

“Beruriah Said Well”: The Many Lives (and Deaths) of a Talmudic Social Critic

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This article revisits the iconic Talmudic figure Beruriah. We examine both her representation in the Talmud and several significant appropriations in the medieval and modern periods, focusing on her depiction in Rashi’s disturbing gloss on the “Beruriah Incident.” One of the only women represented in rabbinic literature as a Torah scholar on par with the rabbis themselves, dominant modern readings of Beruriah have tended to present her as a kind of proto-liberal feminist, a woman who can function competently and successfully in the male-dominated spheres of intellectual achievement and cultural power. The modern Orthodox Jewish community has appropriated her as a traditional precedent for the legitimacy of women’s Torah study. We argue that approaches limiting Beruriah’s significance to her status as a “woman who is like a man” has overlooked the words attributed to her, and missed what we claim is a more radical social-critical voice. Our reading acknowledges Beruriah’s vaunted equality with her culture-hero contemporaries, while highlighting the ways in which she is also represented as an outsider identified with those at the margins of cultural power, who knows the many ways in which that power is abused and when confronted with such abuses speaks out to critique them. Repeatedly affronted and disappointed by what she sees as a gap between the core values of the tradition and the thoughtless and/or irresponsible ways in which she experiences the rabbis (her relatives and peers) treating her and others, from her words emerge a social-critical voice that is also a voice of rabbinic self-critique.

A door bolt: Rabbi Tarfon rules it impure, but the Sages rule it pure. And Beruriah says, “Remove it from this door and hang it on another.” On the Sabbath, these matters were related to Rabbi Judah. He answered, “Beruriah said well.”

—TOSEFTA KELIM BAVA METZIA 1:6, OUR TRANSLATION

THE APPROPRIATIVE LIFE OF A TALMUDIC WOMAN

Beruriah is the bold anomaly of a Talmudic woman who is learned in all the holy books, fluent in the conversations of the Sages, confident in her opinions, and respected by the most learned and respected men of her generation.¹ Her singularity excites the imagination and raises important questions that have elusive answers. What meaning or meanings could the Talmudic editors be attempting to convey, or preserve, by including her stories? How has she remained such a vital figure in the Jewish cultural imagination across so many centuries and settings?

Such a provocative figure was perhaps always bound to become appropriated, and thus abstracted and reconstituted, by different readers with varying perspectives and different questions. And, indeed, the complex of stories that constitute the persona known as “Beruriah” has become an important anchor for modern Jewish discourse—in this case, discourse about gender, authority, education, and possibility within Jewish culture.²

Not surprisingly, then, is that who this Beruriah was, is, and could be for modern readers is highly contested. But we begin our own examination of Beruriah not by wading into this highly charged and consequential discourse but with noting what occurs to us as a striking observation about the discourse itself. While Beruriah has become an important, even pivotal cultural figure, sparking an intense surge of interest and scholarship over the last thirty years, it is extremely interesting, and indeed quite surprising, that among the most prominent modern interpreters and appropriators of Beruriah, few seem to take much interest in what she is represented as actually having said.

Granted, the very inclusion of such a character in the essential volume of rabbinic Jewish teaching, the Talmud, is clearly meant to teach us something. But many modern readers, perhaps in their zeal at discovering such a striking character, seem to have taken her prematurely into further abstraction, presenting her as a symbolic touchstone for rabbinic thinking about women and Torah study without closely examining her actual (reported) speech. To these readers, the mere fact of Beruriah, of her ability to hold her own with the rabbis, seems so striking in itself that it becomes close to the entirety of what she is about. Beruriah becomes a symbol—the “learned woman”—and thus the judgments about who she was and

what she meant to the rabbis revolve overwhelmingly around the phenomenon of her learnedness *per se*. What if, as we would like to suggest, her learnedness is not the only quality of Beruriah the Talmudic editors meant to stress? What if it is, instead, or also, the currency through which she gained entry into their world, through which she acquired their attention and respect? What if Beruriah is not a woman who is like a man, but a woman who has learned how to make men listen to her?

In this article, we will track the henceforth scarcely remarked-upon, but, as we hope to show, powerfully resonant voice of social criticism that speaks forth from this character—who becomes in the process a vivid and dynamic nexus point for cultural self-critique. It is this subversive, redemptive voice, muted with varying degrees of efficacy by certain traditional commentators, glossed over almost entirely by most modern scholars—the “missing discourse” of social criticism in Beruriah—that has in different ways motivated the charged meanings Beruriah has held and the uses to which she has been put by the diverse generations that have inherited her and passed her forward to their successors.³

THREE TALES

CHARACTER CONTEXT: BERURIAH'S BACKGROUND

Most readings of Beruriah rest on the notion that she manages to successfully “pass” in the world of the rabbis—“a feminine parallel to a rabbinic sage.”⁴ The entry about Beruriah found in the *Encyclopedia of Religion* puts her popular significance succinctly: “Beruryah’s contemporary importance lies in her prominence as a rare woman-scholar in the male-dominated rabbinic culture.”⁵ In the eyes of another major modern Beruriah scholar, this fact becomes the central, if not exclusive, meaning of her character. For him, Beruriah “exemplifies the possibility, though quite uncommon, of a woman receiving formal education within rabbinic society.”⁶ Within this point of view, Beruriah is a kind of rabbinically fashioned golem: a mute instrument of the rabbinical mind, tasked with a single, limited purpose. Beruriah does not speak; she signifies.

While it is true that Beruriah walks and speaks freely among the rabbis, there are also indications in the Talmud that they did not count her precisely as a peer.

As both the daughter and the wife of rabbinic royalty—she is referred to at various points as “Beruriah the daughter of Rabbi Hananya ben Tradyon” and “Beruriah the wife of Rabbi Meir,”⁷ luminaries of the Talmudic canon admired both for their learning and communal leadership—part of her special status seems connected to her pedigree. Her formidable learning clearly distinguishes her as person to be taken seriously. Nevertheless, her personal relationships seem to contribute to her level of comfort among rabbinic luminaries and to provide her with special access to the inner workings of rabbinic thinking and life.

NARRATIVE CONTEXT: MEMORY, EMBODIMENT,
AND ABUSE OF RABBINIC POWER

It will be helpful to take a moment to present and analyze the Talmudic contextualization for these Beruriah tales—the broader thematic textual unit, or *sugya*, in which they appear. In doing so, we assume the relevance of Jeffrey Rubenstein, who argues for the literary value of interpreting Talmudic stories within the larger context of the *sugyas* in which they appear.⁸ The *sugya* provides a thematic setting meant to influence the valence with which her character is read. Exploring the stories immediately preceding Beruriah’s will help us better to locate Beruriah within the Talmudic imagination.

