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Omen and Anti-omen: The Rabbinic Hagiography of the Scapegoat's Scarlet Ribbon

Abstract: This article proposes that the place and meaning of various objects among religious communities can be explored in terms of “hagiography,” that is, through the narratives constructed around sacred objects sometimes long after their physical disappearance. It takes as its point of departure the assumption that in the same way that written accounts of saints’ lives disclose more about the authors of these accounts than about the protagonists, so narratives regarding “things” reveal the concerns and debates of their authors, and in particular their concerns about materiality and divine presence within physical objects. The article explores the rabbinic narratives concerning the scarlet ribbon tied to the scapegoat of the Day of Atonement, its function and its vicissitudes, as developed in the Mishnah and in the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds. Using both a synchronic and a diachronic lens, the article shows how the scarlet ribbon is utilized in the rabbis’ attempts to define their own times vis-à-vis earlier times, and to grapple with pressing religious uncertainties.

Introduction

In his influential article “The Cultural Biography of Things” Igor Kopytoff (1986: 64–91) put forth the suggestion that objects, like persons, can be explored and approached through a biographical lens, that is, by close attention to processes of change and transformation. Kopytoff proposes that by tracing shifts of ownership, location, use, function and so on for a particular object or object-type, and by identifying the implications of those shifts, we will be able to offer a rich reconstruction of the cultural place and meaning of objects, accounting for questions such as “What are the recognized ‘ages’ or periods in the thing’s ‘life,’ and what are the cultural markers for them? How does the thing’s use change with its age, and what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness?” (Kopytoff 1986: 66–67). Fundamentally, however, as Richard Davis stressed in his work on Indian images, the biography of an object can only be construed vis-à-vis the community in which this object is given meaning and function, as objects do not actually have “lives” except for those bestowed upon them by viewers, users, or worshipers. The identities of objects, Davis maintains, “are not fixed once and for all at the moment of fabrication, but are repeatedly made and remade through interactions with humans” (Davis 1997: 7–8). In this article, I follow both Kopytoff’s biographical model and Davis’ emphasis on the relations between objects and the different communities that interact with

them, but attempt to reconstruct and explore not quite the biography of an object, but rather its *hagiography*.

By utilizing the concept of *hagiography*, a term initially used to describe commemorative narratives of Christian martyrs but which by the fourth century came to denote more generally a literary account of the lives and actions of saints (Barnes 2010: xi), I wish to propose that in conceiving and accounting for the “life” of an object, there is room to consider not only the physical and interpretive vicissitudes through which the object itself went, but also the ways in which this object was *remembered and told of* in different communal and cultural settings that are removed from the actual object either in time, in place, or in both. Just as the meanings and functions of objects are continuously reshaped by those who physically encounter them, so too do their functions and meanings in social and cultural memory continuously change—sometimes long after the objects themselves have ceased to exist—in the literary narratives constructed around them. In this respect, accounting for the ways in which objects are remembered and told of introduces a portion of “afterlife” to their biographies. As in the case of persons and the communities that remember them, the relations between a particular object and those among whom it bears significance do not terminate at the time of physical disappearance but continue to evolve beyond the moment of “death.”

Clearly, the term “hagiography” and the focus on memory and storytelling is not applicable to each and every physical object: in truth, it would be fair to say that most objects go more or less “unremembered” once they fall out of sight, use, or physical existence, or that at most they are remembered sporadically and anecdotally as mere background elements. However, when objects function as actors within a real or imagined turn of events in such a way that they actively make a difference in the course of events, or when objects are otherwise endowed with “agency” by proxy insofar as they are imagined as capable of conveying divine messages, these objects often come to play a role in the constitutive stories that communities tell themselves about their formation, struggles, and heroes. Thereby, objects come to feature in sacred histories in the same way that saintly human figures feature in them: as vehicles of transformation, as markers of power, and as sites for divine and human interaction. It is this function of objects within sacred histories and the evolvment and change of this function through time—in a single narrative account or in a series of accounts—that I term here *hagiography*.

In what follows, I explore the rabbinic “hagiography” of one small but fascinating object, the scarlet ribbon of the scapegoat of the Day of Atonement. Several Jewish and early Christian texts attest to a custom of tying a scarlet ribbon around the head of the goat designated to be sent away to the wilderness as part of the annual rite of the purification of the community and the sanctuary. All of these texts, however, were composed after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE, that is, after the scapegoat ritual was no longer performed; by the second century this ritual functioned as a literary trope rather than as a witnessed event. While there is no reason to doubt that the tying of a scarlet ribbon was indeed part of the scapegoat ritual

as it took place during the Second Temple period, it is important to note that the different interpretations of this ribbon's meaning and function that are available to us all constitute elements of cultural memory and appropriation of the past rather than depictions of an existing reality, and as such their purpose is not primarily to explain the ritual but rather to utilize the ritual for particular discursive needs (see Halbwachs 1992: 27–167). My purpose in this article, then, is not to assess the historical veracity of the textual accounts regarding the scarlet ribbon nor to try to identify its “original” meaning (for this line of inquiry, see Goldstein 1980: 237–245), but rather to trace the development and transformations of the scarlet ribbon as a discursive theme, and thereby to gain some insights on the concerns and considerations of different rabbinic authors, at different points in time, who utilized this object and created “an afterlife” for it.

I chose the scarlet ribbon as the focus of this analysis of an object's literary afterlife for two major reasons. First, the literary evidence regarding this object readily lends itself to such analysis, as it provides two concise but highly dramatic “biographies” of the scarlet ribbon that divide its “life” into three distinct periods. Second and perhaps more important, these two literary biographies describe a gradual depletion of this object's signifying power and sacred function, thereby closely engaging with one of the most fundamental aspects of religious objects: the tension between absence and presence. As Jean-Pierre Vernant observed, what marks religious objects as such is the implicit assumption that divinity is present in them and is made present through them: “The religious sign is not simply a piece of mental equipment... Its intention is always also to establish true means of communication with this power and to really introduce its presence into the human world” (Vernant [1983] 2006: 331). At the same time, since the object itself is markedly *not* the divinity that it calls forth but something different from it, the object is also a manifestation of the divinity's absence, of the distance between it and those who seek to invoke it. Because of this insurmountable gap, a religious object is always at risk, so to speak, of being viewed *just* as an object, of being cognitively stripped from its sacred garb and reduced to wood, stone, metal, fabric, etc., and much of the interpretive and creative efforts that communities invest in religious objects are geared to protect objects from their mere materiality by emphasizing the “presence” within them.¹ The question of an object's ability to convey the divine, and the continuous possibility of a sacred object's reduction into mere materiality, are the governing themes in the rabbinic biographies of the scarlet ribbon, and thus these texts can be read as fascinating meta-reflections on the dynamics of absence and presence within religious objects.

The rabbinic accounts of the scarlet ribbon are not, to be sure, testimonies of interactions with a visually and sensually accessible physical object, but rather textual

¹ As William Pietz (1985: 5–17) observed, the tension between the apparent materiality of objects and the sacredness assigned to them gave birth the concept of “fetish” in the early modern period.

constructs of an object that the creators of those texts have never encountered. In other words, these accounts negotiate alternations of presence and absence as manifested in an object that for the authors is *itself absent*. The absence of the object in question, that is, the fact that the rabbis do not interact with an actual material entity but rather with the *idea* of a particular material entity, ostensibly projects the object at hand into a mythical and impalpable realm: in a sense, the scarlet ribbon is not different for the rabbis from the staff of Moses or the Ark of the Covenant, since it similarly exists only as an imaginative literary representation. Yet I will argue that the scarlet ribbon is unique as a textually constructed object insofar as the rabbis attempt to establish a direct and continuous line from the time in which the ribbon was present and functional to their own time in which it is nonexistent, by creating biographical-like narratives of transition from presence to absence. Through these narratives the rabbis suggest that the physical disappearance of the scarlet ribbon from their own religious landscape is only the last phase in a process during which the ribbon lost its agency as a divine vehicle, and thereby they trivialize the difference between mere material presence and no presence at all.

I begin by presenting the custom of tying a scarlet ribbon on the scapegoat's head as it is depicted in the Mishnah (the earliest extant rabbinic legal code, compiled in the beginning of the third century CE) and is echoed in two early Christian texts roughly from the same period. I then discuss a notion that we encounter in the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds, two extensive commentaries on the Mishnah compiled between 400 and 600 CE respectively, according to which the scarlet ribbon functioned as an omen and was expected to turn white after the scapegoat had reached the wilderness to indicate that Israel's sins were forgiven. Finally, I analyze two Talmudic "biographies" of the scarlet ribbon that portray its gradual transition from omen to anti-omen, that is, to an object that fails to fill its divinatory function, and discuss these texts as windows to the rabbis' own concerns, anxieties, and agenda regarding God's presence and absence in the sanctuary and among the people. I propose that whereas the first biography portrays the ribbon as a manifestation of God's abandonment of his people, the second biography portrays the ribbon's depletion of divine presence and significance as a result of a conscious decision of the rabbis themselves. Through this analysis, I aim to show how attention to the narrative "afterlife" of sacred objects can serve as a valuable resource for constructing cultural histories of religious communities.

