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Rabbis on the Road: Exposition En Route in Classical Rabbinic Texts

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Rabbis on the Road: Exposition En Route in Classical Rabbinic Texts

by

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Abstract

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Throughout classical rabbinic texts, we find accounts of sages expounding Scripture or law, while "walking on the road." We may well wonder why we find these sages in transit, rather than in the usual sites of Torah study, such as the *bet midrash* (study house) or *ʿaliyah* (upper story of a home). Indeed, in this corpus of texts, sages normally sit to study; the two acts are so closely associated, that the very word "sitting" is synonymous with a study session or academy. Moreover, throughout the corpus, "the road" is marked as the site of danger, disruption and death. Why then do these texts tell stories of sages expounding en route?

In seeking out the rabbinic road, I find that, against these texts' pervasive notion of travel danger runs another, competing motif: the road as the proper – even necessary – site of Torah study. Tracing the genealogy of the road exposition (or "road *derasha*"), I find it rooted in traditional Wisdom texts, which have been adapted to form a new, "literal" metaphor. The motif of sages expounding en route *actualizes* the Proverbial "Way of Wisdom" making it a real road upon which sages tread. That way is paved by a (literalized) reading of the Shema's command, "speak [these words] as you walk on the road…"

In the first part of my study, I consider the motif's setting, asking what rabbinic texts tell us about this site. I find that danger is the keynote of discourse about the road; indeed the multitude of dangers and risks indicate that this is a far from suitable place for Torah study. Rabbinic discourse *about* the road seems to preclude discourse while *on* the road. The second part of my work focuses on teachings that (in spite of this pervasive sense of road danger) actually adjure travelers to study en route, declaring that Torah study protects travelers on the way. Not only do these teachings seem to justify the accounts of road exposition, but they also point the way to the roots of the motif; by closely reading each teaching and its links to the larger corpus, I mark the way to the Wisdom tradition in which the motif is grounded, and which it transforms. Finally, in the last part of my study, I consider a text containing many road *derashot* – and of which the main theme is the journey. This text, which concerns esoteric wisdom, complicates our motif, for here (instead of guiding and protecting us on the way), Wisdom is considered a dangerous path, from which we are warned away. And yet,

even against warning and prohibition, it seems that the imperative to "speak [these words] on the way" is still in force. For here too, we find sages expounding on the way – accounts that are emblematic of the text's larger discursive journey towards this dangerous wisdom.

For my mother

Transliteration and reference sources

Transliteration:

For the Hebrew and Aramaic words transliterated in this work, I have primarily used the Library of Congress Cataloging transliteration system:
http://www.loc.gov/catdir/cpso/romanization/hebrew.pdf

However, for proper names and the titles of tractates, I have used fewer diacritical marks (for example, eschewing marks for ו, ט, ק, שׂ), and have sometimes opted for a more familiar, commonly used spelling (such as Shabbat rather than the LCC's Shabat).

I have adopted this method in the hopes of a smoother read, and apologize for the remaining infelicities or inconsistencies.

Reference sources:

In the notes to this work, I refer to the following dictionaries of Aramaic:

Jastrow, Marcus. *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Babli, Yerushalmi and Midrashic Literature.* New York: The Judaica Press, 1996.

Sokoloff, Michael. *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine Period*, Second Edition. Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2002.

Sokoloff, Michael. *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods.* Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2002.

For brevity's sake, I refer to these throughout as "Jastrow"; "Sokoloff (*Babylonian*)"; and "Sokoloff (*Palestinian*)."

Contents

Introduction: Embarking on the rabbinic road

The second chapter of Bavli tractate Ḥagigah begins with a series of teachings that weave stunning, mythic images of the Creation of the world. Here we learn that God created the heavens by "taking fire and water and hurling them together"; we see "the depths shattered by His reason" and "the mountains set by His might." We learn that "by the light created on the first day, one could have seen from one end of the world to the other." Could have, but did not – for this is a landscape that as yet has no human footprints. Even the sages who describe it seem to do so from offstage, in teachings marked "our sages taught" and "Rav said," but reported without any narrative setting; we hear their words, as it were, but do not see the sages speaking. Yet, quite suddenly – just after God's elemental creation of the heavens – the scene abruptly changes: "R. Ishmael asked R. ʿAkiva, as they were walking on the road: For twenty-two years you served Naḥum ish Gamzo … Tell me, how would he expound [*And God created*] *the heavens and the earth*?" Suddenly our sages are visible; they seem to have walked right onto the primordial stage – or rather, to have changed the setting entirely. We might well wonder why, in the midst of the momentous event of Creation, these two sages are doing something as mundane as "walking on the road."

Although, in this context, the sages' sudden appearance on the road is particularly striking, their location is not unusual. Throughout rabbinic literature, others may be found expounding "on the road" – that is, while on a journey.[1] As in the case above, these accounts often begin with a question: "As they were walking on the road, Rabbi Ishmael asked Rabbi Yehoshuʿa : Why are we forbidden the cheese of heathens?"[2] Some contain their own "telling": "Rabbi said, I once asked R. Yose and R. Shimʿon when they were walking on the road: What is the law when a menstruant examined herself on the seventh day…?"[3] Rabbi marks the exchange as something to be retold, and indeed, it seems that road exposition is not only "heard of" but also expected; when erudite sages visit R. Shimʿon b. Yoḥai, he sends his students after the departing guests "to see what they expound on the way."[4] These and other accounts indicate that the rabbinic road is a place where exegetical, legal, and even metaphysical questions are asked and discussed.

My work is a study of the rabbinic motif of teaching on the way – and the texts in which it is grounded. I begin by asking why we find these sages expounding on the road, instead of the expected sites of Torah study: the *bet midrash* (study house) or ʿ*aliyah* (upper story of a home). Indeed, in classical rabbinic texts, sages normally sit to study; the two acts are so closely associated, that the very word "sitting" is synonymous with a study session or academy. So why are these sages teaching in transit?

Finding our sages on the road is not in itself surprising, for these are texts in which people go places. We hear of jaunts to neighboring towns, as well as travel between Babylonia and Palestine, and journeys to Alexandria, Cappadocia, and Rome. Sea voyages

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[1] The expressions *holkim ba-derekh* and *azli ba-orḥa* most often indicate the act of traveling, rather than simply the act of walking. In fact, in some cases *holkim ba-derekh* refers to sages who are riding rather than walking (see for example, b.Ḥagigah 14b and b.Shabbat 52a), and in b.Bava Batra 73a, *azlinan ba-orḥa* refers to a sea voyage.

[2] m.ʿAvodah Zarah 2:5, b.ʿAvodah Zarah 24a.

[3] b.Niddah 68b. This is actually only the beginning of Rabbi's question, abbreviated here.

[4] Genesis Rabbah 35:3.

and treks to the "wilderness" are reported; sailors, desert nomads and traveling tradesmen cross our path. In this world of people on the move, our sages are no exception. Indeed, classical rabbinic texts specifically describe scholars as travelers. In addition to accounts of rabbis on the road (such as those above), we also hear of sages "going from city to city and from province to province" to settle a halakhic question, and "scholars who go from town to town to study Torah." Moreover, one text, which concerns professions that require extensive travel, lists among them "students who go away to study Torah."[5]

And yet, if scholars must "go away" to study, there is ample reason not to study *on the way*. For in these texts, the road is most often the site of danger, loss and death, as is attested by two of its typical denizens: the robber and the *met mitsṿah* (abandoned corpse). Even the recitation of daily prayer may be abbreviated or postponed while on the road – so that the traveler can remain attentive to the dangers around him. We might therefore expect that such heady activities as the exposition of Scripture, law, ethics and metaphysics would also be avoided in such a setting. Why then do these texts tell tales of sages expounding on the road?

It is precisely the "telling" that concerns me. My question is not whether these sages actually taught while walking – nor is my project an attempt to deduce from the texts the historical reality of travel for Jews in late antiquity.[6] Rather, my topic here is road teaching as a powerful motif, a sign with literary and cultural meaning. In seeking out the rabbinic road, I find that, against these texts' pervasive notion of travel danger runs another, competing motif: the road as the proper – even necessary – site of Torah study. Tracing that motif's literary genealogy, I locate it within the rabbinic Wisdom tradition, with roots in the Proverbial "way of Wisdom" and the Deuteronomic command to "speak [these words] as you walk on the road." Yet, in our texts, the biblical metaphor is given new shape, heft and color; Wisdom's way becomes a *literal* metaphor, an actual road on which our sages tread, enacting "*uve-lekhtekha va-derekh*." This motif is, I claim, a distinct product of classical rabbinic literature. As a literary form, the road *derasha* (or exposition) is similar to the moment in b.Ḥagigah, when our sages suddenly appear: connected to, but strikingly different from what preceded it.

We may also distinguish the rabbinic motif from those that, in a sense, surround it. For example, the image of sages teaching en route might well remind us of the legend of peripatetic philosophers teaching and learning as they stroll about in Aristotle's school, the Lyceum. Yet, in spite of the similarity between the two traditions, there is a crucial difference between them. The philosophers' strolling occurs well within the confines of the city – and indeed is located precisely *within* the institution of the Lyceum; the very notion that these philosopher were *peripatetikos* seems to derive from (a pun on) the name of that place, the *peripatoi* or "colonnades" of the Lyceum.[7] In contrast, rabbinic sages walk "the road," a site that, by definition, lies outside the physical and institutional bounds of city and town.

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[5] Sifre Deuteronomy, *Eḳev* (Piska 48); b.ʻEruvin 54b; b.Ketubot 61b-62b.

[6] For a study of rabbinic texts on travel with an eye to their implications of the social and historical realities of travel for late antique Jews, particularly in Palestine, see Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Travel in Antiquity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).

[7] That is, these philosophers were originally called *peripatos*, apparently meaning "[of the] collonades," a name which refers to the Lyceum itself, and not to any particular activity. The name *peripatetikos* ["walking about"], and the notion that these men conducted discourse while strolling about, arose very early on, perhaps even with Hermippus of Smyrna. (See David Furley, "Peripatetic School," in N.G.L. Hammond and H.G. Scullard, eds. *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2nd edition). Yet at least some scholars hold that this was never more than a

This notion of wayfaring sages – roaming a terrain "outside" – suggests another familiar scenario: the ancient (and modern) trope of traveling to seek wisdom from a far-away teacher or guru. The many varieties of this motif include, for example, ancient Greek accounts of traveling to India or Egypt to obtain secret wisdom there.[8] Yet, this is primarily a model of going away to obtain wisdom in a faraway place (indeed, at the very limit of the known world) and bring it back home; although such journeys may involve learning at different stages of the journey (and especially at the far destination), they are not necessarily or always a matter of learning en route, as are road *derashot*. Moreover (although, as noted above, rabbinic texts do describe sages traveling to study or confer with other authorities), the specific motif of sages teaching en route means first and foremost traveling *with* (not *to*) wisdom.

While it seems likely that classical rabbinic cultures also partook of these "outside" traditions, my focus here is on the (so to speak) "indigenous" sources of the rabbinic motif: the strong, developing current within rabbinic texts, locating study on the road.[9] That is, although there are certainly links and parallels to other cultural forms, I am concerned here with what is *particular* to the rabbinic motif.

As a preface to that project, let us take a preliminary look at the motif's setting: the road. Metaphors of the road are so widespread within and throughout different cultures as to seem ubiquitous. Indeed, the similarities between different cultural forms can give a powerful impression of coincidence – and even of uniformity. And yet, while there is certainly a degree of overlap between the rabbinic road and that of other literatures, rabbinic texts develop and shape the notion of the road in highly specific and formal ways that give it an entirely distinctive character, and which link narrative and legal texts. For example, two motifs frequently associated with the road – liminality and choice – are certainly present in rabbinic texts, but with very specific meanings and implications.

Rabbinic roads (like those of other literary traditions) are liminal spaces; roads cross between towns and cities – places with established customs, teachings and hierarchies – and so specifically mark a space "in between." Moreover, since the uncertainties and risks of travel can interfere with the observance of the law as it is practiced in towns, the road, for the sages, is a site that requires change and adjustment of even the most sacred duties (as tractates

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legend. See G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), vol. 2, p. 129.

[8] See Philip A. Harland, "Journeys in Pursuit of Divine Wisdom: Thessalos and Other Seekers," in Philip Harland, ed., *Travel and Religion in Late Antiquity* (2011).

[9] In fact, it seems to me quite likely that such traditions may have contributed to the rabbinic motif. However, analysis of these fascinating possibilities awaits further study. Perhaps relevant to this question is Catherine Hezser's classification of brief rabbinic sayings (which are presented with minimal narrative setting) within the genre of classical "pronouncement story" or *apopthegma* (see Catherine Hezser, "Apopthegmata Paturm and Apopthegmata of the Rabbis," in *La Narrativa Cristiana Antica. Codici Narrativi, Strutture Formali, Schemi Retorici.* Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 1995, p. 453-464; and *Form, Function, and Historical Significance of the Rabbinic Story in Yerushalmi Neziqin.* Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1993, p. 288-292). In *Jewish Travel in Antiquity*, Hezser notes that road stories sometimes provide the setting for such sayings, and may provide a suitable background for certain kinds of lessons, but also points out that such sayings are often unrelated their setting. Hezser does not seem to view the road as a necessary site for these sayings (see her discussion of sages "walking on the way," p. 215-226).

Shabbat and ʿEruvin clearly attest).[10] Indeed, in rabbinic texts, the notion of the road's liminality is highly developed and formalized; not simply a literary motif, it requires and comprises specific legal categories. The theme of ownership provides a key example, for the road is a place where one may be robbed or plundered. While highwaymen and pirates loom large in many traditions, the rabbinic road is not only the setting for tales of bandits, but is a site where ownership may be called into question – and where it is situated between categories. Crossing between privately owned spaces – fields and orchards – the rabbinic road itself is generally designated a public and non-owned space. And indeed, the road is one setting for the case of the found object, in which an object or livestock discovered on the road may be declared "ownerless" and its ownership re-assigned.[11]

The road as the site of decision or choice is certainly part of the rabbinic motif: the explicit or implied figure of the crossroads is a key location here, as in other traditions.[12] Moreover, rabbinic interpretive traditions regarding the danger, privation and "tests" of the journey make it an apt setting for the ethical dilemma (e.g., the two travelers in the desert who have only enough water for one),[13] yet the association of journey and choice goes much further than this. Not only does the rabbinic road require adjustment of established practice, but it is often the site where one law or person must be given precedence over another. The road is often the stage for a stand-off between two elements, in which the established hierarchy must be reversed.

The *met mitsṿah* – by definition, a case set on the road – brings these matters into sharp focus. A traveler who happens upon a dead body on the road is obligated to tend and bury it; thus the road – the "home" of the *met mitsṿah* – is the site not only of death but of duty. That duty is often framed as a dilemma, since texts on the *met mitsṿah* so often imagine the traveler particularly as a Nazir or priest – one who is forbidden contact with the dead.[14] The priest or Nazir's encounter with the *met mitsṿah* exemplifies a particular type of rabbinic dilemma, in which a decision must be made regarding a situation that creates conflict or contradiction between two commandments. The resolution requires weighing the implications of each commandment (and its transgression) and a finding justification for one duty superseding the other. The process – and sometimes the resolution itself – may demand a mechanism of reversal, in which the lesser or lighter is put before the seemingly more grave. Texts on the *met mitsṿah* sometimes heighten this irony by casting the travelers as two priests of different status,[15] with the resolution requiring the High Priest to tend the corpse and the priest of lower status to guard his own sanctity. This case study in precedence requires that two analogous questions "which duty has higher priority" and "who has higher status" be

[10] In these tractates are elaborated the restriction (on Shabbat) of carrying from one domain to the other, and on traveling more than a set distance on Shabbat (i.e. to the Sabbath limit). We might also refer to the discourse on prayer in m.Berakhot, in which motion complicates the matter of orienting oneself toward Jerusalem.

[11] See, e.g., the discussion in m.Bava Metsi'a 2.9 of whether an animal found on the road can be considered "lost"; b.Bava Metsi'a 21b, regarding figs found on the road; b.ʿEruvin 64a in which a traveling R. Gamliel finds a loaf of bread, which then changes hands a few times. (This does not even touch on the shenanigans that may go on when a purse of money is left at an inn).

[12] See, e.g., b. ʿAvodah Zarah 17a, in which R. Ḥaninah and R. Yonatan come to the crossing of a way that goes past a harlot's place and a road that goes past a place of idolatry.

[13] See, e.g., b.Bava Metsi'a 62a.

[14] See m.Nazir 7.1, and the subsequent discourse on this text.

[15] See b.Horayot 13a and b.Nazir 47b.

considered in a new light; in both cases, the road occasions reversals. Such reversals – of personal status and legal precedence – are not restricted to the case of the *met mitsʿvah*, but rather recur throughout rabbinic teachings, cases and stories about the road.

Such reversals are often occasioned by a person one meets on the way. Indeed, like other literatures, rabbinic texts understand the road as a place of encounter – and confrontation. Certainly, the encounter en route can take different forms: one may meet a stranger or friend, an antagonist or ally; one may meet a helper, or one who needs help. However, in rabbinic texts, such accounts are heavily weighted toward threat; the encounter disrupts, challenges, or endangers. Indeed, as we shall see below (in chapter one), danger seems to be a keynote of rabbinic discourse about the road. And thus, danger will be the starting point for this study, and our journey toward road Torah.

A literary engagement

Although it is now commonplace to view classical rabbinic texts as compositions, rather than as reliable or transparent historic accounts, the notions of their "compilation" and "redaction" do not necessarily require their analysis as works of art. Indeed, although these texts are commonly referred to as "rabbinic literature," the practice of reading them primarily as literary works is a relatively recent endeavor, and has often taken the back seat to the pressing concerns of deriving their halakhic implications or deducing what they can reveal to us about the cultures in which they were formed. And yet, the innovation of viewing rabbinic texts as works of literature – possessing themes, motifs, and genres – not only enables a deeper appreciation of individual texts, it can also potentially change our understanding of "rabbinic literature," providing a corrective to the view of these works as primarily "collections," and their structure as basically "accumulative." Indeed, a literary approach means taking seriously the notion that these works are *compositions* – that is, considering a text as something created and fashioned, rather than merely accidental. This means looking at the shape and texture of the work, along with (and perhaps as integral to) its content.

One such path into rabbinic texts focuses on the individual story or passage. Largely inspired by the work of Jonah Fraenkel,[16] the literary readings of the last generation emphasized close reading of individual stories, focusing on and highlighting the text's local and internal qualities, rather than seeking to meld or harmonize it with others like it. Recent scholarship often seeks to supplement this approach, by emphasizing the necessity of reading a story in its context, rather than as a separate piece that may be extracted and read separately. This emphasis on context is part of a larger movement towards considering the redacted rabbinic text as a coherent whole, rather than merely a collection of pieces. One might consider these two approaches as two kinds of vision: a near, highly acute, intimate look, and a more comprehensive, far-sighted view. In seeking a "depth perception" of rabbinic texts, it seems essential to combine these two kinds of sight.

Indeed, "looking" is a very evocative motif for modern readers, as we tend to think texts and reading in terms of vision (we look at a page, and read with our eyes). But this does not seem to be the primary sense in which the sages conceive the endeavor. Although

[16] That is, such works as *Darkhe ha-agadah ʿeha-midrash* (Israel: Masadah, Yad la-Talmud, 1991), and Fraenkel's numerous scholarly articles presenting incisive readings of aggadic texts.

rabbinic texts certainly speak of "reading Scripture," the term itself connotes reading aloud; moreover the common term for learning (*shoneh*) also means "repeating" or "reciting." But, to my ear, perhaps the most evocative term for study is the expression *'osek ba-Torah*. This term seems to have no suitable English translation; "engaging" or "being occupied with" sound much too casual for such a necessary, even vigorous, activity.[17] Indeed, the word *'osek* indicates effort; something that requires not simply "looking," but also grasping and handling.

My own approach to rabbinic texts is decidedly two-handed: striving to balance the demands (and attractions) of both close reading and context. Close reading is essential to appreciating any individual narrative's inherent shape, texture and sense; elements that can be easily blurred by harmonizing the text with others like it. However, the close view can also be distorting, without a sense of where and how that text is situated. My sense of "context" is always two-fold; in order to appreciate a text's meaning, we must read it in the textual setting in which it appears – but I also see its relation to texts in other sources as part of its context. Indeed, my reading is grounded in the assumption that every individual text is in fact a node or nexus of other texts.

This notion – that there is no "autonomous" or isolated text, but rather that every text is formed in relation to others – is something that may guide our reading "from outside" via the work of Bakhtin, or literary theories rooted in structuralism. But it is also something demanded by the texts themselves. As Dina Stein remarks:

> [Rabbinic texts] constantly, and explicitly, refer to other texts, biblical and rabbinic, and such references expose their means of production as well as the textual and linguistic concepts implicated in such a productive process. Midrash is composed of two explicit layers: scripture and rabbinic commentary. The Talmud is likewise built from two layers: Mishnah and Gemara, with those two layers containing, in addition, numerous midrashic expansions. In other words, the seams of the rabbinic cloth are, at least partly, sewn on the outside, making visible the process by which it was made.[18]

Thus, an intentional and often quite explicit intertextuality is inherent to rabbinic texts – and indeed is central to their endeavor. Rabbinic texts thus mark out for us where they are going and have been discursively – and moreover, require that in our reading, we go there with them, criss-crossing back and forth between the two (or many more) texts that are linked. Indeed, the richness of reference is often quite stunning: the sages might cite and allude to particular passages from Bible, Mishnah, traditional rabbinic teachings and debates, tales and

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[17] On the verb *'osek,* see Jastrow (1098), "to work at, to be engaged in"; Sokoloff (*Palestinian*), 414, "to be occupied with, to deal with"; Sokoloff (*Babylonian*), 873, "to engage in, deal with" (and 874 on *'osek ba-Torah:* "to study the Torah"). Although *work* seems to be the key concept, perhaps translators have traditionally downplayed this notion in an effort to distinguish Torah study from mundane endeavors. In my work below, I have generally translated *osek ba-Torah* simply as "study Torah."

[18] Dina Stein, *Textual Mirrors: Reflexivity, Midrash, and the Rabbinic Self* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), p. 4. Stein continues, "I suggest that this intertextual quality of rabbinic texts is a marker of self-reflexivity." Indeed, that reflexivity is point of this passage – and of Stein's book. I have cited this lovely passage for the more general purpose of remarking on the expressed intertexuality of rabbinic texts (merely Stein's preliminary premise).

folk traditions – but may also play upon the dynamics within or between those texts. Moreover, we may find other links not marked within the texts themselves: contrasts, similarities and parallels between our text and others. The vibrant interpretive tradition that precedes us may seem to give warrant to these latter attempts to situate and link texts; and yet such handling is not necessarily innocuous or without the risk of becoming manipulation.[19]

Thus, in recent decades, scholarship in rabbinic literature has tended to focus on the specifics of different works, taking care to distinguish between tannaitic and amoraic texts (or layers within a text), and between Palestinian and Babylonian works. Thus, scholarship has assiduously responded to the challenges presented by a supposedly "traditional" approach to the text (which views each corpus – and at times the entire "tradition" – as a unified whole, recognizing no marks of historical development or fissure), or to the sort of generalizing approach sometimes associated with earlier scholarship, in which different texts are harmonized in a concept of a larger "rabbinic literature" – which approach often assumed the primacy of the Bavli. Thus, as individual texts (or groups of texts) are studied in and of themselves, their particular traits come to light, instead of being blurred with others.

While I stand in this tradition, which has formed and nurtured me, I also take a somewhat different approach in this work, particularly its first part. Because I see the road discourse as a motif that develops and ranges throughout the corpus, I too range across different works in pursuit of it. While certainly eastern and western texts are different works with distinct characteristics, they also are the products of communities that were in close, avid conversation. Of course, the dialects of place and time do not always translate; across the axes of old and new and east and west, there are wrinkles, rifts and downright contradictions in language and values. And yet, these were communities that were, to a great extent, conversant with and "fluent" in the same cultural language.[20]

Itinerary

In each of the chapters below, I take a somewhat different route of literary analysis. In the first chapter, I roam through a wide variety of texts, seeking out "the road" as a sign in rabbinic literature. In contrast, chapter two focuses on just two short teachings in the Bavli, in something like a "stay a while" tour of two sites; yet this close focus is broad as well, for by reading each teaching's contexts and co-texts, I trace its links to the larger corpus. Finally, in chapter three, I read a much longer text (of several *dapim*) in the Bavli, which I treat as a coherent discourse unto itself. Though now moving through a much larger textual terrain, my focus here is "domestic"; I refer to the text's sources and parallels (not in a full-scale comparative endeavor, but) primarily to the extent that they enrich reading of my home text.

Thematically, however, the chapters build one upon the other.

In chapter one, I take the first step towards my larger inquiry ("why study on the road?") by asking "what *is* the road?": what do rabbinic texts tell us about this site? Here, I conduct a wide-ranging survey of a variety of texts (early and late, east and west), in order to

[19] Certainly, there is always the danger – and indeed, the likelihood – of distorting ancient texts by the assumptions and methods imported into them. On the problematic endeavor of determining a text's co-texts, see Dina Stein, *Textual Mirrors*, p. 150, note 8.

[20] See now Daniel Boyarin, *A Traveling Homeland: The Babylonian Talmud as Diaspora* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

trace a rabbinic semiotics of "the road," which I see as underlying rabbinic texts in general. The keynote of this discourse, I find, is disruption and danger – dangers often conceived in terms of encounters on the way. Confronting a stranger means a threat not only to a traveler's life and property, but also to his mind, social status and sexual continence. Even the encounter with a fellow Jew can be problematic, as is vividly demonstrated by texts that consider how and whether to pass others on the road; how can one overtake another on the narrow roadway without treading either on private land – or the other's honor? Thus, the road's physical narrowness – or the squeeze of its dangers and mishaps – may force the first to become last. My excursion through these (and other) dangers of the rabbinic road is framed by a discourse on daily prayer, in which danger on the road trumps the obligation to pray. Indeed, the elaboration of this discourse in the Bavli seems to pull prayer back to the very threshold of the journey, marking the road as a place without recitation. If the road forestalls the recitation of prayer, we might also presume that it precludes another kind of rabbinic recitation: Torah study.

In chapter two, I examine two Bavli teachings, which – against the clamor of the many texts on road danger – actually adjure travelers to study and discuss Torah on the road. R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi declares, "Whoever walks on the road without any escort should study Torah, *for they are a garland of grace…*," whereas R. Ilaʿi warns of dire consequences if "two scholars…walk on the road without words of Torah between them…!" These teachings seem to justify our accounts of sages expounding en route. Moreover, because they explicitly require what those accounts portray, these teachings also provide a key to the "Torah on the road" motif, their adjurations pointing the way to its origins. I mark that path by closely reading each teaching, its contexts and its co-texts. Each teaching quotes a traditional wisdom text: R. Ilaʿi 's warning evokes the promise, in mishnah Avot, that divine blessing is bestowed on those with "words of Torah between them"; R. Yehoshuʿa b. Leṿi cites the "garland of grace," the Proverbial sign of Wisdom's reward. Yet, by drawing on the complex interplay of images and associations in their sources, these teachings fashion a new motif, in which the road becomes the vivid and necessary location of the obligation to study Torah. Thus, these teachings (and our accounts) *actualize* the Proverbial "Way of Wisdom," making it an actual road on which the sages tread, speaking words of Torah. Compelling us along that way is the teachings' subtext: the command, "Speak [these words]…as you walk on the road." Thus, whereas the pervasive sense of road danger seemed to ban utterance from the road, the motif road=Wisdom overturns that notion; not only does Torah study protect the traveler on the road, but in fact we are obligated to walk that way, speaking "words of Torah."

In chapter three, I turn to a text particularly rich with road *derashot:* the second chapter of Bavli Ḥagigah. The core of this text is m.Ḥagigah 2.1, which restricts exposition of Genesis 1 ("the Account of Creation") and Ezekiel 1 ("the Account of the Chariot")[21] – and seems to prohibit metaphysical and mystical speculation. The Bavli sets out to clarify the mishnah, to mark out just where the boundaries lie. And yet, by explicating the mishnah's limits, the gemara in fact transgresses them, taking a good look at "the first days" of the world, delving below to find what lies beneath the earth, and ascending to heaven. Thus, the gemara's discourse is itself a journey, and that larger journey is marked – and indeed,

[21] *Maʿaśeh Merkavah* ("the Account of the Chariot"), so called in reference to the divine Chariot of Ezekiel's heavenly vision; "the Chariot" also connotes the divine throne and Presence. On this matter, see chapter 3.

exemplified – by its brief, vivid accounts of sages expounding Creation or the Chariot as they "walk on the road." It seems then that, like Proverbial wisdom, esoteric wisdom is also located on the road – and yet, this is a quite a different sort of trip. Previously we walked the path of *divre Torah*, but here we attempt the "secrets of *divre Torah*" – and are repeatedly warned against looking, speaking, or going that way. Again and again, the discourse pulls back or shields our gaze from the divine realm, and at times punishes those who glimpse the garden, saying as well as vividly demonstrating that these secrets are not for us to see. If previously Wisdom urged, guided and protected us on the way, now it seems that the danger is – Wisdom itself. Thus, this text seems almost to overturn the road-Torah motif. And yet, it is still in force, both in the text's approach and retreat from its goal – and we come to find that the road is a particularly apt setting for this "outside" Wisdom. It seems that even against warning and prohibition, the imperative to tread wisdom's way still applies; we are still compelled to walk this way, speaking Torah.

Chapter One: Danger on the Road

"In all journeys there is the presumption of mortal danger"

Our preliminary look at the rabbinic road (in the introduction, above) indicated that it is a liminal space, the site of instability and reversal. A closer look reveals that the road is a far from likely site for the work of the study house. Throughout the corpus, the road is associated with formidable dangers, risks and disruptions, threats that would seem to require that the traveler attend to matters "on the ground," and not scholarly exposition and discourse. That the traveler through this landscape should "keep his eyes on the road" is clear from the discourse on daily prayer.

The fourth chapter of mishnah Berakhot deals with circumstances affecting the proper recitation of the *Shemoneh ʿesreh,* all of which involve travel: "If astride a donkey, one should dismount…," or "if on a boat, wagon or raft" (and thus unable to be sure of facing east), "direct [your] heart to the Holy of Holies."[1] These situations require adjustment of posture or mental focus – but danger seems to trump the prayer itself:

> R. Yehoshuʿa says: If traveling in a dangerous place, say a short prayer [instead]: "Rescue, O Lord, Your people Israel; at every crossroads, may their needs be before you…"[2]

Here, quite a short prayer is substituted for the lengthy *Shemoneh ʿesreh*, presumably because the traveler "in a dangerous place" must keep his wits about him and be attentive to his surroundings.

But what exactly is "a dangerous place"? The Bavli offers this gloss of R. Yehoshuʿa's teaching:

> **R. Yehoshuʿa says: When traveling in a dangerous place, say a short prayer.** Our sages taught: When traveling through a place rife with beasts or bands of robbers, say a short prayer.

Here, danger on the road is defined as violent attack; where such attack is likely, one may indeed substitute a short prayer for the *Shemoneh ʿesreh*. Yet, while the image of "beasts or robbers" vividly justifies the short prayer (and the need to hurry), it is just at this point that the Bavli slows down, offering no fewer than four additional versions of the prayer. This proliferation of versions seems to leave us without a definitive answer for what to say "in a dangerous place." Moreover, following this series of possibilities, the Bavli offers yet another, more general prayer for the traveler:

> Whoever sets out on the road must say the road prayer. What is the road prayer? "May it be Your will, O Lord my God, to lead me forth safely,

[1] m.Berakhot 4.5 and 4.6.
[2] m.Berakhot 4.3-4.

and direct my steps safely and uphold me in safety, and deliver me from the hand of every enemy and ambush on the road …"[3]

Here is a prayer for the traveler about to embark, and presumably at leisure to express his keenest hopes for the journey. Yet the traveler's words remind us of nothing more than that "dangerous place." The expectation of "enemy and ambush" and the repeated plea for safety seem to indicate that the road entire is a dangerous place. Thus the Bavli intimates what the Yerushalmi states more starkly:

> **R. Yehoshuʿa says: When traveling in a dangerous place, say a short prayer** … R. Shimʿon b. Aba said in R. Ḥanina's name: In all journeys, there is the presumption of mortal danger. R. Yonah, when he went abroad, would give his last will to his household…[4]

According to R. Ḥanina, R. Yehoshuʿa's teaching applies to every journey, since we must presume that any journey can mean the worst kind of danger. R. Yonah's practice exemplifies this notion; by giving his last will before embarking, he testifies that each journey means risking his life. R. Yonah's words, uttered just before he departs, are perhaps the darker twin of the traveler's prayer; one speech says "I may die on the way" while the other pleads "save me from harm."

In spite (or because) of the many formulas for prayer "in a dangerous place," we might at last surmise that the only recitation appropriate to the road is that plea for protection, to be uttered on the threshold. But on the way, the traveler would do well to keep his attention on the dangers around him, rather than on words of prayer – or of study.[5] For, as we shall see below, the traveler in rabbinic texts faces a multitude of dangers: from physical harm to other (and at times, more subtle) threats, such as ideological, social, sexual, and supernatural dangers.[6]

Physical danger

The Yerushalmi's sense of the road as a place of mortal danger (and indeed, R. Yonah's tacit message, "I may die on the way") is confirmed by one of the key figures of the

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[3] b.Berakhot 29b

[4] y.Berakhot 8b. The phrase I've rendered "[he] would give his last will to his household" is הוה מפקד גו ביתיה. For this sense of the verb פקד, see Sokoloff (*Palestinian*), p.442: "to give last commands before death or danger thereof."

[5] That prayer and study are both forms of speech may not be obvious to modern readers, for whom study and reading are most often silent. However, for the sages, the opposite seems to have been the case: study seems to have been primarily a matter of recitation, rather than silent pondering. Indeed, Strack and Stemberger describe the traditional manner of study as "continual vocal recitation of the teaching material in a set manner of cantillation" (13). For a concise expression of this value, we need only refer to the Bavli's account of R. Yoḥanan b. Zakkai (in b.Sukkah 28a): "No one ever found him sitting in silence, but rather only sitting and learning..."; here it is clear that "learning" [שונה] and "being silent" [דומם] are opposites.

[6] Although, in this introductory context, I use the familiar modern word "supernatural" to denote such matters as magic, demons and unseen forces, it should be noted that this term is not appropriate to rabbinic texts, in which such phenomena seemed to be considered quite "natural" indeed. On this matter, and my subsequent use of the term "meta-physical," see page 37, note 111.

road: the *met mitsṿah* or abandoned corpse. The *met mitsṿah*, defined as "whoever has no one to bury him,"[7] is usually encountered on roads and fields,[8] far away from the safety of town: "What is the *met mitsṿah*? Whoever screams, but townspeople don't hear him."[9] The traveler who happens upon such a corpse is obligated to bury it on the spot, since "a *met mitsṿah* acquires its place" (that is, the right to be buried where it lies).[10] Thus, in a sense, the road is the "turf" of the *met mitsṿah*, and the many matter-of-fact references to the *met mitsṿah* seem to indicate that finding a dead body on the road is a normal, perhaps even common occurrence.[11]

But how does the death occur? The very definition of the *met mitsṿah* intimates a scene of violence: here is a person who screams, but is too far away to be heard or helped. While this clearly exemplifies the Yerushalmi's notion of "mortal danger," it is the Bavli that provides us with more specific clues as to what went wrong. We may well note, that when defining "a dangerous place," the Bavli does not mention natural dangers (such as swift rivers or dangerous terrain) or the privations of travel (such as exposure to the elements or scarcity of food, drink or shelter). Rather, the danger is "beasts and bandits" and "enemy and ambush." Indeed, to great extent, travel danger in rabbinic texts is imagined as a confrontation not with nature, but with other people. We thus are a long way from the notion of the road as a place where one encounters and gazes upon a benign, exotic Other. Our sages have a less sanguine view; although clearly the rabbinic road can be a place of hardship and privation, the main problem of travel is the stranger one encounters on the way.

Indeed, while "wild beasts" do sometime figure in rabbinic road stories,[12] danger on the road most often means bandits.[13] We might even say that the Bavli is itself a "place rife

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[7] See b.ʿEruvin 17b, b.Yevamot 89b, b.Nazir 43b.

[8] See, for example, m.Nazir 7.1 ("If [a High Priest and a Nazir] are going on the road and find a *met mitsṿah*…"); b.Nazir 63a and b.Pesaḥim 81b ("If one finds a corpse lying across the width of a path," and the ensuing discussion); b.Horayot 13a ("if [two priests of different rank] were going on the road and found *met mitsṿah…"*), and the similar passages on b.ʿEruvin 17b and b.Bava Kama 81b, which consider the case when a corpse is found "lying on the road" near two fields, one fallow and one sown. (In contrast, however, see y.Nazir 56a, which considers the possibility of a *met mitsṿah* found "within the *teḥum*," as well as outside it).

[9] This version, from the later text, Evel Rabbati (4:29-30), seems to indicate that the traveler is so far away that his screams can't be heard in town. In the Yerushalmi, the phrase is "one who screams and townspeople do not come," which seems also to indicate distance; the victim is too far away for townspeople to arrive in time to save him. (Regarding the probable geonic provenance of Evel Rabbati, see Kraemer, *Meanings*, 9).

[10] y.Nazir 56a. For the notion "the *met mitsṿah* acquires its place," see also b.Bava Kama 81a-b, b.ʿEruvin 17b, and b.Sotah 45. On the obligation to bury the *met mitsṿah* (but without the emphasis on "in its place"), see also the later text, Evel Rabati 4:29-30.

[11] Since the discussion of *met mitsṿah* is largely the product of these texts' interpretation and elaboration of their sources, especially m.Nazir 7.1, they are not necessarily a reliable measure of lived experience, or of how often people of the time actually encountered dead bodies. However, for my purposes, it is enough that our texts return again and again to the topic, rendering it something of a commonplace, thereby betraying the notion that travel is highly dangerous and that the road is symbolically a place of potential defilement.

[12] Marauding beasts seem to appear primarily in fable-like stories illustrating a moral lesson (often from a biblical verse). See, for example, b.Sanhedrin 59b (in which the traveling R. Shimʿon b. Ḥalafta uses a biblical verse to deter attacking lions), b.Berakhot 54a (where "a place where a miracle was wrought" is illustrated by accounts of sages miraculously saved from attack by lion or camel), and b. Berakhot 13a (where the tendency to forget earlier troubles in light of recent ones is illustrated by the story of a traveler who escapes from a wolf, then a lion, then a snake). See also the tale (in b.Berakhot 60b) of the traveling R. ʿAkiva's encounters with "a wind … a cat … and a lion." However, in contrast, see the rather practical advice (on b.Shabbat 110a) regarding what to do when followed by a snake.

with bandits," for in rabbinic (as in other ancient) texts, bandits rule the road,[14] and seem to be a "natural hazard" of land travel.[15] Not surprisingly, highwaymen often appear where the topic is loss of property, in such scenarios as "a man traveling on the road, carrying money, when a bandit accosted him."[16] But bandits also run wild in texts on quite different matters. Regarding the testimony required for a woman's remarriage, the Mishnah states: "If a woman and her husband go overseas … and she returns, saying, 'My husband is dead,' she may remarry."[17] But the gemara is more specific: "[If she says:] 'Idolaters attacked us –' or 'bandits attacked us – and he died but I escaped,' she is believed!"[18] Such an attack seems the likely, "believable" meaning of danger abroad. Moreover, as the widow's testimony indicates, loss of property is not the only danger of roadside attacks; bandits are also known to abduct their victims[19] – or kill them. This is clear from the scenario mentioned by-the-way in a discussion of priestly purity: "He was traveling in the valley of '*Arabot*, and bandits cut off his head…"[20] Thus the bandit is not only a robber, but may also be an attacker, a kidnapper, or a murderer.[21]

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[13] The figure I call the "bandit," "highwayman" or "robber" is referred to by various names in rabbinic texts. Scenes (or the threat) of robbery, abduction, murder feature ליסטים / ליסטין ליסטיס (bandits), לסטין מזויין (armed bandits) and גייסות (robber bands), as well as גנבי (thieves) and אנסים (attackers).

[14] In this regard, the Bavli is well in accord with other texts of late antiquity (and antiquity), which conceive of bandits as a chief hazard of travel. Indeed, to some extent, even the terminology is the same: in rabbinic texts, the bandit is commonly called לסטיס, a form of the Greek word, λῃστής (for derivation and variants of the Aramaic word, see Sokoloff, *Palestinian*, 282); the Latin form "*latro, latrones*" was used in Roman texts (see Shaw, esp. 3-4). On Roman texts, see Brent D. Shaw, "Bandits in the Roman Empire" in *Past and Present* (Nov. 1984), p. 3-52, as well as the remarks on p. 154-6, in Colin Adams, "There and Back Again: Getting Around in Roman Egypt," in Colin Adams and Ray Laurence, *Travel and Geography in the Roman Empire* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 153-8. On the problem of bandits for early Christians, see Bruce W. Winter, "Dangers and Difficulties for the Pauline Mission," in Peter Bolt and Mark Thompson, ed. *Gospel to the Nations: Perspectives on Paul's Mission* (Leicester: Apollos, 2000), p. 285-95. See also the remarks regarding bandits as a danger for pilgrims in Greek antiquity, in Ian Rutherford, "The Dangers of Pilgrimage in Greek Religion and Society," *Studi e materiali di storia delle religioni* (SMSR) 61 (1995), p. 275-92.

[15] A most telling text in this regard is the discussion of corporate property loss, in b.Bava Kama 116a. Here, three cases are considered: the account of "a boat traveling on the sea, when a storm rose against it to sink it" is framed by two cases of "a caravan traveling through the desert, when a band of robbers rose against it to plunder it." The parallel is notable: both storm and bandits "rise against" the craft to sink or plunder it. Thus it seems that bandits on land are like storms on the sea – a regular, natural hazard of travel.

[16] b.Bava Kama 115b. In this case (in which the robber is called אגס), the issue is whether lost property can be declared as tithe or *terumah*.

[17] m.Yevamot 15.1, cited on b.Yevamot 114b.

[18] b.Yevamot 115a. While Gentile violence is not the topic here, the subject of death does underlie this discussion (and the tractate as a whole), since the discussion of remarriage hinges on proof that the husband has died.

[19] See, for example, the passages in b.Gitin on human trafficking: b.Gitin 37b, 53b, and 58a and 81b.

[20] b.Nazir 43b (here the robbers are גנבי). Another striking example is the account of a bandit who, on the way to be executed for his crimes, declares: "Go and tell the wife of Shim'on b. Kohen that I killed her husband when [he] entered Lud" (b. Yevamot 25b). See also b.Sanhedrin 73a, regarding the obligation to save anyone who is "drowning, mauled by beasts, or attacked by robbers." (See next note).

[21] Though clearly formidable in themselves, bandits are often mentioned alongside other figures, which associations only highlight the variety of threats posed by the bandit. Loss of property is clearly the concern where the dangers listed are "tax collectors and robbers" (b.Shevu'ot 39a), while abduction and captivity are the concern where one "is turned over to the government or attacked by bandits" (b.Ketubot 30b, b.Sotah 8b). In the list "murderers, bandits, or customs collectors," (b.Bava Kama 113a), the bandit links loss of property with loss of life – both of which are within his purview. Physical harm and death are the least common denominator of

While bandits and robbers are still an abiding concern for modern travelers, rabbinic texts also present us with another, perhaps less familiar face of physical danger: the idolater. In the widow's testimony above, the two are mentioned in the same breath, as if interchangeable figures of aggression.[22] And indeed, many other texts bear out the notion that the encounter with an idolater en route is a key danger of the road:

> Our Rabbis taught: If a Jew is joined on the road by an idolater, he should let [the idolater] walk on his right. R. Ishmael b. Yoḥanan b. Berokah says: Let [the idolater armed] with a sword walk on his right; [but if armed] with a stick, on his left. If they ascend or descend, the Israelite mustn't be lower … nor bend down before [the idolater], lest he smash his skull.[23]

Here it is clear that the non-Jew encountered on the road is not expected to be a friendly companion. One's position vis-à-vis this stranger is crucial, precisely because he is presumed to be hostile – and indeed, armed! The first teaching advises keeping the stranger on one's right; thus the Israelite – with his right hand is closest to the aggressor – is better positioned to defend himself. According to R. Ishmael b. Yoḥanan, however, the Israelite's position should depend on the sort of weapon the stranger carries. In order to best counter an attack, the Israelite should stay closest to the weapon: on the stranger's left if he bears a sword (worn on the left), and on the stranger's right if he holds a stick (in his right hand).[24]

This image of the stranger is not too surprising in a passage elaborating the Mishnah's dictum "No man should be alone with [idolaters], because they are suspected of bloodshed."[25] Yet, we also find this scenario in texts concerned with quite different matters: for instance, in

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the list "drowned, mauled by beasts, attacked by robbers (b.Sanhedrin 73a), and the many texts warning of "beasts and robbers" (b.Berakhot 29b, b.Sotah 21a, b.Bava Metsi'a 93b-94a, b.'Avodah Zarah 43a). Finally (as discussed below), bandits are often linked to (or confused with) idolaters (e.g., b.Yevamot 115a, b. Bava Kama 116b, b.'Avodah Zarah 25b-26a) or appear in the list "gentiles, robbers or evil spirits" (b.Shabbat 29b, b.Ta'anit 22b).

[22] See previous note, regarding texts that mention together the danger of "idolaters and bandits" or "idolaters, bandits or evil spirits." Moreover, the figures are sometimes actually exchanged, with the character changing from "idolater" to "robber" in the space of one text. See, for example, the continuation of the text discussed below (b.'Avodah Zarah 25b); the text warns against revealing your destination to the "idolater" who joins you on the road, but illustrates this warning with the example of R. 'Akiva's students, who accordingly deceive the "robbers" who join them en route. It is important to note, however, that (although the two are often linked) bandits in rabbinic texts are not necessarily idolators; "Israelite bandits" are also mentioned (see, e.g., b.Gittin 81b, b.Bava Kama 114a, b.'Avodah Zarah 15b). Surely the most notable of Israelite bandits was Resh Lakish, who gave up banditry to become a sage (see b.Bava Metsia 84a). However, Resh Lakish is himself a case for the bandit's otherness; in becoming a sage, he sheds banditry and its (somewhat Roman) demeanor and accouterments. (On Resh Lakish as seemingly "Roman," see e.g., Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, p. 128-9).

[23] b.'Avodah Zarah 25b

[24] I have followed Rashi's interpretation here (see b.'Avodah Zarah 25b: טופלו, בסייף, במקל and טופלו ישראל בשמאולו). However, it is also possible that the first teaching (which advises keeping the stranger on one's right) may in fact be recommending that one assume an apparently appeasing posture, since (as we shall see below) the right side is considered the higher-status position. Be that as it may, the second teaching clearly defines the situation as one of aggression and self-defense.

[25] m.'Avodah Zarah 2.1, explicated on b.'Avodah Zarah 22a-26a. While the Mishnah provides no setting for its warning, the Gemara's explication seems to assume that such an attack would take place on the road.

the midst of a text on the rules pertaining to *tsitsit.*[26] That discussion, in b.Menaḥot, deals with the material and color of the *tsitsit* strands, the proper form of its knots and joints, as well as the appropriate way to obtain, keep and dispose of a garment with *tsitsit* attached.[27] The keyword of this text is *kasher*, since the main issue is what renders the *tsitsit* valid – or not. And yet, when this text forbids the sale of a *tsitsit*-garment to a non-Jew, the prohibition is justified not in terms of desecration, but danger:

> A man may not sell a garment with *tsitsit* to an idolater unless he [first] removes the *tsitsit.* What is the reason? … Rav Yehudah said: Lest [an Israelite] joins him on the road and [the idolater] kills him. [28]

Tsitsit must be removed before selling the garment to an idolater, not because they would be thus defiled, but rather because they may endanger another Jew. The non-Jew wearing a *tsitsit*-garment will give the appearance of being a Jew, an illusion of safety which serves as a trap for his unsuspecting Jewish victim. Rav Yehudah's terse warning – "lest a Jew join him on the road and he kills him!" – seems to deem murder the necessary outcome of such an encounter. This is all the more striking when we note that, as a whole, the discussion in b.Menaḥot evinces a rather neutral attitude towards non-Jews: for instance, declaring that a *tsitsit*-garment bought from a Gentile merchant in the marketplace is *kasher*.[29] Yet when we move to the road, the idolater's presence seems inherently threatening.

Moreover, the danger lies not only in the encounter with the non-Jewish stranger; even travel with a Gentile comrade seems to contain a trace of this threat:

> Abba Yudan of Tsaidan said: Once an Israelite and an idolater went on a journey together, and when the idolater returned, he said: 'Alas for the Jew who was with me on the journey, for he died on the way and I buried him!' [On this testimony, the Israelite's] wife was allowed to remarry. Moreover, once a group of men were going to Antioch, and an idolater came [back] and said: 'Alas for that group of men, for they died and I buried them!' – [on this account] their wives were allowed to remarry. Moreover, once sixty men were going to the camp of Betar, and an idolater came [back] and said, 'Alas for the sixty men who were on the way to Betar, for they died and I buried them!' Their wives were allowed to remarry.[30]

As in the case of the woman returning from abroad, the topic here is the testimony required for a woman's remarriage; here the Bavli elaborates the Mishnah's dictum that the report of a non-Jew may suffice. In the first account, the idolater is clearly a comrade in whose company

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[26] That is, the knotted tassels of thread attached to a *talit* (prayer shawl) or other garment.

[27] See b.Menaḥot 38a-44a, which remarks on m.Menaḥot 4.1: "[the absence of] blue [fringes] does not invalidate the white [fringes]…" Elaborating on the topic of what renders *tsitsit* valid, the Bavli introduces the scenario of selling a *tsitsit*-garment (see below).

[28] b.Menaḥot 43a.

[29] See the teachings just preceding the one above: "If one buys a *tsitsit* garment from an Israelite in the market, it is presumed [valid]; if one buys it from a gentile merchant, it is valid, but from an individual, it is not valid…"

[30] b.Yevamot 122a. (See next note regarding the difference between this text in the Bavli and Tosefta).

the Israelite willingly set out on the road. We have no reason to suspect any misdeed on his part; indeed (by his own report), the idolater behaved righteously by burying his dead companion on the way and returning to report his death. Given this case alone, we might consider the death an unfortunate accident that might have befallen either traveler. Yet the next two accounts seem to undermine this notion. It seems that even strength in numbers is not enough to tip the scale, if a band of Jews – and even great troop of sixty men! – proves more vulnerable than the sole Gentile.[31] Again, there is no indication that the messenger is in any way culpable for the sad news he brings; rather, the number of reported deaths serves to demonstrate the extent to which the non-Jew's testimony is valid – even for the wives of sixty men! And yet, there is something unsettling about the repeated (and worsening) scenario of the non-Jew lamenting, "Alas, that Jew – or band of Jews, or sixty Jews – died on the way and I buried them!" that might lead us to conclude that travel with a Gentile is a bad risk. Perhaps our ears are still ringing with the woman's cry (several pages previous), "Idolaters attacked us and [my husband] died!"[32]

There is a trace of this threat even in a rather triumphant account, in which the Jewish traveler prevails. The story remarks on a tradition regarding the physical cost of grief: "A sigh breaks down half the body." As in the cases above, we begin with an Israelite and idolater traveling together on the road – but here the Israelite has the advantage:

> Rav says: "A sigh breaks down half the body" … Once an Israelite and an idolater were traveling on the road together, and the idolater could not keep up with the Israelite. [When the idolater] reminded him of the destruction of the Temple, [the Israelite] grew faint and sighed. But still the idolater was unable to keep up with him. He said to him, "Don't you-all say that a sigh breaks down half the body?" [The Israelite] said, "That refers only to a new loss, but not this, with which we are familiar. As

[31] The Bavli's account of these three cases differs in significant ways from its precedent in the Tosefta (t.Yevamot 14.10). Perhaps most striking is the Tosefta's different account of the second case; there "the band of men" return to report that "So-and-so the Jew was killed from amongst us." Thus, it seems that the Tosefta's "band of men" is comprised primarily of non-Jews (who survived), accompanied by a Jew (who did not). Moreover, the Tosefta's account of the third case (in which "sixty men went to Betar and not one of them returned") lacks any reference to a gentile returning to report the deaths. Thus, the Tosefta lacks the Bavli's emphasis on the role of the Gentile, and the imbalance indicated by the lone surviving Gentile reporting the deaths of many Jews. Indeed, what binds together the Tosefta's three (somewhat disparate) accounts is not the report of death, but the sages' halakhic assessment of the situation, marked by the phrase that concludes each account: ...ובא מעשה לפני חכמים ("and the matter came before the sages…"). Significantly, the Bavli's accounts are linked instead by the lone Gentile's report, marked by the phrase ...ובא עובד כוכבים ואמר ("and a Gentile came and said...").

[32] And even more so, since the reports of our ostensibly blameless Gentiles are immediately preceded by this account: "Once a certain idolater said to an Israelite: Cut some hay and throw it to my cattle on the Sabbath! If not, I will kill you as I killed So-and-so, that son of an Israelite; I said to him 'Cook me a dish on the Sabbath!' and when he didn't, I killed him!" Once again, the character of the idolater is not the point here; rather, it is that his account enables the dead man's wife (who overhears this exchange) to make a case for her remarriage. Yet this portrayal of an idolater who not only murders, but does so on a whim, casts a pall over the righteous Gentiles who follow him.

people say: a woman accustomed to bereavement is not alarmed [by another loss] …"[33]

Unlike the unfortunate Israelites of our previous accounts, this one is far more vigorous than his Gentile companion. The idolater attempts to use Rav's teaching against his companion; he refers to the destruction of the Temple, in order to grieve and weaken him. Yet while this does cause the Israelite to sigh with sorrow, it fails to slow him down. When the frustrated (and no doubt winded) idolater objects ("but don't you [Jews] say…"), the Israelite explains that an old grief does not have the same devastating effect as a new loss.[34] Thus it seems that the idolater's attack fails because his understanding, like his physical strength, is inferior to that of the Israelite. Although in this case, the idolater apparently intends merely to somewhat weaken – not kill – the Israelite, it is clear that his words are used as a physical weapon, to "break down half the body" of his companion.[35]

Ideological danger

The idolater's attempt to wield a rabbinic teaching should alert us to the danger posed even by strangers who don't carry sticks or swords. At times, that danger is not so much physical as ideological. For instance, when Shim'on b. Elijah is confronted on the road by a man shaking his fist,[36] the stranger wields not a weapon but a polemical argument:

R. Shim'on b. Elijah said:[37] Once, when I was traveling on the road, a man met me and approached me with arm [raised threateningly]. He said to

[33] b.Ketubot 62a. On this text, see Dina Stein, "Collapsing Structures: Discourse and the Destruction of the Temple in the Babylonian Talmud," in *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 8, No. 1, especially p. 10-11.

