

and motherly generosity. Kalmanofsky doesn't play this game. Acknowledging the patriarchal ideal of the biblical narrative, and how a woman's position interacts either with or against the patriarchal ideal, Kalmanofsky succeeds in showing how, in a very natural way, biblical sisters pack a powerful punch.

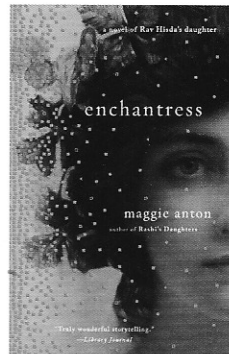
Chana Thompson Shor is a Conservative rabbi, the first woman mesader gittin (preparer of Jewish religious divorces), a Judaic fabric artist, and a writer.

The Enchanted Talmud: Rabbis and Muggles

by Ilana Kurshan

When I began studying Talmud in Jewish day school, my friends and I used to act out the cases discussed in the

Mishnah: "If a man uncovers a woman's hair in public... If a man leaves his jug of water in the middle of the street..." We relied on makeshift props—a cheerleading pom-pom for a head of hair, or a juice box from someone's lunch for a jug of water. I was reminded of those junior high school plays when I read *Enchantress* (Plume, \$17), Maggie Anton's second and final book about Rav Hisda's daughter and the Jewish community of fourth-century Babylonia. Anton dramatizes scenes from the Talmud featuring her eponymous heroine (also known as Hisdadukh), her second husband Rava (her marriage to her first



husband was the subject of the previous book), and the rabbis and sorceresses with whom they interact.

Knowledge, in this novel, is highly gendered: Men study Torah and women cast spells. That is not to say that women do not also learn Torah—and indeed, in the book's closing pages an aged Hisdadukh teaches Mishnah

to her granddaughters and their daughters, "according to each girl's capabilities." But for the most part, it is the men who quote Mishnah and the women who write incantation bowls, wear special rings that enable them to understand the speech of animals, and cast spells to quell deadly sandstorms and turn men into donkeys.

ON NOT LEARNING TO FLIRT

Daphne Merkin's new memoir, The Fame Lunches: On Wounded Icons, Money, Sex, The Brontes, and the Importance of Handbags (Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, \$28) is biting, insightful, and as revealing and withholding as a well-observed life deserves. Alert to all kinds of experiences, Merkin mines her fraught relationship with her father in the chapter "On Not Learning to Flirt." Here's a taste:

I was invited one summer to spend a weekend in New Hampshire with the writer Saul Bellow at the behest of his agent, who had recently taken me on as a client. Bellow was his larger-than-life, oxygen-eating self, as charming a host as you could wish for, discoursing on everything from Bach to his secret recipe for tuna fish salad that called for a tablespoon of ketchup. He was solicitous of me, praising what writing of mine he had read, and in general conspiring to make me a happy guest. But his very assumption of masculine irresistibility, which his agent had succumbed to long ago, put my teeth on edge, and I spent a good deal of time taking walks by myself so as not to have to be an audience to his sweltering ego.

Towards the end of the stay, Bellow and I were talking outside, just the two of us, while he tilled his bounteous garden. I could swear he did an imitation

of Marlon Brando in *The Godfather* by cutting an opening into a piece of orange skin, sliding it over his teeth, and then smiling at me ghoulishly, but whether I am inventing this in

retrospect or it really happened, I know I suddenly felt tenderhearted toward him. As Bellow was seeing us off, I leaned over to give him a hug, and after we had said our goodbyes, he added, in a quiet voice, "Be kinder to the male gender." This suggestion, in the simplicity of its appeal and the vulnerability that lay behind that appeal, broke through my already-wobbly defenses, opening up vistas of affection withheld and received that I mostly had shied away from. I cried all the way to the airport and then throughout the plane ride, feeling that I had been seen and understood, that the once-ignored little girl was now an adult woman whose feelings and responses left their mark on the male beholder.



Midway through the book, in a scene reminiscent of countless middle-grade novels about preteen witches and their magic-making moms, Hisdadukh discovers that her mother, too, was a sorceress: "I'd thought it was Father's study and piety that safeguarded our family all those years," Hisdadukh relates, dumbfounded to discover that it was in fact their mother's spells that had protected the family from harm. Several of these spells are included in the novel, as Anton draws on the astrological and demonic lore that is sprinkled like fairy dust throughout the Talmud's

Anton has elsewhere stated that her goal in writing these novels is to encourage more non-Orthodox Jews, especially women, to study Talmud. Towards this end she bridges an ancient text with contemporary academic scholarship on the Talmud's Persian and Zoroastrian context, from magi to menstrual rituals. When at her best, she brings Talmudic characters vividly to life, as in her ingenious depiction of Rav Nahman's imperious and importunate wife Yalta as a hawk-nosed lesbian. At times she seems merely to be dramatizing scene after scene from the

She bridges an ancient text with contemporary academic scholarship on the Talmud's Persian and Zoroastrian context, from magi to menstrual rituals.

pages, including vividly colorful curses such as "hot excrement in torn baskets." At these moments the book seems to be a sort of "Harry Potter meets the Talmud," with the Angel of Death as Dementor and other non-rabbinic Jews as muggles.

