

#Problematic: Attempting to Redeem the Most Problematic Texts of the Talmud

Session Three – Power

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 “insinuation.” 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.

Polemicalists 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 belt 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 "perpetual 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.**

I. Are Some Texts Just Irredeemable?

3) Babylonian Talmud Tractate Nedarim 20b

The Gemara relates: A certain woman, who came before Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, said to him: My teacher, I set him a table, and he turned it over (this is a euphemism to say that her husband had forced her to have intercourse in a "turned over" way).

Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi said to her: My daughter, the Torah permitted you to him, and I? What can I do for you?

A certain woman who came before Rav (who was the student of Rabbi Yehuda Hanassi – y.e.) and said to him: My teacher, I set a table for him and he turned it over.

He said to her: In what way is this different from a fish?
 (Rashi - that one may eat any way he wishes?)

תלמוד בבלי מסכת נדרים כ:

היהא דאמאי לקמיה דרב, אמרה לו: רבי, ערבת לך שולחן והפכו!

אמר לה: בתי, תורה התירתה, ואני מה אעשה לך?

היהא דאמאי לקמיה דרב, אמרה לו: רבי, ערבת לך שולחן והפכו!

אמר: מאי שניא מן ביניתא?

II. The Dangers of Excessive Humility

4) Midrash Leviticus Rabba 9:9

Rabbi Meir was sitting and discoursing on Shabbat evening. There was a certain woman who would come there, and sit and listen to him give his lecture. Once she waited until the lecture ended, went home, and found the light had gone out.

Her husband said to her, "Where have you been?"

She said to him, "I was sitting and listening to the voice of the lecturer."

He said to her, "Thus and more I vow: I will not let you enter here until you go and spit in the lecturer's face!"

She stayed away one Shabbat, another, a third.

Her neighbors said to her, "Are you still angry at each other? Let's come with you to the lecture."

When Rabbi Meir saw them, he figured it out through the holy spirit.

He said to them, "Is there here a woman knowledgeable in treating eyes?"

Her neighbors said to her, "If you go spit in his eye you will become permitted to your husband."

When she sat down in front of him she became afraid of him, and said to him, "Rabbi, I am not knowledgeable in treating eyes."

He said to her, "Even so, spit in my eye seven times, and I will be cured."

She did so.

He said to her, "Go tell your husband you told me to do it once and I spat seven times.

His disciples said to him, "Rabbi, should people thus abuse the Torah? Couldn't one of us offered a treatment for you?"

He said to them, "Is it not enough for Meir to be like his Maker?"

As Rebbe Yishmael taught: Great is peace, for even the Great Name written in holiness, the Holy Blessed One said to blot out in water so as to impose peace between husband and wife."

ויקרא רבה ט:ט

רבי מאיר הנה יתיב ודריש בלילי שבתא
 הנה תמן חדא אתתא יציבא ושמעיה ליה תנתא
 מדרשא, אמתנית עד דיתסל ממדרש, אזלה
 לביתה אשכחא בוצינא טפי,
 אמר לה בעלה אן הנית,
 אמרה ליה אנה יתיבא ושמעיה קליה דרושה,
 אמר לה פן וכן לא אעילת להכא עד דאזלת ורוקת
 באנפי דרושה,

יתיבא שבתא קמייתא ותנינא ותלימא, אמרין לה
 מגירתא פדו אתון צהיבין, אחינן עמך לגבי
 דרושה,

כיון דחמי ותהון רבי מאיר צפה ברוח הקדוש,
 אמר להו אית מנכון אתתא דחכימא למלחש
 בעינא,

אמרין לה מגירתא פדו את אלת ורוקת באנפיה
 ותשרי לבעלה,

כיון דיתבא קמי אידחילת מיניה, אמרה ליה רבי
 לית אנה חכימא למלחש עינא. אמר לה אפלו הכי
 רוקי באנפי שבע זמנין ואנא מינשים,
 עבדה הכין.

אמר לה איזילי אמרי לבעליך את אמרת חדא
 זימנא ואנא רקית שבע זימנין.

אמרו לו תלמידיו רבי פך מבזין את התורה, לא
 הנה לך למימר לסד מינן למלחש לה,

אמר להו לא דיו למאיר להיות שונה לקוננו,
 דתני רבי ישמעאל גדול שלום ששם הגדול
 שנכתב בקדשה אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא ימחה על
 המים בשביל להטיל שלום בין איש לאשתו.

Questions for consideration:

- *What is this text telling you about Rabbinic Power?*
- *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? As an apologetic for Rabbinic Texts?*
- *Do you recognize any voices in this text that are self-critical? In what ways?*

5) Babylonian Talmud Tractate Brachot 60b-61a

Rav Hunah in the name of Rav, in the name of Rebbe Meir, said: This is what R. Akiva taught: One should always accustom himself to say "Everything that God does, He does for the good."

R. Akiva was traveling. He came to a city, but no one would give him lodging for the night. He said "Everything that God does is for the good."

He went to spend the night in the wilderness.

He had with him a rooster, a donkey and a lamp.

A wind extinguished the lamp, a cat ate the rooster, and a lion ate the donkey. He said "Everything that God does is for the good."

That night, marauders came and took the city captive.

R. Akiva said to them: Did I not tell you that all that God does is for the good!

Rav Hunah in the name of Rav, in the name of Rebbe Meir, said:

A person should say few words in front of God, as it says: "Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thy heart be hasty to utter a word before God; for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth; therefore let thy words be few. (Ecclesiastes 5:1)

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף ס עמוד ב

אמר רב הונא אמר רב משום רבי מאיר, וכן תנא משמיה דרבי עקיבא: לעולם יהא אדם רגיל לומר כל דעביד רחמנא לטב עביד.

כי הא, דרבי עקיבא דהוה קאזיל באורחא, מטא לההיא מתא, בעא אושפיזא לא יהבי ליה.

אמר: כל דעביד רחמנא לטב.

אזל ובת בדברא, והוה בהדיה תרנגולא וחמרא ושרגא.

אתא זיקא כבייה לשרגא, אתא שונרא אכליה לתרנגולא, אתא אריה אכלא לחמרא. אמר: כל דעביד רחמנא לטב.

ביה בליליא אתא גייסא, שבייה למתא.

אמר להו: לאו אמרי לכו כל מה שעושה הקדוש ברוך הוא הכל לטובה!

ואמר רב הונא אמר רב משום רבי מאיר: לעולם יהיו דבריו של אדם מועטין לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא, שנאמר אל תבהל על פיך ולבך אל ימהר להוציא דבר לפני האלהים כי האלהים בשמים ואתה על הארץ על כן יהיו דבריך מעטים.