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ENGAGING *DIRSHUNI* AS A COLLECTIVE WOMEN'S ENTERPRISE: A TRANSLATION, COMMENTARY, AND ANALYSIS OF THE STORY OF YEHUDIT

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In the 1970s, the genre of midrash captured the imagination of Jewish, religious feminists.[1] They used the ancient rabbis' methods—including

[1] For a summary of this initiative, one that is ongoing, see Rivkah M. Walton, "Lilith's Daughters, Miriam's Chorus: Two Decades of Feminist Midrash," *Religion and Literature* 43.2 (Summer 2011), 115–127. For Judith Plaskow, as Walton correctly notes, the idea was to "render visible the presence, experience, and deeds of women erased from traditional sources" (*Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* [San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990], 28). Poets and literary critics such as Alicia Suskin Ostriker wrote creative midrash building upon biblical foundations (see *Feminist Revision of the Bible* [Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993] and *The Nakedness of the Fathers: Biblical Vision and Revision* [New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994]). This literary output included everything from novels such as Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent* (New York: Macmillan, 1997) to short stories such as Jill Hammer's *Sisters at Sinai: New Tales of Biblical Women* (Philadelphia: Jewish

audacious interpretation and revision of biblical narrative and law—to grant themselves creative license to rewrite the tradition in their own era. These early feminists appropriated rabbinic interpretive tools to free themselves from history's constraints and rabbinic patriarchal positioning. Theirs was modern midrash, even if their impressive literary output looked nothing like ancient Jewish scriptural interpretation. They were finding their voices and writing women and themselves into the history of Jewish tradition and literature.

Dirshuni embraces the same aims of this earlier work and also represents a new feminist moment. As with early feminist midrash, *Dirshuni* imbues the ancient rabbinic canon with significance and authority while recognizing its limits. Born of a frustration with the androcentric and at times misogynistic content of early Jewish literature, the *Dirshuni* project also unabashedly retrieves the past in order to reconstruct it. In contrast to earlier feminist work, however, *Dirshuni's* midrashim wholly follow the patterns of ancient rabbinic midrash. Displaying their deep knowledge of early rabbinic methods and dialects, the authors of these new midrashim hew close to biblical sources and rabbinic traditions. In doing so, they are forced to continually engage with difficult content that evokes the pain of being sidelined and misunderstood. They voice their own struggles and triumphs, their gratitude and pain, through the reconfiguration of the very same canonical texts that appear to have forgotten them. Far more than earlier feminist midrashists who made looser connections to past material, freely associating in the name of producing new literary compositions, *Dirshuni*'s authors follow the style of their ancient rabbinic ancestors more closely.

As women and academics in the field of rabbinics, we were struck by how the *Dirshuni* project might parallel our own work. For our scholarship, too, we reach back to the male-dominated rabbinic past,

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Publication Society, 2001) to plays and poetry (Merle Feld, "We All Stood Together," https://ritualwell.org/ritual/we-all-stood-together/.). But inasmuch as the rules of the genre of midrash were loose and far-reaching, these poems and stories brought inspiration to a large community of people searching for the voices of those other than men.

attracted to the strange beauty of ancient midrash with its cryptic and allusive hermeneutics. We spend our days tracking down sources and mining dictionaries to unlock these midrashim. We, too, imbue every word and phrase of these ancient texts with significance. In this way, we consistently grapple with the ways that early rabbinic literature objectifies, victimizes, infantilizes, and overlooks women. And yet, sometimes to our own chagrin, we persist in making these texts our focus rather than abandoning them in favor of more palatable material—that is, literature more attuned to modern sensibilities and surely more inclusive. These biblical, Second Temple, and rabbinic sources remain at the center of our life's work. And so we find ourselves searching for forms of analysis and methodologies that open these texts up to new possibilities, at times wondering if we are unearthing what is there in the texts or creating connections that make these texts resonate with us and our contemporary audiences.

A second parallel between *Dirshuni* and feminist scholarship in rabbinics emerges when one observes the contemporary environments in which this work is undertaken. Both *Dirshuni*'s authors and editors as well as feminist rabbinics scholars work with ancient texts that have overlooked them, but also push back against these texts, driven by their present-day experiences. Unlike scholars of rabbinics, the authors and editors of *Dirshuni* stake out a deeply religious claim. They view themselves as partners in the shared endeavor of Torah study and interpretation. They write themselves into the history of Sinaitic revelation, seeing it as continuously unfolding and requiring (finally) the voices of women; they write in the idiom and language of the past, perhaps, we might add, to obscure their late arrival.[2] They do this in a religiously conservative (largely Orthodox by denomination) environment in which women are trained experts in reading rabbinic literature, on the one hand, and encouraged to accept the authority of the patriarchal past, on the other hand, even if they have doubts or struggles.

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[2] Tamar Biala, ed., *Dirshuni: Contemporary Women's Midrash* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2022), xxvii.

In fact, when they began to write their own sacred texts for *Dirshuni*, the largely male Orthodox rabbinic world circled the wagons, as Tamar Biala, an editor of *Dirshuni* reported: "Many people that heard we were doing it told us that we were ruining Judaism." When the first published editions came out, "[there were] horrible, horrible book reviews. A rabbi published a [halakhic responsum] that says you are not allowed to have [the book] at home, and even though there are quotes from the Bible in it you have to throw it in the garbage…."[3] For these contemporary rabbis, new ideas brought to the surface through traditional midrashic skill and knowledge threatened the status quo and needed to be shut down.

As scholars, we are also trained in a type of knowledge-production that belongs to an older, once all-male academy. We must remove our personhood from the process and distance ourselves from affective, creative, or religious reflection in the name of producing "objective" analyses. We must compete to attain mastery over our field of inquiry. At times, our field is best described as what Michael Berubé calls a "culture of intellectual aggression" that encapsulates "a toxic masculinity mode of debate in academe."[4] The authors of *Dirshuni*'s boldness, however, in the face of stark opposition, has made us think about what it looks like to confidently push back against a patriarchal, meritocratic, intellectual culture that is insular, heteronormative, hierarchical, and competitive by engaging in the act of writing ourselves into this textual tradition. *Dirshuni*, born out of similar frustrations with a patriarchal culture, has also reminded us of the power of feminism to challenge past structures and to think about new alternatives, not only for women, but for all.

This article traces our foray into the world of *Dirshuni*, capturing a kind of experience that is often missing from our typical work-mode. We are choosing to document our process as a kind of auto-ethnography: a

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[3] Tamar Biala and Avi Killip, "The Missing Half of the Jewish Bookshelf: Israeli Women Writing Midrash," YouTube, uploaded by CSP - Community Scholar Program, Feb 23, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PfiXAUqK9Cw&ab_channel=ArieKatz, at 11:30 and 12:23.

[4]Michael Bérubé, "An Audacious Argument for Modesty," *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 135.5 (2020): 970–975, (here) 974.

feminist collaboration as a model for working through a complex midrashic text built on wordplay, allusion, and associative logic. We reached for midrashim that would thematize this process as well, that were at least to some extent self-reflexive. We found ourselves drawn to a midrash by Ruth Kara-Ivanov Kaniel built on an obscure Talmudic woman, Yehudit, who is grappling with childbearing in b. Yevamot 65b–66a.[5] In Kaniel's new midrash we are made witnesses to her personal frustrations with the world she inhabits and her journey out. In Kaniel's hands, the Yehudit of b. Yevamot 65b–66a is recharacterized. Highlighting Yehudit's role as a birthing mother, Kaniel enables her to take on the strength and cleverness of the biblical Tamar, the anguish of the foremother Rachel, and the loneliness and invisibility of the wives in prophetic marriage metaphors who are abused, renamed, or discarded by their husbands as a kind of performance art. Yehudit's frustrations reverberate throughout the midrash as she considers how a life lived within the patriarchal constraints of her culture—a life devoted to raising children—infringes on becoming a great Torah scholar. Men can have both in Yehudit's world; women cannot. And then, following our instinct to read rabbinic passages in conversation with others in the same document or written during the same time period, we followed the trajectory from Kaniel's midrash to others. We came upon another entry from the new English volume.[6] It drew us in because of its struggle to imagine the more utopian fantasy of scholarly fulfillment that Kaniel merely wishes for in presenting her vision of Yehudit.

