

## Video Clip: Tanna'it Asenath Barzani

A female Rosh Yeshiva in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century

In the seventeenth century there was a brilliant female Torah scholar, named Asenath Barzani, who personally trained rabbinic students in Mosul, in present-day Iraqi Kurdistan. How did Asenath rise up to run a Torah academy at a time when there was no formal female Torah education?

### Suggested Implementation

#### History

1. Sarah Schneirer and organized Torah education for women

#### Philosophy

1. Women and Torah learning
2. תורה עם דרך ארץ
3. What constitutes a Rabbi?

### Background

Asenath Barzani was born in 1590 in Mosul. Asenath's father was the esteemed Rabbi Shmuel b. Netanel Ha-Levi of Kurdistan, who, as a skilled scholar and mystic, sought to train rabbinical leaders for a region lacking substantial educational mentors. As he had no sons, he personally taught his daughter to be an elite scholar like he was. Asenath describes the intellectual environment of her upbringing as all-encompassing: she devoted all her time to Torah study, constantly surrounded by *talmidei hachamim*, and did little else. In a letter she wrote:

*I never left the entrance to my house or went outside;*

*I was like a princess of Israel...*

*I grew up on the laps of scholars, anchored to my father of blessed memory.*

*I was never taught any work but sacred study, to uphold, as it is said:*

*"And you should recite it day and night (Joshua 1: 8)" (Mann I: 511).<sup>1</sup>*

She married her father's star pupil, Rabbi Judah Mizrahi, who knew from the start that Asenath would not spend her time doing housework but rather would devote herself to Torah, just as he was doing. After her father died, the official leadership role over his academy went to her husband, but it was Asenath who prepared the students for the rabbinate. Significantly, she received no known opposition in her work due to her gender. In fact, Asenath's talent gained wide recognition and appreciation. Rabbi Pinhas Hariri wrote to her: "My rabbi and teacher, we are always willing to serve you with pure faith".

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<sup>1</sup> Jewish Women's Archive. 2021. *Asnat Barazani* | *Jewish Women's Archive*. [online] Available at: <<https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/barazani-asnat-bat-samuel>> [Accessed 29 August 2021].

The community of Baghdad even asked her to choose for them a rabbi from one of her yeshiva students.<sup>2</sup> She responded by sending her son whom she had trained.

We're not left with many primary sources written by Asenath herself, but we do have many amulets containing legends about her grand persona. A well known "fact" about Asenath is her decision, atypical for Jewish women at the time, to only raise two children for the sake of an absolute commitment to her Torah study.<sup>3</sup>

Tales, popular amongst female folklore, are about her superpower to thwart sexual predators by calling upon holy names to protect her.<sup>4</sup> Stories abound as to her miracles. On a trip to Amediya she partook in a synagogue service when a fire erupted in the synagogue. All of the people escaped, but her concern was now for the Torah scrolls. Legend holds that Asenath repeated one of God's holy names and the fire stopped - saving the Torah scrolls and all the holy texts. That synagogue, then, was called by her name.

Just as her father taught her Torah, Asenath guided her own son in the yeshiva she ran and he ended up continuing the family's long line of Torah scholars. However, she did not shape her own daughter into a learner. Asenath was both always intensely traditional in faith and practice as well as being a nonconventional master in Torah and its Midrash, Talmud, and Kabbalah. Asenath specifically was given the title *tanna'it*, the female equivalent to her father's *tanna*.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately much of her writings were lost, but we are left with a glimpse into her brilliance and even some poetic talent through letters that remain. She is buried next to the synagogue in Amediya.

Although Asenath Barzani has been cherished within Kurdish Jewish tradition for many centuries, more Jews from all different communities and lifestyles are now reveling in the tales of Asenath, with the publication of *Asenath and her Dove: The True Story of the World's First Female Rabbi*, a children's book written by Sigal Samuel and illustrated by Vali Mintzi. *Asenath and her Dove* teaches the profound and inspiring lesson to shape one's own path despite societal norms and expectations, and specifically that women, too, can lead in the Torah world. Samuel writes: "No one had ever heard of a woman leading a yeshiva anywhere in the world." Indeed, Asenath is about refusing to surrender to such challenges, no matter how daunting.

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<sup>2</sup> Derman, Ushi. "The Brilliant Woman Who Headed Yeshiva, Osnat Barazani." *Museum of the Jewish People*, 20 Mar. 2018

<sup>3</sup> Melammed, Renee Levine. "Asnat Barazani." *Jewish Women's Archive*, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/barazani-asnat-bat-samuel>. "These include her ability to limit her childbearing to two children so that she could devote herself to her studies, and the ability to freeze an intruder in his tracks in order to prevent him from raping her, a feat achieved by loudly calling out holy names."

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup><https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1615185551/wbtlaorg/c9456x04f8cxogndx7vo/First-Woman-Rabbi-Asenath-Barzani.pdf>

## Questions for Discussion

1. Discuss the relatively modern introduction of Jewish women to organized Torah study - <https://www.sefaria.org.il/sheets/127720?lang=he>
2. Ben Azai vs. Rabbi Eliezer on women Torah learning <https://www.sefaria.org.il/sheets/37623?lang=he>
3. Asenath's position as the head of the yeshiva was uncommon at the time or for much time after that. Is it possible there was no opposition because it was her father, a rosh yeshiva, who taught her and paved the way for her to reach that position? What does that say about others who want to hold positions outside of societal norms but don't have those connections? What are the advantages/disadvantages of taking individual steps outside the norm versus pushing for widespread acceptance of change with public outcry and lobbying.

## Suggested Readings

Bengio, Ofra. "Game Changers: Kurdish Women in Peace and War." *Middle East Journal*, vol. 70, no. 1, 2016, pp. 30–46..

<https://www.bina.org.il/tishabaven/>;

<https://resources.finalseite.net/images/v1615185551/wbtlorg/c9456x04f8cxogndx7vo/First-Woman-Rabbi-Osnat-Barzani.pdf>; also a source sheet that lists the different superpowers and legends about Barzani.

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/worlds-1st-female-rabbi-led-a-16th-century-mosul-yeshiva-for-kurdish-jewry/>

מלמד, אורי, and רינה לוין מלמד. "הרבנית אסנת: ראש הישיבה בכורדיסטאן." *Pe'amim: Studies in Oriental Jewry* / פעמים: רבעון לחקר קהילות ישראל במזרח. no. 82, 2000, pp. 163–178. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/23429512](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23429512).

Derman, Ushi. "The Brilliant Woman Who Headed Yeshiva, Osnat Barazani." Museum of the Jewish People, 20 Mar. 2018.

<https://www.amazon.com/Osnat-Her-Dove-Worlds-Female/dp/1646140370>

Quick overview by Professor Renee Levine Melammed <https://youtu.be/7jeZ9nsVUvM>