

Diversity and Rabbinization

Jewish Texts and Societies
Between 400 and 1,000 CE

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11. THE RABBINIZATION TRACTATES AND THE PROPAGATION OF RABBINIC IDEOLOGY IN THE LATE TALMUDIC PERIOD

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1.0. What is Rabbinization?

The term rabbinization is used in contemporary Talmudic scholarship in two different, but related, senses. First, it denotes a process by which Jewish knowledge of the past is integrated into classical rabbinic literature. Sometimes this process also entails adaptation of the non-rabbinic tradition to rabbinic ideology and interests—in the words of Jacob Neusner, when rabbinic literature “rabbinizes” ancient Jewish traditions (biblical or not), it introduces into them “generative myths and symbols particular to rabbinic Judaism.”¹ In his classic article from 1984, ‘The Significance of Yavneh’, Shaye Cohen, following Jacob Neusner, talked about “the rabbinization of the past”: how the redactors of ancient rabbinic texts depicted people from the past as rabbinic Jews. This is also the way the term is used by Isaiah Gafni and Richard Kalmin, among others.²

1 Jacob Neusner, *A Theological Commentary to the Midrash, Volume Six: Ruth Rabbah and Esther Rabbah I* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001), 59. See also the discussion in José Costa’s article in this volume.

2 Isaiah Gafni gives the following definition: “By rabbinization I refer to the representation of earlier figures and institutions of Jewish

Next to the meaning of rabbinization as a text-related process, the term can be used in scholarship to denote a sociological process in which Jews accept rabbinic discourse as normative. Seth Schwartz uses it in this sense in an article from 2002 entitled ‘Rabbinization in the Sixth Century’.³ In general, when historians deal with rabbinization in the sociological sense, they look for the external signs of the phenomenon: whether a certain piyyut, synagogue, or mikveh is constructed according to rabbinic norms. Notwithstanding the difficulty that sometime arises in establishing these norms, we try to use our findings in order to understand the scope of rabbinization, its mechanisms, and dynamics.

The two senses are of course interrelated—the rabbinization of the Jewish past contributes to the rabbis’ claim of authority among Jews.⁴ It is the relationship between the sociological and textual facets of this process that is the subject of this article. What I hope to achieve is a glimpse into the actual dynamics of the dissemination of rabbinic knowledge and ideology in Jewish societies during the Talmudic period and later. My question is

history—primarily biblical but quite a few post-biblical ones as well—in the image of the rabbinic world in which the sages functioned,” in ‘Rabbinic Historiography and Representations of the Past’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. by Charlotte E. Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 295–312 (305). Another example is the rabbinization of the figure of Jesus in the Babylonian Talmud: see Richard Kalmin, ‘Christians and Heretics in Rabbinic Literature of Late Antiquity’, *Harvard Theological Review* 87 (1994): 155–69.

- 3 In *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture III*, ed. by Peter Schäfer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 55–69. Stuart S. Miller in *Sages and Commoner in Late Antique Erez Israel* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 299, also uses the term in that sense.
- 4 In this sense, the roots of rabbinization are found already in Tannaitic literature, which describes ancient Jewish institutions and leaders as following rabbinic norms. See, for example, Naftali S. Cohn, *The Memory of the Temple and the Making of the Rabbis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

not if and to what extent a certain (textual) object or a human individual or community was rabbinic. I am more interested in the encounter between the rabbinic texts and the yet-to-be rabbinized person.

This raises a methodological problem, since the encounter has a significant subjective dimension that resists objectification. It can never be fully represented, because it takes place in between a textual tradition that we have today and the person who received it, about whom we know very little. When we choose it as our object of study we have to use our imagination in order to fill in the gaps and to reconstruct the moment where the 'magic' took place and the rabbinic project recruited, perhaps only temporarily and partially, another adept.

To help us to imagine this subjective component, we can think of rabbinization as an ideological process that manipulates knowledge of the past in order to change conception of the present. Thus, even someone who had never been 'rabbinized' knows something essential about it: we all accept and reject preconceived notions about 'our' history that inform our behaviour and understanding of ourselves (our ethos). And we know, from our experience and that of others, and also from our work, that the mere divulgation of true knowledge about the past is not sufficiently effective. In order to produce an ethical effect, this knowledge need not be completely true, but it must be presented as such. The study of rabbinization is also the study of that space between the past and its representation, where the past becomes an agent of power and change.

