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THE WOMAN'S BODY: MIDRASH OLD AND NEW

by Michelle Missaghieh

THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR ORDINATION is a study of an aspect of the Midrashic imagination. Ms Missaghieh has looked at the ways that the Rabbis looked at the female body, in the world of sensual experience and in the world of Biblical and Rabbinic texts. She suggests that perception follows attitudes and attitudes reflect structural and power relationships for Rabbinic literature, created by and for men, saw woman as threatening male dominance and woman's body as attracting men to sin. Eve, the first woman, brought death into the world and that which was most specific to the daughters of Eve, the vagina, was termed kever, the grave. Though it might have occurred to the writers of the Midrash that life might be associated with that organ since man and woman become "one flesh" by the act of intercourse in it and through it life passes in the act of birth, the association of death and vagina tells much about a particular attitude and ethos.

Ms Missaghieh goes beyond presenting the texts and notions of the past; she has created some modern Midrashim using some of the midrashic materials in a new setting. As the Midrash of the past gave the reader an imaginative setting for the Biblical text and therefore created new meanings for that text, so Ms Missaghieh's modern Midrashim give the reader new insight into the Biblical text and a new insight into the relation of imagination to societal context. Thus past and present reciprocally illumine each other.

Ms Missaghieh has ranged widely in the world of the Midrash, has reflected on what she has read, and has presented her findings precisely, and has written lucidly. It is with great pride in her achievement, that I recommend the acceptance of her thesis to the Faculty of the Hebrew Union College- Jewish Institute of Religion.

21 March 1996

Dr Leonard S. Kravitz
Professor of Midrash & Homiletics

Perception follows attitudes and attitudes follow

How the female body in toto and its parts was

he composers of the Midrash treated Biblical verses dealing with women.

Thesis
Missaghieh
1996

THE WOMAN'S BODY: MIDRASH OLD & NEW

Michelle Missaghieh

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
Graduate Rabbinic Program
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INTRODUCTION AND APPROACH

An Introduction To The Significance Of The Woman's Body

When I was a young girl, every time I visited my grandmother she would greet me with a complement and warning, "Michelle, your hair is so beautiful. Promise me that you won't cut it. You know that a woman's hair is the most beautiful part of her body." I have always wondered how she came up with such an idea. When I was sixteen years old, at a communal shower in Israel near the Dead Sea, a turning point occurred in my life. I stood with many other pubescent girls and uncomfortably scrubbed the mud off of my body. Our counselor must have felt our discomfort at exposing ourselves to one another. In the most loving and comforting voice I remember her saying "I think all women's bodies are unique and beautiful." I recall being moved by her statement. I thought, all women's bodies? Even the unproportioned, overweight and skinny ones?

As a woman who believes Jewish texts tell the story of our people's development, I became interested in how our rabbis viewed the woman's body. Was the hair the most beautiful part of a woman? Did the rabbis speak of all women's bodies as beautiful? What words were used to describe and define specific female body parts such as the hair, breasts, voice and genitalia? Through my research in the Mishnah, Talmud and Midrashic literature, I found one striking theme that runs through many rabbinic texts. The world, seen through rabbinic eyes, viewed the woman's body as beautiful and sexual. Yet the rabbinic response to this reality was the classification of her as dangerous. Over and over again stories about a woman's body, or specific

female body parts, involved the word *ervah* - ערְוָה, meaning "nakedness, shame; unchastity, lewdness, obscenity."¹ While the negative connotation of the meaning of the word *ervah*, as well as the *agadot* referring to women's bodies, depict the women as so sexually enticing, women are also paradoxically described as disgusting and wild.

During the rabbinic period, the rabbis were surrounded by the influences of Roman and Greek culture. The Hellenistic world exposed women's bodies (along with men's) in art, gymnasiums, bathhouses and the streets. The Greek world, as represented by Philo, Paul and the Fathers of the early Christian church, viewed the soul as a dwelling place of the body, and the body as a "prison, tomb, fetters, vestment, ugly mask, garment of skin, dwelling place" of the soul. This polarization led the Greeks to theologically value the soul over the body and sometimes repress the body's sexual and physical needs. The rabbis, influenced by Greek culture, also showed evidence of the unity of body and soul.²

A clear example of this unity of body and soul appears in the daily morning blessings when Jews recite the following prayer upon rising to give thanks to God for returning one's soul to one's body after a long night's sleep:

The soul that you have given me, O God, is a pure one. You have created and formed it, breathed it into me, and within me You sustain it. So long as I have breath, therefore, I will give thanks to You, O God

¹Marcus Jastrow, A Dictionary Of The Targumim, The Talmud Babli, And Yerushalmi, And The Midrashic Literature (Israel, 1903), p. 1114.

²Daniel Boyarin, Carnal Israel (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993) pp. 31-35 disagrees with this view and believes that "the human being (is) an animated body and not as a soul trapped or even housed or clothed in a body."

and God of all ages, Master of all creation, Master of all living beings. Blessed are you, God, in whose hands are the souls of all the living and the spirits of all flesh.³

With the separation of body and soul the rabbis chose to distance themselves from the possibility of sexual temptation of the body by transferring wild, seductive and life threatening characteristics to the woman's body. This defense mechanism transferred unrealistic descriptions onto women and resulted in creating an unapproachable distant woman the rabbis knew very little about. The woman's body became dangerous. Dangerous to men and dangerous to the status and sexuality of women.

³This prayer is found at the beginning of the morning service and is entitled "Elohai Neshamah"

Feminist Approach

In the following paper I will examine the representation of the woman's idealized and imperfect body in the Mishnah, Talmud and Midrashic literature. I will both analyze specific body parts of female genitalia, breasts, hair and voice as they appear in these work and examine the various words used to describe these body parts.

Throughout my exploration of the texts I have found that many of the *aggadot* were disturbing to the modern ear. The negative associations of the woman's body is alienating as a woman, and upsetting as a Jew. In response, I have decided to parallel some of the male rabbinic voices with a modern feminist voice. In this paper I will re-write certain texts and introduce my re-writes with the phrase "R. Michal bat Yitzchak v' Esther Sara said/taught..." I have chosen to use my Hebrew name as a way of reclaiming the lost power for so many unnamed women who are either side thoughts or main characters of many *aggadot*.

I have chosen to imaginatively recast rabbinic *aggadot*, not to replace these ancient texts that will continue to be a part of our tradition, but rather to stand parallel to these same male texts. My re-writes are not to serve as a corrective to our texts, which speak from their specific world view. Rather I add the woman's modern voice to rise above the male rabbinic aggression. I will provide the missing dimension for the committed Jewish woman of today, who searches to incorporate the texts of her past with the reality of her physical body.

I do not assume that my female voice would be spoken by the silent women of the Mishnah, Talmud, or Midrashic literature. I can not step back into their shoes. I hope that my attempt at a modern Midrashic commentary serves to facilitate serious reflection and usefulness which might otherwise have been ignored or rejected by contemporary feminist Jews.

PART I: Exploring the Woman's Body

The Ideal Woman's Body

The contrast between the ideal verses the imperfect woman appears in Proverbs 31:10-31 and Proverbs 7:10-27. In Proverbs 31, the ideal woman is wordly. Her husband trusts her with the finances, she runs the household and the family business, she is a teacher and a seamstress and she fears God. In contrast, the woman of Proverbs 7 is a wild seducer. She purposely corners men, kisses them in the night and leads them astray when her husband is out of town. By following her, one hastens his entrance into *Sheol* - the underworld. These two biblical passages, though they do not describe the female body, do serve as a backdrop for the rabbis' descriptions of the female body.

In M. Ketuboth 5:5² the rabbinic ideal woman comes to life. She grinds corn, bakes bread, washes clothes, cooks, breastfeeds her children, readies her husband's bed and works in wool. After a list of activities that are not only permissible but praised, the Mishnah explores the situation of a woman who brings in bondswomen to work for her. If she has one maid she doesn't need to grind corn, bake or wash clothes. If she has two maids she is exempt from cooking and breast feeding her children. With three maids, her list of jobs is completed, she doesn't need to make his bed or work in wool. Finally, if she has four maids, the Mishnah tells us that she may sit in her easy chair all day and be under no obligation to others. Yet this situation is not easily accepted, as evident by R. Eliezer and R. Simeon ben Gamaliel's words:

R. Eliezer said: Even if she brought him a hundred bondwomen, he may compel her to work in wool; for idleness leads to unchastity (זיקה). R. Shimon b. Gamaliel said: Even if a man forbade his wife under a vow to do any work he must divorce her and give her *Ketubah* to her for idleness leads to idiocy (שיעמום).

Though the purpose of the passage is to define the woman's domestic activities, R. Eliezer is concerned with the danger of an unoccupied woman's body. His logic assumes that if a woman is able to bring in four maids to fulfill her domestic duties, she will run off and commit adultery. The word "unchastity" (זיקה) means "obscenity, libidinousness, carnality."⁴ R. Eliezer can not imagine a woman who would rather engage in volunteer work by feeding the hungry or clothing the naked. He can not imagine that she might spend her time increasing her capital by running her own business, as in Proverbs 31. According to R. Eliezer, a woman of financial power threatens a man's control over her sexuality. Another reading might suggest that R. Eliezer believes that a woman's power is in her body. If she does not have other tasks to distract her from this power, she will abuse it unchecked. R. Simeon b. Gamaliel views a woman's role as an intellectual if not social companion to her husband. His fear is that if a woman does nothing all day, she will become boring. Though R. Simeon b. Gamaliel values a woman's mind over her body, he still lacks the vision to assume that she might do something constructive with her free time.

Not suprisingly, the Gemara⁵ on this Mishnah discusses the criteria for taking a wife:

⁴Jastrow, p. 394.

⁵Kethuboth 59b

Our Mishnah does not agree with the view of R. Hiyya. For R. Hiyya taught: A wife (should be taken) mainly for the sake of her beauty (אין אשה אלא ליופי); mainly for the sake of her children. And R. Hiyya further taught: A wife is only good for wearing her finery. And R. Hiyya further taught: He who wishes his wife to look graceful should clothe her in linen garments. He who wishes his daughter to have a bright complexion, let him, on the approach of her maturity, feed her with young fowls and give her milk to drink.

In the above passage, all the reasons R. Hiyyah offers for taking a wife, relate to her physical beauty. Whether her purpose is to have children or to look beautiful in her jewelry, or to have clear white skin, the woman's main value is her beauty. The women of today might nod in agreement to R. Hiyyah's observation that a woman's beauty is of great importance in society. Today our advertising uses the woman's body to sell everything from beer to home computers. At the same time, with the rise of feminism, our society now values the woman's mind and accomplishments. The dichotomy of R. Hiyyah's obsession with beauty and R. Simeon b. Gamaliel's concern with a woman's intellectual contribution to the relationship are still in tension.

An example of a woman's beauty is found in Kethuboth 75a. This passage discusses the circumstances under which a husband may divorce his wife at the beginning of the marriage, immediately after the consummation. There are five physical characteristics of a woman's body that may render divorce, each of which defines the ideal woman's body. The five categories are: 1) If a woman perspires excessively; 2) If she has a large mole with hairs that is not easily seen in public; 3) If she has a scar; 4) If she has a harsh voice; or 5) If her breasts are spread too far apart or are too big. In all of the above cases, except that of a woman with a harsh voice (קול עבה), the reasons for ending the

marriage could not have been known beforehand. The mole, scar, perspiration, and breasts are all private matters that a man would only discover in the intimacy of a sexual encounter. The harsh, rough or strong voice ⁶ (קול עבה) apparently could have been discovered before, unless the woman was kept quiet and essentially traded as an object from father to husband. In each case the woman is considered "damaged goods," not a person. Only in the case of the woman with a harsh voice, is a biblical proof text given: "For sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely."⁷ In the other cases, the defects were most likely defined by rabbinic experiences or commonly accepted gossip. The ideal woman, according to Ketuboth 75a, is a physically perfect object. Just as today's advertising would lead us to believe that an ideal woman's body is hairless, thin and perfectly proportioned, so too do the rabbis of this text fail to see the beauty in the diversity of womens' bodies.

Perhaps our messianic list could read differently. Imagine the following rewrite that focuses on the equality of roles between men and women, the reasons a marriage may fail and the recognition of same sex relationships:

R. Michal bat Yitzchak v' Esther Sara says: A husband and wife may divorce one another if there is physical or emotional abuse, if the wife is not physically and emotionally attracted to her husband, or if the husband is not physically and emotionally attracted to his wife. What is considered "physically attracted" to one's spouse? The male and female rabbis ruled "if one disagrees with one's spouse about a monetary, ethical, political, business, or social issue and continues to feel desire for his/her spouse in bed." Some rabbis ruled that this also applies to marriages between men and men, and women and women.

⁶Jastrow, p. 1037

⁷Song of Songs 2:14

In another section of the Talmud⁸ the Rabbis actually single out four women whose good looks are exceptional:

The Rabbis taught: There have been four women of surpassing beauty in the world- Sarah, Rahab, Abigail and Esther. According to the one who says that Esther was fallow, Vashti should be inserted in place of Esther. Our Rabbis taught: Rahab inspired lust by her name; Jael by her voice; Abigail by her memory; Michal daughter of Saul by her appearance. R. Isaac said: Whoever says, "Rahab, Rahab" at once has an issue (ejaculates.) Said R. Nahman to him: I say Rahab, Rahab, and nothing happens to me! He replied: I was speaking of one who knows her and is intimate with her.

It seems that these two lists of beautiful women were written by different groups of rabbis or, at least, they represent different opinions. The first lists Sarah, Rahab, Abigail and Esther (and some say Vashti) as the four most beautiful women. The second account lists Rahab and Abigail from the first list, but then substitutes Jael and Michal for Sarah and Esther. The reasons for Rahab, Jael, Abigail, and Michal's beauty are each given in the second account. According to this text, Rahab's name inspired lust. The biblical account of the story⁹ teaches that Rahab was the non-Jewish prostitute in the walled city of Jericho who hid two Israelite soldiers after a sexual encounter and enabled them to eventually overpower Jericho. She and her family were rewarded with their life due to her belief in God and her cleaver lie to the king of Jericho. Yet the Talmudic reason for Rahab's beauty focuses not on her cleaverness or belief in God, but on her sexual looseness. Rahab's name (רַחַב) means wide. The rabbis focus on her profession as a prostitute and imply that her name suggested that she opened up wide for anyone who might want to enter her. She was literally a "broad" in modern language.

⁸Megillah 15a

⁹Joshua 2 and 6

Jael,¹⁰ another non-Jew, killed Sisera with a tent pin after calming him with words and milk. In Bereshit Rabbah¹¹ R. Joshua b. Hananiah asks a series of questions about the differences between men and women, based upon the belief that men were created from the earth and women from the rib of the man. He concludes that women have higher voices. Jael's beautiful voice rings high while her physical strength and cunning action are forgotten. Abigail,¹² another non-Jew who was previously married to Nabal the Calebite, becomes King David's second wife after bringing him presents and warding off total destruction of her first husband's estate by King David. Perhaps Abigail's "memory" is the memory King David had of Abigail after their first encounter, which led him to propose. Finally, we read that Michal,¹³ the younger of Saul's two daughters, fell in love with David the warrior and helped him escape from her father's sword. She was later given to another man as his wife and finally transferred back to King David after many years.¹⁴ Michal began her relationship with love for David, and ended it bitter without children.¹⁵ The Talmud attributes Michal's beauty to her appearance, which in her case resulted in being transferred from man to man.

Each of the biblical women (Rahab, Jael, Abigail and Michal) prove themselves to be clever in times of war or life threatening situations. Yet the Talmud focuses on their physical beauty, be it overtly stated in the *Tanach* (as

¹⁰Judges 4

¹¹Bereshit Rabbah 17:8

¹²I Samuel 25

¹³I Samuel 18-19

¹⁴II Samuel 3

¹⁵II Samuel 6

in the case of Rahab) or never mentioned at all (as in the case of Mical.) The rabbis do not choose to name specific body parts that caused these biblical women to be known for their beauty. The list did not include Jael's beautiful eyes or Rahab's sexy genitals. In addition, every woman described in the second list is as non-Jew, with the exception of Michal. The non-Jewish woman was taboo and perhaps could be spoken about more freely than exposing one of the "local girls." A modern re-write of the text might focus on their strengths rather than their physical beauty:

The Rabbis taught: There have been four women of surpassing beauty in the world- Rahab by her mind, Yael by her physical strength, Abigail by her tenderness, and Michal by her integrity.

