

A Maidservant and Her Master's Voice: Discourse, Identity, and Eros in Rabbinic Texts

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[A] maidservant saw at the sea what Isaiah and Ezekiel and all the prophets never saw.

—Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael, Tractate Shirata 3

Reading the literature of Slavery, then, will also involve reading its exposure of the gaps and rifts in ideology, its capacity to let the unspeakable be spoken, to assert what it apparently denies.

—W. Fitzgerald, *Slavery and the Roman Literary Imagination*

RABBINIC LITERATURE is a cultural production in which social identities are negotiated and renegotiated. In part, this body of literature reflects the varying circumstances of its creation, spanning the period between the third and the sixth centuries and including texts from both Palestine and Babylonia. Whether viewed as an “arena in which society struggles for its identity” or as an “ethnographic practice,” the rabbinic corpus does not present completely formed and finalized cultural identities.¹ Quite the opposite: rabbinic texts offer us a glimpse into the *process* of identity construction, and, by the same token, they reveal the precarious grounds on which distinct identities are imagined.

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¹J. Levinson, “Fatal Fictions,” *Tarbitz* 68, no. 1 (1999): 86 (Hebrew); G. Hasan-Rokem, “Narratives in Dialogue: A Folk Literary Perspective on Interreligious Contacts in the Holy Land in Rabbinic Literature in Late Antiquity,” in *Sharing the Sacred: Religious Contacts and Conflicts in the Holy Land*, ed. A. Kofsky and G. G. Stroumsa (Jerusalem, 1998), 109–29. Citations from the Palestinian Talmud appear with a lowercase *y*. in front of the tractate title; citations from the Babylonian Talmud appear with a lowercase *b*. Citations of texts from the Tosefta appear with a lowercase *t*.

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The rabbinic corpus introduces, among its many players, two interrelated characters: Rabbi Judah the Patriarch and a maidservant in his court.² In this essay I examine a few of the narratives that involve the maidservant (and, explicitly or implicitly, her “master”), reading them as particularly revealing examples of the inherently relational quality of discursive dynamics. Reminded of Michel Foucault’s famous words that “relations of power are not in a position of exteriority with respect to other types of relationships . . . but are immanent in the latter,” I propose that these narratives are a case in point.³ Social hierarchy, gender, and eros are the dominant and connected threads that are cunningly woven through these stories. Furthermore, these themes are enriched by the semantic potentials of figures like the maid and her master, prior to and beyond their deployment in the *specific* narratives that will be the focus of this essay.

First, the social-hierarchical aspect of the characters: one can be understood as an emblem of rabbinic authority in general, while the other can be understood as a “mute signified” on which the dominant discourse constructs and imposes its authority. For what could be set in more oppositional terms than “the” Rabbi (a man, a powerful leader, notoriously rich)⁴ and a maidservant (a woman, a slave, devoid of any independent means)?⁵ She does not even possess a name: her title defines her exclusively in relation to Rabbi Judah.⁶ Yet, as we shall see, it is both

²In the framework of this essay, I have limited myself to a small number of narratives, thereby overlooking some of the other intriguing texts in which the maid plays a complex set of roles. I hope to return to these as well as to other related texts in future work.

³Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. R. Hurley (New York, 1978), 94.

⁴On Rabbi Judah the Patriarch’s authorial position and his wealth, see L. I. Levine, *The Rabbinic Class in Palestine during the Talmudic Period* (Jerusalem, 1985), 91–100 (Hebrew), and O. Meir, *Rabbi Judah the Patriarch* (Tel Aviv, 1999) (Hebrew), with the bibliography cited there. Meir discusses the differences between Palestinian and Babylonian depictions of his character, including his leadership and wealth. In the framework of the discussion here it is important to note that in *all* the stories where Rabbi’s maid is involved, a hierarchy in which she occupies the lowest social position and he the highest is implied.

⁵P. V. McCracken Flesher notes that “the Mishnah frames both . . . categories of slavery and . . . of women according to the same taxonomic criterion, namely, the householder’s control” (*Oxen, Women, or Citizens?*, Brown Judaic Studies no. 143 [Atlanta, 1988], 51). Although Flesher confines his discussion to the mishnaic corpus, it seems plausible to apply the mishnaic scheme to later texts as well, since Rabbi’s maid belongs to the lowest category insofar as she is both a woman and a slave. Moreover, she is a woman slave controlled by *the* householder (Rabbi Judah) and is thus the epitome of the classificatory system, signifying the lowest class. See also *b. Menachot* 43b, where R. Judah’s blessing, “that He did not make me a woman,” is discussed. It is implied there that “men are thankful that they are not compared to women, who, in this statement, are compared to slaves—either occupying the same low level (according to R. Aha b. Jacob’s son) or only slightly higher (according to the father)” (J. Hauptman, *Rereading the Rabbis* [Boulder, 1998], 236).

⁶On slaves in the Mishnah, see Flesher. On the Greco-Roman model of Jewish slavery in the Roman period, see D. B. Martin, “Slavery and the Ancient Jewish Family,” in *The Jewish*

the potential contrast between the two and their close habitual proximity that render the maidservant a critical commentator on rabbinic discourse.

The narratives that include Rabbi's maidservant revolve around the point at which the constructed boundaries that separate maid and master, contingent upon a hierarchy of social categories, are blurred and violated from within. This could be explained, at least partly, by the disruptive quality embedded in the figure itself. For, as Hegel once pointed out, the master-slave relation contains a paradox where "total personal power becomes a form of total dependence on the object of that power."⁷ The paradoxical nature of slavery can be seen from yet another angle: slavery has been equated with "social death," insofar as "the essential feature of slavery in any culture is not the legal status of the slave but his or her position as a 'socially dead' outsider."⁸ Still, in other respects the slave is quite clearly alive, and "although it may seem that slavery operates only by de-humanizing slaves, a slave is useful precisely because he or she has the human attributes of knowledge, judgment, reasoning."⁹ In other words, "the slave's place cannot be reduced to that of either a unique, validated subject or that of a fungible, commodified object: the slave is defined by his/her position as the crossing point of subjectivity and objectification."¹⁰ It is here that the prime function of slaves to signify and define the "free" subject turns against itself. Slaves confuse categories that are imagined to be clear-cut: living/dead, objective/subjective, social/asocial, among others. In doing so, they

Family in Antiquity, Brown Judaic Studies, no. 289, ed. S. J. D. Cohen (Atlanta, 1993), 113–29. Martin makes the point that "slavery among Jews of the Greco-Roman period did not differ from the slave structures of those people among whom Jews lived" (113).

⁷H. Parker, "Loyal Slaves and Loyal Wives," in *Women and Slaves in Greco-Roman Culture*, ed. S. Murnaghan and S. R. Joshel (London and New York, 1998), 161; G. W. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J. B. Baillie (London, 1910), 228–40. See also W. Fitzgerald, *Slavery and the Roman Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, 2000), 1–8, which explores figures of slaves in a variety of Latin works and the range of metacultural and metaliterary notions that are thematized in relation to those figures.

⁸I. A. H. Combes, *The Metaphor of Slavery in the Writings of the Early Church* (Sheffield, 1998), 22 (commenting on O. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* [Cambridge, MA, 1982]).

⁹K. McCarthy, "Servitum Amoris: Amor Serviti," in *Women and Slaves*, ed. Murnaghan and Joshel, 180.

¹⁰McCarthy, following Igor Kopytoff ("The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as a Process," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. A. Appadurai [Cambridge, 1986], 65). Compare Claude Lévi-Strauss, who makes a similar observation regarding women: "The emergence of symbolic thought must have required that women, like words, should be things that were exchanged . . . But woman could never become just a sign and nothing more, since even in a man's world she is still a person, and since in so far as she is defined as a sign she must be recognized as a generator of signs" (*The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, trans. J. H. Bell and J. R. von Stumer, ed. R. Needham [London, 1969], 496).

call into question the very principles of categorization on which society is constructed and on which authority is based. Slaves' liminal position rendered them, in W. Fitzgerald's revealing phrase, "good to think with."¹¹ The figure of the slave—and the maidservant in particular—allowed (rabbinic) culture to reflect on itself.