The overarching theme of the *sugya* into which these Beruriah stories are woven is relationship between mastery of language—in the sense of both precision of form and lucidity of meaning—and the remembering, or embodying, of Torah study. The study of Torah is presented as functioning as a check against the abuse of power by those most strongly identified with it, communal leaders. When those entrusted with communal authority fail to internalize the values imparted through Torah study, they are in danger of losing their moral compass. When their teaching and learning become lax in a way that compromises a full integration of traditional values and ideals, they put themselves at risk for more far-reaching forms of ethical compromise. They risk becoming corrupt.

The theme of embodied knowledge and its importance first appears in a rabbinic discussion about the populations of Judea and the Galilee, who with regard to this theme, the Talmud says, are polar opposites. The former, known for

their extreme concern for precision and clarity in language, are contrasted favorably over the latter, whose laxness, according to the Talmud, caused a hemorrhaging of Torah knowledge from among them and turned them into a source of some ridicule, the butt of a cultural joke. A hapless salesman from Galilee is represented as having such muddled speech that he cannot effectively convey the fact that he is selling, much less describe the nature of his goods. For this he is met with derision, heckled by bystanders as a “Foolish Galilean”—an epithet that seems to connote a disconnect between what is known and what is expressed, and which recurs in one of the subsequent Beruriah tales analyzed below.

The theme of embodying, and its failure, is illustrated with a provocative declaration by a great rabbinic leader. “R. Yehoshua ben Chananya said: In all my days no one ever defeated me [*nitzkhani*], except for a woman, a little boy, and a little girl.”⁹ The three stories R. Yehoshua narrates in support of this claim all entail his being colorfully and sharply called to task in verbal contests with profound moral implications, by those considered well beneath him in both standing and understanding. Variations on a theme, for our purposes it will suffice to quote and discuss just one of these vignettes.

What was the incident with the woman? Once I was staying at a certain inn, and the hostess made me beans. On the first day I ate them and did not leave over any of them. The second day [she served me beans and] I did not leave over any of them. On the third day she “burned” them with too much salt. As soon as I tasted them, I pulled my hands away. She asked me, “Rabbi, why aren’t you eating?” I said to her, “I already ate during the daytime.” She said to me, “If so, you should have refrained from eating the bread.” She said to me, “Rabbi, perhaps you did not leave over a portion of beans from the first [servings, i.e., and that is why you are leaving over the beans now]. For did not the Sages say that we do not leave a portion over in the serving pot, but we do leave a portion over on the plate?”¹⁰

By the anonymous innkeeper’s response, we are given to understand that during his first two days at the inn, R. Yehoshua cleared his plate, failing to leave anything over for the food server. According to Soncino’s annotation, as well as Rashi’s

gloss, when the server would pour the evening stew from the pot into the individual bowls, he would not leave anything over in the pot for his own needs. It was the responsibility of the diners to leave over an unfinished portion on their plates, which he then would collect and combine into one complete portion, his supper. Moreover, this custom was, according to the innkeeper, instituted by the rabbis themselves. After witnessing one of the greatest living exemplars of this exclusive fellowship clear his plate for two days in a row, she takes him to task, quoting his own authoritative canon against him. How can a rabbi fail to uphold the standards he has taken it upon himself to embody?

Moreover, it is noteworthy that R. Yehoshua's first response is evasion. While his conscious intent seems initially to be polite—he does not want to give the impression that the food is bad—this itself implies how remote is the possibility in his mind that a female innkeeper could possibly be questioning his ethical integrity. There is a disturbing glibness in his amiable attempt to save her feelings while systematically cheating the help. The ease and facility with which he comes up with small deceptions to deflect her inquiry also give one pause. The powerful rabbinic intellect, the Talmud quietly suggests, trained for agility and quickness, is ethically neutral. It can just as easily be enlisted in the service of justifying lapses of integrity as it can in clarifying the will of God.

The three stories end with a summary declaration by R. Yehoshua expressing a humbling new sense of inclusiveness (“ . . . for all of you are wise . . . ”) that contrasts sharply with his initial elitist condescension toward these three social and intellectual inferiors. He now understands that it is possible to learn from anyone, and that to presume otherwise is to place oneself in significant moral danger. What he learns over the course of these interactions is that his mastery of halakhic language is not synonymous with the embodiment of its values. To the contrary: it can lead to a sense of complacency and smugness that leaves one vulnerable to various forms of corruption. Only when exposed to the perceptions and judgments of people operating outside the Talmudic framework, unimpressed by title or verbal dexterity, does he become vulnerable to verbal battles he cannot win, based on ethical critiques he cannot answer.

These critiques seem to center on inconsistencies and abuses of power that evoke a pattern of ethical laziness, which may, in turn, be a function of entitlement: an occupational hazard of occupying such a vaunted position of communal

authority. Interestingly, R. Yehoshua not only is able to acknowledge the truth of these critiques but also to celebrate them. When it is pointed out that he has “forgotten” or failed sufficiently to embody and express one or another of these values, he not only concedes his accountability to this shared framework but also welcomes the opportunity for self-correction.

TALE 1: A FOOLISH GALILEAN

Beruriah appears to be waiting in the wings, as it were, of R. Yehoshua’s three tales, appearing immediately upon their conclusion.

“R. Yose the Galilean was walking down the road when he met Beruriah.”¹¹

As in the preceding stories, here we have a great and well-known rabbi out in the world, removed from his natural element, the *beit midrash* (study hall). At this early moment in the story, then, we face a subtle narrative uncertainty. Which kind of tale is this? Is it meant to be an extension of R. Yehoshua’s “outsider” encounters, or a familiar tale of banter between rabbinic peers? The multiple voices within the construction of the Talmudic editors’ tale draw upon different types of context to create an allusive layering that will exert subtle narrative effects upon the story that follows.

“He asked her, ‘Which road do we take to Lod?’”

To this seemingly innocent query, Beruriah responds with a kind of critical fury. “Foolish Galilean! Did not the Sages say, ‘Do not indulge in excessive conversation with a woman?’ You should have just said, ‘Which way to Lod?’”

It should be noted that the structure of Beruriah’s response to R. Yose mirrors quite directly the scores of Talmudic exchanges wherein one rabbi accuses another of imprecise word choice, illustrating the legal consequences of subtle linguistic variation. We are (at least partially) in the familiar genre of rabbinic verbal sparring. Within this genre, Beruriah is treated—by R. Yose and by the Talmudic editors, who guide our attention to the genre association via the narrative echoes elucidated above—as a legitimate rabbinic interlocutor more than capable of holding her own, who uses familiar rabbinic language to critique a peer’s infraction.

This initial reading, while plausible on its own terms, leaves out some important, if perhaps muted, questions in the text. Upon further listening, another voice can be

heard as well. We begin this second reading with the observation that both the battle Beruriah picks, and the fury with which she launches it, are puzzling. R. Yose's verbal infraction appears to be both technically minor (in the Aramaic of the original, she edits his inquiry from four words to two) and, more importantly, of little practical consequence. His response seems neither excessively long nor expressive of any obvious impropriety of the type the rabbis were concerned to warn against in their prohibition against excessive chatter with women. One could easily ask—What's the difference?—and the text itself provides no easy answer. The tradition Beruriah quotes to justify her critique thus might easily be read as an overreaction. Were she indeed simply “one of the boys”—a woman who is like a man—R. Yose's comment may well have provoked a list of directions rather than an outburst of inexplicable hostility.