[34] As Dina Stein has pointed out, the key to the Israelite's explanation (and apparently to his complacency) is his description of the Temple's destruction as הא דשנן בה (that which "has been repeatedly articulated/studied"), indicating that the act of repetition (and indeed of study) has mitigated the loss (see Stein, "Collapsing Structures," p. 11).

[35] Sokoloff's translation (*Babylonian* 189, 136) of the phrase "a woman accustomed to bereavement…." suggests another element to the attack. He renders the word בהתה (translated above as "is not alarmed") as "is not ashamed." From this reading, we might surmise that the idolator's mention of the Temple's destruction could be an attempt to *shame* (as well as grieve) the Israelite, thus weakening him.

[36] The approaching man is described in the text as בא אלי כבא על חבירו בזרוע, which the Soncino translation (see inset quote) renders "…approached me with arm [raised threateningly]." Since "arm raised" is ambiguous in English, I have chosen here the expression "shaking [the] fist," to convey the apparent aggression of the gesture. While the biblical phrase בא על in itself can have the sense "to accost" or "to attack" (see Brown, Driver and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, p. 98), the term בזרוע is commonly used to mean "by force" in Tosefta, Yerushalmi and Bavli (see, e.g., t.Maʿaser Sheni 1.11, t.Sotah 14.1, y.Pesaḥim 31b, y.Sotah 24a, b.Shabbat 56a, b.Kiddushin 71a, and many others). Moreover, the image of the fist is not entirely an import from English, as some of these texts combine this expression with the term *baʿale egrof*: men of violence, lit., "men of the fist" (see, e.g. t.Pesaḥim 3.18, מפני שבעלי אגרוף באין ונוטלין אותו בזרוע). Indeed, the Bavli's version of this passage actually makes the translation, referring instead to *baʿale zeroʾot*: בעלי זרועות נטלי אותן בזרוע (b.Pesaḥim 57a).

[37] Although Margalioth prints the version "R. Shim'on b. Gamiliel said," he notes that *Tana de-rabi Eliyahu* lacks this attribution, instead attributing the teaching to the author of Seder Eliyahu himself, "who is accustomed to telling about his different encounters when he is en route [מהלך בדרכים]." Margalioth surmises that "that the words אמר רשב"ג are a slip of the pen," repeating the attribution just preceding this one in *Ya-yikra Rabbah.*

> me, "You say that seven prophets have risen to warn the [Gentile] nations of the world, but [because they didn't heed] they go down to Gehinnom. But since [the last of those prophets], the nations of the world can say: The Torah was not given to us, nor have we been warned; why should we go down to Gehinnom?" I said to him: "My son, the Sages taught in the Mishnah: When someone converts to Judaism, we extend a hand to bring him beneath the wings of the divine Presence. Since [the time of that last prophet], the converts of each generation warn their own generation."[38]

This stranger may not be armed, but he clearly has an axe to grind with the sages. Like the idolater above, he cites a rabbinic teaching ("you say…"), but this time to contest it. If the Gentiles are condemned because they did not heed their prophets, what of the generations since the last prophet's demise: why should they be condemned? R. Shimʿon seems to fully equal to the challenge, not only parrying the attack with ease, but doing so in a way that further vindicates his cause. The address "my son" bespeaks a magnanimous authority over his interlocutor,[39] while the notion of the "hand extended" to welcome converts seems to overturn the claim of injustice.

Yet, not every traveler is so well-equipped to deflect such attacks. In another account,[40] we find R. Yonatan traveling to Jerusalem by way of Samaria. As he passes Mount Gerizim,[41] the site sacred to the Samaritans, he is accosted by one of the locals:

> A Samaritan saw him and asked, "Where are you going?" He said, "To worship in Jerusalem." [The Samaritan] said: "That dunghill! Wouldn't it be better for you to pray at this blessed mountain?" He asked: "How is it blessed?" [The Samaritan] said "It was not submerged by the Flood." For a moment, R. Yonatan couldn't recall [what to say on] the matter, and didn't answer him.

It seems that traveling by Mt. Gerizim is like walking through an ideologically bad neighborhood.[42] The rather thuggish Samaritan not only challenges the sage, but goes so far as to refer to the site of the Jerusalem Temple as "that dunghill"! Far from having a ready answer, R. Yonatan is nonplussed, and unable to parry the blow. But luckily, he is not alone:

(Margalioth, Mordecai, ed. *Midrash Ṿa-yikra rabbah.* Jerusalem: Ḳeren Yehudah Leb u-Mini Epshṭain, she-ʿal yad ha-Aḳademyah le-Madaʿe ha-Yahadut be-Artsot-ha-Berit, 1953-1960, p. 49).

[38] Leviticus Rabbah 2:9

[39] The identity of the stranger is unclear: is he himself a Gentile? The fact that R. Shimʿon addresses him as "my son" may indicate a near stranger, such as a non-rabbinic Jew, a convert, or perhaps a Christian.

[40] Genesis Rabbah 32:10.

[41] Here called "Palatinus." On this appellation, see Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Travel in Antiquity,* p. 223.

[42] On the mocking Samaritan as a stock figure in rabbinic stories (particularly in Palestinian texts), see Richard Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia between Persia and Roman Palestine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), chapter 4, especially p. 90-94.

> His donkey-driver said to him, "Rabbi, permit me to answer him." [The sage replied,] "Yes, do." [The donkey-driver] said "If [that is one] of the high mountains, it is written: *All the high mountains were covered* (Gen. 7:19). If it is one of the low ones, Scripture didn't even consider it worthy of mention."

The donkey driver succeeds where his master could not. By citing Scripture, he not only overturns the Samaritan's claim, but essentially levels the mountain: either it is a great peak, in which case Scripture specifies that it was indeed submerged in the Flood, or it is such a puny hill that it wasn't even mentioned. The shot seems to hit home, for we hear no more from the Samaritan. Yet the triumph seems to restore R. Yonatan's voice and vigor:

> Right away, R. Yonatan got down from his donkey and made [the driver] ride for three miles. He recited upon him three verses: "*There shall be no barren among you … even among your cattle* [*drivers*]" (Dt. 7:14). "*Your brow* [רקתך] *is like a split pomegranate*" (Song 4:3); even the emptiest *[ריקנים]* among you are as full of answers as a pomegranate [of seeds]! "*No weapon formed against you shall succeed, and every tongue that rises against you in judgment you shall prove wrong; this is the lot of the servants of the Lord!*" (Isa. 54:17).

R. Yonatan rewards his servant by (temporarily) putting him in the master's place – astride the donkey – and praises him by citing three Biblical verses. With his concluding verse (which likens verbal and physical attacks), R. Yonatan makes it quite clear that the dispute with the Samaritan is a battle, and the Samaritan's argument a dangerous weapon. By citing the words of Isaiah, R. Yonatan describes his servant as the people Israel, who through God's favor disprove every calumny, and defeat "every weapon formed against you."

Yet, R. Yonatan also manages to undercut that lavish praise; instead of quoting the exalted final words of the verse – "such is their triumph through Me, says the Lord" – he concludes with a reference to "servants," thus reminding us of the victor's real status.[43] Like his insistence that – *for a time* – the driver take his place astride the donkey, R. Yonatan's speech both elevates the servant and cuts him down to size. This ambivalence is even more pronounced in the sage's (reading of his) first two verses. Punning to find the donkey driver in a biblical reference to "cattle," the sage seems to demote him to a beast, even while extoling him. Moreover, as he praises the driver's mind, R. Yonatan also identifies him as the "emptiest" – thereby re-setting the normal hierarchy of wise to unlearned.[44] It seems that by rescuing his master, the servant has also harmed him in a way that must rectified; R. Yonatan must answer the driver's triumph over the Samaritan with an attack of his own. Thus R.

[43] The story seems to hinge on the surprise of the donkey-driver's erudition, clearly not something we are to expect from someone of his status or profession. In addition to the apparent presumption here that the donkey-driver is '*am ha-arets*, see also the low estimation of donkey drivers in m.Kiddushin 4.14, where this trade is maligned (along with camel-drivers, barbers, sailors, herdsmen and shopkeepers) as "the trade of thieves." While some exception is made for camel-drivers (most of whom are "decent"), we learn that "most donkey-drivers are evil men."

[44] This striking feature of R. Yonatan's speech has been remarked upon by other scholars. See, e.g., Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Travel in Antiquity*, p. 144.

Yonatan's expositions indicate two threats: an external enemy, who attacks (rabbinic) Judaism, and a closer foe, who might usurp the sage's social standing.

Status at risk

The latter concern may seem, to the modern reader, merely a matter of temporary embarrassment. Yet in classical rabbinic texts, loss of face is quite a serious problem and (particularly in the Bavli) can result not only "social death," but can also be physically harmful – or fatal.[45] Moreover, it seems that the danger arises not only for those who chance to travel with exceptionally erudite servants; rather, the very fact of being on the road can threaten social hierarchy. Indeed, the risk to one's status – even from one's helpers – seems inherent to travel:

> *And he went, he and two men with him* (I Sam 28:8) … R. Aibu said: Here Torah teaches you proper conduct:[46] that a man should not set out on the road with less than two [accompanying him], for if he does, he will end up as the servant to his servant![47]

This rather practical teaching indicates how easily are the mighty fallen – when on the road. One must never travel with only one servant, for if something happens to the servant, his master must tend him, thus becoming like a servant himself. Outside of town, the master's status seems easily toppled; indeed, where distinction can so easily collapse, it seems that the social hierarchy itself has become shaky.

Such upheaval is of particular concern among the sages themselves, as we can see from texts that mark the position of traveling sages. Perhaps the most obvious such indicator is the image of master astride a donkey, with his student(s) following behind, familiar from such scenes as, "Yoḥanan b. Zakkai was leaving Jerusalem riding a donkey, and his students were walking after him."[48] The donkey serves as a clear status marker, elevating the master and placing him in front, with the students situated physically as suits their figurative role as followers. Another such image of Yoḥanan b. Zakkai, "traveling on the road riding a donkey, with Elʿazar b. ʿArakh driving the donkey from behind…"[49] makes it clear that a student may

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[45] On the costs, particularly in Babylonian texts, of losing face, see Jeffrey Rubenstein, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), chapter 4 ("Shame"). While recognizing the violent (and sometimes fatal) effect of shame in these texts, Rubenstein's main concern is its emotional and social consequences.

[46] The term used here for "proper conduct" is *derekh erets*, which provides a nice resonance with (and slight pun upon) the following phrase "a man should not set out on the road […*yotse la-derekh*]":
... דרך ארץ שלא יהא אדם יוצא לדרך

[47] Leviticus Rabbah 26.7. R. Aibu cites I Samuel 28:8.

[48] b.Ketubot 66b. See also b.Ḥagigah 14b (another image of Yoḥanan b. Zakkai), and b.ʿEruvin 64b (where Rabban Gamliel rides a donkey, with R. Ilaʿi walking behind), as well as texts in which mounted Amora'im are followed by their students, such as b.Berakhot 33b (R. Zera and R. Ḥiyya b. Abin) – and the variation on this theme in b.Pesaḥim 53b (where ʿUlla rides a donkey with R. Abba and Rabbah bar Bar Ḥanah at his right and left) b.Ḥagigah 15a (where Aḥer rides a horse, with R. Meir following behind).

[49] b.Ḥagigah 14b (regarding this story, see chapter 3 below).

occupy not merely the physical spot but also the role of servant.[50] Here, practicality meshes with status: since sages ride donkeys (not horses), and donkeys are driven from behind (not led from the front), the student's necessary position behind the donkey also suits his station. However, in the (perhaps more common) case, where all parties travel on foot, horizontal position is what counts; hence the many texts in which masters walk in front, and students follow behind, such as this scene of Tannaim traveling with their entourage: "R. Ishmael, R. ʿAkiva and R. Elʿazar b. ʿAzaryah were traveling on the road, with Levi ha-Sadar and R. Ishmael b. Elʿazar b. ʿAzaryah following."[51] Moreover, in addition to placement front and back, we also find status marked laterally, with the right side deemed "higher":

> Rav Yehudah said: Whoever walks at his master's right hand is a boor! [Yet] we learned [in the Mishnah: "The High Priest went out, with] the deputy High Priest at his right and the Head of Household at his left"! [From this, we learn that] when three are walking, the teacher should walk in the middle, the greater of his students to his right and the lesser to the left.[52]

Rav Yehudah's teaching is borne out in such scenarios as "Abaye was walking, with Rav Papa on his right and Rav Huna b. Yehoshuʿa on his right" and "'Ulla was traveling riding on a donkey, with R. Abba on his right and Rabbah bar b. Ḥana on his left."[53]

We might well note an obvious feature of these texts: they do not seem to picture more than three traveling abreast. Indeed, in contrast to the notion of an "open road" (or the evidence of broad Roman highways), here the road seems a rather narrow place. Hence, the importance of adjusting even the modest guidelines above, when that narrowness requires one person to pass or walk in front of the other.[54] Presumably, in such cases, one would always

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[50] Thus, where the image of scholars "walking behind" a master signifies their metaphoric "following" of his teaching, here b.ʿArakh's position and role intimates the act (and institution) of "serving" (שמש) a scholar as his disciple.

[51] b.Yoma 85a. See also R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's report, "Once I was walking behind the eminent R. Elʿazar ha-Kappar on the road…" (b.ʿAvodah Zarah 43a). For the same image of *Amora'im*, see for example: b.Shabbat 108b (Ravin behind R. Yirmiyah) and 112a (R. Yirmiyah behind R. Abahu), as well as b.Menaḥot 37b (Ravina behind Mar son of Rav Ashi).

[52] b.Yoma 37a, where the reference (in m.Yoma 3.9) is to the Temple rite on Yom Kippur.

[53] The texts are b.Pesaḥim 111b and 53b. Status is a key factor in both stories. In b.Pesaḥim 111b, Rav Papa objects when the master temporarily reverses the students' positions; in b.Pesaḥim 53b, Rabbah bar b. Ḥanah's lesser status seems proven, when his version of 'Ulla's teaching meets with the master's disapproval. This model – in which the most prominent sage has the middle position – may even underlie the above account of R. ʿAkiva's traveling party, if we read the list as a description right to left (with R. Ishmael in second place and R. Elʿazar b. ʿAzaryah third).

[54] That passing on the road – or waterway – was deemed a commonplace necessity is also indicated by quite a different kind of text; in b.Sanhedrin 32b, the resolution of conflicting biblical verses, and the reconciliation of strict to lenient judgment is illustrated by a pair of apparently ordinary, homely scenarios: "*As it has been taught: Justice, justice shalt thou follow*; one ["justice" means strict judgment]. How so? When two boats sailing on a river meet, if both try to pass at once, both will sink. But if one goes after the other, both can pass. If two camels climbing the rise to Bet-Ḥoron met, and both go up [at once], both fall. But if one goes after the other, both go up. How is that? If one has a load and the other does not, the one without a load gives way to the laden one …"

give precedence to one's master – and yet travel does seem to strain the limits of normal practice.

That tension is evident in the following text from tractate Berakhot, which concerns the importance of marking rank at a meal.[55] Travel enters the picture only when we consider exceptions to the rule: "Our sages taught: We do not honor others [by letting them go first] on the road or on a bridge or when washing greasy hands after a meal." Clearly, the exigencies of travel trump gestures of respect; road and bridge seem to indicate the sort of dangers that justify suspension of the normal rules. Moreover, the fact that these sites are listed alongside "greasy hands" seems to indicate that they are not only dangerous, but also uncomfortably "sticky" or slippery situations. In such cases, the baraita tells us, the social graces must be put aside. Yet no sooner is this stated, than the downside of the practice is shown:

> Once Ravin and Abaye were on the road and Ravin's donkey got in front of Abaye's, yet [Ravin] did not say to him: Master, go ahead. Abaye said [to himself]: This one is haughty, since he's returned from the West! When [they] arrived at the door of the synagogue, [Ravin] said, Master, go ahead.[Abaye] said to him: And until now, was I not Master?[56]

Although Ravin acts in accordance with the traditional teaching just cited, Abaye seems offended by this "haughty" behavior, supposing it to be an unpleasant effect of Ravin's sojourn among the Palestinian sages. Yet Abaye makes no remark until the two arrive at the threshold of the synagogue, where Ravin resumes the gestures of respect. This gives Abaye the perfect opening to point out the earlier gaffe: "And until now, was I not Master?" His point is clear: On the road, you failed to honor me as you should![57] And yet – perhaps there is also a note of ambivalence in the story. While Abaye's restraint en route enables him to deliver quite a zinger at journey's end, the fact that he refrains from commenting until safely home might also indicate an uncomfortable concession to the necessity of Ravin's behavior. Just behind Abaye's rhetorical (even sarcastic) question, we may hear its rather plain and straightforward echo: "Was I truly not Master on the way?" Without the gestures that mark it, does social distinction evaporate?

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[55] See b.Berakhot 46b. Here, rabbinic practices (reported by Rav Sheshet) are contrasted with the (rather similar) "Persian" practices (reported by the Exilarch). In both cases, rank is marked by the order in which diners sit and wash, as well as by their position. Indeed, Rav Sheshet's report will remind us of the discourse above on the proper positions of master and students on the road: "What is the order of reclining? When there are two couches, the senior reclines first and then the junior takes his place below him. When there are three couches, the senior takes his place first, the second next above him, and the third one below him." See also b.Kiddushin 32a-b, which disputes whether a rabbi may (or may not) forgo the honor due him. This matter is disputed precisely through accounts of mealtime etiquette. In each account, a high-ranking host stands to serve wine to his seated guests; however, this demeanor of hospitable graciousness dissolves when some of those guests fail to stand up before him (thus apparently placing him in an actual, rather than token position of "serving," i.e., שמש).

[56] b.Berakhot 46b-47a.

[57] It should be noted that, although Ravin addresses Abaye as "Master" (and Abaye insists on being so addressed), it does not seem that theirs was (strictly speaking) the relationship of master and disciple. Rather, it seems that Ravin was more like Abaye's (junior?) colleague. If so, the story indicates that even – or perhaps *especially* – where the gap in rank was relatively small (i.e., as compared to the greater distance between master and servant, or master and student), gestures of honor are crucial.

A similar incident is recounted in tractate Shabbat. Here, the topic at hand is the prohibition of carrying objects from one domain to another on Shabbat, and specifically whether work animals may go out bearing bridle, bit or muzzle.[58] The gemara recounts a Tannaitic dispute on the matter ("A beast may not go forth with a muzzle. [But] Ḥananyah said: It *may* go forth with a muzzle…"), and the Amoraic ruling: "Rav Huna b. Ḥiyya said… The *halakhah* is according to Ḥananyah." The same Huna b. Ḥiyya figures in the subsequent story, where we find his son, Levi, on the road:

> Levi son of Rav Huna b. Ḥiyya and Rabbah b. Rav Huna were traveling on the road, when Levi's donkey got in front of the donkey of Rabbah b. Rav Huna, who was upset. [Levi thought]: I will say something to him to put him at ease. He said: A donkey with evil ways such as this one, may it go forth on Shabbat bearing a muzzle? [His companion] said to him: Thus said your father…The halakhah is according to Ḥananyah.[59]

Once again, a sage is insulted when his companion passes him on the road. But here, Levi (who seems more alert to the problem than Ravin) immediately tries to undo the damage. By blaming his "bad donkey," Levi implies that the slight was unintentional, while at the same time appeasing his companion by asking his judgment on a legal question. But perhaps, like Ravin's belated gesture of respect, Levi's appeasement works both ways. While Levi's query essentially places his companion "in front" by appealing to his learning, it also causes him to cite the ruling of Levi's own father – perhaps thus subtly nudging Levi himself back towards the lead.

The tensions expressed rather subtly in the stories above are rather more loudly voiced in our next text. As in the story of Ravin and Abaye, here the topic of passing on the road is raised within the context of exceptions or permissions granted to travelers. The gemara (in b.Bava Kama 80b) cites a tradition stating that when (the biblical) Joshua entered the land of Israel, he made special allowances for use of the land. Some of these stipulations allow entry into or use of private fields or paths:

> [Joshua stipulated …] that [the public] be permitted to use the paths in private fields until the second rainfall; that they may turn aside to [private] sidewalks in order to avoid the road-pegs; that whoever gets lost in the vineyards may cut his way through when going up and when coming down….[60]

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[58] b.Shabbat 51b. The discussion derives from m.Shabbat 5.1: "With what may a beast go forth [on Shabbat] and with what may it not go forth? A camel may go forth with a bit, a dromedary with its nose-ring, a Lybian donkey with a halter [פרומביא], a horse with its chain…" The gemara then cites a tannaitic dispute, which, using somewhat different language, considers whether "a beast may go forth with a muzzle [סוגר]…"

[59] b.Shabbat 51b-52a.

[60] b.Bava Kama 80b-81a (see also b.ʿEruvin 17a). Also included among these stipulations (indeed, immediately following those quoted above) is the rule, **"**the *met mitsẏah* acquires [the right to be buried in] the place [where it is found]."

All would seem to be well for those travelers who at times must use private roads or fields. And yet, when the gemara elucidates the permission to "turn aside to [private] sidewalks," it is with the following account:[61]

> Rabbi and R. Ḥiyya were walking on the road, and they turned aside to the [private] sidewalks, while R. Yehudah b. Kenosa went striding along the main road in front of them. Rabbi said to R. Ḥiyya: Who is that man showing off before us? R. Ḥiyya said to him: Perhaps it is my student, R. Yehudah b. Kenosa – but all his deeds are in the name of heaven! When they drew near enough to see him, he said: Were you not Yehudah b. Kenosa, I would have cut off your legs with an iron saw![62]

Keeping to the rough and difficult main road, R. Yehudah b. Kenosa seems to be making a show of his piety, by refusing to use the private side paths, even though this is permitted. Such ostentation – or even the appearance of it – enrages his elders.[63] The violence of the response –"I would have cut off your legs" – is not much checked by the rather weak rein of the subjunctive; clearly Yehudah b. Kenosa's perceived action is so offensive that even the knowledge of his unimpeachable character cannot fully atone for it. Perhaps the assurance that Yehudah b. Kenosa is no show-off is insufficient precisely because showing off is not his main offense. We should recall Rabbi's complaint: "Who is that man showing off *in front of us*?" – particularly in light of what we learned above regarding the student's proper place (beside or behind his master). I would suggest that this student's act of passing and overtaking his elders on the road is in itself extremely offensive, and the appearance of ostentatious piety makes it only more so.[64]

Thus it seems that the problem of maintaining social status, while certainly a concern at home, is aggravated (and indeed made more blatant) on the road. On a basic level, it seems that it is more difficult to maintain one's "standing" while in motion. We may well imagine that distance from the structures of home and town might blur or weaken such distinctions;

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[61] b.Bava Kama 81b. Preceding this account is a story that extends Joshua's permissions: "Shemu'el and Rav Yehudah were walking on the road, and Shemu'el turned aside to the [private] sidewalk. Rav Yehudah said to him: Are Joshua's stipulations [valid] even in Babylon? He answered: I say even outside the land [of Israel]."

[62] This seems to me the plain meaning of the expression גזרתינהו לשקך בגיזרא דפרזלא, and the translation that best suits the context. The shocking violence of the remark should not distract us from its logic: the one who dares to "stride ahead" should be punished by having his legs his cut off. (See also Rubenstein, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*, p. 54, for the same translation). Other renderings seem to diminish that violence. The Soncino translation ("I would have sawed your joints with an iron saw!") somewhat blurs the image, whereas Sokoloff (*Babylonian*, 276) seems almost to erase it, by rendering the phrase, "I would have shorn your legs with iron shears [i.e. excommunicated you]." While it is certainly possible that the phrase has this figurative meaning (as per Rashi), the word "shorn" (which has the connotation of fleecing or shaving) does not quite capture the image of amputation by which that meaning is probably invoked.

[63] It is not clear which sage addresses R. Yehudah b. Kenosa. Some assume that the speaker is R. Ḥiyya (see e.g., the Soncino translation), perhaps because "seeing him" would only be significant for his teacher, who could recognize him. This would mean that even the man who knows his goodness is nonetheless enraged to the point of (nearly) threatening to dismember him.

[64] And worse: with b. Kenosa striding ahead, how did the sages "draw near enough to see him"? If (like the hapless idolater above) the sages had to struggle to catch up, and the vituperative words were uttered pantingly – how much more so!

yet it also it seems that there is something about the road itself that threatens to reverse or flip the hierarchy.

Leaving women behind

Should the traveler through rabbinic texts succeed in protecting his life, limb, purse, ideas and social standing, the path is still not clear, for there are more dangers along the way. One of those risks is sexual temptation, for being on the road seems to intensify sexual desire, both on the way and at home. One indication of the danger is the warning, "Never walk behind a woman on the road."[65]

Yet, considering the importance of position en route, we might at first assume that this is a teaching about maintaining proper hierarchy. Moreover, the context of this dictum is a discourse on the creation of man and woman – a familiar proof for the idea of male dominance. Alongside the familiar story of Eve created from Adam, this text presents an alternate scenario: the primordial androgyne, a creature "with two faces," front and back.[66] Yet, while the notion of simultaneous creation could serve as an alternative to the model of male dominance, it does not do so here:

> Which of the two faces went in front? Rav Naḥman b. Yitsḥak said: It makes sense that the man's face went in front, since it has been taught: A man should not walk behind a woman on the road. And even if his wife happens to be in front of him on a bridge, he should have her move to one side. And whoever crosses a river behind a woman has no portion in the World to Come.[67]

Thus, woman's place is (once again) inscribed in her very creation; or rather, woman's current place "behind" man reveals her origin.[68] It "makes sense" that the man should be in front, as his is the higher social position.[69]

Yet the next teaching hints at a different reason for the rule: "R. Yoḥanan said: Better to follow a lion than a woman; better to follow a woman than an idol …" This tiny parade –

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[65] b.Berakhot 61a. See also b.ʿEruvin 18b.

[66] This notion, often proved by Gen. 1:27 ("And God created man in his image … male and female created He them") is here derived from the account (in Gen. 2:7) of the creation of the lone Adam: *Then the Lord God formed* [וייצר] *man."* The doubling of the letter *yod* in the word "He formed" is read as indication of a double-ness in the creature. According to Rav Naḥman b. Ḥisda, this indicates the creation of the two *yetsarim* (good and evil), but for R. Yermiyah b. Elʿazar, it is a physical double-ness: a creature with two sides, front and back. (For precedents of these teachings, see Genesis Rabbah 14:2-4, and 8:1, as well as Leviticus Rabbah 14:1).

[67] b.Berakhot 61a. For precedents of this teaching, see for example, Genesis Rabbah 60:14 ("*Rebecca and her maids rose and followed after him* – because it is improper for a man to follow after a woman!") and *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* 2.2 (on the latter, see note 72, below).

[68] That is, although we might expect the biblical text to serve as proof for current custom, here that custom is brought to prove the nature of the original human - and to translate the biblical text.

[69] The following bit of one-upmanship only reinforces the theme of dominance: "Rav Naḥman said: [We know that] Manoaḥ was an ignorant man, since it is written [Jud. 13:11]: *And Manoaḥ went after his wife* … Rav Ashi said: [Clearly Rav Naḥman] didn't even learn Scripture in the schoolhouse! For [one may easily justify the rule from the Pentateuch, where] it is written [Gen. 24:61] *And Rebekah and her maids arose, mounted camels, and went after the man* – not before the man!"

with woman set precisely between signs of danger and of transgression – may well cause us to reconsider the original teaching above. It too presents us with a graded scale in its warnings about road, bridge and river.[70] While walking behind a woman on the road is clearly a problem, the bridge seems worse, for here one must avoid following "even one's own wife," whereas crossing a river behind a woman means eternal damnation! Yet, if the issue is male dominance – so often proven by the first couple – why should "one's own wife" be any kind of exception? Indeed, why should the location matter at all?

Rather, it seems that walking behind a woman places the traveling man in an additional sort of dangerous – or "sticky" – situation. This seems to be a position that tempts desire, perhaps because the woman is constantly in view – or because of what one may see from that vantage point. The severity of the warning regarding the river indicates the greatest risk; presumably because (as Rashi suggests), here a woman is likely to lift her dress somewhat to keep it dry, thus revealing more of her body.[71] The same may be true of a bridge, particularly if one must ascend it; and the fact that this site is problematic even for the man traveling with his own wife (for whom surely desire is permitted) seems to indicate that it is a particularly "sexy" location, likely to incite desire in a way that threatens normal decorum.[72]

Indeed, gazing on a woman from behind seems to unsettle even the stalwart:

> Rav and Rav Yehudah were walking on a road, and a woman was walking in front of them. Rav said to Rav Yehudah: Lift your feet before Gehinnom! [Rav Yehudah] said to him: But Master, [you] said that it is alright for proper men [to be alone with a woman]. He said: Who says that proper men means such as you and I?[73]

Seeing a woman on the road ahead of them, Rav urges his student to hurry up. "Get a move on," he says, "lest we be plunged into Hell." Once again, the view of a woman from behind is

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[70] The locations "on road or bridge" may well remind us of the warning above (from the b.Berakhot 46b), regarding the problem giving precedence while en route; yet, at the very sites where that teaching required disruption of hierarchy, this one insists on its maintenance.

[71] See Rashi, b.Berakhot 61a, אחורי אשה בנהר. In addition to this immediate concern, the river may have a particularly "sexy" aura, due to its association with bathing (and perhaps even with menstrual immersion). For an example of the river as the scene of bathing and seduction, we need only turn to the famous story of the meeting of R. Yoḥanan and Resh Lakish in b.Bava Metsi'a 84a.

[72] While certainly desire for one's wife is allowed, the teaching seems to promote a certain moderation and propriety with regard to sexual matters, by attempting to protect men from undue stimulation. Alternately, the teaching might imply that following behind one's wife may seem less risky, if – perhaps due to familiarity – one is less likely to become enflamed by desire. See the similar warning, in *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* 2.2, against "passing behind a woman in the marketplace, even one's own wife." Familiarity does seem to be an issue in the larger context of that text (in which, for example, a man is punished for becoming lax over the years regarding menstrual separation from his wife); it causes men to become careless. Yet when it comes to public situations, that text seems more concerned with reputation than with actual temptation; "people will talk" [תענות/דעת הבריות] is the justification for warnings against "staying alone with a woman in an inn," "talking with a woman in the marketplace," and "walking behind a woman in the marketplace." Although the worry about what people might say seems warranted in places like the inn and marketplace, it is not clear to me that it is as relevant (as Hezser suggests, p. 407) to the Bavli's warnings regarding the road (which in fact make no mention of this issue).

[73] b.Kiddushin 81a

associated with damnation; indeed, here the woman seems to embody both temptation and punishment – which can only be safely avoided when put (physically) behind.

The two sages allude to (Rav's teachings on) m.Kiddushin 4.12: "A man may not be alone with two women, but a woman may be alone with two men…" The mishnah indicates that where more women spell more danger, the presence of more men is a protection against transgression. And yet, in Rav's explication of that mishnah, even the permitted, safer situation seems risky – particularly when we change the scene:

> Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav: [The rule that one woman may be alone with two men applies only] in town, but on the road, three are necessary. For [if there are only two men and] one goes off to urinate, the other will be left alone with a forbidden woman![74]

According to Rav, what may suffice as protection in town simply won't do while traveling. Just as in the scenario of "master serving servant," here the road increases a danger against which greater numbers may provide some protection. And yet, there is not necessarily safety in numbers either, for in the same passage we learn:

> Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav: [The rule that one woman may be alone with two men applies only] to proper men, but as for wanton men, not even ten is enough…! Once ten men carried a woman out [of town] on a bier [to have sex with her]![51]

If they are the wrong kind of men, Rav warns, a greater number is no help at all: quite the opposite, as his lurid proof aptly demonstrates. We should note that, although stating a general rule here, Rav once again situates sexual misdeed outside of town. Whereas in the first teaching, the road signified greater vulnerability to temptation, here it is means a more heinous transgression. Thus, where above, Rav put a dent in the mishnah's assurance, here he seems to threaten it altogether.

Rav's teachings are entwined with yet another key text about sexual transgression:[75] Mishnah Sotah. Here it is precisely "one's own wife" that is the problem; yet while the suspected adulteress is the topic of the tractate, it is not only her temptations that are a worry. The *sotah* who has been formally warned, and against whom there is subsequent evidence, is off-limits to her husband sexually; having sex with his wife – now essentially a forbidden woman – can even invalidate his claim against her. The mishnah seems untroubled by this situation, until we arrive at the next step in the legal process: the journey to Jerusalem: "What does [the husband] do with her? He brings her to the local court of law, and they send two disciples of the sages with him, lest he have sex with her on the way."[76] It seems that on the

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[74] b.Kiddushin 81a.

[75] Actually, Rav's teaching appears in three Bavli texts, all linked by the theme of sexual transgression: b.Kiddushin 81a (discussed above), b.Sotah 7a (discussed below), and b.ʿAvodah Zarah 25b. The last text explicates m.ʿAvodah Zarah 2.1 "A woman should not be alone with idolaters, since they are suspected of wantonness," and cites Rav's teaching on the ten men. (This text immediately precedes the gemara's elaboration of the mishnah "A man should not be alone with idolaters," and the case of the armed idolater, which we read above).

[76] m.Sotah 1.3.

road, even the husband with cause for estrangement from his wife is in considerable danger of sexual entanglement with her. The two *talmide ḥakhamim* serve in part to protect the man's own interests by protecting him from himself – or more precisely his desire for his wife.

The gemara's elaboration of this dictum refers back to Rav's teachings:

> Two [disciples of the Sages] and he make three [men]. May we say that this supports the teaching of Rav? For Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav: [The rule that a woman may be alone with two men applies] only in town, but on the road there must be three, for if [there are only two men and] one of them has to go relieve himself, then one will be left alone with a forbidden woman! No, here the reason is that [the two other men] should be witnesses against him. [But the fact that they must be] disciples of the Sages and not just any men: doesn't this support another teaching of Rav? For Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav: [The rule that a woman may be alone with two men applies only] to proper men, but as for wanton men, not even ten is enough! For once ten men took a woman out [of town] on a bier [to have sex with her]! No, here the reason is that they should warn him.[77]

Here, the dispute concerns the exact role of the escorts: are they there to prevent the husband – and each other – from having sex with this forbidden woman, or are they there simply to act as witnesses in the event that the husband succumbs to temptation and thus invalidates his claim against his wife?[78] The discussion seems to intensify the mishnah's notion that the road is the site of sexual temptation; here, not only the husband, but also the esteemed escorts seem susceptible. Although the gemara finally insists that the escorts' role is purely that of witnesses (not fallible men who must protect one another from temptation), the course of its discussion only heightens the sense of sexual risk, as it considers a series of scenarios that are increasingly shocking: the husband who has sex with his own (forbidden) wife; scholars who have sex with another man's wife; ten men who smuggle a woman out of town to molest her.

Yet this association of the road with temptation – and indeed, with sexual transgression – belongs not only to Rav's reasoning or to the themes of tractate Sotah. These notions appear, for example, in quite a different sort of text: the tale of a man who lusts after his master's wife.[79] The servant contrives a tryst by suggesting that the wife come to get some money he has offered to lend his master. When, after three days, the master asks "where is my wife whom I sent to you?" the servant lies, saying, "I sent her away immediately, but I heard that boys violated her on the road!"[80] This lie, told to cover up the fact that the wife is still with him, is immediately accepted by the husband, who responds, "What shall I do?" The tale – which ends with the servant claiming not only the money and the wife, but also making his master a servant – does not set out to describe real conditions; it is a homiletical folktale linked to the exegesis of a bible verse. Yet, as a story, it demands that

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[77] b.Sotah 7a.

[78] Or, in the final formulation, to warn him away from temptation.

[79] b.Gitin 58a.

[80] "ושמעתי שהתינוקות נתעללו בה בדרך." The perpetrators are described as youngsters (תינוקות). On the verb נתעללו, see Jastrow (1084) and Sokoloff (*Babylonian*, p. 864-866).

the servant's alibi seem likely both to the husband and the story's audience. It demonstrates that sexual transgression on the road is a familiar and probable scenario.

Although that alibi hints that sexual danger on the road may in fact be greatest for women, our texts often focus on the sexual risk faced by traveling men. It seems that even for "proper men," the encounter with (or the hinter view of) a woman on the road is dangerous, precisely because it may incite desire. It seems that once a man leaves the town limits, his desire is also somewhat less bounded and he is more at risk of being ruled by it. Moreover, the traveling man runs a risk not only with regards to the women he encounters on the way, but also those he leaves at home.

In Bavli Yevamot – within a discussion of man's duty to marry and produce children – we find this pair of teachings regarding a man's obligation to "visit" (i.e., to have sex with) his wife:

> R. Yehoshu'a b. Levi said: One who knows his wife to be a God-fearing woman and does not visit her is called a sinner; for it is said, *And you will know that all is well in your tent*… (Job 5:24)
>
> And R. Yehoshu'a b. Levi said: A man must visit his wife when he is leaving on a journey, for it is said: *And you shall know that all is well in your tent.*
>
> But is this [duty] derived from [that verse]? Rather, it is derived from here: *And towards your husband shall be your desire* (Gen. 3:16) – this teaches that a woman desires her husband when he sets out on a journey.[81]

R. Yehoshu'a b. Levi draws his lessons from the verse: "And you will know that all is well in your tent; when you visit your home, you shall not sin." His proof hinges on the latter (unquoted) part of the verse, which he reads as causative: "If you 'visit' your home (understood in the rabbinic sense as "wife"), you will not be a sinner – but failing to do so is a sin!" This nimble reading yields two lessons: a man must have sex with his wife – and particularly when he is about to go on a journey. Yet, an objection is raised regarding that second duty: isn't it to be derived from Genesis 3:16 ("And towards your husband shall be your desire")?

The objection seems to refer to this tradition:[82]

> Eve was cursed with ten curses, as it is written (Gen. 3:16): *To the woman [God] said, I will greatly increase* – [meaning] two drops of blood: one of menstruation and the other of virginity; *Your pain* – [meaning] the trouble of raising children; *And your childbearing* – [meaning] pregnancy; *In pain shall you bring forth children* – just as it says; *And towards your husband shall be your desire* teaches that a woman desires her husband when he

[81] b.Yevamot 62b. Rav Yosef resolves the dilemma by specifying that the latter verse ("your desire shall be towards your husband") applies only to cases in which the woman's menstrual period is imminent.

[82] It is possible, as well, that the Yevamot text may refer to another (no longer extant) text or tradition either containing only this reading of "towards your husband" or which sets that reading in a different context.

> sets out on a journey; *And he shall rule over you* teaches that while a woman asks [for sex] with her heart, a man does with words …[83]

This midrash expands upon the biblical punishment of Eve (and thus womankind) to derive several more "curses," including her increased desire precisely when her husband is about to leave her. This reading of the phrase "*towards your husband shall be your desire*" hinges on its first word ("towards"), understood as indicating a *distance* between the woman and the object of her desire. As in the Yevamot text above, the topic here is sexual duty; the "ten curses" are preceded by such teachings as "Whoever forces his wife to [sexual] duty will have unworthy children" and "A woman who demands that her husband [fulfill his sexual] duty will have [admirable] children…"[84] The "Ten curses" tradition indicates that fulfillment is made more difficult for women due to their subservience ("he shall rule over you"), as well as their sexual deprivation when their husbands are away.

But according to R. Yehoshu'a b. Levi, a woman's need becomes her husband's obligation. The notion that a man must have sex with his wife before departing seems to extend the rabbinic rule that a man is obliged to satisfy his wife's desire – how much more so here when it is greater! And presumably, the man does so in part to diminish or forestall the discomfort of their separation, which for her must be a sexual desert. Men might well worry that, if women experience such premonitory desire before, what must they experience *during* separation? For, after all, women are not camels; the thirst must return, even after one last long drink. Indeed, our next text concerns just that: a woman's unfulfilled desire for her absent husband. The case arises within a discussion of menstrual blood, in which we learn of the expertise of R. El'azar, who could correctly analyze any blood sample shown him.

> And why was [R. El'azar] described as the master in the Land of Israel [at determining types of blood]? Because once a woman brought some blood to R. El'azar, when R. Ammi was sitting with him. [R. El'azar] smelled it and said to her: This is the blood of lust. After she went out, R. Ammi joined her and she said to him: [It's true,] my husband was away on a journey and I was lusting for him.[85]

Whereas the "Ten curses" tradition describes woman's desire as hidden and silent ("in her heart"), here it has a sign and a smell; it is strong enough to cause a flux of blood.[86] Ironically, the message of this woman's unfulfilled desire is received not by her husband but

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[83] b.'Eruvin 100b. See also the (almost identical) text in *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* 1.7.

[84] Literally, "the like of which were not even in the generation of Moses!" The "ten curses" tradition is brought as an argument against the notion that a woman should demand sex like the biblical Leah ("sleep with me, for I have hired you!"); specifically, its gloss of "and he shall rule over you" presents a different view: that while men may demand sex with words [בפה], women may only do so "with their heart" [בלב] – that is, such demands can never be direct.

[85] b.Niddah 20b. See also the following Babylonian version of the story, in which Rava correctly identifies as "the blood of lust" a sample sent to him by no less than the Babylonian Queen Mother (i.e., Ifra Hormiz, mother of King Shapur).

[86] See Charlotte Fonrobert (*Menstrual Purity*, p. 117, note 39 261-2), who notes the dearth of scholarly remark upon "the blood of desire." It's worth noting that in all three texts above (b.Yevamot 62b, b.'Eruvin 100b and b.Niddah 20b), women's sexual desire is somehow linked to blood. Although rabbinic law separates the two, these texts seem to indicate an association between them.

another man: the rabbinic expert. The woman's blood seems a sort of lost letter, never read by its addressee. Yet, even the distant husband (who also inhabits this textual world) must know that his departure and absence has incited his wife's desire "towards him"; he may well be troubled by the fact that he is not home to satisfy his wife's desire – and perhaps prevent her from straying. Indeed, his ears may well ring with the Scriptural words: "*Come, let us drink our fill of love till morning…, for my husband is not at home, he has gone on a journey far away …*"[87]

In our previous texts, the danger lay in *man's* desire (signified by the woman walking before him); here, as the desirous woman's "red letter" indicates, it is woman's lust that may pose a problem. Nonetheless, in both cases, it is the road – the act of traveling – that intensifies sexual desire: both for the man enflamed by temptation en route, and for the woman who lusts for him (or perhaps for someone else!) at home.

Moreover, the woman at home alerts us to a new sort of danger. Up to this point, travel danger, in its various forms, has arisen in the encounter with a stranger (or even a companion) on the road; like the robber, the idolater, and the polemical stranger, the woman encountered on the road poses an immediate threat to the traveler. Yet, the problem of the wife left behind indicates that the act of traveling also means risking harm to one's interests (and as we shall see, one's position) at home.

Status at home

While the knowledge of his wife's unfulfilled desire might worry the traveling man, her other needs may be of more immediate concern. Mishnah Ketubot posits several cases on the subject, such as: "He who went overseas and his wife claimed maintenance," and "He who went overseas and someone else went and supported his wife" – as well as cases in which a woman attempts to claim her *ketubah* "in [her husband's] absence," where "his absence" is specifically defined as "he went overseas" [הלך למדינת הים].[88] Indeed, the many cases in seder Nashim, concerning "[a man] who went overseas" give some sense of the domestic difficulties associated with travel and the distance between spouses.[89] Yet, even if husband and wife travel together, there is still danger – perhaps a greater danger, if we are to judge by the Mishnah's many cases beginning, "The woman who went with her husband overseas, and returned, saying 'my husband died…'"[90] Although modern readers of this repeated scenario

[87] Proverbs 7:18-19, the archetypal scenario of the "strange woman," who seduces the foolish youth. The expression "on a journey far away" (הָלַךְ בְּדֶרֶךְ מֵרָחוֹק) echoes the words of Numbers 9:10 (בְּדֶרֶךְ רְחֹקָה), which will figure in our discussion below.

[88] See m.Ketubot 13.1-2 (in which the wife seeks or receives maintenance) and m.Ketubot 9.7-8 (in which the wife attempts to claim her *ketubah* "in his absence").

[89] See m.Yevamot 4.6, 10.1, 10.3-4, 15.1, 15.6, 15.8-10, 16.1; m.Gitin 3.3, 7.7-9; m.Ketubot 9.7-8, 13.1-2, 13.7; m.Kiddushin 4.10-11, some of which are discussed below. The Mishnah's emphasis on the problem of sending a *get* [bill of divorce] from overseas (see m.Gitin, 1.1-3, 2.1, 3.6, 6.3 and Yevamot 2.9) – and the fact that tractate Gitin actually begins with this question – may be further testament to such difficulties. See also m.Gitin 7:7-9, on the traveler's conditional *get*, "if I don't return in 30 days" or "- in 12 months." On the need to testify to the identity of the wife and children with whom one returns from overseas, see m.Kiddushin 4:10-11. Again, my focus here is on what the texts express about the significance and connotations of "the road" and travel; for a discussion of these texts in terms of the historical and social reality of Jewish life in late antiquity, see Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Travel in Late Antiquity*, especially p. 285-298.

[90] See m.Yevamot 15.1, 15.6, 15.8-10, and m.ʿEduyot 1.12.

may immediately think of Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity,* the Mishnah's concern is not to indict the wife, but to determine the testimony sufficient for her remarriage.[91] Nonetheless, these *mishnayot* make it quite clear that the man who travels overseas runs a good chance of dying. Or he may be (mistakenly) declared dead; hence the cases in which the wife is told "your husband died [overseas]," and remarries, only to find herself and her children in an untenable position when her first husband later returns alive.[92] Although the Mishnah does state – in two specific cases – that the man traveling abroad is presumed to be alive,[93] most of its discourse here is evidence that the traveler may very well die – or be considered dead.

But even putting aside for the moment the "mortal danger" of travel, there remains the problem of the man's physical distance – and time – away from home, which seems to loosen his hold on that which was his.

> He who went overseas and the right-of-way to his field was lost – Admon says: Let him go by the shortest way. But sages say: Let him buy a right-of-way for a hundred *maneh*, or let him fly through the air.[94]

Here, a man loses the access road to his property, since he is not there to maintain it. Although Admon allows him to take a short-cut, the sages are firm: he has no choice but to buy a new access road (or grow wings). It seems that the man who runs off to remote lands must face the consequences when he returns. Witness the Bavli's scenario of the man who makes marriage arrangements for his daughter while he is on a journey:

> It was stated: If her father arranges her betrothal [while he is] on the road, and she betroths herself [to someone else] in town … Shemu'el said: We consider both betrothals.[95]

The traveling man seems to be "out of the loop" – while he is contracting a marriage for his daughter, she is doing so for herself at home. If indeed his daughter is of age, the man's contract may be nullified in favor of his daughter's. The words spoken by the traveling man seem to lack force and validity.

The notion that the traveling man is "out of the loop" is explicitly addressed in the following tannaitic discussion. The mishnah (m.Horayot 1.2) considers the situation in which the court has retracted one of its decisions; if a person continues to abide by the old law, is he liable?

> R. Shim'on declares [one who observes the old law] exempt. But R. Eli'ezer says: It is subject to doubt. What is the doubt? If he was at home, he is liable; if he had gone overseas, he is exempt … Ben 'Azzai [asked]:

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[91] Or, where the husband's death abroad is reported to the wife who stayed home, her status vis-à-vis his possible heirs by another wife. For this scenario, see m.Yevamot. 16.1.
[92] m.Yevamot 10.1 and 10.3.
[93] m.Gitin 3.3
[94] m.Ketubot 13.7
[95] b.Kiddushin 79a-b. This case arises within the discussion of m.Kiddushin 4.9, which states that if both a man and his agent contract different betrothals for the man's daughter, the one that was done first is valid.

> How is he different from the one who stays at home? [R. ʿAkiva explained]: It is possible for the one who stays at home to hear [of the new ruling], but that is not possible for him [who is far away].[96]

In the matter of observing a law that has been revoked, the traveler abroad is deemed exempt from liability, specifically because he is not able to keep up with such changes at home, as can a regular, sedentary townsman. Here, the traveling man is the exception, one who can't be expected to be abreast of (or indeed to "hear") such things, due to his removal from the scene of legislative action.

Yet what exactly is the traveler's status vis-à-vis matters at home? Another mishnah from seder Nashim may begin to give us a better sense of where a man stands, when he is away. The topic here is levirate marriage: a man's obligation to marry his deceased brother's widow.

> It is the duty of the eldest surviving brother to marry [his dead brother's widow] … If he [tries to] suspend [the matter, waiting instead] for a youngster to grow up or for an adult to come from overseas, or for a *ḥeresh* or *shoteh* [to recover], they do not listen to him. Rather, they say to him: "Yours is the duty. Either undergo the rite of *ḥalitsah* or [marry the widow]."[97]

Here, the reluctant levir attempts to avoid the duty of marrying his brother's widow by suggesting another candidate: a minor who has yet to come of age, a relative who is abroad, or who is *ḥeresh* (deaf-mute) or *shoteh* (insane or mentally deficient).[98] This ploy is rejected, since these are all unacceptable long shots: the widow would have to wait for years (for the boy to grow up) or perhaps forever (for the *ḥeresh* or *shoteh* to regain hearing or sense). The traveler seems to fit both categories: his return may be many years distant – or may never occur. Indeed, the traveler's proximity to deaf-mute and madman seems to hint that his safe return (and thus fitness as levir) might take a miracle. In any case, the company he keeps here is significant, for this mishnah tosses him into the same cell with the usual suspects of less-than-adult legal status: the child, and those with physical and mental disabilities.[99]

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[96] m.Horayot 1.2. This discussion, which I've shortened for better reading in this context, actually involves four Tannaim. Elided above is R. ʿAkiva's response to R. Eliʿezer: "I agree that he is closer to being exempt than liable." Ben ʿAzzai's question is (apparently) addressed to R. ʿAkiva.

[97] m.Yevamot 4.5-6.

[98] This difficult term, rendered by Tzvi Marx as "mentally handicapped," has connotations both of madness and idiocy (see Tzvi Marx, *Halakhah and Handicap: Jewish Law and Ethics on Disability.* Ph.D Thesis, Katholieke Theologische Universiteit te Utrecht, 1993, p. 397-410). See Judith Abrams' discussion of the term's range of meanings (in Judith Z. Abrams, *Judaism and Disability: Portrayals in Ancient Texts from Tanach through the Bavli.* Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1998, p. 139-44), as well as the entries in Jastrow (1531, שוטה) and Sokoloff (*Babylonian,*1129 שטיא), both of whom list the definitions: "madman" and "fool."

[99] See, for example, texts indicating that *ḥeresh*, *shoteh* and *katan* are not פקח (e.g. m.Meʿilah 6.2), or specifying that אין בהם דעת (m.ʿArakhin 1.1) or שיש להן מעשה ואין להן מחשבה (e.g., m.Tohorot 8.6, m.Makhshirin 3.8, 6.1). Although the Mishnah sometimes considers the legal ramifications should the deaf-mute or madman recover (see m.Gitin 2:6, m.Bava Kama 4:4 – and the passage from m.Sotah, cited above), these discussions only serve to emphasize their not-fully-adult status, for the crux of such discussions is the fact that the former deaf-mute or

Of course, the *ḥeresh* and *shoteh* are not the same as the child with whom they are often mentioned; they may marry, divorce, and raise children. Yet, in many instances, the Mishnah deems them unfit to carry out cultic, business or legal transactions on their own (or another's) behalf. For instance, Mishnah Sotah specifies the cases in which the Court must step in to formally warn the suspected adulteress on her husband's behalf: where the man has become *ḥeresh* or *shoteh*, or is "bound in prison."[100] These are men who have lost their legal agency, either by disability or absence. The Bavli provides Scriptural support for this dictum, while slightly amending it:

> **MISHNAH: In the following cases, a court of law [warns her]** … Our Rabbis taught [regarding Num. 5:12: "*Any man* (איש איש) *whose wife has gone astray*..."]: Why does Scripture repeat the word איש? To include [cases in which the husband is] *ḥeresh, shoteh, shi'amum*, has gone overseas, or is bound in prison.[101]

Here, the status of mental deficiency has been doubled; the *shoteh* now stands next to the *shi'amum* (mentally dull or confused).[102] Moreover, the list of men unable to act on their own behalf now includes the traveler who "has gone overseas." Presumably the traveler is most similar to the prisoner: able, but forced by circumstance to be absent from the scene and from taking proper legal action. Yet, rather than adding the traveler to the very end of the list (following the prisoner), the *baraita* inserts him just after the (now doubled) fool or madman. This placement between madman and prisoner seems to cast doubt on the traveler from both sides.

Another mishnah granting an exemption to the traveler provides more clues to his status. Here (in tractate Moʿed Katan) the Mishnah determines which activities are permitted – or forbidden – during the *mo'adim* (the weekdays between the first and last days of Passover or Sukkot). Among the many mundane activities discussed (such as watering a field, bringing in crops, making repairs to a house, buying and selling, and writing legal documents), the Mishnah also considers such acts as haircutting and laundry. Haircutting, which is generally forbidden during the *mo'adim*, is permitted in the following special cases:

> These [persons] may cut their hair during the *mo'adim*: he who comes [back] from overseas or from captivity; he who goes forth from prison; he who has been released from his excommunication by the sages; also

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madman may now be fully responsible and liable as a legal adult. See also the discussions in Marx and in Abrams.

[100] m.Sotah 4.5

[101] b.Sotah 27a. I have condensed the syntax of the *baraita*, which (like the Mishnah) specifies, "*the wife of* a deaf man, *the wife of* an idiot," etc.

[102] See Jastrow (1611) and Sokoloff (*Babylonian*,1168; *Palestinian*, 562), both of whom favor the notions "dullness," "stupefaction" and "confusion" in their definitions. In the text above, it is not clear whether שעמום is intended as a synonym for שוטה, or is another, related status of mental impairment; some degree of overlap may be indicated.

> he who asked a sage [to release him from a vow] and was released; and the Nazir or *metsoraʿ* who emerges from impurity to purity.[103]

And again, in the next mishnah:

> These [persons] may wash their clothes during the *moʿadim*: he who comes [back] from overseas or from captivity; he who goes forth from prison; he who has been released from his excommunication by the sages; also he who asked a sage [to release him from a vow] and was released; … *Zavim* and *zavot*, menstruants, women after childbirth, and everyone who goes up from impurity to purity: these ones are permitted [to wash their clothes], but all other people are prohibited.[104]

Here we find the traveler in more diverse company: prisoners and captives who have been freed, those released from ban or vow, and those crossing from the state of cultic impurity to purity. But how does the traveler fit in here? The first part of the list seems to concern release from different kinds of bondage: captivity, prison, or the restraint of vow or ban. Here, (in stark contrast to modern notions of the "free" and open road), travel means constraint, not freedom – for it is only on his return that the traveler is like the freed captive. Moreover, captivity, excommunication and abstemious vows are not just states of bondage *within* constraints; they also mean being held *outside* regular community life.

