LEHRHAUS Over Shabbat

Behukotai

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Amidst the war unfolding in Israel, we have decided to go forward and continue publishing a variety of articles to provide meaningful opportunities for our readership to engage in Torah during these difficult times.

VOICES FROM OUTSIDE THE CAVE: WOMEN AND THE STORY OF RABBI SHIMON BAR YOHAI

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Who among us (who struggle to balance the mundane demands of life with the sublime demands of *talmud Torah*), has not reflected somewhat wistfully on the story of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai? R. Shimon and his son Rabbi Elazar famously spend 13 years hiding in a cave, doing nothing but studying Torah. To the ambitious Torah learner, the idea of living like R. Shimon can sound extremely attractive: a life of perfect learning with minimal distracting obligations and bodily needs. But as the cave story unfolds, we see that the idyllic nature of such a life is fleeting at best, largely illusory, and even dangerous. Through a close reading of rabbinic sources that feature the women in the family of R. Shimon bar Yohai, we will explore the nature of that danger.

The story of the cave is complicated by the glimpses we get of three women: R. Shimon's mother, his wife, and his daughter-in-law (his son Elazar's wife). The voices of women in the Gemara are highly circumscribed, and they are no exception. Yet these nameless but distinct women (whom for clarity we will call Eishet Yohai, Eishet Shimon, and Eishet Elazar) make their mark. Eishet Yohai shows us what leads R. Shimon to the cave, while the stories about Eishet Shimon help us see why he stayed there for so long. Finally, there is Eishet Elazar, the wife of R. Elazar son of R. Shimon. Eishet Elazar shows us the legacy of R. Shimon's time in the cave and the effect it has on his family, his Torah, and the halakhic world the Sages endeavored to create.

Eishet Yohai: The Talker

Our account of Eishet Yohai is brief but provocative: "[When] the mother of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai would talk too much on Shabbat, he would say to her, 'It is Shabbat,' and she would be silent."[1] Rabbi Shimon is strict to prevent non-sacred speech from encroaching upon the holiness of Shabbat. Eishet Yohai doesn't protest or redirect her speech to matters of Torah—she is silent. Her story ends here. This story takes place in a world of rigid binaries: there is weekday speech, or sacred Shabbat silence. R. Shimon is not a man of in-betweens. Perhaps he learned this way of being from his mother Eishet Yohai, but more likely he learned it from his other "mother"—his teacher, Rabbi Akiva. In the following source, we see that R. Shimon replaces his worldly family with the family of teacher and Torah.

> …Rabbi Akiva was imprisoned. Beforehand, Rabbi Shimon [bar Yohai] said to him: "Rabbi, teach me Torah." Rabbi Akiva said to him: "I will not teach you, as it is dangerous to do so at the present time." Rabbi Shimon said to him in jest: "If you will not teach me, I will tell Yohai my father, and he will turn you over to the government…" Rabbi Akiva said: "My son, know that more than the calf wishes to suck, the cow wants to suckle…" Rabbi Shimon said to him: "And who is in danger? Isn't the calf in danger?!"[2]

R. Akiva describes himself as the cow to R. Shimon's calf. R. Akiva nurses R. Shimon with his Torah. The Gemara tells us that R. Shimon's father, Yohai, is aligned with the Romans. Clearly, R. Shimon is not. Therefore, R. Akiva' s metaphor accurately describes R. Shimon's relationship to his family and to Torah: Torah is his primary form of nourishment, and he values it more than he values filial piety and even his own life. Rabbi Shimon's antipathy toward Rome increases (understandably) as he grows up. When one of his colleagues seems to speak favorably about the benefits of Roman rule, R. Shimon responds forcefully:

> Rabbi Yehudah… said: "How pleasant are the actions of [the Romans], as they established marketplaces, established bridges, and established bathhouses…" Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai… said: "Everything that they established, they established only for their own purposes. They established marketplaces, to place prostitutes in them; bathhouses, to pamper themselves; and bridges, to collect

[1] *Midrash Vayikra Rabbah* 34:16. Translation is my own.

[2] *Pesahim* 112a. All translations for passages from the Babylonian Talmud are from the Koren Steinsaltz English translation unless otherwise noted.

> taxes from all who pass over them."[3]

Rabbi Shimon's desire for total purity appears again. To him, the intention is everything; the reason the Romans created these things is all that matters. Since their intentions are wicked, Roman achievements cannot—should not—be pleasant or useful to the Jews.[4] R. Shimon's rejection of moderation has a price. When the Romans hear of R. Shimon's criticism, they decide to execute him, and R. Shimon is forced into hiding.