Well . . . what is the difference? One difference, we would argue, is gender. Perhaps, despite her familiarity with the rabbinic circle and her formidable scholarship, the Talmud represents Beruriah not as a woman who is like a man, but a woman who is a famously incisive, perceptive reader, whose close reading skills apply not only to sacred texts, but to the people charged with representing them. She is intimately familiar both with the rabbinic value system and with the rabbis themselves, and thus, perhaps, particularly sensitive to the gaps that tend to accrue between them. To say that she has learned how to move confidently among them is not the same as to say that she has become “like” them. What we find in these stories is a Talmudic narrative concerned to show that while leveraging her insider access to learn the language she knows they consider authoritative, she never relinquishes her outsider point of view, what Virginia Woolf might have called her “unpaid-for-education.”¹²

As an outsider intimately familiar with the blindspots engendered by rabbinic entitlement, Beruriah seems to sense, in R. Yose's ambiguous inquiry—or is it an invitation?—something morally amiss. Perhaps she takes him to task for diminishing the rabbinic standards he is obligated to embody, thereby putting both of them at risk for the possible confusions and consequences to which such complacency may lead. It is possible that she takes his inclusion of “we” as a flirtation, a suggestion that they should travel together or an invitation to join him on his journey.

Whether these implications are careless or intentional, it is impossible to know. What is significant is that in his imprecise speech, he leaves them open as

unseemly interpretive possibilities. Whether she takes R. Yose’s words as a flirtation or is concerned to point out that they could be taken as such, we now understand that her reaction is neither petty nor academic. In fact, it is of great consequence, as it shuts down these immodest possibilities of R. Yose’s question and defuses their potential sexual charge. Moreover, in this context her quotation from rabbinic tradition constitutes a stinging indictment of rabbinic hypocrisy and its consequences: the ways in which it casually diminishes others for the sake of values the Sages themselves do not consistently uphold. To paraphrase her point: *You, the Sages, preach about the dangers of women’s sexual appeal and the direct correlation between verbal and sexual restraint; yet in this very sphere you yourselves act loosely and open the door to impropriety.* Meanwhile, the injunction not to speak at length with women, which has the effect of sharply limiting women’s voices within rabbinic discourse—cutting them off from the conversations of greatest cultural import, the conversations that take place within the halls of the Talmudic academies—remains dubiously in place. And the Talmudic editors, by giving Beruriah the story’s last words, and the story’s “last word,” allow this implication to hang uncomfortably in the narrative ether.

In other words, we propose that Beruriah senses here something akin to what R. Yehoshua’s first anonymous interlocutor, a female innkeeper, noted—a rabbi failing to live up to his title. We may suggest that it is Beruriah’s sociocultural vantage point as a woman, an outsider—an outsider, moreover, with a lifetime of intimate insider access to the rabbinic world—that sensitizes her to casual abuses of rabbinic power. She is perhaps more aware than her rabbinic counterparts might be of the ways in which title and authority can lead to moral laxness, to arrogant or thoughtless impingements upon the dignity of those holding less stature, less power.¹³

Significantly, the Talmud endows Beruriah with the power to strip R. Yose of both his title and his name, and she replaces them with a humiliating epithet—“Foolish Galilean!”—an allusion to the hapless salesman referenced previously as an illustration of his Galilean kinsmen’s infamous disconnect between what is known versus what is expressed. It is precisely this trait that led them, according to the Talmud, to forget all of their Torah knowledge: a failure of embodiment with the highest cultural stakes. Here the force and scope of Beruriah’s indictment—and

warning—to R. Yose comes into sharper relief. Through her social-critical lens, he has committed a violation of the type that undermines his very identity as a Jewish leader and teacher.

Again, a close reading of the layered contexts the Talmudic editors orchestrate for this text bears out a more complex representation of Beruriah's identity than previously observed. Its immediate proximity to the R. Yehoshua stories guides the reader to view the Beruriah of our story in a similar mold, as an outsider to the rabbinic enterprise with no illusions about rabbinic failure.

There is more to be said about Beruriah's pregnant deletion of the "we" from R. Yose's apparent invitation to join him on his journey to Lod, which might carry other important information about her sense of identity and relationship. With his "we," R. Yose assumes, or offers, a relationship with Beruriah that she resists. Might there be further meaning to her blunt rejection of this assumption/offer, her pointed removal of herself from relationship with him? It may, for example, be further read as a rejection, on Beruriah's part, of an offer of exceptional status vis-à-vis other women based on the merit accrued to her by her learning—a kind of caste loyalty, in other words. *Granted*, she responds to R. Yose in this reading, *I am a learned woman with all the requisite capabilities and credentials for entrance into the rabbinic fellowship; I know what you know. Nevertheless—* and recall her quotation of the rabbinic prohibition against excessive conversing with women—*you have defined me as "other." Perhaps you want to make me an exception, while keeping the overall social structure, which functions to marginalize women, in place. But I will remain loyal to this status. I may speak your language, but I will not take on your "we."*

Again, Beruriah's concurrent devotion to multiple voices within herself is reflected: she embraces her status as both woman and scholar, but does not need to claim that these somehow reconcile, complete, or cancel each other out. She accepts the boundaries that have been imposed upon her, and stands with dignity speaking the language of the Sages to critique them, all the while embracing her separate "we." An echo of this type of stance is found powerfully articulated in the modern era in Virginia Woolf's "Society of Outsiders" and in the work of Carol Gilligan.¹⁴

TALE 2: THE PERILS OF DISEMBODIED LEARNING

Beruriah presents her critique in a language of devotion. We can perhaps hear in her challenge to R. Yose a hint of incredulity or even naivete: “But it says . . . !” That is, since the tradition itself says so, how could you possibly find yourself behaving any differently?!—within the discourse that reinforces her bona fides as a devoted member of their common “fraternity” of values. This underlying devotion, we suggest, is what makes her critique both powerful and palatable, and perhaps in part what captured the moral imagination of the Talmudic editors, who featured her as a deeply embedded cultural critic in these brief but captivating vignettes about rabbinic character and power.

This reading is reinforced as the Talmud follows this charged, enigmatic vignette with another. As the following story demonstrates, Beruriah was concerned not merely with treating the ailment of rabbinic hypocrisy, but with its prevention.

