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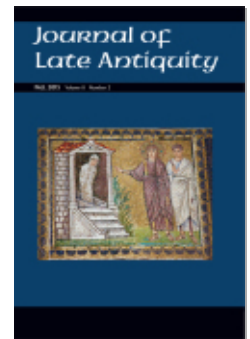
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In and Out of the Body: The Significance of Intestinal Disease in Rabbinic Literature

This article examines the cultural meaning and function of intestinal diseases in rabbinic literature, and particularly in the Babylonian Talmud. Intestinal disease is not only mentioned and discussed more than any other illness in the rabbinic corpus, but is also presented as an ailment reserved for especially righteous people and as allowing the one suffering from it a blissful afterlife. The article endeavors to explain how and why intestinal disease serves as such a potent metaphor in rabbinic culture, and identifies three central themes that converge around this disease: the notion of suffering as salvific in nature, the idealization of the clean and “purged” body, and the ethos of the sage as embodied Torah. Intestinal disease, an illness demarcated by foulness and shame, functions both as a figuration of the state of being-in-body, and of the paths through which humans hope to transcend their bodies.

“I am in bed with influenza,” Virginia Woolf wrote in her 1926 essay *On Being Ill*, “but what does that convey of the great experience; how the world has changed its shape . . . the whole landscape of life lies remote and fair, like a shore seen from a ship far out at sea.”¹ Woolf’s poignant words powerfully capture the profound ways in which illness transforms one’s lived world. As various medical sociologists and anthropologists observed, the experience of illness and bodily suffering is, at its core, an experience of destabilization of order: of the familiar and the certain becoming shaky and flimsy, of the close becoming far and of the normally unnoticed becoming overbearing.² The attempt to restore order to the world from within a state of bodily infirmity usually takes form in the production of language, in a narrative account

This article is indebted to the enduring friendship and inspiration of Yair Lipshitz (“nothing’s lost forever”).

¹ Woolf 2009, 103.

² For discussions of illness as attack on order, see Turner 2008, 173–91; J. Aho and K. Aho 2008, 103–28.

which gives sense, meaning, and structure to the experience.³ Such meaning-making accounts of illness and suffering are inevitably rooted in the cultural world of those who produce them, and thereby reveal some of the paradigms through which different societies, at different points in time, grapple with questions of personhood, embodiment, retribution, and salvation.

While the construction of metaphors and narrative accounts around disease can be seen to accompany any experience of illness, Susan Sontag's provoking and influential essay *Illness as Metaphor* puts forth the observation that in particular social and historical junctions, particular diseases acquire heightened cultural importance and come to signify, in multiple ways, the most urgent anxieties and concerns of the society at hand.⁴ Such, Sontag argues, was the case for tuberculosis in the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century: it was discussed, debated and represented in literature and art like no other contemporaneous disease, since it was seen as an omnisignificant manifestation of the maladies of the time—from the industrialized, filthy, and crowded cities to the romantic and over-sensitive artistic lifestyle. Similar proliferation of what Sontag calls “punitive or sentimental fantasies”⁵ around specific diseases can be seen in regard to cancer in the middle of the twentieth century and in regard to HIV/AIDS at the end of the twentieth century.⁶ The network of symbolic meanings percolating around a particular disease may tell us very little about the actual person afflicted with it, as Sontag rightfully insists, but it can nonetheless tell us something significant about the world in which those meanings are generated, shaped, and related.

In this article I wish to examine the rabbinic discourse around one disease (or more accurately, one subset of diseases) which, I argue, can be traced as bearing unique religious meaning in the world of the rabbis of Late Antiquity. While various rabbinic works (composed in Palestine and Babylonia between the third and sixth centuries CE) contain references to “disease of the intestines” (*ḥoli mē'ayim*), in the Babylonian Talmud this condition is mentioned more times than any other illness, and is described not only as especially agonizing but also as distinctive in the shame and embarrassment that it brings about. At the same time, the rabbis also bestow upon this disease a salvific quality, insisting that it commonly afflicts righteous people and assures one a blissful afterlife. Inspired by Sontag, my purpose is, first, to lay out the web of meanings woven around intestinal disease in rabbinic literature, and second,

³ See Kleinman 1988; Kirmayer 1992; Lupton 2012, 51–78.

⁴ Sontag 2001.

⁵ Sontag 2001, 3.

⁶ For similar analysis of a particular illness as a potent historically-contingent cultural symbol, see S. Hatty and J. Hatty 1999.

to explore why this disease in particular acquired such cultural prominence in the Babylonian Talmud.

