INTERTEXTUALITY AND IDEALISM IN THE RABBINIC READING OF *ESHET ḤAYIL*

KATHARINA HADASSAH KLEIN (WENDL)

A woman of valor who can find? For her price is far above rubies.[1]

This verse, and the 21 following, are traditionally sung every Friday evening in many Jewish homes, just before the Shabbat meal commences. It is the first verse of the poem "A Woman of Valor"/"*Eshet Ḥayil*."[2] Widely understood to praise the Jewish woman, housewife and mother, whose actions demonstrate talent, perseverance, wisdom and modesty, this poem presents an "ideal, but attainable"[3] goal, as Adele Berlin words it.

Many people singing may be unaware that the poem *Eshet Ḥayil* is not just part of the Friday night liturgy but taken straight from the Hebrew Bible. It can be found in the 31st and final chapter of the book of Proverbs. Some traditional Jewish commentators on this text read it as literal as many Jews today, viewing the woman being praised in Proverbs 31:10-31 as a successful businesswoman dedicated to her family. This is also confirmed by Yoder, who provides a comparative socio-historical reading of Proverbs 31 and concludes that the *Eshet Ḥayil* is a "composite figure of real, albeit exceptional, Persian-period women,"[4] deeply rooted in the reality in which the text was composed. Other medieval and early modern commentators, on the other hand, tend to interpret the *Eshet Ḥayil* more allegorically, representing the Torah or wisdom incarnate.[5]

Midrashic interpretations of *Eshet Ḥayil*, though, offer another look at this text. They open up multi-layered perspectives on more than the role of the Jewish woman in her household, family and society. Rabbinic readings of this text connect its verses to other biblical characters such as Moses, Abraham or Sarah[6] and important characters in the Talmud like Beruria and Rabbi Meir.[7] One particular Midrash Eshet Ḥayil connects Proverbs 31:10-31 to a number of female biblical characters, with each verse being assigned to one or more women from the Hebrew Bible.

The so-called Midrash Eshet Ḥayil that I want to discuss is a late midrash found in the exegetical Midrash Proverbs.[8] This text is part of an entire, albeit

Katharina Hadassah Klein (Wendl) is a Faculty Member at the Institute of Jewish Studies at the Free University of Berlin.

small, rabbinic genre of Midreshei Eshet Ḥayil, of which multiple versions in various manuscript witnesses exist.[9] Given that this genre is very small, it has only attracted few researchers who have investigated different versions of it preserved in manuscripts or have situated the text within the wider world of rabbinic literature. I would like to explore what message and what image of the Jewish woman this rabbinic take on *Eshet Ḥayil* conveys.

Shulamit Valler, in an article titled "Who is the ēšet ḥayil in Rabbinic Literature?," analyzes parts of this midrash, focusing on Midrash Eshet Ḥayil's references to Sarah, Miriam, and the wise woman of Abel. Valler highlights that the rabbinic interpretation of Midrash Eshet Ḥayil emphasizes the wisdom, bravery and intelligence exemplified by the biblical characters linked to Proverbs 31:10-31. She concludes that Midrash Eshet Ḥayil points to liberal conceptions of women and womanhood held by the rabbis.[10] According to Valler, the ideal woman in Midrash Eshet Ḥayil is a spiritual and political leader, active outside the home, and involved in activities on a communal, societal, and national level.

In this article, I would like to reassess her reading of this text by close-reading the intertextual connections, sometimes direct quotes of, sometimes references to other parts of rabbinic literature, that can be found in Midrash Eshet Ḥayil.[11] I would argue that rather than a liberal conception, this midrash expresses conservative views of womanhood and lifts the teachings about the biblical Eshet Ḥayil, the woman of valor, onto a national level.

An example highlighting the national impact of the *Eshet Ḥayil* is the Midrash's interpretation of Proverbs 31:16: "*She sets her mind on an estate and acquires it*. This is Yocheved, who gave birth to Moses, who is weighed up against all of Israel, who are called vineyard, as it is said: *For the vineyard of GOD of Hosts / Is the House of Israel* (Isa. 5:7)."

In Midrash Eshet Ḥayil, Proverbs 31:16 is linked to Yocheved, the mother of Moses. The field that the *Eshet Ḥayil* acquires is connected to Isaiah 5:7, which talks about a vineyard (*For the vineyard of GOD of Hosts / Is the House of Israel, / And the seedlings he lovingly tended / Is the citizenry of Judah. / And [God] hoped for justice, / But behold, injustice; / For equity, / But behold, iniquity!*). The vineyard that Yocheved planted, the midrash explains, is her son Moses, because he is equated with the House of Israel. The comparison between Yocheved giving birth to and caring for Moses and God

tending his vineyard, his chosen people, portrays Yocheved's actions as having not just an immediate impact on her child, but on the whole nation.