2.0. Between the Talmud and the People

Where did the encounter between rabbinic knowledge and Jews take place? The synagogue, for example, is a perfectly suitable candidate as a place where Jews gathered to practice their Judaism and rabbis came and presented their version of Jewish knowledge. Another possibility is the Kallah gathering that took place in the Babylonian academies in the late Talmudic and Geonic periods, where many Jews who did not follow the

rabbinic curriculum joined the yeshivot for a limited period of time. We can also think of other types of formal gatherings attested in Geonic sources and in the Talmud itself.

More crucial is the task of identifying the texts that were used in the process. Most of the rabbinic documents from the Talmudic period seem to address an institutionalized rabbinic study group. Their form and format, the way they use technical terms, and the fact that they give a lot of place to discussion or, at least, the presentation of different opinions on the same subject, show that their public had already accepted the authority of rabbinic discourse and was ready to participate in the project of its development and conservation.

There are, however, some exceptions. First, in the more 'scholastic' documents of the corpus we find many stories and legends about the Jewish past that convey a rabbinic worldview. These stories appear already in the Mishnah and the halakhic Midrashim and occupy an important place in the Talmudim. We can consider them texts of rabbinization in the first, textual sense: they produce rabbinic knowledge about the past. As for their use as agents of rabbinization in the sociological sense, it is more complicated. Unless these texts appear in more popular compilations from the period, such as the Targumim or other documents I will discuss later, it is possible that they were developed and consumed only within rabbinic circles.

Other exceptions are the midrashic compilations that seem to have been redacted with a clear intent to propagate rabbinic knowledge. This is the case of at least some of the aggadic Midrashim whose synagogal *Sitz im Leben* is more-or-less clear. Rachel Anisfeld argues that *Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana* is a text meant to propagate rabbinic Judaism.⁵ This view may apply to other 'homiletical' compilations from the Amoraic period.

The problem with this solution is that it covers only the Palestinian side and leaves us in the dark with regard to the situation in the other important centre of rabbinic culture. If

5 Rachel A. Anisfeld, *Sustain Me with Raisin-Cakes: Pesikta deRav Kahana and the Popularization of Rabbinic Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

the aggadic Midrashim indeed functioned as textual agents of rabbinization in the Land of Israel, what were the texts used for this purpose in Babylonia?

My hypothesis is that during the Talmudic period Babylonian rabbis produced texts whose function was precisely the dissemination of rabbinic knowledge and ideology. Unlike the Talmudic discourse that was produced and received among rabbinic scholars, these ‘rabbinization tractates’ were produced within rabbinic circles, but circulated among Jews from outside the yeshiva. These tractates are relatively simple to understand and do not require extensive legal knowledge. In general, they focus a lot on the early Tannaitic period and describe the ancient rabbis as mythical figures.

In the following, I will give two examples of rabbinic texts that can be regarded as rabbinization tractates: the ‘minor’ tractate Kallah and the Sar ha-Torah tradition from Hekhalot Rabbati. I will argue that in both cases we find a text redacted by people within or close to rabbinic circles in an attempt to promote rabbinic ideology. They do it either by the redaction of a Mishnah-like text (as in tractate Kallah) or by the creation of a mythical story presenting the foundation of rabbinic Judaism as a messianic event (Sar ha-Torah). Reading these texts as rabbinization tractates can deepen our understanding of the spread of rabbinic discourse among Late Antique and Early Medieval Jewish individuals.

3.0. Tractate Kallah

Let us start with tractate Kallah. As we have it today, the tractate contains one chapter with twenty-five teachings. It is focused on gender relations and sexuality. Almost all of the rabbis cited by name are Tannaim.

The question of the place of tractate Kallah in the corpus of classic Talmudic literature has drawn considerable scholarly attention, perhaps more than in the case of other minor tractates. Whereas there is consensus on the post-Talmudic date of most of the minor tractates, that is not the case with Kallah, mainly

because of three references in the Bavli to a “tractate Kallah” (b. Qidd. 49b, b. Ta’an. 10a, and b. Shabb. 114a). The first two are *baraitot*, and the third is a *memra* attributed to R. Yohanan.

