# The Midrash as Marriage Guide

*Ido Hevroni*

At the conclusion of the traditional Jewish wedding ceremony, the bride and groom sing praise to God, who, in bestowing sanctity on their marriage, "created joy and happiness, bride and groom, merriment, song, rejoicing and gaiety, love and friendship, and peace and companionship." Yet this traditional, idealized view of marriage rings hollow to many contemporary Jews. In the last generation, Jewish feminists, reformers, and scholars engaged in the study and interpretation of the canonical Jewish legal texts have painted a much darker picture of the status of married women. An example is Tal Ilan, a leading scholar of how women are portrayed in rabbinic literature, who writes:

> All sources describe the same ideal picture of society: Women provide what is asked of them, be it producing legal heirs, doing housework, remaining faithful to their husbands, avoiding contact with other men unrelated to them, or using their beauty to make their husbands' lives more pleasant. Women who deviate from this perfect behavior are described by all the sources as wicked.[1]

Few would dispute the predominantly male slant of the rabbinic traditions and laws governing the family. The halacha, after all, was written by

men, and for the most part, for men, in a world that was run, almost exclusively, by men. In this context, the subjection of wives to their husbands seems axiomatic—and indeed, many scholars of halachic literature have drawn just this conclusion.

But is this really the "picture," as Ilan writes, or just its frame? Many of the conclusions contemporary scholars have drawn about rabbinic attitudes toward the role of women in marriage are based on the literature's numerous halachic injunctions. Yet the rabbinic literature also comprises agada, or parables and legends, which may serve as a window onto the broader rabbinic understanding. And it is here we discover that, quite often, the sages were concerned with the proper content of a marriage, and not merely its legal framework; with a marital relationship based on mutual respect and communication, not hierarchy; and with a deep sensitivity to the emotional world of the married woman. We may thus conclude that while the halacha provides the framework within which marital relationships should occur, it is the agada that concerns itself with the picture itself—that is, with the content of a shared relationship.[2]

Two rabbinic stories offer an important rebuttal to two of the most popular accusations of rabbinic misogyny: First, that women, and the marital framework in general, are tied exclusively to the goal of producing children and perpetuating the chain of Jewish nationhood; and second, that according to Judaism, the wife is relegated to the status of a household slave, subject to the whim of an all-powerful husband. In truth the rabbinic attitude is far more complex—and more sensitive, open, and positive than is often realized.[3]

The first story, from Song of Songs Rabba, deals with a couple whose marriage is about to dissolve due to their failure to bring children to the world:

[In Babylon] it was taught: If a man has taken a wife and lived with her for ten years but she has not borne a child, he is nonetheless obligated [to "be fruitful and multiply," and therefore to marry another woman].

R. Idi said: The story is told of a woman from Sidon who lived with her husband for ten years and did not have children. They came before R. Shimon ben Yohai and asked to be divorced from one another.

He said to them: Look here, as you married each other with food and drink, so too, may you separate only with food and drink. They went on his way, and made a holiday for themselves. They made a great feast, and she got him too drunk.

This brought him back to his senses, and he said to her: "My beloved, if you see anything (*hefetz*) that you want in my house, take it and go to your father's.

What did she do? After he fell asleep, she called to her servants, saying, "Carry him, in his bed, to my father's house."

At midnight he awoke when the effects of the wine had worn off, and said to her, "My beloved, where am I?"

She said to him: "In my father's house."

He said to her: "What am I doing in your father's house?"

She said to him: "Is that not what you said to me last evening, 'anything you desire in my house, take it and go to your father's house'? There is nothing I desire more in the world than you!"

They went before R. Shimon ben Yohai, and he stood and prayed over them, and they had children.[4]

The story opens with a halachic foreword: If a couple has lived together for ten years but has not had children, the husband must take another wife so as to fulfill the commandment "be fruitful and multiply." The halacha does not rule here on whether it is obligatory to divorce the first wife, or if it is instead possible to take an additional wife.[5] We are then told of a case in point, in which a married couple who had not had children after ten years came before R. Shimon ben Yohai and asked him to arrange for their

divorce. From the phrasing of their request ("they… asked to be divorced from one another"), it appears as though they were of a single mind with regard to separating. Unexpectedly, the rabbi refuses their request. Instead he sends them off, bizarrely, to separate from each other by means of a great feast, like that of their wedding.

