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Ritual Studies and the Study of Rabbinic Literature

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Abstract

In the last two decades several important studies have been published that focus on ritual in rabbinic literature, and consider ritual to be a critically important conceptual and analytical category in approaching rabbinic texts and rabbinic culture. This article provides an account of the intersection of Ritual Studies with the study of rabbinic literature, surveys key works and significant developments and shifts in the field, and identifies the central challenges in and benefits of examining rabbinic texts through ritual lenses. The article pays special attention to the complex relations between texts about rituals and ritual performances, as well as to the blurry boundaries between law and ritual in the realm of rabbinic *halakhah*.

Introduction

Heightened attention to ritual not only as a meaningful aspect of religious and social life, but perhaps also as the ultimate site in which culture is produced and expressed, is one of the quintessential characteristics of the study of religion in the last century. Indeed, in contemporary scholarship the words 'ritual' and 'religion' are sometimes used synonymously, to suggest that the latter is effectively contained in the former (Rappaport 1999: 3). The view that an investigation of ritual holds the key to understanding the cultural world of a given community as a whole is rooted in the formative work of sociologists and anthropologists of so-called 'primitive' societies, such as Emile Durkheim (2001), Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1966), Alfred Radcliffe-Brown (1952), and Bronislaw Malinowski (1926, 1962).

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The anthropological emphasis on ritual also had significant impact on scholars of the ancient world, most influentially on the foundational group known as 'the Cambridge ritualists' (Arlen 1990), and the subfield of ritual studies in antiquity has been a flourishing one in recent years (e.g., Hekster, Schmidt-Hofner, and Witschel 2008; Chaniotis 2011; Ambos and Verderame 2013). Classicist Walter Burkert aptly remarked on the centrality of ritual in the contemporary study of ancient religions: 'An insight that came to be generally acknowledged in the study of religion…is that rituals are more important and more instructive in the study of the ancient religions than are changeable myths' (Burkert 1985: 54).

While the notion that ritual is the gateway through which a scholar of religion can gain true insight into the community she studies remained stable and prominent at least in the last seven decades, the theoretical assumptions and the conceptual and hermeneutic apparatuses underlying this notion have changed quite dramatically in the course of those decades. The 'Myth and Ritual' school, most famously associated with James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, argued for a correspondence between myths and rituals, whether as originating from each other (Tylor 1958; Robertson Smith 1927; Frazer 1926) or as explanatory of one another (Malinowski 1926; Eliade 1963). This approach, which prevailed until the 1960s, was almost entirely abandoned in favor of the symbolic approach to ritual, pioneered by structuralist anthropologists Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963), Mary Douglas (1966), and Victor Turner (1967, 1969), and most influentially systematized by Clifford Geertz (1973). This approach views ritual as a symbolic system, that is, as a text that can and should be deciphered, which holds within it in an encrypted form the cosmological, social, and ethical worldviews of the community. The symbolic approach had an enormous impact on the study of religion, but has been steadily and increasingly criticized since the late 1970s by scholars who insisted that ritual is first and foremost an embodied set of actions, not a tool of intellectual expression, and should be approached as practice and not as a set of ideas (e.g., Staal 1979; Tambiah 1979; Grimes 1985, 1990; Bell 1992). In addition, it was noted that rituals involve power relations and must be understood in specific social and political contexts (e.g., Bourdieu 1977: 111-40; Bell 1992: 169-223; Asad 1993: 55-79). Most recently, the 'material turn' in Religious Studies, which called for shifting emphasis from texts to things and from thought to practice as ways of getting to know the religion of 'real people' as opposed to that of learned elites (e.g., Vasquez 2011; Houtman and Meyer 2012; Hutchings and McKenzie 2016) heralded rituals as sites in which religious subjectivities and modes of being truly come to the fore.

Considering the plethora of academic writing on ritual, and the centrality of this category in the study of religion, it is rather noteworthy that relatively little work on ritual that utilizes theoretical frameworks and insights from the greater field of Ritual Studies has been done in the scholarly study of post-biblical Judaism. This scarcity stands in stark opposition to the prolific writing on ritual

in biblical studies, which often pronouncedly attempted to incorporate ritual theory (e.g., Gorman 1990; McVann 1995; Strecker 1999; Olyan 2000; Gilders 2004; Klawans 2006; Klingbeil 2007; DeMaris 2008; Uro 2016). Several scholars explained the general disinterest (until recently) among scholars of early Judaism in the category of ritual as deriving from this category's historical association with the anthropological study of so-called 'primitive' societies, from which scholars of Jewish Studies, from the very inception of this field, have been trying to distance Jews and Judaism (Eilberg-Schwartz 1990: 5-22; Rubin 1995: 9-10; Gruenwald 2003: 147-50; on the general aversion to anthropological methods among scholars of Judaism, see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2005). In my view, this is only part of the story: as I will explain in greater length below, the predominance of the category of *halakhah* in post-biblical Judaism, which serves as an umbrella term for all aspects of normative Jewish practice, conceptually obviates the category of ritual as a distinct type of practice. In the framework of *halakhah* it is not exactly clear what distinguishes, for example, rules on *which* animals can be eaten from rules on *how* animals should be slaughtered: although we may call the former 'law' and the latter 'ritual', in scholarship on ancient Judaism both are usually subsumed under the heading of 'law'. While the issues I mentioned are pertinent both to the study of Second Temple Judaism and to the study of rabbinic Judaism, in this article I wish to focus specifically on the introduction of Ritual Studies to the study of rabbinic literature.

In the last two decades several important studies have been published that focus distinctly on ritual in rabbinic literature, and consider ritual to be a critically important conceptual and analytical category in approaching rabbinic texts. Since these studies have played a transformative role in the development of Rabbinics as an academic field, my purpose in this article is to provide an account of the intersection of Ritual Studies with the study of rabbinic literature, as well as a thoughtful consideration of the category of ritual and its utility for the study of rabbinic texts more broadly. The article sets out to offer a contextualized survey of key works and significant developments and shifts in the study of ritual in rabbinic literature, with special attention to the challenges presented by the textual nature of rabbinic rituals and by the blurry boundaries between law and ritual in the realm of rabbinic *halakhah*.

Rituals in Rabbinic Judaism

Before commencing a discussion on ritual as a category and object of study in rabbinic literature, a working definition of ritual must be put forth. This is easier said than done: as Gerald Klingbeil noted, a survey of all scholarly attempts at defining ritual can easily make for a rather hefty volume (Klingbeil 2007: 16). Very roughly speaking, we can identify two main approaches to ritual: one that

identifies it as a cultural artifact, and one that approaches it as a human mode of behavior.