The Scarlet Ribbon of the Scapegoat in the Mishnah and in Early Christian Literature

The scapegoat ritual is one of the pinnacles of the annual rite of the Day of Atonement in ancient Israel. According to the biblical account of the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16, two goats must be designated every year for the purgation of the tab-

ernacle of iniquities and impurities.² One goat is to be sacrificed on the altar as a purification-offering (*hattat*) and the other, commonly referred to as “the scapegoat” or the “sent-away goat”, is to be driven out into the wilderness, carrying upon itself the sins of the congregation (see Milgrom 1991: 1006–1084). As has been noted by several scholars (e. g., Wright 1987: 17–75; Zatelli 1998: 254–262), this ritual bears close resemblance to other rites of purification in the ancient world, perhaps most famously to the *pharmakos* ritual of ancient Greece (Bremmer 2008: 169–214).

The biblical account of the scapegoat ritual does not mention any customs pertaining to the scapegoat aside from its initial selection from among the two goats by a casting of lots (Leviticus 16:7–10) and its sending away to *Azazel*, presumably some sort of demonic entity (see Milgrom 1991: 1020–1023; De Roo 2000: 233–242), by driving it to the unsettled wilderness (Leviticus 16:20–23). However, in the Mishnah we find some additional details about the way in which the scapegoat was chosen, marked, and treated, prominent among which is the custom of tying a scarlet ribbon on the scapegoat's head. Thus the fourth chapter of tractate *Yoma* (“The Day”), the mishnaic treatise dedicated to a detailed account of the rites of the Day of Atonement, begins by elaborating how the casting of lots on the two goats took place:

[The high priest] shook an urn and brought up two lots: on one was written “For the Name” [i. e., YHWH] and on the other was written “For *Azazel*.” If the [lot of] the Name came up in his right hand, the deputy tells him: My lord the high priest, raise your right hand! And if it came up on his left hand, the head of the [priestly] family [currently in service at the Temple] tells him: My lord the high priest, raise your left hand! He placed [the two lots] upon the two goats, and said “for the Lord is the purification offering.” [...] He then twisted a scarlet ribbon on the head of the goat that is to be sent away, and he placed it opposite the gate from whence it should be sent. And the one for slaughter [he placed] opposite the slaughter-house.³
(Mishnah *Yoma* 4.1–2).⁴

There is notably no biblical basis for the custom described in the Mishnah of tying a scarlet ribbon on the scapegoat's head, yet such a custom is mentioned not only in the Mishnah but also in two early Christian texts that cannot be assumed to have any dependence upon the Mishnah—in the *Epistle of Barnabas* 7.6–11 and in Tertullian's *Against Marcion* 3.7.7,⁵ two works that describe and interpret Jesus's Passion through

2 According to Knohl (1995: 27–34), the assignment of this purgation ritual to one specific day in the year is of later provenance than the account of the ritual itself.

3 The Hebrew phrase *beit shehitato* (lit. ‘its house of slaughter’) is ambiguous, and could refer either to the location of the slaughter in the goat's body (i. e., its throat) or to the actual slaughterhouse in the Temple. While the structure of this mishnaic passage warrants the latter reading (since in the case of the scapegoat *beit shiluhō*, lit. ‘its house of sending away,’ clearly refers to a location in the Temple), later rabbinic interpreters championed the former reading (see Babylonian Talmud *Yoma* 41b). Accordingly, these later interpreters maintained that the sacrificial goat was also marked with a scarlet ribbon, which was tied on its neck.

4 All translations of rabbinic texts are mine.

5 Cf. *Against the Jews* 14.9.

the rhetoric and imagery of the Day of Atonement ritual (see Stökl Ben Ezra 2003: 143–179). In the *Epistle of Barnabas*, commonly thought to be composed during the first half of the second century CE, the tying of the scarlet ribbon is organically integrated into the other instructions pertaining to the scapegoat in the form of a pseudo-biblical quotation: “And do ye all spit on it, and goad it, and bind the scarlet wool about its head, and so let it be cast into the desert” (Lake 1912: 367). A very similar account is offered by Tertullian in the beginning of the third century CE: “One of these goats was bound with scarlet, and driven by the people out of the camp into the wilderness, amid cursing, and spitting, and pulling, and piercing, being thus marked with all the signs of the Lord’s own passion” (Holmes 1868: 133). In both these accounts, the scapegoat’s scarlet ribbon is analogized to the scarlet robe (χλαμύδα κοκκίνην) with which Jesus was clothed prior to his crucifixion (Matthew 27:28; cf. Mark 15:17, John 19:5), a point to which I shall return later on. For the time being, suffice it to note that the conjunction of the Mishnah with these early Christian sources points to a shared oral or written tradition regarding the performance of the scapegoat ritual, which in all likelihood dates back to the times of the Second Temple (see Barnard 1959: 433–439; Grabbe 1987: 152–167).

The shared tradition that informs both the Christian sources and the Mishnah is evident also in regard to the treatment of the scapegoat on its way to the wilderness and upon its final “sending away”—here, implicitly, sending it away to its death. We have seen above that both Tertullian and the author of the *Epistle of Barnabas* mention that the scapegoat was abused, pierced, and spat upon on its way into the wilderness, a custom not even remotely mentioned in Leviticus but echoed in the Mishnah:

[The high priest] went to the sent-away goat, and laid both his hands on it, and confessed [the sins of the congregation] [...] He then handed [the goat] over to the one who would walk it [...] and they made a ramp for it, because of the Babylonians⁶ who used to pluck out its/his hair, and say to it/him: “Take [the sins] and get out, take [the sins] and get out!”
(Mishnah *Yoma* 6.1–4)

The Mishnah attests here (disapprovingly) to a custom of “plucking hair” as a form of abuse during the scapegoat’s journey out of Jerusalem, on account of which a ramp was built for the scapegoat and its leader in order to protect them from such mistreatment. The language here is ambiguous, and it is not clear whether the one abused was the scapegoat itself or the person leading it. Either way, the depiction of the scapegoat or the person “attached” to it as mocked and subject to violence is highly reminiscent of accounts of the Greek *pharmakos* ritual (Bremmer 1983: 299–320). During this ritual, which took place annually on the first day of the *Thargelia* festival

⁶ In the Tosefta (a compilation parallel to and contemporaneous with the Mishnah) this custom is attributed to the “Alexandrians” rather than to the Babylonians (Tosefta *Kippurim* 3.13). The Talmuds also explain that the Babylonians spoken of here were actually Alexandrians (Palestinian Talmud *Yoma* 6.3, 43d; Babylonian Talmud *Yoma* 66b).

(but was apparently also occasionally performed in times of great famine or distress), slaves, criminals, or otherwise “repulsive” persons were declared to embody the defilements of the city and would be beaten, abused, and finally brutally banished from the city. While those human victims were not killed per se, it was evident that their expulsion from the city is tantamount to their death. Based on the similarities between the *pharmakos* ritual and the scapegoat ritual of the Mishnah, Jennifer Berenson McLean noted that even if the biblical scapegoat ritual was not originally intended as a *pharmakos*-like curative exit rite (as forcefully argued by Douglas 2003: 122–123), it certainly took on some of the features of such a rite by the beginning of the Common Era (Berneson McLean 2007: 314–317). Particularly significant in this regard is the fact that whereas in the biblical account the scapegoat manifestly does *not* die—indeed, it is repeatedly referred to as “the living goat” to distinguish it from its sacrificial twin—in the Mishnah the scapegoat ritual notably concludes with the scapegoat’s death. The Mishnah describes the journey of the scapegoat and the person leading it out of Jerusalem, at the end of which they reach a steep cliff (*tzuk*):

[When they reached the cliff] the leader divided the scarlet ribbon into two. Half he twisted on the rock, and half he twisted between its horns. And he thrust [the scapegoat] backwards, and the goat rolled, and descended, and before it reached half the mountain, it was broken to pieces. (Mishnah *Yoma* 6.6).

According to the Mishnah, then, even though the scapegoat is by no means a sacrificial animal, it is purposefully and intentionally killed by the congregation’s emissary. For the purpose of this article, however, I wish to highlight the one additional piece of information provided by this mishnaic passage regarding the scarlet ribbon—namely, that just before pushing the scapegoat to its death the scarlet ribbon that was tied to its head is torn in half, and one of the two halves is tied to a rock.⁷ Once again, this description resonates with the account in the *Epistle of Barnabas* 7.8 (Lake 1912: 367), which mentions that upon reaching the wilderness the ribbon was removed from the scapegoat’s head and tied to a shrub (φρύγανον).⁸ This resonance again strongly speaks to the shared tradition regarding the scapegoat ritual with which both the creators of the Mishnah and early Christian authors were familiar, and while the exact nature and origin of this shared tradition cannot be explored in this article (on this, see Alon 1940: 23–38), we can certainly point to the place of the scarlet ribbon as a prominent motif within it.

⁷ The division of the ribbon into two parts can be understood as a way of producing a duplicate evidence for the completion of the ritual, in the same way that contracts in the ancient world were often torn in half to provide a “receipt” for each side.

