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The Poetry Beit Midrash

Poetic Inspiration from the Talmud

Julia Knobloch

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Advisor: Rabbi Dr. Dvora Weisberg

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Abstract

This work is a bit of a hybrid. Initially thought of as a text immersion, it has become a thesis. In my proposal, I focused on the creation of a study guide for poetry workshops based on Talmud study: The Poetry Beit Midrash. But as my writing was progressing, I realized that what I really wanted and needed to explore more in depth was the scholarly background of this project. Now, this Capstone weaves together several topics that during the years in rabbinical school have shaped my theological, intellectual, and creative approach to Judaism as well as my educational visions. It is a thorough review of five years of learning and will serve as a foundation for my future teachings about Talmud and poetry. The three chapters on talmudic discussions about place, love, and redemption are embedded into a larger rationale of why I chose these subjects, why I believe they are important, and why they make for good poetry writing prompts in a Poetry Beit Midrash. I will use much of the thinking and examples on these pages to create source sheets and to facilitate class discussions and workshops. Likewise, every poem or song that I am quoting can serve as an example or inspiration in class. In an appendix to each section I provide a list of suited poems and songs for further text study.

Throughout, all Bible citations follow Robert Alter's translation.[1] I have not translated the Talmud passages myself, rather, I have slightly modified the translations taken from Sefaria when I felt it was appropriate. Translations of Hebrew texts and poems are referenced in the footnotes. Translations from the German are my own.

[1] Robert Alter: The Hebrew Bible, W. W. Norton, 2019 (Three Volumes)

Introduction: Place, Love, and Redemption

My Capstone advisor, Rabbi Dr. Dvora Weisberg, and I identified passages from the Talmud that deal with themes I find inspiring from a theological as well as a poetic standpoint. Initially, I envisioned writing about five themes. For time-and-space management considerations, I have opted to focus on three – place, love, and redemption. In passing, I will briefly touch on ideas related to loss and time, when appropriate. All these themes are essential to my definition of Judaism, and I see them as intertwined in its fabric. In a short excursion over the next pages, I will give two examples of what I mean by that.

Judaism is a religion informed and shaped by a clear notion of place: the ground around a bush, a land, a mountain, a city, a temple. That place in all its iterations represents the presence of God's love. In messianic times,[2] love will fill that place,[3] sensations of loss will be eradicated,[4] and time will be suspended.[5] Redemption is the return to a paradisiac state, to the Garden of Eden, a repaired world.

> Messianism is intrinsically tied to Creation. In the Garden of Eden, all forms of life have all they need to live. None are in conflict with one another. None of the enemies of human life and dignity —poverty, hunger, oppression, war, sickness, death—are present. Therefore, humans and all forms of life reach full realization. This is the kind of world that the God who lusts for life seeks to bring into being, one in which fulness of life and all its dignities are realized.[6]

[2] Isaiah 52:7
[3] Isaiah 54:8
[4] Isaiah 25:8
[5] Zechariah 14:7
[6] Irving Greenberg: The Triumph of Life, A Narrative Theology of Judaism, JPS 2024, 47

The inquiry of the universe concerning our human existence, the desire to situate ourselves within a peaceful cosmic or divine order is deeply poetic in nature and lies at the heart of any religion. Certain sentiments and feelings shape the human condition now just as they did thousands of years ago: The longing for love, the experience of place, the passage of time, the fear of loss and the hope for better days. Poets have written about these same themes time and again. The longing to overcome mortality, the biggest exasperation of the human condition, and to find ways to triumph over death is in my opinion one decisive force behind a religious system and its promises. By the same token, this exasperation is a motor for artistic expression as well. I understand the veneration of ethereal beauty as a representation of the divine and the wish to become one with it as both a poetic and a religious gesture. And, not surprisingly, we find the craving to reach the heavens and merge with God in that unreachable place expressed both in poetry—especially in Romantic poetry[7]—as well as in rabbinic texts. While in this thesis, I will often argue from an aesthetic perspective, I should caution that excessive veneration of an ideal or an idealized person can lead to unhealthy and abusive patterns. Romantics, poets, as well as religious seekers can be prone to an exceedingly stubborn *Weltfremdheit* that under certain circumstances might lead to indifference and aloofness, and fundamentalism of any kind must always be eyed with suspicion. The story of the four rabbis who entered the Garden of Eden (Chagigah 14b) is a great example.

> תָּנוּ רַבָּנַן: אַרְבָּעָה נִכְנְסוּ בַּפַּרְדֵּס, וְאֵלּוּ הֵן: בֶּן עַזַּאי, וּבֶן זוֹמָא, אַחֵר, וְרַבִּי עֲקִיבָא. אָמַר לָהֶם רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא: " כְּשֶׁאַתֶּם מַגִּיעִין אֶצֶל אַבְנֵי שַׁיִשׁ טָהוֹר, אַל תֹּאמְרוּ "מַיִם מַיִם", מִשּׁוּם שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "דּוֹבֵר שְׁקָרִים לֹא יִכּוֹן לְנֶגֶד עֵינָי".
> בֶּן עַזַּאי הֵצִיץ וָמֵת, עָלָיו הַכָּתוּב אוֹמֵר: "יָקָר בְּעֵינֵי ה' הַמָּוְתָה לַחֲסִידָיו". בֶּן זוֹמָא הֵצִיץ וְנִפְגַּע, וְעָלָיו הַכָּתוּב אוֹמֵר: "דְּבַשׁ מָצָאתָ אֱכוֹל דַּיֶּיךָ פֶּן תִּשְׂבָּעֶנּוּ וְהַקֵּאתוֹ". אַחֵר קִיצֵּץ בִּנְטִיעוֹת. רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא יָצָא בְּשָׁלוֹם.

[7] Joseph von Eichendorff: Mondnacht

> The Sages taught in a baraita: Four entered the pardes, and they were Ben Azzai; and Ben Zoma; Aher, and Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Akiva said to them: When you arrive at the pure place of marble stones, do not say: Water, water (although they appear to be water) because it is stated: "Within my house there shall not dwell one who practices deceit (Psalms 101:7). Ben Azzai glimpsed at the divine presence and died. And about him the verse states: "Precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of His faithful ones" (Psalms 116:15). Ben Zoma glimpsed at the divine presence and was harmed. And about him the verse states: "If you find honey, eat just what you need, lest you have your fill of it and throw it up." (Proverbs 25:16). Aher chopped down the shoots of saplings. Rabbi Akiva came out safely.

פַּרְדֵּס, *pardes*, is the Hebrew word for the Garden of Eden. As Jon D. Levenson has demonstrated,[8] the place of the Garden of Eden can be synonymous, as it is here, with the "upper worlds," the loftiest heavens, the place where the divine presence dwells, but it can also stand for Jerusalem, Mount Zion, the Temple, the gate to heaven; for a place of messianic, redemptive fulfillment. The Sefaria commentary adds that in this passage, entering the garden means to confront the secrets of Torah. No average human can survive the revelation of such powerful mysteries—it would be like seeing God's face—and three of the sages, except for the super-human Rabbi Akiva, suffer dire consequences for entering this holy place before their time[9]. They die, lose their mind, and become destructive, which arguably is a form of mental derangement as well. Myths, aggadot (stories), and poems throughout generations speak of the dangers associated with the quest to penetrate divine secrets, divine truth.[10] And yet for humans, the pull to catch a glimpse of eternity is so strong that they will risk their lives to gaze behind that mystical 50th gate of knowing.[11]

[8] Jon D. Levenson: Sinai and Zion, An Entry into the Jewish Bible, HarperOne, 1987
[9] Living people can't enter the garden, access to it is reserved for the afterlife
[10] One of the many examples is Goethe's Faust, where the scholar makes a pact with the devil, Mephisto, to serve him in the afterlife if Mephisto can make him experience just one moment of blissful, all-knowing transcendence.
[11] B. Rosh Hashanah 21b

Haim Nachman Bialik wrote a poem inspired by the passage from Chagigah, called הֵצִיץ וָמֵת, He Gazed and Died, that ends in disillusion:

אָז יִכְבֶּה הַלַּפִּיד, וְדַלְתוֹת הַשַּׁעַר נִפְתָּחוּ –
וַיָּצֶץ שָׁם פְּנִימָה,
וַתִּצְנַח גוּפָתוֹ, וּבְצִדָּהּ אוּד עָשֵׁן, וַתִּגְהַר
עַל מִפְתַּן הַ בְּ לִ י מָ ה.

The torch went out. The gate swung wide. He glanced within
and dropped, beside his smoking brand
at the edge
of the void.[12]

While in Bialik's poem as well as in Chagigah 14b, entering the garden means disenchantment, death, or loss of sanity, there also exists an entirely different and well-established topos, both in poetry and rabbinic exegesis: The pardes is a garden of sensuous delights, a place for romantic love and lovemaking; ultimately, a version of redemption we can experience while alive, a paradise we can enter without having to die first. The erotic verses of Shir HaShirim, notwithstanding the countless poems that have been written in their wake over the millennia, might still be the best example:

בָּאתִי לְגַנִּי אֲחֹתִי כַלָּה אָרִיתִי מוֹרִי עִם־בָּשָׂמִי אָכַלְתִּי יַעְרִי עִם־דִּבְשִׁי שָׁתִיתִי יֵינִי עִם־חֲלָבִי אִכְלוּ רֵעִים שְׁתוּ וְשִׁכְרוּ דּוֹדִים:

I have come to my garden,
my sister, my bride;
I have gathered my myrrh with my perfume,
I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey,
I have drunk my wine with my milk.
Eat, friends, and drink:
be drunk with loving![13]

[12] Haim Nachman Bialik: He Gazed and Died, in: Haim Nachman Bialik, Selected Poems, Dvir 1981, 74 (this quoted translation is by Haim O. Rechnitzer)
[13] Shir HaShirim 5:1

This is one of several passages in Shir HaShirim where the lovers allude to a sensuous union in a lavish enclosure like an orchard or vineyard. In our religious context, we cannot disassociate a blissful garden experience from the Garden of Eden. Neither could the rabbinic voices recorded in Shir HaShirim Rabbah, who eroticized the love relationship between God and Israel[14] by reading breasts for the tablets, or the embracing arms of the lover as phylacteries. Only on the surface did they move away from physical intimacy and into the realm of pious asexuality. Sex and intimacy remain always in the picture.

Shir HaShirim Rabbah 1:4:5 is not as illustrative but interesting for a different move, in which the rabbis take the quite explicit sentence הֱבִיאַנִי הַמֶּלֶךְ חֲדָרָיו and transport the royal chamber and its couch into the pardes, by linking the verse with our passage from Chagigah. They end with the following reflection:

> רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא נִכְנַס בְּשָׁלוֹם וְיָצָא בְּשָׁלוֹם, וְאָמַר, לֹא מִפְּנֵי שֶׁגָּדוֹל אֲנִי מֵחֲבֵרַי, אֶלָּא כָּךְ שָׁנוּ חֲכָמִים בַּמִּשְׁנָה, מַעֲשֶׂיךָ יְקָרְבוּךָ וּמַעֲשֶׂיךָ יְרַחֲקוּךָ, וְעָלָיו נֶאֱמַר: הֱבִיאַנִי הַמֶּלֶךְ חֲדָרָיו
>
> Rabbi Akiva entered in peace and came out in peace. He said: 'It is not because I am greater than my friends; rather, taught the sages of the Mishnah: Your actions will draw you near and your actions will distance you.' And about this it is written: "The king has brought me to his chamber."[15]

According to the 19th century commentary Etz Yosef, Rabbi Akiva was even-tempered, not overcome by bouts of heroism or panic, and he was thus rewarded with life in the realm where the souls of the (deceased) righteous are bound up,[16] that is, heaven. He was brought, the Etz Yosef goes on to say, into the chamber of the king, that is, initiated into the secrets of the heavenly

[14] Subsequent commentators have understood the interpretation as pious and asexual.

[15] Shir HaShirim Rabbah 1:4:5

[16] פירש רבינו האי שהציץ וכהוגן, וצפה כראוי והכיל דעתו אותן גבורות ובהלות, ונתן לו הקדוש ברוך הוא חיים וכל דבר שצפה חשב בו .'נכנס בשלום כו מחשבה נכונה בדעת נכונה

palaces.[17] In a redemption-like experience, Rabbi Akiva's sojourn in the garden and his contemplation of the Torah's secrets suspended human limitations and transcended the gravity of the human condition. By inference, since the physicality of the king and his lover linger in the background, it was also an act of lovemaking with the divine in a special place: Gan Eden, the king's chamber, or the heavenly temple. [18] This was one example to show the confluence of place, love, and redemption in rabbinic exegesis of erotic poetry.

The second example deals primarily with a connection between love and redemption, but the notion of place shines through as well. In 1966, the Motown band The Supremes sang:

> But mama said you can't hurry love
> No you just have to wait
> She said love don't come easy
> It's a game of give and take
> You can't hurry love
> No, you just have to wait
> You gotta trust, give it time
> No matter how long it takes[19]

When I hear this song, I am reminded of the appeal, repeated three times with urgency throughout Shir HaShirim by the female lover:

> הִשְׁבַּעְתִּי אֶתְכֶם בְּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלִַם בִּצְבָאוֹת אוֹ בְּאַיְלוֹת הַשָּׂדֶה אִם־תָּעִירוּ וְאִם־תְּעוֹרְרוּ אֶת־הָאַהֲבָה עַד שֶׁתֶּחְפָּץ

> I make you swear, O daughters of Jerusalem,
> by the deer or the gazelles of the field:
> that you shall not rouse nor stir love
> until it pleases![20]

---

[17] דהיינו מה שנכנס בסתרי היכלות .ועליו נאמר הביאני המלך חדריו. Visions of entering the heavenly palaces gave the rabbinic literary genre, *Heikhalot* literature, its name.

[18] See also Shir HaShirim Rabbah 1:2:1 "'Blow upon my garden': This is the Permanent House."

[19] The Supremes: You Can't Hurry Love, Holland-Dozier-Holland, Motown Records

[20] Shir HaShirim 2:7, 3:5, 8:4. The deer/gazelle/stag is often a symbol for the Messiah/redeemer in the interpretation of SHS and that has influenced many medieval erotic love poems (and my own poetry) yearning for physical union with a lover who is compared, endearingly and full of supreme yearning, to a gazelle or stag. See Raymond Scheindlin: The Gazelle, Medieval Hebrew Poems on God, Israel, and the Soul, Oxford University Press, 1999.

Both texts are very clear: Love cannot be forced until it is ready to come. The singer's mother is right: Only when love happens out of its own desire and on its own terms does it have a chance to unfold in a lasting way. But how hard it is to wait for something, or someone intensely longed for! As the Supremes sang, "but how many heartaches must I stand… my strength is almost gone…how much more can I take…?" There is a yearning for (secular) redemption in here, a redemption brought about by the arrival of the true love(r) that will end all heartaches and wipe tears from every face.[21] Essentially, this is not too different from religious expectations of a redeemer that will come at the end of days and restore the paradise as of old. And in fact, the Supremes' song is based on a gospel song, where the refrain stated:

> You can't hurry God
> He's right on time
> Trust and give Him time
> No matter how long it takes…[22]

In the rabbinic interpretation of the verses in Shir HaShirim, the love that cannot be hastened is the messianic redemption.

רַבִּי חֶלְבּוֹ אוֹמֵר אַרְבַּע שְׁבוּעוֹת יֵשׁ כָּאן, הִשְׁבִּיעַ לְיִשְׂרָאֵל שֶׁלֹּא יִמְרְדוּ עֹל הַמַּלְכֻיּוֹת, וְשֶׁלֹּא יְדַחֲקוּ עַל הַקֵּץ, וְשֶׁלֹּא יְגַלּוּ מַסְטִירִין שֶׁלָּהֶם לְאֻמּוֹת הָעוֹלָם, וְשֶׁלֹּא יַעֲלוּ חוֹמָה מִן הַגּוֹלָה.

> Rabbi Ḥelbo says: There are four oaths here. He administered an oath to Israel that they would not rebel against the kingdoms; would not accelerate the beginning of the end of days; would not reveal their secrets to the nations of the world; and they would not ascend as a wall from the Diaspora.[23]

[21] Isaiah 25:8
[22] Dorothy Love Coates / The Original Gospel Harmonettes
[23] Shir HaShirim Rabbah 2:7:1. The image of aliyah as a wall will come up again in the discussion on Ketubot 111a

Are Jews supposed to hasten the coming of the Messiah, the redemption? While the Chabad movement, for example, supports measures to bring on the redemption before its time,[24] traditionally the rabbis would side with the Supremes, or Dorothy Love Coates: We can pray for the Messiah's arrival speedily and in our days, but we can't actively interfere with God's timing, because "He's always right!" The debate about whether the establishment of the State of Israel was a heretic act of human-made redemption or a necessary act of secular pragmatism for the sake of survival[25] cannot be traced here, but it is certainly connected to the questions of whether we should rouse redemption or love before they are ready, and if God's love for the Jewish people is tied to a specific place like Israel or can be experienced anywhere in the world.

[24] https://www.chabad.org/search/keyword_cdo/kid/12479/jewish/Hastening-the-Redemption.htm
[25] Michael Manekin: End of Days, Ethics, Tradition, and Power in Israel, Academic Studies Press 2023, Chapter 3

Chapter 1: Talmud and Poetry

This thesis intends to lay the cornerstone for what I am calling a "Poetry Beit Midrash." Poetry workshops based on the weekly parsha abound in adult education, but poetry workshops based on Talmud study are less frequent. Yet amidst a common inhibition against Talmud as an offering in lay adult education settings (too difficult, too removed from the contemporary learner, too patriarchal), I have sensed a desire among students for opportunities to delve into the world of Talmud. I found my subjective impression backed up by Jane L. Kanarek and Marjorie Lehman, who already in 2016 noticed an intensification of interest in the study of talmudic literature:

> We are experiencing a revolution in the teaching of Talmud and rabbinic texts in North America. While the teaching of talmudic literature has long been a focus in Jewish religious institutions, the types of institutions offering courses in rabbinic literature and the range of adults studying it have grown exponentially in recent years.[26]

In life and in learning, we are guided by what we have been exposed to. Sometimes it makes us want to do everything differently, sometimes it makes us want to pass on what we loved. I vividly remember the first Talmud sessions I attended when I didn't know anything about the subject. In people's homes and living rooms in Brooklyn, congregants and friends would gather and study Talmud, led either by young dynamic rabbinical students or established rabbis of shuls in the neighborhood. The Aramaic and Hebrew washed over me, but I remember the excitement, the examples, how the teachers broke it down for those not much or not at all versed in Talmud study. I didn't mind that I didn't understand everything. Rather, I was grateful to be exposed to new things I had yet to study. These evenings in Brooklyn have remained with me, and I would like to

[26] Jane L. Karanek and Marjorie Lehman: Introduction to Learning to Read Talmud, What It Looks Like and How It Happens, edited by Jane L. Kanarek and Marjorie Lehman, Academic Studies Press, 2016, viii

create a similar atmosphere, where people feel inspired and not intimidated. Where realizing what they don't know will ignite their desire to know more.

Text study and poetry are two passions of mine, and I am fascinated by the Talmud because like an archaeological site, it brings to life culture and voices of the Jews in late Antiquity. I envision creating throughout my rabbinate a space where poets engage in writing workshops inspired by Talmud study, and where students of Talmud find inspiration to write poetry. A space where the language and imagery of the Talmud that I often perceive often as profoundly lyrical, the unique ways in which the sages describe their relationship with God and Torah as well as the particularity with which they ground themselves in the topography of their every-day lives are brought into conversation with our poetic hearts, our inquiring minds, and our curiosity to connect with a bygone world that reverberates whenever we engage in Jewish learning. The space of the Poetry Beit Midrash might at first be movable like the mikdash, the desert sanctuary—a slot, preferably in person, on an adult learning program, a class on a Jewish high school curriculum, or a Shabbat retreat offering. Maybe one day it could even grow into a fixed brand and location, a brick-and-mortar or adobe building, a little house in the desert, the mountains, or by the sea, where students engage in the poetry of the Talmud. As I envision this space of the future, I am inspired by projects like the Lehrhaus in Boston and the New Lehrhaus in the Bay Area. Maybe one day these initial thoughts formulated in this Capstone will evolve into a Beit Midrash Poetry Bistro!

I further hope that my inquiry and eventual teachings might contribute to the conversation about the character of Jewish poetry: How do we define Jewish poetry? As in the case of other artistic

expressions, the multilayered nature of "being Jewish" is hard to pin down. What makes a poem Jewish? Is everything written by someone Jewish automatically Jewish? Do we focus on the cultural-religious-ethnic background of a writer or artist or on their chosen content to designate their work as Jewish or non-Jewish? I want to suggest that poetry inspired by the study of a sugya, a text unit in the Talmud, will be rooted in a text genre undeniably Jewish—the Talmud—and thus can answer for itself: Poems written by participants in the Poetry Beit Midrash will be Jewish, regardless of whether the writer is Jewish. Presumably, most participants might identify as Jewish, but non-Jewish writers are just as welcome.

Why Talmud as the Basis for a Writing Workshop?

In the previously quoted volume "Learning to Read Talmud," Elizabeth Shanks Alexander shares her experience while teaching Talmud as Liberal Arts.[27] Although she does not specifically write about poetry, her reflections affirmed me in my idea that Talmud and poetry make for a good hevruta, a study-pair, and that Talmud can be studied successfully and in an inspiring way outside of a traditional frame, as the basis for a literary conversation where English will be the main language of reference. While I plan to facilitate Talmud/poetry classes primarily in a Jewish learning context and to teach basic Talmud skills, always offering an engagement with the original text as well, ultimately, what will dominate over a traditional approach to a daf, or folio, and sugya will be the focus on themes, sentiments, and imagery, hopefully providing a cultural literacy that

[27] Elizabeth Shanks Alexander: When Cultural Assumptions about Texts and Reading Fail: Teaching Talmud as Liberal Arts, in Learning to Read Talmud, 137-158

will satisfy the already initiated Talmud student, inspire everyone to write poetry—and motivate the less learned participants to continue with Talmud study as well.[28]

In my day-to-day, I can be very pragmatic. As a poet, I am prone to nostalgia. From the first day I opened a tractate of the Talmud, I was taken by the vivid details that describe a bygone world that still exerts influence at least on our nominal definition of Rabbinic Judaism today. With peculiar insistence on precision, the pages of the Gemara conjured up for me something like a mirage of that world—a world preserved and yet inaccessible. This hermetic nature of the Gemara enchanted me. I felt a pull to explore the voices recorded on the pages, voices that, like the world they belonged to, are kept alive although they have long fallen silent.

> Classical rabbinic literature was produced within rabbinic educational institutions, by the sages who taught and studied there, for the purpose of educating those who attended them. This much seems clear though unfortunately, just about all specific historical details of this process are uncertain.[29]

This uncertainty enhanced my fascination and stimulated my imagination. Despite my initial painstaking efforts to decode and sound out the Aramaic, I sensed, paradoxically, a feeling of closeness. Or rather, the feeling of wanting to come close to this world and those figures that shaped Rabbinic Judaism. Granted, predominantly men who sat in the beit midrash or in a grove, in the shadow of a carob tree, who went to the market debating and arguing, who taught their children Torah, a craft, and swimming, who took ferries and prayed while sitting on donkeys, who

[28] I am guided here by Jon A. Levisohn's contextual, literary, cultural, and interpretative orientations to teaching rabbinic literature, as discussed in Rabbi Dvora Weisberg's class "Reading and Teaching Talmud" and described in Turn It and Turn It Again, Studies in the Teaching and Learning of Classical Jewish Texts, edited by Jon A. Levisohn and Susan P. Fendrick, Academic Studies Press, 2013, 52-80

[29] Jeffrey L. Rubinstein: Social Institutional Settings of Rabbinic Literature, in: The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature, edited by Martin S. Jaffe and Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, Cambridge 2007 (Cambridge Companion), 58

loved their wives and complained about them, whose wives sometimes outsmarted and scolded them, who had favorite Shabbat dishes, big egos and dramatic feelings, who eulogized their teachers and praised the date palm, who were handsome or uncomely, rich or wretchedly poor, who were able to recite the entire scripture and knew exactly what the colors in the sky looked like at dawn. To me, the newly initiated Talmud student, the Gemara spread out in front of me a world infused with poetry. Like archaeology, the Talmud became an incomplete and crumbling bridge into that hermetically closed world where people seemed to experience longings and sentiments not different from our dispositions today. A Levantine world whose topographic landscape and climate I have always known and felt drawn to. I found poetry in the in the ever-present longing for redemption and union with the divine. I found it in the idea that sailors are like desert wanderers.[30] I found it in the image of dawn rising like a pillar,[31] as well as in the idea that God roars in anger over the lost Temple three times during the night,[32] or the notion that a couple is intimate in the early morning hours —referred to as a woman conversing with her husband [33]— or that the moment when one distinguishes between sky-blue, white, or leek-green in the morning hours and recognizes the features of a friend's face from a distance of six feet[34] is a good time to say the morning Shema, this most important declaration of Jewish faith. Six feet. For someone who started rabbinical school during the pandemic, this distance felt relatable, almost uncanny. Uncanny in a good way, like poetry. Because good poetry is uncanny. It connects with our subconsciousness and reveals, for a split second, a truth before that truth slips away again,

[30] B. Berakhot 54b
[31] B. Berakhot 2a
[32] B. Berakhot 3a
[33] B. Berakhot 3a
[34] B. Berakhot 9b

nevertheless leaving us knowing that we have seen a glimpse of the universe, a glimmer of eternity. When I imagined people 2000 years ago debating how well they knew a beloved face, or how attuned they were with the light in the sky, I felt time and distance dissolve. I was reminded of the poet Walt Whitman on a ferry to Brooklyn, exclaiming:

> The impalpable sustenance of me from all things at all hours of the day,
> The simple, compact, well-join'd scheme, myself disintegrated, every one disintegrated yet part of the scheme,
> The similitudes of the past and those of the future (…)
> It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not,
> I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence (…)[35]

Talmud and the Contemporary Rabbi

When I started rabbinical school, I was excited to be initiated into a discipline that I considered and still consider essential for the formation and shaping of a rabbinic persona. I often think about what makes a rabbi a rabbi, what is it that we receive during our time in school that distinguishes a rabbi from other learned Jewish professionals. And while the answers vary according to one's priorities and schooling, for me, Talmud study has always been a crucial factor. Not because I will be asked by future congregants to derive halakha from the Gemara, but because Talmud study exposes our mind to a specifically rabbinic way of thinking and reasoning, of relating to the world. Sometimes, the logic of the sages seems far-fetched and the persuasiveness of a quoted verse lacking. Sometimes, there are unrelatable digressions and less than lyrical thought experiments. And yet, I believe that if we make our way through these meandering and sometimes exasperating

[35] Walt Whitman: Crossing Brooklyn Ferry, stanzas 2 and 3 (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45470/crossing-brooklyn-ferry)

sugyot, we are made familiar or become more fluent with a specifically rabbinic way of thinking and reasoning. And that's important in our training.

Today, Talmud skills are deemed by some a luxury in the training of future rabbis. They are not directly needed to run a congregation and to engage with congregants going through life cycles or seeking pastoral care or wanting to advocate for social justice. It is considered unpragmatic to spend hours on end decoding passages that convey gender roles that sound antiquated at best, or that detail sacrifices Reform Jews have long stopped praying for. Yet engaging in matters that while not pragmatic are still core to the traditional Jewish canon, arguably its most emblematic discipline, is crucial for the formation of a rabbinic mind, a spiritual and religious Jewish leader who distinguishes herself from those leaders who did not go to rabbinical school. In a time when there is an emphasis on offering only content that is immediately engaging and accessible, important as I recognize such content is, I want to push back softly. "The Babylonian Talmud is a uniquely Jewish scripture and has often come to function as the ultimate symbolic representation of Judaism, Jewishness, and Jews,"[36] writes Barry Scott Wimpfheimer. One discipline that makes Jewish learning distinctively Jewish is Talmud.

Preservation and Reinvention

Rabbinic literature emerged with the destruction of the second Temple as, arguably, a means to preserve the Jewish ethno-religious identity. As Seth Schwartz notes, "it is overwhelmingly unlikely that anything resembling a rabbinic class existed before the destruction of the Second Temple in 70CE", although he cautions that "it seems unlikely that the earliest history of the rabbinic

[36] Barry Scott Wimpfheimer: The Talmud, A Biography. Princeton, 2018

movement can be reconstructed."[37] It is taught that the goal of the rabbinic movement was to record and preserve the Temple rite until it could be brought to life again. And while rabbinic discussions about the Temple often read like a nostalgic conjuring up of a bygone world—which will become interesting for writing prompts about lost places—Marjorie Lehman, for example, notes that the rabbis did not wish for a return of the Temple rite but rather were ready to replace the priests as guardians and decision makers of the new Judaism, which was a new system, a new frame in which to practice Judaism.[38] They did not conceive of it as a second-best plan, but with the intention to seize the moment and revolutionize and change Judaism for good. A system, while born as a reaction to tremendous loss and defeat, would flourish into its own life and continue from strength to strength through the generations. As contemporary rabbis, we are the inheritors of this seismic shift in attitude, a shift that is illustrated by this famous passage from Avot deRabbi Natan which records a walk Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, the mastermind of "Project Yavneh," takes with his student Rabbi Yehoshua, who is dismayed at the site of the Temple ruins.[39]

> Then Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai spoke to him these words of comfort: 'Be not grieved, my son. There is another way of gaining atonement even though the Temple is destroyed. We must now gain atonement through deeds of loving-kindness. For it is written: 'For trust did I want and not sacrifice.'[40]

To study and teach Talmud means to honor the enterprise that saved Judaism from becoming extinct after the loss of political and religious sovereignty and to recognize that however we define

[37] Seth Schwartz: The Political Geography of Rabbinic Texts, in: Cambridge Companion, 77
[38] Marjorie Lehman: And No One Gave the Torah to the Priest: Reading the Mishnah's References to the Priests and the Temple, in: Learning to Read Talmud, What it Looks Like and How it Happens, edited by Jane L. Kanarek and Marjorie Lehman, Academic Studies Press, 2016, 85-116
[39] Taken here from Siddur Sim Shalom and amended to reflect Robert Alter's translation of the verse. Siddur Sim Shalom, The Rabbinical Assembly, 1985, 15
[40] Hosea 6:6

engaging liberal Judaism 2000 years later, it would not exist without the endeavor of a group of sages, shrouded in historic uncertainties as they may be.

Contemplate Torah Day and Night

There's another reason for why I consider a grounded familiarity with Mishna and Gemara essential for the education and formation of the rabbinic persona: The Talmudic sages aspired to put into practice what was commanded to Yehoshua bin Nun: וְהָגִיתָ בּוֹ יוֹמָם וָלָיְלָה.[41] They had Torah on their mind day and night and strove to find the most convincing or resonating interpretation of every verse in the Torah —לְמַעַן תִּשְׁמֹר לַעֲשׂוֹת כְּכָל־הַכָּתוּב בּוֹ, to draw as near as possible to the secrets of Torah, reveal their meaning and live a life worthy of God's approval. For better or worse, rabbis of the 21st century can't sit in the beit midrash day and night. They are part of the leadership team of a congregation or a different organization. There are lifecycle events to facilitate, pastoral care to provide, services and other programming to plan. It is uncommon these days for rabbis, myself included, to know the entire Tanakh by heart, and even less so in Hebrew. Yet I believe that it behooves me as a rabbi to read Torah as often as I can and to interpret what is written in it. And to emulate, through Talmud study, the founding fathers of our old new tradition and rabbinic profession. The first generations of the rabbis and their students and their students' students salvaged the remains of Temple Judaism, not to re-build the old, but to build something new, something sustainable. I consider every contemporary rabbi the most recent link in the chain of transmission from Tzippori to Bavel to Troyes and Fes, to Al-Andalus to Safed and Vilna, all the way

[41] Joshua 1:8: "This book of teaching shall not depart from your mouth, and you shall murmur it day and night, so that you may keep to do according to all that is written in it."

through time and space to the Lainer beit midrash on the Jack H. Skirball Campus in Los Angeles. And even though the world today may be recognizably different from the world of 400 CE, the rabbi of today should still be shaped, informed, and challenged by the worldview of the ancient rabbis. Studying rabbinic literature not only invites me to immerse myself in the exegetical methods of the rabbis, but also because it unearths and brings to life the world they and their families lived in, that impenetrable cosmos about which so many things are uncertain, in peculiar, mystifying, and inspiring layers. And that is quite a poetic undertaking.

Poetic Elusiveness

One of the most enigmatic landscapes that has emerged in my mind is the empty and surrealistic setting of the בירה דולקת, the Burning Palace in Bereishit Rabbah 39, that I was exposed to during my first semester in rabbinical school. I didn't quite understand then what Midrash was, and it took inordinately long to translate the passage, but a fascination for the genre was ignited, nevertheless. I have always seen a desolate landscape, barren, withered, a lone palace in flames in the middle of the plain, and a man standing in front of it, contemplating, but also ready to act. God—in my imagination in the shape of one big eye—peeks out of a window and introduces Godself as the master of the house. It felt like desert surrealism. Someone created this scene more than 1500 years ago. It felt inscrutably ancient and at the same time it spoke directly to me with urgent ageless creativity and a revelatory, mysterious sensation of being-in-the-world. These are all examples of why and how Talmud stimulates my poetic inspiration.

Why Poetry?

In recent years I have either been teaching Jewish texts through a poetic lens, or I have facilitated poetry writing workshops based primarily on Torah study. Now, as a final academic project before entering the professional world, I wanted to immerse myself as much as possible into Talmud study, and to mine selected *sugyot* and explore how they lend themselves as the basis for inspiring discussions and workshops in the "Poetry Beit Midrash." I would like to have something tangible in hand when I begin my rabbinate, a portfolio that I can use with congregants or in other educational settings. Naturally, poetry came to mind as the creative vessel. Poetry is woven into the fabric of Torah, Nevi'im, and Ketuvim, the foundational texts of Judaism and therefore the foundational platforms for the Talmudic discussions, the axis around which they revolve. Some of the oldest passages in Torah are poetic passages.[42]

Moving on to Talmud, in B. Nedarim 38a, the rabbis entertain the possibility that all of Torah, while primarily written in prose, is in fact, one long poem, since in Deuteronomy 31:19, God tells Moses to "write (you) this song and teach it to the Israelites."

"וְעַתָּה כִּתְבוּ לָכֶם אֶת הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת", הַשִּׁירָה לְחוּדָּהּ. "לְמַעַן תִּהְיֶה לִּי הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת לְעֵד בִּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל"! אֶלָּא, פִּילְפּוּלָא בְּעָלְמָא.

