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BOUNDARIES MADE OF GLASS: FIVE EXTRAORDINARY WOMEN AND WHAT THE SAGES SAID ABOUT THEM

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Ordination

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INTRODUCTION

What did the rabbis of the Talmudic era *really* think about women? What did it mean to be a woman then and to be considered truly feminine? Is it possible to find a thread of consistent assessment and expectation of women in the Talmud and midrashim? These questions and others like them have sparked enormous interest and a profusion of literature in the last two decades. Some of what has been written about the sages and their views on women has been apologetic; some has been hostile to the point of dismissiveness. Other authors have painstakingly examined and analyzed texts and found that neither apologetics nor hostility provided a thorough or accurate enough assessment of their contents. Leila Leah Bronner examined rabbinic treatments of biblical women through the lens of Talmud and midrash. She concluded that the sages' attitude toward biblical women, at least in the aggadic literature, was neither fixed nor monolithic and she suggested that the sages' flexible attitudes toward the women were largely dictated by the particular exegetical question under discussion.[1] Judith Wegner, in *Chattel or Person? The Status of Women in the Mishnah* used the lens of contemporary jurisprudence to examine halakhic material relating to women in the Mishnah. She concluded that women were treated as chattel in matters pertaining to sexuality and reproduction, but as person in all other areas of life. Judith Abrams analyzed stories about well-known Talmudic women and followed them through the Jewish life-cycle, finding some important differences

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[1] Leila Leah Bronner, From Eve to Esther: Rabbinic Reconstructions of Biblical Women (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), xiv.

between certain legal directives in the Mishnah and related case histories in the Gemara. In *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in the Talmudic Culture*, Daniel Boyarin found significant differences in attitudes toward women in the Babylonian and Palestinian traditions. In *Rereading the Rabbis: A Woman's Voice,* Judith Hauptman argued that although the rabbis operated in a patriarchal environment, the general thrust of their efforts was toward improving the status and privileges of women. The focus and purpose of these various works differed but, invariably, their authors found that the rabbinic texts they examined were full of ambivalence and inconsistency when it came to writing about women.

In the halachic literature the sages wrote about hypothetical women. In the aggadic, non-legal, sections of the Talmud and in midrashim they cited some women of their own era by name and they also argued about, lauded, criticized, and analyzed biblical characters - including many women. The precise degree of historicity in this aggadic material cannot be determined. The stories probably represent kernels of history enveloped in varying degrees of embellishment, elaboration, and distortion. Still, this material was codified in rabbinic texts because the sages wanted it to be. That said, it may be assumed that, at the very least, the material represents how certain female characters came to be seen by the sages. There was not always consensus but the stories did reflect the *range* of rabbinic opinion about these characters.

This paper grew out of a question that itself grew from reading some of the work done on rabbinic attitudes toward women. Rabbinic treatment of Biblical women had been dissected, examined, and analyzed as had that of Talmudic era women. But, as far as I was aware, nowhere had the treatments of different groups of women been compared to

one another. Had it mattered to the sages *when* the women they discussed had lived? How readily could they relate to women who had been part of other cultures, who had lived lives vastly different from their own? Had history mattered to the rabbis? Had geography? Did heroic status in one age carry over to the next? Had the past - and its protagonists - been idealized? If these factors had not mattered to the sages - why hadn't they? And if they had - why did they?

This paper examines rabbinic attitudes toward three categories of female characters - Talmudic, Biblical, and mythological. Two women - Yalta and Beruriah - were contemporaries of the sages who wrote about them in the Talmud. Two - Huldah and Deborah - were women who appeared originally in the Bible. Lilith, a mythological she-demon, was mentioned only briefly in the Bible but was a well-known and well-developed character by Talmudic times. With the first group, the rabbis were writing about women they knew or knew of in their own time and in their own part of the world. In the second group were Biblical women who were part of the tradition received by the sages and who emerged from that tradition with positive, even heroic, reputations. Lilith, also part of a received tradition, came from outside the Jewish world. A folkloric character, she was nonetheless swept into and used by the Jewish tradition. She - unlike the other women - was not "known" to anyone; that is, her "existence" was dependent on the male imagination.

Rabbinic texts discussed other Biblical women, of course, and there were additional Talmudic-era women who were mentioned by name in these texts. Yalta, Beruriah, Huldah, Deborah, and Lilith were selected for this study for two primary reasons. First,

there simply needed to be an adequate amount of rabbinic material about the women under investigation in order to identify trends and draw some conclusions. Second, I wanted to study women who had consistently pushed the limits and tested the boundaries that were established for them in the rabbinic world. It would be one thing for the sages to write approvingly about women who operated within traditional gender expectations. It would be quite another to see how they reacted to women who challenged, and perhaps even rebelled against, social, cultural, or legal norms.

Chapters One, Two, and Three review what the sages said in the Babylonian Talmud and the various collections of midrashim about the women within each group. I analyze the rabbinic material pertaining to each of the groups and draw some conclusions about how the sages felt about the women in them. In Chapter 4, I compare rabbinic treatments of the three groups to one another and use contemporary feminist and sociological theory to explain my findings.

Following are explanations of the major terms and texts utilized in this thesis. I use the terms "the rabbis" and "the sages" interchangeably to refer to a particular group of Jewish religious leaders who flourished between the second and sixth centuries in Babylonian and Palestine. Following the destruction of the Second Temple, it was these sages who reconstituted and reconstructed Judaism from a priestly to a rabbinic system and produced the era's major literary works, the Talmuds and the midrashim. The *tannaim* ("Teachers") were the authorities and transmitters of the of the Oral Law from

the time of Hillel until Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi. They were succeeded by the *amoraim* ("Interpreters") who expounded the Mishnah from the time of its conclusion around 200 CE to the end of the fifth century and redacted the Babylonian Talmud. The *gaonim* ("Scholars") continued the process of comment and explication from the beginning of the sixth to the end of the tenth century in Babylonia. The Mishnah, or "Oral Law," is a compendium of mostly halachic, or legal, material. Although it originated from an ancient oral tradition, most of the material in it dates from the first two centuries of the common era. Credit is usually given to Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi for its redaction about 200 CE. Each of the two centers of Jewish scholarship - in Palestine and in Babylonia - produced a Talmud. Material from the Babylonian Talmud, which was completed at the beginning of the sixth century CE, is cited in this paper. As a generic term, a tannaitic statement not included in the Mishnah is known as a *baraita*. The largest collection of *baraitot* is the Tosefta ("Supplement"). It was compiled and redacted in the first part of the third century and its material is thought to be generally contemporaneous with the Mishnah. An individual citation in the Talmud from a tannaitic source other than the Mishnah is also known as a *baraita*. The purpose of the midrashic literature was to explicate the Biblical text. There are many collections of midrashim; most of the midrashic texts cited here are from the major collection *Midrash Rabbah*. Midrashic collections are dated over many centuries; scholars believe that most of *Midrash Rabbah* was compiled around the same time as the *Tosefta*. *Tanna debe Eliyyahu*, a broad collection of midrashim, was composed and compiled between the third and tenth centuries. *Tanhuma Rabbah* is an 8th-century midrashic work. The *Targum* is the Aramaic translation of the Bible.

Generally faithful to the original Hebrew as a whole, it occasionally expands or embellishes parts of the text. There are a number of versions of the *Targum*. *Targum Onkelos*, dated around the second century CE,. is cited in this paper. Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhak), master commentator on the Torah and the Babylonian Talmud lived in France and the Rhineland during the eleventh century. The *Tosafot* ("Addenda") is a collection of glosses by French talmudic scholars of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries who continued Rashi's work on the Talmud. Some believe that the *Tosafists* were Rashi's grandsons.

Unless otherwise indicated, the translations of rabbinic texts that appear in this paper are mine.

CHAPTER ONE: THE TALMUDIC WOMEN

Yalta

Seven stories appear in the Talmud about Yalta, a woman born to privilege and position. She was the daughter of the Exilarch, the secular ruler of the Jewish community in exile in Babylonia (*Chullin* 124a; *Kiddushin* 70a). The Talmudic stories about Yalta need to be read with an understanding of the power, prestige, and status of the Exilarch's family. In Babylonia the Exilarch was recognized by Jews and had wide official powers, with responsibility for tax collection and appointment of community leaders and judges.[2] Yalta's father was Rav Huna (c.216-c.297), a second generation Babylonian *amora* who had succeeded his teacher, Rav, as head of the academy at Sura. In the Amoraic period, Rabbi Nachman b.Ya'akov was the son-in-law of the Exilarch and Yalta's husband. A judge and scholar in his own right, Rabbi Nachman's position was still partly dependent on his relationship to his wife's father.

Taken together, the Yalta tales did something unusual in the Talmud. They created a portrait of a woman that was rich and complex. The first two tales, *Shabbat* 54b and *Beitzah* 25b provide the reader with a sense of the esteem in which Yalta was held by her husband and the community. The context of the first is a discussion about the appropriate treatment of animals:

***Shabbat* 54b** Rabbi Aha b. Ulla sat before Rabbi Hisda, and he sat and

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[2] Adin Steinsaltz, The Talmud: The Steinsaltz Edition/ A Reference Guide (New York: Random House, Inc. 1989), 14.

said: "When [a ewe] is sheared, a compress is saturated in oil and placed on its forehead that it should not catch cold. Said Rabbi Hisda to him: "If so, you treat it like Mar Ukba!" [An *amora* of the first generation in Babylonia] But Rabbi Papa b. Samuel sat before Rabbi Hisda and he sat and said: "When she kneels for lambing two oily compresses are made for her, and one is placed on her forehead and the other on her womb, that she may be warmed." Said Rabbi Nachman to him: "If so, you would treat her like Yalta!"

Here the story implied that Yalta is a wife who was highly thought of and well-treated by her husband, although it is not clear whether such tender care and concern was due her primarily because of her status as daughter of the Exilarch. In any case, Rabbi Nachman used what was clearly his own high regard for his wife to illustrate that, the proper treatment of animals as an important principal notwithstanding, a mere ewe was not deserving of the same type of care and concern as a woman such as Yalta. The text did not record that his colleagues found anything unusual or peculiar about this comparison.

***Beitzah* 25b** The rabbis taught in a Baraita: "A blind person may not go out with his cane, nor a shepherd with his pouch, and neither a man nor a woman may go out in a seat." Is this so? But Rabbi Yaakov b. Idi sent [the following report]: "There was an old person in our neighborhood who would go out in his folding seat [on Yom Tov]. And they came asked Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi [if this was permitted] and he answered, 'If the public needs him, it is permitted.'" And our rabbis [permitted this,] relying on the words of Achi Shakya, who said: "I carried Rav Huna [on a seat] from Hini to Shili." Rabbi Nachman b. Yitzchak said: "I carried the master, Shmuel, from the sun to the shade and from the shade to the sun." There [in those cases, it was permitted] for the reason stated [by Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi]: "If the public needs him, it is permitted." Rabbi Nachman told Chama b. Adda, the messenger of Zion: "When you go up to Eretz Yisrael, make a detour and go up the steps of Tyre and go to Rabbi Yaakov b. Idi and inquire of him: "What is your [opinion] regarding [carrying someone on] a seat [on Yom Tov}? By the time he reached the steps of Tyre, Rabbi Yaakov b. Idi had passed away. When arrived [in Eretz Yisrael] Chama b. Adda met Rabbi Zerika. He asked him: "What is

> your [opinion] regarding [carrying someone on] a seat?" [Rabbi Zerika] answered him: "[It is permitted] as long as one does not shoulder [the chair.]" What [did Rabbi Ami mean when he said,] "as long as one does not shoulder [the chair]?" Rav Yosef the son of Rava explained: "[This refers] to a seat [resting] on the shoulder." Is this so? Why, Rav Nachman permitted [his wife] Yalta to be carried out on a seat [resting] on shoulders." [The case of] Yalta is different because she was afraid [she would fall if carried in the hands. Ameimar and Mar Zutra were carried on shoulder [in the study hall until they reached their place] during the Sabbath because of fear. And others say [that they were carried this way] because of the inconvenience of the public [who remained standing until these Rabbis reached their place.]

The notion of a woman being important enough to be carried about in public on a sedan chair is a startling one but the text accepted it without question or comment and quickly passed over it to consider a question: Under what circumstances may an individual be carried in a sedan chair by means of poles on the carriers' shoulders on Shabbat? An acceptable reason to do such a thing was the "inconvenience" or need of the public. Rashi explained what that meant: "[The sages were needed] at the *beit midrash* to expound [to the community]... [Members of the community] were standing on their feet and this was a burden to the community. Therefore they [the sages] were carried quickly to their place on the shoulders of their servants and their students." However, the convenience of the *individual* did not justify this type of carrying on Shabbat. Although the text explained that Yalta was carried because of her fear of falling, just preceding this explanation the Gemara had stated that only public need makes carrying on shoulders permissible. The Tosafot reconciled these contradictory positions:

> If you would say that this is not permitted except where the community has a great need for someone (as they said above), then you might say that

perhaps she was also going out because of the great needs of the community; that she was the daughter of the Exilarch and the community had a great need for her.

The Tosafot assumed that, of course, Yalta was an important public figure. Like the great sages, Ameimar and Mar Zutra, Yalta would be important enough to the community that the provision against certain types of carrying on Shabbat could be overridden. Such was her status and prestige.

Yalta was portrayed as an intellectual companion to her husband in the next two tales. In the first, a disrespectful man from Nehardea demanded to be waited on in a butcher shop ahead of Rabbi Judah b. Yechezkel. Rabbi Judah heard about the incident and pronounced a ban on the man. The man summoned Rabbi Judah to a lawsuit before Rabbi Nachman. Rabbi Judah got into a sparring match with Rabbi Nachman. First he criticized Rabbi Nachman for using too much Persian in his speech. Then the two sages began to debate various points of law and Samuel's pronouncements about them, including the following:

***Kiddushin* 70a** Rav Nachman said to him: "Let Donag, [my daughter], come [and] serve us [something to] drink." [Rav Yehuda] replied to him: "Thus said Shmuel: 'It is forbidden to make use of a woman.'" "[But] she is a minor!" [responded Rabbi Nachman.] ["Nevertheless," said Rabbi Yehudah,] "Shmuel explicitly said: 'It is forbidden to make any use of a woman whatsoever, whether she is an adult or a minor.'" [Rabbi Nachman said to him] "Would master send a greeting to Yalta, [my wife]?" [Rabbi Yehuda] replied to him: "Thus said Shmuel: 'The voice of a woman is provocative.' [Therefore, I may not greet her, for she will respond and I will hear her voice."] [Rabbi Nachman said, "But] it is possible [to send your greeting] through a messenger, [and then you will not hear her voice."] Rabbi Yehuda replied to him: 'Thus said Shmuel: 'One is not allowed to extend greetings to a woman.'" [Rabbi Nachman said: "But you

> could send a greeting] through her husband," [i.e. I can relay your greetings to her. Surely this would not be improper! [Rabbi Yehuda] replied to him: "Thus said Shmuel: 'One is not allowed to extend greetings to a woman at all.'" [At this point] Rabbi Nachman's wife, [who had overheard the preceding discussion,] sent a message to [Rabbi Nachman]: "Resolve his dispute [and let him be on his way,] so that he should not make you [appear] like a common ignoramus [*am ha-aretz*]!"[3]

Here at the end of the story one can imagine an increasingly irritated and impatient Yalta following the men's verbal exchange. It is clear that she was confident of her ability to evaluate the mens' respective sparring points and she decided that her husband was being bested. While unable to participate in the debate herself, Yalta could at least control its direction. In this brief exchange, the reader is given a full picture of a real woman. Yalta was, at turns, impatient with male scholars' endless need to trump one another's arguments; frustrated at her inability to join the discussion; knowledgeable enough about the law to trust her own judgment in evaluating the quality of the men's positions; and protective of her husband, Rabbi Nachman, whom she did not wish to see humiliated. And Rabbi Nachman himself, although he did not directly acknowledge Yalta's comment, immediately followed her directive. The sparring stopped. The two sages moved on to discuss Judah's ban on the disrespectful man and the case moved forward. There was no rabbinic commentary on Yalta's behavior. The story was allowed to stand unchallenged and Yalta uncriticized.

Yalta's considerable knowledge of Jewish law was demonstrated again in the second story.

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[3] Translation from Talmud Bavli, Tractate Kiddushin, Vol. II, The Schottenstein Edition (Brooklyn, New York: Mesorah Publications, 1993).

***Chullin* 109a-b** Yalta once said to Rabbi Nachman: "Observe. For everything that the Divine Law has forbidden us it has permitted us an equivalent. It has forbidden us blood, but it has permitted us liver. It has forbidden us intercourse during menstruation, but it has permitted us the blood of purification. It has forbidden us the fat of cattle, but it has permitted us the fat of wild beasts. It has forbidden us swine's flesh, but it has permitted us the brain of the *shibbuta* [a kind of fish the brain of which has the same taste as swine's flesh.] It has forbidden us the *girutha* [a forbidden bird,] but has permitted us the tongue of fish. It has forbidden us the married woman, but it has permitted us the divorcee during the lifetime of her former husband. It has forbidden us the brother's wife, but it has permitted us the levirate marriage. It has forbidden us the non-Jewess, but it has permitted us the beautiful woman [taken in war.] I wish to eat flesh in milk, [where is its equivalent]?" Whereupon, Rabbi Nachman said to the butchers, "Give her roasted udders." [If the udder is not cut open but is cooked together with all the milk it contained no penalty is incurred.]

This *gemara* follows on a mishnah regarding the opening, draining, and cooking of an udder so as not to transgress the prohibitions on mixing flesh and milk. While the law on mixing would appear to be ironclad, it was Yalta, a challenger of inconsistencies (and, as we shall see later, injustice, and human fallibility in the law as well,) who posed the obvious question. Almost everything in Jewish law has an "equivalent"; that is, there is some way of obtaining satisfaction even from a seemingly intractable prohibition. Surely, then, there must be a way "to eat flesh in milk." Two points are particularly interesting about this story: Rabbi Nachman's "study partner" on this matter was a woman, his wife; and the text placed in the mouth of a woman the necessary breadth of Jewish legal knowledge to pose the challenging question to him.

In two of the tales, Yalta operated autonomously, interacting with other men independently of her husband.

> ***Gittin* 67b** What is *kordiakos?* Samuel said: Being overcome by new wine from the vat...What is the remedy for it? Red meat [without much fat] broiled on the coals, and highly diluted wine... For sunstroke one should eat red meat broiled on the coals with highly diluted wine. For a chill one should eat fat meat broiled on the coals with undiluted wine. When the household of the Exilarch wanted to annoy Rabbi Amram the Pious, [because he used to bother them with his numerous restrictions] they made him lie down in the snow. On the next day they said, What would your honor like us to bring you? He knew that whatever he told them they would do the reverse, so he said to them, Lean meat broiled on the coals and highly diluted wine. They brought him fat meat broiled on the coals and undiluted wine. [Rav Amram later required treatment to counter the effects of the fatty meat and the strong wine.] Yalta heard [about Rav Amram's suffering.] She brought him to a bathhouse and had him stand in the [hot] bath waters until the bath waters changed to [the color of] blood [from Rav Amram's perspiration] and his flesh was [covered with round] blotches.

