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The Great Fat Massacre:
Sex, Death, and the Grotesque Body
in the Talmud*

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Said Rabbi Yohanan, "Rabbi Ishma'el the son of Yose's member was like a wineskin of nine kav; Rabbi El'azar the son of Rabbi Shim'on's member was like a wineskin of seven kav." Rav Papa said, "Rabbi Yohanan's member was like a wineskin of three kav." And there are those who say: like a wineskin of five kav. Rav Papa himself had a member which was like the baskets of Hippomenes. (Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metsia, 84a)¹

A learned discussion of traditions comparing the size of the penis of our hero with that of others of the Holy Rabbis is not something we expect to find in the Talmud.² Enormous phalli, particularly on clerics, inevitably remind of Rabelais,³ suggesting that our text is part of the grotesque tradition, associated so strongly by Bakhtin with cultural issues centering on procreation (Bakhtin 1984), and indeed, investigation of the text shows that the thematics of the material body, the body of reproduction, is its major emphasis.⁴ All that we know of rabbinic Judaism points to reproduction as a cite of central, vital significance in the rabbinic culture, indeed to genealogy as a crucial source of meaning. In Bakhtin's account, the grotesque body is the very triumph of life over death:

It is the people's growing and ever-victorious body that is "at home" in the cosmos. It is the cosmos' own flesh and blood, possessing the same elemental force but better organized. The body is the last and best word of the cosmos, its leading force. Therefore it has nothing to fear. Death holds no terror for it. The death of the individual is only one moment in the triumphant life of the people
and of mankind, a moment indispensable for their renewal and improvement. (Bakhtin 1984, 341)

In this chapter I wish to focus on the cultural dynamics of a talmudic text in which the themes of the grotesque are obsessively present, as in Rabelais. The biography of the holy Rabbi El’azar, the son of Shim’on, in the Babylonian Talmud (Tractate Baba Metzia 83b–85a) is surely one of the strangest of “hagiographies” in the literature. With only the slightest gestures at plot-level consistency, the text consists of a series of incidents whose common feature is that they nearly all deal with the body of the subject, and the text is further interrupted by stories about the bodies of other rabbis. On the one hand, the text brilliantly corroborates Bakhtin’s reading of the grotesque as powerfully, centrally involved with the reproductive body and thus with reproduction, but on the other hand, this text will show not the body that has nothing to fear but the body in terror and anxiety.

The fabula of the narrative runs as follows:

Rabbi El’azar, the son of Shim’on, is appointed to catch Jewish thieves for the Roman government. Rabbi Yehoshua the Bald meets him and calls him by the insulting epithet, “Vinegar, son of Wine,” implying that he is a most unworthy son of a great father. He defends his actions somewhat lamely. When, however, a certain laundryman refers to him by the same designation, he becomes furious and has the man arrested. After calming down, he feels regretful and goes to have the man released but does not succeed. Standing under the crucified laundryman, he begins to cry, whereupon another passing Jew sees him and says that he should not be concerned, for the crucified one and his son had both had intercourse with a married woman on the Day of Atonement, thus committing several capital crimes. The rabbi rejoices and placing his hands on his guts, says “Be joyful, my guts. If you are so accurate when you have no certain information, imagine how accurate you are when you are certain. I am certain that neither rot nor worms will ever prevail over you.” In spite of this expression of self-assurance, the text tells us, the rabbi was still not certain, so he actually tests the claim that his guts are impervious during his lifetime, by having several baskets full of fat removed from his stomach with their blood vessels and placed in the sun to see if they rot (which they don’t). After some very significant “digressions” that I will be treating at length later on, the story continues by telling us that the rabbi still unsure of himself takes upon himself a penance which resulted in illness such that every morning sixty felt mats soaked with blood and pus were removed from beneath his body. His wife, fearing the other rabbis’ reprobation of her husband, prevents him from attending the House of Study, until finally in disgust at his ascetic behavior, she leaves him. He then returns to the rabbinic community, where his first activity is to permit sex for sixty doubtful menstruants, leading to the birth of sixty male children who are named after him. His wife returns to him (although we are never told when, how, or why), and upon his death, he tells her that the other rabbis are still angry with him and will mistreat his corpse, which should be left in the attic, where it does not rot for twenty years or so until finally one day a worm is seen exiting from the ear of the corpse. The rabbi’s father communicates from beyond the grave that he would like his son buried beside him, and after some further misadventures, his desire is fulfilled and the corpse is buried. We have then some codas to the story that, as we shall see, powerfully amplify its meaning.

Neither this brief summary of the plot nor my extended reading below can encompass the unencompassable body of this fat text. A complete translation is presented at the end of the discussion.

At first glance, the text seems readable as a sort of social-political satire, an attack on certain rabbis who were grotesquely fat in body and by implication undisciplined and glutonous and who allowed themselves to be recruited by the Roman authorities to betray their fellow Jews:

They brought Rabbi El’azar the son of Rabbi Shim’on, and he began to catch thieves (and turn them over to the Romans). He met Rabbi Yehoshua, the Bald, who said to him, “Vinegar son of Wine: how long will you persist in sending the people of our God to death?” He said to him, “I am removing thorns from the vineyard.” He said to him, “Let the Owner of the vineyard come and remove the thorns.” One day a certain laundry man met him, and called him, “Vinegar son of Wine.” He said, “Since he is so brazen, one can assume that he is wicked.” He said, “Seize him.” They seized him. After he had settled down, he went in to release him, but he could not. He applied to him the verse, ‘One who guards his mouth and his tongue, guards himself from troubles’ (Proverbs 21:23). They hung him. He stood under the hanged man and cried. Someone said to him, “Be not troubled: he and his son both had intercourse with an engaged girl on Yom Kippur.” In that minute, he placed his hands on his guts, and said, “Be joyful, O my guts, be joyful! If it is thus when you are doubtful, when you are certain you are more so. I
am confident that rot and worms cannot prevail over you." But even so, he was not calmed. They gave him a sleeping potion and took him into a marble room and ripped open his stomach and were taking out baskets of fat and placing it in the July sun and it did not stink. But no fat stinks. It does if it has red blood vessels in it, and this even though it had red blood vessels in it, did not stink. He applied to himself the verse, 'even my flesh will remain preserved' (Psalms 16:8–9).

The Rabbi is recruited by the Roman authorities as a sort of collaborator, who turns over Jewish tax evaders to the Roman authorities. This behavior is roundly condemned by the narrative. Rabbi El'azar is called, "Vinegar, son of Wine" [i.e., Wicked One Son of a Saint. see below] and asked, "How long will you persist in sending the people of our God to death?" It is a gross oversimplification of the text, however, to read it in such political terms. Indeed, the text keeps undermining such a reading. On the one hand, the rabbi is referred to as "Vinegar, son of wine," thus seemingly supporting a reading of the text in political terms. But on the other hand, the successful test of his flesh and the strong testimony regarding the sinfulness of the laundryman (who several times over deserved the death penalty) undermine this reading. Moreover, at a later point in the text he is referred to as a saint (precisely when his own child is portrayed as a sinner!) We need more complex cultural models to understand such a self-contradictory text. Bakhtin provides the models. He has discussed similar ambivalences in the European grotesque tradition:

The soul of the people as a whole cannot coexist with the private, limited, greedy body. There is the same complex and contradictory character in the bodily images related to the banquet; the fat belly, the gaping mouth, the giant phallus, and the popular positive image of the "satisfied man." The fat belly of the demons of fertility and of the heroic popular gluttons (for instance, Gargantua in folklore) are transformed into the paunch of the insatiable simonist abbot. The image, split between these extremes, leads a complex and contradictory life. (Bakhtin 1984, 292)

It is precisely this complex and contradictory association of the grotesque body, on the one hand with exploitation and on the other hand with such positive images as fertility and fecundity, that will provide an important clue to a richer reading of our text.

The text clearly manifests several of the elements of the grotesque that Bakhtin has identified. As Bakhtin has shown, the grotesque body is the uncontainable body. The topoi of exaggerated size, detachable organs, the emphasis on the orifices, and stories of dismemberment are all representations of the body as interacting with the world, not self-enclosed as the classical body:

All these convexities and orifices have a common characteristic; it is within them that the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome: there is an interchange and an interpenetration. This is why the main events in the life of the grotesque body, the acts of the bodily drama, take place in this sphere. Eating, drinking, defecation and other elimination (sweating, blowing of the nose, sneezing), as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body—all these acts are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world, or on the confines of the old and new body. In all of these events the beginning and end of life are closely linked and interwoven. (Bakhtin 1984, 317)

Not surprisingly, the grotesque cultural tradition manifests remarkable ambivalence on this aspect of the body. The opposing principles of corporeal fecundity and corporeal degradation in illness and death are one of the sources of that ambivalence and they are powerfully animated in the talmudic story. Images of decay, dismemberment, and bodily mortification pervade the story.

The rabbi performs a bizarre purity test on himself. In order to demonstrate that his actions with regard to the Jew that he sent to his death were righteous ones, he attempts to prove (to himself) that his body is indeed a classical, impermeable one. He begins by making the claim that since he is so certain that he is righteous, he is equally sure that his body will be impervious to the depredations of worms after his death. That is, he experiences himself as a classical body, the body that is pristine and closed off from the outside world. Ironically enough, the test that the rabbi devises in order to prove his self-image is precisely one that undermines it. He has the integrity of his body violated even in his lifetime in the bizarre operation of removing baskets full of fat from his stomach and having them placed in the sun to see if they will, indeed, be immune from rotting. We have then, a fantastically sardonic moment of the very apotheosis of the grotesque being claimed as a proof for the classic!

As Bakhtin has already pointed out, the image of the body part grown out of all proportion is "actually a picture of dismemberment,
of separate areas of the body enlarged to gigantic dimensions” (Bakhtin 1984, 328). The rabbi is clearly grotesquely obese and several baskets full of fat could be removed from his body, and his activity is portrayed as a grotesque violation of the integrity of the body of the Jewish people. The association of the grotesqueness of body and of behavior is underlined by being doubled in another rabbinic figure, Rabbi Ishma’el, the son of Rabbi Yose, who performs similar services for the Roman government and is also marked as an inferior son to a superior father:

To Rabbi Ishma’el the son of Yose there also occurred a similar situation. Eliahu (the Prophet Elijah) met him and said to him, “How long will you persist in sending the people of our God to death?!?” He said to him, “What can I do; it is the king’s order?” He said to him, “Your father ran away to Asia-Minor; you run away to Lydia.” When Rabbi Ishma’el the son of Yose and Rabbi El’azar the son of Rabbi Shim’on used to meet each other, an ox could walk between them and not touch them.

These rabbis truly are proto-Gargantuas if when they stand together, their stomachs form an arch so big that an ox can walk under it. It is exciting to see how the talmudic text bears out Bakhtin’s remarkable insight by combining in one moment the monstrous belly that “hides the normal members of the body” and the actual disembernment of that monstrous organ. Indeed, the image of what is done to the body of the rabbi is almost comparable to giving birth, to a kind of lunatic Caesarean section. This association makes perfect sense in the logic of the grotesque body because it is precisely in the association of fertility and death that the grotesque draws its power (Bakhtin 1984, 238).