Two different interpretations are considered. One that understands הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת as merely referring to Moses' song/poem, the one that makes up most of Parashat Ha'Azinu. The second interpretation comes by way of intertextual cross-references to equate the entire Torah with הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת: one long poem.

[42] Robert Alter: The Art of Biblical Poetry, Basic Books, (1985), 2011. See also Alison L. Joseph, Shaking Up the Tanakh (Jewish Book Council)

"Why should the Torah be called poetry"? asks Nechama Leibovitz in her "Studies in Devarim," and she quotes Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, the Netziv, with his compelling take on B. Nedarim 38a.

> …But surely the whole of Pentateuch was not written in poetic form! We must therefore conclude that it possesses the nature and essential character of poetry. … In poetry, the subject matter is not plainly set forth as in prose. Additional explanations are necessary in order to indicate the allusions condensed into each expression. It is still, however, not considered to be merely allegory or homily, but this is the nature of poetry … It is obvious too that one who is aware of the background of the allusions and figurative expressions of poetry can better appreciate its character than the man who has only an external apprehension of the immediate literal meaning of the words, which may lead him to misunderstanding the poet's intentions. Such is the nature of Torah. Its story is not elaborated on and plainly explained, but it requires additional explanations in order to appreciate its allusions. This is not its homiletic meaning, but this is the plain meaning of the Scriptures.[43]

This last sentence is thought-provoking: the plain meaning of Torah is symbolic and allusive, like poetry. Indeed, any true poetic gesture and expression is inherently symbolic and allusive because at its heart, at its inception lies a sensation so intense that it is almost impossible to express it in words, let alone to assign plain meaning to it – precisely until it is poured into poetic form.

> The choice of the poetic medium for the Job poet, or for Isaiah, or for the psalmist, was not merely a matter of giving weight and verbal dignity to a preconceived message but of uncovering or discovering meanings through the resources of poetry… Poetry is a special way of imagining the world or, to put this in more cognitive terms, a special mode of thinking with its own momentum and its own peculiar advantages… This is a generalization that holds as true for Jeremiah or Proverbs as for Byron or Baudelaire, but the status of the Bible in the Western world as Holy Writ has discouraged the perception of it as a body of literature that uses poetry to realize meanings.[44]

[43] Netziv: HaAmek Davar, Introduction Genesis, quoted from Nechama Leibowitz: Studies in Devarim, Maor Wallach Press, Ha'Azinu 5, 353

[44] Alter: Poetry, 256

Humans often turn to poetry when they try to distill meaning from inexpressible situations like loss and grief or emotional overwhelm. In fact, one dominant biblical poetic form channeling that sensation is the lament, or dirge—known in Hebrew as *kina*, קינה. "The expression of the innermost expressionless, the language of silence—that is the lament," writes Gershom Sholem.[45] "Every lament," he posits, "can be expressed as poetry."

Tanakh, Talmud, and Poetry Share the Experience of Loss and Grief

Arguably, Judaism has always been a narrative of loss and grief. There is a layer of loss and grief even around the first lonely couple of faith, Abraham and Sarah, that never leaves them from the day they begin their migration, to their first short-lived sojourn in the new land, and to the eventual disintegration of their familial core. Granted, there have been times throughout biblical and post-exilic Judaism where the experience of loss and grief gave way to periods of triumph and agency. Yet they never lasted long. Maybe that is one reason for the particular emphasis of joy and gratitude in our tradition, the insistence on recognizing the good and enjoying it while it lasts so we can, ideally, remain nurtured and sustained by that joy even when it is gone. "The vantage point of the vanquished indeed shapes the entire corpus of biblical writings," states Jacob L. Wright, arguing that

> …loss is the lens through which biblical scribes contemplate the past. … The pattern of most monarchic inscriptions begins with defeat and ends in triumph. The biblical narrative presents the opposite, with the liberation and success at the beginning, and destruction and downfall at the end.[46]

[45] Gershom Sholem: Poetica. Schriften zur Literatur, Übersetzungen, Gedichte, Suhrkamp 2019, 37. My translation.

[46] Jacob L. Wright: Why the Bible began, Cambridge University Press, 2023, 138ff. See also B. Pesachim 116a: מַתְחִיל בְּגָנוּת וּמְסַיֵּים בְּשֶׁבַח (from disgrace to glory) --- but B. Megilah 14a: אַבָּתִי עַבְדֵי אֲחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ אֲנַן (we were still slaves of Ahashveros after Purim) Arguably, the insistence that the Jewish narrative leads from disgrace to glory can be seen as aspirational, encouraging, or messianic.

In his chapter on "Daughter Zion," Wright focuses on Eicha, Lamentations, and applies his findings to much of Tanakh: "An early and foundational building block in the biblical project is the focus on the nation's defeat, and that focus may have its origins in traditions of professional lamenters." Such professional lamenters were usually women, known as מְקוֹנְנוֹת and mentioned in Jeremiah 9:16:

כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת הִתְבּוֹנְנוּ וְקִרְאוּ לַמְקוֹנְנוֹת וּתְבוֹאֶינָה וְאֶל־הַחֲכָמוֹת שִׁלְחוּ וְתָבוֹאנָה׃

> Thus says the Lord of Armies: Look to it and call to the keening women that they may come and to the wise women send that they come.

The word מְקוֹנְנוֹת shares the same root as the word קינה. Whether as a professionally and poetically crafted dirge or a raw cry of lament, a קינה is an expression of loss and grief.

> The reference (in the verse from Jeremiah) to 'Women Lamenters' is even more significant if, as now many agree, laments belong to the earliest iterations of the book of Jeremiah and many other prophetic writings. In some cases, and similar to what we see in this passage from Jeremiah, scribes transmitted older laments that communities performed after defeat (or during unrelated catastrophes) and they reformulated them as oracles of oncoming destruction that prophets delivered prior to the event.[47]

If and how prophecy and poetry[48] relate to one another is a vast field that can't be explored in depth in this Capstone. But Wright's assessment underscores the foundational power and undeniable presence of poetry in biblical and prophetic writing. If laments—קינות—are indeed part of the earliest layers of several prophetic books, and poems do belong to the oldest strata in the Torah, then it is fair to assume that poetic expressions of loss and grief are part of the biblical

[47] Wright, 150. See also: Rachel Adler: For These I Weep, A Theology of Lament, in: The Chronicle, 2006, Issue 68, 10-15

[48] Two of my go-to scholars on this are Robert Alter (for example, Prophecy and Poetry, in: The Art of Biblical Poetry, 171-204 and Abraham Joshua Heschel: Prophecy and Poetic Inspiration, in: The Prophets, Perennial Classics edition, 2001, 468-497. Also Haim O. Rechnitzer: Ars Prophetica, Theology in the Poetry of Twentieth-Century Hebrew Poets Avraham Halfi, Shin Shalom, Amir Gilboa, and T. Carmi, HUC Press, 2023

narrative whose goal, according to Wright, was to foster and fortify a sense of unity among the Israelites and later the Jews.

> The Bible's project of peoplehood grew out of the will to admit defeat, yet also the refusal to allow it to be the final word. In Lamentations and the important works that preceded it, we witness how generations of anonymous scribes denied that military might was all-determinative in world affairs, and how their denial laid the foundation for a new kind if political community.[49]

Like biblical scribes, the Talmudic sages lived in the aftermath of loss and grief. And they, too, pursued a project of peoplehood, in fact, a project of their people's cultural survival. To achieve their goal, they sought to widen their societal influence and strengthen the legitimacy of their new form of Judaism.

> One interesting change from the tannaitic era is the increasing rabbinic presence in the synagogue. … Synagogues were places for prayer, frequented by ordinary Jews, and led by aristocrats or prominent members of the local community. Study houses were places for study, occupied by rabbis and their disciples. During the amoraic period, as rabbis competed to become the religious leaders of all Jews and gradually became more influential among the people, they became more prominent in the synagogue.[50]

Rabbinic literature and the rabbinic aspiration for encompassing societal leadership was a reaction, resilient and bold, to loss and grief—domains, as I have argued above, of the poetic gesture.

Hidden Messages

But most sages didn't see themselves as poets, nor the matter of their discussions comparable to something as frivolous as song lyrics.

[49] Wright, 152
[50] Rubenstein, 64

אֲמַר לֵיהּ אַבָּיֵי לְרַב יוֹסֵף: הָא דְּרַבִּי יִצְחָק, גְּמָרָא אוֹ סְבָרָא? אֲמַר לֵיהּ: מַאי נָפְקָא לַן מִינַּהּ? אֲמַר לֵיהּ: גְּמָרָא גְּמוֹר, זְמוֹרְתָּא תְּהֵא

> Abaye said to Rav Yosef: Is that ruling of Rabbi Yitzḥak oral tradition or his own interpretation? Rav Yosef said to him: What practical difference does it make to us? Abaye said to him: When you study Talmud, is it a song? (Eruvin 60a)

For Abaye, Talmud study is about distilling the correct halakha. The Gemara is holy matter, and song lyrics, to which I add verses of poetry, are not. I won't argue with him on that. Yet I want to point out that song lyrics and verses of poetry inspire a range of individual interpretations and with them a multitude of individual meanings. Similarly, individual Talmudic sages expound on Bible verses and examine them from different angles to derive the meaning they find most adequate. Indeed, interpreting poetry can feel like interpreting a rabbinic statement: I need to be willing to think around the corner, to accept the suspension of conventional rules of syntax and grammar for the sake of expressing or deriving meaning that is not immediately accessible.

Now, poetry primarily speaks to the senses, and the logic of halakhic Talmudic discussions generally unfolds in a distinct realm. And while Abaye is right, the Talmud is neither a song nor a work of poetry, there is much poetic content on its pages, especially in the aggadic sections that Simon Sekles has called "the poetical and fantastical" parts of Talmudic literature.[51] Aggadah, he writes in ornate 19th-century enthusiasm, "incloses the blossoms which enlivened the colorless subject matter of the laws by their brilliant tints and sweet fragrance." While the structure of the compressed halakhic logic of the Talmud cannot be called sensual by any stretch and in Sekles' words "overstrains" the mind, elsewhere, free-flowing discussions and comparisons, evocative

[51] Simon Sekles: The Poetry of the Talmud, New York 1880, 10

images and associative quoting of verses from across Tanakh as well as linguistic playfulness offer "a bed of flowers from the garden of the aggadah."[52] In his word choice, Sekles echoes the poem "Yehuda Halevi" by the German Jewish poet Heinrich Heine (1797-1856), who in his own lyrical language refers to aggadah as

> a garden, most fantastic
> Comparable to the other
> Which in days of yore was planted
> In the town of Babylon—
> Great Semiramis' garden
> That eighth wonder of the world.
> High upon colossal pillars
> Palms and cypresses were standing
> Golden oranges, fair flower beds
> Marble statues, gushing fountains.
> Firmly, skillfully united
> By unnumbered hanging bridges
> Which appeared like climbing plants
> And whereon the birds were rocking.[53]

Earlier in this chapter, I attempted to describe the lyrical pull of the Talmudic world that seems so close at hand, in front of my eyes, and is yet so impenetrable. This impenetrability stems particularly from the form in which the discussions—be they halakha or aggadah, those "two different lights of the Talmud" as they are called in Heine's poem—are recorded.

> Both are couched in the same peculiar style which we may call brachylogy. … Here the words appear as anagrams, or rather like abbreviations of or contractions of ideas. The word does not necessarily represent one conception or idea, but, on the contrary, it sometimes appears as the focus where several ideas are concentrated. Its poetical productions are, therefore, also of a peculiar character and must be differently classified from those of our modern languages. They are altogether epigrammatic, … so as to form surprising contracts. They are seldom picturesque or idealizing imitations of nature; but

[52] Sekles, 11
[53] Sekles does not attribute the translation. The accomplished translator Stephen Mitchell has a translation of the entire poem on his website. I couldn't get hold of a German version.

> they appear rather like the flashes of lightning, descending from higher regions to illumine terrestrial scenes.[54]

I resonate with this lengthy quote in somewhat antiquated language because it expresses, in the flowery academic writing of its time, the fascination for the Talmudic style that I share. The word for a page of Talmud is *amud*, literally "pillar." Its condensed, enigmatic shorthand form was supposed to facilitate and preserve oral transmission (another shared feature of rabbinic literature and poetry, to which I will come back further below). It guards hidden secrets and mysteries and rises before me like the pillar that gave it its name: Beautiful, impressive, chiseled, a canvas for colorful decorations, but beneath its smooth and cool surface, there's always an encased message from the past that can't be fully decoded and transplanted 1:1 into the present. Like in the case of an incomplete archaeological inscription, the message, while not entirely lost, can't make the full trajectory from the Galil or Babylon to my diaspora home.

Orality of Rabbinic Literature and Poetry

In order to legitimate their own teachings as divinely inspired, as Oral Torah, the rabbis insert themselves into the chain of transmission from Moses to Joshua to the elders and subsequent generations.[55] Doing so is possible because of the dynamic and flexibility of the spoken word– whether memorized or attained through intense analysis and debate.[56] Elizabeth Shanks Alexander discusses different approaches to the seamless or disrupted chain of transmission from the Written Torah to the Oral Torah. One set of sources, she writes, makes it appear as if Written

[54] Sekles, 11
[55] Mishna Pirkei Avot 1:1
[56] Shanks Alexander, Cambridge Companion, 39

and Oral Torah were two discrete bodies of tradition received at the same time. In such a scenario, rabbinic literature would have originated on Mount Sinai. She argues that another set of sources suggests profound discontinuities between the revelation at Sinai and the traditions articulated by the rabbis.[57] To underscore the second viewpoint, she relates the passage in B. Menachot 29b, in which Moses time-travels into Rabbi Akiva's classroom, where he cannot follow the latter's teachings. Only when Rabbi Akiva explicitly bases his teaching in a law given to Moses does Moses feel comforted[58] and grounded. As Elizabeth Shanks Alexander explains, while this story emphasizes the divine nature of Oral Torah by positioning the rabbis as a direct link to Sinai, it downplays the relevance of previous transmitters, particularly Moses: "Though Moses is ultimately assuaged by Rabbi Akiva's comment to his students, one cannot help but be shocked by this source's implicit admission that a gap exists between the revelation Moses received and the later teachings of the rabbis."[59] Poetry does not have the same need to legitimize itself. It just is. This independence might be related to its alleged prophetic character and its nimbus of being different, ethereal, not concerned with matters of law.

Like rabbinic literature, poetry was and to a certain degree still is an oral medium, committed to memory, recited, and transmitted.[60] This constitutes a significant commonality between rabbinic texts and poetry. Furthermore, the very fabric of both Talmudic texts and poetry are shaped by orality, even if today, we have volumes of Talmud on bookshelves and in batei midrash around the world, and poems are primarily read off the page in a reading, and not performed. It is important

[57] Elizabeth Shanks Alexander: The Orality of Rabbinic Writing, in: Cambridge Companion, 42

[58] See Dvora Weisberg's feminist analysis of this reassurance's insufficiency, as it highlights God's dismissal of Moses as an unequal, women-like partner (unlike the rabbis in the figure of Rabbi Akiva, whose role is lifted up). Dvora Weisberg: Cold Comfort, A Feminist Reading of Moses in the beit midrash of Rabbi Akiva, CCAR Journal, Spring 2019, pages 123-136, 133

[59] Shanks Alexander, 43

[60] B. Gittin 60b records a tannaitic discussion about whether halakhot (legal rulings) could be written down (and what kind of written texts were not to be memorized). This important debate is not the focus of these pages.

to keep in mind that every oral rendering of a mishnah would always be slightly different. The contradictory and inconsistent varieties that exist of rabbinic teachings are a good example for this obfuscation.

Likewise, in poetry, while specific techniques like rhyme or meter, repetitions or associative imagery eased (and still ease) memorialization and recital, no recital will be 100% identical with another. When spoken by heart, the same poem will have a different intonation, potentially a spontaneous different word choice each time. Musicians who perform their songs by heart are a good example as well. Which poem, which song, then, is the original version? There is more vibrancy to oral speech than could be recorded in writing, and we cannot reproduce what exactly was put in what some point. Once written down, the character of the content is altered. It is no longer exactly what was said in a specific instance, but an approximation.[61] In that inflexible silence lies limitation. The condensed form of the Gemara with its technical terms and stenographic conventions that pose difficulties to the readers[62] and that felt so poetic to Sekles, fulfills the pragmatic purpose of preserving the essence of a debate as well as easing its memorization. Ironically, this preservation comes at the cost of completion. The vibrancy of the message is compromised when written down and with that, counter intuitively, also its accuracy. The messages of Talmudic writings and poetry will always be fragmented to a certain degree, and in that lies either frustration or an allure similar to the appeal of archaeology. It makes sense that the remains of the poems of Sappho (Greece, 700/600 BCE) have inspired many poets to fill in the

[61] Which was for many centuries the reason for the prohibition to commit Oral Torah to writing. In the words of the Ran: "The reason for the prohibition to write down the Oral Torah is that the oral tradition contains explanations of the Written Torah that can only be understood when explained well by a teacher. Were it written down, one might be tempted to suffice with the level of understanding achieved from reading what is written down, even though he did not fully comprehend it."

[62] Ethan M. Tucker: Looking for Problems: A Pedagogic Quest for Difficulties, in: Learning to Read Talmud, 35ff

blanks left by the erosive passage of time and to imagine drawing near to an elusive persona who lived 3000 years ago. Likewise, even a complete poem printed in a fine edition will never reveal all its secrets.

Interpreting Talmud and Poetry

The act of interpreting, of reading sense and meaning into a constructed form is yet another commonality between the two genres. As I have outlined, we can look at decoding poetry like we look at decoding Talmud. Obviously, there are differences in what constitutes a successful interpretation in each case: The rabbinic sages were concerned with halakha and understanding God's will. Poets are concerned with expressing sentiments. The Gemara does not have punctuation—no periods, no commas, no line breaks—devices particularly important to many poets, as they often reveal palimpsests of meaning. Lyrical poetry is often said to defy interpretation due to its delicate, meandering, sensual nature as opposed to logic and prose, because it belongs to the visionary, prophetic, subconscious realm. In fact, many lyrical poets tend to deny that they had a specific message in mind when writing, that their best lines suddenly emerged, and they don't know their source.[63] In my own writing, I have made such experiences as well and agree that lyrical poetry rises from the depths of our subconscious, the domain of visions and dreams, and that the poet-persona is not necessarily identical to the real-life person of the author. There are poetic epiphanies that we must write down immediately because otherwise they slip away like a dream or a deep thought on Shabbat, which contributes to the uncanny or sometimes even prophetic character of lyrical poetry. Conversely, I believe that even lyrical poetry

[63] Who are, generally, different in their relationship and approach to poetry from spoken word poets, activists and poet-liturgists.

has a story to tell, a message to convey. In my own work, I consciously lay tracks inside my poems. I would venture that many poets do. A well-crafted poem is the fruit of intentional work, not an outpouring of ecstatic inspiration. I personally aim to write in such a way that the poem feels accessible to everyone, to give the poem a *p'shat*, a plain, accessible meaning. At the same time, I intentionally weave into the construct of my poems several layers of *remez* (hint), *drash* (message), and *sod* (secret). All these layers could technically be unearthed and expounded on in an interpretation that would follow the paths embedded into the poem, an interpretation that would wander from seed to seed as it decodes and deciphers the unrevealed subtext. While we will always bring our subjectivity to any interpretation, I contend that we can come quite close to an original, intentionally crafted message in a poem or text, just as the rabbis believed that they could come as close as possible to the message(s) of Torah, *ha shira hazot*, this poem/song. And even though poetry likes to present itself as beyond rules, there are rules on how to approach a poem. There is a particular way to engage with a poem, to orient oneself on the page and derive basic characteristics of a poem: How many stanzas does it have? Is it rhymed or blank verse? If rhymed, what is the rhyme scheme? Is there a meter? What are dominant semantic world fields? It is not different from the method applied to decode a sugya, as Ethan Tucker describes:

> Talmudic sugyot, too, are designed to be absorbed in a particular way. All Talmudic sugyot have a beginning, a middle, and an end. They are composed of a logical sequence of sources, statements, challenges, and questions meant to be narrated in order, with both literary and logical coherence. While a sugya may often appear difficult on initial viewing – either because of our own lack of comprehension or its inherent complexity – we must remember it is intended to have a coherent surface meaning that carries its readers from beginning to end.[64]

[64] Tucker, in: Learning to Read Talmud, 38

What Tucker describes holds for a scholarly and inquisitive approach to a poem as well, an approach that I like to teach and encourage in the educational setting of a Poetry Beit Midrash. To be clear, I also appreciate that for an enjoyable engagement with poetry, a "correct" understanding of its layers and inner logic is not mandatory. Not every reader of poetry sets out wanting to excavate meaning and messages. In certain instances, I, too, just revel in the sensory wave of a good lyrical poem washing over me, and ultimately, there is no wrong or right way for that experience and what we take home from it.

That of course is different for Talmud interpretation. As mentioned earlier, for the rabbis, the excavation of Torah-conform, halakhic meaning was paramount. And even if some students today might be more interested in learning about the culture of the rabbinic world in late antiquity rather than practical halakha (even though these two realms are intertwined), there is a framework conditioning the interpretive outcome that cannot be ignored.

Curiosity and Creativity

On the previous pages, I identified several shared characteristics between the Talmud and poetry. But as if drawing a flow chart visualizing a Talmudic debate, I want to emphasize that they are not the same.

מאי נפקא מינה? – In what regard are they not the same? They belong to distinct realms of civilization and creativity. This is why I have limited my short comparison primarily to hermeneutical observations. As genres, as well as in their self-perception and cultural aspirations, they are different. Poetry is more obsessed with the individual; rabbinic literature came into being to preserve and reinvent a collective way a life. Talmud has a stricter set of rules regarding how to

record information and how to decode it, what logic to follow. Poetry is not regulated in the same way and can always escape through the backdoor to the illogical domain of the sensory and sensual, in a mischievous gesture of serendipity. But מַאי לָאו —is Talmud not דּוּמְיָא דְּ, similar to poetry? Talmud is not poetry, but the rabbis speak like poets. In her monograph about time in the Babylonian Talmud, Lynn Kaye shows how the Babylonian Talmud produced sophisticated and innovative portrayals of temporality, which serve as the basis for legal and narrative reasoning:[65] The authors' temporal premises, their poetic, idiosyncratic concepts, set the framework that determines how a society and culture unfolds: What is often perceived as dry law is conditioned by vivid imagination and an intimate knowledge of life and natural phenomena. Furthermore, like poets, the rabbis are driven by the need to give voice to how they try to make sense of the vicissitudes of life, to their yearning for divine guidance or answers. And like poets, they are masters of the metaphor. The complaint that the Talmudic sages go down rabbit holes just to prove an irrelevant point overlooks how playful, how imaginative their language can be; how visually descriptive, how evocative. Like poets, the Talmudic sages offer us a window into their souls and dreams, into how they perceived nature and history, and how much in touch they were with what today is often called "spirituality." The way people related to the cosmos was, despite the official rabbinic campaign against astrology and idolatry, still informed by a proclivity to wonder and superstition.[66] The festivities of Sukkot are a good example, with their burlesque, almost lavish or even sensuous layers that appear to stand in sharp contrast to the seemingly more

[65] Lynn Kaye: Time in the Babylonian Talmud : natural and imagined times in Jewish law and narrative Cambridge University Press, 2018, Introduction, 1-31

[66] B. Shabbat 156b: אֵין מַזָּל לְיִשְׂרָאֵל. Just like the shrines were never fully eradicated from Biblical Israel, so too the belief in astrology and portents and wonders arguably never was overcome. It is impossible – if religion is based on the belief in supernatural events, then the exegesis of those events and the practical implementation of a religious life will be shaped accordingly and cannot appeal to strictly rational minds.

pedantic discussions about the measures of a kosher sukkah.[67] As M. Sukkah states, those who had not seen the ritual of water-drawing,[68] illuminated nocturnal processions with sages declaring hymns and juggling torches, knives, or wine glasses had not seen real joy in his day.[69] Sekles writes:

> The rabbis made great efforts to contribute to the national rejoicings by participating in them and composing songs for the occasion. We possess several of them. One, as sung by Hillel, runs as follows: 'If I am (God) is here, all is here, if I am is not here, who is here? Whatsoever place I take pleasure in, thither my feet lead me. For thus said the Lord: If thou wilt come to My house, I will come to thy house. In all places, where I allow My name to be mentioned I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee…[70]

While the Sefaria commentary to B. Sukkah 53a does not allude to a poetic nature of Hillel's appearance, I like to be swept away with Sekles' excitement, even if that means romanticizing the event and energy. The point that I have been making throughout this chapter and that holds here as well is that apparent rational matters can become poetic in a transcendental context. We must not think of the rabbinic sages as only rational and pedantic, out of touch with their feelings, but rather as full of life and emotions, as members of a culture infused with mysteries, and poetry. In fact, looking further ahead on the timeline, later rabbinic commentators are known to have composed liturgical poetry. Tzvi Novick in his essay Yatziv Pitgam: Poetry as Talmud Commentary analyses a piyyut written by Rabbenu Tam, Jacob ben Meir, the grandson of Rashi.[71] Talmud study and poetry were merged in this "fiery 12th century northern French Tosafist's" world. And contemporary Talmud scholars like Ilana Kurshan write poetic reflections and even a memoir

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[67] B. Sukkot 53aff

[68] Sekles in this context quotes Abraham Geiger's "ingenious explanation" to read שאבה as flames of torches, which seems to have been debunked according to a quick Google search.

[69] M. Sukkah 5:1

[70] Sekles, 30-31. Two things: Sekles does not attribute the translation, which differs from the Sefaria translation in not reading "I am" as a name for God, which is what Sekles does, backed up by Rashi. Rather, Sefaria evokes the famous Hillel adage- אם אין אני לי מי לי (If I am not for myself, who is for me?) in their translation. Soncino does that as well, although they make a reference to the Rashi reading. The second difference is the translation of Exodus 20:21, generally translated not as "allow" but as "where I cause my name to be mentioned."

[71] https://thelehrhaus.com/commentary/yatziv-pitgam-poetry-as-talmud-commentary/

based on their *Daf Yomi*, their daily Talmud study practice.[72] Talmud and poetry, as I have said before, make for a great hevruta.

In closing, I want to repeat that the world and the messages recorded in the Talmud and the world and sentiments behind lyrical poetry will always remain, to a certain degree, a locked garden, never entirely accessible, never revealing all its mysteries. Even an expert in Talmud or poetry will walk away from them feeling that they didn't penetrate all its secrets. That while they peeked behind the curtain of separation, turned the dusty stone, they didn't quite catch what was hiding there. And that, to me, constitutes not a reason to abstain from Talmud or poetry study, but rather a fascinating, sensual appeal, an argument to engage with them with curiosity and creativity.

[72] https://thelehrhaus.com/scholarship/turn-it-and-turn-it-for-all-is-in-it-ilana-kurshan-and-the-talmud-memoir/

Chapter 2: Place

Abraham's story—and by extension the Jewish story—begins with the introduction of a certain place: לֶךְ־לְךָ מֵאַרְצְךָ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַרְאֶךָּ: Go forth from your land and your birthplace and your father's house to the land that I will show you.[73] This place has remained at the center of the Jewish narrative and has shaped and influenced its course over the millennia, as a place shown and seen from afar; as a place unknown, acquired, and possessed; as a place lost and longed for, regained and lost again and longed for again and regained. A place that attracts and a place that ejects, allures, disappoints, and rewards. The Land of Israel, a hill country and desert in the Levant, a mountain, a city, a temple. A gate to heaven and eternity. Abraham and Sarah's journey to the place God reveals to them is a journey to a place that can sustain life. And it is a quest for holiness.

Many religions and cultures attribute holiness to a specific place, which begs the question whether a place is inherently holy or if we assign holiness to it. Jonathan Z. Smith explains that the reasons why a specific place is designated as holy are often arbitrary. The sanctification is often conditioned by what has happened there at some moment in the past, be that an appearance of a deity, the death of a god, or something that significantly altered ancestral customs.

> Once marked, each place is precisely where the event occurred. It cannot be another. The specificity of place is what is remembered, is what gives rise to, and is perpetuated in memorial. … In the Near East, one gets a much greater sense of the arbitrariness of place. A temple is built where it happens to have been built. A temple is built at a central place, the place where a king or god happens to have decided to take up residence.[74]

[73] Genesis 12:1

[74] Jonathan Z. Smith: To Take Place, Toward Theory in Ritual, University of Chicago Press 1987, 22

In Tanakh, two mountains, Mount Sinai and Mount Zion, carry holiness, but only one can be located with some geographic approximation. The name "Mount Zion" has come to encompass Jerusalem and the Temple Mount. Mount Sinai's location is, despite several theories and a tourist destination in the Sinai Peninsula, unknown.

> What accounts for our inability to locate the site of the great mountain of Mosaic revelation with any certainty? The failure is not simply one of the modern science of topography. Rather, there is a mysterious extraterrestrial quality to the mountain in the most developed and least allusive biblical references to it. Sinai/Horeb seem(s) to exist in a no man's land.[75]

This mountain in a desert no man's land was the home of YHWH. A free God, unconfined by boundaries that human beings erect. In "Sinai and Zion," Jon D. Levenson traces how this deity from the wilderness, who was "like its worshippers: mobile, rootless, and unpredictable" moved into a fixed stone house in an urban space on a different mountain. Levenson demonstrates how these two mountains might once have represented two different approaches to holiness of place that gradually merged thousands of years ago and became inseparable.

A palimpsest of the ambiguity regarding what makes a place holy comes to the fore when we juxtapose Exodus 20:24 with Deuteronomy 12:11. The Exodus verse refers to every place where God causes God's name to be mentioned (which sounds like a desert-roaming understanding of sacredness), while the verse from Deuteronomy refers to the place where God causes God's name to dwell. "Place," *makom*, is one rabbinic name for God, and like God, the notion of holy place in Judaism can expand and contract like the fold in an accordion. In Tanakh, the place where God's

[75] Levenson: Sinai and Zion, 21-23

name dwells, is the Temple—and the Temple can stand for Jerusalem, the mountain, or the Land of Israel: Zion.[76]

Adding to these reflections, I want to note how strikingly Judaism is shaped by the place from which it rose and where it was first practiced. The biblical narrative cannot be separated from the tangible geography of the land.

> The land of Israel—biblical chapters hovering everywhere. Places like Hebrew letters, waiting to be vocalized, waiting for crowns with which to be adorned. The land is a text. Here you are illiterate unless you remember words of Scripture. Wherever you stand you are at the frontier of biblical moments.[77]

Walking through Israel, through the hills and valleys around Jerusalem like Abraham Joshua Heschel in the quote above, is an exhilarating religious and spiritual experience, an almost sacred act, an act of poetry.

Seeing the sun rise in Jerusalem illuminates why the Gate of Mercy is also called the Golden Gate: the sun touches first the eastern side of the Temple Mount as it emerges from behind the Mount of Olives. Walking down the road to Silwan from the Sultan's pool reveals why the Gehinnom Valley became the namesake for a hell-like place: as the valley gradually narrows, the southern flanks of Mount Zion appear steeper and higher. The holiness of the Temple must have felt unimaginably far away. A now universal metaphor for hell originated in the topography of a valley near Mount Zion.[78]

On a different level, an individual's location or provenance can express a state of being. For example, the rabbis regard those who dwell in the land as more secure and fulfilled than those

[76] Or the center of the world, Gan Eden, the gate to heaven.
[77] Abraham Joshua Heschel: An Echo of Eternity, Jewish Lights 1995, 119.
[78] It also was a repulsive place because of the waste from the sacrifices being washed down the Kidron Valley that meets Gehinnom Valley at both their lowest points.

who are not in the land. Those who have traversed either sea or desert are considered in the same halakhic category as those who have been released from either prison or captivity.[79] Place in these cases functions as an attribute, a descriptor not so much of the location but of a characteristic. The tangible and concrete are used to express the intangible and ethereal.

There's a Palm Tree in the Way[80]

Physical as well as transcendental topographies of Israel also figure prominently in the rabbinic literature.[81] One passage in the Mishnah that left a lasting impression on me, whether it reflects an actual or idealized ritual, is the passage in Rosh Hashanah that describes the announcement of the new moon signaled with torches on mountaintops:

כֵּיצַד הָיוּ מַשִּׁיאִין מַשּׁוֹאוֹת, מִבֵּיאִין כְּלֵנְסָאוֹת שֶׁל אֶרֶז אֲרֻכִּין וְקָנִים וַעֲצֵי שֶׁמֶן וּנְעוֹרֶת שֶׁל פִּשְׁתָּן וְכוֹרֵךְ בִּמְשִׁיחָה,
וְעוֹלֶה לְרֹאשׁ הָהָר וּמַצִּית בָּהֶן אֶת הָאוּר, וּמוֹלִיךְ וּמֵבִיא וּמַעֲלֶה וּמוֹרִיד, עַד שֶׁהוּא רוֹאֶה אֶת חֲבֵרוֹ שֶׁהוּא עוֹשֶׂה כֵּן
בְּרֹאשׁ הָהָר הַשֵּׁנִי, וְכֵן בְּרֹאשׁ הָהָר הַשְּׁלִישִׁי
וּמֵאַיִן הָיוּ מַשִּׁיאִין מַשּׁוֹאוֹת, מֵהַר הַמִּשְׁחָה לְסַרְטְבָא, וּמִסַּרְטְבָא לִגְרוֹפִינָא, וּמִגְּרוֹפִינָא לְחַוְרָן, וּמֵחַוְרָן לְבֵית בִּלְתִּין,
וּמִבֵּית בִּלְתִּין לֹא זָזוּ מִשָּׁם, אֶלָּא מוֹלִיךְ וּמֵבִיא וּמַעֲלֶה וּמוֹרִיד עַד שֶׁהָיָה רוֹאֶה כָּל הַגּוֹלָה לְפָנָיו כִּמְדוּרַת הָאֵשׁ:

> How would they light the torches? They would bring long poles of cedar, reeds, pinewood, and beaten flax, and tie them together with a string. And someone would then ascend to the top of the mountain and light the torch on fire with them, and wave it back and forth and up and down, until he would see his friend doing so on the top of the second mountain. And so the second torchbearer would wait for a signal from the one on the top of the third mountain, and so on. In this manner the message would reach the Diaspora. And from where would they light the torches? They would transmit the message from the Mount of Olives to Sartava, and from Sartava to Gerofina, and from Gerofina to Ḥavran, and from Ḥavran to Beit Baltin. And from Beit Baltin they would not move to light torches in any other predetermined location. Rather, someone would wave the torch back and forth and up and down, until he would see the entire diaspora like the flame of a bonfire (because of the sea of lit up torches).[82]

[79] B. Berakhot 54b.
[80] B. Shabbat 116b.
[81] One reason is that the halakha is intertwined with the land on a p'shat level (agriculture) and on a transcendental/religious on the remez/drash/sod levels (holiness of place).
[82] M. Rosh Hashanah 2:3-4

To me, this is a very poetic description and a powerful image of the connection with the farthest reaches of the diaspora.