When ritual is seen as a cultural artifact, it is usually considered to be a form of *script*: a formula that is enacted in communal settings in particular circumstances so as to fill certain social and religious functions (e.g., Geertz 1973: 443-48; Parkin 1992: 18). As a cultural artifact, a set of actions can be defined as ritual if it meets two conditions: (1) the actions are not spontaneous but are at least to some extent predetermined; (2) these actions ultimately reference a particular worldview or set of beliefs. In the words of Evan Zuesse, ritual consists of 'conscious and voluntary, repetitious and stylized symbolic bodily actions that are centered on cosmic structures and/or sacred presences' (Zuesse 1987: 405).

The view of ritual as artifact was harshly criticized for ignoring the performative and embodied aspects of ritual activity, as well as for failing to account for change or innovation in ritual. The alternative approach, which considers ritual to be a mode of behavior, shifts the emphasis from the product (the script) to the process of turning ordinary activities such as eating, washing, speaking, walking, and so on into rituals, and thus speaks of *ritualization* rather than of rituals (Grimes 1982: 3-39; Bell 1992: 73-74). In this view, rituals do not have to be collective, traditional, or even meaningful (Grimes 1992): what makes for a ritual is the condensation, exaggeration, and repetition of ordinary behavior in very particular ways (Schechner 1993: 228). There is certain resonance between this approach and Sigmund Freud's famous observations on the correspondences between religious rituals and compulsive behaviors: Freud noted that both 'neurotic ceremonials' (which we may call private rituals) and traditional religious rituals 'consist in making small adjustments to particular everyday actions, small additions or restrictions or arrangements, which have always to be carried out in the same, or in a methodically varied, manner' (Freud 1989: 430; see also Smith 1987).

The definition of ritual that I personally find most compelling and useful centers neither on meaning nor on mode of behavior, but rather on *state of mind*. Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlow proposed that what distinguishes rituals from other actions is that when one performs a ritual, one does not attempt to achieve anything except for the successful completion of the ritual itself: ritual is thus a completely self-referential activity (Humphrey and Laidlow 1994). The question that guides the performance of ritual is not 'what does this mean?' or 'what do I hope to accomplish by doing it?' but rather 'did I get it right?' and the state of mind of 'getting it right' constitutes what Humphrey and Laidlow call 'the ritual commitment'.

Whichever approach we choose for identifying and defining rituals, anyone who is familiar with rabbinic literature, and particularly with the vast rabbinic discussions on how exactly numerous activities should be performed—from the observance of Sabbaths and festivals to the preparation and consumption of meals, from court procedures to sacrifices and purification practices, and so

on—will inevitably see resonance between the above definitions and the way of life prescribed and described in rabbinic texts. A rabbinic Jew, as imagined in the Mishnah, Tosefta, Talmudim, and Midrashim, is one whose almost every activity is at least to some extent scripted and never entirely spontaneous: in fact, some of this literature—particularly the Mishnah—can be seen as a purposeful attempt to provide a script for most aspects of Jewish life. Furthermore, the quintessential interest of rabbinic normative texts is figuring out the smallest details and particularities of every single practice with greatest accuracy (Halbertal 2013), in a manner very similar to that described by scholars who speak of 'ritualization'. On the surface, then, it seems that a study of rabbinic Judaism stands to be at its core a study of rituals: why, then, was it not the case, at least not until recently?

First, let us note the obvious: there is no word in rabbinic Hebrew or Aramaic for 'ritual'. The closest we may come to a word denoting a set of actions that are to be performed in a particular sequence and manner is *seder* ('order'), which also denotes things like seating arrangements or lines of successions. The Modern Hebrew word used for 'ceremony', *tekes*, appears a single time in rabbinic literature (Tosefta Sanhedrin 8.2), and is borrowed from the Greek *taksis*, meaning 'position, rank'. Scholars who approach rabbinic texts exclusively in these texts' own terms will therefore find no use for this category. But here, I believe, the semantic issue reflects a more profound cultural issue: ritual (or something akin to it) is not a pertinent category in rabbinic literature because, as I explained above, *almost everything is a ritual*. 'Ritual' is useful as a concept only if it denotes something exceptional, a mode of being or behaving that is pronouncedly different from other kinds of activities. But if there is a correct, sequential, pre-scripted, and religiously meaningful way of doing everything, from sowing a field to using the lavatory, then what distinguishes ritual from non-ritual?

While this question is rarely ever addressed in scholarship on rabbinic literature, there seems to be an unspoken convention for approaching the matter: the normative dimension of the rabbinic literature, commonly known as *halakhah*, is usually presented as 'law' while certain aspects of the law are subclassified as 'ritual law' (e.g., Berger 1998; Hezser 2003; Halberstam 2010; Wimpfheimer 2011; Cohn 2012; Simon-Shoshan 2012; Kanarek 2015). What distinguishes regular law from 'ritual law' seems to be, at the end of the day, that the former is conceived as rational and the latter as irrational (see the discussion in Hayes 2015: 246-85). As Shai Lavi observed, this distinction between law and ritual has its roots in the German Protestant discourse of the nineteenth century, during which ritual came to signify irrational or superstitious components of religion, but also the dimension of religious normativity that does not interfere with the modern state (Lavi 2011). I will expand more on the relation between ritual and law toward the end of this article.

In addition to the fact that the rabbis do not distinguish between different kinds of normative behavior and therefore that 'ritual' does not seem to be a

distinct category in the framework of *halakhah*, we should also note that many of the activities discussed in rabbinic literature that we would identify as ritualistic are grounded in the Hebrew Bible. Rabbinic detailed descriptions/prescriptions of biblical rituals, from divorce and levirate marriage to sacrifices and purification, work closely with the biblical texts and can be seen as interpretive enterprises in essence, even when the ritual is assumed to be performed in the rabbis' own time. Put differently, for the rabbis (as for the scholars who study them) rituals that originate in Scripture are first and foremost texts, not performances (e.g., Rubenstein 1995; Henshke 2007). The pertinence of Ritual Studies, whose working data consist mostly of ethnographies and observations, to the study of rabbinic texts thus seems rather limited. It should be noted that several scholars whose point of departure was biblical ritual felt comfortable expanding their inquiries to rabbinic texts as offshoots or differentiated continuations of biblical rituals, under the general rubric of 'ancient Judaism' (Destro 1989; Eilberg-Schwartz 1990; Klawans 2000, 2006; Gruenwald 2003), but scholars whose sole focus is rabbinic texts usually went in other directions.

