

TALMUDIC ETHICS WITH BERURIAH: READING WITH CARE

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In recent years, there has been a turn in the field of Jewish ethics. Scholars trained in religious ethics and Jewish thought have brought a new literary sensibility to their readings of classical Jewish texts, approaching rabbinic literature with a set of tools and questions focused not on conceptual content, but rather on discursive features like style, voice, and form.¹ This trend toward literary analysis has been nourished

¹ Rebecca Epstein-Levi identifies this turn and offers a helpful overview of her own and others' recent contributions in "Textual Relationships: On Perspective, Interpretive Discipline, and Constructive Ethics," *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 10, no. 1 (December 2018). Among the important contributors to this turn is Deborah Barer, who employs close reading and redactional criticism to revise and refine earlier accounts of the concept of "lifnim mi-shurat ha-din;" see her "Law, Ethics, and Hermeneutics: A Literary Approach to *Lifnim Mi-Shurat Ha-Din*," *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 10, no. 1 (December 2018). Emily Filler describes a formalist approach in a review article that can also be read as a call for a new approach; see "Classical Rabbinic Literature and the Making of Jewish Ethics," *Journal of Jewish Ethics* 1, no. 1 (2015): 153–170. All of these scholars can be seen as offering correctives to methodological problems diagnosed by Louis E. Newman in his "Woodchoppers and Respirators: The Problem of Interpretation in Contemporary Jewish Ethics," in *Contemporary Jewish Ethics and Morality*, eds. Elliot N. Dorff and Louis E. Newman (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1995), 140–60. Newman's critique is echoed and developed in Jonathan Crane's *Narratives and Jewish Bioethics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). For some rabbinics scholars such

in part by a surge in theoretically-informed studies within the field of Talmudic studies, where an emphasis on critical theory and cultural studies has brought new attention and complexity to themes like gender, power, and the self.² Even as these critical advances in rabbinics scholarship have enriched the field of Jewish ethics, they also raise questions about why and how the teachings of late antique male scholastics should offer normative guidance to contemporary readers.³ To some degree, the recent turn away from content and to formal structures reflects the dissonance between the values encoded in rabbinic literature and the ideological commitments of contemporary Jews and Jewish ethicists.⁴ This essay contributes to the scholarly conversation about how literary analysis can serve normative Jewish ethics by offering a Talmudic reading that bridges the distance between form and content.

Two kinds of literary analysis predominate in the recent turn in Jewish ethics: analysis of form and close reading. Though the two are related and are often deployed in tandem, they present different kinds of challenges. Emily Filler articulates both the promise and problems of a formalist approach. Even as she expresses excitement about how “serious attention to the formal features of classical rabbinic literature as a methodological guide might serve to dramatically redefine the Jewish ethical endeavor,”⁵

as Jonathan Wyn Schofer, ethical questions have always been a central and explicit concern. The work of scholars like Aryeh Cohen anticipated what I identify as a new trend in which ethics scholarship and literary analysis of rabbinic literature converge.

² This observation is articulated by Chaya Halberstam and Elizabeth Shanks Alexander in “Reading Classical Rabbinic Texts as Contemporary Ethical Agents: A Response,” *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 10, no. 1 (December 2018). Both of these writers participate in the turn to theory they describe, along with other leading rabbinics scholars including Daniel Boyarin, Charlotte Fonrobert, Beth Berkowitz, and Ishai Rosen-Zvi. While these scholars do not explicitly engage the field of Jewish ethics, their contributions have shaped how ethicists approach rabbinic literature in profound ways. What this account leaves out, however, are rabbinics specialists whose work is centrally and explicitly engaged with ethics, scholars such as Aryeh Cohen, Julia Watts Belser, and Jonathan Wyn Schofer.

³ This precise question opens the piece by Halberstam and Alexander.

⁴ Epstein-Levi makes this observation.

⁵ Filler, 169.

she acknowledges the difficulty of putting this approach to practical use: “There may be a sharp division between the method of presentation in the literature—a plethora of voices and interpretations set side by side—and the method of presentation in ethics, where an individual surveys the relevant voices and presents a conclusion.”⁶ While the multiform, multivocal aspects of rabbinic literature offer models for critique and debate, they are ill-suited for the realm of practical decision-making. A related problem emerges from the pursuit of close reading. By its very nature, close reading eschews the kind of conceptual reasoning that leads to normative claims, privileging the particular and *sui generis* over universal principles that can be broadly applied.

In what ways can such interpretive exercises as formal analysis and close reading serve normative Jewish ethics? This is the question that I take on here, as I analyze a Talmudic passage which itself depicts an act of close reading, examining how the characters, storyteller, and implied readers engage with ethics. Drawing on Jane Gallop’s claim that the practice of close reading shapes the reader as a moral subject, I argue that distinctive features of Talmudic discourse encourage and reward certain reading practices which in turn shape a particular kind of ethical subject. The practical difference that literary engagement with the Talmud makes is thus not in helping to adjudicate ethical dilemmas, but rather in forming ethical decisionmakers who are attuned to details and oriented to the claims of others.

