

Beruriah: The Final Act

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***“Beruriah”* – Tziporah Breitman Lee, A"H (1918-2008) - oil on canvas.**

ABSTRACT

Perhaps the most acclaimed woman to grace the pages of Talmud, Beruriah's scholarly prowess and personality are legendary. But in an ironic twist of history, she is a character whose end is shrouded in mystery, devoid of closure. Scholars have dissected the story of her horrible fate. This paper chooses to analyze her tragedy through a different lens. To investigate the psychological dynamics surrounding Beruriah's husband, the noted Rabbi Meir, perpetrator

of the infamous scheme leading to her suicide. In so doing, trying to answer the question: Does the evidence suggest this celebrated Talmudic sage was capable of such a treacherous plot?

*Dedicated in loving memory to my darling mother,
(Tziporah Bat Alexander Ziskind, A"H), who inspired this treatise and suggested alternatives
stated herein to search for the truth...*

The victim: A Rabbi's wife. The perpetrator: Her Husband.

Recessed within the pages of Talmudic commentary lies a drama of Shakespearian proportions. A few unassuming lines within gargantuan tomes, pages spanning generations, wield the power of tragic opera centuries before the Bard or Verdi. Betrayal. Conspiracy. Death. A dramatic story unfolds on the stage of history.

No historical ode or epic poem bears tribute to this great woman's tragic end. If not for the famed commentator Rashi (Rabbi Solomon ben Yitzchak, 1040-1105 C.E.), Beruriah's terrible fate would remain locked in an abyss of obscurity.

It is imperative to investigate the the sole transmitter of this woeful tale - Rashi. What prompted him to record, what others dared to "forget"? Who would dare forget and hide the horrific end of a woman whose status rose to that rarely seen in the rabbinic world? Perhaps the reason is simple: Rashi fathered only daughters—*learned* daughters. [1]

Since ancient times, the attainment of scholarship by any female was indeed an exceptional feat, defying social prejudice and subjugation. That Rashi's daughters attained such heights assuredly reflects on their father's positive perspective towards the female intellect.

According to renowned scholar Avraham Grossman:

Rashi was endowed with great spiritual courage and willingness to differ from his teachers and from common prejudices...He stood by his opinions forcefully and assertively, never recanting them before his distinguished teachers or hesitating to engage those teachers in tough and turbulent arguments... Openness and the search for truth guided him in all he did. These characteristics found their expression in Rashi's attitude towards women. It is doubtful whether we can find another Jewish scholar active at the time who was willing to make changes for the benefit of women's rights even where *halakhic* and aggadic sources were not kindly disposed towards them... he sometimes accepted prejudicial opinions about women in the sources, but his relatively tolerant and considerate attitude towards women is worthy of note. (Grossman "Rashi" 2009, par. 1-2) [2]

Maurice Liber, in his classic biographical work, *Rashi*, comments on the man's modesty, uprightness and sterling character:

Toward all his teachers Rashi professed the greatest respect... at the same time... Rashi did not hesitate to be independent, did not blindly accept all their teachings. When he believed an opinion wrong, he combated it; when he believed an opinion right, he upheld it, even against his masters. (Liber 1906, 62) [3]

Rashi would indeed have the courage to stand up and speak out -- even against the opinions of his mentors, complying with the words of the Rabbis: "In a place where there are no men, strive to be a man" (*Pirke Avot* 2:5). In one particular controversy over *kashrut*, Rashi diametrically opposed the verdict of his teacher, Isaac ben Eliezer Halevi of Worms: "I have not retracted and shall not retract. The words of my teachers are unacceptable, their arguments are but superficial... I cannot cause the loss of money to Jews in a matter that is so obviously permitted." [4]

In another case, a husband demanded to divorce his wife, protesting that she had skin defects from a disease prior to their marriage. The husband would not even pay the amount stipulated in the *ketubah* (marriage contract). The wife declared his grounds to be unfounded. In her defense, two witnesses testified to her healthy status before marriage. In conclusion, Rashi not only steadfastly ruled in favor of the wife, he even rebuked the husband for his cruelty. [5]

One might differ philosophically with Rashi's interpretation of a Biblical or Talmudic verse. Yet, one cannot deny the honesty of the man—the fact that he would not lie about facts or events, as horrid as the truth might be. [6]

The protagonists: Rabbi Meir, Tannaitic sage of the 2nd Century C.E.; his wife, Beruriah

The Babylonian Talmud (Bavli, Avodah Zara 18b), relates that Rabbi Meir fled from Israel to Babylon. Two reasons are suggested for his flight, one of them ostensibly secretive in its blunt silence: "from [because of] the deed [incident] of Beruriah." [7] Deed? Incident? What "incident"? The words strangely cut off, without explanation. Here, Rashi jumps in to clarify:

One time, she [Beruriah] scoffed at what the sages said: (Kiddushin 80b) women are "light-minded" [or "their minds are easily swayed"]. And he [Rabbi Meir] said to her: "By your life, your end will be to admit to their [the Rabbis'] words." And he commanded one of his students to test [or "tempt"] her to a matter of sin, and he [the student] pressed at her many days until she acceded and when it was known to her, she strangled herself and Rabbi Meir fled because of shame. (Talmud Bavli, Avodah Zarah 18b) [8]

One might think this was an absurd screenplay for a soap opera. Far from it. These statements are carried by one of the most venerable rabbinic commentators—Rashi.

One intriguing facet is the phrase: "when it was known to her." Apparently, Beruriah was initially *unaware*; something was hidden from her. What was it? Was it the hideous revelation that her own husband was the mastermind behind this plot? Or could it be that she was *drugged*? An ancient version of "date rape"? Did she "come to," groggy from some sort of intoxicating potion, suddenly realizing exactly what transpired? Perhaps some exotic weed dissolved in her drink? Or, was she suddenly struck by the realization of what she had done and this stark reality was too much to bear? Even so, does that detract from Rabbi Meir's guilt in devising her perfect downfall? [9]

From a legal perspective, could this simply be a cold, hard case of "entrapment"? Rabbi Meir designing a foolproof trap for his wife? An inescapable spider's web? "Loading the dice" in a game he could not lose? Thus, assuring himself glory and victory over (what he considered) an arrogant, prideful woman.

"Entrapment" is defined as:

The act of officers or agents of the government inducing a person to commit a crime not contemplated by him, for the purpose of instituting a criminal prosecution against him... for the purpose of obtaining evidence of a crime, he originates the idea of the crime and then induces another person to engage in conduct constituting such a crime when the other person is not otherwise disposed to do so...he induces or encourages another person to engage in conduct constituting such offense by... employing methods of persuasion or inducement which create a substantial risk that such an offense will be committed by persons other than those who are ready to commit it. Model Penal Code, 213. (*Black's Law Dictionary* 1990, 532) [10]

It's significant to note that Rabbi Meir was not a layman but a well-known member of the prestigious Sanhedrin (Rabbinical Assembly), tantamount to a "rabbinical government."

What is the evidence to support this idea of entrapment against Beruriah? One method of investigating is to analyze Beruriah's personality while probing into the mind of her husband, Rabbi Meir. Is Beruriah the kind of woman that would engage in such conduct? If not, one can deduce her husband's intention was to ensnare her—induce her to act against her nature.

It's essential to understand the basis of the argument between Beruriah and her husband. What is this controversial statement that so disturbs Beruriah? Does it refer to intelligence?

The concept that "women are light-minded" appears in two tractates of Talmud Bavli:

V'Nashim daatan kaloth (Kiddushin 80b) ונשים דעתן קלות

Nashim daatan kalah (Shabbos 33b) נשים דעתן קלה

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Rashi connects Beruriah's comments to the quote in Kiddushin. The discussion adjoining the phrase in Kiddushin relates to "sexuality," not mental ability. *Nashim daatan kaloth* means women are morally (not mentally) weak. The Mishnah of Kiddushin 80b relates the rabbinic rulings regarding "yichud" (a *halakhic* hedge of moral safeguards to prevent inappropriate mixing of the sexes): One man may not be alone with two women but two men are permitted to be alone with one woman. Rashi interprets this to mean: Two women alone with one man are easily persuaded to sin. [11] Whereas two men alone with one woman will be more watchful of each other not to sin. Women, the Talmud tells us—*daatan kaloth*—they are naturally deficient in morals. (This is not an indication of Rashi's opinion of women; he is merely explaining the text.)