But Anton's novel is also a romance, and quite a racy one at that. Hisdadukh and Rava have a passionate marriage, and they "use the bed" (Anton's apt translation of the Talmudic euphemism) several times per chapter. Indeed, in one of her more daring and dubious leaps of conjecture, Anton suggests that Rava (meaning "great one") received his epithet not due to his mastery of Torah, but on account of his spectacular endowment. Their sex life, for the most part, is charmed, except when the demon Ashmedai attempts to seduce Hisdadukh in the guise of her previous husband Rami, and Rava is consumed by jealous rage. This scene is perhaps a creative inversion of the Talmudic tale of Rava's wife's jealousy of his study partner's wife Homa, an encounter which Anton surprisingly and disappointingly elects to domesticate.

Talmud, not unlike my amateur junior high Mishnah plays. But then Anton will let slip, say, that Rav Hisda's daughter wore tzitzit, or that the rabbis gained their intimate knowledge of women's bodies by consulting their wives, or that Hisdadukh's vision of the world to come involved studying Torah with both her husbands simultaneously. Suddenly it becomes clear that only a twenty-first century feminist and critical sensibility like Anton's could interpret the Talmud in just this way; and for this reader, at least, the novel succeeds in working its magic.

Ilana Kurshan works in book publishing in Jerusalem.

For special benefits,
subscribe and donate
now at Lilith.org

United States Postal Service
Statement of Ownership, Management
and Circulation

1. Publication Title: Lilith
2. Publication Number: 0146-2334
3. Filing Date August 28, 2014.
4. Issue Frequency: Quarterly
5. Number of Issues Published Annually: 4
6. Annual Subscription Price: \$35
7. Complete Mailing Address of Known Office of Publication:
Lilith, 250 West 57th Street, #2432 New York NY 10107-2420
8. Complete Mailing Address of Headquarters of General Business Office of Publisher: same as no 7
9. Full Names and Complete Mailing Addresses of Publisher, Editor, Managing Editor:
Publisher and Editor: Susan Weidman Schneider
Managing Editor: Naomi Danis
both at 250 West 57th Street #2432, New York, NY 10107-2420.
10. Owner: Lilith Publications, Inc., 250 West 57th Street, #2432, New York, NY 10107-2420
11. Known Bondholder, Mortgagees and Other Security Holders Owning or Holding 1 Percent or More of Total Amount of Bonds, Mortgages or Other Securities: None.
12. Tax Status Has Not Changed in the Preceding 12 Months.
13. Publication Title: Lilith
14. Issue Date for Circulation Data Below:
July 2014
15. Extent and Nature of Circulation: Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months/No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date:
A. Total Number of Copies 6500/6000
B. Paid Circulation by Mail and Outside the Mail
1 Mailed Outside-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on PS Form 3541: 3006/2896
2 Mailed In-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on PS Form 3541: 0/0
3 Paid Distribution Outside the Mails Including Sales through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, Counter Sales, and other Paid Distribution Outside USPS: 1877/1706
4 Paid Distribution by Other Classes of Mail Through the USPS: 154/149
C. Total Paid Distribution: 5037/4751
D. Free or Nominal Rate Outside County Copies included on PS Form 3541
1 Free or Nominal Rate Outside-County Copies Included on PS Form 3541: 50/51
2 Free or Nominal Rate In-County Copies included on PS Form 3541: 0/0
3 Free or Nominal Rate Copies Mailed at Other Classes Through the USPS: 3/3
4 Free or Nominal Rate Distribution Outside the Mail: 983/566
E. Total Free or Nominal Rate Distribution: 1036/619
F. Total Distribution: 6073/5370
G. Copies Not Distributed: 427/630
H. Total: 6500/6000
I. Percent Paid: 83%/88%
17. This Statement of Ownership will be printed in the Fall 2014 issue of this publication.
18. Signature and Title of Editor, Business Manager, or Owner: I certify that all information furnished on this form is true and complete. Naomi Danis, Managing Editor, 8/28/2014