This essay centers on a narrative from the Babylonian Talmud, from Brakhot 10a. The story appears in the context of the Talmudic discussion of Mishna Brakhot 1:2 (b. Brakhot 9b) and features Beruriah, a woman renowned for her scholarship and cleverness, and her husband Rabbi Meir, a leading sage of the second century C.E. The Talmudic storyteller presents Beruriah as a model reader who is also a moral exemplar.

Here is the immediate context within the Talmud: the Talmudic discussion opens with the question of how early in the day one should offer morning prayers, and then moves on to treat verses from Psalms that

⁶ Filler, 161.

the Rabbis included in the daily liturgy. There is an extended series of rabbinic interpretations of verses from Psalms, including two narrative traditions featuring Beruriah that come in quick succession. Both these stories depict Beruriah in conversation with a male interlocutor, and in each she offers an interpretation of a verse from Psalms that demonstrates her superior insight.⁷ My focus is on the first story. The prompt for its appearance is a mention of King David's invocation of Psalm 104:35 earlier in the Talmudic discussion; here, the action turns on Beruriah's interpretation of this verse. Two variants of the story are transmitted in the manuscripts. I will offer a close reading of both versions, demonstrating how narrative elements and scriptural interpretation coalesce to promote Beruriah as an exemplary reader and a model moral subject.

Reading the Story

There were some thugs in Rabbi Meir's neighborhood, and they used to trouble him greatly. Rabbi Meir would pray for mercy upon them, so that they would die.⁸

His wife Beruriah said to him: "What are you thinking? That when it says in Scripture 'yitamu ḥata'im,' that means 'Let sinners cease?' Does it say 'ḥot'im,' sinners? [No!] It says 'ḥata'im,' sins. (Ps 104:35) Moreover, go down to the end of the verse, where it says, 'and wicked be no more.'

⁷ Beruriah has received a lot of scholarly attention, though the focus has not been on these stories in particular. Though my overarching interests are different, my reading of the story closely resembles that of Tova Hartman and Charlie Buckholtz, "'Beruriah Said Well': The Many Lives (and Deaths) of a Talmudic Social Critic," *Prooftexts* 31 (2011), 181–209, especially 193–195. Among other works that treat our story is a recent study informed by gender studies by Marjorie Lehman, "Rereading Beruriah through the Lens of Isaac Bashevis Singer's Yentl," *Nashim* (2017), 123–145. The classic investigation of Beruriah's historicity is David Goodblatt, "The Beruryah Traditions," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 26 (1975): 68–85. Daniel Boyarin invokes the story in his account of Beruriah as a literary character in *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 184.

⁸ In mss. Munich and Paris, this line reads: "He excommunicated them, and sought to destroy them." For transcriptions of textual witnesses, I rely on "Hachi Garsinan: The Friedberg Project for Talmud Bavli Variants," accessed at <https://fjms.genizah.org>.

When sinners cease, then are they no longer wicked? Rather, pray for mercy upon them that they should repent, and then they will be wicked no more.”

He prayed for mercy upon them, and they repented.⁹

As the story opens, Rabbi Meir is being tormented by neighborhood thugs. The various textual witnesses transmit two alternative traditions about how he responds: In the printed version of the Talmud and in many manuscript versions, Rabbi Meir appeals to God to destroy the troublemakers. According to a manuscript variant, Rabbi Meir uses his rabbinic authority to excommunicate them. All the textual witnesses converge as the story continues and Beruriah intervenes, protesting her husband’s harsh treatment of the thugs. Why seek the destruction of evildoers when you can pray for them to repent? Rabbi Meir accedes to his wife’s suggestion, and his prayer for his tormenters’ repentance is fulfilled.

By most measures, this is a very slight narrative with a clear moral message. The first line introduces the problem of Rabbi Meir’s tormenters, and the last line resolves it. We get little detail about any real action — whatever mischief or violence Rabbi Meir’s tormenters are wreaking on the neighborhood happens offscreen, and so does their dramatic change of heart when they turn away from wickedness. Word for word, the majority of the storytelling is dedicated to a single act of direct speech, an exegetical argument through which Beruriah articulates her objection to Rabbi Meir’s initial reaction and makes a case for penitence. A reader who is surveying the Talmud for explicit principles or norms of ethical behavior might be tempted to dismiss the details of this argument as extraneous to the story’s ethical content, however. After all, the moral force of Beruriah’s rebuke seems clear enough. Aside from the convolutions of Beruriah’s textual reasoning, the story reads as a simple

