

Rabbis, Captives, and Brothels
Aggadic texts on coerced prostitution and its victims

David Levine

“[T]he cherished value of the universality and oneness of God is [to be] matched by an equally cherished value of the universality and oneness of humanity” (Moshe Greenberg).

Every year, nearly a million women and children are victims of human trafficking that is targeted for the sex industry worldwide. The annual revenue of this industry reaches billions of dollars, with only drugs and weapons providing more income for criminal organizations. 3000 women are 'imported' into Israel yearly, to be sold for the purposes of prostitution. Many of them are smuggled over the Egyptian border with the security establishment doing very little that is targeted to prevent this trafficking in women.

These women are modern day slaves, abused and exploited, often suffering beatings and rape. Their initial consent was given under false pretenses; they are not free to come and go; they are forced to receive clients 14-18 hours a day; they have no access to medical services. Not speaking the language, they have no acquaintance with Israeli society and have nowhere to turn for help. Their status of illegal residents inhibits them from appealing to the authorities for help.

This is a reality Israeli society must address. Its ongoing presence is a disgrace to anyone with even a rudimentary sense of decency. This disgrace is multiplied many times over when responsibility and commitment to Jewish tradition are added.

The aggadic texts presented here - each in its own way - touch upon the issue of trafficking, enslavement, and forced prostitution. They do not deal with these issues directly, nonetheless they are present and beckon reference.

We should not anachronistically expect to find precedent for all our values and moral positions in these and other ancient rabbinic texts. The *aggadah* of the talmudic sages provides us, *inter alia*, with a rich resource for refining and problematizing our view of contemporary society and its problems. We will see that at times, the protagonist of a story, a rabbinic figure, or the storyteller himself, might leave our ethical expectations wanting. This is no cause for an abandonment of this literature, or for avoiding its guidance and perspective. First and foremost we have at our disposal a repository of accumulated experience and insight on issues that are age-old and burning at one and the same time. Not to avail ourselves of this multi-tiered wealth, is to deny our own experience the grapplings

that former generations have experienced when encountering the imperfect human condition.

The term '*aggadah*' is used to describe all the non-halakhic, non-legal, material found in classic rabbinic literature compiled during the course of the first millennium of the Common Era. Aggadic sections are found in all books and compilations of this literature, from the Mishnah, compiled at the turn of the second-third centuries to the later midrashic compilations of early medieval times. There are many different literary forms in which this aggadic material is found: interpretation of scripture ('midrash'), anecdotes, parables, sermons/homilies, popular maxims and aphorisms, stories and more. Most aggadic stories are not very long and comprise between a few lines and a short paragraph or two. Sometimes there are longer sequences of several aggadic stories, but the individual story is usually of modest proportions.

I

One worthy action

The first of our texts is a double anecdote whose message seems simple and straightforward. Rainfall being dear in this region of the world, the rabbis of the Palestinian Talmud (the *Yerushalmi*) were concerned with the amount of rain being a religious and ethical barometer of society (*a la* Deut. 11). Drought was perceived as conveying divine displeasure and necessitating a critical review of the community's morals. Exemplary behavior, usually on the level of human relations, is identified as a means of ensuring rain and sustenance.

In both instances related in this text, a woman is portrayed being in dire financial need and the only way out she can fathom is selling her body as a prostitute. The two figures that confront this situation give up their well-being and comfort in order to assist the women in need. The former sells the 'vehicle' of his trade - a donkey, while the latter sold his bed (or the props of the theater where he worked, see below).

ירושלמי תעניות א, ד (סד ע"ב)

איתחמי לרבנן פלן חמרא יצלי ומיטרא נחת. שלחון רבנן ואייתוניה.

- אמרון ליה, "מה אומנדך?"

- אמר לון, "חמר אנא".

- אמרין ליה, "ומה טיבו עבדתך?"

אמר לון, "חד זמן אוגרית חמרי לחדא איתה, והוות בכייה גו איסרטה. ואמרית לה, 'מה

ליך?' אמרה לי, 'בעלה דהיא איתתא חביש ואנא בעייתא מיחמי מה מיעבד ומפניניה'. וזבנית

חמרי ויבית לה טימיתיה, ואמרית לה, 'הא ליך פניי בעליך ולא תחטיי'."

- אמרין ליה, "כדיי את מצליית ומתענייתא".