Likewise, Midrash Eshet Ḥayil, elaborating on Proverbs 31:7, praises Miriam for her crucial role in the Exodus narrative, highlighting her proactiveness by establishing connections between the primary text and other parts of rabbinic literature: "*She girds herself with strength*: This is Miriam, who said before Moses' birth: "In the future, my mother will give birth to a son who will save the Jewish people." When he was born and the yoke of the kingdom was heavy on them, her father stood up and hit her on her head. He said to her: "Where is your prophesy?" He stood up and spat in her face. And despite all this, she held onto her prophesy, as it is written: *And his sister stationed herself at a distance* (Ex. 2:4)."

Verse 17, introduced by *She girds herself with strength,* is connected to Miriam. According to a famous midrash that appears, among others and with various minor differences, in *Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael* 15:20:1, *Exodus Rabbah* 1:22, TB *Sota* 11b and TB *Megillah* 14a, Miriam had a prophesy about her yet unborn brother Moses becoming the leader of the Jewish people who would eventually help free them from slavery.[12] In Midrash Eshet Ḥayil, this rabbinic narrative is referenced, and her steadfastness and perseverance are highlighted.

Midrash Eshet Ḥayil uses phrases, word fields, and names to refer to other texts, concepts, and narratives within Jewish traditional literature.[13] Verse 19, which is linked to Yael and starts with the letter yud, mentions a *kishor*, a distaff used by the *Eshet Ḥayil* for spinning. Spinning and making textiles are central to the *Eshet Ḥayil's* life and crucial for her family's survival. Yael, on the other hand, also had a very specific tool, a tent pin, with which she killed Sisera, the commander of the hostile army fighting against the Jewish people in the Book of Judges. She did not use a weapon to kill Sisera, but rather reappropriated the tent pin to kill Sisera. The midrash lauds her for respecting the commandment prohibiting women from carrying weapons, considered male tools, which is mentioned in Deuteronomy 22:5: "*She sets her hand to the distaff* (Prov. 31:19): This is Yael, who did not kill Sisera with a weapon, but with a tent pin through the strength of her hands. And why did she not kill him with a weapon? In order to fulfill that which is said: *A woman must not put on man's apparel* (Deut. 22:5)."

Vayntrub, analyzing the biblical *Eshet Ḥayil*, speaks of a "totalizing description"[14] that Proverbs 31:10-31 presents to the readers: Small glimpses into certain activities in the daily life of the *Eshet Ḥayil* provide us, when seen as a whole, with a total description of who the biblical *Eshet Ḥayil* is. Close-reading the connections established and the parallels between Proverbs 31:10-31, Midrash Eshet Ḥayil and other texts of Jewish traditional literature are essential to understanding this midrash. Midrash Eshet Ḥayil mentions only certain women and only selected narratives. This creates a particular image of women that appears all-encompassing, and which is, upon further deliberation, quite conservative.

The women mentioned in Midrash Eshet Ḥayil are portrayed as strong and active and are characterized by courage, charity and a sense of responsibility. They are mothers, sisters of significant Jewish men, their supporters and even their saviors. They are also primarily defined by the men around them. This, as Miralles-Maciá and Raveh point out, is a common phenomenon in rabbinic texts.[15] Contrary to what Valler would argue, a close reading of Midrash Eshet Ḥayil does not show a particularly liberal conception of womanhood in this text. True, women are the main characters of this midrash, but they are not portrayed in particularly progressive ways, but rather as auxiliary to male biblical characters.

Some women in Midrash Eshet Ḥayil transgress boundaries of traditional norms in situations of hardship, but ultimately, they submit to them. Verse 15 is connected to Batya who saved and raised Moses. As the daughter of Pharaoh, she crosses boundaries of gentile and Jewish solidarity and courageously rescues Moshe, a Jewish baby boy who would otherwise be doomed to certain death. Ultimately, according to rabbinic tradition, Batya converts to Judaism and thus subordinates herself to Jewish traditional norms. Yael, the Kenite woman, is linked to verse 19. When plotting to kill Sisera, she does not forget the Jewish law prohibiting women from carrying and using weapons since these are masculine tools. Ruth, who the midrash connects to the final three verses of Proverbs 31, has a special place in this midrash. These final verses (29-31) extol the *Eshet Ḥayil* for her fear of God and laud her for her actions, which the midrash reads in light of Ruth. She transcends geographical and religious boundaries, joins the Jewish people, commits herself to the observance of the mitzvot and becomes the ancestor of King David. As

emancipatory as these boundary transgressions sound, their descriptions in Midrash Eshet Ḥayil exclusively occur in association with men. Received norms are transgressed only temporarily.[16] The halakhic, traditional and domestic framework, which women are supposed to respect, remains steadfast.