Considering the two issues mentioned above, it is unsurprising that scholarship on ritual in rabbinic Judaism that utilizes anthropological and theoretical insights until recently tended to focus only on very particular kinds of practices. Scholars directed their efforts mainly to practices that (1) do not fall under the category of 'law' but rather of 'custom' or 'tradition', and (2) do not have scriptural basis. There is obvious connection between the two, since 'law' is often understood in the rabbinic context as edicts deriving from scripture (see Hayes 2015). A notable pioneer in the introduction of anthropological methods to the study of rabbinic Judaism is Nisan Rubin, whose trilogy on life cycle rituals in rabbinic literature—birth, death, and marriage—is highly influenced by the works of Van Gennep, Turner, and Geertz (Rubin 1995; 1997; 2004). Rubin's approach is distinctly eclectic and not historical: he collects data on life-cycle related rituals from all corpora of rabbinic literature (Palestinian and Babylonian, early and late), and constructs out of them a Weberian 'ideal type' which is then analyzed for its symbolic meaning and social function (Rubin 1995: 11; 1997: 13). Rabbinic life cycle rituals and customs also stand at the center of other scholarly works published in the last two decades (Hoffman 1995; Kraemer 2000; Satlow 2001; Eldan 2011).

Another set of rituals that received attention in the study of Rabbinic Judaism is liturgical performances, which are again characterized as innovatively rabbinic and as distinct—despite their normative aspect—from the somber realm of the law. In his monograph on non-verbal elements in rabbinic prayer, Uri Ehrlich noted that the abundant scholarly literature on the formation of Jewish prayer is concerned exclusively with texts, and rarely takes into account the fact that prayer involves multiple bodily gestures and features: posture, dress, volume and melody of voice, hand gestures, and more (Ehrlich 1999: 12). Ehrlich

uses a variety of rabbinic sources to construct a picture of the various embodied aspects of prayer, and uses a comparative approach to understand their cultural significance and the active role that these elements play in the overall function of the prayer experience. Following his observation that many of the gestures used in prayer rituals in fact replicate or transpose gestures used in mundane human interactions, in subsequent studies Ehrlich turned to discuss rabbinic rituals of the 'everyday' such as leave-taking and lending a shoulder (Ehrlich 2001; 2004), engaging with both verbal and non-verbal components. From a different angle, focusing more on literary analysis of the prayer-text itself, Dalia Marx analyzed different prayers as they appear in rabbinic corpora as responding to the small dramas of everyday life (Marx 2007; 2008; 2010). Marx notes the importance of 'occasional prayers'—that is, prayers set for particular moments or events—for understanding rabbinic approaches to lived human experiences. Making extensive use of ritual theory on rites of passage, Marx shows that when explored through the accompanying liturgy, trivial-seeming events like waking up and going to sleep, or going into a bathhouse or a new town, are actually revealed as moments of crisis and anxiety, which the liturgical ritual is meant to tackle and assuage. Finally, a recent dissertation by Shimon Fogel follows Ehrlich's and Marx's emphasis on everyday rituals, and offers an analysis of the construction of the rabbinic study house through rituals of entry, exit, and hierarchy (Fogel 2015). While Fogel makes extensive use of liturgy, he also incorporates other kinds of rabbinic narratives and teachings into his study.

One other area that received a fair amount of attention in scholarship on rabbinic literature is that of rituals related to food, in no small measure due to the seminal works of Mary Douglas on the connections between eating practices, social order, and identity boundaries (Douglas 1966; 1972). Jordan Rosenblum's study *Food and Identity in Early Rabbinic Judaism* (2010) focuses on early rabbinic (tannaitic) texts that prescribe practices pertaining to food—what to eat, how to eat, and especially with whom to eat—and shows how the elaborate legislation of the rabbis seeks to establish boundaries between Jews and non-Jews, males and females, and rabbinic and non-rabbinic Jews. His work thus centers on a sphere of human activity that commonly falls under the category of *halakhah* or 'Jewish law', and offers a socio-historical analysis that builds on insights developed in the study of commensality rituals. Whereas Rosenblum's work examines the role of food in separating rabbinic Jews from outsiders, Ruhama Weiss's study on the place and meaning of meals in rabbinic culture examines how food-related rituals channel, express, and shape relations among the rabbis themselves (Weiss 2010). Making use primarily of Talmudic narratives about cooking, distributing food, and eating, Weiss shows how ritualistic behaviors such as table manners, blessings over food, and sitting practices during meals become locations of personal and inter-personal drama. Importantly, her analysis demonstrates how quintessential facets of rabbinic culture such as emphasis

on learnedness and scholastic competition come to the fore specifically in the seemingly-mundane but highly ritualized and charged settings of meals.

The common trait of all the studies mentioned above is their attempt to apply classifications and analytic frameworks prevalent in the study of rituals as universal phenomena to the particular cultural data supplied by rabbinic sources. Put differently, these studies adopt well-established categories such as rites of passage, entry rites, commensality, and so on, and collect anecdotal information—often from many different rabbinic texts—to show how those rituals play out in the world of the rabbis. The ritual prism, then, serves to reveal and explain ideas or practices in late ancient rabbinic Judaism that would perhaps otherwise be seen as negligible, arbitrary, or meaningless. In contrast, the studies to which I now turn work in the opposite direction: their point of departure is not a general cultural category which is then applied to various texts, but a single textual unit which they seek to understand in ritual terms. As such, these studies bring to the fore the complex question of the relations between text and ritual, and of the utility of ritual theory to the study of rabbinic literature *as literature*.

Ritual Texts and Textual Rituals

One of the main challenges in the utilization of ritual theory in the study of rabbinic literature (as well as in the study of other ancient cultures, our knowledge of which derives almost exclusively from written materials) is that in truth our object of study is not rituals but texts. Suggesting that we can offer anthropological insights akin to those of field ethnographers by reading what certain authors say about ritual is like suggesting that we can write a tour guide to Dublin after reading *Ulysses* or to Moscow after reading *The Master and Margarita* without ever visiting these cities. The information we receive is partial, carefully chosen to serve a certain idea or agenda, devoid of sensual experiences like sound or smell, and perhaps most importantly—devoid of living human presences. For a long time, the fact that scholars of ancient religions deal with texts rather than with lived rituals was not considered a serious problem, for two reasons. First, there was usually an overarching stance of trust toward texts as reliable historical witnesses, and it was assumed that whatever a text is prescribing or describing is a transparent window into what actually was, such that we can see ourselves for all intents and purposes as present in the ritual. Second, for as long as the prevalent approach to the study of ritual was a symbolic one, which rested on the notion that ritual is an embodied expression of worldviews, ritual was perceived as a text to begin with (Geertz 1973: 448). Therefore, even scholars who were cognizant that they are engaging with texts rather than with rituals thought of the two as parallel phenomena, one using words and one using gestures and sensory experiences, but ultimately doing the same thing (e.g., Gorman 1990: 25-31).

