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“THE WISDOM OF WOMEN”: FROM EPSTEIN TO AGNON

Brenda Socachevsky Bacon

The exclusion of women from Torah study and the proper role of women in the Jewish family and society are the subject of both the little-known short story “Ḥakhmot nashim” (1943) by Shmuel Yosef Agnon, and the chapter of the same name in Barukh Halevi Epstein’s memoir, *Mekor Barukh* (1928). In both works women’s learning causes discomfort to men and poses a threat to their view of traditional gender roles. This paper demonstrates that Agnon’s story dialogues in a nuanced way with Epstein’s chapter. In addition, it seems to dialogue with Agnon’s role expectations of his own wife, Esther.

In the city was an important Woman from a good family, who would read the Bible and study Mishnah and midrash and *halakhot* and *aggadot* and have learned discussions with the scholars in the *beit midrash*. There were those who esteemed her and sang her praises, and there were those who looked at her resentfully, saying that it is not suitable for a woman to study Torah, for a woman is only for children and there is no wisdom for a woman except at the spindle.

—S.Y. Agnon, “Ḥakhmot nashim” (The wisdom of women), p. 294

אשה גדולה בת טובים הייתה בעיר, שהייתה קוראת במקרא ושונה במשנה ובמדרש ובהלכות ובאגדות ונושאת ונותנת עם תלמידי חכמים בבית המדרש. יש שהיו מתייקרים בה ומגידיים שבחה ויש שהיו עיניהם צרות בה ואומרים לא נאה תורה לנשים, שאין אישה אלא לבנים ואין חכמה לאישה אלא בפלך.

Shmuel Yosef Agnon’s little-known short story “Ḥakhmot nashim,”¹ whose opening lines are quoted above, raises important issues concerning traditional

attitudes towards women's learning as well as the gendered nature of books. Its relevance to discussions of the place of women in Torah study was recognized by its recent republication in a collection entitled *Bat-Mitzvah* (2002), published by a religious Zionist women's Torah study institution in Jerusalem and aimed at a wide audience.²

"Ḥakhmot nashim" was first published in the Israeli newspaper *Ha'arets* on November 13, 1943, in honor of the fiftieth birthday of Shoshana Persitz (1893–1969), a noted figure in Hebrew publishing, education and Zionist politics, who was also a personal friend of Agnon's. Their friendship dated from the early 1920s, when their families were neighbors in Bad Homburg, Germany,³ and continued after they both moved to what was then Palestine. Persitz's fiftieth birthday was publicly noted by other literary figures, such as Yosef Klausner, writing in the American Hebrew weekly *Hadoar*.⁴ She would later serve three terms in the Knesset (1949–1961) and head the Knesset Education Committee. In 1968, she was awarded the Israel Prize for her contributions to education in the State of Israel.

As we shall see, Agnon's "Ḥakhmot nashim" dialogues in a nuanced way with a chapter of the same title in R. Barukh Halevi Epstein's memoir, *Mekor Barukh*,⁵ in which Epstein describes his learned aunt, Reina Batya Berlin. In a different way, it also seems to dialogue with Agnon's expectations of the proper role of his wife Esther, as expressed in his letters to her.⁶ Arnold Band has described Agnon's signature mode of alluding to Jewish texts as one not of appropriation, but rather of negotiation:

What makes the Agnonic text so intriguing is that a careful reading brings you to the conclusion that the author is supremely conscious of his negotiations with the text and, inasmuch as these are historical Jewish texts, the concrete manifestations of what we ordinarily call Jewish history, he is negotiating with Jewish history.⁷

The historical events with which Agnon is negotiating in "Ḥakhmot nashim" are the crisis of tradition, manifested in the moral disintegration of the *beit midrash*, and the demands of women for a change in their status, manifested in their desire for education and independence.

The Plot of "Ḥakhmot nashim"

Agnon's learned Woman who studies Torah in the *beit midrash* is nameless, as are all the characters in this story. There is a difference in attitude towards her learning between two factions in the *beit midrash*, with some of the men praising her and others resenting her presence among them. The men, unlike the Woman, only pretend to study Torah, and the Woman points out their transgressions to them. The men decide to take revenge. They can't denigrate, dismiss or belittle the Woman for her scholarship, because in any discussion she gains the upper hand. She is clearly smarter and more devoted to Torah study than they are. So, instead, they devise a clever and intricate plan.

The *beit midrash* students take money from the charity fund intended for the repair and purchase of books, "in order to increase Torah in Israel" (*ibid.*: להרבות לתורה בישראל). With this money they buy paper and ask a bookbinder to make it into a book, bound in dark red leather and engraved with the words: *The Book of the Wisest of Women* (ספר חכמות נשים).⁸ They put the book on the shelf in the *beit midrash*, where it stands out because of the new red binding. The yeshiva students wait for their victim to approach, and as they hear her footsteps, they intensify the sounds of their study, until the entire *beit midrash* echoes with their melodies. "And thus they sat, without raising their heads from their books, as if they were concerned with nothing but Torah" (p. 295: וכך היו יושבים ולא היו מגביהים ראשם למעלה מספריהם כאילו אין להם אלא תורה). The Woman enters the *beit midrash*, and as she approaches the bookshelf, her eyes light up at the sight of the book, "for she thought it was written by a woman or included in it all the interpretations that women established on their own, as its name testified" (*ibid.*: הייתה סבורה שנתחבר על ידי אשה או שכולל כל מה שחידשו נשים מדעתן בתורה כשם ששמו מעיד). As she turns its empty pages, she suddenly hears big bursts of laughter, and she understands that her fellow yeshiva students have purposefully and cruelly plotted to ridicule her. Although she wants to throw the book at them, she pretends to feel nothing and returns to her home with the book.

At home, she looks again at the empty book and becomes angry at the students for embarrassing her. But then she reflects and reaches the conclusion that the men are indeed correct, "for we have no book that a woman authored. Before I complain about the students, I should first complain about our foremothers" (*ibid.*: שהרי לא יש בידינו ספר שאישה חיברה ועד שאני קובלת על חובשי בית המדרש מוטב).⁹ She throws down the book and then thinks of all the sorrows that women go through in their lives. The narrator tells us that another woman

might have challenged divine justice, but she justifies her fate. As a reward, she recalls a long list of important women in the past and concludes that “God did not withhold the wisdom of women” (p. 297: הרי שלא קיפח הקדוש ברוך הוא חכמתן: (של נשים). She resolves to return to the *beit midrash*, but then she imagines the women of her generation appearing before her, reminding her that “even though there are wise women, they have no *da‘at Torah*” (*ibid.*: אף על פי שיש בו נשים: (דעתניות אין בהן דעת תורה)—that is, their opinions have no authority. She remembers again what the men did to her, and she starts to cry.

Just then her children come home. They burst into tears when they see her crying, believing they are the cause of her tears. The Woman calms them by telling them a story, after which they want to hear more stories. However, she is busy running her household, so she decides to write her many stories in a book, which they read. The children grow up to be successful, wise, well mannered and learned in Torah. They praise their mother by citing Proverbs 14:1 “The wisdom of women [*ḥakhmot nashim*] builds her house” (p. 298: (חכמות נשים בנתה ביתה).

Agnon’s Story: Literary and Feminist Aspects

The heroine of “*Ḥakhmot nashim*,” the learned Woman from a good family who knows all the fields of rabbinic literature and engages in scholarly discussion with the men in the *beit midrash*, is unique in Agnon’s works.¹⁰ The women of Buczacz, Agnon’s birthplace, gained their Jewish knowledge from the *Tze’ena ure’ena*, an interpretive Yiddish paraphrase of the Bible.¹¹ As Agnon tells us elsewhere, “The learned of the women would read from it on the Sabbath and holidays, alone or with others, and would draw from it the spirit of the Torah and veneration of the commandments, along with upright character traits, and in addition to all this, love of the Jewish people and pleasing things about the Israelite nation and its history.”¹² They evidently did not have time to read from it during the week, for they were too busy doing their household tasks and earning a living, unlike this Woman, who at the beginning of the story seems to have no other worries besides studying Torah. Throughout his works, the only other person whom Agnon calls an “important woman” is portrayed as fulfilling the traditional role of bringing her five sons every day to the synagogue and from there to the *heder*. Her only role parallel to that of a man is that of testing her children on Shabbat about what they learned all week in *heder*,¹³ as is usually done by the father in a traditional Jewish family.

