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Talmud As Dramatic Literature

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by

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1
The Theater of Ritual

Jews are a public people. We share our most important moments with one another. Most of our traditions only make sense when experienced within the context of the larger community. In fact, most of our traditions are clearly designed to encourage us to celebrate and commemorate together. Even our home rituals, like the Shabbat candles and the holiday of Chanukkah are traditionally shared with family and friends. One man on a deserted island may be required by the tradition to continue practicing Judaism, but clearly the emphasis is on those activities we enjoy in our synagogues and at gatherings.

Because of this, it is easy to notice the inherent theatricality that exists within our rituals. Theatricality means that an event is designed to be acted out in front of others. Friday night services are watched by the community, no matter how participatory they are. The congregation is situated in such a way that they can see what is happening at the center of the action – usually on a raised *bimah* or in the center of a circle of chairs. Regular members of this "audience" will notice if any piece of the usual aesthetic is changed in any way. The placement of chairs, the height of the *bimah*, the lighting, the texts, the movements of the participants all add to the intense feelings of familiarity and spirituality. If you have ever been to a Friday night service, you can understand how strange it would feel to come into a sanctuary to find the lights off, or the chairs completely removed.[1]

[1] Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman deals with these aesthetic issues at great length in his works, *The Art of Public Prayer: Not For Clergy Only,* and *Beyond the Text, Indiana University Press.* This has been the primary focus of the work of the Synagogue 2000 project of the Union for Reform Judaism.

The dramatic elements of religious ritual are well documented by scholars like Richard Schechner and Victor Turner, as well as theater practitioners like Bertold Brecht and Antonin Artaud. Religious services are most often carried out upon a raised platform, in full view of a congregated group of followers. Participants have various roles during the ceremony, which contains specific choreography and lines of text. Many of our most sacred texts are set to music and sung, and the entirety of the ritual is repeated at important dates and times in the same fashion.

From its inception, rabbinic Judaism has contained within it this spark of performance, whether through the re-enactment of the Passover Exodus from Egypt, which takes place to this day in Jewish homes around the world; the liturgical dramatization of revelation at Sinai during the Torah service; or performative rituals such as *sotah* and *kiddushin*. The ancient rabbis were keenly aware of the power of theater, and theater as ritual in their development of modern Jewish life.

Life Cycle Events

Jewish life cycle events are theatrical in that they are commemorated in a public forum. The Jewish ritual calendar sees fit to draw attention to and ceremony for the most important transitions in our lives, and to allow for witnesses to the passages of time. A new baby is born and named, a young person begins the path toward adulthood, two adults marry, a loved one or friend dies – in each of these life transitions we not only mark the moment, we call our friends and loved ones to gather around us; we hear encouraging and often comforting words from our tradition. We incorporate music, dress in appropriate ways, and follow appropriate customs and ceremonies.

These aesthetic elements, taken as a whole, create an entire set of conventions at work for any ritual event. There exists an inherent performative quality to most Jewish rituals. Our Friday night service is the perfect example. Those designated to orchestrate the event are situated where the rest of the congregation can see them. There are specific lines of text that are spoken and sung. Complex choreography accompanies the text. We will discuss several specific examples below in some detail.

By extension, the fact that so many religious rituals are theatrical means that to some degree, those rituals are designed to be watched as much as they are participatory. One is exempted from lighting Shabbat candles simply by watching someone in one's household light them. The action occurs and has the desired effect, regardless of who is acting it out, and who is merely a spectator. On Chanukkah, the candles must be publicized, they must be placed in a location where others might see them: an audience. Here again we see an inherent sense of the dramatic within the ritualistic.

Passover

There is perhaps no greater imperative for including dramatic elements in Jewish practice than the rabbinic understanding of the commandment to celebrate Passover. We are told by the ancient rabbis that each of us needs to feel as if he or she directly experienced the emancipation[2], and to retell the story[3]. We are even given a script of sorts: whoever does not include an explanation of the following three things has not fulfilled the commandment to celebrate Passover – the Pesach (paschal offering), matzah and maror[4]. In addition to the songs of praise

[2] Mishnah Pesachim 10:5
[3] Mishnah Pesachim 10:4. The Mishnah quotes from Exodus 13:8, "And you shall tell it to your children on that day, saying: because of this has the Eternal wrought for me when I came forth from Egypt." The text says "I" rather than "Them" as if to say that the reader too, was present at the exodus from Egypt.
[4] ibid. 10:5.

found in our Hagaddot (which are themselves a script of the event – reader's theater extraordinaire) we find specific text given to specific participants to read – even in the most traditional households these "questions" are sung by the youngest participants, and in many households the other "lines" are shared by everyone around the table.

There are specific activities and items needed in particular places on the table to facilitate a Seder. Each of these serves a dual purpose: to establish the conventions of the ceremony/ritual, and to serve as symbols for various details in the retelling of the story. One famous theater director once declared that he did not want a single prop on stage that wasn't crucial to the development of the story and characters – clearly the Passover Seder would have passed this test with flying colors.

Kiddushin –Betrothal and Marriage

The ritual of *kiddushin* also establishes an order of elements acted out before an audience. In fact, traditionally the audience plays a key role in the wedding performance, witnessing the transformation of relationship and offering communal support to the future couple. The traditional script for a Jewish wedding sets every movement, every line, and most of the set design as well. *Kiddushin* is one of the most stylized rituals in all of Jewish practice.

We notice the "ritual" of the marriage ceremony because at this moment in the lives of brides and/or bridegrooms we feel a need for some event of liminality. Liminality means that once this event is undertaken or experienced, those participating have changed in some way. The event becomes a passage, a doorway, through which we transform ourselves and our communities. The details of the ritual matter less than the fact of there being a ritual. This same event has occurred countless times before, which not only transforms the participants, it also connects the participants to anyone who has experienced the event. Indeed, there is great power

in knowing that Jews throughout time have experienced the same basic wedding ceremony; that Jews across the world experience the same basic structure of Shabbat or Passover ceremony as the evening falls through various time zones. We become connected to a long line of tradition, and we become connected to one another.

Missing the Liminal Moment

The theatricality inherent within Jewish ritual serves two basic functions. As we have seen, dramatic elements allow large groups to ceremonially engage one another in spiritual moments: to witness an event. But drama in ritual can also help remind us of the power that ritual was designed to enforce. We not only use ritual to show others our tradition, but to live out that tradition as a path towards meaning-making. Our holidays and celebrations are supposed to transform us as individuals and communities. This is the liminality which is so apparent in life cycle events, but often more difficult to experience during more regular celebrations.

Richard Schechner talks about this type of ritual being, "not simply a doing but a showing of a doing."[5] Shabbat, weddings, the High Holy Days, Purim: these are all public events, witnessed by the congregation. Part of the power of a religious event is the power of community. But communal events contain both elements: the "showing" of custom and commemoration, and a more elusive transformative event. Within our Jewish communities what is being "shown" is clear. We retell the Passover story to learn its lessons and teach our children its truths. We hold the Torah aloft to show it honor and to remain in contact with its mysterious origins.

[5] Schechner, pg. 108

But for Jews the "doing" is often less clear. The opportunity for transformation is lost for many Jews because of the barriers to the ritual or text, or because of a lack of conviction or commitment. Many rituals remain at arm's length; we celebrate Shabbat as a compartmentalized component of a busy week, or even as a single component of an otherwise normal day. Shabbat does not always enter into our consciousness as a moment of liminality.

The one relatively accessible ritual in Judaism is the system of blessings with which Jews encounter every event. We say a *bracha*, a blessing, and we are reminded of our appreciation for the plentiful bounty in our lives. We say a *bracha* and the pre-lit candles are transformed into sacred objects of Shabbat. Our blessings remind us that we are not only "showing" each other a ritual act, we are also ingesting the meaning behind the ritual: blessings are capable of transforming something ordinary into something sacred.

For some, the rituals explored above: Passover and *kiddushin* also become transformative events. At a wedding, the bride and groom celebrate their union, but they also spiritually and legally change status under the *chuppah*. They enter in one spiritual state, and leave in another. During Passover we are commanded to experience the action as if we were really there. Following those instructions, we would not be able to help but feel transformed by the miracle of redemption, each and every year. It would be possible to develop a theory incorporating all of Jewish practice, which illustrated Judaism's transformative potential. The rabbis knew this all too well when they created dramatic rituals and moments of theatricality imbedded within Jewish practice.

The Exceptional Purim

Although the rabbis were clearly focused on the theatrical (opening the door for Elijah as Passover, turning toward the door to welcome the Shabbat bride, etc.) the rabbis who established these Jewish rituals were also concerned, of course, with maintaining control over such expressions of creativity. In fact, the rabbis outlawed the theater outright in the Talmud.[6] New dramatic endeavors were relegated to the one holiday during which all controls were loosened if not given up entirely: the holiday of Purim. The *Purimshpiel*, or carnival, often re-enacted the story of the Book of Esther using lowbrow and crass humor. Rather than focusing on a literary, high art form, the Jewish carnival of Purim celebrates vulgarity and degradation. Its beauty stems from a reversal of aesthetics. The medieval rabbis were willing to give up control over those aesthetics only once a year.

Purim is a holiday during which all reversals are celebrated. Rules are inverted; systematic *halakha* is replaced by chaos and fun. For the rabbis, this was the only time when the populace could be allowed to create their own rituals through theater. During the year it was frowned upon for men to dress as women and vice versa, to transform one's identity into a character for a play. The blending of fantasy with reality was antithetical to the medieval rabbis' attempts to regulate and categorize. The rabbis of the Talmud became so involved with clarifying boundaries and divisions that any attempts to create a legitimate theater would not have met with their approval.

Michael Steinlauf argues that by understanding this phenomenon in Jewish tradition, we can see how the Yiddish theater grew out of traditional celebrations of Purim:

> Of the wealth of customs and practices that have developed around the observance of Purim throughout the centuries, most characteristic, particularly in eastern Europe, was

[6] Avodah Zarah, 18b: "Our Rabbis taught – one should not go to theaters or circuses (*teatrot ve-kirkasot)* because entertainments are arranged there in honor of the idols.

> the *purimshpiel* (Purim play). Associated with the "theaters and circuses" of Roman times, and later with medieval mystery plays, theater had long been proscribed by the rabbis. But on Purim, yeshiva students and young artisans, dressed as non-Jews and women, paraded down the main street of town. . .there they performed grotesque skits loosely based on the Purim story and other biblical narratives, but laced with the coarsest of parody of their hosts, of the town worthies and of the biblical heroes themselves. The east European *purimshpiel* was an annual eruption of carnivaleque freedom into the normative cycle of the Jewish year.[7]

This ritual so closely resembles an organized theatrical movement, it is no surprise that with the revival of Yiddish at the turn of the century Purim found itself at the center of a cultural conflict.

The Yiddish theater that developed in the early 1900's in Warsaw was split into two camps: those who wished to use the theater's popularity to create a refined, literary Yiddish culture (which comprised a tiny fraction of the plays produced at the time), and those who flooded the theaters to see the raucous, bawdy humor of the purimshpiel. Y. L. Peretz, the foremost writer of Yiddish culture and theater critic of the time noted that such vulgar use of Jewish symbols was "impurity." (He much preferred his own Jewish themed plays). He harshly condemned attempts to connect the sacred rituals of Judaism: the *shul,* sukkah, and the traditional learning center called the *kheyder.* But interestingly, it becomes clear that Peretz understood that a national identity can and should be informed through artistic expressions, and especially through the theater. As Steinlauf puts it, "to plant Yiddish theater in the same ground with sukkah, *shul, beys-oylem* and *kheyder,* is to therefore affirm, if only in theory and only potential, the presence of the holy on the Yiddish stage."[8] By condemning the *purimshpiel* and its evolution into theater, Peretz assured the theater's continued support.

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[7] Steinlauf, p. 48. In a note (55) Steinlauf quotes Harold Fisch, who argues that Purim is not an actual carnival but rather a symbolic one, with an emphasis on celebrating the reading of a book, rather than "disorder." He concludes that Purim is a celebration of textuality, and "Fisch thereby returns Purim to the rabbis."

[8] Ibid. pg. 49.

Talmud Study

There exists another ritual, more central and more liminal for Jews throughout time that almost any other. In fact, the rabbis explain that the list of good deeds Jews should do for one another (rejoicing with bride and groom, visiting the sick, etc.) is equal in force to this one vital ritual: the study of Torah -- the teachings of the Bible and rabbinic writings.[9] This one daily event has done more to create and sustain Jewish culture and ritual than any other, and it has developed powerful ceremony and ritual components along the way.

The legacy of Talmud study is as familiar as it is universal. In fact, the actions played out in the study session are theatrical in and of themselves, and will be explored below as a useful tool for bringing a text to the stage. Through the re-enactments of Talmud study, students are taught to ask questions and challenge a text with great voracity. The study hall is filled with a roar and din, with study partners often rising in heated debates over the meanings of the presented materials.

The similarities between this type of environment, and the theater envisioned by Bertold Brecht are powerful and important. Brecht's Theater of Alienation will be explored in the next chapter, but suffice it to say that he wished audience members to have a new kind of experience in the theater in which they were intellectually challenged and stimulated. Brecht's ideal audience would be as engaged in the text of the performance as Talmud scholars are in their material. The actual drama presented would cease to be the end product, and would instead provide the fodder for lively debate and discussion, just as in the study hall. In short, my task as dramaturg is to present the environment of the study hall, as much as it is to present the original written text. In this way our presentation can remain true to the very nature of Talmud: a living

[9] See Mishnah Peah 1:1 and b. Talmud Shabbat 127.

text generated over centuries; a written record of a process that continues to this very day in the study hall.

Let us examine then the ritual and performance of Talmud study. This will also help explain my choice of texts to dramatize. In a poem entitled, "Should You Wish to Know the Source," Chaim Nachman Bialik describes how central textual study is to the life of every Jew[10]:

> Should you wish to know the Source
> From which your brothers drew . . .,
> Their strength of soul . . .,
> And iron might to bear their hardships
> And suffer without end or measure?
>
> And should you wish to see the Fort
> Wherein your fathers refuge sought,
> And all their sacred treasures hid,
> The Refuge that has still preserved
> Your nation's soul intact and pure,
>
> And when despised, and scorned, and scoffed,
> Their faith they did not shame?
>
> And should you wish to see and know
> Their Mother, faithful, loving, kind
> Who . . .sheltered them and shielded them,
> And lulled them on her lap to sleep?
>
> If you, my brother, know not
> This mother, spring, and lap, and fort
> Then enter now the House of God,
> The House of Study, old and gray
> Throughout the scorching summer days,
> Throughout the gloomy winter nights,
> At morning, midday, or at eve . . .
> And there you may still behold,
> A Group of Jews – some young some old,
> Upon the Talmud's folios bent.

[10] Chaim Nachman Bialik, (1898) *Im Yesh es Nafshekha Lodass.* In Heilman, p. 294.

And then your heart shall guess the truth,
That you have touched the sacred ground
Of a Great People's House of Life,
And that your eyes do gaze upon
The treasure of a nation's soul.

Talmud study has been a constant source of inspiration and Jewish thought since its completion in the seventh century C.E. In The People of the Book, Samuel Heilman uses Stanislavski's understanding of the power of drama in order to enter the world of Talmud study. He explores the traditional Talmud study group, and identifies particularly dramatic elements within it. This shows that the marriage of Jewish texts and the arts might not be as far-fetched as it seems.

For Heilman, the traditional group of dedicated Talmud learners, known as a *shuir*, is clearly "a drama, a performance during which the *lerners* became swept up in their action and set into motion their entire creative apparatus."[11] He explains that four components make up the dramatic elements of the Talmud *shiur*. There exists a social drama involving the relationships among the participants and their conceptualizations of text study. A second he calls a cultural performance, during which students discover pieces of their own Jewish identity through active study and dialogue. Another drama acted out by Talmud students involves a highly stylized environment of study, in which a language of vocabulary, gestures, even a certain form of logic is played out. Finally he discusses the reaction of students to what is certainly a complex and new language of study, and new ideas for many students of what it means to be a Jew. Members of the group often would move in and out of that world, as it became more or less comfortable for them.

[11] Heilman, pg. 25.

For my own creative attempt, there will necessarily exist a number of layers of Talmud learning. The *shiur* is ripe territory for exploring the dramas of Talmud study, which should be exploited for this dramatic presentation. On the other hand, the perception of the audience should be that they themselves are a part of the *shiur*. The Talmud they are watching should be as engaging as if they were studying it out of a book. I am trying to integrate the theatricality of the Talmud study circle, with the theatricality of a modern play, and the theatricality of the Talmudic stories themselves. It will be important to understand each of these motivations, and to guide the audience through these various layers.

It is critical that I show that these artistic trends within Jewish life and practice have always been recognized and embraced as a part of what Isa Aron calls the "enculturation" of Jewish education.[12] It may feel new to explore our Jewish culture within the walls of a modern theater, but Jewish learning and Jewish practice have always contained these theatrical elements. By enacting and re-enacting ritual and history, we encode Jewish values onto learners in formal and informal education settings.

Jewish ritual has always contained dramatic elements that have facilitated the ancient rabbis' goals of education and enculturation. But until now, mainstream dramatic attempts have been limited to the *purimshpiel* and "Woody Allen-esque" self-denigrating, or at best introspective commentaries on the State of the Jew, which deal loosely with Jewish traditions and rituals if they are dealt with at all.

In general terms, this has been the extent of a dramatic tradition within Judaism. Every Jewish religious movement has adopted various performative elements to their practice, and

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[12] Aron, pg. 7. This term, as well as the connection between Victor Turner's Social Drama theory explored below and Jewish ritual practice, are also explored throughout J. Reimer's, *Succeeding at Jewish Education: How One Synagogue Made It Work*. See pg. 26 and following.

many experimental groups such as the currently popular Storahtelling[13] explore theatrical games and performance as part of Jewish ritual. But these efforts have remained largely on the fringe of the interest of Jewish scholarship. The ancient rabbis do, however, offer compelling models for the direct use of theater within the bounds of traditional religious practice. By examining rituals such as the Passover Seder, and the Torah service, we discover a more authentic use of dramatic elements to create Jewish ritual, and a way of transforming Jewish ritual and text by presenting it through the lens of modern theater.

