JBC Book Clubs Discussion Guide

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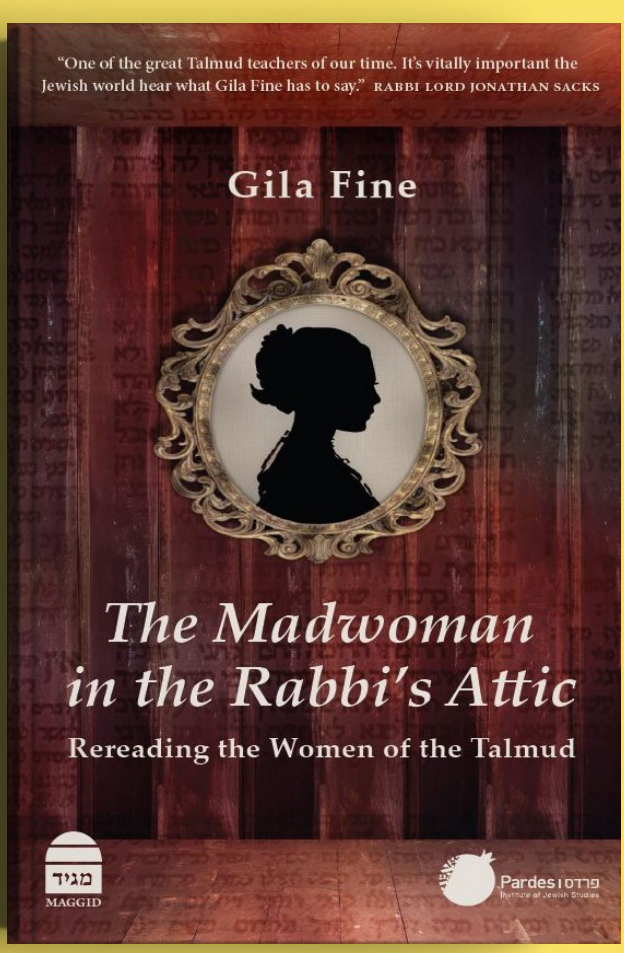

Jewish Book Council

Contents:

Overview

This section is for book clubs devoting one meeting to the book. Clubs devoting more than one meeting will find a chapter-by-chapter guide in the following pages.

1. The book begins with the author describing her moment of religious crisis, three days before her bat mitzvah. "The simple faith, the unquestioning devotion of my childhood were gone, and in their place were confusion and pain and doubt" (p. xi). Was there a moment when you first started having religious doubts? How did you go about resolving them?

2. The Introduction (p. xv) sets out four modes of reading a text, corresponding to four models of relationship with the Other: rejection ("this relationship can never be"), accommodation ("I will change everything about myself to make it work"), subjection ("you are going to have to change everything about yourself"), and negotiation ("dialogue where we disagree"). Which of these modes best characterizes your reading of the text? Which of these models best characterizes your relationship with the Other?

3. Which of the book's six archetypes – shrew, femme fatale, prima donna, madonna/whore, overreacherix, angel in the house – do you most associate with (or has been most associated with you)? and/or With which of the book's six heroines – Yalta, Homa, Marta, Heruta, Beruria, Ima Shalom – do you most identify? spectives, Isaiah is an internationalist who believes

4. The book concludes by stating: "The heroines of the Talmud have been redeemed and, as rabbinic stories tell more of their creators than of their characters, the rabbis have been redeemed along with them" (p. 203). Do you agree with this conclusion? Why.

5. The Conclusions accounts for the rabbis' uncanny ability to identify with women by demonstrating how, throughout history, Jews saw themselves as feminized. Do you think the Jew–woman analogy holds up in the 21st century?

6. Which of the book's six moral lessons – the danger of dismissal, the danger of projection, the danger of purism, the danger of instrumentalization, the danger of stigma, the danger of exclusion–would you like to take into your reading, and your life?