The maid's sexual role was an important component of her semantic potential. That domestic slaves—men and women—who were part of the extended Roman *familia* were the objects of the desires of the *pater* is widely documented.¹² Insofar as a "free person" in the ancient world was characterized by control (not only the ability to control others but also by the need to control the self),¹³ the idea of servants who were potential catalysts of unbridled desire undermined that identity in yet another example of slavery's paradoxes. While the slaves/maids signified the freedom of their owner to the extent that the master had control over them, his potential lack of control over himself in relation to them undermined that sovereignty.

Thus the rabbinic statement that "the more maidservants the more lewdness" (*m. Avot* 2:7) is an expression of anxiety associated with sexuality and female slaves.¹⁴ The negative reputation of maidservants is projected also in the halakhic (legal) discussion where a question is posed: "Why . . . does not every one jump [hurry] to marry a freed-woman?" The answer is explicit: "because . . . the liberated maidservant was in the category of a promiscuous woman" (*t. Horayot* 2:11–12).¹⁵

¹¹Fitzgerald, 11 (paraphrasing Lévi-Strauss). Fitzgerald suggests that "some of what literature has to tell us about slavery . . . concerns the fact that slaves were good to think with, and one of the things about which slaves helped the Romans to think was literature itself" (11). This understanding is close to my own reading of the narratives on Rabbi's maid as reflections on rabbinic discourse, in which, just as in the Latin examples, sovereign identities are at stake.

¹²See, for instance, M. I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (New York, 1980), 94–95; L. Casson, *Everyday Life in Ancient Rome* (Baltimore and London, 1998), 62.

¹³S. R. Joshel and S. Murnaghan, "Introduction," in *Women and Slaves*, ed. Murnaghan and Joshel, 15–16. See also, on the notion of freedom as self-control in a talmudic narrative, S. Naeh, "Freedom and Celibacy: A Talmudic Variation on Tales of Temptation and Fall in Genesis and Its Syrian Background," in *The Book of Genesis in Jewish and Oriental Christian Interpretation*, *Traditio exegetica Graeca*, no. 5, ed. J. Frishman and L. Van Rompey (Louvain, 1997), 73–89.

¹⁴See also the statement, which appears prior to the one quoted, "the more women, the more witchcraft." It has been argued that slavery among the Jews in the rabbinic era by and large resembled the Roman model. Without necessarily accepting this claim in toto, it seems that some of the allusions that relate to maidservants in rabbinic discourse point to similar anxieties that are found in Latin sources.

¹⁵For additional examples, see T. Ilan, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine* (Tübingen, 1995), 205–11.

Being both a servant and a woman, a maidservant faced double discrimination.¹⁶ Furthermore, the maid's inferior social status rendered her an available sexual object. But her sexual role within the domestic circle was a complex one. Maidservants were "other" women within the household. Behavior that was forbidden within the strict boundaries of the family was nevertheless permissible on its fringes.¹⁷ Maidservants were not only objects/subjects through which the social system channeled its sexual overflow, they were objects/subjects that did not adhere to the abiding sexual norms of the elite.¹⁸ Hence, thoughts about maidservants were ambivalent fantasies, intimating wishful desires as well as disruptive, unsettling effects.

Returning now to the notion of rabbinic literature as a locus within which cultural identities are negotiated: the maidservant narratives offer us instances where rabbinic discourse itself is the object of reflection. These narratives address the issue of cultural identity in its very basic form. Here it is not a question of the demarcations of Jewish society in late antiquity in relation to "other" ethnic/religious groups (e.g., pagans and Christians) that is being raised. Rather, it is the very notion of identity, as reflected and produced in discourse, that is held suspect. Where authorial discourse is being considered, Rabbi's maidservant neither is mute (even when she does not speak) nor does she necessarily validate her master's voice.¹⁹

¹⁶P. Vidal-Naquet, "Slavery and the Rule of Women in Tradition, Myth, and Utopia," in *Myth, Religion, and Society: Structuralist Essays by M. Detienne, L. Gernet, J. P. Vernant, and P. Vidal-Naquet*, ed. R. L. Gordon (Cambridge, 1981), 188.

¹⁷Ilan, *Jewish Women*, 205–11.

¹⁸Compare Fitzgerald, 41.

¹⁹In the following readings of the stories about Rabbi's maidservant I am not seeking to present a harmonized picture of her literary character(s). The texts derive from different settings, both geographically and temporally. Thus a variety of images emerge from different compilations. See T. Ilan, *Mine and Yours Are Hers* (Leiden, 1997), 97–107; Meir, 245–46. According to Ilan, in the Babylonian Talmud "Rabbi's maidservant was blown up into an outstanding example of wisdom and loyalty . . . the stories are told in order to demonstrate the greatness of Rabbi" (106). Although Ilan's statement seems to support Meir's conclusions concerning the tendency of the Babylonian traditions to elaborate the greatness of Rabbi (albeit others display more criticism than the Palestinian sources), it seems to reduce the meaning of the stories to this one function, their metonymical portrayal of Rabbi. Furthermore, Ilan implies that in the Palestinian material the maid is a simple character, confined in her roles as compared to the rabbis. This, to my mind, is not the case. Nor is there any reason to assume a historical kernel in one of the traditions (*y. Megillah* 2:2; Ilan, *Mine and Yours*, 99–100), which "gave rise to a legend about the woman's exceptional knowledge of Hebrew, a legend which is presented in the Palestinian Talmud and greatly elaborated upon in the Babylonian" (Ilan, *Mine and Yours*, 100). See also my review of Ilan's book in *Scripta Classica Israelica* (forthcoming).

LANGUAGE, KNOWLEDGE, AND SOCIAL ORDER

Rabbi's maidservant plays a key role in a number of stories in which language is the theme and in which discourse—rabbinic discourse—reaches a stage of uncertainty. The following story from the Palestinian Talmud (*y. Shevi'it* 9:1) will serve as a starting point.²⁰

The narrative opens with two queries that the rabbis are tackling. The first is a linguistic one concerning two words whose meaning the rabbis supposedly do not know.²¹ These words, incomprehensible to the rabbis, have lost their signifying competence and hence are signs lacking a reference. The second quandary relates to the rabbis' own institutionalized world, namely, the hierarchical order of the sages themselves by which their respective positions in the world are organized. Implied in the second query is the question of authority conditioned by relative relationships between the sages in a social system. The two queries, which may appear at first glance to touch upon entirely discrete issues, are in fact closely connected, as the story in its unfolding amply demonstrates.

Said Rabbi Chagai: [what are] "*serugin*" ["intermittently"] and "*haloglogot*" ["purslane"]; and who is greater—in wisdom or in age?

The sages were in doubt.

They said: let us go and ask those at Rabbi's house.

They went to ask.

A maidservant from Rabbi's household came out and said to them: enter in pairs.²²

²⁰For different versions of this story, see the *y. Megillah* 2:2, *b. Rosh Hashanah* 26b, *b. Megillah* 18a. For a comparative study of the different Palestinian and Babylonian versions, see S. Valler, *Women in Jewish Society in the Talmudic Period* (Tel-Aviv, 2000), 152–60 (Hebrew). Valler suggests that the story's "natural place" is in tractate *Megillah*.

