

## Decoding The Bavli: A Case Study

### A Note of Gratitude Before Beginning

I should like to thank two people who I regard as my teachers and encouraged me to attempt this undertaking: Rabbi Judith Abrams of Houston, Texas, and Professor Howard (Zvi) Adelman, of Jerusalem, Israel. Their advice and encouragement in this project has been a blessing that is priceless.

### Introduction: The Bavli, An Experiment That Succeeded

What was certainly known and understood by Jews contemporary with the Bavli, was the discontinuity of the culture and way of life that they were then living. There was no longer any *medinat Israel*, or left standing in Jerusalem any Temple. What could the sages, who were appointed to lead the mass of the Jewish people, do when the Jewish religion and culture lost two of the three foundations on which it was built – *Medinat Israel*, and the Temple? However, despite all its reference to tradition, and its discussion on how traditional norms are observed, what the Bavli accomplishes is to interpret many traditions in new and innovative ways that permitted Judaism to survive as both a culture and the Jewish people to this day. As we shall see in examination of the section of the Bavli and discussion that follows, the transition from a Judaism centered in the Second Temple to the system of the sages was not always a smooth one, but it was definitely an experiment that succeeded.

While it lies beyond the scope of this article to provide a detailed account of the various predecessors of rabbinic Judaism, I will provide some references for the interested reader. These are as follows: Bickerman, *The Jews in the Greek Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 101-305; Erwin Goodenough Neusner (ed.) *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* (Princeton University Press), 1988; Eric Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1998. From these works we can learn that there were various Judaisms in response to the times and conditions of the Jewish people.

Judaism was not a static time bound religion. In a sense the sages were following a tradition of innovation that had been long established. The translation of many Jewish religious works into the Greek vernacular would make Judaism as a culture and a religion accessible to the Gentile world at large, and later facilitate the rise of Christianity, whose growth was roughly contemporary with that of the Judaism of the sages; what is unique regarding the innovation of the sages is that much of what they instituted is still around in various forms in contemporary Judaism. Through its perseverance, the experiment of the sages can be regarded as one that was successful.

Both Talmuds in their redacted form,<sup>1</sup> deal with questions of how Jews should live their everyday lives with the reality that they lived these lives under Roman, and later, Roman rule in the form of the Holy Roman Empire after the establishment of Christianity as the official State Religion of Rome under Constantine circa 323 C.E. To this extent then, we could expect that the Talmuds would provide us with alternative cultural models, and perhaps provide us with some social criticism on both the dominant Roman society and the subjugated Jewish minority, albeit in a rather veiled manner. It can be considered and read as literature of resistance. We have in front of us one such example in the narrative concerning R. El'azar, read on one level. On quite another level, the story of R. El'azar is one of transformation and rebirth of a people and culture facing extreme adversity.

Through unfolding this story that deals with events in the careers of R. El'azar b. Shimon and R. Johanan, I hope to highlight some of the obstacles that were eventually overcome by the bold new experiment that was the sages' system. As well, I should like to show how in the sages' system through illustrations in this story that a correspondence exists between the physical qualities or as some have described it, "carnality" of the Bavli and its metaphysical qualities, or its spirituality.

The reader should also be aware that there are at least two other books in which this particular narrative is discussed. These works, one by Rabbi Judith Abrams, the other by Professor Daniel Boyarin are referenced fully below. They are different from one another, as my discussion also differs from theirs. They are both excellent works, and I have used insights from both of them in forming my own opinions of the narrative as I have set them forth below. In my own exposition, I must confess that I have posed questions that I believe the narrative both asks and answers; and while these are questions and answers that primarily caught my personal attention and therefore are of interest to me, as with any topic related to the discipline of study of the Bavli, these are not the only questions that could be asked of this narrative, and hence, not the only answers that there could possibly be. In its habit to include within its pages contrasting opinions, often side by side, and often without choosing one over all others, I believe the Bavli to be mirroring the reality of life as it actually found it to be, extending an invitation to those of us who study its pages to join in engaging it in active participation; in this it tends to reject both the reductionism characterized by the stark shades of black and white that one is accustomed to find in apocalyptic literature, as well as its insistent immediacy pointing to the eschaton. While its primary interest, and hence, the focus of the Bavli is on this world, yet it fully admits that there is a spiritual side to life, and a God who will judge all in the world to come. It urges the audience that it addresses to choose life, and in active partnership with the Creator, to live it well, thereby preparing for life in the world to come.

### **"Carnality Vs. Spirituality," Or "Just A Matter of Time"**

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<sup>1</sup> The Yerushalami, or the Jerusalem and the Bavli or Babylonian.

Before going very much further, I should like to posit a connection between the mishnah, the midrashim on Psalm 104 and the El'azar narrative proper; below, I have reproduced the Mishnah and the two midrashim found in sequence at the beginning of the section under consideration:

MISHNAH. One who engages labourers and demands that they commence early or work late — where local usage is not to commence early or work late he may not compel them. Where it is the practice to supply food [to one's labourers], he must supply them therewith; to provide a relish, he must provide it. Everything depends on local custom. It once happened that r. Johanan b. Mathia said to his son, 'go out and engage labourers.' He went and agreed to supply them with food. But on his returning to his father, the latter said, my son, should you even prepare for them a banquet like Solomon's when in his glory, you cannot fulfill your undertaking, for they are children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But, before they start work, go out and tell them, "[I engage you] on condition that you have no claim upon me other than bread and pulse." R. Simeon b. Gamaliel said: it was unnecessary [to stipulate thus]; everything depends on local custom. (B. Baba Metzia 83b)

GEMARA: Is it not obvious? — It is necessary [to teach it] only when he [the employer] pays them a higher wage [than usual]: I might think that he can plead, 'I pay you a higher wage in order that you may start earlier and work for me until nightfall;' we are therefore taught that they can reply, 'The higher remuneration is [only] for better work [but not longer hours]. (B. Baba Metzia 83b)

If we start at the beginning with the mishnah, we note that it concerns the hiring of workers, and the employers responsibility to these workers in regards to wages and what must be supplied to the workers in terms of their needs. We also note that there are limitations placed upon the employer in terms of what the customary hours are for the duration of employment. The terms of the contract are further clarified in the Gemara, which includes two midrashim, cited below

Resh Lakish said:

A labourer's entry [to town] is in his own time, and his going forth [to the fields] is in his employer's; as it is written, The sun ariseth, they [sc. the animals] gather themselves together, and lay them down in their dens. Man goeth forth unto his work and to his labour until the evening. But let us see what is the usage? — This refers to a new town. Then let us see whence they come? — It refers to a conglomeration. Alternatively it means that he said to them, 'You are engaged to me as labourers [whose conditions of work are set forth] in the Bible.'

R. Zera lectured — others say. R. Joseph learnt:

What is meant by, Thou makest darkness, and it is night: wherein all the beasts of the forest do creep forth? Thou makest darkness, and it is night — this refers to this world, which is comparable to night; wherein all the beasts of the forest do creep forth — to the wicked therein, who are like the beasts of the forest. The sun ariseth — for the righteous; the wicked are gathered in — for Gehenna; and lay them down in their habitations — not a single righteous man lacks a habitation as befits his honour. Man goeth forth unto his work — i.e., the righteous go forth to

receive their reward; and to his labour until the evening — as one who has worked fully until the very evening. (B. Baba Metzia 83b)<sup>2</sup>

Among the other issues that may not be as obvious as one reads through this section, is that there is a great amount of detail given at the beginning of the gemara (commentary), as to what is meant by the mishnah, and how it is properly observed; the midrash attributed to Resh Lakish is concerned with the practical implications in the mishnah's application; the midrash connected with the names of R Zera and R. Joseph, seem to be interpretations that are more mystical in nature, and could even be regarded as commentary to Resh Lakish. R.Zera is a sage belonging to the period of the Palestinian Amoraim (circa 290 320 C.E.), "R Zera lectured...R. Joseph learnt..." regards the matter of authority or seriousness in regard to the teaching. What is implied here is that R. Zera *lectured* (i.e., it is a saying of R. Zera – implying less authority. "R. Joseph *learnt*," implies that R. Joseph, a Babylonian Amora, roughly contemporary with R. Zera, was actually *taught* that this midrash has authority as a teaching, and it should be regarded as such. Often, midrashim are based upon Biblical passages, not directly cited in the midrash itself. The sages were so familiar with the Bible, that there was no reason for *them* to reference the passage that they were using; for readers today, it is a different matter. Note also, the midrash is explained by Rabbi Steinsaltz as follows: *The expression "You make darkness and it is night," refers to this world..."wherein all the beasts of the forest creep forth," refers to the wicked people in the world who are likened to the beasts of the forest – for it is they who rule this world. "The sun rises, they gather themselves together and lay themselves down in their dens," refers to the belief that the sun rises on the Righteous in the World to Come, while the Wicked are gathered into Gehenna. We will visit this reading again, later.*<sup>3</sup> Here is the biblical passage from the psalm, which serves as the basis for our motif:

You make darkness, and it is night; when all the beasts of the forest creep forth.  
The young lions roar for their prey, and seek their food from God.  
The sun rises, they gather themselves together, and lie down in their dens.  
Man goes forth to his work and to his labor until the evening (Psalm 104:20-23)

The "common denominator," here, of course, is the theme beginning with the mishnah concerning the terms of contract of hired workers. The theme continues with the citation of the two midrashim, and R. El'azar cites the same verses, below, in his answer to the Roman official on how to ensure that only the guilty are arrested as thieves and robbers. Thus, the reader can follow the transition that begins with the mishnah regarding the rules for contracting hired workers, which cites the scripture; it continues with the midrash on the same scripture that R. Zera lectured and R. Joseph learnt, and finally is quoted in the narrative by R. El'azar in his advice to the Roman official. R. El'azar and the rest of the personalities here are regarded as "hired workers" whose "field" or "vineyard" is the community of Israel—linking it to the mishnah at the

<sup>2</sup> The edition of the Bavli referenced here is the Soncino edition on CDROM published by Davka Software.

<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, (ed.) *The Steinsaltz Talmud: Tractate Baba Metzia Part V* (New York: Random House, 1992) pp.114-15; op. cit., Soncino. The term for "reward," used here can also be translated as "wages." Here, I think the meaning intended is reward (in the World To Come).

beginning of the section.<sup>4</sup> I believe that the manner in which this section has been redacted deserves special attention. Both midrashim utilize verses from Psalm 104; clearly however, in the midrash attributed to Resh Lakish, as well as that quoted by Rabbi El'azar to the Roman official, the scripture references a situation, time and place set in this world; the R. Zera/R. Joseph tradition cites a midrash which clearly has its reference in the hope of "The World To Come." Both readings are included, because both meanings are intended.

Here, I differ with Daniel Boyarin, who, in his work *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in the Talmud*, states:

"In his *Tractatus Adversus Judaeos*, Augustine<sup>5</sup> lays the following charge against the "Jews":

"Behold Israel according to the flesh.<sup>6</sup> This we know to be the carnal Israel. But the Jews do not grasp this meaning and as a result they prove themselves indisputably carnal."

Augustine knew what he was talking about...Augustine argues here with fine paradox...that the Jews by their very *insistence that it is the true Israel* demonstrates that it does not understand that there is *both a carnal and a spiritual sense to scripture...*<sup>7</sup>

While there may have been differences in the manner in which Judaism and Christianity tended to view human sexuality, these differences should be sought in the differing world views of each culture, instead of the allegation that Judaism did not admit there was a spiritual sense to scripture; hence, my inclusion here of the R Zera/R. Joseph midrash. Boyarin does cover this narrative,<sup>8</sup> but does not include either the mishnah, which begins this section, or the midrashim that directly follow it. Augustine as well, has a point to make. In what he claimed regarding the nature of Judaism, he is following an established Christian polemical tradition in a genre that was known as *Adversus Judaeos*, which included such famous church writers as Ambrose (339-397 C.E.) and Chrysostom (347-407 C.E) in which the church conceived itself as superceding Judaism.<sup>9</sup>

Apocalyptic Judaisms were common in first century sectarianism. We know of the existence of some of these groups chiefly because they are mentioned in the Jewish and Christian canons; others, such as the Essenes, were discovered, or possibly rediscovered in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From the evidence we have currently, it can be said that sectarian

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<sup>4</sup> There is here a definite intention by the redactors, and this may be why the narrative that follows regarding R. El'azar appears here and nowhere else in the Bavli.