The Imperfect Woman's Body

The deeply ingrained fear of the woman's body clearly manifests itself in the negative characterizations of the woman's body.¹⁶ As we have already seen in Kethuboth 75a, which lists the five reasons a man may divorce his wife after their consummation, other rabbinic texts share a distrust and fear of the woman's body. In Bereshit Rabbah¹⁷ we read:

"And Adonai God built (בָּנָה) *va-yiven* the rib." (Genesis 2:22) [The text says *va-yiven*, which can also mean] "He considered well (חִיתְּבוֹנֶה *hitbonen*) out of what part to create her." God said: I will not create her out of Adam's head, lest she be conceited; nor out of the eye, lest she be a coquette; nor out of the ear, lest she be an eavesdropper; nor out of the mouth, lest she be a gossip; nor out of the heart, lest she be prone to jealousy; nor out of the hand, lest she be light-fingered; nor out of the foot, lest she be a social butterfly - but rather out of the rib, from a place within Adam's body. And as God created each and every part of the woman, God kept saying, "Be a woman [who is capable of withinness], who is retiring." Nevertheless, "ye have set at naught all my counsel." (Proverbs 1:25) for all the undesirable qualities mentioned earlier are in her.

In the above passage, specific women's body parts are the source of evil actions. Though God was very careful to create a perfect woman, who would be "within" or subservient to her man, God's efforts could not nullify nature. According to the rabbis, women are still flirts, eavesdroppers, gossips, jealous,

¹⁶Daniel Boyarin, p. 77, divides Jewish behavior toward women's bodies into two groups. He claims that "there were two types of androcentric social formations in late-antique Judaism: Hellenistic Judaism(s), in which the flesh was abhorred and women and sexuality were feared as a central theme of the culture, and rabbinic Judaism, in which the flesh was greatly valued and women and sexuality were controlled as highly prized essentials."

¹⁷Bereshit Rabbah 18:2

light-fingered and social butterflies. The rabbis chose these body parts to illustrate their prejudicial stereotypes of women. As a result, women must be controlled. If let loose they might very well act on these natural tendencies.

On the other hand, since man and woman are created in God's image, it would logically follow that women's characteristics reflect God's ways.

Imagine the following alternative feminist re-write of Bereshit Rabbah 18:2:

R. Michal bat Yitzchak v'Esther Sara teaches: "And God created man in God's image, in the image of God, God created *Adam*, male and female, God created them." (Genesis 1:27) God said: "Let us" (Genesis 1:26) Who is "us"? Did not God alone create human beings? Rather read "us" as every part of God's body - God spoke to God's eyes and said let us create woman using our eyes, so she will be insightful; let us create woman with our ears, so she will listen to many side of an issue; let us create woman with our mouth, so she will speak tenderly, convincingly, sternly, and understandingly when needed; let us create woman with our heart, so she will have compassion for justice; let us create woman with our hand, so she will act upon that compassion to make the world a better place; let us create woman out of our feet, so she always stands tall and earns respect from all who know her. With that God gave all of God's self toward the creation of woman, as it is said "Her mouth is full of wisdom, her tongue with kindly teachings" (Proverbs 31:26)

This re-write validates women's gifts rather than focusing on stereotypical negative characteristics. By using the same format as the original midrash, I validate the use of Torah proof texts to teach a lesson, but the message that is taught is radically different in meaning. Rather than falling into the rabbinic trap and responding by demeaning men, I choose to raise the reputation of

the first female. Yet the original Bereshit Rabbah text's fear of loose women appears again in another Talmudic passage¹⁸ that categorizes three types of husband and wife relationships:

It has been taught: R. Meir used to say: As men differ in their treatment of their food, so they differ in their treatment of their wives. Some men, if a fly falls into their cup (כוס), will put it aside and not drink it. This corresponds to the way of Papas b. Judah who, when he went out, used to lock his wife indoors; Another man, if a fly falls into his cup, will throw away the fly and then drink the cup. This corresponds to the way of most men who do not mind their wives talking with their brothers or relatives; Another man again, if a fly falls into his soup, he will squash it and eat it. This corresponds to the way of a bad man who sees his wife go out with her hair unfastened, and spin cloth in the street with her armpits uncovered and bathe with the men. Bathe with the men, you say? It should be, rather in the same place as the men.

This text is filled with assumptions about women's bodies. First, women are compared to cups (כוס) of men. This sexual imagery is found elsewhere in rabbinic texts. For example in Sifre to Numbers,¹⁹ R. Nathan's understanding of the verse "not to go after your own heart and your own eyes which you are inclined to go after wantonly" (Numbers 15:39) refers to adultery. R. Nathan's says "It (meaning the verse) indicates that someone should not drink from the cup, or use the cup, of his fellow." In a Talmudic passage²⁰ on this same verse, "Rabbi taught: One may not drink out of one cup and think of another." Rabina said: This is necessary only when both are his wives." The word "cup" is a euphemism for vagina or for the woman's entire body.

¹⁸Gittin 90a-b

¹⁹Sifre to Numbers 115

²⁰Nedarim 20b

Secondly, Gittin 90a-b portrays all women in need of sexual control. Whether a man locks her up or allows her to converse with men that are most likely undesirable (brothers and relatives), she must be restrained. The final situation of a man who disregards controlling his wife's libido, will, according to the rabbis, wind up bathing with men.²¹ Yet to the modern ears this jump of logic seems absurd. How can engaging in the world's activities lead to public adultery with many men?²² The rabbis perpetuate this fear to prevent women from the world of business, politics and learning. Control becomes their antidote to lewdness. In addition, because women generally were prevented from fully engaging in life outside of the home, exceptions resulted in the risk of male sexual aggression. Women were perhaps forced to "bathe" with men. Some relatively modern consequences of sexual repression are evident in the Victorian area. During this period, women were forced to cover every inch of their body, and the legs of chairs were covered so as not to suggest a sexually inappropriate thought. As a result the rate of prostitution during the Victorian era has proven to be one of the highest in recent history.²³

Similar to Bereshit Rabbah 18:2, a Sotah²⁴ text uses a parallel technique of ascribing negative actions to women's body parts. The context of the passage is that of the woman accused and found guilty of adultery through the ritual

²¹Because co-ed public baths were the norm at the time, the rabbis might have been justified in their fear of sexual licentiousness.

²²Bereshit Rabbah 8:12 teaches that a woman may not go out into the marketplace, because "every woman who goes out into the market place will eventually come to grief."

²³Rabbi Leonard Kravitz of Hebrew Union College-JIR, NY brought this to my attention.

²⁴Sotah 8b-9a

of drinking so called "magical" waters. According to the passage women are obliged to watch the "guilty" woman be stoned to death, even though parts of her are naked. Following this decision, the texts goes on to describe and explain the logic of the punishment:

She stood at the entrance of her house to display herself to the man; therefore a priest sets her by the Nicanor-gate and displays her disgrace to all. She wound a beautiful scarf about her head for him; therefore a priest removes her headgear and places it under her feet. She beautified her face for him; therefore her face is made to turn green in color. She painted her eyes for him; therefore her eyes protrude. She braided her hair; therefore a priest undoes her hair. She signaled to him with her finger; therefore her fingernails fall off. She girded herself with a belt for him; therefore a priest takes a common rope and ties it above her breasts. She thrust her thigh towards him; therefore her thigh falls. She received him upon her body; therefore her womb swells.

In the above passage the woman is not created as an adulteress (as in Bereshit Rabbah 18:2 which blames nature for women's actions) rather she is to blame. She uses her body parts to engage in the rabbis greatest fear, sexual promiscuity. The rabbis are very aware of how women seduce men with their hair, face, eyes, hands, waist, thighs and naked body. As a result, each part of the woman's body is systematically punished (מכה כנגד מכה) for its actions. The uncovering of her hair is a public statement of her looseness. One wonders if the protrusion of her womb indicates that she will be executed while pregnant with a *mamzer*, a terrifying insult. Conspicuously absent from this list is any indication of her male partners guilt and punishment. Though "it takes two to tango," this texts focuses on the woman's body, not the man's, who receives all the blame and punishment.

The Woman as Temptress

There is evidence that a woman's beauty was recognized and praised by some rabbis, in what we might today call "a healthy way." In the Jerusalem Talmud²⁵ we read a story about Gamaliel I, the Elder, who was walking by the Temple Mount when he saw an attractive gentile woman and uttered a blessing in response. The text says that it was not because he was uniquely struck by her beauty, but he also said the following when seeing a fine donkey, camel or horse: "Blessed is He who has such handsome creatures in His world."

Gamaliel's response can be an example for our contemporary men who whistle or whisper lewd comments to a woman: upon beauty, a blessing may be uttered. Yet the texts overwhelmingly speak of the man drawn to the woman's body as if she were a magnet. In Sanhedrin²⁶ we read that "The *yetzer*, a child and a woman should be repelled by the left hand, but encouraged by the right." Rashi's comment on the phrase "repelled by the left, but encouraged by the right" teaches that the subject is sexual relations:

If a man alienated his desire completely, he would reduce the propagation of the species; and if he encouraged it completely, he would eventually do that which is forbidden, for he would not be able to restrain his passion from committing sin.

²⁵Yerushalmi Avodah Zarah 1:9

²⁶Sanhedrin 107b

Other examples of male desire are found in Kiddushin²⁷ which teaches that one man may not be alone with a married or unmarried woman for fear of intimacy. Following this law, three stories are told of three well respected rabbis who could not control their sexual drive: Rav Amram the Pious lifted and climbed a heavy ladder up to the room of a beautiful woman only to plead for help before his crime; R. Meir was fooled by Satan dresses as a woman who seduced him across a deep river; and R. Akiba was also tricked by Satan disguised as a woman who seduced him up a tall palm tree. All three men climbed or crossed a certain distance to reach their desired woman, perhaps metaphors for sexual foreplay.

The rabbis cope with their sexual drive by making the desired woman dirty. In another passage²⁸ we read that "A Tanna taught: Though a woman be as a pitcher (חמור) full of filth and her mouth (פיה) be full of blood, yet all speed after her." Here the euphemism for the woman's vagina is "her mouth." The image of a dirty bag or pitcher is used to describe the whole woman. The rabbis defensively degrade the woman's body for their own uncontrollable sexual drive.

The rabbis discuss specific cases that are deemed sexually charged activities if performed by women. In Kethuboth²⁹ R. Isaac b. Hanania defines the actions a woman may engage in when she is menstruating, so as to not arouse her husband:

²⁷Kiddushin 81a

²⁸Shabbath 152a

²⁹Kethuboth 61a

R. Isaac b. Hanania further stated in the name of R. Huna: All kinds of work which a wife performs for her husband a menstruant also may perform for her husband, with the exception of filling his cup (סלס), making ready his bed and washing his face, hands, and feet.

Given that these actions are usually only reserved for the wife to do for her husband, regardless of how many maid servants she can afford to bring into the house, and given that these actions are forbidden to her when she is menstruating, we can infer that each of these actions is a metaphor for a sexual action. Perhaps filling his cup means allowing him to touch or lick her genitals; making his bed ready may refer to foreplay; and washing his face, hands and feet may be euphemisms for intercourse. My criticism of this text is the lack of acknowledgment of the woman's physical pain during menstruation and an assumption that house cleaning and cooking are women's work. A modern feminist re-write might be:

R. Michal bat Yitzchak v' Esther Sara further stated: All kinds of work a woman and her husband are regularly responsible for in their shared household, a menstruant woman is also responsible. A husband should do those things that express his sensitivity and gentleness especially at this time.

The focus of this re-write is to emphasize the equality of men and women in relating to domestic chores, while recognizing that some women may need a softer touch during the period of her menstruation. The danger of such a re-write is that it may be perceived as submitting to anti-feminist rhetoric which claims that women are unstable and weaker than men. Yet I believe to deny the unique cycles of strength and weakness a woman experiences on a monthly basis, would be more harmful. Though I believe that the traditional laws of separation during a woman's menses are emotionally harmful to

women at a time when extra sensitivity may be needed, and religiously unacceptable due to the inevitable "dirtiness" that she becomes. Yet I still believe that menstruation is a holy experience and must be somehow marked by ritual. One solution that I practice is a private recitation of the blessing "Blessed are You Adonai Our God who has created me a woman" upon the first sing of menstrual blood. This ritual re-claims a blessing that is traditionally said by men every morning in the negative ("... who has not created me a woman") and states it in the positive. Though I am aware that a supposed parallel text is already available for women to say ("... who has created me in Your image), I feel that this sends the message of a woman's passive acceptance of her body, rather than a positive active statement.

Perhaps because of men's own fear of sexual promiscuity, transferred onto women, some rabbis were known to take vows of abstinence from sexual relations with their wives:

R. Hiyya would often pray that the "merciful Lord should save him from his evil inclination." Consequently, he refrained from having sexual relations with his wife for several years. Deeply frustrated, his wife disguised herself as a suggestively dressed wanton woman and appeared before her husband, who was engrossed in his studies while sitting in the family garden. Not recognizing his own spouse, the Rabbi asked who she was. Flaunting her charms, the woman replied, "I am a courtesan, who has just returned to my home town." Suddenly, the pious man felt so aroused that he asked what her harlot's fee was. She replied, "The pomegranate atop the nearby tree." Endowed with almost superhuman energy, he leaped to the uppermost bough, seized the fruit and pushed it into her hands... When the episode was over he lay on the ground and wept, apparently overcome with remorse. The "courtesan" had vanished as mysteriously as she had appeared. Almost blinded by his tears, the sage made his way back to his home where he discovered his modestly clad wife kindling a fire to cook their dinner. Still in a state of shock at the enormity of his

"crime," he climbed into the stove and evidently perished there, consumed, ironically, by flames that his wife had kindled.³⁰

According to M. Herschel Levine, in all other printed versions of the story, R. Hiyya somehow emerges from the oven alive but later dies of remorse for his "supposed sin." According to Yonah Fraenkel's article on this story, "Proceedings of the Seventh World Congress of Jewish Studies III," the original narrator was sufficiently self-confident to inform his audience that a Talmudic sage was actually burned to death for his transgression, or that he committed suicide to punish himself. Later editors could not accept this disturbing outcome and "softened" the account by rescuing R. Hiyya from a horrible fate.³¹

What is so disturbing about this story is the consequence of hiding away a woman's body. First, the man is so concerned with his lack of sexual control, that he ends up sleeping with a supposed whore. When sex or sexual expression is severely limited, illicit sex becomes tempting and exciting, resulting in a far more hurtful sexual encounter than the accepted husband and wife relationship. Second, because the man does not attend to his wife's sexual needs, she is portrayed as a whore. Both men and women are in need of sexual fulfillment. This text has the woman obtain her sexual fulfillment from her own husband, showing her devotion to him. Unfortunately, her objection to her husband's prayers of control are never voiced and her actions lead to prostitution. Finally, the reason for the death of R. Hiyyah is unclear.

³⁰This translation is taken from M. Herschel Levine, "Three Talmudic Tales of Seduction" *Judaism*, Vol. 144 (1987), pp. 466. This version of Kiddushin 81b is based on manuscript readings from the Vatican and Munich libraries and an early printed edition published in Guadalajara.

³¹Levine, pp. 466-467, footnote 2.

Was the fire that burned him to death, his wife's inner burning sexual drive that he could not fulfill? Did he die from his own untended sexual fire? If the fire was actually of an oven, and not a metaphor for a sexual flame, did his wife leave the room for a moment and find him in flames? Did she watch him crawl into the oven and not stop him? Did she ever tell him that she was the whore? If she did tell him she was the whole, was that the reason for his death? If not, why? Was she secretly happy that he died so she could find a husband that would fulfill her sexual needs? However we read the text, one truth seems to ring clear, R. Hiyyah was a selfish man. He concentrated only on his sexual and spiritual needs and he left his wife a widow because of his selfish actions in life and in death.

Consider a modern re-write of this story that places community pressure on R. Hiyyah, allows the woman to verbally protest, and allows R. Hiyyah to realize that such vows of abstinence are unacceptable:

R. Michal bat Yitzchak v'Esther Sara taught: R. Hiyyah, would often pray that "the merciful Lord should save him from his evil inclination." Consequently he began to refrain from having sexual relations with his wife. The first time his wife Yehudit realized that her husband was consciously refraining from any sexual actions, she spoke to her husband in a caring but stern voice, "Why, when I come home from the *mikveh*, and am excited about spending a beautiful night alone with you, do you turn to your books and pray?" R. Hiyyah could not answer. The next day Yehudit said to her husband, "R. Hiyyah, I love you and want to be with you like a wife is with her husband." Again he was unable to talk. On the eve of the third night of Yehudit's sexual frustration, she went to R. Hiyyah's teacher, R. Yehudah HaNassi and said, "My husband, your student, is unwilling to be with me like a husband is to his wife." That evening R. Yehudah HaNassi asked R. Hiyyah for an explanation of his inactions. Again R. Hiyyah did not reply. Finally, word began to spread around town that R. Hiyyah would not have sexual relations with his wife. The neighbors knew. His students knew. The butcher and market people

knew. Soon all the men of Babylonia began to turn their eyes to Yehudit. Word spread that she was one of the most beautiful women in the area. One night R. Hiyyah overheard the town talking about his wife. He ran home, undressed, spoke to his wife tenderly and lay with her. He promised never to make a vow of abstinence again. Others say that during this time Yehudit would go into her husband's bed every night when he was asleep, slowly excite him and then lay with him.

This re-write puts the cure for R. Hiyyah's sickness into the woman's hands rather than being an object of discussion. In this re-write the woman has a name, a voice and a plan. She treats her husband with dignity, yet informs the town when all else has failed. The other opinion at the end of the story plays off of the woman's ability to fulfill her desires in a humorous way.

