

Stories of Men and Women in the Talmud
Class 6 – Beruria: Scholar, Daughter and Wife, and the Rabbinic Stereotype of Women
Melton Geshler at the JCC, November 14, 2012

“Women are lightheaded [or fickle]” (TB Kiddushin 80b)

“Rabbi Yehoshua says: A woman prefers (desires) to live on an income of merely one bushel and yet have regular sexual satisfaction (*tiflut*) from her husband rather than to live on ten bushels of income earned by a husband whose need to work away from home condemns her in practice to a life of ascetic denial” (TB Ketubot 62b. Mishna Sotah 3:4)

Wives have great joy with various sorts of clothes and the suitable station as the mistress of the house, but when they have no sex, they fall into depression and confusion, and they have no joy in these things, but only depression and boredom. When they have sex, then they are [even] happier than with these other things.” (Zoroastrian source quoted in, Yaakov Elman “‘He in His Cloak and She in Her Cloak’: Conflicting Images of Sexuality in Sasanian Mesopotamia.” *Discussing Cultural Influences: Text, Context, and Non-Text in Rabbinic Judaism*. Ed. Rivka Ulmer.)

“Dr. Charles Meigs explained to the his all-male gynecology class in 1847 that a female has a head almost too small for intellect and just big enough for love.” (*Marriage, a History* by Stephanie Coontz, p.170)

Beruria learned “300 ritual laws (*halachot*) in one day from 300 Rabbis.” (TB Pesachim 62b)

An oven ... which was plastered in ritual purity and became impure - from whence can it be purified?

R. Halafta of Kefar Hananya said, "I asked Shim'on ben Hananyah who asked the son of R. Hananya ben Tradyon, and he said when they move it from its place. But his daughter said, when they disassemble its parts. When this was told to R. Yehuda ben Babba, he said: "His daughter said it better than his son." (Tosefta Kelim Baba Kamma 4: 17)

A door bolt, R. Tarfon declares it impure, but the Rabbis declare it pure. And Beruria says, one removes it from this door and hangs it on another. On this Shabbat these matters were referred to R Yehoshua. He said: Beruria said it well! (Tosefta Kelim Baba Metziah 1:6)

"He has also broken my teeth with gravel stones. He has made me to wallow in ashes" (Lamentations 3:16). It is related of the son of R. Hananya ben Tradyon that he became friends with robbers whose secret he disclosed, so they killed him and filled his mouth with dust and pebbles. After three days they placed him in a coffin and wished to recite a eulogy over him out of respect for his father, but he [Rabbi Hananya ben Tradyon] would not permit them to do so.

He said to them: "Allow me and I will speak concerning my son." He opened [his discourse] and said: "*I did not pay heed to the voice of my teachers, nor incline my ear to my instructors! I was in dire trouble in the midst of the assembly*" (Proverbs 5:13-14).

And his mother recited over him, "*A foolish son is the vexation to his father, and bitterness to her that bore him*" (Proverbs 17:25).

His sister [presumably Beruria or perhaps her legendary sister] recited over him: "*Bread gained by fraud is sweet to a man; but afterward, his mouth shall be filled with gravel*" (Proverbs 20:17). (Lamentations Rabbah 3:15 16)

Rabbi Yosi the Galilean was once on a journey when he met Beruria.

"By what road," he asked her, "do we go to Lod?"

"Stupid Galilean!" she replied, "Didn't the Rabbis say: '*Do not enter into long discussions with women!*'" (Avot 1:5). You should have asked [more concisely]: 'Which, to Lod?' ""(TB Eruvin 53b)

Beruria once discovered a student who was learning in an undertone [not out loud which helps one's memorization process]. Kicking him, she exclaimed: Isn't it written:

"*Ordered in all things and secure*"? If it is *ordered* in your 248 limbs, then it will be *secure*, otherwise it will not be secure. (TB Eruvin 53b-54a).

A certain *min* (heretic) said to Beruria: "It is written: *Sing barren one, you who did not bear [children]* (Isaiah 54:1). Why if she *did not bear* should she *sing*?"

