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The Rabbinic View of the Female Body, Its Processes, and the Greco-Roman Influence

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Ordination

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March 2013
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Acknowledgments

For Dr. Garroway- The idea for this thesis began when, on a walk from HUC to USC, he asked if I knew about ancient Greek abortion methods. From that moment on, I knew that there was no one with whom it would be more appropriate to study texts about the female anatomy. I will fondly remember the other professors on the Garden Level popping their heads into our study sessions wondering why we constantly yelled out words like "semen" and "coitus". Thank you, Josh, for your patience and expertise in guiding me to create something of which to be proud.

For Matty- The best tshirts came from our time together studying *God's Phallus* and Masechet Niddah. Ai appursheeate yur fwiendshep mor den yu noe. Fanks be 2 Ceiling Cat fo bwinging usez togevaz.

For my HUC professors- Thank you for showing me the wonders of Judaism, helping me figure out everything I love about it, and supporting me as I figure out how to translate that to the "real world".

For my family and friends- From the bottom of my heart, thank you for supporting me through this wild ride called rabbinical school and especially through the endeavor of writing this thesis. I am sure you are all sick of me talking about wombs and seed. ☺

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Abstract

The rabbis of the Talmud and Midrashim attempted to rationalize the peculiarity of the female body vis-à-vis its male counterpart by drawing on previous Jewish sources and also Greco-Roman medical texts. Throughout rabbinic literature, there are many cases where the rabbis' efforts to rationalize yielded an understanding of the female body that modern society would consider to be anatomically incorrect and, at times, misogynistic in its outlook. This thesis will attempt to place the rabbis' views within their historical context and illustrate how they were not practicing misogyny, but instead, working through the rabbinic anxiety about maintaining a gender hierarchy established at Creation. This thesis will also explore the reasoning behind the anthropology of the female body by investigating the rabbis' biblical exegeses in their socio-historical context.

The thesis will analyze specific rabbinic texts such as Mishnah, Gemara, and Midrashim and will deal with the female body and issues specific to the female body, such as menstruation and conception. The analysis will place the texts' milieu within the rabbinic worldview and read them using the lens of the rabbinic anxiety about a gender hierarchy.

CHAPTER 1

Biblical and rabbinic literature often refers to female persons, female bodies, and female-specific issues. This thesis aims to illustrate the anxiety of the rabbis surrounding the maintenance of sex and gender hierarchies established by their reading of the biblical creation of the world. It is widely acknowledged that Genesis 1-3 contains two creation stories, though the pinnacle of creation is the same in each: the genesis of אדם.[1] In the first story we read:

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם׃

> Elohim created the אדם in [God's] image. [God] created him. Male and female, [God] created them.[2]

This enigmatic verse may be read in a few ways. Daniel Boyarin[3], Howard Eilberg-Schwartz[4], and Phyllis Trible[5] choose to read this verse as if the male and the female are created together, an egalitarian reading that is valid but ignores the two previous clauses. Prior to the declaration that "male and female [God] created them," Genesis 1:27 is

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[1] אדם might mean "human" in modern Hebrew, but there is much evidence supporting the

[2] Genesis 1:27 The translation is my own.

[3] Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[4] Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *People of the Body: Jews and Judaism from and Embodied Perspective* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

[5] Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978).

emphatic that God created אדם first—a singular creation referred to in the masculine form more than once throughout the verse.

The priority of the male in creation becomes clearer when Genesis 1:27 is read in relation to the second creation story:

וַיִּיצֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם עָפָר מִן־הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה׃

Adonai Elohim formed the אדם of the dust from the earth and breathed the breath of life into his nose. And he was the אדם—a living soul.[6]

וַיַּפֶּל יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים תַּרְדֵּמָה עַל־הָאָדָם וַיִּישָׁן וַיִּקַּח אַחַת מִצַּלְעֹתָיו וַיִּסְגֹּר בָּשָׂר תַּחְתֶּנָּה׃ וַיִּבֶן יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הַצֵּלָע אֲשֶׁר־לָקַח מִן־הָאָדָם לְאִשָּׁה וַיְבִאֶהָ אֶל־הָאָדָם׃ וַיֹּאמֶר הָאָדָם זֹאת הַפַּעַם עֶצֶם מֵעֲצָמַי וּבָשָׂר מִבְּשָׂרִי לְזֹאת יִקָּרֵא אִשָּׁה כִּי מֵאִישׁ לֻקְחָה־זֹּאת׃

Adonai caused a deep sleep to fall upon the אדם and he slept. And [God] took one of his ribs and closed it instead with flesh. And from the rib that [God] took from the אדם, Adonai built Woman and brought her to the אדם. And the אדם said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. She will be called Woman because she was taken out of Man."[7]

Here אדם is clearly created first, later being referred to as Man. Woman, having been derived from Man, is named accordingly. Woman owes her existence to God, who used the אדם as raw material for her creation. From the Creation stories, readers know that God is

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[6] Genesis 2:7.