איתחמי לר' אבהו פנטקקה יצלי ואתי מיטרא [ומיטרא נחית]. שלח ר' אבהו ואייתיתיה.

- אמר ליה, "מה אומנדך?"

- אמר ליה, "חמש עבירן ההוא גוברא עביד בכל יום, מוגר זנייתא, משפר תייטרון, מעיל

מניהון לבני, מטפח ומרקד קדמיהון, [ומקיש] בבבולייא קדמיהון."

- אמר ליה, "ומה טיבו עבדתך?"

- אמר ליה, "חד זמן הוה ההוא גברא משפר תייטרון אתת חדא איתא וקמת לה חורי עמודא בכייה. ואמרת לה, 'מה לך?' ואמרה לי, 'בעלה דההיא איתתא חביש ואנא בעיא מיחמי מה מעבד ומפניניה'. וזבנית ערסי ופרוס ערסי ויבית לה טימיתיה, ואמריית לה, 'הא לך פניי בעליך ולא תיחטיי'".
 - אמר ליה, "כדיי את מצלייא ומתענייא".

Palestinian Talmud, *Ta'anit* 1:4 64b

A certain donkey-driver was brought to the attention of the rabbis [literally: appeared before, maybe: revealed to them in a dream]. If he [the driver] would pray, rain would fall. The rabbis sent for him, and he was brought before them.

- They asked him, "What is your trade?"

- He responded, "I am a donkey-driver".

- They said to him, "What good [deed] have you done?"

- He responded, "One time [it so happened] I rented out my donkey to a woman, and she was weeping in the street. I asked her, 'What is with you?', and she responded 'The husband of that woman [my husband] is imprisoned, and I wish to see what can be done to release him' [implying that she was considering prostitution as the means to raise the necessary funds]. I sold my donkey and gave her its worth [the proceeds] and told her, 'This is for you, release your husband and do not sin'".

- They [the rabbis] said to him, "You are worthy of praying and being answered [of having your prayers fulfilled]".

A certain 'Pentakakos' [a five-time evil doer: five-'pente', evil-'kakos'] was brought to the attention of R. Abbahu [literally: appeared before, maybe: revealed to him in a dream]. If he [the 'Pentakakos'] would pray, rain would fall. R. Abbahu sent for him, and he was brought before him.

- He [R. Abbahu] asked him, "What is your trade?"

- He responded, "That man [I] commits five transgressions every day: he decorates the theater, hires the musicians and dancers [usually erroneously translated as 'hires the prostitutes'], brings their clothes to the bathhouse, claps his hands dancing before them, and sounds the cymbals for them."

- He said to him, "What good [deed] have you done?"

- He responded, "One time this man [I] was decorating the theater when a woman came by and stood behind a column [of the theater] and wept. I asked her, 'What is with you?', and she responded 'The husband of that woman [my husband] is imprisoned, and I wish to see what can be done to release him' [implying that she was considering either working in the theater or prostitution as the means to raise the necessary funds]. I sold my bed and my bed spread [possibly: my drum and the paraphernalia belonging to my drum] and gave her their worth [the proceeds] and told her, 'This is for you, release your husband and do not sin'".

- He [R. Abbahu] said to him, "You are worthy of praying and being answered [of having your prayers fulfilled]".

(translation adapted from: S. Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine*, pp. 31-32)

The merit of these two men is obvious, but the context of these two short anecdotes lends their actions much more depth. This *sugya* (talmudic discussion) in the *Yerushalmi* offers different illustrations of people worthy of representing the community in prayer during dry spells. The types of characters and behaviors illustrated range from the dedicated and trustworthy communal leader to the eccentric but morally meticulous villager. These are the individuals whose prayers are deemed efficacious in alleviating the drought and ensuring adequate rainfall. They are designated by the refrain 'worthy of praying and being answered'. The two men described in our short texts are not the expected candidates for this type of communal status and recognition. The first one owns a donkey and rents it out as a cargo vehicle. A simple 'blue-collar' figure is portrayed with a decency and sensitivity that merits the attention of the rabbis.

The second individual presents a much more intricate figure. A theater employee, his routine of attending to the actors' needs is beyond the pale of accepted practice. At first glance, he is a figure on the margins of rabbinic (Jewish?) society with dubious morals (five daily wrong-doings), but as things turn out his attentiveness to the pressing needs of another, puts him on higher religious ground (at least temporarily) than the rabbi addressing him.

