

**Midrash Leviticus Rabbah 9:9**

I. Rabbi Meir was sitting and speaking [about Torah] on Shabbat night.

A certain woman was sitting there listening.

His talk lasted too late.

She waited until he was finished speaking.

Then she went to her home, and found that the lamp was already extinguished.

II. Her husband asked her: “Where have you been?”

She told him: “I have been sitting and listening to the rabbi.”

The husband said to her: “I swear by such-and-such that you are not to enter here until you go and spit in the rabbi's face!”

III. They sat [separated] for one week (Shabbat), a second, and a third.

IV. Her neighbors told her: “You are having a quarrel. Let us go with you to the Rabbi.”

When Rabbi Meir saw them, he envisioned [the reason for their coming] by means of the holy spirit [of prophecy].

[Pretending to have something wrong with his eye] He said to them: “Is there among you a woman skilled in reciting a charm for the eye?”

Her neighbors said to her, “Now, go spit in his face and you will be permitted to live with your husband again.”

[So she came forward] but when she sat down before his face, she cringed before his presence. She confessed: “My master [literally, my rabbi], I do not know how to recite a charm for [healing] the eye.”

But he said to her: “Just spit seven times and I will be healed.”

She spat in his face seven times.

Then he said to her: “Go and tell your husband: ‘You asked me to do it only once but I spat seven times!’”

V. His disciples said to him, “Master! Is the Torah to be treated with such contempt?

If you had only told one of us to recite the incantation for you.”

R. Meir replied: “Isn't it enough for Meir to be equal to his Maker?”

VI. Rabbi Yishmael taught: Great is peace, so that God's holy Name written in sacred fashion is as commanded by the Holy One to be obliterated in the water [in the case of the suspected adulteress (Numbers 5: 23-24)], in order to bring about peace between a man and his wife.”

“‘Call the Shabbat a delight’ (Isaiah 58:13) means a delight for both body and soul, a delight for celestial and earthly realms.” (Jerusalem Talmud Kiddushin 4:12)

It is duty to eat three meals on Shabbat ..The Rabbis used to prepare the richest food and finest wines that one can afford. (Maimonides Laws of Shabbat 30:7)

“A husband eats with his wife [at least] every Shabbat eve.” (TB Ketubot 64b)

“A Torah scholar should fulfill the mitzvah of his conjugal duties on the evening of Shabbat” (TB Ketubot 62b; see Mishna Ketubbot 5.8)

“One should be very careful to light Shabbat candles for without them there is no peace in the home. It is an ancient tradition going back to Moshe Rabbenu that we must light Shabbat candles”. (Midrash Lekach Tov)

### **Midrash Numbers Rabbah 9:20**

Rabbi Meir used to give regular talks every Shabbat eve. A certain woman of that town made it a habit to listen to his weekly sermons. On one occasion when he extended his talk to a late hour, she waited and did not leave until he finished.

But when she came to her home, she found that the lamp was out. Her husband asked her, “Where have you been until now?” She told him, “I have been listening to a rabbi’s talk.” Now, the husband said to her, “I swear by such-and-such that you are not to enter my house again until you spit in your teacher’s face.”

In strong opposition to the standard evaluation of gender roles and space in Rabbinic literature, it is the woman who moves between the two realms, whereas her husband stays immured in the house. He, however, has not been able to ensure the stability of the domestic light. And one asks oneself why he did not join his wife to listen to the rabbi's lecture ...It is exactly the free mobility of the woman between private and public space, between her home and the site of learning, that seems to cause the upheaval in her life.

