

# The Madwoman in the Rabbi's Attic

## Rereading the Women of the Talmud



Pardes | פּרְדֵּס  
Institute of Jewish Studies

Gila Fine

*The Madwoman  
in the Rabbi's Attic*

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Maggid Books

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First Edition, 2024

*Maggid Books*  
*An imprint of Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd.*

POB 8531, New Milford, CT 06776-8531, USA  
& POB 4044, Jerusalem 9104001, Israel  
[www.maggidbooks.com](http://www.maggidbooks.com)

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The publication of this book was made possible  
through the generous support of *The Jewish Book Trust*.

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ISBN 978-1-59264-687-6, *hardcover*

Printed and bound in Israel

*In loving memory of our parents*

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Beruria said to him, “Fool! Cast your eyes to the end of the verse.”  
(Berakhot 10a)

Revision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes,  
of entering an old text from a new critical direction –  
is for us more than a chapter in cultural history:  
it is an act of survival.  
(Adrienne Rich)

## INTRODUCTION

**T**his book begins three days before my twelfth birthday. I was on a family visit to my grandparents in London; everyone had gone out for the day, and I was left behind with a pile of my grandfather's books and strict instructions to write my bat mitzva speech. Not knowing much about, well, anything, I reached for the first book on the pile: *The Book of Legends* – a collection of stories from the Talmud and other rabbinic works, organized according to theme. I opened to the theme of “woman,” which seemed appropriate to the occasion, and started to read. Three stories in, I felt a little uneasy; by the tenth, I was in tears, sobbing as only a nearly-twelve-year-old can. I was so hurt, so deeply offended that the rabbis, the architects of my religion and heroes of my childhood, could have such a low opinion of me and my kind. The women in their stories were weak. They were irrational. They were greedy and petty and promiscuous and vain. “When woman was created, the Devil was created with her,” one of the sources read (Genesis Rabba 17:7). Woman was the mother of all vice.

I ended up cobbling together some quotes for my speech (thankfully, there were enough sources from which to cherry-pick), but everything changed for me that day. The simple faith, the unquestioning devotion of my childhood were gone, and in their place were confusion and pain and doubt. I fought to make peace with a religion I so loved, knowing that its founding fathers felt about me the way they did. I spent

many years questioning, searching, reading everything in sight. After high school and national service, I went to a seminary to study Talmud (a subject forbidden to me growing up<sup>1</sup>). But it wasn't until I went to university to study literature that I began to find the answers I was looking for. Learning how to read talmudic stories as talmudic stories ought to be read, I discovered that they are not at all as they first seem; that there is a great deal more to the heroines of the Talmud than initially meets the eye; and that the rabbis had some surprising – so as not to say, proto-feminist – ideas of marriage, childbirth, female sexuality, and what it means to be a woman in the world. After many years of intense religious struggle, the stories of the Talmud, which had so upset me at twelve, became my constant study and my greatest joy. This book is the result of that struggle.

## **SEEING WITH FRESH EYES: REREADING THE WOMEN OF THE TALMUD**

Women in the Talmud are notoriously nameless. It's not that they do not appear at all – they do (though, as a work composed by rabbis for rabbis, the Talmud features women as often as it features non-rabbinic men, which is to say, not terribly often). But when they do, they are generally marginal and almost always anonymous, named after the important rabbi in their life; they are mothers of, daughters of, sisters of, wives of. In all of rabbinic literature, there are just fifty-two named women, as opposed to over a thousand named men.<sup>2</sup> Of these fifty-two, only half a dozen are heroines of their own talmudic narrative: Yalta, Homa, Marta, Heruta, Beruria, and Ima Shalom.<sup>3</sup>

1. On the historical exclusion of women from the study of Talmud, see Chapter 5.
2. Tal Ilan, *Mine and Yours Are Hers: Retrieving Women's History from Rabbinic Literature*, 278–79. Ilan's count is limited to rabbinic (and pre-rabbinic) women, and does not include references to biblical women.
3. One notable absence from this list is Rabbi Akiva's wife, popularly known as Raḥel. This name, however, is only given to her in the later work of Avot DeRabbi Natan (6); the Talmud, as is its wont, refers to her just as “Kalba Savua's daughter” or “Rabbi Akiva's wife” (Y Shabbat 6:1, Ketubot 62b–63a, Nedarim 50b).



Other than having their very own name, and their very own story, there seems to be little to connect these heroines. Three of them live in Israel during the late Second Temple and early rabbinic periods, three live in Babylonia during the later rabbinic period. Four are married, two are widowed. One is beautiful, one is rich, at least three are highly knowledgeable. Four are tragic figures, one is comedic, one features in a drama. All, however, have this in common: Every one of these heroines seems, at first reading, to embody an anti-feminine archetype, a derisive caricature of a “bad woman”; Yalta is a shrew, Homa a femme fatale, Marta a prima donna, Heruta a madonna/whore, Beruria an overreacherix, and Ima Shalom a (fallen) angel in the house. And yet, with practically every one of them we will find, upon second reading, that this is not at all the case; once the heroine’s story is reread, more closely and in context, her archetype systematically breaks down, and in its place emerges the character of a complex, extraordinary woman, as misunderstood by her own world as by generations of readers.

We will therefore read the story of each heroine twice: once, to determine its primary meaning, and a second time, to uncover the deeper truth that lies hidden between its lines. The rereading of a text in order to try and see it in a new, redemptive light is what 20th-century poet Adrienne Rich describes as “revisioning”: “Revision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: It is an act of survival.”<sup>4</sup>

In revisioning the stories of the women of the Talmud, there is a great deal we stand to learn, both about how to read a text, and about how to regard an Other. Women, for the rabbis, are the paradigmatic Other, “a people unto themselves” (Shabbat 62a).<sup>5</sup> When the Talmud tells a tale of a woman, nine times out of ten it tells a tale of an Other,

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4. Adrienne Rich, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” 18.

