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Women and Priests: Encounters and dangers as reflected in I Samuel 2:22

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag beschäftigt sich mit der rabbinischen Bearbeitung des Verses: „Und Eli war sehr alt geworden. Und immer wieder hörte er ...dass sie mit den Frauen schliefen, die Dienst taten am Eingang des Zelts der Begegnung“ (1 Sam 2,22). Der Vers bezieht sich indirekt sowohl auf das religiöse Verhalten von Frauen als auch auf den durch die lokale Priesterschaft verübten Missbrauch. Der Beitrag fragt nach einem größeren Radius an Erkenntnissen, die aus den rabbinischen Texten zu weiblicher, öffentlicher Religiosität in der Antike gewonnen werden können. Ein besonderer Fokus liegt hier auf der Verbindung zwischen der Darstellung der Frauen, die als Pilgerinnen zum Tempel kamen, und den männlichen Priestern.

What can we learn about the religiosity of commoners, of lay people in antiquity? Not much was ever related about it directly, and most of what we can learn, needs to be deciphered from texts.¹ Learning about women's religiosity in ancient Israel, and its resonance in later generations, is an even more difficult task. And finding out about Jewish women pieties and devotion may be even more challenging, since the sources referring to it are even scarcer than those referring to religiosity in general, and they are often obscure. In this paper I deal with a specific text, indirectly implying women's religious behavior, or more accurately – the abuse of women while publically practicing religion – and ask what can be learned from it about wider questions relating to the female religiosity and, as I will try to show, complex relations between women and the clergy, that is to say priests.

I. The troubling accusations of the sons of Eli

The first book of Samuel begins with a description of the decline of the prophet Eli's dynasty in Shiloh and the rise of the prophet-judge Samuel. Eli, the priest of Shiloh fails to understand the outpouring religiosity of a barren woman, Hannah,

who comes with her family from “Ramathaim Zophim, of the hill-country of Ephraim” (*I Sam* 1:1) to worship in Shiloh, and misinterprets her bitter plea for a child as the inappropriate conduct of a drunken woman. Hannah explains her actions to him, and Eli, who finally understands his mistake, promises her that she would indeed bear the child she is craving for. It seems, as we will see, that this was not the only time Eli failed to understand women’s religiosity.

At the same time Eli’s sons, Hophni and Pinhas, were serving in the Shiloh Tabernacle, as “priests unto the Lord” (1:3) but the Bible describes them as “base men who knew not the Lord” (2:12). Eli is depicted as an old man, helpless regarding his sons’ deeds. In a feeble way he tries to rebuke them by saying: “Nay, my sons; for it is no good report which I hear” (2:24); he attempts to convince them to stop sinning against God: “If one man sins against another, God shall judge him; but if a man sin against the Lord, who shall entreat for him?” (2:25).ⁱⁱ However, he is not very successful, for his sons do not hearken to the voice of their father “because the Lord would slay them” (*ibid*). Just before this verse, the biblical narrator tells about Eli’s encounter with the bad deeds of his sons, and indirectly informs us about their sins:

וְעֵלִי זָקֵן מְאֹד וְשָׁמַע אֶת כָּל אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשׂוּן בְּנָיו לְכָל יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֵת אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁכַּבּוּן אִתָּהּ
הַנָּשִׁים הַצֹּבְאוֹת פֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד (כב, 22).

Now Eli was very old; and he heard all that his sons did unto all Israel, and how that they lay with the women that assembled at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting (*I Sam* 2:22).

According to this verse, the sin of the sons of Eli, was double – they sinned against the Israelites, and they sinned by laying with the women who came to the Tent of Meeting. Eli’s failure to rebuke his sons for committing the severe sin of adultery, while referring to their wrong-doing in general language, as “these things” about which he hears (2:23), incriminates him as well. The nature of Hophni and Pinehas’ sin against the Israelites is specified earlier in the chapter,ⁱⁱⁱ but the meaning of the second accusation remains unclear. The biblical narrator does not tell about the sex related sins, neither before this verse not later, and this failure has led Alexander Rofé to maintain that the second part of the verse was added later.^{iv} The fact that both, version B of the Septuagint and the Dead Sea Scrolls version fail to translate this phrase may bolster Rofé’s argument. Yet perhaps the sequence should be explained in the other direction, namely that the

phrase was omitted in these versions in order to spare the honor of Israel and its leaders.

What I am interested in here is, who are these women, who assembled at the entrance of the Tabernacle?^v What were they doing there? Under what circumstances did the sons of Eli sleep with them? Was this sex consensual? Was it procured under pressure? Can we imagine reference to a ritualized intercourse here? Can this be considered rape? While the Bible does not clarify any of these questions, Josephus writes about the transgressions of Hophni and Pinehas in a very harsh tone, claiming that:

These sons of Eli were guilty of injustice towards men, and of impiety towards God, and abstained from no sort of wickedness. Some of their gifts they carried off, as belonging to the honorable employment they had; others of them they took away by violence. They also were guilty of impurity with the women that came to worship God at the tabernacle, obliging some to submit to their lust by force, and enticing others by bribes; nay, the whole course of their lives was no better than tyranny (*Antiquities* 5:10:1).

Josephus relates to the actual sin against the women in the Tabernacle as rape of some of the women and as enticing others “by bribes.” This reading coincides with a tannaitic statement quoted regarding the reasons for the destructions of the Temples; this one refers to the destruction of the Shiloh:

א"ר יוחנן בן תורתא: מפני מה חרבה שילה? מפני שהיו בה שני דברים: גלוי עריות ובזיון קדשים. גלוי עריות דכתיב "וְעָלִי זָקֵן מְאֹד וְשָׁמַע אֶת כָּל אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשׂוּן בְּנָיו לְכָל יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֵת אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁכָּבוֹן אֶת הַנְּשִׁים הַצְּבָאוֹת פְּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד" (בבלי יומא ט, ע"א).

