

Ula (Urszula) Chowaniec

Tikkun by Judith, the Wife of R. Hiyya!

Or about (un)Desired Motherhood, Freedom(s) and the Right to Individual Choice¹

She changed her clothes to prevent Rabbi Hiyya from recognizing her and came before Rabbi Hiyya to ask him a halakhic question. She said: Is a woman commanded to be fruitful and multiply? He said to her: No. ²

Sefaria

Yevamot 65b
The William Davidson Talmud

17 יהודה וחזקיה תאומים היו אחד נגמרה צורתו לסוף תשעה ואחד נגמרה צורתו לתחלת שבעה יהודית דביתהו דר' חייא הוה לה צער לידה שנאי מנא ואתיא לקמיה דר' חייא ואמרה אתתא מפקדא אפריה ורביה אמר לה לא אולא אשתאי סמא דעקרתא

The Gemara relates that Rabbi Hiyya's sons, Yehuda and Hizkiyya, were twins, but one of them was fully developed after nine months of pregnancy and one was fully developed at the beginning of the seventh month, and they were born two months apart. Yehudit, the wife of Rabbi Hiyya, had acute birthing pain from these unusual deliveries. She changed her clothes to prevent Rabbi Hiyya from recognizing her and came before Rabbi Hiyya to ask him a halakhic question. She said: Is a woman commanded to be fruitful and multiply? He said to her: No. She went and drank an infertility potion.

18 לסוף איגלאי מילתא אמר לה איכו ילדת לי חדא כרסא אחרייתא דאמר מר יהודה וחזקיה אחי פוי וטוי

Eventually the matter was revealed, and Rabbi Hiyya found out about what Yehudit had done. He said to her: If only you had given birth to one more belly for me, i.e., another set of twins. As the Master said: Yehuda and Hizkiyya were twin brothers and became prominent Torah scholars, and Pazi and Tavi, Rabbi Hiyya's daughters,

¹ This text was written for Professor Fania Oz-Salzberger in gratitude and compliment for her presence and academic classes offered to the Amos Oz Fellows during the year in Paideia 2019-2020.
² From Yevamot 65b (The William Davidson Talmud), <https://www.sefaria.org/Yevamot.65b.17?lang=bi> (accessed 20.03.2020). I wish to thank my Paideia friend, Lilinaz Evanz, for pointing out this story to me, as to a mother of twins, and altogether three children. Undoubtedly, this essay has been written from the perspective of "personal ethnography" and informed personal experience as a woman and a mother, even though there are centuries and vast cultural and ideological gap between Judith and me, we are connected through a unchangeable (probably) bodily experience, pains and exhaustion, so often connected to motherhood.

Introduction

It is March 20th, 2020: the most difficult spring-day in my life. The world is facing pandemic outbreaks and I am writing this essay on Jews and words. It is hard to write now, because the world is turning upside down, and we are all living in fear. It is so difficult to concentrate now even on something that has always fascinated me - Jewish heritage. It has been almost impossible to engage with the texts that testify to a millennia of extraordinary thinking and scrutinizing of our existence, finding some meaning, constantly asking and answering, and with each answer posing many more questions (you know, the Jewish way: answering a question with another question!³). How to write an essay? How to be logical and systematic? If I could go to Rabbi Hiyya and ask him if in these circumstances I am "patur" or "hayav", what would his answer be? And despite the little I know about the vast beauty of the Talmud and its commentators, one thing is definite: I would most likely get both answers: I could be patur given the circumstances, and I could be hayav given the circumstances, since fearing for our loved ones is robust, yet the need to keep to our duties is also essential. Hence, without further ado, I shall talk about Jewish words, texts and ideas!

This short text will combine two tasks and debate two main ideas of (1) freedom and (2) authority as they function from the perspective of the notion of the position of women in the Hebrew Bible and the concept of motherhood. I will also refer to both classical texts on Jewish civilisation (e.g. Kaplan) as well as to voices on contemporary secularism (3), which discuss the concept of obligation in the secular world (here texts by Yizhar, Leah Goldberg and others will be mentioned). This text is just a short sketch, inspired by our online classes led by

³ Of course, the joke I heard in the interviews of Amos Oz.