Furthermore, halakha and aggadah are often rooted in the precise geography of the land of Israel. This may not be surprising, since halakha is often conditioned by and related to the land, and folkloric stories usually take place in surroundings familiar to the narrator and audience. Thus both genres literally express a way of being in the world, being in a place. To my poetic mind, the many passages in which geography is used to illustrate a point are evocative in the way they bring to life a world that is both past and present. Maybe Rabbi Zeira and Abaye, sitting in their Babylonian beit midrash, felt a need to draw near distant places that once had significance to the Israelite narrative, in their discussion on B. Sukkah 2a about what renders the roof covering for a sukkah unfit.

> אֲמַר לֵיהּ אַבָּיֵי: אֶלָּא מֵעַתָּה, הָעוֹשֶׂה סוּכָּתוֹ בְּעַשְׁתְּרוֹת קַרְנַיִם, הָכִי נָמֵי דְּלָא הָוֵי סוּכָּה? אֲמַר לֵיהּ: הָתָם, דַּל עַשְׁתְּרוֹת קַרְנַיִם — אִיכָּא צֵל סוּכָּה

> Abaye said to him: But if one is required to sit in the shade of the roofing of the sukkah, then one who makes his sukkah in Ashterot Karnaim, which is located between two mountains that prevent sunlight from reaching there, it is not a fit sukkah, since he is not sitting in the shade of the roofing. Rabbi Zeira said to him: The two cases are not comparable; there, if one theoretically removes the Ashterot Karnaim mountains that obstruct the sunlight, there is still the shade of the roofing of the sukkah.

This supernatural thought-experiment is shaped by the geography of Ashterot-Karnaim, a town mentioned twice in Tanakh[83] situated east of the Jordan River, far away from the Babylonian beit midrash of Rav Zeira and Abaye. A more local example from the Galilee is in Mishnah Sheviit 9:2,

[83] Genesis 14:5; Joshua 12:4

where precise nuances in landscape and geography are used to define areas with halakhic implications.

שָׁלֹשׁ אֲרָצוֹת לַבִּעוּר, יְהוּדָה, וְעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן, וְהַגָּלִיל. וְשָׁלֹשׁ שָׁלֹשׁ אֲרָצוֹת לְכָל אַחַת וְאַחַת. גָּלִיל הָעֶלְיוֹן, וְגָלִיל הַתַּחְתּוֹן, וְהָעֵמֶק. מִכְּפַר חֲנַנְיָה וּלְמַעְלָן, כָּל שֶׁאֵינוֹ מְגַדֵּל שִׁקְמִין, גָּלִיל הָעֶלְיוֹן, וּמִכְּפַר חֲנַנְיָה וּלְמַטָּן, כָּל שֶׁהוּא מְגַדֵּל שִׁקְמִין, גָּלִיל הַתַּחְתּוֹן. וּתְחוּם טְבֶרְיָא, הָעֵמֶק. וּבִיהוּדָה, הָהָר וְהַשְּׁפֵלָה וְהָעֵמֶק. וּשְׁפֵלַת לוּד כִּשְׁפֵלַת הַדָּרוֹם, וְהָהָר שֶׁלָּהּ כְּהַר הַמֶּלֶךְ. מִבֵּית חוֹרוֹן וְעַד הַיָּם מְדִינָה אֶחָת:

> There are three territories in respect to the law of removal of sheviit produce: Judea, Transjordan, and Galilee, and there are three territories in each one. Upper Galilee, lower Galilee, and the valley. From Kfar Hananiah upwards, the region where sycamores do not grow, is Upper Galilee. From Kfar Hananiah downwards, where the sycamores do grow, is Lower Galilee. The borders of Tiberias are the valley. Those of Judea are the mountain region, the plains of the south, and the valley. The plains of Lod are like the plains of the south, and its mountain region is like the king's hill-country. From Bet Horon to the sea is considered as one land.

Such almost intimate familiarity with the land's texture and features is the basis for distinctions that determine halakha. Place and law are inseparably interwoven. The land is text, the land is metaphor, and the land is halakha. When the rabbis discuss regulations of daily life, it is always with one eye to practicality while simultaneously, they reach for the sky, dream up and yearn for utopia, the promises of redemption. In Judaism, the secular is conditioned by the sacred and the sacred by the secular, impossible to be broken apart, just like good poetry. Many early rabbinic sages lived in the north of Israel. Towns like Tzippori, Tiberias, and Akko are often mentioned, like in this exclamation of Rabbi Yosei ben Halafta:

יְהֵא חֶלְקִי מִמַּכְנִיסֵי שַׁבָּת בִּטְבֶרְיָא, וּמִמּוֹצִיאֵי שַׁבָּת בְּצִפּוֹרִי

> May my portion be among those who welcome Shabbat in Tiberias" (located in a valley where the sun disappears earlier) "and those who see it out in Tzippori!" (located on a hilltop, where the sun stays longer)[84]

[84] B. Shabbat 118b

I remember driving through the Galilee and passing an exit to a village called Halafta. It was one of those special moments that feel like a time warp in the same geographic place and that to me make visits in Israel so powerful. Equally powerful was visiting Tzippori, the alleged birthplace of the Mishnah that has been compared to a "bird on a mountain,"[85] and that Reish Lakish described as "flowing with milk and honey."[86] I recall how on an October day in 2022, a sudden afternoon breeze moved through pine and olive trees and blew over leaves of grass and ocher stones down the slope toward the excavated remains of mansions with their colorful floor mosaic and dining parlors, and it felt as if Yehuda HaNasi had just passed by.

On the following pages, I look at selected mishnayot, sugyot, and midrashic passages more in depth and examine 1) what concept of place they convey, 2) what practical implications the existence of tangible, holy places might have, and 3) how the power of transcendental, intangible places without a clear location inspires rabbinic and poetic minds.

[85] B. Megillah 6a
[86] Ketubot 111b

Holy Places and Their Practical Implications

1. Mishnah Kelim 1:6-9

With thirty chapters discussing primarily impurities and purities of utensils, M. Kelim is the largest tractate of the Mishnah; and the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmud do not treat it. Couched in between numerous laws relating to impurities acquired through emissions, infections, or menstruation, four statements (1:6-9) deal with the holiness and purity of place, particularly the land of Israel and the Temple compound.[87] Many rabbinic statements establish tiers and hierarchies or describe an upward moving process of becoming. The halakhic principle behind many of these hierarchies is called מעלין בקודש ולא מורידין – We ascend in holiness, but we do not descend.[88] M.Kelim 1:6 must be read in this context:

עֶשֶׂר קְדֻשׁוֹת הֵן, אֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל מְקֻדֶּשֶׁת מִכָּל הָאֲרָצוֹת. וּמַה הִיא קְדֻשָּׁתָהּ, שֶׁמְּבִיאִים מִמֶּנָּה הָעֹמֶר וְהַבִּכּוּרִים וּשְׁתֵּי הַלֶּחֶם, מַה שֶּׁאֵין מְבִיאִים בֵּן מִכָּל הָאֲרָצוֹת:

> There are ten grades of holiness: the land of Israel is holier than all other lands. And what is the nature of its holiness? That from it are brought the Omer, the first fruits and the two loaves, which cannot be brought from any of the other lands.

In this case, three ritually essential products constitute the criteria for Israel's specific holiness because they must come from within its borders. The verses from Deuteronomy 26:5-9 that were recited upon offering the *bikkurim*, the first fruits, begin with אֲרַמִּי אֹבֵד אָבִי, My father was an Aramean about to perish,[89] and end with a reference to the land of "milk and honey."[90] These verses convey that the Israelites were not, in keeping with their own foundational narrative,

[87] In post-exilic times, these halakhot could not be observed.
[88] B. Menachot 99a, for example. Alternative in Megillat Ta'anit Kislev 8: מעלין בקודש ואין מורידין
[89] The more familiar translation is "a wandering Aramean."
[90] Deuteronomy 26:9

indigenous to the land, and that they needed to be in the land in order to worship their God fully. Embedded in this acknowledgment is an ethical responsibility:[91] Why this specific patch of Levantine soil? Whence the claim to the land, a land whose inherent holiness has remained a topic of debate among theologians, scholars, and Zionists over centuries. As Joshua Kulp writes:

> It is revealing that the rabbis grade holiness by opportunities to perform mitzvot. A place in which more mitzvot can be performed is holier than others. This implies that holiness is wrapped up in the performance of God's will, as if to say that the more one can perform God's will, the more holiness is brought to the world. A different view of gradations of holiness might claim that God "resides" in a certain place, and therefore, that place is holier."[92]

The question about the Israelite claim to the land is a question about holiness: Is the land inherently holy because it is God's dwelling place[93] and was given to the Jewish people by the deity, or because of the divinely commanded actions executed by the Israelites/Jews there?[94]Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook is one religious thinker associated with the former, although Abraham Joshua Heschel's position that holiness infuses the land and is manifested through divinely inspired human acts does not sound too distinct from Kook's.[95]

> The land was not holy at the time of Terah or even at the time of the Patriarchs. It was sanctified by the people when they entered the land under the leadership of Joshua ... We do not worship the soil. The land of Israel without the God of Israel will be here today and gone tomorrow.[96]

[91] See also Rachel Adelman: https://hebrewcollege.edu/blog/my-father-was-a-wandering-aramean-the-ethical-legacy-of-our-origins-in-exile/
[92] Joshua Kulp commentary on M. Kelim 1:6, on Sefaria.
[93] The Rabbinic view is that prophecy occurs only in the Land of Israel or (as in Ezekiel's case) for the sake of the Land of Israel. See Lauterbach, Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, 1:4, 6–7.
[94] This also has implications on how to legitimize Zionism but won't be addressed here.
[95] Rav Abraham Isaak Kook, Introduction to Shabbat HaAretz, with a foreword by Nigel Savage, Hazon, 2014
[96] Heschel, 222

Writing about her findings when she sought to sensitize graduate students at the Jewish Theological Seminary to political undercurrents in rabbinic texts, Marjorie Lehman gives the example of a passage concerning the first fruit offering.[97] A superficial reading of the laws concerning this ritual might suggest that the rabbis were not critical of the established practice during Temple times. Yet a second look reveals a different interpretation of this rite, "vestiges of which were never incorporated into any future observance."[98] The ritual commanded that people bring the fruits of their own land on "Israeli" soil, which excludes those who did not own land or whose harvest had been ruined, for example.[99] I am adding this short reference to Lehman's teaching as it demands of the contemporary students that they reassess the ambivalent relationship the rabbis had with the Temple as the primary representation of the land's holiness and how to pay tribute to the divine.[100]

> The narrative of bringing bikkurim to Jerusalem makes it sound like everyone was involved, but that is not possible. The third chapter makes this rite sound like it worked perfectly each year. In contrast, M. Bikkurim 1:1-2 offers us a different impression when it excludes certain individuals from this rite. I almost feel as though the rabbis included such a discussion about bikkurim in M. Bikkurim 1 and 3 to convince themselves that their observances were more inclusive, even more democratic, than those of the Temple.[101]

The question: "Why this land?" remains. If the tribes that would become the Israelite nation were indeed not native to the land, why did they choose this stretch of the Levant, its mountainous backbone along the Jordan Valley from Eilat to the Dead Sea and to the Galilee, a valley that once

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[97] Lehman 108-116

[98] Lehman, 108

[99] Mishnah Bikkurim 1:1-2.

[100] They still produce a lot of text in reverence to the Temple, especially later midrashim like SHSR, that writes of the Temple as the shechinah's dwelling place, as a place for lovemaking. I wonder whether one way of understanding this discrepancy is by looking at it through a poetic lens: It was inspiring as an image without direct implications in reality. Not unlike some worshippers saying mechayeh hametim despite their rootedness in science and acceptance of finality.

[101] Lehman, quoting favorably from a student's response in an exam, 112

was a sea trench, a fault line through the desert? Was it for geopolitical and economic reasons? Was the designation of holiness and God-givenness just a rallying cry to conquer a desirable area not theirs? And if they were indigenous after all, as put forth, for example, by Eric and Carol Meyers in the Gradual Emergence Theory, why then, the foundational narrative of outsiders, of a journey from the east in a half moon's arch between Ur-Chasdim and Be'er Sheva, the same arch that Talmud scholars would later make in reverse between Palestine and Babylonia?

The following three mishnayot continue the inquiry into the sanctity of places and turn to fortified settlements: M. Kelim 1:7 states that walled cities in the land of Israel are holier than unwalled cities. The reason for this distinction is that lepers must be sent outside of the city's walls and that a corpse, once taken out of the city, must not be brought back into its walled confines. Other laws that must be observed in a walled city are not mentioned here: Besides the two cases about the leper and the corpse, Purim is celebrated on the 15th Adar instead of on the 14th, and ownership of a house can be transferred to a buyer in perpetuity[102], unlike in unwalled cities, where original ownership will be restituted during the yovel, or Jubilee, year. Apparently, walls seem to elevate or change the status of a settlement.[103]

Elevating and changing are processes of separation, and one of the core ideas of Judaism is that separation can mean sanctification: We separate the seventh day from the six-day work week and thus make it holy. We separate the holy from the mundane; and some will say, we separate the Jewish nation from the rest of the nations. But why do certain laws apply to walled cities but

[102] Jerusalem is the exception.
[103] Wikipedia Walled Cities

not to unwalled cities? Might not any settlement at some point decide to fortify its parameter with a wall and thus move up randomly on the sanctity hierarchy?

The deeper reason seems to be that walled cities, specifically those that date back to the days of Yehoshua bin Nun, represent the original holiness of the land. Why? Because Yehoshua was the leader of the people when the Israelites first entered the "Promised Land" to possess it and through that possession make it holy. This perspective underscores the often-complicated intertwining of religious motivation and claim to a place: From the Tanakh's perspective, the miliary campaign under Yehoshua was a sanctified and sanctifying endeavor, Year Zero for the official count of holiness in the land. By Talmudic times however, the sanctity of the Land of Israel had been tainted due to the Babylonian exile, followed by Greek and Roman occupations: Exile and occupation removed the Jewish people's uninterrupted presence and sovereignty in the land that fell into unholy hands. For the generation of *shivat Zion*, the return to Zion from Babylon, it would have been difficult to determine with certainty whether a settlement had been walled since the days of Yehoshua and preserved the original sanctity of the military campaign. There is another factor that likely jeopardized the uninterrupted holiness of cities and land: If, as Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai states,[104] the shechinah, the divine presence, leaves the land and goes with the Jewish people to wherever they are exiled, the divine presence would have withdrawn from the land for the duration of exile and thus withdrawn holiness. The rabbis discuss this matter, for example, in tractates B. Shevuot[105] and B. Arakhin.[106]

[104] B. Megilla 29a.
[105] B. Shevuot 16a
[106] B. Arakhin 32b

In B. Shevuot 16a, the Gemara juxtaposes two seemingly contradictory baraitot, or extra-mishnaic tannaitic statements, that are initially attributed to the same sage, Rabbi Yishmael bar Yose. In one, he is quoted as saying that the sanctity of walled cities since the time of Yehoshua bin Nun was nullified when the Jewish people were forced into exile. In another one, he is quoted as stating that the land and its walled cities were sanctified not only in their time but also in perpetuity. Eventually, in a move that feels dissatisfying, the Gemara resolves this contradiction by attributing the second statement to the sage's brother, Rabbi Elazar ben Yose.

The Temple and Jerusalem as the ultimate walled city are also the subject of a previous discussion on the same page in B. Shevuot, in which the sages debate the sanctity of the Temple and Jerusalem in particular.[107] There, Abba Shaul holds that the initial consecration—the original holiness—was nullified with the exile: City and Temple site had to be fully consecrated anew upon return from Babylon to Zion, similar to one of the two traditions attributed to Rabbi Yishmael ben Yose. Rabbi Yehoshua as well as Rabbi Eliezer in turn hold that city and Temple were sanctified "for their time and forever"—thus echoing the second tradition eventually attributed to Rabbi Elazar ben Yose. With a poetic mind going against Gemara conventions, I would like to suggest that it might be possible to hold both of Rabbi Yishmael's statements as true. Is it not possible, I wonder, to imagine that while land and cities required a ritual of reconsecration, similar to the Maccabees' rededication of the Temple after the Greek occupation, the original sanctity had not been nullified entirely because it had been remembered continuously?[108] Granted, the absence of

[107] Referencing similar discussions in B. Arakhin 32a and M. Eduyyot 8:6

[108] This points to a related exploration of what constitutes "continuously." Is it a seamless, uninterrupted line, or is it rather a continued cycle of repetition? Did not the אֵשׁ תָּמִיד (Leviticus 6:6), the eternal flame, need to be replaced and rekindled at some point, just like the ,לֶחֶם פָּנִים the showbread, that was supposed to be displayed before God always, תָּמִיד, (Exodus 25:30) had to be lifted and replaced every week? This is discussed on B. Menachot 99a-b.

the shechinah would represent a clear hiatus, a break in what ideally would be a seamless timeline. But the importance of the place always reverberated: Its holiness continued in imagination and memory, in the hidden, in the unrevealed. One might call that nostalgia, or the power to conjure up bygone moments and sentiments as if they were still present, which represents a constant characteristic for many lyrical poems. Or one might call it a transcendental awareness of holiness. I believe that timebound experiences can overlap even if they seem to contradict one another and take place on different planes. Time flies, the saying goes, but time also moves very slowly. The experience depends on the perspective and on one's priority, and neither cancels out the other. Let us consider the case of Orthodox Jews who walk only on a strictly delineated path when visiting the Temple Mount, if at all they go: Theoretically, with the Dome of the Rock sitting on its former site, the compound might be considered no less desecrated than the Second Temple was in Antiochus IV's time. And even though the site is arguably occupied by two houses of worship of a different religion, with the remains of the Holy of Holies nowhere to be found or seen, Jews still treat that same place as holy, although there is nothing to connect to that former holiness but the remnant of a wall, and the power of imaginative manifestation.

Lastly, M. Kelim 1:8-9 serve as examples for the hierarchic structures that are so frequently established in Judaism. They trace the path from the outermost areas of the Temple—the blueprint for any Jewish sanctuary—toward its innermost chamber, the Holy of Holies: the closer we come to the core, the higher we rise in sanctity. What is important to note considering my earlier comment regarding the overlapping experience of time is that this path of ascending holiness is traced and recorded post-destruction—whether by hearsay or by relying on older sources, which is another example for the power of imagination and memory.

In conclusion it can be said that holiness of place can continue even after that place is no longer tangible or reachable, even when it has ceased to exist. While some rabbis hold that the holiness of a physical place can be removed and needs to be reassigned at the appropriate time, it is also possible that the holiness of a remembered place, of place as an idea lasts in perpetuity. This is significant for a poetic approach to an exploration of holiness of place. As I mentioned before, much of lyrical poetry's dealings with place happens in the realm of memory, imagination, evocation. In writing about a specific place that still exists, poetic imagination might conjure up a layer that reaches back to the past, addressing a previous iteration of a place that has significantly changed if not disappeared. It might allude to memories associated with past experiences or hopes projected onto the future. As Jonathan Smith has shown, it is primarily us, our own inventory of experiences, dreams, and desires that give meaning and emotional weight to a place and ascribe holiness to it. This is why I would align myself with the opinion of Rabbi Yishmael/Elazar bar Yose or Rabbis Eliezer and Yehoshua, who held that the consecration of a place lasts for its time *and* forever.

Writing these pages as fires burn around Los Angeles and thousands of people have lost their most essential place—their homes, their personal sanctuaries—the significance of a place as an expression of ourselves and as a container of memories starkly resonates: A lost place is a lost piece of our lives, of our vision for our future. We can keep memories and maybe one day be comforted by them, but they will always remind us of what was lost.

2. B. Megillah 28a-29a

This sugya is embedded in deliberations about conditions for selling a synagogue as well as standards for dignified public behavior. Previous folios in Bavli Megillah explored related notions of holy space and ways to pay them tribute and respect. This unit takes a more definite stand on the lasting nature of holiness of a place than what we learned from M. Kelim 1:6-9.

M. Megillah 3:3 outlines several prohibitions referring to one's conduct in a synagogue in ruins. All these prohibitions target disrespectful and egoistic behavior in a (formerly) sacred space and can be divided into two or three categories. The first category includes work activities, such as using the synagogue space to spread out and twist ropes, to repair animal traps, or to dry fruit on the roof. These examples are given because they require the spaciousness a synagogue would generally provide, but according to Joshua Kulp, the prohibition applies to all mundane work.[109] The next two categories intersect: There is the prohibition against eulogizing, arguably because it would mean using the synagogue for a private event.[110] There is also the prohibition against using the synagogue as a short cut. While these forbidden activities may seem distinct at first sight, the underlying motivations – to derive personal benefit or ease from a holy place that has fallen into ruins – are similar.[111] In the Mishnah, Rabbi Yehuda asserts that a holy place retains its holiness even after it has been destroyed. His hermeneutic move relies on the textual juxtaposition of "desolate" and "sanctuaries" in Leviticus 26:31.[112] As Joshua Kulp puts it:

[109] Joshua Kulp's commentary on M. Megillah 3:3 on Sefaria

[110] Kulp also notes that our custom to eulogize inside a synagogue is of modern origin and probably borrowed from Christianity.

[111] Ultimately, doing mundane work is also aimed at personal benefit.

[112] וְנָתַתִּי אֶת־עָרֵיכֶם חָרְבָּה וַהֲשִׁמֹתִי אֶת־מִקְדְּשֵׁיכֶם וְלֹא אָרִיחַ בְּרֵיחַ נִיחֹחֲכֶם׃

I will lay your cities in ruin and make your sanctuaries desolate, and I will not savor your pleasing odors.

> Rabbi Judah applies the holiness of the Temple in Jerusalem to the synagogue of the post-destruction period. Just as the holiness of the Temple and the Temple Mount remained even when Jerusalem was destroyed, so too the holiness of a synagogue remains when it physically lies in ruins.[113]

Rabbi Yehuda echoes the opinions of Rabbis Yehoshua, Eliezer and Yishmael/Elazar bar Yose quoted above in the discussion of the original and lasting sanctity of the Temple and walled cities.

The Gemara begins by citing a baraita that introduces an umbrella term for the various prohibited activities: "Frivolity," *kalut rosh* in the original, literally light-headedness, can be described as taking serious matters lightly and not being mindful of the respect holy places demand even when in disarray. In this context, the Gemara adds existing, functional synagogues to the conversation. The regulations for proper behavior in a defunct synagogue also apply to active places of worship. It would be frivolous to eat or drink in them, to eulogize a regular individual in them, to wander around aimlessly, to use them as a shelter against sun or rain, or to refresh one's make-up, i.e., to "adorn" oneself. As long as the synagogue is in use, Rabbi Yehuda teaches, the following activities are either permitted or required: To study holy texts and halakha, to eulogize a Torah scholar in an event for the public (as distinct from a private event), and to keep the place clean and sweep the floors so that no weed can grow. Once the synagogue is abandoned and has fallen into ruin, while all other prohibitions still apply, one does not: Weeds must not be plucked because seeing the place unkempt and ungroomed will cause pain and anguish.[114] It might remind everyone of the days when the presence of God dwelt there and potentially cause the desire to rebuild, which was a costly and difficult enterprise for the occupied or exiled Jewish communities in Palestine and Babylon.

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[113] Joshua Kulp's commentary on M. Megillah 3:3 on Sefaria

[114] That's twisted: letting a holy place fall into ruins on purpose so that it may be restored does not count as treating a holy place with disrespect.

Although they faced similar hardships regarding maintenance and synagogue budget, Rav Asi points out that there is a significant difference between synagogues in Eretz Israel and Babylon:[115] Babylonian synagogues are considered places of lesser sanctity than synagogues in Eretz Israel. This constitutes another example of how hierarchic structures apply to both physical, geographic as well as to intangible, spiritual places. Tosafot, the medieval Franco-German commentators, explain that in the age of messianic redemption, any sanctity inherent to functioning Babylonian synagogues will expire due to their diaspora location, but the sanctity of synagogues in Eretz Israel will always remain.[116] Another related distinction here is that Babylonian synagogues are said to lose their sanctity when in ruins, whereas, according to Rabbi Yehuda, Eretz Israel synagogues retain *kedushat hamakom*, the sanctity of the place, even in an abandoned state. However, despite the lesser sanctity of Babylonian synagogues, people must conduct themselves with respect and dignity inside them.[117] In this context, it is interesting to note the shift in interpretating what "frivolity" might mean: In Eretz Israel, it refers to behaving with vanity, while in a Babylonian context, per Rav Asi, it refers to talking business matters. Both these conducts display a lack of subordination and a focus on personal matters. Talking business is explicitly brandished as a case of moral depravity by Rav Asi: A community whose members engage in business calculations when

[115] Rav Asi was a Babylonian scholar who migrated to Tiberias in Eretz Israel. His statement might also hint at a polemic/competition between Palestinian and Babylonian sages.

[116] Further along in the sugya, the Gemara records voices from Babylonian rabbis that attest to the presence of the shechinah in Babylonian synagogues in what reads like a defensiveness, an assertation of the validity and sanctity of Babylonian synagogues. On B. Ketubot 111a the rabbis engage in a defense of Babylonia's sanctity that is supposed to equal that of Eretz Israel, that could be explored in more depth in a later discourse, but this mention shall suffice for this capstone.

[117]Rabbis have greater liberties regarding their conduct: the "beit knesset" is considered the house of the rabbis, thus allowing for more casual and private behavior like adorning oneself, eating/drinking and potentially also business conversations. This is an example for the double standard the rabbis often established, to distinguish their perceived elite status from the rest of the people, in a domain that was not originally theirs: the "house of the rabbis" was the beit midrash, only later did they become more present in the "house of assembly", the beit knesset, the synagogue (Rubinstein, 64) See also: https://www.etzion.org.il/en/talmud/seder-moed/massekhet-megilla/28b-inappropiate-uses-synagogue-2: If the beit knesset is the rabbi's house, comparable to a private domain house, then a eulogy will be acceptable in that same private space.

in the synagogue, whether during services or at any other times, will be stricken with an inordinate number of deaths, so that there won't be enough close relatives to arrange funerals of loved ones. Thus, the community would have to take care of burying the deceased, necessitating those corpses be stored inside the synagogue—which is a horrific scenario for a religion that aims to keep death as far away from holiness as possible.

The Gemara continues the theme of proper behavior inside a sanctuary, and again criticizes the pursuit of individual benefit derived from using the synagogue: One must not use a holy place as a short-cut[118] or as a shelter from sun or rain without at least acknowledging the inherent and sacred purpose of the structure.[119] Regardless of weather conditions, if one enters only to summon a friend who is already inside, one must pay a certain measure of tribute directly related to the holiness of the space. For the sages, the respectful tribute to holiness is expressed in Torah study. Therefore, they set up a hierarchy of required Torah study depending on the person's level of education and societal status: A rabbinical student must recite a halakha before he can leave, for example, while an ignoramus is required to ask a child to repeat to him a verse the child learned that day: We see here the acknowledgment of Torah's superiority as an admissions fee on a sliding scale. I want to mention that these deliberations also hint at an underlying *machloket*, or disagreement, that appears on previous pages, particularly B. Megillah 26b-27a: Is a beit midrash, a house of study, so commonly associated with the rabbis' constant pursuit of Torah study, holier than a house of prayer, a beit knesset, the synagogue building, the common place for prayer and

[118] However, if a road passed through there originally, it is permitted to use the synagogue as a short cut (R. Abahu) This can lead to a conversation about passageway and easement, the superiority of public needs, and to the layers that make up our places.
[119] Again, the rabbis grant themselves the privilege for loopholes here – when sages enter a synagogue during a bad rainstorm, it is not because of the weather but rather to focus on the halakhic discussion they were engaging in.

worship? Thus, is Torah study a holier activity than prayer? And do the above-mentioned prohibitions apply to a house of study or a house of prayer, or to both – or is there no difference between them?[120] Further down in the sugya, both Rava and Abbaye cite Bible verses that ultimately cause a fusion of both realms:[121] The synagogue is the dwelling place of God, of the shechinah, ergo it is a matter of heightened respect and dedication to study Torah in the house of worship—effectively merging the beit midrash with the beit knesset.

The superior significance of Torah study is further expounded on as the sugya turns to the matter of eulogies in synagogues. As stated above, the mishnah's prohibition against eulogizing regular private persons applies also to synagogues, in use or in ruins. However, the Gemara allows for a distinction: One may use the holy space for eulogies when these honor Torah scholars, whose accomplishments live up to the posthumous praise they are expected to receive in the eulogy. Since one can expect a large crowd in attendance, the character of the event becomes public. And, since synagogues earlier have been defined as houses of the rabbis, the holy synagogue space becomes the rabbis' private domain. However, using a holy space for an event that honors an individual would be using that space for one's own personal benefit or vanity—and would thus constitute frivolity and a desecration. The difference here lies in the esteem the sages deemed the deceased worthy of. An individual who was not an accomplished rabbi yet had earned the rabbis' respect would have merited a public eulogy, whereas a learned person whose scholarship the rabbis didn't hold in high esteem might not have been granted the privilege of a public eulogy.

[120] See footnote 23
[121] Psalms 90:1 and 26:8

So far, this analysis has only hinted at a thematic juxtaposition of death, Torah study, and sanctity, but as the sugya ends, this connection becomes eminent. First, halakha allows if not encourages that one interrupt the holy task of Torah study to attend a wedding and a funeral. Second, in interpreting the last line of M. Megillah 3:3, which prohibits plucking weed from the floor of an abandoned synagogue, the Gemara cites a baraita. The baraita specifies that the prohibition only refers to plucking weed to feed one's animals, but that one could pluck weed and leave it laying on the site. Granted, the place would still look unkempt and abandoned, thus potentially causing sufficient pain and anguish – but that doesn't feel like a satisfying enough explanation. What is it about the feeding of animals in particular that the prohibition targets? To answer that question, the Gemara brings another baraita about prohibited frivolous behavior in a cemetery: One must not graze one's animals on cemetery grounds, direct a water channel through it or pluck grass and gather it for one's animals. The same reasoning applies here – just as in our mishnah, one must act properly and not for one's own benefit in a synagogue, out of respect for God's dwelling place and divine presence, so too in a cemetery, out of respect for the dead, one must act with decency. Just as one cannot use the synagogue as a short cut, so too a water channel cannot be built through a cemetery. Ultimately, a synagogue in ruins is like a cemetery: One grieves the loss of the divine presence that once used to dwell there as it used to dwell inside a living human being. Taking it a step further, synagogues are like living beings, and living beings are vessels of holiness. Even though the synagogue is in ruins and the person no longer alive, their sanctity remains in remembrance and must be acknowledged and honored.

3. B. Ketubot 110a-111a

Masechet Ketubot deals primarily with laws relating to married life, defining pertinent duties and responsibilities of husband and wife.[122] The last two mishnayot of this tractate discuss the ability of spouses to force each other to change their place of residence. Thus, on these pages as arguably throughout tractate Ketubot, the rabbis discuss power dynamics in a marriage: Who must abide by whose will and why; whose refusal will be punished financially and whose will be sanctioned. In theory, the discussion is not about gender, however, in practice it was significantly more likely for a woman having to relocate against her will than for a man, and the translation reflects that imbalance.

It is important that the word "force" only appears in the English translation. The Hebrew uses the Hifil verb "מוֹצִיאִין"—to take out of the previous environment, to remove. Further, "force" must not be understood as physical but as economical: If one partner refuses to move according to the other partner's will, and the rabbis have determined that the move would be acceptable and justifiable, that partner will lose the money from the ketubah. The options are to move with the husband or to be divorced without financial backup, in a time when most women were financially dependent on their husbands. Technically, this mishnah makes no distinction between genders: If a man insisted on a move not sanctioned by the sages, he would have to divorce his wife and pay her the ketubah money, although women most likely were under more pressure in the domestic debate, especially concerning local moves that are not related to immigration to Israel. M. Ketubot

[122] Ketubot is often referred to as "*shas katan*", the Little Talmud, because it contains more references to the other tractates of the Talmud than any other tractate.

13:10 considers primarily local moves, whereas M. Ketubot 13:11 focuses specifically on moves to Israel and Jerusalem.

In M. Ketubot 13:10 and in the Gemara that deals with it, the notion of place is not discussed in terms of levels of holiness, like the previous examples of M. Kelim and B. Megillah have done, but rather as an illustration of rabbinic values and halakhic rules, of what is possible within the framework of a marital contract regarding geographic relocation. The mishnah begins by a segmentation of the Land of Israel that recalls the first sentence of Julius Caesar's De Bello Gallico:[123]

שָׁלֹשׁ אֲרָצוֹת לַנְּשׂוֹאִין, יְהוּדָה, וְעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן, וְהַגָּלִיל

Regarding marriage, Eretz Israel is divided into three separate lands: Judea, Transjordan, and the Galilee.

The boundaries of these provinces, the same that apply, for example, to Sabbatical produce,[124] limit the radius of a possible relocation: If a man married a wife within the boundaries of Judea, he cannot force her to move to Transjordan.[125] Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz specifies that if a woman marries a man from another province, she is expected to come live with him, but if both reside in the same province at the time of the wedding, he has no leverage to have her to move with him to another province.[126] This mishnah however does not express a ranking between the provinces. Arguably, it accommodates the desire, if not the necessity, that relatives live not too far apart. For practical reasons it might be preferable that particularly the wife stay within a certain distance of

[123] Gallia est divisa en partes tres.
[124] See the previously quoted M. Sheviit 9:2
[125] They may move, if both agree, but he can't compel her.
[126] The Noé Edition of the Koren Talmud Bavli, Koren Jerusalem 2015, 278

her father's house. The mishnah, and subsequently the rabbinic discussion, then adds another layer to this matrix: Within the same province, a husband may relocate his wife from one town to another town, or from one city to another city: A horizontal move that maintains the overall character of the place of residence is acceptable. Here is an example from our time and region: A husband cannot force his wife to move from Los Angeles to San Francisco, although they are both cities, because it would mean moving from the province of Southern California to the province of Northern California. But he can compel her to move from Lancaster to Victorville, which are similar in size and living standard and located within the same province of Southern California. Yet one must not mix different types of settlements: It is therefore not permissible to force a spouse to move from Los Angeles to Lancaster, or from Lancaster to Los Angeles, even if they are located within the same province. The Gemara argues that the prohibition against moving a woman from an urban center with its conveniences to a smaller town seems reasonable, but asks why it would not be permissible to move someone from a smaller town to a larger place, where there are more opportunities for shopping and entertainment that render the new place more attractive? Joshua Kulp argues that certain women might prefer the intimacy of a more tight-knit community.[127]

How do we imagine such a small town, which the mishnah calls "עיר" (which today confusingly is also a common word for city)? According to Maimonides, the Rambam (13th century, Spain), an עיר is one of the villages that surround a larger, walled city or the capital. Rashi (11th century, France) explains that, unlike cities, smaller towns have "gardens and orchards next to the houses, and the air is beautiful." Cities are difficult to live in, according to Rabbi Yose bar Hanina, who is quoted in

[127] Joshua Kulp commentary on the M. Ketubot 13:10

the Gemara and bases his reasoning on a verse from Nehemiah that hints at the hardship of life in Jerusalem: If it is difficult to live in the holy city, then it must be difficult to live in all other cities.[128] The reasoning of the commentators and sages is fascinating because it reveals how timeless Talmud study can feel, and how little certain structures and patterns of human life have changed since Late Antiquity or medieval times. Ovadia Bartenura (15th century, Italy) explains the term for city used in the mishnah, "ברך": It is larger than a town and a place of markets, and from everywhere around it people come there for business and for all things that are found in it. Related to the same root that gives the modern Hebrew word for sandwich, it refers to a walled city, a fortified place – a בן ברך is considered a refined person, as opposed to a villager. Such a place offers many commodities, but it also has negatives aspects: Dwelling in cities is hard for everyone who resides there, Bartenura agrees, because cities are densely populated, houses close to one another, and the air is bad. Life is more expensive and there is more pressure, especially on the women, to always look impeccable: centuries ago, people complained about or cherished the same things regarding city and country life as citizens of the 21st century do.

