



## The Gender of God in Ancient Israel

***Dr. Benjamin Sommer***

**Benjamin D. Sommer** joined The Jewish Theological Seminary faculty as professor of Bible in July 2008. Previously, he served as director of the Crown Family Center for Jewish Studies at Northwestern University, where he had taught since 1994. Dr. Sommer has been a fellow at the Israel Institute for Advanced Studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, the Tikvah Center for Jewish Law and Civilization at the New York University School of Law, and the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem. He has served as a visiting faculty member in the Department of Bible of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and at the Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, Texas. He has received fellowships from the American Council of Learned Societies and the Yad Hanadiv/Berakha Foundation.

Dr. Sommer's most recent book, *Revelation and Authority: Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition* received the prestigious Goldstein-Goren Prize in Jewish Thought from Ben Gurion University for the years 2014-2016 and was a finalist for both for the National Jewish Book Award for 2015 and the Association for Jewish Studies' Jordan Schnitzer Prize for 2014-2016. The Hebrew edition of this book was recently published by Carmel Press in Israel. An earlier book by Professor Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel*, received the Award for Excellence in the Study of Religion in 2010 awarded by the American Academy of Religion, as well as the Jordan Schnitzer Award from the Association for Jewish Studies for the years 2006-2009. The first book Dr. Sommer published, *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40-66*, was awarded the Salo Wittmayer Baron Prize by the American Academy of Jewish Research in 1998.

Dr. Sommer has long been active as a lecturer and scholar-in-residence, teaching rabbis, Jewish educators, and laypeople in a variety of settings in the United States and Israel.

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## Genesis 1:26-27

(26) And God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth."  
(27) And God created humankind in the divine image, creating it in the image of God—creating them male and female.

## בראשית א':כ"ו-כ"ז

(כו) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ  
כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ וְיִרְדּוּ בְדִגְתַּת הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם  
וּבַבְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל־הָאָרֶץ וּבְכָל־הָרֶמֶשׂ  
הָרֹמֵשׁ עַל־הָאָרֶץ: (כז) וַיְבָרָא אֱלֹהִים  
אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא  
אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם:

## Isaiah 42:13-16

(13) The LORD goes forth like a warrior,  
Like a fighter He whips up His rage.  
He yells, He roars aloud,  
He charges upon His enemies. (14) "I have  
kept silent far too long,  
Kept still and restrained Myself;  
Now I will scream like a woman in labor,  
I will pant and I will gasp. (15) Hills and  
heights will I scorch,  
Cause all their green to wither;  
I will turn rivers into isles,  
And dry the marshes up. (16) I will lead the  
blind  
By a road they did not know,  
And I will make them walk  
By paths they never knew.  
I will turn darkness before them to light,  
Rough places into level ground.  
These are the promises—  
I will keep them without fail.

## ישעיהו מ"ב:י"ג-ט"ז

(יג) יְהוָה כְּגִבּוֹר יֵצֵא כְּאִישׁ מִלְחָמוֹת יַעִיר  
קִנְאָה יִרְעֶה אֶף־יִצְרִיחַ עַל־אֹיְבָיו  
יִתְגַּבֵּר: {ס} (יד) הִחֲשִׁיתִי מַעוֹלָם  
אֲחֵרִישׁ אֶת־אֶפֶק כִּי־לִדְהָ אֶפְעֶה אֲשֶׁם  
וְאֲשַׁאף יִחַד: {טו} אֲחַרִּיב הָרִים וּגְבָעוֹת  
וְכָל־עֲשָׂבָם אוֹבִישׁ וְשִׁמְתִי נְהָרוֹת לְאֵיִם  
וְאִגְמִים אוֹבִישׁ: {טז} וְהוֹלַכְתִּי עוֹרִים בְּדֶרֶךְ  
לֹא יָדְעוּ בְּנִתְיָבוֹת לֹא־יָדְעוּ אֲדָרִיכֶם  
אֲשִׁים מִחֲשֹׁךְ לְפָנֵיהֶם לְאוֹר וּמַעַקְשֵׁים  
לְמִישׁוֹר אֶלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים עֲשִׂיתֶם וְלֹא  
עֲזֹבְתֶם:

### Isaiah 45:9-10

(9) Shame on him who argues with his Maker,  
Though naught but a potsherd of earth!  
Shall the clay say to the potter, "What are you doing?  
Your work has no handles"? (10) Shame on him who asks his father, "What are you begetting?"  
Or a woman, "What are you bearing?"

(ט) הוֹי רַב אֶת־יָצְרוֹ חָרַשׁ אֶת־חֲרָשָׁיו  
אֲדָמָה הִיא־מֶרְחֵם לִיָּצְרוֹ מֶה־תַּעֲשֶׂה  
וּפַעֲלָהּ אֵין־יָדָיִם לוֹ: {ס}  
(י) הוֹי  
אֶמֶר לְאָב מֶה־תּוֹלִיד וּלְאִשָּׁה  
מֶה־תַּחֲלִין: {ס}

### Jeremiah 2:32

(32) Can a maiden forget her jewels,  
A bride her adornments?  
Yet My people have forgotten Me—  
Days without number.