In the first part of the article, I provide an overview of the rabbis' treatment of intestinal disease and venture to account for its religious significance. I argue that the purgative nature of intestinal disease, in which the body is seen as repulsively filled with excrement while simultaneously depleting and purifying itself of excrement, lent itself to rabbinic ideologies of overcoming the baseness of the body through the body itself. In the second part of the article, I turn to one specific aspect of intestinal disease, namely, the exclusion of those suffering from it from Torah-related activities due to the precept that excrement has to be distanced from anything sacred. I examine one Babylonian narrative in which this aspect of intestinal disease is especially emphasized, and propose that the figure of the sage afflicted with intestinal disease personifies what the rabbis perceived as a fundamental dimension of a life of Torah-learning—a constant oscillation between the disgusting and the divine.

Shame and Glory: Intestinal Disease in Rabbinic Literature

The rabbinic corpora of Late Antiquity, which include the Mishnah, the Tosefta, the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds, and the Midrashic compilations, are legislative and exegetical works in essence. As such, they do not contain any sustained treatment of diseases or health concerns *per se*, but rather only present passing comments on these topics amidst discussions of various scriptural, juridical, or ritual matters.⁷ Nevertheless, the richly associative character of rabbinic discourse provides us with multiple anecdotes on the rabbis' lived world, including some of the health predicaments that were pertinent to their lives. Intestinal disease is one of several physical afflictions mentioned in rabbinic texts.⁸ However, whereas in the entire Palestinian corpus it is mentioned only on five occasions, in the Babylonian Talmud (whose final compilation is debatably dated to the sixth century CE) intestinal disease is mentioned about twenty times, more than any other disease or physical condition,⁹ and seems, as I will show, to be endowed with a unique range of social and religious meanings.

⁷ The plethora of medical information, beliefs, and practices in rabbinic literature was collected in the formative work of Julius Preuss (Preuss 1923), which was recently reworked, translated, and supplemented by Fred Rosner (Rosner 2000). For general overviews of medical knowledge and interest among the rabbis see Prioreshi 1998, 663–96; Kottek 2006.

⁸ Alongside an abundance of other conditions mentioned in passing, three other diseases beside intestinal disease are mentioned relatively frequently in rabbinic literature: *'askarā* (diphtheria), *hydroqan* (dropsy), and *yēraqōn* (apparently, jaundice; see Rosner 2000, 329–31).

⁹ The exact number of occurrences of the phrase “intestinal disease” is debatable, since often-times the phrase appears several times in a single passage, which can be counted either as a single

While the generic term “disease of the intestines” (*ḥoli mē‘ayim*) does not necessarily point us to any specific maladies,¹⁰ it is very clear from its descriptions that the disease in question is diarrheic in nature, or in the Talmud’s own words, “one whose waste is abundant (*nēfish zivlē*) suffers from intestinal disease.”¹¹ Although we have no access to medical records from this period, it stands to reason that inflammatory bowel diseases were fairly common, especially in urban areas (in which most of the Jewish population resided in Late Antiquity): the combination of questionable sanitation and stagnant drinking water can safely be assumed to be conducive to the spread of gastric diseases.¹² Indeed, “intestinal disease” seems to have been such a regular occurrence that the Mishnah, the earliest rabbinic text (redacted ca. 200 CE) mentions a special office in the Jerusalem temple, of a person designated to care for priests who have come down with intestinal disease.¹³ The Babylonian Talmud reveals some of the popular ideas and practices surrounding this disease, providing both warnings regarding behaviors and substances that may bring it about (for example, sudden change of habit¹⁴ or eating without drinking first¹⁵), and advice on how to prevent and treat it (for example, eating small fish,¹⁶ abstaining from particularly rich foods, and evacuating one’s bowels immediately when the need arises¹⁷).

The rabbinic preoccupation with intestinal disease can be explained not only in light of the presumed ubiquity of this disease, but also in light of its view as particularly agonizing. This view is explicitly quoted by Rab Hama bar Gurya in the name of Rab: “[Let one come down with] any disease—and not [with] intestinal disease.”¹⁸ Another text describes intestinal disease as a lethal plague (*makkāh*), comparing it with other deadly agents such as wild beasts, venomous snakes, robbers, swords, knives, and demons: intestinal disease stands out as the only bodily illness included in this list.¹⁹ The

occurrence or as multiple occurrences. In comparison, however, the three diseases mentioned above, *’askarā*, *hydroqan*, and *yēraqōn*, are mentioned by name only six or seven times each, and other diseases are mentioned by name only once or twice.

