
Reviewed by Laura Dreuth Zeman, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL

A beautifully catalogued collection of unique folktales primarily about Jewish women comes to life with the elegant writing of Hava Ben-Zvi. Ben-Zvi, a librarian by profession, organized and retold stories in English that were contributed by Jewish immigrants to the Israel Folktale Archives. This collection provides a rare look at stories passed down through generations that share Jewish wisdom within the context of families and communities. Most notable is Ben-Zvi’s emphasis on selecting stories that shared accounts of Jewish culture told from the point-of-view of women. The collection of folktales alone would be an asset to any library, but Ben-Zvi digs beyond the stories to provide notes that connect each tale to the culture of origin, to stories with associated themes, and to religious texts or themes that the tales represent from Biblical, Talmudic, and Midrashic sources.

Ben-Zvi organized the stories into chapters that represent themes across women’s lifecycles such as being daughters, falling in love, being wives, and raising families as well as themes representing women’s wisdom as it applies to the broader community, often in Diaspora, and in business. Yet, one cannot help but become aware of the common themes, or archetypes that shape our understanding of women that emerge from reading the folktales. From the tales of daughters one finds stories that present young women as princesses and scholars. Mothers are sweet and sacrificing. Wives, the most complex of the archetypes explored in this anthology, emerge as shrews, kingmakers, and servants. Selected tales representing popular archetypes of daughters and wives are discussed in this review as an overview of the critical utility of this collection.

The archetype of daughters as princesses and scholars are delightfully told through several of the folktales. The princess daughter is best represented in the tale, *The Princess Who*...
Would Not Speak. In this tale, the beautiful, dark haired princess’s hand in marriage was the prize to a prince who distinguished himself from the other suitors by his cleverness. The challenge the suitors faced was to make the beautiful princess speak or die by beheading. A pair of magical birds enhanced the cleverness of the handsome young prince who ultimately won the challenge and married the beautiful princess. The scholar is the other daughter archetype represented in the folktales and is represented by Batyah, in The Beast Maiden. Batyah, the daughter of a Rabbi, was born with a facial deformity. Her parents arranged for her to live above their house of study where she listened to daily lessons and became very wise herself. Circumstances emerged where she was married to a young scholar, sight unseen, who was so profoundly repulsed by her looks that he abandoned her after one night of marriage. Left alone, Batyah raised their son who years later visited his father. Purified by her son’s love, Batyah was magically transformed into a beautiful woman before seeing her long lost husband. The family was reunited. Ben-Zvi’s insightful commentary discusses the desire for education among women during years that Talmudic studies were male endeavors. The tale of Batyah is discussed as a reflection of young women’s struggles between longings for knowledge, beauty, and being loved.

The most notable archetypes of wives that emerge in the folktales are the shrews, kingmakers, and servants. In Fatima’s Horse, the shrew wife degrades her husband, does the opposite of his requests, and publicly humiliates him. The husband outsmarts the shrew and Fatima spends the remainder of her existence trapped with a demon while the husband remarries to a princess and inherits her father’s kingdom. Ben-Zvi’s commentary connects the shrew to Talmudic wisdom that teaches that there is nothing stronger than an evil woman. The kingmaker archetype represents the wife who brings her husband “both riches and wisdom” as told in The Tale of Three Wishes. Elijah appeared as a beggar and granted the wishes of three men: one for riches, one for a good wife, and one for wisdom. Ultimately, the men lost their wisdom and the
riches, but the man with the good wife kept his wife and gained riches and wisdom. In a similar tale of three married brothers, *Her Price High Above Rubies*, Ben-Zvi retells a tale that represents the archetype of wife as servant. In this tale self-sacrificing, servant wives influence their husbands’ youthfulness.

Undoubtedly, *The Bride Who Argued With God* is a rare collection of folktales that present key archetypes of women through storytelling. Ben-Zvi’s rich retelling of these tales includes scholarly commentary connecting them to Jewish practice and meaning. This anthology is suitable for young adult and adult readers and would make an excellent gift for new Jewish parents. It would make an exceptional addition to a religious school or family library as it can be used to pass on folklore to new generations. It could also be assigned in university courses where the folktales could be used to guide students’ understanding of representations, or archetypes, of women.