

A NEW VIEW OF WOMEN AND TORAH STUDY IN THE TALMUDIC PERIOD

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Introduction¹

Scholars have long maintained that women did not study Torah in the rabbinic period. D. Goodblatt claims that it was uncommon for a woman to be learned in rabbinic traditions.² D. Boyarin writes that women's voices were suppressed in the Houses of Study.³ T. Ilan and D. Goodblatt both hold that women learned domestic rules and biblical verses, but not other subjects.⁴ S.J.D. Cohen says that women

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² D. Goodblatt, in "The Beruriah Traditions," (*JJS* 1975, 86) writes: "the existence of a woman learned in rabbinic traditions was a possibility, however uncommon."

³ D. Boyarin, in *Carnal Israel* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1993, 169), writes: "My major contention is that there was a significant difference between the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds with regard to the empowering (or disempowering) of women to study Torah. Both in the Palestinian and in the Babylonian text the dominant discourse suppressed women's voices in the House of Study. These texts, however, provide evidence that in Palestine a dissident voice was tolerated, while in Babylonia this issue seems to have been so threatening that even a minority voice had to be entirely expunged." He adds that it is possible that the suppression of women's voices in Babylonia could either mean that women did not have access to Torah study or, just the opposite, that they frequently studied Torah.

⁴ T. Ilan, in *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck 1995, 200), writes: "We may conclude, then, that the *tannaitic* Beruriah . . . who is given to quoting Bible or halakhah, was no different from those women who, as we have seen, knew even better than did the men those laws pertaining to domestic matters, and could conceivably quote Scripture." D. Goodblatt writes ("Beruriah," 83): "Details of rabbinic law relating to the kitchen and house would be known by a woman who grew up in a rabbinic household. Girls would learn these rules from their mother when they helped

learned mimetically from their mothers the rules they needed to know to fulfill their domestic duties, but not Torah.⁵

Numerous passages in the Talmud support these views. To give two examples: 1) ““And you shall teach them [the words of Torah] to your sons’ (Deut 11:19, וְלַמְדַתֶּם אוֹתָם אֶת בְּנֵיכֶם)—but not to your daughters” (bKid 29b; yBer 3:3, 6b); 2) R. Eliezer says, whoever teaches his daughter Torah, it is as if he is teaching her lewdness (mSotah 3:4). Not allowing women to study Torah is consistent with a patriarchally configured society, which rabbinic society certainly was.⁶

The observation that women did not study Torah collapses under scrutiny, however. Until now, scholars have drawn inferences from *prescriptive* statements, like the ones above. I will read and analyze *descriptive* passages, i.e., short anecdotes that appear in the gemara in association with a given mishnah, because they give a more accurate picture of social reality than do the laws.⁷ Careful review of many passages of this sort leads to the conclusion that women in rabbinic families did learn Torah, in the broad sense, which includes Bible and rabbinic teachings.⁸ And they learned it from men. At the very least, these anecdotal passages suggest that the editors of the two Talmuds consciously chose to portray a significant number of women as Torah-knowledgeable.

C. Hezser’s important research on the *bet midrash*, or study house, has changed our understanding of how and where Torah was studied in the ancient world. Basing herself on D. Goodblatt’s theories that

out with the housework.” See also Y. Elman, in “Middle Persian Culture and Babylonian Sages,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, C.E. Fonrobert, M. S. Jaffee, eds., (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press 2007, 173), who says that the rabbis did not allow women to study Torah.

⁵ Public comments at the AJS Conference, Boston, December 20, 2010.

⁶ It is also consistent with the view that women are less intellectually capable than men. As we read in the Talmud, “Women’s wisdom is only for the spinning wheel” (R. Eliezer, bYoma 66b; with minor variations, ySotah 3:3, 19a).

⁷ See discussion below on whether or not one may deduce social reality from Talmudic anecdotes.

⁸ I am using the expression “to learn Torah” to refer to mastering rabbinic teachings on a variety of subjects, as the anecdotes will make clear. I am therefore differentiating between what a girl learns by watching her mother in the kitchen and conversations in which a man teaches a rabbinic rule to a woman.

rabbinic study groups took the form of disciple circles with a rabbinic personage at the center,⁹ she goes on to argue that Torah study took place not just inside the walls of the study house¹⁰ but also in many different locations, among them a rented room, a courtyard, under a tree, at the bathhouse, in a rabbi's home, and at a rabbi's table.¹¹ Although I will continue to employ the term "study house" in this paper, it will not necessarily refer to a free-standing physical structure, but to a location where Torah was discussed on a regular or semi-regular basis.

The significance of the "portable" *bet midrash* for women is enormous. It means that they did not have to go to the study house: it came to them. Women living in rabbinic families could overhear Torah discussions taking place in their own homes, and even participate in them on occasion.¹² I am not suggesting that women were full-fledged students as were men, but that they were able to catch Torah "on the fly." This is still Torah study, even if it is less sustained, less systematic, and, of course, less extensive.

But this is not all. The anecdotes portray conversations between husbands and wives and fathers and daughters in which a man, presumably at home, relates to a woman the new laws emerging from the study house. These exchanges are also a form of Torah study. Since we know so little about the lives of women in the talmudic

⁹ C. Hezser, in *The Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement in Roman Palestine* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck 1997, 196ff.), cites the findings of D. Goodblatt, *Rabbinic Instruction in Sassanian Babylonia* (1975, 267). She later argues for the lack of permanence of amoraic study houses and notes that no buildings have been excavated that can clearly be identified as study houses (205).

¹⁰ In *The Cambridge Companion to Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, "Social and Institutional Settings of Rabbinic Literature," Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, affirming Hezser's findings, questions whether such a structure existed prior to the late amoraic period. He writes, "The 'school' was essentially the master himself" (59); "There were no school buildings A few disciples gathered around a rabbinic master and learned traditions from him in his home or some other private dwelling that could serve as a school" (60).

¹¹ Hezser also writes that early Christian communities were house-churches, in the sense that they met in private homes for meals, prayers, and Scriptural readings—not unlike rabbinic disciple circles (*Social Structure*, 210ff.).

¹² It is important to note that the halakhic discussions that women would hear would be about those laws that were in the process of being decided. See below.

period, any information we can glean from the texts is precious. A detail like this about Torah study, an activity highly regarded by the rabbis, is of particular interest.¹³

It makes sense, when we think about it, that a man who is portrayed as placing Torah study above all else would want—actually need—to have those around him Torah-knowledgeable as well. If, for example, he wanted the food he ate to be prepared according to the latest laws, he needed to teach them to his wife or daughter so that they could apply them in the kitchen. Logic dictates that this was the case. But, until now, no one has proven this point with texts.¹⁴

I will shortly present anecdotes that show that women in rabbinic households in the amoraic period – 1) overheard discussions of emerging halakhic rules; 2) engaged in halakhic exchange with a male relative; 3) asked questions of halakhah based on prior knowledge, 4) transmitted *halakhot* from one man to another, and 5) applied halakhic knowledge to real-life situations. As for subject matter, rules of household management appear often, but the texts also show women learning a variety of other rules. I am thus offering a corrective to the widely-held notion that women in the talmudic period did not learn Torah.¹⁵

¹³ Those episodes in which a Torah rule is uttered by a woman but not discussed with a man do not strike me as evidence that women studied Torah. For instance, when Imma Shalom, at the end of the Oven of Okhnai story (bBM 59b), says that she has a family tradition that the gates of abusive speech (*ona'ah*) are never locked, it seems to me that the editor put these words into her mouth to make a point about R. Eliezer. I am therefore not using stories of this sort in this inquiry.

¹⁴ I find it ironic that a number of scholars today admit that such communication seems necessary, but at the same time maintain that women did not study Torah. Such was the response to an early version of this paper delivered at Bar-Ilan University on 28 October 2010.

¹⁵ In a somewhat similar vein, C. Baker offers a corrective to the widespread view that women were confined to the private domain of the home. In *Rebuilding the House of Israel* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press 2002), she writes: “As for Palestinian rabbinic texts, there are no halakhic traditions remotely associated with domestic seclusion of women . . . (19). She further comments that public and private domain were not gendered. Women produced and sold goods, like bread, eggs, oil, and wine from the doorways of their homes. The home and the shuq, she claims, are not gendered binaries; rather, they interpenetrate and overlap (146). B. Brooten, in *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue* (Chico, California: Scholars Press 1982) issues a significant corrective to the widespread notion that women did not play a role

The Talmud's case stories that I will present are almost always brief. They consist of a report of a triggering "event" and a rabbi's response to it. They do not utilize formulaic language or adhere to any established structures.¹⁶ They are included in the *sugya* to teach a new rule. For instance, we read in *yBesah*¹⁷ that the household staff approached R. Hiyya Ruba on a festival that fell on a Friday and said to him, "We forgot to set an *eruv tavshilin* (which would allow us to prepare food on the festival for the Sabbath)." He responded, "Are there any lentils left from yesterday?" They answered, "Yes." That is the end of the story. This anecdote clearly comes to teach a new rule, that even a small amount of food not designated *ab initio* as an *eruv tavshilin*, may, after the fact, still serve as one. The Mishnah does not say so explicitly.

Since practically everything I argue emerges from anecdotes, the question that arises is this: are these anecdotes "real," meaning did

in the ancient synagogue. She shows in Chapter 1 that when previous scholars read ancient inscriptions that indicated that women held the title of *archisynagogos*, they concluded that the term could not mean "head of synagogue" because women, they thought, could not function in that role. She proposes that women who achieved that title were, in fact, active in synagogue administration and exhortation (32). I, too, am suggesting that, because of preconceived notions, when scholars saw evidence of women and Torah study, they simply read the evidence out of existence.

¹⁶ M. Shoshan, in "Halachah Lema'aseh: Narrative and Legal Discourse in the Mishnah," (Ph.D. dissertation, 2005, University of Pennsylvania, 91), suggests that stories appearing in the Mishnah are reworked to conform to a stereotyped pattern, that past events are not presented as they actually happened, but are reshaped by the Mishnah's redactors to conform to literary, legal, and other "non-historical" concerns. He further says that exempla appearing in the Mishnah are merely narrative representations of specific actions, told in a distinctive voice and from a specific point of view (129). Somewhat similarly, in "Roman Law and Rabbinic Legal Composition" (*Cambridge Companion*, 145ff.), Hezser suggests that there is little distinction to be made between hypothetical and real cases that came before the rabbis. The anecdotes in this paper are most often reports of small incidents that give the impression of having actually occurred. It is not evident that an editorial hand significantly reshaped them. They do not seem to be told from a specific point of view. In short, what is true for highly edited stories appearing in the Mishnah does not seem to hold for more loosely constructed anecdotes appearing in the two Talmuds. See discussion below.

¹⁷ *yBesah* 2:1, 61b. ר' חייה עלה לביתו. אמרין ליה אנשינן מערבה. אמ' לון אית הכא. טלופחין מאיתמל? אמרין ליה אין.

something like this actually happen, or are they fabrications for didactic purposes? Did the women behave in the ways reported or are the anecdotes literary contrivances? Many scholars have wrestled with this topic.¹⁸ D. Boyarin writes, “If there ever was a literature whose very form declares its embeddedness in social practice and historical reality, it is these texts.”¹⁹ R. Kalmin speaks at length about the historicity of talmudic passages. Most relevant to this inquiry is his assertion that “the Talmud is composed of diverse statements not completely homogenized in the process of editing the Talmud.”²⁰ By this he means that the Talmud’s individual strands can be identified even after incorporation into the larger work. Each retains in part its original characteristics. If so, one can tease out details of social reality. C. Fonrobert asks whether talmudic passages preserve actual voices. Upon reviewing the collected statements of Abaye’s mother on the topic of infant care (bShab 134a), she says:

I read her texts as a woman’s voice, and I would challenge a notion of a monolithically male-authored culture in the case of rabbinic literature The Talmud as collective literature is primarily a citational literature. It quotes the traditions of the many who participate in it. Even though the overwhelming majority of speaking participants are men, we should not single out the one woman’s voice as the only one not “quoted” but the mere product of male speech.²¹

¹⁸ See R. Kalmin, *Sages, Stories, Authors, and Editors in Rabbinic Babylonia* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, Brown Judaic Studies 1994), 10, n. 30, for a comprehensive listing of publications on this subject.

¹⁹ *Carnal Israel*, 11, cited by C. Baker, 30. Boyarin also says: “The question of the relation of the literary text to the rest of culture has always been a live one in the modern interpretation of rabbinic texts.” (*Carnal Israel*, 10).

