

Women Heroines of Torah Study

As portrayed by rabbi Joseph Mesas

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The issue of a Jewish woman's right to learn Torah - and the options that should be available to her in order to truly exercise such right - continues to this day to be a topic of debate and the subject of disagreements between contemporary halakhic authorities. In the 1970's rabbi Moshe Feinstein ruled outright that women should not be taught Torah at all. However, if they nevertheless studied the Written Torah (i.e., Bible) they would not be considered as if 'studying obscenity' – while if they studied Mishnah, they would indeed be so considered, since they are forbidden to study the Oral Torah.² Dramatic developments in the realm of Torah study by women have occurred since then, especially in Israel during the recent two or three decades.³ Nevertheless, these changes are widely regarded as a post-modern feminist phenomenon. It is therefore of great interest to see earlier sources that express a highly positive view of women devoting themselves to the highest levels of Torah study. Rabbi Joseph Mesas' lesson on the first mishna in *Avot* ch. 6 is a fine example of such a positive view, and it is to the analysis and discussion of his teaching that this article is devoted. But first, a few words introducing Rabbi Mesas' biography and his Torah writings.

Rabbi Joseph Mesas

Rabbi Joseph Mesas was born in 1892 in Meknes, Morocco, where he received a broad Torah education and was ordained as qualified to serve as a *dayyan* (judge in a rabbinic court). From 1924 to 1939 he served as the rabbi of Tlemcen, Algeria. In 1940 he returned to Meknes where he was appointed judge in the rabbinical court. Later he was also appointed president of the all-Moroccan rabbinical tribunal for adjudication of disputes concerning rabbinical *serara*, a position that was bestowed

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² Responsa *Iggerot Moshe*, vol. 6, *Yoreh De'ah*, responsum 87(b).

³ For an overview of developments in women's Torah study in the U.S. during the last decades of the second millennium see Fishman. And see especially *ibid.* at pp. 144-148, where she notes the impact of Israeli Orthodox institutions for women's study of Torah upon the U.S. Modern Orthodox scene. For a survey of developments in Israel in recent decades, as well as the continued opposition of many leading Orthodox-Zionist rabbis to women's study of Talmud (especially if it is at a high-level), see Feuchtwanger, especially at pp. 5-29. Fuchs (2014) charts 20th century developments in the attitudes of Ashkenazic Orthodox rabbis to women's Torah study.

only upon those recognized for outstanding probity.⁴ In 1964 he made Aliya and was appointed Chief Rabbi of Haifa, a position in which he served until his death in 1974.

Rabbi Mesas had a broad Torah education, and was in addition keenly interested in other areas of human knowledge and endeavor - including history, medicine, science, technology, politics, etc. He saw intellectual openness as a religious value, and regarded Torah erudition that was ignorant of the accomplishments of human culture as flawed. In his commentary on the words of Ecclesiastes (7, 11) "Wisdom is good with an inheritance, yea, a profit to them that see the sun", Rabbi Mesas offered the following explanation:

One should interpret "them that see the sun" as meaning those whose eyes are open to look at worldly affairs. For by doing so their minds become smarter and sharper. We see in both the early and later generations that every sage whose mind was engaged in worldly matters was outstanding in his generation, like Maimonides and his companions and those similar to them in every generation (may their memory protect us, amen). The Torah wisdom of those not engaged with worldly affairs, on the other hand, is filled with gullibility, naivety, and ignorance.⁵

Rabbi Mesas was also a preacher and a poet. His writings reflect his comprehensive scholarship and his detailed and original consideration of a range of questions that arose at the interface between North African Jewry and the modern European-Western world.

Many of his writings remained in manuscript form, and the following are those that were published: *Responsa Mayyim Hayyim* (vol. 1 Fez, 5694/1934, vol. 2 Jerusalem, 5745/1985); *Geresh Yerahim* on the laws of divorce (facsimile of the author's manuscript, Jerusalem, 5749/1989); *Zevah Todah* on the laws of ritual slaughter (printed facsimile of the author's manuscript from 5689/1929, Jerusalem, n.d.); *Naḥalat Avot* – lessons and sermons on Ethics of the Fathers (vol. 1-8, Jerusalem 5731/1971 – 5747/1987); *Otzar haMikhtavim* – Collected Correspondence (vol. 1-3, Jerusalem 5728/1968 – 5735/1975); *Ner Mitzvah*, on matters of Hanukkah and other timely issues (Fez 5699/1939); *Vayizkor Joseph – a Passover Hagadah* (facsimile of the author's manuscript from 5677/1917, Haifa 5739/1979); *Bigdei Yesh'a* – on the prayers and customs of the Sukkot holiday (Jerusalem 5750/1990).

⁴ Some of the individuals and families among the rabbinic leaders in Morocco were recognized as having the right to oversee the management and functioning of different religious institutions. Such a right provided its owner with a considerable economic base, as well as a great deal of honor (on this see Dshen). It is therefore not surprising that controversies tended to arise with regard to the question of the right to run one institution or another. These controversies involved the religious leaders themselves, and a special court was set up whose judges needed to combine extraordinary erudition, reputation among the rabbis, and public recognition for integrity and ethical behavior.

