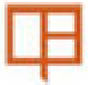

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DANIEL BOYARIN

Internal Opposition in Talmudic Literature: The Case of the Married Monk

Rabbi Akiva says: Anyone who commits murder diminishes the image of God, as it says, "One who spills blood of a human, for the sake of the human his blood will be spilt, for in the image of God, He made the human" [Gen. 9.6].

Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah says: Anyone who does not engage in procreation diminishes the Divine Image, for it says, "In the image of God, He made the human" [Gen. 9.6], and it is written [immediately following], "And as for you, be fruitful and multiply."

Ben-Azzai says: Anyone who does not engage in procreation is a murderer and diminishes the Divine Image, for it says, "One who spills blood of a human, for the sake of the human his blood will be spilt, for in the image of God, He made the human, and as for you, be fruitful and multiply."

Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah said to him: Ben-Azzai, words are fine when accompanied by practice. There are those who interpret well and behave well, and those who behave well but do not interpret well. You interpret well, but do not behave well. Ben-Azzai said to them: What shall I do? My soul desires Torah. Let the world continue by the efforts of others!" (Tosefta Yevamoth 8.7; cf. Babylonian Talmud Yevamoth 63b)

THE ABSOLUTE AND CONTRADICTORY demands of marriage and commitment to study of Torah remained one of the great unresolved tensions of rabbinic culture. The above text thematizes that tension by "personifying" its poles.[1] The Rabbis are commenting on the biblical text "One who spills blood of a human, for the sake of the human his blood will be spilt, for in the image of God, He made the human. And as for you, be fruitful and multiply." Rabbis Akiva and Eleazar disagree on the interpretation of the context. Rabbi Akiva understands that the clause referring to the "image of God" has to do with the murderer, while Rabbi Eleazar reads it as pertaining to the continuation of the text and thus referring to procreation. Ben-Azzai reads the entire text as one context and thus derives his strong principle that nonprocreation is equivalent to both murder and diminishment of the Divine Image. Rabbi Eleazar, quite naturally, attacks the celibate Ben-Azzai for hypocrisy, to which he replies that, much as he would like to be able to fulfill the commandment, he cannot, because his soul has such desire (the verb used is exactly the verb used in erotic contexts) for study. All of his erotic energy is devoted to the love of Torah; there is none left for a woman.[2] This reading, however, seems merely to imply that Ben-Azzai is a com-

plicated hypocrite. We must read him, therefore, to be saying that he knows that he ought to be performing the commandment to be married; indeed he knows that he is both a murderer and a diminisher of the divine by not doing so, but his lust for Torah will not let him. His argument is the exact analogue of the self-justification of the lecher who says that he knows that he should not be a-whoring, but he cannot help himself. In fact, Ben-Azzai's self-defense is modeled on that kind of statement, and the erotic terminology that Ben-Azzai uses, the terminology of desire, strengthens this reading. In this story, then, we find the perfect representation of the extreme internal conflict set up by contradictory demands that one be married, have children, and also devote oneself entirely to Torah. Both Ben-Azzai's self-justification and Rabbi Eleazar's condemnation of him are left to stand in the text, suggesting how lively the contest was in rabbinic times. But, it should be emphasized, Ben-Azzai is a limit case, truly an exception that proves the rule. All of the other Rabbis are represented as married, and marriage was a nearly obligatory norm for the Rabbis as well as for the populace, but for the former constant attention to Torah was also obligatory.

The privileging of virginity in the church and some late antique Jewish religious groups allowed for the division of humanity into two classes: the religious who were able to be wholly devoted to the spirit and the householders who married and reproduced.[3] This solution was available to the Rabbis as well, but they vehemently rejected it. The story of Ben-Azzai is an index of how much energy was required to combat the attractiveness of the celibate life. Extravagant praise of the married state, which occurs over and over in rabbinic texts, is not a marker of how happily married the Rabbis were but of how much pressure against marrying there was in their world. Celibacy provided an attractive "out" from the world's pain, and, moreover, the life of the purely spiritual seeker of wisdom was the ideal of much of the ambient culture, both Jewish and non-Jewish.[4]

Rabbinic culture, accordingly, is beleaguered with a constant, unresolved tension—almost an antinomy—between the obligation to marry and the equal obligation to devote oneself entirely to the life of Torah study (Fraade, 275). In contrast to different cultural formations, both Jewish and other, that formulate the problem as a conflict between body and spirit, the rabbis do not set this up as a hierarchy of values. In the recent past, the rabbinic discourse of sexuality has been too lightly and apologetically described as being pro-body. We should escape from that apologetic moment, but we should not, in reaction, conflate it with the discourses of sexuality of other late antique groups, Jewish or others. The Rabbis generally avoided the dualism of late antiquity that perceived people as imprisoned in a body; rather they saw people as being animated bodies.[5] The activities of the "lower" (reproductive) body were considered as important as those of the "upper" (speaking) body, but at the same time they were somehow thought to conflict, at the very least in that they both competed for the same allotment of

time and energy.[6] If we do not keep our eyes on both poles of this tension equally it will be difficult to account for many of the features of rabbinic culture. Rabbinic texts reveal several attempts to produce social practices that would resolve the tension between marriage and the study of Torah, between sex and the text. As we will see, however, all of the proposed resolutions roused great opposition within the culture, as we can discern from oppositional discourses captured in the very texts that produce the "solutions."

A Rabbinic Romance

The Babylonian Talmud relates the following "biography" of one of its greatest heroes, Rabbi Akiva, a Palestinian authority of the second century:

> Rabbi Akiva was the shepherd of Kalba Savua'. The daughter of Kalba Savua' became engaged to Rabbi Akiva. Kalba Savua' heard and cut her off from any of his property. She went and married him in the winter. They used to lie in the haybarn, and he would take hay out of her hair. He said to her, "Were I only able, I would give you a 'Jerusalem of Gold!'"[7] Elijah the Prophet came and appeared to them as a person crying out at the door. He said, "Give me some of your hay, for my wife is giving birth and I have nothing for her to lie down on." Rabbi Akiva said to his wife, "You see, there is someone who doesn't even have hay." She said to him, "Go and sit in the House of Study." He went for twelve years and studied with Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua. At the end of twelve years, he came home. He heard from behind his house a certain rogue saying to his wife, "Your father treated you suitably. First of all, he [Rabbi Akiva] is not of your kind, and moreover he has left you a grass widow all of these years." She said to him, "If he were to follow my wishes, he would remain for another twelve years." He said, "Since she has given me permission, I will go back." He went for another twelve years. He came with twenty-four thousand pairs of disciples. Everyone came out to receive him, and she also came out to meet him. That rogue said to her, "Where do you think you are going?" She said, "'The righteous man senses the need of his pet' [Prov. 12.10]."[8] She came to show herself to him. The Rabbis were pushing her aside. He said to them, "Leave her be. That which is mine and that which is yours is really hers!" Kalba Savua' went and asked to be relieved of his vow, and he was released. In six ways Rabbi Akiva became wealthy from the property of Kalba Savua'. (Babylonian Talmud Nedarim 50a)

In traditional positivistic historiographical approaches to the study of rabbinic literature, the biographical stories about the Rabbis were treated as the "historical background" for the study of both their halakic (ritual law) views and midrashic interpretations of the Bible. In my work, in direct contrast to that approach, these will be treated as the least transparent of texts, that is, precisely as fictions requiring foregrounding to explain *them*. This text may be seen to show several of the generic characteristics of romance. We have the topoi of the marriage for love obstructed by societal strictures and by parental opposition, the triumph of the young lovers who resist the thwarting of their desires and their

eventual vindication even in the eyes of the original opponent of their love. Given that that is so, it is impossible, of course, to read it as a representation of actual historical-biographical reality, or even as a literary version of a "kernel" of biographical truth.[9] However, it is not *just* a romance either, not just a fictional tale about made-up characters, but a highly charged story about a central culture hero. A relevant question for interpretation, then, is certainly, Why is this story told about Rabbi Akiva? What is the cultural work that is done by realizing the romance genre specifically with regard to a great scholar and martyr and more specifically with regard to Rabbi Akiva? In order to attempt an answer to these questions, let us have a look at some other rabbinic discursive practices that can be made to inform our reading of the biographical narrative, and especially the genre of halakic (ritual legal) controversy.

Halaka

Which precedes: marriage or Torah? The first halakic text that seems relevant for the narrative of Rabbi Akiva's romance is the discussion in Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 29b of the appropriate timing for marriage; the question is, Which comes first, study or marriage?