The second group (the ritually impure) mirrors these themes of constraint and separation,[105] as its first two figures clearly attest: the Nazir is by definition one bound by abstemious vows,[106] whereas the *metsoraʿ* is defined as "outside *maḥaneh Yiśraʾel*."[107] This

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[103] m. Moʿed Katan 3.1

[104] m. Moʿed Katan 3.2. I have not omitted – with the ellipses above – any additional persons / statuses, but rather the mishnah's interpolation of *objects* that may be washed: "hand towels, barber's towels, and bath towels [may be washed]."

[105] Biblically, all of these statuses require a rite (and in some cases, a waiting period), a threshold which must be crossed before the period of impurity is ended. Moreover, the list of impure persons in these two *mishnayot* (i.e., Nazir, *metsoraʿ*, *zavim*, *zavot*, *menstruants*, women after childbirth) comprises the entire (human component of the) category of *avot ha-tumʾot*, that is, persons or objects that are considered an original source of impurity and which transmit ritual impurity to others.

[106] The Nazir is a complex figure, connoting both separateness and impurity itself. The Nazir connotes separation, both in purity (when he must keep abstemious vows) and in impurity (when he must cleanse and perform a Temple rite). And because the impure Nazir is by definition one who has come in contact with the dead, he also connotes that that most potent source of impurity: the corpse. Indeed, the presence of the Nazir at the very head of the list hints at a less incidental link between travel and impurity, particularly since his defilement is imagined, by the mishnah, as a road story: "If [a Nazir and a High Priest] were traveling on the road and found a *met mitsṿah*…" (m.Nazir 7.1). The extensive discussion of (and allusion to) this case in both Talmuds renders this scenario of impurity on the road a trope, which at times is interwoven with the discourse on Passover law, particularly the injunction (in Numbers 9:10), "Whoever is impure from a corpse or is on a journey far away…offers the Passover in the second month" (see b.Pesaḥim, b.Nazir 63a). Indeed, this verse (entwined with biblical law on Nazirite and priestly purity at Numbers 6:9 and Lev. 19:1) seems to underlie the scenario of m.Nazir 7.1, as if the mishnah read the biblical juxtaposition as "impure *and* on a journey far away." The trope arising from this nexus of texts (and their elaboration), may also underlie our passage from m.Moʿed Katan, with its juxtaposition of the traveler and the impure.

[107] Often translated as "leper," the *metsoraʿ* was a person with a highly communicable disease, *tsoraʿat* (see Leviticus 13-15, and tractate Negaʿim); yet the term *tsoraʿat* was also applied to articles of clothing and houses.

second group looms large, by virtue of its size, generality ("everyone who…") and specificity (no fewer than six statuses are named). We should note, however, that listed here are not simply the ritually impure, but rather those in transition from one state to the other. Like those who have been released from captivity (and presumably are now free to move), these are people in motion, as they "go up from" impurity. These are temporary outsiders, about to cross the threshold between outside and in.[108]

Thus we have found that the status of the traveler, particularly one who goes "overseas" or "on a "journey far away," is uncertain or depleted. Although, even in the age of modern travel, we may easily comprehend that a traveler may be "out of the loop," prevented by distance from effectively conducting his own affairs, these texts seem to go further, by linking the traveler with impurity (a temporary disability of set duration), but also with bondage, captivity, deafness and madness (disabilities of indefinite duration).[109] Moreover, we may even find the traveler likened to further outsiders, as in the following passage from the Bavli, regarding the obligation to eat *matsah* on the Passover:

> A [Scriptural] verse is not required [to prove that a person] who is ritually impure or on a journey far away [must eat *matsah*], for they are no worse than the uncircumcised or the alien, [about whom] it was taught: *No uncircumcised person shall eat of it* [the Paschal offering]: of *it* he may not eat, but he must eat *matsah* and *maror*.[110]

Here, the traveler's obligation to eat *matsah* is derived from the fact that he is "no worse" (that is, somewhat closer) than the uncircumcised and the alien, who are themselves obligated to eat *matsah*. Whereas in the texts above, the traveler was placed among those whom we might term "internal" outsiders, this text seems to nudge him a bit further outside, by likening him to non-Jews. Yet even these statuses are potentially temporary; the state of being "alien" or "uncircumcised" can be remedied and the outsider naturalized. Thus, once again, we find the traveler in the company of outsiders whose disability can be removed only by their entry. Yet for all of these persons, from the alien to the prisoner to the madman, re-entry is currently (and perhaps indefinitely) delayed.

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[108] Some of the same cast of characters appears in another list of exceptions, in t.Pesaḥim 8.1, which lists those ineligible to offer the Passover sacrifice at its proper time, and therefore permitted to offer it a month later: "These do [the Passover offering in] the second [month]: *zavim* and *zavot*, menstruating women, woman after childbirth, *anusim* [those who were unavoidably prevented], those who sinned inadvertently, those who sinned intentionally, *metsora'im,* whoever had sex with a menstruating woman, and whoever is impure or on a journey far away." In addition to the familiar company of the variously impure, the traveler is here also accompanied by a variety of sinners. Like the impure, sinners (for the most part) have a remedy: a process and rite by which they are re-integrated. Thus, these are another class of persons who are temporarily cast outside, but expected to re-enter.

[109] While impurity is a necessarily temporary state (its duration clearly determined by purification rite), and bondage and captivity are presumably – or hopefully – temporary, the states of physical and mental disability are (in rabbinic texts) potentially temporary as well, since one may recover from deafness or madness. However, these states are surely somewhat different: the duration of bondage, deafness and madness is less certain than that of impurity; we cannot know for sure when captivity will end, or indeed if deafness or madness will be cured.

[110] b.Pesaḥim 120a, citing Exodus 12:48.

The traveler, as someone who is physically outside and at a distance, provides a vivid key to this field of analogies. But the traveler's cohort in these texts also casts light (or is it shadow?) back upon him: like them, the traveler is someone who is *unable.* It seems that, by setting out on the road, the traveler takes on more than whatever dangers he may face on the way; rather, by going "overseas" or an a "journey far away," the traveler incurs another more subtle kind of harm, an impairment of self and standing at home.

Meta-physical danger

The survey above has taken us on a sort of tourist's safari, enabling us to view the dangers encountered on the road in rabbinic texts: robbery, physical assault, ideological attack, sexual temptation, threat to one's social status en route, and loss of control over one's interests at home. In most cases, the danger derives from the encounter with another person, a near or far stranger who threatens to harm, weaken or defile our traveler. Yet, texts on the traveler's status at home indicate that – even apart from any encounters along the way – being on the road is something that diminishes the traveler, taking a bite out of his home self or integrity.

Our tour of travel dangers would not be complete without consideration of yet another peril: the threat of meta-physical forces and beings.[111] Consider this warning (in b.Berakhot 55b), for the traveler entering a strange town:

> Whoever enters a town and fears the evil eye should hold his right thumb in his left hand and his left thumb in his right hand[112] and say: I, So-and-so, am of the seed of Joseph, over which the evil eye has no power, as it says: *Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine by a fountain*. Do not read [it as] "by a fountain" [*'ale 'ayin*] but "overcoming the evil eye" [*'ole 'ayin*] …[113]

Here is good advice for the small-town kid arriving at Grand Central Station, for in rabbinic texts as today, danger lurks not only out on the road, but also within an unknown city. Yet, where we might expect a traveler entering the big city to fear robbery or physical attack, here the main threat seems to be the magical harm that others may inflict upon him.

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[111] I have chosen the term "meta-physical" to denote a range of phenomena sometimes described as "magical" or "supernatural," because the latter terms are problematic, particularly with regard to rabbinic texts. The word "supernatural" is hardly appropriate to rabbinic texts, in which such phenomena seem to be considered quite "natural" (with warnings about demons, for example, thoroughly mixed into a discourse on general health and hygiene, as in b.Gittin 70a). The word "magical" (aside from other difficulties with the term), is too specific, as "magic" usually denotes the use of enhanced power by humans; the interference of demons and spirits in human affairs doesn't require magic per se.

[112] My translation follows the version זקפא דידא דימיניה בשמאליה בידא דשמאלא (which appears in the printed version of both this text and the similar passage in b.Pesaḥim 110a), and on Rashi's gloss of the word (זקפא b.Berakhot 55b and b.Pesaḥim 110a) as "thumb" (אגודל/ גודל). However, Sokoloff (*Babylonian*, p. 411) translates זקפא as "straight arm," and (citing the version נינקוט זקפא דימיניה for Berakhot) reads the phrase: "let him take his straight right arm in his left (sleeve) and that of the left arm in his right (sleeve)," thus picturing the magical remedy somewhat differently.

[113] b.Berakhot 55b.

Indeed, the "evil eye," demons and evil spirits – although often working invisibly – are, in rabbinic texts, another kind of clear and present danger. We can see this in texts that warn (in one breath, as it were) of "idolaters, bandits, or evil spirits"[114] – and in the following, rather matter-of-fact report:

> Abaye was traveling along,[115] with Rav Papa walking on his right and Rav Huna son of R. Yehoshuʿa on his left. Seeing a *Ketev meriri* [type of demon] approaching him on the left, he moved Rav Papa to his left and Rav Huna son of R. Yehoshuʿa to his right. Rav Papa said to him: "How am I different that you don't fear for me?" [Abaye] replied: "Time is on your side."[116]

Clearly Rav Papa is not happy about being moved into harm's way (and, perhaps, out of the "high" position on his master's right); yet, his complaint (or the fact that he is at leisure to object) seems to render this a rather normal encounter. Indeed, as its classification indicates, this demon is a familiar type – a being one is likely to meet en route.

This story, which appears within a brief field guide to demons (on Pesaḥim 111b),[117] is preceded by a rather more involved text on demonic harm,[118] in which the danger is once again linked to travel. The discussion begins with the Mishnah's dictum that each person at the Passover Seder must be given "no fewer than four cups of wine."[119] The sages of the gemara balk at this law, because it contradicts another: the notion that doing certain acts twice in a row is bad luck – or a sort of hex: "How could our Rabbis ordain something that endangers? For surely it was taught: A man mustn't eat twice [in a row], nor drink twice, nor wipe twice nor meet his needs twice!"[120] By this logic, drinking four cups is doubly

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[114] See, e.g., b.Shabbat 29b (citing m.Shabbat 2.5) and b.Taʿanit 22b.

[115] The expression here is אביי הוה שקיל ואזיל. For the expression שקיל ואזיל, see Sokoloff (*Babylonian*), p. 1175: "to move along, to travel."

[116] b.Pesaḥim 111b. Abaye's reply is literally, "The time sustains you."

[117] Here are offered a series of warnings (such as, "Whoever relieves himself on the stump of a palm tree, the demon Palga seizes him; whoever leans his head on the stump of a palm tree, the demon Zerada seizes him"), some basic classification ("There are five shadows [dangerous because of demons residing there]: the shade of a single palm tree, of the kanda tree, of the caper tree, of the sorb bush, [and of the willow]"), names ("[demons] of the caper bush are called *Ruḥe*, those of the sorb bushes are called *Shide*, and those that haunt roofs are called *Rishpe*…), descriptions ("There are two *Ketebs*: one before noon and one after noon. The one before noon is called *Keteb Meriri* and looks like a ladle turning in a jug of *kanda*…"), and other helpful information (e.g., "from the first of Tammuz until the sixteenth, they are certainly to be found, after that it is doubtful…").

[118] That is, the discussion, on b. Pesaḥim 109b-110a, regarding concerns the danger of drinking twice in a row – which act makes a person vulnerable to demonic harm (see my discussion below). The link between demonic harm and drinking "double," while indicated throughout, is made explicit on 110a, in the following reports: "Rav Yosef said: The demon Yosef told me [that] Ashmedai the king of the demons is appointed over all 'doubles'… Rav Papa said, Yosef the demon told me: For two we kill; for four we do not kill – [but] for four we harm [the drinker]." As far as I can tell, the notion of "double" drinking and its risk is specific to the Bavli. See also the rather more oblique reference to this problem on b.Berakhot 51a: "He who drinks doubles should not say grace, because… this one is not fit."

[119] "On the eve of Passover … one should not eat until it gets dark. And even the poorest Israelite shouldn't eat without reclining. And they should give him no fewer than four cups of wine, even if [the funds] come from public charity" (m.Pesaḥim 10.1).

[120] b.Pesaḥim 109b. The "doubles" rule seems to be nearly – if not equally – as authoritative as the mishnah under discussion. The "doubles" rule is emphasized both by repetition and by the extensive discussion devoted

dangerous – and so Passover must be proven an exception to the rule:[121] "Scripture says, *It is a night of guarding* [*for the Lord*, meaning] it is a night always guarded from demons."[122] Thus, where drinking "double" makes a person the target of evil forces, Passover's special protection from demonic harm overrides the hex.

But what about drinking "double" when that protection is lacking – on every other day of the year? Next, the gemara seeks to circumvent – or limit – that general danger.

> Our Rabbis taught: Whoever drinks twice [in a row], his blood is on his own head! Rav Yehudah said: When is that? When he has not [gone out to] see the street; but if he has seen the street, he is permitted [to drink a second cup] … [Yet, an objection was raised: "Double" drinking is dangerous] only when one is setting out on a journey; at home, it is not [dangerous]!

Here, quite a severe warning ("his blood is on his own head!") is addressed in two different ways. Rav Yehudah tempers the warning, by providing a way to continue drinking without harm: "going out to see the street" between drinks creates an interruption that breaks the hex. The next teaching, however, takes a different approach, by relegating the danger to one situation only: "[This applies] only when one is setting out on a journey; at home it is not dangerous!" According to this view, "double" drinking is not an inherently (or sufficiently) dangerous act in itself; it only becomes so in a particular situation: just before a journey. Apparently, Abaye's encounter was no fluke; it seems that the journey (and even the very cusp of the journey) is a situation in which one is particularly susceptible to demonic harm.[123]

However, this attempt to limit the danger is immediately refuted:

> R. Zera said: [But] going to sleep is like setting out on a journey! Rav Papa said: And going out to the toilet is like setting out on a journey! So, at home is it not [dangerous]?

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to it. Moreover, it is presented (both here and when repeated below) as a Tannaitic teaching, and – unlike the mishnah! – is never disputed. Indeed, it seems that the sort of concerns represented by this teaching seem to "take over" the discussion; this text, which is ostensibly on the laws of Pesaḥ (m. Pesaḥim 10.1), actually turns into a guide to demons and demonic harm (with some discussion of demons and other meta-physical dangers on b. Pesaḥim 110a-111a, and the "field guide" on b.Pesaḥim 111b).

[121] For example, by re-grouping the four cups so that they no longer form pairs: "Rava said: The cup of Blessing combines [with the others] for good, not for bad. Ravina said: Our Rabbis instituted four cups in the mode of freedom: each one is a *mitsʏah* unto itself" (b.Pesaḥim 109b-110a). The more physical remedies described in the ensuing discussion ("going out to see the street" between drinks; being served two drinks at once after the first drink) are nonetheless forms of the very same technique: splitting the pair.

[122] b.Pesaḥim 109b. this is a teaching of Rav Naḥman, who reads Exodus 12:42 ("It is a night of watching for the Lord") to mean that Passover is a day on which God provides special protection.

[123] Indeed, when (later in the text), a remedy is provided, should one "forget himself" and set out on a journey after drinking double, it may well remind us of the travel scenario (from b.Berakhot 55) with which we began: "Let him take his right-hand thumb in his left hand and his left-hand thumb in his right hand and say, "You [two thumbs] and I, surely that is three!" Here the struggle between demons and humans (and the effectiveness of this sort of numbers magic) is made explicit: "Should he hear [a demon] saying, '[but] you and I makes four!' he should say to him, 'You and I are five!' If he hears [a demon] saying, 'you and I makes six," he should say to him, 'You and I are seven!' This happened once, until one hundred and one, [when] the demon burst."

Rejecting the claim that "double" drinking is risky only at the outset of a journey, R. Zera and Rav Papa argue that the danger exists even at home, since home life includes acts that are similar to embarking on a journey. Far from disputing the underlying notion – that travel means vulnerability to demonic forces – R. Zera and Rav Papa depend on that notion as the basis for their claims.

The claims, "Going to sleep is like setting out on a journey … and going out to the toilet is like setting out on a journey" are simply stated, as if familiar or self-evident. Yet, while the modern reader may readily concede that a person who is unconscious – or squatting in an outhouse – may be somewhat more physically vulnerable than otherwise, this notion does not address the basis of the analogy. Rather, going to sleep or to the outhouse – like embarking on a journey – means crossing the threshold into another, more dangerous realm, where unseen forces prevail. For R. Zera and Rav Papa, travel is the ground of comparison, the known entity that describes the others; but we may benefit from reversing their simile, and thus learn more about the meta-physical danger of the road by briefly considering what rabbinic texts tell us about going to the outhouse and going to sleep.

Although the sages are hardly mysterious about toilet matters (but instead have a great deal to say about what one does there and how to do it),[124] the outhouse is rather a forbidding site in rabbinic texts; going to the toilet seems to place men in an extremely vulnerable position, exposing them to an array of risks, from faux pas to physical harm.[125] Injunctions against praying, wearing tefillin, or pondering Torah in the outhouse[126] seem to endow it with an aura of impurity, while the many texts on toilet etiquette indicate the risk of impropriety.[127] Yet immodesty – or even the very act of elimination – does not seem to be the source of danger; rather, like "double" drinking, these acts make one vulnerable to malevolent forces, which seem ready to rush in an any opportunity: "[In the outhouse, first] touch and then sit. Do not sit and then touch, for anyone who [does so] – he will be struck by witchcraft wrought even [as far away as] Aspamia!"[128] Yet the primary danger is much nearer, for the outhouse

[124] On proper conduct – and safety – in the outhouse, see, e.g.: b.Berakhot 23a-b, 53a-55a, 62a-b; b.Shabbat 10a-b, 81a-82a; b.Nedarim 7a; b.Gitin 70a; b.Kiddushin 32b-33a, and b.ʿAvodah Zarah 47b.

[125] I specify men, because the outhouse seems to be primarily a male domain, at least in the Bavli; among the many dangers and faux pas, the possibility of encountering women there is never mentioned. Perhaps this silence hints that women (were thought to) use chamber pots in the home. However, the reference in b.Gitin 45a to the outhouse as the place where women talk dirt about men may indicate the (at least imagined) use of separate outhouses by women. (While that text could indicate separate use of the same facilities, one would then expect to find some account of men and women inadvertently encountering one another in the outhouse – but I have found no such accounts).

[126] On abstaining from prayer in the outhouse, see b.Berakhot 25a and 26a. On removing tefillin, see b.Berakhot 23a-b, 25a; b.Shabbat 62a; b.Ketubot 104a; b.Menaḥot 36a, and b.Bava Kama 17a. On refraining from pondering *divre Torah*, see b.Berakhot 24b, b.Shabbat 40b, 150a; b.Kiddushin 33a; b.ʿAvodah Zarah 44b; b.Zevahim 102b, and b.Bava Kama 17a; however we should note the exception of R. Shimʿon, who does impart a teaching in the outhouse (b.Zevahim 102b). In several of these cases, the outhouse is paired with another liminal space marked therein as off-limits for Torah study and tefillin: the bath house. On rabbis in the bath house, see, e.g., Hayim Lapin, *Rabbis as Romans: the Rabbinic Movement in Palestine 100-400 CE* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p.126-132.

[127] See, e.g., b.Berakhot 8b (in which the "Persians" are paragons of toilet etiquette), b.ʿAvodah Zarah 47b, and especially the discussion on b.Berakhot 62a-b, which includes the saying "Whoever behaves modestly in the outhouse is saved from three things: snakes, scorpions and demons – and some say, his dreams will [not disturb him]."

[128] b.Berakhot 62a.

is itself the favored haunt of demons; there are even "outhouse demons" who make this site their home.[129] Among the various protective rites and charms for entering the outhouse (such as rattling nuts in a cup or bringing in a lamb as decoy)[130] is a pair of prayers, which only more clearly outline the danger:

> On entering an outhouse, say: "Be honored, holy [angels] who serve the Most High … Wait for me while I enter, meet my needs, and return to you." Abaye said: One should not speak so, lest [the angels] abandon him and depart! Instead say: "Preserve me, preserve me! Help me, help me! Support me, support me, while I go in and come out – for this is the way of humans!"[131]

The first prayer – and even more so, Abaye's revision – evince anxiety about a place barred to angels (and, presumably, to Torah and prayer); entering here means being bereft of, or even abandoned by holy protection. Yet neither the site nor its danger can be avoided, since "this is the way of humans!"[132]

Sleep is another dangerous "place" that human nature forces us to enter again and again. Like the outhouse, it is a site where one may encounter demons, against whom prayer may be an effective weapon:

> R. Yitsḥak says: If one recites the Shema on his bed, it is as though he held a double-edged sword in his hand … as [Scripture] says: *Let the faithful exult in glory; let them sing for joy on their beds* – and then it says:

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[129] On the outhouse as a hangout for demons, see, e.g., b.Berakhot 60a, 62b and b.Pesaḥim 111b. On "outhouse demons," see b.Shabbat 67a, b.Gitin 70a (שד / שידא דבית כיסא), and b.Kiddushin 72a (שעירים של בית הכסא). Demons are found not only within but also "in the shadow of the outhouse" (b.Pesaḥim 111b), and its surrounding area: "On leaving the outhouse, a man shouldn't have sex until he has gone one-half *mil*, because the outhouse demons go along with him [for that distance]" (b.Gitin 70a). Perhaps not unrelated to the notion that demons prevail in the outhouse is the tale (on b.Kiddushin 81b) of the fleeing man cornered in an outhouse by Satan.

[130] See b.Berakhot 62a: "Abaye's mother trained a lamb to go with him into the outhouse … Before Rava became head [of the academy, his wife] the daughter of Rav Ḥisda used to rattle a nut in a brass dish [when he went into the outhouse]. After he became head, she made a window for him, and put her hand on his head." Thus, while women do not seem to be part of the danger of the outhouse, they do (at least in this passage) play a key role in providing the remedies.

[131] b.Berakhot 60b. The prayer's final phrase ("For this is the way of humans") is "שכן דרכן של בן אדם." Versions of the first prayer ("Be honored…") appear already in t.Berakot 6:21 and y.Berakhot 14b (where the final remark is "דרך ארץ הוא").

[132] The alternative to entering the outhouse – that is, "going outside" – is also problematic. The repeated rule "one should go in the morning and in the evening, so that he need not go far away" (see b.Berakhot 62a) gives some indication of the problem. But even if a congenial spot is found, there are the further problems of facing in the correct direction (see b.Berakhot 61b) and taking care of business without being seen or heard (b.Berakhot 62a). Yet, while going outside – particularly in the dark – is to be avoided, such warnings do not generally refer to the presence of demons. Rather, such "going" seems problematic in a more mundane ways: it's unpleasant to go outside in the dark, and doing so may create problems for other nearby sites (see, e.g., the case of the olive press, b.Berakhot 62a).

> *With the praises of God in their throats and a double-edged sword in their hands.* R. Yitsḥak also says: If one recites the Shema on his bed, the demons keep away from him…[133]

According to R. Yitsḥak, recitation of the Shema at bedtime defends against demonic attack; indeed, the image of the soon-to-be slumberer poised for battle "on his bed" indicates that such attack is expected. Moreover, R. Yitsḥak's sword of prayer may serve to ward off even a greater threat, by reversing another familiar image: the Angel of Death wields a sword, and we learn elsewhere that "when a sick person is about to depart, [the Angel of Death] stands above [the] head-pillow with his drawn sword in his hand."[134] But R. Yitsḥak's teaching turns the tables; instead of lying under the sword, the person abed wields it himself, warding off demons – and perhaps even death itself. For it is not only the sickly and "about to depart" over whom death looms. Rather, rabbinic texts (like other ancient – and indeed, modern – cultures) evince the notion that sleep is akin to death;[135] it is taught that "sleep is one-sixtieth of death," and at bedtime, one prays for God to "light my eyes [against] the darkness of death."[136]

That prayer (which immediately follows the outhouse prayer cited above) reveals a great deal about the dangers of sleep:

> … May it be Your will, Lord my God, that I lay down safely. Give me my portion in your Torah; lead me into *mitsṿah* and do not lead me into transgression; do not bring me into sin, nor wrong-doing, trial or disgrace.[137] May the good *Yetser* rule within me, and not the evil *Yetser*.[138] Rescue me from harm and bad illnesses, and do not frighten me

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[133] b.Berakhot 4b-5a; the proof is Psalm 149:5-6. These teachings seem to build upon the preceding teaching of R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi (on b.Berakhot 4b): "R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi said: Though one has recited the Shema in the synagogue, it is a mitsṿah to recite it again on his bed."

[134] b.ʿAvodah Zarah 20b. Here, the Angel of Death wields a sword [חרב]. See also b.Ketubot 77b, where R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi seizes the knife [סכין] of the Angel of Death.

[135] The mixed roles of some ancient deities seems to express this connection, such as the (late) Egyptian god Tutu, who guarded tombs – and protected sleepers from danger and bad dreams, or Hermes, who served as a guide into dreams – and into death. We might recall, as well, the Greek twin gods Hypnos (sleep) and Thanatos (death). The motif is still powerfully present in modern times, as evinced by such colloquial expressions as "sleep like the dead" and the bedtime prayer "Now I lay me down to sleep… If I should die before I wake…"

[136] b.Berakhot 57b, b.Berakhot 60b.

[137] The verbs here are תרגילני, "lead me" (see Jastrow 1448) and תביאני, "bring me."

[138] These terms are often misleadingly translated as "the good inclination" and "the evil inclination," thus implying that the two *yetsarim* are inherent parts of the human psyche, or represent an internal battle between parts of the self. However, Ishay Rosen-Zvi has ably argued against this conventional notion of the *yetsarim*, and the concept of rabbinic anthropology that it entails. Instead, Rosen-Zvi demonstrates that (although the two-*yetser* model is prevalent in later texts) the far more predominant notion in classical rabbinic texts is that of a single evil *yester* – which is conceived as a demonic entity, not as a metaphor for conflicting psychological tendencies. Indeed, Rosen-Zvi shows that the evil *yester* must be understood against the background (and as a development) of ancient demonology, for far from an integral part of the self, the evil *yester* is conceived as a demon resident in the human heart, "a fully internalized, yet always foreign intruder" (64). See Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires: Yetzer Hara and the Problem of Evil in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011). Our text above seems to further justify Rosen-Zvi's claim that the notion of a good yester was added on to the already existing (and different) model of the single evil *yester*, for here the names of

with bad dreams or bad thoughts. May my bed be perfect before you, and light my eyes [against] the darkness of death.[139]

While modern readers will recognize several familiar concerns (darkness, fear, and bad dreams), the prayer also addresses matters we don't commonly associate with sleep. Here one asks to be spared not only "bad dreams and bad thoughts" but also "harm and bad illnesses," as if these too were likely to occur during slumber.[140] Moreover, the pleas "May…I lay down safely" and "May my bed be perfect" (which clearly refer to sleep) frame a series of requests we may regard as more relevant to waking life and active conduct: "Lead me into *mitsvah* and [not] into transgression; do not bring me into sin, nor wrong-doing, trial or disgrace."[141] Apparently, when the mind and body are in darkness, they are more susceptible to evil influence and to some kind of going astray. The very words "lead me" and bring me" indicate that in sleep, the inner self is in motion.[142] The terrain is not only dark and dangerous, but is a place where the evil *Yetser* (a sort of internal demon) seems to have the advantage, and threatens to take control.[143]

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the two *yetsarim* don't actually match; the good yester is simply *yester tov,* while the bad yester seems to have a fully formed proper name: *yester ha-raʿ*.

[139] b.Berakhot 60b.

[140] Moreover, in rabbinic texts, dreams themselves are not solely an experience of sleep; while dreams may disturb or frighten the sleeper, their harmful potential is not necessarily thus exhausted. Rather, dreams may portend – or even cause – real-life events. Thus, a bad dream is like a seed, which must be uprooted before it can take root and sprout events in waking life. Remedies for bad or mysterious dreams usually combine Scripture, prayer and other magic in order to drain the dream of its harmful potential or "turn it" for good. While ideas about dreams can be found throughout the Bavli, perhaps the best account of these notions is in the extensive discussion in b.Berakhot 55a-57b. (On this text, see Philip S. Alexander, "Bavli Berakhot 55a-57b: The Talmudic Dreambook in Context," in *Journal for Jewish Studies,* vol. 46, no. 1-2, p. 230-248). Although this discourse cites several views on dreams (including the claim that dreams merely reflect the thoughts or experiences of the past day, and the notion that the negative power of a dream is restricted to its emotional effect on the dreamer), by far the predominant view in this text is the notion of dreams as powerful portents, put into force by interpretation.

[141] And indeed, this seems to be the later understanding of this text; the morning liturgy (see, e.g., Birnbaum, *Ha-Siddur Ha-Shalem*, p.17) features a very similar passage ("Lead us into Your Torah…bring us not into sin, transgression … let not the evil impulse have power over us…") – but without any reference to sleep. In fact, that prayer immediately follows the blessing "Blessed are You…who removes sleep from my eyes…" (the blessing to be said upon awakening in the morning), thus placing it after sleep and within waking life. Although the original text may contain such implications – and certainly implies a link between the sleeping and waking mind – the later version seems to have relocated the prayer entirely, making it purely a matter of conscious and active conduct.

[142] That sleep in particular is analogous to travel is apparent from this prayer's reprise of the traveler's prayer, which precedes it on b.Berakhot 60a. The plea for guidance ("lead me … bring me") recalls the traveler's request "lead me… direct me," whereas the cry "save me from harm, illness, bad dreams and bad thoughts" recalls the traveler's plea, "save me from every enemy and ambush on the way"; each asks to be protected from the kind of attack typical of the local terrain. But perhaps the most compelling evidence that sleep is a journey is the fact that, in the middle of a series of remedies for bad dreams on …, we are suddenly offered advice on how to safely enter a strange town (the "thumbs" remedy quoted above).

[143] Thus, like the outhouse (and the road) sleep is also a place where demons (or demon-like entities) "hang out" and threaten to prevail. Indeed, the prayer seems to indicate that (like a demon in the outhouse) the evil *yester* has "home field advantage" in the territory of sleep. (On the *yester* as a demonic entity, see Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires,* and note 138 above).

Thus, like setting out on the road, going to sleep and going to the outhouse are psychically dangerous transits for which special prayers or charms are required. Moreover, where we find such remedies provided in b.Berakhot, the three transits are again grouped together, with the above prayers for entering sleep and the outhouse (both on 60b), preceded by one for the road (60a): "Lead me in safety, support me in safety, direct me in safety and save me from the hands of all enemies and those who lie in wait on the road…"

Crossing the threshold

These remedies for the road, the outhouse and sleep are part of a series of prayers (on b.Berakhot 60a-b), to be said at five different junctures: when entering a city, when entering the bath-house, when entering the blood-letter's, when entering the outhouse, and when entering sleep. The repeated formula ("one who enters… says…") defines the various acts as similar; each is a transit into a dangerous realm, requiring a threshold prayer.[144] Indeed the gemara provides a prayer not only for entry but also for exiting each place.[145]

The obvious source of this series of prayers is the misnah it explicates (m.Berakhot 9.4), which is itself a scenario of travel: "On entering a city, pray twice: once upon entering and once upon leaving." Our understanding of the series, however, depends on consideration of the mishnah's context, in m.Berakhot 9.3-9.5. That passage, framed by the admonition, "one must bless the bad as the good,"[146] defines valid – and ineffective – prayer:[147]

> To pray for what is past is a vain prayer … If one's wife is pregnant and he prays "May it be Your will that my wife bear a male child" – that is a

[144] Each "place" poses a different danger, as their prayers indicate. Safety seems to be the main concern of one entering a city ("bring me in / out of this city safely"), whereas at the bath-house, one prays to be saved from "sin and disgrace" and delivered from "the fire." At the bloodletter's door, one declares that healing power belongs to God, not humans, thus perhaps betraying fear of the bloodletter's ability to affect the body for good or ill. At the outhouse, one attempts to retain angelic protection, whereas at bedtime, one prays for protection from darkness, sin, bad dreams and death. There is, however some overlap between the dangers; all of these locations seem to threaten physical or psychic harm, and several seem to connote a (literal or figurative) darkness. Moreover, as we shall see below, the prayer for sleep contains elements reminiscent of the traveler's prayer.

[145] While the wording of the prescriptions for city, bath-house, and outhouse denote physical places, the other two prayers, for "entering to let blood" and "entering to sleep" seem to point to actions. The motif of "entering," however, seems to imply that all five are realms or places. And indeed, action and location are entwined in these prayers, as we see in the formulas for entering and leaving the city: "on entering [the city] he says…; once he's entered, he says…; when he wants to depart, he says…; once he has departed he says…"

[146] The frame consists of the parallel but different teachings, "One blesses the bad as the good and the good as the bad" (m.Berakhot 9.3) and "One must bless the bad just as one blesses the good" (m.Berakhot 9.5). However, the Bavli does not seem to entirely accept the radical implication that one must bless bad fortune. Instead (on 60a), it reads the first teaching as a matter of paradox: one blesses the bad that entails good (such as a flood that swamps one's fields, but ultimately makes them more fertile), and the good that entails bad (finding a valuable object that is ultimately seized by the government). Although, on the very next page, the gemara presents a series of teachings (seemingly in line with the mishnah) that "one must receive the evil with gladness," the subsequent tale of R. ʿAkiva's aplomb in facing a series of misfortunes is rather ambivalent. For, in the end, all of ʿAkiva's misfortunes turn out to be good fortune, in that (although unpleasant at the time) they ultimately save his life (see b.Berakhot 60b-61a).

[147] On the larger context of this discourse (the ninth chapter of Mishnah Berakhot), see Ishay Rosen-Zvi, "Blessing as Mapping: Reading Mishnah *Berakhot*, Chapter 9," in *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 78 (2007), p. 25-46.

> vain prayer. If one is coming from a journey and hears the sound of screaming in the town, and says, "May it be Your will that these are not members of my household!" – that is a vain prayer.[148]

Here, we learn that petitionary prayer is inappropriate for anything already set or "past." Since the mishnah considers the sex of the child in utero a fait accompli,[149] the man who prays that his pregnant wife will bear a son is praying in vain; the matter is already settled. Similarly, the traveler approaching home, who prays that the screams he hears are not those of his family, prays in vain; the violence is already happening, and it is too late to ward it off or change the identity of the victims. Thus it seems that the road is situated between the past – which has happened, and cannot be changed – and the future, about which one may still plead.

The next mishnah (m.Berakhot 9:4) develops this sense of time and utterance:

> On entering a city, pray twice: once upon entering and once upon leaving. Ben ʿAzzai says: Four (times) – twice when entering and twice when leaving. Give thanks for the past and plead for the future.

The first teaching prescribes one prayer for entering and one for exiting the city – but does not specify their content. Should one pray for protection when entering the big city, and then give thanks for being delivered from its dangers – or is petition necessary in both cases? Ben ʿAzzai removes the ambiguity by assigning both kinds of prayer to each transit: at each crossing, one gives thanks for past deliverance and pleads for future protection. Thus, the traveler is not only one who enters and leaves cities, but is also one who crosses the line between past and future, which transit is neatly marked by his utterance: thanksgiving points backward, and petition points forward. Ben ʿAzzai's teaching renders the process finite and symmetrical: beginning outside the city, with a plea for safe entry, it also concludes outside, with thanks for safe exit. Here, danger lies within the big city, and the traveler's utterances are an envelope containing it on each side.

The Bavli fleshes out Ben ʿAzzai's teaching, by providing a *baraita* specifying the content of each prayer:[150]

> **One who enters a city…** Our Rabbis taught: What does he say upon entering? "May it be Your will Lord my God, to bring me into this city safely." Once inside he says: "I thank You, Lord my God, for bringing me into this city safely." When he wants to leave, he says "May it be Your will, Lord my God, and God of my fathers, to bring me out of this city safely." When outside, he says: "I thank you, Lord my God, for bringing me out of this city safely – "

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[148] m.Berakhot 9:3.

[149] But not so the Bavli, which negotiates a bit with the mishnah's statement, instead positing an initial phase of the pregnancy during which the sex is not yet established and petitionary prayer on this account is still permitted: "[But] are prayers of no benefit? … It has been taught: [in] the first three days, he prays that it will not spoil; from [day] three to forty, he prays that it will be male; from [day] forty to three months, he prays that it will not be a miscarriage [*sandal*]…" (b.Berakhot 60a).

[150] In so doing, the Bavli seems to follow the pattern of the Tosefta (t.Berakhot 6:21) and the Yerushalmi (y.Berakhot 14b). See discussion below and next note.

Here are the four prayers, according to Ben ʿAzzai's prescription, beginning with a plea on entering the city, and ending with thanks for safe departure from it. And yet, at this point, the Bavli adds something more:

> " – And just as You have brought me out safely, so may You lead me in safety, support me in safety, and direct my steps safely – and deliver me from the hand of every enemy and ambush on the road."

Here the Bavli disrupts the symmetry of the mishnah, by adding an addendum – or rather, a fifth prayer. Thus the pattern which concluded with thanks for the past is now propelled forward again with a plea for the future. It seems that the mishnah's neat envelope of utterance (containing danger within the city) is insufficient for the Bavli. The mishnah's final image of the departing traveler standing outside the city is for the Bavli only the beginning of more trouble: the road ahead. The severity of the danger is perhaps indicated by the extent of the prayer, for here, the Bavli breaks the pattern of brief, matching prayers by instead adding a prayer that is fully twice as long as any of the previous utterances.

To some extent, the Bavli's reading of this mishnah follows those of the Tosefta and Yerushalmi, which not only provide a script for Ben ʿAzzai 's four prayers, but also add an additional prayer at the end.[151] In the Tosefta, the exit prayer, "I thank You for bringing me out safely" is followed by " – and so may I arrive at my place," whereas the Yerushalmi adds, "– so may it be Your will, Lord my God, that You lead me to my home safely, or to whatever place safely!" Thus, for all three texts, exit from the city is not a happy ending (requiring only thanks); instead they seem acutely aware that this exit constitutes another entry (requiring prayer). Yet, while in the Tosefta and Yerushalmi, this final prayer skips forward to the end of the journey ("my place," "my home" or "whatever place"), the Bavli seems to see only the road ahead: "Lead me in safety, support me in safety, and direct my steps safely – and deliver me from the hand of every enemy and ambush on the way!"

Here, the Bavli reprises the traveler's prayer, first prescribed on b.Berakhot 29b. There, the prayer concluded hopefully, " – and bless the works of my hands, and grant me grace, kindness, and mercy in Your eyes and in the eyes of all who see me. Blessed are You, O Lord, who hears prayer." While the current, shorter version may denote the full prayer, it is perhaps no coincidence that here the prayer ends not with blessing and grace, but with the "enemy and ambush" – and indeed, with the word *ba-derekh,* "on the road." The topic here is not arrival, but the journey itself; indeed this rather open-ended prayer presents a decidedly un-Romantic "open road" – a dangerous place from which deliverance is not guaranteed.

Our tour of the many and varied perils of the rabbinic road has borne out the notion that the road entire is "a dangerous place." Moreover, if we learned at the outset that the only prayer suited to such a place is a brief and hurried one, our current text seems to pull us back a bit further. The Bavli's threshold prayers mark the brink as the place of utterance; one speaks

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[151] And yet, the prayers are marked and located rather differently in each text. The Tosefta marks only three sites ("on entering," "having entered," and "on leaving") and links prayers of thanksgiving and petition, so that, in a sense, there seem only to be three prayers (see t.Berakhot 6.21). The Yerushalmi, on the other hand, neatly marks each of the four sites, matching it to an utterance (see y.Berakhot 14b). Indeed, the Yerushalmi version is highly symmetrical, adding an "extra" petitionary prayer (for the next step) both after safe arrival in the city and again after safe departure from it. In contrast, the Bavli shifts all the weight to the very last stage, reserving the additional petition exclusively for the final step: setting out on the road.

at the threshold, but *within* the five dangerous realms, it seems, there are no words. Perhaps even more so, the more effusive traveler's prayer, recited at the cusp of the journey, seems to mark the road itself as a place of no recitation. It seems that the traveler, on his way from the vocalized past to speaking of the hoped for future, traverses a silent terrain.

Chapter two: Wisdom on the Road

The texts we surveyed in Chapter one identify the road as the site of risk, danger and death. Embarking on the road requires a special prayer of protection, and while en route, a traveler may even postpone his recitation of the *Shemoneh ʿesreh*, so that he may remain vigilant. Those texts seem to indicate that the road is a far from suitable setting for the work of the study house. Surely travelers should keep their eyes on the road, rather than turning attention to text and exposition!

That notion is made plain, in b.Taʿanit, when R. Elʿazar warns that travelers who discuss "matters of *halakhah*" en route put themselves in danger. Yet this sensible advice is immediately refuted: "Can this be so? Didn't R. Ilaʿi say: Two scholars who walk on the road without words of Torah between them deserve to be burned in fire?" R. Ilaʿi's proof is the story of the prophets Elijah and Elisha: "As it is said: *They went on walking and talking, when suddenly there appeared a chariot of fire and horses of fire, which separated them from each other.*"[1] According to R. Ilaʿi, it was their "talk" – words of Torah – that saved the prophets from being consumed by the flames: "had there been no talk, they should have been burned with fire!"

R. Ilaʿi's teaching is part of a larger genre of rabbinic teachings on the merit of Torah study, and its power to protect, heal and redeem – even from death. Among these, we find another teaching prescribing Torah study on the road, this time for the lone traveler. "R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi said: One who walks on the road without any escort should study Torah, as it is said: *For they are a garland of grace for your head…*"[2] R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi cites the Proverbial image of Wisdom as an emblem of honor, and a token of protection and healing. By playing on the similarity of the words *leʸayah* ("escort") and *liʸyah* (Wisdom's "garland," which stands for Torah), he declares Torah the traveler's best companion, and its study his best pursuit. Indeed, the remedy for the lone traveler is also "talk," for in the classical rabbinic context (in which learning is spoken), "Study Torah!" means "Recite (or discuss) Torah!"[3]

Whereas our Berakhot text provided apotropaic prayer for the traveler's protection, these teachings prescribe study and discourse as the amulet for safe travel. Moreover, R. Ilaʿi indicates that these pursuits are mandatory, an obligation travelers neglect at risk of their lives. Thus, we might say that these teachings provide justification for the accounts of sages teaching en route. Moreover, because they explicitly require what those accounts portray, they also provide a key to understanding the "Torah on the road" motif; the directive "do this" is signpost pointing us toward the motif's origins.

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[1] 2 Kings 2:11.

[2] Proverbs 1:9

[3] Modern readers might mistakenly assume that there is a contrast between the acts prescribed by R. Ilaʿi's and R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's: that is, between spoken debate and solitary, silent pondering. However, in classical rabbinic texts (although we do occasionally find reference to "pondering," e.g, הרהור), the primary model of Torah study – whether solitary or in company – is spoken. See below for the model of the lone scholar "reciting his studies" (m.Avot 3.7, discussed below); on the importance of studying aloud, see, e.g., b.ʿEruvin 52b-55a. On the contrast between "reading" in the rabbinic period and the modern sense of reading as a "private" experience, see Daniel Boyarin, "Placing Reading – Ancient Israel and Medieval Europe," in Jonathan Boyarin, *The Ethnography of Reading* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

In this chapter, I delve into these two teachings, through which I trace the genealogy of the road *derasha*. First reading each teaching in its context, I then map its connection to the larger corpus by tracing its citations, allusions and parallels.[4] Each teaching, I find, is rooted in the language and imagery of traditional Wisdom texts – and yet, this is not simply a matter of rabbinic texts translating biblical Wisdom to "Torah." Rather, by drawing on the complex interplay of images and notions in their sources, these teachings refashion them into a new motif: a literal metaphor which actualizes the Proverbial "Way of Wisdom" and the Shema command to "speak [these words] as you walk on the road…" This is a particular convergence of Wisdom and rabbinic Torah, which locates the mitsṿah of Torah study … on the road.

R Ilaʿi

The debate between R. Elʿazar and R. Ilaʿi (cited above) occurs in the context of a yet another text on travel danger. The discussion, in b.Taʿanit, begins with the relatively harmless scenario of travel among Jewish towns:

> If one travels from a place where they are not fasting to a place where they are, he should fast with them. [If one goes] from a place where they are fasting to a place where they are not, he should nevertheless complete his fast.

Considering how travel to a different community might affect one's observance of a fast, the gemara finds that proper conduct may require a degree of non-conformity. Yet, this does not warrant reckless disregard: "If one forgets and eats and drinks, he mustn't display himself before the community!" The anathema of "showing off" is proven by citing a biblical story of hunger and plenty:[5]

> *And Jacob said to his sons: Why do you show yourselves* [תתראו]?
> meaning: When you are fully sated do not show yourselves [תראו עצמכם] before Esau or Ishmael, lest they envy you.[6]

Here, Jacob's reprimand of his sons' passivity ("Why do you [merely] look at one another? Go [to Egypt] for grain so we may live") becomes a warning against heedless ostentation. Suddenly we are no longer confronting other Jews, but rather (since Esau stands for Rome and Ishmael for Arabia) the dangerous jealousy of non-Jews. Thus, it seems that the scenario

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[4] On co-texts as context, see Dina Stein, *Textual Mirrors: Reflexivity, Midrash and the Rabbinic Self* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsyvania Press, 2012), chapter 2. Stein's discussion vividly shows that "the co-textual space designates a field of meaning in which our text resides" (36).

[5] Genesis 42:1. In a beautiful example of the resonance that often characterizes rabbinic compositions, the gemara's discussion of fasting and travel cites the admonitions addressed to the sons of Jacob as they embark to and from Egypt, thus alluding to a biblical story of hunger, plenty, and the journeys in between.

[6] The reading plays on the similarity of the Hebrew verbs "to see" and "to show," glossing the reciprocal תתראו ("why do you [merely] look at one another?") as the reflexive "why do you show yourselves" (תראו עצמכם). The wordplay derives from the preceding warning not to "display oneself [אל יתראה] before the community!"

of travel – even to Jewish towns – immediately raises the specter of the dangerous Other to be encountered on the way. Once again, travel means danger.

That theme is taken up by the next teaching, which reads the end of the biblical story: the moment when Joseph sends his brothers back to Canaan, warning them: "do not quarrel on the way."[7] But here we learn that what concerned Joseph was not brotherly strife, but scholarly "argument" on the road:

> *"Do not quarrel on the way*" [אל תרגזו בדרך]. R. Elʿazar explained: Joseph said to his brothers: Do not engage in matters of *halakhah*, lest the road quake / become angry at you [שמא תרגזו עליכם הדרך].[8]

Punning on the tacit phrase [*halikhah*] *ba-derekh*, R. Elʿazar reads "don't argue [while walking] on the road" as "don't argue *halakhah* on the road,"[9] and then shows that such argument causes "anger" to backfire: "you will be angry on the road" becomes "the road will be angry at you."[10] In his comment on this passage, Rabbenu Gershom explains the angry road as a metonym for the dangerous Others encountered there: "Seeing you disagreeing on a matter of *halakhah*, they will think you contentious and become angry with you."[11] Thus the scenario of travel, which first raised the specter of Others' dangerous envy, now confronts us with their wrath. Yet, whether we see here hostile Others or a road quaking with divine retribution, it is clear that scholarship on the road endangers travelers.

Nonetheless, the teaching is immediately refuted: "Can this be so? Did not R. Ilaʿi bar Barkhiyah say: two scholars who walk on the road without *divre Torah* between them deserve to be burned with fire?

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[7] Genesis 45:24

[8] R. Elʿazar seems to invoke the biblical motif תרגז הארץ, in which God's wrath at human misconduct causes the earth to quake (see, e.g., Amos 8:8, Ps. 18:8, 2 Sam 14:15, Isa. 13:13, 23:11) or the earth itself shudders in horror (see Proverbs 30:21). However, here (in standard print editions and MS Munich) the verb is plural, which is puzzling, if we expect "the road" to be its grammatical subject. I find the most intelligible reading is to consider the verb a second person plural imperfect *hiphil* (*targizu*), "lest you cause X to be angry" עליכם "at you." (For a similar form of the verb, also missing the pretonic yod, see Ezekiel 16:43). Other manuscripts, however, have no such problem (or have emended it); the Vatican, British Library and Herzog mss. render the verb תרגז or יגז , making the noun *ha-derekh* (which is both masculine and feminine) the subject of the phrase: "lest road become angry at you." Thus, in the first version, R. Elʿazar's reading works by shifting from stative (to be angry) to causative (to anger), whereas in the latter, he merely changes the subject of the verb (you become angry; the road becomes angry). For the sense "the earth quakes," see below.

[9] The word "*ba-derekh*" seems to suggest the phrase "*halikhah ba-derekh*." Through the pun *halikhah / halakhah*, the biblical phrase "*al tirgezu [halikhah] ba-derekh*" can be read "*al tirgezu halakhah ba-derekh*," which R. Elʿazar renders אל תעסקו בדבר הלכה בדרך.

[10] This two-part warning ("Don't…lest") is created by R. Elʿazar 's doubled reading of the word אל, by which he renders the single biblical phrase as two clauses: cause ("Don't") and effect ("lest").

[11] Rabbenu Gershom thus resolves the subject/verb puzzle (and perhaps reconciles the different manuscript versions) by making "the road" the sign for a plural "them" (i.e., Others encountered on the way). I find less satisfying Rashi's gloss of the phrase as "lest you get lost," or as Jastrow (1447) explains it: "lest the road becomes unsteady for you (you lose your way)." This seems to weaken the verb (from earth "quaking" to a mere perceived unsteadiness or uncertainty) and removes all association with the retributive wrath that answers misconduct. This reading not only seems to dilute the teaching, but it also removes its connection to its discursive context.

> As it is said, *They continued walking and talking* [הולכים הולך ודבר], *when suddenly there appeared a chariot of fire separating between them*. The reason was that there was talk [דיבור], but had there been no talk, they would have deserved to be burned in fire!

The threatened "anger" is now a deadly fire, but according to R. Ilaʿi, travelers' talk does not provoke but rather wards off the flames.[12] If we imagine this redacted dispute as an actual one, we might say that R. Ilaʿi wins his point by deftly shifting the terms of debate. R. Ilaʿi speaks not of "quarreling" but of "speech," using the repeated words *diber* and *dibur* to echo the phrase *benehem divre Torah,* thereby underlining his point: the necessity of scholarly discourse. He proves that point by citing the journey (not of the oft-reprimanded sons of Jacob, but) of master and devoted disciple.[13] That proof undoes R. Elʿazar's opposition of *halikhah* and *halakhah,* for here walking (seemingly doubled in the phrase *holkim holekh*)[14] is paired with "*diber*"; walking and talking go together. Moreover, by placing "words of Torah" precisely where the heavenly fire stands – "*between* them," R. Ilaʿi imputes to this speech an analogous power or sanctity.

"Walking and talking"

To better appreciate this teaching, let's take a closer look at the proof text, and R. Ilaʿi's reading of it. R. Ilaʿi's source is the biblical story of the prophets Elijah and Elisha; he cites the penultimate moment in their journey together, just before Elijah is borne away to heaven. Yet, the crux of his teaching is the unremarkable moment that precedes that event: "They went on walking and talking." In the biblical text, this phrase is merely the link between two events (Elijah's bequest and his departure). But in R. Ilaʿi's reading, this subordinate clause becomes a statement – and event – unto itself, thus revealing a new scene in the story: master and disciple learning Torah.[15]

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[12] Regarding R. Ilaʿi's reading technique, see note 15 below.

[13] For examples of the rabbinic tradition of Elijah and Elisha as iconic master and disciple, see the Berakhot texts discussed below (in which Elijah and Elisha prove the ethic of imparting a Torah teaching when departing), as well as Sifre Deuteronomy, Piska 34, in which the claim that "teach them to your children"(Deut. 6:7) means "teach your students" is proven by the story of Elisha, and his cry at Elijah's departure, "My father, my father…!" See also that cry as quoted by R. ʿAkiva, on the death of his teacher, R. Eliezer (b.Sanhedrin 68a), and alternately, the claim that Elisha's words "the chariots of Israel!" mean "my master!" (b.Moʿed Katan 26a).

[14] In the Masoretic biblical text, the word is "*halokh*" [הלוך], the *qal* infinitive absolute, which (when linked to other verbal forms) is a marker indicating continuous action (that is, "they continued walking and talking"). By rendering the word *holekh* ("walking"), our texts seem to convert the word back to a finite verb – perhaps thereby further emphasizing the act of walking.

[15] Using a standard exegetical technique, R. Ilaʿi reads the first phrase ("and they continued walking and talking") as the cause of the next ("and there appeared horses and chariots of fire, separating between them"). While R. Ilaʿi's explicit lesson is that the prophets' *dibur* protected them from the fire (so that it could only separate but not destroy them), he may also be implying that heavenly fire was drawn down by the lofty or pure nature of their discourse (as in b.Ḥagigah 14a). (For another such "causal" reading by R. Ilaʿi, see the teaching following this one in b.Sotah 49a, below). Moreover, in addition to the explicit "causal" reading of the phrase, R. Ilaʿi may also be implying its link to the previous scene, in which Elisha requests "a double portion" of his master's spirit; read rabbinically, the master's bequest can only mean his teaching.

We can get an inkling of the roots of R. Ilaʿi's reading by considering a similar take on the verse in the Yerushalmi. Here it is proof of the proper way to take leave of a friend (or colleague):[16]

> One mustn't depart from one's friend with chatter, joking, light-mindedness, or idle words, but only with a word of Torah [*davar shel Torah*], as we find in the early prophets, who concluded their speeches with words of praise and words of consolation … Even Elijah did not depart from Elisha except with a word of Torah: "*They went on walking and talking…*"[17]

Just as for R. Ilaʿi, the verse proves the necessity of "*divre Torah* between them," here it proves the model of departing with "*davar shel Torah*"; even Elijah (whose departure was particularly cataclysmic) imparted a Torah teaching before leaving his disciple. Moreover, here we even get a sense of that teaching's content:

> What were they discussing?[18] R. Aḥva b. Zeʿira said, they were discussing the recitation of the Shema, as it says *And **speak** them* [*…as you go on the way*]. R. Yuda b. Pazi said: they were discussing the Creation of the World, as it says, *By the **word** of God the heavens were made.* R. Yudan b. R. Ayavu said: they were discussing the Consolation of Jerusalem, as it says: ***Speak** to the heart of Jerusalem.*

The content of the prophets' speech is revealed by linking it (the word *ve-diber*) to "speech" (*diber* / *davar*) in other texts – or to the phrase immediately following it: "Our sages said: they were discussing the Chariot, as it says: *And behold a chariot of fire and horses of fire…*"[19] Thus we find the two prophets discussing the topics of prayer, Israel's consolation in Exile, the Creation – and the very nature of God (indicated by the divine Chariot).[20]

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[16] y.Berakhot 8d. This passage explicates m.Berakhot 5.1: "One stands to pray only with seriousness of mind."

