overcome their enemies and protect them, is the same power used by him to oppress, exploit, and enslave the very people entrusted to his care.[[6]](#footnote-6)

In *And He Will Take Your Daughters*, April D. Westbrook reads the female figures in the Book of Samuel as a constant focus of challenge, doubt, and criticism of the ruler’s righteousness and moral character, as well as of the institution of monarchy in general. Westbrook argues for a literary pattern of the “woman story” intertwined with David’s reign: “these woman stories are placed at strategic points within the unfolding political progression of David’s life,”[[7]](#footnote-7) provide a negative ethical evaluation of David, and highlight how entitlement leads to the abuse of the power that comes with it.

However, even though they occupy an essential critical position in the political thought system of the Book of Samuel, the women in Westbrook’s description, often manipulated by the control of the man, are a secondary object intended to be used as a tool in illuminating the character of David—albeit in a negative light, as he is the active figure and the paragon of the narrative. As in Elhanan Nir’s poems, they are not political subjects with independent agency and the ability to offer an alternative to the negative exploitation of power by the king.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Of course, in a political theology where the man is in control and politics is based on the grip of power, women’s ability to act is diminished and pushed to the margins of the narrative. I would like to briefly focus on two female characters who stand, indeed, at the margins of the narrative—at its beginning and at its end—but from this strategic position, they create a strong framework for thinking about action as a female political subject.

Conventional discourse of political theology following Carl Schmitt revolves around concepts of emergency, political sovereignty, and decisionism. Schmitt proposes God’s sovereignty as an analogical theological key to political sovereignty. Thus, war is the focus of the actualization of a sovereign’s power, enabling decision-making.[[9]](#footnote-9) This convergence between the political and theological is well expressed in the modes of salvation, victories, and even the abandonments that God allocates to the kings he anoints, and in the mechanism of revenge and humiliating decision-making that drives the wars in the Book of Samuel. Toward the end of the book, David praises “God who avenges me, and brings down nations under me” (2 Samuel 22:48). However, it is important to see that the concept of “political theology” in itself does not necessarily entail a discourse of war, revenge, and decisionism. The theological discourse may also offer other resources of political expression, resources of dialogue, morality, and avoidance of violent solutions.

The Book of Samuel, whose narrative progresses through a series of struggles between men, actually begins with a rivalry between women (Hannah and Peninnah) and a strong female figure who acts as a subject and offers an alternative political theology. The very fact that Hanna is the dominant character in the opening chapters presages the importance and vitality of the female position for the rest of the book. Hannah, destined to be Samuel’s mother, turns to God and conducts a direct negotiation, in which she offers that if God opens her womb, she will dedicate her son to God’s service. It is natural to interpret that her plea for a child seeks a remedy that will allow her to follow the path designated for women, but it is also worth noting the way in which she actually deviates from this path. Her prayer is carried out in a whisper, “only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard” (1 Samuel 1:13). This image of voiceless activity presents a polar opposite to Tamar, who “went along, walking and crying,” her voice heard aloud, yet her fate was sealed. Hannah’s very silence expresses that her dialogue is with God himself, and not with the men around her, from whom no salvation could come. The direct dialogue with God clearly excludes the men from the picture, rendering them superfluous. Eli the priest even mistakes her for a drunk, and Elkanah, who denies Hannah’s needs (“Am I not better to you than ten sons?” 1 Samuel 1:8), has no say in the fate of the child or his name—he is nothing more than a sperm donor for a son whom “I [Hannah] asked for from the Lord” (1 Samuel 1:20) and he cannot oppose the dedication of the child.

Hannah’s theological-political discourse expresses a conception of God as one who administers justice. Her prayer of thanksgiving is not about her personal salvation but about God’s power to reverse conditions of poverty, servitude, and lack and bring about social and political liberation.[[10]](#footnote-10) In her statement, “For not by strength shall man prevail” (1 Samuel 2:9) and the agreement she makes with God, she formulates a political theology based on dialogue and attentiveness to distress. In the narrative’s point in time—immediately following the horrific bloodshed of the Book of Judges—she offers an alternative conception of power and an affirmative horizon linked to an ethic of giving and of doing justice.