⁸ As both Alon (1940: 32) and Barnard (1959: 434–435) noted, behind this tradition might stand a conflation or confusion of the Greek words *πάρις* (mountain ridge) and *παχός* (thorny bush). However, the author of the epistle may have intentionally used the imagery of a thorny bush in order to invoke Jesus’s crown of thorns.

How did the scarlet ribbon, an object that receives no mention in the biblical account of the purgation of the Temple and the congregation, find its way into the scapegoat ritual—whether the ritual as it was actually performed during the times of the Temple or the ritual as it was imagined in popular Jewish traditions? Several possible explanations have been suggested by scholars. One manner of accounting for this custom is explaining it as deriving from the sheer practical necessity of distinguishing between the sacrificial goat and the scapegoat, which are otherwise identical (Goldstein 1980: 238).⁹ This reading is potentially supported by two biblical narratives, in which a crimson thread is used to distinguish a firstborn twin from its brother (Genesis 38:28) and one house from its neighboring houses (Joshua 2:18), but the question does arise whether such distinction was indeed necessary considering that the goats were marked by their respective “lots” and by their different locations.¹⁰ An alternative explanation, which rests on the mishnaic ritual’s resemblance to the Greek *pharmakos* ritual, views the scarlet thread as a form of adornment and beautification, a process that functioned in the *pharmakos* ritual as a way of “elevating” the victim prior to its final degradation (Bremmer 1983: 305–307). Here the removal of the scarlet thread (half or all of it) from the goat can be seen as a “stripping” of the honors that were conferred upon it prior to its elimination—indeed in the same way that the removal of the scarlet robe from Jesus before his crucifixion signifies his “dethronement” from his position as King of the Jews. The Passion narrative in the Gospels, as scholars have noted, was clearly shaped through the imagery of the biblical scapegoat ritual (see DeMaris 2008: 91–111), and the fact that it contains this motif of enthronement and dethronement and uses the color scarlet to convey this motif serves as important support for the reading of the scapegoat’s scarlet ribbon as a sign of a temporary elevated status. As I mentioned above, the author of the *Epistle of Barnabas* and Tertullian explicitly presented the scapegoat’s scarlet ribbon as a symbolic figuration of the scarlet robe of Jesus.

While this explanation of the scarlet ribbon’s function as a marker of transformation of status (from low to high to low again) is powerful, there is one important feature of the scarlet ribbon that this explanation does not take into account, namely, the role of scarlet threads in other biblical rites of purification. Both in the bird rite of the purification of the leper (Leviticus 14:4–6) and in the red heifer rite (Numbers 19:6) it is instructed that cedar wood, hyssop, and crimson wool (*shni tola’at*) be tied together and be used in the purification process; it is thus not implausible that the scarlet ribbon of the scapegoat ritual should be understood in the same vein, as part of the ritual’s purificatory function.¹¹ In a recent article, Noga Ayali-Dar-

⁹ Both the Mishnah (*Yoma* 6.1) and the Christian Texts make the point that the goats had to be identical both in appearance and in cost (on this theme, see Dinur, Lipshitz, and Shoham 2005: 109–123).

¹⁰ The editorial layer of the Babylonian Talmud explicitly rejects this understanding, and maintains that both goats were marked with a scarlet ribbon (see n.3 above).

¹¹ The view of the crimson thread as a purifying agent is evident in Hebrews 9:15–27, in which such thread is integrated into the covenant ritual described in Exodus 24.

shan (2013) traces the use of a scarlet ribbon in the scapegoat ritual to ancient Syrian-Anatolian purificatory customs documented in various Hittite texts, and argues that the Mishnah here (as in several other cases) independently preserves an ancient Near Eastern tradition that is not echoed in the Hebrew Bible. Ayali-Darshan (2013: 21–23) sees the tying of colored threads around the heads or necks of animals in Hittite purification rites as means of transmitting impurity, disease, or sin from an afflicted person to an animal, and identifies the scarlet threads in biblical purification rites as such channels of transmission from person to animal.¹² The notable similarity between the purification of the leper through two birds (one of which is killed and the other sent away) in Leviticus 14 and the purification of the tabernacle through two goats (again, one of which is killed and the other sent away) in Leviticus 16 leads Ayali-Darshan to argue that in the same way that a crimson thread was tied to the sent-away bird as a mode of transmitting the leper's impurity to the bird, so a crimson thread was tied to the sent-away goat as a mode of transmitting the congregations' iniquities to the goat.¹³ Ayali-Darshan's reconstruction is cogent, and yet it should be noted that even if this is the "original" purpose behind the tying of the scarlet ribbon on the scapegoat, the Mishnah does not actively point in this direction. In sum, while all three explanations regarding the role and function of the scarlet ribbon in the scapegoat ritual (distinction, status transformation, or transmission of impurity) are compelling and plausible, there is not enough evidence within the mishnaic text itself to ascertain which of the three is the most apposite, and I prefer to have this question remain open.

Indeed, the Mishnah itself does not provide any indication of what the rabbis perceived to be the purpose or function of the scarlet ribbon. The Mishnah refers to the ribbon's place in the scapegoat rite as an established fact requiring no explanation or justification. This is admittedly not at all unusual in the Mishnah, which rarely offers reflections on or explanations for its own ritual and legal system. However, the Mishnah does include one tradition that can be seen to serve as *symbolic interpretation* of the custom of the scarlet ribbon—although it is highly doubtful whether this tradition was indeed intended as such. The ninth chapter of tractate *Shabbat* of the Mishnah contains a collection of seven statements, all of which begin with the word "whence" (*minyain*) and proceed to inquire regarding the bibli-

¹² As Ayali-Darshan (2013: 21–23) notes, the biblical account of the scapegoat mentions an alternative form of transmitting impurity—namely, laying hands on the animal's head (Leviticus 16:21). The laying of hands is also mentioned in the Mishnah (*Yoma* 6.1), which thus includes, according to Ayali-Darshan, two alternative modes of "transmission" in the same ritual.

¹³ Whereas in regard to the bird rite of the leper and the red heifer rite the Mishnah uses the biblical term *shni tola'at* (crimson color produced from the Kermes worm), in regard to the scapegoat it uses the term *lashon shel zehorit* (literally, 'a strap of bright wool'), which has no biblical precedent. However, other mishnaic passages indicate that the rabbis occasionally referred to the thread used for the purification of the leper and for the red heifer rite also by the term *lashon shel zehorit*; see Mishnah *Sheqalim* 4.2, *Nega'im* 14.1, *Parah* 3.13.

cal basis of several rabbinic non-biblical customs. As Noam Zohar (2001: 357) noted, none of these statements is making the claim that the biblical verse is the *source* of the rabbinic custom (that is, that the rabbis established the custom as a result of engagement with the biblical text); rather, these statements invoke verses more as mnemonic devices that bolster the customs and offer them support (see also Epstein 1959: 240). Among these seven statements we find the following:

Whence is it [to be inferred] that a scarlet ribbon is to be tied to the head of the scapegoat? From this verse (Isaiah 1:18): *Though your sins be like scarlet, they shall become white as snow.* (Mishnah *Shabbat* 9.3)

How does the biblical verse from the book of Isaiah, “*Though your sins be like scarlet, they shall become white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool,*” serve as scriptural support for the custom of tying a scarlet ribbon on the head of the scapegoat? The connection seems to lie in the symbolic dimension of the color red, or scarlet, as a marker of sin in the verse.¹⁴ In light of this poetic identification of red with sin, it seems quite appropriate that the goat that carries the sins of the people away be marked with the color red. To reiterate, there is no reason to assume that the rabbis who created this mishnaic tradition saw the biblical verse as *accounting* for the custom of the scarlet ribbon, and in all likelihood they used the biblical verse as illustration for the custom rather than as justification for it. Nevertheless, even if the juxtaposition of the verse with the custom was not intended as an explanation of the custom, it does inevitably *function* as such. By associating the scarlet ribbon with sin (rather than with regal clothing, for example, or as a neutral distinguishing marker), the rabbis framed the scarlet ribbon as a sign of a temporary flawed reality which by definition should be changed and transformed if the purification rite is successful. In other words, the juxtaposition of the custom with the verse from Isaiah places emphasis on the scapegoat’s ribbon as a locus of transformation: if the ritual is performed properly, the “red” is to turn metaphorically white, that is, the sins are to be eradicated. This association of the scarlet color with what must change and disappear stands in stark contrast to the way the scarlet color is construed in the *Epistle of Barnabas*, in which it represents the eternal majesty of Christ, and is patently depicted as enduring and unchanging (Lake 1912: 367). There the scarlet ribbon of the scapegoat stands not for what the scapegoat eliminates (namely, sin) but for the scapegoat’s future reward (namely, kingship) for all the suffering through which it went.