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[5] Ruth Kara-Ivanov Kaniel, "בוס עקרין," in *Dirshuni I: Israeli Women Writing Midrash* (Hebrew), ed. Nehama Weingarten-Mintz and Tamar Biala (2009). https://www.sefaria.org/Dirshuni_I%2C_Marriage_and_Fertility%2C_X.1?vhe=Dirshuni,_Israeli_Women_Writing_Midrash._Tel_Aviv,_2009&lang=bi. By placing the words from b. Yevamot, סַמָּא דְּעֵקְרֵתָא, into the search bar in Sefaria, the search brings up Kaniel's midrash in *Dirshuni*. This means that *Dirshuni* functions as a commentary of sorts and one can easily locate its midrashim online connected to a base text.

[6] Hila (Halevy) Unna, "Daughters of the Place," in *Dirshuni: Contemporary Women's Midrash*, ed. Tamar Biala (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2022), 152.

The Beginning: Our Textual Encounter with *Dirshuni* on b. Yevamot 65b–66a

Inviting the type of creativity evident in midrashic texts, the authors of *Dirshuni* midrashim courageously link themselves to the same project as their male rabbinic predecessors, using a similar associative midrashic approach. In so doing, they offer up the same challenges to us—the task of figuring out how one text unlocks another. While this journal issue marks the publication of the landmark volume of English translations of some of *Dirshuni*'s midrashim,[7] we decided to begin with a midrash from the original Hebrew/Aramaic volumes, much as we do in all of our work. We applaud the nuanced and sensitive translations in the volume and the commentary that accompanies them; however, we wanted to examine as closely as possible the trajectory of the authors as they navigated the Hebrew and Aramaic source material to construct new midrash.

Having sought out the original versions of the midrashim and divided up our tasks to begin our translating, we surprised ourselves by seeking out each other instead of working independently. For each of us, one of the main challenges was deciphering poetic or idiomatic uses of modern Hebrew, which we could not always distinguish from early Hebrew terminology. To make sense of the many obscure (to us) lines and phrases in the midrash, and to unearth all of the midrashic and literary nuance, we felt drawn to working together. Perhaps vocabulary that was obscure to one of us, we thought, would be obvious to the other, and vice versa. We noted that just as ancient rabbinic texts do, the *Dirshuni* texts drove us to traditional *havruta* learning, often missing from our scholarly projects. Ridding ourselves of any discomfort in revealing our uncertainties, and attempting to clarify and free-associate with each other, we recognized we might generate much more understanding together.

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[7] *Dirshuni: Contemporary Women's Midrash*, ed. Tamar Biala (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2022).

Step Two: b. Yevamot 65b–66a

As we began our *havruta* sessions, we turned first to the main intertext of the *Dirshuni* midrash, its dialogue partner. It is a rare Talmudic passage that features a named woman, in this case, Yehudit,[8] who poses a halakhic question and then acts in response. Yehudit stood out for us precisely because her story is often already considered feminist, or at least progressive for its time. In fact, she has gained much feminist scholarly attention for her use of a legal loophole to carve out a legally valid opportunity to stop having children, and possibly even to abort the one she is carrying.[9] Feminist midrash often tends to find the gaps in the record and "give voice" to women who were deprived of one. We were fascinated by how this subversive text about a woman taking matters of her body into her own hands in b. Yevamot would serve as a basis for additional feminist commentary.

More specifically, b. Yevamot 65b–66a is constructed to examine the Mishnaic debate (m. Yevamot 6:6) regarding whether both women and men are required to procreate as conveyed in Genesis 1:28 or whether the commandment falls only on men. If both husband and wife are required to produce progeny, there is the expected consequence that women would need to divorce infertile husbands who could not impregnate them so that they could remarry and have children.[10] Requiring both husbands and

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[8] We considered that this "name," Yehudit, is also a general word meaning "Jewess." As such, Yehudit emerges as a kind of "everywoman" rather than just a specific one.

[9] See Judith Hauptman, *Rereading the Rabbis: A Woman's Voice* (Boulder: Westview Press), 130–140, and Barry Scott Wimpfheimer's discussion, "Footnotes to Carnal Israel: Infertility and the Legal Subject," in *Talmudic Transgressions*, ed. Charlotte Fonrobert et al.(Leiden: Brill: 2017), 168–180.

[10] m. Yevamot 6:6 and t. Yevamot 8:5 (ed. Lieberman) command men to divorce their wives if they do not procreate. This is in keeping with the general law of divorce which gives men the power to divorce their wives and not wives, their husbands. However, b. Yevamot 65b offers examples of women who come before rabbis to ask that their husbands be forced to grant them divorces because they had not been able to have children. Compare this also to discussions in Yerushalmi Yevamot (y. Yevamot 6:6, 7d) as discussed by Hauptman, *Rereading the Talmud*, 139–140, esp. 134, and Shana Strauch Schick, "'And God Blessed Them':

wives to procreate would also lessen the risk that women would be left without children to take care of them in their old age, a point that b. Yevamot 65b makes quite clearly. On the other hand, a commandment of procreation directed only at men allows men to divorce infertile wives at will after a period of time and remarry.[11] They can also remain married and take second wives for the purpose of producing offspring, sidelining the first wife who will produce no heirs. Moreover, as b. Yevamot 65b observes, when women are not required for the same commandment of procreation, it leaves them with more freedom to do as they please with family planning, such as limiting the number of pregnancies they have or deciding not to have children altogether. Despite this window of female agency, the patriarchal framing of the talmudic passage is evident, as the passage ends supporting the point that only men are required to procreate. Along the way however, the talmudic discussion keeps the following questions front and center: Which path helps foster rabbinic ideals and family values more? Is it an obligation to procreate, or an exemption from procreation for women? The Talmudic passage cannot settle on a satisfying answer.

Evidence for the rabbinic struggle with this issue arises right in the middle of b. Yevamot 65b–66a, where we find the story of Yehudit:

> יהודית דביתהו דר' חייא הוה לה צער לידה. שנאי מנה ואתאי לקמי' דר' חייא אמרה אתתא מפקדא אפריה ורביה א' לה לא. אזלא אישתיא סמא דעקרת'. לסוף איגלאי מילת' אמ' לה איכו ילדת לי חדא כרסא אחריתי. דאמ' מר יודא וחזקיה אחי פזי וטוי אחוותא
>
> Is this not like the case of Yehudit, the wife of R. Hiyya, who had pain in childbirth? She changed her clothes and came before R. Hiyya and said: is a woman obligated in procreation? He said to her: No. She went and drank a potion of sterility. In the end, it was revealed, and he said to her:

Procreation in Palestinian Halakhah and in Babylonian Aggadah," in *Land and Spirituality in Rabbinic Literature: A Memorial Volume for Yaakov Elman*, ed. Shana Strauch Schick (Leiden: Brill Reference Library of Judaism, 2022), 260–291. See Schick's notes regarding the *Tosefta*, 266, n. 24, where she points out that Saul Lieberman follows the Genizah fragments and MS Vienna. See Lieberman's discussion in, *Tosefta Kefshuta: Seder Nashim*, Parts 6–7, 67–68.

[11] m. Yevamot 6:6 and t. Yevamot 8:4–6.

> "If only you had given birth to another bellyful for me." (b. Yevamot 65b–66a, according to MS Munich 141)[12]

Yehudit disguises herself and comes before a rabbinic decisor, R. Hiyya (who also happens to be her husband), and asks him whether women are obligated in the commandment of procreation. He confirms that they are not. Yehudit then leaves his presence and immediately drinks a potion that will make her infertile.[13] The anonymous voice in the Bavli passage tells us that Yehudit wished to save herself from the physical pain of pregnancy and childbirth, and that she has already given her husband children, which gives her leeway to choose not to get pregnant again (or possibly to abort her current pregnancy). Quite intentionally, the passage uses Yehudit to make a point about the mishnah's disagreement over who is required to procreate, siding with the position that women are exempt. Ironically, while Yehudit is empowered within a legal system through an exemption, her worth is still measured only by the productive womb she possesses and the children she can birth for her husband Rabbi Hiyya. Yehudit's story is contained within a patriarchal frame. In the end, Rabbi Hiyya fails to understand Yehudit's motivations and castigates her for choosing not to offer him another womb full of children. Halakhically, though, the passage ends by siding with the position that only men are required to fulfill the commandment to procreate.

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[12] The story segment in the Bavli actually ends with the somewhat strange anonymous gloss, "As the Master says, Yuda and Hizkiah were brothers and Pazi and Tavi were sisters." We have chosen to leave it out here for the sake of better comprehension. It is a gloss by the *stammaim* that attempts to lessen the radicality of Yehudit's act, either by letting us know that she already has four children and has already "done her duty" when it comes to child-rearing, and/or that she had a pattern of having twins that made her childbirth experiences more painful than typical births. On this point, see Shana Strauch Schick, "'And God Blessed Them'": Procreation in Palestinian Halakhah and in Babylonian Aggadah," in *Land and Spirituality in Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Shana Strauch Schick (Leiden: Brill, 2022): 260–291, (here) 275.