Eishet Shimon: The Breadmaker

When Rabbi Shimon first goes into hiding, he does not go directly to the cave but to the *beit midrash*:

> Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai and his son, Rabbi Elazar, went and hid in the study hall. Every day Rabbi Shimon's wife would bring them bread and a jug of water, and they would eat.[5]

In contrast to his mother, R. Shimon marries a woman who does not speak at all (at least not in the stories that we have of her). And yet Eishet Shimon appears as an extraordinarily daring and active figure: she is both R. Shimon's partner and his adversary. In a *midrash* that takes place in the time before R. Shimon and R. Elazar flee the Roman government, Eishet Shimon appears as an avid nurturer of her son's body, providing a stark contrast to the life of carob and water that R. Shimon will later provide:

> Donkey drivers came to Rabbi Elazar [son of Rabbi Shimon]… He was sitting near the oven; his mother removed bread [from the oven] and he ate it, [and again] his mother removed bread [from the oven] and he ate it, until he ate all the loaves. [The donkey drivers] said: "Alas, there is an evil snake in this one's intestines; it appears that this one is bringing famine to the world." [R. Elazar] heard their voices. When they left to purchase their loads, [R. Elazar] took their donkeys and brought them up to the roof… The latter miracle was more difficult than the first. When he took them up, he took them up one at a time, but when he took them down, he took them down two at a time.[6]

At first, Eishet Elazar might have appeared to be a bad influence: perhaps her endless feeding of R. Elazar is a sign of gluttony. But the *midrash* makes it clear that Eishet Elazar's efforts have made R.

[3] *Shabbat* 33b.

[4] This is consistent with R. Shimon's position on *davar she-eino mitkaven*: R. Shimon holds that a person is not liable for an action performed unintentionally (See *Shabbat* 22a).

[5] *Shabbat* 33b.

[6] *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 5:14. Translation: Sefaria, 2022.

Elazar supernaturally strong.

R. Elazar's prodigious strength seems to be linked to his appetite, which is satisfied by the diligent (and perhaps also miraculous) breadmaking of Eishet Shimon. But this account of Elazar's strength (which grows as the *midrash* continues) takes a turn at the end: "As soon as [Rabbi Elazar] became preoccupied with Torah, he was not even able to lift his cloak."[7] When he leaves home and begins learning Torah with Rabbi Shimon, his strength disappears.

What first appears to be a rather traditional division of labor—R. Elazar's mother feeds him, and his father teaches him Torah—is actually more complicated. The efforts of husband and wife are in direct conflict. Eishet Shimon's work makes Elazar physically strong, while R. Shimon's work makes him physically weak. Their desires for their son are diametrically opposed. This conflict between Torah study and the health of the body will haunt R. Elazar until the end of his life.

When Rabbi Shimon goes into hiding, Eishet Shimon is again addressing the bodily needs of her husband and her son, seemingly at great personal risk to herself: "Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai and his son, Rabbi Elazar, went and hid in the study hall. Every day Rabbi Shimon's wife would bring them bread and a jug of water, and they would eat."[8]

The walls of the *beit midrash* keep R. Shimon and R. Elazar hidden, and Eishet Shimon keeps them fed, all while avoiding Roman notice. But this partnership does not last. The Gemara says, "When the decree intensified, Rabbi Shimon said to his son: 'Women are easily impressionable and, therefore, there is room for concern lest the authorities torture her and she reveal our whereabouts.' They went, and they hid in a cave."[9]

Although we never see Eishet Shimon speak, R. Shimon believes that eventually, she will. R. Shimon goes into hiding because he fears the Romans, but he goes into the *cave* because he fears a woman's speech. Just like he did with his mother, R. Shimon curbs a woman's speech, but now he does so preemptively—he will abandon her before she can speak about them. R. Shimon assumes that the Romans will torture her but does not take her with him. We never hear from her again. In the cave, R. Shimon and R. Elazar do not require outside assistance to address the needs of their bodies. They only need each other—and some Divine intervention:

> [In the cave] a miracle occurred, and a carob tree was created for them as well as a spring of water. They would remove their clothes and sit covered in sand up to their necks… At the time of prayer, they would dress, cover themselves, and pray, and they would again remove their clothes afterward so that they would not become

[7] Ibid (own translation).

[8] *Shabbat* 33b.

[9] Ibid.

> tattered. They sat in the cave for 12 years. Elijah the Prophet came and stood at the entrance to the cave and said, "Who will inform bar Yohai that the emperor died and his decree has been abrogated?"[10]

The things Eishet Shimon offered her husband and child—food and water—are now provided by Hashem. Yet there is a gap between what R. Shimon tells his son and what actually happens: he says they cannot tell Eishet Shimon where they are hiding because *women* are easily impressionable and she will tell the Romans. But R. Shimon does not tell *anyone else*, even his rabbinic colleagues, about his location. This is why Elijah must intervene in order to get R. Shimon to leave the cave—no one knows where to find him, and R. Shimon seems to make no effort to leave on his own. Why would he? To R. Shimon, besides R. Elazar, the outside world consists of "easily impressionable" women. Inside the cave, he lives in an eternal Shabbat. R. Shimon's wife thus stands in for all that R. Shimon renounces when he goes into the cave: she is the body, community, agriculture, politics, technology—she is *olam ha-zeh*.

