



## WOMEN'S LEAGUE FOR CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

### Orpah's List Non-Fiction Selection, 2014-2015

#### Study Guide

#### *Chapters of the Heart:*

#### *Jewish Women Sharing the Torah of Our Lives*

By Rabbi Sue Levi Elwell and Rabbi Nancy Fuchs Kreimer

Ellen Kaner Bresnick, Chair, Program Activity Committee (PAC)

#### Synopsis

In *Chapters of the Heart: Jewish Women Sharing the Torah of Our Lives*, 20 prominent Jewish women invite readers into their lives through their beautifully crafted personal narratives. In this collection of essays, each author analyzes a journey or experience through the prism of a Jewish text that she finds personally comforting or helpful. Through their respective points of view and backgrounds, they share their experiences as mothers, daughters, sisters, partners, and friends, contemplating the significant moments in their lives when Jewish tradition helped them to find answers to challenging questions. The essays cover a wide spectrum of issues such as eating disorders, Alzheimers and other illnesses, personal relationships, divorce and death.

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#### About the Authors

**Rabbi Sue Levi Elwell**, PhD., has been exploring, teaching and writing about spirituality, and creating and sustaining healthy and open-hearted communities. Since her ordination at Hebrew Union College, she has worked as both a pulpit rabbi and an academic, teaching at the University of Cincinnati, UCLA, and LaSalle University. Elwell's publications are many. Most recently she served as the poetry editor and member of the editorial board of the award winning *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (2008). She was the founding director of the Los Angeles Jewish Feminist Center, and has served also at the Union for Reform Judaism and as a Senior Rabbinic Fellow of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem. Elwell is the mother of two grown daughters and lives in Philadelphia with her partner, Nurit Shein, who directs The Mazzone Center, Philadelphia's pre-eminent LGBT health center.

**Rabbi Nancy Fuchs Kreimer**, Ph.D., received her rabbinic ordination from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and has been actively involved with interfaith dialogue for nearly four decades. Kreimer is on the advisory board of the new *Journal of Inter-Religious Dialogue* and serves as a founding board member of Clergy Beyond Borders, and has attended many of the world's landmark interreligious gatherings. Throughout her rabbinic and academic careers she has been a guest lecturer and scholar in residence across the United

States and in Germany. Previously, Rabbi Fuchs Kreimer served as director of the Kaplan Institute for Adult Jewish Studies and as rabbinic director of the Jewish Identity Program of the Jewish Family and Children's Service of Philadelphia. She is a past president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association.

The author of many publications in a variety of journals and other academic publications that focus on ecumenical study, Fuchs Kreimer blogs at [www.multifathworld.org](http://www.multifathworld.org) at The Huffington Post

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## **General Discussion Questions**

1. What is the "Torah of Our Lives" and why was this selected as the book's sub-title?
  2. What is a personal narrative? Do you think there are any essays that do not fit in with your definition of a personal narrative?
  3. In one of the reviews cited at the beginning of the book, Rabbi Zalman Schachter –Shalomi describes this as "sacred storytelling." What do you think is sacred storytelling? Why do we participate in it?
  4. What general truths can we find throughout these stories? Why do you think these are so common?
  5. How can this collection of essays be used to complement the Women's League Mishpachah initiative?
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## **Specific Essay-Based Questions**

### **"A Life With Things" by Vanessa L. Ochs**

1. In what way does the author's mother-in-law see the china as a metaphor for marriage? How does it affect Ochs?
2. Ochs says that she learns from the Talmud that there are situations in life when we must turn to objects. What are those situations? How does she relate these situations to her own marriage?

### **"On Raising a Son: One Mother's Search for Wisdom" by Hara E. Person**

1. In what ways does Person employ archetypal images in raising her son?
2. What is the most significant biblical archetype that she uses? Why this one?
3. What does she learn about men's voices as she writes her own narrative, using her own voice?

### **"Between Sisters" by Ellen M. Umansky**

1. How is it possible for the author and her sister to be best friends, yet they also have the most "complicated and emotionally charged" relationship that Umansky has ever experienced?
2. How does she come to interpret the Jacob stories in a more "gyno-centric" (woman-oriented) way?

**“The Face Under the Huppah: Relating to My Closest Stranger” by Nancy Fuchs Kreimer**

1. Who is the author’s “closest stranger”?
2. Why does the author see “being trapped in one car together for hours” as standing in for the larger spiritual challenge of a long-term committed relationship?
3. Why does she see the act of storytelling as a means to find ourselves? And why does she see Jewish storytelling as transformative?

**“Loving Our Mothers” by Vivian Mayer**

1. Why does the author begin this narrative by saying that she had a visit from “Rivkah Imeinu”? What does Rivkah represent for her?
2. How does she feel about “internalized oppression” and what does it represent for her?
3. How does she come to understand the individual’s relationship with God?

**“Portals to Sacred Family Life” by Julie Greenberg**

1. How does Greenberg see the daily-ness of what we encounter as a “portal to a holy journey”?
2. How does she see ritual objects as invested with the same meaning as those encountered in our daily lives?
3. How does she see all of this as relating to family life and to the Self and the Other?

**“Sing , O Barren One: Ambushed by a Hysterectomy at Age Twenty-Six” by Ellen Frankel**

1. How does Frankel’s relationship with Bible stories change when she has her hysterectomy?
2. What emotion has she never talked about prior to this narrative? Why? How does she handle it in her narrative? How does she come to terms with it?

**“El Na Refa Na La: Please, God, Heal My Daughter!” by Amy Eilberg**

1. How does Eilberg come to terms with her daughter’s anorexia?
2. What role does Kabbalah play in her response to this illness?
3. What is significant about Penina’s response to her mother’s narrative?