But this explanation neatly aligns with the plot of Rabbi Meir against his wife. Beruriah did not believe the rabbinical statement that women are morally weak. Rabbi Meir was zealous to prove her wrong—by using her as an example. That she is more vulnerable to following physical impulses—because she is merely a woman. Indeed, why would he arrange a plot to have his wife seduced if the dispute surrounded the question of feminine imbecility? Surely, Rabbi Meir could have devised a plan to show her up as an ignoramus (a stratagem not foreign to his dealings with rivals, as will be seen later) if female foolhardiness was the thrust of his argument. Yet, it could have all be a matter of sexually ethical behavior.

Additionally, *daat* ("knowledge") can allude to "carnal knowledge" as in, the Tree of Knowledge, "*Etz HaDaat*," which awakened Chavah and Adam to sexuality (Genesis 3). The verbal form, *yadah*, can imply the sexual act; Adam "knew" Chavah (Genesis 4:1). In Kiddushin, the word *daat* seems a euphemistic reference to this definition.

Disregarding the logic [or illogic] behind this Talmudic premise, it was this statement that might have upset Beruriah.

The other source of this phrase, in Tractate Shabbat, applies the words *daatan kalah* to a different situation than that in Kiddushin. In Tractate Shabbat, "light-minded" conveys a woman's *physical* weakness, i.e., that she succumbs easily to physical duress. When subjected to torture, a woman might be more vulnerable to pain and thus reveal secrets. Since one can translate *kalah* to mean either "light" or "easy," *daatan kalah* could also mean: "their knowledge easily [comes out]."

Curiously, the two adjectives vary in spelling— *kaloth* (in Kiddushin, plural adjective) and *kalah* (in Shabbat, singular adjective). The word *daat* is a singular noun without the plural conjugation [12]. *Kalah* should be the correct adjective. Was the use of *kalot* an intentional “error” or a subliminal message to emphasize the actual plural noun—*nashim*? To stress that *women, not men*, have weaker morals? Did Beruriah, perceiving this nuance with her sharp intellect, object to this as an added affront against women?

The interpretation of the terms in Shabbat and Kiddushin can be linked. When pushed to the brink, a female might literally “break” and surrender herself. She might easily fall prey to physical, psychological or emotional pressure—despite her intellect—and commit an immoral act. Either way, the Talmud suggests a rather generalized, low opinion of feminine morality, placing the male on a higher pedestal of self-control. [13]

Why *wouldn't* Beruriah—a woman of superior intelligence—deride this claim? As a *respected scholar*, was she forbidden to express her own opinion regarding what she deemed an irrational conclusion? The Talmud is rife with controversy, argument, and disputation, to which Beruriah was an active participant. Apparently, despite her great learning (or perhaps, because of it), Rabbi Meir bore deep-seated acrimony towards his wife.

Yet another shadow falls over the Talmud's vague details concerning this “incident.” It suggests a deliberate “cover-up,” a scandalous occurrence to be hidden and buried. Ostensibly, Rabbi Meir is esteemed as one of the great “*chachamim*” (sages) of Israel. In any event, all the more reason to evaluate Rashi's revelation.

Whatever the case, Beruriah was a victim in the most pathetic sense; though many historical records present an alternate view. Even today, a veil of secrecy surrounds Beruriah's death. *Entziklopedia L'Chachmai HaTalmud V'Hagaonim*, under the heading “Beruriah” [14], blatantly ignores the entire episode. Even the reputable *Encyclopaedia Judaica* shamefully deletes facts:

...Rashi, in explaining the obscure phrase ‘the story of Beruryah,’ mentioned in *Avodah Zarah* 18b, quotes a legend to the effect that as a result of her exaggerated self-confidence— feeling that she was above ‘feminine weakness’ —she ultimately was led astray, with tragic consequences. (*Encyclopaedia Judaica*, “Beruryah”) [15]

The *Encyclopedia Judaica* article regarding Rabbi Meir is equally bizarre: "According to a legend quoted by Rashi (*Av. Zar.* 18b), Beruriah herself was seduced by one of the scholars. None of these traditions, however, seem to have any historical basis." [16] There is absolutely no mention, nor hint, of Rabbi Meir's complicity in this plot. Nor of his scheming devices to drag "one of the scholars" into the act. Whether the story is fact or fiction, the facets of Beruriah's tragic death should not be ignored, certainly not in a reputable scholarly source, no matter how shocking the details.

Isidor Epstein (1894-1962) and Eli Cashdan (1905-1998) in their English commentary to *Avodah Zarah* 18b refer to Rashi's remark in this manner:

...he [Meir] replied that one day she would herself testify to its truth [that women are light-minded]. When... she was enticed by one of her husband's disciples, she indeed proved to be too weak to resist. She then committed suicide and the husband, for shame, ran away to Babylon.
(The Traditional Press Talmud Bavli, *Avodah Zarah* 18b) [17]

Again, Rabbi Meir's involvement is masked; the outright command to his disciple, blatantly absent. Beruriah is not depicted as the victim of a wily scheme, but instead, a licentious sinner.

The complete history of Beruriah is at best, obscured; at worst, horribly stained in the annals of Jewish history. Many educated, Jewish women are unaware of the suspicious, haunting circumstances surrounding Beruriah's death. Rabbi Meir's guilt is concealed as he is extolled as a great man, at the expense of his wife's fate. No matter how blameworthy Beruriah, Rabbi Meir must be recognized as an instigator of adultery, resulting in his wife's tragic suicide.

The Characters of Beruriah and Rabbi Meir

From various quotations in the Talmud, one divines an incredible woman -- a superlative scholar, ranked highly, even among the rabbis, but also an individual of immense compassion and amazing emotional restraint and certainly, the antithesis of the Talmud's depiction of women as "light-minded" in any context.

Rabbi Chanina (Chananya) ben Teradion, Beruriah's father, stands forever among the ten martyrs tortured and murdered by the Romans. His sentence for the "crime" of teaching Torah was execution. He was burned alive, wrapped in a Torah scroll. The Talmud (*Avodah Zara* 18a) relates Beruriah's tormented words to her father as the flames began to engulf him:

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"Father, I will see you like this?" He said to her," If I alone were burning, it would be a difficult thing for me. Now that I am being burned and a *sefer* Torah [Torah scroll] with me, He who seeks [retribution] for degradation of a *sefer* Torah will seek [retribution] of my degradation."

Her mother was butchered by the Romans; her sister exiled to a house of prostitution. [18] Her brother was killed by bandits. [19] Throughout these macabre travails, Beruriah remained staunch and resilient in her faith and observance of the Jewish Law.

Perhaps the most poignant vignette from her life surrounds the death of her two sons. The self-sacrifice she exhibits for her husband's wellbeing and sanctity of the Sabbath is inconceivable. According to Midrash Mishlei (31:10) [20], Rabbi Meir's two sons died on *Shabbat*—unknown to him—as he sat learning in the *beit ha-midrash* (house of study). Beruriah, neglecting her own maternal pain and grief, forestalled bearing him the awful tidings, her intent being to save him from sorrow and tragedy on the Sabbath, a day when all sadness is forbidden. Placing her two beloved children on the bed, she covered them with a blanket and waited. Upon Rabbi Meir's return home, before reciting the Havdalah prayer which ends *Shabbat* and ushers in the new week, he asked for his sons. Beruriah offered excuses for their absence. Only after the complete culmination of *Shabbat* and serving him food did she broach the subject subtly: "My Master, before today, a man came... and gave me something to watch over; and now, he has come to take it. Should we return it to him, or not?" Rabbi Meir replied: "My daughter, whoever has something in keep must return it to its owner." Beruriah responded: "...Without your opinion, I would not have given it to him..." With that, she took his hand, bringing him to the room where the sons reposed in their final sleep. Removing the blanket, she revealed the silent corpses. Rabbi Meir burst into tears. Whereupon she said to him: "Did you not say to me, I must return the pledge to its owner...?"

