

## **“The Gate of Wounded Feelings and Other Talmud Tales, or What is the Punchline?”**

materials prepared for Kol Isha -- Temple Micah, 11/16/08 -- Virginia Spatz

Last year, when we were studying women's voices in prayer, we jumped from biblical to medieval texts and then to contemporary voices, skipping over the Talmudic period. This long jump was attributed to a lack of women's voices in the Talmud. And that explanation is what prompted me to suggest today's session: My favorite Talmudic passages include several very powerful ones in which women teach about prayer, and I thought it would be important to look at those passages and what we know about the women involved.

I believe it *is* true, by the way, that the Talmud contains no words of what we call “prayer” attributed to women as authors. There are no women quoted, for example, when Tractate Berakhot [“Blessings”] lists the various prayers used by several individuals to follow the prescribed Standing Prayer:

“Rabbi Eleazar used to say in his concluding prayers...”

“Rabbi Hiyya used to say in his concluding prayers...”

“Rabbi Zera used to say...” (16b – 17a).

But such direct prayer quotations are relatively rare in the Talmud, as far as I've been able to ascertain. Far more common are discussions about prayer: who is obligated to pray when, how to fulfill those obligations, the meaning and power of prayer – and women and women's words *do appear* in these discussions.

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### **Some Introductory and Not-So-Introductory Stuff**

“It bears no resemblance to any single literary production, but forms a world of its own that must be judged according to its own laws. The ancient Hebrew metaphor which speaks of the ‘ocean of the Talmud’, is helpful to the understanding of its nature...an ocean, vast in extent, unfathomable in depth, with an ocean-like sense of immensity and movement about it.....swarms with a thousand varied forms of life....” J.H. Hertz, introduction to the Soncino Talmud.

“From what time may one recite the Shema in the evening?”

This is the first thing one reads upon opening the first tractate of the first order of the Talmud. One might also notice that the book begins with a page numbered “2a.” Starting with page 2 is probably the result of a medieval printers' convention, but I have read that this also serves to remind us that, whenever we open a volume of Talmud, we're coming late to a conversation already in progress.

Similarly, the specific question -- “From what time may one recite the Shema in the evening?” -- clues us into some of the ways the Talmud works:

- 1) there are assumptions of background knowledge – the user is assumed to know about the Shema and the obligation to recite it, for example. It helps to keep in mind that the intended users were pairs of ancient students learning in community, never a “reader” in isolation, using a written text without a live teacher nearby.