[17] Note the emphasis on "words" in this passage, which reads literally, "…not with idle words, but with a word of Torah, as we see in the prophets, who sealed their words with words of praise and words of consolation … Even Elijah departed … only with a word of Torah…" I have translated the phrase *davar shel Torah* in order to retain some of this emphasis, but also to make obvious – even in English translation – the direct link between the phrase and R. Ilaʿi's term *divre Torah*.

[18] Literally, "with what were they occupied?" [במה היו עוסקין]. See next note.

[19] Since each topic corresponds to a biblical text, it may seem, at first glance, that the question posed is actually "with what [text] were they occupied?" meaning, "what text were they reciting?" However, the fact that not all the proofs given here are from those source texts (i.e., "Creation" is proved by Psalm 33, not Genesis 1; "Chariot" is proved by our own verse in Kings, not Ezekiel 1) indicates that this "word of Torah" is a matter of discussion and not strictly recitation. The last proof is particularly fascinating, as it reads the next phrase of our verse as the "content" of the prophets' talk – and perhaps its result, for we know that teaching the Chariot may draw down heavenly fire (see b.Ḥagigah 14a, and my discussion of it in chapter 3, below).

[20] The text thus links the fiery Chariot of the biblical verse with the notion of the divine Chariot (which metonymically indicates the divine throne and abode), and the field of study (and perhaps practice) known as *Maʿaśeh Merkavah* – speculation on the form and nature of God. On this matter, see chapter 3.

In the Bavli's corresponding passage,[21] we are advised to depart "not with chatter, joking, light-mindedness, or idle words" but rather with "*devar halakhah*":[22]

> For so we find in the early prophets, that they concluded their speeches with words of praise and comfort; and so [it was] taught:[23] Do not take leave of a friend except with *devar halakhah*, so he will remember you thereby.

Yet here, the point is proven not by our peripatetic prophets, but by a more recent example: two sages on a journey:

> As we see here: Rav Kahana escorted Rav Shimi bar Ashi from [the town of] Pum-Nehara to Be-Tsinyata of Babylon, and when he arrived there, he said: Master, is it true what people say, that these palms have been here from the time of Adam ha-Rishon until now?
>
> Rav Shimi bar Ashi responds:
>
> You remind me of the saying of R. Yose b. Ḥanina [who said]: What is meant by the verse, *A land that no man passed through and where no man dwelt*? For if no one passed, how could anyone dwell there? Rather, the verse teaches you: every land that Adam ha-Rishon decreed should be inhabited is inhabited, and any land he did not so decree is not.

While it is not clear (at least to this reader) whether Shimi bar Ashi has answered or diverted from his companion's question, his response does demonstrate the appropriate conduct for such a moment. When the sages arrive at their destination (and presumably just before parting), Rav Shimi passes on a tradition he has learned from another teacher; thus, the proper conduct at parting is clearly a matter of teaching or transmitting teachings. Moreover, this is not just any goodbye, but rather a parting after quite a long journey together, as we see again in the brief account that closes this passage: "Rav Mordekhai escorted Rav Shimi bar Aba from Hagronia to Be-Kafi – or some say, to Be-Dura!"[24] Thus, the necessity of passing on Torah teachings is proven here by stories of traveling sages. And there is even a sense that

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[21] b.Berakhot 31a, which like the Yerushalmi passage above, explicates m.Berakhot 5.1: "One stands to pray only with seriousness of mind."

[22] Strictly speaking, this term means "a matter of law" or "a traditional legal teaching." However, the term is illustrated (see below) with the example of a sage imparting, not a legal teaching, but an aggadic exegetical teaching. This (and the text's close relation to y.Berakhot 8d, where the term is *davar shel Torah*) seems to indicate that what is meant here is the more general category of "a traditional teaching." It is worth noting that, in the "debate" above, R. Elʿazar employs precisely the very same term: *devar halakhah.* Perhaps R. Elʿazar's teaching is a polemic against the association of travel and *devar halakhah* established by this teaching (or a tradition like it).

[23] To shorten the passage and make it more smoothly readable in this context (but with no disrespect intended), I have elided the attribution to Mari the grandson of Rav Huna son of Yirmiyah b. Abba.

[24] By these accounts, Rav Kahana seems to have traveled over 200 miles (from Pum-Nehara to Be-Tsinyata), while Rav Mordekhai either traveled approximately 25 miles (from Hagronia to Be-Kafi) or over ten times that distance (from Hagronia to Be-Dura). Either way, these were no short jaunts!

the lesson "teach Torah when departing *from* a friend" could become "teach Torah when departing *with* a friend" – that is, when traveling together.

Thus, we find R. Ilaʿi within a developing tradition: a tradition that links travel and *divre Torah,* and according to which "walking and talking" must mean Torah study. Yet, R. Ilaʿi's warning (with its threat of mortal punishment) puts the lesson into high relief. Moreover, the redactors of the b.Taʿanit debate seem to render R. Ilaʿi the focal point of the tradition, by enlisting him to quash the opposition: "Can this be so? But didn't R. Ilaʿi say…?"

Words that redeem

With that remark, the Taʿanit redactors mark R. Ilaʿi s as an already extant teaching, cited from another place. And indeed, R. Ilaʿi's admonition does appear in another context, in the final chapter of b.Sotah.[25] Here, it is one of four teachings by R. Ilaʿi,[26] a series that might be titled "Words that redeem." The first two teachings concern the redemption effected for future generations by the prayers of biblical prophets (or intercessors), which in this text include David.[27] First, R. Ilaʿi declares that Israel was saved from squalor by David's plea, in Psalm 9: "If not for David's prayer, all Israel would be grease peddlers [מוכרי רבב], as it is said: *Grant them esteem, O Lord*."[28] Next, he shows how the words of Habukuk (in Hab. 3:2) warded off dire poverty:

> If not for Habukuk's prayer, two scholars would have to cover themselves with one *talit* to study Torah, as it says, "… *Revive them in these years*." Do not read "in these years" [*bekerev shanim*] but rather "when two draw near" [*bekeruv shenayim*].

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[25] More specifically, the context is this chapter's concluding lament for the "decline of the generations" (b.Sotah 47b-49b). "From the day the Temple was destroyed," the mishnah tells us, "there was no day without curse, the dew has not descended for blessing, and the flavor has departed from the fruits." According to the mishnah, the end of prophecy, the destruction of the Temple, the end of the Sanhedrin, and the deaths of the great *tanna'im* were losses that changed the nature of the world and began a process of relentless degradation. R. Ilaʿi's teachings appear in the gemara's exposition of the passage "When the Temple was destroyed, men of faith disappeared" (b.Sotah 48b-49a) – but also clearly refers to the previous passage, "When the early prophets died…" (b.Sotah 48b). Yet, R. Ilaʿi teachings go against the grain of the main discourse, in which all virtue belongs to the past. Instead, R. Ilaʿi posits a Good transmitted from past to present. (See also the explication of "little of faith" that precedes R. Ilaʿi teachings, in which the spirits of dead children force God to lessen the punishment of their wicked parents. This strange reversal is particularly striking in a context in which what is younger is necessarily debased and has nothing to offer the pristine past).

[26] The sage's name – and patronym – appears in different forms in the two texts. In the Taʿanit text, our sage is called R. Ilaʿi b. Barkhiyah [רבי אלעאי בר ברכיה], but in Sotah, he is (four times) referred to as R. Ilaʿa b. Yevarkhiya [ר׳ אילעא בר יברכיה]. While there are several references elsewhere in the Bavli (and many in the Yerushalmi) to (our sage's father) R. Barkhiyah, the Sotah cites are the only references to him as R. Yevarkhiyah. For clarity's sake, I refer to the sage as R. Ilaʿi throughout this chapter.

[27] This broader notion of "prophets" as biblical heroes or intercessors is evident on the previous page, (b.Sotah 48b) where we learn: "Who were the early prophets? R. Huna said, they were David, Samuel and Solomon**."**

[28] Psalm 9:21. I've used the Soncino rendering, as it concisely conveys what is being read into the biblical verse. That is, the biblical phrase, "put fear upon them [the nations]; let them know they are but men" is here read as "make the nations fear them [Israel]" – i.e., give Israel worldly status.

Here, we learn that Habukuk's words ("Revive them") directed divine blessing to the site of poverty (two scholars sharing one *talit*), thereby removing the need to huddle together thus. Yet, at the same time, the teaching implies that divine blessing is bestowed whenever two scholars "draw near"; the image of "two scholars together" is now charged with divine force.

That charged space is precisely the concern of the next teaching:

> Two scholars who walk on the road without words of Torah between them deserve to be burned with fire! As it is said, *They continued walking and talking, when suddenly there appeared a chariot of fire*, etc. The reason was that there was talk, but had there been no talk, they should have been burned with fire!

Read here, R. Ilaʿi's admonition is clearly linked to what came before it: "two scholars [who] draw near to study Torah" become "two scholars…with words of Torah between them." Like the first two teachings, this one centers on the speech-acts of the biblical prophets. Here, we are no longer concerned with the words' saving grace for future generations, but rather their immediate power for those who speak them *now*. Yet, that power brings with it a certain severity; the tone is no longer one of thanksgiving, but rather of warning.

The final teaching in the series is also a warning for "two scholars":

> If two scholars live in the same town and do not support each other in *halakhah*, one dies and the other goes into exile, as it is said: *That the manslayer, who without knowledge slays his fellow, might flee there* (Deut. 4:42). "Knowledge" can only mean Torah, as it is said: *My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge* (Hosea 4:6).

This teaching also concerns what is "between" two scholars: their conduct toward one another. Reading the description "one who slays without knowing" as a statement of cause and effect, R. Ilaʿi finds that when there are two "without knowledge" between them, one kills the other and must flee. "Knowledge can only mean Torah," he explains, and by citing Hosea's tirade against misconduct and disobedience, indicates that this means proper conduct in Torah. Thus, having taught of the divine blessing bestowed when two scholars "draw near," and of the power of *divre Torah* "between them," R. Ilaʿi now warns of the dire consequences if they mismanage that force, and "do not support one another in *halakhah*."[29]

What began as a series of teachings on the redemptive speech of biblical "prophets" (teachings 1-3) has become a series on "what is between" scholars (teachings 2-4). In the process, the speech of prophets has melded with the speech of sages – and the moment of joining is precisely in the "road" teaching, which identifies the words of both prophets and sages as *divre Torah*. Thus, this teaching is the crux of a series indicating that the heirs of

[29] Note the similar theme in b.Yevamot 62b: "It was said that R. ʿAkiva had twelve thousand pairs of disciples … and all of them died at the same time because they did not treat each other with respect."

biblical prophets (or intercessors) are the sages, to whom they have bequeathed the power of redemptive speech.

"Divre Torah between them"

The notion of "what's between" two scholars alerts us to R. Ilaʿi's other cited source. The very phrase "*divre Torah* between them" is a quote from mishnah Avot 3, which for R. Ilaʿi, is a source not only of words, but of structure and meaning.

In order to appreciate R. Ilaʿi's adaptation of Avot, let us first review the structure of his teaching. His admonition begins with its protagonists (two scholars) and the activity in which they are engaged (going on the road). Next, a problem (or misstep) is proposed: what if these two have no words of Torah between them? Misdeed is followed by judgment: their due punishment (death by fire) is declared. Thus far, we have the standard warning structure: "wrong conduct will be punished." Finally, a proof text is provided, showing by opposite example that *divre Torah* redeem from death by fire. We are thereby presented with a dichotomy of wrong and right acts, of punishment and reward. The teaching is thus comprised of: a) number/type of persons, b) activity, c) problem: "no *divre Torah*," d) judgment, and e) proof text (providing positive example).

This teaching's form – and its lesson – is almost identical to m.Avot 3.2:

> Two who sit without *divre Torah* between them are a session of scorners, as it is said: *Nor sits he in the session of scorners*.[30] But when two sit and there are *divre Torah* between them, the divine Presence abides between them, as it is said: *Those who feared the Lord spoke one with another and the Lord heard it and listened*...[31]

As in R. Ilaʿi's warning, the lesson – that Torah study must be the concern of any two that gather – hinges on the words "without *divre Torah* between them." Moreover, we find here the same structural syntax: a) number of persons ("two"), b) activity ("who sit"), c) problem ("without *divre Torah* between them"), d) judgment ("a session of scorners"), e) proof text and positive example (which here has its own proof text). Here, the reward for *divre Torah* is no less than the divine Presence itself, which comes to abide precisely where those words are spoken, "between them."

The next mishnah (Avot 3.3) employs the same structure for a similar scenario: "Three who sat and ate at one table, but did not say over it *divre Torah* are as if they had eaten sacrifices to the dead, as it is said, *All [their] tables are full of vomit and filth, there is no Place.*" But three who sit and do speak words of Torah "are as if they had eaten from the

[30] Psalm 1:1, "Happy is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor takes the path of sinners, nor sits in the company of scorners."

[31] This is a teaching of R. Ḥananyah b. Teradyon, who cites Malakhi 3:16, including the rest of the verse (which I've elided above): "and a book of remembrance was written before Him, for them that feared the Lord and thought upon His name" – thus indicating that those "with *divre Torah* between them" are given merits in God's account book.

table of the Blessed Place, as it is said, *This is the table before the Lord.*"[32] Again, the reward for *divre Torah* is divine Presence (proved here by puns on the word "*maḳom*").[33] Moreover, this teaching's key phrase – "speaking *divre Torah*" – translates "words between them" into a verb, making the right act more vivid: words of Torah must be *spoken*.

Having proven the necessity of *divre Torah* for groups of two and three, the Mishnah then provides a more comprehensive list. Mishnah 6 declares, "[When] Ten sit and study Torah, the divine Presence abides between them, as it is said, "*God stands in the congregation of God*" – and proceeds to prove that Presence for groups of five, three, two, and even the lone scholar.[34] This teaching's structure heightens the sense of culmination, for here the Mishnah skips the warning clause and speaks only of reward. Moreover, where mishnah 3 emphasized "speaking," this teaching, which turns on the phrase "*ʿosek ba-Torah*," makes it clear that the right act is Torah study.

R. Ilaʿi's lesson clearly matches the form and content of this series of *mishnayot.* Yet, for all their similarity to R. Ilaʿi's teaching, these *mishnayot* present an obvious and striking difference: for R. Ilaʿi, "walking and talking" go together, but in Avot, those who speak words of Torah are seated. Indeed the repetition of the phrases "two who sit," "three who sit," "ten who sit" seems to indicate that sitting is essential to the act of studying Torah.

That notion is underlined by a dichotomy within Avot 3, for its *divre Torah* series is punctuated by warnings about "walking on the road." Immediately following "three who sit" (Avot 3.3), we learn that "One who stays awake at night, who walks on the road alone, and who makes room in his mind for idleness [בטלה], he is liable for his life!" (Avot 3.4).[35] This startling teaching declares the death penalty for apparently minor misdeeds: staying up late (a careless act?), traveling alone (a dangerous act), and "idleness" (*baṭalah* – traditionally understood as the opposite of Torah study).[36] While the teaching does not tell us precisely how these acts are connected, the fact of grouping them together seems to render them somewhat apposite. Thus *baṭalah* – the non-Torah pursuits that might otherwise seem merely careless or wasteful – takes on an aura of danger, while "walking on the road" (now linked to *baṭalah*) seems an activity opposed to Torah study.

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[32] m.Avot 3.3. The proof texts are Isaiah 28:8 and Ezekiel 41:22. This lesson has the same syntactic structure: number (three), activity (sat and ate at one table), problem ("did not say over it *divre Torah*"), judgment ("like those who eat sacrifices to the dead"), proof text, and positive model, with its proof text.

[33] That is, the divine name "*ha-Maḳom*" (the Place) is read into Isaiah's phrase "*beli maḳom*" ("there is no place"), indicating the absence of God where *divre Torah* are not spoken – which is then contrasted with the [place] at God's table won by those who speak *divre Torah.*

[34] Here, the lesson turns on Scriptural words that imply number: "congregation" (in the phrase above from Psalm 82:1) indicates a *minyan* (ten); in the subsequent proof texts (Amos 9:6, Psalm 82:1, Malakhi 3:16, and Exodus 20:21), "a band" (*agudah*) implies five; "judges" connote a court's minimum requirement of three judges; "with one another" implies two, and the singular pronoun "you" indicates one. Proving God's presence among all sizes of scholarly groups, this teaching builds upon – and even "completes" – what came before.

[35] מתחייב בנפשו: one who has committed an act that is in the category of, or is comparable to a capital crime (see, e.g., the distinction, in m.Ketubot 3.2 and m.Bava Ḳama 3.10, between transgressions for which one pays monetary recompense and those for which one "is liable for his life"). Thus, the phrase marks generally marks what is considered (or is marked as) an extremely serious offense (see, for example t.Ḥulin 6.2 and t.ʿAvodah Zarah 7.6). It should be noted that while Jastrow translates the phrase, "guilty of a deadly sin," he reserves for Avot 3:4 a different meaning: "he would have himself to blame" (428). However, I am assuming that some sense of serious transgression also applies to the acts denounced in Avot 3.

[36] See, for example, R. Yonatan's teaching in m.Avot 4.9, which opposes כל המקיים את התורה ("all who fulfill the Torah") to כל המבטל את התורה ("all who neglect the Torah").

This sense that the road is anti-Torah is made explicit in mishnah 7. Just after the comprehensive list of those rewarded for Torah study (Avot 3.6), we are warned:

> A traveler [מהלך בדרך] who is reciting and breaks off from his lesson to say
> 'What a fine tree that is! What a fine newly-plowed field that is!' –
> Scripture reckons him as one who is liable for his life!

Reprising the language of mishnah 4, this teaching warns of a traveler ("*mehalekh ba-derekh*") who is "liable for his life" ("*mitḥayev be-nafsho*").[37] This closer view of the lone traveler shows precisely how he is in danger; he starts off right, reciting his lesson [*shoneh…mishnato*] as he goes, but sights along the way distract him from study. Moreover, to heighten the opposition of road to Torah, this teaching makes "Scripture" itself the judge who sentences the errant one. And if, after all this, we are still tempted to minimize the cost of such a lapse in attention, the next mishnah drives home the point: "Whoever forgets one word of his learning, Scripture reckons him as one who is liable for his life!"[38]

Thus, as a group, these *mishnayot* seem to associate the road with idle pursuits (mishnah 4), distraction from study (mishnah 7) and forgetting one's learning (mishnah 8). And yet the vivid image of the traveling scholar (presented in mishnah 7) cannot be entirely confined to admonition. By presenting a lone traveler reciting Torah, this mishnah in effect renders the road a site – albeit a challenging one – for Torah study. Indeed, the right course from which this traveler strays is attention to his study as he goes!

Moreover, the "road" *mishnayot* contain another key element of R. Ilaʿi's teaching: the penalty. While the *divre Torah* teachings pronounce moral judgments on wrongdoers (indicating e.g., that they are "scorners"), only here do we find the kind of quasi-legal verdict R. Ilaʿi employs: here the wrongdoer is "liable for his life," while R. Ilaʿi declares that the heedless "deserve to be burned (to death)!"[39] Thus, while the "seated" *mishnayot* provide the formula that comprises the first part of R. Ilaʿi's warning ("two who do X without *divre Torah* between them…"), these *mishnayot* provide its predicate: the punishment.

Read together, the Avot series (*mishnayot* 3:2-8) presents much of the formal structure, the language, and the lesson that we find in R. Ilaʿi's teaching. We find here the exact syntax of R. Ilaʿi's warning, his phrases "two … without *divre Torah* between them" and "*mehalekh ba-derekh*," as well as the verdict. Moreover, we see here something of R. Ilaʿi's motifs: the obligation to study, a special power between those engaged in study, and the road as the (de facto) site of that endeavor.

Yet, R. Ilaʿi combines and adapts these elements to form a somewhat different lesson. Instead of a generic "two," "three" or "ten," he specifies "two *talmide ḥakhamim*" – this is a warning for scholars only. And instead of imagining them seated at table or in the study house, R. Ilaʿi places them on the road. Yet, he retains – and even intensifies – the Mishnah's tone of warning, by emphasizing the danger and apparently diminishing the reward. Where

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[37] And like that teaching, this one does not simply *describe* the wrong-doer, but actually metes out a sentence.
[38] m.Avot 3.8. This mishnah uses the exact same terms as the previous one: ממשנתו ("from his lesson") and מעלה עלוי הכתוב כאלו מתחייב בנפשו ("Scripture deems him as one liable for his life!").
[39] While in both cases, the "sentence" is death, the language of the two verdicts is different. The *mishnayot* declare the negligent "*mitḥayev be-nafsho*," but in R. Ilaʿi finds them "*reʾuyin liśaref*."

the Mishnah promises an ultimate Good (the divine Presence), R. Ilaʿi seems only to promise a lessening of Evil: protection from harm.

However, when we look at R. Ilaʿi's teaching alongside its source in Avot, a startling feature comes to light. In Avot 3, words of Torah *attract* divine Presence – which "abides between" scholars, indicating blessing and favor. But, in R. Ilaʿi's teaching, words of Torah *repel* heavenly fire, a retributive force that "separates between" our scholar-prophets. Indeed, in R. Ilaʿi's scenario, *divre Torah* seem to compete with divine fire for that space "between" – and to triumph. For R. Ilaʿi, *divre Torah* have replaced divine Presence as the teaching's ultimate Good.[40]

Steven Fraade's remarks on a passage from Sifre Deuteronomy are also apt here. In that passage, the Sifre balks at the verse "Hold fast to Him" (Deut. 11:22), objecting "can a human ascend to heaven or cleave to fire?" – and instead interprets the verse as a command to study Torah. This teaching, Fraade notes, "[advocates] a scholastic alternative to the hope for … direct, unmediated human access to God, whether on earth or in heaven" and asserts "the radical idea that attachment to a community of sages whose central ritual was the study of humanly mediated divine words [should] be regarded as the closest one could approach God…" Moreover, notes Fraade, the teaching "suggests that in acquiring words of Torah, the rabbinic student acquires … a bit of God's fiery heavenly throne."[41] R. Ilaʿi's teaching seems to be part of this same tradition, which places "words of Torah" against – and over – heavenly fire.[42] This is a particularly emphatic expression of the notion that *divre Torah* are "not in heaven," but rather are "ours to do" here on earth – or, as R. Ilaʿi shows us, on the road.[43]

We first encountered R. Ilaʿi in debate, overturning the opposition of *halikhah* and *halakhah* by insisting that *divre Torah* protect travelers on the way. That claim is underlined by his teachings in b.Sotah, which liken *divre Torah* to the speech of biblical "prophets," whose words redeemed the Jewish people. Considering R. Ilaʿi's reading of the phrase

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[40] That is, the two teachings imagine opposite kinds of divine force: in Avot, it is the benevolent Presence, bestowing favor; whereas in R. Ilaʿi's teaching, it is a force of retribution. Thus, R. Ilaʿi claims for *divre Torah* the power, the act, and and the very *place* of blessing "between them."

[41] Steven D. Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and Its Interpretation in the Midrash Sifre to Deuteronomy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 93-94. The text is Piska 49, which comments on Deut. 11:22.

[42] I make an analogy here, via the symbol of divine fire, between two somewhat different themes: the Sifre verse refers to a fire that is the essence of divinity, whereas R. Ilaʿi's teaching figures fire specifically as the force of divine retribution. I liken the Sifre's lesson that divine fire is unattainable, whereas *divre Torah* are ours, to R. Ilaʿi's notion of *divre Torah* displacing divine retributive fire (with which he has already replaced Avot's benevolent Presence). However, in making this analogy, I do not intend to sum up the complex symbolism, in rabbinic texts, of divine fire vis-à-vis Torah study. See Fraade's further remarks (on the motif of fire in Piska 49 and 343), *From Tradition to Commentary*, p. 92-94, 45-49, and p. 206-210, notes 91 and 99. For an analysis of the semiotics of fire and Torah, see Dalia Hoshen, "'*Ha-Torah esh' u-farshanut shel esh,"* (in Simcha Raz, ed. *Religious Zionism in Action.* Jerusalem: Mizrachi Hapoel Mizrachi World Organization, 2000), and "Semiotics as a Religious Question" (in Jacob Neusner, ed. *Approaches to Ancient Judaism: New Series,* vol. 5). However, to a certain extent in these articles, Hoshen brackets the issue (which concerns me here, and below in chapter 3) of fire as a retributive force.

[43] I refer here, of course to the principle of Deut. 29:28 ("…revealed things are for us and our children, to do…") and Deut. 30:11-12 ("This commandment...is not far away; it is not in heaven…"), as expressed, for example, in the story of R. Eliʿezer's contention with the sages, in b.Bava Metsiʿa 59b, in which a voice from heaven is disregarded because "*It is not in heaven*... (that is,) the Torah was already given at Mount Sinai; we do not regard a *bat kol*…"

"walking and talking," we found him within a tradition that associates *divre Torah* with departure and travel. Yet, in his adaptation of m.Avot, we seem to find R. Ilaʿi in the act of creating a new motif out its apparent opposites: seated Torah study versus the distracting, dangerous road. At this point, we may well ask what motivates the tradition as well as the innovation. Why do R. Ilaʿi and the sages of our Berakhot texts assume that "walking and talking" means Torah study? What motivates R. Ilaʿi to convert the archetypical scene of seated study to an image of study en route? To address this question, and delve deeper into the road motif, let us now consult our second teacher: R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi.

R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi

We now turn to our second teaching, which prescribes Torah study for the lone traveler: "R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi says: One who walks on the road without any escort should study Torah, *for* [*these teachings*] *are a garland of grace for your head and necklaces for your neck.*"[44] After our journey with R. Ilaʿi, and with the warning of Avot 3.7 before us, we may well note that Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's teaching contains no warning, only a promise.[45] This is remarkable, since on the ancient (as the modern) road, the traveler who makes his way without help or escort is usually considered more vulnerable to mishap, danger, or attack. In fact, R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's teaching appears in the context of these very concerns; we first encounter his teaching (like R. Ilaʿi's in b.Taʿanit), in the midst of a text that presumes the danger of travel.

The setting of R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's teaching is an excursus, in the final chapter of b.Sotah, on the obligation to escort a traveler. The topic arises from the Bavli's reading of *ʿeglah ʿarufah*, the rite (described in Deut. 21 and m.Sotah 9) to be performed when a corpse is found outside city limits.[46] The gemara's explication of *ʿeglah ʿarufah* proceeds in a rather matter-of-fact, descriptive mode, until we arrive at the rite's climax: "The elders of the city nearest to the corpse shall wash their hands … and say: Our hands have not shed this blood nor have our eyes seen it."[47] Balking at the literal sense of this disclaimer, our sages reinterpret it: "But can we imagine that [members of a] *Bet Din* are killers? Rather [they are saying]: he did not come to us to be turned away without food; we did not see him and let him go without escort!"[48] By assuming that the victim died for lack of escort, the Bavli identifies

[44] R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's teaching appears in two places in the Bavli – and in two somewhat different forms. I shall first consider the more concise version of the teaching, in b.Sotah 46b, and then (after some discussion of the teaching's proof text), turn to the longer version of the teaching, which appears in b.ʿEruvin 54a.

[45] In this regard, R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's teaching is analogous to the climax of the Avot 3 "reward" teaching (m.Avot 3.6), which promises the bestowal of divine Presence for "even one" who sits and studies Torah.

[46] The biblical scenario may itself contain the implication of travel danger, since the corpse is found outside town limits. However, the primary concern of the biblical text is not the circumstances leading to the death, but the situation post mortem: the need to assign civic responsibility for the corpse. Only in the Mishnah does the matter of "what happened" begin to arise (in the form of the assertion, "…we did not see him and let him go!"). It is finally in the Bavli that the scenario is fleshed out ("…we did not see him and let him go without escort!"), and the victim (whose identity was not a concern for the biblical text) is now identified as a hapless traveler (see note 49, below).

[47] Deut. 21:7

[48] This re-reading of the ritual speech also appears several pages earlier (on b.Sotah 38b), where it is a teaching of R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi. Thus, that earlier attribution likely sounds in the background here as well, with the sense that we are again hearing the teaching of R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi.

him as a wayfarer, thus converting the gist of the speech to "we did not deny this traveler the help due him!"[49]

From this imagined scenario, a duty is derived: "R. Meir used to say: We may compel a person to escort [a traveler], because the reward for escorting is limitless…" R. Meir's proof is the Canaanite who (in Judges 1:24-26) indicates to Israelite marauders how to enter the city Luz;[50] in return, he and his family are spared in the ensuing massacre. The Canaanite escapes to found a second Luz, which (the gemara explains) was invulnerable not only to human conquest, but even to the Angel of Death; no one died within its walls.[51] Thus, the reward for merely pointing out the way was nothing less than eternal life, proving that the rewards of escort are limitless:

> Are these matters not *kal va-ḥomer*? If this Canaanite, who did not utter a word or walk a step, caused deliverance for himself and his seed to the end of all generations, how much more so if one does the escorting on foot![52]

The ensuing discussion of *proper* escort ("on foot") begins with R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's teaching: "One who walks on the road without any escort should study Torah, as it is said: *For they shall be a garland of grace for your head…*" This is followed by another saying of R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi:

> R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi also said: Because of the four paces that Pharaoh escorted Abraham – as it is said: *And Pharaoh ordered men [to escort] him*, etc.[53] – Pharaoh [was permitted to] enslave his descendants for four hundred years, as it is said: *And they shall serve them, and they shall afflict them four hundred years.*[54]

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[49] The printed version of the Bavli also includes these phrases ("without food" and "without escort") in its initial quote of the Mishnah. However, since these phrases do not appear in the Kaufman and Parma manuscripts of the Mishnah (where the phrase is "he did not come to us to be turned away; we did not see him and let him go" as I've rendered it above) or in the Yerushalmi, it seems unlikely to me that these words were part of the original mishnah. Rather, they seem later emendations, based on the Bavli's reading of the Mishnah. If so, the Bavli has innovated – or at least made plain – the specific matters of charity and escort. If, however, the phrases "without food" and "without escort" did originate in the Mishnah, then the Bavli is fleshing out, rather than adding to what the mishnah has stated.

[50] Presumably, this is a case of "compulsion," (and thus fitting proof of R. Meir's maxim), since the man acts in response to a "request" from the scouts of an attacking army.

[51] This is a pair of connected *baraitot*, beginning with "It was taught: R. Meir said…" and continuing, "It was taught, this is Luz … that Sennacherib [could] not disrupt and Nebuchadnezzar [could] not destroy and even the Angel of Death was not permitted to pass over it…" The latter seems to be an elaboration of the last verse of the proof text ("…and he built a city, and called it Luz, *which is its name to this day*"), which reads "to this day" as indication of the town's endurance and even eternity.

[52] b.Sotah 46b. All of the passages (on escort) quoted below are from the same page.

[53] Genesis 12:20, in which Pharaoh apparently orders his men to escort Abraham and his entourage on their way out of his kingdom: "And Pharaoh gave men charge concerning him; and they brought him on the way, and his wife, and all that he had" [New JPS translation]. The determination that there were "four paces" may be derived from the number of words in the cited phrase, ויצו עליו פרעה אנשים.

[54] Genesis 15:13.

This second teaching provides a mirror image of R. Meir's Canaanite; it is another example of the *amplified effect* in later generations of a biblical deed (which here earns the right to conquest rather than protection from it).[55]

The next teaching seems to translate Pharaoh's "four paces" for the (Amoraic) present:

> Rav Yehudah said that Rav said: Whoever accompanies his friend four cubits in a town will come to no harm [when on a journey]. Ravina accompanied Rava b. Yitsḥak four cubits in town; danger threatened [Ravina], but he was saved.

Rav Yehudah teaches that the act of escorting a friend even as little as four steps within the relative safety of town merits protection on the more dangerous open road. Like the Canaanite, Ravina is rewarded with life – that is, with redemption from danger and death. Once again (in this continued explication of R. Meir's teaching), a modest deed earns a much greater reward. But here it is clear that the reward matches the deed; in return for his protection, Ravina receives (greater) protection. Thus, escort preserves life – of both escort and escorted.

Having reckoned the reward of escort, the gemara now specifies the rules of its practice for sages and their disciples:

> Our Rabbis taught: A teacher [escorts] his pupil to the outskirts of a city; one colleague [escorts] another to the Sabbath-limit; a pupil [escorts] his master a distance without limit. But how far? R. Sheshet said: Up to a parasang. But only if his master is not prominent; if his master is prominent, three parasangs.[56]

Unlike the mythic "four paces" of Pharaoh, these distances are specific and familiar (to the city's edge, to the Sabbath limit) and measurable (one or three parasangs). This quite practical guide is followed by impressive accounts of sages accompanying sages considerable distances in Babylon,[57] beginning with: "Rav Kahana accompanied Rav Shimi bar Ashi from Pum-Nehara to Be-Tsinyata. When they arrived, he said to him: Is it true … that these palms of Babylon are from the time of Adam?" This indeed is the same story we read above in b.Berakhot.[58] Here too, it is followed by the case of Rav Mordekhai, who "accompanied Rav

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[55] Here, the text seems to assume a logic of "opposite" rewards for Israel's foes, as we also see several pages later: "R. Ḥaninah said: On account of the forty-two sacrifices offered by Balak, king of Moab, forty-two children were cut off from Israel." (However, there is some dispute over the status and effect of Balak's sacrifices, and a positive outcome – for Israel – is also posited).

[56] The distance one must go depends on the relative status of the person escorted. A teacher brings his student only to the edge of the city, whereas one scholar accompanies another his peer the further distance to the Sabbath limit (2000 cubits beyond the city's edge), whereas a student escorts his teacher the even further distance of 1-3 parasangs (4-12 times the distance of the Sabbath limit). (See Frank's chart of distance equivalents in *The Practical Talmud Dictionary*, p. [298]).

[57] Perhaps illustrating the notion "a distance without limit," these accounts report sages providing escort for journeys many times longer than 3 parasangs (perhaps 3-40 times that distance). See note 24 above.

[58] Here, however, the text lacks the lesson on proper departure (i.e., "only with *devar halakhah*"), which framed it in b.Berakhot. (Moreover, the following exemplary tale is slightly different, as here Rav Mordekhai accompanies Rav Ashi, not Rav Shimi bar Ashi).

Ashi from Hagronia to Be-Kafi; and some say, to Be-Dura!" While this latter account (which lacks a teaching) did not well serve the lesson of b.Berakhot, it is quite apt here: both Rav Kahana and Rav Mordekhai are models of rabbinic escort, each traveling many times the maximum distance required for a student escorting his master.

The discussion concludes with another teaching of R. Meir: "Whoever does not escort or allow himself to be escorted is like a killer…!"[59] The proof: "For if the people of Jericho had escorted Elisha, he would not have set bears upon the children…"[60] By letting the prophet leave Jericho unaccompanied, the townspeople left him vulnerable to their children's roadside jeering, and were thus responsible for his reaction and their children's deaths.[61] This final teaching sums up the discussion: if escort protects life, shirking that duty means danger and death.

Thus, R. Meir's promise ("unlimited reward") and his warning ("like shedding blood") frame a sort of essay – or litany – on escort. "*Leẏayah*" is more than the topic here: it is a refrain, repeated (in some form) over 15 times on one page.[62] Forms of the verb "to accompany" (*lelaẏot*) are repeated throughout – with R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's teaching providing a punning flourish on the theme. Not only does he compel us to read the Proverbial "garland" (*liẏyah*) as "escort" (*leẏayah*), but the sage's very name (*Leẏi*) rings as a form of the same word.[63] His name seems to indicate that R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi is an essential part of the discussion: "Mr. Escort," the authority on (or personification of) the topic.[64]

R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's precise location in the text indicates another reason this may be so. His two teachings are placed at the very beginning of the escort essay, just after the proof of R. Meir's saying, "we may compel escort…" That story – of the Canaanite whose merit

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[59] Literally, "one who sheds blood." The teaching is given by R. Yoḥanan in R. Meir's name.

[60] The text refers to II Kings 2:23-24, in which local children taunt Elisha as he departs Jericho, and Elisha curses them "in the name of God," whereupon two bears appear and attack the children.

[61] In contrast to the aforementioned biblical acts of merit, which win rewards for *future* generations, Jericho itself is punished for its negligence. Similarly, in the text's subsequent stories of Elisha, it is supposed that he died of an illness caused by his own misdeeds. Likewise, in R. Ilaʿi's teachings in b.Sotah 49a (a few *dapim* later), the speech acts of Elijah and Elisha effect immediate protection for the prophets themselves, whereas the prayers of other biblical figures win redemption for future generations. It seems that this text attributes a special immediacy to acts that occur in the stories of Elijah and Elisha.

[62] (In addition to the biblical verb לשלוח, which is here read as indicating escort), forms of the verb "to escort" ללוות appear 12 times. Changes are rung by three more instances: R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's garland (לויה) and the two mentions of his name (לוי).

[63] On paronomasia on sages' names, see J.D. Wynkoop and P. Van den Biesen, "A Peculiar Kind of Paronomasia in the Talmud and Midrash," in *The Jewish Quarterly Review, New Series* 2, no. 1 (Jul. 1911), p. 1-23, and Louis Jacobs, "How Much of the Babylonian Talmud is Pseudepigraphic?" in *The Journal for Jewish Studies*, vol. 28:1 (1977), p. 46-59. On rabbinic paranomasia on biblical names, see Philip S. Alexander, "The Etymology of Proper Names as an Exegetical Device in Rabbinic Literature," in *Studia Philonica Annual* 16, (2004), p. 169-187). On paronomasia as practice of aggadic texts, see Jonah Fraenkel, "Paronomasia in Aggadic Narratives," in *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 27 (1978), p. 25-51.

[64] Moreover, this sense of R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi as "Mr. Escort" actually precedes the present text. The very teaching that generates the escort essay appears for the first time several pages earlier (on b.Sotah 38b) – among a series of teachings attributed to R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi: "R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi also said: The *eglah arufah* only comes [to be necessary] due to a grudging spirit, as it is said: *Our hands have not shed this blood*. But can we imagine that the elders of a Bet Din are killers? Rather [this means]… he did not come to us for help and we turned him away without food, we did not see him and let him go without escort!" When we encounter this teaching again, at the head of the escort essay (on b.Sotah 46b, where it is marked as a baraita), we may nonetheless remember it as a teaching of R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's, thus making this sage our guide into the topic.

was so powerful that it warded off the very Angel of Death – seems immediately to suggest the rabbinic model of such death-defying merit: R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi, whose Torah merit empowered him (in b.Ketubot 77b) to disarm the Angel of Death and to enter paradise alive.[65] Thus, the discussion begins with the teachings of this paragon of protective virtue.[66]

If R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi is the emblem of the text, the text in turn helps clarify the meaning and implications of his teaching. Without this lesson in late antique travel, we might mistakenly think of "escort" merely as companionship: a pleasant but optional addition to a journey. The Sotah discussion makes it clear that what is at stake for our sages is life itself. When R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi teaches that Torah study "escorts" the lone traveler, he indicates that study is what the traveler needs most: not merely a guide or companion, but a protector. Like R. Ilaʿi's *divre Torah*, R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's Torah study saves travelers' lives.

Yet, while R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's teaching is thematically (and lexically) entwined in its context, it also stands out as something markedly different. Among these accounts of companions and escort, this is the only scenario of a lone traveler. Moreover, unlike the rest of the text, R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi does not teach about *actual* escort; rather, he uses "escort" as a *metaphor* for the protective merit of Torah study. In a text that treats escort quite literally and practically, this metaphor stands out – and forces us to see that R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi has a somewhat different agenda than the surrounding discussion, in which the topic of Torah study never arises. Thus, in order to better appreciate R. Yehoshuʿa b. Leṿi's lesson, let us now turn to his teaching's own frame of reference, beginning with its proof text.

The "garland of grace"

R. Yehoshuʿa b. Leṿi's proof text is a quote from the book of Proverbs – or more precisely, from the distinct work comprised of its "introduction" (Proverbs 1-9), the series of Wisdom lectures addressed by father to son (each beginning with some form of the exhortation, "Son, hear my teaching"), which concludes with the speech of Wisdom herself.[67]

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[65] See b.Ketubot 77b, in which R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi tricks the Angel of Death, and (while still living) enters heaven, where he is welcomed by the prophet Elijah. Moreover, the text in b.Berakhot 51a – in which R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi imparts secrets he's learned from the Angel of Death – implies that R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi is on intimate terms with this terrible entity. Our text's juxtaposition of the Canaanite and R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi seems to indicate that the redactors of our Sotah text are aware of such traditions. (On b.Ketubot 77b and the character of R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi, see Jonah Fraenkel, "Demuto shel R. Yehoshuʿa ben Leṿi be-sipure ha-Talmud ha-Bavli" (in *Divre ha-ḳongres ha-ʿolami ha-shelishi le-madaʿe ha-Yahadut* 3. Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1977, p. 403-417), and next note.

[66] Thus, I read Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's powerful, protective merit as a keynote of the story in b.Ketubot 77b, indicated not only by his triumph over the Angel of Death, and his apparent protection from disease, but also by the sage's own remark: "If [Torah] grants grace, will it not protect?" (See note 90, below). However Fraenkel's analysis of the sage's character (which he illuminates in and between b.Ketubot 77b, Pesaḥim 50a, and Sanhedrin 98a), does not focus on this aspect of the story. Although Fraenkel notes the (Ketubot) text's implication that Yehoshuʿa b. Levi is a redemptive figure (whose merit replaces the sign of the rainbow), his discussion focuses instead on the moral tests the sage faces, and the values of humility and service he imbibes and comes to represent.

[67] On Proverbs 1-9 as structurally distinct from the rest of the book, see Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), p. 4-6, 322-330; R.B.Y. Scott, *The Anchor Bible: Proverbs. Ecclesicastes* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), p. xix, 15; and William McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), p. 4. On Proverbs 1-9 as the

R. Yehoshuʿa b. Leṿi quotes the book's first page, as it were: the start of its first lecture.[68] "My son," it begins, "hear the instruction of your father and do not forsake the teaching of your mother." It is to these wise teachings that the next verse refers: "For they are a garland of grace for your head and necklaces for your neck." These adornments seem to indicate the reward (or incentive) for heeding Wisdom, as we see when the image is reprised in chapter 4: "Embrace [Wisdom] and she will place a garland of grace on your head; she will bestow upon you a crown of glory." Yet in this first instance, as the verse informs us, the garland and necklace also "are" the teachings – and thus stand for Wisdom itself.

Part of the figure's meaning and impact derives from its precise location in the book. As the book's first figurative image, marking its first lecture and exhortation, the garland stands as a sort of rubric, a visual title for what follows. Citing this title image evokes the book's theme (pursuit of Wisdom), its form (the Wisdom lecture, epitomized by the exhortation, "Son, hear my teaching"), as well as its main motif: pursuit of Wisdom as a path – or road.[69] This motif – which Michael Fox calls "the ground metaphor of Proverbs 1-9," the symbol "that unifies its teachings" [70] – is established in chapters 1-4, the text framed by the two images of the garland.[71] Each garland verse precedes a warning against straying from the path,[72] whereas the garland at 4:9 heads the text's most extensive exposition of the road motif, in Proverbs 4:10-27. Thus the garland is the title and frame of a text that imagines the road as the *site* of Wisdom – and of its reward. Those who choose the path of Wisdom are promised

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"introduction" to the Proverbs, see Fox p. 6 ("Proverbs 1-9 introduces and tells us how to read the rest of the book…"), and Scott, p.15.

[68] The book's first seven verses state its purpose: "The proverbs of Solomon … for learning wisdom and discipline … for endowing the simple with shrewdness, the young with knowledge and foresight…" Verse 8 begins the first wisdom lecture, with the address to be repeated throughout chapters 1-7: the father's exhortation to heed his words and the teachings of Wisdom. On these verses as the "prologue" to the wisdom lectures, see Fox, *Proverbs 1-9,* p. 53-4, 71-78.

[69] Right conduct is a road (e.g., "the paths of justice" 2:8), as is the teaching that guides one to it ("do not swerve from my words" 4:5). This road is the way to find Wisdom ("you will understand what is right, just and equitable, every good course" 2:9), and it is where Wisdom is *located* (for Wisdom declares, "I walk on the way of righteousness, on the path of justice" 8:20). Moreover, the "way" even seems to be a part or attribute of Wisdom itself (e.g., "Her ways are ways of pleasantness and all her paths are peace" 3:17). Those who tread this road are guided and protected along it, as in Prov. 4:11-12 ("I instruct you in the way of Wisdom; I guide you in straight courses. You will walk without breaking stride; when you run, you will not stumble") and 2:8 ("[God] guards the path of justice, protecting the way of those loyal to Him"), and many other passages (see note 73).

[70] Fox, *Proverbs 1-9,* p.128. Fox refers here specifically to the road as the symbol of right conduct ("behavior is a path"), whereas I am speaking of the motif's broader implications: the road as the sign for pursuit of Wisdom, the site of Wisdom, and by implication, an aspect of Wisdom itself. (Though my discussion draws on Fox's excellent commentary, the notions of the garland as the book's rubric and as frame of the road motif are my own).

[71] Chapters 1-2 introduce the motif as the choice between two paths (the straight road of righteousness and life versus the crooked road of evil and death), while chapters 3-4 develop the theme of the right road: Wisdom's way.

[72] The first garland (1:9) heads a lecture warning against "evil companions," which culminates in the first instance of the road image: "My son, do not set out with them; keep your feet from their path" (1:15). The second garland (4:9) is followed by a similar passage: "Do not enter the path of the wicked… Avoid it, do not pass through it, turn away from it, pass it by" (4:14-15).

guidance and protection on the way; their road will be "smoothed," their feet kept from "snares," "stumbling," or "straying."[73]

Moreover, the meaning of the garland itself is not restricted to this "frame" (Proverbs 1:9 and 4:9), but rather unfolds as the text does, in a series of passages that ring the changes on the first exhortation and its reward.[74] These passages interweave the notion of the garland with related images of wearing and binding wisdom to the body – images that figure Wisdom as an amulet of healing and protection.[75] A brief consideration of these familiar texts is necessary to our appreciation of R. Yehoshuʿa b. Leṿi's teaching, which draws on the subtle interplay in his source text of interrelated notion and images linked to protection on the way.

When the exhortation ("Son, hear my teaching") is repeated in Proverbs 3:1, the command to "heed [and] not forsake" becomes "do not forget" – and there is an after-image of the necklace and garland:

> Do not forget my teaching; let your mind retain my commandments…
> Bind them about your neck and write them on the tablet of your mind[76]
> And you will find favor [חן] in the eyes of God and man.[77]

Fulfilling the earlier assurance that the garland and necklace *are* Wisdom teachings, this passage adjures us to bind the teachings themselves to body and mind. This time, the act of wearing Wisdom is not the reward, but its prerequisite: the act of devoting oneself to Wisdom, fixing and internalizing its teachings. The image of binding shows us what it looks like to "heed" and "not forget." Once again, the reward for this devotion is *ḥen,* "favor" or grace.[78]

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[73] See for example, Proverbs 2:8-13, 3:6, 3:21-26, 4:10-27, 6:20-24, 7:24-25, as well as the specific "chain" of verses discussed below.

[74] The verses (to be discussed below) are Proverbs 3:1-4, 3:20-23, 4:9, and 6:20-22. With Proverbs 1:8-9, these verses form a chain interweaving the elements: a) the command to "hear"/ keep; b) the image of something bestowed or bound on the head, throat or "heart"; and c) bestowal of grace / favor (חן). In all of these passages, the proffered teaching is referred to as "*torah"* – in fact (with the additional "binding" verse at 7:3), these are the only places in the text where it is so named. Moreover, all these passages either contain or are immediately followed by imagery of walking on the road.

[75] Part of the beauty of this series of verses and the work that they do is the fact that they unfold the imagery of the garland and necklace (or "chain") – ornaments that are braided or interlinked – precisely by linking and interweaving related images in a series, which like a necklace (or garland), is not only a "string" but (as we shall see below) also loops around to its beginning.

[76] The fact that the biblical word לב (or לבב) means both "heart" and "mind" allows for a subtle play of meanings and imagery. While generally in Proverbs, the word "*lev*" marks the act of internalizing teachings in the mind (as the image of "inscribing" above indicates), it can also evoke a physical image, as in the (Proverbs 6:21) command "tie them over your heart." Here (in Proverbs 3:1) the phrases "around your neck… on your heart" recall the previous image, "around your neck / for your head," creating a parallel between "heart/mind" and "head." (On the imagery of the heart in this passage, see Fox, p. 145-147, as well as 86-87. On Proverbial imagery of two or three body zones "denoting the whole personality" – and the heart as "an organ of will," Fox, 220 and 240).

[77] Proverbs 3:1, 3:3-4. Fox (*Proverbs 1-9,* p. 145) notes that "As 6:21 and 7:3 show, the antecedent of 'them' is the teaching and precepts mentioned in vv 1-2 (Plöger), rather than kindness and constancy [of 3:3] (Delitzsch, Toy, and most). The teachings are to be (figuratively) worn as a necklace or garland (1:9 [q.v.]; 3:22; 4:9; 6:21)."

[78] Thus, in this passage, there are two correlates to the garland of Proverbs 1:9: a) teachings placed on the body, this time through devotional binding; b) the reward that is again bestowed as "grace."

The next exhortation (Proverbs 3:21-22) adds another sense to the "grace" bestowed when we "keep" Wisdom and understanding:[79] "They will be life to your spirit [נפשך] and grace to your throat." Since the word *nefesh* also connotes the throat, this passage doubles the image of something worn about the neck,[80] recalling the plural "necklaces" of Proverbs 1:9. The result of wearing such (life-giving) "grace" is made clear in the next verses:

> Then you will go on your way safely and not injure your feet
> When you lie down, you will be unafraid.
> You will lie down and your sleep will be sweet.[81]

Thus, when Wisdom "graces" the throat, it provides protection at two (traditionally linked) points of vulnerability: setting out on the road and entering sleep.[82] Here Wisdom imparts "life" by protecting from danger and harm. Moreover, the notion that Wisdom protects is repeated when the garland reappears in Proverbs 4:9, paired with the bestowal of a "glorious diadem." Fox notes that, since this bestowal (the verb *migen*) has the double-entendre "to grant" and "to shield," the verse should be read: "Wisdom will grant you a splendid diadem *and* shield you."[83]

All of these motifs are combined, when the exhortation (and reward) is reprised in chapter 6:

> My son, keep your father's commandment
> Do not forsake your mother's teaching
> Tie them over your heart always
> Bind them around your throat.[84]

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[79] Here, the apposition of Wisdom and understanding as God's attributes and primordial forces (vs. 19-20) are the (humanly attainable) qualities of "'resourcefulness and foresight" (vs. 21), both of which parallel the "teaching" of 1:8. As in verse 3:1, the verb "to keep is נצר, repeated again in the parallel 6:20, and echoed by the verb צפן, in the exhortations at 2:1 and 7:1.

[80] See Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, p. 163, as well as his comment, "the parallel in v 22b, with its reference to the 'neck' and the promise of [*ḥen*] activates the necklace metaphor in 22a." See also Yehudah B. Cohn, *Tangled Up in Text: Tefillin and the Ancient World*, p. 47.

[81] Proverbs 3:23-24.

[82] Examples of the ancient notion that travel and sleep are similarly dangerous passages may be found in the literature of the (long-enduring) cult of Hermes, who was guide to both wayfarers and those entering sleep (see, e.g., the classical Greek texts cited at http://www.theoi.com/Olympios/HermesTreasures.html) and in rabbinic texts that liken falling asleep to setting out on a journey (see my discussion above in chapter one).

[83] Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, p. 176. Although generally cautious about amulet imagery (see, e.g., p. 83-5, and p. 145), here Fox allows that the diadem is not just coincidental with, but is the source or focus of protective power, noting that "diadems and other head ornaments had apotropaic functions" (176). On Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's use of this double-entendre, see note 90 below.

[84] Proverbs 6:20-21. Here and above (at Proverbs 3:3), I follow the new JPS translation, which – accounting both for the subtleties לב – renders that verse "write them on the tablet of your mind" and this one "tie them on your heart." And yet we should note that once again "*lev*" is paired with the throat, creating a parallel to the head / neck of the first exhortation.

As in chapter 3, the image of binding teachings illustrates the exhortation to "keep" them. Here, that exhortation is an almost exact repetition of the very first (Proverbs 1:8),[85] leading us to expect the garland and necklaces that were its reward.[86] In their place, however, is another promise:

> When you walk, it will lead you
> When you lie down, it will watch over you
> When you awaken, it will talk with you.[87]

This passage repeats the promises of Proverbs 3:22 ("you shall go on your way safely… when you lie down, you will be unafraid"), but here, a third clause has been added; Wisdom not only guides and protects, but also provides company – and conversation.[88] As in chapter 3, "walking" is the primary image – and may even be read as the setting of the whole scenario; the reward for heeding (and binding) Wisdom is guidance, protection and companionship along the way.[89] Thus, this verse – which parallels Proverbs 1:9 – presents all that R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi attributes to the "garland of grace"; Wisdom (Torah study) provides the words – or "talk" – that accompany and protect the traveler on the road.

This review of the verses elaborating Proverbs 1:8-9 bears out our initial claim – that the "garland of grace" is a rubric connoting the Wisdom lecture, its themes and figures. The chain of entwined verses creates a pattern of linked motifs: devotion to Wisdom (figured as binding words to the body); the rewards of Wisdom (described as protection or healing, and figured as garland, necklace or crown); the Way of Wisdom – and protection on that way. The combination of all these elements in Proverbs 6 provides a sort of précis of the motifs evoked by R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's teaching. Moreover, the teaching itself (and particularly the wordplay on which it turns) elegantly alludes to the loop between Proverbs 1:9 and 6:22. By equating "*liyyat ḥen*" and "*leyayah,*" R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi reminds us of the parallel:

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[85] Not only are the two passages similar, but they are also the only exhortations that mention the teachings of both parents. The second clause (regarding "your mother's *torah*") is exactly the same in both passages. And the first clause, "My son, heed your father's instruction" (שמעי בני מוסר אביך) is now rephrased "My son, keep your father's commandment" (נצר בני מצות אביך). I'd argue that these variations actually recall the original verse through homophony (**מצוה** / **מוסר**) and meanings linked by homophony (שמע linked by its homophone שמר to נצר).