The theme of reproduction begins explicitly to obstruct in the sequel to the anecdote about the two fat rabbis and thus connects the theme of grotesque obesity with the theme of fecundity:

A certain matron said to them, “Your children are not yours.” They said, “Theirs are bigger than ours.” “If that is the case, even more so!” There are those who say that thus they said to her: “As the man, so is his virility.” And there are those who say that thus did they say to her: “Love compresses the flesh.”

The Roman matron who sees the two obese rabbis cannot believe that they could possibly perform sexually, so she challenges the legitimacy of their children. A highly comic brief linguistic farce ensues. They answer her cryptically, “Theirs are bigger than ours,” apparently understanding the matron to have meant that since they have such enormous penises, they could not have intercourse and replying that their wives have even bigger vaginas. The matron, misunderstanding their answer and thinking that they are referring to their wives’ abdomens, retorts, “If your wives are even fatter, then all the more so that you could not have intercourse.” At this point the fat rabbis finally understand the matron’s concern and answer—according to one tradition that the size of a man’s genitals is in keeping with the size of the rest of his body, and according to the other, that desire overcomes obesity.

It is at this moment of anxiety about paternity in the text that the account of the gargantuan phalli of the rabbis is mustered. Beginning from this incident and continuing from here, the text produces a phenomenal series of stories that all have anxiety over gender and reproduction as a major motif. The most obvious sign of this thematic concern is the fact that when Rabbi El’azar returns to the House of Study, his first activity is to permit marital sex for sixty women who have had a flux of blood that may or may not be menstrual. According to rabbinic practice, when a woman has a discharge, if it is certainly menstrual blood, then she and her husband are forbidden to have sex until after the period and a purification ritual. However, if it is doubtful as to whether the discharge is menstrual or not, a stain is shown to a rabbi who makes a judgment based on his expertise. In our story, Rabbi El’azar was shown sixty of such stains and judged them all to be nonmenstrual, thus permitting intercourse for these wives. All of the sixty children born of the intercourse permitted by R. El’azar were named after him, signifying him as in some sense their parent. My claim for the significance of this narrative moment in signaling the thematic emphasis of the text is occasioned by its very gratuitousness. We could have had the rabbi performing any feat of halakhic (rabbinic law) ingenuity in order to prove the great loss to Torah of the years that he was away from the House of Study, but precisely the halakhic feat that he performs is one concerned with sexuality and reproduction. The choice of this particular halakhic matter as the example of Rabbi El’azar’s great ability is a strong symptom, then, of what our text is “about”.9

One day he went to the study-house. They brought before him sixty kinds of blood, and he declared all of them pure. The Rabbis murmured about him, saying is it possible that there is not even one doubtful case among those? He said, “If I am right, let all of the
children be boys, and if not, let there be one girl among them." All of them were boys. They were all named after Rabbi El'azar. Our Rabbi said, "How much procreation did that wicked woman prevent from Israel!"

The guilt for the prevention of this procreation is displaced from the rabbis themselves who by their undue stringency in applying their laws prevented wives from having intercourse with their husbands and projected onto the wife of Rabbi El'azar whose only guilt was in protecting her husband from maltreatment by those selfsame rabbis. Moreover, the "credit," as it were, for the procreation that took place is taken by the rabbis for themselves in the naming of the children after the rabbi. 10 This reading suggests a source for the tremendous tension that our text manifests around the grotesque, reproductive body. I think that the conflict in the text shows a great deal of anxiety about the role of the rabbinic community in the reproduction and genealogy of Israel and first and foremost about their own genealogies, that is to say, of their own continuation through replication in their offspring.

We find another particularly strong and disturbing connection between the grotesque body of Rabbi El'azar and the female reproductive body in the description of his illness, where the text tells us exactly that "in the evening, they used to fold under him sixty felt mats, and in the morning they would find under him sixty vessels full of blood and pus." The text signals by a formal device the gender-related issue at stake here. These sixty vessels of the blood of dying cannot be separated in this text from the exactly sixty issues of feminine blood that were brought before the rabbi in the segment discussed above. Our text of the grotesque body, then, not surprisingly turns very significantly on explicit thematic issues having to do with sexuality, gender, and reproduction. The Bakhtinian concept of the grotesque body and its complex and ambivalent connection with death and birth thus provides a conceptual model for reading what is often taken as a series of individual textual moments as a complex (but not organic) textual system.

The epithet awarded to Rabbi El'azar ben Shim'on, "Vinegar, the son of Wine," can now be read not as a political evaluation but as an expression of the problematic of reproducibility that is the concern of the text. 11 Rabbi Shim'on, the father of our hero, was one of the holiest and most ascetical of all the rabbis, a man who was famous for his entire devotion to the study of Torah alone, as well as for his implacable opposition to the Romans. His son, as signified by his obesity, as well as by his willingness to serve as errand boy to the Romans, is not "Wine, the son of Wine," as would be hoped for, but "Vinegar, the son of Wine," a decidedly inferior product. Exactly the same applies to Rabbi Ishma'el, the son of Rabbi Yose, again an ignoble son of a noble father. With great [dramatic] irony, it is these two men who are challenged by the Roman matron insisting, "Your children are not yours." Their obesity prevents them, she suggests, from being able to have intercourse with their wives. They answer her, however, in convincing manner that indeed they are the fathers of their children, so as to prevent their children from being mocked. The matron misreads the signification of their bodies, thinking that their grossness and grotesqueness in body signify an interruption of genealogical connection between them and their children. However, we, the readers, know that the genealogical signification which does not obtain is not the physical one between these men and their children, but the spiritual one between these men and their fathers. The fathers were wine; the children are vinegar.

The text, then, seems to bear out the suggestion that its issue is a rabbinic anxiety about their own "continuity through replication." The mistakenness of the matron's taunt that the children of the two fat rabbis are not theirs only underlines through its ironies the truth that they are not truly sons of their fathers. The theme is unmistakably taken up, once more, in the remarkable sequel to our story on the next page of the Talmud:

Rabbi happened to come to the town of Rabbi El'azar the son of Rabbi Shim'on [after the latter's death]. He asked, "Does that righteous man have a son?" They answered, "He has a son, and a prostitute who is hired for two [coins] would pay eight for him." He came and ordained him and gave him over to Rabbi Shim'on, the son of Issi, the son of Lakonia, the brother of his mother [to teach him Torah].

The son of Rabbi El'azar, he who had once been dubbed "Vinegar, son of Wine," is again presented as an unworthy son to his father. The problematic of continuity through procreation is intensely signified in this brief incident. On the one hand, we have an unbeautiful father, who has a son whose body is so beautiful that whores are willing to pay four times their normal fee in order to sleep with him. On the other hand, he is presented again as the highly unholy son of a (suddenly saintly) father. Thus, we find the comfort of belief in survival through reproduction is twice challenged in the
same figure; he neither looks like his father nor follows in his footsteps. The story, moreover, suggests as well a response to this tragic despair; namely reproduction through education.

This story is immediately doubled by an even more remarkable one:

Rabbi happened to come to the town of Rabbi Tarfon. He asked, "Does that righteous man have a son?" [for Rabbi Tarfon] had lost his children. They said to him, "He has no son, but he has the son of a daughter, and any prostitute who is hired for four, hires him for eight." He said to him, "If you return to [to Torah], I will give you my daughter." He returned.

This is a recapitulation of several of the themes we have seen so far. Rabbi Tarfon has no living sons, and moreover, his [only?] grandson is as far from Torah as could be. Rabbi takes him under his wing through a displaced erotic relationship, a situation that we will be meeting again and interpreting later on. I read here the extraordinary tension that the rabbinic culture seems to feel between the desire on the one hand to pass on the mantle of Torah from father to son and their anxiety that in a profound sense, people do not reproduce each other, and reproduction is not the answer to death.

Once again, after Rabbi El'azar's death, his body is put to the test of impermeability. The text produces another very intense image of a grotesque birth out of the flesh of a feminized male (dying) body. This association makes perfect sense in the logic of the grotesque body because it is precisely in the association of fertility and death that the grotesque draws its power (Bakhtin, 1984, 238). Moreover, obesity itself is an issue of gender, being associated with the maternal grotesque body.

When he was dying, he said to his wife, "I know that the Rabbis are furious with me and will not take proper care of me. Let me lie in the attic and do not be afraid of me." Rabbi Shmuel the son of Rabbi Nahman said, "Rabbi Yohanan's mother told me that the wife of Rabbi El'azar the son of Rabbi Shimi on told her that 'not less than eighteen and not more than twenty-two [years] that he was in the attic, every day I went up and looked at his hair, when a hair was pulled out, blood would flow. One day I saw a worm coming out of his ear. I became very upset, and I had a dream in which he said to me that it is nothing, for one day he had heard a rabbinical student being slandered and had not protested as he should have.'

Again here, we have exactly the same situation of the very zenith of the grotesque in precisely the place where the text is claiming to represent the classical. The theme of the saint's body that does not rot after death is a topos of hagiography. But, the grotesqueness of its handling in this text, and particularly the grotesque denouement with the worm coming out of the Rabbi's ear, suggest not a hagiography, but a satire or parody on hagiographies. Although the text reduces the force of the image by moralizing it, its power "to upset" does not really disappear. If a worm is seen coming out of the ear of a corpse, the suggestion is certain that the cavity is, in fact, full of worms. In order to better understand this moment, we have to remember that until the modern period, the corpse was understood to produce the very worms that devoured it. The corpse is said "to beget" the worms, that is to give birth to them. A more powerful icon, then, of death in life and life in death, of the imbrication of death in the production of life, is hard to imagine. This talmudic grotesque can hardly be said to represent the "last best word of the cosmos."

I have my doubts about Rabelais as well. Certainly the image of an infant so gigantic that he suffocates his mother in being born no more supports these rhapsodic remarks about "triumphant life" than does corpse being consumed by the worms that it has "begotten." Indeed, where Bakhtin talks about "birth-giving death" (1984, 392), I think often we must think of "death-bringing birth." Indeed, I would suggest that it is the very question of reproduction as providing the kind of "triumphant life of the people," the conquering of death which Bakhtin conjures, that is the source of the inner tension of our discourse. For Bakhtin's Rabelais, it is clear that his children will not only repeat the father and render him immortal, but "the father's new flowering in the son does not take place on the same level but on a higher degree of mankind's development. When life is reborn, it does not repeat itself, it is perfected" (Bakhtin, 1984, 406ff.). This utopian desire is, it seems, the exact contrary of the Talmud's fear that the "father's new flowering" will be a bitter one, a Vinegar, son of Wine. Reproduction, then, so far from continuing one's existence into the future, only emphasizes the dissolution that death brings. The reproductive principle was not, it seems, sufficient for this culture to provide a conviction that "death hath no dominion."