⁵ *Naḥalat Avot*, sermon 454, p. 79.

Rabbi Joseph Mesas' original and wide-ranging creativity has not yet received the scholarly attention it fully merits.⁶ This article focusses on one aspect of Rabbi Mesas' thought, by analyzing a lesson on *Pirquei Avot* he taught in Meknes in the early 1950's. The text under consideration was the opening mishna of the 6th chapter of *Pirkei Avot* ('Ethics of the Fathers') – a chapter that sings the praises of Torah study and of those engaged in it:

Rabbi Meir said: Anyone who occupies himself with the Torah for its own sake,⁷ acquires by merit many things; nay more: the whole of the world is worthwhile for his sake. He is called a friend, a beloved, one that loves the Omnipresent, one that loves his [fellow] creatures. One that gladdens God, one that gladdens man. It [the Torah] clothes him with meekness and fear and fits him to be righteous, pious, upright and faithful; it also keeps him far from sin and brings him near to merit. Men benefit from him by [way of] counsel and wisdom, understanding and strength, as is said ([Proverbs 8:14](#)): "Counsel is mine, and sound wisdom; I am understanding, power is mine."⁸ And it gives him sovereignty and dominion, and the faculty of searching in judgment. And they reveal to him the secret meanings of the Torah, and he is made as a well that ever gathers force and like a stream that never ceases and becomes modest and long-suffering and forgiving of insult towards himself and it makes him great, and exalts him above all the works [of God]. The Torah's secrets are revealed to him, and he becomes as an ever-increasing wellspring and as an unceasing river. He becomes modest, patient and forgiving of insults. The Torah uplifts him and makes him greater than all creations.

The reader has certainly noted that the entire text is written in the masculine: The person who studies Torah is a man, and as a result of this study he merits all those wonderful virtues, strengths and character traits that Rabbi Meir lists in detail. And what of a woman who wants to study Torah?

⁶ Two doctorates nearing completion promise to somewhat alleviate this situation: David Biton's work on the halakhic responses of Moroccan rabbis to the challenges of modern times (Bar Ilan University) and Yehuda Maimaran's work on the educational-halakhic thought of Rabbi Joseph Mesas (Hebrew University).

⁷ Hebrew: *Kol ha-oseq ba-Torah li-shmah*.

⁸ The speaker (feminine in the Hebrew) is Wisdom, which was identified by the sages with the Torah – see for example Urbach, p. 287.

Who Merits Many Things?

Early in the summer of 5713/1953⁹ Rabbi Mesas opened a class on Ethics of the Fathers by saying that one needs to take note of the word "Kol"¹⁰ in the beginning of Rabbi Meir's words – what does that word add to the content of the sentence? He replies that the general function of the word "Kol", here and elsewhere, is to make a statement more inclusive. Rabbi Meir could have simply said "he who studies Torah for its own sake"; by opening with the word "kol" he seeks to expand the category of those who merit these things and to include among them also those who at first glance seem to be excluded. To whom, then, is he referring?

It seems that the word "kol" serves to include women. For even though they are not commanded to study Torah (see *Shulḥan 'Arukh Yoreh De'ah* ch. 246 section 6), if they do study it for its own sake they too merit many things. Like Devorah and Ḥulda who merited prophecy because of their wisdom and righteousness. And Ima Shalom, Rabbi Eliezer's wife and Raban Gamliel's sister (see Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 115a); as well as Beruriah, Rabbi Ḥananiah ben Teradion's daughter and Rabbi Meir's wife (see the *Otzar Yisrael* Encyclopedia, part B, s.v. Beruriah). And Rashi's daughter who used to write and sign responsa in her father's name (may his memory protect us!), as well as his sister Chilit. And Miriam the wife of *Rabeinu Tam*, and Ḥana sister of *Riba"m* (Rabbi Yitzḥak Bar Menahem one of the *Ba'alei ha-Tosafot* of blessed memory) and many more (see *Otzar Yisrael*, part N, s.v. *Nashim/* women).¹¹

Halakhic tradition has ruled that the commandment to study Torah does not obligate women; Rabbi Mesas acknowledges this and specifically declares that this is indeed the case. But he differentiates between Torah study as an obligation and Torah study as a source of virtue and merit, and holds that the study of Torah possesses great value and significance, whether the one studying it is commanded or not. Moreover, Rabbi Mesas explains that the "many things" merited by those who study Torah for its own sake are not a reward received in return for observance of a commandment. Rather, these "many things" are "natural" positive consequences that follow from the quality and essence of "engaging in Torah for its own sake".¹²

⁹ The dating is based on the fact that in the previous sermon, number 441, the author summarizes the sermons and lessons that he gave on Israel "Independence Day", and from their content it is evident that this was five years after Israel's establishment. From this we can see that the sermon we are discussing was given soon after that, in the early summer of 1953.

¹⁰ Kol is usually translated as "all". Above, due to the requirements of English syntax, it is rendered as "anyone".