Rabbi Chanina notes in the Midrash the remarkable restraint and compassion Beruriah exhibited for her husband, embellishing her with the famous adoration: "A Woman of Valor, who can find?" (Proverbs 31:10).

The Rabbis cite Beruriah's accepted opinions in *halakhic* disputes. [21]. She is attributed with learning 300 *halakhic* hearings a day, from 300 Rabbis! [22] Even if this is an exaggeration, the respect bestowed on her by an assemblage of all-male scholastic peers is impressive.

Her dual gifts of wisdom and compassion shine exceptionally in Tractate Brachot (10a). Rabbi Meir, tormented by a group of evil people, was in such despair that he prayed for their

deaths. Beruriah, however, advised him to beseech God for the destruction of *sin, not sinners*. He listened to her, whereby, they did repent. Such was her feeling for humanity, even to those deemed unworthy of mercy.

Nowhere in the vast traditional literature is Beruriah's character vilified. Quite the opposite. She is neither arrogant nor ambitious to upset the established order. In spite of her many accomplishments in a male-oriented world, she never attempts to usurp the place of men to assume a rabbinical title.

And what of Rabbi Meir? Rabbi Meir does exhibit positive attributes: Rabbi Yose ben Chalafta describes him as "great," "holy," and "modest." [23] To his credit, Rabbi Meir believes in work ethic— one should teach his son a trade. [24] The Talmud describes him as a scribe by profession. In a curious twist of history, the Talmud also assigns his lineage to one of the greatest tyrants, Emperor Nero of Rome. [25] Indeed, there lurks a darker side to his character, filled with shadows and contrasts. Though he is praised as respectful towards his colleagues' decisions [26], he conspires to disgrace the "*Nasi*," President of the Sanhedrin, the supreme rabbinical council that adjudicated Jewish Law. The account of this political power play, an attempt to force the *Nasi's* resignation, is a conduit into the mind and personality of this famous rabbi.

Herein enters a new figure: Rabbi Nathan (Nathan Ha-Bavli, "The Babylonian") [27]. He and Rabbi Meir hold the two highest positions in the Sanhedrin below that of *Nasi*: respectively, *Av-Beth-Din* and *Chacham* (literally: "Father of the Court" and "Sage"). Tractate Horayot relates how trouble ensues when the *Nasi*, Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel, changes a protocol governing the rabbinical assembly's rising from their seats upon his arrival—the new protocol according him greater honor. However, the Traditional Press English commentary notes Rabbi Shimon's reputation for humility—his decree was not an exercise in pomposity, but "introduced in order to increase the authority of the college over which the *Nasi* presided and to promote due respect for learning." [28]

Rabbi Nathan and Rabbi Meir, absent at the proclamation of this new decree, feel suddenly stripped of their former honors at their next attendance of the Sanhedrin. In retaliation, they conspire to humiliate the *Nasi* to such an extent that he would be forced to resign. An added bonus would be the automatic promotion of Rabbi Nathan to *Nasi*, and Rabbi Meir to *Av-Beth-Din*. The

scheme involves plying Rabbi Shimon with intricate questions from the tedious Talmudic tractate Uktzin. Thus, the *Nasi* would suddenly appear ignorant and incompetent. The plot is instigated by Rabbi Meir.

Fortunately for the *Nasi*, another member of the Talmudic Academy overhears the hatching intrigue and, in a brilliant feat of discretion, sits within earshot of Rabbi Shimon, repetitiously and loudly studying the difficult tractate. The *Nasi* interprets this strange behavior as an omen and reviews the passages intensely.

Their intentions are foiled by the prompt and learned responses fired back by the *Nasi*. The President of the Sanhedrin sees through Rabbi Meir's and Rabbi Nathan's scheme and expels them from the *yeshiva* (Talmudical Academy). But the two troublemakers have not learned their lesson, continuing to arouse mischief. They submit problematic questions to the *yeshiva*, in the hopes of stumping and shaming Rabbi Shimon. Those the *Nasi* solves they throw out; those he fails to solve they write down the answers and submit them. A stratagem to evidently advertise their expertise while portraying the *Nasi* as ignorant.

In an attempt to stop these immature games, the Sanhedrin president readmits them to the *yeshiva* on a conditional basis. Hereafter, any new opinions either of them would propose to the rabbinical academy would not be recorded in their names, but only by anonymous labels: "Others" for Rabbi Meir; "There are those who say" for Rabbi Nathan.

In an interesting postscript, Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Nathan both have dreams instructing them to appease Rabbi Shimon. Rabbi Nathan complies; Rabbi Meir refuses, stating "dreams are of no account." [29]

Even so - *could* Rabbi Meir be capable of such a foul design against his wife? Another story from the Talmud provides more interesting tidbits. Rabbi Meir would scoff at sinners. Perhaps it is this self-righteous attitude that ignites "Satan" to tempt him in the form of a beautiful woman on the opposite bank of a river. This rabbinic hero is so taken with this vision of loveliness that he crosses the river by means of a rope. Halfway there, however, Satan reveals himself and rebukes him: "Had they not proclaimed in Heaven, 'Take heed of Rabbi Meir and his learning,' I would have valued your life at two *ma'ahs*' [a paltry monetary amount]." [30]

The above anecdote illustrates the Talmud's criticism of someone who is not only arrogant but mocks the frailties of others. In an interesting twist, Beruriah is penalized by her husband for "scoffing," while he is tempted to sin as a penalty for scoffing.

The next example, from Talmud Yerushalmi [31], lends itself to various impressions, depending on one's perspective. It is the unfortunate tale of a married woman who enjoys attending Rabbi Meir's lectures. One night, the lesson finishes later than usual and the woman returns home to a very irate, impatient husband. With the classical question, "Where *were* you?" the intimidated wife replies that she was listening to the Rabbi's class. In a fit of temper, the husband declares she is forbidden to enter the house again until she spits in the face of the sage!

Rabbi Meir understands, through Divine means, what has occurred and seeks to resolve the poor woman's plight (to his merit, a sincere trait of compassion). Pretending to have a painfully afflicted eye, he publicly requests if anyone can heal it through an incantation. The poor woman's friends advise her to pretend she is an expert in charms, thus gaining permission to spit in the rabbi's eye. Reluctantly, in awe of the esteemed scholar, she apprehensively approaches, too nervous to say or do anything. She even replies "no" when Rabbi Meir asks if she is aware of any charm that could cure his eye. "Do they not spit into it, seven times?" Rabbi Meir suggests. After summoning enough courage to finally spit in his eye, Rabbi Meir instructs her to inform her husband that she did spit (in his eye).

Rabbi Meir's disciples, however, are very disturbed by their teacher's solution to this domestic problem. Furthermore, his students' comment, if they had known about this husband's cruel conduct, they would have flogged him until he reconciled with his wife. Rabbi Meir replies that if God's name could be blotted out in the interest of "*shalom bayit*" (domestic bliss), how much more so is his own honor forfeit. [32]

This account illustrates a remarkable sense of altruism and humility on the part of Rabbi Meir—seemingly contrary to a political schemer basking in ego and pomposity. But is the handling of this domestic problem *correct*? Does it serve the purpose of *shalom bayit* to permit a husband to tyrannically control his wife? Condoning such harsh demeanor would only sanction this behavior, inviting further emotional abuse towards the wife. It is not only the verdict alone which is troubling but its rationale.

Unlike the title “Rabbi” today—merely the conferring of a theological degree from a seminary—rabbis in Talmudic times were *legislators and judges*. What can be deduced concerning Rabbi Meir’s philosophy towards women in this particular case? Despite the admirable self-sacrifice of Rabbi Meir’s dignity, one might conclude that a husband is justified in his actions—no matter how emotionally inhuman or vile. The husband is not to be punished for his behavior *but appeased*. Unlike the case of Rashi, who actually reprimanded a husband who heartlessly slandered his wife in order to achieve a divorce, analyzing Rabbi Meir’s judicial reasoning further reveals his psyche.