⁹ B. Brakhot 10a. My translation, following the standard Vilna print. Except as noted, there are not significant differences among the various textual witnesses.

moral tale, an illustration of the virtues of patience and generosity that ratifies the precept “Love the sinner, hate the sin.”¹⁰

The kind of literary analysis that I seek to model here, however, cannot be satisfied with abstraction to general principle. Before I derive ethical content from the passage, I want to examine how discursive features like generic form, word-choice, voice, and style contribute to shaping its meaning. According to English professor Jane Gallop, close reading means attending to the particulars of a piece of writing, and especially to any difficult or surprising details; it “means looking at what is actually on the page, reading the text itself, rather than some idea ‘behind the text.’”¹¹ Among the features that Gallop highlights are places where writing calls attention to itself: unusual vocabulary, repetitions, images and figurative language, words set off by italics or parentheses, or long footnotes.¹² To Gallop’s list, we can add other discursive elements that are particular to Talmudic literature: shifts in language or linguistic register, technical terms, citations, attributions, and juxtapositions of form and genre. Approaching a Talmudic text as a close reader means meeting the text on its own terms, attending to each particular feature and seeking to account for how each part relates to the whole.¹³ In the story before us, Beruriah’s act of exegesis all but overwhelms the narrative frame. How does her textual argument relate to the surrounding story, and how does it inform the story’s moral message? By the same token, why is Beruriah’s act of exegesis conveyed in a narrative frame unlike the other interpretations of verses from Psalms that are cataloged in the

¹⁰ I have been unable to identify the origins of this formulation, but many popular writers attribute the idea to St. Augustine.

¹¹ Jane Gallop, “The Ethics of Reading: Close Encounters,” *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* (Fall 2000), 7–17.

¹² *Ibid.*, 7.

¹³ Yonah Fraenkel, a pioneer in the literary analysis of rabbinic narrative, advanced the idea that every detail of a rabbinic story contributes to its overall structure and theme. For Fraenkel, this economy of expression, or “closure,” is a distinctive feature of rabbinic narrative. See his *Sipur Ha-’agada: Ahdut Shel Tokhen Vetzura* (Tel Aviv: Ben Hayim, 2001).

surrounding Talmudic passage? In this passage, the interpenetration of narrative and exegesis mandates a literary approach that joins close reading with an analysis of generic forms.

At the heart of this narrative is an act of interpretation. Beruriah offers a close reading of Psalm 104:35, explaining that there are two different ways to understand the verse. The first possibility corresponds to the plain sense of the passage as rendered in the following translation: “May sinners disappear from the earth, and the wicked be no more. Bless the Lord, O my soul, Halleluya!” (New JPS Translation.) This interpretation presumes that the verse makes use of parallelism, a feature of biblical poetry in which the sense of one part of a verse is echoed in a succeeding phrase. The parallelism can be diagrammed like this:

Let sinners **cease** from the earth ||

And wicked people **be no more**.

According to this understanding of the verse, the second phrase simply echoes the first; the words are different, but not the meaning. Within the story, Beruriah attributes this precise understanding of the verse to her husband Rabbi Meir, and then goes on to explain why she rejects it. As she points out, the word *ḥata'im*—here translated “sinners”—could be vocalized slightly differently so that it means not “sinners,” but “sins.”¹⁴ Beruriah’s alternative vocalization of this one word yields an entirely different interpretation of the verse: “Let *sins* cease from the earth, and there will be no more wicked people.” In Beruriah’s preferred interpretation, the second phrase does not merely repeat the sense of the first, but rather builds on it. Beruriah reads the verse as a conditional sentence, in which the first phrase functions as a protasis—“If sins cease from the earth,”—and the second phrase offers the apodosis: “then there will be no more wicked people.”

¹⁴ While the orthography of the Masoretic text allows for Beruriah’s wordplay, the version of this word as preserved in Qumran corresponds to the plain meaning that Beruriah rejects. See 11Q5 Psalms fragment Eii, where the word appears as חוטאים. See Brill’s “11Q5,” Dead Sea Scroll Electronic Library of Biblical Texts, Brill, accessed 1/24/19, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2451-9383_dsselbt_DSS_EL_BT_11Q5.

Beruriah's interpretation exemplifies key principles and practices of midrashic exegesis. While contemporary biblical scholars identify parallelism as a typical feature of biblical poetry, for the rabbis, it is axiomatic that each and every word of Scripture is there for a reason. Beruriah addresses the problem of an apparent redundancy with two standard midrashic moves: she re-vocalizes a word, and she re-punctuates a sentence. For a rabbinic audience, the elegance and effectiveness with which her intervention resolves the exegetical problem would have been satisfying in its own right. But the fact that this interpretive performance is conveyed within a narrative frame invests the act of interpretation with drama. Before delving into the ethical import of the exegesis or the narrative, it will be helpful to say something about what makes this passage a satisfying specimen of storytelling.