²⁰ R. Kalmin discusses at length the question of molding or fabrication of stories for political and other purposes and the possibility that there is, nevertheless, historical information embedded in the stories (*Sages, Stories*, 8ff.). The question to ask, he says, is not, “Can we or can we not make use of talmudic sources as historical evidence?” but rather, “What kind of historical use can we make of the sources?” (15) He also discusses extensively how sources become altered in the course of transmission according to the agenda of the tradent. See also his *Jewish Babylonia between Persia and Roman Palestine* (New York: Oxford University Press 2006), 12-17.

²¹ *Menstrual Purity* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press 2000), 159. According to Fonrobert, a short episode involving Yalta, the wife of R.

Even M. Satlow, who contends that women in talmudic stories are often fictional, introduced into the text in order to work out cultural issues, admits that stories that deal with legal issues pertaining to women do not feature fictional women.²²

In accord with these views, I will argue that the anecdotes I cite below, which are taken from this vast body of citational literature, reflect social reality and may even preserve women's voices, albeit filtered through a male lens.²³ As for those who see the anecdotes as fabrications, the point will still be that the narrators chose to portray women in rabbinic families as Torah-knowledgeable. This, too, is a significant finding, different from conventional wisdom which holds that women are not described as learning Torah.

My major contention is that until now we have conceptualized Torah learning itself, and the sites at which it took place, in very limited ways. When we broaden our understanding of where and how Torah learning took place, as noted above, it becomes extremely easy to bring women into the picture. Additional support for this conclusion about women and Torah study, though requiring further development, is that in Zoroastrian sources, which are roughly contemporary with the Babylonian Talmud, women are portrayed as

Nahman (bNiddah 20b), is not just about this one woman but also “leaves a trace of how problematic establishing structures of displacement and dominance can be” (127). Fonrobert also notes that the *sugya* portrays Yalta as “familiar with mishnaic halakhah or halakhic midrash” and as someone who can “replicate rabbinic knowledge” (121).

²² M. Satlow, in “Fictional Women, A Study in Stereotypes” (*The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture III*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2002, 225-243), divides stories about women into several categories. In many, he claims, the woman is a purely fictional character, invented by men who are working out views of their own masculinity. He writes: “Most commonly, Palestinian rabbinic stories feature women because they are dealing with legal problems that uniquely concern women” (233). Others, he goes on to say, “draw upon female stereotypes in order to make moral or other points” (234). The anecdotes in this study are about issues pertaining to women, and hence, would not fall into Satlow's category of fictional women. See n. 88 for further comments on his theories.

²³ If legal literature, to this very day, preserves records of cases that came before judges for adjudication, why should the Talmud be any different?

studying religious texts.²⁴ Greco-Roman culture also featured learned women.²⁵

One might say that these findings about women and Torah study are hardly different from the observations of Goodblatt, Boyarin, Ilan, and Cohen. My response is that there is a continuum of Torah learning: at one end is the woman who watches her mother and learns to designate a hallah portion for the kohen, and so on. At the other end is the man who sits in a study house all day learning Torah with colleagues. I am situating many women somewhere in between these two poles. They did not sit in a study house with men, but they were able to do much more than learn Torah by watching their mothers. Each woman may have been at a different point on the Torah-learning continuum, but the continuum, and not just its polar extremes, exists.

Why did this finding not come to light sooner? For many reasons: because the Talmud opposes teaching Torah to women; because only men are described by the Talmud as frequenting the *bet midrash*; because the *bet midrash* has been imagined by scholars as an academy or *yeshivah*, even though such academies only came into being in the late amoraic or early geonic period;²⁶ because no female rabbis appear in rabbinic literature; because talmudic rabbis, and rabbis throughout the ages, disparaged women's intellectual ability, and even, in later generations, banned women from the study of Talmud. For all of these reasons, scholars of the past did not pay attention to the small, scattered anecdotes about women and Torah study.

²⁴ Y. Elman, in *The Cambridge Companion*, writes: “. . . if a male accompanying a female to study religious texts at a Zoroastrian school seduces her . . .” (171).

²⁵ D. S. Levene writes (electronic communication, 2.16.11): The Stoic philosopher Musonius Rufus in the 1st century CE argued at some length (sections 3-4) that women had equal capacity for philosophy as men do, and accordingly should study philosophy as they do; other Stoics said the same (see e.g. Lactantius Inst. Div. 3.25 – not a Stoic himself, but reporting the views of the Stoics). The general scholarly view is that Epicureans admitted women to their school exactly as they admitted men. There were certainly Epicurean women philosophers, such as Epicurus' mistress Leontion (Diogenes Laertius 4.2), who is known to have written works of philosophy in her own right (one is cited by Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 1.93). And individual women philosophers are known in most schools: for example, Diogenes Laertius 3.46 and 4.2 names two female disciples of Plato.

²⁶ J. Rubenstein, *Cambridge Companion*, 70.

In order to dispel this widespread, entrenched misconception regarding women and Torah study,²⁷ I will analyze a relatively large number of anecdotes. They subdivide as follows: women who learn household halakhah from men (1-4), women who ask men Torah questions (5-6), women who apply Torah knowledge (7a-b), women as tradents (8-11), women who know non-household halakhah (12-14), a rabbi who taught his daughters Torah (15), and a doubtful case of a woman knowing Torah (16).

Women who Learn Household Halakhah from Men

1. yShabbat 1:3, 3b (parallel in bShabbat 12b)

תני רבי חייה אבל מסתכל הוא מה שבכוס ומה שבקערה ואינו חושש . . . רב ירמיה סלק לגבי רבסי מזג ליה כסא שרי מסתכל ביה אמרה ליה בני ביתיה חמי מה הוא עביד אמר לה דהוא נהוג בשיטתיה דרבו תני²⁸ רבי חייה מסתכל הוא מה שבכוס ומה שבקערה ואינו חושש.

Rabbi Hiyya taught: But he may examine what is inside the cup and the bowl without worrying . . . R. Jeremiah²⁹ went to visit R. Assi. He [the host] mixed for him [the guest] a cup of wine. R. Jeremiah began to examine it [by the light of the Shabbat lamp]. R. Assi's wife (*b'nei beiteih*) said to him [her husband]: Look what he [the visitor] is doing! He [R. Assi] said to her: He acts according to the teachings of his own rabbi, [for] R.

²⁷That women “spoke” Torah is well-established. I myself wrote about the rabbinic sayings appearing in the mouths of women in *Religion and Sexism* (ed. Rosemary R. Ruether [New York: Simon and Schuster, Touchstone 1974], 203-204). I mention there, among other examples, Samuel's daughters who apply a rabbinic principle to themselves in order to obtain permission to marry a kohen after having been returned from captivity when such permission is usually denied (bKet 23a). See below, section 15.

²⁸ The Leiden ms. reads, “For R. Hiyya taught” (דתני ר' חייה) which suggests that this is what R. Assi continued and said to his wife.

²⁹ R. Jeremiah is a fourth generation Land of Israel Amora. He visits R. Assi, a third generation Land of Israel Amora. In the Bavli parallel (bShab 12b), R. Jeremiah bar Abba, a second generation Babylonian Amora, visits R. Assi, a first generation Babylonian Amora. If the story originates in the Yerushalmi, then the Bavli modified the names in accordance with the rabbis with whom it was familiar. The next anecdote, at bPes 106b, which appears only in the Bavli, speaks of the same pair of Babylonian rabbis, R. Yirmiyah bar Abba and R. Assi. It, too, may have been modified.

Hiyya taught, “He may examine what is inside the cup and the bowl without worrying.”

R. Assi’s wife, designated “members of his household (*b’nei beiteih*)”,³⁰ knows that it is forbidden to examine a cup by the light of the Shabbat lamp, apparently to see if it is clean. One who does so may be led inadvertently to tilt the lamp to get it to burn more brightly and thus violate the Sabbath. Others disagree with R. Assi and permit such action, as this story and the toseftan parallel indicate.³¹ It would appear that R. Assi taught his stringent view to his wife or that she overheard a discussion of it. She is therefore troubled by the guest’s violation of the house rule and informs her husband of her concern. In response, R. Assi teaches his wife a new “principle”, that if the guest is following his own teacher, who permits such activity, he may do so even in their home, even though their practice is different.

Note that in this episode two halakhic discussions have taken place: the first in which R. Assi informs his wife of his stance on the issue of examining a cup by the light of a Shabbat lamp; and the second in which he teaches her to tolerate a guest’s behavior even if it contradicts house rules. It is also of interest that R. Assi’s wife is present at the meal (although not clear in what capacity: as server or co-diner) and speaks up at the table. Note that her knowledge-based critique is not accepted by her husband, thus making her look a little foolish.³²

2. bPesahim 106b

אמר רב הונא אמר רב: טעם אינו מקדש. בעא מיניה רב חנא בר חיננא מרב הונא: טעם מהו שיבדיל? אמר ליה: אני אומר טעם מבדיל, ורב אסי אמר: טעם אינו מבדיל. רב ירמיה בר אבא איקלע לבי רב אסי, אישתלי וטעים מידי.

³⁰ See S. Lieberman, *Tosefta Ki-fshutah*, Mo’ed, Pisha (New York, Jewish Theological Seminary 1962, 627), ובני ביתו היא אשתו. . .; see also 649.

³¹ See tShabbat 1:11, אבל מסתכל הוא לתוך הכוס או לתוך הקערה ואינו חושש.

³² It appears that criticism by a senior scholar of a junior scholar is standard in the Talmud and is not to be taken as treating the student in a dismissive manner. See, for example, bBer 13b where R. Hiyya bar Abba criticizes R. Yirmiyah; bBer 24b where R. Ashi criticizes Ravina; yBer 3:1, 6a, where R. Yizhaq criticizes R. Mana and R. Yudan. If so, when a husband criticizes a wife’s halakhic opinions or input, he is treating her as a senior scholar treats a junior scholar and is not implying she is light-minded or unable to understand halakhah.

הבו ליה כסא ואבדיל. אמרה ליה דביתהו: והא מר לא עביד הכי! אמר לה: שבקיה, כרביה סבירא ליה.

Said R. Huna said Rav: If one tastes [food] before [reciting Kiddush on Friday night], he may not recite Kiddush. R. Hanna bar Hinena asked R. Huna: What [is the rule] if he [already] tasted [food before reciting Havdalah], may he [then] recite *havdalah*? He said to him: I say that if he tasted [food] he may [still] recite *havdalah*; but R. Assi says, if he tasted [food], he may not recite *havdalah*. R. Yirmiyah bar Abba visited R. Assi. He forgot and tasted something [before *havdalah*]. They handed him a cup [of wine] and he recited *havdalah*. R. Assi's wife said to him [her husband]: But the Master does not do thus! He said to her: Let him be. He holds like his teacher.

As in the previous anecdote, in this one too R. Assi's wife points out to her husband that the guest, the same R. Jeremiah, violates the rules of their home. She knows that the guest ate before he recited *havdalah* and that, according to her husband, if one has tasted food after sundown, he may not recite *havdalah*. R. Assi and others, as the Talmud indicates, are engaged in a dispute on this subject, one that continues for generations to come. It is likely that R. Assi's wife overheard a conversation on this topic or was informed directly by her husband of his view. She is therefore upset with a guest who behaves contrary to house rules. Upon hearing her complaint, R. Assi defends the guest's behavior with the statement that he was following what his own rabbi taught him and he is allowed to do so in their home, even if it violates their practices. This, too, is a halakhic discussion between a husband and a wife. Here, too, she is criticized by her husband for criticizing a guest.³³

3. yBesah 4:5, 62c

(משנה ביצה ד:ה, ואין גורפין תנור וכירים אבל מכבשין.)

ברת' דר' חיייה רבה אתת מיפה גו תנור' אשכח' כיפה בגויה אתת שאלת לאבוה א"ל³⁴ איזלין גרפין אמרה לינה יכלה א"ל איזלין כבשין. ידעה הוות אלא דהוות בעיא מישמע מן אבוה.

(mBesah 4:5, One may not rake out an oven [on a Festival] but one may press down the ashes.)

³³ See above note on criticism.

³⁴The Leiden ms. consistently writes לה אמ' instead of א"ל when a man addresses a woman.

The daughter of R. Hiyya Rabbah came to bake in an oven [on a Festival] and found a rock in it. She came and asked her father [what to do]. He said: go and rake it out. She said to him: I am not able to do so. He said to her: go and press down [the ashes]. She knew [this rule] but wanted to hear it from her father.