- 2) there are assumptions about purpose – the user of this text is assumed to care deeply about the minutia of reciting the evening Shema, for example, understanding the question and the practice as part of a sacred enterprise of learning and action.
- 3) the idea is to make something relatively abstract – like the general biblical injunction to “speak of it when you lie down and when you rise up,” here -- functional in the real world, often by comparing and debating somewhat contradictory practices and beliefs of various teachers and localities. Participants are working out details of what was already present in the Torah. Several of the texts we'll look at today deal in part with differences of philosophy concerning the phrase “It is not in heaven,” i.e., what it means to interpret Torah.
- 4) just as we can assume we're not getting in on the beginning of the conversation, we can assume that we'll not see the “end” of a tale or topic.
  1. There are determinations of practice -- even while acknowledging that two or more practices are supportable by the text: Shammai had good reasons for wanting to light eight candles the first night and then reduce that number through Chanukah, for instance, and we have his arguments preserved in the Talmud (somewhere around Shabbat 22a), but the practice, finally, was ruled according to Hillel.
  2. Still, new circumstances extend older dialogues into this day. We'll read later of an argument – which took place in a Jew's home some 1700 years ago -- over who is obligated to offer the blessing after a meal, and you can read contemporary arguments about calling others to recite *birkat hamazon*, as traditional Jews continue to seek more inclusive rules.
  3. We'll also look at a story which is frequently taught with what many consider a happy ending, while the tale, from a slightly longer view, can be followed through to several tragic endings.
- 5) the style is organic – questions are posed; answers are suggested and debated, often across decades or centuries, with teachers who were not contemporaries arguing as though they were at the same table; one topic leads to another... Before page two is finished, for example, discussion has moved from when the average person should recite a required bit of prayer text to the time of day priests bathe. I have heard it said that Talmud was the original hypertext – long before there were technologies to allow jumping from one topic to another electronically.
- 6) it's important to realize that material was organized and labeled after its creation – so, one cannot assume that the volume called “Berakhot” [blessings], e.g., is meant to impart some body of knowledge about blessings, as a modern book of such a title might be; instead, it might be easier to envision the organization like this: A student clears out a deceased teacher's attic and
  1. finds a formal paper on the topic of blessings, labels a box “Berakhot,” and puts the paper about blessings inside;
  2. happens next on lecture notes relating to the Shema, and thinks “OK, we say blessings before and after the Shema in the morning and evening prayers, and these have nothing to do with women or tithing,” so puts the notes in “Berakhot,” too;
  3. discovers some journal pages relating a conversation the student knows involved scholars who attended the conference where the blessings paper was given and adds those to the “Berakhot” box.
  4. Much later, someone finds the “Berakhot” box and reads about the Shema and the dialogue from the conference, along with material specifically addressing the topic of blessings.
- 7) as complex and intimidating as the enterprise might seem on many levels, the text begins with a question...an invitation to conversation.

“Talmud” consists of two main strands

- “Mishnah” [“repeating”], which was committed to writing, it is generally believed, beginning in the time of Yehuda haNasi (Judah the Prince or just “Rabbi”), around the year 200 CE; and
- “Gemara” [“completing”], discussion of the Mishnah, probably recorded from 200-600 CE.

On a printed Talmud page, the central column contains “a mishnah,” a bit of the oldest recorded teaching (of varying length), followed by the somewhat later teachings of “gemara,” (also of varying length and complexity). Surrounding that column are later commentaries. Modern printers include some annotations – citations for biblical verses, references to other Talmudic discussion, identification of speakers, etc.

The unadorned word “Talmud” means “Babylonian Talmud” (“Bavli”), named for the active community, where Jews thrived in exile for hundreds of years. But there is also a “Yerushalmi,” or Jerusalem Talmud, reflecting the pre-Exilic community and the remnant who remained behind. “B” and “J” contain some overlapping, nearly identical material and some that differs substantially in the two versions. The former is about four times more extensive, however, and the version most often studied.

The latter would more accurately be called the “Greater-Tiberius-area Talmud,” but the the name is “Jerusalem” and the citation “J” or “Y,” although older texts sometimes cite “P” for “Palestinian.” Fortunately, there is no variation in the “B” for Bavli/Babylon, and no letter is, by default, “Babylonian.”

The Talmud is divided into six “orders” -- as in “Six are the orders of the Mishnah” in the Passover song, “Who knows one?” -- the first of which is “Seeds.” Each is composed of “tractates,” such as “Berakhot,” the first in the order Seeds.

#### Timeline

#### **Period of the Tannaim, [Aramaic, like Hebrew "shana," to repeat, as in "Mishnah"] ~70-200 CE**

\*Imma (or Ima) Shalom

- Learned woman of the late 1st/early 2nd Century CE in the family of Hillel.
- Wife of Eliezer ben Hyrcanus.
- Sister of Gamaliel II (sometimes called his daughter, with a reconciling note that she was raised in his care); she and Gamaliel are grandchildren of Gamaliel the Elder, grandson to Hillel.

\*Beruriah

- 2nd Century CE scholar, only woman in the Talmud cited as legal authority.
- Wife of Meir.
- Daughter of (martyr) Hanania ben Teradion.
- Only woman in the Talmud whose words are cited with legal authority

\*Daughter of Acher

- Otherwise unnamed, woman of the 2nd Century CE.
- Daughter of heretic Elisha ben Abuya, known as “Acher” [“the Other”].
- Appears before Rabbi, Yehuda HaNasi (Judah the Prince), to demand financial support.

