

BOOK REVIEW

***Sorrow and Distress in the Talmud*, by Shulamit Valler**

Reviewed by Chaya Halberstam

Biography: Chaya Halberstam is Associate Professor of Hebrew Bible and Judaism at King's University College at the University of Western Ontario. She is the author of *Law and Truth in Biblical and Rabbinic Literature* (IUP, 2010).



Meorot 10
Tevet 5773
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A Publication of
Yeshivat Chovevei Torah
Rabbinical School

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In the modern Western world, law and emotion are often seen as opposite and mutually exclusive. The practice of law—judging in particular, but legislating as well—is understood as best done with utter impartiality if not indifference. As if to underscore this point, several years ago, conservatives attacked President Obama for invoking the “quality of empathy” in assessing what makes a good Supreme Court judge.¹ But scholarship on law and emotion, at least since the late 1990s, has come to reject this separation between the sphere of law (rationality, impartiality, efficiency, democracy) and emotion (irrationality, partiality, excess, opacity). Emotion is currently seen to be much more in harmony with cognitive and ethical impulses and practices, just as law has been shown to be thoroughly infused with emotional currents. A leading scholar of philosophy, Martha Nussbaum, has traced the interdependence of emotion, law, and ethics back to Greek antiquity.² The same might be done with Jewish antiquity, and Shulamit Valler’s *Sorrow and Distress in the Talmud* excavates the Babylonian Talmud specifically to reveal the vivid emotional world that lurks beneath the sages’ Torah study and *halakhic* decision-making. Valler remarks in her preface that it is the first of a series of books on the variety of emotions represented in the Talmud.

Valler’s book is, first and foremost, a compendium of rich talmudic stories about sadness: for the most part as experienced by sages, and for the most part regarding their perceived shortcomings in the rabbinic academy or the spiritual world. Valler’s readings of these stories are meticulous and thorough. She locates

parallel sources, teases out the narratives’ nuances, and explicates even seemingly irrelevant details, showing their significance. Drawing the stories together, Valler sketches some larger pictures of the causes of sorrow for the rabbinic sages and the trying social and professional networks in which the sages struggled.

The book’s chief weakness, however, is that it does little to surround these observations with the vast scholarship available in theory of emotion or history of late antique Babylonian Judaism. Theoretically, notwithstanding an appendix by Alex Aviv on self-psychology written as a complement to chapter two, the book falls short of defining emotion, or sorrow and distress specifically, from a psychological, cognitive, or philosophical standpoint. Valler occasionally makes off-hand remarks such as “the fierce anguish of the sages ... is based on an egocentric approach to life” (103) or “the dream is seen as expressing the sub-conscious mind” (58) which come across as anachronistic or unsubstantiated because they are not grounded in any studies of emotion or discussions of late antique thought. Moreover, comments which attempt to place the rabbis’ emotions in concrete historical context draw only very minimally from the growing amount of historical scholarship on Jewish life in Sassanian Babylonia.

Valler describes her own methodology as “a critical reading approach whose [sic] purpose was to understand what Yona Fraenkel called ‘harmony of content and form.’ In other words, to investigate the literary features of the

sources—structure, style, and language—and to use these to reveal the meanings” (15). What Valler describes here is a literary critical method known as New Criticism, which was popular in the middle of the last century and has since been criticized for turning a blind eye to the real people and cultures that produce and consume these texts. Can “meanings” be revealed by a text without regard to the people who wrote it, edited it, and read it? Is meaning produced on a page, or between speakers and audiences? Do our own biases and conceptual frameworks not inevitably color and shape the meanings we “discover”? Valler continues by admitting that she was often “not satisfied with merely uncovering meanings, but ... rather [wished] to explain [the stories] according to the social reality and cultural milieu in which the sources were created” (15).

This contextual awareness helps rescue much of Valler’s interpretations from the New Critical vacuum, but what remains underwritten is the inevitable exchange between the sages’ “social reality and cultural milieu” and the “meanings” of the stories they write and redact. Valler rarely questions the motives of the authors and editors of the Talmudic stories she cites, seeing them instead as faithful adaptations of real situations or neatly constructed fictions. She does not thoroughly investigate who wrote these stories, when, and, most importantly perhaps, *why*.

