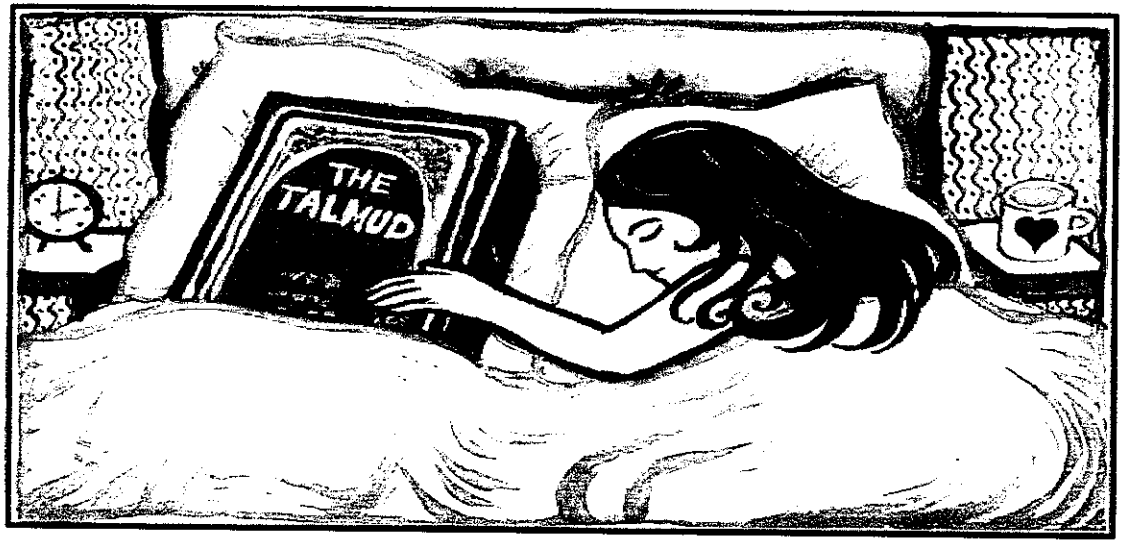

Passionate Torah: Sex and Judaism

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Book of Joshua: Rahab-A Canaanite Heroine
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2

Prostitution

Not a Job for a Nice Jewish Girl

Judith R. Baskin

PROSTITUTION AND TRAFFICKING in human beings for the purpose of prostitution have been and continue to be ugly realities of human life. In this chapter, I focus on some portrayals of prostitution in biblical and aggadic (non-legal) rabbinic writings. These traditions often display a romanticized view of prostitutes—as long as they are not Jews. This double standard is evident in attitudes expressed about the "world's oldest profession" and its practitioners in the Hebrew Bible and in the midrashic traditions of the rabbinic era.[1]

Prostitution in the Hebrew Bible

The Hebrew term for prostitution is *zenut* or *zenunim;* a prostitute is a *zonah.* The Hebrew Bible also mentions the *qedesh* and *qedeshah,* apparently male and female "cult" or "temple" prostitutes connected with non-Israelite rituals.[2] Biblical narratives present prostitutes as part of daily life in both the countryside and the city; we catch glimpses of their lives as they ply their trade at twilight (Prov. 7:6–11); attract customers by playing musical instruments (Isaiah 23:16); and sit by crossroads near public events such as sheep shearings (Gen. 38:13–19). One of the unnamed prostitutes who comes to Solomon for justice puts her child's life above her claims as its mother (I Kings 3:16–27).

Women who became prostitutes were orphans, widows, or divorcées on the margins of Israelite society; some may have been released captive women or manumitted female servants or slaves. Certainly, they were

outside the mainstream patriarchal system that relegated women to domestic roles under the authority and care of specific men. Some prostitutes, such as the women who quarreled over the infant in I Kings 3, banded together and shared lodgings. Others may have functioned quite successfully as independent entrepreneurs. The biblical authors portray Rahab, the harlot of Joshua 2, as a respected citizen who lived in a private residence where she dried flax on the roof. The wanton woman of Proverbs 7 is said to have coverlets of Egyptian linen and to sprinkle her bed with "myrrh, aloes, and cinnamon" (Prov. 7:16–17).

Prostitutes were a reality in Israelite society, but biblical legislation took a negative view of their occupation. Deuteronomy 23:18–19 forbids male and female Israelites from serving as "cult" prostitutes, and Leviticus 19:29 adjures Israelite men not to degrade their daughters into *zenut,* lest "the land be filled with depravity." Members of the high priestly caste (*kohanim*) are specifically prohibited from marrying harlots (Lev. 21:7, 14), because priests are required to marry virgins, which also rules out widows and divorcées (Lev. 21:14). The daughter of a priest who engaged in *zenut* was to be burned (Lev. 21:9), but no legal penalties are specified for other prostitutes. No Israelite man would have wished his daughter to descend to prostitution, although men facing bankruptcy may have been helpless to prevent it. Jacob's sons, Simeon and Levi, justified slaughtering their putative brother-in-law, Shechem, and all his male kinsmen on the grounds that their sister, Dinah, should not be treated as a *zonah* (Gen. 34:31). Tamar, of Genesis 38, posed as a prostitute and slept with her father-in-law, Judah, when he failed to fulfill his levirate obligation[3] toward her; she is praised and honored as an ancestor of David (Gen. 38). The text makes clear, however, that Tamar would have faced death had she not presented the pledges her father-in-law had left with her in lieu of payment and had he not acknowledged the justice of her claims.

The religious opprobrium directed toward prostitutes is most intensely expressed in biblical passages that invoke harlotry as a metaphor for Israel's betrayal of God. Thus the Israelites at Shittim are described as "whoring with the Moabite women who invite the people to the sacrifices for their god" (Num. 25:1). Jeremiah condemns "rebellious Israel" for "going to every high mountain and under every leafy tree and whoring there" (Jer. 3:6), and Hosea decries those who forsake God to practice *zenut* by worshiping other deities (Hos. 4:11–12). Hosea is ordered to take "a wife of whoredom" who will bear him "children of whoredom" (Hos. 1:2) as living allegories of Israel's lack of faithfulness.

Gentile Prostitutes in the Bible and Midrash

The biblical narrative of the Canaanite Rahab, the harlot heroine of Joshua 2, presents a Gentile prostitute in an extremely positive light. Rahab is portrayed as a strong-minded, independent woman who cleverly saved two Israelite spies from capture in Jericho. Moreover, she had the spiritual capacity to recognize the unique powers of Israel's God, confessing that "the Lord your God is the only God in heaven above and on earth below" (Joshua 2:11). In return for her generosity, the spies she had hidden promised that Rahab and her kin would be saved when Joshua and the Israelites destroyed Jericho. On the fateful day, Rahab hung a red thread from her window and gathered all her family within her house; remembering Rahab's goodness to his spies, Joshua ordered that she and her family be escorted to a safe place outside the Israelite camp. Joshua 6:25 confirms the happy ending: "Only Rahab the harlot and her father's family were spared by Joshua, along with all that belonged to her, and she dwelt among the Israelites—as is still the case." It is instructive that the biblical author depicts Rahab as a woman of substance, living in her home, respected by her neighbors, and in friendly contact with her relatives. This probably reflects the lives of some urban prostitutes in biblical times.

The biblical story of Rahab is exciting and hortatory, and Rahab herself is portrayed as a stalwart, praiseworthy woman. The Rabbis of the midrash and Talmud, moreover, developed Rahab beyond the scriptural parameters of her story. They saw Rahab as a preeminent model of the righteous convert who went beyond all others in her recognition of God's great powers. By imagining Rahab as a repentant fallen woman who found God and joined the community of Israel, the Rabbis also represent Rahab as an exemplar of the efficacy of Judaism and its traditions in taming the disordering powers of female sexuality. Indeed, Rahab's two personae, the good-hearted whore and repentant fallen woman, establish prototypes with far-reaching implications in the Western imagination—from Mary Magdalen of the New Testament to the ubiquitous whore with the heart of gold in the popular cultures of every era.[4]

Why did Rahab become such an important rabbinic model? It appears that both her gender and her profession appealed to rabbinic interpreters looking for engaging female figures of repentance and conversion. In an extended midrash on the Book of Esther in the Babylonian Talmud (BT) *Megillah* 15a, Rahab is also eroticized when she is linked with other

women whom the Rabbis associated with surpassing beauty and irregular sexual behavior. Part of this passage focuses on the unusually seductive qualities of Rahab, Yael (Judges 4–5), Abigail (1 Samuel 25), and Michal, the daughter of Saul (1 Samuel 18, 19, 25:44; 2 Samuel 6). Each biblical character is problematic for rabbinic exegetes because each acted in ways that included independence, assertion of sexuality, and an apparent willingness to betray the men of her own family and community. The passage, which is both funny and openly titillating, reads in part:

> Rahab inspired lust by her name; Yael by her voice; Abigail by her memory; Michal, daughter of Saul, by her appearance. R. Isaac said, "Whoever says, 'Rahab, Rahab' at once ejaculates." R. Nahman responded, "I say 'Rahab, Rahab,' and nothing happens to me." He replied, "I was speaking of one who knew her and was intimate with her."