> The sages have taught: On studying Torah and marrying a woman? He should study Torah and then marry, but if he cannot manage without a wife, he should marry and then study Torah. Said Rav Yehudah that Shmuel said: The halaka is that he should marry and then study Torah. Rabbi Yohanan said: A millstone around his neck and he will study Torah!? *And they do not disagree; that is for us and that is for them.*

First of all, some simple commentary. The text begins with a *baraita*—that is, an early Palestinian halakic tradition—which in the absence of a contraverting text from the same period is normally halakically authoritative.[10] In spite of this theoretically definitive statement, the later Babylonian authority, Shmuel, is reported as having held that the young scholar should marry and then study Torah. His equally authoritative Palestinian counterpart and contemporary, Rabbi Yohanan, holds the opposite view, expressing himself in what seems to be a proverbial formulation, that the responsibilities of marriage are a millstone around the neck of the young scholar, who cannot be free, then, for the study of Torah. The Talmud—that is, a later stratum thereof—comments that in fact they do not disagree with each other, but each is referring to the situation of a different community, presumably each to his own, that is Shmuel to Babylonia and Rabbi Yohanan to Palestine. Presently I shall undertake to interpret this difference, but for the moment let us note that there is, as expected, no disagreement on the obligation to marry for Torah students, only on its antecedence to study. Moreover, even Rabbi Yohanan, who expresses himself so strongly to the effect that Torah comes first, does not project an essential contradiction between the holi-

ness or spirituality of Torah study and sexuality but only a pragmatic contradiction between the responsibilities of marriage and full commitment to the study of Torah. Quite the opposite, the idea is that being married and having a sexual outlet is productive of purity and not of impurity. This concept is, moreover, well supported in other rabbinic texts, such as the requirement that only married men should be the leaders of prayer (Babylonian Talmud Taanith 16a).[11]

The difference between the Babylonians and the Palestinians seems to be predicated on a division in the understanding of male sexuality between the two cultures. While the Palestinians seem to have adhered to the general Hellenistic notion that sexuality was something that a human being could do without, and all that was required was self-control, *sophrosyne*, the Babylonians apparently did not think so. This suggestion is supported strongly by the continuation of the text itself, which proceeds with the following story that clarifies both the intensity of the Babylonian allegiance to early marriage and the reason for it:

> Rav Huna [the Babylonian] said: Anyone who is twenty years old and not married, all of his days are sinful. *Can you really think that he is sinful?* Rather I will say: All of his days are in thoughts of sin. Rava said, and thus also the One of the House of Rabbi Ishmael teaches: Until the twentieth year, the Holiness, may it be blessed, waits for the man; when will he marry? When he is twenty and unmarried, He says, "Blast his bones!" Rav Hisda said: I am preferable to my fellows, for I married at sixteen and if I had married at fourteen, I could have said to the Satan, "An arrow in your eyes!"[12]

The discourse of these two major Babylonian Rabbis suggests strongly that the primary motivation (or at least, *one* primary motivation) for marriage as understood by the Babylonians is that sexual activity is necessary for people from the age of puberty on (fourteen), and that without sex they would find it impossible to concentrate on their studies.[13] Moreover, it is at least possible that there is a suggestion here that an unmarried adult male will either masturbate or have nocturnal emissions, both of which were considered as leading to impurity in ways that marital intercourse did not. This story should be understood, then, as commentary on the talmudic passage that precedes it. The Babylonian text strongly encodes its own self-perception that adult males cannot live without sex, and therefore the young scholar should marry and then study.[14]

We are left to account for the view and practice of "them"—the Palestinians—also encoded in our text. Presumably, "they" have a different understanding of the nature of men and the function of marriage from "us." Rabbi Yohanan's case for delaying marriage is based on the impossibility of full commitment to Torah study while exercising the responsibilities of marriage. Moreover, he seemingly does not share the Babylonians' concern that an unmarried man could not possibly study Torah "in purity." If the Babylonians understood marriage as the means to fulfillment of a universal need and as a defense against pollution, and therefore are opposed to putting it off at all, the Palestinians who support delayed marriages must have had a different conception of its teleology. It would seem a

priori that the most obvious candidate for such a role is procreation, which can be postponed without being entirely subverted. This hypothesized emphasis on procreation is consistent with general cultural trends in the Greco-Roman world. David Daube has shown how the twin notions of the duty of procreation and a tendency to deny any value to sex other than procreation are an offspring of the marriage of Platonism and Stoicism in Hellenistic culture.[16] The Palestinians provide then a model of a partial resolution of the antinomy between full commitment to marriage and to Torah by organizing them into different stages in the life of the Torah student. Since it is impossible to fulfill both at the same time and possible to fulfill them serially, that is precisely what is proposed.

In Babylonia, this solution was excluded by the assumption that a man without a sexual outlet will inevitably sin, or at least be constantly occupied with "thoughts of sin." Not only can Torah study not best be fulfilled by remaining unmarried for a time, but the state of celibacy renders it nearly impossible to do so "in purity." The text proposes then a sort of utopian solution that allows for both marriage and total commitment to Torah study, namely marrying early and then leaving home for extended periods of time to study Torah. In short, the solution of the Babylonian culture was to create a class of married monks, men who had the pleasure and benefit of marriage for parts of their lives but would absent themselves from home for extended periods for study. However, problems arise for this "solution" from another halakic requirement.

The marital debt rabbinic style (Ketubboth 61bff.). In addition to the aspect of sexuality as an obligation that the man owes his own body, as it were, the married man was considered by talmudic law under a legal contractual obligation to sleep with his wife regularly for her pleasure and benefit.[17] This obligation was derived by the Rabbis from the verse of the Torah that, speaking of the taking of a second wife, says that he must not "reduce the flesh, covering, or seasons" (Exod. 21.10) of the first wife. This philologically puzzling list was variously interpreted in the midrash, but the hegemonic opinion is that *flesh* means "food," *covering* refers to "clothing," and *seasons* to "regularity of sexual intercourse."[18] This obligation was also made contractual in the standard rabbinically approved marriage contract, which reads, "I will feed you, clothe you, and have intercourse with you, in accordance with the customs of Jewish husbands." In this context, the Mishna discusses the exact definition of "regularity," i.e., what constitutes fulfillment of the husband's sexual debt to his wife.

The Mishna reads:

> If one takes a vow not to sleep with his wife: Bet Shammai says two weeks, and Bet Hillel one week.[19] The students may go away from their homes for study of Torah without permission for thirty days and laborers for one week. The "season" [required frequency of intercourse] that is mentioned in the Torah: for the *tayyalin*,[20] 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.

The talmudic commentary on this Mishna is revealing in the manner in which it vacillates and contradicts itself. Thus, close reading of the text will provide us with symptomatic evidence of the unresolvability of the cultural problem of tension between marriage and Torah study within the Babylonian rabbinic system.

The Talmud discusses the exceptional "permission" that the Mishna affords the students to be away from their wives for thirty days without the agreement of the wife:

The students may go away from their homes for study of Torah without permission for thirty days and laborers for one week. With permission, how much? As much as he wants. But what is the correct behavior? Rav said: One month here (studying) and one month at home, for it says, "In the matter of the labor brigades, one goes and one comes month by month for the months of the year" [1 Chron. 27.1]. Rabbi Yohanan says: One month here and two at home, for it says, "One month they will be in Lebanon and two months at home" [1 Kings 5.28].

The issue here is that although a wife is sovereign to permit her husband to spend as much time away from her as they mutually agree upon, it is recognized that an unequal power relationship exists between them. The husband will very likely be able to prevail upon her to "permit" him to go away for longer periods of time, and then, in the words of Rashi, he will be "sinning" against his wife.[21] The Talmud establishes, therefore, if not a strictly legalistic proscription, a strong moral one on being away from home for longer than thirty days. Two of the most dominant talmudic authorities are cited to that effect, the only difference between them being about how much time the husband will spend at home once he arrives. According to the Babylonian Rav, the married man would spend one half of his time studying Torah, but according to the Palestinian Rabbi Yohanan, only a third, while two-thirds of his time will be spent with his wife.