And yet, even as Rabbi Shimon rejects womanly worldliness, he immerses himself in it. The miraculous cave of Rabbi Shimon is a dark place where one learns the whole Torah while naked, nourished, and sustained by the walls that contain them. In other words, it is a womb. As the Gemara says:

> …To what is a fetus in its mother's womb comparable? To a folded notebook… And it eats from what its mother eats, and it drinks from what its mother drinks... And there are no days when a person is in a more blissful state than those days… And a fetus is taught the entire Torah while in the womb… And once the fetus emerges into the airspace of the world (*la-avir ha-olam*), an angel comes and slaps it on its mouth, causing it to forget the entire Torah, as it is stated: "Sin crouches at the entrance" (Genesis 4:7).[11]

If the cave of R. Shimon is a womb, then his time there is a retreat into a second infancy. But what does it mean that he takes his son with him? Perhaps R. Shimon seeks to replace his wife with himself, just like R. Akiva replaced R. Shimon's mother. But R. Shimon doesn't seem to be taking on the role of parent. If they are together in the womb, then the cave is their mother, and they are twins. R. Shimon does not want his son to be his student, but his mirror. As we see later, this approach has tragic consequences.

What the Gemara hints at, and what R. Shimon must learn, is that while it is blissful to learn in the

[10] Ibid.

[11] *Niddah* 30b.

womb-like cave, this can only be a temporary state. If the cave is a womb, then any Torah learned there will be violently forgotten as soon as it emerges into the world. Perhaps this is the case with R. Shimon and R. Elazar, for as soon as they leave the cave, they incur Divine anger:

> They emerged from the cave and saw people who were plowing and sowing. Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai said: "These people abandon eternal life of Torah study and engage in temporal life…" Every place that Rabbi Shimon and his son Rabbi Elazar directed their eyes was immediately burned. A Divine Voice emerged and said to them: "Did you emerge from the cave in order to destroy My world? Return to your cave." They again went and sat there for 12 months… A Divine Voice emerged and said to them: "Emerge from your cave." They emerged. Everywhere that Rabbi Elazar would strike, Rabbi Shimon would heal. Rabbi Shimon said to Rabbi Elazar: "My son, you and I suffice for the entire world."[12]

What has R. Shimon learned from his time in the cave? His position appears consistent with his view of the world before he entered the cave: that a life of Torah necessarily separates one from the world. When they reemerge, R. Shimon's rage initially abates, but his son continues destroying the world. R. Shimon doesn't directly stop R. Elazar, but he seeks to undo the damage he causes, telling him, "You and I suffice for the entire world."

Perhaps R. Shimon has learned to appreciate (or at least tolerate) his neighbors who are not wholly devoted to Torah. But while R. Shimon's views seem to moderate, his ideology remains the same. While R. Shimon sees the value of not destroying the world, he holds himself (and his son) apart from it—the world should not be destroyed, but only because of us. Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Elazar appear to try and have it both ways: they will live in the world outside the cave but maintain a separateness from it. One need not destroy it, but it is all superfluous.

The story of the cave usually ends on the following comforting note:

> As the sun was setting on Shabbat eve, they saw an elderly man who was holding two bundles of myrtle branches and running at twilight. They said to him: "Why do you have these?" He said to them: "In honor of Shabbat…" Rabbi Shimon said to his son: "See how beloved the *mitzvot* are to Israel." Their minds were put at ease.[13]

Rabbi Shimon's rage abates and seems to lead to a genuine change of heart, a moderation of action

[12] *Shabbat* 33b.

[13] Ibid.

if not of lasting belief.[14] But his son's peace of mind is only temporary. After he leaves the cave, R. Elazar is never truly at ease. It is only through the intervention of his wife that R. Elazar's rigidity does not destroy him completely.

Eishet Elazar: This Evil Woman

The story of the later life and death of R. Elazar from tractate Bava Metzia[15] is the true ending to the story of the cave. The child who spent his early years hiding from the Romans and learning Torah in a magical cave grows up to be a Roman informer. R. Elazar enthusiastically reports Jewish criminals to the Romans. For this, he gets the nickname "Vinegar, Son of Wine"—nasty son of a holy father. R. Elazar swings from one extreme to the next: from someone who is completely cut off from the world outside of Torah, to someone who feels no compunction about allying with the empire who sought to destroy it:

> Rabbi Yehoshua ben Karhah sent Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, the following message: "Vinegar, son of wine, until when will you inform on the nation of our God to be sentenced to execution?" Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, sent a message back to him: "I am merely eradicating thorns from the vineyard." Rabbi Yehoshua ben Karhah[16] sent back to him: "Let the Owner of the vineyard… eradicate His own thorns."[17]

R. Elazar's actions are the consequence of believing that he and his father "suffice for the entire world." This kind of solipsism is potentially destructive to Jewish life and to anyone who believes it. R. Elazar sees no conflict between becoming a Roman informer and living a life of Torah. The purity of his intention purifies the act. . . But this resolve soon collapses.

When a poor Jew insults R. Elazar, R. Elazar hands him over to the Romans to be executed. But suddenly, R. Elazar repents and tries to get the Romans to rescind the decree—they refuse. R. Elazar "stood beneath the gallows and wept."[18] His students attempt to comfort him. R. Elazar performs miracles to show himself that his actions are acceptable. But even when the miracles work, he is not satisfied, and he spends the rest of his life suffering from a self-imposed ailment,

[14] See also *y. Shabbat* 1:2. Here Rabbi Shimon says initially that he wishes human beings had two mouths: one for Torah, and one for all of "his needs." But then "he reversed himself" because he acknowledges that since men do so much damage with one mouth, they could do more damage with two. Sdei Hemed suggests that this reversal and others like it can be accounted for by saying that R. Shimon's more rigid statements are from before the *Bat Kol* sent him back to the cave, and the more accommodating ones come from afterward (Sdei Hemed, *Kelalim*, 6:16).