**“Facing Pain, Facing My Fears” by Ruth H. Sohn**

1. What power does Sohn ascribe to meditation ?
2. What has she learned about praying for the healing of the sick?
3. What does she see as the path to blessing?

**“My Mother as a Ruined City: Insights from the Book of Lamentations” by Rachel Adler**

1. Why does Adler find comfort in the Book of Lamentations?
2. Why does she organize this narrative in non-chronological order?
3. After writing this whole painful narrative, why does she end with the words, “let there come renewal”?

**“Wrestling with God and Evil” by Judith Plaskow**

1. What literary genre inducted her into the incomprehensibility of human evil?
2. What enabled her to change her view of God and evil? How did this view change?
3. What does she think is God’s answer to Job’s most profound question? Why does she come to this opinion?

**“In the Right Time: Reflections on an Abortion” by Sue Levi Elwell**

1. What happens to Elwell when she is ambushed by “a piercing memory”? Do most of us have the same reaction? Why?
2. How does she feel about her silence?
3. Does her silence and her narrative help us to understand why she chose to be one of the editors of this book?

**“My Life as a Talking Horse: Hybridity and Gender Equity as Jewish Values”**

by Wendy Zierler

1. In what ways does Zierler’s life have a bi-furcated or dual structure? What does this do to her?
2. Does she think it is possible to discover a true, authentic, coherent self? Why? Why not?
3. Why does she select Balaam? How does she see similarities between herself and the text?

**“My Interfaith Friendships: Blessings and Challenges” by Blu Greenberg**

1. What rules does Greenberg hold sacred for one engaged in dialogue?
2. Why does she spend so much of her narrative on Sister Rose?
3. Is it possible to actually have the interfaith dialogue that she craves? Would she agree with you?

**“The Remembrance of These Things: War, Occupation, Parsley, Bitter Herb”**

by Margaret Holub

1. Is it possible for Holub to reconcile her need for a State of Israel with her disappointment in some of its security measures? Does she think it is possible?
2. Why does she call herself a pharaoh?
3. How does she view the concept of Mitzrayim? How do you feel about this?

**“Shattering and Rebirth: My Midlife Gap Year by Dayle A. Friedman**

1. What does Friedman view as the various chapters of her life?
2. What does she learn about the way she handles the transitions from each chapter to the next?

**“Letting Go and Drawing Close” by Laura Geller**

1. What are the three spiritual practices that Geller finds effective when she is experiencing a difficult time in her life?
2. In what different ways does the story of Abram and Sarai challenge her?
3. Finally, how does she reconcile “letting go” with “drawing close”?

### **“Leaving Egypt Again: Aging With Awareness” by Sheila Peltz Weinberg**

1. Why is Passover such a significant holiday for Weinberg as she contemplates the effects of aging?
2. How does she re-invent the significance of the symbols on the Passover plate and on the seder table? What message does she derive from her rethinking of the power of these symbols?

### **“A Heart So Broken It Melts Like Water” by Barbara Eve Breitman**

1. How is it that through the nightmare of Breitman’s husband’s unexpected death and her cousin’s murder that she is able to attain some of the greatest clarity of her life? What does she learn?
2. How does she feel about the idea that some of this clarity is facilitated by Buddhist rather than Jewish thought? What do you think about this?
3. What does she mean when she says that we give birth to ourselves over and over again?

### **“With the Song of Songs in Our Hearts” by Tamara Cohn Eskenazi**

1. What is the role of literature in Eskenazi’s life? How did it help her to cope with the deaths of her first two husbands?
  2. How does she see the role of Song of Songs in her life, especially in her third marriage?
  3. What does she mean when she says that a common language was springing from within “us” and that the language was “us” ?
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## **Suggested Activities**

1. Read one selection and then create or develop a ritual inspired by that selection. Why do you think this particular ritual works so well with this selection? In what other ways might you use this ritual? What are the Jewish elements in this ritual? What Jewish writings/teachings relate to this ritual?
2. Write your own personal narrative in which you present one of your “journeys” and describe your attempts to grapple with a particular conflict or issue. How did you reconcile your conflicts and issues---those with others and those within yourself? What Jewish elements, writings and teachings helped you to resolve your conflicts? Why do you think these are the ones that can inspire you to find an answer or at least some peace?
3. If you feel inspired by activity #2 above, write about other personal narratives. Combine them in a booklet similar to the format of *Chapters of the Heart*. Illustrate the narratives if you wish and/or are comfortable doing this. You might even present your narrative in a kind of group sharing or reading program.

4. For an extended period of time, keep a journal in which to jot down your thoughts, observations, etc. Use sermons, newspaper articles, blog-entries, books you are reading, any kind of written text to inspire you. Look for common points of entry that might give you an idea about what inspires you spiritually – either from Judaism or from life, in general.
5. Create a sacred space or a designated space for yourself and for the other women in your sisterhood. Display their writings, their art, their thoughts---with permission, of course.
6. As a Social Action project, visit with residents of local Jewish homes. This is often a privilege that is reserved for our children. Do personal narratives similar to the ones in this book or oral histories in which residents of these homes might write about significant moments in their lives. The residents present their writings and their own stories, and you and other sisterhood members can help them illustrate their writings or create a scrapbook for these writings. You might even create a space for them, either in their own rooms or in the facility.
7. Create an on-going forum of dialogue to help understand family issues that are reflected in this book, or other kinds of issues that might also surface within the membership of your sisterhood. Invite specialists from your own synagogue ---social workers, psychologists, etc. or from the non-profits in your area. Make this a safe (i.e. non -judgmental) place by stressing ground rules for discussions---“I statements” only, respect for each other in not sharing what someone says or writes unless they give you permission to do so.

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## Interviews

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