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RABBINIC STORIES

TRANSLATED AND INTRODUCED BY
JEFFREY L. RUBENSTEIN

PREFACE BY
SHAYE J. D. COHEN



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Contents

Acknowledgments	xv
Preface	xvii
Introduction	1

Part I:

Historical Memories and the Lessons of History

<i>Chapter 1. Hasmonean Memories</i>	25
A. The Festival of Hanukka (Bavli Shabbat 21a)	27
B. Nikanor's Day (Bavli Taanit 18b)	27
C. The War of Aristobolus and Hyrcanus (Bavli Sotah 49b)	29
D. Of Sieges and Sacrifices (Yerushalmi Berakhot 4:1, 7b)	29
<i>Chapter 2. The Sages and King Yannai: Standing Up to Authority (Barai Sambeirin 19a–b)</i>	31
<i>Chapter 3. Herod and Barva b. Buta (Bavli Barva Barva 3b–4a)</i>	33
<i>Chapter 4. Stories of Destruction</i>	38
A. The Destruction of the Second Temple (I) (Bavli Gittin 55b–57a)	38
B. The Destruction of the Second Temple (II) (Acor d'Rabbi Natan §4)	48
C. The Destructions of Tur Malka and Betar (Bavli Gittin 57a)	51
<i>Chapter 5. Bar Kokhba: Hubris and Defeat (Yerushalmi Taanit 4:8, 68d)</i>	55
<i>Chapter 6. Rebuilding the Temple (Genesis Rabbah 64:8)</i>	61

Part II:

Rabbinic Authority, Rabbinic Character

- Chapter 7. The Banning of Akavia b. Mehaleh: A Dissident Opposes the Majority (Mishna Eduyot 5:6-7)* 67
- Chapter 8. Hillel and the Passover* 71
- A. Hillel and the Passover (I): The Sources and Methods of Rabbinic Law (Tosefta Pesahim 4:13-14) 71
- B. Hillel and the Passover (II): Mastery of Torah and Arrogance (Bavli Pesahim 66a) 74
- C. Hillel and the Passover (III): The Importance of Tradition (Yerushalmi Pesahim 6:1, 33a) 76
- Chapter 9. The "Oven of Akhnai": Rabbinic Authority and Human Dignity (Bavli Bava Metzia 59a-59b)* 80
- Chapter 10. The New Month and the Authority of the Patriarch (Mishna Rosh Hashana 2:9-11)* 85
- Chapter 11. Authority over the Calendar* 88
- A. Palestinian Privilege; Babylonian Challenge (I) (Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 1:2, 19a) 90
- B. Palestinian Privilege; Babylonian Challenge (II) (Bavli Berakhot 63a-b) 91
- Part III:**
- Life and Death in the Rabbinic Academy**
- Chapter 12. Conflict in the Academy: The Deposition of Rabban Gamaliel* 95
- A. Gamaliel the Tyrant (Yerushalmi Berakhot 4:1, 7c-d) 98
- B. Gamaliel the Elitist (Bavli Berakhot 27b-28a) 99
- Chapter 13. Leadership of the Academy: Lineage or Torah?* (Bavli Horayot 13b-14a) 104
- Chapter 14. The Saga of Rav Kahana: The Torah of Babylonia vs. the Torah of Palestine (Bavli Bava Qama 117a-b)* 109

Chapter 15. The Tragedy of R. Yohanan and Resh Laqish: Give Me Dialectics or Give Me Death!

(Bavli Bava Metzia 84a) 114

Chapter 16. The Tragedy of Honi: Give Me Fellowship or Give Me Death! (Bavli Taanit 23a) 117

Part IV:

Holy Men and Rabbinic Masters

- Chapter 17. R. Shimon bar Yohai* 121
- A. R. Shimon bar Yohai, the Miracle-worker (Yerushalmi Shevit 9:1, 38d) 123
- B. The Education of R. Shimon bar Yohai (Bavli Shabbat 33b-34a) 125
- Chapter 18. Honi the Circle-Drawer: The Holy Man and Rain* 128
- A. Honi's Prayers for Rain (I) (Mishna Taanit 3:9-12) 129
- B. Honi's Prayers for Rain (II) (Bavli Taanit 23a) 130
- Chapter 19. R. Yehoshua b. Levi and the Angel of Death (Bavli Ketubot 77b)* 133
- Part V:**
- Women, Wives and Marriage**
- Chapter 20. Rabbits and Wives: Love, Babylonian Style (Bavli Ketubot 62b)* 139
- Chapter 21. God as Marriage-Maker (Leviticus Rabbah 8:1)* 146
- Chapter 22. Rabbits, Husbands and Wives* 148
- A. The Pious Wife (Yerushalmi Sotah 1:4, 16d) 149
- B. The Ugly Wife (Bavli Nedarim 66b) 150
- Chapter 23. Beruria (Bavli Erubin 53b, Berakhot 10a)* 151

CONTENTS

**Part VI:
Romans, Gentiles and Others**

Chapter 24. *Alexander Macedon and the World Court* (Bavli Sanhedrin 91a) 157

Chapter 25. *Alexander Macedon and the Faraway King* (Terushalmi Bavu Metvia 2:5, 8c) 161

Chapter 26. *Antoninus and Rabbi* 163

A. The Body and the Soul (Bavli Sanhedrin 91a) 164

B. The Evil Inclination (Genesis Rabbah 34:10) 165

C. Political Consultation (Genesis Rabbah 67:5) 166

D. Antoninus, Servant of Rabbi (Bavli Avodah Zarah 10b) .. 167

Chapter 27. *Jesus and His Disciples* 169

A. Rabbis and Christians (Tosefta Hullin 2:22–24) 172

B. Jesus the Wayward Disciple (Bavli Sanhedrin 107b) 174

C. The Trial and Death of Jesus (Bavli Sanhedrin 43a) 175

Chapter 28. *Ongelos the Convert* (Bavli Avodah Zarah 11a) 176

**Part VII:
The Life of Piety:**

Charity, Commandments, Virtues

Chapter 29. *Hillel, Shammai and Converts:*
Virtues and Theological Basics (Bavli Shabbat 31a) 181

Chapter 30. *The Commandment of the Fringes and Its Reward* (Sifre Numbers S115) 186

Chapter 31. *The Power of Righteousness* (Bavli Shabbat 156b) 190

Chapter 32. *The Honor of Parents* (Terushalmi Qidushin 1:6, 61b / Bavli Qidushin 31b) 193

Chapter 33. *The Pursuit of Torah* (Bavli Yoma 35b, Sanhedrin 10a, Berakhot 62a) 200

CONTENTS

**Part VIII:
Suffering, Martyrdom and Theodicy**

Chapter 34. *Nahum of Gamzu:*
Happy that You See Me Suffer 207

A. To Suffer or Not to Suffer (Yerushalmi Peah 8:9, 21b) .. 208

B. The Rewards for Suffering (Bavli Taanit 21a) 208

Chapter 35. *Suffering: Not Them and Not Their Reward* 210

A. Test of the Righteous (Song of Songs Rabbah 2:16) 211

B. Not Them and Not Their Reward (Bavli Berakhot 5b) . 213

Chapter 36. *Theodicy and Torah* (Bavli Menahot 29b) 218

Chapter 37. *Stories of Martyrdom* 218

A. The Mother and Her Seven Sons (Bavli Gitin 57b) 220

B. The Martyrdom of R. Ishmael and R. Shimon (Mekhila d'Rabbi Ishmael, Neziqin, §18) 222

C. The Martyrdom of R. Akiba (I) (Yerushalmi Berakhot 9:5, 14b) 223

D. The Martyrdom of R. Akiba (II) (Bavli Berakhot 61b) ... 223

**Part IX:
Sin and Repentance**

Chapter 38. *Stories of Elisha b. Ahuyah* 229

A. Elisha as Sinning Sage: The Inviolability of Torah (I) (Bavli Hagiga 15a–b) 230

B. Elisha as Sinning Sage: The Inviolability of Torah (II) (Yerushalmi Hagiga 2:2, 77b–c) 237

C. Elisha the Heinous Sinner (Yerushalmi Hagiga 2:1, 77b) 242

Chapter 39. *The Power of Repentance* (Bavli Avodah Zarah 17a) 245

Chapter 40. *A Sinner's Good Deed* (Terushalmi Taanit 1:4, 64b) 247

Notes 249

Bibliography 303



INTRODUCTION

RABBINIC JUDAISM AND RABBINIC LITERATURE

The stories translated in this book come from the main works of classical rabbinic literature, the texts produced by Jewish sages between 200–600 CE. In two major centers, one located in the Galilee, the northern region of the Land of Israel, the other located in the Babylonian region of the Persian Empire, the rabbis (from *rabbi*, master) shaped a distinct form of Judaism. Rabbinic Judaism gradually spread among Jewish communities in North Africa, Egypt, Asia Minor and Europe, and became the dominant form of Judaism until modern times.

Rabbinic Judaism developed out of the Pharisaic movement and other expressions of Jewish piety that flourished in the Second Temple Period (539 BCE–70 CE). After the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans in 70 CE, the rabbis responded by reshaping Judaism so that it became less dependent on the temple and sacrificial worship. While the rabbis both preserved a significant body of tradition from earlier times and hoped for the resumption of biblical religion, they gradually forged a new vision of Judaism based on Torah. *Torah*, meaning “instruction, learning, study,” ultimately came to refer to wisdom, tradition, interpretation and a complete way of life. The rabbis sought to study God’s Torah and to live a life of Torah, a life dedicated to mastering tradition, fulfilling the commandments and infusing the world with sanctity.

The fundamental tenet of rabbinic theology is that God revealed his will to Moses on Mt. Sinai in two Torahs, a “Written Torah” and an “Oral Torah.” The Written Torah (the Bible) began

with the Pentateuch and includes the books of the Prophets and Writings. As the name implies, the books of the Written Torah were transmitted in writing from generation to generation. The Oral Torah, the rabbis believed, was passed down orally from Moses to Joshua to other prophets and religious authorities throughout the ages, and ultimately to the sages themselves. The two Torahs are interdependent and complementary. The Written Torah contains the basis for much of the Oral Torah, and the Oral Torah in turn explains how the Written Torah should be understood. In addition, the Oral Torah contains many laws and institutions omitted from the much briefer Written Torah. A paradoxical theological statement asserts that all opinions uttered by sages in the future were already revealed to Moses on Mt. Sinai.¹ Thus the rabbis were aware that new Torah was produced in each generation but simultaneously maintained that this Torah was included in the original revelation.

As time passed the quantity of rabbinic traditions expanded tremendously. Eventually the traditions had to be arranged and organized so as to facilitate memorization. Gradually various rabbis or perhaps rabbinic schools devoted themselves to this project and produced edited compilations of rabbinic traditions. Although we refer to these compilations as "literature" and "texts," it is important to realize that they were oral texts, transmitted by word of mouth from master to disciple.² It was not until the Middle Ages that scribes wrote down rabbinic texts so that they could be studied from manuscripts. The main works of rabbinic literature are as follows:

Mishna: The earliest rabbinic work, the Mishna is primarily a compendium of legal traditions attributed to sages who lived before 200 CE. According to tradition, Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi edited the Mishna by selecting rabbinic traditions and organizing them topically.³ Although the Mishna bears some affinity to a law code, it also includes scriptural interpretations, wisdom sayings and a few stories. The term *Mishna* comes from the Hebrew verb *shama*, which means "to repeat" and refers to the process of orally repeating traditions in order to memorize them. The Mishna contains six major divisions or orders, which in turn are divided into

sixty-three tractates. Thus Mishna Shabbat 6:4 refers to the Mishna, tractate Shabbat ("the Sabbath") chapter 6, paragraph 4.