The context for this story is as follows. Despite the generally high character of those occupying the position of Exilarch, the Exilarch's staff often abused their authority, utilizing the power that they wielded to intimidate people who did not find favor with them. [4] Rav Amram the Pious often rendered stringent halachic rulings for the Exilarch that seemed unduly restrictive to the Exilarch's servants, who were less than pious. Therefore, they engaged in various schemes to make his life unpleasant. *(Rashi.)* This story painted a picture of rather sadistic staff members who forced Rav Amram to sleep in snow (that is, they opened his windows on frigid nights after he was asleep [5]) and deliberately brought him the opposite food and drink than that which he requested. When Amram suffered the effects of the rich food, it was the competent and quick-thinking

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[4] Talmud Bavli, Tractate Gittin, Vol. II, The Schottenstein Edition, 67b, n. 16
[5] Ibid. n. 17.

Yalta who knew how to cure him and was unafraid to take a public stand against the Exilarch's servants.

The Yalta tales make it clear that, as an Exilarch's daughter and a knowledgeable woman in her own right, Yalta was used to being listened to by the sages. While she recognized their authority and the realities of her and their respective gendered positions, she did not see male scholars as all-powerful. She seemed to operate on the premise that learned, powerful women had authority of their own in, at least, some matters and that when they shared their expertise with the sages they should expect to be heeded. The following story suggests that Yalta could also be quick to manipulate the system in order to point out error, inconsistency, or capriciousness on the part of the rabbis. Once again, she interacted with men independently of Rabbi Nachman, in this case with two sages:

> ***Niddah* 20b** Yalta brought blood to Rabbah b. Hana, and he ruled that it was impure. Then she turned around and brought it to Rabbi Yitzhak b. Rabbi Yehuda, and he ruled that it was pure. How could he do such a thing when a *baraita* teaches: "If a sage ruled it impure, his colleague is not permitted to rule it pure. If he ruled it forbidden, the colleague may not rule it permitted?" At first [Rabbi Yitzkah] ruled that it was impure. When she told him, "Every other time [Rabbah] has ruled for me that [blood] just like this was pure, and today he has a pain in his eye." Rabbi Yitzhak ruled it pure. [6]

The *baraita* specifically discouraged an appellate-type situation in which the ruling of one judge could be overturned by another. Presumably the *baraita* took this position to prevent sages from undermining one another and to reinforce the notion that the law was

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[6] Translation from Rachel Adler, "Feminist Folktales of Justice: Robert Cover as a Resource for the Renewal of Halakhah, " Conservative Judaism, Spring, 1993): 33.

objective and immutable. It is clear that Yalta was aware of the *baraita's* ruling. Dissatisfied with Rabbah b. Hana's determination, she went to Rabbi Yitzhak but, aware of the principle of judicial solidarity, she then made herself an active participant in the next legal ruling. Nowhere does the story suggest that there was, in fact, anything wrong with Rabbah b. Hanna's eyesight. Yalta, wishing not to be declared a menstruant, had little difficulty upsetting the principle of judicial solidarity. She played by the rules, but she was not beaten by them and she manipulated them for her own purposes. She believed Rabbah b. Hana to be wrong and found it almost laughably simple to convince Rabbi Yitzhak to change his ruling. Doing so, Yalta exposed the fallibility of those who would make laws and then claim their rulings were sacrosanct. Two dissenting judges could not both be right. If one was wrong, then the human element in judicial decision-making would be laid bare and the law's potential for error revealed.

Commenting on this story, the *Tosfei HaRosh* noted that the Gemara in no way suggested that Yalta did anything wrong in asking for the second opinion about the blood, or that her behavior was inappropriate. The commentary did question why Yalta did not bring the blood to her own husband, Rabbi Nachman, but quickly provided a justification: Rabbi Nachman was simply not an expert in matters pertaining to blood. Even if he had been particularly knowledgeable, the *Tosfei* provided another reason Yalta had been correct to exclude Rabbi Nachman. It quotes *Negaim*, Mishnah 5: "A man may examine all leprosy signs except his own. Rabbi Meir ruled: 'Not even the leprosy signs of his relatives. A man may annul all vows except his own.' Rabbi Judah ruled: 'Not even those of his wife which affect relationships between her and others [may he annul.] A man may

examine all firstlings except his own.'" In other words, the *Tosfei* acknowledged that a sage, for all his learning and for all the supposed objectivity of the law, might not be able to rule impartially when he or a member of his own family had a stake in the outcome. The sages recognized that the law can be susceptible to human whim and impulse - precisely what Yalta demonstrated through her encounter with Rabbi Yitzhak.

The last tale is probably the best-known about Yalta. It portrayed her as a woman both learned in her own right and fully aware of her privileged and powerful position as the Exilarch's daughter. The text demonstrated - with no dissenting voice - the reaction of this proud and accomplished woman to a male scholar's attempt to diminish and dismiss her:

> ***Berachot* 51b** Ulla once happened to be a guest at Rabbi Nachman's house. He ate a meal, prayed the grace after meals, and passed the cup of blessing to Rabbi Nachman. Rabbi Nachman said to him, "Please pass the cup of blessing *(kasa d'virkhata)* to Yalta, sir." He replied, "This is what Rabbi Yochanan said: 'The issue of a woman's belly *(bitna)* is blessed only through the issue of man's belly *(bitno)* as the Bible says, "He will bless the issue of your [masc. sing.] belly *(p'ri bitnkha)*" (Deuteronomy 7:13). It does not say "her belly" but "your belly."'" So, too, a *baraita* teaches: 'Rabbi Natan said: "Where is the prooftext in Scripture that the issue of a woman's belly is blessed only through the issue of a man's belly? As the Bible says, 'He will bless the issue of your [masc sing.] belly *(p'ri bitnkha)*. It does not say 'her belly' but 'your belly.'"'" When Yalta heard this, she got up in venomous anger, went to the wine storeroom and smashed four hundred jars of wine. Rabbi Nachman said to Ulla, "Please send her another cup." He sent [it to her with the message]: "All of this is a goblet of blessing" *(navga d'virkhata)*. She said [in reply]: "From travelers come tall tales and from ragpickers lice."[7]

This story follows an earlier discussion (*Berachot* 51a) about the ten things to be said

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[7] Translation from Ibid., 40-55.

regarding the cup of blessing.. The "ten things" included instructions for washing, rinsing, covering, and concentrating properly on the cup. At the end of the directions the reader finds this tag line from an anonymous source: "And some say [there is an eleventh requirement:] - He also sends it as a gift to the members of his household, [i.e. his wife, after concluding *birkat hamazon.*]" [8] A dissenting voice appeared next, that of Rabbi Yochanan who claimed, "We do not have [the custom of keeping all ten rules] but only four alone." Rashi clarified that the "cup of blessing" was the cup of wine over which *birkat hamazon* was recited. He further noted that the expression "as a gift" meant that the cup should be sent in a gracious and elegant fashion. And he stated specifically that "the members of his household" referred to one's wife. Apparently both Rabbi Nachman and Yalta were accustomed to Yalta's full participation in this ritual.

Ulla maintained that women should not have direct access to the cup of blessing because the blessing it represented was fertility and, as his biblical prooftext would "establish," fertility belonged to men. Since "your belly" was written in the singular, masculine form Ulla concluded that the main agents of fertility are men. If women were unable to be fertile except in a derivative manner, then the symbol of their fertility - the wine-holding cup -need not, in fact, should not pass to their hands. Any benefit to be derived from the cup of blessing would be passed to women indirectly, through the actions of men. In this case, Yalta would be blessed through her husband's drinking from the cup. Although in a rage following Ulla's pronouncement, Yalta was not out of control She,

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[8] Talmud Bavli, Tractate Berachos, Vol. II, The Schottenstein Edition, 51a.

too, could make symbolic gestures. Her wrath was pointed and specific and her fury-driven actions made a statement of her own. If Ulla thought that wine was a symbol of a man's potency alone, then Yalta would demonstrate that potency was not inviolable. In the wine storage area of what was most likely their sumptuous home, Yalta smashed four hundred jugs of wine, presumably watching with satisfaction as masculine "potency" ebbed away. Thus did Yalta symbolically castrate Ulla who justified his hostess's exclusion from the "the cup of blessing," on the basis of biological inferiority. Four hundred barrels of wine would suggest that the "castration" was meant to include more men than just Ulla.

And what was Rabbi Nachman's reaction to his wife's behavior? Did his chastise her, apologize to his guest, disagree, change the subject? No, he merely asked Ulla once again (politely!) to send Yalta "another cup"! Ulla complied, but this time he sent a *navga d'virkhata*, not a *kasa d'virkhata*. But a *navga* is not a *kasa*. *Navga* is an Aramaic word, comparable in meaning to the Biblical Hebrew term *bakbuk*.[9] It is a vessel, a container for liquid, but nowhere used to signify the cup of blessing. Since most English translations of this passage render both *kasa* and *navga* as "cup," one might wonder if Rabbi Nachman meant to tell Ulla to send Yalta a "different" cup, that is, another kind of cup, not a sanctified object, rather than simply a replacement cup of blessing. But a careful reading of the Aramaic text makes it clear that Rabbi Nachman specifically asked Ulla to send a *kasa*, just as he did the first time. Their guest, however,

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[9] A Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi and the Midrashic Literature, ed. Marcus Jastrow (New York: The Judaica Press, 1975), 867.

responded by sending a *navga*. And now Ulla offended Yalta in an even more profound way. As a woman, a member of that subset of human beings whom Ulla would exclude from the ritual of the cup of blessing on the basis of biological inferiority, the previous insult to Yalta was at least general, not specific. But now, in contemptuously passing Yalta a *navga* instead of a *kasa*, as if she is too ignorant or dim-witted to know the difference, Ulla demeaned Yalta not just as a member of the underclass of women, but as an individual whose learning, lineage, wit, and poise could all be trumped by Ulla's gender. Ulla, an itinerant traveler between Babylonia and Palestine, unknown for wealth or ancestry, could not hope to compete with Yalta's advantages of lineage and social status. She was at least a match for him in terms of her learning and her familiarity with Jewish rituals and customs. But simply as a male, he could deny her access to sanctified objects and rituals. Without a moment's hesitation, Yalta flung this man's contempt for her and for women back in his face, reciting (in rhyme!) a torrent of insults. She likened Ulla's teachings to peddlers' gossip, and denigrated the fact that he came from Israel. In other words, one would expect vermin to crawl out of rags and she expects a second-rate sage to come from the Land of Israel since Babylonia was, in her mind at least, the center of learning at that time. Calling him a peddler was also Yalta's way of slyly suggesting that Ulla would go around between the two communities spreading gossip. Like a peddlar of worthless goods, it would come as no surprise that this was a man who would try to pass off to unsuspecting customers a *navga* for a *kasa*.[10]

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[10] Here I have been very influenced by the work of Rachel Adler whose analysis of this passage appeared in her article, "Feminist Folktales of Justice: Robert Cover as a Resource for the Renewal of Halakhah."

(In an interesting postscript to this story, the *Tosafot* on the previously-discussed *Kiddushin* 70b discussed the injunction against a man sending greetings to a woman under any circumstances.

> [The Tosafot cites *Baba Metziah* 87] "They said to him, 'Where is Sarah, your wife?' And he said, "Behold, she is in the tent.' This is to inform us that she was modest. But Rabbi Judah said, in Rab's name, 'The ministering angels knew that our mother, Sarah, was in the tent, but why bring out the fact? To make her beloved to her husband.' Rabbi Jose in the name of Rabbi Hanina said, '*In order to send her the wine cup of benediction* [my italics]...The Torah thereby teaches etiquette, that a man must inquire of his hostess {about his host.} But did not Samuel say, 'One must not inquire at all after a woman's well-being?' [When inquiry is made] through her husband, it is different [and permitted.]"

The *Tosafot* reconciled these conflicting positions by concluding that one may only ask literally *where* a woman is, not *how* she is. And it lent an unexpected show of support to Yalta and Rabbi Nachman in their dispute with Ulla: Rabbi Jose said that it was the intention of Ulla's predecessors, those long-ago dinner guests, *the ministering angels themselves*, to send the matriarch Sarah the wine cup of blessing!)

Beruriah

Beruriah lived during the fourth generation of *tannaim*. She was the wife of the great tannaitic sage, Rabbi Meir, and the daughter of Rabbi Chananyiah ben Teradyon (*Avodahh Zarah* 18a, *Pesachim* 62b). In the second century her father was a teacher in the Galilee *(Sanhedrin 32b.)* Born to one renowned man and married to another, she is the only woman in the Talmud about whom halachic debates with the sages were

recorded. In talmudic anecdotes, Beruriah was always pitted against men and was shown engaging them in learned discussions and debates. She was a women who experienced great tragedy in her life. Her father was burnt alive by the Roman authorities for teaching Torah in public, her mother sentenced to death, and her sister placed in a house of prostitution (*Avodah Zarah* op.cit.) She appeared in several Talmudic tales as a learned scholar and an intellectual women who engaged in scholarly debate with rabbis of her time. Her ability to use Scriptural texts in innovative ways is found in a eulogy which she gave at her brother's funeral:

> ***Lamentations Rabbah* 3:15**: "He has also broken my teeth with gravel stones." (Lamentations 3:16) It is related of the son of Rabbi Chananyiah ben Teradyon that he became friends with robbers whose secret he disclosed, so they killed him and filled his mouth with dust and pebbles. After three days they placed him in a coffin and wished to offer praise over him out of respect for his father, but he [Rabbi Chananyiah] would not permit them to do so. He said to them, "Allow me and I will speak concerning my son." He opened [his discourse] and said, "Neither did I listen to the voice of my teachers, nor inclined my ear to those who instructed me! I was well nigh in all evil in the midst of the congregation and assembly" (Proverbs 5:13-14). And his mother recited over him, "A foolish son is the vexation to his father, and bitterness to her that bore him" (Proverbs 17:25). His sister recited over him, "Bread of falsehood is sweet to a man; but afterward his mouth shall be filled with gravel" (Proverbs 20:17)

In this tale, Beruriah and her mother appear to be equal participants with Rabbi Chananyiah in speaking over their slain son and brother. This is rather remarkable in and of itself although the text reported it without comment. All three family members condemned the deceased as a person who did not live up to the family's high ideals; he failed to learn from his teachers, he was inclined toward evil, he was foolish. However, it

was Beruriah who cleverly linked a Biblical text to the specific circumstances of her brother's death. She used the text, "...but afterwards his mouth shall be filled with gravel," as a literal representation of the sad end that comes to one whose own words lead to his demise. In a restrained, cerebral, and intellectual manner, Beruriah mourned by expressing herself through text rather than by means of the behaviors more commonly prescribed for women such as those in this description about mourning practices on festivals in *Megillah*:

> ***Megillah* 3b** Have we not learnt: Women [when mourning] on a festival make a dirge but do not beat the breast. R. Ishmael says: If they are near the bier, they can beat the breast. On New Moon, Hanukkah and Purim they may make a dirge and beat the breast, but on neither the one nor the other do they wail.

In the following midrash, Beruriah broke the news of their sons' deaths to her husband:

> ***Midrash Mishlei,* Chapter 31:** "What a rare find is a capable wife!" A tale is told of Rabbi Meir that while he was sitting and expounding in the academy on a Sabbath afternoon his two sons died. What did their mother do? She left them both lying on their couch and spread a sheet over them. At the close of the Sabbath, Rabbi Meir came home from the academy, and he asked her, "Where are my two sons?" She replied, "They went to the academy." He said, "I looked for them at the academy but did not see them." She handed him the cup for the Havdalah Benediction and he pronounced it. Then he asked her again, "Where are my two sons?" She replied, "Sometimes they go someplace; they will be back presently." She served him and he ate. After he recited the Grace after meals she said to him, "Master, I have a question to ask you." He replied, "Ask your question." She said, "Master, some time ago a certain man came by and left something on deposit with me. Now he has come to reclaim this deposit. Shall I return it to him or not? He replied, "My daughter, is not

> one who holds a deposit obligated to return it to its owner?" She said, "Without your opinion I would not give it back to him." What did she do? She took him by the hand, led him up to the children's room, brought him to the bed, and removed the sheet, so that Rabbi Meir saw them both lying on the bed dead. He burst into tears, saying, "My sons, my sons! My masters, my masters! My natural born sons, and my masters who enlightened me with their Torah." At this point, Rabbi Meir's wife said to him, "Master, did you not just now tell me that we must return a pledge to its owner?" To which he replied, "The Lord has given, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21). Rabbi Chanina said: In this manner she comforted him and brought him solace, hence it is said, What a rare find is a capable wife! (Proverbs 3:10)

Here, the text demonstrates Beruriah's expertise in Jewish law and lore. She knew that mourning on the Sabbath is not permitted and so evaded Rabbi Meir's questions until after Havdalah. Next, in a display of considerable psychological sophistication, she fortified her husband with a meal. Then she posed a legal question to him, skillfully manipulating the conversation so that Rabbi Meir was forced into an acceptance of his sons' death which he might not otherwise have been able to muster. Once again, Beruriah used Jewish text and theology as the prism through which to understand such a momentous calamity and she functioned in this tale as her husband's spiritual guide and teacher. While one reads of Rabbi Meir's tears, it was Beruriah who was portrayed as completely controlled and accepting of what fate - or God - had dealt them.

Beruriah appeared in two stories in the *Tosefta*. In each, she was cited as a learned woman whose positions on aspects of ritual purity were accepted and acknowledged by the rabbis. In the first case, she appeared as the anonymous daughter of Rabbi Chananyiah:

***Tosefta Kelim Baba Kamma* 4:17** When may an oven which had been plastered in purity and then became impure be made pure? Rabbi Chalafta of Kefar Hananya said, " I asked Shimon ben Hananyah who asked the son of Rabbi Chananyiah ben Teradion, and he said, 'When one will have moved it from its place.' And his daughter said, "From the time that the coat [of plaster of the stove] is taken off.'" When he heard these things, Rabbi Judah ben Baba said, "His daughter has said better than his son."

***Tosefta Kelim Baba Metziah* 1:6** A door bolt -Rabbi Tarfon declares it impure and the sages declare it pure. And Beruriah says, "One removes it from this door and hangs it on another door." On Shabbat, when these things were reported to Rabbi Judah, he said, "Beruriah spoke well."

At issue in both cases is the ability of a specific item to become ritually impure. Generally, an item must be "whole," that is, easily recognized, in order to become impure. In both stories, Beruriah made fine and clever distinctions to distinguish those items which may become impure from those which may not. Both texts placed Beruriah in settings (study halls?) where she interacted with male scholars and was independent of father or husband. Both presented a woman learned enough to debate equally with the male sages of her day. It is clear that her views were respected in these situations and, even more, her opinions on the halachic matters involved in these cases were judged to be over and above those of her colleagues.

Goodblatt has argued that Beruriah displays knowledge which could have been acquired simply by growing up in a rabbinic household . He maintains that one cannot cite these stories as evidence that Beruriah was a particularly learned or educated woman.[11] However, his position is countered by the circumstances in the first story in which

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[11] David Goodblatt, "The Beruriah Traditions," Journal of Jewish Studies, 26 (1975): 72.