Introduction

1. The book begins with the author describing her moment of religious crisis, three days before her bat mitzvah. "The simple faith, the unquestioning devotion of my childhood were gone, and in their place were confusion and pain and doubt" (p. xi). Was there a moment when you first started having religious doubts? How did you go about resolving them?

2. According to the History of Aggada section, the rabbis told their stories in order to "critique their own legal system, acknowledge its limitations, and give voice to those it inadvertently hurts" (pp. xxii-xxiii). Does this resonate with your experience of learning aggada? Can you think of other rabbinic stories that support this claim, or, conversely, contradict it?

3. One of the methodologies the book applies to the study of aggada is archetypal criticism, the theory by which the recurrence of an archetype in stories from different times and places indicates that it is an expression of a primal fear or fantasy. In the words of founding father of the theory, Carl Gustav Jung:

> When, for instance, one examines the world of fairytales, one can hardly avoid the impression that one is meeting certain figures again and again, albeit in altered guise.... Over the whole of this psychic realm there reign certain motifs, certain typical figures which we can follow far back into history, and even into prehistory, and which may therefore legitimately be described as "archetypes." They seem to me to be built into the very structure of man's unconscious, for in no other way can I explain why it is that they occur universally and in identical form, whether the redeemer-figure be a fish, a hare, a lamb, a snake, or a human being. It is the same redeemer-figure in a variety of accidental disguises.
> - C.G. Jung, "Fundamental Questions of Psychotherapy," 16:254

Can you give an example of other archetypes (beyond the six explored in the book) that recur throughout history and across cultures? What, in your opinion, is the primal fear or fantasy these particular archetypes express?

4. The Introduction (p. xv) sets out four modes of reading, corresponding to four models of relationship: rejection ("this relationship can never be"), accommodation ("I will change everything about myself to make it work"), subjection ("you are going to have to change everything about yourself"), and negotiation ("dialogue where we disagree"). Which of these modes best characterizes your reading of the text? Which of these models best characterizes your relationship with the Other?

Yalta, the Shrew

1. Below are a number of quotes and images not included in the book. Read, alongside the opening section The Archetype (pp. 1–7), and discuss: Who is the shrew, according to these examples? What sort of man is her husband? What are the main features of her story? Are there any other notable shrews you can think of?

> Rava said: A bad wife is as troublesome as a day of heavy rain, as it is stated: "A continual dropping on a very rainy day and a contentious woman are alike" - (Prov. 27:15) Yevamot 63b

> "Idiot!" said the Queen, tossing her head impatiently.... The Queen turned crimson with fury, and, after glaring at her for a moment like a wild beast, screamed "Off with her head! Off—"....
> The King laid his hand upon her arm, and timidly said "Consider, my dear: she is only a child!" The Queen turned angrily away from him. The players all played at once without waiting for turns, quarrelling all the while, and fighting for the hedgehogs; and in a very short time the Queen was in a furious passion, and went stamping about, and shouting "Off with his head!" or "Off with her head!" about once in a minute.
> - Lewis Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, 8

Frasier: Can you recall a specific incident when Maris lost her temper or behaved in a way you'd characterize as volatile or unstable?

[Frasier and Niles burst out laughing.]

2. Read the story of Yalta (p. 8). What was your initial impression when you first read the story? Did you agree with the primary reading of it as "a classic shrew tale" (p. 11)?

3. Review the Broad Context section (pp. 13–16). Of all the other talmudic appearances of Yalta, which, in your opinion, presents the strongest evidence that Yalta "is hardly your typical shrew" (p. 14) and why?

4. The story's revisioning draws on ancient theories of reproduction to uncover the deeper meaning of Yalta and Ulla's conflict: "Not a petty fight over a cup of wine, but a principled debate about the power of procreation" (pp. 21–22). Why, do you think, was it so important for the men of Antiquity to appropriate the female power of reproduction? Are you convinced by this reading of the story? Is there any other way of reading it, in your opinion?