[7] Genesis 2:21-23.

able to create humans using God's own image[8] or from the dust of the earth[9] but here, God chooses to create Woman from אדם. Although verse 23 uses the word איש is instead of אדם, one may still infer that the male was created first. As Charlotte Fonrobert puts it, "'adam, the term for human, can come to be represented by the male body, but never by the female body.[10]

So the rabbis considered the paradigmatic human being to be male, and this assumption generated ongoing anxiety regarding the alterity of the female body and its peculiar processes. Since the male was supposed to be the normative body, the rabbis concerned themselves greatly with trying to understand the female body, its purposes and processes. As Gwynn Kessler has observed, a sterling example of this rabbinic pursuit is their curiosity over the phenomenon of gestation, a process that only females experience. In trying to understand this phenomenon, the rabbis sometimes go so far as to remove entirely the female role this seemingly female experience, thus revealing the lengths they will go to in maintaining the originality and superiority of the male over the female form. Consider, for example, the graphic illustration of the female body's alterity in BT Bechorot

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[8] Genesis 1:26

[9] Genesis 2:7

[10] Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, "The Human Body in Rabbinic Legal Discourse," in *The Cambridge Companion to The Talmud and Rabbinic Literature,* eds. Charlotte Elisheva Fornrobert and Martin S. Jaffee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 279.

45a, which follows a lengthy discussion about blemishes on a human body. The body under discussion is male, the concern being the blemishes that can disqualify one from the Levitical priesthood. In the course of the discussion, the rabbis assert that a human body– that is, a male body– has 248 limbs and joints[11]; however, it is also reported that Rabbi Ishmael's disciples discovered an anomaly. They dissected a body and found 252 limbs and joints. The four extra body parts were, on Rabbi Ishmael's reckoning, clearly the parts of a female, which he describes as "hinges and doors", and clearly represent the female sexual organs.

Rabbi Ishmael and his disciples were not the only ones to use architectural metaphors to describe the female body. BT Bechorot 45a continues with biblical proof of the different female body parts and their relation to the house. Rabbi Elazar offers that the "hinges" come from the word ציר in 1 Samuel 4 and are related to labor pains.[12] In this particular verse, the author uses an architectural term to relate to the area of Phineas' wife that was in excruciating pain during her travail. Rabbi Yehoshua then offers that the "doors" are related to the doors of a womb described in Job.[13] The author is more literal in his usage of an architectural term here. It is extremely clear that the דלתי בתני to which the

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[11] This is previously asserted in BT Makkot 23b.

[12] 1 Samuel 4:19.

[13] Job 3:10.

author refers is a part of the female anatomy. Rabbi Ishmael's disciples do not mention the "key" to the house, but the baraita that follows, in the name of Rabbi Akiva, explains that there is a "key" on a woman, a determination proved by a verse from Genesis.[14] Here, Genesis notes that Rachel's womb was barren, implying that it needed to be "opened" and the word for "key" comes from the same root as "to open". These explanations of the extra body parts of women clearly point to the normative human body as being male.

While the creation stories from Genesis 1 and 2, on the rabbinic reading at least, establish an unambiguous gender hierarchy, the rabbis recognize that another biblical verse potentially undermines the paradigm. Leviticus 12:2 declares:

דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר אִשָּׁה כִּי תַזְרִיעַ וְיָלְדָה זָכָר וְטָמְאָה שִׁבְעַת יָמִים כִּימֵי נִדַּת דְּוֹתָהּ תִּטְמָא׃

> Speak to the children of Israel saying, "If a woman emits seed and bears a male child, then she will be impure for seven days, as in the days of her separateness she will be impure."[15]

The verb used here with respect to a female, תזריע, is normally reserved for male subjects.[16] Indeed, the noun of the same root, זרע, is a euphemism for semen. While this verse might therefore support an identification of the female body with the male, at least in terms of

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[14] Genesis 30:22.

[15] Leviticus 12:2 The translation is my own.

