



“The Five Books of Moses:
Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

37 Shlach — We look like Grasshoppers!

Text

במדבר יג

א וידבר יהוה אל-מֹשֶׁה לאמר הֲבִי שְׁלַח-לְךָ אַנְשִׁים וַיִּתְּרוּ אֶת-אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן אֲשֶׁר-אָנִי נֹתֵן לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אִישׁ אֶחָד אִישׁ אֶחָד לְמַטֵּה אָבִי תִּיּוּ תִשְׁלַחוּ כֹל נְשִׂיא בְהֵם. ג וַיִּשְׁלַח אִתָּם מֹשֶׁה מִמִּדְבַר פָּאֲרָן עַל-פִּי יְהוָה כָּל־אֲנָשִׁים רֵאשִׁי בְנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל הֵמָּה. ד וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹתֵם לְמַטֵּה רְאוּבֵן שְׁמוּעַ בֶּן-זְכוּר. ה לְמַטֵּה שִׁמְעוֹן שִׁפְט בֶּן-חֹרִי. ו לְמַטֵּה יְהוּדָה כָּלֵב בֶּן-יִפְנֶה. ז לְמַטֵּה יִשְׁשָׁכָר יִגָּאֵל בֶּן-יֹוסֵף. ח לְמַטֵּה אֶפְרַיִם הוֹשֵׁעַ בֶּן-נוּן. ט לְמַטֵּה בְנִימֵן פִּלְטִי בֶן-רְפוּאִי. י לְמַטֵּה זְבוּלֹן גְּדִיאֵל בֶּן-סוּדִי. יא לְמַטֵּה יוֹסֵף לְמַטֵּה מְנַשֶּׁה גְּדִי בֶן-סוּסִי. יב לְמַטֵּה דָן עֲמִיאל בֶּן-גַּמְלִי. יג לְמַטֵּה אֲשֶׁר סִתּוּר בֶּן-מִיכָאֵל. יד לְמַטֵּה נַפְתָּלִי נַחֲבִי בֶן-וּפְסִי. טו לְמַטֵּה גַד גִּאוּאֵל בֶּן-מְכִי. טז אֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת הָאֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר-שָׁלַח מֹשֶׁה לְתוֹר אֶת-הָאָרֶץ וַיִּקְרָא מֹשֶׁה לְהוֹשִׁיעַ בֶּן-נוּן יְהוֹשֻׁעַ. יז וַיִּשְׁלַח אִתָּם מֹשֶׁה לְתוֹר אֶת-אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם עֲלוּ זֶה בְּנִגְבַּ וְעֲלִיתֶם אֶת-הָהָר. יח וּרְאִיתֶם אֶת-הָאָרֶץ מֵה-הוּא וְאֶת-הָעָם הִי שָׁב עֲלֶיהָ הַחֲזַק הוּא הִרְפָּה הַמַּעֲט הוּא אִם-רַב. יט וּמַה הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר-הוּא יִשָּׁב בָּהּ הַטּוֹבָה הוּא אִם-רָעָה וּמַה הָעָרִים אֲשֶׁר-הוּא יוֹשָׁב בָּהֶנָּה הַבְּמַחְנִים אִם בְּמִבְצָרִים. כ וּמַה הָאָרֶץ הַשְּׂמֵנָה הוּא אִם-רְזָה הִישָׁבָה עֵץ אִם-אֵין וְהַתְּחַזְקֶתֶם וּלְקַחְתֶּם מִפְּרֵי הָאָרֶץ וְהַיַּמִּים יָמִי בְכוּרֵי עֲנָבִים. כא וַיַּעֲלוּ וַיִּתְּרוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ מִמִּדְבַר-צֹן עַד-רְחֹב לְבָא חֲמַת. כב וַיַּעֲלוּ בְּנִגְבַּ וַיָּבֹאוּ עַד-חֲבֹרֹן וְשֵׁם אַחִימֵן שֹׁשֵׁי וְתַלְמִי יְלִידֵי הָעֵנֶק וְחֲבֹרֹן שִׁבְעַ שְׁנַיִם נִבְנְתָה לְפָנָיו צֶעַן מִצְרַיִם. כג וַיָּבֹאוּ עַד-נַחַל אֲשַׁכְּלַ וַיִּכְרְתוּ מִשֵּׁם זְמוּרָה וְאֲשַׁכּוֹל עֲנָבִים אֶחָד וַיִּשְׁאַהוּ בְּמוֹט בִּשְׁנַיִם וּמִן-הָרֶמֶס נִים וּמִן-הַתְּאֵנִים. כד לְמַקּוֹם הַהוּא קָרָא נַחַל אֲשַׁכּוֹל עַל אֲדוֹת הָאֲשַׁכּוֹל אֲשֶׁר-כָּרְתוּ מִשֵּׁם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל. כה וַיֵּשְׁבוּ מִתּוֹר הָאָרֶץ מִקֶּץ אַרְבַּעִים יוֹם. כו וַיֵּלְכוּ וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל-אַהֲרֹן וְאֶל-כָּל-עַדְת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל-מִדְבַר פָּאֲרָן קְדֵשָׁה וַיִּשְׁיבוּ אִתָּם דָּבָר וְאֶת-כָּל-הָעֵדָה וַיִּרְאוּם אֶת-פְּרֵי הָאָרֶץ. כז וַיִּסְפְּרוּ-לוֹ וַיֹּאמְרוּ בָּאֲנֹו אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר שְׁלַחְתֶּנוּ וְגַם זַבַּת חֶלֶב וְדִבַּשׁ הוּא וְזֶה-פְרִיָּהּ. כח אָפֶס כִּי-עַז הָעָם הִי שָׁב בְּאָרֶץ וְהָעָרִים בְּצֻרוֹת גְּדֹלֹת מְאֹד וְגַם-יְלִדֵי הָעֵנֶק רָאִינוּ שָׁם. כט עַמְלֵק יוֹשֵׁב בְּאָרֶץ הַנִּגְבַּ וְהַחֲתִי וְהַיְבוּסִי וְהָאֱמֹרִי יוֹשֵׁב בְּהָר וְהַכְּנַעֲנִי יוֹשֵׁב עַל-הַיַּם וְעַל יַד הַיַּרְדֵּן. ל וַיְהִי כָלֵב אֶת-הָעָם אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר עַל הַנַּעֲלָה וַיִּרְשָׁנוּ אִתָּה כִּי-יִכּוֹל נוּכַל לָהּ. לא וְהָאֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר-עָלוּ עִמּוֹ אָמְרוּ לֹא נוּכַל לַעֲלוֹת אֶל-הָעָם כִּי-חֲזַק הוּא מִמֶּנּוּ. לב וַיֵּצִיאוּ דַבַּת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר תָּרוּ אִתָּה אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר עֲבַרְנוּ בָּהּ לְתוֹר אִתָּה אָרֶץ אִכְלֵת יוֹשְׁבֵיהָ הוּא וְכָל-הָעָם אֲשֶׁר-רָאִינוּ בְּתוֹכָהּ אַנְשֵׁי מְדוּת. לג וְשֵׁם רָאִינוּ אֶת-הַנְּפִילִים בְּנֵי עֵנֶק מִן-הַנְּפִילִים וְנָהִי בְּעֵינֵינוּ כַּחֲגָבִים וְכֵן הָיִינוּ בְּעֵינֵיהֶם.