¹⁰ See Rosner 2000, 175–76.

¹¹ Babylonian Talmud (hereafter BT) Sotah 42b. All translations of rabbinic sources in the article are mine.

¹² See Scobie 1986.

¹³ Mishnah Shekalim 5.1.

¹⁴ BT Kettubot 110b; see parallels in BT Nedarim 37b and BT Sanhedrin 101a.

¹⁵ BT Shabbat 41a.

¹⁶ BT Berakhot 40a.

¹⁷ BT Gittin 70a.

¹⁸ BT Shabbat 11a.

¹⁹ *Avot deRabbi Nathan A* ch.40 (ed. Schechter 128). Another text in the same compilation (*Avot deRabbi Nathan A* ch.41, ed. Schechter 130) mentions a person afflicted with intestinal disease who is cursing furiously, presumably indicating that this disease entailed great suffering.

agony associated with this disease has to do, of course, with the severe physical pain it involves, but also—and apparently no less importantly—with the shame that it entails. According to a rabbinic teaching attributed to the second century sage Rabbi Eliezer, although visiting the sick is an imperative religious obligation, there are three types of ailing persons whom one should refrain from visiting: those with intestinal diseases, those with eye diseases, and those suffering from headaches. The anonymous layer of the Babylonian Talmud explains that in all three cases, the visit will increase the sick person's discomfort: in the case of eye diseases and headaches, because talking exacerbates the affliction, but in the case of intestinal disease, it is “because of [the] shame” (*mi-shum kisufā*) of the sick one.²⁰

One shameful facet of intestinal diseases lies in the offensive odor generated by ongoing diarrhea, which seems to have been so pungent that it persisted even after one's death. The Tosefta, a third-century Palestinian compilation, mentions an early custom of using incense in the funeral processions of people who have died of intestinal diseases—presumably, to cover over the foul smell.²¹ This custom was later replaced with a different custom in which incense was used in each and every funeral procession, regardless of the cause of death. The Tosefta reports that the custom was changed in concern for “the dignity of the dead” (*kēvod ha-metim*). This phrase is ambiguous, and could mean either that all dead people were seen as deserving of pleasant scent in their funerals,²² or alternatively, that the custom was changed to preserve specifically the dignity of those who died of intestinal diseases, in an attempt not to make their cause of death known to all. In the Babylonian Talmud's version of this early tradition, however, the reason for the change in custom is presented differently: it was changed not in concern for the dignity of the dead but because it caused shame to *living* persons suffering from intestinal diseases—one can only assume, by making their illness conspicuous and highlighting its repugnant aspects.²³

Beyond the issue of foul smell, the indignation entailed in intestinal disease pertains more broadly to the loss of control over one's bowel movements, and to the fact that the afflicted person cannot hide his²⁴ bodily

²⁰ BT Nedarim 41a.

²¹ Tosefta Niddah 9.16.

²² On the use of incense in rabbinic funerals, see Green 2011, 55–56.

²³ BT Mo'ed Qatan 27b.

²⁴ My choice to use masculine pronouns throughout the article reflects the language of the rabbinic texts, which refer exclusively to males. While this does not mean that the rabbis would not have applied their teachings to women as well, their imagined audience clearly consisted strictly of men.

functions in the socially expected manner.²⁵ As Rachel Neis commented, this concern with conducting one's toilet visits in privacy, without being seen or heard by others, is distinctly a Babylonian concern, which is not paralleled in Palestinian sources (in Palestine, like in most of the Roman world, latrines were mostly public).²⁶ The Babylonian rabbis were evidently influenced by their Zoroastrian neighbors, who exercised extreme modesty when relieving themselves,²⁷ and considered exposure to others while defecating to be profoundly shameful.²⁸ As noted, this pertains not only to visual exposure but even to auditory exposure: one particularly touching Babylonian story relates how the stableman of Rabbi Judah the Patriarch (who, as we shall see, was afflicted with intestinal disease) made a point of giving food to the animals exactly when his master was in the latrine, so as to cover over the sounds that would come out of there.²⁹ The Babylonian apprehension with intestinal diseases can thus be better understood against the common etiquette and sensibilities of Sasanian Babylonia.