Rabbi Yohanan ben Torta said: Why was Shiloh destroyed? Because of two things that prevailed in it: sexual immorality and contempt of sanctified objects. Sexual immorality – as it is written: “Now Eli was very old, and he heard all that his sons did unto all Israel, and how that they lay with the women that assembled at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting” (*ibid*), (*bYom* 9a).

According to Yohanan ben Torta, Shiloh was destroyed because of two sins,^{vi} the two are referred to in the Bible itself – the sons of Eli despised the Holiness, since they took of the meat brought by the people offering at the Tabernacle by force. Ben Torta does not specifically mention the sons of Eli in both contexts, but it is obvious that just as **בזיון קודשים** was performed by them, also **גילוי עריות** (forbidden sexual relations) has to do with them, and the verse indirectly informing about it is now quoted. Yet next to this overt accusation, made by ben Torta just before or after Bar Kokhba's Revolt in the middle of the second century,^{vii} a later statement is cited in the Talmudic discussion, in which a clear reservation regarding this accusation is made by Rabbi Samuel bar Nahmani in the name of Rabbi Jonathan:

ואע"ג דאמר ר' שמואל בר נחמני, א"ר יונתן: כל האומר בני עלי חטאו אינו אלא טועה, מתוך ששהו את קיניהן מיהא מעלה עליהן הכתוב כאילו שכבוס (בבלי יומא ט, ע"א ע"ב).

Notwithstanding Rabbi Samuel bar Nahmani who said in the name of Rabbi Jonathan: Whosoever says, that the sons of Eli sinned is but mistaken; because they delayed offering up their nests, Scripture describes them as though they had lain with them (*bYom 9:a-b*).

Claiming that the sons of Eli did not actually engage in sex with the assembled women, Rabbi Jonathan maintains that their sin was instead, tardiness in tending to women's offering, and it is deemed as though they actually slept with them. We will come back to the women's offerings but first, let us consider this apologetic explanation. Clearly, it does not emerge from a literary reading of the biblical verse, but has nevertheless become a common and frequently quoted commentary of this troubling accusation. Later texts seem to interpret this reading rather than the actual verse, for example, in Genesis Rabbah we find the following elaboration:

אפשר כן בניו של אותו צדיק היו עושין אותו מעשה?! אמור מעתה: ע"י שהיו משהין את קיניהם לשילו להטהר, והן משהין אותן חוץ לבתיהם לילה אחד, העלה עליהם הכתוב כאלו שמשו עמהן (בראשית רבה פה, יב).

Could it be that the sons of that righteous (man) would do such a deed?!! Say from now on: by delaying their nest offerings [which they brought] to Shiloh, in order to be purified and they delayed them outside their homes

for one night, Scripture describes them as if they had intercourse with them (*GenR* 85:12).^{viii}

Another later midrash, that stemmed from Rabbi Jonathan's interpretation, says, that the women used to bring offerings after giving birth or after healing from genital discharge (זיבה), and the priests והיו נוטלין ומעבירין השעות ולא היו מקריבין (זיבה), and the priests בשעתן והיו בנות ישראל סבורות שנטהרו, והולכות ומשמשות לבתיהן ... משכיבין את הנשים עם בעליהן טמאות, ("they would take [the offering] and pass the hours and not offer it at its right time, and the daughters of Israel, thinking that they were purified, would go back and serve their homes ... [the priests] were causing the women to have intercourse with their husbands while they are impure" *Genesis Rabbati* 41:1).^{ix}

We have seen, that while Second Temple writers^x and early rabbinic sages did not hesitate to specify the guilt of Hophni and Pinehas, using even a more explicit language than the Bible itself to criticize them,^{xi} later rabbinic figures, dating from the third century on, deny the mere possibility that sexual intercourse between these priests and the women at the Shiloh Tabernacle actually occurred.^{xii}

Rabbi Jonathan's statement appears elsewhere in the Babylonian Talmud but in a different context. Unlike the text quoted above from tractate Yoma, the discussion in tractate Shabbat deals with several figures, who are depicted as dubious in the Bible – Reuben, the sons of Eli, the sons of Samuel, King David, King Solomon and King Josiah – saying about each one of them: "whosoever says, X sinned, is but mistaken" (*bShab* 55b-56b).^{xiii} The function of the allusion to the sin of each one of these figures may serve as a double-edged sword – on the one hand, it acquits them from sin but at the same time, by mentioning it, it makes the alleged sin present and apparent. By discussing these figures with relation to their alluded sins, there is a great chance that these will be remembered and not the amnesty from them (this brings to mind contemporary affairs, in which we sometimes remember a public figure involved in a scandal and do not recall whether s/he was eventually found guilty at all). One may claim that the repetitious formula mentioned above and the סימן (a mnemonic device, *bShab* 55b) provided to mark the order of the discussion may indeed make the guilt of each one of these apparent and remembered.^{xiv}

Let us now shortly survey the way medieval commentators dealt with the troubling accusation of the sons of Eli. Of all the classical commentators of the

Hebrew Bible, I am only aware of Rabbi Shlomo Yitshaki (Rashi) and Rabbi David Kimhi (Radak, of the 12-13th century in Provence), who argued, in their commentaries on the book of Samuel, that the verse should be understood in its literal sense (במשמעו), and even they add the common interpretation. Thus Radak adds: “some of our rabbis maintained that it is not literally meant.”