In another Talmudic tale³² of husband/wife sexual relations, Imma Shalom, the wife of R. Eliezer ben Horkenus, tells why her children are so beautiful. She replies that her husband only speaks to her in a sexually alluring way at midnight as he uncovers one part of her body at a time, while covering the rest of her body. His reason for such a bizarre action is so he "may not think of another woman," lest his children be bastards. Imma Shalom's body is portrayed as so alluring that it can only be exposed in part, even to her husband. Beautiful children are a result of such modesty gone far. We never hear Imma Shalom's feeling concerning her husband's sexual behavior. When she tells this story does she mock her husband's actions? Does she sit around the kitchen table with her friends and moan over such sterile encounters, or does she laugh with them and think it ridiculous? When she reports this story to her husband's colleagues, does she tell it with a straight face and then beg them to force him to stop such absurd actions? A

³²Nedarim 20b

modern re-write might cast Imma Shalom as the older woman who has had sexual experiences prior to her encounter with her younger inexperienced boyfriend. At night when they lie together, he is uncertain how to act and begins to uncover and cover parts of her body. Instead she slowly teaches her boyfriend how to seduce her by fully undressing her, and they develop a fulfilling sexual relationship. Years later when they are married to each other, they laugh about his days of inexperience.

In most of the above stories the woman's entire body is portrayed as generally tempting. Yet the rabbis of the Talmud also discuss the sexual temptation of specific women's body parts. The following is a passage³³ which discusses whether a man may recite the evening *Shema* while naked in bed with his wife:

The Master has said: "One turns his face away and recites the *Shema*." But there is contact of the buttocks (עגבות)?- This supports the opinion of R. Huna, who said: "Contact of the buttocks is not sexual (ערוה)... " R. Isaac said: "A handbreath (טפח) [exposed] in a [married] woman constitutes incitement (ערוה)." In which way? Shall I say, if one gazes at it (להסתכל בה)? But has not R. Shesheth [already] said: "Why did Scripture enumerate the ornaments worn outside the clothes with those worn inside?" To tell you that if one gazes at the little finger of a woman, it is as if he gazed at her secret place (במקום החורף)!- No, it means, in one's own wife, and when he recites the *Shema*. R. Hisda said: "A woman's leg (שוק) is a sexual incitement (ערוה), as it says..." Samuel Said: "A woman's voice (קול) is a sexual incitement (ערוה), as it says..." R. Shesheth said: "A woman's hair (שער) is a sexual incitement (ערוה), as it says..."

³³Berakoth 24a

From this passage we learn that according to the rabbis, the buttocks is not considered an *ervah* (ערוה), meaning sexually tempting. Yet a handbreath of exposed skin, the little finger of a woman, her leg, voice, and hair are all considered *ervah*. There are no gradations of exposure according to this passage. In every case, all married women who expose part of their body invite sexual excitement. It is no matter if the woman is beautiful or ugly, skinny or fat, young or old. The consequence of this passage is that women are forced to be hidden from men.

In a similar text found in Talmud Yerushalmi³⁴, we read:

He who stares at a woman's buttocks (המסתכל בעקיבה של אשה) is as if he stared at her vagina (בבית הרחם). He who stares at her vagina (כילו בא עליה) is as if he had sexual relations with her (בבית הרחם).

In the Babylonian version, vagina is called החורף במקום, while in the Jerusalem version of the Talmud it is called בבית הרחם. The context of both quotes are over the permissibility of reciting a prayer while risking sexual temptation. The Babylonian version uses the term "dirty place" as a way of alienating the man from the woman's vagina by making it unappealing, while the Jerusalem version uses the term "house of the womb" or "house of comfort" as a way of warning the man of the potential of creating children at an inappropriate time.

What might have been the results of these teachings? Did this lead women to cover themselves around their husbands as well as themselves? Did

³⁴Yerushalmi Hallah: Perek 2, Halachah 4

women lose touch with what made them sexually excited because their own bodies became foreign to them? Did this cause women to have affairs with each other without their husbands' knowledge in order to seek a comfortable haven with another woman who could relate to their seclusion? Did men lose interest in women's bodies because they were all covered? Or did men become so obsessed with the covered woman that they fantasized about naked women?

The Naked Woman

The naked woman's body was so tempting to a man that even upon a woman's execution men were not permitted to look upon her naked body because of the fear of "impure thoughts being aroused"³⁵ According to the rabbis, "Scripture (Leviticus 20:18) so indicates that the law treats one who uncovers nakedness as equivalent to one who completes the act of intercourse."³⁶ The power of the woman's naked body was so great that it was even thought to be used as a medical cure³⁷:

Rab Judah said in the name of Rab's name: A man once conceived a passion for a certain woman (lit: set his eyes on a certain woman,) and his heart was consumed by his burning desire [his life being endangered thereby.] When the doctors were consulted, they said, "His only cure is that she shall submit." (עד שחבעל) Thereupon the Sages said: "Let him die rather than that she should yield." Then [said the doctors] "Let her stand nude before him" (תעמוד לפניו ערומה) [they answered] "Sooner let him die." "Then" said the doctors, "Let her converse with him from behind a fence." (חספר עמו מאחורי הגדר) "Let him die" the sages replied "rather than she should converse with him from behind a fence."

Following this story two rabbis dispute over why the Sages forbid the woman from standing naked. One reason is that she was married, and could not be seen by another man. The second is because she was unmarried and if allowed would cause disgrace to fall upon her family. The third is because

³⁵Sotah 8a-b

³⁶Sifra Kodashim Parashah 10, Pereq 11.

³⁷Sanhedrin 75a

Jewish women on principal should not be treated in such a way. The question arises: Why then if she is unmarried couldn't the sick man just marry her. The answer given is that "marriage would not assuage his passion" (מינסב לא מייחבה דעתיה). Since the destruction of the Temple "sexual pleasure has been taken [from those who practice it lawfully] and given to sinners, as it is written "Stolen waters are sweet and bread eaten in secret is pleasant." (Proverbs 9:17)

In this story the Sages are concerned about protecting a woman's naked body from sexual exploitation. The "medical advise" of having the woman stand naked in front of him reminds us of a modern day strip joint. Or the suggestion of having the woman submit to him is equivalent to telling a man to go to a prostitute to quench his desires. The seemingly "compromise" of having the woman converse with him behind a screen, reminds us of modern peep shows and paid phone sex, often "staffed" by under age runaway girls. The Sages understood that the requests of the man and "doctors" would end up humiliating and objectifying the woman. The fact that the Sages were willing to let the man die from sexual longing was either their way of saying "Sir, we think you are exaggerating" or "Sir, we will not let you humiliate any woman you choose" or "Sir, masturbation is prohibited, and this will most likely be a result of your requests."

The missing part of this story is the woman's voice. Is she also attracted to this man? Does she want to stand in front of him naked and also be aroused? Is he her secret love and because she is already married, they both try to construct a way of being with each other "legally"? Is she single and her father prohibited her from being with him? Or perhaps she doesn't even

know who he is. Perhaps the man is a "dirty old man" who intimidates her. Maybe she is married and feels humiliated by such propositions. Maybe she is single and has no interest in him. We will never know. Consider this modern re-write that addresses a similar situation, with a very different approach:

R. Michal bat Yitzchak v'Esther Sara teaches: A man once had a burning passion for a certain woman. He chased after her on the way to *schul* on Friday evening. Every Erev Shabbat he would sit in his seat and she would sit in hers. He watched her sway as she *dovened*. He asked people who she was, her name and profession. All this time she never knew he existed. He was going mad. All he wanted was to look at this woman face to face. He asked for advice from his friends and they all suggested that he go up to her, but her could never find her after *shul* ended. One day, during the week, this woman entered the subway as he exited. Immediately he fumbled for a token and raced after her. "Hello" he said. "You go to such-and-such a *schul* don't you." The woman was surprised. Was this person dangerous? How did he know who she was? He didn't look very familiar. She was flattered that he noticed her. Her train came to a loud stop. "Are you going uptown?" she asked. "Yes" he lied. They rode two stops and exchanged names and meaningless small talk. The woman exited the train and he continued to ride on, pretending he was on his way somewhere. The man and woman continued to meet. Soon, with her permission, they spent many hours face to face. His passion was finally quenched.

The word "naked" is also used by the rabbis to describe a sense of lacking. In *Mechiltah D'Rabbi Yishmael*³⁸ the generation of Abraham is described as being "naked from all the *mitzvot* that God would one day give them." According to the *Tanach*, *tzitzit* are a symbolic physical reminder to guard and do the commandments. They are to prevent each Jew from going "after your own heart and your own eyes after which you go whoring."³⁹ In a midrashic

³⁸*Mechiltah D'Rabbi Yishmael*, Bo, Parashah 5

³⁹*Numbers* 15:39

story related by R. Nathan, the biblical "going a whoring" metaphor is taken literally.⁴⁰ This story features a man who was very scrupulous about wearing *tzitzit*. The man heard of a certain harlot in one of the towns by the sea who he could pay 400 *dinars* for hire. He sent forth the money and fixed a date:

When the day arrived he came and waited at the door, and her maid came and told her, "That man who sent you 400 gold *dinars* is here and waiting at the door" to which she replied "let him come in." When he came in she prepared for him seven beds, six of silver and one of gold; and between one bed and the other there were steps of silver, but the last were of gold. Then she went up to the top of the bed and lay down upon it naked (ערומה). He too went up after her in his desire to sit naked with her, when all of a sudden the four fringes of his garment struck him across the face; whereupon he slipped off and sat down upon the ground. She also slipped off and sat upon the ground and said, "By the Roman Capital, I will not leave you alone until you tell me what blemish you saw in me." "By the Temple" he replied "never have I seen a woman as beautiful as you are; but there is one precept which the Lord our God has commanded us, it is *tzitzit*..."

The story continues with the man explaining to the beautiful naked harlot that his *tzitzit* reminded him that he is a Jew, and was therefore forbidden to lie with her. She was so struck by his devoutness that she demanded to know his name, the name of his teacher, his town, and his school. Upon receiving this information she divided her estate into thirds, giving one third to the government, one third to the poor and one third she kept for herself, including her bedclothes. She then went to the school of R. Hiyyah⁴¹ (the same R. Hiyyah who vowed not to sleep with his wife in Kiddushin 81b) and asked him to make her a Jew. R. Hiyyah guessed correctly that the woman had met one of his students. When she became a Jew, R. Hiyyah rewarded

⁴⁰Menahoth 44a

⁴¹Some say "Rabbi Meir" rather than "Rabbi Hiyyah" see Warren Zev Harvey, "The Pupil, the Harlot and the Fringe Benefits" *Prooftexts* Vol. 5 (1986), p. 260.

her by saying "Go and enjoy your acquisition. Those very bed clothes which she had spread for him for an illicit purpose she now spread out for him lawfully."⁴²

There are so many surprising aspects to this short story. First, though it may appear that the man has the power, since he pays for her services, it is clear from the start that the woman is at the locus of control. The man is the one who is forced to wait until he is recognized, welcomed and announced in her home. Second, the woman is wealthy. Granted she makes her money through prostitution, but she has a maid, is well known through out the region, and covers her beds in silver and gold. Third, she immediately responds to a sense of honesty and integrity when the man explains why he can not sleep with her and takes action to correct her life.

Finally, the woman did not feel badly about admitting to R. Hiyyah that she learned of his school through her near prostitution encounter with one of his students. Was this because she was not aware that her actions were against Jewish law, and therefore had no reason to be ashamed? Or could it be that she was simply unashamed of her profession? In addition, it is not clear how the woman becomes a Jew. There seems to be no time between the woman handing the Master proof of his student's handwriting, and the Master's blessing for her to marry him. It is also unclear why the woman was motivated to become a Jew. Was it to be able to marry this man who was honest and righteous? Or was she so moved by his integrity that she felt drawn to discover what prevented him from doing what all other men did so

⁴²Menahoth 44a

easily? What is certain is that this woman is in full control of her destiny. She chose her profession, to leave her home and to marry.

One inconsistency in this story is her lapse of emotional insecurity. When he refuses to lie with her, rather than saying "what is wrong with you," she immediately thinks she is to blame. These words seem to contradict her strong character. Perhaps her self-deprecating words are a literary tool to increase the humor of the story, or perhaps they address the greatest female insecurity - body image.

What is wonderful about this story is that the woman's naked body becomes the source of positive expression, that of being a Jew. The last line of the story ("Those very bed clothes which she spread out for him for an illicit purpose she now spread out for him lawfully" which echoes Proverbs 7:16) illustrates the duality of the woman's body. It can either be used for bad (prostitution) or for good (sexual relations in a married relationship.)

PART II: Specific Female Body Parts

The Uterus & The Vagina

Biblical References

The first place readers of sexual female language look for descriptions of the woman's body is Song of Songs. Its love poetry is alluring and sexually charged, perhaps earning it the title of the "Holy of Holies" according to R. Akiba.⁴³ Though Song of Songs is pregnant with images of the woman's body, there are other places throughout the Hebrew Bible that physically describe the female woman's uterus and vaginal area.

There are three terms found in the Hebrew Bible that refer to the human female "womb" in a biological sense: 1) "beten - בטן" 2) "rehem - רחם" 3) "mayaim - מעים" The word "kever - קבר" also seems to parallel these three terms and/or serve as the same beginning and end point of life, but is never found alone. There are five sets of terms that refer to the human female genitalia (the vagina itself or the vaginal area) in a sexual way: 1) "mekor - מקור" 2) "regel - רגל" 3) "carmi sheli / crameha - כרמי שלי / כרמיה" 4) "gal naool / gan naool / gan - גל נעול / גל נעול / גל" and 5) "hor - חור"

"Beten," the most frequently used biological term has six meanings: 1) belly or lower abdomen 2) stomach 3) womb or procreative organ 4) inner parts or the body 5) innermost part or the upper cosmos and 6) and an architectural

⁴³ Mishnah, Yadaim 3:5

projection upon which pillars of a building stood.⁴⁴ When referring to the woman's womb, "beten" is often paralleled to "rethem" or "mayaim."⁴⁵ When "rethem" appears alone, it means uterus, potential strength, and a symbol of progeny.⁴⁶

One of the most common sexual euphemisms for the vagina is "mekor" meaning "spring" or "fountain." "Mekor" often refers to a menstruating woman or a sexually aroused woman and is often coupled with the word "damayha" meaning "her blood" when referring to menstruation.⁴⁷ The terms "regel," meaning "leg,"⁴⁸ "carmi sheli" or "crameha"⁴⁹ literally meaning "my vineyard" and "her vineyards," "gan" "gan naool" and "gal naool"⁵⁰ literally meaning "garden" and "locked garden/well" and "hor"⁵¹ meaning a hole, also refer to female genitalia.

The Midrashic literature and Talmud share some of these biblical euphemisms for the uterus and vagina, while adding others. These words and phrases fall into three categories: 1) sexual; 2) biological - referring to birth, miscarriage and maturity; and 3) menstrual.

⁴⁴Lundbom Freedman, "Beten," The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, Vol II, 1975 ed. p. 95.

⁴⁵Psalms 22:10-11, 58:4, 71:6; Isaiah 49:1; Jeremiah 1:5; Genesis 25:23; Job 3:11, 10:18-19, 31:15.

⁴⁶Jeremiah 20:17-18; Psalms 110:3; Hosea 9:14; Job 24:20; Genesis 20:17-18, 29:331, 30:22, 49:25; I Samuel 1:5-6.

⁴⁷Leviticus 12:7, 20:18; Jeremiah 51:36; Proverbs 5:18.

⁴⁸Deuteronomy 28:57; Judges 5:27; Ezekiel 16:25; Jeremiah 2:25; Proverbs 7:11.

⁴⁹Song of Songs 1:6, 8:12; Hosea 2:17.

⁵⁰Song of Songs 4:12, 4:15-16.

⁵¹Song of Songs 5:4.

Uterus & Vagina

Sexual References

The term "in that place-מקום באותו" or "from that place-מקום מאותו" often refers to the vagina in a sexual context.⁵² The very meaning of the phrase suggests a taboo place that can not be named, but is understood in context. By not naming the vagina, the author(s) increase its taboo nature. In Niddah⁵³ Rabbis Eleazar, Zadok, Johanan b. Beroka, Ashi, and Jose argue over the signs of maturity for a woman. Most of the argument centers around the development of a woman's breasts. R. Simeon offers the suggestion that the woman is physically mature when "משנתמעך הכף" literally "her pubic mound lowers." Later R. Huma⁵⁴ defines this phrase as "There is a rounded eminence above that place -מקום תפוח יש למעלה מאותו מקום- and as the girl grows in age, it steadily grows lower." Once a woman reaches maturity, her genitalia becomes the main source of anxiety for the rabbis.

Often the rabbis state that looking and kissing a woman's vagina is equal to or leads to sexual intercourse. This fear is understandable, given that a person would only look at a woman's vagina for sexual purposes. (The exception being a doctor or handmaid assisting in childbirth.) In the Minor Tractate Kallah⁵⁵ referring to the offerings given to make the Golden Calf, the Talmud asks:

⁵²The only exception is in Niddah 42b, when the phrase "that place" is used to refer to the menstrual vagina.

