The “Killer Wife” (*Qatlanit*) in Jewish Law: A Survey of Sources

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Abstract

This article traces the development of Jewish law regarding the *qatlanit* or “killer-wife,” a woman who was twice widowed. The Jewish law examines the dilemma whether she should be allowed to marry again because of the risk that she poses a mortal danger to men whom she marries. Fear of marrying a woman twice-widowed plays a role in the story of Tamar, but Genesis 38 makes it clear that it is God who is responsible for the deaths of Er and Onan, and not the innocent widow. The Talmud prohibits the marriage of a twice-widowed woman, and attributes the demise of her husbands not to any intention on her part, but rather her “source” (sexual organs) or her “mazel” (fate as determined by astrology). Later responsa generally reflect a more lenient attitude towards the remarriage of the *qatlanit* in response to the tumult and tragedy of medieval Jewish history, as well as the growing influence of rationalism in Jewish thought. Modern rabbis, because of their openness to scientific thought and concern for the loneliness of old age, show a marked leniency towards the remarriage of a twice-widowed woman.

Hebrew *qatlanit*, or “killer wife,” refers to a twice (or thrice) widowed woman who unintentionally caused the deaths of her husbands. This can be distinguished from the English term, “black widow,” which indicates a female serial murderer, one who kills her husbands for financial gain, revenge, or pleasure. The focus of Jewish law is whether the *qatlanit* should be allowed to marry again because of the chance that she poses a mortal danger to men with whom she is married.

The term *qatlanit* is derived from the Hebrew root *qtl*, which appears only rarely in the Hebrew Bible,¹ but serves as the general root for killing in Aramaic and Arabic. The word *qatlanit* does not occur in the Hebrew Bible or Talmud, but first makes its appearance in medieval Halachic literature.

The pre-modern circumstances of humanity in general and Jews in particular made it such that the twice-widowed woman who was relatively young, and still fertile, was not uncommon. In modern times, a woman might be widowed twice because the life span of women is usually longer than men’s. The difference today is that a twice-widowed woman might be in her 70s or 80s. In ancient and medieval times, however, a woman might have reached her mid-20s and already be widowed twice. The death toll for all people from plague, untreated medical conditions, and natural disasters was very high, while Jews in particular had additional risks. Many Jews, especially in Spain and central Europe, engaged in far-flung trade, and risked their lives at sea where they might

have perished in a shipwreck or died at the hands of pirates. On land, a merchant ran the risk of a lethal encounter with highway robbers. Further, martyrdom, especially in Spain and central Europe, was not uncommon, especially after the Black Death and the anti-Jewish riots of the fourteenth century. In Christian lands, husband and wife may have been close in age, however this was not usually the case in Muslim lands, which would have exacerbated the problem. Avraham Grossman estimates that twenty percent of adult females in medieval Spain were widowed,² and certainly there were a considerable number who suffered this fate twice in a lifetime.

Most women were likely to desire remarriage because of their precarious financial circumstances. The property of a dead husband was inherited by his sons or other male relatives who were then required to provide the widow with her necessities and support her in the way she became accustomed during her marriage. The widow had to get the money owed from her *ketubah* (marriage contract), pay back her husband’s creditors, and perhaps deal with sons from a husband’s previous marriage who anticipated a share of the inheritance. (Still, it appears that the rabbinic inheritance law was not followed consistently throughout the various Jewish communities.) In addition to financial issues, the widow may have suffered from loneliness, social isolation, and the burden of caring for children and a household without the help of a spouse. While wealthier women might not need the economic assistance that could be had through remarriage, most women probably saw remarriage as a necessity to a satisfactory life. Thus, one should not be surprised that discussion of the marriageability of the twice-widowed woman appears often in Halachic literature.

In addition to the social and economic aspects of widowhood, the widow, especially one who was twice or thrice-widowed, had to suffer from the stigma that she was somehow responsible for the deaths of her husbands. Her guilt was established by the comments offered in Jewish texts, especially the Talmud, even if her ability to kill was not intentional.