Whether ‘tractate Kallah’ in the Bavli refers to our tractate was already debated by medieval Talmudic scholars. The debates about the date and provenance of the tractate were summarized by David Brodsky in 2006.⁶ Brodsky proposes a detailed analysis of the tractate before concluding that according to its current state it was probably redacted towards the end of the second generation of Babylonian Amoraim, that is, the end of the third century.⁷ Following Brodsky, I tried to situate the tractate in the social and religious context of the Babylonian rabbinic movement at the turn of the fourth century.⁸ The technical simplicity of the tractate, especially when compared to other rabbinic compositions dealing with the same subjects (*niddah*, marriage), as well as other factors, lead me to believe that it was not intended for advanced Talmudic scholars, i.e., *talmide hakhamim*, but rather for Jews who were not well-versed in rabbinic traditions, but who still attributed to the rabbis and their scholarship some sort of authority (perhaps potential new *talmidim*). I suggested reading the tractate as an ideological tool designed to promote rabbinic discourse among Babylonian Jews.

I will focus here on two points. First, the emphasis the tractate puts on marriage and on the possibility of living a ‘holy life’ in this state.

In a well-known passage of his *Demonstrations*, the fourth-century Christian author Aphrahat recalls a conversation that took place between a Christian and a Jew revolving around the question of celibacy. This passage opens a long discourse in

6 David Brodsky, *A Bride Without a Blessing: A Study in the Redaction and Content of Massekhet Kallah and its Gemara* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006).

7 Ibid., 9–86.

8 Ron Naiweld, ‘Saints et mondains: Le traité *Kallah* et la propagation du mode de vie rabbinique en Babylonie’, *Revue des études juives* 172 (2013): 23–47.

which Aphrahat, who writes in Syriac in the northern part of the Sasanid Empire, promotes the value of celibate life.

According to Aphrahat, the Jew mocked the Christian, telling him that he and his fellows are impure because they live in celibacy, whereas the Jews are holy (*qdishin*) because they marry and procreate and “increase seed in the world.” Aphrahat wrote this discourse around 340 CE, meaning that the conversation was at least imaginable in some parts of the Sasanid Empire.

This conversation, imagined or not, has to be put in the context of Eastern Christianity and its focus on sexual abstinence.⁹ It tells us something about the status of the question in an environment geographically and ‘religiously’ close to that of rabbinic Jews. The possibility of living a holy life while participating in a conjugal relationship was a subject of debate in Christian and Zoroastrian circles. It was a conversation in which Jews must have participated.¹⁰ As the dialogue in Aphrahat shows, the different ways of treating the question could also be used as identity markers. It was one of the possible spiritual-ethical discussions where Jews and Christians negotiated their borders.

A large part of tractate Kallah is dedicated to the question of holiness within marriage. It contains a series of very explicit halakhot concerning the pious behaviour in a marriage as well as during the wedding celebration. If indeed tractate Kallah of the Bavli is our tractate and was known among Jews in Babylonia, then its focus on the interaction between marriage and holiness can be understood against the background of the debate on the possibility of living a holy life in marriage. At least, according to Aphrahat, the debate was a key factor in the distinction between Christians and Jews.¹¹

9 Another Christian text from the period, the Acts of Thomas, which enjoyed a broad diffusion among Syriac-speaking Christian, also cites celibacy as a distinguishing feature of Christian identity.

10 See also Naomi Kolton-Fromm, *Hermeneutics of Holiness: Ancient Jewish and Christian Notions of Sexuality and Religious Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

11 Note also the centrality of the question in the fourth-century Acts of Thomas.

What distinguishes Kallah from other rabbinic texts promoting the value of marriage is that it presents itself as a classical rabbinic text—a Mishnaic tractate—but at the same time it is highly accessible to any Jew with knowledge of Hebrew. For Jews in the Sasanid Empire, for whom the question of holiness was relevant, the tractate could provide good rabbinic advice, a kind of manual on how to live a holy life while remaining married and having children. The question of holiness was the channel through which rabbinic knowledge could reach Jewish subjects.