<sup>5</sup> Augustine lived from 354-430 C.E. He became a Christian in 387, when Ambrose, his teacher and mentor, baptized him. The title of his work is Latin meaning *Against The Jews*.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Cor. 10:18, quoting the Apostle Paul.

<sup>7</sup> Op. Cit., Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, p.1. The last italics are mine, added for emphasis.

<sup>8</sup> See above, n. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Brown, *The Body And Society: Men, Women, And Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) pp. 305-322. Also, James Carroll, *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001) pp. 208-219.

groups were the rule rather than the exception in both first century Judaism and Christianity; Heterodox expression in both traditions preceded any attempt at a monolithic form of either. Rabbinic Judaism, although admitting the existence of no other authority than its own, never developed a monolithic or systematic approach in matters of faith in the same sense as its Christian sibling.

The writings that survive from these Jewish apocalyptic sects date from around 200 BCE to 150 CE., and are characterized by pseudonymity, often a claim that a revelation was vouchsafed from the beginning of time to be revealed in the present crises, symbolic imagery, and the expectation of an imminent cosmic cataclysm in which God, or His messianic agent, destroys the ruling powers of evil and raises the righteous to life in a messianic kingdom.<sup>10</sup> Very often, the adherents of these sects practiced sexual continence as part of their lifestyles; Christianity, which began its existence as an apocalyptic sect within Judaism, was one of a very few such sectarian Judaisms to become a unique and separate expression of faith.

In its infancy, Christianity shared many of its views regarding the world with other apocalyptic Judaisms; including its view of human sexuality, which was influenced more by the belief that the end times were imminent, then by any inherent belief that sex in and of itself was sinful. In both apocalypses cited in the reference below, the code word “Babylon” is used as an example of “hidden transcript,” discussed in more detail below. In Daniel, “Babylon” originally was code for the Greeks under Antiochus Epiphanes; in the Apocalypse of John, which is the last book of the Christian canon, “Babylon” is code for the Empire of Rome.

The apostle Paul as well in his proclamation to the Gentile world of Christianity maintained for the most part the traditional Jewish view toward the expression of human sexuality within the bonds of marriage. When he wrote of the community that he envisioned awaiting the return of their messiah, Paul took codes of sexual behavior directly from the example of the Jewish married household of his day. Although he had either remained celibate, or perhaps left a wife, Paul considered his own practice in this regard to be a personal blessing from God, and certainly not applicable as a practice to the whole community. Paul considered the time short, and himself and others like him lucky because there was not a family over which to worry at the approach of the eschaton; yet another reason for his personal choice may have been a traditional understanding of the relationship between the office of prophet and the continent lifestyle. Paul’s view of continence was not informed by a belief in the dualistic nature of the opposites between carnality and spirituality although there were other Christian communities not connected with Paul that maintained a different dogma.

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<sup>10</sup> For examples, see, Daniel, chapters 2, 4, 5, 7-9. In the Christian canon, see Revelation, chapters 4-20. Complete texts in English of extant extra-Biblical apocalyptic texts are available in James H. Charlesworth, (Ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments* and *Philosophical Literature: Prayers, Psalms and Odes, Fragments*. (Two Vols.). New York: Anchor Bible Library, 1985.

In some early Christian groups where sexual continence was the lifestyle, women often became the intellectual equal of men, and they enjoyed a freedom of mobility and choice that in most instances was not to be found in other non-Christian communities.

Often, it was not a choice of either one lifestyle or the other as much as both coexisting side by side; many others of these practitioners were older members of the Christian communities to which they belonged and had already raised families. Some of them were wealthy; and these shared the same circumspect views in common with many Romans of the ruling class within society who were not Christian in their attitudes to human sexuality. While continent, they remained householders, and often times remained married. The young unmarried community member was rather the exception than the rule. The tension over the practice of continence as a lifestyle continued to exist during the early history of the Church.<sup>11</sup>

As the eschaton delayed and receded still further into the indeterminate future, Christianity, now the official State Religion of Rome, was faced with the double paradox of the delayed eschaton on the one hand, and the fact that the Jewish people and religion continued to exist in a viable form under the rabbis. By the time of Augustine, this fact caused enough consternation in Christian circles so that he wrote, "The Jews should survive but not thrive"<sup>12</sup> Here, I suggest that while differing views on sexuality may have had a part to play, the primary difference of opinion was over "what time it was."<sup>13</sup>

Rabbinic Judaism although it, too, used a hidden transcript, tended to view such apocalyptic notions with suspicion, perhaps because Roman reprisals were harsh, and severe persecution and martyrdom were often the results. The hidden transcript of the sages nearly always indicated that resistance to the Romans was to be passive in nature for they were convinced that such end-times were *not* at hand, and were more interested in charting a course that made survival of *Am Israel* possible. Issues regarding the end-times were not for the novice, and popular discussion of such was discouraged. The suspicion with which such issues were treated can be illustrated with the following anecdote:

Four [sages] entered into esoteric philosophy [i.e., the "Orchard",): Ben Azzai and Ben Zoma, Aher and Rabbi Akiba. One [Ben Azzai] looked and died. One [Ben Zoma] looked and was injured. One [Aher] looked and mutilated the shoots. And one [Rabbi Akiba] went up and came [back] down in peace. (T. Hagigah 2:3//B. Hagigah 14bff).

Here, the "Orchard" may refer study of to "Paradise," and esoteric philosophy refers to the "end-times, or eschatology.

While there are known instances where Jews as well practiced sexual continence as part of their belief, such as the sectarian Essenes, their practice was limited to a certain duration, and they were not about changing the traditionally close knit family structure

<sup>11</sup> Brown, op. cit, pp. 32-139 and pp. 213-338.

<sup>12</sup> Op. Cit., Carroll, p. 219.

<sup>13</sup> "What time it was," early Christian expectations of the eschaton, was linked inseparably to their belief in Jesus of Nazareth as messiah.

that has always been a part of Jewish values. Rather, the practice was more directed toward the idea of “singleness of heart.” Sectarians such as the Essenes may have considered themselves warriors of Israel, bound to abstinence for the duration of a holy war, their celibate state symbolizing the embattled character of the Community as a whole.

The sages had learned by this time from hard experience the harm that failed expectations of apocalyptic hope could bring, and much preferred to chart a course that led to survival of the community and culture. Judaism could and did hope for the World to Come, but it was to be brought about by God rather than human initiative. Apocalyptic thinking was a route that was ultimately rejected by rabbinic Judaism, because it did not work.

The culture of the sages was in a sense, a continuation of the Judaisms that preceded it, but in a sense, like its sibling Christianity, it was a break with the past as well, in that it opened up participation to groups of Jews that heretofore would have been barred from participation by the predecessors of the system of the sages; one could be rich or poor, no matter. What was required however, was *da’at*, an understanding of how things were done in the correct manner. It is important to note as well that early rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity (Christianity before Constantine) were faced with similar problems as to survival, and found similar solutions. One way of looking at the development of the two cultures early on would be to consider them siblings who were contemporary and competitive. After Constantine, Christianity replaced a multi cultural Rome, and achieved a dominion that went unchallenged. From here forward, emperors of Rome would see the Church useful as a tool for unifying the diverse cultural elements within the Empire, often creating hardship for Jews.

Roughly contemporary with Ambrose Augustine and John Chrysostom within Christian circles, Jewish academies in Persia, adding to the Mishnah would create the Bavli, or the Babylonian Talmud. As James Carroll has noted:

Because it was “conducted at a remove from Christianity, (it) led to a more or less independent self understanding...and Jews stopped acting like sibling rivals in a contest over a shared legacy and began to see their own legacy as having nothing to do with developing theology or opinions of Christians. Jewish sages, commenting on the commentaries, interpreting the interpretations, had entered an entirely new room of the religious imagination. The discourse of rabbis became multilayered. They derived meaning as much from the nuances of texts as from its obvious significance. Exegesis became a way of recovering the past, and “*midrash*,” from the Hebrew word for ‘interpretation,’ became a way of infusing the present with awe.”<sup>14</sup>

By Augustine’s time, the two traditions had parted, each developing its own traditions.

Boyarin discusses <sup>15</sup> the phenomena of martyrdom, as it developed within the traditions of both early Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism, observing that the boundaries

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p.214.

<sup>15</sup> *Dying For God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 1-126



between the two traditions early on were often indistinct. Both early Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism looked upon the aspect of martyrdom as “proof” of the rightness of each of the early traditions. Boyarin compares the early traditions to two different dialects of a common language, and he makes the observation that early Christian martyrs often chose their fate even when a possibility of avoiding death existed; the sages on the other hand, when there was a choice often chose to live, resorting sometimes to deception in order to achieve their end. This is an oversimplification. There were Christians who were not martyrs, as well as sages who were. The choice, when it was a voluntary one was often governed by Christian apocalyptic considerations, which included the belief that the time remaining on this earth was short, and in an existence after death in eternity.<sup>16</sup>

This belief in early Christianity, it seems to me, would lead naturally to a devaluation of carnality. As Christianity became more influenced by its Greco-Roman environment, a dualistic notion of opposites did come to influence its worldview, but the delay of eschaton, by now receding further and further into the indeterminate future, as well as increased persecution by Rome exerted no small influence on this shift.<sup>17</sup>

There is a world of difference in these two views; hence, the differing responses to human sexuality and the world. As Christianity became the religion of the Empire, the (Holy) Roman Empires were faced with the same problem of its predecessor, Rome: continued existence of the society and its infrastructures. There existed a tension between the ideal of sexual continence and the practical need for continued population of the Church and Empire. Continence became a practice that was sometimes used as a form of protest by the few Christian groups on the fringes who viewed some practices of the Church as worldly. Eventually, it was confined to, and expected from, church officials. Whether the laity practiced it was left to individual choice, but most were encouraged otherwise.

What *is* comparable to its younger sibling Christianity, Judaism was becoming a religion that also had a two-part canon, and its adherents were learning to survive while interpreting their tradition in innovative ways. We have already experienced some of the way midrash was used to derive entirely different meanings from Psalm 104 in various situations; these are not the only known midrashim based on this Psalm,<sup>18</sup> however the

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<sup>16</sup> See Rev. 3, where the author of the book discusses some of the problems that beset the early Church, among which are veiled references to the fact that not all believers were willing to travel the route to martyrdom. From the author’s words, the implication is that not only were there some believers that were not voluntary martyrs, but there were others who recanted their faith in order to save themselves from Roman persecution and death.

<sup>17</sup> By the time of Augustine, this delay needed explanation; Christianity by now was the State Religion of Rome, and it was put into service to justify the existence of Rome as an institution, and the notion of an intervening period of time (from the Latin word *secular*) was used in part to explain the postponement of the eschaton. This dualism was used to good purpose to unify the empire, and suppress sectarian expressions within Christianity itself.

<sup>18</sup> For a more complete, but certainly not exhaustive listing, see *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, edited by H.L. Strack and Gunther Sternberger (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), pp. 166-179 for twenty-seven known examples and variants of midrashim on psalm 104. Most of the material probably

three used in the text are explicit because they are used to further the interpretation of the text. The wonderful thing about midrash is that it is still utilized to give scripture a present meaning today.

Another way of looking at some of my statements above would be to use the idea of boundaries: there is the boundary between This World and The World to Come; between rabbinic Judaism and Christianity; between genders male and female; between life and death. Some of these boundaries were thought to be indistinct; others might be crossed in certain ways while others could not be crossed at all. Still others were a break with the Judaisms of the past and the boundaries of a new frontier.

What follows, perhaps is a rather odd story concerning a few of the earlier sages, Resh Lakish, Rabbi Johanan, but most assuredly, the strangest of them all is Rabbi El'azar, son of Rabbi Shimon. While it should be read as more parable than history, it does deal with some historical aspects of the establishment of the rabbinic leadership and the system of the sages. The narrative is printed in its entirety at the end of this article for reference.