What was the rabbi aiming at? Why refuse their request for a divorce, to which they have both agreed? Why send them to feast? And why do this when, at the end of the story, it becomes clear that the rabbi has the mystical power to pray over them and give them children?

The meaning of the tale becomes clear, however, on closer reading. The story opens from the perspective of the wife, and only afterward proceeds to use the plural ("*They* came before R. Shimon ben Yohai"). From the outset we are given to believe that it is the woman who is the genuine protagonist of the story.

The couple's reaction to the rabbi's mission—"they went on his way"—is itself unusual, suggesting acceptance, even determination, for a task that was probably carried out grudgingly. After all, their goal had been to separate immediately. But by doing what was asked of them, and with the utmost seriousness, they show their desire to make the most of their remaining moments together. Indeed, their reaction might even suggest that they harbor a secret hope that this last meal together might somehow turn things around. And here again, the wife stands out as the hero: She gets her husband "too drunk," likely with the aim of lowering his inhibitions. And indeed, the husband's drunkenness, paradoxically, brings him to his senses. The man who was but moments from divorce makes his wife a most generous proposal: Take anything you want from my house. It is here, in his willingness to give her all he has, for the sake of her happiness and comfort alone, he shows how deep and true his feelings for her really are.

Our heroine takes her husband at his word. She commands her servants to carry him, in the bed on which he has passed out, to her father's house. It is worth noting the wordplay in the text: Whereas the husband meant "hefetz" in the contemporary sense of "object," she interpreted it according

to its original, biblical meaning, as something one cherishes or desires.[6] Moreover, rabbinic tradition relates to the home of a woman's father as an intimate place of refuge. By taking her husband there, the wife has granted him entry, perhaps for the first time, into her inner world, in which she reveals that "There is nothing I desire more in the world than you." They now return to the rabbi, but this time they are united not in their will to divorce, but in their desire to stay together.

The story alternately zooms in and out, from an external description of the couple seeking a divorce into their internal world, and when it is revealed—notably, at midnight, that enchanted time of miracles from as far back as the exodus from Egypt—back out again to their return to the rabbi, thus completing the story's circle. While the narrator does not reveal what transpired during this second conversation, from the couple's subsequent actions and the rabbi's response we may surmise that this time, they did not seek a divorce. Thus was R. Shimon bar Yohai able to pray for them: Once the husband and wife had broken down the barrier between them, so, too, could the rabbi break down Heaven's barrier and enable them to have children.

Some modern commentators have seen this as depicting an act of protest against the inhumanity of the halachic norm. But a more plausible reading is that it is not the halachic norm that is holding the couple back, but rather their attitude toward the marriage. Indeed, the couple's behavior throughout the story demonstrates that it was not really divorce they had wanted, but instead to conform with the expectations of the rabbinic and legal norms as they understood them. Thus is the only description of their ten years of marriage stated in a noticeably laconic manner: She "lived with her husband for ten years but did not have a child"—showing that the halachic framework for their union had become the sole content of their life together. Fulfilling the commandment to have children had come at the expense of their personal and emotional world. Thus, by requiring them to reenact their wedding feast, the rabbi uses his own authority to let them re-experience the first moments of their union. This time, however, they would be free of obstructive thoughts about the demands of halacha, since, officially, it was to be their

last meal together. Now unencumbered by the external dictates that they had internalized, the couple's love for each other is renewed. The husband makes his generous offer, and the wife responds by explaining that what she wants is him, and not the trappings of an ideal marriage in accordance with legal norms.

Significantly, the husband and wife in this story both take up roles contrary to the traditional ones: Whereas it is normally the man who takes the woman, and she who gives herself to him, here it is he who is giving of himself, and she who takes him as a husband.[7] By overturning these norms, the narrator reveals their true meaning: The goal of a marriage is not the taking of the other as a piece of property, but the desire for him as a *person* and not as an object.

Seen this way, the wife's infertility may even be read as a divine response to a malfunctioning marriage. Indeed, elsewhere in the same midrash, the rabbis identify the infertility of wives as stemming from God's desire for their prayers. "[God] said to them: My dear, I will tell you why I made you infertile. Because I am desirous of listening to your prayers."[8]

It appears, then, that in certain cases, God believes it necessary to disrupt a woman's natural reproductive cycle, and demand that she distill her desire for offspring into an understanding of the meaning of the institution of marriage and having children itself. This is true of the case of the couple from Sidon: God waits to grant them children until they have broken free of the self-imposed restrictions of halachic norms so as to truly appreciate the real meaning of being married and having children.

