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# MASSEKHET

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**'Massekhet'** is a periodical established by Matan, The Women's institute of Torah Studies, in memoriam to Esther Aumann, one of the first students in its *Beit Midrash*. Esther, who devoted her life to her home and to raising her family, began attending the *Beit Midrash* at the age of sixty-two and for the first time in her life delved into the depths revealed in the study of Gemara, Tanach and Jewish Philosophy. Six years later she passed away of cancer. The story of her life epitomizes the complete metamorphosis that women's Torah study has undergone in the last generation.



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**The Romantic Mask of the Didactic Story – A Study  
of the Sages' Tale of Rabbi Akiva's Marriage to the  
Daughter of Kalba Savua**

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Michal Rosenberg

The object of examination of this article is the story of the marriage of Rabbi Akiva to the daughter of Kalba Savua as told in its two versions in the Babylonian Talmud (*Nedarim* 50b, *K'tubot* 62b). The twisting histories of the stories' heroes are a type of latter-day rerun of the story of another marriage – that of Ya'akov and Rachel – but the Talmudic narrator utilizes all the inter-class romantic motives and tensions of the mythical love story as a motif into which he casts didactic material. According to his story, the grace acquired by suffering is superior to a couple's self-contained love such as the love of the biblical forefathers. Benevolence is the prerequisite to learning Torah and is also the purpose of its study, reflecting the image of God's goodness as portrayed in the Torah. Such benevolence is not however the sole command of the learned, but rather stems from an inner awareness of another's soul as if he could see it: Rabbi Akiva's wife "saw" that he was "distinguished and modest" and offered to marry him in order that he may be able to attend the *beit midrash*. According to the version in *Massekhet Nedarim*, when the prophet Elijah disguised himself as a poor man begging for straw for his wife who had given birth, Rabbi Akiva "saw" that the stranger's plight was worse than his own and said: "see this man, he doesn't even have straw". Finally, upon returning home after 24 years absence, when Rabbi Akiva's students pushed his poor wife, he made a public declaration in front of them that revealed the full benevolence of both husband and wife: "That which is mine and yours – is all hers".

Rabbi Akiva's life was shaped due to the actions of his wife. Until the final scene, she remains an active, quasi "masculine" character: she initiates the marriage, in a type of oedipal struggle she detaches herself from her father's life and wealth, she determines the timing

of her husband's departure to go and study in the *beit midrash* and that of his return. At the same time however, it is she who sacrifices her socio-economic standing and her motherhood in long years of anticipation for her husband to fulfill the destiny that she has determined for him. In contrast, Rabbi Akiva assumes the accepted stereotypical passive "feminine" role. He accepts upon himself his wife's conditions and commands, and is revealed as being of soft and romantic character, dreaming to adorn his wife's straw-ridden hair with a golden Jerusalem crown. Rabbi Akiva's poverty, humility and responsiveness dismantle the barriers of the masculine "ego" and open up to him new horizons of understanding, as if his personality had been enhanced and coupled with his wife's.

The command to "love your neighbor as yourself", of which Rabbi Akiva said: "this is a fundamental principle of Torah", acts in a unique manner in the story of the marriage to his wife. Rabbi Akiva reached the determination of this principle only after having studied the entire Torah, however his wife knew and implemented it from the outset and imbued it with lofty significance: the grace of her love for her husband "as herself" meant that they were united in the holiness of their marriage in the love of the Torah - itself an expression of the love and reciprocity between man and God.



**They were also present during that Miracle:**  
*Then and today.*

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Orna Raz

The essay examines a strange story, a description of a public act that constitutes unusually bold behavior on the part of a daughter of a Jewish religious authority in opposition to a decree that upon marriage a woman must be bedded by the governor before returning to her husband. The deed poses many questions. It can be assumed that the woman was educated to modesty and the act she employed was surely inconsistent with her generally accepted image. Moreover, her sole objective was precisely the safeguarding of her innocence and modesty by rescuing herself from the governor's sexual demands. Why then was she forced in to such a flagrant act that so contradicted her values and faith – the exact opposite of the objective in whose name it was carried out? Could she not have chosen to express her protestation in another manner? The essay suggests possible answers to these questions and clarifies aspects of her act including by means of theoretical contemporary ideas.