The second point that allows us to think of Kallah as a rabbinization tractate concerns rabbinic ideology in a stricter sense—the hierarchy inside the Jewish world between rabbis and non-rabbis. Teaching 4 of the tractate reads:

One who reads a verse from the Song of Songs and makes it like a ditty, as well as one who does not read a verse of the Torah at its appropriate time, brings a flood upon the world, because the Torah puts on sackcloth and stands before the Holy One, blessed be he, and says: “Master of the Universe, your sons have made me like a lyre that the gentiles play.” He says to her: “My daughter, if so, what should they do when they are happy?” She replies before him: “Master of the Universe, if he is a disciple of a Sage (*talmid hakham*), let him busy himself with Torah and Talmud and good deeds and aggadot. If he is an ordinary person (*‘am ha-aretz*), let him busy himself with the laws of Passover on Passover, and of Atzeret on Atzeret, and of Sukkot on Sukkot.”¹²

Another version of this teaching is found in b. Sanh. 101a (see also t. Sanh. 12 and Avot R. Nat. A 36). However, in the Bavli version, the Torah distinguishes between different classes of rabbinic students defined according to their field of expertise—Miqra, Mishnah, or Talmud. In the Kallah’s version of the text the distinction is between rabbinic students and *‘am ha-aretz*. The

12 Translations of tractate Kallah are based on the Munich manuscript, which was also used by Michael Higger for his edition: *Tractate Kallah: Tractate Kallah and Tractate Kallah Rabati* (New York: Deve Rabanan, 1936).

latter are defined here clearly by their relationship to rabbinic discourse. It is very strict—they should study the laws only when they are supposed to follow them. They should not feel free to do whatever they fancy. Compared to them, the rabbinic student has much more freedom in his engagement with the Torah. He can busy himself with any part of it—both intellectually and practically (good deeds)—whenever he likes.

This teaching portrays a mythical image of the hierarchy between rabbis and other Jews based on their relationship to halakhic discourse. However, even though the distinction between the two groups could not be clearer, we do not find here the hostile tone of some Talmudic references to *‘am ha-aretz*. Both classes of Jews—rabbinic or not—are the subject of the conversation between the Torah and God. Both have a place in the intersection between the Law (Torah as it is studied and elaborated by the rabbis) and the Holy One (God, the *Qadosh Barukh Hu*). Thus, especially when compared to its Talmudic parallel, this teaching articulates a hierarchical partnership between rabbis and non-rabbis.

Other teachings of the tractate display a close conception of the relationship between the two groups, but instead of using mythical imagery, they use the early rabbinic period as background. Thus, in teaching 16 we read:

R. Judah says: The bold-faced are destined to hell and the shame-faced are destined to heaven. The bold-faced—R. Eliezer says *mamzer*; R. Joshua says the child of a menstrually impure woman. One time the elders were sitting at the gate, and two children passed before them. One covered his head, but the other uncovered his head. The one who uncovered his head—R. Eliezer says: He is a *mamzer*. R. Joshua says: He is the child of a menstrually impure woman. And R. Akiva says: He is a *mamzer* and a child of a menstrually impure woman. They said to R. Akiva: How dare you contradict the words of your fellows [or masters]? He said to them: I will establish it. He went to the child's mother and saw that she was sitting and selling beans in the market. He said to her: My daughter, if you tell me what I ask you, I will bring you to the life of the world to come. She said to him: Swear it to me. R. Akiva swore to her with his lips,

but nullified the oath with his heart. He said to her: This son of yours, what is his nature? She replied: When I entered the marriage canopy, I was menstrually impure. My husband separated from me, and my groomsman came upon me, and I had this son. It turns out the child is a *mamzer* and a child of a menstrually impure woman. They said: Great is R. Akiva who bested his rabbis. At the same time, they said: Blessed is YY, God of Israel, who revealed his secret to R. Akiva b. Joseph.

A version of the same story is found in another popular Jewish composition, *Toledot Yeshu*. In that narrative, the child is Jesus, and R. Akiva is presented as a Jewish religious hero—not only is he the one who exposes the scandalous circumstances of the birth of the Christian Messiah, but he is also the one who has a special relationship with the God of Israel, akin to the relationship that Christians draw between Jesus and God.

I will not treat here the question of the relationship between the two versions, but would rather like to focus on the image of R. Akiva, especially the way in which his *'azut-panim* or *chutzpah* is described (to some extent the analysis is valid for both versions). The boldness of R. Akiva is a motif that we also find in several Talmudic stories about him—not only his encounter with the Roman governor, but also his relationship with his master, R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus. In the Talmud, Akiva's boldness is parrhesiastic in nature: it consists of his courage to tell the truth. In the Kallah story, this boldness is explained otherwise: Akiva allows himself to be bold because God has revealed his secret to him.