[13] Wimpfheimer notes the following possible interpretation in "Footnotes to Carnal Israel," 180: "An examination of the story's language, however, suggests that the issue [for Yehudit] might not be the memory of difficult labors but the present pain of pregnancy. On this reading, the sterilizing potion is both an abortifacient and a sterilizer."

Step Three: Diving into the *Dirshuni* Midrash

Yehudit's story has been tamed by generations of male commentary,[14] which turns this story on its head to allow women the freedom of choice about their procreative bodies only in exceptional circumstances. But it becomes a springboard for a vision of true feminist liberation in the hands of the scholar and poet Ruth Kara-Ivanov Kaniel. An academic herself who had explored this passage in her scholarly work,[15] Kaniel experimented with the midrashic license granted to her by the *Dirshuni* project to move herself and us beyond academic analysis. Cryptic like midrash, rich in poetic flourish, challenging in the way outside ideas are brought into it, Kaniel's midrash draws us to the characters she builds out of words and worlds familiar to us.

In Kaniel's midrashic commentary on b. Yevamot 65b–66a, Yehudit's voice is centered in her interchange with her husband. We glimpse her inner life and the emotional and physical pain women like Yehudit experience in childbirth, which dominates her thoughts and feelings. A woman who chooses to end what we might presume is the physical pain she experiences in childbirth becomes a locus for Kaniel to consider the deep emotional pain women experience when their desire to have access

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[14] Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Issurei Biah, 16:12; Joseph Karo, *Shulhan Arukh*, Even Haezer, 5:12, make the argument that women can take potions so that they will not get pregnant, turning Bavli Yevamot 65b–66a into a jumping off point for discussions about contraception. Moshe Feinstein, however, in *Iggrot Moshe*, Even Haezer, 1:13, notes that such allowances are only when a woman's life is in danger and not because of travail in childbirth (ודאי אין להתיר אלא במקום סכנה ולא בשביל צערא בעלמא), like the case in Yevamot expressed through Yehudit. Compare this to further discussions in: Rachel Biale, *Women and Jewish Law: The Essential Texts, Their History, and Their Relevance for Today* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1984; 2011), 211–213; Judith Hauptman, *Rereading the Rabbis*, 130–140; Judith Baskin, "Rabbinic Reflections on the Barren Wife," *Harvard Theological Review* 82.1 (1989), 101–114; David Feldman, *Marital Relations, Birth Control, and Abortion in Jewish Law* (New York: New York University Press, 1968), 54; Ronit Irshai, *Fertility and Jewish Law: Feminist Perspectives on Orthodox Responsa Literature* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2012), 53–58. Finally, see the following halakhic presentation on the website of the Orthodox Union: https://www.ou.org/blog/birth-control-whats-halacha/.

[15] This text is examined by Kaniel herself in Ruth Kara-Ivanov Kaniel, *Birth in Kabbalah and Psychoanalysis* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2022), 110.

to the same life that men do—Torah study, not child-rearing—is not valued. She prompts us to consider what a Jewish community looks like when women question their role as solely biological progenitors rather than intellectual ones.

The "Yehudit" midrash we chose presented us with a particular set of roadblocks. The lack of clarity in one text required another to reveal its meaning, and these complex associations then generated more meanings. A deep and very slow dive highlighted for us how each word used in *Dirshuni* brims with multivocal significance. Each phrase is chosen to conjure up biblical images, rabbinic narratives, and legal categories pointing the reader to a network of ideas that is continuously dynamic rather than static. In this sense, the midrash gave us far too many threads to successfully contain. We struggled with these allusions, trying to figure out how to correctly identify which ones were "right" and which underlying message was most salient. We chose to follow each textual thread, allowing ourselves to "get distracted," examining each possibility. We were then confronted with an entirely new and puzzling configuration of (biblical, rabbinic, medieval, and modern) Hebrew and Aramaic fragments that did not readily offer up a unified meaning. We wondered aloud: How could we pull this together into an essay with a coherent argument?

As we read, we also encountered half-formed ideas. In fact, *Dirshuni* makes no claim to produce clearly developed analyses as the academic might expect; these are not essays containing a set of ideas that are clearly mapped out. Were we getting it all wrong? A new type of constraint on our play with meaning presented itself in the form of authors and editors who were still alive, who might even read what we had to say about their work. We knew full well that the original intent of the author does not define the meaning of the text, but still, we felt compelled to turn to the author (Ruth Kara-Ivanov Kaniel), indulging in a luxury we had never before been able to enjoy in our work on third- or sixth-century texts. These conversations also extended our circle of collaboration, as we felt in a small way included in the *Dirshuni* community of learners and writers.

Another resource we turned to in trying to make sense of our "Yehudit" midrash was the collection of notes that ran beneath the midrashim in the Hebrew version of *Dirshuni.* These notes were cryptic, unlike in the English edition, where we found commentaries written as essays and associated with each midrash. Often the notes were nothing more than a citation of a biblical, rabbinic, or medieval source. We believed these would help us narrow down the author's trains of thought, following her references instead of our own associations. But this assumption turned out to be wrong. We reached out to the editor of *Dirshuni* (Tamar Biala), who told us that in many cases these notes were added by the editors of *Dirshuni* and not the authors of the midrashim themselves.[16] This seemingly minor point reminded us that even midrashim that have a named author (or tradent) function as a "base" text that is already infused with analyses and glosses at the editorial level. We recalled how the extraordinary polysemy of rabbinic midrash is most likely the result of a composite text: a redactor gathering together words from many different interpreters and arranging them, perhaps with glosses, as he saw fit. A similar process was now in its infancy with the *Dirshuni* collection. Its editors thought about which textual references in the base text should be explicitly noted and which could remain under the surface. The notes are thus suggestive but not definitive. *Dirshuni* posits that the knowledge we bring to our reading of the base texts gives us the freedom to draw what we want from a vast sea of material. We can follow the notes, add to them, ignore them, or disagree with them. There is always more room for another interpretation.

In the end, we were left with an English text and a network of references of associations we could not readily disentangle. As we thought about what thread we could pull out for our organizing argument or theme, we felt bereft of the richness of the threads we had to leave behind. It occurred to us that far more than a traditional scholarly essay, a commentary would capture the deep and multi-directional work we had done. And so we settled on writing a translation and commentary,

[16] Personal communication with *Dirshuni* editor Tamar Biala, May 21, 2023.

imitating the recently published English edition. It may represent a modest contribution to an ongoing project of translation and commentary.

Below we present Kaniel's midrash, placing relevant footnotes found in the original *Dirshuni* collection in the right-hand column and our own notes based on our interchange with each other and with the author in the left-hand column, adding our own layer of commentary to that which we found in the volume.

Step Four: Translation and Annotation

Notes (Lehman and Halberstam)	**Translation** (Lehman and Halberstam)	**Original Midrash** (Ruth Kara-Ivanov Kaniel)	**Selected Notes** (*Dirshuni*) (trans. Lehman and Halberstam)
	A woman is permitted to dwell without a man: so the man says a-bout the woman. And another man says: She is not permitted to dwell	האשה רשאי לישב שלא באיש', ככה אמר האיש על האשה, ואיש אחר אמר: 'לא רשאי לישב	***A woman is permitted****: See Tosefta Yevamot 8:2*
Female language*: there is a play here on the grammatical concept of feminine language and the language of women's pain.*	And they had difficulty with this statement and they repeated and disagreed and spoke—as though they did not have female language	ודחקו באותה פסיקה ושנו וחלקו ואמרו, כאילו לא הייתה להם לשון נקבה	