Beruriah encountered a certain student who was reviewing his studies quietly. She kicked him. She said to him, “Is it not written in Scripture as follows: ‘Ordered in all respects, and secure’? If your learning is ordered in all of your 248 limbs, then it is secure [i.e., it will not be forgotten]. If not, it is not secure [i.e., and will be forgotten].”¹⁵

As in the previous story, the issue of failing to embody what one has learned is dramatized in the form of an oddly explosive reaction to an apparently minor offense. A student sits quietly in the beit midrash, reviewing what he has learned. Beruriah approaches him, notes his behavior, and rewards it with a swift kick. She backs up her visceral rebuke with a proof from the rabbis: “Is it not written . . . ?”

Here we find Beruriah strolling confidently through cultural terrain traditionally reserved for men, surveying the scene from what appears to be a position of acceptance and respect: a rabbinic peer. She sees herself as possessing authority in this setting and does not hesitate to use it. In the world of the rabbis, she too is a teacher of students. This is the Beruriah of legend, the woman who passes freely through the aisles of the religious academy. She is not a woman studying privately

at home, accumulating wisdom from overheard conversations or fatherly tutoring. Rather, she stands front and center as a protagonist in the place where religious tradition is being created.

Why does she attack this particular student, who seems diligently devoted to his studies? Why is learning quietly a crime whose proper punishment is physical assault? What is the meaning of the obscure tradition Beruriah quotes?

By Beruriah's own account, her harsh treatment of the student seems intended as preventive medicine. The kick is not merely a kick; it is a message clearly announcing her theme: the critical importance of embodied learning. She wants him to learn using his whole voice, his whole body. Her kick is intended as a physical disruption of his intellectual reverie, forcing him to remember that there is a body attached to the learning mind which must be felt and engaged, which must be penetrated and animated by what the mind discovers, in order for such discoveries to be translated into normative behavior: a central object of the rabbinic enterprise. For the work of the mind to have any lasting significance, it must be absorbed and integrated into the habits and sensibilities of lived experience. By confining his learning to a low mental murmur, he unwittingly betrays it and dooms himself to lose it, along with everything that grave loss implies.

Beruriah frames her criticism not as an assault against common sense, but against tradition itself. As in the previous story, she uses the words of other sages, quoting from traditional sources, to make her point. We are reminded again that she knows how to play by their rules. She is backed by the system itself in her pedagogical rebuke of the student. His failing is a failure to live up to the standards he has accepted in embracing the spiritual culture defined by rabbinic tradition. In this story, she uses her knowledge not to wage a veiled critique of a specific law, but rather to attack an entire method of study. Her critique of a student at a formative stage of his religious development is a challenge to the entire Talmudic system to slight embodied learning at its own peril. The Talmudic editors pick up on this deep cautionary message and channel it through the multiple voices of a woman who carries an outsider's insight, which she is able to convey through an insider's command of language and tradition.

TALE 3: A DEBATE ABOUT PRAYER

We have mentioned that Beruriah’s outsider insight is deeply informed by her intimate access to rabbinic power. Nowhere is this dynamic clearer, perhaps, than in a scene narrated in the Talmud between her and her husband, R. Meir, who plays a seminal role in the transmission of rabbinic thought. Beruriah, in her intimate relationship with him, can be seen as gaining access to a particularly deep level of the tradition’s values. Of course, she can also be seen as gaining access to a particularly deep level of rabbinic humanity. The tension between the values and their embodiment in the people who carry them—an issue that affects how rabbinic Jewry shapes itself at its foundations—is crisply illustrated in this incident reported by the Talmud as an excerpt from their daily life.

There were certain hoodlums in R. Meir’s neighborhood, and they caused him great distress. R. Meir was praying for mercy: that they would die. His wife, Beruriah, said to him: “What is your reasoning [i.e., for utilizing such a prayer]—because it is written: ‘Let sinners [*hata’im*] cease from the earth’? (Psalms 104:35) But is it written *hot’im* [i.e., in a form that exclusively and unequivocally denotes sinners]? The word written is *hata’im* [i.e., a more ambiguous form that can accommodate a meaning closer to ‘sin’ than ‘sinner’]. And furthermore, go down to the end of the verse: ‘. . . and let the wicked be no more.’ Is it true that once sinners cease from the earth, there will be no more wicked people [i.e., in the future]? Therefore, pray for mercy regarding them, so that they will return in repentance. Then [i.e., once the drive to do evil is eliminated, we will accurately be able to declare]: ‘and the wicked will be no more.’” R. Meir prayed for mercy regarding them, and they returned in repentance.¹⁶

In this story, we find Beruriah’s critical faculties sharply engaged at another flashpoint of rabbinic leadership. She assertively finds fault with her husband’s decision to pray for the deaths of local hoodlums who have been giving him grief:

“Beruriah said to him: ‘What is your reasoning?’”

Significantly, Beruriah frames her critique not in terms of moral outrage, but as a matter of interpretive integrity. This serves for her the double purpose of providing a safe platform from which to open the conversation, and locating the issue within a discursive framework with the potential to bring about a shift in behavior. Her mastery of biblical and rabbinic tradition combines with a strong relational sensitivity—granting her husband the benefit of the doubt with respect to his intentions, framing the question as neutral and interpretive—to make her a formidable interlocutor even for a rabbi of her husband’s stature.

What is the nature of her critique? On the surface, what is at stake is little more than philology, the correct analysis of a grammatical form. She surmises that R. Meir understands the word *hata'im* to mean sinners, and thus reads the verse from Psalms as “Let sinners [*hata'im*] cease from the earth.” Beruriah’s point is not that the verse cannot be read as urging the physical downfall of sinners, just that it doesn’t have to be. “But is it written *hot'im* [i.e., in a form that exclusively and unequivocally denotes sinners]?” The Psalmist could have chosen a word that could only mean *sinners*; instead, he chose a more ambiguous term, open to being interpreted as something closer to “sin.” Her reading of the continuation of the verse affirms its textual grounding by pointing out not only its coherence but also an interpretive benefit—noting a flaw in her husband’s reading that her own reading corrects (i.e., accounting for the pervasiveness and persistence of sin itself). This new interpretation then becomes the textual basis for a radically different possibility of understanding sin, prayer, and repentance, even regarding those who transgress against one directly:

Therefore, pray for mercy regarding them, so that they will return in repentance. Then [i.e., once the drive to do evil is eliminated, we will accurately be able to declare]: “. . . and the wicked will be no more.”

By demonstrating that there are multiple ways in which the contested word, and verse, can be read, Beruriah adeptly shifts the terms of the conversation from interpretive speculation to interpretive choice:

“R. Meir prayed for mercy regarding them, and they returned in repentance.”

The textual opening creates a gateway to personal introspection, of which R. Meir promptly avails himself. Before praying for the repentance of the hoodlums, he undergoes a serious turnabout of his own. Beruriah’s multivalenced engagement—her devotion to the tradition, both its interpretive methods and its core values; her devotion to the ethical intuition honed by her position on the cultural margin; her devotion to R. Meir, both as a communal leader and as her husband; and her devotion to prayer, her belief in both its power and its essentially positive nature—allow him finally to hear the profound critique underlying her words. How can people on society’s margins be judged for summary execution? How can a spiritual leader use prayer as a weapon of personal vengeance? Beruriah points out the possibility of a distinction between people’s actions and their essence, which in turn opens up possibilities for personal transformation: repentance. R. Meir, in his distress, seems initially to have lost touch with this core Jewish value.