In the last two decades the discrepancy or gap between lived rituals and texts about rituals became much more pronounced in scholarship, not only as a problem that must be acknowledged but also as a topic of study in and of itself. Awareness of this gap has to do with changing approaches to ritual more broadly, which as discussed above have largely abandoned the ritual-as-text model in favor of emphasis on embodiment, performance, and materiality. More fundamentally, however, this awareness is a result of the 'textual turn' in the humanities, which following de- and post-structuralist intellectual trends came to view texts as self-contained artifacts whose ability to reflect anything but themselves is highly questionable (see Clark 2004). The newfound suspicion towards texts as windows to lived realities was aptly summarized by historian Gabrielle Spiegel:

> Reality does not exist 'beyond' the reach of language; it is 'always already' constructed in language, which is itself anterior to our knowledge of the world. It follows that literature, as an instance of linguistic utterance, cannot transparently reflect a world outside itself, since that 'world' is only a linguistic construct, and what it reflects, therefore, is merely another articulation of language, or discourse. (Spiegel 1990: 61)

The insight that texts teach us primarily (and perhaps only) about texts rather than about 'real' events or 'real' experiences had a redirecting force in the study of rituals in historical societies. In an influential monograph titled *The Dangers of Ritual* medieval historian Phillippe Buc sharply claimed: 'There can be no anthropological reading of rituals depicted in medieval texts. There can only be anthropological readings of (1) medieval textual practices or perhaps (2) medieval practices that the historian has reconstructed using texts, with full and *constant* sensitivity to their status as texts' (Buc 2001: 4, emphasis original). Highly influenced by Buc, biblical scholar James Watts dedicated an entire monograph to analyzing the book of Leviticus (the most 'ritual' of all biblical books) through lenses of rhetoric, style, and presentation, guided exactly by the notion that Leviticus teaches us very little about actual rituals but much about the creation and workings of texts *about* ritual (Watts 2007). A similar direction of analysis of the same biblical material was taken by David Wright, who termed the Priestly ritual instructions 'pseudoarcheography', stressing that these instructions are set in an imagined world constructed through textual and narrative techniques (Wright 2011). The same approach guides the works of Stanley Stowers (2011) and Daniel Ullucci (2012) on ancient Mediterranean sacrifice.

In the study of rabbinic literature, heightened awareness to the fact that texts about rituals are first and foremost texts, and that as such they require analysis of their authors' literary and rhetorical choices, agenda, and presumed audiences, had a transformative effect in regard to one specific, but crucially important, set of rabbinic texts: the ritual narratives of the Mishnah. To account for the major scholarly developments in this area, it is necessary first to explain what these

ritual narratives are and what distinguishes them from other texts about ritual in rabbinic literature.

While rabbinic literature provides information on many dozens of rituals that constitute Jewish life—whether regular or occasional, individual or collective—for the most part this information is presented in a very scattered and incomplete manner, and must be carefully assembled from scholastic discussions, particular case-stories, and random anecdotes. For example, nowhere in the rabbinic corpus do we find a clear account of the ritual of welcoming the Sabbath or performing a circumcision: rather, we encounter discussions on what elements should or should not appear and in what configuration in different circumstances, and are left to deduce the overarching structure and course of the ritual from these discussions. There is, however, one important exception to this rule: the ritual narratives of the Mishnah, which provide play-by-play depictions of different rituals (usually rituals that took place in the temple or in its vicinity) and aim to describe a ritual from beginning to end while accounting for all its components in a sequential manner (Simon-Shoshan 2012: 42-45). This mishnaic literary genre operates as what the Greeks called *ekphrasis*, a rhetorical exercise meant to produce 'a vivid visual passage describing the topic so clearly that anyone hearing the words would seem to see it' (James and Webb 1991: 5-6). As Patricia Cox Miller explained, since the purpose of *ekphrases* is 'turning listeners into spectators', such descriptions are not only technically elaborate but also affective, geared to instigate a subjective, emotional response (Cox Miller 2009: 9). Accordingly, the Mishnah's ekphrastic-like ritual narratives depict rituals not only in striking detail, which generates a strong sense of verisimilitude and eye-witnessing (Cohn 2012: 57-72), but often also with particular emphasis on aesthetics and sensual affect. Among some of the most notable ritual narratives of the Mishnah one can list the elaborate accounts of the Day of Atonement in the temple (*Yoma* 1–7), the description of the Passover sacrifice (*Pesahim* 5.5-6), the festivities of Sukkot (*Sukkah* 4–5), the morning worship in the temple (*Tamid* 1–7), the burning of the red heifer (*Parah* 3), and others.

The remarkable detail and elaborateness of ritual narratives in the Mishnah, as well as the occasional (and probably deliberate) use of archaic language in them, led some of the founding scholars of rabbinic literature to identify those textual units as particularly early in their provenance and as first-hand memories of individuals who were actually present at the temple (Hoffman 1882; Ginzberg 1919; Epstein 1959: 25-46). Thus, until recently these ritual narratives were used as historical sources, and were considered to be reliable eye-witnesses to the practices of the Second Temple (e.g., Büchler 1895; Alon 1958; Safrai 1994) despite the fact that they were presumably redacted long after its destruction. Considering the strong historical-philological tendencies that characterized the study of rabbinic literature in the twentieth century, it is unsurprising that scholars who engaged with these texts did not utilize the category of

ritual or theoretical insights pertaining to ritual in any significant way. However, two important exceptions should be noted: Baruch Bokser's study on the *seder*, which concerns the ritual narrative in the tenth chapter of Mishnah *Pesahim*, and David Levine's study on public fasts, which deals extensively with the ritual narrative in the second chapter of Mishnah *Ta'anit*. While both Bokser and Levine approach the Mishnah first and foremost as a historical text from which one can derive information on the way things actually were at the time of the rabbis, they also utilize anthropological categories to explain and analyze the structure and the specific details of the rites described in those texts. Bokser explains the *seder* meal as depicted in the Mishnah using Victor Turner's notion of *communitas*, and sees it as a ritual that undoes status distinctions and brings together different members of the community as equals (Bokser 1984: 81-84). Levine analyzes the rabbinic public fast as 'a rite of intensification'—a performance meant to enact, in an exaggerated and dramatic manner, the crisis that a community experiences and its members' response to it (Levine 2001: 66-96; for a recent study of the public fast ritual from a literary perspective, see Watts Belser 2015: 116-48).

