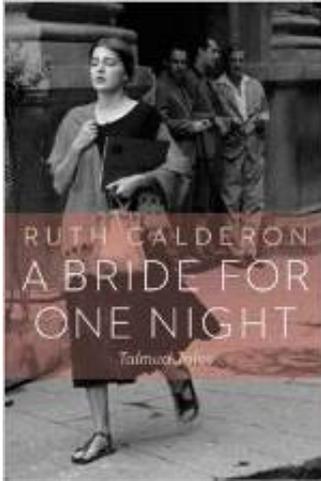


## "A Bride for One Night: Talmud Tales"



Book review

Daniel Rosenberg | 30.11.2014

**Ruth Calderon:**

***A Bride for One Night: Talmud Tales.***

Trans. Ilana Kurshan.

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xx + 163 pp. \$16,71

When Ruth Calderon published *Hashuk, Habayit, Halev: Aggadot Talmudiyot* (2001), she actualized the potential for Talmudic literature to be part of Israeli national culture. Ilana Kurshan's new English translation, *A Bride for One Night*, now makes available Calderon's powerful work to non-Hebrew readers. Calderon uses rabbinic *\_aggadot\_* (narratives) as the foundation for her own compositions of modern Jewish midrash, both offering her new narratives and demonstrating the tools she uses for building them.

Academic discussions of Talmudic narratives a century ago were nearly absent, often presumed the straightforward historicity of the accounts, and were characterized by a willingness to combine narratives from disparate sources about any given subject into a unified biography. This began to be problematized by Jacob Neusner and his students in the 1970s, at the same time that the science of source criticism of Talmud (by scholars such as David Weiss Halivni and Shamma Friedman) reached a well-established momentum based on the work of earlier scholars. Although Neusner limited conclusive analysis to the final version of the latest redactor, others continue to argue that discrete pericopes are nevertheless preserved even within redacted collections, and that those sources still reflect their compositional provenance (and therefore historical realia), and not only their redactional context. Stories about historical figures are not only hagiographical but are also historical sources, because they deeply reflect--and discretely preserve--the values of their compositors. Just as the history of ideas in the Babylonian Talmud is being expanded in cross-study with Persian Zoroastrian literature, the study of later Bavli narratives has been sharply focused in the work of Jeffrey Rubenstein, who characterizes the values and culture of the academy that produced them.

Both Calderon's and Rubenstein's work rely on the literary readings pioneered by Yonah Fraenkel, who brought New Criticism to bear on reading rabbinic narratives as works of literary art.<sup>[1]</sup> Such

narratives in their best-preserved form may be seen to have well-defined structures, to use literary tools comparable to those of modern authors, and to be discrete works irrespective of their current contexts. This "purity" of the rabbinic story was a ripe point for the New Historical and other methods of Fraenkel, since he described the rabbinic story in a rarefied atmosphere free of all context--a way in which such stories were never encountered. Scholars since then have sought both to reconnect narratives with their contexts (Rubenstein, Ofra Meir) and to bring other tools to bear on the critical reading of the narratives themselves (Daniel Boyarin, Galit Hasan-Rokem, and joined now by many others).<sup>[2]</sup>

All of this is to say that rabbinic stories have become a hot topic in academia. They are now understood to be key parts of the discourse of *halacha* (Jewish law) in the normative Babylonian Talmud. As narratives, their capacity to assert as well as to subvert is particularly attractive to scholars whose sensibilities and critical eyes have been trained not only through reverence, study, and intellectual criticism but also by sophisticated contemporary literary criticism. In what at times feels like black-and-white dialectic, narratives are a zone of colorful grey in which many ideas are hammered out.

The academically trained Dr. Calderon made waves upon her election to the Knesset last year by teaching Talmud in the Knesset chamber--not any kind of traditional academic forum--to demonstrate her conviction that the study of Talmud, and Torah, is a shared national space, all the more important in a democratic society. Learning spaces like Elul and Alma, among others, present alternatives for Israelis who do not take on religious practice as the only valid choice available to them as they are, in Adina Newberg's words, "attempting to create a new hybrid identity, in which their Jewish/Israeli identity will feel more rooted and connected on the one hand, and where they will continue to be open to major trends and people in the world at large on the other."<sup>[3]</sup> Newberg describes many discourses for which such study centers play host: connection to the Jewish people, to the generic "other" within Israeli society, to students' own spiritual identities, to different discourses of Zionism, and to God. The stories that Calderon chose for this collection are therefore, by virtue of being narratives now understood as reflections of the cultural struggles of the communities that created them, better variegated and more accessible entry points of engagement with Jewish cultural thinking for nonacademic, nonreligious Jews. As it turns out, this is no less true for religious or academic Jews, or (with Kurshan's translation) for English-only readers of all stripes.