5. The statement is attributed to Ulla, whose views on women will be discussed in the following chapter. Rabbinic literature, says Judith Wegner, “treats the male as the norm and the female, by definition, as an anomaly, a deviation from the norm. Woman as ‘Other’ automatically occupies a different category from man... she is both ‘like’ and ‘not like’ man.” Judith R. Wegner, *Chattel or Person? The Status of Women in the Mishnah*, 5.

imparting moral lessons about how to treat the Others in our midst. In this respect, the rabbis, far more than they may be said to be feminists, are, fundamentally, moralists.

Now, I do not wish to imply that everything in the Talmud is proto-feminist. Far from it; the Talmud is a product of Late Antiquity, and much of it, we shall see, is steeped in patriarchal thought (there was a reason I cried that day). Women throughout the ancient world were repressed and restricted, financially dependent and politically dispossessed, deprived of basic social and legal rights – and the women of the Talmud were no different.<sup>6</sup> But every now and then, the text transcends its historical context, as the Talmud tells a story that critiques patriarchal culture, portrays a powerful woman, or offers a feminine point of view. It is to these moments that this book is dedicated.

## **NEGOTIATING OUR DIFFERENCES: READING AS RELATIONSHIP**

The relationship with the Other is one of the central themes of rabbinic narrative. Indeed, it's been suggested that the stories of the Talmud all fall into one of two categories: those that show that the gap between man and God is smaller than we think, and those that show that the gap between man and man is greater than we imagine.<sup>7</sup> The tales of the heroines of the Talmud belong to this second group.

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6. "Classical rabbinic Judaism has always been... a male dominated culture, whose virtuosi and authorities are males, whose paragon of normality in all legal discussions is the adult Jewish male, whose legal rulings in many areas of life (notably marriage and ritual observance) accord men greater privilege than women, and whose values define public communal space as male space. Within this culture, women are unable to initiate a marriage or a divorce, are obligated to dress modestly in public and to segregate themselves behind a partition in synagogue, and are excluded from the regimen of prayer and Torah study that characterizes, and in the rabbinic perspective sanctifies, the life of Jewish men.... In this culture, women are socially and legally inferior to men." Shaye J.D. Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised? Gender and Covenant in Judaism*, 135–36.
7. Ari Elon, "The Symbolization of the Plot Components in the Talmudic Story," 107.

But relationships are not just a main concern of rabbinic stories; reading these stories is itself a relationship. The ways we respond to the talmudic text are not unlike the ways we respond to an Other, particularly when the Talmud – like the Other – doesn't see things exactly as we do.

The first type of response is rejection. You and I are too different, we might say to the Other, we disagree on far too much; this relationship can never be. Such is the response made by many readers throughout Jewish history, as we have moved further and further away from the rabbinic period, and the gaps between our views and those expressed in the Talmud – scientific, theological, ethical, political – have grown ever wider. No longer reflecting what they believe in, the Talmud, for these readers, has ceased to be a source of religious authority, cultural heritage, or moral wisdom. They have simply walked away.

A second possible response is accommodation. We're clearly very different, we would say to the divergent Other, but I want this relationship so badly, I will change everything about myself to make it work. This is a response often found on the right, where readers, faced with the inevitable dissonance between the Talmud's opinions and their own, alter the latter to accommodate the former. Such readers sacrifice their identity to the text.

A third response is subjection. You and I are different, so if you want to have this relationship, you are going to have to change everything about yourself. This response is typically found on the left, where readers eliminate the gap between themselves and the Talmud by misinterpreting it (whether deliberately or not), subjecting its meaning to contemporary thought. The text loses its integrity so that the readers may maintain theirs.

A fourth response, the one this book strives to adopt, is negotiation. We're very different, you and I, and there's much we disagree on, but this relationship is something we both want. So I will come to it with all of my opinions, and you will do the same, and we'll negotiate to make it work. This is not only the healthiest way to manage a relationship, it is also the best way to read a text. We must bring our whole selves to the encounter with the talmudic text, as we must allow the Talmud to

bring its full self to its encounter with us. We must give full voice to our beliefs and our biases, and let the Talmud speak its own (for we are no less conditioned by the 21st century than the Talmud is by Antiquity).<sup>8</sup> We must negotiate our differences, and dialogue where we disagree. It is only when we are who we are, and accept the Talmud for what it is, that a true relationship, a real act of reading – where we learn and evolve and grow – can occur.

## **THE LAUGHING FACE OF GOD: A HISTORY OF AGGADA**

The rabbis were, as mentioned, the founding fathers of the Jewish religion, and the rabbinic period (c. 1st–7th century) is roundly considered to be the classical era of Judaism. It was during this time, following the Destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE) and consequent upheaval of Jewish life, that Judaism acquired the character and creed it has to this day.<sup>9</sup>

The first work of rabbinic culture was the Mishna (c. 200 CE), a compendium of legal traditions which had been passed down orally from one generation to the next (and which were attributed to the Oral Torah revealed at Sinai as a companion to the Written Torah). After the Destruction, the rabbis, fearful for the survival of these traditions, organized and codified them into the sixty-three tractates of the Mishna, each tractate dedicated to a different area of Jewish life: Berakhot (blessings), Kiddushin (marriages), Avoda Zara (idolatry), etc. Shortly after there appeared the Tosefta (c. 230 CE), a supplementary work to the Mishna

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8. This is what Daniel Boyarin terms “generous critique” – a critique of a text from the reader’s perspective, without diminishing either the former’s then and there or the latter’s here and now. Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture*, 21.

9. See Chapter 3. It is not for nothing that the Judaism practiced for the past two thousand years is known as *rabbinic* Judaism. What follows is a very broad overview of rabbinic history and works; for a more comprehensive introduction, see Charlotte E. Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, 1–9; Hermann L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 1–350; Barry S. Wimpfheimer, *The Talmud: A Biography*, 15–40.

which followed the same structure and contained many traditions not included in the latter.

Another set of works produced during this early rabbinic period were the halakhic midrashim (c. 3rd century) – collections of legal statements ordered, not by theme as in the Mishna and Tosefta, but by the biblical verses on whose interpretation they hinge (midrash being the rabbis’ unique mode of biblical exegesis). There are three main works of halakhic midrashim: the Mekhilta (on Exodus), the Sifra (on Leviticus), and the Sifrei (on Numbers and Deuteronomy).