Both Bokser and Levine discuss rituals that are distinctly and perhaps uniquely 'rabbinic'—the former, a biblical ritual that the rabbis radically modified, and the latter, a ritual that has no textual precedent prior to the rabbis. This is in keeping with the more general scholarly inclination I identified above, to avoid discussing rabbinic representations of biblically-mandated rituals using tools from the field of Ritual Studies. This inclination is, at first blush, understandable: presumably, if the rabbis work with existing biblical materials, and they are not inventing or creating any of the ritual's building blocks or structure on their own, then there is nothing for the scholar to analyze from a ritual perspective. However, the notion that rabbinic depictions of biblical rituals are devoid of invention or creativity was significantly challenged in more recent scholarship, which spurred a new interest in and understanding of the Mishnah's ritual narratives. This scholarly turn was propelled by two contiguous realizations: first, that the Mishnah's ritual narratives cannot and should not be taken as reliable historical sources, and second, that the mishnaic depictions of ostensibly 'biblical' rituals often radically diverge from the biblical paradigm, effectively creating a brand new ritual.

As in many other cases, one can identify a somewhat idiosyncratic precursor to those recent developments in the work of Jacob Neusner. In an article titled 'Ritual without Myth: The Use of Legal Materials for the Study of Religions', Neusner argued that the rituals described in the Mishnah were never actually performed in the times of the rabbis, and that they must be read not as historical documents but as theological treatises (Neusner 1975). According to Neusner, unlike other religious authors, the rabbis do not present their views on cosmos, divinity, and sacred order through a mythology but rather through accounts of (imaginary) rituals. He demonstrated his claim through a detailed comparison of the rite of the red heifer as described in Numbers 19 with the rite of the red

heifer as described in Mishnah *Parah*, and convincingly showed that the latter cannot be read as mere expansion or elaboration of the former, but as presenting an entirely new paradigm of the ritual which, for Neusner, derives from a unique rabbinic theology. While Neusner's methodology can be (and was) criticized on many counts—most notably, he ignores the multilayered and composite nature of the mishnaic text and simplistically considers it to be a third-century product—his article makes an important contribution in steering readers of the Mishnah from the historical to the textual, and in fleshing out the inventiveness and independence of the rabbis in their renditions of biblical rituals.

Neusner's dismissal of the historicity of rabbinic descriptions of temple rituals, which in the 1970s and 1980s was still considered anathema in the field, has become a common approach, and in some circles even a given, in the last two decades (Schwartz 2014; Tropper 2016). Specifically in regard to ritual narratives in the Mishnah, the cautious work of Yochanan Breuer, who showed through linguistic analysis that rabbinic ritual narratives freely combine descriptive and prescriptive stances, such that 'what was' is inseparable from 'what should be' (Breuer 1987), had significant impact in swaying scholars away from a facile understanding of the Mishnah as reliable eye witness to temple rituals. The Mishnah's tendency to mix the real and the ideal can be traced not only in the grammatical structures that it uses but also in the 'facts' that it chooses to relate: for example, in the depictions of the Day of Atonement ritual in the temple, the Mishnah repeatedly refers to 'the ark' (*Yoma* 5.1-4), but also mentions in passing that there was no ark at all in the Second Temple (*Yoma* 5.2)—thereby revealing that the account of the ritual is partially or wholly idealized (Stökl Ben Ezra 2003: 21-22).

The realization that the Mishnah's ritual narratives are essentially textual constructs, and that they present a fantasy rather than a reality (even if this fantasy is sometimes grounded in historical facts), led scholars in the past fifteen years to explore these narratives first and foremost as literary creations. Adopting a literary stance, these scholars approach ritual narratives as ideological platforms, as powerful rhetorical tools, and as modes of religious expression, and thus investigate how wording, presentation, and style work within those texts to promote certain ideas and agendas. Various insights from the field of Ritual Studies play an important role in recent studies of ritual narratives, but with new and heightened attention to the fact that ritual in rabbinic literature is a *literary genre* rather than an observed practice. Two pioneers of this approach to ritual narratives, who influentially developed the notion of 'textual rituals' in the study of rabbinic literature, are Beth Berkowitz and Ishay Rosen-Zvi. Their respective studies have both redirected the field in ways that merit a somewhat lengthier account.

Beth Berkowitz's *Execution and Invention* looks closely at rabbinic accounts of capital punishment and execution rituals, its point of departure being that these accounts are entirely ahistorical since Jews under Roman rule never had the

prerogative to enforce capital punishment. Fully aware that rabbinic texts introduce ritual 'purely as a literary artifact and not as live performance' (Berkowitz 2006: 10), Berkowitz explains that she utilizes ritual not as an ontological category (that is, as a distinct type of action) but as a heuristic tool for examining how different elements—space and time, speech and silence, laypersons and specialists—are organized in a meaningful way (2006: 11). The centerpiece of Berkowitz's book is her analysis of the ritual narrative of execution described in Mishnah *Sanhedrin* chapter 6, which is strongly guided by Catherine Bell's observations on ritual as a mechanism for structuring power relations (Bell 1992: 169-221). Adopting Bell's notion of 'redemptive hegemony', Berkowitz explores the mishnaic execution ritual by examining the power dynamics between those who control the ritual (the judges and executioners) and those who are controlled by it (the condemned person, his relatives, and the audience). She shows how the rabbis position themselves through this ritual narrative both as hegemons who have the power to take away life, but also as benevolent and merciful figures of authority who do not wish to use this power. This dual claim, namely, that the rabbis possess the ultimate political and juridical authority but that they are reluctant to use it, can only be made through a *text* about ritual and cannot be made through actual ritual performance (Berkowitz 2006: 72). Because this ritual is a literary creation, the rabbis can convey their ideology through very deliberate sequences and word choices: for example, an execution that can seem to the observer exactly like murder is carefully portrayed through a vocabulary that invokes lack of malicious intention (2006: 76). Berkowitz, then, suggests to introduce 'textual performances' to the field of Ritual Studies, that is, to draw attention to rituals that exist only as texts, and to analyze them as distinct types of rituals while also emphasizing their unique features (2006: 10).

