

Introduction

My first serious encounter with rabbinic literature came during my freshman year in college. This experience was reminiscent of another college activity: drinking a little too much. In both, I experienced a feeling of euphoria and pleasant disorientation, followed by a splitting headache. When reading rabbinic texts, I became intoxicated by drinking in the twists and turns in rabbinic logic; the hypothetical world in which the ancient Rabbis lived—much like Charlie in the Chocolate Factory—was a place of wonder and unlimited imagination. But it also made my head hurt, because coming to grips with it required a tremendous amount of concentration and prior knowledge. It forced me to keep so much information straight (wait, which Rabbi said what? And in what order?) that I found myself reaching for an aspirin.

After a while, I got my sea legs. The twists and turns in rabbinic literature no longer left me nauseated. That does not mean that I could take them for granted. Just when I thought that I could navigate what is often called “the sea of Talmud,” a wave would come crashing down and capsize me. These texts are hard work. Nonetheless, I kept coming back to them. Eventually, studying rabbinic literature became my profession. But I have never forgotten how I felt when I first encountered

these texts. This book is my attempt to help others sail the beautiful, and stormy, sea of Talmud.

WHAT IS THIS BOOK?

Rabbinic literature presents many obstacles for entry both to those who wish to study and to those who aim to teach these texts. Given the amount of background knowledge they presume, where does one start? For example, here are the opening lines of a few famous passages from the first major rabbinic document, the Mishnah:

From what time may one recite the *Shema'* in the evening? (*m. Berakhot* 1:1)

Berakhot 1:1)

A woman is acquired in the three ways ... (*m. Qiddushin* 1:1)

Two people are holding a cloak ... (*m. Bava Metzi'a* 1:1)

What is the *Shema'* and why does it matter when one recites it? What does saying women are “acquired” mean? And is the cloak (Hebrew *tal-lit*) a specific or general example? Is the ruling that follows limited to this one specific garment or does it refer to a general category? Does it apply just to cloaks or also to pants? Only to clothing or to all chattels corporeal? And how the heck am I supposed to know?!

By focusing on drinking—including the beverages themselves and the laws associated with producing and imbibing them—this book introduces key themes in rabbinic literature. For example, we learn about the *Shema'*, a central rabbinic prayer, from a discussion among Rabban Gamaliel's sons, who come home late from a drinking party and want to know if they can still recite the *Shema'* (chapter 7). We learn about issues of gender asymmetry, both in general and in regard to marriage, by looking at rabbinic attitudes to gender and alcohol consumption (chapter 4). And the question of whether a law is specific or general is addressed throughout this book (see, e.g., the discussion of meat and milk in chapter 3).

Though this may seem like an odd comparison, in many ways writing about the ancient Rabbis is similar to the problem that Susan McHugh articulates at the beginning of her book *Dog*:

The problem facing everyone who writes about dogs is that there are thousands, if not millions, of people who have already done so. Like dogs themselves, dog literature abounds and, in part because of this wealth of materials, dog books tend to lose in coherence what they gain in comprehensiveness. In attempting to reconcile too much information, such texts take on a randomness that even those of us who call ourselves “dog people” find tedious. Predictably, these documents of dogs frustrate even the most comprehensive attempts at categorization, and threaten to rub our noses in the mess we make of understanding dogs. But in their chaos they also remain faithful to our confusing (sometimes confused) experiences with canine companions. The difficulty of representing dogs—let alone accounting for how they have become a central part of the human experience—reflects the ongoing struggle of defining what a dog is. (2004, 7)

As with dogs, there are thousands of volumes devoted to the study of the ancient Rabbis—and even one devoted to the Rabbis *and* dogs (Ackerman-Lieberman and Zalashik 2013)! In writing about them, one is obliged to sacrifice either cohesion or comprehensiveness. In this book, I have opted for cohesion, to present general overviews of rabbinic themes by focusing on selected, fairly representative, texts about drinking and drinkables. My goal is neither to cover everything ever written about a given beverage (e.g., beer or wine) or a given rabbinic theme, nor to cover every theme in rabbinic literature; rather, it is to use some texts about some beverages in order to survey a variety of key themes in rabbinic literature.

