CHAPTER 12

Jewish Women Writing Historical Novels Based on Rabbinic Sources

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In 2012 two historical novels were published, one by Kinneret Zmora-Bitan Dvir publishing house in Israel and one by Penguin group in the USA. The one was written in Hebrew and the other in English. I doubt if one author knew of the other or shared her work and ideas with the other, but I identify in the two a literary and historical trend that unites in it the culmination of a long process within rabbinic studies which I would like to outline and characterize. The books are של עקיבא by Yochi Brandes1 and Rav Hisda’s Daughter by Maggie Anton.2

The authors I am interested in come from completely different backgrounds: Brandes was born in a haredi home in Israel, daughter of a Hassidic admor and while holding on to her Jewish identity, has worked hard on releasing herself from the authoritative environment in which she grew up.3 First she shed her religious garb and turned secular and leftist in her views. Then she went to university. In order to do this she underwent a complex psychological and intellectual transformation, where much of the conventional wisdom about women and their role in society, which she received at home, would have had to be discarded. Anton, on the other hand, grew up in a secular-socialist house in California, and was drawn to her Jewish roots at a later stage in life.4 She too, would have had to undergo a transformation in her understanding of her identity and heritage. She has become a synagogue going woman, and a practicing Jew. Both women share, however, in what can be defined as nothing less than a scholarly revolution which, at the end of the

1 Yochi Brandes, Akiva’s Orchard (Or Yehudah: Kinneret Zmora-Bitan Dvir, 2012).
4 See under http://maggieanton.com/.
20th century opened up talmudic studies for women. Both books in which I am interested derive from this experience.

Both authors have already tried their hand at writing historical novels previously. Brandes had written about the Dead Sea Sect (לכבות את האהבה) and about the biblical period (מלכים ג), and Maggie Anton is the author of a trilogy about Rashi’s daughters. We note that the issues they had previously concentrated on seem to circumvent the Talmud—Brandes wrote about the forerunners of rabbinic literature and Anton about its greatest commentator—as though they were both keeping away from the very heart of Judaism which they were studying. But they both finally arrived there, and at the same time—2012.

Brandes and Anton have more in common: Not only are they women writing historical novels on the Talmud, they also both write in first person singular feminine. In other words, both speak in the name of a female heroine, who was supposed to have lived at the time about which they report, both women who are mentioned prominently in their sources—Brandes uses Rabbi Aqiva’s wife as her storyteller, and Anton, Bat Rav Hisda. In so doing, both women put into practice what feminist scholarship in all disciplines, and also in the study of rabbinic literature, preach—pull the woman out of the margin and put her in the centre. Anton and Brandes are thus products of the same historical-intellectual milieu. In the following lines I will describe this milieu in greater detail and show how their work fits into it. I will concentrate on three points: A. Rabbinic biography; B. Feminist rabbinic readings and C. Between the Land of Israel and Babylonia.

1 The Death of Rabbinic Biography

In 1936 in New York Louis Finkelstein published a biography of Rabbi Aqiva. This is a classic example of how rabbinic biography was written at the time.

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5 The issue is being debated and studied extensively. For a very recent study see Ilan Fuchs, Jewish Women’s Torah Study: Orthodox Religious Education and Modernity (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

6 Yochi Brandes, Quench Love (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, 2001); Kings III (Or Yehudah: Kinneret Zmora-Bitan Dvir, 2008). The latter has now been translated into English as Kings III [The Secret Book of Kings] (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2016).


8 Louis Finkelstein, Akiba: Scholar Saint and Martyr (New York: Covici Friede, 1936).