A. Midrashic traditions about Rahab fall into several groups. First are those that emphasize her lurid past and then describe her sincerity as a convert. *Sifre Zuta* on Numbers 10:28 recounts that four names of disgrace and obscenity pertained to Rahab, and explains that she was called *zonah* because she was unchaste both with men of her own country and wanderers from elsewhere. According to BT *Zebahim* 116a–b, there was no prince or ruler who had not possessed Rahab the harlot: "She was ten years old when the Israelites departed from Egypt, and she played the harlot the whole forty years spent by the Israelites in the wilderness. At the age of fifty she became a proselyte." This tradition expresses the rabbinic conviction that women are sexually untrustworthy, particularly non-Jewish women. However, it stresses, too, the significant lesson that past wickedness is no bar to present repentance and future salvation. Perhaps the most important lesson is that women, as well as men, are capable of spiritual transformation and are equally welcomed into the Jewish community.

B. A second category of remarks details Rahab's many distinguished descendants who were said to be priests and prophets in Israel. That a convert and former prostitute could achieve such a name for herself in the annals of Jewish history is proof that those who sincerely return to God will achieve repentance, no matter how great their previous sins. Rahab's name can be understood as "breadth" and her past excesses are frequently cited as evidence of the breadth of the gates of repentance, as in the following homiletic midrash from *Pesikta Rabbati* 40:3:

"He will judge the world and declare it acquitted / But He will minister judgment to the heathen peoples according to the upright" (Psalm 9:9). What is meant by, "according to the upright"? R. Alexandri said: He will minister judgment to the heathen people by citing as examples the upright ones among them, the example of Rahab, of Jethro, of Ruth. How will he do so? He will say to each individual of the peoples of the earth: "Why did you not bring yourself closer to Me?" And each of them will answer: "I was wicked, so steeped in wickedness that I was ashamed." And God will ask: "Were you more so than Rahab whose house was in the side of the wall so that on the outside she would receive robbers and then whore with them inside? Nevertheless, when she wished to draw near Me, did I not receive her and raise up prophets and priests from her line?"

A third group of traditions revises Rahab's past entirely and transforms her from a harlot to an innocent innkeeper who ultimately married Joshua (BT *Megillah* 114b). Because Rahab is said to have been so intimately connected with prominent figures in Israel, as wife and as ancestor, this revisionist tradition is not surprising.[5] To launder her past in this way, however, seriously undercuts the main message about the warm reception Judaism offers the repentant harlot. Moreover, by transforming Rahab into a pious convert and devoted wife of Joshua, the Rabbis vitiate Rahab's otherness, defuse her dangerous sexuality, and undercut her disturbing independence.

Traditions about Rahab are part of a larger rabbinic repertoire of erotic stories about prostitutes. One midrashic tale in BT *Menahot* 44a (and *Sifre Numbers* 115), for example, appears in a discussion of the importance of observing the precept of *tzitzit* (ritual fringes) and recounts the tale of a student who was very careful in observing this precept. This young man learned about a prostitute "in the cities of the sea" who required four hundred gold pieces as a fee, and he determined to visit her. Sending the money in advance, he set a date for their assignation. When he arrived, the prostitute had prepared seven beds, "six of silver and one of gold; and between each bed there were steps of silver, but the last were of gold." The woman ascended to the top bed and lay down on it naked. When the young man followed her, the four fringes [of his garment] suddenly struck him across the face and he fell to the ground.

The harlot descended from the golden bed and asked what blemish he had found in her to treat her this way. The man replied that she was the most beautiful women he had ever seen, but he explained that his "*tzitzit* had testified against him" and dissuaded him from endangering his life in the world to come by engaging in harlotry. The woman was so impressed that she became a convert to Judaism and married the man who had rejected her when she was a prostitute. The story ends, "Those very bedclothes that had been spread for him for an illicit purpose she now spread out for him lawfully. This is the reward [for observing the precept] in this world; and as for its reward in the future world—I know not how great it is." This appealing and romantic narrative, like the Rahab story, juxtaposes some of the risqué imagined details of its subject's profession with a religious miracle and the spiritually elevating account of her acceptance into the Jewish community.

Rabbinic Ambivalence

Prostitution as a social reality is decried in rabbinic writings. BT *Berakhot* 23a tells the story of a student of the Rabbis who committed suicide when a prostitute revealed their apparent liaison to his teachers. Although contrary examples are given, the Sages advise that men should not practice their vocations in neighborhoods where harlots live (BT *Pesahim* 113a–b). Exodus *Rabbah* 43:7 and BT *Berakhot* 32a explain the Israelites' practice of idolatry in Egypt through the analogy of a man who established his son as a vendor of perfumes in a street where prostitutes lived and then upbraided him for frequenting his customers.[6] *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan* B3 advises:

> Scripture says, "Keep yourself far from her [a forbidden woman]" (Proverbs 5:8). A man is told: "Do not walk down this street or enter this alley, for there is a prostitute here; she is an attractive woman and she seduces all creatures by her beauty. He said, "I am confident that although I walk [there], I won't look at her and I won't desire her beauty." He is told, "Although you are confident, don't go."

However, as is frequently the case in rabbinic *halakhah* (legal rulings), there is a distinction between what is ethically preferred and what is legally permitted. Thus the *halakhah* was decided in accordance with the opinion of R. Judah ha-Nasi (Tosefta *Temurah* 4:8): visiting prostitutes was not forbidden (assuming the prostitute was an unmarried woman so that adultery was not a factor). If a man chose to visit a prostitute, despite moral

exhortations to the contrary, there was a definite preference for Gentile women. This is based on rabbinic interpretations of the statements "do not degrade your daughter and make her a harlot" (Lev. 19:29) and "no Israelite woman shall be a cult prostitute [*qedeshah*]; nor shall any Israelite man be a cult prostitute [*qedesh*]" (Deut. 23:18). According to BT *Sanhedrin* 82a, *qedesh* and *qedesha* refer to all prostitutes.

A significant reason for this attempt to deter Jewish men from frequenting Jewish prostitutes was the fear of incest. According to an early midrashic collection on Leviticus, "Whoever hands his unmarried daughter [to a man] not for the purposes of matrimony," as well as the woman who makes herself sexually available not for the purposes of matrimony, could lead to the whole world being filled with *mamzerim* [illegitimate children], since "from his consorting with many women and not knowing with whom, or if she has had intercourse with many men and does not know with whom—he could marry his own daughter, or marry her to his son" (*Sifra Kedoshim* 7, 1–5). Such disastrous misalliances would be far less likely to occur if Jewish men avoided Jewish prostitutes. However, this is not to say that the Rabbis condone sexual contact with Gentiles. It is important to point out R. Hiyya b. Abuiah's saying that "he who is intimate with a heathen woman is as though he had entered into marriage relationship with an idol" (BT *Sanhedrin* 82a).

Jewish Prostitutes in Rabbinic Midrash

A very different tone attends rabbinic narratives about Jewish men and women who were sold into brothels or sexual slavery by Roman conquerors following the failures of the First and Second Jewish Wars (66–70 C.E. and 132–136 C.E., respectively). These grim narratives fall into several categories, but they all portray prostitution as a degradation that, metaphorically, reflects the powerlessness and emasculation that Jews suffered under Roman rule. The prostitutes in these midrashic stories are male and female, but, as Daniel Boyarin has pointed out, all Jews were feminized in their subjugation to Roman rule.[7]

An expression of this is found in a tradition in BT *Gittin* 58a, attributed to the Sage Resh Lakish:

> It is related of a certain woman named Tzafnat bat Peniel [the daughter of the high priest][8] . . . that Roman battalion abused her for a whole night. In the morning [one of the captors] put seven veils around her and took her out to sell her. A certain man who was exceptionally ugly came and said: "Show me her beauty." He replied: "Fool, if you want to buy her, buy, for there is no other so beautiful in all the world." He said to him, "All the same [show her to me]. When the woman had been stripped of her seventh veil, she rolled in the dust and cried out, "Sovereign of the universe, if You do not have pity on us why do you not have pity on the sanctity of Your name?" Resh Lakish applied to her situation a verse from Jeremiah, "Daughters of my people, / put on sackcloth and strew dust on yourselves! / Mourn as for an only child; / Wail bitterly / for suddenly the destroyer is coming upon us" (6:26); he explained that since the verse says "upon us," the rape and degradations of the daughters of Israel are also attacks on God.[9]

Other traditions in the same *sugya* (Talmudic discussion) recount the story of four hundred boys and girls who were carried off by the Romans to be placed in brothels (BT *Gittin* 57b). The children knew their probable destination and discussed among themselves the option of suicide, wondering, "If we drown in the sea shall we attain the life of the future world?" When the eldest boy interpreted Psalm 68:23, "The Lord said, 'I will retrieve them from Bashan, I will retrieve them from the depth of the sea," in the affirmative, all the girls leaped into the sea. "The boys then drew the moral for themselves, saying, 'If these for whom this is natural [being sexually used by men] act so, shall not we, for whom it is unnatural?' They also leaped into the sea." The anecdote concludes with the citation of Psalm 44:23, "It is for Your sake that we are slaughtered all day long / That we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." As this midrash affirms, one of the three permitted reasons for martyrdom in Jewish tradition is to preserve oneself from sexual depredation. The other two reasons to prefer death, whether by suicide or the agency of another, are murder of another human being and participation in idolatry. The strong connection between prostitution and idolatry is constant in rabbinic writings. The tradition that immediately follows the story of the four hundred children is the martyrdom narrative of the woman and her seven sons who choose death over worshiping false gods.[10]

