

## **BERURIAH AND RACHEL: TWO WOMEN IN THE TALMUD**

### **BERURIAH**

It is not very often that we find the name of a woman mentioned in the Talmud. Beruriah was one such exception, a great Jewish woman whose wisdom, piety, and learning inspire us to this day.

Beruriah lived about one hundred years after the destruction of the Second Temple, which occurred in the year 70 CE. 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.

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. She studied three hundred matters pertaining to Halachah (Jewish law) every day, which would be quite an amazing feat for any scholar. 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 purity 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. 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."

Beruriah was very well versed in the Holy Scriptures and could quote from them with ease. To illustrate what her character was like, we are told the following stories in the Talmud:

Beruriah had a sister who was spared by the Romans and carried off to the city of Antioch where they wanted to force her to live a life of shame. Beruriah urged her husband Rabbi Meir to take the great risk of going to Antioch and saving her sister. Not only did Rabbi Meir succeed in freeing her, but he also made an

investigation and managed to obtain witnesses, proving that his sister-in-law had remained pure, which was very important for her future. This investigation made it necessary for them all to flee from the Holy Land. Beruriah fled with her husband to Babylonia to share his exile with him there.

Another time, Rabbi Meir was very disturbed by the noisy, drunken parties of his neighbors. Their terrible behavior was such that they constantly interfered with his Torah study. In his anger, Rabbi Meir once prayed that God 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."

The most touching and most famous story about the piety, wisdom and courage of Beruriah describes the death of her two beloved sons. One Sabbath while Rabbi Meir was in the study house, a plague struck their children and they passed away before anything could be done for them.

Beruriah covered them up in the bedroom and did not say a word to anyone. After nightfall Rabbi Meir returned from the House of Learning and asked for his sons. Casually, Beruriah remarked that they had gone out. She calmly prepared the Havdalah, the cup of wine, the light and the spices. She also distracted him while she prepared and served the evening meal with which a Jew accompanies the departing "Sabbath Queen." Then, after Rabbi Meir had finished eating, Beruriah asked him for an answer to the following problem:

"Tell me, my husband, what shall I do? Some time ago something was left with me for safekeeping. Now the owner has returned to claim it. Must I return it?"

"That is a very strange question indeed. How can you doubt the right of the owner to claim what belongs to him?" Rabbi Meir exclaimed in astonishment.

"Well, I did not want to return it without letting you know of it," replied Beruriah. She then led her husband into the bedroom where their two sons lay in their eternal sleep. She removed the bedcovers from their still bodies. Rabbi Meir, seeing his beloved sons, and realizing that they had passed away, burst out into bitter weeping.

"My dear husband," Beruriah gently reminded him. "Didn't you yourself say a moment ago that the owner has the right to claim his property? God gave and has taken away; blessed be the name of God."

### **The Beruriah incident**

The Talmud mentions that, in the middle of his life, Rabbi Meir fled to Babylonia, and mentions two possible motivations. The second of these is "the Bruriah incident" (מעשה דברוריא), a phrase which is not explained.

Various post-Talmudic commentaries offer explanations of this incident. According to Rashi, Beruriah made light of the Talmudic assertion that women are "light-minded". To vindicate the Talmudic maxim, Rabbi Meir sent one of his students to seduce her. Though she initially resisted the student's advances, she eventually acceded to them. When she realized what she had done, she committed suicide out of shame. (Other sources have it that she fell ill emotionally due to shame, and a group of rabbis prayed for her death and peace.) Rabbi Meir, in turn, exiled himself from Israel out of shame and fled to Babylonia.

This explanation has no recorded source earlier than Rashi, who lived 900 years after the time of Beruriah. It is also surprising in that it attributes serious crimes not only to Beruriah and Rabbi Meir's student (who allegedly committed adultery), but to Rabbi Meir himself (who encouraged them to commit adultery). Traditional rabbis such as Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, as well as academic scholars such as Eitam Henkin,<sup>[15]</sup> have argued that this story was not written by Rashi, but rather inserted later into his commentary by a mistaken student.