¹¹ *Nahalat Avot*, p. 13.

¹² Study of Rabbi Meir's words in the Mishnah reinforces this reading. The things merited by the person who studies Torah are in the area of the personality, quality traits, and religious virtues. There is no "reward" here of the kind usually found in discussions of "reward and punishment". Thus it

The women that Rabbi Mesas refers to as exemplars are divided into three categories: Biblical figures – Devorah and Ḥulda; women from the Talmudic period – Ima Shalom and Beruriah; and women from the Middle Ages. The latter include women from Rashi's family – his sister Chilit, his daughter (who is nameless), and Miriam (wife of Rashi's grandson, *Rabeinu Tam*) – as well as another woman from Rashi's circle – Ḥana, sister of the Tosafist Rabbi Yitzḥak Bar Menaḥem.¹³

The passage gives the impression that these women were generally acknowledged by traditional sources to have been scholars, but examination of those sources reveals another picture. For example, the notion that Ḥulda's prophecy was bestowed upon her by virtue of her Torah erudition is moot in the Talmudic tradition. According to one opinion her husband, Shalum Ben Tikvah "was among the great men of his generation, and he used to perform righteous deeds day in and day out... and as a result of his righteous deeds the Holy Spirit resided in his wife."¹⁴ A second tradition gives no explanation at all as to why Ḥulda merited prophecy.¹⁵ A third view indeed presents Ḥulda as learned: Yonatan translated the words that describe the prophetess Ḥulda – "she dwelt in Jerusalem in the second quarter (*bamishneh*)" (Kings II, 22, 14) as "she sat in Jerusalem in the house of study",¹⁶ i.e., in the Beit Midrash. But even Yonatan, who presented Ḥulda as learned, did not state that this is why she merited prophecy. Thus it is clear that Rabbi Mesas made two cumulative exegetical choices, in order to link Ḥulda's prophecy to her study of Torah: first, he opted for Yonatan's position in attributing to Torah wisdom to Ḥulda, and then determined that this wisdom was the reason that she merited Divine inspiration. Similarly, his determination with regard to the reason Devorah merited prophecy was also not necessitated by the sources.¹⁷

makes sense to interpret the expressions "*malkhut u-memshala vehikur din*" (sovereignty, dominion, and the faculty of searching in judgment) as referring to acquired capabilities in the realm of Torah exegesis and discernment of the true law.

¹³ Rabbi Mesas combined here two different women mentioned under "women" in the *Otzar Yisrael* Encyclopedia: Rabeinu Tam's sister Ḥana, and Rabbi Yitzchak Bar Menaḥem's sister Bilit.

¹⁴ *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer*, chapter 33, s.v. Rabbi 'Azaryah says (folio 76a in the Warsaw 5612/1852 edition)

¹⁵ This exegetical stance can be attributed to those commentators who interpreted "she dwelt in Jerusalem in the second quarter" literally – see in the next footnote.

¹⁶ The Yonatan translation is an Aramaic translation of the Bible, attributed by tradition to the Tana Yonatan ben Uzziel. The prevalent scholarly opinion today identifies the Yonatan translation of the Prophets as a translation that was composed in the Land of Israel in the first few centuries of the common era, and underwent an additional editing in Babylonia during the Amoraic period (my thanks to Prof. Menachem Cohen who made me aware of this matter). Comparison of the interpretations given by medieval Bible commentators ad.loc. shows that some of them rejected Yonatan and a literal interpretation of the biblical text; these included Rashi, Rabbi Yosef Caro, and Rabbi Yosef Kaspi ad.loc. Radak and Ralbag, however, followed the view of Yonatan.

¹⁷ Rabbinic sources generally agree that Devorah was a woman well-versed in Torah – see: *Ḥidushei Ha-Ritva* on Kiddushin 35b s.v. "*asher tasim bifneihem*"; *Ritva* on Shevuot 31 s.v. *shevuat ha'edut*; Tosefot Ro"sh, ad.loc.; Tosefot on Gittin 88b s.v. *velo lifnei hediotot*; Tosefot on Nida 50a s.v. *kol hakasher ladun*; *Sefer ha-Hinukh*, positive commandment 77. And see *Zohar*, part 3, 19b: "Woe unto

Among the two women mentioned by Rabbi Mesas who lived during the Tanaitic period, Ima Shalom¹⁸ and Beruriah, only Beruriah is clearly presented as exceptionally learned in Torah. Rabbi Mesas does not refer to relevant Talmudic sources about Beruriah, but instead points his readers to the entry "Beruriah" in the *Otsar Yisrael* Encyclopedia.¹⁹ This might reflect ambivalence with regard to other aspects of her persona, as reflected in Talmudic sources.²⁰

The entry *Nashim* in *Otsar Yisrael* is distinctly apologetic, and reads like a paean to the virtues of the Jewish woman. While the author of the entry admitted that "there were some among the sages who thought that women were at a lower level than men", he invested great effort to give the impression that this was a minority opinion, and that women were very positively regarded, both in the Bible and among Jewish sages throughout the generations. However, he held a conservative stance with regard to women's social role, and with regard to the structure of the family: "Nature limited women's traits to dwelling in the home and caring for all its internal needs.... The woman should cook and sew and weave for herself and for her husband and children, and the husband should support them through a craft or business".²¹ Further on it is said that it is because of the wonderful way that Jewish women were (and are) treated, "that they show no inclination to join the cult of women demanding for themselves legal status and equal rights to men in all matters of state (Suffrage)". Considering the article's characteristics, it is worthy of note to see how Rabbi Mesas extracted only the specific information that suited his needs, and subsequently presented his audience with a quite non-conservative position with regard to the right of Jewish women to study Torah.