Thus, the learned Woman is an anomaly, engaging at the beginning of the story in behavior outside the norm. Her very presence in the *beit midrash* causes discomfort to the men, who view the realm of Torah study as their own,¹⁴ even as their own hypocritical behavior belies their dedication to it. The men will not allow this discomfort to continue, even if it involves transgressing the Torah's commandment not to embarrass another person publicly. As Daniel Boyarin has pointed out, "If the study of Torah is the singular performative that determines the Jewish man as gendered male, then we can understand the basis for the cultural taboo against women entering that space and engaging in that performative."¹⁵ The men could not allow this blurring of boundaries between themselves and women.

In addition to being the "other," the important Woman acts as a castigator, showing up the learners' lack of seriousness and hypocrisy. Her stance is similar to that of the *maskilim*, proponents of the nineteenth-century Jewish enlightenment, who pointed to the corruption of the *beit midrash* and its denizens' idleness and lack of productivity.¹⁶ The narrator does not tell us why the men spent their time in the *beit midrash*, conversing in a sing-song as if they were indeed studying Torah. However, Gershon Shaked has enjoined us to apply to Agnon's works the rabbinic saying, "The words of the Torah are poor in one place and rich in another"—that is, details missing from one story may be inferred from those explicated in another story.¹⁷ In the novel *Oreah natah lalun* (*A guest for the night*), too, the *beit midrash* is in a state of crisis. The men spending their time there are being supported by their fathers-in-law, or perhaps they come "to be warmed not by the light of Torah but rather by the stove of the *beit midrash*, because they don't have enough money to light their own stoves."¹⁸ In "Sippur pashut" (*A simple story*), Agnon asks: "Who were the *beit midrash* students in that generation? Young men who studied Torah out of boredom."¹⁹ The men come to the *beit midrash* not for the sake of heaven or to increase their wisdom, but to while away their time. Torah study, viewed in Jewish tradition as a privilege and duty, is a very different sort of activity for them.

The stronger faction of the men, those who do not want the Woman in the *beit midrash*, wins out. After the opening paragraph, we no longer hear the voice of the men who had supported her at the beginning of the story. It is ironic that the fund from which the men steal is for the purpose of repairing and purchasing books to "increase Torah in Israel." The Torah they designate for the women of Israel (i.e., the Jewish people) is an empty book, while their

traditional sing-song covers their own lack of devotion to Torah study, undermining the very purpose of the *beit midrash*. The narrator has no sympathy for the men, calling their plan an *eitzah nivarah*, a foolish or crass counsel.

The ironic elements in the story are highlighted by what Esther Fuchs calls “the technique of *paralepsis* (a large number of unneeded details) acting in mutual complementation of the technique of *paralipsis* (omission of indispensable and necessary detail).”²⁰ Agnon has the narrator expand upon the size of the empty book and the kind of leather and letters used in its binding, instead of simply telling us that it was similar to the other books in the *beit midrash*; but he doesn’t tell us how the voice of the men who opposed the Woman’s presence gained the upper hand.

The men humiliate not just the important Woman who has trespassed onto their territory, but all women, by implying with their empty book that there is no wisdom in women. Agnon here imposes new meaning on the empty book found, as he informs us in *Ir umelo’ah*, on the prayer stand in the synagogue in his hometown of Buczacz. It was called *sefer haḥibut*, “the book of beating,” because the prayer leader, when repeating the silent devotion, would bang on it between two blessings to remind the unlearned men to say amen, for they might in their ignorance have thought the two blessings were one. The book “was made of parchment, and it had in it neither Torah nor wisdom” (עשוי קלפים ואין בו לא תורה ולא חכמה).²¹ In our story, the empty book that the men place on the shelf for the sole purpose of humiliating the woman is indeed a “book of beating,” for with it the men beat out the spirit of the learned Woman. In transforming the empty book in his hometown synagogue into an empty book entitled *Ḥakhmot nashim*, Agnon may have been playing with the Yiddish expression “*Ḥakhmos noshim nit benimtza*,” that is, “women’s wisdom is not to be found,”²² as indeed it is not in the empty book. When traditional arguments about women’s proper role, such as those presented by the men at the beginning of the story, do not succeed in silencing the Woman and removing her from the public space, the threatened men take the route of embarrassing her to gain their end.

The men send a clear message to the Woman that they no longer want to hear her voice in Torah study, nor view her presence, which they cannot abide, in the *beit midrash*. After the men’s vengeful act, the Woman leaves of her own accord, so as not to lower herself to their level. Her voice is silenced, and, as Rachel Elior writes, “Voice is a metaphor for an opinion that does not remain in the private domain and has a physical, acoustic dimension of speech—being

listened to . . . in the public domain—and an ideological dimension of public significance and authority.”²³ It is indeed the “significance and authority” of her voice that the men reject.

The Woman finds strength and comfort in the knowledge that there were important women in the past. This is a tactic used by women in other cultures,²⁴ and it stands her in good stead, if only temporarily. She knows that the empty book is not really empty and does not deserve to be empty, and with the help of the narrator begins to fill it with the contributions of wise women of the past. These women offer her emotional support in her loneliness and embolden her to make the decision to return to the *beit midrash*, for she is no longer wholly alone.²⁵ However, she retreats when she sees before her the women of her own generation, whose words have no authority, although they may have been quoted in various books.

Agnon is probably referring here to the early twentieth-century genre of popular anthologies of stories and quotes relating to or uttered by various rabbis. Some of these included chapters entitled “*Ḥakhmot nashim*,” with anecdotes about learned and pious women.²⁶ However, in these lone chapters, subsumed among the many chapters about great men, the women’s words indeed have no authority. With her understanding of this reality, the Woman again feels lonesome, vanquished and humiliated, and she bursts into tears, perhaps representing the tears of all women caught up in what Rachel Elior has called the tragedy of “the patriarchal order, which grants sovereignty, acquisition and domination to the male.”²⁷

Returned to the domestic domain by the cries of her children, the Woman begins to engage in literary activity, writing stories about “times past, the deeds of the Sages, heaven and earth, sun and moon, monsters and men, animals and plants, the discourses of birds and the discourses of palm trees, stories about people, parables and fables” (p. 297: *סיפורי הימים, ומעשי חכמים, שמים וארץ, שמש*; (וירח, תנין ואדם, חי וצומח, שיחות עופות ושיחות דקלים, משלי הבריות משלות ומשלים)). The list of topics echoes those featuring in the stories told by the hasidic rebbes, who used them as an educational device. As a young boy, Agnon not only prayed with his father in the hasidic *kloiz* in Buczacz but also visited a hasidic court, where he must have witnessed the power of the rebbe’s storytelling. He later worked with Martin Buber on collecting hasidic stories, which the two intended to publish in a multi-volume anthology. Although this monumental project never came to fruition, each of them published volumes of stories on his own,²⁸ and the stories served as sources for many of Agnon’s literary works.²⁹

Agnon (and Buber) had a special affection for the tales of Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav,³⁰ for whom, as Rivka Dvir-Goldberg, has described, the story was “a means of transmitting messages”:

Stories . . . can penetrate the consciousness of every person in any spiritual state. . . . Folk tales are well engraved in the memory of a person, and in moments of spiritual awakening the person is likely to find in them various interpretations and meanings.³¹

Furthermore, storytelling took on religious significance:

[In] Hasidism a reversal occurred in the attitude toward folktales, from an attitude of almost complete negation in the traditional world, mainly in Europe in the modern period, to a completely positive attitude in which the story is viewed as pertaining to religious activity.³²

The kind of religious activity reflected in storytelling can be seen as rivaling the time spent in studying Torah. Thus, the literary creativity in which the Woman engages, developed only once she leaves the *beit midrash*, can be seen as a religious act imbuing her with spiritual power. Her voice, no longer heard in Torah study in the *beit midrash*, reverberates in her children by means of a different sort of religious activity.