#### **Period of the Amora, roughly 200 - 500 CE [Aramaic, "those who say"]**

Yalta

- Prominent woman of 3rd-4th Century CE Babylon.
- Daughter of “the Exilarch” (or “reish galuta,” in Aramaic, Jewish leader in Babylon), which some assume is Rabba ben Abuha and others identify as another Exilarch.
- Often recognized as the wife of Nachman (bar Yaakov), sometimes as his patron.

“[Talmud] bears no resemblance to any single literary production, but **forms a world of its own** that must be judged according to its own laws.” -- J.H. Hertz, introduction to Soncino Talmud (my emphasis)

Over the last thirty years or so, scholars have increasingly wondered in print – and more recently on-line – about the relatively few learned women who appear prominently in the Talmud:

Did the few women who made it into the pages of the Talmud end up there by accident or design?  
 Given the socio-economic climate in Palestine two millennia ago, were learned women anomalies?  
 Or more common than the text would suggest? Perhaps later excised or marginalized?  
 What did these women come to teach about their age or ours?

Dalia Hoshen, in a 2007 book, considers the much-discussed example of Beruria (2<sup>nd</sup> Century, wife of Meir, daughter of martyr Chaninya ben Taradion) being renowned for “learning 300 halachot [laws] from 300 rabbis” (from Tractate Pesachim). Was this meant as tokenism? Was it, on the contrary, meant as a countertype to teach that women should *not* study Torah (a prominent argument in the Talmud)?

Poring over Beruria's texts, among the relatively few with learned women at the center, some saw:

- a woman who was learned enough to be a threat to men: we won't talk today about somewhat later Beruria stories involving her seduction into adultery and consequent suicide, but much is/was made of these in feminist analysis of Beruria, her learning and her circumstances;
- a woman representing more “feminine” qualities, like compassion. This perspective is sometimes applied, for example, to Beruria's response when her husband, Rabbi Meir, says he will pray for the end of some sinners who are troubling the neighborhood, but Beruria tells him to pray, instead, for the end of their sins;
- a woman who had to work twice as hard as her male counterparts to even be noticed: in one story, Beruria's opinion is accepted by the sages over that of her brother; just as Ginger Rogers was sometimes said to “do everything Fred did, but backwards and in high heels,” perhaps Beruria, with her 300 halakhot, learned everything her brother did, but barefoot and breastfeeding?

Judith Wegner concluded in 1991 that, overall, the Talmud couldn't teach us directly about women's experience:

A literature produced by men offers very little testimony to the actual experience of real, historical women. The Talmud rarely speaks of individual women, treating them for the most part in a generic and stereotypical way. What we get, in the end, is the rabbinic understanding of women's nature and place in the social fabric, along with a set of rules delineating the (perhaps theoretical, perhaps actual) legal status of women in a patriarchal culture.

-- Judith Wegner, 1991, “The Status of Women in Classical Rabbinic Judaism.”

A new kind of scholarship brought the Talmud's women into 20<sup>th</sup> Century discourse on gender, sex and power. For example, here are two responses to a 3<sup>rd</sup> Century Babylonian story in which visiting rabbi Ulla refuses to pass the kiddush cup to his hostess, Yalta, after the meal; she smashes the remaining wine jars and insults him. (The first two paragraphs fare from Rachel Adler's 1998 *Engendering Judaism*, The third is from Judith Baskin's 2002 *Midrashic Women*):

Why..is Ulla bent upon reducing his hostess to a womb? [issue is female versus male contributions to fertility, symbolized by the after-meal cup of wine] Perhaps he is compensating for other disparities. Yalta, daughter of the fabulously wealth leader of the Jews of Babylonia, is Ulla's superior both in affluence and in lineage. The only thing Ulla has that Yalta does not is that appendage around which he and his sources have been creating a justifactory structure. [so: symbolic castration] (p.55)