So far we have seen how Rabbi Mesas presented examples of learned women, some of whom lived in the Land of Israel during the time of the Bible or the Talmud, and some of whom lived in eleventh and twelfth century France. However, in his introduction to *Naḥalat Avot*, Rabbi Mesas states that when teaching classes on *Ethics of the Fathers* he frequently included "stories from the lives of exemplary individuals (*tzadikim*) ... because stories are a powerful means of awakening people and motivating them to the service of the Lord who dwells on high".²² Many times in

the nation who could find no one to judge them but a single female". However, I did not find any source stating that the reason Devorah merited prophecy was her learnedness. See for example *Tana Devei Eliyahu*, beginning of ch. 9, where Devorah is presented as having merited her prophecy because she convinced her ignorant husband to make thick wicks for the Temple Menorah.

¹⁸ The source to which Rabbi Mesas refers (Shabbat 116a-b) presents Ima Shalom as intelligent and sharp-witted, but there is no mention of her having been learned. For more on Ima Shalom, see Ilan.

¹⁹ Rabbi Mesas' citations from *Otsar Yisrael* indicate the authoritative status that encyclopedia achieved among many Torah scholars, who regarded it as a "Kosher" Hebrew window into the world of enlightenment and science .

²⁰For discussions of Beruriah's character and the significance of her literary construction in traditional sources, see for example: Sarah; Drori; Gerwin; Hoshen; Levin Katz; Monikandem; Boyarin, pp. 181 ff.

²¹ *Otsar Yisrael*, entry "*nashim*", p. 117.

²² There are no page numbers.

that multi-volume work, he cites such tales from manuscripts that were shown to him or that he had discovered.²³ The current lesson is a case in point: after referring to women of earlier times, rabbi Mesas devotes the major part of his teaching to two stories he found in the manuscript of book, that portray two women much closer in place and time.²⁴ We will now present these tales and analyze their implications with regard to the value and status of a woman who studies Torah.

The First Story

I saw in a manuscript book, that in the city of Algiers in the time of the Gaon Rabbi 'Ayyash may his memory protect us, there was a beautiful virgin who was the daughter of a wealthy man. She was wise in Torah and devoted herself day and night to Torah study. Many honorable people sought her out as a bride. Yet she was not the least bit interested in marrying, for the same reason as Ben 'Azzai: Her soul desired Torah.

The story is placed in Algiers, in "the time of the Gaon Rabbi 'Ayyash". The 'Ayyash family was a well-known rabbinic family in Algiers; its most famous member was Rabbi Yehuda ben Yitzhak 'Ayyash, who presided over the rabbinical court in Algiers between the years 1728-1756, and it is most likely he to whom the tale relates.²⁵ If so, the tale unfolds around the second quarter of the eighteenth century.

The heroine of the story is a beautiful young woman, daughter to a wealthy father; she was also very learned in Torah. Her beauty, her wealth, and her wisdom made her a very sought after match, and many wanted to marry her. However, she categorically refused to consider any suitor, because marriage would drastically reduce the time available to her to study Torah. The figure that she adopted as her role model, and whom she undoubtedly would not have known about had she herself not been learned, is the Talmudic sage Ben 'Azzai, who throughout his life refused to marry, claiming "What can I do? My soul yearns for Torah".²⁶ The norm in

²³ For some examples see *Naḥalat Avot* vol. 1 pp. 58, 201, 289, 302, 321; vol. 3 pp. 32, 90, 111, 115, 311; vol. 6, pp. 88-89. 148, 169.

²⁴ For other lessons in which rabbi Mesas relates tales he found in manuscript or that were shown to him by others in whose possession the manuscript was, see *Naḥalat Avot* vol. 1 pp. 58, 201, 289, 302; vol. 6, pp. 88-89.

²⁵ On Rabbi Yehuda 'Ayyash see: Marciano, pp. 190-191; *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 3, col. 994. Rabbi Mesas relates tales in which Rabbi 'Ayyash is a central figure also elsewhere in *Naḥalat Avot*; see e.g. *Naḥalat Avot* vol. 3 pp. 115-120; vol 5b p. 206; vol. 6 p. 148; *ibid.* pp. 157-159.