[86] There are in fact two correlates here to Proverbs 1:9. First: after the exhortation, where we expect the garland/reward clause, we find the command to bind (again linking this "wearing" of Wisdom to the wearing that is its reward). Then, (after this restatement of the exhortation, when we once again expect the reward), we find another parallel to garland and necklace – in a different picture of Wisdom's reward.

[87] Proverbs 6:22.

[88] Indeed, this version of the promise indicates a certain reciprocity between Wisdom and her devotee (and between act and its reward): if you wear Wisdom "about your throat," she will "talk" with you; if you keep her teachings, she will guard you; if you do not abandon them, then she will guide you on your way.

[89] Certainly, this addition of a third point to the dyad road/sleep may be read in a variety of ways. While waking might be viewed as the end point of the dangerous journey that is sleep, the pair sleeping/waking might also be read under the heading of travel, as the even more dangerous sleep of the traveler, exposed on the road. While this is certainly not the only way to read the verse, those reading through the motif of road danger might certainly view it this way.

the "garland of grace" (Proverbs 1:9) is the very "escort" of Proverbs 6:22: Wisdom, who guides, protects and speaks to her traveling devotee.[90]

Walking and talking again: the Shema

Proverbs 6:22 not only provides a key to the motifs invoked by R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi, it also further illuminates his teaching by its close links to another text: the Shema. A brief look at the affinities between these texts will inform our reading of Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's teaching, for these textual dynamics underlie his midrash of the "garland of grace."

The resonance between the two texts, which has engrossed both ancient and modern scholars,[91] is also strikingly apparent even to the casual reader (particularly those many for whom the words of the Shema are familiar and ingrained). It is perhaps impossible to read the Proverbial words "When you walk, it will lead you; when you lie down, it will watch over you; when you awaken, it will talk with you" without hearing the command, "Speak [these words] when you are sitting in your home, when you are walking on the road, when you lie down and when you rise up." Perhaps most striking is the fact that both passages mark experience by the same three acts, and in the same order: walking, lying down, and arising. It is among these coordinates that speech occurs; if Proverbs indicates stations at which personified Wisdom guides, guards and speaks, Deuteronomy (which adds the fourth action, "sitting at home") commands speech at all of these points.[92] Moreover, the Proverbial

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[90] R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's use of the garland as a primary rubric – and sign of protection – is also demonstrated by another text: the account of his triumph over the Angel of Death (in b.Ketubot 77b). The story begins when R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi goes to study Torah among the sufferers of (the apparently infectious disease) *ra'atan*, whom other sages carefully avoid. R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi explains his actions by citing Proverbs 5:19, "A lovely hind and graceful doe" [ויעלת חן], remarking, "If Torah grants grace to those who study it, does it not also protect them?" [אם חן מעלה על לומדיה, אגוני לא מגנא]. Through a double pun, R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi transforms this quite different image of "grace" back into the garland. By reading "graceful doe" (*ya'alat hen*) as the act of bestowing grace (*hen ma'alah*), R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi evokes the familiar symbol of Wisdom's reward; he then refers directly to the garland of Proverbs 4:9 by playing on the double-meaning of its "bestowal" (the verb *migen*), showing that grace "given" also "protects." Thus, in R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's reading, the "graceful deer" is in fact the "garland of grace." This lesson – and the apotropaic power of the garland – is subsequently proven: not only does R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi apparently remain invulnerable to *ra'atan*, but (in the ensuing account), his Torah-merit shields him from and enables him even to triumph over the Angel of Death.

[91] For modern scholarship on the relation between Proverbs 6 and Deuteronomy 6, see (for example) Patrick D. Miller, "Apotropaic Imagery in Proverbs 6:20-22," in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 29, no. 2 (April 1970), p.129-133; Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 299-306; Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, p. 84, 130, 229-230, 240. For rabbinic texts, see for example, Sifre Deuteronomy, Piska 34 (which, as we shall see below, reads Deut. 6:7 through Proverbs 6:22). A particularly striking later example is the allusion to Proverbs 6 in *Ahavat ʿOlam* (the evening prayer preceding the Shema), in which the two texts are combined in the phrase בְּשָׁכְבֵנוּ וּבְקוּמֵנוּ נָשִׂיחַ בְּחֻקֶּיךָ. Thus, the prayer paraphrases the command to "speak [these words] when you lie down and rise up" using (not the verb דבר, as in Deut. 6:7, but instead) the verb נָשִׂיחַ, an allusion to the Proverbial phrase "when you awaken, she will speak with you (תְּשִׂיחֶךָ).

[92] The addition, in the Deuteronomic verse, of a fourth point ("sitting at home") converts the three acts instead into two merisms:"lie down/ rise up" (perhaps indicating "at all times") and "at home / abroad" (perhaps indicating "in all places"); we might compare other such biblical pairs, such as Psalm 139:2-3 "my sitting and my standing… my walking and my reclining." The addition of a fourth point creates marked difference (and a virtual progression) from the "walk / lie down" of Proverbs 3:23-24 (which thus opposes – and perhaps likens – the acts of going and sleeping), and the list in Proverbs 6:22, (in which there are three acts: walking, lying down, awakening) to the matched pairs of Deuteronomy 6:7.

command that introduces this image ("tie them upon your heart always, bind them about your neck") closely matches the passages framing Deut. 6:7: "And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart … tie them as a sign on your hand and as frontlets between your eyes."[93]

The resonance of the two passages points to the texts' broader affinities.[94] Indeed, the language and imagery of the Shema is sharply evocative of the Wisdom lectures as a whole; the Shema's first command to "Hear" echoes the repeated opening of each lecture "Son, hear my teaching!" Both texts propound "these words" (or "teaching" or "command"), and picture the act of "keeping" those words as putting them in the heart and binding them on the body. Moreover, both texts are inflected with the road motif: both imagine "these words" spoken along the way – and the Proverbial command to keep to Wisdom's path ("Let your eyes look forward, let your gaze be straight ahead … do not turn to the right or left, keep your feet from evil") has its parallel in the prayer's warnings against "turning after other gods" and "following the desires of your heart and your eyes to lead you astray."[95]

Yet, the close resemblance of the two texts is somewhat obfuscated by a powerful interpretive tradition intervening between them. While the figurative meanings of the Deuteronomic verses may still resonate in the prayer, they are somewhat muted by the normative halakhic glosses of those verses. According to the halakhic reading, the command to bind "these words" to the body refers specifically to the act of tying on *tefilin*, while the command to "speak [these words] … when you lie down and rise up" means reciting the Shema itself.[96] According to this sort of reading, Deuteronomy's four vivid points of experience – sitting at home, walking on the road, lying down and rising up – are all signs for something else. "Lying down" and "rising up" do not describe physical actions, but instead indicate morning and evening, the times when the prayer should be recited,[97] whereas the phrases "sitting at home" and "walking on the road" refer not to those acts themselves, but instead indicate a broader category: acts that do not fulfil a specific commandment (and thus

[93] Proverbs 6:21; Deut. 6:6, 8. On binding imagery in Deuteronomy and Proverbs, see Yehudah B. Cohn, *Tangled Up in Text: Tefillin and the Ancient World.* (Providence: Brown Judaic Studies, 2008), p. 46-48.

[94] On the general correspondence between Deuteronomy and Proverbs, see Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School*, p. 244-319 ("Deuteronomic Literature and Wisdom Literature").

[95] Proverbs 4:25, 27; Deut. 11:16, 28; Numbers 15:39. This particular expression of the road motif is a marked theme in Deuteronomy: in addition to the warnings of the Shema (Deut. 11:16 and 11:28), we find this trope throughout the book, in such passages as Deut. 5:29-30 ("Be careful to do as the Lord your God has commanded you. Do not turn aside to the right or to the left; follow only the path that the Lord your God has commanded you…that you may prolong your days…") and Deut. 9:12 ("They have quickly turned aside from the way that I commanded, that they have made themselves a molten image"). Turning aside usually means serving other gods, as in Deut. 28:14 ("… and do not deviate to the right or to the left from any of the commandments that I command you this day and turn to the worship of other gods"), Deut. 30:17-18 ("But if your heart turns away and you give no heed, and are lured into the worship and service of other gods,… you shall surely perish"), Deut. 31:20 ("Should they … turn to other gods and serve them, spurning me and breaking my covenant…") and Deut. 31:29 ("You will turn aside from the way that I have commanded you." But see also Deut. 30:19: "I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life…"

[96] For "you shall bind" as tefillin, see for example, Sifre Deuteronomy, Piska 35 and its many later iterations. For Deut. 6:4-6 as commanding the recitation of the Shema itself, see for example m.Berakhot 1.3, Sifre Deuteronomy, Piska 31, b.Berakhot 13a and 15a-b.

[97] The core of this (much elaborated) tradition is of course the dispute in m.Berakhot 1.3 on whether the "lie down and rise up" refer to physical attitudes or times of day.

cannot forestall recitation of the prayer).[98] Thus, in its translation to a larger halakhic concept, the road all but disappears. Even the more general understanding of the four acts as indicating "at all times" (from rising to lying down) and "in all places" (at home or abroad) effaces the image of walking on the road by translating it to something else.[99]

Yet, if the halakhic reading seems to sever the connection between Proverbs and Deuteronomy, there is also an interpretive tradition that links them – which in fact explicates the verses comprising the Shema by citing Proverbs. Witness this passage from Sifre Deuteronomy, explicating the verse, "Teach them to your children …Speak them as you sit in your home, as you walk on the way, as you lie down and as you rise up":

> *You shall teach them to your children*: They should be so finely honed in your mouth that when someone asks you about them, you will not stutter, but will be able to reply immediately. Hence Scripture says, *Say to wisdom, "You are my sister," and call understanding your kinswoman* (Prov. 7:4); *Bind them upon your fingers and write them on the tablet of your heart* (Prov. 7:3) …
>
> *And speak of them*: Make them matters of basic importance … by not mixing other matters with them. Should you say, "I have learned the wisdom of Israel, so now I will go learn the wisdom of the other nations," Scripture says: *To walk in them* (Lev. 18:4) – and not depart from them. So Scripture says, *Let them be only your own, and not strangers with you* (Prov. 5:17); *When you walk, it will lead you, when you lie down, it will watch over you; and when you awaken, it will talk with you* (Prov. 6:22) …[100]

Here we get a sense of the interpretive mode (to be explored further below), by which Proverbial verses serve as a lens for discerning the Deuteronomic ones. For our present purpose, the crucial part of the passage is the second half, in which the Shema's command to "speak of them […as you go on the road] is linked to its parallel in Proverbs 6:22. Indeed, the midrash seems to read the verse precisely as I have rendered it here, for it eschews any comment on the intervening phrase "sitting in your home," and skips directly to "the road," by reading "speak them" through the verses "Walk in them" and "When you walk, it will lead you…" Moreover, this link is also the basis of the message, for here "speaking" and "walking" together illustrate the trope of straying versus keeping to the path. Here, in sharp

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[98] On "home" and "road" as signifying regular, non-*mitsʸah* activities, see for example, b.Sukkah 25a and b.Berakhot 11a. Also worth noting is Bet Hillel's metaphoric turn in m.Berakhot 1.3, by which "as you walk on the way" is the proof that "each may recite in his own way."

[99] Against these figurative and allusive readings of the rest of the text, the literalistic interpretation of "you shall bind" as tefillin is particularly striking. (On this matter, see Yehudah B. Cohn, *Tangled Up in Text: Tefillin and the Ancient World*). And yet the literal/metaphor dichotomy is not quite sufficient to the topic, for tefillin retains a metaphoric quality as well. (On tefillin – and our road motif – as "literal" metaphors, see below, page 130).

[100] Sifre Deuteronomy (*Ya-ʾetḥanan*) Piska 34. This translation is adapted from that of Reuven Hammer, *Sifre: A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 63-65.

contrast to the halakhic reading, the road is not blurred or effaced, but rather is the fulcrum of the lesson.

With this interpretive tradition in mind, let us again consider R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's teaching: "One who walks on the road without any escort should study Torah, *for they are a garland of grace…*" This adjuration of the lone traveler, while surely evoking the Proverbial father's warnings to keep to the straight and narrow, also calls up the imperatives of the Shema. Indeed, in R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's call to study (that is, recite) Torah on the way, we can now hear the sharp echo of the command to "speak [these words] as you go on the road."

Good medicine: RYBL 2

Let us now consider the somewhat different version of R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's teaching that appears in Bavli tractate ʿEruvin. The teaching begins with the familiar lesson: "R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi said: One who walks on the road without any escort should study Torah, as it is said: *For they shall be a garland of grace."* But here it continues:[101]

> One who feels pain in his head should study Torah, as it is said: *For they shall be a garland of grace for your head* (Prov. 1:9). One who feels pains in his throat should study Torah, as it is said: *And necklaces around your neck* (ibid). One who feels pain in his innards should study Torah, as it is said: *It shall be healing to your navel* (Prov. 3:8). One who feels pain in his bones should study Torah, as it is said: *And a tonic for your bones* (ibid). One who feels pain in all of his body should study Torah, as it is said: *And healing to all his flesh* (Prov. 4:22).

Here, Proverbs 1:9 is linked to other reward clauses from Proverbs chapters 1-4: verses describing Wisdom's grant of life and health to her adherents.[102] Reading the garland and necklace with "healing to your navel," "a tonic for your bones," and "healing for all [your] flesh," R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi not only cites the healing power of Torah, but also seems to enact it by topically applying a medicinal verse to each ailing organ. Six times, he reminds us how to tap this power; as he "touches" each body part, he intones, "Study Torah!" [יעסוק בתורה].[103] Thus it seems that words of Torah are the medicine, and Torah study is the act of

[101] It is possible to view this additional material as a separate piece, and not as a part or continuation of R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's teaching. However, the "actual" authorship of the teaching is not my concern here. For my purposes, it is sufficient that this long version has been read as R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's teaching, rather than a comment upon it.

[102] The implicit link between the motifs of "adornment" and healing may well be the trope "necklaces about your throat," and its association with the subsequent verses, "tie them about your throat" (Prov. 3:3) and "they shall be life to your *nefesh* and grace to your throat" (Prov. 3:20).

[103] The teaching could even be read as implying that one may use Scripture as a healing incantation – a practice condemned in m.Sanhedrin 10.1. Indeed, immediately following R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's "healing" teaching in b.ʿEruvin is another teaching, which seems to comment upon and correct it. "Yehudah bar R. Ḥiyya said: Come see how unlike are human and divine nature. When one person gives another a medicine, it is good for this [organ] and bad for that one. Not so the Holy Blessed One. God gave Torah to Israel, a drug of life [*sam hayim*] for all its body, as it is said, *And healing to all his flesh* (Prov. 4:22)." Bar Ḥiyya seems to curb the radical implications of R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's scenario by insisting that true healing comes only from God, and by focusing not on the individual ailing body, but rather the corporate "body" of Israel. Modern readers, as well,

fixing that remedy to the body.

This lesson, while clearly linked to the first "garland" teaching, nonetheless seems to divert us from the road. Similarly, our reading of the teaching, through its sources and intertexts, will take us "off road" for a time; however, this excursion will deepen our understanding of the Shema as subtext of the "garland" – and indeed, of the notion that the road is the site of Torah study.

R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's "healing" lesson recalls a passage in Leviticus Rabbah, which describes *divre Torah* as "a crown for the head, necklaces for the neck, a remedy for the heart, a salve for the eyes, and a cup of root-drink for the innards." Here, the ornaments of Proverbs 1:9 are listed alongside a series of specific physical remedies, proven by Psalm 19:9 ("*rejoices the heart... and lights the eyes*") and Proverbs 3:8 ("*healing to your navel*"). Moreover, like R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's teaching, this one concludes with the promise of total healing, proven by Proverbs 4:22: "Whence [do we know that *divre Torah* heal all] 248 organs in [the body]? Scripture says: "[*they are life to those who find them*] *and healing to all his flesh.*"[104]

That final proof alerts us to the source of these teachings in tannaitic traditions on Proverbs 4:22. One strain of the tradition links Proverbs 4:22 with its parallel at Proverbs 3:8,[105] as in the Mekhilta teaching in which God proclaims, "The *divre Torah* that I have given you are healing for you, are life for you, as it is written, *They are life to those who find them* (Prov. 4:22), and it says, *Healing to your flesh and a tonic for your bones* (Prov. 3:8)."[106] A variant of the tradition links Prov. 4:22 to the garland verses, as we see in Sifre Deuteronomy, Piska 48. That piska's extensive discourse on the benefits of *divre Torah* begins with Proverbs 4:22: "*Divre Torah* are compared to water. Just as water [gives] life to everyone,[107] so do *divre Torah*, as it says, *For they are life to those who find them.*" Other qualities of water are brought forth to illustrate the nature of *divre Torah*, until a flaw is found in the comparison ("but since water does not gladden the heart, we might think that *divre*

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seem alert to the troubling implications of Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's teaching; witness R. ʿAkiva Eger (Gilyon ha-Shas)'s remark on the passage, in which he seems to resolve the problem by citing Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's's contrary saying (in b.Shevuʿot 46b), אסור להתרפאות ("it is forbidden to heal oneself with *divre Torah*"). However, since the Shevuʿot text brings this teaching ("but didn't R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's say…?") to squelch the same suspicion (arising in that case from Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's apotropaic recitation of Scripture at bedtime), perhaps the two texts together raise more doubts than they settle.

[104] Leviticus Rabbah 12:3 (on Psalm 19:9). This tradition, which as we shall see develops from tannaitic texts, not only "survives" in the R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's teaching, but endures – and even thrives – in the subsequent texts. A quite comprehensive version (in Kallah rabati 8) attributes to R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi the saying that "Torah is great for it gives life," which is then proven by Proverbs 4:22, 3:8, 3:17, 3:17, 4:9, 1:9, and 3:16. Another notable later version, from Midrash Tanḥuma, is discussed below. Interestingly, some later versions omit what seems to be the cornerstone of the earlier texts: Proverbs 4:22.

[105] That is, the alternate reading of Prov. 3:8 (*rif'ut ... le-sarekha*) as "healing to your flesh" (instead of "navel") creates a close parallel between the verses, echoed by the phrase *ule-khol besaro marpe* in Prov. 4:22.

[106] Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Va-Yasa 1 (on Ex. 15:26). This teaching places its citations such that Proverbs 4:22 – "They are life to those who find them [and healing to all his flesh]" – overlaps with and is reinforced by its parallel Proverbs 3:8: "Healing to your flesh and a tonic for your bones."

[107] Literally, "*mayim ḥayim le-ʿolam*." Here I differ with Hammer's translation ("water endures forever," p. 102), since the proof text ("they are life to those who find them") does not seem to prove eternity but rather bestowal of life – a meaning that is only underlined by the following simile, "Just as water restores a man's soul, so do words of Torah…" Moreover, I should point out that Hammer uses this sense of "*le-ʿolam*" when translating the parallel phrase "*ḥinam le-ʿolam*," which he renders (not as "free forever," but) as "forever free to everyone" (p. 103).

Torah are likewise!") and a new one is found: "Thus it says, *Your love is better than wine* (Song 1:2); *divre Torah* are likened to wine, for just as wine gladdens the heart, so do *divre Torah*."[108] The benefits of wine are explicated until once again the metaphor is exhausted: "But since wine is sometimes bad for the head and the body, one could think that *divre Torah* are also!" The passage then concludes:

> That is why it says, "*Your ointments yield a sweet fragrance*" (Song 1:3) – just as ointments are good for head and body, so are *divre Torah*, as it says:[109] "*They are a garland of grace for your head and necklaces about your neck*" (Prov. 1:9), and it says, "*She shall place a garland of grace on your head*" (Prov. 4:9).

Thus, the series of analogies – proving that *divre Torah* sustain the body and revive the spirit – culminates with the image of garland and necklaces, the final sign of what is "good for the head and body." No flaw is found in this comparison, and the cycle ends here.[110]

In R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's teaching (as in Leviticus Rabbah), we see the two strands of the tradition woven together, with all three verses (Proverbs 1:9, 3:8 and 4:22) proving the healing force of *divre Torah*.[111] However, R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's teaching adds something more. While the earlier texts proclaim the healing power of *divre Torah*, even likening them to particular remedies, only in R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's teaching do we witness the act of healing – only here are we shown, in effect, how to apply the medicine. In this regard, R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's teaching more closely resembles (and perhaps alludes to) another Sifre text: Piska 45, in which *divre Torah* are likened to a medicated poultice (or "bandage").[112]

The piska features a parable: a king dresses his son's wound, warning him, "My son, so long as this bandage is on your wound, … you will suffer no harm; but if you remove it, the wound will fester." Just so, God warns Israel: "My children … study words of Torah [*hayu ʿasuḳim be-divre Torah*]; if you abandon the words of Torah, the evil *Yetser* will gain mastery over you."[113] Like R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's teaching, this earlier text imagines Torah

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[108] On this rhetorical strategy, see Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary*, p. 106, 112, and 251 (note 155).

[109] Some editions of the text also cite Proverbs 3:8 here, but this seems to be a later emendation (apparently drawing on such later versions as the Leviticus Rabbah passage and R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's teaching). See Louis Finkelstein, ed. and annotated, *Sifre ʿal Sefer Devarim* (New York: Bet ha-Midrash le-Rabanim ba-Ameriḳa, 1969), p. 111.

[110] A final simile, comparing *divre Torah* to honey, is added to the end of the passage, but does not "correct" the garland image, in which no flaw has been found. Fraade (*From Tradition to Commentary*, p. 112) notes that this "breaks the rhetorical pattern," and notes that the honey metaphor is added to match the motif with which the larger textual unit (i.e., preceding the chain of similes) began.

[111] Moreover, both R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi and the Leviticus Rabbah text combine not only proofs but also themes of the two texts: the notions that *divre Torah* heal the body, and that the adornments of Proverbs 1:9 demonstrate their benefit to the body. However, in the Leviticus Rabbah passage, the garland and necklace seem to remain adornments, listed alongside healing remedies, whereas in R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's teaching, these adornments are themselves medicines.

[112] The word used here is רטיה, meaning "emollient, plaster, compress" (Jastrow, 1471). Hammer translates the term "bandage," thereby emphasizing the central act (and admonition) of the parable: keeping the *reṭiyah* always affixed to the wound.

[113] Sifre Deuteronomy (*Eḳev*), Piska 45. It should be noted, however, that the scenario and implications of the parable (in which in fact, the father dresses a wound that he himself inflicted) are far more complex than those of R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's teaching, in which Scriptural words bestow an unalloyed beneficience: a healing, which

as a medicine, and Torah study as the act of placing or fixing it on the body.[114] Indeed, the notion of "placing" *divre Torah* is the crux of the matter, for this parable illustrates the piska's explication of Deut. 11:18: "*Place* these My words on your heart" [*śamtem devarai* …]. Through the tacit pun *sam tam devarai* ("My words are perfect medicine"),[115] the Sifre glosses the verse: "thus we learn that *divre Torah* are like a drug of life [*sam ha-ḥayim*]."[116]

The lesson of Piska 45 seems rooted in the tradition of reading Deut. 11:18 in light of the subsequent verse "*And your days shall be many*" (Deut. 11:21) – that is, reading the acts "*place these My words on your heart [and bind them]*" as the way to secure that promise of long life.[117] Since the command "*put [them] on your heart*" reads easily as a figure for retaining those words, the teaching moves smoothly from the lemma to its gloss ("*ʿasuḳim be-divre Torah!*"): the way to keep words in the heart is by studying them. Yet something else happens along the way: the parable's central image – the act of affixing the poultice to the wound – also seems to refer to the unquoted part of the verse, "…*and bind them!*" Indeed, it is specifically the act of *keeping* the bandage on the body that the parable equates with Torah study.[118] Moreover, it is this image of binding with which midrash illustrates the command "*put them on your heart*." Thus, the midrash equates the two parts of the verse: "*put [them] on your heart*" equals "*and bind them*," both of which stand for Torah study.

It is helpful to contrast this teaching with the one just preceding it (Piska 44), which reads the very same verse: "*Therefore, put these My words on your heart* – this refers to Torah study[119] – *and bind them for a sign on your hand* – these are *tefilin*." Here, each part of the verse is allotted to a different kind of reading – and act. While "*put them on your heart*" is read as a figure for internalizing teachings (and thus for Torah study), "*bind them*" is read halakhically (and somewhat more literally) as the actual binding of *tefilin*. By contrast, Piska 45, with its parable, reads both acts figuratively. There, even the image of binding, usually hermeneutically reserved for *tefilin*, refers unequivocally to Torah study.

The very same motif ("place and bind these words … and you shall live") underlies R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's teaching, echoing just behind his proof texts. The statement, *"They are life to those who find them, and healing for all [their] flesh* (Prov. 4:22) is in fact the predicate

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in the subsequent teaching of bar Ḥiyya is figured as God's gift. On the Sifre piska, its meaning and implications, see Ishay Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires: Yetzer Hara and the Problem of Evil in Late Antiquity,* in which this piska is a focal point (see especially chapter 4).

[114] Here, the medicine is specifically "*divre Torah"* (which term may indicate both Scriptural words and rabbinic teachings); thus the piska closely identifies the healing drug (*divre Torah*) and the act of applying it (study).

[115] See Reuven Hammer, *Sifre: A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy.* (New Haven: Yale, 1986), p. 415, note 1 to Piska 45. Hammer refers to b.Kiddushin 30a, where the *śamtem / sam tam* pun is explicit.

[116] It is not surprising then, to find that R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's teaching in b.ʿEruvin is immediately followed by another (i.e., Bar Ḥiyya's) that describes Torah as "*sam hayim.*"

[117] I am indebted to Yehudah B. Cohn for the notion of this interpretive tradition (which he proposes in *Tangled up in Text: Tefillin and the Ancient World*, p. 91-92). Cohn posits this reading of Deut. 11:18-21– along with a literalistic interpretation of the binding image – as a key factor in the institution of an amuletic tefillin practice. While Cohn is concerned with the actual ritual practice, I am suggesting a later, corresponding but more figurative reading. What we see in the parable above seems to be another strain of the tradition, in which the images of placing and binding are read as we might read them in Proverbs: as signs of the acts of adhering to and retaining wisdom.

[118] Thus, the midrash seems to imply that the original dressing of the wound by the King/God is in fact the giving of the Torah, and the son's careful "keeping" of the bandage is Torah study.

[119] The term used here is *Talmud Torah.*

of the command, *"Keep them in your heart!"* (Prov. 4:21), while the healing promise of Prov. 3:8 derives from the exhortation: *"My son… let your heart retain my commandments, for they will bestow on you length of days [and] years of life … bind them about your throat, write them on the tablet of your heart…"* (Prov. 3:1-3).

Indeed, one might say that Piska 45 reads the Deuteronomic act of binding in a Proverbial way, as a figure for securing and retaining teachings – and indeed, the parable's central image seems motivated by the Proverbial association of binding with a healing and protective amulet.[120] This teaching exemplifies what I would call the "Wisdom reading" of the Shema, according to which all of its imperatives are understood (not in terms of rite, prayer, or performance of *mitsṿot*, but rather) as the command to study.

The "Wisdom Shema"

The sort of reading we find in Piska 45 is a strong current in Sifre Deuteronomy, and is even more developed in other passages.[121] For example, Piska 41 explicates "*If you diligently hear these commandments*" (Deut. 11:13) through the verse "…*that you may learn* [*them*]," indicating that the command "to hear" should be understood not in the sense of heeding or obeying, but in the rabbinic sense: "to learn."[122] Thus begins an exposition on the primary importance of Torah study ("Deeds are dependent on study, but study is not dependent on deeds!").[123] Moreover, even the acts commanded in rest of the verse ("…*loving the Lord your God and serving Him*…") are read in the same manner; "Loving" is explained as study that stems from no motivation other than love of God, while "serving" is succinctly defined: "this refers to study."

The "Wisdom Shema" is perhaps most fully elaborated in Piska 48, which expounds a very similar verse: *"If you diligently keep all this commandment…to love and serve God"* (Deut. 11:22). Indeed, the midrash begins by reading "If you diligently keep …" [אם שמור

[120] For this dual connotation of Proverbial binding, one need only refer back to Proverbs 3: "My son, do not forget my teaching… for they will bestow on you length of days … bind them about your throat, and write them on the tablet of your heart" (vs. 1-3) and "My son, do not lose sight of them… they will give life to your spirit and grace to your throat" (vs. 21-22).

[121] For the Sifre's reading of such commands as the charge to study Torah, see Fraade's reading of Piska 41 (*From Tradition to Commentary*, p. 89-92), as well as his remarks on p. 116-117, p. 241, note 80. But of course, the Sifre also features emphatically "halakhic" readings of these verses, at times running right alongside "Wisdom" passages, as we saw above with its two consecutive readings of Deut. 11:18 (in piska 44 and 45). Similarly, the Sifre's "Proverbial" reading of Deut. 6:7 (Piska 34, which we read above on p.) is followed by a thoroughly halakhic reading of Deut. 6:8 ("you shall bind"), specifying the physical form and the Scriptural contents of tefillin. Moreover, the midrash also features passages modifying the stance that study is primary (or suggest that it must be balanced with "deeds" – on this see Fraade's remarks, *From Tradition to Commentary*, p. 257, note 208) or that read the Shema as commanding prayer (see Fraade's remarks, p. 90-91, and 240, note 78).

[122] On this sense of the word, see Fraade (*From Tradition to Commentary*), p. 106, Hammer (*Sifre: A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy*), p. 410, note 1; p. 416, notes 1-2, as well as Sokoloff's definition (*Babylonian*, p. 1159), "to hear or recive a (legal) tradition," and the related word שמעתא / שמועתא , "legal tradition" (Sokoloff, *Babylonian*,p. 1161, 1156).

[123] This lesson is derived from (a Wisdom reading) of the verse, "*That you may learn them, keep them and do them"* (Deut. 5:1); that is, the midrash reads the order of the verbs as indication of their importance (instead of reading the last word "to do" as the purpose of all learning).

תשמרון] through its parallel in Deut. 11:13: "if you diligently hear…" [אם שמוע תשמעו].[124] Thus, this explication of the verse just following the Shema immediately turns back to the Shema itself:[125]

> "*If you diligently keep all this commandment*" (Deut. 11:22): Why is this said? Because it says, *"… if you diligently hear My commandments*" (Deut. 11:13). [From that verse] I might deduce that if one has heard *divre Torah*, he may sit idly and not repeat them; that's why it says "*if you diligently keep*…"

Thus, the link between the verses teaches us that initially learning ("hearing") is not sufficient; one must recite ("keep") the lesson in order to retain it. If we were reading in the halakhic mode, these commands might be understood in the sense of obeying ("heeding") and observing ("keeping") *mitsvot*. But here, "hearing" and "keeping" are two stages of learning.

What follows is a lengthy explication of "*If you diligently keep*" through other biblical verses, comprising a sort of essay on how to study.[126] The other texts are read as a figures for how to "keep" one's learning (such as saving money, tending a field, or capturing a bird), as signs for the proper scholar (who must be like a sponge, and a sieve, and "drink from [his] own cistern"), and finally, for *divre Torah* themselves. This latter is the passage we cited above, in which a series of verses (flowing from Proverbs 4:22 to the garland verses) show how *divre Torah* are like water, wine and oil: precious fluids that nourish and sustain.

If by now we have not thoroughly understood that "keep" and "hear" (and indeed the Shema as a whole) refer to the act of Torah study, the midrash returns to the command *"to love"*:

> *To love*: You might say, "I am studying Torah in order to be called a sage, in order to sit in the academy, in order to prolong my days in the World to Come." That is why Scripture says, *To love*; study it for its own sake, and honor will come, as Scripture says: [Wisdom] *is a tree of life for them that grasp it* (Prov. 3:18); *For they are life for those that find them* (Prov. 4:22); [Wisdom] *will place on your head a garland of grace* (Prov. 4:9)…

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[124] That is, the midrash links the verses by the homophony of the words שמר and שמע and the matching phrases *shamor tishmerun* and *shamoʿa tishmeʿu*. By thus joining the "hearing" of one verse to the "keeping" of the other, the midrash creates a link already present, as an internal play on words, in almost all the biblical verses that command "diligently hear," for those verses also specify "…and keep" (see Ex. 15:26, 19:5, 23:22, and Deut. 15:5, 28:1). In fact, the only such verse that lacks the command to "keep" (and thus, the internal play on words) is our Shema verse, Deut. 11:13. Similarly, the command "to keep" at 11:22 (with which the midrash begins) lacks the reference to its homophone, "to hear." Thus, the midrash "complete" these two commands by bringing them together.

[125] Thus, this reading of Deut. 11:22 actually becomes a re-reading of the Shema – and in fact reiterates or expands upon several of the Sifre's previous comments (in Piska 41) on Deut. 11:13 itself.

[126] Here, the biblical command *shemor tishmerun* ("diligently keep") is matched by the Sifre's own phrase *divre Torah mitḳayemim be-yado* ("*divre Torah* are retained in his hand"). The mode of study that results in such retention is sometimes indicated by the related term *meḳayem.* Literally, to maintain (or fulfil), this term is used by the Sifre to refer specifically to the practice of repeating lessons to retain them. (On this meaning of *ḳiyem* with regard to Torah study, see Fraade (*From Tradition to Commentary*), p. 101, 112-113, and 248, note 136, and Hammer (*Sifre: A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy*), p. 103, "retains them in his mind"). Thus, if one should *meḳayem* his studies, they will *mitḳayem be-yado.*

Here, once again, the "Wisdom Shema" is developed by reading Deuteronomy through Proverbs. This approach – which we encountered above, in the Sifre's explication of *"Teach them … and speak them"* – is perhaps most emphatic in the current piska. Of the 42 verses cited here to explicate the commands to "keep," "hear" and "love," more than half are quotes from Proverbs.[127] Thus, the midrash keeps this source of Wisdom imagery before us, as a lens through which to read Deuteronomy. Indeed, in so doing, the Sifre indicates again and again that the two texts are not only interwoven, but are the same fabric.

Yet, the Sifre also propounds the Wisdom Shema without quoting Proverbs, as we saw above, in the parable of dressing the wound. There, a Wisdom reading of "*place them on your heart* [*and bind them*]" is developed without any explicit reference to the parallel imagery in Proverbs. But, if (as other Sifre passages indicate) the two texts are almost one fabric, perhaps explicit citation is not necessary for the text's twin to ring in our ears. And if the Sifre need not always cite Proverbs, neither must Yehoshuʿa b. Levi explicitly cite the Shema in order to evoke it. The power of the shared imagery, combined with a tradition of reading the texts together, calls the prayer to mind.

That tradition is borne out by a later version of the "healing" teaching, which chooses to enunciate that which R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi implied:[128]

> The Holy Blessed One said: There is no affliction without a remedy[129] and you shall know the remedy and medicine for each and every affliction. If you want troubles not to weary your body, study Torah, for it is the remedy for the entire body. For the head, whence? As it is said, *She shall place a garland of grace on your head* (Prov. 4:9). For the heart, whence? As it is said, *Write them on the tablet of your heart* (Prov. 3:3). For the throat, whence? As it is said, *And necklaces for your throat* (Prov. 1:9). For the hands, whence? As it is said, "And they shall be a sign on your hand." For the navel, whence? As it is said, *It shall be healing to your innards* (Prov. 3:8). For all the bones, whence? As it is said, *And a tonic for your bones* (ibid).

Once again, passages from Proverbs chapters 1-4 prove that Torah study heals "the entire body." To the familiar sites (head, throat, innards and bones) are added "the heart" (proven by Prov. 3:3) and "the hand" – which might have been neatly proven by Prov. 7:3: "[Keep My commandments and live…] bind them upon your fingers." But instead, the midrash cites a

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[127] I've noted three main patterns: a) explicating a Deuteronomic verse via Proverbs only (as in the passage on "to love"); b) interweaving (a majority of) Proverbs verses with other biblical citations (as in the main body of the discourse on how to study); and c) the briefer, more tightly woven pattern, in which a few Deuteronomic verses are followed by one or two verses from Proverbs (as in Piska 34 above, or the final, technical teachings of Piska 48, where "*if you keep all this command*" is explicated by Deut. 8:19 and Prov. 23:5, then by Deut. 33:4 and 29:9 with Prov. 15:23, and finally by Deut. 32:47 and 8:3 with Prov. 27:11 and 23:15).

[128] Tanḥuma Shemot, Yitro 8. This passage appears in the standard printed edition (Warsaw), but not in the Buber edition. (Here, the teaching is attributed to R. Yoḥanan).

[129] See also Tanḥuma Noaḥ 8 (Buber Noah 13), "There is no affliction without a remedy." That passage, however, lacks the list of remedies. Moreover the one example given is the remedy, not for a physical ailment, but for *yester ha-ra* – and that remedy is not Torah study, but repentance.

phrase evoking the command of Deut. 6:8, "[and bind them] as a sign upon your hand."[130] Thus, Proverbial remedies are once again linked to the imagery of the Shema, with the (implied) act of binding the nexus point between the two texts. Yet all these remedies (even binding) are read as signs for Torah study.

While our exploration of the first ("road") part of R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's teaching brought us (by way of Proverbs) to the Shema, our examination of his "healing" teaching has led us to a tradition of reading the Shema – by way of Proverbs. The above texts from Sifre Deuteronomy exemplify this interpretive mode, according to which the prayer's first word – "Hear!" is understood in the rabbinic sense ("Learn!"), and the entire prayer is read as the (repeated) command to study Torah. As we have seen, the "Wisdom Shema" may be expounded through explicit and repeated reference to Proverbs – or without such explicit reference. Moreover, a Wisdom reading of the Shema may center on a single image at the nexus of the two texts: in Piska 45, it is the figure of binding (the nexus of Deut. 11:18-21 and such texts as Prov. 3:22 and 6:22); in Piska 34, it is the image of "speaking…on the road," in both Deut. 6:7 and Prov. 6:22. Indeed, as we learned above (by reading the chain of verses from Prov. 1:9 to 6:22), the two figures are linked: healing for the body and protection on the road are two benefits of "binding" (or wearing) words of Wisdom on the body. The longer version of R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's teaching combines these two figures, under the rubric of "the garland of grace."

And yet, R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's lesson – and in particular his "road" teaching – represents a particular form of the Wisdom Shema not (yet?) developed in Sifre Deuteronomy. While the road motif clearly is crucial to such passages as Piska 34 (which implies a necessary link between "speaking" and "walking in" Torah), the midrash focuses primarily on one aspect of the trope: the choice between fidelity and "going astray." By contrast, R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's road is not the site of "turning," but is first and foremost the location of study. Indeed it seems that R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's road is actually the Way of Wisdom, and it is through this "ground motif" that he reads the Shema. By reading the prayer through Wisdom's way, R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi renders the road its primary location and "Speak it … on the way" its central command; thus the road becomes the site of the obligation to study. Moreover, whereas in the Sifre teaching, the road remains a metaphor (for adherence to or straying from "the Wisdom of Israel"), in R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's teaching Wisdom's way also becomes a real place: an actual road on which sages tread. Thus, walking the road becomes a literal figure by which one enacts the Shema's command.

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[130] The exact reference is unclear, since the cited phrase (והיו לאות על ידך) doesn't precisely match any biblical verse in the Masoretic text. The phrase resembles Ex. 13:16 (וְהָיָה לְאוֹת עַל-יָדֶךָ) and Ex. 13:9 (וְהָיָה לְךָ לְאוֹת עַל-יָדְךָ), but the verb form does not match. Rather, the form והיו, when combined with the phrase לאות על ידך, strongly evokes words of the Shema (Deut. 6:8): וּקְשַׁרְתָּם **לְאוֹת עַל-יָדֶךָ וְהָיוּ** לְטֹטָפֹת בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ. However, the midrash does seem to intend a specific verse (rather than paraphrase or combination), for this phrase (like every other citation in the passage) is preceded by the term שנאמר. Perhaps this is a reference to a variant (pre-Masoretic) version of Exodus 13:16, a close intertext of Deut. 6:8. Or perhaps this is an authorial or scribal error, with the familiarity of the Shema forcing וְהָיוּ where there should have been וְהָיָה. Either way, the Shema command to "bind them on your hand" strongly resounds here.

Keep your eyes on the road (of Torah)

We have traveled a long way with R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi. His "garland" directed us to the Proverbial "way of Wisdom," the road where "you will go on your way safely and … [need] not fear." Moreover, his teachings have brought us around, again and again, to the (Wisdom reading of the) Shema. The Shema's repeated resonance in R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's sources enables us to recognize it as the subtext of the teaching itself. We can now hear in R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's advice to the lone traveler ("*ʿosek ba-Torah!*") a version of the command to "speak it…as you go on the road."

Let us now pause to look back on R. Ilaʿi's teaching, for our travels with R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi have in fact led us to the ground in which both teachings are rooted. Having arrived at the Way of Wisdom, we can see the logic underlying R. Ilaʿi's presumption that teaching takes place on the road – that "walking and talking" must mean Torah study. Moreover, now we can begin to understand what motivates R. Ilaʿi to create that motif from the opposed notions of seated study and dangerous road – for we've seen how a Wisdom reading of the command "speak them on the road" can render that location a real and vivid necessity. In R. Ilaʿi's insistence that scholars speak *divre Torah* en route, we may hear a version of that command; moreover, his scenario of "two scholars" and emphasis on "what's between them" seems to refer also to the earlier phrase ("teach them"), rendering the verse, "teach [these words by] speaking them … on the road."

Like R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi, R. Ilaʿi shapes his ethic of road teaching through a Wisdom text[131] - which itself contains intimations of the (Wisdom) Shema. In the repeated lesson of Avot 3 – that *divre Torah* must be spoken in any gathering (and even by a lone person) – we may recognize the generalized reading of Deut. 6:7, that "these words" must be spoken *in all situations*. Even more pointed, however, is the cautionary tale of the traveling student distracted from his studies by sights along the way. While this warning surely evokes the Proverbial warning to "keep your eyes forward," the student's delight in "fine trees" and "fine fields" seems more particularly an illustration of the Shema's warning against "following the desires of your heart and your eyes to lead you astray." In Avot (to an even greater extent than in the Sifre) the road serves primarily a sign for "turning" – primarily to worldly distractions, as its association with *baṭalah* indicates. Yet, for R. Ilaʿi, there is no distraction; the only intrusion is the threat of divine retribution if one does not keep the acts of "walking and talking" together!

There is one key aspect of the new motif which (as we hinted above) is already present in Avot: the real road. In Avot 3.7, we do not hear of a metaphoric straying from "the Wisdom of Israel" but see a student actually walking a road. Here we already have the kernel of R. Ilaʿi's and Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's motif: the literal metaphor. Yet, in Avot 3.7, that

[131] Indeed, the sages' two sources are closely linked. Mishnah Avot's teachings on proper conduct and the centrality of Torah study might be considered a tannaitic version of the biblical Wisdom lectures – indeed, Judah Goldin dubbed the work "the rabbinic book of Proverbs" (see Judah Goldin, *The Living Talmud: the Wisdom of the Fathers*, New York: New American Press, 1957, p. 37). In addition to the generic and thematic similarities (e.g., the didactic tone, the emphasis on learning and conduct), we should also note the tractate's explicit citation of Proverbs (in m.Avot 3:14,4:1, 4:19 and 5:19), as well as its many apparent paraphrases or interpretations of Proverbial statements and motifs (see, for example, Avot 1:17, 2:1, 2:4, 3:14, among many others). Moreover, the link between the texts, which to some extent remains implicit in Avot itself, is made more obvious by the proof and explication of its maxims through Proverbial verses in *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*.

location serves the lesson, "Don't let worldly pleasures distract you from study" (or "don't let the physical road distract you from the metaphoric road of Wisdom"). The same lesson seems to underlie the story of the palms (which we read above in b.Berakhot and b.Sotah). Rav Kahana's wonder at the venerable palms of Be-Tsinyata ("Is it true … that these palms have been here since the time of Adam?") is clearly a matter of marveling at "fine trees" along the way; yet by responding with an exegetical teaching, Shimi bar Ashi turns his companion's attention back to *divre Torah.* His is a (rather more gentle) version of the lesson in Avot: "Don't keep your eyes on [the sights of] the road; keep your eyes on [the way of] Torah!" But according to R. Ilaʿi and R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi, the two roads are the same, and they may simply declare, "Keep your eyes on the Way of Wisdom by speaking Torah en route!"

Finally, let us again consider the accounts of road exposition with which we began, such as the dialogue of R. ʿAkiva with R. Ishmael on "heaven and earth" and of R. Ishmael with R. Yehoshuʿa regarding "the cheese of heathens." Our teachings' prescription of Torah study en route gives warrant to these accounts. Yet it is only when we trace the roots of Ilaʿi and R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's teachings – and their adaptation of those traditions – that we begin to truly understand why we find our sages expounding Torah on the dangerous road. As formidable as that danger may be, there is another poetic reality that overturns it; Wisdom protects from danger; one is obliged, indeed commanded to go wisdom's way. We can now see that our peripatetic sages are actually treading on the Way of Wisdom, and that the account of their exposition en route is an exemplification – a sort of "movie" – of "*uve-lekhtekha va-derekh.*"

Chapter three: Dangerous Wisdom

We now turn to a text particularly rich with road *derashot*: the second chapter of Bavli tractate Ḥagigah.[1] This chapter (or more precisely, its first half)[2] is a corpus of metaphysical and mystical teachings, in which accounts of sages teaching en route figure prominently. Moreover, the text's discourse is itself a journey – or series of journeys – to the moment of Creation, to the foundations of the earth, and up through the seven heavens.[3]

All this traveling is appropriate to the chapter's larger context, since tractate Ḥagigah itself centers on a journey: pilgrimage to the Jerusalem Temple. The tractate begins by asking who is obligated to make the last leg of that journey: to go up to the Temple and appear before God.[4] Thus, like the other great journeys of the people – Exodus and Exile – pilgrimage is defined in terms of approach (or departure from) God. But unlike those epic journeys, the pilgrimage described here is concise and controlled: a roundtrip with a known outcome. The pilgrim's entrance into God's earthly "abode" – and his address to God – is managed and mediated by the court administrators, and by the sages who dictate the rite.

The second chapter of the tractate diverts us from this journey. Or rather, it superimposes another journey over the pilgrimage, as if covering one map by placing another on top of it. For here, we travel, not to the Jerusalem Temple, but rather to God's heavenly abode and Presence. Like the pilgrimage, this is necessarily a round trip, but it is undertaken, not by a pilgrim surrounded by family and livestock, but by the scholar, who makes his way via exposition – or at perhaps more directly. Instead of "appearing" these travelers set out to *see*, to catch a glimpse (or a good long look) at the divine realms and Presence.[5] But this is a

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[1] That is, *Ein dorshin* ("Do not expound"), so called after the first words of m.Ḥagigah 2.1, with which it begins.

[2] The chapter, spanning Bavli pages 11b-20b, explicates m.Ḥagigah 2.1-7. Yet, fully one half the chapter (Bavli pages 11b-16a) is devoted to a single mishnah, m.Ḥagigah 2.1, while the second half to the chapter deals with the remaining six *mishnayot*. That first half of the chapter (the Bavli's explication of m.Ḥagigah 2.1) is my subject here. This a text that has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention and about which there is considerable controversy, regarding (for example): the meanings of m.Ḥagigah 2.1 (which this text elaborates); on the meaning of the Pardes account and the implications of the (tannaitic) "mystical collection"; which of the variant texts (in Tosefta, Yerushalmi, Bavli and the midrashim) is closest to the original; the link between these works and *hekhalot* and apocalyptic texts. (For references to works on specific issues or parts of the text, see below). I will not, however, take part in those debates here (see next note).

[3] Thus my reading is a very particular path through the Bavli text, which I read as a wisdom journey. Although I will at time refer to other texts (as they help my reading), mine is not primarily a work of comparison. Instead, I focus on the Bavli text itself, which – although clearly a collection – is also a coherent work. Moreover (although I read a large portion of the text), mine is not a comprehensive reading, which no doubt would require the space of a book. Yet it seems likely that a "definitive" reading is impossible due to the ambiguities of the text itself, which was perhaps never meant to be fully resolved, concerning as it does "secrets" and mysteries.

[4] Indeed, the discourse b.Ḥagigah focuses almost entirely on arrival – and on the rules and rites surrounding the Temple offerings. The journey to and from Jerusalem is (almost entirely) out of the tractate's picture.

[5] Thus, this part of the tractate subverts the emphasis (indeed, insistence) in the tractate's pilgrimage discourse on "appearing before" (but not seeing) God. That pilgrimage discourse might itself be considered a subversion – of the centrality of sight in other ancient and late antique modes of pilgrimage (on which, see Andrea Nightingale, "On Wandering and Wondering: 'Theôria' in Greek Philosophy and Culture," in *Arion*, Third Series, 9, no. 2, p. 23-58; and Georgia Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). On vision in rabbinic texts, see Rachel Neis, *The Sense of Sight in Rabbinic Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). On a particular rabbinic discourse on seeing (or not), see Dina Stein, *Textual Mirrors*, chapter 3 ("The Blind Eye of the Beholder").

dangerous, perhaps forbidden quest; throughout the text, we find the way circuitous and beset with dangers.

The spine of this corpus of teachings is a series of road *derashot*. The text's contemplation of the heavenly and divine realm begins with R. ʿAkiva's teaching on "heaven and earth" and centers on accounts of traveling sages discussing the divine Chariot.[6] These expository explorations are followed by an "actual" heavenly journey: the account of "the four who entered Pardes" – and its aftermath. Here we find ʿAkiva's prefatory warning ("when you arrive…"), Ben Zoma's subsequent report of his indelible vision of divine Presence, Aḥer's disastrous utterance in the heavenly court, and his (earthly) teaching en route, with R. Meir following "to learn Torah from his mouth."[7]

Thus we find that esoteric wisdom – like Proverbial wisdom – is also located on the road, but as we shall see, this is quite a different journey. Previously we found that wisdom provides protection, guiding to the right path or making the hazardous road safe. But here, the danger is – wisdom itself. The quest for esoteric knowledge, like a journey to the divine realm, is a perilous endeavor for mere mortals, and the Scriptural words indicating that realm are so potent that they are dangerous, even fatal. Far from being invited, urged and guided on this road, we are in fact warned away from it. Previously we traced the straight path of *divre Torah:* the revealed Wisdom that is "for us to do" – that is "not in heaven" but "very close, in your mouth and heart." Here instead, we consider the "secrets of *divre Torah*" – and precisely what *is* in heaven.

Point of Departure

In order to understand where the Bavli is going, we must first take a brief look at its starting point: the mishnah it explicates. Although the discourse of tractate Ḥagigah primarily concerns pilgrimage and Temple offerings, its second chapter begins with quite another kind of teaching – the only one not clearly related to the topic at hand.[8]

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[6] That is, Ezekiel 1, called *Maʿaśeh Merkavah* ("The Account of the Chariot"), since divine form is envisioned upon a celestial chariot (*merkavah*). *Maʿaśeh Merkavah* denotes mystical exegesis of Ezekiel 1 – and (as we shall see below) can also connote broader speculation on the divine realm, throne, and body

[7] In fact, the text contains two different kinds of road *derashot:* those beginning with the formula "Rabbi X and Rabbi Y were walking on the road…" – and other accounts of teaching en route that do not employ this formula. The "formula *derashot*" are R. ʿAkiva's teaching on "heaven and earth" (b.Hag. 12a), and the accounts of b.ʿArakh and R. Yehoshuʿa expounding *Maʿaśeh Merkavah* (14b). The subsequent road stories (the Pardes episode on 14b, and the ensuing accounts of Ben Zoma, Aḥer and R. ʿAkiva on 15a-b) lack the introductory formula (and in some cases, explicit reference to the road), but as I shall demonstrate, are all accounts of teaching while on a journey, and are rooted in the road *derasha* motif. Moreover, some of these later accounts (notably those involving Aḥer) strongly evoke the formula itself: i.e., "After he went out to evil ways, Aḥer asked R. Meir…" and "Aḥer was riding a horse … with R. Meir following to learn Torah from his mouth" (all on b.Ḥag. 15a).

[8] Another possible exception is m.Ḥagigah 1.7, which (referring to Ecclesiastes 1:15) asks, "What is it that which is crooked and can't be made straight?" The two kinds of error considered here (fathering a mamzer or forsaking Torah study) are well outside the realm of the tractate's main topic, and is thus similar to our mishnah. However, this mishnah does have a link to the topic at hand; its interpretation of Eccl. 1:15 derives from the previous mishnah, which cites the verse to prove that if one fails to bring the Temple offering at the right time, it cannot be made up later.

> [We] do not expound ʿ*Arayot* with three [persons], nor *Maʿaśeh Bereshit* with two, nor *Maʿaśeh Merkavah* with one – unless he is a sage and understands by himself. Whoever looks at four things, it would be better for him had he not come into the world: what is above, what is below, what is before and what is after. Whoever has no concern for the glory of his Maker, it would be better had he not come into the world.[9]

The mishnah issues two kinds of warnings. First, it limits the study of particular biblical texts:[10] ʿ*Arayot*, the forbidden sexual relations listed in Leviticus 18; *Maʿaśeh Bereshit*, the "Account of Creation" in Genesis 1; and *Maʿaśeh Merkavah* ("the Account of the Chariot"), the theophany of Ezekiel 1.[11] These are apparently volatile, even dangerous texts, for their exposition is severely restricted; *ʿArayot* can be taught to only two students, *Maʾaseh Bereshit* to only one, whereas *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*, it would seem, cannot be taught at all, except to a sage of particularly deep insight.[12] The second part of the mishnah ("Whoever looks…") moves beyond such practical limitations to more sweeping warnings; here the dangers are dishonoring God – and "looking at" four directions or topics: "what is above, what is below, what is before and what is after."[13] The consequences of such acts are perhaps not to be

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[9] This is a difficult text, and there is a degree of scholarly dispute about almost every one of its terms. For example, we might ask if "with three" includes the teacher or only specifies the number of students (the Bavli resolves this by glossing the phrase "*to* three"). The phrase *mevin be-daʾato* (here translated, "understands by himself") has been variously interpreted, whereas the reference to "above, below, etc." is the subject of some controversy (i.e., whether the reference is spatial, temporal or both; whether this phrase should be related to *Maʿaśeh Bereshit*, *Maʿaśeh Merkavah,* both – or neither, and whether this is actual reference to metaphysics or not).