“Skotsl\* as legal guerrilla retells Yalta's stories. Applying her feminist hermeneutic, she finds a mirror within the story and holds this mirror up to the tradition's face. The purpose of a feminist Jewish hermeneutic is not to reject either text or law but to seek ways of claiming them and living them out with integrity. It keeps faith with texts by refusing to absolve them of moral responsibility. It honors halakhah by affirming its inexhaustible capacity to be created anew.” (p.58) [\*Skotsl is a yiddish folktale heroine who disappears, presumably into heaven, when women organize a human ladder, hoping to complain to God about gender inequalities on earth.]

While feminist readers of this passage have praised Yalta for her feistiness and presence of mind, most have failed to emphasize the central message of this narrative. Yalta's response to Ulla changes nothing. Neither her wealth, nor her high social position, nor her asperity count for anything in this instance. She is still excluded from full participation in the *kiddush* because of her gender. (p.86)

Returning to Beruria's 300 halakhot, Hoshen argues that the central question of the story “has disappeared in the light of the feminist focus.” (*Beruria the Tannait*, 2007. p.23) The real question should be: “Why three hundred *halakhot* [laws] and not three hundred *aggadot* [midrashim/stories]?”

Similarly, ahistorical, feminist analysis of Beruria's opinion in the oven case (where her opinion is accepted over that of her brother, mentioned above) reduces a complex dispute “about *taharot* (Purity) to feminine kitchen issues,” Hoshen argues. More generally, an ahistorical approach

has led to superficial textual research....we are guided to view the woman behind each text, not its substance. Even in her scholarly texts, Beruria seemingly merely mimics rabbinical methodology. It is not necessary to seek insight into it, nor examine its unique interpretation or conception, as we would have done if the text had not borne Beruria's name. (p.23)

Hoshen argues for a different approach, for looking at Beruria ***from within her world***. Meeting her there makes it possible to learn from her stories in a new way.

Beruria is a “Tannait,” Hoshen says, using the feminine form of the word “tanna,” which is applied to those in the scholarly community of the Mishna period. Beruria “viewed the socio-biological dimension of any object, including herself” through the lens of ***that*** world. She is “revealed through her texts as a *tannait*, who integrates Halakha and Aggada, whose conception of Torah is that Torah encompasses all strata of life and that the Midrash” is the way “the ideal entity of Torah is revealed.” (p.26)

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“The plot [of the 1983 movie *Yentl*] includes a Shakespearean love triangle between Babs/Yentl, Mandy Patankin (hunky Avigdor) and Amy Irving (sexy Hadass) – but in the end, Yentl gets neither the boy nor the girl. Nor, as in the Isaac Bashevis Singer story on which the movie is based, does she continue living as a man, thereby ensuring her scholastic freedom. Nope. She goes off to America without love, resolution or even a clear direction for further study. But we, the audience, are to understand that she managed to enter the male-only world of learning and that, most important, she found herself...and that was enough. And you know what? For a long time that was plenty.

“Yeah, well. Not anymore....Now it's Yentl's turn to run the damn yeshiva....”

--Danya Ruttenberg, introduction to *Yentl's Revenge: The Next Wave of Jewish Feminism*. (2001)

## "Beruriah -- The Mishnaic Age" (excerpt from Chabad's website)

[http://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/112056/jewish/Beruriah.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/112056/jewish/Beruriah.htm)

It is not very often that we find the name of a woman mentioned in the Talmud. It is the names of our great Tannaim and Amoraim, the teachers of our people, that we usually find in the Talmud. Now and again, however, we come across a great Jewish woman whose wisdom, piety, and learning inspire us to this day. One of the greatest of such women of worth was Beruriah.