As rabbinic history progressed, the rabbis turned their interpretive skills from biblical law to biblical narrative, composing numerous aggadic midrashim (c. 4th century on) – works devoted to close and creative readings of the stories of the Bible. Best known among these are the ten volumes of Midrash Rabba on the Torah and the Five Scrolls, in addition to such later works as Midrash Mishlei, Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer, and the Tanhuma.

Finally, of course, there is the Talmud, the crowning achievement of rabbinic culture. After its completion, the Mishna became the central text of the rabbinic study hall (or *beit midrash*), where its finer points were parsed, debated, and developed so that a large body of commentaries was formed around it. These commentaries were orally transmitted through the generations until they, too, were collected and redacted, and so was the Talmud born. Or, more accurately, Talmuds, for there are two such compositions: the Jerusalem Talmud (or *Yerushalmi*, c. 400 CE), edited – contrary to its name – in the north of Israel, and the Babylonian Talmud (or *Bavli*, c. 650 CE), edited in the Babylonian yeshivas of Sura and Pumbedita. It is the *Bavli* that became the cornerstone of Jewish life and learning, the one we refer to when we say, simply, “the Talmud.”

Because the Babylonian rabbis, unlike their Israelite counterparts, did not create independent works of midrash (the primary halakhic and aggadic midrashim all originated in Israel), the *Bavli* became the single repository for all of Jewish wisdom at the time: legal conversations surrounding the Mishna, midrashic interpretations of the Bible, legends concerning the rabbis, sermons made in the synagogues, philosophical discussions of God and the universe, principles of Jewish faith and particulars of Jewish practice, ethical epigrams on the good life and the

just society, biological theories and astrological teachings, folk remedies for brain tumors and kidney stones and toothache. All this, and more, is the Talmud – an immense, encyclopedic, kaleidoscopic treasure trove of Jewish knowledge.

The vast rabbinic corpus is traditionally divided into two meta-genres: halakha – the legal debates, and aggada – the narratives. The rabbis themselves describe aggada as a distinct discourse on several occasions. “Do you wish to know the Creator of the world?” asks the midrash, and rhetorically replies, “Then learn aggada, for through it you will come to know God and cleave to His ways” (Sifrei Deuteronomy 49); while halakha deals with the fine detail of the law, aggada is concerned with the big questions of God and religion and morality. Elsewhere, the rabbis play on the two possible roots of “aggada” – *H-G-D* (lit., to tell) or *N-G-D* (lit., to draw) – when they describe it as “words which draw one’s heart like a tale” (Shabbat 87a), alluding to the compelling nature of narrative. In yet another instance, the rabbis list aggada among the different parts of the Oral Torah revealed by God at Sinai: “God appeared... with an angry face for Bible, a moderate face for Mishna, a friendly face for Talmud, a laughing face for aggada” (Pesikta DeRav Kahana 12:25); as opposed to the other elements of the rabbinic curriculum, aggada is playful, whimsical, subversive – the laughing face of God.

The beauty of these rabbinic descriptions notwithstanding, the real working definition of aggada was coined years later, in the geonic period (directly following the rabbinic period, c. 7th–11th century): “Aggada is every interpretation that appears in the Talmud about any matter that is not a commandment.”<sup>10</sup> Simply put, aggada is everything in the Talmud (and, by extension, rabbinic literature) that is not halakha. Under this broad negative definition there is a whole range of aggadic sub-genres: midrash and rabbinic legends and philosophical inquiry and parables and sermons and folktales and epigrams and jokes.<sup>11</sup> But it is

10. Rabbi Shmuel ben Hofni Gaon, *Introduction to the Science of the Mishna and Talmud*.

11. Hayim Nahman Bialik, Israel’s national poet and the editor of the aforementioned *Book of Legends*, aptly captures the richness and variety of aggada in the book’s introduction: “Aggada is... a classic expression of the spirit of our nation... Practically all

not just a multiplicity of form that defines aggada, it is also a multiplicity of content: from the lofty discussions of metaphysics and theology to small, everyday tales of friendship and family, food and money, study and sex. Herein is the profound humanism of the rabbis; nothing is deemed too trivial or mundane to be the subject of a rabbinic story. In aggada, everything is included because everything is important, everything is meaningful, everything carries a lesson to be learned.<sup>12</sup>

Thus was aggada immortalized within rabbinic literature in general, and the Talmud in particular (where it constitutes one-third of the text<sup>13</sup>). The geonim, who succeeded the rabbis as leaders of the Babylonian Jewish community, were the first to recognize the foundational significance of their forebears and canonize their writings. The Talmud assumed its rightful place at the heart of the *beit midrash* and as the basis of Jewish law.

Not all parts of the Talmud, however, were considered equal. The study of aggada, as opposed to that of *halakha*, had no immediate practical implications. The stories often seemed silly and inconsequential. Above all, cultural changes between the rabbinic and post-rabbinic periods rendered aggada more than a little problematic: The worldwide turn, inspired by Greek philosophy, from *mythos* (narrative) to *logos* (reason) called into question many of the rabbis' more fantastical tales; and the Talmud's newfound canonical status made its subversive

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literary genres that were prevalent in Israel at the time made their way into aggada ....

Whoever wishes to know the nation of Israel in all of its different dimensions, let him learn aggada." H.N. Bialik and Y.N. Ravnitzky, eds., *The Book of Legends*, 1.

12. "Classical Judaism produced a literature which looks at first sight like someone's grandmother's attic in which endless quantities of curious things which 'might someday come in handy' have been passed down like so many balls of string lovingly collected over the years and piled on top of each other without apparent concern for distinctions between weighty and trivial matters .... This apparent jumble of piety and trivia is the medium of the rabbinic message which is the effort to penetrate every corner of ordinary life with God's presence .... The rabbis think nothing of making their most profound comments on the nature of God in the midst of discussing the uses of cheese!" Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Judaism and Christianity: Two Fourth-Century Religions," 7–8.

13. J.H. Weiss, *Dor Dor VeDorshav*, 9.

stories – accounts of bad rabbinic behavior, composed by rabbis for rabbis and not meant for public consumption – a matter of deep discomfort.

