

"In Memoriam: Tikva Simone Frymer-Kensky, 1943-2006," *Nashim, a Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* No.13, Spring 5767/2007, 252-261.

Tikva Simone Frymer-Kensky, 1943-2006
Yehi Zichronah Le-vrachah, May her Memory be for a Blessing

Diane M. Sharon, PhD
Academy for Jewish Religion
December, 2006

My teacher, colleague, and friend, Dr. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, died just before Labor Day weekend on Thursday, August 31, 2006, 7 Elul 5766. At that time, Tikva, 62, was Professor of Hebrew Bible and the History of Judaism in the University of Chicago's Divinity School. She had battled mis-diagnosed breast cancer for four years.

Tikva was a tireless biblical scholar, whose meticulous work was exemplary for combining the disciplines of historical critical methods, literary analysis, and feminist approaches to reading the biblical text in its ancient Near Eastern cultural context. Her passion was exploring the history and present reality of women and religion.

The bare bones of her academic achievements are impressive: Tikva trained in at Yale, earning a doctorate in Assyriology and Sumerology in 1977, ten years after receiving a master's in West Semitics from Yale in 1967. She was the author of five books plus her unpublished dissertation, co-editor of two other books, contributor of 37 book chapters and 32 articles as well as another two-dozen or so encyclopedia, dictionary, and commentary entries. At her death, she had a commentary on the book of Ruth almost finished, and the beginnings of a theological analysis of Genesis 1-11, both of which will see the light of day in some form. (I've included an abbreviated annotated bibliography of her books at the end of this piece.)

Tikva did all this at a time when women were not routinely considered for serious academic appointments. She often commented that for women scholars a non-traditional career path was essential, since there *was* no traditional academic career path for them. At the same time, Tikva was the wife for 32 years of a Rabbi and scholar in his own right, Dr. Allan Kensky, and the mother of two children who are now in PhD programs themselves.

At her funeral, Allan, now spiritual leader of Beth Hillel Congregation in Wilmette, IL, said of her early years in the academy, "Tikva was a pioneer, a woman academic in a field that, when she began, was not that friendly to women, especially to those who sought to raise a family. When she applied to graduate school, one of her professors in college thought he was giving her the best possible recommendation when he wrote, 'She thinks like a man.' Later, she returned to teaching full time just two weeks after [daughter] Meira was born, as she was told it would not be considered professional to take a maternity leave. Eventually her position at Wayne State was closed, and Tikva sensed that as a woman she had been given a raw deal."

In her children's early years, Tikva put her own career on hold to remain in the community where Allan was a congregational rabbi in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Tikva wrote about this:

"From a career perspective, I should have left my job at Wayne State University as soon as I received my doctorate. But my husband was happy in Ann Arbor and in his

congregation, so I stayed in my “starting job,” teaching Hebrew and a little Bible long after I should have left. I even stayed on to teach part-time after I was denied tenure because my position was being closed. I was a classic “Mrs. Adjunct,” a married woman who is unable to move to where the jobs are and therefore teaches courses all over the place.”¹

Unlike many people who compartmentalize their work and their personal experience, Tikva’s scholarship was influenced by her life. Allan recalls:

“Waiting overnight for a C-section that was suddenly scheduled in the 40th week of pregnancy, she spent the night reading Babylonian birth incantations, and, as she was wont to say, when she woke up from the anesthesia some nine months later, she came to the realization that there was a gap in our religious sources addressing the mystery and spirituality of birth. Tikva worked on that project with great love for many years. In focusing on birth, she was also seeking to send a powerful message to women of all religions: giving birth and mothering partake of the sacred.”²

The result of this experience was her book, *Motherprayer: The Pregnant Woman’s Spiritual Companion*, in which she reclaims ancient Near Eastern birth incantations and also creates a new liturgy acknowledging women’s universal yearnings and anxiety during the time of pregnancy and childbirth.

Tikva was a pioneer in balancing motherhood and two-career families, and a role model for many of us in her ability to put family first even as she maintained a punishing schedule of teaching, writing, and traveling. Later, she and her husband often held posts in different cities—commuting among Philadelphia, New York, and Chicago for many years.

Allen recalls, “During the years she commuted from Philadelphia to Chicago, homework was sent back and forth by fax machine. When the children were young, she did much of her writing late at night, after they went to sleep. Meira and Eitan always knew that they were their mother’s first priority.”³

Before coming to the University of Chicago in 1995, Frymer-Kensky served as director of biblical studies at Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Wyncote, PA, and as assistant professor of Near Eastern studies at Wayne State University in Detroit. She was also a visiting professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary, the University of Michigan, Ben Gurion University and McMaster University.⁴ Her colleague, Jeffrey Tigay, notes, “Over the years Tikva’s scholarship was recognized with prestigious awards. She won several post-doctoral 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*. In 2005 a collection of her articles, *Studies in Bible and*

¹ Frymer-Kensky, “Introduction: A Retrospective,” in *Studies in Bible and Feminist Criticism*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2005, p.xix.