Tosefta: The Tosefta, meaning "supplement," is a companion to the Mishna. It follows the Mishna's structure, comprising the same six orders and sixty-three tractates. It too contains traditions attributed to sages who lived prior to 200 CE. Many traditions that Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi decided not to include in the Mishna were collected in the Tosefta. Some Toseftan traditions appear to be variants of those found in the Mishna, while others comment upon, complement or supplement the Mishna's rulings. The Tosefta is about four times the size of the Mishna and was edited during the third century CE.

Tannaitic Midrashim: The term *midrash* (from the root *darash*, "search," hence also "interpret") refers both to individual scriptural interpretations (a midrash on Exodus 2:3) and to compilations of scriptural interpretations (books of midrash). The Tannaim (singular, Tanna) are the rabbis who lived prior to 200 CE, whose traditions are contained in the Mishna and Tosefta. Tannaitic midrashim are those volumes of midrash containing the scriptural interpretations attributed to the Tannaim, although the editing of these compilations took place much later. There are seven extant Tannaitic midrashim, which comment on substantial portions of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The Tannaitic midrashim include interpretations of both the legal and narrative portions of these biblical books. Among our collection of stories are selections from the *Sifre* to Numbers and the *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael* to Exodus.

Amoraic Midrashim: The Amoraim (singular, Amora) are the rabbis who lived from 200–400 CE, whose traditions are contained in the Talmuds and in later midrashic compilations. As opposed to the Tannaitic midrashim, which include a great deal of legal exegesis, the Amoraic midrashim comment almost exclusively on the narrative portions of the biblical books. Many Amoraic midrashim originated as sermons preached to audiences in synagogues. Our collection of stories includes selections from the Amoraic midrashim known as *Genesis Rabbah*, *Leviticus Rabbah* and *Song of*

Songs Rabbah. These works were edited in the Land of Israel in the fifth and sixth centuries.

Yerushalmi: The Yerushalmi or Jerusalem Talmud (also known as the Palestinian Talmud) was the exposition to the Mishna produced by the sages who lived in the Land of Israel from 200–400 CE. *Talmud*, which means “study, instruction, teaching,” follows the Mishna’s structure and primarily consists of explanations and discussions of its rulings. However, the Yerushalmi also includes biblical interpretation (*midrash*), records of court cases, stories and sayings. Like the Mishna and Tosefta, the Yerushalmi is divided into orders and tractates. Thus Yerushalmi Peah 8:9, 21b designates the Yerushalmi’s commentary to Mishna Tractate Peah, chapter 8, paragraph 9, found on folio 21, column b in the first edition (Venice, 1523). There is Yerushalmi to thirty-nine of the Mishna’s sixty-three tractates.

Bavli: The Bavli or Babylonian Talmud was the great commentary on the Mishna produced by the rabbinic sages of Babylonia from 200–600 CE. The Bavli too contains a variety of materials, including scriptural interpretations, records of court cases, folklore, liturgical texts and stories. Jewish communities in the Middle Ages considered the Bavli to be the authoritative source of Jewish law and made study of the Bavli the cornerstone of the rabbinic curriculum. Consequently, the stories of the Bavli are generally among the best known stories of Jewish tradition. The Bavli too follows the order of the Mishna but is simply referred to by the folio number of the standard printed edition, for example, Bavli Shabbat 34a. There is Bavli to thirty-six of the Mishna’s tractates.

TYPES OF RABBINIC STORIES

While the rabbis composed no texts exclusively devoted to stories, every ancient rabbinic compilation included numerous stories, legends, anecdotes and other narrative traditions. These narratives can be divided into two categories: stories about sages and biblical expansions. Stories about sages—the subject of this book—tell of the lives and deeds of rabbis and early masters. A few stories

feature historical figures such as Alexander the Great, Vespasian and King Herod, but these stories typically center on the figure’s encounter with a famous sage. Biblical expansions, on the other hand, are based on biblical narratives and feature biblical characters. These stories derive, in large part, from processes of biblical exegesis.⁴ Storytellers sought to fill gaps in the biblical record and to expand the frustratingly brief biblical narratives by extrapolating from hints in the text, embellishing details, drawing on allusions found in other biblical books and imaginatively reconstructing the exploits of biblical characters. Biblical expansions are therefore a type of *midrash* in the technical sense of the term—rabbinic biblical interpretation.

Most stories about sages are brief, recounting one or two events in the rabbi’s life. They can be characterized as biographical anecdotes rather than biographies or comprehensive accounts of rabbinic lives. Rabbinic texts themselves do not use technical terms to classify different types of stories.⁵ But as a first step, we can adopt the standard categorization of rabbinic literature as Halakha (law) or Aggada (lore). Halakha includes law; legal commentary, analysis and exegesis; accounts of court cases and any legally oriented material. Halakhic stories, accordingly, are stories about sages that focus on legal questions and figure primarily in the study of law. Aggada encompasses rabbinic teachings of a nonlegal nature, including moral and ethical instruction, theology, maxims, proverbs, sermons, folklore and biblical exegesis (other than exegesis of biblical law).⁶ Aggadic stories deal with ethics, character and general aspects of the rabbinic way of life.

Halakhic Stories

The majority of stories about sages are halakhic. They function as legal precedents, reporting a rabbi’s actions when confronting an unclear situation. The very first paragraph of Mishna in fact contains an example of such a story:

Once the sons [of Rabban Gamaliel] returned from a wedding feast. They said to him, “We have not yet recited

the *SHEMA*." He said to them, "If dawn has not broken yet, you are obligated to recite it."⁷

This brief anecdote bears on the question of how late into the night the prayer known as the *SHEMA* may be said. This prayer must be recited "when you lie down," as prescribed by Deuteronomy 6:7. Does that mean before a certain hour in the evening, or prior to midnight, or whenever one happens to lie down, even until daybreak? To help answer this question, the Mishna reports that the sons of Rabban Gamaliel once neglected to recite the prayer, apparently due to a night of hearty eating and drinking. Their father, an eminent sage, instructed them to recite the prayer provided it was not yet dawn, at which point night ends and day begins. By relating this story the Mishna suggests that the *SHEMA* may be recited at any time during the night, at least according to the opinion of Rabban Gamaliel.

The assumption behind such stories is that the actions of rabbis are sources of law. A rabbi not only studied Torah but embodied it, hence succeeding generations of sages could shed light on difficult legal questions by studying their predecessors' behavior. Where the sages lacked a specific legal tradition and could not derive the answer from biblical exegesis, they turned to rabbinic practice. In most societies precedent is an important consideration in the determination of law. For the rabbis, precedents could be found not in legal casebooks but in the ways of their masters. They were careful, therefore, to pass down reports—stories—of rabbinic practices.

Aggadic Stories

Stories that depict sages as moral exemplars and character models are found in every rabbinic compilation. Just as a disciple learned the fine points of Jewish law by observing his master's conduct, so he learned moral behavior by emulating the master's interactions with others. And just as students transmitted accounts of their masters' ritual practices, so they preserved stories of their masters' pious deeds, ethical practices and outstanding character traits. Similarly, rabbinic teachers and preachers used such stories

to instruct their pupils and congregations. While halakhic stories figured prominently in the rabbinic legal tradition, aggadic stories played a critical role in transmitting rabbinic ethics and teaching rabbinic spirituality throughout the ages. Let us look at a standard example of such a story:

In Mar Uqba's neighborhood there lived a poor man. He would send him 400 zuzim [each year] on the afternoon before Yom Kippur [the Day of Atonement]. Once he sent his son to give it to him. He [the son] returned and said, "He doesn't need it." He [Mar Uqba] said, "What did you see?" He said, "I saw that he was pouring himself old wine." He said, "Is he so delicate? Let us double the amount and send that to him!"⁸

This is one of many stories about the charitable activities of the sages. Mar Uqba, a prominent third-century Babylonian rabbi, annually made an extremely generous gift to an indigent man. Since the man seemed to have enough money to splurge on expensive wine, Mar Uqba's son believed that he did not deserve alms. But Mar Uqba drew the opposite conclusion: a man with such expensive tastes in fact required more charity to sustain a tolerable existence! The audience—which probably shared the son's assessment initially—learns a striking and certainly counter-intuitive lesson from Mar Uqba's answer. Not only is it proper to give large amounts of charity, but one must sustain the needy at their usual standard of living. It is not enough to keep the poor from starving; one must preserve their dignity and ensure that they are reasonably content.

Perhaps the most engaging stories of this type address fundamental tensions of rabbinic life and rabbinic culture. How should a rabbi strike a balance between his devotion to Torah study, an all-encompassing activity, and his responsibilities to his wife and family? What percent of a sage's time should be dedicated to Torah study and what percent to other good deeds or community service? What are the appropriate ways to confront suffering and death? How should the rabbis relate to the local secular authorities? Such questions have no simple answers and cannot be resolved by turning to a

prescriptive guidebook or collection of maxims. But tales of great sages who faced similar situations provided rabbis with a means to ponder and meditate on these challenges. Consider the following story about two sages who decided to leave their studies to provide for themselves:

[A] Ilfa and R. Yohanan were in extreme need. They said, "Let us rise, go and busy ourselves with commerce, and we will fulfill [the verse], *There shall be no needy among you* (Deut 15:4)." They went. They sat down beneath a certain rickety wall. While they were eating their meal, R. Yohanan heard one angel say to his fellow, "Let us cast it down upon them and kill them,⁹ for they abandon eternal life and busy themselves with temporal life."¹⁰ His fellow said to him, "Leave them be. One of them is destined for important things."

[B] R. Yohanan said to Ilfa, "Did you hear anything?" He said to him, "No." He said [to himself], "This means that I am the one. I will go and return [to my studies], and I will fulfill the verse, *For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land* (Deut 15:11)."

[C] By the time Ilfa came [back to the academy], R. Yohanan was leading [the academy]. When Ilfa came, they [the students] said to him, "If you had sat and studied, he would not be leading [but you would]."¹¹

The story concludes with Ilfa challenging anyone to fault his knowledge of tradition, an assertion that he too achieved great erudition despite engaging in a trade.

This story addresses a problem faced by those rabbis whose parents or in-laws could not support them: at what point should they give up their studies and earn a living wage? On the one hand, a man must eat and provide for his family. No one could criticize a rabbi who had to work in order to survive. On the other hand, to abandon Torah study, the highest value in the rabbinic worldview, for a mundane job could be seen as selling out. Was

the sage really in such need or was he pursuing earthly riches at the expense of spiritual values? To earn enduring merit required a life of dedication and self-sacrifice, and personal hardships were to be expected.