One could surmise, then, that if intestinal disease is perceived in rabbinic literature as both excruciating and humiliating, it would be presented as a form of punishment especially reserved for sinners and villains.³⁰ Strikingly, however, the rabbis portray the likely victims of this illness in the exact opposite manner, and proclaim that death by intestinal disease is usually a prerogative reserved for *righteous* persons. So much so, that Rabbi Yose is quoted as saying "let my share be among those who die of intestinal disease" and the anonymous Talmud explains: "for the majority of righteous [persons] die of intestinal disease."³¹ Similarly, when Rabbi Judah the Patriarch is lying on his death bed Rabbi Hiyya attempts to offer him consolation by saying, "it is a good omen for one to die of intestinal disease, for the majority of righteous [persons] die this way."³² This notion appears also in a Palestinian Midrash, which comments on Genesis 25:8, "And Abraham breathed his last (*wa-yyigw'a*) and died in good old age." Rabbi Judah bar 'Ilay claims that

²⁵ For a collection of rabbinic toilet "regulations," see BT Berakhot 62a, and Neis 2013.

²⁶ See Scobie 1986; also Neis 2013, 355.

²⁷ The rabbinic awareness and admiration of Zoroastrian toilet practices is explicitly expressed in BT Berakhot 8b: "Rabban Gamaliel said: I like the Persians on account of three things: they are modest in eating, and modest in the toilet, and modest in another thing [=intercourse]." On the Zoroastrian regulations regarding bodily functions, see De Jong 1997, 417–19.

²⁸ On bodily shame in rabbinic culture, see Englander and Kamir 2013.

²⁹ BT Baba Metzia 85a.

³⁰ Interestingly, two of the greatest "villains" portrayed in Jewish literature from the Second Temple period, Antiochus and Herod, are said to have died of painful intestinal disease. On Antiochus, see 2 Maccabees 9.5–8; on Herod, see Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 17.6.5.

³¹ BT Shabbat 118b.

³² BT Kettubot 103b.

every biblical figure whose death is related with the uncommon verb *gw'a* died of intestinal disease, and adds: “The first pious ones (*ḥasidim ha-rishonim*) would be tormented with intestinal disease for ten or twenty days [prior to their death], to indicate that disease perfects one’s cleanliness (*mēmarēq*).”³³ It is this last statement that provides us with a key, I believe, for deciphering the seemingly paradoxical construction of intestinal disease as both the worst of ailments and the best of ailments.

The verb *mrq*, which I translated as “to perfect (one’s) cleanliness,” is used in Rabbinic Hebrew to connote burnishing or polishing, and is perhaps the most apt translation for the Greek verb *kathairō*. Specifically, we often find this verb in the context of sin and atonement, as denoting the “final touches” of wiping away one’s sins. The rabbis introduce the idea that even after one atones (*kpr*) for one’s sins through the prescribed procedures (sacrifice, fast, etc.), there is still a need for a “polishing away” of the sin (*mrq*): this complete removal or “perfection of cleanliness” is effected either through suffering (*yisūrin*) or through death.³⁴ Suffering is thus viewed as a form of divine favor, which allows one to rid oneself of all residues of sin and enter the after-life without blemish.³⁵ On one level, then, the view of intestinal disease as a prerogative reserved for the righteous is most readily explained through this rabbinic soteriology of suffering: it is unsurprising that a disease perceived as particularly harrowing, both physically and mentally, was seen as a most effective means of washing away all of one’s iniquities and as guaranteeing one eternal bliss in the world to come. Indeed, this reading is supported by the Talmudic statement that those afflicted with intestinal disease are promised never to “see the face of Hell”—because they had all their sins atoned for in this world through their anguish.³⁶

Yet intestinal disease has another cleansing dimension to it, not a figurative one but rather a concrete one: since the main characteristic of this disease is ongoing diarrhea, in its course the body is continuously purging itself of excrement and presumably emerges at the end—whether alive or dead—as pristine on the inside. In other words, intestinal disease functions as *katharsis* not only in the spiritual sense of “purification” but also in the physical sense of “expulsion.”³⁷ This process of purging and attainment of inner cleanliness is explicitly denoted by the root *mrq*, “to perfect (one’s) cleanliness,” in an

³³ Genesis Rabbah 62 (ed. Theodor-Albeck 2:670).

³⁴ Tosefta Kippurim 4.8; Mekhilta dRabbi Ishmael *Bahodesh* 7 (ed. Horovitz and Rabin 228); BT Berakhot 5a, Yoma 86a; Palestinian Talmud (hereafter PT) Horayot 2:7, 46d.

³⁵ For the most extensive Talmudic discussions of this notion, see BT Berakhot 5a-b and BT Arakhin 16b. I thank Sarah Wolf for sharing her evolving work on this topic with me.

³⁶ BT Eruvin 41b.