[16] See Genesis 17:7-10, Leviticus 15:16, 2 Samuel 7:12.

procreative function, the commentary of Leviticus Rabbah on the verse hardly reads it as such. It makes no mention of the anomalous usage of תזריע in this case, focusing instead on the roles that God and the male play in procreation and downplaying the female's role. It even makes the female body out to be a dangerous, but necessary, part of procreation. The midrashim contained in Leviticus Rabbah 14:2 describe the female's womb in terms of a prison: God serves as a redeemer, a light in the darkness, who releases the fetus from the womb just as God saved the Israelites from bondage in Exodus.[17] The uterus is also described as an "upside down purse" in Leviticus Rabbah, from which the fetus would invariably fall were it not for God's help. R. Abba bar Kahana points out that while the woman presents a danger because of her physiological structures, God acts as the protector of the fetus while in utero.[18]

The rabbis do not just focus on the role of the woman in gestation, they also argue embryology and the supposedly different growth rates of female and male embryos, continuing to support the theory that even as embryos, males are normative and females are non-normative. BT Niddah 30a and b describes sages performing experiments on imprisoned Egyptian women and their fetuses, from which they prove that males develop at a faster rate than the females. The conclusions stem from a discussion about the length of

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[17] Leviticus Rabbah 14:2.

[18] Leviticus Rabbah 14:3.

impurity for a woman after she miscarries. According to Rabbi Ishmael, the lengths differ depending on the amount of time she was pregnant. If a woman miscarries before the moment at which the rabbis believe ensoulment occurs—that is, forty days—her impurity is reckoned as if she had menstruated regularly and she pursues purification accordingly. If, however, she miscarries after the fortieth day, she must purify herself as if she had menstruated and delivered a male and a female—the maximum length of impurity. This view, held by the sages, implies that female and male embryos develop at the same rate and is the opposite of what Rabbi Ishmael said. The dissenting opinions present in the Gemara point to the validity of the sages' opinion, but also value Rabbi Ishmael's because he also provides scriptural proof of his belief.

In addition to their anatomical discussions of the female body, the rabbis also show considerable interest in the menstrual process. In one particular passage, the rabbis' assertion of legal control over menstruation reveals their fear and anxiety over the alterity of the female body. BT Niddah 20b empowers females to be in charge of their own purity regarding menstruation. While the sages considered themselves to be experts, it is up to the females to discuss their menses, or lack thereof, with their rabbis. The power women have over the rabbis, insofar as they possess more knowledge about their bodies, was a source of anxiety for the rabbis who feared that women might deceive men and thus

jeopardize male purity. In order to maintain the gender and sexual hierarchy, the rabbis placed themselves in the middle of the strictly female issue of menstruation in order to gain control over their own purity.

In BT Eruvin 100b, female empowerment and sexuality is not feared, but praised as sexuality comes from the Torah. In Genesis 30:16, Leah solicits Jacob for intercourse and the rabbis praise her highly. Eruvin 100b explains that children who are conceived from intercourse solicited by a woman will be greater than Moses. On the other hand, BT Baba Metzia 84a also regards feminine beauty as a sort of power that females can exert over men, but in this case, is to be feared.

The chapters that follow will enumerate the philosophies of Greco-Roman physicians about the female and male bodies and will then seek to synthesize and differentiate the physicians' philosophies with those of the Talmudic and Midrashic rabbis.

CHAPTER 2

When modern Jews have questions about ritual, law, and other matters, they turn to the halachic and aggadic literature of the rabbis, composed and compiled from the third through the tenth centuries CE. This literature did not come about in a vacuum. Certain sections of rabbinic literature reveal the influence of non-Jewish texts, ideas, and modes of expression. One example of such influence is obvious correlation between medical and philosophical literature from Greco-Roman civilization and the literature of the rabbis dealing with the female body. In order to understand how the rabbis understood female body, its unique processes and its distinction from male bodies, a consideration of prevailing Greco-Roman views on this matter is in order. This study focuses primarily on the Greco-Roman influence on rabbinic literature of the physicians Hippocrates, Soranus, and Galen.. Hippocrates was a fifth century BCE physician in ancient Greece. His extensive gynecological work can be attributed to him and his school in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. Throughout this study, the diverse Hippocratic corpus will be attributed to Hippocrates although it is known that other physicians contributed to Hippocrates' works[19]. Soranus, a second century CE Greek physician, practiced medicine under the rule of the Roman

[19] Works of the *Hippocratic Corpus* include the Hippocratic Oath, Aphorisms, On the Sacred Disease, and The Book of Prognostics.

