

#Problematic: Attempting to Redeem the Most Problematic Texts of the Talmud
Session One – Gender

1) Teresa M. Bejan, Now Explain What the Problem Is, The Atlantic, October 2, 2021

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/10/problem-with-word-problematic/620289/>

Academics like me love to describe things as “problematic.” But what do we mean? We’re not saying that the thing in question is unsolvable or even difficult. We’re saying—or implying—that it is objectionable in some way, that it rests uneasily with our prior moral or political commitments.

For instance, when I described applying Ancient Greek free-speech ideals to social media as “problematic” in a recent article, I wasn’t saying that Socrates’s audience was impossible to please. I was saying that these practices were premised on exclusion in a way that modern egalitarians won’t like. Or when my Oxford colleague Amia Srinivasan describes stand-up comedy in Los Angeles as “problematic,” she’s not saying that she struggled to understand the jokes. She’s saying that they relied on sexism in a way that she—and everyone—should find morally bad.

In principle, every usage of the term *problematic* should be followed by an explanation. Is the situation or person in question unjust, immoral, or unfair? Racist, sexist, or otherwise bigoted? Wrongheaded, perhaps, or just plain wrong? All too often, the explanation never comes...

Problematic may have escaped the academy, but scholars and teachers still bear a lot of responsibility for its current use. Like any casual Twitter user, academics use *problematic* as an innuendo, or better yet, an “insinuating.” Rhetorically, this usage divides our audiences between those who know already what our commitments are—in many cases because, on a politically homogeneous campus, they share them—and so are presumptively in the know about what we find objectionable. To this audience, *problematic* indicates *where* the problem is; they do not need to be told *what* it is.

Yet for those who, for whatever reason, don’t belong to this community of judgment, the effect is very different. *Problematic* implies that they, themselves, may present a problem. They are offside, and they better get onside, and quick—whether they understand the objection or not.

In effect, *problematic* communicates that those who don’t share our commitments at the outset are not worth arguing with, let alone persuading. It relies on a subtle sort of bullying in place of mutual justification. It excludes, rather than explains. To say that *problematic* functions as an exclusionary rhetorical strategy implies intent, but I blame intellectual indolence more than malice. In my field of political philosophy, we like to do things with words; we are less attuned to the ways in which words do things with us. Academics are also human beings, often with imposter syndrome, and we come to rely on words such as *problematic* precisely because they are vague enough to preempt objection. Students, especially, would rather agree with us than admit that they don’t understand what we mean.

In this way, *problematic* is highly efficient. But it is also disastrous for learning.

This is why I find the word *problematic* to be, well, problematic. I object to its proliferation not simply because it **encourages sloppy thinking and poor communication among scholars and students alike, but because it divides audiences into in-groups and out-groups based on unstated, but assumed, commitments.** Moreover, by failing to express our own specific objections, we academics insulate ourselves from critique. We make ourselves *unchallengeable* as teachers and so fail our students and ourselves...

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2) Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, Feminist Interpretations of Rabbinic Literature: Two Views, Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues (4) Fall 5762/2001, p. 7-14

Unless the interpreter reflects consciously on which aspect of talmudic literature establishes its authoritativeness to him or her and why, interpretations will always be caught between the polarized fronts of polemic and apologetic and thus remain highly politicized.

Polemicists accuse the Talmud of sexism or misogyny at worst or exclusivism at best, both in its discourse and in the institutions based on it. It thus becomes meaningless to them for constituting a meaningful Jewish identity today. Apologists defend the rabbinic texts; their exclusivism is explained and thus always already justified to a certain degree.

A way out of this battle is hard to find. However, a starting point for the way out from between these two fronts would be the assertion that **a text, in and of itself, never simply is sexist or misogynist, unless we endow it with power over us, or unless institutions use the text to support a given power structure.** Talmudic texts certainly lend themselves to such a use, and they have been used in Jewish cultural history, for instance, to exclude women from the most prized aspect of a Jewish religious life, that of learning. Nonetheless, the most powerful claim brought forth by feminist thinking in the Jewish context has perhaps been the claim that these texts belong to women also, that they are part of women's heritage, religious commitments and aesthetic pleasures.

