

# A CUP OF AFFRONT AND ANGER: YALTHA AS AN EARLY FEMINIST IN THE TALMUD

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We know very little about the lives of specific women in Jewish society at the time of the Talmud, both because they are not the central figures in the vast Talmudic corpus and because the Talmud makes no effort to provide biographical details of the figures it does mention—not even of those well-known, major male Torah scholars.

The attempt to focus on a single individual figure from those mentioned in the Talmud, place it under a magnifying glass, and provide a comprehensive biography is doomed to failure from the outset. We can only engage in a general character study, with details taken from scattered texts, and painstakingly try to compose a coherent picture as though they were fragments uncovered in an archaeological excavation.

The following vignette about a woman named Yaltha (about whose life there are a few more extant short narratives, but we will focus on the best known of them)<sup>1</sup> teaches us about the clear demarcation between the

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<sup>1</sup> See *b. Berakhot* 51b; *b. Beitzah* 25b; *b. Kiddushin* 70b; *b. Hullin* 109b. Feminist scholars were especially attracted by Yaltha's conduct concerning the laws of *niddah* (laws pertaining to

lives of men and women in the social contexts of that time. Women occupied a very inferior position; the social framework removed the woman from the center of public activity and relegated her to the private realm of the home and its tasks. However, with regard to the relationship between a woman and her husband, and between a woman and the world of men in general, a woman's status was determined in a quite individual manner, according to the strength and force of her personality.

Yaltha, who came from a distinguished family, possibly from that of the Exilarch,<sup>2</sup> fiercely defended her rights, even once she had been married to R. Nahman. As we learn from the extant narratives, she waged a sort of early "feminist" battle over her standing in the male world of her time, engaging in a rebellion against rigid social norms without attempting to breach their bounds. Her struggle was therefore limited to the narrow space permitted her within those norms. This is the central Yaltha narrative, as it appears in the Talmud:

Ulla [a sage who lived in the early fourth century CE and was a merchant who went from place to place] was once a guest in the home of R. Nahman. They ate bread [i.e., had a meal], he recited Grace after Meals, and handed the cup of blessing to R. Nahman.

Nahman said to him: "My master, send [this] cup of blessing to Yaltha."

He [Ulla] said to him: "Thus said R. Johanan: The fruit of a woman's womb [*bitnah*] is blessed only from the fruit of a man's body [*bitno*], as it is said: '[He (God) will love you and bless you and multiply you;] He

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menstruation), as depicted in *b. Niddah* 20b. R. Adler even called Yaltha a kind of "legal guerrilla" ("Feminist Folktales of Justice: Robert Cover as a Source for the Renewal of Halakhah," *Conservative Judaism* 45, no.3 [1993]: 53). See also Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert "Yalta's Ruse: Resistance Against Rabbinic Menstrual Authority in Talmudic Literature," in *Women and Water: Female Rituals of Purification in Jewish History and Culture*, ed. Rachel Wasserfall (University Press of New England, 1999), 60-82. See also the discussion by S. Waller on the outstanding elements of Yaltha's character, which she summarizes assertiveness and forcefulness (*Women in Jewish Society in the Talmudic Period* [Tel Aviv, 2001], 186-87, 211, n.33). Incidentally, S. Margaliyot is of the opinion that R. Nahman married her after her former husband had died (*On the Study of Names* [Jerusalem, 1989], 40-41).

<sup>2</sup> For a clarification of this point, see the discussion in A. Korman, *The Interpretation of Aggadot* (Tel Aviv, 1991), 33 n. 5.

will bless the fruit of your [m.] womb [*bitneka*]' (Deut. 7:13)' —it does not say, 'the fruit of her womb,' but 'the fruit of your womb.'"<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, Yaltha heard. She arose in her anger and went up to the wine store, and broke four hundred jars of wine.

Nahman said to him [Ulla]: "Let my master [now] send her another cup [of wine]!" He [Ulla] sent her [another cup of wine, together with the following message]: "All this is the *nivga* [special wine] of blessing."<sup>4</sup> She sent him [a message in return]: "From those who go about [in the villages, as nomadic peddlers like yourself] comes only [idle] talk, and from [the wearers of] rags [like yourself, come] lice!" (*b. Berakhot* 51b)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> An amazing similarity to Ulla's attitude can be found in the anthropologist Thomas Gregor's report on men from the Amazonian Mehinaku tribe who were quite aware of "how babies come into the world," but the males interviewed adamantly argued that "only men create new life" (T. Gregor, *Anxious Pleasures: The Sexual Lives of an Amazonian People* [Chicago and London, 1987], 168). See also the discussion by M. Mead, *Male and Female* (New York, 1975), 59-60. On quite a similar medieval dispute, see A. Melamed, "Maimonides on Women: Formless Matter or Potential Prophet?," in *Perspectives on Jewish Thought and Mysticism*, ed. Alfred Ivry et al. (Harwood Academic Publishers: Amsterdam 1988), 109-110.

