

Beruriah



People of the Book
Boca Raton Synagogue
Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

Biography - Her Father



- ❧ Lived in the 2nd Century in Israel
- ❧ Ironically, we don't know her mother's name
- ❧ Her father was R' Chanina ben Tradyon
 - ❧ Lived in Siknin which housed a prominent Yeshiva (Sanhedrin 32b)
 - ❧ Gabbai of the communal tzedaka fund with which he was scrupulous (Bava Basra 10b)
 - ❧ He and his wife were murdered by the Romans for teaching Torah during the Hadrianic persecutions.
 - ❧ Beruriah witnessed their death



Biography – Her Father



- ❧ R' Chanina ben Tradyon was one of the Asarah Harugei Malchus (Ten Martyrs) whose story we read on Yom Kippur and Tisha B' Av
- ❧ He was wrapped in a Torah scroll and placed on a pyre of brush. Wet wool was placed on his chest to prolong his suffering and he was lit on fire.
- ❧ His students asked, "what do you see?" He answered, "I see the parchment burning while the letters of the law soar upward."
- ❧ The executioner took pity on R' Chanina and removed the wool while fanning the flame. He then plunged himself into the flames. (Avoda Zara 17b)



Biography – Siblings



- ❧ Rebbe Chanina ben Tradyon was survived by two daughters and a son.
- ❧ Beruriah's brother was very learned. (Tosefta Keilim Bava Kamma 4:17)

תנור מאימתי מקבל טומאה משיסיקנו כדי לאפות בו סופגנין ור' שמעון מטמא מיד. רבן שמעון בן גמליאל אומר משם רבי שילא הטיחו בטהרה ונטמא מאימתי טהרתו אמר ר' חלפתא איש כפר חנניא אני שאלתי את שמעון בן חנניא ששאל את בנו של ר' חנניא בן תרדיון ואמר משיסיענו ממקומו ובתו אומרת משיפשט את חלוקן כשנאמרו דברים לפני ר' יהודה בן בבא אמר יפה אמרה בתו מבנו:

- ❧ Ultimately, Beruriah's brother left observance to run with bandits and degenerates. (Eicha Rabbah 3:17)

[טז] ויגרס בחצץ שני. מעשה בבנו של ר' חנינא בן תרדיון שנתחבר ללסטים וגילה רזם והרגוהו, והלך אביו ומצאו במדבר, ופיו מלא עפר צרורות

Biography – Siblings



ברוריא דביתהו דר' מאיר ברתיה דר' חנינא בן
תרדיון הואי, אמרה לו: זילא בי מלתא דיתבא
אחתאי בקובה של זונות.

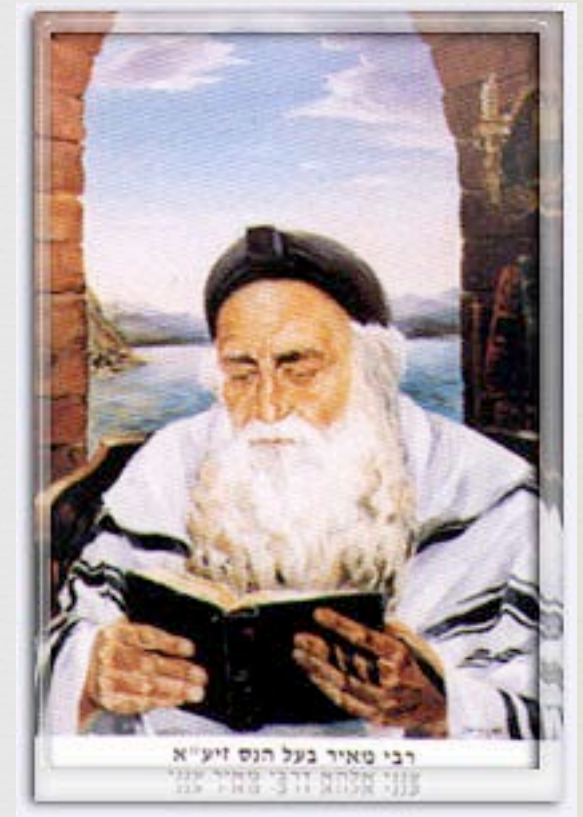
- ✧ Beruriah's sister was taken by the Romans and placed in a brothel to work as a prostitute. (Avodah zara 18a)
- ✧ Beruriah dispatched her husband, Rebbe Meir to rescue her.
- ✧ Rebbe Meir performed miracles and brought her back without her having compromised herself.
- ✧ That miracle earned him the title Rebbe Meir Ba'al Ha'Nes



