



PROJECT MUSE®

Brenda Socachevsky Bacon Responds

Brenda Bacon

Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues, Number 6, Fall 5764/2003, pp. 207-208 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/nsh.2004.0028>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/53333>

and forced to work as a prostitute. Rabbi Meir set out to rescue her, but only after his wife complained, “It is a disgrace to me that my sister dwells in a house of prostitution.” He succeeded in saving her—after she passed his test of her righteousness—and then fled to Babylonia. “Some say he fled because of this matter,” says the Talmud (*Avodah zarah* 18b), “while others say [it was] because of the affair of Beruriah.”

What happens when an illustrious rabbi cannot acknowledge the debt he owes a learned woman like Beruriah, when he cannot appreciate her righteousness, feel the hurt unjustly inflicted on her, and come to her defense? What happens when he is driven to undermine her and prove her unworthy despite her obvious trustworthiness? The answer is that he succeeds and, in the process, corrupts his student, destroys her, and disgraces himself.

That certainly seems to be a lesson worth teaching.

Brenda Socachevsky Bacon responds:

Joel B. Wolowelsky’s understanding of the purpose of Rashi’s anecdote about Beruriah’s end—“to reprimand Rabbi Meir for his outrageous behavior”—is a fine example of re-interpretation of problematic texts and indeed accords with Rashi’s favorable treatment of women as reflected in his legal rulings. However, it is questionable whether that is the true intent of the anecdote, which in the past has been used to undermine the legitimacy of Torah study for women. For example, Rabbi Haim David Azulai (the Hida, Eretz Israel, eighteenth century) wrote in his responsa collection, *Tuv Ayin*:

In the beginning the opinion was that the halakhah is not in accordance with Rabbi Eliezer [who said: “whosoever teaches his daughter Torah, it is as if he teaches her *tiflut*”], and they would teach Oral Torah to the women, and they learned this from the case of Beruriah. But because of what happened to Beruriah, they agreed that the halakhah is in accordance with Rabbi Eliezer.

Citing the ending of Rabbenu Nissim, according to which Beruriah ran away with Rabbi Meir to Babylonia, may be a means of “getting around” Rashi’s unhappy ending to the story, but I have argued that it may be based on an older and more reliable tradition than that of Rashi.

Joel B. Wolowelsky

Wolowelsky's response suggests to me that perhaps we should be telling all the stories of Beruriah's end: that of Rabbenu Nissim, which leaves Beruriah's reputation intact; that of Rashi, which undermines it and serves as one of the bases for the view that women's oral Torah study is illegitimate; and that of the feminist re-interpretation of Rashi, which undermines the legitimacy of those who display no empathy for the plight of Jewish women yearning to study Torah. These multiple narratives reflect the history of the changes in the status of Jewish women.