The geonim, as we saw, responded to these cultural challenges by formally contrasting halakha and aggada – and invalidating the latter. “We do not rely on aggada,” they repeatedly stated;<sup>14</sup> whereas halakha is authoritative and binding, aggada should only be heeded when it accords with reason. Another response, formulated in the geonic period and popularized by talmudic commentators in the Middle Ages, was to rationalize aggada, usually by interpreting it allegorically, “as a riddle [or] a parable”<sup>15</sup> (so that even the most trivial of tales became a vehicle for deep esoteric wisdom). A third response, equally popular among medieval talmudists, and surviving well into the modern era, was to remove the subversive sting from the stories by providing them with apologetic explanations. The most prevalent response, however, was marginalization; the stories of the Talmud were consistently ignored, glossed over in traditional yeshiva study, and disregarded by the majority of commentaries.

The modern resurgence of aggada began in the 19th century, when Jewish historians turned to it as a window into the rabbinic period. Here was, after all, the classical era of Judaism, and practically the only historical records they had of it were the works of the rabbis themselves. Historical records which, all told, weren't terribly historical: The glaring contradictions between key facts and figures of Antiquity and their representation in rabbinic literature, the internal inconsistencies between different rabbinic descriptions of the same event, the stories' emphasis on spiritual or moral (rather than geopolitical) causality, their featuring of mythical creatures and supernatural occurrences, and most importantly, their literary elegance and structural artistry – all these point to the obviously fictional nature of aggada.<sup>16</sup> Nineteenth-century historians, however, held fast to the premise that the stories of rabbinic literature

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14. See, for example, B.M. Levin, ed., *Otzar HaGeonim*, Berakhot:91, Hagiga:59–60.

15. Maimonides, *Commentary on the Mishna*, Sanhedrin:10:1.

16. This claim was not, strictly speaking, new; even traditional commentators were forced in some cases to admit that “our rabbis' story... never happened in this manner.” Rabbi Azaria de Rossi, *Meor Einayim*, 16:299.



contained a kernel of historical truth, and devoted much of their efforts to trying to identify these kernels and piece them together into a full account of rabbinic history. The rabbinic chronologies created in this process were not only methodologically flawed (the result of imposing a modern view of history onto pre-modern texts that didn't share the same view) but also highly speculative, no less fictional than the fictional chaff the historians sought to eliminate.

It was only in the late 20th century that aggada became the province of those best suited to analyze it: literary scholars. Aggada is literature, these scholars asserted; this is how it was authored, and this is how it ought to be read. The rabbis, in telling their stories, did not seek to chronicle history. Rather, they used the literary devices and rhetorical ploys of narrative, those *words which draw one's heart like a tale*, to convey certain religious or ethical teachings. The turn toward aggada-as-literature was nothing short of revolutionary. It shifted scholarly attention from the stories' content to their form, so that their literary properties, once an obstacle to interpretation, now became its object. It also considerably expanded the field, opening it up to the many different schools of literary criticism. Above all, it made aggada not less historically valuable, but more: If a rabbinic story actually happened, as previous historians had assumed, it is an account of one thing that occurred to one person (or, at most, a small group of people) at one time. But if, as scholars were now arguing, the story didn't happen exactly as told, if it was authored, transmitted, and edited by successive generations of rabbis – then it can shed light on the intellectual and spiritual lives of all of those rabbinic authors, transmitters, and editors. Aggada, turns out, *is* a window into the rabbinic period, but not in the way 19th-century historians had meant; it is a historical record, not of the stories' characters, but of their creators.<sup>17</sup>

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17. Jacob Neusner, who, together with Jonah Fraenkel, laid the groundwork for the shift in the study of aggada away from history and toward literature, maintained that “talmudic literature simply cannot be converted into historical narrative.... No passage can be treated as an eye-witness account. None can be supposed to tell ‘just how things were’.... The question, Did these things ‘really’ happen? is not important. What is important is the question, What view of reality shaped the minds of the men who told these stories, lived by these laws, believed these myths?” Jacob Neusner,

After a millennium and a half on the sidelines of the *beit midrash*, *aggada*, in the 21st century, has risen to unprecedented heights of popularity. Today, the stories of rabbinic literature are some of the most beloved texts of Judaism, studied in traditional *yeshivas* and secular universities, synagogues and schools, organizations and communities across the Jewish world. The *aggada-as-literature* movement has revealed these stories to be literary masterpieces. They may read like simple folktales, but scratch the surface of these texts and worlds and worlds of drama, of conflict, of passion and emotion burst forth from between the lines. The rabbis' storytelling genius, and their repeated rounds of editing through the generations, ensured that by the time the stories assumed their final form they were intricately structured and elaborately stylized. Unpacking a piece of *aggada* is therefore uniquely challenging and (when done successfully) extremely rewarding.

Another reason for the current popularity of *aggada* is its accessibility. The halakhic sections of the Talmud – long, complex, and laden with jargon – require years of study to master; whereas the stories, short and seemingly straightforward, can be read and understood (at least on some level) by anyone.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, while halakha includes many arcane and obsolete laws that have no bearing on life as we know it, *aggada* deals with themes that feel remarkably close to home. It tells of people contending with difficult parents and disobedient children, treacherous friends and insensitive spouses, financial insecurity and failing health, ethical dilemmas and spiritual crises, loneliness and death. They may be hundreds of years old, but the stories of the Talmud are as existentially relevant to us today as they were to the rabbis of 7th-century Babylonia.

Finally, *aggada* seems particularly compatible with the spirit of our age. Halakha, a general system designed for the general good, cannot but infringe upon those who do not fit the norm (as does any code of law). The rabbis knew this, so alongside halakha they gave us *aggada*, stories which critique their own legal system, acknowledge

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*Development of a Legend: Studies on the Traditions Concerning Yohanan ben Zakkai*, 300–1.

