

Stories of Men and Women in the Talmud  
Class 7 – A Deeper Look at Beruria and Rabbi Meir  
Melton Gesher at the JCC, November 28, 2012

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 a 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.

He said to him: How do I know that it will really work?

He said to him: Now you will see. There was there a pack of dangerous man-eating dogs, and Rabbi Meir threw at them a clod of earth. They ran towards him to devour him, but when he proclaimed “Answer me, God of Meir”, they left him alone.

He gave her to him.

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 one finger in and sucked a different finger.

Some say: Elijah appeared before him as a prostitute 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 18a -b)

A comparison of the two stories of Rebbi Meir

- Rebbi Meir attempts to seduce his sister in law just as he has his student attempt to seduce his own wife

- Rebbi Meir holds the women close to him to almost impossibly high sexual standards
- Rebbi Meir suspects that even the women close to him are unable to live up to his standards
- Rebbi Meir has no respect for women who are unable to live up to his almost impossibly high standards
- The worst punishment meets those women who are seduced
- Rebbi Meir's actions cause him to flee from the Land of Israel

Two opposing readings of the Beruria tale told by Rashi

- A lesson to women who might overestimate themselves and do not know their place. The woman who thought she could learn Talmud like the men and not be corrupted by it, learns how wrong she was and in effect confesses her sin. The story affirms the traditional social order and women's proper place within it.
- A lesson to men who would endeavor to put women in their place and end up by bringing only shame upon themselves. Beruria's fall was caused by the suspicion of her husband. His lack of trust in her ability to transcend societal expectations and his certainty of male superiority ultimately caused his own downfall.

These two readings actual follow the lines of two different readings of the Garden of Eden story

- A story of a woman who has an irresistible thirst for the tree of knowledge.
  - o She is unable to resist seduction
  - o She ends up betraying her husband
  - o She brings her husband down with her
  - o The result is death and exile.
  - o The moral of the story is that 'her desire should be towards her husband' and that she must accept that for her own good 'he shall rule over her'.
- The Garden of Eden story can also be read quite differently.
  - o It may be a story of male effort to protect and fence in women that backfires.

"A vineyard surrounded by a fence is not similar to one not surrounded by a fence [which is not well-protected]. However a human should *not* make a fence beyond that which is essential for the fence may fall and cut off the saplings. That is what we find in the case of the first Adam who made fence beyond that which is essential and the fence fell and cut off the saplings". (Avot d'Rabbi Natan, version B, Chapter 1)

"What was the first Adam's fence to his words?

It says: '*God commanded Adam saying: From all the trees in the garden you may eat and from the Tree of Knowledge Good and Evil you may not eat for on the day you eat from it you will surely die*' (Genesis 2:17). But Adam did not want to say that to Eve in the way that the Holy One said to him, rather he said: '*From the fruit of the tree in the garden God said: You shall not eat from it and you shall not touch it lest you die*' (Genesis 3:3).

At that moment the evil snake plotted in his heart...He told her: If you say the Holy One commanded you not to touch it, then I will touch it and not die. So too if you touch it,

you will not die. What did the evil snake do at that moment? The snake stood up and touched the tree with his hands and legs and shook it until its fruits dropped to the ground..... What did Eve think to herself: all those words that my master (my rabbi) commanded me were false from their very origin. For Eve originally called Adam 'my rabbi.' Immediately she took the fruit, ate it and gave it to Adam who ate...10 curses cursed Eve from that moment.....Your husband will rule over you, he will make his sexual demands verbally and the woman makes hers in her heart only. She is covered like one in mourning and locked up like one imprisoned and she is secluded from everyone [like someone excommunicated/*m'nudeh* from society]. What/who caused this touching? The fence with which Adam fenced in his words. From this we learn that if one fences in one's words, one cannot uphold one's words. (Avot d'Rabbi Natan, version A, Chapter 1).

Rabbi Yosi says: Better a fence that is only ten handbreadths high that can stand, than a hundred handbreadths that falls. (Avot d'Rabbi Natan, version B, Chapter 1).

- According to this midrash, the fault lies not with the woman but with the man, who treats his wife like a child, holding knowledge back from her on the basis of lack of trust in her ability to process it. The fear-driven effort to protect her backfires.
  - o You might say that with the help of the snake, she uses reason to undermine the misrepresentation of the fence.
  - o Or you might say that Rabbi Meir and his student are compared to the snake. They pervert the truth of Torah and turn it into seduction.
- In the same self-critical spirit, the tale of Beruria crowned by Rabbi Meir's shamefaced flight from Eretz Yisrael proves that it is wrong and it is impossible to erect fences that will keep women out of the arena of Talmud study. Some women can and will become Torah scholars. Men who try to put them down with exaggerated "fences" of suspicion will destroy themselves as well as the women, by insisting on cross-the-board stereotypes and one-fits-all laws.

Based on electronic files of Noam Tzion