A related group of stories deals with ransoming Jews who were already in Roman brothels. According to the Mishnah, Jews have an obligation to redeem fellow Jews who have been enslaved: "A woman's nakedness must be covered sooner than a man's and she must be brought out of captivity

sooner than he. When both stand in danger of defilement, the man must be freed before the woman" (*Horayot* 3:7). One of the most famous of these narratives about redeeming captives is found in BT *Avodah Zarah* 18a, which relates that the Romans martyred the Sage R. Hanina b. Teradion because he persisted in teaching Torah against their orders. As part of his punishment, his wife was also killed and his daughter was placed in a brothel. Her sister, Beruriah, the wife of R. Meir, insisted that her husband attempt to rescue her. R. Meir agreed to do so and set out for Rome with funds with which to ransom his unnamed sister-in-law. On the way he determined that he would only be able to save her if, by some miracle, she had not committed any sexual sin (that is, been sexually violated as a prostitute). The story continues,

> Disguised as a Roman officer, he came to her and said, "Prepare yourself for me." She replied, "The manner of women is upon me." He said, "I am prepared to wait." "But," she answered, "there are many here who are far more beautiful than I am." He said to himself, these [responses] prove that she has not committed any wrong, since she must say this to deter every potential customer. He then went to her warder and said, "Hand her over to me."[11]

A similar story appears in different versions in Tosefta *Horayot* 2:5 and BT *Gittin* 58a recounting R. Joshua b. Hananiah's ransoming of a Jewish boy, "a child with beautiful eyes and face, and hair arranged in locks," who "was in danger of shame" in a Roman brothel.[12] When R. Joshua heard about this child, he stood at the doorway of the brothel and called out, "Who was it who gave Jacob over to despoilment and Israel to plunderers?" (Isaiah 42:24). The child answered, "Surely the Lord, against whom they sinned / In whose ways they would not walk / And whose law [*torahto*] they would not obey" (Isaiah 42:24). R. Joshua said, "I feel sure that this one will be a teacher in Israel. I swear that I will not budge from here before I ransom him, whatever price may be demanded." The boy was redeemed at great cost and he grew up to become R. Ishmael b. Elisha.

In both these stories, each of the Jewish prisoners must pass a gender-based test of virtue and intelligence in order to merit being ransomed. R. Hanina b. Terodian's daughter showed that she had preserved her honor by using her wits to trick customers and deter their advances; this convinced her brother-in-law that she was worthy of redemption. Similarly,

R. Ishmael's demonstration of Torah knowledge ensured his rescue. Clearly, these didactic narratives are meant to emphasize the qualities that the Rabbis believed were essential for Jewish survival under Roman captivity.

Still, the Sages understood that resistance in a situation of virtually certain violation was generally not possible. Thus a related tradition immediately follows the narrative of how R. Ishmael was ransomed from captivity in BT *Gittin* 58a. Linking the related themes of prostitution, incest, and martyrdom, the story relates that R. Ishmael's children were taken captive and sold to different masters in Rome. The young people were both beautiful and their masters decided to mate them and share their offspring. They put them in a dark room overnight, but each sat in a separate corner,

> He said [to himself] "I am a priest descended from high priests, and shall I marry a bondwoman?" She said: "I am a priestess descended from high priests, and shall I be married to a slave?" So they passed all the night in tears. When the day dawned they recognized one another and fell on one another's necks and lamented and wept until their souls departed. For them Jeremiah said, "For these things do I weep / My eyes flow with tears / Far from me is any comforter / Who might revive my spirit; / My children are forlorn / For the foe has prevailed" (Lam. 1:16).

In this tragic narrative, which also appears, in another version, in Lamentations *Rabbah* 1,[13] the young people's strong consciousness of their priestly lineage saved them from committing incest, but their overwhelming horror and grief at their situation led to their merciful deaths as martyrs.

Conclusion

Religious systems promote ethical and moral principles and people depend on these teachings as they struggle with the ambiguities and compromises of human existence. As these biblical and rabbinic traditions about prostitutes and the state of being a prostitute reveal, Judaism and Jews are no different. It is easy to tell romantic tales about idealized and beautiful harlots who are convinced to abandon their wicked, if rather exciting, ways. It is not so pleasant to face the realities of prostitution when one's own identity and one's own loved ones are at risk of violation.

NOTES

1. This chapter focuses on biblical and rabbinic texts. For scholarly research on Jews and prostitution in medieval and modern times, see Yomtov Assis, "Sexual Behavior in Medieval Hispano-Jewish Society," in *Jewish History: Essays in Honour of Chimen Abramsky*, ed. Ava Rapoport-Albert and Steven Zipperstein (London: Halben, 1998), 25–59; Avraham Grossman, *Pious and Rebellious: Jewish Women in Medieval Europe* (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2004), 133–147; Edward Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice: The Jewish Fight against White Slavery, 1870–1939* (New York: Schocken, 1983); Rachel Gershuni, "Trafficking in Persons for the Purpose of Prostitution: The Israeli Experience," *Mediterranean Quarterly* (fall 2004): 133–146; and Nora Glickman, *The Jewish White Slave Trade and the Untold Story of Raquel Liberman* (New York: Garland, 2000).

2. Elaine A. Goodfriend, "Prostitution," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:505–510.

3. "Levirate marriage," from the Latin *levir* (brother-in-law), refers to the mandated marriage of a widowed woman to her husband's brother. Levirate marriage in the case of a childless widow is a feature of Israelite religion and has a long history in Judaism. According to the Hebrew Bible, if a man dies and leaves no sons, his widow should not be married to a "stranger" (Deut. 25:6–8). Rather, her husband's oldest brother is to perform the duty of the *levir* (in Hebrew, *yibbum*) and marry her. The first son that the woman bears to her new husband will be considered the heir of the deceased brother, "so that his name is not blotted out in Israel."

4. On rabbinic midrash about Rahab, see Judith R. Baskin, *Midrashic Women: Formations of the Feminine in Rabbinic Literature* (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2002), 154–160; and Leila Leah Bronner, "Hope for the Harlot: The Estate of the Marginalized Woman," in idem, *From Eve to Esther: Rabbinic Reconstructions of Biblical Women* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster, John Knox Press, 1994), 142–162.

5. For these traditions, see Baskin, *Midrashic Women*, 157–160; on Rahab's Israelite descendants, see *Sifre Numbers* 78 and *Ruth Rabbah* 2:1; on Rahab as an innkeeper, see *Sifre Numbers* 78; and on Rahab as a linen maker, see *Ruth Rabbah* 2:1, *Sifre Numbers* 78, and *Sifre Zuta* on Numbers 10:28.

6. On this narrative and for other stories about involvements of rabbis with prostitutes, see Meir Bar-Ilan, "Prostitutes," in idem, *Some Jewish Women in Antiquity*, Brown Judaic Studies 317 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 132–155, 139–141.

7. Daniel Boyarin, "Thinking with Virgins: Engendering Judaeo-Christian Difference," in idem, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 67–92, 73.

8. The allegorical nature of this narrative is evident in the name of the protagonist. BT *Gittin* 58a explains that she was called Tzafnat because all gazed *"tzofin"* at her beauty; her father was Peniel because he served as high priest at the Temple's inner shrine in the Divine presence (p'nei El).

9. Concerning the possible influence of Greco-Roman erotic romances on this narrative's themes and construction, see David Stern, "The Captive Woman: Hellenization, Greco Roman Erotic Narrative, and Rabbinic Literature," *Poetics Today* 19, no. 1 (1998): 91–127, 94–96.

10. On martyrdom in rabbinic literature, see Boyarin, *Dying for God*; on this story, see 87–88.

11. This narrative about R. Meir continues with numerous complications and complexities. For fuller discussions than are possible here, see Rachel Adler, "The Virgin in the Brothel and Other Anomalies: Character and Context in the Legend of Beruryah," *Tikkun* 3, no. 6 (1988): 28–32, 102, 105; and Daniel Boyarin, "Thinking with Virgins", 71–73.

12. The earlier version of this story in the Tosefta makes it clear that the boy is in a brothel. By the time the narrative is associated with R. Ishmael and appears in the Babylonian Talmud, the brothel has been changed to a "prison," no doubt out of deference to R. Ishmael's scholarly reputation. However, as with the rehabilitation of Rahab to a different occupation discussed above, much of the point of the story is lost. With thanks to Robert Daum, "Rabbi Ishmael in the Roman Brothel: Early Palestinian Narrative and Babylonian Rabbinic Hagiography," unpublished paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Medieval Academy of America, Vancouver, B.C., April 4, 2008.

13. On the somewhat different and more extended version of this narrative in *Lamentations Rabbah*, its erotic overtones, and its transgressive reversal of the typical romance plot, see Stern, "The Captive Woman," 96–97; and idem, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Unversity Press, 1991), 244–245.

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6

Good Sex

A Jewish Feminist Perspective

Melanie Malka Landau

WHEN WE THINK of "good sex" we think of sex that feels good and gives pleasure. Some less affected by advertising and popular culture may think of sex as acts between humans that create connection. But we know that sexual relationships are not only between two atomized individuals but are located within a complex set of contexts and relationships. If good sex is about sex within an ethical context, then good sex from a feminist Jewish perspective has its own set of questions to account for. This chapter asks: How can we make sex holy as feminist Jews while grappling with the gender injustices that emerge through the male-centered textual tradition?