Beruriah's opinions were judged to be superior to her brother's. If her knowledge had been acquired merely by being the daughter of Rabbi Chananyiah, then why would her brother propose a different answer? Indeed, Boyarin has pointed to the existence of an alternate version of the first tale in which it was her father, not her brother, whom Beruriah bested.[12] Such a version of the tale would provide an even stronger counter to Goodblatt's contention that Beruriah's knowledge was simply picked up from the household in which she was raised. It seems more reasonable to say that in both stories Beruriah was portrayed as a woman who had an understanding of principles of religious law that she could apply to specific hypothetical situations and that her answers to vexing questions of ritual practice were authoritatively cited.

In the following tale, Beruriah's stature as a scholar seemed to be taken for granted:

> ***Pesachim* 62b** Rabbi Simlai came before Rabbi Yochanan [and] said to him, "Let the Master teach me the Book of Genealogies." He said to him, "Where are you from?" He replied, "From Lod." "And where is your dwelling?" "In Nehardea." He said to him, "We do not expound it either to those from Lod or to those from Nehardea and all the more so not to one who is from Lod and whose dwelling is in Nehardea." Rabbi Simlai pressured him and he agreed. [Rabbi Simlai] said to him, "Let us learn it in three months." [Rabbi Yochanan] threw a clod of dirt at him and said to him, "If Beruriah, the wife of Rabbi Meir and the daughter of Rabbi Chananyiah ben Teradyon, who learned three hundred rulings a day from three hundred masters, could not fulfill her obligation in three years, you [propose to do it] in three months!"

Here, a scholar from Lod (in the south of Israel), residing in Nehardea (in Babylonia), is

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[12] Daniel Boyarin, Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 183.

compared unfavorably to Beruriah. Rabbi Simlai's origins and current association with Nehardea were significant. The *Yerushalmi, Pesachim* 5:3 explained that the discrimination against those from the south of Israel and Babylonia was based on a perception that those individuals were too prideful and did not study Torah enough.[13] Rabbi Simlai, then, not only came from places which ought to render him unfit to study this work, but he reinforced the stereotype against him by proposing to master the proposed study in an absurdly shortened period. By contrast, the picture painted of Beruriah was of a woman who not only learned rapidly but was modest enough to know that such intensive study could not be rushed. Such a combination of humility and intellect could have been assigned to any number of sages, yet the text placed these traits in a woman.

It is interesting to examine the phrase which the text used to describe Beruriah's study of the scholarly work in question, *"yatz'tah y'dei chovatah,"* literally, "she fulfilled her obligation." This expression is found throughout the Talmud in conjunction with the fulfillment of Scripturally-based commandments: reading Torah (*Rosh Hashana* 32b); building a Sukkah (*Sukkah* 2a); shaving a Nazir (*Nazir* 5b); Temple sacrifice (*Zevachim* 37a); bringing offerings to the Temple (*Menachot* 105b); reading the Megillah (*Megillah* 19b); recitation of the Shema (*Berachot* 9b), and many more. Women are exempt from all positive, time-based commandments (*Kiddushin* 29a) and, specifically, from Torah study even though the latter precepts are not necessarily time-dependent.

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[13] Judith Z. Abrams, The Women of the Talmud (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc, 1995), 6.

Kiddushin 34a "And you shall teach them to your sons" (Deut. 11:1), but not daughters, and since "you shall teach them" can be so punctuated as to read, "you shall learn," it is inferred that whoever does not have to be taught need not learn himself."

Yet, here this technical phrase was applied to Beruriah. Women are not forbidden to study Torah and the author of this tale could simply have cited Beruriah's studiousness as praiseworthy without calling her actions obligatory. However, by employing the phrase, "she fulfilled her obligation," the *stam* seemed to be signaling at least his own assumption that Beruriah was obligated to Scriptural study just like her male counterparts.

It was not Beruriah's intellect alone that was lauded in the Talmudic tales. She was also cited for her moral authority. In the following case, her ethical sense was portrayed as being superior to that of her husband:

Berachot 10a Once there were some bandits in Rabbi Meir's neighborhood and they caused him a great deal of distress. Rabbi Meir was praying for mercy regarding them, so that they would die. His wife, Beruriah, said to him, "What is your reason [for praying for them to die]? Because it is written, "Let sins (*chata'im*) cease [from the earth]" {Psalms 104:35}? Is it written *chota'im* [sinners]? It is written *chata'im* [sins]. And furthermore, go down to the end of the verse, 'and let the wicked be no more' [Does this mean that] once sinners cease, the wicked will be no more? Instead, you should pray for mercy about [these bandits] that they should repent and [then] the wicked will be no more." Rabbi Meir prayed for mercy regarding [the bandits] and they repented.

The Scriptural verse in question is "Let the sinners/sins cease out of the earth, and let the wicked be no more." Unvocalized, the Hebrew word חטאים can be read as either *chata'im* (sins) or *chota'im* (sinners). Rabbi Meir interpreted it as the latter, but Beruriah

maintained that since the word was not written specifically as חוטאים it was to be read as *chata'im* (sins). The story attributed several virtues to Beruriah. First, she demonstrated her mastery of the relevant texts. She could make fine distinctions between variant readings of a crucial word; she knew how to delve into the text and discern its true meaning. Arguing for mercy, not death, for sinners she also displayed a depth of compassion not exhibited by her husband. By means of a gentle rebuke, Beruriah fulfilled the true role of teacher; she lead her erring husband to a recognition of his error. Without comment, Rabbi Meir accepted his wife's correction and prayed a revised prayer. His prayer was answered. The sinners repented.

Immediately following the last tale, Beruriah appeared in another. But this time the merciful woman was gone, replaced by a haughty, intimidating character:

> ***Berachot 10b*** A certain *mina* said to Beruria, "It is written: 'Sing, O barren one who did not give birth (Isaiah 54:1).' Because she did not bear is she to sing?" She replied to him, "You fool! Look at the end of the verse, where it is written, 'For the children of the desolate one shall be more than the children of the married wife, says the Lord.' But what then is the meaning of 'a barren one that did not bear'? Sing, O community of Israel, who resembles a barren woman, for not having born children like you for Gehinnom."

The *mina* was likely a Sadducee.[14] In this story, an unnamed man challenged the verse in Isaiah on the grounds that a barren woman would have no reason to rejoice. Beruriah contemptuously explained that the "barren one" meant Israel (and implied that the "married wife" was Rome). Not content to let the matter end there, she continued to

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[14] Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Berakoth (London: The Soncino Press, 1990), 19.

verbally assault this questioner by declaring that in some cases, no birth at all would be better than a birth to someone so despised as him, whose offspring would be fit only for Gehinnom. Israel should rejoice rather than grieve that she did not bear children such as these! What was the cause for Beruriah's hostility? Rachel Adler argued that this story demonstrated Beruriah's identification with her own normative (Pharisaic) tradition by emphatically repudiating any kinship with this Sadducee.[15] Throughout the stories about her, Beruriah disputed many sages, but only in this story did she so vociferously repudiate and disassociate herself from one of them. The *mina* belonged to merely a sect. Beruriah belonged to the majority. In this story, she made it clear that it was *he*, the Sadducee who was "Other", the marginal character, not Beruriah herself, the woman. The *mina* was dismissed as not worthy to call himself a member of the Israelite nation; indeed, he was no better than the "married wife", the hated Rome. Beruriah, however, asserted her status; she stood for Pharisees, for the true Israel.

In two tales from tractate *Eruvin*, Beruriah again rebuked male scholars:

> ***Eruvin 53b-54a*** Rabbi Jose, the Galilean, once was on a journey when he met Beruriah. He asked her, "By which road to Lod?" She replied, "Foolish Galilean. Did not the sages say, 'Do not converse excessively with women?' You should have said, "How to Lod?'"
> Beruriah once discovered a student who was studying in a low voice. She reproached him, exclaiming, "Is it not written, 'Ordered in all things, and sure (II Sam. 23:5)'? If it [Torah learning] is ordered in your two hundred and forty-eight limbs it will be 'sure.' Otherwise, it will not be sure."

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[15] Rachel Adler, "The Virgin in the Brothel and Other Anomalies: Character and Context in the Legend of Beruriah," Tikkun, 3, no. 6 (1988): 30.

Rabbi Jose in the first story was well aware of the need for brevity in his conversation with Beruriah and he addressed her without a greeting. Beruriah appears to have argued from within rabbinic tradition, almost as would a male scholar, and she rebuked Jose for speaking with her excessively. She showed him up by demonstrating how he might have made his request for directions even shorter. But by doing so, Beruriah, in fact, forced Rabbi Jose to converse with her more! One suspects that Beruriah spoke here with her tongue firmly in her cheek. Rabbi Jose was trapped by his clever rebuker. He was chastised by her for speaking too much to her from the start but he found himself manipulated into a prolonged engagement with her, the very situation he had tried to avoid from the outset. Yet, his Torah-knowledge was clearly inadequate and the only way he could be shown his error was by being talked to "excessively" by a woman.

It is not clear where the events in the second story take place, but certainly it is possible that it was in a study hall. Beruriah came across a certain student and rebuked him for his poor study habits. She included the organs of speech among the two hundred and forty-eight limbs and predicted that if he did not use every "limb" to its maximum "ordered" potential then his learning would not be adequate. Here one finds an interesting role reversal. It was the woman in this story who was the stern and critical disciplinarian and the male student who was passive and quiet, mumbling and calling no attention to himself like a woman. Not only did the hapless student fail to use all of his God-given faculties. He also failed to act like a man!

Any discussion of Beruriah would be incomplete without mention of the shocking description of her end by the 11th-century Rashi, almost a thousand years after Beruriah's

own era. Rashi's comment was based on the story about the martyrdom of Rabbi Chananyiah (*Avodah Zarah* 18b). As mentioned above, in this story Beruriah's sister was consigned to a brothel. Spurred on by his wife's statement, "I am ashamed to have my sister in a brothel," Meir went to Rome, tested his sister-in-law's chastity, found her virtuous, and engineered her escape by providing divine intercession for her jailer. Hotly pursued by the Romans, he was said by some to have hidden with a harlot, by others to have sought refuge in a pagan temple. Ultimately, Meir fled to Babylonia. The story ends with the words, "Some say it was because of that incident that he ran to Babylonia, but others say it was on account of the incident about Beruriah."

What incident about Beruriah? It was to this puzzle that Rashi addressed himself:

> ***Rashi on Avodah Zarah 18b*** "The incident about Beruriah" - One time she [Beruriah] mocked the rabbinic dictum, "Women are light-headed [easily seduced"] (*Kiddushin* 80). He [Rabbi Meir] said to her, "By your life, your end will demonstrate that these words [are right]. He ordered one of his students to tempt her into a matter of sin. He [the student] urged her for many days until she submitted. When it became known, she strangled herself and Rabbi Meir fled because of the disgrace.

What was remarkable throughout the Talmudic tales about Beruriah was that her gender and her sexuality never posed a hindrance to her scholarly interactions with men. And yet it was precisely her sexuality that Rashi would have be the cause, not merely of her defeat in a scholarly debate with her husband, but of her very death. In Rashi's telling Beruriah became nothing more than a "light-headed" woman herself, no different than all other women - easily seduced, and (suddenly) indifferent to the Torah values and ethical behavior previously demonstrated by her character. Rashi's tale, then, dismissed all of the

values that the Talmud had previously attributed to Beruriah: her personal modesty, her piety, Torah-learning, and independence; the depth of affection between herself and her husband; and Rabbi Meir's own respect for his wife's intellect, and wisdom. However, there was simply nothing in the Talmudic depictions of Beruriah's moral or intellectual character to make Rashi's account of her demise convincing. It is equally implausible that Rabbi Meir would have sought to treat his wife so cruelly or to lead a student of his own to such disgrace.

An explanation for this later story has been suggested by Bronner: "More likely it [the story of Rabbi Meir and Beruriah's end] was contrived by men of a later generation who grew uncomfortable with the legacy of such a woman. This story was the rabbinic way to warn women against following Beruriah and studying Torah. Later tradition preferred the image of the self-sacrificing and self-effacing Rachel above the assertive, intellectual Beruriah."[16] Similarly, Cynthia Ozick argued, "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."[17] Rashi seems to have been unable to accept that this extraordinary woman's intellectual gifts could be unaccompanied by licentiousness, as if there would always be an intrinsic connection between a Torah-learned woman and uncontrolled sexuality. As Daniel Boyarin put it, "...that a wife like Beruriah could not

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[16] Bronner, 11.

[17] Cynthia Ozick, "Women - Notes Toward Finding the Right Question," Forum 35 (1979): 44.

possibly end up beloved and befriended by her husband, and that a husband like Rabbi Meir who would love and befriend such a woman, must himself end up an exile."[18]

Discussion

It was highly unusual for Talmudic tales to portray women as full, complex characters. Women of the Talmudic age appeared in the literature primarily as nameless daughters, wives, mothers, sisters, "matrons" - accessories who were brought on stage to fulfill specific social, religious, or literary functions and then swept away when the purpose for which they were brought forward has been accomplished. Yalta and Beruriah were exceptions. They were characters who surfaced and then remained visible as exemplary individuals in their own right. In literary terms, they are rounded characters not flat or stylized. While it is impossible to determine the precise degree of historicity in these stories, one may say that the literary portrayal of certain personalities in the Talmud reveals how the rabbinic community at the time of their writing viewed the women.[19]

The richness of the Yalta/Beruriah portrayals may be understood by examining the stories from several perspectives. In the Talmud, each women was shown functioning both independently of and with her husband. Some of the stories about the women took place in public settings, some in the home. Sometimes women were referred to simply by their own names; sometimes in association with their husbands. In about half of the her tales Beruriah was referred to as the wife of Rabbi Meir, in the rest her identity stood

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[18] Boyarin, 191.
[19] Abrams, xvii.

alone. Although Yalta was not accorded the same degree of scholarly stature in the community of sages as Beruriah, nonetheless, in not one of the stories about her was the appellation "the daughter of the Exilarch" or "the wife of Rabbi Nachman" appended to Yalta's name. Clearly, when the rabbis wrote about "Yalta," they expected that their readers would know who they meant. Both women essentially vindicated rabbinic Judaism in that they debated with men from *within* the tradition and its laws. Their demand was that the law be applied correctly. When Yalta became enraged at Ulla it was not because she perceived the law to be fundamentally flawed, but rather because she believed that Ulla was misusing it to further his own social/political agenda and to exclude her where such exclusion had not been legally mandated.

Both women were portrayed as, alternatively, biting and critical, protective and loving, impatient, gentle, scathing, and clever. The Yalta/Beruriah tales always involved their protagonists in some type of interaction with men and in every story in which they engaged intellectually with a man they were portrayed as besting him at some halachic or midrashic task. Yet both were also shown at moments of great personal pain. The most remarkable thing about how these women were portrayed in the Talmud is that nowhere did the *stama d'gemara,* the anonymous voice of the Talmudic text, insert into the stories criticism or repudiation of them - their opinions, their politics, their scholarly credentials, *their very right to have behaved and argued and thought as they did.*

Perhaps the rabbis were so sanguine about Beruriah and Yalta because of the women's association with their distinguished husbands. The Talmudic concept, אשת חבר הרי היא כחבר ("The wife of a scholar is like a scholar herself"), appears

twice in the Talmud. It has two meanings depending on whether it refers to honor or to trustworthiness. In the first case it means that just as one must honor the scholar, so one must honor his wife since she is accorded similar status. In the second it means that the trustworthiness of a man in regard to tithes, ritual cleanliness, and *tikhelet* [20] devolves upon his wife as well. In *Shevuot* 30b, the issue is honor. The widow of Rabbi Huna brought a case before Rabbi Nachman:

> He said [to himself]: What shall I do? If I should rise before her, the plea of her opponent will be stopped; [but] if I should not rise before her, [I should be doing wrong, for] the wife of a scholar is like a scholar.

In *Avodah Zarah* 39a, the issue was the trustworthiness of one who validates *tikhelet*:

> Rabbi Huna b. Minyomi purchased *tikhelet* from the household of Rabbi Amram's wife and he came before Rabbi Joseph. He was unable to answer him. Hanan the tailor chanced to meet him [and Rabbi Huna mentioned the matter to him]. He said to him: "Joseph is poor. How would he know about this? But it once happened that I purchased *tikhelet* from the household of Rabbanah, brother of Rabbi Hiyya b. Abba, and I came before Rabbi Mattena who could not answer [the same question]. So I went to Rabbi Judah of Hagronia and he said to me: 'I will instruct you. Thus said Samuel: The wife of a scholar is like a scholar; for our rabbis have taught: The wife of a scholar is like a scholar, the slave of a scholar is like a scholar and when a scholar dies the members of his household remain trustworthy until [there is reason for] suspicion.'"

Perhaps, then, one could say that the rabbis tolerated Yalta and Beruriah and muted their misgivings and their criticism simply out of respect for their husbands,

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[20] *Tikhelet* was a blue-green dye used in priestly and royal garments. By biblical law, a strand of the exact shade was to be included in each set of the fringes of one's *tsitsit*.

"אשת חבר הרי היא כחבר" Yet the instances in which the text "permitted" Yalta and Beruriah to transgress expected norms of female behavior were numerous. It is instructive to examine the women's actions through the lens of two issues: Torah study and modesty Regarding the first, the following text specified that women were exempt from Torah study even though this is not a positive, time-dependent precept:

> ***Kiddushin* 34a** Study of the Torah, procreation, and the redemption of the son, are not affirmative precepts limited to time, and yet women are exempt [from them]? How do we know it? It is learned from phylacteries: just as women are exempt from phylacteries, so are they exempt from all affirmative precepts limited to time. Phylacteries [themselves] are derived from the study of the Torah: just as women are exempt from the study of the Torah, so are they exempt from phylacteries.

Although Ben Azzai said that a man ought to teach his daughter Torah (*Sota* 3b), this was only so that she would be prepared to defend herself if her husband were to accuse her of adultery. Rabbi Eliezer vehemently disagreed with even this limited proposal: "A foolish pietist, a cunning rogue, a female Pharisee and the plague of Pharisees bring destruction upon the world." In *Y. Sotah* 3:4, he raged, "Let the books of Torah be burned rather than be given to a woman." And in *Yoma* 66, when a "wise woman" approached him with a Scriptural question, he replied: "There is no wisdom in woman except with the distaff. Thus also does Scripture say: 'And all the women that were wise-hearted did spin with their hands.'" Furthermore, in *Kiddushin* 29b:

> It is written: "And you shall teach your sons"...How do we know that she [the mother] has no duty [to teach her children]? Because it is written: "And you shall teach," [which also reads]: "And you shall study".

> [Therefore] whoever is commanded to study, is commanded to teach; whoever is not commanded to study, is not commanded to teach. And how do we know that she is not obligated to teach herself? Because...the one whom others are commanded to teach is commanded to teach oneself; and the one whom others are not commanded to teach, is not commanded to teach oneself. How then do we know that others are not commanded to teach her? Because it is written: "And you shall teach them your sons" - but not your daughters.

Yet Yalta and Beruriah were clearly learned. And if they were capable of understanding, then they would also have had the ability to teach. Regarding the issue of commandedness, the passage from *Kiddushin* 34a above clearly demonstrated that at least some authorities believed that Beruriah was obligated to Scriptural study just like her male colleagues.