### “Some People’s Children”

When we first meet Rabbi El'azar,<sup>19</sup> we see that he seems to be cooperative to the point of becoming employed as an agent of the Roman government. The task that he was assigned might be compared today as a sort of constable or police official. This contrasts sharply with what we know of his earlier experiences when he hid in a cave with his father from Roman persecution during the reign of the emperor Hadrian.<sup>20</sup> His present willingness to cooperate with Roman officialdom is also a direct opposite of his father's attitude and actions toward Roman rule

As I indicated above, much of the literature of the Bavli can be viewed as literature that would foster an attitude of resistance from within the community. As Boyarin notes, the term “teaching Torah,” has implications. Below, is the example he cites of two different approaches using midrashim based on interpretations of Deuteronomy 2:6. I have set the midrashim in italic text so that the reader can more easily see what is going on, and how this works:<sup>21</sup>

Deut. 2:6 mentions Edom. “Edom” and “Esau” later became code that was used to refer to Rome, and, still later, Christian Rome. Shimon Bar Yohai (R. El'azar's father) taught (in a midrash) *“You shall buy food from them (Rome) for money and eat, and*

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dates back to the Bavli, and the expression and nature of the haggadic expositions would favor *Eretz Israel* as the place of origin. Ibid., p. 351.

<sup>19</sup> See Abrams' study of this passage op. Cit., *The Women of the Talmud*, pp. 154- 170. The irony here, Abrams mentions is that Rabbi El'azar and his father Shimon once hid from the Romans during the Hadrianic persecution. Shimon persisted in teaching Torah, despite the ban against such activity at the time.

<sup>20</sup> B. Shabbat 33b, as cited in Abrams' *The Women of the Talmud*, pp. 154-5.

<sup>21</sup> Boyarin's *Dying for God*, op. Cit., pp. 46-49, quoting B. Shabbat 1:3, 3c, Talmud Yerushalami.

*water from them for money and drink.” Just as water is that which has not been modified from its original state, so also everything that has not been modified from its original state.”* Reading the verse this way Boyarin does would have two effects; it would limit the trade that could be transacted between Jews and Romans, and also make it difficult to eat meals together.

R. Hiyya interpreted the same verse in an entirely different manner. Below is his ‘drash on the same verse:: “How then does R. Hiyya The Great interpret the verse: ‘*You shall buy food from them for money and eat?*’ *If you feed him, you have “bought” and “defeated” him, for if he is harsh with you, buy/defeat him with food, and if that does not work, then defeat him with money.* The play here is on the words “buy” and “defeat,” which Boyarin indicates share the same root in Hebrew.

We can see from these two ‘drashim is that a code is needed to understand what the sages that used them were really saying. We note as well, that the two ‘drashim recommend completely different courses of action as regards resistance; the one taught by R. Shimon Bar Yohai severely limits trade, and as a result *contact* between Jews and Romans, while the course of action advocated by R. Hiyya would seem to suggest bribery as an appropriate course of resistance action. Boyarin calls this code “the hidden transcript.” What is not in doubt here was whether it was right to resist, but only what form the resistance should take, and to what degree one should offer resistance to the Roman government.

El’azar’s willingness to be so employed may be his way of controlling how much damage could be done to the Jewish community where he lived by the Roman authorities; it was his way of offering passive resistance to Roman domination; he may indeed actually believe what he is telling the Roman officer regarding the best method of catching criminal elements living within the Jewish community, while insuring that innocent Jews would remain free. From internal elements within the story, it would seem that he might even have been forced into the position of accepting the assignment.

However, another reading of his motives is possible. Rabbi El’azar’s advice may have been given to the Roman officer with the certainty that he would report it to his superiors and that El’azar himself would wind up assigned the task.<sup>22</sup> If this were so, then it would mesh nicely with Boyarin’s theories regarding the dominated culture’s behavior in response to the dominant culture, and “tricking” the dominator into granting beneficial circumstances to the dominated. One cannot help but smile at the double entendre in the ‘drash that El’azar quotes on Psalm 104 to the Roman officer; do the words “Therein all the beasts of the forest creep forth,” and, “He lieth in wait secretly as a lion in his den,” refer to the catching of thieves, or does R. El’azar mean them as a slur against Roman domination? If we take this narrative seriously as literature of resistance, then it is likely that the Roman official would comprehend R. El’azar’s ‘drash as referring to thieves if he indeed was familiar at all with the psalm, while R. El’azar might well have intended it as a comment on Roman oppression. The intended audience would indeed be familiar with and wryly appreciate the coded message; here you have to know the code.

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<sup>22</sup>. Op Cit., *Dying For God.*, pp. 46-55.

It is my stance that the redactors here are purposely letting us in on how they feel by briefly showing us some of R. El'azar's negative character traits, by first telling us about his encounter with the Roman officer and the ensuing exchange of words with R. Joshua, and then the incident involving the insult of the doomed fuller (laundryman). However, the symbolization embodied in the character of R. El'azar is not static; at times he does indeed symbolize the Community of Israel or a part of that community in transition. In short, it would seem that El'azar was definitely *not* considered to be a "chip off the old block," at least by some leaders in his community!

R. Shim'on, El'azar's father, was one of the holiest and ascetic of the sages. He was noted for his devotion to Torah study, and was an implacable foe to the Romans. In this story about R. El'azar, as well as the story that follows regarding R. Ishmael, son of R. Yose, the situation the redactors wish us to notice here is one of carrying on the tradition from Father to Son, i.e., the problems associated with a sort of dynastic succession or inherited succession, and its limited success as a means of transmitting tradition and culture.<sup>23</sup> We don't know if there was an interim period within rabbinic Judaism when it might have been assumed that the mantel would be passed from father to male heirs within a family; certainly, assuming the worthiness of the heirs, this method of transmitting the tradition would not be disallowed; but another solution the sages adopted was one they held in common with early Christianity, the institution of discipleship. "One who teaches another's child Torah is regarded by the tradition as one who gave birth to the child." (B. Sanhedrin 19b). Unlike its predecessor that was based on lineage, the system of the sages was based on *da'at*, or correct knowledge or practice. This innovative approach to Judaism made direct participation in the system accessible for many more people, and it was a more dependable system simply because it was not based on either dynastic succession or lineage.<sup>24</sup> There may be another reason that this issue is raised precisely here. I believe the theme serves as a redaction device to pull together what otherwise would appear to be disparate elements within the narrative. In our next section, we will see the relationship between teacher and disciple break down with disastrous results for both; and the problem of successful transmission of tradition is at best only tentatively resolved toward the end of our narrative by the tradition quoted by R. Parnak in the name of R. Johanan, regarding as it were the indwelling of the tradition of Torah within a rabbinic family and its successful transmission from one generation to the next. The Bavli, in typical fashion is pointing out a problem indirectly for the consideration of the attentive reader to consider before actually taking it up and dealing directly with it. However, one needs to follow the lead of the Bavli as it directs our focus. Admittedly, the Bavli has much to say about its hope in the world to come, but its primary concern is in the here and now, dealing with the everyday reality of living and surviving in this world, and its center of focus is Torah, which has been given to make such survival possible. Martyrdom is not sought after, but if it comes, it is accepted; rather, perseverance in observance is counseled here, and is the key to survival in this world. God is counted to

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<sup>23</sup> Op. Cit., Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, pp. 206- 208.

<sup>24</sup>, See Rabbi Judith Abrams' *Judaism And Disability: Portraits in Ancient Texts from the Tanach to the Bavli* (Washington, D.C., 1998; Gallaudet University Press), pp. 123-197.

keep His promises as to survival in the next. Humanity indeed is an active participant and partner with God in the drama continually unfolding on this stage.

The redactors also appear to reject both extremes; on the one end, that symbolized in the asceticism of Shimon Bar Yohai and on the other his son, R. El'azar, who seems more than willing to cooperate with his captors – something his father would never do--and appear to indicate that there is a middle path that is more desirable.

In his treatment of this narrative, Boyarin, discusses it in terms of a problem of reproducibility and not necessarily a political evaluation on the situation. It seems to me, that one is not limited here to either one answer or the other, but in good Talmudic tradition, might even choose to view the situation outlined in the narrative both in terms of a political comment *as well as* one concerning the loss of the values held between the generations from father to son. This loss of values certainly did not occur in a political vacuum. It is apparent that again, we are dealing with the real world, and the redactor would like the audience to focus on both issues.<sup>25</sup> Although the Bavli never indicates it, the reader must be aware as well that at this point in time, the system of the sages is a daring experiment that if, successful, will allow for the survival of the community. It is not a case of envy on the part of the sages over the newly emerged and independent Christianity with its doctrine of life eternal as Boyarin would have us believe; but rather one of familiar lines and contours in the shape of now *Christian* Roman Empire still attempting forced assimilation of what, to it, was a culture whose way of life was still seen as inferior. It had developed into more than just a struggle between two sectarian expressions of Judaism; and it was more than just a difference of opinion over “what time it was;” and it was, above all else, a struggle that would be waged in this world.

Returning to the narrative, the community at large seems to be aware of R. Joshua's epithet “Vinegar, Son of Wine,” for El'azar meets a fuller who uses it to insult the sage, who promptly has the fuller arrested, and later executed. Although El'azar on reconsideration of his actions towards the fuller tries to have him released, he arrives too late only to see the fuller hanging from a tree already executed.<sup>26</sup>

Thus far in our narrative two particularly unworthy heirs of worthy fathers have been pointed out, and the problem briefly stated is with “workers” like these, what hope is there for the “vineyard?” The fact is, the redactors of our narrative, fully admitting that these two are indeed a part of the community of Israel are also saying that they are *unworthy precisely because of their willingness to serve their Roman overlords. By serving them, they become like them. They conform more to their image than to God's.* We can observe this as we further follow the narrative; first we see it in the issue raised over El'azar's “rightness” as regards the character of the fuller. Apparently, to his credit, his flesh remains intact, but his treatment of the fuller was the very thing against which he warned the Roman official; he has the fuller arrested because of a personal insult and *not* because El'azar knows anything at this time about the fuller. El'azar is informed only

<sup>25</sup> Certainly, we have Biblical precedents here of a story also that portrays the community in transition at a critical crossroad. The narratives contained in the book of Judges and 1 Samuel readily come to mind.

<sup>26</sup> Boyarin reads “crucified,” op. cit., *Carnal Israel*, p. 199.

later regarding the moral character of the fuller and his son, and still he has doubts about his actions in regards to the fuller.<sup>27</sup> Boyarin here is right when he argues that the problem thus far is one of reproducibility from father to son, but he does not go far enough; it is not as important in terms of the individual as much as it is in terms of the community. If indeed the sages are concerned for the system, they are not concerned as much for the system as an institution as they are in regards its ability to allow for the survival of the community in the face of eroding ideals, and the environment in which the community is situated has everything to do with it.<sup>28</sup> Despite a move toward more individualistic expression within the pages of the Bavli, the individual's identification as a person is still very much defined by the community of which he is a member.

Having said all of the above, is there unanimous agreement here expressed in the narrative regarding the person of R. El'azar?

Common to both the Yerushalami and Bavli, dissention and offering an opinion that differed from a colleague would be a familiar way of exploring topics of interest, or in this case, bringing the character of R. El'azar into sharper relief. Here is how David Kraemer describes this process:

The Bavli is the longest and most elaborate of all rabbinic documents of Late Antiquity. It purports to be a commentary on the Mishnah but in fact is far more. Although the Bavli does begin by addressing the Mishnah, its theoretical exploration will often take it far beyond the immediate interest of the Mishnah text; in the end, the precise subject it addresses is almost always of its own choice. More correctly defined, then, the Bavli is a sophisticated theoretical exploration of matters of law and religion, matters that are often, but not always, suggested by the Mishnah or other earlier rabbinic documents, now part of the canon.

In its deliberations on a Mishnah base-text, the Bavli typically enriches the range of sources available for consideration by quoting other texts, including scripture, sources attributed to Mishnaic authorities but not included in the Mishnah (*baraitot*), and opinions of later Talmudic sages (*amoraim*). With these many sources, the Bavli weaves sophisticated and often lengthy deliberations. These deliberations are often theoretical; the Bavli is not primarily concerned with rendering practical decisions for all matters of Jewish practice. Consequently, the Bavli will often examine two or more contradictory opinions without declaring a preference between them or, with similar intent, it will explore opinions of sages whose authority is for other reasons known to be rejected; such rejection does not negate the value of these opinions for theoretical deliberation.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> If El'azar now knows about the son, one would think if the redactors approved of his actions toward the fuller, the son would have been arrested as well.