Nissim ben Jacob of Kairouan provides a different explanation that is closer to the text. According to him, Rabbi Meir and Beruriah had to flee to Babylonia after the Roman Empire executed her father, sold her mother into slavery and her sister into sexual slavery at a brothel (to be rescued by Rabbi Meir) and were looking for her. Other rabbinic sources also take issue with Rashi's commentary, and indeed, there exists a tradition among Orthodox rabbis to name their daughters Beruriah, as an assertion of her righteousness.

The commentators explain that she was really able to overcome that test, but God punished her for speaking badly of the sages, saying that if she had said the rabbis are correct, but that she was an exception, there would have been no problems. The commentators also posit that there was no actual sin committed

because the student was sterile; those that say there was an act of sexual intercourse hold that Rabbi Meir pretended to be his own student. (It is Rashi who puts forth this idea; he had only daughters and they were all scholarly. Some say they even assisted him in writing his commentary.)

### Challenging the Status Quo

As we have read, tragedy stalked Beruriah and her family. Her father was martyred by the Romans, and her mother and brother also died violently. Her two sons died suddenly in a single day, and her sister was carried off into exile.

Beruriah could be loving and gentle, as she was with her husband, Meir, and also arrogant and biting, even to great scholars. She ridiculed a sectarian (B. *Berakhot* 10a), derided an erring student (B. *Eruvin* 53b 54a), and made a fool of R. Jose the Galilean when he met her on the road (B. *Eruvin* 53b).

When she mocked the sages' belief that women are weak and easily seduced, she challenged the prevailing wisdom of her time and came to a shameful end, proving the contention of the Rabbis that any woman who studies excessively, like Beruriah, is vulnerable to sexual sin.

### Theories About Beruriah

These accounts concerning Beruriah are made up of different components, most written much later by many different men. In the Babylonian Talmud she is called the wife of R. Meir, pupil of R. Akiva. In the two passages about her in the Tosefta (an earlier compilation) she is referred to once by name with no association to any male relative (Tos. *Kelim*, *Bava Metzia* 1:6), and the second time as the unnamed daughter of R. Hananiah (Tos. *Kelim*, *Bava Kamma* 4:17). Because of these variations, it has been suggested that perhaps two or even three historical women became incorporated into a single persona. One is Beruriah the scholar, another is the wife of R. Meir, and a third is the daughter of R. Hananiah ben Teradion. In the stories from the Babylonian Talmud that portrayed Beruriah as a scholar, her name was mentioned alone, without reference to husband or father.

In these reports she was quick, sarcastic, and knowledgeable in areas beyond domestic issues.

In the stories that refer to Beruriah as R. Meir's wife, she is compassionate, gentle, patient, and understanding as well as wise. She quoted Bible passages to her husband in order to improve the quality of his prayer (B. *Berakhot* 10a), and comforted him when their children died. But these examples of Beruriah's emotional strength and intellectual ability are not the sum total of her story.

### **A Plot of Seduction**

In the Middle Ages, a plot of seduction and shame was superimposed on the heroic character of Beruriah. The shocking account was first written down by Rashi in the 11th century as part of his commentary to the Talmud (B. *AvodahZarah* 18b). The passage itself alludes to the fact that R. Meir had to flee from the Romans because he had rescued his wife's (Beruriah's) sister from a Roman brothel. Rashi adds his own postscript to this passage: "But some say [he had to flee] because of the Beruriah incident."

According to Rashi's explanation, Meir arranged the seduction of his wife by one of his pupils in order to prove the validity of the Talmudic claim that women are light-minded. After many refusals, Beruriah finally yielded to the student's sexual advances. When she realized that her husband had set the trap for her, she hung herself and Meir ran away out of shame.

### **A Heroine for All of Time**

This incident, while not part of the original Talmudic composite, raises some disturbing questions: Could a woman such as Beruriah have existed in the land of Israel in the second century? If the education of women was rare, then Beruriah was more likely an exception or a legend. Whether she was fictional or historical, why did Rashi feel obliged to damage the reputation of a righteous and learned woman by writing down these stories? Despite the unanswered questions associated with her, Beruriah's name continues to resonate in women's history and she remains an exemplary heroine for scholarly Jewish women.