The continuation of the talmudic text on the next page switches gears in a very startling contradiction of the previous section:

[*The students may go away from their homes for study of Torah without permission for thirty days . . .*]; *these are the words of Rabbi Eliezer*. Rav Bruna said that Rav said: The halaka is in accordance with the view of Rabbi Eliezer. Rav Ada the son of Ahva said that Rav said: Those are [only] the words of Rabbi Eliezer, but the sages hold that the students may go away for the study of Torah for two or three years without permission. Rava said that our rabbis have relied upon Rav Ada the son of Ahva and indeed practice in accordance with his view.

We find here a relatively late Babylonian tradition, which, in contrast to all earlier authorities, reverses the ruling of Rabbi Eliezer that the married scholar may not absent himself for more than thirty days from his wife and permits absences of several years.[22] This reversal demonstrates powerfully how much pressure the halakic requirement that a husband must sleep regularly with his wife brought to bear on the entire sociocultural system. Without, of course, suggesting that Rav Ada's tradition is fabricated, it is nevertheless remarkable that this tradition

became accepted as authoritative in spite of the fact that it contradicts the Mishna and contradicts another tradition of Rav's own view.[23] The Palestinian Talmud, on the other hand, knows of no such "qualification" of the Mishna's position, and the law there is established that he may not leave home without permission for more than thirty days.

The Babylonian Talmud's report of Rava's declaration that "our rabbis have relied upon Rav Ada, the son of Ahva and indeed practice according to his view" makes a claim to be evidence for a change in social practice that is associated by tradition with Rava, that is, with the leading Babylonian rabbinic authority of the fourth century. It would seem, however, that the attempt to institute this change in marriage practice met with substantial opposition in spite of Rava's hegemonic prestige. The Talmudic text, at the same time that it is ostensibly recording the support for this innovation, reveals sharp dissension from it. These oppositional voices encoded within the text, I suggest, are intimations of the social conflict outside the text.

Contestation in the Texts

Conflict within Babylonia: covert contestation. The Talmud proceeds to cite a story that while overtly claiming to be a precedent for the practice of the "Rabbis" who stay away from their wives for two or three years, is plausibly read as an index of ambivalence and opposition to this practice:

> Rava said that our Rabbis have relied upon Rav Ada the son of Ahva and indeed practice in accordance with his view. As in the case of Rav Rehume who was a disciple of Rava's in Mahoza. He would regularly visit his wife every year on the eve of Yom Kippur. One day, his studies absorbed him. His wife was waiting for him, "Now he will come. Now he will come." He did not come. She became upset, and a tear fell from her eye. He was sitting on the roof. The roof collapsed under him and he died.

As I have said, on the overt level of the structure of the Talmud's argument, this text is cited as a support for Rava's contention that the Rabbis depend legitimately on Rav Ada's tradition and practice accordingly. However, it does not take a very suspicious hermeneut to read it against the grain. The story, in fact, encodes a sharp critique of the practice of married Rabbis being away from home for extended periods. First of all, let us note that it is clear from this story that the Rabbi did not study at any great distance from his home, for had he done so one day of slightly extended study would not have made such a difference and prevented him from getting home for Yom Kippur. This consideration only enhances the irony that Yonah Frankel has pointed to in the phrase "would *regularly* visit his wife on the eve of Yom Kippur."[24] Further, the fact that he is portrayed as being so callous that he even forgets the one time of the year that he goes to visit his wife can only be read as an extremely critical and ironic represen-

tation of the moral level of this Rabbi's behavior. It is possible that the name of the protagonist also is ironically emblematic of his character, for his name *Rehume* means "lover" or "merciful one," and he demonstrates that he is neither. The empathetic depiction of the eagerly waiting wife is calculated by the narrator to lead the reader/hearer of this story to a position of identification with her, a moral judgment that is confirmed on the explicit level when the Rabbi is punished by death. To be sure, there is nothing in the overt narrative that condemns the practice of being away from home per se. The implication is that had he fulfilled at least his habit of visiting once a year, there would have been no stain on his behavior. Nevertheless, I would claim that the way the entire story is presented provides rather a strong condemnation of the practice at the very same time that it overtly supports it. We will find this strain between overt support and covert contestation in other texts as well.

The Talmud continues its halakic discourse with another statement that seems to strongly contest Rava's claim that it is legitimate for Torah scholars to be away from home for extended periods:

What is the "season" of the Disciples of the Wise? Rav Yehuda said that Shmuel said: From the Eve of Sabbath till the Eve of Sabbath [i.e., the Torah scholar should at least come home every week and sleep with his wife on Friday night]. "The one who gives his fruit in its time" [Ps. 1.4], said Rav Yehuda—and there are those who say Rav Huna, and those who say Rav Nahman—this refers to one who sleeps with his wife every Eve of the Sabbath.

The Talmud then tells us a tale of one who regularly came home to sleep with his wife every Friday night and the dire consequences that ensued upon his missing this appointment one time:

Yehuda, the son of Rabbi Hiyya, was the son-in-law of Rabbi Yannai. He went and sat in the House of Study. Every Friday at twilight he would come to his wife, and when he would come they would see in front of him a pillar of fire. One day, he became engrossed in his study and did not come. As soon as they did not see the sign [the pillar of fire], Rabbi Yannai said to them: Turn over his bed, for were Yehuda alive, he would not fail to fulfill his sexual obligation, and it was "like an error from the mouth of a ruler" [Eccles. 10.5], and Yehuda died.

This story not only encodes opposition to the practice of extended absences of rabbis from their wives, it also encodes in narrative the ideological significance of sexuality that is the reason for the opposition. Frankel notes that the pillar of fire functions in the tale as a hermeneutic key (102–4). Were we not to have this element, it is conceivable that the story could be understood as a story of conflict between the sacred and the secular, and that its point is render unto Caesar, as it were. However, the fact that Yehuda's procession to his home is preceded by a pillar of fire, the very sign that led the Jews in the Wilderness and brought them to the Promised Land, is a strong indication that we are not to read the narrative that way. There is no conflict of values. Both the study of Torah and marital sex

are holy acts. Moreover, the "pillar of fire" is highly charged as an erotic symbol, since it is both phallic in shape and since fire has strongly erotic associations. The text is thus strongly encoding a sacred status for marital sex. The nexus between the Sabbath and sexual intercourse also promotes this connection. To put it in structural terms, sex and Torah, or marriage and the Study House, are set up as equal but opposed alternatives in complementary distribution.[25]

Yehuda, who should be equally willing to perform both religious obligations, seems, however, to perform the obligation of study with zeal and joy while his coming home to sleep with his wife seems almost against his will and only out of a sense of obligation. That is what trips him up and leads to his death. His father-in-law is sure that only death could have prevented Yehuda from performing the commandment, and therefore enacts a rite of mourning for him—turning over his bed. The performance of the rite, however, turns out to cause his death. The fact that this rite is precisely a turning over of the bed is most evocative, as Frankel acutely notes. He who ignored the responsibilities of the bed is punished by the bed, as it were. Without a doubt, the point of the story is, as Frankel claims, that the Rabbi suffers capital punishment because of his failure to perceive that the obligation to sleep with his wife is as holy a commandment as the obligation to study Torah. The story, as the previous one, remains an eloquent testimony to the fact that the utopian solution of the halaka which requires the husband who studies to nevertheless come home regularly does not work. The tension and contradiction remain.

At this point in the text of the Babylonian Talmud, the story of Rabbi Akiva and his romance with Rachel is produced. We are now in a position to read that story. Both the immediate textual context and the larger cultural intertextual context suggest that this romantic narrative is the ultimate Babylonian attempt at a utopian resolution and justification for the local practice, attested to in the name of Rava, of husbands spending enormous quantities of time away from home to study Torah. It will be remembered that this practice is contrary to the expressed moral injunctions of both early Palestinian and Babylonian supreme authorities, who said that even with permission husbands should not be away for more than a month at a time.[26] It stands, also, in contradiction to the view of Shmuel, another major Babylonian authority, to the effect that a Rabbi should sleep with his wife at least once a week. It is not surprising that, given the weight of halakic and moral authority which had to be overcome, "big guns" were necessary to do so, and there is none bigger in Jewish tradition than Rabbi Akiva. The thoroughly romantic quality of the story of his marriage to Rachel underscores dramatically how extremely disrupting the practice must have been—a disruptiveness that is allowed place in all of the other stories but that is completely suppressed in the story of Rabbi Akiva. Twice the story emphasizes the fact that the Rabbi had been given "permission" by his bride to be away for so long. The "solution," then, that the Babylonian Talmud produces is to create a system of enormous sociocultural

pressure on women to "voluntarily" renounce their rights. As we shall see below, this Babylonian innovation was vigorously contested from Palestine on near-feminist grounds.[27]

Closer reading of the story itself will show how it performs as narrative its ideological and cultural function of female subjugation and how the employment of the romance genre is crucial to this work as well. The key to my reading is the name *Rachel.* This name, while quite a common Hebrew woman's name, is, in fact, also the normal word for "ewe."[28] The entire story of the romance of Rabbi Akiva and Rachel is generated by one root metaphor, Akiva as the shepherd and Rachel as an ewe. Rabbi Akiva the shepherd's relationship with his wife is figured in several ways in the narrative as the relationship of a shepherd to a beloved ewe-lamb: the very site of their erotic idyll is a barn. Rachel's declaration that the "righteous [shepherd] knows the soul [desire] of his animal" is, in fact, the key moment in the story. The metaphor of male lover as shepherd and female beloved as ewe is, in fact, a common one in biblical discourse, used frequently as a figure for the relationship of God and Israel, on the one hand, and appearing often in the Song of Songs on the other. The story of Rabbi Akiva and Rachel is thus a plausible narrative development of a common biblical erotic metaphorical model.