RASHI’S TROUBLING “BERURIAH INCIDENT”

If we understand Beruriah not as a rabbinic thought experiment, a woman with a man’s voice, but rather as a woman lodging a critique within the heart of the rabbinic enterprise in a voice that they—and thus we as readers—must acknowledge as authoritative, then we can perhaps better understand the infamous epilogue to her story supplied by Rashi, the medieval elucidator of Jewish texts, which has confounded the meaning of her character and haunted her memory since it appeared in his canonical commentary on the Talmud. Faced with an obscure reference to something called “The Beruriah Incident” as a secondary explanation for why rabbi Meir was eventually forced to flee Palestine for Babylonia, Rashi presents the following account:

Some say it is because of the Beruriah Incident. Because she once mocked the saying of the Sages: “Women are weak-minded.” R. Meir, her husband, said to her, “By your life you will end up admitting their words.” He then commanded one of his students to seduce her to a matter of sin [i.e., to have sex with him]. The student pleaded with her

many days until she submitted, and when she found out (the true story) she strangled herself. R. Meir then left Babylon out of shame.¹⁷

To acknowledge that this is a strange story seems somehow insufficient to convey the deep unsettling jolt of perversion it manages to express and evoke. How could such events possibly be considered narratively plausible, given their total incoherence with what we know of these characters as presented in the Talmud? Scholars argue as to whether Rashi in this commentary was quoting an earlier, forgotten source, which possibly could even date back to Talmudic times, or alternatively drawing upon his own midrashic imagination.¹⁸ In either case, he is responsible for bringing this version of Beruriah and Rabbi Meir into the discourse of Jewish learning and culture. What could have motivated Rashi so completely to invert our image of these two Talmudic figures? “Whether she was fictional or historical, why did Rashi feel obliged to damage the reputation of a righteous and learned woman by writing down these stories?”¹⁹

Modern readings of Beruriah that characterize her in more abstract, symbolic terms have a difficult time answering this question convincingly. Rachel Adler, in one of the more nuanced and evocative literary-cultural analyses of the Beruriah corpus, is striking in her attempt to place Rashi’s epilogue on a logical narrative continuum with Beruriah’s representations in the Talmud. “Rashi’s story,” she argues, is “thematically contiguous with the earlier portions of the Beruriah legend.”

On the positive side are Beruriah’s brilliance, her special usefulness as a woman who vindicates rabbinic Judaism, and the uniquely appealing depictions of her relationship with her husband. On the negative side, Beruriah is viewed as a threat, a competitor, an arrogant woman contemptuous of men and of rabbinic tradition . . . the message [is] that Beruriah is subversive and unmanageable, a fifth column in the patriarchal domain in which she has hitherto enjoyed the privileges of a resident alien.²⁰

Adler may be right that Rashi’s attempt to subvert Beruriah’s legend is an attempt to reinforce male superiority and patriarchal power “by reducing women to their sexual

function,” that it is “precisely sexual humiliation that cuts Beruriah down to size.” However, our reading of the Talmud highlights a different attitude toward Beruriah within its pages.²¹

Daniel Boyarin presents a textual-historical account of the strains of Talmudic thinking that culminated inexorably, he claims, in Rashi’s narrative coup.²² To summarize his thesis, which he argues by way of a comparative analysis of a cluster of related Talmudic texts, the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds differ on the issue of the value, implications, and permissibility of teaching Torah to women. The former sees it as permissible and valuable, while the latter holds it to be dangerous and prohibited. Boyarin argues that Rashi’s treatment of Beruriah, found in his commentary on the Babylonian Talmud, is the logical culmination of this Babylonian view opposing women’s Torah study. Given such opposition, how could such a figure as Beruriah be allowed to stand as an honored, authoritative figure within its pages? Her very existence within the Babylonian tradition represents an affront to the Babylonian view, which for the Babylonian Talmud is the only view on this matter.

For Boyarin, as for Adler, Beruriah’s meaning within the discourse of the Talmud lies squarely in the fact of her learnedness.

Another way of putting this is that the same cultural forces in the Babylonian rabbinic community that did not even permit [the Mishnaic position encouraging women’s Torah study] to be retained as a minority opinion could not tolerate the exceptional case of even one woman learned in the Torah. . . . The horror of her end, the extraordinary lengths to which the text goes, even defaming one of its greatest heroes to achieve its purpose, is once again a symptom of the extraordinary threat that the learned woman represented in the Babylonian (and later European) rabbinic culture, a power that threatened to upset the whole apple cart of gender relations and social organization and that had to be suppressed, therefore, by extraordinary means.²³

Boyarin repeatedly uses the designation “Beruriah’s story” in reference to Rashi’s commentary, blurring the line between the medieval commentator and his rabbinic

predecessors. Nevertheless, the Talmudic editor(s) either saw no contradiction in presenting Beruriah as a figure of respect, or felt comfortable allowing the contradiction to stand. Nowhere do they evince symptoms of seeing Beruriah as a threat requiring suppression, much less an “extraordinary” one. Had they indeed seen her in this way, there were plenty of measures at their disposal to discredit, silence, or simply erase her. Whatever condition is indicated by Rashi’s symptomatic tale can be attributed only to him.

The strain of Babylonian-Talmudic thinking that generated the Beruriah stories may seem at odds with the strain of Babylonian Talmudic thinking antipathetic to women’s learning. But this does not seem sufficient to justify reading Rashi’s apparent hostility toward her back into the Babylonian Talmud itself—which presents both strains as canonical and provides no clear criteria for adjudicating between them—overvoicing all others. Thus when Rashi arrived at the enigmatic “Beruriah Incident,” and quite reasonably deemed it in need of explanation, both of these strains were available for him to draw upon. If he indeed chose one of these strains over the other, the choice must be seen as his own, rather than an inexorable culmination of Babylonian Talmudic thought.

This is not to say that no sense can be made of Rashi’s harsh interpretive turn, or that no connection can be found tying it to Beruriah’s Talmudic representation. Our claim is that both Adler’s and Boyarin’s readings of Rashi’s Beruriah legend do not pay sufficient interpretive attention to the Talmud’s account of what she is reported as having said, and its significance for her inclusion within the Talmudic tradition. In neither of their readings does abstracting her into the signifier “learned woman” manage to account for Rashi’s subversion of her legacy.