As noted above, one of the tragedies of Beruriah’s prestigious rabbinical family is her sister being ruthlessly kidnapped by the Romans and thrown into a brothel. The mental anguish of Beruriah, aware of her innocent sister’s plight, cannot even be imagined. Her expressed mental torment to Rabbi Meir prods him to rescue his sister-in-law. [33] Here too, another door opens to Rabbi Meir’s psychological mindset. His attempt to rescue Beruriah’s sister from a life of prostitution is “conditional.” He deems her worthy of saving *only if she is still pure*. He devises a test of her righteousness. If she fails, then she is unworthy and no miracle can save her. Fortunately, Beruriah’s sister passes the test. But upon contemplation, there is the hideous realization that if she had indeed been defiled, in Rabbi Meir’s eyes she would not be worthy of redemption. Whether her impurity was forced upon her or the result of passive consent does not matter to him.

This mentality runs counter to one of the pillars of Judaism: the power of repentance and forgiveness, accentuated by the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Rabbi Meir’s behavior rings even more alarming considering the issue relates to a pure, naïve Daughter of Israel— a member of his own family— thrown into depravity.

Talmud Bavli (Nazir 49b), relates: after the death of Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yehuda ordered his own *talmidim* (plural of *talmid*) to forbid any of Rabbi Meir’s disciples from entering the same *beit midrash* where they were studying. Why? “...for they are disputatious and do not come to learn Torah, but come to overwhelm me with citations from tradition...” In spite of this decree, a devotee of Rabbi Meir named Symmachus enters forcibly, declaring one of his master’s *halakhic* opinions. The raucous incident greatly upsets Rabbi Yehuda, seeing that the interloper is deliberately trying to create a scene. [35]

Why should Rabbi Meir's disciples earn a bad reputation? Were they following their mentor's example, imitating a reckless spirit for spite and revenge? Is it not reasonable to suspect that negative traits exhibited by a sage might be mirrored in his devoted disciples?

Conversely, Rabbi Meir's famous mentor was Rabbi Akiva. R. Akiva's wife, Rachel, also stands out in the annals of women in Jewish history. However, her dynamics are quite different from that of Beruriah. Born to a family of wealth, she forfeits the family fortune to marry an impoverished, ignorant shepherd, Akiva ben Yosef, against her father's wishes. Perhaps she imagines her life should be sacrificed on the altar of altruism, for she accepts Akiva's marriage proposal only if he will devote himself totally to the dream of becoming a Torah scholar. To this goal, she will nullify self and center her existence on his pursuit of scholarship. He is to travel to the Talmudical Academy to study in uninterrupted bliss, as she voluntarily accepts poverty and loneliness. At her own command, Akiva abandons her for the *yeshiva*, as she remains to struggle alone.

After twelve long years, Akiva returns with a following of 12,000 disciples. Before he reunites with his beloved Rachel, he overhears her remark that she would even wait another twelve years if it would mean he could double his learning. Without revealing himself, he leaves once again, returning to learn in the *yeshiva* for yet another twelve years, finally returning home with 24,000 students. [36]

The comparison of Rachel to Beruriah is an interesting clash of contrasts. [37] Rachel's fanatic self-sacrifice for her husband seems an impossible model for any woman to emulate. Does Rabbi Meir see his mentor's wife as a template for what he expects from his *own* wife? Though Beruriah is seen as the noble mother and wife, she is also a woman of exceptional intellect, who will *not* sit in the shadow of a man. She is a woman with determination, who can vie scholastically with any male, including her own husband. *Does the extreme devotion and self-denial of Akiva's wife make Beruriah seem less of a wife in Rabbi Meir's eyes?* Where Rachel pushes herself into the shadows, Beruriah proudly stands in direct sunlight, perhaps shining a glaring light over the image of her erudite husband. One might assume that Rabbi Meir, a follower of Rabbi Akiva, was somewhat privy to and influenced by the personal details of his master's life. If Rachel had been different, would Beruriah's end have been different?

Another factor possibly relates to Akiva's influence on Rabbi Meir is a decline of favorable *halakhic* legislation towards women, reflecting the era of Rabbi Akiva.

The Mishnah, in fact, was edited in light of Rabbi Akiva's approach, which.... viewed exclusion as the proper tool for dealing with the position of women in society... That his *halakhic* approach to women won the day was bad news for women, not because the *Amoraim* [38] ... adopted his approach, but because they adopted his Mishnah. The Mishnah's central position in Judaism and Jewish legal history is undeniable and beyond dispute. It is largely responsible for women's position in Jewish society ever since. (Ilan, "Daughters of Israel" 2001, 29-30) [39]

Considering the devout devotion of a *talmid* for his rabbi, understandably, Rabbi Akiva's ideology may have influenced Rabbi Meir philosophically and personally.

Another hint to Rabbi Meir's attitude towards women appears in the *Torah Temimah's* commentary to Genesis (24:1, n. 6), which echoes the Talmud (Baba Batra 16b): "God blessed Abraham with everything," which Rabbi Meir interprets as being blessed with everything. Yet, Abraham had no daughters. If Rabbi Meir thought this to be a blessing, did he also think having daughters was a *curse*?

The *Torah Temimah* further elaborates, intertwining Rabbi Meir's interpretation with the blessing incumbent upon every Jewish male to recite each morning - thanking God for not making him a woman. This "blessing" is inherently linked to Rabbi Meir:

It is taught in a *baraita* that Rabbi Meir would say: A man is obligated to recite three blessings every day praising God for His kindnesses, and these blessings are: Who did not make me a gentile; Who did not make me a woman; and Who did not make me an ignoramus. (Talmud Bavli, Menachot 43b) [40]

Daniel Sperber, in his book *On Changes in Jewish Liturgy: Options and Limitations*, states that there was rabbinic opposition to this "blessing," – even in the time of the Talmud. [41] Additionally, he cites *Torah Temimah*:

...one might say concerning this view of R. Meir that he is...consistent with his ruling in BT Menachot 43b that one must recite the blessing every day "that He has not made me a woman," and one may suggest that women were of lesser value in his eyes because of their inferior intelligence (קלות דעתן), as is apparent from BT Avodah Zarah 18b... that he fled in shame because of his wife Beruriah... and also that he fell into temptation at the hands of a certain woman, as we learn from his biography in *Seder ha-dorot*. (Sperber 2010, 37)

Mordechai Akiba Friedman, in his article "*Iyunim B'Midrasho Shel Rabbi Meir*," concludes that Rabbi Meir is indeed the author of this "blessing." He adds that it totally fits Rabbi Meir's

“method”: There is no blessing in a daughter; sons are the significant factor; women are of little value. [42] [43]

Moreover, another strange and provocative story surrounds this legendary character. The protagonist is also called "Rabbi Meir." Is he the same celebrated Rabbi? The *Torah Temimah* seems to think so, describing the famous rabbi as falling to “temptation at the hands of a certain woman.” If he is not, how odd to find another "Rabbi Meir" involved in a "sex scandal." Because of the strange parallels, one is tempted to believe they are one and the same person. If so, an eerie sense of "poetic justice" pervades— perhaps atonement for poor Beruriah's untimely death? One can't help but wonder at the parallels. There are varying versions of the tale [44] but the main line runs as follows:

Rabbi Meir regularly travels to Jerusalem for each of the three pilgrimage festivals— *Pesach*, *Shavuot*, and *Sukkot*— where a man named Yehuda always provides him with accommodations. Beyond that, the host instructs his wife to accord the rabbi every honor and hospitality. This she performs scrupulously. In time, Yehuda's wife dies and he remarries; but Rabbi Meir is unaware of this. At his next visit to Jerusalem, he finds himself disoriented when a new female greets him at the door. Though Yehuda is not home at the time, the new wife assures the rabbi she will bestow even more honor on him than did the previous woman of the house. Out of propriety, Rabbi Meir refuses to enter the house until Yehuda himself confirms his wife's words. Only later, following the husband's assurance, does Rabbi Meir feel confident and comfortable to lodge in the man's home.