1. The Hebrew Bible: Genesis 38

The first time one encounters the “killer wife,” the bride who is thought responsible for the death of her husbands, is in Genesis 38. Indeed, Tamar’s two husbands, Er and Onan (both sons of Judah), die seemingly soon after their marriage to her. Verse 11 reveals Judah’s deceitful words

to Tamar, which contrast with his actual intention. He sends Tamar, a childless widow, back to her father’s home “until my son Shelah grows up,” leaving her to assume that when the young man is ripe for marriage, she will be retrieved and wed to him. However, Judah’s true intention in sending Tamar away was, “lest he die too like his brothers.” Thus, Tamar is sent away in order to eliminate her as a threat to his only surviving son. Rashi writes here that Judah “had no intention of marrying her to Shelah for she was assumed to be a woman whose husbands die.” While Judah might have thought that Tamar possessed some malevolent power that killed his two sons, the reader knows better because in verses 7 and 10, the Torah reveals that it is *God* who killed Er and Onan for their sins.³ Mordechai Friedman notes that the Torah’s ascription of their deaths to sin (and not Tamar) shows the Torah’s opposition to the belief in the “killer wife:” “Israelite religion – as manifested in Genesis 38 – rejected this pagan superstition,” and affirms that “women are sources of life, not death.”⁴ This conforms to the general tendency in the Hebrew Bible to suppress belief in the demons and other malevolent powers independent of Israel’s God.⁵

2. The Apocrypha: The Book of Tobit

In contrast to the Hebrew Bible, faith in the power of demons emerges unreservedly in the Book of Tobit, a work of Jewish origin which dates to the Persian period.⁶ In this narrative,⁷ the “evil demon Asmodeus” kills each of the seven husbands of the virtuous Sarah, daughter of Raguel. Ultimately, Tobias, son of Tobit, repels the demon by burning the liver and heart of a fish on incense embers; this was done in accordance with instructions offered by Raphael, one of God’s seven “good” angels. Asmodeus is known in rabbinic sources as *Ashmedai*, “chief of demons.”⁸ Modern scholarship notes the influence of various folk motifs on the tale, thus Friedman suggests that the “killer wife” superstition in Tobit represents a “foreign element” reintroduced into Jewish belief during the Second Temple period.⁹ Noteworthy is the fact that no prohibition of marrying the woman widowed twice or even seven times is evident in the story.

3. The Babylonian Talmud: *bYevamot* 64b

The prohibition of marrying a two-time widow emerges in the Talmud. In *bYevamot* 64b, the rabbis’ discussion concerns the number of similar incidents which constitute a presumption (Hebrew *hazaqah*) upon which a Halachic ruling is based. The topics include the following:

- a. Women who fail to produce children.
- b. Baby boys who die following circumcision.
- c. Women whose husbands have died.
- d. Women whose menstrual cycles are regular or irregular.
- e. Oxen that gore.

The discussion eventually focuses on the difference between the opinions of Rabbi Judah the Prince and his father Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel. The former, according to the *beraita*¹⁰ cited, rules that two boys who die as the result of circumcision create a *hazaqah* so that a third son should not be circumcised, while the latter opines that three boys who die constitute a legal precedent so that only the fourth should be spared the rite of circumcision. Another *beraita*, however, reverses their opinions so that Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel believed that two creates a legal precedent and Rabbi Judah the Prince is certain that three did. Rabbi Yochanan, however, seemed to think that Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel ruled that three constitutes a precedent because he himself told a woman whose two sisters had babies that died after circumcision that she should have her own son circumcised. Abaye, a 4th century Babylonian rabbi, relied on Rabbi Yochanan’s understanding that three times constitute a *hazaqah* (not two), and went ahead and married a woman, Homa, who had been widowed twice. Ironically, he died a short time afterwards (!).

The *Gemara* then presents the relevant *beraita*:

For it has been taught: If a woman marries a man and he dies, and she marries a second man and he dies, she may not be married to a third husband: These are the words of Rabbi (Judah the Prince). But Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says: She may be married to a third husband, but may not be married to a fourth husband.

At this point, the *Gemara* contrasts circumcision and marrying a widow regarding the issues that constitute endangerment. Regarding circumcision, it is known that there are “families with thin blood and families with thick blood.” This is assumed to be the first recorded description of hemophilia.¹¹ Regarding the reason why a twice-married woman would constitute a lethal danger, the *Gemara* then explains: “Rav Mordechai said to Rav Ashi: Thus, said Avimi from Hagraunia in the name of Rav Huna: Her “spring” (*ma’ayan*) is the cause. But Rav Ashi said, *mazal* is the cause.” The *Gemara* then queries about the practical difference between the two potential

causes and responds: “The difference between them is the case when a man betrothed her and didn’t consummate, alternatively, he who falls from a palm tree and dies.”