Pain in child-birth: *Kaniel wants this phrase to speak to more than just "painful child-birth." This is a kind of pain that includes "distress and sorrow" and continues well be-yond the birthing process.*[17] ***And if not****: in this verse Rachel screams, "Give me children, and if not I shall die!" The first part of the verse is left out here, rendering the source of Rachel's pain more ambiguous. Even so, this passage emphasizes that the only women these halakhists are familiar with are ones who did give birth and rear children, rendering their under-standing of women who choose not to*	And oh, how this man was such an expert to say a-loud: "There is a woman who wants to prohibit herself to her husband" or "a woman experiences pain in childbirth." It is as if he never came from the body of a woman, as if that [fore]-mother never screamed, "and if not, I will die!"	וכמה האיש בקיא לומר בקול רם ונישא: 'יש אשה רוצה להיאסר על בעלה', 'אשה יש לה צער לידה', כאילו לא יצא מגוף אשה, כאילו אמא שם לא זעקה ואם-אֵין-אני-מֵתָה	***To prohibit her-self:*** *See Maimon-ides, Mishneh Torah, ishut 24:6* ***Pain in childbirth:****.b. Qiddush-in 12b [this is a parallel text to b. Yev 65b–66a]* ***And if not****: Genesis 30:1*

[17] Personal communication with author, May 23, 2023.

have children even more remote.			
And a man said: *referring back to the story in b. Yevamot*	A woman tried to say "Ah." She tried to say, "I have pain—" And a man said: "it's too bad that your womb is not fit for purpose."	אשה ניסתה לומר 'אה'. היא ניסתה לומר 'יש לי צער - '. ואיש אמר, 'חבל שהכרס שלך כבר לא כשירה	
Please recognize*: in the biblical passage quoted and duplicated here, Ta-mar forces Judah to realize that he had neglected her needs.* ***I****: the word 'ana here carries different Hebrew (oh! I pray!) and Aramaic ("I") meanings, both of which are appropriate in this woman's need to be seen as her own person.*	A woman said "Ah" and said, "this is me—," "please recognize, please recognize me, I pray, I—, please recognize."	אשה אמרה 'אה', ואמרה 'זו אני -', 'הכר נא, הכר נא, אנא. הכר נא	***Please recognize****: Genesis 38:25*
Voices he did not see*: Women's voices are as vivid as the thunder of*	And a man did not hear her; he did not see the voices when she	ואיש לא שמע, קולות לא ראה,	***Voices he did not see****: Exodus 20:15*

revelation at Sinai, but they are not perceived.	did not call him her man or her sexual possessor.	כשלא קראה לו אישה ולא בועלה	***Her man**: Hosea 2:18*
***A woman drank**: this paragraph is poetic/associative rather than linear.* ***A cup of barrenness**: reference to the named Yehudit in b. Yev 65b-66a* ***Drank blood**: the most enigmatic clause of the midrash, as consuming blood is anathema (detested by God, according to the Torah) and thus not found in rabbinic sources. However, the clause calls up several associations, most of which are referred to via citations in the notes. (1) there is wordplay with the similar sounds of shotah (drink) and shotet (flows out), so there may be a*	A woman drank a cup of barrenness, a woman drank blood, a woman found herself excommunicated. A man spoke and a woman drank—a man who is infinitely permitted to dwell wants on the birthing stool of the woman.	אשה שתתה כוס עקרין, אשה שתתה דם, אשה התחפשה מנודה, איש דיבר ואשה שתתה, איש שרשאי תמיד לישב על משבר האשה	***A woman drinks blood**: drinking (sheti'ah) or flowing (shotet) blood, as in m. Ohal 3:5 [flowing blood from a crucified man]; Deuteronomy Rabbah 3:8 [the Egyptians drink blood from the Nile]; t. Sot 2:3 [a woman's mouth is pried open and she is forced to drink the waters of the suspected adulteress]* ***Birthing stone**: m. Niddah 10:5 [a woman who dies on the birthing stone and emits blood still conveys menstrual impurity]; m. Arakh 1:4 [you can wait for a woman to give birth before proceeding with*

deliberate confusion of which flow goes in or which comes out of the body; (2) there is ambiguity in the meaning of "dam"—literal blood (as in menstrual blood) or guilt (as in the suspected adulteress). In the Sotah ritual, a woman must literally drink to reveal her guilt; and (3) a rabbinic theory of lactation in which menstrual blood "decomposes" and turns into breastmilk (see b. Nid. 9a).[18] ***To dwell on the birthing stool**: in determining the halakhah, a man gives himself infinite permission to determine a woman's status and worth based on her bodily functions. The*			*her execution if she is sitting on the birthing stone]*

[18] See Kaniel, *Birth in Kabbalah and Psychoanalysis*, 110.

term mishbar/ mashber is more literal in mishnaic Hebrew, meaning a birthing stool. In biblical Hebrew it is even more specific, referring to the opening of the cervix. A man can be seen to sit and monitor even these most private parts of women's experience.			
	In the end this woman says "my soul desires Torah and your soul desires my womb. So what should I do since that which is sealed with the pain of the womb cannot be revoked.	ולבסוף איתתה זו (שיש-בה), אמרה, 'נפשי בתורה חשקה, ונפשך בכרסי חשוקה אך מה אעשה שאת הנֶחְתָּם בחֶבֶל טָבּוּר אין להשיב	***My soul desires**: like Ben Azzai who remained unmarried in order to study Torah (b. Yevamot 63b)*
***Time for Torah**: this may be an allusion to women's exemption from precisely those commandments which are time-bound, including Torah*	"And the time of Torah runs to her; and she is like a mother who is tethered to her infant, and tethered to her nursing child,	והתורה זמנה אץ לה ורץ לה, והיא כאם זקוקה לתינוקתה וזקוקה ליניקתה	***The Torah is like a mother**: b. Eruvin 54b: "Why were matters of Torah compared to a breast? Just as with a breast, whenever a baby feels for it they find*

study. The woman here realizes she is bound by time and yet is pulled to fulfill the commandment anyway.			*milk in it, so too, with words of Torah. Whenever a person utters them, he finds taste/ meaning in them.*
***Finder and redeemer**: more liter-ally translated as abstract nouns "finding" and "redemption." More concrete connect-ions seem apt here.*	"and tethered, like a foundling to her finder and redeemer. The Torah is tethered to me since she, here, is isolated and alone.	וזקוקה כאסופית למציאה וגאולה זקוקה לי תורה שהיא כה בודדה לבדה	***Like a lost child**: According to Ezekiel 16*
***I can't**: the im-plication here is that I will never be able to later.* ***Being fruitful and multiplying**: we have come full circle here, having begun with the question of whether a woman must pro-create and ending with the question of metaphorical barrenness if a woman neglects Torah.*	"And if I do not learn, I can't, for the one who does not learn Torah at the time of her betrothal, in her youth, then can-not acquire it, and is compared to someone who loses his world in one moment and voids the com-mandment of being fruitful and multiplying." And she said, "I can't."	ואם לא אלמד, איני יכולה. שמי שאינו לומד תורה בשעה היעודה, בנערותה, כבר אינו יכול לקנותה ומשול למפסיד עולמו בשעה אחת ומבטל מצוות פריה ורביה" ואמרה: 'איני יכולה'. ואמרה 'עלה נעלה וירשנו אתה כי יכול נוכל לה' (במדבר יג, ל נוכל לה עתה. רק עתה	***The one who does not learn**: Deut Rab 8:6*

***Num 13:30**: this quoted verse is Caleb's response to the other (pessimistic) spies, reminding Israel that they can indeed successfully conquer the land of Canaan with God by their side.*	And she said: "let us go up and inherit it for we are well able to overcome it" (Num 13:30). We can overcome it now, only now.		

Commentary

In the first half of the midrash above, b. Yevamot 65b–66a serves as a backdrop for a sardonic critique of the male-centered nature of halakhic discussions regarding issues that pertain to women[19]—in this case a debate over whether women can "dwell" alone or not. Kaniel's midrash recalls a typical rabbinic dispute lifted from Tosefta Yevamot 8:2 that situates us, the readers, in a world where men are making legal determinations about the place of women, that is, about whether they need to marry or not. The silence of women is not surprising. However, Kaniel enters startlingly fresh territory when as a seasoned (Torah) scholar, she does more than add the voices of women. She echoes the weary cries of women like ourselves who utter the refrain "here those rabbis go again, those men, who call themselves experts on what women do and want," assuming ancient women would likely have brimmed with similar resentments. She plays with the idiom "*leshon neqeva,*" the feminine half of Hebrew's grammatical gender system, and it is "as though" male decision makers do not possess or utilize it. This comment ties in to some ancient midrashic grammar-play as well in this passage in

[19] The order of Mishnaic tractates is somewhat ironically entitled *Nashim* (Women). Far from a series of works about women, as Kaniel and others point out, they are works about how patriarchal rabbinic halakhah and culture view and treat women.