The rabbi's lecture, representing Torah and sacred learning, paradoxically enough overthrows the institution of marriage (Galit Hasan- Rokem, “Building the Gate or Neighbors make Good Fences,” *Tales of the Neighborhood*, p. 66-68)

“Mentioning the lamp at home that was extinguished, the light that burned out, symbolizes the absolute coldness in the intimate relations between him and her. The kind of lamp is a ceramic container, a round utensil in whose center is opening out of which a wick burns from the oil within (see Mishna Shabbat 2:4). It is not hard to see how the lamp overflowing with oil represents the woman and the wick dipping in it represents the man. So too the rabbinic metaphor of “two wicks in one lamp” (TB Gittin 58a) is a euphemism for a woman committing adultery, having intercourse with her husband and with another man.” (Avigdor Shinan, “Light and Blindness in Rabbinic Stories”, p. 79)

Elijah of blessed memory appeared to Rabbi Meir and said to him: 'It is because of you that the woman has left her house!' Elijah informed Rabbi Meir of the whole incident.

What did Rabbi Meir do? He went down to the Great Beit Midrash.  
When that woman came in to pray, he saw her and pretended to have eye problems etc

**Midrash Numbers Rabbah 9:20**

His disciples said to him, “Master! Is the Torah to be treated with such contempt? If you had only told us we would have brought that husband and flogged him at the post until he consented to be reconciled with his wife.”

**Midrash Deuteronomy Rabbah 5:15**

Rabbi Meir said: “Tell your husband, ‘I spat in the face of Rabbi Meir...Go and become reconciled with your husband.’” See how great is the power of peace.

Rabbi Akiba said: I will prove to you how great is the power of peace. For God has commanded that when a man suspects his wife of adultery, the Holy name written in holiness [upon a scroll] shall be blotted out in water in order to bring about peace between the woman suspected of adultery and her husband.

**The Goblet (TB Ketubot 65a)**

I. Homa, Abaye’s wife, came before Rava.

She said, “Issue me an alimony decree to fund my food allowance.”

He issued it for her.

“Issue me an allotment of wine.”

But he said to her, “I know that Nahmani [=Abaye] did not drink wine.”

She said to him, “By your life, sir! He *did* give me wine—in a goblet like this!”

As she showed him [how her husband used to pour the wine], her arm was revealed and light went out into the courthouse.

II. Rava got up, went into his house,  
and demanded sex of [his wife], Rav Hisda’s daughter.

Rav Hisda’s daughter said to him, “Who was just now in the courthouse?”

He said to her, “Homa, Abaye’s wife.”

III. She went out after her, and she whacked her with a stick [or a trunk lock or silk-weaver’s club<sup>1</sup>] until she had driven her entirely out of Mehoza [*in another version*: out of the *bet midrash*].

She said to her: “You’ve already killed off three [husbands],  
and now you’ve come to kill off another one?”

---

Let us examine **three lines of interpretation of Rava's inner world** and the encounter with Homa. One is more Freudian, one more Jungian and one concerns the professional ethics of a rabbi exposed to the intimate revelations from an emotionally needy woman.

### **A. Freud.**

A Freudian would suggest that Rava is sexually aroused but forbidden to have sex with the object of his desire. Therefore he **sublimates** the same sexual energy into his wife, into the permitted expression of that animal lust. The Rabbis are very aware of these sudden irrational urges that can easily remove the thin layer of civilization and self-control even from the paragons of rationality and willpower, the Rabbis themselves.

Rabbi Meir used to mock transgressors. One day Satan appeared to him as a woman on the opposite bank of the river. As there was no ferry, he seized the rope and proceeded across. When he was halfway along the rope, he [Satan] let him go saying: Had they not proclaimed in Heaven, "Take heed of R. Meir and his learning," I would have valued your life at two farthings.

Rabbi Akiva used to mock transgressors. One day Satan appeared to him as a woman on the top of a palm tree. Grasping the tree, he went climbing up: but when he was halfway up the tree he [Satan] let him go, saying: Had they not proclaimed in Heaven, "Take heed of R. Akiba and his learning," I would have valued your life at two farthings.