18. I say “at least on some level” since, as we’ll see, there is a major gap between the narratives’ apparent and actual meaning.

its limitations, and give voice to those it inadvertently hurts.<sup>19</sup> Hence the aforementioned interest of aggada in the treatment of the Other, who often takes center stage in these stories: We have tales of simple folk criticizing rabbis, of non-Jews putting Jews to shame, and – most notably for our purpose – of women showing up men.<sup>20</sup> There is something about this rabbinic self-critique that is especially appealing to our 21st-century sensibilities. Aggada’s *laughing face of God*, the subversiveness that made it so problematic for so long, is precisely what makes it so popular today.<sup>21</sup>

## CAST YOUR EYES TO THE END: HOW TO READ AGGADA

One of the hallmarks of rabbinic storytelling is the false front. Aggada, as noted, is deceptive; the simple understanding one comes away with after the first reading is frequently at odds with the deeper meaning that emerges after the second.<sup>22</sup> This is particularly true in the case of

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19. “One of the more interesting theories in aggadic studies posits that the narratives of the Talmud are a critical tool through which the rabbis examine themselves and criticize their halakhic creation. The stories constitute a reflection on the talmudic work, which is why they often diverge from the halakhic ethos and even oppose it.” Ishay Rosen-Zvi, “The Evil Inclination, Sexuality, and Forbidden Cohabitations: A Chapter in Talmudic Anthropology,” 69–70.

20. As Shulamit Valler demonstrates, rabbinic stories “present explicitly feminine positions, or at the very least positions of thoughtfulness and sensitivity toward the feminine view, positions which do not correspond with, and perhaps even contradict, what is said or inferred from the halakha.” Shulamit Valler, *Women and Womanhood in the Stories of the Babylonian Talmud*, 19. That said, it cannot be denied that even within aggada there are numerous expressions of rabbinic prejudice against women, non-Jews, and unlearned men; the rabbis were no more consistent in their egalitarian tendencies than they were in their feminism. Yet it is specifically in their stories that the rabbis recognize the humanity, at times even superiority, of the non-rabbinic Other (it is, for example, no coincidence that the remarkable women of this book all exist in the realm of aggada).

21. Indeed, this is probably the first time in Jewish history that rabbinic narrative can be read with the same subversive mindset with which it was composed.

22. According to Jeffrey Rubenstein, the realization “of the true nature of things as opposed to their surface appearance... comprises the didactic or ideological point of the [rabbinic] story.” The rabbis, he argues, envisioned an “implied audience of...

rabbinic legend (the aggadic sub-genre explored in this book<sup>23</sup>). With their literary sophistication and moral complexity masked by their short, folktale-like appearance, these legends can never just be read – they must always be reread.

And not only reread; there are specific rules that must be applied to our rereading. If we are to break through the stories' false front and expose their true significance, we must zoom in and do a close reading of the text, and zoom out and examine the context.

### **Zoom In: Close Reading**

Since aggada is literature and ought to be read as such, we must treat it as we would any other novel, short story, or play. This last genre is perhaps the most apposite, as rabbinic legends are fundamentally scenic; they present their plot directly through dialogue and deed, unmediated by lengthy descriptions of scenery or characters, thereby giving the reader the impression of watching a drama enacted on a stage.

We begin, then, with a close reading, breaking the narrative down into its literary building blocks:

#### (1) Structure

Our first step is to map the story's structure, dividing it into acts (and, when relevant, the acts into scenes). Rabbinic legends, we will find, tend toward the three-act drama.

#### (2) Setting

Next, we must determine when and where each act takes place. Rabbinic legends are generally set in condensed time and space, lending the drama an air of immediacy and intensity.

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like-minded sages" who were sophisticated and knowledgeable enough to unpack their stories and uncover their hidden meaning. Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture*, 9, 21.

23. Despite its generic diversity, aggada's two primary forms are midrash – the stories the rabbis told about the Bible, and rabbinic legend – the stories the rabbis told about themselves. The narratives of this book, all concerning rabbinic (and pre-rabbinic) women, belong to the latter category.

(3) Characters

The third element to analyze is the story's *dramatis personae* – their views, personality traits, and relationships to one another. Rabbinic legends usually feature a limited cast of characters, who interchange from one act to the next, as a chamber play of sorts.

(4) Plot

The next step is to follow the storyline through, identifying its important parallels, turning points, and climaxes. Like the setting and characters, the plot of rabbinic legends is compressed, taut, and thus highly dramatic.

(5) Themes, Motifs, Symbols

Finally, we must search the narrative for underlying themes, repeated words, and elements of symbolic significance. This is the surest way to get past the story's façade, go from text to subtext, and discover the deeper message that lies beneath.

### Zoom Out: Contextual Reading

Yet zooming in is not enough. The Talmud features several instances of close readings of the Bible which are met with “Fool! Cast your eyes to the end of the verse”;<sup>24</sup> no reading, no matter how close, can be quite accurate if it fails to take the context into account. Aggada, specifically, comes to us embedded in numerous levels of context, and we must zoom out and consider them each in turn:

(1) Immediate Context

The stories of the Talmud do not appear in isolation, but within a unit of talmudic discussion (or *sugya*). They frequently come on the heels of a halakhic debate, clarifying, illustrating, or – as mentioned – subverting it. Other times, they follow a narrative, as part of a cluster of tales on a single theme.<sup>25</sup> The framing of the story, whether by law or by narrative,

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24. See, for example, Berakhot 10a (discussed in Chapter 5), Eiruvin 101a, Hullin 87a.

25. “A great number of the narratives in the Talmuds and midrash do not appear discretely, but in cycles of stories which follow one another... unified by... a common subject and structure.” Eli Yassif, *The Hebrew Folktale: History, Genre, Meaning*, 232–38.

is typically the result of the rabbis' deliberate editorial decision, and has direct ramifications for the way the story should be read.<sup>26</sup>

(2) Broad Context

Zooming out further, we must explore the story within the broad context of the Talmud in particular, and rabbinic literature in general. Breaking the story down into its literary components can only get us so far; we must understand what these components mean to the rabbis, the role they play in the rabbinic imagination. To this end, we must search for other appearances of every setting, character, plot device, motif, and symbol we identified in our close reading, so that we may determine their full literary significance. This is especially relevant in the case of rabbinic legend, where stories of a specific character often presuppose knowledge of other stories about the same character.<sup>27</sup>

(3) Historical Context

Although the stories of the Talmud are not historical, they are nonetheless set in a historical reality – a reality from which we are removed by a good millennium and a half.<sup>28</sup> We can never assume that the historical circumstances depicted in these stories are in any way like our own. To

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26. "The literary contexts created by the rabbinic redactors suggest the influence of the context on the narrative it frames, and on the worldview it presents." Ofra Meir, "The Influence of the Redactional Process on the Worldview of Agadic Stories," 83.

