

**Passionate Torah: Sex and Judaism**

Text Study with Rabbi Alyson Solomon

Spicy, complex, gritty narratives from the Book of Joshua, Talmud & contemporary scholars

**Session 3-July 26, 2018**

**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.<sup>16</sup>

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.).<sup>17</sup> 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]<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup>

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.<sup>20</sup> 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

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

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 Beruria 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.

the text of Berurja's end as being generated specifically in the intertextual web of the Babylonian talmudic tradition. Although the story of Berurja'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.<sup>21</sup> 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

behaves light-mindedly (-)  
sent to brothel (-)  
passes R. Meir's test (+)  
rescued by miracle (+)

## Beruria

studies Torah (+)  
marries scholar (+)  
fails R. Meir's test (-)  
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!<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup>

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.