5. By the end of the chapter, Yalta emerges as radically different to the shrew we had first taken her to be. But if she is no longer a shrew, what does that say of Rav Nahman? How would you revision his role in this domestic drama?

6. "Dismiss the Other as irrational, or wicked, or unworthy, and they will become the very thing you dismiss them for" (p. 22). Have you ever dismissed anyone? Have you yourself been dismissed? What was the effect of that experience?

Homa, the Femme Fatale

1. Below are a number of quotes and images not included in the book. Read, alongside the opening section The Archetype (pp. 25–31), and discuss: Who is the femme fatale, according to these examples? What sort of man does she seduce? What are the main features of her story? Are there any other notable femmes fatales you can think of?

> Balak made for them enclosures... and sat prostitutes in them, with an old woman outside and a young woman on the inside. And at the time when Jewish people were eating and drinking and were glad and going out to stroll in the marketplace, the old woman would say to a Jew, "Aren't you seeking linen garments?" He would enter the enclosure.... [The young woman] said to him, "Is it your wish to drink a cup of wine?" Once he drank the wine, his evil inclination burned within him. He said to her, "Submit to me." She removed the idol she worshipped from her lap and said to him, "Worship this." -Sanhedrin 106a

> In the woman wantonly adorned to capture souls, the garland upon her head is as a single coal or firebrand of Hell to kindle men with that fire; so too the horns of another, so the bare neck, so the brooch upon the breast, so with all the curious finery of the whole of their body. What else does it seem or could be said of it save that each is a spark breathing out hell-fire, which this wretched incendiary of the Devil breathes so effectually... that, in a single day, by her dancing or her preambulation through the town, she inflames with the ire of lust – it may be – twenty of those who behold her, damning the souls whom God has created and redeemed at such a cost for their salvation. For this very purpose the devil does adorns these females, sending them for through the town as his apostles, replete with every iniquity, malice, fornication. - John Bromyard, "Sermon" (14th century)

I'm not bad. I'm just drawn that way. Jeffrey Price & Peter Seaman, Who Framed Roger Rabbit?

2.Read the story of Homa (p. 35). When you read the story at first, how did you see the relationship between Homa and Rava? And between Rava and Rav Hisda's daughter?

3. The revisioning of Homa begins with the deconstruction of the femme fatale as "the sum total of society's sexual projections," often imposed on single women: "The unattached woman is, in this respect, especially threatening. Desirable because available, and dangerous because desirable, she is more readily a site for projection" (p. 40). Do such projections still exist today, in your opinion? Or has 21st-century society become more accepting of unattached women?

4. The story's Close Reading deliberately leaves the question of Homa's intention open. Why do you think she raised her arm in the courtroom? Was it for emphasis, to prove that she and her husband did in fact drink wine, or was she aware of the power of her beauty to sway the judge in her favor?

5. Rav Hisda's daughter is often read as the villain of the piece, the frigid foil to the sensual Homa. However, one of the book's reading hypotheses is that, in rabbinic stories, we need "to get into the head and heart of every character" (p. xxvi). Try getting into Rav Hisda's daughter's head; how would the story go if it were told from her perspective?

6. "'Anyone who rejects another as flawed… has the same flaw' (Kiddushin 70a). Rejection is born of projection. We project onto the Other our deepest flaws, our most shameful secrets, and then we ostracize them, unable to bear in them that which we cannot acknowledge within ourselves" (p. 50). What is the flaw you're in most danger of projecting onto others? How might you avoid it?

Marta, the Prima Donna

1. Below are a number of quotes and images not included in the book. Read, alongside the opening section The Archetype (pp. 51–57), and discuss: Who is the prima donna, according to these examples? How is she treated by her inferiors? What are the main features of her story? And are there any other notable prima donnas you can think of?