[15] *Bava Metzia* 83b-85a.

[16] This exchange is even more poignant when one considers Rashi's and Rashbam's assertions that R. Yehoshua ben Karhah is the son of Rabbi Akiva.

[17] *Bava Metzia* 83b.

[18] Ibid.

seemingly out of guilt:

> Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, still did not rely on his own opinion [that his actions were justified]… He accepted afflictions upon himself. At night, his attendants would spread out 60 felt bed coverings for him. In the morning, despite the bed coverings, they would remove 60 basins of blood and pus from underneath him. Every morning, his wife would prepare for him 60 types of *lifda* [relish made from figs], and he would eat them and become healthy. His wife… would not allow him to go to the study hall, so that the Rabbis would not push him beyond his limits.[19]

This is how we first encounter the wife of Rabbi Elazar. Eishet Elazar appears as an exceptional healer. At first, this woman seems to fit squarely within the paradigm of her foremothers: she is both a nurturer of his body's endless needs—and an obstacle to Torah study. But when Eishet Elazar realizes her husband is the source of his own illness, she leaves him: "She said to [Rabbi Elazar]: 'You are bringing [the pains] upon yourself. You have diminished the money of my father's home.' She rebelled and returned to the house of her father." [20]

Elsewhere in the Gemara, we learn that Eishet Elazar's father is a sage called Rabbi Yossi ben Laconia.[21] "Laconia" is not a person, but a place—a region of Greece, and classically, the home of the city-state of Sparta, famous for both its warriors and its warrior-like women. Perhaps there was a Jewish diaspora community in Sparta, or he is descended from Spartans who converted to Judaism.[22] If Eishet Elazar is the daughter of a "Spartan Rabbi," that would make her a kind of Spartan woman.

In classical thought, the Spartan woman is a distinct type: physically strong (and concerned with physical health), strong-willed, and capable of political rule.[23] This was a necessity because the men were usually away, fighting in war.

As Plutarch writes in his "Life of Lycurgus [the lawgiver of Sparta]":

> [Lycurgus] made the [Spartan] maidens exercise their bodies in running, wrestling, casting the discus, and hurling the javelin, in order that the fruit of their wombs might have vigorous root in vigorous bodies and come to

[19] *Bava Metzia* 84b.

[20] Ibid.

[21] *Bava Metzia* 85a.

[22] See Ory Amitay, "Some Ioudaio-Laconian Rabbis," *Scripta Classica Israelica* 26 (2007): 131–134.

[23] Plutarch, "Life of Lycurgus," in *Parallel Lives*, vol. 1, trans. Bernadotte Perrin, Loeb Classical Library 46 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), 14:1-4.

> better maturity, and that they themselves might come with vigour to the fulness of their times, and struggle success-fully and easily with the pangs of child-birth. He freed them from softness and delicacy and all effeminacy…

Spartan women were also famously witty—and mean.

> [Spartan maidens] sometimes even mocked and railed good-naturedly at any youth who had misbehaved himself; and again they would sing the praises of those who had shown themselves worthy, and so inspire the young men with great ambition and ardour… Nor was there anything disgraceful in this… rather, it produced in them habits of simplicity and an ardent desire for health and beauty of body. It gave also to woman-kind a taste of lofty sentiment, for they felt that they too had a place in the arena of bravery and ambition. Wherefore they were led to think and speak as Gorgo, the wife of Leonidas, is said to have done. When some foreign woman, as it would seem, said to her: "You Spartan women are the only ones who rule their men," she answered: "Yes, we are the only ones that give birth to men."

Eishet Elazar seems to have many of the characteristics of the Spartan woman (particularly her biting dialogue with Rebbe Yehudah ha-Nasi, below). Altogether, Eishet Elazar serves as a foil to the anti-Hellenic worldview of R. Shimon.

Although the two separate, they remain in dialogue. The Gemara relates:

> One day, the wife of Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, said to her daughter: "Go and check on your father and see what he is doing now." The daughter came to her father, who said to her: "Go and tell your mother that ours is greater than theirs…" He read the verse about himself: "She is like the merchant-ships; she brings her food from afar" (Proverbs 31:14).[24]

Even while the classical world of Eishet Elazar and the rabbinic world of R. Elazar are separate, they remain in dialogue. Through his daughter, R. Elazar taunts his Spartan wife with words of Torah (which he seems to assume she will understand). Pointedly, the response he sends is from *Eishet Hayil.* R. Elazar's response upholds the worldview of R. Shimon: women are unnecessary. *I am my*

[24] *Bava Metzia* 84b.

own wife.

