



**MASSEKHET**  
say to wisdom, thou art my sister  
In Memory of Esther Aumann z"l

*Women of the Jewish World*

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# MASSEKHET

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*Massekhet* is a periodical established in *Matan, Women's Institute for Torah Studies*, in memory of Esther Aumann, one of its first students. Esther, who devoted her life to her home and to raising her family, began attending *Matan* at the age of sixty-two and for the first time in her life delved into the depths of Bible, Talmud and Jewish-thought studies. Six years later she passed away of cancer. The story of her life epitomizes the revolution undergone by women's Torah studies in the last generation.



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## **Rivka's Choice**

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*Yael Shemesh*

The purpose of this essay is to sketch the unique profile of Rivka – as both chosen and chooser. The first section of the essay is devoted to the choice of Rivka as Yitzchak's wife. Rivka is the only one of the matriarchs of whom it is told that she was presented with a test of character. Her spectacularly successful navigation of this challenge led to her being chosen, as a woman, as one of the founders of the Jewish people (Gen. 24). It seems from the text that not only did Avraham's slave choose her, but also God Himself. Rivka is not only chosen however but also excels herself at choosing. In practice, by virtue of her own successful choices, she is also chosen for the role of Yitzchak's wife and one of the matriarchs of the Jewish People. Initially choosing to acquiesce to the request of Avraham's to quench his thirst from her pitcher, she then goes even further. Subsequently, she elected without hesitation to leave her homeland in order to marry Yitzchak (Gen. 24). These choices led, directly, to her being chosen as Yitzchak's wife. In my opinion however, her choices during the course of her adult life, as the mother of Ya'akov and Eisav, can also be viewed as an indirect reason for God's choice of her. By choosing Ya'akov as the son worthy of his father's blessing, she demonstrated astute intuition, thereby tuning in to God's will. With this intuition, Rivka completed that which was lacking in Yitzchak who, in his spiritual blindness, favored Eisav. It would not be unfounded to speculate that Rivka also was chosen as Yitzchak's wife in order to keep guard and ensure that the correct son receive his father's blessing.

The gender role exchange between Yitzchak and Rivka in the story of their betrothal was perhaps intended to teach us of the important role that Rivka will play in diverting Avraham's blessing in the right direction, even if she did so in a deceiving and underhand manner, apparently faced with no other option. Although Rivka is a strong woman, as a woman

living in a patriarchal society, she possesses no formal power enabling her to transfer the blessing to the son she regarded worthy.

### **The *Sugyot* Pertaining to 'Isha Hashuva' in the Babylonian Talmud**

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*Yael Levine*

This article is devoted to an examination of the Talmudic *sugyot* which discuss the phrase '*isha hashuva*' (a woman of stature). This articulation is not mentioned in the tannaitic literature but is cited in the course of seven halakhic *sugyot* in the Babylonian Talmud. It is not found in the Jerusalem Talmud.

A detailed examination of the topic shows that the 'woman of stature' *sugyot* refer to women-related *halakhot*. An analysis of the relevant Talmudic passages reveals that in five of the instances, the discussions concerning '*isha hashuva*' belong to the amoraic stratum. This term is thus cited in the names of Abayye, Rava, R. Yirmiya and R. Ashi. One of the '*isha hashuva*' passages is anonymous in authorship however evidence exists to support the opinion that it is from the amoraic period, and two further *sugyot* are anonymous. In two instances '*isha hashuva*' relates to the halakhic ruling in the Mishnah, while in two other cases it refers to rulings in *baraitot*.

The meaning of the term '*isha hashuva*' is not explicit in the Talmudic passages themselves, and a single succinct definition cannot therefore be offered. It can be deduced from several of the discussions that a 'woman of stature' is one of high economic status or a woman from a respected family. It is significant to mention that from the context of the *sugyot* there is no evidence to support the notion that '*isha hashuva*' refers to a woman knowledgeable in Torah, and as a rule Jewish women in Babylon did not possess such knowledge.

The term '*isha hashuva*' is affiliated to the articulation '*adam hashuv*' and both categories can be found in the Babylonian Talmud alone. It is also



noteworthy to state that each of the Talmudic tractates containing the expression '*isha hashuva*', also features the term '*adam hashuv*'.

The main intent of this paper is to conduct an in-depth inquiry into the Talmudic *sugyot* themselves relating to '*isha hashuva*'. Therefore, only scant use is made of sources from post Talmudic literature, in several instances where the definition of '*isha hashuva*' is not clear.