The relationship between shepherd and ewe is an extraordinarily poignant and marked liaison within the context of the pastoral culture. As obnoxious as we may find the status of wife that is encoded in this metaphor, we will not be able to understand it or its power to persuade without taking seriously the cultural context in which it was generated. In order to get some feel for what this relationship might have evoked in the rabbinic culture, a vivid biblical text will be helpful. The text is the famous parable of the Poor Man's Ewe-Lamb in 2 Samuel 12:

> And God sent Nathan to David and he came to him and said to him: "There were two men in the city, one rich and one poor. [2] The rich man had very great flocks and cattle. [3] The poor man had nothing but one small ewe-lamb, which he had acquired and which he sustained and she grew up with him and with his children together; from his bread she would eat, and from his glass she would drink, and she would lie in his arms and was a daughter to him. [4] And a guest came to the rich man, and he didn't want to take from his flock or herd to cook for the guest who had come to him, and he took the ewe-lamb of the poor man and cooked it for his guest." [5] David was horrified, and said to Nathan, "That man should be executed."

This is an extraordinary picture from the point of view of our cultural stance. The animal is adopted into the family as a foundling child would be. Note as well the explicit class coding in the story; the poor man feeds and cares for the animal as if it were human; the rich man thinks of the animal (and of the poor man!) as only an instrument to fulfill his economic needs. There is, moreover, a powerful erotic valence to the word-picture of the man sharing his bed with the ewe, an

overtone that the talmudic rabbis do not miss: "By sleeping in his arms, she is a daughter?! Rather, a wife" (Megillah 13a). The midrashic comment is based on a linguistic subtlety; the word for "daughter" is *bat*, while the word for "house," often used to mean "wife," is *bayt*.[29] This erotic overtone is inescapable given the context in which the parable is told, namely an accusation against David, the king with many wives, for stealing the one beloved wife of his servant Uriah. The biblical text encodes a vivid picture of an ideal marriage as like the love of a shepherd for his only ewe-lamb. The wife is the ewe, in the biblical parable, as well as in our parabolic life of Rabbi Akiva and Rachel.

There is, moreover, another important biblical intertext here, the story of Jacob and his marriages. There also the hero is a shepherd in love with his master's daughter. There also the father opposes the match. There also the shepherd works for two periods of a number of years to win her, and there also the daughter is named Rachel. That shepherd's name, in Hebrew *Ya'qov*, is moreover an almost perfect anagram of our hero's name, spelt in Hebrew *Aqyva*. We have, accordingly, strong support for the suggestion that the pattern of Rabbi Akiva's marriage and particularly the shepherd-ewe relationship is being encoded as a marriage ideal for Jews in this story.

I have gone on at some length in what may appear to be a digression, because it is important for me to establish the cultural-emotional background of the association of husband with shepherd and wife with ewe on which the talmudic story is built. As subservient as the ewe-wife is, she is not denigrated or despised in this encoding. Indeed, she is both loved and honored when she knows her place. The text recognizes her subjectivity; at least in theory she has the power to accept or reject the absence of her husband for study. She chooses, of course, to accept. Indeed, she is the original motivating force for him to go away to study Torah. This moment constitutes a crisis as well as a crux in the story.[30] Up until then Rachel is the agent of the narrative. It is she who "becomes engaged to Rabbi Akiva," she who marries him in the winter, not he who marries her. This is a reflection of the class coding of the story; she as the patrician holds the upper hand. He is a poor shepherd, while she is the daughter of his master. However, at the moment that he reveals his potential as a Torah scholar by drawing the proper moral of the incognito advent of Elijah, she exercises her agency for the last time by abdicating it. She sends him to study. From here on in, the class code is superseded by the learning code, which is (almost ineluctably) a gender code. At this point he becomes, as it were, her pastor. It is self-understood and beyond question that what a Jewish wife desires is a husband learned in the Torah.[31] The love of Rabbi Akiva for her is marked twice in the story in powerful ways as well, in the poignant wish of the poor shepherd to give his bride an expensive gift and then in the dramatic statement to the students that "that which is mine and that which is yours is really hers!" It is this double effect—on the one hand, encoding a self-abnegation on the part of women, but on the other hand rewarding that

self-abnegation with great prestige—that enabled this story to have the normative effect it had in Jewish culture. A formation that did not offer powerful social rewards to women for behaving in this way could not have been as successful in achieving the hegemony this role model for women did achieve among Jews.

A coda, added in the version of the Rabbi Akiva story in Ketubboth, makes even more explicitly manifest the political function of those stories:

> The daughter of Rabbi Akiva also behaved in this manner toward Ben-Azzai. And this fits the popular saying, "Ewe follows ewe—as the mother, so the daughter!"

This remark makes explicit for the first time the pun on the name of *Rachel* meaning "ewe." More to the point, however, is the ideological work this little epilogue is performing. First of all, the story solves the problem of the recalcitrant Ben-Azzai, who refused to marry because his soul desired Torah, by domesticating him. He, also, got married in the end and became a married monk himself. There really is no tension, the text implies, between marriage and lust for learning. All you need is the right kind of wife. The story encodes the extreme model of Rachel as an ideal for Jewish womanhood and not as an exception, and indeed the practice of husbands leaving their wives for very extended periods to study Torah was current in some communities (and a theme of literature) until the early twentieth century, when it seems to have been abandoned.[32] The romance of Rabbi Akiva and Rachel is thus historical in precisely the sense that Eva Cantarella argues the Homeric epics are historical:

> For all the centuries of the so-called Hellenic Middle Ages, the *aidoi* and *rhapsodoi*, singing the deeds of their ancestors, fulfilled not only a recreational function but an important pedagogical one as well. They taught the Greeks what to feel and think, what they should be, and how they should behave. As men learned from the *epos* to adapt themselves to the model of the hero, so women listening to the poets learned what sort of behavior they should adopt and what they should avoid. It is in this sense that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are considered historical documents.[33]

Our romantic fiction is a historical document in precisely this sense. The romance of Rabbi Akiva and Rachel is foundational for the two-edged sword of European Jewish patriarchal culture, which often gave women much power and prestige in the "secular" realm while denying them participation in the religious sphere. My great-grandmother ran a large lumber business while her husband devoted himself to the study of Torah.[34] Such is the cultural power that the figure of Rabbi Akiva commands.

All was not smooth, however, in the innovation of the practice of the married monk. The Talmud itself shows us the cracks just under the surface of the utopian solution. The amount of conflict that the new social practice engendered is marked by the astonishing final story in the collection. After reading it, truly one of the most appalling stories of a Rabbi's behavior in the Talmud, we are not at

all surprised at the cultural energy that was required to institute such an extreme practice, nor at the necessity to utilize Rabbi Akiva for its production:

Rav Yosef the son of Rava was sent by his father to the House of Study to study with Rabbi Joseph. They set for him six years of study [i.e., he had been married and it was decided that he would be away from home for six years]. After three years, on the eve of Yom Kippur, he said, "I will go and visit my wife." His father heard and went out to meet him with weapon. He said to him, "You remembered your whore?" *And some say, he said, "You remembered your dove?"*[35] They fought, and neither of them got to eat the final meal before the fast.

This shocking tale, with near-unique violence of language and more than a hint of violent behavior between a father and a son, testifies eloquently to the extent of the conflict that the Babylonian innovation associated with Rava's name aroused in his own community of Babylonia. Representing the strife as between Rava and his own son makes that conflict vividly real.