## **RACHEL, WIFE OF RABBI AKIBA**

Rabbi Akiba ben Joseph was one of the greatest Talmudic scholars of all times. With his sharp mind the Sages said, he could "uproot mountains," and he explained every single letter of the Torah, even the little crowns that adorn many of the letters of the Torah. Rabbi Akiba- was one of four great Sages who tried to enter the deepest secrets of the Creation and of learning, and he was the only one who came out sound of body and sane of mind.

It is told that that all the extraordinary scholarship of this most famous of all Tanaim was due to the self-sacrificing love of Torah of his wife. You see, Rabbi Akiba was not one of the fortunate ones who are born to riches, or into the house of a scholar. He was born as the child of a very poor family and became an ignorant shepherd, one of the many who took care of the thousands of flocks of the wealthy Kalba Sabua, about whose riches the Talmud tells many stories.

The daughter of this fabulous man was a beautiful and God-fearing girl. The richest and most learned young men of that time would have considered themselves fortunate to marry her. But Rachel, Kalba Sabua's only child, the heir to his riches, had observed the shepherd Akiba and some inner voice told her that this ignorant youth had the making of a great scholar. On the condition that he would leave her father's work to go and study Torah, she married him secretly.

As Rachel refused one young man after the other, Kalba Sabua found out about her secret marriage to his former shepherd. He was incredibly angry, and he vowed that he would have nothing to do with her or her husband. Gladly, the only child of the richest man of those days left all the luxuries and comforts to which she had been used, and went to live with Akiba in a shack, sleeping on a bundle of straw, and working hard with her own, soft hands, so that her husband could devote himself to the study of Torah. Once when she could not find work, she even cut off her beautiful long hair to sell it, so that she would have some money with which to buy a dry crust of bread for both.

Yet even in their poverty, they were willing to share with others the little they possessed. Once a poor man passed the shack of Akiba and Rachel, and begged, "Pray, good people, let me have a handful of straw. My wife is sick and I have nothing to bed her on." At once Akiba shared his own bundle of straw with

the poor man, remarking thus to Rachel: "See, my child, there are those who fare worse than we." The poor beggar, say our sages, was none but the Prophet Elijah who had come to test Akiba's good heart.

After Akiba had mastered the basic knowledge of the Torah, his wife and he agreed that he was to go to the academy of the great scholars of those days, headed by Rabbi Eliezer, to devote twelve years to intensive study. Thus the two parted and for twelve long years Rachel slaved hard to support herself, while her husband grew to become one of the most learned of all men that ever lived. At the end of twelve years Rabbi Akiba returned to his wife, as he had promised.

When he came before the shabby old shack, he heard a conversation between his wife and a neighbor who was taunting Rachel for being foolish enough to wait and slave for her husband who had left her to study Torah. "You could live in riches and luxuries, if you were not so foolish," said the woman.

"For my part he could stay away another twelve years at the Yeshivah to acquire more knowledge," was Rachel's reply. Full of pride and admiration for his great wife Rabbi Akiba turned around to do as Rachel wanted him to do.

At the conclusion of the twenty-four years Rabbi Akiba had become the most famous of all living scholars. From near and far came the youth of Israel to study under his direction.

Accompanied by twenty-four thousand students, Rabbi Akiba returned home in a triumphant journey from city to city, welcomed everywhere by the highest nobility. The masses, rich and poor, turned out when he came home to Jerusalem.

Kalba Sabua, too, was among those who tried to get close to the master. Suddenly Rabbi Akiba saw his disciples trying to hold back a woman dressed in ragged clothes. At once he made his way through the crowd to greet the woman and led her to the chair by his side. "If not for this woman I would be an ignorant shepherd, unable to read the Aleph Beth. Whatever I know, I owe to her," Rabbi Akiba declared.