Narrative Form as an Ethical Resource

Though scholarly definitions abound, many agree that a minimal requirement for a piece of writing or speech to be considered a "story" or "narrative" (some scholars distinguish between the two, but I use these terms interchangeably) is for at least two events to be relayed in relation to each other. A classic example is provided by E. M. Forster when he proposes that the following sentence meets the minimal requirements for story: "The king died and then the queen died of grief."¹⁵ Forster emphasizes that the narrated events must be in causal relationship; the phrase "of grief" is necessary because without it, there is no clear relationship between the two events. While establishing this minimal threshold for storytelling does not on its own account for what makes stories so powerful in human life, it provides an important hint. For folklorist Katharine Young, it is the consequential logic of a story that

¹⁵ Moshe Simon-Shoshan presents a succinct and penetrating primer on the defining features of narrative and an account of how they relate to rabbinic literature in *Stories of the Law: Narrative Discourse and the Construction of Authority in the Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 15–22. See pages 16–17 for his discussion of Forster.

hooks a listener in.¹⁶ A good story creates suspense because, while the audience knows that one event will inexorably bring on another (and usually another after that), we cannot predict precisely what will unfold. We want to find out what will happen next, and it is this expectation of consequences that compels us, reeling us into the alternative reality that a story momentarily creates.

Not all subjects or plot lines are equal when it comes to telling a compelling story. A report on events that consistently happen in just the same way might technically be considered a narrative, but it is not the kind of story that will capture our attention and make us care to keep listening. A good story does not recount the regular, predictable unfolding of events, but rather the exceptional, surprising, unexpected turn. Scholars have coined the term “tellability” to describe the kind of unexpected event that generates narrative interest.¹⁷ The concept of tellability suggests that a penchant for breaking rules, defying convention, or at least upsetting expectations is intrinsic to the activity of storytelling.

¹⁶ Young cites Erving Goffman’s account of narrative as characterized by “unforetellable unfoldings” (*Frame Analysis* [New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1974], 508). A similar idea is conveyed by Paul Ricoeur in “Narrative Time,” *Critical Inquiry* 7, 1 (Autumn 1980), 180: “The story’s conclusion is the pole of attraction of the entire development. But a narrative conclusion can be neither deduced nor predicted. There is no story if our attention is not moved along by a thousand contingencies” (“Narrative Time,” *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 [Autumn 1980], 180). In Young’s words, “It’s this anticipation that hooks us into a world that thereby cracks open for us. We, the narratees, and to some extent the narrator, are plunged into an alternate reality as an open-ended engagement such that as we move through the story, a world materializes around us” (Personal email communication, May 22, 2011).

¹⁷ William Labov describes the way storytellers signal a story’s “tellability” through evaluative statements that depart from an account of what happened to offer explanations of why it is worth telling in the first place (William Labov and Joshua Waletzky’s “Narrative Analysis: Oral Versions of Personal Experience,” re-printed in a volume exploring its impact after 30 years, *Journal of Narrative and Life History* 7 [1997], 3–38). His observations about stories’ tendencies to focus on a breach of norms have provided fertile ground for explorations of the relationship between narrative and law. For a succinct account of Labov’s contribution, see Jerome Bruner, “The Narrative Construction of Reality,” *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Autumn 1991), 1–21. For a discussion that explores the implications of “tellability” for the interpretation of Talmudic law and narrative, see Barry Scott Wimpfheimer, *Narrating the Law* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 19–26.

Those who seek to convey ethical content through narrative thus contend with a tension between edification and entertainment that inheres in the act of storytelling. On the one hand, the causal logic of narrative is a perfect vehicle for conveying the negative consequences of errors in judgment—this is why parents, teachers, and religious authorities have used stories to impart moral lessons since time immemorial. On the other hand, for a story to be tellable—compelling and interesting—it must in some way confound expectations, break a rule, or stray from the predictable course of events. Just such an upset occurs in the Talmudic tale of Beruriah.

Beruriah's teaching penetrates because it is attributed not to a rabbinic sage, but to a more unlikely exegete. While the content of her argument could very well have been transmitted on its own as a piece of rabbinic exegesis, the tellability of the story emerges from the upset of watching a woman school a sage, a wife chastise her husband. This is why the narrator's extended attention to Beruriah's exegesis does not derail the narrative: the trouble in the neighborhood is but a pretext for the real intrigue that emerges from the breach of social expectations at home. The tension that hooks us in as readers arises not from the conflict between Rabbi Meir and the bullies outside, but rather from the domestic drama that unfolds as Beruriah out-rabbis Rabbi Meir, besting her accomplished husband in both exegetical skill and ethical judgment. As soon as Rabbi Meir acquiesces and acts on her argument, the narrative tension dissipates and the force of Beruriah's interpretation is confirmed.