What Midrash Eshet Ḥayil does convey through its selection of biblical and rabbinic narratives, though, is the importance of women's actions for the survival of the Jewish people. By aligning each verse of Proverbs 31:10-31 with a female character from the Hebrew Bible, the contents of the biblical primary text are positively reinforced. All these biblical women are exemplary of individual characteristics of the *Eshet Ḥayil*. The style of this midrash idealizes, therefore, the *Eshet Ḥayil* in the Book of Proverbs as well as the biblical women mentioned in the midrash. Since its primary text is sung in so many Jewish homes, reading the Midrash Eshet Ḥayil in a contemporary Jewish liturgical context also idealizes the perfect Jewish woman of today.

The *Eshet Ḥayil* is a flawless personality in both the Book of Proverbs and Midrash Proverbs.[17] In Midrash Eshet Ḥayil, however, this image of women is idealized even further and appears more strikingly. Each verse of Proverbs 31:10-31 is assigned a female, biblical role model. Through the compilation of the individual midrashim, which begin with Sarah and end with Ruth, the *Eshet Ḥayil* becomes an unattainable ideal. Although in the Bible many of these personalities are portrayed in their whole complexity, this is not the case in this compilation. Here, it is about the successes and achievements attained by these women. While they often demonstrate beneficence and strength of will, they are just as often portrayed as wives, mothers and sisters of important male personalities who are the actual drivers of the narrative.

Nevertheless, this midrash elevates the significance of the woman of valor from a domestic, familial level to a collective, national level. The midrash brings into focus the importance of women in Jewish history and suggests that there can be no Jewish history, identity, or tradition without the active involvement of women.

The idealizing tendencies in Midrash Eshet Ḥayil and the important role of women in Jewish society and Jewish history are underlined in the final interpretation about Ruth. She is the only woman to have three verses of the biblical text of *Eshet Ḥayil* attributed to her. She is also the only woman referred to in the Tanakh as an *Eshet Ḥayil* (Ruth 3:11). The *Eshet Ḥayil's* unique-

ness, therefore, is underscored by Ruth. Imitating her is almost impossible for Jewish women, even though they may take some of Ruth's experiences as points of identification. Ruth does not fit at all into the commonly held conception of a Jewish woman. She comes from Moab, had to live in poverty for a long time, shows boundless loyalty to Naomi, engages in almost inappropriate interactions with Boaz, is the ancestress of King David. According to rabbinic tradition, she is the paradigmatic convert to Judaism whose interaction with Naomi inspired the requirements of conversion today.[18] Midrash Eshet Ḥayil describes an ideal woman that hardly any Jewish woman can attain. The final two interpretations on Ruth, though, give an indication of how Jewish women can at least aspire to this ideal: By observing Torah and mitzvot.

After analyzing the entire Midrash Eshet Ḥayil, Valler's conclusion must be amended. The content of Midrash Eshet Ḥayil is certainly anchored in the patriarchal system: the ideal woman is characterized by being a support, help or salvation to the men in her life and, in some cases, to the Jewish people at large. She intuitively recognizes the right moments to stand up for others. If male leaders are unavailable, unsuccessful or simply not present, the Eshet Ḥayil will jump in, boldly, and will save the show. However, she is not naturally the spiritual and political leader Valler described. Even more so, one of the most important and striking female leaders in the Hebrew Bible, Deborah, is missing from the text! So is Esther. More frequently and more importantly, the *Eshet Ḥa*yil raises her children well and, through her own exemplary character, educates her sons (not necessarily her daughters) to become important and significant figures in Jewish society and history. Thus, the rabbinic reading of *Eshet Ḥayil* in this midrash fits very well into other traditional rabbinic concepts and ideas about the role of Jewish women and of individual biblical characters.