The issues raised by this *sugya* are as follows:

- a. Is the *beraita* a prohibition or recommendation? Friedman emphasizes that the sages forbid the widow’s remarriage and “were not simply giving sound advice.” He writes that all other uses of the phrase “she is not married” in the Mishnah and Tosefta refer to forbidden marriages,¹² such as the case in *mBikkurim* 1:5 of a priest and the daughter of proselytes.
- b. Whose opinion determines the Halacha? Abaye’s premature demise compels the reader to conclude that Rabbi Judah was correct, that in the case of women whose husbands die, two cases create a presumption. Later in the *sugya* the *Gemara* declares that regarding widows, the Halacha stands with Rabbi Judah the Prince.
- c. What is a woman’s *ma’ayan*? According to Jastrow’s *Dictionary of the Talmud*, a *ma’ayan* is a “spring,” “fountain” or “source.”¹³ It is used in *bNedarim* 41b for the intestines as the “gushing source” for dysentery and in *bNiddah* 11b and 35b for the “source” of menstrual blood. Song of Songs 4:12 refers to the “sister” as a “sealed fountain” (*ma’ayan hatum*), an allusion to her virginity. In *bYevamot* 64b, the term is a euphemism for her sexual organs so that her husband’s misfortune was thought to be the result of intimate contact. The perception that intimate contact could be potentially dangerous may be the result of several factors, including the mechanics of intercourse, fear of impurity or the association of women with sorcery.¹⁴
- d. What is the role of *mazal* in this case? Belief in the power of the stars and their movements to affect the affairs of humankind was quite prevalent in Jewish antiquity. Thus, one can define *mazal* (which literally refers to the constellation of the stars) as fate or destiny determined by the arrangement of stars when the individual was born. For example, Rava, a sage mentioned in this *sugya*, believes that “life, children, and sustenance do not depend on merit but on fate (*mazal*)” (*bMo’ed Qattan* 28a). In *bShabbat* 156a-b, the sages engage in a long discussion about astronomy [i.e., Astrology], and differ whether Israel is subject

to planetary influence or immune because of its unique relationship with God. In the discussion in *bYevamot*, *mazal* is thought by Rav Ashi to determine the fate of the widow and her husbands. Perhaps this is because, according to Rava, the stars dictate that she is doomed to be poor, without the sustenance afforded by a husband.

In what ways do these two terms, *ma'ayan* and *mazal*, limit the prohibition of the widow's remarriage? The rabbis discuss the practical application of the two possibilities, her “spring” versus “her destiny:” “The difference between them is the case when a man betrothed her and didn't consummate, alternatively, he who falls from a palm tree and dies.” Both of these cases, when he dies without consummating the marriage and his death by accident, could be attributed to the woman's *mazal*, and certainly not her *ma'ayan*.¹⁵ On the other hand, perhaps the husband's ascent in a palm tree eliminates the possibility that the wife's *mazal* killed her husband; his own risky behavior was the determining factor and thus this would not count against her.¹⁶

4. The “Killer-Wife” in Maimonides

Jewish sources, such as *responsa*, fail to mention the *qatlanit* from the redaction of the Babylonian Talmud until the 12th century. The absence of discussion suggests that such a woman was not allowed to marry a third husband and there was little dissent.¹⁷ Rabbis began to discuss the subject more often in the 12th century, especially in Spain. This is due to several factors: Jews travelled more extensively for business and were exposed to greater risk of dying; an increase in anti-Jewish violence especially in the 14th-15th centuries; the frequency of early marriage in Jewish society; the influence of Maimonides (d.1204); the increasing influence of rationalism and science.¹⁸ A growing tendency towards leniency slowly becomes evident towards the late Middle Ages. Rabbinic discussions focus on the factors which led to the husbands' demise and whether these should count towards rendering the widow a *qatlanit*.

Maimonides, as a physician and philosopher influenced by Greek and Islamic science, rejected belief in the hidden supernatural powers which were normally thought to constitute the “true” causes of disease and death. He addresses the practices of divination and astrology in his *Mishneh Torah* and concludes:

All of these things are false and spurious, and it was with such that the ancient idolaters misled the peoples of many lands so that they were following them. And it is unbecoming to the people of Israel who are exceedingly wise to be attracted by these absurdities, nor to even imagine that they are of any consequence . . . But wise and sound-minded people know that all these matters which the Torah disallowed are not matters of wisdom but formless nonsense followed by senseless people for the sake of which they abandoned every path of truth. (*Avodat Kochavim* 11:4-16)

Maimonides addresses the issue of the *qatlanit* in particular in two contexts. He writes in the *Mishneh Torah*, “Forbidden Relations,” (21:31), “When a woman was married to two husbands and they both died, she should not marry a third. If she did marry, she need not be divorced. Indeed, even if he merely consecrated her, he may consummate the marriage.” In this case, Maimonides repeats the *baraita* from *bYevamot*, but immediately offsets it by stating that after the fact, they can marry if they are betrothed.