The essay highlights a number of levels of gender inequality that the act attempts to breach. First, this particular "woman" story is pushed aside away from the mainstream compared to other, relatively more familiar texts in Jewish tradition. Beyond this, there are obviously some aspects of real gender inequality dealt with in this text, for which the character felt forced to undertake the said act. The essay relates to her lack of ability, as a woman, to merit the status of spokeswoman listened to by her audience, and to her need to undertake a "virtuous transgression" as a result. The essay probes the view of the woman as chattel in an exchange-based system and of the subversion of her actual departure from out of the depths of the house to such a public act. Subsequently, the essay points to the link between the deed itself and the disciplinary and normalization mechanisms customarily imposed on the

rebellious woman. In conclusion the essay deals with female courage and leadership and the possibility of sounding a female voice whilst still fully adhering to the *halakha*, tradition and the world of Jewish values.

## **Jewish Women and Families in Gaza in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries**

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Ruth Lamdan

During the Ottoman era, Gaza was one of the main cities in *Eretz Yisrael*, acting as a passageway for the caravans traveling between Egypt and Syria. The city, with a general population of more than twelve thousand inhabitants, was home to approximately 120 Jewish households who were active in trade, agriculture and various other handicrafts. The sources of our knowledge regarding Jewish settlement in Gaza are few in number and in the past, most of the research centered on economic aspects mentioned in *halakhic* literature and Ottoman documents. This essay emphasizes the references relating to family life. Many men in the community were active in trade, were frequently absent from home or embroiled in financial affairs. *Halakhic* questions bear witness to the marital problems that arose as a result, to the attitude regarding polygamy and to the figure and status of women in the local Jewish society.

**Meditative Instructions for Friday Night Conjugal Intimacy:**  
*Romantic Kabbalah in the Writings of*  
*R. Moshe Cordovero*

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Natan Ophir (Offenbacher)

How should love, intimacy, and joy be aroused? What is the secret for transforming physical love into a spiritual vehicle? In what ways can conjugal sex become a powerful tool to connect to the Divine? Such questions are addressed by the *RaMaK*, R. Moshe Cordovero (1570–1522), one of the most prolific *kabbalist* thinkers in Jewish history. In '*Ohr Yakar*', his commentary on the '*Zohar*', and in '*Tefillah LeMoshe*', his commentary and meditative manual to the liturgy, the *RaMaK* provides guidance on why, when and how to make love.

The *RaMaK* quotes with approbation a 14<sup>th</sup> century *kabbalist* dictum that a person who has not experienced physical sexual passion cannot truly discover spiritual love for God. He reprimands those who advocate pious sex by using the "hole in the sheet" method by claiming that in reality, they wedge an artificial separation between male and female and prevent a truly intimate union. Instead, relying upon the authority of the '*Zohar*', the *RaMaK* argues for a romantic-spiritual experience.

This article contrasts the tantalizing instructions of the *RaMaK* to the prevalent *halakhic*-moralistic traditions of leading authorities such as the *Rambam*, *Raavad*, *Tur* and *Shulhan Arukh* who tended to mitigate the pleasure element in sex. In contrast, the *RaMaK* justifies a romantic intimacy that breaks away from the ascetic trend. He frames conjugal sex as a redemptive undertaking that creates harmony in both interpersonal relations and in the spiritual world of the Divine *Sefirot*.

The *RaMaK* demonstrates the inherent value of love and sex at the proper time and place. He explains why Friday night is most

conducive to creating the spiritual transformation. He details the *kabbalistic* premises underlying the physical-mystical sexual intimacy as essential to both channeling erotic desire and facilitating the flow of 'Divine Influx' (*Shefa*).

In summary, this article analyzes the *RaMaK*'s exposition upon the '*Zohar*'s 'secrets' for arousing passion and then transforming it into a vehicle for spiritual unification. It demonstrates how this is part of a mindfulness practice inherent in the meditative *Kabbalah* developed by the *RaMaK* and his colleagues in 16<sup>th</sup> century Tzfat. The article concludes by suggesting that the *RaMaK*'s approach is a rudimentary model of what we might call "Kosher Tantra".