The story does not offer a facile solution to the problem. That the angels consider killing the sages because they "abandon eternal life"—the study of Torah—certainly indicates a negative view of their decision. Similarly, R. Yohanan's rise to glory as head of the academy proves that he chose the right path, while the students' remark that Ilfa could have achieved such stature implies that he made a poor choice. Yet at the outset of the story the angels foresee a great future for but one of the two sages. That R. Yohanan alone hears the angelic talk leads to the conclusion that he, not Ilfa, is destined for greatness. So it is far from clear that Ilfa made the wrong decision, or that he could have become head of the academy, despite the students' comment. Moreover, the continuation of the story suggests that Ilfa was no slouch but had mastered a great deal of Torah despite engaging in business. How R. Yohanan managed to support himself must also be considered. The verse he cites implies that he accepted alms and was maintained from the community's funds for the poor. But this option would be viable only in reasonably prosperous communities and only for a limited number of sages. In these ways the story expresses the tensions that confront sages and offers several perspectives on the various possible choices. It encourages the sages to appreciate the different sides of the problem without clarifying exactly what should be done.

Many stories of this type, especially those found in the two Talmuds, focus on aspects of life in the rabbinic academy. Who should be the head of the academy and on what grounds should he be chosen? How should academic ranks and honors be distributed? What are the mechanisms by which conflicts can be resolved? To what extent should dissenting opinions be tolerated or encouraged, and on what points must there be unanimity? How are decisions to be made: by majority vote or by the decree of the head of the academy? What will be the ultimate rewards for choosing the life of Torah and giving up so many earthly comforts? Storytellers addressed these questions by telling stories of the conflicts and struggles of earlier

sages. And as the stories were incorporated into the works that became part of the rabbinic curriculum, they provided students with a set of texts with which to study, discuss and ponder these issues.

Some aggadic stories bear a strong affinity to folktales.¹² Stories of the common dimensions of human experience—the rich and the poor, the wisdom of children, the perils of greed, the danger of pride—found their place in the rabbinic moral tradition. Such stories pass easily from culture to culture and are routinely translated from one language to another. Tales of Alexander the Great and his exploits, for example, which spread through all parts of the Hellenistic world, appear in rabbinic texts.¹³ So too do stories of riddling competitions, magical snakes, mysterious strangers, seventy-year naps and pious robbers.

Seldom, however, did folktales and stories of foreign provenance enter rabbinic literature without undergoing significant change. Just as every culture alters elements of the stories it adopts to conform to its particular idiom, so rabbinic storytellers “rabbinized” the tales they adopted. Wise men, philosophers and other sage-like characters were transformed into rabbis in rabbinic texts, and instead of quoting aphorisms and proverbs they cite biblical verses. The morals of such rabbinized folktales are typically rabbinic sayings or biblical principles rather than popular adages.

Even the tales that filtered into rabbinic literature from earlier strands of Judaism—which we might call traditional Jewish folktales—were refracted through rabbinic eyes. The first-century historian Josephus, for example, who began his career as a leader of the Jewish forces who fought the Romans during the first revolt (66–73 CE), relates that he predicted to the Roman general Vespasian that Vespasian would be selected emperor of Rome.¹⁴ This “prophecy” eventually proved true, and Vespasian rewarded Josephus for his prophetic talents and for divulging this good fortune. Rabbinic literature contains a similar tale in which Rabbi Yohanan b. Zakkai encounters Vespasian and demonstrates by interpreting scripture that Vespasian will soon be crowned emperor (see chapter 4A, 4B herein). Similarly, Josephus tells a story of a holy man named Onias who once prayed for rain in the midst of a drought and successfully caused a downpour.¹⁵ In an early rabbinic version of this story, Honi

(the Hebraized form of the Greek name Onias) successfully brings rain but is subsequently rebuked by a famous sage. And some later rabbinic versions portray Honi as a sage who studies in the rabbinic academy (see chapters 16 and 18 herein).

In sum, while there are a variety of types of rabbinic stories that serve a spectrum of ends, their common denominator is their didactic character. Some of these stories originated in homilies delivered before a popular audience attending synagogue or ritual gatherings. Others derive from the rabbinic academy, intended for an audience of aspiring rabbinic students and relating to aspects of the rabbinic way of life. In all cases they served to instruct the audience on points of law, proper ethics, ideal character, folk wisdom and rabbinic self-definition. Stories were thus an indispensable element of the spiritual lives of Jews in late antiquity.

Most of the stories translated in this book are aggadic. Halakhic stories essentially form part of the rabbinic legal tradition. In subsequent centuries they were included in legal responsa, Talmudic commentaries and law codes. Aggadic stories came to form a distinct component of Jewish spirituality. They were often included in rabbinic sermons and in books of moral and ethical literature. Aggadic stories had great appeal on a popular level for those seeking moral and spiritual inspiration. In the sixteenth century, for example, Rabbi Yaakov ibn Habib (d. 1516) excerpted almost all of the aggadic portions of the Babylonian Talmud.¹⁶ He called this anthology of stories, lore and biblical interpretation the *Ein Yaakov*. Completed by his son and first published in 1522, this work became one of the most popular Jewish books, republished more than one hundred times between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries and still studied in Jewish homes to this day.¹⁷

RABBINIC STORIES: FICTIONAL AND BIOGRAPHICAL ASPECTS

Although rabbinic stories tell of the lives and acts of sages and occasionally refer to historical events such as the building of the Herodian temple and the rebellion against Rome, they should not

be classified as biographical in our sense of the term. The storytellers were not attempting to document "what actually happened" out of a dispassionate interest in the objective historical record, or to transmit biographical facts in order to provide pure data for posterity. This type of detached, impartial writing of a biography is a distinctly modern approach. Nowadays we distinguish biography from fiction. The former involves scholarly research, examination of sources, verification of facts, testing of hypotheses and presentation of evidence. In principle the enterprise is replicable: another scholar should be able to analyze the evidence and arrive at similar conclusions. Fiction makes no claims to veracity and involves none of these constraints. In pre-modern cultures, however, the distinction between biography and fiction was blurred. Ancient authors saw themselves as teachers, and they were more concerned with the didactic point than historical accuracy.¹⁸

Biographical writing in late antiquity, the culture in which much of rabbinic literature took shape, involved a weighty fictional component.¹⁹ The purpose of Roman biographers was overwhelmingly didactic: to use the lives of their subjects to model character, teach virtue and provide lessons. They endeavored to portray their heroes as great, virtuous, brilliant and noble even when the truth was rather different. Biographers made little effort to verify their sources of information or to distinguish rumor, hearsay and legend from eyewitness accounts and accurate reports. Plutarch, the celebrated Roman biographer and author of *Lives of the Greeks and Romans*, explained to his audience, "We are not writing history but lives."²⁰ By this he meant that he should not be accountable even to the standards of classical history-writing, for the genre of biography worked according to different conventions. Readers should expect a great deal more truth-bending and outright fiction, for his purpose was to educate, not to provide a record of real events. Sometimes we find that Roman anecdotes told of a certain figure in one biography are reported of another figure by a different author. If the anecdote effectively taught an important lesson, a biographer had little compunction to relate it to his protagonist and incorporate it into his work. Many biographies also include stock themes such as a hero's miraculous birth, childhood portents of future greatness, sudden arrival at a

scene in a time of crisis, discovery of true identity and suchlike. Moreover, scholars have noted that Roman historiography underwent a "degeneration" during imperial times, in the very period when rabbinic traditions were formed. The authors placed less emphasis on the accurate recording of history than on achieving their literary aims. Rabbinic stories share much in common with the Roman biographical tradition and contain many of these characteristics of fiction. Indeed, the fact that rabbinic stories circulated orally made them more malleable than the written sources of classical literature.²¹

Several other factors contribute to our understanding of rabbinic stories as didactic fiction rather than accurate history. Many rabbinic stories appear in multiple versions in the various rabbinic works. The Bavli, for example, often reports a biographical incident in a way that differs substantially from the version preserved in the Yerushalmi. Storytellers clearly felt free to shape the material according to their own needs and to introduce changes that they deemed appropriate. Moreover, when we compare the versions contained in later texts, such as the Bavli or Yerushalmi, with the versions in earlier texts, such as the Mishna and Tosefta, we find that the later versions are consistently more elaborate and literarily developed. As stories were handed down from generation to generation, storytellers embellished and added to received traditions. Similarly, as noted above, the rabbinic versions of stories with parallels in the writings of the historian Josephus and other non-rabbinic sources have been altered significantly. By "rabbinizing" the story, by transforming some of the characters into rabbis and refracting the story through the prism of the rabbinic world, the storytellers communicated their message more effectively.

Another reason to recognize rabbinic stories as fiction is the hefty component of supernatural material. The sages routinely perform miracles, such as curing the ill, bringing rain and resurrecting the dead. They have supernatural powers, such as the ability to look at an enemy and transform him or her into a heap of bones (see chapter 17 herein). Some stories tell of angels, demons, speaking snakes, gargantuan creatures and other mythic beasts (see chapter 38A herein). In some stories rabbis travel down to Hell or up to Heaven, where they encounter God teaching in the heavenly academy.²²

These elements obviously mark the imaginative and fictional nature of the rabbinic story.

This is not to say that most rabbinic stories lack a historical kernel. The sages about whom the stories are told were real historical figures, as were the subjects of Roman biographical writing. Some stories relate to historical events such as the journeys of Alexander the Great, the Roman siege of Jerusalem and the Bar Kokhba revolt. But the presence of core historical material does not alter the story's fundamental fictional character any more than in the case of modern historical or biographical fiction. A modern author might write a fictional novel about Christopher Columbus, for example, that incorporated some of the facts we know about Columbus's life in an imaginative account whose sole goal was to entertain the audience. Moreover, to isolate a rabbinic story's historical kernel from the fictional embellishment is in most cases an impossible task. There is no accurate way to decide between contradictory versions or to determine which sections are legendary and which are "true." Furthermore, to strip away parts of the story in a search for the historical core does serious injustice to the story. The storyteller included the supernatural and fictive elements for a reason, so to ignore them is to miss important keys to understanding the message. That a rabbi turns his opponent into a heap of bones teaches us a great deal about the storyteller's view of the powers of a rabbi and about the rabbinic image he wished to convey to his audience. Consider a relatively modern example: the famous story in which George Washington's father asks him whether he cut down the cherry tree, and George replies, "Yes, Father, I cannot tell a lie." Whether completely true, completely fictive, or containing a historical kernel, the story's point lies in the moral. The proper questions to ask of this story are *not*: Did it really happen? Where was Washington residing when his father discovered the deed? What type of cherry tree was it? Rather one should ask: Why did the storyteller tell this story of Washington? What ethical quality was he trying to teach? So too the proper questions to ask of rabbinic stories are: Why did the storyteller tell this story? What lessons did he wish to impart to his audience? What does the story teach us about rabbinic beliefs, virtues and ethics?

