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Reader Response:
BERURIAH'S FINAL LESSON

Joel B. Wolowelsky

In the last issue of *Nashim* (no. 5, 2002), Brenda Socachevsky Bacon raised the question: "How Shall We Tell the Story of Beruriah's End?" She writes:

The learning of Beruriah, the wife of Rabbi Meir, has turned her into a role model for those who view the relatively new phenomenon of women's Torah study as an important value. However, a report of Beruriah's tragic and shameful end prevents complete identification with her. (p. 231)

The story to which Bacon refers is quoted by Rashi:

One time [Beruriah] mocked the Sages [over their] saying, "Women are light-headed" (*Kiddushin* 80b, *Shabbat* 33b). [Rabbi Meir] said to her: "By your life, you will ultimately affirm their words." He instructed one of his disciples to seduce her. [The student] urged her for many days, until she consented. When the matter became known to her she strangled herself, and Rabbi Meir fled out of disgrace. (Rashi to *Avodah zarah* 18b)

For Bacon, Rashi's anecdote undercuts the positive image of Beruriah that had been developed by the talmudic sources depicting her learning and sensitivity. She therefore explores ways of "getting around" this uncomfortable challenge. However, I feel that we should not hesitate to tell the story of Beruriah's end to our students.

Of course, this anecdote does show Beruriah to be imperfect, but that is the approach taken in the Bible and Talmud toward our national heroes. Commenting on what on the surface seems to be Abraham's questionable behavior, Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch remarks: "The Torah never

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presents our great men as being perfect. . . . The Torah [and, we may add, the Talmud] is no collection of examples of saints” (Commentary to Gen. 12:10). Unfortunately, mocking others was part of Beruriah’s *modus operandi* (*Berakhot* 10a, *Eruvin* 53b–54a), and that type of behavior is often counterproductive.

Likewise, it does not undermine Beruriah’s greatness to suggest that a trusting soul like hers could be undermined by a mean-spirited campaign to do her in. *Ein apotropus le’arayot*, said the Sages: Everyone—not only the light-headed, and certainly not only women—is vulnerable to sexual temptation, even someone who, like Beruriah, “learned three hundred traditions a day from three hundred masters” (*Pesahim* 62b). I see no reason not to want to make that point to our students.

The real purpose of Rashi’s anecdote, I believe, was not to undermine Beruriah but rather to reprimand Rabbi Meir for his outrageous behavior. In so doing, Rashi presents a message that is quite relevant to our present-day society.

Rabbi Meir was indebted to his wife for many important insights. She had taught him to hate sin rather than sinners, gently admonishing his misplaced anger at the local brigands who were troubling him (*Berakhot* 10a). When their sons died, she had the presence of mind to prepare him for the bitter news and helped him come to terms with the tragedy (*Midrash mishlei* to Prov. 31:10). When her father was sentenced by the Romans to be burned and her mother to be killed, and she herself was sentenced to hard labor, she recited the verse: “Great in counsel and mighty in deed; whose eyes are open to all the ways of men, rewarding every man according to his ways and according to the fruit of his doings” (Jer. 32:19). How great is this righteous woman, exclaimed Rabbi Judah Hanasi upon hearing this; in her time of distress she summoned a verse vindicating God’s judgment, something unprecedented in all of Scripture! (*Midrash sifre*, Deuteronomy, 307, ed. Finkelstein, p. 346).

Rabbi Meir certainly knew that Beruriah was not light-headed and that she had every justification to be offended by such a slur. How should he have responded to her hurt? Surely not by violating the biblical command not to put a stumbling block before her. What could his student have thought of his master when he was instructed to behave so reprehensibly? His loyalty to his teacher seems to have blinded him to the ethics of the Torah.

Indeed, Rashi quotes this story in connection with a talmudic discussion that illustrates Rabbi Meir’s insensitivity. Beruriah’s sister had been captured

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 women 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 Beruria’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.

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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.