Agnon gives this short story a seemingly happy ending, though it is accompanied by irony and by pain, for the heroine’s literary creativity begins at the point where she no longer engages in Torah study in the *beit midrash*. As Esther Fuchs has written, “The ironic story will feature a happy end as a pretense that a solution to the conflict in the plot has been reached. . . . The ironic element is the pain in the laughter.”³³ The ironic ending accords with the other ironic elements in the story, such as the actions of the men, which are so divergent from the basic beliefs of Judaism. Study of Torah is one of the commandments to which men are obligated, while women are exempt; but it is the men who make a mockery of Torah study, and the Woman who is dedicated to it. Study of Torah is meant to develop fine character traits in the learners, but the men steal from the charity box and embarrass the Woman in public. Indeed, the occasion of the story itself adds a perhaps unintended ironic element. Agnon indirectly pays tribute to Shoshana Persitz as a publisher of children’s books by having the narrator praise the activities of the Woman who wrote stories for her children. However,

the Woman writes only after withdrawing from the public sphere, while Peritz herself was active in the public sphere at the time of when the story was published, as a Tel-Aviv city councilor representing the General Zionists, as a member of the education department of the Vaad Leumi, and as head supervisor of the general school system.

“What is the virtue of feminine qualities born of oppression?” asked the feminist scholar Judith Evans.³⁴ The Woman’s children themselves point to these virtues by quoting Prov. 31:29: “Many women have done well, but you surpass them all.” Her stories have contributed to their becoming fine people who not only engage in Torah study but also, unlike the yeshiva students, have positive character traits. At the beginning of the story, some of the yeshiva students denigrate the Woman by quoting the rabbinic saying, “There is no wisdom in women except at the spindle”; at its end, her children praise her for what she contributed to their home life. The heroine finds a way to make a creative and intellectual contribution to her home, one that expands the definition of Torah.

Moreover, the Woman does this by engaging in the sort of literary activity that Agnon himself pursued and valued. When he was still a boy, his father attempted, unsuccessfully, to direct his energy away from writing poetry to concentrate on Talmud study.³⁵ Agnon made a choice to channel his creative energy into literary activity rather than spend his days in the *beit midrash*. If, in his heroine’s case, the choice was forced rather than one freely made, one may nevertheless infer that Agnon saw himself on the same side of the line as the Woman. Perhaps Agnon was suggesting a literary redefinition of Torah, such as came to expression in his own work, raising the question of what sorts of literary creations are worthy of being included in the “Jewish bookshelf.” Having grown up in a hasidic environment, in which stories, and not just Torah study, were seen as instruments of education, he was surely open to expanding the traditional Jewish bookshelf to include modern literary creations. Perhaps, too, Agnon was expressing his own ambivalence towards Torah study, an activity in which he continued to engage for almost all of his life.

Agnon’s “Ḥakhmot nashim” in Dialogue with Epstein’s “Ḥakhmot nashim”

The narrator’s happiness at the end of Agnon’s story is a direct counterpoint to the disquiet expressed by Barukh Halevi Epstein in the chapter of his memoir entitled “Ḥakhmot nashim,” in which he recounted his conversations

with his learned aunt Reina Batya Berlin (1825?–1876?). Epstein was the nephew of Reina Batya's husband, R. Naftali Tzevi Yehuda Berlin (known as the "Netziv," 1817–1893), head of the famous yeshiva of Volozhin, Lithuania. Reina Batya herself, whom Epstein describes as a woman devoted to Torah study but unable to manage her household properly, was born into a family of distinguished lineage, for whom Torah study was the loftiest means of worshipping God. As the granddaughter of R. Hayyim b. Isaac Volozhiner (1749–1821), a student of the Gaon of Vilna and founder of the Etz Hayyim Yeshiva, and the daughter of R. Isaac b. Hayyim Volozhiner (d. 1849),³⁶ who succeeded his father as head of the yeshiva, it is not surprising that she, too, wished to participate in Torah study.

From a distance of forty years, Epstein relates a series of conversations he had with Reina Batya around 1875, when he was a boy of bar-mitzvah age who had come to study at the yeshiva, and she was a woman of about fifty. Epstein paints a picture of a woman who was extremely devoted to her studies.³⁷ She spent her days in the kitchen by the oven, poring over piles of books, including Mishnah and midrash, history chronicles and *mussar* (ethical literature) books.³⁸ According to Epstein, she was also angry, anguished, bitter, humiliated and depressed over her exclusion from regular Torah study and time-bound commandments. She attempted to persuade her nephew that it was the male interpretation of God's commandments that excluded women from these areas, and thus it was men, not God, who brought the shame of exclusion upon women. Epstein recalls that Reina Batya gained the upper hand in the first few arguments, but eventually ended their conversations after he presented her with both an essentialist and a sociological explanation for women's exclusion.³⁹ Basing himself upon rabbinic sources, he argued that the feminine nature itself is the cause of this exclusion, for the kind of strength needed to gain mastery in Torah is similar to that required in warfare, for which women are unsuitable.⁴⁰ In addition, he argued that the family would be disrupted if women were to dedicate themselves to the study of Torah in the same way as men, for who would take care of the children?⁴¹ After this conversation, Epstein writes, Reina Batya came to accept her fate as a heavenly decree that she must suffer in silence.

Might Reina Batya have discussed her feelings with her husband? In the circumstances typical of the time and place, she would have been physically distanced from her husband's Torah study, most of which took place in the yeshiva, where he spent most of the day and often his nighttime hours as well, for Torah learning continued around the clock. Her loneliness, as well as her

“weak nerves” (p. 1949), might have exacerbated her sense of humiliation at her exclusion from the obligation of Torah study. Perhaps, too, she was aware of the newly opened schools for girls in the big cities of Russia.⁴² Reports of these schools appeared in the Hebrew newspaper *Hamagid* in the 1860s and 1870s, and we know that this newspaper reached her home. Knowledge may also have reached her of the discussions about the status and education of women that were taking place outside the Jewish community, among Russian intellectuals and revolutionaries,⁴³ and the opening of institutions of higher education to women—developments that emphasized the inferior position of Jewish women in the male-dominated world of Torah study. There was no school for girls in Volozhin, and Reina Batya, in Epstein’s portrayal, seems to have had no community of women with whom to share her studies and her feelings.

We cannot know any of this for certain, since everything we know about Reina Batya Berlin is through Epstein’s late refraction. Eliyana Adler has pointed out the “instability, constructed nature and questionable accuracy”⁴⁴ of the description of Reina Batya, who “becomes, in essence, an opportunity to point out some flaws in the grand tradition.”⁴⁵ Yet, despite the questionable historicity of the sequence of events described in the chapter, what we can learn from their account is that Epstein felt the need, forty years on, to revisit the issues he reports as having first been raised for him in his conversations with his aunt.

Although Reina Batya would not have dared to step into her husband’s yeshiva and confined her learning to her kitchen, she caused discomfort to her nephew by expressing her feeling that she, too, belonged spiritually in the *beit midrash*. She passionately desired the obligation to study Torah along with the men. Epstein could accept a learned woman as an anomaly, but he could not accept Reina Batya’s ideology, which contradicted the traditional Jewish view of the differing roles of men and women. As he wrote about exceptional women, “If we find individual women learning Torah and keeping the time-bound commandments, this is no proof against the general principle [i.e., that women are exempt—BB], for every general principle has exceptions” (p. 1969). He supported the order of things in which most women acquired at home the knowledge they needed to instill the proper values in their children and manage their households according to Jewish law. Reina Batya, however, did not argue her case from an instrumentalist point of view; for her, the inherent equality of men and women ought to be the factor obligating both of them equally.