[10] The mishnah's key term, "*dorshin*," implies exegesis of texts – and this sense of *Maʿaśeh Bereshit* and *Maʿaśeh Merkavah* as biblical texts is attested elsewhere in the Mishnah (m.Megilah 4.10, Taʿanit 4.2, and Ḥulin 5.5). Yet it must be noted that in post-mishnaic texts, *Maʿaśeh Bereshit* may also refer to more general inquiry into the subject of Creation and *Maʿaśeh Merkavah* to more general speculation on the divine realm and form. The mishnah's text is further distinguished by the fact that it groups *Maʿaśeh Bereshit* and *Maʿaśeh Merkavah* with *ʿArayot*, which does seem the "title" for a text, not a larger field of study (although one might argue that the term could also indicate Oral Law on forbidden relations).

[11] Ezekiel's vision begins with a description of the holy Creatures supporting a celestial Chariot, upon which he sees the divine Presence. On this account, the term *Merkavah* (Chariot) becomes a metonym for the divine throne and Presence.

[12] That is, "do not expound … to three" (in the typical diction of the Mishnah) means that one may expound the topic only with a group smaller than three (two or fewer); "[do not expound] to two" limits class size to one, and "[do not expound] to one" would seem to prevent any exposition at all, where it not for the qualifying phrase, "unless he is a sage and understands by himself."

[13] The warning "whoever looks at four things" recalls the teachings of Mishnah Avot (2.1 and 3.1), where, in contrast, we are urged to look: "Whoever looks at three things will not come into sin." In m.Avot 2.1, we are encouraged to "know what is above you: an eye that sees, an ear that hears, and all your deeds written in a book." In m.Avot 3.1, we are urged to speculate on "where you came from, where you are going, and before whom you will give account." The first mishnah reminds us that God "above" is witness to and judge of all our deeds on earth. The second mishnah reminds us of our lowly stature (we come from "a fetid drop" and are destined for "maggots and dust") before God, who will judge us after death. Both teachings seem to address the man so absorbed in earthly affairs – and perhaps, his own importance within them – that he does not "see" how humble is his stature before God. Thus, both teachings urge us to consider what is above us – and indeed, give a glimpse of the heavenly realm by making us imagine God watching above, and the mortal standing in judgment. Yet, their purpose is not to penetrate the divine realm, but rather to "put us in our place" as God's earthly subjects. Thus, these teachings, which urge us to look "up," do not in fact contradict our mishnah, which warns

imagined, for the mishnah declares that "it would be better not to have come into the world" than to do so.[14] In contrast to its initial restrictions, here the mishnah pronounces something more like a prohibition, as if to say, "Just don't go there!"

But where is "there"? While the mishnah does not define the phrase "what is above, what is below, what is before and what is after," we can certainly recognize the structure. Here are two sets of merisms, which (like sitting/walking and lying down/arising) might suggest two kinds of totality: spatial and temporal. The earliest comments on the mishnah read the phrase in just this way, by linking it (to the statements just preceding it in the mishnah, on) *Maʿaśeh Bereshit* and *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*: the topics of Creation, and the divine realm. Thus, the phrase indicates what was (temporally) before this world and what will be after it, and what is (physically) beneath the world and what is in the celestial heights above it.[15]

We might therefore see a sort of contradiction within the mishnah, which first grants (limited) permission to study *Maʿaśeh Bereshit* and *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*, but then seems to entirely prohibit these fields of inquiry. However, Alon Goshen-Gottstein has argued persuasively that, rather than contradicting itself, the two parts of the mishnah speak of (and thereby contrast) two different kinds of endeavors. The first part ("Do not expound…") restricts, but permits, the guided exposition of texts on Creation and the Chariot; the second part ("Whoever looks…") prohibits unfettered visionary speculation on such topics.[16]

The Bavli's explication of m.Ḥagigah 2.1 follows the structure of the mishnah: first discussing the rules "Do not expound…" and then turning to the warnings, "Whoever looks…" and "Whoever has no regard…" Here, as always, the gemara seeks to elucidate the Mishnah: unknown or unclear wording is addressed; the dicta are explained and justified (often by fitting a Scriptural proof to the rabbinic ruling), and related topics are discussed. Yet here, a curious thing occurs. By attempting to define the limits declared by the mishnah, the gemara's discussion effectively transgresses them. In the course of its explication, the gemara actually expounds *Maʿaśeh Bereshit* and *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*; thus this text, which presumably records and is intended for general scholarship, addresses the very topics that the

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against such looking. Our mishnah's warning is another way of reminding mortals of their place, not just as subjects of God, but as beings unfit to comprehend the mysteries of Creation and divinity.

[14] We might contrast this verdict with those of our previous texts. Both the judgments of Avot 3 (that the errant one is "liable for his life") and of R. Ilaʿi (that negligent scholar's "deserve to be burned") invoke or connote the death penalty. Yet, whereas there the transgressor is threatened with death, here his whole life is (in effect) erased.

[15] Indeed, the Tosefta reads "what is before and what is after" as temporal, glossing the phrase as "what is before and what is yet to be" (see t. Ḥagigah 2.3). Of course, this does not resolve or exhaust the mishnah's possible meanings. (For the argument that the Tosefta – and thus subsequent texts – distorts the mishnah's original meaning, see Goshen-Gottstein, "Is *Maʿaseh Bereshit* Part of Ancient Jewish Mysticism?" in The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy 4, no. 2, p. 185-201). The mishnah's allusive possibilities (as well as its rich mystical background) are intimated by the parallel in 1 Enoch 60:10-11: "And [the angel] said to me: Son of man … (to the degree) which it will be permitted, you will know the hidden things. Then the other angel…was showing me the hidden things: what is first and last in heaven, above it, beneath the earth, in the depth, in the extreme ends of heaven, the extent of heaven…"

[16] See Alon Goshen-Gottstein, "Four Entered Pardes Revisited," in the *Harvard Theological Review* 88, no. 1 (1995), as well as his concise remarks on p. 75-76.

mishnah marks as esoteric, to be taught only to a single student or especially qualified sage.[17] The text also considers "what is above, what is below…" In the course of its explications, the gemara describes the first days of Creation and what is beneath the earth; it maps the levels of heaven and their contents, and even contemplates the divine Chariot and Presence. Moreover, the Bavli's discussion actually seems to reverse the mishnah's priorities. Quickly passing over the least restricted topic (*ʿArayot*) in less than a page, it then lavishes several pages of discussion on the more restricted *Maʿaśeh Bereshit* – and finally devotes the greatest part of its discourse to the most restricted of all: *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*.[18] With its dire warning against looking at "what is above, etc.," the mishnah essentially says "don't go there [into metaphysical and mystical speculation]" – but this is precisely what the Bavli does.

In the pages below, we will follow the path of the gemara through *Maʿaśeh Bereshit, Maʿaśeh Merkavah,* and "Whoever looks…" That exposition comprises several kinds of journeys. By navigating the boundaries placed by the Mishnah, the gemara's exposition takes a virtual trip to Creation and to the heavens; for, as we shall see, those limits in the text also mark places in the terrestrial and celestial terrain. Within this larger, virtual journey is the account of an "actual" heavenly ascent; the Pardes episode. Yet this quite different journey seems to have a similar theme; how far may we go towards – or into – the divine realm? Finally, marking our way through the gemara's discourse are its road *derashot*: brief, vivid accounts of sages expounding *Maʿaśeh Bereshit* and *Maʿaśeh Merkavah* while "walking on the road." These expositions en route are emblematic of the text's larger journeys – and of the implicit (and at times quite explicit) questions that drive it: "which way" and "how far" we may go into dangerous wisdom?

Maʿaśeh Bereshit: "Heaven and Earth"

The Bavli's discourse on *Maʿaśeh Bereshit* is a voyage to Creation – in both senses of the word. Begun as a journey to the time of the world's Creation, the text moves on to explore the terrain – to map out the created world, from the foundations of the earth to the heights of heaven. Yet this ambitious expedition starts with the warning "Do not expound…" Indeed, the gemara begins rather modestly, by seeking biblical justification of the gemara's rule that *Maʿaśeh Bereshit* may only be taught to one student:

> **Nor *Maʿaśeh Bereshit* with two.** Whence [do we derive] this? It is as our Rabbis taught: *Ask now of the first days*; [the singular form "Ask" indicates that only] one person may ask, but two may not ask!

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[17] While the Yerushalmi does allow the exposition of *Maʿaśeh Bereshit* (see y.Ḥagigah 77a), it seems significant that the Bavli never cites this decision, but instead proceeds with the mishnah alone. Indeed, the Bavli seems to take the mishnah's restriction quite seriously, and in fact devotes very little space to the actual exposition of Genesis 1.

[18] Moreover, (although the gemara ostensibly follows the mishnah's structure), the mishnah's topics are not so neatly separated in the gemara, nor are they dealt with strictly in order. As we shall see, the discussion of *Maʿaśeh Bereshit* soars into heaven, revealing the abode of angels and the divine Chariot (the territory of *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*). Indeed, from the outset of its discussion here, the Bavli mixes the two "opposed" parts of the mishnah; by linking *Maʿaśeh Bereshit* to "what is above, what is below, etc." it blurs the distinction between permitted exposition and forbidden visionary speculation.

Here, the Bavli cites a midrash on Deuteronomy 4:32 ("… Ask now of the first days that were before you, from the day that God created man upon the earth, and from one edge of heaven to the other …"). Read as a command to contemplate the Creation ("Ask now of the first days…"), the verse serves to justify the mishnah's restriction, for it addresses a singular "you": thus, "only one may ask!"

While this reading provides sturdy, conventional proof for the mishnah's admonition, it also makes for a subtle shift. The biblical call to "Ask of the first days," although employed here to reinforce the warning "Do not expound…," nonetheless carries with it a sense of warrant. And indeed, having proven the mishnah's limit on class size, the midrash goes on to explore the boundaries of the topic itself:

> You might presume that a person may ask about [the period] before the world was created – but Scripture says: *Since the day that God created man upon the earth.* You might then presume that a person may *not* ask about the [preceding] six days of creation – but Scripture says: *First days that were before you*. You might presume that a person may ask about what is above and what is below, what is before and what is after – but Scripture says: *And from one edge of heaven to the other.* [Regarding that which is] from one edge of heaven to the other you may ask, but you may not ask what is above, what is below, what is before, and what is after.

Here, each part of the verse corrects a misconception about how far we may go in our inquiry: "Since the day God created man on earth" pulls us back from considering the time before Creation began, yet lest we think that inquiry is permitted only from that (sixth) day forward, the verse reminds us that we may inquire into "the first days that were before you [humans were created]" – that is, from day one. The final phrase "from one edge of heaven…" seems to indicate limits in both time and space;[19] one may inquire from the day the heaven (and earth) were created[20] – or regarding the created world contained from one horizon to the other – but not what is above, below, before or after that.

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[19] The meaning of this phrase in the midrash remains ambiguous – as we can see from the different versions of the midrash in the Tosefta, Yerushalmi and Bavli. In the Tosefta (t. Ḥagigah 2.3), "from one edge of heaven to the other" seems indicate a temporal limit: that is, from the time the heavens were created (see next note). In the Yerushalmi (y. Ḥagigah 77c), the phrase seems to mark both temporal and spatial limits; the phrase proves that one mustn't expound "what is above the heavens and below the abyss" – but this is immediately followed by warnings about seeking into "[what was] before the world was created" and "after the world was created." In the Bavli, "from one edge of heaven…" proves that one mustn't ask about "what is above, below, before, after" – but of course that phrase itself can have both spatial and temporal meanings. The gemara's very next remark (למה לי מן היום?) clearly refers to temporal limits; "since we have already have a phrase to prove that we may inquire from day one, why do we need '*since the day God created man…'*[which refers to day six]?"). Yet it is not clear here whether the primary proof of "day one" is "*Ask now of first days"*—or "*from one edge of heaven,*" read as a temporal marker (see next note).

[20] This seems to be the Tosefta's interpretation of the phrase. Whereas in the Bavli, "from one edge of heaven" proves that one mustn't ask "what is above, etc.," in the Tosefta, it proves that one mustn't ask about the period "before the order of the planets [סדרי תקופות] were created." Lieberman explains that "the order of the planets," that is, the creation of the heavens and luminaries, stands here for the larger creation (i.e., of "heaven [and earth]"); thus "from one edge of heaven" proves that one may not inquire before the heavens were created (that is, when creation began): day one (see *Tosefta ki-feshuta* , v.5 *Betsah-Ḥagigah*, p. 1296). Thus *ḳushya* here is, "since we've established 'day one' with the phrase '*from one edge…*,' why did we need '*from the day that God*

We have surely moved beyond the matter of class size – and the exposition of Genesis 1. Rather, the midrash conceives of *Maʿaśeh Bereshit* not as a text, but as a wider field of inquiry into Creation, both time and terrain. Indeed, by marking the bounds of the topic with the phrase "What is above, what is below…," the midrash blends the two "opposite" parts of the mishnah; it equates textual exegesis (*Maʿaśeh Bereshit*) with speculation ("what is above…") – thereby blending the mishnah's prohibition with its permission.

While the midrash does place limits on this inquiry (essentially saying "this far and no further!"), the process of setting those limits (of asking "this far? Or this far?") is one of repeatedly nudging the boundary. Each implied question ("May we ask about pre-Creation?" "May we ask about the first six days?") momentarily takes us to that edge. We might compare this to the dynamic where a child told "You must not cross the street!" nonetheless asks, "May I go to the corner? May I stand on the curb? May I step in the gutter?" We can easily see how her questions (even if motivated by caution) are an act of "pushing it" – usurping a bit of parental authority by inserting herself into the process of setting the limit.[21]

This sense of pressing the limits is even more vividly conveyed in the next passage, a third reading of the same verse.

> R. Elʿazar taught: the First Adam [extended] from the earth to the sky, as it is said: *Since the day that God created man upon the earth*. But when he sinned, the Holy Blessed One placed His hand upon him and shrunk him, as it is said: *You have hemmed me in fore and aft, and laid Your hand upon me*. Rav Yehudah said that Rav said: The First Adam [extended] from one end of the world to the other, as it is said: *Since the day that God created man upon the earth, and from one edge of heaven to the other*; when he sinned, the Holy Blessed One, put His hand upon him and shrunk him, as it is said: *And laid Your hand upon me*.[22]

The verse that previously marked the bounds of inquiry now describes "the First Adam," a primordial colossus who stands "upon the earth" with his head against the sky – or who extends head-to-toe from horizon to horizon. This oversize creature serves as the measure of the world – or the portion of it we may investigate. At the same time, he seems to fill that world, pressing its edges. That is, until "God placed His hand upon him and shrunk him." Thus, the midrash – almost in the style of a tall tale – shocks us into a new perspective, as if saying, "You think *that's* big? God dispensed with this world-filling giant with one hand

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created…' [day six]?" While the Bavli's version of the midrash eschews the (explicitly temporal) reference to "before the order of the planets" (replacing it with the ambiguous "above, below, etc."), it is not clear – especially in the subsequent *ḳushya* – whether it retains (or hints at) the Tosefta's temporal reading.

[21] This is not to say that the conventional structure *Yakhol … Talmud lomar* [you might presume…but Scripture states…] always or even usually functions this way. But the particular tensions here, between the mishnah and midrash, and between permission and prohibition, create a situation in which it can function – or be read – this way.

[22] b.Ḥagigah 12b. While Deuteronomy 4:32 provides the image of First Adam's original extension, his ultimate fate is proven by Psalm 139:5. The reading depends on a punning reading of the Psalmist's phrase "you hemmed me in fore and aft" [אָחוֹר וָקֶדֶם צַרְתָּנִי וַתָּשֶׁת עָלַי כַּפֶּכָה] – to mean both "you formed me before and after" (i.e., twice) and "you constrained me in front and in back." Moreover, here the Bavli provides a key to the earlier midrash, for here it matches the biblical phrase *from one end of the heavens to the other* with its own expression "from one of the world to the other."

(tied behind His back)!" This repeated act of squashing down the giant likewise squelches any notion that his reach indicates authority. Far from a Vitruvian Man (whose body denotes the cosmic pattern, whose toes and fingers mark the circumference), First Adam turns out to be a mere instrument (a sort of T-square), cast aside once it has served its purpose.

Defined finally not by cosmic proportions, but by sin, First Adam is in effect dismissed, and hereafter, we find God alone on the primordial scene. Indeed, when (in the next passage) the gemara begins its exposition of Genesis 1, it seems to emphasize the solitude of the Creator.

> Rav Yehudah said that Rav said: Ten things were created on the first day, and they are: heaven and earth, *tohu* and *bohu*, light and darkness, wind and water, the measure of day and the measure of night. Heaven and earth, as it is written: *In the beginning God created heaven and earth* (Gen. 1:1). *Tohu* and *bohu*, as it is written: *And the earth was tohu and bohu* (Gen. 1:2). Light and darkness: Darkness, as it is written: *And darkness was upon the face of the deep* (Gen 1:2); Light, as it is written: *And God said, Let there be light* (Gen. 1:3). Wind and water, as it is written: *And the wind of God hovered over the face of the waters* (Gen. 1:2). The measure of day and the measure of night, as it is written: *And there was evening and there was morning, one day* (Gen. 1:5).

According to Rav's teaching, all the things mentioned in the first few verses of Genesis were in fact created on the first day – even those which in the biblical text seem to already be there "at the beginning": the waters, darkness, and the mysterious *tohu* and *bohu.*[23] In effect, Rav's teaching removes "what is before" from the biblical text – taking away all of its intimations of the time before God began creating.[24]

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[23] Rav's inclusion of "wind" among the ten created things seems quite a forceful reading, particularly as the biblical text indicates that *ruaḥ* (which is in genitive construct with "*Elohim*") belongs to or is a part of God. Defining "wind" as something separate and later severs this connection (thereby also effacing this verse's intimation of a pre-Creation moment, in which God's wind hovers over the pre-world). While it is possible that the inclusion of "wind" merely indicates an orderly attempt to include all the nouns mentioned in verses 1-5, it may indicate a pressing agenda of removing "before" from these verses – and perhaps an objection to any hint of a divine hypostasis. In the Genesis Rabbah teaching cited below, the "philosopher" (i.e., a polemical opponent) also counts "wind" as a "material" separate from God However, since the "philosopher" also hints that such "materials" were God's partners in Creation, this does not necessarily discount the possibility that Rav (in the later teaching) makes the same move for the opposite (or rebutting) purpose.

[24] Here, Rav seems to assert the notion of *creatio ex nihilo*, something not normally countenanced in rabbinic texts, which on the contrary seem to assume that there was something there "before." Indeed, David Winston argued cogently against the modern (mis-)attribution of *creatio ex nihilo* to the sages (see "The Book of Wisdom's Theory of Cosmogony," in *History of Religions* 11, no. 2, Nov. 1971, p. 185-202). And yet, in so doing, Winston seemed to give Rav's anomalous teaching short shrift, implying that it simply recycles an earlier (anomalous) teaching: that of R. Gamliel in Genesis Rabbah (discussed below). Moreover, Winston appears to treat that original teaching (or at least, its claim "creation was written regarding all of these!") as polemical hot air, rather than a serious claim of *creatio ex nihilo*. Alon Goshen-Gottstein, on the other hand, treats Rav's teaching as meaningful, but argues that Rav is not actually claiming that there was no primordial matter; rather, he is redeeming that questionable matter by marking it as "created" (see "Mitos Maʿaśeh Bereshit be-Sifrut ha-Amora'im," in Havivah Pedayah, ed. *Myth in Judaism*, vol. 4: 58-77 [Hebrew]).

Rav's teaching forecloses dangerous interpretive possibilities more explicitly refuted elsewhere: the notion that God was helped by the use of "good materials" or by partnership with other divine beings. We might contrast Rav's teaching with a somewhat more explicit one in Genesis Rabbah:

> A philosopher asked R. Gamliel, saying to him: Your God was a great artist, but surely He found good materials to help Him: [R. Gamliel said]: May [your] breath expire![25] Creation is written [regarding] all of them…[26]

Here, the claim that God was "helped" in Creation elicits a curse from R. Gamliel (as well as an exegetical rebuttal, elided here). The implication of precedence – and even agency – seems to require his denial that there was any such matter on the primordial scene. The "good materials" must be clearly relegated to the second order of *created things*, which by definition could not have assisted in Creation.

The question of whether God had partners in Creation is addressed more explicitly another teaching of Genesis Rabbah:

> When were the angels created? … All agree that no [angels] were created on the first day. If not, you might say: [The angel] Michael spread out [the world] in the south and Gabriel in the north, while the Holy Blessed One measured it in the middle. Instead [it is written]: *It is I, the Lord, who made everything, who alone stretched out the heavens, and spread out the earth by Myself* [מאתי].[27]

Here, the problem of "helpers" is once again resolved according to R. Gamliel's method: removal of the contenders from the earliest moments of Creation. If angels were present on the first day, we might imagine that they helped God create the world – thus their creation must have taken place later. We get some measure of the problem from that fact that one proof does not seem to suffice, but is followed by two more:

> [The word מאתי] is written מי אתי [that is, "who was with Me?" meaning]: Who was My partner in creating the world? … R. Tanḥuma said: *For You are great and do wonders*. How? *Because You are God alone* [meaning]: You alone created the world.

Here we learn that the very word "by Myself" is inscribed with God's rhetorical question, "Who was with Me?" – meaning, "There was *no one* was with Me in Creation!" Or, as R. Tanḥuma teaches (from Psalm 86), all God's "wonders" were done "alone."[28] We have

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[25] Literally, "may that man's breath expire!" See Sokoloff (*Palestinian*), 355.

[26] Genesis Rabbah 1:9. Here, some internal dispute is recorded; R. Yoḥanan claims that angels were created on day two, whereas R. Ḥaninah says day five. Moreover, the expression "lest you say" seems to indicate an error that could be made by any of "us." And yet, the text expels the notion of angels' precedence (and role as creators) by stating "all agree [that none] were created on the first day," indicating that this notion belongs outside "us."

[27] Genesis Rabbah 1:3, citing Isaiah 44:24.

[28] R. Tanḥuma cites Psalm 86:10 ("You are great and do wonders; you alone are God"), reading the second phrase as causative: you are great because you [create] alone.

moved beyond the specific concern regarding angels to dispute the notion that God had *any* partner in Creation. As in the case of the "good materials," the question of the angels' role suggests – or even stands for – a dispute regarding God's solitude in Creation.[29]

The Bavli seems to sidestep such dangers by removing "helpers" from the primordial scene via Rav's teaching on the "ten things" created on the first day. The image of divine solitude in Creation is reinforced by another teaching of Rav, in which the world itself is created by "ten things" (or words) – but those things are divine attributes:[30]

> R. Zutra b. Tuvyah said that Rav said: By ten things was the world created: by wisdom and understanding, by reason and strength, by rebuke and might, by righteousness and judgment, by loving kindness and compassion.

Each divine attribute is proven by a verse demonstrating its role in Creation:

> By wisdom and understanding, as it is written: *The Lord founded the earth by wisdom, and by understanding established the heavens*. By reason, as it is written: *By His reason the depths were broken up*. By strength and might, as it is written: *Who by His strength set the mountains, Who is girded about with might.* By rebuke, as it is written: *The pillars of heaven were trembling, astonished at His rebuke*. By righteousness and judgment, as it is written: *Righteousness and judgment are the foundation of Your throne.* By loving kindness and compassion, as it is written: *Remember, O Lord, Your compassions and Your mercies; for they are eternal* [literally, "of the world"].[31]

The only person in this austere landscape is God – now imagined as specific qualities – forming, breaking down and firming up the heavens and earth, waters, mountains, the pillars of heaven, and the divine throne.

And yet, surging just beneath this teaching's overt message is a different story, for Rav's proofs are drawn from biblical texts describing God's cosmogonic battle with the mighty seas. This is a primordial world peopled by semi-divine beings (the "sons of gods"), the "proud, raging" seas, and their "denizens," Rahav and the Serpent.[32] Rav's teaching

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[29] That dispute is explicitly addressed in Genesis Rabbah 1:7, where it is stated: "No person can say that two powers created the world!" Here, it is argued that the singular form of verbs describing God's acts attests to his solitude – and disproves the notion that the (plural) form *Elohim* indicates a plurality in the Godhead: "for it is not written here [in Ex. 20:1] "and the Gods spoke" [וידברו אלהים], but rather *And God spoke* [וידבר אלהים]. "In the beginning the Gods created" [בראשית בראו אלהים] is not written here [in Gen. 1:1], but rather *God created* [ברא אלהים]…" God's action is grammatically singular – and therefore God acts alone.

[30] However, according to Genesis Rabbah 17:1, the world was created by God's words (not attributes), for that teaching specifies, "By ten utterances [מאמרות] was the world created." Although the notion that the world was created by God's word is surely acceptable, the Bavli may be sidestepping something by using the more ambiguous term *devarim* ; by shifting the emphasis slightly from words per se, perhaps the Bavli avoids the notion that "the word" is a hypostasis of God.

[31] The verses are Proverbs 3:19-20, Psalm 65:7, Job 26:11, Psalm 89:15, Psalm 25:6.

[32] For example, in Psalm 65:7, just after the phrase "who in his power fixed the mountains," are the words, "who stilled the raging seas, the raging waves"; just preceding "righteousness and justice are the base of Your throne"

seems to domesticate the unruly seas by placing them among other creations shaped by God, in a scenario of absolute mastery. That image is sustained in Rav's next teaching, an elaboration of the notion "rebuke":[33]

> Rav Yehudah said that Rav said: When the Holy Blessed One created the world, it kept expanding like two spools of warp, until [God] rebuked it and brought it to a standstill, as it is said: *The pillars of heaven were trembling, but they became astonished at His rebuke* … When the Holy Blessed One created the sea, it kept expanding, until [God] rebuked it and caused it to dry up, as it is said: *He rebukes the sea and makes it dry*…

Here God is a craftsman, a weaver whose loom, in its pace and flurry, causes the spools of raw stuff to spin and unroll endlessly, until he stops them. And subsequently, we see God as a celestial chef or alchemist, blending primary elements to create form:

> What is the meaning of "*shamayim*" [Heaven]? R. Yose b. Ḥaninah said: [it means] that there is water [*she-sham mayim*]. In a baraita it is taught: [*shamayim* means] fire and water [*esh u-mayim*], teaching that the Holy Blessed One brought them and cast them together and from them made the firmament.

In between these mythic images is a short debate on whether heaven or earth was created first, which features such homely images as "a man building a house" or "making a chair and footstool." Yet there is no doubt who is the real builder: "Both were created at the same time, as it is written: *My own hand laid the earth and My right hand spread the heavens; I call to them and they stand at once*." If, for a moment, we considered angels spreading the heavens or pictured the head and feet of the primordial giant touching the edges of the world, we can have no doubt Whose prerogative this is – for we now we have seen the hands of God placing and pressing those edges.

(Psalm 89:15) are the passages, "Who in the skies can equal the Lord, who among the sons of gods can compare with the Lord?... You rule the swelling of the sea, when its waves surge, you still them; You crushed Rahav like a corpse; with your powerful arm you scattered your enemies" (verses 7, 10-11). Moreover, Job 26:5-13 vividly describes God as conqueror/Creator: "The shades tremble beneath the waters and their denizens; Sheol is naked before Him… He drew a boundary on the surface of the waters … The pillars of heaven tremble, astounded at His rebuke; By his power He stilled the sea, and by His skill He smote Rahav … His hand pierced the Elusive serpent…"

[33] The fact that, of all the ten attributes, only "rebuke" requires further elaboration (and is here applied to the waters) is another hint of the underlying drama of primordial combat. Here, the rival Sea is rendered merely an unruly (but ultimately obedient) material or product of Creation. The subtext of this brief teaching may indeed be Genesis Rabbah 5:1, in which the verse "Let the seas be gathered…and let dry land appear" (Gen. 1:9) is read via Psalm 104:7: "[The waters stood above the waters;] at your rebuke they fled." Yet, the trouble boiling under this complacent reading comes to the surface as the teaching continues; the humbled primordial waters are compared to the mute servants of a king, who silently pay their respects – but when they are granted speech, they rebel, crying, "this is our palace!"

Bereshit on the road

It is at this point, in this rather stark, mythic landscape, that we suddenly hear footsteps and the sound of familiar voices. Two sages appear, walking on the road, and discussing Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" [*be-reshit bara Elohim et ha-shamayim ṿe-et ha-arets*]. Here, our understanding of the momentous event seems to hinge on the tiny word *et*:

> R. Ishmael asked R. ʿAkiva as they were walking on the road: For 22 years you served Naḥum ish Gamzo, who used to expound every *et* in the Torah; how would he have explained *et ha-shamayim ṿe-et ha-arets*? [R. ʿAkiva] said to him: If [Scripture] had said, *shamayim ṿa-arets*, I could have said that Heaven is the name of the Holy Blessed One, but since it says *et ha-shamayim ṿe-et ha-arets*, heaven is actual heaven, and earth is actual earth.

What concerns R. Ishmael is the interpretive practice (represented here by Naḥum and his student ʿAkiva) of deriving meaning from each and every word in the Torah. He seems to test the limits of that practice, by challenging ʿAkiva to derive meaning even from the particle "*et*" – a grammatical marker that serves only to indicate the object of the verb. An earlier version of this story (in Genesis Rabbah) has R. Ishmael stating more specifically:

> Since you studied twenty-two years under Naḥum of Gimzo, [who taught that the words] *akh* and *rak* are limitations [of the text], while *et* and *gam* are amplifications, how do you explain et in this verse? [34]

In that version, R. Ishmael himself demonstrates the method: "*Et ha-shamayim* includes the sun and moon, the stars and planets; *Ṿe-et ha-arets* includes trees, grass and the Garden of Eden!"[35] Thus, the verse *God created* [*et*] *the heavens and* [*et*] *the earth* indicates also the creation of all the contents of heaven and earth.

In our Bavli text – in response to R. Ishmael's more concise challenge – we might well expect R. ʿAkiva to show how *et* requires an expansion of the text's plain meaning. Yet, R. ʿAkiva – reputedly the champion of this method – refuses to employ it, instead insisting on reading *et* solely as object marker. Indeed, ʿAkiva uses *et* to limit, rather than expand the verse's interpretive possibilities; he claims that, by marking "heaven" as the object of God's creating, *et* protects us from presuming that "heaven" is another name of God.[36]

And yet we may well wonder at ʿAkiva's teaching: what is the danger from which his careful reading of *et* protects us? Would it be a grave error to mistake *ha-shamayim* for a name of God – particularly as the term in fact so often serves as such? Rather, it seems that the danger is failing to see that "heaven" is in fact a creation of God (and not identical with

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[34] Genesis Rabbah 1.14

[35] This is R. Ishmael's response to – and indeed, correction of – R. ʿAkiva's "direct object" reading, which he clearly finds unsatisfactory.

[36] Thus, it seems that (as perhaps our mishnah intimated) *Maʿaśeh Bereshit* is a precisely a text that requires a suspension of exegetical norms (that is, of R. ʿAkiva's normal hermeneutic practice).

God). Thus, ʿAkiva's answer in fact hints at a more serious error, stated more explicitly in the Genesis Rabbah version: "[ʿAkiva replied:] If it were [written] *bereshit bara Elohim shamayim va-arets* [In the beginning, God heaven and earth created], we might think that 'heaven' and 'earth' were gods!"

Thus, between the two versions of the story, we find a range of possible interpretive errors: a) mistaking "the heavens" for a name of God; b) failing to see that heaven is a creation of God; and c) reading in Genesis 1 the presence of "other Gods" at the time of Creation. In our Bavli text, ʿAkiva addresses only the most innocuous possibility – that "heaven" is a name of God. Like the teaching "Ten things created on the first day," this one suppresses – yet still contains a hint of – a more dangerous interpretation. For surely one possibility would be to read the word "*et*" not as the object marker, but as its homonym, meaning "with"[37] – thus indicating that God created in partnership with materials – or entities – called Heaven and Earth. By insisting on "*erets mamash*," ʿAkiva, in effect, affirms R. Gamliel's claim: "Creation is written regarding all of these!"

Like the first exposition of Genesis 1 (in the teaching "Ten things were created"), this one seems to echo the mishnah's "Don't expound…!" by (implicitly) saying "Don't read it that way!" Whereas that first exposition says, "don't read before-time in the text!"; this one says, "don't read divine helpers in the text!" Moreover, ʿAkiva's closing words, "*erets mamash*" recalls the boundaries marked by the midrash with which we began: from horizon to horizon, but not above, below, before or after that! ʿAkiva's last word "*mamash*" ("real" or "literal") drives home his point – and perhaps the road is the appropriate setting for this "down-to-earth" message: the "heaven and earth" of Genesis 1:1 are not gods, but are the literal and *palpable* heaven and earth – like the sky we see and the road we're on.[38] Indeed, ʿAkiva's *derasha* – the text's last exposition of Genesis 1 – seems to utter the "last word" on the subject.

And yet, immediately following this "last word" is quite a different kind of message, a call to look beyond what is (or seems) *mamash:*

> It was taught [in a baraita]: R. Yose says: Woe to them, to those people[39] who see, but know not what they see; [who] stand, but know not upon what they stand!

R. Yose's cry "woe to them who see" echoes the mishnah's warning "whoever looks… it would be better had he not been born!" Yet, where the mishnah regrets the life of one who dares look, R. Yose bemoans the act of looking and not truly seeing. If that were all, we might consider this a call to greater attention in everyday affairs, but the warning continues: "who stand and but know not upon what they stand!" R. Yose seems to be calling for insight

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[37] This sense of *et* may even better suit R. Ishmael's description of Naḥum's reading method: i.e., that limitation is indicated by the words "but" and "only" (*akh* and *rak*), and expansion by the words "and" and "with" (*gam* and *et*).

[38] Moreover (as we shall see below), the road seems an apt location for dealing with dangerous or "outside" wisdom. Here it provides a fitting backdrop for a lesson on the correct way of interpretation (in essence, "read it this way, not that way!"). Yet, as we shall see below, it may also serve as precisely the sign setting for those who have taken a wrong interpretative turn.

[39] "People" here are *briyot* [בריות], literally "creatures" (but usually used in reference to human beings). The use of this word here emphasizes the theme of (expounding or "looking at") Creation [בריאה].

beyond the apparent, an insight that penetrates surfaces – even those which seem the most solid. This may be a call to consider the intangibles behind and beneath what we see and stand upon, to consider what is "hidden" by appearance. And indeed, R. Yose's saying inspires a process of delving downwards:[40]

> The earth – upon what does it stand? On the pillars, as it is said: *He who shakes the earth from its place, and its pillars tremble*. The pillars [stand] on the waters, as it is said: *To Him who spread the earth above the waters.* The waters on the mountains, as it is said: *Upon the mountains stood the waters.* The mountains on the wind, as it is said: *For behold, He who forms the mountains, and creates the wind.* The wind on the storm, as it is said: *The wind – the storm makes its substance.* [The] storm hangs on the arm of the Holy Blessed One, as it is said: *And underneath are the arms of the world* [*zero'ot 'olam*]…[41]

Here, a series of biblical verses describe what is below the earth's surface, each revealing a deeper layer. In one sense, this map of all that lies beneath the earth may seem quite a mundane reading of R. Yose: a description of the physical world, not essences. However, the map disrupts the notion of solid earth, describing instead a world of waters and wind beneath it, all of which rests upon the "arms" of the Almighty.[42] Thus the *mamash* world – the very ground we walk on – is placed in a larger cosmological and metaphysical context, and is transformed. By considering "what the earth rests upon," the text has gone deeper and deeper until it arrives at the basis of all; without so naming the endeavor, we have considered "what is below."

Moreover, this journey through the levels below seems to impel the gaze upwards, for immediately following its final words "*yesod olam*" (the basis of the world")[43] are the sayings, "R. Yehuda says: there are two heavens … R. Lakish says: [there are] seven." Thus begins a descriptive ascent through those seven heavens, a journey "above":[44]

> R. Lakish says: [There are] seven [heavens] and they are: *Vilon, Rakiah, Sheḥakim, Zevul, Ma'on, Makhon*, [and] *'Arabot. Vilon* [Curtain] – serves solely to enter in the morning and go out in the evening, to renew the work

[40] The following passage, although not explicitly marked as separate from R. Yose's statement, does seem to me to be of another piece; perhaps, as Daniel Boyarin has suggested (in personal correspondence), it is another *baraita* appended to the first.

[41] b.Ḥagigah 12b. The verses are Job 9:6, Psalm 136:6, Psalm 104:6, Amos 4:13, Psalm 148:8 (translated here according to Rashi's gloss), and Deuteronomy 30:27. While the first three verses contain explicit reference to one thing "upon" another, the readings of Amos 4 and Psalm 148 depend on the sequence of words ("forms mountains and creates wind" indicates that mountains are above and wind below them).

[42] Here it seems that the primordial wind and waters are still surging beneath Creation. Yet, again, that force (and our glimpse of "what was before") is limited, contained between the created earth and the hand of God.

[43] Just following the textual bottom of the map ("the arms of the Almighty") is a brief dispute on the number of pillars supporting the earth, which ends with the statement: "[Just] one pillar and its name is Righteous, as it says *But the righteous is the foundation of the world* (Prov. 10:25).

[44] This trip to the bottom before a journey to the top foreshadows the juncture between *Ma'aśeh Bereshit* and *Ma'aśeh Merkavah* on the next page; after ascending the heavens, we are cast down to the Pit, at the end of *Ma'aśeh Bereshit*, only to return to that point in the discussion of *Ma'aśeh Merkavah* on 13b.

> of Creation each day – as it says, *He who spreads the heavens like a fine curtain…*

The ensuing description of the heavens fills most of a page and spills on to the next. Like the map of all that lies below, this is a world made of biblical verses. Yet, here, each level of heaven is built from at least two proof texts, and expanded with interpolations throughout, and thus the account is considerably more lengthy, rich and vivid. (The following, quite abbreviated version provides merely an outline).

Above the "curtain" of day and night lies the second heaven, *Rakiah* ("firmament"), "in which the sun, moon, stars and constellations are set…" Beyond this is *Sheḥakim* ("clouds"), "where millstones stand to grind manna for the righteous…"[45] The next level is *Zevul*, "in which are "[the heavenly] Jerusalem, the Holy Temple and built altar, where Michael the great prince stands and gives offering upon it …", and above that, is the fifth heaven *Maʿon,* "where there are bands of ministering angels …" This is a journey into divine territory: at the upper levels, we see the celestial Jerusalem and Temple (tended by the archangel Michael) and, rising, we hear choruses of Ministering Angels. Rising further, we seem to draw even closer to the divine Presence, for here we see the materials of God's retribution – and reward.

> [The sixth heaven is] *Makhon*, in which are storehouses of snow, storehouses of hail, an attic of destructive dews and an attic of raindrops, a chamber of whirlwind and storm, and a cave of smoke. And their doors are of fire…
>
> [The seventh heaven is] *ʿArabot* in which are righteousness, justice and charity, treasuries of life, treasuries of peace, treasuries of blessing – and the souls of the righteous, [and] the spirits and souls of those yet to be created; and the dew that the Holy Blessed One will use to revive the dead…

Finally, here in *ʿArabot*, we seem to arrive at the heavenly court itself, where the angels and Creatures of Ezekiel's vision abide[46] – presided over by God Itself:

> There are the *Ofanim*, the *Serafim*, the holy Creatures and ministering angels, and the Throne of Glory. The King, the living God – exalted on high – rests upon them, as it says Extol Him who rides upon the clouds (*ʿarabot*)…[47]

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[45] This description derives from a play on the word *Sheḥakim*: שחק also means "[to] grind" – thus, these clouds (שחקים) are the site of (or are themselves) the celestial grinding stones.

[46] These are the *ḥayot*, literally "living [beings]" or "beasts." Here I follow the new JPS translation, which refers to the *ḥayot* as the "creatures" (revised from the – perhaps more precise – old JPS and King James rendition "living creatures"). However, considering my text and topic in this chapter, it is important to note that the word *ḥayot* itself (derived from *li-ḥeyot*, "to live") has no connotation of "creating" or "creation."

[47] We should note, particularly in this context of journeys to heaven (and road discourses on heaven) that God is envisioned specifically as a deity in motion, not only upon a chariot, but "riding upon the clouds."

Thus, our consideration of *Maʿaśeh Bereshit* – of "heaven and earth" – has launched us into the very realm of *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*, for here we have arrived at the acme of heaven; we are gazing at the divine throne and the very Presence of God.

And yet, that vision is immediately obscured and our gaze averted. The very next teaching declares that "Darkness, cloud and thick cloud surround Him, as it says, *He made darkness His hiding-place, His shelter around Him* …" And if this obscurity does not stop us, the next teaching pulls us back from our heady rush into the inner sanctum, by placing God in a separate, utmost chamber which cannot be entered:

> R. Aḥa b. Yaʿakov said: There is yet another Heaven above the heads of the living Creatures, for it is written: *And over the heads of the living Creatures there was the form of an expanse, with an awe-inspiring gleam as of crystal, spread out over their heads* (Ezek. 1:22). This far you have permission to speak, but beyond you haven't permission to speak. For so it was written in the book of Ben Sira: "Seek not things that are too wondrous for you, and search not things that are concealed from you. Think on what has been permitted you, but you have no business with hidden things."

R. Aḥa's teaching, in effect, grabs us by the collar and pulls us back to the level to the Creatures beneath the Throne, sealing off the divine Presence from our gaze by the shimmering icy ceiling above them. To drive his point home, R. Aḥa cites the words of Ben Sira, thereby declaring the highest heaven something "too wondrous" and "concealed from" us. Ben Sira's admonition "you have no business with hidden things" reminds us that "hidden things belong to the Lord our God" (Deut. 29:28), whereas the phrase "too wondrous for you" ironically recalls the verse "it is not too wondrous for you…it is not in Heaven"; what *is* in heaven, therefore, is indeed too wondrous, and should not be sought. If R. Aḥa's reprimand – "beyond this, you may not speak!" – reminds us of our mishnah, Ben Sira seems almost to repeat it: his "do not seek" (*al tidrosh*) echoing the mishna's admonition, "*ein dorshin*!" It would seem that, after a rather vigorous exploration of "what is below" and "what is above," the gemara stops, recalling the warning with which it began.

Indeed, at this point, our progress is not only checked but reversed, for the discourse now plummets to earth. Following Ben Sira's teaching is story that seems to prove it: heaven's reprimand of the mighty conqueror Nebuchadnezzer – whose ambition and arrogance are figured as an attempt to scale the heavens: "What answer did the heavenly voice give to that wicked one, when he said "*I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the Most High"*?[48]

> A heavenly voice went forth and said to him: O wicked man, son of a wicked man, grandson of Nimrod, the wicked…! How many are a man's years? Seventy, as it is said: *The span of our life is seventy years*… But the distance from the earth to the firmament is a journey of five hundred years, and the thickness of the firmament is a journey of five hundred

[48] Isaiah 14:14

> years, and so too between each firmament and the next [is a journey of five hundred years]…

Reminiscent of the divine reprimand of Job, here the heavenly voice places the mere human in divine perspective, showing the insignificance of one who thought himself mighty. In this case, what bars the human from the divine is not only a limitation of mind but of time; human life is insufficient to a journey measured in hundreds of years – a journey which (by this calculation) would take 7000 years to complete.[49] Ironically, that journey is measured in human terms, for each stage is called a *mahalakh* (a walking journey) – yet this is a trek that no human can ever complete – or begin, for no mortal could survive even the first stage of the journey, much less arrive at the topmost heaven.

Moreover, the seventh heaven is not itself the end of the expanse. At the top (as the heavenly voice continues), we once again find the Creatures of the divine Chariot:

> Above [those heavens] are the holy Creatures; the feet of the Creatures are equal to all of the [heavens]; the ankles of the Creatures are equal to all of them; the legs of the Creatures are equal to all of them; the knees of the Creatures are equal to all of them; the thighs of the Creatures are equal to all of them; the bodies of the Creatures are equal to all of them; the necks of the Creatures are equal to all of them; the heads of the Creatures are equal to all of them; the horns of the Creatures are equal to all of them.

These vast (and rather oddly shaped) beings surpass even the heavens, for their feet alone equal the entire expanse below them, as do each ascending body part: ankles, legs, knees, thighs, bodies, necks, heads and horns. And the exponential expanse continues upwards:

> Above them is the throne of glory; the feet of the throne of glory are equal to all of them; the throne of glory is equal to all of them. The King, the Living and Eternal God, High and Exalted, dwells above them.

Once again the text brings us to the divine Presence – but only briefly. For, at this point, the heavenly voice declares: "And you said, *I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High*! But you shall be cast down to *Sheol*, to the depths of the pit." Thus, having (virtually) scaled the heights once more, we are thrown (with Nebuchadnezzar), not simply "down to earth," but to a place far below the earth. Having once allowed our rapid ascent through the heavens, the text not only checks it (with the words of R. Aḥa), but now violently repeats and reverses it, as a punishment.

This is where the discourse on *Maʿaśeh Bereshit* ends: "in the depths of the pit." It seems that, along with the mighty conqueror, we have been punished for daring to ascend the heights. Having singed our wings, as it were, at the topmost heaven, we have hurtled to earth, and those final words – "the depths of the pit" – ring as a final judgment of the ambition to fly. Surely we must regard the journey as an error of hubris, nullified by the lesson "don't go there."

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[49] Since traversing the space between earth and the sky takes 500 years, and it takes 500 years to cross each of the seven heavens and each of the (six) spaces between them, the total journey (and arrival at the top of the seventh heaven) would require, by this calculation (14 x 5000 =) 7000 years.

And yet, we have gone there. We have travelled far in time and space: to the moments of Creation, to the foundations of the earth, and (twice) to the heights of heaven. The total journey has comprised several voyages, with a few trips back and forth. Starting out from the mishnah's warnings, we traveled to the edge of "before," skirting (but glimpsing) the question of what – or who – preceded the act of Creation.[50] A murmur of the notion that other divine beings (whether competitors, helpers or partners) were present is silenced by R. ʿAkiva's teaching, defining heaven and earth as that which we can *mamash* perceive. R. ʿAkiva's teaching concludes the discourse on the *act* of Creation, but also introduces the text's expository journeys below (to the strata beneath the earth) and above (to the seven levels of heaven). This is followed by another journey, described by its impossibility: the calculation of the extent of the heavens and the holy Creatures above the. Once again, the question is "how far?" but this time the answer is "much too far to imagine, much less travel." Nonetheless, that impossible distance is precisely measured and thus traversed; by calculating it, we have completed another, quantitative journey to match the previous descriptive one. Yet after our two ascents from earth (or earth's foundations) up to the top of heaven, we are swiftly cast down, and thus concludes the section on "the Work of Creation."

Maʿaśeh Merkavah

After our plummet into the pit, the gemara takes up the subject of *Maʿaśeh Merkavah* – perhaps a bit cautiously. We begin with the mishnah's dictum, which seems both to prohibit and to allow: "nor *Maʿaśeh Merkavah* with one" suggests that *no one* may study this topic, while "unless he is a sage and understands by himself" indicates that there may be someone who proves the exception to this rule.

But who is this extraordinary sage? One of the first teachings declares that only "one who worries in his heart" may attempt *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*. Yet in the story that follows, that very quality seems to preclude any possibility of doing so:

> R. Yoḥanan said to Elʿazar: Come, I will teach you *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*. He said to him: I am not old enough! When he was old, R. Yoḥanan died. R. Assi said to him: Come, I will teach you *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*. He said to him: if I were worthy, I'd have learned from R. Yoḥanan your teacher…

Here surely is someone who "worries in his heart," but that very scrupulousness prevents him from studying *Maʿaśeh Merkavah* – even when his teachers are willing to teach it to him. In R. Elʿazar's case, it seems that *Maʿaśeh Merkavah* cannot be studied at all. The next story reinforces this notion:

> Rav Yosef was studying *Maʿaśeh Merkavah* and the elders of Pumbedita were studying *Maʿaśeh Bereshit*. They said to him: Master, teach us *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*. He said to them: Teach me *Maʿaśeh Bereshit*. After

[50] Where waters and darkness are conceived as the materials on which Creation was founded (and which perhaps persist, physically or metaphorically, "beneath" God's Creation), the question of "what is before" is also a question of "what is below."

> they taught him, they said: Master, teach us *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*! He said to them: Regarding those [matters], I teach you, *Honey and milk under your tongue*: Things that are sweeter than honey and milk should be [kept] under your tongue. [The elders] said to him: We have already studied as far as *And He said unto me: Son of man* (Ezek. 2:1). He said: That indeed is *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*.

Here we have the opposite situation; the students are eager, but the teacher is reluctant, even unwilling. Could it be that the elders of Pumbedita – though probably "old enough" – do not actually qualify to study *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*? Compared to that model of restraint, R. Elʿazar, they seem a bit over-eager, practically hectoring Rav Yosef with their demand, Teach us! Teach us! And indeed, Rav Yosef repeatedly rebuffs (or diverts) them, first by demanding that they teach him something else, then by indicating that *Maʿaśeh Merkavah* must be kept secret, and finally by essentially saying: you've already completed it! In the end, it seems just as impossible for these students to be taught *Maʿaśeh Merkavah* as it was for the extra-cautious R. Elʿazar. Indeed, these first explications of the mishnah seem to match its ambivalence, for here, rather than stories of studying *Maʿaśeh Merkavah,* we hear accounts of *not* studying it.

Yet, far from closing the door on our inquiry, these stories actually initiate it. Rav Yosef's concluding remark turns our attention from (potential) students back to the text itself, for when the elders say that they have already studied the entire first chapter of Ezekiel, Rav Yosef responds, "This indeed is *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*." The gemara immediately takes up the matter, asking "How far does *Maʿaśeh Merkavah* go?" – meaning, "how far in the text may we go?" The answer to this question hinges on the part of the text in which Ezekiel's visionary gaze moves from the Creatures bearing the Chariot to what is above them:

> 26 …over their heads was the semblance of a throne… and on top was the semblance of a human form.
>
> 27 And I saw the gleam of *ḥashmal*, like the semblance of fire encased in a frame, from what appeared to be His loins upwards, and from what appeared as His loins downward, I saw what looked like a fire.

Yet, this revelation of the divine throne and body – what we might deem the essence of *Maʿaśeh Merkavah* – is defined as beyond the limit:

> An objection was raised: Up to where is *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*? Rabbi said: Up to the second "*And I saw*" [the first word of verse 27]. R. Yitsḥak said: Up to "*ḥashmal*" [the next word]. Up to "*I saw*" may be taught; after that [only] the section headings may be transmitted. There are those who say: Up to "*I saw*," the section headings are transmitted, but after that, if he is a sage and understands by himself, yes – but if not, no.[51]

[51] b.Ḥagigah 13a

Here, the gemara presents a series of opinions to dispute Rav Yosef's statement that *Maʿaśeh Merkavah* comprises the entirety of Ezekiel chapter one. Instead, a boundary is set just before the revelation of the divine body in Ezekiel 1:27. While Rabbi sets the marker at the very first word of that verse ("And I saw"), R. Yitsḥak nudges closer to the divine person by pushing the boundary up to the word "*ḥashmal."* Moreover, the subsequent (anonymous) opinions indicate that the textual boundary "And I saw" marks both "how far" and "who qualifies"; this is not so much a wall as a gate, through which only the specially-qualified sage may pass.

Of course, the matter of how far we may go in the text was already raised (at the end of *Maʿaśeh Bereshit*) by R. Aḥa, who drew the line at the "glass ceiling" of Ezekiel 1:22, warning: "thus far you may speak, but further you haven't permission to speak." Thus, we have already hit up against several textual borders: the icy "*rakiah"* (Ezekiel 1:22); the more proximate "And I saw" (Ezekiel 1:27) and the next word, *ḥashmal.*" And, as R. Aḥa so vividly attested, these limits in the textual space also mark precisely how far we may go in the celestial space: to the heads of the Creatures… or beyond.

Apparently "forgetting" R. Aḥa's earlier warning, the gemara now considers the very closest edge: *ḥashmal.* Remarking on R. Yitsḥak's opinion, the gemara objects, "But may we [really] expound *ḥashmal*?":

> But may we expound *ḥashmal* ? … Our Rabbis taught: There was once a child who was reading the Book of Ezekiel at his teacher's house, and when he understood *ḥashmal*, a fire came out of *ḥashmal* and consumed him. So they sought to suppress the Book of Ezekiel, but Ḥananyah b. Ḥizkiyah said to them: If he was a sage, everyone is a sage!

This story – which is actually told twice in a row[52] – would seem to be a powerful cautionary tale: here is one who expounds *ḥashmal*, only to be killed on the spot by flames leaping out of the word – or the substance of – *ḥashmal.* And yet that lesson is qualified by the notion that the child was unfit: "[the case of] the child is different, for he had not reached the proper age!"[53] – or as Ḥananyah b. Ḥizkiyah puts it: "If he was a sage, everyone is a sage!" Indeed, the whole story is couched in praise of Ḥananyah, who persisted in teaching Ezekiel: "May that man's name be remembered for good … if not for him they would have suppressed the book of Ezekiel…What did he do? Three hundred garabs of oil were brought up to him, and he sat in the attic and expounded it."[54] Thus, the point of the story is not that *Maʿaśeh Merkavah* should never be studied. *Ḥashmal*, it seems, is not an absolute boundary; rather (like "And I saw," above), it marks who is qualified and who is not.

The gemara seems emboldened by the story of the child, for its very next act is, in fact, to expound *ḥashmal*:

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[52] First the story is related briefly, in the remark "there was that child who was expounding *ḥashmal*, when flames came out and consumed him." This is backed up with citation of the *baraita* quoted above. Yet in both cases, the possible moral of the story (that *ḥashmal* is off limits) is countered: "[the case of] the child is different, because he was not old enough" and "if he was a sage, all are sages!"

[53] Literally, "he had not reached his time."

[54] Although both accounts indicate that the danger of *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*, marked by the fiery *ḥashmal* and the death of the child, is the reason for suppressing Ezekiel, this first account includes another reason: "because its words contradict the words of Torah."

> What is [the meaning of] *ḥashmal*? Rav Yehudah said: Fiery Creatures speaking [*ḥayot esh memalelot*]. In a baraita it is taught: [*ḥashmal* means] sometimes they are silent, sometimes they speak [*ḥashot … memalot*]. When the speech goes forth from the mouth of the Holy Blessed One, they are silent, and when the Holy Blessed One [is not speaking], then they speak.[55]

Here begins the Bavli's exposition of the text of *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*. Indeed, the gemara seems to stride forward, braving the fiery *ḥashmal*.[56] Yet it also steps back, for here *ḥashmal* is defined, not in terms of the divine throne and body (verse 26-27), but rather in terms of the Creatures beneath the throne (verses 23-25).[57]

Yet, we would do well to reflect, at this point, on where we have been. The heavenly journeys of *Maʿaśeh Bereshit* ended with our plummet into "the depths of the pit." And yet, when exposition of *Maʿaśeh Merkavah* commences, we are once again gazing at the Creatures of the Chariot. [58] It is as if – in spite of being cast down from the summit – our previous expositional journeys upwards were indeed successful, for here we take up where we left off: regarding the living Creatures.

