Women in Solidarity with Women in Talmudic Literature

Dr. Alyssa Gray
Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
(All translations by Alyssa Gray unless otherwise noted)

B. Ketubot 72a

Rav Kahana said: “The one who imposes a vow on his wife that she should neither borrow nor lend a sieve, strainer, millstones, or an oven—he must divorce her and pay her marriage settlement, because he has caused her to have a bad name among her neighbors.” It was also taught: The one who imposes a vow on his wife that she should neither borrow nor lend a sieve, strainer, millstones, or oven—he must divorce her and pay her marriage settlement, because he has caused her to have a bad name among her neighbors. And similarly, she who vowed to neither borrow nor lend a sieve, strainer, millstones, or oven, or not to weave nice garments for his children—she should be divorced without her marriage settlement, because she has caused him to have a bad name among his neighbors.

B. Nedarim 21b-22a

There was a certain woman who imposed a vow on her daughter. She came before Rabbi Yohanan. He said to her, “Had you known that your neighbors would say about your daughter: ‘Were it not for the fact that her mother saw something unseemly in her, she wouldn’t have imposed a vow on her for nothing’—would you have imposed the vow?” She said, “No,” and he released her [from her vow].

He gave her (her) writ of divorce, [then] took it from her and cast it into the sea or a river: If at a later point he said to her, “It had been a blank sheet or a cancelled document”—he lacks the power to invalidate her [i.e., prevent her from remarrying]. R. Bun bar Hiyyah asked R. Ze’ira: “If he isn’t the one who can invalidate her, then who can?” [R. Ze’ira] said to him: “Since she was legally presumed to be a divorcée in the presence of two [witnesses], he lacks the power to invalidate her.”

He gave her (her) writ of divorce, and it was found to be invalid: They compel him to give her another. The matter came before the Rabbis, who declared [the new writ of divorce] valid [despite the fact that the husband gave it under compulsion]. But wasn’t it said: “He lacks the power to invalidate her”? [So why wasn’t the husband compelled to give her a new writ of divorce in the first case?] There [in the first case], there was no proven flaw [in the writ of divorce]; here, there is a proven flaw [in the writ of divorce].

This [that if the wife is legally presumed to be a divorcée we are concerned about the status of the writ of divorce] is like the case of Hinena the son of Rabbi Asi, who was from Mesan. He threw a writ of divorce to his wife, saying to her, “Here is your writ of divorce.” She screamed and her neighbors came. He snatched it from her, and gave her a blank sheet. The matter came before the rabbis, who were concerned [on account of the writ of divorce he had given her initially]. But didn’t R. Yasa say in the name of R. Yohanan: “If the rumor [that a woman had been divorced by her husband] was investigated and found to come from women or minors, the rumor is invalid”? There [the rumor is invalid] because the name [“writ of divorce”] was not mentioned. But here [in the case of Hinena], the name “writ of divorce” was [explicitly] mentioned. And there are those who say that if he said “It was a kosher writ of divorce” and then she screamed, her neighbors came, and he snatched it from her and gave her a blank sheet [we are not then concerned about his snatching it from her afterwards; she is still validly divorced].

B. Ketubot 62b-63a

Rabbi Akiva was the shepherd of Ben Kalba Savua. [Ben Kalba Savua’s] daughter saw that he was modest and of quality. She said to him: “If I become betrothed to you, will you go to the house of the master [=house of study]?” He said, “Yes.” She became betrothed to him in secret and sent him away. Her father heard about it, evicted her from...
his house, and imposed a vow on her forbidding her any benefit from his possessions. [R. Akiva] went and spent twelve years in the house of study. When he returned, he brought with him 12,000 students. He heard a certain old man say to [his wife]: “How long will you live a life as a living widow?” She said to him: “Were he to listen to me, he would remain [in the house of study] for twelve more years.” [R. Akiva] said [to himself]: “I am acting with permission.” He went and spent twelve more years in the house of study.

When he returned, he brought 24,000 students with him. His wife heard [of his return] and went out to greet him. Her neighbors said to her: “Borrow garments and cover [yourself].” She said to them: “The righteous man knows the soul of his beast” (Proverbs 12:10). When she came before him she fell on her face and kissed his feet. His attendant pushed her away. [R. Akiva] said to them: “Leave her alone; mine and yours are hers.” [Remainder of story omitted].

Everyone went out to greet [R. Akiva], and even she got up to go out to greet him. A certain evil one said to her: “Where are you going?” She said to him: “The righteous man knows the soul of his beast” (Proverbs 12:10).
R. Meir would teach a lesson in the synagogue of Hamata every Friday night. There was a woman who would regularly come to listen to him. One time he was discoursing [late], and when she got home, the lamp had gone out. Her husband said to her: “Where have you been?” She said to him: “I was listening to the lesson.” He said to her: “May God do thus and such to me if this woman enters her house before she goes and spits in the face of the teacher.” R. Meir discerned [what had transpired] by means of the Holy Spirit, and acted as if he had an eye ailment. He said: “Let any woman who knows how to cure an eye ailment with a charm come and recite the charm.” Her neighbors said to her: “Here is your time to go back to your house. Act as if you know how to heal his eye with a charm, and spit in his eye.” She came before him. He said to her: “Do you know how to heal an eye ailment with a charm?” From awe of him, she said: “No.” He said to her: “Don’t they spit in it seven times, and that is good for it?” When she had spat, he said to her: “Go and tell your husband: ‘You told me [to spit] once, and I spat seven times.’”

[Remainder of story omitted]

**Leviticus Rabbah 9:9**

They [the husband and wife] remained [angry with each other] a first Sabbath, a second, and a third. Her neighbors said to her: “How long will you [two] be angry? We will come with you to the lecturer. When R. Meir saw them, he discerned by means of the Holy Spirit [what had transpired]. He said to them: “Is there among you a woman who knows how to cure an eye ailment by means of a charm?” Her neighbors said to her: “Now you can go and spit in his face and be permitted to your husband. . . .”