[13] See: www.storahtelling.org - a radical fusion of storytelling, Torah, traditional ritual theater and contemporary performance art. Founded in 1998.

2
The Ritual of Theater

Introduction to Western Theater

Constantin Stanislavski, the father of modern drama, explained that the theater has a unique capacity "to attract [and] to excite" attention, to "set in motion [the] whole creative apparatus."[14] This was most certainly the goal of the ancient rabbis who introduced the Jewish rituals still practiced today. The Passover Seder and other holiday celebrations described above are certainly meant to attract and excite attention, not only for children but adults as well. In order to sustain the Jewish community's emotional connection to the holidays, the rabbis intuitively incorporated these artistic elements.

This is the power of drama. Live performance engages an audience like no other medium, creating active conversations within communities, creating shared experience and often liminal moments. Performance can mark the achievement of important personal goals such as life cycle events or national achievements and celebrations. It can spark the creative spirit within each of us, in order that we may explore our history, and our divinity. Theater, as with any art, helps us understand ourselves by holding up a mirror to our civilization. And theater is the most human of all the arts. Theater reminds us of who we are, where we came from, and where we are going.

In the twenty-first century, art forms will continue to evolve as a potent form of self-discovery within the Western world. This self-discovery is accomplished as a direct result of the intimacy of witnessing powerful human interactions. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the

[14] Stanislavski, pp.25.

live theater. Hollywood movies spend more and more money creating the appearance of live drama, but the spark of live human interaction will always elude them. And as movies continue to develop new and more realistic technologies, audiences find themselves drawn more and more to the intimate power of theater.

As Jews in the last half-century we have seen this power of the Western theater as we have explored our collective identity through the works of playwrights like Clifford Odets, Herb Gardner, David Mamet, Donald Margulies, and Tony Kusher. Through their exploration of the modern Jewish condition, these artists have opened the door to a revitalization of traditional Jewish values and forms through the modern medium of theater. The Jewish contribution to Western theater in the last century has been so vital in fact, that renowned British director Tyrone Guthrie observed in the sixties that if the Jews withdrew from the American theater, it "would collapse about next Thursday."[15]

Non-Realistic Theater

These modern playwrights were born into a naturalistic theater world. Ever since Chekhov and Stanislavski created the theatre of realism – the drama of everyday life – in the 1890's, few movements have explored the creative power of non-natural theater. The great exceptions are the symbolic/ absurdist theater tradition, and several non-Western forms. The importance of these movements is in their influence of the tradition of realism. Most successful American plays of today present a combination of realistic emotion and action, with metaphoric or symbolic actions.

Realism is the expressed goal of displaying realistic emotion and realistic action on stage, and it has its limitations. Non-Western theater, especially Asian forms of theater such as

[15] Guthrie, v.

Japanese Noh drama and the Beijing Opera are more concerned with symbols than with realism. And the work of the great absurdist playwrights seems to focus on the potential for creating meaning out of more than mere reality. With its heavy emphasis on metaphor and symbolism, religious ritual would seem to align itself most closely with non-realistic theater.

The ancient rabbis, were they to place themselves along the theatrical spectrum with their developments of the Passover Seder and religious rituals, would have fallen into this same category. They were concerned with meaning-making, not with reality. Here we may understand what is meant by the dictum in the Haggadah that each one of us "feel *as if* he himself were personally freed from Egypt." The rabbis understood that it is not possible to trick people into believing that they were *actually* present thousands of years ago; rather the goal was for us to re-enact the Exodus so that the effects might be enacted as well.

In 1896, Aurélien-Marie Lugné-Poë presented a play by Alfred Jarry at his Théâtre de l'Oeuvre in Paris, entitled *Ubu Roi*. This play is often called the first absurdist drama.[16] The work is anti-realistic; it envisions characters as caricatures of virtues or human foibles, rather than three-dimensional beings on stage. For the first time, a play had attempted to challenge society through the use of the very form of theatricality. Jarry inspired an entire movement of non-realistic playwrights such as August Strindberg in Sweden, and Gordon Craig in London, who brought theater into the twentieth century by challenging every assumption of what brings people to view a play.

The realism of theater in the nineteenth century assumed that the art of theater has as its purpose the development of as real a scene as possible: the portrayal of believable characters and scenes. A proscenium stage looks very much like a framed picture, in which the time of day, even seasons of the year might change as realistically as they do in real life. This suspension of

[16] Brockett, p. 443.

disbelief is effective, as explained above, but as an audience loses itself in the action of the play, to some degree it loses its ability to learn, to actively and knowingly engage in the issues being discussed.

Brecht's Theater of Alienation

Bertold Brecht is well known for his plays as well as his theoretical writings. Carrying the anti-realism movement forward, he wished to assign audiences an active role in the theater by making them watch critically rather than passively. He wanted to make stage events strange enough that people would ask questions about them. An audience attending a play expects certain conventions to be upheld, which helps them to follow the action and to know what to expect. Brecht introduced the idea that by challenging those conventions, one could actually force audience members to rethink their expectations: to think outside of the box. Brecht exposed the mechanics of the theater building: the lights and curtains. He interrupted the flow of the plot with songs and monologues. By distancing, or alienating the audience from the characters, Brecht hoped to create new conventions, and a new kind of theater event.

For my purposes, Brecht's alienating techniques are useful for two reasons. First, most contemporary American theaters use aspects of Brecht's ideas in creating scene designs, and most plays take for granted that an audience can and will find meaning and order when presented with symbolic actions and designs on stage. Second, in creating a dramatic performance from historically non-dramatic literature, it will be imperative that I help the audience learn to ask questions of the "text" just as Brecht wanted his audience to think critically about his plays. The goal of a rabbinic text-based theater will be to "study" the text using this new medium.

The Theater of the Rabbis

By understanding the ways in which the ancient and medieval rabbis used theatrical devices in their ritual creations, I hope to illuminate a path towards a new form of Jewish theater. Drama "replaces reality with a socially reconstructed world."[17] The ancient rabbis used ritual to create the constructed world of Jewish practice. Our ancestors wanted to structure the world around themselves, to create a vision for the world as it might one day become. Whether those practices are enacted in a private home, synagogue, or public auditorium, there is very little difference between the rules of the theater and Jewish social interactions.

How aware the rabbis were of their interest in creating theater we can never know. I have argued above that all religious ritual contains within it dramatic elements. It is also true that the modern Western theater presents us with a new medium through which to enable Jewish education and the creation of new Jewish ritual. Our culture lends itself easily to theatrical adaptation because of its existing dramatic components.

Social Drama

Victor Turner describes a social drama as any situation in which participants not only do things, but "also show themselves and others what they are doing or have done."[18] This mirrors closely our understanding of religious ritual and its two components as well. A social drama is an interaction between audience and performer, community and facilitator (in Hebrew, *shaliach tzibbur*, or service leader). Jewish social dramas form the basis for our rituals as well as our dramatic canon.

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[17] Heilman, pg 29. Heilman credits several theorists with this idea, including: Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*, Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*, Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life.* I understand this sentence to mean that the theater shows the world as it should be, and often as it is too, but always in a deliberate, ordered way.

[18] Schechner, pg. 166.

Turner has written extensively of how social drama, with its definite beginning and line of development, mirrors staged drama.[19] At the most basic level, some human interaction may be set apart as dramatic if it meets certain criteria. We may use this definition for our understanding of Jewish religious ritual. For Heilman and Turner these interactions are invested with meaning and power that can be harnessed by individuals and communities.

For Turner, social dramas have four main phases: (1) the breach of the norm and the ensuing tension, (2) the resulting crisis, (3) action designed to redress the crisis, (4) resolution of the crisis either through an reintegration or a legitimation of irreparable schism. In other words, something out of the ordinary occurs, and the participants are forced to either find a way to reconcile the new event, or to reject it and move past it. This not only describes the normal structure for western drama, it also describes the experience of viewing a theatrical performance.

Schechner points out how this formula works for most Western drama, even non-realistic plays like *Waiting for Godot*.[20] He also points out that the crises and resolutions only attain their symbolic significance because audience members understand that they have gathered for a dramatic presentation. Even in Guerilla Theater, which happens at seemingly random places and at unannounced times, at some point the audience is made to understand that it is witnessing a theatrical event – however unwittingly. People may gather, or they may leave the area of play.

New Jewish Ritual Theater

The importance of this theory for the development of a new Jewish theater cannot be overemphasized. Our existing ritual supports dramatic elements, and can become, in the best situations, dramatized events in themselves: the Talmud study group or the Passover Seder. In

[19] Turner (1974), pp. 33-43.

[20] Schechner, p. 167. Schechner shows that in *Waiting for Godot*, which on the surface appears to have no noticeable structure, there is a breach (the separation from Godot) crises (waiting, the arrival of the Boy at the end of each act) and a notable lack of any reintegration.

the same way, the theater has been used from time immemorial, to recognize those social dramas that need to be set aside from daily life, the ones that need to be framed within the context of a heightened awareness of an audience. The community understands that it has been gathered to witness an important event in its communal life.

The expression of a theatrical event in Turner's four stages reflects the traditional understanding of religious ritual directly. The breach of the norm may be understood as a suspension of normal rules of etiquette as we enter a special space and time for a ritual to occur. In Jewish tradition this is often accomplished through the use of a blessing that begins or ends a particular period of holy time. Many times, the *kiddush* blessing over wine accomplishes this in Jewish services and holidays. As I have shown, these blessings help the community to recognize the liminality of the ritual, the movement from one space and time into another, different space and time. The Hebrew word for holiness, *kadeish,* literally translates as "set aside." Our rituals are made special because we set them apart, just as we leave the conventions of daily life behind in order to enter the world of a play.

The crisis which arrives as a result of this loss of conventions is quickly resolved by the creation of liturgy and choreography to fill the breach. This means that any religious ritual must contain its own inner structure in order for a congregation to follow. Very quickly group members learn what is expected of them, and what they may expect from the ritual they are about to witness.

When a community embraces the ritual through repetition or through celebration/ approval (rejoicing with the bride and groom after a wedding, or celebrating Shabbat during weeks to follow) the ritual has been reintegrated into the communal norm. During the gathering and dispersing that surround a dramatic event, there are many customs and rituals to facilitate this reintegration. Applause, a change in lighting, or some other formal way to conclude a

performance re-establishes the reality of everyday life and helps us begin to integrate what we have gleaned from the performance.

In the same way, our rituals should inform our daily lives, while remaining set apart from them: they should remain holy in space and time. Even daily rituals such as *ha-motzi* said before meals, or the laws of *kashrut* are designed to increase our awareness in a given moment – to create a higher level of awareness, or holiness, for the performance of an action. The transition from play to reality can inform our *kavanah* or intention as we approach each of these Jewish moments.

Theater as Education

There is another aspect of Western theater that will be useful for my presentation. Just as I hope to use the inherent theatricality of Talmud and Talmud study to dramatize both, I also see a need to exploit the educational potential of theater to fully dramatize the study of religious text. If people are to leave the theater and integrate what they have experienced, my project will benefit greatly from the recent work of adult learning theorists.

Olga V. Kritskaya and John M. Dirkx from Michigan State University have written extensively on what is most effective in adult learning. They explain that a deep form of experience for adults may be called "transformative learning."[21] They have found that adults' transformative learning is apprehended through symbols and images. Adults need to find an emotional connection to the material through the use of symbols - this could not more perfectly describe a theatrical event. Dirkx writes of the importance for adult learners of the creation of an environment in which powerful images embody a collective meaning-making for the group

[21] Kritskaya, O. V. & J. M. Dirkx. 2000.

(read: audience)[22]. In other words, adults do not find meaning through an intellectual process alone, they must be challenged to make emotional connections to the material, which happens most effectively through myths, rituals, and modes of symbolic action.[23]

This scholarship suggests that theater is perhaps the most effective tool for adult Jewish education. It is clear that intellectual, culturally engaged adults in the Western world come to the theater for education through entertainment. Recent theatrical productions in Los Angeles have explored topics as diverse as post-Apartheid South Africa and the African-American experience of the past one hundred years. In each case, the audience is introduced to important issues of our day, as they become educated. Many intellectuals who would never make time for a lecture series on Afghanistan will pay over a hundred dollars for a seat at Tony Kushner's play, *Homebody: Kabul*. The theater is a powerful tool for adult education.

The modern theater has great power, both as an educational tool and a tool for cultural meaning-making. We must turn our attention away from using drama to talk about being Jewish, and start using drama as a means by which to transmit our culture – to create authentic Jewish experiences such as Talmud study. Our existing rituals have already tapped into the immense power of drama and the theater, and we can continue that work through more modern forms. Our communities have already embraced the medium of theater to explore their world; the time is now to allow them to explore their own heritage through the same powerful medium.

[22] Dirkx, (2000).
[23] Turner, (1986). p. 21.

3
Talmud Theater

Judaism's Source Text

The Babylonian Talmud is the foundational document for rabbinic Judaism, and yet remains inaccessible for large numbers of so-called "rabbinic" Jews of the 21st century. Most Jews maintain their distance from this rich and engaging text simply because they do not understand its role in their lives. In order to unravel the Talmud's mysteries, one must not only master the Aramaic and Hebrew technical vocabularies, but must then translate the layers of meanings found in the terse dialogue.

Every form of modern Judaism reaches back in time to the development of the Talmud as a book as well as a paradigm for Jewish thought - in the development of ritual, theology, and every other aspect of Jewish life. Whether we feel ourselves ultimately bound to the halakhic system or not, the parameters which define our sense of what is "Jewish" come to us directly from the *Mishnah* and *Gemarah*: the Talmud. Therefore it is critical that as Jewish leaders we continue to search for ways to familiarize our populations with Talmud the book, and the process and history of Jewish thought.

In order to bring familiarity of Talmud to Jews, we need first to address the ways in which we ourselves are unfamiliar with Talmudic discourse. After all, we no longer enjoy the environment of the 6th century, in which we might have added our own thoughts to the developing body of work. As a group, we remain wholly unsure of how to reconcile our relationship to modernity, while remaining "faithful" to these texts of our fathers.

Rabbi Raymond Zwerin, the famous editor from A.R.E. publishing in Denver, Colorado recently announced his retirement from his pulpit of 38 years at Temple Sinai. In his last Yom Kippur sermon, he concluded that he had a tremendous sense of accomplishment at having made such a difference in so many peoples' lives. And it was clear by the outpouring of letters and phone calls that the feeling was very mutual. In that same sermon, the rabbi noted that if he could change anything,

> it would be more study of texts. Everyone would be able to read Hebrew and we would do Torah and Talmud study for adults on a continuing basis. There is such rich insight in our heritage. You know the story of the lady who inherits a precious opal. She puts it in a box. It sits there for years. One day, in dusting the box, she decides to take the gem out. It crumbles in her hand. An opal needs to be touched and worn and fussed over or it will disintegrate. So too our heritage. Our books need to be opened often and handled and well-worn lest they turn to naught."[24]

In order to ensure that our tradition survives and remains vibrant, it is our responsibility to seek authentic ways to bridge this growing divide in our communities between the people and their texts. Jews must be led to the rich insights of tradition, and those insights must be made available to our people, in any and every way. Talmud study circles have already begun to spring forth in various communities around the country, but we can do more. In order to bring our texts to life again we must be unafraid to reach out to people through modern channels, using the theatre and dance, modern music and the Internet.

The Talmud is enigmatic to the most seasoned student, who in beginning to peel back the layers comes to realize that the most fundamental elements of literature are unreliable at best in Talmudic thought. What appears to be the most basic dialogue actually betrays an impossible narrative that spans several hundred years. What appears to be a conversation about lost property actually conveys a community's deepest fears about their identity.

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[24] Zwerin, p. 5.

What is it about this text that keeps Jewish students pouring over it? How does this archaic process of law become the foundational text for modern Judaism? Clearly the Talmud forms the basis for the many decisions of Jewish law that appear in later codes including the *Shulchan Aruch*. But Talmud also forms the basis for a Jewish dialogue, a way of thinking about text, and parameters for that dialogue. These themes are as much a part of our heritage as the texts themselves. An intellectual heritage of study and debate emerges from the pages, which themselves appear to be little more than a repository for ancient scenes of intellectual verbosity and the playing out of relational dynamics.

Modern Scholarship on the Talmud

The very texts I have chosen to study contain within them a hint of this same culture of study – the stories imagine textual study and legal debate as a kind of "other woman" who competes with an actual wife, in many cases, for a rabbi's attention. Is it the books themselves that form such a precious bond? Or are the rabbis drawn to the culture of the yeshiva, the relationships with *chevruta* (study partners), or the intellectual stimulation? Here we may begin to understand the tension between a wife and a textual "mistress" who offers a companionship of a different sort, but just as deep.

Recent attempts to explore this text through the lens of modern scholarship have found that traditional Judaism has done its best to stagnate this once vital text. When freed from the shackles of holy scripture, and viewed as literature like any other ancient document, we can use techniques of literary analysis to learn more about our subject. Jacob Neusner and Robert Alter are two of the most famous scholars in this area, and they have given us important insights into the Talmud and its importance to modern Jewish living:

1) The Talmud was written at a particular place and time, and must be seen as a product of that environment.
2) The redactor/editor(s) of the Talmud provided much of the actual content, and did not live during the same time as their subjects.
3) The characters in the Talmud are not meant to be seen as completely consistent – rather they are given a specific point of view in a particular story by the storyteller or redactor.
4) Until recently, the act of studying Talmud was seen as a way to contribute to the conversation of the rabbis, rather than a recitation of law decided many generations ago. Alexander Schindler once explained that halakha was frozen some centuries ago in the name of self-preservation. Our task, he says, is to defrost the halakha until it is once again soluble in human tears, human blood, human reality. We must pick up the thread of rabbinic discussion in order to assure the text's continued relevance.

These insights provide the groundwork for a new exploration of Talmud. Jeffrey L. Rubinstein suggests that the most important question in order to understand the nature of Talmud and its place in our lives is to develop an understanding of what genre the Talmud belongs to. Clearly if the Talmud is viewed as historical "truth" its relevance is different than if viewed as satire or fables. Henry Fischel uses the work of Neusner and others to suggest that historians have never quite understood into which genre Talmud should be placed.[25] He goes on to point out that a particular genre of biographical literature, the *chria*, shares many traits with the rabbinic stories.