The second case is a responsum¹⁹ regarding a woman who was widowed twice and had no children from her second husband. The question focusses on her possible Levirate marriage to his brother, but obviously the widow in question has the status of a *qatlanit*. Maimonides is asked if the fulfillment of the levirate supersedes the prohibition of the twice-widowed wife. Maimonides responds, “I am very surprised by wise students of Torah who find great difficulty in simple matters like these and can’t distinguish between a matter forbidden by the Torah from a matter which is forbidden by them, for [the rabbis] did not say it was a prohibition but rather a ‘refraining.’” He further ridicules their analogy of potentially lethal circumcision (in the case where previous infant cousins have died) to marrying a “killer wife” for the former is about saving an innocent life and the latter is an issue tied to astrology and other forms of nonsense. He opines that the only real danger in marrying the widow is derived from the fear caused by breaking the taboo. He continues, “the practice in all the cities of Andalusia is when a woman loses her first and second husbands, she is not prevented from marrying, and especially so if she is young, for one can fear the unfortunate event that she would engage in sexual liaisons.” He continues, “Therefore, the custom has spread that she and her husband would do betrothal first (in the presence of witnesses). Subsequently the judges of the local rabbinical court would write her *ketubah*, and finally they would join under a bridal canopy for the Seven Blessings.” Grossman concludes that Maimonides wanted to “totally uproot the fear of the *qatlanit*” and thus he insisted

that this be done by a rabbinic court which would give legitimacy to this roundabout method of undermining the prohibition.²⁰ Friedman observes that Maimonides, “the rationalist and physician, ignored the Talmud’s pseudo-medical and astrological explanations,” and thus abolished the Talmudic prohibition of marrying a “killer wife.”²¹

One might think that the influence of Maimonides was so great that his opinion on the *qatlanit* would be widely accepted in the years that followed, but such was not the case.²² Other Spanish rabbis rejected his permissive approach. Grossman suggests that geography may have been the determinant as northern Spanish rabbis were more influenced by mystical ideas, as opposed to those in the south, such as Maimonides, who had a more rationalist bent. For example, the Rashba (Rabbi Shlomo ibn Aderet, d.1310) writes, “there is a person who allows her to a third husband, a ruling the basis of which I don’t know, and that which Maimonides wrote is not in the *Gemara* and I don’t know of anyone else who wrote thus.”²³ The Ramah (Rabbi Meir Halevi Abulafia, d.1244) writes that the *beraita* in *bYevamot* is “*halacha*, and one who wants to transgress it should be prevented from doing so, and if he says, ‘I am willing to endanger myself,’ one should not listen to him, because he has no right to destroy himself.”²⁴ Nahmanides (Rabbi Moshe ben Nahman, d.1270), in his commentary on Genesis 38,²⁵ concurred with the traditionalist view, apparently because of his belief in the influence of mystical forces.²⁶

5. The *Qatlanit* in the *Zohar*

Credence in the power of mystical forces was bolstered by the emergence of the *Zohar*, a mostly Aramaic-language library of mystical commentaries on the Torah, in the last quarter of the 13th century. It gradually became more influential in the centuries following, reaching its peak of authority in the 16th and 17th centuries.²⁷ According to the *Zohar*:

Other people who have departed from the world, leaving a spirit in the vessel that they used – if she marries and another comes and infuses another spirit in that vessel, what becomes of the first one . . . The first spirit denounces this inflowing spirit, and they cannot dwell calmly together. Therefore, a woman does not settle fittingly with her second husband, because the first spirit pulsates within her, so she remembers him constantly and weeps or sighs over him, since his spirit rattles in her belly like a snake, denouncing the other, incoming spirit. For a long time, they assail one another. This one entering arouses the one who entered first; afterward, the first one leaves and goes away. Sometimes, this first one repels the second one, becoming his accuser, finally removing him from the world. Concerning this we have learned that from two [husbands] on, a man should not marry this woman, for the Angel of Death is empowered within her, and inhabitants of the world do not realize that once this spirit has prevailed and defeated that other, second spirit—from now on, no one else should mingle with it. . . He who marries a widow is like one who sets to

sea in fierce winds and hurricanes without ropes, not knowing whether he will cross safely or drown in the deep.²⁸

The *Zohar* apparently discourages re-marriage of a widow after the death of her *first* husband, whose spirit was still inextricably attached to her and aims to kill the second husband. Marrying a *twice*-widowed woman was especially hazardous! Later, the *Zohar* indicates that if she does not remarry, the souls of husband and wife will reunite in paradise, reflecting the desirability of the wife awaiting re-union with her husband’s soul. The *Zohar* thus adds another layer of causality to the danger posed to a third husband; his premature demise may indicate the powerful grip held by the first (or second) husband. Just when the rationalist approach of Maimonides could have made an impact on the circumstances of the *qatlanit*, the *Zohar* may have undermined any improvement of her plight.