Obviously, the courage to speak the truth is not something with which the Akiva of the Kallah story preoccupies himself. He has no problem lying to the woman in order to show to his fellows that he was right. Indeed, in the Kallah story, Akiva's power is not to tell the truth, but rather to see it and to use it in order to make a change in the world.

The story of Akiva concludes a thematic section of the tractate that deals with impious sexual relations and how they engender defective sons. The teachings' purpose is to control the sexual behaviour of their readers: they warn the Jew that if he engages

in impious sexual relations, his sons will be sick and crippled. The Akiva story that concludes this section takes the warning to the next level. It presents the rabbi as a holy man whose mission is to control the sexual purity of the Jews. Thus, even if there are no visible signs of the impious condition in which the child was conceived, the rabbi's X-ray eyes allow him to see the truth and to impose rabbinic order on subjects who tried to transgress it.

4.0. Sar ha-Torah

The mystical allure of R. Akiva in the Kallah story brings us to the other composition I wish to deal with here, the Sar ha-Torah (SH) story of Hekhalot Rabbati. Here I would like to present the conclusion of another French article I published in 2012.¹³ My analysis of the SH story draws on previous studies, mainly those of Michael Swartz,¹⁴ Moulie Vidas,¹⁵ Ephraim Urbach,¹⁶ and Joseph Dan.¹⁷ Notwithstanding their differences, all seem to agree that the text was written by people who knew the rabbinic academy (yeshiva) from within, a crucial point to which I will return.

Another important source of inspiration was Ra'anan Boustan's 2011 article from the *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 'Rabbinization and the Making of Early Jewish Mysticism'. Although he does not

13 Ron Naiweld, 'Le mythe à l'usage de la rabbinisation: La tradition de *Sar ha-Torah* dans son contexte historique et social', *Henoch* 34 (2012): 245–69.

14 Michael Swartz, *Scholastic Magic: Ritual and Revelation in Early Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

15 Moulie Vidas, *Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

16 Ephraim Urbach, 'The Traditions about Merkabah Mysticism in the Tannaitic Period', in *Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to Gershom Scholem on His Seventieth Birthday by Pupils, Colleagues and Friends*, ed. by Ephraim Urbach, R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, and Chaim Wirszubski (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1968), 1–28 (Hebrew).

17 Joseph Dan, *The Ancient Jewish Mysticism* (Tel Aviv: MOD Books, 1993).

directly address the SH tradition, Boustán proposes rethinking the relationship between the Talmudic corpus and Hekhalot literature. The ‘rabbinization’ he deals with is mainly the first kind, that of textual tradition. One of his main arguments is that from the middle of the first millennium onwards we find attempts at harmonization between the two corpora (Talmud and Hekhalot), with the penetration of Hekhalot traditions into the Talmudic corpus to an extent that at some points it is impossible to distinguish between a ‘Talmudic’ and a ‘Mystical’ composition. In my article I proposed that at least some parts of Hekhalot literature were used in order to propagate rabbinic ideology to Jews who were at the margins or completely exterior to the yeshiva.

It was already suggested that the authors of the SH tradition were those members of the yeshiva who oversaw the conservation and transmission of early rabbinic oral teachings. The two groups, Talmudic and Mystical, shared the same body of knowledge, but each one had a different relation to it. Behind the conflictual relationship that must have existed between them, there was also an important basis for collaboration, a common ground or a common general understanding of the religious and national project of Judaism.

The SH tradition joins other Hekhalot stories in which the heroic side of the earliest rabbis is portrayed without the ironic distance we often find in the Talmud. The rabbis in Hekhalot literature are heroes or even superheroes—not only because they can access the divine realm and converse with angels and God himself, but also because of their ability to bring divine wisdom to their fellows in the lower world. What distinguishes the SH narrative from the other stories in Hekhalot literature is the important role it gives to the people of Israel as interlocutors with God. It stages a second national revelation that took place when the Second Temple was built.

The critical tone that our story contains regarding the Talmudic rabbis is not necessarily personal, but may result from a different approach to the rabbinic project. We can imagine the authors of SH (possibly of other Hekhalot stories as well) as rabbis who

wished to provide a more joyful account of the beginning of the rabbinic movement in a way that would also be appreciated by non-rabbis. They wished to take the ancient rabbinic teachings outside the ‘ivory tower’ of the yeshiva and to show the people why rabbinic activity matters—how it can affect their lives in a positive way, how it can provide them with a framework to practice their religion, their spirituality, their Judaism.