Throughout a number of discussions in the Talmud, the sages acknowledged that men are easily aroused in the presence of women and that specific injunctions were required in order to avoid the violation of social and religious norms. [21] Woman's sexuality had the potential to create chaos, disorder, and social disequilibrium. Its antidote was that other primary value, female modesty, often justified by the biblical passage, "All the glory of the king's daughter is within." (Psalm 45:13) The rabbis understood this verse to mean that women's virtue was to be found within the modest seclusion of private life. The verse is cited in *Shevuot 30a:* "You might say, it is not usual for a woman [to go to the *bet din*] because 'all glorious is the King's daughter within'." Not being able to appear before the *bet din* could lead to significant legal consequences. An example is

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[21] Judith Hauptman, Rereading the Rabbis: A Woman's Voice (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1998), 31.

found in tractate *Gittin* in which a husband who pledged property to pay his wife's marriage settlement could not sell it lest his wife have to go to the court in the future to determine subsequent purchasers:

> ***Gittin* 41a** Another [baraita] taught: If a man makes his field security for a debt to his creditor or for a woman's ketubah, they may recover from the remainder of his property. Rabbi. Shimon ben Gamaliel, however, says that [while] a creditor may so recover a woman cannot recover from the remainder, because it is not seemly for a woman to keep on coming to court.

A woman who "went out" exposed herself to considerable peril and bore full responsibility for any ensuing consequences:

> ***Midrash Tanhuma* 8:12** The man subdues the woman, and the woman does not subdue the man. But if she walks about a lot and goes out into the marketplace she finally comes to a state of corruption, to a state of harlotry. And so you find the case of Jacob's daughter, Dinah. All the time that she was sitting at home, she was not corrupted by transgression; but as soon as she went out into the marketplace she caused herself to come to the point of corruption.

> ***Genesis Rabbah* 80:1** Like the daughter, so is the mother, like the generation so is its leader, like the altar so are its priests, says Kahana. According to the gardener, so is its gardener...a cow does not gore unless her calf kicks, a woman is not immoral until her daughter is immoral. If so...then our mother, Leah, was a harlot. Even so, he replied, because it says, "And Leah went out to meet him" (Genesis 30:16), which means that she went out to meet him adorned like a harlot, and therefore "And Dinah the daughter of Leah went out." (Genesis 34:1)

If women did venture into the public realm, modesty of dress and comportment were mandated in order to prevent uncontrollable sexual incitement in men (*Ketubot* 72a). A

major cluster of regulations - the *yichud* laws - developed around the issue of keeping men and women from mingling in situations that could lead to indecent behavior or even the possibility of indecency.[22] *Baba Kamma* 8:6 relates a story about men who were fined for removing the head covering of women in the street. One rabbi discouraged men from engaging in discussion with women on the grounds that such talk would expose them to temptation:

> ***Avot* 1:5** Jose ben Yochana of Jerusalem used to say: Let your house be wide open, and let the poor be members of your household. Do not engage too much in conversation with women. They said this with regard to one's own wife. How much more with regard to another man's wife! Thus have the sages said: As long as a man engages in too much conversation with women he causes evil to himself for he goes idle from the words of Torah and his end will be that he will inherit Gehinnom.

In a world in which women were enjoined to be modest in dress and in behavior, and in which Torah learning for women was, at best, highly problematic Beruriah and Yalta stand out as anomalies. They "went out" in public where they learned (and taught) Torah. They debated the law with the sages and challenged them. Doing so, their words and actions were permitted to stand without rabbinic challenge, recrimination, or reproach. Despite the values espoused by אשת חבר הרי היא כחבר, I would argue that the sheer weight of untraditional and unchallenged material in the Beruriah and Yalta tales favors the position that these two extraordinary women earned the rabbis' respect for accomplishments in

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[22] Bronner, 6.

their own right. *Why* and *how* the rabbis were able to transcend the weight of tradition and their own expectations of proper female conduct will be explored in Chapter Four.

CHAPTER TWO: THE BIBLICAL WOMEN

Huldah

The prophetess Huldah appears in the Bible in 2 Kings 22 and in a parallel account in 2 Chronicles 34:

***2 Kings 22:* 3-20**

And it came to pass in the eighteenth year of king Josiah, that the king sent Shaphan the son of Azaliah, the son of Meshullam, the scribe, to the house of the Lord, saying, Go up to Hilkiah the high priest, that he may count the silver which is brought to the house of the Lord, which the gatekeepers have gathered from the people; And let them deliver it to the hand of the workmen, who supervise the house of the Lord; and let them give it to workers who are in the house of the Lord, to repair the breaches of the house; To carpenters, and to builders, and to masons, and to buy timber and quarried stone to repair the house. But there was no account made with them of the money that was delivered to their hand, because they dealt in good faith. And Hilkiah the high priest said to Shaphan the scribe, I have found the book of the Torah in the house of the Lord. And Hilkiah gave the book to Shaphan, and he read it. And Shaphan the scribe came to the king, and brought the king word again, and said, Your servants have gathered the money that was found in the house, and have delivered it to the hand of the workmen, who supervise the house of the Lord. And Shaphan the scribe told the king, saying, Hilkiah the priest has delivered me a book. And Shaphan read it before the king. And it came to pass, when the king had heard the words of the book of the Torah, that he tore his clothes. And the king commanded Hilkiah the priest, and Ahikam the son of Shaphan, and Achbor the son of Michaiah, and Shaphan the scribe, and Asaiah a servant of the king's, saying, Go, inquire of the Lord for me, and for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that was found; for great is the anger of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not listened to the words of this book, to do according to all that which is written concerning us. And Hilkiah the priest, and Ahikam, and Achbor, and Shaphan, and Asaiah, went to Huldah the prophetess, the wife of Shallum the son of Tikvah, the son of Harhas, keeper of the wardrobe; she lived in Jerusalem in the second quarter; and they talked with her. And she said to them, Thus said the Lord God of

> Israel, Tell the man who sent you to me, Thus said the Lord, Behold, I will bring evil upon this place, and upon its inhabitants, all the words of the book which the king of Judah has read; Because they have forsaken me, and have burned incense to other gods, that they might provoke me to anger with all the works of their hands; therefore my anger shall be kindled against this place, and shall not be quenched. But to the king of Judah who sent you to inquire of the Lord, thus shall you say to him, Thus said the Lord God of Israel, Concerning the words which you have heard; Because your heart was tender, and you have humbled yourself before the Lord, when you heard what I spoke against this place, and against its inhabitants, that they should become a desolation and a curse, and have torn your clothes, and wept before me; I also have heard you, said the Lord. Behold therefore, I will gather you to your fathers, and you shall be gathered to your grave in peace; and your eyes shall not see all the evil which I will bring upon this place. And they brought back word to the king.[23]

The time was the reign of King Josiah of Judah (639-609 B.C.E.). After half a century during which paganism infected Israelite religious practice, King Josiah had led a campaign to restore its purity and to centralize the worship of Yahweh in Jerusalem. Under the direction of the high priest, Hilkiah, carpenters and masons set about repairing the Temple that King Solomon built When the scroll was found it was given to Shaphan who read it for the king. Distressed at the gap between the current pace of his reforms and the demands for ritual purity inherent in the scroll, Josiah asked several ministers to "Go, inquire of the Lord on my behalf, and on behalf of the people, and on behalf of all Judah, concerning the words of this scroll that has been found. For great indeed must be the wrath of the Lord that has been kindled against us, because our fathers did not obey the words of this scroll to do all that has been prescribed for us." (2 Kings 22:13) In other

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[23] Translation based on the 1895 version of the Mikraot Gedolot. Taken from the Judaic Classics Library CD-ROM, 1991-1996 Institute for Computers in Jewish Life and Davka Corporation.

words, Josiah was unsure of the scroll's divine authenticity. If it contained true revelation from God, he would need to embark on much more sweeping reforms. The ministers apparently understood without further explanation that "Go, inquire of the Lord on my behalf" meant that they had to consult a prophet who could best discern the words' divinity.

At that time, the prophets Jeremiah, Zephaniah and Nachum were living nearby, in Jerusalem. All had been helping Josiah in his efforts to return to the proper practice of the Israelite religion. Despite the accessibility of capable male prophets, the delegation of royal officers turned instead to Huldah. That Huldah was a woman was apparently irrelevant to both the biblical redactor and the king's ministers, none of whom expressed any surprise that a woman should be sought out as a prophet to determine the word of God. The text recounted the royal officers' visit to Huldah and their unquestioning acceptance of her authority. Huldah responded to them in prophetic fashion saying, "Thus said the Lord, the God of Israel." Continuing, she revealed God's calamitous plan for an Israel which had forsaken the Almighty by bringing offerings to false gods and by behaving immorally. Despite Josiah's personal righteousness, his reforms to that point had not altered the fundamental religious and personal immorality of his people. God would reward Josiah's own efforts by sparing him the agony of witnessing the coming destruction. The king was to be laid in his tomb in peace. Within thirty-five years, Huldah's prophecy was fulfilled.

Nowhere in the biblical text was anything made of the fact that it was a woman who was consulted by the king concerning a religious-legal problem. No one suggested asking

another opinion from another source or consulting a male prophet. Huldah's credentials as a prophetess were unquestioned. The language used by the king, "Go, inquire of the Lord on my behalf..." meant to seek a divine oracle that would be spoken through a human agent. In all but one instance that agent was a prophet. [24]

Some information about Huldah's life is available. The biblical text identified her as "the wife of Shallum, son of Tikvah, son of Harhas, the keeper of the wardrobe, who was living in Jerusalem in the second quarter [*Mishneh*]." Later generations took up the question of Huldah's place among the prophets of her day and added considerably to the limited information contained in the biblical narrative.

Huldah's professional activities were elaborated in the *Targum:*

> ***Targum* to *II Chronicles* 34:22** She lived in Jerusalem in the house of instruction.

How did the Targum's translate "the Mishnah" as "the house of instruction"? The Biblical text (II Kings 22:14 and II Chronicles 34:22) reads:

הולדה הנביא והיא יושבת בירושלים במשנה.

Although several Biblical translations understand במשנה to refer to a residential quarter in Jerusalem, the Targum based its translation on the Hebrew root ש נ ה, "to repeat," from which comes "Mishnah." The word, "Mishnah" was derived from the concept of verbal teaching by repeated recitation and came to mean "to study the Mishnah" and then a

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[24] Diana Edelman, "Huldah the Prophet - Of Yahweh or Asherah?" in Athalya Brenner, A Feminist Companion to Samuel and Kings (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 232.

general word, "to study or to teach." Hence, the Targum understood Huldah to have lived and taught in Jerusalem in some sort of academy or teaching establishment.

The aforementioned "Gate of Huldah" appeared again in a seemingly nonchalant description:

> ***Song of Songs Rabbah* 11:26** Another explanation: Or a young hart, young deer. "Behold he stands behind our wall": behind the western wall of the Temple. Why is this so? Because God has sworn to him that it will never be destroyed; nor will the Gate of the Priests or the Gate of Huldah ever be destroyed till God shall renew them.

In a second Targum reference, Huldah's scholarly credentials were restated:

> **Rashi to *Targum Kings* 22:14** What do the sages teach about Huldah? In the Talmud, a certain "Gate of Huldah" is mentioned in relation to the Temple. The rabbis teach that this had previously been the gate which led to Huldah's school!

Huldah's husband, Shallum, was also described in the above *Targum:*

> Scripture writes that Huldah was married to a man named Shullam whom the rabbis teach was a noble and compassionate man. Every day he would carry a pitcher of water outside the city limits and offer each and every passing traveler a drink. It was a reward for his deeds that his wife was granted the ability to prophecy.

A description of Huldah's place among the prophets came from this 7th-century midrash:

> ***Pesikta Rabbati* 26:1-2** In that generation, three prophets prophesied - Jeremiah, Zephaniah, and a woman named Huldah. Jeremiah prophesied in the city squares, Zephaniah in the Temple and in the synagogues, and

Huldah among the women.

A thousand years after the reigns of King Josiah, the rabbis examined Huldah under their own unique lens. In passages from *Megillah*, the sages contended with the implications of Huldah's prophesying:

> ***Megillah* 14a-b** Our Rabbis taught: "Forty-eight prophets and seven prophetesses prophesied to Israel, and they neither took away from nor added anything written in the Torah except only the reading of the Megillah."....'Seven prophetesses'. Who were these? Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Huldah and Esther....Huldah, as it is written: "So Hilkiah the priest and Ahikam and Achbor..." [2 Kings 22:14] But if Jeremiah was there how could she prophesy? It was said in the school of Rav in the name of Rav: "Huldah was a relative of Jeremiah, and he did not object to her." But how could Josiah himself forsake Jeremiah and send [his ministers to her]? The school of Rabbi Shaila replied: "Because women are tender-hearted." Rabbi Yochanan said:" Jeremiah was not there, as he had gone to bring back the ten tribes."....Rabbi Nachman said: "Haughtiness is not fitting for women. There were two haughty women, and their names are repulsive. One's name meant a bee [Deborah] and the other a weasel [Huldah]....Of the weasel it is written, "Tell the man." [II Kings 22:15] She did not say, "Tell the king."

The *sugiya* began by establishing Huldah's prophetic credentials. The text quoted Scripture as explicitly stating that she was a prophetess. The sages were disturbed. They knew that Jeremiah began to prophesy in the thirteenth year of Josiah's reign Scripture placed Jeremiah, clearly by then an established prophet, at the forefront of the mourning for Josiah upon his death five years later: "And Jeremiah lamented for Josiah: and all the singing men and the singing women spoke of Josiah in their laments to this day, and made them an ordinance in Israel, and, behold, they are written in the laments." (II Chronicles

35:25) The school of Rav proposed an answer to Huldah's preempting Jeremiah; Huldah and Jeremiah were related. The age's preeminent prophet was tolerant of his relative and did not object to being supplanted by her in this instance. Their prooftext was a *baraita:*

> ***Megillah* 14b** Rabbi In the Elder questioned Rabbi Nachman in objection: "Eight prophets who were also priests were descended from Rahab the harlot, namely, Neriah, Baruch, Serayah, Mahseyah, Jeremiah, Hilkiah, Hanamel and Shallum." Rabbi Judah says: "Huldah the prophetess was also one of the descendants of Rahab the harlot."

A midrashic text took the same position with a slight variation:

> ***Ruth Rabbah* 11:1** It was on the strength of this verse that they said: Ten priests who were also prophets descended from Rahab, the harlot: Jeremiah, Hilkiah, Seraiah, Mahasyah, Hanamel, Shallum, Baruch, Neriah, Ezekiel, and Buzzi while some add that Huldah the prophetess was also a descendant of Rahab, the harlot.

The *stam* was not satisfied with this explanation of Huldah's supplanting Jeremiah. Not content to leave the matter as one which was resolved between the two prophets themselves, the text continued by questioning the actions of King Josiah. Regardless of Jeremiah's opinions on the matter, surely the king himself should have intervened in such misguided folly. The academy of Shaila justified the king's actions by suggesting that, as a woman, Huldah's natural compassion and mercy could temper the divine decree. As a prophetess, Huldah's obligation was clear; she could not deviate from or change the word of God. After receiving the divine plan, however, she could beseech God to reverse or temper the threatened destruction and the sages appear to have believed that she would have done so with greater effort than a male counterpart.

The sages' discomfort with Huldah's prophesying in lieu of Jeremiah led Rabbi Yochanan to offer a more acceptable answer: Jeremiah was simply not present when the scroll was discovered. Instead, he was away from the city, engaged in bringing back the ten tribes. In this reading, Huldah was, at best, a substitute prophet who surely would have been superseded by Jeremiah had he been in a position to interpret the scroll when needed.

Could Huldah have refused the royal request for prophecy? If prophecy was initiated by God, how could the sages question her actions, especially if Jeremiah were unavailable? Huldah would seem to have had little choice but to fulfill the king's request to discern God's word. Yet the sages proceeded to harshly criticize Huldah. Her name, they said, meant "a weasel" and she was haughty. Bearing the name of such a lowly creature, she should have recognized her humble status and behaved accordingly. Instead, she acted in a haughty manner, earning the sages' harsh criticism for referring to Josiah as "the man" and not "the king." To be called "haughty" (יהירותא) in the Talmud was to be judged severely. Along with synonymous Hebrew terms, סרירות גאוה, רמות רוחה, גסות הרוח and מעשה גובה, the rabbis' severest scorn and condemnation was reserved for "haughty" individuals (*Shabbat* 94a), worshipers who failed to recite the Amidah (*Eruvin* 65a), those akin to idol worshipers (*Sotah* 4b), sinners destined for Gehinnom (*Baba Batra* 10b), and the wicked among the exiles in Babylon (*Sanhedrin* 24a). Wherever else Talmud used the term "haughtiness," it was referring to general *classes* of people. Only here, in reference to Huldah (and it was also done to Deborah) was the appellation "haughty" affixed to a specific, named individual.

Deborah

The Book of Judges marks a pivotal point in the Israelite story which extended from Genesis to Second Kings. The larger story tells of God's promise of the land of Canaan and Israel's ultimate loss of it. The promise was fulfilled and the gift of the land given, only to be squandered by a people unworthy to be its caretakers. In Judges, Israel's story was played out through a series of national leaders who judged, rebuked, and liberated Israel in a patterned sequence of events: Israel did evil in God's sight. God delivered the people into the hand of oppressors and conquerors. The people cried to God and eventually God raised up a deliverer. The deliverer exhorted and rallied Israel and, ultimately, redeemed them and the land. The people were faithful for a period of time until the cycle began anew.[25] The Book of Judges is exceptional in this respect: its stories are filled with women. Women appear in the book in the three predictable roles - mother, wife, and daughter - and in several unexpected roles.[26] The female characters include Jephthah's daughter, the mothers of Samson and Micah, Ibzan's daughter, the wife of Manoah, Delilah, Achsah, the collective wives of the Israelites and wives of the non-Israelites, a collection of unnamed prostitutes, primary wives and secondary ones, and the four women in Judges 4-5: Deborah, the prophetess, Yael, the murderous seductress, and Sisera's mother and her maid. At the

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[25] Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, Women's Bible Commentary, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 73.

[26] M. O'Connor, "The Women in the Book of Judges," Hebrew Annual Review, 10 (1987): 279.

beginning of this complex - the story of Deborah - the Israelites had been oppressed by the Canaanites for 20 years.

> ***Judges* 4:1-17** Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife [woman] of Lappidot, she judged Israel at that time. She sat beneath the palm tree of Deborah between Rama and Bet-El in Mount Efrayim and the people of Israel came up to her for judgment. She sent and called Barak, the son of Avinoam from Kedesh-Naftali, and said to him, "Has not the God of Israel commanded, saying, 'Go and gather your men to Mount Tabor and take with you ten thousand men of the people of Naftali and of the people of Zebulun?' I will draw Sisera, the captain of Navin's army, out to you to the wadi of Kishon with his chariots and his multitudes, and I will deliver him into your hand." Barak said to her, "If you will go with you, then I will go, but if you will not go with me then I will not go." She said, "I will surely go with you, but you will not attain honor on the journey that you go on because God will deliver Sisera into a woman's hand." Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kedesh. Barak called Zebulun and Naftali to him at Kedesh and he went up with ten thousand men at his feet and Deborah went with him....Deborah said to Barak, "Rise up for this is the day on which God has delivered Sisera into your hand, has not God gone out before you?" So Bak went down from Mount Tabor and ten thousand men after him. God confounded Sisera, and all his chariots and all his army with the edge of the sword before Barak so that Sisera came down from his chariot and fled on foot.. Barak pursued after the chariots and after the army as far as Charoshet-Hagoyyim and all of Sisera's army fell by the sword, there was not one man left.