Critique from without: Palestinian rejection. The two communities of Rabbis, in Babylonia and Palestine, were by no means hermetically sealed off one from the other. Any cultural currents in one would have been felt as waves in the other. We have already seen that in the Palestinian Talmud, no such extreme marriage patterns as that of the Babylonians are contemplated. There is, indeed, further evidence that not only were they not contemplated but that they were not countenanced either. Our Babylonian Talmudic text contains three more narratives of Rabbis who married and then left their wives for periods of twelve years or more. I will read just one of these stories because, since it occurs both in a Babylonian version here and in a Palestinian version in *Bereshit rabba*, it gives me elegant testing ground for my hypothesis that the practice of marrying and leaving one's wife for extended periods was much more heavily stigmatized in Palestine than in Babylonia. To facilitate comparison, I will present the two stories side by side:

PALESTINIAN VERSION	BABYLONIAN VERSION
Hananiah the son of Hakinai and Rabbi Shimon the son of Yohai went to study Torah with Rabbi Akiva in Bnei Berak.	Rabbi Hananiah the son of Hakinai was going to the House of the Rabbi [the Study House] at the end of the wedding of Rabbi Shimon the son of Yohai. He [Shimon] said to him, "Wait for me until I can come with you." He did not wait.
They were there for thirteen years.	He went and sat for twelve years in the House of the Rabbi.
Rabbi Shimon the son of Yohai used to send letters to his wife, and used to know what was happening to his family. Hananiah the	

son of Hakinai did not send letters to his wife and did not know what was happening to his family. His wife sent to him, "Your daughter is grown; come and find her a match." Rabbi Akiva perceived with the Holy Spirit and said, "Anyone who has a grown daughter should go and find her a match."	
[He wished to enter his house but found that it was turned in a different direction.] What did he do? He went and sat by the well. He heard the voices of the water drawers saying, "Daughter of Hakinai, fill your pitcher and ascend."	By the time that he arrived, the streets of the town had changed and he did not know the way home. He went and sat by the bank of the river. He heard that they were calling a girl: "Daughter of Hakinai, Daughter of Hakinai, come and fill your pitcher, and come let us go." He said [to himself], "One can derive from this that this girl is mine."
She went, and he went after her, until he came into his house. Just as his wife saw him, her soul left her.	He followed her. His wife was sitting and sifting flour. She lifted her eyes, saw him, was filled with desire; her soul departed. He said before Him, "Master of the Universe, such is the reward of this poor woman?" He prayed for her and she lived.
{There are those who say that it returned.}[36]	

Precisely the evident fact that we have the *same* story in front of us in two versions here enables us to perceive the different cultural work that each version is doing, thus providing clues for differences between the two cultures that produced them. Looking first at the Palestinian version, we see that it is entirely oriented toward condemnation of the behavior of Hananiah (note that he is not even awarded his title of "Rabbi" in this version!). We have here a portrayal of an extreme, a married man who becomes so involved with his studies that he does not know whether he has a daughter, or if he does forgets her existence entirely. Even after his wife writes to him—after thirteen years—and requests his aid in caring for his daughter's future, he does not respond until explicitly commanded to do so by the Head of the Yeshiva, none other than Rabbi Akiva, whose cultural prestige is being mobilized here for a purpose quite different than in the Babylonian text. The original story ends with the bitter consequence of his behavior, the death of his wife. There is nothing in this version that ameliorates in any way the critique of the practice of long absences for study of Torah, unless it be the implicit contrast with Rabbi Shim'on, who at least stayed in constant touch with his wife.

In stark contrast to this version is the Babylonian rewriting of the story. Here, the elements of critique of Rabbi Hananiah are relatively muted. We are not told that he did not contact his family, nor that he only decided to go home when forced to either by her or by the teacher. When his wife dies, he is horrified and

intervenes with heaven to restore her to life. What I am claiming is that the Babylonian version is a revision of the story that is explicitly designed to provide a utopian solution to the enormous moral and halakic contradictions involved in the practice of husbands being away from their wives to study Torah for years on end, as if to suggest that, in our contemporary language of utopia, you can have it all. The Babylonian reteller, struggling with a Palestinian story that, not surprisingly, reflects the strongly critical position of that culture against the practice, mutes that critique dramatically by leaving out certain elements of the narrative. His provision of the *deus ex machina* of a miraculous resurrection only emphasizes the failed utopian resolution of the story even more. This happy end rings as false as the endings of *The Tempest* or *Midsummer Night's Dream*, with everyone well married. This is not intended, of course, as an aesthetic comment, but rather a statement of the way that the very resolutions typical of the comic literary text often betray rather than provide solutions for the underlying sociocultural conflicts.[37]

If in Babylonia the practice of extended absence of rabbinic husband from wife was contested, in Palestine it seems, then, to have been simply rejected. I am not arguing for greater asceticism in Babylonia than in Palestine; quite the opposite, I think that in Palestine there was more of a sense that it is possible and desirable for men to separate themselves from sexual desire at least in part, either by remaining unmarried for extended periods of time or by ascetic sexual practice within marriage.[38] However, together with that notion, there seems also to have been an understanding in Palestine that once married such asceticism cannot be imposed on a wife.[39] Support for this claim can be found in the tannaitic midrash on Miriam's complaint against her brother Moses (Num. 12 and Sifre ad loc.). This narrative tells of a complaint that Miriam lodged with and against her brother Moses and the strong rebuke and punishment that she received from God for this insolent behavior. By diverting the interpretation of this complaint from one against the wife of Moses (as the biblical text seems to imply) to one on her behalf, the midrash produces strong opposition to celibate marriage.

The biblical story opens with the statement that Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses regarding the Ethiopean woman (Tzipporah, according to the midrash) that he had married:[40]

> *And Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses* [Num. 12.1]. This teaches that both of them spoke against him but Miriam initiated it, for Miriam was not accustomed to speaking in the presence of Aaron, except for an immediate need.

The midrashic text is a response to an anomaly in the biblical text, namely that while the verb has two subjects, one male and one female, the verb form is feminine singular.[41] The midrash interprets this to mean that it was on Miriam's initiative that the slander or complaint against Moses took place. While the linguistic

issue that the midrash addresses may be a real one, the particular emphasis of its resolution, namely that Miriam was the prime instigator here, serves a larger hermeneutic and ideological purpose. The midrash continues to explicate the story:

And Miriam and Aaron spoke with regard to the Ethiopean woman. And indeed, how did Miriam know that Moses had withdrawn from sexual intercourse?[42] She saw that Tzipporah no longer adorned herself with women's ornaments. She said to her: What is the matter with you? Why do you not adorn yourself with women's ornaments? She said: Your brother does not care about the matter. And this is how Miriam knew. And she spoke to her brother [Aaron], and the two of them spoke against him.

Rabbi Nathan said Miriam was at the side of Tzipporah, at the time, when it says, "And the youth ran . . . and said Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp" [Num. 11.28]. When Tzipporah heard, she said: Woe to the wives of these![43] And this is how Miriam knew. And she spoke to Aaron, and the two of them spoke against him.

In contrast to other early interpretative traditions that understand that Miriam and Aaron were complaining *against* the wife of Moses, the midrash understands it to be a complaint on her behalf. The midrashic rewriting of the story is, as is usually the case at least in these early midrashim, a response to a gap in the biblical text that demands interpretation. The story begins with Miriam complaining "with regard to the Ethiopean woman," but in the elaboration the complaint of Miriam and Aaron is entirely different: "Did God only speak with Moses; He indeed spoke with us as well?" Rather than being a charge having to do with whom Moses had married, it seems to be a challenge to some power or privilege of his. Moreover, God's defense of Moses cum punishment of Miriam seemingly has nothing to do with his wife, being merely a statement of Moses' special holiness. There is accordingly an inner contradiction in the story: Was the complaint because Moses had married inappropriately or because Miriam was jealous of his status? The midrashic story fills this gap by connecting the two complaints as one; she complained on behalf of the wife, arguing that he had behaved toward her in a way that was arrogant and overbearing. Did she and her elder brother not share his status and yet not behave so toward their spouses? The midrash, moreover, knows precisely what the complaint of the wife was, and as plausible a resolution of the contradiction as this is, it is not straightforwardly accountable for as the "meaning" of the biblical text. As is typical for midrash, we seem to have a synergy of two factors in creating the interpretation; on the one hand a genuine interpretative difficulty that is addressed by the interpretation and on the other hand an ideological investment that is served by the interpretation.[44] Accordingly, the midrash doubly ventriloquizes the voice of the woman and her complaint, first because it is Miriam who is the initiator of the action and speaker here, but also because the midrash reports, in her name, what she had heard from Tzipporah that had made her aware of the wife's distress.[45] The text communicates

two forms of the woman's complaint against her husband. The first is more subtle in that only by indirection does it imply an indictment of Moses for not having intercourse with her, while in the second case the grievance is sharp, direct, and clear. "Woe to the wives of these!" Woe to the wife of him who becomes overly holy, and owing to his holiness ignores the needs of his wife for sex. At the same time that Miriam is being condemned by the biblical text and by the midrash for her untoward accusation against Moses, the text ventriloquizes the voice of the woman whose husband devotes himself overly much to the study of Torah and refrains from intercourse.