Beruriah lived about one hundred years after the destruction of the Second Beth Hamikdosh, which occurred in the year 70 CE. It is not surprising that she was such a wise and learned woman, for she was the daughter of the great Rabbi Chananiah ben Teradion, who was one of the "Ten Martyrs" whom the Romans killed for spreading the teachings of the Torah among the Jewish people.

When the Romans caught Rabbi Chananiah with a Torah scroll, they burnt him, his wife and a daughter. They wrapped the scroll about his body and put wet sponges around him so that he should not burn too quickly, but that his death should be long and painful. But Rabbi Chananiah remained staunch and steadfast to the very end. His Roman hangman was so inspired by the courage and faith of this great Jewish Sage, that he removed the sponges to ease his victim's suffering and jumped into the flames to burn and die with the saint.

One can well understand that the daughter of such a great man should also reach greatness. Indeed, we learn from the Talmud that Beruriah's qualities made her truly worthy of such a great father. Beruriah was not only the daughter of a great man but was also the wife of an equally great Sage, the saintly Rabbi Meir one of the most important teachers of the Mishnah.

The Talmud tells us many stories about Beruriah. In contrast to other women she studied three hundred matters pertaining to "Halachah" (Jewish law) every day, which would be quite an amazing feat for a male scholar who spent all his time studying. Thus, the Sages frequently asked her views regarding matters of law, especially those laws which applied to women. For instance, the Sages had different opinions about the law of cleanliness and asked Beruriah for her opinion. Rabbi Judah sided with her and recognized her authority.

There was another case where there was a dispute between Beruriah and her brother, Rabbi Simeon ben Teradion. One of the greatest authorities was asked to judge the case and he said: "Rabbi Chananiah's daughter Beruriah is a greater scholar than his son Rabbi Simon."....

Another story showing Beruriah's fine character is the one telling about neighbors they had who were such wicked people, such rogues, that they annoyed Rabbi Meir continuously with their noisy, drunken parties. Their terrible behavior was such that they constantly interfered with his Torah study. In his anger Rabbi Meir once prayed that G-d rid him of these wicked pests. Hearing him, Beruriah gently said to him: "The Psalmist says: 'May the sins disappear from the earth.' You see, the word is sins, not sinners. One should pray that evil disappear, then there will be no evildoers."

**Women in Judaism: The Status of Women in Formative Judaism**  
 by Leonard Swidler. The Scarecrow Press, Inc. Metuchen, N.J., 1976  
 excerpt from paper posted at <http://global-dialogue.com/swidlerbooks/womenjudaism.htm>

a) Beruria: The Exception that Proves the Rule

Montefiore said, "they tell of a few exceptional women such as Beruria," who apparently had some knowledge of Torah. In fact, whenever some kind of evidence is put forth which is counter to the above documentation, that women in reality did not study Torah, Beruria is always mentioned. When one finds in this connection a reference to Beruria everywhere, and very often only to Beruria, one is tempted to see this as a classical case of the exception proving the rule....

Beruria became an avid student of Torah, although we do not know who taught her to read or with what rabbi she studied; she may have studied with her father, but perhaps also with other rabbis. Apparently she went through the intensive three-year course of study customary for disciples of rabbis at the time:

Rabbi Simlai came before Rabbi Johanan and requested him: Let the master teach me the Book of Genealogies.... Let us learn it in three months, he proposed. Thereupon he (Rabbi Johanan) took a clod and threw it at him, saying: If Beruria, wife of Rabbi Meir and daughter of Rabbi Hananya ben Teradyon who studied three hundred laws from three hundred teachers in one day could nevertheless not do her duty in three years, yet you propose to do it in three months!