This all seems straightforward, but then M. Ketubot 13:10 takes a turn and adds another layer of criteria:

מוֹצִיאִין מִמָּוֶה הָרַע(ה) לְמָוֶה הַיָּפֶה, אֲבָל לֹא מִמָּוֶה הַיָּפֶה לְמָוֶה הָרַע(ה). רַבָּן שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן גַּמְלִיאֵל אוֹמֵר: אַף לֹא מִמָּוֶה רַע(ה) לְמָוֶה יָפֶה, מִפְּנֵי שֶׁהַמָּוֶה הַיָּפֶה בּוֹדֵק

> One may take his wife from an inferior residence to a pleasant one, but not from a pleasant residence to an inferior residence. Rabban Simeon ben Gamliel says: One may also not remove her from an inferior residence to a pleasant residence, because a pleasant residence tests the individual.

[128] Nehemiah 11:2

While so far, the mishnah so far the radius and type of permitted or forced relocation between different provinces, it now seems to allow that a husband move his wife from an inferior residence to a more pleasant one, even, according to the Steinsaltz commentary, if that nicer house is located in a different province![129] So far, it appeared that horizontal stability within a limited framework was important: A move from town to town or city to city within the same province was acceptable, but not from a town to a city, even within the same province. Maybe, within a certain proximity, the level of the living situation needs to stay the same so that family dynamics don't get altered and mixed up significantly: Change, the rabbis seem to concede, can be good, but if it happens in proximity to friends and relatives whose framework won't change, it might cause alienation for a variety of uncomfortable emotions potentially ranging from shame to jealousy.

Surprisingly, a more dramatic change in turn seems allowed as well: A husband would have the right to move his wife from an inferior residence in Salton City to a nicer house in San Francisco. Embedded here are three changes that affect (1) the type of residence, (2) the size of town, and (3) the province. It is important to note that "town" is not synonymous here with "inferior residence," nor is "city" synonymous with "pleasant residence," and that this exception must have to do with the terms inferior and pleasant residence. At first, the mishnah condones only the upward move, not the other way around: A husband cannot force his wife to move from a pleasant residence to an inferior residence, regardless of where that house would be located, which seems self-evident. Yet why does Rabban Simeon ben Gamliel prohibit an improvement of living standards, and what does he mean with "שֶׁהַבַּיִת הַיָּפֶה בּוֹדֵק"— a pleasant residence puts the

[129] Maimonides states that the halakha is with Rabban Gamliel who prohibits any change in status.

individual to a “test”? The testing, Rabban Gamliel says, lies in the probability of change leading to intestinal diseases, one of the worst predicaments the Talmudic sages can think of. Maimonides states that by “testing” we must understand the proclivity of an individual to go around in the nicer place and ask for things he or she doesn’t have, therefore, it would cause ambitions that could not be satisfied and consequently frustration. Adapting to a nicer place can be challenging when one will constantly need to compare what one has with what others have, and it might lead to borrowing and begging, or even criminal activity.

Subsequently, B. Ketubot 110b brings in Shmuel’s opinion that echoes Rabban Simeon ben Gamliel’s: A change in habits, whether dietary or residential, will cause intestinal diseases. But Shmuel and the Gemara go further and bring in another element to reject change and social mobility based on this at first-sight innocent seeming proverbial advice. Their argumentation hinges on a verse from Sefer Ben Sira, a book of wisdom literature not unlike Pirkei Avot that was not canonized by the Jewish tradition. There it is stated that “the days of the poor are bad,” which is interpreted to mean that change for the better is not lasting: Even if the poor might eat well on Shabbat and festival days, the baseline will always be a deficient diet. The Gemara then considers the rest of the verse from Ben Sira and uses topographic imagery to explain its meaning: Not only are the days of the poor bad, “also the nights are bad”: The days are bad because the poor can only afford vineyards on top of the mountain, which are the least convenient and desirable plots due to the tedious ascent and particularly because of the loss of soil that erodes down to other vineyards, especially when it rains. Furthermore, the nights of the poor are bad because their houses are found in the lowest part of town, and when it rains, the rain washes down from all the

roofs of the superior houses and ultimately ends up of on the roofs of the poor, preventing a good night's sleep. These striking illustrations and their implications feel starkly modern in their essence. In general, nothing has changed: the poor live in bad, dark, and damp neighborhoods, and the rich enjoy more beautiful and more protected locations. And it must stay like this, Shmuel argues, because a change of one's place and habits, even if for the better, will inevitably lead to intestinal diseases, and therefore the poor will never benefit from an improvement of their living situation. Rashi says that the smell of the bad place sticks to the social climber, singling the individual out and potentially contaminating the nicer place. These arguments betray a fatalism that can be read as an elitist endorsement of segregation by social class. Rabban Simeon ben Gamliel, Shmuel, Rashi, and Maimonides exhibit a reluctance to change that might express a desire to keep the social status quo: If the poor will always continue to suffer, and only get intestinal disease when being fed better, why even try to improve their living conditions? The Gemara does not elaborate further on these rather unsatisfying arguments, seemingly accepting them.

Summing up, it can be said that place here functions as a measure of power and determines quite literally how far a husband's control over his wife can go. It also functions as a measure of societal status: Where you live is who you are. Simultaneously, the sages admit to a bond between a person and a place—the land, the birthplace, the father's house. Judaism of all religions knows that these bonds can be severed, but in the day-to-day, the rabbis seem very attached to an almost provincial notion of "home." While they recognize that a man cannot force his wife to leave the province of her youth, even if he were to offer her a grander residence, the sages also display an attitude

against social or at least general mobility.[130] By not permitting a move against a wife's will between city and town, or from a pleasant to noxious residence, they seem to guard familiar life circumstances for the dignity of the woman. But Rabban Simeon ben Gamliel's ruling that a woman cannot be forced to move from the poorer to the nicer neighborhood is noteworthy. Does it express protection of the wife's preference, or does it express protection of social status quo?

M. Ketubot 13:11 refines the hierarchies and power dynamics established in the previous mishnah. It is divided in two parts.[131] The first part seamlessly continues the matter of forced relocations:

הַכֹּל מַעֲלִין לְאֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאֵין הַכֹּל מוֹצִיאִין. הַכֹּל מַעֲלִין לִירוּשָׁלַיִם, וְאֵין הַכֹּל מוֹצִיאִין, אֶחָד הָאֲנָשִׁים וְאֶחָד הַנָּשִׁים (וְאֶחָד עֲבָדִים).

> All may force (their household) to move to Israel, but nobody can force (their household) to move away from Israel. All may force (their household) to move to Jerusalem, and nobody can force (their household) to move away from Jerusalem, and this applies both for men, women, and slaves.[132]

This mishnah contradicts the previous rabbinic discussions:[133] Moving to Israel or Jerusalem is valued so highly that it overrules Rabban Simeon ben Gamliel's statement that one may not force anyone to move from an inferior to a pleasant, or from pleasant to an inferior residence.[134] In our

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[130] In our times it is popular to quote the proverb משנה מקום, משנה מזל – Change your place, and you change your luck, and it is generally expected that it will always lead to a better outcome than before. This is obviously not guaranteed, for going to a new place might also cause even more troubles – or no change in a baseline situation at all. Cursory research suggests that the attribution of this expression to B. Rosh Hashanah 16b seems incorrect. While the rabbis do discuss that a change of place can change an evil decree, or one's fate (bringing the prime example of Abraham leaving not only his father's house and province but also his native land), the expression is not found verbatim in the Talmud.

[131] The second part is a discussion about the values of currencies of Israel and Cappadocia, detailing how husbands get away with paying the ketubah money to their wives in the lesser currency. While it does touch on notions of place, it is only tangentially related to my point of focus and therefore won't be further analyzed here.

[132] Not every manuscript of the Mishnah contains the verse about slaves. I will not further elaborate on the subject of slaves.

[133] While often "the rabbis" are spoken of as a homogenous collective, not every single rabbi held always the same opinion as everyone.

[134] I wonder if it is for this reason that RSBG's ruling that allows neither is halakha, so that the case of Israel and Jerusalem could stand out in the way it does.

day, new immigrants to Israel must often make do with lowered living standards, especially regarding their housing situation. In Mishnaic and Talmudic times, moving to Israel generally meant a significant decline in comfort, and yet, any family member who refused to make aliyah (immigration to Israel) could be forced to come along or be financially liable: If a wife refused, she lost her ketubah money, and if the husband refused, he would have to divorce his wife and pay her the ketubah money. Furthermore, by inference, this mishnah also allows forced relocation across any distance and type of settlement: When it comes to Israel or Jerusalem, the rabbis do not consider potential complications like intestinal disease: This mishnah allows a spouse to force their partner to move from a beautiful rancho in Topanga to a windowless barrack in Dimona, or from a sprawling apartment in Tel Aviv to a damp hole-in-the-wall in Giv'at Shaul. Thus, this part of M. Ketubot 13:11 and its relevant rabbinic discussion emphasize the superiority of the Land of Israel over all other lands and the superiority of Jerusalem over all other cities. Not only many modern-day diaspora Jews might object against such a perspective. Tosafot also voiced reservation about forcing a spouse to make aliyah:

> It is not practiced in our times, as there is danger on the roads. And Rabbenu Chaim says that today, it is not a commandment to live in the Land of Israel, as there are several commandments that are dependent upon the land - and several punishments - that we are not able to be careful about and to be cognizant of.

Joshua Kulp alludes to the perennially contentious and divisive question prompted by this mishnah: Can we value Zionism and diaspora Jewry equally? The rabbis, he points out, would have denied the possibility:

> One may legitimately wonder whether these mishnayot were issues of practice. It seems to me more likely that this is the way that the rabbis express their values. Rather than just stating that aliyah is a mitzvah, or that it is at least an important value to move to Israel and to stay there, the rabbis express their values in concrete halakhah. Values are

> important not just as values; they must also be manifested by our actions. I realize that I am probably touching a nerve here. Most people reading this do not live in Israel and yet probably feel that they do value the state of Israel.[135]

Further down on the same Talmud page, B. Ketubot 110b, the sages add another stab against diaspora living:

> תָּנוּ רַבָּנַן: לְעוֹלָם יָדוּר אָדָם בְּאֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲפִילּוּ בְּעִיר שֶׁרוּבָּהּ גּוֹיִם, וְאַל יָדוּר בְּחוּצָה לָאָרֶץ וַאֲפִילּוּ בְּעִיר שֶׁרוּבָּהּ יִשְׂרָאֵל, שֶׁכָּל הַדָּר בְּאֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל דּוֹמֶה כְּמִי שֶׁיֵּשׁ לוֹ אֱלוֹהַּ, וְכָל הַדָּר בְּחוּצָה לָאָרֶץ דּוֹמֶה כְּמִי שֶׁאֵין לוֹ אֱלוֹהַּ.
>
> The rabbis taught in a baraita: A person should always reside in Eretz Israel, even in a city that is mostly populated by gentiles, and he should not reside outside of Eretz Israel, even in a city that is mostly populated by Jews. Anyone who resides in Eretz Yisrael is like someone who has a God, and anyone who resides outside of Eretz Yisrael is like someone who does not have a God.

According to this statement, even living in Pico-Robertson with its abundance of synagogues and kosher supermarkets would be less preferable than living in a Palestinian or Druze village in Israel.[136] This might aggravate not only residents of the Los Angeles Jewish community but also the Babylonian Talmud scholars, who generally feel defensive of their place of residence and, in many cases, their choice to remain in Babylon. Life was easier in Babylon, and the Talmudic academies were flourishing, especially after Emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity, when the level of oppression against Jews became consistently worse in Palestine.[137]

In discussing B. Megillah 28a-29a, I alluded to the exchange and competition between Babylonian and Palestinian scholars, and the hierarchy between Babylonian and Palestine synagogues.[138] This

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[135] Joshua Kulp commentary on M. Ketubot 13:11

[136] I wonder if they draw here a parallel between "other nations" and "inferior residence," which is after all called נוה רעה

[137] A discourse could be made here about the type of scholar who traveled back and forth between Palestine and Babylon (נָחוֹתָא) like the Babylonian Amora Rav Dimi or Ulla. The word נָחוֹתָא is Aramaic for יורדים, those who "go down" from Eretz Israel.

[138] Compare FN 116

theme comes up again on B. Ketubot 111a, where Rabbi Yehuda justifies staying in Babylon with Jeremiah's verse בָּבֶלָה יוּבָאוּ וְשָׁמָּה יִהְיוּ עַד יוֹם פָּקְדִי אוֹתָם נְאֻם ה' —To Babylonia shall they be brought, and there shall they be until the day I attend to them and bring them up and return to this place."[139] This opens a back-and-forth between Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Zeira, who rejects the former's opinion by quoting the previous verse, Jeremiah 27:21, which in Rabbi Zeira's eyes seems to make a distinction between Temple vessels, i.e. objects that must not be returned before the Messiah comes on the one hand, and people, who may return before such a redemptive event, on the other hand. Rabbi Yehuda's counter argument is a famous verse from Shir HaShirim that appears three times in this biblical collection of erotic love poetry. In verses 2:7, 3:5, and 8:4, the female lover addresses a group of "daughters of Jerusalem" with an oath that brings me back to the Motown song "You Can't Hurry Love," as briefly discussed in my introduction:

> הִשְׁבַּעְתִּי אֶתְכֶם בְּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַ͏ִם בִּצְבָאוֹת אוֹ בְּאַיְלוֹת הַשָּׂדֶה אִם־תָּעִירוּ וְאִם־תְּעוֹרְרוּ אֶת־הָאַהֲבָה עַד שֶׁתֶּחְפָּץ
>
> I make you swear, O daughters of Jerusalem,
> by the deer or the gazelles of the field:
> that you shall not rouse nor stir love
> until it pleases!

Just as you can't force love to come, so too you can't force your human will and desires on a divine decree. Love, like the Messiah, will come in its time. You can't hurry love, and you can't hasten the redemption, Rabbi Yehuda insists. Basing himself on a teaching from Rabbi Yose bar Hanina, Rabbi Zeira then states the verse is repeated three times to prove that first, immigration to Eretz Israel should come in phases, not "like a wall," but little by little, that second, Jews should not rebel against other nations, and that third, God asked the other nations to vow that they would not

[139] Jeremiah 27:22

oppress the Jews excessively. Rabbi Yehuda in turn remains more straightforward in his insistence, saying that the three repetitions of the verse highlight the urgency and intensity of the divine decree. It is dangerous to rouse up and stir up something as powerful as love or redemption.[140] The exchange is not over, rather it gets escalated when it is Rabbi Zeira's turn again to make sense of the urgency and intensity conveyed in the repetition. The Gemara explains that Rabbi Zeira is quoting Rabbi Levi, who found in the verse not one but two oaths or appeals: The direct addressing of the daughters of Jerusalem— "I make you swear, daughters of Jerusalem" —and the actual matter of concern: "that you shall not rouse nor stir love, until it pleases!" Therefore, Rabbi Levi, and with him Rabbi Zeira derive three additional oaths from the verse: Fourth, that those who know should not reveal the end of days, fifth, that they should not delay the redemption by claiming it is still distant—people should not be discouraged by thinking that the redemption might not come in their lifetime—and sixth, that those who are in the know should not reveal the secret of the Jews to the nations.[141]

Judaism balances a matter-of-fact approach to human life on earth with a beautiful, mystical, poetic openness to the universe and its secrets. In fact, secrets, whether actual secrets or the allusion to something we are deprived of during our earthly existence, play a big role in Judaism. The discussion between Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Zeira points to that dualism, that also affects how one interprets Bible verses: Is it about reading meaning into secrets and mysteries? Is it about deriving messages from verses we want to convey deeper meaning? These are inspiring questions

[140]In fact, the female lover adjures the daughters of Jerusalem four times, but only three times in the exact identical phrasing including the appeal to not rouse or stir love, and by having them swear by the deer of gazelle of the field.
[141] This reminds of Jacob on his deathbed, who said he was going to tell his sons what will happen at the end of days, but then wasn't able to because, according to the commentators, the divine presence left his eyes.

for an artistic and creative engagement with these passages, with our relationship to the divine in general and to Judaism in particular.

Before this chapter ends, I would like to briefly touch on two more aspects on the remaining pages of tractate Ketubot, where the discussion moves further and further away from the bare bones of marriage contracts and their financial consequences. Rather, the rabbis debate how to be united not with one's wife—but with God and the Land of Israel: But how can those in the diaspora make sure that they will be part of the redemptive resurrection of the dead when they are not buried in the land? In this context it is interesting to consider that the word for the absorption of the bodily remains into the earth of Eretz Israel is the same word that is used in modern Hebrew to describe the integration of new immigrants into Israeli society: קליטה, *k'litah*. And in harkening back to the theme of hierarchies of holiness in relation to place, the following passage from B. Ketubot 111a is illuminating:

> אָמַר רַב עָנָן: כָּל הַקָּבוּר בְּאֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל כְּאִילּוּ קָבוּר תַּחַת הַמִּזְבֵּחַ. כְּתִיב הָכָא: "מִזְבַּח אֲדָמָה תַּעֲשֶׂה לִי", וּכְתִיב הָתָם: "וְכִפֶּר אַדְמָתוֹ עַמּוֹ".
>
> Rav Anan said: Anyone who is buried in Eretz Yisrael is considered as though he is buried beneath the altar. It is stated here: "An earthen altar shall you make for Me" (Exodus 20:24), and it is stated there: "For His servants' blood will He avenge, and vengeance turn back on His foes, and purge His soil, His people." (Deuteronomy 32:43). This teaches that one who is buried in the earth of Eretz Yisrael is considered as though one is buried beneath the altar in the Temple.

According to this reading, the whole land of Israel is as holy as the Temple grounds; in fact, the land of Israel might here be understood as equal to the Temple grounds. Thus, B. Ketubot, the "shas katan," the tractate of contractual language and stipulations ends in almost feverish illustrations and expressions of longing and love for the Land of Israel; in deliberations of how to

be united with this beloved soil before the Messiah comes. Its last pages are a firework of images of holiness, love, and redemption, an idealization of the land that reminds of similar idealizations of a beloved or of a redeemer. In the following chapters, I will discuss a few rabbinic takes on love and redemption that will echo or continue threads encountered in this chapter.

Selected Poems and Songs for Text Study: Place

Yehuda Amichai: Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Why Jerusalem? in: The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai, edited by Robert Alter, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015, 500

Yehuda Amichai: In this Valley, in: Yehuda Amichai, Love Poems / Shirei Ahava, Schocken, 1986, 58

Yehuda Amichai: The day olive trees breathed deeply…, in: Yehuda Amichai: Time, Harper and Row, 1979, 66, translated by Yehuda Amichai and Ted Hughes / Yehuda Amichai: שירי המשך in: הזמן, Schocken 1978, 60

Chana Bloch: The Valley of the Dead and Alone on the Mountain, in: Chana Bloch: The Past Keeps Changing, Sheap Meadow Press, 1992,4; 75

T. Carmi: At the Stone of Losses, in: T. Carmi: At the Stone of Losses, UCLA Press, 1983, 15, translated by Grace Schulman

Leonard Cohen: Show Me the Place, on: Leonard Cohen: Amen, Columbia Records, 2012

Itzhak Feld: Dort wo die Zeder…
https://jewish-music.huji.ac.il/en/content/dort-wo-die-zeder-forgotten-zionist-anthem-german
Hebrew versions at zemereshet.co.il

Amir Gilboa: The Whole Land is Mine, in: The Light of Lost Suns, Persea, 1979, translated by Shirley Kaufman, 58

Yehoram Gaom: Hineni Kan
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Pp9vrI-EP8

Yehuda HaLevi: My Heart is in the East, in: T. Carmi (editor and translator): The Penguin of Hebrew Verse, Penguin, 347

Abraham Joshua Heschel: A Sunday in July in Berlin, in: Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Ineffable Name of God, translated from the Yiddish by Morton M. Leifman, continuum, 2005, 149

Rodger Kamenetz: Forget Thee, in: Rodger Kamenetz: The Missing Jew, Poems 1976-20021, Ben Yehuda Press, 2021, 209

Julia Knobloch: Ascent and Jerusalem in: Liner Notes, Kelsay Books (forthcoming 2026)

https://juliaknobloch.substack.com/p/laurel-canyon
https://juliaknobloch.substack.com/p/jerusalem

Philip Levine: Waking in March
https://www.poetrynook.com/poem/waking-march#google_vignette

José Martí: Yo Soy un Hombre Sincero
https://www.gavilan.edu/academic/spanish/gaspar/html/4_15.html

Dunya Mikhail: The Iraqi Nights and The Old Olive Tree, in Dunya Mikhail, The Iraqi Nights, New Directions, 2013, 3; 51

Rabeinu Tam: Yatziv Pitgam, featured in: Tzvi Novick:
https://thelehrhaus.com/commentary/yatziv-pitgam-poetry-as-talmud-commentary/

Rahel: Was it only a dream..., in: Rahel: Flowers of Perhaps, translated by Robert Friend, menard, 1995, 31

Naomi Shemer: El Borot HaMaim and Yerushalaim shel Zahav, on: Naomi Shemer Shira, Unicell, 2004
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JfJ3DrI7-6w 9 (sung by Naomi Shemer)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mjmMllp8hJg (sung by Shuli Nathan)

Shaul Tchernikovsky: Hoy Artzi Moladeti
Version sung by Naomi Shemer

Chapter 3: Love

What is love, anyway?[142] And what's Judaism got to do with it? This Capstone won't resolve what has been explored since time immemorial without reaching a definite solution. Everyone reading these pages will have their own idea about what love is: a feeling, a longing, a memory, a hope, a commitment, an act of kindness, a burning desire to become one with a beloved. Even though there seems to be agreement on the nature or essence of love—it is a *positive* thing—the elusiveness of a clear definition of love continues to inspire songs, poetry, movies, and books. Zooming into what Judaism's got to do with love, several recent theological books have explored the power and role of love in Judaism or in building intentional Jewish communities. Among these, Shai Held's *Judaism is about Love* has drawn a lot attention by stating that the perception of Judaism as bound by loveless laws is wrong.

> Judaism is not what you think it is. Judaism is about love. The Jewish tradition tells the story of a God of love who creates us in love and enjoins us, in turn, to live lives of love. We are commanded to love God, the neighbor, the stranger—and all of humanity— and we are told that the highest achievement of which we are capable is to live with compassion. This is considered nothing less than walking in God's own ways. If this seems new or surprising to you, this is likely because centuries of Christian anti-Judaism have profoundly distorted the way Judaism is seen and understood, even, tragically, by many—probably most—Jews.[143]

These are Held's opening sentences, and while I agree with him, I find it surprising that his message has indeed been considered by "many, probably most" Jews "surprising," almost revolutionary. Jewish liturgy abounds with expressions of love that contain notions of loyalty and faithfulness and that describe God's act of creation as an act of love expressing love for life. In fact, God loves life: מֶלֶךְ חָפֵץ בַּחַיִּים —God-(King) desires life, the Rosh Hashanah liturgy insists on the day that

[142] Howard Jones, Human Lib, WEA, 1983
[143] Shai Held: Judaism is About Love, Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2024, 3

celebrates the creation of the world and remembers barren women longing to become mothers.[144] Held is right again when he states that Christianity has successfully and to the detriment of Judaism laid claim to being the superior religion of love, largely because of Jesus' popular preachings on love's various manifestations like kindness, mercy, or forgiveness. Yet these terms—*hesed*, *rachamim*, *s'licha* (חסד רחמים סליחה)— were core to Judaism long before followers of Jesus and early Christians began to deconstruct and make obsolete the legal system that housed these terms as ethical imperatives. Unlike Christianity, which of course does value justice but whose definition of love in its extreme culminates in "turning the other cheek," traditional Judaism still holds that it expresses love for God and love for God's creation through the same ethical and legal imperatives, through Jewish law.

What *does* "אהבה"— "*ahava*"— "love" mean in a religious context? What kind of love is "loving-kindness"—חסד, *hesed*? *Hesed* can mean faithfulness, truthfulness, loyalty. These are all attributes any healthy relationship and society need to thrive and be sustainable. In a religious context, they are attributes for an individual's reciprocal relationship with God (בין אדם לחברו, *bein adam lemakom*, between God and human) as well as with God's creation. (בין אדם למקום, *bein adam lechavero*, between humans)

An interesting example for the multilayered definition of love is the famous command from Leviticus 19:18: וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֲךָ כָּמוֹךָ – usually translated as "Love your neighbor as yourself." Certainly, this וְאָהַבְתָּ carries a different connotation of love than does the love between romantic

[144] Zochreinu insertion in the High Holiday Amidah (Avot)

partners, or self-love, just as the love God has for Israel is presumably not the same love a parent feels for a child, or a neighbor for his fellow. And yet there must be some intersection in the essence of the sentiment that ideally brings out the best In people. Furthermore רע, *r'eh* is sometimes translated as "friend" and, depending on the context, might take on a romantic or erotic connotation: The word's semantic field spans two Hebrew roots, one that encompasses friendship, companionship, even shepherding, while the other root touches on notions like desire or taking delight in something or in someone's company.[145] While there are many Hebrew roots whose various meanings have nothing in common, in this context, the case of ה-ע-ר I and II and their semantic overlap begs for a poetic drash, or interpretation. In fact, in medieval Hebrew love poetry as well as in Shir HaShirim, the poetic and erotic Song of Songs in the Bible, "friend" often denotes a person with whom the speaker desires to be joined in emotional and physical intimacy that goes well beyond neighborly conviviality or longstanding deep friendship.[146] Many standard Bibles translate Song of Songs 4:1 הִנָּךְ יָפָה רַעְיָתִי as "O, you are fair, my *darling*,"[147] thus emphasizing the romantic and erotic component in the relationship of the two protagonists. Robert Alter, insisting on a plainer essence of the root, translates as "O you are fair, my *friend*."[148] Yet in both cases, the reader has no doubt that the context of the verse is romantic courtship.

Even though the specific sentiment varies from person to person and from context to context, in an ideal case, love will always be informed by kindness and fairness. It will always be a sustaining

[145] Jastrow on I and II רעה
[146] A go-to collection that I use to teach about exactly these kind of ambiguous erotic-spiritual poems about "friend" is Raymond Scheindlin: The Gazelle, as referenced before.
[147] JPS, among many others
[148] Alter, Bible (Vol. 3), 592

force that binds people together in one way or the other – as "the only engine of survival."[149] This expression is a quote from the song "The Future," written by the Canadian-born Jewish poet and musician Leonard Cohen. Cohen wrote extensively about love. In many of his songs, love belongs to the realm of physical chemistry and intimacy. Love manifests itself as lust, and lovemaking expresses the delight to be joined with a beloved, even if the devotion may not last beyond the sexual encounter. As a poet, he infused descriptions of "falling together,"[150] as he termed the sexual union, maybe in echoing Genesis 2:24,[151] with Jewish imagery and expressions of longing for divine redemption. Thus, Cohen effectively equated spiritual with romantic and carnal love. "The Future" however is an apocalyptic vision, informed by rather disturbing Jewish and Christian end-of-days scenarios and darker than his earlier lyrics. In this song, the world has become so corrupt and evil that even repentance will not ensure survival—only "love," arguably in the form of an impulse that seeks to merge with the divine just as it seeks to merge with the human partner in the flesh. And while the poet's conception of the word "love" means reaching for the sky and for the partner next to him, it does not necessarily consider the neighbor or the larger community. Cohen's conception of love as the only engine for survival then might refer to the impulse of two people desiring and enjoying a physical and spiritual union, a union through which they approach and experience the divine. And while I don't want to claim that this or any other Cohen song is an appeal to make babies, it is also true that such a union might produce new life; life longing for itself.[152] And Judaism is indeed also about procreating, as the first command recorded in Genesis

[149] Leonard Cohen: The Future
[150] Leonard Cohen: Last Year's Man
[151] "Therefore does a man leave his father and his mother and cling to his wife and they become one flesh."
[152] This reminds me of what the Syrian-American poet Khalil Gibran wrote in his collection of poetic fables, "The Prophet:" "Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself. They come through you but not from you. And though they are with you, yet they belong not to you."[152] Khalil Gibran, The Prophet, Alfred A. Knopf, 1950, 18

affirms.[153] It is about continuing and valuing life as expressed in the most basic form: as a seed, as drops of blood, as a new generation: מֶלֶךְ חָפֵץ בַּחַיִּים, *melech chafetz ba'chaim*: God desires life. Emerging from an essential "lust" for life and powered by "love" for life, for all creation in its many different iterations and expressions, Judaism develops its moral and ethical legal system: A triumph of life, of goodness, dignity—and justice.[154]

Another famous Jewish master poet of love is the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai. He shared with Leonard Cohen the focus on desire, lust, and intimacy and, like Cohen, played masterfully with the confluence of spiritual and romantic, carnal love. Like Cohen, Amichai postulated that the closest humans can come to an experience of divine redemption might be by losing themselves in the other, in giving themselves over in an act of physical and emotional surrender. The sexual climax can suspend an individual's sensation of time and place, for no matter how brief, and this establishes a sensual link to the redemptive age, of which Jewish texts from the Bible to Abraham Joshua Heschel's works say that notions of time and place will cease to exist as well.[155] To be clear, this parallel is but *one* mystical-poetic interpretation, although, as I will show later, within the poetics of Bible interpretation, it is not too far-fetched.[156] It certainly is an idea that shines through many of Amichai's poems – like in the opening poem of his collection "Time." Like Cohen's song,

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[153] Genesis 1:28, פרו ורבו, Be fruitful and multiply–Biale and Sachs Zion write that in biblical terms, procreation is an ideal yet in rabbinic Judaism the rabbis turned it into a commandment, to elevate (and frame) the sexual act.

[154] Greenberg, 19-26

[155] One of the countless possible references is Isaiah 60:20: "No more shall your sun set, your moon shall not go down. But the Lord shall be your everlasting light, and your mourning days shall be done. Robert Alter writes about this: "…the heavenly luminaries are to be replaced by God, as an everlasting source of light. Again, poetic hyperbole points the way to eschatological vision." Alter, Bible, Vol II, 825

See also Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Sabbath, Farrar, Straus and Giroux (1951) 2005, not only his famous statement about Shabbat being a "palace in time" (12) but also his elaborations on the "splendor of space" (34) as well as "holiness in time" (78). Heschel also points to essential rabbinic discussions about space and time throughout the book.

[156] David Biale gives a short survey of diverging rabbinic opinions on lovemaking as a redemptive act: David Biale: Eros and the Jews. From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America, University of California Press, 1997, 41-43

it offers the sexual act as the only engine of survival, especially in darker times that feel further removed from God's presence:

האנשים כאן חיים בתוך נבואות שהתקימו
כמו בתוך ענן כבד אחד פצוע שלא התפזר
וכך בעורונם הבודד הם נוגעים זה לזה
בין הרגלים בין הערבים
כי אין להם זמן אחר ואין להם
מקום אחר והנביאים מתו מזמן

People here live inside prophecies that came true, as inside a thick cloud after an explosion that did not disperse.
And so in their lonely blindness they
touch each other between the legs, in the twilight, for they have no other time and they
Have no other place,
and the prophets died long ago.[157]

Shifting gears now toward the rabbinic discussion of motions and actions we generally perceive as love, i.e., romantic love, it becomes apparent that while Torah does acknowledge the special, powerful sentiment of love that can bind partners together—Isaac loves Rebekah,[158] Jacob loves Rachel[159]—the Talmudic sages did not think much of losing oneself and giving oneself over in an act of physical and emotional surrender, at least not, or thankfully so, as a topic for legal discussion. As it is written in Sanhedrin 105b:

תָּנָא מִשּׁוּם רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן אֶלְעָזָר אַהֲבָה מְבַטֶּלֶת שׁוּרָה שֶׁל גְּדוּלָּה מֵאַבְרָהָם דִּכְתִיב 'וַיַּשְׁכֵּם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֹּקֶר

It was taught in a baraita in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar: Love negates the standard conduct of those of prominence. This is derived from Abraham, as it is written: "And Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey" (Genesis 22:3).

This is quite an example of what love does to humans! Rashi expounds on it thus:

"אהבה - שאהב הקב"ה את אברהם ביטלה שורה של גדולה שחבש הוא בעצמו" - Abraham was so confused by the love of God that he didn't feel love – self-esteem – for himself anymore! On that fateful

[157] Yehuda Amichai:שירי המשך הזמן :in, Schocken 1978, 1. Songs of Continuity, in: Time, Harper and Row, 1979, translated by Yehuda Amichai and Ted Hughes, 1. Note also the echo of Isaiah's vision of the glory of God (Isaiah 6:3) with the וְקָרָא זֶה אֶל־זֶה
[158] Genesis 24:67
[159] Genesis 29:17

morning, Abraham is overwhelmed by the intensity of God's love and by his love for God, so much so that he loses his self-respect and saddles his donkey with his own hands (instead of having his servants take care of it), in order to go sacrifice his son Isaac, whom he also loves, and whom he conceived, maybe lovingly, with Sarah, his wife, who is not in the picture.[160] Who loves whom here? And can even God become a confused lover? The 17th century commentator Or HaChaim explains the upheaval of chronology in the journey of the Israelites (Exodus 19:2) with emotional and sensual confusion and anchors his argumentation with the same rabbinic statement about Abraham from Sanhedrin 105b:

ויסעו מרפידים ויבאו מדבר סיני

> They journeyed from Rephidim and arrived in the desert of Sinai. The position of the verse is peculiar. We have already heard in verse one that the Israelites arrived in the desert of Sinai. Why did the Torah repeat it again? Perhaps we can explain this in terms of a statement in Sanhedrin 105 that "love negates the standard conduct of those of prominence." As a result of love, what took place later may be reported earlier. Inasmuch as the day the Israelites accepted the Torah was the day that God had been waiting for ever since He created the universe, it is understandable that the Torah reported the arrival of this day at the earliest possible moment. This explains the emphasis of the Torah on ביום הזה באו, "on this day they arrived." The arrival describes the meeting of the lover and his beloved. Heaven and earth both rejoiced that this day had arrived at last.