The divergent symbolic readings attached to the red color of the ribbon constitute what is perhaps the first stage in its “hagiography,” that is, in its literary reception and interpretation as a cultural memory. The sources we have considered above

¹⁴ Ayali-Darshan (2013: 19–20) claims that the author of Isaiah may have been alluding precisely to prototypical purification rites in marking redness as a sign of impurity, and in presenting a process in which red material is ‘laundered white’ through a purification process.

seem to agree on the basic facts: they all attest that a scarlet ribbon was tied to the head of the scapegoat after the lot was cast on it by the high priest, and that this ribbon (or half of it) was finally removed from its head at the edge of the wilderness and tied to a rock or a shrub. But in addition to these basic facts of the object and its use, these sources also offer (advertently or inadvertently) a commentary on the meaning of this ribbon and on the cultural associations with which it is infused. This “meaning” is not inherent to the object itself, as the multiple explanations for its origin and purpose presented above demonstrate, nor is it readily traceable through the depictions of the ritual process it undergoes: rather, this meaning lies within the interpretive communities for which the scapegoat ritual functions as an important religious site (see also Stökl Ben Ezra 2012: 163–187). This is not to argue that the interpretation of the scarlet ribbon as a marker of sin, as is implied in the Mishnah, was necessarily developed only in the second or third century: it is quite conceivable that this interpretation was already prominent among Jewish circles back in the time of the Temple, but the incorporation of this interpretation into a collection of rabbinic teachings compiled over a century after the cessation of the scapegoat ritual positions it within the realm of the *textual afterlife* of this ritual. In its capacity as a textual artifact the scarlet ribbon continues to “live” and acquire meanings, even though it is unequivocally recognized as a thing of the past.

The extent to which a ritual object can not only “live on” through text and cultural memory after its physical disappearance, but also notably change and gain a new set of meanings, will become particularly notable as we move from the Mishnah to later rabbinic sources, compiled between the fourth and the sixth centuries CE. At the center of these sources lies a view of the scarlet ribbon as a representation of sin, which we have already encountered in the Mishnah: but here the ribbon is not simply a symbol of the sin that must be eradicated, but rather it is a physical manifestation and proof of the actual eradication of sin. In other words, in later rabbinic sources the scarlet ribbon does not merely invoke the *idea* of change, but rather it itself is undergoing change.

The Scarlet Ribbon as Omen

Above we have seen the different stages of the scapegoat ritual as they are depicted in tractate *Yoma* of the Mishnah, the culmination of which is pushing the scapegoat off a cliff. However, the Mishnah points out that in order for the purification rites of the Day of Atonement to be officially concluded, the high priest must receive an official notice that the scapegoat had indeed reached the wilderness: only then may he carry on with the ritual. Immediately following the mention of this necessary report, the Mishnah raises a seemingly trivial question: how did those serving in the Temple know that the scapegoat had indeed reached the wilderness? Two possible answers for this question are offered in the Mishnah, both of them quite technical and mundane in nature. According to the anonymous voice of the Mishnah, watchmen were

set along the road, and they would signal to each other with handkerchiefs (*sudarin*) to indicate that the scapegoat reached its destination. According to Rabbi Yehudah, the people of the Temple knew the distance between the Temple and the cliff and simply estimated the time that it would take the scapegoat to get there (Mishnah *Yoma* 6.8). However, in the printed editions of the Mishnah there appears a third answer to the question “whence did they know”:

Rabbi Yishmael said: A scarlet ribbon was tied on the door of the Temple, and when the goat arrived in the wilderness the ribbon turned white, as it is said, *Though your sins be like scarlet, they shall become white as snow.*

(Mishnah *Yoma* 6.8, according to the printed edition)

The tradition attributed here to Rabbi Yishmael does not appear in any of the Mishnah’s manuscripts, nor does it appear in any of the manuscripts of tractate *Yoma* of the Babylonian Talmud, which all quote the Mishnah in full. In MS Leiden Scaliger 3, the only surviving manuscript of the Palestinian Talmud, Rabbi Yishmael’s comment appears only in the margins, in handwriting different from the scribe’s handwriting. It is thus quite evident that this tradition was not originally a part of the Mishnah, and was added to it only at a rather late stage (Epstein 1959: 960).¹⁵ In all likelihood, this addition to the Mishnah was formulated in light of a comment that appears in the Babylonian Talmud, which relates an ostensibly early custom pertaining to the scarlet ribbon:

Rabbi Nahum bar Pappa¹⁶ said in the name of Rabbi Eleazar ha-Kapar: At first (*ba-rishonah*) they used to tie a scarlet ribbon on the door of the Temple hall from within, and once the goat would arrive in the wilderness it would turn white, and they would know that the commandment [regarding the scapegoat] was fulfilled, for it was said, *Though your sins be like scarlet, they shall become white as snow.*

(Babylonian Talmud *Yoma* 67a)

This tradition, attributed to a rabbinic sage of the third century, reports an early and presumably rejected custom (this is the common connotation of the word *ba-rishonah*) of tying a scarlet ribbon on the Temple hall’s door and expecting it to turn white as the scapegoat reaches the wilderness. It seems that at a rather late stage of the transmission of the Mishnah—presumably in the Middle Ages—this tradition was incorporated into the mishnaic passage that discusses “signs” for the goat’s arrival to its destination, and eventually came to be formulated as a third answer to the

¹⁵ To the best of my knowledge, the earliest textual witness of the Mishnah in which this statement appears is the edition printed in Naples in 1492, in which the statement is attributed to Rabbi Yehudah, and is introduced by the phrase *ve-’od ’amar Rabbi Yehudah*, ‘and further said Rabbi Yehudah.’ In the *editio princeps* of the Babylonian Talmud (Venice 1523) the statement is already attributed to Rabbi Yishmael, and appears under the heading ‘*baraita*’ (i. e., non-canonical Mishnah).

¹⁶ In MSS Munich 6 and JTS 1623: Nahum bar Napah; In MS Munich 95: Nahum bar Parnakh.

question “whence did they know.” The attribution of this statement to the second-century sage Rabbi Yishmael is, in my view, a result of a series of scribal misconstructions.¹⁷

The question of how the tradition attributed to Rabbi Yishmael developed and found its way to the printed Mishnah aside, it is evident that in post-mishnaic rabbinic literature (commonly known as Amoraic literature) we encounter a notion regarding the scarlet ribbon's role and function that has no precedent in earlier rabbinic literature. According to this notion the scarlet ribbon functioned as an *omen*, that is, it was a medium of conveying a divine message: once the scapegoat would arrive in the wilderness the ribbon would turn white, thus indicating that the sins of the congregation were obliterated, in literal fulfillment of the verse from Isaiah, “*Though your sins be like scarlet they will become white as snow.*” Note that the tradition in the name of Rabbi Eleazar ha-Kapar that we have seen above does not indicate that the ribbon that was tied to the goat's head was expected to turn white, but only that there was a ribbon on the Temple's door (either in addition to the ribbon on the scapegoat's head or instead of it) that was expected to do so.¹⁸ However, in the later strata of the Babylonian Talmud it is already assumed that the ribbon on the scapegoat's head was also expected to turn white and thereby to function as a sign of divine approval. The anonymous Talmud explains the practice of splitting the scarlet ribbon and tying half of it to the rock as motivated strictly by expectation for this omen, stating that since the goat might be falling off the cliff head first, the one who walks him to the wilderness may not be able to see the ribbon on its head turning white, and hence the instruction to tie half of it to the rock first (Babylonian Talmud *Yoma* 67a).

Thus, whereas in the Mishnah we encountered the idea that the red color of the scarlet ribbon symbolically *represents* the sins of the congregation that are to be eradicated through the ritual, in the Talmud we encounter the tradition that the scarlet ribbon would itself change and turn white to indicate the eradication of sins. The transition from symbol to omen, or from metaphorical to literal reading, is in itself quite understandable. As Peter Struck cogently showed, omens and symbols operate with the same fundamental logic, which assumes “sympathy between sign and meaning” (Struck 2004: 189). Both diviners and allegorists view the world through

¹⁷ My conjecture is that this statement was first added (perhaps in the margins) without any attribution, and later on appeared as a second statement of Rabbi Yehudah, as we see in the Naples 1492 printed edition. Presumably Rabbi Yehudah's name was then abbreviated as RY, and a later scribe took this abbreviation as pointing to a different sage with the same initials, namely, Rabbi Yishmael.

¹⁸ Mishnah *Sheqalim* 4.2 mentions two scarlet ribbons, one that was paid for from the central fund of the Temple (*terumat ha-lishkah*) and one that was paid for from the remainders of this fund (*sheyare ha-lishkah*); the latter is referred to as “the ribbon between [the scapegoat's] horns.” Ostensibly, this passage could be seen as attesting to the existence of an additional ribbon in the scapegoat ritual, perhaps one that was tied to the door; however, the first scarlet ribbon mentioned in the passage is more readily understood as pertaining to the red heifer rite (Epstein 1959: 299).

semantic lenses, assuming that no detail is insignificant, and furthermore, that different visible phenomena and objects intrinsically entail their invisible meaning (Struck 2004: 91–96, 187–203). The rabbis, as Michael Schwartz demonstrated, were not different from their Greek and Roman contemporaries in their deep-seated belief that God speaks through palpable physical signs, and considered objects and natural phenomena both as “poetic” or representational symbols and as omens that reveal certain divine intentions and interventions (Schwartz 2012: 55–74). For example, in rabbinic exegesis the word “dove” is taken as a symbol of the people of Israel, and rabbinic narratives suggest that because of this symbolic connection the appearance of an actual dove was taken as a good omen (Schwartz 2012: 68). It is unsurprising, then, that the scarlet ribbon of the scapegoat lends itself to such “divinatory” interpretation, in which it is both a symbolic marker of sin and a physical proof of atonement. What is noteworthy, however, is the fact that such interpretation is completely missing from the Mishnah, and appears only in post-mishnaic sources.