יִרְמְיָהוּ ב'ל"ב  
(לב) הֲתִשְׁכַּח בְּתוּלָה עֲדָתָה כָּלָה קְשָׁרֶיהָ  
וְעַמִּי שִׁכְחוּנִי יָמִים אֵין מִסְפָּר:

### Isaiah 49:14-15

(14) Zion says,  
"The LORD has forsaken me,  
My Lord has forgotten me." (15) Can a woman forget her baby,  
Or disown the child of her womb?  
Though she might forget,  
I never could forget you.

יִשְׁעִיהוּ מ"ט:י"ד-ט"ו  
(יד) וְתֹאמַר צִיּוֹן עֲזָבֵנִי יְהוָה וְאֵדֹנִי  
שִׁכְחָנִי: (טו) הֲתִשְׁכַּח אִשָּׁה עוֹלָה מֵרַחֲמָם  
בֶּן־בֶּטֶן גַּם־אֵלֶּה תִשְׁכַּחַנָּה וְאֲנֹכִי לֹא  
אֲשַׁכַּח:

### Isaiah 66:13

(13) As a mother comforts her son  
So I will comfort you;  
You shall find comfort in Jerusalem.

יִשְׁעִיהוּ ס"ו:י"ג  
(יג) כַּאֲשֶׁר אֲמַר אִמּוֹ תִנְחַמְנֻ בֶּן אֲנֹכִי  
אֲנַחְמְכֶם וּבִירוּשָׁלַם תִּנְחַמוּ:

### Isaiah 46:1-5

(1) Bel is bowed, Nebo is cowering,  
Their images are a burden for beasts and cattle;  
The things you would carry [in procession]  
Are now piled as a burden  
On tired [beasts]. (2) They cowered, they bowed as well,  
They could not rescue the burden,  
And they themselves went into captivity.  
(3) Listen to Me, O House of Jacob,  
All that are left of the House of Israel,

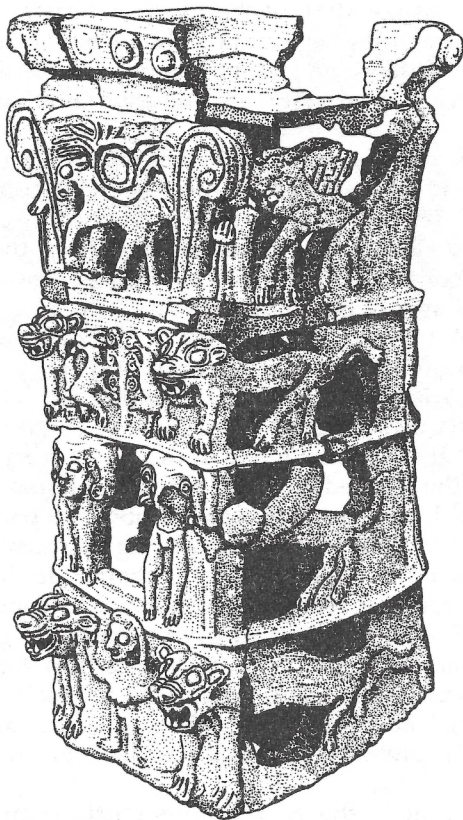
יִשְׁעִיהוּ מ"ו:א'-ה'  
(א) כָּרַע בֵּל קֶרֶס נִבּוֹ הָיוּ עֲצֻבֵיהֶם לַחִיָּה  
וּלְבֵהֶמָּה נִשְׂאֵתִיכֶם עֲמוּסוֹת מַשָּׂא לַעֲיִפָּה:  
(ב) קֶרֶסוֹ כָּרְעוּ יַחְדָּו לֹא יָכְלוּ מִלֵּט מַשָּׂא  
וּנְפִשָׁם בַּשָּׁבִי הִלָּכָה: {פ}  
(ג) שָׁמְעוּ אֵלַי בֵּית יַעֲקֹב וְכָל־שְׂאֲרֵית בֵּית  
יִשְׂרָאֵל הַעֲמִסִּים מִנִּי־בֶטֶן הַנְּשָׂאִים  
מִנִּירָחֻם: (ד) וְעַד־זִקְנָה אֲנִי הוּא  
וְעַד־שִׁיבָה אֲנִי אֶסְבֵּל אֲנִי עֲשִׂיתִי וְאֲנִי

Who have been carried since birth,  
Supported since leaving the womb: (4) Till  
you grow old, I will still be the same;  
When you turn gray, it is I who will carry;  
I was the Maker, and I will be the Bearer;  
And I will carry and rescue [you].  
(5) To whom can you compare Me  
Or declare Me similar?  
To whom can you liken Me,  
So that we seem comparable?

(ה) אִשָּׁא וְאָנִי אֶסְבֵּל וְאִמָּלֵט: {ס}  
לְמִי תִדְמִיּוּנִי וְתִשְׁוּ וְתִמְשְׁלוּנִי וְנִדְמָה:



From O. Keel and C. Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel* (Fortress, 1998), p. 159







3. Tenth-century cult stand from Taanach (front view). (Courtesy of Nancy Lapp)





Plate 4. Tenth-century cult stand from Taanach (side view). (Courtesy of Nancy Lapp)