במדבר יד

א וַתִּשָּׂא כָל-הָעֵדָה וַיִּתְּנוּ אֶת-קוֹלָם וַיִּבְכוּ הָעָם בְּלִילָה הַהוּא. ב וַיֵּלְכוּ עַל-מֹשֶׁה וְעַל-אַהֲרֹן כֹּל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם כָּל-הָעֵדָה לֹו-מִתְּנוּ בְּאָרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אוֹ בְּמִדְבַר הַזֶּה לֹו-מִתְּנוּ. ג וְלִמָּה יְהוָה מְבִיא אֶתְנוּ אֶל-הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת לְנַפְלֵ בַחֲרָב נָשִׁינוּ וְנִסְפָנוּ יְהִיוּ לְבָזֵי הָלֹוא טוֹב לָנוּ שׁוּב מִצְרָיִמָּה. ד וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל-אָחִיו נִתְּנָה רֵאשׁ וְנִשְׁוֵבָה מִצְרָיִמָּה. ה וַיִּפֹּל מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן עַל-פְּנֵיהֶם לְפָנָיו כָּל-קְהֵל עַדְת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל. ו וַיְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן-נוּן וְכָלֵב בֶּן-יִפְנֶה מִן-הַתְּרִים אֶת-הָאָרֶץ קָרְעוּ בְּגָדֵיהֶם. ז וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל-כָּל-עַדְת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר עֲבַרְנוּ בָּהּ לְתוֹר אִתָּה טוֹבָה הָאָרֶץ מְאֹד מְאֹד. ח אִם-חִפְצֵי בְנוּ יְהוָה וְהִבִּיא אֶתְנוּ אֶל-הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת וְנִתְּנָה לָנוּ אָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר-הוּא זַבַּת חֶלֶב וְדִבַּשׁ. ט אַךְ בִּיהוָה אֶל-תִּמְרָדוּ וְאִתָּם אֶל-תִּירְאוּ אֶת-עַם הָאָרֶץ כִּי לַחֲמֵנוּ הֵם סָר צֶלֶם מְעֻלֵיהֶם וַיְהוָה אֶתְנוּ אֶל-תִּירָאֵם. י וַיֹּאמְרוּ כָל-הָעֵדָה לְרָגוּם אִתָּם בְּאֲבָנִים וּכְבוֹד יְהוָה נִרְאָה בָּאֵל מוֹעֵד אֶל-כָּל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.



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Bamidbar 13

¹ The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ² "Send men to scout the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelite people; send one man from each of their ancestral tribes, each one a chieftain among them." ³ So Moses, by the Lord's command, sent them out from the wilderness of Paran, all the men being leaders of the Israelites. ⁴ And these were their names:

From the tribe of Reuben, Shammua son of Zaccur.

⁵ From the tribe of Simeon, Shaphat son of Hori.

⁶ From the tribe of Judah, Caleb son of Jephunneh.

⁷ From the tribe of Issachar, Igal son of Joseph.

⁸ From the tribe of Ephraim, Hosea son of Nun.

⁹ From the tribe of Benjamin, Palti son of Rafu.

¹⁰ From the tribe of Zebulun, Gaddiel son of Sodi.

¹¹ From the tribe of Joseph, namely, the tribe of Manasseh, Gaddi son of Susi.

¹² From the tribe of Dan, Ammiel son of Gemalli.

¹³ From the tribe of Asher, Sethur son of Michael.

¹⁴ From the tribe of Naphtali, Nahbi son of Vophsi.

¹⁵ From the tribe of Gad, Geuel son of Machi.

¹⁶ Those were the names of the men whom Moses sent to scout the land; but Moses changed the name of Hosea son of Nun to Joshua. ¹⁷ When Moses sent them to scout the land of Canaan, he said to them, "Go up there into the Negeb and on into the hill country, ¹⁸ and see what kind of country it is. Are the people who dwell in it strong or weak, few or many? ¹⁹ Is the country in which they dwell good or bad? Are the towns they live in open or fortified? ²⁰ Is the soil rich or poor? Is it wooded or not? And take pains to bring back some of the fruit of the land." — Now it happened to be the season of the first ripe grapes.