Without his Spartan wife around to rule him, R. Elazar returns to the *beit midrash* where, just like in the cave, a kind of miracle occurs:

> As he was unhindered by his wife from going to the study hall, Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, ate and drank and became healthy and went out to the study hall. The students brought 60 questionable samples of [menstrual] blood before [Rabbi Elazar]… He deemed them all ritually pure... The Rabbis of the academy were murmuring… "Can it enter your mind that there is not one uncertain sample among them…?" Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, said to them: "If the Halakhah is in accordance with my ruling, let all the children born from these women be males. And if not, let there be one female…" It turned out that all of the children were males, and they were called Elazar in his name. It is taught… that Rebbe [Yehudah ha-Nasi] said: "How much procreation has this evil woman [Eishet Elazar] prevented from the Jewish people!"[25]

Rabbi Elazar's colleague Rebbe upholds the paradigm we've seen before, the paradigm of R. Shimon: women detract from Torah; they are an obstacle to be overcome. A female child represents errors in Torah, but perfect learning is male. In a way, Rabbi Elazar is even able to reproduce asexually: while separated from his spouse, he makes more "Elazars." Yet the Gemara suggests that this outcome is neither sustainable nor ideal.

Although R. Elazar's colleagues call his wife "evil," the Gemara eventually shows us that her fears were well grounded: the rabbis *do* push R. Elazar too far. Just after showing us what seems to be his halakhic victory, the Gemara shows us R. Elazar on his deathbed:

> Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, was dying, [and] he said to his wife: "I know that the Rabbis are angry at me [for informing, or for showing them up in the *beit midrash*]… therefore, they will not properly tend to my burial. When I die, lay me in my attic and do not be afraid of me."[26]

Somewhere between R. Elazar's return to the *beit midrash* and his death, he and Eishet Elazar have reunited. We do not get to see how this reunion happens or find out who relents first. The Gemara shows us a R. Elazar who vacillates constantly between two extremes: a life of pure Torah and a life of bodily agony and excess (which, the Rabbis

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid.

assume, is a world with no Torah).

In the end, it is this world R. Elazar turns to. He trusts his wife over his rabbinic colleagues. By refusing to be buried, he values his body even at the risk of improper halakhic behavior. If the story were to end here, perhaps we would describe this ending as R. Elazar's ultimate failure. It would seem as if, in the end, R. Elazar chose "temporal life over life in the world to come," the very thing he despised when he left the cave. But the story continues in a way that seems to directly challenge the dichotomy R. Elazar and Eishet Elazar have put in place. When R. Elazar dies and gives his body to his wife to guard, he somehow is able to continue to teach Torah. Her care for his body doesn't destroy his Torah—it makes this Torah possible.

The Gemara lets Eishet Elazar tell us the story in her own words. We hear the story secondhand, through the mouth of another unnamed woman:

> Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahmani said: "Rabbi Yonatan's mother told me that the wife of Rabbi Elazar son of Rabbi Shimon told her: 'I laid [R. Elazar] in the attic for no less than 18 years and for no more than 22 years.'" During this period, when two people would come for adjudication… they would stand by the doorway to [her] home… One litigant would state his side of the matter, and the other litigant would state his side of the matter. A voice would issue forth from his attic, saying: "So-and-so, you are guilty; so-and-so, you are innocent."[27]

While Eishet Elazar keeps R. Elazar's body in her possession, R. Elazar's Torah lives on. Miraculously, it is said that the body does not decompose. The Gemara does not explicitly state that the voice that issues from the attic is R. Elazar's voice and thus invites us to ask whose voice it is. Is it the ghost of R. Elazar? Is it the *Bat Kol*? Or—is it Eishet Elazar herself? Eishet Elazar is not described as standing with the litigants when they relate these decisions. She also claims to receive messages from her deceased husband in her dreams.[28] Perhaps the *kol* in the attic is R. Elazar's voice speaking through Eishet Elazar (or perhaps she claims it is). Perhaps this woman—whose father, brother, and husband are all Torah scholars, and whose husband taunts her with words of Torah—issues the rulings herself. It would be easy enough to disguise her voice. Any other incongruity could be explained away by the fact that the voice is supposed to be issuing from a corpse. While this would be an extraordinary act of boldness, it would be a fitting move for a daughter of Laconia.

The Torah that emanates from R. Elazar's attic is not the rarefied Torah of the cave or the stuff of miracles but rather the average Torah of an everyday *posek*: the settling of disputes, and making peace between human beings.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

When the news of this situation spreads, the Rabbis are resolved to stop it:

> When word spread that Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, had not been buried, the Rabbis said: "This much (i.e., now that the matter is known), to continue in this state is certainly not proper conduct," and they decided to bury him… There are those who say that the Sages found out that Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, had not been buried when Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai, his father, appeared to them in a dream and said to them: "I have a single fledgling among you, i.e., my son, and you do not wish to bring it to me by burying him next to me." Consequently, the Sages went to tend to his burial.

Once R. Elazar's body is taken, the voice from the attic ceases. Perhaps then, Rabbi Shimon—by appearing to *Hazal* and demanding that R. Elazar be buried with him—has silenced yet another woman. R. Elazar's resting place will be back in the cave, with his father. The Sages have defeated the "evil woman" at last. And yet, Eishet Elazar remains defiant.