²¹On the meaning of *haloglogot*, see E. Kutscher, *Words and Their History* (Jerusalem, 1965), 81–82 (Hebrew). I thank Ronit Gadish for providing me with the reference. Both *haloglogot* and *serugin* appear in the Mishnah. Kutscher reads the story as indicative of a stage in which Hebrew was still spoken by the "simple folk" but was gradually forgotten by the sages. Accordingly, the maid is one of the "simple folk." T. Ilan suggests that since the Nabatean language retained forms and words that the Hebrew had lost, the maid was an Arab woman who could still understand the meaning of these words (*Mine and Yours*, 99–100). To be sure, the assumed social/ethnic identity of the maid modifies the reading of the stories. Her role as an "other" would change, depending on whether she is assumed (by the narrator/audience) to be a (Jewish) country girl or a (gentile) Nabatean. Furthermore, in the context of the discussion here, the question of the source of the maid's linguistic knowledge is of prime importance. However, there does not seem to be any conclusive evidence supporting either of the "historical" conjectures. See also Valler's account of Yalon's and Margalioth's historical conclusions regarding the status of Hebrew as reflected in this story (159–60).

²²I have chosen the option of understanding the Hebrew abbreviation as *lishnai*, meaning *ishmayim* (in pairs). It is of course possible to understand the abbreviation as referring to years (*leshanim*), that is, enter according to your age (literally, "your years"). I thank my friend Adi Schremer for pointing this out to me as well as for arguing against my interpretation. He

They said: so and so go in first, so and so go in first.
 She said to them: why are you entering “*serugin serugin*”?
 One Rabbi was carrying purslane in his bowl and some of it fell out.
 She said to him: . . . Rabbi, your “*haloglogot*” have scattered.

When the rabbis arrive at Rabbi Judah’s threshold, they are met by a maidservant who requests that they sort themselves out and enter in pairs.²³ Seemingly clear and simple instructions turn out to be more than the rabbis can handle, for they are busy measuring honor, trying to match the order of their entry into the house to the corresponding hierarchy that codes their relationships to one another.²⁴ This petty behavior, which seems self-defeating in relation to the initial purpose of the visit (to seek an answer to two quandaries), is, ironically, what produces the answer to the query involving one of the words, *serugin*. The maidservant, observing the commotion of the rabbis, turns round (quite impatiently, one could imagine) and asks them why they are entering *serugin serugin*, that is, intermittently. The context in which she utters her words endows the word with meaning. Still, it is not simply the surrounding events that make the word meaningful, nor is the story’s main point the contrast between “real life” and the scholars’ detached ivory tower (the *beit midrash*, the house of study) in which they had failed to connect signifier to signified. The irony of the tale lies at the point where the lack of workable categories (correspondence) among the sages, their inability to pair themselves, brings about the correspondence between the word *serugin* and its referent. The joke is actually at their expense: thanks to the maidservant, the rabbis seem to have acquired more linguistic competence.²⁵ However, nowhere does the story indicate that they understand that the contextual process that produced the linguistic answer is also an indirect comment on—albeit not a

drew my attention to the fact that MS Leiden, MS Vatican, the parallel in *Megillah*, and later commentators (e.g., Rabbi Shlomo Ha-adani) all have “years” (*shanim*) in their version. However, despite this overwhelming counterevidence, my choice can still be held, I believe, not only on literary grounds (compare also Penei Moshe, a pivotal commentator of the Palestinian Talmud, who understands the phrase to mean precisely “enter in pairs”).

²³On the customary visit of the sages to Rabbi the Patriarch as analogous to the Roman custom of *salutatio*, see H. Shapira, “The Deposition of Rabban Gamliel: Between History and Legend,” *Zion* 64 (1999): 14, n. 42 (Hebrew) and the bibliography cited there.

²⁴The order of entry (*ordo salutatio*) determined one’s status. See R. Kimelman, “The Conflict between the Priestly Oligarchy and the Sages in the Talmudic Period (an Explication of PT Shabbat 12:3, 13C = Horayot 3:5, 48C),” *Zion* 48 (1983): 137 (Hebrew).

²⁵It is of course possible to see the maid’s command of Hebrew as demonstrating the grandeur of Rabbi’s house, in which “every one spoke good Hebrew, even the lowliest maidservant” (Ilan, *Mine and Yours*, 99, counter to her other explanation, see n. 21 above). Thus one might understand the story as an indirect praise of Rabbi Judah’s authority. However, it seems to me that this understanding of the text, like the assertion that “the purpose of the story is not to endow the woman with special knowledge which the sages lack” (99),

solution to—their second query: “who is greater—in wisdom or in age?”²⁶ In this respect, their desire to capture a signifying practice is not fulfilled; the story does not resolve the overdeterminate signifier (“greater”) that relates to two alternative signifieds (“wisdom,” “age”). The disparity between the rabbis’ (ultimate) enhanced command of language and their lack of introspection implies that their erudite discourse is not anchored on stable grounds. On the contrary, the destabilized institutional order is what in effect produces the newly acquired linguistic knowledge.

Let us return now to the figure who exposes this discursive blind spot, Rabbi’s maidservant. She is also the one who supplies the rabbis with the meaning of the second unknown word, *haloglogot*. One of the rabbis, carrying the bowl of purslane, is holding the solution in his very own hands without even knowing it. The story ends here. A similar version of the tale, in *y. Meggillah 2:2*, includes an additional scene: someone (perhaps the servant’s mistress?) orders her to bring a *matate* (broom) to sweep up the scattered herb. Two things are achieved by this additional episode: first, the meaning of the word *matate* is explicated. Second, it is not the maid who introduces the meaning but rather someone of a higher rank, and the servant herself is safely restored to the domain of housecleaning, where she supposedly belongs.

SELF-REFLECTIVITY, LINGUISTIC SKILLS, AND IDENTITY

Rabbi’s maidservant appears elsewhere in rabbinic literature as a mediator through whom lexical understanding is attained. In the following text, *b. Nazir 3a*, the Nazirite vows that appear first in the Mishnah are discussed.²⁷

“I intend to curl [*mesalsel*] [my hair].”

How do we know that this word [i.e., *mesalsel*] refers to the curling of the hair?

From a remark made by a maidservant of Rabbi’s household, who said to a certain man:

How much longer are you going to curl [*mesalsel*] your hair?

fails to account for the complexity of the tale. Ilan also contends that the words (*haloglogot*, *serugin*) are “archaic Hebrew words from the Bible.” To the best of my knowledge, they are not biblical words.

²⁶In the framework of these criteria (age, wisdom) the maidservant is not necessarily excluded, since “gender” is not mentioned as a defining category. Ironically, the maidservant could be occupying a high position.

²⁷Compare *b. Rosh Hashana 26b* and *b. Megillah 18a*, in which there is no implied reference to a Nazirite. In these texts the maid’s use of the word *mesalsel* serves to explicate a biblical verse (Prov. 4:8), as do two other mundane instances that are presented there and that shed light on forgotten meanings of biblical words.

The rabbis cite Rabbi's maidservant's words as proof that "curling one's hair" indicates long hair. The context of the rabbis' discussion concerns Nazirite vows, but it is unclear from the text whether they assume that Rabbi's servant's words were specifically addressed to a Nazirite. Her rhetorical question sounds reproachful. The tone may reflect the ambiguous connotations of the expression: *mesalsel bise'aro* (curling his hair) is associated in midrashic literature with the figure of a "dandy," an effeminate male.²⁸ Accordingly, Rabbi's maid was addressing an effeminate man whom she criticized for behavior that is perceived in the culture as inappropriate. It is also possible that the servant's words were directed to a Nazirite. If so, why would she be critical of his long hair, a sign of dedication and sublime intent? A possible answer appears in a story in the Babylonian Talmud a few pages after the text under discussion.²⁹

This is the story of Narcissus, only it has a happy ending. It tells the tale of a "would-be" Narcissus who is not doomed by seeing his reflection in the water but rather saved at that very moment.