Empire.[20] Galen was a third century CE physician and philosopher who lived in Rome, but was born in present-day Turkey and was an ethnic Greek.[21]

According to historian and sexologist Thomas Laqueur, quoting the fourth century bishop of Emesa, Nemesius, the ancient Greeks subscribed to a "one-body" or "one-sex" theory, meaning that the normative human body was male while the female "had the same genitals as men except that...'theirs are inside the body and not outside it.'"[22] Aristotle made the "one-sex" theory popular in the fourth century BCE. In other words, male and female bodies were not two discrete forms, as we understand them today, but variations of a single human form.[23] Since the normative body was male, however, Greek thinkers had to account for the apparent discrepancies in the female body in terms of height, shape, reproductive organs, body hair, fluids, etc. In all such accounts, of course, the female version of the body was an inferior, unfinished, underdeveloped form.[24] The Greco-Roman

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[20] Soranus' works include *Gynaecology*, *On Acute and Chronic Diseases*, and *The Life of Hippocrates*.

[21] Galen's prolific works include, but are definitely not limited to Commentaries on the Prognostics of Hippocrates, Of the Art of Medicine, On Semen, Of the Foetal Formation, and Of the Dissection of the Uterus.

[22] Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender From the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 4.

[23] This view was made popular by Aristotle in *On the Generation of Animals*, a century or so after Hippocrates.

[24] Helen King, *Hippocrates' Woman: Reading the Female Body in Ancient Greece* (London: Routledge, 1998), 10.

physicians treated the female body and its processes differently, but all influenced the rabbinic literature.

The aforementioned physicians discussed the anatomy of the female body at length and their perceptions vary, though all three seem somewhat mystified by the female body itself. The inner workings of the female body helped communicate with the ancient Greek female's physician and often did so more effectively than the male's body. That is to say, the physiological processes of the female appeared systematized enough to the physicians to treat women successfully. As long as women were able to articulate their female issues to physicians, they would be treated. The physicians spoke with women about their processes and maladies, but rarely examined them. They did learn a lot from dissecting corpses of female animals, but rarely humans. For the rest of their learning, the physicians used powers of deduction and comparative analyses.[25]

Hippocrates explained in his Diseases of Women that, females are entirely different from males in their physiological functions and deserve to be examined as such.[26] Hippocrates' view was an aberration from Laqueur's theory about Greco-Roman medicine, presented above. He based his approach to the treatment of females on the myth of Pandora. Just as her creation was different from the other gods, so female patients ought

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[25] King, 51.
[26] King, 13.

to be treated separately and differently. Not every physician held this idea that the female form is an alternative to the male in this period. Indeed it was somewhat unique. As Laqueur suggest above, most physicians believed in the "one-sex" theory. While Hippocrates' notion of the female body as completely unique and distinct from the male may have been radical, Hippocrates made popular the methodology about body temperatures and fluids that would continue in the works of the other Greco-Roman physicians. For Hippocrates, the female was not just different because of her reproductive organs, but different in her very flesh and the movements of the fluids inside of her.[27] The female body needed to be colder and moister than a male's in order to function properly, including during periods of gestation.

Soranus' work was clearly influenced by Aristotle's "one-sex" theory, on which view the male and female have identical body parts, including reproductive organs. On the male, these organs are outside the body; on the female, they remain inside because she is weaker and less developed. Testicles generate power, and since the female's ovaries had not developed into testicles, she lacks the power of a man.[28] Despite his belief that female and male bodies are structurally analogous on the whole (although the female is "inside-out" as it were), Soranus concluded that the uterus was peculiar. Though it is made from the

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[27] King, 248.

[28] Soranus, *Sorani Gynaeciorum,* II, 6.

same tissues in a male body. Accordingly, females need to be treated distinctly from males when dealing with medical issues.[29]

Writing after Hippocrates and Soranus, Galen adhered to the Aristotelian view of the single body continuum.[30] He thus opposed Hippocrates, but nevertheless maintained Hippocrates' views regarding the temperatures and fluid levels in the body. For Galen, too, heat plays an important role not just in reproduction but also in living one's life well. Women cannot live less well than men because, lacking heat-producing testicles, they are generally colder than men.[31]

With regard to menstruation, most ancient thinkers believed that menarche was the beginning of the process leading a girl into womanhood; full maturation would not occur until a female gives birth. A young woman in ancient Greece was called a parthenos (i.e., virgin) even after the onset of menstruation. After giving birth, she would become a gyne (i.e. a woman). little is discussed about what occurs between menarche and childbirth, but the Greco-Roman physicians attempt to shed light by describing the processes of menstruation.[32]

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[29] Soranus, *Gynecology*, 129.
[30] Laqueur, 25.
[31] Galen, *On Semen* I, 15.
[32] King, 23.