Indeed, circumstances in the 14th and 15th centuries made the legal rulings regarding the *qatlanit* of even greater importance as the number of young widows increased. The Black Death ravaged Europe, killing perhaps a third of its population in the mid-14th century, while the religious violence in Spain following 1391 surely left thousands of women bereaved. Sages began pondering the question: if one’s husband died as a martyr or in a plague when thousands of others shared the same fate, how is this attributable to his wife? Surely this should not count against the widow’s ability to remarry.

Rabbi Hasdai Crescas (d. 1410), a Spanish philosopher and community leader, had a son who died in the anti-Jewish riots of 1391. He ruled that a man dying as a martyr does not make his wife a *qatlanit*.²⁹ The Ribash (Rabbi Isaac ben Sheshet, d.1408) minimized the danger of marrying a *qatlanit*, saying “the opinion of Maimonides seems more correct.” He makes an analogy to the case in *bBaba Metsi’a* 105b, where an epidemic decimates the crops of a certain region: the misfortune is not imputed to the bad luck of the man who rented a certain field therein. Thus, when a disaster strikes many people, as in the riots of 1391, the *mazal* of the *qatlanit* is not judged to be a determinant,³⁰ so that she may remarry. Similarly, Joseph Albo (d.1444) allows a *qatlanit* to remarry if her husband died during mass persecutions because a “death that is due to the general lot” (as opposed the death that is “due to the lot of the individual”) is not included when considering the status of the widow.³¹ Further, Albo writes that the death of a martyred individual does not

make a *qatlanit*, “since his death is considered the free decision of the martyr and not the result of the *mazal* or *ma‘ayan* of his wife.”³² Thus, the tragedies of the 14th and 15th centuries, particularly in Spain, gave impetus to more compassionate rulings regarding the fate of the widowed.

6. The *Shulhan Arukh*: The 16th Century

In the 16th century, Joseph Caro (d.1575) published the *Shulhan Arukh*, a code of Jewish law. Because the work neglected the Halachic decisions and customs of Ashkenazic Jewry, it was supplemented by an “overlay” by Rabbi Moses Isserles (d.1572) and ultimately became accepted as the code of Jewish law *par excellence*. In *Even Ha‘ezer* 9:1, the following passage is found:

A woman who was married to two men and they died may not become married to a third, for she is already assumed to be a woman whose husbands die. But if she married a third husband, she need not get divorced, and even if she was only engaged, he may marry her. And if he is aware of her as a woman whose husbands die and consented to marry her, she receives a *ketubah*, but if he is unaware of her status, she does not receive a *ketubah* from her third husband, but will receive a *ketubah* from her second husband. [Rabbi Moses Isserles adds] There are those who say that [the prohibition] applies specifically if they died natural deaths but if one of them was murdered or died in a plague or fell and died, etc., that doesn’t count, and so most people are lenient in this matter, and they should not be prohibited from doing so.

Obviously, the code echoes Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah* ruling regarding her ability to marry a third man, albeit in an indirect manner. The second issue focusses on her ability to receive her *ketubah* money from second and third husbands.³³ The last comment by Isserles, which offers a lenient position, reflects the tumult and tragedy of the preceding centuries, as well as Isserles’ rationalist bent.³⁴

7. Later Responsa

A survey of modern opinions on the permissibility of marrying a *qatlanit* shows just what one would expect: a tendency toward leniency in an environment where scientific thought plays a more pronounced role. Further, as people live much longer lifespans, the prohibition of remarriage for a twice-widowed woman is rejected if one of her husbands lived to an advanced age, that is, his seventies or eighties. Rather than fearing the promiscuity of young widows, modern Halachic authorities are more concerned with the loneliness of old age.

- a. One responsum is offered by *Eretz Hemdah*, the Institute for Advanced Jewish Studies, in Jerusalem. The case concerns an 86-year-old Jew in Buenos Aires Argentina who was very lonely after the death of his wife. His psychologist told him to find a new girlfriend, so he befriended a

twice-widowed woman who was 78 years old, and now they want to marry. Is there reason to fear that she is a *qatlanit*? The rabbi who answered the query wrote that the marriage is allowed and the woman does not have the status of a *qatlanit* if one of the following two conditions is fulfilled: a. if one of the woman’s marriages lasted several years in good health; b. if one of her husbands died at an advanced age (minimum age 70). If one of her husbands died in an unnatural way, such as in a car accident, then there is even more reason to be lenient.³⁵