> *Chriae* emerged primarily from schools of philosophy and rhetoric, a setting that recalls the rabbinic academy and the master-disciple relationship. These brief anecdotes circulated both orally and in written collections. *Chriae* satirized or criticized sages as

[25] Rubinstein, pg.7.

> often as they depicted their wisdom. They contained well-known proverbs and stock motifs. . . the stories were designed to teach values and social ideals, not to report actual encounters or sayings. Training in rhetoric even required students to invent *chriae* by imaginatively devising narratives in which to place the sayings of wise men or elaborating upon brief outlines with fictive detail.[26]

The similarities between this description and the modern, liberal understanding of the culture of the Talmud is striking. Therefore in our quest to reevaluate our study of Talmud, we may benefit from a closer examination of *chriae* and their relationship with the study of rhetoric. This is not to suggest by any means that the Babylonian or Palestinian Talmud developed using *chriae* as a model; I shall leave that question to another time. But here I would like to suggest that by understanding the similarities between the two bodies of literature we may arrive at a useful and powerful new way to create Talmud study environments.

Rubinstein points out that by identifying Talmud as belonging to the same genre as *chriae*, we solve many of the problems presented by Talmudic scholars in recent times. For example, the "contradictory traditions" Neusner found in Talmud could have resulted from different schools shaping materials for their own needs, in the style of classic *chriae*. Also, what Rubinstein calls the "linguistic precision" of rabbinic stories can more clearly be explained by "literary-artistic factors," rather than any attempt at recording historical truth.[27]

For my purpose, it is most interesting to note that classic *chriae* incorporated a performative element in which students were asked to invent creative stories and fables as a rhetorical form. Rubinstein points out that rabbinic stories contain many of the same elements. The field of literary criticism has had much to say about Talmudic literature, and these critics have ultimately revolutionized the study of Talmud.

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[26] Bonner, pp. 256-59, as cited in Rubinstein, p. 300. Similarly, students were called upon to invent stories, fables, speeches, and other rhetorical forms.
[27] Rubinstein, pp. 7-9

Talmud as Dramatic Literature

Jonah Fraenkel has laid much of the groundwork for a developing literary approach to Talmud. Through his analysis of literary devices at work in the text, Fraenkel argues that the genre of rabbinic stories most closely resembles dramatic literature. These stories, he notes, generally describe a single event, with very little description of the world outside of that event. The stories focus on the tensions of human reality, and usually culminate with a single character who comes to some sort of realization through plot developments.[28]

These are many of the same characteristics of drama found in other literary and dramatic methods. Take as an interesting example the theory of Chamber Theatre, in which non-dramatic literature is "dramatized" and performed complete with its narrative elements intact. In this format, the differences between literature and drama are heightened. Both forms are interested in not only telling a story but also in *showing* a story through wordplay and other narrative devices. Both forms are concerned with developing plot and narrative through dialogue and non-verbal forms of communication.

For Chamber Theatre, several issues are confronted which need to be resolved. For example, a drama depends on the audience's ability to see a rhythmic interaction of characters.[29] At the same moment, an audience member sees an action and a reaction by two independent characters. When one character swings a fist, we instantaneously watch the second character move out of harm's way. In literature, the audience must be content with a serial presentation that shows first the action, and then describes the reaction.

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[28] ibid. 10-11.
[29] Breen, p. 2

On the other hand, using the written word a reader may be exposed to the internal condition of the characters at the same moment an action is taking place, whereas in a live performance the audience may only be allowed to assume a character's motivation while an action is underway. It is possible to write, "Henry burned with jealousy as he swung his fist," but not to show that emotion explicitly.

Perhaps the most intriguing question for a student of Talmud as dramatic literature is the exploration of the narrative voice in the text. In traditional circles, text that is not attributable to any other source becomes the property of the *Stam*; it is known as *Stamaitic* material. This is the anonymous voice of the editor/redactor who placed the stories together, who weaves the legal and narrative texts into a seamless whole, and who allows for rabbis from distant generations to argue with each other over any given issue. Once this narrative voice is given a context, we can begin to ask questions about his motives and methods. It is interesting to note that any serious student of Talmud through any medium will encounter these same questions – whether through the traditional text or any other format.

In turning the written word into a dramatic presentation, then, these elements must be accounted for. Even though literature and drama have many common elements such as character and plot devices mentioned above, Chamber Theatre helps us understand what occurs at the crossroads of these two genres. Many practitioners of both arts have already created great works by borrowing narrative elements from fiction to use on stage or vice versa. Contemporary playwrights such as Thornton Wilder, Tennessee Williams, Tony Kushner and Terrence McNally have all made explicit use of a narrative voice on-stage. And many novelists have employed the use of dramatic dialogue and even full-length plays in their work as well.

For those who are concerned that this examination of Jewish text strays too far from the path of traditional text study, my goal is to sustain that very traditional form of study, and simply

transport it into a new medium. Needless to say this journey will require a rethinking of the text and of the process of Talmud study through a different lens than the Talmud study hall. I rely on the work of Daniel Boyarin, who in Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash argues that there "is no such thing as value-free, true and objective rendering of documents. They are always filtered through the cultural, socio-ideological matrix of their readers."[30]

It is commonly accepted among modern literary scholars that biases exist when we encounter a "text" whether by reading a manuscript or witnessing a performance. As dramaturg, I will need to facilitate the recognition of the lens through which the audience sees the Talmud text, so that we may learn from the Talmud just as we would were we sitting together in the study hall.

[30]Boyarin, D. (1990). p. 12.

4
Ketubot 61b – 63a

Any serious presentation of rabbinic text, through the arts or any other medium, must begin with a thorough investigation of the text itself. The parameters of this kind of investigation must be far-reaching but, as discussed above, must support the general thrust of scholarship regarding this text during the rabbinic period. In this way, our study of the text, and therefore our presentation, may find validity in the eyes and ears of learners as an authentically Jewish text.

I have begun my own study of Ketubot 61b – 63a of the Babylonian Talmud by exploring traditional and modern commentaries on the text. What follows are several interesting approaches. By connecting my study to the studies of those who came to the material before me, I hope to draw out the material in an authentic way, and to provide an audience with an informed view of the multi-vocal nature of the text.

In developing a dramatic presentation from the written word, we must pay close attention to certain relevant features of the material. The dramatist is mostly interested in character development and the resolution of plot tensions. Therefore, as we explore the Talmudic passages through the lens of literary analysis and rabbinic thought, we must pay particular attention to these strands for use in the drama.

The development of character has long been the subject of Talmudic study, and recent attempts by Jacob Neusner suggest that comprehensive character analysis is not worthwhile. However, the Talmudic editors clearly assign specific roles to specific rabbis, and therefore the

specific function of character in Talmudic narratives must be important. In our drama, character will be a critical element.

The stories we have chosen to approach consist of an interesting mix of Aggadic (narrative discourse) and Halakhic (legislative discourse) material. A continuing question for us, both as a practical representation issue and as a large context issue, will be related to the handling of these very different aesthetics. How should we represent the narrative on-stage? How should we represent the legislative? What is the relationship between the two types of text?

It is this area of questioning that most inspires me to explore the use of artistic media to study Jewish texts. For it is clear that the questions we naturally ask of the text as literature are the same questions the dramaturg would demand of any dramatic material. As we study the written word, we constantly challenge ourselves to "see" the text played out, the narrative encourages us to do so. The relationship between the two styles of text is anything but obvious.

Daniel Boyarin has spent a great deal of time and energy on these stories and others that explore the nature of rabbinic thought about rabbis and their wives. In his book, Carnal Israel, Boyarin makes the claim that our text sets up an ideal situation in which a scholar may spend a tremendous time studying away from home, and still fulfill his marital responsibilities. He sees our collection of stories as enforcing the legislative material, culminating in the relationship of Rabbi Akiva and his wife.

It is interesting to note Boyarin's explanation of the marital responsibilities, according to the rabbis. He points out that in the rabbis' discussion of the taking of a second wife, a man must not, "reduce the flesh, covering or seasons," (Ex. 21:10) of the first wife. Boyarin quotes the Midrash that "flesh" refers to food, "covering" refers to clothing, and "seasons" refers to the regularity of sexual intercourse. He cites as a proof text the traditional marriage contract, the

Ketubah, in which a husband commits to provide food, clothing, and regular sexual intercourse with his wife.[31]

We must first ask the basic question presented by this text. Are these the three things wives required from their husbands in that time? Women certainly relied upon their husbands for material needs, but Boyarin argues that normally husbands were (and are) interested in a greater frequency of sexual intercourse than their wives. In this text, and in the traditional marriage contract, references to the needs of wives actually betray a truer concern for the rabbis' own needs.

Are the rabbis, in fact, reversing the stereotypical sexual dynamic between men and women? Boyarin calls this, "thinking with women."[32] This is the concept that the rabbis talk about women when referring in fact to their own sexuality. In other words, by placing certain sexual requirements upon the husband to satisfy his wife, the rabbis are in fact guaranteeing themselves that same frequency of sexual satisfaction with their wives.

This point raises several more interesting questions. We will be exploring a series of stories related to a rabbi's obligation to leave the house of study and fulfill his marital requirements. Does the tension suggested by the text actually exist between marital "obligation" and the lust for Torah study? Did it exist for the rabbis? Are they describing the world as they see it, or as they wish it to be?

A fundamental tension in these stories is the one between the lure of Torah and that of family/wife/home. How are we to understand this tension? Are we to accept the surface explanation that the rabbis feel an obligation to their wives, but would rather be far away studying Torah? If the rabbis are describing the world not as it is, but as they would like to see

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[31] Boyarin, D. *Carnal Israel* p. 143.
[32] Ibid. p. 145.

it, is it not plausible that the rabbis are betraying their own sexual appetite, attributing it to their wives?

Questions of the Mishnah

The Mishnah begins[33]:

> **If one takes a vow not to sleep with his wife, Bet Shammai says two weeks and Bet Hillel says one week. The students may go away from their homes for the study of Torah without permission for thirty days, and laborers for one week. The "season" (required frequency of intercourse) which is mentioned in the Torah, for the tayyalim[34] it is every day, for laborers twice a week, for donkey drivers once a week, for camel drivers once in thirty days, for sailors once in six months; these are the words of Rabbi Eliezer.**

Let us begin by asking our own questions of this text. What does the opening statement mean? Under what conditions would a man take a vow not to sleep with his wife? On the surface, the text seems to suggest that men might feel the need to take a short-term vow of self-denial or self-restraint. This places the stories that follow into an interesting context. Immediately we are confronted with the central conflict of each story. The husband in each situation feels conflicted about spending time studying versus spending time at home.

Possibly we are meant to understand that men were able to use their sexual lives as collateral for the fulfillment of an unrelated vow. Bet Shammai and Bet Hillel argue about the length of the abstinence, which supports this reading. If a husband wanted to punish his wife by withholding sex from her, it would more likely be a complete ban, or at least a longer abstinence than a single week or two. One or two weeks without sex in a modern marriage does not seem out of the ordinary.

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[33] This Mishnah appears on page 61b, but is dealt with in the Talmud beginning on page 62b. All translations are my own.

[34] This is a difficult term to translate. It may mean idlers, or those who do nothing but study.

And so we have entered into the legal realm of vows. The two major schools of mishnaic debate, Bet Hillel and Bet Shammai, are determined to set limitations on the use of sex as collateral. They agree that if a man breaks a vow, and is required to deprive his wife of sex as a result, that this situation can only last a few weeks at most. For Bet Hillel it should only last one week.

The larger issue for the rabbis is clearly one of conflicting vows. One may not use the nullification of the marriage contract as collateral for another vow. The man in this situation has conflicting responsibilities: he has a contractual agreement with his wife that has nothing to do with the vow he has hypothetically broken. This places the stories that follow in an interesting frame: the rabbis regularly deal with intense human emotion as a commodity, and the reader must remember to look for the legal ramifications in each episode. In attempting to uncover the editor's mindset and motivation, we must ask ourselves, "why did the editor/redactor place this story in this particular place? How does this story change or further the legal argument? What concepts are added by this story? Are there multiple ways to understand the legal arguments being made?

We should also mention the striking disparity between amounts of time granted to various professionals. Sailors, we might assume, are frequently away from home for months at a time, which would explain their being granted six months. But how then are we to understand the granting of an entire month to students of Torah, when laborers have only one week? The most obvious answer, based upon our assumption about sailors, is that students of Torah must travel great distances in order to study. Perhaps it takes a student a full week or more to arrive at his Yeshiva, and a full week longer to arrive home. In that case, it would make sense that the student also be allowed two weeks to study, in order to make the trip worthwhile.

These assumptions help us to clarify certain aspects of the story that follows. As a dramaturg, I must begin with the most important question: what is the author's intent for this text? Does the author intend, for example, to entertain a discussion of his own wants and needs, or is this about a time and place removed from the author/redactor, so that the concerns of his characters are removed from his own?

Two issues become immediately obvious. One is that we are going to need to come to some kind of resolution about our editor/redactor; we are going to need to deal with him and his investment in his work, and we are going to need to do this on stage. The other issue is that any attempt we make at understanding our author/redactor will inevitably come under fire from one or more segments of our audience. It is impossible to come to this kind of text without a framework, to present the text completely or clearly as written. Choices will need to be made.

In the creation of any dramatic piece, the author must be supremely clear about who is his or her audience. The redactor of the Talmud had a specific audience in mind when placing these stories together; part of my study here is to determine in what context that audience would have understood the stories. It is also true that any modern study of Talmud must begin with the questions about the audience. Who was the intended audience? What biases do we bring to the text as a "different" audience from the original audience? Through what lens do we view the text? And my ultimate goal is to find a way to make my audience aware of these same questions for themselves in their encounter of the original text, through the medium of the theater.

Many of these questions will inevitably be answered during the transition in media. For example, it is not at all clear what the relationships are between husbands and wives in our texts. Boyarin points out that the very first story may be read as support for the rabbis who wish to stay away from home for extended periods, but may also be read as "an index of ambivalence and

opposition to this practice."[35] We will need to address this question either by choosing one or the other interpretation, or by highlighting the debate itself.

The Seven Tales

After several discussions about the law regarding various professions, we find an odd collection of stories about students who go away to study Torah and leave their wives behind. The stories can only be truly understood in relationship with the legal material which introduces them, and by answering the many questions I have raised here.

1 - Rav Rehumi

Rava stated: The [contemporary] Rabbis relied upon R. Adda b. Ahavah [who allowed students to go away for Torah study even without their wives' permission for two or three years] and acted this way for themselves. Thus Rav. Rehumi who [studied] frequently with Rava at Mahuzza used to return home on the Eve of every Day of Atonement. One day he was so attracted by his subject [that he did not return home.] His wife was expecting [him, saying,] 'He is coming soon, he is coming now.' When he did not arrive she became so overwhelmed that tears began to flow from her eyes. He was [at that moment] sitting on the roof. The roof collapsed under him and he was killed.

The first story, of R. Rehumi, appears to be offered in support of the legislative statement immediately preceding it – that neglect on one's marital duties is dangerous to one's very life. As is often the case in Talmudic discourse, it is useful to explore each phrase of this text very carefully, in order to verify if in fact the story is serving this purpose. Sometimes a text may be read in various ways, greatly influencing the overall meaning of the text, as well as influencing our understanding of its message.

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[35] ibid p. 147.

The Talmud discusses the various lengths of time husbands can be away from their wives. The Mishna has already explained that husbands have a marital duty to perform, but the rabbis of the Talmud understand that various employments would make a universal standard impossible to enforce. Camel drivers, as an example, are likely away from their wives for longer periods of time than day laborers who come home every night. While even this motivation may be an assumption, it is a well-documented one!

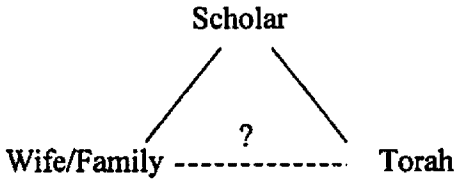
Daniel Boyarin suggests that in the first story, Rav Rehumi's demise strongly suggests that he should not have stayed away from his wife for so long. Shulamit Valler goes a step further and suggests an alternate reading for the story. She suggests that the initial statement by Rava: "The rabbis relied on Rav Adda bar Ahavah and acted in this way *for themselves*," can be understood in two ways. Either Rava agrees with Rav Adda and the rabbis confirm the view by acting upon it, or else Rava disagrees with Rav Adda, and says that the scholars who followed this view were *on their own*. She quotes the commentator Rashi on this point, who writes of the rabbis, "It takes from them their souls, and they were punished by death."[36]

And so it seems that our initial story paints an unflattering picture of husbands who leave their wives for long periods of time. Our rabbi is severely punished for what might be seen as a small oversight: after one Yom Kippur without a visit home Rav Rehumi is sentenced to instantaneous death. As we explore the other six stories, it will become important to remember the tone and mood of this first story. The editors of the Talmud have segued from a legal debate into a rather dramatic and violent narrative. This will help us frame the rest of the narrative, and will be an important component in our dramatic presentation.

One other critical element to explore before we move through the rest of the stories is the issue of relationship. In this first story there are clear lines of connection between the wife and

[36] Valler, p. 53.

husband, although the text's ambivalence towards the causative nature of the wife's tear is something we may wish to preserve. These two characters nonetheless interact on an emotional level, as do the scholar and his study material, which may be represented as a third character. This makes sense because of the intensity of emotion the scholar feels towards the material he is studying. A diagram might be helpful in understanding the relational tensions we are discussing:



Immediately we realize that there is a third potential relationship within our stories, that of the wife or family to Torah. Also, it is important to realize that in other rabbinic texts, the relationship of a scholar to the Torah is manifested through the relationship a scholar has with his chevruta: his study partner, or his teacher. This relationship is described in great detail throughout rabbinic literature as being a primary one for every rabbi.