She replied to him: You fool! Look at the end of the verse, where it says, *For the children of the desolate shall be more than the children of the married wife, says God* (Isaiah 54:1).

But what then is the meaning of "*sing, a barren one that did not bear*"?

Sing, community of Israel, who resembles a barren woman, for not having born children like you for Hell! (TB Berakhot 10a)

The Story of Beruria's Downfall

Then Rabbi Meir ran away to Babylonia.

Some say that was because of this story [his rescue mission of his sister-in-law in a Roman brothel] and some say because of the story of Beruria.

(TB Avoda Zara 18b)

Rashi fills in the gap on this obscure reference:

Once Beruria made fun of the rabbinic dictum, "Women are lightheaded [or fickle]" (TB Kiddushin 80b).

He [her husband, R. Meir] said, "On your life! You will end up admitting that they are right." He commanded one of his students to tempt her into [sexual] transgression. The student importuned her for many days, until in the end she was appeased (*nitrazit*). When the matter became known to her, she strangled herself, and R. Meir ran away because of the shame.

Above is what appears in the printed editions. In the earliest manuscripts of Rashi, Parma, circa 1300, we find:

The student importuned her for many days, until in the end she was appeased to him. When the matter became known, she strangled herself, and R. Meir ran away because of the shame.

THE PLACE WHERE WE ARE ABSOLUTELY RIGHT

Yehuda Amichai

From the place where we are absolutely right
flowers will never grow in the spring.
The place where we are absolutely right
is trampled, hardened
like a courtyard.

However
doubts and loves
make the world rise like dough
like an molehill, like a plow.
And a whisper will be heard
in the place where a home was destroyed
(where the *bayit/bet hamikdash* was destroyed)

Why did Beruria commit suicide? (Noam Zion)

(1) Failing in Virtue. Punishment for Adultery.

Suicide by strangulation is the punishment prescribed for adultery (Mishan Sanhedrin 11:1), so Beruria accepts her moral responsibility for giving in to the student. Her husband's involvement is immaterial. She had violated her representation of Torah. Beruria has been harsh in judging the moral failings of others such as the student who studied silently or the Rabbi who talked "at length" with women. So to maintain her integrity and be consistent, she cannot cut any slack for herself in such a serious crime, whatever the extenuating circumstances. .

(2) Failing in Self-Knowledge. The Shame of Sensuality.

Beruria has been foolish to imagine she could transcend and ignore her sexuality when she is studying Torah. She had a false sense of what she was capable.

Beruria represents a woman who just like Rabbi Hiyya is incapable of accepting the promiscuous and sensual side of herself ...Beruria was a woman who was incapable of really accepting the fact that she was a woman [as defined by Rabbinic roles of women]. (Mordechai Gafni)

(3) Failing her Cause

Beruria may blame herself for **failing the cause of women** and allowing the men to chalk up another contrived proof of their libel about all women. The exceptional woman – like Jackie Robinson breaking the color barrier in baseball – had to be above all suspicion. Being normal, being fallible even under extreme provocation by entrapment was no excuse.

Beruria's suicide can also be a response to her behavior that corroborates publicly the truth of the Rabbis' stereotype about women as weak-willed.

Her suicide does not take place at the moment that the sexual act is over, like R. Hiyya who decides to burn himself [in the oven] immediately after sinning, but rather the moment ...she became aware that the adulterous act was only a test, whose purpose was to prove her error to her. ..Beruria could have accepted herself as an adulteress, if in the final reckoning it was only her own personal failure....But there was no way that she could bear the shame of **admitting defeat to the Sages, her husband's colleagues**, which meant that she, too, as a woman, has another side, a side which the Sages call "weak". (Mordechai Gafni)

But why would Beruria concede to a power struggle with Rabbis who have been so unscrupulous in entrapping her? Why seek to prove women can transcend any form of sensuality? That has been a typical form of male hubris, not a woman's utopian dream.