Epstein describes himself as expending a lot of energy in justifying the traditional exemption of women from Torah study. Perhaps his frequent encounter

with his aunt's arguments forced him to solidify his own position. There may be an additional factor. Shaul Stampfer suggests that coming to learn in the yeshiva was an adolescent rite of passage, one that separated the *yeshiva bahur* from his family and from women and inducted him into a world of males.⁴⁶ Thus, by insisting that women, too, should study Torah, Reina Batya challenged young Barukh's notion of what it meant to be a Jewish adult man at a crucial time in his life, in his first year at the yeshiva. By undermining his categorization of what men and women do, she threatened his sense of self and his view of the natural world order.⁴⁷

That is exactly what happens to the men in the *beit midrash* in Agnon's story. We know that Agnon read the volume of Epstein's memoir that includes the description of Reina Batya, because he quotes from another part of it in one of his books.⁴⁸ As we shall see, many additional themes common to both sources point to Agnon's story as alluding to and dialoguing with the chapter on Reina Batya. Agnon's reworkings of these themes convey the ambivalences apparent in his story as to the proper role of women.

First, both Reina Batya and Agnon's Woman are described as being born into good families. Epstein, at the opening of his description, relates his aunt's lineage—"daughter of the *gaon* R. Itchele of Volozhin" (p. 1949)—thus emphasizing that she was born into the intellectual elite of Lithuanian Jewry. As we have seen, Agnon, too, opens by mentioning the Woman's lineage; she is "an important Woman from a good family" (p. 294). As was the case in non-Jewish families as well, education for girls was a class privilege.⁴⁹ In many cases, a woman became learned by being born into a family that had no sons; her father fulfilled the commandment to "teach them to your children" (Deut. 11:19) by teaching his daughter,⁵⁰ notwithstanding the Sages' interpretation of the word *banim* in this verse as referring only to sons. In other cases, women absorbed knowledge by being in the proximity of learned fathers, brothers and/or learned husbands. We do not know what sort of education Reina Batya might have received, but she is depicted as having enough knowledge to be able to hold her own in a discussion of "Oral Torah" (rabbinic texts) with her nephew. Her depth of knowledge was unusual at a time when most girls were given just enough Jewish education to read Yiddish and follow the prayers in Hebrew.⁵¹ Similarly, Agnon's Woman is depicted as having the kind of family background that made possible the privilege of an education, such as could theoretically have enabled her to hold her own in a discussion with the men in the *beit midrash*.

Second, in both cases the women are compared to men. Epstein describes Reina Batya as “a pious and wise woman, modest and extraordinarily learned, almost like one of the whole men” (p. 1949: אשה כשרה וחכמה, צנועה ומלומדת). Similarly, Agnon writes of his heroine: “like a man’s was her valiance in the war of Torah; though she was a woman, she was valiant like the men” (p. 294: כאיש גבורתה במלחמתה של תורה, ואף על פי שהיא אשה עושה גבורה כאנשים). Neither Epstein nor Agnon compared his learned woman with other learned Jewish women in the past, which would have normalized them, rather than stressing how they failed to conform to societal models of femininity and evinced unacceptably masculine forms of intellectual courage and comportment.

The extraordinarily manly nature of their behavior is problematic. As noted, Epstein uses the imagery of the warlike thrust and parry of Torah discourse (מלחמתה של תורה) in his argument that it is not fitting for a woman to engage in it, for “a woman is by birth and nature . . . weak and feeble, and she cannot weaken and make herself more feeble in Torah study” (p. 1968: האשה מתולדתה היא רפה וחלושה, ולא תוכל להחליש ולרפה עצמה עוד על למוד תורה). Women who study Torah thus go against their nature. By devoting herself to her studies all day next to the oven, Reina Batya brought a manly act into the womanly sphere of her kitchen. Although she would not have dreamt of setting foot in the yeshiva, she still, according to her nephew, represented a phenomenon that went against the natural order of the world.

By having the important Woman “discuss [Talmud] with learned men” (p. 294) in the physical space of the *beit midrash*, Agnon, too, emphasized the incongruousness of the situation of learned women. As Daniel Boyarin has written, “It is . . . unthinkable for a girl to be part of the homotopic space of the Study-House. Manhood is tested and confirmed (and, I would add, constructed) every day precisely in the House of Study.”⁵² Thus, by doing the “unthinkable,” Agnon’s Woman challenged the male identity of the men.

The narrator does not tell us if the Woman continues to study Torah in her home, although some of the stories she writes are about the Sages. Care of her children and her household activities completely fill her time, and there is no longer any similarity between her activities and those of the men. If some of the men praised her at the beginning of the story for her learning, all of her children praise her at its end with the traditional praise of Proverbs for a “Woman of Valor.” The qualities that likened her to a man are no longer apparent; as she devotes herself to caring for her children, the voice of Torah

learning is transmuted into literary activity. The men reminded the Woman that even though her exceptional education may have tempted her to attempt to cross gender lines, her proper place is at home with her children and not in the *beit midrash*.⁵³

Third, both women are described feeling anger and embarrassment at their situation. For Reina Batya Berlin, according to her nephew, this was an ongoing state:

More than once I heard her complain and bemoan in sorrow and pain, with unpleasant countenance and a bitter soul, the bitter fate and narrow portion of a woman in this life. . . . Even more than this, she was disturbed and pained by the desecration of women's honor and by their lowly position, inasmuch as it was forbidden to teach them Torah.

She considered herself to be among the “wretched and shamed” (p. 1950: עלוּבוֹת וּנְכַלְמוֹת), and she blamed the men for this situation. After her nephew rejected the view of an Italian rabbi who wrote that one should praise learned women, she said to him, “You are resentful (רע עין) like all the men” (p. 1963). This same motivation of resentment is attributed at the beginning of Agnon's story to the men who do not accept the Woman's presence.

In Agnon's story, the feelings of shame arise only when the men in the *beit midrash* embarrass the learned Woman. “She was upset and enraged that they had embarrassed her” (p. 295: הֵייתָה כּוֹעֶסֶת וְרוֹעֶמֶת שֶׁהִכְלִימוּ אֶת פְּנֵיהָ). These feelings, triggered by the actions of the men, were then focused on her maternal ancestors for not having written anything authoritative: “She would rage sometimes against the denizens of the *beit midrash* and sometimes against the women” (*ibid.*: פְּעָמִים מֵתְרַעֶמֶת עַל חֹבְשֵׁי בֵּית הַמְדָּרֶשׁ וּפְעָמִים עַל הַנְּשִׁים). What Reina Batya felt every day in her very being emerges in Agnon's story only after the Woman has left the *beit midrash*. However, by having the Woman blame her maternal ancestors for not writing anything of note, Agnon introduces an additional nuance into the factors influencing women's exclusion from the discourse of Torah study.⁵⁴

Fourth, in both cases a list of important women serves to bolster the claim of the legitimacy of Torah study for women. Epstein recounts an argument in which Reina Batya quoted the view attributed in the Talmud to Hillel that the Torah may be taught to anyone, as opposed to that of Shammai, who said that it should be taught only to the wise, the humble and the worthy.

Reina Batya sought to strengthen her argument by citing “the names of many learned women, such as Beruriah, the wife of Rabbi Meir, Yalta, the wife of Rav Nahman, . . ., the mother of Baal Hasma and the sister of Rabbi Isaiah Berlin . . .” (p. 1953). Her nephew, attempting to appease her anger, added some more exceptional women to those she mentioned: “And furthermore I remember that I added to her knowledge and reckoning of the names of wise women an additional number of women such as these” (p. 1955). A list of nineteen important women follows, several of them added by Epstein in retrospect; some were known for their learning and some for their activities in other spheres, such as publishing. Epstein remembers that his aunt was pleased upon hearing his list. However, her feelings of satisfaction were fleeting, since the existence of exceptional women did not belie the shameful fact that women as a group were excluded from the obligation to study Torah.

Similarly, the list of learned women in Agnon’s story serves the Woman only as a temporary comfort. The narrator tells us that, “She saw all of the important women that God had set down, from [the exile in] Egypt until today” (p. 296: ראתה כל אותם נשים גדולות ששתלן הקדוש ברוך הוא ממצרים ועד הנה). This list comprises thirteen important women in Jewish history, from the Bible through the Middle Ages. Agnon’s heroine notes that “close to our own generation there were important women, learned in Torah, in whose names the books cite points of halakhah” (pp. 296–297: ואף סמוך לדורנו נמצאו נשים גדולות בעלות תורה שהספרים מביאים הלכה מפיהן כיוון שהתחילה מתגאה בא). This list makes her proud, until “the women of her generation came and stood before her” (p. 297: דורה ועמד לפניה), reminding her that women’s words of Torah have no authority and causing her once again to fall into despair.