²⁶ The discussion between Ben 'Azzai and his colleagues is cited in *Tosefta Yevamot*, chapter 8, 7 [p. 26 in the Lieberman edition]; compare with Babylonian Talmud Yevamot 63b. Significantly, elsewhere in Tamudic literature Ben 'Azzai holds that "A man is obligated to teach his daughter Torah" (*Mishnah Sota* 3, 4) – in direct opposition to rabbi Eliezer's very negative view of women's Torah study (Jerusalem Talmud, *Sotah* 3, 4; Babylonian Talmud *Yoma* 66b). And see also Seḥayeq.

traditional Jewish society was that a daughter should not interfere with the choice of her future husband, instead accepting the match arranged for her by her parents.²⁷ In the story before us, the young woman's expertise in Torah literature enabled her to deviate from these norms, relying on a source from within the Torah tradition itself.

Her father, on the other hand, was sure that daughter's future well-being was contingent upon marriage, and attempted to change her mind. When he saw that his efforts to convince her were of no avail, he turned in his despair to Rabbi 'Ayyash, assuming that his learned daughter would accept the words of the sage, even if she rejected those same words when they came from him. The daughter agreed to meet with the rabbi, but her learning enabled her to construct a strong argument refuting conventional societal attitudes, by employing one of the thirteen modes of classic Torah interpretation – *qal ve-ḥomer*.²⁸

And her father complained about her to the above Gaon. And he sent for her and spoke kindly to her saying good things. But she was unwilling to obey him, on the basis of a "*qal ve-ḥomer*" from Ben 'Azzai:

He is a man, commanded to "be fruitful and multiply", and nonetheless he said "what can I do, my soul yearns for Torah". And how much more is this so with regard to her, who is not commanded to be fruitful and multiply!

Rabbinic tradition sees God's words in the book of Genesis "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it"²⁹ as the source for a man's obligation to bring into the world a minimum of a boy and a girl (with an implicit obligation to marry a woman for that purpose). Although God's words cited above seem to be directed to men and women alike, Talmudic tradition identified the male as bearing the specific obligation to fulfill this commandment, because finding a partner was an active endeavor, and it was socially accepted that men were the initiating and active gender.³⁰ Our story's heroine knew all this, and on its basis she constructed a "*qal ve-ḥomer*" argument: The obligation to be fruitful and multiply is the man's, and

²⁷ A classic description of traditional European Jewish society can be found in Katz; on the parents' choice of a husband see there, p. 163 and beyond. With regard to Jewish society in Islamic countries, see for example Gabbay, pp. 121-126, who shows that in Baghdad, even in the 1930's and 1940's, it was the parents who chose whom their daughter would marry, and their daughter acquiesced (even if she was otherwise quite educated and independent).

²⁸ *A-fortiori*.

²⁹ Genesis 1, 28

³⁰ Relying upon the word "*vektivshuha*" (and subdue it) in the biblical verse, rabbinic Midrash identified the commandment as directed to the man because "It is the nature of a man to subdue but it is not the nature of a woman to subdue" (Yevamot, 65b). And see Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Ishut* 15,2; *'Arukh Hashulḥan, Even Ha'ezzer*, ch. 1 section 2. Note, that we have before us an interesting example of a transition from social reality to normative ruling: Since in social reality men were the active ones, the obligation to bring children into the world was placed upon them.

despite this if a man's soul desires Torah he is permitted to refrain from fulfilling this commandment and to study Torah. If this is the case, then *a fortiori* I, who am not commanded to be fruitful and multiply, am permitted to study Torah and to refrain from getting married!

Rabbi 'Ayyash challenged this position:

The Rabbi said to her: But she is not commanded to study Torah, and thus will receive no reward! And she laughed and said to him that he must have momentarily forgotten the words of Maimonides of blessed memory, that also a woman is rewarded for Torah study (*Yoreh De'ah* ch. 246, section 6³¹). However – may it be God's will that your words - that I will receive no reward in this world or in the next - actually come to pass! For I am not studying Torah in order to receive a reward, but only out of love for Torah.

From Rabbi 'Ayyash's response it is evident that he understood the Talmud's logic concerning Ben 'Azzai in the following manner: Ben 'Azzai found himself under two concurrent obligations that he experienced as contradictory – to study Torah and to be fruitful and multiply. Since he felt able to fulfill only one of them, Ben 'Azzai chose to study Torah, and not to father children.³² However, Rabbi 'Ayyash claims, once Ben 'Azzai forfeited his obligation to have children, he could devote himself to fulfillment of the commandment to study Torah, for which he would be greatly rewarded; whereas if the young woman before him decided not to marry and have children, she would nevertheless be under no obligation to study Torah, and thus (unlike Ben 'Azzai) would receive no reward for doing so. That being the case, what point would there be to her Torah study? The young woman responded spontaneously that despite her not being obligated to study Torah, she would receive Heavenly reward if she chose to study, "for a woman too has a reward for learning", in Maimonides' opinion.³³ While phrasing herself politely by saying that Rabbi 'Ayyash "must have momentarily forgotten" Maimonides' position, she simultaneously delicately demonstrated that in this case she was better versed in the sources than he.