The process of menstruation provided physicians with sensory evidence that could be considered carefully. All three physicians agreed that there were positive associations with girls learning the "oral tradition" of women, meaning how to interpret gynaikeia (i.e.women's things), and gaining the ability to communicate successfully with their physicians.[33]

Hippocrates believed that menstruation occurred because women needed to rid themselves of excess fluid. A human body needed to maintain a balance of warm and cold fluids, and menstruation was an important process in maintaining that balance in a female body. The cessation of menstruation in a woman thus led to disease and eventually death. Women were considered the colder sex and, therefore, had to purge the heat monthly to maintain health and their colder temperaments. For this reason, Hippocrates believed that a heavy menstrual flow was healthier than a light one.

On the other hand, Soranus believed menstruation (and intercourse) to be bad for the health of a female, even as he understood that both were necessary for conception.[34] Soranus also notes a change in physicality of females who are unable to menstruate or who

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[33] Ann Ellis Hanson, "The Medical Writers' Woman," in *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, eds. David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler, and Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 309.

[34] King, 30.

have stopped menstruating, calling them masculine and recognizing the relationship between amenorrhea and sterility.[35]

Hippocrates and the later Greco-Roman physicians wrote extensively about menarche and its symptoms and the descriptions allude to Greeks not being afraid of blood, particularly menstrual blood. Helen King explains that the blood was compared to sacrificial blood because it symbolized the relationships between humans and gods. While menstrual blood was not to be feared, women were generally excluded from shedding the blood of sacrificial animals even though they were included in all other parts of sacrifices. This might be due to the fact that the ancient Greeks believed only men shed the blood of other humans and that women bleed from their own bodies- possibly making menstruation a sacrifice in and of itself.[36] The sacrifice was a way that females contributed to Greek society, but their greatest contribution, it was believed, was as bearers of children.

All three physicians agree that a female's purpose in society was to reproduce, but there are many tensions between them in their descriptions of the roles that females and males play in producing offspring. For Hippocrates, the womb, an essential aspect of gestation, is seen as a jar that is meant to contain something.[37] The womb, or jar, needed

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[35] Soranus, I, 29.
[36] King, 93.
[37] King, 26.

to maintain a healthy balance in order to successfully gestate a fetus. This meant the female working in conjunction with her physician to make sure her uterus was hospitable, cold and moist, to sustain a healthy fetus.[38] Additionally, Hippocrates saw a clear connection between menstruation and breasts, as breast milk is just menstrual fluid redistributed and refined.[39]

As stated above, Soranus did not believe that the natural occurrence of menstruation and intercourse were healthful, but understood that procreation was necessary. In this vein, Soranus advocated that intercourse be staved off for a young female until menstruation was underway so that she may experience intercourse only to conceive.[40] Soranus participated in the arguments over the theories of just who and what was involved in the process of intercourse and conception. Just as there was a popular "one-sex" theory, there was also a "one-seed" theory as it related to procreation. Soranus did not believe that the female's physiological functions had anything to do with conception except being a receptacle for a fetus. While he did not believe that the female produced

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[38] King, 31.

[39] Hanson, 321.

[40] Soranus, *Sorani Gynaeciorum*, I, 32.

anything that would turn into a fetus, Soranus did support that the mental and emotional intentions of the female during intercourse played a vital role in the well being of the fetus.[41]

Galen, on the other hand, wrote one of the most radical notions of his time- that both the female and the male play a role in conception.[42] While incorrect by today's scientific standards, Galen was one of the first physicians to understand that both males and females play an active role and not just males, as was previously believed by physicians such as Soranus. According to Galen, both males and females produce seminal fluids that are active agents for conception. For males this would be semen as it is known today, and for females this is menstrual blood, although Galen explains that the male semen should defeat the female semen in order to reproduce successfully.[43] Galen also explained that both the male and female agents in conception help form the different red and white parts of an embryo- much like in the rabbinic literature to be discussed later.[44]

A look into the views of the female body over a few centuries illustrates varied, dynamic views held during the Greco-Roman period. In spite of the multiple views of the female body and its processes, the rabbinic works of the centuries following exemplify the

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[41] Soranus, I, 39.

[42] This is opposition to Aristotle's view that while the female produces matter, Galen's belief was that females produced a true seed. Laqueur, 40.

[43] Galen, I, 7.

[44] Galen, I, 11.

clear influence the Greco-Roman medical texts had on them. Numerous rabbinic texts dealing with female anatomy and physiological processes will be synthesized with the Greco-Roman medical texts in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

This chapter examines the extent to which the rabbis were influenced by Greco-Roman assumptions about the female body and female health, particularly with respect to the rabbis' aforementioned anxiety in maintaining the male form as the crown jewel of Creation.