Scripture called Deborah a prophetess, as it did Huldah. Deborah's domain was the public sphere. She sat out of doors, under a single, leafless tree, receiving those who would come to her for judgment and counsel. For an unspecified period of years Deborah remained at her place. When the political and social climate was right, and presumably in response to a divine command, the prophetess summoned Barak to join her in battle. Her authority was clear and unambiguous. Roles were assigned: Barak

was to lead the men while Deborah entrapped and delivered Sisera to him. The credit for military victory was to be ceded to the men while she manipulated the action from behind the scenes. Deborah appears to have incorporated a number of assumptions about (public) gender roles into her own thinking. Although in their personal relationship it was Deborah who dominated Barak, she appears to have upheld the cultural stereotype of private/woman, public/man in proposing the division of their roles in battle. In fact, it was Barak who objected to her plan. He implored her to go with him and it was Deborah who reminded him that any merit he earned in battle would be diminished if it became known that she had accompanied him. The text painted Barak as the weaker of the two warriors.

The battle won and Sisera slain by Yael, Deborah and Barak together sang a song of rejoicing and praise. Recounting the events of the victory they hailed Yahweh, praised Israel "who willingly offered themselves," cursed the rulers of the enemy, and called Deborah "a mother in Israel." Deborah was revealed to be a poet as well as a prophetess. Her energy, courage, and greatness were praised without restraint in the song.

> ***Midrash Tehillim* 22:20** "Deborah, a prophetess...judged Israel." With regard to this verse, Rabbi Berekhiah had four sayings: "Woe unto the living who need help from the dead; woe unto the strong who need help from the weak; woe unto the seeing who need help from the blind; woe unto the generation which has to be led by a woman."

With this text, the rabbis demonstrated just how discomfited they were by Deborah. Deborah - prophetess, poet, judge, military strategist - was reduced to an association

with the dead, the weak, and the blind; a miserable representation of humanity which could be of little help to those in desperate need of salvation. In order to deny - or at least to minimize - the virtues with which Scripture so unstintingly portrayed her, the rabbis worked energetically to recast Deborah as something other than an unequivocal Biblical heroine. In this first set of texts, the rabbis investigated Deborah's husband:

> ***Megillah* 14a** "Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidot." What [is the meaning of] "the wife of Lappidot"? [Through this expression Scripture tells] that she used to make wicks for the Tabernacle.

The word *lapid* means "torch" and this text explained that the name "Lappidot" referred to the wicks of the menorah that stood in the Tabernacle. Thus, whatever merit might have seemed to accrue to Deborah by virtue of her prophetic activity, it was really her roles of candle-maker and wife that identified her. With a husband named "Torches," no one would be likely to forget that Deborah, the wick-maker, "belonged" to this particular man.

> ***Tanna debe Eliyyahu*** "Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth judged Israel at that time." What was the special character of Deborah that qualified her to prophesy about Israel and to judge them? Was not Phineas, son of Eleazar, still alive at that time? In the school of Elijah it was taught: I call heaven and earth to witness that whether it be a heathen or a Jew, a man or a woman, a manservant or a maidservant, the holy spirit will suffuse any one of them in keeping with the deeds he or she performs. (What were Deborah's meritorious deeds?) It said that Deborah's husband was unlettered (in Torah). So his wife told him, "Come, I will make wicks for you; take them to the holy place in Shiloh. Your portion will then be with men of worth in Israel (who will be studying by the light of your wicks) and you will be worthy of life in the world-to-come." She took care to make the wicks thick, so that their light would be ample. He brought these wicks to the holy place. The

> Holy One, who examines the hearts and minds of mankind said to her, "Deborah, since you took care to make the light for the study of my Torah ample, I will make the light of your prophecy ample in the presence of Israel's twelve tribes."[27]

Here, as with Huldah, the author was disturbed by Deborah's status as prophetess, pecially in light of the existence of a male prophet of the same generation. The thor worked strenuously to reconcile Deborah's position and again highlighted her fely role in order to do so. It could not be denied that she was a prophetess; ripture stated that clearly and unequivocally. *How* she obtained such status, then, came the author's preoccupation. At first reading, the text appears to be wholly mplimentary to Deborah; a loyal and supportive wife, she made candle wicks so that r illiterate husband could join the ranks of the learned at Shiloh. Once among them, own status would be elevated and his place in the world to come assured. cording to this text, God rewarded Deborah for her virtue with a promise to make r prophecy "ample." The underside to this fanciful tale is the fact that its author felt mpelled to link Deborah's future accomplishments in the public sphere with her tue in the private realm. Thus, she was seen as fulfilling that most fundamental manly role - helpmeet and support to her husband. It was *this* role which was mary according to this text, since without it she could never have attained the status prophetess. Portraying Lappidot as a man of such humble station and modesty also l the effect of highlighting and emphasizing the arrogance of which Deborah was so

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der Eliyyahu Rabbah, ed. Meir Friedmann (Vienna, 1902, 1904), 48 in The Book of . Hayim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky; trans. William G. Braude Schocken Books, 1992).

forcefully accused.

Another source suggested that *Barak* could have been Deborah's husband:

> ***Tanna debe Eliyyahu*** She sent and called Barak, the son of Avinoam from Kedesh-Naftali, and said to him, "Has not the God of Israel commanded, saying, 'Go and gather your men to Mount Tabor..'" What connection is there between Deborah and Barak and between Barak and Deborah since, to begin with, they lived some distance from one another; Deborah in her place (Mount Ephraim) and Barak in his place (Kedesh-Nafta)? The answer is that Barak ministered to the elders during the life of Joshua and after Joshua continued to minister to them. Therefore, it came about that he was summoned and joined in marriage to Deborah.[28]

Here, the text was determined to find a relationship between Deborah and Barak that was something other than that of "professional" colleagues. The notion that a woman and man could interact in a nonsexualized fashion seems to have been unthinkable. This source determined that the only plausible way for these two characters to have behaved as they did was for them to have been married to each other! This story also equalized Barak's stature with Deborah's. In this version, Barak and Deborah lived apart, equally "ministering" to different communities. (It is not clear from this text who "summoned" Barak. If the author meant that it was Deborah who initiated their "reunion" and summoned Barak to Mount Ephraim, then this would serve to re-emphasize the disparity in their relationship which the biblical text had shown when the two were preparing for battle.) Since "Barak" means "lightning," the association of "lightning" and "flames" might have led some commentators to fashion a

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[28] Tanna debe Eliyyahu, translated by William G. Braude and Israel J. Kapstein (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of American, 1981), 156.

a story in which the two were brought together.

In the next passage the text used a line from the beginning of Judges 5 to retroactively equalize Barak's status with Deborah's in chapter 4:

> ***Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 3:17** Deborah and Barak arose and made night into day, as it is written: Then sang Deborah and Barak, the son of Avinoam on that day...[Judges 5:1]. Rabbi Pinchas and Rabbi Hilkiah said in the name of Rabbi Simon: "Six miracles were performed on that day. On the same day they both came, she sent for him and he for her, they fought the battle, Sisera was slain, they shared the spoil, and uttered as a song, as it is said: Then sang Deborah and Barak..."

Here, the text attempted to erase any difference in hierarchy or status between Deborah and Barak. While the Biblical text could be used to support the argument that Deborah and Barak fought in battle and later sang of it together, nowhere did it suggest that the initial "summoning" of one for the other was mutual.

A similar effort at "equalization" is found in a rather harsh indictment in the next passage. Interestingly enough, it also included Yael:

> ***Ruth Rabbah* 1:1** Woe unto that generation which judges its judges, and woe unto the generation whose judges are in need of being judged! As it is said: And yet they did not listen to their judges." [Judges 2:17] Who were [the judges who were referred to]? Rab said: "They were Barak and Deborah." Rabbi Joshua b. Levi said: "They were Shamgar and Ehud." Rabbi Huna said: "They were Deborah, Barak, and Yael."

Yet another midrashic text collapsed Barak and Lappidot into one character, Deborah's husband who bore three names:

> ***Tanna debe Eliyyahu*** In fact, he had three names - Barak, Lappidoth,

> and Michael. Barak, because his face had the livid look of lightning; Lappidoth because he used to make wicks which he took to the Holy Place in Shiloh; and Michael, which was his given name.[29]

Although the name "Michael" was not explained here, elsewhere the name is connected with the Hebrew root מוכ, meaning "lowly".[30] Since the rabbis were particularly disturbed by aspects of Deborah's behavior which they considered arrogant, calling her husband "lowly" or "modest" simply emphasized the contrast between husband's and wife's character. Although the sages were quite strenuous in their efforts to link Deborah with a husband, the tales about Lappidot are so fanciful (and so inconsistent) that it seems likely that the sages constructed them (haphazardly) simply to make Deborah conform better to their notion of proper womanly behavior.

Another set of texts addressed the question of Deborah's "arrogance":

> ***Megillah* 14b** Rabbi Nachman said: "Haughtiness is not fitting for women. There were two haughty women, and their names are repulsive. One's name meant a bee and the other a weasel. Concerning the "bee," it is written: 'And she sent and called Barak.' However she herself did not go to him."

The Hebrew word "Deborah" means "bee" although it appears in this text in the Aramaic as זיבורתא. It is not clear from the text whether Rabbi Nachman meant that Deborah's name was lowly or that it was repulsive. (Perhaps both) The bee is not always portrayed negatively. On the contrary, in this line from *Deuteronomy Rabbah*

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[29] Ibid., 153.
[30] Bronner, 172.

the bee was used in association with the most upright: "Rabbi Samuel b. Nahman said: 'God said: 'As the bee is followed by the young, so are the Israelites led by the righteous.'" (It is also interesting to note that Semonides of Amorgos, who lived in the seventh century B.C.E., in his unflattering description of the creation of woman, listed seven animals from which woman was created. He claimed that only the woman made from the bee was a good wife! [31]) According to Rabbi Nachman, Deborah displayed unseemly behavior when she did not seek out Barak herself but summoned him to come to *her* instead.

Deborah's alleged arrogance was also the subject of the next passage:

> ***Pesachim* 66b** Rabbi Judah said in the name of Rav: "Whoever is boastful, if he is a sage, his wisdom departs from him. If he is a prophet, his prophecy departs from him." 'If he is a sage, his wisdom departs from him.' [We learn] from Hillel. For the Master said: "He began chastising them with words," and then he said to them, "I have heard this halacha, but I have forgotten it." 'If he is a prophet, his prophecy departs from him.' [We learn this] from Deborah. For it is written: The rulers ceased in Israel, they ceased, until I arose, Deborah, I arose a mother in Israel. [Judges 5:7] And it is written: Arise, arise, Deborah, arise, arise, sing a song. [Judges 5:12]

The verses in question were taken from Deborah and Barak's victory song following the death of Sisera and the routing of his army. In the song, Deborah and Barak reviewed the chronology of the battle and unabashedly noted their own bravery and skill in it. In this passage from *Pesachim*, the sages criticized Deborah for "boasting" of

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[31] Encyclopedia Judaica, Vol. 12 (Jerusalem:Keter Publishing House, 1972), 803.

the military victory which she had just wrested from the Canaanites. The sages claimed God on their side. Deborah's words were followed five verses later by "Arise, arise, Deborah, arise, arise, sing a song." This, the sages argued, indicated that Deborah had, in fact, lost her "song," the embodiment of the Holy Spirit which she had possessed. Just as it was God who had endowed her with the gift of prophecy, so it was God who had taken it from her as punishment for her arrogance From here one learns that even the poetry of this prophetess was believed to have a power as real as her military prowess, but that, according to the sages, it was not fitting for Deborah to place herself so prominently in the retelling of the victory.[32] Perhaps the sages objected to Deborah's description of herself in that most basic of female biological roles, as "a mother in Israel" since she claimed it for herself by non-procreative means.

In the next text, a critical Rabbi Nehemiah and Rabbi Reuven imagined the thought behind Deborah's words in Judges 4:9

> ***Genesis Rabbah* 40:4** Barak said to her: "If you will join me, then I will go," which, according to Rabbi Nehemiah means that Barak said to Deborah: If you are willing to join me [in a lesser role] in the song [praising God], I will go with you [as a subordinate] into battle, but if you are unwilling to join me in the song, I will not go with you into battle. She replied: "I will certainly go with you. But desist [from setting conditions]. The glory of the song shall not be thine," by which, according to Rabbi Reuben, she meant: What do you suppose - that [the major role in] in the song will be given to you for your glory alone? As it turned out, "Deborah sang, and [in a lesser role] Barak the son of Avinoam [Judges 5:1].[33]

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[32] S.D. Goitein, "Women as Creators of Biblical Genres," Prooftexts, 8 (Jan. 1988): 13.

[33] Translation from The Book of Legends: Legends from the Talmud and Midrash, ed. Hayim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky (New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1992), 109.

The previously-mentioned Ecclesiastes Rabbah text read "And Deborah sang and Barak, son of Avinoam," as an equalization of roles. Rabbis Nehemiah and Reuven did not. The biblical wording convinced them that Deborah was predominant and Barak subordinate in the song and the rabbis strenuously used this text to rehabilitate Barak's image. To them, Barak was not a rather weak man who had to beg a woman to accompany him into battle but, rather, a man of such extraordinary modesty and generosity of spirit that he had offered to split the glory of the battle-to-come with his female partner! By contrast, in this reading Deborah was spiteful, mean-spirited, and unappreciative. Rabbis Nehemiah and Reuven had her contemptuously rejecting Barak's offer while demanding all of the honor for herself.

To be sure, the character of Deborah must have presented the sages with enormous difficulty and the texts reflect their ambivalence about her. In addition to the abovementioned passages which criticized Deborah, there are others which were approving of or, at least, neutral toward her. The following discussion concerned the propriety of Deborah's prophesying out of doors:

> ***Megillah* 14a** And she sat under a palm tree. [Judges 4:5] Why [did Deborah judge sitting under a palm tree]? Rabbi Shimon ben Avshalom said: "Because of *yichud*."

Yichud, or "privacy" refers to the injunction against men and women secluding themselves together; the laws of *yichud* were post-Biblical. Deborah was already doing

her work in a public place; the Bible stated that unequivocally. Investigating testimony presumably would demand a certain amount of privacy. Here, the text did not address the public nature of her work directly; rather, it asked why Deborah sat under a palm tree and why Scripture mentioned this particular species. Since the branches of a palm tree are very high off the ground, anyone sitting beneath such a tree would be completely exposed. Thus, although she was prophesying in a public place, Deborah fulfilled the requirements of *yichud*. Her behavior with men who came to her for judgment could be beyond reproach or suspicion since it would have been impossible for her to conceal any of her activities from passersby. Interpreting Scripture thus, the sages could acknowledge the reality of Deborah's public activity while simultaneously keeping it within the confines and demands of *yichud*. Her reputation could be upheld. This formulation approved of the modest way Deborah went about her work and gave tacit acceptance to her prophesying. The point was made explicit in a later midrash:

> ***Tanna debe Eliyyahu*** The point of the words, She sat under the palm tree of Deborah [Judges 4:5], is taken to be that, since it is improper for a woman to be alone in a house with a man, Deborah went outside and sat down under a palm tree where she instructed multitudes in Torah.

In other places, however, the sages could not contain their admiration and respect for Deborah:

> ***Aggadat Esther*** **on 7:1** Judah b. Simon taught: "You find that when a house in which a snake nests is fumigated with a hind's horn or a woman's hair, the snake immediately flees. So, too, Deborah and Esther were as effective as a hind's horn, for Deborah did not budge until she destroyed Sisera and his hosts; and Esther did not budge until she had

Haman and his ten sons hanged.

Here, Deborah was linked in status to that most unambivalent of Biblical heroines, Esther. They were equated with the means used to rid a house of a fearful predator! This text lauded both women for power, tenacity, thoroughness, and competence. Both were accorded full credit for obliterating men who represented the death and destruction of the Jewish people. A similar argument was made in the following midrashic passage:

> ***Esther Rabbah* 5:4** There was a certain Jew of Shushan, the castle, whose name was Mordechai. [Esther 2:5] Similarly we read: And God saw the people of Israel, and God knew. [Exodus 2:25] Who was the right man for this occasion? Moses....Similarly, And Samuel said to the men of Israel: Go every man to his city. [I Samuel 8:22] Who was the right man for this occasion? Saul. It goes on: Now there was a man of Benjamin, whose name was Kish...[ibid., 9:1] Similarly, And when Saul and all Israel heard those words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and very afraid. [ibid., 17:11] Who was the right man for this occasion? David. And it goes on: Now David was the son of the Ephraithite...[ibid.,12] Rabbi Joshua b. Abiram said two things. "It is written, 'He mightily oppressed the children of Israel [Judges 4:3]' [What is meant by "mightily"?] Rabbi Isaac said: "With insults and blasphemies"....Who was the right person for this occasion? Deborah; and so the text continues: Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife [woman] of Lappidot....

Here, Deborah was placed in extraordinary company. She was associated with Moses, Saul, David, and, indirectly, Mordechai. Each example was one of enormous historical significance: military engagement with David and Saul, national liberation with Moses and Mordechai. Furthermore, the text suggested that in each case there was only one

person who was capable of overcoming the challenge and accomplishing the task at hand. What is particularly interesting about Deborah's inclusion in this group is that her designation as a "right person for this occasion" was unequivocal. She might have been a woman but, according to this midrash, there was no one else of the time who could have replaced her or achieved what she did.

Finally, in several places Deborah's activities were simply referred to matter of factly, without qualification or concern:

> ***Pesachim* 117a** Our rabbis taught: Who uttered this Hallel? Rabbi Eleazar said: "Moses and Israel uttered it when they stood by the Sea. They exclaimed: 'Not unto us,' and the Holy Spirit responded....Joshua and Israel uttered it when the kings of Canaan attacked them. They exclaimed: 'Not unto us,' and the Holy Spirit responded"....Rabbi Eleazar the Modiite said: "Deborah and Barak uttered it when Sisera attacked them. They exclaimed, 'Not unto us,' and the Holy Spirit responded."....The sages maintain: "The prophets among them ruled that the Israelites should recite [Hallel] at every time and at every trouble..."
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> ***Genesis Rabbah* 28:4** And of Naphtali a thousand captains [I Chronicles 12:35]. The text alludes to the woman judge of his tribe, as it is written, And she sent and called Barak, the son of Avinoam from Kedesh-Naftali [Judges 4:6]....Who was it that trampled upon the wealth of Sisera? Deborah and Barak and all their followers.

Deborah has been used as a pivotal example in discussions regarding women's fitness to serve as judges. Traditionally, women were disqualified from acting as a judges by the principal that anyone qualified to be a judge was also qualified (or not) to be a witness. The Talmudic citation with its Biblical prooftext appears below, followed by a clarifying comment from the Tosafot:

***Shevuot* 30a** MIDRASH: The oath of testimony applies to men and not to women; to non-relatives, and not to relatives; to those qualified [to be witnesses] and not to those not...GEMARA. How do we know? Because the Rabbis taught: [If a false witness rise up against any man to testify against him that which is wrong,] then both the men, [between whom is the controversy] shall stand. [Deuteronomy 19:16-17] The verse refers to witnesses.