In Agnon’s story, the conversation between Reina Batya and young Barukh becomes an internal dialogue. In neither case does the list serve as a lasting source of comfort; ultimately, it only exacerbates the women’s feelings of shame.

Fifth, household management is an issue in both stories. Epstein argues that “The characteristics and temperament of woman destine her to remain at home and take care of the needs of her home and raise her children” (p. 1969). If Torah study defines manhood, then motherhood and household management define womanhood. We can only speculate as to whether Reina Batya’s nervousness and weakness, as Epstein describes them, were a result of her frustration at the traditional expectations of her role, and whether these feelings contributed to her ineptness at running her home. However, Epstein does

make an explicit connection between a woman's devotion to learning and her inability to perform household tasks. He recalls that once, when he was visiting Reina Batya's home with a friend, she contended to them that some sages held that a man is obligated to teach his daughter Torah. After they left the house, Epstein told his friend that the sage Ben Azzai had never married "because he thought that a woman was obligated to study Torah, in which case he would have a learned wife, which was not good, and he therefore decided that it is better not to take a wife at all" (p. 1965). Young Barukh seems to have seen a proof of this in his learned but inept aunt.

Epstein was pained as a boy that his aunt's failings as a housewife had implications for his uncle's welfare. In the following chapter, entitled "Ḥayyei miskenut" (A life of poverty), he describes the household's frugal way of life, both because of R. Berlin's small salary and because of his wife's inability to run a proper home. He relates that R. Berlin once arrived home after a very busy morning, during which he had consumed nothing but a piece of cake and a cup of tea. After eating lunch, which consisted of two thin slices of bread and some vegetables in milk, R. Berlin walked up and down the room as though he wanted more food. His eyes lit on a small amount of butter on another table, and he asked his wife if he could have it. She hesitated and then responded: "Of course you can, but shouldn't we leave it for our daughter?" Looking back, Epstein regrets that he let this incident pass in silence, explaining that he was only a child then and so didn't make a fuss about household members "taking care to guard this holy body" (p. 1979). His worshipful attitude toward his uncle may have colored the way he presented his aunt. This seemingly trivial incident prefaces a description of his own sister Batya Mirel, who became R. Berlin's second wife after Reina Batya's death and devoted all her energies to taking care of her husband (p. 1980).

Unlike Reina Batya, Agnon's Woman is a competent manager of her home. At first, when she is in the *beit midrash*, we know nothing about her household skills. At the end of the story, however, she is "busy with household affairs, cooking and baking, crocheting socks and mending clothes and entertaining visitors and showing a pleasant face to her husband" (p. 297: הייתה אותה אישה עסוקה בטרדיי (בית לבשל ולאפות לסרוג פוזמק ולתקן מלבוש ולקבל אורחים ולהראות פנים יפות לבעלה). Is Agnon implying that if Reina Batya had properly understood her role, she, too, could have had a "happy" ending? Or does he wish, rather, to indicate that intellectualism and running a proper home need not be mutually exclusive?

Or is Agnon perhaps hinting that in posing Torah study as the ultimate value, and so buying into the values of the men rather than finding her own

creative niche, Reina Batya was making a mistake? Perchance, influenced by his hasidic background, Agnon could find value in story-telling, while Reina Batya Berlin, influenced by her scholarly Lithuanian surroundings, found value only in Torah study. In this light, Agnon's negotiation with Epstein's work becomes part of the modern Jewish conversation about the value of different kinds of Jewish literary creativity.

The final element common to Reina Batya and Agnon's heroine is the silencing of both women by men, and their pious justification of their fate. Following his long speech rationalizing women's exemption from Torah study, Epstein relates his aunt's response:

After many thoughts and deep ones, she said to me: "What can be done? Yes, yes, thus it is: Turn to the right, turn to the left; in the end it is for us miserable and disgraced women to bow our heads beneath our evil fortune. Righteous are You, God, in all that has been decreed concerning us. Your Torah is certainly true and Your laws are a deep abyss; there is no speech nor are there words. Blessed are You who created me according to Your will." Afterwards she turned to me and said, "Just as everything has an end and a limit, so let there come an end and a limit to this painful matter." From that time on, she never again spoke on this subject. (p. 1976).

Whether or not this scene actually occurred as Epstein describes it,⁵⁵ by presenting it in this way he may be suggesting that silence is the only way of dealing with the suffering of women in Jewish tradition.

Elsewhere, Epstein describes an incident in which Reina Batya expressed her humiliation at being obliged to answer "amen" to the daily blessing in which men thank God "who has not made me a woman," especially when it is said by a vulgar man of inferior lineage.⁵⁶ In a note, Epstein remarks:

The Tur [R. Jacob b. Asher, author of the halakhic compendium *Arba'ah turim*] wrote in *Orah hayim* §46: "And the women were accustomed to saying [as a parallel daily blessing], 'who has made me in accordance with His will'; perhaps it is as if they are justifying the harsh decree [of their status—BB]." (p. 1961)⁵⁷

According to her nephew, that is exactly what Reina Batya did.

In Agnon's story, the important Woman justifies her fate in similar terms:

She did not speak insolently towards Heaven, but not only that, she also justified the Divine judgment, spread out her hands and pronounced, “Blessed is He who has made me in accordance with His will.” (pp. 295–296)

שלא הטיחה דברים כלפי מעלה ולא עוד אלא שהצדיקה עליה את הדין, פשטה ידיה
ואמרה ברוך שעשאני כרצונו

Both learned and pious, Reina Batya and the fictional Woman are in a bind. Despite their anger and humiliation, they maintain their silence, moved by their piety to justify their fate as part of the divine order of the universe. They cannot believe that God is responsible for their inferior position, and so they hold men and their interpretations responsible, in the case of Reina Batya, or men as well as their own maternal ancestors, in the case of the Woman. However, recognition that God is ultimately responsible for the way the world is run grows upon them. At that point, their faith becomes the primary value, superseding the public expression of their feelings of injustice at their inferior status.

Both Epstein and Agnon record women’s pain at being excluded from what they perceive to be the center of Jewish life. Despite that exclusion, however, Reina Batya was not the only woman in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe, or even in her own immediate surrounding, to have some knowledge of Torah.⁵⁸ We know of at least one other learned woman in Reina Batya’s extended family—her first cousin Rivka Hina, described in a memoir by her grandson Yehezkel Kotik (1847–1921).⁵⁹ Rivka Hina’s mother, Esther, was the sister of R. Itchele, Reina Batya’s father. Like Reina Batya, she was a granddaughter of R. Hayim of Volozhin and the wife of a respected scholar, R. Eliezer Halevi of Grodno (d. 1853).

Rivka Hina’s experience was very different from that of Reina Batya, for her husband, Reb Leizer, studied at home. He owned a lot of books, inherited from his father Yehezkel and his father-in-law Hillel Fried, and they filled up all the rooms of the house. R. Leizer, who was a rabbinic judge (a *dayan*), would sequester himself in his study, and his wife would pass the queries of the townswomen to him through the door. She became proficient in handling questions about *kashrut*, and usually it was she who decided whether or not a fowl with some blemish must be discarded on ritual grounds:

Her husband listened to her evaluations and queried her, and finally granted her the license [*semikhah* in the original Yiddish] to handle the easier kinds

of questions. She also knew well how to study a page of Talmud, for which people greatly respected her and even considered her a true scholar.⁶⁰

Reb Leizer was not only learned but also very pious. He took a long time to say his prayers and therefore was not always available to those who wanted to speak with him. His wife filled in for him on these occasions. Kotik relates:

His house was constantly filled with the hubbub of rabbis and *lomedim*. The scholars of Grodno also liked to discuss passages from the Torah with the rebbetzin, as it wasn't always easy to get to Leizer himself. She had a keen, scholarly mind, and only when she came up against a really tricky question would she consult her husband, when no one was around.⁶¹

Kotik does not mention anyone looking askance at his grandmother's seemingly masculine role. She was part of the Torah activity in her house, but her Torah study did not become an ideology, as it did for her cousin Reina Batya, and thus she could be seen as one of the exceptional women whose Torah study was valued, as evidenced by the men who sought her out. There was no separation in her life between the public and private spheres, and the public space entered her home. Perhaps, too, she was protected from criticism because of her family connections. In addition, she enabled her husband to maintain his intensive Torah study by acting as a filter for the many people who might have distracted him.⁶² This gave her a lot of power, as the gatekeeper who decided whom to allow into her husband's study. She also wielded a certain amount of authority, in that she decided on her own which questions (about the fowl) she could answer and which were difficult and must involve intruding upon her husband's study in order to get an answer.