This apologetic explanation of Pinhas and Hophni's actions diverts the accusation from the realm of sexually related sins to sins against the Divine. And indeed Rashi, in his commentary to Rabbi Jonathan's claim, explains that they בביזיון קדשים חטאו (in contempt of sanctified objects they sinned, *bShab* 55b). In making this statement, Rashi, in contradiction to his own commentary to Samuel, chooses to turn away from both the literal interpretation and the biblical accusation voiced in Rabbi Yohanan ben Torta's statement, claiming that the sons were guilty of only one sin - contempt of holy objects. By so doing, he acquits them from sexually related sins.

II. Who are these women assembling at the entrance of the Tabernacle?

The questions we must now ask are, why was it easier for the rabbis to accept the accusation that these two priests committed sins against God, while they had difficulty relating to their sexual sins against the women? And no less interestingly, who are these הנָּשִׁים הַצְּבֹאוֹת (the assembling women)? What were they doing at the entrance of the Tabernacle of Shiloh? What can we learn from their practice about women's religiosity in antiquity, and how was it manifested publicly and with relation to authoritative figures, namely priests, all of whom were men? Let us see what can be learned from the above-quoted verse about the presence of the women in the Tabernacle.

Words stemming from the same grammatical root and form as הצְּבֹאוֹת are used elsewhere to describe ritual activity,^{xv} but one cannot ignore its military sound, since it comes from צב"א, which indicates military behavior^{xvi} and strong group bonding. In this case, it was a strong, cohesive group of women that may have been deemed a threat to the male priestly institution.^{xvii} Another interpretation is provided by a midrash in the Tanhuma (cited below), which understands the word הצְּבֹאוֹת, as causative, referring not only to the assembly of many women at the gate of the Tent of Meeting, but also to their bountiful conduct that caused the children of Israel to multiply as צבאות (hosts).

The actual meaning of the women's actions at the entrance of the Shiloh Tabernacle remains unclear. Let us consider the phrase relating to the women's

activity and presence at its gate, as it appears elsewhere. In a verse relating the exploits of women who donated mirrors for the construction of the basin in the Tent of Meeting it says: וַיַּעַשׂ אֶת הַכִּיּוֹר נְחֹשֶׁת וְאֶת כְּנֹו נְחֹשֶׁת בְּמִרְאֵת הַצְּבָאוֹת אֲשֶׁר: וַיַּעַשׂ אֶת הַכִּיּוֹר נְחֹשֶׁת וְאֶת כְּנֹו נְחֹשֶׁת בְּמִרְאֵת הַצְּבָאוֹת אֲשֶׁר: (And he made the laver of brass, and the base thereof of brass, of the mirrors of the assembling women who assembled at the door of the tent of meeting, *Exod* 38:8). Onkelos translates the phrase הַצְּבָאוֹת as נְשִׂיא דִּי אַתִּין לְצִלְאָה (the women who came to pray at the gate of the Tent of Meeting). The *Peshitta*, the Syriac translation of the Bible, also maintains that the women were praying at the gate as does the Aramaic translation for our verso from *I Sam* 2:22. The Septuagint in Exodus translates their action as צְמוֹת (fasting).^{xviii} The positive approach toward these women is emphasized even more in the Pseudo-Jonathan interpretative translation of the verse:

ועבד ית כיורא דנחשא וית בסיסיה דנחשא מן אספקלירי נחשא נשיא צניעותא,
 ובעידן דאתון לצלאה בתרע משכן זמנא הואן קיימין על קרבן אדמותהון ומשבחן
 ומודן ותייבין לגובריהון וילדן בנין צדיקין בזמן דמדכין מן סואבות דמהון (ת"י לשמות
 לח, ה).

And he made the laver of brass, and the base thereof of brass, of the mirrors of the modest women, while they came to pray at the door of the tent of meeting, they were standing by the offering of their lands and praised and thanked and returned to their husbands and bore righteous sons, while they were purified from the impurity of their blood (Pseudo-Jonathan *Exod* 38:8).

We see in Pseudo-Jonathan a very positive attitude toward the presence of the “modest women” at the gates of the Tent of Meeting. The translator depicts them as landowners and describes them as praising and thanking the Lord, while bringing offerings from their lands and adds that in so doing, they merited bearing “righteous sons”. According to this, the women had to be present, or at least, they were allowed to be there, while the priest offered their offering. This had not been stated in the Bible and rabbinic literature is rather obscure about it.^{xix}

In this commentary we sense no tension. No danger is depicted in the presence of the women at the gate of the Tent of Meeting and no menace is sensed in the communication between them and the priest. On the contrary, the description is of harmonious cooperation.

According to these readings, it appears that the women may indeed have had a ritual or even a liturgical role in the Tabernacle.^{xx} Could it be that women were

present there (albeit – “at the entrance” only) because they served there, or is it possible that at least in later generations this is how the matter was perceived? Why is it that what seemed natural and good in the Exodus narrative is suddenly perceived as dangerous and problematic in the book of Samuel? And even more troubling, why do later commentators blame the women at Shiloh for sexual transgressions when their sexual initiative in their interpretation of Exodus 38:8 is deemed positive? For this is exactly what we find in a number of later commentaries.

While some medieval commentators expressed hesitations regarding the transformation of a secular object meant for vanity and earthly needs (mirrors) into a holy vessel,^{xxi} others used it to show the praiseworthiness of the righteous women:

הנה היו בישראל נשים עובדות השם, שסרו מתאוות זה העולם ונתנו מראותיהן
גדבה, כי אין להם צורך עוד להתייפות. רק באות יום יום על פתח האהל מועד,
להתפלל ולשמוע דברי המצוות. וזהו "אשר צבאו פתח אוהל מועד" כי היו רבות
(אבן עזרא).