The gemara continues:

> *And the Creatures ran and returned like the appearance of lightning* (Ezek. 1:14). What is [the meaning of] "*ran and returned*"? Rav Yehudah said: Like the flame that goes forth from the mouth of a furnace….
>
> *As I gazed on the Creatures, I saw one wheel on the ground by the Creatures* (Ezek. 1:15). R. Elʿazar said: [This is] an angel, who stands on the earth and his head reaches the Creatures. In a baraita it is taught:

[55] b.Ḥagigah 13a-b.

[56] On one level, the discourse seems to proceed on the understanding that *ḥashmal* is off limits only for the unqualified and underage. But in another sense, the gemara seems to act out an ironic sense of Ḥananyah's words ("if he was a sage, all are sages!"), for here however (in opposition to notion that only the rare individual may study *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*) the gemara seems to interpret *ḥashmal* for general consumption.

[57] The Creatures are, of course, also described in verses 5-12. However, the gemara's remarks here ("sometimes they are silent, sometimes they speak") parallel the passage just before *ḥashmal:* the description (in verses 23-25) of the roar of the Creatures' wings, which resounds when they are in motion, but "when they were still they let their wings droop." Their stillness seems a response to sounds emanating "from the expanse above their heads" (see verse 25), and thus their sounds seem to alternate with God's. By indirectly invoking verses 23-25, the discourse crosses the boundary previously set (at the end of *Maʿaśeh Bereshit*) by R. Aḥa: the icy firmament of Ezek. 1:22.

[58] Indeed our travels up to heaven, down to the pit and back prefigure the text's subsequent account of "Four entered Pardes," a story of heavenly ascent – and descent. There, while one sage "goes up and comes down safely," an "other" is cast out of heaven (perhaps recalling the plummet earthward at the end of *Maʿaśeh Bereshit*).

> Sandalfon is his name; he is taller than his fellow [angels] by a [distance of] five hundred years' journey, and he stands behind the Chariot and wreathes crowns for his Maker.[59]

Here, instead of reading the description of the Creatures in the verses just preceding *ḥashmal* (vss. 23-25), we scroll back to the earlier description, in verses 14-15. And yet, this reading launches us very quickly to the throne itself; the image of Sandalfon raises us from the earth almost to the very head of the Almighty.

This proximity seems to require another step back:

> But is it so? Isn't it is written: *Blessed is the glory of the Lord from His place,* [meaning] there is no one who knows His place! [Rather, Sandalfon] pronounces the [divine] name over the crown, and it goes and rests on His head.

Thus, we (and the angel Sandalfon) are pulled back from regarding – or even locating – the divine Presence. The proof text is perhaps a most suitable way to avert our gaze, as it is cited from the scene of Ezekiel's return to earth: "Then a spirit carried me away, and I heard a great roaring sound: 'Blessed is the glory of the Lord, from His place!'" And yet it is hard not to also hear the (uncited) remainder of the passage:

> I heard a great roaring sound: "Blessed is the glory of the Lord, from His place!" – with the sound of the wings of the Creatures beating against one another and the sound of the wheels beside them – a great roaring sound.[60]

We are back with the Creatures, and yet (even as we turn or depart) the Creatures and the Presence seem very close together indeed.

Next the gemara considers the apparent contradiction between different accounts of the Creatures:[61]

> One verse (Ezek. 1:10) says: *Each of them had a human face* [*in front*]*… a lion's face on the right … an ox's face on the left, and… an eagle's face* [*at the back*], but it is [also] written (Ezek. 10:14): *Each one had four faces: One was a cherub's face, the second a human face, the third a lion's face, and the fourth an eagle's face* – but the ox is not mentioned! Resh Lakish said: Ezekiel prayed for it and changed it to a cherub…
>
> One verse (Isa. 6:2) says: *Each one had six wings*, but another verse (Ezek. 1:6) says: *And every one had four faces, and every one of them had*

[59] In between these two passages, the gemara also cites the pre-vision of Ezekiel 1:4: "I looked, and, lo a stormy wind came sweeping out of the north – a huge cloud and flashing fire, surrounded by a radiance; and in the center of it … a gleam as of *ḥashmal*." By citing the earlier, less dangerous instance, the gemara nonetheless touches again on *ḥashmal*, thus intimating the divine Presence.

[60] Ezekiel 2:12-13.

[61] This passage (and the ensuing extended discussion of conflicting verses) begins with Rava's teaching, "All that Ezekiel saw, Isaiah saw" – that is, with another reconciliation of different accounts.

> *four wings*! There is no contradiction: here [it refers to] when the Temple stood, and [the other verse refers to] the time when the Temple no longer stood, [when] as it were, the Creatures' wings were diminished.

Here, the sages engage in the quite conventional endeavor of reconciling biblical verses, something that could be performed anywhere in the biblical text – or indeed, with regard to traditional rabbinic teachings. Yet here, this rather unremarkable mode of reading enables us to linger near the Chariot, and indeed, to edge upwards:[62]

> One verse (Dan. 7:10) says: *Thousands upon thousands served Him; Myriads upon myriads attended Him*, but another verse (Job 25:3) says: *Can His troops be numbered?...*
>
> Shemu'el said … Every day ministering angels are created from the fiery stream, utter song, and cease to be! … He differs from R. Shemu'el b. Naḥmani [who taught] … An angel is created from every utterance that goes forth from the mouth of the Holy Blessed One …

As we regard the myriad host "attending" to God, and the fiery stream beneath the throne, we seem to be entering the royal throne room; witnessing (as it were) the creation of angels in each divine word, we move closer to God's presence. And indeed, next we learn:

> One verse (Dan. 7:9) says: *His garment was like white snow, and the hair of His head was like lamb's wool*, but it is [also] written (Song 5:11): *His locks are curled and black as a raven…*
>
> One passage (in Dan. 7:9) says: *His throne was tongues of flames*, but another passage says, *Thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took His seat…*

In the process of reconciling different accounts (of a young and an old God; of one throne or many thrones), we seem to have arrived. In spite (or by way) of exegetical caution, we are now gazing at the divine throne and regarding the presence of God.[63]

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[62] This "up and down" motion of the discourse, which repeatedly brings us just beyond and then back to the Creatures, matches the dynamic in the text of Ezekiel itself. In Ezek. 1:22, the text directs our gaze upwards, remarking "Above the heads of the Creatures was an expanse…" but in the very next verse turns us back to "under the expanse" to describe the wings of the Creatures. (And again in verses 24-25, after describing the roar of the Creatures' wings, the text mentions a sound coming from above the expanse – but then returns to the Creatures' wings). Moreover, the Bavli's overall tendency to *linger* at the level of the Creatures also mimics the text of Ezekiel 1, the bulk of which is devoted to a detailed description of the Creatures (and wheels) in verses 5-25. But of course in the biblical text, the Creatures and wheels *are* the Chariot – no other chassis or frame is described. Similarly, in the Bavli, the Creatures denote the vehicle, and hovering near them means staying close to the *Merkavah*.

[63] Here at the top, however, is a dispute regarding what the texts reveal. Here, R. ʿAkiva reads the "thrones" of Daniel 7:9 as indicating two divine figures, and is reprimanded, "How long will you make the divine Presence profane?" Although this episode is clearly significant for the text as a whole (which struggles throughout with the notion of "Two Powers") and for ʿAkiva's story in particular (as the midpoint from his rather "abstinent"

We should note, however, that nowhere does this exposition cite the verse that was deemed off-limits: Ezekiel's description of the divine throne and body, in Ezekiel 1:27. Indeed, the discourse seems (almost) to observe the boundary of *ḥashmal*, by citing verses much previous to it. And yet, by citing Daniel and Job (and later chapters of Ezekiel) we manage to contemplate the throne and divine Presence.[64] Just as, at the beginning of the discourse, the image of Sandalfon vaulted us from earth to the divine crown, these other texts (more gradually) convey us past (or around) the barriers, to the highest height.

As we read from the cautious R. Elʿazar through to the unfortunate young student of *ḥashmal*, it seems that extreme care, secrecy and retributive fire mark *Maʿaśeh Merkavah* as an untouchable subject. Indeed, *ḥashmal* is set as a sort of boundary, marking how far we may go in the text. And yet, the question "how far" – the attempt to define what is allowed and what is not – quickly moves us into the actual exposition of *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*. It is as if, in the act of examining a boundary, we move to its nether side – in order to see exactly where it stands. Our purpose may be to examine or fortify the fence, but we are nonetheless now standing beyond it. And indeed, from that fiery gate, we enter the highest levels of heaven.

Merkavah on the road

After first leading us through some exposition of the text itself, the Bavli now shows us what it looks like to expound *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*. As above (in the section on *Maʿaśeh Bereshit*), we first hear the "unsituated" voices of our sages expounding the topic, and next are provided with a story in which we actually see sages engaged in the endeavor. And when we finally see our sages expounding these difficult texts, they are not sitting in the study house, but are "going on the road."

> Once R. Yoḥanan b. Zakkai was riding a donkey, going along on the road, and R. Elʿazar b.ʿArakh was driving the donkey from behind. [R. Elʿazar] said to him: Master, teach me a chapter of *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*! He said to

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reading of Genesis 1, to his final, "correct" *derashot* on God's preeminence), I will not be reading this passage, except to remark here that the rebuke and correction of ʿAkiva here might be viewed as yet another descent from the top. For discussion of this episode, and the problem of "Two Powers in Heaven," see Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), chapter 6 (and particularly, p. 139-145); "Beyond Judaisms: Meṭaṭron and the Divine Polymorphy of Ancient Judaism" in *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 41 (2010), p. 323-365, and most recently, "Is Metatron a Converted Christian?" in *Judaïsme ancien - Ancient Judaism*, Volume 1 (2013), p. 13-62.

[64] The gemara's navigation around and through the textual boundaries is actually incredibly meticulous and graceful. (As noted above) the first boundary is set by R. Aḥa at the end of *Maʿaśeh Bereshit*, when he remarks (citing Ezekiel 1:22), that there is "yet another heaven" above the creatures, which declares "concealed" and not to be sought into. The Bavli's subsequent exposition of the *Merkavah* steers clear of actually citing the following section (vss. 23-25), which describes the Creatures' wings and the sound they make, but instead intimates this in its description the Creatures' intermittent speech (see note 57, above). Nor does it cite the verses "beyond" those, which describe the divine throne and God's appearance (Ezek. 1:26-28), but instead mostly quotes verses well before the "ceiling" of verse 22 or the further boundaries of "I saw" and "*ḥashmal*" (the beginning of verse 27). And yet, the "deleted" topics are treated in order: once the creatures (and their wings), the fire, and other angels have been described, the Bavli turns to other texts (Daniel, Job, Song of Songs, Isaiah) to touch on the topics of Ezek. 1:26-28: first the throne, then God's form.

> him: Have I not taught you: "Nor *Merkavah* with one, unless he is a sage and understands by himself"?

As the story opens, we find master and student *ba-derekh:* on a journey. As they go, the student speaks up, asking to be taught "a chapter of *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*!" His master responds by citing the mishnah's rule ("… unless he is a sage and understands by himself"). Apparently, b.ʿArakh is not that insightful sage; his teacher seems to be saying, "You're not ready yet, sonny."

At this point, we might well recall the other R. Elʿazar, who refused his master's offer to teach him *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*, saying, in essence: "I am not ready!" – and the subsequent story, in which those who ask to learn *Maʿaśeh Merkavah* are rebuffed. Is Elʿazar b.ʿArakh like the elders of Pumbedita – a bit too eager in his pursuit of esoteric knowledge? He has not waited for his teacher to open the topic, and indeed seems to be reprimanded for his precocity. Will we find that he'd have done better to emulate his modest namesake and refrain from the endeavor? [65] No indeed, for this story takes quite a different turn. Having been checked by his teacher, R. Elʿazar b.ʿArakh nonetheless presses forward.[66]

> [R. Elʿazar] said to him: Master, permit me to say before you something which you have taught me. He answered: Speak! [and] immediately got down from the donkey, wrapped himself [in a *talit*], and sat on a stone beneath an olive tree. [R. Elʿazar] said to him: Master, why did you get down from the donkey? He said: [While] you expound *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*, and the divine Presence is with us, and the ministering angels accompany us, could I ride the donkey?

Here, the master responds to his student's boldness in two ways. First, he gives permission to proceed ("Speak!"), and then he dismounts and dons a *talit*. This act itself may well remind us of prayer, for we have learned (in m.Berakhot 4.5) that "one who is riding on a donkey dismounts" to recite the *Shemoneh ʿesreh*. Moreover, the master's explanation of this act ("while you expound … and the divine Presence is with us…") recalls the promise of Avot 3, in which "speaking *divre Torah*" invokes that Presence. Thus, by word and deed, Yoḥanan b. Zakkai cues us that what is coming is a sacred moment. The coming exposition takes on some of the ceremony of prayer – and perhaps, like prayer, will be a way of addressing God. Yet this is an address that expects a direct divine response. And this is precisely what occurs:

> R. Elʿazar b.ʿArakh began expounding *Maʿaśeh Merkavah* – and fire came down from heaven and encircled all the trees in the field. They all burst into song. What did they sing? "*Praise the Lord from the earth, O sea-monsters and all depths … O fruitful trees and all cedars … Hallelujah!*"[67]

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[65] Of course, b.ʿArakh's "namesake," while preceding him in the text, succeeds him in time.

[66] While here b.ʿArakh presses forward (in an appeasing fashion), by claiming to repeat his master's words, in the tannaitic version of the story, R. Elʿazar seems even more insistent, responding "Therefore I shall speak before you!" – perhaps protesting that he is (or will prove himself to be) a sage who understands by himself. Yet, neither appeasement nor insistence is reprimanded, for in both the Tosefta and Bavli texts, the master replies simply: "Speak."

[67] Psalm 148:7, 9, 14.

> An angel answered from the fire, saying: This indeed is *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*!

No sooner does b.ʿArakh begin his discourse, but heaven and earth emphatically respond, declaring by word and sign that b.ʿArakh's words are the very substance of *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*. Surely no greater endorsement could be sought; it is clear that the upstart student is indeed qualified – and authorized – to expound *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*, and we need not retain any doubts about his right or ability to do so. Yet the story provides us with more, for the divine endorsement is followed by a human one:

> R. Yoḥanan b. Zakkai stood up, kissed him on the head, and said: Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, who has given a son to Abraham our father, who knows to speculate upon, investigate, and expound the *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*! Some expound well but do not act well, others act well but do not expound well, but you expound well and act well.[68] Happy are you, O Abraham our father, that that you have begotten R. Elʿazar b.ʿArakh!

Thus, Elʿazar b.ʿArakh receives the seal of approval both from the heavens and from his earthly teacher – who now commends him as an exceptional scholar.[69] Surely we cannot but impressed by b.ʿArakh's success, and inspired by the abundance of praise heaped upon him. It certainly seems that the exposition of *Maʿaśeh Merkavah* is a laudable – and attractive – endeavor, which should inspire imitation.

Indeed, this is precisely what happens next. When other sages (who are also on the road) hear about b.ʿArakh's success, they exclaim: "Let us, too, expound *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*!" It seems that they too would like to receive the praise of their earthly master and the heavenly host.

> When these things were told to R. Yehoshuʿa, he and R. Yose ha-Kohen were on a journey [*mehalkhim ba-derekh*]. They said: Let us too expound *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*! R. Yehoshuʿa began to expound. [And although] that day was the summer solstice, the heavens became knotted with clouds and a kind of

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[68] Although this is clearly high praise, the meaning is not entirely self-evident. The above translation (or Soncino's "some preach well but do not act well") seems to contrast speech and action, wisdom and deed. Certainly "*meḳayem*" can mean to "fulfill" or "establish" (and thus to "act," in the sense of fulfilling commandments). Yet we have also seen above (in our reading of Sifre Deuteronomy), that (in a Wisdom context) the word *meḳayem* can mean to grasp or retain one's learning. Thus, the pair here might be "grasp" versus "expound."

[69] While this is almost identical to the blessing that appears in the tannaitic version of the story, there b.Zakkai's lavish endorsement is the sole response to the *derasha*. The fact that the Bavli (and Yerushalmi) see fit to precede and augment it with a heavenly seal of approval seems to indicate that something more was required. And indeed, if we consult the Toseftan version, we can see that it retains a strong sense of warning and danger. There, this story, which immediately follows the warning "nor *Maʿaśeh Merkavah* with one…," leads directly into the cautionary tale of the four who entered Pardes and the warning against looking "above, below, before and after." Thus, b.ʿArakh's story seems to prove that exposition of *Maʿaśeh Merkavah* is allowed only for the very exceptional sage – as perhaps the b.Zakkai's praise indicates. In the Bavli, however, the extravagant praise heaped upon b.ʿArakh and the addition of a second success story significantly dilute – if not efface – the warning.

> rainbow appeared in the cloud, and the ministering angels gathered and came to listen, like people who gather and come to watch the entertainments of a bridegroom and bride.

The sages' hopes are not disappointed. R. Yehoshuʿa's exposition has an immediate impact on the heavens, which cloud up and produce a rainbow, while angels gather to listen. R. Yehoshuʿa clearly has a heavenly audience, if not an explicit confirmation from on high. Moreover, when his partner later reports the events to Yoḥanan b. Zakkai, he is rewarded with a blessing that confirms both earthly and heavenly approval:

> R. Yose ha-Kohen went and told [these] things to R. Yoḥanan b. Zakkai, [who] said: Happy are you, happy is she that bore you, and happy are my eyes that have seen thus! In my dream, you [two] and I were reclining on Mount Sinai, when a voice came to us from heaven, [saying]: "Come up here, come up here! Great dining halls are prepared and fine dining couches are spread for you! You, your students, and your students' students are invited for the third class!"

Thus, Yoḥanan b. Zakkai not only bestows his own blessing, but conveys a blessing from on high. If the previous exposition inspired imitation, this one seems to confer continuing merit, as it warrants entry into the heavenly house of study, not only for the master and his exemplary students, but to their "students' students" as well.

It is worthwhile, at this point to again recall the other R. Elʿazar, who was so cautious and humble that he never actually dared study *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*. After these extravagant success stories, we might well wonder at his abstinence, for we have seen a much bolder approach richly rewarded. Upon hearing these accounts, should we not also exclaim, "Let us, too, expound *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*"? What is to stop us from eagerly emulating our sages? In this moment, where is the mishnah's warning, "do not expound..."?

Yet, even in this extravagantly positive portrayal of mystical exposition, there is a key element missing, the lack of which inhibits our imitation: the *derasha* itself. In both stories, when our sages "begin to expound," the heavens respond with attention and approval. But we do not hear the first part of the conversation; that part of the film is silent. We can only wonder what were the words and insights that elicited such approval. These stories don't help to guide us to proper exposition (or away from unwise routes of inquiry) – they only serve to show the reward. Thus, the cautions of the mishnah seem to have a part even in these success stories, for we are never shown precisely what gained that success. Perhaps the very extravagance of the reward requires that the endeavor itself – which surely now looks more attractive than ever! – be hidden.

One thing we can surmise, however, is that such exposition seems particularly suited to the road. If, in *Maʿaśeh Bereshit*, that setting matched R. ʿAkiva's "down-to-earth" denial of other gods, here the unsheltered, open road provides a stage for the heavenly phenomena that authorize the *derashot*: fire falling from the skies, trees crying out in song, the sky darkening with clouds and the rainbow appearing, and angels gathering to watch from above. Yet, if we look closely at those endorsements, we may find a bit of "*erets mamash*" even here. The song of the trees ("Praise the Lord from the earth") reminds us that such exposition, while it may garner heavenly attention, must take place here on earth; whereas the heavenly voice of

b.Zakkai's dream, which bids our scholars "come up here!" seems to beckon them for ascent only in the hereafter.

The divine realm may be expounded – with both feet on the ground. Yet what happens if one attempts a more direct ascent?

Pardes: really going there

Just following these "success stories" is quite a different sort of account: the story of the four sages who "entered Pardes."[70] In the Bavli's reading of this tannaitic text, that entry seems to be an actual ascent to the heavenly realm:[71]

> Our Rabbis taught: Four entered Pardes: Ben ʿAzzai and Ben Zoma, Aḥer and R. ʿAkiva. R. ʿAkiva said to them: When you arrive at the pure marble stones, do not say, "Water! Water!" – for it is said: *He that speaks untruth shall not stand before My eyes*. Ben b.ʿAzzai looked and died. Of him Scripture says: *Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His pious ones*. Ben Zoma looked and was stricken. Of him Scripture says: *If you find honey, eat only what you need, lest you fill yourself and vomit it*. Aḥer [looked and] cut down the saplings. R. ʿAkiva departed safely.[72]

Here we find sages engaged in a different sort of endeavor than what we have witnessed so far. Instead of calling down the heavens (or vicariously traveling there) through textual exposition, here our sages seem to actually embark. R. ʿAkiva appears to be the leader of the expedition, for he offers his companions some advice as they set out: "When you reach the stones of pure marble, do not cry out: Water! Water!" This is the voice of experience; apparently ʿAkiva knows some of the landmarks – and pitfalls – of the upper world. The very stones of that place may not be what they seem, yet misperception is not the only danger.

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[70] The word Pardes [פרדס] means a park, orchard or garden. Where it appears in the Hebrew Bible, פרדס connotes sumptuousness (see Song 4:13), pleasure and wealth (Ecclesiastes 2:5) and royalty (see Neḥemiah 2:8, where the *pardes* is specifically the king's orchard). In rabbinic texts, the word appears in parables of "a king's garden" (a place of wealth and pleasure, which should be entered with caution) and has connotations of the Garden of Eden and the hereafter. On orchard parables, see Goshen-Gottstein, "Four Entered Paradise Revisited," p. 93-113; for a short summary of notions regarding Pardes, see Alexander, "[Introduction to] 3 (Hebrew Apocalypse of) Enoch, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1983), vol. 1, p. 230-231.

[71] While in its other versions (in the Tosefta and Yerushalmi) the passage might be read as a parable (or as Goshen-Gottstein convincingly argues, a mixture of parable and typological list), the Bavli version (with its addition of ʿAkiva's warning and the subsequent elaboration) indicates that the entry into Pardes was a journey to another world. Even such a skeptic as Halperin (who generally argues heartily against any mystical or visionary meaning to the "original" core story, concedes that in the Bavli version, ʿAkiva's warning "indeed seems to refer to a journey through some wondrous realms" (see *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature*, New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1980, p. 89). Similarly, Goshen-Gottstein remarks that "The Babylonian Talmud … clearly assumes that the story is a record of a factual event. It thus places a warning in the mouth of R. ʿAkiva, who warns his fellows to avoid certain dangers of the way" ("Four Entered Pardes Revisited," p. 88).

[72] b.Ḥagigah 14b. Here, R. ʿAkiva cites Ps. 101:7, while the verses describing the fates of Ben ʿAzzai and Ben Zoma are Ps. 116:15 and Prov. 25:16. The Bavli (and Yerushalmi) account disrupts the symmetry we find in the Tosefta version, in which there is a proof text for each sage. The Bavli only reveals Aḥer's and R. ʿAkiva's verses considerably later in the text, when their stories are elaborated.

Rather, it is speaking the mistake, which in heaven's stark atmosphere is nothing less than a falsehood. Such an utterance, it seems, would bar the adventurers from entry.

The upshot of this road *derasha*, then, seems to be "tread carefully and keep quiet!" And perhaps the three sages take ʿAkiva's warning to heart, for in this brief account, none of them utters a word.[73] Instead they look – yet looking is enough to endanger them, for "Ben ʿAzzai gazed and died, Ben Zoma gazed and was stricken..." Indeed, this account seems to bear out the mishnah's warning that looking at "what is above" can or should nullify a life. If the preceding road accounts indicate that the exceptional sage may conduct an expository journey to the divine realm (and even be rewarded for it), here we learn that the actual or visionary quest for that territory is another matter; it is unlikely that the traveler will survive intact.

Perhaps the Pardes account should be sufficient warning, and we – like the sages themselves – should learn to go no further. But instead the Bavli seems to wonder, "What happened there?" The next few pages (and indeed almost the entire remainder of the text) are devoted to further account of three of the travelers: Ben Zoma, Aḥer, and R. ʿAkiva.[74] And yet, the success story of R. ʿAkiva comprises just a few lines at the very end of the text, whereas pages are devoted to Ben Zoma and Aḥer, the two travelers who survived, but did not emerge intact.[75]

First, we learn a bit more about Ben Zoma, the sage who "looked and was stricken." From the Proverbial proof text ("If you find honey, eat only what you need…"), we might imagine that Ben Zoma's gaze was too voracious, taking in more than he could contain.[76] Indeed, when the Bavli gives further account of Ben Zoma, we find him lost in a vision:

> Our Rabbis taught: Once R. Yehoshuʿa b. Ḥananyah was standing on a step on the Temple Mount, and Ben Zoma saw him and did not stand before him. [R. Yehoshuʿa] said to him: Where from and where to, Ben

[73] Though later it is said of Aḥer, "Let not the words of your mouth lead your flesh into sin" – and in the ensuing story, he is punished for his mistaken utterance in heaven – here he is as silent as the others.

[74] The Bavli's total silence regarding Ben ʿAzzai (that is, apart from its citation of the Pardes account) seems significant. Perhaps by avoiding the story of the sage who died, the Bavli "softens the blow" – thus making the implied condemnation of visionary speculation less severe. In much the same way, in its subsequent report of Ben Zoma's encounter with R. Yehoshuʿa, it omits the account of his death, which appears in all other versions of the story. These omissions seem to suit a text that (although cautious) seems determined to engage in mystical speculation. (Regarding another text's account of Ben ʿAzzai – in which others suppose he is engaged in *Maʿaśeh Merkavah* , but he denies it – see Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash.* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990, p. 109-11).

[75] In his discussion of the Tosefta version of the Pardes acccount, Alon Goshen-Gottstein notes the text's similarity to the genre of typological lists, comprised of two extreme and two intermediate types (see *The Sinner and the Amnesiac: the Rabbinic Invention of Elisha Ben Abuya and Eleazar Ben Arach*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 48-54, and "Four Entered Pardes Revisited," p. 88-93). Goshen-Gottstein identifies Aḥer (a wicked man) and ʿAkiva (a righteous man) as the extreme types. However, it is also possible to read the text as listing the sages from greatest to least harm incurred (a possibility Goshen-Gottstein considers in *The Sinner and the Amnesiac*, p. 51-2), with ʿAkiva (who emerges unharmed) and Ben ʿAzzai (who does not survive) as the extreme cases, and Aḥer and Ben Zoma as the intermediate cases. According to this reading, it would seem that the Bavli is most interested, not in the extreme cases, but in the murkier middle ground.

[76] On Ben Zoma's voracious gaze, see Goshen-Gottstein (on the Tosefta version of the Pardes episode), "Four Entered Paradise Revisited," p. 112-114. For that text's larger themes of "unguided vision" and "spiritual gluttony," see especially p. 106-120.

> Zoma? He said: I was gazing between the upper and the lower waters, and between them there is only three fingers [breadth], as it is said (Gen. 1:2): *And the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters* – like a dove that hovers over her young without touching. R. Yehoshuʿa said to his students: Ben Zoma is still outside.[77]

Read here (following the Pardes episode), this story seems to take place after Ben Zoma's return, after he has been "stricken."[78] The first sign that things are not as they should be is his failure to show respect to R. Yehoshuʿa when he encounters him on the steps of the Temple Mount.[79] R. Yehoshuʿa responds to this lapse by asking, "Where from and where to, Ben Zoma?" Apparently a scolding (perhaps meaning, "Wake up and look around you!"), R. Yehoshuʿa's words also echo the warning of mishnah Avot 3.1: "[Consider] where you came from, where you are going and before whom you will give account."[80] While the mishnah "puts us in our place" by reminding us of our lowliness before God, R. Yehoshuʿa seems to apply the lesson to more worldly concerns: the necessity of knowing (and demonstrating) one's place with regard to social superiors, Thus, we might read his remark to mean: "Ben Zoma, remember that you are subject to me!"[81]

Yet Ben Zoma does not respond to this scolding, nor does he say, "Forgive me, master, I did not see you!" Instead, he reports quite a different vision, which clearly supersedes the image of the man before him; he sees the divine Presence in the act of Creation. Ben Zoma describes what he is doing as "gazing" (*tsofeh*) – a verb meaning to look into the distance;[82] yet, ironically, what he sees in the distance seems extremely near. Looking at the cusp of Creation, Ben Zoma sees the spirit of God close-up; and what is more,

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[77] b.Ḥagigah 15a. Ben Zoma's *derasha* on the "upper and lower waters" may indeed remind us of ʿAkiva's warning (just above) against remarking on (what appears to be) water. But perhaps the strongest echo is that of Ben Zoma's other teachings on the primordial waters, in Genesis Rabbah. Here, the area of Genesis 1:6-7 is clearly marked as a dangerous place in the text. First (in Genesis Rabbah 4:4) we hear the debate between R. Meir and a "Samaritan" on Gen. 1:6. Next (in Genesis Rabbah 4:6), Ben Zoma expounds Gen. 1:7, "And God made the *rakiah*" [dividing the waters] – on which it is remarked: "this is the verse with which Ben Zoma shook the world." And in Genesis Rabbah 5:4 (which continues a discussion of Genesis 1:9 "Let the waters below the sky be gathered … and the dry land appear"), Ben Zoma is cited (along with Ben ʿAzzai) as one who expounds that "the word of God became Metatron upon the waters…" For more on the links between these texts and Ben Zoma's Bavli teaching, see my forthcoming article, "Visions of Ben Zoma."

[78] The aspect of the Bavli's account is notable in comparison with the other versions of the story. In the Tosefta, although Ben Zoma's story follows the Pardes account, there is not the same sense that it is subsequent in time; rather, it seems to explicate the "gazing" in Pardes. In the Yerushalmi, Ben Zoma's story *precedes* the Pardes episode (instead it follows the *Maʿaśeh Merkavah* "success stories," to which it provides a contrast). The Genesis Rabbah version of Ben Zoma's story lacks the Pardes episode entirely.

[79] This is a meeting between an elder and a junior sage, a situation which (as we know from chapter one) has certain physical imperatives, not the least of which is "one rises before an elder." Yet this is a meeting that does not go according to Hoyle, for even though (as the text informs us), Ben Zoma sees the master, he fails to make any gesture of respect. (For a discussion of the significance of the Temple Mount as the setting for the Bavli's story, see my forthcoming article, "Visions of Ben Zoma").

[80] See also Lieberman (*Tosefta ki-Feshuta*, volume 5, p. 1292), who describes מאין ולאן as the normal question asked of a person who's behaving strangely – yet also relates the question to m.Avot 3.1.

[81] We might also hear in R. Yehoshuʿa's question the slight echo of Job 28:12 (וְהַחָכְמָה מֵאַיִן תִּמָּצֵא וְאֵי זֶה מְקוֹם בִּינָה), which itself could serve as an ironic comment on Ben Zoma's abstraction – or on his subsequent *derasha*.

[82] See Sokoloff (*Palestinian*), 468, "to see at a distance"; and Jastrow (p. 1296), "to look, esp. to look into the distance of space or time."

the primordial moment itself seems incredibly close. Creation is occurring now, as Ben Zoma stands on the Temple Mount.

It might be possible to read Ben Zoma's vision (and his absorption in it) as a rebuttal to the rebuke, "know your place [before me]!" – as a hint that such distinctions pale before the presence of God. Yet this is not what R. Yehoshuʿa gleans from the encounter; instead he remarks to his entourage, "Ben Zoma is still outside." Instead of putting R. Yehoshuʿa in his place, Ben Zoma's vision verifies that he himself is not in his proper place. It seems that somehow in his journey between "where from" and "where to," Ben Zoma has gotten lost.

Indeed, by remarking that he "is still outside," R. Yehoshuʿa indicates that Ben Zoma has gone somewhere, but has not yet returned. Moreover, it seems that Ben Zoma is still in motion, in transit between "from" and "to." Thus, even though this text describes these sages as "standing" (and "not standing"), this is clearly as story of coming and going.

That motif is even more explicit in earlier versions of the story, for there the encounter takes place as the two sages pass on the road.[83] The Yerushalmi account begins:

> Once R. Yehoshuʿa was walking on the road, and Ben Zoma approached facing him. R. Yehoshuʿa greeted him, but Ben Zoma did not answer. R. Yehoshuʿa said to him: Where from and where to, Ben Zoma?

Here we find the two sages en route, approaching each other from opposite directions. In this setting, R. Yehoshuʿa's words ring, not only as a scolding, but also as the simple question one traveler might ask another: where have you been and where are you now heading?[84] Indeed, the image of the two sages coming from opposite directions prepares us for a story of two different "approaches." R. Yehoshuʿa's question seems to be a challenge – and, in response, Ben Zoma offers a *derasha*:

> I was looking at *Maʿaśeh Bereshit*, and between the upper and lower waters there is merely a hands-breadth. Just as here [in Genesis 1], Scripture speaks of "hovering," there too [in Deut. 32] it says: *Like an eagle waking its nest, over his nestlings he hovers*. There Scripture speaks

[83] While the Yerushalmi and Tosefta versions of the story begin with the two sages walking on the road, another early version of the story (Genesis Rabbah 2:4) begins "Once Ben Zoma was standing [or in another manuscript, "sitting"] and pondering, when R. Yehoshuʿa passed by…" We might presume that there are two strains to the tradition: one (represented by the Yerushalmi and Tosefta) in which the sages are in motion, and another (represented by Genesis Rabbah and the Bavli) in which Ben Zoma is standing – or sitting. However, Lieberman reads motion in all four of the texts, and explains the Bavli's phrase "ולא עמד מלפניו" as "ולא עמד מהליכתו": that is, "[Ben Zoma] did not cease his walking" (*Tosefta ki-Feshuta*, volume 5, p. 1291). For a comparison of the four versions of Ben Zoma's story, see my forthcoming article, "Visions of Ben Zoma."

[84] We might note, for example, the similar question asked of a traveler in Judges 19:17, "אנה תלך ומאין תבוא" ("where are you going and from where have you come?"). However, biblical travelers are more commonly asked simply, "where have you come from?" (see "מאין באת" and variants in Genesis 29:4, Joshua 9:8, Judges 18:9, II Kings 20:14, and Jonah 1:8). Similarly, in the Bavli, we find that people ask either מאין *or* לאן, but not usually both (see, for example, b.Zevaḥim 32a, b.Yoma 27a and 38a, as opposed to b.ʿAvodah Zarah 25b and 26a).

> of "hovering" as touching yet not touching; just so, here it means touching yet not touching.[85]

Here we get a sense of the exegetical underpinnings of the Bavli teaching. Ben Zoma reads the "hovering" of Genesis 1 through its parallel in Deuteronomy 32:11, in which an eagle "hovers over its nestlings" – an image, according to Ben Zoma, of "touching yet not touching." What was implied by the image of the brooding dove is here made rather more explicit; allusion to the eagle of Deuteronomy 32 imparts to the Creation scene a powerful sense of divine protection and nurturance, for the nesting eagle is a figure for the God who "encircled [Israel], watched over and protected him … bore him away on his wings … [and] nursed him on honey from the rock…"[86]

Whereas in the Bavli, Ben Zoma states that he is "gazing between the upper and lower waters," here he specifies, "I was looking [*mistakel*] at *Maʿaśeh Bereshit.*"[87] This might mean, "I was looking at the text of Genesis 1" (and indeed, Ben Zoma does point to textual places, "here" and "there"),[88] yet his words indicate that something more is going on, as well. *"Mistakel"* is the very word our mishnah uses to prohibit looking at "what is above, what is below, what is before and what is after." Thus, Ben Zoma quotes and combines the two "opposed" parts of our mishnah – the limit on expounding the text of *Maʿaśeh Bereshit* and the prohibition of broader speculations on "above and below…" – thereby blending exposition and vision.[89] The result is disastrous:

> R. Yehoshuʿa said to his students: Indeed, Ben Zoma is outside. It was but a few days later that Ben Zoma died.

The story's end gives an additional, prescient quality to the words "Ben Zoma is outside," as if R. Yehoshuʿa is predicting that he is not long for this world. Moreover, Ben Zoma's death casts an eerie light back on his own teaching. His last words "touching yet not touching" now seem a fitting description of his own tenuous hold on earthly life.

Those words seem an ironic echo of what happened to Ben Zoma: he gazed and was "stricken," we might imagine, with a harmful, punishing touch – so different from the nurturing touch that is so light as to be almost "not touching." Is Ben Zoma unaware that he has been warned and punished? Hasn't he been given the message to back off from the divine realm and to control his gaze? Yet instead we find him still lost in that gaze, apparently unable to see the divine Presence as either remote or retributive. Clearly Ben Zoma's "way" has to do with vision – but is his vision mistaken? Here indeed is a striking contrast to the "success stories" above; while those sages's *derashot* received praise from their master and

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[85] y.Ḥagigah 77a-b.
[86] Deuteronomy 32:10-11, 13.
[87] That is, in the Bavli, Ben Zoma declares צופה הייתי בין מים העליונים למים התחתונים, whereas here he states מסתכל הייתי במעשה בראשית (and then remarks on the narrow space between the upper and lower waters).
[88] We might assume that, since Ben Zoma is walking, he must be referring to an act of pondering, rather than poring over the text. Yet, since the Torah text also (or even primarily) resides in the memory, it seems to me that a kind of "looking at" is possible even in this situation.
[89] See also Goshen-Gottstein's remarks on the relation between "Four things" and Ben Zoma's vision, in "Is *Maʿaseh Bereshit* Part of Ancient Jewish Mysticism?" p. 198, and "Four Entered Paradise Revisited," p. 79, note 24.

from heaven, Ben Zoma's master turns away from him, and he dies.[90] Apparently, Ben Zoma's teaching doesn't warrant praise; instead it indicates that he has gone "outside" the limit and his own capabilities.[91]

The Yerushalmi's account of Ben Zoma closely resembles what may be the oldest version of the story, in the Tosefta.[92] Here as well, the two sages meet on the road, approaching from opposite directions. When Ben Zoma fails to greet R. Yehoshuʿa, he asks "Where from and where to, Ben Zoma?" – and Ben Zoma answers with a *derasha* linking Genesis 1 and Deuteronomy 32. Here too, R. Yehoshuʿa remarks that Ben Zoma is "outside" – and we learn that just a few days later, Ben Zoma "departed." Yet, there is a key difference: instead of an encounter "*ba-derekh*," here, the two sages meet "*ba-istrata*."

Another term for "road" or "path," the word *istrata* is a fair equivalent of *derekh*, and would be unremarkable, if not for its occurrence in the passage just above the Tosefta's Ben Zoma's story, in which two parables elucidate the Pardes account:[93]

> [Four entered Pardes….] To what is the matter similar? To the orchard of a king, [with] a loft built on top. What [must one] do? Look, but not feast [his eyes] on it.
>
> Another parable: to what is the matter similar? To a path [*istrata*] passing between two roads [*derakhim*], one of fire and one of snow. If [a person] turns here, he is harmed by the fire; if he turns here, he is harmed by the snow. What must a person do? Walk in the middle, without turning here or [there].

Here, we learn that entering Pardes is like entering the garden of a king, where one must be careful not to look too boldly.[94] Or, it is a path located between two other, dangerous, extreme ways. One who treads this path must, like the Proverbial traveler, be careful not to turn left or right. Yet here, the danger is not a detour, but is quite close, at either side. Indeed, here the right, middle way seems dwarfed by the vivid, harmful *derakhim* on either side; this is a narrow path indeed. And when, just following this parable, when we find Ben Zoma *ba-istrata*, we cannot escape the impression that it is the same narrow path. Yet, apparently, Ben Zoma has taken a hazardous turn – and so was "stricken." We finally we encounter Ben Zoma in the Bavli, he seems to still be in transit, on this dangerous path.

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[90] The version of this story in Genesis Rabbah 1:2 actually specifies that R. Yehoshuʿa turns around to address his students. Indeed, there the words נהפך רבי יהושע ואמר לתלמידיו seem to indicate a vehement about-face.

[91] Thus, the story seems to tell us more about one "approach" than the other. Yet R. Yehoshuʿa's act (of turning aside to remark) is in itself significant: here an ordained sage with an entourage of students, who thus perhaps represents normative study within a hierarchy of sages, rather than lone, unguided vision. On the notion that R. Yehoshuʿa signifies supervised exposition, while Ben Zoma is "outside the chain of tradition [and] the field of legitimacy," see Goshen-Gottstein, "Four Entered Paradise Revisited," especially p. 82-4.

[92] For a more detailed discussion of these two texts' similarities and differences (as well as their relation to the versions in Genesis Rabbah and the Bavli), see my forthcoming article, "Visions of Ben Zoma."

[93] t.Ḥagigah 2.2 is comprised of the following: a) the Pardes account; b) the two explanatory parables; and c) the story of Ben Zoma and R. Yehoshuʿa "*ba-istrata*."

[94] The act of "feasting [one's eyes]" is no doubt akin to "feasting": eating the king's fruits, which is a form of theft. On the motif trespassing and eating in the orchard, see Goshen-Gottstein, "Four Entered Paradise Revisited," p. 93-113.

If Ben Zoma's story suggests the aftermath of the journey, the story of Aḥer[95] gives us a glimpse of what happened (and what went wrong) along the way. Indeed, on the next two pages, the Bavli offers an extended account of Aḥer, relating not only what happened after his return to earth, but also after his death.[96] Yet Aḥer's story begins in heaven: [97]

> Aḥer cut down the saplings. Of him Scripture says: *Do not let your mouth cause your body to sin.*[98] What does this [mean]? He saw that Metatron had been given permission to sit and write the merits of Israel. [Aḥer] said: It is taught that Above there is no sitting, no competition, no back, and no weariness. Perhaps, God forbid, there are two powers! They took out Metatron, and struck him with sixty fiery lashes, and said to him: Why did you not rise before him when you saw him? Permission was given him to blot out the merits of Aḥer. [Then] a *bat kol* went out and said: *Return, rebellious children*[99] – except Aḥer. [Aḥer] said: Since I have been driven out of that world, I shall go out and enjoy this world.[100] Aḥer went out to evil ways.[101]

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[95] The sage Elishaʿ b. Abuya is, in this account, referred to almost exclusively as "Aḥer" ("other"). On the name "Aḥer," see Goshen-Gottstein, *The Sinner and the Amnesiac*, especially p. 62-69.

[96] The b.Ḥagigah account includes these episodes: a) Aḥer in heaven ; b) Aḥer and the harlot; c) Aḥer's dialogues with R. Meir; d) Aḥer and Meir at the Sabbath limit – and their tour of 13 schoolhouses; e) the sages' attempts to redeem Aḥer after his death; f) Aḥer's daughter's appeal for support; f) a discourse on the status of Aḥer's Torah (was Meir justified in learning from a sinning sage?). Although I see Aḥer's entire story as a journey, I shall cite here the only the episodes in which the road motif is most explicit: Aḥer in heaven ("He saw Metatron…"); Aḥer's discourses with R. Meir ("After he went out to evil ways, Aḥer asked R. Meir…"); Aḥer and Meir at the Sabbath limit ("Aḥer was riding a horse on Shabbat, and R. Meir was following…"), and their tour of 13 schoolhouses ("[R. Meir] seized him and took him to a schoolhouse"). Aḥer's story in b.Ḥagigah has several parallels in other texts, and has been much discussed. For readings of the entire story cycle, see Alon Goshen-Gottstein, *The Sinner and the Amnesiac*, and Yehudah Liebes, *Ḥeṭo shel Elishaʿ : arbaʿah she-nikhnesu la-pardes ṿe-ṭivʿah shel ha-misṭiḳah ha-Talmudit.* Yerushalayim: Aḳademon, 1990.

[97] This text, which is both strikingly vivid and stubbornly obscure, has understandably inspired many readings and no little controversy. For a close analysis of the episode (focusing on the character of Elishaʿ ben Abuya), see Goshen-Gottstein, *The Sinner and the Amnesiac,* chapter 4 (particularly p. 89-111); For another view, see Yehudah Liebes (*Ḥeṭo shel Elishaʿ*, especially chapter 3); Many scholars have discussed this text's links to 3 Enoch and other hekhalot texts. See, for example, Philip S. Alexander, "3 Enoch and the Talmud," in *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period*, 18 (1987), p. 40-68; "The Historical Setting of the Book of Enoch," in *Journal of Jewish Studies* 28 (1977), p. 156-180; and Daniel Boyarin, "Beyond Judaisms: Metatron and the Divine Polymorphy of Ancient Judaism," in *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 41 (2010), p. 323-365, and "Is Metatron a Converted Christian?" in *Judaïsme ancien - Ancient Judaism* 1 (2013), p. 13-62.

[98] Ecclesiastes 5.5. As many scholars have noted, the Bavli's elaboration of Aḥer's story depends also on the (uncited) remainder of the verse: "… and do not say before the angel that it was an error, lest God be angered by your voice and destroy the work of your hands."

[99] Jeremiah 3:14.

[100] הואיל ואיטריד ההוא גברא מההוא עלמא : literally, "since that man has been cast out of that world…"

[101] תרבות רעה, literally "evil growth" (or development).

Although not explicitly set "on the road," this story describes one stage of a journey: arrival at the destination – or rather, the midpoint of a roundtrip.[102] Having arrived, Aḥer seems to forget ʿAkiva's initial warning about speaking rashly. Apparently, expecting to see the heavenly retinue – like royal courtiers – standing at attention before the seated King, Aḥer is shocked by the sight of the seated angel, and exclaims: "Could it be – God forbid – that there are two powers in heaven?"[103] This is Aḥer's first "road" *derasha*. Yet rather than expounding a text, he interprets what he sees – and the result is cataclysmic. If we recall ʿAkiva's warning – that the liar is not permitted in God's presence – we might expect to see Aḥer immediately expelled from heaven. But the punishment is more severe; his merits are erased, and he is barred from repentance. Thus, Aḥer has been *permanently* cast out of heaven, and may never return, even after death.

Here is a traveler changed by his journey; he comes back an "other" man. Moreover, Aḥer is a traveler who can't really go home again, for he can never resume normal life. Unable to earn merit or repent for misdeeds, Aḥer is off the grid; he has been cast out of the moral universe. Thus, like Ben Zoma, Aḥer never fully returns; but, whereas his comrade presumably goes back to the other world after death, it is decreed that Aḥer must remain "outside" in death as well as in life.[104] Indeed, throughout this cycle of stories we repeatedly hear that Aḥer has "gone out": he "goes out" to enjoy this world; he "goes out" to evil ways, he "goes out" to a harlot, etc.[105] It seems that Aḥer's typical act is to set out from one place (or state) to another. Moreover, as his story unfolds, we continually see Aḥer in motion, particularly in relation to R. Meir.

In two episodes beginning "after he went out to evil ways, Aḥer asked R. Meir…," we see him engaged in exegetical discourse. In their first exchange, Aḥer asks R. Meir to interpret Ecclesiastes 7:14, "[In good times, enjoy the good, and in bad times, see that] the one no less than the other was God's doing":

> After he went out to evil ways, Aḥer asked R. Meir, saying to him: What is the meaning of the verse (Eccl. 7:14): *The one no less than the other was God's doing*? [R. Meir] said: It means that for everything that God created, He created its counterpart. He created mountains and created hills; He created seas and created rivers. [Aḥer] said to him: R. ʿAkiva,

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[102] Ascent to heaven (alive) is presumably like an astronaut's trip to the moon: arrival at a destination from which one must return. Indeed, the success story of R. ʿAkiva (who "went up safely and came down safely") seems to indicate that this is the model for this journey as well. However, the vibrant traditions regarding the notable exceptions to the rule (Elijah and Enoch, who entered heaven alive, and joined the celestial retinue) are certainly subtexts of the Pardes account – and its elaboration here.

[103] On the difficulties of this text, see Philip S. Alexander, "3 Enoch and the Talmud," and Alon Goshen-Gottstein, *The Sinner and the Amnesia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), chapter 4; regarding the "heresy" (or former orthodoxy) of "Two Powers" as the crux of the text, see Daniel Boyarin, "Beyond Judaisms" and "Is Metatron a Converted Christian?"

[104] Ultimately, however, Aḥer is redeemed – after death – by R. Meir and R. Yoḥanan (see b.Ḥagigah 15b). The two sages achieve another two transits on Aḥer's behalf: bringing him first into judgment, and then into the next world. Thus, even after death, Aḥer is the one who crosses from one domain to the other.

[105] On "going out" as Aḥer's definitive act, see Along Goshen-Gottstein, *The Sinner and the Amnesiac*, especially p. 115-119.

> your master, did not explain it so. Rather: He created righteous and created wicked; He created the Garden of Eden, and created Gehinnom.

Aḥer has chosen a rather "loaded" verse, especially in light of his personal history. He cites a passage in which Ecclesiastes declares that God dispenses both good and bad fortune – and that this dispensation does not always match human conduct:

> Consider God's doing! Who can straighten what He has twisted? In good times, enjoy the good and in bad times, see that the one no less than the other was God's doing … Sometimes a good man perishes in spite of his goodness and sometimes a wicked one endures in spite of his wickedness.[106]

The echo of this passage behind Aḥer's verse reminds us that, like the good man who "perishes in spite of his goodness," Aḥer's merits were erased; like the "twisted" that can't be straightened, Aḥer cannot repent. Moreover, by citing this text, Aḥer not only refers to the events of his own life, but also intimates a distinctly ambivalent view of divine justice.[107] These heavy implications are surely not lost on R. Meir, yet he chooses to read the verse in perhaps the most innocuous way possible: as indicating slight (and surely morally neutral) variation in the natural world.[108] Aḥer rejects this tame reading and returns to the theme of reward and punishment. He explains:

> Everyone has two portions, one in the Garden of Eden and one in Gehinnom. The righteous man, being meritorious, takes his own and his fellow's portion in the Garden of Eden. The wicked man, being guilty, takes his own and his fellow's portion in Gehinnom.

The rather bizarre moral economy depicted here (in which one person's merits are seized by another)[109] remind us that Aḥer's merits were taken from him; the wicked man who must give up his portion in the Garden recalls Aḥer's expulsion from heaven.[110]

The next *derasha* is even more explicitly autobiographical. Here Aḥer asks Meir for his reading of Job 28:17: "Gold or glass cannot match the value [of Wisdom]…"

> After he went out to evil ways, Aḥer asked R. Meir: What is the meaning of the verse (Job 28:17): *Gold or glass cannot match its value, nor vessels of fine gold be exchanged for it*? [Meir] said to him: These are *divre*

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[106] Ecclesiastes 7:13-15.

[107] The next verses sketch the radical implications of such a view: a way of life that partakes of both good and evil: "It is best that you grasp the one without letting go of the other …" By alluding to this passage, Aḥer seems to justify his own ambidextrous approach to good and evil – and to hint at a skeptical, non-Proverbial view of good and evil, wisdom and foolishness.

[108] Indeed, R. Meir not only steers clear of the subject of good and evil, but also avoids any hint of "opposites" (whether moral or natural) by pointing to phenomena that are (different in size, but) of the same kind.

[109] On the teaching as an anomaly, see Goshen-Gottstein, *The Sinner and the Amnesiac*, p. 133.

[110] The "autobiographical" nature of these *derashot* has been much remarked. See, for example, Goshen-Gottstein, *The Sinner and the Amnesiac*, p. 132-134. While these remarks tend to focus on the *derashot* themselves, I find Aḥer's "autobiographical" bent even in his choice of verses, as noted above.

> *Torah*, which are hard to acquire like vessels of fine gold, but are easily destroyed like vessels of glass.

Aḥer's verse sounds like a bit of Proverbial wisdom, asserting the value of wisdom over riches. Yet these words are from a passage beginning, "But where can Wisdom be found?" and concluding "It is hidden from the eyes of all living … [only] God understands the way to it."[111] By citing this passage, Aḥer alludes to one of Job's key themes: that true Wisdom belongs only to God, and is hidden from humans, who cannot begin to conceive or grasp it. R. Meir, however, shifts the subject back to "our" Wisdom ("*divre Torah*"), which he interprets well within the box of Proverbs (or Sifre): Wisdom is attainable, but difficult to achieve and maintain. Once again, Aḥer objects. Fastening on Meir's final image of the shattered vessel, he responds:

> [Aḥer] said to him: R. ʿAkiva, your master, did not explain it so. Rather: Just as vessels of gold and vessels of glass, though they be broken, have a remedy, so too a scholar, though he has sinned, has a remedy. [R. Meir] said to him: Then, you too return! He said: I have already heard from behind the [heavenly] veil: "*Return, rebellious children* – except Aḥer."

Here, Aḥer grabs the wheel, as it were, and steers the exposition back to the topic of sin and redemption. Reminding Meir of the heavenly verdict, Aḥer declares himself outside the system in which one who sins "has a remedy" in repentance; while other vessels may be repaired, he alone is irreparably damaged.[112] Indeed, here Aḥer seems to refer back to his first text: the word "remedy" (*taḳanah*) ironically echoes the words "Who can straighten [*le-taḳen*] what He has twisted?" and reminds us that Aḥer's way cannot be smoothed or straightened.[113]

But are these road *derashot*? In the Yerushalmi version of the account, it is clear that the dialogues occur in transit, for there the passage begins as R. Meir leaves the study house to go out to Aḥer, who is passing by on horseback, and ends with Aḥer saying "[You have gone far] enough, Meir…"[114] In contrast, the Bavli text seems to give the *derashot* a strictly temporal setting: they occur after Aḥer "went out." And yet that introductory phrase ("After he went out to evil ways, Aḥer asked R. Meir, saying to him…") matches almost exactly the

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[111] Job 28:12: Job 28:21, 23.

[112] It is not clear that the metaphor is actually one of "repair," as the image of shattered glass does not suggest something that can be fixed. Rather, the motif may be one of re-use rather than repair: damaged gold and glass may be melted down to create new vessels. If so, the metaphor may indeed point to redemption after death – a latter restoration effected by repentance in this life. This trope is perhaps even more suitable for Aḥer's case, and the *bat kol*'s decree, for he is the one man who lacks the key to entering the hereafter: repentance.

[113] Indeed, Aḥer's two *derashot* seem to be a linked pair, connected in several significant ways. We should note that: a) from the first to the second *derasha*, the autobiographical reference goes from implicit to explicit; b) the two derashot refer in turn to the two events by which Aḥer was thrust "outside": the erasure of his merits (the seizure of the evil man's portion) and his exclusion from redemption (the vessel that can't be repaired); c) together, the two derashot cite two main text of "critical" wisdom (Ecclesiastes and Job) and intimate its main tenets: that God's justice is beyond human ken, and that true wisdom is mysterious and unattainable.