The daughter of R. Hiyya found a rock in the oven on a festival and was concerned lest it ruin the bread she was about to bake or even make baking impossible. Raking out the oven would solve the problem but she apparently had already learned the rule, or mishnah, that one may not rake out an oven on a festival (see citation, above). So she asks her father what to do. He tells her to rake out the oven. She refuses to do so, apparently because halakhah forbids it, or else because the task is too difficult.³⁵ Her father then tells her to press down the ashes. The anonymous voice comments that the woman knew that pressing down the ashes was the solution but wanted to hear it from her father. The reason the *stama* must speak up at this point is that the story does not make sense: if she knows the mishnah that says raking out is forbidden, she also knows that pressing down ashes is permitted. Why would her father need to inform her of that? Why would she ask? The answer, according to the *stama*, is that she wanted to hear from her father that such activity was permitted before she proceeded to do so on a festival.

What we see here is a halakhic conversation between father and daughter. It appears to come on the heels of a previous conversation between father and daughter in which he informed her of the prohibition of raking out an oven on the festival. It is possible, of course, that her mother taught her that rule (because it does not seem to be newly emerging). If so, it is strange that her father suggests to her that she rake out the oven. This is in direct opposition to the Mishnah, which, we may assume, was a collection known to R. Hiyya, a very early Amora or even a Tanna according to some. The commentator Pnei Moshe (*ad locum*) says that her father was just testing her. There is nothing in the words, however, to suggest that this is the case. It is possible that the rule of pressing down the ashes was not yet included in the Mishnah in the time of R. Hiyya, but was

³⁵ Raking out an oven was a woman's job. See T. Orr, *Massekhet Betsah* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck 2010), 155. See also bHag 4b-5a for another reference to a woman cleaning out an oven.

added in response to this anecdote. An even more radical conclusion is that he is instructing her to rake out the oven *even though* the Mishnah forbids such action. His rationale would be that having tasty bread on a festival trumps the rule of no raking.

A parallel text appears in bBesah 32b:

ואין גורפין תנור וכירים. תני רב חייא בר יוסף קמיה דרב נחמן: ואם אי אפשר לאפות אלא אם כן גורפו מותר. דביתהו דרבי חייא נפל לה אריחא בתנורא ביומא טבא. אמר לה רבי חייא: חזי דאנא רפתא מעלייתא בעינא.

The Bavli tells the story differently. It was the wife (not daughter) of R. Hiyya who found a brick (not a stone) in the oven, and, it seems, came and asked him what to do, apparently because she knew that raking out the oven was not allowed on the festival. Otherwise, why ask? He told her that he wanted good bread, which means, according to Rashi (s.v. *rifta ma'alyata ba'inan*), that he was telling her, in covert terms, that she should rake out the oven. That is, the Bavli concludes that raking out an oven in order to be able to bake good bread on the festival is allowed. The woman in this story knows the Mishnah's rule of not raking out an oven on a festival but is instructed by her husband to ignore it.

Note that the Bavli plays down R. Hiyya's halakhic audacity by prefacing the anecdote with a comment of a later Amora, R. Hiyya bar Joseph (BA 2). It is possible that this Amora's comment was added later to the *sugya* in order to resolve the contradiction between R. Hiyya and the mishnah. R. Hiyya bar Joseph says that if one cannot bake on the festival unless one rakes out the oven, then one is permitted to rake out the oven. This Amora thus limits the Mishnah's ban on raking out the oven to times when baking is possible without raking, but permits it when baking can only take place if the oven is first raked out. It thus seems that the Mishnah's rule was undergoing significant modification both in Babylonia and the land of Israel.

Note that in both versions of the story, a man tells a woman to rake out the oven on a festival. In the Yerushalmi, she refuses to do so. In the Bavli, it seems, she agrees to do so. Also note that in both versions, a father or husband engages in a halakhic conversation with a daughter or wife who already is knowledgeable on the subject of raking out ovens.

4. yShabbat 4:1, 6d

תני אין טומנין ברמץ. אמר רבי זעירא הדא אמרה אפר שצנן מותר לטמון בו, כהדא,³⁶ ברתיא דרבי ינאי הוות משמשה קומוי אבוי והוות מעלה קומוי תבשילין רותחין. אמר לה היך איתעבידא, אמר[ה]³⁷ ליה במרא וגיפתא, אמר לה לא תהי עבדה כן אלא במרה גו קופתה ויהבא קופתא על גיפתא.

A tannaitic teaching: One may not cover food with hot ashes or an ember [on Friday afternoon to keep it warm for Shabbat]. Said R. Zera: This implies that if the ashes cooled down, one may use them to cover food. Like this: the daughter of R. Yannai was [once] serving her father [on Shabbat], and bringing boiling food up to him. He said to her: How is this being done? She said to him, with *mara*' and olive pulp.³⁸ He said to her: Do not do it like that but with *mara*' in a vessel and place the vessel on the pulp.

The topic of this passage is how to keep food cooked on Friday warm for the Sabbath. In conjunction with the baraita's statement that one may not cover food with hot ashes or an ember to keep it warm, the *sugya* relates that R. Yannai's daughter once served him very hot food on the Sabbath. He asked her how she was able to do so. She revealed her strategy³⁹ to him and he asked her to modify it somewhat.

It is clear that the father and daughter in this episode are engaged in a halakhic discussion. Since the third and fourth chapters of Mishnah Shabbat are devoted to the topic of keeping food hot or cold, it stands to reason that R. Yannai (or his wife) had already taught his daughter a number of those rules, in particular the one that mentions not using

³⁶ Punctuation and translation based on L. Moscovitz' understanding of כהדא, in his volume *הטרמינולוגיה של הירושלמי* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, Magnes Press 2009, 243).

³⁷ Leiden ms. reads ליה אמרה. It also spells קופתה with a 'heh' at the end in both mentions of this word.

³⁸ *Gipta* is the residue of olives after pressing (M. Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic* [Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press 1990], 145).

³⁹ According to the commentator Pnei Moshe, she covered the pot with pulp, which is not permitted by the Mishnah, and to prevent the pulp from raising the temperature, she took ashes that had cooled off, with a utensil called a *mara*, and put them on the pulp. Pnei Moshe needed to produce an explanation that satisfied two criteria: 1) why this anecdote appears in conjunction with a baraita about hot ashes, and 2) how the woman used pulp in a way not prohibited by the Mishnah.

olive pulp to keep food hot (mShabbat 4:1). She attempts to abide by that rule and only use pulp indirectly.⁴⁰

If we compare this anecdote about keeping food warm on the Sabbath to the previous one about baking bread on a festival, we will arrive at the same conclusion, i.e., that the laws about food preparation on a festival, which were formulated by men and even articulated in the masculine,⁴¹ needed to be taught to women and others who prepared food for the family.⁴² If the Mishnah states that one may not rake out the oven on the festival, and this rule is not transmitted to women, they will serve the head of household food that was cooked and bread that was baked in violation of his halakhic specifications. But if we assume, as we see in these two anecdotes, that the rules were, in fact, transmitted to women, then the outcome will be that the head of household will be able to live in compliance with the rules that he himself developed or learned from others. Should one say that a daughter could learn all of these rules mimetically from her mother, the obvious rejoinder is that this anecdote, and others above, preserve instances in which a father teaches a daughter a newly emerging halakhah.

Women who Ask Men Torah Questions

5. yHallah 1:5(6), 57d

(משנה חלה א:ה, עיסה שתחלתה ספגנין וסופה ספגנין פטורה מן החלה. תחלתה עיסה וסופה ספגנין, תחלתה ספגנין וסופה עיסה, חיבת בחלה. . . .) **הדא איתא שאלת לרבי מנא בגין דאנא בעייתא למיעבד אצוותי אטרי מהו דינסבנה**⁴³ **ותהא פטורה מן החלה** אמר לה למה לא. אתא שאיל לאבוי אמר ליה⁴⁴ אסור שמא תימלך לעשותה עיסה.

⁴⁰ Many texts make it clear that the head of household did not enter the kitchen to cook and serve food. Members of the household staff, headed by the wife it would appear, were in charge of those tasks. It is therefore not so surprising that the small anecdotes that appear in bShabbat and yShabbat 3 and 4 speak of women and servants who bring hot or cold food to the head of household on the Sabbath. See, for example, yShabbat 3:1, 5d; bShab 48a; bShab 51a.

⁴¹ ועושה תבשיל מערב יום טוב וסומך עליו לשבת (משנה ביצה ב:א).

⁴² See my article, "הדבר מסור לנשים": נשים וטקסי דת ביתיים, *Sidra* 5770, 83-111, where I argue that many chapters of Mishnah, even though they describe food preparation activities that are performed mainly by women, are articulated in the masculine.

⁴³ D. Marcus (electronic communication, 1 June 2011) writes: The words מהו דינסבנה are made up of the phrase מהו plus די and the verbal form נסבנה which

A [certain] woman asked R. Mana: since I want to make my dough into *itri*,⁴⁵ can it then be exempt from [separating] hallah [on it]? He said to her, why not? He [then] came and asked his father. He said to him, this is prohibited lest she change her mind and make the dough [into bread].

A woman approaches R. Mana and asks him if the dough she is preparing can be exempted from the *hallah* gift because she is going to bake *itri* (Aramaic) or *sufganin* (Hebrew), and not bread. By locating this story in association with this mishnah, the editor of the Yerushalmi is suggesting that *itri* and *sufganin* are closely related to each other. He answers her that she need not designate a hallah gift. But when he then reports the case to his father he is told that he gave the woman bad advice. It is possible, says his father, that she will change her mind and bake the dough into bread, and hence she should have been told to separate hallah from it.

It is clear that this woman, who is not presented as a close relative of a rabbi, is well-informed about the laws of separating hallah. Her request to be exempt from separating hallah from dough that will become *itri/sufganin* suggests that she has some degree of familiarity with the associated mishnah that says: Dough which was intended for *sufganin*, and was baked into *sufganin*, is exempt from hallah. . . . (mHallah 1:5).⁴⁶ At the very least, she understands that hallah gifts are not required when baking products other than bread.

It is admittedly not surprising that a woman would know the rules of separating hallah from dough, since it is well-established that women, in rural areas at least,⁴⁷ baked bread for the family. But this

seems to be a participle plus pronoun, “I am taking/I take.” The meaning of מהו plus יד literally is, “what is it that?” but then develops into “is it permitted?” (Sokoloff, DJPA, 294). So “What is it that I can take it” means, “Is it permitted for me to take it (and it can then be exempt from hallah)?”

⁴⁴ Leiden ms., אמר לה.

⁴⁵ Sokoloff, 47, says that *itri* are vermicelli. I am accepting the interpretation of the traditional Yerushalmi commentators that the reason the episode is located here, in conjunction with a mishnah about *sufganin*, is that *itri* are the same as *sufganin*. See below.

⁴⁶ The Mishnah continues and says: But dough which was intended for bread but was baked into *sufganin*, or was intended for *sufganin* but was baked into bread, one is required to separate hallah from it.

⁴⁷ C. Schultz, in *Women’s Religious Activity in the Roman Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2006, 134) comments that, according

woman also seems to know that *itri*, made of flour and water, is a borderline case in that it is both similar to and yet different from bread, and hence she comes and asks about it. Do rabbis like to portray people as seeking them out for answers to religious questions? Yes.⁴⁸ Even so, the women who come to them are portrayed as knowledgeable, as is this woman. The father's concern about women changing their minds shows a somewhat negative attitude to women—that they are fickle. At the same time, however, the father's comment implies the need to teach women the details of halakhah.

6. bNiddah 24b

אמר רב יהודה אמר שמואל: המפלת דמות לילית, אמו טמאה לידה. ולד הוא, אלא שיש לו כנפים. תנ"ה א"ר יוסי: מעשה בסימוני באחת שהפילה דמות לילית, ובא מעשה לפני חכמים, ואמרו ולד הוא אלא שיש לו כנפים. המפלת דמות נחש, הורה חנינא בן אחיו של רבי יהושע: אמו טמאה לידה. הלך ר' יוסף וספר דברים לפני ר"ג, שלח לו [ל]רבי יהושע:⁴⁹ הנהג בן אחיך ובא. בהליכתן יצתה כלת (ר') חנינא לקראתו, אמרה לו: רבי, המפלת כמין נחש מהו? אמר לה: אמו טהורה. אמרה לו: והלא משמך אמרה לי חמותי אמו טמאה! ואמר לה מאיזה טעם,⁵⁰ הואיל וגלגל עינו עגול כשל אדם! מתוך דבריה נזכר רבי יהושע, שלח לו לרבן גמליאל: מפי הורה חנינא.

to Pliny, until professional bakers arrived in the early part of the second century BCE, bread production had been a task for the women of Roman households (Nat. 18.107). See also C. Meyers, "Grinding to a Halt: Gender and the Changing Technology of Flour Production in Roman Galilee," 65-74, in *Engendering Social Dynamics: The Archaeology of Maintenance Activities*, eds. Sandra Montón-Subías and Margarita Sánchez-Romero, BAR International Series 1862 (Oxford: ArchaeoPress, 2008). Meyers notes that in urban centers in the Galilee, hand grinding, which had been performed by women, was replaced by machine milling, performed by men.