The ultimate social predicament chosen by this storyteller is the threat of a woman having to sell her body as a solution to financial need. Helping a woman rescue herself from prostitution is among the worthy actions this talmudic discussion enumerates. Even more so, a person with no other recognizable advantage is propelled to the forefront when he is able to save one woman from this fate. He is 'worthy' of representing a community in need and his prayers for rain will be answered. In such a way the *sugya* condemns this social reality, demands active response, and identifies the ideal assistance to be rendered.

The social stratification and differentiation in these stories is clear. Donkey-driver and theater-worker are presented as contrasting everything that is represented by the rabbi in his academy: One because of the menial nature of his profession and the other because of moral estrangement of his occupation. The mere detail of this person's existence coming to the knowledge of the rabbis is either coincidental or miraculous depending on how we translate and understand the Aramaic original. Subsequently the person is summoned by the rabbi and brought before him. The hierarchy is clear. The rabbi is in a position of authority and respectability and the commoner is presented as socially inferior and apologetic. However this social depiction may offend our sense of solidarity with the underprivileged and those different from us, it serves the humbling purpose of indicating that righteousness and spiritual privilege do not necessarily reside in the academy and its circles.

Part of the problem - though not articulated and not treated - is the assumed priority of the woman's husband and the precedence given to his safety over the wife's subjection to physical abuse. The husband must be freed from his captivity and the wife's brush with prostitution is a price that can be contemplated. This of course is not a position that can be accepted by modern day sensibilities and ethics, and this difference should be identified, acknowledged and addressed.

The androcentric bias of the talmudic storyteller is indeed evident here. The ideals of talmudic society were realized first-and-foremost by its scholars, all of them men. They are the focus of the process that created the literature of the rabbis, and created the culture that we refer to as traditional Judaism. These texts - including our *aggadot* - were created by men, transmitted and disseminated by men, and first-and-foremost reflect a male perception and world-view. This accounts for the androcentric nature of this story. As stated in the introductory paragraphs, this should not be a reason to abandon the use of the literature as resource and guide. Our expectations should be mindful of this perspective so that we may examine our tradition, and ourselves, and be able to provide the appropriate corrective for old and new.

II

Rabbis in brothels

The second story we will read is much more complex. It is the final component of a lengthy and intricate talmudic examination of the issue of martyrdom and the threat of gentile surroundings to Jewish existence, both physical and spiritual (Babylonian Talmud, *Avodah Zarah* 16b-18b). Whether they encounter heretic challenges to their fidelity to Torah, or are persecuted and martyred by the Roman authorities for their religious observance, the rabbis of the Talmud portray themselves as encircled by hostile - and at the same time enticing - forces. One of the figures who looms large in this sequence is R. Hananiah (or: Haninah) ben Tradion of the town of Sikhni(n) in the Galilee. Needless to say there is no cooperation on his part with the authorities. However, he exacerbates the situation by being oblivious to any danger that might befall him as he pursues his Torah-study and teaching, saying 'Heaven will have mercy'. Ultimately he is martyred, his wife executed, and his daughter sold as a prostitute. This young woman is condemned to be on display in a brothel in Rome. The aggadic narrative of the Babylonian Talmud (the *Bavli*), having a propensity to discover familial ties amongst its protagonists, identified this daughter as the sister of R. Meir's wife Beruriah. Here is where our story begins.

בבלי עבודה זרה, יח ע"א-ע"ב

ברוריא דביתהו דר' מאיר, ברתייה דר' חנינא בן תרדיון הואי. אמרה לו: זילא בי מלתא דיתבא אחתאי בקובה של זונות.

[1]

שקל תרקבא דדינרי ואזל.

אמר: אי לא איתעביד בה איסורא מיתעביד ניסא, אי עבדה איסורא לא איתעביד לה ניסא.

אזל נקט נפשיה כחד פרשא.

אמר לה: השמיעני לי.

אמרה ליה: דשתנא אנא.

אמר לה: מתרחנא מרתח.

אמרה ליה: נפישין טובא (ואיכא טובא הכא) דשפירן מינאי.

אמר: שמע מינה לא עבדה איסורא, כל דאתי אמרה ליה הכי.

[2]

אזל לגבי שומר דידה

אמר ליה: הבה ניהלה.