By this I do not wish to assert that the view of the scarlet ribbon as omen was necessarily generated at a later period and did not yet exist during the time of the Mishnah: one certainly cannot dismiss the possibility that this view dates back to earlier times, and perhaps even to the time in which the ritual was still performed. But in the rabbinic hagiography of the scarlet ribbon, this notion appears at a rather late stage, and more importantly, in a quasi-mythological setting. We first encounter the notion of the scarlet ribbon as omen not in the Mishnah’s normative account of how the ritual *ought* to be performed,¹⁹ but in the Talmud’s nostalgic anecdotes on how the ritual *was* performed, anecdotes that weave together earlier traditions, scriptural interpretation, and vivid imagination and fantasy. In its Talmudic setting, which constructs Temple rituals not as ongoing reality, as the Mishnah does (see Rosen-Zvi 2008: 249), but as a distant and largely inaccessible past, the scarlet ribbon of the Day of Atonement becomes a token of the mythical quality of Temple times. In other words, even if the idea of the scarlet ribbon as omen may date back to an earlier period, the appearance of this idea only in the Talmud, a compilation so far removed in time from the actual ritual, constitutes a new phase in the textual development of the scarlet ribbon as a sacred object. The ribbon now comes to stand not only as sacred object insofar as it is used in a sacred ritual, but as a sacred object insofar as it is a medium of divine message and, moreover, a site of divine presence. The ribbon’s ability to change in a miraculous way, which presumably runs against the regular course of nature,²⁰ turns it from a means to a practical end—be it distinguishing

¹⁹ As noted by several scholars (e.g., Rosen-Zvi 2008; Cohn 2012), the Mishnah’s ritual narratives are clearly prescriptive rather than descriptive.

²⁰ Ayali-Darshan (2013: 19–20) suggests a quasi-natural explanation for the whitening of the ribbon: “Tying a thread to a rock in the Levantine sun-bleached desert indubitably guaranteed that it would turn white in a very short period of time.” Such explanation, however, does not cohere with the Talmudic account, in which the ribbon was first tied indoors, and in general the assumption in the Talmudic accounts is that the ribbon turned white *instantly* once the goat reached the wilderness.

between the goats, marking a change of status, or purification—to an emblem of God's responsiveness to his people and active intervention in the human world.

The scarlet ribbon's function as an emblem of God's responsiveness acquires a mythical dimension in its Talmudic context since it is implicitly contrasted with the prominent assumption of the Talmudic rabbis regarding their own world—namely, that it is a world in which such direct communication with God, and such ability to receive an unequivocal divine approval for human actions, is for the most part no longer possible.²¹ The immediacy of God's response and the people's certainty regarding the efficacy of their ritual actions turn the scarlet ribbon into an object that encapsulates a golden age that can only be looked back at longingly. Yet interestingly enough, in post-mishnaic literature the notion of the scarlet ribbon as omen is used not only to depict an idealized picture of the past, but also to question and undermine this idealized picture. In what follows, I will examine two Talmudic narratives in which the scarlet ribbon fails to turn white (either part of the time or all the time) despite the expectation that it will do so, thereby turning from omen to anti-omen, from a sign of God's presence to a sign of absence (or at least, of angry silence). I suggest that these narratives, each of which can be read as a three-phased "biography" of the scarlet ribbon, were shaped by the rabbis as a way of de-mythicizing the Temple period, and of blurring the ostensibly sharp theological divide between their own times, in which God is seen as silent if not entirely absent, and the Temple times.

First Biography: The Destruction of the Temple before its Destruction

The first Talmudic biography, or hagiography, of the scarlet ribbon that I wish to examine here is preserved as part of a hagiography in the more traditional sense of the word, that is, an account of the life of a holy man: Shim'on the Righteous (*ha-tzaddik*), a semi-mythical high priest whose period of activity is roughly dated to the third century BCE and who serves in rabbinic literature as the ultimate embodiment of a forlorn golden age (Amitai 2007: 236–249; Tropper 2013: 199–211). Among various traditions relating miraculous events and occurrences that took place during Shim'on's life, presumably owing to his great merit, we find a recurring literary pattern that contrasts aspects of the worship in the Temple during Shim'on's times with worship in the Temple after his death. The earliest extant appearance of this pattern is in the *Tosefta*, an early rabbinic (tannaitic) compilation more or less contemporaneous with the *Mishnah*, which presents Shim'on's death as a watershed between two ep-

²¹ For rabbinic comments on the deterioration of the world and of the relations with God after the destruction of the Temple, see, for example, *Mishnah Sotah* 9.12–15 (= *Tosefta Sotah* 15); Babylonian Talmud *Berakhot* 59a, *Ta'anit* 19b, *Baba Batra* 25b.

ochs in the history of the Temple: a blessed and glorious epoch replete with everyday miracles, and a compromised and deteriorated epoch in which miracles no longer take place. The Tosefta (*Sotah* 13.7) relates three such “everyday miracles” that ceased after Shim’on’s death. First, for as long as Shim’on was alive the western candle of the Temple’s lamp never stopped burning during the night (that is, between its afternoon lighting and its morning lighting); after he died, however, the candle would sometimes remain lit but at other times its flame would die down. Second, for as long as Shim’on was alive the fire on the altar was steady and no additional firewood was necessary apart from the wood first set in the morning, but after he died the priests had to add more wood to sustain the fire during the day. Third, for as long as Shim’on was alive the ceremonial bread presented weekly at the Temple sufficed to satiate all the officiating priests, but after he died the priests would fight and struggle over it and remain wanting. The principle underlying this tradition is evident: during the time of Shim’on the Righteous the Temple, its practices, and its objects transcended the laws of the nature, so to speak, but after his death they became subordinate to the laws of nature (Tropper 2013: 197).

The same tradition that we find in the Tosefta regarding the “everyday miracles” of the Temple and their cessation after the death of Shim’on the Righteous appears also in the two Talmuds, the Palestinian and the Babylonian, with few modifications.²² However, in addition to the three miracles mentioned in the Tosefta (candle, firewood, bread), the two Talmuds mention two additional miracles that ceased after the death of Shim’on the Righteous, both of which pertain to the scapegoat of the Day of Atonement.²³ Thus the Palestinian Talmud:

During all those days that Shim’on the righteous was alive, the lot with the Name [of God] would come up in the right [hand of the high priest]. After Shim’on the Righteous died, at times [it would come up] in the right and at times in the left [...]

During all those days that Shim’on the righteous was alive, the scarlet ribbon would [always] turn white (*malbin*). After Shim’on the Righteous died—at times it would turn white (*malbin*) and at times it would turn red (*ma’adim*).

(Palestinian Talmud *Yoma* 6:3, 43c)²⁴

22 The version in the Palestinian Talmud is almost identical to the version in the Tosefta. In the Babylonian Talmud, in contrast, the “at times... at times” pattern is used for all three miracles, and not just for the western candle.

23 Even though the miracles pertaining to the Day of Atonement are not mentioned in the Tosefta, a story of Shim’on the Righteous’ entrance into the Holy of Holies during the Day of Atonement appears in the same chapter (Tosefta *Sotah* 13.8). This literary connection between Shim’on and the Day of Atonement may have led later rabbis to integrate the additional miracles into the list.

24 The Palestinian Talmud mentions one additional transformation in the scapegoat rite after the death of Shim’on the Righteous: before he died, the scapegoat would always die before reaching the bottom of the cliff (as described in the Mishnah), but after he died, it would wander into the wilderness. This tradition has no parallels in the Babylonian Talmud.

The Babylonian Talmud similarly integrates the two miracles of the Day of Atonement to the list of everyday miracles in the Temple, although with some changes in order and wording.²⁵ Most notably, whereas the Palestinian Talmud contrasts the ribbon turning white with the ribbon “turning red” (a phrase to which I shall return shortly), the Babylonian Talmud contrasts the ribbon’s turning white with the ribbon’s not-turning white: “[For as long as Shim’on served] the scarlet ribbon would [always] turn white (*malbin*). From then on—at times it would turn white and at times it would not turn white (*lo haya malbin*)” (Babylonian Talmud *Yoma* 39a). I will address this possibly significant difference in wording between the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmud toward the end of this section.

The fact that the notion of the scarlet ribbon turning white does not appear in the Tosefta but does appear in the Talmuds is indicative both of the relative belatedness of this notion and of its importance for the Talmudic rabbis. Whereas earlier rabbinic sources contain no hint of an “omen” function of the ribbon, the Talmudic rabbis put forth this idea and utilize it as part of their construction of an idealized past. Interestingly, here the function of the scarlet ribbon as omen is juxtaposed with another tradition regarding an omen in the Day of Atonement ritual, namely, the emergence of the lot with God’s name in the high priest’s right hand rather than his left. As we have seen above, the Mishnah (*Yoma* 4.1) considers the possibility of the lot with the Name emerging in the right hand to be of equal probability to the possibility of it emerging in the left hand (as one would expect), and does not attribute any divinatory meanings to the process either way. The Talmuds, however, turn the casting of lots into yet another miraculous site, in which the unique (and lost) quality of the Temple as a place where the laws of nature are suspended manifests itself. We thus see that while the nostalgic notion of the Temple as a place of marvel is firmly rooted in early rabbinic traditions, the incorporation of the scapegoat ritual into this literary trope is apparently of later provenance.