Our text, however, rejecting almost entirely the utopian character of reproduction so emphasized by Bakhtin, attempts to provide its own utopian solution, substitution of the phallic mouth for
the phallic penis. This substitution, itself, has been brilliantly documented and analyzed by Howard Eilberg-Schwartz (1990, 229–234). Our text shows it to be, however, not the product of discomfort with the body and genealogical reproduction so much as despair at the failure of that ideal. The rabbis are in a strong sense the inheritors of the priestly role in Israel. This transfer of authority is dramatized in the Talmud (Yoma 76b), where all of the people who were following the high priest upon his departure from the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement turned and followed Shemaia and Avtalyon, semilegendary founding figures of the rabbinic movement, when the latter appeared. Notice that the very activity in which Rabbi El'azar engages, the distinction between menstrual blood and blood that does not cause impurity, is a priestly task par excellence. Concerns with procreation and genealogy are very critical in the priestly culture of the Bible, and an impotent priest was even disqualified from serving at the altar and blessing the people. The signifier of biological filiation has a strong anchoring in the values of the culture. As such, the rabbinic mantle should have passed from father to son, as does the crown of priesthood. But it doesn't, at least not in any straightforward way. On the one hand, the rabbis have created a sort of meritocracy to replace the religious aristocracy that the Bible ordains. Filiation is no longer from father to son but from teacher to disciple. But the desire that genetic replicability be homologous with pedagogical replicability persists. For a powerful signifier within the story of this desire and its failure, we need look no further than the following moment:

As for Torah, what did he mean? When Rabban Shim'on the son of Gamliel and Rabbi Yehoshua the Bald used to sit on benches, Rabbi El'azar the son of Rabbi Shim'on and our Rabbi, used to sit in front of them on the ground and ask and answer. And the rabbis said, "We are drinking their water, and they sit on the ground?" They built benches for them and put them upon them. Rabban Shim'on ben Gamliel said, 'I have one chick among you and you wish to cause him to be lost from me!' [Apparently, the concern is that by singing him out as talented, the Evil Eye would be attracted to him.] They moved Rabbi down again. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korha said, 'Shall he who has a father live, and he who has none shall die?' They took Rabbi El'azar down as well. He became upset. He said, 'They think we are equals. When they put him up, they put me up; when they put him down, they put me down.' Until that day, when Rabbi would say something, Rabbi El'azar the son of Rabbi Shim'on used to say, 'There is a tradition which supports you.' From that day onward, when Rabbi said, "This is my answer," Rabbi El'azar the son of Rabbi Shim'on said, 'This is what you will answer; you have surrounded us with vain words, answers that are empty.' Rabbi became upset. He came and told his father. He said, 'Don't feel bad. He is a lion the son of a lion, and you are a lion the son of a fox.'

Rabban Shim'on ben Gamliel, the patriarch, has power to take care of his son in this world—'Rabban Shim'on ben Gamliel said, 'I have one chick among you and you wish to cause him to be lost from me!' "—, but he cannot guarantee that his son will be superior in learning to the sons of his inferiors in power. On the other hand, the injustice of the power that the father has in this world to promote his inferior son is given a utopian solution in the text when the other Shim'on, who had no power while alive (indeed was considered as if nonexistent then): 'Shall he who has a father live, and he who has none shall die!' can take care of his son from the next world, 'Some say that his father appeared to the rabbis in a dream and said, 'I have one chick that is with you, and you do not want to bring it to me.' The text thematicizes by repeating the exact phrase the conflict that was aroused by the desire that merit and prestige should pass in a homologous way from father to son, only emphasizing the more that they do not in the real world.

The text ends with the comforting conclusion, "Said Rabbi Par-nak in the name of Rabbi Yohanan, 'Anyone who is a disciple of the wise and his son is a disciple of the wise and his grandson is a disciple of the wise, the Torah will not cease from his progeny forever.'" According to this apothegm, the very relationship of replication through discipleship is paradoxically precisely what guarantees that one's physical progeny will be a replication of one. The very bravado of this statement, however, reveals more anxiety and the strength of desire for this to be so than any confidence that it is indeed the case.

This problematic orientation toward bodily filiation is figured in our text in another way as well:

Said Rabbi Yohanan, "I have survived from the beautiful of Jerusalem." One who wishes to see the beauty of Rabbi Yohanan should bring a brand new silver cup and fill it with the red seeds of the pomegranate and place around its rim a garland of red roses, and let him place it at the place where the sun meets the shade, and that vision is the beauty of Rabbi Yohanan. Is that true?! But haven't we been taught by our master that, "The beauty of Rabbi
Cahana is like the beauty of Rabbi Abbahu. The beauty of Rabbi Abbahu is like the beauty of our father Jacob. The beauty of our father Jacob is like the beauty of Adam," and that of Rabbi Yohanan is not mentioned. Rabbi Yohanan did not have splendor of face. Rabbi Yohanan used to go and sit at the gate of the ritual bath. He said, "when the daughters of Israel come out from the bath, they will look at me in order that they will have children as beautiful as I am." The Rabbis said to him, "Are you not afraid of the Evil Eye?" He replied, "I am of the seed of Joseph, our father, of whom it is said, 'A fruitful son is Joseph, a fruitful son by the spring' (Gen. 49:22), and Rabbi Abbahu said (of this verse), 'Do not read it, 'by the spring' but 'safe from the eye.'" Rabbi Yosef the son of Rabbi Hanina learned it from here, "And they will multiply like fish in the midst of the land" (Gen. 48:16), just as the fish of the sea, the water covers them and the Eye does not prevail over them, so also the seed of Joseph, the Eye does not prevail over it."

Now, on one level, all we have here is a topos of folk literature that an embryo is affected by appearances which the mother has seen either during pregnancy or at the time of conception. As such, this would not be a particularly remarkable story. However, according to talmudic morality, thinking of another person while having intercourse with one's spouse is accounted as a kind of virtual adultery. The theme of the importance of the sexual partners having no images of another person at the time of intercourse is emphasized over and over in rabbinic literature. It even carries over into halakhic prescriptions for the act of love, e.g., that sexual intercourse should be practiced at an hour when no voices will be heard from the street. Violation of this principle is represented as resulting in children of a sort of mixed genealogy who are not lovely. An exception is made in our case. In fact, I believe that this is a correct reading of the challenge the Rabbis make to Rabbi Yohanan.

"Are you not afraid of the Evil Eye?" He replied, "I am of the seed of Joseph, our father, of whom it is said, 'A fertile son is Joseph, a fertile son by the spring' (Gen. 49:22), and Rabbi Abbahu said (of this verse), 'Do not read it, 'by the spring' but 'out of reach of the Eye.'"

Ostensibly, the challenge that the rabbis made to Rabbi Yohanan is something like, are you not afraid that by calling attention to your beauty, you will be attracting the Evil Eye? And the rabbis' reply is made to mean merely, I am of the seed of Joseph who are proof from the Evil Eye. However, I am convinced that there is another meaning lurking within Rabbi Yohanan's words, which the Talmud has either willingly or unwittingly obscured. The whole verse that Rabbi Yohanan quotes is "A fertile son (or young man) is Joseph, a fertile young man by the spring; the daughters walked on the wall." The last word can, however, be taken as a verb meaning "to look." The verse, so read, becomes an exact authorization for Rabbi Yohanan's practice, "a fertile young man is Joseph, he is a fertile young man alongside the ritual bath (=the spring); the daughters walked to look at him." It is, as if, therefore, what Rabbi Yohanan is proposing is that he would, spiritually, become the father of all of these children, transferring his qualities to them, through the thoughts of their mothers at the moment of intercourse with their physical fathers. If my reconstruction of Rabbi Yohanan's midrash is correct, then, the original challenge must have been "Isn't it immoral for you to be sitting near the ritual bath and introducing yourself into the thoughts of these women as they sleep with their husbands," and Rabbi Yohanan's answer would be: I am exceptional because of my beauty and have a precedent for my actions. Joseph, my ancestor!, also behaved thus. This reading is doubled by Rabbi Yohanan's very claim to be of the seed of Joseph as well, for he certainly could not have meant that literally he was a physical descendant of Joseph, the tribes of Joseph having been long exiled from the Land and lost. He meant, on my reading: I am of the spiritual seed of Joseph; just as he was beautiful of form and spirit and sat by the ritual bath and produced spiritual progeny, so also I. The beauty of Joseph and his ardent sexual purity were, of course, both topoi of the culture and would have been easily recognized in Rabbi Yohanan's claim. Rabbi Yohanan thus embodies the ideology of the classic.

The story of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish continues the theme of gender, sex, and reproduction. The former is extraordinarily beautiful, nearly androgynous, beardless and so sexually attractive to the masculine Resh Lakish that the latter is willing to perform prodigious athletic feats to get to him. Moreover, compared to the other rabbis, he had the smallest penis as well, in the Hellenistic world a signifier of male beauty. Lest we miss the message, the narrator segues immediately into the story of Resh Lakish's misidentification of Rabbi Yohanan as a woman.

One day, Rabbi Yohanan was bathing in the Jordan. Resh Lakish saw him and thought he was a woman. He crossed the Jordan after
him by placing his lance in the Jordan and vaulting to the other side. When Rabbi Yohanan saw Rabbi Shim on the son of Lakish [Rakish Lakish], he said to him, "Your strength for Torah!" He replied, "Your beauty for women!" He said to him, "If you repent, I will give you my sister who is more beautiful than I am."

As in the Paideia, Rabbi Yohanan does manage to produce Resh Lakish as a spiritual copy of him, just as he wished to produce infants who would be physical copies of him. Just as he is effeminate or androgynous, he feminizes Resh Lakish also, and by doing so, reproduces him as a "great man":

He agreed. He wanted to cross back [vault back on his lance!] to take his clothes but he couldn't. He taught him Mishna and Talmud and made him into a great man.

The feminizing virtue of Torah is strongly represented in this story. As soon as Resh Lakish even agrees to study Torah, he can no longer vault back over the river on his spear! "His strength has been sapped as that of a woman."27 What we have here is, in fact, an almost exact reversal of the pattern of Greek pederasty, in which an older man, marked as such by his beard,28 takes an adolescent under his wing and in an erotic relationship educates him and prepares him for full participation in civic life. At the end, the young man is a hoplites, a spear-bearer. Here it is the beardless, androgynous one who takes the virile hoplites under his wing, educates him and makes him a "great man," sapping, however, his physical prowess and disempowering his "spear" in the process. To be sure, within the Jewish moral economy, the homoerotic implications must be displaced from a relationship between Resh Lakish and Rabbi Yohanan to his sister, a displacement that the text makes explicit. Rabbi Yohanan's almost androgynous quality is once more underlined in the text further on when in the discussion of why he is not mentioned in a list of beautiful rabbis, it is remarked that the others had splendor of face, but "Rabbi Yohanan did not have splendor of face."

Is that true? But haven't we been taught by our master that, "The beauty of Rabbi Cahana is like the beauty of Rabbi Abbahu. The beauty of Rabbi Abbahu is like the beauty of our father Jacob. The beauty of our father Jacob is like the beauty of Adam," and that of Rabbi Yohanan is not mentioned. Rabbi Yohanan did not have splendor of face.