<sup>28</sup> Op. Cit., *Carnal Israel*, pp. 200-201. I disagree with Boyarin here only in that he seems to want to discard the obvious "political comment" of the text in favor only of that of the motif of the uncontained (violated) body. I think both are needed to completely understand the story and the character of El'azar. In a sense he has done this to himself; in quite another sense he has *allowed* the Romans to do it to him. It is obvious to me that the redactors seem to be suggesting by their use of sexual motif that El'azar has been violated by Rome, and because of the first violation, El'azar must perform the second on himself to assure himself that his actions toward the fuller are just.

<sup>29</sup> *Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.151.

We begin to hear the dissenting voice of R. El'azar's supporters in the consolation offered to him by his disciples:

Said they [his disciples] to him: 'Master, do not grieve; for he and his son seduced a betrothed maiden on the Day of Atonement.'

and his rejoinder on learning of the fuller's lack of morality:

"Rejoice, my heart! If matters on which thou [sc. the heart] art doubtful are thus, how much more so those on which thou art certain! I am well assured that neither worms nor decay will have power over thee."

However, the redactor makes sure that the reader knows that El'azar himself is not assured that his actions in regard to the fuller are just:

"Yet in spite of this, his conscience disquieted him. Thereupon he was given a sleeping draught, taken into a marble chamber and had his abdomen opened, and basketsful of fat removed from him and placed in the sun during Tammuz and Ab, and yet it did not putrefy. But no fat putrefies — [True,] no fat putrefies; nevertheless, if it contains red streaks it does. But here, though it contained red streaks, it did not. Thereupon he applied to himself the verse, My flesh too shall dwell in safety."

What we are listening to here are both voices within the community, each with contrasting opinions regarding the character of R. El'azar.<sup>30</sup>

Boyarin, in *Dying for God*, discusses cross-cultural influences of Judaism and Christianity;<sup>31</sup> it is quite possible that the story of El'azar is yet another such example, a sort of "life (in this case, "story") of a saint," who, it would seem is not all that saintly. There is no doubt that the narrative is redacted in such a way as to portray the character of R. El'azar negatively. One might even compare it to Greek drama, in which the reader, along with viewing the actions of the protagonist on stage, is listening to the various voices of the chorus – in this case the community – where there are some who support him, and others who do not. However, the very fact that stories about him are included in the Bavli, are indications that although he was controversial, he was important enough that the redactors couldn't expunge him, but they could, indeed, shape how he might be regarded by future generations.

Possibly what follows is the climax of the narrative as it relates to R. El'azar. Here we see him in the company of R. Jose, but the focus of the narrative seems to be on the character of R. El'azar. It is so much more than a story about two overweight rabbis: we have what initially seems to be an encounter between R. Ishmael, R. El'azar and a

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<sup>30</sup> Boyarin believes that this indicates the correctness of R. El'azar's actions. I disagree. It appears to me that this has to be read as common example where the redactors' custom is to present opposing or contrasting views, only later to work toward possible resolution by the way in which the redactor shapes the material. One can only guess at the nature of the material favorable to R. El'azar that the redactors might have had at their disposal; what isn't in doubt though is their own opinion in the matter by the way they shape the material in setting up the contrasting testimony regarding R. El'azar.

<sup>31</sup> Pp. 42-66

(Roman) matron.<sup>32</sup> On one level, the encounter is straightforward and concerns the matron's incredulity that the two Rabbis are in fact the *biological* fathers of their children. The commentary on this part of the narrative in the Soncino edition even observes that:

This humorous and exaggerated description of the figures of these Rabbis has been stated to prevent any stigma being attached to the offspring of people of large contour.<sup>33</sup>

Steinsaltz as well, in his commentary to this section would interpret the passage in a straightforward manner. He does add that *Marharshal*<sup>34</sup> interprets the reference to size to refer to specifically the penises of the two rabbis, in order to teach that despite their passionate nature, they always remained fully in control of their impulses. But that is just the point, the reader has definitely discovered that R. El'azar *is not* in control of his passions, but is more likely a man who, Although there is good in his character and he tries his best, is ruled by them. The Bavli has painted us a picture in shades of humanity tempered by a reality with which most of us can identify, and perhaps one with which we can even empathize; and while never fully releasing the tension by rejecting El'azar and his actions outright, it refuses to cover his flaws.

In the way that the passage has been interpreted traditionally, it seems to me much of the meaning of the story that was addressed to its contemporary audience would be lost. However, is there anything that would prohibit perhaps what Boyarin would label a more "spiritual" interpretation? Indeed, there may be evidence within the structure of the text of a pattern, as well as other elements within the text, that suggest it might be read in more than just a carnal manner.

It seems to me that there is such evidence that comes within the narrative itself; first, there are the two midrashim on Psalm 104. The one attributed to Resh Lakish, a sage who we will discuss further later in the article, is clearly linked to the mishnah that introduced this extended narrative. There is no doubt that its reference is the real world contemporary with our characters.

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<sup>32</sup> She may or may not be Roman. If she were, then it would seem that R. Ishmael, and R. El'azar's fame has spread beyond the Jewish community to which they belonged, and that they have become a laughingstock that even Romans comment upon. In my opinion, it is more reasonable to suppose, this "matron" serves as a device to voice opinions of those within the *Jewish* community who were opposed to the two rabbis. On the issue of the "Roman matron," as it is used in the Talmuds, see Abrams *The Women of the Talmud*, pp.17-38. We should not dismiss that the "matron" may well be based on an accurate historical memory, and the possibility of cross-cultural influences here either. We have already examined the position attained by some women within some sects of Christianity, and there is no reason not to suppose that at least some sages would teach women and respond to their questions, the pages of the Talmuds themselves offer this testimony.

<sup>33</sup> *Tosafot*, a collective creation of Rashi's disciples and their students that serve as a sort of summary of the style of study and inquiry in the *yeshivot* (rabbinic academies) of France and Germany in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Originally begun as notes for and additions to Rashi's commentary, they were subsequently expanded, becoming a profound and independent interpretation on the Gemara. Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, (Ed.), *The Steinsaltz Talmud: A Reference Guide* (New York: Random House, 1989) p.52.

<sup>34</sup> A commentary by Rabbi Shlomo Luria (1510-1573). A major part of his work consists of textual emendations, many of which are incorporated within the printed editions of the Bavli itself, often without indication that they are emendations. Ibid. Steinsaltz, p.57.



However, the midrash connected with R. Zera and R. Joseph clearly reference the “World To Come,” and because of this, it references a future time, and probably another world where things are different from how they are in R. El’azar’s day. And with this observation comes a question – why did the redactors choose this particular midrash on the psalm and not another?

Again, as I stated at the start of this article, I believe that the redactors wish us to focus on the whole – physical and spiritual – at the same time, and perhaps unlike the Hellenistic philosophies that were so much a part of their environment, they were either unwilling or unable to talk of either the physical or the spiritual apart from consideration of the whole.

We are given hints of this possibility throughout the narrative: “Vinegar, Son of Wine”; is R. El’azar really “sour,” or is what he is doing and the political power which he is representing giving him this quality? Note as well, the excessive use of image; first of a person who has himself cut open (symbolically violated) to prove his justification in regards to the fuller, and then, later, enduring the taunt of the matron, who questions his ability to biologically father his own children. But is the matron referring to “children” only in the physical sense?<sup>35</sup>

Of course, the answer to these questions regarding El’azar is obvious, and they are posed only for the sake of rhetoric – to get us to look at the narrative thus far from a little different perspective.

As I stated in the beginning, we were going to examine the phenomena of boundaries; indeed, boundaries or in another form separation, is the theme that runs throughout this narrative and serves to unify it. The idea as I have stated it is introduced at the very beginning with the introduction of the mishnah regarding the rule for hired workers. It is presupposed that those hired would be working in a field, which as anyone knows has length and breadth, a perimeter – definite boundaries. We are reminded of boundaries again in the differing focus of the two midrashim on Psalm 104, one set in this world attributed to Resh Lakish, and one set in the world to come associated with the names of R. Zera, and R. Joseph. The idea again suggests itself in the exchange of words between R. Joshua and R. El’azar about proper care of the “vineyard.”

Reexamining the drastic cure that El’azar allows to be administered to his body in order to prove the rightness of his suppositions regarding the character of the fuller, we can also reinterpret it and better understand what the redactors are trying to tell us about the reality of life as they lived it. It concerns boundaries as well.

Mary Douglas in her work, *Purity and Danger: an analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*, states:

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<sup>35</sup> We will meet a son of El’azar later in this narrative who is definitely not like him. When we find him, he is living his life in dissipation.

It is not difficult to see how pollution beliefs can be used as a dialogue to claims and counter-claims to status. But as we examine pollution beliefs, we find that the kind of contacts which are thought dangerous also carry a symbolic load... I believe some pollutions are used as analogies for expressing a general view of the social order. For example, there are beliefs that each sex is a danger to the other through contact with sexual fluid... Such patterns of sexual danger can be seen to express symmetry or hierarchy. It is implausible to interpret them as expressing something about the actual relations of the sexes... Many ideas about sexual dangers are better interpreted as symbols of the relation between parts of society, as mirroring designs of hierarchy or symmetry which apply in the larger social system. The two sexes can serve as a model for *collaboration and distinctiveness of social units*... *Sometimes bodily orifices can seem to represent points of entry or exit to social units or bodily perfection can symbolize an ideal theocracy.*<sup>36</sup>

I suggest that the character of El'azar is a symbol of all of the elements above. He has become effectively engendered as a violated female body that is violated by Rome; and, if we follow Ms. Douglas in what she says above, we are able to see what the narrative truly conveys to us is done in symbolism.

Many of us who are not Jewish, or who are not acquainted with some of the reasoning behind the ordinances as we find them in Torah, wonder at the minuteness of these ordinances in the way they are prescribed and the preciseness with which they are carried out. One of the primary reasons for this phenomenon is the sense of *order* that comes to the society that observes them. Another purpose would be to keep in this case the Roman and Jewish societies, *set apart or separate*, so that each maintains its distinctiveness, and so that members of each society would be aware of the boundaries of the other. Such boundaries were necessary especially considering the minority status of the Jewish culture living in the midst of the dominant Roman culture of which it was a part. If boundaries are important in the communal sense, they are just as important on an individual basis as well. Here, we might do well to look at the physical body of El'azar in its primary sense of a container. By doing all that he is doing, he has allowed his borders to become indistinct and permeable. In a symbolic, but nonetheless real sense he has *mixed* with his Roman overlords. Again, Mary Douglas helps us to understand some of the symbolism behind the Levitical codes, which have a direct application here:

This is a universe in which men prosper by conforming to holiness and perish when they deviate from it... Granted that its root means separateness, the next idea that emerges is of the Holy as wholeness and completeness. Much of Leviticus is taken up with stating the physical perfection that is required of things presented in the temple, and of persons approaching it. The animals offered in sacrifice must be without blemish, women should be purified after childbirth, lepers should be separated and ritually cleansed before being allowed to approach it once they are cured. All bodily discharges<sup>37</sup> are defiling and disqualify from approach to the temple. Priests may only come into contact with death when their own close kin die, but the high priest must never have contact with death... he must be *perfect as a man* if he is to be a priest...<sup>38</sup> In short,

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<sup>36</sup> The italics are mine. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: an analysis of the concepts of purity and taboo* (New York: Rutledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd.), pp.3-4.

<sup>37</sup> There are some discharges that *are not* considered to defile such as breast milk or earwax.

<sup>38</sup> Op. Cit., *Purity And Danger*, pp.52-56. See Leviticus 21:17-21 for the qualifications that pertain to priests.

the idea of holiness was given an external, physical expression in the wholeness of the body seen as a perfect container...

Wholeness is also extended to signify *completeness in a social context*. An important enterprise once begun, must not be left incomplete...<sup>39</sup>

Other precepts extend holiness to species and categories... Hybrids and other confusions are abominated...(see Leviticus 18:23)...the word “perversion is a significant mistranslation of the rare Hebrew *tebhel*, which has as its meaning , “mixing” or “confusion.”