> The Rabbis say: Four traits apply to women. They are greedy, nosy, lazy, and envious. - Genesis Rabbah 45:5

> There are many things which are necessary for married women's practices: expensive clothes, gold, gems, shopping sprees, maids, all kinds of furniture, litters, a gilt two wheeled chariot. Then, all night long, the nagging complaints, "That woman looks so much prettier when she goes out; this one is honored by everyone".... [It is] a torment to put up with a rich [woman].... You have to call her "lady," celebrate her birthday, toast her health, and wish for her to outlive you.... If you put her in charge of the whole household, you will become one of the servants. - St. Jerome, Theophrastus' *Golden Book on Marriage*

[I took] my first selfie in 1984 and that opens up the book.... There's just such an evolution of the selfie. And Icaptured that, I think, really well.

Kim Kardashian, *Selfish*

2. According to the Introduction, "rabbinic legends are fundamentally scenic," written like plays to be enacted on a stage (p. xxiv). Read the story of Marta (p. 57–58). If you were staging this story, what directorial choices would you make? Would you show the servant's repeated journeys to the market,or just his return home each time? How would you emphasize Marta's barefootedness? And would you have her throwing out her gold and silver before her death, or, as it is told in the Talmud, as a flashback after?

3. The chapter attempts to revision Marta's character by exploring the story's context and other Marta texts, only to admit that "Marta cannot be revisioned; what seems to be a tale of a selfish, spoiled prima donna is indeed a tale of a selfish, spoiled prima donna" (p. 66). Do you agree with this statement? Or was there anything in the story's broad and immediate contexts that you found redeeming?

4. The reading of Marta's story within the broader context of the Destruction story cycle reveals a parallel between the paralysis of Marta's servant and that of the rabbis: "If the servant, in his fear of deviating from his mistress's orders, ends up causing her death, then the rabbis, in their fear of deviating from their Master's orders, end up destroying Him" (p. 78). What does this parallel tell us of the rabbinic view of the man–God relationship?

5. "If Marta attempted to go out and see (eipok ve'ehezei) whether she could save herself, Rabbi Yohanan, following her example, tries to see (hazei)

whether he can go out (de'eipok) and save a little" (p. 80). The story makes extensive use of the contrast between being in (the home/the city) and going out. What is the metaphoric meaning of go out, in this respect? Why do you think the rabbis use this particular metaphor?

6. The chapter concludes with the need to get past our purism and act, even if it means making a mistake. In his important essay " The Will to Believe," philosopher William James contends:

> There are two ways of looking at our duty in the matter of opinion. We must know the truth; and we must avoid error.... We may regard the chase for truth as paramount, and the avoidance of error as secondary; or we may, on the other hand, treat the avoidance of error as more imperative, and let truth take its chance. Clifford... exhorts us to the latter course. Believe nothing, he tells us, keep your mind in suspense forever, rather than by closing it on insufficient evidence incur the awful risk of believing lies. You, on the other hand, may think that the risk of being in error is a very small matter when compared with the blessings of real knowledge, and be ready to be duped many times in your investigation rather than postpone indefinitely the chance of guessing true.... In a world where we are so certain to incur [errors] in spite of all caution, a certain lightness of heart seems healthier than this excessive nervousness on their behalf. - William James, "The Will to Believe," VII

Can you think of a time when you got past your purism and acted, despite the danger of error? What was it that allowed you to do so?

Heruta, the Madonna/ Whore

1. Below are a number of quotes and images not included in the book. Read, alongside the opening section The Archetype (pp. 87–94), and discuss: Who is the madonna and who the whore, according to these examples? How are these two women contrasted? Are there any other notable madonna/whore duos you can think of

> The lips of a forbidden woman drip honey, her mouth is smoother than oil. But in the end she is as bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword. Her feet go down to death, her steps take hold of Sheol... Find joy in the wife of your youth, a loving doe, a graceful mountain goat... Why be infatuated, my son, with a forbidden woman? - Proverbs 5:3–20