Kotik's memoir was widely read,⁶³ and we may assume that Agnon, given his interest in portraying east European Jewish life, would have found the book a valuable resource. Along with Reina Batya, Rivka Hina or women similar to her may very well also have been in the background to his description of the learned Woman at the beginning of the story.

Agnon's Negotiation with Esther's Frustration

Sheila Jelen has asked, "To what extent . . . is it appropriate to read [Dvora] Baron's work as an account of her life 'exactly as [it] happened,' and to what extent is it dangerous and blinding to read her work for hints of her biography?"⁶⁴ The same question can be asked of many authors whose works seem to incorporate biographical elements. For example, Claire Bloom, Philip Roth's wife of eighteen years, wrote in a memoir that events in Roth's life inspired many of his works: His first marriage inspired *My Life as a Man*; his relationship with his former companion inspired *The Professor of Desire*; and so on.⁶⁵ However, Roth's novel *Exit Ghost* raises the question of whether any reader has the right to draw an author's personal biography into a discussion of his novels, and responds by implying that such a discussion cannot contribute to an understanding of works of literature. Those who search for biographical events in a work of fiction are viewed as "cultural journalists" bent on destroying the author's reputation.⁶⁶

Nevertheless, Meshullam Tuchner has argued for the centrality of Agnon's biography in his works.⁶⁷ Without losing sight of the above caveat, we may note that the issue at the heart of "Ḥakhmot nashim" is one that concerned Agnon throughout his marriage. His highly educated wife Esther, of the distinguished Marx family, would have liked a career outside the home, but Agnon thought her function in life was to take care of him and their children. In his letters to her, published in *Estherlein yekirati*,⁶⁸ as well as in their daughter Emunah Yaron's memoir *Perakim miḥayai*,⁶⁹ we learn of Esther's frustration at her lack of independence, and of Agnon's exasperation at her frustration. Dan Laor, Agnon's biographer, also mentions the tension in their relationship caused by Agnon's attitude toward Esther's ambitions.⁷⁰

Would he have liked his educated wife to be like Rivka Hina, a competent gate-keeper, rather than like Reina Batya?

The views of the two groups of men at the beginning of Agnon's story, who are divided as to the value of the Woman's learning, may well reflect the ambivalences within an individual modern Jewish man toward the reality of learned women. On the one hand, a learned woman who dedicates herself to Torah study is deserving of admiration; on the other hand, she is a potential threat to the fulfillment of male needs, sows confusion as to the proper role of each gender, and upsets the traditional balance of power between the genders in the

family and society. Torah study in Agnon's "Ḥakhmot nashim" can be seen as a metaphor for activities of women outside the home that demand dedication on their part and make them independent. Agnon honored Shoshana Persitz's public activities with a story, but he wanted his own wife to devote herself to taking care of him, his children and their home. In the end, we are left with a puzzle. As Avinoam Barshai has pointed out, "Agnon is an author who purposefully avoids clear statements and refrains from sending clear messages to his readers. . . . His words . . . include a statement and its opposite in the same sentence."⁷¹

Both Epstein's memoir and Agnon's story reflect the beginnings of change in traditional definitions of men as those who engage in Torah study and of women as those who mother and nurture. Women are now seen not only as facilitators of Jewish scholarship, gaining merit for "bringing their sons to schools and sending their husbands to study Oral Torah and waiting patiently until they return" (BT *Berakhot* 17a), but also as performers, participating in the same acts of literacy as the men.⁷² The implications of this transformation for the family and society are being worked out in our time, shaping "an alternative vision of the future."⁷³ The two "Ḥakhmot nashim" reflect the discomfort some felt with this endeavor.

Notes:

I would like to thank my colleagues, Dr. Tova Hartman, for introducing me to Agnon's story "Ḥakhmot nashim" and sharing with me her interpretation of it, and Dr. Yael Levine, for discussing with me various points in the story and bringing to my attention a number of references that I have used. They are both working on different aspects of the story than those discussed in this article. Tova Hartman is analyzing "Ḥakhmot nashim" in the context of the Beruriah stories, while Yael Levine is focusing on the rabbinic sources on which "Ḥakhmot nashim" is based. I would also like to thank Adv. Susan Weiss for her feedback on an earlier version of this article. I am grateful to my husband, Prof. Gershon Bacon, and daughters Dr. Naomi Bacon Shnoor and Estee Bacon for their helpful comments. Additional thanks go to the editors of this volume, Dr. Wendy Zierler and Deborah Greniman, for their insightful remarks.

1. S.Y. Agnon, "Ḥakhmot nashim," in *Me'atzmi el 'atzmi*, ed. Emunah Yaron (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1976), pp. 294–298. This story has not yet been translated into English, and the translations from it are my own.

The title of the story, like that of the chapter from Barukh Epstein's *Mekor Barukh* discussed herein, is taken from Prov. 14:1: חכמות נשים בנתה ביתה: , rendered in many

English Bible translations (such as NJPS) as “The wisest of women builds her house,” and in other versions as “The wisdom of women builds her house.” The use of the expression in the story’s plot and in the works to which Agnon alludes make the latter translation preferable for our purposes.

2. Sarah Friedland ben Arza (ed.), *Bat-Mitzva: An Anthology* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Matan [Makhon Torah Lenashim], 2002), pp. 388–392. According to the editor, the story was included in this collection so as to “stir discussion about the exclusion of women from Torah study in the past” (personal communication).

3. On Agnon’s long-standing friendship with Shoshana Persitz, which continued through the end of her life, see Dan Laor, *S.Y. Agnon: A Biography* (Hebrew; Tel-Aviv: Schocken, 1998), *passim*. Agnon noted her seventieth birthday in 1963 by publishing stories in *Ha’aretz* about prayer and the *Mahzor*, which were later republished in his collection *Book, Writer and Story (Sefer sofer vesippur)*; Tel-Aviv: Schocken, 1978).

Persitz was educated in Russia and then in France, where she received a master’s degree in literature. She founded the *Omanut* publishing house, which published children’s books, Hebrew translations of European novels, and original Hebrew fiction and non-fiction. After her arrival in Israel from Germany as a widow with four children, she continued her publishing and political activities. She served on the Tel Aviv city council and directed its education department from 1926 until 1935, when she became head supervisor of the general school system. She represented the General Zionists in the education department of the Vaad Leumi; headed the General Zionist Women’s Organization (1948–1954); represented the General Zionists in the Knesset (1949–1961); and chaired the Knesset Education Committee. She died a year after receiving the Israel Prize and was survived by her four children: Akiva Persitz, Shulamith Schocken, Beruriah Rita Persitz-Sirkin and Yemina Mila.

On Persitz’s life see Yehudit Harrari, *A Woman and Mother in Israel: From Biblical Times to the Tenth Anniversary of the State of Israel* (Hebrew; Tel-Aviv: Masada, 1959), pp. 398–400, 447–448; and Asher Herman, “Shoshana Persitz,” *Al Mah*, 13 (2004), pp. 37–39. A scholarly biography remains to be written. What Paula Hyman has written of Puah Rakovsky may also be said of her: “[She] certainly had an impact on her own time, and it was recognized by her contemporaries. Yet she has been forgotten, I would argue, because women’s activity in general . . . did not matter to historians.” Paula Hyman, “Discovering Puah Rakovsky,” *Nashim*, 7 (2004), p. 112.