² Dr. Allan Kensky, Rabbi of Beth Hillel Congregation in Wilmette, IL, “Eulogy for Tikva Frymer-Kensky,” delivered at her funeral, Sunday, September 3, 2006.

³ Allan Kensky, “Eulogy for Tikva Frymer-Kensky,” delivered at her funeral, Sunday, September 3, 2006.

⁴ University of Chicago News Office: “Tikva Frymer-Kensky, 1943-2006” <http://www-news.uchicago.edu/releases/06/060905.frymer-kensky.shtml>.

Feminist Criticism, was published by the Jewish Publication Society in its *Scholar of Distinction* series. Tikva was the first woman scholar to be so honored.”⁵

Even more impressive than her academic achievements is Tikva’s influence upon the fields in which she worked, and upon the scholars whose lives she touched. Tikva was a natural mentor, respecting the abilities and talents of each person she met, and encouraging them, challenging them, to think deeper, stretch broader, expect more from themselves, than they ever thought possible. Her ability to ask the incisive, tough question was legendary among those she knew and worked with. Allan Kensky notes, “Tikva was an inspiring, creative teacher. She loved to teach, and in the course of her life she taught thousands. She could teach people of any age, and had the gift of knowing how to explain the most difficult concepts in ways that lay audiences could understand. She lectured throughout the country, at synagogues, universities, kallot, retreats and camps. She taught at three rabbinical seminaries—the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, where she was director of Bible studies for seven years, and where she had a profound impact on those classes of rabbinical students, at JTS, and at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in New York, where she was the first scholar to occupy a visiting chair in Jewish women’s studies. Teaching was Tikva’s lifeblood. Her former students spoke fondly of her and remembered her years after she taught them. She took a personal interest in her students, became friends to many of them, inspired them and touched them by her warmth and generosity of spirit.”⁶

One of her current students at the University of Chicago, Anne Knafl, wrote of Tikva that she “approached the text, whatever text she was reading, with passion and honesty. ...There was nowhere to hide. You couldn’t hide behind a commentary, or behind the dictionary meaning, or behind the chain of tradition, not even in the text itself. She would inevitably ask, ‘But what does this mean?’ ‘Why do you think it means that?’ ‘Where is that in the text?’”

I smiled when I read that. I remember my first class with Tikva, as a 40 year old adult, at the very beginning of my graduate studies. We were reading the story of Abraham’s journey from Ur to Haran to Canaan, and Tikva asked, “Why did God choose Abraham?” Recalling the teaching of my youth in an Orthodox yeshiva, I raised my hand and offered the story of Abraham smashing his father’s idols. “Find it in the text,” Tikva challenged. I knew exactly where it ought to be, where it had been in the text of my Orthodox childhood education, between the notice of Abraham’s father’s lineage, and God’s call to Abraham [the end of Genesis 11 and the beginning of Genesis 12]. However, when I checked the Hebrew Bible, the story of Abraham’s faith in the one God was nowhere to be found. “That,” said Tikva, “is an important lesson. When you were a child, the text you studied was ‘Chumash with Rashi,’⁷ the five books with medieval

⁵ Jeffrey Tigay, A.M. Ellis Professor of Hebrew and Semitic Languages and Literatures, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, University of Pennsylvania, “Tikva Simone Frymer-Kensky, September 3, 2006/10 Elul, 5766” remarks delivered at her funeral.

⁶ Allan Kensky, “Eulogy for Tikva Frymer-Kensky,” delivered at her funeral, Sunday, September 3, 2006.

⁷ Rashi is an acronym for Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhak, a pre-eminent biblical commentator of the 11th Century in France.

commentaries, not the Hebrew Bible. In that traditional approach, you could not read the text and translate without asking, “What troubles Rashi?” Today, you need to read the text itself, without the traditional commentaries, and answer the question, ‘What troubles me?’” I still recall the exhilaration I felt at receiving permission to read the text on my own. Tikva had empowered me to ask my own questions. That was just the beginning of her influence upon me, as a scholar, as a teacher, and as a friend.

On the occasion of the publication of *Studies in Bible and Feminist Criticism* in the JPS Scholars of distinction series, Ellen Frankel noted that in her work Tikva challenges conventional biblical reading by both traditional scholars and contemporary feminists. Throughout, she “teases out of the spare details of the story the legal, social and political assumptions underlying the narrative. She does this through what has become her signature method: 1) careful reading of every word, having first set aside any preconceptions she might have brought to the text; and 2) bringing to bear on the story relevant texts from Babylonian, Sumerian and Greco-Roman literature. ...The difference between her method and those of other modern readers is that she is careful to differentiate between what the ancient texts *meant* in their own time, vs. how they illuminate the meanings we bring to them as we search for a usable and personally intelligible Judaism.”⁸

Tikva’s best-known book, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* has been described by Jeffrey Tigay, Professor of Hebrew and Semitic Languages and Literatures at the University of Pennsylvania and a close friend and academic colleague of Tikva’s for 45 years, as “unsurpassed for reliability.” Tigay described Tikva’s major academic contributions in this work (material in single quotations is from Tikva’s own writing):⁹

“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.’”