Traits of a liberal disposition can hardly be found in Midrash Eshet Ḥayil when approaching it through a comparative and intertextual reading. This resonates with Baskin's assessment of the representation of women in the genre of midrash overall: Over the centuries, no significant tendencies of a more liberal disposition within aggadic literature can be detected.[19] Midrash Eshet Ḥayil is exceptional in that women are mentioned so often, are portrayed as active and bold characters. They are portrayed this way, though, for

the sake of men. In emergency situations, the rabbinic *Eshet Ḥayil* jumps in, shows courage and resourcefulness and temporarily transcends normative boundaries. By outlining the way Jewish and non-Jewish women in the Hebrew Bible make a difference and save the Jewish nation, their role on the collective national level is highlighted. In doing so, this midrash emphasizes the importance of women in Jewish history and suggests that there can be no Jewish history or identity without the active involvement of women. Ultimately, though, the rabbinic *Eshet Ḥayil* finds her way back into the rabbinic framework of Torah and Jewish law, which is significantly shaped and regulated by men.

By observing mitzvot and upholding tradition (and traditional gender ideas), a woman can come close to the ideal of the rabbinic *Eshet Ḥayil*, but this ideal can hardly be called liberal. In contrast to the biblical conception of the *Eshet Ḥayil*, which is "ideal, but not unattainable,"[20] the image of Jewish women in Midrash Eshet Ḥayil is not only traditional and idealized, but also unattainable.

NOTES

1. This translation is taken from the 1917-edition of the Hebrew Bible published by JPS. All following translations have been taken from the later 1985-edition, though.

2. It is unclear how to translate the term *Eshet Ḥayil* because of the semantically ambiguous character of the word *ḥayil*. Across centuries, religions and cultures the term *Eshet Ḥayil* has been translated in very different and diverse ways. Adele Berlin, in an essay on the difficulties of translating this verse, lists 16 different translations, see: A. Berlin, “On Translating Proverbs 31:10”, in: *Found in Translation. Essays on Jewish Biblical Translation in Honor of Leonard J. Greenspoon*, ed. by J.W. Barker, A. Le Donne, J.N. Lohr (West Lafayette/ Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2018), pp. 201-208, pp. 203-204.

3. Berlin, “On Translating Proverbs 31:10”, in: *Found in Translation. Essays on Jewish Biblical Translation in Honor of Leonard J. Greenspoon*, ed. by J.W. Barker, A. Le Donne, J.N. Lohr (West Lafayette/ Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2018), pp. 201-208, p. 202.

4. C.R. Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance. A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 1-9 and 31:10-31* (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2001), p. 113.

5. Ibn Ezra on Proverbs 31:10, Rashi on Proverbs 31:10, Metzudat Zion and Metzudat David, 31,10, 31:21 and 31:2 (2nd interpretation). A discussion of different interpretations as to the identity of the Eshet Ḥayil can be found here: R. Apple, “The Two Wise Women of Proverbs Chapter 31,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 39:3 (2011), pp. 175-181 and here: N. Gutstein, “Proverbs 31:10-31: The Woman of Valor as Allegory,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 27:1 (1999), pp. 36-39.

6. *Midrash Tanḥuma* to Genesis 23; *Aggadat Bereshit* 34:1.

7. S. Buber, *Midrash Mishlei* (Vilna: Ha‘almana ve-ha‘achim Rem, 1893), chapter 31.

8. S. Buber, *Midrash Mishlei* (Vilna: Ha'almana ve-ha'achim Rem, 1893), chapter 31. Dating Midrash Mishlei is difficult. The most recent estimate by Burton L. Visotzky suggests that it dates to the 9th century, though previous researchers such as Leopold Zunz and Zvi Meir Rabinovitz date it to the end of the gaonic period or the 7th-8th century, respectively. Shlomo Buber argued that Midrash Mishlei must have been compiled shortly after the completion of the Babylonian Talmud in the 5th or 6th century. For more on this, see: B. L. Visotzky, *Midrash Mishle. A Critical Edition Based on Manuscripts and Early Editions with an Introduction and Annotated English Translation of Chapters One through Ten* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1982), p. 55; B. L. Visotzky, *The Midrash on Proverbs* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 10-12, pp. 21-22; G. Stemberger, *Einleitung in Talmud und Midrasch* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2011), p. 360; T. Ilan, L. Miralles-Maciá, and R. Nikolsky, "Die Bibel und die Frauen - Rabbinische Literatur. Einleitung", in: *Rabbinische Literatur. Die Bibel und die Frauen*, ed. by T. Ilan, L. Miralles-Maciá and R. Nikolsky (Wien: Kohlhammer, 2021) pp. 9-48, p. 38.