LITERARY CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RABBINIC STORY

Rabbinic stories often strike the modern ear as raw and unpolished. In part the problem is that they derive from a distant time and place and have been translated from their original language to a foreign idiom. More significant is their oral provenance: not only were the stories originally spoken by the storyteller to his audience, but they were preserved in oral form in rabbinic literature. When we read them today, whether in the original Hebrew and Aramaic or in a translation to another language, we apprehend from a page words that were originally verbalized and heard. Oral literature, however, works by conventions that differ from those that govern written texts. First and foremost, oral narratives tend to be extremely brief so as to facilitate memorization. In most cultures the transmitters memorize only the skeleton of the story with the essential information necessary to understand the action. Thus one finds in the rabbinic story little description of a character's appearance, personal qualities or past experiences unless that information is indispensable to the plot. Typical protagonists include "a certain man," "a certain woman," "a righteous man," "an evil woman," and so forth, without further detail. A great deal of the background information that we would expect an author to provide is lacking. Apparently the sages who transmitted and received the memorized versions within the rabbinic academies filled in part of the missing background by drawing on their knowledge of tradition and deduced the rest from the context or narrative dynamic. Most likely, when they performed the story, that is, when they recited it before a live audience, they embellished the skeletal narratives with rich descriptions and supplied the requisite background. Performances probably varied considerably according to the talents of the storyteller, the particular setting and the type of audience. At all events, we have received only the terse outlines that were formulated for memorization and preserved in the rabbinic corpus. To make the translations comprehensible to the reader I have supplied the necessary information in square brackets (and occasionally in endnotes) in order to distinguish it from the actual text of the stories. In this way readers can both appreciate the

true texture of the rabbinic narrative and understand what is going on. Other standard characteristics of the rabbinic story, some of which typify oral literature in many cultures, include the following:²³

A preference for dialogue over narration: Rabbinic stories make heavy use of dialogue, as we might expect of oral literature. Many stories begin with a brief narrational introduction to set the scene followed primarily by interchanges among the characters.²⁴ These interchanges are usually introduced by simple quotation formulas: "He said....He said to him....He said to him...." Sometimes even these quotation markers are omitted so that the story consists of an uninterrupted dialogue; only the context informs us when one character's words end and the other's begin. The rapid back-and-forth dialogue makes the stories more dramatic.

Interior monologues: Together with the high density of dialogue, rabbinic stories typically use interior monologues to communicate a character's thoughts. Instead of reporting the thought in indirect discourse ("R. So-and-so thought that..."), the stories use the standard quotation formula, "R. So-and-so said...." where "said" means "said to himself" or "thought." Some scholars suggest that the ancients did not fully distinguish thought from speech or that they understood thought as an inner type of speech. Be that as it may, this rhetorical device contributes to the dramatic quality of the rabbinic story by allowing characters to express their thoughts and feelings directly, not through the narrator's voice. Thus a story of a bitter rabbinic conflict relates, "R. Yaakov b. Qudshai heard them. He said, 'Perhaps, God forbid, it will result in shame!'" (see chapter 13 herein). We gain a better sense of R. Yaakov's state of alarm than if the narrator had reported, "R. Yaakov b. Qudshai was very worried because he thought that someone would be publicly embarrassed."

Questions directed to the audience: Rabbinic stories often contain rhetorical questions directed to the audience, such as: "What did he do?" "What did he see?" (chapter 38A herein). "What did Israel do at that time?" (chapter 18B herein). Here one must picture a storyteller speaking to a live audience. To engage the audience and

to keep it attentive, an effective storyteller periodically poses direct questions. This rhetorical device involves the audience by making it more of a participant in the encounter. Such addresses are rare in written narratives, although occasionally an author will turn to the reader in the second person ("You might wonder, dear reader,...") to similar effect.

Wordplay: Many rabbinic stories involve wordplay or paronomasia. Words that rhyme, alliterate or resemble each other in some respect are juxtaposed. Wordplay has aesthetic appeal as a literary device, a hallmark of the narrative art of the storyteller. It also contributes to the content by creating a connection between parts of the story. For example, a story about a rabbi named Rav Rahumei who caused his wife great anguish concludes: "She became distressed and a tear fell (*abit*) from her eye. He was sitting on a roof. The roof collapsed (*ybit*) under him and he died" (chapter 20 herein). The rhyme *abit/ybit* emphasizes the cause-and-effect relationship. *Because* of the pain Rav Rahumei caused his wife, the roof fell under him. Wordplay frequently appears in poetry and occasionally in written prose. It is particularly common in oral literature, where the audience hears the sounds of the words and thus senses the play immediately.

Symbolic names of characters: The characters in rabbinic stories frequently have names that relate to their role or to some aspect of the plot. One rabbinic story features a sinner named Pantokakos, which means "completely evil" (chapter 40 herein). In another story Imma Shalom, meaning "Mother Peace," attempts to keep her husband from causing the death of another sage (chapter 9 herein). Symbolic names are a very economical means of characterization, since little additional effort need be spent on sketching the character. Once we hear a name like Pantokakos, we know the character's essential qualities. In this way symbolic names contribute to the brevity of the rabbinic story. Symbolic names are often found in folktales and are particularly prominent in the Bible.²⁵

Threefold repetitions: Rabbinic stories often repeat the description of an event or the pattern of a dialogue three times with minor variations, as is common in folklore, children's stories and other oral genres. Anyone familiar with the story of "The Three Little Pigs" or of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" has encountered this phenomenon. Thus in the famous story of the "Oven of Akhnai" (chapter 9 herein), R. Eliezer tries to prove his case to the sages by appealing to miracles of nature: "He said to them, 'If the law is as I say, let the carob [tree] prove it.' The carob uprooted itself.... They said to him, 'One does not bring proof from the carob.'" He proceeds to appeal to the water of the aqueduct, which flows backward, and to the walls of the academy, which begin to fall, and the story narrates the events with the same words apart from the varied items. Now in written prose it is considered poor style to repeat the same words or phrases in close proximity. In oral communication, however, repetition makes it easier for the audience to follow the action and allows it to anticipate what will happen. Unlike readers, who can reread a passage to grasp the meaning fully and pick up what they missed at first sight, an audience to an oral performance has no means of going back. It must follow the speaker closely and comprehend as the words are spoken, and repetition facilitates this task.

Structure: Many rabbinic stories display a well-defined structure, dividing easily into two halves or into three or four parts. Sometimes the structure is created by a repeated phrase that introduces each section (chapter 24 herein). In other cases the content creates the divisions, such as an account of the character's advent, encounter and departure. A few highly crafted stories display a chiasmic structure, in which the first section corresponds to the last, the second section to the second-to-last, the third to the third-to-last, and so forth (chapters 12B, 38B herein).²⁶ A precise structure serves a mnemonic function. It is much easier to memorize a story with a familiar pattern than a text lacking clear organization. Similarly, it is easier for the audience to follow the oral recitation of a story with a defined pattern.

The use of biblical verses: The Bible, for the rabbis, was much more than an eternally relevant source of insight and inspiration. It

was the lens through which they understood the present. They related biblical passages not only to the larger, history-making events of their times but to their mundane experiences. The sages knew the biblical text by heart; its verses were constantly on their lips. To incorporate a pertinent biblical verse or phrase into their everyday speech was a type of art. Just as we might quote an apt line of Shakespeare in ordinary conversation and thereby please our friends with the familiar phrase brought into a new context, so the rabbis integrated biblical passages into their informal talk. Similarly, they wove biblical phrases into almost every story they told, including stories about sages and post-biblical events. In some cases the verse serves as the moral of the story, a succinct illustration to summarize the point. In other cases the characters debate the meaning of verses or explain their actions by invoking a particular precept. In yet other cases the storyteller formed the dialogue of the characters out of biblical phrases, modifying them as need be.

Let us look at an example of a character's dialogue that incorporates a biblical verse. A remarkable story relates that a Gentleman named Ongelos, son of Qaloniqos, contemplated conversion to Judaism and raised up from the dead Bilaam, the seer mentioned in Numbers 22—24, in order to seek advice (chapter 4A herein). Bilaam tells Ongelos, "You shall never concern yourself with their welfare or benefit as long as you live," which in this context means that Ongelos should have nothing to do with the Jews. A Jewish audience schooled on the Bible immediately would have recognized these words as a direct quotation from Deuteronomy 23:7. The full biblical context is significant: "No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted into the congregation of the Lord... because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey after you left Egypt, and because they hired Bilaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Aram-naharaim to curse you.... You shall never concern yourself with their welfare or benefit as long as you live" (Deut 23:4—7). In its original context the verse is addressed by God to Israel and comprises a commandment prohibiting certain nations from being "admitted to the congregation," understood by the rabbis as conversion. And the same biblical passage explains that these nations may not convert because they attempted to recruit Bilaam to curse

the Israelites. I imagine that the audience would have smiled at the powerful irony created by the storyteller placing the verse in Bilaam's mouth. For Bilaam's answer to Ongelos draws on a passage that implicates himself in evil and forbids conversion on account of that crime. Now the storyteller could have had Bilaam say, "Don't convert," or "Don't waste your time," or suchlike. But this would lack the irony that contributes to the literary art of the story and the enjoyment of the audience.

THE TRANSLATIONS

Translators generally claim that they have remained faithful to the original language while rendering the translation in smooth, idiomatic English. In these translations the English is idiomatic and comprehensible, but I adhere extremely closely to the original Hebrew or Aramaic, even at the expense of an occasional awkward or strained construction. Only in this way can the English reader appreciate the literary features and structure of the original story. Where parts of the story begin with the same Hebrew word or phrase, I replicate that form in the translation, even if the resulting construction sounds stilted. Where an Aramaic word is used in two distinct meanings in the story, I use the same English word in both places, even if the English equivalent may not have the exact semantic field. If the Hebrew repeats language three times, I translate accordingly. This fidelity to the form and literary character of the original distinguishes these translations from most others. For in most translations the translator has endeavored to "improve" the style to conform to modern English standards, such as avoiding the repetition of the same phrase. Unfortunately, such translations do an injustice to rabbinic stories by destroying their literary characteristics and distorting their contours.

Square brackets in the translations indicate words and phrases that are needed to understand the story but that do not appear explicitly in the original. In this way the reader can get a sense of the true content of the story and see how brief and elliptical most stories are. Generally the bracketed information is implied or presupposed by

the story, and any well-versed rabbi would have had no trouble supplying it from his knowledge of tradition. Occasionally, however, the data derive from commentators who offer plausible explanations to make sense of what seem to be gaps in the story. In these cases extrinsic information has been "read in" to the story through an interpretive process. Astute readers may wish to consider alternative ways to understand the story that stem from different assumptions and interpretations. Issues that require more detailed explanation than can be supplied in a brief parenthetical comment are addressed in endnotes.

The translations are divided into sections labeled with English letters: A, B, C, and so forth. The divisions provide an easy means to refer to specific parts of the story and thereby to facilitate discussion. They also allow the reader to recognize both the overall structure of the story and the internal structural units created by repetitions. In addition, where the story appears in multiple versions in different rabbinic texts, the marked divisions facilitate the task of comparison and contrast. Some divisions stem from formal criteria such as the repetition of a phrase, while others devolve from explicit anticipatory signs in the text, such as "three types of men have no share in the world to come," followed by the detailing of the three types. In some cases, however, I determined the divisions based on the content and general flow of the action. In these cases the divisions are more subjective, and the reader should feel free to contemplate alternative divisions that would yield different structures.

A brief introduction precedes each translation. The introduction provides both background to the specific issues that figure in the story and a brief analysis of the story's principal themes, meanings and literary character. While the analysis will help the reader appreciate the story, the reader simultaneously must have read the story in order to follow the analysis. The reader, therefore, should work back and forth between the story and the introduction, or should be sure to reread the introduction after studying the story. In no way should the analysis be considered the only possible interpretation or a comprehensive discussion of the story's significance. Readers are encouraged to arrive at their own interpretations and to find additional messages. Most rabbinic



stories are extremely rich in meaning, and the introductions are intended as a means to enter the world of the story, not as the final word in its evaluation.

The editions of rabbinic texts used for the translations are listed in the bibliography. However, in many cases the translations are based on versions preserved in manuscripts, which often provide better readings than those of the standard printed editions. For this reason the translations may differ slightly from those found elsewhere and from the standard printings.