Despite some of these flaws, Valler’s work and her detailed textual readings illuminate the largely-ignored emotional world of the Talmud, and her book works well as a first study of a subject that needs to break new ground and cover a vast quantity of material. Chapters 1-3 organize the sources terminologically: chapter one explores the talmudic stories which use the word *mitzta’er*, chapter two covers *bulshat da’at*, and chapter three examines *bechi*. While these words are roughly translated as sorrow, extreme sorrow, and weeping respectively, these definitions are rightly not strictly adhered to, as each of these terms evidences a semantic range—and signifies various emotions—across

the stories (for example, Valler remarks in chapter three that in addition to grief, weeping at times signifies “insult, anger, disappointment or happiness” [182]). Chapters 4-5 are organized thematically, with chapter four exploring emotional responses to the death of children, and chapter five investigating narratives of sorrow in which women play a role. The turn from terminological to thematic organization is not jarring, however, because even while the first three chapters are delimited by the particular word used for sadness, Valler expertly ties the narratives together conceptually and/or thematically as well.

Can “meanings” be revealed by a text without regard to the people who wrote it, edited it, and read it?

Chapter one, the chapter on *tza’ar*, or sorrow, essentially finds that sorrow is generally linked to the world of Torah, and that there is a distinction in the way this sorrow is represented by the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds. Valler concludes that the BT stories are more “didactic” (53), portraying the sages’ sorrow over the mostly deliberate misuse of rabbinic status for some kind of personal gain. The JT narratives, on the other hand, are not connected to scholarly status but rather sorrow over the loss of Torah in the world or the inability to perform commandments as the rabbis might have wished. Where I depart from Valler’s analysis, however, is her assessment that this distinction reflects a divide between fiction and reality. Valler writes that “the laconic nature of the [JT] narratives, and the different causes of sorrow being described all support the presumption that they are close to being reports of *actual events*” (53, emphasis mine); in contrast, the BT narratives “take on the aspect of *literary creations* with a didactic agenda” (53). The evidence does not bear out such a historical conclusion, but Valler nonetheless helpfully points out the very different agendas that might

lurk behind the construction of the BT versus the JT narratives.

The second chapter explores “extreme distress” (*hulshat da’at*), which Valler finds is associated most often with competition for what she calls “spiritual greatness,” and which breaks down to: 1) competition over rabbinic status; 2) displaying complete authority in expertise as compared to students; 3) competition among students; 4) perceived failures in achieving spiritual greatness and 5) competition with both sages and “simple people ... for Divine love” (103). Because it is these types of failures—all to do with perceived lack of ranking, authority, or divine approval—that bring about extreme distress, Valler understands this emotion as resulting from “an egocentric approach to life” (*ibid.*). She presses on, however, trying to understand why the sages would have adopted such an outlook. Her conclusion is psychological-historical:

In Jewish society, which was a completely closed religious society that placed Torah study at its center, the natural masculine competitive drive was channeled towards the world of Torah and the study hall, and there against the backdrop of the culture of argumentation and polemic it developed to immense proportions and brought about a severe deterioration in human relationships within the band of scholars. (107)

There is much in this analysis that is convincing; most significantly, Valler’s observation that Torah study would be no different from any other institution just because it was understood as a spiritual or God-centered pursuit. The sacred nature of Torah study did not exempt its practitioners from egocentric concerns and competitive, even aggressive, behaviors; in fact, it might have exacerbated them, given that the stakes of the pursuit were that much higher. But other aspects of this interpretation seem somewhat reductive, such as naming the competitive drive “masculine” without enough of a theoretical framework on gender or

referring to Jewish society as “completely closed” (is any society at any point in history ever *completely* closed?). Valler’s conclusions also beg the question of why the sages would have written, edited and indeed canonized such unflattering stories about themselves. Is there a didactic agenda regarding these stories as well? If so, it is not particularly overt. Were these stories intended to circulate beyond the walls of the *bet midrash*, and if so, what purpose were they meant to serve?