For the Tannaitic rabbis of the SH tradition, the essence of rabbinic teaching and activity is not the production of legal/halakhic knowledge or the ‘mystical’ act of communicating with the divine world. Like the other Hekhalot rabbis, they desire to be affected by the Torah, to obtain its secret. And according to the SH story, the secret of the Torah gives not only the intellectual ability to remember it, but also the power to shape people’s minds on the spiritual, ethical, political, economic, liturgical, and aesthetic levels. It is a self-sufficient existential framework, a divinely-designed matrix for Jews to live their lives.

The mythical story of Sar ha-Torah is brought to us through a chain of three rabbis:

R. Ishmael said that R. Akiva said in the name of R. Eliezer that from the day the Torah was given until the day when the last Temple was built—the Torah was given, but its splendour was not. And not only its splendour, but also its greatness, its honour, its beauty, its awe, its fearsomeness [...] were not given until the day when the last Temple was built and the Shekhinah resided in it.¹⁸

18 Translations are based on manuscript M40. See also §§281–306 of *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur*, ed. by Philip Schäfer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1981). At least two manuscript versions of the story (M22 and B328) add a portion from which one can conclude that the splendour in question is the secret (*raz*) of the Torah, a kind of magic allowing the rabbinic student to remember all the Torah he has learned. But this passage does not appear in the other manuscripts, which give a different understanding of the secret. According to the short version of the story, those who possess the secret (*sod*, *raz*) of the Torah are those who hold the power to apply it as Law.

The point of departure is a situation of deficiency: God communicated his Law to the people of Israel without providing them with its power. The knowledge was there, but it had no aesthetic, ethical, emotional, or psychological effect. It left people indifferent. They acknowledged the Torah's existence and the fact that it came from God, but they were not subjectively invested in it. It was not even a yoke, just a curiosity, an ancient Law to which they were distantly related.

Everything changed when the Second Temple was built. Somehow the deficiency was filled, and the people received the missing element that allowed them to lift the burden and to relate to their Law easily. The story tells us how. While they were building the Temple, the people of Israel complained to "their Father in Heaven": "You have bestowed many troubles upon us [...] you have cast a huge burden on us, a heavy weight. You told us: 'Build me a home and, even while you build it, busy yourself with Torah'."

God answers his people. He accepts that the two dispensations—the Temple and the Torah—are too complicated to be followed simultaneously, and explains the reasons for his demand: "You became idle because of the Exile, and I was yearning to hear you pronounce matters of Torah". He continues by admitting that he did not act correctly when he punished Israel as harshly as he did and that the people proved him wrong by their prayers and by their agreement to rebuild his house. Therefore, he says, he will give them whatever they need. In fact, he knows already what they want:

I know what you are asking for; my heart knows what you desire—you are asking for a multiplied Torah (*torah merubah*) and a lot of Talmud and many traditions (*shmu'ot*) [...] To multiply Talmud outside (*be'utzot*) and *pilpul* in the streets [...] To put *yeshivot* in the gates of the tents, to interpret what is forbidden and what is permitted, to declare the impure impure and the pure pure. The *kasher kasher* and the *pasul pasul*. To know [recognize?] the living, to instruct women in menstruation what to do, to decorate your heads with crowns of kings, to force kings to submit to you [...] You will appoint *nesi'in*, *avot bet-din*, and exilarchs; you will have the

authority to appoint judges of towns; you will pronounce the eternal regulation (*tiqqun 'olam*), and no one will contradict it...

According to the story, the desire of the people is to live in a theological-political order ruled by the rabbis. This is presented as a solution to the problem at the outset: the burdensome nature of the Law. In the utopian rabbinic order, people will not need to busy themselves with Torah, because the rabbis will do it for them. The people will live in a Talmudic universe and be surrounded by agents of rabbinic knowledge. Whatever question or hesitation they will have on how to apply Torah in their daily lives—there will always be a rabbi around the corner to tell them what to do.

The desire is articulated by God in a moment of reconciliation with his people: not only did he forgive them for their sins, he practically asks them to forgive him. It is a rare moment of balance, where the people and their God speak the same language, with which they negotiate their relations. From this rare dialogue emerges an ideal rabbinic world. It allows the people to follow the Law of their God effortlessly. Rabbinization is presented thus as a project both divine and popular. It binds Israel to its God.