Prof. Fania Selzberger-Oz, rather than any established argument. Yet, I hope it brings a bit of a light to each of us in these difficult times, since it is about the quest for the importance of woman's self-love and self-esteem as seen in the story of the wife of Rabbi Hiyya.

Talmudic sympathy for suffering

Judith, the wife of Rabbi Hiyya already had two pairs of twins, a pair of sons and a pair of daughters, when she came to her husband in disguise and asked him if a woman is commanded to be fruitful. When the Rabbi said "no," she decided that she was allowed (Talmudic keyword: *mutar*) to drink an infertility potion. She did this because, as we know, she had "acute birthing pain from these unusual deliveries." This test case, this tiny Talmudic parable, testifies to a huge transgression in Jewish law-making: firstly, it narrates the challenge of the very first mitzva given to people, in the Bible, by God: to multiply themselves (Genesis 1:28 "be fertile and increase", and then repeated in the Parashat Noah, Genesis 9:1) and secondly this mitzva is challenged by a woman. The challenge - following the Talmudic discussion ("Gemara then asks immediately: 'Are women not commanded to be fruitful and multiply'", later Medieval commentators also posed this question) - has been subsequently solved by stating that the imperative of procreation is addressed only to men, based on the reasoning that no pain can be inflicted by mitzva onto another living being. However, this solution does not diminish the transgressive energy of this parable, which I discuss henceforth.

Of course, Rabbi Hiyya, was not happy about the event and his dishonest wife, Judith, is not portrayed in a good way, she is mentioned elsewhere as being contemptuous, and also her act, the pure act of self-defence from pains, is condemned - in the text - by (1) revealing the sorrow of Rabbi Hiyya, who wished she could have given him "one more belly" (another pair of twins) and (2) by stating that Judith most likely deprived humanity of another wonderful pair of saintly scholars. This is made clear by the fact that the previous pairs of twins are deliberately mentioned: firstly, the sons Yehuda and Hizkiyya as forthcoming great Talmudic scholars; and subsequently, the daughters (the matriarchs: Pazi and Tavi) as the imminent great mothers of several great Talmudic scholars.

A contemporary reader finds it difficult to understand the Talmudic scornful attitude towards the wife of Rabbi Hiyya and her trickery, when she was simply a woman in pain. Yet, there are three aspects of this Talmudic test case, the story of Judith, which are particularly empowering for female herstories:

(1) deception as woman's agency can be seen here as a method of self-defence and of creating her own rules, she is a Talmudic trickster, having her own *chutzpah*. It can also be argued that this is the first transgendered manifestation in Jewish texts,⁴ since it is quite evident that Judith was disguised as a man;

(2) it is important to notice the Sages' awareness and sympathy towards birthing pains and understanding the enormous bodily efforts invested in the child-delivery experience. The fact that women's needs, fears and objections were addressed should be unquestionably seen as a signature of the strong position of women in the private sphere of Jewish life; and

(3) thirdly, the test case gives the actual Talmudic standpoint towards woman's procreation as non-obligatory, and this stands completely against commonly-held opinions; however, as Kaplan explains the authority works twofold: "A living civilisation must include a general will, which makes itself felt in the consciousness of the individual, either as a form of authority, capable of physical coercion, or as that more subtle form of authority which reveals itself in what may be called as social expectation" (Kaplan 2005). And this is clear: the social pressure for women, both Jewish and non-Jewish, religious and non-religious is put - to diverse degrees and intensities - on her fertility and her ability to secure continuity (not the textual one, as discussed by Oz-Salzberger 2012, but the physical one - the bloodline continuity). The authority of social expectation in our everyday experiences overshadows completely the lesson from the Talmudic parable. Yet, whatever the social practice and authority of communal pressure has been over the past thousands of years, the Talmud, the Jewish law in its verse was exempting women from the most difficult bodily experience, which is delivering a child.