Our second story appears at the end of a collection of similarly structured tales appearing in the talmudic tractate Nedarim. All include a description of a husband who exerts his authority over his wife—with halachic backing—and renders the continuation of married life contingent on his wife's execution of an almost impossible task.

> A son of Babylon went to the land of Israel, and took a wife. He said to her: "Cook me a couple of lentils." She cooked him two lentils. He was angry with her.
>
> The next day, he said to her: "Cook me a *se'a* [of lentils]." She cooked him a *se'a* [of lentils]. He said to her: "Go and bring me two *botzinei* (either pumpkins or oil lamps)." She brought him two oil lamps. He said to her: "Go and break them against the head of the *baba* (gate)."
>
> Baba ben Buta was sitting at the city gate and giving judgment. She went and broke them on his head. He said to her: "What have you done?"
>
> She said to him: "What my husband bade me do."
>
> He said: "Because you did your husband's bidding, God will give you two sons like Baba ben Buta."[9]

Four times, the husband sends his wife on missions that are not entirely clear, and four times she fails. First, he asks her to cook him "a couple of lentils." She takes him literally, and cooks him precisely two, leaving him hungry and angry. The next day, he deliberately overstates the request, asking for a *se'a*, or about fourteen liters, of lentils. Once again his wife takes him at his word, and cooks an absurd amount—probably at considerable cost to the family. The third time, the husband tries to vary the menu and asks for pumpkins, but gets oil lamps—the other meaning of *botzinei*—instead. Finally, when he asks his wife to get rid of the unwanted lamps by throwing them against the gate of the house, she hurries off to the city gate and throws them against the befuddled brow of a most learned sage, Baba ben Buta, shaming her husband's name in public.

On the face of it, our story appears to be a classic narrative of marital oppression, of the power men may wield unthinkingly and unimpeded at women's expense. In this reading, the wife of our story is little more than a punching bag, knocked about by a tyrannical husband, on the one hand, and a representative of the male-halachic establishment, on the other. Indeed, Baba ben Buta, instead of giving her shelter until the husband's anger subsides, sends her home to preserve the husband's honor. The only

difference between the rabbi and the husband, it would seem at first glance, lies in the extent of their extremism: Whereas the husband cannot find anything positive in his wife's behavior, Baba ben Buta recognizes that for all her mistakes, her intentions were pure—to do her husband's bidding. Thus, in the way of every proper wife, her obedience earns her the ultimate prize: Two righteous children.

It is possible, however, to propose an alternate reading of this story, according to which the wife is highly assertive and refuses to conduct her life according to the extreme dictates of her husband. At first glance, this reading may appear anachronistic, especially to someone who is mired in the concept of the oppressed status of the wife normally attributed to the sages. Yet such a reading actually reveals a higher literary sensitivity than that of its predecessor.[10] Whereas the previous reading rests of necessity on the assumption that it is about a particularly witless woman, this reading highlights the striking illogicality of her acts, revealed in her first error and snowballing as the story proceeds. For what wife, after all, would imagine that her husband would be satisfied by eating two lentils? Accordingly, this reading leads us to the conclusion that the story's heroine is a kind of proto-feminist waging a war of self-liberation against the marriage norms of the period. Instead of carrying out her husband's demands in just the way he wants, she provides us with a feminine parody of the extreme phallocentrism of the Babylonian male. This also helps us to understand the wife's vicious attack on the rabbi sitting in judgment as throwing down the gauntlet to the entire male establishment, and especially to the sages who provide him with halachic backing.

This reading, which supposes that the wife is rebelling against her husband, nonetheless finds it difficult to explain Baba ben Buta's conclusion that "you have done your husband's bidding," but it could be argued that this is a kind of gentle hint from a judge, trying to steer a wife who has gone off course back to the desired track—that is, doing the will of her husband and bringing up God-fearing children. Thus, even if this reading supports the character of the wife, when all is said and done, the end of the story is

still intended to rein in Jewish wives in general. The purpose is clearly *not* to urge them on in their development of independence, and the entire story may be seen as offering the reader a kind of warning against straying from the proper course.