The midrash goes on to emphasize the good intentions of Miriam, while still recognizing that the Torah narrates her punishment for this act:

Behold, the matter is suitable for an argument from the mild case to the severe: Since Miriam did not complain to her brother for blame but for praise, and not to decrease procreation but to increase it and only in private, and thus was punished, all the more so one who speaks against his fellow for blame and not for praise, to decrease procreation and not to increase it, in public and not in private.

Many who commit the sin of slander do so in order to decrease procreation, either by preventing marriages from taking place or by promoting disharmony between husband and wife. Miriam did the opposite. Her intention was to promote the good by restoring harmony between Moses and Tzipporah, and the proof of this is that she made her charge in private. The midrash here goes out of its way to reduce the culpability of Miriam, in spite of the severe punishment that she is given in the Torah narrative—temporary leprosy, precisely the normal punishment for slander in the rabbinic moral system. Her sin was only in being overly and inappropriately zealous for the performance of the commandment. By thus minimizing the disapproval of Miriam's speech against Moses and making its intentions entirely praiseworthy, the midrash is already expressing a negative attitude toward married celibacy, within the confines of a possible reading of the biblical text.

The midrash goes on to explain the rest of the story. Miriam and Aaron's complaint had to do with the way that Moses was holding himself above them—holier than thou—in his celibate behavior:

And they said, "Did God speak only to Moses?" Did He not speak with the Fathers, and they did not withdraw [from sex]? *Did the Holiness not speak also with us,* yet we did not withdraw?

To which comes God's reply to them:

If there will be for you a prophet. Perhaps just as I speak with the prophets in dreams and visions, so I speak with Moses, therefore Scripture tells us, "Not so is my servant Moses"—except for the ministering angels. Rabbi Yose says, even than the ministering angels.

Mouth to mouth do I speak with him. Mouth to mouth I told him to withdraw from his wife.

At first blush this midrash seems to be an approbation of the holiness of celibacy and even of celibate marriage—a practice well known in certain early Christian circles, as has been discussed by Peter Brown. After all, Moses is the very highest model of what a human being can achieve in religious life. He chose to be celibate at a certain point in his life and is approbated for this very strongly by God Himself. This would seemingly then be an exemplum, as it were, to the Rabbis themselves. And so, indeed, Finkelstein interprets it, arguing that the midrash is a support for the practice of extended postmarital separations.

In fact, I would claim, not only does this text not promote the ideal of celibacy or celibate marriage for the Rabbis, it constitutes a very strong polemic against such a practice or ideal. To see why that should be so, we shall need to read the text a little more closely. First of all, we must realize that the midrash is explicitly and formally *citing* the received tradition of Moses' celibacy. Note that it does not ask how *we* know that Moses had withdrawn from his wife after Sinai, only how Miriam came to know. The midrash thus conveys (and we know for a fact) that the motif of Moses' *mariage blanc* was current in earlier Jewish tradition. In Philo, for example, Moses is the very type of the highly regarded *therapeutae* who renounce sex entirely (Fraade, 264). My thesis is that the midrash cites this authoritative and widespread tradition here in order to counter it. By introducing this traditional theme precisely at this point in the midrashic text and not, for example, in the context of accounts of Moses' piety, the midrash has found a means of neutralizing and opposing the ideology of the tradition, without, however, denying its validity entirely—something they apparently could not have accomplished given its widespread authority.

God's condemnation of Miriam and Aaron is explicitly put into terms that emphasize the exceptional nature of the relationship between Moses and God. Miriam and Aaron seem to be proposing that since they have the same status as Moses, having also spoken with God, either they should be refraining from sex also or he shouldn't be. God's rebuke to them consists of a very strong statement that Moses is special—indeed, unique. There will be other prophets, just like Miriam and Aaron, but to them God will speak in dreams and visions. They, accordingly, are not required to refrain from sexual intercourse. Even the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were not expected or allowed to be celibate. Only Moses, with whom God spoke "mouth to mouth"—in itself, a highly erotic attribute—only he was required to withdraw from marital life. He is either only slightly below the angels or even more spiritual than they, and no other human being was ever like him. It would follow, of course, a fortiori, that all lesser mortals than the Patriarchs, prophets, and Moses' siblings, whatever the degree of holiness to which they aspire, are not expected to be celibate. I read the midrashic text, then, as a form of opposition to the received tradition that Moses was a celibate husband. In order to neutralize the force of this authoritative motif, the midrash cites it and contests it at the same time by marginalizing it as the practice

expected of and permitted only to Moses in all of history. Thus the midrash manages both to remain faithful to a powerful received tradition and at the same time to counter it. When this point is combined with the vivid expression of empathy with the neglected wife of the "prophet" who opts for celibacy, we have a robust polemical statement against the sort of practice that the Babylonian Rabbis engaged in (or at any rate, say they engaged in) of leaving their wives for years on end without sexual companionship.[46]

Once more, comparing the Babylonian version of this tradition with the Palestinian text just read will reinforce this point. In the Babylonian Talmud, the story is cited thus:

> Moses separated himself from his wife. What did he reason? He reasoned for himself by a syllogism [*qal wehomer*]. He said: If Israel, with whom the Shekina only spoke for a short time, and only for a set time, the Torah said, "For three days do not approach woman," I with whom the Shekina speaks at every moment and without a set time, a fortiori. And how do we know that God agreed with him, for it says, "Go tell them, return to your tents," and right after that, "But you stay here with me." And there are those who say [that we learn it] from "Mouth to mouth will I speak with him." (Shabbat 67a)

This Babylonian retelling of the story is conspicuous for its absences and by its absences makes the presences of the Palestinian version all the more prominent. There is no representation here, whatsoever, of the feelings of the wife, indeed no recognition that she is, in any way, an interested party in the decision. Moreover, although the difference between Moses and the ordinary people is adduced here as well, it is not done in such a way that we clearly understand that for all others renunciation of marital sex is excluded and regarded as arrogance and wrong, as it is in the midrash. One could easily read this text as a further authorization for the apparent Babylonian practice of long postmarital separations for the study of Torah, while the Palestinian version above strongly condemns the practice.

The Case of the Married Monk

By cross-examining the talmudic texts, then, I have proffered a solution to the case of the married monk. A set of directly contradictory social demands were current within the culture; on the one hand, the highest of achievements was to devote oneself entirely to the study of Torah, and on the other hand, there was an absolute demand on everyone to marry and procreate. The Palestinians resolved this tension by following a common Hellenistic practice of marrying late after an extended period devoted to "philosophy," which for the Jews meant Torah. The Babylonians, on the other hand, having a strong cultural model of the necessity of sexual activity for postpubescent men, were prevented

from such a pattern. They instituted, at some point, therefore, the impossible "solution" of men marrying young and then leaving their wives for extended periods of study, creating, then, a class of "married monks." The romantic story of the marriage of the hegemonic symbol, Rabbi Akiva, is a text produced to institute a practical resolution of the social dilemma. The talmudic literature produces as well strong (and often covert) opposition to the practice instituted by this story.[47] (These oppositional literary techniques take many of the forms of oppositional literature in other cultures as well, including ironic appropriation.)[48] Literary analysis can be then a means to tentative exposition of cultural reality. Precisely through close (but contextualized) reading, the surface of the text manifests unresolved tensions and conflicts within the actual social structure. It is the failure of the narrative to totalize that is significant, and not its success. We do not have to read the texts as documents that reflect social practice, as in the older historicism, nor as "texts" that are entirely self-enclosed and autonomous, as in the various formalistic practices of literary criticism, but as themselves practices of culture that can be pressured to reveal from within themselves the cultural work that they do.