²¹ They went up and scouted the land, from the wilderness of Zin to Rehob, at Lebo-hamath. ²² They went up into the Negeb and came to Hebron, where lived Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmi, the Anakites. — Now Hebron was founded seven years before Zoan of Egypt. — ²³ They reached the wadi Eshcol, and there they cut down a branch with a single cluster of grapes — it had to be borne on a carrying frame by two of them — and some pomegranates and figs. ²⁴ That place was named the wadi Eshcol because of the cluster that the Israelites cut down there.

²⁵ At the end of forty days they returned from scouting the land. ²⁶ They went straight to Moses and Aaron and the whole Israelite community at Kadesh in the wilderness of Paran, and they made their report to them and to the whole community, as they showed them the fruit of the land.



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²⁷ This is what they told him: "We came to the land you sent us to; it does indeed flow with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. ²⁸ However, the people who inhabit the country are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large; moreover, we saw the Anakites there. ²⁹ Amalekites dwell in the Negeb region; Hittites, Jebusites, and Amorites inhabit the hill country; and Canaanites dwell by the Sea and along the Jordan."

³⁰ Caleb hushed the people before Moses and said, "Let us by all means go up, and we shall gain possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it."

³¹ But the men who had gone up with him said, "We cannot attack that people, for it is stronger than we." ³² Thus they spread calumnies among the Israelites about the land they had scouted, saying, "The country that we traversed and scouted is one that devours its settlers. All the people that we saw in it are men of great size; ³³ we saw the Nephilim there — the Anakites are part of the Nephilim — and we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them."

Bamidbar 14

¹ The whole community broke into loud cries, and the people wept that night. ² All the Israelites railed against Moses and Aaron. "If only we had died in the land of Egypt," the whole community shouted at them, "or if only we might die in this wilderness! ³ Why is the Lord taking us to that land to fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be carried off! It would be better for us to go back to Egypt!" ⁴ And they said to one another, "Let us head back for Egypt."

⁵ Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembled congregation of the Israelites. ⁶ And Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, of those who had scouted the land, rent their clothes ⁷ and exhorted the whole Israelite community: "The land that we traversed and scouted is an exceedingly good land. ⁸ If the Lord is pleased with us, He will bring us into that land, a land that flows with milk and honey, and give it to us; ⁹ only you must not rebel against the Lord. Have no fear then of the people of the country, for they are our prey: their protection has departed from them, but the Lord is with us. Have no fear of them!" ¹⁰ As the whole community threatened to pelt them with stones, the Presence of the Lord appeared in the Tent of Meeting to all the Israelites.



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Context

Parashat Shlach opens with God instructing Moshe to send scouts to explore the land of Canaan in preparation for the Children of Israel's entry. He selects one person from each tribe. When these scouts, all men, return from their tour of the land, they report their findings to the Children of Israel. Ten claim that it will be impossible to enter the land, while two, Calev and Joshua, believe that the Children of Israel can succeed to fulfill the promise to ascend to the land. Upon hearing these reports, the people cry out in despair and consider appointing a new leader who will take them back to Egypt. The eventual punishment for this lack of faith and confidence in their own and God's ability to enter the land results in 40 years of wandering through the wilderness. The parasha continues with a statement of some of the laws about sacrifices and offerings upon entering the land, with the punishment by stoning of a person who gathers wood on shabbat, and concludes with the commandment of *tzitzit*, ritual fringes.

Explorations

One of the traditional interpretations of *Shlach lekha* emphasizes the importance of sending the scouts “for yourself”. Rashi interprets our opening verse,

Send, for yourself. According to your opinion - I do not command you. If you wish, send. Because the Israelites came and said, 'let us send people before us' (Devarim 1:22) as it is said, "all of you approached me, etc." Moshe conferred with the *Shechinah*. S/He [God] said, 'I told them that it [the land] is good, as it says, "I will bring you up from the suffering of Egypt (to a land flowing with milk and honey)" (Shmot 3:17). By their lives! I'll give them an opportunity for error with the report of the spies, so that they will not inherit it (Tanchuma 5).