We may offer a third reading, however, one that does not accept the first interpretation, but neither does it seek merely to place a feminist reading in its stead. It is similar to the second in that it sees the wife as an active and creative subject, but differs from it in its understanding of what motivates her behavior. Whereas in the previous reading the motive was the battle of the sexes, this reading will identify the wife's objective as a struggle for dialogue, an effort to bridge the gap between two widely disparate emotional worlds, and an attempt to break down the walls of social norms. Finally, the rabbi, in this reading, actually cooperates with the wife, encouraging her by behaving as he does.

Our story appears in the collection as the last in a series of tales about husbands who exert their legal authority and demand that their wives perform extreme acts of self-abasement before they can return home. In the first case, the wife—whose husband has apparently tired of what she makes in her kitchen—is asked to give R. Yehuda and R. Shimon a taste of her cooking. The husband confidently assumes that the rabbis, too, will be dismayed by the food, and will justify his request to put his wife out of the house. But instead they come down in favor of the wife, condemning the husband's extreme behavior.

The second story describes an even more extreme case, in which a husband bars his wife from his home until she spits on R. Shimon ben Gamliel, the president of the Sanhedrin. The husband likely imagines that the grand rabbi, in the face of her act, will be more than willing to grant a divorce from a woman for whom he has no legal pretext for demanding a divorce. Yet here too, the rabbi shoulders the humiliation and decides in the wife's favor.

In the third story, a husband forbids his unattractive wife to return home until she has convinced R. Yishmael son of R. Yose that there is something in her that is beautiful. This time, too, the rabbi reacts unexpectedly, and in a brilliant rhetorical exercise, proposes to consider her name—"Lichluchit," which translates approximately as "Cinderella"—as incredibly beautiful, because of its perfect coherence with her outward appearance.

In these three stories, the rabbis act contrary to the expectation that they will take the men's side at their wives' expense. Indeed, despite the great power bestowed upon them by both the Jewish legal code and societal norms, they respond sensitively to the wife's distress. Thus do they make clear to their male audience that the proper use of the power provided to a man by the halacha is not the arbitrary imposition of one's will on another, but rather the ability to help another person, to bestow respect and kindness upon one's spouse.

In our own story, as well, the wife is sent by her extreme husband to the local rabbinical court, which attempts to iron out the difficulties they are facing. On the face of it, the rabbi misunderstands the broader picture, praising her for doing "her husband's bidding," despite the fact that she appears to have done the reverse, misinterpreting each of his requests. A further question may be added: Whereas the sages in the previous stories were satisfied to rule in the woman's favor, Baba ben Buta goes further, blessing her with two sons like himself—he was, after all, one of the great scholars of his time. Again, a close reading of the text may help explain his bizarre response to her.

The story opens by presenting the husband as a recent immigrant to Palestine from Babylonia. We know nothing else about him. He chooses to marry one of the local women, and we may assume the presence of a cultural divide between the two. The original story is in Aramaic, and it is possible that the four misunderstandings on which the story is constructed are based on differences between the vocabularies of Babylonian Aramaic and that of the land of Israel, or at least differences in dialect or usage.[11] In any event, it is clear that the linguistic mismatch is symbolic of a more profound

gap in their own communication, and possibly between men and women more broadly—that men are from Babylonia, in other words, and women from Israel. So our story takes the problem of the abuse of male power in the marriage and adds to it the subject of communication between husband and wife.

The story also tells us nothing about the couple's married life before we hear the husband's request for "a couple of lentils." In the original Aramaic, as in our English translation, it is clear that he did not mean to be taken literally. The silence of the story about the husband's previous life, and the request for the lentils, creates the impression that this is an introverted man, who does not indulge in small talk, and who makes little effort to communicate his intentions in a way that they will be understood—not even to the person with whom he should be most open and clear.

But at the same time, the wife does not work too hard to understand her husband, either. We should not be surprised at his anger at her taking him literally; her actions look more like mocking than naïveté. We are immediately confronted with the question of what compelled her to respond in this way. Is this her subtle rebellion against his misanthropic behavior?

The next day, he asks for not two, but an entire *se'a* of lentils. Dutifully, or mockingly, the wife again takes him at his word, presenting him with a dozen pots of lentil stew. By this point it is hard to believe that either of them is acting in good faith; each, it seems, is taking a stand. If the mishap on the first day could be chalked up to misunderstanding, now it is clear that neither is being straight with the other. The husband, who yesterday was the victim of his wife's literalism, could have made his second request in clear, simple language; his wife, in turn, could have learned from the previous day's fiasco and worked a little harder to understand what her husband wanted. Why, then, does neither of them do just that?