Is there a way to understand the tension of these stories as being between a rabbi's emotional connection with his family in opposition to his connection with his chevruta or study material? Is there a way to see the relationship each wife or family has or develops with Torah? After all, Torah is no ordinary course of study for the rabbis. Clearly the Torah represents much more: it is a way of life, the very path to salvation in *Olam Haba*, the world to come. Boyarin even points out that Rav Rehumi's name implies his relationship with Torah. Rehumi can mean 'merciful one,' or 'lover.' Either this is ironic in a story about a husband's neglect of his wife, or it tells us that Rehumi is a lover of Torah, more than he is his wife's lover.

2 – Rav Yehudah

How often are scholars to perform their marital duties? Rav Yehudah in the name of Shmuel replied: once a week on Friday night[37]. *That brings forth its fruit in its season* (Psalm 1:3) Rav Yehudah, or some say Rav Huna, or other say R. Nahman stated: This [refers to the man] who performs his marital duty every Friday night.
Yehudah the son of Rav Hiyya and son-in-law of Rav Yannai was always going and sitting in the school house but every Shabbat evening he came home. Whenever he arrived people saw a pillar of light moving before him. Once he was so attracted by his subject of study [that he did not return home]. Not seeing the sign, Rav Yannai said to those [around him], 'turn over his bed[38], for had Yehudah been alive he would not have neglected his marital duties.' This [remark] was *like a mistake that was decreed from the ruler*[39], for [the consequence was] Yehudah's soul returned to its eternal rest.

The second story closely mirrors the first. In both stories the scholar is away from home, and visits his wife regularly to fulfill his marital responsibility. However, in this story, the primary relationship at issue is not between the scholar and his wife, but rather between the scholar and his father-in-law. Valler shows that the similarities between our text, and another story in the Palestinian Talmud[40] suggest that our author/redactor connected an existing story about Yehudah coming to visit his father-in-law with Rav Rehumi's story, editing or rewriting the story.[41] This would explain the absence of the wife character in this second story. Frankel has shown that the use of the pillar of fire in this story introduces the marital obligation as a sacred obligation.[42] God is equally involved in helping our scholar pursue his Torah study, and fulfilling his sexual duty.

In addition, the pillar of fire, according to Boyarin, may be viewed as a "highly charged erotic symbol, since it is phallic in shape and since fire has strongly erotic associations. If the previous story encodes the erotic nature of Torah study, this one complements it by strongly

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[37] See Talmud Yerushalmi 64b: the Mishnah explains that a wife is entitled to eat with her husband once a week on Friday nights. Here the rabbis interpret this Mishnah text to refer to sex.
[38] a mark of mourning for the dead.
[39] Eccelsiastes 10:5
[40] Bikhurim, chpt 2, Hal 2, 65c.
[41] Valler, p 64.
[42] Boyarin, D, p. 149.

encoding a sacred status for marital sex"[43] Boyarin argues that even the act that directly leads to Yehudah's death, the turning over of his bed, is symbolic of the text's emphasis on the scholar's sexual obligation.

These visual images are perhaps the most important proof that Talmud may be read as dramatic literature. These are stories designed to be interpreted in the imagination. Visual images are presented that allude to other stories, the pillar of fire reminiscent of the Israelites' journey through the desert, and perhaps for the modern reader, plays like Sophocles' Lysistrata. Interpreting these stories through a visual medium is a natural next step.

Exploring Yehudah's story further, we find clear links to the first story. Many of the same phrases are used, "He used to return home," "his studies engrossed him," and the fact that the rabbi dies in both. In neither story is the wife mentioned before the husband's departure, nor do we know if she gave her consent to his long absences. Valler argues that these stories are offered up as poor solutions to the tension the authors felt themselves about staying away from home to study.[44]

On the other hand, neither story specifies directly that death was a punishment. In the first it was at the same moment as the wife's tear, and in the second it was the result of his father-in-law's error. On the surface, the author/redactor seems to imply that scholars should attend to their wives, and if they don't, the following stories explain what might happen. Why then does the author shy away from an explicit connection between the emotional hurt done to the wife, and the death of the rabbi? Especially in our second story, it seems as if the moral of the story might be: make sure your in-laws know where you are!

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[43] Ibid.
[44] Valler, p 63.

3 - Rabbi (Yehudah Hanasi)

Rabbi was arranging the marriage of his son into the family of Rav Hiyya, but when the ketubah was about to be written the bride passed away. 'Is there, God forbid,' said Rabbi, 'any taint [in the ancestry of the proposed union]?' An enquiry was made into the families [and it was discovered that] Rabbi descended from Shephatiah[45] the son of Avital, while Rav Hiyya descended from Shimei a brother of David[46].
Later [Rabbi] was engaged in preparations for the marriage of his son into the family of R. Jose ben Zimra. It was agreed that he [the groom] should spend twelve years at the academy. When the girl was led before him he said to them, 'Let it be six years [away from my bride]. When they made her pass before him [a second time] he said, 'I would rather marry [her first] and then proceed [to the academy]. He felt ashamed before his father, but the latter said to him, 'My son, you have the mind of your creator, for in Scripture it is written first, *Thou brings them in and plants them*[47], and later it is written, *And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them*[48]. [After the marriage] he departed and spent twelve years at the academy. By the time he returned his wife had lost the power of procreation. 'What shall we do?' said Rabbi. 'If we order him to divorce her, it will be said the poor woman waited in vain. If he marries another woman, it will be said that latter is his wife and the other his mistress.' He prayed for mercy for her and she recovered.

On the surface, the third story in our series has little to do with the two that came before. Let us examine this story backwards. Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi has married off his son, with the agreement between the two families that his son would study for twelve years, and then return home to start a family with his wife. This seems to be the point of connection with the prior stories.

The first difference then, is the fact that this story has a happy ending! The wife, after waiting for twelve years, has become infertile, presumably because of her age. The reasons for her infertility may become important for our dramatic interpretation, because infertility is an issue with modern resonance. In addition, it may become important to research the rabbis' opinions and thoughts about infertility, which was thought to be related to abstinence elsewhere

[45] King David's son.
[46] Rav Hiyya was not a descendant of King David's family, and so it was not proper for his daughter to marry one who was directly related to King David.
[47] Exodus 15:17 – Only after settlement in the promised land was the sanctuary (the symbol of the union between God and Israel) to be built.
[48] Exodus 25:8

in the Talmud[49]. To any modern audience, this story will exist in an emotional context we must address. The fact that it is the rabbi in the story who resolves the wife's infertility complicates things immensely. Are we to suspend our disbelief in the efficacy of interventionist prayer, and accept the story as written? Are we to draw from this story the lesson that the son was correct in leaving home for twelve years? Was he punished for leaving home for so long? Should he not have married the woman before his absence, but rather allowed her to live her own life for the duration of his absence? What about the wishes of his unnamed wife?

Taken on its own, this story presents a troubling vision of marriage, in which the husband-to-be is "shown" his wife, and he becomes desirous of her based on nothing more. He is willing to marry her on the spot, rather than wait twelve years, after merely viewing her a few times. It seems to be a fair assessment that the husband in the story is overcome not by an emotional connection, but rather by a sexual one.

These concerns are tempered only slightly by reading the rest of the story. The use of biblical quotes suggests that the husband-to-be's motives were perhaps a bit more honorable than we originally suspected. He desires his wife just as God desires the Jewish people. The enumeration of the husband's "viewings" add suspense to the story, and also reflect a progression of time, which may show the husband's commitment to his wife. We also learn that this son has attempted to marry before. The mystery of his fiancée's death is solved only by the cleverness of his father, who realizes that his son must marry someone of a certain lineage. The audience is made to feel the great honor bestowed upon the woman who will finally succeed in marrying him. She even becomes the recipient of miracles!

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[49] Yevamot 34b. R. Yohanan speaks of a woman who waited ten years after being separated from her husband before she remarried and was unable to have children. R. Nahman argues that woman had given up on remarriage, which was the cause of her infertility.

An important difference between this story and the others is that here, unlike the previous stories, the husband does not wish to leave his wife in order to study. In fact, the more often he sees her, the less time he seems willing to wait in order to marry. This is a startlingly different portrayal of the power within the marriage. Whereas in the last story, power seemed perfectly balanced between the pull of Torah and the pull of marital responsibility/pleasure, here sexual gratification, and perhaps the more lofty emotional connections of marriage, has a clear advantage over Torah. The only hint we are given to the contrary, is that Rabbi's son has no compunction against leaving for twelve years in order to study.

How should we understand this shift in the narrative? Is the editor attempting to show an even balance of motivations for his rabbis? Is he simply connecting together stories about the dangers of spending too much time away from home? What significance can we find in the fact that this story is about a father marrying off his son, rather than the husband as protagonist? The more clearly we can understand the blending of these stories, the landscape created by their development, the more clearly we will be able to translate that landscape onto the stage.

4 - Rav Hananyah ben Hakinai

Rav Hananyah ben Hakinai was about to go away to the academy at the end of Rav Shimon ben Yochai's wedding. 'Wait for me,' the latter said to him, 'until I am able to join you.' He, however, did not wait for him but went away alone and spent twelve years at the academy. By the time he returned the streets of the town were altered and he did not know the way to his home. Going down to the river bank and sitting down there he heard a girl being addressed: 'Daughter of Hakinai, O daughter of Hakinai, fill up your pitcher and let us go!' 'It is obvious,' he thought, 'that the girl is ours,' and he followed her. [When they reached home] his wife was sitting and sifting flour. She lifted up her eyes and seeing him, was so overcome with joy that she fainted[50]. 'O Lord of the universe,' [the husband prayed] 'this poor soul, is this her reward?' And so he prayed for mercy for her and she revived.

[50] Others translate this as "expired" since her death would better explain his prayer.

In our fourth story we find the introduction of another theme of the collection – the scholar who, arriving back home, does not recognize his own children. This will tie the fourth and fifth stories together, and may account for their placement together. According to Valler[51] this story exists in a similar form in the midrashic collection *Vayikra Rabbah*. The differences between these two versions suggest that the story was edited slightly in order to contain stylistic elements appropriate for this collection in the Talmud.

Some of the common elements that tie this story to others in the collection include: the twelve years spent at the academy, shared with the sixth and seventh stories; the prayer for mercy and the happy ending, shared with the third story; and the lack of recognition of one's children, which strongly connect this fourth story with the fifth. For our purposes, these details are useful in two ways. Most importantly, we can derive from these repetitions a sense of emphasis or importance. These are key elements in describing each scene or narrative, and may become key elements in the physical production of the stories. As we explore each element separately, we can begin to understand not only the editor's intent, but to identify the lens through which we understand the text.

In addition, these stories will come to life through the various media of the theatre: painting, acting, scenic design, poetry. We must begin to isolate these elements as they appear in the text, to discover what pieces are unclear, and to assign relative value to those elements that are clear. For example, the fact that in two stories the rabbi does not recognize his own children might be understood as having singular significance and import. Therefore we might choose to stage those two events parallel to one another, perhaps utilizing a central part of the stage. We might even choose to focus attention on these two events using specific lighting, music, or even creative dialogue. These concerns will become vital when we turn to the creative process.

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[51] Valler, p. 67-69.

Valler makes an interesting point[52] that the fourth story can be seen as merely a prelude to the more complex fifth story, whose protagonist opens by stating, "I will not do what the son of Hakhinai did." But I find one element in this fourth story that does not exist in any other, an element that may actually serve to thread together all seven stories. Here we see the relationship of chevruta, study partners, in a dramatically emotional moment. Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai has just gotten married, and Rabbi Hananyah ben Hakhinai apparently was in attendance. This suggests that the two have a relationship of some sort, at least enough for the latter to have attended the wedding of the former.

The fact that the two engage in dialogue immediately following the wedding, might also suggest an intensity of relationship. After all, a husband certainly has other concerns after his own wedding than sending off a friend to study abroad, even a very good friend. But the newlywed not only wants to send his friend off, he wants to go with him. In all of these stories, we find no clearer indication of the intensity with which the rabbi engages in study. Even in the moments following his wedding, Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai is thinking about leaving to study. And his desire becomes manifested in the person of his friend, Rabbi Hananyah.

We are told that our protagonist does not wait for his friend. Perhaps we were wrong about their relationship; perhaps they are not as close as we suspected. What we do know is that this is not a thorough recounting of their discussion – clearly much more was said, and deeper emotions are present in this brief encounter. The story does not even make clear what this encounter has to do with the rest of the tale, only that the rabbi leaves to study for twelve years in the Academy. We are left to imagine what might have happened between these two rabbis during a scene about which we are told a single detail. The creation of new dialogue in order to

[52] ibid. p. 69.

flesh out this scenario is an issue that will demand our full attention later. Suffice it to say here that more dialogue is implied by the story itself.

In reflecting back on the halachic material presented before our narratives, it seems as if the focus has shifted. We began by thinking about the proper amount of time for a husband to be kept away from his wife. The priority in the legal discourse is to bring families together again as quickly as is practical. The motivations for doing so are unclear – it is entirely possible that rabbis wished to spend more time away from home, which caused the lawmakers to define maximum boundaries. But Boyarin and others stress that the opposite may also be true. Our rabbis may want to define maximum boundaries to give themselves an excuse to enjoy more frequent visits with their wives.

The first story seems to be told as a warning to those rabbis who forget their marital obligation. A direct connection is drawn between the rabbi's inattentiveness to his wife, her emotional response, and the rabbi's untimely demise, although the author stops short of declaring a cause and effect. The second story shifts focus slightly to explain (perhaps) that when one's studies engross him, the resulting complications may lead even more indirectly to one's death. In this story, the possible cause and effect of the wife's emotional response is not even mentioned. Rather it is the unexpected results of one rabbi's mistake that lead to the death of his son-in-law.

We are still in the realm of halachic proof-text with the first two stories. Both of these stories show the editor's concern with rabbis who spend too much time away from their wives. The third story, then, is quite a tangent. The story seems to say that even when a long period away from one's wife is justified and expected, severe damage may be done to the relationship, manifested for the rabbis in the wife's barrenness. In this story, the wife appears to be deserving

of the miracle by which she is cured. It is also possible that the miracle was granted not based on her merit, but perhaps on the merit of her husband or father-in-law.

How can we understand the fourth story of Rabbi Hananyah ben Hakhinai in relation to the halachic material that begins the sugyia? Clearly there are repeating images and similarities that connect the stories. And we know that the Talmud often seems to follow tangential logic to conclusions that are unconnected to their beginnings. But the resonating themes in this sugyia suggest a deeper connection, as both Boyarin and Valler suggest. The fourth story, therefore, may be seen as bringing a deeper context to the discussion.

What themes can we find in this narrative that might help us in understanding its placement? Using William Cutter's work on narrative[53] we might begin by identifying the most powerful emotional moments in the story. There seem to be three such tableaus. The first is the moment of decision, when Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai asks Hananyah to wait for him, and he does not. The second is when Hananyah sits by the riverside, recognizing nothing from his hometown. He must be overcome with grief over the thought of losing his entire family and everyone he has ever known. At last Hananyah develops a plan to solve the problem, and we are left with the final resolution: the rabbi has found his wife and daughter, his wife has been revived, and the hearts that recognize one another are reunited.

The first tableau is unique to this particular story, but serves, as stated above, to explain the strong pull of the Academy and possibly the chevruta relationship. The second and third tableaus recall moments in other stories, which repetition emphasizes their importance. In the fifth story we again have a father who does not recognize his child, although the setting this time is in the local study hall. And in the third story we find the protagonist praying for mercy on behalf of the wife, who is cured of her affliction, or restored to life.

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[53] See Cutter (1995).

While the connection between these moments in the story and the halachic material remains unclear, the dramatic content and centrality of these images makes them a focus of our continued study. Part of the difficulty in teaching/presenting any Talmudic text, through the theater or any other medium, lies in answering the questions that arise from these unclear connections. In staging these central moments, we will be forced to make decisions about the meaning of each story, and its relationship to the halachic material. As long as we can show that these are the same questions asked and answered in any medium, we will be justified in doing so on stage.

5 - Rav Hama bar Bisa

Rav Hama bar Bisa went away and spent twelve years at the house of study. When he returned he said, 'I will not act like ben Hakinai.' He therefore entered the [local] house of study and sent word to his house. Meanwhile his son, Rav Oshaia entered, sat down before him and addressed to him a question on a subject of study. [Rav Hama], seeing how well versed he was in his studies, became very sad. 'Had I been here,' he said, 'I also could have had such a child.' [When] he entered his house his son came in, whereupon [the father] rose before him, believing that he wished to ask him some [further] legal questions. 'What father,' his wife said, 'stands up before his son!' Rami ben Hama applied to him [the following scriptural text:] *And a threefold cord is not quickly broken*[54], which is a reference to Rav Oshaia, son of Rav Hama, son of Bisa[55].

Many of the questions raised by the fifth story have already been brought to the table. The connection between the fourth and fifth stories is clear, as Rabbi Hama bar Bisa is aware of the preceding tale. His actions are an attempt to avoid the shock to his wife, and he seems to be successful. Returning home after twelve years of study, he send word to his wife, but unexpectedly encounters his son on the way home. He does not recognize his son, but is soon to learn that the boy has grown up into a renowned scholar himself.

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[54] Ecclesiastes 4:12

[55] Three generations of scholars, all living at the same time

This story supports the halachic material in only one way: the rabbi is rewarded for his dedication to study at the story's conclusion. He does not care for his wife by coming home every thirty days as R. Eliezer suggests in the Mishnah. He doesn't even come home every few years, as R. Adda bar Ahavah argues should be done. And he certainly does not fulfill the requirement of R. Judah in the name of R. Huna (or R. Nahman) who sets the obligation at once a week. And yet the Talmud does not disapprove of his actions, and Rami bar Hama actually praises him and his father and son when he declares that a three-fold cord is not quickly broken. Valler also points out (pg. 70) that this statement suggests that family harmony was maintained by R. Hama's return. Here we find the corrective to the preceding story. The editor informs us that it is okay to leave your wife for many years, as long as your return is announced!