Tigay continues, “God himself [sic] 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 [sic] 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

⁸ Ellen Frankel, “Celebrating Tikva-Frymer-Kensky: On the Occasion of the Publication of *Studies in Bible and Feminist Criticism*, JPS Scholars of Distinction Series, #8, Chicago, December 17, 2005,” unpublished remarks.

⁹ Jeffrey Tigay, from remarks delivered at her funeral.

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.”

Tikva’s scholarly enterprise was geared in all its aspects to her effort to construct a new religious vision, standing upon the shoulders of other paradigms, including the pagan religions of the ancient Near East as well as the biblical theology of ancient Israel. As Ellen Frankel has noted, “Tikva is one of a handful of courageous and creative academics who believe that ‘doing’ scholarship is not enough, that the wisdom gained from a life of study obligates the scholar to bring this wisdom to bear upon her society.” Frankel continues, “She also has used her insights about the bible to critique rabbinic Judaism whose borrowing from Greek thought and culture reduced women’s access to public life and eroded the essentially gender-blind values of biblical theology.”¹⁰

Tikva loved working on interfaith projects, and was selfless in her ability to put herself in the position of another and ask questions from that perspective, even if it was not her own. Susan McGarry, a Christian minister and close friend of Tikva’s, spoke at her funeral about how strongly Tikva was committed to Interfaith dialogue, not as a casual observer but as a deeply spiritual person committed to Judaism. She recalled, “Tikva could reach out to others with sincere respect. She not only participated in the Hartmann Institute in Jerusalem but in serious interfaith dialogue here and abroad. One time when she visited me back in Ann Arbor, we went to see an exhibit of Judy Chicago’s art. In one mural, the artist had presented the creation. In it, the entire world and its creatures emanated from the womb of God. We were fascinated and began to discuss it loudly, spinning ideas, one upon another. We finally sank to the ground leaning on the opposite wall. The disapproving docent came often to glare at the misbehavior of this obvious riffraff, but we were too excited to notice. We had just finished an exhaustive discussion of the possibilities for species differentiation (everything was, after all, coming out of one womb), when Tikva asked me, ‘What about Jesus? Where does he fit in?’ I snapped back, ‘Oh, Tikva, don’t bother me about Jesus.’ She answered, ‘But Susan, you are a Christian (actually for my day job I am an Episcopal Priest), You have to deal with Jesus.’ And, she was right! And I also knew then that she understood that real dialogue, real conversation does not happen when we practice ‘religion light.’ Rather, when we plumb its depths and make our commitments and then reach out with respect and openness.”¹¹

Allan Kensky recalls, “Deeply rooted in her own Jewish faith and practice, Tikva reached out to people of other faiths. She was proud that she spent a year of study as a Phi Beta Kappa Sibley fellow at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome. Later, she became a sought out participant in inter-religious dialogues.” He continues, “Tikva once relayed to me an encounter at one such dialogue with a Muslim co-panelist, who objected

¹⁰ Ellen Frankel, CEO and Editor-in-Chief, Jewish Publication Society, unpublished remarks “Celebrating Tikva-Frymer-Kensky: On the Occasion of the Publication of *Studies in Bible and Feminist Criticism*, JPS Scholars of Distinction Series, #8, Chicago, December 17, 2005.”

¹¹ Susan McGarry, Rector, St.Aidan’s Episcopal Church, Ann Arbor, MI, orally communicated at the funeral of Tikva Frymer-Kensky, September 3, 2006.

when Tikva relayed the biblical story of Hagar, in which she explained that Hagar was a servant. ‘You see,’ said the co-panelist, ‘in your tradition our ancestors are described as slaves.’ Replied Tikva: ‘You got it wrong: In our tradition it is a badge of honor to be descended from slaves. We are descended from slaves.’ Tikva was, until she became ill, active in the Scholar’s Group of the Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies in Baltimore, and had a major role in the development of the Dabru Emet statement, which called on Jews to reexamine their relationship with Christianity in light of Christianity’s growing acceptance of Judaism.”¹²

At the University of Chicago, William Schweiker, Professor of Theological Ethics, noted about Tikva, “She was exemplary as a human being and as a scholar in wanting to understand the connections between religious traditions and to render those connections as humanely as possible. She was a religious humanist.”¹³