*Some say it is because of the Beruriah incident. Because she once mocked the saying of the Sages: “women are weak-minded.” R. Meir, her husband, said to her, “By your life you will end up admitting their words . . .”.*²⁴

It is not Beruriah’s learning, perhaps, but her critical spirit, her challenging of rabbinic authority, to which Rashi appears so violently to object. This is the one aspect of Rashi’s Beruriah that can indeed be traced back to her Talmudic origins. As shown above, it is a dominant motif throughout her exchanges with R. Yose the

Galilean, the unnamed student, and her husband R. Meir, and may be the feature of this character that the Talmudic editors were most concerned both to emphasize and preserve. It echoes her critique of the patronizing rabbinic attitude toward women’s intellect expressed in that vignette. The scenario he describes is presented as a punishment for her harsh and unabashed admonishment of rabbinic inconsistency and abuse of power. The same passionate, educated critical spirit the Talmudic editors so carefully crafted into her character, structured into her tales, and fixed in their canon, for Rashi has become an intolerable trait.

This seems an instance in which Rashi appears intent on silencing one of the voices his received tradition has kept robustly alive. In this, he seems to fall victim to precisely the rabbinic tendency Beruriah rails against, abusing his hegemonic power as a sanctioned interpreter to dismiss criticism rather than address it. R. Meir’s first human impulse was to use his spiritual authority as a rabbi violently to dispatch of his harassing hoodlums rather than engage with and encourage them through prayer. It is perhaps only Beruriah, with her uniquely multiple perspective, who could press him to think twice.

Rashi seems to interpret Beruriah’s critical temperament as a form of harassment rather than devotion. Perhaps he felt that murdering her—and it seems fair to say that her reported suicide bears all the markings of a setup—was the only way for the self-critical rabbinic conscience she represents to be put to rest. In this act, Rashi silences a voice with which the Talmudic rabbis seemed to express a sense of identification.

If Adler frames the Talmud’s treatment of Beruriah as a legal test case ultimately stamped with a negative verdict, we would offer a different juristic metaphor. Perhaps Beruriah is more like the literary-cultural equivalent of the kind of minority opinion that is preserved as an option for later generations to appropriate in accordance with their uniquely situational communal needs. The Talmudic editor preserved this opinion, while Rashi attempts to disqualify it from the field of cultural legitimacy, to erase Beruriah’s challenging voice from the record by showing her to be unfaithful—unfaithful to her husband, and perhaps by extension unfaithful to the tradition he represents. In short, what Rashi misses, and thus impugns, is Beruriah’s devotion. Because the Talmudic editors sensed it deep within her critique, they responded in kind, with devotion to ensuring the integrity of her legacy. Rashi

interprets her challenge as betrayal, and repays her with betrayal. For him, the type of critical stance Beruriah represents must not be emulated, and thus it must not be valorized in any way. To the contrary, Rashi's Beruriah must be grotesquely humiliated and assassinated in one of the most public places to be found within Jewish discourse—his own commentary—in order for her multidimensionality to be flattened, her devotion to be denied, and her critical voice to be rendered suspect once and for all. That Beruriah is critiqued for these reasons and not for being a woman is bolstered by the generally very positive attitude toward women in Rashi's commentaries, as noted recently by Avraham Grossman.²⁵

BERURIAH'S OUTCRY: FROM "LIBERAL" SIGNIFIER TO "RADICAL" CRITIC

For much modern scholarship, the striking feature of Beruriah's character is the seemingly radical contrast between her social stature as a learned sage operating at the heart of Talmudic culture, and her gender, which in that cultural milieu would seem to make such a status impossible. For many contemporary Orthodox readers, Beruriah is an inspiring cultural and legal precedent whose near-exclusive function is to permit the study of Torah to women. It is our claim that the deeper levels of what the Talmud seems interested to have us learn from her have been largely overlooked. Insofar as she has been reduced, in the modern imagination, to a signifier—a pawn in a Talmudic chess match—it is fair to say that Beruriah has ironically, to a significant extent, been ignored.

Translated into modern feminist terminology, we might say that Beruriah's dominant appropriation within contemporary discourse has been as a kind of proto-"liberal" feminist—living proof that a woman can master the dominant discourse and mechanisms of cultural power, operating freely and effectively within this realm. We find embedded in her Talmudic representation a more "radical"-feminist voice. This is a voice that draws upon Beruriah's experience as a marginalized figure within her society, that knows of rabbinic moral failure and abuse. While she speaks in the language of the cultural elite, her words betray shock and disappointment. She is so immersed within the tradition that she cannot help but cry out when she sees its core values being violated by those leaders

charged most fully to embody them—and it is in this indignant outcry that her more “radical” social-critical voice comes to life.

RASHI'S MULTIPLICITY: DEVOTED CRITIC AFTER ALL?

By preserving within these stories a voice that resists a flattened reading of Beruriah as a “woman who is just like a man”—and then is punished on account of embodying such a discomforting anomaly—we argue that the Talmud also preserves an important paradigm for cultural self-correction, embedding within its canon a model of devoted criticism. Once we are sensitized to this trend, possibilities of resistance may be found even in seemingly unlikely places.

Rashi, for example, has evoked the horror of modern feminists for what we have seen interpreted as the total silencing of the Beruriah character—and provoked some of our own interpretive ire above. Given the extremity of his seeming transformation of Beruriah and R. Meir's characters, what appears to be a great shift from their Talmudic versions, we naturally come to wonder if perhaps we are missing something in our understanding of Rashi: ways Beruriah's character is not flattened nor her critical voice erased; in which the Talmudic spirit of Beruriah may have been preserved. We do not take it for granted that we will find evidence to support such a reconsideration, but we leave the possibility open, and read with it in mind.

And indeed, adopting this lens, we find that the valences in the story begin to shift in potentially surprising ways. It becomes possible to see Rashi not necessarily as denigrating Beruriah, but harshly critiquing R. Meir himself for his outrageous abuse of power (recall that Rashi's R. Meir perpetrates a twofold abuse: of his wife, and of his authority over the student he enlists into his scheme)—the kind of critique of rabbinic corruption that lies at the heart of the Beruriah whom Rashi inherited from the Talmud. In this reading, Rashi may not be so focused on exposing Beruriah's “true colors” as a woman, no matter how much learning she has done, that he misses the horror of the plot perpetrated upon her by her husband. To the contrary: in this reading the horror is emphasized by Rashi precisely in the *service* of the critique.

Along these lines, some modern scholars have noted, at times quizzically, that this story, while focused on Beruriah's defrocking and its implications for her

character, does no great service to R. Meir, his student, or the class of people they represent. The response to this quandary tends to take some form of the argument that Rashi's R. Meir is meant as a cautionary example of just how far the male rabbinic tradition is willing to go to maintain its proprietary hold over Torah study. The medieval historian Avraham Grossman expresses surprise at the tendency of modern cultural critics to read Rashi's Beruriah legend as relevant in any way to the issue of women's Torah study.