- b. Rabbi Shmuel Halevi Vosner (d.2015), a prominent *Haredi* rabbi in Bnei Brak, answered an inquiry about a woman who was thrice widowed: her first husband committed suicide, her second husband, who was over 70, died in a car accident, and her third husband was over 80 when he died a natural death. He responds that she may remarry: “it is known that one may be lenient when one of her husbands was older than 60, and the third husband was over 80 so there is no fear of remarriage.”³⁶
- c. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (d.1986), a leading *halakhist* of the twentieth century, was asked regarding a woman whose first husband died at the age of 48, and after 15 years of singlehood, she married a man who was 74 and he died at almost 80 years of age. He writes that it is “right” that she marries a third husband: “despite the fact that he was not yet 80, there is reason to be lenient.”³⁷

8. Where Is The “Killer Husband”?

No prohibition is found in rabbinic discourse regarding the “killer” husband, a man who marries two or three wives who die during the course of their marriages to him. The *Shulhan Arukh* mentions the case of a man whose two wives have pre-deceased him, but immediately establishes that there is no obstacle to his remarriage: “A man whose two wives have died may not prevent himself from marrying a third” (*Even Haezer* 9:2). Why the difference in Halacha?

- a. Rabbi Yair Bachrach (*Havot Yair*, d.1702) explains that Halacha is not so concerned about a man who marries two or more wives that die “because a husband is obligated regarding the financial support of his wife, and regarding the wife whose two husbands have died, we see that her fortune (*mazal*) is bad, for it has been decreed regarding her that she will not receive sufficient sustenance from another.”³⁸ Rabbi Bachrach reasons that since a woman is dependent upon her husband’s financial support, and since (according to the Talmud) this support is directly linked to her *mazal*,

then the death of two husbands is clearly a sign of her bad fortune. Since husbands are not dependent upon the support of wives, the death of a man’s wives does not betoken his ill fortune and the danger he poses to a third.

- b. Rabbenu Asher (Rosh, d.1327) was asked regarding a man whose two wives had died in childbirth: perhaps he is a *qatlan* and should not be allowed to remarry? Rabbenu Asher reasons that if the likelihood of a woman dying because of her husband was as great as a husband dying because of his wife, the rabbis would certainly have prohibited it, for they valued the life of a woman as much as the life of a man. Rather, he cites the Talmud that attributes the potential lethality of a woman to her “well:” “such a woman hastens the end of everyone who cohabits with her.”³⁹ Noted above were the several factors, such as impurity or witchcraft, which played a role in the perception that women were potentially dangerous. Thus, men were not viewed as a potential danger; women were.
- c. The death of wives in childbirth was a common occurrence so that it is probable that many men experienced the deaths of two wives.
- d. Jewish men are obligated to procreate according to Jewish law, while women are not (*bYevamot* 65b). Therefore, men must be allowed to remarry as many times as it takes to fulfill the commandment regarding procreation.

9. Final Thoughts

Within this author own family line, there was one such woman who was widowed twice, was allowed to remarry, and was widowed a third time. She was this author’s great-grandmother, who bore children to all three husbands and died at 62 years of age in 1928. This author’s father reports that several of her offspring became rabbis.

References to the *qatlanit*, or more generally the danger of marrying a widow, can be found in Jewish popular culture, for example in the Israeli series about *Haredim* in Jerusalem, called *Shtisel*. When the main character, Akiva Shtisel, wants to date a twice-widowed woman, the matchmaker responds by comparing her to a piece of *shnitsel* (fried chicken cutlet) that has been “frozen, thawed, heated up in a microwave and served on a paper plate,” and then adds, “I’ll tell you something else: everyone who tasted this *shnitsel*, you know what happened to him? He died

a strange death, *ptoo, ptoo, ptoo*.” Another example is offered by an American author named Wendy Dickstein, who wrote a short story called “The Diamond Necklace.” The story focusses on an elderly religious man who betroths an elderly woman (via the gift of a diamond necklace) without knowing that she was widowed twice. His friend, a rabbi, first refers him to *bYevamot* 64B which makes him painfully regret his decision, but then when he consults Maimonides, he realizes that the betrothal gift of the diamond necklace allows him to marry her.⁴⁰