4. Yosef Klausner, “On Shoshana Persitz upon Her 50th Birthday,” *Hadoar*, 87 (May 21, 1943), p. 478 (Hebrew).

5. Barukh Halevi Epstein, *Mekor Barukh* (Vilna, 1928). For an analysis of the chapter “Ḥakhmot nashim” see Don Seeman, “The Silence of Reina Batya: Torah, Suffering and Rabbi Barukh Epstein’s ‘Wisdom of Women,’” *The Torah U’Madda Journal*, 6 (1996), pp. 91–128; and idem and Rebecca Kobrin, “Like One of the Whole Men:

Learning, Gender and Autobiography in R. Barukh Epstein's *Mekor Barukh*," *Nashim*, 2 (1999), pp. 52–94. For a critique of the accuracy of Epstein's citations see Dan Rabinowitz, "Reina Batya and Other Learned Women: A Reevaluation of Rabbi Barukh Halevi Epstein's Sources," *Tradition*, 35/1 (2001), pp. 55–69, and the response by Yael Levine Katz, "Communications," *Tradition*, 35/3 (2001), pp. 89–93. For an analysis of *Mekor Barukh* see Navah Bar-Lev, "The Spiritual and Social World of Students in the Lithuanian Yeshivas in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century and the Beginning of the Twentieth Century as Reflected in the Memoir Literature" (Hebrew; M.A. Thesis, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1997). For a discussion of Agnon's use of literary sources see Shmuel Werses, *The Plain Meaning of Agnon's Works* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2000), pp. 329–333.

6. Meshulam Tuchner has argued that the "visible and hidden autobiographical aspects in the works of Agnon are immeasurably wide-ranging in their dimensions." Idem, "Identifying Agnon's Autobiographical Self," in Avinoam Barshai (ed.), *S.Y. Agnon in Hebrew Literary Criticism* (Hebrew; Tel-Aviv: Open University Press, 1991), I, pp. 305–314.

7. Arnold J. Band, "Negotiating Jewish History: The Author, His Code and His Reader," in David Patterson and Glenda Abramson (eds.), *Tradition and Trauma* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), p. 31.

8. There is a real sixteenth-century book by that name, about Jewish law and ethics for women, written by an Italian rabbi. See Israel Zinberg, *History of Jewish Literature* (Hebrew; Tel-Aviv: Sifriyat Poalim, 1958), IV, p. 108.

9. Her complaints against "our foremothers" (*imoteinu*) echo Virginia Woolf's observations about the want of female precursors in *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1929; republished with a foreword by Mary Gordon, 1981), pp. 21–22 and 45.

10. I would like to thank Prof. Hillel Weiss of Bar-Ilan University for allowing me access to his data-base on Agnon's works.

11. For a survey of this book's appearance in Agnon's works, see Yael Levine Katz, "The *Tze'ena ure'ena* in the Writings of S.Y. Agnon," *Bitzaron*, 9 (1999), pp. 17–22 (Hebrew).

12. Agnon, *Book, Writer and Story* (above, note 3), p. 363.

13. Idem, *The Beams of Our House* (*Korot beiteinu*; Tel-Aviv: Schocken, 1994), p. 127.

14. Rashi's account of the sad end of Beruriah, R. Meir's scholarly wife (BT *Avodah zarah* 18b and Rashi *ad loc.*), is a fine example of the implications of male discomfort with women's Torah study. For a review of some of the scholarship on this topic see my article, "How Shall We Tell the Story of Beruriah's End?" *Nashim*, 5 (2002), pp. 234–239, and the expanded Hebrew version in Margalit Shilo (ed.), *To Be a Jewish Woman* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Urim, 2003), pp. 121–130. Rachel Adler argues that

the Beruriah stories address an unlikely prospect for the Sages: “What if there were a woman who was just like me?” Agnon’s story answers that question by not allowing his heroine to continue to be just like a man. See Rachel Adler, “The Virgin in the Brothel and Other Anomalies: Character and Context in the Legend of Beruriah,” *Tikkun*, 3/6 (1988), p. 29.

15. Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), p. 144.

16. For a discussion of the maskilic criticism Jewish men’s lack of productivity see Mordechai Levin, *Social and Economic Values in the Ideology of the Haskalah Period* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Bialik, 1975). On this issue in the context of maskilic critiques of gender role reversal see Iris Parush, *Reading Jewish Women* (English transl. by Saadya Sternberg; Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press–University Press of New England, 2004), pp. 43–46.

17. Gershon Shaked, “S.Y. Agnon, Revolutionary Traditionalist,” in Emunah Yaron, Rafael Weiser, Dan Laor and Reuven Mirkin (eds.), *Kovetz Agnon* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1994), pp. 316–317.

18. Gershon Shaked, *S.Y. Agnon: A Writer with a Thousand Faces* (Hebrew; Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1989), p. 68.

19. S.Y. Agnon, “A Simple Story” (Sippur pashut), in *Al kappot haman ‘ul* (Tel-Aviv: Schocken, 1967), p. 67.

20. Esther Fuchs, *The Art of Ingenuousness: Irony in Agnon’s Works* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Tel-Aviv University, 1995), p. 72.

21. S.Y. Agnon, *A City and the Fullness Thereof (Ir umelo ‘ah)* (Tel-Aviv, Schocken, 1973), p. 39.

22. Quoted in Avraham Holtz, *Sights and Sources* (Hebrew; Tel-Aviv: Schocken, 1995), p. 8.

23. Rachel Elior, “‘Present but Absent,’ ‘Still Life’ and ‘A Pretty Maiden Who Has No Eyes’: On the Presence and Absence of Women in the Hebrew Language, in Jewish Culture and in Israeli Life,” in Rachel Livneh-Freudenthal and Elhanan Reiner (eds.), *Streams in the Sea: Jubilee Volume for Felix Posen* (Hebrew; Tel-Aviv: Alma College, 2001), p. 199.

24. A long list of virtuous women appears in Christine de Pizan’s *Book of the City of Ladies*, written in 1405. Gerda Lerner notes that the validity of the list, which includes mythological as well as historical figures, is not important: “What matters is the strong argument for women’s intellectual quality and the recognition that a reinterpretation of past mythology and history might yield a Women’s History from which succeeding generations might draw inspiration and strength.” Such lists continued to be compiled for the next six hundred years. See Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 194.

25. My thanks to Tova Hartman for bringing this point to my attention.

26. An example of such a book is Avraham Ettinga, *Sefer imrei tzaddikim* (Lwow, 192?). My thanks to Yael Levine for bringing this point to my attention.

27. Elior, "Present but Absent" (above, note 23), p. 211.

28. On this endeavor see Dan Laor, "Agnon and Buber: The Story of a Friendship, or: The Rise and Fall of the 'Corpus Hasidicum,'" in Paul Mendes-Flohr (ed.), *Martin Buber: A Contemporary Perspective* (Jerusalem–Syracuse, NY: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities–Syracuse University Press, 2002), pp. 48–86.

29. For examples of this influence see Gedalya Nigal, *S.Y. Agnon and His Hasidic Sources* (Hebrew; Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1983).

30. On the influence of Rabbi Nahman's stories on Agnon's writings, see Rivka Horwitz, "The One Illuminates the Other: S.Y. Agnon and Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav," in Benjamin Ish-Shalom (ed.), *Darkhei Shalom: Studies in Jewish Thought Presented to Shalom Rosenberg* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Beit Morasha, 2007), pp. 153–167. On the differences between the two types of stories, see Eliezer Schweid, "Between Agnon and the Bratzlaver Rebbe," in Barshai, *Agnon in Hebrew Literary Criticism* (above, note 6).

31. Rivka Dvir-Goldberg, *The Tzaddik and the Palace of the Leviathan: A Study of Stories Told by Hasidic Rebbes* (Hebrew; Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2003), p. 14.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

33. Fuchs, *Art of Ingenuousness* (above, note 20), p. 19.

34. Judith Evans, *Feminist Theory Today: An Introduction to Second Wave Feminism* (London: Sage Publications, 1995), p. 19.