6 - Rabbi Akiva

Rabbi Akiva was a shepherd of Ben Kalba Savua[56]. The latter's daughter, seeing how modest and noble [the shepherd] was, said to him, 'If I was betrothed to you, would you go away to [study at] an academy?' 'Yes,' he replied. She was then secretly betrothed to him and sent him away. When her father heard he drove her from his house and vowed to not allow her any benefit from his estate. [Rabbi Akiva] left, and spent twelve years at the academy. When he returned home he brought with him twelve thousand disciples. [While in his home town] he heard an old man saying to her, 'How long will you lead the life of a living widow?' 'If he would listen to me,' she replied, 'he would spend another twelve years [studying.]' [Rabbi Akiva] said, 'It is then with her consent that I am acting,' and he left again and spent another twelve years at the academy. When he finally returned he brought with him twenty-four thousand disciples. His wife heard [of his arrival] and went out to meet him, when her neighbors said to her, 'Borrow some nicer clothes and put them on.' But she replied, '*A righteous man regards the life of his beast.*[57] She approached him and fell upon her face and kissed his feet. His attendants were about the throw her aside when [Rabbi Akiva] cried to them, 'Let her alone, all that is mine and yours is hers.' Her father, on hearing that a great man had come to the town, said, 'I will go to him, perhaps he will invalidate my vow.' When he came to him [Rabbi Akiva] asked, 'Would you have made your vow if you had known that he was a great man[58]?' '[Had he known] even one chapter or one law [I would not have made the vow].' He then said to him, 'I am that

[56] One of the three richest men of Jerusalem at the time of the Roman siege in the first century – see Gittin 56a.
[57] Proverbs 12:10.
[58] That married your daughter

man.' The other fell upon his face and kissed his feet and also gave him half of his money. The daughter of Rabbi Akiva acted in a similar way towards Ben Azzai. This is an illustration of the proverb: *Ewe (Rachila[59]) follows ewe, a daughter's acts are like those of her mother.*

According to Boyarin, "the entire story of the romance of Rabbi Akiva and his wife is generated by one root metaphor: Akiva as the shepherd and his wife as a ewe." He also notes that the placement of this story suggests that it is, "the ultimate Babylonian attempt at a utopian resolution and justification for the local practice...of husbands spending enormous quantities of time away from home to study Torah."[60] These are two ideas worth exploring in some detail.

Valler also agrees that this story is intended as a climax of the sugyia, and suggests that one reason for this is that here we see a wife who not only has given permission to her husband, but actually instigated his leaving in the first place. The fact that her father disinherits her only adds to the role she plays in her husband's departure. It is she who sends him away, and it is she who faces the consequences. She shows complete trust and confidence in her husband, even at the moment of his return, in which she refuses to adorn herself for him. Valler uses a scale of optimism in assessing these stories, and here she finds a completely optimistic tale. The wife is a complete partner in the husband's absence. At the end of the story, they both become rich and famous, and their daughter follows in her mother's footsteps.

This optimism actually began with the prior story of Hama bar Bisa, who showed some measure of consideration for his wife, which saved her from shock and what Valler calls "mental anguish." In the case of Rabbi Akiva, the wife has moved to an even more prominent position, and is still deserving of her husband's care and concern. The relationship between husband and wife has developed through these stories into a major focus point. Whereas in previous stories

[59] This is a sign of the tradition that Rabbi Akiva's wife was named Rachel, which is the word for Ewe as well.
[60] Boyarin, D, p 151.

the wife played a walk-on role if she was mentioned at all, now she is a primary character who influences the actions of her husband. And he treats her as close to an equal.

Boyarin's other reading of the text I find difficult to embrace. He shows that the relationship between Rabbi Akiva, the shepherd, and his ewe would have been a powerful metaphor for a medieval audience, and he brings forth examples of this type of relationship from other texts. He also points out that the coda at the end of the story makes explicit the pun that Akiva's wife was named Rachel, which means ewe. The shepherd/ewe metaphor has been used to explain God's relationship with the Jewish people, and certainly a man's relationship with his wife in Jewish texts, but I prefer to make use of this metaphor in a more modern way. For Boyarin, the role of the ewe is necessarily subservient to the shepherd, and therefore the woman's role should be subservient to the man. But this can also be seen as another indication of the tenderness between Akiva and his wife, a term of endearment. Rachel may be known as Akiva's ewe not because she was subservient, but rather because she was beloved.

No answer is given in the Ketubot text, and none is found in the tractate Nedarim where a version of the story also appears.[61] The way in which we interpret this seemingly small detail may influence a great many decisions we make in presenting this material. It is imperative that we make some choice about the meaning of the text. Just as above I discussed the question of the relationships between husbands and wives, and the necessity of making a choice or highlighting the debate, even the choice to name Akiva's wife will contain important significance. This is as unavoidable as translation. One of the goals for our drama should be to not only educate the audience regarding our reading of the text, but also to introduce them to this type of disagreement within the text; to show them this basic nature of Jewish textual study.

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[61] Valler, p. 71.

Take that a step further; these stories present the struggle between two homes for the rabbis – with each story a different solution to where they find their home.

Boyarin concludes that the rabbinic system sees the, "cultural problem of tension between marriage and Torah-study" as unsolvable.[62] This places the story of Rabbi Akiva and his wife into an interesting frame. If Boyarin views the tension as unsolvable, and also holds up Rabbi Akiva as an ideal, then Rabbi Akiva and his wife must exist as characters in the story, with ongoing tension between their time together, and the twenty-four years apart. This kind of tension makes for very interesting characters, and interesting dramatic tension. It suggests to the dramaturg that the wife, although she appears to be completely supportive of her new husband's actions, might actually have other motives and desires.

A thorough investigation of the development of themes through these stories results in the flushing out of the wife's character as a three dimensional, entirely human character. The reader is ultimately challenged by her seemingly selfless act, and the human imagination fills in the gaps. We strive to understand her, and since we are given very little information about her; the human imagination cannot help but create what actors refer to as a "back story." What possible chain of events might have led the character to this moment in her life? If we assume that her actions and motives might be intelligible to a modern audience, what lessons might she teach us? What purpose does this dramatic character serve the narrative? In other words, why did the Talmudic editor include this story in his collection?

We must also address the primary relationship in this particular story that exists under the surface: the relationship the wife has with the Torah text. Filling in this kind of information can help us to flesh out her character, and to develop theories about how to stage the story. She clearly cares about the Torah, or more specifically her husband's opportunity to study it.

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[62] Boyarin, D, p. 143.

Perhaps she wishes that she herself could study. Rabbi Akiva attributes his entire success to her at the end of the episode. While her outward appearance makes her unrecognizable to the disciples, Akiva is quick to point out that only her beneficence allowed his learning, and by extension, their own.

In what way does Rabbi Akiva attribute his learning to his wife? I used the word beneficence, but we are not actually told the manner in which Akiva benefited from his wife during those twenty-four years. It cannot be that Akiva needed her permission to study, as in the first two stories the wife does not explicitly grant permission. In fact, this wife seems to suggest that their betrothal will somehow facilitate her husband's ability to go away to study[63]. One possibility is that wives traditionally supported their husbands financially while they studied, in which case Akiva would have needed a wife to serve as benefactor. This would add weight to the punishment meted out by her father, cutting her off from his fortunes.

But the text does not discuss dollars and cents. Rather we are led to believe that Akiva's wife simply desires her husband to become as great a scholar as he can, as if her own passion for Torah study supercedes her desire to have a family. Could it be that rather than suggesting to Rabbi Akiva that they get married, she actually proposed a sort of artist/benefactor relationship? Could it be that the rabbis are holding up this sort of economic partnership as a model of relations with their wives?

Boyarin supports this theory by suggesting that perhaps students were not expected to be celibate during their long periods away from their "wives." He quotes two stories from the Talmud that support this theory: Yoma 18b and Yevamoth 37b[64] and mentions that similar traditions have survived in the Iranian Jewish community. He further argues that this speculation

[63] The Bavli suggests that Akiva would never have thought of studying had his wife not suggested it.
[64] Boyarin, D, p. 145

would explain why the rabbis are primarily concerned with the sexual needs of the women and not the men.

Boyarin makes an interesting case for viewing this relationship as the rabbis' model for the perfect relationship. He points out that the biblical story of Jacob and his wives also contains a Rachel (which is the agreed upon name of Akiva's wife). Jacob's name, "Ya'akov," is almost an anagram of Akiva. Therefore, Boyarin tells us that this story is being encoded for us as an ideal marriage, as Jacob's love for Rachel was ideal. This seems to agree with Valler's reading of the optimism of the story, and makes sense of the placement as well. But what is less clear, is what the underlying message is of this relationship as the ideal.

It makes little sense to view the relationship between Akiva and his wife as a literal shepherd and his ewe. In fact, since Akiva is the one who is, "let out to pasture," so to speak, it makes more sense to envision Rachel as the shepherd, carefully tending to the physical and economic means of the family while Akiva is off studying. I agree with Boyarin then, that the ideal wife for the rabbis seems to be one who encourages her husband to fulfill the natural lust for Torah, and who waits patiently at home for her reward. He compares this literature with the Homeric epics[65], which are intended to teach their audience how to behave and what to expect.

However, I am also intrigued by Valler's insight that the wife's role has increased in strength throughout the narratives. She mentions that the first six stories appear in dyads – the first and second, third and fourth, fifth and sixth – and that there are marked contrasts between the second, fourth, and sixth as they appear in other sources. She suggests that the stories were edited and arranged in this particular order to teach a moral and social lesson, "to show that in no case is the study of Torah to be preferred above family life, if it renders the wife miserable." (pg. 74)

[65] Ibid. p. 155.

7 - Rav Yosef

Rav Yosef the son of Rava was sent by his father to the academy under Rav Yosef, and they arranged for him [to stay there] six years. After he was there for three years and on the eve of the Day of Atonement approaching, he said, 'I will go and see my family.' When his father heard he took up a weapon and went out to meet him. 'You have remembered your mistress!' or in another verson, 'you have remembered your dove!' They fought and neither one nor the other ate the last meal before the fast.

Each dyad, according to Valler, presents a different kind of relationship, and all six lead to the conclusion that the wife's permission is necessary in order to go off and study. The seventh story simply presents a more extreme example of what happens when the balance is upset. According to Boyarin, this story shows that the creation by the rabbis of, "the married monk," as an ideal was an imperfect solution, as highlighted by the final story. The perfect rabbi who is content to wait many years before visiting his wife, may occasionally attempt to shorten the duration of his absence. Even though this possibility undermines the rabbis' balance of the dual passions of Torah and marriage, they include it as a final cautionary tale, showing the disasters that may result.

5
A New Jewish Theater

I have made the case that rabbinic texts are easily translated into dramatic literature, and that it is compelling to do so. Our communities are eager to embrace the arts, as is evidenced by the popularity of Jewish art festivals across the country. At this year's North American Federation of Temple Youth Convention (NFTY – the Reform Jewish Youth Group of North America) students were asked to choose a track of study for a portion of the weekend. There were several arts tracks including music, visual art and drama, and each of these was full to capacity.

At the same time, our communities are losing their connection to traditional Jewish texts. Small groups have some success in studying texts once the commitment has been made to engage in study, but that commitment is difficult to maintain in competition with the other elements of the busy lives of modern Jews. Even in more traditional, observant environments, few Jews make regular time in their schedules for serious textual study. The source for our practices, the very process of creation that at once embodies Jewish practice and invents it anew, is becoming lost.

By using the arts to reconnect our communities with the event of textual study we are reaching out to Jews in a way in which they are already prepared to accept. Jews already go to the theater to become culturally enriched; they will even happily engage in dramatic works about the Jewish condition. But until now there has been no serious attempt to explore the depth, range and beauty of our traditional texts through this medium. A new Jewish theater would maintain

the dignity and integrity of traditional textual study, while bringing a new energy and vitality to that study.

The elements discussed in this paper are easily transferred to other Jewish texts as well. The main concern is that the dramaturg constantly place him or herself in the position of the theater-goer, and ask whether or not the experience would feel like some level of Jewish education, in the best sense. Biblical stories are easily portrayed on the stage, but can they be presented along with various commentaries on those stories? Can they be presented in such a way that the audience feels a part of the process of commentary; connected to the interpretive process of their ancestors? Can modern Hebrew poetry, or traditional Midrashic texts, be presented in the same way, with the same qualifications? The answer is a resounding yes. In fact, as these forms of Jewish literature are brought to life through the arts Jewish heritage will be forever enriched.

Every playwright and dramaturg will present the range of Jewish texts in their own personal way. This closely parallels the range of experiences students encounter in traditional text study. Contemporary presentations of our heritage should be as diverse and rich as the ancient ritual and practices we have inherited from our ancestors. The ancient rabbis embraced the dramatic and creative, which is evidenced by the beauty and richness inherent in their rituals. If adults are to be engaged by their Jewish community, we must continue to explore new avenues of engagement, and we must embrace the tools available to us in the modern world.

The Play – "Two Weeks Home"

Characters
Rabbi[i]
His Wife Rachel[ii]
His Therapist Jay[iii]
President/Narrator Stephen[iv]
Rava
Rabbi Judah
Rabbi Nahman
Shimon bar Yochai
Rabbi Hanania – romantic lead
Rav
Son of Rav
Oshaia

Scene One

(Rabbi is moving into a new office – his first rabbinic job. In his office is a shtender, a portable podium used for studying or praying.[v] Rabbi displays surprise at seeing this in a Reform synagogue, but it is truly a piece of art. He unpacks a few books and places one on the shtender. Eventually he finds himself swaying back and forth as he reads the book – the natural position for using a traditional shtender. Wife comes in slowly. After a few moments, he sees her, stops swaying, and looks again) .

Wife: Hi. I'm. . .I was . . . I just stopped by home[vi]. . .

Rabbi: This isn't home, this is work

Wife: I mean, yes. I know. Listen, I stopped by to wish you luck today, they told me you'd be here.

Rabbi: You're not mad?

Wife: Of course I'm mad, and so are you. . . clearly. We had a fight.

Rabbi: It's no big deal, there's a lot of stress

Wife: Yes

Rabbi: I haven't been around

Wife: No

Rabbi: And you've been. . . great. Really, this wasn't going to be easy

Wife: We talked about that,

Rabbi: We talked about a lot of things. We can talk about it again.

Wife: No. I'm sorry I shouldn't have come.

Rabbi: You're sorry?

Wife: No, I mean, I'm sorry I dropped by, you're probably overwhelmed with your first day, Probably going out to lunch with the President or Harvey or something.[vii]

Rabbi: Yeah, I think so. It's a big commitment you know – it's stressful

Wife: I know. Were you working off some stress?

Rabbi: What?

Wife: When I came in? You looked like you were praying or something.

Rabbi: Oh, I was. No, I just, look what I found. (He shows her the shtender)

Wife: Neat. What is it?

Rabbi: It's a shtender, I haven't seen one in years. You use it to read from, it holds the books open, you see?

Wife: You mean <u>you</u> use it to read from – is that what you were doing? Reading? Working off some stress?

Rabbi: Now you're just teasing me.

Wife: Yeah?

Rabbi: Come on, it's my first day

Wife: Okay, it looks like you're doing great. You meet some secretaries, say hello to the kids at school, go out to lunch with the Rabbi.

Rabbi: It's going to take some time to, for them to see whether they made a good decision

Wife: It was your decision too.

Rabbi: Right

Wife: You chose them just as much as they chose you.

Rabbi: I know.

Wife: No, more! They knew they were getting the best!

Rabbi: Okay.

Wife: No, I mean it!

(As she is talking, the President has walked in and is listening from the doorway)

Rabbi: Uh. . .

Wife: Don't let them talk you into taking on a bunch of stuff you don't want to do just because you're the new guy

Rabbi: Honey. . .

Wife: No, it's really important. I know how synagogues get, Steve is going to know they got you to sign without really knowing. . .

Rabbi: Steve knows I've signed on to the right place, and we're going to work out whatever we need to work out. Trust me.

Wife: They probably want me to get the sisterhood up and running for all we know. Did you talk to them about how much I hate sisterhood?

Rabbi: Uh, sweetie, let's talk about this later, okay? (she notices)

Wife: Oh God.

Rabbi: It's okay

Wife: Oh no.

Pres: It's okay – hi Rachel.

Wife: Oh! So good to see you. You know, that whole thing

Pres: Yes I do.

Wife: It's his first day and . . .

Pres: No need to explain

Wife: Just a little pep talk. (She jokes): Have a good day honey!

Pres: Yes.

Rabbi: He understands. . .

Pres: I do, I understand. Plus, I've been through this contract negotiations stuff before. You guys are going to like it here. I like you, I really pushed for you, you should know.

Rabbi: That's very nice. Just give me a minute okay, and I'm ready to go.

Pres: No problem. (he leaves)

Wife: You can't stay mad at me forever.

Rabbi: I'm not mad at you

Wife: I'm mad.

Rabbi: Oh yeah? Mad at the world?

Wife: No, I'm mad at you.

Rabbi: You are?

Wife: No, yes. I am mad, why shouldn't I be, you started a fight with me last night!

Rabbi: Did I? How dare I do that! (they kiss)

Wife: You did! It's been two weeks already, two whole weeks.

Rabbi: Honey, probably the most stressful two weeks of my life, you know?

Wife: Before we got married (she checks the door) before then, two days was a long time.

Rabbi: Look, there have been times when you haven't wanted to either!

Wife: So you don't want to!

Rabbi: No, it's not that, come on, I really can't talk about this now

Wife: Just tell me, if you're going to tell me.

Rabbi: This is not a big deal. No one has sworn off sex, okay?[viii] It's just bad timing right now.

Wife: Look, I want you at home. We know too many rabbis who can't leave this place at night. You're not like that.

Rabbi: Right, but the first couple of weeks are going to be. . .

Wife: Two more weeks, right?

Rabbi: That's not fair. How about we re-evaluate after one week. Just one week. I'll be able to write my first sermon, get that class of angry carpool moms going, then we'll have a date. I'll take you out.

Wife: Deal. One week, not two.

Rabbi: You know, the Mishnah says,

Wife: Oh god, you are a rabbi!

Rabbi: Well, it says a student of Torah can leave his wife

Wife: Is that what we've come to?

Rabbi: No listen, can leave his wife for thirty days without her permission![ix]

Wife: One week, mister. Two weeks tops.

Rabbi: Camel drivers get thirty days too

Wife: Is that what you want? You want to drive a camel?