Biography – Husband



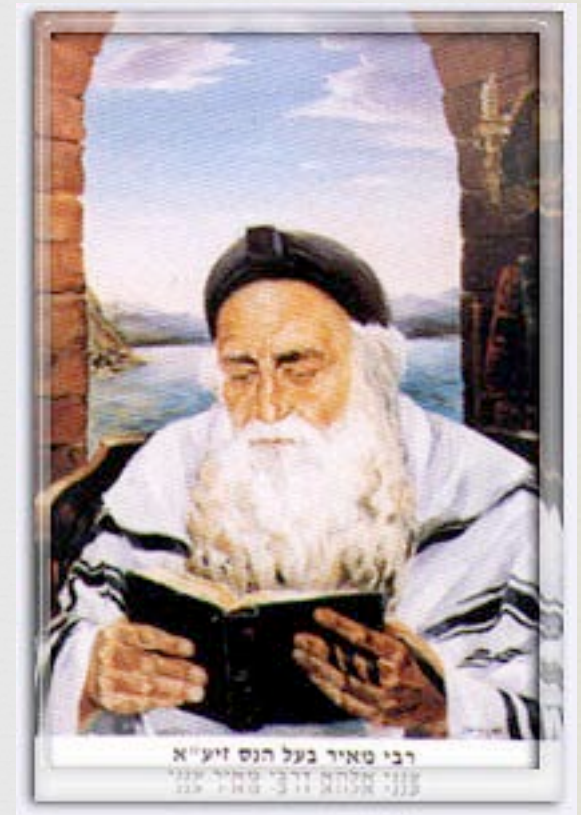
- ❧ Beruriah was married to the great 2nd c. Tanna, Rebbe Meir
- ❧ Rebbe Meir was one of 5 students R' Akiva ordained after Romans destroyed Judea and killed 24,000 of his students.
- ❧ Rebbe Meir descended from a Roman convert who was a close relative of the Emperor Nero (Gittin 56a)
- ❧ His was a sofer by profession (Gittin 67a)



Biography – Husband



- ❧ His real name was Nahori. The name Meir, meaning "Illuminator" in Hebrew, was given to him because he “enlightened” the eyes of scholars in Torah study and to know the light of Hashem.
- ❧ He was brilliant and could analyze issues from countless directions.
- ❧ He was bold, tenacious and stubborn.
- ❧ His teachings quoted throughout Mishna but only as Acheireim Omrim after his coup against Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel failed.
- ❧ He remained loyal to his teacher Elisha ben Avuya after his rebbe became a heretic and was known as Acheir.



Biography - Children



❧ Rebbi Meir was studying in the beit midrash one shabat afternoon, when his two sons died suddenly. What did their mother [Beruriah] do? She left the two of them on the bed, and pulled a sheet over them. When shabat concluded, Rebbi Meir returned from the beit midrash and asked, “Where are my two sons?” Beruriah answered. “They went to the beit midrash.” “But I looked for them there,” said Rebbi Meir, “and did not see them.” She gave him a cup of wine and he concluded shabat with the recitation of havdalah. Again he asked, “Where are my sons?” She answered, “Sometimes they go to someone’s house, they will soon return.” She gave him to eat, and after he ate she said, “My teacher, I have a question to ask you.” “Then ask your question,” he said.

Biography - Children

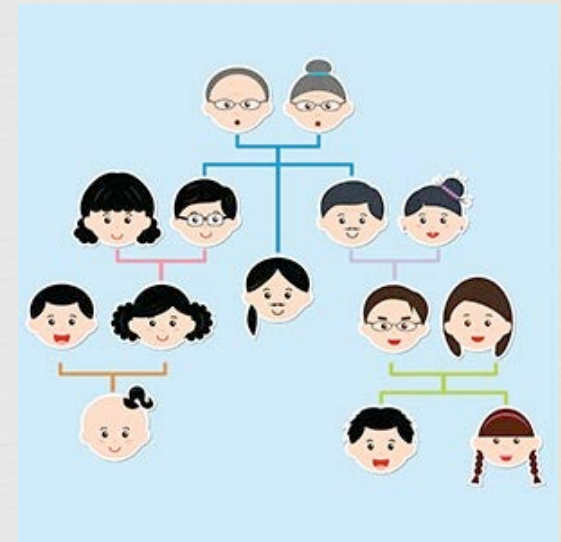


✧ “At an earlier time, someone came and left a deposit with me, and now he has come to take it back; should I return it to him or not?” He answered, “Is not one who is holding a deposit obligated to return it its owner?” She said to him, “If this were not your position, I would not have been inclined to return it.” She took him by the hand, led him to the bedroom, and brought him close to the bed. She removed the sheet from upon them, and he saw the two of them lying there dead on the bed. He began to cry, “My children, my children, my teachers, my teachers.” At that moment she said to him, “Did you not just say to me that we are obligated to return the deposit to its owner?” Said Rebbi Haninah: With these words, Rebbi Meir was comforted. (Yalkut Mishlei 964)