In this collection, Calderon recognizes the same academic value of rabbinic stories to serve as meaning-rich cultural nexuses and folds in the idea of a "barefoot" reading: one unbound by the traditional institutional interpretations in making meaning, and therefore a mode of reading of the same texts which opens the possibility of institutional criticism. The goal of this openness is to reveal cracks of connection for readers who may be shut out of that institutional "academy," either through opposition or insufficient training. Her method is decidedly fresh for this part of the academy in that she explores these readings and ideas by rewriting them into modern short stories.

She presents each story of her selection of rabbinic texts (mostly but not all from the Babylonian Talmud) in its traditional form, and then retells it at greater length as a short story--not transposing its historical period to today, but bringing the reader into a literary past. She follows each retelling with an explanation of her process, her intellectual back story as it were, to highlight some of the artistic and intellectual choices in her composition. The retellings here of the stories she selects consistently critique the pervasive and institutional maleness of the Talmud's page, refocusing woman-centered stories on the voices of those women as well as narrating emotional color and depth into the highly cerebral construction of male genderedness and sexuality.

For instance, she first presents the Talmudic story (b. Ketubbot 62b) of Rav Rehumi's failure to return home one year for his annual brief visit (to his wife!), in its original tripartite brevity: Rav Rehumi's distraction, his wife's waiting and sadness, and his divine punishment. Calderon retells the story with a preface, narrating Rav Rehumi's (still nameless) wife's experience of being married to a

scholar who lives his life at work most of the year while she feels increasingly neglected by her absent husband. The voice of her still anonymous character is richly human and fully grounded in emotional experience as she tells of her disappointments and anticipation. When Calderon turns to depicting Rav Rehummi in his distraction, her scholar is distant in thinking of his wife, though consumed with his study, and the things for which he cares--and those regarding which he is care-less--are clear. This characterization brings poignancy to the sadness of the wife, and endows the punishment of the neglectful husband with a measure of tragedy. In her unpacking of the story, her first comment is nearly inflammatory: "Just between us, Rav Rehummi was a rather mediocre scholar" mentioned but rarely in Talmudic discussions, not a scholar who is "a shark but, rather, small fry" (p. 37). And yet, she explains how that fact, and other careful readings of the two characters set here result in a Talmudic story "about a loving wife and a husband whose Torah renders him incapable of sensing another's pain" (p. 38). She explains in this section how the bare narrative of the Talmudic account may be unpacked to show that the axis of the original story is the anonymous wife, upon whose lonely shoulders the yoke of her husband's Torah study has been symmetrically balanced.

Her retellings are often gems, consistent with the best art of modern midrash of biblical texts, and compelling literary works in their own right. Her writing shows her to be a consummate and sensitive teacher who is deeply learned: in every paragraph of her retellings, explicit references to the full breadth of traditional Talmud study and history resonate to the mind's ear of the classically and academically trained reader, and yet are presented accessibly and gently to the reader for whom this is the first encounter with them.

The best are stories such as "Lamp," "Sisters," and "Sorrow in the Cave," which are compellingly narrated in the first person, and not only draw out subversive readings of the text but invite subversive experience of the reader's self. In the stories told from the third person, like "the Other Side," "Libertina," or "He and His Son," the broader narrator's access to multiple minds occasionally stumbles over flashes of the dissonant author's omniscience that are stirred in but not fully blended together with the rich telling.

Nevertheless, every story is insightful and full of meaning.

Calderon's analyses for each retelling effectively highlight her reclaiming of readership and relevance for the modern reader, and lay out fine examples of the struggle fully to integrate (rather than jettison) modern identity in engaging traditional texts. In these sections, her values of unsilencing and critique of hierarchy are unapologetic and unobscured. She justifies her authorial choices and offers a short-list of academic treatments for the interested (and, often, Hebrew-capable) scholarly mind. Ilana Kurshan's English translation is well done, effectively capturing the sensitivity and poetry of the ancient Hebrew and Aramaic and modern Hebrew originals in an accessible idiom most appropriate for the venture of the work.

