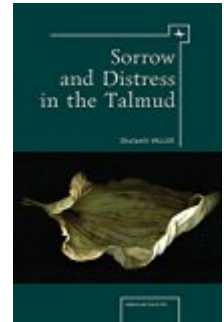


Shulamit Valler. *Sorrow and Distress in the Talmud*. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2011. 313 pp. \$59.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-936235-36-0.



Reviewed by Marc Bregman

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Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

Shulamit Valler's collection of seventy-five narratives from Talmudic literature that deal with grief and distress is an illuminating illustration of the statement: "What a religion has to say about suffering reveals in many ways more than anything else what it believes the nature and purpose of existence to be." [1]

A brief preface first outlines the problem of investigating the general topic of emotions in Talmudic literature. This is followed by a brief survey of previous research on Talmudic narratives, which are characterized by their minimalist style, and a brief explanation of the author's rationale for focusing specifically on stories about sorrow. This preface serves to introduce five detailed chapters, an afterword, and an appendix to chapter 2 ("*Hulshat da'at* and Self-Psychology," by Dr. Alex Aviv of the Sackler School of Medicine, Tel Aviv University).

Chapter 1 examines narratives whose focus is the Hebrew word *Tza'ar* (sadness or emotional distress) and its derivatives. Valler finds that such

narratives in the Babylonian Talmud depict the sadness and distress of Palestinian sages associated with their status as Torah scholars, in comparison to parallel narratives in the Palestinian Talmud that are not related to competition over scholarly status.

Chapter 2 examines narratives containing the expression *hulshat da'at* (and its derivatives), which Valler defines as a temporary lapse of consciousness as a result of profound sorrow. In the appendix by Dr. Aviv, this emotional state is further explored in light of the concept of psychological "fragmentation" as employed by Heinz Kohut, the psychoanalyst who founded the school of "self-psychology." Since emotional distress is often mentally and physically debilitating, it is not surprising that sages are depicted as having experienced *hulshat da'at* as a result of competition over their scholarly status, particularly in narratives whose plots unfolded within the study house.

Chapter 3 deals with narratives in which sages are described as having wept. *Tannaim* are never described as weeping because of personal anguish alone but rather because of communal calamities or philosophical problems such as the futility of human existence or the incomprehensibility of divine behavior. *Amoraim* are more often depicted as having wept for personal reasons, sometimes when reading particular verses that struck a painful chord. In contrast to the narratives dealt with in the previous two chapters, sages are not said to have wept because of challenges to their status and honor in the world of Torah. Consequently their weeping does not tend to set them apart but rather to bring them together among themselves and with the larger community.

Chapter 4 explores narratives about grief over the deaths of children. Sages coping with such tragedy are not described as showing outward signs of sorrow, but often remain silent as the primary reaction to their loss, loneliness, and bereavement. These narratives describe attempts at consolation employing homiletical interpretations of biblical verses. What is said to have been spoken by both the mourners and the comforters does not express sorrow over life cut short, but rather the hope that the deceased child will return to God. These stories seem to be intended to exemplify faith in God and divine justice.

Chapter 5 compares the behavior of sages and the women accompanying them in situations of grief and physical or mental distress. While male sages are depicted as focusing on their own personal pain, their women are described as thinking of the pain experienced by others and how to alleviate it. Sages who are concerned with their own honor are rendered powerless to overcome their own grief. In the same situations, their women become more empowered precisely because of what is depicted as their loyalty, sensitivity to others, selflessness, and lack of concern for their own dignity.

One of the many significant achievements of Valler's study is to provide an illustration of how traditional Jewish teaching from biblical through Talmudic times employed the seemingly counter-intuitive tactic of inculcating right behavior by relating how even the greatest leaders sometimes failed to behave according to the principles, ideals, and values they themselves espoused.[2] Particularly, there seems to be a significant disjunct between rabbinic teaching about maintaining humility despite scholarly achievement, and narratives about scholarly competitiveness in the rabbinic academy (see particularly chapters 1 and 2). The point of these narratives is apparently not to encourage the emulation of egotistical behavior, but to acknowledge the nearly paradoxical expectations of those who would aspire to join the ranks of the scholarly elite.[3]

In a work that collects and categorizes narratives on the basis of the use of a particular term it is surprising to find such a high degree of continuity in the way Valler links nearly every story she analyzes to the one that follows in what becomes a set of flowing discussions that make up each of the chapters. In her close readings of the narratives she quotes both in the original and in English translation, the author makes abundant use of variant readings from the best available textual witnesses, despite the lack of text-critical editions for most Talmudic tractates. She also makes reference to studies by other scholars who have dealt with the narratives that she analyzes. Valler includes in her notes brief biographical information on each Talmudic sage mentioned in the texts she cites. Attention to such details makes the author's scholarly research accessible to a wider audience of readers, including students and others just entering the world of Talmud scholarship. A pleasant surprise in a work of this sort is the inclusion of a "Glossary of Terms Used," followed by a bibliography, an index of biblical and Talmudic figures, an index of biblical and Talmudic references, and an index of topics, all of which facilitate location of the discussions of any particular

narrative of interest to various readers. In conclusion, Valler's study of stories of sorrow in Talmudic literature exhibits an all too rare combination of scholarly erudition and didactic practicality. This book will fuel further scholarship and also be useful in teaching. It will make a valuable addition to wide variety of Jewish studies collections.

Notes

[1]. John Bowker, *Problems of Suffering in the Religions of the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 2.

[2]. See, for example, the biblical stories of Moses striking the rock (Numbers 20:1-13), David's affair with Bathsheva (2 Samuel, chapter 11). See also, for example, Babylonian Talmud Yoma 86a, where the Babylonian Amora Rav and the Palestinian Amora Rabbi Yohanan each "confess" specifically how they committed the transgression of *Hillul HaShem* ("desecration of God's name," i.e., disgracing the Jewish religion), a transgression so serious that only the transgressor's death finally expunges it. On Yoma 86b, Moses is said to have begged to have his sin of striking the rock written down.

[3]. See, for example, Avot 2:9 "Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai used to say: If you have studied much Torah do not take credit for yourself because for this you were created." Rabbi Yonatan ben Amram, a disciple of Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, seems to have been a sage, rare enough to merit special mention, for refusing to derive any personal benefit or even acknowledgement of the honor due him for his Torah learning. See Babylonian Talmud Baba Batra 8a, and the discussion of this narrative by Valler, 24-28.

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