The law of the *qatlanit* provides an interesting focus because it reveals the interplay of different concepts relevant to Jewish law, including superstition, rationalism, and compassion. The *beraita* as stated in the Talmud is rooted in belief in malevolent spiritual forces and lacks sensitivity to a woman’s tragic plight. Maimonides (and perhaps other Spanish rabbis), in his championing of rationalism and condemnation of astrology and witchcraft, provides the precedent and authority for leniency regarding the *qatlanit*’s remarriage. Despite the influence of the Zohar and traditionalist rabbis, the tragic vicissitudes of Jewish and general history over the centuries motivated rabbis to create exceptions to the general prohibition, so that plagues and martyrdom wouldn’t count regarding the widow’s status. No doubt these rabbis saw in their own communities women repeatedly widowed by anti-Jewish violence and epidemic illness; perhaps their own daughters or sisters suffered from this burden. With the emergence of modern medicine, the deadly potential of a woman’s “source” can be medically evaluated, while astrology no longer plays a significant role in Jewish life. Finally, in the last fifty years, with the dramatic increase in average life expectancy, compassion for older people who need companionship motivates rabbis to dismiss the prohibition. While researching this topic, this author asked two rabbis if they would officiate at the marriage of a woman who had been twice widowed. One reacted with a startled smile as if this issue was familiar but one he hadn’t heard since his *yeshivah* days. The other replied with certainty, “No, it’s three deaths that disqualify a woman.”

¹ The root *qtl* appears in Dan 2:11-14, 3:22, 5:19, 30, 7:11, Ps 139:19, Job 13:15, 24:14. The language of Daniel 2-7 is Aramaic.

² Avraham Grossman, *Pious and Rebellious: Jewish Women in Medieval Europe* (Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis UP, 2004), 254.

³ The sin of Er is not explicit but a relationship exists between his name (Er) and the Hebrew term for evil, *ra’* (its inversion), or perhaps *’er*, “childless.” Rashi, following the midrash, suggests that he intentionally withheld his seed

(as his brother did), so that Tamar would remain childless and thus more attractive. As for Onan, he deprives Tamar of progeny to prevent financial loss to himself, because a child born posthumously to his older brother would be counted as Judah’s firstborn and this would substantially reduce his inheritance.

⁴ Mordechai A. Friedman, “Tamar, a Symbol of Life: The ‘Killer Wife’ Superstition in the Bible and Jewish Tradition,” *AJS Review* 15 (1990): 32.

⁵ Jacob Milgrom (*Leviticus 1-16* (New York: Doubleday, 1991): 1079) concludes that the Bible rejects the idea of “demonic attack and the appeasement of threatening demons.” Belief in the potency of demons was widespread in the ancient Near East, thus it is possible that belief in demons among Israelites was suppressed in the textual evidence which remains, but difficult to suppress in practice. For the popular belief in demons in Mesopotamia, see Karen Rhea Nemet-Nejat’s *Daily Life in Ancient Mesopotamia* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1998): 205-210.

⁶ Carey A. Moore, “Book of Tobit,” *ABD* 6:591.

⁷ Moore categorizes the work as a “romance,” an extended narrative written primarily for the sake of entertainment or spiritual edification. It tells of the adventures of individuals, and in this case it “takes the form of the successful quest” (“Book of Tobit,” *ABD* 6:589).

⁸ Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (New York, New York: Judaica Press, 2004), 129. Asmodeus (*Ashmidei*) is mentioned twice in the Talmud (*bPesachim* 110a, *bGittin* 68a).

⁹ Friedman, “Tamar, A Symbol of Life,” 24.

¹⁰ A *beraita* is an authoritative Tannaitic rule which is not found in the Mishnah.

¹¹ Daniel Eisenberg, “Hemophilia and Circumcision,” *Jewishmedicalethics.com* (2016) (https://www.jewishmedicalethics.com/uploads/4/6/4/0/46409757/_eisenberg_schlesinger_hemophilia_and_circumcision_as_published_in_jme_without_irp.pdf); Jeremy Brown, MD, “Chullin 4b - Circumcision, Shechita, and Hemophilia,” at <http://www.talmudology.com> (<http://jeremy-brown-vpk4.squarespace.com/jeremybrownmdgmailcom/category/Chullin+4>).

¹² Friedman, “Tamar, A Symbol of Life,” 36.

¹³ Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*, 816.

¹⁴ Contact (even indirect) with a menstruating woman was thought by some to pose a grave danger; in the Talmud, see *bPesachim* 111a. This idea is linked in Judaism especially with the *Baraita de-Niddah*, an early medieval work which emphasizes the risks of being in proximity to the menstruant (Nahmanides on Gen 31:35; see “Baraita de-Niddah,” by Evyatar Marienberg at <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/baraita-de-niddah>). The Hebrew Bible links women and the occult in Exod 21:17, 2 Samuel 28, and Ezek 13:17-23.

¹⁵ Shira Weiss, “Free Choice in the Responsum of Joseph Albo: The Case of the Katlanit,” *JQR* 105 (2015):441, note 3, which discusses both interpretations. “If he fell from a palm tree, his death is clearly not the result of his wife’s *ma’ayan*,” so she should not be prohibited from marrying. “Both instances, however, may have been precipitated by the wife’s *mazal*. According to this view, the woman should be prohibited from remarrying in these cases.”