Apparently, the head of the house is frequently absent from the daily meals and the handsomeness of the guest catches the wife's eye. She devises a scheme to seduce him, intoxicating him until he is incoherent. In this way, she succeeds to spend the night with him.

The next day, as usual, the clueless visitor is served food by the hostess. [45] This time, however, she speaks to him in the most immodest fashion, chiding him about the previous evening. Shocked and stunned at her shameful behavior, Rabbi Meir does not even want to look at her, denying her fantastic lies. But the woman has indisputable proof—knowledge of a particular mark on his body.

Devastated and shaken, the rabbi embarks home shouting, tearing at his clothes, placing ashes on his head, mourning for his transgression. Though an unwitting victim, he has been a participant in one of the Torah's most felonious transgressions— adultery. [46] Confiding to his relatives, they attempt to convince him that, despite the disgrace to the family, his sin was not intentional. [47] But Rabbi Meir is insistent. He must seek counsel from the *Rosh Yeshiva*, the head of the Great Talmudical Academy in Babylonia. His aggravated emotional state indicates he sincerely assumes some guilt. Indeed, would a truly pious man allow himself to be alone with another man's wife, even innocently? Allow himself to be so vulnerable as to become inebriated in her singular presence?

The Chief Rabbi, after much consideration, sentences Rabbi Meir to a horrible death: to be devoured by a lion. [48] This horrid execution is willingly accepted by the perpetrator. He is brought to an area frequented by lions and bound, hand and foot. The Chief Rabbi declares: "If he will be eaten, bring me his bones and I will greatly eulogize over them, that he accepted upon himself the decree of Heaven."

Midnight, tied and trapped, the prisoner awaits his fate. A lion approaches, sniffs him but leaves him untouched. The *Rosh Yeshiva* commands the procedure be repeated the following night. A lion sniffs the prisoner, then turns over his terrified body. The Chief Rabbi, still not convinced, repeats the command for a third night, stating: "If he comes to no harm, then the judgment of Heaven is not against him." But a lion severely attacks him, biting one of his ribs and eating a chunk of his flesh the size of an olive! Hearing of this gruesome outcome, the *Rosh Yeshiva* has Rabbi Meir brought to the physicians, proclaiming that since a "*k'zayis*" (olive size) of his flesh was consumed by the lion, it is as if he had been consumed whole. [49] Returning home, a Heavenly Voice decrees that Rabbi Meir merits life in the World-to-Come.

From a literary perspective, if this story is fiction, perhaps the author was so deeply moved by Beruriah's tragedy, he concocted a tale that would somehow render "poetic justice." Indeed, the Talmudic reticence on this matter— save for Rashi's bold commentary— cries out for some sort of balance. Some sort of retribution to a man who became a legendary figure of Jewish history.

If the "Rabbi Meir seduction" is true and it's the same "Rabbi Meir," one cannot determine its chronology relative to his life. Does it occur before, during or after his marriage to Beruriah? In the version found in Adolf Jellinek's *Bet ha-Midrash*, Rabbi Meir is a young man. If he is a bachelor, does this terrible experience instill in him a hatred of women? Hence, his future attitude towards Beruriah and *the method imposed by him to bring her ruin*? Or, if he *is* married at the time, perhaps the family chooses to keep the truth from Beruriah. The last and most dramatic option proposes he's already a widower and this is divine justice.

It's easy to consign this tale to the realm of myth and fantasy. Even so, isn't one presented with a peculiar parallel, a weird, reversed version of the "Beruriah incident"? Rabbi Meir is duped into a drunken state, then seduced. He later has no recollection of his actions. Relate this to Rashi's description of Beruriah's reaction to her own seduction: "and when it was known to her..." Rabbi Meir succumbing to sin via intoxication seems a curious counterpoint to the suggestion that Beruriah was drugged.

But is it possible that Rabbi Meir was capable of such a despicable plot? As already noted, Rabbi Meir is no stranger to controversy or scandal: The plot to usurp the position of *Nasi*, Rabbi Shimon, in order to gain authority and control. His arrogant, stubborn refusal to show any remorse for this rebellious undertaking, despite the heavenly dream directive to appease Rabbi Shimon. Then, the audacious conduct of Symmachus, Rabbi Meir's disciple, as well as the generally bad reputation of his other students, indicated by Rabbi Yehuda's words.

One astonishing angle of the plot is ostensibly ignored: the accomplice, Rabbi Meir's disciple. Does he have any feelings of guilt about breaking one of the sacred Ten Commandments—at the sheer whim of his teacher's behest? A crime in the Torah *de jure*, punishable by death. Without his compliance, could the entrapment have even been possible? Rashi does not tell anything about this man, his identity, fate or even his age. Does he receive any punishment? Any reprimand for committing adultery or trying to induce it? For causing another to sin? Sadly, perhaps these facts were unknown to Rashi as well.

What *is* grasped from Rashi is the *talmid's* repeatedly failed attempts to seduce Beruriah. In frustration, did he finally resort to a different strategy? To an ancient form of "date rape"? Consider the elusive and exotic mandrake (*Mandragora officinarum*), a plant identified in the

Bible as "*dudaim*." It is described as an object of struggle between Leah and Rachel regarding fertility and marital relations with Jacob. [50] *Shir Hashirim* (Song of Songs) speaks of *dudaim* in romantic overtones. [51] Many cultures attribute this plant with interesting and fascinating qualities: aphrodisiac, analgesic, anesthetic, and sleeping agent. [52] The Greek physician and pharmacologist Dioscorides (c. 40 - 90 C.E.) [53] prescribed a recipe for mandrake wine that could induce sleep, with the caveat that overdosing could be fatal. Other features of the plant include smoking the leaves; the roots can be burned as incense. Though the fumes have an unpleasant odor, it can be masked by fragrant olibanum, as the "very subtle" psychoactive powers of mandrakes take effect. [54] This suggests that a victim's mental capacities could be subliminally affected by the vapors.

Possibly, Rabbi Meir's student, in a zealous quest to "score points with his Rebbe," may have played with fire. Did he surreptitiously slip a potion into Beruriah's drink, possibly mandrake? Or burned it as incense beneath her window? Perhaps her "finally acceding" to the student was due to a disoriented state of mind. She might *not* have actually committed any indecent act but *thought* she had— "raped" psychologically. Rashi states she "acceded" but not that she actually *did* anything wrong. She might have become detached from reality and reason. Later, dazed and left alone, she could have impulsively hung herself in an incoherent moment. Unfortunately, in her case, no one was present to save her from herself.

What if there were no potions involved? What if Beruriah *was* conscious? Rashi says that she succumbed only *after* she had reached an emotional breaking point when the student relentlessly pushed her to the edge of "compliance." Then what was she to do? Tell Rabbi Meir? What would he say? Was this student a teenager, someone she thought was experiencing a childish infatuation soon to wither away? Perhaps to stop his pestering she finally said "yes," not expecting anything serious or physical to come of it.

From the standpoint of psychoanalytic psychiatry, it may be said that every individual has what we may call a suicide-potential, a tendency to self-murder which varies in degree of intensity from individual to individual... It is a pain inflicted on the ego, which, in being a compensation for guilt or a relief from anxiety, may be the only form of release... In the sense that all human beings have been subjected to the process of frustration and repression, of guilt and anxiety, to that extent suicide is a potential outlet under given kinds of emotional stress." (Durkheim and Spaulding 2002, xxiii-xxiv) [55]

Surely, every person has a breaking point. Even if Beruriah *did* sin, it was under constant duress. And as pilgrims migrate to the grave of Rabbi Meir Baal HaNess ("The Miracle Worker") for divine intervention, Beruriah's final resting place remains unknown.