***Tosafot Niddah* 50a** In any event, among the judges there were no women at all and Deborah [acted as a judge] because of God's [express] word or else she was not a judge at all; rather, she [simply] taught the laws In the Yerushalmi [it teaches that] women are not fit to judge because "the two men shall stand." [This refers to] witnesses.

By this interpretation, the scope of Deborah's role was significantly scaled back. No longer considered to be a judge, she was now reduced to being a prophet alone, appointed by the Divine word. Now her "judgeship" meant that she functioned only as a teacher; that is, she taught the laws but did not rule on them. Here, in the hierarchy of professions, teaching ranked lower than judging. The Tosafot was at pains to account for Deborah's role as "judge" since the description of her activities in Judges 4 would appear to contradict the ruling in *Shevuot* which limited witnesses to men and, therefore, prevented women from serving as judges. Once disqualified as a judge, Deborah could no longer be used as justification for other female judges. However, some held that women might always be judges, like Deborah, since the verse, "...and these are the judgments you shall set before them" (Exodus 21:1) - written in the second person plural - suggested that women were equated with men in all Torah laws

including, presumably, the right to qualify as a judge.[34]

Discussion

Although many of the women of the Bible were recorded in connection with traditional female roles as daughter, wife, mother, and harlot, a few characters broke the mold and emerged as women of independent power. Deborah and Huldah are among the five women to whom Scripture attributed the term "*nevi'ah*" (prophetess), and among the seven so described in the Talmud.[35] They and Miriam are the only women to be named in both texts. (It was probably the case that many other women functioned as prophetesses but that their names were lost.) The primary attribute of a prophet in the Jewish tradition was to serve as the medium of communication between the people and God. In the Bible, God used prophets to exhort and chastise human beings and to direct their behavior. Prophecy included both religious teaching and foretelling of future events.

Scripture mentioned Huldah and Deborah in ways that make clear that the existence of prophetesses must have been a common phenomenon in Israel. Nowhere do the Biblical texts reflect concern about or opposition to women as prophetesses. Even among the group of female prophets Huldah and Deborah were unique. Both were *literary* prophets; that is, their work was in some way involved with texts. In

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[34] *Encyclopedia Talmudit*, ed. Rabbi Shlomo Joseph Zevin (Jerusalem: Talmudic Encyclopedia Institute, 1969), 253.

[35] The other Biblical prophetesses are Miriam, Nodiah (the false prophetess mentioned in Nehemiah 6:14), and the anonymous prophetess in Isaiah. The other Talmudic prophetesses are Sarah, Miriam, Hannah, Abigail, and Esther.

fact, Huldah holds a singular place in history. It was she who, for the first time, designated a written document as Holy Scripture, a scroll which now forms part of the book of Deuteronomy.[36] Until then, no writing had ever been designated as God's word. As Phipps pointed out, "...although manuscripts about the past had been accumulating since the rise of literacy... none had yet been singled out as a witness to God's will." It was Huldah who began the process which would eventually lead to a canonized body of holy writings. Elsewhere Huldah has been acknowledged as "the certifier of the first Bible."[37] In a discussion of contemporary scriptural authority, Claudia Camp emphasized that the authority of a text is dependent on the authority of its authorizer. The actual process by which the written word receives human authentification was described only three times in the Hebrew Bible and in all three cases the authorizer was a woman.[38] (The others were Esther in Esther 9:16-32 and the female personification of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9.) Camp went on to note that Huldah's authority was not *given* to her; rather, she "created and claimed" it for herself. Camp argued that the extent and power of Huldah's three-part action should not go unrecognized. As an authoritative woman, she made a claim to speak for the deity, which was recognized as legitimate; she claimed the authority to declare a document worthy of obedience and representative of the will of God; and she brought

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[36] William E. Phipps, "A Woman Was the First to Declare Scripture Holy," Bible Review, ril 1990): 14.

[37] Samuel Terrien, Till the Heart Sings, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 81-82.

[38] Claudia Camp, "Female Voice, Written Word: Women and Authority in Hebrew pture," in Embodied Love: Sensuality and Relationship as Feminist Values, ed. Paula M. ey, Sharon A. Farmer, and Mary Ellen Ross (San Francisco: Harper Row, 1987), 99.

the text in judgment against the history of her day.[39]

In all of the subsequent discussion about Huldah in the Talmud and Midrash the issue of Huldah's *literary* abilities did not arise. However, Phipps suggested that, in fact, it was these very skills that provide the answer to the question, "Why was Huldah consulted and not Jeremiah?" Phipps wrote:

> My own guess is that Huldah was consulted, rather than Jeremiah, because she was literate. Jeremiah needed a professional scribe - Baruch ben Neriah - to write down his message. The prophets were generally recognized as *speakers* of oracles, not as interpreters of scrolls.[40]

Deborah did not read from or interpret a literary text as Huldah did; instead, she composed one. Like Miriam, Deborah was a *bard*. It has been suggested by Goitein that poetry was the original form of female prophecy.[41] The words of Deborah's poetry-in-song, "Arise, arise, O Deborah! Arise, O Barak; take your captives, O son of Avinoam! (Judges 5:12), were Deborah's battle cry. The prophetess' poetry, then, had power every bit as real as the military prowess of the commanders of battle. In the multifaced Deborah one finds not just a judge, but a military strategist and visionary capable of channeling the will of God, with the literary skills to express her work in poetic language. As Goitein has put it: "We have found that the Hebrew woman of ancient days lifted up her voice in song. For the rule governing her was not yet 'the voice of a woman is indecent' but rather its opposite: 'let me hear your voice.'"[42]

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[39] Ibid., 101.
[40] Phipps, 15.
[41] Goitein, 13.
[42] Ibid., 29.

While a relatively small number of women were portrayed as powerful leaders, the examples that have come down to us show a Biblical literature less rigidly gender-conscious regarding leadership than the Talmud and Midrash. The complete absence of disapproval or even ambivalence in the Bible about Huldah and Deborah suggests considerable tolerance among its authors for women functioning in roles more often occupied by men. Carole Meyers pointed out that, "...especially in the book of Judges, the goals and strategies of those women visible in the Bible are not peculiarly feminine: they are part of the general goals of family and community."[43] Bronner similarly noted that Biblical women were not viewed as lawbreakers, but nation-savers.[44] Thus, if Meyers and Bronner are correct, it would seem that when Biblical women's gifts of charismatic leadership or prophecy or scholarship were perceived as beneficial to the community, they tended to be accepted by the Biblical world without difficulty.

The rabbis acknowledged Huldah and Deborah as prophetesses, but the women's careers caused the sages to react to them with considerable confusion and ambivalence. These feelings are reflected in the generally inconsistent manner in which they discussed, analyzed, and dissected the Biblical stories about them. The sages had difficulty coming to terms with these powerful Biblical women, both of whom as leaders superseded their male contemporaries in the public realm. None of the other Biblical women accorded prophetic status - Sarah, Miriam, Hannah, Abigail, or Esther

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[43] Carol L. Meyers, "Everyday Life: Women in the Period of the Hebrew Bible," Women's Bible Commentary, ed. Carol A Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1998), 257.

[44] Bronner, 3.

- functioned so independently of powerful men and none of them rose above their male contemporaries to positions of leadership and power. Less threatening to the social order, they could be viewed more benevolently by the rabbis. The sages, despite their obvious admiration for Huldah and Deborah could not entirely separate their ideas about appropriate female conduct from their reactions to these powerful, capable, and unusual Biblical women. Faced with what must have been a considerable dissonance, the rabbis attempted to deal with their discomfort by containing and redefining these women.

The rabbis used three approaches to accomplish this task. First, they defined the women in relation to their husbands. Thus, we find Deborah praised for the wick-making efforts which allowed her husband, Lappidot, to learn in the community of scholars. In the passage from *Tanna debe Eliyyahu*, the sages even suggested that it was Deborah's merit as a wife which made it possible for her to be rewarded by God with the gift of prophecy. The sages' rather extensive efforts to identify Deborah's husband (was he Barak? was he Lappidot? Michael?) emphasize how much they needed to link her with a man and thus stabilize her in a female role that was familiar and comfortable for them. This model was similarly applied to Huldah. Her husband, Shallum, was lauded in the Targum as a man who, the rabbis taught, was "noble and compassionate," a man who offered water to passersby at the city limits. In this case, though, it was not Huldah's treatment of her husband that merited her status as prophetess. Rather, it was because of her *husband's* virtue that she was accorded the ability to prophesy! In both cases, a strenuous effort to place Huldah and Deborah in

the role of wife resulted in a diminishment of their status as independent women.

Second, the rabbis attributed unflattering (some might say, unwomanly) qualities to the women. Both were harshly criticized for their "arrogance" or "haughtiness." In some cases, what the rabbis meant by "arrogance" was that the women rose above a male contemporary; in Huldah's case Jeremiah, in Deborah's Barak. In other examples, the rabbis accused both women of presumptuousness towards men, citing them specifically for the manner in which they spoke to or called for men. It is interesting to note again that wherever else the term "arrogance" or "haughtiness" was used in the Talmud it referred to general categories of people. Only in regard to Deborah and Huldah were individuals targeted and so defined. The sages identified both women by the animal meanings of their names and then criticized them for not behaving in a fashion appropriate to those animals, that is, humbly. Although, as Bronner pointed out, women were often given animal names without any suggestion that such names were negative, that was not the case here.[45] It is interesting to note, however, that while the sages criticized Huldah's and Deborah's "unwomanly" arrogance in some texts, they reasserted the women's adherence to the laws of modesty in others. With Deborah, the rabbis pointed out that scandal could not touch her since she judged in a place where all could see her. For Huldah, it was her description as a prophet "to the women" which upheld her reputation.

Third, the rabbis redefined the nature of Huldah and Deborah's work. Deborah's career as a judge unsettled the sages; they could not tolerate a woman in such a

[45] Bronner, 110.

powerful and (usually) gender-specific role. The Biblical text clearly stated that Deborah was a *shoftah*, a "judge," even putting the more common word for judge, *shofet*, in the feminine form. It seems unlikely that the Biblical authors meant to say that Deborah was anything other than what they called her - a female judge - since they took pains to feminize the name of the position. However, the rabbis' discomfort with Deborah as judge must have overridden the evidence of the Biblical text before them. They reduced her status to that of "teacher," presumably because, in their eyes, that was a more tolerable role for a woman to fill. The rabbis could not completely take Deborah's "professional" status away from her; the Biblical text was too specific in its description of her as a leader in her generation. The best they could do was to maneuver within the parameters established by the Bible and minimize what she did. Although it was generally not acceptable for a woman to be a teacher either, it was less unacceptable than being a prophet or judge.

In Huldah's case, the rabbis were disturbed that Huldah, not Jeremiah, was chosen to interpret and deliver the scroll's prophecy to the king. Their "solution" was to "prove" that Jeremiah and Huldah were relatives and/or that Jeremiah was engaged in the extremely important task of returning the lost tribes, leaving only Huldah to prophesy. In this way, Huldah's prophesying would imply no slur on Jeremiah since the sages could suggest that he simply "permitted" her to prophesy as if she were under his supervision or tutelage.[46] Read this way, Huldah was at best a stand-in for her more accomplished relative, not a formidable prophet in her own right. Additionally, when

[46] Ibid., 175.

the rabbis explained that the king had sent for Huldah because she was "merciful," they diminished her status as a prophet by citing her supposed "womanly" trait of compassion not her "masculine" intelligence as the reason for her selection. In other words, when they found a powerful challenge to the social and legal assumptions of their day, the rabbis redefined Huldah and Deborah as more personally dependent, less morally virtuous, and more occupationally ambiguous than, it can be argued, the Biblical authors ever intended.

At the same time, other rabbinic texts assessed Huldah and Deborah in more positive terms. The rabbis' views about these unusual and challenging women were not monolithic, nor were they very consistent. The sages found much to praise in both women and they were sanguine about some aspects of their behavior that one might have expected to elicit indignation or censure. Huldah was acknowledged as a teacher of men, Deborah was hailed as a national savior. The women's intellect, scholarship, and competence were often recognized and praised. From a distance of a thousand years and more, the rabbis gazed back at these female ancestors with a mixture of emotions - awe, admiration, and approval mixed with confusion, rage, and indecision and, overarching all the rest, a profound ambivalence.

CHAPTER THREE: A MYTHOLOGICAL SHE-DEMON

Lilith

> No she-demon has ever achieved as fantastic a career as Lilith who started out from the lowliest of origins, was a failure as Adam's intended wife, became the paramour of lascivious spirits, rose to be the bride of Samael the demon King, ruled as the Queen of Zemargard and Sheba, and finally ended up as the consort of God himself.[47]

Long before the sages ever wrote about her, the character who was to become the Lilith of Jewish tradition was developing from the mists of Sumerian demonology literature. She appears to have had one of the longest continuous histories in Near Eastern demonology. As far back as the third millennium B.C.E. the Sumerian epic "Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld" mentions a demon, *ki-sikil-lil-la*. From the term *lil*, this demon was associated with Akkadian texts in which *lilu, lilitu, and ardat lili* often appeared together as three closely related demons whose dominions were the stormy winds.[48] While *lilu* was particularly associated with the southwest wind, the demon *lilitu's* special characteristic was her ability to flee from a house through the window like the wind. Sometimes it was imagined that this demon resembled a bird. (The possession of bird-like wings was in Near Eastern mythology conventional for

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[47] Rafael Patai, The Hebrew Goddess (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1967), 207.

[48] Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), 974.

residents of the underworld.[49]) These harmful spirits took on various roles. *Ardat-Lilit* was believed to prey on males; the others threatened women in childbirth and their newborn offspring. At one time the names of these demons were thought to be etymologically related to the Hebrew word *lilah*, night, and they were known as "night demons," but this theory is no longer considered valid.[50] Hebrew or Canaanite inscriptions found at Arslan-Tash in northern Syria and dating from the seventh or eighth century B.C.E. mention winged female demons who strangle children: "To her that flies in rooms of darkness - pass quickly, quickly, Lil(ith)".[51]

Ardat lilit was described as a wild aggressive consort; husband-less, but always searching for men in order to ensnare them or to enter their homes through the window. Her sexuality was not normal; the Sumerian texts specify that men did not have sex with these creatures in the same manner that they did with their wives.[52] In this way, Hutter noted, this Mesopotamian demon-group resembled Ishtar "who stands at the window looking for a man in order to seduce him, love him and kill him."[53] This early Lilith's abnormal sexuality was further demonstrated by textual references to her inability to bear children or to produce milk for the infants she wet-nursed. Instead, she fed them poison.[54] While the name and predominant traits were clearly derived from Sumerian demonology, the conception may also have been influenced by Persian ideas.

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[49] Joseph M. Baumgartner, "On the Nature of the Seductress in 4Q184," Revue de Qumran, 15 (1991): 139.

[50] Encyclopedia Judaica, Vol. 11, 247.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible, 974.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Patai, 208.

Scholars have found parallels between Lilith and Bushyancta, who was also portrayed in Persian mythology as a female demon and a night spirit.[55]

The Essenes, too, were preoccupied with angelology, and the dualistic nature of Qumran theology led this sect into the realm of demonology as well.[56] The "Song for a Sage" appears to have been a liturgical hymn used for exorcism purposes:

> "And I, the Sage, sound the majesty of his beauty to terrify and confound all the spirits of destroying angels (מלאכי חבל) and the bastard spirits (רוחות ממזרים), the demons, Lilith (לילית), the 'Ehim, the..., and those that strike suddenly, to lead astray the spirit of understanding, and to make desolate their heart."[57]

A Lilith-like demon character appeared in a number of other literary and historical genres. An identification of Lilith with the Queen of Sheba originated in the Targum to Job 1:15, based on a Jewish and Arab myth that the Queen of Sheba was actually a jinn, half human and half demon.[58] Sixth-century C.E. Aramaic magic incantation bowls, designed to capture threatening demons within their circular forms, bear inscriptions referring to Lilith. In fact, some bowls appear to have been designed to protect against Lilith specifically.[59] Some had drawings which depicted Lilith shackled in chains. Inscriptions on the bowls made it clear that Lilith was perceived as a danger to the

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[55] Edward Langton, Essentials of Demonology: A Study of Jewish and Christian Doctrine, Its Origin and Development (London: The Epworth Press, 1949), 48.

[56] Baumgartner, 133.

[57] Ibid., 134.

[58] Encyclopedia Judaica, Vol. 11, 247.

[59] Deborah R. Prinz, "Lilith: Lust and Lore," CCAR Journal: A Reform Jewish Quarterly, (Summer 1997), 63.

home and that she was believed to threaten members of the family, both men and married women. In some cases she was cited in connection with a divorce:

> Designated is this bowl for the sealing of the house of this Beyonai b. Mamai, that there flee from him the evil Lilith...
>
> And again, you shall not appear to them in his house nor in their dwelling nor in their bed chamber, because it is announced to you, that Rabbi Joshua b. Perahia has sent against you the ban.
>
> A divorce-writ has come down to us from heaven and there is found written in it for your advertisement and your terrification, in the name of Palsa-Pelisa, who renders to thee thy divorce, and thy separation, your divorces and your separations. Thou, Lilith, male Lili and female Lilith, Hag and Ghul, be in the ban...[of Rabbi] Joshua b. Perahia...[60]

Lilith made her first appearance in Jewish literature in Isaiah 34:14 as one among the beasts of prey and the spirits that would lay waste the land on the day of vengeance. Her "resting place" was to be a place of devastation:

> ...and it shall be a habitation of wild dogs, and a court for owls. The wild creatures of the desert also meet with the jackals, the scops owl shall cry to his fellow; the לילית shall repose there and find for herself a place of rest.

The Hebrew word לילית appears only in this passage in the Bible although Baumgartner noted that some have proposed to read תשכון באהלו מבלי-לו in Job 18:15 as תשכן באהלו לילי.[61] The context of that passage is a description by Bildad the Shuhite of

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[60]Ibid.
[61]Baumgartner, 135.

the "dwellings of the wicked," a terrifying depiction of desolation, destruction, and death. While an assessment of this claim is beyond the scope of the present work it is interesting to note that the Job passage also described a location of unmitigated horror. In any case, it seems likely that by the 8th-century B.C.E. Lilith was a well-known demon in Israel whose name only had to be mentioned to conjure up the beliefs current about her.

There is a great deal of information in the Talmud about demons but it is not systematic. Large, systematic descriptions of angels and demons developed after the Talmud was already redacted. However, the sages were quite well-versed in what they believed to be the attributes and habits of demons and they seem to have assumed that their readers were familiar with them as well. A sample of Talmudic texts demonstrates the range of the sages' interests:

> ***Berachot* 6a** It has been taught: Abba Benjamin says: "If the eye had the power to see them, no creature could endure the demons." Abaye says: "They are more numerous than we are and they surround us like the rings around a field." Rabbi Huna says: "Everyone among us has a thousand on his left hand and ten thousand on his right hand."
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> ***Eruvin* 41b** Our rabbis taught: Six things are said concerning demons. In regard to three, they are like the ministering angels, and in regard to three, like human beings. [In regard to the first] they have wings...and they fly from one end of the world to the other...and they know what will happen...[In regard to the latter] they eat and drink like human beings, they propagate like human beings, and they die like human beings.
>
> ***Berachot* 62a** Rabbi Tanhum b. Hanilai said: "Whoever behaves modestly in a privy is delivered from three things: from snakes, from scorpions, and from demons."
>
> ***Gittin* 68b** Demons, remember, have bird-feet.