The fact that Beruriah's exegetical insight is expressed through narrative configures its implications for normative ethics. Emerging from the mouth of a woman, the force of Beruriah's speech is shaded with defiance—it reads as a critique, a provocation that subtly subverts Rabbi Meir's approach. But just how forceful is this critique, and to what is it targeted? The two alternative versions of the story generate divergent accounts of the force and direction of Beruriah's challenge. According to the version in the printed Talmud, when Rabbi Meir is antagonized by the neighborhood thugs, he does not use his authority as a rabbi to retaliate; rather, he turns directly to prayer, appealing to God to correct the

injustice. In this version of the story, Rabbi Meir's juridical powers are not invoked by the narrator, and there is little foundation for seeing his character as representative of the rabbinic establishment. In this version, although Beruriah's insight and compassion exceed those of her husband, both characters are operating in the same ethical field, in an extra-judicial realm governed by the divine. In the manuscript variant, things are different, however. Here, Rabbi Meir deploys the power of his rabbinic office and not only excommunicates his antagonists, but "seeks to destroy them." In this version of the story, when Beruriah objects, her challenge is far more pointed because she opposes not just a faulty understanding of Scripture, but an enactment of rabbinic power on the ground. In this version, Beruriah's invocation of the power of penitence and of divine mercy stands in opposition to the punitive justice that Rabbi Meir has already imposed. The manuscript variant thus depicts Beruriah actively challenging the excesses of rabbinic power wielded by her husband.

While the two versions of the story characterize the degree and direction of Beruriah's challenge differently, both portray her as a paragon of virtue who exposes shortcomings in Rabbi Meir's vision of punitive justice. The fact that Beruriah's argument reads against the grain of Scripture's plain sense reinforces the sense that this story comes to challenge settled notions. An outsider/insider, Beruriah surpasses the rabbis in quintessentially rabbinic pursuits, using the structures and tropes of rabbinic discourse to highlight its shortcomings. Against the backdrop of a vast Talmudic corpus dedicated to explicating intricacies of rabbinic law through careful exegesis, this narrative functions as a counter-text, enlisting the character of Beruriah as a mouthpiece for internal critique. Beruriah stands outside the established power structures, expressing a moral perspective that transcends the workings of the rabbinic study house and of rabbinic courts of justice.

The Talmud's deployment of Beruriah's story to advance an extra-judicial vision of justice is consistent with scholarly accounts of how narrative can serve as a supplement or corrective to rule-based forms of

ethical reasoning.¹⁸ In the extensive theoretical literature investigating relationships between narrative and ethics, scholars debate to what degree narrative challenges other modes of ethical reasoning.¹⁹ Moral philosopher Martha Nussbaum credits imaginative storytelling with the cultivation of both private morality and public justice, and this leads her to recommend the study of literature as a supplement to philosophy, economics, and law:

The literary imagination is part of public rationality, and not the whole. I believe that it would be extremely dangerous to suggest substituting empathetic imagining for rule-governed moral reasoning, and I am not making that suggestion. In fact, I defend the literary imagination precisely because it seems to me an essential ingredient of an ethical stance that asks us to concern ourselves with the good of other people whose lives are distant from our own. Such an ethical stance will have a large place for rules and formal decision procedures...On the other hand, an ethics of impartial respect for human dignity will fail to engage real human beings unless they are made capable of entering imaginatively into the lives of distant others.²⁰

¹⁸ There is an extensive theoretical literature that investigates the relationship between ethics and narrative. See, for example, Adam Zachary Newton's *Narrative Ethics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), whose investigations of philosophy and literature engage classic Jewish literature. For an investigation of narrative approaches to bioethics, see *Stories and Their Limits: Narrative Approaches to Bioethics*, edited and with an introduction by Hilde Lindemann Nelson (New York: Routledge, 1997). Closely related to theoretical work on ethics and narrative is the cross-disciplinary Law and Literature movement which investigates interactions between narrative and law. For an introduction to this approach, see *Law's Stories: Narrative and Rhetoric in the Law*, ed. Peter Brooks and Paul D. Gewirtz, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996). Such approaches are applied to rabbinic literature in particular in Barry Wimpfheimer, *ibid.*, and in Jane Kanarek, *Biblical Narrative and the Formation of Rabbinic Law* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

¹⁹ For a helpful critique of the tendency to put narrative and law in opposition, see Guyora Binder and Robert Weisberg, "Narrative Criticism of Law," *Literary Criticisms of Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 201–291.

²⁰ Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), xvi.