At the outset I acknowledge that I am limiting this discussion to heterosexual relationships. I think the heterosexual relationship is the potential site for radical gender transformation on the level of gender roles and the separation between gender and biology. At the same time I believe that this is limiting, because it reinforces the idea that there really are two polarized sexes as opposed to a continuum of sexual beings attested to by the existence of intersex people. A focus on heterosexual relationships also bypasses the gender injustices that abound for Jews in same-sex partnerships.

The question now is this: Can a just and good sex be retrieved and fashioned from the compulsory heterosexuality of a male-centered rabbinic tradition? Judith Plaskow argues that "the question of what constitutes good sex from women's perspectives simply cannot be asked within the framework of the system."[1] In this chapter I ask this question in dialogical relationship with the tradition. This process of retrieving and refashioning, which I aim to achieve here, builds on the exciting scholarship that shows

love and passion for both rabbinic texts and radical feminism while creating an evocative dance that weaves together the strands of their commitments.

We enter the discussion on good sex from the House of Learning (*Beit Midrash*) and the experience of women reading about sex from the voice of men in the Talmud. The Talmud places a high value on learning, and yet rabbinic culture excludes women from this most prized practice. David Biale argues that the exclusion of women from the highest cultural value of learning and the dominant male role in sexuality were intimately and inseparably linked. Although women's business was highly important, the textual tradition attributes superior value to men through their focus on learning and because they have more religious obligations than women do. Moreover, compared to non-Jewish men and Jewish men who did not fit the scholarly ideal, the rabbis considered themselves to be a sexual elite which was manifested through their sexual restraint. Women and Torah are used interchangeably as objects of male desire.[2]

When people are reduced to objects, even by being classified in one group or another, their full range of humanity and of possibility is denied. To acknowledge objectification is to recognize that there is no particular correlation between the way that women are represented and the lived reality of those women. When we read texts about women, we may learn more about the dominant discourses from which they come than about the women themselves. Thus, how man and woman are seen to be is actually a construct upon which whole societies, economies, and religious systems are based.

A story in the tractate *Menahot* 44a in the Babylonian Talmud illustrates one way of seeing the move from objectified to subjectified sex. My reading of this story also shows how rabbinic texts can be appropriated for a feminist agenda. Narratives yield a multitude of interpretations that usually reflect the ideological commitments of the interpreter.

In this particular story, a rabbi paid a lot of money to come to a world-renowned prostitute who lived by the sea. He had to travel very far and schedule his appointment with her well in advance. Finally, his turn had come. After waiting for some time he was escorted to a luxurious room with seven levels of elaborate beds—six silver beds crowned by a golden bed on the top. The woman for whom he had been waiting was naked on the top bed, waiting for him to come up. He undressed as he climbed the beds; after he removed his shirt, the *tzitzit* attached to his undergarment smacked him in the face, as if to admonish him for what he was about to

do. Castigated and embarrassed, he went back down and sat naked on the ground. When the woman saw this, she came down after him; they faced each other naked on the ground. She had never been rejected. Before she let him leave, she wanted to know what blemish he had found in her that caused him to react in this way. He told her that she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in his life, but he explained that there is a commandment called *tzitzit* that called him to account for himself by appearing as four witnesses as he ascended the beds to have sex with her.

The woman was totally transformed by this encounter. She did not let the man leave until he told her his town and the name of his teacher. She then divided her property three ways: one-third for the poor, one-third for the government, and one-third she took with her. When she arrived at the study house of Reb Hiyya, who was this rabbi's teacher, she told him that she wanted to convert to Judaism. The rabbi asked her if she had taken a fancy to one of the students. She handed him the note that the man had written for her with the name of his town and his rabbi. The Sage then told her she could now fully consummate her relationship with that man with whom she had nearly had relations. The tale ends with her spreading the same linen for their marital union that had been previously spread for their anticipated illicit union.[3]

The rabbi in our story undergoes an inner transformation that results in his no longer seeing the woman—the prostitute—as an object. His "sin" is interrupted by the ritual fringes. I contend that this man did not only think prostitution was wrong because it is against the law—rabbis found various justifications for seeing prostitutes—but rather that it was not how he was meant to relate to another human.

Even if it is too speculative to suggest that he saw her as a subject, once he interrupted the process of objectification she then took upon herself autonomy as a subject and could see herself in a new way. It is a near miraculous moment when the horizon of possibility opens up and humans see that there is a range of alternatives in a given situation. A force of no less than Divine proportion—the mythical intervention of the *tzitzit*—was needed to interrupt the objectifying relationship.

This may be a reminder about the intensity of the drive to objectify. In this story the Divine voice—through the vehicle of the *tzitzit*—is used as a way to promote the shift to subject. At other times Divine authority, at least through the force of the law, is used to reinforce unequal power dynamics between men and women in a relationship.

The image of the rabbi and the prostitute sitting on the ground, face to face and naked, evokes a deep sense of human connection. They have experienced a transformation in each other's company.

The story is comforting in that it reports a transformation from depersonalised sex to a grounded meeting between two people. In one sense it actually represents the way in which the social construction of women and men sets them up to relate to each other in a certain way that does not necessarily serve either of them particularly well. In the story it is the fringes of the garment that intervene to effect the transformation to a way of relating, stripped (literally) of the other roles they had been playing. Being stripped of roles, as crucial as it may be, can only ever be a temporary position; we see, in the end, that the two resume other defined roles of husband and wife according to the rabbinic tradition. Despite this, the moment of nakedness does show the contingency of our roles and the possibility that they can be disassembled. This story repeats some of the stereotypes and oppressions of women; it features a prostitute, after all, who is absorbed back into society through the respectable channel of marriage. Yet, at the same time, it also interrupts the objectification of the prostitute and shows the human vulnerability inherent in their relationship.

This story has in it all the kernels of the conundrum of kosher sex. There is a move from impersonal sex to "sex in a relationship." The twentieth-century Jewish legal and philosophical scholar Eliezer Berkovits calls this movement "the humanized transformation of the impersonal quality of the sexual instinct" and claims that this is "the climax in man's striving for sexual liberation."[4] Good sex, according to Jewish tradition, takes place within the marital relationship. This means that it is between a Jewish man and a Jewish woman in a committed relationship at the right time. The ultimate resolution of our story depicts the gentile prostitute becoming the Jewish wife of a scholar. Although intermarriage is frowned upon, as a convert the prostitute is welcomed into the fold. The rabbi suspected that perhaps she only wanted to convert to get married, but when she told him the story he was reassured that she wanted to adopt Jewish life and values for herself and not just to get a Jewish husband. Bad sex, here, becomes good sex. In one way it could be seen that the sex that began as "illicit" becomes "holy" within the appropriate framework; however, it resonates more to say that the relationship became transformed from an I-It relationship to an I-Thou relationship. Although "good sex," traditionally, is any sex within the prescribed framework, this essay argues that "good sex" also encompasses a

thinking of another woman; (2) one of the parties is excommunicated; (3) a husband who has two wives has intercourse thinking that he is with the other wife; (4) one party is angry with the other; (5) one party is drunk; (6) the husband has already decided to divorce the wife; (7) the wife is sleeping with another man; (8) a woman brazenly demands relations.[15]

The laws of *nidah*, the physical separation of husband and wife during menstruation and for one week after, enable relationships to focus substantially on nonphysical aspects of connection. Whereas feminists have described marriage as implying a continuous male sex right, the laws of menstrual separation interrupt any implied female sexual availability. As one contemporary observant woman writes:

> Quite simply, for non-Jews, marriage means that the other is always sexually available to them, subject to an unspecific, largely unenforceable notion of consent. The Jewish laws of Family Purity and those that mandate the explicit consent to sexual relations make it clear to Jewish men from the outset that even marriage does not enable perpetual access to a woman's body and that sexual relations are not an inalienable and constant right purchased through the transaction of marriage.[16]

Yet women may also use this issue of availability as a way to engage in a power play with their husbands and withhold sex *not* because they do not want to be intimate per se but as a weapon to punish their partners. I think this actually objectifies men and their sexual desire, and takes advantage of their vulnerability. At the same time, perhaps, women withhold one of their most significant values in marriage in order to transform their power as objects. This exemplifies how the categories of subject and object may become fluid and indiscrete. In a situation where a woman feels powerless, she may use her capacity to withhold or delay sexual encounters with her husband as a way to reclaim a sense of autonomy and power in the relationship. In fact, the Palestinian Talmud recounts such an episode:

> Shmu'el wanted to sleep with his wife. She said to him: "I am in the status of impurity." But the next day she said: "I am in the status of purity." He said to her: "Yesterday you were in the status of impurity and today you are in the status of purity!?" She said to him: "Yesterday I did not have the same strength as today." He went to ask [the opinion of] Rav, who said to him: "If she gave you a plausible reason for her words [which she did] she can be believed.[17]

As this story reveals, Shmu'el's wife has a measure of control over the couple's sexual life, which is couched as her control over the way laws of menstruation are practiced. Charlotte Fonrobert also reads this story as a symptom of the rabbi's anxiety about women making halakhic decisions to their advantage as well as undermining the rabbi's authority through questions of believability.[18]

The critical reading of classical rabbinic and medieval texts about sexuality—as well as the reading of contemporary practices—can locate resistance within the texts themselves to some dominant paradigms of heterosexuality. Through an activist interpretation of these sources the feminist project of rebuilding gender relations can be achieved from the ground up, using the foundations of the tradition to seed the support for a constantly developing vision for Jewish practice and community. Similarly certain interpretations of the sources can reinforce gender hierarchies and masquerade gender constructions as natural and biological differences between women and men. The desirable relationship between men and women is not about exchanging male dominance for female dominance; rather, it is about transforming the relationship beyond power dynamics to a dance of giving and receiving, of communication and openness. This can only be achieved by acknowledging the various contexts in which the heterosexual relationship is located. It is within this paradigm that, in the best case, certain strands of tradition will guide us.