But we all have boundaries, even in contemporary society. I remember lamenting to one of my teachers the wish that there was no separation between people, and that we all lived in peace. He answered that sometimes boundaries were desirable because they defined who we were, and sometimes they protected us from harm. Another image that applies here is one of dismemberment,<sup>40</sup> which is close to and implies death.<sup>41</sup> Although the example of El’azar above is symbolic, the harm that it does him is readily apparent; this is a boundary that the sages decree cannot be crossed. To attempt to do so could very well bring about the “death” of the Jewish people.<sup>42</sup> And now we are able to see that even testimony in support of El’azar does little to mitigate what he in large part has done to himself.

In short, what these precepts are designed to show in their application is an *outward, physical manifestation of an inner state or condition of the community which extends to the individual members which make up the community*. Further, I would suggest that the dichotomy which exists between the outer physical manifestation which the precepts are designed to instill and the inner state which results from their observance is exactly analogous to the carnal/spiritual debate as observed by Daniel Boyarin in *Carnal Israel*.

Above, I posed the question whether in El’azar’s encounter with the insulting matron El’azar’s *biological* children were the only type of children to which she could be referring? Is there another way that one could give birth to a “child” other than physical labor? Here as we shall see, *that boundary was crossed* by the sages; and because it follows directly after this encounter between El’azar and the matron, one has to wonder if the matron might have been employing a code of her own in her implications regarding the paternity of El’azar:

### **“Like Father, Like Son?”**

<sup>39</sup> See Genesis 1:1-2:4, for the Priestly version of the Creation. Note that each successive action of God is completed before the next is begun. See also Deut, 20:5-7 for how this rule functioned during war.

<sup>40</sup> Boyarin, *Carnal Israel* p. 202. He is right, however, I feel that he takes the “long way around” to arrive at the destination. Here, I have tried to show a bit more simply what the redactors wish to tell us in the symbolism using Douglas’ understanding of the rules of purity as these are stated in the Tanakh. I hope I have succeeded.

<sup>41</sup> Ironically, *dismemberment* would indeed prohibit El’azar from serving in a priestly capacity, which is exactly how he functions later in the narrative. For anyone else as well, *death* would prohibit further rendering of halachic decisions, but not El’azar! Who claims the Talmud doesn’t have a sense of humor?

<sup>42</sup> I am alluding here to “death” in its spiritual sense, although I am aware that there could also be definite *physical manifestations as well*.

Our narrative continues with a story regarding R. Johanan and his disciple Resh Lakish. Notice too the connection, however tenuous it may be, with the opening of our narrative. One of the drashim is attributed to Resh Lakish, and it is only now that we have a story told about him and his teacher, R. Johanan.

There have been many that have approached Talmudic literature with the assumption that it has no discernible pattern as regards its redaction, leaving the novice student with the impression that many times Talmudic literature is a collection of aggadic and halachic material with no discernable order or plan running through it, when in reality, exactly the opposite is the case. David Kraemer again aids us in understanding how the Talmud is trying to direct us:

Because of the richness of the sources quoted in the Bavli, it has been the custom of earlier scholars to give their attention to individual quoted traditions while ignoring the context in which they appear. These traditions have then been understood to represent the opinion of the individual to whom they are attributed, regardless of the chronological gap between the named individual and the ultimate documentary record...Treating the Bavli as a mere anthology of opinions, these scholars have ignored the deliberative context which gives shape to the whole, thus neglecting the voice of the Bavli itself. The methodological tools necessary to overcome these earlier failings and to get at the Bavli's own, unique, message are those of rhetorical and canonical criticism. By rhetorical criticism, I mean the perspective that considers the text in its final (redacted) form<sup>43</sup> and reads the signals imbedded in the text as they serve, in combination, to convince the reader of this opinion or another. Among the literary features that should attract the reader's attention are the text's structure, repetitions, unexpected turns, contradictions and their resolution, and so forth. It is essential, in this approach, to be aware of how the text plays with the reader's expectations and seeks to sway the reader's interpretations...

Canonical criticism, as used here, means the analysis and interpretation of the combination and juxtaposition of ideas in a single document or recognized canon. This approach is particularly important for reading the Bavli because the Bavli will frequently include in juxtaposition or in more distant contexts, opinions that are contradictory or at least not fully reconcilable...

Furthermore, the Bavli places itself within a canonical tradition. It frequently quotes pieces of that earlier tradition, or more often, it appropriates and transforms the tradition to serve its own ends. By comparing the Bavli's use of the teaching with the use of that same teaching elsewhere in the canon—through sensitivity to the differences implicit in the canonical settings—a whole new set of messages, beyond the apparently literal meaning of the words will become available. Only by being attentive to the differences and tensions will the struggle of the authors come to the fore. Only by appreciating the impact of canonical juxtaposition and intracanonial interpretation will the richness of the Bavli's opinions be properly and fully characterized.<sup>44</sup>

Let's see what Kraemer means; there are several things in tension here in this part of the narrative, but they all have connections, and serve to amplify and expand our narrative, permitting us to consider other forms of "parenthood" than biological. Let us begin at the beginning; we notice immediately something peculiar to our Western way of thinking. We are introduced to R. Johanan, who to our ears seems to be bragging about his physical beauty. This scene is immediately followed by an insertion into the text of

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<sup>43</sup> Parentheses are mine.

<sup>44</sup> Kraemer, p. 152.

the narrative that informs us that R. Johanan was not listed among those who were considered beautiful precisely because he lacked “splendor of face,” or in other words, a beard, a point well worth our attention.<sup>45</sup> What is being said here in plain language is that R. Johanan is not on the list because he *is more Roman than Jewish*. Again, we are confronted with the motif of image.

What may seem peculiar to our Western sensibilities is the fact that we might expect the redactors’ comment about R. Johanan not making the list as it were to be placed elsewhere in the narrative maybe in the middle or perhaps better at the end. Instead, however, it is placed here at the beginning, as if supplying a conclusion before the story of R. Johanan and Resh Lakish is related, as if to say, “Here’s what I think. And here’s why.”

We are then told of R. Johanan’s custom of sitting at a mikveh and permitting the women to view him as they emerge from it.

Again, we are confronted by the motif of image. Here is the verse, which he uses in a drash, that R. Johanan refers to in his conversation with the rabbis:

Joseph is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a well; whose branches run over the wall: (Genesis 49:22)

As James L. Kugel notes,<sup>46</sup> the translation of this verse is extremely difficult and its exact meaning is problematic. It could just as well be rendered into English by the following:

Joseph is a wild ass, a wild ass by a spring; wild colts on a hillside.<sup>47</sup>

Or this:

Young wild ass Yosef,  
young wild ass along a spring;

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<sup>45</sup> See Boyarin’s explanation of this in *Carnal Israel*, op. cit, pp. 216-17. I agree with him when he says this alludes to the very real struggle that is going on between the two cultures. Before we castigate the redactors of the Talmud too unfairly, we should not project our contemporary definitions of morality and lifestyles back in to their times and understandings of life realities, else we might totally miss what they are trying to tell us here, which is once again that there is a mirror-like correspondence between a person’s appearance on the outside to what he’s like on the inside. It also must be stated that there is no connection between R. Johanan as he is portrayed here for purposes of parable, and the actual historic R. Johanan. The same can be said as regards El’azar. Some have seen a possible reference to the practice of homosexuality here that was considered acceptable in pre Christian Greek and Roman societies. If there is indeed such a reference within this narrative, then all the more reason for the redactors’ stance on R. Johanan’s lack of facial hair. However, it is more likely that the reference refers only to the fact that lacking beards, these two *appeared* physically to be more like Romans. Rather ironically, Roman attitudes toward Jews were at times to envision them as feminine. The reality of the situation may be as simple as saying that within different cultures, there are different definitions regarding engendered behavior.

<sup>46</sup> James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide To The Bible As It Was At The Start Of The Common Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) pp. 438-458

<sup>47</sup> *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1999)

donkeys along a wall.<sup>48</sup>

About the only sure definitions here are “spring,” and “wall.” But even the Hebrew word which means “spring,” *ayin*, can also mean “eye,” as in “appealing to the eye,” i.e., “handsome,” “beautiful,” or in the sense of “overcoming the Evil Eye,” this is indeed one sense that the rabbis are implying with the drash. Playing “spring” against “eye,” they are also implying a matter of fecundity, and another idea suggested by water may be not only its ability to bring forth, nurture and grow, but its ability to hide (from the Evil Eye) as well.

Neither is there any doubt that the second variants in interpreting the passage was known to the redactors of our narrative; the fact that the redactors tell us that R. Johanan is a descendant of Joseph is important. It will help us to better understand what this part of our narrative is trying to convey, there may be more than “meets the eye.”

Joseph brought evil report of them, etc. R. Meir said: [He told Jacob]: Thy children are to be suspected of [eating] limbs torn from the living animals. R. Judah said: They insult the sons of the bondmaids [Bilhah and Zilpah] and call them slaves. R. Simeon said: They cast their eyes on the daughters of the country. R. Judah b. Simon said: With respect to all three, A just balance and scale are the Lord's (Prov. 16:11). The Holy One, blessed be He, rebuked him [Joseph]: ‘Thou didst say, “They are to be suspected of eating a limb torn from a living animal”: by thy life, even in the very act of wrongdoing they will slaughter ritually,’ as it says, And they killed a he-goat (Gen. 37:31). ‘Thou didst say, “They insult the sons of the bondmaids and call them slaves” ’Joseph was sold for a slave (Ps. 105:17). ‘Thou didst say, ‘They cast their eyes upon the daughters of the land”: I will incite a bear against thee’-His master's wife cast her eye upon Joseph, etc. (Gen. 39: 7).<sup>49</sup> (Genesis Rabbah 84:7)

Note carefully what the redactor accomplishes through first the use of an earlier midrashic<sup>50</sup> tradition about Joseph and his brothers combining it with the use of juxtaposition of the traditional roles of Esau/Edom (Rome/Resh Lakish) and Jacob/Joseph, symbolized in the person of R. Johanan I believe the redactors have this passage from *Genesis Rabbah* in mind, and may be referencing it however indirectly, when they relate the story of R. Johanan and his unusual action. Both sources, that contained in *Genesis Rabbah*, as well as the alternate reading of the verse in the Biblical book of Genesis may be a contribution to this extended aggadic midrash here, and may indeed have served as a starting point on which to create the episodic narrative we have here in the Bavli.

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<sup>48</sup> Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995)

<sup>49</sup> The version of the *Midrash Rabbah* consulted here is the Soncino edition, published by Davka Software on CDROM.

<sup>50</sup> See Jacob Neusner's *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1994) pp. 355-81. Neusner suggests a date between the fifth and early sixth centuries C.E. for the final form of *Genesis Rabbah* from earlier extant material. See also H.L. Strack, *Op. Cit.*, p. 279, who proposes a date in the early fifth century C.E. for the final redaction of the work.

Now Jews undoubtedly regard Joseph as a hero everywhere; yet as we see, there are negative parts to the Joseph tradition.<sup>51</sup> The sense here is that Joseph, although innocent of the affair of seducing Potifar's wife is being punished instead for bearing tales about his brothers. In our story here, I believe that the redactors may well have this particular section in mind, and they suggest as much by telling us that R. Johanan is of the seed of Joseph. However subtle it may be, here they are treating R. Johanan more as if he were one of the siblings of Joseph, rather than a descendant, as we see from the story's negative outcome. By using this midrashic tradition to create one of their own even more radical midrash as commentary on the situation of their day, the redactors of the Bavli have completely transformed the original import of the tradition as it is originally found in the biblical book of Genesis.