Shim'on the Just said: in the whole of my life, I have never eaten the guilt-offering of a defiled Nazirite except for once.

The incident of [*ma'ase be'*] this man who came from the south and I saw [*ure'itiv*] that he had beautiful eyes, that he was good looking [*tov ro'ei*] and his locks were heaped into curls.

I said to him: my son, why did you see fit [*ra'ita*] to destroy this magnificent hair?

He said to me: I was a shepherd in my native town, and on going to draw water from the river I looked at my reflection [in its waters].

My evil inclination assailed me, seeking to drive me from the world. I said to him: you wicked one, should you have tampered with something which is not yours, which is to become dust and maggots and worms? I shall shave these locks for the sake of Heaven.

I lowered his head and kissed him and said: my son, may there be many like you, who do the will of God in Israel. With you is this verse fulfilled: "When a man shall utter a vow of a Nazirite to consecrate himself unto the lord." (Num. 6:2)

²⁸See *Midrash on Psalms* 80 (Buber edition), in which Yoel ben Petuel's name is explained: "For he used to be seduced [*mitpateb*] and curl his hair [*mesalsel bise'aro*] like a virgin [*betulah*]." See also the description of Joseph in *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* 84:7, *Midrash Tanchuma Vayeshev* 8, and Kugel's discussion of these sources in J. L. Kugel, *In Potiphar's House* (Cambridge and London, 1990), 76–79. On the rabbinic Joseph as a cultural androgyne, see J. Levinson, "Cultural Androgyny in Rabbinic Literature," in *From Athens to Jerusalem: Medicine in Hellenized Jewish Lore and in Early Christian Literature*, ed. S. Kottek, M. Horstmanshoff, G. Baader, and G. Ferngren (Rotterdam, 2000), 133–39.

²⁹The version quoted here is taken from *t. Nazir* 4:7. The other variants include *b. Nazir* 4b, *b. Nedarim* 9b, *y. Nedarim* 1:5.

This text, not unlike the Greek rendering of the myth, is preoccupied with issues of sight, representation, and true knowledge, with the critical need to recognize “the source of reflection” on which self-knowledge depends.³⁰ Indeed, the short Hebrew text accentuates the role of “sight” and its relation to knowledge in the transformation of its two protagonists.³¹ The double exposure in the rabbinic story includes the inner “Narcissus”/Nazirite visionary self-realization tale but also, of no less importance, the story of the first-person narrator Shim’on the Just. His apprehension regarding Nazirites in general is expressed at the beginning when he declares that the narrative he is about to recount is an exception. His initial impression of the beautiful Nazirite is articulated through the use of externalities (“sight”) that he associates with Nazirite vows. He “*saw*” that he was “good *looking*,” and he asked him why he “*saw* fit” to shave his head. However, the Nazirite’s own account moves him beyond his misjudgment of external appearances to a new, contextually specific understanding. In other words, Shim’on the Just acquires new knowledge that not only allows him to eat from the Nazirite sacrifice (which he generally refused) but that also leads him to the ultimate goal of bridging the potential gap between the biblical text (Num. 6:2) and reality.

Unlike the Greek Narcissus, the Nazirite who sees his reflection in the water realizes the danger and is thus saved from the fate of eternal self-deception and frustrated desire. Yet although the story presents a case of Naziritehood as a way out of narcissistic entrapment, it nevertheless conveys a potential association between vows of abstinence and narcissism.³²

The main theme within the myth of Narcissus, as Froma Zeitlin suggests, is about misrecognizing self for other: “Narcissus finds a mirror in which he misrecognizes his self for the other. . . . At the absence of an other, the self can only divide (or double) and can only hopelessly yearn to play both parts, self and other. Narcissus wastes away, caught in the specular fascination of impossible desire, doomed to gaze at the surface of the water but never to fathom its depths.”³³ In spite of the happy ending of the rabbinic tale, the deep psychological and cultural anxiety that lies at its base cannot be overlooked. It is in relation to the association between Naziritehood and narcissism (which is presumed by Shim’on the Just to be a general rule) that the exceptional tale is cited.³⁴

³⁰Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. L. S. Roudiez (New York, 1987), 107.

³¹The root *r-a-h* appears three times: Rabbi Shim’on sees that the Nazirite is “good looking” (*tov ro’ei*), and he asks him “why have you sought,” literally, “why have you seen” (*mah ra’ita*).

³²The danger of pride, brought about by ascetic behavior, is of course not an uncommon theme in early monastic literature. See, for example, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. B. Ward (Kalamazoo, 1984), 106–7, and *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, trans. N. Russel (Kalamazoo, 1981), 144.

³³Froma I. Zeitlin, *Playing the Other* (Chicago, 1996), 266.

³⁴Thus in the case of a Nazirite the explicit devotion to the “totally other,” that is, God, is distrusted. That which drove Narcissus to mistake himself for an “other” may carry severe

Let us return now to Rabbi's maidservant and her role in relation to rabbinic narcissism. When Rabbi's maidservant turns to the man and reproaches him with the words, "How much longer are you going to curl your hair" (*b. Nazir* 3a), she may be reflecting on this narcissism/vanity. Of all possible phrases, it is the ambiguous expression "curling the hair" that is being explicated in the context of vows of abstinence. If the maid's words are indeed addressed to a Nazirite, she is assuming the role of the reflective water—the mirror held up against his face—that awakens him from his autoerotic fantasy. Here it is not the modified Nazirite/Narcissus who sees his own reflection in the water and is suddenly alarmed but rather an "other" who serves as a reflector. In her words to the Nazirite, Rabbi's maid is performing a role similar to the one she plays in the first story (from *y. Shevi'it*). After failing to find the words' referents in their closed-off world of the *beit midrash*, the sages turn outward in search of meaning. But there, on the threshold of Rabbi's house, the maid solves the rabbis' linguistic riddles, only to hint at a fundamental enigma that stands at the core of their discourse.³⁵ This enigma or blind spot is rooted in the very same lack of self-reflection on their part: their inability to see themselves as objectified "others." To be sure, there is a difference between the narcissistic mistaking of "selves" for "others" and the mistaking of "others" for "selves." However, in both cases the conflation of the two (self and other) inevitably results in a confusion of the semiotic signifying process. If the production of a meaningful discourse relies on distinct signifiers, the lack of a distinct signifier, defined in relationship to an "other," implies inherent discursive ambiguity if not total chaos.³⁶ All the more so when the signifying agents themselves

implications when transposed onto the theological level, in which the "other" is God. One may even suggest that Shim'on the Just's apprehensive stand toward Naziritehood is analogous to neo-Platonic interpretations of the Greek myth. Kristeva explains Plotinus's explication of the "narcissistic plot," according to which "the primary reflection that created the cosmos is a necessary process, and it is only the reflection of that reflection in perishable substances that leads us away from the ideal and consequently deserves to be condemned. . . . Narcissism is thus condemned, but that condemnation has no bearing on the origin of the reflection process; according to Plotinus, the error would simply set in at the moment when the individual being grants reality to such images instead of granting his own intimacy" (105–6). In the rabbinic story the Nazirite from the south is awakened at exactly that crucial moment in which the ephemeral body (matter), on the one hand, and God's propriety, on the other, are realized.

³⁵On enigmas in relation to riddles, see G. Hasan-Rokem and D. Shulman, "Afterword," in *Untying the Knot: On Riddles and Other Enigmatic Modes*, ed. G. Hasan-Rokem and D. Shulman (New York, 1996), 316–20.

³⁶One may choose, for example, between Mary Douglas's structuralist/functionalist account of instances of cultural ambiguities, which are in turn treated with (successful?) confining measures within the otherwise coherent cultural system, and Derrida's "play of signification," which has no limits, implying an inherent deconstruction of an ambiguous system/structure. See Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings* (Wiltshire, 1996), 51–54, and Derrida's reading of Lévi-Strauss in "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass (Chicago, 1978), 278–93.

