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Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

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It is my great pleasure to introduce this issue of the *Journal of Textual Reasoning*. Rachel Adelman has brought together a fine selection of deeply considered articles which use specific, focused moments in the narratives of Jewish sacred texts to ply at broader and universally relevant questions about the texts' outlooks and implications. Adelman, Cohn, and Labovitz's offerings come to us by way of a panel at this year's Association for Jewish Studies conference entitled "The Female Ruse: Women's Subversive Voice in Biblical and Rabbinic Texts." Admiel Kosman's paper is based on a section of his book *The Women's Tractate*. (Jerusalem, 2007).

The format of this issue differs somewhat from our previous offering. Whereas that issue was a series of responses to a central paper, this issue is best described as the application of a common question to particular moments in the Jewish canon. Though the papers all stand as independent entities, there is a notable harmony between them. Adelman introduces the central question—How is female subterfuge treated in the Jewish canon, and how can it function in determining religious norms?—and gives us an explication of two instances of the goal of a "female ruse" as becoming normative within the biblical narrative. Naftali Cohn introduces us to a very different socio-cultural context in the Rabbinic period, and she uses cases of women's interaction with the Tannaitic rabbis to tease out

just how restrictive the boundaries imposed on women in this religious and legal arena are—asking, in essence, just what the female tricksters in the Talmud are up against. Admiel Kosman moves the action into the realm of the Babylonian Talmud with his focus on the resistance of one woman, Yaltha, to rabbinic condescension. Finally, Gail Labovitz brings us full circle with her focus on the legal trickery of two women and makes the case that their subterfuge has further-reaching legal implications than might be expected at first glance.

In “From Veils to Goatskins: The Female Ruse in Genesis,” Rachel Adelman argues that in these stories the practice of veiling functions as a subversive exercise of female agency in a male-dominated world. With the activities and even identities of women in this world are controlled by male authority, the action of concealing or transforming one’s identity becomes a silent resistance. The stories of Rebekah and Tamar are especially compelling because the products of their ruses are enormously consequential: as a result of their subterfuges both women play a key role in determining the lineage of the Israelite monarchy. Thus, these deceptions, argues Adelman, are not only forgiven but also condoned.

Adelman turns to the Midrash to bolster her linkage of the cases of Rebekah and Tamar, and to draw out the divine approval of their wiliness. “Midrash,” she writes, “has served not only as a literary tool...but also to answer a theological question: why is God in cahoots with the women?” The midrash on these narratives, she argues, places the women’s knowledge of their offspring’s paternity and election in synch with God’s knowledge: “The midrash...seems to shift the locus of ‘knowing’ from the woman onto God in attributing knowledge to divine omniscience...[in order] to imply a synergy between [the women and God].”

Whereas Rachel Adelman focuses on narratives in the Tanakh, Naftali Cohn, in “When Women Confer with Rabbis: On Male Authority and Female Agency in The Mishnah,” turns to episodes in the Mishnah to examine women’s exercise of subversive power within the rules of their social and cultural context. Like Adelman, Cohn uses details from these episodes to paint a broad and vivid picture of their setting. The stories, writes Cohn, “speak to the authority claims that the rabbis made, to the

nature of the rabbinic memory of Rabbi Akiva as a legal innovator, to the way rabbis constructed ‘woman,’ and to the possibilities, or the logical space, that was available to women.” Indeed, the simple fact that each of these women came of her own accord before the Rabbis suggests that the space they inhabited granted them a degree of agency that is perhaps surprising. At the same time, that the stories are told by (invariably) male interpreters and redactors reminds the reader that this agency, though extant, is deeply circumscribed. Within the legal arena, women do indeed have autonomous voices, and they may engage in ruse, cunning, and subterfuge towards their ends.

It is against this social and cultural backdrop that we consider the cases presented by our last two writers. Admiel Kosman, in “A Cup of Affront and Anger: Yaltha as an Early Feminist in the Talmud,” explores an episode in the Babylonian Talmud concerning Yaltha, a figure generally identified as the wife of Rabbi Nahman. In *b. Berakhot* 51b, Yaltha has prepared a meal for her husband and his guest—a meal in which she, owing to the ritual separation of men and women, may not participate. Over the course of the meal, the guest patronizes her. She makes her affront clear, first by smashing the household’s wine jars and later by sending a withering retort to Ulla’s continued condescension.

What, asks Kosman, can this episode tell us about women’s place in Rabbinic society and how they respond to it? Clearly men define the boundaries of Yaltha’s agency, and Yaltha does not break these. Yaltha performs the social roles expected of her, and observes the limits of modesty. She never elides the margins allowed her, either directly or, as the biblical figures in Adelman’s paper do, by subterfuge. Within the sphere permitted to her, however, Yaltha demands recognition for the critical part she plays in sustaining the social structures that the Rabbis depend on—the very structures that hold her in. While remaining well within her prescribed boundaries, Yaltha makes her displeasure with the guest’s condescension perfectly clear, first by loudly breaking the wine jars, and second by sending—indirectly, so as to preserve her modesty—a barbed and unambiguous rhetorical takedown.

If the episode in Kosman's piece represents women fighting unambiguously for honor within the sphere assigned them, the episodes dealt with by Gail Labovitz involve women breaching that sphere in ways that are less obvious. In "Rabbis and 'Guerrilla Girls': Thematizing the Female (Counter) Voice in the Rabbinic Legal System," Labovitz focuses on three episodes in the Bavli, one of which involves the aforementioned

Yalta and two of which feature Yehudit, the wife of Rabbi Hiyya. At first glance, all of these episodes feature women who, like Yaltha in the episode Kosman highlights, remain within the confines of their assigned domain. Labovitz, however, portrays them as "legal guerillas" and trickster figures. In b. Yemavot 65b, for instance, Yehudit disguises herself to obtain unwitting permission from her husband to cease bearing children. She uses visual deception to obtain what she desires from two social spheres—law and family—in which her power as a woman is lesser. Labovitz characterizes actions such as these as actions of a "legal guerilla"—stealthily inserting her voice into, and thereby influencing the accepted legal narrative.

Labovitz notes that, given that the texts in question were recorded and redacted by the selfsame male authority figures against whom these legal ruses were directed, that the inclusion of these trickster figures in the legal canon may well be intended as propaganda against them: "trickster stories might be a place for the tellers, when they themselves wield the cultural power and capital to shape those stories, to consider and explore their own societal position." However, "to depict them in order to demonstrate the threat they might pose to the system is, at the same time, to necessarily allow their challenge into the discourse." In sliding their way into the canon, Labovitz argues, these figures have accomplished yet another layer of trickery.

Throughout their diverse foci, these papers share a technique of using particular moments in the text to explicate universal concerns. Considered as a whole, this issue of the journal might be seen as viewing the Jewish sacred canon as a single, epic narrative, within which the papers focus on three separate eras: Adelman's paper on Genesis, Cohn on the Mishnah, and Kosman and Labovitz on the Babylonian Talmud. Yet each author

weaves in perspectives from other periods within the larger narrative to illuminate their own focal point, all through the critical lens of contemporary feminism, creating a synergy between the papers that is remarkable. In bringing the methodologies and moral concerns of feminist scholarship to traditional methods of studying these texts, the authors have brought their inhabitants to life in a way that lets them speak to us as real and complex figures in a vivid and intricate world.