Notes

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1. This is to be taken as neither an assertion nor a denial of the biographical, historical "reality" of these rabbis and their discourse but only as an interpretation of the function that the text plays, in my reading, in rabbinic culture.
2. On Ben-Azzai's self-justification, see also David Daube, *The Duty of Procreation* (Edinburgh, 1977), 37–38.
3. Steven D. Fraade, "Ascetical Aspects of Ancient Judaism," in *Jewish Spirituality from the Bible Through the Middle Ages*, ed. Arthur Green (New York, 1986), 266–67. See also Gary Anderson, "Celibacy or Consummation in the Garden?: Reflections on Early Jewish and Christian Interpretations of the Garden of Eden," *Harvard Theological Review* 82, no. 2 (1989): 121–48.
4. Peter Brown's *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, 1988) is the most eloquent evocation of that pain and the response to it among early Christians. See also the important comments of Jeremy Cohen, *"Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it": The Ancient and Medieval Career of a Biblical Text* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1989), 114, n. 177.

5. Alon Goshen-Gottstein, "The Body as Image of God in Rabbinic Literature," Paper presented at People of the Body/People of the Book conference, Department of Near Eastern Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 1991.
6. Daniel Boyarin, "'Behold Israel according to the flesh': On Anthropology and Sexuality in Late Antique Judaism," *Yale Journal of Criticism* (forthcoming, Spring 1992).
7. A particularly precious sort of tiara.
8. "Pet" is not a literal translation, as pethood is an institution specific to modern culture. However, this translation comes closest to conveying the connotations of the relation between a shepherd and sheep in the pastoral Jewish culture, including the erotic overtones thereof. For the erotic associations of pet keeping, see Marc Shell, "The Family Pet," *Representations* 15 (1985): 121–51. "Beast" would be a more strict rendering, but would be misleading in its connotation. The use of this verse implies the solicitous (patronizing) care of a superior in the hierarchy for an inferior, not an ascription of bestiality. Thus, for example, it is used in Tanhuma at Noah 7.1 to refer to the fact that God knew that Noah was righteous among all of the human beings who existed then. I shall further develop these points in my reading of the story below.
9. The historical reading is problematic, that is, beyond the bare facts that there was an Akiva, that his wife was named Rachel (although given the emblematic value of her name in the story, maybe even this is fictive), and that apparently they suffered great poverty while he studied Torah. This much of the story seems so frequently told as to be established historically. If we only find significance, however, in the historically "true," then we will be left with very little to read in rabbinic literature.
10. The talmudic literature is divided into two main branches chronologically: the tannaitic branch, which extends until the editing of the Mishna at the end of the second century of the Christian Era; and the amoraic period, which follows it until the completion of the main parts of the Talmud between the fourth and sixth centuries. Virtually all of the tannaitic literature is Palestinian, while the amoraic literature comes from both centers. The tannaitic halaka is considered definitive for both communities, although various dialectic strategies can be employed to overcome that hegemony, as we shall see presently.
11. This insight enables us to understand better a passage from the Persian Church Father, Aphrahat, that puzzled Gary Anderson somewhat:

    > Aphrahat declares that one Jew has asserted that Christians are unclean because they do not take wives. He writes:
    >
    > > I have written to you, my beloved, concerning virginity and holiness because I heard about a Jewish man who has reviled one of our brethren, the members of the church. He said to him, "You are impure for you don't take wives. But we are holy and more virtuous for we bear children and multiply seed in the world."
    >
    > Aphrahat's understanding of holiness is significant. He correctly distinguishes the Jewish understanding of the term, as reflected in rabbinic documentation, from the Christian. Jews understood the term to refer to the state of marriage. Syriac Christians understood the term to refer to sexual continence. Aphrahat's identification of sexual abstinence with uncleanness might seem unusual. The Rabbis never placed the sexually abstinent individual in the legal category of unclean.

    Anderson, "Celibacy and Consummation," 122–23. We can see, however, that Aphrahat's allusion is exactly correct. For the (Babylonian) Rabbis (the ones that Aphrahat's

congregation would have been in contact with), one who was unmarried was impure, because of their assumption that he would necessarily engage in impure thoughts or more probably seminal emissions, which would of course produce impurity in the technical sense.

12. Rashi: "I could have opposed him (and Satan is the Evil Inclination) and not have been afraid that he would cause me to sin."
13. Sexual activity is necessary, at any rate, for males. Note the difference between this and Paul's notion of marriage as a defense against lust. For Paul this is a concession for those "not gifted" by being able to transcend sexuality, and he argues that it is not to be accounted a sin for them to marry, while for these Babylonians *everyone* is prey to lust and should marry. The ability to renounce sexuality cannot be taken as any sort of barometer of the person. Anne Drafthorn Kilmer has informed me that the notion that sex is necessary for everyone seems to have been a current one in the Babylonian *Kulturgebiet* from very ancient times. In the epic *Atrahasis*, the priests and priestesses are forbidden to bear children after the flood, but not to have sex!
14. By "self-perception," I mean that it reflects a judgment by Babylonian Rabbis on themselves—as well as others. While this does not in itself constitute a positive appreciation of sexuality per se, as opposed to procreation, it does make it impossible for the capacity to withdraw from sex to be understood as a barometer of the spirit, as it does in several Hellenistic traditions, as the following illustrates:

    > A man must not treat his wife as he would a mistress, Seneca admonishes, and Saint Jerome cites him approvingly. His nephew Lucan was of the same opinion. He wrote an epic, a sort of realistic historical novel, in which he describes in his own fashion the story of the civil war between Caesar and Pompey. He shows Cato, model of the Stoic, taking leave of his wife (the same wife he lent for a time to a friend) as he prepares to go off to war. Even on the eve of such a lengthy separation, they do not make love, as Lucan is at pains to point out, explaining as he does the doctrinal significance of the fact. Even that semigreat man Pompey, although no Stoic, does not sleep with his wife on the farewell night. Why the abstinence? Because a good man does not live for petty pleasures and is careful about every action. To give in to desire is immoral. There is only one reasonable ground for a couple to sleep together: procreation. It was a question not of asceticism but of rationalism.

    Paul Veyne, "The Roman Empire," in Veyne, ed., *A History of Private Life*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), 1:47. In addition to the fact that a Jewish husband is *required* to sleep with his wife on a farewell night, the fundamental difference here is that according to the rabbinic cultural formation, fulfilling desire (within the bounds of the permitted) is in no way censorable and cannot, therefore, serve as a barometer of virtue.
15. Brown, *Body and Society*, 5–7.
16. Daube, *Duty of Procreation*, 29.
17. Boyarin, "Behold Israel."
18. The linguistic basis for this identification is complex. The root *'ny*, from which *'onah* (the word that I have translated "season") is often used in sexual contexts to mean "have intercourse with." In that sense, it is unrelated linguistically to the word that means "seasons." I think, however, that the Rabbis have conjoined the two senses into one and from thence derived the complex meaning of "regular intercourse."
19. I.e., these are the maximum amounts of time that he is permitted to vow not to sleep

with her. If he takes a vow for longer, he must divorce her and pay her the divorce settlement.