(the rabbis) fail to make the true differentiation, hence establish, their own pivotal identity—not unlike Narcissus, of whom Maurice Blanchot writes: “Narcissus is said to be solitary, but it is not because he is excessively present to himself; it is rather because he lacks, by decree (you shall not see yourself), that reflected presence—identity, the self-same—the basis upon which a living relation with life, which is other, can be ventured.”³⁷ Yet surprisingly enough, as the story implies, the unstable social categories and the shortsightedness of the sages are precisely what produce their linguistic-erudite knowledge/discourse, which is, after all, a salient component of their identity and authority.

This story does not stand alone in the rabbinic corpus. There are numerous narratives in which the sages’ self-indulgence is highlighted and in turn criticized. Yet this story goes a step farther, for it explicitly introduces a maidservant (the most servile subject) as the agent through which the rabbis’ self-absorbed patterns—specifically related to the construction of rabbinic discourse—are exposed. She is not trapped, as we might have expected, in the rabbis’ gaze.

One might argue that since the maid is a “secured” category—not merely a woman but a servant woman—she is a safer semiotic object onto which to project reflection/criticism. Such a view would accentuate the “objectified” component of the maid-character whose function in the (hegemonic) discourse is in turn confined by the narcissism on which the authority constructs itself.³⁸ Accordingly, rabbinic hegemony as an authority-wielding power is viewed as relying on narcissism, which does not allow for the existence or presentation of an “other” that is not a total mirroring of itself. Yet it seems that the understanding of the maid’s role as a controlled and safe mode of self-reflection does not account for the unsettling effect she (or, rather, the narratives in which she appears) produces.³⁹ While her presence implies a hidden seed of discursive anxiety, the maidservant has the potential capacity to rupture the desired foundation of rabbinic hegemony.

IDENTITY AND DISCURSIVE ANXIETY

Rabbi’s maid’s inherent liminal position, being “a crossing point of subjectivity and objectification,”⁴⁰ renders her such a powerful commentator on cultural narcissism since narcissism addresses this very basic distinction

³⁷M. Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. A. Smock (Lincoln, 1995), 127.

³⁸On narcissism in the service of colonialism, in which the colonized are seen (and come to see themselves) as a reflection of the colonizers, see Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. C. L. Lam Markman (New York, 1967), 109.

³⁹However, it should be clear that we are forever in the presence of hegemonic discourse that employs servants in different discursive contexts. Whether they are acting as subjects or objects, we do not hear “their” stories but, rather, those of their owners (see Fitzgerald, 2).

⁴⁰McCarthy, 180.

of subject/object. Her ambivalent position, which defies absolute objectification, frees her from total discursive bonds. In turn, the perception of the hegemonic mechanism as “narcissistic” is supplemented by another notion, one that points to the “ambivalence at the very heart of colonialism, which . . . is due to the ambivalence inherent in mimicry.”⁴¹ Echo replaces Narcissus. Homi Bhabha, in what has become a classic essay, introduces this paradigm of mimetic anxiety/ambivalence:

The *menace* of mimicry is its *double* vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority. . . . A (colonial) desire that, through repetition of *partial presence*, which is the basis of mimicry, articulates those disturbances of cultural . . . difference that menace the narcissistic demand of colonial authority. It is a desire that reverses “in part” the colonial appropriation by now producing a partial vision of the colonizer’s presence; a gaze of otherness, that shares the acuity of the genealogical gaze which, as Foucault describes it, liberates marginal elements and shatters the unity of man’s being through which he extends his sovereignty.⁴²

Bearing in mind the notion of mimicry, let us turn now to another story about Rabbi Judah’s maid (*y. Berakhot* 3:4):

There was the case of one who wished to have sex with the maid-servant of Rabbi.

She said to him: if my mistress does not immerse—I do not immerse.

He said to her: but are you not like a beast?

She said to him: and have you not heard that [the punishment] for a person who has sex with an animal that s/he is stoned to death, as it is written: “Whoever lies with a beast shall be put to death?”

There are two moments of mimicry in this tale. The first occurs when the maid explains that her (impure) position results from her mimicry of her mistress: “if my mistress does not immerse—I do not immerse.” The immersion to which the maid alludes is the purifying ritual that a woman performs, marking the transition from a state of impurity (in general, immediately before, during, and until seven days after menstruation, in which the woman is *niddah*) to that of purity (in which she is allowed to have

⁴¹Sara Mills, *Discourse* (London, 1997), 124. I am using a model that addresses colonial power structures to talk about a hegemonic system, which is obviously not synonymous with the colonial. However, in terms of the dynamics of power and identity formation, the application of insights from the colonial model to rabbinic culture is possible, I believe, without assuming the overall political and historical framework of the former.

⁴²Homi K. Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man,” in *The Location of Culture* (London, 1994), 88–89.

sexual intercourse with her husband).⁴³ However, the maid's statement is puzzling: a few lines before this tale, the Palestinian Talmud discusses an additional law that requires immersion before each sexual act. Do her words, then, refer to the ritualistic immersion before intercourse? If so, she would be saying that she—like her mistress—does not immerse before the act, opposing the potential lover who observes that dictum. Or, alternatively, does the maid simply state that the timing of her “immersion” is dependent on when her mistress immerses (e.g., after menstruation, etc.)? One way or the other, the maid is clearly trying to dissuade the man by pointing to her impure state, a state that she associates with her dependency on her mistress. Furthermore, this dependence is articulated in explicit terms of mimicry: if the mistress does not do X, then the maid does not either.

This mimicry is by its very nature ironic. If the mimicry relates to the mistress's custom not to immerse before intercourse, then the irony lies in the backfiring of a supposed norm against the norm-creator (the hegemonic male). An even greater irony is produced if we understand the maid as referring to her mistress's ritualistic immersion in general. In this case, the maid's conduct regarding immersion is not dependent on the behavior of her mistress insofar as it is *modeled* (in an iconic relation) on it. Rather, her conduct is *directly* (in an “indexical,” causal relation) dependent on it with a slight but nevertheless crucial difference: what is for the mistress a purifying rite, contingent on her physical/biological being, is for the maid a mere act of washing, lacking the same symbolic meaning. She is in essence “disembodied” in the sense that her physical/biological existence is excluded from the hegemonic symbolic structure of purity/impurity.⁴⁴ Yet it is precisely that exclusion that enables her to

⁴³On rabbinic discourse on *niddah*, see C. E. Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender* (Stanford, 2000).

⁴⁴Her response is indeed unclear. Louis Ginzberg understands the maid to be threatening that, should her mistress begin to immerse (in the future) *after* intercourse, then she will do the same. Hence the sexual act will be made public, and both of them will be shamed (*A Commentary on the Palestinian Talmud* [New York, 1941], 3:244). As M. Satlow notes, this explanation seems “strained” (*Tasting the Dish*, Brown Judaic Studies, no. 303 [Atlanta, 1995], 99–100). In a recent English translation, the text is emended: “If the gentleman [!] will not immerse himself, then neither will I” (*The Talmud of the Land of Israel*, trans. Z. Zahavy [Chicago and London, 1989], 1:133). This textual emendation seems to be based on the immediate context, in which the previous section deals with immersion prior to having intercourse as a means of preventing sinful sexual relations. Following the man's analogy between the woman and a beast, the translator explains that the woman was a gentile (see also Satlow, 99–100). But compare *b. Niddah* 66b, where Rabbi himself supervises the immersion of his maid. Daniel Boyarin has suggested to me an alternative explanation: when the maid says that she does not immerse (or will not immerse) if her mistress does not (will not) immerse, she is literally saying that if her mistress does not (will not) have sex (hence, immerse), then neither will she. In this reading the maid's mimicry is further enhanced.