However, another avenue can be pursued— careful analysis of Rashi's wording in the original Hebrew. Following the student's persistent pestering of Beruriah, it is not written she *wanted to do it* (רצתה - as a grammatically active verb), but נתרצית *she acceded*. This phrase implies that she "gave in"; it was something she did *not* want to do. (Again, there is no way of knowing if she only consented verbally— perhaps to make the student leave her alone.)

In what other similar ways do other commentators utilize this word? Ramban (Rabbi Moses ben Nachman, also known as Nachmanides, another prestigious Biblical commentator, 1194–1270 C.E.) uses similar phrasing: ולא נתרצית — "and she did not accede"— regarding the rape of Dinah, Jacob's daughter (Genesis 34:2). The term conveys doing something against one's will. Dinah did not succumb to do anything immoral. Regarding Beruriah, Rashi insists that Rabbi Meir's student was unrelenting... until she finally *acceded*. The word נתרצית indicates a surrender to the will of another. It appears Rashi's slant on the case presents Beruriah as a harassed victim, not an immoral villain.

Another example can be found in the Or HaChayim (Rabbi Chayim ben Attar, 1696-1743 C.E.) commentary to Genesis (3:6), where the term נתרצית is utilized. He applies it to another situation, where a woman was influenced to do something she originally did not wish to do: Chava *acceded* to listen to the seducing serpent, who had deluded her.

So far, one can deduce: whatever Beruriah did was against her nature, as a result of constant coercion — a victim of entrapment.

Rashi's other phrase - וכשנודע לה - "and when it *was known to her*," is grammatically passive. This raises three possibilities:

- 1) Didn't she realize she was committing a sexual act? Not if she was drugged.
- 2) Perhaps Beruriah only *consented* without committing anything immoral. Then her conscience suddenly struck. She "realized," even verbally consenting to adultery was a sin. (Even consent would be enough for Rabbi Meir to prove his point.)

- 3) Most heartbreaking, what was made known to her was the horrid truth her husband initiated this intrigue in order to make her stumble immorally.

Since adultery is one of the cardinal sins for which a Jew must surrender his life, one could reason Rabbi Meir instructed his protégée to only *tempt her*, not to actually commit the act. This would also support the idea that she only *consented*. Rabbi Meir would have something to "hold over" his wife for the rest of her life. But toying with someone's psyche is dangerous business. Her suicide was certainly not part of the plan, which is why he fled to Babylon.

Accepting the premise that Beruriah's transgression was merely consent, could mere verbal agreement to perform an immoral deed— without actually committing it — be enough to drive a pious individual to kill himself? In the High Holiday prayer book, one of the most revered of the religious poems is *U'Netanah Tokef*. The origin of this liturgy for the Days of Awe is enwrapped in the poignant legend surrounding Rabbi Amnon, a prestigious German scholar of Mayence, Germany. Consistently harassed by the gentile nobility to convert to Christianity, Rabbi Amnon— perhaps hoping for a reprieve from the badgering— requested a three-day period to consider the matter. Later that day, however, he suffered horrific pangs of guilt for even implying he might abandon the faith of his forefathers. He refused to eat or drink. After the three-day period, he didn't meet with the authorities and was subsequently arrested, his feet and hands dismembered. On *Rosh Hashanah*, Rabbi Amnon asked to be carried to the synagogue, where he spontaneously composed *U'Netanah Tokef*, finally dying of his wounds. [56]

Fiction or fact, there's a message in the story of Rabbi Amnon. Extreme guilt and remorse can overwhelm the instinct to survive. Interestingly, the cases of Rabbi Amnon and Beruriah both encompass the three cardinal sins for which a Jew must surrender his life: idolatry, sexual immorality, and committing murder. Believing she had succumbed to the student's advances (even if only verbally) could have been too much for Beruriah's conscience. Perhaps she passed an extreme sentence upon herself, as Rabbi Amnon chose to accept his self-inflicted punishment.

Noteworthy is the word, הִנָּקָה— "*she strangled herself*" — grammatically *active*. This is an action she did of her own accord— intentional self-destruction; it contrasts her passive submission to the student's persistent advances. Rashi apparently was extremely selective in his wording. A parallel can be found in another incident regarding impropriety, from Genesis (9:20-24). "And

Noah awoke from his wine *and knew*” (פעל—active—יָדַע) “that which his younger son had done to him.” Despite his alcoholic, groggy state, Noah *knew*, he perceived how his son Ham had shamed him, allowing him to remain disgracefully naked.

Beruriah, in contrast, as shown by Rashi’s carefully chosen tense, seems unaware of what transpired, even slightly amnesiac. She was in a passive state. She did *not* know; it *was made known to her*. Like Noah, Beruriah might also have been under the influence of a drug that led her into a stupor of consent followed by amnesia - but unlike Noah, who was cognizant enough to remember his younger son’s dishonorable conduct. [57]

From a grammatical perspective as well, all possibilities point to Beruriah as a passive individual, not a sinner. One who *submitted* under pressure. The worst that can be concluded is that she was a victim of a vicious plot of entrapment.

Rabbi Meir can be respected for his erudition and knowledge. But can he be respected as a human being? Despite all the evasive descriptions of Beruriah’s end, the injustice against her is appalling. In the eyes of some, the humanity of this great woman must be sacrificed and slaughtered on the altar of history. She must be diminished in order to prop Rabbi Meir’s legendary standing. After all, Beruriah was *only* a woman— a woman who thought she was a bit more... and paid the fatal price.

Perhaps there existed a segment of Talmudic text that was lost long ago, holding details to Rashi’s truth. He introduced an innovation to Talmud study: writing down notes rather than learning by sheer rote through the interpretative lens of a lecturer. His notes were more than memory aids; they included his own commentary and views. It was understood “that the explanations and interpretations flowing from his pen were precisely those ‘he had heard’ from his teachers.”[58] Previous to Rashi, the story of Beruriah’s tragic end might not have been transmitted to every Talmudic student, due to its high sensitivity— except perhaps, only to the most intellectually gifted and pious *talmidim*. This might explain why Rashi’s commentary is the sole surviving record of the Beruriah “incident.” He might have been one of the few privileged students to hear the tale, which he recorded in his notes.

Without some physical, unearthed parchment as proof, it is impossible to construct any definitive answers-- only *attempt* to determine the truth, working with whatever is available. But

all angles of the story must be told. The Hebrew Bible does not flinch reporting the faults of its heroes: the incest of Lot's daughters, Jacob's deception of Esau, Aaron's hand in the Golden Calf, and King David's adultery. Does a Talmudic rabbi deserve more respect than they, while Beruriah's tears still cry out?

Notes:

[1] Maurice Liber, *Rashi*, Trans. Adele Szold (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1906), 62.

[2] Avraham Grossman, "Rashi," in *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia* (1 March 2009), Jewish Women's Archive, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/rashi> Accessed December 31, 2018.

[3] Liber, *Rashi* (above, note 1, 77-78. See also pages 74-86 for further mention of Rashi's character and learning.

[4] Maggie Anton, "Rashi and His Daughters," *Judaism; A Quarterly Journal of Life and Thought*, 54, no.1-2 (Winter-Spring 2005), 48, Academic OneFile.

[5] Jacob Rader Marcus. *The Jew in the Medieval World: A Source Book*, pp. 315 - 1791 (Cleveland, Ohio: Meridian Books, 1961,1938), 302-303.

[6] There are scholars who believe the story to be an unsubstantiated Rabbinic invention. See: Tal Ilan, *Mine and Yours are Hers: Retrieving Women's History from Rabbinic Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp. 68-73. Page 72, fn. 35, suggests the Hebrew word "maaseh" in the Talmud (generally translated as "deed," here understood to mean "incident"), refers to Beruriah's *halakhic* decisions, with which Rabbi Meir did not agree. As a result of this conflict, he relocated to Babylonia. See also pp. 81-82 in David Goodblatt, "The Beruriah Traditions," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 26:1-2 (1975): pp. 68-85, accessed Jan. 5, 2014, <https://www.jjs-online.net/archives/fulltext/739>. Also, see Pages 468-470: M. Herschel Levine, "Three Talmudic Tales of Seduction," *Judaism* (Fall 1987): 466-470.