אמר ליה: מיסתפינא ממלכותא.

אמר ליה: שקול תרקבא דדינרא, פלגא פלח ופלגא להוי לך.

אמר ליה: וכי שלמי מאי איעביד?

אמר ליה: אימא 'אלהא דמאיר ענני' ומתצלת.

אמר ליה: ומי יימר דהכי איכא?

[אמר ליה: השתא חזית].

הוו הנהו כלבי דהוו קא אכלי אינשי, שקל קלא שדא בהו, הוו קאתו למיכליה.

אמר: אלהא דמאיר ענני, שבקוה.

ויהבה ליה.

[3]

לסוף אשתמע מילתא בי מלכא, אתיוה אסקוה לזקיפה, אמר: אלהא דמאיר ענני. אחתוה.

אמר ליה: מאי האי?

אמר להו: הכי הוה מעשה.

[4]

אתו חקקו לדמותיה דר' מאיר אפיתחא דרומי, אמרי: כל דחזי לפרצופא הדין ליייתה.

יומא חזא חזויה, רהט אבתריה, רהט מקמייהו, על לבי זונות.

איכא דאמרי: בשולי עובדי כוכבים חזא, טמש בהא ומתק בהא.

איכא דאמרי: אתא אליהו אדמי להו כזונה, כרכתיה,

אמרי: חס ושלום, אי ר' מאיר הוה לא הוה עביד הכי.

קם ערק אתא לבבל.

איכא דאמרי: מהאי מעשה,

ואיכא דאמרי: ממעשה דברוריא.

Babylonian Talmud, *Avodah Zarah* 18a-b

Beruria the wife of Rabbi Meir was the daughter of Rabbi Hanina. She said to him, “It is a disgrace for me that my sister is sitting in a prostitute’s booth”.

[1]

He took a *tarqeva* [a measure of volume, approx. 7 quarts] of dinars and went, saying if she has done nothing wrong a miracle will occur, and if not a miracle will not occur. He dressed up as a cavalryman (or: official).

He said to her, “Submit to me”.

She replied, “I am menstruating”.

He said, “I can wait”.

She said, “There are many here more beautiful than I”.

He said to [himself], “I deduce from this that she has done no wrong, this is what she has said to whoever comes”.

[2]

He went to her guard and said, “Give her to me”.

He [the guard] replied, “I am afraid of the authorities”.

He [R. Meir] said, “Take the *tarqeva* of dinars, keep half for yourself and use half for bribing”.

He said, “What shall I do when they (the dinars) are gone?”

He said, “Say ‘God of Meir, answer me’ and you will be saved.”

He said, “Who will say [assure me] that this will happen”.

He said, “Now you will see”. Man-eating dogs were there, he [R. Meir] took a clod of earth and threw it at them. They came to eat him, he said ‘God of Meir, answer me’, and they let him be.

He gave her to him (the woman was released).

[3]

Subsequently the authorities heard of the matter. They brought him [the guard] and crucified him. He said, ‘God of Meir, answer me’, and they took him down.

They asked, “What is this?” and he told them, “These were the events”.

[4]

They engraved R. Meir’s image [face] on the gates of Rome and said, “All who see this face, bring [arrest] him”.

One day he was seen [and identified] and chased. He [R. Meir] ran away and went into a brothel.

Some say, he saw food cooked by heathens and he dipped one finger in the food, and then sucked the other.

Some say, Elijah appeared in the guise of a prostitute and embraced him.

They [the Roman pursuers] said, “Had this person been R. Meir, he would not have done so”.

He [R. Meir] arose, fled, and arrived in Babylonia.

Some say it [the flight to Babylonia] was because of this incident.

Some say it was because of the Beruriah incident.

(translation adapted from: D. Goodblatt, ‘The Beruriah Traditions’, pp. 71-72; D. Boyarin, ‘Tricksters, Martyrs, and Collaborators’, pp. 71-72 sic!)

The story begins and ends with comments by the narrator, one introducing the sister’s plight (this being the plot-propelling detail) and the other indicating R. Meir’s (=RM) flight eastward. The plot progresses through four distinct scenes, in which the rabbi is either the active character (1, 2, 4) or is centrally mentioned (3). The first scene puts RM in the brothel ensuring the woman’s chastity, and the next one has him negotiating for her release from the brothel-prison. The guard (pimp?) is arrested and punished in the third scene, and gives up RM as a felon. The last scene has RM on the run. The character of RM not only dominates the story but also seems to undergo a change, from a would-be rescuer and loyalty-tester he becomes a victim, the target of persecution.