⁵³Niddah 47a

⁵⁴Niddah 47b

⁵⁵Kallah 50b (1:7)

Why [did they offer] signet rings? Because whoever gazes intentionally at a woman (באשה) is as though he had intercourse with her (עליה בא). Hence the Rabbis declared: Whoever touches a woman's little finger is as though he touched that place (מקום) (באילו).

Staying with the theme of the fear of the women's vagina, Kallah⁵⁶ continues with a story related by R. Johanah:

R. Johanah said: The Ministering Angels told me four things and they are related to the lame, the blind, the dumb and the deaf. Why [are children born] lame? Because [their parents] overturned their table (שהופכים את שולחנם) and behaved like animals. Why [are children born] blind? Because [their parents] gaze at that place (מקום). Why [are children born] deaf? Because their parents converse during cohabitation. Why [are children born] dumb? Because their parents kiss that place (מקום).

The above text is parallel to Nedarim 20b as discussed above. In both stories R. Johanah refers to the vagina as "that place" and Imma Shalom (also using the phrase "that place") relates why her children are beautiful. In the first passage (Kallah 1:7), when we read "whoever gazes intentionally at a woman," we must add the words "intentionally at her vagina." The context clearly refers to sexual starrng. The phrase "overturned their table" (in Kallah 1:9) is also a euphemism for a prohibited sexual activity. Either it refers to the sexual position of the woman on top of the man during intercourse or anal intercourse. Nedarim 20b offers a case of a woman who goes to her rabbi because she set the table before her husband, "but he

⁵⁶Kallah 50b (1:9)

overturned it. The Rabbi replied: My daughter! The Torah permitted you to him - what then can I do for you?"

Both of the above texts (Kallah 1:7 and 1:9) are troublesome to the modern ears because they blame birth defects on loving sexual actions between a husband and wife. The stories teach that the closer the man and woman's sexual relationship may be, the greater chance of creating deformed offspring. Imagine the following modern re-write which focuses on the positive impact a couple's relationship can have on their children's dispositions:

R. Michal bat Yitzchak v' Esther Sara said: The Ministering Angels told me four things and they are related to the strong, the insightful, the wise and the musical. Why [are children born] strong? Because [their parents] overturned their table (שהופכים את שולחנם) and strengthened their love. Why [are children born] insightful? Because [their parents] gaze at that place (באותו מקום). Why [are children born] wise? Because their parents converse during cohabitation. Why [are children born] with a loving disposition? Because their parents kiss that place (באותו מקום).

Midrash⁵⁷ also uses the phrase "that place" in a story about a man who tried to commit adultery but didn't succeed:

Another exposition of the phrase "A man, A, man": Be just the equal of other men (meaning: be satisfied with you own wife and not presumptuous in wanting others.) An incident is told of a certain woman to whom a man made approaches (literally: had sex with her - שנזדקק לה). She asked him to what spot she should go. What did she do then? She went and told his wife. His wife proceeded to that spot and he coupled with her (אשתו לאותו מקום ונזדקק לה). Afterwards he repented and prayed for death. His wife said to him: "You have eaten of your own bread and have drunk out of your

⁵⁷Bamidbar Rabbah 9:3

own cup. The cause of your trouble is that you are presumptuous. Be just the equal of other men!"

Many of the motifs discussed earlier appear in the above story. First, the phrase "that place- *מקומו*" has a double meaning. The preposition "ל" meaning "to" before the phrase "that place" indicates the actual place where the married man and desired woman were to meet. In addition, "that place" followed by the verb "*גודקק*" meaning "to have sex," clearly echoes its second meaning "vagina." Second, we encounter the motif of a wife who disguises herself as a foreign seducer only to seduce her own husband into being with her.⁵⁸ The difference between this and other stories is that the man does not die, rather he has taught a lesson by his wife. On this rare occasion we hear her words of condemnation telling him to be thankful for what he has, meaning her. In addition, this story shows two women, who could have been potential rivals for one man, working together to save a marriage. It is unclear whether the first woman did in fact have sexual relations with the man, as suggested by the words "*שנגודקק לה*" which seem to mean "had sex with her" or if he just wished to "have sex with her." In any case, the first woman approached the wife of the man and coached her in winning back her husband. This female support seems unique in the male dominated voices of the Talmud. The third similarity between this story and others is the comparison of the woman to a cup and bread.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ See above on Kiddushin 81b

⁵⁹ See above Shabbath 152a and Gittin 90a-b. Also Nedarim 20b and Megillah 12b for women compared to cups or vessels; and Sifre to Numbers 115, Rashi on Genesis 39:6, Kethuboth 62b and Yoma 67a for women compared to bread.

A similar expression to "that place - מקום" is "מקום התורף" meaning "a filthy, decaying place," found in Berakoth⁶⁰: "If one gazes at the little finger of a woman, it is as if he gazed at her filthy, decaying place - מקום התורף." The use of the word "התורף" is a blatantly negative word and appears to be unique. In all other instances the phrase "מקום התורף" refers to the blank or exposed part of a Jewish divorce certificate or deed, in which the names of the contracting parties, or the particulars of the date, place, sum involved, etc. are specified.⁶¹ here the vagina is instead portrayed as filthy and undesirable.

Paralleling Song of Songs eroticism "gan" and "gan naool" meaning "garden" and "locked garden" respectively, also appear in midrashic *aggadot*. Midrashic literature defines the verse "A garden locked, is my own, my bride/ A fountain locked, A sealed-up spring"⁶² as referring to the woman. Pirkey D'Rabbi Eleazer⁶³ clearly states that "gan" is "a euphemism... meaning merely woman, who is compared to a garden." Vayikrah Rabbah⁶⁴ defines each phrase of the Song of Songs verse:

"A fountain locked - גַּל נָעוּל - are virgins, "A garden locked - גַּן נָעוּל" are married women, and "A sealed-up spring - מַעְיֵן הַחֲתוּם - are men. It was taught in the name of R. Nathan: The expressions "A locked garden" and "A fountain locked" point to two acts of coition, one in a natural way and the other in an unnatural way.

⁶⁰Berakoth 24a

⁶¹Baba Metziah 7b, Baba Batra 168b, Gittin 21b and Gittin 23a

⁶²Song of Songs 4:12

⁶³Pirkey D'Rabbi Eleazer, Ch. 21

⁶⁴Vayikrah Rabbah 32:5

Other midrashim define the Song of Songs verse differently. Bamidbar Rabbah⁶⁵ switches around the meaning of the first two phrases by defining "גַּל נְעוּרִים" as virgins and "גַּל נְעוּרִים" as married women, while completely redefining "מַעֲקֵנֵי הַתּוֹמִים" as unmarried women who are either widowers or divorced. Midrash Tehillim⁶⁶ defines "גַּל נְעוּרִים" as all married women and combines "גַּל נְעוּרִים" and "מַעֲקֵנֵי הַתּוֹמִים" as both referring to betrothed women. Paralleling Vayikrah Rabbah, Midrash Tehillim names "גַּל נְעוּרִים" and "נְעוּרִים גַּל" as two terms for intercourse. Finally Otzer HaMidrashim⁶⁷ provides two sets of definitions, one according to R. Natan and another according to R. Nehemia. Defining the first two phrases, R. Natan says "גַּל נְעוּרִים" are men and "גַּל נְעוּרִים" are women. R. Nehemia defines all three phrases as "נְעוּרִים גַּל" meaning betrothed virgins, "גַּל נְעוּרִים" meaning married women, and "מַעֲקֵנֵי הַתּוֹמִים" meaning virgins. Whichever midrash one chooses to follow, they each confirm the prevalent use of these terms as euphemisms for the sexual woman or adolescent. The literal meanings of these phrases play on the natural images of water and foliage, which the reader associates with *Gan Eden*.

Shir HaShirim Rabbah⁶⁸ and Pesikta De-Rab Kahana⁶⁹ use Song of Songs 4:12 to tell a parallel story about two unmarried sisters who actively pursued finding husbands:

"A garden shut up is my sister, my bride" (Song of Songs 4:12) R. Judah b. R. Simon in the name of R. Joshua b. Levi made a comparison to a

⁶⁵Bamidbar Rabbah 3:6

⁶⁶Midrash Tehillim 122

⁶⁷Otzer HaMidrashim, p. 130

⁶⁸Shir HaShirim Rabbah 4:12

⁶⁹Pesikta De-Rab Kahana 11:6

king who had two daughters, an elder and a younger, whom he neglected to marry. He left them many years and went abroad. The daughters thereupon took the law into their own hands and found husbands, and each one took from her husband his signature [to the marriage contract] and his seal. When the king returned home, he heard tales about his daughters that they had miscondacted themselves. So he issued a proclamation that all people should assemble in the stadium, and he himself came and held court there. He said to his daughters: "Have you really acted thus and miscondacted yourselves?" Forthwith each one produced the signature and seal of her husband. He summoned his son-in-law and asked him who he had married. He replied: "I am your first son-in-law, the husband of your elder daughter." "What is this?" he said to him. "This" he replied "is my seal and this is my ring." Similarly with the second. The king thereupon said: "My daughters have guarded themselves against immorality, and do you [the towns people] malign and abuse them [my daughters]? I swear that I will punish you."

This story is refreshing in its portrayal of sisters by expanding on the metaphor of a "sealed spring." Their "gardens," meaning their vaginas, had been locked, but they changed their situation. Abandoned from their father's daily care and guidance, the sisters take the initiative and find men to marry. The reader is left to wonder if these men were physically and emotionally desired by the women, or merely utilitarian caretakers. Given that the sisters were the king's daughters, and presumably had the palace and its comforts at their disposal, the former situation is more likely. If this is so, while following their hearts, the sisters calculatingly ensured their credibility by attaining a *ketubah* and access to their husbands' assets (in the form of their signatures.) Since the townspeople were secretly talking behind the sisters' backs about their presumably "unlawful actions," we might infer that the weddings were not public affairs. Perhaps they were ashamed of their situation or they did not want to host a big celebration in their father's absence. When their father did return, the reason for his disappearance and return being unclear, the father first addressed his daughters. He publicly

asked them for an explanation. Based on his actions one might infer that he was not in contact with his daughters during his lengthy absence, otherwise he would have been aware of their marriages. In addition we learn that he trusted his daughters' integrity by risking public humiliation. Finally we learn that the men the sisters chose to marry, were honest and maintained their dedication to their wives.

This story provides a powerful account of two women who worked together to build their own lives regardless of their absentee father and non-existent mother. Somehow they knew that wealth was not the answer to a meaningful life. They ventured out of their protective palace, without a mother's guidance and a father's presence, to pursue love and stability. They held their heads high and rebuilt their lives. Today, these nameless woman can be role models for "Motherless Daughters,"⁷⁰ women seeking mates, women in search of their own happiness and women of dysfunctional families who are attempting to break the cycle of abuse or neglect.

Though the term "רגל" meaning "foot" or "leg" is another common biblical euphemism for male or female genitalia⁷¹, it only appears once in the Talmud⁷² when referring specifically to the vaginal area:

R. Johanan said: That profligate (Sisera) had seven sexual connections on that day (when he fled from Barak and Deborah) for it is said:

"Between her feet (בין רגליה) he sunk, he fell, he lay; at her feet he

⁷⁰"Motherless Daughters" is a phrase coined by Hope Edelman, Motherless Daughters: A Legacy of Loss (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group Inc., 1994)

⁷¹Edward F. Campbell Jr., The Anchor Bible: Ruth (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1975), p. 121.

⁷²Yebamoth 103a

sunk, he fell; where he sunk, there he fell down dead." (Judges 5:27)
 But surely, she (Yael) derived gratification from the transgression! R.
 Johanan replied in the name of R. Simeon b. Yohai: All the favors of
 the wicked are evil for the righteous.

This midrash plays on the repetition of the verbs "to fall- נָפַל", "to sink- קָרַע"
 " and to lie down- שָׁכַב " which appear seven times in one verse. The
 Talmud explains these seemingly repetitive verbs as seven euphemistic
 accounts of sexual intercourse. It sites this explanation after a list of biblical
 instances in which the word "feet" is an obvious sexual euphemism. The
 unfortunate result of this talmudic re-reading of Judges 5:27 is that Yael's
 physical strength as the heroin of the day is put aside in favor of her sexual
 prowessness. In addition R. Johanan's statement suggests that Yael's "favor"
 of killing Sisera only resulted in evil for the Israelite people. Imagine a
 modern re-write that would emphasize her strength and skill:

R. Michal bat. Yitzchak v' Esther Sara said: Yael fought seven times
 against Sisera (when he fled from Barak and Deborah) for it is said:
 "Between her feet (בֵּין רַגְלֶיהָ) he sunk, he fell, he lay; at her feet he
 sunk, he fell; where he sunk, there he fell down dead." (Judges 5:27)
 When Sisera first entered Yael's tent he desired sexual satisfaction after
 a tense battle, so her grabbed for Yael's feet ("רַגְלֶיהָ") meaning her
 vaginal area.) To ward off an unwanted sexual encounter, Yael (using
 her self defense skills) first tried to talk him out of his idea, then placed
 a table in-between them, then she screamed out for help, then she ran
 for the door but was blocked by his body, then she poked at his eyes,
 then she kicked him in the genitals and finally as he lay on the floor in
 pain she grabbed a tent pin and killed him. These seven actions of
 survival are reflected in the seven seemingly repetitive verbs. To this
 day Yael serves as a model for women in danger.

The Woman's vagina is also compared to the word בַּיִת, meaning house. In
 the Talmud⁷³, we find a discussion between a few rabbis about the meaning of

⁷³Niddah 16b

the verse "But he that despises His ways shall die." (Proverbs 19:16) R. Johanah responds that this verse applies to those people described in the Book of Ben Sira. He states:

There are three [types] that I hate, yea, four that I do not love: A scholar who frequents wine-shops [or others say, a scholar that is a gossip], a person who sets up a college in the high parts of town, one who holds the member (penis) when making water and one who enters his friend's house suddenly (והנכנס לבית חברו פתאום). R. Johanah observed: Even his own house (ואפילו לביתו). R. Simeon b. Yohai observed:

There are four [types] which the Holy One, blessed be He, hates, and for me, I do not love them: The man who enters his house suddenly (הנכנס לביתו פתאום) and much more so [if he enters] his friend's house (לבית חברו), the man who holds his member when he makes water, the man who when naked makes water in front of his bed, and the man who has intercourse in the presence of any living creature.

In the above text the word בית, house, refers to a house and it serves as a euphemism for the woman's vagina during intercourse. According to both R. Johanah and R. Simeon b. Yohai, it is detestable for a man to enter into his friend's house suddenly. It is assumed that this is unacceptable behavior because of the possibility of interrupting and perhaps seeing a man and a woman engaging in sexual relations. But immediately following this sage advise, a man is warned from even entering his own house swiftly. Presumably this does not mean literally walking into his own house, what could possibly be the danger in such behavior? Rather "house" here refers to the woman's vaginal canal. Here a man is warned not to force his wife to have sexual intercourse with him too rapidly, or not to reach orgasm before she does.

In another text⁷⁴ R. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, along with R. Joshua and R. Akiva, teaches that the woman's womb is compared to a house with doors:

R. Eliezer says: Just as a house has doors (דלתות לבית), so too a woman has doors (דלתות לאשה), as it is written "because it shut not up the doors (דלתות) of my mother's womb (בטני)" (Job 3:10) R. Joshua says: Just as for a house there are key, so too for a woman (כך לאשה), as it is written "God heeded her and opened her womb (מפתחות לבית)", as it is written "God heeded her and opened her womb (רַחֲמָה)" (Genesis 30:22) R. Akiva says: Just as a house has hinges (צירים לבית), even so does a woman have labor pains (צירים לאשה), as it says written "she was seized with labor pains (נהפכו עליה צריה)", and she crouched down and gave birth" (I Samuel 4:19)

The term "house" traditionally suggests images of stability, protection and comfort. Though the woman's vagina is not specifically named, the comparison of a woman who can be opened, closed and locked like a door, clearly refers to her vaginal area in a sexual context. The midrash bases this connection with a creative play on the word ציר, which means both hinges of a door and labor pains. The woman's vagina is shut naturally by her own will, as in the case of Job's mother; it is opened and closed by God, in the case of Rachel; and it is part of the birthing process as in Phinehas' wife. In this midrash, both the woman and God appear to hold the keys to accessing the woman's vagina, as opposed to the man in many other texts.