According to this view, the source of the scouting mission is lack of faith in the divine promise, doubt and fear among the Israelites about their ability to fulfill their destiny.

The ten scouts who go to the land are intimidated by the inhabitants of Canaan, their size and their fortifications. They bring back bad reports and convince the Children of Israel to despair. The scouts and the community react with hopelessness in the face of the power of the inhabitants of Canaan. Calev and Joshua who are confident in the ability of the Children of Israel to ascend to the land are over-ruled.

In the 1985 “New” Jewish Publication Society translation that I quote unmodified above, God instructs Moshe to send *men* to scout the land. He appoints twelve, one *man* to represent each tribe. They are charged to assess the situation on behalf of their people and make recommendations at an historic moment. The Children of Israel are on the brink of fulfilling the divine promise to inhabit the Land.



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The NJPS translation is modern and direct from the Hebrew Masoretic text, the product of decades of scholarly effort. It is widely circulated, used and respected as a trust-worthy Jewish translation. However, like the group of spies who scouted the land, not a single woman participated in the translation project. The translators were probably not concerned about the question of women's participation, nor did they query the matter in their translation work. They uncritically accepted and incorporated gender conventions into their text.

The words *anashim* and *nashim* appear together sometimes in the Torah (Shmot 35:22, for example). At the end of his life, Moshe finally summons the entire nation at the edge of the Land of Israel in Devarim 31:12,

Gather the people — anashim, nashim, children, and the strangers in your communities — that they may hear and so learn to revere the Lord your God and to observe faithfully every word of this Teaching. ¹³ Their children, too, who have not had the experience, shall hear and learn to revere the Lord your God as long as they live in the land that you are about to cross the Jordan to possess.

This context seems to indicate *anashim* - men and *nashim* – women. However, these words are not nearly as straightforward as they seem. David Curwin, who [blogs](#) about Hebrew linguistics, points to a number of sources about these words that indicate their complexity. David Kimhi, the [Radak](#) questions the root of the words *ish* – man and *isha* – woman in his entry, אנש - anash in the *Sefer HaShorashim*. He writes,

And it is possible that *isha* is from this root אנש - anash and the *dagesh*-accent point is due to the missing *nun*, and it is properly אנשה – ansha.

The JPS Bereshit translator, Nahum Sarna does note that the roots of *ish* – man and *isha* – woman are different. He does not, however, derive any outcomes about the plural forms that relate to men and women. The modern commentator, [Shadal](#), Samuel David Luzzatto [comments](#) about *ish* and *isha*,

Moses recorded these words as they were pronounced in his time, even though *isha* was not actually derived from *ish*, but rather from *enash*, which became *enesh* (as *gevar* became *gever*), yielding the plural *anashim*, as well as the feminine form *inshah*, which became *ishah*. The word *ish*, however, has been preserved in its original form.

According to Shadal, *anashim* is the plural form of woman. Contemporary linguist, Edward Horowitz writes in *How the Hebrew Language Grew* (p 107),

Strange and unbelievable as it seems the word אשה- *isha* has absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with the word איש - *ish*. In אשה – *isha* in the first place a *nun* has fallen out; the word is really אנשה (*insha*). The plural נשים – *nashim* gives some hint of that.



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It is clear to biblical linguists that *ish* and *isha* are from completely different roots. *Ish* is from יש , meaning strength (the word ששק means strengthen), and is reminiscent of the Latin *vir* – man = strong. *Isha*, from אשה , the meaning of which I prefer to say is underdetermined – it is translated variously as weak / sick or friendly / social.

From this brief examination, it is possible to conclude that where the Hebrew text reads *anashim*, a recognizable plural of the form *anshah*, *woman*, it might not exclusively refer to *male* people. The word *anashim* certainly does not exclude women. Moshe, however, appoints twelve men, ten of whom conclude that the land is unattainable. He might have done this not by divine command, but in some sense, *for himself*, that is, according to his own limited conceptions of appropriate representation of the Children of Israel.