We know to start with that the activity in which R. Johanan engages definitely contravenes what is proper behavior for the society of his day. The idea here is that when the women look on his beauty, they will have that vision in mind when they engage in sexual intercourse with their husbands. This idea is not far removed from the way it could be understood hypothetically in our own time, if we might suppose that we were involved in a situation where our spouse saw an "old flame," or perhaps any appealing person, and it was this relationship, real or imagined that they thought of as they made love to us, or indeed that might have initiated the desire behind the encounter. Here we see that this descendant of Joseph, unlike his virtuous ancestor, *has engaged* in a form of sexual impropriety. R. Johanan and Resh Lakish meet one day while the former is bathing in a river.<sup>52</sup> R. Johanan teaches Resh Lakish Torah; he marries R. Johanan's sister and subsequently becomes a great man.<sup>53</sup>

Then, one day, in the heat of argument, the two disagree over when an implement made of iron may become unclean; R. Johanan insults his disciple Resh Lakish by reminding him that he had once been a gladiator; Resh Lakish deeply hurts his teacher by saying that he saw no benefit in learning Torah over being employed as a gladiator, for after all, in both endeavors he is known as "master." The two men refuse anything further to do with each other, and despite pleas from Resh Lakish's wife, R. Johanan refuses to intervene, and Resh Lakish dies.<sup>54</sup> The one thing that R. Johanan does have in

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<sup>51</sup> Op. cit., *Traditions of the Bible*. It seems to me quite clear that the redactors indeed have in mind the Joseph narratives, and the traditional aggadic material that accrued around it. Although today, we may have trouble interpreting this parable-like episode regarding R. Johanan and Resh Lakish, Jewish audiences of the third century C.E. would have readily understood it the way I am about to unfold it, even without the background material which I have included.

<sup>52</sup> Resh Lakish repents, and R. Johanan teaches him Torah; later Resh Lakish goes to collect his weapons, but cannot. The sense here is that Torah study has made him so weak that he does not have the strength to pick his weapons up. Note also the root cause of the disagreement between teacher and disciple.

<sup>53</sup> He becomes a noted scholar of Torah on his own merit.

<sup>54</sup> R. Johanan clearly is hurt by Resh Lakish's response. Interestingly, R. Johanan may have little control, except to forgive Resh Lakish, over his resentment upon being insulted. It is the power inherent in the feeling of R. Johanan's resentment – made all the more powerful because of the greatness of the man – that does Resh Lakish in. The ancients believed that the negative powers as expressed in the emotion of resentment had actual power to harm or even, as in this case be lethal; thus, we see that the commandment to forgive was not just thought to be "a nice thing to do," it was for the sake of restoring peace and

his power to do, to *forgive*, like his ancestor Joseph *forgave his brothers*, R. Johanan refuses to exercise. R. Johanan is thus caricatured as an anti-Joseph. Instead of seeing R. Johanan as a “fruitful bough,” the image he has of himself, the redactors seem to be saying that R. Johanan is more like a “wild ass,” a creature that is untamed. Interestingly, the verse that immediately comes to mind is Gen. 16:11-12, where the term “wild ass of a man,” is used to describe Ishmael, Abraham’s son with Hagar. While I don’t believe our redactors were necessarily implying a direct correspondence between R. Johanan and Ishmael, I do believe that they mean to suggest that R. Johanan was impetuous and lacked the discipline normally expected from a Tzadekh. But, if R. Johanan is a type of anti-Joseph, surely the redactor has in mind that Resh Lakish plays an anti-Ishmael, or, better yet, an anti-Esau in a supportive role! Remember, Ishmael/Esau can often be substitute code for Rome, and we have already been told that Resh Lakish not only appears to be Roman, but that he was a gladiator before R. Johanan taught him Torah and took him as a disciple, after which he married R. Johanan’s sister. Although not directly stated in the narrative itself, it is entirely possible that the relationship between teacher and disciple here turned into one of rivalry, and their may have been a good deal of jealousy on the part of R. Johanan toward his pupil, Resh Lakish, once he becomes a scholar in his own right.

What is ironic here, of course, and what the original audience probably greeted with sardonic humor, is the role juxtaposition between R. Johanan, the descendant of Joseph, and Resh Lakish, the former gladiator. It also seems that the irony in this role reversal is compounded when it is realized that Resh Lakish is given at least tacit approval with the words out of R. Johanan’s own mouth; indeed, these words serve as a fitting epitaph:

“When I stated a law, the son of Lakisha used to raise twenty-four objections, to which I gave twenty-four answers, which consequently led to a fuller comprehension of the law.”

The alternate reading of Gen. 49:22 is not directly stated, but surely implied, in reference to R. Johanan; and when the reader realizes this, it makes this seemingly obtuse anecdote all the more pointed in its condemnation of R. Johanan’s behavior.<sup>55</sup>

The connection this story has with what we have seen so far with the narrative of R. El’azar seems to be a motif that centers on impetuosity and the resultant undisciplined behavior demonstrated by both protagonists as its direct result of the lack of discipline. As well, there may be another, not so evident connective point between the two that balance out the pair, imposing a symmetry on the whole; thus far in the narrative as it relates to R. El’azar, we see a Jew working as an agent of the Roman Government, and who in his character traits, is considered by some in his community more Roman than Jewish. In the encounter between R. Johanan and Resh Lakish, we have on the other side a convert to Judaism that knows Torah more expertly, and thereby can give a

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wholeness, expressed in the one Hebrew word *Shalom*. See Mary Douglas’ *Purity And Danger*, pp. 95-114.

<sup>55</sup> This is not the only way to unpack this section of the narrative; for an alternate interpretation the explanation of Rabbi Judith Abrams, Op. Cit., *The Women of the Talmud*, pp. 163-164. See also Daniel Boyarin’s exposition of this same portion, Op. Cit., *Carnal Israel*, pp.212-219, for yet another insight.



“fuller comprehension of the law” than many others who are born into the tradition. Additionally, not only is this part of the narrative transformed, but also suddenly we realize the larger implications toward which the Bavli is directing us. By the redactional use of juxtaposition, and broadly quoting the patriarchal narratives in the Bible, the redactor forces the Bavli’s contemporary audience to take notice.

### **Two Portraits in Suffering**

We are going to end this article with consideration of what I have chosen to call “Two Portraits in Suffering.” One portrait is that of R. El’azar, and the other portrait that we will consider will be that of “Our Rabbi, R. Judah (The Patriarch).

As in times contemporary with ourselves, so it was with the Bible and talmudic periods, people often asked themselves why there was suffering for some who did not seem to deserve it, and why for others there was none—and not only that—these that did seem to deserve it, not only did not suffer, but actually seemed to prosper while righteous people seemed to fail.

In the Bible, for the most part, suffering is seen as a punishment visited upon humanity by God for sin, either the sin of individuals or the collective sin of the nation of Israel as a group. If people sinned, there was punishment; likewise, if there was punishment, people must have sinned, even if only the people involved, knew the particulars of such sin; after all, God was just. The whole sacrificial system is based on the reality that humans sin, and there must be a way to atone or cover such sins. It is only in the later Biblical writings that a direct correspondence between the actions of an individual or group of people and resultant outcome begin to be openly questioned and debated. Most of us are familiar with the Biblical writings of Job and Ecclesiastes, as well as some of the material contained in the Psalms.

While the question is posed in the Bible, overwhelmingly, the answer is given that suffering is the result of sin. By in large, this is the response of the Yerushalami as well, except to note that if there is indeed injustice, such will certainly be resolved in the world to come if it hasn’t been in this world. A second answer given is that the suffering of the righteous atone for the sins of the unjust.

In the Bavli, however, the distinct possibility is raised that there may indeed be suffering that has no answer, although it too argues at times in favor of traditional views. Other times, it uses contrasting opinions to present opposing views, and there are even times when these oppositions are left without resolution. The suffering of an individual could be seen not only as atonement for personal sins, but might be seen as efficacious for the community as a whole as well; or the righteous were thought to suffer in this world, so that their reward in the world to come would be greater. It is important for the reader to realize that the reality of suffering in this world began to acquire a spiritual significance which it was not thought to possess in earlier times. We can see that the

Bavli offers many possible answers to the problem of human suffering, but perhaps if anything, suffering could be a doorway connecting this world and the next.

In our next section under consideration, we have, I believe a story that ultimately *does have* a resolution as regards sin and its punishment as well as one that deals with the suffering of the righteous and reward; but it takes some unexpected twists and turns as it unfolds.

When we rejoin the story of R. El'azar, we find that he has taken on *voluntarily* penance of suffering to atone for his sins, caused by his work for the Romans. It is important to note the insistence of the narrative that the action in this instance is at R. El'azar's own volition, rather than suffering that sent by God and inflicted on him involuntarily. How can the reader know this to be the case?

Obviously, first, because the narrative tells us as much; but, there is another clue that points to this conclusion. Kraemer mentions this episode specifically as a voluntary assumption of suffering, as opposed to the suffering that God visits on R. Judah the Patriarch, as a result of his lack of mercy towards a calf that is about to be slaughtered for food.<sup>56</sup>

The clue as far as the situation of R. El'azar may lie in the fact that he is still able to engage in the study of Torah. This fact is enough for the factions that support R. El'azar to offer this fact as proof of the rightness of his actions. They seem to be indicating, if it were otherwise – if indeed the suffering had be sent as punishment for actions he committed earlier in his career – his suffering would be so great as to prevent him from continuing his Torah study.<sup>57</sup> Also, the rightness of El'azar is shown by the fact that his ruling on bodily issue in the form of fluid from sixty women is correct according to halacha by all there offspring turning out to be male. There may as well be here in this section elements of birth, death, and rebirth all intertwined as El'azar seems to take on the qualities of a woman; there is a significant role reversal also—R. El'azar's wife leaves him after her entire dowry has been spent in an attempt to ease his suffering; he then is cared for by seaman who attribute to him miraculous protection from peril at sea. The symbolism seems to portray these male figures as female, and I believe El'azar at this point in the narrative may well represent the new system the sages are trying to implement.<sup>58</sup>

Not only is his suffering beneficial to him and others around him in this life, but, it extends as well to his corpse after his death shown by the fact that his body does not decay, at least for quite a long time after his death; why, he even continues to render halachic rulings from the upper room of his residence, where his wife has put him, following his directions. But there may be more here to unpack than may at first is

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<sup>56</sup> Kraemer, Op. Cit., *Response to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature*, p. 157-158.

<sup>57</sup> Often, the study of Torah is symbolically referred to in phrases as are found in the psalms referring to "God's face," and the longing of the supplicant to be able to view it.

<sup>58</sup> For more on this, see the discussion in *The Women of the Talmud*, pp. 167-69.

apparent, because after a time, R. El'azar's wife notices a worm crawling out from his ear!

Rabbi Judah the Patriarch truly deserves his sufferings we are told, because of his seeming inability to feel pity for and show mercy to a calf on the way to be slaughtered. A voice declares that since he shows no pity, no pity will be shown to him. R. Judah's penance takes the form of pain in the act of relieving himself. Ouch!!

We need to examine this situation closely however to see what it may be trying to tell us about life as the Bavli interprets it.

First, how does suffering, whether deserved or undeserved, enter into life's equation, and now alter it. With the destruction of the Second Temple, the both the system of sacrifices that was a primary focus of its activity, and the priesthood who was responsible for overseeing the administration of the system, ceased to function.

We see in fact, a reference in the narrative that the sages at least partially took over some of the responsibilities of the priesthood in the episode that pits El'azar against the majority of his colleagues over the issue of whether the bloody fluid of the sixty women is menstrual, a case in which it were in fact, intercourse would be prohibited—or whether because it isn't – intercourse would be allowed. R. El'azar allows it, and the rightness of his decision is reinforced by the miraculous fact that his prediction of all male births turns out to be correct.

However, some of the other responsibilities of the priesthood could not be appropriated because they were no longer operational; here mainly, this regards the system of sacrifices, which in the past, while the Temple stood effected atonement for sins, both collectively and individually.

Both the Judaism of the sages and the newly emerging independent Christianity saw that human suffering – especially the suffering of the righteous – as an answer to the problem of atonement for sins. Prayer and suffering come to be effective substitutes as atonement within each tradition. It is with this understanding that we should approach both the suffering of R. El'azar and that of R. Judah the Patriarch as well. We know that each case of suffering is in its own way effective because the narrative demonstrates as much; as for the benefits accrued to the suffering of R. El'azar, no one died prematurely, while that attributed to R. Judah assured the world of an abundant supply of rain and hence food.<sup>59</sup>

I believe the main point here is to focus on what the redactors are trying to achieve here in relaying the events of a rather convoluted story. They are attempting to achieve a sense of balance, and what they are trying to point us to by doing this is their overall belief in justice; a justice that is tempered by and seen through a lens of reality. We have clues that this may be the case—elements whose ambiguity plays with us and we may not

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<sup>59</sup> There may indeed be just a hint here of “one upmanship” between the two factions one supporting R. El'azar, the other R. Judah ha-Nasi. R. Judah eventually wins out, but not before suffering some loss.

be quite sure even why they are included, as we may be more comfortable with just a simple reductionist statement; we may well start to worry along with El'azar whether his actions were motivated from a sense of justice and self sacrifice; or were they committed by a man who could not control his passions fully, but rather was at times like many of us, driven by them? The redactor, by setting contrasts side by side has posed for us a question as if to ask in the words of the song, "is you is, or is you ai'nt?"