The rabbinic tradition that divides the Temple period into two epochs, before and after the death of Shim’on the Righteous, does not serve merely to put this venerable high priest on a pedestal and to speak longingly of his days: it also serves to construct a narrative of gradual deterioration of the Temple and perhaps of the world more broadly.²⁶ Within this narrative of deterioration, the anecdote regarding the scarlet ribbon stands as somewhat exceptional. For all the other objects mentioned, the transition marked by Shim’on’s death can be simplistically described as a transition from defiance of natural laws to compliance with them: the fire that could be sustained without additional wood starts requiring more wood, the lot that would al-

²⁵ The Babylonian Talmud mentions the right hand and the scarlet ribbon first, and then the three items that appear in the Tosefta (candle, firewood, bread). In the Palestinian Talmud, in contrast, the order is: right hand, candle, scarlet ribbon, firewood, bread. The changing location of the two additional traditions probably points to their later incorporation into the texts.

²⁶ As clearly suggested by the broader context of this tradition in the Tosefta (*Sotah* chapters 13–15), which contains numerous anecdotes on the gradual decline of society and of the world.

ways emerge on the right hand becomes subject to the laws of probability and sometimes emerges on the left hand, and so on. In contrast, the scarlet ribbon continues to function in a miraculous way and turn white even after Shim'on's death, but does so only sporadically. Presumably, if the scarlet ribbon operated according to the same principle as the other objects, it should have stopped turning white altogether after Shim'on's death.

One could, of course, maintain that the reference to the scarlet ribbon was simply shaped in this passage in the literary pattern of "at times... and at times..." which is used in regard to other objects in the list, and that this choice should not be understood in any terms except of stylistic consistency. However, I believe that the application of the seemingly inappropriate "at times" pattern to the scarlet ribbon here is best explained by turning to the rabbinic tradition that immediately follows the unit on the death of Shim'on the Righteous in the two Talmuds.²⁷ This tradition describes the last forty years before the destruction of the Temple as a time of impending doom:

It was taught: Forty years before the Temple was destroyed the [flame] of the western candle would die down, and the scarlet ribbon would turn red (*ma'adim*), and the lot [with the Name] would come up in the left [hand], and they would lock the doors of the Temple hall in the evening and rise in the morning and find them open.²⁸ Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai said to it: Temple, why are you frightening us? We know that you are destined to be destroyed, for it was said (Zechariah 11:1): *Open your doors, O Lebanon, so that fire may devour your cedars.* (Palestinian Talmud *Yoma* 6:3 43c; cf. Babylonian Talmud *Yoma* 39b)

It seems most likely to me that this tradition is not dependent upon the tradition discussed above, which depicts the death of Shim'on the Righteous as a watershed between two epochs, but rather stands as its own unit. I thus trace the development of this Talmudic pericope as follows. Initially there existed two unrelated traditions: one akin to what we find in the Tosefta regarding the death of Shim'on the Righteous, which mentions three miracles (candle, firewood, bread), and one describing the last forty years of the Temple and relating four signs of the looming destruction (candle, lot, scarlet ribbon, doors). The juxtaposition of these two independent traditions that have one item (the western candle) in common generated a textual sequence that seems to point to *three* epochs in the history of the Temple: before the death of Shim'on, after the death of the Shim'on, and the last forty years before the destruction.

²⁷ In the Palestinian Talmud this tradition immediately follows the list of miracles; in the Babylonian Talmud it is separated from the list by the brief account of Shim'on's entrance to the Holy of Holies, which also appears in the Tosefta.

²⁸ Here too we encounter the difference to which I pointed above: whereas the Palestinian version relates the "failures" of the Temple objects in the affirmative (die down, turn red, come up on the left), the Babylonian version (*Yoma* 39b) relates these failures in the negative: "Forty years before the destruction of the Temple the lot would *not* come up on the right hand, and the scarlet ribbon would *not* turn white, and the western candle would *not* be lit..."

As a result of this juxtaposition, the two items that appear in the second tradition, the lot and the scarlet ribbon, were integrated into the first tradition, and were charted in the same pattern as the one item that all “three” epochs have in common, the western candle. Since the candle’s lifetimes are divided into “always lit” “sometimes lit” and “never lit” when the two traditions are read together, the biographies of the lot and of the scarlet ribbon were also formed in the same pattern.

While the seemingly sequential narrative of three epochs in the “lives” of the scarlet ribbon (and of other Temple objects) is, as I proposed, a result of a somewhat artificial literary juxtaposition of two separate traditions, in its redacted form this narrative presents a coherent account of gradual decline that anticipates the destruction of the Temple and turns this destruction from a sudden rupture to a foretold culmination of a long process. What remains ambiguous, however, is the exact meaning of this decline: do these objects stop functioning miraculously because they are devoid of divine presence and are reduced to mere materiality, or because the presence that fills them has become angry and conveys this through them? In other words, is the “silence” of these objects a bad omen or a non-omen, a message of doom or not a message at all? The ambiguity regarding the nature of these objects’ malfunction extends to a much broader theological ambiguity that inhabits the consciousness of those living in an age without a temple, without prophecy, and without revelation: does God simply not communicate directly any more, or is He actively communicating anger and abandonment?

Whereas the first tradition in the unit, which neatly divides the Temple period into “before” and “after” Shim’on the Righteous, seems to leave room for both interpretations, the second tradition seems to point more actively toward the second interpretation. Three of the four items mentioned in this tradition—the lot with the Name, the western candle, and the Temple doors—are clearly constructed in this passage not as non-miracles but as *negative* miracles, as *divergences* from the order of the world that distinctly constitute bad omens. The case of the scarlet ribbon, however, is different: when the scarlet ribbon fails to turn white it is clearly an anti-omen insofar as the object does not change in the way expected of it, but at the same time there is no divergence from the order of the world here. All we have, at the end of the day, is a red ribbon that remains a red ribbon. The ambiguity I described above thus emerges in full force in regard to the scarlet ribbon: Is its failure to turn white a sign that the ribbon simply “doesn’t work,” or is it a very clear omen from God—in this case, a sign that the sins of the congregation were *not* forgiven?

While the Talmuds do not resolve this ambiguity, it is interesting to note that their different wording may point to different implicit stances on this question. Whereas the Babylonian Talmud consistently uses the negative phrase “would not turn white” (*lo haya malbin*) to describe the scarlet ribbon’s malfunction, the Palestinian Talmud consistently presents this malfunction as active change, using the phrase “would turn red” (*haya ma’adim*). It is of course possible that the transmitters of this tradition in the Palestinian Talmud chose the active verb “turn red” simply to maintain the morphological format of “turn white,” but this choice may also suggest

that those transmitters wished to make the point that the scarlet ribbon did not “fail” to respond, but rather did respond, only in a negative way. Put differently, the ribbon did not remain unchanged but rather actively changed (presumably, intensified its color) in order to convey God’s *refusal* to forgive. The transmitters of this tradition in the Babylonian Talmud, in contrast, describe the anti-omen in terms of lack of action, thereby leaning more in the direction of non-omen (that is, of lack of any divine presence in the ribbon) than in the direction of intended bad omen.²⁹

Whether one reads this “biography” of the scarlet ribbon as one in which the ribbon loses its miraculous quality or as one in which it maintains it, it is evident that this Talmudic unit concomitantly constructs the scarlet ribbon both as omen and as anti-omen: it casts it both as a sacred object imbued with divine presence which serves as an emblem of a lost golden age and as a manifestation of divine absence—or, perhaps, of divine disdain. This absence or disdain begins well before the actual destruction of the Temple: in fact the destruction of the Temple is depicted here simply as the culmination of a lengthy process of deterioration. The scarlet ribbon is thus used by the rabbis in this unit (along with other ritual objects) to create a narrative of “destruction before destruction,” which blurs the divide between the rabbis’ own era and the times of the Temple. The scarlet ribbon serves as metonym for a change in God’s communication with his people—from constant favorable messages to ambiguous and unnerving silence. By locating this change within the period of the Temple rather than in their own time, I propose, the rabbis are relieving themselves of some of the anxieties pertaining to their own Temple-less era (see Klawans 2006: 198–211), since the transition from a dysfunctional Temple to a wholly absent Temple is more manageable than a transition from a glorious and wondrous Temple to a wholly absent Temple.

