Columns
Spirituality



This mid-17th century British textile (linen embroidered with silk thread) depicts David and Abigail, whose story is told in the Hebrew Bible's 1 Samuel. (Metropolitan Museum of Art)



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As in the New Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures are peopled with a wide variety of women. Some of their names have been lost to history, others have names and stories that seem larger than life. However, all are part of the great fabric of salvation history which is our story. That story began with the words, "Let there be light."

The author of Genesis 1:1 wrote that the spirit/breath of God moved over the fearful mystery of chaos. I like to invite that same Holy Breath to be my prayer companion on a regular basis —either individually or in a group of other Biblical/saintly feminine friends of my choice.

In several modern languages, such as Spanish, nouns are considered either masculine or feminine. During my graduate theology studies, I took a class on Hebrew. I was surprised to discover that Hebrew nouns are likewise either masculine or feminine. Thus, the word *ruah* is, grammatically, a feminine noun that means spirit or breath. However, *ruah* and many other Hebrew feminine nouns are often used as poetic metaphors in the human attempt to say something about God.

Joan P. Schaupp had this to say in her article "The Feminine Imagery of God in the Hebrew Bible":

> There are profound metaphors of God as feminine in the Hebrew Old Testament. On occasion this poetic imagery is allegorized literally as female; most often the feminine appears in the Hebrew Bible in metaphor and allegory. ...
>
> For women, this introduction to Genesis has profound implications, which are being grasped as a growing number of scholars closely examine the original Hebrew text. Simply stated, God is described in both masculine and feminine imagery in the opening verses of Genesis. *God* (a masculine noun) creates by his Word, and life begins as the *spirit* (a feminine noun) of God hovers over the earth with her life-giving breath.

That said, one can honor the feminine aspect of *ruah.*

Another Hebrew feminine noun is *shekhinah*, which is translated as “presence of God.” Including this concept during my prayer helps me deepen my meditation. I found this beautiful description in the Jewish Virtual Library: "It is through the shekinah that humans can experience the Divine.” The spirit moved to help bring order out of chaos. Thus, beginning the process of creation, we can pray for those who work to care for our Earth and for government leaders to craft laws that will help heal and protect our Earth.

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I reflect on the mother of Moses (Exodus 2:1-10): how sad that she had to give up her child not once but twice. Many parents during the Holocaust sent or gave their children to other people so they would have a chance to grow up. This reality continues today as parents of families fleeing violence often must make the difficult choice to separate from their children by sending them to places they hope are more safe. I can imagine myself listening to Moses’ mother as she shares her pain of letting go. With whatever spiritual practice you use to pray for the end of violence, pray also for those families and for those unwed mothers who have given their child up for adoption, as well as for more women who will choose adoption over abortion.

Turning to Miriam, sister to Moses and Aaron, *(*Exodus 15:1-18*)* makes me think of “Oh, Freedom!”, a song I often enjoy hearing the lyric soprano Renée Fleming sing. Her rendition is lush, which, I believe, is perfect for this timeless spiritual. While its lyrics originally celebrated the ultimate freedom of heaven after death, the song was commonly sung as part of the civil rights movement to celebrate the newfound freedom of African Americans in America.

After the Israelites crossed the Red Sea, Miriam led her people in a dance to celebrate their deliverance. I can well imagine how these freed slaves must have danced and sang their own version of “Oh, Freedom!” The biblical text mentions the Israelites considered Miriam a prophetess. Maybe her prophetic role was to show her people how to celebrate again. After 400 years of slavery, perhaps they had forgotten how.

When this pandemic ends and Christians of every faith community return to church in greater numbers, how will we all celebrate? Let us pray with Miriam that we all will sing with grateful hearts a freedom hymn. Pray also for those people who seeking freedom as refugees as well as for those who live under dictators.

Another favorite is Abigail *(*1 Samuel 25:2-42*)*. Locked in an arranged and difficult marriage, Abigail was able to remain true to herself using her strong diplomatic skills with her husband. She also used her diplomacy to soften David's angry response to her husband's inhospitable behavior. It was no surprise that after her husband dies, David marries her. To have such strong skills, Abigail must have first been a very caring and compassionate person. What might she say to you about compassion? As you listen, perhaps you could pray for those couples who have difficult marriages and for those who have escaped domestic violence.

Then there is Anna, Tobit's wife *(*Tobit*).* At one point in the story, Tobit becomes blind. As a result, Anna must become the wage earner. Even though her earnings were essential for their survival, it was a source of friction in their relationship. As a result, the story reveals the ups and downs many marriages go through. What I find interesting is how this couple's conversation progresses. We see Anna as a wife who speaks her mind to a doubting husband — then a husband who changes from doubting to one who comforts a tearful wife. Similar tensions can occur today when a husband can no longer work due to an accident or illness. Anna would be an apt companion when we pray for couples in such situations and for those who are preparing for marriage.

Susanna *(*Daniel:13*)* was beautiful, rich, and deeply religious. But her spirituality didn’t protect her from being sexually assaulted verbally. Then came "blame the victim.” The two elders had everything going for them — or at least they thought they did. Then someone spoke up — oddly enough, it was a youth. Suddenly, everything changed. The elders were put on trial, their lie was exposed, they were found guilty, then they received the punishment meant for Susanna. I like to share Susanna's prayer to intercede for the unjustly condemned on death row, for women who are sexually harassed on their job and for all those who are sexually violated.

If you invite these or other women of the Hebrew Scriptures to be a part of your prayer and if you use the intentions I suggested, consider adding one or two of your own. In whatever way we choose to pray, we must pray for a needy world.