Yevamot: R. Nahman b. Yitshaq's revocalization of the biblical Hebrew term "וְכִבְשֻׁהָ" (*ve-kivshu-ha*, "and you (pl) shall conquer it") to the singular (*ve-kivshah*, "and you (sg) shall conquer it) in order to exclude women from the *entire* commandment: "Be (you, pl.) fruitful and (you, pl.) multiply, fill (you, pl.) the earth and conquer (you, sg.) it" (b. Yevamot 65b). The commentator seemingly forgets the inclusive plural imperative God uses when speaking to both Adam and Eve throughout the rest of the passage. "Forgetting" the feminine half of the grammar system is a symptom, for Kaniel, of the male establishment ignoring or not comprehending the full gamut of what women need to say about their birthing bodies. Kaniel wonders how the sages can so casually refer to women who "want" or "choose" to be single and childless as though it were a simple decision and "lifestyle choice" instead of one wrenched from the depths of agony and sacrifice. The implicit accusation here is that the rabbis fail to reckon with the way the culture they live in and the religious obligations they fashion so drastically limit women's options. Breaking free of their prescribed roles takes overwhelming strength of will. It also leads to little else for women other than abandonment, and even excommunication.

Kaniel draws directly from the biblical narrative's emphasis on and reversal of the foremothers' childlessness and exclusion from childbearing. Women in the biblical narrative eventually give birth, although their ordeal percolates to the surface of the narrative as they try to claim a place for themselves in Israelite history. Their pain is palpable. And despite b. Yevamot's full consideration of the possibility that women might be required to procreate, women's deep feelings about the issue, echoed in biblical pleas for children like that of Rachel in Genesis 30:1, are not considered here and rarely given full consideration in rabbinic literature. In fact, the only rabbinic commentary on Rachel's desperate plea displaces women altogether. In b. Nedarim (64b) and in Genesis Rabbah (71:6), the rabbis use Rachel's cry to make a more general point: "four (m.) are considered (m. pl.) as dead (m. pl.): the poor man (m.), the leper (m.), the blind man (m.), and the childless man (m., lit: he who does not have sons). … And the childless man (m.), as it is written, "Give me

children or I will die."[20] Rachel's anguish is put in the mouth of a childless *man*, reappropriated as part of an admonition to prod men into having children (so as to remain alongside the healthy, able-bodied, and middle-class). Kaniel attempts to rectify this imbalance by reminding us that it was "our mother" (*'imma'*) who bluntly spat out these words, like the millions of silent, infertile women who would walk in her footsteps.

Taking full midrashic license with Genesis 30:1 by quoting only *some* of Rachel's words of distress—"If not I shall die," and leaving out the remainder of the verse and its context, notably the beginning of the utterance "Give me children"—Kaniel opens up these anguished words to a wider spectrum of women who do not have the same experiences or desire to birth children. She induces us to recognize a broader women's agony that is generated by the commandment to procreate and that is not easily assuaged. A culture in which it is compulsory to "be fruitful and multiply" drowns out the voices of women tormented not only by infertility but also by other concerns that might lead them to not want to have children, from the physical and emotional pain of childbearing and its mortal dangers to their worries that children would hold them back from achieving in other areas of life. Unlike the midrash in b. Nedarim and Genesis Rabbah that removes Rachel's anguish from women altogether to place it upon men, Kaniel broadens the number of women Rachel's cry can include beyond those struggling with infertility. Kaniel redirects our focus, putting some distance between us and the common (and often lone) biblical trope connecting women with infertility (that is ultimately reversed for our righteous foremothers). But, as Kaniel tells us, unfortunately, none of these cries—from the traditional desire for children to the less traditional desire to avoid child-rearing—garner any response.

If procreation is a commandment incumbent on men alone, it supersedes the very well-being, needs, and personhood of wives who have to be fertile, do the birthing, the childrearing, and give up anything that stands in the way of enabling their husbands to fulfill this

[20] See Genesis Rabbah 71:6 and its parallel in b. Nedarim 64b. Also see echoes in Rashi's commentary on Genesis 30:1.

commandment. And while the commandment, when required only of men, appears to offer women ways to work around the legal system in their own favor, as evidenced by the sterility potion that Yehudit drinks in b. Yevamot 65b, the law does little to widen the possibilities of female personhood. In b. Yevamot, Rabbi Hiyya expresses his desire for more children. Women are what their husbands and their community expect of them—they are the ones who enable their husband's commandedness so that they have progeny—or not.

Once Kaniel turns back to our story in Yevamot, leaving Rachel aside, she anonymizes Yehudit, presenting us with a woman (any woman) who struggles to speak for herself, but is unsuccessful. All she can do is "try" to speak, but everything she says emerges from her mouth as clipped and incomplete. She utters syllables that are not words, and phrases that have no context: "Ah," "I have pain—", and "this is me—." Her male interlocutor tunes her out and says nothing. In fact, one of her anguished, truncated phrases, "please recognize הַכֶּר־נָּא," reverberates with biblical resonances that magnify the sense of frustration. The midrash moves away from Rachel to ventriloquize Tamar, the biblical daughter-in-law of Judah (Yehudah—a fitting intertext for Yehudit). Tamar finds her voice only after she becomes pregnant with her father-in-law's child by pretending to be a sex worker. Like Yehudit, she figures out how to get what she wants by disguising herself so that a close family member will not recognize her. Her goal? To birth Israelite progeny. Tamar lays an elaborate trap that forces Judah to impregnate her and thereby recognize his own neglect of her in his failure to ensure that she has progeny with his third son and therefore to birth an ancestral line for Yehudah (Gen. 38:25). In the end, Tamar gets Judah to humble himself because she presents him with physical proof that the baby she carries is his, and he admits, "You are more right than I" (Gen. 38:26).[21] The anguished cries of Kaniel's female speaker duplicate Tamar's but die in the air. This woman,

[21] This story also deals with procreation, and levirate marriage—a full explanation of which is beyond the scope of this article.

like Tamar, desperately wants to be heard and recognized, but unlike Tamar, her pleas for recognition have no direct object since she has no physical proof to back up what she wants to say. Tamar uses her sexuality to grab Yehudah's attention because she wants to get pregnant; Yehudit wishes pregnancy away because it is precisely what she wants to avoid. Hence, the pregnant Tamar is recognized, while the child-free woman Kaniel imagines is ignored. By using the midrashic device of putting Rachel's and Tamar's words into our Talmudic woman's mouth, Kaniel lets us know just how much more—worlds more—Yehudit has to say, but she has not been given the space to say it. Her cries of distress might even be as overwhelming and loud as the thunder (*kolot*) accompanying God's revelation on Mount Sinai, a further allusion in Kaniel's midrash. Still, husbands cannot hear them, seeing their wives only as wombs that must incubate progeny. There is no real language to express the varied ways women feel pain that men can hear and decipher.

A subsequent snippet in the *Dirshuni* text, בשלא קראה לו אישה ולא בועלה, draws us to the prophets, recalling Hosea 2 and Isaiah 54 and their suffering women. These biblical passages consist of metaphors for Israel (extended, in the case of Hosea 2) as women who are alone, who long for the care of a loving partner. We receive another window into women's inner lives, however blurry, as we unravel Kaniel's elliptical use of these biblical images. The poetry of Hosea 2 is breathtaking and straightforward as God plays the abusive husband to Israel, the wife who is imagined to have scorned her caregiver. The foreign gods appear in this poem as the wayward wife's many lovers; she has "run after" (Hos 2:9) these *Ba'alim*, an honorific that means "Lord," "Master"—or "husband." And so the prophetic oracle proclaims that one day Israel, like a forlorn and abandoned wife, will come back to God and God will take her back: "'and on that day,' says YHWH, 'you will call me "my man" [*'ishi*] and you will no longer call me "my Lord/Husband [*ba'ali*]"'" (Hos 2:18). The even pairing of "woman" and "man" —*' isha /'ish* —replaces the unequal woman/husband (master) (*' isha /ba'al*) in both the strict, definitional sense and in the aural reception of these words. A reader of this passage would not be faulted for being astounded by this biblical gesture towards, and

idealization of, an egalitarian relationship not only between husband and wife but between God and God's people. Women (or nations) may rebel if a man (or a deity) tries to control them and limit their freedom, as this chapter in Hosea tells us, but she will come back with love if her partner stands before her as her equal, if he is the *'ish* to her *'ishah*.