The *Kli Yakar*, Shlomo Efraim of Luntchitz, a sixteenth century hasidic commentator speculates that God knows that women -- who have more intense love of the land -- would have brought back a positive report. If women had numbered among the scouts, the forty years of desert wandering would have been averted, he claims (Parshat Shelach, Bamidbar 13:2). The *Kli Yakar* attributes some kind of deep faith to women without explaining why.

The scouts passage has effects that extend far beyond the biblical context. The Babylonian Talmud in Megillah 23b discusses the minimum number of people needed for a quorum to publically sanctify the divine in our midst. When the sages derive the number ten from connections among biblical verses, they include the ten male scouts who report negatively about the land of Canaan. Indeed, none of the groups of ten men they cite are particularly worthy of emulation - most of them have deficits of sanctity in their behavior. With few exceptions, for centuries the Jewish definition of community for public sacred rituals has counted only men, and men largely continue to be our representatives and decision-makers.

The birth and development of the State of Israel demonstrate that the Jewish People has replaced fear and reluctance to inhabit the land with bold risk-taking and innovative spirit. However, the paucity of women in leadership and decision-making in state and religious affairs, both within Israel and among the Jewish People generally hovers at abysmally low levels. With gender exclusivity in focus, we look like grasshoppers in our own eyes – more inclusiveness promises to make us more capable to meet the challenges facing the Jewish People in our day.



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Questions for Discussion

- In what ways do we, like the scouts, react with fear and despair to obstacles and doubt our ability to overcome them? How can we, like Calev and Joshua, build our confidence, optimism and hope, and strengthen our ability to achieve our goals even when they conflict with powerful forces and interests?
- How does the dominance of one category of person – men - as the representatives and decision-makers for our communities and nations affect our policies, priorities, and lives? To what extent ought we to intentionally include more diversity among our representatives?
- How might the outcome in the biblical text have been different if women had numbered among the scouts who explored the land? -- explain why.
- How do sensitivity to, inclusion and empowerment of multiple and diverse perspectives affect our vision, actions, and values?

Study Links

Check out [The Contemporary Torah: A Gender-Sensitive Adaptation of the JPS Translation](#) published by JPS with consulting editors Carol L. Meyers, Adele Berlin, and Ellen Frankel. [Here](#) is a critical review.

Fear of failure is one of the factors that inhibits risk-taking and growth. In national terms, the authors of *Start-up Nation* claim that modern Israel is succeeding to innovate partly due to the high tolerance for risk-taking of our population. [Here](#) is a brief essay about the book's argument. The director of the Abu Dabi Council for Economic Development discusses the national culture of fear of risk-taking [here](#).

Men continue to serve as CEO's of 90% of the veteran national Jewish organizations and large-city federations. The mission of the non-profit organization, [Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community](#) (AWP) is “to advance women into leadership positions in Jewish life; stimulate Jewish organizations to become more equitable, productive and vibrant environments; and promote policies that support work-life integration and flexibility for professionals and volunteers.”

Evaluate [this survey](#) conducted by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life, “The Stronger Sex -- Spiritually Speaking” that claims to have found that women are more religious than men on a variety of measures.

[This](#) is a Christian preacher, Glenn Arekion's sermon discussing “Seeing yourself from a divine perspective. (Breaking grasshopper complex)”.



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Summary of Issues

The interpretation of the commandment to send *male* scouts is an example of a subtle process of culture that normalizes exclusion and discrimination against women that needs to be interrogated and corrected.

Methods & Observations

Assumptions about gender are rampant even in recent publications and translations. The transparency of these assumptions perpetuates the exclusion of women from view, from consideration, from representation, and gives credence to continuing these practices in our societies. Interrogating such assumptions enables us to broaden our perspective to include the wealth of women's experience and insight.

Contact

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