(4) Failing her Family

To understand Beruria as an exceptional woman we must combine narratives and see her as a natural outgrowth of her exceptional family. Her suicide is a logical outcome of her sense of shame at desecrating her family tradition. We saw above that Beruria's mother as well as her father were scholarly, eloquent and moralistic (in condemning their pseudo-eulogy for her murdered brother who had gotten into debt to the Mafia of those days). Her study of Torah may well be the result of such outstanding parents as well as away to distance herself from the delinquent brother. But her absolute identification with Torah as the source of meaning in her life probably stems from her traumatic witnessing of her father's death by torture while wrapped in a Sefer Torah.

Let us return to that formative moment. The Romans after the Bar Kochba Revolt promulgate an edict forbidding the study of Torah. Rabbi Akiva and Beruria's father Hananya ben Tradyon along with others are caught and taken to Caesarea for torture and execution:

They then brought up Rabbi Hananya ben Tradyon and said to him, "Why have you occupied yourself with Torah [forbidden by Emperor Hadrian under penalty of death]?"

He said to them: "*Thus the Lord my God commanded me.*"

At once they sentenced him to be burned, his wife to be slain, and his daughter to be consigned to a brothel.

[As the three of them went out from the tribunal] they declared their submission to God's righteous judgment:

He said: "*The [Divine] Rock, God's work is perfect, for all God's ways are just*" (Deuteronomy 32:4).

His wife said: "*A God is faithful and without sin, just and right*" (Deuteronomy 32:4).

And his daughter said: "*Great in counsel and mighty in work, whose eyes are open upon all the ways of the sons of men, to give everyone according to their ways, and according to the fruit of their doing*" (Jeremiah 32:19)....

They found Rabbi Hananya ben Tradyon sitting and occupying himself with the Torah, publicly gathering assemblies and keeping a Scroll of the Law in his bosom. "Straightaway they took hold of him, wrapped him in the Scroll of the Torah, placed bundles of branches round him and set them on fire. They then brought tufts of wool, which they had soaked in water, and placed them over his heart, so that he should not expire quickly.

His daughter exclaimed: Father, that I should see you in this state!

He replied: If it were I alone being burnt it would have been a thing hard to bear; but now that I am burning together with the Scroll of the Law, the One who will have regard for the plight of the Torah will also have regard for my plight.

His disciples called out, Rabbi, what do you see?

He answered them: The parchments are being burnt but the letters are soaring on high.

[They said:] Open your mouth, so that the fire enter into you [and hasten your death and end your suffering].

He replied: "Let the One who gave me life take it away, but no one should harm oneself.

The Executioner then said to him: Rabbi, if I stoke the flames and take away the tufts of wool from over your heart, will you cause me to enter into the life to come? Yes, he replied. Then swear unto me [he urged]. He swore unto him.

The Executioner thereupon raised the flame and removed the tufts of wool from over his heart, and his soul departed speedily. The Executioner then jumped and threw himself into the fire.

And a voice from Heaven / *bat kol* exclaimed: Rabbi Hananya ben Tradiyon and the Executioner have been assigned to the world to come. (Tb Avodah Zara 17b- 18a)

Beruria may not be the only daughter of Hananya Ben Tradyon for there are other stories about another daughter being sent to a Roman brothel and being redeemed at Beruria's request by Rabbi Meir. But in any case we can imagine what it was like to grow up in the shadow of such a story of total dedication to Torah. Her father's story was transformed into an elegiac poem *Eleh Ezkara*, read every year on Yom Kippur. It describes the burning letters floating in the air above Rabbi Hananya as his soul departs. Beruria's choice of study of Torah may have been a way to compensate her parents for her fallen brother and later to honor her father's memory. Beruria's betrayal of Torah as a realm of soulful purity is a desecration of her father's martyred heritage. Her weakness in giving in to love or desire with her hevruta contrasts pitifully with his strength whatever his physical pain. The condemnation of R. Hananya's other daughter to a brothel against her will mirrors negatively Beruria's voluntary acquiescence to adultery under the gentle duress of verbal entrapment. Beruria who condemned her brother's involvement with criminals, just as did her moralistic parents, cannot but make feel that her sin reveals her own hypocrisy and her own betrayal of her parents who had already lost one son to an illicit culture. These stories echo and comment on one another forming a cycle that approaches a psychological family saga of depth and painful self-knowledge. In that context a onetime affair cannot be overlooked. Suicide follows the narrative and psychological logic of a heroine who has

shamed her family, just as many contemporaneous Greek and Roman novels treat suicide as the most appropriate self-inflicted punishment for women who have somehow dishonored their families and the virtue of women.

