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## Girls in Trouble plays out darker side of the Bible

By Emily Savage, Staff Writer

When vocalist-fiddler Alicia Jo Rabins crafts a new song, she pours over ancient texts in the Torah and Midrash and seeks out the forgotten women — the women who dealt with sinister and tragic events that are rarely discussed in modern dialogues.

Rabins says she tries to get inside their skin, inhabit them and then write new music from their perspectives.



*Alicia Jo Rabins performs with her husband, Aaron Hartman.*

“I love how dark the stories are, because they make me feel better about the darkness I see around me and in me,” Rabins says. “That is such a huge part of being human — the struggles and mistakes and missteps and misunderstandings.”

It was Rabins’ professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York who convinced her to turn her interest in both violin and women of the Bible into her master thesis.

The resulting song cycle did indeed become her thesis and is now her current folksy indie pop outfit, Girls in Trouble.

On Dec. 12 Rabins will bring her act to the Bay Area for the first time, performing in the Super 8 Hannukah Festival at the Contemporary Jewish Museum.

While Girls in Trouble is usually an electric band, for the Super 8 festival Rabins will play a stripped-down acoustic version of her songs. She will be backed by her husband, Aaron Hartman, on bass. San Francisco-based musician Jascha Hoffman will play the keyboard and glockenspiel.

“It will be small and intimate — I love getting to present the songs that way,” Rabins says.

It was a Phil Donahue TV special detailing a method of teaching children through music that led Rabins’ mother to hand her a tiny violin at the age of 3.

Rabins has been writing music and poetry since her middle school days in Towson, Md., where she grew up. She had her bat mitzvah in Baltimore and in 1998 began her undergraduate studies at Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies, a progressive yeshiva in Jerusalem.

Upon returning to the States, Rabins picked up klezmer fiddling after she happened upon a record by violinist Alicia Svigals. After tracking down Svigals and nabbing lessons with her, Rabins — at Svigals' suggestion — performed with spastic klezmer-punk act Golem.

Rabins moved to Brooklyn, N.Y., joined Golem and began studying for her master's in Jewish women's studies at the Jewish Theological Seminary. It was there that her interests in Judaism, music and poetry finally converged.

Rabins delved into the lives of lesser-known women of the Bible, wrote poetry that turned into lyrics and played fiddle as her own musical accompaniment.

"So many people don't know these stories," Rabins says. "I think they are meant to show us something about ourselves and what we are capable of in both good ways and bad ways, but not as some pat morality story."

Some of the women Rabins explores in song include Tamar, who seduced her father-in-law, Judah, and Serakh Bat Asher, who never died, according to the Midrash.

Rabins also was taken by the tale of Bat Yiftach, whose warrior father offered her as a sacrifice.

"[Bat Yiftach's] story is shocking," Rabins says. "I was talking to a very Jewishly educated and observant friend recently and she'd never read that story — it's pretty obscure and I think it's because it is so damn harsh!"

In her song "Mountain/When My Father Came Back," Rabins discusses Bat Yiftach's plight as she disappears into the forest for two months, then returns to fulfill the sacrifice.

Rabins also includes pieces on some better-known women in the Torah, but focuses on the seedier background details that are often overlooked. For example, a song about Miriam includes some of her darker moments.

"A lot of people know about Miriam singing at the Red Sea, and feminists love to claim that moment — as they should," Rabins says. "But a few chapters later she's struck with leprosy and exiled from the camp. So that's what my song is about."

While *Girls in Trouble* lyrics are heavily influenced by Judaism, the music itself has a secular indie pop aesthetic.

"Of course I love it when [Jews] are predisposed to be into Jewish music," notes Rabins, "but there is also something special about people finding [*Girls in Trouble*] just through the music."

**Girls In Trouble** will perform at the Hub of JCCSF's Super 8 Hanukkah event from 7 to 10 p.m. Dec. 12 at the Contemporary Jewish Museum, 736 Mission St., S.F. Tickets are \$10 pre-sale, \$15 at the door. For details, e-mail [info@thecjm.org](mailto:info@thecjm.org) or call (415) 655-7800.