But there were pious women in Israel who overcame this worldly temptation [to look in the mirror and to make up their faces], and freely gave away their mirrors because they found no more need to beautify themselves, but came instead daily to the door of the tent of meeting to pray and hear religious discourses. The text says: “Who assembled at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting” ... because there were many of them (Ibn Ezra on *Exod* 38:8).^{xxii}

Ibn Ezra describes the assembling women as righteous since they gave up worldly vanity in order to dedicate themselves to pray and to engage in Divine teaching (even if as listeners only). It is perhaps not surprising that for this medieval commentator living in Spain they are, in a way, depicted as nuns, abstaining from worldly delights. Another reading of the verse from Exodus holds the women’s actions very highly but from an opposite stance – the following bold midrash tells of the righteous daughters of Israel who in spite of the pitiful conditions of slavery in Egypt, continued to look attractive and made sure that the Israelites continued to procreate,^{xxiii} using the mirrors to excite their husbands in order to have sex with them and to conceive. They later contributed these mirrors to the Tent of Meeting. The midrash now continues:

אתה מוצא בשעה שהיו ישראל בעבודת פרך במצרים, גזר עליהם פרעה שלא יהיו ישנים בבתיהם ושלא יהיו משמשין מטותיהם. אמר ר' שמעון בן חלפתא: מה היו בנות ישראל עושות? יורדות לשאוב מים מן היאור והקב"ה מזמין להם דגים קטנים בתוך כדיהם והן מוכרות ומבשלות מהן ולוקחות מהן יין והולכות לשדה ומאכילות את בעליהן שם. משהיו אוכלים ושותים נוטלות המראות ומביטות בהן עם בעליהם. זאת אומרת: 'אני נאה ממך', וזה אומר: 'אני נאה ממך' – ומתוך כך היו מרגילין עצמן לידי תאוה ופרין ורבין והקב"ה פוקדן לאלתר שנאמר: 'וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל פָּרוּ וַיִּשְׂרְצוּ וַיִּרְבוּ וַיַּעֲצְמוּ בְּמֵאֵד בְּמֵאֵד' (שמות א, ז) וכתוב בהן 'וַתִּמְלֵא הָאָרֶץ אֹתָם' (שם), 'כִּאֲשֶׁר יַעֲנוּ אֹתוֹ, כֵּן יִרְבֶּה וְכֵן יִפְרֹץ' (א, יב) בזכות אותן המראות שהיו מראות לבעליהן ומרגילות אותן לידי תאוה מתוך הפרך - העמידו כל הצבאות, שנאמר: 'יֵצְאוּ כָּל צְבָאוֹת ה' מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם' (שם יב, מא), ונאמר: 'הוֹצֵיא ה' אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם עַל צְבָאוֹתָם' (יב, נא).

כיון שאמר לו הקב"ה למשה לעשות את המשכן, עמדו כל ישראל ונתנדבו: מי שהביא כסף ומי שהביא זהב או נחשת ואבני שהם ואבני מלואים – הביאו בזריזות הכל. אמרו הנשים: מה יש לנו ליתן בנדבת המשכן? עמדו והביאו את המראות, והלכו להן אצל משה. כשראה משה אותן המראות זעף בהן, אמר להן לישראל: "טלו מקלות ושברו שוקיהן של אלו, המראות למה הן צריכין?!" אמר לו הקב"ה למשה: משה! על אלו אתה מבזה?! המראות האלו הן העמידו כל הצבאות הללו במצרים! טול מהם ועשה מהן כיוור נחשת וכנו לכהנים שממנו יהיו מתקדשין. שנאמר: 'וַיַּעַשׂ אֶת הַכִּיּוֹר נְחֹשֶׁת וְאֵת כַּנּוֹ נְחֹשֶׁת בְּמִרְאֵת הַצְּבָאוֹת אֲשֶׁר צָבְאוּ' (שמות לח, 8) באותן המראות שהעמידו את כל הצבאות האלו (תנחומא פקודי ט).

You find that when the Israelites suffered hard labor in Egypt that Pharaoh decreed that they should not sleep at home nor have sexual relations with their wives. Said Rabbi Simeon ben Halaftha: What did the daughters of Israel do? They would go down to draw water from the river. Whereupon the Holy One Blessed be He prepared small fishes for them inside their jars. They would cook some, sell some and buy with the proceeds wine and go out into the fields and give their husbands to eat there.^{xxiv} After they had eaten they took their mirrors and looked into them together with their husbands. She said: 'I am more comely than you'. He said: 'I am more comely than you'. In the course of this, their sexual desire was aroused and they became fruitful and multiplied, the Holy One Blessed be He forthwith remembering them (i.e. blessed them with issue), as it is stated: "And the children of Israel were fruitful and swarmed and multiplied and became exceedingly mighty" and it is written regarding

them: “and the land was filled with them ... but the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied.” Through the merit of those same mirrors which they showed their husbands arousing their sexual desire in the midst of the hard labor, they raised up all the hosts, as it is stated: “all the hosts of the lord went out of the Land of Egypt” (*Exod* 12:41) and “the lord did bring the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt by their hosts” (*ibid* 12:51).

As soon as the Holy One Blessed be He told Moses to make the Tabernacle, all Israel came along to contribute. Some brought silver, some gold or brass, onyx and stones to be set. They readily brought everything. Whereupon the women said: What have we to contribute to the offering of the tabernacle? They came along and brought the mirrors and presented themselves to Moses. When Moses saw the mirrors he was furious with them. He said to Israel: Take sticks and break the legs of those who brought them. What use are such mirrors?