Beruria not only put in the canonical three-year program of study, but also did it in such an exemplary manner that she was held up as an example of how to study Torah. Indeed, her reputation as an avid student was so great that it spawned legends about her studiousness, as in the clearly hyperbolic reference to the three hundred laws studied from three hundred teachers every day for three years. Such a legend was quite a compliment to her reputation, and triply so when it is also recalled that Beruria was being held up to be emulated by Rabbi Simlai who himself was a very renowned rabbi, and that Rabbi Simlai lived over a hundred years after Beruria.

Beruria also took part in the discussions and debates among the rabbis and their more able followers. In one such a debate over a very technical matter of ritual purity she opposed, and bested, her brother: in referring to Beruria, Rabbi Judah ben Baba said, "His daughter has answered more correctly than his son." Another debate was recorded in which two rabbinical schools were ranged on opposite sides, whereupon Beruria gave her solution. "When these words were said before Rabbi Judah, he commented 'Beruria has spoken rightly.'" The striking thing about these reports, and others elsewhere in the Talmud, is that a woman's opinion on Torah became law, halacha. At least one woman penetrated to the heart of Judaism, Torah, and not only as an absorbent student, but also as a rabbinical disputant and a decisive maker of law.

Beyond these accomplishments Beruria also followed the path of all other really able students of Torah and became a teacher of Torah: "Beruria once discovered a student who was learning in an undertone. Rebuking him, she exclaimed: Is it not written, 'ordered in all things and sure?' If it (the Torah) is 'ordered' in your 248 limbs it will be 'sure,' otherwise it will not be 'sure.'" The then common mode of studying Torah was to recite it aloud to memorize it more effectively. Here Beruria not only drilled the student as a schoolmistress, but did so in a peculiarly rabbinic fashion: she quoted from the Torah and argued her position by explaining and applying the scriptural passage. Her rebuke of the student was gentle; she tried to lead him more deeply into his studies. As one modern Jewish woman scholar states, "One gets the impression that Beruria had the personality of a master-rebbe who was seriously concerned with the spiritual and educational welfare of people." That this story of Beruria, together with one of her

teaching the famous rabbi Jose the Galilean on the road to Lydda, is grouped with a number of other rabbinical stories about teaching, indicates that the editors of the Babylonian Talmud were aware of her teaching prowess as late as the fifth century-three centuries after her death.

Beruria clearly did not suffer fools gladly, as this story and the one about Rabbi Jose the Galilean, related below, indicate. She could also be extremely sympathetic and sensitive to those she felt were sincere, but here she faced a man she thought was helping to destroy true Judaism (min is to be understood here either as a Sadducee opponent of the Pharisees/rabbis or as a Jewish-Christian) and who apparently was expounding Scripture in an ignorant way. If there was anything Beruria could not tolerate, it was a man being pretentious about Torah.

Beruria likewise had an intense moral fervor and sensitive concern for persons, as illustrated by the following story about her and her famous husband, Rabbi Meir:

Certain highwaymen living in the neighborhood of Rabbi Meir annoyed him greatly, and Rabbi Meir prayed for them to die. His wife Beruria said to him: What is your view? Is it because it is written: 'Let the sinners be consumed'? Is 'sinners' written? 'Sins' is written. Moreover, look at the end of the verse: 'and let the wicked be no more.' Since the sins will cease, the wicked will be no more. He prayed for them and they repented.

This is clearly high moral advice, presented with the usual scriptural quotation, analysis and application of its meaning. Beruria here showed herself the superior of the best male rabbinical mind and moral spirit; the hard proof of that is that Rabbi Meir took her advice, with success. A modern male Jewish scholar has commented on this passage: "Students sufficiently familiar with Hebrew would profit greatly by following Beruria's argument in the Talmud's original text, also looking up the Hebrew of the verse ...."

If Beruria was a brilliant student and teacher of Torah, a decider of halacha, and one who lived and taught an intensely moral life, did she not have all the qualities of a rabbi? ... ..

