

Woman Cave House Woman

Ruth Calderon

Anat Betzer's paintings, from the very first exhibitions, have been rife with images of houses and caves. The house—whether a makeshift tree house or a real stone house—is located in nature, in a thicket, like a flicker of tranquility and a hope for a peaceful rest in a reality of anxiety and tension.

Moshe Halbertal, a professor of Jewish thought and philosophy, observed that home is distinguished and characterized by what people do there, and there alone: i.e. sleep. Hence, the essence of home lies in its being a place that allows us to drop our defenses, to be unvigilant, nonalert, to sleep.¹ Betzer's paintings, however, elicit vigilance. The depicted landscapes, which seem to swallow the beholder, are realms of the unknown, of tension and lack of control. The image and coloration capture the alert gaze—and lo, in the depth of the painting, the eye identifies the house, rushing to focus on it, to find protection therein.

The paintings repeatedly prompted me to seek my way to the house in the depths of the forest, as did Hansel and Gretel, deep in the woods. In so doing, I became aware of the double meaning of the word "house" in Aramaic, the language of the Talmud: the Aramaic word "*debeitehu*" denotes both "his house" and "his wife." The woman as house/home.

¹ See Moshe Halbertal, "Philosophical, Political, and Human Perspectives on the Notion of Home," Paideia Conference, Stockholm 2016.

Rabbi Tanhum, a 3rd-century Eretz Israeli Talmudic sage, is quoted in the Babylonian Talmud² as stating in the name of R. Hanilai: "Any man who has no wife lives without joy, without blessing, and without goodness. 'Without joy,' for it is written, *And thou shalt rejoice, thou and thy house*.³ 'Without blessing,' for it is written, *To cause a blessing to rest on thy house*.⁴ 'Without goodness,' for it is written, *It is not good that the man should be alone*.⁵" In his assertions R. Tanhum relies on two biblical verses in which the house is used interchangeably with the woman, and on a seminal verse from Genesis, which postulates that "It is not good that the man should be alone." The man will wrap his loneliness with the woman, who will become his home, will keep sadness, difficulty, and evil away, and protect him from all the pains of life, the opposite of which is a woman.

Later in the same Talmudic discussion, the sages of Babylon add and elucidate the image of the woman, recounting that "in the West"—namely, in the Land of Israel, "it was stated: Without Torah and without a [protecting] wall"—to wit, not only is the woman the house/home that furnishes the man with a place of rest and comfort, but she is also his walls, his boundaries, his law. "A woman shall compass a man" (Jer. 31:22), that is to say—she will envelope and surround him the same way a wall surrounds a city. "'Without Torah,' for it is written, *Is it that I have no help in me, and that sound wisdom is driven quite from me*.⁶ 'Without a [protecting] wall,' for it is written, *A woman*

² *The Soncino Babylonian Talmud: Yebamoth*, ed.: R. Isidore Epstein, trans. R. Israel W. Slotki, 62:2 (London: Soncino Press, 1936).

³ Deut. 14:26.

⁴ Ezek. 44:30.

⁵ Gen. 2:18.

⁶ Job 6:13.

shall encompass a man"⁷—in other words: one's peace of mind is also dependent on the matrimonial peace, on one's tent/home being in peace, that is, on the woman. When your wife is well—you, too, will find peace.

The affinities I formed, as a spectator, between Betzer's works and the discourse of the sages, who regard the home as a woman and as a place for relaxation, are reinforced by the fact that the artist who created them is a woman. A woman, symbolized in culture by the image of a house, comes out of the house and observes the prevalent male image with a brush in her hand. Generations of women have dreamt of this moment, of abandoning their supporting role, taking off the apron, dressing up, and embarking on a journey of their own; only that now, on her journey in the depths of the woods, she herself yearns for a home. Where will a woman find her haven of rest?

A recurrent image in the *Wuthering Heights* series (2005–07) is a luring cabin deep in the forest. In some instances, stairs lead up to it, and it is a house built on a tree. The eyes climb up the stairs, and our consciousness is reminded that the simple image has become entangled. Feminist thought has reinstated the woman with the right to revisit the time and place as a protagonist, a heroine—just like the man, like a hiker in the woods. She is allowed, for the first time, to step out of her status as an object and constitute herself as a subject. With the great freedom enjoyed by women today, however, the hope of reaching the cabin, of arriving at the comforting lap whose sole function is to engulf and protect the hiker, and rock him to sleep—that hope is drawing away. The lap itself has set out on a journey.

⁷ Job 5:24.