Rule-based reasoning remains foundational for Nussbaum, yet she nonetheless values imaginative storytelling for the way it encourages empathy, curiosity, and a sensitivity to the diverse particulars of human experience. Our story of Beruriah is one example of how the Talmud deploys narrative to spark a more expansive ethical vision than is projected by legal reasoning alone.

Rather than press an individual Talmudic tale to carry more interpretive weight than is warranted, here I simply want to suggest that the way Beruriah's argument invites its readers to re-think Rabbi Meir's presumptions is redolent of observations that other scholars have made about how narrative serves ethics. The place of storytelling in the Talmud's ethical outlook is similar to the role that it is granted by Nussbaum with relation to the philosophic tradition. For the Talmud, rule-based reasoning is primary, and that is why legal dialectics predominate in the composition of the Talmud. But the elaboration of legal principles and procedures does not exhaust the Talmud's ethical imagination. Alongside and threaded through the Talmud's dominant discourse of legal argumentation are other modes of discourse—chiefly narrative—that move beyond the law. Sometimes Talmudic storytelling serves to ground or illustrate rule-based argumentation, but sometimes it conveys an internal critique, demonstrating how the generalities of law fall short with regard to the particulars of individual cases.²¹ At still other times—and this is how I would characterize what's at stake in the story of Beruriah—Talmudic narrative pushes beyond a legal frame to a more expansive vision of human flourishing.²² For Nussbaum, creative storytelling serves as a valuable supplement to the main curricula of moral

²¹ This is one way that Barry Wimpfheimer describes the significance of legal narrative in the Talmud. He emphasizes how narratives resist and frustrate the drive toward coherence and codification which characterizes the dominant mode of interpreting the Talmud. See his *Narrating the Law*, especially pages 2–3, 9–30.

²² Occasionally, Talmudic storytelling is so ribald and irreverent that it threatens to subvert the very foundations of rational judgments. This is how Daniel Boyarin characterizes the dialogism of the Talmud's serio-comic couplings of the utterly serious with the subversions of the grotesque. See *Socrates and the Fat Rabbits* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), especially 193–242.

philosophy, law, and economics. The editors of the Talmud anticipate and exceed Nussbaum's approach when they make room for the narrative imagination within the core text of the rabbinic curriculum, in the Talmud itself.

Within the Talmud, an acknowledgement of the law's insufficiency is baked in, expressed through the Talmud's multiform make-up and especially through its juxtapositions of narrative and legal argument. This is one important way that analysis of the Talmud's discursive forms serves an investigation of ethics. But the claims I wish to make about the exemplarity of the story of Beruriah are more specific than that. While the invocation of *any* story within the Talmud has something to teach us about the about the shape and scope of Talmudic ethics, Beruriah's story is particularly instructive in how it enacts its ethical message, offering the character of Beruriah as both a model reader and a moral subject. The normative possibilities of her story are best pursued through a practice of close reading.

Close Reading as an Ethical Practice

I have identified three distinct rewards that Beruriah's story holds out to readers who attend to the narrative's details: First, a moral lesson about the capacity of evil-doers to overcome their evil ways; second, an interpretive insight that rescues a scriptural phrase from apparent redundancy; third, the esthetic experience of intrigue and dramatic suspense. But my goal here is not simply to explicate this story's strengths, but rather to use this story to illustrate how literary analysis can serve normative ethics. The story of Beruriah is effective both as a narrative and as ethical instruction because of the way all of its parts work in concert.

The particular way Beruriah makes her interpretive intervention is precisely where the ethical content of this story is centered. Close reading reveals that she does not merely argue for a particular ethical position, but she enacts it, extending to Rabbi Meir the kind of care and consideration that she would have Rabbi Meir extend to his harassers. Beruriah chastises her husband for rushing to judgment, for presuming that the aggressions

of the neighborhood bullies exhaust their characters, for reducing his tormenters to their worst traits. But she does not simply come out and say this directly. She couches her critique in the rhetoric of the rabbinic study house, presenting her reproach as a scholarly disagreement about a detail of exegesis. Before launching into her own interpretation of the biblical verse, she ascribes a conflicting position to her husband, attributing his harsh judgment of his tormenters to his mistaken understanding of a verse: "What are you thinking? That when it says in Scripture '*yitamu hata'im*,' that means 'Let sinners cease?' Does it say '*hot'im*,' sinners? [No!] It says '*hata'im*,' sins." Beruriah's attribution of such a considered position to Rabbi Meir strains credulity. Does she really think his wish for his tormenters to die is motivated by a particular interpretation of a scriptural verse? Far more likely, having just escaped a run-in with the neighborhood bullies, he is angry and upset and wants his enemies to disappear or even to suffer. Beruriah, however, takes pains to extend to Rabbi Meir the benefit of the doubt. She interprets his behavior in the most generous way possible and thereby models the kind of measured consideration she would have Rabbi Meir extend to his antagonists.