Second Biography: Out of Sight, out of Mind

In the above narrative, which relates (in its redacted form) a process of gradual deterioration of the Temple, the change in the function of the scarlet ribbon is described as having been imposed on the people. The ribbon’s failure to turn white is construed in this account as an indication for the imminent end of the Temple, in regard to which humans are helpless. In contrast, another Talmudic biography of the scarlet ribbon suggests a very different perspective on its transformation, and presents this transformation as propelled by human agency. Here, it is not the ribbon itself that is the locus of change, as in the previous account, but rather the actions and practices

²⁹ It should be noted that in another tractate of the Babylonian Talmud (*Rosh HaShanah* 31b) the same passage appears with somewhat different wording: “Forty years before the Temple was destroyed the scarlet ribbon would not turn white, but would turn red (*lo haya malbin ’ela ma’adim*.)” This phrasing, which is consistent throughout the manuscripts, may be the result of an amalgamation of two different formulae.

of the community that responds to it. Taken together, these two accounts serve as a powerful example of the complex and multifaceted way in which the “hagiographies” of religious objects are generated—through a narrative interplay of material, human, and divine actions and inactions alike.

Commenting on the mishnaic passage that mentions the custom of tying half the ribbon between the scapegoat's horns and half of it on a rock (*Yoma* 6.6), both Talmuds relate a short account of how this practice came about, describing it as the last stage in a threefold process of gradual concealment of the ribbon. The Palestinian Talmud describes this process as follows:

At first (*ba-rishonah*) they [the people] would tie it [the scarlet ribbon] on their windows, and for some of them it would turn white and for some of them it would turn red, and they would be ashamed before one another. They therefore made a custom of tying it to the gate of the Temple hall, and some years it would turn white and some years it would turn red. They therefore made a custom of tying it to a rock.³⁰

(Palestinian Talmud *Yoma* 6.5, 43d; cf. Palestinian Talmud *Shabbat* 9.3, 19a)

The Palestinian Talmud is cryptic about the identity of those who initiated the changes described (it simply uses the third person plural here, “they”), and is also rather ambiguous as to the motivation behind those changes. Presumably, since the first change has to do with the feelings of shame that arose when the ribbon did not turn white for different individuals, the second change speaks to a similar emotional response, but it remains unclear why such an emotional response was something that needed to be prevented. I shall return to these two ambiguities shortly.

The Babylonian version of this account is very similar to the Palestinian one, with one notable difference: in the Babylonian narrative there never existed a multiplicity of ribbons, but rather only one ribbon, which changed its location:

At first they would tie a scarlet ribbon on the Temple hall door from the outside. If it turned white, they would rejoice; if it did not turn white, they would be saddened. They then decreed (*hitqinu*) that it would be tied on the Temple hall door from the inside, but they would still peek in and see [it]. If it turned white, they would rejoice; if it did not turn white, they would be saddened. They then decreed that it would be tied half to a rock and half between its horns. (Babylonian Talmud *Yoma* 67a, cf. Babylonian Talmud *Rosh HaShanah* 31a).

The Babylonian version of this account seems to be a deliberate adaptation of the Palestinian tradition, which sets out to replace the unusual notion of a scarlet ribbon in every household—a notion incommensurate with the view of this ribbon as a sacred object designated strictly for ritual purposes—with the more ordinary view of

³⁰ The Palestinian Talmud does not mention the splitting of the ribbon into two parts (whereas the Babylonian Talmud does). This omission may stem simply from a tendency toward brevity, or may attest to a different view of the practice at hand.

one centralized scarlet ribbon. Like the Palestinian Talmud, the Babylonian Talmud relates how the scarlet ribbon gradually became less and less visible, but locates the first phase of this transition within the realm of the Temple itself—from outside to inside. However, evidence that the Babylonian tradition relies on the Palestinian tradition but actively modifies it can be found in some of the manuscript versions of the Babylonian account, which use the verb “be ashamed” (*mitbayshin*) when relating the first transition of the ribbon (from outside to inside), but use the verb “be saddened” (*atzevin*) in relating the second transition (from the Temple door to the rock).³¹ There is no logical reason why one would be “ashamed” when the ribbon is outside and “saddened” when the ribbon is inside when essentially responding to the same phenomenon, and indeed most of the textual witnesses use “saddened” in both cases, as one would expect. But the inappropriate use of “ashamed” in the first instance seems to point to an earlier version—akin to the Palestinian one—in which individuals were personally implicated in the ribbon’s failure to turn white and were consequentially ashamed, a version which was later modified in the smoother textual witnesses of the Babylonian Talmud.

Despite the differences between the two versions, their trajectory is identical and evident: both the Palestinian and the Babylonian Talmuds explain that because of the people’s emotional response to the ribbon’s occasional failure to turn white, it was removed further and further from sight until the only person seeing it was the one walking the scapegoat to the wilderness. Two assumptions seem to be underlying this narrative: first, “the people” fully expected the scarlet ribbon to turn white as an indication of the eradication of sin; second and more importantly, the scarlet ribbon indeed functioned in such a way. If the scarlet ribbon changes for some and does not change for others, or changes in some years and does not change in other years, this discrepancy can only be understood, in the Talmudic context, as deriving from discrepancies in the moral rectitude of individuals or of the congregation at different points in time. In fact, these very discrepancies serve in this narrative as testament to the efficacy of the scarlet ribbon as a litmus test for the eradication of sin, and construct the scarlet ribbon as stable in its function despite the fact that its location and the practices pertaining to it change.

This begs the question, then, of why it was decided that the ribbon needs to be taken out of sight if it was an accurate omen and an effective medium for conveying divine forgiveness. If the scarlet ribbon faithfully delivered God’s message, why should this much-desired message be hidden? The Talmudic accounts themselves trace this decision to the strong emotional response of the people to the ribbon’s failure to turn white—and by implication to the message that their sins were not forgiven

³¹ This is the case in MSS JTS 1623 and London-Harely 5508 for tractate *Rosh HaShanah*, and in MSS Munich 6 and Munich 95 for tractate *Yoma*. The other textual witnesses use “saddened” for both stages, with the exception of JTS 1623 for tractate *Yoma*, which uses “ashamed” for both cases. A particularly interesting version appears in the printed edition of tractate *Yoma*, which uses “saddened and ashamed” for the first stage and “ashamed” for the second.

—a response of shame, sadness, or both; but the texts do not explain why this response was so problematic that it was necessary to remove the ribbon from the public eye. After all, if the ribbon indicates that sins were not forgiven, are not shame and sadness exactly the appropriate responses? Various Talmud commentators grappled with this apparent paradox—namely, that the changes in the location of the ribbon were meant to stave off emotions that were not only natural but also warranted. For example, one commentator (Bornstein 1962: 5) suggested that while some sadness was certainly in order, the people would fall into such profound depression when the ribbon would not turn white that they lost their faith in their ability to repent. Another commentator (Ettlinger 1931: 38) went in the opposite direction, and argued that the problem was not the people's sadness when the ribbon did not turn white—indeed this response was appropriate—but rather their joy when it did turn white, which made them light-hearted and too certain of their merit in the eyes of God. The lack of a single, obvious solution to this narrative conundrum reveals, in my view, the tensions that underlie it, and the conflicting impulses that guided the Talmudic rabbis in constructing it.

I propose that through this account of the gradual removal of the scarlet ribbon from sight the rabbis attempted both to uphold the mythical dimension of the Temple period and to create continuity between this period and their own time. In other words, they attempted to present the Temple period as governed both by divine and miraculous powers and as governed by their own worldly power. The result, as I will argue, is a story in which divine communication through objects indeed takes place, but is also rejected by human beings.

First, let us address the question of the agents behind those reported changes in practice. Neither the Palestinian Talmud nor the Babylonian Talmud provide any clear indication as to the identity of the actors in these accounts, and they both use the unspecified third person plural form “they would tie” (*hayu qoshrin*), “they decreed” (*hitqinu*), “they would be saddened” (*hayu 'atzevim*) and so on. This unspecified form is very common in rabbinic Hebrew and is used to describe actions *qua* actions, without regard to the one performing them; but in this case this verb form must not obfuscate the fact that there are two different groups of actors here: those who respond strongly to the scarlet ribbon and those who decide to remove it from sight. The first group is ostensibly “the people”—in Jerusalem or maybe throughout the land; the identity of the second group is unclear, but one can only assume that it consists of figures possessed of some kind of authority, if they can institute such changes in the ritual customs of the Day of Atonement. While the Talmuds do not name this second group, any experienced reader of rabbinic literature immediately identifies these figures of authority with the Sages (*hakhamim*), that is, with the rabbis.³² Based on dozens of other similarly structured rab-

³² Indeed, in the Babylonian Talmud (*Rosh HaShanah* 31b) the decree regarding the scarlet ribbon is

binic narratives, which describe how authoritative “decrees” that altered existing practices were issued in response to different religious, national, or jurisdictional challenges, one can assert without hesitation that such narratives always position the “Sages” as the instigators of change, whether they refer to named rabbis, to “the Sages” as a group, or just use the third person plural, as in our case (Jaffee 1990: 204–205). This, as Martin Jaffee (1990: 221–223) noted, is not a testament to the rabbis’ actual authoritative stance, but quite the contrary—it is an attempt of the rabbis to fantasize themselves into a position of power that they did not possess. In particular, rabbinic accounts of decrees that were issued by the Sages during the time of the Second Temple, such as the one we are discussing here, reflect a persistent rhetorical attempt by the rabbis to project themselves back to the times of the Temple so as to claim continuous supremacy (Cohn 2012: 39–56).