After the Sages bury R. Elazar, Rebbe Yehudah ha-Nasi—the one who explicitly called Eishet Elazar an "evil woman"—proposes marriage to her. Eishet Elazar responds to him as a Spartan woman would—she insults him:

> [Rebbe] sent a messenger to speak with the wife of Rabbi Elazar son of Rabbi Shimon and propose marriage. She sent a message to him: "Shall a vessel used by someone sacred… be used by someone… profane?" There, in *Eretz Yisrael*, they say that she used the colloquial adage: "In the location where the master of the house hangs his sword, shall the contemptible shepherd hang his basket [*kultei*]?" [Rebbe] sent a message back: "Granted that in Torah, he was greater than I, but was he greater than I in pious deeds?" She sent, "Whether he was greater than you in Torah, I do not know; but I do know that he was greater than you in pious deeds, as he accepted afflictions upon himself…" [Rebbe] said to himself: "Afflictions are evidently precious." He accepted 13 years of afflictions upon himself.[29]

Even though she rejects Rebbe as a husband, Eishet Elazar becomes, in a way, his teacher. But why does she tell Rebbe that R. Elazar's self-imposed afflictions were pious deeds? When she

[29] *Bava Metzia* 84b-85a.

first learned that Rabbi Elazar was the source of his own illness, she rebelled against him. Perhaps she wants to punish Rebbe for his affront, for pulling her husband back into the *beit midrash* at the expense of his health or for calling her "evil." Or perhaps she has changed her mind about R. Elazar's afflictions. Perhaps she thinks that Rebbe needs to learn something about pain and the limitations of the body. Whatever her intention, Rebbe accepts these afflictions upon himself per her advice. His pains appear repeatedly in the Gemara, and they shape the Torah he teaches.[30]

In a way, Rebbe's legacy is a refutation of the divided world of R. Shimon bar Yohai. Rebbe is both worldly and holy. He is called the only one since Moshe Rabbeinu to combine "[greatness] in Torah and [worldly] greatness… in one place."[31] Rebbe, as a scholar and politician, is an excellent compromiser and blurrer of boundaries. And he seems more tolerant of human frailty than his teacher, R. Shimon, and his lifelong rival R. Elazar. The traditional account of Rebbe's codification of the Mishnah—that he committed the Oral Torah to writing because he feared it would be forgotten—is itself a kind of concession to the weaknesses of the Jewish people, to our fallibility, the ways we are subject to other demands besides *talmud Torah*. Thus, our account of the halakhic world we have inherited exists as it does because Rebbe took into account and tolerated our frailty.

Conclusion

In Rabbinic texts, R. Shimon's reputation for spiritual excellence is almost unparalleled, but halakhically, he is often sidelined in favor of his more "wordly" peers.[32] As Rabbi Binyamin Lau writes, this phenomenon "reminds us that halakha is decided by those who are most rooted in the reality of this world."[33] R. Shimon rejects "the reality of this world" which, to him, is the realm of women and other distractions from Torah. Even when he reconciles himself to the world of the mundane, he only sees human beings—Jews—as valuable because they teach him Torah. R. Elazar, on the other hand, vacillates wildly between the corporeal and the transcendent, between self-aggrandizement and self-mortification. This struggle causes him great suffering. It is only when he is close to death that he seems to find a kind of balance. Rather than forsake life in the world to come for temporal life, or temporal life for eternal life, R. Elazar, with the help of Eishet Elazar, finds a way to partake—if only briefly—of both worlds at the same time.

The question, then, is whether ordinary human beings and Jews can find the balance between the transcendent and the worldly without relying on miracles. The stories of Eishet Yohai, Eishet Shimon, and Eishet Elazar, when taken together,

[30] See, for example, *Bava Metzia* 85a.

[31] *Gittin* 59a.

[32] *Eruvin* 46b.

[33] Rabbi Binyamin Lau, *The Sages: Character, Context & Creativity*, vol. 3 (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2013), 153.

seem to refute the paradigm initially established by Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai. The body cannot be overcome, and an attempt to escape it completely ultimately puts the one who would attempt such a thing even more forcefully at the mercy of the body's limitations. The Torah that lives on after R. Elazar dies is a Torah rooted in the world, one that finds transcendence in the messy details of everyday life. R. Elazar and Eishet Elazar's stories can teach us that only Torah which is holy *and* worldly is *Torat hayyim*, a Torah of life, rather than a Torah that destroys the world and the one who teaches it. The tradition that grows from this assertion—that is, the halakhic world that the Sages built—is doubtless more messy and inconstant than the one R. Shimon would seem to prefer. And yet rather than scorn the mundane, the Gemara adores it, bringing us back again and again to places where the holy and the temporal meet and our gross, corruptible selves brush up against eternity.

BOOK REVIEW OF FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS ONLY: RESHAPING JEWISH ORTHODOXY THROUGH THE ARTS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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In the early 20th century, it was not easy to be an Orthodox Jew in the United States. Trying to work and be observant of Shabbat was challenging. That struggle created the notion of a *hashkamah minyan* where a person could pray early on Shabbat morning in the synagogue and leave early enough to make it to work on time.

The options for Orthodox women wanting to pursue avenues in song, film, dance, and music were almost nonexistent if they wanted to stay observant. In fact, the theme of the classic 1927 movie *The Jazz Singer* was about choosing between the father's tradition and a son's entertainment desires.

A century later, much has changed. Many synagogues still have a *hashkamah minyan*, but that exists mainly for those who don't want to endure the often lengthy services starting later. For those women whose aspirations are in the arts, they find there is no conflict between that and halakhic observance.