NOTES

1. J. Plaskow, "Authority, Resistance, and Transformation: Jewish Feminist Reflections on Good Sex," in *The Coming of Lilith: Essays in Feminism, Judaism, and Sexual Ethics, 1972–2003* (Boston: Beacon, 2005), 193–205, quote at 196.

2. D. Biale, *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 36.

3. BT *Menahot* 44a.

4. E. Berkovits, *Essential Essays on Judaism*, ed. D. Hazony (Jerusalem: Shalem, 2002), 114. One might question what Berkovits calls the "sexual instinct" and his assumption that it is naturally and originally impersonal. One may agree that it is impersonal but may not agree that it is naturally so, but rather that it is a

function of many interrelated social processes. Nevertheless, its transformation is still significant even if there are different understandings regarding its origin.

5. For more information about the male marital obligations, see D. Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 143.

6. C. Pateman, "Women and Consent," *Political Theory* 8, no. 2 (May 1980): 149–168, quote at 150. Pateman continues:

> To examine the unwritten history of women and consent brings the suppressed problems of consent theory to the surface. Women exemplify the individuals who consent theorists have declared uncapable of consenting. Yet, simultaneously, women have been presented as always consenting, and their explicit non-consent has been treated as irrelevant or has been reinterpreted as "consent."

7. D. Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 170. See also BT *Ketubbot* 61b.

8. Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct.*

9. Ibid., 171.

10. Ibid., 172.

11. See *Eiruvin* 100b: Rami b. Hama citing R. Assi further ruled: "A man is forbidden to compel his wife to the [marital] obligation, since it is said in Scripture: 'Without consent the soul is not good; and he that hurries with his feet sins'" (Prov. 19:2); *Ba'ailei ha-Nefesh, Sha'ar ha-Kedushah; Hil. De'ot* 5:4; *Even ha-Ezer* 25:2. Available at http://www.jsafe.org/pdfs/pdf_032206_2.pdf (accessed 22 May 2007; p. 10).

12. Incidentally, the husband who refuses to have sex with his wife is called a *mored* (rebel), and for every week that he refuses to have sex he has to add more payment to her *ketubah*. At any point the wife can also choose to divorce, in which case the Beit Din will force the husband to divorce her. See *Shulchan Aruch, Even Haezer* (Laws of *Onah*) 77:1. The wife can also prevent her husband from working in a certain place if it will reduce his capacity to fulfil her sexually. If he chooses to be a Torah scholar, however, then she cannot prevent him from moving. Even without her permission, he may go away for two or three years; with her permission, he can go away for even longer (76:5). These laws, which trump a husband's religious obligations to his wife, demonstrate the extremely high cultural value attributed to learning Torah.

13. I. S. D. Sassoon *"Ra'ah ma'aseh ve-nizkar halakhah," Judaism* (winter/spring 2005).

14. Available at http://www.jsafe.org/pdfs/pdf_032206_2.pdf (accessed 22 May 2007; p. 12), in reference to *Nedarim* 20b.

15. Ibid.

16. J. Shmaryahu, "We Will Do and We Will Listen," in *Total Immersion: A Mikvah Anthology*, ed. R. Slonim (New York: Jason Aronson, 1996), 35.

17. PT *Ketubot* 2:5, 26c; and quoted in Tosafot, BT *Ketubot* 22b. Translation from C. E. Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000), 26.

18. Ibid.

Ruttenberg, Danya, ed. *The Passionate Torah: Sex & Judaism.*
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Rabbi Meir & Beruria-In All Her Complexity

Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture

> If we do entertain the notion that Athenian citizen-wives had at least certain kinds of informal power, we must also be clear that it was socially necessary for men not to acknowledge it—to deal with it at most indirectly through myths of Amazons and through their cultural fantasies of rebellious wives in tragedy or comedy.
>
> (Winkler 1989, 7)

> Beruriah's learned status has often been used in apologetic arguments that seek to minimize rabbinic misogyny. I assume rabbinic culture to have been fundamentally sexist and even misogynist. The Beruriah texts and their portrayal of women should be understood as a way of nuancing that misogyny; it wasn't monolithic, but variegated. In some eras, it was more severe, in some less. *In every age, there were likely to be at least a few dissenters and non-conformists: rabbis who taught their wives and daughters Torah, wives and daughters who naturally wanted to display their knowledge to other women.* The Beruriah materials, which span a thousand years, are a discourse on gender whose existence testifies to the possibility of imagining women in unfamiliar ways.
>
> (Davis 1991; emphasis added)

Running through the talmudic and midrashic literature are narratives about a very learned woman, generally called Beruria and often portrayed as the wife of one of the greatest of the tannaitic sages, Rabbi Meir. In this section of my text, I propose to read this narrative complex as just such a "cultural fantasy" as Winkler has described—that is an acknowledgment/denial of at least some access to Torah-study that women seem to have had. Although we have no way of knowing whether or not such a woman actually existed, the stories about her are certainly significant in relaying some "reality" about the culture of the Talmuds.

The Palestinian text of ritual law, the Tosefta, the very text which had taught us that women may study Torah, actually cites two cases in which a learned woman made a point regarding ritual purity that was accepted and approbated by the Rabbis. The first case involves a woman in the guise of an anonymous daughter of R. Hanina:

> An oven . . . which was plastered in purity and became impure—from whence can it be purified? R. Halafta of Kefar Hananya said, "I asked Shim'on ben Hananyah who asked the son of R. Hananya ben Tradyon, and he said when they move it from its place. But his daughter said when they disassemble its parts. *When this was told to R. Yehuda ben Babba, he said, "his daughter said better than his son."*
>
> (Tosefta Kelim Baba Qamma 4:17)

The second such story appears in the same text as about Beruria:

> A *claustra*—R. Tarfon declares it impure, but the sages declare it pure. And Beruria says, one removes it from this door and hangs it on another.

> On the Sabbath these matters were related to R. Yehoshua. *He said, "Beruria said well."*
>
> (Tosefta Kelim Baba Metzia 1:6)

These texts, whatever else they may be, are certainly highly marked representations of a learned woman. That is to say, they are an acknowledgment of the structural possibility within the culture that a woman could achieve such knowledge of Torah as to be authoritatively cited in an important question of ritual practice. As such, they can be read as part of the same social force represented by Ben-Azzai and the Tosefta cited in the previous section—a counter-hegemonic voice that recognizes the reality of *some* women's intellectual and spiritual accomplishment.[16]

In the Babylonian Talmud, the legend of Beruria the learned woman is also maintained. She is portrayed as having learned "three hundred ritual laws in one day from three hundred Rabbis" (Pesachim 62b). Moreover, she even teaches a moral lesson to her husband, the great Rabbi Meir, by besting him at midrashic reading of a verse:

16. Goodblatt argues two points with reference to these texts: one, that they do not constitute evidence for the identification of these two personalities (Goodblatt 1975, 77), and two, that they do not constitute evidence that this woman, or women, was learned (ibid., 83). He argues that this is the sort of knowledge that a daughter would have had by virtue of being part of a rabbinic household. On the first point, I am prepared to agree with the plausibility of his claim, but on the second, I disagree. Neither of these ritual situations is so common as to constitute the sort of matters that any member of a rabbinic household would have observed—indeed, both situations (certainly the first) are presented as unusual. Moreover, the first narrative contradicts Goodblatt's claim from within itself. If the daughter were simply reporting the practice in her household, why did her brother have a different suggestion? It is possible, of course, that the daughter obtained her knowledge not through formal instruction but simply through being present at learned discussions or lessons given by her father at home. This alone would form an avenue of resistance to the discourse of exclusion of women from study, and it is not the same as Goodblatt's claim that hers was merely "practical" knowledge of kitchen practice, which I find highly implausible for the reasons stated. There is even one version of this text (and quite an important one—R. Yehuda ben Kalonymos), in which it was her *father* that she bested here; that version, at any rate, would entirely forestall Goodblatt's claim that this was knowledge the girl had picked up from seeing the practice of her household. The story rather suggests in both cases that the woman (or girl) in question had an understanding of principles of religious law that she could apply to specific hypothetical situations, and the text in both cases strongly marks its approbation of her knowledge, a fact that will be of some importance below.

On the basis of these two traditions, it is less surprising that the Babylonians regarded these as two stories of the same woman (see also Davis 1991). In fact, I would suggest that the literary similarity of the two narratives suggests that they may be variants of the same basic story. It certainly seems from this text, moreover, that Beruria was a well-known figure in the Palestinian tradition as well.