But the Bavli refuses to paint us such a picture of life in so simplistic terms. Living life then, as it remains so now, is not so simple. El'azar, although severely criticized in this narrative is never completely rejected, because, when all is said and done, *he still represents a part of the Community of Israel*; and what is more, the narrative fully lets into its pages R. Judah's humanity by telling us the negative episode regarding the slaughtered calf, as well as the spurning of his offer of marriage to R. El'azar's widow. It does not even spare us her insult to him. This is one episode that is recorded and not glossed over – a sage upon whom his colleagues confer the title of *Nasi*, or Patriarch – a title of esteem and leadership.

We see in this section an earlier vignette that concerns the live of R. El'azar and R. Judah in which both are promoted and allowed the honor of sitting on benches with their teachers, thus saying as it were, that their teachers consider their scholarship equal with their own. Judah the Patriarch is relegated to sit at the feet of his teacher once more because of the fear of the evil eye doing him harm. It is significant here that no complaint from R. Judah is forthcoming – probably because there was none, for he understood why the action was necessary.

R. El'azar on the other hand as is his wont, misinterprets the same action when it is applied in his case for the very same reason. He goes on to ridicule R. Judah. The redactor has chosen to reveal to us that R. El'azar has a consistent character flaw that will not improve with experience. He continually misreads the motive of not only other people but also his own – never really sure that his own actions are justifiable even in his own eyes. Even though it comes before in sequence in the narrative, the final attitude of the redactor toward El'azar is much less than flattering when he lets us in on the fact that a worm issues from El'azar's ear, and El'azar's answer to his wife's concern over it. It would seem that he regards assurance of the rightness of his actions as of supreme importance – perhaps even more than mercy. The redactor urges us on toward this conclusion all the more so; because we have been alerted previously to the fact that R. Judah's suffering was brought upon him in order to teach him compassion, and removed, once the lesson had been learned.

Perhaps the story is resolved, however tentatively when we learn that R. El'azar's son – the same one whose paternity the Roman matron questioned – became a scholar in his own right, pointing to the fact that there is hope, even in situations where it otherwise might least be expected.

Finally, there is yet more reason to hope, as we are told in the tradition transmitted by R. Parnak in the name of R. Johanan:

R. Parnak said in R. Johanan's name: He who is himself a scholar, and his son is a scholar, and his son's son too, the Torah will nevermore cease from his seed, as it is written, As for me, this is my covenant with them, saith the Lord; My spirit is upon thee, and my words which I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed, nor out of the mouth of thy seed's seed, saith the Lord, from henceforth and for ever. What is meant by 'saith the Lord'? — The Holy one, blessed be He, said, I am surety for thee in this matter. What is the meaning of 'from henceforth and forever'? — R. Jeremiah said: From henceforth [i.e., after three generations] the Torah seeks its home<sup>60</sup>

Indeed there is hope, the narrative seems to tell us, but we must do our part by participating and transmitting what has been given to us.

### **The Narrative: (B. Baba Metzia 83b – 85a)**

MISHNAH. One who engages labourers and demands that they commence early or work late — where local usage is not to commence early or work late he may not compel them. Where it is the practice to supply food [to one's labourers], he must supply them therewith; to provide a relish, he must provide it. Everything depends on local custom. It once happened that r. Johanan b. Mathia said to his son, 'go out and engage labourers.' He went and agreed to supply them with food. But on his returning to his father, the latter said, my son, should you even prepare for them a banquet like Solomon's when in his glory, you cannot fulfil your undertaking, for they are children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But, before they start work, go out and tell them, "[I engage you] on condition that you have no claim upon me other than bread and pulse." R. Simeon b. Gamaliel said: it was unnecessary [to stipulate thus]; everything depends on local custom.

GEMARA: Is it not obvious? — It is necessary [to teach it] only when he [the employer] pays them a higher wage [than usual]: I might think that he can plead, 'I pay you a higher wage in order that you may start earlier and work for me until nightfall;' we are therefore taught that they can reply, 'The higher remuneration is [only] for better work [but not longer hours].'

Resh Lakish said:

A labourer's entry [to town] is in his own time, and his going forth [to the fields] is in his employer's; as it is written, The sun ariseth, they [sc. the animals] gather themselves together, and lay them down in their dens. Man goeth forth unto his work and to his labour until the evening. But let us see what is the usage? — This refers to a new town. Then let us see whence they come? — It refers to a conglomeration. Alternatively it means that he said to them, 'You are engaged to me as labourers [whose conditions of work are set forth] in the Bible.'

R. Zera lectured — others say. R. Joseph learnt:

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<sup>60</sup> Torah remains within the family passed from one generation to the next.

What is meant by, Thou makest darkness, and it is night: wherein all the beasts of the forest do creep forth? Thou makest darkness, and it is night — this refers to this world, which is comparable to night; wherein all the beasts of the forest do creep forth — to the wicked therein, who are like the beasts of the forest. The sun ariseth — for the righteous; the wicked are gathered in — for Gehenna; and lay them down in their habitations — not a single righteous man lacks a habitation as befits his honour. Man goeth forth unto his work — i.e., the righteous go forth to receive their reward; and to his labour until the evening — as one who has worked fully until the very evening.

R. Eleazar, son of R. Simeon, once met an officer of the [Roman] Government who had been sent to arrest thieves, 'How can you detect them?' he said. 'Are they not compared to wild beasts, of whom it is written, Therein [in the darkness] all the beasts of the forest creep forth?' (Others say, he referred him to the verse, He lieth in wait secretly as a lion in his den.) 'Maybe,' [he continued,] 'you take the innocent and allow the guilty to escape?' The officer answered, 'What shall I do? It is the King's command.' Said the Rabbi, 'Let me tell you what to do. Go into a tavern at the fourth hour of the day. If you see a man dozing with a cup of wine in his hand, ask what he is. If he is a learned man, [you may assume that] he has risen early to pursue his studies; if he is a day labourer he must have been up early to do his work; if his work is of the kind that is done at night, he might have been rolling thin metal. If he is none of these, he is a thief; arrest him.' The report [of this conversation] was brought to the Court, and the order was given: 'Let the reader of the letter become the messenger. R. Eleazar, son of R. Simeon, was accordingly sent for, and he proceeded to arrest the thieves. Thereupon R. Joshua, son of Karhah, sent word to him, 'Vinegar, son of wine! How long will you deliver up the people of our God for slaughter!' Back came the reply: 'I weed out thorns from the vineyard.' Whereupon R. Joshua retorted: 'Let the owner of the vineyard himself [God] come and weed out the thorns.'

One day a fuller met him, and dubbed him: 'Vinegar, son of wine.' Said the Rabbi to himself, 'Since he is so insolent, he is certainly a culprit.' So he gave the order to his attendant: 'Arrest him! Arrest him!' When his anger cooled, he went after him in order to secure his release, but did not succeed. Thereupon he applied to him, [the fuller] the verse: Whoso keepeth his mouth and his tongue keepeth his soul from troubles. Then they hanged him, and he [R. Eleazar son of R. Simeon] stood under the gallows and wept. Said they [his disciples] to him: 'Master, do not grieve; for he and his son seduced a betrothed maiden on the Day of Atonement.' [On hearing this,] he laid his hand upon his heart and exclaimed 'Rejoice, my heart!<sup>61</sup> If matters on which thou [sc. the heart] art doubtful are thus, how much more so those on which thou art certain! I am well assured that neither worms nor decay will have power over thee.' Yet in spite of this, his conscience disquieted him. Thereupon he was given a sleeping draught, taken into a marble chamber and had his abdomen opened, and basketsful of fat removed from him and placed in the sun during Tammuz and Ab, and yet it did not putrefy. But no fat putrefies — [True,] no fat putrefies; nevertheless, if it contains red streaks it does. But here, though it contained red streaks, it did not. Thereupon he applied to himself the verse, My flesh too shall dwell in safety. (B. Baba Metzia 83b)

A similar thing befell R. Ishmael son of R. Jose.

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<sup>61</sup> Boyarin, in *Carnal Israel*, p. 220, translates this line, "Be joyful, O my guts, Be Joyful."

[One day] Elijah met him and remonstrated with him: 'How long will you deliver the people of our God to execution!' — 'What can I do', he replied, 'it is the royal decree.' 'Your father fled to Asia,' he retorted, 'do you flee to Laodicea!'

When R. Ishmael son of R. Jose and R. Eleazar son of R. Simeon met, one could pass through with a yoke of oxen under them and not touch them. Said a certain [Roman] matron to them, 'Your children are not yours!' They replied, 'Theirs [sc. our wives'] is greater than ours.' '[But this proves my allegation] all the more!' [She observed]. Some say, they answered thus: 'For as a man is, so is his strength.' Others say, they answered her thus: 'Love suppresses the flesh.' But why should they have answered her at all; is it not written, Answer not a fool according to his folly? — To permit no stigma upon their children.

R. Johanan said: The waist of R. Ishmael son of R. Jose was as a bottle of nine kabs capacity. R. papa said: R. Johanan's waist was as a bottle containing five kabs; others say, three kabs. That of R. papa himself was as [large as] the wickerwork baskets of Harpania. (B. Baba Metzia 84a)

When R. Ishmael son of R. Jose and R. Eleazar son of R. Simeon met, one could pass through with a yoke of oxen under them and not touch them. Said a certain [Roman] matron to them, 'Your children are not yours!' They replied, 'Theirs [sc. our wives'] is greater than ours.' '[But this proves my allegation] all the more!' [She observed]. Some say, they answered thus: 'For as a man is, so is his strength.' Others say, they answered her thus: 'Love suppresses the flesh.' But why should they have answered her at all; is it not written, Answer not a fool according to his folly? — To permit no stigma upon their children.

R. Johanan said: I am the only one remaining of Jerusalem's men of outstanding beauty. He who desires to see R. Johanan's beauty, let him take a silver goblet as it emerges from the crucible, fill it with the seeds of red pomegranate, encircle its brim with a chaplet of red roses, and set it between the sun and the shade: its lustrous glow is akin to R. Johanan's beauty.

But that is not so; for did not a Master say: R. Kahana's beauty is a reflection of R. Abbahu's; R. Abbahu's is a reflection of our Father Jacob's; our Father Jacob's was a reflection of Adam's; whereas R. Johanan is omitted! — R. Johanan is different, because he lacked a beard.]