The entire range of sources concerning the topic of '*isha hashuva*' is of interest in itself, providing a fascinating glimpse into *halakhot* pertaining not to the average Jewish woman but rather to those who constituted a minority in their time. This reality changed in Europe during the time of the *Rishonim*, at least with regard to the question of a woman's obligation to eat while reclining at the Passover Seder, until all Jewish women came to be encompassed, according to some of the *Rishonim*, in the category of important women.

### **The Figure of Marta bat Baitus as a Religious '*Other*'**

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*Liat Sobolev-Mandelbaum*

The central theme of this essay is a discussion examining the representation of Marta bat Baitus as an 'other', different from status, religious and gender perspectives, and the complexity of this representation in Talmudic literature. Its conclusions will lead to questions regarding "the essence of a woman", her place in society and her exclusion from it in these sources.

In all the Talmudic references to her, Marta bat Baitus is portrayed as a wealthy woman of distinguished lineage wielding both power and influence. In a few instances, she is also depicted as a widow living with relative independence at a certain stage in her life. This independence is expressed by her lack of dependence on a man and by her wealth. In Tannaic sources, Marta bat Baitus is described as a well-known woman whose irregular marriage to the High Priest formed the base for a halakha

that preserved her in the consciousness of the Tannaim as a wealthy widow and as the symbol of a wealthy woman. In the later Ammoraic sources, a dramatic change takes place in this description. Both in the Land of Israel and in Babylon, the figure was preserved as a symbol of a wealthy woman, however she was also accused of intervening in political and religious life and indeed, of damaging them, by abusing her status and wealth. She was also blamed for indulgence, haughtiness and insensitivity to her fellow Jews in light of the deteriorating economic situation in her city at the time of its destruction. Moreover, these sources are devoid of attributes commonly identified with women in the Talmud, such as sensitivity for others, empathy, social weakness, subservience and acceptance of authority.

Her "otherness" can be explained by the combination of her socio-economic standing and her gender that allowed her independence, power and control to intervene in the culture of the Sages and to perform acts that did not conform, and even contravened, the Sages' will. Furthermore, a widow, especially one from the upper class, was viewed as a social problem, as unrestrained, and as possessing moral blemishes. The representation of her figure, through the relation to that of other prominent women characters in the Babylonian Talmud, reflects a patriarchal tendency. It criticizes and condemns female, and especially independent female characters, who penetrated the world of the Sages and who were active in the spheres of government, study and halakhic ruling. At the same time, this tendency glorifies those woman figures who belonged to the Sages and who acted mainly within the home-family framework, generally in realms that were associated with women and their biological role.

## **'And Yet He Did Not Shame Her': Motherhood and Embarrassment in Talmudic Literature**

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*Anat Israeli and Inbar Raveh*

In this essay, we will examine aggadic stories, most of which are connected to the issue of respecting one's mother. Of primary interest is the fact that, in a most unusual manner, these stories place women in a central reference position, even one deserving of respect. The stories of respect for mothers that appear in the Talmudic corpus present various difficulties in fulfilling the mitzva, as well as a wide range of mother-son relations and varying forms of respect. They are spread over many of the different branches of Talmudic literature, both Tannaic and Amoraic, from Babylon and the Land of Israel.

Despite the wide and varied distribution, the stories contain an underlying common theme that is exposed and discussed here. The occupation with respect for mothers, in contrast to the occupation with respect for fathers, is inseparably connected to the exact opposite of respect, namely shame and embarrassment. It is as if the very act of respecting one's mother necessarily involves some form of humiliation, whether of the son, of the mother, or of both of them together. This mixture is testimony to the complexity of son-mother relations and is in need of explanation, also provided in the essay. To our understanding, the Sages deliberately focused the stories of respect for mothers on the issue of the sons' shame and shaming, and in so doing, seemingly touch on the root of a central problem inherent in the relations between mothers and their adult and respected sons. The meeting with the mother frequently returns the older son to a vulnerable and sensitive point, exposing him to fundamental difficulties that render the meeting especially charged. The Sages, aware of the great difficulty that this entailed and of the consequent emotional effort required from the sons, accorded them impressive literary expression.

## **Ben Sira – Philology and Gender**

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*Tal Ilan*

This article discusses gender issues in the Hebrew version of the Ben Sira text discovered in the Cairo Genizah. It inquires whether the Genizah text is indeed authentic Ben Sira or a translation from the Greek (or the Syriac). The article shows that while the Genizah text on the "bad daughter" (also preserved in the Masada Manuscript of Ben Sira) certainly preserved the original Hebrew, the Genizah text on the courting of "good wisdom" (also preserved in Qumran) cannot be considered the original because in Qumran the text is an achrostic, while the Genizah text is not. I suggest that this was influenced by gender - Ben Sira's negative attitude to women has survived through the centuries, but his positive attitude to Lady Wisdom was lost.

