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Posted April 28, 2011, by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

A WOMAN EMERGES FROM THE SHADOW: MARTHA'S DAUGHTER IN THE YERUSHALMI

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Martha of the Baitusi is a well-known, very wealthy woman who was married to a priest. Her daughter makes only one appearance in rabbinic literature...in the Yerushalmi.

A story contrasts the funerals of Judah ben Tabbai and the village tax collector, Bar Maayan. The former did not have a large crowd at his funeral while the whole town went to the tax collector's funeral. The sages wonder about this, as they uniformly hated tax collectors.

Judah ben Tabbai [a Nasi] fled to Alexandria. He arrived in a boat. He was asked: Do you remember Devorah, the daughter of Martha who received us, lacked? One of his disciples said to him: Rabbi, her eye was blinking. He said to him: Lo, two [sins] are against you. First, one suspected me [of looking at her], and second, you looked at her....

He was angry with him and he went away. What meritorious deed did Bar Maayan, the village tax collector, do? Heaven forefend! He never did a meritorious deed in his life. But one time he made a banquet for the councilors of his town but they did not come. He said: Let the poor come and eat the food, so that it not go to waste.

There are those who say that he was traveling along the road with a loaf of bread under his arm and it fell. A poor man went and took it, and the tax collector said nothing to him so as not to embarrass him.

After both Judah ben Tabbai and Bar Maayan died, Judah saw Bar Maayan the village tax collector with his tongue hanging out, by a river. He wanted to reach the river but could not reach it. (Y. Hagigah 2:2)

Reading between the lines, it seems that the tax collector might not have been such a bad man after all. And Devorah is merely a supporting character in the story. Nonetheless, when we're learning about women in rabbinic literature, we take what we can get. The Baitusi were a wealthy priestly clan and its daughters might have been celebrities in their own right.

Discussion Questions:

1. Devorah here is described according to her physical attractiveness (sigh). What else might she have been: hospitable? Kind? Smart? What do you imagine the rest of her story might be?

2. No matter how much the sages disliked paying taxes to the tax collectors, it appears that Bar Maayan did something right. What else might he have done that the Yerushalmi didn't tell us? Again, what do you imagine his story might be?
3. Punishment in the world to come doesn't seem to have changed much over the ages. Is there something in our basic cognitive and/or emotional make up that causes us to see life after death in this way?