produce a “hidden transcript.”⁴⁵ She uses the basic (male) hegemonic categorization to push the man away rather than argue her way through some alternative discourse. Again, when the man discards her first excuse, implying further degradation for which the equation of “slave” and “beast” is recruited,⁴⁶ she pursues the same strategy of addressing *his* line of argument; she does not protest in rage. Thus her hidden, tricksterlike transcript is a mimicry of his discourse.⁴⁷ Furthermore, once she alludes to a biblical verse to refute his second argument, that is, that having sex with a beast is a capital crime, her mimicry of a basic rabbinic-hegemonic discursive praxis is underlined. Through the repetition of biblically anchored discourse she lets herself off the hook, and the man’s desire is left unfulfilled. The frustrated physical-erotic desire is shown to be analogous to or even to stem from his very own discourse, which turns on itself. Rabbi’s maidservant is thus presented as an example of a mimicking figure, figures whom Homi Bhabha has characterized as “a doubling, the part-objects of a metonymy of (colonial) desire which alienates the modality and normality of those dominant discourses in which they emerge as ‘inappropriate’ (colonial) subjects.”⁴⁸ The maidservant’s mimicry leads to a point of frustrated desire where her “partial representation” of hegemonic discourse questions the very “notion of identity” on which the discourse is constructed.⁴⁹ Or, rather, this mimicry leads to a point at which the discourse fails to *produce* a coherent identity.

⁴⁵James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven, 1990). Scott distinguishes between four kinds of political discourse among subordinate groups. The maid’s discursive strategies here belong to the third kind, of which Scott says: “This is the politics of disguise and anonymity that takes place in public view but is designed to have a double meaning or to shield the identity of the actors” (19). What is especially relevant for our discussion is his observation that a “partly sanitized, ambiguous, and coded version of the hidden transcript is always present in the public discourse of subordinating groups” (19).

⁴⁶On the identification of (Canaanite) slaves with beasts in halakhic discourse, as well as in aggadic material, see J. Heinemann, *Aggadab and Its Development* (Jerusalem, 1974), 125–29 (Hebrew).

⁴⁷In fact, her argument is all too familiar. It is, after all, used by Rav Shila as a coded transcript in his appeal to *his* hegemonic authority (*b. Berakhot* 28a). For a close reading of the text, see J. Fraenkel, “The Story of R. Sheila,” *Tarbitz* 40 (1971): 33–40 (Hebrew). Menstrual impurity is Beruria’s sister’s excuse for not having sex with her (disguised) brother-in-law, who witnesses her virtuous conduct in the captivity of a Roman brothel (*b. Avoda Zara* 18a). See D. Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1990), 190. For “hidden transcripts” embedded in double-entendre rabbinic discourse vis-à-vis Roman hegemony, see D. Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford, 1999), 42–66.

⁴⁸Bhabha, 88.

⁴⁹Ibid., 89.

A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD: LANGUAGE OF INTIMACY
VERSUS DISCURSIVE ESCAPE

“[T]hey shall cast before the sword together with my people; oh, strike the thigh” (Ezek. 22:17)—said Rabbi Eleazar: these are men who eat and drink together and stab each other with the swords in their tongues.

—*b. Yoma* 9b

Rabbi’s maid is not only a talented mimic of rabbinic biblical/legal (halakhic) discourse, she is also skillful at other kinds of wordplay. The following anecdote, which presents the skill of Rabbi’s maids for poetic, riddlelike wit (*leshon chokhmah*), is the first in a series of three, introduced by the formula “when so and so used to speak in *leshon chokhmah*.”

When Rabbi’s maids engaged in witty language [*leshon chokhmah*] they used to say: “The ladle strikes against the barrel [i.e., there is no wine left in the barrel], let the eagles [i.e., guests] fly to their nests.”

And when he wanted them [the students/sages] to stay, he used to say to them: “We shall remove the plug cork from her friend [open another barrel] and the ladle will float in her barrel like a ship that sails the seas.” (*b. Eruvin* 53b)

In this short narrative, the maids (presented here as a group) are not tricksters bargaining for freedom, nor are they the liminal figure whom the rabbis encounter at the threshold of Rabbi’s house. Here they are situated at the heart of Rabbi’s house, where they mark the limits of Rabbi’s hospitality. The language through which they communicate their message is highly poetic and witty. It is also a language that implies their intimate acquaintance with rabbinic witty discourse, as if to match their status as the pseudomistresses of the court.⁵⁰ Their role, not only their eloquence, seems to transgress social boundaries. One might imagine Rabbi’s wife (or senior student) but not his maids guarding him from the demanding students who might tire him too much.

A similar kind of intimacy between Rabbi Judah and his maid comes up in the next story, where once again a maid takes a contrasting position to

⁵⁰In the other two examples in the Babylonian Talmud, *b. Eruvin* 53b, the protagonists are rabbis. In fact, this anecdote appears within a wider context in which the importance of exact use of language and the subtleties of wit are discussed. It begins with Rabbi Yehudah’s quotation of Rav, who said that the Judeans, as opposed to the Galileans, were strict in regard to their language, and therefore their Torah was sustained. Further on, it includes Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananiah’s famous saying, “I have never been defeated except . . . by a woman, a boy and girl” (followed by his tales); Rabbi Yossi’s encounter with Beruriah, who rebukes him (“Galilean fool”) for not having formulated the question in pithier form; and more. It seems that one of the thematic threads that runs through this textual unit is the linguistic superiority of the sons of Judea (in connection with their customs of the reading of the Torah).

the group of rabbis (*b. Ketubot* 104a). This is a haunting story about impending loss in which language, authority, and human power are challenged to their limits. “The” rabbinic authority is about to die, and the rabbis are gathering together in this last battle against the heavenly forces who seek Rabbi Judah’s death.

On the day when Rabbi died⁵¹ the rabbis decreed a public fast and offered prayers for heavenly mercy.

And they announced: whoever says “Rabbi is dead” will be stabbed with a sword.

Rabbi’s maidservant ascended the roof and said: “Those above claim Rabbi, and those below claim Rabbi; may it be the will that those below will overpower those above.”

Yet, when she saw how often he resorted to the privy, painfully taking off his tefillin⁵² and putting them on again, she prayed: may it be the will that those above will overpower those below.

And the rabbis did not cease to pray for mercy.

She took a jar and threw it down from the roof to the ground.

[Because of the noise] They were silent [from asking mercy], and Rabbi died.

The rabbis said to Bar Kappara: go and find out.

He went and found that he was dead.

He tore his garment and turned the tear backwards.

He stated: “The angels and the righteous clung to the ark [*aron haqodesh*], the angels have defeated the righteous, and the ark has been taken captive.”

The rabbis (the rabbis) said to him: has he died?

He said to them: you said so, I did not say so.

Strict measures of expression—of discourse—are demanded at this crucial point: fasting, prayer, and prohibition (accompanied by capital punishment) of uttering the words “Rabbi is dead” (literally, “Rabbi’s soul is rested”). Language is confined to extreme regulative channels.

Rabbi’s maid buys into the discursive orders, for at first she aligns herself with the rabbis’ prayer that Rabbi Judah should not die. But then something happens that makes her change both her mind and her mode of action. Standing on the roof, the maid witnesses his agony at having to take

⁵¹Literally, “His soul rested/his life rested” (*nah nafshei*). It is important to note that the expression that the rabbis, as well as the narrator, seek to avoid throughout the story is in itself a mediated (if not euphemistic) formulation. Compare the usage here to the use of a direct verb connoting Rabbi’s death in the *y. Kila’yim* 9:4.