For Orthodox women who wanted to pursue the entertainment field, the Internet and the COVID-19 pandemic created a combination of factors that significantly expanded their opportunities for artistic expression. That notion is brilliantly detailed in *For Women and Girls Only: Reshaping Jewish Orthodoxy through the Arts in the Digital Age* (NYU Press) by Dr. Jessica Roda, assistant professor of Jewish Civilization at the Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University.

The book delves beyond the politicization of women's bodies, images, voices, and stories; it shows the role of the digital age and the arts in our everyday lives, positionalities, and ways of defining publicity and privacy. Many ultra-Orthodox women have used those opportunities

to create a subindustry of music and film within the Orthodox world.

In their research, Nathaniel Deutsch and Michael Casper detailed the growth of the Satmar community in Brooklyn after World War II. Under the leadership of the Satmar Rebbe, they were able to "change without changing" and regrow into one of the most potent political and religious groups in the state of New York. Roda details how these women were able to "change without changing" when it came to music and entertainment. Had their approaches been too subversive, they would have had much more pushback from rabbinic authorities and community leaders.

Roda writes of what she calls the *kol ishah* industry. The Talmud states, "*Kol ishah ervah*"—a woman's voice is nakedness (*Berakhot* 24a). This is based on a verse from Song of Songs: "Let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet and your face is comely" (2:14). Rashi explains that a woman's singing (but not spoken) voice is attractive to a man and is thus prohibited to him. The literature on *kol ishah* is extensive and could fill volumes.

In addition to the halakhic issue of *kol ishah*—and it is a significant one—generations of Orthodox Jewish women had been taught and inculcated with the notion to be private and non-public based on two verses in Psalms: "The royal princess… is led inside to the king" (45:14-15). As such, Orthodox women in media, performance art, and the like were seen as an anathema.

Aside from Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis's appearance at Madison Square Garden in November of 1973, one is hard-pressed to find an Orthodox Jewish woman appearing in a large public amphitheater. And her event was an educational one, not entertainment, for which there is no prohibition of a woman speaking in public.

In this engaging book, Roda shows how ultra-Orthodox women have managed to deal with the conflict of integrating Halakhah that limits their spheres of public performances with their desires for entertainment as self-expression and the opportunities that the Internet and social media afford them.

Roda presents several arguments in the book. The first is that religious women, in the face of changes in the arts and technology, are redefining the act of being public and private and engendering social change in their societies. She also argues that the significance of technology and the arts in creating a new sense of belonging has redefined conservative religious communities beyond the local.

On the subject of Internet censorship, John Gilmore, a founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, famously said that "the Internet interprets censorship as damage and routes around it." Similarly, with perceived restrictions from rabbis and Jewish law, these women have dealt with it, succeeded, and routed around most objections. The many women entertainers and writers portrayed in the book show no conflict

with their desires and fealty to Halakhah.

This also begs the question of why most ultra-Orthodox rabbis are not opposed to these innovations. The truth is that in more insular communities, such as Kiryas Joel and New Square, there has been pushback. But to a degree, it comes down to a combination of "don't ask, don't tell" and the fact that Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter (now X) have essentially been considered marketing and business tools in the Orthodox world that rabbis and rebbes have deemed acceptable.

Roda shows how to effect change in Orthodox society and how these women did that. R. Aharon Lichtenstein observed that Orthodox society prefers evolution rather than revolution. The women portrayed in Roda's book kept their heads down and incrementally worked on change on the local level until critical mass was achieved. At that point, it was embedded and almost immune to protest.

At the educational level, this is the approach Sarah Schenirer took when starting the Bais Yaakov school system as well as what singer Shaindel Antelis did as a pioneering female singer.

The protagonist in *The Jazz Singer* was given the choice between tradition and expression. Roda shows that women no longer need to choose. She writes how Dobby Baum, Franciska Goldschmidt Kosman, Bracha Jaffe, and other Orthodox female entertainers use their natural talents to pursue their passions without compromising Halakhah.

The digital world democratized entertainment opportunities for Orthodox women. In the past, their opportunities were limited to summer camps and high school plays. Now, they are making a living, raising money for charity, and appearing at performing arts centers with thousands of seats. Witness the Shaindy Plotzker concert in April 2024 to benefit EFRAT with orchestra seats priced at $500. Or witness Franciska Goldschmidt Kosman, who used her talents to create a body of music to assuage the pain of Israelis going through the Gaza war.

Roda here interviewed women in their roles as singers, musicians, producers, studio owners, dancers, filmmakers, and actresses who are using the arts as an economy. While the arts might be considered a liminal practice existing in peripheral spaces—and, therefore, unrepresentative of broader societies—in these *frum* communities, they nevertheless reveal important changes in the making of publicity in conservative religious circles.

The Orthodox female art worlds encapsulate the contradiction between ultra-Orthodox women's need for privacy and the publicity of the arts. They offer alternative ways to understand religious norms that demand privacy and artistic norms whose raison d'être dwells in publicity.

The glass ceiling for ultra-Orthodox religious women in the entertainment sector existed for the longest time. However, it was social media and the Internet, condemned by many rabbinic leaders, which ironically were the mechanisms these religious women used to break that ceiling.