The Talmud raises an objection to the citation of Rabbi Yohanan as the very embodiment of beauty because there is a tradition that lists beautiful rabbis and does not mention him. The answer is that Rabbi Yohanan, although beautiful, was left out of this list, because he did not possess "splendor of face." This phrase refers to the biblical verse in which we find the injunction to "give splendor to the face of an elder" (Lev. 19:32), which is interpreted in midrash to mean that one must grow a beard. What was lacking then, in Rabbi Yohanan's beauty was precisely that which defined his beauty for Resh Lakish, his effeminate appearance! The text seems then to contradict itself, asserting that the lack of the beard is a marker of beauty and at the same time that it is a defect in beauty. This text manifests, therefore, an ambivalence or anxiety about the value of virility; on the one hand, the signs of virility are what produce beauty in the male, and at the same time, it is the very lack of those signs that produce the male as beautiful.29 This ambivalence about the effeminate body of Rabbi Yohanan is thus the double of the ambivalence about the grotesquely masculine bodies of the Fat Rabbis. The ideal male seems to be feminized in this culture, but there would be then an understandable apprehension about the reproducibility of this ideal male.

I would claim that contestation of the significance of physical virility, substituting replication through teaching for replication through reproduction, is an attempt (doomed to failure as it happens) to reduce this anxiety. The production of spiritual children, those who will follow in the moral and religious ways of the parent, is claimed by our text as more important than the production of biological children, not, I hasten to add, because of a hierarchical privileging of "spirit" over body but owing rather to a profound skepticism about replication of the qualities of the parent in the child. Spiritual excellence is claimed as superior to physical prowess. Reversing the Hellenic pattern, the masculine figure joins the "effeminate" one, and while losing his physical virility, becomes nevertheless, or accordingly, a "great man."30 The narrative seems, therefore, to be challenging the cult of physical virility and male beauty, substituting for it a spiritual reproduction through the oral dissemination of Torah. However, it would be very difficult to claim that our text substitutes for these values anything clear or unambiguous:

Once they [Rabbi Yohanan and his pupil/child Resh Lakish] were disputing in the Study House: "the sword and the lance and the
dagger, from whence can they become impure?” Rabbi Yohanan said, “from the time they are forged in the fire.” Rosh Lakish said, “from the time they are polished in the water.” Rosh Yohanan said, “a brigand is an expert in brigandry.” He said to him, “What have you profited me. There they called me Rabbi and here they call me Rabbi” He became angry, and Rosh Lakish became ill. His sister came to him and cried before him. She said, “Look at me!” He did not pay attention to her. “Look at the orphans!” He said to her ‘Leave your orphans, I will give life’ (Jeremiah 49:11). “For the sake of my widowhood!” He said, ‘Place your widows’ trust in me’ (loc. cit.). Rosh Lakish died, and Rabbi Yohanan was greatly mournful over him. The Rabbis said, “What can we do to set his mind at ease? Let us bring Rabbi El’azar the son of Padat whose traditions are brilliant, and put him before him [Rabbi Yohanan].” They brought Rabbi El’azar the son of Padat and put him before him. Every point that he would make, he said, “there is a tradition which supports you.” He said, “Do I need this one?! The son of Lakish used to raise twenty-four objections to every point that I made, and I used to supply twenty-four refutations, until the matter became completely clear, and all you can say is that there is a tradition which supports me?! Don’t I already know that I say good things?!” He used to go and cry out at the gates, “Son of Lakish, where are you?” until he became mad. The Rabbis prayed for him and he died.

Even pedagogical filiation is not left unproblematic by our narrative; the eventual treatment of the student by the teacher and its tragic result are an eloquent exposure of trouble in paradigm. Indeed, the concept of spiritual filiation replacing biological one is given a very bitterly ironic reading, when Rabbi Yohanan replies to his sister that she needn’t be concerned about the death of her husband (whom her brother is killing), because God is the “father of orphans.” We are left, therefore, with a highly inconclusive evaluation: the text seems neither able to comfortably inhabit nor to reject the importance of biological filiation as a signifier of value. Indeed, the text is not at all sure about the educability (or malleability) of human nature. Both Rabbi Yohanan with his assertion that Rosh Lakish is still, as it were, a brigand and the latter’s answer that “there they called me Rabbi, and here they call me Rabbi” seem to express great reservation about whether anything at all has changed. So while the raising of spiritual progeny is produced by our text, on my reading, as a solution to a deep-seated problem in the culture, it was itself perhaps no less of a problem for the culture than the problem of procreation that it was supposed to solve. Having downplayed out of a certain despair the consequence of genetic filiation,

the culture seems still very uncertain about the reliability of filiation through pedagogy as well. The result is the very anxious and conflicted text we have before us. The problem of the body remains unsolved.

The Tale of Rabbi El’azar the son of Rabbi Shim’on**

Babylonian Talmud Baba Metzia 83a–85a

Rabbi El’azar the son of Rabbi Shim’on found a certain officer of the king who used to catch thieves. He asked him, “how do you prevail over them? Aren’t they compared to animals, as it is written ‘at night tramp all the animals of the forest’ (Psalms 104:20)?” There are those who say that he said it to him from the following verse: ‘He will ambush from a hiding place like a lion in a thicket’ (Psalms 10:9). Said he to him, “perhaps you are taking the innocent and leaving the guilty.” He said to him, “how shall I do it?” He said to him, “come I will teach you how to do it. Go in the first four hours of the morning to the wine-bar. If you see someone drinking wine and falling asleep, ask of him what his profession is. If he is a rabbinical student, he has arisen early for study. If he is a day-laborer, he has arisen early to his labor. If he worked at night, [find out] perhaps it is metal smelting [a silent form of work], and if not, then he is a thief and seize him.” The rumor reached the king’s house, and he said, “Let him who read the proclamation be the one to execute it.” They brought Rabbi El’azar the son of Rabbi Shim’on, and he began to catch thieves. He met Rabbi Yehoshua, the Bald, who said to him, “Vinegar son of Wine: how long will you persist in sending the people of our God to death?” He said to him, “I am removing thorns from the vineyard.” He said to him, “Let the Owner of the vineyard come and remove the thorns.” One day a certain laundry man met him, and called him, “Vinegar son of Wine.” He said, “Since he is so brazen, one can assume that he is wicked.” He said, “Seize him.” They seized him. After he had settled down, he went in to release him, but he could not. He applied to him the verse, ‘One who guards his mouth and his tongue, guards himself from troubles’ (Proverbs 21:23). They hung him. He stood under the hanged man and cried. Someone said to him, “Be not troubled; he and his son both had

**The title, of course, does not exist in the talmudic text. I will provide here brief exegetical notes for difficult passages that are not treated above in the main text.
intercourse with an engaged girl on Yom Kippur.” In that minute, he placed his hands on his guts, and said, “Be joyful, O my guts, be joyful! If it is thus when you are doubtful, when you are certain even more so. I am confident that rot and worms cannot prevail over you.” But even so, he was not calmed. They gave him a sleeping potion and took him into a marble room and ripped open his stomach and were taking out baskets of fat and placing it in the July sun and it did not stink. But no fat stinks. It does if it has red blood vessels in it, and this even though it had red blood vessels in it, did not stink. He applied to himself the verse, ‘even my flesh will remain preserved’ (Psalms 16:8-9).

To Rabbi Ishma’el the son of Yose there also occurred a similar situation. Eliahu (the Prophet Elijah) met him and said to him, “how long will you persist in sending the people of our God to death?!” He said to him, “What can I do; it is the king’s order?” He said to him, “Your father ran away to Asia Minor; you run away to Lydia.”

When Rabbi Ishma’el the son of Yose and Rabbi El’azar the son of Rabbi Shim’on used to meet each other, an ox could walk between them and not touch them. A certain matron said to them, “Your children are not yours.” They said, “theirs are bigger than ours.” “If that is the case, even more so!” There are those who say that thus they said to her: “As the man, so is his virility.” And there are those who say that thus did they say to her: “Love compresses the flesh.” And why did they answer her at all? Does it not say, ‘Do not answer a fool according to his foolishness? In order not to produce slander on their children, that they are bastards.

Said Rabbi Yohanan, “Rabbi Ishma’el the son of Yose’s member was like a wineskin of nine kav; Rabbi El’azar the son of Rabbi Shim’on’s member was like a wineskin of seven kav.” Rav Papa said, “Rabbi Yohanan’s member was like a wineskin of three kav.” And there are those who say: like a wineskin of five kav. Rav Papa himself had a member which was like the baskets of Hipparenum.33

Said Rabbi Yohanan, “I have survived from the beautiful of Jerusalem.” One who wishes to see the beauty of Rabbi Yohanan should bring a brand new silver cup and fill it with the red seeds of the pomegranate and place around its rim a garland of red roses, and let him place it at the place where the sun meets the shade, and that vision is the beauty of Rabbi Yohanan. Is that true?! But haven’t we been taught by our master that, “The beauty of Rabbi Cahana is like the beauty of Rabbi Abbahu. The beauty of Rabbi Abbahu is like the beauty of our father Jacob. The beauty of our father Jacob is like the beauty of Adam,” and that of Rabbi Yohanan is not mentioned. Rabbi Yohanan did not have splendor of face. Rabbi Yohanan used to go and sit at the gate of the ritual bath. He said, “when the daughters of Israel come out from the bath, they will look at me in order that they will have children as beautiful as I am.” The Rabbis said to him, “Are you not afraid of the Evil Eye?” He replied, “I am of the seed of Joseph, our father, of whom it is said, ‘A fruitful son is Joseph, a fruitful son by the spring’ (Gen. 49:22), and Rabbi Abbahu said (of this verse), “Do not read it, ‘by the spring’ but ‘safe from the Eye!’” Rabbi Yosef the son of Rabbi Hanina learned it from here, “And they will multiply like fish in the midst of the Land’ (Gen. 48:16), just as the fish of the sea, the water covers them and the Eye does not prevail over them, so also the seed of Joseph, the Eye does not prevail over it.”

One day, Rabbi Yohanan was bathing in the Jordan. Resh Lakish saw him and thought he was a woman. He crossed the Jordan after him by placing his lance in the Jordan and vaulting to the other side. When Rabbi Yohanan saw Rabbin Shimon on the son of Lakish [Resh Lakish], he said to him, “Your strength for Torah!” He replied, “Your beauty for women!” He said to him, “If you repent, I will give you my sister who is more beautiful than I am.” He agreed. He wanted to cross back to take his clothes but he couldn’t. He taught him Mishna and Talmud and made him into a great man. Once they were disputing in the Study House: “the sword and the lance and the dagger, from whence can they become impure?” Rabbi Yohanan said, “from the time they are forged in the fire.” Resh Lakish said, “from the time they are polished in the water.” Rabbi Yohanan said, “a brigand is an expert in brigandry.” He said to him, “What have you profited me. There they called me Rabbi and here they call me Rabbi!” He became angry, and Resh Lakish became ill. His sister came to him and cried before him. She said, “Look at me!” He did not pay attention to her. “Look at the orphans!” He said to her ‘Leave your orphans, I will give life’ (Jeremiah 49:11). “For the sake of my widowhood!” He said, ‘Place your widows’ trust in me’ (loc. cit.). Resh Lakish died, and Rabbi Yohanan was greatly mournful over him. The Rabbis said, “What can we do to set his mind at ease? Let us bring Rabbi El’azar the son of Padat whose traditions are brilliant, and put him before him [Rabbi Yohanan].” They brought Rabbi El’azar the son of Padat and put him before him. Every point that he would make, he said, “there is a tradition which
supports you." He said, "Do I need this one?! The son of Lakish used to raise twenty-four objections to every point that I made, and I used to supply twenty-four refutations, until the matter became completely clear, and all you can say is that there is a tradition which supports me?! Don't I already know that I say good things?" He used to go and cry out at the gates, "Son of Lakish, where are you?" until he became mad. The Rabbis prayed for him and he died.