Defining romantic love is messy and confusing, and it is impossible to regulate, even in a legal system that understands itself as an expression of love for God. Thus, unlike conjugal obligations and rights, among them sexual intercourse, romantic love is not a widespread Talmudic topic.[161] As Noam Sachs Zion writes: "Romantic love may flow spontaneously, but for the Rabbis, long-term marital love must be cultivated under law, and sex must be scheduled in accord with the marital

[160] Genesis 22

[161] Although there are passages about romantic love, for example the story of the couple from Sidon and Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai (Shir HaShirim Rabbah 1:4) and the story of Rabbi Akiva and Rachel. (B. Nedarim 50a/B. Ketubot 62b)

agreement. Therefore, they codify marital intimacy by setting standards for both its quality and quantity."[162] Many halakhic discussions deal with prohibited and permitted, commanded, encouraged, or tolerated ways of physical intimacy between spouses, their frequency and where they should best take place. Often, these discussions are peppered with examples or parables of lust[163] or rabbinic guilty conscience,[164] and the rabbis know many euphemisms for sex of which ביאה (coming, M. Kiddushin 1:1); בעילה (climbing, M. Yevamot 5:6) or אוכלין שום בערב שבת (eating garlic on Shabbat, B. Bava Kama 82a) are just three examples.[165] Another term for the marital duty for both spouses to engage in sexual relations is עונה, *onah*, a term that goes back to Exodus 21:9:[166]

אִם־אַחֶֽרֶת יִקַּח־לוֹ שְׁאֵרָהּ כְּסוּתָהּ וְעֹנָתָהּ לֹא יִגְרָֽע׃

> If another woman he should take for himself, he must not stint for this one her meals, her wardrobe, and her conjugal rights.

Sachs Zion, in his chapter on "Marital Duties and Scheduled Sex," traces the rabbinic discussion and interpretation of עונה into the present day and shows how the sages came to "institutionalize sexual relations in marriage in accordance with the biblical purposes in Genesis 1 and 2: procreation, on the one hand, and emotional solidarity and erotic pleasure on the other."[167] Judaism has always acknowledged that married partners have a right not only to sexual

[162] Noam Sachs Zion: Sanctified Sex. The Two-Thousand-Year Jewish Debate on Marital Intimacy, University of Nebraska Pree, 2021, page xxxii
[163] Abaye chaperone B. Sukkahh 52a
[164] B. Kiddushin 81b (Heruta the Prostitute)
[165] Here is a somewhat comprehensive list of Talmudic euphemisms for sex. See also Michael Satlow: Tasting the Dish. Rabbinic Rhetorics of Sexuality, Scholars Press/Brown University, 2020
[166] עונה is another example of a root with various meanings that can inspire a drash: While here, the basic meaning of the root ע-נ-ה is "season," other meanings of the same root letters include "trouble, suffering" and, as an interesting layer for our context, "to answer" (לענות).
[167] Sachs Zion, 14

intercourse and potential procreation, but also to sexual satisfaction, and the rabbis "obligate husbands to make love regularly to their wives, regardless of whether the wives area fertile or not."[168]

When it comes to relationships, romance, and marriage, modern sentiments are often aggravated by rabbinic rulings and the often one-sided, male perspectives on matters of the female body and a woman's disposition that can feel chauvinistic. How can it be that wives are "acquired," to use the language of M. Kiddushin, but also "consecrated" to their husbands? Can an acquisition ever be sacred? Can anything that needs a contract be holy? The essence of the Jewish concept of *kedusha*, holiness, is about separation, about making something special by setting it apart. And of course, God enters in several contracts, or covenants, with the Jewish people, arguably a prime example of a sacred and holy relationship.[169] For the rabbis, marriage symbolizes that same level of set-apartness, separation, holiness, ultimately, chosenness: Just as the Jewish people are consecrated to their God, so too a wife is consecrated to her husband. In a culture that does not condemn the sexual act per se but has clear views about what constitutes permitted and illicit sex, the one space for proper sexual intimacy was the marital union. As Sachs Zion goes on to show in "Sanctified Sex," this opens the way for kabbalistic and mystical interpretations of the holy sexual act that merge the concept of clinging to a partner with the idea of clinging to God in an almost redemptive experience of lovemaking (*devekut*), enabling Cohen's "falling together" and

[168] Sachs Zion, 15

[169] While such elevation lends itself to romantic poetic exegesis, to which I am no stranger, I do want to note that such separation can present like an unhealthy, controlling, obsessive relationship, both in human relationships as well as in religious terms.

harkening back to Genesis 2:24:[170] "Therefore does a man leave his father and his mother and cling to his wife and they become one flesh."

As has been true until the modern period even in Western societies—and still is true in other places and cultures— love was not a prerequisite for marriage in the Ancient Near East. Marriages primarily had the purpose of preserving property and strengthening alliances through procreation and inheritance.[171] Like the sugyot on B. Ketubot 110a-111a discussed in the previous chapter, the following sugyot on B. Ketubot 61b-64b about conjugal duties are not concerned with kabbalistic sensuousness and mystical lavishness. Rather, they emphasize the contractual character of a marriage, and the potential leverage built into the ketubah. Here, too, it becomes clear that the "ketubah's monetary penalties served as a substantive deterrent to marital misconduct."[172]

Vows, Force, and Money

Ketubot 61b-64b

As has been noted, the rabbis were adamant that husband and wife had a right to not only sex but also physical and emotional pleasure. But then and now it wasn't that easy. For a variety of reasons—spiritual, physical, mental, emotional—a spouse might not want to engage in marital relations when the other spouse desires.[173] M. Ketubot 5:6 discusses a case where a husband vows to abstain from sex with his wife. This causes a problem, because sex and satisfaction are

[170] Sachs Zion, chapters 5 and 6. Genesis 2:14 speaks about man and woman clinging to each other (using the Hebrew root davak ד-ב-ק) and becoming one flesh.
[171] Naomi Steinberg: Kinship and Marriage in Genesis. A Household Economics Perspective, Fortress Press 1993, 26-34
[172] Sachs Zion, xxix
[173] Or might want to engage excessively.

conjugal rights. Rashi points to that in his comment on this mishnah: כגון דאמר יאסר הנאת תשמישך עלי – "It means that he says: I deny myself the pleasure of sleeping with you."

The pre-Mishnaic sages Hillel and Shammai are quoted as debating the length that a husband may abstain from his marital duty before he can be forced to divorce his wife and pay her the ketubah money.

.הַמַּדִּיר אֶת אִשְׁתּוֹ מִתַּשְׁמִישׁ הַמִּטָּה, בֵּית שַׁמַּאי אוֹמְרִים, שְׁתֵּי שַׁבָּתוֹת. בֵּית הִלֵּל אוֹמְרִים, שַׁבָּת אֶחָת

> One who vows that his wife may not derive benefit from marital relations with him, Beit Shammai say: He may maintain this situation for up to two weeks, but beyond that he must divorce her and give her the payment for her marriage contract. Beit Hillel say: He must divorce her if it continues beyond one week.

Shammai says two weeks, Hillel says one week. One might expect the Gemara to weigh in and explain or maybe endorse one opinion over the other. Instead, the *stam*, the anonymous redactor, veers to clarify a tangentially related aspect: From where do Shammai and Hillel derive the lengths of their proposed allowed lengths of abstinence? And about what do they really disagree?

The School of Shammai derives their time period from the laws concerning a woman who gives birth to a girl and is prohibited from marital relations for two weeks, based on the verse in Leviticus 12:5. The School of Hillel is said to derive their time period from the laws concerning a woman who gives birth to a boy, which, per Leviticus 12:1-4, rules that she must refrain from sex with her husband for one week. Yet in this parallel argumentation, the anonymous redactors of the Gemara reflect on an imbalance – shouldn't Hillel have derived their position also from the birth of a female child, and then come to the same conclusion as Shammai? True, the Gemara says, but to think that Hillel derive their opinion from the laws of *niddah,* the laws concerning female ritual impurity related to birth, is wrong. Rather, the Gemara says, Hillel in fact derive their

opinion from the laws concerning female impurity related to menstruation—which render a woman forbidden to her husband for one week. And if that is so, the debate between these two early rabbinic sages cannot really be about the length but rather about the underlying principle that guides their reasoning. Hillel says that one should derive the allowed length of abstinence from a matter that occurs commonly and naturally—presumably postulating that vows of abstinence caused by marital discord happen often and are almost a given and equating their occurrence with the regular occurrence of menstruation and its resulting in one week of ritual impurity. Husbands get upset and vow abstinence often in Hillel's opinion. Shammai seems more concerned with the seriousness of a vow: Vows shouldn't be taken lightly and thus not happen frequently. And if they do, they should be considered as a cause that has an effect – impacting the atmosphere at home, the relation between the couple, the neglected right of the woman – just as the birth of a child, a girl in this case, is the effect of a cause, i.e. the act of sex and procreation. In both cases, the husband caused an outcome: vow and birth of a girl, and thus the period of permitted abstinence should be established accordingly: Two weeks.[174] If he withholds intercourse and sexual pleasure longer, he must divorce his wife and pay her the ketubah money—a familiar example of leverage and force.

The debate doesn't end there. Later rabbis, the Amoraim Rav and Shmuel, heads of competing Talmud academies in Babylon, argue that Hillel and Shammai only disagree about a vow in which a husband specifies the length of his abstinence. The two schools agree, Rav says, that he must

[174] While one might wait for the Gemara to ask why Shammai does not, like Hillel, base their ruling in the laws for the birth of a boy, the redactors don't reflect on this imbalance. Dvora Weisberg has suggested that "perhaps the Gemara does not ask this question because it accepts the possibility that Beit Shammai prefers to be strict."

not vow abstinence for an unspecified length. If he does, he can be forced to immediately divorce his wife and pay. Shmuel pushes back and wants to find more leniency: Even if a husband vows abstinence for an unspecified time, one should give him the opportunity to find a way to dissolve his vow – vows are serious, and loopholes need to be found – so that the marriage can continue. The Gemara then refers to a similar mishnah, M. Ketubot 7:1, to contextualize and reconcile the diverging opinions of Rav and Shmuel. The case in M. Ketubot 7:1 differs slightly in that there, the husband not only vows to not have sex with his wife, but that she may not benefit from anything belonging to him for thirty days- effectively vowing that he will not sustain her and provide her with food and water, which also constitutes a marital duty. And while the husband personally will not provide sustenance, the wife will receive nourishment from an appointed trustee for thirty days. Rav says that if he vows to withhold sustenance (and sex) from her for an unspecified amount of time, he must divorce her and pay her the ketubah money. Shmuel again states that one should allow him a grace period so that he can potentially dissolve his vow and the marriage can continue. Joshua Kulp explains the context of M. Ketubot 7:1:[175]

> If a man takes a vow thereby forbidding anything he owns to his wife, he has broken one of the guarantees of the ketubah, namely that he must provide her with food and clothing. Therefore, he must divorce her. The first opinion in the mishnah gives him thirty days to "cool off". After that time, he must divorce her and give her her ketubah. Furthermore, even during these thirty days he is not allowed to abrogate his duties to her. Rather he must appoint someone to provide for her during this period.

Is there the possibility that each sage concede to the other to a certain degree? Rav might agree that because provisions of sustenance can be administered through a trustee, the husband could be granted the opportunity to dissolve his vow even after 30 days have passed, as per Shmuel.

[175] Joshua Kulp's commentary on Sefaria, M. Ketubot 7:1

Conversely Shmuel might concede that because a trustee cannot provide sexual relations, a stricter process could be warranted, and the deprived woman be set free sooner and receive her ketubah money. The Italian medieval commentator Bartenura would probably draw the line at thirty days in any case:

דעד שלשים יום לא שמעי אינשי וליבא זילותא. טפי משלשים יום שמעי אינשי ואיבא זילותא

> For up to thirty days, people don't listen and there is no disgrace. At more than thirty days, people listen, and there is disgrace[176] –

– meaning that at first, the husband might be too upset to listen to intervening advice from the outside, and there is a chance that things calm down by themselves. Later, while there is a chance that the husband might be open to mediation efforts, matters might become too distasteful, and the entire block will know what is going on.

The layered technicality of this sugya makes it easy to overlook the emotional drama playing out between the two spouses in the background: A man is angry and vows to not sleep with his wife for a certain amount of time, punishing her by withholding conjugal rights, intimacy as well as an acknowledgment of her dignity. In the case of M. Ketubot 7:1, she is humiliated further by her husband's refusal to provide her with bare necessities of nourishment. Maybe anger and vows and the desire to let it out on the partner are indeed natural and common, if lamentable, as Hillel and Shmuel seem to say. A vow might be uttered in anger and shouldn't lead to the dissolution of a marriage when it can be avoided; Shmuel, like Shammai, is willing to accept that the wife remains longer in a state of limbo and unresolved strife and conflict for the sake of potentially saving the

[176] Bartenura on M. Ketubot 7:1

marriage. And while the preservation of marriage was a value the rabbis generally took seriously, here, Hillel and Rav seem to lean toward easing a woman's right to a divorce. Because if matters like vows of abstinence in anger are a common matter, they might happen again, and again. And things can get distasteful again, and again.

Before I continue with the Gemara's discussion on the second part of M. Ketubot 5:6, I will skip ahead to the following mishnah, M. Ketubot 5:7. Because as seamlessly as it continues the aspect of force built into the ketubah money, as starkly it contradicts the concern for a woman's needs and rights noted just above. Now, the rabbis discuss the case where a woman refuses herself to her husband – in the language of the Mishnah, "rebels" against him.

הַמּוֹרֶדֶת עַל בַּעְלָהּ, פּוֹחֲתִין לָהּ מִכְּתֻבָּתָהּ שִׁבְעָה דִינָרִין בַּשָּׁבֻעַ. רַבִּי יְהוּדָה אוֹמֵר, שִׁבְעָה טַרְפְּעִיקִין. עַד מָתַי הוּא פּוֹחֵת, עַד כְּנֶגֶד כְּתֻבָּתָהּ. רַבִּי יוֹסֵי אוֹמֵר, לְעוֹלָם הוּא פּוֹחֵת וְהוֹלֵךְ, שֶׁמָּא תִּפּוֹל לָהּ יְרֻשָּׁה מְמָקוֹם אַחֵר, גּוֹבֶה הֵימֶנָּה. וְכֵן הַמּוֹרֵד עַל אִשְׁתּוֹ, מוֹסִיפִין לָהּ עַל כְּתֻבָּתָהּ שְׁלֹשָׁה דִינָרִין בַּשָּׁבֻעַ. רַבִּי יְהוּדָה אוֹמֵר, שְׁלֹשָׁה טַרְפְּעִיקִין:

> A woman who rebels against her husband, her marriage contract is reduced by seven dinars each week. Rabbi Yehuda says: Seven half-dinars *(terapa'ikin*) each week. Until when does he reduce her marriage contract? Until the reductions are equivalent to her marriage contract, i.e., until he no longer owes her any money, and then he divorces her without any payment. Rabbi Yosei says: He can always continue to deduct from the sum, even beyond that which is owed to her due to her marriage contract, so that if she will receive an inheritance from another source, he can collect the extra amount from her. And similarly, if a man rebels against his wife, an extra three dinars a week are added to her marriage contract. Rabbi Yehuda says: Three *terapa'ikin*.

The ensuing discussion in the Gemara betrays the chauvinism the talmudic sages are maybe too often accused of: First the Gemara asks to define the target of the rebellion: is it about refusal to have sex or refusal to do the work a married woman is obligated to do?[177] Rabbi Huna says it is

[177] To make the bed, spin wool, raise infant/nurse, cook meal, grind flour, bake bread, launder, B. Ketubot 59b

about sex; Rabbi Yosei says it is about work. But the Gemara points to the fact that the same mishnah also notes the case of a rebellious husband! And since reasons and argumentations must be aligned and parallel, her rebellion can only refer to marital relations because a man surely is not obligated to do any work for his wife—מִי מְשׁוּעְבָּד לַהּ! Is he subjugated, literally, "enslaved" to her!? Of course not, the chaffing exclamation indicates. Yet the stam refer to what Rav held on the previous pages, that a man who vows to withhold sustenance from his wife for an *unspecified* amount of time must be compelled to divorce her and pay her the ketubah money. Ergo, the work a husband is obligated to do for his wife is precisely to provide her with nourishment and other forms of basic sustenance.

The formula אֵינִי זָן וְאֵינִי מְפַרְנֵס – "I will not sustain, and I will not support (my wife)" comes up in several passages in B. Ketubot as well as once in Y. Gittin, all of which deal with marital conflicts. Tosafot, the French commentators around Rashi's grandsons, double down on the Gemara's understanding of what constitutes a husband's work for his wife:

> מכאן מוכיח רבינו אליהו שחייב אדם להשכיר עצמו ללמד תינוקת או לעשות מלאכה אחרת בדי לזון את אשתו דאם לא כן מה ענין זה אצל מורד ממלאכה[178]

From there Rabbi Eliyahu proved that a man is obligated to find himself work even to teach children or to do some other work *(i.e. than his "degree")* in order to be able to provide for his wife, and if he doesn't do it, that constitutes the essence of rebellion against his work duties.

The Gemara continues to dissect the nature of the woman's rebellion. They need clarity about what exactly constitutes rebellion in this mishnah in order to determine the monetary punishment: They debate without resolution whether a woman who refuses to do her work is in fact "rebellious," and they distinguish between a woman who is ill and can't work (most say she is

[178] Tosafot on B. Ketubot 63a:5

not rebellious) and a woman who is ill and refuses sex (all say she is rebellious). But, the Gemara interjects, is it so terrible to not have sex with one's wife for a week or two—aren't we used to that, they seem to say, because of the laws of *niddah*? So why make such a big deal out of it? Well, the reasoning goes, someone who has bread in his basket can't be compared to someone who doesn't have bread in his basket—meaning, when you know what you could have (sex, bread), missing out is harder to accept than when you know that you can't have it to begin with.

Be that as it may, on B. Ketubot 63b, the Gemara cuts off these various thought-experiments and returns to the pressing question at hand: Money, and how much to deduct over what period, and how to compel the woman to end her "rebellion" —with sending court emissaries to warn her, and by making public announcements. While there are sages who voice objection to public shaming, the matter is bound to get distasteful in one way or the other, even before the Bartenura's thirty-day grace period is over:

אָמַר רָמֵי בַּר חָמָא: אֵין מַכְרִיזִין עָלֶיהָ אֶלָּא בְּבָתֵּי כְּנֵסִיּוֹת וּבְבָתֵּי מִדְרָשׁוֹת. אָמַר רָבָא: דַּיְקָא נָמֵי, דְּקָתָנֵי: אַרְבַּע שַׁבָּתוֹת זוֹ אַחַר זוֹ. שְׁמַע מִינַּהּ. אָמַר רָמֵי בַּר חָמָא: פַּעֲמַיִם שׁוֹלְחִין לָהּ מִבֵּית דִּין, אַחַת קוֹדֶם הַכְרָזָה, וְאַחַת לְאַחַר הַכְרָזָה

> Rami bar Ḥama said: We make announcements about her only in synagogues and study halls, but not in the street. Rava said: This is also precise, as it teaches to make announcements on four consecutive Shabbatot, (when people are not to be found in the streets, but rather in synagogues and study halls.) Conclude from this that this is so. Rami bar Ḥama said: The court sends people to talk with her twice, once before the announcement and once after the announcement.

What has not yet been discussed is the motivation of a woman who refuses sexual relations with her husband. What might she have to say? Since women are generally not consulted for this

process of halakhic determination, we have the nuanced perspective of Ameimar, a 4th century Babylon sage, and the disturbing pushback from his local contemporary Mar Zutra:

אָמַר אַמֵּימָר: דְּאָמְרָה ״בָּעֵינָא לֵיהּ וּמְצַעַרְנָא לֵיהּ״. אֲבָל אָמְרָה ״מְאִיס עֲלַי״ — לָא כָּיְיפִינַן לַהּ. מָר זוּטְרָא אָמַר: כָּיְיפִינַן לָהּ

> Ameimar said: She is rebellious when she says: I want to be married to him, but I am currently refusing him because I want to cause him anguish due to a dispute between us. However, if she said: I am disgusted with him, we do not compel her to remain with him, as one should not be compelled to live with someone who disgusts her. Mar Zutra said: We do compel her to stay with him.

And why does Mar Zutra endorse such a disgusting opinion? Because, like many rabbis to this day, he once issued a questionable decision that resulted in what he considers a positive outcome, so he feels vindicated and justified:

.הֲוָה עוֹבָדָא וְאַכְפְּיֵהּ מָר זוּטְרָא, וּנְפַק מִינֵּיהּ רַבִּי חֲנִינָא מִסּוּרָא. וְלָא הִיא: הָתָם סְיָיעְתָּא דִּשְׁמַיָּא הֲוָה

> There was an incident in which a woman rebelled, claiming that she was disgusted with her husband, and Mar Zutra compelled her to stay with him. And from this couple issued Rabbi Ḥanina of Sura.

A fine Torah scholar was conceived in a sexual act that made his mother suffer with disgust, so the end (fine Torah scholar) justifies the means (unhappy marriage, repulsive sex). To their credit, the editors of the Gemara don't agree with Mar Zutra's zealous doctrine:

וְלָא הִיא: הָתָם סְיָיעְתָּא דִּשְׁמַיָּא הֲוָה

> That is not so. That case should not serve as a precedent, as there the positive outcome was due to heavenly assistance.

Meaning, nothing good results from conjugal relations that the wife does not desire. While there is a certain awareness of the wife's disposition and situation, the rest of the sugya drastically highlights the unequal power dynamic between husband and wife and underscores the

dependency of women on their husbands' will, as well as the disadvantaged treatment of women by the courts. In worst-case scenarios, women who live in precarious, loveless, and abusive relationships can be made to wait for a divorce letter for up to one year and ultimately find themselves destitute and humiliated.

The rabbis do concede that a man can be found rebellious (both in his work and in his sexual duties) against his wife, but there are two significant differences: One, the financial pressure on the man is less (pay equity didn't exist then, either) – they add less money to the wife's ketubah than they take out of hers as long as the status of rebellion continues. Shmuel's statement on B. Ketubot 64b reveals the transactional nature of the marriage contract and sexual obligations in a drastic way that may or may not have been condoned by all sages, but that nonetheless permeates the majority of the sugya:

אֲמַר לֵיהּ רַבִּי חִיָּיא בַּר יוֹסֵף לִשְׁמוּאֵל: מָה בֵּין מוֹרֶדֶת לְמוֹרֶדֶת? אֲמַר לֵיהּ: צֵא וּלְמַד מִשּׁוּק שֶׁל זוֹנוֹת, מִי שׂוֹכֵר אֶת מִי?

> Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Yosef said to Shmuel: What is the reason for the difference in halakha between a rebellious man and a rebellious woman? According to all opinions, a rebellious wife's fine is greater than that of a rebellious husband. He said to him: Go and learn from the market of prostitutes. Who hires whose services?

The reasoning is that men generally hire women for prostitution, and not the other way around, so men seem to need sex more. Second, the sages delay the process that would declare a husband rebellious, whereas they write a letter of rebellion against a wife more swiftly. And if a woman pleads with the court to speed up proceedings and declare the husband rebellious, they may send her away: זִיל, לָא מְפַקְּדַתְּ – Go away, you are not commanded to procreate. (B. Ketubot 64a) Since she isn't commanded to be fruitful and multiply, she might as well endure her misery for as long

as the court deems fit. Only if she argues based on her economic welfare might the court be more amenable:

אֶלָּא בְּבָאָה מֵחֲמַת טַעֲנָה, דְּאָמְרָה: בָּעֵינָא חוּטְרָא לִידָּא וּמָרָה לִקְבוּרָה

> Rather, the case where a letter of rebellion is issued must be referring to a woman who comes with a claim, saying: I want a staff in my hand and a hoe for burial, (i.e., I want children who will support me in my old age and attend to my burial after my death.)

In such cases, the court recognizes her claim as valid and issues a letter of rebellion against the husband. This mishna and sugya contradict other passages where the rabbis seem to rule more equally and balanced within similar contexts. Sometimes, the same verse or argument is used in contradicting ways—here, the rabbis humiliate the woman by reminding her that she is not commanded to procreate. And yet, as has been noted before, the rabbis also require a husband to engage in sexual relations with his wife, even when the wife is infertile or has reached menopause, although, as will be shown later, the command to procreate can be used as grounds for a divorce when the couple is childless. Lastly, this sugya ends with a statement about the male urgency to have sex, a perspective that even today is used to condone testosterone-driven masculinity:

דָּבָר אַחֵר: זֶה יִצְרוֹ מִבַּחוּץ, וְזוֹ יִצְרָהּ מִבִּפְנִים.

> Alternatively, when he desires sexual relations, his inclination is noticeable on the outside, (and therefore he feels shame as well as pain.) But for her, her inclination is on the inside (and is not obvious.)

This statement, too, is an example of contradictory leniencies and rulings depending on the broader context or general priorities. For this, I will now go back to the Gemara's discussion of the second half of M. Ketubot 5:6. How long are men allowed to go on conjugal duties leave, not

because of vows of abstinence but for professional reasons? As will become obvious, here, the rabbis can very much contain their sex drive and restrain themselves from a privilege they otherwise so forcefully sue.

M. Ketubot 5:6

הַתַּלְמִידִים יוֹצְאִין לְתַלְמוּד תּוֹרָה שֶׁלֹּא בִרְשׁוּת, שְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם. הַפּוֹעֲלִים, שַׁבָּת אֶחָת. הָעוֹנָה הָאֲמוּרָה בַּתּוֹרָה, הַטַּיָּלִין, בְּכָל יוֹם. הַפּוֹעֲלִים, שְׁתַּיִם בַּשַּׁבָּת. הַחַמָּרִים, אַחַת בַּשַּׁבָּת. הַגַּמָּלִים, אַחַת לִשְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם. הַסַּפָּנִים, אַחַת לְשִׁשָּׁה חֳדָשִׁים, דִּבְרֵי רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר:

> Students may leave their homes and travel in order to learn Torah without their wives' permission for up to thirty days, and laborers may leave their homes without their wives' permission for up to one week. The set interval defining the frequency of a husband's conjugal obligation to his wife stated in the Torah (Exodus 21:10), unless the couple stipulated otherwise, varies according to the man's occupation and proximity to his home: Men of leisure, who do not work, must engage in marital relations every day, laborers must do so twice a week, donkey drivers once a week, camel drivers once every thirty days, and sailors once every six months. This is the statement of Rabbi Eliezer.

If one had been under the impression that many of the sages don't want to suppress their sex drive for any given amount of time, unless they intentionally deprive their wives,[179] one might expect Torah scholars to return quite regularly to their wives and fulfill their conjugal duties while enjoying the satisfaction of their own needs. But the study of Torah trumps all other desires: הַתַּלְמִידִים יוֹצְאִין לְתַלְמוּד וְכוּ'. בִּרְשׁוּת כַּמָּה? כַּמָּה דְּבָעֵי – If students may leave without permission for thirty days to learn Torah, for how long may the leave with permission? For as long as they want.

Anticipating marital strife if this matter is not regulated, Rav and Rabbi Yochanan, two Amoraim from the 3rd century, disagree over the reasonable length of a Torah study retreat: One month study, one month at home, suggests Rav, whose prooftext is from 1 Chronicles 27:1—the soldiers

[179] And potentially seek or at least contemplate relief with prostitutes: B. Kiddushin 81b (Heruta the Prostitute)

in King David's army were granted leave at home every other month.[180] The beautiful Rabbi Yochanan holds that one month of study should be followed by two months at home, likely displaying his tendency for pleasure but also choosing to support his statement with a different verse:[181]

וַיִּשְׁלָחֵם לְבָנוֹנָה עֲשֶׂרֶת אֲלָפִים בַּחֹדֶשׁ חֲלִיפוֹת חֹדֶשׁ יִהְיוּ בַלְּבָנוֹן שְׁנַיִם חֳדָשִׁים בְּבֵיתוֹ וַאֲדֹנִירָם עַל־הַמַּס׃

> He (King Solomon) sent them to the Lebanon in shifts of 10,000 a month: they would spend one month in the Lebanon and two months at home. Adoniram was in charge of the forced labor.

As before, the Gemara elaborates on the underlying principle for the sages' divergent rulings: Rabbi Yochanan, who prioritizes a longer break at home chooses a verse that focuses on the husband's presence at home: A construction worker's contribution is interchangeable like the work of an employee at a conveyer belt. Thus, he can stay away from the job longer, as his individual absence is not decisive to the overall goal, the building of the Temple. Rav however prioritizes the absence of the husband for the sake of Torah study: Just as a soldier in David's army would receive a personal monthly pay that would only benefit him directly and could not be received by anyone else, so too, his Torah study can only be done by him and benefits him. The Gemara is quick to point out that while that may have worked for the wife of a soldier in King's David army, because her husband would have brought home a salary, then (as now) there is no money to be made by studying Torah. So, Rabbi Yochanan has the better argument (if one overlooks that Solomon forced his subjects to labor on his Temple without pay, but as מַס, which

[180] וְשִׁטְרֵיהֶם הַמְשָׂרְתִים אֶת־הַמֶּלֶךְ לְכֹל דְּבַר הַמַּחְלְקוֹת הַבָּאָה וְהַיֹּצֵאת חֹדֶשׁ בְּחֹדֶשׁ לְכֹל חָדְשֵׁי הַשָּׁנָה הַמַּחֲלֶקֶת הָאַחַת עֶשְׂרִים וְאַרְבָּעָה אָלֶף׃
The number of Israelites—chiefs of clans, officers of thousands and hundreds and their clerks, who served the king in all matters of the divisions, who worked in monthly shifts during all the months of the year—each division, 24,000.

[181] 1 Kings 5:28

in modern Hebrew means tax). While Rabbi Yochanan with his balance of pleasure and study[182] appreciates quantity and hopefully also quality time with the wife, the majority of the rabbis are apologetic of prolonged absences of eager Torah students who leave their wives behind for as long as they want to, if the wife agrees. All other professions listed in the mishnah, while a more reliable source of income, are lower in status to Torah study, and thus it is easier to establish a pattern of domestic visits and fulfillment of conjugal duties, since none of the professions equal the urgency of Torah study. In fact, men who have means and don't need to work are supposed to have sex and provide sexual pleasure to their wives daily. But what are men of means, or leisure, טַיָּילִין —*tayalin*? Rava and Abaye, two Babylonian Amoraim from the fourth century, disagree as usual: Abaye chaffs at Rava's suggestion that a man of leisure could maybe be a local Torah lecturer who goes home every day. But even an "adjunct" Torah scholar at the equivalent of a community college, Abaye says, is diligent in his studies and stays in the library late at night, unable to even think of his wife when he comes home exhausted. No, a man of leisure, Abaye says in another Babylonian stab at the Palestinian culture, is a pampered, wealthy man from the West, Eretz Israel.[183] Such men can satisfy their wives, and themselves, every night. Workers who have a local trade and don't need to commute are expected to have sex twice a week. Husbands who go on business trips—donkey drivers, camel drivers, and sailors, must make sure to return in certain intervals, depending on the distance they travel. When at home, all husbands have a special duty

[182] B. Bava Metzia 84a רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן הֲוָה אָזֵיל וְיָתֵיב אַשַּׁעֲרֵי טְבִילָה, אֲמַר: כִּי סָלְקָן בְּנוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל מִטְּבִילַת מִצְוָה לְפָּגְעוּ בִּי, כִּי הֵיכִי דְּלֶהֱוֵו לְהוּ בְּנֵי שַׁפִּירֵי כְּווֹתִי, גְּמִירֵי אוֹרָיְיתָא כְּווֹתִי.
Rabbi Yocḥanan would go and sit by the entrance to the ritual bath. He said to himself: "When Jewish women come up from their immersion after menstruation, they should encounter me first, so that they have beautiful children like me, and sons learned in Torah like me." There is an idea that the image upon which a woman meditates during intercourse affects the child she conceives – this will come up in a similar situation again later with Rabbi Eliezer and Imma Shalom, B. Nedarim 20b. About Rabbi Yochanan's representation and reputation see also Daniel Boyarin: Carnal Israel. Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture, University of California Press, 1993, 215-219

[183] In a rebuttal, the Gemara inserts two tales of Palestinian rabbis with extraordinary strengths and vitality.

to engage in marital intimacy on Shabbat evening, which remains colloquially known as a "double mitzvah," for fulfilling the command to—potentially—be fruitful and multiply as well as to enjoy Shabbat.

עוֹנָה שֶׁל תַּלְמִידֵי חֲכָמִים אֵימַת? אָמַר רַב יְהוּדָה אָמַר שְׁמוּאֵל: מֵעֶרֶב שַׁבָּת לְעֶרֶב שַׁבָּת. "אֲשֶׁר פִּרְיוֹ יִתֵּן בְּעִתּוֹ", אָמַר רַב יְהוּדָה, וְאִיתֵּימָא רַב הוּנָא, וְאִיתֵּימָא רַב נַחְמָן: זֶה הַמְשַׁמֵּשׁ מִטָּתוֹ מֵעֶרֶב שַׁבָּת לְעֶרֶב שַׁבָּת.

> When is the ideal time for Torah scholars to fulfill their conjugal obligations? Rav Yehuda said that Shmuel said: The appropriate time for them is from Shabbat eve to Shabbat eve, (i.e., on Friday nights.) Similarly, it is stated with regard to the verse "that bears its fruit in its season" (Psalms 1:3): Rav Yehuda said, and some say that it was Rav Huna, and some say that it was Rav Naḥman: This is referring to one who engages in marital relations, bringing forth his fruit, from Shabbat eve to Shabbat eve.[184]

And yet, several aggadot on B. Ketubot 62a-63a tell of rabbis who abandon their wives and children for the sake of Torah study for years. These stories don't explicitly condone the rabbis' behavior. There is the example of Rabbi Rehumi, who kept his wife waiting for his return in vain, until a tear fell from her eye. In that same moment, he dies when a roof collapses underneath him. The narrative detail that the moment of his demise coincides with the moment when his distressed wife, who has longed for his return, sheds a tear mirrors another story of demise, this one, on a grander scale: B. Gittin 58a records the devious scheme of an apprentice to marry the wife of his master and become rich in the process. The apprentice lends the master the money for the large ketubah payment, but when he, now married to the master's ex-wife, wants his money, the master can't pay him back.