35. S.Y. Agnon, "The Doctor and the Rabbi" ("Bein doctor lerav"), in *Me'atzmi el 'atzmi* (above, note 1), p. 45.

36. There were stories about the unusual learning and wisdom of R. Haim Volozhiner's mother, the daughter of the learned Rabbi of Piesk. She is purported to have engaged in community affairs and in discussions with learned men, to the chagrin of the rabbi of Volozhin, R. Aryeh Leib Ginsburg. See Yehuda Leib Hakohen Fishman, *Sarei hame'ah* (Jerusalem: Rav Kook Institute, 1943), II, pp. 113–116. Although these stories appear to have no historical basis, they do point to the existence of a genre of stories about exceptional learned women.

37. According to Epstein, *shakdanut*, diligence, was the trait R. Berlin most admired in a yeshiva student, and it indeed characterized R. Berlin himself; see *Mekor Barukh*, p. 1678. However, we do not know how he may have viewed his own wife's diligence in Torah study.

38. Epstein doesn't mention any volumes of the Talmud on her table, although he describes her as adducing talmudic material.

39. In our own time, R. Mordechai Breuer has argued that women can never be equal to men in the obligation of Torah study, and that their study is not rewarded like men's.

His argument is essentialist rather than sociological. Since the purpose of Torah study is to tame the animal nature of the male, women should view this state of affairs as a compliment to their feminine nature. They have no need to be tamed and therefore need not be obligated to study Torah. See Mordechai Breuer, "Battles Destined to be Lost," *Masechet*, 3 (2005), p. 161.

40. In describing the effort exerted by his uncle in Torah study, Epstein uses this same imagery of warfare (*Mekor Barukh*, p. 1678).

41. Not only male Torah scholars held this view; many *maskilim* thought women should acquire some education and then devote themselves fully to their homes. See Shmuel Feiner, "The Modern Jewish Woman: A Test-Case in the Relationship between Haskalah and Modernity," *Zion*, 58/4 (1993), pp. 453–500 (Hebrew).

42. Margalit Shilo, *Women's Voices in Jerusalem* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Dinur Center, 2004), p. 17. See also Eliyana R. Adler, "Women's Education in the Pages of the Russian Jewish Press," *Polin*, 18 (2005), pp. 121–132.

43. See Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism and Bolshevism, 1860–1930* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

44. My thanks to Eliyana R. Adler for sharing with me the manuscript of her article in preparation, "Reading Rayna Batya: The Rebellious Rebbetzin as Self-Reflection" (forthcoming in *Nashim*, no. 16 [Fall 2008]).

45. *Ibid.*

46. Shaul Stampfer, *The Lithuanian Yeshiva* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 1995), pp. 142–144.

47. For a discussion of learned women in general as a threat, see Sara Delamont, *Knowledgeable Women: Structuralism and the Reproduction of Elites* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 20.

48. Agnon, *Book, Writer and Story* (above, note 3), p. 400. In the section of *Mekor Barukh* to which Agnon refers, Epstein describes his uncle's disappointment one Friday afternoon when the newspapers usually delivered then failed to appear.

49. Lerner, *Creation of Feminist Consciousness* (above, note 24), p. 22.

50. For descriptions of learned women throughout Jewish history, see Shoshana Pantel Zolty, *And All Your Children Shall Be Learned: Women and the Study of Torah in Jewish Law and History* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1993).

51. Shaul Stampfer, "Gender Differentiation and Education of the Jewish Woman in Nineteenth-Century Eastern Europe," *Polin*, 7 (1992), pp. 63–67.

52. Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct* (above, note 15), p. 154.

53. Fear of crossing gender lines is omnipresent, as witnessed by Tamar El-Or in her anthropological study of women's learning in the modern Orthodox community in Israel. To a student who expressed dissatisfaction with the limits upon women's participation in religious life, a teacher in the Midrashah at Bar-Ilan University responded:

“Whoever wants to do like a man—her end is to be frustrated.” See Tamar El-Or, *Next Year I Will Know More* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002), p. 283.

54. The phenomenon of blaming women, and not just the societal conditions in which they lived, for their lack of cultural productivity may be observed in the second part of the twentieth century, too. See Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (New York: Norton, 1986).

55. Adler, “Reading Raya Batya” (above, note 44).

56. We have evidence of at least two other nineteenth-century women who expressed resentment about the blessing “who has not made me a woman.” The first instance is Sonia (Sarah) Diskin, second wife of the renowned R. Yehoshua Yehuda Leib Diskin (1818–1898), whose husband tried to appease her. See Joseph Tabory, “The Benedictions of Self-Identity and the Changing Status of Women and Orthodoxy,” in *Kenishta: Studies on the Synagogue* (Hebrew; Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 2001), pp. 130–131. The second is Bulisa Angel, the best student in the 1878 graduating class of the Evelina de Rothschild girls’ school in Jerusalem. In the course of a public examination in the presence of the Sephardi chief rabbi and other notables, she expressed her envy of men who study Torah, and her sorrow at not being allowed to study. She said, “Because of her lowly state, the woman sadly blesses ‘Who has made me in accordance with His will.’” See Margalit Shilo, “Girls’ Education as a Means of Shaping a New Woman and a New Society: The Case of the Evelina de Rothschild School, 1854–1914,” in Margalit Shilo, Ruth Kark and Galit Hasan-Rokem (eds.), *The New Hebrew Women* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2001), p. 229.

57. For the background of this blessing, see Tabory, “Benedictions” (above, note 57), pp. 107–138.

58. See Adler, “Reading Rayna Batya” (above, note 45), note 47.

59. David Assaf, *Journey to a Nineteenth-Century Shtetl: The Memoirs of Yekhezkel Kotik* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2002), p. 252.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 252. At a time when there were no political feminist implications to the term, Kotik could use the word *semikhah* to describe the license conferred by his grandfather upon his grandmother to answer certain halakhic questions, a nuance lost in the English translation. Moreover, in the Yiddish, Kotik uses the word *lamdan*, in the masculine form, to describe his grandmother. David Assaf’s Hebrew edition of the memoir renders this as *lamdanit*, in the Hebrew feminine, while the English edition renders it as “scholar.” What is lost in both versions is how Kotik fit his grandmother’s learning into the male categories with which he was familiar.

61. *Ibid.*, pp. 252–253.

62. In European culture, a smoothly run household was regarded as an important factor in enabling a scholar to devote his time to learning. In medieval Europe, for example, a woman’s potential efficiency in managing the household of her scholarly

husband and being able to filter out distractions was a factor in choosing a wife. See Gad Algazi, "For This Boy I Prayed: Konrad Pellikan and the Making of Scholarly Families in Northern Europe," *Historia*, 14 (2004), pp. 39–40 (Hebrew). I am grateful to Dr. Elisheva Baumgarten for this reference.

63. For a description of the reception of Kotik's memoirs, see Assaf, *Journey* (above, note 60), pp. 37–58. The memoirs were widely reviewed in the press after their publication in Yiddish in 1912.

64. Sheila E. Jelen, *Intimations of Difference* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2007), p. xxiii. Jelen reads Baron's fiction "as a literary biography, not a life autobiography" (*ibid.*, p. xxvi).

65. Claire Bloom, *Leaving a Doll's House* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1996), pp. 145, 167–69, 178, 183, 187, 191.

66. Philip Roth, *Exit Ghost* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007), particularly pp. 47, 182–3, 184, 196, 207, 275. My thanks to Stanley Dalnekoff for bringing this book to my attention.

67. Tuchner, "Identifying Agnon's Autobiographical Self" (above, note 6).

68. S.Y. Agnon, *Estherlein yekirati* (Tel-Aviv: Schocken, 1983). See pp. 75, 81, 108, 112, 117, 262.

69. Emunah Yaron, *Chapters from My Life* (Hebrew; Tel-Aviv: Schocken, 2005). See pp. 17, 36, 71, 80, 88.

70. Laor, *S.Y. Agnon* (above, note 3), pp. 341, 354.

71. Avinoam Barshai, Introduction, in *idem*, *Agnon in Hebrew Literary Criticism* (above, note 6), p. 69.

72. For a discussion of the cultural function of these gender roles in traditional Ashkenazi society, see Moshe Rosman, "A Prolegomenon to the Study of Jewish Cultural History," *Jewish Studies Internet Journal*, 1 (2002), pp. 124–125.

73. Lerner, *Creation of Feminist Consciousness* (above, note 24), p. 274.