¹⁶ Thus suggests the Radbaz (Rabbi David ben Shlomo Ibn Avi Zimra, d.1573) regarding a woman who was twice widowed, when one or both of her husbands died of the plague (https://www.sefaria.org/Teshuvot_HaRadbaz_Volume_2.682.1-2?lang=bi). The Radbaz writes that the deceased placed himself in danger by remaining in an area devastated by plague. The Ramah’s comment on the *Shulhan Arukh* 9:1 (see below), that a husband’s death by falling from a palm tree does not make the wife a *qatlanit*, concurs with this interpretation.

¹⁷ Grossman, *Pious and Rebellious*, 264.

¹⁸ Grossman, *Pious and Rebellious*, 264-265.

¹⁹ *Teshuvot HaRambam*, (Leipzig: H.L. Shnui, 1859), 143. Online: https://www.sefaria.org/Teshuvot_HaRambam.143.

²⁰ Grossman, *Pious and Rebellious*, 264.

²¹ Friedman, “Tamar, A Symbol of Life,” 51, 54.

²² Shalem Yahalom, “Tradition and Innovation in the Writings of Ramban,” *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts*, 17 (2008):213-216 (Hebrew).

- ²³ Yahalom, “Tradition and Innovation,” 213.
- ²⁴ Yahalom, “Tradition and Innovation,” 210.
- ²⁵ In his commentary on Genesis 38:11, he writes that Judah was not deceiving Tamar in telling her to go to her father’s house, “For why would he deceive her when she is forbidden to Shelah, just as they say, ‘two times creates a legal assumption.’”
- ²⁶ Yahalom, “Tradition and Innovation,” 216.
- ²⁷ Gershom Scholem, “Zohar,” *EncJud* 16:1208-1213.
- ²⁸ *The Zohar: The Pritzker Edition* (trans. Daniel C. Matt; Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 5:52-54.
- ²⁹ Grossman, *Pious and Rebellious*, 266; Weiss, “Free Choice,” 447, notes that Joseph Albo cites a ruling by Crescas that permits the widows of those killed in mass martyrdom to remarry. Crescas’ intended systematization of *halakhah* was never written and his responsa have not survived (Warren Harvey, “Hasdai Crescas,” *EncJud* 5:1081).
- ³⁰ This is the opinion of the Rivash, Rabbi Isaac ben Sheshet Perfet of Spain, d.1404 (*Teshuvot Harivash*, 241-243, at https://www.sefaria.org/Teshuvot_HaRivash).
- ³¹ Weiss, “Free Choice,” 448-449.
- ³² Weiss, “Free Choice,” 451.
- ³³ For this issue, see Yahalom, “Tradition and Innovation,” 207-209.
- ³⁴ Isserles was known as the “Maimonides of Polish Jewry” (Shlomo Tal, “Moses Ben Israel Isserles” (*EncJud* 9:1081-1085). The text and translation is *Shulchan Arukh, Even Ha’ezer, siman* 9:1.
- ³⁵ This responsum is found in a collection called *B’Mareh Habazak*, IV 126, found at https://www.sefaria.org/B'Mareh_HaBazak_Volume_IV.126?lang=bi.
- ³⁶ *Shevet HaLevi* 8:268, found at <http://hebrewbooks.org/1418>.
- ³⁷ His discussion focuses on the definition of *zaken*, as surely if one of her husbands died when he was “old,” this would not count against her (*Igrot Moshe, Even Ha’ezer, part 4, siman* 43 (Bney Brak, 1985); online: <https://hebrewbooks.org/921>).
- ³⁸ *Havot Yair* 197 (Lemberg, 1896). Online: https://www.sefaria.org/Havot_Yair.197.3?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en.
- ³⁹ *She’elot u’Teshuvot haRosh* (Vilna, 1881). Online: https://www.sefaria.org/Teshuvot_HaRosh.53.8.2?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en. This responsum, along with the *qatlanit* in general, is discussed by Rabbi Isaac Sassoon, *The Status of Women in Jewish Tradition* (Cambridge UP, 2011):124-126.
- ⁴⁰ Wendy Dickstein, “The Diamond Necklace,” in *Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary E-Journal*, 11 (2014): 126-134 (<https://wjudaism.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/wjudaism/article/view/21747>). See also Rabbi Pinchas Kahn, “Comments by Rabbi Pinchas Kahn on ‘The Diamond Necklace,’” *B’Or Ha’Torah* 24 (2016-2017):173.

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