The whole huge crowd bowed in respect before the woman to whom Rabbi Akiba owed his great scholarship. Kalba Sabua, too, suddenly discovered who his son-in-law was. Publicly he expressed his regret for having treated his daughter and her husband so badly. Now all his wealth would be theirs. Thus, ends our story of Rachel, Rabbi Akiba's wife, whose heroism and self-sacrifice gave us the great Rabbi Akiba.

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Rachel is the medieval name given to the wife of Rabbi Akiba in the late Avot de-Rabbi Nathan version A (chapter 6). In none of the older sources is a name attached to this woman, although she was well known.

Rabbi Akiba's wife is mentioned in three separate sources. While these tell different stories about her, they agree on two details, which may represent the historical core behind the woman. All sources agree that Rabbi Akiba's wife was in some way instrumental in her husband's rise to prominence. He began his life as a pauper and through her agency became learned and rich. In addition, all the sources know that her husband rewarded her for her troubles with a glamorous headdress usually identified as a golden city, or a golden Jerusalem.

Aside from these two details, the sources tell different stories about how Akiba's wife helped her husband, and in some details contradict one another. Thus, the Babylonian Talmud relates that Rabbi Akiba was a shepherd employed by the rich Jerusalem magnate Ben Kalba Savu'a. His daughter saw Akiba, recognized his hidden qualities and proposed to him on condition that he go and study. This resulted in her father's disowning her. Disowned by her father and deserted by her husband, Akiba's wife was left to fend for herself for twenty-four years, until finally her husband returned in glory and recognized his wife's role in his success, saying to his disciples: "Mine and yours are hers."

This story, told twice in the Babylonian Talmud, seems to contradict itself in some details.



In one of the versions Akiba's studies are presented as a condition without the fulfillment of which no marriage will take place. Thus, Akiba goes off to study after betrothal, but without consummation.

In the other version, Akiba sets out on his studies only after the couple has lived in poverty for some time.

In any case, both versions contradict the stories of Akiba's wife told in the Jerusalem Talmud and in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan and pose chronological complications. If Rabbi Akiba died a martyr's death in the aftermath of the Bar Kochba revolt (135 C.E.), it is not very likely that he was an employee of the Jerusalem millionaire of 66 C.E., who, according to legend, could supply the city with food for twenty years but lost all his riches when armed bands burnt the food supplies in besieged Jerusalem.

Thus, one should conclude that the Babylonian Talmud story is legendary and was composed for didactic purposes, primarily in order to justify husbands in Babylonia leaving their wives at home for protracted periods of time in order to study Torah.

Perhaps the true father of Akiba's wife was a certain Joshua, whose son, Rabbi Yohanan, is described in one source as "Rabbi Johanan, son of Joshua, Rabbi Akiba's father-in-law. "Rabbi Akiba's son was certainly called Joshua, probably after his grandfather.

In the Jerusalem Talmud, a completely different story is related about the help Akiba's wife rendered her husband. According to this version, she sold her hair and thus supplied him with the funds for his study. Apparently, women's hair was a real commodity and could become a source of income for women at the time, but women's selling their hair is a very common and also an ancient literary motif. Furthermore, the story of the sale of hair serves the literary strategy of measure for measure. Akiba's wife sold her hair in order to assist her husband, and he later rewarded her with a magnificent headdress.

The Jerusalem Talmud version, which tells of the economic assistance that Rabbi Akiba's wife rendered her husband, does not involve the husband's long absence from home. In this it disagrees with the Babylonian Talmud version.

The third version of the story, found in the two editions of Avot de-Rabbi Nathan, seems to reject the stories of both the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud. It relates how Rabbi Akiba started off as a pauper and an ignoramus, deciding on his own initiative to go and study. He already had an adult son when he began school. While he was learning he also supported himself economically. Yet the story ends with Rabbi Akiba buying his wife a golden crown; when questioned about the inappropriateness of his actions, he responds by claiming that his wife too had “suffered much with me in the Torah.”