Samuel remains to serve in Shiloh, and Hannah visits him annually with a “little coat/robe” she’s made for him. In making the coat, she unifies her identity as a mother, wrapping her son in love, with her commitment to dedicating him to his theological role. This is the same coat that becomes a metonym for Samuel’s prophetic authority when Saul grabs the edge of Samuel’s coat, and when he appears before the Witch of Endor. To a large extent, the coat’s metamorphoses in the subsequent narrative echo the figure of Hannah, the coat-maker, who established the dialogic connection with God—a connection based on the theology of “For not strength shall man prevail"—and bequeathed it to her son.

As the narrative progresses, the political theology that Hannah formulates clearly comes out on the losing end, and is sidelined along with the departure of the anti-monarchic Samuel from the leadership of the people as the stage is cleared for the coercive political theology of royal sovereignty. However, her ethic anticipates the actions of other women in the Book of Samuel who possess a dialogic and inclusive power, such as Abigail, the wise women of Tekoa and Abel Beth Maacah, the Witch of Endor, and others—an ethic of protection and care, of “not by might,” working to mitigate violence, save lives, and uphold the value of human dignity.

This ethic is defeated and retreats as the events of the book become increasingly cruel and brutal, under a political theology marked by revenge and decisionism. Thus, the “woman story” that concludes 2 Samuel presents a peak of barbarity and moral corruption that seem to have grown as David’s position grew stronger and was reinforced by the grip of power. Here, once again, a woman’s figure stands as a political subject offering a moral alternative. In chapter 21, on the grounds of ending a three-year drought, and following the same political theology where justice is achieved through revenge and humiliation, David hands over seven of Saul's descendants to the Gibeonites, including two sons born to him by his concubine Rizpah, daughter of Aiah. These sons are murdered and desecrated by the Gibeonites, who leave their bodies unburied. “Then Rizpah, daughter of Aiah, took sackcloth and spread it on a rock for herself, and she stayed there from the beginning of the harvest until rain from the sky fell on the bodies, and she suffered neither the birds of the air to settle on them by day, nor the beasts of the field by night” (2 Samuel 21:10). Rizpah’s action defies imagination: over the course of months, from the harvest until the onset of the winter rains (from the month of Nissan to Cheshvan), she stands on the rock and shields and protects the impaled corpses of her sons from predatory animals. The marginal figure of the exploited concubine, a bereaved mother who is defenseless and without status, who acts from her defeated situation and nevertheless finds a way to influence and change reality using the meager tools at her disposal—her motherhood, her body, and a strip of sackcloth—creates a tragic portrait like something out of the Iliad or the story of Antigone (she too acted against a political sovereign who marked corpses as enemies). Indeed, Martin Buber saw Rizpah bat Bat Aiah as the “Antigone of the Jews.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

The two women who open and close the narrative framework—Hanna and Rizpah—express their political theology through acts of wrapping and covering, one through the little coat and the other through the draping sackcloth. It is a recurring feminine gesture that communicates an alternative feminine ethic associated with care, protection, and rescue.[[12]](#footnote-12) The same is true of Michal’s cover-up actions, concealing David’s escape by covering the bed with a goatshair quilt (1 Samuel 19:13),[[13]](#footnote-13) or the woman from Bahrim who hid Ahimaaz and Jonathan in the well of her house, which she covered with fabric and seeds on it (2 Samuel 17:19). The male figures, especially Saul and David, in contrast, are characterized by acts of tearing and cutting—Saul tears Samuel’s coat and David cuts Saul’s coat, which symbolize not only male violence but also the desire to destroy female ethics.

Hannah and Rizpah are also characters who appear in their identity as mothers; they act as maternal political subjects. As a side note, I will comment that it is possible to read the Book of Samuel as a book that presents us with figures of good mothers and bad fathers. It is precisely fatherhood—through the figures of Eli, Samuel, Saul, David, and to a large extent also the figure of God himself—that is depicted as a flawed structure, of weakness of character, treachery, abandonment, the absence of a paternal role model and the inability to establish adequate continuity.