PART I:

HISTORICAL
MEMORIES
AND THE LESSONS
OF HISTORY



Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. Yerushalmi Peah 2:4, 17a.
2. While the initial redaction or editing—the organization of discrete traditions into a fixed form—may have been accomplished by aid of the technology of writing, the texts were then memorized and transmitted orally. See Martin Jaffee, “Writing and Rabbinic Oral Tradition: On Mishnaic Narrative, Lists and Mnemonics” *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 4 (1994), 123–46, and “How Much ‘Orality’ in Oral Torah? New Perspectives on the Composition and Transmission of Early Rabbinic Traditions,” *Shofar* 10 (1992), 212–33.
3. *HaNasi* is a title generally translated as “the patriarch.” See the introduction and notes to chapter 26.
4. For a fine study of how stories are generated from close reading and interpretation of details of the biblical text, see James Kugel, *In Paraphrase’s House* (San Francisco: Harper, 1990).
5. Some stories are introduced by technical terms such as *muaseb* and *nuada*, both of which mean “event,” “case,” “deed,” and can be translated idiomatically as “Once....” However, these terms are not specific to a particular type of story.
6. For a sophisticated taxonomy of types of rabbinic stories, see Catherine Hezser, *Form, Function and Historical Significance of the Rabbinic Story in Yerushalmi Neziqin* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1993), 283–320.
7. Mishna Berakhot 1:1.
8. Bavi Kerubot 67b.
9. In the rabbinic worldview, malevolent angels have the ability to harm humans who put themselves in a dangerous situation: in our idiom, “to tempt fate.” The angel presumably could not have harmed the rabbis were it not that they sat beneath an unstable wall.
10. “Eternal life” is the study of Torah, which earns eternal reward in the world to come. “Temporal life” refers to business, which provides material riches in the here and now. The rabbis abandoned their studies in order to make money, thus trading enduring merit for this-worldly prosperity.
11. Bavli Taanit 21a.
12. A folktale is generally defined as a story passed down by word of mouth and therefore subject to change in each retelling. Folktales

include legends, fables and tall stories, and often involve magic and mythical creatures.

13. See chapters 24-25 herein.
 14. Josephus, *The Jewish War* 3:392-408. While Josephus ostensibly wrote history, many of the stories he included originated as folktales. His accounts of the course of the revolt and his own exploits probably circulated more by word of mouth than by the reading of his work, as books were hard to come by in antiquity. The rabbis—a century or two later—most likely picked up folkloristic versions of a few of his stories and modified those versions for their own purposes.

15. *Antiquities* 14:22.

16. See Marjorie Lehman, "The 'Ein Ya'agov: A Collection of Aggadah in Transition," *Prooftexts* 19 (1999), 21-40, and "The 'Ein Ya'agov: A Talmudic Anthology of Aggadah" (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1993).

17. Lehman, "The 'Ein Ya'agov: A Collection of Aggadah in Transition," 31.

18. The same is true to some extent of pre-modern historiography. I focus on biography because even those rabbinic stories that concentrate on historical events such as the destruction of the temple recall the event through the exploits of the leading characters. Hence rabbinic historiography is essentially a type of biography.

19. See Arnaldo Momigliano, *The Development of Greek Biography* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971); Patricia Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983); *Latin Biography*, ed. T. A. Dorey (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967).

20. The citation is found in *Alexander* 1.2.

21. In principle, oral literature can be as fixed as written texts. Stories, however, tend to be particularly subject to modification. Stories transmitted orally will tend to change more than laws transmitted orally.

22. See Bavli Bava Metsia 86a.

23. On the literary characteristics of rabbinic stories, see the many works of Jonah Fraenkel, especially, *Darkhei ha'aggada vehamishash* (The Methods of the Aggada) (Masada: Yad Letalmud, 1991), 260-73; "Paronomasia in Aggadic Narratives," *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 27 (1978), 27-51; "Bible Verses Quoted in Tales of the Sages," *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 22 (1971), 80-99; "The Structure of Talmudic Legends," *Folklore Research Center Studies* 7 (1983), 45-97 (Hebrew).

24. See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 63-87.

25. See Moshe Garsiel, *Biblical Names: A Literary Study of Mishmic Derivations and Puns*, trans. Phyllis Hackett (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1987).

26. The terms *chiasm* and *chiasmic* come from the Greek letter *chi* (χ), which looks like our X. The letter gives a graphic representation of a chiasmic structure.

PART I

CHAPTER I. HASMONEAN MEMORIES

1. 2 Macc 1:18, 10:5-8. The connection to Sukkot also appears in 2 Macc 1:9, a quotation from an earlier source.

2. 1 Macc 4:36-59.

3. *Antiquities* 12:324-26. Josephus conjectures that the name derives "from the fact that the right to worship appeared to us at a time when we hardly dared hoped for it." That is, the victory was like a light that suddenly pierced their darkness.

4. 1 Macc 7:26-38; 2 Macc 14:30-15:37. The rabbinic tradition is an almost verbatim citation from 1 Maccabees 7:34 and 47: "He sneered at them [the priests], and jeered at them and polluted them, and spoke disdainfully. He swore with rage, saying, 'Unless Judah and his army are delivered into my hands right now, it shall come to pass when I return in peace, that I will burn down this house.' ... They took the spoil and plunder, and cut off Nikanor's head and right hand, which he had stretched forth so arrogantly, and brought them and hanged them near Jerusalem." (Translation from *The First Book of Maccabees*, ed. S. Zeitlin, trans. S. Tedesche [New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950], 143.)

5. *Antiquities* 14:25-28.

6. Additional literature: Zeitlin, *The First Book of Maccabees*, 1-63; Lawrence H. Schiffman, *From Text to Tradition: A History of Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism* (Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav, 1991), 72-78, 98-102; E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, rev. G. Vermes, F. Millar, et al. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1973-87), 1:125-233; O. S. Rankin, *The Origins of the Festival of Hanukkah* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1930). On Josephus, see H. W. Attridge, "Josephus and His Works," *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period*, ed. Michael Stone (Philadelphia: Fortress, Assen: Van Gorcum, 1984), 185-232.



Chapter 10

THE NEW MONTH AND THE AUTHORITY OF THE PATRIARCH (MISHNA ROSH HASHANA 2:9–11)

The Jewish calendar was not fixed until the fifth century CE. Each month began with the appearance of the new moon and had twenty-nine or thirty days. If the new moon appeared on the thirtieth day of the previous month, then that day became the first of the new month. If the new moon failed to appear, then that month had thirty days and the new month automatically began the next day. To ensure that no mistakes were made, the Mishna prescribes that witnesses testify before a rabbinic court, which would assess their testimony and proclaim the new month.

The calendar was of critical importance because the beginning of the month determined the days for celebrating Jewish festivals, including the offerings sacrificed in the Jerusalem Temple. Control over the calendar was therefore a sign of authority and prestige: he who determined the calendar determined the festivals for the Jewish world. Throughout the Second Temple Period various calendrical systems were used by different Jewish groups. Bitter disputes broke out among the Pharisees, Sadducees and the Dead Sea Sect over this issue. Such tensions persisted into rabbinic times. Rabbinic traditions tell of opposing Jewish groups sending false witnesses to testify that they had seen the moon in order to fix the calendar according to their system.

The following story tells of a conflict among Tannaitic rabbis over the calendar. The story grapples with various aspects of authority.

Rabbinic traditions considered Rabban Gamaliel II (c. 80 CE) to have been the *nasi* or patriarch, the recognized leader of the sages. The story makes a claim for patriarchal authority over the calendar and illustrates the gravity of challenging his power. A related point, expressed primarily in R. Akiba's midrash, is that God has given human beings the authority to set the calendar and to determine the dates of the festivals (E). The Jewish festivals follow the decrees of the human court, not an objective celestial reality. The story also makes a powerful claim for rabbinic judicial authority. R. Dosa b. Harkinas's midrash contends that the decisions rendered by the recognized court cannot be questioned (F). Behind the story is an awareness of the importance of unity within the rabbinic movement and the dangers of the sages splitting into different groups, as had been the case in earlier times. In order to flourish, a religion requires recognized authorities, a common calendar and accepted mechanisms for making decisions.¹

[A] Rabban Gamaliel had images of forms of the moon on a tablet and on the wall of his upper-story. He would show them to commoners [who came to give testimony about the new moon] and ask: "Did you see [the moon] like this one or like that one?"

[B] Once two came and said, "We saw it [the moon] in the morning in the East, and in the evening in the West." R. Yohanan ben Nuri said, "They are false witnesses." But when they came to Yavneh, Rabban Gamaliel accepted them.²

[C] Another time two came and said, "We saw it at the appropriate time. But the following night it could not be seen"—and Rabban Gamaliel accepted them. R. Dosa b. Harkinas said, "They are false witnesses. How can one testify about a woman who gave birth, and the next day her belly is between her teeth?" R. Yehoshua said to him [Dosa]: "I see your words."³

[D] Rabban Gamaliel sent to him [R. Yehoshua], "I decree that you come to me with your staff and your money on the day on which Yom Kippur falls according to your [calendrical] reckoning."⁴

[E] R. Akiba went to him [R. Yehoshua] and found him in distress. He [Akiba] said to him, "I can demonstrate that every decision made by Rabban Gamaliel is valid. For it says, *These are the festivals of the Lord, the sacred occasions, which you shall appoint* (Lev 23:4)—whether at their proper times, whether not at their proper times, I have no festivals other than these ones [that you appoint]."

[F] He [R. Yehoshua] approached R. Dosa b. Harkinas. He [Dosa] said to him, "If we go and question the [decisions of the] court of Rabban Gamaliel, we should also question [the decisions of] every single court that existed from the time of Moses until now. For it says, *Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Avihu and seventy of the elders of Israel ascended* (Exod 24:9). Why were the names of the elders not specified? To teach that every group of three who stood as a court for Israel—behold, they are like the court of Moses."⁵

[G] He [R. Yehoshua] took his staff and money in his hand, and he went to Yavneh to Rabban Gamaliel on the day that the Day of Atonement fell according to his reckoning. Rabban Gamaliel stood up and kissed him on his head. He said to him, "Come in peace, my master and my student. My master in wisdom, and my student in that you accepted my words."

13. Although R. Yehoshua opposed R. Eliezer at the outset, God directs his wrath at Rabban Gamaliel. As patriarch and leader of the sages he apparently bears primary responsibility for the ban. For detailed discussion of this question see Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, 44, 55.

14. The three destructions, J1-J3, balance R. Eliezer's three supernatural proofs, C1-C3, and the destructive wave, K, balances the proof from the heavenly voice, D. Moreover, there appears to be an intrinsic connection that creates a measure-for-measure theme: the sages reject R. Eliezer's backward-flowing water and Rabban Gamaliel is threatened by water rising up against him. The sages reject the miracle of a disruption in the course of nature, the uprooting of a carob tree, and the world experiences a corresponding disruption in the vegetable realm, the ruination of crops. The sages burned R. Eliezer's purities (H), so the world burns from his gaze. The sages filled his eyes with tears (K); now his eyes blaze with fire. God stated that the law follows Eliezer "in every place," and destruction consequently occurs "in every place" he gazes (D, G3). Gamaliel's death eventually avenges the social death of the ban.