As we have seen, the two different Creation narratives in Genesis presented a challenge: who, or what, was created in each story and can the two narratives be reconciled? The rabbis, insisting that the paradigmatic human form is male, insist that אדם be read specifically as man rather than generally as human being[45]. Others, such as Phyllis Trible and Daniel Boyarin, contend that the being created in the first story is androgynous. Boyarin sees the androgyne as a spiritual representation of the human body containing both sexes, from which body God generates the separate sexes in the second creation narrative by separating the female from the male. On this reading, the male is not properly male until the female is created from him, but the male nevertheless comes first.[46] Thus, even though the first human is considered a spiritual androgyne, the male still precedes the female.

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[45] It is important to note that the rabbis simultaneously hold the view in Genesis Rabbah 8:1 that the first human being was a hermaphrodite and not just male or female.

[46] Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 37.

Philo, the hellenistic Jewish philosopher of the 1st Century CE, understood creation similarly. He believed that the first human being was a spiritual androgyne, but the relative placement of the female in the second creation story makes clear that she is secondary. Boyarin writes extensively on Philo's interpretations of the Creation narratives contained in his Legum Allegoria.[47] Philo explains that, in the first creation story, the human being is created in God's own image, which is neither male nor female, thus representing the spiritual androgyne. Philo writes of the differences between the two narratives signified by the birth of the human in the second story:

> By this also he shows very clearly that there is a vast difference between the man thus formed and the man that came into existence earlier after the image of God: for the man so formed is an object of sense-perception, partaking already of such or such quality, consisting of body and soul, an idea or type or seal, an object of thought, incorporeal, neither male nor female, by nature incorruptible.[48]

Boyarin notes that woman, after this explanation, becomes a "supplement" to Philo's notion of the creation of humanity.[49]

For Philo, woman is not just a supplement. She also represents the moral Fall of Man. When the humans are in the Garden of Eden, the serpent comes and tempts Eve, into disobeying God's order not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Not only

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[47] Philo's *Legum Allegoria* can be found translated in the Loeb Classical Library, vol. 1, no. 226, 127.

[48] Excerpted from Boyarin's *Carnal Israel.*

[49] Boyarin, 38.

does Eve eat of the tree, she convinces Adam to eat, resulting in their being expelled by God from the garden. The Avot de Rabbi Natan (version B, chapter 1) describes several punishments Eve received for her role in the primeval transgression, including pain during childbirth and menstruation. Genesis Rabbah 18:6 is more sympathetic to Eve, depicting her as the victim of the serpent rather than the sexual manipulator and instigator that Philo understands her out to be.

Philo's reading may be influenced by the ancient Greek myth of Pandora, who is fully in control of her sexuality and is read as evil in Greco-Roman society for bringing chaos into the world. The ancients believed that because Pandora opened her jar, here a euphemism for sexuality, and not Epimetheus, a male, that she was in control of her sexuality.[50] The rabbis also draw on the myth of Pandora in Genesis Rabbah 19:10, but they turn the myth on its head by attributing the introduction of evil into the world with Adam, not Eve.[51] It says in Genesis Rabbah 19:10:

"And he said, I heard Your voice, and I was afraid for I am naked and I hid. And he said, who told you that you are naked?" [Gen. 3:9-10]
Rabbi Levi said, This should be compared to a woman who comes to borrow vinegar, who enters into the house of the wife of a colleague.
She [the borrower] asks her [the wife], "How does your husband treat you?"

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[50] This particular read on Pandora is from Boyarin's mention of Giulia Sissa's 1990 work *Greek Virginity.*
[51] Ibid., 86.

She [wife] said to her [visitor], "Everything he does with me is good, except that there is this jar, which is full of snakes and scorpions, which he does not let me control."
She [visitor] said, "All of his jewels are in there. And he plans to marry another woman and give them to her."
What did she [wife] do? She stretched out her hand into the jar.
They began to bite her.
When her husband came, he heard her voice crying out, and said, "Perhaps you touched that jar?"
Similarly, [God said to Adam]: "Did you eat from the tree which I commanded you?"[52]

Here, Adam is compared to the wife sticking her hand in the jar, thus turning the idea of Eve as the introduction to evil on its head.

Rabbinic literature that deals with the female body often aims to reconcile the two different Creation stories and to maintain the male as the paradigmatic human body. It also aims to understand the female's processes and how they relate to a male hegemony in Leviticus. The rabbis appear to have been influenced by the Aristotelian view of the female body, for Aristotle, too, viewed the male as the paradigmatic human form. Aristotle maintained that there was a singular human form, of which the male was the superior and the female the inferior version. This view contrasted with that of Hippocrates, who believed that there were two basic human forms, the female and the male, with no difference in value between them.[53]

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[52] Translation: Theodor and Albeck, 1965.
[53] Helen King, *Hippocrates' Woman: Reading the Female Body in Ancient Greece* (London: Routledge, 1998), 13.