(5) Her Husband and Hevruta Fail Her. The loss of her trust in her family and environment.

People who falter can do teshuvah. Beruria had herself argued convincingly to her husband to pray not for the death of sinners but for their moral transformation. "Why do I have to pray for the destruction of evil-doers? Rather it means that since wicked deeds will exist no more, there will be no more evil-doers." He prayed for them, and they repented."(TB Berakhot 10a). Rabbi Meir himself is famous for trying to convince his teacher Elisha ben Abuya who left the way of Torah to come back. He quotes Rabbi Akiva, Elisha's own teacher, who said: "Just as glass and gold utensils that have been broken, can still be fixed (*takana*), so a Talmid Hakham, a Torah scholar, who sinned (*sarakh* implies shameful acts that stink). So you too can come back and repent" (TB Hagiga 15a).

But Beruria may not believe that her husband believes in her ability to do Teshuvah. While she was supportive in his grief over the death of their two children, as we shall see, he has sought to undermine her and exploit her weaknesses. He is probably lording over her with his "I told you so" triumph. Worse, her husband has betrayed her and her *hevruta* with whom she shared her intimate secrets (Avot de Rabbi Natan 8:3). Her husband has sided with the Rabbis against her. He has pulled the dirtiest trick to prove the Rabbis right at all costs. Male bonding has destroyed the male-female bond of marital solidarity of becoming "one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). Teshuvah is now impossible because the community of righteous and good people whose norms she has violated and to whom she might want to be reconciled are themselves totally corrupt. Marriage, Torah study and rabbinic tradition have all been desecrated. There is no path back to being a demur housewife and no path forward to a more circumspect declaration of the woman's place in a mixed-sex Beit Midrash.

In summary we have offered two kinds of interpretations of Beruria's motives for suicide: First, her shame at what she had done and second her sense of being betrayed by what her husband has done to her. Each view follows a slightly different manuscript of Rashi.

Beruria, wife of Rabbi Meir and daughter of Rabbi Hananya ben Tradyon, said to him: It bothers me [literally, dishonors me] that my sister is sitting in house of prostitution [According to one source, the Roman sentenced her to a life of forced prostitution as part of the punishment for her father who was cruelly tortured and executed in Ceasaria for studying Torah].

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

So he went to her guard and said: Give her to me.
He replied: I am afraid of [being punished for dereliction of duty by] the government.
Rabbi Meir said: Take these coins, half for them [for a bribe] and half for you. The guard said: When the money is exhausted, what shall I do?

Rabbi Meir said: Say 'Answer me, God of Meir!' and you will be saved....

In the end the government found out [about the sister's escape] and took out the guard to be executed and raised him on the scaffold. He cried out: 'Answer me, God of Meir!' and [they were apparently miraculously unable to execute him, so] they took him down from the scaffold.

They asked the guard: What is this all about? The guard told them the story.

They chiseled the likeness of Rabbi Meir on the entrance to Rome [as a most wanted criminal] and announced: Anyone who sees this face, bring him to us.

One day they saw him and ran after him and he ran before them and entered a house of prostitution [to hide].

Some say he saw some food cooked by pagans [which is forbidden by rabbinic prohibition from eating] and he stuck his finger in and sucked his finger.

Some say: Elijah appeared before him and hugged him.

[The Roman pursuers] said: God forbid, if that were really Rabbi Meir [our wanted Jewish criminal] he would never have done that.

Then Rabbi Meir ran away to Babylonia.

Some say that was because of this story and some say because of the story of Beruria. (TB Avoda Zara 18b)