The sacred nature of Torah study did not exempt its practitioners from egocentric concerns and competitive behaviors

Chapter three looks at the activity of weeping, which often (though not always) expresses sorrow. Valler insightfully distinguishes stories of weeping from stories of distress by revealing that while *hulshat da’at* often depicts a self-centered sorrow, weeping almost always signifies “an expression of sorrow for another person or for the collective, free of egocentric concerns” (182; again, the position is perhaps overstated, as it is hard to imagine any emotion experienced by an individual being *entirely* free of egocentric concerns, but her overall point is nonetheless taken). Here Valler notes a distinction between stories about *Tannaim* and stories about *Amoraim*: *Tannaim* are portrayed as expressing sadness about catastrophic or tragic events, while *Amoraim* are depicted as weeping in response to biblical verses “that reminded them of divine punishment” (182) or made them question God’s justice. But in the end these two types of stories are aligned in terms of the causes of sorrow and the communal and fellow-feeling that they signify. While it is not altogether clear *why* weeping is used so differently in Talmudic stories from other expressions of distress, Valler’s distinction between “egocentric” sorrow and empathic sorrow is fundamental and ought to be taken into account in any further study of emotion in rabbinic literature.

Chapter four shifts away somewhat from emotion in and of itself toward the practice of mourning: specifically, mourning over the death of children. Valler finds that:

“paradoxically, ... the sages named in these [sic] narratives bear their grief with restraint; they are not beset by profound despair (*bulshat da’at*), they do not weep, and they are not even described as grieving all of their lives” (233).

Nevertheless, Valler reads these stories closely to ascertain the specific emotions and their causes associated with descriptions of sages mourning children: 1) *pain* due to the lack of explanation for premature death; 2) frustration over theological questions about divine justice; and 3) loneliness and a “need ... to be surrounded and embraced” (237) during the period of mourning. As much as this chapter is an analysis of expressions of sorrow, it is also a study of the practice of mourning, an encounter with challenge of what constitutes comfort.

Emotion in the Talmud has been overlooked because it is considered a “feminine” subject

The final chapter moves one step farther away from investigating the depiction of emotions in the Talmud to examine how responses to grief might be gendered. This chapter lays bear, perhaps, a feminist project that has been implicit from the beginning in Valler’s work: that emotion in the Talmud has been overlooked because it is generally considered a “feminine” subject; that most of the depictions of the sages’ anguish result from hyper-masculinized, competitive values; that we would do well to remember that the valorized (male) sages often felt sorrow and distress, and that they openly wept.

In chapter five, Valler points out a dichotomy in how men and women are portrayed in Talmudic narratives when confronting grief: men “focus ... on themselves and [are] apprehensive about their honor” and they “become powerless”

(271); women, on the other hand, “become more empowered: ... they are sensitive and loyal to their fellows, they are able to seize the initiative and take action to help or rescue even at the price of setting aside their own feelings and waiving their dignity” (272).

This gender division is fascinating and astutely observed; however, it leaves more questions open than it resolves. First and foremost, is it “empowering” that the women in the Talmud, during times of sorrow, display sensitivity (to men) and loyalty (to men) and set aside their own feelings or dignity? Though she does not say so explicitly, it appears that Valler would like to claim these stories on behalf of women, as positive portrayals of women’s experiences in the androcentric, rabbinic world, contrasting, in the last paragraph of the book, women’s sorrow which is “reserved and free of egotistical considerations” with “masculine outbursts of ego”(272).

But seeing women placed in care-giving roles, suppressing their own profound grief in order to sympathize with their husbands or work to alleviate their pain, in stories undoubtedly *written by men for other men*, does not strike me as a feminist victory for women of Late Antiquity, or for women today who want to find role models in a work they believe to have sanctity. Valler’s omission of any feminist theory in this chapter leads to somewhat facile conclusions about “women’s empowerment” that do little to rescue the Talmud, or Jewish women today from the androcentrism of traditional Judaism.

The feminist victory of this book is not the final chapter, but the emphasis Valler places on the significance of “trivial, feminine” subjects such as emotion in the masculinized world of Torah study. The study and practice of law, *halakhah*, is never indifferent or pristinely cerebral. Judging or decision making in the world of *halakhah* is rationally ordered, but it is also subject to vagaries of the emotions of *halakhic* practitioners. In the end, the *halakhic* system does not determine *halakhah*—people do.

NOTES

¹ http://www.upi.com/Top_News/Special/2010/06/28/Obama-empathy-questioned-at-Kagan-hearing/UPI-52001277761061/, accessed June 26, 2012.

² See, for example, Martha Nussbaum *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1990); "Equity and Mercy," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 22, 83 (1993); Emotion in the Language of Judging. *St. John's Law Review*, 70, 23 (1996). *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001).