Had our heroine's argument ended at this point, her debate with the rabbi would have been about the relative advantage to be gained from a woman's reward for Torah study, vs. the loss incurred by lack of family life. However, her next words shifted the discussion to an entirely different plane, completely removing it from the formal halakhic categories of commandment, obligation and reward: our heroine

³¹ I.e., *Shulḥan 'Arukh Yoreh De'ah*. This work by Rabbi Joseph Caro is cited here by Rabbi Mesas himself, as it quotes Maimonides' view. For the original source in Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* see note 27. <=33>

³² On Ben 'Azzai and the tension between having a family and studying Torah, see Boyarin, p. 134 and beyond.

³³ Mishnah Torah, laws of Talmud Torah 1, 16.

declared that she studied Torah not for any reward at all, but solely out of love for Torah. At that very moment, the elderly rabbi recognized that the young woman standing before him was a veritable embodiment of one of the most exalted ideal-types in rabbinic culture – the very figure praised by rabbi Meir in chapter six of Avot: "One who studies Torah for its own sake". Immediately upon realizing the quality of her personality and the nature of the pathos that motivated her, he stopped pleading with her:

These words of hers resonated deeply with the Gaon, and he concluded their discussion with many blessings. And he said to her father: Let her do as she wishes, for by doing so she will have great merit to protect the people of the city. And so it was.

The rabbi understood that the father of the young woman was a decent man, but far from the extraordinary quality of his daughter. Thus, it was important to speak with him in utilitarian terms: If he would permit his daughter to continue her study of Torah, this would be to the benefit of the townspeople, as her merit would be great in the eyes of God, and this would protect them from calamities that might come their way in the future. The father acceded – and the story proceeds:

Once, the Gaon dreamt that a military force was approaching the city to kill and pillage. And that same girl went out against them, all alone with a drawn sword, and she defeated and slew them all, and there was a great salvation. And the rabbi was frightened by the beginning of the dream, and sat in fast. After three days, on Friday night, a force of Spanish raiders approached the city by sea. And God in his mercy brought a stormy wind to the sea, and every last one of their ships was broken and sank as lead in the mighty waters, and God saved the entire city from the hands of the oppressors (*metzeirim*).³⁴ And then the rabbi understood the meaning of the dream: That the merit of that virgin protected the people of the town.

The event anticipated by rabbi 'Ayyash's dream – raiders³⁵ approaching the city of Algiers in order to kill and plunder – was not rare in those times: invasions by foreign marine forces were a recurring phenomenon in the coastal cities of North Africa during the early modern period (16th-18th centuries).³⁶ Two raids in particular were

³⁴ The heavenly intervention is described by Rabbi 'Ayyash using turns of phrase reminiscent of the Biblical "Song of the Sea" (Exodus XV). Thus, the Spanish ships "sank as lead in the mighty waters" (comp. Exodus XV:10); "And God saved ... from the hands of *metzeirim*" (compare: Exodus XIV:30). The latter verse describes the Lord as a savior from the hands of the Egyptians (*Mitzraim*); the story before us alludes to the same verse, and by a play of words describes Him as saving from the hands of oppressors (*Metzeirim*).

³⁵ Hebrew "*Baleshet*" (cf. Mishnah 'Avodah Zarah 5, 6). In bTBeitzah 21a Rashi explains that this means "a big military force of Gentile brigades who are scouting out opportunities for pillage". Our text thus employs this term in accordance with Rashi's explanation.

³⁶ On this see Wolff, pp. 299-307; Spencer.

experienced by the Jews of Algiers as terribly threatening, to the extent that when the raiders retreated in failure, the communal leadership instituted an annual feast in commemoration and thanks for their salvation. Thus the Jews of Algiers celebrated two 'local Purims': on the 4th of Heshvan to mark events of 1541³⁷ and on the 10th and 11th of Tammuz to mark events of 1775.³⁸ Each of these days, as well as the Shabbat preceding them, was also the occasion for recital of liturgical poems composed by local rabbis in honor of the miraculous delivery experienced by the community.³⁹

However, rabbi 'Ayyash was no longer alive during the Spanish raid of 1775; and of the two events described above, it was the 1541 attack of the Holy Roman Empire that was terminated by a catastrophic storm. Thus, the raid described in the manuscript cannot be identified with a specific historical event. Rather, generic memories of those times were invoked by the tale's author, to provide a dramatic context for the actions of the two central figures: rabbi 'Ayyash and our outstanding heroine, lover of Torah.

Rabbi 'Ayyash's response to the dream's message was to sit in fast; armed action was not an option for Jews of that time and place. For this reason the rabbi was surprised by the military response of "the girl" in the beginning of the dream. Subsequent events enabled him to interpret the dream's meaning: responding to the merit of her learnedness, God protected the city from a Spanish naval invasion, by causing a storm to destroy the approaching fleet.

The story's last sentence emphasizes that the city was saved by the merit of that young woman – i.e., not by Rabbi 'Ayyash's own virtue, righteousness and Torah study. Was the storyteller hinting that this was because she studied Torah purely for its own sake, while his Torah and scholarship earned him status and honor?