> Miss Amelia Sedley was a young lady of this singular species.... She had such a kindly, smiling, tender, gentle, generous heart of her own, as won the love of everybody who came near her.... She was a dear little creature; and a great mercy it is... that we are to have for a constant companion so guileless and good-natured a person. Miss Rebecca Sharp... was not in the least kind or placable.... It could not be expected that everyone should be of the humble and gentle temper of Miss Amelia Sedley.... [She was] so attractive that the Reverend Mr. Crisp, fresh from Oxford, and curate to the Vicar of Chiswick, the Reverend Mr. Flowerdew, fell in love with Miss Sharp.... She sat commonly with her father, who was very proud of her wit, and heard the talk of many of his wild companions – often but ill-suited for a girl to hear. But she never had been a girl, she said; she had been a woman since she was eight years old. Oh, why did Miss Pinkerton let such a dangerous bird into her cage? - William Makepeace Thackeray, Vanity Fair, 1–2

Lilibet is my pride. Margaret is my joy.
- KingGeorge VI

2. The story of Heruta is introduced with three different Primary Readings (pp. 96–100): a reawakening of desire (traditional), a rabbinic seduction story (modern), and an anti-abstinence polemic (modern). Which of these did you find most persuasive and why?

3. The story's first act features a broken-down marriage, a husband and wife fundamentally misunderstanding one another. "Herein lies the full tragedy of the Bar Ashis' marital life. A husband and wife, both contending with unfulfilled sexual needs, both believing themselves to be alone in their struggle" (p. 104). Get into the heads of Rav Hiyya and his wife: What is he thinking? What is she thinking? What is she thinking he's thinking? What is he thinking she's thinking he's thinking?

4. The story's final line – "That righteous man fasted

all of his days until he died of that death" – is, according to some scholars, a later editorial insertion, added to make this outrageous story a little more kosher. What is the overall effect of ending the story on the penultimate line? Does the final line indeed make the story more palatable, in your opinion? Why?

5. In her book Mating in Captivity, psychotherapist Esther Perel relates an incident that sounds almost like a modern retelling of the story of Heruta:

> Leo had begun to withdraw physically when Carla became pregnant with their first son, and they had no sexual contact at all during the last trimester. Leo just came home later and later from work. Carla knew something was up, though they never discussed it openly. "What changed for you when she became a mother?" I ask. "Her significance," he answers. "Her whole being turned from being my lover, my partner, and my wife to being the mother of my son".... "Let's talk about this whole madonna/whore business," I continue. "It has deep psychological roots. A lot of men find it difficult to eroticize the mother of their children. It feels too regressive, too incestuous, too oedipal. What you need to remember is that she's their mom, not yours. At this point, I recommend anything that can introduce a little healthy objectification. Anything that might distinguish her from 'the mother.'" Carla had been quiet for much of the session, but the following week I had no doubt she'd been paying attention. Laughing, she told me the story. "I really wanted to let go with Leo... But I knew there was this thing with the wife, 'the mother.' Would he let me? So I initiated this game and said, 'You know, we can have... sex and you can call it what you will, but... it's going to cost you.' I said, 'A hundred bucks'".... Carla's playful erotic intervention has stayed with me for years. In one gesture she cleverly captured and subverted the whole issue: how to retrieve the lover from the mother. Leo feared expressing the rawness of his desire to the mother of his children, a woman too worthy of love and respect. Carla took a risk, interrupted the pattern, and invited him into an erotic complicity. She uncloaked the repression and became a sexually provocative, slutty woman who demanded to be paid. In the midst of this explicitly staged endorsement of blatant sexuality, Leo's lustfulness was finally unleashed. - Esther Perel, *Mating in Captivity: Sex, Lies and Domestic Bliss*, 96–97

How are the two stories similar / different? Why does Carla succeeds where Heruta fails?