R. Johanan used to go and sit at the gates of the mikweh. 'When the daughters of Israel ascend from the bath', said he, 'let them look upon me, that they may bear sons as beautiful and as learned as I.' Said the Rabbis to him: 'Do you not fear an evil eye?' — 'I am of the seed of Joseph', he replied, 'against whom an evil eye is powerless.' For it is written, Joseph is a fruitful bough, even a fruitful bough by a well: whereon R. Abbahu observed: Render not [by a well] but, 'above the power of the eye.' R. Jose son of R. Hanina deduced it from the following: and let them multiply abundantly like fish in the midst of the earth: just as fish in the seas are covered by water and the eye has no power over them, so also are the seed of Joseph — the eye has no power over them

One day R. Johanan was bathing in the Jordan, when Resh Lakish saw him and leapt into the Jordan after him. Said he [R. Johanan] to him, 'Your strength should be for the Torah.' — 'Your beauty,' he replied, 'should be for women.' 'If you will repent,' said he, 'I will give you my sister [in marriage], who is more beautiful than I.' He undertook [to repent]; then he wished to return and collect his weapons, but could not. Subsequently, [R. Johanan] taught him Bible and Mishnah, and made him into a great man. Now, one day there was a dispute in the schoolhouse [with respect to the following. Viz.,] a sword, knife, dagger, spear, handsaw and a scythe — at what stage [of their manufacture] can they become unclean? When their manufacture is finished. And when is their manufacture finished? — R. Johanan ruled: When they are tempered in a

furnace. Resh Lakish maintained: When they have been furbished in water. Said he to him: 'A robber understands his trade.' Said he to him, 'And wherewith have you benefited me: there [as a robber] I was called Master, and here I am called Master.' 'By bringing you under the wings of the Shechinah,' he retorted. R. Johanan therefore felt himself deeply hurt, [as a result of which] Resh Lakish fell ill. His sister [sc. R. Johanan's, the wife of Resh Lakish] came and wept before him: 'Forgive him for the sake of my son,' she pleaded. He replied: 'Leave thy fatherless children. I will preserve them alive.' 'For the sake of my widowhood then!' 'And let thy widows trust in me,' he assured her. Resh Lakish died, and R. Johanan was plunged into deep grief. Said the Rabbis, 'Who shall go to ease his mind? Let R. Eleazar b. Pedath go, whose disquisitions are very subtle.' So he went and sat before him; and on every dictum uttered by R. Johanan he observed: 'There is a Baraita which Supports you.' 'Are you as the son of Lakisha?' he complained: 'when I stated a law, the son of Lakisha used to raise twenty-four objections, to which I gave twenty-four answers, which consequently led to a fuller comprehension of the law; whilst you say, "A Baraita has been taught which supports you:" do I not know myself that my dicta are right?' Thus he went on rending his garments and weeping, 'Where are you, O son of Lakisha, where are you, O son of Lakisha;' and he cried thus until his mind was turned. Thereupon the Rabbis prayed for him, and he died.

[Reverting to the story of R. Eleazar son of R. Simeon] yet even so, R. Eleazar son of R. Simeon's fears were not allayed, and so he undertook a penance. Every evening they spread sixty sheets for him, and every morning sixty basins of blood and discharge were removed from under him. In the mornings his wife prepared him sixty kinds of pap, which he ate, and then recovered. Yet his wife did not permit him to go to the schoolhouse, lest the Rabbis discomfort him. Every evening he would exhort them, 'Come, my brethren and familiars!' whilst every morning he exclaimed, 'Depart, because ye disturb my studies!' One day his wife, hearing him, cried out, 'You yourself bring them upon you; you have [already] squandered the money of my father's house!' So she left him and returned to her paternal home. Then there came sixty seamen who presented him with sixty slaves, bearing sixty purses. They too prepared sixty kinds of pap for him, which he ate. One day she [his wife] said to her daughter, 'Go and see how your father is faring now.' She went, [and on her arrival] her father said to her, 'Go, tell your mother that our [wealth] is greater than theirs' [sc. of his father-in-law's house]. He then applied to himself the verse, She is like the merchant's ships; she bringeth her food from afar. He ate, drank, and recovered, and went to the schoolhouse. Sixty specimens of blood were brought before him, and he declared them all clean. But the Rabbis criticised him, saying, 'Is it possible that there was not [at least] one about which there was some doubt!' He retorted, 'If it be as I [said], let them all be males; if not, let there be one female amongst them.' They were all males, and were named 'Eleazar', after him

It has been taught: Rabbi said: How much procreation did this wicked [state] prevent in Israel.

On his deathbed he said to his wife, 'I know that the Rabbis are angry with me, and will not properly attend to me. Let me lie in an upper chamber, and do you not be afraid of me.' R. Samuel b. Nahmani said: R. Jonathan's mother told me that she was informed by the wife of R. Eleazar son of R. Simeon: 'I kept him lying in that upper chamber not less than eighteen nor more than twenty-two years. Whenever I ascended there, I examined his hair, and [even] if a single hair had fallen out, the blood would well forth. One day, I saw a worm issue from his ear, whereat I was much grieved, but he appeared to me in my dream and told me that it was nothing. ["This has happened," said he,] "because I once heard a scholar insulted and did not protest, as I should have done." Whenever two people came before him [in a lawsuit], they stood near the door, each stated his case, and then a voice issued from that upper chamber, proclaiming, "So-and-so, you are liable; so-and-so, you are free." Now, one day his wife was quarrelling with a neighbour, when



the latter reviled [her, saying,] 'Let her be like her husband, who was not worthy of burial!' Said the Rabbis: 'When things have gone thus far, it is certainly not meet.' Others say: R. Simeon b. Yohai appeared to them in a dream, and complained: 'I have a pigeon amongst you which you refuse to bring to me.' Then the Rabbis went to attend to him [for burial], but the townspeople of Akabaria<sup>15</sup> did not let them; because during all the years R. Eleazar son of R. Simeon slept in his upper chamber no evil beast came to their town. But one day — it was the eve of the Day of Atonement, when they were busily occupied, the Rabbis sent [word] to the townspeople of Biri, and they brought up his bier, and carried it to his father's vault, which they found encircled by a serpent. Said they to it, 'O snake, O snake, open thy mouth, and let the son enter to his father.' Thereupon it opened [its mouth] for them. Then Rabbi sent [messengers] to propose [marriage] to his wife. She sent back: 'Shall a utensil, in which holy food has been used, be used for profane purposes!' There [sc. in Palestine] the proverb runs: Where the master hung up his weapons, there the shepherd hung up his wallet. He sent back word, 'Granted that he outstripped me in learning, was he [also] my superior in good deeds?' She returned, 'Yet at least he outstripped you in learning, though I did not know it. But I do know [that he exceeded you] in [virtuous] practice, since he submitted himself to mortification.

'In learning'. To what is the reference? — When Rabban Simeon b. Gamaliel and R. Joshua b. Karhah sat on benches, R. Eleazar son of R. Simeon and Rabbi sat in front of them on the ground, raising objections and answering them. Said they, 'We drink their water [i.e., benefit from their learning], yet they sit upon the ground; let seats be placed for them!' Thus were they promoted. But R. Simeon b. Gamaliel protested: 'I have a pigeon amongst you, and ye wish to destroy it!' So Rabbi was put down. Thereupon R. Joshua b. Karhah said: 'Shall he, who has a father, live, whilst he who has no father die!' So R. Eleazar son of R. Simeon too was put down, whereat he felt hurt saying, 'Ye have made him equal to me!' Now, until that day, whenever Rabbi made a statement, R. Eleazar son of R. Simeon supported him. But from then onward, when Rabbi said, 'I have an objection,' R. Eleazar son of R. Simeon retorted, 'If you have such and such an objection, this is your answer; now have you encompassed us with loads of answers in which there is no substance.' Rabbi, being thus humiliated, went and complained to his father. 'Let it not grieve you,' he answered, 'for he is a lion, and the son of a lion, whereas you are a lion, the son of a fox.' To this Rabbi alluded when he said, Three were humble; viz., my father, the Bene Bathyra, and Jonathan, the son of Saul. 'R. Simeon b. Gamaliel,'<sup>1</sup> as has been said, 'The Bene Bathyra,' as a Master said: They placed him at the head and appointed him Nasi over them. 'Jonathan, the son of Saul,' for he said to David, And thou shalt be king over Israel, and I shall be next unto thee. But how does this prove it: perhaps Jonathan the son of Saul [spoke thus] because he saw that the people were flocking to David? The Bene Bathyra too, because they saw that Hillel was their superior [in learning]? But R. Simeon b. Gamaliel was certainly very modest

Rabbi observed: Suffering is precious. Thereupon he undertook [to suffer likewise] for thirteen years, six through stones in the kidneys and seven through scurvy: others reverse it. Rabbi's house-steward was wealthier than King Shapur. When he placed fodder for the beasts, their cries could be heard for three miles, and he aimed at casting it [before them] just then when Rabbi entered his privy closet, yet even so, his voice [lifted in pain] was louder than theirs, and was heard [even] by sea-farers. Nevertheless, the sufferings of R. Eleazar son of R. Simeon were superior [in virtue] to those of Rabbi. For whereas those of R. Eleazar son of R. Simeon came to him through love, and departed in love, those of Rabbi came to him through a certain incident, and departed likewise

'They came to him through a certain incident.' What is it? — A calf was being taken to the slaughter, when it broke away, hid his head under Rabbi's skirts, and lowed [in terror]. 'Go', said

he, 'for this wast thou created.' Thereupon they said [in Heaven], 'Since he has no pity, let us bring suffering upon him.'

'And departed likewise.' How so? — One day Rabbi's maidservant was sweeping the house; [seeing] some young weasels lying there, she made to sweep them away. 'Let them be,' said he to her; 'It is written, and his tender mercies are over all his works.' Said they [in Heaven], 'Since he is compassionate, let us be compassionate to him.'

During all the years that R. Eleazar suffered, no man died prematurely. During all those of Rabbi the world needed no rain; for Rabbah son of R. Shilah said: The day of rain is as hard [to bear] as the day of judgment. And Amemar said: But that it is necessary to the world, the Rabbis would have prayed that it might cease to be. Nevertheless, when a radish was pulled out of its bed, there remained a cavity full of water.

Rabbi chanced to visit the town of R. Eleazar son of R. Simeon. 'Did that righteous man leave a son?' he inquired. 'Yes,' they replied; 'and every harlot whose hire is two [zuz], hires him for eight.' So he had him brought [before him], ordained him a Rabbi, and entrusted him to R. Simeon b. Issi b. Lakonia, his mother's brother [to be educated]. Every day he would say, 'I am going to my town; to which he [his instructor] replied, 'They have made you a Sage, spread over you a gold trimmed cloak [at the ceremony of ordination] and designated you "Rabbi", and yet you say, I am going back to my town!' Said he, 'I swear that this [my desire] has been abandoned.' When he became a great [scholar], he went and sat in Rabbi's academy. On hearing his voice, he [Rabbi] observed: 'This voice is similar to that of R. Eleazar son of R. Simeon.' 'He is his son,' they [his disciples] told him. Thereupon he applied to him the verse, The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life; and he that winneth souls is wise. [Thus:] 'The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life' — this refers to R. Jose, the son of R. Eleazar, the son of R. Simeon; 'And he that winneth souls is wise' — to R. Simeon b. Issi b. Lakonia. When he died, he was carried to his father's burial vault, which was encompassed by a snake. 'O snake, O snake,' they adjured it, 'open thy mouth and let the son enter to his father;' but it would not uncoil for them. Now, the people thought that one was greater than the other, but there issued a Heavenly Voice, proclaiming: 'It is not because one is greater than the other, but because one underwent the suffering of the cave, and the other did not.'<sup>62</sup>

Rabbi chanced to visit the town of R. Tarfon. Said he to them: 'Has that righteous man, who used to swear by the life of his children, left a son?' They replied: 'He has left no son, but a daughter's son remains, and every harlot who is hired for two [zuz] hires him for eight.' So he had him brought before him and said to him: 'Should you repent, I will give you my daughter.' He repented. Some say, he married her [Rabbi's daughter] and divorced her; others, that he did not marry her at all, lest it be said that his repentance was on her account. And why did he [Rabbi] take such [extreme] measures? — Because, [as] Rab Judah said in Rab's name — others Say, R. Hiyya b. Abba said in R. Johanan's name — others say, R. Samuel b. Nahmani said in R. Jonathan's name: He who teaches Torah to his neighbour's son will be privileged to sit in the Heavenly Academy, for it is written, If thou [sc. Jeremiah] wilt cause [Israel] to repent, then will I bring thee again, and thou shalt stand before me. And he who teaches Torah to the son of an 'am ha-arez,<sup>23</sup> even if the Holy One, blessed be He, makes a decree, He annuls it for his sake, as it is written, and if thou shalt take forth the precious from the vile, thou shalt be as my mouth

R. Parnak said in R. Johanan's name: He who is himself a scholar, and his son is a scholar, and his son's son too, the Torah will nevermore cease from his seed, as it is written, As for me,

<sup>62</sup> A reference to an earlier event in R. El'azar's life. See B. Shabbat 33b.

this is my covenant with them, saith the Lord; My spirit is upon thee, and my words which I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed, nor out of the mouth of thy seed's seed, saith the Lord, from henceforth and for ever. What is meant by 'saith the Lord'? — The Holy one, blessed be He, said, I am surety for thee in this matter. What is the meaning of 'from henceforth and forever'? — R. Jeremiah said: From henceforth [i.e., after three generations] the Torah seeks its home

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