Rabbi: Sounds sexy.[x]

Wife: You'd prefer a camel to me? Are you trying to tell me something?

Rabbi: Well, there's an argument in the Talmud

Wife: You want an argument? Keep talking.

Rabbi: Okay, I gotta run.

Wife: That's right, run off with your tail between your legs, Mr. Camel Driver.

Rabbi: I'll see you tonight, okay? I think I'll get home early

Wife: Early? I thought you have a meeting?

Rabbi: I mean early after that, I think I'll be home by nine.

Wife: (pauses) It's good we don't have kids yet.

Scene Two

(Lunch - the President and Rabbi are at lunch together in a diner, they have their own table with some privacy. It's not a fancy place, just enough where they can sit and talk)

Pres: As long as we keep talking, I'm sure it will work itself out by the High Holy Days.

Rabbi: I'm sure you're right.

Pres: I know I'm right. That's why I make a good President. Let me ask you, so why did you want to be a rabbi? When did you know?

Rabbi: Well, I've thought about that a lot. I guess I knew pretty early on. Although I'm not sure Rachel knew when she married me, you know what I mean?

Pres: Hmmm. Well, I've seen a few new rabbis come and go, and I can tell you the ones who were married before they got to rabbinic school have a much better chance at making it than the ones who get married after rabbinic school. It's the pressure. Gets 'em every time! But don't you worry. Rachel will feel right at home here soon enough.

Rabbi: I think she worries about me feeling at home.

Pres: Well, don't you?

Rabbi: Well, we just moved here

Pres: We've got very nice people working here! You don't like your office?

Rabbi: Oh no. Of course I feel welcome in the synagogue, I didn't mean that. We don't quite feel at home in the city, that's all. It just takes time to find your place.

Pres: You know this isn't really a job you've chosen for yourself.[xi] We're a big synagogue, you're going to run into congregants like me everywhere you go. The book store, the video store, the grocery store, car dealerships, the movies, the gas station. And they won't care if it's your day off, you know? If they want to talk, you're the rabbi – period.

Rabbi: Yes, I think I know that. That's why I think it's important that the staff supports one another, from the top to the bottom. And that can start with you and me.

Pres: I'll support you in any way I can. You support me, I support you, and together we support Harvey, who probably needs to lean on us a little more than he used to. He runs this place, for sure, but he needs me to connect with the staff, and he needs you to connect with the people. Out there. Wherever you meet them. Twenty four hours a day. That's the job.

Rabbi: Right. Got it.

Pres: Rachel will love it. (pause) Maybe she could get the sisterhood back on its feet? (the lights begin to change) Listen, I know the next couple of weeks are going to be tough on the two of you. The truth is, we've all got to balance what our wives want with what the community needs.[xii] You understand?

(Upstage, in a small spotlight, we see the therapist in a comfortable chair, speaking to the Rabbi)

Jay: You can learn to distinguish between what you want, and what you need. You have a baby, or things don't go the way you hope they will with Rachel, you take a step back and see, what do we want, and what do we need.

Pres: probably needs to lean on us a little more than he used to

Jay: Two weeks is not so long, you know. There's a lot going on in your lives right now, give yourselves permission to just go with the flow for awhile.

Rabbi: How long?

Pres: We're already having the discussion you know.

Jay: Awhile can mean two weeks or two years, its not the time, it's the way you think of it. What's your opinion, how long is too long? There's no right or wrong, only differences of opinion.

Rabbi: I learn from my rabbis

Pres: Don't you worry, people love the rabbi. He's not going anywhere. The discussion is simply in preliminary stages, nothing to concern you at this point. But you should know that people are very excited about you coming here now.

Jay: You need to give this place a try. To see how you'll feel in a week or two. Maybe a month. It's not going to take very long and you'll know.

Rabbi: Know any good camel drivers who need an assistant?

Pres: Six months and we'll sit down again to see how things are going, sound good? Great. I'll get the check. (he leaves, light fades on therapist)

Rabbi: (to audience)[xiii] Why should one week away from home feel like such punishment? Rachel has always understood that this job is different than others. One rabbi says two weeks, another says one. Perhaps the time away is not what matters but the reasons behind the leaving.

If a man swears to stay away from his wife, the great house of Rabbi Shammai argues it should only be for two weeks, while the house of Rabbi Hillel, who perhaps loved his wife a bit more, argues for one week. Right in the middle of the record of wedding

ceremonies, Ketubot. But why would a man want to stay away from his wife? I'm not mad, I'm not upset. I don't particularly want to be away from her even for a night. And yet I do. The last two weeks I haven't touched her. Why? Could it be that I am no longer interested in her? Of course not. And I know she wants to support me in this new job. Could it be the job? Do you see any other way to do this? The congregations have needs, they've made that clear. And I want this job – not just here, I want to do this. And it takes so much out of me. Like the first time you've been in a hospital, it takes so much. One week or two, there's not much I can do other than find the right balance. That's what every rabbi before me has tried to do, and where are they now?

Scene Three

(Rabbi back in his office, at the shtender, asleep over a large book[xiv])

Narr: Rav Adda bar Ahavah used to tell a story that his rabbi told him, and another rabbi told him, down from the Sages of old, that students used to leave their wives for two or three years at a time in order to study Torah. But Rava argued . . .

Rava: Just you try it! The rabbis who left their wives for three years at a time? That reminds me of a story I once heard . . .[xv]

Rabbi: (sleep-talking) Just you try it!

Narr: Once upon a time. . .

Rava: I think it was Yom Kippur

Narr: In a land far, far away

Rava: Probably near Tigris I bet

Narr: Rabbi Rehumi was just about to leave for home

Rava: He came home once a year, you see

Narr: On Yom Kippur

Rava: And this being the day, he started to pack things up

Narr: No.

Rava: No? What do you mean?

Narr: Two or three years, remember. Rehumi had been home just one year ago

Rava: On Yom Kippur last year!

Narr: Right. But this year

Rava: He forgot!

Rabbi: (still asleep) I didn't forget!

Narr: He never came home.

Rava: Right. He had become so wound up in studying

Narr: The endless work of the student

Rava: Being a rabbi, he got caught up at work

Narr: that it had driven him upstairs (he motions to Rabbi, who jumps up with his book, and races up to the "roof" of the building, a storage space above his office)

Rava: Just imagine, he's alone, all the others have left

Narr: He might have been studying with his chevruta

Rava: His study partner? You think he was alone on the roof with his study partner? No, he must have been alone.

Narr: If you say so.

Rava: He was completely wrapped up in his books

Narr: Damned sexy books, those must have been

Rava: Have you ever studied them? They'll suck you dry, spit you out empty and leave you begging for more.

Narr: If you say so. I say that his wife remembered, even if he did not, that Yom Kippur was the one holiday he held sacred for her.

Rava: to come home

Narr: He left the comfort of the study hall to come home, to his home

Rava: Or he left his home to visit his wife for a day. But this year, he forgot

Rabbi: Nice, friendly people. . .

Narr: He forgot. And she was left, waiting for him.

Rava: Maybe they had a fight

Narr: Maybe he wanted to forget, she wanted him home, but he needed to stay

Rabbi: (looking through the book) Where was I?

Rava: Damned sexy book!

Wife: (in a spotlight, hair back in a kerchief, sweeping) He is coming soon.

Narr: His wife was expecting him every moment, saying

Narr: He is coming soon

Wife: He is coming soon.

Rabbi: (studying) What is meant by tayyalim?[xvi] Day students. These are the men of whom it is written, 'It is vain for you who rise early and stay up late, you that eat of the bread of toil.

Wife: He is coming soon.

Rabbi: so God gives to those who chase their sleep away. These are the wives of scholars, who chase the sleep from their eyes in this world and achieve thereby the life of the world to come!

Narr: A woman prefers one measure with frivolity to ten measures with abstinence. But surely a husband knows.

Rabbi: Day students? Oh God! I see it now, I am that day student! My eyes in this world have been so blind. My wife, she is waiting, I must get to her. Somewhere in here there must be a way to get to her. She is waiting for me, it has already been too long. I am coming soon, I am coming!!

Narr: At that moment, a single tear dropped from the eye of his wife

Rava: And the roof collapsed under him! Crash! He was killed.

(The lights change, and Rabbi is back in his office, asleep at the shtender, he awakens suddenly)

Rabbi: I've got to get home. (he leaves the shtender, with the book still open on it)

Scene Four

(breakfast at Rabbi's house, about to leave for work)

Rabbi: I had another dream last night.

Wife: Why didn't you call me?[xvii] (she stops herself) What are you going to eat? Make yourself some breakfast like you live here.

Rabbi: I'm not hungry, I'll eat lunch early after the funeral.

Wife: This is your third funeral in a month.

Rabbi: I know, I know. At least now I'm comfortable doing them! Last time, I stayed afterwards to make sure the workers put the coffin into the wall without making noise, and they just about dropped it from ten feet off the ground! I don't think they've ever been so freaked out!

Wife: Can we not talk about this at breakfast?

Rabbi: Sorry, it's just been on my mind.

Wife: So what was it about?

Rabbi: What?

Wife: Your dream. Do you want to tell me about it?

Rabbi: Do you remember the one I had that time about dying because I couldn't get home to you?

Wife: I think so.

Rabbi: Well, I had another one of those.

Wife: The same dream.

Rabbi: Not exactly. I couldn't get back to you, but you thought I was dead in this one.

Wife: Morbid. I think you were dead in the other one too.

Rabbi: Okay, just listen.

(Two rabbis – Judah and Nahman, and our narrator are illuminated in front of the scene)

Narr: How often should these "students of Torah" come home and visit their wives?[xviii]

Judah: My teacher Samuel told me

Narr: Rav Judah, in the name of Samuel replied

Judah: from the eve of Shabbat until the next Shabbat eve

Narr: To perform one's marital duties

Nahmn:Who bringeth forth its fruit in its season

(the lights change back suddenly)

Wife: "Bringeth?" Someone in your dream said "bringeth?"

Rabbi: I think that's how the Talmud translates these things. It makes it sound more, medieval. This dream reminds me of a page of Talmud, the rabbis arguing over who should leave first to get home to their wives.

(the lights change again)

Narr: Rav. Judah, and some say Rav Huna, or again, as other say, Rav Nahman, said

Judah:This refers

Nahmn:This refers to

Judah: To the man

Nahmn:of course the man, who

Judah: Who performs his martial duty

Nahmn:The one who brings the fruit in its season, who carries the fruit in one's womb until it is ripe and tender, to be plucked.

Judah: The fruit in its season is the man who finds his way home every week

Narr: This refers to the one who performs his marital duty every Friday night.

Nahmn:Who brings forth fruit in its season – from the very first Psalm

Judah: I knew that.

Narr: Judah spent all of his time. . .

Nahmn:verse three

Judah: yes.

Narr: all of his time in the academy, but every Shabbat he came home.

(the lights change to bring in the Rabbi and his wife behind the rabbis)

Rabbi: In my dream I was on my way home to see you, surrounded by light. Rays of light surrounded me and stretched out to the heavens and down into the earth, swirling around me like a mighty flame. And you were waiting for me, you could see the light surrounding me, and you knew I was coming.

Wife: A pillar of fire? (she's getting angry)

Rabbi: That could be it.

Wife: Surrounding you?

Rabbi: I don't know.

Narr: Whenever he arrived people saw a pillar of light moving before him.

Judah: Every Friday night he would come home.

Nahmn:home.

Rabbi: What do you think that means?

Wife: Maybe it's all the craziness of your new job, all of these funerals you've been officiating, and it's all following you home. I don't see you anymore unless we're talking about your work. You don't ask me how my day was anymore. I mean, I get it. I know you're still in your first transition or whatever it is, and I'm trying to be patient, I really am. You're surrounded by a giant tower and I get all excited that you're coming home? A huge pillar guiding you towards me? Maybe you're just horny, did you ever think of that? Maybe you actually miss being with me, and now you've got giant flaming pillars and towers in your sleep.[xix]

Rabbi: That's not fair.

Wife: Isn't it? What's not fair exactly? The part about me never seeing you anymore, or the part about you not wanting to have sex with me anymore.

Rabbi: Can we talk about this later?

Wife: I don't know. Can we? What happened in your dream? After your burning pillar didn't find its way home.

Rabbi: That's right. It didn't. In my dream I forgot to come home again. It was Friday night and I thought I needed to be at work. And you didn't see it.

Wife: Didn't see what?

Rabbi: The pillar wasn't there, and your family all gathered around, you weren't even there, in my dream. They planned my funeral, but all the time I was sitting in my office, because it was Friday night, Shabbat, and I had to be there. They thought I died.

Wife: You died. Again.

Rabbi: In my dream, when they thought that I had died. It actually happened. Just sitting there in my office, I died. I keep dreaming that I can't find you, and I can't live – it just can't work, and so I die.

Wife: Why don't you make an appointment with Jay, honey.

(lights change again, focus on Narrator and two rabbis)

Narr: Judah the son of Rav Hiyya and the son-in-law of Rabbi Yannai spent all his time in the academy

Judah: But every Shabbat he came home.

Nahmn:every Shabbat.

Narr: When he arrived people saw a pillar of light moving before him. Once he became so involved with his studies

Judah: He forgot to return home!

Nahmn:He forgot!

Narr: Not seeing the sign, Rabbi Yannai said to them

Nahmn:"turn over his bed"

Narr: For had Judah been alive he would not have neglected his marital duties.

Nahmn:Like it says in Ecclesiastes, "Here is an evil I have seen under the sun as great as an error committed by a ruler."

Narr: An error committed by a ruler.

Judah: Yannai made a mistake, he wasn't really dead, just under the spell of his Torah study.

Narr: but the consequence was that Judah's soul returned to eternal rest.

Nahmn:his bed was turned over.

Scene Five

(Therapist's – Jay's Office. The Narrator should still be present, closely monitoring the movements of our Rabbi, ready to jump in and help should the need arise)

Jay: (long silence with Jay and Rabbi sitting together) So, how are you?

Rabbi: Okay, it's been a tough transition

Jay: Into your new job?

Rabbi: Yes, I think so. Things aren't so great at home.

Jay: Does your wife like that you have this job?

Rabbi: I'm not sure anymore. We never see each other, and I've been having these dreams about her, most of the time I can't get home to her, or I forget to go home to see her, and I die in the dreams.

Jay: Do you actually die in the dreams?

Rabbi: No, I don't think so, once I fell through a floor, and another time I didn't experience it at all, I just knew I had died.

Jay: Have these dreams been bothering you?

Rabbi: I'm mostly trying to figure out what they mean, you know? Do you remember your dreams?

Jay: Not recently. Sometimes I do. I often think of a dream I had a long time ago, or sometimes a dream will suddenly make sense to me, once I've chewed on it for awhile.

Rabbi: That sounds right. I think I've been spending too much time at work.

Jay: Well, it's a new job, that's very common.

Rabbi: True, but it doesn't feel like it's going to get better. It feels like it's going to get worse. I'm on call all the time, there's a ton of work to get through every day, and most nights I have meetings to go to.

Jay: Did you work before you went to rabbinic school?

Rabbi: Why?

Jay: I'm just wondering if you had any thoughts about how this compares with any other work experiences you've had.

Rabbi: I don't know if I work any harder than anyone else, but it just feels like there's more pressure in my life now than there used to be.

Jay: That makes sense. How many kids do you and Rachel want?

Rabbi: Oh, there is no way we would have time for kids right now.

Jay: But if you did. . .

Rabbi: Well, I think she wants three, I want two.

Jay: Sounds like you've thought this out.

Rabbi: (thinking) How do people have time to both work full-time, get through school too, and have kids? And have a savings account?!

Jay: Sometimes you have to prioritize.

Rabbi: Right, but is there any suggested path? Any guidance? It seems like our culture is just work, work, work, you haven't made something of yourself unless you make a lot of money. And the reality is that you need a lot of money to have kids, send them to school, take vacations, own a home. . .

Jay: Well, you've got a lot on your mind.

Rabbi: Well, I do have a lot on my mind! Right now I'm supposed to be making all this money so we can have all the things we want, and then I feel guilty that I'm working at such a crazy place, in such a crazy position. People want their rabbi to be humble and modest, not to take vacations with their three kids and wife who also works full-time and can't make it to the synagogue most Friday nights because she's working![xx]

Jay: You're right, you're right! Keep talking!

Rabbi: Let me tell you something that just happened to me.

(Narrator comes into view, to one side of the action)

Rabbi: This man was in my office, we were talking about his children. He explained to me that he was really looking for some nice Jewish girl to marry off his older son, who is only just finishing college, by the way. I asked him what was the rush? He seemed to be in a great big hurry to get his son married off.

Narr: Rav was arranging the marriage of his son into the family of Rav Hiyya. When the Ketubah was about to be written the bride passed away.

Rabbi: Can you imagine? He had been dating this woman all through college. They were two months from the wedding, his son's finance drops dead, they still don't know why.

Narr: It was discovered that Rav was descended from the son of King David himself, and Rav Hiyya was descended from King David's brother. Their descendants would never be fit for one another.

Jay: He wanted to remarry his son out of fear?

Rabbi: Maybe. People get very superstitious around weddings. Anyways, it turns out that his son doesn't want to be married again; he wants to go away to school first. The specialty he wants to study they only have in some school far away. I think he just wanted to get away for awhile.

Jay: Understandable. It sounds like his parents were pushing him pretty hard to get married.

Rabbi: I mean, marriage is great, but it helps if you've got school out of the way too. I was thinking about myself as he's telling me this story. It would have been much easier for Rachel and I if I was already a rabbi when we met.

Jay: How would that have been easier?

Rabbi: Well, maybe she just would have known what she was getting herself into.

Jay: Do you think she would have chosen differently if she had known how much you would be working?

Rabbi: I don't know. Maybe.

Jay: Tell me what happened with the man in your office.

Rabbi: When I talked to his son, he told me he had fallen in love with someone else.

Jay: That happened fast!

Rabbi: I know. I couldn't believe it. It seems like when people are determined about the path they want to take, they make sure they get there. You know what I mean?

Jay: Or maybe this son is taking his father's dreams for him and making them his own.