<sup>4</sup> According to Rashi, Ulla sent Yaltha a huge cup filled with all the wine remaining in the jug, mocking the husband's conciliatory gesture towards his wife. He bases himself on the halakhic assumption that when one recites the blessing over a single cup of wine, all the wine in the house formally receives the status of the "cup of blessing [*nivga*]." (The halakhah follows Rashi's interpretation; see the explanation in the *Turei Zahav* commentary on *Shulhan Arukh, Orach Hayyim* 182:5.) There would therefore be no need to pour wine, especially from this specific cup, for someone who wished to participate in drinking of the *nivga*. According to this, Ulla tells her there was no (formal) need to send Yaltha a special cup of blessing, and she could have poured for herself from the jug. This, of course, is extremely insulting, since Yaltha was not interested in the halakhic issue or in the formal participation in drinking the *nivga* by herself. All she desired was that they be considerate of her and respect her; sending the *nivga* to her was a polite gesture that she expected. The vocalization of *nivga* follows M. Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic* (Ramat Gan, 2002), 725.

<sup>5</sup> According to R. Jacob Reischer, she attacked Ulla's empty words (for if he would learn to keep quiet, like her husband, the quarrel would have been avoided) and his stinginess, since he thought to "save" R. Nahman a cup of wine. She accordingly declares, "If someone wears rags because of his miserliness, this will result in his being troubled by lice and their bites. Moreover, anyone who is too stingy to send a cup of blessing to those present in the house will cause dissension and keep peace from them, with the most grievous results" (J. Reischer, *Iyyun Yaakov*, printed in J. Ibn Habib, *Ein Yaakov* [Vilna, 1883-1884] on *b. Berakhot* 51b, s.v. "*Amar Lei Hakhi*").

Yaltha, despite her importance, and despite the obvious effort she made in preparing the meal, does not participate in it. She can only listen to what happens from behind the curtain.

At this point our tale seems to allude to the biblical narrative of the angels who came in human guise to visit Abraham (Gen. 18:1-16). There, too, the guests conduct a conversation with the woman indirectly, as they address her husband. The Talmud (*b. Yevamot* 77a) cites the behavior of Sarah—who remains behind the scenes throughout the entire narrative—as an archetype of the correct behavior of wives when guests come to the house. The Talmud rules that the wife is not to go forth to greet guests outside the home, not even a female guest.

This Talmudic passage in *Yevamot* pits two central rabbinic values against each other: female modesty (namely, taking care not to directly conduct a conversation with another man) and hospitality. Here, the Talmud privileges the first value over the second, since it holds that a woman is not to greet a male guest. The discussion in *Yevamot* also establishes that this prohibition applies to greeting another woman, since welcoming anyone outside the home is always an immodest act for the woman host. The “outside,” therefore, is invariably a male sphere, with a verse from Psalms offered as an explanation: “All the honor of the king’s daughter is within” (Ps. 45:14).<sup>6</sup> As applied to this vignette, Yaltha definitely could not greet the distinguished guest, Ulla, nor could she participate in the men’s conversation.<sup>7</sup> We therefore should not be surprised that women were less enthusiastic than men about the prospect of receiving guests in their home, since the burden of preparing the meal fell

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<sup>6</sup> Within their homes women would receive indigent men who knocked at the door, and they would give them food to eat. See, for example, *b. Taanit* 23b: “A wife stays at home and gives bread to the poor, which they can eat once enjoy.”

<sup>7</sup> This ancient custom is preserved in the traditional Bedouin society. Although the Bedouin woman can sit with the male guests, she has to cover her face. See A. Levanon, *Collections of Laws from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor* (Haifa, 1967), 237.

upon them<sup>8</sup> while they were denied the pleasure of participation in the meal itself.

The Amora R. Isaac draws the following conclusion about female society from the biblical narrative of Abraham's hospitality: the Bible relates that Abraham told Sarah to prepare cakes for the guests from "three measures of choice flour (Gen. 18:6)." Why did he go into such detail? Because he knew that if he did not do so, Sarah would prepare the cakes from plain flour. According to Rashi, Abraham and Sarah actually quarreled on this matter: "She said: 'Flour!' and he: 'Choice flour!'" This disagreement arose "because a woman looks with a more grudging eye upon guests than a man" (*b. Bava Metzi'a* 87a).<sup>9</sup>

Incidentally, the great honor that the Shunammite woman showed Elisha (2 Kgs. 4:8-37) was later deemed to be exceptional, to the extent that *Zohar* 2:44a teaches that the greatness of the Shunammite woman lay in her generous hospitality towards Elisha *despite* being a woman.