6. "We must see the Other as we ourselves wish to be seen – in all of their fullness, in all their beauty, as an end to themselves. Only then can there really be a relationship, only then can we really have an encounter" (p. 115). Can you think of a time when instrumentalization (of you or by you) got in the way of a true relationship? What would you do differently today?

Beruria, the Overreacherix

1. The chapter coins the archetype of the overreacherix, marshalling several examples of queens, prophetesses, warriors, scholars, and doctors to illustrate it (pp. 117–26). Which of these examples did you find most interesting? What do you make of the fact that the majority of them are "legends [which] were part of calculated smear campaigns by rival religious or political factions" (p. 123)? Can you think of any examples of 21st century overreacherixes?

2. Beruria is the "best known and most complex of the women of the Talmud." Have you come across Beruria before? In what context? Was she "hailed as a heroine" or "denounced as a transgressor" (p. 126)?

3. Beruria's earliest, and most historically credible, mention is a law pertaining to a door bolt in the Tosefta (p. 129), misattributed to Rabbi Yehosua in the Mishna. How does this erasure go on to influence Beruria's legacy? Do you think her representation in the Talmud, and in Rashi, would have been different had she not been edited out of the Mishna?

4. The chapter explores the immediate, broad, and historical contexts to demonstrate that the Beruria Incident cannot (as in previous chapters) be reread, but must be unread. Do you agree with this conclusion? Might there be a way to reread the Incident nonetheless?

5. Review the talmudic narratives of Beruria (pp. 153–56). Which is the one, in your opinion, that reads most differently once we've removed the giant shadow cast by the Beruria Incident? Why?

6. "By revisioning the Beruria of the Talmud, we find… [that she] is simply a woman devoted to her Torah; a woman who has thrown herself into her studies, knowing that as a female scholar she has more to prove; a woman doing her utmost to earn her place in the beit midrash, while remaining, as Caesar's wife, above suspicion" (p. 157). Was there ever a time when you had to be better than, wiser than, more irreproachable? Do you consider that a good or bad experience?

Ima Shalom, the Angel in the House

1.Below are a number of quotes and images not included in the book. Read, alongside the opening section The Archetype (pp. 159–68), and discuss: Who is the angel in the house, according to these examples? What is the division of labor between her and her husband? What are the main features of her story? Are there any other notable angels in the house you can think of?

> "Fill the earth and conquer it" (Gen. 1:28) – It is the nature of a man to conquer but it is not the nature of a woman to conquer ... Said R. Isaac, it is written "and conquer it" – A man must conquer his wife so she does not go out into the marketplace, for if she roams she comes to immorality and sin, as you find with Dinah daughter of Jacob, "And Dinah daughter of Leah went out and Shehem son of Hamor saw her" (Gen. 34:1-2). - Yalkut Shimoni, Genesis 247:16

> Mr. Wickfield tapped at a door in a corner of the panelled wall, and a girl of about my own age came quickly out and kissed him.... Although her face was quite bright and happy, there was a tranquillity about it, and about her – a quiet, good, calm spirit – that I never have forgotten; that I shall never forget. This was his little housekeeper, his daughter Agnes, Mr. Wickfield said. She had a little basket-trifle hanging at her side, with keys in it; and she looked as staid and as discreet a housekeeper as the old house could have.... There he sat, taking his wine, and taking a good deal of it, for two hours; while Agnes played on the piano, worked, and talked to him and me. He was, for the most part, gay and cheerful with us; but sometimes his eyes rested on her, and he fell into a brooding state, and was silent. She always observed this quickly, I thought, and always roused him with a question or caress.... Agnes... the better angel of the lives of all who come within her calm, good, self-denying influence is quite a woman. - Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, 15–18

> In January 2020 I made worldwide news as a "Trad-Wife," an individual who chooses to take care of her family over having a "career." When I'm not doing the laundry, drinking tea, or cooking something from scratch, you'll likely find me here writing about traditional living, tending the vegetable patch, or stalking the royal family. - Alena Kate Pettitt

2. Read the story of Ima Shalom (p. 171). If you were directing this story for the stage, what choices would you make? How would you represent time standing still in the Ben Hyrcanuses' household? Would you show the outdoors as well, or just the indoors? What tone would you have Ima Shalom adopt when she says "Stand up. You have killed my brother"?