The term נקבות meaning "cavity" or "hole" is used to refer to human male genitalia⁷⁵ and female animal genitalia.⁷⁶ In one case, that of a hermaphrodite⁷⁷, the term is used specifically for the female human genitalia:

⁷⁴Vayikrah Rabbah 14;4

⁷⁵Brachoth 23a

R. Samuel son of R. Judah said in the name of R. Abba, the brother of R. Judah b. Zabdi, in the name of Rab Judah in the name of Rab: In respect of the hermaphrodite the penalty of stoning is incurred through either of his organs. An objection was raised: R. Eliezer stated, "In respect of the hermaphrodite the penalty of stoning is incurred as in the case of a male." This however applies only to his male organ; but in respect of his female organ (בנקבות) no penalty is incurred!- He [Rab] holds the same opinion as the following Tanna. For it was taught: R. Simai stated that in respect of the hermaphrodite the penalty of stoning is incurred through either of his organs. What is R. Simai's reason? - Raba replied: Bar Hamduri has explained it to me as follows: "And thou shalt not lie with a male, as well as with womankind (אשה משכב) (Lev. 18:22); what male is it that is capable of two manners of lying (משכב)? Obviously the hermaphrodite. And the Rabbis? - Though he is capable of two manners of lying it is nevertheless written in Scripture, "With a male (אח זכר)"

Similar to contemporary controversies which struggle over the medical and emotional consequences of hermaphrodite children, the rabbis grapple over an acceptable sexual solution for such a person. R. Eleazer does not want to place the person in danger of violating laws against homosexual relations by having the person use his/her penis for anal intercourse with a male. Therefore R. Eleazer rules that a hermaphrodite can only be punished by using his/her penis with another man. But if he/she uses his/her vagina while sleeping with a male it is acceptable. Yet Rab holds that the hermaphrodite must totally abstain from any sexual relations because he reads the verse "And thou shalt not lie with a male, as well as with womankind (אשה משכב) (Lev. 18:22) as specifically applying to hermaphrodites. These people are able to sleep with both men and women (משכב) and therefore they can not sleep with either one. The rabbis solve

⁷⁶Bekoroth 39b

⁷⁷Yebamoth 83b

this disagreement by ruling that the words "with a male" indicate the true violation, and so the hermaphrodite may in fact have sexual relations only using his/her vagina (נקבה). This compromise might have in fact been biologically practical. To force the hermaphrodite to only use its penis and obtain an erection might be physically impossible to attain. The text might have chosen to assume that the hermaphrodite would be sleeping with a woman and using its penis or vagina with a woman, but the context of the quoted Torah verse has been understood as speaking to men, and not women. Evidence of this is that most anti-halachic texts focus on male-male and not female-female relations. This text is no exception.

Uterus & Vagina

Biological References: Birth, Maturity and Miscarriage

The common terms for the woman's uterus and vaginal area in discussions of birth and miscarriage are Roman words for sections of a house, along with the words קבר (meaning "grave"), רחם (meaning "uterus" and coming from the same root as "compassion") אם (meaning "mother") and רגל (meaning "foot"). The fascinating metaphors of a Roman house, for the woman's uterus and vaginal area, are found in the following Mishnah⁷⁸:

The sages spoke of a woman in metaphor: [There is in her] chamber (החדר) and ante-chamber (הפרוזדור) and an upper chamber (העלייה). The blood of the chamber (החדר) is unclean, that of the upper chamber (העלייה) is clean. If blood is found in the ante-chamber (הפרוזדור), and there arises a doubt about its character, it is deemed unclean, because it is presumed to have come from the source (המקור).

In another part of the Mishnah⁷⁹ the world to come is also compared to a Roman house:

R. Jacob said: "This world is like a vestibule (הפרוזדור) to the world to come; prepare thyself in this vestibule (הפרוזדור) that thou may enter into the banqueting-hall (טרקלין)"

Each text is connected to life and death. In the first Mishnah, the woman's vaginal area is named and paralleled to three sections of a Roman house.

⁷⁸Niddah 2:5

⁷⁹Pirkey Avot 4:16

The woman is described from the inside out. The first part of the woman is described as a חדר, meaning the inner room of a Roman house, referring to the innermost part of the woman's genitals, probably the uterus. The second part is the פרוזדור, usually referring to the verandah or vestibule of a Roman house and here meaning the vaginal canal. Finally, the word עלייה, meaning the upper story of a Roman house, here referring to the clitoris or labia majoria. According to the Mishnah, the woman's uterus is always ritually impure and her clitoris is always pure. Yet the woman's vaginal canal may or may not be ritually pure depending on whether she is menstruating. Here the vaginal area and uterus combined is referred to as the source (המקור). It is interesting to note that the woman is compared to a Roman house using typical Greek words. Perhaps this reflects the common reference of a wife to a house (בית) in Rabbinic literature, or because women are often associated with domestic duties.

On the other hand the same word פרוזדור is used as a metaphor for the passage way to the world to come. The world to come, עולם הבא, is defined by Rashi and Maimonides as "the court of the king", as in God's court in the world to come.⁸⁰ The parallel usage between the vaginal canal and the entrance into the world to come plays on life and death. The woman's vagina holds the potential to create life⁸¹, sustain life, and also reject an abnormal life. The woman's body is the beginning of our journeys as human beings to this world and perhaps is the end of the experience of life to death.

⁸⁰Kravitz, Leonard and Olitzky, Kerry ed. Pirke Avot: A Modern Commentary on Jewish Ethics (New York: UAH Press, 1993), p. 66.

⁸¹In Niddah 42b the word פרוזדור is used to refer to the uterus and vaginal canal in a discussion of birth

In contemporary literature, people who tell about their near death experiences often describe a tunnel they pass through. Perhaps this tunnel is the vaginal canal that the rabbis refer to which we re-enter as we pass into God's palace in the world to come.

In another section of Talmud⁸², the point at which a woman becomes a *bogereth* (a mature woman) is debated. Though the physical signs of a woman's maturity focus around her breast development, pubic hair, and the lowering for her public mound (משנתמעך הכף)⁸³, the debate ends with the opinion of R. Papa and R. Hinena b. R. Ika who assert that the woman's maturity is "in connection with (or compared to) the law of the Tyrian courtyard (אחצר צורית)" concerning tithes. Though the euphemisms are different, פרוזדור and חצר, both terms use the metaphor of a house to refer to the woman's vaginal area. R. Johannah explains the parallel between women and courtyards by saying that Tyrian courtyards regularly place watchmen at their enterances (שכנו בצור מושיבין שומר על פתח החצר). According to R. Akiba "Any courtyard which one may open and another close, is exempt from tithe" presumably because it is not closely guarded. So too, the parallel is subtly inferred: any woman who is not closely guarded is either not presumed to be in need of protection, since she is not yet a *bogereth*, or she is in need of protection and instead let loose for all men to have. R. Nehemiah then ruled that "Any courtyard in which no one is ashamed to eat is subject to tithe." Again, perhaps the eating of properly tithed food is compared to a husband's legal sexual encounter with his wife.

⁸²Niddah 47a-b

⁸³R. Simeon is also quoted in Y.Yebamoth 1:2 as using "until the crest of the genitals begin to flatten - עד שתתפשט הכף - as a sign of maturity.

In keeping with the metaphor of the woman's vaginal canal as a passage from life to death, קבר, meaning "grave," is another word commonly used for a woman's uterus in discussions of birth. We read in the Mishnah⁸⁴:

One may not deliver an animal [in giving birth] on a festival, but one may assist it. We may deliver a woman on the Sabbath, summon a midwife for her from place to place, desecrate the Sabbath on her account, and tie up the navel-string. R. Jose said: One may cut [it] too. And all the requirements of circumcision may be done on the Sabbath.

The Talmud⁸⁵ then goes on to discuss how one is to know when a woman is actually going to go into labor, and therefore one is obliged to desecrate the Sabbath:

Rab Judah said in Samuel's name: If a woman is in confinement, as long as the uterus (קבר) is open, whether she states, "I need it" or "I do not need it," we must desecrate the Sabbath on her account. If the uterus (קבר) is closed, whether she says "I need it" or "I do not need it," we may not desecrate the Sabbath for her: that is how R. Ashi recited it.

Mar Zutra recited it thus: Rab Judah said in Samuel's name: If a woman is in confinement, as long as the uterus (קבר) is open, whether she states, "I need it" or "I do not need it," we must desecrate the Sabbath for her. If the uterus (קבר) is closed, if she says, "I need it," we desecrate the Sabbath for her; if she does not say "I need it," we do not desecrate the Sabbath for her.

Rabina asked Meremat: Mar Zutra recited it in the direction of leniency, [while] R. Ashi recited it in the direction of stringency; which is the law? - The law is as Mar Zutra, replied "when [a matter of] life is in doubt, we are lenient."

From when is the opening of the uterus (קבר)?- Abaye said: From when she sits on the seat of travail. R. Huna son of R. Joshua said: From when the blood slowly flows down; Others state: From when her friends carry her by her arms.

⁸⁴Shabbath 18:3

⁸⁵Shabbath 128b-129a

Throughout this passage, the word קבר is used to refer to the uterus during birth. The "grave" is a dark place where earth and body reunite at death. The earth rejuvenates life through decay and growth of plant life. The earth provides nourishment for humans to grow produce for our sustenance, as well as provide a place for humans to rest eternally. So too, the uterus is a place where life is planted, and either grows toward maturity and is born, or dies through miscarriage.⁸⁶ The uterus is the total source of nourishment for all fetuses before birth. Like a body that is laid to rest in the earth, the uterus is dark and completely surrounding.

Death is often feared because of life's beauty and death's unknown. So too, the power of the uterus to sustain as well as to kill is frightening. Given these two meanings, the word for uterus, קבר, has a nurturing and protective connotation, as well as a fearful and destructive one. As opposed to the texts that negatively refer to the woman's vaginal area in a sexual context, here the word קבר justifiably may be playing on the fear of birthing, in which a woman uses her קבר to bring about life and death. Given this reading, it is clear why the text (Shabbath 128b-129a) centers around the safety of the woman's life, by endorsing Mar Zutra's lenient interpretation of Rab Judah's words.

⁸⁶In Niddah 21a a discussion arises over whether a woman is able to have a miscarriage with out blood issuing with the fetal mass, providing a situation in which it is doubtful whether it was an actual miscarriage or just a discharge of tissue. Here R. Joshua, using the word "grave" for uterus, rules that the woman "must bring a sacrifice and it may be eaten, since it is impossible for the uterus (קבר) to open without some bleeding."

An astounding text in Bereshit Rabbah⁸⁷ addresses the fear and wonder of childbirth with the following account of Rachel's birth:

Bar Zutrah said- Come and see how beloved our father Jacob loved Rachel. Even in the moment that he [Jacob] came to bless her son [Joseph, upon the completion of her childbirth] he gave her a blessing of breasts and womb (ברכות שדים ורחם). Blessing her nipples (דדיא) so they would be prepared to nurse, and her womb (מעיא) so it would be prepared to give birth in the future.

Here we find an ancient reference to blessings over safe childbirth. Where have these blessings gone? According to Bar Zutrah, the father pronounces this blessing by himself. Today women have *tkhines*, Yiddish prayers mainly written in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Germany and the Netherlands for women, to be said on occasions in a woman's life. In Seder Tkhines Uvakashos (the Order of Supplications and Entreaties), an anthology published anonymously in Furth in 1762, which draws upon at least four earlier collections, we find the following *tkhine* to be said by a woman after a safe delivery⁸⁸:

When she comes out of childbed, she says this: Lord of all the world, You hear all the prayers of those who call upon You wholeheartedly, and who fear You. Lord God, I thank you as a Lord that you have caused me to escape from the great, bitter pains of childbirth, and You give me milk to nourish the child, and strength to arise today from the bed and return to the service of your holy name... Lord of the worlds, accept my speech and my prayer and my calling upon Your holy Name from the bottom of my heart as if they were the [Temple] alter and the

⁸⁷Bereshit Rabbah 98:20

⁸⁸Rabbi Debra Orenstein, ed. "Tkhines 103" in Lifecycles: Jewish Women on Life Passages & Personal Milestones, Vol. 1 (Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1994), p. 21-22. Also see Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin ed. Out Of The Depths I Call To You (New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc. 1992), p. 108-109 for an Italian version of a *tkhine* said upon a safe delivery.

offering. Protect me further from evil, along with all Israel who trust in You. Continue to give me strength, and also to my husband, that we may be able to raise this child and the other [children] easily according to the desire of our hearts. And also give [us] your help that the child may serve Your Name at all times with truth and with love. God our Lord, may this come true in Your Name, Amen.

This prayer concentrates on the themes of the danger of childbirth, thankfulness for the ability to breast-feed, and a petition for the strength and wisdom to raise children. In this prayer, the mother and father are both viewed as responsible for child rearing. Missing from this prayer is the use of feminine God imagery, such as the phrase "Av HaRachaman" the Compassionate One, playing on the word "rechem," meaning "womb"; as well as references to Biblical women who all experienced the pangs of childbirth. A modern re-write of this prayer which focuses on these missing references while retaining the essence of Bar Zutrah's teaching and the *tkhine's* message:

Blessed are you *Em HaRachaman*, Mother of the Universe, the mother of Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah, who has caused me to birth life. You opened up the wombs of our formothers in ancient times and helped them close them for new worlds to grow. So too, may my womb that has opened to the love of my spouse, close to rejuvenate and one day produce life again. May my breasts gush forth with milk, just as our mother's Sara's breasts fed nations. May my health, and the health of my child(ren) and lover always increase to enable us to love one another and create a Jewish home that sanctifies the holy and enables us to practice the traditions of our people. Blessed are you, the source of life, who has shielded me from danger and enabled me to bring forth life.

The word אִמָּה, meaning "mother" appears in another midrashic passage⁸⁹ referring to "womb." The passage discusses how the gender of a child is determined in the womb:

A woman's womb is full of blood (אִם שֶׁל אִשָּׁה מְלֵא דָם), some of which goes out by way of her menstrual flow, and by the favor of the Holy One, blessed be He, a drop of white matter (semen) (שֶׁל לְבָנוֹת) (טֶפֶף) goes and falls into it and immediately the fetus begins to form. It may be compared to milk in a basin; if one puts meso [a curdling or stiffening agent] into it, it congeals and becomes consistent, if not, it continues to be loose [to tremble or wobble.] It may be compared to two artists, each of whom executes the likeness of the other; thus it is always that the female is formed from the [seed of the] man, and the male that from the [seed of the] woman... R. Adin said: There is no barber who cuts his own hair.

Before our knowledge of X and Y chromosomes, the above text taught that the gender of a child is determined in the woman's אִמָּה, by the parent who is the opposite sex of the child. If the child turns out to be a boy, then the woman must have determined his gender, and if the child is a girl then the man must have determined her sex. The rationale is that both artists and barbers do not paint portraits of themselves and cut their own hair respectively. Therefore a father or mother can not create something in his own likeness. The use of the word אִמָּה, meaning "mother" seems to emphasize the woman's status after the birth has taken place. Just as a child's gender can only be "proven" once the child is born, so to the mother's womb becomes an אִמָּה only once birth has passed and she is a mother.

⁸⁹Vayikrah Rabbah 14:9

In a passage discussed above⁹⁰, R. Johanan accuses Sisera of engaging in sex with Yael seven times, representing the seven times the verbs כרע, נפל and שכב appear. Just before this passage R. Kahana comments on the definition of the phrase "between her feet" in the Mishnah and uses the word רגל, meaning "foot" as a euphemism for uterus:

R. Kahana raised an objection: "And against her afterbirth that comes out from between her feet" (Deut. 28:57) - Abaye replied: When a woman kneels down to give birth she presses her heels against her thighs and thus gives birth. Come and hear: "He had neither dressed his feet nor trimmed his beard" (II Samuel 19:25) - This is a euphemistic expression. Come and hear: "And Saul went in to cover his feet" (I Samuel 24:4) - This is a euphemistic expression. Come and hear: "Surely he is covering his feet in the cabinet of the cool chamber" (Judges 3:24) - This is a euphemistic expression. "Between her feet.." (Deut. 28:57) - This is a euphemistic expression.

Above are a handful of examples the rabbis show as evidence for the word רגל as a euphemism for genital area. According to the text, the word רגל is used as a euphemism for uterus, since when lying on her back the woman physically pushes her feet against her thighs to open her uterus for birth. During birth, her feet are closest to her vagina and most visible if looking at her vagina. In addition, if one considers the purpose of the feet for any human being, that of support, the choice of the word רגל for uterus takes on a different meaning. The uterus becomes the physical support for the fetus' life that enables it to one day walk on its own.

⁹⁰Yebamoth 103a

Uterus & Vagina

Menstrual References

Three terms are often used when referring to the menstruant woman's vagina: *מקורה* and *בית רחם*, *פה/פי*. The word *פה* is used in the Mishnah⁹¹ when discussing the signs of the onset of menstruation:

If a woman has fixed periods, it is enough for her [that she be deemed unclean only from] her time [of suffering a flow.] And these are the symptoms of fixed periods: if she yawned or sneezed or felt pain in the top of her stomach (*כריסה בפי חוששת*) or the bottom of her bowels, or if she discharges, or if a kind of shuddering took hold on her, or other similar symptoms. Any woman who experienced [one of] these symptoms three times, they are deemed the symptoms of a fixed time.