⁴⁸ See C. Fonrobert who says that it is in the nature of rabbinic literature to represent rabbis as experts in all areas discussed in that literature (*Menstrual Purity*, 259, n. 25).

⁴⁹ Munich ms., Vatican 111 and 113 all add the ל.

⁵⁰ It is not clear who utters the words ואמר לה מאיזה טעם. It could be R. Joshua asking her for the reason he gave her mother-in-law, or it could be the daughter-in-law herself, continuing to explain what her mother-in-law taught her in R. Joshua's name. Munich 95 omits the words ואמר לה and so do Vatican 111 and 113. It thus seems that these words are a later addition. Without them, it is easier to claim that the daughter-in-law continued to speak, offering the rationale without being asked to do so by R. Joshua. Munich 95, מאיזו טעם; Vatican 111, ומאי זו טעם; Vatican 113, מאיזה טעם.

Said R. Judah said Samuel: If a woman aborts [a fetus] in the shape of a Lilith [a she-demon], the woman who gave birth is ritually impure [as if she gave birth to a human fetus].⁵¹ Thus is also taught in a baraita: Said R. Yosi, it once happened in Simonia that a woman gave birth to a fetus in the shape of a Lilith and the incident came before the rabbis, who said, this is a [human] fetus, even though it [also] has wings. If a woman [spontaneously] aborts [a fetus that looks like] a serpent, Hanina, the son of R. Joshua's brother, ruled that the mother [of this fetus] is ritually impure [by virtue of] birth. R. Joseph went and informed Rabban Gamliel of this decision (lit., these things) and he [Rabban Gamliel] sent to R. Joshua, take your nephew and come and see me. As they were on their way, the daughter-in-law of Hanina came out towards them. She said to him [to R. Joshua]: Rabbi, if a woman [spontaneously] aborts [a fetus that looks like] a serpent, what is the law? He said to her, the mother [of the fetus] is ritually pure. She said to him: but did not my mother-in-law tell me in your name that the mother [of the fetus] is ritually impure?! He said to her, for what reason? [She answered:] Since his eyes are round like that of a human being. Her comments reminded R. Joshua [of what he had ruled and the reason he had ruled that way]. He sent to Rabban Gamliel: Hanina issued a ruling based on my words.

Samuel says that if a woman aborts a fetus in the shape of a Lilith, she is ritually impure as if she gave birth. A baraita follows, introduced by the phrase *tanya nami hakhi*, supporting his statement.⁵² It continues with a second matter, similar to the first: if a woman spontaneously aborts a serpent-shaped fetus, is she ritually impure as if she gave birth, because the abortus is human in form, or does she remain

⁵¹ The rules of ritual impurity following birth: if a woman gives birth to a boy, she is ritually impure for 7 days following birth, and pure for the next 33; if she gives birth to a girl, she is ritually impure for 14 days following birth, and pure for the next 66. If the sex of an aborted fetus cannot be determined, R. Meir (mNid 3:2) treats it as if it were a girl, with a 14 day period of ritual impurity. The Sages say that if a fetus does not have a human shape, it is not a human birth and the rules of ritual impurity following birth do not apply.

⁵² See my *Development of the Talmudic Sugya: Relationship Between Tannaitic and Amoraic Sources*, (Lanham: University Press of America, Studies in Judaism 1988), Chapter 3.

ritually pure because it is not human in form? Hanina, the nephew of R. Joshua, rules that such a woman is ritually impure. R. Joseph⁵³ informs Rabban Gamliel of this decision, and he summons R. Joshua to appear before him with his nephew, apparently to question the stringency. As the two are on their way to meet with Rabban Gamliel, Hanina's daughter-in-law comes out to greet them and asks R. Joshua the very same question he is concerned about—the status of a woman who aborts a fetus in the shape of a serpent. He answers her that the woman is ritually pure. She then tells him that when her mother-in-law asked him that same question,⁵⁴ the answer he gave her was that such a woman was ritually *impure*. He asks her the reason he gave for his ruling⁵⁵ and she answers him that he told her mother-in-law that the round eyes of the aborted fetus resembled human eyes. R. Joshua then remembers that that is what he had ruled and that that is the reasoning he had given. He sends word to Rabban Gamliel stating that his nephew's stringency was based on what he, R. Joshua, had ruled.⁵⁶ This, he thinks, should satisfy Rabban Gamliel. The visit, it appears, is cancelled.⁵⁷

It is *not* unusual for women to ask rabbis about the rules of ritual impurity following a spontaneous abortion, but it *is* unusual that the episode describes three halakhic conversations, two of which involve a man and a woman. In the first, R. Joshua teaches the mother-in-law, his nephew's wife, the rule of a woman who spontaneously aborts a serpent-shaped fetus and the rationale behind the law; in the second, the mother-in-law teaches the law and the rationale to her daughter-in-law; in the third, the daughter-in-law “teaches” R. Joshua the law and the rationale that he had issued but then forgotten. Note that the women speak about the halakhah of spontaneous abortion in the same terms as the men.

⁵³ Munich 95, Vatican 111 and 113: R. Yosi Hagelili; Soncino 1489: R. Joseph.

⁵⁴ Did she ask the question because she aborted a serpent-like fetus? Was she asking theoretically/hypothetically? We cannot know, but the women in case stories generally ask a rabbi a question when they are dealing with a matter at hand. See sections 3 and 5.

⁵⁵ See above, n. 50.

⁵⁶ See bBerakhot 27b and bBekhorot 36a for other cases in which R. Gamliel treats R. Joshua highhandedly. See also mRosh Hashanah 2:9.

⁵⁷ The baraita in bNiddah 24b does not have a parallel anywhere else. See bNiddah 23a where a discussion of fetuses resembling various animals, including a serpent, also appears.

Women are portrayed extremely positively in this anecdote. The mother-in-law asks questions, gets answers, and then transmits the information to her daughter-in-law, so that the daughter-in-law can follow rabbinic law. The daughter-in-law is portrayed in even more laudatory terms: she asks a question, gets an answer, and has the courage to challenge the answer by citing what she learned from her mother-in-law—the law and the reason taught to the mother-in-law by R. Joshua. Is this yet another instance in which a smart woman is used by a storyteller to show up a man?⁵⁸ If so, the praise is not real.⁵⁹

In many other passages, women ask questions of rabbis, but their questions do not always provide evidence of prior halakhic knowledge. The questions do show, however, that women recognized the need to seek expert advice when the situation exceeded the limits of what they knew.⁶⁰

Women who Apply Torah Knowledge

7. bShabbat 147b

אבל לא מתגררין. תנו רבנן: אין גוררין במגררת בשבת. רבן שמעון בן גמליאל אומר: אם היו רגליו מלוכלכות בטיט ובצואה גורר כדרכו ואינו חושש. רב שמואל בר יהודה עבדא ליה אימיה מגררתא דכספא.

⁵⁸ See, for example, bPesahim 89a, where a father uses his daughters who are *zerizot* to shame his sons who are *shefalim*, meaning the daughters are energetic and the sons lethargic. See also bPes 62b, where one rabbi cites Beruriah's vast knowledge and speed in assimilating halakhah in order to shame another rabbi who learns at a slower pace.

⁵⁹ What are we to make of the fact that the story portrays R. Joshua in an unflattering manner, as a man who is inconsistent in his halakhic rulings, and who needs to be reminded by a woman of what he said and why he said it? This is not one of the famous stories of the tense interactions between R. Joshua and Rabban Gamliel (see n. 56). In this story, although summoned to appear before Rabban Gamliel, R. Joshua instead sends a letter to explain his ruling. He thereby defuses the tension. But if we put that interaction aside, the image of R. Joshua's incompetence remains. Since this story has no parallel elsewhere, and neither does the story in the first part of the baraita, I can only suggest that the Bavli preserved it for its own reasons. Perhaps it seeks to portray R. Joshua negatively elsewhere as well.

⁶⁰ See, for example, mNiddah 8:3, where a woman says to R. Akiba, "I found a bloodstain." One cannot determine from this question how much halakhic knowledge the woman has. It is clear she has enough to know that she should ask. Bavli Niddah presents many such anecdotes.

. . . One may not scrape [away dirt on Shabbat, mShab 22:6⁶¹]. A baraita: one may not scrape with a scraper on Shabbat. R. Simon b. Gamliel (RSBG) says: if his feet were covered with clay or excrement, he may scrape [on Shabbat] as is his habit [on ordinary days] and not worry [that he has violated the Sabbath].⁶² The mother of R. Shmuel b. Judah made him a scraper out of silver.

Tannaim in the baraita disagree about the use of a scraper on the Sabbath. The first Tanna prohibits such activity, but RSBG permits it for the purpose of cleaning off clay and excrement from one's feet. The *sugya* then relates that the mother of the Amora R. Shmuel b. Judah (BA 3) made for him, or commissioned someone else to make for him, a silver scraper or strigil, apparently for use on the Sabbath only, as noted by Rashi (s.v. *migrarta d'khaspa*).⁶³ That is, his mother appears to know that certain (questionable) activities are permitted on Shabbat if executed with an implement designated for Shabbat use exclusively. In other words, this is a woman whose actions reflect halakhic knowledge. At least, that is how the editor of the episode describes her. One can assume that she heard these matters debated in her own home.

⁶¹ The mishnah presents a list of activities performed in the bathhouse (H. Albeck, *Mishnah, Moed*, [Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1952 69).

⁶² תוספתא שבת פרק טז הלכה יט, אין מגרדין במגרדת ביום טוב ואין צריך לומר בשבת רבן שמעון בן גמליאל מתיר וכן היה רבן שמעון בן גמליאל או' אם היו מלוכלכות בטיט ובצואה מגרדין RSBG's opinion in this parallel halakhah in the Tosefta is more lenient: he permits using a scraper on the Sabbath for any purpose at all. Some Tosefta mss. add the word "feet" or "hands" to RSBG's opinion.

⁶³ It is possible, therefore, that she was familiar with several *halakhot*, or that the editor of the episode suggests that such was the case. She knows the tannaitic debate about using a scraper on the Sabbath. If she were not familiar with it, that is, if she knew only one opinion, she would have refrained from making him a silver scraper—either because the first tanna prohibits all scraping on the Sabbath, or because RSBG permits one to use any scraper on Shabbat. Why did she make him a silver scraper? This would reflect a decision somewhere in between RSBG and the first tanna: a dedicated Sabbath scraper would reflect greater leniency than what the first tanna would require but greater stringency than what RSBG would require. Was the later halakhah, that scraping in general was forbidden, but scraping mud and excrement was permitted, based on her actions? Silver strigils existed in the ancient world. See www.flickr.com/photos/mharrsch/556582560.

A second example appears in bPes 40a-b. After a lengthy debate about whether or not one may moisten grain before baking it into Passover matzah, Rava says that it is indeed obligatory to moisten it (מצוה ללתות), and supports this ruling with the verse, “And you shall guard the unleavened bread (Exodus 12:17).” Later in the *sugya* it is reported that Rava told the workers who were handling the sheaves, “Handle them for the purpose of the precept,” which means, “do not let them get wet.” The *gemara* comments that this proves that Rava holds that guarding is required from the time of harvest and until the dough is put in the oven. The *sugya*’s concluding note is that the mother of Mar the son of Ravina, who lived a generation or two later than Rava, stored grain for her son in a trough [מר בריה דרבינא מנקטא [ליה אימיה בארבי], from harvest time until the grain was ground into flour and baked. Again, it seems clear that Mar’s mother was familiar with the halakhah that grain must be guarded from the outset. It is likely that she learned this rule by overhearing her husband’s or son’s study sessions which took place, it would seem, in her own home. Alternatively, she may have learned it from her own mother, since the rule emerged a number of years earlier. To help her son fulfill this difficult requirement, Mar’s mother herself put the grain in a trough and kept it dry from the time of harvest and until the time of baking.⁶⁴ One may even assume that she is a widow who is living with her son.