I do not mean to suggest that Beruriah's exegetical argument is but a tactic calculated to help her reproach go down easier. As we have seen, Beruriah's exegesis is adroit and persuasive. Her interpretation attends to the details of the scriptural verse far more cleverly than the conventional interpretation that she assigns to her husband. In my reading, the mechanics of her exegetical argument are not arbitrary. The midrashic mode of interpretation that Beruriah adopts exemplifies the same virtues of generosity and judiciousness that she models in her interaction with Rabbi Meir. Midrash is generous because it attributes to each word of Scripture a depth of meaning that exceeds plain, surface understanding. Midrash is judicious because it attends to the small details. The exegetical act—a meticulous engagement with the minute particulars of scriptural discourse—models a kind of careful attention that is its own corrective to Rabbi Meir's rash dismissal of his tormenters' humanity.

The story of Beruriah thus conveys its ethical insight at every level of analysis. The exegesis is inextricably linked to other aspects of the story,

because the “how” and “what” of Beruriah’s argument are mutually reinforcing. Slow, careful, deliberative interpretation opens up redemptive possibilities that hasty judgments foreclose. And it is not just Rabbi Meir who is reformed by Beruriah’s example—we, as readers, are too. Slowing down so as to track the details of her argument, we enact through our own reading practice the kind of caution and care that Beruriah’s character both models and recommends. The reversal of gender roles that initially hooks us in to the narrative gives way to broader, deeper turnabouts and transformations when we recognize that people—like texts—can surprise us.

The idea that one’s experience of reading a text can shape one’s ethical understanding is central to my understanding of Beruriah’s example, but the idea is by no means limited to Talmudic studies. Nearly twenty years ago, Jane Gallop published an essay in which she characterizes the practice of close reading that she teaches in her college English classes as ethical training.²³ The claims she makes for close reading are closely akin to the claims I make for Beruriah’s exemplarity. Gallop’s argument can thus serve as a scaffold for my own.

Gallop draws a sharp distinction between the practice of close reading that she teaches and the skill that most English classes emphasize when it comes to expository prose: “reading for the main idea.” She exhorts her students to attend to precisely those details that they have been trained to ignore when reading for the main idea. For Gallop, the strategy of close reading surpasses reading for the main idea in two important ways: it is both more pedagogically effective and more ethically valuable.

First, her pedagogical claim: Close reading facilitates the learning process because it impels students to attend to knowledge and perspectives that are new and challenging. According to Gallop, the principal pedagogical problem with reading for the main idea is that it encourages one to project one’s own ideas onto texts, attending only to those features of a text that confirm one’s overarching theory about what

²³ Gallop, 7–17.

the text means and why it is important. Most readers form impressions of a text fairly quickly, and when reading for the main idea, we end up paying attention only to the ways that a text matches our first impressions. When reading for the main idea, we skip over details that are unexpected, dismissing them as trivial if we notice them at all. We ignore the kind of information that would make us revisit our preconceptions and change our minds. Close reading trains students to do the opposite. A close reader lets the details lead to the general idea, instead of the other way around, and attends to that which is unexpected while remaining curious, aware, and questioning. Close reading invites texts to surprise and challenge us, goading us to new understandings.²⁴

As powerful as close reading is as a pedagogical tool, for Gallop, the real pay-off lies beyond the classroom, in the realm of the ethical. She describes close reading as a discipline that trains students to move beyond the solipsism of their own views and experiences to have real encounters with others. In teaching students how to approach texts, she is also teaching them how to engage with other people:

What do I mean by ethical? I believe it is ethical to respect other people, by which I mean: listen to them, try and understand what they are actually saying, rather than just confirming our preconceptions about them, our prejudices. I believe it is our ethical obligation to fight against our tendency to project our preconceptions, that it is our ethical duty to attempt to hear what someone else is really saying.²⁵

According to Gallop, ethics means moving beyond the self and engaging with others with respect and caring. Close reading trains us to live in a world with others by developing our capacities to move beyond our own ideas and prejudices and attend to what others are actually saying. In characterizing close reading as ethical reading, Gallop does not suggest that texts make any particular ethical claims on their readers, but rather proposes that texts serve as stand-ins for people, so that the ways we relate to texts instill patterns of thought and action that we can then extend into

²⁴ Ibid. 10–11.

²⁵ Ibid., 12.

the interpersonal realm. Close reading encourages ethics because it trains readers to bring curiosity and respect to their interactions with others out in the world.