Unlike Hannah, Rizpah does not speak directly to God. Nevertheless, her action has a strong dialogic force, and as such, she is rewarded: following her, David takes action to bury the bones of the impaled men and even brings up the bones of Saul and Jonathan, who were impaled after the battle at Gilboa, and includes them in the proper burial. Only then did God relent and stop the famine, a stop made possible only by virtue of Rizpah’s action. In the final chapters of Samuel, the figure of David is struck by fatigue and the knowledge of his weakness and the practical extent of his stature, as if he had learned the lesson of Hannah on his body: “For not by strength shall man prevail.”

1. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 1985. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire.* New York: Columbia University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. René Girard, 1977. *Violence and the Sacred*. Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Joan W. Scott, 1986. “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *The American Historical Review*, 91: 1068. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Sara Ahmed, 2006, Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, p. 9. וראו מירי רוזמרין 2018, "פמיניזם, ביקורת וסוביייקטיביות פוליטית", *תיאוריה וביקורת* 50, עמ' 461. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Moshe Halbertal and Stephen Holmes, 2017. *The Beginning of Politics: Power in the Biblical Book of Samuel*. Princeton and Oxford: Princetown University Press, p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. April D. Westbrook, 2015. *‘And He Will Take Your Daughters…’: Woman Story and the Ethical Evaluation of Monarchy in the David Narrative*, London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. According to Westbrook, the woman stories have a vital and significant role in the Book of Samuel due to their critical and skeptical purpose. In my opinion, the vital role of the women in the Book of Samuel is related precisely to its novelistic quality, which is essentially unsparing, and is evident in the relative abundance of secondary characters and their casual, random, and fleeting appearances, such as the girls who draw water and direct Saul and his servant to Samuel's location, or the slave girl who is sent to warn Yonatan and Ahimaatz in Ein Rogel. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Christoph Schmidt (ed.) and Eli Schonfeld (co-ed.), 2009. *God Will Not Stand Still: Jewish Modernity and Political Theology*. Tel Aviv: Van Leer and Hakibbutz Hameuchad. (In Hebrew)

וראו: כריסטוף שמידט (עורך); אלי שיינפלד (עורך משנה), 2009. *האלוהים לא ייאלם דום: המודרנה היהודית והתיאולוגיה הפוליטית*, ירושלים: מכון ון ליר; תל אביב: הקיבוץ המאוחד, עמ' 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Ilse Müllner, 2012. “Books of Samuel: Women at the Center of Israel’s History”, in: *Feminist biblical interpretation: a compendium of critical commentary on the books of the Bible and related literature*, edited by Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, p. 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. מרטין בובר, 1978. דרכו של מקרא: עיונים בדפוסי סגנון בתנ"ך. ירושלים: מוסד ביאליק, עמ' 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The maternal ethic of covering and protection is associated with the figure of Cypris in the Iliad:

האתיקה האמהית של הכיסוי וההגנה מתקשרת לדמותה של קיפריס באיליאדה: בזרועותיה הלבנות חבקתו את בנה שאהבה / פרשה סככה מעליו בקמטי לבושה המזהיר / כמגן בפני כל החצים, ולא יזרוק בלבו נחושתו / אחד מבני הדנאים לקחת נפשו ממנו / ככה הוציאה את בנה אשר אהבה מן המלחמה (תרגום טשרניחובסקי). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In my opinion, this can shed light on another aspect of Michal’s negative reaction to David’s dancing “girded with a linen ephod” (like the garment worn by the boy Samuel before he received the robe from his mother) before the Ark of the Lord. His exposed body in the simple garment represents a new kind of confidence he has in himself as king, in contrast to the time when he was pursued by Saul and needed the hiding and covering with which she herself provided him out of love. The absence of covering, therefore, also points to the end of her role in his life, and her removal from the picture. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)