A note: both mothers, those of Mar and of R. Shmuel b. Judah, are portrayed as very devoted to their sons. The motif of a mother who will spend inordinate amounts of time and money on her son appears in a number of places in rabbinic literature.⁶⁵ Two well-known cases are the mothers of the high priests Yishmael b. Piavi and Eleazar b. Harsom, who spent 10,000 and 20,000 *zuzim* respectively to make their sons a garment of fine fabric.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ There is nothing in the language to suggest that someone else asked her to do so. The plain sense meaning is that she did so on her own in order to please her son. See next note.

⁶⁵ Ross Kraemer, in “Jewish Mothers and Daughters in the Greco-Roman World,” writes that Jewish mothers favored sons over daughters because sons were expected to provide for their mothers in their old age and serve as their legal guardians and protectors. Daughters were not in a position to provide sustenance or support to mothers (S. J. D. Cohen, ed., *The Jewish Family in Antiquity* [Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, Brown Judaic Studies 1993, 108]).

⁶⁶ See tYoma 1:21, 22.

Women as Tradents

8. yShabbat 13:6, 14b (=yBesah 5:1, 62d)

רבי שמי בעי מהו לכפות עליו כלי? ייבא כהיא דאמ' רבי שמעון בי רבי ינאי:
 אני לא שמעתי מאבא, אחותי אמרה לי משמו, ביצה שנולדה ביום טוב
 סומכין לה כלי בשביל שלא תתגלגל אבל אין כופין עליה כלי. שמואל אמר
 אף כופין עליה כלי.

R. Shaimi asked: what is the rule for inverting a utensil over it [an egg laid on the Festival, to keep it from rolling away and getting broken]? Let it be [answered from] that which R. Simon of the house of R. Yannai said: I did not hear [the following halakhah] from Father; my sister told it to me in his name. If an egg was laid on a festival, one may prop a utensil against it so that it does not roll away but one may *not* invert a utensil over it. Shmuel said: One *may* invert a utensil over it.

A rabbi comes to the study house and informs his colleagues of a halakhah that he heard from his sister that she had heard from their father. Had he not trusted her to relay it faithfully, he would not have passed it on to his colleagues. She thus becomes part of the chain of transmission, which rabbinic literature consistently takes pains to present accurately and in full.

Many talmudic sources indicate that it was women, not men, who raised chickens and collected the eggs.⁶⁷ It therefore stands to reason that the triggering event for R. Yannai to teach his daughter a new halakhah was that one of her chickens laid an egg on the festival.⁶⁸ Since she does not ask her father if she may eat the egg, she probably knows that the halakhah is in accordance with Bet Hillel, that on the festival, one may not eat an egg that was laid on the festival. But she does not know if she may invert a utensil over the egg to stop it from rolling away; hence, it seems, she asks about it. Her father tells her

⁶⁷ See, for instance, tBM 4:24,25.

⁶⁸ I am making the assumption that this woman learned a halakhah from her father in response to a question she asked him. The setting had to be private because it does not include her brother. In most cases in which a man transmits a halakhah to a woman, there was a triggering event or question. See above, sections 3, 5, and 6. Had she overheard “public” discussion of this halakhah in her own home, it would not have been necessary for her to transmit it to her brother.

that she may not invert a utensil over the egg⁶⁹ but may prop one against it. She then informs her brother of what she heard from their father. It is not clear what impelled her to do so. It is even possible, but not likely, that her father taught her this law without her asking him about it.

We see in this case that a woman learns a halakhah about domestic matters from her father, not her mother. That this halakhah was not yet settled is demonstrated by the fact that Samuel (in Babylonia) disagrees with R. Yannai (in the Land of Israel) and allows inversion of a utensil over the egg. It follows that two halakhic discussions took place between a man and a woman: the first in which a father teaches a newly emerging halakhah to his daughter; the second in which the daughter transmits the new halakhah to her brother, who then transmits it to his colleagues in her name. Is the fact that R. Simon includes his sister in the chain of transmission a way of undermining the legitimacy of the law he brings to the *bet midrash*? I do not think so. That would be reading into the text. He seems merely to present the full chain of transmission.

9. yTerumot 11:10, 48b

מהו להדליק שמן שריפה בחנוכה אמרין דבי רבי ינאי מדליקין שמן שריפה בחנוכה אמר רבי ניסא אנא לא אנא חכים לאבא אימא הוה אמרה לי אבוך הוה אמר מי שאין לו שמן של חולין מדליק שמן שריפה בחנוכה.

May one use oil of *terumah* that has become ritually impure to light the Hanukkah [lamp]? They said at the School of R. Yannai that one may light a Hanukkah [lamp] with such oil. Said R. Nisa: I did not know my father.⁷⁰ Mother told me, “Your father did say, ‘He who lacks ordinary oil may light the Hanukkah [lamp] with oil of *terumah* that has become ritually impure.’”

A question arose regarding a particular kind of oil—may it be used to light a Hanukkah lamp—and the School of R. Yannai answered in the affirmative. R. Nisa, a fourth generation Land of Israel Amora, supports that conclusion with an “anecdote.” He says to his colleagues that although he did not know his father, his mother told him that his

⁶⁹ Amoraim differ on whether a utensil may be moved on Shabbat for the sake of an object that itself may not be moved. See yShabbat 17:1, 16a.

⁷⁰ Meaning of phrase not clear. The root חכב means “to know.”

father told her that if someone does not have ordinary oil with which to light a Hanukkah lamp, he or she may use oil of *terumah* that has become ritually impure. His mother probably asked this very question of his father when she once found she did not have ordinary oil for the Hanukkah lamp, but only oil of *terumah* that had become ritually impure. And he answered her “yes.” It is also possible that he taught her this halakhah without her asking him about it.

This is another clear example of a woman being included in the chain of transmission. R. Nisa explains why he is transmitting a law in the name of his mother—because he was not able to hear it from his father directly. Again we see two halakhic conversations between a man and a woman: 1) At some point in the past, R. Nisa’s father transmitted to his wife the halakhah of lighting a Hanukkah lamp with oil of *terumah* that had become ritually impure; 2) At a later time, R. Nisa’s mother transmitted this halakhah to her son in his father’s name. R. Nisa is not minimizing the teaching by including his mother in the chain of transmission. As he himself says, he did not know his father. His goal is to support R. Yannai’s teaching. There is no reason to assume, a priori, that a halakhah transmitted by a woman is anything other than reliable.

10. bBerakhot 39b

. . . אלא אמר רבא: מברך ואחר כך בוצע. נהרדעי עבדי כרבי חייא, ורבנן עבדי כרבא. אמר רבינא: אמרה לי אם, אבוך עביד כרבי חייא,⁷¹ דאמר רבי חייא: צריך שתכלה ברכה עם הפת, ורבנן עבדי כרבא. והלכתא כרבא, דאמר: מברך ואחר כך בוצע.

. . . Rather, said Rava, one [first] recites the blessing and then breaks [bread]. The Nehardeans followed [the ruling of] R. Hiyya but the Rabbis followed [the ruling of] Rava. Said Ravina: Mother told me, your Father followed R. Hiyya, for R. Hiyya said, The blessing should end simultaneously with the [breaking of] bread. But the Rabbis followed [the ruling] of Rava. And the halakhah is like Rava, as he said, One [first] recites the blessing and then breaks [bread].

⁷¹ This phrase appears in all the mss. Are these the words that the narrator claims she said, or did she actually go on and cite R. Hiyya’s opinion? By applying the logic of Ockham’s razor, I accept the first option.

R. Hiyya and Rava disagreed on the order of events at a meal. R. Hiyya, an early Land of Israel Amora, recommends that one recite the blessing over bread and simultaneously break the bread. Rava, who lived much later in Babylonia, suggests that the acts be performed sequentially. Ravina, an even later Babylonian Amora (of either the fifth or seventh generation), attempts to resolve the dispute by citing what his mother told him she had learned from his father, namely, that one should follow the view of R. Hiyya and perform both acts simultaneously.

His mother's statement, "Your father followed the view of R. Hiyya," suggests that she knew that there was a dispute between two rabbis and that her husband followed one of them. It is not at all clear why the father did not transmit his view to his son directly. Perhaps he was no longer alive or available. But the image of the mother is of a woman who is aware of a conversation about this matter, which perhaps took place in her own home, and weighs in on the matter with information that only she has. She paid close attention to how her husband performed rituals at the meal and understood that there was significance to the order in which he executed them.

This anecdote provides evidence of one, or possibly two halakhic conversations between a man and a woman. The first took place in the past, when her husband told her that he favored the view of R. Hiyya or else announced it at the table. The second took place when she informed her son of his father's practice.

11. bMenahot 68b

רב פפא ורב הונא בריה דרב יהושע אכלי חדש באורתא דשיתסר נגהי שבסר, קסברי: חדש בחוצה לארץ דרבנן, ולספיקא לא חיישינן. ורבנן דבי רב אשי אכלו בצפרא דשבסר, קסברי: חדש בחוצה לארץ דאורייתא, ורבנן יוחנן בן זכאי מדרבנן קאמר, וכי תקיין ליום הנף, לספיקא לא תקיין. אמר רבינא, אמרה לי אב: אבוך לא הוה אכיל חדש אלא באורתא דשבסר נגהי תמניסר, דסבר לה כר' יהודה, וחייש לספיקא..

R. Pappa and R. Huna b. R. Joshua ate of the new crop in the evening of 16 Nisan, the night before 17 Nisan. They held: the new crop, outside the land of Israel, is prohibited by rabbinic [enactment], and one need not concern oneself with a doubt [as to which day is 16 Nisan—that day or the next]. But the rabbis of the school of R. Ashi ate [of the new crop] on the morning of 17 Nisan. They held: [the ban on eating] the new crop outside the land of Israel is a biblical rule, whereas R. Yohanan b.

Zakkai's enactment is rabbinic. As for his enactment about the Day of Waving, he did not enact [it] for a case of doubt. Said Ravina: Mother told me, your father did not eat of the new crop until the evening of 17 Nisan, the night before 18 Nisan, for he holds like R. Judah and is concerned about [a situation in which there is a] doubt.

The issue under discussion is when one may eat of the new grain crop, the *hadash*, outside the land of Israel. When the Temple still stood, new grain was permitted to be eaten in the land of Israel after the *omer* was offered on 16 Nisan. After the Temple was destroyed, R. Yohanan b. Zakkai made an enactment that new grain was forbidden for the entire Day of Waving, 16 Nisan. A question arose regarding when one may eat of the new grain outside the land of Israel. Since outside the land there is a doubt as to which day is 16 Nisan—the one locally designated as such or the one locally designated as 17 Nisan—different practices developed.

1) R. Pappa and R. Huna son of R. Joshua would eat new grain at the end of 16 Nisan. They did not think it was necessary to wait an extra day to act upon the doubt regarding which day was the “real” 16 Nisan, that day or the one following. They held that the ban on new grain outside the Land of Israel was a rabbinical decree, and when there is a doubt regarding a rabbinical decree, one need not act on it.

2) The rabbis of the school of R. Ashi ate new grain on the morning of 17 Nisan. They held that the ban on eating new grain outside the land of Israel was biblical. Therefore, because one must act upon a doubt regarding biblical rules, they waited an extra day to eat *hadash*. But they also held that when R. Yohanan b. Zakkai issued his stringency—that one could not eat new grain for the entire Day of Waving—he intended it as a rabbinic rule and so it would not apply to situations of doubt. Since 17 Nisan is doubtfully the Day of Waving outside the land of Israel, they held one could already eat new grain that morning (as was done on 16 Nisan when the Temple still stood).

3) Finally, Ravina reports on an even more stringent practice. He says that his mother told him that it was the practice of his father not to eat new grain until sundown on 17 Nisan. The passage then reports her saying that her husband holds like R. Judah of mMenahot 10:5, who says that the ban on eating new grain for the entire day of 16 Nisan is biblical, not rabbinic. He also held that the ban on eating the new crop outside the land of Israel is biblical and therefore one must

be concerned about doubtful dates. This means, in his opinion, that 17 Nisan was to be treated as if it were 16 Nisan, and hence one had to wait until sundown to eat new grain.