According to this Mishnah, a woman becomes ritually impure once the above symptoms occur three times. The Mishnah refers to the menstrual cramps a woman endures as coming from *כריסה בפי* literally the "mouth of her stomach." In another Talmudic passage⁹², Beth Shammai teaches that "a woman needs two testing-rags" to check her vagina for the presence of blood before she engages in each act of sexual intercourse, while Beth Hillel rules that a woman only needs to check herself two times during the whole night, regardless of how many times she engages in sexual intercourse. The Talmud continues by stating:

It was taught: Beth Shammai said to Beth Hillel, "According to your view is there no need to provide against the possibility that she might emit a drop of blood the size of a mustard seed in the course of the first

⁹¹Niddah 9:8

⁹²Niddah 16a-b

act and this would be covered up with semen during the second act?" "But" replied Beth Hillel "even according to your view is there no need to provide against the possibility that the semen, while still in the mouth (עד שהרוק בתוך הפה), was crushed out of existence? ["We maintain our view"] the former [Beit Hillel] retorted, "because what is crushed once is not the same as that which is crushed twice."

In the above passage, Beth Shammai and Beth Hillel debate the possibility of a woman bleeding due to intercourse or due to the unexpected onset of her menstruation after sexual intercourse. This would place the man and woman in violation of the laws of *niddah*. Beth Shammai is concerned that her blood might mix with the semen from the first ejaculation of the evening and be hard to detect, therefore Beth Shammai rules stringently and suggests that each act of intercourse must be preceded by checking for blood. But Beth Hillel argues that the woman's uterus, called her פה meaning "mouth" or "orifice," would be filled with semen and dilute the blood, effectively making the checking of blood impossible. Again the word פה is used for the uterus that is possibly ritually impure due to blood.

Just as in Shabbath 152a when we read "A Tanna taught: Though a woman be as a pitcher (חמת) full of filth and her mouth (פיה) be full of blood, yet all speed after her," so too here the word פה, means vaginal area.⁹³ Perhaps the word, פה, meaning "mouth" or "orifice," is used because of the similar delicate flesh that appears in both the woman's vagina and a person's mouth, the similar warmth of each area, and the ability for both the mouth and vagina to open wide - and for a penis to enter and one for a child and blood to exit.

⁹³Sanhedrin 100a and Menachot 98a uses the term פה to refer to a childless woman whose womb is finally opened.

As we saw earlier in the Talmud Yerushalmi⁹⁴ and the Bible, the term הרחם בית (or just רחם) is another euphemism for the vagina. In Shabbath⁹⁵ and Kallah⁹⁶ the text explains that women offered כומז, some sort of golden ornament, which the Talmud defines as "casts of the womb (של בית הרחם) (דפוס)" to make atonement for building the Golden Calf. In a couple of other instances in the Talmud⁹⁷ the term הרחם בית refers to the womb of a female animal, yet there are two instances when this term is used to refer to the female woman. The first is in Niddah⁹⁸ when Beth Shammai and Beth Hillel are discussing when a woman is considered untouchable due to her menstruation. Since a woman may not feel the beginning of her blood flow, or she may be asleep when it begins and not feel it, or she may be passing through the market place and not know her menstruation has begun. Beth Shammai argues that her period of *niddah* begins "at the time of discovering the flow." Following this statement his reasoning is given:

This is Shammai's reason: If in fact any blood were there it would have flowed out earlier. And Hillel? [What is his reasoning?] - The walls of the womb (כותלי בית הרחם) may have held it [the blood] back. And Shammai? - The walls of the womb (כותלי בית הרחם) do not hold blood back. But what can be said for a woman who uses an absorbent in her marital intercourse? - Abaye replied: Shammai agrees in the case of one who uses an absorbent (במשמשת מוך). Raba replied: An absorbent too [does not affect Shammai's ruling, since] perspiration causes it to shrink. Raba, however agrees in the case of a tightly packed absorbent.

⁹⁴See above Yerushalmi Hallah: Perek 2, Halachah 4

⁹⁵Shabbath 64a

⁹⁶Kallah 50b (1:7)

⁹⁷Hulin 51a; Hulin 70a.

⁹⁸Niddah 3a

In the above discussion over the onset of menstruation, the woman's vaginal area is called **בית הרחם** (literally "a house of the womb" or "a house of comfort".) Shammai feels that the **בית הרחם** is not able to hold back the flow of blood, therefore causing the woman to bleed uncontrollably. He is challenged by the situation of a woman who consciously uses contraceptives that block blood flow (such as a sponge or diaphragm) during sexual intercourse which may cause her to engage in sex without knowing if her menstruation has begun. In this case Abaye feels that Shammai would rule that her menstruation would officially begin when it actually began and not when it was noticed. But Raba feels that if the woman was using a very effective contraception that blocked the flow of her blood, Shammai would have ruled that her *niddah* period would begin once the blood was discovered.

In a similar text⁹⁹ the rabbis argue over when a woman's *niddah* begins if she prematurely aborts. Again the term "walls of the womb- **כותלי בית הרחם**" is used to refer to the vaginal area. Perhaps these texts use the phrase **בית הרחם** to warn the man that a woman's "house of comfort," her "place of the womb" could bring disaster if entered at the wrong time. Something so comforting and potentially enriching, as the vagina, has the possibility of being taboo. The choice of this term reinforces this double edged sword.

The final term for the vaginal area is **מקורה**- meaning "source" or "fountain." As we read earlier in Niddah¹⁰⁰, when the woman's vagina is compared to three sections of a Roman house, the **מקור** is the place from

⁹⁹Niddah 25b

¹⁰⁰Niddah 17b

where blood flows. Most of the Midrashic texts use the verse "he hath bared her fountain (מְקוֹרָהּ), and she hath uncovered the fountain of her blood (מְקוֹר דְּמִיָּה) (Lev. 20:18) as the proof text for using the word מְקוֹרָהּ as a synonym for vagina. Ramban¹⁰¹ calls the vagina an "oiled" or "perfumed" fountain (הַמְקוֹר הַמוֹשַׁחַת) that "should be covered, and not bared" during the period of *niddah* "in order to draw its bad extremely harmful waters". In another commentary¹⁰² Ramban uses the term מְקַרָּה בְּדֶרֶךְ literally "in the way of her fountain" to refer to an act of prostitution.

The Talmud picks up on the interpretation of מְקַרָּה as a euphemism for sexual intercourse, by teaching that "he hath made naked her fountain" (Lev. 20:18) means "They might rule that in the natural way it is forbidden (אִסּוּרָא כְּדֶרֶכָּהּ) ; in an unnatural way it is permitted (שְׂרִיא כְּדֶרֶכָּהּ שְׂרִיא). But, surely, it is written, 'As with womankind'."¹⁰³ Based on the context, the term מְקַרָּה refers to intercourse with the vagina in a permitted way, meaning when she is ritually clean, or in a forbidden way, meaning during her menstruation.

Pesikta De-Rab Kahana¹⁰⁴ and Vayikrah Rabbah¹⁰⁵ choose another biblical proof text to parallel to Lev. 20:18 in defining the woman's menstrual vagina: "By slothfulness the rafters (הַמְקָרָה) sink in; and through idleness of the hands, the house leaketh (Eccles. 10:18). While the Vayikrah Rabbah text blames the woman for not covering herself and checking herself before sexual

¹⁰¹Ramban on Leviticus 18:19

¹⁰²Ramban on Exodus 21:9

¹⁰³Horayoth 4a

¹⁰⁴Pesikta De-Rab Kahana 12:15

¹⁰⁵Vayikrah Rabbah 19:4

intercourse, the Peskita text only blames the woman for not checking herself.

The Peskita reads:

Taken in special sense, the word rafters, *המקרה*, in "By slothfulness the rafters sink in," provides additional proof that by a woman's slothfulness, the well of her blood sinks in- that is, because she is slothful in examining herself, her menstrual flow is excessive. For in "the rafters (*המקרה*) sink in" [the phrase] is taken as a cognate of *מקורה*, "the well of her menstrual blood," as in the verse "he hath made naked her well *מקורה*" (Lev. 20:18)

The play on the similar roots and sounds of the words *המקרה* and *מקורה* are used to blame a woman's heavy bleeding on her lazy *niddah* practices. If she sleeps with her husband during her menstruation, not only will she and her husband be "cut off from among her people" (Lev. 20:18) but she will suffer excessive menstrual bleeding. Peskita¹⁰⁶ even tells of a story in which Rabban Gamaliel's maidservant is praised for checking her menstrual flow each time she touched one of his ritually clean jars before removing them from one house to another. The result of excessive concern with blood and ritual purity can be damaging to women. Women become taboo because of their constant source of impurity. Since women have the power to "corrupt" they must be trusted, and therefore men risk being fooled. The presence of the story of Rabbi Gamaliel's maidservant is significant because of its fairytale quality of reassuring men that it is possible to be very careful about the laws of *niddah*. Yet how does the modern woman feel about such laws? Is she pleased with the privacy her menstrual period offers her? Does she enjoy the focus on her body that the period of *niddah* allows? Or is she angry at the parallels between her menstrual blood and "impurity"? Does she yearn for

¹⁰⁶Pesikta De-Rab Kahana 12:15

her husband's warm touch upon her stomach during her menstrual cramps? Does she feel a need to orgasm and release the tightening of her uterus at a time when sexual intercourse is prohibited? These questions are of no concern to the male authors of the above text. Ritual purity is of utmost concern, not the woman's emotional or physical well-being. A modern rewrite might focus on the woman's need for sexual comfort during all times in her cycle, as well as a new metaphor for the woman that focuses on the cycles of her body:

Rabbi Michal Bat Yitzchak v' Esther Sara said a woman is compared to water. During the beginning of the month, when her uterus is beginning to fill itself with blood and nutrients, she is like warm water. She is able to nourish herself and others. In the middle of the month she is like ice. Her uterus is full of blood and she is able to with stand the greatest weight, that of a child. At the end of the month she is like the steam of a pot of water that begins to boil and then boils until there is no water left. At first her blood flows lightly, then heavy, and finally light again. Just as water is necessary to drink in the winter when it is hot, and ice is needed in the summer to make drinks cold, so too is the woman's vaginal area in need of sexual attention at every time of the month.

The Woman's Breasts

There are four terms that are used to describe the woman's breasts: שדיים, לבנה, דד, and בית הדדים. These terms are used when the woman's breasts are metaphors for other things, refer to nursing and the onset of puberty, and when describing the woman's body during the punishment of a *Sotah* woman. Following are examples of all such uses.

Breasts as a Metaphor

A woman's breasts are the main source of nourishment for an infant child. Like a woman's vaginal area, her breasts are uniquely female. With the development of a fetus in a woman's womb, her breasts enlarge and her ability to nurse continues never ending, as long as there is a demand. The image of a bottomless well of nourishment is found through out midrashim concerning breasts. In Midrash Tanchuma¹⁰⁷ a rabbinic notion of primitive geology is put forth, comparing mountains to breasts:

"Then Moses and Israel sang" (Ex. 15:1) "So Israel after staying in Kadesh traveled on through the wilderness, skirting the land of Edom and Moab" (Judges 11:18) A mountain that was in the land of Moab was not shaken, because it had in it caves. But the mountains in the land of Israel shook because in them were rocks like breasts (שדיים), and the mountain was put next to it... This is compared to a maidwoman who saw her master's son and she jumped away.

¹⁰⁷Midrash Tanchuma, Chukat 47

In the above text the rabbis reasoned that in the case of an earthquake, mountains with caves will collapse into themselves, while mountains that are filled with rocks, like breasts that are filled with body tissue and milk, will shake. Similarly the text continues by teaching that the Egyptians were squished to death when the mountains of the waddai (the term שדיים is used for mountains) closed in on the Egyptians as they tried to chase after the Israelites. The use of the metaphor of breasts for mountains is a three-fold metaphor. First, both mountains and breasts can look alike. Second, both provide protection to those around them: Breasts protect infants from starvation and mountains protect animals and people from harsh wind and rain storms. Finally, both mountains and breasts are beautiful to look at on the landscape of a woman or land. The fertility of a woman and land is also linked to this metaphor.

Bereshit Rabbah¹⁰⁸ continues the similarity of mountains and breasts in a word play on the Valley of Siddim:

"They made a war in the Valley of Siddim (שדים)" - which had three names: Valley of Shadayim (שדיים), Valley of Shaveh (שוה), and Valley of Succot (סוכות). Valley of Shadayim because it produces sycamore trees (סדנים). Another reason: because it looks like breasts (שדיים). Another reason: because it suckles the children of the land like breasts (שהוא מניק את בנו כשדיים).

Isaiah 66:7-11 actually compares the land of Jerusalem to a woman who goes through labor pains and suckles her people Israel. God asks Israel to rejoice in Jerusalem's birth and suckle from her breasts, meaning the land. In Tannah

¹⁰⁸Bereshit Rabbah 42

D'ivray Eliahu Rabbah¹⁰⁹ this verse is used as a proof text to prove that breasts refer to Torah:

"Gather me seventy men from the elders of Israel" (Numb. 11:16)
 Children (עוללים) refers to children who attend school. "Sucklers of the breasts (שקייים)" (Job 2:16) are not breasts but Torah (אלא תורה) as it is written, "That you may suck from her breasts/ Consolation to the full,/ That you may draw from her bosom/ Glory to your delight." (Isaiah 66:11)

The rabbis are caught in their own trap. Since young children are called "sucklers of the breast," and since these children elsewhere are called school children, it would appear that these school children study breasts all day. Instead the rabbis define breasts as Torah. This metaphor of Torah compared to breasts follows many other parallels of Torah compared to a woman.¹¹⁰ Seen in this light, Torah is nourishing, a source of comfort, and enticing.

In another part of Bereshit Rabbah¹¹¹, Abraham is compared to a young girl that does not yet have breasts. Breasts are now compared to *Mitzvot*:

R. Berachia opened: Such that one who stiches together something that is torn, "a young girl" meaning Abraham (a young boy) who held on to the *mitzvot* and good deeds; "and had no breasts" (Song of Songs 8:8), breasts did not suckle him, neither did he have *mitzvot* or good deeds...

Abraham is considered praiseworthy because, according to this midrash, before he received the Torah he did not have a set of laws to teach him how

¹⁰⁹Tannah D'ivray Eliahu Rabbah 18

¹¹⁰Ari Aloni, "Torah as Love Goddess" in Essential Papers on the Talmud, ed. Michael Chernick (New York: New York University Press, 1994)

¹¹¹Bereshit Rabbah 39

to act. Yet it is implied that he followed God's ways and lived an exemplary life. In this passage breasts are compared to *mitzvot* which give a person strength and integrity, nourish one's empty soul, and sustain the misguided.

Finally Moses and Aaron, the receivers and transmitters of Torah and *mitzvot*, are compared to two breasts that nourish Israel during times of confusion, isolation and stress:

"And I let you grow like the plants of the field; and you continued to grow until you attained womanhood, until your breasts became firm (בְּעֵרִי עֲרִיִים שָׁדִים נִכְנֹו) and your hair sprouted" (Ezek. 16:7) You will come in wealth. Why is it written עֲרִי עֲרִי? Because one עַר stands for the booty they took from the Egyptians before their escape, and one עַר stands for the booty they captured from the Egyptians at sea once they drowned. Which booty was the greatest? "Breasts made firm..." These refer to Moses and Aaron who were to Israel like breasts that lactate...

In the above passage two of Israel's greatest male leaders are compared to one of the most feminine parts of a woman's body. Just as women have two breasts that nurture, comfort and are sexually enticing, so too do Moses and Aaron comfort Israel in the desert, help them find physical and spiritual sustenance, and entice Israel to be faithful to God and the laws of the Torah.

Breasts & Nursing

All of the above metaphors comparing women's breasts to mountains, Torah, *mitzvot* and leaders, reflect a positive view of women's breasts. Through out each text, the sustaining quality of the breasts seem to be the focus of all the metaphors. Yet the ability of a woman to lactate and nourish her young is both beautiful and dangerously powerful. As was quoted earlier, Bar Zutrah taught that Jacob loved Rachel so much that he gave her a "blessing of breasts and womb" upon the birth of their son.¹¹² In contrast during a time of danger, refraining from breast-feeding was a sign of mourning or communal fasting. *Sifre Dagd'tah al Esther*¹¹³ teaches that:

In the night that he [the King] was restless, the same hour that Mordechai went and divided the sages to one side and the students to the other (those children who had just been weaned - חלוצי שדיים - יונקים), the students ripped their clothes, women unraveled their hair (נשים שערן סחור), and women did not give their sons milk, and they cried and mourned over Mordechai and over Esther...

In this text women unraveled their hair and stopped breast-feeding as a reaction to the immanent danger Esther assumed as a secret Jew in the king's court, when Haman's plan to execute the Jews was immanent. Just as communal fasting was, and is, a response to danger and destruction, so too do women's breasts fast their children by refraining from breast-feeding.

¹¹²Bereshit Rabbah 98:20

¹¹³*Sifre Dagd'tah al Esther*, Midrash Panim Acherim, parashah 6.