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## **Hatred, Jealousy and Compromise in Jewish-Ottoman Society at the Beginning of the Modern Age**

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*Ruth Lamdan*

The essay deals with a range of emotions between a married couple, and their reflection in halakhic and Jewish sources in the period following the Jews' expulsion from Spain. While feelings of love between a couple are not given widespread expression in Responsa literature, emotions of hatred and jealousy are publicly conveyed as the result of disputes and divorce cases, and are perpetuated in the rabbinical rulings of that period. In many cases, the dayanim strive to reconcile the two conflicting spouses and the Bill of Compromise cited in this essay, originating in the Cairo Genizah, is an example of a fair settlement obligating both parties and providing hope for their continued future married life.

## The Queen Turns into a Woman: The Personage of Athalie in Racine's Tragedy and its Hebrew Adaptations

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*Nir Ratzkovsky*

Racine's *Athalie* (1691), which tells the tale of Queen Athalie of Judea and her death, is the last tragedy written by the great 17<sup>th</sup> century French playwright. Its biblical subject contrasts with Racine's previous "secular" tragedies, and made it a popular subject for translation and adaptation by Jewish Hebrew-writing scholars. Following the 1766 adaptation *Gemul Athalia* ("Athalia's Punishment"), by the early *Haskala* writer David Franco Mendes, *Athalie* was subsequently translated into Hebrew in 1835 by Meir Letteris, and again in 1949 by Elyahu Maitos.

This paper begins by questioning the tragic core of the play, then explores its Hebrew adaptations and translations, and the ways in which Athalie's complex tragic persona is developed and modified in each of them. While Franco Mendes presents Athalie merely as an "evil queen", and refuses any inner conflict which might "attenuate" her crimes, Letteris paints her as a hysterical woman, typical of the Romantic period to which he belonged. It is through Maitos's translation, which follows relatively modern standards and is much more loyal to the original text, that we can discover the fascinating Racinian conflict between the queen and the woman.

We have before us a critical feminist reading that negates the perception that a woman establishes her identity solely via a female viewpoint. These novels, written by men, have transformed this silenced issue into both legitimate and relevant.

## **Regina Jonas – Spiritual Shepherd for the Jewish Community in Berlin and in the Theresienstadt Ghetto**

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*Margalit Shlain*

Regina Jonas was born in a poor suburb of Berlin to an Orthodox Jewish family. Her father died when she was 11 years old and the family remained penniless. Poverty and orphanage at such a young age fortified her character. Jonas attended a school for Orthodox Jewish girls and excelled at her studies. She subsequently studied teaching and in March 1924 received a teaching certificate for girls' schools that enabled her to support herself and her mother during the subsequent years.

However, Jonas destined herself for the rabbinate and in July 1930, following six years study at the Higher Institute for Jewish Studies Liberal Rabbinical Seminary in Berlin, she submitted a halakhic thesis supporting the ordination of women to the rabbinate. Her pioneering work on the question of the status of women in modern society in general and in the Orthodox-Jewish society in particular, expressed her immense knowledge in the fields of halakha, Jewish history and general education, and her belief that equality between men and women can be realized even within the standards of Jewish halakha.

Her academic supervisor, the Talmudist Prof. Eduard Baneth, approved her thesis but after his sudden death on August 7, 1930, none of the other seminary teachers, all of whom opposed the ordination of women, were prepared to administer her the final examination. Only in 1935, did Rabbi Dr. Meir Max Dienemann, Head of the Conference of Liberal Rabbis, grant her ordination.

All her life, Jonas struggled for her right to serve as a rabbi, deliver sermons, and to teach Judaism, and advocated full spiritual equality between men and women.

Jonas' rabbinic roles expanded following the Nazis' rise to power and throughout the years of the war. With the deteriorating plight of German Jewry, many communities remained bereft of rabbinic assistance and Jonas served as a spiritual shepherd, helping many in strengthening their

faith and their connection to Judaism. In November 1942, she was deported to the Theresienstadt ghetto and assigned there to the "Self Help Organization" established by the psychoanalyst Dr. Viktor Frankl. For two years she served as a spiritual leader for the camp's inmates and worked tirelessly with the depressed elderly and infused them with the hope necessary to fight for their survival. In 1944, she was sent to Auschwitz where she was murdered, aged only 42.