Tigay notes, “To lose a scholar of such brilliance, erudition, range, and imagination is a loss for all the fields of scholarship in which Tikva was engaged. But the loss goes far beyond the world of scholarship: all are bereaved.”¹⁴

For those of us who knew her, relied on her wisdom, and, even through her illness, expected her always to be there, Tikva’s passing carries with it the shock of the disappearance of a force of nature. As her student, Anne Knafl, wrote, “Tikva told and retold the biblical stories and the biblical story. She created a community around those stories based not on ritual or belief, but on passion and honesty. Hers was an honesty that I am lucky to have known, and hers is an honesty that I am proud to continue, as best I can.”¹⁵ A classmate of Tikva’s from her days at Yale summed up what we all feel: “Along with her expertise in ancient languages, she knew how to be thoroughly human, and made everyone she met feel appreciated. I will miss her.”¹⁶

¹² Allan Kensky, “Eulogy for Tikva Frymer-Kensky,” delivered at her funeral, Sunday, September 3, 2006.

¹³ University of Chicago News Office: “Tikva Frymer-Kensky, 1943-2006” <http://www-news.uchicago.edu/releases/06/060905.frymer-kensky.shtml>.

¹⁴ Jeffrey Tigay, University of Pennsylvania, from remarks delivered at her funeral.

¹⁵ Anne Knafl, doctoral student at the University of Chicago Divinity School, privately communicated to Allan Kensky, 2006.

¹⁶ Bill Fulco, Loyola Marymount University, posted on the SBL Forum in response to the Frymer-Kensky obituary, <http://www.sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleId=587>.

SOURCES for this appreciation of Tikva Frymer-Kensky:

University of Chicago News Office: "Tikva Frymer-Kensky, 1943-2006"

<http://www-news.uchicago.edu/releases/06/060905.frymer-kensky.shtml>

Frymer-Kensky, "Introduction: A Retrospective," in *Studies in Bible and Feminist Criticism*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2005, pp.xi-xxiii.

Allan Kensky, "Eulogy for Tikva Frymer-Kensky," delivered at her funeral, Sunday, September 3, 2006.

Jeffrey Tigay, "Tikva Simone Frymer-Kensky, September 3, 2006/10 Elul, 5766" delivered at her funeral.

Susan McGarry, Rector, St.Aidan's Episcopal Church, Ann Arbor, MI, orally communicated at the funeral of Tikva Frymer-Kensky, September 3, 2006.

Ellen Frankel, CEO and Editor-in-Chief, Jewish Publication Society, unpublished remarks "Celebrating Tikva-Frymer-Kensky: On the Occasion of the Publication of *Studies in Bible and Feminist Criticism*, *JPS Scholars of Distinction Series*, #8, Chicago, December 17, 2005,"

Anne Knafl, doctoral student at the University of Chicago Divinity School, privately communicated to Allan Kensky, 2006.

Bill Fulco, Loyola Marymount University, posted on the SBL Forum in response to the Frymer-Kensky obituary, <http://www.sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleId=587>.

ABBREVIATED ANNOTATED BOOK BIBLIOGRAPHY :

- 2005 *Studies in Bible and Feminist Criticism*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society.
This is a collection of most of Tikva's articles, part of the JPS *Scholar of Distinction* series. It includes an extensive autobiographical essay in the Introduction, and a full bibliography at the end.
- 2002 *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories*. New York: Schocken books. Reprint, 2004.
An accessible and innovative reading of more than two-dozen stories of selected women in the Hebrew Bible, feminist in sensibility and well-grounded in the Hebrew text. Winner of a Koret Jewish Book Award in 2002 and a National Jewish Book Award in 2003.
- 1995 *Feminist Approaches to the Bible: Symposium at the Smithsonian Institution September 24, 1994*. With Phyllis Tribble, Pamela J. Milne, and Jane Schaberg. Edited by Hershel Shanks. Washington D.C.: Biblical Archaeology Society.
This book is a wonderful introduction to the issues of feminist approaches to the Bible. It presents papers from a 1994 symposium held at the Smithsonian, followed by a transcription of the panel discussion with an introduction by Hershel Shanks.
- Motherprayer: The Pregnant Woman's Spiritual Companion*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. Reprint, New York: Riverhead Books, 1996.
In this book, Tikva reclaims long-neglected readings, like Sumerian incantations for pregnancy and childbirth, that address women's issues and needs, and creates new theology and liturgy in original poems that use traditional religious language.
- 1992 *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth*. New York: Macmillan, Free Press. Reprint, New York: Ballantine, 1993.
A meticulously researched survey of ancient Mesopotamian civilization and religion, thoroughly readable, offering a sweeping examination of the functions of goddesses in the polytheistic system of the ancient Near East, and what happened to these functions in biblical religion, in the absence of goddesses.