In all the stories recorded about Beruria, she is always set over against a man... Moreover, she is always superior to the men, whether as a model of studiousness, a teacher, or as a superior and even at times triumphant disputant and exegete. This is the case even in regard to her husband, the most learned and renowned rabbi of his age. If such a strong and positive image comes through even the totally male memorized, written and edited rabbinic materials, what must Beruria have been like?

Beruria had to be an unusual-a rabbinical-woman to make a broad mark on that massive male work, the Talmud. Clearly she did not fit the female stereotype of her day. But she was more than that. She very keenly felt the oppressed, subordinate position women held in the Jewish society around her, and struck out against it. Her consciousness was extremely sensitized: "Rabbi Jose the Galilean was once on a journey when he met Beruria. 'By what road,' he asked her, 'do we go to Lydda?' 'Foolish Galilean,' she replied, 'did not the Sages say this: Engage not in much talk with women? You should have asked: By which to Lydda?'" What is irritating Beruria is woman's second class status, here reflected in the rabbinic law that a man should not speak much with women., who are too "lightheaded" to waste time on, and sexually tempting besides. Here was a chance to throw verbal acid in the face of one of her "oppressors." A student she treated gently; the rabbi she called a fool. But with her keen wit she did not simply vituperate the rabbi (one wonders if he had earlier delivered himself of some pompous sage quotation on the frivolity and inferiority of women to have earned this breathtaking attack); instead, she carefully followed the traditional rabbinic pattern of disputation by rebutting a statement with a quotation from the written or oral Law. Always she remained the intellectual.

## Women in Rabbinic Judaism

Judith R. Baskin

excerpted from bit posted at <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/>

....Women do utter words of wisdom in rabbinic stories, but generally such stories either confirm a rabbinic belief about women's character, such as women's higher degree of compassion for others (BT Avodah Zarah 18a; BT Ketubot 104a), or deliver a rebuke to a man in need of chastisement (BT Eruvin 53b; BT Sanhedrin 39a).

Both qualities are present in traditions about Beruriah, the wife of the second century C.E. rabbi, Meir, known for her unusual learning and quick wit (BT Pesachim 62b, BT Erubin 53b-54a). Yet Beruriah's scholarship was a problem for rabbinic culture, and in later rabbinic tradition she is shown to reap the tragic consequences of the "lightmindedness" inherent in woman's makeup: in his commentary on BT Avodah Zarah 18b, Rashi ([the pre-eminent] eleventh-century [Bible and Talmud commentator]) relates that Beruriah was seduced by one of her husband's students and subsequently committed suicide.

Contemporary scholars have shown that the scholarly Beruriah is a literary construct with little historical reality, yet they agree that the traditions about her articulate profound disquiet about the role of women in the rabbinic enterprise.

Rachel Adler suggests that Beruriah's story expresses rabbinic ambivalence about the possible place of a woman in their wholly male scholarly world, in which her sexuality was bound to be a source of havoc. Daniel Boyarin writes that for the amoraic sages of the Babylonian Talmud, Beruriah serves as proof of "R. Eliezer's statement that 'anyone who teaches his daughter Torah, teaches her lasciviousness' (Mishnah Sotah 3:4);" in rabbinic culture, he writes, "The Torah and the wife are structural allomorphs and separated realms...both normatively to be highly valued but also to be kept separate." [...]

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“Another,” “Others,” and “Some” --

“Another,” refers to Elisha ben Abuya; one of the four who entered paradise, he “cut the shoots,” i.e., became a heretic: When he visited a harlot on Shabbat, she asked who he was; then when he pulled up a raddish and handed it to her [seeing him violate Shabbat], she said “it must be another.”

“Others” often refers to Rabbi Meir, and “some say” refers to Rabbi Nathan, following a ruling that “no traditional statement shall be reported in their names,” in the wake of a dispute in the Sandhedrin.

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Elisha ben Abuya taught:

When a person studies as a child, to what may he be compared? To ink written on fresh paper. When a person studies when he is old, to what may he be compared? To ink written on blotted paper. (Avot, 4:25)