Said the Holy One Blessed be He to Moses: Moses! You look down on them! It was these mirrors, which raised up all these hosts in Egypt! Take them and make out of them the basin and its stand for the priests in which they can purify themselves, as it is stated: 'And he made the laver of brass, and the base thereof of brass, of the mirrors of the assembling women who raised up hosts [literally – assembled] those same mirrors which raised up all these hosts (*Tanhuma, Pequdey* 9).^{xxv}

Here it is the women’s physicality and sexuality that is praised; their mirrors serve as a living reminder for the resourcefulness of the women in the dark years of slavery in Egypt. Not the denial of their sexuality is praised here but the positive use they made of the desire for life and survival. This midrash, that runs along the same line as the Pseudo-Jonathan’s interpretation, teaches about the close and intimate connection between women and the Holy. God reproves Moses and instructs him to use the women mirrors to build the basin, from which the priests were to purify themselves before performing sacred rituals. A midrashic tradition maintains that in addition to the basin, there was in the Tent of Meeting a ritual bath for women 'ואם הנשים היו טובלות, נחשב להם הטבילה כאילו עשו עבודת ה' (and when women would immerse [there] it would rank to them as though they were engaged in Divine service). This tradition explains the claim made by Pseudo-Jonathan that the women immersed and conceived “righteous sons”.^{xxvi}

In this midrash not only sexuality is depicted as a positive and vital force, the vanity of the women who used their mirror to arouse their husbands is portrayed

as positive. However, as opposed to this line of interpretation, in the verse quoted from I Samuel 2:22, the women's presence in the Shiloh Tabernacle is always deemed as danger. It is true that they are not explicitly accused of seducing the priests but the verse remains unclear about the nature of the sexual relation between them. In general it is not unlikely that priests took advantage of the fact that women were dependant on them for obtaining a state of ritual purity. However it seems that the opposite situation, namely that the women may have tempted the priest, was deemed even more troubling for the sages.

III. Women and priests

Here are some further thoughts on the matter. According to the often quoted talmudic tradition cited above, Eli's sons delayed the women's offering, perhaps due to the fact that many women brought bird offering, the smallest animal sacrifice, which hence contained only a small amount of meat for their consumption.^{xxvii} Of course, women could have also brought other sacrifices, not necessarily gender related, such as Thanksgiving-offering, Sin-offerings etc. But I wish to concentrate here on what was considered to be essentially women sacrifice, namely bird offering.

The apologetic statement of Rabbi Jonathan may reveal an awareness to the possible problematic ramifications of the encounter between priests and women. I have shown elsewhere that tractate *Qinnim* in the Mishnah, which deals with bird offerings brought mostly by women after giving birth or after being purified from genital discharge, stresses a complex situation: the woman has the right to designate the birds in her nest according to her choice and the priest must abide by her directions. At the same time, indirectly but clearly, she is recommended to refrain from making any special requests regarding her nest, lest mistakes disqualify it and cause her to resort to expensive replacements (*mQin* 3:6). Not designating her nest decreases the chance for mistakes and confusion to the minimum but also minimizes the time that the woman must spend with the priest.^{xxviii} At the same time it also reduces the participation of the woman in the service considerably.

The unuttered assumption in the verse is that women stayed in the Tabernacle during the offering process and that they wanted to play an active part in it (see the translations quoted above for הַצְבָּאוֹת in Exodus).^{xxix} Although they were allowed to resume their marital relations with their husbands after seven or fourteen days from birth depending on the baby's sex (*Lev* 1-4), Rabbi Jonathan

claims they did not want to leave the Tabernacle before making sure that their nests were properly offered.

This may reveal a complex picture: the women were torn between two institutions – the Tabernacle and their homes and between two male figures – the priest (who represents God) and their husband. When they had to pledge allegiance, it was not always clear that they would choose to go back home. Clearly, bringing a nest offering was not an everyday event^{xxx} but it may underline the rabbis' anxiety concerning women's religiosity and desire to participate in the public rituals in a way that would lessen their commitment to their homes and husbands.^{xxxii} The situation portrays the women in the Tabernacle in a dualistic position: On the one hand, the picture is a powerful one – many women assembling at the Tabernacle's gate, and although many of them brought birds offerings, the smallest animal offering, they supply the priests with nourishment. But on the other hand, they are put in a rather vulnerable position. Even though the talmudic statement refuses to accept the literal reading of *I Sam 2:22*, according to which, the women were sexually approached (violated?) by the priests, the fact that the women were dependent on the priests and subject to their manipulations may have served as a warning to those women who desired to be involved in worship in the public domain.

Some commentators viewed the women's active involvement in their nest offering inappropriate. For example, on Rabbi Jonathan statement "Whosoever says, that the sons of Eli sinned is but mistaken" (*bYom. 9b*) HaMeiri wrote: "They [the sons of Eli] made the women wait [for the offering of their] nests, and that is why it is written that it was as if they slept with them. It means that because of that [delay] they came home late, and that was hateful [to their husbands]. It is not the [only] matter. It was also that they treated themselves lavishly and did not come back to their husbands before their nests were offered." Instead of hailing the women who wanted to make sure that their nests were properly offered and wanted to witness it themselves, the Ashkenazi commentator criticizes.

The potential danger in the encounter of a woman and a priest may also be demonstrated in the following tradition. The story is found in the context of the Temple vessels immersion:

אמר רבי בון בר חייה: אני אומר, שהיה שם אחד מן הכהנים שיצא לדבר עם האשה על עיסקי קינה, ונתזה צינורה של רוק מתוך פיה על בגדיו וטימתו (י' חגיגה ג, ה; עט, ע"ד).

Rabbi Bun, son of Rabbi Hiyyah said: I say that one of the priests there went out to speak with a woman about matters of her nest and a spittle of saliva from her mouth sprayed on his clothing, defiling him (*yHag* 3:8, 79d).

In this incident, the woman's accidental spitting on the priest's garments, while discussing her nest offering, defiled him.^{xxxii} Although brought in a different context altogether, this tradition may attest to the tension and danger encapsulated in encounters between women and priests, caused by the law that requires a woman to reveal intimate information about her status to a stranger. Conversely, could it be because of the mere encounter between the two? One would suspect that both scenarios are possible.