The speaker in our midrash *rejects* this idealized male-partner image alongside the husband/master image, spurning both equally. It goes another radical step beyond the biblical poem, giving us a woman who does not want to come back to a man at all. Kaniel enhances this image even more by using a common tool of rabbinic midrash that we saw above, revocalizing "my *ba'al*" in Hosea 2:18 to "my *bo'el*." *Bo'el* is the participial form of a verb root used exclusively in Talmudic dialect for sexual intercourse in which the man is always the active agent (he "sexually possesses"), and the woman the passive one (she "is sexually possessed").[22] The allusion to the *ba'al* gods does not really resonate with rabbinic or contemporary readers, so aggressive sexual possession that asserts dominance over the woman stands in here for the alternative to a more desirable relationship of partners on equal footing.

This term may also allude to another line in biblical, prophetic poetry if we follow the *Dirshuni* notes: כִּי בֹעֲלַיִךְ עֹשַׂיִךְ יְיָ צְבָאוֹת שְׁמוֹ, "For your husband/master is your maker, God of hosts is His name" (Is 54:5).[23] Rather than rejecting a hierarchical husband-wife relationship as Hosea does, this prophetic poet doubles down on it, demonstrating that the woman (a metaphor for Israel, again) would surely be nothing if the husband, who is God, was not ruling over her. He "made her," in all senses of the phrase. Kaniel's midrash bounces from the somewhat gentler imagery of Hosea to the far harsher metaphor in Isaiah. But then she negates (and essentially equates) both by pointing out that in each biblical passage, what is of interest to the reader or hearer is the metaphorical woman's relationship to "her man." What if this unnamed woman wants to embrace neither a

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[22] See Michael Sokoloff, "בעל," *DJBA*, 227.

[23] Lit. "For the one who owns/rules you is the one who makes you."

more egalitarian relationship nor a hierarchical one; what if, Kaniel posits, "she *does not* (*ke-she-lo'*) call him her man *and also not* (*ve'lo'*) her sexual possessor?" Kaniel's female speaker asks. Kaniel wants women to be heard outside of their traditional roles in the household. And husbands, whether they consider themselves equals or masters, hear their wives desires' only when they are premised on this relationship and connected to him.

The extremely terse, atomized biblical quotations and allusions in this part of the midrash work on us in exactly the same way that ancient rabbinic midrash operates. Midrash pulls these fragments of Torah into its vortex and creates something entirely new, breathing new life into well-worn biblical passages and using the energy of familiar biblical texts and characters to give thinner and less elaborate texts new dimensions. Yehudit plays a small albeit important role in b. Yevamot, but in working through this midrash together, we see her take on the fearlessness of Tamar, the pain of Rachel, and the rejection of the wives in prophetic marriage metaphors who are taught to see themselves as nothing without their husbands. At the same time, by being forced to look at these fragments and allusions to biblical texts atomistically, we are given different snapshots of these biblical women. Lined up next to each other, we see them from new angles and in new lights. If external questions fuel midrashists in their interpretive tasks, here the external question is—what do these women, confronted by the constraints of patriarchy, want? Indeed, Kaniel prompts us to grapple with this question, one that is all too often neglected when we chant or study these passages. Yehudit, a marginal Talmudic character, now stands at the center of a web of relationships with biblical women trying to give voice, together, to what it is they desire. And Kaniel's empathic and affective poetry encourages others who are reading this midrash to try to do the same.

The genre of midrash enables this work to achieve something that is much more difficult, if not impossible, to accomplish in scholarship. Kaniel, like many of the authors of midrash found in *Dirshuni*, considers all references to women in the canon and rereads them as if they are at the very center of our tradition. There are no caveats, no need to contextualize.

If following the rules of "doing" midrash means that for the author every word in the canon is fair game for use in interpreting every other word—or every narrative can be fleshed out to explain every other narrative—as long as a sight, sound, or sense parallel can be forged, Kaniel can look to the entire Tanakh and all of rabbinic literature as the building blocks to construct a female-centered tradition. Kaniel can move in an almost infinite number of directions to produce new Torah, weaving a different tapestry with the same ancient threads.

By the time we reach the middle of Kaniel's midrashic passage, however, we have only heard a chorus of women's anguish. At this point, Kaniel's midrash leads us into a kind of poetic, swirling abyss. She presents us with a string of images that highlight dreadful treatment of women in our male-centered literature. These images all serve to reinforce women's carnality in contrast to men's measured deliberation and oversight. It is not just wives that nominally belong to men but women's bodies and women's orifices. In the infamous procedure for the suspected adulteress (Num. 5:12–31), never performed by the rabbis but nonetheless elaborated upon in great detail by them,[24] a woman is dragged before (male) priests who tear her garments and force her to drink a kind of holy water intended to make her body somehow discharge a fetus (or uterus?)[25] and physically reveal her guilt. In the male-authored rules of menstrual impurity, lawmakers (in their minds' eyes) watch women's vaginas intently to see the first drops of blood that flow from them to determine their color and type. Similarly, they plant themselves under pregnant women in labor, on their birthing stools, to watch what is discharged, dead or alive or somewhere in between, and declare its purity or impurity. As Kaniel's midrash puts it pithily, "men speak and women drink": men observe, categorize, and decide, while women have sensations and experiences in their bodies. Even Yehudit, b. Yevamot's empowered

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[24] See Ishay Rosen-Zvi, *The Mishnaic Sotah Ritual: Temple, Gender and Midrash* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

[25] Wimpfheimer, "Footnotes to Carnal Israel,"180.

woman, feels she must disguise herself in order to find out if she has the legal recourse to drink a potion that will render her infertile, and afterward to hear only her husband's lost desire for more children. She drinks poison and modifies her body; her husband does not engage her but laments the body part (*keras*) that she has ostensibly destroyed.

The scornful allusion to a woman's birthing stool, on its face, implies general rabbinic-male decision-making about Jewish offspring as soon as they are born: their gender, their caste, their suitability for circumcision and eventually for Jewish marriage. The *Dirshuni* notes furnish us, however, with two surprising citations that call up horrifying images.[26] Both sources in the notes conjure dead or almost dead women in that place of imminent life, twisting the image of birthing a new life into something almost grotesque. In the first passage, the mother has died in childbirth, and the halakhic discussion concerns whether and for how long the blood that still flows from her body is ritually impure. In the other, a difference of opinion is presented over whether a condemned woman who is sentenced to execution should be killed along with her full-term fetus or allowed to give birth before she is slain. In this overlaid commentary to Kaniel's midrash, men position themselves as voyeurs of women not only in their most intimate, life-giving moments, but also in their most abject ones. As such, these references push Kaniel's observations about women's casual objectification in rabbinic literature to its limits, exposing the degree to which women's carnality and objectification persist even at and beyond the moment of her death. A woman's status quickly morphs from being dependent on her childbearing capabilities to being dependent on the extent of the ritual impurity her body can exude.

This section, obscure as it is, also points to women in all corners of the Torah. At this low ebb and dark center of the midrash, Yehudit, who is objectified by her husband as an incubator for children, is connected to other women who are similarly objectified by rabbinic halakhah. The suspected adulteress (Numbers 5, Mishnah Sotah 4:4ff.), mentioned above; the menstruant who must separate herself from her household

[26] b. Arakhin 7ab; b. Shabbat 135a.

(Lev. 15:19, Mishnah Niddah 2:2ff); the woman who simultaneously births a new life and a months-long period of impurity ensues (Lev. 12:1–5, Mishnah Niddah 5:1); and the women who face imminent death as they begin their labors (b. Arakhin 7ab; b. Shabbat 135a). Kaniel draws these women together, observing that they are all united by the hyper-focus of rabbinic *halakhah* on the liquids that flow through their bodies and the dangers they represent. They threaten to (almost literally) mess up the ordered system that must be managed by the men who control the places women go and the legal statuses they inhabit.[27] The power here is in bringing these female outcasts together, much as female biblical characters are drawn together in the first part of the midrash. Seen alongside one another the *sotah*, the menstruant, the parturient, and the dying appear to us as though they are in solidarity, a kind of banished women's collective. Together they wield an unholy power and threaten sacred institutions. Kaniel is more explicit in her related scholarship about the disturbing way the rabbis conjure women and their reproductive emissions as she writes, "[They] portray [them] as filthy and drenched in blood, and yet mysterious and alluring … . [They] paint a picture of the birthing mother as one who returns from the world of the dead."[28]

As Kaniel's midrash sharply exposes the utterly skewed gender dynamics found throughout rabbinic texts, it moves from a reflective mode to a constructive one, allowing, at last, our anonymous female speaker to say her piece—fully and eloquently—and be heard. Unconnected to any part of the story in Yevamot, Kaniel's speaker articulates her yearning for Torah. In the same way that many women long for children, she suggests, these women long for more knowledge, to rear their immature understandings of Torah to maturity and nurture their study. Pulled to the Torah, they ache to nourish their souls and those

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[27] See Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 128–159, for a larger discussion of the rabbis' creation of a science regarding women's bodies. The rabbis pushed back against women's knowledge of their own bodies fully aware that it superseded their own.