To highlight the importance of this parable and the importance of the action of the Talmudic trickster-woman, Judith, we need to observe how it offers an extraordinary, multifaceted perspective on women's agency:

(1) on one hand - it gives a woman freedom to choose, at least from the perspective of official law;

(2) on the other hand, it is a perspective of mindfulness and compassion for women's physical pain and suffering, since - as we know - delivering a child has always been the most mythicized and romanticized experience ever; with very few literary accounts of the actual pain and fear women experience throughout it.

⁴ This notion is further developed by Ravch 2014.

Judith's chutzpah, secular intuition or the performing of tikkun!

If we see the act of Judith, the wife of Rabbi Hiyya, as a chutzpah that can be traced back to Sara's chutzpah, laughing at God's messengers; to Esther's chutzpah, saving the Jewish people; or to Hannah's chutzpa – which seems to be concerned with quite the opposite issue – yet, at the same time is still the same chutzpah of getting a woman what she really wants. Then, perhaps, we can see all these women as feminist Biblical and Talmudic heroines, who worked hard to reclaim their voices (and becoming - as the authors of *Jews and Words* call them - “vocal women”!).

Furthermore, if we follow the argument of David Biale that the Sages' gesture against Eliezer and God's support for Eliezer can be seen as a prototype of the secular act of reclaiming human agency, then – perhaps – the wife of Rabbi Hiyya, this contemptuous woman, unhappy in her position (and probably completely overburdened, as a mother of twins - times two!) can also be seen as a prototype of a woman's secular rebellion against God's commandment to “be fertile and increase”.

And Judith is not just a conformist rebel, she – like every serious secular thinker – makes sure she both considers and engages with the law. Through, or with help of a disguise, she gets involved in the rabbinic dispute. She is overburdened with the mundane (motherly and bodily pains), nonetheless she chose to engage with the law. She has *a courage for the mundane*, as the poet Leah Goldberg would call it two thousand years later. This concept is explained by Anat Weisman: “with the concept of ‘courage for the mundane,’ Goldberg scrutinizes the relationship between the constant work of taking apart and examining incomplete, daily, and ordinary existence, on the one hand, and the yearning for perfection and the sublime, on the other. Only in this way, she believes, does the ‘great human synthesis’ come about. On the one hand, the mundane must not be betrayed on account of the desire for the great whole, the perfect; on the other hand, if we do not want to betray the values of art, then ‘small reality’ cannot be all what we have. (Weisman 2013, 225).

From this perspective, this overburdened mother of four children, can be seen as the one who possessed this essential ability of not-fearing, perhaps even the secular courage of combining the everydayness with her engagement with Talmudic law: creating within this law a space for herself! Judith acts alone, she will be condemned by majority, but she acts. As S. Yizhar writes in his 1982 formative essay: “To be secular means to claim sovereignty over one's own life, without *a priori* commitments to precepts or obligations that do not derive from

one's own autonomous decisions—accepting responsibility for any mistakes, as well as the consequences they may bring. The secular chooses to live in a state of perpetual revolution.”

There is no doubt that Judith, the wife of Rabbi Hiyya, had to pay for her “revolution:” her children would have to recompense for their mother's sin and they all would become Talmudic scholars (or the mothers of such scholars), hence her children would become an even stronger mirror of Judith's crime. Judith, the wife of Rabbi Hiyya would be noticed only as a contemptuous, trickster woman, the prototype of the sort of folk beliefs that one can never believe about a woman, the sort of commonplaces expressed in the Nietzschean quote: “you go to women? Do not forget the whip!”.

Yet, the shaming and silencing of Judith - as with many other Biblical and Talmudic women - did not stop her from becoming part of our Jewish “vocal women” heritage, because - as Adrienne Rich, one of the most wonderful Jewish women poets - says:

*Silence can be a plan
Rigorously executed*

The blueprint to life

*It is a presence
It has a history, a form*

*Do not confuse it
With any kind of absence.*

Silence can be broken. This is why Judith, the wife of R. Hiyya, so cunningly sneaked into my essay. This is a story of Judith, as the etymology has it, the one that will be praised! This is a story of Judith, a story - to conclude with a quote of one of her interpreter's – “of a woman who performs an act of *tikkun* (repair) for herself and resumes her independent, individual identity, not completely conditioned by the social norms that defines her, simply – Judith” (Raven 20014, 81).

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