

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

THE IMPORTANT WOMAN

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One of the joys of studying rabbinic literature is tracing a concept through the sources. It is a spiritual and intellectual delight. My latest experience of this joy was occasioned by my remembering the following passage from the Bavli related to whether women recline at the Passover Seder:

A woman in her husbands [house] need not recline, but if she is an important woman she must recline. (B. Pesachim 108a)

Simply put, if a woman is rich enough that she does not have to serve the seder meal, she must also recline as a celebrant of freedom.

This "important woman" (ishah chashuvah) appears in only four other places in rabbinic literature, all of them in the Bavli. She is depicted as being accustomed to wearing a tiara (B. Shabbat 59b), wearing perfume (B. Ketubot 71b), is subject to the subtle pressures on herself and her suitors to make a proper marriage (B. Ketubot 75a) and known to non-Jews as well as Jews to be an important person, thus making it less likely that she will be harmed since her family would see to it that the aggressor was punished (B. Avodah Zarah 25b).

What's truly interesting is that this category of woman is never related to any specific individual. By way of contrast, the matronah, the "society matron", appears almost exclusively in texts from the Land of Israel and is usually portrayed as active in a given story, as in this well-known passage:

A matron asked R. Eleazar, "How is it that, though only one sin was committed in connection with the [golden] calf, those who died, died by three kinds of execution?" He said to her, "Woman has no wisdom except at the distaff, for it is written, 'And all the women that were wise-hearted did spin with their hands. (Exodus 35:25)'" Said to him Hyrcanus, his son, "So as not to answer her with a single teaching from the Torah you have deprived me of three hundred kors of tithes per year!" He said to him, "Let the teachings of the Torah be burned, but let them not be handed over to women." (Y. Sotah 3:4 19a)

Rabbi Eleazar refuses to teach the matron anything and urges that she not ask such questions, saying that women should occupy themselves with hand work, not Torah study.

Though the woman's verbal response is not recorded, we can deduce that she is put out by Rabbi Eleazar's answer from Rabbi Eleazar's son's reaction. Apparently he and his father were priests who were the beneficiaries of tithes. Had they maintained good relations with this woman they, and not some other member of the priestly class, would receive the tithes from this woman's property. A kor is the equivalent of 7 bushels or 246 liters, so a good bit of material wealth was at stake in this interchange. Her ability to give so much in tithes also suggests that this matron may have been the Jewish corollary to pagan and Christian wealthy matrons.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think the two streams of rabbinic literature (from Israel and Babylonia) had different vocabulary and ways of portraying powerful women? What does this tell us about these documents?

2. Is it likely that a pagan or Christian woman would have known this much about the Jewish interpretation of the golden calf story?
3. Today, how do we define a woman's high status? Are there different ways of talking about women's status in different communities?
4. Should economic status play a role in decisions about religious practice?