Ishay Rosen-Zvi's study on the mishnaic rite of the suspected adulteress (*sotah*) is similarly concerned with themes of power, authority, and supervision, and similarly approaches the mishnaic ritual narrative as an ideologically driven textual construct rather than as a reliable historical account (Rosen-Zvi 2013). However, Rosen-Zvi differs from Berkowitz in paying close attention to the interpretive, or midrashic, project of the Mishnah—that is, to the relation between the biblical ritual in Num. 5.11-31 and its rabbinic counterpart. He argues that the rabbis of the Mishnah did not merely venture to resolve specific problems in the biblical *sotah* rite (as argued by Halbertal 1997: 94-112), nor did they merely reshape the rhetoric of the ritual (as argued by Satlow 1995: 158-86): rather, they completely reinvented the ritual. Most prominently, they transformed it from an examination ritual, or ordeal, into a punishment ritual. Rosen-Zvi approaches this punishment ritual with a Foucauldian lens, and analyzes it as a site through which, like in other punitive rites, the sovereign inscribes his own power of the body of the condemned (Foucault 1977). Rosen-Zvi contends that the mishnaic *sotah* ritual is purely a literary creation not only in the sense that it was never performed as it

is described (2013: 153-82), but also because its building blocks are themselves textual: primarily, he points to the key role of Ezekiel 16 in the formation of this rite in the Mishnah. He thus dedicates much of the book to retracing the textual materials of which the mishnaic *sotah* rite was fabricated, both biblical and rabbinic, and to the stylistic and redactional decisions that shaped it. Nevertheless, Rosen-Zvi maintains that the 'textuality' of the mishnaic *sotah* rite does not in any way diminish its 'rituality': we can analyze it as a ritual, using tools and insights pertinent to the study of rituals, while at the same time remaining conscious that the literary choice to discuss and present the treatment of the suspected adulteress in the form of a ritual cannot be taken for granted, but must be accounted for both in terms of its motivations and in terms of its effects.

Rosen-Zvi reads the rabbinic depiction of the *sotah* ritual as a fantasy of complete control of female sexuality, in which the suspected adulteress, who represents the 'threat innate in all women', is captured, exposed, and becomes entirely visible for all (men) to see (2013: 225). This mishnaic ritual, which entails the stripping and public humiliation of the woman, is in many ways opposed to the rabbis' own norms of modesty: as such, it cannot be read plainly as a rabbinic prescription for the required procedure in a case of adultery, but rather as a fantasy that cannot, and should not, ever come true. In this observation, Rosen-Zvi follows in the footsteps of Jonathan Z. Smith, who theorized ritual as a controlled environment for enacting *what ought to be but cannot be* (Smith 1980). The force of ritual, according to Smith, derives not from its congruity with the community's emotions, ideals, or desired ends, but rather from its *incongruity* with them (1980: 125; for a similar theory see Seligman *et al*. 2008: 17-42). For Rosen-Zvi, this explanation for the dynamics of ritual applies not only to lived rituals but also and perhaps especially to textual rituals, as both types of rituals have similar effects in the real world: the Mishnah's ritual narratives operate on their readers/listeners in fostering certain views, commitments, and dispositions in the same ways that live ritual performances operate on their participants. It is thus misguided to say that the Mishnah's rituals exist only as texts and are not 'actually' performed: their recitation and reproduction as texts *is* their performance (2013: 236).

Michael Swartz's series of articles on the Day of Atonement ritual in rabbinic literature and in liturgical poetry shares several key insights with Berkowitz and Rosen-Zvi. First, Swartz vehemently argues that textual performance is ritual performance: when the rabbis describe the sequence of activities of the Day of Atonement or when the High Priest's entry into the Holy of Holies is described in liturgy, these are forms in which the temple ritual actually persists after the destruction of the temple. Those who recite, listen to, or study those texts during the sacred day do not feel that they are hearing *about* the ritual, but rather that the ritual is happening then and there (Swartz 2012). Second, Swartz shows in detail how the rabbis, while working closely with the biblical blueprint of the Day of

Atonement ritual, re-envision it and re-create it in a way that coheres with their own social and religious agenda and their own claim for expertise, thus confirming that rabbinic rituals are always original creations even if they heavily rely on biblical materials (Swartz 2014). Finally and perhaps most importantly, Swartz puts forth that when the rabbis (and other late ancient Jewish authors, for this purpose) create texts about ritual, they by and by create *a theory of ritual*: the making of these texts 'served both as an activity embedded in ritual itself and as theoretical examination of its meaning and purpose' (Swartz 2011: 295). Put differently, texts about rituals are both praxis (since their production and recitation is a ritual performance in its own right) and meta-praxis—because they introduce an implicit or explicit logic and meaning to the praxis they describe. At times this meta-praxis is a semiotic explanation for the activities performed; at other times, it is an assessment of which parts of the ritual are more important and which are less important, or how they relate to each other (see also Balberg 2017). Swartz points out that meta-praxis is usually generated in times of competition or crisis, when one group feels the need to define the praxis in its own terms and to ground it in its own system of meanings and values.

Swartz's observation that texts that describe rituals are both praxis and meta-praxis leads us to consider whether other types of rabbinic texts can also be viewed as forms of meta-praxis. The rabbinic corpus includes about two dozen ritual narratives, that is, lengthy play-by-play accounts of rituals, but it also includes thousands of rulings, discussions, and anecdotes about rituals. These rulings, discussions, and anecdotes usually fall under the generic category of *halakhah*, but is there something to be gained from thinking about *halakhah* more broadly in ritual terms, and from thinking about rabbinic halakhic discourse as ritual meta-praxis? Put differently, is rabbinic *halakhah*, broadly conceived, itself a form of ritual theory? If so, what is the nature of this theory and what does it teach us about rabbinic culture? Finally, how can Ritual Studies enrich and contribute to the study of rabbinic literature as it continues to evolve? It is with these questions that I wish to conclude this article.

Ritual, *Halakhah*, and Future Directions

As I mentioned above, the utility of the category of 'ritual' and of ritual theory is contingent upon the notion that ritual behavior and ritual activity are manifestly different from other, more 'ordinary', forms of behavior and activities. Those inclined to see ritual as a 'script' of sorts would identify this difference as pertaining to the agency of the individual vis-à-vis her actions: for example, while immersion in a *miqveh* and taking a bath may seem like comparable activities, the latter is not a ritual because each individual decides when, where, and how to do it, whereas the former is a ritual because the time, place, and manner of the activity are determined by an external authority. Those inclined to speak of

'ritualization' and to emphasize the performative aspects of ritual behavior will identify the difference in the level of detail, elaboration, and fixedness of actions: whereas taking a bath is a means to an end and therefore it does not matter in which order one washes one's body, what one does before or after, or how long one stays in the bathtub, in ritual immersion every single one of those details is important and has impact on the completeness and validity of the ritual as a whole. Finally, those inclined to associate ritual with a particular state of mind will argue that whereas in taking a bath the actor's intention is becoming clean, in ritual immersion the actor's intention is 'getting it right' or fulfilling a commandment. One way or another, ritual is viewed as a distinct realm of human existence and action.