The parallels between the biblical account of Abraham's hosting of the angels and our narrative about R. Nahman and Yaltha does not end with the woman remaining behind the scenes. They are also analogous in several other details:

1. We learn from the biblical text that Sarah, like Yaltha here, eavesdrops on the conversation of the men, from which the exegetes derive what they deem to be the disgraceful trait of women's curiosity. Incidentally, the midrash also ascribes three other improper attributes to women, one of which, "sloth," is also derived from Sarah's antagonistic attitude to guests:

Women are said to possess four traits: they are greedy, eavesdroppers, slothful, and envious. Greedy: "[When the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable

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<sup>8</sup> In the case of Abraham, the preparations were made in tandem with the husband, but this is an exceptional instance of eagerness on his part, according to the exegetes. See, for example, Nahmanides' commentary on Gen. 18:7.

<sup>9</sup> See also J. Nacht, *The Symbolism of the Woman: A Study in Folklore with Reference to Jewish and World Literature* (Tel Aviv, 1959), 134 n. 6a.

as a source of wisdom,] she took of its fruit and ate" (Gen. 3:6). Eavesdroppers: "[Then one said, 'I will return to you next year, and your wife Sarah shall have a son!'] Sarah was listening [at the entrance of the tent]" (Gen. 18:10). Slothful: "[Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said,] 'Quick, three *seahs* [of choice flour! Knead and make cakes!]" (Gen. 18:6).<sup>10</sup> Envious: "[When Rachel saw that she had borne Jacob no children,] she became envious [of her sister]" (Gen. 30:1). (*Gen. Rab.* 45:5)

2. The Talmud contains an expansive tradition from R. Yose bar Hanina, who argued that the angels' interest in Sarah (cf. Gen. 18:9), which was presumably out of place in the ancient world, originated in their simple desire to send her a cup of blessing following Grace after Meals (*Bava Metzi'a* 87a).

3. In the biblical narrative the angelic guests come to inform Sarah of the birth of Isaac, and in our Talmudic narrative as well, the conversation between Ulla and R. Nahman immediately turns to the subject of fertility. Not only does Ulla ignore R. Nahman's request to acknowledge the trouble to which Yaltha went in preparing the meal, but he immediately begins an exposition that expropriates the only advantage given to woman by nature: procreation. He argues that the blessing of procreation does not come by way of the woman, but only by way of the man. His exposition, in the name of R. Johanan, strangely distorts the literal meaning of the verse in Deuteronomy, since the phrase "the fruit of your (m.) womb [*bitnekha*]" refers mainly to the woman who nurtures the fetus as a "fruit" in her womb.

This is the last straw for Yaltha, who hears his exposition from behind the scene, and she breaks the jars. Yaltha does not burst into the place where the meal is being held with insults and invective, apparently because she did not want to cross a certain line set for her as a woman (and actually, what can she say against a teaching from the school of R. Johanan?), but the sounds of the smashing of jars above leave the two men below with no doubts as to her disapprobation.

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<sup>10</sup> An anonymous exegete deduces that Sarah was lazy, since Abraham had to urge her to hurry.

Preparing the meal for the two men is not enough for Yaltha; she demands recognition for her effort and expects to hear some thanks. Her husband R. Nahman, who knows her well, tactfully suggests once again that the guest send her the cup of blessing, and this time, the suggestion serves as a calming and conciliatory message for what has already been done.

Ulla does indeed send the cup, but he turns the tables once again; he mocks Yaltha. He sends her a huge cup and emphasizes, in a patronizing manner, that she is permitted to drink all the wine that he sends her—as if to say, “What do you women have to do with drinking wine, which is something for men?”<sup>11</sup> He might also be directing a barbed criticism at the husband’s conciliatory, “unmanly” behavior.

Ulla undoubtedly thinks that, by sending this large cup with his caustic remarks, he would silence Yaltha, but this is not so. She still has the last word. Although she follows the “rules of the game,” since she, both figuratively and physically, is left outside the “guest room” and does not address him directly, the message she sends by an intermediary leaves nothing to the imagination. She directs a razor-sharp dart at Ulla’s “manliness”: if you were such an important personage, you would not need the meal that I just made for you, and you wouldn’t go about in the villages to trade in your “rags”!

This narrative, with all its strangeness and the discrepancy it presents between the social world of the Amoraim and our own world, is not especially complimentary to women. It could also be read as disparaging towards women like Yaltha who so vigorously fought for their honor, but it nevertheless patently directs a critique against men such as Ulla who are incapable of understanding women’s hearts and their distress, and who are insensitive to the other. In our case, in his joust with Yaltha, Ulla even draws the sword of the “Torah” that he brings from the study hall.

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<sup>11</sup> On women and drinking wine, see E. A. Halevi, *The Values of the Aggadah in Light of Greek and Latin Sources* Vol. 4 (Tel Aviv, 1982), 249-51; S. Waller, *Women and Femininity in the Talmudic Stories* (Tel Aviv, 1993), 81-95.

Yaltha might not be portrayed in laudatory terms as a spiritual figure, and she certainly does not present the ideal role model according to which generations of Jewish women were educated, but we can understand her and see her, in modern terms, as one of the first advocates for women's honor recorded in the Jewish sources.