The point of interest in this passage is that regarding the issue of when to begin to eat *hadash*, which was debated by so many, Ravina did not have direct evidence of his own father's custom. It was his mother who informed him how his father had behaved. That is, when Ravina's father was no longer alive, or perhaps no longer available, his mother, who probably understood the issues surrounding eating new grain, relayed to him his father's practice. One need not assume that she also said to her son that her husband followed the view of R. Judah, although it is certainly possible she said so since she might have overheard discussion of these points in her own home. But what she did say to her son was that his father waited to eat new grain until sundown on 17 Nisan. This is a rule that she herself needed to know in order to run her kitchen and so it is easy to understand why her husband transmitted that information to her. In other words, there is evidence here of two halakhic conversations between a man and a woman: the first between a husband and wife and the second between a mother and son.

In none of the four cases—one from the Yerushalmi and three from the Bavli—cited in this section is there reason to think that citing a woman as a tradent disqualifies or casts doubt on the teaching transmitted by her. In three of the four episodes, the woman cited helps support one side of a debate: the sister of R. Simon transmits a ban on inverting a utensil over an egg laid on a festival; the mother of Ravina supports the position of R. Hiyya regarding breaking bread relative to reciting the blessing over bread; and the mother of Ravina supports a stringency regarding when to eat new grain outside the Land of Israel. In the fourth instance, the mother of R. Nisa supports R. Yannai's answer to a question about Hanukkah oil.

Women who Know Non-Household Halakhah

12. bKid12a-b

. . . ההוא גברא דאקדיש באבנא דכוחלא, יתיב רב חסדא וקא משער ליה, אי אית ביה שוה פרוטה אין, ואי לא, לא. ואי לית ביה שוה פרוטה לא? והא אמר שמואל: חיישינן! רב חסדא לא סבר ליה דשמואל. אמרה ליה אימיה: והא ההוא יומא דקדשה הוה ביה שוה פרוטה! אמר לה: לאו כל כמינך דאסרת לה אבתרא, לאו היינו דיהודית דביתהו דרבי חייא, דהוית לה צער לידה,

אמרה ליה, אמרה לי אם: קיבל ביד אבוך קידושי כי זוטרת. אמר לה: לאו כל כמינה דאימך דאסרת לך עילוואי.

A certain man betrothed [his wife] with a stibnite stone.⁷² [She later received a betrothal gift from another man.⁷³] R. Hisda was trying to determine if [the stone] was worth a penny, and if so the [first] betrothal was valid, or if [the stone] was not worth a penny, and if so the [first] betrothal was not valid . . . His mother said to him: But on the day he betrothed her, it was worth a penny!⁷⁴ He said to her: We will not [decide the law] according to you, because you would prohibit her to a second [husband]. Is this not like the story of Judith, the wife of R. Hiyya, who had [terrible] labor pains,⁷⁵ and said to [her husband]: Mother told me that Father accepted a betrothal [gift] for you when you were small. He said to her: We do not decide the law according to your mother because [if we did] she would be prohibiting you to me!

In these two anecdotes, the one involving R. Hisda's mother⁷⁶ and the other involving R. Hiyya's wife Judith, a woman discusses halakhah with a man. R. Hisda's mother overheard her son dealing with a question of betrothal and wondering if the first betrothal—effected with the stone—was valid. If it was not, a second man could still betroth her (or already did). R. Hisda seemed to be favoring the legality of a second betrothal because he was interested in the current, perhaps decreased value of the stone, not its worth at the time of betrothal. So his mother interjects and points out that the stone *was*

⁷² Ground stibnite, called kohl, is used to paint the eyes.

⁷³ So interprets Rashi.

⁷⁴ Several mss. expand her statement: "But there are witnesses who know that on the day he betrothed her it was worth a penny." See, for instance, Munich 95: אמר' לי אימ' איכ' סהדי דידיעי דבההי שעת' דקדיש אית בה שוה פרוט'.

⁷⁵ In an episode in bYevamot 65b, Judith, the wife of R. Hiyya, appears to know that rabbis are discussing whether or not women are obligated to procreate. Reference is also made to her severe labor pains.

⁷⁶ One ms. suggests that it was the mother of the first husband who made the comment to R. Hisda. Oxford Opp. 248, . . . אתיא אימיה אמרה ליה והא איכ'. If we overlook the section about R. Hisda disagreeing with Samuel, one could argue that the woman who comes to the man's assistance is his own mother, not R. Hisda's. For the purposes of this paper, it makes little difference whose mother it is. She is portrayed as a woman who knows marital law. I find it more reasonable to see her as R. Hisda's mother.

worth a penny on the day the man betrothed his wife. It follows that the first betrothal was valid and a second would not be. R. Hisda rejects his mother's opinion because, he says, he does not want to prohibit the woman to a second husband, as did R. Hiyya.

It stands to reason that this halakhic exchange took place in a study house that was located in a home. It also stands to reason that an old mother was living with her grown son. Since halakhic discussions happened within her earshot, she received a broad-based halakhic education and hence knew enough to express an opinion on the matter of the sabbath stone.

And similarly in the second anecdote,⁷⁷ Judith explains to her husband R. Hiyya that the reason she is suffering such severe labor pains is that she is not validly married to him. Another man had preceded him and given her father a betrothal gift for her when she was only a small girl. If so, she is living with her present husband, R. Hiyya, in sin. Most important, Judith understands that a second betrothal cannot trump a first if the first was performed according to the rules. In both of these anecdotes, a woman discusses halakhah with a man from a position of knowledge. But in both the man sets aside her view.⁷⁸

13. bHullin 44b

. . . כי הא דרבה שרא טרפתא וזבן מינה בישראל, אמרה ליה בת רב חסדא: אבא שרי בוכרא ולא זבן מיניה בישראל!⁷⁹ אמר לה: ה"מ בוכרא דאשומא מזדבן, הכא מתקלא מוכח. מאי איכא? משום אומצא מעלייתא, כל יומא אומצא מעלייתא זבנו לי! אמר רב חסדא: איזהו תלמיד חכם, זה הרואה טרפה לעצמו.

⁷⁷ Rashi (*ad locum*) says that R. Hisda relates this second anecdote. I do not find it necessary to read the passage this way. The editor may have inserted the second anecdote because it is similar in important ways to the first.

⁷⁸ See n. 32 above.

⁷⁹ Hamburg 169: אבא לא עבד הכי אלא כי אייתי בוכרא לקמיה ומורי בה להיתירא לא הוה; Vatican 121, שקיל מיניה; Vatican 122, הא אבא שרא; . . .; אבא שרי בוכרא ולא זבן מיניה; Vatican 123, בוכרא ולא זבן מיניה; Soncino, הא אבא כי הוה שרי בוכרא לא זבן מיניה, Vatican 123, בוכרא ולא זבן מיניה. The presence of the word הא in two mss. suggests that the plain sense interpretation of Bat Rav Hisda's comment is that her husband is not living up to her father's standards. Without that word, one might say that she merely contrasts her father's and her husband's behavior. See below, n. 84. I thank Tzvi Novick for bringing this episode to my attention.

. . . Like⁸⁰ the instance of Rava⁸¹ who permitted a doubtful case of *terefah*⁸² [to be eaten] and then bought [for himself] some of the flesh [of that animal]. The daughter of R. Hisda [his wife] said to him: Father permitted a firstling to be eaten [because it was blemished] but did not [then] buy any of the flesh [of that animal]. He said to her: In that case [there was reason to suspect that the rabbi who permitted the firstling to be slaughtered made a self-serving decision] because there the flesh was sold by appraisal [and hence he could have bought the flesh cheap], but here [the flesh is sold] by weight and this is proof [that I made the decision to allow the animal to be slaughtered and eaten without regard to my own benefit]. What [other suspicion] can there be? That [as the rabbi who permitted the animal to be slaughtered I am sold] a choice cut? But every day they sell me a choice cut!

Said R. Hisda: Who is a scholar? He who would declare his own [animal] to be a *terefah*⁸³ [and hence not permitted to be eaten.].

The Talmud preserves a report of R. Hisda's halakhic ruling, as transmitted by his daughter. She understood well that if her father found a firstling to be blemished, it would benefit the kohen who brought the animal to him for inspection. The rule is that when a

⁸⁰ The broader context is a discussion of a perforated windpipe which renders an animal a *terefah*. The narrower context is a discussion of the appearance of impropriety if a rabbi purchases the flesh of an animal that he himself decided could be slaughtered and eaten. The *stama* makes mention, in the immediately preceding unit, of selling meat by appraisal, not weight. It seems that he lifted this language from Rava, who uses those very terms in the *sugya* under discussion.

⁸¹ Printed ed., Rabbah. All mss. (Hamburg 169, Munich 95, Vatican 121, 122, 123, and Soncino 1489) read Rava.

⁸² A *terefah* is an animal that is certain to die because of a serious organic defect or disease. The mishnah associated with this anecdote, mHullin 3:1, lists eighteen such defects. Even if ritually slaughtered, the flesh of a *terefah* is not permitted to be eaten.

⁸³ That is, a man worthy of being called a scholar would not use his Torah knowledge for his own benefit. When there is doubt about an animal being viable and permitted to be eaten, or being a *terefah* and not fit to be eaten, he would not use his Torah knowledge to find a way to permit the slaughter of his own animal, thus protecting himself against financial loss.

firstling is declared permanently blemished, by birth or accident, the kohen may slaughter it and either eat or sell it. If not blemished, he must wait to slaughter it until it becomes blemished on its own. She is saying that since her father was the one who permitted the animal to be slaughtered, he did not buy any of its flesh. If he did, it would appear as if he had made that determination in order to gain personally. She then draws an analogy between two cases, the firstling and the doubtful *terefah* that her husband permitted to be slaughtered, and criticizes her husband who acted, it seemed to her, in a self-serving manner.⁸⁴ That is, after Rava permitted a doubtful *terefah* to be slaughtered and sold, he then purchased some of the flesh, thus making it look as if he arrived at his lenient decision in order to benefit personally. Rava defends himself to his wife by noting that the two matters are different. In the case of a firstling, the flesh is sold by appraisal, which means *below* market price. In the case of a *terefah*, the flesh is sold by weight, which means *at* market price.⁸⁵ He therefore did not stand to gain by permitting the *terefah* to be slaughtered, and he did not give the appearance of having made a legal determination with his own benefit in mind when he bought some of the flesh.

The *sugya* goes on to cite a statement of R. Hisda himself on the very subject of pronouncements that are self-serving. He says that a worthy scholar is one who makes decisions about a doubtful *terefah* of his own, whether or not it may be slaughtered and eaten, and rules stringently, without regard to his own benefit. It is rather likely that R. Hisda's daughter knew this teaching of her father, in addition to the related episode involving the kohen and his firstling. It is also likely that R. Hisda issued the firstling decision in a location where his daughter would have seen or heard about it. That is, the questioner probably approached the rabbi in his own home or courtyard, and

⁸⁴ R. Haut (conversation, January 12, 2011) suggests that all this woman is saying is that her father does things differently, and she is not criticizing her husband. I hold otherwise, but either way we interpret, the point remains that this woman is knowledgeable about both the laws of firstlings and of *terefah*. See above, n. 74.

⁸⁵ As mightily as the Talmud strives to present Rava as above reproach, one can easily side with his wife and think he gave the appearance of benefitting from his own legal decision by being able to buy meat cheaply. I might even suggest that the story originally ended with his wife's critical comment. Perhaps a later editor added Rava's response to her in order to "rescue" him.

brought the animal with him. R. Hisda's daughter was thus able to learn this Torah rule from her father as it was issued. Even if she was not a witness to the proceedings, but her father later told her about what he did, this too is a means of enabling her to learn Torah.

In the principal anecdote, we see a husband and wife, Rava and the daughter of R. Hisda, engaged in a halakhic discussion about a law that a woman clearly knows, even though it was not a subject she needed to master in order to manage her own home and kitchen. The response that Rava gives her is the kind one gives to someone who understands, and is familiar with, the *halakhot* of slaughtering a *terefah*. His answer is typically rabbinic in that it points out a distinction between two similar cases. In other words, he does not talk down to her but treats her like a scholarly equal, even as he dismisses her critique of him.

To return to the subject of writing social history using what appear to be "real life" anecdotes: following the passage about the daughter of R. Hisda and Rava (and her father's teachings in three versions),⁸⁶ the *sugya* continues with two anecdotes about rabbis in the land of Israel. The first says that when R. Eleazar was sent a gift from the house of the Nasi, he would not accept it; and when he was invited to dine [there] he would not go.⁸⁷ The *sugya* goes on to say that when R. Zera was sent a gift he, too, would not accept it, but when he was asked to dine he would accept the invitation because, he explained, his presence would honor the host. If so, the meal was not a gift but an even exchange of favors. R. Zera would thus owe his hosts nothing should they ever appear before him as litigants.