The ritual narratives of the Mishnah, which were the focus of most scholarship on ritual in rabbinic literature in the last fifteen years, offer a unique opportunity to analyze rabbinic texts through a ritual lens insofar as they are distinct both in genre and in content. In terms of genre, mishnaic ritual narratives are written in an ekphrastic, richly descriptive style, which allows the reader/listener to imagine herself as a viewer; in terms of content, these narratives usually depict activities that are by definition separate from the 'ordinary' world either because they are framed by a sacred and set-apart space (the temple and its vicinity) or because they pertain to a distant and unreachable past. However, when we venture to reach beyond those narratives and think of the applicability and utility of ritual theory to rabbinic literature more broadly, we are confronted with a major challenge: in a literature that meticulously builds Judaism as a legal system in which there is a right way and a wrong way to do almost everything, what is ritual and what is not? For example, considering that even a mundane activity like eating a meal is structured in rabbinic texts through a whole series of rules (what blessings to say and in what order, what gets eaten before what, and even when one wipes one's hands and when it is appropriate to sweep the floor), can we even say that there is a clear distinction between 'ordinary eating' and 'ritual eating' in rabbinic texts? Not to mention that the components of the meal are determined by a whole set of prohibitions in and of themselves (only certain animals can be used for meat; they must be slaughtered in a particular way; grain can only be used as of a certain date; fruits and wine and oil must be tithed; and so forth). Put differently, the rabbis construct an elaborate system in which all aspects of daily life are governed by rules and procedures: does this mean that all of *halakhah* is ritual? If so, what is the relation between law and ritual in rabbinic literature, and how useful can the category of ritual be as an analytic tool if everything is ritual?

Ithamar Gruenwald, in an ambitious attempt to propose an overarching theory of ritual relying on ancient Jewish sources, indeed defines *halakhah* in its entirety as a ritual system. Gruenwald's understanding of ritual, while somewhat scattered, consists of two central facets. First, he maintains that ritual is a *sui*

generis mode of action and behavior, which cannot be translated into a coherent ideology or theology—that is, there is no way to express what a ritual does in any other way except through a ritual (Gruenwald 2003: 5). Second, he sees ritual as a structuring mechanism, through which individuals impose order and coherence on an otherwise chaotic reality (Gruenwald 2003: 20). Building on these two principles, he sees rabbinic *halakhah* as a proposition for a wholly ritual way of being. Gruenwald writes: 'Halakhah is an applied philosophy of life. It organizes in a ritual manner every aspect of life in systemic categories that create ritual clusters. Halakhah develops and is practised in the framework of certain presuppositions, which are primarily based on the principle that doing, rather than critical thinking, shapes and preserves life and the social order' (Gruenwald 2003: 33). Later in the book he explains that every halakhic performance is a ritual, since it includes 'intentionality, timing, choosing a special place, unique modes of sequencing the details, specifying the exact measures and quantities required and establishing the correct order' (Gruenwald 2003: 144).

Gruenwald's study of *halakhah* as ritual is problematic in several respects. Its two most notable flaws are an essentializing tendency that frequently dismisses change through time as inconsequential, and insufficient attention to the textuality of the rituals he discusses, that is, to the fact that rabbinic texts about rituals are literary constructs. While Gruenwald acknowledges that 'changing historical circumstances clearly had their impact on the development of the rituals at hand' (2003: 39), he maintains that rituals have an intrinsic meaning to them, which can be seen as constant through time and which allows—nay, behooves—the scholar to adopt a transhistorical approach: 'the study of the Passover sacrifice in the book of Exodus (Chapter 12) is not exhaustive, unless it includes the study of the Passover rituals as described [in] other parts of Scripture, in Mishnah and Talmud, and later in the Passover Haggadah' (2003: 39). It is difficult to fathom how a ritual that consists of slaughter and application of blood on doorframes (as described in Exodus 12) and a ritual that consists of conversation and narration (as prescribed in the Haggadah) can be construed as entailing the same 'intrinsic meaning' unless one insists that both rituals ultimately point to the same ideological or theological platforms—an approach that Gruenwald himself vehemently rejects at the outset. Furthermore, in adopting a platonic view of Jewish ritual as maintaining constant meanings and structures across times and places, Gruenwald glosses over the fact that he derives these platonic forms from very particular written texts, which are products of specific circumstances, settings, and cultural tendencies. To be sure, Gruenwald is aware that scholarship of ancient Jewish ritual relies on reading and analysis of texts, and as such it is subject to all the challenges and pitfalls of other hermeneutic enterprises (2003: 34). However, he does not address the fact that just as scholars are reading texts and not rituals, the authors of classical Jewish texts authored texts and not rituals.

He therefore overlooks the fact that rabbinic texts about ritual are themselves hermeneutical and intellectual projects.

   Despite these drawbacks, Gruenwald's study makes a significant contribution in its insistence that 'ritual' is an appropriate and highly useful tool for understanding the rabbinic halakhic project as a whole, and not just discrete and isolated parts of it. In particular, Gruenwald's characterization of *halakhah* as a ritual system makes an important intervention insofar as it goes beyond the more common characterization of *halakhah* as a legal system. As I mentioned earlier, scholars of rabbinic literature tended to circumvent the conceptual overlap between law and ritual in rabbinic normative writings in one of three ways: identifying and discussing scripted behavior as 'ritual' only when it is clearly outside the purview of 'law', that is, is grounded in unbinding cultural customs and not in biblical edicts; reserving the category of 'ritual' only to action sequences that are described in a very specific style and genre; or defining 'ritual law' as a subset of 'law' in general, which pertains to the cultic realms of the rabbinic normative world (as opposed to civil law, family law, criminal law, etc.). In contrast, Gruenwald does not see ritual as a cloistered area of *halakhah* but rather as an all-encompassing dimension of *halakhah*. *Halakhah*, he explains, is indeed a legal system since it rests on firm edicts of revealed law, and it is these edicts that legitimize it and give it religious significance: but those legal edicts unfold, more often than not, in the form of rituals (2003: 140-42). In other words, *halakhah* is a normative edifice that consists both of a 'what' (law) and a 'how' (ritual), and as such it is not reducible to law alone. The decision to present law in the form of ritual, that is, to textually account for the minutest details of legally-mandated activities, must be understood as a thoughtful expression of the rabbis' distinct understanding of life in accordance with the law. While Gruenwald does not analyze in detail how the rabbis used ritual to conceptualize law, he does chart out their most fundamental premise, which is that 'purposive doing'—that is, doing for the sake of doing and not as encrypted reference to some other ultimate reality—has primacy above all other human modes of behavior (2003: 158).