⁵²Two black cubical leather boxes in which scriptural passages are inserted and that are strapped on a man’s left hand and on his head. In rabbinic times they were worn during the day. Putting on the *tefillin* is an elaborately specified procedure that (we assume) Rabbi follows meticulously each time he is forced to take them off and put them on again.

off the *tefillin* and put them on again each time he goes to the toilet. The maid, unlike the rabbis, sees him in moments of physical intimacy. Yet she sees more than that. The maid sees Rabbi Judah in moments where his bodily dysfunction can no longer endure the legal (halakhic) requirements of the *tefillin*: the intersecting point where the physical naked body can no longer clothe itself with halakhic-cultural garb.⁵³ On the roof, positioned between heaven and earth, she perceives the broader picture,⁵⁴ and her compassion stems from the recognition of the unbridgeable discrepancy inherent in Rabbi's position, of what constitutes his subjectivity. She sees the battle of the "ones above" and the "ones below" grotesquely incorporated in Rabbi: the *tefillin* (the ones above) and his bowel sickness (the one below) are at painful odds.⁵⁵ The maid recognizes that the image, as the rabbis express it, of the battle between the Heavens and the mortals is a decontextualized conception in that it fails to relate to the human agent entrapped in this battlefield. Her recognition, unlike the implied notion of the rabbis, suggests that Rabbi's painful position is not a direct reflection of the cosmic struggle but, rather, an opposite projection of it. At this moment, she realizes that her master ought to die. Having presented a reflective mirror held up against rabbinic notions, she brings the rabbis' discourse to a halt, this time not by words but by the violent act of breaking the jug. She silences the praying sages and tips the scale.

The powerful image of a shattered jar on the ground evokes the image of man as a vessel,⁵⁶ man who is cursed by God, "For dust you are, and to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3:19).⁵⁷ The "ones below" who pray for Rabbi end up receiving the scattered pieces of the symbolic jar.⁵⁸ To be sure, the rabbis' words are seen in this story to hold overwhelming powers: it is only when their prayers stop that they are, so to speak, vanquished.

⁵³Compare the words of Rabbi Shemuel bar Rav Yitzhak's maid, who testifies that she used to wash his clothes daily and never saw a bad thing, that is, emission on his clothes (*y. Sanhedrin* 10:2, *y. Yebhamot* 2:4, *Midrash Leviticus Rabbah* 24:6). In the last citation, it is told of Rabbi Yishmael bar Rav Yitzchak, but see M. Margaliot, *Midrash Vayiqra Rabbah* (New York and Jerusalem, 1993), 560 (Hebrew).

⁵⁴See Meir, 331 n. 69 (on the roof as a place for prayers in times of adversity in rabbinic literature).

⁵⁵I thank Galit Hasan-Rokem for this observation.

⁵⁶See, for example, *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* 14:7. See also the *b. Ta'anit* 7a, *b. Nedarim* 50, in which, following Caesar's daughter's analogy, Rabbi Yehoshua explains that there is an explanation for the seeming incongruity between his ugly physical appearance and his knowledge of Torah. Just as wine is best preserved in an earthen vessel (i.e., a cheap material), so is scriptural wisdom best contained in an ugly one.

⁵⁷Compare Ecclesiastes 12:5-7: "But man sets out for his eternal abode, with mourners all around in the street. Before the silver cord snaps and the golden bowl crashes, the jar is shattered at the spring, and the jug is smashed at the cistern."

⁵⁸The image of the uterus as an upside-down jug appears in rabbinic literature; see *Midrash Leviticus Rabbah* 14:3 and Levinson, "Cultural Androgyny," 124, n. 30. On the image in Greek medical texts, see A. E. Hanson, "The Medical Writers' Woman," in *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, ed. D. M. Halperin, J. J. Winkler, and F. I. Zeitlin (Princeton, 1990), 317.

But there is also something to be said about this kind of discursive force. For one thing, it may be misguided—however human—in its motives, since it is the rabbis' fear of their own impending orphanhood (which entails an immediate cultural/institutional void) and not their concern with the well-being of Rabbi Judah that drives them to desperate measures. For another, the apprehension over uttering the explicit words "Rabbi is dead" is carried on after his actual death, as the explicit utterance is deliberately postponed. Bar Kappara tears his garment as a sign of mourning but then turns it backward. In indirect, poetic language, replete with biblical allusions,⁵⁹ he cries out that the ark has been taken captive. When directly asked by the sages if Rabbi is dead, he answers, "You said so, I did not say so." It seems, then, that the resourceful, powerful discourse cannot endure the existential ultimate negation: human death.⁶⁰

Bar Kappara invokes a depersonalized image of the sage (as the ark) as part of an abstract, cosmological picture of a war between the angels and the righteous.⁶¹ The image of the ark taken captive connotes temporal loss, not a final dead-end. Moreover, if the sage is considered to be "a personified Torah," then the description of Rabbi's death, while enhancing that image (the ark contains the Torah), also suggests that it is a double-edged sword. Indeed, the function of the image in constructing rabbinic authority is obvious. Yet the identification of the sages with their pivotal text proves to be, in this case, a prison house of language. Here we are offered a glimpse into the depths of the ineffable, mute abyss. Here the ineffable does not imply a disrupted discursive universe in which signifiers are in search of signified (as in the first story from the *y. Sevi'it*). On the contrary, at the beginning, when Rabbi is still alive, the rabbis' ban against uttering the words "Rabbi is dead" implies that they see the connection between their words and the referent not only as being present but as an almost causal one. Yet paradoxically, this enhanced power of language is pointed toward death, toward a *missing* referent. Put differently, it is the representation of the void that the rabbis are dreading. Rabbi is the dying man whom Michel de Certeau sees as "the lapse of this discourse [a discourse that 'tirelessly articulates tasks']. He is, and can only be, ob-scene. And hence censured, deprived of language, wrapped up in a shroud of

⁵⁹See Meir, 305 (on the parallel tradition in *y. Kila'yim* 9:4), 332 (our text).

⁶⁰Note that the prohibition against uttering the words "Rabbi is dead" is accompanied by the threat of death against whoever dares to breach it. The incongruity between the rabbis' execution of (discursive) power—via capital crime—and their inability to utter these words is the ultimate irony. Again, the threat that the violator "will be stabbed with a sword" is an indirect way of stating that "he shall die" (on the differences between the Palestinian and the Babylonian traditions regarding this phrase, see Meir, 330).

⁶¹Compare the *y. Kila'yim* 9:4, where Rabbi is compared to the Tablets. The two traditions allude to the prevalent image of the sages as the personification of the Torah. See, for instance, the *y. Mo'ed Qatan* 3:7, *b. Sotah* 49b (on Rabbi Eliezer, who in *Midrash Song of Songs Rabbah* 1:3 is compared to the ark). See also J. Neusner, *Why No Gospels in Talmudic Judaism* (Atlanta, 1988), 20.

silence: the unnamable.”⁶² In this account of Rabbi’s death the “silence” is indeed there. It is deferred by prayers and subsequently camouflaged by a thick layer of metaphors.

In this case, Rabbi’s maidservant does not present linguistic competences that the rabbis lack. She herself does not utter the forbidden words, nor does she offer a linguistic alternative. She does, however, modify the rabbis’ use of language (prior to the death) inasmuch as she literally disrupts it: the noise of the shattered jug interferes with the prayers. Her disruptive act stems from her holistic view: she has the ability to see the essential connectedness between the personal (Rabbi’s physical agony), the cultural (his pain in putting on the *tefillin*), and the theological/cosmological (the battle between the ones above and the ones below). The maid’s encompassing view positions the subject (i.e., the personal) in the center without losing sight of the grand plan (the cosmic battle) in which the subject is objectified. One may argue that it is the slave’s liminal position as “the crossing point of subjectivity and objectification” that is projected into the maid’s understanding so as to illuminate the shortcomings of the rabbinic reaction to the overwhelming crisis. Bar Kappara’s depersonalized, desubjectified image of Rabbi Judah as the ark is juxtaposed with the maid’s complex understanding of the personal and subjective experience. Bar Kappara’s elaborate, escapist language contrasts with her nonverbal act.⁶³

VITALITY AND LANGUAGE

Whether outliving her master or not,⁶⁴ Rabbi’s maid is said to have enjoyed a long life:

⁶²Michel de Certeau, “The Unnamable,” in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. S. Rendall (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1988), 191.