Let us take a closer look at the incident of the woman and the priest, the expectoration or ejaculation, if you will, of a bodily fluid from the woman to the man has clear sexual overtones. Here the woman is the active party; it is her spittle that crosses the boundary between her and the priest, and her involuntary action carries physical ramifications.^{xxxiii} The same is true regarding the woman's role as the offerer. She is the initiator; she comes to the priest; and she has the right to determine the destination of the birds. This may explain in part the ambiguity in rabbinic literature toward her role in the bird offering process. The power discourse in this situation can be demonstrated by the following parallel about defiling spittle:

מעשה בשמעון בן קמחית שיצא עם המלך ערב יום הכפורים עם חשיכה, ונתזה צינורה של רוק מפיו על בגדיו וטימאתו. נכנס יהודה אחיו ושימש תחתיו בכהונה (י' יומא א, א; לח ע"ד).

It is told about Shimeon ben Qimhit, who went out with the king on the evening of the Day of Atonement when it was dark. And a spittle of saliva was sprinkled from his (the king's) mouth and defiled him. His brother Yehudah went in and served instead of him as a priest (*yYom* 1:1, 5a, cf. *yMeg* 1:10, 72a^{xxxiv}; *bYom* 47a)

In this case, the power relations are clear – the immediate contact with a distinguished king, caused an involuntary defilement of the High Priest on the evening of the Day of Atonement. This close contact with this man of authority led to a drastic outcome. Needless to say that a woman is not an authoritative or powerful figure in her contact with the priest, but like the king her decisions

obligate the priest, and he has to obey her choices regarding the designation of her nest, and at the same time, close proximity between the two parties, may expose the (Jewish) man to danger and defilement.

In conclusion, many of the interpretations of the phrase **הַנְּשִׂים הַצְּבֹאוֹת** (the assembling women) reflect an appreciation for women who want to be religiously active, even if strictly speaking they were not legally required to it. However there is a duality in the evaluation of these pious practices – the presence of women in the public sphere provokes anxiety and ranks as danger. Even when performing acts of piety, women are mostly judged according to their physicality and not according to the quality of their religious action.^{xxxv}

And yet, we can rephrase the last sentence in a more positive manner – female religiosity is holistic, body and mind are joined together in their worship and there is no separation between the spiritual and the physical. More and more contemporary Jews aim to combine all parts of their being, may be inspired by this kind of religiosity.

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ⁱ For an instructive discussion of the issue, see for example: Shaye Cohen: “From the Maccabees to the Mishnah”, Louisville (KY) 1989, pp. 60-103; Ed P. Sanders: “Common Judaism and the Synagogues in the First Century”, in: Steven Fine (ed.), *Jews, Christians, and Polytheists in the Ancient Synagogue*, London/New York, pp. 1-17; idem, *Judaism: Practice and Belief, 63 Bce-66 CE*, London/Philadelphia 1992, pp. 45-313.

ⁱⁱ The motif of the sons of Eli, who do not follow in their father’s footsteps, repeats itself several times in the book of Samuel – the sons of Samuel fail to follow their father as do the sons of Saul and the sons of David. Eli’s feeble rebuke toward his sons may pre-figure David’s indecisive approach to his children.

ⁱⁱⁱ The biblical narrator tells of “the custom of the priests with the people” (2:13), which doesn’t correspond with the Deuteronomic description (Deuteronomy 18:3). The sons of Eli took for themselves “all that the flesh-hook brought up” (2:14), and not the prescribed parts of the offered animal, as specified in Deuteronomy. The verse in the Torah instructs the Israelites as follows: “And this shall be the priests’ due from the people, from them that offer a sacrifice, whether it be ox or sheep, that they shall give unto the priest the shoulder, and the two cheeks, and the

jaw” (Deuteronomy *ibid*). Here however, it is emphasized that the priests forcefully took from the raw meat.

^{iv} Professor Rofé communicated this suggestion to me in a conversation.

^v Irmtraud Fischer holds the opinion that the women, who assembled at the entrance of the Tabernacle, carry out a cultic service similar to that of the Levites. To support her point of view she refers to the equal use of the word constellation (cf. the use of the participle of the verb) *bc* in 1 Samuel 2:22 and in Numbers 8:24 (see Fischer, pp. 103-104). Fischer provides a helpful summary of German language publications and further information regarding the subject of the women, who assembled at the entrance of the Tabernacle: Irmtraud Fischer:

“Gotteskünderinnen. Zu einer geschlechterfairen Deutung des Phänomens der Prophetie und der Prophetinnen in der Hebräischen Bibel”, Stuttgart 2002, pp. 95-108; concerning this subject see also: Christine Stark: “«Kultprostitution» im Alten Testament?. Die Qedeschen der Hebräischen Bibel und das Motiv der Hurerei”, OBO 221, Fribourg/Göttingen 2006.

^{vi} The category of sexual sins is one of the three types of transgression that require dying rather than committing. The rule is set in the Talmud: “Rabbi Yohanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimeon ben Jehozadak: It was decided by a vote in the loft of the house of Nitezeh in Lod: For all the sins in the Torah, if a man is told: Transgress and you will not be killed, he should transgress and not be killed, except for idol worship, forbidden sexual relations and bloodshed” (bSan 74a). The second accusation of the sons of Eli is not ranked as idol worship, but it is related to inappropriate worship.

^{vii} Moshe Beer: “The Sons of Eli in the Rabbinic Aggadah”, Ramat Gan 1973, pp. 84-85 (in Hebrew).