Despite their dangerous potential the study of demonology was sometimes considered part of the rabbinic study curriculum:

> ***Baba Batra* 134a** It was said about Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai that his studies included the Scriptures, the Mishnah, the Gemara, the Halachot, the Aggadot; the subtle points of the Torah and the details of the Scribes; the inferences from minor to major and the analogies; astronomy and geometry, washer's proverbs and fox fables; the language of the demons, the whisper of the palms, the language of the ministering angels and the great matter and the small matter

While her meaning in the Biblical period was more sketchy, by the Talmudic period Lilith was a fully developed she-demon. The five specific references to Lilith in the Talmud and Midrash portray her as a wild-haired, winged, destructive character with nymphomaniac tendencies:

> ***Shabbat* 151b** Rabbi Shimi b. Eleazar said: "A day-old infant, alive, need not be guarded from weasels or mice, but Og, king of Bashan, needs to be guarded from weasels and mice, as it is said, And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth [Genesis 9:2]. As long as one is alive, he fears dumb creatures, but when he dies his fear ceases...Rabbi Hanina said: "It is forbidden to sleep alone in a house and whoever sleeps in a house alone, he is seized by Lilith."
> [אמר רבי חנינא: אסור לישן בבית יחידי. וכל הישן בבית יחידי אחזתו לילית.]

This passage follows a mishnah concerning the circumstances under which the eyes of a corpse may be closed on the Sabbath. Here, the sages linked Lilith to terrifying topics - the prospect of death and a corpse being devoured by animals - and used her character to concretize and personify the common fear of being "seized" when one is

alone and vulnerable in night's darkness. The conjugation of the Hebrew, אחזתו, indicates that the violent and dangerous Liiith's targets were males.

In the next passage the warning was addressed to women. The context is a discussion among the sages about the propriety of wives initiating sexual relations with their husbands. Rabbi Samuel b. Nahmani, citing Rabbi Yochanan, encouraged women to do so and promised them extraordinary offspring if they did. But the *stam* questioned this position. It cited Rabbi Isaac b. Abdimi who listed ten curses on a woman who solicited her husband and it quoted a *baraita* in support of his position:

> ***Eruvin* 100b** In a Baraita it was taught: She grows long hair like Lilith, sits when making water like a beast, and serves as a bolster for her husband.

In this view, a woman who initiated sex was an out of control woman; that is, in Rabbi Isaac's eyes she had transgressed the bounds of acceptable female behavior. Having crossed this line, the offending woman would immediately be transformed from a human into a monster. No longer would her hair be bound, hidden, and modest. Now it would fly long and wild like the demon Lilith's. She would urinate like an animal. The Hebrew word כר means "bolster," "mattress," and "paving roller."[62] What it refers to in this passage is not clear. However, given the context in which the word appears here, it could refer to the woman being used by her husband in either a violent or a sexually impermissible manner. What is important to emphasize is that the rabbis

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[62] Jastrow, 663.

believed that a woman's sexually assertive behavior was "monstrous" and that they could confidently use the name "Lilith" to convey the strength of their feelings on the matter.

It is worth noting the meaning given to women's hair which, in the West at least, has historically been charged with erotic significance; female head hair was fetishized into one of the chief markers of the erotic.[63] Cultures often attached great symbolic significance to whether women's hair was bound or loose In the Middle Ages, loose hair indicated that a woman was unmarried while bound hair represented the bonds of matrimony.[64] Lilith's hair, then, was one of a number of symbols used to denote her uncontrolled and destructive eroticism.

Lilith's "monstrous" qualities appeared in another passage of "horror," this time a discussion about spontaneously aborted fetuses which bore severe abnormalities.

> ***Niddah* 24b** A Tanna taught before Rab:...it might have been assumed that if a miscarriage was a creature with a shapeless body or with a shapeless head its mother is unclean by reason of its birth.... Rabbi Judah citing Samuel ruled: If an abortion had the likeness of Lilith its mother is unclean by reason of the birth, for it is a child, but it has wings. So it was also taught: Rabbi Jose stated: "It once happened at Simoni that a woman miscarried the likeness of Lilith and when the sages ruled on the case they said that it was a child but that it also had wings."

Here, the sages pondered the boundaries between human and not-human living creatures. Their task was to determine the *niddah* status (that is, the state of ritual

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[63] William Ian Miller The Anatomy of Disgust (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997), 54.

[64] Ibid., 269, n.34.

impurity) of women who gave birth to fetuses which fell into the ambiguous area between two states. A fetus resembling Lilith fell in this place of fear and horror. Although it had been gestated and borne by a mortal woman, a "Lilith-fetus" had also taken on supernatural characteristics and borne wings at birth. Like Lilith, it was not quite one thing or another.

Lilith as progenitor herself was depicted in the next passage. Its context is a discussion about the terrors of sea-travel:

> ***Baba Batra* 73b** Rabbah said: "Seafarers told me that there is a distance of three hundred *parsei* [a measure the length of half a furrow of one hundred cubits [65]] between one wave and the next and the height of the wave is three hundred *parsei*." [They said] "Once we were on a journey and the wave lifted us up so high that we saw the place of the smallest star and there was a burst of light like that of shooting forty iron arrows. If [the wave] lifted us any higher we would have been burned by its heat. One wave said to the other: 'My friend, is there anything left in the world that you did not wash away? I will go and destroy it.'"...Rabbah said: "I saw how Hormin, the son of Lilith, was running on the parapet of the wall of Mahuza and a rider who galloped below on horseback could not pass him. Once they saddled two mules [for him]...he jumped from one to the other, forward and backward, and he held two cups of wine in his hand and poured from one to the other and not one drop fell to the ground."

Here again, the rabbis described a frightening and ambiguous creature. Hormin could outrun a horse and he could perform amazing feats while he himself was riding. He was familiar in enough ways to resemble a mortal man but he appeared as an apparition to frightened sailors during a terrifying and lightning-filled storm at sea. His mother was Lilith and she apparently gave birth to offspring like herself - demons bearing

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[65] Jastrow, 1233.

human likeness who appeared at terrifying and vulnerable moments.

Some scholars interpreted the following passage to mean that Lilith spawned demon offspring from Adam's nocturnal emissions:

> ***Eiruvin* 18b** Rabbi Jeremiah b. Eleazar further stated: "In all those years during which Adam was under the ban [the one hundred and thirty years after his expulsion from the Garden] he begot ghosts and male demons and female demons [רוחין ושידין ולילין]"....That statement was made in reference to the semen which he emitted accidentally.

Lilith as mother appeared again in the following passage:

> ***Numbers Rabbah* 16:25** Moses said to Him: "The inhabitants of the Land...have heard that you, Adonai, are in the midst of this people...Now if you will kill this people as one... [Numbers 14:14-15]. Another explanation: Do not do it that the nations of the world regard you as a cruel Being and say: "The generation of the Flood came and Adonai destroyed them, the generation of the Separation came and Adonai destroyed them, and also these whom God called, "My son, my firstborn" [Exodus 4:22] now Adonai is destroying! As that Lilith who when she finds nothing else turns upon her own children, so Because Adonai was not able to bring this people into the Land...God has slain them. [Numbers 14:16].

The rabbis made an astounding assertion in this passage. First, they depicted the monster Lilith as a mother who was capable of devouring not just other people's offspring but her own. Then, in searching for an analogy to which they could compare God's threatened abandonment of Israel, the sages turned to the example of Lilith and likened God (if the threat was carried out) to this demon! Here, Lilith was used to represent perhaps the most terrifying calamity that can befall human beings - being abandoned, possibly even devoured (and therefore annihilated) by the trusted and

beloved parent.

Genesis Rabbah 22:7 discussed a "first Eve:"

> Out of this argument, Cain rose up against his brother Abel [Genesis 4:8]. Judah b. Rabbi said: "Their quarrel was about the first Eve." Said Rabbi Aibu: "The first Eve had returned to dust."

Two other midrashim imagined humanity developing from an original dual-gendered being:

> ***Leviticus Rabbah* 8:1** Rabbi Jeremiah ben Eleazar said: "When the Holy One, blessed be He, created Adam, He created him a hermaphrodite, as it is said, Male and female God created them and called their name Adam." [Genesis 5:2] Rabbi Samuel b. Nachman said: "When God created Adam He created him double-faced. Then He split him and made him with two backs, one back on this side and one back on the other side."

> ***Leviticus Rabbah* 14:1** Rabbi Levi said: "When man was created, he was created with two body fronts. Then God cut him in two so that there were two backs, one back for the male and another back for the female."

Two separate and distinct beings - Lilith of the Talmud and "first Eve" of the midrash - seem to have then come together and become Lilith, the first partner of Adam. The two traditions merged in a version of the Creation story found in *The Alphabet of Ben Sira*, a work written during the Gaonic period:

> Soon afterward the young son of the king took ill. Said Nebuchadnezzar, "Heal my son. If you don't, I will kill you." Ben Sira immediately sat down and wrote an amulet with the Holy Name, and he inscribed on it the angels in charge of medicine by their names, forms, and images, and by their wings, hands, and feet. Nebuchadnezzar looked at the amulet. "Who are these?" "The angels who are in charge of medicine: Snvi

{Sanvil}, Snsvi {Sansanvi}, and Smnglof {Semangelaf}. After God created Adam, who was alone, He said, 'It is not good for man to be alone.' {Genesis 2:18}. He then created a woman for Adam, from the earth, as He had created Adam himself, and called her Lilith. Adam and Lilith immediately began to fight. She said, 'I will not lie below,' and he said, 'I will not lie beneath you, but only on top. For you are fit only to be in the bottom position, while I am to be in the superior one.' Lilith responded, 'We are equal to each other inasmuch as we were both created from the earth.' But they would not listen to one another. When Lilith saw this, she pronounced the Ineffable Name and flew away into the air. Adam stood in prayer before his Creator: 'Sovereign of the universe!' he said, 'the woman you gave me has run away.' At once, the Holy One, blessed be He, sent these three angels to bring her back. Said the Holy One to Adam, 'If she agrees to come back, fine. If not, she must permit one hundred of her children to die every day.' The angels left God and pursued Lilith, whom they overtook in the midst of the sea, in the mighty waters wherein the Egyptians were destined to drown. They told her God's word, but she did not wish to return. The angels said, 'We shall drown you in the sea.' 'Leave me!' she said. 'I was created only to cause sickness to infants. If the infant is male, I have dominion over him for eight days after his birth, and if a female, for twenty days.' When the angels heard Lilith's words, they insisted she go back. But she swore to them by the name of the living and eternal God: 'Whenever I see you or your names or your forms in an amulet, I will have no power over that infant.' She also agreed to have one hundred of her demons perish, and for the same reason, we write the angels' names on the amulets of young children. When Lilith sees their names, she remembers her oath and the child recovers." [66]

This story is older than the preceding midrashic material but clearly draws upon earlier strands and traditions about Lilith. Contemporary scholars believe that *The Alphabet of Ben Sira* was written as a satirical work but accept it as part of the

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[66] "The Alphabet of Ben Sira," in Rabbinic Fantasies: Imaginative Narratives from Classical Hebrew Literature, ed. David Stern and Mark Jay Mirsky; trans. Norman Bronznick et al. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), pp. 183-184.

midrashic tradition.[67] The ambiguity of the Lilith character is once again apparent in this tale. Lilith was called a "woman," but by the end of the story her offspring were "demons," and she herself had powers which could only be warded off by means of special amulets. She proclaimed that her life's purpose was to destroy children. Interestingly, she was willing to strike a compromise in this matter and she agreed that when she was confronted with an amulet she would restrain her destructive impulses and instead kill one hundred of her own demon children (whom, it would seem, she created alone). This version of the Lilith story is also noteworthy for its fuller portrayal of Lilith as an independent being who was created in the same manner as Adam and who, at least initially, attempted to form a relationship with a (mortal) male.

Lilith as "first Eve" also found her way into visual art. In her review of theologian Dorothee Solle's *Great Women of the Bible,* Jo Milgrom noted that a number of Renaissance painters depicted Lilith as returning to take revenge on Eve by offering her fruit from the tree of knowledge. Milgrom suggested that an anthropomorphic, female-headed serpent in works by Michelangelo, Raphael, and Nicholas of Lyra represents a vengeful Lilith come back to punish her successor for displacing her. In other works Lilith was interpreted as representing the sexual - as opposed to maternal - side of Eve. Milgrom pointed out that these works, as well as others which feature female mythological figures, embody the fears and potentially lethal consequences of sexual

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[67] Naomi Mara Hyman, Biblical Women in the Midrash: A Sourcebook (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1997), 6.

allurement.[68]

Discussion

When the sages wrote about Lilith in the Talmud and the Midrash they approached her and treated her character differently than they did those of Yalta, Beruriah, Huldah, and Deborah. In most of the stories about the latter, the women themselves were the subjects of the tales. Lilith fulfilled a different literary, social, and legal function. Her character was not the subject of the stories in which she appeared; that is, these stories were not "about" her. She was the antagonist, not the protagonist, of her tales and she was used for a different, and two-fold, purpose: she served as both a representation of horror and as a warning to her readers. Lilith's appearances were more incidental than those of the other four women but they were telling.

In literary terms, Lilith is a flat but highly stylized character, what is known as a "type." Characters who are "types" exhibit a limited number of characteristics and remain unchangeable and predictable throughout a story. The richness with which Yalta, Beruriah, Huldah, and Deborah were portrayed is absent in Lilith's picture; in any case, to have depicted her more fully would not have suited the rabbis' purposes. In order for both men and women to simultaneously identify with Lilith and heed warnings about her she had to be endowed with some recognizably human traits. At the same time, those very traits had to be magnified and distorted in order for her

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[68] Jo Milgrom, "Giving Eve's Daughters Their Due," Bible Review, 12 (February 1996), 30.

character to retain its power and its threat. Thus, Lilith was portrayed as undeniably female, but her "female" characteristics were enlarged to grotesque proportions. She was a woman, true, but her *raison d'etre*, the purpose of her being, was - unthinkably - to murder children. She was a mother but the offspring she bore were demons and she willingly agreed to destroy them. She had sexual relations with men but there was no love, devotion, or modesty in the act. Hair flying loosely, Lilith initiated sex and behaved like an animal. The hearts and minds of men were of little interest to her. Rather, she sought to seize them and, having sucked the life-producing seed out of them, move on. Men were, at best, of utilitarian value to her.

Lilith's wings, her ability to fly, her lurking in the dark, and her capacity to change form represented and concretized the elusive woman who can neither be caught nor controlled. In the rabbinic imagination, Lilith became both the first woman *and* the first monster. What her story suggested was that angry revolt against constricting social norms and male domination must inevitably render a woman demonic. In *The Alphabet of Ben Sira,* the price of Lilith's freedom from Adam's control was the death of her children by her own hand and a lifetime of wandering. To mortal women, the message of Lilith from the rabbis' hands was that independence and self-definition carried a cost too terrible to contemplate. It was no accident that the rabbis chose to use a monstrous mythological character as the carrier of this message. Embodying all of humanity's deepest fears - seizure, abandonment, and death - the legends about Lilith were themselves a monstrous repository of the most primitive and fundamental human terrors. This "monster-woman" is no stranger to the literary imagination:

> We will see that the monster-woman, threatening to replace her angelic sister, embodies intransigent female autonomy and thus represents both the author's power to allay "his" anxieties by calling their source bad names (witch, bitch, fiend, monster) and, simultaneously, the mysterious power of the character who refuses to stay in her textually ordained "place"....Similarly, assertiveness, aggressiveness - all characteristics of a male life of "significant action" - are "monstrous" in women precisely because [they are] "unfeminine"...the monster may not only be concealed *behind* the angel, she may actually turn out to reside *within* the angel...committed only to their own private ends, these women are accidents of nature, deformities meant to repel, but in their very freakishness they possess unhealthy energies, powerful and dangerous arts...because these...women can create false appearances to hide their vile natures, they are even more dangerous....Thus all women were inexorably and inescapably monstrous, in the flesh as well as in the spirit.[69]

In the extant rabbinic literature, Lilith stands out as the archetypal misogynistic fantasy figure. She became the carrier of rabbinic fears about female autonomy and the sages used her to convey warnings to both men and women. To men, Lilith represented the monstrous every-woman against whom each man had to protect himself. At the heart of the "monster-woman" myth lies the masculine fear of engulfment and destruction by women. However, although Lilith herself and her unrestrained and aggressive sexuality were represented as the *overt* threat, her character really served as a warning to men about *all* women since it implied that every woman has within herself the capacity to *become* Lilith. For women, of course, Lilith represented the danger inherent in self-determined sexuality, independence from men,

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[69] Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 28-30.

and personal autonomy. No sensitive woman would want to destroy children, to be cast out of her community, or to be a monster. The character of Lilith, then, served to warn women about the destructive and self-destructive potential that lurked within them all. Thackery described the phenomenon of the hidden character within this way:

> In describing this siren, singing and smiling, coaxing and cajoling, the author, with modest pride, asks his readers all around, has he once forgotten the laws of politeness, and showed the monster's hideous tail above water? No! Those who like may peep down under waves that are pretty transparent, and see it writhing and twirling, diabolically hideous and slimy, flapping amongst bones, or curling around corpses; but above the water line, I ask, has not everything been proper, agreeable, and decorous?...[70]

In the mythology of Lilith, the rabbis were faced with an insurmountable problem. They could not do with Lilith what they had done with Yalta, Beruriah, Deborah and Huldah. No amount of rabbinic imagination or fancy could "stabilize" or "normalize" Lilith by attaching her to a man, simply because her man-less state, her autonomy, was the centerpiece of her mythological character. Lilith could not be "rescued" but, even if they had been able to, the rabbis really had no need or incentive to do so. Instead, the sages harnessed the power of myth (and the process of demonization) and used it to advance their own agenda - the maintenance of orderly, safe, and pure Jewish communities as they understood them.[71] In an unsettled and, at times, terrifying world, the rabbis could use the myth of Lilith to reinforce the boundaries holding back chaos and disintegration. They knew then, as Jung and his fellow psychoanalysts would later

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[70] Ibid., 29.
[71] Prinz, 67.

understand, that myth has the authority to enforce cultural norms even more powerfully than literature or the law. And they recognized that, as Simone de Beauvoir was to write many centuries later:

> ....It is always difficult to describe a myth; it cannot be grasped or encompassed; it haunts the human consciousness without ever appearing before it in fixed form. The myth is so various, so contradictory, that at first its unity is not discerned: Delilah and Judith, Aspasia and Lucretia, Pandora and Athena - woman is at once Eve and the Virgin Mary. She is an idol, a servant, the source of life, a power of darkness; she is the elemental silence of truth, she is artifice, gossip, and falsehood; she is healing presence and sorceress; she is man's prey, his downfall, she is everything that he is not and that he longs for, his negation and his *raison d'etre.*[72]

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[72] Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), 133.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

This paper examined rabbinic treatment of three categories of females: Biblical, Talmudic, and mythological. These groups differed from one another in significant ways and analysis revealed striking differences in how the sages thought and wrote about them. However beneath all the dissimilarity was, of course, a fundamental sameness. All of the individuals under consideration were women. All the sages who wrote about them were men. A brief review of some general theories about women's status in patriarchal cultures can serve as a framework to understand why and how the rabbis distinguished among them.

