

Sacred Texts, Personal Connections

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Midrash bridges "the reality of the text ... and of the person who's alive at this moment," says Alicia Jo Rabins.



Alicia Jo Rabins wears so many hats there are probably days when she'd like to rent a second head. Rabins is a singer-songwriter, a poet, a fiddler and a private tutor for students of Torah ranging in age from traditional b'nai mitzvah students to senior citizens.

At the moment she is speaking to a reporter, though, she is a passenger in a van heading for the Maryland suburbs of Washington, where she is playing a gig with one of her various musical aggregations, Girls in Trouble, whose second album is being released later this month.

"I didn't mean to start a band," the 34-year-old Rabins says. "The project really grew out of my master's thesis in Jewish women's studies at JTS."

Rabins had been working with Professor Burton Vizotsky, her thesis adviser, on a series of modern midrashim about women and music in the Hebrew Bible, but somehow a conventional academic paper didn't seem right.

"It was Burt's idea that I write songs about the stories and annotate them," she explains. "He helped me get it approved, and he deserves credit for the fact the project exists."

Not long after, Rabins played some of the demos for JDub co-founder Aaron Bisman, who was enthusiastic enough to tell her that if she wrote enough material for an album, he'd release it on the label. The result was an eponymous first CD that was a springboard for Rabins, already well-known for her violin work with Golem, to keep moving ahead with a second album, "Half You Half Me," and plans for a trilogy of these musical commentaries on Torah.

"I'm still writing songs and there are some older songs that didn't fit either album that may end up on the third," she says.

Her songwriting is deft, her approach to the original texts oblique. Several of the tunes on the new album were actually suggested by friends and fans, including "We Are Androgynous," a brilliant variant on the tale of Lilith, and "Rubies," a beautiful bluegrass setting of "Eshet Chayil" that would grace any Sabbath table admirably.

"After the first album, people started asking for songs, so I asked for submissions," Rabins explains. "'Rubies' was actually a commission from someone who wanted a Sabbath song."

Girls in Trouble is hardly her only project. A recipient of a Six Points Fellowship, she is creating a musical drama piece inspired by the depredations of Bernard Madoff, although she readily admits, "It's in such an early stage that I don't know what it will end up looking like. A lot of my process is finding what my angle will be."

And there's still her fiddling for Golem and other projects.

That part of her career she owes to the unlikely spur of the "Phil Donahue Show."

"My parents were watching his show," Rabins says, "and he had a program on the Suzuki method," an educational philosophy centered on teaching music to children at a very young age. "It seemed like a good idea to them, so they found me a teacher and I began playing violin at 3. And my two [younger] sisters followed."

No "tiger mothers" here, though.

"It was a loving thing for the family, we all did it," Rabins says, laughing. "There are still eight tiny violins of increasing size somewhere in the house; they were handed down to each of us in turn."

In fact, all three still play.

Her engagement with Jewish texts, however, is entirely her own doing. Raised in a conventional Reform Jewish family in Towson, Md., a town just outside of Baltimore with a small Jewish community, Rabins celebrated both a bat mitzvah and confirmation, but had little experience of in-depth textual study until she joined an informal group while an undergraduate at Barnard College.

"I was paired with a woman who had grown up in an Orthodox family," she recalls. "It was her first time in the secular world, and my first time talking to someone Orthodox. Once I got a taste of Pirke Avot, I was really hooked, and I knew I needed to learn more."

A friend had told her about the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem and shortly after graduating from Barnard she hopped a plane, expecting to study there for a year. She ended up staying two years.

"I'm a pretty focused person when I get into something," Rabins says. "It really got into my system. I was dreaming in Aramaic."

She may have been dreaming in Aramaic, but she was playing fiddle in bluegrass and old-time bands in Jerusalem at night and at lunch, and for simchas at Pardes.

In a sense, Girls in Trouble is a project that reunites all the hats that Rabins wears.

"I wanted this to reflect my own musical world," she says. "It's my own native musical language, formed by going to punk shows and falling in love with American folk music, going to fiddle conventions in West Virginia and listening to singer-songwriters like Leonard Cohen and Tom Waits."

That desire to approach sacred texts from a personal connection comes from her own clear conception of how midrash functions.

"I see midrash as a kind of joint between the reality of the text and the reality of the person who's alive at this moment, and the community around the midrashist," she says. "Oral Torah and midrash are one of the ways we weave those realities together, to make one reality."

On some level, even her poetry, which has appeared in such prestigious journals as *Ploughshares* and *American Poetry Review*, is related to the same desire.

"The poetry and the songwriting come from the same place, are expressions of the same impulse," she says, even though her pieces "don't jump across the genres because my poems don't tend to rhyme or be metric."

So you might say that Alicia Jo Rabins, despite all the seemingly different hats, really is wearing just one.

"Half You Half Me," the new album by *Girls in Trouble* will be released on May 17. Alicia Jo Rabins and the band will perform for an album launch at Joe's Pub (425 Lafayette St.) on Thursday, May 19 at 7:30 p.m. For information, call (212) 539-8778 or go to www.joespub.com.