An important clue may be found in the husband's reaction to his wife's second error. Having reacted in anger on the first day, we might have expected even greater anger on the second. Instead, he shows no signs of irritation. Yet, he indeed responds: Whereas the first time, he grew angry but

waited until the next day to make his new request, this time, he responds immediately with a new demand. The content of his request is also different: If until now he has spoken in idiomatic hyperbole ("a couple of lentils" instead of "some," and "a *se'a*" instead of "a lot"), now he asks for *botzinei*, a word that may be understood as either pumpkins or oil lamps. There is nothing in the context of his request to help his wife guess what he means. Is he looking for different food, or better lighting?

In any case, this time, too, the wife succeeds in misunderstanding her husband, and she is sent on yet another errand: "Go and break them [the oil lamps] on the head of the *baba*." Again, the husband is not angry. He merely responds with yet another task. And this task is simple and clear: Again you got it wrong; go smash the lamps. This time, it requires a serious creative effort on her part to misunderstand him. But the wife remains true to form, and makes off for the city gate, the place of law and judgment, to where the sage Baba ben Buta dispenses the law in public. She bursts into the court and breaks both lamps on his head. The rabbi's reaction is clearly the punch line of the story, but to grasp its meaning fully, we must also understand what preceded it.

As we saw, whereas the wife's first mistake was just silly, the second time, she should have expected his anger in light of the previous day's experience. This, combined with his unexplained failure to get angry on the second day, leads us to suppose that we are dealing not with either a slow-witted or a simply rebellious wife, but rather with a sensitive woman, whose every act is tailored to break down the walls that her husband has erected between himself and the world. Far from being a story about a hopeless couple, we discover the possibility of hope in difficult relationship. The husband is a closed, stiff person incapable of communicating effectively with the world. His wife does everything she can to create a channel of communication with her spouse. Whereas he views marriage as a power game in which the husband gives orders and the wife carries them out, the wife tries to ease him into a view of marriage as give-and-take, as a partnership in which each has

to learn to listen to the other. With impressive determination, she holds up a mirror to his closed world. She tries to teach him that it is impossible to live with someone unless you can speak her language, unless you can listen to her and understand her world.

So, on the first day, she follows his request verbatim, showing him what his words sound like from the outside. He fails to get the point, however, and continues to issue orders with little regard for how they are understood. On the second day, however, he begins to suspect that his wife's failure to comply stems not from a lack of understanding, but rather from an attempt to communicate with him. So, instead of getting angry, he puts her to the test: This time, he selects a word whose definition cannot be known from the outset. Finally, despite his order to break the oil lamps, which might appear to be a reaction to getting his request wrong, we may have reason to think that in choosing the lamps she actually chose correctly.

How so? The husband's insistence on two *botzinei* and Baba ben Buta's parallel blessing of two children reveal the symbolism behind the lamps the wife brought: They were, we may suggest, Sabbath lights, intended to grant *shalom bayit*, or domestic peace, between husband and wife. The rabbis taught that anyone who lights them will be rewarded with sons who are scholars:

> Rabba said: It is a simple thing: When choosing between the [Sabbath] candle in his home or the Hanuka lamp, the lamp in his home is preferable because of peace in his home. Between the lamp in his home and the day's Kiddush blessing—the lamp in his home is preferable because of peace in his home….
>
> R. Huna said: He who is accustomed to light a candle [on the Sabbath] will have sons who are scholars….
>
> R. Huna would walk back and forth in front of the door to the home of R. Abin the carpenter. He saw that they were accustomed to light a [Sabbath] candle, and he said: Two great men will emerge from there. R. Idi bar Abin and R. Hiya bar Abin emerged from there.[12]

Although scholars are generally agreed that the custom of lighting two Sabbath candles postdates the talmudic period, in this case the story uses the two candles—as it did two lentils and two sons—to symbolize partnership in marriage.[13] And that, we may presume, is the wife's test: If she chooses the pumpkin, a swollen and hollow vegetable, it will be as a sign of emptiness, revealing her hollow understanding of the test to which her husband has put her. But she chooses the candles, making it abundantly clear that the purpose of her errors all along was establishing peace in the home.[14]

But if our suggestion is correct, that the story is about her attempts at communicating in a realm of no communication, then why, when the wife has made her intentions clear, does the husband send her to smash the lamps? And why, of all places, "on the head of the gate"? It would seem that the choice of the gate indicates not anger over yet a third mistake, but rather a desperate plea: Shatter, please, the locked gate to my locked heart; I need you to help me break through.[15] His wife, responding to his plea, does something so extreme as to make clear to him just how far she is willing to go on his behalf. In a courageous act of love, and a desperate cry to the world for help, she bursts into the court and breaks the lamps on the head of the judge.