15. Just as R. Yehoshua rejected the heavenly voice by adducing a principle about the integrity of the law (E), so Rabban Gamaliel temporarily wards off heavenly punishment by citing a principle regarding the integrity of the law.

16. On the motif of kinship relations among the sages, see chapter 4, story A, sections F and Q.

17. To "fall on the face" is to lie prostrate in private prayer. Like Akiba (D), she realizes that God intends to punish the sages for the pain they caused R. Eliezer. She too tries to prevent or restrain his expression of pain.

CHAPTER 10. THE NEW MONTH AND THE AUTHORITY OF THE PATRIARCH

1. Additional literature on the calendar: Arnold Lasker and Daniel Lasker, "Behold, a Moon Is Born! How the Jewish Calendar Works," *Conservative Judaism* 41/4 (1989), 5-19; M. D. Herr, "The Calendar," *The Jewish People in the First Century*, vol. 2, eds. S. Safrai and M. Stern (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992), 83-4-64.

2. Apparently Rabban Gamaliel thought that one sighting was the new moon and the other simply a mistake.

3. That is, "I accept your position." Because the moon could not be seen, Dosa and Yehoshua believe that the first sighting was mistaken. So the second day of the month according to Gamaliel's calculation was the first for them. Gamaliel evidently assumed the moon could not be seen on the next evening because the skies were overcast.
4. One may not carry a staff and money on Yom Kippur. Rabban Gamaliel demands that R. Yehoshua demonstrate publicly that he accepts Rabban Gamaliel's authority.
5. That is, every subsequent court potentially possesses the same status as the court of Moses. Because we do not know who was on Moses' court, we can never say that a later court is inferior.

CHAPTER 11. AUTHORITY OVER THE CALENDAR

1. A deficiency of 11 days (365-354) over 19 years produces 209 missing days, which works out to about seven extra months.
2. The fixed calendar of Hillel II required periodic adjustments, and these were a source of controversy.
3. The story also appears in Yerushalmi Nedarim 6:8, 40a. Additional literature: Isaiah Gafni, *Land, Center and Diaspora: Jewish Constructs of Antiquity* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 106-12; Alon, *The Jews in Their Land*, 1:237-48.
4. Rabbi suggests that the Babylonians violate the privileges of Jerusalem just as building a temple in the diaspora would violate sacrificial law. "Nehunyon" seems to refer to "Honyo" (Onias), the high priest who fled Jerusalem and built a temple in Egypt (Bavli Menahot 109b). The rabbi considered that temple an idolatrous shrine.
5. The sense is: You follow Hananiah's intercalation, as if your Torah reads, "These are the set times of Hananiah." But the verse says, "of the Lord," and we inhabit his holy land.
6. Hananiah's place of residence, a city in Babylonia.
7. But you follow Hananiah as if your version of Isaiah reads, "Torah shall come forth from Babylonia."
8. They themselves tell me that they have become great scholars (the kids have become goats). But I was there and saw how trivial their abilities.
9. The text is difficult here. Another possible reading is: "Since [he says] that if they do not know [how to calculate as accurately] as he, they



Chapter 12

CONFLICT IN THE ACADEMY: THE DEPOSITION OF RABBAN GAMALIEL

We know little about the precise workings of the rabbinic study-houses and academies during talmudic times. Throughout the Amoraic period in Babylonia most rabbinic learning probably took place in small disciple circles (200–400 CE). Students congregated around a local master and studied with him for years before moving on to study with another master or to attract disciples of their own.¹ Toward the end of the Amoraic period, after about 400 CE, the rabbis established permanent institutions of higher learning. These rabbinic academies (*beit midrash* or *yeshiva*) were led by a “head of the academy” (*rash yeshiva*) who directed official study sessions and presided over numerous sages and students. A rigid hierarchy apparently governed the daily protocol. Members of the academy were seated in rows according to their positions within the hierarchy. Sages and disciples honored the head of the academy and the other high offices by rising when they entered or passed by.² The situation in Palestine is less clear, but it seems that here too most rabbinic study took place in small schools directed by one sage.³ In the fourth century larger institutions (usually called “assembly-houses,” *beit vaad*) may have been established in the cities of Sepphoris and Tiberias.

Among the most dramatic rabbinic stories are those that describe conflicts in the academies, especially clashes over the positions of leadership. In the following story the sages rebel against the

head of the academy, temporarily depose him and appoint another in his stead. While the story is set in the Tannaitic era and features the patriarch Rabban Gamaliel II (died c. 120 CE) and his contemporaries, the description of the assembly house/academy, language and other motifs indicates that a much later story has been projected back upon earlier times. Later storytellers in both Palestine and Babylonia used Tannaitic sages as characters to represent the conflicts of the contemporary institutions and also used the patriarch to represent the head of the academy in their time.

In both Talmuds the conflict is precipitated by the heavy-handed administration of Rabban Gamaliel, in particular his tendency to humiliate other sages. To cause shame was no light matter in rabbinic culture; we have seen in the story of the "Oven of Akhnai" that God severely punishes the rabbis for shaming R. Eliezer (see chapter 9 herein). Both stories depict Rabban Gamaliel as having little care for the poverty in which the other sages toil. Thus he does not know that R. Yehoshua is a needle-maker (K) or smith (k) until he visits R. Yehoshua's house. One senses in the background a growing distance between the leaders atop the rabbinic hierarchy and the rest of the sages.

The story deals in part with the issue of eligibility for the highest positions in the academic hierarchy. There is a strong emphasis on lineage (see also chapter 13 herein). The sages pass over R. Akba because he has no illustrious ancestors and choose R. Eleazar, in part because he is "tenth [generation] in descent from Ezra" (D, d). Moreover, when R. Yehoshua instructs the sages to give Rabban Gamaliel his position back, he uses imagery that stresses priestly descent (m, M). "Sprinkler" and "ashes" refer to the priest who sprinkled the ashes of the red heifer in the purification ceremony described in Numbers 19:1-22. When he compares Rabban Gamaliel to "sprinkler son of a sprinkler" he seems to mean that he is of the pedigree and dynasty that rightfully leads the academy. Likewise the robe he invokes is the special garment worn by priests when serving in the temple (L). By suggesting that taking Gamaliel's position is analogous to taking "the robe" from the priest who rightfully wears it, he indicates that Gamaliel too enjoys a hereditary right to his office. This is

probably why the ousting is temporary. The storytellers seem to believe that a certain family dynasty deservedly leads the academy, but they wish that the leaders were more sympathetic to the rank and file of the sages.

A prominent theme in the Bavli version is the accessibility of Torah. Rabban Gamaliel had placed a guard at the door of the academy to keep out unworthy students but subsequently realizes that he has "held back Torah from Israel" (f, h). During his demotion 400 or 700 benches of students are added, thus opening the doors of Torah to thousands of students (g).⁴ The increased brain-power in turn enables the sages to resolve every "single law pending in the academy," that is, to decide all the previously intractable questions (i). Even the issue they discuss at length, whether an Ammonite may convert to Judaism, deals with the matter of inclusion and exclusion (j).⁵ An important message of the story is that Torah study should be as inclusive as possible. It is hard to know what, if any, historical reality lies behind this theme. Perhaps some sages (the leaders of the academy?) saw themselves as an elite social class and attempted to exclude the common people from higher studies of Torah. The Yerushalmi version lacks this concern.

In these and the following stories one sees that the storytellers experienced the academy as a place of conflict—the Bavli even uses the metaphor of "shield-bearers" to describe the sages (b). They waged the "war of Torah," thrusting and parrying in the give and take of dispute, attacking weak arguments and defending their rulings from assault. This kind of metaphorical battle was an inherent part of rabbinic activity within the academy. Yet when sages crossed the line and shamed or insulted others, the conflict turned from legal controversy to the personal struggles represented in the stories. Both versions of the story narrate a transition from conflict to reconciliation and compromise. They instruct the sages that the study of Torah should be pursued in a harmonious environment.⁶

A. Gamaliel the Tyrant (Yerushalmi Berakhot 4:1, 7c-d)⁷

[A] Once a certain student came and asked R. Yehoshua, "The evening prayer—what is its status?" He said to him, "Optional." He went and asked Rabban Gamaliel, "The evening prayer—what is its status?" He said to him, "Obligatory."⁸ He said to him, "And yet R. Yehoshua said to me 'Optional.'" He said to him, "When I enter the assembly-house tomorrow, stand up and ask about that law."

[B] The next day that student stood up and asked Rabban Gamaliel, "The evening prayer—what is its status?" He said to him, "Obligatory." He said to him, "And yet R. Yehoshua said to me 'Optional.'" Rabban Gamaliel said to R. Yehoshua, "Are you the one who said 'Optional'?" He said to him, "No." He said to him, "Stand on your feet that they may bear witness against you."

[D] Rabban Gamaliel was sitting and expounding while R. Yehoshua stood on his feet until all the people murmured and said to Hutsplit the *meiturgeman*, "Dismiss the people." They said to Zenon the *hazzan*, "Say 'Begin.'" He said "Begin," and all the people stood on their feet and said to him [Rabban Gamaliel], "*Who has not suffered from your constant malice?*" (Nah 3:19).¹⁰ They went and appointed R. Eleazar b. Azariah to [lead] the assembly. He was sixteen years old, and his entire head became full of white hair.¹¹ Rabbi Akiba was sitting and feeling upset [that he was not selected]. He said, "Not that he knows more Torah than I, but he is the descendant of greater men than I. Happy is the man whose ancestors have gained merit for him. Happy is the man who has a peg on which to hang." And what was the peg of R. Eleazar b. Azariah? He was tenth generation [in descent] from Ezra.

[G] And how many benches were there? R. Yaakov b. Sisi said, "Eighty benches of students were there, excluding those standing

beyond the fence." R. Yose b. R. Avun said, "Three hundred were there, excluding those standing beyond the fence."

[I] (This refers to what we have learned elsewhere. *On the day they sent R. Eleazar b. Azariah in the assembly* [Mishna Yadain 3:5].¹² We learned elsewhere, *R. Eleazar expounded this interpretation to the sages at the vineyard in Ya'neh* [Mishna Keritot 4:6]. But was there a vineyard there? Rather, these are the students who used to assemble in rows like a vineyard.¹³)

[K] Immediately Rabban Gamaliel went and apologized to each and every one in his own house. He went to R. Yehoshua and found him sitting and making needles. He said to him, "From these you make your living?" He said to him, "You did not know this until now? Woe be the generation whose chief you are!" He [Rabban Gamaliel] said to him, "I apologize to you."

[L] They sent a certain laundryman to R. Eleazar b. Azariah, and some say it was R. Akiba.¹⁴

[M] He said to him, "Let a sprinkler, the son of a sprinkler, sprinkle. Should he who is neither a sprinkler nor the son of a sprinkler say to a sprinkler, the son of a sprinkler, your water is cave water and your ashes are common ashes?"¹⁵ He [R. Eleazar b. Azariah] said to them [the sages], "If you are satisfied, let you and me rise early to the door of Rabban Gamaliel."¹⁶

[N] Nevertheless, they did not demote him [R. Eleazar b. Azariah] from his high office but appointed him head of the court.¹⁷



B. Gamaliel the Elifist (Bavli Berakhot 27b-28a)

[a] Our sages have taught. Once a certain student came before R. Yehoshua. He said to him, "The evening prayer—optional or

obligatory?" He said to him, "Optional." He came before Rabban Gamaliel. He said to him, "The evening prayer—optional or obligatory?" He said to him, "Obligatory." He said to him, "But did not R. Yehoshua say to me, 'Optional.'" He said to him, "Wait until the shield-bearers [the sages] enter the academy."¹⁸

[b] When the shield-bearers entered, the questioner stood up and asked, "The evening prayer—optional or obligatory?" Rabban Gamaliel said to him, "Obligatory." Rabban Gamaliel said to the sages, "Is there anyone who disagrees on this matter?" R. Yehoshua said to him, "No." Rabban Gamaliel said to him, "But did not they say to me in your name, 'Optional?'" He said to him, "Yehoshua! Stand on your feet that they may bear witness against you."