⁶³Here, too, the rabbis’ discursive practices surrounding the death scene may be seen as narcissistic insofar as narcissism and the denial of mortality (and corporeality) are connected. Narcissus “dies (if he dies) of being immortal, of having the immortality of appearance—the immortality which his metamorphosis into a flower attests: a funeral flower or flower of rhetoric” (Blanchot, 128).

The intimate relationship between the maid and her master does not end with his death; it does, however, go sour. In the context of different stories about Rabbi’s death, from which the previous narrative was quoted, a few of Rabbi’s last wishes are recounted. It is told that on his deathbed Rabbi Judah instructed his sons: “Beware of your mother’s honor, a light should be lit in its place, a table should be laid in its place, a bed should be made in its place” (*b. Ketubot* 103a). The Talmud goes on to explain the reason for these seemingly strange requests: “Every Sabbath Eve (after his death) Rabbi used to come home, until once, in the twilight of Saturday evening, a neighbor knocked on the door. Rabbi’s maid hissed at her, saying: be quiet, for Rabbi is sitting.” Since he heard this he never returned, so as not to shame the righteous, who did not reveal themselves to their families after their death. In this case the maid discloses his presence and is responsible for his ultimate disappearance from this earth.

⁶⁴If identified as the same maid (as a literary figure) who witnesses his postmortem return (*b. Ketubot* 103a).

And thus too did Barzillai the Gileadite say to David: “I am this day eighty years old: can I discern between good or bad?” (II Samuel 19:36) —This shows that the opinions of old men are changeable; “can thy servant taste what I eat or drink?” (ibid.) —This shows that the lips of old men fall apart; “can I hear any more of the voice of singing men and singing women?” (ibid.) —This proves that the ears of old men are heavy.

Rav said: Barzillai the Gileadite was a liar. For there was a maid in Rabbi’s household who was ninety-two and she used to *taste the dish*.

Raba said: Barzillai the Gileadite was steeped in lewdness. (*b. Shabbat* 152a)

This text appears in the Talmud in the midst of a discussion of old age and its discontents, not the least of which is the problem of sexual decline. At the beginning of the discussion, before the cited passage, Rabbi Shim’on Bar Halafta laments his own position, in which “the peacemaker of the home has ceased” (i.e., he has lost his ability to have sexual intercourse). Raba, for his part, comments on Barzillai’s lewdness. In the midst of these reflections, Rabbi’s maid is mentioned as a counterexample to the bleak opinions about old age. She is praised for her sustained palate and her ability to “taste the dish” at her advanced age, a phrase that does not refer only to literal food, since food, cooking, and dishes are known metaphors for sex throughout the rabbinic corpus.⁶⁵

This short anecdote about Rabbi’s maid connotes more than a pinch of fantasy about (her) erotic vitality at the age of ninety-two. In fact, in addition to the erotic component that might be implied simply from the status of the maid, her specific erotic character could be traced in some of the previous stories. She is clearly the object of desire who frustrates the desiring man. Yet she is seen to stand not only at the core of physical/erotic desire but at the point where discourse is left wanting. She intimates moments in which language is brought to a halt: the flowing signifying practice ceases to produce the union that it seeks to reflect or establish. The Eros of language that “brings the separated together . . . connect[s] the disconnected” fails, and a broken discursive universe is revealed.⁶⁶ The lack of corresponding referents (*y. Shevi’it*) or present (yet unbearable) referents of lack/negation/death suggests a discursive crisis. The insistence on formulated, persistent discourse at the time of Rabbi’s death, the inability to utter the ineffable words (Rabbi is dead/his soul is at rest) is an example of the latter. In this case, too, the rabbis are off the mark when they do not realize the disparity between

⁶⁵As the context of this text implies, too. For the food/sex metaphor in rabbinic texts, see, for example, *b. Berakhot* 70a, *b. Nedarim* 20a–b, *b. Avodah Zarah* 18b. See also Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, 109–13.

⁶⁶Hasan-Rokem, “Riddles as Images of Loss,” 121.

the cosmological scheme—the ones below versus the ones above—and the individual experience of one human being—Rabbi. It is the maid who is able to acknowledge (and produce) the—however horrific—signified, namely, death. Paradoxically, through her erotic competence, she has the power to accept death as the referent.

In his end was his beginning. Rabbi Judah the Patriarch's roots were traced back to the house of David.⁶⁷ A maidservant, we are told in *Yalkut Hamekhiri*,⁶⁸ played a significant role in the conception of Jesse's son: she was the one whom Jesse really desired. Subsequently, she made the arrangements and promised to wait for him in her quarters. But it was dark, and Jesse did not notice that her mistress—his wife—had taken her place. David was thus the outcome of a mistake, of a misrecognition. Yet he was also the phantasmagoric bridge between institutionalized procreative imperative and pure lust, or even between institutional power and subalterity, between patriarchy and abdication.⁶⁹ Either way one looks at it, the coherent "original" identity is cast into doubt,⁷⁰ if only because of the incongruity between intention (lust for the maid) and practice (intercourse with the wife). The story also raises questions regarding (self) knowledge in relation to its carnal and linguistic sources.⁷¹ If Rabbi Judah were to look closely at the original image (of David), we can only wonder what reflection of it he would see in himself. Put differently, what if Narcissus looked at his reflection in the water, realized that it was his own reflection, but then recognized that this reflection (and by implication he too) contained a foreign element, an "other" within? Going a step further, we might discover that when Rabbi Judah's maid shatters—or exposes—the rabbinic narcissistic illusion, she is merely following in the footsteps of her "ancestors," much as Rabbi Judah purports to carry on the Davidic dynasty.

⁶⁷This is not to say that the Davidic "genealogy" was not controversial among the rabbis. See, for example, A. I. Baumgarten, "Rabbi Judah I and His Opponents," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 12, no. 2 (1981): 145–49; Meir, 27–33.

⁶⁸Admittedly, this tradition is only documented in a late medieval midrashic anthology (*Yalkut Hamekhiri* on Psalms 118). However, I agree with Y. Zakovitch (*David: From Shepherd to Messiah* [Jerusalem, 1995]), who says that the late *recording* of this tradition does not prove that it is indeed a late tradition. The substitution of a mistress for the maid is the opposite motif to that of the replacement of the mistress by a maid, found in Latin literature (Fitzgerald, 63–68).

⁶⁹In discursive terms this account of David's conception conflates the institutional ("symbolic") discursive order with the imaginary ("semiotic") order.

⁷⁰This, of course, comes out explicitly in the biblical story of Ruth, the foreigner from whom the seed of David will emerge, as well as in the Judah/Tamar story.

⁷¹See the themes explored by W. Doniger concerning sexual doubles and bedtricks in *The Bedtrick: Tales of Sex and Masquerade* (Chicago, 2000).

In the body of rabbinic discourse, Rabbi's maid is an "other within," an "other" who is recognized as being seated at the very heart of its being. Insofar as discursive practices are the mechanisms through which a culture constructs its identity (and, by implication, its hegemony), this stranger within plants the seeds of ambiguity. Her role as the stranger within is carried out on the discursive level itself. She is engulfed in the very discourse on which she comments, simultaneously included and excluded from it. Positioned at the threshold as well as in the inner quarters of the house, the maid points to the eternally frustrated (rabbinic) desire for an external "other," or, put differently, for an undivided self.⁷²

⁷²"Deprived of the One, he [Narcissus] has no salvation; otherness has opened up within himself" (Kristeva, 121).