   Allow me to provide an example of my own to better illustrate the notion that the rabbis conceptualize law *as* ritual. In two different places in the Pentateuch, the Israelites are commanded to return lost objects to their owners (Exod. 23.4; Deut. 22.1-3). This commandment puts forth an injunction, or a law: one who found an object that belongs to someone else must return it, or if the owner is unknown, the finder must attend to the lost object until the owner is found. In the Mishnah, however, this law turns into a ritual: the one who found the object must officially and publically 'declare' that he found it, using specific formulae. As for the time and place of the declaration, Rabbi Meir maintains that it is enough to declare the lost object in one's own neighborhood, but Rabbi Yehudah maintains that one is required to declare the lost object specifically during the triannual pilgrimage to Jerusalem, in fixed time intervals (Mishnah *Baba Metzia* 2.6). While

the level of ritualization required by Rabbi Yehudah is much higher than that required by Rabbi Meir, they both partake in the same enterprise: turning a general principle of good citizenship into a structured, sequential, scripted procedure. The ways in which these two rabbis ritualize the law of lost objects teaches us much about their perceptions of key legal and religious issues: What is 'public'? What are the limits of civil duty? What is the structure and organization of the community? But at the same time, the enterprise of ritualization in and of itself teaches us something seminal about the rabbis' approach to law: it reveals their view that observance of the law, in its most perfect form, is expressed through highly controlled and exacting modes of behavior.

In his work on normative structures in tannaitic literature, Tzvi Novick made a significant additional step toward a more sophisticated analysis of the rabbinic tendency to 'ritualize' law (although he does not use this term per se). Novick's examination of the usages of the word *mitzvah* (most commonly translated as 'commandment') in early rabbinic literature reveals two distinct rabbinic perspectives on the performance of commandments: deontological and teleological. The deontological perspective approaches commandments in dichotomous terms of obligation, and is concerned with the question whether an act is obligatory or optional. In contrast, a teleological perspective approaches commandments in processual terms: it rests on the assumption that in order to be performed to completion in the best way possible, an obligatory act must be carried out according to a particular protocol. A deontological perspective assesses commandments vis-à-vis the actor, who must or must not do something; a teleological perspective assesses commandments vis-à-vis the procedure, which is either valid (that is, complete and need not be repeated) or invalid. Novick calls the latter use 'teleological' because 'it addresses not the agent who is to perform the relevant act or acts, but the end to be realized' (Novick 2010: 40). The deontological/ teleological distinction, to be sure, does not map onto different areas of the law (for example, civil vs. cultic); rather, it captures different modes of normativity in respect to the very same law. For example, deontological normativity identifies the obligation to perform levirate marriage, whereas teleological normativity determines both what is the ideal way of performing levirate marriage and whether a given performance of levirate marriage 'counts' as a fulfillment of the obligation (2010: 48). Nor should these two approaches be identified as representative of different schools of rabbinic thought: Novick argues that both the teleological approach and the deontological approach originate in the school of Rabbi Akiva (2010: 215).

The normative mode that Novick calls 'teleological'—that is, the halakhic discourse that is concerned with correct process (namely, required actions in particular sequences)—produces textual accounts of what we would most readily call 'ritual'. Put differently, Novick's observations allow us to see ritual in rabbinic literature not as a genre and not as one subcategory of law, but as a

distinct *theory of law.* A teleological approach to law, Novick explains, 'turns the commandment upon itself' (2010: 48), that is, reifies the commandment such that it is no longer defined through the relationship between the commander and the commanded, but through the required acts in and of themselves. Accordingly, a teleological theory of law suggests that in performing a commandment the actor is subordinate not only to the commanding authority, but more immediately and more importantly to the act that he is required to perform in its idealized form (2010: 51). While Novick makes very little use of studies in ritual theory, his analysis of rabbinic teleological normativity is strikingly resonant with key insights in the study of ritual behavior (e.g., Bell 1992; Humphrey and Laidlow 1994; Rappaport 1999). Thus, his work—perhaps inadvertently—makes an invaluable contribution to the study of ritual in rabbinic literature, in three central ways. First, Novick helps us see that ritual is not a type of law, but a rhetorical and conceptual manner of thinking about law in general. Second, he explains how rabbinic discourse about ritual—even in the form of trivial and exacting rules and regulations—functions as meta-praxis, that is, as a discourse *about* normative actions. Finally, Novick draws important conclusions on the ways in which rabbinic ideas of ritual shape not only notions of relations to divine law, but also notions of relations to oneself (2010: 49-50).

The realization that ritualization (of the law and of everyday life) is a key characteristic of the rabbinic project at large, and that ritually-oriented discourse is pervasive in rabbinic texts and is not confined only to texts that manifestly describe ritual performances, opens new and compelling directions for further research. One such direction is an examination of rabbinic ritualization of Torah study, that is, of the ways in which the rabbis turn scholastic engagement with written and oral Torah into a scripted, performative process. This topic can be examined in various ways: through the rhetoric used in rabbinic texts to discuss Torah study (for an example of such direction of inquiry, see Shanks Alexander 2013: 178-215); by tracing the different activities associated with Torah Studies and their generative function in rabbinic texts, such as recitation, attribution, etc.; and by examining how rabbinic tropes of study and scholastic engagement find their way into other ritual performances such as funerals, weddings, and communal convocations. Relatedly, while important work was done on gendered aspects of rabbinic law (e.g., Hauptman 1998; Fonrobert 2000), it would be interesting to implement ritual theory to examine different constructions of gender in halakhic discourse, and to explore not only how ritual is gendered but also how gender is ritualized. Another important direction is examining the role of rituals and ritualization in the formation of rabbinic subjectivity, and the function of rituals as forms of spiritual or philosophical exercises (for studies that point in this direction, see Naiweld 2010; Balberg 2014). Finally, it would be fascinating to consider how ritual studies can inform not only our understanding of rabbinic culture and ideology as reflected in mishnaic, midrashic, and Talmudic texts, but

also of the production of these texts as such: how would our understanding of rabbinic forms of interpretation, inquiry, and storytelling change if we think of those activities in ritual terms? Future research will hopefully take those questions into account, and utilize the rich corpus of studies on ritual theory, practice, and textuality in doing so.

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