27. While rabbinic legends are not connected by historical truth – they regularly contradict one another, and almost always fail to fit neatly onto one timeline – they are usually linked through conceptual consistency; the biographical details may differ, but the character's basic personality, worldview, and life trajectory remain largely the same. Hence it is consistency, rather than history, that justifies the reading of rabbinic legends in light of one another. "Rabbinic sources cannot be used at face value to reconstruct history. The relinquishing of the biographical program, though, has brought with it a tendency not to pay attention to the construction of particular sages within rabbinic literature as figures with distinctive personalities, dispositions, ideological stances, and perhaps even life stories . . . The appearance of one of these sages within a given agada . . . must be read with a consciousness of other agadot about this sage." Devora Steinmetz, "Agada Unbound: Inter-Agadic Characterization of the Sages in the Bavli and Implications for Reading Agada," 293–310.

28. As noted, the historical reality reflected in these narratives is less the characters' reality than that of the creators, from 7th-century Babylonia.

avoid the all-too-common mistake of projecting our reality onto that of the rabbis, we must zoom out even further and explore the social conventions, political climate, cultural mores, economic structures, scientific knowledge, and material objects of the rabbinic world.<sup>29</sup>

For this purpose, in addition to the texts of the rabbis themselves, we also have recourse to works from the surrounding cultures, in which the rabbis operated and by which they were deeply influenced – Greco-Roman (to the west), Persian (to the east), and Christian.

### Reading Hypotheses

To our two planes of reading – close and contextual – we must add three reading hypotheses:

#### (1) Omnisignificance

The stories of the Talmud, as mentioned, are terse and compact, whole worlds of drama held together in a few short lines. This minimalism (shaped, primarily, by the oral nature of the stories' transmission and the need to commit them to memory) requires that we look closely at each and every sentence, clause, and word. Not unlike the way we read biblical narrative, we must assume that every detail is there for a reason; nothing in these carefully crafted stories is redundant.<sup>30</sup>

#### (2) Interiority

Because rabbinic legends are scenic, they tell us what characters say and do, rarely what they think or feel. It is therefore up to us to get into the head and heart of every character (for, like in a play, there are as many points of view as there are speaking parts), teasing out the unstated

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29. "To understand the past in the present, one must know the past and the present and be able to distinguish between them . . . . Any scholarly study of an ancient text requires an in-depth familiarity with generations past (including different cultural eras of the past), primarily in order to differentiate the past from the present . . . . We must go back to rabbinic times . . . to be sure that we have interpreted the past as the past." Jonah Fraenkel, "Hermeneutic Problems in the Study of the Aggadic Narrative," 12–14.

30. "The extreme brevity of Babylonian Talmud stories [gave rise to] the need to invest as much meaning as possible in every word." Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, 247.

thoughts and feelings. The bulk of these stories' drama, we shall see, is often in the emotional subtext.<sup>31</sup>

### (3) The Moral of the Story

Just because a rabbinic legend didn't happen, it doesn't mean it isn't true. There is a profound truth to these stories, but it is ethical, religious, philosophical – not historical. The rabbis told their tales not to record history, but to teach us how *to know God and cleave to His ways*. Hence the final question we must ask ourselves when reading a piece of aggada is: Why are the rabbis telling us this? What is the lesson they would like us to learn?<sup>32</sup>

## Archetypal Criticism

So far, this section has outlined three sets of fairly standard reading rules for aggada. There is, however, a fourth methodology I'd like to add, one which is rather more unique to this book: archetypal criticism. According to archetypal critics, if certain literary elements – character types, plot-lines, motifs – appear in stories from different times and different places (where no cross-cultural influence can be discerned), it is because their origin is not cultural, but psychological. The recurrence of an archetype in narratives throughout history and across cultures indicates that the archetype is rooted deep within the human psyche. The stories we tell, from ancient mythology to medieval folklore to modern fiction, are all

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31. "Since [talmudic] stories do not center on the internal world of their characters, but reveal it through the characters' actions, they leave whole spheres blank, un-narrated.... The psychological experience resonates beneath the text's mute surface... thoughts, feelings, views, motives, and intentions, which the reader is called upon to articulate." Inbar Raveh, *Fragments of Being: Stories of the Sages – Literary Structures and Worldview*, 31–41.

32. "Historiography was of no interest to the rabbis. They saw no point in describing events and characters just as they were. Undoubtedly they believed that one ought to learn from the lessons of the past... but did not see any difference as to whether the lessons... are learned from actual historical reality or from moral literary fiction. In fact, the rabbis seemed to prefer fiction and recognize its advantages. In this respect, they were not unlike the great moral authors of history." Moshe David Herr, "The Conception of History Among the Sages," 139.



essentially the same, since they are all trying to work through the same primal fears and fantasies.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, when an archetypal critic looks at a literary text, it is in order, first, to identify its archetypal elements (the elements it has in common with works of other cultures), and second, to trace those elements back to the unconscious forces whence they derive.<sup>34</sup> The value of archetypal criticism to our understanding of literature has been repeatedly demonstrated by contemporary critics. In the study of aggada, it hasn't been used quite as much – although, I submit, it has the power of casting these stories in an entirely new light.

## READING THE TEXT, REGARDING THE OTHER: THE PROGRAM FOR THE BOOK

Our reading of the stories of the heroines of the Talmud begins, accordingly, with an archetype. Each chapter opens with a cross-cultural exploration of an anti-feminine archetype, sketching it through prominent examples from the Bible, rabbinic literature, classical myths, medieval folktales, modern novels, poems, and plays, and 20th-century film.<sup>35</sup> In

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33. Archetypal criticism developed out of the psychoanalytic thought of Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung. The latter describes the theory as follows: "When, for instance, one examines the world of fairytales, one can hardly avoid the impression that one is meeting certain figures again and again, albeit in altered guise.... The psychologist of the unconscious proceeds no differently in regard to the psychic figures which appear in dreams, fantasies, visions, and manic ideas, as in legends, fairytales, myth, and religion. Over the whole of this psychic realm there reign certain motifs, certain typical figures which we can follow far back into history, and even into prehistory, and which may therefore legitimately be described as 'archetypes.' They seem to me to be built into the very structure of man's unconscious, for in no other way can I explain why it is that they occur universally and in identical form." Carl Gustav Jung, "Fundamental Questions of Psychotherapy," 16:254.

