

Homa, Wine, and the Rabbinic Imagination

Ketubot 65a-65b



Rabbi Daniel Reichenbach · VisualMidrash

I first studied these texts with Gila Fine in 2017 in Jerusalem at the Pardes Institute's Egalitarian Yeshiva. There, in a class devoted to rereading the women of the Talmud, we worked through material that would later become her book, *The Madwoman in the Rabbi's Attic*. The course existed, at the time, only because students repeatedly begged her to teach it-and then begged her again to publish it. When the book finally appeared, it was met with remarkable success. Fine has since toured widely, delivering lectures and appearing on podcasts and interviews, welcomed by audiences hungry for a way of engaging rabbinic literature without either abandoning it or apologizing for it.

It is precisely into this tension that the work of Gila Fine enters. Fine does not deny the misogyny of the rabbis, nor does she attempt to soften or excuse their most disturbing claims. Instead, she proposes a radically different way of reading: a literary, attentive rereading of rabbinic stories that resists taking their surface messages at face value. These narratives, she argues, are often read as one-dimensional cautionary tales about the dangers of women. But when read closely-attuned to structure, withholding, point of view, and irony-they frequently yield far more complex, and at times surprisingly humane, insights about women, desire, power, and the ethical limits of law (Fine 1-12).

For me, the impact was personal as well as intellectual. I was struggling with how the Talmud so often reads-how harsh, dismissive, and at times cruel its treatment of women can feel, especially across a distance of nearly two thousand years. Fine's approach was strangely hopeful. She refused to let the rabbis off the hook for the truly awful things they sometimes say, and she openly recounts how shattered she herself was by what she encountered in the text. Yet she chose to read between the lines rather than turn away, to search for a reading she could hold onto without ignoring the misogyny that glares at the reader upon first-and often second or third-encounter with these sugyot (Fine 14-18).

Ketubot 65a-b offers an unusually sharp test case for this method. The sugya places law, fantasy, and narrative in immediate proximity: crude speculation about women and wine, careful legal reasoning about a widow's support, and finally a fully realized story whose emotional force destabilizes both. If Fine's approach can hold here-where misogyny is overt, sexuality is explicit, and violence is enacted-then it offers not an escape from the Talmud's difficulties, but a way of staying with them.

Before Homa ever appears, the Talmud primes the reader with a strikingly explicit discussion of women and wine. The sages imagine, in escalating terms, what happens when female sexuality is left unsupervised. One cup is acceptable; two are degrading; three lead to public sexual solicitation; four collapse the boundary between human and animal. The bluntness of the passage is difficult to miss: "With four, she solicits even a donkey" (Ketubot 65a). These are precisely the sorts of passages young rabbis would have studied aloud in the beit midrash.

And then, almost immediately, the text pivots. The same sugya insists that a widow must be sustained according to the life she lived with her husband: "If she was accustomed to wine, they give her wine" (Ketubot 65a). Law interrupts fantasy without resolving it. Habit, not suspicion, governs entitlement.

It is into this unresolved tension that Homa enters the courtroom. She appears without embellishment, identified only as the widow of Abaye. Food is granted without resistance. Wine is denied. Rava claims to

know Abaye's habits and insists that he did not drink. Homa counters with a different kind of authority-marital memory-declaring, "By the life of the master, he would give me wine in horns as large as this" (Ketubot 65b).

As she gestures, her sleeve slips and her forearm is revealed: "As she gestured, her arm was uncovered" (Ketubot 65b). Nothing about Homa's behavior changes. What changes is Rava. He is immediately aroused. Fine emphasizes that this moment reveals not Homa's danger but Rava's instability, noting that "rejection is born of projection" (Fine 102).

Rava's response is not reflection but flight. He rushes home and propositions his wife in the middle of the day-an act so out of character that she immediately demands to know who was present in court. When he answers that it was Homa, the narrative pivots again. This wife is not anonymous. She is the daughter of Rav Hisda.

Rav Hisda is remembered elsewhere in the Talmud for a charged pedagogical gesture. Holding a jewel in one hand and a clod of earth in the other, he shows his daughters the jewel while withholding the clod until they grow distressed, revealing it only then (Shabbat 140b). The lesson is not modesty as innocence, but modesty as discipline.

Her response is violent. She takes an iron locking bar and beats Homa until she drives her out of Mehoza (Ketubot 65b). The object signifies chastity and control, and its blunt, rigid form is also unmistakably phallic.

Only at the end does the Talmud reveal that Homa is an *isha katlanit*. Fine argues that this narrative withholding is deliberate, ensuring that the reader encounters Homa first as a human being rather than as a threat: "Withholding the fact of Homa's multiple widowhood until the very end, the rabbis ensure that the reader will not be prejudiced against Homa" (Fine 97).

The sugya of Homa in Ketubot 65a-65b is the only place in the Babylonian Talmud that offers a sustained narrative portrait of this woman. Elsewhere, Homa appears only as a legal abstraction-an *isha katlanit*, a woman deemed dangerous to marry. Here alone we see her speak, gesture, and suffer judgment. That this lone narrative glimpse ends with her expulsion from her city makes the scarcity of her representation all the more tragic.

The people of Mehoza expel Homa. The Talmud does not. By preserving this story, the rabbis leave the reader with discomfort rather than closure, exposing how fear so easily becomes violence.