^{viii} In the same way, but further from the literary meaning of the verse, the 13th century Rabbi Levi ben Gershon from Provence interprets it: וראוי שתדע שאין הכונה בזה הענין המשגל שאם היה הענין כן היה ראוי שיגנה הנביא שבא לעלי בני עלי על זה החטא העצום ולא מצאנו שגנה אותם רק על החטא... [ש]היו מתעצלין בהקרבת זה החטא העצום (And it is important that you know, that this matter does not mean sexual intercourse, for if that were the case, it would be fitting for the prophet who visited Eli [2:27-36] to rebuke him for that horrendous sin, and we found only that he rebuked him for the sin ... that they were lazy in offering their offerings, in a way that [caused the women] to sleep before their nests were offered). Here the “lay” is understood as “spend the night”.

^{ix} This explanation is problematic from a legal point of view, since at that stage, the women were not forbidden to have sex with their husbands. They were only

forbidden to partake in the consumption of family offerings brought to the Temple (Leviticus 12:1-4).

^x Another Second Temple writer who treats the sons of Eli harshly is Pseudo-Philo, although he doesn't mention the sexual crimes ascribed to them (Montague R. James (ed.): "The Biblical Antiquities of Philo", New York 1971, pp. 218-220). See: Beer, "Sons", 80-84.

^{xi} Regarding the rabbinic perception of the tale of Eli's sons, it is interesting to consider Moshe Zipor's treatment of the tanaaitic instruction: "The Blessing of the Priests... may not be read and translated" (mMeg 4:10; tMeg 4:8; bMeg 25). It appears within the framework of a list of restricted texts, of which some should not be translated to the vernacular, and therefore are to be understood by educated people only, and some should not be read at all. While it is clear why the rabbis wanted to restrict the exposure of shameful or embarrassing stories (such as that of Reuven and Bilhah), it was not clear to the Amoraic sages, nor to commentators ever since, what could be the difficulty with the Priestly Benediction. Zipor surveys the various explanations and then suggests that the phrase *ברכת כהנים* (the Blessing of the Priests) is a mere euphemism to *קללת הכהנים* (the Curse of the priests), relating to the story of Eli's sons, and more specifically to the phrase *מְקַלְלִים לָהֶם בְּנָיו* (I Samuel 3:13). See: Moshe Zipor: "The Blessing of the Priests is not Read and not Translated?", in: *Textus 24* (2009), pp. 221-238. If Zipor is right, then we are witnessing another method of avoiding the troubling text – omitting it from public attention. Clearly, one may claim the opposite, namely that singling the troubling texts out may cause more attention to be given to them, at least in educated circles where these restrictions are learned.

^{xii} Beer maintains that the criticism against the sons of Eli, as the criticism against the sons of Moses and the sons of Samuel, was intended to prevent the nepotism. Those sages, who practiced a more lenient approach toward these biblical figures, represent a more positive attitude toward such appointments claims Beer (Beer, *ibid*, pp. 91-93).

^{xiii} The figures are mentioned in a chronological order and can be divided into two groups: sons of important figures who did not walk in the ways of their father (Reuven, the sons of Eli and the sons of Samuel) and Kings of the Judean kingdom (David, Solomon and Josiah). On this Talmudic discussion, see: Reuven L. Kalmin, "Portrayals of Kings in Rabbinic Literature of Late Antiquity", in: *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 3 (1996), pp. 341-322; Refael Yarhi: "Whosoever says, that David sinned is but mistaken: Pedagogical, Epistemological and Ethical

Aspects”, in: *Derekh Haaggadah* 1 (1998), pp. 171-198 (in Hebrew); Israel Rosenson: “Whosoever says, that David sinned is but mistaken? A Midrashic-Educational Discussion”, in: *Derekh Haaggadah*, 1 (1998), pp. 92-125 (in Hebrew); Avigdor Shinan: “King David in the Rabbinic Literature”, in: Yair Zakovitch (ed.), *David: From Shepherd to Messiah*, Jerusalem 1995, pp. 191-198 (in Hebrew).

^{xiv} Another possible reading of the formula: “whosoever says, X sinned is but mistaken”, is that it does not intend to acquit these figures from guilt. Instead it has to be read in the context of the larger Talmudic discussion, which is dedicated to the *תוכחה* (the duty to reprove a person who did wrong). This is how my colleague, Rabbi Shlomo Fox, reads the talmudic discussion. According to this reading, claiming that a certain person is sinful is wrong, since the essence of the duty to reprove is intended first and foremost to move the reprovved party to correct his/her conduct.

^{xv} For example: (במדבר ד, 23) “כָּל הַבָּא לְעִבְדָּהּ לְעִבְדָּהּ בְּאֵהָל מוֹעֵד (במדבר ד, 23) (“all that enter in to wait upon the service, to do service in the tent of meeting”, Numbers 23:4).

^{xvi} The Ben-Yehudah Dictionary explains the verb *צָבָא* as follows: *צבא על האויב*, *יצא למלחמה עליו, הסתדר לקראתו כמו צבא* (assembled toward the enemy, went to war against it, attained military order against [the enemy] as an army”, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, *Thesaurus Totius Hebraeae*, vol. XI, Jerusalem 1951, p. 5354.

^{xvii} In her unpublished Doctoral dissertation, Chana Safrai deals with the concept of *חבורות של נשים* (women [worship?] groups). She shows that the rabbis attitude toward these groups was rather negative (mPes 8:7; tPes 8:6; yPes 8:7, 36a; bPes 91a).

^{xviii} This translation may be due to a confusion of the letters *מ* and *ב*, which is a common one.

^{xix} While a large part of tractate Qinnim, that deals with bird offering, which were considered a feminine sacrifice, depicts necessary communications between the offerer and the priest, it is hard to reconstruct the actual state of affairs.

Elsewhere, the Mishnah tells of a completely different practice, that of the thirteen horn shaped chests (*שופרות*) which served as receptacles of money for the different purposes inscribed on them (mSheq 6:5; tSheq 3:1). The word Qinnim was inscribed on one of these chests (see: tSheq 3:2, *חלק, תוספתא כפשוטה, חלק*, 699-700 עמ' ד). This way, there was no direct contact between the offerer and the specific birds chosen for their offering (see: Dalia Marx: “Tractate Qinnim: Margins or Horizons”, forthcoming).