[c] R. Yehoshua stood on his feet and said, "If I were alive and he [the student] dead—the living could contradict the dead. Now that I am alive and he is alive—how can the living contradict the living?"

[d] Rabban Gamaliel was sitting and expounding while R. Yehoshua stood on his feet, until all the people murmured and said to Hartsprit the *turgeman*,¹⁹ "Stop!" and he stopped. They said, "How long will he [Rabban Gamaliel] go on distressing [R. Yehoshua]?"

(1) He distressed him last year on Rosh HaShana.²⁰

(2) He distressed him in [the matter of] the firstling, in the incident involving R. Zadoq.²¹

(3) Now he distresses him again.

Come, let us depose him. Whom will we raise up [in his place]?

(1) Shall we raise up R. Yehoshua? He is involved in the matter.

(2) Shall we raise up R. Akiba? Perhaps he [Rabban Gamaliel] will harm him, since he has no ancestral merit.

(3) Rather let us raise up R. Eleazar b. Azariah, for he is wise, and he is wealthy, and he is tenth [in descent] from Ezra.

(1) He is wise—so that if anyone asks a difficult question, he will be able to solve it.

(2) He is wealthy—in case he has to pay honor to the emperor.
(3) And he is tenth in descent from Ezra—he has ancestral merit and he [Rabban Gamaliel] will not be able to harm him."²²

[e] They said to him, "Would our Master consent to be the head of the academy?" He said to them, "Let me go and consult with the members of my household." He went and consulted his wife.

(1) She said to him, "Perhaps they will reconcile with him and depose you?" He said to her, "There is a tradition. *One raises the level of business but does not diminish it* (Mishna Menahot 11:7)."²³

(2) She said to him, "Perhaps he [Rabban Gamaliel] will harm you?" He said, "Let a man use a valuable cup for one day even if it breaks on the morrow."

(3) She said to him, "You have no white hair." That day he was eighteen years old. A miracle happened for him and he was crowned with eighteen rows of white hair. (This explains what R. Eleazar b. Azariah said [elsewhere], *One recites the [paragaph about] the redemption from Egypt at night. R. Eleazar b. Azariah said: Behold I am as seventy years old... (Mishna Berakhot 1:5), and not "[I am] seventy years old."*)²⁴

[f] It was taught: That day they removed the guard of the gate and gave students permission to enter. For Rabban Gamaliel had decreed, "Any student whose inside is not like his outside may not enter the academy."

[g] That day many benches were added. R. Yohanan said, "Abba Yosef b. Dostanai and the sages disagree. One said, 'Four hundred benches were added.' And one said, 'Seven hundred benches were added.'"

[h] Rabban Gamaliel became distressed. He said, "Perhaps, God forbid, I held back Torah from Israel." They showed him in a dream white casks filled with ashes.²⁵ But that was not the case, they showed him [the dream] only to put his mind at peace [but he really had held back Torah.]

[i] It was taught, "They taught [Tractate] Eduyot on that day." (And anywhere that it says *On that day* [in the Mishna]—[refers to] that day.)²⁶ And there was not a single law pending in the academy that they did not resolve.

[j] And even Rabban Gamaliel did not hold himself back from Torah. For it was taught:

On that day Yehuda the Ammonite proselyte stood before them in the academy. He said to them, "Am I [permitted] to enter the congregation of Israel [= to convert]?" Rabban Gamaliel said to him, "You are forbidden." R. Yehoshua said to him, "You are permitted." Rabban Gamaliel said, "Is it not written, No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted into the congregation of the Lord (Deut 23:4)?" R. Yehoshua said to him, "And are Ammon and Moab in their [original] places? Semaberib King of Assyria has since come up and mixed up all the nations, as it says, I have erased the borders of peoples; I have plundered their treasures and exiled their vast populations (Isa 10:13). And whatever separates, separates from the majority."²⁷ Rabban Gamaliel said to him, "Has it not already been said, I will restore the fortunes of the Ammonites—declares the Lord (Jer 49:6), and they have already been restored?" R. Yehoshua said to him, "Has it not already been said, I will restore my people Israel (Amos 9:14), and they have not yet been restored?" Immediately they permitted him to enter the congregation (Mishna Yadayin 4:4).

[k] Rabban Gamaliel said, "I will go and appease R. Yehoshua."²⁸ When he arrived at his house, he saw that the walls of his house were black. He said to him, "From the walls of your house it is evident that you are a smith." He said to him, "Woe to the generation whose chief you are, for you do not know the distress of the scholars, how they earn a living and how they subsist." He said to him, "I apologize to you. Forgive me." He [R. Yehoshua] paid no attention to him. [Rabban Gamaliel said,] "Do it for the honor of my father's house."²⁹ He said to him, "You are forgiven."

[l] They said, "Who will go and tell the rabbis [that we have reconciled]?" A certain laundryman said, "I will go." R. Yehoshua sent [word] to the academy, "Let him who wears the robe wear the robe. Should one who does not wear the robe say to one who wears the robe, 'Take off your robe and I will wear it?'" R. Akiba said, "Lock the doors so that the servants of Rabban Gamaliel cannot come in and distress the sages."³⁰

[m] R. Yehoshua went and knocked on the door. He said, "Let a sprinkler, the son of a sprinkler, sprinkle. Should he who is neither a sprinkler nor the son of a sprinkler say to a sprinkler, the son of a sprinkler, your water is cave water and your ashes are common ashes?" R. Akiba said to R. Yehoshua, "Have you been appeased? We acted only for the sake of your honor. Tomorrow you and I will rise early to his [Gamaliel's] door."

[n] They said, "What shall we do?"

(1) Shall we depose him [R. Eleazar b. Azariah]? There is a tradition, *One raises the level of holiness but not does not diminish it* (Mishna Menahot 7:11).

(2) Shall this master expound on one Sabbath and that master on the next? He [Rabban Gamaliel] will not accept that since he will be jealous of him."

(3) Rather, they ordained that Rabban Gamaliel would expound three Sabbaths and R. Eleazar b. Azariah one Sabbath.

(This explains the tradition, *Whose Sabbath was it? It was [the Sabbath] of R. Eleazar b. Azariah* [Tosefta Sotah 7:9].)³¹

[o] And that student [who asked the original question] was R. Shimon bar Yohai.³²



Chapter 13

LEADERSHIP OF THE ACADEMY: LINEAGE OR TORAH? (BAVLI HORAYOT 13b–14a)

While the previous story tells of a successful, if temporary, deposition of the patriarch, the following story describes a plot that failed. Here too we deal with a late Babylonian tale projected upon Tannaitic times that uses the earlier sages as characters.¹ The story probably took shape in the post-Amoraic academy well into the age of the redaction of the Talmud (fifth to seventh centuries CE).

The fundamental question of the story is the primacy of lineage or knowledge of Torah as the basis for positions of academic leadership and the accompanying honors. Rabbis Meir and Natan, who occupy the second and third positions in the academic hierarchy, plan to depose Rabban Shimon b. Gamaliel from his position of leadership when they find that he has reduced their honors so as to distinguish his status from their own. The two rabbis object that they know more Torah than the patriarch, who probably represents the head of the Babylonian academy, hence they should receive equal, if not greater, honors (D). Rabban Shimon b. Gamaliel's claim to his position as patriarch, in contrast, devolves from his lineage. His rebuke of R. Natan emphasizes that R. Natan's admittedly impressive lineage does not qualify him for the position of patriarch (I). In the next generation Rabban Shimon b. Gamaliel's son, R. Yehuda HaNasi, informs his son, R. Shimon, of how R. Meir threatened "your honor and the honor of your father's house" (J). The

LIFE AND DEATH IN THE RABBINIC ACADEMY

challenge was not to Rabban Shimon b. Gamaliel alone, but to their dynasty, by virtue of which each holds the highest office.

The movement of the plot clearly favors Rabban Shimon b. Gamaliel and his family. Not only does he successfully meet the challenge posed by R. Meir and R. Natan, but he turns the tables on the sages and symmetries them with his knowledge (G). R. Meir and R. Natan attempt to depose the patriarch and move a step up the academic hierarchy, but they lose their positions and find themselves exiled from the academy. R. Natan humbles himself with an apology, while Meir is not rehabilitated until after his death and even then bears a lasting stigma (I–J). Yet Rabban Shimon b. Gamaliel's triumph is by no means absolute. The students force him to re-admit R. Meir and R. Natan to the academy because they need the sages' knowledge of Torah (H). Even the attenuated punishment, the effacement of the rabbis' names, does not last.

Thus the story offers a warning to sages like R. Meir and R. Natan who may be tempted to stake a claim to the highest academic rank based on their knowing more Torah than the "patriarch," the current head of the academy. They had better tread carefully lest they find themselves banished from the academy due to the "patriarch's" power. At the same time, the story sounds a warning to any head of the academy who lags behind his colleagues in Torah knowledge. Perhaps he should be careful about insisting on displays of honor when around sages more proficient than he. Rabban Shimon b. Gamaliel survived the threat due to the fortunate intervention of R. Yaakov b. Qudshai (E–F), but there is no guarantee that the next "patriarch" (=head of the academy) will be so lucky.

Most surprising about the story is that knowledge of Torah, normally the leading value in Babylonian rabbinic culture, does not determine academic rank. Yet we know from other sources that Babylonian Jewry placed extremely high value on lineage.² Priests (*kohanim*), who enjoyed high status before 70 CE by virtue of their serving in the temple, continued to be respected in the rabbinic period. In the Geonic era (c. 700–1100 CE) rabbinic society became increasingly dynastic as the heads of the academy were selected exclusively from a few leading families. Judging by the story, that situation seems to have started already in late talmudic times. These

twin values of Torah and lineage, achievement and birth, create a defining reversion of Jewish culture.³

The theme of shame in the academy features prominently in this story (see the previous and following stories as well), and in particular, the experience of a loss of face in the course of academic debate. Sages distinguished themselves by shining in the questions, answers and give and take of discussion, and felt deep shame when unable to answer as their colleagues and students looked on. When R. Meir and R. Natan attempt to shame Rabban Shimon b. Gamaliel, they not only aim at measure-for-measure punishment for his promoting his personal honor, but they assault the very basis of academic standing. The shocked reaction of R. Yaakov b. Qudshai and harsh retribution of Rabban Shimon b. Gamaliel should be seen against this background.