20. *Tayyalin* is a difficult term that means something like "idlers"; it may mean "those who spend all of their time in study."
21. To be sure, this is not the only interpretation possible of this passage, but it is, interestingly enough, the interpretation of the canonical commentators on the Talmud, Rashi and the Tosafists.
22. "Two or three" is a conventional Semitic expression for "several."
23. Rav Ada's tradition further contradicts the statement above in the names of both Rav and Rabbi Yohanan to the effect that *even with permission a man should not stay away from home for more than a month, a fortiori, without permission.* However, it is possible to understand that statement differently, to wit that normal practice is that one is away for thirty days, or even that the two are describing the practice of the one who goes away for thirty days without permission and are merely questioning how long he must stay home before leaving again; so the argument is not definitive.
24. Yonah Frankel, *Readings in the Spiritual World of the Stories of the Aggada* (in Hebrew; Tel Aviv, 1981), 101.
25. I owe this formulation to Allen Dundes. While on the one hand, then, this text encodes equal status, as it were, to the wife and the Torah, it also removes women entirely from the sphere of Torah through this complementary distribution. Another way to put this would be that the woman is raised to the status of Torah and therefore prevented from engaging in Torah—analogous to the status of women as art objects in "Western" culture, which has barred them from being artists. In another part of the present project I will analyze at length a discontinuity in the discourse of gender that allows women access to study of Torah.
26. This contradiction was already remarked by the twelfth-century talmudic commentators, the Tosafists, who are puzzled at the fact that the Rabbis stay away from home for two or three years, in direct contradiction to the views of both Rav and Rabbi Yohanan. They reinterpret the clear meaning of the text in order to escape from this contradiction, while in my view the whole function of these stories is to neutralize Rav and Rabbi Yohanan, as explicitly noted by Rava himself, who is presented as citing the first one.
27. That is, the opposition to this innovation originates in representation of women's subjectivity, not that it is a presentation of actual women's subjectivity. See also below, note 45.
28. Since Rachel's father in this text also has an emblematic name—this quintessential fat cat is called "Satisfied Dog"—I do not think that reading Rachel's name as emblematic is overdrawn. Note that her name is only hinted at in the talmudic text, but so strongly that the tradition univocally understood that her name was Rachel. The very absence of explicit reference becomes, accordingly, almost a means of drawing attention to the symbolic value of the name. See below for further support for this point.
29. The slippage between wife and daughter is not accidental, as "my daughter" was a common mode of address for the Rabbis toward their wives and other adult women. Moreover, as Chana Kronfeld remarks, erotic love is often figured in biblical (and later Hebrew) parlance as kinship, thus "my sister, my bride" in the Song of Songs.
30. Some critics have suggested in fact that two originally unconnected texts have been joined here. In good formalist tradition, I will argue that the story is a unity and the gap in the *sujet* is homologous with a sharp transition in the *fabula.*

31. See also Frankel, *Readings*, 113, on this point.
32. Note that this notice of Rachel's daughter as the wife of Ben-Azzai contradicts the one cited above and other traditions that hold that Ben-Azzai remained unmarried, only emphasizing all the more the ideological function of the stories.
33. Eve Cantarella, *Pandora's Daughters: The Role and Status of Women in Greek and Roman Antiquity* (Baltimore, 1982), 25.
34. He lived, at any rate, at home, but many young husbands (into the nineteenth century!) were sent away to study away from their wives in perfect imitation of the story of Rabbi Akiva. Louis Finkelstein, *Akiba: Scholar, Saint, and Martyr* (New York, 1964), 80, also sees that this story of Rabbi Akiva is crucial for establishing the practice of married students staying away from home for years on end, but he takes it to mean that Rabbi Akiva actually established the practice while I, of course, see it as a later Babylonian story that enforces the practice instituted there.
35. The difference in Hebrew is but one letter. Not surprisingly, the glossator could not stand to leave the text as it was.
36. Jehuda Theodor and Hanoch Albeck, eds., *Genesis rabbah* (Jerusalem, 1965), 1232. The curly braces indicate that the last sentence is a very late addition to the text, on which see next note.
37. To be sure, a glossator has added a line to the Palestinian version as well to the effect that the wife's soul returned; however, it is clear that this is only a later addition to the text, and perhaps one that is based on the Babylonian story. Frankel makes the same point. The version in the equally Palestinian *Wayyiqra rabba* 21.8 text also includes an ending in which the outcry of Rabbi Hananiah causes a miraculous resurrection. However, I am virtually certain that this also is a later scribal addition imitating the Babylonian talmudic version. There are three reasons for this judgment. First, the very fact that the two Palestinian texts, otherwise almost identical, have entirely different formulations at the end suggests strongly that they are later glosses in both. This is further supported by the enormous variations between the different manuscripts of *Wayyiqra rabba* itself, often a sign of a belated addition. Second, there is nothing in the Palestinian version of the story that would prepare us in the slightest for the Rabbi's expression of concern and compassion. Third, the phrase "this poor woman" is a copy of the language of the Babylonian text and occurs previously in the Babylonian talmudic passage, from which it has almost certainly been imitated in our story, first in the Talmud and then secondarily in the Palestinian midrash. And indeed, the phrase does not occur anywhere else in Palestinian literature, but it does occur at least once more in the Babylonian Talmud (Hullin 7b).
38. Such an ascetic sexual practice in marriage would be, e.g., having intercourse clothed, as Rabbi Eliezer is reported to have done, a practice energetically opposed in the Babylonian Talmud; Boyarin, "Behold Israel."
39. Paul's famous declaration in 1 Corinthians 7 that husbands and wives should not deny each other, in spite of his clear valorization of celibacy, would be closely related to this understanding. As I have argued at length in "Behold Israel," this Palestinian notion should not be misunderstood as encoding an assumption that only men can control their sexuality while women cannot. It is only that with the endemic androcentrism of the discourse only men are addressed as to their obligations. Halakically, such an obligation was equally addressed to wives. Both were permitted to refuse sex at any given time, but not for an extended period.
40. The word *Ethiopean* is explained as a metaphor:

> *The Ethiopean woman.* But was she indeed Ethiopean, she was Midianite, as it says, "And the Priest of Midian had seven daughters" [Exod. 2.16]. So why does Scripture say, "Ethiopean," but to teach us that just as the Ethiopean is unusual for his skin, so was Tzipporah unusual for her beauty more than all the other women.
>
> *For he had married an Ethiopean woman.* Why is it said again? Hasn't he already said, "with regard to the Ethiopean woman"? Why does Scripture say, "for he had married an Ethiopean woman"? There are women who are comely in their beauty but not in their deeds, in their deeds but not in their beauty, as it says, "like a gold ring in the nose of a pig is a beautiful woman without wisdom" [Prov. 11.22]. But this one was comely in her beauty and in her deeds; therefore it says, "for he had married an Ethiopean woman."

Since it is impossible to suppose that Tzipporah fits the normal denotative meaning of *Ethiopean*, the term is taken as a metaphor for distinctiveness, for being somehow unusual, a fairly common midrashic move. The midrash goes out of its way to read the attribution as positive, praising Tzipporah as both attractive and righteous, thus emphasizing all the more the injustice done to her by Moses' overzealous piety. As the Talmud remarks in another context, "Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: Anyone whose wife is a fearer of Heaven and he does not sleep with her is called a sinner, as it says, 'And you shall know that your tent is at peace' [Job 5.25]"; Yevamoth 62b.

41. To be sure, modern grammatical analysis of Hebrew does not recognize this as an anomaly, arguing that in Hebrew, as in other Semitic languages, when a verb appears before two coordinated subjects it agrees with the first of them. However, as I have argued in my book *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington, Ind., 1990), midrashic exegesis must be understood on the basis of the Rabbis' perceptions of Hebrew grammar and not ours, and the fact is that wherever this construction appears it is treated as having special meaning by the midrash. Furthermore, the continuation of the story suggests strongly that the rabbinic reading that Miriam was the instigator of this event is not overreading.
42. The literal translation would be "procreation"; however, as this text indicates and others as well, this is a rabbinic term for sexual intercourse, whether or not it results in pregnancy and indeed whether or not this is its primary aim. The implications of this linguistic usage will be considered in another context.
43. I.e., upon hearing they were prophesying she commiserated with their wives, thinking that now they would stop sleeping with them, as Moses had stopped sleeping with her.
44. I am aware, of course, that my statement here of the hermeneutics of midrash is highly oversimplified. It is dependent on my theory of midrash, as worked out in my book.
45. The use of the term *ventriloquy* indicates that one should *not* understand that there is an *expression* here of women's subjectivity; there is, however, a *representation* of an imagined women's subjectivity, an effort at empathy with women and one, moreover, with at least potential effect in actual marriage practices. Women are often represented in rabbinic texts as subjects. Their subjectivity is, however, as here, only represented as an object of rabbinic discourse.
46. The dating of the midrash is contested. I, paradoxically, am among those who are inclined to regard it as earlier than the Babylonian Talmud, in which case it could hardly be a polemic against the practice that I am claiming was instituted by the talmudic Rabbis; rather, it would be against other well-attested practices of *mariage blanc* among Jews and non-Jews at least as early as the first century. It becomes then a polemic against the Babylonian institution *avant la lettre*.
47. I would like to make clear the difference between my interpretative practice and that

of structuralist readings of myth, which also see the myth as an attempt at resolution of tensions in the culture. In structuralism, the tensions are reconstructed at a level of deep structure and the myth is read as a perfect resolution; the surface of the mythic text is, therefore, not significant. Here the surface tensions in the text reveal unresolved contradictions in the culture.

48. Ross Chambers, *Room for Maneuver: Reading (the) Oppositional (in) Narrative* (Chicago, 1991), 117.