Ishay Rosen Zvi, who has written on Rabbinic anthropology and *yetzer (Demonic Desires, 2009)* suggests that this Freudian language of sublimation need not be wholly anachronistic for understanding this tale. Similar principles are part of the explicit self-understanding of the Rabbis.<sup>1</sup>

### **B. Jung**

A second perspective on Rava's response to Homa's simulation of the "pouring of wine" with her husband is proposed by Admiel Kosman who is inspired by a Jungian as opposed to a Freudian approach. The issue is not merely sexual instincts, but about reclaiming **a shadow self** of sensuality that has been denied by the overly-developed intellectual masculinity of the Beit Midrash. Jung describes a process by which our formation of our particular character and self-image is the result of binary choices in which one aspect of potential self is repressed and rejected as not-me and another enhanced and elevated as the true-me in accordance with the societal demands around me. In the case of Rava, Kosman imagines him making himself into a master of verbal skills and abstract thinking demanded by the Beit Midrash and honed in his disputes with Abaye. This cultural and personal character type controls sexuality and other anarchic elements in the self's repertoire and even downgrades as immoral. That is why Rava is so quick to deny Homa a wine allowance that strikes him as antithetical to the life style and the ideal character embodied by Abaye and Rava.

However Rava sees another side to Abaye when the enchanting Homa models in the courtroom the undulating movements of pouring wine as did Abaye for her.

"Initially Homa speaks in the courtroom the judicial jargon, the male tools, but she quickly realizes that she cannot stay with that language [when speaking of her needs for wine which represent a whole other dimension of life]. So she moves to a more familiar language, body language.....With absolute naivete Homa expresses [by showing in the

---

courtroom how Abaye used to pour wine for her] her own free and comfortable relationship with her body. Rolling up her sleeves, the court experiences her body, not just her words and judicial words about her bodily needs.” (*Women’s Tractate*, p. 97)

Rava is drawn to Homa’s way of being in the world. He is shocked to realize that she might have participated in an aspect of Abaye’s lifestyle that he previously could not have allowed himself to imagine. What was permitted to Abaye, then can be permitted to him. Rava is attracted to a freer relationship to his own body, his own sexuality, and to an alternative mode of relating to the world. One can communicate powerfully without verbal language, without rationally measured and well-argued legal formulations which is the essence of the famous “debates of Abaye and Rava” by which the Talmud epitomizes Rabbinic life. Light can be radiated from one’s body, not only from one’s words. Homa is persuasive in way that Rava cannot refute in logical argument. That is what arouses him – a new side to his own personality previously interdicted.

### **C. The Ethics Committee of the Rabbinical Assembly.**

A third explanation of Rava’s abrupt abandonment of the courtroom is illuminated by a discussion I had with Rabbi Harold Kravitz who speaks to the lived dilemmas of rabbis’ professional encounters with women. Kravitz sits on the **ethics committee** of the American Conservative movement’s Rabbinical Assembly and often deals with rabbis in compromising situations with needy congregants that might lead and have led to sexual encounters. Often a rabbi has a mourning widow come into his office for emotional help. While she feels vulnerable, she also feels the exceptional compassion and strength of the rabbi who gives her full attention and listens to her heart's pain and loneliness. Sexual intimacy may follow “naturally” after such deep sharing, after baring one’s soul with such emotional intimacy. The woman feels that she has found someone who cares for her and the male rabbi feels called upon to help her. It is so seductive because the rabbi may see himself not as sexually exploiting a vulnerable client but as redeeming and comforting and even replacing her loss. If the rabbi has issues in his own marriage leaving him in search of greater intimacy as well, then he can lose his professional objectivity. ... In the case of Rava and Homa, the emotional situation is doubly complex for he too is grieving for Abaye as well as Homa, so the danger of liaison is even greater for they share the intimacy with Abaye.

However a rabbi sensing the danger in this situation must learn to stop immediately and withdraw physically from the encounter. Rava, Kravitz would say, is absolutely correct to adjourn his session with Homa instantaneously and go home.<sup>1</sup>