The story is encompassed by recurring themes and motifs that appear at the beginning and towards its end. [A] Beruriah is the first and last figure mentioned. She is the connection between RM and the woman sold into prostitution. This seems to indicate an importance that is not explicitly addressed in the text.

[B] The whorehouse is where the plot begins and ends. A brothel is where moral integrity and religious allegiance are tested. Here ultimate fidelity will to be expressed. Both the sister-in-law and RM are tested. This invites comparison of their respective responses and behavior when confronted.

[C] A brothel is a place that invites masquerade, a place where true identity is a perceived danger. RM initially presents himself as a Roman official (or: equestrian) both to the operators and patrons of the brothel, and to his sister-in-law. At the end of the story RM himself must be disguised as a prostitute’s client in order to hide from the authorities that are searching for him. The prevalent conception being manipulated is that a rabbi would never frequent such an establishment.

[D] Both the guard and RM are subjected to public hanging and display. The former placed on a crucifix as a means of interrogation and a deterring punishment. The latter’s image is on display at the city gate as a fugitive. The guard is miraculously saved and pardoned, but RM must flee. For some reason he is not worthy of supernatural intervention.

All these recurrences highlight issues pertaining to the purpose and message of the story. What is symbolized with a brothel? What constitutes chastity and fidelity? What is problematic about the protagonist’s actions? Can there be a happy ending when dealing with the issues raised, what might that end be?

The brothel here serves as a metaphor of foreign domination – exile - its enticements and dangers. A young woman coerced into offering her services in a whorehouse - her most intimate and most precious being coming under threat - provides the rabbis and storytellers of the Talmud with a powerful metaphor for viewing themselves. A relentless demand on the part of an outside world to acquiesce to its demands. A constant need for defensive positioning, posturing, and manipulation in order to retain an acceptable level of loyalty. This maneuvering is portrayed as including the external semblance of complying. The narrative accepts this as an option and does not frown on it. One has to do what indeed has to be done to get by. The proverbial red line is drawn far away from these routine negotiations. No harsh judgment is rendered upon them.

What of RM's test of the sister-in-law's chastity? This is a painful issue when attempting to understand the story and its morals. A test of loyalty for captives is something we today find ethically problematic. Should indeed the decision to free a captive or help a victim of coerced prostitution, be dependent on whether or not she was forced to cooperate with her captors and persecutors? Is it proper to examine fidelity under these circumstances in order to establish merit and justify an effort to redeem? Judging the victim is wrong. The victim's predicament is something beyond his or her control, and therefore he or she is not culpable. Certainly mobilizing society and its resources to alleviate the hardship is not to be dependent on any type of judgmentalism.

An interesting reading of this aggadah identifies significance in the fact that RM is subjected to the same predicament that was forced upon his sister-in-law. Both are placed in a brothel and both find a way of giving the appearance of assimilating to their surroundings but retain their integrity. Perhaps negative light is cast on the figure of RM for deeming it necessary to put the woman's sexual purity to a test. Perhaps the story indicates a reservation from the condition that RM had articulated in redeeming his sister-in-law. Liberating someone from these dire circumstances is not to depend on loyalty as defined by the rabbi. Shouldn't the indication be, that unconditional assistance and liberation are required? Any other response is inappropriate. Thus interpreted, RM acted wrongly and paid the price for improperly defining loyalty and fidelity.

Subjecting RM to the same fate as his sister-in-law does indeed present us with an interpretive challenge. Whether we choose to explain it as a criticism of the rabbi's chastity test (as above), or as a reinforcement of the talmudic sense of Jews-in-exile being a lot like virgins-in-brothels; the fact remains that the story has marked this parallel as significant. These are the opening and closing scenes of the plot. Anyone can potentially find himself in this type of situation, physically and metaphorically. Harsh judgment should not be rendered. Much compromise is to be tolerated. Exile - enticing and dangerous outer circumstances - is all around us. In this respect, we are all captive in brothels. Let us not judge them, but offer our assistance in true solidarity.

השתא עבדי, לשנה הבאה בני חורין

Now we are enslaved, next year may we all be liberated

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