34. "The archetype is synchronous.... The extent of the archetypal critic's interest in drawing attention to the similarities between a later work of art and an earlier one should be in demonstrating that an archetype is in operation... [as] a constant in our psyches that we share with humans of all times and places." Evelyn J. Heinz and John J. Teunissen, "Culture and the Humanities: The Archetypal Approach," 194.

35. I must confess to a Western bias here: The majority of examples are taken from the Western canon, with which the reader is most likely to be familiar; I have, however,

## *The Madwoman in the Rabbi's Attic*

the course of this survey, the archetype is defined: her character traits, relationships with those around her, and key moments in her story.

Next, we will conduct a primary reading of our talmudic heroine, whose narrative, we will find, features all of the elements previously delineated. The Talmud's portrayal of its heroine, at first reading, perfectly conforms to the archetype at hand.

We will then proceed to a revisioning of the story, beginning with an analysis of the unconscious forces that gave rise to the archetype in the first place. With this archetypal critique in mind, we will reread the story, subjecting it to aggada's three sets of reading rules: (1) Close reading – mapping the text's structure, setting, and characters; zooming into the twists and turns of the plot; and identifying the motifs, symbols, and underlying themes. (2) Contextual reading – zooming out to the surrounding sugya; examining other rabbinic references to the story's characters, plot details, and motifs; and highlighting relevant historical facts about the rabbinic world. (3) Reading hypotheses – looking closely at each and every word; trying to get into the characters' heads and hearts; and ultimately, attempting to articulate the moral of the story.

Finally, we will go back and revisit our primary reading, in light of what we have gone on to learn. With the story's false front completely deconstructed, and its deeper truth now plain to see, we can recognize how grossly we had misread our heroine, and by extension, how often we misinterpret the Other. The moral of the story is born of the gap between its apparent and actual meaning; the way we read the characters in the text becomes the way we must regard the people in our lives.

Having charted what the book will do, a few words on what it won't. This is by no means a general survey of rabbinic attitudes toward women. Over the past few decades, several such studies have been undertaken, arriving at very different conclusions – from claims of the rabbis' essential

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included a handful of well-known non-Western examples where relevant. I must also issue a general spoiler alert: In many cases, I discuss how the stories end, so let the reader proceed with caution.

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patriarchy and subjugation of women,<sup>36</sup> through attempts to nuance and qualify their patriarchal positions,<sup>37</sup> to arguments in defense of rabbinic proto-feminism.<sup>38</sup> This book, by contrast, has the far more humble goal of reading six stories of named talmudic women; any broader conclusions regarding the rabbinic view of women will be drawn directly, and exclusively, from these readings.<sup>39</sup>

Nor am I claiming that the readings proposed are the only readings possible. My sole objective is to apply the reading rules of aggada to the stories of the six talmudic heroines in an effort to understand them as best I can. There are many aspects of each legend I do not touch upon, since I find them less relevant to this purpose. Similarly, I do not analyze the stories' manuscript variants, compare them to parallel

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36. Judith Baskin, for instance, explores several aggadic traditions concerning women, demonstrating that “the rabbis’ justifications of the patriarchy they themselves maintained and fostered relied on establishing the secondary nature of females... and the inferior nature of their abilities and qualities.” Judith R. Baskin, *Midrashic Women: Formations of the Feminine in Rabbinic Literature*, 2–12.
37. Shulamit Valler, as mentioned (n. 20), posits a difference between rabbinic law, which tends to overlook the female perspective, and rabbinic narrative, where the rabbis display a far greater sensitivity to women and their sometimes difficult circumstances. Judith Wegner, for her part, identifies a rabbinic distinction between women whose reproductive function belongs to a man, who were consequently regarded as property, and women to whom no man lays claim, who were accorded “a measure of personhood... many rights, powers, and duties corresponding to those of men.” Wegner, *Chattel or Person?*, 174.
38. Daniel Boyarin, reading rabbinic culture alongside Hellenistic and Christian cultures, finds that the former’s affirmation of sexuality made it significantly less misogynistic than its contemporaries, and that “on the margins of [the rabbis’] dominant and hegemonic discourse, there was... a dissident proto-feminist voice.” Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, 242. Judith Hauptman, comparing rabbinic law to biblical law, which the rabbis inherited and by which they were bound, shows that while “the rabbis upheld patriarchy as the preordained mode of social organization, as dictated by the Torah,” they simultaneously “broke new ground, granting women benefits that they never had before... in almost every key area of law affecting women.” Judith Hauptman, *Rereading the Rabbis: A Woman’s Voice*, 4.
39. It must be owned, though, that the abovementioned studies are also all limited in scope (Wegner confines her research to the Mishna, Baskin to aggadic literature, and Hauptman to halakhic literature; Boyarin focuses on texts dealing with sexuality and the body; and Valler looks at five sugyot concerning women). Rabbinic literature is vast and multivocal by nature, and any attempt to analyze it is bound to be selective.

versions elsewhere in rabbinic literature, or try to identify their historical kernels; I address such questions only inasmuch as they impact the literary reading of the text.

I have elected, throughout the book, to let rabbinic texts speak for themselves, so that explanations always come after the texts, never before. I have also chosen to keep bibliographical references to a minimum; the reader can find the full range of works that have informed each chapter, and the book as a whole, in the bibliography. As is customary, “Talmud” alone refers to the Babylonian Talmud. I have largely followed the Steinsaltz English translation, but have modified it in places, and have regularly replaced pronouns with proper names, for the sake of clarity. Citations of tractates preceded by (M) are to the Mishna, (T) to the Tosefta, and (Y) to the Jerusalem Talmud; when they are unpreceded, they are to the Babylonian Talmud. The book uses “rabbi,” “ben,” and “beit midrash” when discussing stories set in an Israelite context, and “rav,” “bar,” and “yeshiva” when discussing stories in Babylonia. Because of the impossibility of distinguishing talmudic authors from editors in the multigenerational process of oral transmission, I shall refer to them collectively, simply as “the rabbis.”<sup>40</sup> Since rabbinic stories tell more of their creators than of their characters, this book is primarily about them.