After this dramatic event corroborating and validating our heroine's choice, the narrator brings the tale to a positive conclusion:

And so the woman remained a virgin, beloved of Torah. Upon reaching the age of sixty, she made Aliyah to the Holy Land where she devoted herself to Torah, till the day of her death at a ripe old age of over one hundred years old.

Did Rabbi 'Ayyash tell her of his dream, and inform her (or others) that the city was saved thanks to her? We are not told. In any case, she did not change the course of her life, but remained totally devoted to Torah – and unmarried. Upon reaching the

³⁷ On these events see Garnier, pp. 202-208.

³⁸ On these events see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Invasion_of_Algers_\(1775\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Invasion_of_Algers_(1775)) (accessed on 18 May 2014).

³⁹ For these liturgical creations see Qrovetz. In a lecture he gave in 1927, M.J. Kaoua discusses the historical events leading to the two local Purim festivities of the Jews of Algiers (see: Kaoua).

age of sixty, she made another choice – one considered extremely virtuous in traditional Jewish culture.⁴⁰ She made Aliyah to the land of Israel where she studied Torah for over forty more years, ending her life in peace and holiness.

The Second Story

Rabbi Mesas continues his lesson by citing a second story, found in the same manuscript. This story also relates to Algeria, but rather than taking place in the capital city of Algiers it took place in the small city of Tlemcen.⁴¹

It [i.e., the manuscript] goes on to say there that in Tlemcen too there was an extremely beautiful virgin whose soul yearned for Torah. Her parents were destitute and had sons and daughters to feed. One day a young and wealthy widower came from the city of Oran. He spoke persuasively to the girl's father, asking that he give her to him to be his wife. He [the groom] promised he would give bride-price and presents, and support her father and his household for their entire life. The girl's parents were delighted at the find. When they informed their daughter and she was unwilling, they fell at her feet and cried and begged for a long time that she should take account of their poverty, pressure and distress and relieve them of their plight. When she could restrain herself no longer, she asked them for three days to consider the matter, and then they let her be.

In this story, in contrast to the first one, the family's economic situation was abysmal. The salvation of this young woman's father, mother, brothers and sisters depended on her agreement to marry. However, the basic assumption underlying the story is that once married, she would be unable to continue her study of Torah. The concluding sentence of this paragraph implies that – should no viable alternative present itself – the heroine of this tale will give priority to her familial obligations over her desire to study Torah. She asks for time to see if she can come up with a solution to the crisis, but it is apparent from the tone of her words that if three days pass and she finds no solution, she will agree to marry.

What happened during these three days?

She fasted, and cried and pleaded before the *Maqom*⁴² (blessed be He) to open the gates of mercy for her parents from a different place. And the Lord heard her prayer and saw her tears. And on the third night, in the middle of the night, she had a dream in which a voice called out to her saying: "Behold great wealth is hidden under the earth upon which you are sleeping". And

⁴⁰ Rabbi 'Ayyash himself famously made the same choice; see Marciano, pp. 190-191.

⁴¹ Rabbi Mesas had served as rabbi of Tlemcen for almost sixteen years (see above).

⁴² Lit. "The Place" – a term indicating God.

she arose while it was still night-time and told her father. And he had faith in her righteousness, and brought a shovel and dug two *amot* below the place where she was sleeping, and found a big clay pot filled with golden dinars. And no one knew [that the pot was there]. And they were very, very happy. And in the morning he informed the man that his daughter was unwilling, and bid him farewell.

While in the first story Rabbi 'Ayyash receives a dream from on high, here the woman herself receives a dream informing her of God's answer to her prayer. The story's ending suits the family's modest beginnings:

And he [the father] took some of the gold coins and established a small business and was very successful. And he lived a life of pleasure, quiet, and tranquility. And his daughter found satisfaction in being able to pursue Torah study as she wished.

This second tale is in minor key. Its heroine did not save an entire city through the merit of her Torah study. She did not see herself as being like Ben 'Azzai, nor did she not make Aliyah to the holy land, nor did she die at a mythic age of over one hundred years. She faced a difficult personal dilemma and was prepared, if she had to, to forfeit her personal intellectual and spiritual well-being for the sake of enabling a better life for those dear to her. God saw her distress, and provided a solution that enabled her to devote herself to Torah.

Ethical and Religious Messages

What ethical and religious messages did Rabbi Mesas convey to his listeners and readers by means of the above lesson on The Ethics of the Fathers? One message, mentioned above, is the lack of contingency between the commandment to study Torah and the ideal of studying Torah for its own sake. The obligation to study Torah is a commandment anchored in rabbinic Biblical exegesis and linked to an established social structure. The obligation to study Torah can exist when it is binding only upon men, and when women accept upon themselves to take care of everything else in the home, thereby facilitating the establishment and functioning of the male Torah world. In contrast, Torah study for its own sake is not an obligation or a commandment. Rather, it is a vocation, and as such it is not dependent on an individual's position in the existing social structure or on birth into a specific status. Rabbi Mesas's innovation is his unequivocal and radical explication of this message, as well as his outright clarification that there is no difference in this matter between women and men: "Whosoever studies Torah for Torah's sake alone merits many things".