Rabbi Nissim of Kairouan (R. Nissim ben Jacob) who lived two generations before Rashi (circa 990-1062 C.E.), relates that Rabbi Meir fled to Babylon *with his wife*. {Nissim ben Jacob ben Nissim ibn Shahin, *An Elegant Composition Concerning Relief After Adversity (Hibur Yafeh MehaYashu'ah)*, transl. William M. Brinner (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1977), 54.} For alternate versions, see Brenda Socachevsky, "Reader Response: How Shall We Tell the Story of Beruriah's End?" *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies and Gender Issues*, No. 5, *Feeding and Identity: Gender, Food, and Survival* (Fall 5763/2002) pp. 231-239. Published by: Indiana University Press. www.jstor.org/stable/40326562

[7] The other explanation for Rabbi Meir's flight is connected to the rescue of Beruriah's sister from a brothel, where the Romans forcibly had her confined. The Talmud (Avodah Zara 18b) presents various legends as to how Rabbi Meir eluded Roman authorities, some of which do not reflect favorably on his reputation (e.g., running into a house of prostitution, where no one would expect him to enter). Out of disgrace, he fled to Babylon. See also: Avraham Grossman, *Hasidot u'Mordot: Nashim Yehudiyot be-Eropah beYeme-ha-Benayim* (Yerushalayim: Merkaz Zalman Shazar L'Toldot Yisrael, 2001), 269-271. *Pious and Rebellious: Jewish Women in Medieval Europe (Hasidot u'Mordot: Nashim Yehudiyot be-Eropah beYeme-ha-Benayim)* transl. Jonathan Chipman [Tauber Institute for the Study of European Jewry series— Brandeis Series on Jewish Women] (Waltham, Mass: Brandeis University Press, 2004), 157, 297 {fn.7}. According to Rabbi Nissim of Kairouan, after freeing Beruriah's sister from the brothel, Rabbi Meir became a fugitive, wanted by the Romans. He "took his wife and all that he possessed and moved to Iraq

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[Babylon].” Nissim ben Jacob ben Nissim ibn Shahin, *An Elegant Composition Concerning Relief After Adversity*), 54.

[8] See: Talmud Bavli (Avodah Zarah 18b), Schottenstein ed., vol. 30, pt.1 (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publ. Ltd. [Artscroll], 1990), 18b1, note 9. See also: Schottenstein, Kiddushin 80b2, note 17 (“their minds are light upon them”). My thanks to Talmudic scholar and lecturer Chaim Malachi, for his critiques on the translation.

[9] Reflections from a personal discussion with Chaim Malachi, who suggests that Beruriah— in a state of shock when she realized what transpired— cried out in a panting manner, triggering a spasm, tightening her muscles to such an extent causing asphyxiation, shutting off oxygen— a type of strangulation. This would not be suicide but a case of unintentional “self-strangulation.”

[10] “Entrapment,” in *Black’s Law Dictionary*, 6th ed. (St. Paul: West Publishing Co., 1990) 532.

[11] Talmud Bavli (Kiddushin 80b), Schottenstein ed., vol. 10, pt.2 (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publ. Ltd. [Artscroll], 1990), 80b2, note 17.

[12] Saul Barkali, *Luach Hashemot HaShalem* (Jerusalem: Reuven Mas, 1962), 41 (“pachad”n.4).

[13] Stephanie Pappas, “Female Mass Killers: Why They’re So Rare,” *Live Science* (April 3, 2018), <https://www.livescience.com/53047-why-female-mass-shooters-are-rare.html> [Accessed 24 Jan. 2019].

[14] “Beruriah,” in *Entziklopedia L’Chachmai HaTalmud V’HaGaonim*, ed. Mordechai Margoliot, vol. 1 (Tel Aviv, Israel: Yehoshua Chachik, 1958), 187-189.

[15] Stephen G. Wald, “Beruryah,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., vol.3 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), pp. 492-493, Gale Virtual Reference Library,

https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX2587502817/GVRL?u=nysl_me_yeshival&sid=GVRL&xid=cf986dba
Accessed Feb.12, 2020.

[16] A’hron Oppenheimer and Stephen G. Wald, “Meir,” *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., vol. 13 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), pp.776-777, Gale Virtual Reference Library,

https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX2587513536/GVRL?u=nysl_me_yeshival&sid=GVRL&xid=d1da5101
Accessed Feb.12, 2020.

[17] Isidore Epstein, ed., *The Babylonian Talmud*, vol. 21 (Avodah Zarah 18b), transl. Maurice Simon (New York City: Traditional Press; M.P. Press, Inc., 1979-1980), 18b, note a2.

[18] Talmud Bavli (Avodah Zarah 17b-18a).

[19] Talmud Bavli (Minor Tractates - Semachoth, Chapter 12).

[20] Salomon Buber, ed., *Midrash Mishlei* (with Midrash Shmuel), (Jerusalem: No publ. cited. [Originally published in Vilna, 1893], 1964 or 1965) pp. 54b-55a [Heb. page numbers. English page numbers 108 - 109].

[21] Tosefta: Kelim, Baba Kama (4:17); Kelim, Baba Metzia (1:6).

[22] Talmud Bavli (Pesachim 62b).

[23] Talmud Yerushalmi [Jerusalem Talmud] (Berachot 2: Halakhah 7).

[24] Talmud Bavli (Kiddushin 82b).

[25] Talmud Bavli, Gittin 67a, regarding Rabbi Meir's profession. Gittin 56a recounts Nero leading the Roman legions against Jerusalem. Possibly as a portent, Nero shot arrows into the air. No matter which direction he aimed them, each one fell in Jerusalem. As a final omen, Nero asked a Hebrew boy the latest Biblical verse he had learned. The child answered from Ezekiel (25:14): God would seek vengeance on Edom (Rome) through His people, Israel. Nero

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understood this to mean: God intends to destroy the Temple in Jerusalem and he (Nero) would have to answer for it. He fled and converted to Judaism, Rabbi Meir being his descendant. See also, *Traditional Press* (Epstein, ed.) commentary: Note a5.

[26] Talmud Bavli (Shabbat 134a).

[27] David Joseph Bornstein and Stephen G. Wald, "Nathan Ha-Bavli," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., vol. 15 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), Gale Virtual Reference Library,

https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX2587514586/GVRL?u=nysl_me_yeshival&sid=GVRL&xid=d0fbbe62 Accessed Feb. 28, 2013.

[28] Talmud Bavli (Horayot 13b). See, Epstein, *The Babylonian Talmud*, vol. 20 (Horayot 13b), trans. Israel W. Slotki (New York City: Traditional Press; M.P. Press, Inc., 1979-1980), 13b, note d1.

[29] Literally: "Words of dreams do not elevate or bring down."

[30] Talmud Bavli (Kiddushin 81a). See, *Traditional Press* translation (H. Freedman), vol.15. Also see notes c14-c15, d1-d3. (Curiously, on the very same page is told a very similar story of the great Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Meir's teacher!)

[31] Talmud Yerushalmi (Perek 1: Halakhah 4).

[32] Rabbi Meir alludes to the Biblical ritual of "*Sotah*," a woman suspected by her husband of adultery (Numbers 5:11–31). On a scroll, the priest in the Temple inscribes curses that invoke the name of God in order to afflict the accused wife if she is guilty. This writing is erased with the "bitter waters," which the woman is then commanded to drink.

[33] Avodah Zara (18a-b).

[34] Interestingly, Rabbi Meir attempts this rescue only *after* Beruriah complains. The disgraceful and pathetic predicament of his sister-in-law apparently does not bother him. Joel B. Wolowelsky, "Reader Response: Beruriah's Final Lesson," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies and Gender Issues*, No. 6, *Women, War, and Peace in Jewish and Middle East Contexts*, Fall (5764/2003), 205-208,

https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A112411166/AONE?u=nysl_me&sid=AONE&xid=315587ba
Accessed: Feb. 12, 2020.