³⁷ On the range of meanings of the term *katharsis*, see Walker 2000.

anecdote brought forth in the Palestinian Talmud. Following a comment that one ought to have a “clean body” (*gūf nakī*) when putting on one’s phylacteries (*tēffilin*), it is told that Rabbi Yannai made a point of having his phylacteries on for three full days after being ill, to indicate that “disease perfects one’s cleanliness” (*ba-ḥoli mēmarēq*).³⁸ While this Palestinian anecdote does not specifically identify the disease in question as intestinal disease, the concept of “clean body,” which here undoubtedly pertains to physical cleanliness, strongly suggests that the *mērūq* or “polishing” mentioned here pertains not only to the spiritual effect of suffering, but also to the physical effect of purging the body of excrement.

I would thus like to propose that the notable attention given to intestinal disease in rabbinic literature, and especially its presentation as an affliction suitable for righteous persons, reflects both a cultural ideal of an excrement-free body and a view that the path toward this ideal necessarily involves the production of excrement. The Babylonian Talmud makes it abundantly clear that excrement is unseemly and repulsive when placed outside the body, prescribing how one ought to refrain from any sacred activity (prayer, Torah reading, use of phylacteries, etc.) in the vicinity of feces³⁹; but it also indicates that excrement is a source of disgust and repulsion even when still contained *inside* the body. To that effect, an anonymous rabbinic teaching proclaims that when one is in need of using the toilet one may not pray,⁴⁰ and a statement attributed to Rab Ahai warns that one who does not evacuate one’s bowels immediately upon need is transgressing the biblical commandment of Leviticus 11:43, “You shall not make yourselves detestable (*al tēshaktsū*)” by letting feces reside inside him for an extended period of time.⁴¹ To be clear, excrement is not among the biblical (or rabbinic) sources of ritual impurity,⁴² but it does seem to be, as Schofer pointed out, a placeholder for all that is lowly, animalistic, and disgusting in human beings, a painful reminder of their distance from the divine.⁴³ Those who suffer from intestinal disease are manifesting a curiously dual condition: on the one hand, they are replete with excrement and produce it in abundance, but on the other hand, they are constantly ridding themselves of exactly that which makes them “abominable”

³⁸ PT Berakhot 2:3, 4c; cf. BT Shabbat 49a and 130a.

³⁹ See the Talmud’s lengthy discussion in BT Berakhot 22b-25a.

⁴⁰ BT Berakhot 23a.

⁴¹ BT Makkot 16b.

⁴² Some scholars maintain that excrement was in fact considered a source of ritual impurity among the Qumran sect; see Broshi 2004. Whether or not this was the case, rabbinic legislation explicitly excludes excrement from the list of substances that convey impurity; see Mishnah Makhshirin 6.7.

⁴³ Schofer 2010, 53–76.

on the inside—they are in the ongoing process of becoming an excrement-free, purified body. As such, they embody both the detestable and shameful dimension of containing excrement *and* the aspired ideal of being pristine on the inside, with the former being viewed as leading, eventually, to the latter.

Intestinal disease, then, serves as a potent cultural site through which the rabbis can explore and express both the base nature of the human body as they perceive it, and the notion that the body can be transcended and overcome by means of the body itself. The descent into the abyss of bodily pain and filth is portrayed as enabling an ascent into a realm of righteousness and immaculateness, indeed as a form of spiritual redemption. The person afflicted with intestinal disease is experiencing agonizing bodily suffering and shame, but this suffering is salvific in nature, a means of transferring to a blissful afterlife; and he embodies the disturbing reality of human excrement while also moving beyond it and acquiring a perfect, clean body. Intestinal disease is thus both a poignant metaphor for everything about human beings that is flawed, objectionable, and profane, and a metaphor for the channels through which those flaws can be ultimately conquered and obliterated.

Death of a Patriarch: Between Toilet and Torah

Intestinal disease, as I discussed above, was perceived by the rabbis as harboring not only physical but also mental anguish, which had to do with the shameful aspects of foul smell and incontinence. As such, this disease entailed, at least to some extent, also an element of social exclusion and isolation from human company. In what follows, I would like to turn to another aspect of exclusion entailed in intestinal disease, which seems to have been even more disturbing for the rabbis than social isolation: the aspect of exclusion from the world of Torah. As I noted, there are clear rabbinic restrictions on proximity between feces and Torah, which require one to distance oneself at least four cubits from excrement—and even from the mere smell of excrement—before putting on one's *tēfillin* (phylacteries, which contain biblical verses), reciting the *shēm'a* creed, engaging in prayer, or actively studying Torah.⁴⁴ Since a person afflicted with intestinal disease is in constant need of relieving his bowels (and perhaps is doing so uncontrollably), he is seen as largely incapable of distancing himself from excrement in the prescribed manner and accordingly, he is excluded from Torah-related activities. The Babylonian Talmud thus rules that a person suffering from intestinal disease is altogether exempt from the daily obligation of putting on his *tēfillin*.⁴⁵ Although this exemption

⁴⁴ BT Berakhot 23b-25a.