What role do these anecdotes play in the *sugya*? They illustrate the rabbinic ideal of not letting the possibility (or the fact) of personal gain affect halakhic decision making. They even suggest that such temptation arose frequently. It is possible that the editors are jibing R.

⁸⁶The other two versions of R. Hisda's statement are: ואמר רב חסדא: איזהו שונא: מתנות יחיה (משלי טו:כז)? זה הרואה טרפה לעצמו. דרש מר זוטרא משמיה דרב חסדא: כל מי שקורא ושונה, ורואה טרפה לעצמו, ושימש תלמידי חכמים, עליו הכתוב אומר יגיע כפיך כי תאכל (תהלים קכח:ב). What all three have in common is the notion that making a favorable decision about one's own doubtful *terefot* is immoral and comes under the category of conferring a benefit on oneself, which will of course lead people to think that the decisor was subjective rather than objective in considering the facts of the case.

⁸⁷ According to the gemara, he supported his actions with a verse, "He who hates gifts will live long" (Prov 15:27).

Zera for what they view as his self-serving policy on meals. True these are moralistic teachings, but they are presented as if the incidents actually took place. It follows that episodes involving women may be similarly real.⁸⁸ That is, the narrator may use a real life anecdote to exhort his audience to behave in like manner or to refrain from such behavior. It is therefore not necessary to conclude that anecdotes of this sort are fully fabricated. They may be edited versions of actual incidents.

14. bKetubot 85a

ההיא איתתא דאיהייבא שבועה בי דינא דרבא, אמרה ליה בת רב חסדא:
ידענא בה דחשודה אשבועה, אפכה רבא לשבועה אשכנגדה.

A woman came under an obligation to take an oath in the court of Rava. The daughter of R. Hisda [Rava's wife] said to him: I know she is suspect regarding oaths. [So] Rava shifted the oath to the other [claimant, i.e., the plaintiff].

A woman came before Rava for a judicial decision.⁸⁹ He ruled that if she would take an oath denying the monetary claim against her, she would be exempt from payment.⁹⁰ His wife, a daughter of R. Hisda, informed him that the woman could not be trusted to tell the truth. Heeding his wife's words, Rava shifted the oath to the other claimant instead. As a result, he, i.e., the plaintiff, became entitled to collect the moneys he argued were owed him. The defendant lost her lawsuit because Rava's wife deemed her to be untrustworthy. It makes no difference, for the purposes of this paper, that Rava's decision appears questionable. What we see here is an instance of one woman's

⁸⁸ I thus challenge M. Satlow's claim ("Fictional Women") that when the woman in the anecdote conforms to one of his five stereotypical images, it follows that she is fictional. I am suggesting a more nuanced approach. Each story needs to be examined on its own. Some will show tendentious reworking of an incident that likely occurred. Others will be reworkings of folkloric tales and yet others pure fabrications.

⁸⁹ See J. Rubenstein (*Cambridge Companion*, 69) who notes that the government gave Jews the right to conduct their own judicial hearings in certain areas. Cf. S. Schwartz (*Cambridge Companion*, 91).

⁹⁰ See Rashi, *ad locum*.

negative assessment of another woman being accepted by a male judge.⁹¹

Rava's wife appears to have a good understanding of the judicial proceedings. She does not hesitate to speak up when she feels it necessary and helpful. There is no halakhic exchange between husband and wife in this episode, and yet a woman is presented as halakhically knowledgeable regarding an area unrelated to domestic matters. The most reasonable explanation for the presence of Rava's wife at the hearing is that it is taking place in close proximity to her, i.e., in her home or courtyard. Also of interest is that in the episode that follows, Rava does not accept R. Pappa's assessment of a claimant as untrustworthy. When asked about his seeming inconsistency, Rava says that he can fully rely on his wife but not on R. Pappa. Again we see that a woman is being used to shame a man.⁹² If so, Rava's praise of his wife is suspect. Note also that since a number of these case stories involve women who are close relatives of R. Hisda (sections 12-14), it is possible that he, even more than others, favored Torah study for the women of the household.

A Rabbi who Taught his Daughters Torah

15. bKetubot 23a

מתני'. . . אמרה נשביתי וטהורה אני נאמנת, שהפה שאסר הוא הפה שהתיר; ואם יש עדים שנשבית, והיא אומרת טהורה אני, אינה נאמנת. ואם משנשאת באו עדים, הרי זו לא תצא.
גמ'. . . ואם משנשאת באו עדים וכו'. אמר אבוב דשמואל: לא נשאת נשאת ממש, אלא כיון שהתירוה לינשא אע"פ שלא נשאת. . . ואישתביין בנתיה דמר שמואל ואסקינהו לארעא דישראל. אוקמן לשבווינהו מאבראי ועיילי לבי מדרשא דר' חנינא, **הא אמרה נשביתי וטהורה אני, והא אמרה נשביתי וטהורה אני**, שרינהו. סוף עול אתו שבווינהו, אמר רבי חנינא: בנן דמוריין אינון.⁹³ איגלאי מילתא דבנתיה דמר שמואל הוויין. . . .

⁹¹ See mGit 2:7 and mYev 16:4 where female relatives are not trusted to testify regarding each other.

⁹² See n. 58 for other examples of women who are used by the narrator to shame a man.

⁹³ מורינא means "a scholar who makes legal decisions" (Sokoloff, 649). The mss. vary in small ways in their spelling of מוריין. Most abbreviate it, as in Vatican 112, בנן מוריין אינון. Only Munich 95 writes in the feminine: בנתן מוריין. Some mss. include the ך before מוריין and some do not. Without the ך one might be tempted to translate the phrase as "scholar daughters," meaning

Mishnah . . . If she said, “I was taken captive, but I am pure,” she is believed, for “the mouth that forbade is the same mouth that permits.” But if there are witnesses that she was taken captive, and she says, “I am pure,” she is not believed. But if after she married [a kohen], witnesses [to her captivity] show up, lo, she does not leave [him].

Gemara . . . “But if after she married witnesses show up” and so on. Said the father of Shmuel: [The word] “married” does not mean that she actually married, but since they permitted her to marry, even if she had not yet married [she may still marry a kohen even if, before she marries, witnesses show up who testify to her captivity]. . . . And [it happened that] the daughters of Mar Shmuel were taken captive, and they were brought up to the Land of Israel. They left (*oqman*) their captors outside and entered the *bet midrash* of R. Hanina. This one said, “I was taken captive, but I am pure,” and that one said, “I was taken captive, but I am pure.” He permitted them [to marry a kohen]. Later, the captors entered. R. Hanina exclaimed: These are the daughters of a scholar! And then the thing became known that they were the daughters of Mar Shmuel . . .

The mishnah says that if a woman shows up and says about herself, “I was taken captive, but I am pure,” she is believed and permitted to marry a kohen. Her claim falls under the rubric, “The mouth that forbade is the same mouth that permits.” This means that if she voluntarily places herself at a disadvantage, without anyone else affirming the fact of the disadvantage, and then goes on to dismiss it, she is to be believed. Either the court believes both parts of her statement, or neither. The outcome either way is that she is viewed as ritually pure. In this instance, since she herself provided the information that she was taken captive—when she could have remained silent and no one would have had knowledge of her kidnaping—but then continues and says that no one violated her, she is to be believed.

Shmuel’s father understands the mishnah to be saying that not only in the case that witnesses to her captivity show up after she got

“women who make legal decisions,” as these women did. I thank David Marcus for this suggestion. Such a provocative idea may have led to the addition of the 7. See the Yerushalmi parallel below, n. 96.

married may she remain with her kohen husband, but she may do so even if they show up after she was given permission to marry a kohen but before she actually married him. The permission may not be revoked. The gemara then relates that two daughters of Shmuel were once taken captive. The captors brought them from Babylonia up to the Land of Israel. The women intentionally left their captors outside and entered the study house of R. Hanina. Each testified about herself, “I was taken captive, but I am ritually pure.” He accepted their claims and declared them fit for marriage to a kohen. The captors later entered and gave independent confirmation of the kidnaping. Since, according to the father of Shmuel’s interpretation of the Mishnah, it was too late to reverse the decision, R. Hanina did not do so, but instead exclaimed, *b’nan d’moryan ninhu*, which means, “these are daughters of a scholar,” implying that they know how to control the flow of information to their own benefit.⁹⁴ Note that according to the narrator, these women know not just the simple rule of prohibition to a kohen if one has been raped, but the far more complicated rule of “the mouth that forbade is the same mouth that permits.”⁹⁵ The parallel version of this story in the Yerushalmi makes the same points.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Rashi translates that phrase as, “they are the daughters of a Torah scholar and a man who issues judgments that they knew to say this.” בנן דמוריין אינון - בנות אדם גדול ובעל הוראה הוא שידעו לעשות כן.

⁹⁵ Should one argue that these women merely were telling the truth, i.e., that they were not raped, but that they did not know the principle “the mouth that forbade,” I would respond that the reason this story appears in the Talmud, and is located precisely here, is that the editor is saying that these women *did* know the principle. That is the point of the story. The women, according to the narrator, were not violated in captivity, but if their captors accompanied them into the *bet midrash*, R. Hanina would have no choice but to disbelieve their claim of purity. These women knew the rules well enough to leave their captors behind.

⁹⁶ yKetubot 2:6, 26c

האשה שאמרה נשביתי כו' רב חונה אמר לא סוף דבר שנישאת אלא אפילו התירוה בית דין לינשא... ואישתביין בנתיה דשמואל כשגגה שיוצא מלפני השליט כד סלקון להכא סלקון שביין עמהון עלין קומי רבי חנינה אוקימן שביין מלבר אמר ליה נשבינו וטהורות אנו והתירן מן דנפקן שלחון שביין עלין אמר ניכרות אילו שבנות חכם הן. מן דאיתודעין מאן הויין....

The Yerushalmi version is similar to the Bavli in that R. Hanina says, “it is clear that they are the daughters of a scholar (הכם),” implying that they know how to argue their case to their own benefit. The ending, however, is somewhat different. In the Yerushalmi version, Shaiman bar Abba marries one of the women and she dies, and then marries the other woman and she too dies. Not because they lied about being sexually violated, says the storyteller, but

By calling these women “daughters of a scholar,” R. Hanina is suggesting that scholars teach halakhah to their daughters on many subjects, not just those related to household management. And that, in fact, is the central thesis of this paper: that women living in rabbinic households learned halakhah by overhearing Torah discussion and by direct instruction. Here we see an Amora saying exactly that, i.e., that (rabbi) fathers teach Torah to their daughters.⁹⁷

It is of great interest that it is Shmuel’s father who interprets the mishnah in a lenient way. He clearly did so with the intent of helping women returning from captivity marry a kohen.⁹⁸ The order of statements in the *sugya* suggests that Shmuel’s father did not know, when he issued his interpretation, that it would benefit his own granddaughters. It is also of interest that Shmuel, his son, holds that all women returning from captivity have been raped, their own denials of that fact notwithstanding.⁹⁹ It is thus ironic that it was Shmuel himself, by teaching his daughters Torah, who made it possible for them to confound his own assumption. One can say more generally

because of a relative’s sin. Does this ending cast a negative light on these learned women? Is the storyteller saying that this is what happens to learned women, that they die young? Perhaps, but even if he is saying that, he openly admits that they are learned. In the Bavli, this same Shaiman bar Abba, called Rabbi, objects to marrying a woman returned from captivity. R. Hanina tries to convince him otherwise. Is it possible that this Yerushalmi episode gave rise to the story about Beruriah’s demise, as told by Rashi (bAvodah Zarah 18b)? Do learned women always get their comeuppance? Since the Yerushalmi version is likely to be older than, and the basis of, the Bavli version, we can also say that perhaps the Bavli editor deliberately changed the ending. The women, it seems, do not marry their relative and do not die young. Their Torah knowledge does not hurt them.

⁹⁷ Furthermore, R. Hanina’s statement may be categorized as “innocent speech” (מסייה לפי תומו) and hence reliable. That is, he did not deliberately craft his comment to achieve a certain result. It just slipped out of his mouth.

⁹⁸ Without the statement of Shmuel’s father, or the parallel statement by R. Huna in the Yerushalmi, one can read the mishnah as saying that if a woman who makes a claim of purity after captivity is given permission to marry a kohen, and witnesses to her captivity appear before the marriage takes place, the permission may be revoked.