Rabbi: That's interesting. It makes me wonder why I wasn't talking to his son directly.[xxi]

Narr: He made new arrangements for the marriage of his son into the family of Rav Yossi ben Zimra. It was agreed that first he should spend twelve years at the academy.

Jay: We call that triangulation. It could be more effective for you to find out where the source of the problem is. But on the other hand, the guy sitting in your office is your client; you want to be able to figure out what he is asking you for. Most of the time, you'll be able to help just by talking to whoever is there in your office.

Rabbi: Right. Clearly there is more going on than this man is even telling me, but he's my congregant, and I'm getting the story from his perspective.

Jay: Perspective is a tricky thing. For example, do you know the girl? What did the she want?

Rabbi: That's a good question. Apparently, no one had asked her that.[xxii]

Narr: When the girl was led before him, he said to them, "Let it be six years."

(lights change, we see a group of rabbis sitting around a table, celebrating. They are loud and boisterous, and singing a traditional table song. The group is quieted by the Narrator, who has entered the scene with a beautiful young woman in tow. The Son of Rav stands from among the group, walks to the girl and studies her, without touching her. They smile at each other, and she steps towards him)

Rabbi: They met at some party or something like that. They hardly knew each other.

Jay: Love at first sight?

Rabbi: Does that really exist? In my experience, love is something to work for.

Son: (to his father – Rav) Please father, let is be six years. (He looks back at the girl)

Narr: When they made her pass before him again he said…

Son: Father?

Rav: My son! This night is yours. For soon you shall join our ancestors in the sacred tome of the Talmud. Day and night you shall caress her pages like the fragile wings of a dove. Her gold embossed letters shall dance before you in the firelight like dreams of your lover, who. . .[xxiii]

Son: Dad! Can we talk for a minute?

Rav: What is it, my kaddish, my beloved?

Son: (he struggles) I don't want to study. I don't want to go away. I don't want to be your kaddish!

Rav: (sighs) This again? What is it this time? Do you want to make hats? Do you want to grovel for tzedakah on the street corner? What is so terrible about our traditions that you flaunt them so blatantly before me and my chevruta?!

Son: No, it's not that. I don't want to make hats or anything. I just think I could. . .

Rav: Yes? What!?

Son: I just think I could, make Temma very happy by staying here and working at her father's store.

Rav: Temma? Who's that?

Son: Father! You've just arranged for me to marry this woman, and you don't even know her name?

Rav: Zishe, Zishe, my pupeleh! My kaddish! You know I love you, right? Right? That is why it is going to be very, very painful for me to rip your throat out from your neck!

Son: Father! Wait!

Narr: And, and and! When they made Temma pass before him a second time (father reluctantly lets go of his son and grudgingly brings the girl before him) he said: I would rather marry her first and then proceed to the academy. (he saves the day with this suggestion) He felt ashamed before his father (forces them to act this out) but his father said to him. . .

Rav: I have nothing to say to him!

Rabbi: (to the Therapist) I'm sure the father is pretty pissed about the whole thing, what are you going to tell him?!

Rav: I have nothing to say to him!

Narr: My son, your actions are simply God-like!

Rav: I said what?

Narr: God-like, in that (thinking fast) Torah tells us "You bringest them in and plantest them, Exodus twenty five, verse eight, which means the planting comes first! Only later the Torah tells us "Let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them! (very proud of himself)

Rav: I said . . . bringest?

Son: Do you mean, my dear father, that first the Israelites had to settle in their new home before they could build the sanctuary and study God's word? Home first papa, home first!

Narr: Yes! That's exactly it! Exactly what I meant!

Rabbi: Without a home, what are they going to do? Consummate their marriage over the internet? Long distance? Use up a lot of cell phone minutes that way, let me tell you!

Rav: Okay, okay. (To audience) So I let them marry first, even though I knew it was a bad idea. My sons got a lot of crazy ideas about his home being where his heart is. And every parent knows that a child's home is where I tell him it is. What's got into kids these days, they just run off and get married? If he could have waited, his heart could have been full with something more substantial than this wife, this woman, this Temma. Now she will wait for him, twelve years she'll be my daughter, with no hope for her life. I wanted my son to be married, and I want him home with me. But I don't want him stuck here, with me, with her. She will wait, oh yes. And he. . . will not.[xxiv] I know he will not. Boys will be boys, and the yeshiva is a long way from home. She will wait for twelve years for a letter, a call, a visit, even once in a year, and she will learn that boys in a yeshiva care more for each other than they do for their own wives. They learn together, they eat together, they learn to care for each other, in kindness, in gentle ways, soft ways. Often boys at the yeshiva grow very lonely so far away from home. It was this way for my father and his father, and it was this way for me. And it will be this way for my son.

Rabbi: I have to go. (gets up to leave)

(The scene changes, back to Therapist's office)

Jay: You know, it's not your fault.

Rabbi: What do you mean?

Jay: I mean, this couple, you're helping their father, not them.

Rabbi: I know.

Jay: What I mean is, I wonder what feelings about Rachel this is bringing up for you.

Rabbi: (sits back down) I haven't really talked with her about it yet.

Jay: About this man in your office?

Rabbi: What I was really thinking about when he was sitting there, was how much he must love his son to be so involved in his life.

Jay: I'm sure it's frustrating to his son

Rabbi: Yeah, but like you said, I'm not talking to his son, he is sitting in my office, in a lot of pain, you know, and I'm not talking to his son, I'm talking to him.

Jay: So what were you thinking?

Rabbi: Do you have any children?

Jay: Yes, have we talked about them before?

Rabbi: No, I just was thinking how strange it is that I never asked you about your children.

Jay: We haven't really talked about children here.

Rabbi: No, we haven't. Why is that?

Jay: Do you want to talk about children?

Rabbi: I don't know. Maybe it's just on my mind. I want two, Rachel wants three, how do these decisions get made? Right now I'm so busy, I feel like weddings, children, these are maybe things that only get to happen to other people. Maybe I'm just not cut out for it.

Jay: Busy helping other people with their children.

Rabbi: Exactly. I see them at school, at services, they come and visit.

Jay: And none of them know that you don't have any.

Rabbi: No. I feel like I'm at the wedding, and trying to sneak out the back door to go get more work done. I want to be at the wedding, I want to be getting married.

Jay: You are married.

Rabbi: No, I mean, life is happening to my friends, all the people around me, but not me. We're not moving, we're not creating a home together, just an apartment, you know?

Jay: And you're upset.

Rabbi: Yes. No. I'm not really upset, I just, it doesn't really feel much like a home. I think Rachel thinks about it a lot.

Jay: Is Rachel upset?

Rabbi: It just doesn't really feel much like a home.

(scene changes – we are at the wedding of Shimon ben Yochai.)

Rabbi: I want to dance at my children's weddings.

(ben Yochai dances by with a large group, singing the Hora. One member of the group falls out of the group and catches his breath downstage, Rabbi Hanania. He picks up his

satchel and with a final, silent goodbye, begins to head offstage. Shimon benYochai runs to him and grabs him)

Yochai:My friend! Where are you running off to?

Han: Mazal Tov! Best wishes, take care, enjoy your night.

Yochai:Wait. Okay, I'm here, where are you going?

Han: This is so beautiful, your party. Your wife loves you, go to her.

Yochai:Are you leaving? Tonight? From here?

Han: I have to go. If I don't go tonight, I know I won't go at all.

Yochai: (hugs him) wait for me. We'll do it together! The yeshiva is several days from here, youl'l need a travel partner.

Han: Don't be a fool, you can't leave your own wedding!

Yochai:I love you.[xxv] I love you. Okay? We'll go. Together. My wife will wait, like Rabbi Akiva's wife, you know, twenty four years, twenty four thousand disciples – come back rich and famous![xxvi]

Han: They are calling for you.

Yochai:Just wait for me, until I am able to join you. Wait for me, until I am able to join you. Wait for me, until I am able to join you (he starts back to the party) You were going to leave for twelve years and not say goodbye?

(Shimon bar Yochai heads back to the party, and Hanania waits for a moment, unsure of what to do. Then he leaves, running off stage)

Jay: But there's nowhere to run

Rabbi: So I tell him. You've got to support your kids, and love them, and tell them you'll always be there for them. You've got to let them go out into the world, and make their own mistakes, and fail. And sometimes you've got to be there when they fail, and sometimes...

Jay: Sometimes not.

Scene Six

(At home, boxes and stacks of clothes and books)

Wife: Hello? Hello? Is there someone there?[xxvii] (no answer. She takes a stack of clothes and places them in a box) How come when I feel like talking there's no one there? How come when I talk to myself I always ask questions? How come. . .

At the store today, someone followed me home. I don't know who it was, but he actually looked familiar and so I wasn't sacred. I kept thinking, I know that person from the synagogue, I'm sure I know that person. But I didn't recognize them. It happens a lot, a haven't been there in awhile and someone comes up to me and says hello, I have to just assume I know them from synagogue, or my husband knows them, or maybe we don't really know them but because he's the rabbi they think we do. It happens all the time. It's sort of frustrating, not knowing people and yet knowing them. Or they feel at home with me and I don't even feel at home here, in my home, in my skin.

It's like I'm supposed to be the one to welcome them. Thousands of Jews in this city, they all want to feel like the rabbi's wife knows them. I had no idea. . . I don't think he did either. But that's not me, it's not me. What about my home? What about Shabbes dinners and Channukah parties and birthdays, and . . . baby's rooms and family time. What about. . .

I know what happens when that rabbi comes home. He goes away for. . .years at a time, then comes home and expects everything to look the same. He wouldn't even recognize his own daughter, that's the truth. He would have to hear her name to know who she was, even then he would follow her home to find out where he lived.[xxviii] I don't know what I'm saying.

It's just that I would be shocked, actually shocked if he surprised me in some way today. I just feel like I know what's coming now, I know this job will be here for three years, maybe five, then we'll move again. And these boxes, I shouldn't even throw them away, I should fold them neatly and place them with our family photographs and keepsakes. They will get us through this move, and then next. I would faint if he surprised me. I would simply faint.

(R. Hanania appears at the edge of the stage – to play out this fantasy with Rachel)

Narr: By the time he returned the streets of the town were all changed and he was unable to find the way to his home. He did not know the way to go. He was unable, could not, did not want to find the way, for the streets had moved, they were not in the same places, nor did they intersect in any recognizable patterns. He had lost the way, in his mind, could not find home.

Wife: Going down to the river bank and sitting there, crying because he missed his wife so damned much, he heard a girl being addressed with his name.[xxix]

Narr: Fill up your pitcher and let us go

Wife: And then he knew, he knew as if it was obvious, that this was his daughter, and in utter shock and dismay, and carrying his tremendous burden of guilt, he stalked after her, followed her home, with no thought of her safety whatsoever.

Narr: When they reached the house, his wife was sitting and sifting flour

Wife: She was wearing the fancy dress he bought her, the one that she was going to wear when he took her out dancing, and she looked beautiful, pushed out in all the right places, she looked. . . she looked. . . she looked. . .

(Hanania takes her in his arms, lifts her up and holds her)

Narr: (clears his throat) She lifted up her eyes and seeing him, was so overcome

Wife: Overcome

Narr: with joy

Wife: with. . . joy.

Narr: that she fainted. (she faints) O God of the universe! Her husband prayed, this poor soul, has waited for me for so long

Wife: So long!

Narr: And this is her reward? He prayed for mercy

Wife: Mercy

Narr: and justice

Wife: Justice

Narr: and she was revived!

Wife: Amen!

(as Rabbi enters the home, the Narrator disappears, along with Hanania)

Rabbi: Hi honey.

Wife: Oh, hi.

Rabbi: What are you doing? I thought we were throwing these boxes away. . .

Wife: Right. I was just. . . playing.

Rabbi: Playing.

Wife: That's right.

Rabbi: I see. I thought we might have lunch together today.

Wife: Seriously?

Rabbi: Why? Are you busy?

Wife: No, no. I'm not busy, I just, I'm surprised, that's all. And happy to see you.

Rabbi: I thought we'd go to that place we went that time.

Wife: Sounds good. I'll get my coat.

Rabbi: I'll help.

Scene Seven

(Rabbis Judah and Nahman join the Narrator)[xxx]

Narr: R. Hama bar Bisa went away from his home and spent twelve years at the house of study. When he returned he said

Judah: he said, "I will not act as did Hanania"

Nahmn: Who thought he had killed his wife by entering unexpectedly after so long an absence.

Judah: So he entered the local place and sent word to his house.

(they sit on stools and study, Rabbi joins them with the shtender)

Narr: Meanwhile, his son, Oshaia entered (Oshaia enters and stands near Rabbi)

Osh: What are you studying

Rabbi: Oh, me? I'm new here. I'm not really studying, I'm just amazed at this shtender. It's beautiful

Osh: Do you want to see something?

Rabbi: What?

(Oshaia shows him something w... the shtender, he is very impressed)

Rabbi: That's amazing! You've studied for a long time

Osh: I've been studying my whole life. Here, other places. The only way to really learn is to find a teacher, you know what I mean?

Rabbi: They must have good teachers here.

Osh: Sure. But a great teacher has to been found. It's not so obvious who you can learn from. A friend you can buy, but a teacher you have to find

Rabbi: What do you mean, a friend you can buy?

Osh: Friendship costs all kinds of things. It's like marriage. Expensive, my friend. But a teacher. . .

Rabbi: A wedding is expensive, but . . .

Osh: How long have you been married?

Rabbi: A few years now.

Osh: If you don't know the cost by now. . .

Rabbi: Okay, but it's worth it, it's worth it all. You're talking about compromise. I know that.

Osh: Compromise, sure. You compromise your dreams, I'll compromise mine. Nothing worth doing is easy, my friend.

Rabbi: But I haven't compromised my dreams.

Osh: Not yet.

Rabbi: And Rachel hasn't compromised hers either. We're just . . .

Osh: Taking turns?

Rabbi: We're figuring it out together. We've made it so far. It has been worth it. I know it has. There's no easy way, not for any of us. I could have been a lawyer or a doctor and I probably would see her less! We want so many things; we sometimes just forget why we wanted it in the first place.

Osh: Look. Marriage is worth it. I believe that. But don't kid yourself that she needs you in your office. She needs you in her arms. She needs you helping with bills and budgets. She needs you in her bed. She does not need you in your office. I know you know that.

Rabbi: I do. I do.

Osh: Say it to her, man. Not me. One week, my friend. Two tops. That's all you've got. A month is for camel drivers, my friend.

Rabbi: We were going to throw away those boxes.

Scene Eight

(Rabbi has followed Oshaia back into his – Rabbi's home, where Rachel is waiting)

Wife: R. Hama bar Bisa went away from home and spent twelve years at the house of study. When he returned he said

Rabbi: I will not be like ben Hakinai, Hanania who arrived home early. . .

Osh: Hanania who arrived home unexpectedly and nearly killed his wife with shock.

Rabbi: He therefore entered the local study house of study and sent word to his house.

Osh: He sent word and therefore entered the house of study.

Wife: Word went to his house and he went to the house of study.

Osh: Meanwhile his son, Oshaia entered, sat down before him and addressed him. . .

Rabbi: Addressed to him a question

Osh: The question, addressed

Wife: Address. . .He forgot the way . . .Unable to find. . .Down to the river bank

Rabbi: A question of study

Wife: A threefold cord is not quickly broken!

Osh: R. Oshaia and his father

Rabbi: R. Hama and his son

Wife: And?

Rabbi: and three? His father. When he entered his house, his son came in also

Osh: His son followed him home

Wife: Home. Please come home.

Rabbi: He stood up, believing that the boy wished to to ask him some further questions

Osh: What father stands before his son?

Rabbi: Had I been here, I could have had such a son!

Wife: This is your son. Your home. Just tell me, if you're going to tell me.

Rabbi: This is not a big deal. No one has sworn off sex, okay? It's just bad timing right now.

Osh: Fill up your pitcher, and let's go.

Wife: Look, I want you at home. We know too many rabbis who can't leave this place at night.

Rabbi: I'll get home early

Wife: Two weeks.

Osh: Two weeks, tops!

Wife: A threefold cord is not quickly broken.

Rabbi: The threefold cord. A father, wife and son?

Osh: My father's father was a great man, three generations all studying together. A father, who is also a son.

Wife: Too many rabbis.

Rabbi: I could have been a lawyer, or a doctor.

Osh: R. Oshaia, son of Reb Hama, the son of Bisa.

Wife: A threefold cord.

Rabbi: Not quickly broken.

Scene Nine

(back at home, as in scene 1 – the boxes are neatly stacked at one side. Rabbi comes in, carrying, awkwardly, the shtender)

Wife: Hi. I didn't expect you home.

Rabbi: Hi, I um. I just stopped by work.

Wife: This isn't work

Rabbi: No, I know. I do still live here. (pause) Look, in case I haven't told you, I think you've been really great.

Wife: You do?

Rabbi: Yeah, I do. Here's the thing. I need your feedback. When you're mad, it reminds me that it's okay to get mad. Does that make sense?

Wife: Not really, no.

Rabbi: I brought you a present.

Wife: Your podium?

Rabbi: No, let me explain. It's a shtender, I haven't seen one in years. You use it to read from, it holds the books open, you see?

Wife: You mean you use it to read from.

Rabbi: I do, I do. It's not just about reading, though. It's about studying. These books are so heavy, you need a shtender to, to see the books. To have the books close. Jews need to keep their books close.

Wife: That's why we moved your books into your office, isn't that where your shtender should be?

Rabbi: Rachel, what are the boxes for?

Wife: You want to put it in a box?

Rabbi: No, I just thought we were getting rid of these boxes.

Wife: I just want to be prepared, that's all.

Rabbi: Prepared for what?

Wife: Look, we each have our own story, okay? My story doesn't involve you running off to this funeral and that baby naming, and people calling at all times of the night. Your story is about keeping the books close, about leaving me here while you go off and study, or whatever you need to do. And the thing is, I want that for you too. I've always wanted that for you. I love you. I love your modesty, and your kindness. And I know you'll make a great rabbi. It's just that every rabbi I know wants to be at work on Friday night. And I don't know where I fit in, in that picture anymore.

Rabbi: Sweetie, you are the love of my life. My Rachel. My little lamb chop.

Wife: You haven't called me that in a long time.