**Sarah-Ita Felman:**  
A Jewish Orchard Farmer in *Eretz Israel*

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Zipora Shehory-Rubin

Dov-David Felman arrived in *Eretz Israel* in 1883. He was a scholar, an affluent merchant and an elder of the Mezrich community in Poland and arrived in Israel with the aim of purchasing land and settling on it. Upon arrival he purchased an orchard on the outskirts of the Arab village Summayl (Al-Mas'udiyya) in northern Jaffa out of belief that citrus orchards were to become an important agricultural sector in *Eretz Israel*. Felman returned to Mezrich to liquidate his business and immigrated to *Eretz Israel* with his wife Sarah-Ita, his mother and his seven children, in Kislev 1884. The house on their estate, now called David's Garden, was prepared in time for their arrival and Felman focused on nurturing the orchard which was in later years to prove the main source of the family's income. The beginning was promising but already during the first year Felman died, leaving Sarah-Ita a 27 year old widow with 7 orphaned children. She found herself the only Jew remaining in a village of Arabs, far from any Jewish settlement, defenseless in a foreign environment, caring for children aged from 17 to 1 year old. Sarah-Ita was determined not to abandon the place and return to her homeland. She clung not only to the house and family, but also to all the necessary household chores and mainly to those in the orchard which were considered men's work, and against the odds succeeded in making a living. She continued her husband's enterprise for more than another 50 years.

The objective of the essay is to examine the fascinating life of Sarah-Ita Felman, the first citrus farmer in Israel, who is directly linked to the development of the citrus industry in *Eretz Israel*; to describe the circumstances surrounding the first Jewish orchard in Jaffa during the twilight of the Ottoman Empire and to assess Sarah-Ita's contribution to its development set against the backdrop

of the era; to tell of her life as an independent citrus farmer attempting to establish her place in the life of the *Yishuv* in the village of Summayl, controlled by male Arab orchard owners. In so doing, we will attempt to revive her memory, embellish her presence and grant her a place in this historic narrative.

*'No need to ask, No need to answer'*  
**On Questions in Rachel's Poems**

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Udi Gur

Question and answer are one of the most characteristic expressions of the narrator's emotional state in many of Rachel's poems: excitement, helpless rage, sudden joy, frustration, expectation, bitter despondency or hope. In this essay I will examine several of Rachel's poems, composed in various forms of question and answer. At times the questions appear at the beginning of the poem and the answer thereafter, and at others the poem opens with a statement or description of a certain situation about which a profound question, consideration or thought is posed. The motif of the question in Rachel's poems is connected to a particular emotional mood, and this mood is especially dominant in the poems that conclude with a question and leave the reader alone to ponder it. When the question is posed to a specific person, it is more likely not to be a rhetorical question but rather one that expresses a yearning for the other's presence.

The essay describes the manner of the poems' composition as a dialectic process and how they represent one fundamental emotional standpoint out of the several such viewpoints that exist in Rachel's poems. In addition, the essay examines how these poems reflect the special style of this motif – the dialectic motif of question and answer – in each one of the three volumes of Rachel's poems: *Saphiah (Aftergrowth)*, *Mineged (Across From)* and *Nevo*. I have no intention here of examining in depth the overall character of these volumes but rather to suggest a general distinction between them in the role of the motif of question in each. Of the three volumes, the essay will focus on the second one published by Rachel, *Mineged*, and in particular the poem *Gan Naul* – 'Locked Garden'.



*Readings and Reflections*

**The Story of Bil'am – on Conflict and Resolution**

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Eliezra Herzog

The Moabite king Balak, who feared Israel approaching his border, sent Bil'am, a diviner and prophet, two delegations one after the other, asking him to curse the Hebrew nation. In response to the first, God forbade Bil'am to go and curse Israel whereas in response to the second, he permitted him to go but forbade him to deliver a curse. Using magic, the diviner tried to curse Israel however as a result of God's intervention, he ended up blessing Israel four times.

This essay focuses on Bil'am through the prism of intrapersonal conflict between the components of the human psychic, and assumes that the diviner-prophet did not fully identify with the mission but rather experienced a conflict between his aggressive desire to curse Israel and God's prohibition for him to do so.

Through close reading of the text I revealed the various expressions of Bil'am's conflict and the process he underwent. This involved gradual transformation from ignoring God's initial prohibition at the time of his departure, through the first stage of acknowledging it when encountering an angel on the way, and concluding with him internalizing it while visiting Balak and eventually blessing Israel willingly without coercion.

In addition I examined the literary pattern 'Three-Four' of the encounter with the angel and the blessings, and showed its correspondence with Bil'am's psychological process.