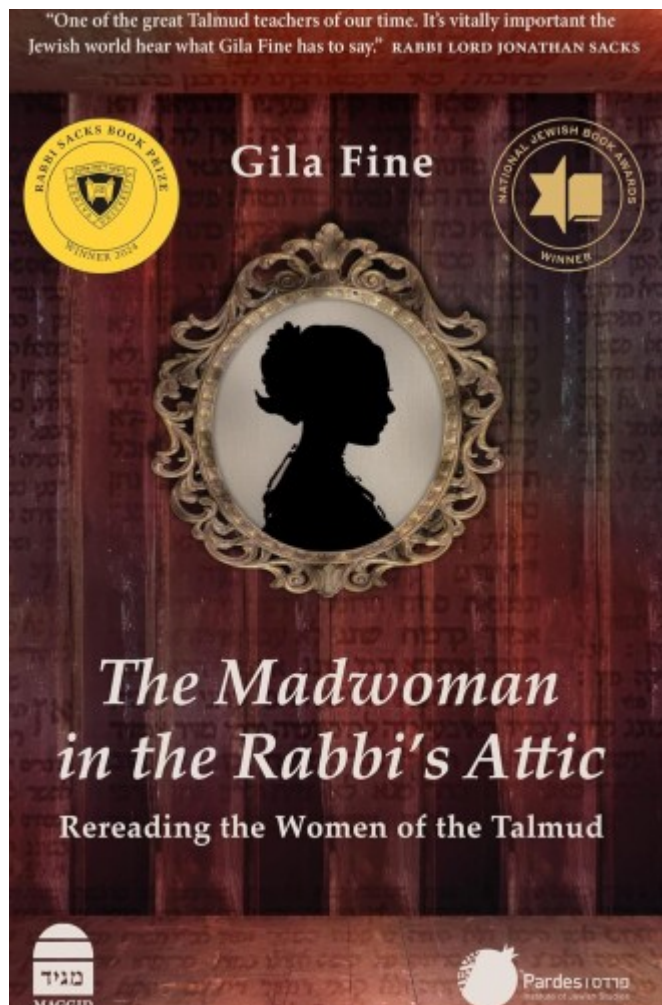


Beyond the whore, the angel, and the shrew

Gila Fine shows how the Talmud both upholds and subverts classic archetypes for female characters.

by [Beth Kissileff](#) in the [May 2025](#) issue
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In Review



The Madwoman in the Rabbi's Attic

Rereading the Women of the Talmud

By Gila Fine

Maggid Books

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

Quick, name a few stereotyped roles for women in literature. Whore with a heart of gold, overachiever, shrew. Victorian angel in the house, femme fatale, prima donna. Where do these archetypes come from, and why do so many cultures have them? What can those of us who don't want to see gender roles in such hackneyed patterns learn about them?

The Madwoman in the Rabbi's Attic—the title is a play on Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's groundbreaking book *The Madwoman in the Attic*—is part of a wave of books by Orthodox Jewish women spurred by programs that encourage those who are learned to take the next step and publish books. Written by Jerusalem-based scholar Gila Fine, it is one of the first by the women who are participating in the Word-by-Word fellowship sponsored by the Sefaria library of Jewish texts.

Fine cleverly shows how the classic archetypes for women characters are both upheld and subverted in rabbinic literature, masterfully evoking a variety of tropes and types of artistic models. She discusses movies, plays, and works of visual art as well as the texts from classical rabbinic literature that are the basis for her exploration. Fine's wide assortment of models is not chosen at random: each one adds something different to our understanding of the text, whether in subverting its usual hierarchies or changing how those hierarchies are understood. In this way, Fine follows after British models of an earlier generation: Jonathan Sacks and Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, who are known for using secular literary sources and motifs to elucidate Jewish texts. What Fine does exceptionally well in each of the six sections of her book is to break down the archetypal categories, show how they are used in various literary and other texts and artifacts, and then examine how rabbinic texts work through those same clusters of ideas.

For example, in her analysis, one significant text that discusses the "angel in house" motif switches the genders by applying the archetype to a man who is banned from public life and Torah study and weeps about it. Fine reaches an innovative interpretation of the famous story of the rabbis arguing over the purity of the oven of Akhnai in Bava Metzia 59b. In this story, the rabbis tell God that even if one of them is legally correct, the majority must decide the case, to which God rejoins

admiringly, with a smile, “My sons have defeated me.” Fine argues that the story is not only about the value of communal decision-making; it also takes on the perspective of the wronged rabbi, who is turned away from his role as a legal decisor despite his technically correct answer. She writes:

Exclusion doesn't just wrong the Others excluded. It also wrongs us, who are deprived of the good those Others might bring. And, the Akhnai story teaches, it wrongs God who will swiftly answer their prayers. The others may have all gates locked to them, but the gates of wronging remain forever open.

Fine's examination of this text from the viewpoint of a rabbi cast in the role of a woman excluded from public spaces creates a novel understanding of this often explicated text.

In her examination of Homa, a widow who petitions the court for enough money to drink as much wine as she did with her late spouse, Fine suggests that the story is about “an entirely different marital life.” The widow shows that her spouse had another side, “a great, solemn sage by day and a passionate lover by night.” The wife of the judge arrives to run the petitioning widow out of town by attacking her with a lock (which, Fine explains, is a symbol of female chastity). However, Fine adds, the irony of the story is that “the only character who remains calm and collected throughout the narrative is Homa, that wild and wanton single woman.” In other words, it is the woman who asks for the right to drink and claims she did so regularly with her husband who is in the right. As Fine suggests, “the framing of Homa's story implies that the talmudic editors are completely on her side.” Fine explains how the editors withhold information—that Homa has lost more than one husband—until the end of the story, thus encouraging readers to sympathize with her. The understanding that the story is told to provide a narrative counterpoint to the “shortcomings of these legal positions” enables readers to grasp the multifaceted nature of the talmudic text.

What is unique about Fine's approach is the way she combines literary sources to delve into familiar archetypes. She includes a picture of Barbra Streisand portraying Yentl (a woman who dresses as a man to gain access to male learning) alongside serious literary analysis of relevant rabbinic texts. As Fine writes of Beruria, a learned woman portrayed positively in the Talmud but negatively in later

explications, “the rabbis of the Talmud treat Beruria without sanction or stigma—simply as one of their own.”

It’s refreshing to see a book that regards images of women as an integral part of delving into classical rabbinic texts. Fine’s interpretations and analysis not only will remake the ways readers view familiar texts but will also introduce powerful stories worth learning about to readers who are new to these texts. The clarity of writing, combined with Fine’s integration of familiar types into careful analysis informed by both Western literary ideas and textual scholarship, makes this book one of the best things I’ve read all year.