⁹⁹ In this *sugya*, father and son are locked in debate. The father holds that women returning from captivity are to be given guards so that they can later claim in court that they were not raped, not during captivity and not after release. The son holds that guards need not be appointed because all women returning from captivity are ritually impure, i.e., they have been raped.

that both the Bavli and Yerushalmi versions of this episode show men's deep ambivalence about believing women who claim ritual purity when their circumstances suggest otherwise. If so, the fact that the Mishnah states that one should accept the claim of a woman who says "I was taken captive, but I am pure" is all the more remarkable.

A Doubtful Example of a Woman Knowing Torah

There are also instances in which women speak words of Torah but the editor seems to have placed the words in their mouth. The reason the women's Torah knowledge in the next two anecdotes is doubtful is that the episodes are highly didactic. Even more to the point, they describe an event but do not include a rabbinic response to it. All the other episodes featured a rabbi who responded to the actions of the female protagonist—by challenging her, modifying her practice, transmitting what she said to others, and so on.

16. bBerakhot 22a

אמר רבי חנינא: גדר גדול גדרו בה דתניא: מעשה באחד שתבע אשה לדבר עבירה. אמרה לו: ריקא! יש לך ארבעים סאה שאתה טובל בהן? מיד פירש.¹⁰⁰

Said R. Hanina: They erected a high fence [by requiring immersion in 40 *seahs* of water after sex and not just 9 *qabs*], as was taught in a baraita: It once happened that a man summoned a woman to commit a [sexual] transgression. She said to him: Fool, have you 40 *seahs* of water in which to immerse yourself? He immediately left [her alone].

A man solicits a woman for sex. His action sounds more like seduction than rape. In response, the woman cites to him the rule that a man must immerse himself in 40 *seahs* of water after sexual relations if he then wants to study Torah. This rule has little relevance to her, and yet she is familiar with it. By rhetorically "throwing cold water" on her potential paramour, she succeeds in rebuffing him. According to Rashi (*s.v. she-tava' ishah*), the woman is not married, but that fact is not evident from the words of the story.

¹⁰⁰ In practically all mss., after she calls him a fool her comment begins with the word כלום, which does not change the meaning but just indicates that she asks a question. Also, two mss. conclude by saying that he abandoned the sin, פירש מן העבירה (Oxford, Paris). This seems to be a copyist's addition.

A similar anecdote appears in the Yerushalmi.

yBer 3:4, 6c

מעשה באחד שבא להיזקק עם שפחתו של רבי אמרה לו אם אין גבירתי
טובלת איני טובלת א"ל ולא כבהמ' את אמר' לו ולא שמע' בבא על הבהמה
שהו' נסקל שנאמר כל שוכב עם בהמה מות יומת

It once happened that a man attempted to have sexual relations with Rabbi's maidservant. She said to him: If my mistress does not immerse, then I do not immerse. He said to her: But are you not like an animal [and so immersion is not necessary]?! She said to him: Have you not heard that one who has sex with an animal is stoned to death, as it says, "Anyone who has sex with an animal shall surely be put to death"?

In this story, the female protagonist is a maidservant, not a free woman, and the male protagonist is not necessarily someone who studies Torah, but simply a man. When he attempts to have sex with the maidservant, which, given her low social status, probably involves a degree of coercion, she says to him, "if my mistress does not immerse, I do not immerse." That is, she will not immerse herself in order for him to have sex with her. The immersion she speaks of seems to be post-menstrual. It is not clear what the maidservant is saying about her mistress.¹⁰¹ He then says to her, "But are you not like an animal?" which implies that immersion prior to sex is not necessary for a man who is having sex with a maidservant.¹⁰² And she retorts, "Have you not heard that he who has sex with an animal is to be stoned to death, as it says, 'One who lies with an animal, he shall surely die' (Exodus 22:18)?" Note that it is the rabbis who interpret the words "he shall surely die" to mean execution by stoning. Since the woman is Rabbi's maidservant, about whom a number of stories are told that show her to be Hebrew-literate,¹⁰³ it is perhaps not so

¹⁰¹ Perhaps she is saying that when her mistresses immerses in a miqveh, she too immerses. But when her mistress does not immerse, she does not immerse.

¹⁰² This is an insulting way for him to say to her that the rules of menstrual impurity do not apply to non-Jewish maidservants. According to rabbinic law, however, non-Jewish maidservants in a Jewish home are required to follow the same rules as free Jewish women.

¹⁰³ yMegillah 2:2, 73a (parallel yShevi'it 9:1, 38c); bMQ 17a; bRH 26a; bNazir 3a. See yBer 2 :7, 5b, for another reference to slaves as animals.

surprising that the narrator has her cite biblical verses and rabbinic interpretations. Her wit is presented as sharper than that of the woman in the Bavli episode, for she turns his own argument right back at him—if you think I am an animal, then you will have signed your own death warrant by having sex with me!

The moral of the Yerushalmi episode is that a man should not take sexual advantage of a vulnerable woman, such as a maidservant. It is on a higher plane than the moral of the Bavli, which is that a scholar should not engage in sex too frequently. In the Yerushalmi, it is immersion *prior* to sex that restrains him, in the Bavli immersion *after* sex.¹⁰⁴ Despite these differences, the Bavli episode seems to be based on the Yerushalmi. Note also that the Bavli tale is an inversion of mSotah 3:4 in which R. Joshua implies that women prefer sex to Torah.¹⁰⁵ In this case it is the man, not the woman, who favors sex. Both the Bavli and Yerushalmi episodes implicitly critique R. Eliezer who says, in the same Mishnah as above, that a father who teaches his daughter Torah teaches her lewdness. In these stories it is just the opposite: a woman who knows Torah is able to use that very Torah to save herself from unwanted and uninvited sexual attention.

¹⁰⁴ The Bavli episode is about scholars immersing after sex and before Torah study. The story speaks out in favor of immersion in 40 *seahs*, arguing that it accomplishes a wide variety of goals, not just to keep scholars from having frequent sex (“not be with their wives like roosters”), but also to make it harder for men to commit sexual sin. The Bavli *sugya* reports that there had been opposition to this post-coital immersion. The Yerushalmi episode does not speak of a scholar but an ordinary man who seeks to take advantage of a woman of low social status. It seems that when this episode arrived in Babylonia it was altered by the context in which it found itself, i.e., a discussion of immersion after ejaculation. Although it appears in the Bavli in association with the same mishnah as in the Yerushalmi (mBer 3:6), it became, in the hands of the Bavli editors, a story about Torah study and full immersion following sexual relations, rather than a story about inappropriate treatment of female slaves, as in the Yerushalmi. The Bavli episode also resembles the immediately preceding episode in the Yerushalmi: It once happened that a vineyard guard sought to have sex with a married woman. By the time they finished preparing a place for immersion [following sex], people started passing by and the sin was abandoned. It seems that the Bavli has conflated two Yerushalmi episodes.

¹⁰⁵ According to H. Albeck (*Mishnah, Nashim* [Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1958], 241), R. Joshua is saying, in context, that women prefer less wealth and more sex to more wealth and less sex. This shows, Albeck concludes, that women are not fit for Torah study.

The question is this: did the Bavli woman know the 40 *seah* rule and the Yerushalmi maidservant the verse that says that sex with an animal is a capital crime? Or did the storyteller put the words of Torah into the mouths of these two women? I think the latter. Both episodes seem to have been fabricated (or at least modified) by editors who wish to warn men that if they succumb to their sexual urges and solicit sex from women who are not married to them, not only will they become frustrated, but a woman will humiliate them in the process.¹⁰⁶ And, as noted above, no rabbinic response appears in either version of the episode. This omission leads to the conclusion that these anecdotes are didactic fabrications.

Methodological Comments

I did not decide in advance that women discussed halakhah with men. Rather, one anecdote after another came my way in which such exchange was taking place. So I decided to look for additional examples, using search strings like “his mother,” “his daughter,” “his wife,” and “she said.” And more case stories turned up. Even so, the most effective way of locating such stories turned out to be reading the Talmud, page after page. I have not completed the search for materials about women and Torah study, but feel that the large number I have collected so far warrants the conclusions I am drawing from them.

The anecdotes about women and Torah study appear in both Talmuds, and, to a much lesser extent, in the Mishnah and the Tosefta.¹⁰⁷ The latter two are more focused on prescriptive rather than descriptive material. There are no obvious differences between stories about women in the Bavli and in the Yerushalmi. In both Talmuds, the anecdotes consist of a triggering event, a rabbinic response, and, in most cases, a halakhic conversation between a man and a woman.

¹⁰⁶ This Bavli episode seems like a fabricated exhortatory tale. Anonymity seems to be standard for such tales, as in bShabbat 26a: “A mother-in-law hated her daughter-in-law. She [the mother-in-law] told her [the daughter-in-law] to anoint herself with persimmon oil. She went and did so. When she returned, the mother-in-law said to her, light the lamp. She went and lit the lamp, caught fire, and was consumed.”

¹⁰⁷ See mYadaim 3:1; tKelim, Baba Batra 1:2.

Conclusions

1. No evidence turned up that women sat alongside men in the study house—whether the study house was a free-standing building or a private home. Hence, one has no basis on which to conclude that women studied Torah to the same extent or in the same intensive way as men.

2. Even so, the materials show that men discussed halakhot with women, couching the halakhot in the same terms as those used in the study house. The halakhot they taught women were the ones newly emerging from the study house or even those still in dispute. Many halakhot relate to household management, but some address other subjects too. Women also overheard and participated in halakhic discussions that took place in the courtyard, in the home, or at the table.

3. Women asked rabbis questions of halakhah that demonstrated prior knowledge of halakhah.

4. Women transmitted a halakhah they learned from one man, such as a husband, to another man, such as a son. Men brought rules to the study house that women transmitted to them. As a result, women appear in the chain of transmission.

5. Women applied halakhah to a variety of life situations.

6. The audience for these anecdotes is most likely male, and so the implicit lesson to men is, “Teach your women Torah if you want them to manage the kitchen according to your rules.”

7. Either these anecdotes reflect social reality, i.e. that women in rabbinic families in the amoraic period learned Torah in their own way, or else they reflect the desire of the storytellers and redactors to portray women as Torah knowledgeable. It is not clear why they would choose to do so.¹⁰⁸

8. Rabbinic criticism of women’s “Torah statements” is similar to that offered by a senior colleague to a junior colleague.

The anecdotes analyzed above, and others, lead to the further conclusion that many chapters of Mishnah, such as those which speak of men setting an *eruv tavshilin*, or men putting food on the stove to keep it warm for Shabbat, are actually legislating for women, for it is

¹⁰⁸ In some passages, the storyteller uses a knowledgeable woman to shame a man, as in sections 6 and 16, and as in the stories about Beruriah at bEruvin 54b.

they, the women, who set the *eruv tavshilin* and put food on the stove on Friday afternoon. Even more important, these anecdotes, which show fathers and husbands teaching individual halakhot to daughters and wives, suggest that men may have even taught complete chapters of Jewish law to their women.¹⁰⁹

My findings thus revise those of Boyarin, Goodblatt, Ilan, and Cohen. Because of their focus on Beruriah, they make the assumption that when the gemara describes her as someone who learned three hundred halakhot in a day (bPesahim 62b), it implies that she was the *only* woman to engage in Torah study. I would agree that she is portrayed as having much greater intellectual capacity and knowledge than any other woman—hers is a staggering rate of assimilation of Torah knowledge¹¹⁰—but I challenge the conclusion that only Beruriah studied Torah. These many anecdotes prove that it was commonplace for women in rabbinic circles to learn Torah from men—in their own way.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ See my article in *Sidra 5770 (supra n.42)* on women's religious role in the home and their acquiring the knowledge they needed to fulfill that role.

¹¹⁰ The appearance and re-appearance of the number three in that passage—three months, three hundred *halakhot*, three hundred rabbis, three years—implies that the numbers are an approximation and, in most cases, an exaggeration. A similar usage appears at bEruvin 54b, where R. Pereida says that he taught a certain lesson to his student 400 times, until the student grasped it. The number 400 is not to be taken literally but as a way of saying that the teacher repeated the lesson many, many times.

¹¹¹ Should one argue that this is not a finding of significance, limited as it is to this one group of women, I would respond that the Talmud's portrayal of men studying Torah in the amoraic period is limited to rabbis and disciples of rabbis. We know very little about the Torah study of followers of rabbis or other Jews. If so, concluding that women in rabbinic households learned Torah is a finding of significance.