This claim already defies women's historical and in some cases institutional exclusion from learning Talmud. This claim and the related emergence of women scholars of Talmud already has begun to change the "face" of the text, as women move from being spectators in the talmudic beit midrash to being participants in it. To cite but one example from my own work: Polemicists regard the discussions in Tractate Niddah as sexist, in their most basic assumption of menstrual "impurity," while apologists - in what I would call the "per-petual honeymoon" apologetic, generated already by the Talmud itself - regard them as providing the basis for a couple's healthy sexual life. However, their much more problematic aspect is that even here, in discussions of menstruation, women are excluded from participation. A different kind of investigation might ask what aspects of the discourse, such as the objectification of women's bodies, contribute to the exclusion of women, and, furthermore, how the rabbis established their authority as menstrual experts. Did these strategies, indeed, remain uncontested? These questions take me out of the realm of ideological dogmatism about the practice of hilkhot niddah, which some women find meaningful and some do not. **They put me in the position of regarding the rabbinic discussions of women's bodies as irrevocably part of the web of our collective Jewish imagination, which we continue to spin. Only, we pick up threads that have been left hanging and continue to spin with them, adding different colors and textures to the web.** One way this may happen is for women to train as halakhic counselors, as they do at the Nishmat seminary in Jerusalem, thus changing the face of rabbinic authority in Israel.

Another is for us to use the texts as a springboard for philosophical and poetic reflections on the function of the body in religion. **Either way, the Talmud will have a different future, and the talmudic beit midrash will change its collective face in ultimately unpredictable ways.**

3) Judith Plaskow, Depatriarchalizing Judaism – Interview in Jewish Currents Magazine, Susan Reimer-Torn, September 10, 2020

<https://jewishcurrents.org/depatriarchalizing-judaism>

SRT: But if you take the patriarchal language and context and worldview out of Judaism, what's left?

JP: In the early '70s, Protestant Bible scholar Phyllis Trible wrote "[Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation](#)," a very important and influential article in which she reinterpreted Genesis 1–3 from a feminist perspective. The radical feminist theologian Mary Daly quipped that a depatriarchalized Bible would make a nice pamphlet.

I don't think it would even be a pamphlet, because you cannot disentangle the patriarchal aspects of Jewish tradition from the liberating aspects. If you think of the prophets, their visions of a just and transformed world are articulated in the language of patriarchal marriage. You can't separate out Hosea's vision of a covenant of peace, justice, and harmony with all living things from his violent images of Israel as adulteress and whore.

But where does one go? What isn't mixed with patriarchy? You can go to Goddess religion, but a tremendous amount of historical Goddess religion is also profoundly patriarchal. Think of Greek mythology. A lot of female divinities are subordinate to male power and are even abused and raped. If you want to be rooted in any kind of historical tradition, you have to align yourself with the liberating voices within the tradition while acknowledging that the horrible stuff is there. I don't see an alternative for myself.

4) Ruth Calderon, A Bride for One Night, p xiii

When I retell a Talmudic story in my own words and comment on it, I am engaging in an act of exegesis. This is a way of assuming ownership of a story I love or coming to terms with a text that unsettles me. In so doing, I may achieve any of several goals, among them acquiring a new heroine for myself, redeeming a literary figure from her tragic fate or creating a better life for her, crafting role models for my own children to replace images of oppression, and coming to terms with the complex cultural legacy that I have no choice but to understand because it is a part of me and I am a part of it... **Allowing myself the interpretive freedom to tell these stories anew is also a form of tikkun olam, that is, of repairing the world.**

I. Categories of Otherhood

5) Tosephta, Tractate Brachot, Chapter 6 Halacha 18 Rebbi Yehudah says, "A person is obligated to say three blessings every day: Blessed are You who did not make me a non-Jew Blessed are You who did not make me an ignoramus Blessed are You who did not make me a Woman.	תוספתא ברכות פרק ו' הלכה י"ח ר' יהודה או' שלש ברכות חייב אדם לברך בכל יום ברוך שלא עשני גוי ברוך שלא עשאני בור ברוך שלא עשאני אשה
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Questions for consideration:

- What is this text telling you about the Rabbis understanding of Non-Jews and Women?
- What is problematic to you about this text? Please be specific in your critique.
- Is there anything in this text that can be read as self-critical? In what ways?