Rabbi: What do you mean, it's your name?

Wife: I didn't know you remembered that.

Rabbi: How could I forget, your father telling me that I better be a good shepherd for his little lamb! I had no idea that Rachel means lamb.

Wife: It means Ewe.

Rabbi: Ewe, lamb, what's the difference. I'm still the shepherd!

Wife: Baaaaa. (they laugh)

Rabbi: Look, we made a deal. Now that my job has started, it's going to be rough for awhile.

Wife: I know, I know . . .

Rabbi: But really, the other half was that we would celebrate this together. I need you to celebrate this job with me. I need you to.

Wife: But I'm not just your wife. I don't just want to have your babies and come to your synagogue and run the sisterhood. I feel like my dreams are fading away.

Narr: (appears to one side) Rabbi Akiva was a shepherd of Ben Kalba Savua. Savua's daughter saw how modest and noble the shepherd was.

Rabbi: There is a way to do this. I know there is. But I need to do a better job of showing you. That's why I brought you this shtender.

Narr: She said to him, "If I marry you, will you leave me behind and study at the academy?"

Rabbi: Don't laugh. I've been spending a lot of time with this thing. It's a symbol. This is my study time, my time with the books.

Narr: She was then secretly betrothed to him and sent him away.

Rabbi: You are my life, my love, my home. If you can't find your way to me, then I will find my way to you. Just wait for me, and I'll never leave you again.

Narr: Her father drove her from his house, and disinherited her. She was left on her own, waiting.

Rabbi: We need to find our family again, even before our children come. I want to bring this study, these books, back home, to study with you, to be your partner.

Wife: You are a rabbi.

Rabbi: I could be a doctor or a lawyer, I would probably see you less. It's not okay.

Wife: We want so many things, we cannot have them all.

Narr: Rabbi Akiva spent twelve years away, when he returned home he brought with him twelve thousand disciples.

Wife: If I had my way, I would want to be stronger. I would want you to become a great rabbi, I would want to wait for you. But I am not that strong.

Narr: She said, "If he would listen to me, he would spend another twelve years in study."

Rabbi: But we want so many things. We want to work, and we want to be good fathers and mothers. We want to raise our children and watch them grow a little every day. We want to take them on vacations, and we want to remain passionate about our work in the world. Tikkun Olam cannot happen without our help.

Narr: When he finally returned he brought with him twenty-four thousand disciples.

Rabbi: We want to keep learning.

Narr: On approaching him she fell upon her face and kissed his feet.

Wife: I am not that strong. All I want is a family that loves each other, and a successful career. I cannot kiss the feet of the rabbi.

Narr: His students were about to throw her aside when he said, leave her alone. . .

Rabbi: What's mine is yours.

Narr: (overlapping) What's mine and yours is hers.

Rabbi: My dreams and your dreams, we have to find a way to have both.

Narr: And their daughter, how noble, who learned from them, waited for Ben Azzai as he

became a great scholar. How like a woman of valor, like a dove, like a sheep whose passion for Torah joins with her husband.

Rabbi: It is Yom Kippur then, and I apologize to you that I have not been here sooner. I am here now, I am home. My books will stay with you, and some in my office. But my time, my study time, I want with you. Can we try? Can we have both?

Narr: You are Rabbi Joseph.

Wife: My Joseph. Come and have something to eat.

Narr: They arranged for Rabbi Joseph to stay at the academy for six years, and on the Eve of Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, he said,

Rabbi: I would like to try.

Narr: I would like to go and see my family. When they heard of his early arrival, he said to him

Wife: You have remembered

Rabbi: I have remembered

Narr: My dove, my mistress, my home. And neither ate the last meal before the fast.

Wife: I would like to try. Come and have something to eat. (she takes the shtender, and slowly opens a book and rests it there)

FADE OUT

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Play Notes

[i] The central character for our play must be some combination of the rabbis from the Talmud stories. In this interpretation, I have chosen to identify this character with Rabbi Joseph, who argues with his father-in-law in the final story. This works well dramatically, and is a compelling explanation for the inclusion of this seventh story.

[ii] It is a controversial choice to identify the "wife" character with Rabbi Akiva's wife. This does not necessarily mean that the Akiva story should be viewed as a model, but this is the most compelling female character in the seven stories. In a production, this character would need to be fleshed out by a director and actress working with the text.

[iii] One of the best ways for us to enter the Talmudic material in a modern way is through the character of the modern psychologist. I will attempt to show the rabbi's motivations and emotions through scenes with this character.

[iv] As I have shown, one of the most important decisions to make in the play is how to treat the narrative elements of the Talmudic text. I have chosen to portray the narrator as an actor who also plays another role. In addition, many of the *Stammatic* material will be spoken by various characters, as if the narrator engages them in dialogue and only afterwards creates the Talmudic text itself as a record of the conversation.

[v] The shtender should be used throughout the play as a symbol of the character's relationship with traditional textual study. This physical object will provide the actor with many opportunities to create doorways to and from the Talmudic material. For example, in one scene the rabbi will be asleep on the shtender, which segues into a dream sequence in which he is studying and forgets to visit home.

[vi] As the play begins, there is an immediate misunderstanding and confusion around the word "home." Here we see the central conflict of the play.

[vii] Clearly I am motivated here with my own journey through rabbinic school, the end of that journey and the beginning of a new job. But this material should be relevant to anyone who seeks to balance professional and personal goals. In his book, *Searching for my Brothers*, Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin explores the changing roles of men within the Jewish community. Our society must re-examine the larger questions of professional balance so that men's roles may continue to evolve.

[viii] The Mishnah begins with an argument about how long a man may be allowed to take a vow not to sleep with his wife (as if it were the wife who "needed" sex more than her husband). With some basic familiarity, an audience member should be made to recognize that the rabbi and his wife have entered the halakhic debate in a modern context. It may be appropriate for an audience to be asked to read portions of the original text either before or during the performance. Brecht would suggest that the performance break at various points in order for a discussion or brief study session to occur.

[ix] It is my hope that with several direct references to the text (in a completely realistic way) the audience may slowly become accustomed to the terminology and the conventions of the play.

[x] There should be no reason to avoid modern humor in the presentation of the Talmudic text, any more than students comfortable with one another should avoid joking about the text when studying it in a classroom. In Heilman's book, he discusses this dynamic as one of the primary modes of drama in evidence during a *shiur*. (see page 11).

[xi] This is the modern answer (of a generation ago) to the dilemma posited by the Talmud. In order to balance one's personal and professional life, one must realize that there are some professional goals which supercede one's family. This is still compelling to many professionals, but more and more research shows that people care less about professional goals that require them to give up on other important life goals such as a healthy family life.

[xii] For the President, here the comparison is what one party merely wants, with what another party clearly needs.

[xiii] This point might present a good opportunity for an audience to actually study the first Mishnah text, since they will begin to see the text in a new way – moments from the play should resonate with the text they are reading.

[xiv] The transition from the last scene to this one must be handled extremely well, since this will set up the convention of the rabbis from the Talmud page coming to life. They must feel entirely real, but also separated from the action of the modern office. This can be effectively conveyed using light if necessary. These rabbis and the narrator are discussing a halakhic issue, but might also have something to say to our rabbi, asleep over his books. The narrator will eventually write down this discussion, and create the Talmudic text.

[xv] As with Roman *chriae*, I hope to convey that these rabbis are somewhat remembering an actual story, and also somewhat loosely creating a story in order to make a point. What the point is will be determined by the audience's interaction with the actors on stage.

[xvi] This is the material that the rabbi might have been studying here. The effect should be of the rabbi's total immersion in his studies, so that he might neglect his wife. For a modern audience, the actors should explore various ways to show the rabbi's relationship with the text as intellectually stimulating, but perhaps also emotionally and physically stimulating.

[xvii] With very few scenes together, the rabbi and his wife must convey the disintegration of their relationship. These moments of conflict must be played to their full effect. The acting question must be asked, "What is at stake for the wife in this scene?" "How is she going to achieve her goals?" The wife uses the various Talmudic stories and their interpretations to show her husband how she is feeling, and in some instances, she is reminding him of how he is feeling too.

[xviii] At this point, the narrator and ancient rabbis form a sort of Greek chorus, which does not exist in the world of the Rabbi and his wife, but clearly interact and overlap with their dialogue. The actors should play with the idea of the Greek chorus, because it allows the audience to focus attention on the action between the Rabbi and his wife, but also to integrate the Talmudic text in a different way.

[xix] It is important to remember that our research uncovered these seemingly modern readings within the ancient text. At every point, I hope to remind the audience that the views expressed on stage are not only the viewpoint of the speaker, they also represent actual Talmudic study happening on stage. Each character presents authentic readings of Talmudic material.

[xx] Here is a concise reflection from the Rabbi on the meaning behind the texts for him. This statement could be used to facilitate a discussion during or after the play with the audience.

[xxi] An interesting question to ask about the original story.

[xxii] A somewhat veiled reference to the lack of female voices in the original text.

[xxiii] This text is very funny if it is read in a certain way. The messages of the Talmud text do not have to be reverent in order to be powerful. This scene was written as a farce: a broad, slapstick physical comedy. This dramatic effect can make the message of the scene more powerful than if it was presented as a straight story, and I believe it is an authentic reading of the original text.

[xxiv] Boyarin and others have suggested that an underlying principle to the Talmudic stories is the fact that students of Torah had women available to them while they were away from their wives. In addition, some scholars suggest that perhaps study partners who read together, ate together, and often shared a bed together may have shared more intimate experiences as well. I did not wish to enter into the complexity of that statement, but there are powerful echoes of it here.

[xxv] This line could be another reference to the intensity of the relationship between study partners, which is so strong it pulls a man away from his wedding night. But it also should be read as a simple indication of the friendship between these two students, and not as an indication of a sexual relationship.

[xxvi] Another reference to Roman *chriae*, here a story is recalled in a flippant way, as if it was an exaggerated fictional tale, shared simply for the moral of the story, and not for any historical accuracy.

[xxvii] This is a reference to the upcoming story of the wife who is surprised at home. Our wife will receive just such a surprise visit in a moment.

[xxviii] She should not recognize that she is retelling the Talmudic story almost verbatim, rather, this should be a natural progression of thought for her, through which she builds up animosity towards her husband. The purpose of the Talmudic text, in this example, is to facilitate an emotional response in the speaker.

[xxix] This might be played as a Harlequin romance novel. The wife should continue to build in emotional intensity, however, and use the fanciful story to feed her anger.

[xxx] The Greek chorus was often used to facilitate scenic changes, a sort of intermission of the action of the play. In this instance, I have taken tremendous liberties with the traditional text. The narrator will still be justified in writing the Talmudic story as it is, but the line between text and performance, between the layers of reality on stage, should fade more and more. By the end of the play, it should not be at all clear who is speaking as their characters, and who is quoting the actual source text. If this is done correctly, the audience should feel as if the entire performance existed on both planes: the entire script exists as authentic Talmud, and at the same time the play presents a powerful, modern reality for rabbis and families.

Appendix A

Babylonian Talmud - Ketubot 61b-63a

<u>תלמוד בבלי מסכת כתובות דף סא עמוד ב</u>

מתני'. המדיר את אשתו מתשמיש המטה, ב"ש אומרים: שתי שבתות, בית הלל אומרים: שבת אחת. התלמידים יוצאין לתלמוד תורה שלא ברשות שלשים יום, הפועלים - שבת אחת. העונה האמורה בתורה, הטיילין - בכל יום, הפועלים - שתים בשבת, החמרים - אחת בשבת, הגמלים - אחת לשלשים יום, הספנים - אחת לששה חדשים, דברי רבי אליעזר.

<u>תלמוד בבלי מסכת כתובות דף סב עמוד ב</u>

(1)
אמר רבא: סמכו רבנן אדרב אדא בר אהבה ועבדי עובדא בנפשייהו. כי הא דרב רחומי הוה שכיח קמיה דרבא במחוזא, הוה רגיל דהוה אתי לביתיה כל מעלי יומא דכיפורי. יומא חד משכתיה שמעתא, הוה מסכיא דביתהו השתא אתי השתא אתי, לא אתא, חלש דעתה אחית דמעתא מעינה, הוה יתיב באיגרא, אפחית איגרא מתותיה ונח נפשיה.

(2)
עונה של תלמידי חכמים אימת? אמר רב יהודה אמר שמואל: מע"ש לע"ש. (תהלים א') אשר פריו יתן בעתו - אמר רב יהודה, ואיתימא רב הונא, ואיתימא רב נחמן: זה המשמש מטתו מע"ש לע"ש. יהודה בריה דר' חייא חתניה דר' יוחנן הוה, אזיל ויתיב בבי רב, וכל בי שמשי הוה אתי לביתיה, וכי הוה אתי הוה קא חזי קמיה עמודא דנורא. יומא חד משכתיה שמעתא, כיון דלא חזי ההוא סימנא, אמר להו רבי יוחנן: כפו מטתו, שאילמלי יהודה קיים לא ביטל עונתו. הואי (קהלת י') כשגגה שיוצא מלפני השליט ונח נפשיה.

(3)
רבי איעסק ליה לבריה בי רבי חייא, כי מטא למיכתב כתובה נח נפשה דרביתא. אמר רבי: ח"ו פסולא איכא? יתיבו ועיינו במשפחות, רבי אתי משפטיה בן אביטל, ורבי חייא אתי משמעי אחי דוד. אזיל איעסק ליה לבריה בי ר' יוסי בן זימרא, פסקו ליה תרתי סרי שנין למיזל בבי רב. אחלפוה קמיה, אמר להו: ניהוו שית שנין. אחלפוה קמיה, אמר להו: איכניס והדר איזיל. הוה קא מכסיף מאבוה א"ל: בני, דעת קונך יש בך, מעיקרא כתיב: (שמות ט"ו) תביאמו ותטעמו, ולבסוף כתיב: (שמות כ"ה) ועשו לי מקדש ושכנתי בתוכם. אזיל יתיב תרתי סרי שני בבי רב. עד דאתא איעקרא דביתהו. אמר רבי: היכי נעביד? נגרשה, יאמרו ענייה זו לשוא שימרה: נינסיב איתתא אחריתי, יאמרו זו אשתו וזו זונתו: בעי עלה רחמי ואיתסיאת.

(4)

רבי חנניה בן חכינאי הוה קאזיל לבי רב בשילהי הלוליה דר"ש בן יוחאי, א"ל: איעכב לי עד דאתי בהדך, לא איעכבא ליה. אזל יתיב תרי סרי שני בבי רב. עד דאתי אישתנו שבילי דמתא ולא ידע למיזל לביתיה. אזל יתיב אגודא דנהרא, שמע להההיא רביתא דהוו קרו לה: בת חכינאי, בת חכינאי, מלי קולתך ותא ניזיל. אמר: ש"מ, האי רביתא דידן, אזל בתרה. הוה יתיבא דביתהו קא נהלה קמחא, דל עינה חזיתיה, סוי לבה פרח רוחה. אמר לפניו: רבש"ע, ענייה זו זה שכרה? בעא רחמי עלה וחייה.

(5)

רבי חמא בר ביסא אזיל יתיב תרי סרי שני בבי מדרשא. כי אתא, אמר: לא איעביד כדעביד בן חכינאי, עייל יתיב במדרשא, שלח לביתיה. אתא ר' אושעיא בריה יתיב קמיה, הוה קא משאיל ליה שמעתא, חזא דקא מתחדדי שמעתיה, חלש דעתיה, אמר: אי הואי הכא הוה לי זרע כי האי. על לביתיה, על בריה, קם קמיה. הוא סבר, למשאליה שמעתתא קא בעי, אמרה ליה דביתהו: מי איכא אבא דקאים מקמי בראי? קרי עליה רמי בר חמא: (קהלת ד') החוט המשולש לא במהרה ינתק - זה ר' אושעיא בנו של רבי חמא בר ביסא.

(6)

ר"ע רעיא דבן כלבא שבוע הוה, חזיתיה ברתיה דהוה צניע ומעלי, אמרה ליה: אי מקדשנא לך אזלת לבי רב? אמר לה: אין. איקדשא ליה בצינעה ושדרתיה. שמע אבוה אפקה מביתיה, אדרה הנאה מנכסיה. אזיל יתיב תרי סרי שנין בבי רב. כי אתא, אייתי בהדיה תרי סרי אלפי תלמידי. שמעיה להההוא סבא דקאמר לה: עד כמה (סג.) קא מדברת אלמנות חיים? אמרה ליה: אי לדידי צייתי, יתיב תרי סרי שני אחריני. אמר: ברשות קא עבידנא, הדר אזיל ויתיב תרי סרי שני אחריני בבי רב. כי אתא, אייתי בהדיה עשרין וארבעה אלפי תלמידי. שמעה דביתהו הות קא נפקא לאפיה, אמרו לה שיבבתא: שאילי מאני לבוש ואיכסאי, אמרה להו: (משלי י"ב) יודע צדיק נפש בהמתו. כי מטיא לגביה, נפלה על אפה קא מנשקא ליה לכרעיה, הוו קא מדחפי לה שמעיה, אמר להו: שבקוה, שלי ושלכם שלה הוא. שמע אבוה דאתא גברא רבה למתא, אמר: איזיל לגביה, אפשר דמפר נדראי. אתא לגביה, א"ל: אדעתא דגברא רבה מי נדרת? א"ל: אפילו פרק אחד ואפי' הלכה אחת. אמר ליה: אנא הוא, נפל על אפיה ונשקיה על כרעיה, ויהיב ליה פלגא ממוניה. ברתיה דר"ע עבדא ליה לבן עזאי הכי. והיינו דאמרי אינשי: רחילא בתר רחילא אזלא, כעובדי אמה כך עובדי ברתא.

(7)

רב יוסף בריה דרבא שדריה אבוהי לבי רב לקמיה דרב יוסף, פסקו ליה שית שני. כי הוה תלת שני מטא מעלי יומא דכפורי, אמר: איזיל ואיחזינהו לאינשי ביתי. שמע אבוהי, שקל מנא ונפק לאפיה, אמר ליה: זונתך נזכרת? איכא דאמרי, אמר ליה: יונתך נזכרת? איטרוד, לא מר איפסיק ולא מר איפסיק.