In contrast, the ability to breast-feed many children was considered a sign of great human strength and righteousness, as well as God's presence. Many stories¹¹⁴ appear of Sara's ability to immediately breast-feed hundreds of children as proof of God's power. Though, according to some writings, a woman's breasts are a source of sexual excitement and should generally be covered up even in front of her husband when breast-feeding¹¹⁵, in the following passage¹¹⁶ Sara is urged to refrain from her modesty and nurse the nations:

Our mother Sara was exceedingly modest, so that our father Abraham had said to her, "This is not a time for modesty. To hallow God's name, uncover your breasts (גלי את דדיך) that all may be aware of the miracles the Holy One has begun to perform." Sara uncovered her breasts (גלחה את דדיה) and her nipples poured out milk like two fountains/jets of water. Noble ladies came forward to have their children suckled by Sara, saying, "We do not merit having our children suckled on the milk of such a righteous woman."

The above text shows Sara's breasts responding to the miracle of giving birth at an old age. Her ability to breast-feed is proof of God's existence to the Roman proper ladies. In a similar text¹¹⁷, once Sara begins to breast-feed Isaac, all the women gather around and see that Isaac's looks immediately change to resemble Abraham and all the people become convinced that Abraham is truly Isaac's father. In another version¹¹⁸ the people of the city believe that Sara brought Isaac home from the marketplace, and only become

¹¹⁴Bereshit Rabbah 53:9; Yalkut Shmoney 93; Midrash Tanchuma, Toldot 3; Baba Metzia 87a

¹¹⁵Yoreh Deah 195

¹¹⁶Bereshit Rabbah 53:9

¹¹⁷Baba Metzia 87a

¹¹⁸Midrash Tanchuma, Toldot 3

convinced that she is truly the mother when her breasts miraculously begin to flow with milk. Whichever version of the text one chooses, each conveys a message of the positive qualities of the woman's breasts. Breasts are signs of God's presence that raise Sara, if not all Jewish women, to the status of a mother to all people.

Breasts as Signs of Maturity & Sources of Punishment

Though breasts can be the source of sustenance, they are still a part of the woman's body and just like women's genitalia, they have the potential to seduce men and therefore must be watched and controlled. Unlike the genitalia, which must be uncovered to see, breast development can be easily observed, even if covered. Therefore breasts are one of the main determinants of the stages of sexual development. In Berakoth,¹¹⁹ R. Hisda and an anonymous group of rabbis debate over the age of maturity, using the proof text of Ezekiel 16:7 as a reference:

R. Hisda said: A girl up to three years and one day, a boy up to nine years and one day. Some others say: A girl up to eleven years and one day, and a boy up to twelve years and one day; with both of them (a boy and a girl) it is up to the time when "Thy breasts were fashioned and thy hair was grown." (Ezek. 16:7)

R. Hisda's definition of a mature girl seems to be a bit young, and probably refers to the time when a child is conscious of his/her actions. Yet the anonymous other opinion appears to focus on the sexual maturity of the maturing child. The context of these statements appears at the beginning of a list woman's body parts that are defined as ערוה.

Whether the first or the second opinion is accepted, these definitions are subjective numbers which do not recognize the differences in physical development of each woman's body. We are not sure if the Ezekiel quote is

¹¹⁹Berakoth 24a

of primary importance, or if the rabbis assume that any girl who is twelve years and one day will by definition have developed breasts and public hair. In another Talmudic passage the rabbis go into much greater detail as to the different stages and signs of a woman's physical development. In the Mishnah, a woman is compared to an unripe fig as a child (תנוקה); a fig in the early ripening stage when she is a maiden (ימרי נעוריה); and a ripe fig when she is a developed woman (בגרה). The Mishnah¹²⁰ then goes on to ask what the marks of a mature woman are:

R. Jose the Galilean says: The appearance of the wrinkle beneath the breast.

R. Akiba says: The hanging down of the breasts.

Ben Azzai says: The darkening of the ring around the nipple.

R. Jose says: [The development of the breast to a stage] when one's hand being put on the nipple it sinks and only slowly rises again.

Yet the Talmudic commentary¹²¹ on this Mishnah seems to offer other signs of womanhood:

What are the marks of a *bagruth*?

R. Eleazar son of R. Zadok stated: When breasts begin to shake.

R. Johanan b. Beroka stated: When the top flat part of the breast grows white. But is not a woman when this grows white already old?

Rather said R. Ashi: When the top of the nipple splits.

R. Jose stated: When a ring is formed around the nipple.

R. Simeon stated: When the pubic mound grows lower.

So also did R. Simeon state: The Sages have indicated in [the physical development of] a woman three marks below and corresponding ones above. If namely, she is like an unripe fig above, it may be taken for granted that she has not yet grown two hairs [below]. If she is above like a fig in its early ripening, it may be taken for granted that she has already grown two hairs [below.] If she is like a ripe fig above it may be

¹²⁰Niddah 5:7

¹²¹Niddah 47a-b

taken for granted that the pubic mound (כף) has grown lower. What is meant by pubic mound (כף)? - R. Huna replied: There is a rounded eminence above that place (מאורת מקום), and as the girl grows in age it steadily grows lower.

The above Talmudic commentary on the Mishnah never offers an explanation for the differing views on when womanhood begins. The only similarity is the statements of Ben Azzai in the Mishnah and R. Jose in the Talmud, who both claim that womanhood begins when a ring or a darkening color is formed around the nipple. Otherwise, each rabbi has a different definition of maturity. R. Simeon of the Talmud tries to unite the Mishnaic opinions that focus on the stages of a woman's breasts paralleled to the ripening of a fig, with the Talmudic notions of the development of the woman's breasts and pubic hair. What is surprising about these texts is the precision in which each rabbi defines a woman's mature body. Not only are the breasts almost always the determining sign, but the subtle differences in breast development seem to be completely familiar to these male rabbis. Unlike the vagina, which is often referred to by a euphemism, each part and habit of the breasts is defined and analyzed.

This apparent comfort with the anatomy of the woman's breast can also lead to the humiliation of women. Some rabbis lacked a sensitivity concerning the modesty of a woman's breasts. For example, in order for R. Eleazar to determine whether a woman was mature, he would have had to stare at a woman's chest and watch to see when her breasts shook. And if R. Jose's method of determining womanhood was adopted, then men would be able to touch women's breasts without any recourse, to see if she became sexually

excited. Proof of these insulting actions can be found in the same Talmudic passage: R. Samuel pays a female slave "four zuz compensation for her indignity" in order to examine her breasts and thereby understand the proper appearance of mature breasts.¹²²

The difficulty with these texts is that a woman's physical maturity is concentrated on the breasts and can only be proven by a close examination of the woman's body. Since a sexually immature woman is under the control of her father, one could assume that he would have the right to examine her body and determine when it developed into that of a mature woman. Perhaps a modern re-write of the signs of a woman's maturity would focus not only on the many physical signs, but also the emotional signs that women experience during this changing time. This re-write takes the decision of when maturity begins off of the male outsider, and places it in the woman's private domain:

R. Michal bat Yitzchak v'Esther Sara says: A girl becomes a woman when she menstruates, when her breasts are fully grown, when her genitalia are covered with hair and when her eyes turn to those who attract her or her body heats up when she thinks of a special person. For some this begins at twelve years and one day, and for some it begins later.

A woman's time of maturity was very important to the rabbis because of the fear of engaging in sexual activities with such a woman. The punishment of exposing one's breasts at a mature age is briefly discussed in the case of a

¹²²It is important to also remember that the rabbis did have a notion of what the "perfect breasts" were to look like: As discussed earlier, Ketuboth 75a allows a man to divorce his wife if her breasts are spread too far apart or are too big.

Sotah woman. The Mishnah¹²³ thoroughly describes how the supposedly "guilty" woman is to be executed:

A priest seizes her garments- if they are rent they are rent, and if they become unstitched they are unstitched- until he uncovers her bosom (מגלה את לבה) and he undoes her hair (וּסוֹתֵר אֶת שְׁעָרָהּ). R. Judah says: if her bosom was beautiful (אִם הָיָה לְבָה נָאֵה), he does not uncover it. And if her hair was beautiful (אִם הָיָה שְׁעָרָה נָאֵה), he does not undo it....After that the priest takes a common rope and binds it over her breasts (וּקוֹשְׁרוֹ לְמַעַל מְדֻרְיָהּ). Whoever wishes to look upon her comes to look with the exception of her male and female slaves... All women are permitted to look upon her, as it is said "that all women may be taught not to do after your lewdness." (Ezek. 23:48)

The Talmudic commentary¹²⁴ on this passage concentrates on the seeming contradiction between this text and Sanhedrin 45a which states that "a man is to be stoned naked but a woman is not to be stoned naked." The anonymous author of the Talmud questions whether this implies that R. Judah of the Mishnah was not concerned with the fact that "all of a woman's body is sexually charging - עֲרוּהָ שְׂכֻלָּהּ". The solution to this apparent contradiction is that according to R. Nahman, one is to always choose a light death. The difference is that the Rabbis hold that the disgrace of nudity is worse than the physical pain of stoning, but R. Judah of the Mishnah holds that physical pain is worse than the disgrace of nudity. Therefore it is evident why R. Judah of the Mishnah would like a beautiful woman's breasts and hair to be covered upon execution, because the execution itself is already painful.

¹²³Sotah 1:5-6

¹²⁴Sotah 8a-b

It is easy to understand why the rabbis chose to focus on the exposure of the woman's breasts and hair, as opposed to her genitalia, since the former are more easily seen when stripped. The disturbing part of this discussion is the assumption on the part of all of the rabbis that a man would become sexually aroused at the sight of a woman in bondage, about to be executed. This harmful image is prevalent in so called "hard core pornography."

Photographs or videos of women who are bound and gaged into submission, appeal to some men's sense of insecurity. These men are able to fantasize about their ability to overpower women, who would intimidate them under normal circumstances. In addition the woman's body is treated as if it were merely flesh and blood and not a holy image of God. By treating women, or men, in such a disgraceful manner, no matter what their crime, the result is that the body becomes dangerous and objectified. According to this view, even in a woman's last days, at her dying breath, she is sexually wild and in need of control. Whether a person is at home with their family or about to be executed, all people's bodies should be treated with dignity. This contradiction of preserving one's dignity before an execution may seem ridiculous, but it is also uncertain whether a Jewish court of law ever truly carried out an execution. If this is the case then the discussion is only theoretical, but still important because of the tone that it sets.

In the Zohar¹²⁵ a story is told of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi who is allowed to peek into purgatory. There he finds each person experiencing a punishment that matches his or her crime:

¹²⁵Zohar, Reshith Chakhmah, Shaar HaYirah 13, quoted in Rabbi Yaakov Culi, The Torah Anthology: MeAm Lo'ez Book II (New York: Maznaim Publishing Corporation, 1977), p. 280

Once when he was traveling, he encountered the prophet Elijah. Elijah took the rabbi (Yehoshua ben Levi) to the entrance of purgatory and showed him people being punished there. Some were hanging by their noses, some by their hands, some by their tongues, some by their feet, some by their ears, and some women were hanging by their breasts. Each one, explained Elijah, was being punished for sins of that part of the body.

Hanging in these ways is obviously painful. Some women are thus punished for exposing their breasts presumably to the wrong man or under the wrong circumstances (מדה כנגד מדה). The seemingly nurturing aspect of the woman's breasts can therefore also be a source of evil if exposed incorrectly. Though the overall view of women's breasts seems to be positive, the female voice and hair, often called ערוה, tell another story.

The Woman's Hair

Perhaps my grandmother is right. Perhaps the woman's hair is the most beautiful part of the woman's body. The rabbis knew of its power and were very concerned with when a woman could and could not expose her hair. According to the Mishnah¹²⁶, loose hair was a sign of either virginity or illicit adultery. Paralleling the Mishnah, the Jerusalem Talmud¹²⁷ recalls a case where a woman who was widowed or divorced is claiming her *ketubah* money from her soon-to-be-ex-husband. Since she was a virgin at the time of her marriage, she asks for two hundred *zuzim*. Yet her husband claims that she was not a virgin and refuses to pay her her full *ketubah*. Then witnesses who testify that she went to her marriage with music and "her hair flowing loose - פרוּעַ רֵאשָׁה." At that point her husband is told to pay her two hundred *zuzim*. Later in the text the rabbis define "with her hair flowing loose" as an indication of virginity:

"She went forth with her hair flowing loose." R. Hiyya in the name of R. Yohanah: "It is on account of those who went forth on the Day of Atonement." But if it is because she went forth with hair flowing loose (רֵאשָׁה פְּרוּעָה), and witnesses concerning her gave testimony that she had not had sexual relations, should we not take account of the possibility that she may have been a virgin at the stage of the consummation of the marriage? That is to say, a virgin at the consummation of the marriage, who remarries, does not go forth with her hair flowing loose (רֵאשָׁה פְּרוּעָה).

¹²⁶Ketuboth 2:1

¹²⁷Yerushalmi Ketubot 2, 26a-b

This passage clearly states the *minhag* during the rabbinic period, that virgin brides marry with loose hair. The Babylonian Talmud¹²⁸ tells this same story with the addition of the phrase "if there are witnesses that say she went out with a veil..." Rashbam¹²⁹ explains the phrase by teaching that it was the custom of virgin brides to go out into the marketplace with loose hair at the hour of entering her wedding canopy, until she became a bride and was then veiled. Rashi¹³⁰ echoes this practice and adds that women would walk with loose hair down to their shoulder as they walked from their father's house to their bridegrooms' house. What is interesting is that the Mishnah¹³¹ even goes as far as to say that the testimony of a minor is acceptable in the case of a woman who is falsely accused of not being a virgin. This shows that the woman's virginity is so intricately linked with loose hair, and that to falsely accuse a woman of not being a virgin is so important, that the usual laws of not accepting a minor's testimony are disregarded.

There is evidence that on a bride's marriage day she would beautify her hair as perhaps a final way of exposing her beauty to everyone, and also as a way of attracting her husband's attention. According to an argument between Beth Hillel and Beth Shammai concerning the proper way of praising an ugly bride on her wedding day, Beth Hillel believes that one should always say that a bride is beautiful, and Beth Shammai says that one should tell the truth, even if it is unpleasant, about a bride. Following this difference of opinion, R. Dimi teaches that in "The West," meaning Eretz Yisrael, "no powder and no

¹²⁸Bava Batra 92b

¹²⁹Rashbam, Bava Batra 92b on "בהינומא"

¹³⁰Rashi, Bava Batra 92b on "וראשה פרוע"

¹³¹Ketuboth 2:10

paint and no waving of the hair and still a graceful gazelle - ויעלת חנ -
 132 R. Dimi seems to support the idea that
 brides do not need to pretty themselves up with makeup and fancy hair
 styles¹³³ to look beautiful.

The flip side of the coin is that once a woman is married, her hair is
 considered sexually enticing and must be covered - שער באשה ערוה. The
 proof text for the beauty of a woman's hair that is given in the Talmud¹³⁴ is
 from Song of Songs "שערך בעדר העזים שגלשו מחר גלעד" - Your hair is
 like a flock of goats/ Streaming down Mount Gilead." Given the beauty of
 hair, the Mishnah¹³⁵ specifies which hair pieces are appropriate for women to
 wear on the Sabbath:

A woman may not go out with ribbons of wool (בחוטי צמר), linen
 ribbons (בחוטי פשתן), or headbands (ברצועות) round her head. Nor
 may she perform ritual immersion while wearing them, unless she
 loosens them. She may go out with frontlets, garlands, if they are not
 sewn, or with a hair net (קבול) into the street, or with a golden city, or
 with a necklace, or with earrings, or with a finger-ring which has no
 signet, or with a needle which is unpierced. Yet if she goes out with
 these, she is not liable to a sin offering.

Since the passage mentions a woman on her way to the *mikveh*, this text is
 presumably written for the married woman. The items that are allowed to be

¹³²Kethuboth 17a

¹³³Rashi defines פירכוס as "twisted hair"

¹³⁴Berakot 24a

¹³⁵Shabbath 6:1

worn by the woman are ornaments that are not on her hair, except for the wig, כבול, which covers her hair completely.¹³⁶

The reason why women are told to cover their hair is usually stated simply: שער באשה ערוה. This statement is found over and over again in Otzer HaMidrashim¹³⁷ and the Talmud.¹³⁸ In the Mishnah¹³⁹ women are warned that the uncovering of hair is not appropriate to Jewish practice and will inevitably lead to adulterous actions:

And what [conduct is such that transgresses] Jewish custom? If she goes out with loose hair (ראשה פרוט), or spins in the street, or speaks with any man.

The Tosefta¹⁴⁰ expands these actions to include women who go out to the marketplace or in front of her male and female slaves, with uncovered hair and open clothes, and then proceed to spin wool exposing her bosom. These women, according to the Tosefta, will end up bathing with every man in the public baths. The Talmudic commentary¹⁴¹ on this Mishnah explains that a married woman may not enter the public arena with an uncovered head, but she may walk in the privacy of her own courtyard with an uncovered head. The Shulchan Aruch¹⁴² also warns married women to refrain from showing

¹³⁶In Shabbath 57a, R. Simeon b. Eleazer says that "Whatever is worn beneath the net, one may go out with; whatever is worn above the net, one may not go out with it." From this definition it seems that a כבול is a wig.