[28] Kaniel, *Birth*, 111, 108.

of others with it. Kaniel compares the Torah to "a mother who is tethered to her infant, and tethered to her nursing child." The bond between this woman and Torah is not an equal one, but like a mother and child, each are physically drawn to each other and feel intimately close, even duty bound, to nourish and be nourished. Drawing from a simile in the Talmud of the Torah as a breast,[29] Kaniel again airlifts a different midrash into ours, taking it from its place in b. Eruvin 54b, where it is surrounded by other, less relevant and less female-centered visions of Torah, to bring it here, where it can be enveloped by women's voices and perspectives.

At first the Torah is the mother, and our speaker the child, seen above. Then the image is flipped on its head: "And [Torah is] tethered, like a foundling to her finder and redeemer. The Torah is tethered to me since she, here, is isolated and alone." The shift from depicting the Torah as a nourishing and nurturing mother to depicting it as abandoned and neglected is a jarring one, but the bond of care and nurturance remains the same. This time the Torah, rather than our speaker, needs care, and the speaker is drawn to provide it. In flipping this image, Kaniel portrays the push and pull of the interpreter and interpreted: the interpreter learns from the text, and when the textual tapestry is sparse or the parameters for meaning narrow, when it is "neglected," the interpreter supplements it, feeds it.[30]

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[29] "Why are words of Torah compared to a breast? Just as with a breast, whenever a baby searches it out they find milk in it, so with words of Torah. Whenever a person meditates upon them, he finds meaning (lit. 'taste') in them."

[30] A similar idea for this exchange of roles is spelled out in Kaniel's academic work: "The Talmudic exposition with which we began this discussion (b. Eruvin 54b) presents the Torah as a maternal breast that satisfies at any time, but also as a hind, whose womb is narrow and is "loved by its mate at all times as at the first hour of their meeting." Thus, a single exegesis unites maternal and erotic relations between student and text. The link between the spousal model and the maternal one generates a relationship between the container and the contained, *who continually exchange roles*. The reader of the text, who infuses it with meaning, is both the nourishing mother as well the infant who nurses from her, and aids in the production of the milk from which he himself is nourished" (Kaniel, *Birth*, 173, emphasis added). If the juxtaposition between maternal and erotic analogies for Torah allows the "exchange of roles" between the one who receives nourishment and the one who produces (seed), the midrash Kaniel writes here provides a far more equal and indeed nearly identical exchange of roles between the woman who is nursed by the Torah and who also nurses it

While the Yehudit of Yevamot boldly makes her halakhically allowable decision to render herself biologically infertile, in Kaniel's midrash, in exchange for a life of Torah, the woman who stands in for Yehudit begins to reveal her insecurities about pursuing this ambition. She wonders if it is too late for her to begin a life of Torah, not having acquired it in her youth or during her years she "lost" raising children. She utters the words "I can't." On the brink of giving up, another female voice[31] offers encouragement and an outstretched hand. She responds not in the second person singular, but in the first person plural: "*We* can." This concluding dialogue quotes and directly appropriates the fraught exchange in the wilderness when the spies warn the Israelite people that the land of Canaan will likely be too difficult to conquer, and advise against taking it (Num. 13:25–32). They had observed that the enemies were too strong and the obstacles too difficult, even too dangerous, to overcome. But Caleb hushes the people, saying, "Let us by all means go up, and we shall take possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it (Num. 13:30)." The female voice at the end of Kaniel's midrash uses the very words that led Israel to the promised land, even though it also led them into battle instead of away from it, exposed to the dangers that reaching for the fulfillment of God's promise entails. Alone, women cannot succeed in charting new paths, but together, as a group (as an "us"), they can move forward. The backdrop of conquering the land of Israel conjures how difficult it is, not to mention how important it is, to have different voices be heard in the pursuit of an ideal, even if it is one that God commands. Often one needs to break from the majority in the name of speaking for something more valued. Of course, land falls by the

back to life when it becomes weak. A freedom Kaniel enjoys in her midrash that she cannot partake of in her academic work is to excise the image of the virginal hind and her penetration which appeals to the male gaze in b. Eruvin 54b. She must explain that image in her scholarship, but she is free to leave it aside in her constructive work.

[31] It is unclear who this voice is. Much as in ancient rabbinic literature, when there is a dialogue the name of the speaker is rarely stated, making for much ambiguity. Perhaps this is another woman in Yehudit's life. Perhaps it is her own voice speaking back to her. Perhaps it is even the voice of the Torah herself speaking to her.

wayside here, and the ultimate success is not in the acquisition of the Land of Israel but rather, in a typical rabbinic substitution, in the life-giving Torah. And it is our own endurance, Kaniel's women start to recognize, our own belief in the unpopular path, a break from the easy way, that can become a shared collective to acquire and enjoy that which never seemed attainable.

The protagonist of Kaniel's midrash disrupts stereotypes of women and challenges prescribed female roles. When parsing *halakhah*, we often overlook that an exemption from the commandment to procreate offers women the latitude to walk away from the commandment entirely. As such, Kaniel makes us think more deeply about alternative choices with regard to other more well-known exemptions associated with women: women's exemption from Torah study. Much as with procreation, an exemption from Torah study may not mean a desire to leave that commandment behind. Women want to believe that they can be seen and accepted into families and communities even if we define mothering as an intellectual endeavor, rather than a biological one. Kaniel's larger subversive move emerges when she gives a rabbinic woman a voice to define the shape of her own commandedness—that is, to describe the contours of what she knows in the depths of her soul that she is obligated to do. In this case, to untether herself from an obligation towards children and bond herself to Torah.

The publication of larger collections of *Dirshuni* midrashim enables us to put Kaniel's midrash into dialogue with others in the collection. The accessibility of the recently published English edition allows us to quickly discover a rich intertext for Kaniel's speaker who yearns for Torah but who fears it might be too late for her. For example, Hila (Halevy) Unna writes a contemporary midrash that complements Kaniel's:

> [In the beit midrash of Beruriah it was said:] And one who trusts in Me will inherit the land, and take hold of My holy mountain . . . , clear the obstacles out of the way of My people . . . to bring to life the spirit of the downtrodden and bring to life the spirit of the crushed . . . Peace, peace, to far and near, says God (Isa 56:13–15, 19). And the way is very hard, and the way is very long. But the women who seek shelter in God, to inherit the land, to steep the world in sanctity, and to get to The Place—

> it is up to them to rouse and wake up others, To bring to life the spirit of the downtrodden and the hearts of the crushed women, to see those far and those cast away and bring them near and bring them to reconciliation.
>
> And that is why Scripture repeated *peace, peace*—peace unto you, peace unto your daughters, in your days and in theirs. On that day they added a prayer in the beit midrash:
>
> Happy the woman who reveres God, who walks in His ways.
>
> When you eat of the toil of your hands, you're happy, it is good for you . . .
>
> May God bless you . . . And may you see your daughters' daughters [*banot lebenotayikh*]:
>
> Daughters in understanding, [*tebuna*]
>
> Daughters in deep reflection, [*hitbonenut*]
>
> Daughters in the work of building, [*binyan*]
>
> So that there will come peace upon Israel (after Ps 128).[32]

In this midrash, prophetic oracles deliver the same message that Caleb does in our previous midrash about clearing the way to bring Israel into the land and the presence of God. "The land" is again reinterpreted, much as in Kaniel's midrash and in much of rabbinic literature in general, as the *beit midrash*, the "Place" of God in rabbinic theology, and to the Torah, which provides divine shelter. As the midrash continues, lines are blurred between biological offspring and female students through wordplay, mirroring a move often made in rabbinic literature in which students are seen as sons (or, often, better than sons),[33] and the *beit midrash* becomes an alternate space for homosocial family. This midrash thus gestures at a

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[32] Hila (Halevy) Unna, "Daughters of the Place," *Dirshuni: Contemporary Women's Midrash* (English), 152.