⁴⁵ BT Hullin 110a.

is meant to make the sick person's life easier, it also serves as indication that this disease, in effect, removes one from the realm of the Torah.

It is difficult to overemphasize the critical role that Torah and Torah-study play in the rabbinic ethos, and the extent to which the rabbis refer to engagement with Torah as the ultimate and in many ways the only path toward spiritual perfection.⁴⁶ The Torah, which is regarded in various Babylonian Talmudic sources as “eternal life” (*ḥayyē ‘olām*),⁴⁷ is perceived and depicted as a god-sent gift that enables human beings to transcend bodily weaknesses and temptations⁴⁸ and, fundamentally, allows them to partake in the divine realm.⁴⁹ One who is incapable of partaking in Torah-related activities is thus removed from the pivot of life itself: he is bereft of the one tool available for human beings to overcome their base nature and become what God, in the rabbinic view, intended them to be. Intestinal disease poses a notable cultural concern for the rabbis, since it presents a situation in which a barrier is erected between a person and his “eternal life”—a barrier, as it were, in the form of mounds of excrement.

In what follows, I would like to focus on one Talmudic story in which intestinal disease functions as a figuration of a back-and-forth movement of the body into and out of the realm of Torah. This story, which relates the death of Rabbi Judah the Patriarch, helps further illuminate why intestinal disease came to bear more cultural significance than any other disease in the Babylonian Talmudic culture.

Rabbi Judah the Patriarch (*Yēhudāh ha-nāsi*), who lived between approximately 135 and 225 CE, stands out in rabbinic literature as one of the most impressive, influential, and revered sages of all times. He is said to have combined “Torah with greatness,” that is, scholastic accomplishments with a position of public leadership, in a manner comparable only to that of Moses.⁵⁰ His prominence in the rabbinic movement was so exceptional that he is commonly referred to in rabbinic compilations simply by the title “Rabbi,” as he is referred to in the narrative that will be examined below. Several anecdotes and stories from the different corpora of rabbinic literature depict Rabbi Judah the Patriarch as suffering from precarious health for extended periods of time,⁵¹

⁴⁶ See, for example, Satlow 2003; Naiweld 2010.

⁴⁷ For example, BT Berakhot 21a, 48b; Shabbat 33b. On this expression, see Flusser 1989.

⁴⁸ See, for example, BT Sukkah 52b, BT Kiddushin 30b.

⁴⁹ One of the clearest manifestations of the notion that Torah study allows one to partake in the divine realm is the recurring theme of the “heavenly academy” in the Babylonian Talmud. On this, see Rubenstein 2003, 28–44.

⁵⁰ BT Gittin 59a, BT Sanhedrin 36a.

⁵¹ For an elaborate examination of the sources relating Rabbi Judah the Patriarch's illnesses, see Dvorjetski 2002.

and in keeping with the rabbinic notion that suffering affects atonement, some of his physical ailments are explained as semi-voluntary in nature and even as tools to alleviate the suffering of others.⁵² Rabbi Judah the Patriarch's death is related both in the Palestinian Talmud and in the Babylonian Talmud, and the two accounts are for the most part very similar; however, only in the Babylonian account of his death is it explicitly stated, on several occasions, that the cause of his death was intestinal disease. Here I wish to examine one unit within the lengthy Babylonian account, which due to its importance I shall quote here in full:

- A. On the day that Rabbi's [=Judah the Patriarch's] soul went to rest, the rabbis decreed a fast and prayed for mercy. They said: whoever will say 'Rabbi's soul went to rest' shall be stabbed with a sword.
- B. Rabbi's maidservant then climbed up to the roof and said: the ones above are requesting Rabbi, and the ones below are requesting Rabbi; let it be willed that the ones below will overcome the ones above.
- C. When she saw how many times he [=Rabbi] was going to the toilet, and was removing his *tēfillin* and putting them back on, and [how] he was pained (*we-qā mitsta'ēr*), she said: let it be willed that the ones above will overcome the ones below. But the sages did not cease for a single moment from praying for mercy.
- D. She then took a jar and threw it down from the roof to the ground. They stopped their prayers, and Rabbi's soul went to rest.
- E. The sages then said to Bar Qappara: go check [what took place]. He went and found that [Rabbi's] soul went to rest.
- F. He tore his garment [as a sign of mourning] but then placed the torn piece behind him [so that it would not be seen].
- G. He opened and said: The angels (*'er'elim*) and the pillars (*mētzoekim*, i.e., the righteous men on earth) held onto the Holy Ark. The angels had defeated the pillars, and the Holy Ark was captured.
- H. They told him: has his soul gone to rest? He said: you said it, I did not say it.⁵³