> There were two hooligans in the neighborhood of Rabbi Meir who were troubling him greatly. He would pray for them to die. His wife Beruria said to him: "What is your view? Is it because it says, 'Let the wicked be terminated from the earth' (Psalms 104:36)? Does it say 'wicked people'? 'Wicked deeds' is written! Moreover, interpret it according to the end of the verse, 'And there are no more evil-doers.' Now if the first half means that the wicked are dead, why do I have to pray that there will be no more evil-doers. Rather it means that since wicked deeds will exist no more, there will be no more evil-doers." He prayed for them, and they repented.
>
> (Berakhot 10a)

In the light of such exceedingly positive contexts for Beruria and her learning at every turn, it is shocking to discover the following narrative of her end:

> Once Beruria made fun of the rabbinic dictum, "Women are light-headed" [i.e., lewd]. He [her husband, R. Meir] said, "On your life! You will end up admitting that they are right." He commanded one of his students to tempt her into [sexual] transgression. The student importuned her for many days, until in the end she agreed. When the matter became known to her, she strangled herself, and R. Meir ran away because of the shame.
>
> (Rashi ad Babylonian Talmud Avoda Zara 18b)

In the Talmud itself, all we are told is that Rabbi Meir ran away to Babylonia, because of the "incident of Beruria." The Talmud tells no more. Our narrative is found only in the important medieval French commentator on the Talmud, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, the famous Rashi. The story recounts an ugly tale of entrapment and suicide. Rabbi Meir, to prove a point to his proud wife, has her seduced and disgraced (not so incidentally disgracing himself and a student of his in the bargain). This aberrant legend about the behavior of one of the greatest rabbis of the Talmud toward a wife presented otherwise as pious, wise, respected, and loved demands historicization and explanation, and to be sure, in both the traditional and scholarly literature, a great deal has been written about this text. Recently, a very powerful and moving feminist reading of this story has been written by Rachel Adler (1988, 28 ff.).[17] I am in

17. There is, however, one moment in Adler's text I wish to dispute directly, namely, her reading of the text of the Mishna Tractate Avot 5:16. Adler translates this text:

sympathy with the general thrust of her text and its reading practice ("Retelling it from the world in which we stand, we can see how character strains against context, how it shakes assumptions about what it means to be a woman, a Jew, a sexual being"), but I wish here to present another reading of the text, retelling it from the world in which we stand but attempting also to learn more from it about the world in which it was told. The main difference in principle between our readings is generated by Adler's declaration that, "I call it a story, though in fact it is many stories from many times and many texts" (28) and the consequent conflation of "Palestine in 200 B.C.E. [sic][18] or Babylonia in 500 C.E." (29). While Adler shows here a fine awareness of the distinctions between these historical moments, her intention seems to be to produce an account of the

> All love which is dependent on sexual desire, when the desire is gone, the love is gone. Love which is not dependent on sexual desire never ends. What is love dependent on sexual desire? The love of Amnon and Tamar. And love which is not dependent on sexual desire? The love of David and Jonathan.
>
> (Adler 1988, 32)

On this, Adler remarks: "If Amnon and Tamar and David and Jonathan represent the two ends of a continuum, the fact that one end is represented by an incestuous rape and the other by a relationship presumed to be nonsexual does suggest a dichotomy between sexual desire and true love."

I think that this is a misreading of this text, and one that has serious consequences for our understanding of the place of legitimate Eros in rabbinic culture. The Mishna's text does not read, "All love which is dependent on sexual desire," but "love which is dependent on something," that is, love that has an ulterior motive versus "love which is disinterested." The point of the comment is that love that grows out of the fulfillment of some particular need in the lover is not a true love and will last only as long as the need exists and the beloved is fulfilling it. See also Aspegren (1990, 45) for a similar idea in Aristotle. The story of Amnon and Tamar is, in fact, an apt illustration of this, for once Amnon had raped his sister, the Bible tells us that not only did he not love her any more but he hated her. The Mishna commentator, R. Israel Danzig, insightfully remarks that Amnon did not love Tamar at all but only himself, for it was only the pleasure of his body that he was seeking.

This text hardly represents the talmudic culture's generally positive appreciation of the power of sexual relations between husband and wife as an expression and enhancement of their love; there is even a rabbinic technical term for "the love caused by intercourse" (Babylonian Talmud Ketubbot 57a), a term that only functions in positively marked contexts, i.e., to indicate that only after a marriage has been consummated is there real commitment between the husband and the wife. After all, we also would hardly wish to claim the lust of the rapist as a model for a valorized erotic love. On the other hand, Adler's comments on the homosocial aspects of the institution of *havruta*, the practice of men studying in pairs, and the relationship of David and Jonathan as a model for it, are very important and suggestive of lines for further research. For the nonce, see Chapter 7.

18. In context, she certainly seems to mean Palestine in C.E. 200, the time of the historical Beruria, and "B.C.E." would be a misprint.

effect that the conflated stories of Beruria have had on women and men in hegemonic rabbinic culture since the early Middle Ages. My hope is that by paying attention precisely to the differences between the many stories from many times and many texts we will be able to generate a more nuanced and historicized understanding of the different readings of the signifier "woman" in different rabbinic cultures, opening up a space, perhaps, for new possibilities for the future. I will offer another reading of this text, taking it in the intertextual context of the legal discussion analyzed in the previous section of the chapter. This has suggested a difference precisely between the two historical terms of Palestine in 200 and Babylonia in 500.[19]

The end of Beruria's story, given to us only in the margins of the Babylonian talmudic text, as it were (but a very central margin indeed), is an extraordinary anomaly, not only in the presentation of her character throughout but also in the presentation of her husband's character. In Adler's reading, anomaly is the very meaning of this text. In an insightful comparison of this narrative with halakhic texts that portray unrealistic situations as test cases for legal theory, Adler writes:

> What do these surrealistic situations represent if not a passionate attempt to capture some elusive truth by smashing context? Imagining Beruriah must be regarded as just such an effort—a straining for a more encompassing context, an outrageous test case proposed as a challenge to all contextually reasonable assumptions: *What if there were a woman who was just like us?*
>
> (Adler 1988, 29)

The ambivalence of Beruria's story is then read by Adler as a single cultural unit representing ambivalence: "While it is threatening to imagine being ridiculed and exposed by a woman too learned and powerful to be controlled, it is also moving to imagine being loved and befriended by her. Thus the rabbis, in describing the domestic life of Beruriah and Meir, portray Beruriah as a feminine version of the ideal study partner" (32). The story of her downfall, then, is a solution to the negative pole of the ambivalence. Moreover, the very intimacy of the relationship with the

19. Goodblatt 1975 also argues for this historical difference, but in quite a different direction from the reading here proposed. Once again, I am deliberately fudging the question of chronological or geographical difference as determinative. Perhaps both were factors.

ideal study partner, when that partner is potentially a woman, makes it impossible for Beruria to fit in on Adler's reading. "Authority in rabbinic Judaism flowed through the medium of rabbinic relationships, and the rabbis could not imagine how to give Beruriah authority without including her in the web of rabbinic relationships—the web of teachers and students and study partners. And they could not imagine doing that without also imagining her sexuality as a source of havoc" (32).

We find excellent illustration of Adler's cultural thesis in a text that appears several times in the Palestinian corpus of rabbinic literature, but significantly perhaps, never in the Babylonian. Interestingly enough, and perhaps not coincidentally, the story involves, once more, Rabbi Meir:

> Rabbi Meir used to sit and teach on the Sabbath nights. A certain woman was there listening to him. Once his discourse was extended, and she waited until he had finished discoursing. She went home and found the candle already extinguished. Her husband said to her, "Where were you?" She said to him, "I was sitting and listening to the teacher." He said, "I swear that you will not enter here until you go and spit in the face of the teacher." She stayed away the first week, two, and a third. Her neighbor-women said to her, "Are you still angry with each other?! We will come with you to the teacher." When Rabbi Meir saw them, he saw by the Holy Spirit. He said to them, "Is there anyone among you who is learned in the magical curing of eyes?" Her neighbors said to her, "Now go and spit in his face and you will be permitted to your husband." When she sat before him, she withdrew from him. She said to him, "Rabbi, I am not learned in the magical curing of eyes." He said to her, "Spit in my face seven times and I will be cured." She spat in his face seven times. He said to her, "Go tell your husband, 'You said one time, I spat seven times!'" His disciples said to him, "Rabbi, are we permitted to dishonor thus the Torah?! Should you not have requested of one of us that we say an incantation?" He said to them, "Is it not enough for Meir to be like his Maker? For Rabbi Ishma'el has said, "Peace is so important that a name written in holiness can be erased in the water, in order to establish peace between a husband and a wife."
>
> (Wayyiqra Rabba 9:9; and see Palestinian Talmud Sota 1:4)

On the one hand, this story does confirm the structural anomaly to which Adler refers. The husband was clearly jealous of his wife's interest in Torah and the fact that as a result of that interest he was deprived of her company on the Sabbath eve. Indeed, he seems to have suspected her of

being in love with Rabbi Meir, for otherwise why demand of her that she demonstrate contempt for that figure. This illustrates further the underlying eroticism of the study of Torah and why women were excluded from its precincts. Symbolically, they would have interrupted the pure erotic connection of the male students with their female lover, the Torah, and disturbed as well the homosocial mediation of that relationship, an aspect of the culture that will be explored in the next chapter. On the other hand, if this story is intended to serve as a cautionary tale against women studying Torah, it would be very curious indeed. The woman is the heroine of the story, her husband a dolt at best; in some versions the students wish to punish the husband severely. There is not the slightest suggestion of any impropriety in the woman's love for learning; indeed, the story is consistent with the general Palestinian assumption that some women do have a legitimate interest in the study of Torah. Finally, it is consistent as well with rabbinic notions that the function of the Sota ordeal was not to find out and punish guilty wives but to remove the jealousy of paranoid husbands, for this husband here is an analogue of the jealous husband of biblical times, and the spitting in the Rabbi's eye is an analogue of the ordeal. Just as Rabbi Meir was willing to have his eye spit in, in order that the stupid jealousy of the husband be obliterated, so God is willing to have his name obliterated in order to deal with the stupid jealousy of husbands. While it would be difficult to claim, of course, that this is anything like the "original" meaning of the biblical ordeal, it is fascinating and significant that this is how these Rabbis understood it, since it would be hard to imagine what apologetic purposes *they* would have had in turning its meaning in this fashion. It seems, therefore, that we must seek a more specific structural explanation for the story of Beruria's death than a generic, structural horror of women studying.

