A scholar delves into the Bible for roots of Jewish stereotypes

By Elise Kigner

They’re in everything from Philip Roth novels to Woody Allen films. The JAP (Jewish American Princess) is spoiled, materialistic, selfish and vain. The Jewish mother is overbearing, and the Jewish father is powerless. What if the stereotypes may seem like products of modern consumer culture, they’re actually ancient history, rooted in the Bible, argues Lori Lefkovitz in her new book, “In Scripture: the First Stories of Jewish Sexual Identities.”

In the book, Lefkovitz, director of Jewish studies at Northeastern University, uses gender theory to critique Bible stories from Genesis to the Book of Ruth. In one chapter she attributes the reputation of the Jewish mother to the Biblical women described as barren mothers. The stories imply that G*d played some role in the birth, Lefkovitz said. “What is actually underplayed by the stories is that we have a role in it.”

“We have lots of stories of heroines, Esther, Judith, Tamar, women who access political power through acts of seduction, which I think resonated through many generations of the stereotypes of the Jewish American Princess,” said Lefkovitz, who is 55. “It is this characterization of Jewish women as having a moral center, said Lefkovitz, who started last fall at Northeastern, teaches both Jewish studies and English. She plans to add classes on Israel studies and Jewish cultural studies to teach the legacy of the爽士 studies program. Among the professors in the program are Larry Lowenthal, former director of the American Jewish Committee Boston, who teaches classes on Jews and pop culture, and Joshua Jacobson, who directs the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Philadelphia. That year the founding director of Kolot: Center for Jewish Women’s and Gender Studies at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Philadelphia. That year the center launched Rosh Hodesh: A big part of Jewish cultural history. “I ask, what does the Torah assume about what does it mean to be a man? What does it mean to be a woman, that the world is divided into men and women?”

Lefkovitz said in Newton with her husband, Leonard Gor-...