[184] B. Ketubot 62b

אָמַר לוֹ: בֹּא וַעֲשֵׂה עִמִּי בְּחוֹבְךָ. וְהָיוּ הֵם יוֹשְׁבִים וְאוֹכְלִים וְשׁוֹתִין, וְהוּא הָיָה עוֹמֵד וּמַשְׁקֶה עֲלֵיהֶן, וְהָיוּ דְּמָעוֹת נוֹשְׁרוֹת מֵעֵינָיו וְנוֹפְלוֹת בְּכוֹסֵיהֶן. וְעַל אוֹתָהּ שָׁעָה נִתְחַתֵּם גְּזַר דִּין.

> The apprentice said to his master: Come and work off your debt with me. And they, the apprentice and his new (and the master's ex-) wife, would sit and eat and drink, while he would stand and serve them their drinks. And tears would drop from his eyes and fall into their cups, and at that time the Jewish people's sentence was sealed.

The behavior of the new couple is cruel and humiliating, and the morality of this tale seems to be that whoever causes emotional pain to their fellow community member deserves to be punished either by individual death, like Rabbi Rehumi, or by causing calamity for an entire people: The fate that was sealed refers to the fall of the town of Beitar, the first in a series of military advancements by the Romans that would ultimately end in the destruction of the Second Temple.[185] What might seem like a coincidence – a falling tear – shouldn't be brushed over, especially not when we look at poetic inspiration from the Talmud. I want to read this parallel as a statement against causing unnecessary emotional distress to anyone, and particularly to a partner one has been intimate with: avoid "cruel and inhuman treatment," as the language of grounds for divorce goes. And I want to read it as a message to the reluctant Torah students who subdue their carnal desires with ever more years away in the beit midrash: Don't wait too long to have sex with your wife, lest you or your wife die. While some of these tales do in fact end in the death of the rabbi or his wife, a particular subset of them is characterized by a magical happy ending: Wives who have become infertile during the prolonged absence of their husbands have their fertility restored, as in the case of none other than the daughter-in-law of the eminent sage Yehuda HaNasi.

[185] A cruel behavior led to the destruction of a beloved place. Love needs a place.

אָמַר רַבִּי: הֵיכִי נַעֲבֵיד, נְגָרְשָׁהּ — יֹאמְרוּ: עֲנִיָּיה זוֹ לַשָּׁוְא שִׁימְּרָה. נִינְּסֵיב אִיתְּתָא אַחֲרִיתִי — יֹאמְרוּ: זוֹ אִשְׁתּוֹ, וְזוֹ זוֹנָתוֹ. בְּעָא עֲלַהּ רַחֲמֵי וְאִיתַּסְיָא.

> Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi said: What should we do? If he divorces her, people will say: This poor woman waited and hoped for naught. If he will marry another woman to beget children, people will say: This one, who bears him children, is his wife and that one, who lives with him, is his mistress. Therefore, her husband pleaded with God to have mercy on her and she was cured.

Aggadot must be read primarily as literary compositions, and scholars dispute how much historicity can be gleaned from them.[186] But even if one doesn't believe in a miraculously divine cure from infertility, as many of us might not, one might still understand this narrative twist to convey an apologetic attitude of the rabbis and an attempt to have it both ways: To study Torah as long as they wanted and still be able to procreate (and hopefully make their wives a little less distressed as well.)

> Where biblical culture had taken desire for granted, rabbinic culture made desire itself the subject of much discussion, both as something necessary for the existence of the world and as a potentially destructive, evil force. The challenge confronting the rabbis was to channel this desire so that it might equally serve the ends of Torah study and procreation, the twin values that animated rabbinic culture. At the heart of this discourse was a profoundly ambivalent attitude toward sexuality as such, an ambivalence not found in the biblical sources.[187]

David Biale portrays the conflicted rabbinic sage as torn between desire, the command to procreate, and Torah study. Love here feels like an afterthought, if it is present at all, as Dvora Weisberg points out:

[186] See Dvora Weisberg: "Women and Torah Study in Aggadah" in Women and Judaism: New Insights and Scholarship, Frederick Greenspan, ed., NYU Press, 2009, 41-63, 45-46
[187] Biale, 35

> Ketubot 62b-63a underscores the tension between marriage and Torah study. Rabbis are portrayed first and foremost as lovers of Torah, not of their wives. … What also emerges from Talmudic stories is the powerful desire of rabbis for the Torah, which is presented as an alternative to the eroticism of marital relations.[188]

Weisberg takes a more categorical position than Biale or Sachs Zion, both of whom are men. While they don't deny the rabbis' focus on Torah study as a vessel to channel and control desires that cause them discomfort, Biale and Sachs Zion seem to leave more room for the possibility of spousal care and love: "Stipulating the frequency and quality of sexual duties within a negotiated contract is the Rabbis' primary mechanism to defend wives and to upgrade love and emotional intimacy in marriage."[189] As a woman, I appreciate the criticism of certain perspectives, prevalent to this day, that tend to explain and apologize male misconduct with a man's tortured and sensitive psyche. At the same time, I also resonate with the idea that the rabbis, their awkward eschewing or re-channeling of carnal desire notwithstanding, were mindful of healthy spousal intimacy, within the framework of their culture. After all, the Gemara states that Rabbi Yochanan's two-month leave is the preferred solution over Rav's one month.[190] And while the story of Rabbi Akiva's 24 year-long absence, with permission of his wife, flies in the face of this ruling and is, true to the zealous and effervescent nature of Rabbi Akiva, an almost intolerable self-defense for long rabbinic absences, one might find in it a kernel of recognition of his wife's suffering as well as her contribution to Akiva becoming a famous scholar: שֶׁלִּי וְשֶׁלָּכֶם — שֶׁלָּהּ הוּא שִׁבְקוּהָ, : I couldn't have done it without her, or: What I and you (his students) have in Torah knowledge is hers.[191] And despite my critique

[188] Weisberg refers to Boyarin, 215-219, and the platonic-erotic study-partnership between Rabbi Yochanan and Reish Lakish
[189] Sachs Zion, 28
[190] Biale (37) points out that the rabbis' conflicted perspective on sexuality might have been a counter-reaction to the hedonistic Roman and Greek cultures of their eras.
[191] B. Ketubot 62b-63a, and B. Nedarim 50a

of the portrayal of Rabbi Akiva and his wife, the beginning of this story does give us a rare, beautiful image of romantic love. The young couple have eloped, and the bride has been disowned by her rich father.

בְּסִיתְוָא הֲוָה גָּנוּ בֵּי תִּיבְנָא, הֲוָה קָא מְנַקֵּיט לֵיהּ תִּיבְנָא מִן מַזְיֵיהּ. אֲמַר לַהּ: אִי הֲוַאי לִי, רָמֵינָא לִיךְ יְרוּשָׁלַיִם דְּדַהֲבָא.

> In the winter they would sleep in a storehouse of straw, and Rabbi Akiva would gather strands of straw from her hair. He said to her: If I had the means I would place on your head a Jerusalem of Gold, a type of crown.[192]

For a short moment between economic worries and the calling of the beit midrash, a young Akiva and his wife seem to be living on love alone.

Now that I have looked at for *when* the rabbis scheduled lovemaking, I briefly include two stories from the rabbinic bedroom that give insight into *how* two sages performed their duties.

Pleasure and Procreation

Berakhot 62a

I appreciate how Dvora Weisberg begins the retelling of Rav Kahana in Rav's and his wife's bedroom:

"The rabbi and his wife retired for the evening. Unbeknownst to them, one of the rabbi's students was hiding under their bed."[193]

[192] B. Nedarim 50a. To be sure, the Jerusalem of Gold will be interpreted as the crown of all wealth and jewelry, Torah knowledge. But the scene still displays tenderness and affection. Another expression of love and affection is the story of the couple from Sidon, Shir HaShirim Rabbah 1:4. Both stories will be used in source sheets for a class on Love, the Rabbis, and the Talmud (see appendix)

[193] Weisberg, 41

שַׁמְעֵיהּ דְּשָׂח וְשָׂחַק וְעָשָׂה צְרָכָיו. אֲמַר לֵיהּ: דָּמֵי פּוּמֵיהּ דְּאַבָּא כִּדְלָא שָׂרִיף תַּבְשִׁילָא. אֲמַר לֵיהּ: כָּהֲנָא, הָכָא אַתְּ? פּוֹק, דְּלָאו אֹרַח אַרְעָא. אֲמַר לֵיהּ: תּוֹרָה הִיא, וְלִלְמוֹד אֲנִי צָרִיךְ

> He heard (Rav) chatting and laughing with his wife and engaging in intercourse and said to him: The mouth of Abba (Rav) is like one whom has never eaten a cooked dish (Rav was lustful). Rav said to him: Kahana, you are here? Leave, as this is an undesirable mode of behavior. Rav Kahana said to him: It is Torah, and I must learn.[194]

Behind the superficial slapstick comic, there are two perspectives conveyed here that differ depending on one 's vantage point. Dvora Weisberg is interested in gender dynamics between rabbis and their wives as well as women's overall access to Torah study. She looks primarily at the imbalance between the rabbinic esteem of spousal intimacy and an almost intimate approach to Torah study displayed in the story as an indicator for the limitation and barriers women experienced both as members of society and particularly regarding access to the beit midrash:

> Rabbis and their students are engaged in an intimate relationship, the object of their mutual desire being Torah. This relationship trumps the intimate relationship of the rabbi and his wife. When the rabbi in question confronts his student, he indicates that the student's presence is intrusive. At that moment, the three actors in the drama are triangled; the rabbi's reaction suggests that the student is the outsider while the rabbi and his wife are paired. Through his reply, "This too is Torah, and I need to learn," the student proposes a different way of seeing the relationship. He and his teacher are now allied, for together they are engaged in the study of Torah; the rabbi's wife is now the outsider. The sexual act, which is too private to be shared with a third party, is transformed; the proper behavior of a sage during the sexual act is Torah, something meant to be analyzed by student and teacher. The wife, by virtue of her gender, is not a suitable study partner for her husband; she is displaced by both Torah and her husband's student. She is now the intruder, the unwanted, unnecessary outsider.[195]

Noam Sachs Zion in turn appears more interested in mining this passage for insights about one way of rabbinic lovemaking. The term שָׂח וְשָׂחַק —*sakh v'sakhak*, an idle (or playful) conversation,

[194] B. Berakhot 62a
[195] Weisberg, 41-42

as appropriate for spousal intercourse, according to Rashi, is another rabbinic euphemism for sex.[196][197] A similar term comes up in B. Berakhot 3a, when the rabbis divide the night into various segments, mirroring the once priestly nightshift duties with what goes on now on a mundane level, and infusing the mundane with a memory of holy.

מִשְׁמָרָה רִאשׁוֹנָה חֲמוֹר נוֹעֵר, שְׁנִיָּה כְּלָבִים צוֹעֲקִים, שְׁלִישִׁית, תִּינוֹק יוֹנֵק מִשְׁדֵּי אִמּוֹ, וְאִשָּׁה מְסַפֶּרֶת עִם בַּעֲלָהּ.

> In the first watch, the donkey brays; in the second, dogs bark; and in the third people begin to rise, a baby nurses from its mother's breast and a wife converses with her husband.

Here, the word is מְסַפֶּרֶת – *mesaperet*, she talks (with) – but the connotation is the same: Pillow talk, literally, intercourse, that ideally takes place like a dialogue. Having relied on the privacy of their sleeping quarters, Rav and his wife, though she is not an active character in this episode, are engaged in lovemaking. When Rav Kahana speaks up, not only the wife but Rav, too, is annoyed and embarrassed. In Sachs Zion's read of the episode, it is primarily Rav Kahana who is unwanted and othered– as a student who judges and humiliates his teacher and breaches boundaries:

> Angrily yet also educationally, Rav tries to teach Kahana that his manner of learning Torah "is not the way of the world" (good manners), because both the secret intimacy of the marital bed and the honor of a teacher must be guarded zealously. In this case, he implies that the Torah of lovemaking is taught not by watching or eavesdropping on the master and not by entering surreptitiously and violating his personal space and the intimate sanctuary of his marriage. Rather, one must approach lovemaking by respecting the privacy of the bedroom, and therefore Rav expels Kahana forthwith."[198]

[196] Sachs Zion, 52

[197] With poetic license, I am not the first to remark that שחק sounds very close to צחק – playing and laughing go together, and in various instances in Torah, צחק appears in implicitly sexual contexts: Ishmael and Isaac (Genesis 21:9) and Isaac and Rivka (Genesis 26:8)

[198] Sachs Zion, 46

I am here primarily interested in Rav's expressive lovemaking and his positive, if maybe excessive, relation to physicality that puts him in the same camp as Rabbi Yochanan. But Weisberg's point that the wife is at best a foil in this story is significant, as it puts such joyful attitude into a more shaded perspective: Granted, Rav is making lustful foreplay, but hopefully it is also enjoyable to his wife. And while Kahana is sent away, student and teacher still engage in a debate about the nature of Torah study, a debate that excludes the wife. And Rav, who is protective of his and only by extension his wife's privacy, seems to have regarded sexual pleasure foremost as a male privilege and known how to make the most out of halakhic loopholes, as Sachs Zion shows in his chapter on "Talmudic Proprieties of Pillow Talk:"

רַב כִּי מִקְּלַע לְדַרְשִׁישׁ, מַכְרֵיז: מַאן הָוְיָא לְיוֹמָא. רַב נַחְמָן בַּד מִקְּלַע לְשַׁבְנְצִיב, מַכְרֵיז: מַאן הָוְיָא לְיוֹמָא

When Rav happened to be in the city of Darshish, he would proclaim: 'Who wishes to be my wife for the night?'[199]

Rav endorses a sensuous view of lovemaking that is already found in Shir HaShirim:

בָּאתִי לְגַנִּי אֲחֹתִי כַלָּה אָרִיתִי מוֹרִי עִם־בְּשָׂמִי אָכַלְתִּי יַעְרִי עִם־דִּבְשִׁי שָׁתִיתִי יֵינִי עִם־חֲלָבִי אִכְלוּ רֵעִים שְׁתוּ וְשִׁכְרוּ דּוֹדִים:

I have come to my garden, my sister, bride,
I have gathered my myrrh with my perfume
I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey,
I have drunk my wine with my milk.
Eat friends, and drink,
be drunk with loving.[200]

Yet while he propagates the importance of chemistry between both partners as one guarantee for *shalom bayit*, domestic harmony,[201] I wonder how he would react if his wife refused marital

[199] Sachs Zion, 53 (B. Yoma 18b)
[200] Shir HaShirim 5:1
[201] Sachs Zion 54-56. ("No one can live with a snake in the same basket," B. Ketubot 77a)

relations because she finds him repulsive. Would he offer to pay her the ketubah, or just send her away without money after having made her wait for a divorce as long as he possibly could in order to punish her?

Nedarim 20a-b

Rav's Babylonian lavishness stands in contrast to the recorded asceticism of the Palestinian Rabbi Eliezer. Earlier, I mentioned an example where Mar Zutra endorses forcing a woman to have sex with a husband she finds repulsive because fine Torah scholars might spring from that union.[202] Rabbi Eliezer now forces himself to quick sex in the dark in order to produce unblemished children:

שָׁאֲלוּ אֶת אִימָּא שָׁלוֹם: מִפְּנֵי מָה בָּנַיִךְ יְפֵיפִין בְּיוֹתֵר? אָמְרָה לָהֶן: אֵינוֹ מְסַפֵּר עִמִּי לֹא בִּתְחִלַּת הַלַּיְלָה, וְלֹא בְּסוֹף הַלַּיְלָה, אֶלָּא בַּחֲצוֹת הַלַּיְלָה. וּכְשֶׁהוּא מְסַפֵּר, מְגַלֶּה טֶפַח וּמְכַסֶּה טֶפַח, וְדוֹמֶה עָלָיו כְּמִי שֶׁכְּפָאוֹ שֵׁד. וְאָמַרְתִּי לוֹ: מָה טַעַם? וְאָמַר לִי: כְּדֵי שֶׁלֹּא אֶתֵּן אֶת עֵינַי בְּאִשָּׁה אַחֶרֶת, וְנִמְצְאוּ בָּנָיו בָּאִין לִידֵי מַמְזֵרוּת.

> They asked Imma Shalom, the wife of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus: Why are your children so beautiful? She said to them: My husband does not converse with me (he doesn't have intercourse) at the beginning of the night nor at the end of the night, but rather at midnight. And when he converses with me, he reveals a handbreadth of my body and covers a handbreadth, and he covers himself up as though he were being coerced by a demon. I asked him: Why are you behaving like this? And he said to me: So that I will not set my eyes on another woman, (nobody will be out in the middle of the night, and so I am not tempted to think about another woman,) because if a man thinks about another woman during sexual intercourse with his wife, his children consequently come close to receiving a *mamzer* status (i.e., illegitimate birth out of wedlock.)

Similar thinking made Rabbi Yochanan sit at the exit of the mikvah[203]—but because women only receive the seed of Israel and do not sire the offspring, the problem of *mamzerut* seems irrelevant here, at least to Rabbi Yochanan. The tortured attitude of Rabbi Eliezer reveals another aspect of rabbinic attitude about sexuality: It is not that they didn't have desires—women for example were

[202] Ketubot 63b
[203] Compare footnote 180, about Bava Metzia 84a

prohibited to sing in public because otherwise the easy-to-excite rabbis might not be able to control themselves—it is that they had to build fences around themselves because they couldn't trust they would find a balanced constrained without this scaffolding.[204] For certain people it is always easier to follow rules imposed from the outside rather than following their own moral compass. Thus, Rabbi Eliezer must deprive himself, and by extension his wife, of conversations during any moment of the night. And I wonder how Rav kept the many one-night-wives in Darshish out of his imagination while gulping up the tasteful dishes served by his wife.[205]

Both attitudes represent extremes. Arguably there have always been men, and by extension talmudic sages, who maintained a more tempered and healthier relationship toward sexuality and desires. At the same time, both these extremes have shaped Jewish law and rabbinic perspectives. Onah and niddah regulate the rhythm of marital sex life in a back and forth between duty and prohibition. A wife must give consent before the husband "possesses her sexually," and Rav's approach to marital intercourse is seen as a preferred way to arouse a wife and please her.[206] "It is frequently argued that rabbinic Judaism represents a moderate, this-worldly affirmation of sexuality," writes David Biale. And yet, Rabbi Eliezer and Rav Kahana share a strong distaste for carnality, albeit for different reasons: Rabbi Eliezer seems primarily conflicted with his inner demons, at unease with his desires and physical needs. Rav Kahana in turn appears cold and dismissive, complaining that Rav doesn't direct his passions enough to the superior activity of Torah study—which brings this chapter back to Weisberg's original thesis and argumentation:

[204] See also Abaye as a preoccupied chaperone in B. Sukkah 52a
[205] For a nuanced and vivid take on Rav in Darshish, see Ruth Calderon: A Bride for One Night. Talmud Tales, JPS, 2014, 57-65
[206] Sachs Zion, 52

> … in excluding women from the study of Torah, rabbinic culture marked women as Other. While this is not the only way in which rabbinic Judaism differentiates between men and women, it is one of the most powerful. Rabbinic culture idealizes the study of Torah, naming it the highest calling and most rewarding endeavor open to Jews. In doing so, it dismisses, to a greater or lesser degree, those who do not engage in the study of Torah—[207]

—in this case, women. Furthermore, and relatedly, Torah study functioned as the fence around unwanted excessive sexual desires:

> For the rabbis, the association between proper sexuality and study of Torah was more than just an arbitrary analogy. In similar fashion, a dominant rabbinical faction banned women from the study of Torah on the grounds that it would teach them "lasciviousness." In this culture, as in every other, the way sexuality is constructed is a map for the hierarchies of the society as a whole. For the rabbis, the dominant role in sexuality and study of Torah were intimately, indeed inseparably, linked.[208]

This inseparable linkage constitutes the merging of concepts of holiness and profanity. It significantly influences one strand of rabbinic thinking about redemption and lovemaking, which will be discussed in the following chapter.

Separation and Heartbreak

The notion of love has been largely absent from the previous pages about rabbinic concepts of sexuality and marital intimacy. Maybe it has lurked in the background, indirectly, by inference, or by assumption. I believe that along with halakha, internal conflicts, obsession with Torah study, and the self-imposed duty to procreate, the rabbis also had genuine feelings and emotions. While the frame of this Capstone doesn't allow for a broad survey, and a relevant extensive survey has been done by Noam Sachs Zion,[209] I am supporting my opinion at the end of this chapter by listing

[207] Weisberg, 42
[208] Biale, 36
[209] Noam Sachs Zion: Talmudic Marital Dramas, A multi-volume series devoted to Talmudic tales and laws about interpersonal love, Zion Holiday Publications, 2018.

a few statements that express heartbreak and devastation and the loss of a beloved partner, or in passages that attest to feelings of "true" romantic love. I have previously cited the aggadah about the childless couple from Sidon, whose love was stronger than the command to procreate:

אֲתוֹן גַּבֵּי רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן יוֹחָאי בָּעַיִן לְמִשְׁתַּבְקָא דֵּין מִדֵּין, אֲמַר לְהוֹן חַייבוֹן כְּשֵׁם שֶׁנִּזְדַּוַּגְתֶּם זֶה לָזֶה בְּמַאֲכָל וּבְמִשְׁתֶּה, כָּךְ אֵין אַתֶּם מִתְפָּרְשִׁים אֶלָּא מִתּוֹךְ מַאֲכָל וּמִשְׁתֶּה. הָלְכוּ בְּדָרְכָיו וְעָשׂוּ לְעַצְמָן יוֹם טוֹב וְעָשׂוּ סְעוּדָה גְּדוֹלָה וְשִׂבְּרַתּוּ יוֹתֵר מִדַּאי, בֵּיוָן שֶׁנִּתְיַשְּׁבָה דַּעְתּוֹ עָלָיו אָמַר לָהּ בִּתִּי רְאִי כָּל חֵפֶץ טוֹב שֶׁיֵּשׁ לִי בַּבַּיִת, וּטְלִי אוֹתוֹ וּלְכִי לְבֵית אָבִיךְ, מֶה עָשְׂתָה הִיא, לְאַחַר שֶׁיָּשַׁן רָמְזָה לַעֲבָדֶיהָ וּלְשִׁפְחוֹתֶיהָ וְאָמְרָה לָהֶם, שָׂאוּהוּ בַּמִּטָּה וּקְחוּ אוֹתוֹ וְהוֹלִיכוּהוּ לְבֵית אַבָּא. בַּחֲצִי הַלַּיְלָה נִנְעַר מִשְּׁנָתֵיהּ בֵּיוָן דְּפָג חַמְרֵיהּ, אָמַר לָהּ בִּתִּי הֵיכָן אֲנִי נָתוּן, אָמְרָה לֵיהּ בְּבֵית אַבָּא, אָמַר לָהּ מַה לִּי לְבֵית אָבִיךְ, אָמְרָה לֵיהּ וְלֹא כָךְ אָמַרְתָּ לִי בָּעֶרֶב, כָּל חֵפֶץ טוֹב שֶׁיֵּשׁ בְּבֵיתִי טְלִי אוֹתוֹ וּלְכִי לְבֵית אָבִיךְ. אֵין חֵפֶץ טוֹב לִי בָּעוֹלָם יוֹתֵר מִמָּךְ.

> They came to Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai and sought to separate from one another. He said to them: 'By your lives, just as you came together with food and drink, so too, you shall separate only with food and drink.' They followed his advice and made a celebration for themselves, made a great feast, and she got him to drink in excess. When he was in good spirits, he said to her: 'My daughter, see any good item that I have in the house, take it, and go to your father's house.' What did she do? After he fell asleep, she motioned to her servants and maidservants and said to them: 'Carry him in his bed and take him to my father's house.' At midnight he awakened from his slumber after his wine had abated. He said to her: 'My daughter, where am I?' She said to him: 'In my father's house.' He said to her: 'What am I doing in your father's house?' She said to him: 'Is this not what you said to me in the evening: See any good item that I have in the house, take it, and go to your father's house? There is no item in this world better for me than you.'[210]

This story both expresses heartbreak and love. Because it is a rabbinic tale, the love will be rewarded with sudden fertility, but the statement of the woman expresses tenderness and love before the fact.

If marriage is considered a holy and sacred contract that parallels the holiness of a relationship with God, then, within the logic of that parallelism, the dissolution of such a union can be experienced as painful as a dissolution of a union with God. To be sure, often there were and are cases where divorce was or is sought after precisely because the union is unbearable, unfortunate,

[210] Shir HaShirim 1:4

or unwanted, and the end of the relationship constitutes a welcome endpoint. And yet, it shouldn't go unmentioned that the end of B. Gittin, the tractate dealing with divorce proceedings, ends with the stark image of a crying altar.

דְּאָמַר רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר: כָּל הַמְגָרֵשׁ אִשְׁתּוֹ רִאשׁוֹנָה – אֲפִילּוּ מִזְבֵּחַ מוֹרִיד עָלָיו דְּמָעוֹת, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: ”וְזֹאת שֵׁנִית תַּעֲשׂוּ, כַּסּוֹת דִּמְעָה אֶת מִזְבַּח ה’, בְּכִי וַאֲנָקָה מֵאֵין עוֹד פְּנוֹת אֶל הַמִּנְחָה, וְלָקַחַת רָצוֹן מִיֶּדְכֶם. וַאֲמַרְתֶּם: עַל מָה? עַל כִּי ה’ הֵעִיד בֵּינְךָ וּבֵין אֵשֶׁת נְעוּרֶיךָ, אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה בָּגַדְתָּה בָּהּ, וְהִיא חֲבֶרְתְּךָ וְאֵשֶׁת בְּרִיתֶךָ”.

> As Rabbi Elazar says: With regard to anyone who divorces his first wife, even the altar sheds tears over him, as it is stated: “And this, besides, did you do: cause to cover with tears the Lord’s altar, with weeping and groans, because there is no more turning to the grain offering or accepting with favor from your hand. And you say: Why? Because the Lord bore witness between you and the wife of your youth. It was you who betrayed her when she was your friend and your covenanted wife.” (Malachi 2:13–14).

Critical voices might detect bigotry and point out that here, a divorce primarily constitutes a violation of a holy union, and that the rabbis once again shift the realm of marriage into the realm of God: Abandoning the “wife of one’s youth”[211] is equated with abandoning God, as the prophets Hosea, Jeremiah, and Malachi have expressed in several passages.[212] And while I don’t disagree, with poetic license I do see beauty and sensuality in an image like the one Jeremiah 2:2:

זָכַרְתִּי לָךְ חֶסֶד נְעוּרַיִךְ אַהֲבַת כְּלוּלֹתָיִךְ לֶכְתֵּךְ אַחֲרַי בַּמִּדְבָּר בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא זְרוּעָה׃

> I recalled for you the kindness of your youth,
> your bridal love,
> your coming after Me in the wilderness,
> in an unsown land.

A tendency for zealotry can be embedded into poetry and romance. In the realm of art, that might be inspiring and productive. In our day-to-day existence, it is a fine line to walk between

[211] Conversely, there also exists the longing for the “husband of one’s youth” (Joel 1:8, part of the Kinnah Eli Zion, chanted on Tisha b’Av): בבתולה חגרת־שק על־בעל נעוריה : Howl like a virgin girl clad in sackcloth over the husband of her youth.
[212] Jeremiah 2:2; Hosea 2:16-17; Malachi 2:13-14

oversimplifying exaggeration and the strength to not lose oneself in feelings, to maintain a sense of reality and dignity. But the Torah's imagery doesn't function like that, nor do poetry, or romance. Realistically, a second wife might in fact be a better partner than the first. And realistically, as we get older, we begin to mourn a certain vibrancy that might be associated with the "love of our youth." In old photos, we see our young faces beaming with excitement and promises that the course of time has tempered, and it can make us nostalgic, even when we're perfectly happy and grateful for where life has taken us. If the poets of Tanakh and the rabbis of the Talmud had not known this viscerally, they would not have been able to use images from the realm of human love, heartbreak, and longing to describe their love and longing for God and the fear of heartbreak at the prospect of losing divine intimacy. Whatever one might object against their motivation to turn toward spirituality and Torah study, and away from carnal desires and romantic passions, I believe that the power of the images they created is decidedly life-affirming and love-embracing. And they knew that love, whether human or divine, can't be forced. I suspect that most people who made the painful experience of unrequited love, of trying to hasten a union that is not meant to be[213], will resonate with the wisdom of Shir HaShirim:

הִשְׁבַּעְתִּי אֶתְכֶם בְּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַ͏ִם בִּצְבָאוֹת אוֹ בְּאַיְלוֹת הַשָּׂדֶה אִם־תָּעִירוּ וְאִם־תְּעוֹרְרוּ אֶת־הָאַהֲבָה עַד שֶׁתֶּחְפָּץ

I make you swear, O daughters of Jerusalem,
by the deer or the gazelles of the field:
that you shall not rouse nor stir love
until it pleases!

[213] B. Moed Katan 18b

The moment when love finally pleases and awakens, when the desired lover—or God—turns their face to us is often depicted in literary or religious imagery as a moment when a new dawn rises over unsown paths: A moment of redemption.

Selected Poems and Songs for Text Study: Love

Yehuda Amichai: In the Middle of the Century, Jacob and the Angel, On This Evening and Returning from Ein Gedi, in Yehuda Amichai, Love Poems / Shirei Ahava, Schocken, 1986, 36; 12; 44; 20

Haim Nachman Bialik: Take Me Under Your Wing, in Haim Nachman Bialik, Selected Poems, Dvir 1981, translated by Ruth Nevo
Version sung by Arik Einstein

Leonard Cohen: Dance me to the End of Love, Famous Blue Raincoat, Take this Longing, on The Essential Leonard Cohen, Sony, 1984

Abraham Ibn Ezra: Lekha Eli Teshukati
Various versions on The National Library of Israel
https://www.nli.org.il/en/discover/music/jewish-music/piyut/piyut/lekha-eli-teshukati

Shlomo Ibn Gabirol: Shachar Avakeshcha, in: Siddur Lev Shalem, The Rabbinical Assembly, 2016, 101

Lea Goldberg: A Hike in the Hills, in: Lea Goldberg: Selected Poems and Drama, translated by Rachel Tzvia Back, Toby Press 2005, 174

Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Month of Tammuz in the Fields, in: Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Ineffable Name of God, translated from the Yiddish by Morton M. Leifman, continuum, 2005, 153

Julia Knobloch: Yedid Nefesh, in: Julia Knobloch: Book of Failed Salvation, Ben Yehuda Press, 2021

Chapter 4: Redemption

"The resurrection of the dead is one of the cardinal principles established by Moses our teacher. A person who does not believe in this principle has no real religion, certainly not Judaism," writes Maimonides in his Introduction to Perek Helek, the 10th chapter of M. Sanhedrin, and he concludes his introductory words by listing his thirteen attributes of faith, which contain, as the last attribute, the belief in the resurrection of the dead.[214]

I had planned to connect the beginning of this chapter with the end of the preceding one, to begin with reflections on how erotic, romantic love can afford one possible experience redemption. But I am sitting down to write this chapter in the immediate wake of the return of the remains of Oded Lifshitz z"l; Ariel Bibas z"l; and Kfir Bibas z"l from Hamas captivity to Israel, waiting for the return of Shiri Bibas z"l. Would that it be possible that the dead could not only be resurrected on some future day, but revived here and now; that their lives be restored, returned! Would that it be possible to turn back time to a never-ending October 6th, 2023! Would that death be swallowed up forever, and that God wipe the tears from every face, and that the disgrace of His people was taken off from all the earth![215]

How can one not yearn for life's triumph over death. Ariel and Kfir will not be un-pelted, un-choked and they will not run over marbled stone tiles on Kibbutz Nir into the arms of their mother and

[214] Maimonides: Introduction to Perek Helek, 13-14; 23 (via the website of the Maimonides Heritage Center: https://www.mhcny.org/qt/1005.pdf). I also looked at the version on Sefaria.
[215] Isaiah 25:8

father ever again. Oded Lifshitz will not drive sick Gazan children to Israeli hospital ever again or stand in his cactus garden together with his wife Yocheved. My friend Gilad Kfir, who was murdered in the Gaza envelope on October 7th, will never again take beautiful wildlife photos in Africa or play with his cats. As trite as it sounds, it is so simple to experience happiness. Looking at the laughing faces of people who are now dead makes the sweetness and preciousness of being alive tenfold clear. The amount of devastation, of shattered happiness, of the many tears streaming down every face that weigh on many hearts these days is staggering. As Rav Yosef Kanefsky, echoing Kohelet,[216] wrote in a message to his Los Angeles Bnai David Judea congregation: "Because that which has been broken will never be fixed. That which has been torn will never be repaired." It is a healthy human impulse, to want to fix what has been broken, to regain the state of bliss of a summer day in the back yard. To want to make the world a better place, to redeem, to free the captives. In several instances in the Bible, the concept of redemption is associated with the return to a previous, original, untainted state; with unconstrained space and unbound light, with freedom, liberty, and sovereignty,[217] as it is expressed in the song Acheinu, Our Brothers, that became a staple addition to the MiSheberach section of synagogue services, asking for the Israeli hostages to be brought home:

אַחֵינוּ כָּל בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל, הַנְּתוּנִים בְּצָרָה וּבַשִּׁבְיָה, הָעוֹמְדִים בֵּין בַּיָּם וּבֵין בַּיַּבָּשָׁה, הַמָּקוֹם יְרַחֵם עֲלֵיהֶם, וְיוֹצִיאֵם מִצָּרָה לִרְוָחָה, וּמֵאֲפֵלָה לְאוֹרָה, וּמִשִּׁעְבּוּד לִגְאֻלָּה, הַשְׁתָּא בַּעֲגָלָא וּבִזְמַן קָרִיב.

> As for our brothers and sisters, the whole house of Israel, who are given over to trouble or captivity, whether they abide on the sea or on the dry land: May the All-Present have mercy upon them, and bring them forth from trouble to enlargement, from darkness to light, and from subjection to redemption, now, speedily, and soon.

[216] Ecclesiastes 1:15
[217] Leviticus 25:8; Isaiah 43:1-8; Isaiah 61:1ff

A coupon can be redeemed, an unkind action balanced with kindness: Redemption is often associated with a certain price that must be paid, a sacrifice that must be given for the return of someone or something held dear: The living hostages so far handed over by Hamas so far were holding coupons in their hands, a "decision of release", החלטת שיחרור: One life—or the remains thereof—for a batch of imprisoned Palestinians, some maybe innocent, but many of them terrorists. This balance cannot be settled, and there won't be a return to a previous state for the slaughtered, nor for the ones left behind. What could redemption possibly look like for Yarden Bibas, or Eli Sharabi?