This is a very bold way to describe the rabbinic project, especially when compared to the Talmud, which practices a more encyclopedic process of rabbinization. Mythical language is, of course, present in Talmudic discourse, but the framework itself is never mythical—the truth of the story is not presented as complete, as there can always be another version of it, another way to remember what happened. When the Talmud rabbinizes the Jewish past, it does so as part of a discussion about the ideological and legal implications of rabbinic knowledge for Jewish life. It gives an intellectual context to the manipulation of the past. Its aim is the production of new knowledge and the development of new discursive mechanisms to produce this knowledge.

Hekhalot discourse is organized according to a different order. Its function is not to produce new rabbinic knowledge, but to give an image of the world to which the already-existing knowledge applies. It does not busy itself with the establishment of the

discourse, but rather with the conditions that make it viable. It gives a mythical image to the structure that holds the rabbinic world together (God-Law-Israel). This is a completely different horizon from the Talmud, and it dictates the way Hekhalot literature, in general, and the Sar ha-Torah story, in particular, conceives of the project of rabbinization.

Indeed, the messianic horizon of Hekhalot literature expresses itself perfectly in our story. It divides Jewish history in two: the period in which only the Torah was given and the one in which Israel received its power. The present, i.e., the time when the story is told, is already in the new period, after the second revelation of God to his people. It is already messianic—it will end with the end time—*sof kol hadorot*. It is the world to come.

Whatever their intentions, the Hekhalot authors produced a discourse that presented the rabbinic project as a part of the national Jewish myth. Through the myth, rabbinic knowledge could connect to non-rabbinic Jews and participate in the shaping of their ethos. Thus, the difference between the Hekhalot rabbis and those of the Talmud, which was articulated in many ways throughout history, hides an interesting and perhaps unintended collaboration between two different agents of rabbinization: one focused on the production of knowledge and the other on the power of this knowledge to affect lives—its biopower.

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The category of ‘rabbinization tractates’ introduces a distinction within the rabbinic corpus that seems to be relevant to many other textual corpora. It is the distinction between two types of texts: those where knowledge is developed and others that promote the power of this knowledge to affect lives. From this point of view, their study can contribute not only to our understanding of the historical phenomenon of the spread of rabbinic Judaism. It can also enrich a discussion about the epistemological, political, and ethical conditions of our own historiographic enterprise.

Neither the Talmud nor the rabbinization tractates are a historiographic project in the modern sense, but the differences between their conception of the Jewish past resembles a constituent

tension within the project of modern Jewish historiography. These tensions were brought to light by Y. H. Yerushalmi in the famous final chapter of *Zakhor*.¹⁹ The chapter can be read as the confession of a Jewish historian's inability to achieve the goal of the founders of his discipline—healing the Jews by providing them with a new rational collective memory, a universal knowledge of their past. Yerushalmi reminds us that the founders of the discipline believed that scientific historical discourse had the potential to become a living memory of the Jewish people; they wanted their work to influence how Jews remembered their past.

On the one hand, they had immense success. Despite all the difficulties and the obstacles imposed on them because of their Jewishness, they started a machine that, in less than a century, produced an ever-growing scientific discourse about Judaism.²⁰ On the other hand, their project was doomed to failure, because of the stark opposition between memory and modern historiography that “stand, by their very nature, in radically different relations to the past.”²¹ A discourse such as modern historiography cannot do what memory does: generate “a catharsis or reintegration.”²² On a very basic level it leaves the actual agents of memory indifferent. It has no real power over them and can promise nothing.

What is described as deficiency has its great advantages, as Yerushalmi notes. The popular indifference towards modern historiography provides it with the space it needs to explore the past and to represent it more accurately. The product of historiographical research is always mediated to others in order to become a part of the memory (or not). This process of mediation is done outside the yeshiva of the historians. That is why they cannot prevent the possibility that their findings will be manipulated by agents of interest. Jewish historiography, both traditional and modern, provides us with numerous examples.

19 Yosef Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996).

20 Ibid., 87.

21 Ibid., 94.

22 Ibid., 95.

The study of rabbinization is a precious opportunity to renegotiate our rights and duties as producers of knowledge of the past. The attempt to imagine the subjective power of rabbinization, i.e., the modalities of rabbinic knowledge, recalls the conditions of our own intellectual production. It gives us a metaphorical platform to reflect upon the purpose of our project and to deal with at least two important questions: how should we communicate our knowledge of the past, and how should we deal with the possibility of its manipulation?

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