The attempt of several scholars to see the bizarre legend cited by Rashi concerning the alleged suicide of Beruria in wake of her infidelity, as intended to convey a negative message regarding women's Torah study, is remote from its literal sense and . . . indeed, we did not find any agitation in the Middle Ages against Torah study by women based upon this story by Rashi.²⁶

Perhaps, then, it is not Beruria's indiscretion but the diabolical machinations of R. Meir that are Rashi's focus. In this reading, Rashi assigns Beruria a martyr's death, killing her in order to revitalize her legacy not only as a formidable, learned social critic but also as one willing to stand as an example by taking ultimate responsibility for her own mistakes (in contrast to her disgraced husband, whose response to the incident is to run away). While Rashi may on one reading seem to present an image of Beruria at odds with the spirit that seems to animate her Talmudic image, perhaps he reads her in a way that upholds the Talmudic spirit as well.

This approach to a reading of Rashi can be detected in the writing of turn-of-the-century rabbi and Torah scholar Barukh Epstein, as presented in his still widely studied Torah commentary, the *Torah Temimah* (1902). There he quotes R. Meir's Talmudic interpretation of the enigmatic verse, "And God blessed Avraham with everything/in all things [Heb., *ba-kol*],"²⁷ as signifying that Abraham "had no daughter." A daughter, in other words, would have detracted from Abraham's "wholeness," from the quality of his life and legacy. Epstein goes on to claim that this disparaging attitude toward women is consistent with R. Meir's personality as expressed elsewhere in the Talmud. For example, he cites another Talmudic source that has R. Meir responsible for instituting the daily morning blessing for men,

“Blessed are you, Lord our God, who did not make me a women.” According to Epstein, this legislation represents another expression of R. Meir’s contempt for women, “because the stature/value of women was slight/light [Heb., *ki*] in his eyes, on account of their weak-mindedness (heb. *kalut da’atan*).” Invoking Rash’s infamous “Incident,” Epstein relates R. Meir’s attitude to his having “fled [Israel] out of the humiliation over Beruriah, his wife.”²⁸

While there are various possible ways of interpreting Epstein’s understanding of Rashi’s “Beruriah Incident” as reflected in this commentary, it seems clear that for him the story’s central meaning is focused on R. Meir’s antipathy toward women, rather than on Beruriah’s transgression and its implications for the character of women or their suitability for Torah study. It is his dogged and dogmatic insistence that women are “weak-minded” that leads him to conduct his perverse experiment upon his wife, resulting in his humiliation and exile.

This focus makes sense with reference to what we know of Epstein’s biography, based on the personal reflections he recounts in his memoir, *Makor barukh*.²⁹ As a thirteen-year-old boy just beginning his yeshiva study, Epstein was very close with his aunt, Reina Batya Berlin (wife of one of luminaries of Lithuanian Torah scholarship of the time, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin). According to Epstein, his aunt, with whom he recalls having many lengthy, substantive conversations, was extremely learned in traditional Talmud study, and extremely devoted to her learning. “She spent her days in the kitchen by the oven, poring over piles of books, including Mishnah and midrash, history chronicles and *mussar* (ethical literature) books.” She seems to have been something of a “Beruriah” figure, not only in her scholarship but in her open criticism of the rabbinic system for its exclusion of women from the sacred endeavor of Torah study. According to Epstein, his aunt was particularly infuriated by the daily blessing that, as Epstein notes in his Torah commentary, was instituted by R. Meir:

How bitter was my aunt that, as she would say from time to time, “every empty-headed ignorant man,” every ignoramus who hardly knew the meaning of the words and who would not dare to cross her threshold without first obsequiously and humbly obtaining her permission, would not hesitate to boldly and arrogantly cite to her face the blessing of “[Blessed

are you, Lord our God,] who did not make me a woman.” Moreover, upon his recitation of the blessing, she was obliged to answer “amen” [i.e., vocally affirming her belief in the statement’s truth]. “And who can muster enough strength,” she would conclude with great anguish, “to hear this eternal symbol of shame and embarrassment to women?”³⁰

It seems reasonable to speculate that Epstein’s reading of Rashi may to some extent have been informed by his relationship with his beloved aunt. It is perhaps his devotion to this relationship (his account of their conversations, rendered with great vividness and pathos, were written some forty years after they took place) that focused his interpretive attention on the irrational contempt for and systemic marginalization of women within Jewish tradition, reflected in Rashi’s “Beruriah Incident,” whose hurtful effects he witnessed with his own eyes.

MODERN APPROPRIATIONS (AND NON-APPROPRIATIONS): A MUTED CRITICAL VOICE

If even Rashi can also be read as attempting to amplify Beruriah’s resistant voice, it is reasonable to ask: How did this voice become so muted? We would argue that this is less a function of canonical inheritance than interpretive choice. A negative example that makes this point sharply can be found in the writings of another turn-of-the-century Torah luminary, R. Israel Meir Hakohen Kagan (the Chofetz Chaim). Kagan was faced with the question of whether, in contravention to standing communal policy, the shifting pressures of modernity should prompt the halakhic prohibition against women’s Torah study to be lifted and a concerted, community-wide effort at Torah education to be launched. In response, he ruled that the prohibition should indeed be lifted, basing himself on what, for a conservative legal system run mainly according to precedent, constitutes a radical form of argument. In short: times have changed:

It seems that this [the prohibition to study] applies only to earlier times, when everyone lived in his ancestors’ locality, and the ancestral tradition was very strong for each individual. This motivated one to act in the

manner of one’s forefathers, as Scripture says: “Ask your father, he will inform you, your elders, they will tell you” (Deut. 32:7). It was then that we could say that a woman should not study Torah but rely upon the customs of her upright ancestors. However, nowadays, on account of our many sins, the tradition of our fathers has become very weak; and we find people who do not live close to the ancestral locality at all and, even more, who educate themselves in the writing and language of the gentiles. Therefore it is certainly a great mitzvah to teach [women] the ethical writings of our Sages, the Pentateuch, the Prophets and Writings too . . . so that the principles of our holy faith will be verified for them. Otherwise, they may deviate entirely from the path of God and violate all the foundations of religion, God forbid.³¹

The impact of this ruling upon modern Jewish religious culture can hardly be overstated. It is widely credited with opening the way for Orthodox women’s Torah education in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, it hardly can be read as a celebration of this development, or even as an endorsement of women’s study as a value per se. To the contrary, the ominous, begrudging tone used here to confer the privilege of Torah-education onto women conjures a sense of a world gone awry. Kagan sees himself as offering a stop-gap to a communal catastrophe. There is no positive reasoning to employ, no validating precedent to enlist. Desperate times call for desperate measures and for stoical realism from those in a position to make rulings on communal policy.

Kagan’s rationale for permitting women’s learning is particularly interesting to us, of course, for its significant omission. A Talmudic master, he certainly would have been aware of the Beruriah traditions discussed above. A more conservative move, from the perspective of legal procedure, would have been to enlist her as a ready precedent for a positive model of women’s study. But in providing the basis for a new movement of women’s education—and this positive verdict did indeed give birth to just such a movement, the vibrant Beis Yaakov system of ultra-Orthodox girls’ schooling—he chose to ignore Beruriah. Perhaps he, too, was aware of her potentially subversive power as an internal social critic, and feared invoking such a model for emulation.

