

HILA (HALEVY) UNNA

Daughters of the Place

A scholarly discussion took place in the imaginary beit midrash of Beruriah regarding the feasibility of advancing the status of women within the religious system. The midrash deals with the difficulty of recruiting support for this project and with anxieties about the influence it will have on the next generation. Hila Unna includes women from various historical periods in the imagined conversation, allowing for a more panoramic perspective. The midrash is entitled "Daughters of the Place." The title touches on the various meanings of the Hebrew word for place, *makom*, which refers to a physical and geographical place but is also a term for God, the Omnipresent. The midrash explores women's search for closeness to God. The women ask whether they have indeed arrived at the place they have desired and sought from a religious and an ideological perspective.

And He has brought us to this place, and has given us this land (Deut 27:9).

They asked in Beruriah's beit midrash, What is *this place*?

Esther told them, the one that Mordechai spoke of to me, *relief and rescue will come to the Jews from some other place* (Esth 4:14).

They further asked, and who will bring us to *The Place*, i.e., The Holy Blessed One?

Esther answered, every single one of you, *for just for a time like this you have reached rulership* (Esth 4:14). Each one of you *do not think you can run away* (4:14).

They went on and asked, and when?

She answered, *be ready for the third day, for on the third day God will come down before the eyes of all the people* (Exod 19:11). Just like I gathered up my courage and dressed in sacred garb, as is written *and so it was on the third day that Esther dressed in royal garb* (Esth 5:1).

So, you *Pave the path, clear the way, get rid of the obstacles out of the way of My people* (Isa 57:14). For the third generation, your daughters' daughters will reach *The Place*.

Their minds were yet uneasy, and they discussed their daughters among themselves: Perhaps building up the road will be vexing and bad for them? Maybe opening the way will rob their time and energies for nothing?

Maybe clearing the obstacles will bring up new hardships?

And all the while Esther was weeping and pleading *How can I bear to see the evil that will happen to my people?* (Esth 8:6).

Until Beruriah said to them, here as elsewhere, read the end of the passage to uncover its beginning: *And one who trusts in Me will inherit the land, and take hold of My holy mountain . . . clear the obstacles out of the way of My people . . . to bring to life the spirit of the downtrodden and bring to life the spirit of the crushed . . . Peace, peace, to far and near, says God* (Isa 56:13–15, 19).

And the way is very hard, and the way is very long.

But the women who seek shelter in God, to inherit the land, to steep the world in sanctity, and to get to *The Place*—it is up to them to rouse and wake up others.

To bring to life the spirit of the downtrodden and the hearts of the crushed women, to see those far and those cast away and bring them near and bring them to reconciliation.

And that is why Scripture repeated *peace, peace*—peace unto you, peace unto your daughters, in your days and in theirs.

On that day they added a prayer in the beit midrash:

Happy the woman who reveres God, who walks in ^{God's} His ways.
When you eat of the toil of your hands, you're happy, it is good for you . . .
May God bless you . . .

And may you see your daughters' daughters. *כי יראו בנותי בנותי*

Daughters in understanding, *בנותי בהבנה*

Daughters in deep reflection, *בנותי בהרהור*

Daughters in the work of building, *בנותי בעשיה*

So that there will come *peace upon Israel* (after Ps 128).