It is from an academic approach that I must question how to dance before this Bride. In contrast to the approach of Fraenkel, criticized for imagining the isolated art-story form as far too rarefied for its real, situated context in rabbinic literature, Calderon has knit together stories of characters whose biographies are synthesized from a geographical and historical range of sources.

For a modern collection of fiction, this is in no wise inappropriate, and instead contributes substantially to the depth of experience (and the breadth of learning value) for the lay reader by creating richer characters deeply based on textual sources. For this academic reader, however, such confluences at times were still minor stumbling blocks in the pure enjoyment of the work, because the stories are woven from materials that are academically understood to be of different knits.

For instance, the description of Rabbi Yochanan's practice of brandishing a finger bone from his dead child (b. Berachot 5b) did not come originally in the same source as the tragic narration of Resh Lakish's life (b. BM 84a), despite the fact that Calderon uses them both together to great effect in

constructing a Rabbi Yochanan character embittered at his student's successful transformation.

David Goodblatt's historical analysis of the handful of surviving Beruriah traditions proved them to be historically and literarily disparate, and despite that, Calderon willfully recombines them powerfully in constructing a single (and singular) source for the benefit of a readership that is thereby provided a heroine who transcends her particular history.<sup>[4]</sup> (It is noteworthy that the reclamation of the stories for modern readers has surpassed academic deconstruction, and restored them to a mythic wholeness.) It is consistent with her goals to reinvigorate connection and to celebrate the human experience at the heart of the Talmudic text, but her narrative act overrides the sources--or at least, the thinking that isolates them as "sources." In addition, it is the essential multivocality and dialectic of the Babylonian Talmud that have reclaimed for it a most-favored status even in the "open" world of Jewish study today. However, by virtue of their own commission to print (a notoriously fixed medium), these strongly centered stories, and the analyses which follow them in the book but intellectually precede and underlie their narrative exposition, are presented authoritatively and do not easily leave room for diverse reading.

Calderon acknowledges both of these challenges in her introduction, but persists, firm in the conviction that her work's potential surpasses the limitations of these challenges. As a work composed by a PhD graduate of the Hebrew University's Talmud department, Calderon's *\_Bride\_* invites an academic rabbinics reader to face dissonance and emerge through it into a vital and wider experience of the impact that these texts--or their retellings--may have beyond the academy.

Ultimately, it is not for the engagement of academic theory that this work is primarily written, nor is that the realm in which it is bound to be most powerful. These are stories for the (thoughtful) heart.

Clearly based on mindful choices of both academic study and thorough Talmudic learning, these stories are new doors into the *beit midrash* (house of study), and offer access to those who await entry--students who have stayed out because of illiteracy, because of disenfranchisement, or because they have until now only used the door they were shown. According to the Babylonian Talmud, Rabbi Akiva, who may or may not have been illiterate until the age of forty, gained riches from six sources (b. Nedarim 50a-b). Calderon's work offers seventeen gates to a richness of heart-in-mind--and, as the Talmud points out, the Holy Blessed One demands the heart.

## Footnotes

[1] Yonah Fraenkel, *Darkhei haAggadah vahaMidrash* (Tel Aviv: Modan Press, 1996).

[2] See, for instance, Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Ofra Meir, "Sippurei haAggadah beHeksherim Sifrutim keTofa'ah Makbilah leMatzavei Higgud Mishtanim: Sippur heChasid vahaRuchot beVeit haK'varot," in *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklore*, vol. 13/14 (Jerusalem: Mandel Institute for Jewish Studies, 1991-2); and Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Galit Hasan-Rokem, *Web of Life: Folklore and Midrash in Rabbinic Literature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

[3] Adina Newberg, "'Hitchabrut' or Connecting: Liberal Houses of Study in Israel as Political and Spiritual Expression," *Israel Studies Forum* 20, no. 2 (2005): 101.

[4] David Goodblatt, "The Beruriah Traditions," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 26, nos. 1-2 (1975): 68-85.

## Editorial remarks

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