The wife's choice of Baba ben Buta serves four purposes simultaneously. First, she continues to reflect his grotesque mode of communication by responding to his ambiguous demands with perverse literalness. Second, whereas the heroines of the previous stories in the anthology were sent by their husbands to the sage, here it is the wife herself who initiates the action, although her husband did not ask it of her. Indeed, whereas in the previous stories, the husbands sought to justify, at least de facto, their separation from their wives, here there is no hint that the husband seeks to rid himself of his wife. It would seem that our wife takes advantage of his willingness to play along to put up a warning sign to him, making it clear to what depths married life can sink if his type of communication is allowed to prevail. Third, through her willingness to go at his "request" to the court—again, it

should be emphasized that in this case, even if her husband had intended to send her directly to the rabbi, he did not use his halachic prerogative to force her to do it—she makes it clear to him just how much she is willing to risk to preserve their relationship.

Fourth, and no less important, she expects, as in the previous stories, that the rabbi's behavior will serve as a lesson to her husband, as a living demonstration of proper behavior toward one's wife. This is hardly a far-fetched expectation: Throughout the Talmud, the character of Baba ben Buta is portrayed as a paragon of openness and attentiveness. Indeed, despite his origins in the strict academy of Shamai, he appears in the literature as someone who was always willing to listen to others and to change his mind, even when it meant ruling in favor of the more lenient school of Hillel.[16] In one story, he spares no effort to rescue a wife from her husband, who is spreading slanderous stories about her.[17] We may speculate, then, that the wife in our own story knew of Baba ben Buta's reputation, and counted on it in choosing him for a target.

And indeed, Baba ben Buta ignores her flagrant act of contempt for the court and the Tora—the penalty for which, back then, would have been flogging or incarceration—and instead treats her with kindness. He stops the legal proceedings, and turns to the wife with a relatively gentle question: What have you done?

Upon hearing her tale, he responds that she "did [her] husband's bidding."[18] In light of the above, it is clear that this is not a misreading of reality, but rather a plumbing of its depths. For when the rabbi speaks of what the husband wanted, he does not mean his immediate, apparent wish for a specific amount of lentils, but rather his desire, however ill-expressed, to be as one with his wife, as revealed in his choice of the married life—as opposed to that of bachelorhood—in the first place, as well as in his consistent use of pairs ("two lentils," "two pumpkins") in his requests. This, in truth, is the desire with which his wife did her utmost to comply, if in a roundabout way. It is for this that the rabbi blesses her with two wise sons

like himself. For surely, a wife who is prepared to make such an enormous effort to break down the barriers that separate her from her husband is most likely to teach her children, in turn, the utmost importance of openness and sensitivity toward the other.

The inner meaning of the two stories presented here is clear: In the first story, the wife "takes" her husband in an act contrary to the normative marriage arrangement, in which the husband takes the wife. In the second story, the wife appears to rebel against her wifely duties, but is praised by the rabbi for trying her best to validate the marital space and to fill it with content. In both stories, the wife is presented as emotionally superior to her husband. And rather than fighting for independence, or choosing the path of aggression against the male establishment, her energies and wisdom are directed toward the attainment of a true and open dialogue with her partner. And in this the rabbis consistently encourage them, and seize the opportunity to teach their male audience an important lesson on the meaning of marriage and partnership.

---

*Ido Hevroni is an Associate Fellow at the Institute of Philosophy, Politics, and Religion at the Shalem Center. His last contribution to* Azure *was "Circumcision as Rebellion" (*Azure *28, Spring 2007).*

## *Notes*

1. Tal Ilan, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine: An Inquiry into Image and Status* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1996), p. 226.

2. It is not my intention to argue that all agada is pro-women, just as it is difficult to argue that all halacha is pro-men. I merely hope to show that it is possible to find in this agadic material many sources that demonstrate the attitude of the rabbis toward women in a different light than the normally accepted one. If scholars do not relate to this material, as well, they will invariably form an incomplete picture of rabbinic thought.