3. Anticipating Betty Freidan's critique of the angel in the house, the 1924 novel The Home-Maker tells of the unhappy home life of Eva and her husband Lester:

> What was her life? A hateful round of housework, which, hurry as she might, was never done. How she loathed housework! The sight of a dishpan

full of dishes made her feel like screaming out. And what else did she have? Loneliness; never-ending monotony; blank, gray days, one after another, full of drudgery. No rest from the constant friction over the children's carelessness and forgetfulness and childishness! How she hated childishness! And she must try to endure it patiently or at least with the appearance of patience.... But it was bitter! Bitter! She was fit for something better than scrubbing floors all her life. He was tired to the bone.... How he loathed his life-long slavery to the clock, that pervasive intimate negative opposed to every spontaneous impulse.... He never had time to know his children, to stalk and catch that exquisitely elusive bird-of-paradise, their confidence. Leicester had long ago given up any hope of having time enough to do other things it seemed worthwhile, to read the books he liked, to meditate, to try to understand anything. But it did seem that in the matter of his own children.... What a wonder of competence Eva was! Only it was a pity she let the children get on her nerves so. Lester never doubted that his wife loved her children with all the passion of her fiery heart, but there were times when it occurred to him that she did not like them very well – not for long at a time, anyhow. But, like everything else, that was probably his fault, because she had all the drudgery of the care of them, because she never had a rest from them, because he had not been able to make money enough. Everything came back to that.

- Dorothy Canfield Fisher, *The Home-Maker*, 47–71

How does The Home-Maker echo Freidan's critique?

4. The Broad Context section features an intimate scene between Ima Shalom and her husband (p. 177). What does this account tell us of the Ben Hyrcanuses' marriage?

5. The Immediate Context section analyzes the structure of the oven of Akhnai narrative, showin how it "points to the complex relationship posited by the Talmud between the political (represented in Acts 1 and 3) and the personal (represented in Acts 2 and 4). If the personal is political, as the feminists of the 1960s proclaimed, the political is often deeply personal" (pp. 194–95). Why is it so important for the Talmud to make this connection? And why is this connection so often ignored in readings of the Akhnai myth?

6. The chapter concludes with the claim that it is Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanuses who is the real angel in the house of the Akhnai narrative. "If Beruria was a rabbinic thought experiment on what if a woman were just like a man, the Akhnai narrative is a rabbinic thought experiment on what if a man were treated just like a woman" (p. 201). What is the fundamental difference between these two thought experiments? Why does one end so positively and the other so tragically?

Conclusion

1. Which of the book's six archetypes – shrew, femme fatale, prima donna, madonna/whore, overreacherix, angel in the house – do you most associate with (or has been most associated with you)? and/or With which of the book's six heroines – Yalta, Homa, Marta, Heruta, Beruria, Ima Shalom – do you most identify?

2. The book concludes by stating: "The heroines of the Talmud have been redeemed and, as rabbinic stories tell more of their creators than of their characters, the rabbis have been redeemed along with them" (p. 203). Do you agree with this conclusion? Why?

3. Each of the book's chapters attempts a revisioning of the story of its heroine. With which of the revisioning attempts did you most agree, and which was the least convincing?

4. The Conclusion accounts for the rabbis' uncanny ability to identify with women by demonstrating how, throughout history, Jews saw themselves as feminized. Do you think the Jew–woman analogy holds up in the 21st century?

5. Which of the book's six moral lessons – the danger of dismissal, the danger of projection, the danger of purism, the danger of instrumentalization, the danger of stigma, the danger of exclusion – would you like to take into your reading, and your life?

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