For Gallop, close reading is an activity that can and should be applied to any and all texts.²⁶ Unlike Gallop, my argument focuses on a particular text, a passage from the Babylonian Talmud. In arguing for the exemplarity of Beruriah's act of exegesis, I am proposing that the fine-grained textual analysis advanced by the Talmud promotes the very kind of heightened attentiveness and interpersonal relationship that Gallop attributes to close reading in general. In a sense, then, my study can be seen as one rich example of how Gallop's theory plays out in relation to a particular text. But I actually wish to make a stronger claim on behalf of the Talmud: I contend that there is something special about the forms and styles of Talmudic discourse that recommend it for cultivating the kind of curiosity and concern that Gallop attributes to close reading. While Gallop attributes an ethical orientation to a specific reading practice, I am attaching this orientation to a specific text. In a sense, I am casting the Talmud in the role of professor, arguing that the text itself provides the kind of ethical training that Gallop provides for the students in her English classes. The particular force of the story of Beruriah is that it offers a portrait of a Talmudic reader in action, illustrating how the modes of reading that the Talmud deploys generate ethical understanding in the realm of human relationships. The Talmud's form, content, and language work together to train its readers to read slowly and carefully, and in teaching this, they provide a model for relating to the world outside with humility, curiosity, and respect.

It is important to note that while I'm making a special claim on behalf of the Talmud, it is not the kind of claim that the rabbis of the Talmud—neither those who composed it nor those whose teachings and stories are transmitted within it—would have made themselves. The rabbis that one encounters in the Talmud are masters of close reading, and many of the

²⁶ Rather than a way to read a particular kind of text, it becomes a particular way to read all texts" (Ibid., 8).

signature features that Gallop teaches her students to notice— unusual vocabulary, repetition, and the like—are precisely the kind of textual details that rabbinic exegetes use as hooks for midrash. In the story above, when Beruriah simultaneously teaches her husband how to read a verse from Psalms and how to treat the bullies in their neighborhood, she instantiates the confluence between reading texts and relating to people that Gallop describes. This makes it tempting to overstate the congruence between Gallop’s approach to reading and the way that rabbinic readers like Beruriah approach their reading material. But rabbinic readers would not likely subscribe to Gallop’s egalitarianism with regard to all texts; for the rabbis, it is the sacred character of scriptural language that justifies granular attention to the details. For the creators of the Talmud and its earliest readers, there is a confluence between the special status of certain texts and the special kind of reading it generates.

I emphasize the difference between what Talmudic reading practices meant to rabbis in late antiquity and how they can serve as a model for contemporary ethicists because this difference helps me highlight two distinct aspects of this exercise. First, I am interested in illuminating how the Talmud can be read as ethical literature. While the category of ethics is not native to rabbinic discourse, I contend that the Talmud addresses many of the preoccupations of ethics, albeit in its own distinctive idiom. Bringing an ethical lens to the study of the Talmud reveals aspects of Talmudic discourse that would otherwise be obscured. This aspect of my inquiry is historicist, and it seeks to understand how the creators of the Talmud imagined and expressed visions of human flourishing. A second aspect of this exercise is a constructivist impulse to engage the Talmud as a model for present-day ethical deliberation and theory.

In this essay, I have employed a methodology that the Talmud and contemporary critical scholarship share in common: close reading. Through my analysis of a single narrative, I have pointed to some distinctive features of the Talmud’s ethical vision, including the way its deployment of narrative signals the limits of rule-based reasoning, as well as the way its penchant for close reading invests alterity and particularity with meaning. To return to the question with which I opened, to what

degree can the literary analysis of Talmudic literature contribute to normative ethics? The chief contribution that emerges through this exercise relates not to instances of practical decision-making, but rather to the qualities and habits that characterize ethical decision-makers. In advancing Beruriah as a moral exemplar, the Talmudic storyteller highlights commonalities between the practice of careful reading and the practice of ethical discernment. While close reading does not on its own decide particular ethical questions, it shapes the kind of ethical subject who is well-disposed to make such judgments.

The story of Beruriah is emblematic of how the Talmud uses narrative to nurture the ethical imagination and exegesis to cultivate a judicious acumen. The Talmudic storyteller depicts Beruriah as a model reader: her interventions within the narrative convey the idea that attention to the scriptural text is always already attuned to the exigencies of life, affirming that exegesis can answer the question of what is good in a way that perfectly aligns with the elaboration of what God requires. Though critical scholars approach the Talmud with very different ideas about where sacred texts come from and why they are important, the figure of Beruriah offers a compelling model to contemporary Jewish ethicists. She demonstrates what it means to read with care, putting her scholarly acumen to work in making a difference for people. Even as she intercedes to overturn the established order of things, she tethers her innovations to a textual hook, presenting her interpretive acts as part of a shared communal enterprise. Her story exemplifies how the Talmud's distinctive discourse trains its students to read slowly and carefully, promoting an ethical attitude that resists generalization, that eschews rash judgments, and that attends to the divergent claims of others.