[35] Talmud Bavli (Nazir 49b). See: *The Babylonian Talmud*, vol. 13, *Traditional Press*, trans. by B. D. Klein.

[36] Ketuvot (62b – 63a). (Yevamot 62b mentions 12,000 *pairs* of students. My thanks to scholar Chaim Malachi for this additional observation.) See also, Harry Freedman and Stephen G. Wald, "Akiva," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd. ed., Vol. 1. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 562-563, Gale Virtual Reference Library,

https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX2587500632/GVRL?u=nysl_me_yeshival&sid=GVRL&xid=602761d2 Accessed Feb.12, 2020.

[37] My thanks to Talmudic scholar Chaim Malachi for his insights regarding Rachel and the parallel to Beruriah. Mr. Malachi opines that Rachel, born into a life of ease and wealth, needed to find a reason for her existence. Rachel's altruistic nullification of self paradoxically was *selfish*. Her entire motive being existential legitimization by creating a "Torah scholar" — what Mr. Malachi terms "lofty selfishness."

[38] The term "*Tanna*" (plural "*Tannaim*") indicates a scholar of the 1st and 2nd centuries CE, at the time of the *Mishnah* (or "Oral Law," the basic root of Talmudic literature. "*Tanach*," or "Written Law," is generally called "The Bible"). An "*Amora*" (plural "*Amoraim*") describes a sage whose interpretation of the *Mishnah* contributes to the corpus of Talmud.

[39] Tal Ilan, "'Daughters of Israel, Weep for Rabbi Ishmael': The Schools of Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael on Women," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies and Gender Issues*, No. 4, *Feminist Interpretations of Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal Volume 16 Number 1 (2019)*

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Rabbinic Literature, Fall (5762/2001): pp. 15-34 [especially note pp. 29-30], www.jstor.org/stable/40326533
Accessed: Feb. 12, 2020.

[40] Translation: *Sefaria: The William Davidson Talmud*
<https://www.sefaria.org/Menachot.43b.14?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en> Accessed Feb. 18, 2020.

[41] Daniel Sperber, *On Changes in Jewish Liturgy: Options and Limitations*, 1st ed. (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2010), 34-38.

[42] Mordechai Akiba Friedman, "Iyunim B'Midrasho Shel Rabbi Meir," *Teuda* 4 (Article 7, 1986, Studies in Judaica): 79-92, <https://humanities.tau.ac.il/jstudies/Teuda-vol-4> Accessed Feb.18, 2020. See also Sperber, *On Changes in Jewish Liturgy: Options and Limitations*, p.37.

[43] V. Mark Durand and David H. Barlow, *Essentials of Abnormal Psychology* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/CENGAGE Learning, 2013), 415 – See, Table 11.1 - "Personality Disorders"; 439 – See, DSM Box - "Disorder Criteria Summary." Scrutinizing Rabbi Meir psychologically under a microscope, examining his actions and behaviors scientifically, what would be revealed? Placed on the psychiatrist's couch, combining all the aforementioned "incidents," one might make a very shocking claim, as follows... Narcissistic personality disorder is marked by: "Pervasive belief that the individual is better than everyone else, which leads to attention-seeking and a lack of concern for others." Such an individual has "a grandiose sense of self-importance"; "requires excessive admiration"; "takes advantage of others to achieve his...own ends"; "is often envious"; "shows arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes." Perhaps Rabbi Meir suffered from this personality disorder? In our modern age, Beruriah, "The Wife," would have had the option of attending family therapy sessions to deal with her spouse.

[44] Various sources for this tale:

i. Solomon Aaron Wertheimer, *Batei Midrashot*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Ktav V'Sefer, 1980), 184-186.

ii. Adolf Jellinek, *Bet ha-Midrash*, pt.1, 3rd ed. (Jerusalem: Wahrman Books, 1967), 81-83. This version implies Rabbi Meir is a young man (p.81). If so, and this provocative tale occurs *before* he is married, there is still a "Beruriah connection." Perhaps the trauma that unfolds triggers in him a disdain and distrust of women.

iii. Ellen Frankel, *The Classic Tales: 4,000 Years of Jewish Lore*. (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1989), 323-326.

iv. The version of Nissim ben Jacob concludes on a happier note. Nissim ben Jacob ben Nissim ibn Shahin, *An Elegant Composition Concerning Life After Adversity*, Chapter 25, 118-120. Page 118, fn.1, discusses the possibility that this Rabbi Meir is not the famous Talmudic sage.

v. Jehiel Heilprin, in his *Seder HaDorot HaShalem*, relates the tale under the entry for Rabbi Meir, thus equating the two individuals. Jehiel Heilprin, *Seder HaDorot HaShalem*, (Jerusalem: Oraysah, 1985), p. 264 (English numerals); 132b (Hebrew numerals).

[45] A man and woman who are not immediate family or married are forbidden to be alone together ("yichud"). It appears Rabbi Meir's stringent observance of this law slackened. According to *Batei Midrashot*, it was Purim night, when one is allowed to drink wine and liquor freely (p.184).

[46] The Torah states that adultery is punishable by death. (Leviticus 20:10).

[47] *Bet Ha-Midrash* adds: "not to bring out slander upon your sons." The version in *Batei Midrashot* states: "that you should not make slander on the sons ['*bnei*'—members?] of your family." Whether Rabbi Meir is married at the time remains unresolved. A wife is not mentioned but perhaps the scandal is hidden from her. Are the "sons" mentioned those of Beruriah— the boys who died on Shabbos, as recounted in Midrash Mishlei (31:10)? According to *Batei Midrashot*, it may not imply Rabbi Meir's sons in particular but relatives or possibly future generations.

[48] According to the Torah, at least two witnesses are required to convict anyone of a crime (Deuteronomy 19:15). The Chief Rabbi apparently tries to circumnavigate these obstacles, devising an "execution" that leaves the outcome in the hands of God.

[49] In Jewish Law, the "size of an olive" is very significant. It is an important standard of measurement in Jewish Law, determining fulfillment of a commandment. The fact that the lion eats an olive-sized piece of his body means it is "halakhically equivalent" to devouring him whole (!).

[50] Genesis 30:14-17.

[51] *Shir HaShirim* [Song of Songs] 7:14. Citation according to the Artscroll ed. (Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 1977).

[52] Christian Ratsch, *The Encyclopedia of Psychoactive Plants: Ethnopharmacology and its Applications* [Enzyklopadie der psychaktiven Pflanzen], trans. John R. Baker with Annabel Lee and Cornelia Ballent (Rochester, Vermont: Park Street Press, 2005), 353.

[53] *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "Pedanius Dioscorides," <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pedanius-Dioscorides> Accessed Feb.12,2020.

[54] Ratsch, *The Encyclopedia of Psychoactive Plants: Ethnopharmacology and its Applications* (above, note 50), 347.

[55] Emile Durkheim and John A. Spaulding, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, trans. George Simpson (Florence, KY, USA: Routledge, 2002), xxiii -xxiv, <https://www.stopsafeschools.com/wp-content/uploads/securepdfs/2019/09/Suicide-A-study-in-sociology.-London-Routledge.pdf>.

[56] This version of the legend appears in Philip Birnbaum's *High Holiday Prayer Book* (N.Y.: Hebrew Publ. Co.,1951), 790-792.

[57] The Schottenstein English commentary states regarding Beruriah: "when the matter became known," not "when it became known to her," implying that public shame was the catalyst for her suicide. Yet another contortion of the emotional angle of the tale. See Talmud Bavli, Avodah Zarah, Schottenstein translation, vol.30, pt.1, 18b1, Note 9 (Brooklyn., NY: Mesorah, 1990).

[58] Cecil Roth, ed., *The World History of the Jewish People*, Second Series, Medieval Period, Volume 11, *The Dark Ages: Jews in Christian Europe 711–1096*, (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1966), 230-231.

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