
Reviewed by David J. Zucker, Aurora, Colorado, USA

In *A Bride for One Night: Talmud Tales*, Ruth Calderon reaches into the Talmud and produces for her readers an exciting, vibrant retelling of a number of the biographic descriptions found in that ancient work. She focuses on the “personal experiences of the heroes and heroines of the stories: their daily lives, their family structure, the power dynamic in their relationships” (p. xiv.). She writes “against the grain,” in a consciously unconventional manner, which sees these texts through new eyes, not through the lenses of traditional exegesis. She purposely seeks to breathe new life into the ancient words. Calderon presents seventeen stories based on material in the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, as well as certain collections of Midrash. Each story produces the sacred text, followed by Calderon’s own exegetical retelling of the tale, often through the eyes of a woman, and then her own reflections on the story. Calderon, who earned a doctorate in Talmud from the Hebrew University, brings a provocative perspective to these tales. For example, in the story “Libertina” based on a section from Babylonian Talmud *Kiddushin* 81b, the narrative of Rabbi Hiya bar Ashi and his wife, Calderon points out that in “talmudic times women’s bodies and minds were controlled by social norms and proscriptions” that channeled their inner strength into maintaining home and children, and thereby a “woman lost sovereignty over her own body.” As she writes in her commentary, she “dares to ask whether such social control is necessary or even desirable.” (p. 44). In the lead story, “A Bride for One Night,” based on a brief passage in Babylonian Talmud *Yoma* 18b, she
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raises the appeal of a one-night stand from a woman’s viewpoint, making us “think twice about how much opportunity we waste in our lives of routine and fidelity” (p. 64). Her story “The Goblet” is a retelling of a section in Babylonian Talmud Ketubot 65a. Like the biblical stories of Sarah and Hagar, Leah and Rachel, sadly here too, it pits one woman against another, which is a projection of the “warring forces inside [the sage] Rava, preferring to attribute to them [the women] the feelings of jealousy, frustration, and anger that Rava himself cannot contain” (p. 96). Calderon points out that there are references in the rabbinic literature where rabbis engage in discourse with Roman matrons, “The Matron” is based on Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 40a. In rabbinical writings, these wealthy matrons are presented as one-dimensional figures, who are sensed by men as Lilith-like, “sensual, strong, forbidden, and alluring” as opposed to their own “maternal, domesticated” wives at home, but in the end, the “sages of the study houses conclude their discussions of the Roman matron and return home to their wives” (p. 90). In the story “Lamp” based on a passage in the Midrash collection Yalkut Shimoni, Proverbs 18, in her retelling the story, Calderon in a very sensuous way has the protagonist create “a new paradigm…an attempt to repair the flawed relationship in the Garden of Eden…Man and woman are united as one being…[together] they study Torah” (p. 81). Ruth Calderon seeks to teach us that the ancient texts can continue to speak to us, and that we can view them critically; we need not read them through the sexist filter of that time, and neither through the inherited traditional readings which also are oftentimes sexist in nature.

Although relations between women and men is a continuing theme through many of her stories, the examples found in A Bride for One Night are not limited to this one topic. Likewise, the voice of Calderon’s exegetical retelling of the rabbinic
episode is not always that of a woman. In the tale “Nazir” based on Tosefta Nazir 4.7, women do not appear in the story, which deals with the struggles of how to be honest to one’s vows and likewise how to maintain a sense of freshness and excitement, kavannah/intentionality in one’s sacred acts and not allow them to become purely keva/rote behavior.

Calderon has taken these rabbinic biographic references and she has given them new meaning through the critical eyes of a woman in the 21st century. For the interested reader, she provides short reference notes, and also sources for further reading for many of her stories. She likewise provides a bibliography. Yet, as helpful as this appears to be, it is less than ideal: most of the sources only appear in Hebrew, and the likelihood is that the readers of this book will not have that facility. It would have been wiser to provide more examples for further reading and for references for the English-reading public.