Yet as we learn throughout this book, rabbinic texts presume a tremendous amount of background knowledge. We often enter a conversation midstream and not from the beginning. It is like never having watched a baseball game and then being asked to work as the home plate umpire. Absent the type of guided learning offered by rabbinic

study academies (both ancient and modern), this book seeks to give access to rabbinic literature to anyone who wishes to study it, regardless of prior learning.

Why should such an introduction focus on texts about drinking? Quite aside from the obvious fact that two beverages, water and (for an infant) breast milk, are essential for our survival, regulation of drinking communicates rabbinic values of moderation and self-restraint; ritual celebration; financial support of a husband for his wife while she is breastfeeding; and interactions with non-Jews, to name but a few. Key rabbinic views on matters ranging from interactions with non-Jews to actions permitted on holidays are conveyed via rabbinic conversations about beer, for example. And, finally, the fascinating texts on the subject of drinking bequeathed to us by ancient Rabbis, in which the mundane and even the comical mingles with the profound, make for engaging reading.

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

If you are reading these words, you likely have begun reading this book as most readers approach any volume: starting from the beginning. I have designed it to be read in the usual manner. However, it can also be read in a variety of combinations.

Readers following the Table of Contents will find that this book proceeds in a logical linear fashion. After the Introduction, we proceed to a chapter that surveys the history and literature of the rabbinic movement. After this background information has been digested, eight thematic chapters follow. The first thematic chapter, chapter 2, focuses on biblical interpretation, which is essential to the underlying claim of authority that permeates rabbinic literature. From there, we move on to a discussion of social boundaries (chapter 3), in which we learn the fundamental schema the Rabbis developed for separating Us from Them. Building on this information, the next two chapters explore how the themes of gender and sexuality (chapter 4) and magic, idolatry, and

illicit practices (chapter 5) offer concrete examples of how some of these social boundaries are embodied (both figuratively and literally). After discussing illicit practices, we turn to practices that are not only licit but indeed often commanded: chapter 6 deals with the Sabbath, festivals, and holidays; chapter 7, with prayer and ritual. Finally, we have two chapters on themes relevant to both physical and spiritual bodies: ritual purity (chapter 8) and health and hygiene (chapter 9).

For readers who wish to chart their own paths through this volume, however, each chapter can stand alone. Although I try not to repeat myself, I briefly reintroduce key concepts when they appear. Each chapter focuses on individual rabbinic texts, but there are numerous references to other texts for you to explore on your own and a list of suggested readings, with full citation of each entry, even if it has already appeared earlier in the book.

However you read this volume, its goal is to introduce key themes in rabbinic literature; more than that, I hope to show why after I began reading the Rabbis, I simply could not stop.

A BRIEF NOTE ON TRANSLATION STYLE

All translations of biblical and rabbinic documents in this book are my own. They range in length from a sentence to a page, since adequate introduction of the various rabbinic themes explored requires interacting closely with the rabbinic sources. Over the course of writing the book, I developed a series of principles to guide my translation, which are worth briefly spelling out here.

My primary intention is to convey the feel, flow, and language of each text. Therefore, my translations sometimes employ language that sounds wooden. Though it might not be the most felicitous English prose, such translations reflect what the Hebrew or Aramaic words say and how the various texts are saying it. However, as any translator knows, to translate is to make choices and, implicitly or explicitly, to comment on what a given text “means.” (This is something the Rabbis

themselves do, for example, when they decide whether a text should be read literally or is open for symbolic interpretation; see Yadin 2004, 48–79.) In a related point, I sometimes deviate from a more wooden and/or literal reading when I feel that a particular idiom better conveys the meaning. In sum, I stick to a more wooden style, except when I do not. In all cases, I have done my best to explain why I made certain linguistic (and hence interpretive) choices.