[114] See y.Ḥagigah 77b. Here, the texts and *derashot* are rather different; the sages discuss Job 42:12, Ecclesiastes 7:8, and Job 28:17 (although Aḥer, who must at that point must indicate the Sabbath limit, does not rebut Meir's reading of the last). The focus of their discussion is on how something (or someone) begins versus how it ends.

road *derasha* formula*:* "Rabbi X asked Rabbi Y, when they were going on the road, saying to him…" In fact, the phrases are identical, except that here, "going on the road" has been replaced by another kind of going: "after he went out to evil ways." Thus, the setting for these *derashot* is not just a journey, but Aḥer's larger journey "out."[115]

Their third dialogue, however, clearly occurs on the road *mamash*, for here we find that "Aḥer was riding on a horse on the Sabbath and R. Meir was walking after him …" The sages are en route, apparently setting out from town; but, on the Sabbath, when one must stay within a certain area, such a journey cannot continue.

> Once, Aḥer was riding on a horse on the Sabbath, and R. Meir was walking after him to learn [Torah] from his mouth. [Aḥer] said to him: Meir, turn back, for I have already measured by the paces of my horse that thus far extends the Sabbath limit. [Meir] replied: You, too, turn back! [Aḥer] said: Haven't I already told you that I have already heard from behind the [heavenly] veil, "*Return you rebellious children* – except Aḥer."

Even as we see Aḥer's horse in motion, the story and the sages seem to pause here – at what is perhaps best described as their turning point. The sages have arrived at a threshold – a marker between observance and violation of the Sabbath. Although it is not a physical barrier, this rabbinically-ordained limit is clear and formidable, and provides an opportunity to reflect once more on Aḥer's unique status. When he urges Meir to return to town, Meir responds by urging Aḥer to "return" (via repentence) to the fold – and Aḥer repeats the decree declaring him unable to repent.

We hear the sages' conversation at this point, but the teaching that preceded it does not reach our ears. Instead it is simply marked as an event ("R. Meir was walking after him to learn [Torah] from his mouth)." Thus, Aḥer's road teaching resembles the road *derashot* on *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*, which were uttered (as it were) out of earshot.[116] In this case, we know even less; not even the title or topic is provided, nor can we know if Aḥer's teaching here recalls the preceding *derashot* on punishment and redemption. Yet, the text does give us one clue, in the expression, "from his mouth." Unlike the previous *derashot*, which (however personal and idiosyncratic) were attributed to R. ʿAkiva, this one seems to be Aḥer's own teaching. And perhaps, just as the exposition of *Maʿaśeh Merkavah* was too dangerous to relate, the teaching of this anomalous "sinning sage" is too hot to handle, as well.

Indeed, the image of Aḥer and Meir on the road surely recalls the similar scene of Yoḥanan b. Zakkai riding a donkey, with his student b.ʿArakh following behind. There too,

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[115] The conversion of this phrase to more readable English ("After he went out to evil ways, Aḥer asked…") obscures the similarity, which in the Hebrew is quite striking. The actual syntax of the phrase is "Aḥer asked R. Meir – after [Aḥer] had gone out to evil ways – saying to him" (שאל אחר את רבי מאיר לאחר שיצא לתרבות רעה, אמר ליה). This is almost identical to such "formula" road *derashot* as "R. Ishmael asked R. Yehoshuʿa when they were going on the road, saying to him" (שאל ר' ישמעאל את רבי יהושע כשהיו מהלכין בדרך, אמר לו), and "R. Ishmael asked R. ʿAkiva when they were going on the road, saying to him" (שאל רבי ישמעאל את רבי עקיבא כשהיו מהלכין בדרך, אמר ליה). The only difference is that "going on the road" has been replaced by "after he went out to evil ways."

[116] We need not assume from this, however, that Aḥer, too, was expounding *Maʿaśeh Merkavah.* Indeed (though it is certainly not impossible), there is nothing in the text to indicate that.

the sages pause in their journey, but whatever tension (or doubts about b.ʿArakh) we may have had at the outset of the story are entirely dispelled by its triumphant end. For Aḥer and Meir, however, the tensions that have built up throughout their discourse are certainly not resolved here. If anything, this fork in the road propels them to the next stage of their journey.

Aḥer's insistence that he cannot repent – indeed, his reiteration of the heavenly verdict – does not deter R. Meir. Next, he actually forces Aḥer to "turn back"[117] – in search of an oracle to overturn the heavenly decree.[118]

> [R. Meir] seized him and took him to the schoolhouse.[119] [Aḥer] said to a child: Recite for me your verse! [The child] said to him: *There is no peace, says the Lord, for the wicked*. He took him to another schoolhouse. [Aḥer] said to a child: Recite for me your verse! [The child] said to him: *Though you wash with nitre and use much soap, still your iniquity is marked before Me, says the Lord God* … He took him to another schoolhouse until he took him to thirteen schoolhouses: all of them quoted in this manner.[120]

The first child-oracle only verifies the heavenly verdict, reciting "There is no peace for the wicked." This bad omen requires more traveling from Aḥer and Meir, and they visit twelve more schoolhouses (or synagogues) in an attempt to secure a better one, but without success. The childrens' confirmation (and elaboration) of heaven's condemnation of Aḥer is surely the opposite of the lavish praise showered upon b.ʿArakh. Far from any resolution, we seem to be building to a crisis. And indeed, the last child, in effect, personally indicts Aḥer:

> To the last one he said: Recite for me your verse. [The child] said: *But to the wicked* [*ṿela-rashaʿ*] *God says: who are you to recite my laws*, etc. That child was a stutterer, so it sounded as if he said: "But to Elisha [*ṿele-Elishaʿ*], God says…" Some say that [Aḥer] had a knife with him, and he cut up [the child] and sent him to the thirteen schools; and some say that he said: Had I a knife in my hand I would have cut him up!

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[117] The word תקפיה implies force; in his attempt to redeem Aḥer, R. Meir seems to have coerced or overpowered him. On the other hand, it is also possible to read the text ("he seized him") to mean that Aḥer grabbed Meir and dragged him to the thirteen schoolhouses. (Liebes, for one, seems to favor this reading, arguing that "אין דרך מאיר השימוש בכח הולמת בדמות של ר'," *Ḥeṭo shel Elishaʿ*, p. 73). This of course raises the question of Aḥer's purpose in doing so. Is he seeking to prove – via the oracles – that redemption is still barred to him? Or has he "turned" with R. Meir, and now seeks to find a voice that will undo the heavenly verdict. Yet, if so, why should he have to "seize" and force R. Meir, who is so intent on redeeming him? (On this scenario, see also Goshen-Gottstein's brief remark in *The Sinner and the Amnesiac*, p. 343, note 66).

[118] On children's verses as oracles, see Goshen-Gottstein (*The Sinner and the Amnesiac*, p. 143, and p. 344, note 71), and Liebes (*Ḥeto shel Elishaʿ*, p. 72)

[119] (Like other translations,) I use this term to match the story's content, although the actual term used varies. At first, the sages go to a בי מדרשא (study house), but thereafter to "another" בי כנישתא (synagogue or schoolhouse).

[120] b.Ḥagigah 15a-b. The children's verses are Isaiah 48:22, Jeremiah 2:22, Jeremiah 4:30 (elided here, for brevity), and finally, Psalm 50:16 (see below).

This violent end to the story is certainly a vivid contrast to the blessings which conclude the "success stories" – in which b.ʿArakh is praised as the "son" of Abraham, and heaven calls b.Zakkai to ascend with "your students, and your students' students"! Far from any kind of succession, here we have the end of the line, for the child's death also marks Aḥer's end; the very next words are "when Aḥer died," thus marking the end of his way with R. Meir, and of his earthly journey.

But where in fact have the sages traveled? While the first two dialogues are set on Aḥer's way "out," this stage of journey, which begins at the Sabbath limit, seems to be a venture back in. Indeed, since it is the Sabbath, we must perhaps assume that the sages turned back from the limit, and that all thirteen trips all took place in town – perhaps in Tiberias, which was reputed to have thirteen houses of study.[121] Or – can we imagine that R. Meir actually sacrificed his own virtue and crossed the boundary with Aḥer, taking him to thirteen schoolhouses in different towns?[122] There is certainly a hint of this in the story's horrible end. The pieces of the child's body sent to the thirteen schoolhouses recalls the similar scene in Judges 19:29,[123] but here Israel's twelve tribal territories have been replaced by the thirteen school houses, indicating that they too are separate domains.

And, as we have seen, the notion of separate domains – and crossing the border between them – is a repeated theme in Aḥer's story. First, he enters "Pardes," then is thrust from heaven – and then from the moral universe, when he is barred from redemption. Indeed, Aḥer himself remarks, "if I am driven from that world, let me go out to enjoy this world!" Finally, after his death, other sages smuggle Aḥer over the border – from the limbo of a death without judgment, punishment or redemption – into the world of the hereafter.[124] Thus, even without the formula "when they were walking on the road," this is a story of journeys – ascents, crossings, and returns – and the teachings along the way. Each stage of this journey recalls the Proverbial fork in the road, for here, every trip is a question of moral status.

Yet instead of choosing, Aḥer seems to straddle two paths, instead illustrating the wisdom of Ecclesiastes – and the passage cited in his first *derasha*:

> Consider God's doing: who can straighten what He has twisted? …
> Sometimes a good man perishes in spite of his goodness, and a wicked one endures in spite of his wickedness. So don't overdo goodness and don't act the wise man to excess … don't overdo wickedness and don't be a fool … It is best that you grasp one without letting go of the other, for he who

[121] See Goshen-Gottstein, *The Sinner and the Amnesiac,* p. 144, and p. 344, note 73.

[122] Indeed, Goshen-Gottstein notes an inconsistency in the text with regard to the Sabbath setting: whereas the schoolhouse scenes seem a continuation of the Sabbath limit episode, he finds it "unlikely that children would be the schoolhouse on the Sabbath" (see *The Sinner and the Amnesiac,* p. 344, note 66, as well the comments on p. 345, note 73).

[123] That is, the sordid tale of the woman whose corpse is cut into twelve pieces and sent "throughout the territory of Israel [בכל גבול ישראל]. Liebes pointed out this link between the texts in *Ḥeṭo shel Elisha*ʿ, p. 72.

[124] Thus, Aḥer crosses: a) from heavenly court to earthly life; b) from the system of reward / punishment and repentence / redemption to a no man's land outside them; c) from "that world" (meaning both heaven and the hereafter) to "this world"; d) from the Sabbath limit / proper observance to violation of the Sabbath (and other commandments?); e) from a post-mortem state of limbo (in which he can neither be punished nor redeemed) to (presumably) the hereafter.

> fears God will do his duty by both … for there is not one good man on earth who does what is best and doesn't err…[125]

Here, instead of the two clear paths of Proverbs, there is a confusion of the ways. God's justice is ambiguous – and human character is mixed. The response to this ambiguity is conduct which similarly mixes both sides: holding goodness and evil at once. Just so, Aḥer grasps both wickedness and virtue; he "goes out to evil" while refusing to let go of Torah. This is surely a different way than the optimistic pursuit of goodness and Wisdom we found in Proverbs (or indeed, the cautious, "keep your hands inside the car" progress down the Tosefta's narrow *istrata*). Indeed, Ecclesiastes' cry, "Who can straighten what He has twisted?" refers back to his the broader statement at the beginning of the book: "I observed all the happenings beneath the sun, and I found that all is futile and the pursuit of wind. A twisted thing that cannot be made straight; a lack that cannot be made good."[126] Whereas in Proverbs, the "twisted" way belongs to evil-doers and is to be avoided, here it seems to be the only path to take.[127]

Indeed, the Bavli's account of Aḥer in chapter two of b.Ḥagigah seems an elaboration of the motif of the "twisted" way, explicitly cited at the end of the first chapter of m.Ḥagigah. There, Ecclesiastes 1:15 is cited, quite pragmatically, with regards to the person who failed to bring a festal offering: "If the festival passed … he is not liable to make it up. About this, it is said: *The twisted cannot be made straight, and the lack cannot be made good.*"[128] The very next teaching, however, considers the moral aspect of "twisted":

> R. Shimʿon b. Menasya says: what is the twisted that cannot be made straight? … R. Shimʿon bar Yoḥai says: we don't call something twisted unless it was first straight and then became twisted. And which is that? That is a scholar who departs from Torah [*ha-poresh min ha-Torah*].[129]

Here, the word "twisted" [*meʿuṿat*] indicates the wrong "way" – just as rejection of Torah is a departure, movement away from Good. The irreparably crooked, then is the scholar who "departs" (*poresh*) from Torah, who leaves it behind. Aḥer's story gives account of just such a sage: one who departs from Torah by sinning. The very image of Aḥer astride a horse (and ready to cross the Sabbath limit) may derive from a punning reading of the phrase "the one

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[125] Ecclesiastes 7:15-20. This is the continuation of the passage cited by Aḥer in his first *derasha*.

[126] Ecclesiastes 1:14-15. His response (in the next few chapters) is first to seek wisdom; but finding that this leads to heartache, he then indulges in pleasure – which likewise does not satisfy. Along the way, he finds contradiction and ambiguity: the evil thrive while the good are punished; mourning is better than celebration, etc. Finally, he resolves on a middle path, which holds onto to both sides.

[127] Ecclesiastes uses the word עוות, while Proverbs favors the term עקש. The words are quite similar, both meaning "crooked" and both used at times to describe crooked paths (for עוות, see Lam. 3:9; for עקש, see such passages as Prov. 2:15, 10:9, 28:18, and Isaiah 59:8). Yet the only word עוות also carries the further connotation of "twisting" justice. This the word used by Job to indict God, in such passages as Job 8:3 ("Will the Almighty pervert justice?") and Job 19:6 ("Know that God has wronged me!"), as well as Elihu's rebuttal in Job 34:12 ("Shaddai does not pervert justice!").

[128] Here, what was a descriptive statement in the Bible ("a twisted thing that cannot be made straight") is read as a decree "a twisted thing – it cannot be made straight." Here, the emphasis seems to be on "what is lacking" (i.e., the missed offering).

[129] See Sokoloff (*Palestinian*, 451): to leave, depart, set sail.

who departs from Torah" (*poresh min ha-Torah*) as "the horseman from the Torah" (*parash min ha-Torah*). And yet, as we learned in our Berakhot texts (on imparting "*devar Torah*" when leaving a friend), "departing *from*" can become "departing *with*." Just so, Aḥer is also the scholar who departs "with" Torah: he strays from Good, while still engaging in Torah. This is most vividly depicted in his travels with R. Meir, for, as Aḥer (continually) leaves, he gives a *derasha*.

After its extensive account (in b.Ḥagigah 15a-b) of the two travelers who were harmed, the gemara now considers the one successful traveler, about whom we learned above, "R. ʿAkiva emerged safely." Yet, in contrast to his unfortunate comrades, R. ʿAkiva is given quite a brief account:

> R. ʿAkiva went up safely and came down safely. Of him Scripture says: *Draw me after you, let us run* [*the king has brought me into his chambers*].[130] The ministering angels tried to drive out even R. ʿAkiva, [but] the Holy Blessed One said to them: Leave this sage, for he is fit to make use of my glory [להשתמש בכבודי].

Here, ʿAkiva's success is explained via (the uncited portion) of the proof text: "the king has brought me into his chambers." Thus we learn that God personally intervened (calling off the palace guards, as it were) to allow ʿAkiva's entry. ʿAkiva is clearly the exceptional sage, whom God deems "fit" to enter and behold the divine Presence.[131]

In this moment we seem to glimpse the threshold of the inner sanctum. And yet, as if to demonstrate that only the exceptional sage may enter, the narrative pauses here and changes direction, asking "What did [ʿAkiva] expound?" The eager race to the king's chamber halts, and we rewind the film to see what ʿAkiva said to (show his worth and) gain entry. Or, the question might refer to ʿAkiva's conduct once within the "palace" walls; what did he say, upon regarding the divine realm? In the first case, we might expect to see ʿAkiva at the gate, speaking the password; in the latter, we might see him within the heavenly court. But once again, the gemara takes a step back, for what is now related is not ʿAkiva's direct speech *in situ*, but other sages' notions of what he might have said.

> What did [ʿAkiva] expound? Rabbah b. Bar Hanah said in R. Yoḥanan's name:[132] [ואתא *And He came*] *from the myriads holy*, meaning: He is the sign [אות] among His myriad. And R. Abbahu said: *He is preeminent above myriads* [דגול מרבבה], meaning: He is the model [דוגמא] among His myriads.

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[130] Song of Songs 1:4.

[131] Indeed, the term להשתמש may indicate something more or closer than beholding – perhaps there is even the connotation of touching the King's garment. There is also a shade of sexual connotation to the word, perhaps indicating a greater intimacy than looking. The proof text, from the opening passage of the Song of Songs, deepens this impression, for it seems to hint that ʿAkiva is the Lord's beloved. (For other texts on the resonance of the Song of Songs for ʿAkiva, see Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, chapter 8).

[132] Literally, "Rabbah b. Bar Ḥanah said that R. Yoḥanan said…" That is, Bar Ḥanah reports R. Yoḥanan's account of ʿAkiva's exposition.

Through wordplay, these teachings show that verses describing God among his "myriad" host actually assert God's clear supremacy over his entourage. The next teaching makes the point through close reading: "And Resh Lakish said: *The Lord of hosts is His name*: [meaning] He is the *Lord* among His host." Yet, the final teaching indicates that the presence of God might be somewhat more difficult to identify:

> And R. Ḥiyya b. Abba said in R. Yoḥanan's name:[133] "But the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice." "And behold, the Lord passed by."[134]

According to these sages, R. ʿAkiva's reading of these verses enabled him to clearly distinguish God from other heavenly beings – or from the fire and fury preceding God's appearance. Thus, according to these reports, ʿAkiva avoided the error of supposing another being has a status comparable to God's. He has learned to distinguish and declare God's singularity – and apparently this is what gains him entry and insures his safe departure.[135]

Thus, ʿAkiva's exposition seems to be a different kind of road *derasha*: it is the riddle answered at the bridge, or the password given at the gate to gain entry or a safe crossing. Or perhaps it is the speech the visitor gives before the royal court, thereby winning the approval of the King.[136] And yet, instead of seeing ʿAkiva entering the sanctum, regarding the heavenly host, or standing before God, the scene has changed; we are now back on earth, among our sages, who suppose what may have happened above. Thus concludes the brief account of ʿAkiva's journey – and indeed, the entire Pardes episode. Once again, we witness the rhythm of the gemara's exposition: no sooner do we arrive, but we are thrust out of the garden.

If the sages' suppositions about ʿAkiva's *derasha* subtly bring us down to earth, the next passage seems to clip our wings for good. Here, (in a baraita beginning "Six things are said of demons…") we learn to distinguish demons from angels, and heavenly beings from humans.[137] Along the way, we learn that angels and demons "have wings," "fly from one end of the world to the other," and "know what is yet to be" – or "hear of it from behind the

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[133] Literally, "R. Ḥiyya b. Abba said that R. Yoḥanan said…" (see previous note).

[134] b. Ḥagigah 16a. The sages' verses are Deut. 33:2, Song 5:10, Isa. 48:2, and I Kings 19:11-12. The final teaching makes the point by reversing the order of the verses (in the biblical text the passage begins with "And the Lord passed by").

[135] We may therefore surmise (with Rashi) that ʿAkiva avoids the error that was so disastrous for Aḥer. Moreover here ʿAkiva seems to correct his own mistake, two pages earlier, when he reads the "thrones" of Daniel 7:10 as "one for the Almighty and one for David." There he is chastised by R. Yose ha-Gelili, who exclaims, "Akiva, how long will you make render the divine Presence profane?!" ʿAkiva does not seem entirely redeemed in that passage: although he later declares a more acceptable, modal reading ("One for justice and one for mercy"), he is still called out by another sage. Here, however, the four *derashot* supposed to be ʿAkiva seem to emphatically attest to his exegetical and theological correctness.

[136] Alternately, these teachings might attest to what ʿAkiva taught on earth, before his journey – that is, the correct teachings that were "on his record" and thereby insured his access to the divine realm. If so, the text returns even more quickly to earth after our brief glimpse of the King's chambers.

[137] b.Ḥagigah 16a: "Our sages taught: Six things are said of demons: three like ministering angels, and three like human beings…; Six things are said of human beings: three like ministering angels and three like beasts…"

[heavenly] Veil." Moreover, humans, although they are somewhat like beasts, do share some attributes with angels; they have understanding, they walk upright, and they speak the holy language. Although the comparison ends there, we can hardly fail to surmise that humans lack the other attributes of angels: they do not fly from one end of the world to the other, nor do they stand so close as to hear divine decree of what shall be. While still apparently speaking of heaven, the gemara at this point clearly puts us back in our place, by implying that ascent to and intimacy with the divine realm is not our portion.[138]

And perhaps this is the point of the original Pardes account: surely it is a cautionary tale, warning us that gazing into the divine realm is the wrong way to go. And yet (as we saw in Avot 3:7), the vivid account of a disputed act has its own power; the act is thereby portrayed (for better or worse) as something that is done. Moreover, as the Bavli unfolds it, the Pardes story is too long, involved and compelling for a cautionary tale. We see more than a glimpse here; indeed the Bavli seems to have a greater interest in danger, damage, and "what went wrong" than in the correct path.

"Whoever looks…"

Finally, after several pages explicating "[Do not expound] *Ma'aśeh Bereshit* with two" and "[Do not expound] *Ma'aśeh Merkavah* with one," the gemara finally turns to the second half of the mishnah: the warnings, "Whoever looks at four things…" and "Whoever does not concern himself with the honor of his Creator." Although these warnings are arguably the subtext for the entire text, this is the first time that the gemara has addressed these dicta in and of themselves. What follows is surprising, for in fact, only a few lines are devoted to each.

On "Whoever looks at four things," the gemara remarks briefly, "It is well [to forbid looking at] what is above, what is below, what is after – but regarding what was before: what happened, happened!" Passing over the first three prohibitions, the gemara raises an objection to the fourth: What already occurred is settled, done and (presumably) known; how can this be considered a secret and untouchable topic? That objection is answered with the short parable of "a human king" who built his palace on a dung heap; afterwards, surely "the king does not want the dung heap mentioned!" Here, we get another glimpse of what was before (and indeed beneath) Creation, just as the door is being shut. Yet, while we may know what preceded Creation, speaking of those murky origins would surely displease (and indeed, dishonor) the Creator.

Regarding the mishnah's final warning ("One who does not concern himself with the honor of his Creator"), we learn:

> What [does it mean]? Rav Abba says: this is one who looks at the rainbow… as it is written, *Like the appearance of the bow which shines in the clouds on a day of rain, such was the appearance of the surrounding radiance. That was the appearance of the semblance of the Presence of the Lord* (Ezek. 1:28).

[138] Indeed, the conclusion of the teaching, which lists the similarity of humans to beasts, utters a decisive last word on the matter: "like beasts, [humans] eat and drink, they [have sex and] reproduce, and they defecate."

By citing this passage, which immediately follows Ezekiel's vision of the divine form in verse 27, Rav Abba seems to exceed the limit placed just before that verse. And yet, his teaching diffuses the vision, by focusing, not on the man-like form described there, but instead on the celestial phenomena surrounding the divine form. Moreover, after an extended discourse which penetrated the clouds, as it were, to stand before the divine Chariot, throne and Presence, this interpretation seems to minimize and de-mystify the mishnah's prohibition. It brings the prohibition out of the heavens and down to earth, for it seems to prohibit earthly gazing upon the rainbow one may see in the sky, and not a more proximate view. This earthly orientation is verified by the subsequent teaching: "Gazing on three things dim the eyes: the rainbow, the prince and the priests." These are clearly earthly sights – we are no longer in heaven. An additional, alternate reading of the mishnah's warning only deepens the impression, for it glosses "One who does not concern himself…" as "One who sins in secret."[139] Thus the mishnah's warning concerns earthly, human conduct, and has nothing to do with gazing upon the divine realm or form – or even upon a sign or reminder of that form.[140]

In the course of the previous pages, the gemara has in fact speculated at length on "what is before," "what is below," "what is above" and "the glory of one's Creator," without directly citing these warnings. Yet when it now turns to remark on the warnings themselves, it seems to rush past them with rather hasty remarks that seem to minimize the prohibitions. The warning against looking in four directions is, in effect, reduced to one by remarking on the first three "that is well" - and the whole comment seems a bit like closing the door after the cows have escaped, for "well" or not, haven't we just remarked on those prohibited topics? [141] In the next passage, "Whoever has no concern…" is made very specific and limited, by any reading (whether it is defined as regarding the rainbow or sinning in secret) – thereby diverting us from the mystical meaning we might otherwise derive from "the glory of his Creator." Yet, the effect of such a highly specific reading could be to permit all that is not particularly mentioned … and so, to retroactively allow the very mystical speculations we have enjoyed in the previous pages.

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[139] That is, one dishonors God by imagining that it is possible to conceal one's sins from God.

[140] Perhaps it is no coincidence that this is a saying of Rav Yosef, who (judging from our earlier encounter with him and the elders of Pumbedita) seems to be an expert on what is truly secret, and in diverting from the revelation of esoteric topics.

[141] Moreover, the Bavli's "hastiness" is even more striking when contrasted with the earlier version of this tradition, in Genesis Rabbah (1:5). There, the parable illustrates a teaching (on Psalm 31:19, "Let lying lips be stilled…that speak with arrogance and contempt"), which condemns speaking "on matters that [God] has withheld from his creatures." Here, the exposition of *Ma'aśeh Bereshit* is associated with "arrogance" ("boasting and saying, I expound *Ma'aśeh Bereshit*!") – and is proven by the parable: "whoever says, 'This palace is built on a site of sewers, dunghills, and garbage,' doesn't he diminish it? Thus, whoever comes to say that this world was created out of *tohu* and *bohu* and darkness, does he not indeed diminish it [and thus God's glory]?" The Yerushalmi, however, seems to soften the blow, by separating the parable from the teaching "Let lying lips be stilled…!" – and by combining it with the tradition of the King's garden ("One may look at it, but not touch it"). Thus, the Yerushalmi allows exposition of *Ma'aśeh Bereshit*, as long as it is done with great care (see y.Ḥagigah 77c).

Signposts

Recounting the Bavli's exposition of m.Ḥagigah 2.1, we might describe it an ambivalent journey: a repeated pattern of advance and retreat, of reaching and pulling back. The text seems to mimic the topic, and we learn that the way to secret wisdom and the heavenly realms is a "crooked" and circuitous path. And yet, in spite (or because) of its reversals, the discourse actually arrives, again and again; bumping up against the before-time and touring Creation, and then soaring into the heavens, to glimpse the divine sanctum.

We might consider the road *derashot* as a sign or symbol of the text as a whole; these vivid moments of sages teaching on route exemplify the larger journey. But the road *derashot* are also something much more *mamash*; they are milestones, marking the midpoint of each of stage of the journey: the halfway point of *Maʿaśeh Bereshit* and of *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*. Each discourse begins by expounding its text (of Genesis 1 or Ezekiel 1), an exposition comprised of the reported teachings of sages heard from "offstage." In both cases, that exposition is followed by an exemplary tale, showing us *what it looks like* to properly expound the text[142] – and these examples of the right way (to do it) take place on the road.

These exemplary tales both intimate and conceal what we hope to see. R. ʿAkiva's *derasha* (the text's last word on Genesis 1) warns us to keep to the interpretative straight and narrow, by asserting the plain meaning of "heaven and earth"; the "success stories" – which "fast forward" over the very teachings that garner such extravagant praise – conceal that wisdom from us. Nonetheless, the road *derashot* also direct us to much more expansive explorations. In *Maʿaśeh Bereshit*, R. ʿAkiva's last words, "*erets mamash*," signal the text's turn toward extensive topographical exploration of "below" and "above" – a venture that vaults us into the territory of *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*. In *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*, the "success stories" mark the shift from textual exposition of Ezekiel to the "actual" journey into Pardes. Thus, the road *derashot* are the fulcrum on which the text turn; they are moments emblematic of its repeated process of turning fences into gates.

Yet along the way there is danger, fire, damage, and death. There seems to be no sure protection on the path to "secret" wisdom. Indeed, the fact that this wisdom is itself a dangerous way – which we are repeatedly warned not to pursue – might seem to undo the lesson (and motif) we learned from R. Ilaʿi and Yehoshuʿa b. Levi. And yet, instead we find that deeper, more dangerous wisdom must also be pursued. It remains necessary to take Wisdom's road, expounding.

[142] In the discourse on *Maʿaśeh Bereshit*, the exegetical exposition of Genesis 1 (via other texts and traditions on Creation) is followed by R. ʿAkiva's road *derasha* on "heaven and earth"; in *Maʿaśeh Merkavah*, the text's exposition of Ezekiel 1 is followed by the "success stories" of b.ʿArakh and company.

Departing *be-shalom*

In conclusion, let us consider a parable from Leviticus Rabbah, which explicates the Proverbs verses, "[Wisdom] is a tree of life to them that grasp it" (3:18) and "My son, if you take my words, and store up my commandments with you…" (2:1):

> This is like a king who said to his son: Go out to [do] business. He said to him: Father, I am afraid of bandits on the road and pirates on the sea! What did his father do? He took a staff, hollowed it out, and put an amulet inside. He gave it to his son, and said to him: Let this staff be in your hand and you need not fear any creature. Just so did the Holy Blessed One say to Moses: Tell Israel: My children, study Torah [*ʔisḳu ba-Torah*] and you need not fear any nation.[1]

The parable closely reads, and thus weds its two verses; the hidden amulet is the "stored" commandments, words that the son "takes" with him, while the magically enhanced walking stick is the "tree of life," protecting the traveler who "grasps it" in his hand.

This passage may well remind us of the Sifre parable we read above, in chapter two, in which the king bandages his son's wound.[2] Once again, the father/God provides his son/Israel with a physical remedy, equivalent to the command, "Study Torah!"[3] In both cases, the item to be worn or grasped evokes the motif of Wisdom as amulet; while the Sifre passage proved its healing power, here we see its protective force. In these parables, the images of binding and grasping illustrate the notion of "keeping" or holding Wisdom close – through constant Torah study. Here, however, that act is linked to going on the road; the walking stick parable seems to intimate exposition en route. And yet, its road and its staff are entirely contained within the *mashal*; they remain strictly figurative, signs for the lesson, "Torah study protects." Indeed, the parable's image of walking-with-a-staff is a symbol of Torah study in general, not necessarily the act of doing so in transit. What's missing here is the "literal" part of the motif: the image of sages actually walking while studying.

We might contrast the parable with a somewhat more "literal" statement to be found in the Yerushalmi: "I never walked four cubits without [speaking words of] Torah."[4] One of several virtues listed by Rav Ada bar Aḥa when asked about the "good deeds [he] possesses,"[5] this statement indicates that Rav Ada refuses to consider walking without talking

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[1] Leviticus Rabbah 25:1, on Lev. 19:23 ("And when you enter the land and plant any tree for food…").

[2] Sifre Deuteronomy (*Ekev*), Piska 45, in which the King says, "My son, so long as this bandage is on your wound…you will suffer no harm," and we learn: "Just so, the Holy Blessed One said to Israel: My children … study Torah [*ʔisḳu ba-Torah*], and the evil *Yetser* will not rule over you; but if you abandon *divre Torah*, it will gain mastery over you!" (For my discussion of this text, see page 74-76 above).

[3] By adding the figure of Moses, the Leviticus Rabbah parable complicates and enhances the father-son / God-Israel motif (while also elegantly intimating the image of Moses' staff). Moses now stands in the middle, holding the staff/Torah, and yet also comprehends the actions of both father and son: transmitting and receiving.

[4] y.Taʿanit 67a. Rav Ada declares, "I never went four cubits without Torah" – which statement is clarified (and qualified) by the next: " – and I never recited *divre Torah* in a filthy place." Thus, Rav Ada seems to claim, "I never went anywhere without reciting Torah – except in unsuitable places."

[5] Here, too (as in the walking stick parable) there is a theme of protective or beneficent power; due to his great merit, Rav Ada is able – by his mere presence – to keep a ruin from collapsing, and can bring on the rains by

– that is, going any distance without speaking *divre Torah.* In the Bavli's version of this account (in which the sage is asked the secret of his longevity), Rav Ada's answer is somewhat different; there he declares, "I never walked four cubits without Torah and without tefillin."[6] This particular claim can be heard several times in the Bavli: "He never walked four cubits without Torah and without tefillin" is among the virtues attributed to R. Yoḥanan b. Zakkai (in b.Sukkah 28a); R. Zera, when asked the secret of *his* longevity (in b.Megilah 28a) also claims, "I never walked four cubits without Torah and without tefillin"; whereas R. Yoḥanan remarks (in b.Yoma 86a) that, "for me, walking four cubits without Torah and without tefillin is a desecration of the [holy] Name!" This claim, while marking these sages' exemplary virtue, also creates a parallel between Torah study and tefillin. Indeed, here the two acts seem to be examples of the same sort of piety: the principle of taking or keeping "these words" with you always, wherever you may go.[7]

And yet, can we take this claim "literally"? Or, more to the point: is there a road here? Indeed, the term "four cubits" is itself somewhat figurative (indicating "a very small distance"), and the claim, "I never walked four cubits without…" is a hyperbolic statement akin to "I never even stirred without…" Moreover, each of these statements occurs in the account of an extraordinary sage, endowed with superlative virtue, longevity or near-magical powers. Thus, the statement seems to be an emblem of extraordinary, super piety.[8] Certainly, these sages' claim, which pictures them in motion while speaking Torah, brings us one step closer to the road *derasha* motif – and yet it still fits within the general, allusive reading of the Shema's command ("speak these words as you sit in your house and as you go on the road, etc.") to mean "at all times and in all places."

These sages' notion of how to "keep" *divre Torah* – with tefillin and Torah study – may remind us of the Sifre commentary on Deuteronomy 11:18 (which we read above in chapter two): "*Place these my words on your heart* – this is Torah study; *and bind them* – this is tefillin." While distinguishing between the two acts, this lesson also matches them, indicating that both are (perhaps equal) *mitsṿot.*[9] However, in the next teaching (with its bandage parable), the two commands become one; "Place these My words on your heart" is explicated with an image of binding, which is defined as Torah study. Thus, where the first lesson created a parallel between tefillin and Torah study, the parable closes the gap, and

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merely removing his shoe. It seems that the sages' visit is a response to these miraculous deeds (just previous in the text), and their question seems to be "what good deeds have you done [to earn such powerful merit]?"

[6] See b.Taʿanit 20b, in which Rav Ada declares: "I never pondered [Torah] in filthy alleys, and I never walked four cubits without Torah and without tefillin." Here, Rav Ada seems to refer to three different acts: "pondering" words of Torah, speaking those words, and wearing them – in the form of tefillin.

[7] As such, this claim balances other images of constant (seated) Torah study, for example (in the passage on the virtues of R. Yoḥanan b. Zakkai): "No one ever found him sitting in silence, but only sitting and learning, and… he never said: it is time to arise from (studies at) the *bet midrash*…" (b.Sukkah 28a).

[8] In contrast, our accounts of sages expounding en route take place on a real road; moreover, the prescription of Torah study in transit requires this act for any and all scholars. R. Ilaʿi's warning is for "two scholars" (*talmide ḥakhamim*), not only for super sages, as is R. Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's promise for "whoever travels alone." While certainly the discourse of b.Ḥagigah raises the issue of the exceptional sage (who "understands by himself"), that text is arguably much more interested in the flawed and damaged sages. This is not to say that road *derashot* are not exemplary; for example, the question of whether the "formula" *derashot* are, in a sense, reserved for the great *Tanna'im* awaits further study.

[9] On the Sifre's notion of Torah study as a commandment, and indeed "as the paramount religious obligation," see Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary*, p. 89-94, and p. 239, note 71.

tefillin becomes Torah study, as it were. This notion is also intimated in the walking stick parable. According to the parable, traveling with the magical walking stick in hand is a sign for Torah study – and yet, the walking stick itself – a container in which (amuletic) "words" of "commandments" are enclosed – strongly suggests tefillin as well. Thus, the parable hints that Torah study is another kind of tefillin: that is, a way of keeping *divre Torah* close and thus receiving the benefits of adherence. Indeed, we might say that the walking stick parable accomplishes, with one figurative gesture, the entire distance crossed between the Sifre's bandage parable and the more "halakhic" lesson just preceding it.

Thus, these are texts that – like our road motif – seem to move between the figurative and literal aspects of the Shema's commands (in Deut 6:6-8 and 11:18-19) to put "these words" in your heart, to "speak them … as you walk on the road" and to "bind them as a sign on your hand…" Yet here the image of binding is at the forefront. In the walking stick parable, there is a strong implication of tefillin as a physical object, whereas in the "four cubits" texts, it is a physical practice; yet in both cases, the road is either metaphoric or vaguely indicated. By contrast, in our accounts of road exposition, the road is "*mamash*" – but the notion of binding is only present in the metaphoric sense of adhering to Torah by constant study.[10] Indeed, it seems that tefillin has disappeared, and that – as a physical image or practice – it has nothing to do with our motif. And yet, on another level, there is a vital connection between the two.

I have described the road *derasha* as a "literal metaphor": that is, a figure in which part of the meaning is acted out. Perhaps the most familiar (if not the prime cultural) example of such a metaphor is in fact tefillin. The rite of tying on tefillin enacts a "literalistic" reading of the biblical metaphors of binding words of Wisdom to the body, such that the figure becomes a physical act of actually tying on an object containing words.[11] And yet that physical act is also still a metaphor, a physical symbol for adherence to the word of God. In a similar way, accounts of sages teaching en route *actualize* the biblical metaphor of Wisdom's path; it is now an actual road on which sages walk. Yet that act remains a sign with metaphoric power, for these expounding sages are also a *sign* for "keeping" Torah.

I began this study by comparing the innovation (or appearance) of the road *derasha* in rabbinic literature with the surprising moment when R. ʿAkiva and R. Ishmael suddenly appear in the mythic discourse of Bavli Ḥagigah; like that scene, the motif is connected to, but strikingly different from what preceded it. Moreover, like that narrative moment, the motif leaves a powerful after-image, for its type-scene becomes the frame for the wisdom teachings of the Zohar – the words of wayfaring sages.[12]

The Zohar, considered the central work of the literature of Kabbalah, was apparently composed in 13th century Spain – at a great distance in time and space from our classical

[10] However, we may also note the intimation of tefillin in the motif's underlying theme of amuletic protection provided by "these words." For the amuletic qualities and connotations of tefillin, see Yehudah B. Cohn, *Tangled Up in Text: Tefillin and the Ancient World* (Providence: Brown Judaic Studies, 2008).

[11] On tefillin as a "literalistic" reading of biblical texts, see again Yehudah B. Cohn, *Tangled Up in Text: Tefillin and the Ancient World*.

[12] To point out the Zohar's "after-image" of our road motif is not to say that the classical motif was *sustained* throughout later literature up to the advent of the Zohar, hundreds of years after the Bavli. On the contrary, it seems that later texts may have returned to a more Proverbial, more strictly metaphoric motif; this question awaits further study. However, if it is the case that the classical motif fades in later texts, its revival in the Zohar is all the more striking.

texts. And yet in a certain respect, the Zohar's very different textual landscape brings us to familiar ground. As the work opens, with commentary on the word *Bereshit*, we hear that "Rabbi Ḥiyya and Rabbi Yose were walking on the way…"[13] – and this is the setting for their exposition of the first word of Genesis.[14] This scenario repeats again and again (usually introduced by the formula, "Rabbi A and Rabbi B were walking on the road, [when] Rabbi A said to him…")[15] and is arguably the work's archetypal setting for its teachings.[16] Often the sages themselves remark on what they are doing, thereby indicating that the road is an apt setting for "words of Torah":[17] "Rabbi Yehudah and Rabbi Yitsḥak were walking on the way. Rabbi Yehudah said, 'Let us open with words of Torah as we walk.'"[18] Similarly, we read that:

> Rabbi Shimʿon was walking on the way together with his son Rabbi Elʿazar, Rabbi Yose, and Rabbi Ḥiyya. While they were walking, Rabbi Elʿazar said to his father, "The way before us is smooth. We want to hear words of Torah!"19

Here we have an intimation of the Proverbial road, smoothed and straightened by words of Wisdom.[20] Indeed it is explicitly stated that Torah study en route protects a traveler from harm:

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[13] While not the first of the Zohar's teachings, the account occurs very early on in the work's preface.

[14] "Rabbi Ḥiyya and Rabbi Yose were walking on the way. As they reached the site of a certain field, Rabbi Ḥiyya said to Rabbi Yose: What you have said – *bara shit* [He created six] – is certainly true, for there are six supernal days in the Torah" (*Haḳdamat Sefer ha-Zohar*, 1:3b; Matt, *The Zohar, Pritzker Edition*, Vol. 1, p. 17). The "certain field" seems merely to be scenery along the way, rather than a destination or significant location; these sages (unlike the unfortunate scholar of Avot 3.7) do not remark on it, nor does it at all distract them from the matter at hand: the text of Genesis 1 and the mystic reality implied therein. The "six supernal days" refers to the lower six sefirot, which these sages find marked in the very first word of Torah (see Matt, p. 17, notes 113-116); thus, this teaching, like the discourse of b.Ḥagigah, treats the matters of Creation and upper realms as related, even entwined topics.

[15] See, for example, 1:65b, 1:107b, 1:64a, 1:173a, 1:186a, 1:192b, 2:223a, 3:51a, 3:261b. Although very similar to the classical formula ("…walking on the road when Rabbi X asked to Rabbi Y…"), we should note, however, that, in contrast, Zohar sages "say" (אמר – or "begin" פתח), but don't "ask." For cases in which the introductory phrase includes a brief "scenic" note or encounter (such as "…walking on the road when they arrived at a field; Rabbi A said to Rabbi B…"), see 1:3b, 1:63a, 1:238b, 1:244b, 2:50, 3:8, 3:53b, 3:115a. On cases in which the sages themselves preface the *derasha* with such remarks as "Open your mouth and speak words of Torah," or "let us engage in words of Torah," see below.

[16] See now David Greenstein, *Roads to Utopia: The Walking Stories of the Zohar* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

[17] The Zohar's term, מלי דאורייתא [*mile de-Oraita*] is the Aramaic equivalent of *divre Torah*. For cases in which sages say (in essence), "Let's do Torah!" see, for example, 1:58b, 1:76a, 1:115b, 1:157a, 1:164a, 1:229b, 1:237a, 1:244b, 2:160b, 3:20a, 3:188a.

[18] *Zohar (Ṿa-yehi*)1:237a (Matt, *The Zohar, Pritzker Edition*, Vol. 3, p. 440).

[19] *Zohar (Bereshit*)1:58b (Matt, *The Zohar, Pritzker Edition*, Vol. 1, p. 334).

[20] The Aramaic expression ארחא מתקנא קמן (which might also be rendered, "the road before us is straight") is analogous to the biblical motif of the "straight" path (ישר) of Wisdom and fidelity (see, e.g., Prov. 3:6 וְהוּא יְיַשֵּׁר אׇרְחֹתֶיךָ). Although here, it is not clear that it is Wisdom/road exposition that smooths the path; rather, it seems that a smooth path is a better setting for road *derashot.*

> Rabbi Ḥizkiyah was walking from Cappadocia to Lydda. He met Rabbi Yeisa, who said to him, "I am surprised that you are all alone, for we have learned that one should not set out alone on a journey." He replied, "A child is walking with me; he's following behind." He said, "I am surprised by that! How can you be accompanied by someone with whom you cannot discuss words of Torah? For whoever walks on the way unaccompanied by words of Torah endangers his life."[21]

Rabbi Ḥizkiyah's admonitions recall the discourse on escort (which we read in b.Sotah), as well as our two prescriptions of Torah study on the road – for here it is clear that an escort's purpose is to engage the traveler in "words of Torah."[22]

In one account, Rabbi Elʿazar and Rabbi Abba are traveling along, with a man driving their donkeys from behind. In response to their *derashot*, the donkey driver also speaks up, amazing them with his interpretive virtuosity and mystical depth. Stunned, the sages urge the driver to ride instead of them (he refuses); they then dismount, kiss and praise him, and ask his name. He responds: "Do not ask who I am! Rather, let us go together, engaging in Torah. Let each one speak words of wisdom to illumine the way." After more mystical exposition (and the driver's mysterious disappearance), Rabbi Abba remarks, "This is precisely what we learned: on whatever path the righteous walk, with words of Torah between them, virtuous ones of that world come to them."[23] Rabbi Abba seems to read Avot ("words of Torah between them") with R. Ilaʿi, for here those who speak Torah are in transit ("on whatever path the righteous walk…").[24]

While Rabbi Abba thus surmises that the donkey driver was in fact the avatar of a great sage (who has departed to "that world"), we might instead recognize him as the reincarnation of the clever donkey driver who (in Leviticus Rabbah) helped R. Yonatan make his polemical way through Samaria. Moreover, these sages' responses to the driver's *derasha* (dismounting, kissing and praising him) vividly recall the actions of Yoḥanan b. Zakkai (in b.Ḥagigah), in response to b.ʿArakh's mystical exposition en route.[25] Indeed, as even these few excerpts attest, the journeys of the Zohar often recall classical road *derashot* (as well as their sources and the teachings that "justify" them).

Thus, by picturing its expounding sages actually walking on the road, the Zohar revives the classical motif, with its literalized metaphor. And yet, a strictly figurative notion of the road is also crucial to the Zohar. The work is studded with maxims on the importance of taking the "straight road" (אורח מישר), such as, "Happy are the righteous who follow the

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[21] *Zohar (Noaḥ)*1:69b-70a (Matt, *The Zohar, Pritzker Edition*, Vol. 1, p. 409-410).

[22] That is, the maxim "One should not set out alone on a journey" evokes the b.Sotah discourse and Yehoshuʿa b. Levi's prescription of Torah study for the lone traveler; The definition of a travel companion as "someone with whom you… discuss words of Torah" surely echoes R. Ilaʿi's maxim that two scholars walking on the road must have *divre Torah* between them" as does the warning "whoever walks on the way unaccompanied by words of Torah endangers his life." Matt notes the latter allusion (citing the b.Taʿanit teaching of R. Ilaʿi), and also refers to b.ʿEruvin 54a (the escort discourse). See Matt, *The Zohar, Pritzker Edition*, Vol. 1, p. 410, as well as p.43.

[23] *Zohar, Bereshit*, 1:7a (Matt, *The Zohar, Pritzker Edition*, Vol. 1, p. 30-43).

[24] However, here *divre Torah* are rewarded, not with the protection R. Ilaʿi promises, nor with the divine Presence of m.Avot, but rather with the presence of a great sage!

[25] In which his master first dismounts to hear the *derasha*, and then rises to kiss and praise him. (See Matt's comment, *The Zohar*, p. 35, note 245).

straight path…" – as opposed to "the wicked who abandon the paved path… leaving the straight path for the crooked."[26] Yet such passages, which read almost like (Aramaic) glosses of Proverbial maxims, do not comprehend the figure. Rather, the Zohar also presents another, distinctive (and perhaps its primary) road metaphor: "the ways of Torah" (ארחי/ן דאורייתא). This figure appears many times, in such teachings as "When a person follows the ways of Torah and all his ways are properly aligned, countless advocates stand over him to speak well of him.'"[27] Like the "straight path" maxims, these speak of a generic "person"[28] (not a particular sage), and he goes (not on foot, on an actual road, but) on "ways" of righteousness and Torah learning. The metaphoric quality of this road is even more striking when we note that, even more common than the text's references to "walking in the ways of Torah" are its maxims about "*knowing* the Ways of Torah"[29] (a phrase that is often paired with " – and walking in the way of Truth").

This connection between going and knowing is surely reminiscent of the Proverbial way, as well as its adaptation in rabbinic texts. However, we should note that the Zohar has in fact *completed* the translation, rendering "the way of Wisdom" as "the ways of Torah."[30] This term is virtually unknown in classical rabbinic texts; as much as they read "Wisdom" as "Torah," and picture Torah study en route, these texts nonetheless do not speak of "the way of Torah."[31] Indeed, the classical version of this concept seems to be the road *derasha* itself. By contrast, the Zohar imagines *two* distinct roads: a metaphoric "Way of Torah" and more literal location for Torah study.[32] In the following passage, we see these two motifs together, linked by the verse, "[Wisdom's] *ways are ways of delight, and all her paths are peace"*:

> R. Yeisa and R. Ḥizkiyah were walking from Cappodocia to Lydda… R. Yeisa said to R. Ḥizkiyah, "Open your mouth and utter one of those

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[26] These are excerpts from Zohar 1:55a and 1:74a, respectively, but see also such passages as 2:106b, 2:128a, 2:163b, 3:15a, 3:70b, 3:85b (among many others).

[27] *Zohar (Va-Yishlaḥ*)1:174b (translation adapted from Matt, *The Zohar, Pritzker Edition*, Vol. 3, p. 54). I have adapted Matt's more beautiful translation ("paths of Torah… all his ways are aligned") to reflect the fact that the two words are the same: ארחי / ארחוי.

[28] Often referred to as בר נש, i.e., a human being (e.g., 1:152b, 1:191a, 1:201b) or "the righteous" (see, e.g., 1:204a, 2:253a, 3:11b).

[29] See, e.g., 1:59b, 1:175b, 1:221a, 2:75a, 2:180b, 2:253a (among many others).

[30] This is not to say that the Zohar has invented this phrase, which we can also be found in late midrashim (such as *Midrash Tehilim* and *Midrash Mishle*). Yet the Zohar emphasizes the phrase, making it a central concept, in a way that seems unprecedented.

[31] The only exceptions I have found, in classical texts, is the statement in Lamentations Rabbah 1:40 ("*All you who pass by:* all you who transgress the way of Torah") and the perhaps later formulation (in Tanḥuma 58.3 and Kallah Rabati 8): "This is the way of Torah: a piece of bread with salt shall you eat, and water by measure shall you drink." Classical texts do make pointed (Proverbs-like) analogies between Torah and a "way"; see, for example Mekhilta Yitro 2 ("*Make known to them the way*: this is Torah study"), and Sifre Deuteronomy, Piska 48 (in which *divre Torah* direct a person from "ways of death" to "ways of life" and from the "way of evil" to the "way of good"). However, these texts lack the direct translation of the "Way of Wisdom" to the "Way(s) of Torah."

[32] The very prominence and importance of the Zohar's metaphoric road might explain the author's apparent effort to stress the reality (and literality) of the road on which its sages walk – particularly by providing scenery ("they passed a field"; "they entered a cave"; "they crossed a ravine") or encounters along the way. As classical texts, the Zohar sages occasionally expound these locations (as when they happen upon evidence of the Flood), yet here there also seem to be an abundance of "by-the-way" topographical details unrelated to the content of the sages' *derashot* – in contrast to the unadorned and generic road of the classical "formula" *derashot.*

> sublime words of Torah that you deliver daily before [Rabbi Shimʿon]. He opened saying, "*Her ways are ways of delightfulness, and all her paths are peace* (Prov. 3:17). *Her ways are ways of delightfulness* – ways of Torah, for whoever follows the ways of Torah is showered by the blessed Holy One with the delight of the Shekhinah, never departing from him. *And all her paths are peace* – for all the paths of Torah are entirely peaceful, providing him peace above, peace below, peace in this world, peace in the world that is coming.[33]

Once again, we find sages expounding on the way, but here "the way" is also the topic of exposition. Indeed, R. Ḥizkiyah makes plain what is elsewhere implied, by explicitly reading (and defining) the Proverbial Way as "Ways of Torah."

This is clearly the way to go; one who takes this path wins the escort of the Shekhinah "never departing from him." Indeed, we might well note the abundance of "peace" in this passage; not only are "all the paths of Torah…entirely peaceful," but peace is also bestowed from "above,…below,…in this world and…in the world that is coming." Thus, while evoking m.Ḥagigah 2.1 (with its four directions),[34] this text also contradicts it, for where the mishnah warned against even looking "above and below," here those are sites of blessing or "peace." The phrase "peace to him above, peace to him below"[35] also recalls the Pardes episode, and particularly its one successful traveler: R. ʿAkiva, who went up and descended "*be-shalom*."[36] Yet it seems that the Zohar has clipped out that success story, leaving behind the mishnah's warnings – and the whole turbulent discourse of the gemara, which was so very interested in those who did not make it out *be-shalom*.

Indeed, we may well ask if we are still talking about the same "peace"; what does it mean to go and return *be-shalom*? In the context of b.Ḥagigah, in which the danger of the journey is so clear and palpable, I translated this word in the sense of "safely" or "unharmed"; Rabbi ʿAkiva is a clear contrast to Ben ʿAzzai (who did not survive) and Ben Zoma and Aḥer (who returned damaged). The word reflects the danger survived.

Which brings us back to the traveler's prayer, for the Zohar's abundance of *shalom* on the road sounds a somewhat ironic echo of that plea for protection: "lead me forth *be-shalom*, and direct my steps *be-shalom* and support me *be-shalom*, and deliver me from the hand of every enemy and ambush on the way." In the prayer, all this *shalom* is an indicator of just how much danger there is to be feared on the road. But in our Zohar text, there is no "enemy and ambush," only "peace." Here, both going on the road and mystical speculation seem peaceful and blessed with divine favor and protection. Thus, although the Zohar revives the classical motif, perhaps there is something missing – something that was with us every step of the way through our classical texts: the danger.

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[33] *Zohar (Mi-ḳets*)1:197b (Matt, *The Zohar, Pritzker Edition*, Vol. 3, p. 208-209). The sages are accompanied by a servant ("a certain Jew lugging a skin of wine") who supplements this teaching with a broader metaphor: "Wherever in Torah one reads *way*, it is a way open to all, like a road open to every person."

[34] Or more properly, t.Ḥagigah 's translation of the mishnah's "… before and after" to "…what was before and what is yet to be." Notably, the Zohar text replaces "before" with "this world."

[35] The Zohar's phrase here (translated above as "providing him peace…") is שלם ליה לעילא. שלם ליה לתתא, literally: "peace to him above, peace to him below…"

[36] See t. Ḥagigah 2.2 and b.Ḥagigah 15b in which "רבי עקיבא עלה בשלום וירד בשלום."

Throughout this study, I have found "the road" linked (and opposed) to two other elements: danger and wisdom. Chapter one concerned the road as the site (and sign) of danger; here, it seems a site opposed to, or precluding Torah study. In chapter two, however, I examined a competing motif: Torah study protects travelers. Here we learned that the road is Wisdom, the site of the command "speak these words." This motif seems to overturn the previous one, pushing danger (as it were) off the road. However, in chapter three, danger resurfaced, for here we read a text in which (esoteric) wisdom is itself a hazardous way. Here, the distance (or opposition) between the elements collapses, and the road is both the site of wisdom and terrible danger. This text reveals a more complex, ambivalent form of the motif – suggesting that the danger that was present all along the way is an integral element.

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