Sherry Ortner has focused on the dichotomy of "nature" vs. "culture":

> Every culture implicitly recognizes and asserts a distinction between the operation of nature [understood as biological needs and processes] and the operation of culture (human consciousness and its products); and further, that the distinctiveness of culture rests precisely on the fact that it can under most circumstances transcend natural conditions and turn them to its purposes. Thus culture (i.e. every culture) at some level of awareness asserts itself to be not only distinct from but superior to nature, and that sense of distinctiveness and superiority rests precisely on the ability to transform - to "socialize" and culturalize" - nature.[73]

Since cultures utilize a process through which human beings bring order and control to the natural world, it is culture that is accorded the higher value and status. Women take their subordinate place to men in most cultures by virtue of the perception that

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[73] Sherry Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture,?" in Women, Culture, and Society, ed. Michelle Z. Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1974), 69.

women's greater involvement with "natural functions" (particularly due to menstruation, pregnancy, childbearing, and lactation) renders them the human equivalent of nature. Men in this scheme become the more highly valued embodiments of "culture." This accounts for what Ortner calls the "universal devaluation of women."[74]

Other theoreticians have proposed an economic explanation for women's place in society. Catherine MacKinnon compares men's exploitation of women to the exploitation of workers by capitalists and argues that:

> Sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism: that which is most one's own, yet most taken away....As the organized expropriation of the work of some for the benefit of others defines a class - workers - the organized expropriation of the sexuality of some for the use of others defines the sex, woman.[75]

What Wegner has called "the men's club hypothesis" was developed by Mary O'Brien; it contains elements of both the economic and nature/culture arguments and it attempts to account for the public/private dichotomy in which the domain of the former is claimed by men and the domain of the latter accorded to women. Wegner summarized O'Brien's theory:

> ...the separation of the private and individual realm from the public and political realm of society results from oppositions inherent in the dialectics of human reproduction. In that process men, once they have

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[74] Ibid., 73.

[75] Catherine MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method and the State: An Agenda for Theory," quoted in Judith Romney Wegner Chattel or Person? The Status of Women in the Mishnah (New York Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 191.

> deposited their seed, become alienated, separated from the world of reproduction and nurture that forms the principal focus of the private domain and the primary concern of women. In response...men go out and create their own "second nature," the sociopolitical world in the public domain to compensate for their loss of - indeed, perceived rejection from - their natural function in the private domain. In other words it is not that men *commence* by excluding women from the public domain. Rather, what happens is that men, by nature deprived of continuous involvement in the creative natural process of reproduction, feel the need to generate substitute forms of production to satisfy their creative urge. Hence they turn to cultural production instead - in particular to the creation of intellectual and spiritual culture.[76]

In 1952, in her ground-breaking work, *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir reviewed then-current explanations for women's subordination and declared that neither economic nor psychological theories were sufficient to explain female status. De Beauvoir argued that more radical and fundamental processes were at work - "existentialist explanations rooted in the total perspective of man's existence."[77] In the framework of that total perspective, de Beauvoir claimed, man perceives woman primarily as the Other.

> It amounts to this: just as for the ancients there was an absolute vertical with reference to which the oblique was defined, so there is an absolute human type, the masculine....[Man] thinks of his body as a direct and normal connection with the world, which he believes he apprehends objectively, whereas he regards the body of woman as a hindrance, a prison, weighed down by everything peculiar to it. "The female is a female by virtue of a certain *lack* of qualities," said Aristotle; "we should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness." And St. Thomas for his part pronounced woman to be an "imperfect man," an "incidental" being. This is symbolized in Genesis where Eve is depicted

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[76] Mary O'Brien, The Politics of Reproduction, quoted in Wegner, 194.
[77] Wegner, 192.

> as made from what Bossuet called "a supernumerary bone" of Adam. Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being....She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute - she is the Other. The category of the *Other* is as primordial as consciousness itself.[78]

In support of her theory, de Beauvoir cited Levi-Strauss's work on primitive societies and his conclusion that "passage from the state of nature to the state of Culture is marked by man's ability to view biological relations as a series of contrasts; duality, alternation, opposition, and symmetry constitute not so much phenomena to be explained as fundamental and immediately given data of social reality;" and Hegel, "We find in consciousness itself a fundamental hostility toward every other consciousness; the subject can be posed only in being opposed. He sets himself up as the essential as opposed to the other, the inessential, the object."[79] The "other, the inessential, the object" is, of course, woman.

In this construct, the phenomenon of identifying Self and Other becomes a function of deepest consciousness, beyond the grasp of intellectual processes. "Duality, alternation, opposition, and symmetry" become imperatives of survival and not subject to awareness or conscious control. Human existence is a perilous and precarious state; the boundaries of life must be protected at all times and at all costs against disintegration and destruction. Society and its conventions, then, become the means by

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[78] Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, in The Feminist Papers from Adams to de Beauvoir, ed. Alice S. Rossi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), 675-676.

[79] Ibid., 676-677.

which human beings mediate survival. In her anthropological work on concepts of pollution and taboo, Mary Douglas explained this phenomenon:

> The idea of society is a powerful image. It is potent in its own right to control or to stir men to action. This image has form; it has external boundaries, margins, internal structure. Its outlines contain power to reward conformity and repulse attack. There is energy in its margins and unstructured areas. For symbols of society any human experience of structures, margins or boundaries is ready [at] hand....All margins are dangerous. If they are pulled this way or that the shape of fundamental experience is altered. Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins.[80]

What must Self and Other do, then, in order to sustain and support humanity's existence? Calling upon the literary concept of the Outsider, Vivian Gornick explained what is at stake in the desperate struggle to hold back annihilation:

> Wherever it is possible subjugation takes place; the reduction of power for some will increase the power for others....Life from beginning to end is fear....To push back the threatening forces, to offer primitive sacrifices, to give up some in the hope that others will be saved...that is the power struggle. That is the outsideness of [the outsider]....This life is offered up as a sacrifice to the forces of annihilation that surround our sense of existence, in the hope that in reducing the strength of the outsider - in declaring her the bearer of all the insufficiency and contradiction of the race - the wildness, grief, and terror of loss that is in us will be grafted onto her and the strength of those remaining within the circle will be increased. For in the end, that is what the outsider is all about; that is what power and powerlessness are all about; that is what inclusion and exclusion are all about; that is what the cultural decision that certain people are "different" is all about - if only these people will go mad and die for us we will escape, we will be saved, we will have made a

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[80] Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo (London: Routledge, 1966), 114-121.

successful bid for salvation.[81]

Of course it is not only men and women who form the "Self/Other" dyad; recognizing that "Self" and "Other" can be comprised of all sorts of constellations demonstrates the tenacity of the phenomenon. John Boswell's analysis of the lives of gay people in the Middle Ages sounds remarkably like Gornick, Douglas, and de Beauvoir:

> It seems to have been fatally easy throughout most of Western history to explain catastrophe as the result of the evil machinations of some group distinct from the majority and even when no specific connection could be suggested, angry or anxious peoples have repeatedly vented their negative emotions on the odd, the idiosyncratic, and the statistically deviant. In the collapsing and insecure Rome of the 6th century or Paris in the later fourteenth, any deviation from the norm took on a sinister and alarming mien and was viewed as part of the constellation of evil forces bringing about the destruction of the familiar world order. [82]

It is important to remember, however, that a group's designation as "Other" is not dependent on its numerical size, but rather on its status. Gay people are a minority but women are a slight majority in any given population. In the case of both groups, it is a particular set of *characteristics*, not size, which causes them to be singled out for differential and unequal treatment.

Employing the concept of "Otherness" as a useful theoretical frame, it is

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[81] Vivian Gornick, "Woman as Outsider" in Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness eds. Vivian Gornick and Barbara K. Moran (New York: Basic Books, 1971), 129-144.

[82] John Boswell, Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century (Chicago; The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 38.

instructive to consider how such ideas might have influenced the sages of the Talmudic period and how these concepts were reflected in rabbinic ideas about women. Wegner contended that "the sages disliked the excluded middle" and so resisted recognizing "hybrids," that is, those creatures or objects that defied easy classification.[83] This rabbinic discomfort was reflected throughout the Mishnah in which an abhorrence of ambiguity is palpable. In the rabbinic literature, items were classified chiefly by means of analogy and contrast. As Wegner described it, if a category "X" was established, then a contrasting category "not-X" became apparent and a boundary between the two categories appeared.[84] But human history has shown that categories, once established, do not remain value- or hierarchy-free; that is, they are generally not symmetrical. Stability, it would appear, demands hierarchy. Thus, the existence of both "X" and "not-X" demands a process whereby the categories are assigned value and identity vis-a-vis one another and exaggerating the difference between them creates order. The dominant group becomes "superior" and claims the right to designate "Others." In patriarchy, men are the in-group and this positioning "allows" them to establish rules and codes of conduct for women as the out-group.

Wegner asked, "How does 'us' and 'them' work in the mishnaic treatment of women?" She answered her own question this way:

> First, the mere fact that the Mishnah is the creation of men makes "male" the norm and "female" the deviant anomaly. Second, in practice, woman disrupts the Israelite male's ordered world, both as a source of

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[83] Wegner, 174-76.
[84] Ibid., 178.

> contamination and by distracting his concentration on intellectual and spiritual concerns. Hence his need to control her; man must become not just the Self but the *superior* Self, whereas woman becomes not merely the Other but the *subordinate* Other.[85]

From men's standpoint, the most obvious difference between themselves and women is in a woman's anatomical form and biological functions. Women's "otherness," then, is primarily located in their sexual selves although such sexual differentiation could be seen, secondarily, as differentiating women's intellectual and moral selves too. Thus we would expect men to center their concern with controlling women in the sexual and sexualized areas of life.

If we accept the position that the sages generally treated women as Other and acknowledge the theory of Otherness as the existential underpinning of the rabbinic attitude toward them, then we would expect the rabbis to have treated *all* women similarly. However, as this paper has clearly demonstrated, they did not do so. The sages were admiring and accepting of Beruriah and Yalta, their contemporaries in the Talmudic era. They evinced powerfully ambivalent feelings toward Deborah and Huldah, their ancestors from the Biblical period. For Lilith they had nothing but loathing, derision, and fear. *That is to say - for the rabbis, some women were more "other" than others.* Why?

Clearly, what is missing then is a way to explain how the sages could hold such different views about the three groups of women. I would argue that the rabbis' degree of comfort with and acceptance of these women was in direct proportion to how they

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[85] Ibid.

measured each group on a threefold matrix: fulfillment of the female role, shared values, and proximity.

"Fulfillment of the female role" means simply the extent to which each woman conformed to what the sages expected a woman to be and do. For the purpose of this analysis, "fulfillment of the female role" means that the woman was attached to a man and that she was a mother. "Shared values" refers to how much each woman cared about what mattered most to the sages. "Proximity" has two meanings: closeness (or distance) in terms of time and closeness (or distance) in terms of space. Put another way, how well did the rabbis - or could the rabbis - know the women? Where did the women live? And when?

The Talmudic women, Yalta and Beruriah, were married and they were clearly devoted to their respective husbands. Both were mothers. (The tragic deaths of Beruriah and Rabbi Meir's sons were chronicled in *Midrash Mishlei*. Yalta and Rabbi Nachman's children were mentioned in *Ketubot* 60b in a discussion about wet nurses.) Huldah and Deborah would have presented the sages with more difficulty. Huldah's husband, Shullam, received a brief mention in the Bible but primarily as a means of identifying Huldah herself. In the Book of Judges Deborah, too, was only tangentially associated with a husband. The rabbis' discomfort with such tenuous attachments to men was reflected in their strenuous midrashic efforts to make more of Huldah's Shullam and to affix Deborah to a husband, either by enlarging the hapless Lappidot or converting Barak from Deborah's colleague to her spouse. While the Bible portrayed Deborah as clearly relishing her role as "Mother in Israel," her maternal efforts were

expended on the Israelite people not on any offspring of her own. In the Bible Huldah was not associated with children or motherhood in any way and the rabbis made no attempt to reinvent either woman as a mother. Lilith, of course, was the antithesis of woman as wife and mother. Her interest in husbands was limited to using other women's men to sire her demon children. Her interests in children - whether her own or those of others - were only murderous.

Beruriah as a scholar and Yalta as a woman knowledgeable and conversant with Jewish custom and law shared some of the sages' highest values. Every Talmudic tale about them depicted them engaging in some intellectual or scholarly pursuit. Although the Biblical women, Huldah and Deborah, have been described as "literary" prophets, the extent to which the sages could have identified with their work is questionable. The age of prophecy had closed many centuries before the rabbis' time. The Temple no longer stood. Judges, prophets and priests had been succeeded by rabbis. The sages admired and respected Huldah and Deborah but the nature and purpose of intellectual endeavors had changed enormously by their own era. Privileging the life of the mind, the call of tradition, and the work of scholars and intellectuals as they did, the rabbis could never find a common ground of shared values with Lilith who represented only chaos, destruction, and death. In general, then, when the women's pursuits and interests validated or contradicted the sages' own value system the sages reacted to the women accordingly.

Beruriah and Yalta were contemporaries of the sages. As adults, they lived among them in the elite community of scholars and decisors; Yalta had grown up in the

Exilarch's home. Post-exilic life was the common backdrop of all their lives. Almost certainly the women would have shared many of the rabbis' own legal, ethical, practical, and intellectual concerns as well. By contrast, although the Biblical women predated the sages by more than a millennium, Huldah and Deborah *had* been known to the kings and judges who preceded the sages as the people's leaders. The rabbis could not overlook this nor could they ignore the Bible's treatment of the women as heroines. Although the women were important in their own era, they were known only as the stuff of legends to the rabbis who later struggled with their characters. More importantly, the Biblical women had lived in the Land in a way that must have been, at best, like a dream for the rabbis. Biblical life was nomadic, rural and agricultural. Talmudic life was urban and commercial. The Biblical women had lived among mythic heroes, kings and warriors. The rabbis lived among scholars like themselves, merchants, and artisans. Living on - and off - the Land as a sovereign people and defending it - these were concepts that the rabbis used rhetorically and messianically as they struggled to reconstitute Jewish life in exile. But even the most agile of rabbinic imaginations would have been hard pressed to relate to the lives that Huldah and Deborah had lived. Lilith, of course, had connections with neither the rabbis' present reality nor even their Land of the past. Her origins were in the non-Jewish, non-Israelite cultures. The sages were not bound to her by time, distance, or shared beginnings. Feeling no attachment to Lilith at all allowed the rabbis to use her character as the embodiment and the carrier of personal and cultural Otherness.

The impact of proximity is particularly interesting in light of the human tendency to

idealize the past. That is, one might expect the sages to have idealized the Biblical women and favored them over Beruriah and Yalta whose flaws could not be obscured by time or distance. But this was not the case. Work by contemporary sociologists promotes a fuller appreciation of the impact of proximity and how the twin poles of closeness and distance affect the ways in which groups relate to one another. Extrapolated, some of their findings help to explain how proximity to each group might have affected the rabbis' comfort with and acceptance of the women.

Studying American race relations in the middle of the twentieth century Gordon Allport found that when different groups of people meet they normally pass through successive stages of relationship.[86] The first stage, casual contact, seems to increase prejudicial feelings on the part of the dominant group:

> Theoretically, every superficial contact we make with an out-group member could, by the "law of frequency" strengthen the adverse mental associations that we have. What is more, we are sensitized to perceive signs that will confirm our stereotypes. Prejudice screens and interprets our perceptions. Casual contact, therefore, permits our thinking about out-groups to remain on an autistic level since no effective communication takes place.[87]

By contrast, Allport discovered that a later stage, acquaintance, lessens prejudicial attitudes. Even closer contact produces more striking results:

> The nature of [the] perceptions varies with the immediacy (or distance) of the threat. Those who have closer contact perceive less difference than

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[86] Gordon Allport The Nature of Prejudice (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1954), 261.

[87] Ibid., 263.

> those who are more remote....Residential contact, through encouraging knowledge and acquaintanceship, removes barriers to effective communication. When these barriers are removed the result is the reduction of fallacious stereotypes and the substitution of a realistic view for one of fear and autistic hostility.[88]

The significance of proximity now helps to explain how Rashi could have crafted such a terrible demise for Beruriah. The sages of her own time wrote about Beruriah with respect and honor. It would have been inconceivable for them to have so demonized her. But Rashi - who was separated from Beruriah by continents, cultures, and centuries - could.

The rabbis were human beings and they were also men. Their struggles with these five extraordinary women demonstrate that although rabbinic views about women were riddled with complication and contradiction, in some cases the rabbis could bend categorical rules and see through the confines of their own gender preconceptions. The sages did not - they *could* not - bring a consistent set of standards and expectations to their understanding of Yalta, Beruriah, Huldah, Deborah, and Lilith. What they thought and what they wrote about these women was filtered through many prisms, most significantly, as I have argued here, through a threefold matrix of values. The sages were most comfortable, most accepting, and most respectful toward the women of their own time, Yalta and Beruriah. To be sure, these women transcended significant boundaries which marked off the spaces in which women were generally expected to operate. Nevertheless, they fulfilled other significant criteria sufficiently enough to

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[88] Ibid., 270-274.

override their "transgressions." Their "otherness" could be, and was, trumped. The rabbis were more discomfited by the Biblical women; the ambivalence with which they wrote about them makes that clear. Less firmly rooted in marriage and motherhood, heralded in that mystical Biblical past of battlefield glory and crushing defeat as they were, Deborah and Huldah were still impossible for the rabbis to disparage and dismiss altogether. The sages struggled with the parts of these women's lives that troubled them most - their independence from men, the boldness of their endeavors, the initiative that informed their lives Still, the sages honored and respected them for the positions they had held and the contributions they had made to their people and their history. Lilith, however - nonconformist, outsider, underminer of marriages, homes, and families, murderess - presented no dilemma for the rabbis at all. On the contrary, this female demon-character became the perfect symbol of everything that the rabbis believed to be personally and culturally "other." Of course, all of the women were "other" to varying degrees but, as we have seen, "otherness" need not be a static state. When other criteria are fulfilled, "otherness" can be attenuated.

Symbolic boundaries are given reality by those who perceive them. In a boundary that one person sees as unbreachable, another may find an opening wedge. Five extraordinary women saw boundaries but looked through them to what lay beyond. On that other side they saw worlds of challenge, daring, and possibility. For them, the boundaries were made of glass. Shattering them was dangerous but, if one were careful, stepping through did not have to be fatal. Crossing to the other side was a risk worth taking. In a way, the rabbis had the more difficult task. How they must have

wished for boundaries of iron - impregnable, impervious, unyielding! How much easier it would have been to defend them! When Yalta smashed the four hundred barrels of wine she sent a powerful message: No boundary is impenetrable forever. To the sages fell the burden of reinforcement and eternal vigilance, of trying to obscure what some could clearly see, and in the end - when the boundaries had been irretrievably broken - of carefully picking up the shattered pieces.

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