It is not necessary to experience similarly devastating loss and pain in order to wish for a different, better world. Arguably, humans have always imagined an existence without suffering and sorrow, unaffected by the passage of time that inevitably turns us into withered blossoms, fleeting clouds, or flickering dreams.[218] Music and art have been created that deeply touch the nerve yearning for immortality, for the "moment of a lifetime" and beyond, לעולם ועד, *le'olam va'ed*. The idea of redemption is layered and multifaceted, and while the word is used in secular contexts as well, it is primarily associated with the realm of religion. Religions offer frameworks to make life most meaningful and purposeful, as well as shape an acceptance of the finality of death. Certain religious concepts of redemption are clearly defined, like the Christian idea of Jesus as the redeemer who through his death—God's sacrifice of God's son—released humankind from the burden of sin and individual repentance. In Judaism, the words ישועה and גאולה, *yishua* and *geula*, are traditionally translated as salvation and redemption respectively and seem to intersect

[218] Echoing Unetaneh Tokef

semantically, even though some Jewish English speakers tend to avoid using "salvation" for its perceived closeness to Christianity. Be that as it may, both roots denote deliverance from oppression and suffering (as for example in their interchangeable use in Shirat HaYam, the Song at the Sea).[219] However, *geula* seems to be the word used to specify the destination of that deliverance: The Land of Israel. Thus, it is often taught that the Exodus story told on Passover is about the redemption of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and their journey toward the "Promised Land," the Land of Canaan that will become the Land of Israel. The redemption narrative however begins earlier, arguably with Genesis 12:1, when Abraham sets out from the east to the place that God will show him. Judaism's idea of redemption is unthinkable without that place. Yet the redemption narrative never really ends, neither on a historic timeline for the Jews until these days of rising blatant anti-Semitism, nor in Tanakh: If the redemption narrative, that "quest for holiness" as I called it in Chapter 1, is about reaching the land, then the foundational canonic book of Judaism, the Tanakh hints at the cyclical nature of this narrative: At several significant moments throughout the Bible, the Israelites find themselves outside their promised portion: The five books of Moses end with the Israelites at the banks of the Jordan River. Former Prophets, Joshua to 2 Kings, ends with the exile in Babylon. The section Isaiah-Jeremiah-Ezekiel ends with Ezekiel's vision of a rebuilt Temple, while the prophet is in exile. 2 Chronicles ends with the Cyrus edict and the end of the Babylonian exile:

כֹּה־אָמַר כּוֹרֶשׁ
מֶלֶךְ פָּרַס כָּל־מַמְלְכוֹת הָאָרֶץ נָתַן לִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהוּא־פָקַד עָלַי לִבְנוֹת־לוֹ בַיִת בִּירוּשָׁלַם אֲשֶׁר בִּיהוּדָה מִי־
בָכֶם מִכָּל־עַמּוֹ יְהוָה אֱלֹהָיו עִמּוֹ וְיָעַל׃

[219] Exodus 15:1 and 2

> Thus said Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth has the Lord God of the heavens given me, and He has charged me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever be among you of all His people, may the Lord his God be with him, and let him go up."[220]

It is significant for an understanding of the Jewish concept of *geula* that the Hebrew Bible ends with the prospect of returning to the place of holiness, the place of redemption: Eretz Israel.

Emergence of the Messianic Idea in Judaism

In the Bible, and especially later in rabbinic exegesis, there are overlapping yet also simultaneously contradicting concepts that describe deliverance from suffering and the awaiting of a new age, a better world, a union with God. The term "redemption," like an umbrella term, encompasses terms such as *Yemot HaMashiach*, the age of the Messiah, *Techiyat HaMetim*, the resurrection of the dead, and *OlamHaBa*, the world to come. Neither conditions the other, although arguably, if there were a timeline, the age of the Messiah might be the first to materialize.

Israel Knohl has defined two different perspectives that have influenced the emergence of a messianic idea in Judaism.[221] The first one goes back to the 8th century BCE, when the prophet Isaiah saw his country go to ruin because of mismanagement, corruption, and power dynamics in the Middle East. Isaiah was disappointed in King Ahaz and hoped for a better leader, who would restore the glory of the days of King David. He prophesied about the birth of a child who would

[220] 2 Chronicles 36:23
[221] Israel Knohl: The Messiah Confrontation. Pharisees versus Sadducees and the Death of Jesus, University of Nebraska Press 2022, 1-14

take King Ahaz's throne and be a known as "wondrous councilor, divine warrior, eternal father, prince of peace."[222] Knohl sees in this prophecy the seed for a messianic figure as king:

> And so, while the particular word "Messiah" and the ritual of anointing that appear in the Psalms and in the biblical descriptions of coronations are missing from Isaiah's prophecies, nevertheless I call (this) prophecy … a messianic prophecy, for I understand messianism to mean the expectation of an exalted figure who will appear in the future and establish 'justice, righteousness, and peace without end.' A figure of this kind is at the heart of many biblical prophecies that, even if they do not speak specifically of a Messiah, anticipate the notion that in the course of Jewish history will come to be called the messianic idea.[223]

The second early biblical concept of the restitution of better days—and intimation of salvation—is represented by the northern prophet Hosea. Like the southern prophet Isaiah, Hosea was deeply frustrated with the government, the northern kingdom, but unlike Isaiah, who conjured up a messianic figure restoring the glory of the house of David, and with that the fortunes of the Israelites, Hosea came to a diametrically opposed conclusion: He adamantly rejected the institution of monarchy (Davidic or any other line) and called for its total prohibition.[224] By extension, Hosea radically opposed the idea of a redeeming figure and preached to rely exclusively on God's power, rejecting "any reliance on human power, whether that of a foreign country or of an Israelite king. For Hosea, "the only savior was God," writes Knohl and cites this verse from Hosea 13:4:

וְאָנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם וֵאלֹהִים זוּלָתִי לֹא תֵדָע וּמוֹשִׁיעַ אַיִן בַּלְתִּי׃

Yet I am the Lord your God ever since the land of Egypt
and no God save me shall you know, and no rescuer except for Me.

[222] Isaiah 9:5 פֶּלֶא יוֹעֵץ אֵל גִּבּוֹר אֲבִי־עַד שַׂר־שָׁלוֹם
[223] Knohl, 13
[224] Knohl, 15

Hosea, the first and "most antimonarchical position to be found in the Bible," also introduced the use of sexual and erotic imagery to describe the relationship between God and Israel that would inform midrashic exegesis, ancient piyyutim, and Hebrew/Jewish poetry to this day. While he often lashed out against the unfaithful "whoring" wife in bitter language that can feel misogynistic, Hosea also created more tender images of intimacy and commitment, for example the verses still said at Jewish weddings today,[225] or the idea of a loving reunion in the desert, maybe the kernel of the image of lovers on a parched desert path that Jeremiah would later develop:

אֲנִי יְדַעְתִּיךָ בַּמִּדְבָּר בְּאֶרֶץ תַּלְאֻבוֹת.

> I knew you in the wilderness, in a parched land.[226]

The same image is found earlier in the book of Hosea, in 2:16-17:

לָכֵן הִנֵּה אָנֹכִי מְפַתֶּיהָ וְהֹלַכְתִּיהָ הַמִּדְבָּר וְדִבַּרְתִּי עַל־לִבָּהּ: וְנָתַתִּי לָהּ אֶת־כְּרָמֶיהָ מִשָּׁם וְאֶת־עֵמֶק עָכוֹר לְפֶתַח תִּקְוָה וְעָנְתָה שָׁמָּה כִּימֵי נְעוּרֶיהָ וּכְיוֹם עֲלוֹתָהּ מֵאֶרֶץ־מִצְרָיִם:

> Therefore, I am about to beguile her, and will lead her to the wilderness, and speak to her very heart. And I will give her from there her vineyards and the Valley of Achor an opening to hope
> And she shall sing out there as in the days of her youth, as on the day she came up from the land of Egypt.[227]

This image, of the beloved coming up from the desert, is mirrored in Shir HaShirim 3:6, and 8:5:

[225] Hosea 2:21-22. The loving reunion between God and Israel leads to the land blooming and yielding grain and wine in the ensuing verses, a common messianic or redemptive image: If God and Israel are lovers, the land thrives.
[226] Hosea 13:5
[227] From here the name of the Israeli town Petach Tikvah is derived. For another allusion to hope as revival see my discussion of Ezekiel 37:11 further below.

מִי זֹאת עֹלָה מִן־הַמִּדְבָּר מִתְרַפֶּקֶת עַל־דּוֹדָהּ

Who is this (she) coming up from the desert, leaning on her lover?

Midrash Shir HaShirim Zuta,[228] Rashi, and Sforno interpret the ascent of these two lovers from the desert as the Jewish people clinging either to a messianic figure or God, after receiving the Torah on Sinai and approaching the land of Israel, the original and final destination of the redemption narrative. Many centuries after Isaiah and Hosea, the two concepts of a redeemer and a loving, intimate relationship between God and Israel had merged.

[228] מדרש זוטא על שיר השירים רות איכה וקוהלת, נדפס מחדש בתל אביב, Salomon Buber, first printed in Levov, 1896, reprinted in Tel Aviv, 26; 36 (further: Midrash Zuta)

B. Sanhedrin: Perek Helek: A Portion of Redemption

The pages B. Sanhedrin 90b-107b comment on M. Sanhedrin 10:1, the beginning of the last chapter of Tractate Sanhedrin, known as Perek Helek, the Chapter of the Portion.[229] Sanhedrin, named after the rabbinical court in ancient Israel, is part of the order of Nezikim (Damages) and deals primarily with secular laws and the justice system in general.

As has been expressed before, Judaism is firmly concerned with matters of this world, while at the same time it entertains the notion of a different, not yet realized, intangible and ultimately unknown world. Such a world can be interpreted as this world in a dialectical process of constant perfection (the social justice bend of "tikkun olam"), as a poetic-erotic-mystical discourse and artistic expression, or as a faithful anticipation of a union of the soul with the divine after death. Reflecting the parallelism of this world and a world beyond, the last chapter of Sanhedrin with its focus on legislation ends in a turn to the wondrous and metaphorical, the non-rational, poetic realm of faith not in earthly jurisprudence but in divine justice in the world to come:

M. Sanhedrin 10:1

כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל יֵשׁ לָהֶם חֵלֶק לָעוֹלָם הַבָּא, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (ישעיה ס) וְעַמֵּךְ כֻּלָּם צַדִּיקִים לְעוֹלָם יִירְשׁוּ אָרֶץ נֵצֶר מַטָּעַי מַעֲשֵׂה יָדַי לְהִתְפָּאֵר. וְאֵלּוּ שֶׁאֵין לָהֶם חֵלֶק לָעוֹלָם הַבָּא, הָאוֹמֵר אֵין תְּחִיַּת הַמֵּתִים מִן הַתּוֹרָה, וְאֵין תּוֹרָה מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם, וְאֶפִּיקוֹרֹס. רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא אוֹמֵר, אַף הַקּוֹרֵא בַסְּפָרִים הַחִיצוֹנִים, וְהַלּוֹחֵשׁ עַל הַמַּכָּה וְאוֹמֵר (שמות טו) כָּל הַמַּחֲלָה אֲשֶׁר שַׂמְתִּי בְמִצְרַיִם לֹא אָשִׂים עָלֶיךָ כִּי אֲנִי ה' רֹפְאֶךָ. אַבָּא שָׁאוּל אוֹמֵר, אַף הַהוֹגֶה אֶת הַשֵּׁם בְּאוֹתִיּוֹתָיו:

All of the Jewish people, even sinners and those who are liable to be executed with a court-imposed death penalty, have a share in the World-to-Come, as it is stated: "And your people, all of them righteous, shall forever possess the land, the shoot I have planted, my handiwork in which to glory." (Isaiah 60:21). And these are the exceptions, the people who have no share in the World-to-Come, even when they fulfilled many mitzvot: One who says: There is no resurrection of the dead derived from the Torah, and one who says: The Torah did not originate from Heaven, and an "apikorus," who treats Torah scholars and the Torah they teach with contempt. Rabbi Akiva says: Also included in the exceptions are one who reads external literature, and one who whispers

[229] On the discrepancy between the numbering of mishnayic and talmudic chapters see the Soncino commentary on Tractate Sanhedrin, Chapter 11, University Press, Oxford, 1935, 601

invocations over a wound and says as an invocation for healing: "All the sickness that I put upon Egypt, I will not put upon you, for I am the Lord your healer." (Exodus 15:26). By doing so, he shows contempt for the sanctity of the name of God and therefore has no share in the World-to-Come. Abba Shaul says: Also included in the exceptions is one who pronounces the ineffable name of God as it is written, with its letters.

While I am citing here the entire mishnah, I will only look at a few selected sugyot that deal with the resurrection of the dead, the messianic times, and rabbinic descriptions of the world to come. What is striking throughout the rabbinic debates is that while their motivation is theologically dogmatic— a selection of those who will have some sort of reward in a world to come and those who won't—detailed technicalities of the halakhic determination processes are largely absent on these pages. Rather, the pages are filled with aggadot as well as minimally commented or even unprobed listings of rabbinic voices and opinions on the matter of the resurrection of the dead and the world to come. Indeed, Maimonides categorizes this chapter to be aggadic in essence. He differentiates between various approaches of its interpretation: Taking every word literally and for granted is just as "foolish" and "deplorable" as is taking the content literally while rejecting its probability and ridiculing the rabbis for seemingly taking it at face value.[230] Rather, he defends an approach that understands "the legends of the Rabbis to be allegories, human language meant to convey divine truth."[231] He does not, however, describe how to interpret the allegories, and throughout his introduction, his position remains unclear. It almost feels as if when a sharp mind like Maimonides wants to profess a relationship with the divine and affirm faith in things beyond his reach, he must accept compromises in consistency and gaps in knowledge or articulation: He states that all humans "must die, and their bodies decompose"[232]—while fervently postulating

[230] Maimonides, Introduction, 6-7
[231] Joshua Kulp's commentary on M. Sanhedrin 10:1
[232] Maimonides, Introduction, 14

faith in the idea of resurrection. This is an example for the struggle between intellect and faith. Defining the inexplicable as "allegories" or "metaphors" can feel unsatisfactory. And yet it might be the only way humans have to relate to a deeper truth that can be viscerally sensed but not rendered in words. Poetry offers a path leading deeper into the thicket, or toward the clearing in the forest, but ultimately also must bow down to the ungraspable and unrevealed.[233]

Techiyat HaMetim, Resurrection of the Dead

ברוך אתה י׳י מחיה המתים

Blessed are you, God, who resurrects the dead.[234]

Traditionally, Jews affirm this belief thrice daily in the Amidah's Gevurot blessing that praises God's mighty powers. Citing the desire to only say words that reflect what can be rationally thought to be true or possible, Reform Judaism has eliminated that phrase and substituted it with הכול, *hakol*, "everything": Blessed are you, God, who gives life to everything. While this solution circumvents the pronunciation of a belief in resurrection and might sound more rationally palatable, the substitution misses a point that is a core characteristic of belief in God to begin with: To faith, there will always be an element that can't be proven rationally, otherwise, how could it be faith? Asked differently, how can someone with a rational mind believe in or praise God at all, when God's existence cannot be scientifically proven? Why maintain a relationship with God at all when God must be stripped of God's wondrous powers in order for that relationship to work or feel

[233] As I write this, I am reminded of the line in Yedid Nefesh, where the deer bows down before God's glory: יָרוּץ עַבְדְּךָ כְּמוֹ אַיָּל, יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה מוּל הֲדָרֶךָ

[234] Another example for how rabbinic Judaism tried to stake its ground against both the rivaling Sadducees as well as burgeoning Christianity, see Soncino commentary footnote 5 to M. Sanhedrin 10:1 and footnote 12 to B. Sanhedrin 90b; Tractate Sanhedrin, Chapter 11; 601,604

"meaningful;" when the mighty powers of God must be in agreement with science and rationalism.

In this context, Jon D. Levenson points out that

> … the modern objections to resurrection associate God with the alpha point, creation, but disconnect him from the omega point, the messianic end-time, which, if it is respected at all, is reformulated as a product only of human beings following moral law and thus ushering in a perfect world. If the language of miracle is retained at all, it is retained as a description of that alpha point. The miracle, in other words, is that the inviolable laws of nature came into existence at all. But inviolable they are, and inviolable they shall remain, even after the Kingdom comes.[235]

Another factor for the resistance against resurrection as a tenet of Judaism is its association with Christianity, for which the belief in the resurrection of Jesus is essential. But just as the notion of a loving God is not a Christian invention, neither is the idea of the resurrection of the dead. Modern biblical scholars debate when the idea of resurrection first appeared in the Jewish scriptures. Most agree that in the five books of Moses, the idea is absent, and that the only clear and definite statement is found in Daniel. As Knohl writes:

> It must be stressed that the idea of the resurrection of the dead does not appear in a clear literal form anywhere in the Hebrew Bible except in the book of Daniel. … In fact, elsewhere, in several places, the Hebrew Bible says that the path to *s*heol (a place of darkness where the dead go) is one-directional: whoever goes down there can never return.[236]

Other scholars, like Levenson, push back against this categorical position:

> Often mistaken for belief in the immortality of the soul—an affirmation with which, to be sure, resurrection can and does readily coexist—resurrection is too often thought by the less learned to be a Christian innovation and by the more learned to be at best tangential to Judaism. This misperception derives much of its strength from the consensus view among specialists in the Hebrew Bible or postbiblical Judaism and informed non-specialists alike.[237]

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[235] Jon D. Levenson: Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life, Yale University Press, 2008, 23-24

[236] Knohl, 96-97

[237] Levenson, Resurrection, ix

On one hand, the finality of death clearly seems to pervade Tanakh: As just one example, King David tells his son Solomon before his death: "אנכי הלך בדרך כל־הארץ – I am going the way of all the earth" (often translated as of all flesh).[238] Torah records the lifespans of the patriarchs and matriarchs, the gathering to their kin, the burial in the ground, and the grief and pain felt over the loss of a loved one is repeatedly expressed.[239] And yet the rabbis were intent on cementing the belief in resurrection as a core belief established in Torah. This move is another instance where the sages reinterpret the plain biblical text according to their prescriptive community-building goals. In the previous chapter, it was the case of procreation, already stated as an *ideal* in Torah but made into a *halakhic requirement* by rabbinic Judaism. Here, it is the belief in the resurrection of the dead, which is glaringly absent from the Torah. Finding proof for the resurrection of the dead in Torah was, in the words of Levenson "a formidable challenge" for the rabbis.[240]

On B. Sanhedrin 90b-92b, the Gemara lists more than fifteen biblical verses brought forth by various sages that claim them to be proof for the resurrection of the dead in Torah and by extension the Prophets and Writings.[241] Many of these verses prompt discourses about the superiority of halakha and the superior merits of Torah scholars,[242] or polemics against Romans, Egyptians, Greeks as well as heretics in general and Samaritans in particular. Not all verses are

[238] 1 Kings 2:2

[239] Abraham burying Sarah, Isaac mourning Sarah, Jacob grieving over Rachel, Joseph over Jacob

[240] Levenson, Resurrection, 26

[241] Further examples from other rabbinic texts are Mekhilta deRabbi Shimon bar Yochai 15:1: ר' אומ' אז שר משה ובני יש' אין בת' כ[ן אלא] אז ישיר משה נמצינו למדין לתחית המתים מן התו[רה. Rabbi said: "'Then Moses will sing' – it doesn't say 'Then Moses sang'! We learn from this that there is resurrection according to the Torah," (also in B. Sanhedrin) and Midrash Tannaim on Deuteronomy 33:29: יחי ראובן ואל ימות והלא מת הוא אלא ואל ימת לעולם הבא מיכן לתחית המתים מן התורה. 'Let Reuven live and not die' – but did he not already die? Rather, he should not die in the world to come. This proves that there is resurrection of the dead according to the Torah.'

[242] Compare to B. Ketubot 111b, as discussed earlier

accepted as proofs by the rabbis themselves (90b). Several verses hinge on the choice to read verbs that could be in the past tense as imperfect (91b), while others seem to promise eternal life or renewed life after death (92a). Some verses are great examples for the creative exegetical process of the rabbis, how they interwove Bible verses with their individual imagination and dispositions. It also reveals the haphazardness embedded in the endeavor to root halakha in Torah after the fact.

> Resurrection in the Torah? The question turns out to be considerably more complicated than it first appears. The rabbinic effort to find allusions to a doctrine of a general resurrection of the dead at the end of history founders, to be sure, on the plain sense of the scriptural verses in question. This is not only the judgment of modern criticism but also a point sometimes made in the rabbinic literature itself. … The forced nature of the exegeses in question testifies to the gap between the religious culture of the rabbis, on the one hand, and that of their scriptural sources, on the other.[243]

Levenson discusses several of the verses cited by the sages, in particular those that derive the belief in resurrection from the Torah by connecting promises made to the patriarchs and matriarchs, which only become fulfilled long after their deaths. For example, the verse Exodus 6:4, cited on 90b and attributed to Rabbi Simai:

תַּנְיָא רַבִּי סִימַאי אוֹמֵר מְנַיִין לִתְחִיַּית הַמֵּתִים מִן הַתּוֹרָה שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר 'וְגַם הֲקִמֹתִי אֶת בְּרִיתִי אִתָּם לָתֵת לָהֶם אֶת אֶרֶץ כְּנַעַן' 'לָכֶם' לֹא נֶאֱמַר אֶלָּא 'לָהֶם' מִכָּאן לִתְחִיַּית הַמֵּתִים מִן הַתּוֹרָה

> It is taught in a baraita that Rabbi Simai says: From where is resurrection of the dead derived from the Torah? It is derived from a verse, as it is stated with regard to the Patriarchs: “And I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their sojournings in which they sojourned. (Exodus 6:4). The phrase: To give to you the land of Canaan, is not stated, as the meaning of the verse is not that God fulfilled the covenant with the Patriarchs when he gave the land of Canaan to the children of Israel; rather, it is stated: “To give them the land of Canaan,” meaning to the patriarchs themselves. From here is it derived that the resurrection of the dead is from the Torah, as in the future the Patriarchs will come to life and inherit the land.[244]

[243] Levenson, Resurrection, 33
[244] B. Sanhedrin 90b

Both the Gemara and Levenson point to a weakness in Rabbi Simai's argument: That the patriarchs have to rise from the dead before the land can be given to them goes against biblical narrative in general, and in particular against the promise God makes repeatedly to Abraham as well as to Jacob, that is, to assign the land to their offspring and not to them.[245] "On a deeper level, however, Rabbi Simai's observation points us toward a profound truth," Levenson argues: "The deaths of the patriarchs of Genesis do not have the finality that we (and he) associate with death. Rather, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob continue to exist after they have died, not, it should be underscored, as disembodied spirits but as the people whose fathers they will always be."[246] Seen from this vantage point, Rabbi Simai can connect the belief in resurrection with an essential aspect of the Jewish redemption narrative: Inheritance of the land in this world equals inheritance of a portion in the land of the world to come. Resurrection of the dead cannot literally mean "that a man will live after his death and return to his family and dear ones to eat and drink and never die again."[247] And within the framework of the rabbis, it must not be understood figuratively either, as in the sense, for example, that a deceased lives on in the memories of his descendants. Rather, what it *can* mean is that the scientific notion of biological continuation is merged with an ontological vision that transcends pure rationalism, as Levenson gestures against the backdrop of biblical concepts of self:[248]

> The resurrection of the dead was a weight-bearing beam in the edifice of rabbinic Judaism. It was central to two major and inseparable elements of rabbinic Judaism, the rabbis' vision of redemption and their understanding of Jewish peoplehood. Without the restoration of the people Israel, a flesh-and-blood people, God's promises to them remained unfulfilled, and the world remained unredeemed. Those who classify the Jewish expectation of resurrection under more universal and individualistic rubrics, such as ''life after death,'' miss

[245] Genesis 12:7; Genesis 28:13
[246] Levenson, Resurrection, 30
[247] Maimonides, Introduction, 2
[248] Levenson, Chapter 6

> the promissory character of the expectation and its inextricable connection to a natural family, the Jews.[249]

Under these premises, "living on" would mean more than a recurring genetic resemblance or being remembered in stories. Rather, it would mean that every Jew represents a divine promise and will live on forever embodied by the Jewish people on the grounds of the promised land. In fact, the proof text for the resurrection of the dead quoted in M. Sanhedrin 10:1 is Isaiah 60:21, where the notion seems to be immortality through eternal possession rather than resurrection:

וְעַמֵּךְ כֻּלָּם צַדִּיקִים לְעוֹלָם יִירְשׁוּ אָרֶץ נֵצֶר מַטָּעַי מַעֲשֵׂה יָדַי לְהִתְפָּאֵר׃

> And your people, all of them righteous,
> Shall forever possess the land,
> The shoot I have planted,
> My handiwork in which to glory.

Ezekiel's Vision of the Valley of the Dry Bones is another pertinent example. On B. Sanhedrin 92b, the Gemara's discussion exemplifies the confluence of concepts of peoplehood, inheritance, and resurrection as well as the oscillation (of Judaism, of poetry) between the literal and figurative that will always leave the purely rational mind cynical or unsatisfied. Apparently, it also left many of the rabbis unsatisfied, or at least wondering: Does Ezekiel 37 represent a parable or the truth?

.רַבִּי יְהוּדָה אוֹמֵר אֱמֶת מָשָׁל הָיָה
אָמַר לוֹ רַבִּי נְחֶמְיָה אִם אֱמֶת לָמָּה מָשָׁל וְאִם מָשָׁל לָמָּה אֱמֶת אֶלָּא בֶּאֱמֶת מָשָׁל הָיָה רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר בְּנוֹ שֶׁל רַבִּי יוֹסֵי הַגְּלִילִי אוֹמֵר מֵתִים שֶׁהֶחְיָה יְחֶזְקֵאל עָלוּ לְאֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל וְנָשְׂאוּ נָשִׁים וְהוֹלִידוּ בָּנִים וּבָנוֹת עָמַד רַבִּי יְהוּדָה בֶּן בְּתֵירָא
'עַל רַגְלָיו וְאָמַר 'אֲנִי מִבְּנֵי בְנֵיהֶם וְהַלָּלוּ תְּפִילִּין שֶׁהִנִּיחַ לִי אֲבִי אַבָּא מֵהֶם

> Rabbi Yehuda says it was truth *and* it was a parable. Rabbi Neḥemia said to Rabbi Yehuda: If it was truth, why do you refer to it as a parable, and if it was a parable, why do you refer to it as truth? Rather, it means: In truth, it was a parable. Rabbi Eliezer, son of Rabbi Yosei HaGelili, says: Not only was it not a parable, the dead that Ezekiel revived ascended to Eretz

[249] Levenson, Resurrection, x

> Yisrael and married wives and fathered sons and daughters. Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteira stood on his feet and said: I am a descendant of their sons, and these are phylacteries that my father's father left me from them.

The rabbis precede to define who these dead were and offer an array of interpretations, among which the following stands out to me:

> וּשְׁמוּאֵל אָמַר אֵלּוּ בְּנֵי אָדָם שֶׁכָּפְרוּ בִּתְחִיַּית הַמֵּתִים שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלַי בֶּן אָדָם הָעֲצָמוֹת הָאֵלֶּה כָּל בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל הֵמָּה הִנֵּה אֹמְרִים יָבְשׁוּ עַצְמוֹתֵינוּ וְאָבְדָה תִקְוָתֵנוּ נִגְזַרְנוּ לָנוּ.

> And Shmuel says: These dead that Ezekiel revived were people who denied the resurrection of the dead, as it is stated: "Then He said to me: Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel; behold, they say: Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost; we are cut off" (Ezekiel 37:11).

As is well known, the reversal of the phrase "our hope is lost" is central to Israel's national anthem, HaTikva, the hope, as it says: "עוד לא אבדה תקותינו": Our hope is not yet lost." In a way, then, it is as if HaTikva inserted itself seamlessly into the rabbinic discussion about the belief in the resurrection of the dead and redemption, a discussion that cannot be read without the context of exile and the will to regain sovereignty. As Devorah Dimant writes:

> Critical scholars generally understand these summary verses to mean that the vision is a dramatic image, expressing that the exiled Judeans, who feel that all hope is lost, will actually be revived as a people and return to their land—it is a prophecy about national restoration rather than individual resurrection. Some early rabbinic interpreters, however, understood it as about individual resurrection.[250]

The merging of these concepts— resurrection of the dead, return to the land of Israel and national restoration—can be encountered as well, for example, on B. Ketubot 111a, where the rabbis discuss burial in the soil of the land as a prerequisite for revival in the messianic age.

[250] Devorah Dimant: The Valley of Dry Bones and the Resurrection of the Dead, TheTorah. com

וּלְרַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר, צַדִּיקִים שֶׁבְּחוּץ לָאָרֶץ אֵינָם חַיִּים?! אָמַר רַבִּי אִילְעָא: עַל יְדֵי גִּלְגּוּל. מַתְקֵיף לַהּ רַבִּי אַבָּא סַלָּא רַבָּא: גִּלְגּוּל לְצַדִּיקִים צַעַר הוּא! אָמַר אַבָּיֵי: מְחִילוֹת נַעֲשׂוֹת לָהֶם בַּקַּרְקַע.

> And according to Rabbi Elazar, will the righteous outside of Eretz Yisrael not come alive at the time of the resurrection of the dead? Rabbi Ile'a said: They will be resurrected by means of rolling, i.e., they will roll until they reach Eretz Yisrael, where they will be brought back to life. Rabbi Abba Salla Rava strongly objects to this: Rolling is an ordeal that entails suffering for the righteous. Abaye said: Tunnels are prepared for them in the ground, through which they pass to Eretz Yisrael.

It is poignant in these times to think about tunnels as a pathway to redemption for the resurrection of the dead of Israel, when bodily remains of Jews are being brought back to Israel after having been tortured and murdered in Hamas' tunnels, and redemption, in its many layers, seems always further out of reach than it might have seemed even for the talmudic sages.

Yemot HaMashiach, The Age of the Messiah

> The "days of the Messiah" refers to a time in which sovereignty will revert to Israel and the Jewish people will return to the land of Israel. Their king will be a very great one, with his royal place in Zion. His name and his reputation will extend throughout all the nations and even greater measure than did King Solomon's. All nations will make peace with him, and all countries will serve him out of respect for his great righteousness and the wonders which occur through him. All those who rise against him will be destroyed and delivered into his hands by God. All the verses of the Bible testify to his triumph and our triumph with him. However, except for the fact that sovereignty will revert to Israel, nothing will be essentially different from what it is now. This is what the sages taught: "The only difference between this world and the days of the Messiah is that oppression by other kingdoms will be abolished."[251]

While he differs in his theology, Maimonides here shares with modern non-Orthodox Jews a focus on measurable actions in the earthly realm: Reform Judaism for example understands a redeemed world to be a world in the ongoing process of being repaired. Redemption is ongoing, and we all can contribute to the messianic work of making the world a better place, improving social justice, eliminating oppression in its many ugly faces, step by step.

There is no determined chronology or timeline on which the future redemptive events, including the *Yemot Mashiach*, are potentially to unfold. If we entertain the assumption of their probability in some form, then, arguably, the days of Mashiach,[252] the Messiah, might precede a resurrection of the dead and be considered a step toward the world to come—which can also be understood as an unrelated, independent end-of-time scenario.[253] B. Sanhedrin Chapter 11 begins with debates about the resurrection of the dead because this is the first justification for exclusion from the world to come mentioned in the mishnah. The ensuing debate about the identity of those

[251] Maimonides, Introduction, 12
[252] From the Hebrew root מ-ש-ח, to anoint with oil, like in the coronation ceremony for a king
[253] About the vague talmudic conception of how to understand the future redeeming events, and whether Olam HaBa is identical with the days of Mashiach, see the Soncino commentary on Tractate Sanhedrin, Chapter 11; 601

revived by Ezekiel moves the rabbinic discussion on to the return of exiles, particularly from Babylon, which in turn leads to deliberations about the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, the resurrection of the dead as described in Daniel and its implications as well as to statements about the lineage of a redemptive or messianic figure. (B. Sanhedrin 93a-b) Some rabbis hold that the Messiah had already arrived in the person of King Hezekiah, son of King Ahaz, whose reign so frustrated the prophet Isaiah. According to those views, Hezekiah would be the child and leader born to the Jewish people, the "wondrous councilor, divine warrior, eternal father, prince of peace" Isaiah mentions in his prophecy in Is. 9:5 (B. Sanhedrin 94a). Most rabbinic voices seem to agree, however, that the Messiah, while from the line of David like Hezekiah, is yet to come. Among the thematic throughlines of the following pages are the deliverance of Israelite leaders from persecution by their enemies or from precarious situations as well as the role of the land, sometimes portrayed like a living entity, in their rescue or in leading up to a future redemption. (B. Sanhedrin 94b-96b). Two questions that begin to emerge and will be discussed in particular on B. Sanhedrin 97a-99a are:

- When will he come?
- Where is he now?

“I don’t want to see him.”

Unlike modern, hopeful views of an ongoing redemptive age that will repair the world, for most of the rabbis, the advent of the Messiah is not expected to be an easy and peaceful time of transition (B. Sanhedrin 97a-b). Rather, they imagine an era that will devalue all values and bring destruction and devastation.

תַּנְיָא רַבִּי יְהוּדָה אוֹמֵר דּוֹר שֶׁבֶּן דָּוִד בָּא בּוֹ בֵּית הַוַּעַד יִהְיֶה לִזְנוּת וְהַגָּלִיל יֶחֱרַב וְהַגַּבְלָן יֵאשֵׁם וְאַנְשֵׁי גְבוּל יְסוֹבְבוּ מֵעִיר לָעִיר וְלֹא יְחוֹנְנוּ וְחָכְמַת הַסּוֹפְרִים תִּסְרַח וְיִרְאֵי חֵטְא יִמָּאֵסוּ וּפְנֵי הַדּוֹר כִּפְנֵי הַכֶּלֶב.

It is taught in a baraita that Rabbi Yehuda says: During the generation that the son of David comes, the hall of the assembly of the Sages will be designated for prostitution, and the Galilee will be destroyed, and the Gavlan, i.e., Bashan, will be desolate, and the residents of the border who flee the neighboring gentiles will circulate from city to city and will receive no sympathy. The wisdom of scholars will diminish, and sin-fearing people will be despised. And the face of the generation will be like the face of a dog.