In contrast to Adler's reading of Beruria's story as a solution to an anomaly in the rabbinic culture in general, I propose to read it as an exemplum of a very specific and local principle, namely R. Eliezer's statement that "anyone who teaches his daughter Torah, teaches her lasciviousness," as it was understood in the Babylonian Talmud.[20] Beruria

20. Compare the reading of Aliza Shenhar (1976), who argues that the story is an attempt to exemplify R. Meir's great zeal to prove the truth of rabbinic dicta, in this case, that "women are light-headed." That is, on her reading, the text is prepared to defame the wife in order to present a positive [!] picture of the husband. It would be, however, a strange storyteller who would imagine that this story of entrapment is a positive story of the rabbi. I think that my reading, namely, that the storyteller is prepared to defame both husband and wife in order to preserve the force of R. Eliezer's opinion, is much more plausible. Cynthia Ozick has gotten much closer to this reading in her suggestion that, "To punish her for her impudence, a rabbinic storyteller, bent on mischief toward intellectual women, reinvented Beruriah as a seductress. She comes down to us, then, twice notorious: first as a kind of bluestocking, again as a licentious woman. There is no doubt that we are meant to see a connection between the two" (Ozick 1979, 44). I wonder, however, why Ozick makes it worse and turns Beruria into the seducer, rather than the seduced, indeed the seduced after much resistance. See also Schwarzbaum (1983, 69–70), who argues that the story is a realization of an international folk topos of the best of women seduced. This element is surely present in the story, but by no means enough to explain it entirely and certainly not enough to account for its presence here. See Boyarin 1990a. None of the interpreters that I have seen, except Adler, has pointed out the parallels between the stories of the two sisters (see below), but she reads them differently: "It is no coincidence that Rashi juxtaposes his story to the story of Meir's adventure in Rome. The two stories share several motifs. In both, Meir conducts a chastity test. In both, female sexuality brings shame and causes Meir to leave home. In both, women are assumed to be solely responsible for sexual behavior, even when pressured, deceived, or entrapped by men" (1988, 103). I believe that my analysis of the *contrastive* structure between the two tales, and the way that the earlier one clones itself in mirror image, as it were, to produce the later one only strengthens the points that Adler wishes to make about how the story represents women.

is, after all, the very paradigm case of a daughter learned in Torah. If R. Eliezer's dictum is true, in the way that the Babylonian Talmud understood it—namely that there is an intrinsic connection between the woman studying Torah and sexual immorality—then Beruria's fall into license is a structural necessity. Any other denouement to her biography would constitute a refutation of R. Eliezer. Another way of putting this would be to say that the same cultural forces in the Babylonian rabbinic community that did not even permit Ben-Azzai's voice to be retained as minority opinion could not tolerate the exceptional case of even one woman learned in the Torah. The horror of her end, the extraordinary lengths to which the text goes, even defaming one of its greatest heroes to achieve its purpose, is once again a symptom of the extraordinary threat that the learned woman represented to the *Babylonian* (and later European) rabbinic culture, a power that threatened to upset the whole apple cart of gender relations and social organization and that had to be suppressed, therefore, by extraordinary means. The best context for this legend is, in my reading, the discussion of ritual law that we have read above, and the differential between the Palestinian and Babylonian texts is reproduced in the differential of the readings of Beruria in these two traditions—in both she is atypical, but only in one does she become a scandal.

In the rest of this section, I wish to deepen and extend this reading of

the text of Beruria's end as being generated specifically in the intertextual web of the Babylonian talmudic tradition. Although the story of Beruria's seduction and suicide is extant only in Rashi's authoritative eleventh-century French commentary on the Babylonian Talmud, I think I can show how it was generated there and why it is not a fluke in Rashi. The story I will tell of the production of this text will strengthen the connection between it and its hypogram, the saying of R. Eliezer. Beruria had, according to the Talmud, a double, in fact a sister. In the wake of their father's martyrdom for rebellious teaching of the Torah, the Romans condemned Beruria's sister to a life of prostitution in Rome. Beruria sent Rabbi Meir to Rome to rescue her. The Babylonian Talmud relates:

> He took a *tarqeva* of coins and went, saying that if she has not done anything forbidden, there will be a miracle; while if she has done forbidden things, there will be none. He went disguised as a cavalry officer and said to her: Be with me. She said to him: But I am menstruating. He said to her: I am burning with passion. She answered: There are many here much lovelier than I. He said [to himself]: I understand from this that she has done nothing forbidden; anyone who comes, she says the same thing.
>
> (Avoda Zara 18b)

R. Meir, the miracle worker, performs his miracle (an allusion to the miracle performed for the innocent wife), and the sister of Beruria is saved. As a result of this activity, however, R. Meir ends up having to run away to Babylonia. But according to another tradition, the Talmud tells us, he ran away not because of this but because of the "story of Beruria." That is all that the Talmud itself tells of the story of Beruria. But we know from the Talmud something more of the story of this other daughter of R. Hanina. The Talmud asks what she did to deserve such a fate and answers that she would not have suffered had she not brought it on herself in some way: "R. Yohanan said: Once his daughter was walking in front of Roman nobles. They said, 'how lovely are the steps of this maiden!' She began to be very careful of her steps." As usual in rabbinic discourse, "the punishment fits the crime." She wished to attract Roman men; now that is her "profession." We can begin to construct the picture: this daughter embodied in her behavior precisely the rabbinic dictum that women are light-minded and lascivious. To be sure, she had a terrible experience, but by strength of character, she passed the test of R. Meir, and by miracles was saved from her fate. Presumably, she lived happily ever after.

Her sister Beruria's story is the exact structural opposite. Beruria began

as the very antithesis of the light-minded and lascivious girl; indeed, she was interested from girlhood in the Torah and in wisdom. She is represented over and over as the embodiment of morality. When the time comes, she is also tested by R. Meir, but unlike her sister, she fails the test. The consequence of her exemplary life is ignominious suicide. Her story, only tantalizingly hinted at in the Talmud, and told only in its margins, is generated by simply reversing the polarity of every element in the sister's story that *is* told in the text of the Talmud itself. One sister becomes the exemplum of the proper behavior of a woman, because she had not studied Torah in accordance with Rabbi Eliezer and thus was not led into lewdness. The other sister dies a wanton, because she violated the taboo, submitted to temptation, and learned Torah.

My theory is that Beruria's story is generated as the dark double of the story of her sister, out of the matrix of the Babylonian understanding of R. Eliezer—namely, that there is an essential nexus between a woman studying Torah and the breakdown of the structure of monogamy, that a wife like Beruria could not possibly end up beloved and befriended by her husband, and that a husband like R. Meir who would love and befriend such a woman, must himself end up an exile. Taken together, the story of the two sisters forms one exemplum, one paradigm case that illustrates R. Eliezer's dictum as it was understood and experienced in the Babylonian Talmud's cultural field, a demonstration that there is an intrinsic and necessary connection between a scholarly woman and uncontrolled sexuality.[21] This point-for-point homology between the two narratives can be laid out as a series of structural oppositions.

21. Laurie Davis has read the connection between the two sisters in a slightly different fashion. She emphasizes (following Goodblatt 1975) that it is *only* in our talmudic passage that the two women are identified as sisters. Disconnecting Beruria from the family of Rabbi Hananya ben Tradyon, she suggests that the daughter of the story here, before she is awarded Beruria as a sister, is identical to the learned daughter of the Tosefta. Then:

> Moreover, the life of the unnamed daughter is a mirror image of what Beruriah's life would become. These are parallel stories of righteous, morally upright, Torah-studying females who are "supplied" with a sexual crime that contradicts all other stories about their character. The parallel aspect of their lives can only be discerned after Rashi's story of Beruriah's seduction and death in the eleventh century.
>
> (Davis 1991)

I would grant that this reading is as plausible as my suggestion but does not materially change the overall picture I am drawing. Rather than a structure of binary oppositions, we would have a doubling of the two women in each other.

The Sister	*Beruria*
behaves light-mindedly (–)	studies Torah (+)
sent to brothel (–)	marries scholar (+)
passes R. Meir's test (+)	fails R. Meir's test (–)
rescued by miracle (+)	commits suicide (–)

The paradoxes of these oppositions and the reversal of the usual expectations of reward and punishment mark all the more strongly the significance of this narrative as an exemplum of the danger of teaching a daughter Torah. But I again emphasize that this explanation for the story is intelligible only on the Babylonian Talmud's interpretation of the Mishna. This story is not told, nor does it fit in with the Palestinian interpretation in which Ben-Azzai holds that there is real merit for women in studying Torah. Moreover, even R. Eliezer's view according to the Palestinian reading is that there *is* merit for women in studying Torah, and that this merit would protect them from punishment for adultery, thus removing the very deterrent that the Bitter Waters is meant by the Torah to be. This interpretation implies no *necessary and essential* causal relation between a woman studying Torah and sexual license, and indeed, in the Palestinian texts there is no hint of censure of Beruria for studying Torah or her father for teaching her Torah. She is certainly an anomaly in Palestine as well, but her halakhic opinion was cited as authoritative and there are no stories condemnatory of her.