Identified by Pedigree



- ❧ When mentioned in the Talmud, Beruriah is almost always identified by her pedigree.
- ❧ She is known as Beruriah the daughter of R' Hananya ben Tradyon and/or Beruriah, the wife of Rabbi Meir (Pesachim 62b)
- ❧ This can be interpreted negatively to suggest that her standing relied on her connection to scholarly men.
- ❧ Or, it can be understood positively to suggest that which gives her stature in addition to her own knowledge.



Brilliant Scholar



- ❧ Beruriah was a brilliant scholar in her own right.
- ❧ She is greatly admired for knowledge in halacha and aggadah.
- ❧ She learned from the rabbis 300 halachot on a single cloudy day (Tractate Pesachim 62b)
- ❧ We saw that her opinion was accepted over her brother's.
- ❧ Another example,

קלוסטרא ר' טרפון מטמא וחכמים מטהרין וברוריא אומרת שומטה
מן הפסח זה ותולה בחברו בשבת כשנאמרו דברים לפני ר' יהודה
אמר יפה אמרה ברוריא:

R' Yehoshua praises Beruriah's position over R' Tarfon and the Chachamim. (Tosefta Keilim Bava Metzia 1:6)

Teachings of Beruriah



- ❧ Berachos 10a – Story of Beruriah teaching Rebbe Meir to pray for repentance of neighbors.
- ❧ Berachos 10a – Story of conversation between Beruriah and heretic
- ❧ Eruvin 53b -54a – Story of Beruriah and student learning Torah
- ❧ Eruvin 53b – Story of Beruriah and R' Yossi Ha'Glili
- ❧ **What is the common denominator of all the stories and teachings of Beruriah?**

Teachings of Beruriah



- ❧ Beruriah's emphasis seems to be that students of Torah must embody what they learn.
- ❧ Torah is not intended to be theoretical or philosophical but must be implemented.
- ❧ She is incredulous and strong when rebuking her rabbinic peers and pointing out hypocrisy or their falling short.
- ❧ Beruriah participates among the rabbis and don't simply study Torah privately.
- ❧ She is an insider and outsider simultaneously



Teachings of Beruriah



- ❧ Beruriah is “not just a woman with a man’s voice.”
- ❧ “To the readers, the mere fact of Beruriah, of her ability to hold her own with the rabbis, seems so striking in itself that it becomes close to the entirety of what she is about. Beruriah becomes a symbol – the “learned woman” – and thus the judgments about who she was and what she meant to the rabbis revolve overwhelmingly around the phenomenon of her learnedness per se.”



Hartman and Buckholtz, “Beruriah Said Well:
The Many Lives of a Talmudic Social Critic,”
Prooftexts 31:3



Did Beruriah Exist?



- ❧ According to some scholars, Beruriah never really existed and there is doubt surrounding her biographical details. She is simply the rabbi's symbol of a learned Jewish woman.

David Goodblatt , "The Beruriah Traditions," Journal of Jewish Studies 26 (1975)

- ❧ If R' Yehoshua is a contemporary of Beruriah it is difficult to reconcile with her being the husband of R' Meir and daughter of R' Chanina ben Tradyon who was a generation younger.
- ❧ We, of course, believe she existed and perhaps chronological challenges can be resolved by suggesting that the real Beruriah was such a symbol of a learned Jewish woman, we identify teachings in other generations with her.



Ma'aseh Beruriah



❧ The talmud (Avoda Zarah 18b) records that Rebbe Meir was forced to flee to Bavel for one of two reasons. The second, it ambiguously refers to as “the Beruriah incident” (מעשה דברוריא)

❧ Rashi offers a remarkable explanation:

One time Beruriah mocked the sages over their saying, ‘Women are light-headed’ (Kiddushin 80b). Rebbe Meir said to her: “By your life, you will ultimately affirm their words.” He instructed one of his disciples to seduce her. The student urged her for many days, until she consented. When the matter became known to her, she strangled herself and Rebbe Meir fled out of disgrace.