This is but one example for the envisioned dystopian scenario that will precede the coming of the Messiah. The sages liken the idea that suffering will increase before a new dawn brings better days to the pains of a woman in labor, hence the well-established term חבלי מושיח, *chavelei Mashiach*, birthpangs of the Messiah, for the pre-messianic time,[254] a time so terrible that several rabbis are recorded as saying that they would not want to live through it:

אָמַר עוּלָּא ייֵתֵי וְלָא אִיחְמִינֵיהּ וְכֵן אָמַר [רַבָּה] ייֵתֵי וְלָא אִיחְמִינֵיהּ.

Ulla says: Let the Messiah come, but after my death, so that I will not see him. Likewise, Rabba says: Let the Messiah come, but after my death, so that I will not see him.

[254] B. Sanhedrin 98b:4, statement of Abaye. A similar statement attributed to Rav expresses the same idea:
מָר רַב אֵין בֶּן דָּוִד בָּא עַד שֶׁתִּתְפַּשֵּׁט מַלְכוּת הָרְשָׁעָה עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל תִּשְׁעָה חֳדָשִׁים שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר לָכֵן יִתְּנֵם עַד עֵת יוֹלֵדָה יָלָדָה וְיֶתֶר אֶחָיו יְשׁוּבוּן עַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
Rav says: The son of David will not come until the evil Roman kingdom will disperse throughout Eretz Yisrael for nine months, as it is stated: “Therefore will He give them up, until the time when she who is in labor has given birth; then the remnant of his brethren shall return with the children of Israel” (Micah 5:2).

Different sages have different takes. Rav, whom we have previously encountered as a man who enjoys earthly pleasures, expects to also enjoy the delicacies of the messianic age.[255] Rav Yosef is so eager for the Messiah to come that he would gladly sit in the shadow of the Messiah's donkey's excrement.[256] And Abaye tries to mitigate Rabba's worries about the messianic age:

אֲמַר לֵיהּ אַבָּיֵי לְרַבָּה מַאי טַעְמָא אִילֵּימָא מִשּׁוּם חֶבְלוֹ שֶׁל מָשִׁיחַ וְהָתַנְיָא שָׁאֲלוּ תַּלְמִידָיו אֶת רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר מָה יַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם וְיִנָּצֵל מֵחֶבְלוֹ שֶׁל מָשִׁיחַ יַעֲסוֹק בְּתוֹרָה וּבִגְמִילוּת חֲסָדִים וּמָר הָא תּוֹרָה וְהָא גְּמִילוּת חֲסָדִים

> Abaye said to Rabba: What is your reasoning? Granted, if we say it is due to the birthpangs of the Messiah – but isn't it taught in a baraita that Rabbi Elazar's students asked Rabbi Elazar: What shall a person do to be spared from the birthpangs of the messianic time? Elazar said to them: They shall engage in Torah study and acts of kindness. Abaye continued: And have you, master, not engaged in Torah and performed acts of kindness?[257]

This statement suggests, in its essence, a perspective that does align with a more modern take on continued tikkun olam, repairing of the world, and that counters the expected challenges of the arrival of the Messiah with two eternal Jewish values put into action: Torah study and acts of kindness can sustain us through troubled times and therefore become redemptive in their own right. It might be added that the rabbinic elitist view of themselves as guardians of Torah wisdom shines through Abaye's self-assuredness as well.

<u>When will he come?</u>

But when will this time that most fear and some are willing to endure be upon the world? B. Sanhedrin 97-98 record some poetic and philosophical opinions about how to accept that which

[255] B. Sanhedrin 98b: אָמַר רַב גִּידֵּל אָמַר רַב עֲתִידִין יִשְׂרָאֵל דְּאָכְלִי שְׁנֵי מָשִׁיחַ: Rav Giddel says that Rav says: The Jewish people are destined to eat from the bounty of the years of the Messiah.
[256] B. Sanhedrin 98b
[257] B. Sanhedrin 98b

we are not in control of. Many different rabbinic voices are quoted on how to calculate and predict the arrival of the Messiah, and all of them are refuted in one way or the other: The Messiah will come at the conclusion of a *shmitta* or sabbatical-year cycle, when the land has laid barren. The Messiah will come after 85 Jubilee years have been completed. The Messiah won't come because he was already here, in the person of King Hezekiah. We still commit too many iniquities; we do not merit his coming. The Messiah will only come when the world is either entirely wicked or entirely righteous, entirely innocent or entirely guilty, when all existing values have been toppled over and reversed. He will only come when the suffering has become unbearable, when the Jewish people are utterly surrounded by enemies, or when all haughtiness, pettiness, conceit and the current justice system have been abolished; in 40, 400, 365, or 1000 years, after the end of the world, the war of sea monsters, the war of Gog and Magog.[258] Even the smartest, most refined or most extravagant solutions don't hold. Every proof-text falls apart in the face of the human, and by extension rabbinic, inability to know: The Messiah will not come in accordance with the opinions of our rabbis, the Gemara states repeatedly.[259] Even the prophet Elijah, who in Jewish tradition will herald the coming of the Messiah, does not know when it will happen.[260] This again conjures up the oft-cited verse from Shir HaShirim 2;7; 3:5; and 8:4:

> I make you swear, O daughters of Jerusalem,
> by the deer or the gazelles of the field:
> that you shall not rouse nor stir love
> until it pleases!

[258] B. Sanhedrin 97a-b
[259] B. Sanhedrin 97b
[260] B. Sanhedrin 97b

In that same vein, Rabbi Nathan is quoted as urging his colleagues by citing the prophet Habakkuk (2:3):[261]

כִּי עוֹד חָזוֹן לַמּוֹעֵד וְיָפֵחַ לַקֵּץ וְלֹא יְכַזֵּב אִם־יִתְמַהְמָהּ חַכֵּה־לוֹ כִּי־בֹא יָבֹא לֹא יְאַחֵר׃

> For there is yet a vision for the appointed time,
> and a witness for the end that is not false.
> Though it tarries, wait for it,
> for it shall surely come, it shall not delay.

While the verse from Shir HaShirim and the verse from Habakkuk both urge patience, they come from slightly different vantage points. The female lover's appeal sounds ever so cautious: Be careful not to arouse a powerful force before its time, and be prepared that it might not happen, she seems to say. Whereas the prophet focuses on a more appeasing and confident factor: Trust in what has been appointed for you, regardless how long it takes. In quoting Habakkuk, Rabbi Nathan might want to encourage his colleagues to ease their eagerness in determining the awaited arrival of better days. Rabbi Zeira in turn contributes another angle:

בְּמָטוּתָא בָּעֵינָא מִנַּיְיכוּ לָא תְּרַחֲקוּהּ דִּתְנֵינָא 'שְׁלֹשָׁה בָּאִין בְּהֶיסֵּח הַדַּעַת אֵלּוּ הֵן מָשִׁיחַ מְצִיאָה וְעַקְרָב'

> Please, I ask of you, do not delay his coming by calculating the end of days. As we learn in a baraita: There are three matters that come only by means of diversion of attention from those matters, and these are they: The Messiah, a lost item, and a scorpion.[262]

The more one thinks about a desired event, the more keenly one might feel its prolonged absence. One should go about one's life and neither try to hurry love nor hasten the redemption: The desired event will materialize when one least expects it:

[261] B. Sanhedrin 97a
[262] B. Sanhedrin 97a

מַה־נָּאוּ עַל־הֶהָרִים רַגְלֵי מְבַשֵּׂר מַשְׁמִיעַ שָׁלוֹם מְבַשֵּׂר טוֹב מַשְׁמִיעַ יְשׁוּעָה אֹמֵר לְצִיּוֹן מָלַךְ אֱלֹהָיִךְ׃

How lovely on the mountains
the steps of the bearer of good tidings,
announcing peace, heralding good things
announcing triumph
saying to Zion: Your God reigns.[263]

Where is he now?

There is something almost tender in the way the sages, these confident, sharp, reassured men, try to grapple with their unfulfilled longing for or reluctant anticipation of the Messiah that all their Torah knowledge can't help with. Sprinkled in between the palette of ruminations and trials might be one deeply theological concept, that was alluded to on the previous pages, and that not every sage is able to follow: One must have faith that better days will come, and one must accept that the darkest hour is before the dawn. What I find so human and relatable in these discussions, is precisely the revolt against faith that I hear through some of the rabbinic voices. These pious men who applied themselves to building a firm house of Judaism supported by Bible-vetted halakhic beams, demonstrate frustration, wavering faith, fear, disillusion and disenchantment. And at the same time, they display the sometimes irrational belief to hope for better days, for something hidden, for which one must dig deeper through the rubble left from fires and grief and pain and loss and believe that life is worth it. That there are invisible good people among us, and sometimes, all we need to do is to recognize them; to listen deeply to ourselves, others, and the world. If we do that, the rabbis say, we might realize that the Messiah is already among us. One famous story that carries this message is found on B. Sanhedrin 98a:

[263] Isaiah 52:7

אֲמַר לֵיהּ אִימַּת אָתֵי מָשִׁיחַ אָמַר לֵיהּ זִיל שַׁיְילֵיהּ לְדִידֵיהּ וְהֵיכָא יָתֵיב אַפִּיתְחָא דְּרוֹמִי וּמַאי סִימָנֵיהּ יָתֵיב בֵּינֵי עַנְיֵי סוֹבְלֵי חֳלָאִים וְכוּלָּן שָׁרוּ וְאָסְרִי בְּחַד זִימְנָא אִיהוּ שָׁרֵי חַד וְאָסַיר חַד אָמַר דִּילְמָא מִבְּעֵינָא דְּלָא אִיעַכַּב.
אֲזַל לְגַבֵּיהּ אֲמַר לֵיהּ שָׁלוֹם עָלֶיךָ רַבִּי וּמוֹרִי אֲמַר לֵיהּ שָׁלוֹם עָלֶיךָ בַּר לֵיוַאי אֲמַר לֵיהּ לְאֵימַת אָתֵי מָר אֲמַר לֵיהּ הַיּוֹם אֲתָא לְגַבֵּי אֵלִיָּהוּ אֲמַר לֵיהּ מַאי אֲמַר לָךְ אֲמַר לֵיהּ שָׁלוֹם עָלֶיךָ בַּר לֵיוַאי אֲמַר לֵיהּ אַבְטְחָךְ לָךְ וְלַאֲבוּךְ לְעָלְמָא דְּאָתֵי אֲמַר לֵיהּ שַׁקּוֹרֵי קָא שַׁקַּר בִּי דַּאֲמַר לִי 'הַיּוֹם אָתֵינָא' וְלָא אֲתָא אֲמַר לֵיהּ הָכִי אָמַר לָךְ 'הַיּוֹם אִם בְּקֹלוֹ תִשְׁמָעוּ'

> Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi asked Elijah: When will the Messiah come? Elijah said to him: Go ask him. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi asked: And where is he sitting? Elijah said to him: At the entrance of Rome. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi asked him: And by what sign can I identify him? Elijah answered: He sits among the poor who suffer from illnesses. And all of them untie their bandages and tie them all at once, but the Messiah unties one bandage and ties one at a time. He says: Perhaps I will be needed. (he needs to be able to leave promptly and not be delayed). Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi went to the Messiah. He said to the Messiah: Shalom, my rabbi and my teacher. The Messiah said to him: Shalom, bar Leva'i. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said to him: When will the Master come? The Messiah said to him: Today. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi came to Elijah. Elijah said to him: What did the Messiah say to you? He said to Elijah that the Messiah said: Shalom, bar Leva'i. Elijah said to him: He thereby guaranteed that you and your father will enter the World-to-Come, as he greeted you with shalom. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said to Elijah: The Messiah lied to me, because he said to me: I am coming today, and he did not come. Elijah said to him, this is what he said to you: He said that he will come "today, 'if you would only heed his voice.'" (Psalms 95:7)

In keeping with my poetic conviction to read love as redemptive, an approach supported by Shir HaShirim Rabbah, I want to juxtapose the end of this talmudic passage with a verse from Shir HaShirim that contains the famous line "*kol dodi dofek*,"[264] "the voice of my beloved is knocking." Shir HaShirim 5:2 narrates a moment when the female lover is sleeping while the beloved's voice knocks at her door, asking, with clear erotic undertones, to be let in:

אֲנִי יְשֵׁנָה וְלִבִּי עֵר קוֹל דּוֹדִי דוֹפֵק פִּתְחִי־לִי אֲחֹתִי רַעְיָתִי יוֹנָתִי תַּמָּתִי שֶׁרֹּאשִׁי נִמְלָא־טָל קְוֻצּוֹתַי רְסִיסֵי לָיְלָה׃

> I was asleep, but my heart was awake.
> Hark! my lover knocks.
> Open for me, my sister, my friend,
> my dove, my perfect one

[264] Kol Dodi Dofek is also the title of a book by Joseph Soloveitchik in which he discusses the religious, if not Messianic, significance of the establishment of the State of Israel.

For my head is drenched with dew,
my locks with the drops of the night."[265]

Yet she rises not fast enough, and when she finally opens the door for the beloved, he has disappeared, which sets in motion her frantic nighttime search through a slightly dystopian, urban landscape, so rarely the setting amidst the bucolic nature depictions of Shir HaShirim. This scene clearly does not represent a moment of rousing love before its time nor of a hastened redemption, but exactly the opposite: A missed opportunity of a union with the beloved, which Shir HaShirim Rabbah understands to be God. Here, too, like at the gates of Rome, the voice of the beloved was not heard, and the moment passed. Too soon, too late – how difficult it is to know when the right moment of love and redemption has come!

The voice of the beloved is mentioned in an earlier scene in Shir HaShirim, 2:8-9, immediately following the first oath the female lover addresses to the daughters of Jerusalem. I read this scene and 5:2 as one narrative or symbolic throughline – the beloved has leaped over mountains, with shouts of joy or wooing, and comes to stand outside the house of love, peering through the window, knocking with his voice:

קוֹל דּוֹדִי הִנֵּה־זֶה בָּא מְדַלֵּג עַל־הֶהָרִים מְקַפֵּץ עַל־הַגְּבָעוֹת׃
דּוֹמֶה דוֹדִי לִצְבִי אוֹ לְעֹפֶר הָאַיָּלִים הִנֵּה־זֶה עוֹמֵד אַחַר כָּתְלֵנוּ מַשְׁגִּיחַ מִן־הַחַלֹּנוֹת מֵצִיץ מִן־הַחֲרַכִּים׃

Hark! Oh my lover is coming,
bounding over the mountains,
leaping over the hills.
My lover is like a deer
or like a stag.
Oh, he stands behind our wall,

[265] Shir HaShirim 5:2. The last two lines have been used in several Hebrew poems and love songs, for example Hamavdil, sung at Havdalah, whose liturgy is replete with allusions to redemption, as well as Erev Shel Shoshanim.

peering through the windows,
peeping through the crannies.[266]

Midrash Zuta interprets the voice of the beloved as "הקולות שעתידים לבא קודם למשיח" – the voices that in the future will come before the Messiah.[267] Furthermore, the stag or gazelle, to which the female lover frequently compares her beloved, is a well-established image either for God or the Messiah in piyyutim[268], or for a lover in secular poetry.[269] The Spanish medieval poet Shlomo Ibn Gabirol for example wrote several erotic love poems "in which God and Israel address each other on the theme of redemption."[270] The following poem takes much of its language and imagery from verses throughout Shir HaShirim, including 5:2:

The gate long shut—
Get up and throw it wide;
The stag long fled—
Send him to my side.

When one day you come
To lie between my breasts,
That day your scent
Will cling to me like wine.

How shall I know his face, O lovely bride,
The lover you are asking me to send?
A ruddy face, and lovely eyes?
A handsome man to see?

Aye that's my love! Aye, that's my friend![271]
Anoint that one for me!

[266] Shir HaShirim 2:8-9
[267] Midrash Zuta, 23 (יב)
[268] For example, Yedid Nefesh: "ירוץ אבדך כמו איל" – Your servant hurries like a deer.
[269] Scheindlin, 25
[270] Scheindlin, 93
[271] Note here the alternate use of רע, as discussed earlier

Besides echoing Shir HaShirim, this poem also connects the redeeming figure in the persona of the lover with King David, the ruddy, handsome young shepherd from 1 Samuel 16:12:

וַיִּשְׁלַח וַיְבִיאֵהוּ וְהוּא אַדְמוֹנִי עִם־יְפֵה עֵינַיִם וְטוֹב רֹאִי
וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה קוּם מְשָׁחֵהוּ כִּי־זֶה הוּא׃

> And he sent and brought him. And he was ruddy, with fine eyes, and goodly to look on. And the LORD said, "Arise, anoint him, for this is the one."

This poem celebrates erotic love and divine redemption in a "bewildering overlapping of images, allusions, and literary personae," writes Raymond Scheindlin and gestures toward the opening gates of Jerusalem (the opening door of the beloved's house, her desired opening body), as Israel's "ultimate triumph:"

> If the image of the gate is to be linked consistently to the rest of the poem, we must imagine the gate as one through which the stag has fled sometime in the past and cannot now reenter without help. But perhaps it is best not to press for a strictly logical clarification of the image. The opening of the gate and the return of the stag could be parallel, though not integrated, images of redemption.[272]

<u>Suffering or Repentance?</u>

Another link between the story about the voice of the Messiah and Shir HaShirim can be found in this statement from Rabbi Levi in Shir HaShirim Rabbah to 5:2 ("*kol dodi dofek*"):

כִּי הוּא אֱלֹהֵינוּ)רַבִּי לֵוִי אָמַר אִלּוּ הָיוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל עוֹשִׂין תְּשׁוּבָה אֲפִלּוּ יוֹם אֶחָד, מִיָּד הֵן נִגְאָלִין, וּמִיָּד בֶּן דָּוִד בָּא, מַה טַּעַם וַאֲנַחְנוּ עַם מַרְעִיתוֹ וְצֹאן יָדוֹ הַיּוֹם אִם בְּקֹלוֹ תִשְׁמָעוּ
תהלים צה, ז

> Rabbi Levi said: Were Israel to make teshuva only for one day, they would immediately be redeemed and immediately, the son of David would come. What is the biblical proof verse for that? "For He is our God, and we are the people that He tends, and the flock of His hand" – today, "If you would only heed His voice!" (Psalms 95:7).

[272] Scheindlin, 95

This is the same verse Elijah quotes to Rabbi Yehoshua on B. Sanhedrin 97b. Now, Rabbi Levi brings another element of redemption into the mix: Teshuva, repentance, as a condition for redemption. Listening and following the voice of the beloved, of God or the Messiah means to repent for wrongdoings. Opening gates or doors and receiving the visitor with his curls dripping with dew are images for receiving God's ways (or returning to them) that will lead out of the night and darkness of *galut*, exile and distance from God into the new dawn, the light of *geula*, redemption and closeness with God.

One might expect the sages to be united in their attitude toward the redemptive role of teshuva, which arguably harkens back to Deuteronomy 30, but in its refinement is a rabbinic term and construct like the command to procreate or the belief that the resurrection of the dead can be derived from Torah.[273] Yet confronted with the inescapability of suffering, loss of sovereignty, and exile, several sages reveal themselves to be less willing to do soul searching. While Rav states that what could have been done to possibly determine the coming of the Messiah has been done and everything now only depends on teshuva and good deeds, Shmuel pushes back, pointing out that it is "enough for the mourner to endure his mourning (אָמַר דַּיּוֹ לָאָבֵל שֶׁיֵּעָמוֹד בְּאֶבְלוֹ)."[274] This means that the experience of intense suffering should be enough to waive expectations of repentance: Suffering in itself is reason enough to be loved and redeemed by God. While one might understand Shmuel's opinion as a compassionate leniency, one might also wonder about ethical consequences of such a position. It reminds me of how extremists will refuse accountability or justify

[273] וְשַׁבְתָּ עַד־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְשָׁמַעְתָּ בְקֹלוֹ – And when you return to Your God and listen to His voice; Deuteronomy 30:2
[274] B. Sanhedrin 97b

relentlessness with their own experience of suffering. Or the tendency I observe in those for whom "trauma" has become a unifying identity that can lead to entitlement, self-absorption, and detachment. How will they be able to see their shortcomings and be open to forgiving and constructive dialogue? Yet suffering shouldn't be the sole reason for teshuva, either. In a heated debate between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua, the former insists that if the Jewish people don't repent, they will not be redeemed. To which Rabbi Yehoshua retorts:

B. Sanhedrin 97b-98a

אִם אֵין עוֹשִׂין תְּשׁוּבָה אֵין נִגְאָלִין אֶלָּא הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא מַעֲמִיד לָהֶן מֶלֶךְ שֶׁגְּזֵרוֹתָיו קָשׁוֹת כְּהָמָן וְיִשְׂרָאֵל עוֹשִׂין תְּשׁוּבָה וּמַחְזִירָן לְמוּטָב

> If they do not do teshuva, they will not be redeemed?! Rather, the Holy One, Blessed be He, will establish a king for them whose decrees are as harsh as those issued by Haman, and the Jewish people will do teshuva, and this will return them to the right path.

Suffering will cause remorse and compel people to repent, Rabbi Yehoshua says. Yet toward the end of the exchange, his theology seems to have slightly shifted, or at least he is offering a different reason for his degradation of the importance of teshuva: Pre-determination.

אָמַר לוֹ רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר וַהֲלֹא כְּבָר נֶאֱמַר 'אִם תָּשׁוּב יִשְׂרָאֵל נְאֻם ה' אֵלַי תָּשׁוּב' אָמַר לוֹ רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ וַהֲלֹא כְּבָר נֶאֱמַר 'וָאֶשְׁמַע אֶת הָאִישׁ לְבוּשׁ הַבַּדִּים אֲשֶׁר מִמַּעַל לְמֵימֵי הַיְאֹר וַיָּרֶם יְמִינוֹ וּשְׂמֹאלוֹ אֶל הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיִּשָּׁבַע בְּחֵי הָעוֹלָם כִּי לְמוֹעֵד מוֹעֲדִים וָחֵצִי וּכְכַלּוֹת נַפֵּץ יַד עַם קֹדֶשׁ תִּכְלֶינָה כָּל אֵלֶּה' וְגוֹ'
וְשָׁתַק רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר

> Rabbi Eliezer said to him: But isn't it already stated: "If you turn back, Israel, said the Lord, to Me you shall turn back" (Jeremiah 4:1), indicating that redemption is contingent upon repentance? Rabbi Yehoshua said to him: But isn't it already stated: "And I heard the man dressed in linen, who was over the water of the river, and he raised his right hand, and his left hand was toward the heavens, and he swore by the One who lives forever that at the appointed time of times and a half and at the end of the shattering of the power of the holy people, all these things shall be finished." (Daniel 12:7).

Rabbi Yehoshua indicates that the time for redemption is set and unrelated to repentance. And Rabbi Eliezer was silent, the Gemara concludes. The rift between the theologies of these two

rabbis as displayed in this debate is exemplified but their choice of proof verses. Rabbi Eliezer chooses the prophet Jeremiah, who clearly expresses what is considered a pillar of Judaism, whereas Rabbi Yehoshua bases himself in an almost apocalyptic-eschatological verse from the book of Daniel that would also speak to budding Christians. In fact, it is easy to see here how appealing Christianity with its one-stop-redemption promise might have been also for Jews facing hardship, discontent, and suffering.

Olam HaBa, The elusive and hidden World to Come

B. Sanhedrin 99a

אָמַר רַבִּי חִיָּיא בַּר אַבָּא אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן כָּל הַנְּבִיאִים כּוּלָּן לֹא נִתְנַבְּאוּ אֶלָּא לִימוֹת הַמָּשִׁיחַ אֲבָל לָעוֹלָם הַבָּא עַיִן לֹא רָאָתָה אֱלֹהִים זוּלָתֶךָ אֱלֹהִים יַעֲשֶׂה לִמְחַכֵּה לוֹ

> Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Abba says that Rabbi Yoḥanan says: All the prophets prophesied only about the messianic era, but about the world to come, the verse says: "They never had seen, they never gave ear, no eye has seen a God beside You. He acts for those who wait for Him. (Isaiah 64:3)[275]

If it is impossible to know when the Messiah is coming, how much more impossible is it to know anything about the world to come! According to rabbinic Judaism, prophecy ceased with the destruction of the Second Temple, and the divine secrets and truths became hidden and unrevealed, which gave birth to rabbinic writings like the *Heikhalot* literature as well as the mystical traditions that sought to penetrate the opaqueness left behind by the prophets and uncover the mysteries.[276]

[275] Rabbi Yochanan's statement does not go unchallenged, but I am focusing here on his proposition.
[276] Compare to the Yehuda Amichai poem, Songs of Continuity, quoted earlier.

Humans want to know the essence of precisely what they can't know. The story in B. Chagigah 14b, about the four rabbis who entered the Garden of Eden that I mentioned earlier, expresses both the desire to reach into the furthest and deepest spheres beyond our existence as well as the limits and potential destructiveness of such endeavors for most humans, unless they are Rabbi Akiva. The longing for a vine or fig tree for every person to sit underneath[277] in this world gets multiplied when it comes to imagining or anticipating that other world different from the one to which humans are confined. A world of immortality and lasting, all-encompassing peace. A world without fear and suffering. A world in which to cling to or merge with the divine. Religions, fantasy novels, or poems all in their own ways conjure up idyllic places of reward and serenity for the pious, the righteous, the brave, the lonely or broken-hearted. In many cases, the defining characteristic of these places is an abiding, enveloping love—and arguably that makes sense, because love might be the only experience humans can make that offers words and images to describe an unknowable transcendental experience.

Love—or Torah study? Centuries after prophecy had ceased, Maimonides would describe the world to come as a sphere where erotic love between spouses has been substituted with the love emanating from Torah wisdom. Where an almost intimate relationship between Torah scholars with each other and with God is sustained by Torah study for the love of Torah.

> In the world to come our souls will become wise out of the knowledge of God the Creator, as the higher physical bodies do, or even wiser. This spiritual delight is not divisible into parts, nor can it be described, nor can any analogy explain it. … Our sages also wrote: "In the world to come there is no eating, drinking, washing, anointing, or sexual intercourse; but the righteous sit with their crowns on their heads enjoying the radiance of the divine presence."[278]

[277] Micah 4:4
[278] Maimonides, Introduction, 11

I expected Rav, the Babylonian bon-vivant, to push back against an asexual world to come, but he is quoted on B. Berakhot 17a with the following statement.

מַרְגְּלָא בְּפוּמֵּיהּ דְּרַב: לֹא כָּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא. הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא אֵין בּוֹ לֹא אֲכִילָה וְלֹא שְׁתִיָּה וְלֹא פְּרִיָה וּרְבִיָה וְלֹא מַשָּׂא וּמַתָּן וְלֹא קִנְאָה וְלֹא שִׂנְאָה וְלֹא תַּחֲרוּת, אֶלָּא צַדִּיקִים יוֹשְׁבִין וְעַטְרוֹתֵיהֶם בְּרָאשֵׁיהֶם וְנֶהֱנִים מִזִּיו הַשְּׁכִינָה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "וַיֶּחֱזוּ אֶת הָאֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאכְלוּ וַיִּשְׁתּוּ".

Rav would usually say: The World-to-Come is not like this world. In the World-to-Come there is no eating, no drinking, no procreation, no business negotiations, no jealousy, no hate, and no competition. Rather, the righteous (i.e. rabbinic sages) sit with their crowns upon their heads, enjoying the splendor of the divine presence, as it is stated: "And they beheld God and ate and drank" (Exodus 24:11), meaning that beholding God's countenance is tantamount to eating and drinking.[279]

While the prophets died long ago, as Yehuda Amichai wrote in his poem "Songs of Continuity," they did leave behind a few intimations of that world that might unfold at the end of days; after death. I want to briefly mention two characteristics that are repeatedly found in Tanakh: At the end of time, which only *might* refer to the emergence of the world to come, sun and moon will no longer function as before. There will no longer be distinction between day and night, the light that will fill the space of that world will be the light of God.

<u>B. Sanhedrin 91b</u>

רַב חִסְדָּא רָמֵי כְּתִיב וְחָפְרָה הַלְּבָנָה וּבוֹשָׁה הַחַמָּה כִּי מָלַךְ ה' צְבָאוֹת וּכְתִיב וְהָיָה אוֹר הַלְּבָנָה כְּאוֹר הַחַמָּה וְאוֹר הַחַמָּה יִהְיֶה שִׁבְעָתַיִם כְּאוֹר שִׁבְעַת הַיָּמִים לָא קַשְׁיָא כָּאן לִימוֹת הַמָּשִׁיחַ כָּאן לָעוֹלָם הַבָּא

Rav Ḥisda raises a contradiction. It is written: "And the moon shall be shamed, and the sun disgraced, for the Lord of Armies has become king on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem and before His elders is His glory." (Isaiah 24:23). Another verse is: "And the light of the moon shall be like the light of the sun, and the light of the sun shall be sevenfold, like the light of seven days" (Isaiah 30:26). The Gemara answers that this is not difficult. The verse here, in Isaiah chapter 30, is written with regard to the days of the Messiah, when the sun and moon will shine more

[279] This again connects to Shir HaShirim 5:1, where the lovers are encouraged to "eat and drink," which Shir HaShirim Rabbah interprets as a feast of sacrifices in the tabernacle or a mighty king's banquet, where everyone abides by the will of the royal host.

brightly; the verse there, in Isaiah chapter 24, is written with regard to the World-to-Come, when the only light will be the light of God.

The moon and the sun are created in the beginning of the world. For them to cease their rotation on the firmament and merge into one special divine light clearly denotes the resolution of a previous world order. Only God has the power to bring about such profound redemptive change.[280]

Another recurring prophetic description of that elusive world to come entails a similar reversal of natural forces:[281] Mountains will melt,[282] wine will drip from summits waving with wheat,[283] and wolves will lie with lambs.[284] The protagonists of Shir HaShirim conjure up to each other similar bucolic and pastoral settings as the perfect spots for their courting and love, which, it should be noted, is never consummated—just like the world waits for redemption and the voice of the Messiah, so too the lovers still wait for one another, longing to hear the friend's voice:

Shir HaShirim 8:13

הַיּוֹשֶׁבֶת בַּגַּנִּים חֲבֵרִים מַקְשִׁיבִים לְקוֹלֵךְ הַשְׁמִיעֵנִי׃

You who dwell in the garden,
friends listen for your voice.
Let me hear it.

Any reference to a garden within a biblical context will recall associations of the first and unparalleled garden in scripture: The Garden of Eden, where the divine presence lingers and the

[280] In Tanakh, the only human figure who for one instance has similar power is Joshua, whose name is connected to the root י-ש-ע that gives yishua: salvation, redemption: Joshua 10:12

[281] I am focusing here on a few idyllic examples. Tanakh is replete with prophetic apocalyptic and destructive visions of the end of days (for example Zechariah, Malachi)

[282] Psalms 97:4-5

[283] Amos 9:13-15

[284] Isaiah 11:6-8

voice of God moves about,[285] and where humans cannot enter. And indeed, Midrash Shir HaShirim Rabbah interprets the lovers' gardens of delight precisely as the site of God's first appearance as under a wedding canopy, or to the tabernacle which by extension will also come to mean the Temple as the place of lovemaking, where lovers cling to each other and become one flesh just as the pious cling and merge with God.[286]

The anticipation of the unknowable has prompted fearful and apocalyptic scenarios. But more often, it has inspired, over millennia, numerous delicate, beautiful, or sensuous poetic images and descriptions of the deepest yearnings of the human soul: To know love and to triumph over death. To behold the presence of God. We don't know when it might happen: Like love, or like a shy deer suddenly appearing in the clearing starring at you before it jumps back into the impenetrable thicket, redemption comes unawares, only when God pleases, when we least expect it.

[285] Genesis 3:8
[286] Shir HaShirim Rabbah on 1:4; 3:11; 5:1

Selected Poems and Songs for Text Study: Redemption

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Naomi Shemer: Havelei Mashiach, on: Naomi Shemer Shira, Unicell 2004

Shaul Tchernichovsky: Omrim Yeshna Eretz
Version sung by Naomi Shemer

Bruce Springsteen: Thunder Road, on: Born to Run, Columbia Records, 1975

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ovoBi3pXD_A

Psalm 126

Yannai: Karev Yom
Version sung by Eviatar Banai

Conclusion

> It is too often forgotten that the classical Jewish doctrine of resurrection does not represent a belief that death can be avoided, averted, or minimized. All to the contrary, it takes the gravity and tragedy of death with full seriousness and represents a belief that death will be—miraculously, supernaturally, graciously—overcome. Resurrection finds its place within a larger vision not of the continuation of the world but of its redemption.[287]

As I wrote earlier, Judaism is indeed about love. Because Judaism is about life. And about redemption. Arguably, and poetically, the most intense experience we make in life is love – and death. Judaism is one long poem in rebellion against mortality, the biggest loss humans know.

שִׂימֵנִי כַחוֹתָם עַל־לִבֶּךָ כַּחוֹתָם עַל־זְרוֹעֶךָ כִּי־עַזָּה כַמָּוֶת אַהֲבָה קָשָׁה כִשְׁאוֹל קִנְאָה רְשָׁפֶיהָ רִשְׁפֵי אֵשׁ שַׁלְהֶבֶתְיָה׃

> Set me as a seal on your heart,
> as a seal on your arm.
> For strong as death is love,
> fierce as Sheol is jealousy
> Its sparks are fiery sparks,
> A fearsome flame.

While Robert Alter omits a reference to God in his translation, scholars like Tamara Eskenazi turn to the last line from Shir HaShirim 8:6 to find God's name mentioned precisely in a passage that speaks about everlasting love and its everlasting rival, death.[288] The fearsome flame of God—shalhevet *yah*—can thus be understood, poetically and theologically, as a redemptive engine of survival. Poetry and religion give shape to our deepest emotions: The longing to become one with the beloved, with the universe, with God, to suspend time in an everlasting embrace. To feel

[287] Levenson, Resurrection, x

[288] As often expressed by her in my conversations with her. She bases herself on the commentaries to Shir HaShirim by Marvin H. Pope (Anchor Bible, Doubleday 1977, 674-678) and Roland E. Murphy (Fortress Press, 1990, 191-192), among others. She has also written about the power of love and death in her personal essay, With the Song of Songs in Our Hearts, in: Chapters of the Heart. Jewish Women Sharing the Torah of Our Lives, edited by Sue Levi Elwell and Nancy Fuchs Kreimer, Cascade, 2013, 176-185

redeemed. The longing for redemption is a deeply poetic impulse. I am interested in expressing in my own words as well as in my teaching that at the confluence of love and redemption emerges sacredness, a holy space. Seen from that vantage point, Judaism is a long poem about the love for life. The poetics of salvation and redemption ask us to imagine a time when time is suspended, when our perception and understanding of "a time for everything"—that echo from Kohelet—shifts toward an era when the time for being born is the same as the time for dying, when time no longer affects us. Poetry, like all art, and religion, can have escapist tendencies. At the same time, art and religion can inspire to create ideals to live up to, places of love where suffering and tears will be absent: realms of the God of Life.

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