^{xx} Susan Grossman: “Women and the Jerusalem Temple”, in: Susan Grossman/Rivkah Haut (eds), *Daughters of the King*, Philadelphia (PA) 1992, pp. 18. One scholar even suggested that they practiced ritual prostitution, see: Phillip Sigal: “Elements of Male Chauvinism in Classical Halakhah”, in: *Judaism*, 24 (1975), p. 235.

^{xxi} See: Admiel Kosman, “The Creation of the Basin and its Base in the Mirrors of the Assembling Women and with Regard to the Wisdom of the Women”, *Bar Ilan* 279 (1999) <http://www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/veyakhel/kos.html>, and reference there.

^{xxii} The translation is based on Nehama Leibovitz’s online commentary of the Torah for Parashat Pekudei (<http://tinyurl.com/6jzx84p>).

^{xxiii} See bSot 11b.

^{xxiv} Compare to bSot 11b. The rest of the midrash, namely the role of the mirrors in creating the צבאות (the hosts of Israel) is unique to the Tanhuma

^{xxv} Rashi follows this direction in his commentary but is not as explicit as the midrash:

The daughters of Israel came along with the mirrors they gazed into to adorn themselves. Even those they did not refrain from bringing as an offering to the tabernacle. But Moses rejected them because they were made to satisfy the evil inclination. Whereupon the Holy One Blessed be He said to him: Accept! For these are dearer to me than everything else, because through them the women raised up countless hosts in Egypt...

When their husbands were weary from the hard labour, they would go along and bring them food and drink, give them to eat and take the mirrors. Each one would look into the mirror together with her husband and egg him on with words saying: I am more comely than you. In the course of this they would arouse their husbands’ desire and copulate, becoming pregnant and giving birth there, as it is stated: “Under the apple tree I aroused thee” (Song 8:5). To this the text “Mirrors that raised up hosts” refers, whereof the basin was made... (Rashi to Exodus 38:8).

The English translation of the midrash and commentary are taken from Nehama Leibovitz online commentary of the Torah. The motif of the merit of the “assembling women” appears already, though very briefly, in the *Mechilata de-Rabbi Yishmael*, pisha, bo, 16 (ed. Horowitz-Rabin, p. 62). Regarding the connection between mirrors and magic, see: Daniel Sperber, *Magic and Folklore in Rabbinic Literature*, Ramat Gan 1996, pp. 63-64.

^{xxvi} Midrash habiur on Exodus 38:8. And see Kosman, *HaKiyor*.

^{xxvii} Although we must bear in mind that the bird sin-offering is the only type of sin-offering that is consumed in its entirety by the priest. See: Menachem Makover “Bird Offerings”, in: *Ma‘alin ba-Qodesh* 4 (2000), pp. 105-116.

^{xxviii} Even if we disregard Rabban Shimeon ben Gamaliel’s ruling, see Dalia Marx, *Qinnim*.

^{xxix} Also the 20th century legalist, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, commented on the women’s desire to attend the sacrificial process (*Igrot Moshe, Hoshen Mishpat* 54).

^{xxx} Marx, *Qinnim*.

^{xxxi} This reluctance to allow women’s independent religiosity reminds one of another rabbinic tradition about a husband who was furious with his wife who went to hear Rabbi Meir’s teaching and came home late (*ySot* 1:4, 5a-b; *LevR* 9:9; *NumR* 9:20; *DeutR* 5:15). Daniel Boyarin: “Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture”, Berkeley (CA) 1993, pp. 187-188; Bernadette Brooten: “Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue: Inscriptional Evidence and Background Issues”, Chico (CA) 1982, p. 141; Michael Satlow: “Fictional Women,” in: Peter Schäfer (ed.), *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Greco-Roman Culture III*, Tübingen 2002, p. 237; Galit Hasan-Rokem: “Rabbi Meir, the Illuminated and the Illuminating: Interpreting Experience,” in: Carol Bakhos (ed.), *Current Trends in the Study of Midrash*, Leiden 2006, pp. 232-234.

^{xxxii} As we will see below, עכו"ם (an idol worshiper) is always considered a zav, and therefore his spittle causes the person that comes in contact with it to contract impurity (*bNid* 34a). Similarly, since there is usually no knowledge regarding the state of purity of a specific woman, she too ranks as a zava, and therefore, her spittle caused the priest impurity.

^{xxxiii} This is not the only case where reference to a spitting woman has sexual overtones and is linked to a relationship in which the woman has authority. It is told about the same Rabbi Yehoshu‘a, that he visited an influential foreign woman, a matronita with whom he has to discuss a political matter. After the conversation we are informed that Rabbi Yehoshu‘a immersed himself, in what could have implied that they had sexual contact. However his disciples interpret his action, saying: “perhaps some spittle spurted from her mouth upon the Rabbi’s garments” (*bShab* 127b). On matrona (matronita) figures, see: Moshe Ganan: “Matrona”, *Shana B’sahna* (2003), pp. 131-150; Tal Ilan: “Massekhet Ta’anit”, Tübingen 2008, pp. 181-183.

^{xxxiv} In this secondary location the king is described as ערבי (an Arabian), but this is probably a scribal error, and the scribe intended to write ערבית (i.e. in the evening).

^{xxxv} See the classical article on the subject by Sherry B. Ortner: “Is Female to Male as Nature to Culture?”, in: Rosaldo Michelle Zimbalist/Louise Lamphere (eds.), *Women, Culture and Society*, Stanford 1974, pp. 67-87 and her later account of the matter: “Making gender: the Politics and Erotics of Culture”, Boston (MA) 1996.

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