II. We Can't Have Two Rulers

6) Genesis 1:14 – 19 God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate day from night; they shall serve as signs for the set times—the days and the years; and they shall serve as lights in the expanse of the sky to shine upon the earth." And it was so. God made the two great lights, the greater light to dominate the day and the lesser light to dominate the night, and the stars. And God set them in the expanse of the sky to shine upon the earth, to dominate the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that this was good. And there was evening and there was morning, a fourth day.	בראשית א:יד – יט וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי מְאֹרֶת בְּרָקִיעַ הַשָּׁמַיִם לִהְבֵּדִיל בֵּין הַיּוֹם וּבֵין הַלַּיְלָה וְהָיוּ לְאֹתֹת וּלְמוֹעֲדִים וְלַיָּמִים וּלְשָׁנִים: טוֹוֹהֵיו לְמְאֹרֹת בְּרָקִיעַ הַשָּׁמַיִם לְהָאִיר עַל־הָאָרֶץ וַיְהִי־כֵן: וַיַּעַשׂ אֱלֹהִים אֶת־שְׁנֵי הַמְּאֹרֹת הַגְּדֹלִים אֶת־הַמְּאֹרֶת הַגָּדֹל לְמַמְשָׁלַת הַיּוֹם וְאֶת־הַמְּאֹרֶת הַקָּטָן לְמַמְשָׁלַת הַלַּיְלָה וְאֵת הַכּוֹכָבִים: וַיִּתֵּן אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים בְּרָקִיעַ הַשָּׁמַיִם לְהָאִיר עַל־הָאָרֶץ: וּלְמֹשֶׁל בַּיּוֹם וּבַלַּיְלָה וּלְהִבְדִּיל בֵּין הָאֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים כִּי־טוֹב: וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר יוֹם רְבִיעִי:
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7) Babylonian Talmud Tractate Chullin 60b

Rabbi Shimon ben Pazi raises a contradiction between two verses. It is written: “And God made the two great lights” (Genesis 1:16), and it is also written in the same verse: “The greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night,” indicating that only one was great. Rabbi Shimon ben Pazi explains: When God first created the sun and the moon, they were equally bright.

Then, **the moon said before the Holy One, Blessed be He: Master of the Universe**, is it possible for two kings to serve with one crown? One of us must be subservient to the other. God therefore said to her, i.e., the moon: If so, **go and diminish yourself**.

She said before Him: Master of the Universe, since I said a correct observation before You, must I diminish myself?

God said to her: As compensation, **go and rule both during the day along with the sun and during the night**. She said to Him: **What is the greatness of shining alongside the sun? What use is a candle in the middle of the day?** God said to her: **Go; let the Jewish people count the days and years with you**, and this will be your greatness. She said to Him: **But the Jewish people will count with the sun as well, as it is impossible that they will not count seasons with it, as it is written: “And let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days and years” (Genesis 1:14).** God said to her: **Go; let righteous men be named after you**. Just as you are called the lesser [hakatan] light, there will be **Ya’akov HaKatan**, i.e., Jacob our forefather (see Amos 7:2), **Shmuel HaKatan** the *tanna*, and **David HaKatan**, i.e., King David (see I Samuel 17:14).

God saw that the moon was not comforted. **The Holy One, Blessed be He, said: Bring atonement for me, since I diminished the moon**. The Gemara notes: **And this is what Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish says: What is different about the goat offering of the New Moon, that it is stated with regard to it: “For the Lord” (Numbers 28:15)? The Holy One, Blessed be He, said: This goat shall be an atonement for Me for having diminished the size of the moon.**

תלמוד בבלי מסכת חולין ט:

רבי שמעון בן פזי רמי כתיב (בראשית א, טז) ויעש אלהים את שני המאורות הגדולים וכתיב את המאור הגדול ואת המאור הקטן

אמרה ירח לפני הקב"ה רבש"ע אפשר לשני מלכים שישתמשו בכתר אחד אמר לה לך ומעטי את עצמך

אמרה לפניו רבש"ע הואיל ואמרתי לפניך דבר הגון אמצית את עצמי אמר לה לך ומשול ביום ובלילה אמרה ליה מאי רבותיה דשרגא בטיהרא מאי אהני אמר לה זיל לימנו בכך ישראל ימים ושנים אמרה ליה יומא נמי אי אפשר דלא מנו ביה תקופתא דכתיב (בראשית א, יד) והיו לאותות ולמועדים ולימים ושנים זיל ליקרו צדיקי בשמך (עמוס ז, ב) יעקב הקטן שמואל הקטן (שמואל א יז, יד) דוד הקטן

חזייה דלא קא מיתבא דעתה אמר הקב"ה הביאו כפרה עלי שמיצטתי את הירח והיינו דאמר ר"ש בן לקיש מה נשתנה שער של ראש חדש שנאמר בו (במדבר כח, טו) (לה' אמר הקב"ה שער זה יהא כפרה על שמיצטתי את הירח

Questions for consideration:

- Assuming that the moon is supposed to be a female image, and the sun a male image - what is this text telling you about the Rabbinic views of women?
- What is problematic to you about this text? Please be specific in your critique.
- How could this text be used as a Polemic against Rabbinic texts? How could it be used as an apologetic for Women's roles in Judaism?
- Do you recognize any voices in this text that are self-critical? In what ways?