“Buried in Scripture are bits and pieces of a story awaiting discovery,” Phyllis Tribble announces, and Beruriah’s resistant voice is preserved intact on the Talmudic page. Responsibility for the muting of this voice cannot only be assigned to the Talmudic editor, who, while perhaps not featuring her as prominently as her rabbinic family, makes a point of giving her a name and a good deal of prestige. Understandably, many readers of culture look for hero figures as models for exploration and emulation; this richly complex canonical character continues to remain available as a figure for cultural appropriation.

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NOTES

- 1 When discussing Beruriah, we are referring to her representation by the Talmudic editors. We are aware that there remains an ongoing debate about whether, or in what form, a woman named Beruriah really existed. For a source-critical examination concluding that “several of the Beruriah traditions should be viewed as nothing more than literary compositions in which the name Beruriah is a secondary insertion,” see Tal Ilan, “The Quest for the Historical Beruriah, Rachel, and Imma Shalom,” *AJS Review* 22 (1997): 1–17, who affirms the conclusions of David Goodblatt, “The Beruriah Traditions,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 26 (1975): 68–85. See also Tal Ilan, *Integrating Women into Second Temple History* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1999), “Was there really a Beruriah . . . or is she no more than a metaphor?” (175). Nevertheless, our interest lies primarily in the work of the editors who shaped the Talmuds’ narratives—i.e., in the literary representations those cultural transmitters generated, and the values those representations reflect. Thus, any reference to her “existence” is meant to refer primarily to her existence as a literary character. It does not preclude the possibility of a historical correlate; nor, however, does it presuppose or require such a basis in fact. In this approach we follow, for example, Charlotte Fonrobert, who regards “the work of the final editors of a sugya, as a whole, as the literary layer of talmudic literature about whose cultural imagination we can learn the most. It is these anonymous editors, or stammaim, who give our aggadah its final shape and

- coherence within its setting in the Talmud” (Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, “When the Rabbi Weeps: Reading Gender in Talmudic Aggadah,” *Nashim* 4 [Fall 2001], 76 n. 6); and Jeffrey Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999), 15–21.
- 2 See Rachel Adler, “The Virgin in the Brothel and Other Anomalies: Character and Context in the Legend of Beruryah,” *Tikkun* 3, no. 6 (1988): 28–32, 102–105; Judith Baskin, *Midrashic Women: Formations of the Feminine in Rabbinic Literature* (Hanover, N.H.: Brandeis University Press, 2002); Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Ilan, “The Quest for the Historical Beruryah”; Goodblatt, “The Beruryah Traditions”; Avraham Grossman, *Pious and Rebellious: Jewish Women in Medieval Europe* (Waltham, Mass., Brandeis University Press, 2004); Tzvee Zahavi, “Beruria,” *Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan Reference Books, 1993); Babylon Talmud, Tractate *Eruvin*, *Pesachim*, *Berachot*.
 - 3 For an extensive discussion of dialogicality or “double-voicedness” as a core rhetorical strategy of the Talmud used in the service of rabbinic self-critique, generating moments of “self-doubt, of self-reflection, self-interrogation, and self-critique,” see Boyarin. For example, “[T]he dialogicality of the Talmud is the dialogue between the two anonymous authors, a monological voice that seeks to bring all under the purview of the system called oral Torah and another stamma that allows cracks to appear in the fabric of the very system” (204).
 - 4 Brenda Sochachovsky Bacon, “How Shall We Tell the Story of Beruriah’s End?” *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies and Gender Issues* 5 (2002): 231–39.
 - 5 See Zahavy.
 - 6 See Goodblatt, 68.
 - 7 BT *Pesachim* 62b.
 - 8 See also Fonrobert.
 - 9 BT *Eruvin* 53b.
 - 10 Ibid.
 - 11 BT *Eruvin* 53b.
 - 12 See Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (New York: Harcourt Brace Janovich, 1938); see also Carol Gilligan, “Joining the Resistance: Psychology, Politics, Girls, and Women,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 29, no. 4 (1990): 4.

- 13 While it might be possible to give a darker interpretation of Beruriah's citing of the authoritative rabbinic tradition circumscribing speech with women—i.e., taking her at face value and understanding her as a patriarchal woman enforcing and affirming patriarchal norms—we find that her active voice, both here and in the next story (and in this context it is noteworthy that the Talmud represents her as continuing, as it were, to speak) seems to suggest that she sees herself as a person entitled to speak and have a voice, which seems, in turn, to run counter to the tradition about women's silence. See, for example Ilan, *Integrating Women into Second Temple History*, who interprets the thrust of this story, along with those that follow it, as “suggesting that it is in fact very fruitful to converse with a wise woman. At this point in the *sugya* the editors have made their point—wisdom is an inborn rather than an acquired trait” (186). While we offer a different angle of interpretation, we share her overarching sense of the *sugya* as affirming Beruriah's speech.
- 14 See note 12.
- 15 BT *Eruvin* 53b.
- 16 BT *Brachot* 10a.
- 17 Rashi on BT *Avoda Zara* 18b.
- 18 See Grossman, *Pious and Rebellious*.
- 19 Emily Taitz, “Beruriah of Palestine,” *The JPS Guide to Jewish Women*, ed. Emily Taitz, Sondra Henry, and Cheryl Tallan (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 26–28, 26. According to Avraham Grossman, *Ha-isha be-mishnatam shel khakhmei yisrael ba-yeme ha-beinayim* (Jerusalem: Shazar, 2011), while Rashi's interpretation of why R. Meir ran away may have come from some historical tradition, no record of such a tradition exists. Grossman, “Pious and Rebellious,” notes that an extant post-Talmudic tradition of interpreting the “the incident of Beruriah” from the exegetical tradition of the Babylonian Geonim offers a narrative in which “Beruriah was not unfaithful and did not take her life” (297 n. 7).
- 20 Adler, 103.
- 21 See also Ilan, “The Quest for the Historical Beruriah.” Employing methods of historical criticism, Adler concludes that “Rashi's Beruriah narrative is not a lost Talmudic tradition after all, and even the Talmudic Beruriah was never considered corrupt or corruptible” (8).
- 22 Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, 181–91.

- 23 Ibid., 189.
- 24 Rashi on BT *Avoda Zara* 18b; emphasis added.
- 25 Grossman, *Ha-isha be-mishnatam*.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Genesis 24:1.
- 28 Epstein 1904.
- 29 R. Baruch Halevi Epstein, *Mekor Baruch* (part 4, chapter 46, section 3) (Vilna: Rom, 1928), 981.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Yisrael Meir Kagan, *Likutei halakhot*, Vol. 2, *Sotah* 21 (Piotrkow: Baumritter, 1903).

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