And even so, Rabbi El'azar the son of Shim'on did not trust himself, perhaps God forbid, such an incident would befall him again. He accepted painful disease upon himself. In the evening they used to fold under him sixty felt mats, and in the morning they would find under him sixty vessels full of blood and pus. His wife made him sixty kinds of relishes and he ate them. His wife would not let him go to the study-house, in order that the Rabbis would not reject him. In the evening, he said, "My brothers and companions [i.e., his pains], come!" In the morning, he said, "My brothers and companions, depart!" One day his wife heard him saying this. She said, "You bring them upon you. You have decimated the inheritance of my father's house." She rebelled and went to her family home. Sixty sailors came up from the sea and came to him carrying sixty purses and they made him sixty relishes, and he ate them. One day she said to her daughter, "Go see what your father is doing." He said to her, "Ours is greater than yours." He applied to himself the verse, 'From afar she will bring her bread' (Proverbs 31:14).

One day he went to the study-house. They brought before him sixty kinds of blood, and he declared all of them pure. The Rabbis murmured about him, saying is it possible that there is not even one doubtful case among those? He said, "if I am right, let all of the children be boys, and if not, let there be one girl among them." All of them were boys. They were all named after Rabbi El'azar. Our Rabbi said, "How much procreation did that wicked woman prevent from Israel!"

When he was dying, he said to his wife, "I know that the Rabbis are furious with me and will not take proper care of me. Let me lie in the attic and do not be afraid of me." Rabbi Shmuel the son of Rabbi Nahman said, "Rabbi Yohanan's mother told me that the wife of Rabbi El'azar the son of Rabbi Shim'on told her that 'not less than eighteen and not more than twenty-two [years] that he was in the attic, every day I went up and looked at his hair, when a hair was pulled out, blood would flow." One day I saw a worm coming out of his ear. I became very upset, and I had a dream in which he said to me that it is nothing, for one day he had heard a rabbinical student being slandered and had not protested as he should have." When a pair would come for judgment, they would stand at the door. One would say his piece and then the other would say his piece. A voice would come out of the attic and say, "I find for the plaintiff and not for the defendant." One day his wife was arguing with her neighbor. She said to her, "May you be like your husband, who is not buried." Some say that his father appeared to the Rabbis in a dream and said, "I have one chick that is with you, and you do not want to bring it to me." The Rabbis went to take care of his burial, but the townspeople did not let them, because all of the time that Rabbi El'azar was lying in the attic, no wild animal came to their town. One day, it was the eve of Yom Kippur, and the people of the town were worried and they went to the grave of his father. They found a snake which was surrounding the opening of the tomb. They said, "Snake, snake, open your mouth and the son will come in unto his father." The snake opened for them. Our Rabbi sent to her to propose to her. She said, "A vessel which has been used for the holy, shall it be used for the profane?" There they say, "In the place where the master hangs his battle-ax, shall the shepherd hang his stick?" He sent to her, "Indeed in Torah he was greater than me, but was he greater than me in deeds?" She sent to him, "As for Torah, I know nothing; you have told me, but as for deeds, I know, for he took upon himself suffering."

As for Torah, what did he mean? When Rabban Shim'on the son of Gamliel and Rabbi Yehoshua the Bald used to sit on benches, Rabbi El'azar the son of Rabbi Shim'on and our Rabbi, used to sit in front of them on the ground and ask and answer. And the Rabbis said, "We are drinking their water, and they sit on the ground!" They built them benches and put them upon them. Rabban Shim'on ben Gamliel said, "I have one chick among you and you wish to cause him to be lost from me!" They moved Rabbi down again. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korha said, "Shall he who has a father live, and he who has none shall die?!" They took Rabbi El'azar down as well. He became upset. He said, "They think we are equals. When they put him up, they put me up; when they put him down, they put me down." Until that day, when Rabbi would say something, Rabbi El'azar the son of Rabbi Shim'on used to say, "There is a tradition which supports you." From that day onward, when Rabbi said, "This is my answer," Rabbi El'azar the son of Rabbi Shim'on said, "This is what you will answer; you have surrounded us with vain words,
answers that are empty.” Rabbi became upset. He came and told his father. He said, “Don’t feel bad. He is a lion the son of a lion, and you are a lion the son of a fox.”...36

Rabbi happened to come to the town of Rabbi El’azar the son of Rabbi Shim’on [after the latter’s death]. He asked, “Does that righteous man have a son?” They answered, “He has a son, and any prostitute who is hired for two [coins], would pay eight for him.” He brought him and ordained him “Rabbi” and gave him over to Rabbi Shim’on, the son of Issi, the son of Lakonia, the brother of his mother [to teach him Torah]. He taught him and spread a mantle over his head. Every day he would say, “I wish to return to my town.” He said to him, “They call you ‘sage’, and place a golden crown on your head, and call you ‘Rabbi’ and you say, ‘I wish to return to my town?’” He said to him, “Here is my oath that I leave that be.” When he became great, he went and studied in the Yeshiva of Rabbi Shemaia. He heard his voice and said, “This one’s voice is similar to the voice of Rabbi El’azar the son of Shim’on.” They said to him, “He is his son.” He applied to him the verse, ‘The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life; and he that wins souls is wise’ (Proverbs 11:30). “The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life: this is Rabbi Yose the son of Rabbi El’azar the son of Rabbi Shim’on, and he that wins souls is wise: this is Rabbi Shim’on, the son of Issi, the son of Lakonia.

When he died, they brought him to the burial cave of his father. A snake surrounded the cave of his father. They said, “snake, open the door and the son will enter to be with his father.” It did not open for them. The people thought that it was because [the father] was greater than the son. A voice came from heaven saying that it was because [the father] suffered in a cave,40 and the son did not suffer in a cave.

Rabbi happened to come to the town of Rabbi Tarfon. He asked, “Does that righteous man have a son?” [for Rabbi Tarfon] had lost his children. They said to him, “He has no son, but he has the son of a daughter, and any prostitute who is hired for four, hires him for eight.” He said to him, “If you return [to Torah], I will give you my daughter.” He returned. There are those who say that he married her and divorced her, and those who say that he did not marry her at all, in order that people would not say that he returned for that. And Rabbi, why did he go to such lengths? For Rabbi Yehuda said that Rav said and there are those who say it in the name of Rabbi Hiyya the son of Abba in the name of Rabbi Yohanan and those who say it in the name of Rabbi Shmuel the son of Nahmani in the name of Rabbi Yonathan. “Anyone who teaches the son of his friend Torah, will be privileged to sit in the Yeshiva on High...” Said Rabbi Parnak in the name of Rabbi Yohanan, “Anyone who is a disciple of the wise and his son is a disciple of the wise and his grandson is a disciple of the wise, the Torah will not cease from his progeny forever.”

Notes

“A shorter version of this chapter was delivered at the MLA in Chicago in 1990 in the section on fictional prose in a session entitled, “The Body and Other Indiscernments.” Another version of this study has been published in The Journal of the History of Sexuality, 1:4. There I have focused more extensively on comparative and cultural-historical aspects of the text and less on its synchronic meanings. This will eventually be a chapter in a book entitled, Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture to be published by the University of California Press. I wish to thank Jonathan Boyarin, Steven Fraade, Stephen Greenblatt, Eric Gruen, Elliot Horowitz, Joshua Levinson, Shlomo Naeh, Ilana Pardes, David Resnick, Dov Satran, Ellen Spolsky, Shira Wolosky, Eli Yassif, and especially Howard Elberg-Schwartz for reading earlier versions of this paper and making many helpful comments.

1. This passage, as all of the text here, is translated from the best manuscript of this section of the Talmud, Hamburg 19.

2. It is so unexpected that nearly all commentators quite “interpret” it out of existence. The word “evreho,” itself in Aramaic means exactly “member” and can refer, as the English, to other parts of the body. Accordingly some interpreters claim that the innards are being referred to here, while others say it is talking about arms or legs. However, just as in English, the word when unqualified otherwise means membrum virile. As we shall see, this interpretation is, moreover, the one strongly suggested by the context. As a hedge, let me say, however that even should my interpretation of this word be less certain than I think it to be, my argument in this paper would not be appreciably weakened.

3. Apparently not so inevitably, since an anonymous reader remarked that he/she found nothing of the grotesque in this text at all!

4. Previous scholarly work on this text has generally focused on determining the so-called “kernel of [historical] truth” that the text is alleged to preserve. Other work has challenged the kernel of truth model. Friedman 1985, Friedman 1989, Meir 1988, and Yassif (1990, 114–9) all challenge the dominant historical interpretations. All of these studies advance our understanding of the redaction of these texts and of their formal literary properties. None attempt to deal with them as culturally significant documents. However, the work that they do is a necessary prelude to the present
analysis, for according to the dominant paradigm in Science of Judaism research (the nineteenth-century paradigm still prevalent in Jewish Studies, although receding in the last decade), the stories were not understood as literary documents at all but mirabile dictu as more or less accurate historical chronicles. Friedman's studies particularly directly challenge the historical research paradigm.

5. The clever laundryman, who often opposes the rabbis, and sometimes bests them, is a topos of talmudic legend. For a similar confrontation in Greek literature, one could cite the confrontation of Kleon by the "sausage maker" in Aristophanes' Knights 877–80, cited in Winkler 1989, 54.

6. Although on the surface the Rabbi is certainly applying the verse to the condemned man, who if he had not been so brazen would not have gotten into trouble, on another (ironic?) level the verse is applicable to Rabbi El'azar himself. He is certainly experiencing a great deal of remorse already at this point and will have considerable troubles later on in the story as a result of his not "guarding his mouth and tongue," by keeping silent and not condemning the laundryman to the Romans. According to one venerable manuscript (the Florence manuscript), the text reads that "he applied to himself" the verse, thus activating this hermeneutic possibility openly.

7. I owe this interpretation to David Satran and to my student Christine Hayes the brilliant suggestion that the matron meant one thing and the two rabbis another.

8. I will be dealing with the feminist problematic of these practices in another chapter of the present research.

9. I.e., what its cultural business is. Notice that in the parallel text of the Palestinian tradition, nearly the same story is told, but all of the themes having to do with sex and procreation are absent. Thus even a theme like the loss of strength from studying Torah that occurs in the Palestinian text has none of the sexual and gender-related overtones that it has in the Babylonian one. See Mandelbaum 1962, 194ff. That text is accordingly "about" something else.

10. Of course, I am referring here to the narrator or author of our story and not to the rabbis in the diegesis. Compare also The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan, Version A, par. 12, "Moreover, how many thousands there were in Israel named Aaron! For had it not been for Aaron these children would not have come into the world [because he reconciled their quarreling parents]" (Goldin 1955, 64).