[33] Martin Jaffee, "A Rabbinic Ontology of the Written and Spoken Word: On Discipleship, Transformative Knowledge, and the Living Texts of Oral Torah," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65 (1997): 525–549.

famous midrash in b. Berakhot (64a): "Don't read sons (*banayikh*) but builders (*bonayikh*)," in which builders are equated with Torah scholars.[34] The sound similarities between daughters/sons/builders/understanding [*banim, banot, bonot, bina*] allow for midrashic play with the similarities between parenthood and teaching, and even, as in the original midrash, the erasure of parenthood for the preferred reading of building the future through Torah. This homophonic assemblage also emphasizes a redefinition of family from the biological fruit of the womb to the close bonds of the *beit midrash*, and here—through the *new* inclusion of *banot* ("daughters") to these sound-alikes, a reimagination of the *beit midrash* as an egalitarian place of Torah for all genders.

But the women in this midrash are poignantly not there yet. They must continue their largely solitary journeys to the divine Place of women's Torah study, here imagined as a *beit midrash* presided over by Beruriah.[35] They must brave conflict, hoping for peace. This midrash fills out the community of women gestured to at the end of Kaniel's midrash. It also makes space for parenthood and Torah to sit more comfortably side by side, refusing to specify whether "daughters in understanding" might also be biological daughters at times, and not presenting to women a stark choice between the two. If Kaniel's midrash offers us a resounding and full-throated expression of a heart-rending and irreversible choice between carnal or cerebral motherhood, Unna's midrash suggests that the two might one day be indistinguishable.

The End: Conclusion

Kaniel's midrash stitches together a whole host of lonely, frightened, or despondent women: the barren Rachel, the unlucky Tamar, the various

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[34] This midrash is quoted in another *Dirshuni* passage that imagines an egalitarian *beit midrash* in the messianic era. See Yael Levine, "I Will Build You Up Again," *Dirshuni*, 92.

[35] Though the subject of debate, I see Beruriah as a childless woman who chose a life of Torah. See my article: Marjorie Lehman, "Reading Beruriah through the Lens of Isaac Bashevis Singer's Yentl," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies and Gender Issues* 31.1 (2017): 123–145.

prophetic "Israels" cast as abandoned wives and lovers,[36] the Sotah, the menstruant, the orphan, the lactating mother who has lost her child, not to mention the countercultural woman who has given up hope. These often-solitary female figures resonate with readers because of how rabbinic literature typically portrays women: dependent on their husbands, fathers, or sons; and rivals of other women (such as co-wives). Even transgressive women are solitary figures in the Bavli. From Beruriah to Yalta to Yehudit, our protagonist who chooses infertility, rabbinic women operate alone in a man's world. That these women achieve any degree of independence within the patriarchal cultural and legal regime the rabbis construct, as these stories suggest, is a testament to their cleverness, strength of will, and survival instincts. But these singular women never work together,[37] and their achievements do nothing to change the system.[38]

Kaniel, and *Dirshuni* as a whole, writes women in the plural. Even those midrashim which focus on a single female character are embedded in a collection birthed by multiple women whose words commingle on the page and who have had the chance to connect with each other in varied ways as people too, forming bonds in complementary groups and pairs, such as between editor and edited, mentor and mentee, experienced lawyer and experienced scholar, public-facing teachers and secret

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[36] We may add to the ones explicitly cited in Kaniel's midrash—that is, the women found in Ezekiel 16 and Lamentations 1 alluded to in Kaniel's word choices and in the published notes that follow her midrash in the Hebrew volume 1.

[37] If one applies a type of Bechdel-test to Talmudic literature, looking for instances in which two or more women talk to each other (even leaving aside the rule that they talk about something other than a man!), nearly every tractate would fail. Such a scenario is rare.

[38] See Gail Labovitz, "Rabbis and 'Guerrilla Girls': Thematizing the Female (Counter)Voice in the Rabbinic Legal System," *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 6.2 (2011): 53–63, in which the hegemonic positioning of these stories is discussed. For a larger context for this idea see Rhonda Hammer, "Culture Wars Over Feminism," *Antifeminism and Family Terrorism: A Critical Feminist Perspective* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), chapter 2, for an excellent analysis of individualized choice or "empowerment" feminism (or non-feminism, in her view) and feminism that is collective and systemic.

learners. Like the Talmud, Mishnah, or Midrash, this work is not a monograph but a living collective that continues to expand. The English edition, with its easily read commentaries and introductions, paves the way for individuals to read the work within our culture's dominant reading practices: on our Kindles before bed or at the beach while enjoying the sun. The Hebrew versions, however—far more terse and associative—demand to be read aloud and studied in *havruta*. As co-learners, we attempted word-by-word explication, repeatedly correcting each other's attempts at translation and prompting each other's recollections of parallel texts and narrative and halakhic contexts. We quickly realized how impoverished our understanding would have been had we been isolated from our peers and forced to confront this text alone as solitary women.

The collaborative energy of *Dirshuni* made us feel part of a community of learners. Despite unwritten rules of scholarship or review-writers to remain at "arm's length" from the authors, we felt comfortable and even had some excitement as we decided to turn to the authors of individual midrashim and to the editors of *Dirshuni* to ask for their input into this article. It helped that we did not feel as though we were competing, criticizing, debunking, or destroying their ideas but adding new pieces to an aggregated whole. As Pardis Dabashi describes it, we felt as though we were "convening" a multiplicity of voices rather than "intervening" in a debate to center ourselves.[39] Strikingly, at the heart of our own collaborative efforts to understand this midrash, we discovered themes of relationship and care. *Dirshuni* reminds us of how much our intellectual pursuits are connected to the care we feel for the texts we

[39] Pardis Dabashi, "Introduction to 'Cultures of Argument': The Loose Garments of Argument," *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 135.5 (2020): 946–955, esp. 951. Erin Spampinato draws out the feminist implications of Dabashi's reimagined academic project, linking it to Donna Haraway's recognition of knowledge as an aggregation of "situated" and "partial" perspectives rather than one correct "objective" view. See Erin A. Spampinato, "'Never Punch Down'; or, How We Disagree (Online) Now." *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 135.5 (2020): 963–969, at 966, and Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies*, 14.3 (1998), 575–599.

study and for the others with and from whom we learn, not to mention the relationships we forge with them.

Midrashim in *Dirshuni* were also constructed in response to present-day human challenges and, as such, evoked feelings of empathy often absent from our scholarly work. *Dirshuni* makes room for feelings of pain and suffering to emerge integral to the search for religious meaning. Indeed, the ability of *Dirshuni*'s midrashim to be soul-stirring gave us the power to feel and to empathize with its authors and with one another. These authors made their dispositions known and did so by speaking with and through centuries of Jewish texts. When immersed in these midrashim, we temporarily felt like an integral part of an unfolding rabbinic legacy, reminding us that we, too, can add another column to the page. More than engaging in the difficult task of finding ancient women's voices, *Dirshuni* drew us all into a dialogue that is continually generative and inclusive.[40] On a more personal level, *Dirshuni* allowed us to exist at the tipping point, where the personal, religious, and emotional sides of ourselves intersect with our academic training and commitments.

The masculinist rabbinic tradition surely needed a corrective that is addressed by *Dirshuni*, but so does the contemporary academy. The continued centering of the "solitary genius" in the humanities, the exclusive value placed on the monograph, and the constant attribution of

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[40] As an additional step towards inclusivity, however, we wonder whether further editions of *Dirshuni* might use a more intersectional lens for some of its commentaries. The intentionally shocking *Dirshuni* midrashim in the English edition on incest, for example, still evoke the so-called "curse of Ham" as well as the divinely sanctioned banishment of Ishmael, two stories which have long racist and xenophobic reception histories. See for example, Oshrat Shoham, "The Father's Scream: Concealment and Revelation" (*Dirshuni*, 162–167, based on Gen. 9:18–22) as a midrash that could be re-reconfigured to address more directly and dismantle centuries-old racist (particularly anti-Black) renderings of this post-flood story of sexual transgression. In addition, the early rabbinic victim-blaming of Ishmael and Hagar for Sarah's egregious treatment of them need not be repeated in our own era. See Oshrat Shoham, "The Mother's Scream: Uncovering and Expulsion" (*Dirshuni*, 166–167, based on Gen. 21:9–10). We would love to see midrashim such as these challenge the hermeneutics of exclusion not only of women, but also of the enslaved and those of "foreign" lineage.

collective or multivocal ideas to the work of individuals uphold an ideal that diverges profoundly from the way knowledge production is envisaged in rabbinic literature, which in this instance suggests a better alternative. Perhaps we scholars of rabbinic literature and culture especially can subvert common academic structures and demonstrate (once we are free enough) the power of collaboration, particularly for women and other people whose identities place them on the margins of the way "the field" is constructed.