Another rabbinic authority, slightly later than Rashi, has quite a different understanding of what the "incident of Beruria" is. In his tradition, it is not the "incident" of Beruria but the "*precedent*" of Beruria, and the "real story" is that R. Meir was exiled because he did not listen to his wife on a point of ritual law![22] Furthermore, according to this same authority, it was not her brother that she bested in knowledge and acumen (see above, n. 16) but her father, the great scholar R. Hanina himself, which

22. Namely the requirement that one study out loud. See Babylonian Talmud Eruvin 53b–54a, where Beruria rebukes (or kicks) a disciple who was not studying out loud. Davis is absolutely correct in her reading that that passage, along with several others she cites, brooks no anxiety or defensiveness over the fact that it is a woman rebuking a man and citing chapter and verse to do so. Adler's notion that these are texts of gender reversal imposes notions of gender on the texts that are not presupposed by them. It nevertheless remains the case that nearly all of the stories about Beruria (including the ones in which she is given an unambiguous positive valence and could be any Rabbi, like this one) all portray her as besting a man at some halakhic/midrashic task.

establishes her even more firmly as an actual halakhic authority (Kalonymos 1963, 31–34). According to R. Yehuda ben Kalonymos's traditions, then, the story of Beruria is a decisive refutation of R. Eliezer's dictum. I would read these antithetical productions of Beruria's end as evidence that the conflict over women studying Torah continued into the eleventh and twelfth centuries in Ashkenaz, too. Indeed, seen in this light, the persistent legends that Rashi's daughter was a medieval "Beruria" (moreover, without any evil end) become highly charged as well.

The legend of Beruria is precisely the sort of ambivalent, troubled acknowledgment/denial of women's autonomy and intellectual achievement as the Greek plays that Winkler refers to or the legends of Amazons, although—and this is important—it is not until the grotesque end to the story is supplied in the medieval commentary that the denial that the Babylonian Talmud achieves in regard to the other texts considered is consummated in respect to Beruria as well. Davis (1991) astutely notes that in another text of the Gaonic (post-talmudic) period, Beruria is neutralized in another way—by being turned into the ideal Jewish wife and mother (Midrash Mishle 31:10). Her motherhood is never mentioned in the talmudic texts themselves. This provides, then, a less violent and therefore perhaps more insidious mode of eliminating the threat of the daughter who studied Torah. Indeed, this Beruria ends up more like Rachel! Notice that all of this evidence is consistent with the hypothesis—and it is only a hypothesis—that a change took place in Jewish gender ideology in the early Middle Ages, a change that resulted in a much more essentialized notion of women as dangerous and threatening.

It is difficult to find any historical context for the daughter who studied Torah, precisely because, as we have seen, the energy expended to suppress even this limited autonomy was great. However, the material discussed by Bernadette Brooten (1982) provides some help. Brooten shows that in approximately a dozen synagogue inscriptions from the talmudic period, women are mentioned as having the title of "Head of the Synagogue." This evidence has traditionally been dismissed by scholars too willing to take at face value the talmudic statements of the forced ignorance of women in Torah. Brooten argues, plausibly in my view, that the evidence should a priori be taken seriously, and if the inscriptions refer to women with the title "Head of the Synagogue," it means that the women performed the task as well, and, moreover, that such a position implied learning (Brooten 1982, 5–37, esp. 30–31).

The relevance of Brooten's work has recently been a subject of discus-

sion. Shaye Cohen, a historian who accepts her reading of the evidence, has nevertheless argued (1980, 27–28) that since the inscriptions come from the non-rabbinic communities of Crete, Thrace, Italy, and North Africa, they are not relevant for the history of that form of Judaism that achieved historical hegemony—talmudic Judaism. In contrast, Judith Plaskow contends that precisely the evidence for non-rabbinic forms of ancient Judaism "leads us to question rabbinic authority as the sole arbiter of authentic Judaism"; Plaskow argues that "texts may reflect the tensions within patriarchal culture, seeking to maintain a particular view of the world against social, political or religious change" (Plaskow 1990, 45). I do not intend to enter here into the theological questions involved, but it certainly seems relevant to me to emphasize that the readings done here bring those tensions home, as it were, locating them within the talmudic texts and thus the rabbinic discourse and power structure themselves. They certainly help to answer the questions that Brooten raises: "Could Jewish women actually have been scholars? Could they have had some say about the reading of the bible in the synagogue?" (Brooten 1982, 55).

The geographical irrelevance of the inscriptional data for rabbinic Judaism is disappointing, however, in another respect, as it does not help us evaluate the presented evidence for greater anxiety about learned women in the rabbinic community of Babylonia than Palestine. Does this represent more or less Torah-study by Babylonian women than their Palestinian sisters? But there is, perhaps, one piece of tantalizing evidence for the first possibility (i.e., that women studied *more* in Babylonia). In the very talmudic text that interprets the Mishna in Sota by claiming that the study of Torah does not give a woman any merit, the conclusion is that a woman's merit comes from "her taking her sons to study Torah and Mishna." But this passage could, as well, be translated "from *teaching* her sons Torah and Mishna"—in fact, this is the literal, grammatical reading of the phrase. In order to teach, they obviously must have learned.[23] This would strongly suggest that the Babylonians' energetic denial of any merit for women in the study of Torah and, indeed, the erasure in the Babylonian Talmud of the Palestinian remarks on women studying are more a "wishful" prescriptive determination than a reflection of actual social conditions. We could then interpret the evident threat of the texts that

23. That is, we have here causative forms of the verbs for "reading Bible" and "studying Mishna." This significant point was made to me by Milan Sprecher.

denote women studying as owing to the fact that women did study in that culture and it is this which explains the greater anxiety of the Babylonian Rabbis. In either case, the suggestion remains valid that the increasing ambivalence about women studying Torah, as reflected both in halakhic proscriptions and in the changes in the traditions about Beruria, provides a parallel for the introduction of gynecophobic expressions into rabbinic Judaism in the same period, which I have discussed in Chapter 3 above.

Within a literary, cultural tradition, there are always forces contending for hegemony. This is at least as true in the heterogeneous texts of the Talmuds produced over hundreds of years and in two separated geographical areas as it is in Shakespeare, where also cultural studies finds both patriarchal hegemony and forces contending against it. The Babylonian tradition with Rashi as its definitive interpreter achieved hegemony in medieval and post-medieval Jewish culture. Within the ancient Jewish texts, however, there is also vivid dissent from the exclusion of women from the study of Torah. The texts we have read here precisely in the differing ways that they suppress this dissent provide symptoms of a cultural difference between Palestine and Babylonia, suggesting that while in Babylonia (at any rate, late in the rabbinic period) it was unthinkable and perhaps terrifying that a woman might study Torah, in Palestine it was merely uncustomary and noteworthy.[24] I would claim much more than Brown for the possibilities of learning cultural history from the talmudic texts. We must very carefully tease out from these texts the different strands of discourse and counter-discourse which they preserve and suppress and sometimes preserve *by* suppressing—complicating our reading of ancient ideology and not simplifying it.

Just as in the case of Rachel discussed in the last chapter, Beruria remains a paradigm for traditional Jewish women until this day. As evidence for the effectiveness of the story of Beruria in forming practice, I need only remark that as recently as in our century, her (Palestinian) story has been cited as a precedent for the empowering of women to study Torah and that argument rejected by other rabbis who cited the legend of her death as counter-precedent (Waldenberg ad loc). The story of Beruria

24. I am not forgetting, of course, R. Eliezer's misogyny, which is also Palestinian, of course. It is not my intention to reify either of these cultures into one monolithic position, and certainly not to claim that the Palestinian culture was anything like egalitarian, but only to surmise that dissent on this issue was more tolerated there than in the other culture.

is thus historical in just the same way as the story of Rachel considered in the last chapter, and as such, we have the possibility even to rewrite future history by reading the story differently.[25]

On my hypothesis, the main motivating force for the confinement of women to the sexual and procreative role in rabbinic culture was fear that were they not so confined, that vitally important role would not be fulfilled—that what concerned the Rabbis was not so much the contamination by a fearful and defiling force so much as the loss of control of a very valued resource. In addition to this, as we have amply seen in the last two chapters, the Torah-study situation was structured as a male homosocial community, the life of which was conducted around an erotic attachment to the female Torah. The Torah and the wife are structural allomorphs and separated realms in the culture—both normatively to be highly valued but also to be kept separate. In the next chapter we will see that neither of these two poles was quite settled in the culture; both were indeed highly troubled sites of meaning.

25. It may be fairly charged that to a certain extent I am bursting through an open door here, as in many (if not most) Orthodox circles today it has been fully accepted that women study Torah. Indeed, I heard a sociologist describe this as the greatest social change that modern Orthodoxy has undergone, namely that this is the first generation in Jewish history in which young women sitting around a Sabbath table are likely to be as learned as the men in Talmud. In Stern College, the Orthodox college for women of Yeshiva University, women may now study Talmud for several years, and the same is true of Bar-Ilan, the Orthodox university in Israel, an institution that is otherwise hardly progressive. I would hope that my historical/literary analysis would further underpin this turn in the culture, which seems to me exemplary for the way that even a very traditional culture can reform itself in a healthy way and retain its integrity.

Boyarin, Daniel. *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture.* University of California Press, 1993. pp. 181-196