11. Once more, the theme already occurs in the Palestinian "source-text." My claim is not, therefore, of an absolute conflict between Palestinian and Babylonian ideologies, but of the further development of internal conflict in the relatively Hellenism-free Babylonian branch of the culture.

12. In the classical world, fat men were considered effeminate. See the fascinating discussion of Nicole Loraux (1990, 31–33). Also Paglia 1990, 91 and Traub 1989, 461–4.

13. Recently it was reported in the Israeli press that a group of French Jews, buried in Paris in the mid-nineteenth century were reinterred in a mass grave in Jerusalem because their remains had been disturbed. One was found to have had his corpse preserved intact and was given, therefore, a separate grave since this "miraculous" preservation proved his holiness. A more relevant comparison, perhaps, to a satiric reflection of this topos is of course the story of Father Zosima in The Brothers Karamazov. Another possible cultural source for this theme here is a motif of Hellenistic Romances regarding the preservation of a dead lover, which would make it a sort of early "A Rose for Emily." See Hadas 1953, 151.

14. Compare the birth of Pantagruel, as discussed in Bakhtin 1984, 328.

15. These images fit more with Paglia's conception of fecundity as being terrifying, of liquid, female nature gone wild (Paglia 1990). Where I part company with her is at two crucial and related points; one, her assumption that such images are somehow natural and not cultural in origin and second, her enthusiastic acceptance of the values implied by the imagery of classical male and grotesque female.

16. According to Elisheva Rosen, there is reason to trace Bakhtin's optimistic reading of the grotesque back to Victor Hugo (Rosen 1990, 129).

17. The issue is made even sharper there by the fact that these two rabbis are not only not hereditary priests but they are converts! I am grateful to Joshua Levinson for reminding me of this source.

18. For an excellent discussion of this matter from a comparative anthropology perspective, see Eilberg-Schwartz 1990, 141–176.

19. See Eilberg-Schwartz 1990; 206–216 and 229–234. Of course, the rabbinic interpretation of biblical "father" and "son" as "master" and "disciple" is common. See, for example, Sifre Deut. §34 (p. 61), §182 (p. 224), §305 (p. 327), §335 (p. 385). The New Testament polemizes against the Pharisees for turning their followers against their biological parents. Becoming a "disciple of the sages" often meant accepting a rabbinic father in place of one's biological father. See the story of R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus in The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan, par. 6, (Goldin 1955, 43), and parallels. However, this meritocracy is also not simple, for on the other hand, the institution of the patriarchate, an institution of both temporal and religious power and prestige, is precisely a hereditary office. The issue of this institution and its hereditary nature is raised in our text in the story of Rabbi El'azar and Rabbi as children, cited immediately below in the text.

But finally, it is rabbi, not Rabbi El'azar, who carries the mantle, not only of political power for his time, but of central cultural prestige for the
Talmudic Judaism of the time of our narrator as well. However, the institution of the patriarchate and its hereditary nature were a source of political and cultural conflict all through the early stages of the rabbinic period. The political dimensions of this cultural conflict are, of course, very significant but beyond the scope of the present chapter. For the passing of rabbinic offices from fathers to sons and the tension of this hereditary principle with that of Torah meritocracy, see Alon 1977, 436–57; Beer 1976, summarized in Beer 1980; and Gafni 1986. I am grateful to Prof. Steven Fraade for these references.

20. It is, indeed, quite ironic that the one figure in our narrative who does seem to have transferred his qualities to his son is the laundryman, of whom it is said “that he and his son had intercourse with a betrothed girl on Yom Kippur!” This point strengthens, moreover, my argument against the political historical readings of the text as a critique of collaboration. The laundryman transgressed genealogical rules, marriage rules, and the sacred calendar, a stunningly thorough vindication of Rabbi El'azar against Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korha who used the same epithet that the demonstrably wicked laundryman employed in his attack on Rabbi El'azar. Rabbi El'azar is presented as physically “Oriental,” anticlassical, but politically as a Roman “collaborator,” and ultimately justified in both respects!

21. “Both the Hippokratians and Soranos recommend preparations prior to intercourse: the prospective mother’s sense of sober well-being concentrates her thoughts upon her man and causes her child to look like him, themes that extend far beyond medical circles” (Hanson 1990, 315–6). See also, Huet 1983 and Lloyd 1990, 174.

22. See, e.g., Babylonian Talmud, Nedaram 20b.

23. The words for “spring” and “eye” are homonyms in the Hebrew, and the preposition “by” can also mean “above, out of the reach of.”

24. It is even possible that this is the original sense of Rabbi Abbahu’s midrashic comment as well, for “going up from the Spring” would be a very natural way in Hebrew to refer to returning from the ritual bath.

25. Lest there be any misunderstanding, let me make it explicit that “Rabbi Yohanan” here means the character Rabbi Yohanan in this particular text. Thus, no claim is being made that the historical Rabbi Yohanan was more or less influenced by Greek culture than any other rabbi but only that here he, as the representative par excellence of Palestinian rabbinism for the Babylonians, is a signifier of a certain cultural moment and cultural struggle. In other Babylonian stories about him, he himself is represented as grotesque in his person as well.

26. “The Greek aesthetic prefers discreet genitals, small in size.” (Lissarrague 1990, 56), and texts cited there. For classical male beauty as being androgynous, see Paglia 1990, 99 ff. In particular, for the small penis as a standard of male beauty, see Paglia 1990, 114–5. In truth, I must admit that I am not certain that, given the size of a kav, Rabbi Yohanan’s penis is actually represented as small, but there can be no doubt that the contrast of nine and seven versus three suggests just that. In any case, we should not misunderstand that the rabbis considered themselves eunuched. Rabbi Yohanan does, after all, have a penis, one of at least normal size.

27. The Talmud in Sanhedrin 26b explicitly refers to the Torah as “sapping the strength of a man,” and “his strength was sapped as that of a woman” is a common phrase in the talmudic literature.

28. Foucault (1986, 199) remarks on the appearance of the beard as the sign that the relationship between the man and boy must end and that now the young man ought to become the subject and not the object of pedagogy (and pederasty). See also, Frontisi-Ducroux and Lissarrague 1990, 217 and Gleason 1990, 405, n. 63.

29. See Gleason 1990, 400–1 for the sources of one pole of the ambivalence.

30. In fact, one of the main points of this whole research project is to argue against such dualism in rabbinic culture.

31. Jonah Frankel already remarked this reversal of expectation (1981, 73–7). Frankel’s reading of the story of Rabbi Yohanan and Resi Lakish is of very great interest, but it entirely removes the story from its literary context as part of a larger narrative text, apparently assuming that it was attached here secondarily and by mere association. However, as Friedman (1985, 79–80, nn. 49, 50) has already shown, there is no doubt but that the present editor carefully wove these two sources into a single narrative text, and it is that text that I am reading here. This does not invalidate Frankel’s reading as far as it goes, and indeed it is a necessary supplement to the interpretation I am giving here.

32. I am indebted for this last comment to Dr. David Resnick.

33. Rav Papa is also a legendary fat rabbi, as is known from several other Babylonian talmudic intertexts.

34. For hair that grows after death, see Satran (1985, 119).

35. Snakes protecting saints’ tombs is a common feature of rabbinic legend.

36. The sexual imagery of both of these proverbs is quite stark.

37. A common figure for learning Torah from someone.

38. I.e., by distinguishing them as extremely talented children, you are attracting the evil eye to them.
39. There follow here stories about the sufferings that rabbi took upon himself in order to “compete” for holiness with Rabbi El’azar, stories which will be treated in another chapter of the present research.

40. When hiding from the Romans for thirteen years for the crime of studying Torah.

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Mizvot Built into the Body:
Tkhines for Niddah, Pregnancy, and Childbirth

Chava Weissler

Introduction

One of the important insights of feminist theory is the alterity, the otherness, of women. Men are the rule, women the exception. Thus, when we ask about the significance of the body in Judaism, we are in the first instance thinking about the significance of the male body. The female body, like the female person, is the exception. What, then, does the female body signify in Judaism? Perhaps the first additional question should be, to whom? While women as well as men are socialized to see men as the norm, it still may make a difference, in understanding the meaning of the body, whether one is embodied as male or female. This chapter explores the connections between women's bodies and the "women's commandments," especially niddah, in two genres of popular religious literature in Yiddish. Ethical literature, written by men, treats women, especially women's reproductive processes, in mythic terms, while devotional literature, which has some female authors, treats women's bodies more concretely.

Recovering women's voices, on this or any other topic, is a difficult process. Traditional Jewish texts are written in Hebrew or Aramaic, by men for a male audience. As a rule, only men mastered Hebrew, the sacred tongue, and the language of scholarly communication. In the late medieval and early modern period, some women in Central and Eastern Europe learned to read Yiddish, the vernacular of Ashkenazic Jewry. But even in popular religious literature in Yiddish, most of the voices are male, albeit often addressed to a female audience. This chapter draws upon an important work from the Yiddish musar, or ethical literature, a guide to the observance of the women's commandments, Ayn shoen
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from *bukhlein* [A Pretty Little Book for Women], also known as *Sefer mitsvos ha-noshim* [The Book of Women's Commandments], by R. Benjamin Aaron Solnik, first published in 1577.\(^1\) It also makes reference to the *Brantshpigl* [The Burning Mirror], a guide to the upright life addressed to women, by Moses Henoch Altshuler, first published in 1596. Material in these works will be compared to *tkhines*, prayers for private devotion recited by women in Yiddish, published in Western and Central Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. While many *tkhines* were written by women, most of the texts to be discussed are anonymous, and I suspect that some of them may have been written by men.\(^2\)

Both the *tkhines* and the ethical works consider the relationship of women's bodies, the biblical story of Eve, and the three “women’s commandments,” religious acts associated with women since the time of the Mishnah (*hallah*, *niddah*, and *hadlaqaq*).\(^3\) And both kinds of texts pay special attention to menstruation as symbolic of the relationship of later women to Eve's punishment. Nonetheless, we shall see a marked difference in attitude toward and significance attributed to women's bodies and bodily processes between the two genres.