9. M. Lerner, "Keta Ḥadash Mi-midrash Eshet Ḥayil ve-teḥilato shel ma'amar 12 nashim", in: *Meḥkarim be-talmud u-ba-midrash*, ed. by M. Bar-Asher; A. Edrei, Y. Levinson, B. Lifshitz, Berachiahu (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2005), pp. 265-292; M. Lerner, "Meḥkarim b-emidrash mishlei", in: *Mehkerei Talmud III. Talmudic Studies Dedicated to the Memory of Prof. Ephraim E. Urbach,* ed. by D. Rozenthal and Y. Sussmann (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2005), pp. 461-488; Y. Katz-Levine, *Midrash Eshet Ḥayil* (PhD Dissertation) (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University, 1992).

10. S. Valler, "Who is the ēšet ḥayil in Rabbinic Literature?", in: *A Feminist Companion to Wisdom,* ed. by A. Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 85-97, pp. 96-97.

11. The rationales for the connections between individual verses of Proverbs 31:10-31 and female biblical characters are based on selected biblical and rabbinic narratives that are referenced in the midrash. These associations are, at times, made without any comments and, at times, accompanied by shorter or longer explanations concerning the biblical personality, thus creating a specific image of women communicated through the interpretations in the midrash. Julia Kristeva would call this a "mosaic of quotations" and "the absorption and transformation" of various texts (J. Kristeva, *Desire in Language. A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. by L.S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980 (1966)), p. 66). Barthes describes the multi-layeredness of the texts in the following way: "[A]ny text is an intertext; other texts are present in it, at varying levels, in more or less recognizable forms (...). Any text is a new tissue of past citations. Bits of codes, formulae, rhythmic models, fragments of social languages, etc. pass into the text and are redistributed within it." (R. Barthes, "Theory of the Text", in: *Untying the Text. A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. by R. Young /Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 31-47, p. 39).

12. Valler analyses the interpretation of Proverbs 31:17 in Midrash Eshet Ḥayil together with its parallel source in TB *Megillah* 14a and the *Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael* 15:20:1 in Valler, "Who is the ēšet ḥayil in Rabbinic Literature?", pp. 96-97.

13. Midrash Eshet Ḥayil is a prime example of rabbinic intertextuality, which Daniel Boyarin would compare to a matrix in which each element of the rabbinic canon can refer to all others. Every element can be interpreted through the lens of all other elements. Narrative parallels and overlaps are, therefore, characterized by phrases, word fields, and names of characters. These

words and phrases, Aryeh Cohen explains, "are signs which refer to 'preexistent word groups.' These preexistent word groups, or intertexts – which might be sentences or books, text or a part of language – determine the production, or inform the meaning of signs in the text" (D. Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 16; A. Cohen, *Rereading Talmud. Gender, Law and the Poetics of Sugyot* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), p. 136).

14. J. Vayntrub, "Beauty, Wisdom, and Handiwork in Proverbs 31:10-31", *The Harvard Theological Review* 113:1 (2020), pp. 45-62, p. 48. Similarly, Yoder describes it as an impressionist painting. Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance*, pp. 75-76.

15. I. Raveh, *Feminist Rereadings of Rabbinic Literature* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2014), xviii; L. Miralles-Maciá, "Andersheiten im Midrasch. Levitikus Rabba über biblische Frauen", in: *Rabbinische Literatur. Die Bibel und die Frauen*, ed. by T. Ilan, L. Miralles-Maciá and R. Nikolsky (Wien: Kohlhammer, 2021) pp. 193-218, pp. 195-196.

16. For more on this, see Neusner's elaborations on the rabbinic attempt to regulate the lives of women through the system of Mishna and Halacha in. J. Neusner, *A History of the Mishnaic Law of Women* (Leiden: Brill, 1980), p. 268.

17. S. Keiter Tuller, "Die Ironie der Eschet Chajil: Sprüche 31,10–31 in der mittelalterlichen jüdischen Exegese", in: *Das jüdische Mittelalter*, ed. by C. Bakhos, and G. Langer (Wien: Kohlhammer, 2020), pp. 132-150, p. 135; J.J. Kimche, „A Husband Of Valor: Who Can Find? The Husband's Role in Proverbs 31:10-31", *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 49:3 (2021), pp. ´143-158.

18. TB *Yevamot* 47b.

19. J.R. Baskin: *Midrashic Women. Formations of the Feminine in Rabbinic Literature* (Hanover, N.H.: Brandeis University Press, 2002), p. 5.

20. Berlin, "On Translating Proverbs 31:10", p. 202.

If you have written a paper in the *Jewish Bible Quarterly* and wish to see if it has been quoted in another academic journal, book, or doctoral dissertation, access http://scholar.google.com and type in Jewish Bible Quarterly under "journal" and your name under "author".