Although this story presents great coherence and unity, it evidently consists of two separate narratives which the Babylonian redactors elegantly combined. Sections A and F–H present one narrative sequence, in which, as part of their

⁵² BT Baba Metzia 84b-85a; cf. PT Kilayim 9:3, 32b and PT Kettubot 12:3, 35a.

⁵³ BT Kettubot 104a. Cf. PT Kilayim 9:3, 32b, PT Kettubot 12:3, 35a.

refusal to accept the possibility of Rabbi's death, the rabbis⁵⁴ issue a prohibition to declare his passing (A). Bar Qappara, who is the first to know of Rabbi's death and must find a way to announce it, eventually overcomes this prohibition by using the metaphor of the Holy Ark taken captive (F–H). These events are described in an almost identical manner in the Palestinian Talmud, but in a single narrative sequence: sections B–E have no parallel in the Palestinian corpus. This indicates that sections B–D, on which I would like to focus here, are a later Babylonian creation that developed as an offshoot of an existing Palestinian tradition. Section E was most likely inserted as a connecting link between the original Palestinian account and the later Babylonian addition.

In the Babylonian addition to the story, the figurative depiction of Rabbi's dying process as a battle between earthly and heavenly powers is initially put in the mouth of Rabbi's maidservant (B). At first she shares the rabbis' hopes that Rabbi will remain alive for as long as possible, but then she sees something that changes her mind: she sees her master going back and forth into and out of the toilet, removing his *tēfillin* every time he goes in and putting them back on every time he goes out. The maidservant realizes Rabbi's agony, and comes to the conclusion that he should be allowed to die and come to peace (C). Since she knows he will not die for as long as people are praying, she creates an interruption by throwing a jar off the roof: when the sound of the jar being shattered is heard, the people stop praying for a moment and Rabbi is finally able to die (D).

Much could be said about this moving story, which places the maidservant above the rabbis in her compassionate discernment of her master's true needs—discernment of which she is capable distinctly because she is privy to the most intimate aspects of her master's life.⁵⁵ Here I would like to emphasize only the central role that Rabbi's intestinal disease plays in this story, and the way in which it is portrayed as a tormenting back-and-forth transition in and out of the realm of Torah, which is symbolized with *tēfillin*. The underlying premise of this story is that Rabbi was in the habit of having his *tēfillin* on throughout the whole day and not only during the required times of prayer, a prevalent practice of piety among Jews in antiquity.⁵⁶ Despite the aforementioned exemption of people with intestinal disease from *tēfillin*, he kept this practice even when ill. However, he had to remove his *tēfillin* every time he went to use the toilet—which, due to the nature of his illness, was rather frequently—and then put them back on, a recurrence by which he is said to have

⁵⁴ In the Palestinian Talmud's version it is the locals at Sepphoris (*tsipora'ēi*) rather than the rabbis who issue the decree that Rabbi's death not be pronounced.

⁵⁵ On Rabbi's maidservant as a literary figure, see Stein 2001.

⁵⁶ See Cohn 2008, 133–38.

been “pained” (*mitsta‘er*). The strong word “pained” could hardly refer only to the nuisance of removing the *tēfillin* and putting them back on again: more plausibly, it denotes Rabbi’s sorrow for his inability to wear this Torah-encapsulating object at all times. The *tēfillin* signify in this story Rabbi’s desire to reside within a world of Torah and sanctity, of which he is forcefully removed every time he has to evacuate his bowels. His agony over this forced removal is so great, that his maidservant realizes that death is preferable to him over life in this condition.