In Hebrew and Aramaic, as in many languages, nouns and their associated verbs are assigned gender. Hebrew and Aramaic gender is binary: masculine or feminine. This gendering of language may reflect an explicit or implicit assumption about a given term or concept (e.g., the Hebrew word *betulah*, “virgin,” always appears only in the feminine form). Where possible, I have translated gendered Hebrew and/or Aramaic text neutrally (e.g., whereas Hebrew and Aramaic have separate forms for masculine and feminine third person plural pronouns, English “they” is not explicitly gendered). However, when it was clear that the gendered language is based on gendered assumptions (i.e., the subject or agent of a given action can only refer to one gender, usually male), my translation reflects that.

Though it is important not to import our own presumptions or values into ancient documents, I feel it is necessary also to include here a principle employed throughout this book with regard to gendered pronoun. In translating rabbinic texts, I have endeavored to convey ancient rabbinic assumptions: sometimes they meant male or female, but often they simply meant male. I render those texts accordingly, and explain their logic in my commentary. But writing about their texts, I favor gender-neutral pronouns, especially the “singular they.” Though it violates standard English grammar, many argue for revising this grammatical rule, because many people do not identify with either pole of the gender binary. For those who are non-gender-binary, therefore, changing “he” to “he/she” continues to exclude them. I embraced the “singular they” after teaching several non-gender-binary students. Hearing their stories and reflecting on how a simple change to my language could make a big

difference in conveying acceptance and inclusion led me to adopt this principle. In the words of Rabbi Hanina: “I have learned much from my teachers, and from my colleagues more than from my teachers, but from my students more than from them all” (*b. Ta’anit* 7a). Having learned from my own students, I do my best to avoid pronouns; but sometimes circumlocutions are too clunky. In such cases, unless a very specific gender is the subject of discussion, I use the “singular they.”

Another principle governs my transliteration of Hebrew and Aramaic words. In general, I employ a standardized transliteration style: Hebrew or Aramaic words appear in italics; transliterations reflect vocalized sound; and the letters *’aleph*, *’ayin*, and *het* are represented by *’*, *‘*, and *ḥ*, respectively. I depart from this slightly when rendering the names of rabbinic figures. Rabbis’ names do not appear in italics or more technical transliteration. However, I do not anglicize rabbinic names (e.g., I write Yehoshua not Joshua). This decision results from my own idiosyncratic opinion that prefers to refer to a person by their own name while at the same time not bogging the name down in too technical a transliteration.

The very fact that I include as many Hebrew and Aramaic words as I do relates to yet another principle. For those readers already familiar with the texts in their original languages, certain key words might be well known or simply of interest. For readers who are new to reading rabbinic texts, including some words in the original language allows them to get a sense of what the text sounds like. I try not to use too many of these words; and to ensure that it does not become too confusing for the novice, I include a glossary of Hebrew and Aramaic words at the end. There is one additional reason why I include these terms in the original. When rabbinic texts are studied in traditional settings, the conversation that ensues is often a mixture of Hebrew, Aramaic, and whatever other languages the students speak (Yiddish, English, etc.). Therefore, including some Hebrew and Aramaic terms throughout this book draws the reader into the rabbinic study academy (Hebrew *beṭ ba-midrash*), where they can enjoy the experience of working through a rabbinic passage (Aramaic *sugya*).

CONCLUSION

We are now almost ready to take a plunge into the sea of Talmud. But before we do, we should learn a little bit about the history and literature of the Rabbis. So pour yourself a drink and turn the page as our adventure begins.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- Ackerman-Lieberman, Phillip, and Rakefet Zalashik, eds. 2013. *A Jew's Best Friend? The Image of the Dog throughout Jewish History*. Portland, OR: Sussex Academic Press.
- McHugh, Susan. 2004. *Dog*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Yadin, Azzan. 2004. *Scripture as Logos: Rabbi Ishmael and the Origins of Midrash*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.