For the rabbis, the prototypical body is male. Thus, as Aristotle might have been, the rabbis are confused and shocked when they discover that a female body has more "parts" than a male's (B. Bechorot 45a).The Biblical proof texts adduced by the rabbis to account for this discrepancy, from 1 Samuel 4:19, Job 3:10, and Genesis 30:22,[54] may indicate a familiarity with Hippocrates as well, as they illustrate the need to make the female body completely other from the male. In B. Bechorot 45a, at least, the rabbis seem to be dealing with the same tension Hippocrates and Aristotle recognized—namely, whether the female and male are different versions of the same form or completely different forms altogether.

Many rabbinic texts also indicate a measure of influence from the Greek medical texts when it comes to the issue of reproduction. Recall that Greek physicians and philosophers debated the relative roles the male and female played in procreation. Soranus viewed the female as a receptacle for the male's reproductive materials, while Galen believed that the female also produced reproductive materials, which mixed with the male's in order to create life.[55] Leviticus 12:2 generates a number of midrashim in which the rabbis consider the role played by the female in procreation. Playing with the feminine verb תזריע,[56] the rabbis downplay and marginalize the role of the female while emphasizing the

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[54] See previous chapter of this thesis.
[55] See previous chapter of this thesis.
[56]Kessler, 3.

role of the male and of God. Just as Soranus held, the female is considered a necessary receptacle for the fetus, though a dangerous one at that, as it is only thanks to God that the fetus endures and emerges safely. In the midrashim about conception, the female body is, in many ways, a danger to the fetus, and it is only thanks to God that any babies are born at all. In Leviticus Rabbah 14:2, the female's womb is at once a prison, an upside down purse, and a furnace. While Leviticus 12:2 opens up the possibility of the female contribution, Leviticus Rabbah 14:2 erases the female contribution entirely and makes her either passive or harmful in the process. This is a significant departure from the ancient Greco-Roman belief that a female nurtured the fetus after the male was in charge of creating it.[57]

Unlike the midrashim of Leviticus Rabbah 12, B Niddah 30a and b acknowledge a substantial role for the female in the procreative process. Here the sages recognize three partners in creation: the mother, the father, and God. The mother produces red matter, menstrual blood, which contributes whatever is red in the fetus—namely, muscles, blood, etc. The father produces white matter, semen, which contributes the white parts of the fetus—eyes, teeth, bones.[58] The facial features are also associated with the father in order to insure that his paternity can be determined. God determines the sex of the fetus in a manner than cannot be understood. God also contributes the affect of the fetus, in addition

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[57] Ibid., 94.

[58] Y. Kel. 8:3.

to teaching it Torah in utero.[59] According to P. Kelim 8:3, God contributes the neshamah of the baby while the male and female partners contribute the physical matter of the baby. These rabbis, then, had an understanding of conception closer to that of Galen, who held that both females and males contributed materially to an offspring, the red matter and the white matter respectively.

Soranus, who lived centuries before the rabbis, believed that the female also played a role in conception, but that her seed needed to be defeated by the male seed, which played the essential role in conception, leaving the female with a small, but consequential role.[60] Some rabbis believed that role of the female was not only material in nature. Her thoughts during intercourse, for example, might also have impact on the anima or facial features of the child. So Rabbi Yohanan would place himself at a certain location so that women exiting the ritual bath might gaze upon him and, in turn, birth babies as beautiful as he.[61]

Other rabbinic texts eliminate both the female and the male role in procreation. For example, in Genesis Rabbah 53:6 Sarah's pregnancy is attributed entirely to God; Abraham

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[59] Kessler, 81.

[60] Soranus, II 2

[61] B. *Bava Metzia* 84a.

is nowhere in the picture.[62] This is a fascinating case, as Sarah was in her nineties, according to Genesis. It further proves the substantial role that the rabbis believed God could have in conception. Nevertheless, most rabbinic texts seem to favor a single (male) seed theory while emphasizing God's role in conception.

The alterity of the female is also illustrated in the rabbinic view of gestation. Male embryos are thought to develop faster and to receive their souls before female embryos do. As discussed previously, the time of ensoulment is debated among rabbinic sources in BT Niddah 30 a and b, Rabbi Ishmael presumes, due to experiments on a corpse, that the female embryos develop at a slower rate than that of the male. Soranus also supports the faster development of the male embryo, as he explains that female embryo's movements are more sluggish than the male's.[63]

On the issue of menstruation, Greco-Roman and rabbinic sources tend to see matters similarly. Obviously, the authors of both corpora never experienced menstruation themselves and therefore relied on women for information. This reliance became a point of contention for both the Greco-Roman physicians and the rabbis of the Midrashim and the Talmud. For the Greco-Roman physicians, understanding menstruation was relegated to speaking with women about menstruation and then analyzing female issues in light of what

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[62] Kessler, 105.