Rabbi’s death is portrayed here as redemptive not only because it puts an end to his physical and mental anguish, but also, and perhaps more importantly, because it allows him to reside for eternity within the realm of Torah. In fact, his death allows him to *embody* the Torah. Bar Qappara’s representation of Rabbi through the imagery of the Holy Ark is not incidental: whether the phrase “holy ark” (*‘arōn ha-qodesh*) refers to the biblical Ark of the Covenant, which was used to contain the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments, or to a generic holy ark used to house a Torah scroll in a synagogue, Rabbi’s body is compared here to a receptacle of the Torah.⁵⁷ This depiction of a dead sage as embodying the Torah is a highly prominent motif in rabbinic literature, as recently shown by Kadari.⁵⁸ Kadari examined the custom of placing a Torah scroll over the bier of deceased sages, and provided ample literary and archeological evidence showing that this practice is rooted in the notion that the sage’s body is itself to be treated and regarded as a Torah Scroll. For example, one who witnesses the death of a sage must exercise the same mourning practices as one who sees a Torah scroll being burned,⁵⁹ and by the same token, a Torah Scroll that can no longer be used is to be buried next to a sage.⁶⁰ Additionally, eulogies for sages often refer to the deceased with phrases that are distinctly used as epithets of the Torah, such as “beloved vessel” (*kēli ḥemdāh*), “book of wars” (*sefer milḥamōt*), and, indeed, “holy ark.”⁶¹

In principle, the sage serves as an embodiment of the Torah even while still alive; but in rabbinic literature this imagery is brought up exclusively in the context of death, and pertains to sages either after their death or immediately on the verge of it.⁶² I propose that the story of Rabbi’s death helps us understand why this is so: only when one fully transitions into death is one

⁵⁷ In the parallel account in the Palestinian Talmud, the angels and the pillars are said to struggle over “the Tablets of the Covenant” (*lūḥot ha-bērit*) rather than over the Holy Ark.

⁵⁸ Kadari 2010.

⁵⁹ BT Mo‘ed Qatan 25a.

⁶⁰ BT Megillah 26b.

⁶¹ Kadari 2010, 200–205; see also Mandel 2005.

⁶² Even when living rabbis are referred to as Torah scrolls, by their disciples or by themselves, this is clearly taking place on the brink of death; see BT Sanhedrin 68a and 101a.

truly released from the realm of toilets and can become, instead of a receptacle for excrement, a receptacle for the Torah.⁶³ In this sense, Rabbi's back and forth movement between *tēfillin* and toilet can be read as a condensed metaphor for the perpetual tension that defines any life guided by the rabbinic ethos of Torah-learning: a tension between one's mortal and incorrigibly flawed body and the "eternal life" harbored in the Torah and its study. This tension is an inextricable part of one's daily life, and comes to the fore whenever one encounters the aspects of the body that are considered as offensive to the Torah—be it urine, feces, semen, nakedness, and so forth. Intestinal disease, with the frequent visits to the toilet it entails, is essentially a time-lapsed picture of what it means, for the rabbis, to live in a human body.

We are now in a better position to see why the Babylonian rabbis, for whom the ethos of Torah learning and the notion of the sage as embodied Torah was so central, chose to depict Rabbi Judah the Patriarch as dying of intestinal disease (as noted, there is no parallel for this depiction in Palestinian sources). By portraying this eminent sage as moving constantly between high (*tēfillin*) and low (toilet), they were able both to say something about the reality of human life and to suggest a comforting and reassuring view of death. The transformation of the sage from one who constantly has to distance himself from the Torah to one who becomes a container of the Torah presents a picture of death as almost metamorphic, as a path through which one can, ultimately, become a "beloved vessel" like the Torah itself.

Conclusion

"It is hardly possible to take up one's residence in the kingdom of the ill unprejudiced by the lurid metaphors with which it has been landscaped" wrote Susan Sontag.⁶⁴ My purpose in this article was to trace, in the rabbinic Babylonian context, how an illness becomes a metaphor—that is, how a particular physical condition becomes a site through which central cultural concerns are worked. I attempted to unravel the "landscape" of meanings associated with intestinal disease in Talmudic sources, and argued that this disease, which is demarcated with excrement, foul smell, and disgrace, functions both as a figuration of the state of being-in-body, and of the paths through which humans wish to—and can, according to the rabbis—transcend their bodies.

⁶³ My identification of a contrastive relation between Torah and excrement in this story resonates with Rachel Neis' analysis of an oppositional analogy between toilets and the Temple in rabbinic texts, and strengthens her conclusion that for the rabbis "the body, even in its most prosaic moments, was endowed with the potential to productively invoke and create the sacred" (Neis 2013, 368).

⁶⁴ Sontag 2001, 4.

Intestinal disease signifies, in the Talmud, an expedited transition from filth to cleanliness, from shame to glory, and from the animalistic to the divine, and as such serves to capture the metamorphosis that the rabbis perceive as the essence of a life of Torah.

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