

Comment and Clarification

In my essay, "The Silence of Rayna Batya: Torah, Suffering, and Rabbi Barukh Epstein's 'Wisdom of Women'" (*The Torah u-Madda Journal* 6 [1996]:90-134), I translated Rabbi Epstein's account of a conversation with his aunt in which she cited a responsum by a sixteenth century Italian rabbi in support of women's learning (p. 101). A reader subsequently challenged the veracity of Rabbi Epstein's version of that exchange, claiming in a letter that the "responsum" in question (which is written in poetic language, and addressed with rhetorical flourish to a woman whom its author describes as "hind of grace . . . who has acquired wisdom") was actually a "love letter" rather than a halakhic opinion, as it is represented by Rabbi Epstein (*Mekor Barukh* [Vilna, 1928], 1962; also *Torah Temimah*, Deuteronomy 11:19, #48). In preparing my response to this claim, I have incidentally noted some inaccuracies in my own presentation of the material, which I would like to take this opportunity to correct.

Rabbi Shmuel Archivolti (not Rikvalti, as I had transliterated) was actually the head of a rabbinical court and yeshiva in Padua (a correction to my n. 35). He lived between 1515 and 1611, and was known for his literary virtuosity as well as his learning (see the entry by Ychoshua Horowitz, *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 3 [Jerusalem 1972], 397). Rabbi Archivolti was a student of Rabbi Meir Katzenellenbogen, the Maharam of Padua. His own

most famous student was Rabbi Leon of Modena, who mentioned him warmly in his Hebrew autobiography (translated by Mark R. Cohen as *The Autobiography of a Seventeenth-Century Venetian Rabbi: Leon Modena's "Life of Judah"* [Princeton, 1988], 86). Rabbi Archivolti was known by contemporaries, it should be noted, for having taught both Jewish women and Christians (*ibid.*, pp. 197-98).

The letter cited by Rayna Batya Berlin, and subsequently by Rabbi Epstein, is taken from a work known as *Ma'ayan Gannim*, published in Venice in 1553. *Ma'ayan Gannim* is a collection of fifty letters and responses written by Rabbi Archivolti to impart wisdom and ethical instruction to his readers while also serving as examples of Hebrew literary style. The letter on women's learning cited by Rayna Batya is printed at the end of this book, where Rabbi Archivolti responds to a woman's query about statements in rabbinic literature which seem to deny the propriety of religious education for women. In his response to her, part of which I reproduced in my essay, R. Archivolti argues that learning by mature, self-motivated women is a precious and praiseworthy act, which ought to be encouraged by the scholars of the generation.

It is true that this letter was not published in a standard volume of responsa. The letters in *Ma'ayan Gannim* are written in an ornate style that includes both biblical and

midrashic allusions, and some erotic imagery in the style of Immanuel of Rome, who also influenced other Italian rabbinic figures during this period (see Robert Bonfils, *Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy* [Berkeley, 1994], 169). As Bonfils points out, however (p. 133), the letters to which Rabbi Archivolti responds point to problems which the author saw as typical to his time. The letters in *Ma'ayan Gannim* represent ethical as well as literary instruction, and there is no reason to suppose that they do not represent the author's opinion on the subjects

they address. That is certainly the way in which the letter on women's learning was understood by both Rayna Batya Berlin and Rabbi Epstein, her nephew. The latter ultimately disagreed with Rabbi Archivolti's opinion, as his treatment of it in both *Mekor Barukh* and *Torah Temimah* shows. There are no grounds, however, for the claim that Rabbi Berlin misrepresented the facts, knowingly or otherwise, by treating Rabbi Archivolti's halakhic opinion as such.

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