Women's Bodies and the Women’s *Mizvot*

There is a well-known rabbinic trope that makes a correspondence between human anatomy and God's commandments. According to this traditional physiology, human beings have 248 limbs and 365 organs, corresponding to the numbers of positive and negative commandments, respectively, and adding up to 613, the traditional number of commandments in the Torah.\(^4\) However, this only describes male human beings; women, with a different anatomy, have a different number of limbs. A long *tkhine* to be recited “every day,” found at the beginning of *Tkhines* (Amsterdam: 1648), discusses the implication of this difference:

... Strengthen my bones so that I can stand before you and serve your awesome Name with my whole heart, with all my limbs that you have created within me, two hundred and fifty two. You have given and commanded your children Israel to perform two hundred and forty-eight *mizvot* (commandments), the same number as men have limbs. And you have promised them that if they keep and do these commandments, you will give them the light that is hidden for the righteous men and women in the next world. And you have given us women four extra limbs, and you have also given us four *mizvot*: kindling lights to honor the holy Sabbath, and to purify ourselves of our impurity, and to separate *hallah* from the dough of our baking, and that we are obligated to serve our husbands. You have also placed in my body three hundred and sixty five organs—the same number as the negative commandments that you have given to your children Israel... (Tkhines 1648, no. 1)

Thus, the three women’s commandments, which are here bound up with subservience to the husband, are built into women’s bodies truly, in this case, anatomy is destiny.\(^6\)

The Significance of the Women’s *Mizvot*

There is an obvious connection between the three women's commandments and aspects of women's traditional activities: separating *hallah* and kindling Sabbath lights can stand for domesticity while the observance of menstrual avoidance structures sexuality and reproduction. However, texts going back to the rabbinic period add another level of meaning. They make both the three women's *mizvot* and women's post-Edenic physiology emblematic of and punishment for Eve's sin. In Midrash Tanhumah, beginning of parashat Noah, we read:

... And why were women commanded these three commandments? The Holy One, be blessed, said, Adam was the beginning of my creation, and was commanded concerning the Tree of Knowledge. And it is written with regard to Eve, When the woman saw, etc. [that the tree was good for eating and a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable as a source of wisdom, she took of its fruit and ate.] She also gave some to her husband, and he ate [Gen. 3:6]. Thus she caused his death and shed his blood. And it is written in the Torah, “Whoever sheds the blood of man [Adam], by man shall his blood be shed [Gen. 9:6].” So she sheds her blood, and keeps her period of separation [niddah], in order to atone for the blood of Adam that she shed. Whence comes the *mizvah of hallah*? She polluted the *hallah* of the world, as Rabbi Yose b. Duesmea said: Just as the woman slaps her dough with water and afterwards takes *hallah* [maghahat hallah], so did the Holy One, be blessed, with regard to Adam, as it was written, “And a mist came forth from the ground and watered [the whole surface of the earth]” [Gen. 2:6], and then afterwards, “The Lord God formed...
Adam from the dust of the earth” [Gen. 2:7]. Whence comes the kindling of the lights? She extinguished Adam’s light, as it is written, “The light of the Lord is the soul of man [Adam]” [Proverbs 20:27], therefore she must observe the kindling of the light.  

Thus, the women’s commandments are seen as punishment and atonement for Eve’s sin, which is understood, here, as the causing of Adam’s death. Menstruation, in this text and others, is seen as part of God’s punishment of Eve.  

In Sefer mitsvas ha-noshim, R. Benjamin Aaron Solnik picks up this midrashic motif and lovingly develops it. He begins by retelling the tale of Eve’s sin in the Garden of Eden.

... After Eve ate of the apple, and knew she must die, she wanted her husband to eat of it as well. She said, If I have to die, you have to die with me. And she gave it to him so that he would also have to eat of the apple. Adam, poor thing, at first didn’t want to eat of the apple. So she took a tree branch in her hand and beat him until he also ate of the apple. As the verse says, She gave me of the tree, and I ate [Gen. 3:12: Hi natnah li min ha-ez va-akhe]. She gave [it] to me with the tree, and I ate. And because that foolish Adam let his wife beat him, God, blessed be his name, cursed him, for he should not have let a woman beat him, but he should have beaten her ... for God made the man to rule over the woman ... (Solnik 1602:3b–4a)  

Thus Eve’s sin includes insubordination to Adam—even though the biblical text declares that Adam will rule over Eve only after they have eaten the fruit, as part of Eve’s punishment (Gen. 3:16). But according to the Sefer mitsvas ha-noshim, Eve’s sin is even worse than that:

... Therefore the woman must also suffer torment and misfortune. And therefore she must have her period every month, and must fast once or twice [a month], so that she will always remember her sin and remain in a constant state of repentance. Just as a murderer continuously does, who must all his days fast once or twice a month, so that he will think about repentance, and regret his sin, so must the woman do as well. Every month she immerses herself in the ritual bath, so that she will remember her sins, and be pious. ... Therefore, it is fitting for her to recite the prayers for a repentant sinner ... (Solnik 1602:4a)

Thus, women’s very bodies give evidence against them as murderers once a month; the implication also seems to be that because of Eve’s sin, all women are “naturally” more sinful than men, and need, therefore, the monthly reminder of their sins that the observance niddah provides. This periodic penitence will ensure the woman piety, says the author, even after she reaches the age of forty, an presumably, menopause. “Therefore, dear daughter,” this chapter concludes, “God has commanded you these three commandments. You keep them and do them properly, he will forgive you your sins in this world and the next” (Solnik 1602:4a).

What should give us pause here is the picture of woman as murderer. Solnik seems to like this comparison, and, again, follow the midrashic sources, develops it further with reference to other two commandments as well:

Women were commanded to kindle the lights, and they are obligated to observe this commandment, because they extinguished the light of the world [no longer just Adam’s light], and darkened it ... And because of her sin, because she ate from the apple, all of us must die. Since she has extinguished the light of our life, she must kindle the lights. (Solnik 1602:4a–4b)

After giving a variety of interpretations for the requirement that the two candles be lit, the author returns to this theme:

... Therefore women must kindle the lights, for they have extinguished our light. And for that reason they must also suffer the pain of menstruation, because they shed our blood. Therefore they have the suffering of menstruation and must immerse themselves. For the immersion is like the repentance of a penitent sinner who was a murderer. And so it is with hallah, too. For she has spoiled things for us, we who are called “Israel was holy to the Lord, the first fruits of his harvest” [Jer. 2:3]; this means in Yiddish: Hallow, Israel, to God, the firstling of his fruit. Therefore she must “take hallah.” For she is commanded, “As the first yield of your baking, you shall set aside a loaf [hallah] as a gift” [Num. 15:20]; this means in Yiddish, the first part of your dough shall you separate as hallah. Therefore the woman must keep the three commandments. (Solnik 1602:4b)

What is fascinating here, even beyond the punitive theory the author develops of the women’s commandments, is his complete collapse of all women into Eve. For him they are all the same, and the sixteenth-century women he addresses must repent continuously for Eve’s “murder” of Adam. Of course, the text of Genesis does indicate that the punishments of both Adam and Eve will apply to future generations, and the midrashic sources also conflate Eve and
later women. However, Solnik goes beyond his sources in two ways. First, he repeatedly uses the term “murderer” avoided by the more delicate language of the rabbinic sources. Second, he implicitly describes all women as the murderers of all men, not just of Adam: “They have extinguished our light . . . They have shed our blood . . .” (emphasis mine). Near the end of the final chapter of the section on niddah, which makes up the lion’s share of the book, Solnik remarks, “. . . Women, with their apple eating, brought death to the world, and with their piety, which means behaving as set out above, they can bring about the end of death . . . Thus has the Lord God spoken; may it come to pass speedily and in our days . . . amen” (Solnik 1602:39b).

The View of the Tkhines

While Solnik builds on well-known themes in rabbinic literature, and while these themes are also echoed, if less elaborately, in the Brantshpigil’s discussion of the women’s commandments, they do not appear in the tkhines for the women’s commandments. I have yet to discover a tkhine that links the three women’s mizvot to Eve’s sin. The biblical figure more likely to appear in tkhines for these mizvot is Hannah (the mother of the biblical prophet Samuel), whose name is an acronym of hallah, niddah, and hadlaqah. According to talmudic exegesis (B. Berakhot 31b), Hannah repeated the phrase “your handmaid” three times in her prayer for a son in order to remind God that she had never transgressed any of the three women’s mizvot. As God answered her prayer, Hannah’s observance was rewarded with a son, a theme explicitly played out in some tkhine texts. Thus, in the tkhines, the observance of the women’s mizvot is connected with fertility, rather than with penance.

In general, tkhines for the women’s mizvot stress the rewards for observance and the positive religious significance of the acts. (Some of the specific motifs are also found in the musar literature.) The reward most frequently mentioned is pious, scholarly offspring. The light of the Sabbath candles symbolizes the light of Torah and Sabbath peace and joy, while the taking of hallah is likened to God’s creation of humanity, without mention of how Eve spoiled that first human loaf (cf. Exodus Rabba 30:13). Both taking hallah and the kindling of Sabbath lights recall Temple rituals: the hallah is in memory of the system of priestly tithes, while the kindling of the lights is compared to the action of the High Priest kindling the candelabrum in the sanctuary:

> . . . We must kindle lights for the holy day, to brighten it and to rejoice on it; therewith may we be worthy of the light and the joy of eternal life . . . Lord of the world, I have done all my work in the six days, and will now rest, as you have commanded, and will kindle two lights, according to the requirement of our holy Torah, as interpreted by our sages, to honor you and the holy Sabbath. And may the lights be, in your eyes, like the lights that the priest kindled in the Temple. And let our light not be extinguished, and let your light shine upon us. Deliver our souls into the light of paradise together with other righteous men and women . . . (Seder tkhines 1650:5b)

Only a small number of tkhines for niddah, pregnancy, and childbirth raise the topic of Eve’s sin. Most tkhines for niddah are primarily concerned with the themes of purity and impurity, while most tkhines for childbirth plead that mother and child may come through the birth alive and unharmed. However, rather than assuming with the Sefer mitsvas ha-noshim that all women are complicit in Eve’s sin and must suffer for it, those few tkhines that mention Eve portray the relationship between Eve’s sin and later women’s suffering in menstruation and childbirth as problematic. Further, Eve’s sin is never described as murder, but rather, disobedience to God.

Three tkhines that mention this motif are found in the Seder tkhines u-vakoshes, first published around 1750, although at least one of them is considerably earlier. All of these texts raise the question of the relationship between women’s present suffering and Eve’s sin. It occurs to them to ask the question—even if they also convey the view that God’s punishment of women is just. Thus, for example, a tkhine to be said during childbirth begins:

> Almighty God, righteous judge, with truth and with justice have you punished as women from the creation of human beings, that we women must bear our children with pain. It is within your power; whomever you punish is punished, and whomever you show mercy is shown mercy, and no one can contradict you. Who would say to you, What are you doing? (Seder tkhines u-vakoshes 1762, no. 100)

There is question here, even if the tkhine asserts that it is improper to ask it. Further, God’s “justice,” the text implies, is partly a matter of brute power.
A *tkhine* to be said when the woman inspects herself to make certain the flow of blood has ceased, which she must do for seven days before purifying herself by ritual immersion, again articulates and then swallows a question:

God and my King, you are merciful. Who can tell or know your justice or your judgment? They are as deep as brooks of water and the depths of springs. You punished Eve, our ancient Mother, because she persuaded her husband to trespass against your commandment, and he ate from the tree that was forbidden them. You spoke with anger that in sadness she would give birth. So we women must suffer each time, and have our regular periods, with heavy hearts. Thus, I have had my period with a heavy heart, and with sadness, and I thank your holy Name and your judgment, and I have received it with great love... as a punishment... (*Seder tkhines u-vakoshes* 1762, no. 91)

This prayer seems chiefly designed to reconcile the women who recited it with both the discomfort of their menstrual cycles and an interpretation of this discomfort as a just punishment. By portraying God’s justice as inescrutable, the *tkhine* does recognize, indirectly, that perhaps women’s situation might seem unjust, but goes on to squelch this thought by having the reciter thank God for her periodic punishment.