To understand the story we must briefly review Tosefta Sanhedrin 7:8, the source prescribing the types of honor shown to the leaders of the rabbinic hierarchy.⁴ This Tosefta paragraph appears in the talmudic discussion that precedes the story:

- [a] When the patriarch enters all stand and they may not sit until he says to them "sit."
 [b] When the head of the court enters, they make a row for him on one side [by standing up], and a row for him on the other side, until he sits in his place.
 [c] When the sage⁵ enters one stands and one sits until he sits in his place.⁶

The story claims that Rabban Shimon b. Gamaliel instituted this teaching in order to promote his own honor at the expense of his fellows. Prior to this act, so the story runs, all officers were shown equal honor. We thus have another example of a story that supplies an etiology for a rabbinic law (see chapter 2 herein).⁷

[A] R. Yohanan said, "This teaching [=Tosefta Sanhedrin 7:8] was taught in the days of Rabban Shimon b. Gamaliel."

[B] Rabban Shimon b. Gamaliel—patriarch. R. Meir—sage. R. Natan—head of the court. When Rabban Shimon b. Gamaliel would enter [the academy], everyone would rise before him. When R. Meir and R. Natan would enter, everyone would rise before them. Rabban Shimon b. Gamaliel said, "Should there not be a distinction between me and them?" He enacted (*taqen*) this teaching [=Tosefta Sanhedrin 7:8].

[C] On that day, R. Meir and R. Natan were not there. On the morrow, when they came, they saw that they [the rabbis of the academy] did not rise before them as usual. They said, "What is this?" They said to them, "Thus Rabban Shimon b. Gamaliel enacted (*taqen*)."

[D] R. Meir said to R. Natan, "I am sage and you are head of the court. Let us fix (*netaqen*) something for ourselves."⁸ R. Natan said to him, "What shall we do (*na'aveid*)?" [Meir said,] "We will say to him, 'Teach us [Tractate] Uqtsin,' which he does not know." And because he has not learned [it], we will say to him, *Who can tell the mighty acts of God, make all his praise heard?* (Ps 106:2). For whom is it pleasing to tell the mighty acts of the Lord? For him who is able to make all his praise heard."¹⁰ We will depose him (*na'aveir*)¹¹ and then you will be patriarch and I will be head of the court."

[E] R. Yaakov b. Qudshai heard them. He said, "Perhaps, God forbid, it will result in shame?" He went and sat behind the upper-story of Rabban Shimon b. Gamaliel. He repeated and taught [Tractate Uqtsin], repeated and taught.¹²

[F] He [Rabban Shimon b. Gamaliel] said, "What is before me? Perhaps, God forbid, there was some matter in the academy?" He paid attention, looked into it and repeated it.

[G] The next day they [R. Meir and R. Natan] said to him, "Let the master teach us from [Tractate] Uqtsin." He opened and taught. After he stymied [R. Meir and R. Natan], he said to them,

"Had I not learned it, you would have shamed me."¹³ He ordered and they removed them from the academy.¹⁴

[H] They [R. Meir and R. Natan] would write objections on slips of paper and throw [them into the academy]. That which he [Rabban Shimon b. Gamaliel] solved, he solved. That which was not solved, they [R. Meir and R. Natan] wrote the solutions and threw them [in]. R. Yose said to them [the rabbis], "Torah is outside and we are inside?" Rabban Shimon b. Gamaliel said to them, "We will bring them in. However, we will penalize them such that we do not say traditions in their names." They designated R. Meir "Others" and R. Natan "Some say."¹⁵

[I] They showed them in their dreams, "Go and appease Rabban Shimon b. Gamaliel."¹⁶ R. Natan went. R. Meir did not go. He said, "Dreams neither help nor hinder."¹⁷ When R. Natan went he [Rabban Shimon b. Gamaliel] said to him, "Perhaps the belt of your father benefited you in making you the head of the court. Shall it benefit you to make you patriarch?"¹⁸

[J] Rabbi [Yehuda HaNasi] taught his son R. Shimon, "Others say, 'If it had been an exchanged beast, it would not have been offered.'¹⁹ He said to him, "Who are those ['others'] whose waters we drink and whose names we do not mention?" He said to him, "They are men who tried to uproot your honor and the honor of your father's house." He said to him, "*Their loves, their hates, their jealousies have long since perished* (Qoh 9:6)." He said to him, "*The enemy is no more; the ruins last forever* (Ps 9:7)." He said to him, "This applies only when their actions benefited [them]. As for these, their actions did not benefit [them]." He then taught, "*They said in the name of R. Meir, 'If it had been an exchanged beast, it would not have been offered'*" [=Mishna Bekhorot 9:8].²⁰

[K] Rava said, "Even Rabbi [Yehuda HaNasi], who was extremely humble, said, 'They said in the name of R. Meir.' He did not say, 'R. Meir said.'²¹



Chapter 14

THE SAGA OF RAV KAHANA: THE TORAH OF BABYLONIA VS. THE TORAH OF PALESTINE (BAVLI BAVA QAMA 117a-b)

We have seen that Babylonian and Palestinian rabbis competed for authority over the Jewish calendar (chapter 11). Each rabbinic community believed that its Torah was of higher quality, its traditions purer, its sages brighter. The following story from the Babylonian Talmud makes a strong claim for the superiority of the Torah of the Babylonians. The climax tells how the Babylonian sage Rav Kahana explained to R. Yohanan, head of the Tiberian school and the greatest Palestinian sage of his age (c. 220–50 CE), every point of law that was unclear to him. This prompted R. Yohanan to concede that while he had believed that Torah "was yours," that the Palestinians had mastered it, he now realized that it "was theirs," that the Babylonians were more proficient (K). Besides knowing more law, Rav Kahana is far more brilliant than his Palestinian colleagues. He easily propounds objections to the discourses of Resh Laqish and R. Yohanan, thus demonstrating his superior dialectic ability (D, G). In a scene that would have made any Palestinian sage cringe, R. Yohanan describes himself in relation to Rav Kahana as a student before a teacher (D). And Rav Kahana was by no means the brightest of the Babylonians!

The language, manuscript traditions and motifs of the story suggest that it was composed in Babylonia late in the talmudic

period.¹ The word for "cushions" is Persian, and the image of a sage sitting atop six or seven cushions appears frequently in Persian art and literature (G). Most significant, the description of the academy with rows of students sitting before the master represents the arrangement of the Babylonian academy in late talmudic and Geonic times. The story may date to the sixth or seventh centuries CE when the Palestinian rabbinic community experienced a period of decline while the Babylonian academies were flourishing.

Two prominent themes in the story are dialectical argumentation and shame. In late Babylonian rabbinic culture the give and take of talmudic debate was considered the highest form of Torah and the true measure of brilliance. A sage demonstrated his abilities by being able to raise "objections" or "difficulties" and to answer them with responses and solutions. Here Rav Kahana's capacity to make objections and solutions earns him recognition as a "lion," while his apparent inability to do so renders him a mere "fox" (D, E). The images of Rav Kahana moving back and forward through rows of students depending on whether he raises objections or not, and of R. Yohanan moving further down from his mound of cushions each time he fails to provide a solution, give concrete representation to the status conferred by dialectical argumentation (E, G).

To lose a debate, to fail to answer an objection directed against one's teaching, produces shame or embarrassment, one of the most important concerns of the Bavli (see chapter 13 and the other chapters in this part). For this reason Rav warns Rav Kahana that he must not speak up while R. Yohanan speaks. He knows that R. Yohanan will feel ashamed when he cannot answer Rav Kahana's brilliant objections and therefore disaster will result. Sure enough, when R. Yohanan becomes "embarrassed," albeit at the mistaken belief that Rav Kahana laughed at him, Rav Kahana dies.² Rav Kahana, for his part, experiences shame at being perceived as an inferior student while refraining from objecting (F). To avoid feeling ashamed when holding back a pointed response, while simultaneously not shaming another sage for fear of severe punishment, was undoubtedly a tricky path to tread.

The story has a highly developed literary character. The seven years of silence, seven cushions and seven rows of students create

thematic parallels (C, E, G). The metaphors of the lion and fox, the supernatural snake, the magical opening of the cave and the resurrection contribute to the dramatic force.³

[A] A certain man intended to reveal another man's straw [to the Persian tax authorities.] He came before Rav. He [Rav] said to him, "Do not reveal it! Do not reveal it." He said to him, "I will reveal it! I will reveal it!"

[B] Rav Kahana was sitting before Rav. He stood up and tore out his [the man's] windpipe. [He said:] "*Your sons lie in a swoon at the corner of every street, like an antelope caught in a net* [Isa 51:20]. Just as they never show mercy to an antelope once it has fallen into a net, so the idolaters never show mercy to the money of Jews once it has fallen into their hands."⁴

[C] Rav said to him, "Kahana, until now there was the kingdom of the Greeks, who were not strict about bloodshed [and allowed us to administer capital punishment]. But now there is the [kingdom of the] Persians, who are strict about bloodshed.⁵ Rise and go up to the Land of Israel and accept upon yourself that you do not raise objections to [the teaching of] R. Yohanan for seven years."⁶

[D] He went [there] and came upon Resh Laqish, who was sitting and reviewing the daily lesson before the rabbis. He [Rav Kahana] said to them, "Where is Resh Laqish?" They said to him, "What for?" He told them this objection and that objection, this solution and that solution. They went and told Resh Laqish. Resh Laqish went and said to R. Yohanan, "A lion has come up from Babylonia. Let the master look deeply into the lesson for tomorrow."⁷

[E] The next day they seated him [Rav Kahana] in the first row [of sages]. He [R. Yohanan] said a tradition and he [Rav Kahana] did not object. He said [another] tradition and he did not object. They seated him back through seven rows until he was in the last

RABBINIC STORIES

row. R. Yohanan said to Resh Laqish, "The lion you mentioned has become a fox."

[F] He [Rav Kahana] said, "May it be [God's] will that these seven rows take the place of the seven years that Rav told me [not to raise objections]." He stood up on his feet. He said, "Let the master go back to the beginning."

[G] He [R. Yohanan] said a tradition and he [Rav Kahana] objected [until] they placed him in the first row. He said a tradition and he objected. R. Yohanan was sitting on seven cushions. They removed a cushion from under him. He said a tradition and he objected to him, until they removed all the cushions from under him and he was sitting on the ground.

[H] R. Yohanan was an old man and his eyelids sagged [over his eyes]. He said to them, "Lift up my eyes that I may see him." They lifted up [his eyelids] with a silver stick. He saw that his [Rav Kahana's] lip was split. He thought that he was laughing at him. He became embarrassed, and he [Rav Kahana] died [as divine punishment for causing R. Yohanan to feel ashamed].

[I] The next day R. Yohanan said to the rabbis, "Did you see how that Babylonian acted?" They said to him, "That's the way he is [he has a split lip]." He [R. Yohanan] went to his [burial] cave. He saw that a snake was coiled about it. He said, "Snake! Snake! Open the door and let the master approach his student." It did not open. [He said,] "Let a colleague approach his colleague." It did not open. [He said,] "Let a student approach his teacher." It opened for him.

[J] He prayed and revived him. He said to him, "Had I known that that is the way you are, I would not have felt embarrassed. Now, sir, come with us to the academy." He said, "If you can pray that I will never die again [because of you], I will go with you. If not, I won't go." He said, "I cannot, for when times change, that which changes, changes."⁶

LIFE AND DEATH IN THE RABBINIC ACADEMY

[K] He [R. Yohanan] asked him [Rav Kahana] all his doubts [regarding points of law] and he [Rav Kahana] resolved them for him. This is [the meaning] of what R. Yohanan said, "What I thought was yours [=I thought the Torah was the Palestinians'] was theirs [the Babylonians']."