The Talmudic tradition, then, in both its Palestinian and its Babylonian versions, implicitly but definitively posits the Sages as those who decided to remove the scarlet ribbon further and further from sight, and thereby depicts them as uncontested authoritative figures. This tradition, however, not only projects rabbinic authority back into the Temple times, but also gives a very particular content to this authority: it identifies the Sages as consciously marginalizing or even disabling direct communication with the divine. In this regard, the Talmudic account is reminiscent of another Talmudic story—perhaps the most famous story in the Talmud—known as the story of “The Oven of Akhnai” (see, for example, Englard 1974: 45–50; Rubenstein 1999: 34–63; Boyarin 2007: 336–63). This story, which appears in both the Palestinian and the Babylonian Talmuds, relates how, in the course of a disagreement among the Sages, Rabbi Eliezer summoned various omens to prove to his opponents that his opinion was the correct one. Each of these omens indeed transpired, but was dismissed by the contesting rabbis, until finally a heavenly voice (*bat qol*) was heard, declaring that R. Eliezer’s opinion was the correct one. In response to this heavenly voice Rabbi Yehoshua proclaimed “it is not in heaven” (alluding to Deuteronomy 30:12), thus making the point that controversies in the rabbinic study house are to be decided based on human majority and not on direct revelation (Babylonian Talmud *Baba Metzi’a* 59b–60a; cf. Palestinian Talmud *Mo’ed Qatan* 3.1, 81b). What both this story and the Talmudic tradition on the scarlet ribbon have in common is the striking view that a straightforward communication of divine messages is *possible*, but nonetheless is (or should be) *inconsequential*. In both stories, God speaks clearly, whether through supernatural effects or through human-like language, but the rabbis consciously choose to ignore his message, either by declaring it irrelevant or by making it inaccessible.

I propose, then, that the second tradition about the scarlet ribbon that we find in the two Talmuds utilizes this object to construct a rabbinic narrative of power: not

attributed by one later rabbi to the quintessential rabbinic leader Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai (apparently without any historical foundation).

just of power over the people, who are depicted as succumbing to rabbinic authority, but also of power over God, as it were, as part of which the rabbis decide if and how he is to communicate. The changes in the treatment of the scarlet ribbon described in these accounts should not be understood as attempts to prevent emotional distress, but rather as attempts to replace one form of religious consciousness with another: to replace an expectation of clear-cut omens and divine messages with restrained reliance on the efficacy of ritual. The Talmudic rabbis thus depict their imagined Second Temple predecessors as engaged in a project similar to their own, but more importantly, they use this narrative to emphasize that it was the Sages who marginalized the scarlet ribbon's function as omen, rather than the ribbon itself ceasing to function in that way. Like the previous biography of the scarlet ribbon, this biography too describes a process of disenchantment, but here the disenchantment is not imposed on humans, but rather *instigated* by them.

It is quite difficult to ascertain what the relation between those two biographies is, and whether or not the creators of one were familiar with the other. I believe that the two Talmudic traditions on the scarlet ribbon are independent of one another, and date roughly to the same time period: there is nothing to indicate that either of them actively responds to the other. However, both these traditions are animated, as I argued, by the same fundamental tension, namely, how one can maintain an idealized picture of the unmediated presence of God in the world while at the same time acknowledge that such an unmediated presence is no longer accessible. In this case, the notion of the scarlet ribbon as an omen serves the rabbis both by telling a story of direct divine communication and of an enchanted world, and by narrating the cessation of this communication and the disenchantment of the world not as a product of their own period, but as a process that began far back in the past. The first biography traces this process as one of gradual deterioration against which people are helpless; the second biography traces this process as motivated by willful human decisions; but both of them work to relieve the post-Temple rabbis from the anxiety that their world and their religious life are fundamentally different from (and inferior to) the world that preceded them.

Conclusion

In the introduction to their recent edited volume *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality*, Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer (2012: 1–23) emphasize the need to “re-materialize” religion by directing attention to objects, spaces, bodies, and sensory experience. These elements, they claim, have been marginalized or trivialized by theologians and classical scholars of religion, such as Tylor and Weber, who insistently located “true” religion strictly within the non-material realm of ideas and beliefs. This de-materializing approach, according to Houtman and Meyer, “burdens the study of religion with a pejorative attitude toward things and ritualized practice, which has as its flip side a strong emphasis on making meaning” (2012: 10).

Houtman and Meyer are doubtlessly right in calling scholars to be more attentive to the material dimensions of religious life, and to the constitutive part of bodily and sensory experience is shaping one's relationship both with one's community and with divine entities. Religious activities, more often than not, entail doing things with objects—lighting a candle, drinking sanctified wine, wearing an amulet, fingering beads in a rosary, and so forth—and whether or not individual practitioners consciously consider material objects to be instrumental to their religious practice, the nature and feel of their practice is nonetheless determined by them. Nevertheless, I contend that Houtman and Meyer, along with other proponents of the “rematerialization” of religion (most notably, Vasquez 2011), tend to create an unnecessary artificial divide between the world of “things” and the world of ideas, marking the latter as the domain of the text-producing cultural elites and the former as the domain of the “real people.” In truth, there is constant fluidity and reciprocity between those two worlds: among religious communities ideas turn into things and things turn into ideas, material experiences are represented textually and text is conveyed through material experiences. While it is entirely warranted to dismiss the traditional assumption regarding the primacy of meaning and thought to matter and practice (as argued by Bell 1992), one would be remiss to discount the many junctures in which things and ideas converge and diverge.

It is easy to detect instances in which an idea turns into a thing: in a sense, one could claim that most of religious art falls under this category. Artistic attempts to capture not just sacred myths (e.g., Immaculate Conception) but also entirely abstract notions such as the trinity (Mills 2008) are obvious examples of the interplay between “meaning” and “matter”; but even seemingly trivial items like key-shaped trinkets attached to a key chain that says “prayer is the key to heaven” are instantiations of the same interplay. Movement in the other direction is similarly traceable among religious communities, when elaborate stories or complex doctrines are constructed around objects that function in ritual practices: the narratives woven to explain how the pre-Muslim shrine of the Ka'ba was purified by Muhammad, or the theological gymnastics performed by Augustine to justify the cult of saints' relics, are clear examples of things turning into ideas and becoming established as part of a textual tradition. However, in the same way that objects have a life of their own once they have been created, such that they can come to be used in a manner very different from the “idea” that brought them about (for example, a statue meant for household worship can end up in a museum), stories and texts about objects also have a life of their own once they have been created. Ideas about particular objects can change and mutate as they travel across regions and as they are transmitted throughout time, and the transformations through which these ideas go reflect the intellectual and cultural concerns and needs of the communities and individuals in which they bear significance.

The case of the scarlet ribbon, which I explored in this article, is a case of an object that turned into a text, into a symbol, and into a story. A ritual involving such a ribbon that in all likelihood was practiced in the Second Temple morphed

into a text in the Mishnah, which describes and prescribes how (but not why) this object is to be used; the Mishnah also preserves a symbolic commentary on this object, which may or may not date back to the times of the Temple. In the later constructions of the Talmud, the scarlet ribbon—now presumably known to the authors only through the Mishnaic texts—turned into an omen, as the biblical verse attached to it by way of symbolic commentary became a literal account of the ribbon's function; Talmudic narratives that built on the identification of the scarlet ribbon as an omen further positioned the ribbon as a marker of the changing relationships and modes of communication between the people and their God. Thus, once the scarlet ribbon became part of the rabbinic textual manual of the Day of Atonement, it acquired a life of its own and became an ideational clay that authors and commentators continued to mold as they saw fit. As a text and as an idea, the scarlet ribbon continued to be significant long after it ceased to exist.

There is unquestionably a difference between physically encountering an object and experiencing its specific dimensions, color, touch, and so forth, and encountering a *text* about an object, which allows one to imagine the object in any way that one wishes without being constricted by the object's own physical presence. Indeed, texts about objects cannot but eliminate the most definitive quality of objects, which is their materiality. But is there a fundamental difference between texts about existing objects that can potentially be encountered, and texts about objects that, by the time texts about them are produced, no longer have any physical presence and have become pure myths? This question, I believe, cannot be answered through a universal generalization but only through careful attention to specific communities' cultural orientations and to the values and functions associated with the object at hand. For rabbinic Jews who are immersed in texts and whose religious consciousness develops primarily through textual imageries, the scarlet ribbon of the Day of Atonement—which is vital for what they perceive as the correct and complete fulfillment of the day's ritual—may be much more vivid and real than many concrete material objects, whereas for others stories about objects that no longer exist may be no more than fairytales. What does make no-longer existing objects unique, however, is the fact that stories about them often account also for their disappearance: to put it in the terms I used in this article, hagiographies about objects that no longer exist also relate these objects' death. As such, hagiographies of “dead” objects are always, in one way or another, meta-reflections on the power and function of religious objects more generally, and on the dynamics of absence and presence within the material world. The re-incorporation of material entities into the study of religion will thus be incomplete without greater attention to the ways in which religious objects were theorized and reflected upon by religious practitioners at different historical and different cultural junctures.

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