Only one text—significantly, the one that seems to be the oldest, and which gives some indication that it emerged from women’s oral tradition—actually dissociates the woman from Eve’s sin. This is the prayer for biting off the end of the *etrog* on Hoshana Rabba, a practice thought to ensure an easy childbirth. Although it was later incorporated into *Seder tkhines u-vakoshes* and several other *tkhine* collections, it appears first in the *Tsenerene*, known as the “women’s Bible,” an enormously popular homiletical work. Since the *Tsenerene* was first published around 1600, this *tkhine* is contemporaneous with the *musar* literature quoted earlier.

The way the *Tsenerene* introduces this prayer makes it sound like a record of women’s practice. The context is a discussion of what kind of tree the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden was:

Some sages say that it was a citron tree. Therefore, the custom is that women take the *etrog* and bite off the end on Hoshana Rabba [the seventh day of Sukkot], and give money to charity, since charity saves from death (Prov. 6:2), and they pray to God to be protected from the sufferings of bearing the children they are car-

rying, that they may give birth easily. Had Eve not eaten from the Tree of Knowledge, each woman would give birth as easily as a hen lays an egg, without pain. The woman should pray and should say:

Lord of the world, because Eve ate of the apple, all of us women must suffer such great pangs as to die. Had I been there, I would not have had any enjoyment from the fruit. Just so, now I have not wanted to render the *etrog* unfit during the whole seven days when it was used for a *mizvah*. But now, on Hoshana Rabba, the *mizvah* is no longer applicable, but I am [still] not in a hurry to eat it. And just as little enjoyment as I get from the stem of the *etrog* would I have gotten from the apple that you forbade (Jacob ben Isaac of Yanov 1702/3:4b).12

The implication, not quite explicitly spelled out, is that since the woman would not have committed Eve’s sin, she should not suffer Eve’s punishment.13

To a greater or lesser degree, all of these *tkhines* distance the woman reciting them from Eve and her sin, at the very least by raising the question of their relationship. Further, while reference to Eve’s sin does occur in these texts, it is not presented as the justification for the observance of *niddah* (let alone the other women’s *mizvot*). Eve’s sin explains why women menstruate and why childbirth is painful. But the observance of *niddah* itself is not described as a continuous penance for Eve’s murder of Adam, or even for Eve’s disobedience to God’s command. Rather, the texts use quite different images, and express quite different views of the meaning and consequences of the observance of *niddah*. The *tkhine* before ritual immersion, for example, uses a vocabulary of purity and cleansing, and articulates the connection of the woman reciting it to other pious Jewish women:

... God, my Lord, may it be your will that my cleanness, and washing, and immersion, be accounted before you like all the purity of all the pious women of Israel who purify themselves and immerse themselves at the proper time... (*Tkhines* 1648, no. 14; *Seder tkhines u-vakoshes* 1762, no. 92)

The *tkhine* to be said after immersion is concerned primarily with hopes for pious offspring, whether male or female (*Seder tkhines u-vakoshes* 1762, no. 93).14 In both these cases, the meaning of the observance of *niddah* for the woman is pictured quite differently.
from the Sefer mitzvot ha-noshim. Further, and this deserves greater attention than I can give it here, the very language describing women’s physiological states differs between the two genres. The tkhines consistently use a vocabulary of purity or cleanliness, and impurity. Both the Sefer mitzvot ha-noshim and the Brantzshpigl, by contrast, prefer a different terminology. Borrowing from the language of cuisine, they describe the woman as either kosher or treyf.\footnote{15}

**Tkhines, Musar, and Women’s Alterity**

What can we conclude from the differences between the musar literature and the tkhines on the subject of the women’s mizvot and women’s bodies? Before dealing with the differences, it is important to point out one similarity. Both genres find it necessary to inquire as to the meaning of women’s bodies and bodily processes; both genres take men as the norm, and women’s bodies as that which needs explaining.

But here the similarities end. For the musar works, women are less individualized—they form a kind of cosmic class—and more anomalous. Eve, a disobedient and sinful woman, is fully paradigmatic for all women, whose post-Edenic bodies testify monthly to their sinful natures. Indeed, the Brantzshpigl makes a direct physiological connection, asserting that the blood of menstruation and childbirth originate in the impure venom that the serpent deposited in Eve (Altshuler 1626, chap. 34, p. 121a).\footnote{16} This text also states that men find the sight of menstrual blood revolting and that women should therefore keep bloodstained chemises and sheeta hidden from their husbands (Altshuler 1626, chap. 34, p. 120b).

For the tkhines, by contrast, the view of women’s bodies might appropriately be termed less mythical, more rooted in actual physical realities. The question most urgently addressed by the tkhines is that of suffering: the physical discomfort, pain, and danger women experience in menstruation and childbirth. The authors of the tkhines want to know why women suffer, not why they bleed, and the blood itself does not inspire them with disgust. Further, since the theology implied in the tkhine literature in general asserts that people suffer for their own sins, these texts do find the idea that all women suffer because of Eve’s sin problematic.

Can we account for the differences between these two genres by the different genders of the authors? The issue is complex, espe-

\textit{Mizvot Built into the Body}
daily for seven days to be certain the flow of blood has completely ceased, and then she must immerse herself in a ritual bath to purify herself before resuming marital relations with her husband. Haddiqa: Shortly before the onset of the Sabbath at sundown on Friday night, the woman of the house (or if she is unavailable, or if there is no woman, the man of the house) kindles at least two lights. (It is forbidden to kindle fire or lights on the Sabbath.) For the woman, this act inaugurates the Sabbath.

4. Targum Jonathan, Genesis 1:27. In the Talmud, the correspondence is given differently: Six hundred thirteen commandments were given to Moses at Sinai, 365 being prohibitions equal in number to the solar days, and 248 being mandates corresponding in number to the limbs of the human body (B. Makkot 32b). Another talmudic passage states that the disciples of R. Ishmael, by dissecting the corpse of a prostitute who had been executed, determined that women have 242 limbs (B. Bechorot 45a).

5. According to B. Hagigah 12a, contemplating future human sin, God hid the primordial light that shone during the seven days of creation, with which one could see from one end of the world to the other, and has laid it up as a reward for the righteous in paradise.

6. One further numerical correspondence suggests that women’s and men’s bodies must be considered in relation to one another. The number of male and female limbs, 248 and 252, respectively (and it is interesting to note that, in traditional Jewish anatomy at least, women are not lacking something, but have more anatomical features than men) add up to 500. This figure is used to explain why women light two candles on the eve of the Sabbath. After mentioning other explanations, the Shlyoshe sheorim, a popular eighteenth-century tkhine attributed to the legendary Sore bas Tovim, states:

"Ner, ner" adds up numerically to 500. This means, the numerical equivalent of candle, twice, comes out to 500, corresponding to the organs of man and woman, the number of organs of the man and of the woman. By the merit of this commandment, God, blessed be he, will heal the limbs of man and woman. Therefore, one should kindle the lights with great seriousness, and God, blessed be he, will enlighten our children in the Torah ... (Sore bas Tovim [?] [eighteenth century], section entitled Dinim fun lektlet tsinin)

7. Tanhuma, beginning of Noah. Tanhuma is one of the few sources that explicitly state that the women’s mizvot function as an atonement. Yalqut Shimsoni, Genesis 3:31, is dependent on the Tanhuma. An earlier source is Avot de-Rabbi Nathan, version B, chap. 9 (Schechter 1945, 13), which, however, was not published until the twentieth century. For other texts that connect the three women’s mizvot to Eve’s sin, without the idea of atonement, see Bereshit Rabba, 17 (end); B. Shabbat 31b–32a, and Rashi; J. Shabbat 2 ad. loc. ‘al she-einan zehiraot ...

8. B. Erubin 100b; Avot de-Rabbi Nathan, chap. 1.

9. I have been unable to locate a midrashic source for Eve’s beating of Adam; this motif does not appear ad. loc. in Genesis Rabba, Midrash ha-Gadol, Avot de-Rabbi Nathan, Sefer ha-Yashar, Pirqei Rabbi Eizeier, Yalqut Shimsoni, nor in Gross (1982). It is not cited by Kasher (1929), nor in Ginzberg (1913–1938). Nor is it found in the Yiddish sources Altsheuler (1626) and Odom ve-Khove Lid (1658–1705). Prof. Mordechai A. Friedman suggests that the origin of this interpretation may be in fact that the Aramaic root yehav means both ‘to give’ and ‘to beat or strike’; the Yiddish gebn also has both meanings.

10. Altsheuler 1626, p. 118b (chap. 35) for niddah; p. 166a (chap. 36) for hallah; p. 166a–b, (chap. 37) for haddiqa.

11. The etrog, or citron, is used, along with the lulav, the palm branch together with myrtle and willow twigs, during the liturgy of the weeklong fall harvest festival of Sukkot. For the etrog to be fit for ritual use, it must be intact: in particular, the raised blossom-end tip of the fruit, or pittam, must not have broken off. There were two, probably interrelated, folk beliefs concerning the pittam, of the etrog. First, attested in twentieth-century ethnographic and literary materials, is the belief that childless women would conceive if they bit off and swallowed the pittam; second, and this is what I find in the tkhines, by biting off the pittam, pregnant women would ensure a safe and easy childbirth.

12. In addition, the text of the prayer only, but not the introduction, is found in Seder tkhines u-vakoshes (1762), no. 89.

13. Interestingly enough, there is another, later tkhine for biting off the end of the etrog (Sobotki 1718, no. 19), written by a man. While Sobotki mentions that Eve’s sin of disobedience, which brought death to the world, is the reason for painful childbirth, he removes all connection between the etrog and the story of Eve. Instead, he has the woman petition God for an easy childbirth in part because she has kept the mizvah of blessing the lulav and etrog. Also, she says, “May I have my child as easily as I bite off the stem of the etrog.” While this text distinguishes the woman who recites it, and has obeyed God’s commandment, from the disobedient Eve, it blunts the power of the earlier prayer.

14. This tkhine also describes the spirit in which the act of marital intercourse may be consummated in a holy manner. A tkhine with rather similar content (although with less explicit discussion of the manner of intercourse) is found in the Sefer mitsvas ha-noshim, no. 49. It is the oldest dated tkhine extant.

15. The use of the term treyf for the menstruating woman requires further investigation. While, in Yiddish, “treyf” can mean not only “forbidden
food, but also “forbidden” in a more general sense, it is not usually applied to people, except in an extremely pejorative sense.

16. The origin of this idea may be Tiqqunei Zohar, tiqqu 40, p. 80a. See also B. Shabbat 146a, B. Yebamot 163b, and B. Avodah Zarah 22b; the Talmud sees the impure venom as the source of human lust, and as an explanation of the fact that Adam, Abraham, and Isaac all fathered evil as well as righteous sons. Zohar 1 54a and Tiqqunei Zohar, tiqqu 70. 128b, continue the Talmud’s concern with evil progeny as the “offspring” of the serpent’s impure venom. An early *piyyut* makes a different but related connection between Eve’s sin and menstrual blood, stating that the color of menstrual blood is reminiscent of the wine which Eve made Adam drink. (On this reading, the Tree of Knowledge was a grapevine.) (Rabinovitz 1985, 435, cited by Friedman 1990, 2 n.)

17. See, for example, chap. 3, pp. 11a–12a, in which Altshuler explain why he is writing this book in Yiddish for women.


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