3. This article is not groundbreaking in identifying the positive attitude of the sages toward women. Several scholars came before me, the most notable of whom are Shulamit Veller, in a book dedicated to the subject, *Women and Womenhood in the Talmudic Stories* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1993) [Hebrew], and Admiel Kosman, in numerous articles. See, for example, Admiel Kosman, "The Hero's Name as a Literary Device in the Talmudic Story in Gender Contexts," in Aaron Demsky, ed., *These Are the Names: Studies in Jewish Onomastics*, vol. 4 (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 2004), pp. 61-93 [Hebrew]. However, these scholars tend to describe the relationship between the pro-man halacha to the pro-women agada as the subversion of the agada to halachic injunctions. This article attempts to explain the relationship between the two parts of the text as complementary, picture and frame.

4. Song of Songs Rabba 1:31. This story engendered several interpretations in recent years. See David Zimmerman, *Eight Love Stories from the Talmud and the Midrash* (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Poalim, 1981), pp. 43-47 [Hebrew]; Dalia Hoshen, *The Fire Symbol in Talmudic-Agadic Exegesis* (Ph.D. diss., Bar-Ilan University, 1989), p. 148 onward [Hebrew]; Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California, 1993), pp. 54-55; Adiel Schremer, "*Male and Female He Created Them": Jewish Marriage in the Late Second Temple Mishnaic and Talmudic Periods* (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center, 2003), pp. 316-318 [Hebrew]; Neil Menussi, "The Opening of Hope of the Keeper of the Secret," *Makor Rishon*, May 27, 2005. Some of these scholars see in this story the collision of halacha and human love, and some of them see various possibilities for the completion of each dimension through the other. This article continues on the path of the latter, while emphasizing additional elements.

5. Concerning the fact that marrying another woman was acceptable at the time, see Adiel Schremer, "Jewish Marriage in Talmudic Babylonia" (Ph.D. diss., The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1996), pp. 236-305 [Hebrew].

6. The root *h-f-tz* appears in the Bible only as a verb with the meaning of wanting. In the works of the sages (as early as the Mishna) it appears as a noun.

7. Menussi, "The Opening of Hope."

8. Song of Songs Rabba 2, 8.

9. Nedarim 66b. I would like to thank Rabbi Hananel Etrog for our joint studies, during which I first learned of the power of this story. Shmuel Faust dealt with this story in "She Does as Her Husband Wishes," *Makor Rishon*, August 22, 2005. The interpretation that I provide for this story is close in spirit, but different in several substantial details.

10. This way of interpreting the text is offered by the Iyun Yaakov, Rabbi Yaakov Reisher, Prague (1670-1734), in his reading on the *Ein Yaakov*.

11. Rashi identified both possibilities. A precise examination of this story in light of linguistic knowledge was made by S. David Sperling, "Aramaic Spousal Misunderstanding," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 115:2 (April-June 1995), pp. 205-209.

12. Shabbat 23b.

13. See Yitzhak D. Gilat, "The Coming of Sabbath Eve," *Sidra* 3 (5747), pp. 33-35.

14. In land-of-Israel sources there is another story that strengthens the connection between the Sabbath candles and domestic peace and to the indulgent sage who is willing to humiliate himself for domestic peace. See Jerusalem Sota 1:4; Leviticus Rabba 9:9.

15. It should be noted that in almost every rabbinic story in which a gate appears, it also acts on the symbolic level of a barrier between two different worlds—the world in the domestic setting, in which there are certain codes, and the external world, in which other norms prevail. On the symbol of the gate, see Ido Hevroni, "An Arrow in Satan's Eye: Symbols and Domains of Significance in a Compilation of Temptation Stories from the Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 81a-b" (Ph.D. diss., Bar-Ilan University, 2005), p. 150 onward [Hebrew]. So, too, in this story, it seems that the gate functions in the same manner when the man asks the woman to break into his world and join him in the same domestic space.

16. Beitza 20a.

17. Gitin 57a.

18. It should be noted that the original story up to this point is told in Aramaic, whereas from this point, at which the wife replies, the story switches to Hebrew and continues in Hebrew until the end, thus symbolizing in its language the horizon of understanding that opens here for the first time before husband and wife.