Making Sense of Rashi



✧ Rashi taught Beruriah's legend to reinforce male superiority and patriarchal power. Essentially, lest you think women can be trusted with scholarship, know that Beruriah brought about her own demise due to her light-headedness like all women. Rashi had an agenda in relaying the legend.

Rachel Adler, "The Virgin in the Brothel and Other Anomalies: Character and Context in the Legend of Beruriah", Tikkun 3:6

Making Sense of Rashi



- ❧ Criticism of Rebbe Meir, more than of Beruriah.
- ❧ “The real purpose of Rashi’s anecdote, I believe, was not to undermine Beruriah but rather to reprimand Rabbi Meir for his outrageous behavior. In so doing, Rashi presents a message that is quote relevant to our present day society...Indeed, Rashi quotes this story in connection with a talmudic discussion that illustrates Rabbi Meir’s insensitivity.”

Rabbi Joel Wolowelsky, “Response to Beruriah’s Final Lesson,”
Nashim 2003

Making Sense of Rashi



- ❧ The earliest known version of this Rashi dates to De Rossi 1292, 200 years after Rashi's death, the only manuscript containing Rashi's full commentary on Avoda Zara.
- ❧ The story travels in different Sefardic manuscripts including Menoras Ha'Maor and in the 15th c. in Italy in Hagados Ha'Talmud and Sefer Yuchsin.
- ❧ In the Ashkenazi sphere, the story is only circulated from the 18th c. onward. The Maharil (early 15th c) does mention the story as well.



Making Sense of Rashi



- ❧ Strange that the story appears farther from Rashi earlier and only close to Rashi later.
- ❧ R' Zvi Hrisch Chayes suggests that the story is true but the gemara only made an ambiguous reference to it to preserve the dignity of Berurah and Rebbe Meir.
- ❧ Many scholars challenge the authenticity of Rashi's depiction of the Beruriah incident.

See Itamar Drori, "The Beruriah Incident: Tradition of Exclusion as a Presence of Ethical Principles,"

And R' Eitam Henkin, "Mystery of the Beriruah Incident: A Proposed Solution."

Alternative Tradition



- ✧ Rav Nissim Gaon of Kira'on (990-1062), in his Sefer Ma'asiyos, has another tradition as to what the Beruriah incident refers to.
- ✧ He says after Beruriah's parents were murdered and Rebbe Meir saved her sister, they were forced to flee together to Bavel.

חבור יפה מהישועה
מז

האלה של ר' מאיר הצילני ולא חייב ויאמר לו שר בית הסודר
מה האות כי יצילני אלהיך כדברך ויאמר לו הנה הכלב' של
בית המלך הם גדולי ורעים והם נושכים את העם א"ל הביאני
אליהם ותראה מה אעשה לך וילך עמו עד הכלב' ויקנסם
לאכרו ולבלעו ויאמר אלהי הצילני ויקומו מעליו . וכשראה זה
האות לקח שר בית הסודר הזוזים ויתן לו הנערה והלכו שניהם
ויוגד למלך הדבר ויצו המלך להרגו ולתלות את שר בית
הסודר ויבאו סוסי המלך לתפשו ויאמר אלה של ר' מאיר
הצילני מהם ולא יכלו לגשת אליו ויאמרו לו הנדה לנו מה הי'
ח'יבר ויספר להם כל מעשיו ויאמרו לו עשה לנו צורת האיש
ז' ושום אותה על שער העיר ויעש כן ויצו המלך כל רואה איש
כמו הצורה הזאת שיתפשהו ויביאחו למלך ויהי היום ויראוהו
השוטרים וירדפו אחריו ויגם מפניהם עד שנכנס לשוק של
זונות ויאמרו לא יבנס איש כזה לבית הזונות וישיבו מעליו ויקח
ר' מאיר את אשתו ואת אחותה ויעתק לבבל הסתכל במעשה
הצדקת לפי ששמידה עצמה מעבירה הצילה הקב"ה מיד מרעי'
אמר הכתוב שר החן והבל היומי וגו' לכן ציטות הצדקניות
להחזיק בצדקתן ללמד את הנשים מעשיהן שלא תהיה מאותן
שאמר עליהן שלמה ע"ה אדם אחד מאלף מצאתי ואשה בכל
אלה לא מצאתי :