The Orthodox entertainment scene was long dominated and controlled by men. In fact, "dominated" may be too kind of a word. There were absolutely no women in any leadership roles in the Orthodox music industry since the men were the alpha and omega of the industry. It's not that women were actively excluded from membership in the way some country clubs in the past excluded women and people of color. Rather, they were not in the equation.

These subversive technologies transformed how these Orthodox women could create an alternative entertainment market outside of the public, male-dominated one. In 2024, these women have countless commercial channels to sell and distribute their music.

The barrier these religious women long faced was that they had to battle the notion that women did not perform in front of men and the general public. It would seem to be an intractable problem. Yet with some ingenious Talmud-like logic, they slapped the disclaimer "for women and girls only" on their videos and transferred the onus onto the men. However, creating a large-scale space like that was helped within the Internet and social media framework.

The combination of the Internet, social media, and Zoom created an underground railroad of sorts, allowing these women, dedicated to Halakhah, to succeed.

This is not just for the arts. A large cadre of Orthodox women are giving workshops and classes on topics that are still taboo in the general realm. Had women such as Fally Klein, Leah Richeimer, and others asked rabbinic leaders if they could use a synagogue to give lectures on intimacy, sexuality, and relationships, the responses would likely have been no. Yet Zoom allowed them to do this. These video-telephony systems enabled them to create a space where they could operate within Halakhah but outside the public sphere, often stealthily, free from rabbinic oversight.

In 1994, Sadie Plant, director of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit at the University of Warwick in Britain, coined the term cyberfeminism to describe the work of feminists interested in theorizing, critiquing, and exploiting the Internet, cyberspace, and new-media technologies in general.

Roda expanded on that and coined the term cyberfrumenism to describe how Orthodox female celebrities have used social media to empower themselves. Cyberfrumenism, when used in cyberspace, allows them to reveal their faces, bodies, and voices, and more specifically, their private social, cultural, and artistic lives, which have been stereotyped by the public sector media and made invisible by the public ultra-Orthodox media.

Most of the Orthodox female artists would not consider themselves feminists. This is in part due to the pejorative nature the term has in Orthodox circles, combined with the notion that feminism is

a modern concept perceived in many ultra-Orthodox circles as something meant to undermine Halakhah.

Feminism is a weaponized and fraught word in the Orthodox space. Many women who effect change in this space do not concern themselves with labels. They keep their heads down and quietly effect change outside of any spotlight. One of those is Rifka Wein Harris, an artist and jeweler whose daughter excels in music and has appeared in *kol ishah* videos.

Wein Harris's education through post-high-school seminary was in the Bais Yaakov school system, and Roda described her effort to rectify this change as a subversive one. Yet even with the seditious nature of the term, Wein Harris and others in the *kol ishah* industry, at the end of the day, show their unwavering fealty to Halakhah.

Until the early 21st century, the voices of women and girls were not commonly recorded commercially to prevent men from accessing them. Because the *kol ishah* industry resulted from a paradox between religious authority's proscriptions and individuals' practices, its success encourages us to consider the changes to authority in religious settings brought about by the digital age.

It has also created female celebrities who are becoming role models in music production, performance, and women's cinema. One of those celebrities is the singer Shaindy Plotzker. As to her celebrity status, witness this video where she surprises a terminally ill fan at a summer camp for sick children.

It's not that all of these women have been met with universal acclaim. Due to what seems to be their subversive behavior, more than a few of them have relocated from more insular, ultra-Orthodox communities to more open ones. In *Brazen: My Unorthodox Journey from Long Sleeves to Lingerie*, Julia Haart writes that she left Monsey, New York, because she felt it was far too oppressive and limiting for her. Ironically, singer Dobby Baum and author Chany Rosengarten relocated to Monsey, a community they called more diverse, inclusive, and modern than where they came from.

As to female artists who found the Orthodox world oppressive and limiting, the book has a chapter on those who left Orthodoxy and brought their talents to the world of secular entertainment. Many from Boro Park and Williamsburg, Brooklyn, used their native Yiddish fluency and brought it to plays and cinema.

Within a few years, social media and the Internet transformed the world. That was not lost on Orthodox female entertainers and writers, who used them to fill a much-needed vacuum. In *For Women and Girls Only: Reshaping Jewish Orthodoxy through the Arts in the Digital Age*, Jessica Roda has written a fascinating and engaging work that details how these women achieved that.

The Talmud states that Moses went and sat in the

study hall of R. Akiva and did not understand what they were saying. His strength waned as he feared that his Torah knowledge was deficient. When R. Akiva arrived at a discussion, his students said, "My teacher, from where do you derive this?" R. Akiva told them, "It is a *halakhah* transmitted to Moses from Sinai." When Moses heard this, his mind was put at ease, as this, too, was part of the Torah that he was to receive (*Menahot* 29b).

If someone from centuries past were to be transported to the entertainment stages of New York City and New Jersey and saw Orthodox women singing, dancing, making movies, writing, and more, they would not recognize them as traditional Jewish women. And they'd likely go apoplectic.

These women are doing this in a manner conducive to Moses's laws and bringing his word to the world. And as Roda has eloquently shown, this should put everyone's mind at ease.