[63] Soranus, I 45.

was said. This activity was called "reading" the female body. The rabbis of the Talmud encountered females differently, as they looked at the various stain samples brought to them. As such, both the Greco-Roman physicians and the Talmudic rabbis needed to put their trust in females in order to learn about menstruation.

Ironically, then, the rabbis had to submit to the informational power of women in order to exercise their legal power over women. At times, however, it seems as though women challenged this arrangement. B. Niddah 20b tells the story of Yalta, one of only a handful of women named in the Bavli, who brings a sample of her menses to Rav bar bar Chana for inspection. He rules that her blood sample is tamei. Yalta then brings the same sample to a different rabbi, Yitzchak, who rules that the blood is tahor. The Gemara reads this story as an issue of rabbinic power, asking how it is possible for Rav Yitzchak to act against the ruling of another sage. The text backs up its own rabbinic authority by explaining that Yitzchak originally ruled the blood tamei.Yalta explained that bar bar Chana normally gave her a tahor ruling, but he was plagued with a pain in his eye on this particular day.

The Gemara does not take Yalta's motives into account and turns the entire story into an issue of power, much like the authors of Leviticus Rabbah Tazria remove the role of the female from procreation. But the story might be read quite differently if Yalta's motives

are considered. On the one hand, Yalta seems to be a willing participant in the rabbis' hegemony, dutifully bringing a sample of her blood to a rabbi for inspection (as a Greco-Roman woman would do for a physician if she were ill). But the Talmud does not specify Yalta's motive for seeking a second opinion. It may well be that Yalta did not accept the first assessment of her sample. If this is the case, readers must consider the different ramifications of the rabbis' recording a story in the Talmud about a woman who rebels against rabbinic authority.

According to Charlotte Fonrobert, Yalta's story, if typical, might have ended with the first ruling. According to other narratives dealing with judging ritual status, rulings are mostly accepted after the first go-round.[64] Yalta is singular in that she acts autonomously and finds the ruling she desires with Rav Yitzchak. The Gemara deemphasizes that display of autonomy by redirecting it towards the issue of rabbinic authority.

A subversive reading takes away the rabbis' power of being able to read females' bodies completely. First, Yalta seems to be an obedient follower of the rabbinic yoke, as she decides on her own to go visit a rabbi for the inspection of her blood sample. The subversion begins when Yalta convinces Rav Yitzchak that Rabbah bar bar Chana was incorrect and Rav Yitzchak takes Yalta at her word. The Gemara does not indicate whether

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[64] Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 119.

or not Yalta is indeed telling the truth. The Gemara's stance is similar to Hippocrates' in that the Hippocratic writers believed that the female body is able to deceive the ancient physician, but that he should take her at her word anyway, as the body is difficult to read but menstruation makes a reading much easier.[65]

The Gemara seems to take Yalta at her word and makes the generalization after this particular section that "a woman is believed when she says, 'I saw a kind of blood like this one..."[66] In this continuation, the woman in question does not even have to consult a rabbi for inspection, but just relays information to him and is believed. The Talmudic rabbis do not consider the consequences that might result from a female deceiving them; they do not think about what might happen if females are given autonomy over their bodies in this arena.

The rabbis of the Talmud and Midrashim seem to be able to understand the female body better than the Greco-Roman physicians due to their being the arbiters of menstrual law in conjunction with the female herself. Hippocrates is the only one of the three examined physicians who discusses the tenuous relationship between the female and the physician. Hippocrates believes that the female body is able to deceive the physician and

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[65] King, 52.
[66] BT Niddah 20b.

sometimes an actual physical examination is necessary.[67] Hippocrates also presents situations where the female examines herself- not so different from the trust that the rabbinic hegemony put in the females of their communities where they needed to bring their own menstrual blood samples to the rabbis for examination.

The works examined previously from the Talmud and Midrashim illustrate the influence the Greco-Roman world had on rabbinic society and literature in their treatment of the female body and its processes. There are imprints of Greco-Roman ideas about the female anatomy, menstruation, and procreation found throughout rabbinic literature. These rabbis used Greco-Roman science to relieve their anxieties about the hierarchy established within the two Creation narratives in Genesis- with the male being the crown jewel of God's creations and the female as other.

[67] King, 41.

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תורה היא ללמוד אני צריך