The second message is the frank discussion of what this first message implies with regard to the institution of marriage. Rabbi Mesas never raises a doubt with regard to the importance of the institution of marriage nor does he seek to undermine the validity of the conventional Jewish view that men and women should marry, live together as a couple and have children. However, he does not at all agree that realization of this convention is the highest value according to which every person must fashion his life. One who desires Torah study more than a partner is exempt from marriage. Undeniably striking is the fact that Rabbi Mesas clarifies point blank that this option relates not only to men. In fact, he goes even further: The significance of the "*qal ve-ḥomer* from Ben 'Azzai" posed by the heroine of the first story is that the right to forego marriage in order to study Torah is even more compelling for women than it is for men.

A third message that emerges from Rabbi Mesas's lesson has to do with the ideal paradigm that should govern relations between men in positions of authority – whether fathers or rabbis – and women who wish to choose a lifestyle that deviates from social norms. The three men described in the stories before us – the father of the young woman from Algiers, Rabbi 'Ayyash, and the father of the young woman from Tlemcen – do not even consider the option of forcing the young women to marry against their will. This holds true even for the poor and needy father of the young woman from Tlemcen, despite the fact that his own fate depended on his daughter's decision. They treat the women's desires, attitudes and opinions with great respect, even when they do not fully understand them in depth. The differences in approach and opinion between these men and women are worked through in a discourse filled with mutual respect. Ultimately, the men accept the stance of the young women, and change their previously held perceptions. These men certainly were not in agreement with the well-known phrase "A woman's mind is flighty".

A fourth lesson can be derived from the first story, with regard to the connection(s) between Torah, Jews, and non-Jews. Not only the Jews of Algiers are saved by the first heroine's devotion to "Torah for its own sake", but also the city's entire non-Jewish population. The Torah is not only a blessing for the Jews but for all of God's creatures, whether or not they themselves are aware of the virtues and holiness of the Torah. Rabbi Mesas' view regarding the value of the lives all human beings in God's eyes, and about the positive contribution of Torah also to the well-being of proximate non-Jews, is in line with what he wrote in other contexts about the appropriate attitude of Jews toward non-Jews.⁴³ In doing so he may be seen as

⁴³ See for example *Mayyim Hayyim* vol. 1 responsum 82; vol. 2 responsa 108(b), 109.

echoing an ancient midrashic statement: "... By merit of the Torah and those who study it the world will be saved".⁴⁴

Conclusion

Our study of Rabbi Mesas' teaching enables us to reflect on his views with regard to the tension between the conventional social roles of women – endorsed by Jewish tradition -- and their intellectual-spiritual aspirations. The heroines of both stories faced a choice between socially mandated roles and their desire to study Torah. Each of these options is an object of erotic desire: On the one, desire for sexual intimacy and family, and on the other hand desire for deep intellectual and spiritual engagement. However, an underlying assumption of the narratives as posed is, that the heroines cannot have both: they must choose either one or the other. Each heroine opted for passionate devotion to Torah, and Rabbi Mesas unequivocally states that such a choice can be entirely justified within the framework of Jewish tradition. It clearly follows from his portrayal that after that justification is acknowledged -- as it should be -- the fact that such a choice by a woman is socially unconventional should have no relevance at all in the eyes of anyone.

In these two tales, the role model who provides a paradigm for such complete devotion to Torah at the expense of marriage is the great scholar Ben 'Azzai. But how many women in the past even knew of the existence of such a person? How many women in the past repressed their desire for Torah in order to satisfy their desire for intimacy and family? How many women never even dared to consider the possibility that there could be other options, because their socialization led them to feel that only one path was open to them? Indeed, it is quite likely that many of the all-male participants of Rabbi Mesas' weekly class in Ethics of the Fathers were themselves unaware of Ben 'Azzai – and it is virtually certain that none of them had considered the *qal ve-ḥomer* implication for women of Ben 'Azzai's refusal to marry. By teaching this Mishna in the manner he did, Rabbi Mesas was hoping to open the eyes of his listeners (and readers) to be aware of such options for women. Perhaps women too would ultimately benefit from these men's expanded horizons....

All that being said, it must be recalled that in the rabbinic world Ben 'Azzai was an anomaly; in general, scholars were expected to integrate commitment to Torah and commitment to marriage. After reading Rabbi Mesas, one is moved to ask: Does traditional Judaism contain within it the possibility of change, of social structures that can enable not only men but also women to integrate family life and desire for Torah? Rabbi Mesas' portrayal of the heroines and of the men in their lives indicates that such a change depends on a combination of two factors. On the one hand, the

⁴⁴ *Shir Hashirim Raba* 2:6.

willingness of women to defy religiously validated social convention for the sake of realizing their own religious aspirations. And on the other hand, the willingness of relevant male figures – husbands, fathers and rabbis – to respect and support women who seek to follow that previously uncharted path. In recent years we have begun to see a vanguard of women who are passionate scholars of Torah. Having read Rabbi Mesas' teaching, we can have no doubt that he is looking down from Heaven in benign satisfaction.

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