¹³⁷Otzer HaMidrashim, p. 169 #97

¹³⁸Berakoth 24a

¹³⁹Ketuboth 7:6

¹⁴⁰Tosefta on Ketuboth 7:6

¹⁴¹Kethuboth 72b. Also see Yerushalmi Ch. 7:31b.

¹⁴²Yoreh Deah 195

their hair to their husbands during their menstrual periods. All of these restrictions point to the sexual power of women's hair.

One powerful midrash in the Talmud¹⁴³ tells of how On's wife in Numbers 16, saved her husband from death by exposing her hair:

Rav said: On, the son of Peles, was saved by his wife. She said to him: What will you gain from [joining Korach's rebellion]? If this master [Moses] is victorious, you will be a disciple, and if that master [Korach] is victorious, you will be a disciple! [ie. Regardless of who prevails you will not gain power.] On said to his wife: What shall I do? I took part in their deliberations, and swore [that I would join them.] She said to him: I know of the entire assembly, that they are holy people, for it is written "For the entire assembly - all of them- are holy." (Numbers 16:3) She said to him: "Turn back, for I shall save you" She gave him wine to drink and caused him to be drunk. And then put him to bed inside her tent. She then sat at the entrance and uncovered her hair (וסתרתה למזירה). Everyone who came by saw her and turned and left. Meanwhile Korach's assembly was swallowed up.

On's wife, who is never given a name, lets down her sexy hair and scares the holy men of Korach's rebellion from summoning him. Every time one of Korach's men came by On's tent to fetch him, On's wife was at the entrance with her hair wildly exposed. Her loose hair scared Korach's men so much that they stayed clear from On's tent, and saved him from being summoned to the rebellion and therefore from death. This story shows that a woman's hair is so much of an ערוה, that it can actually repel men who are concerned about sexually going astray. The Zohar¹⁴⁴ warns men of the power of their wives hair in a quote from Rabbi Chezkhiah who said:

¹⁴³Sanhedrin 109b

¹⁴⁴Zohar, Nasso quoted in Rabbi Yaakov Culi, The Torah Anthology: MeAm Lo'ez Book II (New York: Maznaim Publishing Corporation, 1977), p. 281.

Cursed is the man who tells his wife to expose her hair. A woman who does so to make herself beautiful brings poverty to the house. Her children will be like animals. The forces of evil make themselves at home in her house.

It would seem that women's hair is in and of itself sexually tempting, and needs to be covered because of men's uncontrollable desire. Yet there are two accounts which hold women responsible for the reason why they are forced to cover their hair. In Bereshit Rabbah¹⁴⁵, R. Joshua ben Hananiah asks a series of questions about the inherent difference between men and women, based on the fact that men are created from the earth and women from man's rib. His conclusions are the following:

Women need perfume. Women have higher voices. Women are not easily pleased. Women don't make demands on men. Women are reliable - since they accept sperm. Women do wrong (מבני אדם) - and therefore have to cover their heads (לפיכך יוצאת וראשה מכוסה). Women bring death into the world. Women menstruate - because Eve killed Adam [ie. she shed Adam's blood and therefor her blood will be shed]. Women separate dough. Women light candles.

According to R. Joshua ben Hananiah's stereotypical reasoning, women must cover their heads because "Women do wrong." Suddenly the culprit is not the man who loses control of his sexual desire, but it is the woman's fault. What is this "wrong" that women commit? It is unclear, but given its placement in the text, in between accepting sperm and menstruating, the "wrong" must be a sexual action. In Erubin, Eve's ten curses are listed, and one is that "she is wrapped up like a mourner, banished from the company of

¹⁴⁵Bereshit Rabbah 17:8

men." Which means that "she is forbidden to meet a man in privacy" and "she is forbidden to marry two men."¹⁴⁶ This is understood to mean that her head must be constantly covered so that her hair is not seen. Suddenly, according to these texts, the woman seems to have been created with the inability to sexually control herself. Her hair is inherently seductive and must be constantly covered.

To confirm this idea, Bamidbar Rabbah¹⁴⁷ relates a story about a married woman named Kimhit who is very careful about upholding the law of covering her hair:

The sages say that Kimhit (קמחת) had seven sons and all of them served in the office of High Priest. The sages once called upon her and asked "What good deeds have you performed to have merited such high honor?" She replied, "May Heaven so help me! In all my life the rafters of my house have never looked down upon the uncovered hair (ראשה פרוע) of my head." They exclaimed, "All kinds of flour (קמח) are flour (קמח), but the flour (קמח) of Kimhit (קמחת) is the finest!" They applied to her the verse "All glory of the royal princess is best seen with in her palace." (Psalms 45:14)

This story plays on the similar root of the words flour (קמח) and Kimhit (קמחת). Kimhit is praised and rewarded for constantly covering her hair. Kimhit's reward for such meticulous modesty is that all her children choose to serve God as High Priest. The midrash reads "flour" as Kimhit's sustenance, meaning her children.

¹⁴⁶Erubin 100b

¹⁴⁷Bamidbar Rabbah 2:26. Also found in Vayikra Rabbah 20:11, Yoma 47a, Yerushalmi Yoma 1 and Yerushalmi Horayot 3.

As we have already seen in the case of the *Sotah* woman who is punished by having her hair unraveled by the priest¹⁴⁸, a woman who does not uphold the law of covering her hair can be accused of adultery and be at risk of divorce. According to the Yerushalmi, a woman who goes out with her hair flowing loose can be let go without the any payment of her marriage contract.¹⁴⁹ This is confirmed by Beth Shammai who suggests that exposing one's hair is an ערוה and reason for divorce:¹⁵⁰

I know only that a writ of divorce is issued on the grounds of unchastity (ערוה). How do we know that if a wife goes out in public with her head unkept (ראשה פרוט), with her shoulders bare, with her arms uncovered, [the husband may divorce her]? Because Scripture says "because he has found in her indecency in anything - ערוה דבר - כי קצא בה" (Deut. 24:1)

Finally, pubic hair is also mentioned as an indicator of a woman's maturity, as well as a euphemism for the woman's vaginal area. As mentioned above, a passage in Niddah¹⁵¹ suggests that the presence of a woman's pubic hair, along with breast development, is a sign of physical maturity. Yerushalmi Yebamot¹⁵² suggests that R. Judah's test of maturity, based on when there is "an abundance of black hair - עד שירב שחור", is the acceptable standard for a developed woman's body. A colorful midrash that uses the word שער as a euphemism for vaginal hair, is found in Targum Sheni on Esther.¹⁵³ In this midrash, Queen Sheba is about to arrive at King Solomon's palace. Upon her

¹⁴⁸Sotah 1:5

¹⁴⁹Yerushalmi Ketubot 7:6

¹⁵⁰Yerushalmi Gittin 9:11 and Sotah 1:1

¹⁵¹Niddah 47b

¹⁵²Yerushalmi Yebamot 1:2d

¹⁵³Targum Sheni on Esther 1

arrival King Solomon sends one of his servants, Benaiah son of Jehoiada, to greet her:

Then Benaiah the son of Jehoiada conducted her [Queen of Sheba] to the King, who upon hearing that she was about to arrive, went to a glass house to receive her. When the Queen of Sheba beheld the King seated in the glass house, the thought came to her that the King was seated in water. So [to pass through what she believed to be water, she lifted her skirt] exposing her thighs and the hair on her legs (her pubic hair) became viable (וּנְרָאָה לוֹ שֵׁעַר בְּרַגְלֶיהָ). The King was moved to say "Your beauty is a woman's, but the hair [on your legs] is that of a man - hair is beautiful on a man, and shameful on a woman - יְפִי נָשִׁים. וְשֵׁעַרְךָ - שֵׁעַר גִּבּוֹר, וְהַשֵּׁעַר נָוִי לַגִּבּוֹר וְגִנָּאי לַאֲשָׁה) (יְפִיךָ)"

Unlike Song of Songs 5:11 and 5:2 which read respectively "His head is fine gold/ His locks are curled/ And black as a raven- תַּלְתָּלִים שְׁחֵרוֹב קְעוֹרֵב - רְסִיסֵי לֵילָה - "ראשו כחם קז קוצותיו" and "My locks drenched of the night - קוצותי", using the word קוצות when referring to pubic hair, the above midrash uses the generic word שֵׁעַר as a euphemism for pubic hair. King Solomon chastises Queen Sheba for exposing her legs that are exceptionally hairy. Yet the context of the midrash suggests that Queen Sheba might have been inviting King Solomon to make love to her in the open, euphemistically called a glass palace. The water that Queen Sheba is trying to step over might be her own vaginal fluids that she is offering to King Solomon. Castigating Queen Sheba for exposing the hair on her legs seems to be a bit harsh if that is all she did. Rather read "the hair on her legs became viable (וּנְרָאָה לוֹ שֵׁעַר בְּרַגְלֶיהָ)" to mean "the pubic hair near her legs was exposed." Needless to say, just as a woman's hair on her head must be covered, all the more so must her pubic hair, which covers her most dangerous body part, be hidden.

The Woman's Voice

The woman's voice is not necessarily a body part, yet it is often linked to references of the woman's body in a similar restrictive manner. The voice is the one part of a woman's character which is difficult to hide away. A woman who is covered from head to toe, uses her voice as the only public expression of her personhood and a source of influence on her surroundings. A voice allows her to express her opinions, assert her desires, place herself in the daily intercourse of business and expose others to her personality. The rabbis of the Talmud were aware of the power of a voice, and therefore deemed a woman's voice an ערוה.

In many cases in midrash and Talmud¹⁵⁴, we find the phrase באשה ערוה - a woman's voice is sexually exciting. Yerushalmi Hallah and Otzer HaMidrashim offer the proof text for this statement as "Because of the sound of her harlotry, she polluted the land, committing adultery with stone and tree" (Jeremiah 3:9); Berachot offers another verse "Sweet is your voice and your countenance is comely" (Song of Songs 2:14). Rashi's commentary on Berachot explains that since the female voice is an object of desire, it is therefore forbidden for men to hear. Again, because of men's weaknesses the woman is not only physically covered, but she is also told to be either quite of silent.

¹⁵⁴Otzer HaMidrashim 169:97; Berachot 24a; Kiddushin 70a; Yerushalmi Hallah 2, 58:3.

According to the Mishnah and Gemmorah,¹⁵⁵ the prohibition against hearing a woman's voice actually refers to singing, not speech:

R. Joseph said: When men sing and women join in it is licentiousness (זמרי גברי ועני נשי פריצותא); when women sing together and men join in it is like fire in flax (זמרי נשי ועני גברי כאש בנעורת). For what practical purpose is this mentioned? To abolish the latter before the former.

The melodic woman's voice is so sexually obscene that if singing is unable to be stopped¹⁵⁶ the woman's voice should be suppressed before the man's voice. Yet other texts make it clear that it was not just the woman's singing voice that needed to be silenced. In an interaction between R. Nachman and R. Yehudah¹⁵⁷, the former invites the latter to send greetings to R. Nachman's wife named Yalta. Rav Yehudah refuses on grounds that Shmuel taught "The voice of a woman is considered sexually exciting - באשה ערוה - קול" R. Yehudah seems to be concerned that their verbal interaction might lead to intimacy and therefore even listening to her speaking voice is forbidden.¹⁵⁸

Perhaps because of the silencing of the woman's voice, a woman's voice took on the same secretly sexual connotations as other woman's body parts.

According to R. Hisda "A woman's harsh voice is a bodily defect - זה מום - באשה קול עבה" and grounds for divorce¹⁵⁹ because women are

¹⁵⁵Sotah 48a

¹⁵⁶Sotah 9:11 states that "When the Sanhedrin ceased, song ceased from the places of feasting"

¹⁵⁷Kiddushin 70a

¹⁵⁸Rashba on Berachot 24a and Maharsha on Bava Metzia 87a.

¹⁵⁹See above Kethuboth 75a.

biologically supposed to have higher voices¹⁶⁰; and Yael is considered one of the four most beautiful women because of her voice.¹⁶¹

With all the beauty that a woman's voice can reveal, the uncontrollable expression of a woman's voice is grounds for rebuke. Such a woman is referred to as a קולנית - a woman with a voice. A קולנית either screams during intercourse, or talks loudly in the house. According to R. Tarfon of the Mishnah¹⁶² a man is exempt from paying a woman her *ketubah* sum if she is a קולנית, which means "she talks in her own house and her neighbors can hear her voice." The Gemara¹⁶³ expands on this definition of a קולנית by saying:

"R. Tarfon said: Also one who screams (קולנית)" What is meant by a screamer? (קולנית) Rab Judah replied in the name of Samuel: One who speaks aloud during marital intercourse (קולה על עסקי חשמיש) (במשמעת). In a Baraitha it was taught: [By screams was meant a wife] whose voice during her intercourse in one court can be heard in another court (שנשמע קולה בחצר אחת). But should not this, then, have been taught in the Mishnah [Ketuboth 6:8-9] among defects? Clearly we must revert to the original explanation.

This text shows the fundamental suppression of a woman's sexual expression. If a woman, due to sexual pleasure, screams out during intercourse, she is condemned. With this text, a woman is not only physically covered from society's eyes, but she is emotionally silenced in her

¹⁶⁰See above, Bereshit Rabbah 17:8.

¹⁶¹See above, Megillah 15a.

¹⁶²Ketuboth 6:6

¹⁶³Kethboth 72b

daily interactions as well as the most intimate moments of her sexual life. This text sanctions the subjugation of women's sexual fulfillment and confirms a man's will to only look after his own sexual needs. Unlike many of the other texts that covered women's bodies due to men's uncontrollable sexual drive, the case of the קולנית seems to fear an overly sexually expressive woman. Perhaps if the קולנית is free to scream when she orgasms, she will lose all sense of modesty and begin to be aware of the sexuality of her entire body. If this occurs, the rabbis fear that the woman will enter public discourse and threaten their control over the House of Study, Synagogue and Marketplace.

Perhaps a modern re-write of R. Tarfon's words would re-define the קולנית as someone who yells in a way that would be grounds for divorce according to my re-write of Ketubah 75a that focuses on physical or emotional abuse :

R. Michal bat Yitzchak v'Esther Sara says: "R. Tarfon said: Also one who screams (קולנית)" What is meant by a screamer? A man or a woman who verbally abuses his/her spouse to cause them to feel insecure, degraded, fearful of their life, unable to function alone or suicidal.

Part III

Conclusion

A simple summary of the woman's body in midrash can be stated in one word - dangerous. The ideal woman is one who is perfectly proportioned yet hidden away. The naked woman causes men to leave the commandments and follow their lust-filled desires. The woman's vagina is a source of life, yet it also sheds blood monthly and reminds us of death. The woman's breasts are a source of nourishment, but if exposed improperly they can lead to a painful death. The virgin woman's hair can fall freely but a married woman must cover every strand, lest she be accused of committing adultery. A woman's voice must be high and soft, yet never heard in song or in expressing her innermost desires.

The result of the rabbinic expectation of the woman's body is three fold. First, the woman takes on the status of an acquired object. One that can be bought in marriage from her father, and returned by her husband if found defective. Second, a woman is perceived by male rabbis as attractive and therefore as a male protective mechanism she is made to be repulsive. Her vagina is called "a dirty/filthy place," her voice is silenced, her hair is covered, and her breasts are only used for the functional purpose of nursing. Finally, because of the sexually charged dangerous status of the woman's body, the woman becomes ostracized from the male community and is at the same time blamed for male downfalls.

What is the modern feminist supposed to do with these texts? As I mentioned in the Introduction, one choice is to essentially read these texts out of our working cannon. Of course they will still remain in our books, but just like the curses of Deuteronomy that are chanted in a hushed voice, we can choose to ignore their presence. The risk in this approach is that we are not presenting the fullness, the good and the bad, of the Jewish tradition. There will be men and woman who will eventually find these texts and point to them as proof of Judaism's sexist and destructive nature. As the AIDS activists of the 1980's and 1990's have taught us, SILENCE=DEATH. The more we keep silent about these texts, the less credibility Judaism will have for the modern Jew. By not addressing these texts, we silently confirm their legitimacy.

My approach has been is to study the texts in order to understand the full scope of the status of the woman in the rabbinic period. With this understanding I feel that as a modern Jew I am obligated to re-write these texts for the sake of continuity. By continuity I mean the continuation of Jewish writing which reflects the period in which something is written. Just as the rabbis of the Talmud and many midrashim teach Torah from their world view, I must continue to teach Torah from our world view.

Ben Bag Bag taught "Turn it, turn it [the Torah] for everything is in it."¹⁶⁴ I choose to re-read this text to mean that everything in Torah needs to be constantly turned in order for it to be dynamic and relevant to modern hearts. By re-writing *aggodot* of our tradition, I hope to have confirmed the value of

¹⁶⁴Pirke Avot 5:25

the rabbinic structure, while recreating a contemporary message concerning the beauty and strength of the woman's body.

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