The Talmud is a prime example of a collective act of creation. Yet every act of creation is, in its way, collective. This book, specifically, would never have been written were it not for the help of many, many others.

I am grateful, first and foremost, to God. For charting the course of my life directly to aggada (in a manner so random it could have only been providential); for leaving me no choice but to walk away from everything and write; for giving me life, sustaining me, and bringing me to this day.

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40. “As producers of literary works, the sages of Late Antiquity imagine themselves at most as shapers of what already exists in tradition. They are not authors ... they do not invent, they merely transmit.” Martin S. Jaffee, “Rabbinic Authorship as a Collective Enterprise,” 1–24. Note also that I speak of “readers,” although the original audience of the stories would have heard them communicated orally, rather than in writing.

Second, to my parents, Dina and Philip Fine. For supporting my terribly irresponsible decision to go off and write a book; for encouraging me every step of the way; for believing in me when I didn't believe in myself.

Third, my students. The people I've been privileged to teach at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies, the Nachshon Project, Amudim Seminary, the Tikvah Scholars Program, the Bronfman Fellowship, the London School of Jewish Studies, the Community Scholars Program, WebYeshiva, and Limmud conferences, communities, and campuses across the Jewish world. It was your insightful questions and comments that sharpened my thinking about these stories, your enthusiasm that inspired me to turn my teachings into a book, and your faces that stood before me when I did.

Fourth, Professor Jeffrey Rubenstein. For introducing me, through his writings, to the wonderful world of aggada, and years later (as no good deed goes unpunished) for agreeing to mentor me through this book project. Though he knew nothing about me and owed me even less, Professor Rubenstein gave generously of his time and expertise. If there is any merit in what follows, it is due to everything I've learned from him. Likewise, this book has benefitted from the close and careful attentions of Dr. Adam Cohen, Ilana Kurshan, and Rabbi Shoshana Boyd Gelfand. Each of these readers, in their own way, improved the book tremendously, and I am so grateful for their wisdom and their kindness. I am also indebted to the following scholars, whose brains I have, at one point or another, picked: Professor Galit Hasan-Rokem, Dr. Inbar Raveh, Professor Shuli Barzilai, and Professor Tal Ilan.

Fifth, my profound thanks to Shari and Nathan J. Lindenbaum, who have done so much for the world of Torah in general, and for women's Torah in particular. This book owes its existence to them, in more ways than one. I am honored by their friendship and humbled by their generosity. I am also grateful to Jackie Frankel and Joel Weiss of the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies; after providing me with a happy teaching home for the past decade, I'm thrilled that Pardes has taken on the role of co-publisher of this book. Finally, to the Sefaria Word-by-Word Fellowship which, under the leadership of Dr. Erica Brown and Sara Wolkenfeld, has made it its mission to advance female Torah scholarship, a cause particularly close to my heart.

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Sixth, to the talented individuals who, time and again, have saved me from myself. After many years of editing other people's books, I was so fortunate to team up with former colleagues who agreed to take on the thankless task of editing an editor (and a fastidious, opinionated editor at that): my outstanding editor Deena Glickman, who lovingly turned over every word, endured my Britishisms, and let me have my way with semicolons; and my equally excellent copyeditor Tali Simon, who combed through the manuscript with painstaking thoroughness and eagle-eyed precision. Thanks are also owed to my research assistant Claire Abramovitz, whose research was so entertainingly compiled, it kept me reading through hundreds of pages of findings; my editorial assistant Emma Richter, who dotted all my i's and crossed all my t's with a proficiency well beyond her years; and my accountability partner Joel Haber, whose annoying punctuality in meeting his deadlines shamed me into not completely missing mine. Lastly, it is a pleasure to return to Maggid Books, the imprint I helped build from infancy. My thanks to Matthew Miller, who believed in this book when it was still a twinkle in its mother's eye; to Dr. Yoel Finkelman, who shepherded it through the publishing process with professionalism and skill; to Tomi Mager, for her typesetting flair; to Ruth Pepperman, for her proofreading prowess; and to Tani Bayer, for expressing so perfectly in image what I tried to capture in words.

Seventh, to friends. Far too many to mention, but you know who you are. You who let me prattle on about my heroines, who listened as I complained about the difficulties of writing, who talked me off the ledge more times than I care to remember. I can't list you all, but there are a number who cannot go unmentioned: Eleanor Zinkin, Eliyahu Misgav, Jeffrey Saks, Liron Niego, Miriam Loberbaum, Rachel Harris, Rebecca Zeffert, Roni Zahavi, Sefi Kraut, Tamar Marcus, Yehoshua Engelman, Ayelet and Adi Libson, Batya and Herzl Hefter, Carol and Johnny Arkush, Miriam and Harris Lorie, Sally Berkovic and Jonathan Fishburn, Simi Hinden and Louis Sachs, Suzi and Elie Holzer, Tamra Wright and Ian Gamse, and Tilla and Ben Crowne.

Three women inspired this book, three women who are my personal heroines:

## *Introduction*

My Savta Judith Felsenstein (née Freilich), who, together with Saba Arnold, bought me my first classics, took me to my first plays, and introduced me to the world of arts and letters. It is to them that I owe my love of all things literature.

My Grandma Pearl Fine (née Rubinstein), who, together with Grandpa Morris, taught me the meaning of true heroism, how to face life with fortitude and with grace. I miss them both every day.

My mentor Maureen Kendler, who guided me through my first steps in the world of Jewish education, quelled my anxieties, celebrated my successes, and constantly reminded me to “never threaten to leave, always threaten to stay.” This, precisely, is what the heroines of the Talmud do. In writing about their stories, it’s what I have tried to do, as well.