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Balberg, Mira
Weiss, Haim

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Mira Balberg

Northwestern University, USA

Haim Weiss

Ben Gurion University, Israel

"That Old Man Shames Us": Aging, Liminality, and Antinomy in Rabbinic Literature

Abstract: This article explores the literary trope of old age in rabbinic narratives, primarily in the Babylonian Talmud. We argue that rabbinic narratives construct old persons as liminal figures, occupying spaces between center and margins and between life and death, and that their liminality serves a subversive function in stories in which they appear. We begin the article by providing a brief survey of the paradigmatic roles played by elderly people in rabbinic narratives. In the remaining parts of the article, we offer close readings of two narrative units in which an elderly person acts in an aberrant, confusing, or divisive way and thus casts a shadow of doubt and uncertainty on the normative stance that governs the narrative or its greater context.

Key words: Old age, Talmud, narrative, liminality, rabbinic literature.

Introduction

In her 1970 book *The Coming of Age*, Simone de Beauvoir commented on the great difficulty in writing a history of old age, or of the elderly as a social group, based on the written sources that are available to us. De Beauvoir observed that "So long as the aged man retains some efficiency he remains an integral part of the community and he is not distinguished from it," but "[w]hen he loses his powers he takes on the appearance of *another*; he then becomes … a mere object."[1] In other words, for as long as one still abides by the physical and behavioral norms of the community, one is not actually subsumed under the distinct category of "aged" in any significant way (except in relation to younger persons in intergenerational settings), but is simply considered "an adult" and often enjoys unique privileges, power and status associated with experience and seniority. It is only when one's appearance, mental capacities and everyday routine become noticeably aberrant in one's larger societal context that one is interpolated into the marginalized group

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1   Simone de Beauvoir, *Coming of Age*, trans. Patrick O'Brian (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970) 89.

of "old people," stripped of one's previous power and status, and ultimately comes to be of little or no interest to social and political decision makers and to cultural producers.[2]

Since de Beauvoir published her book, and especially in the last few decades, there has been a surge of academic interest in old age as a social and cultural phenomenon, not only in the present, but also in the past.[3] This newfound interest can be partially explained by the greater scholarly attention to marginalized and silenced groups that has developed in recent years, but also by the realities of our own world, in which life expectancy is higher than ever, and old age is viewed not as a privilege of the few but as the destiny of most. Nevertheless, in scholarship on rabbinic literature the topic of old age remains largely unexplored. What little has been written about old age in rabbinic literature has either bundled aging together with death and mourning, or discussed it as one component of a complete "life cycle," focusing mainly on existential and/or demographic dimensions of aging rather than on the literary construction of old persons.[4] This is particularly noteworthy in light of the fact that "the cultural turn" in the study of rabbinic literature, which has had a definitive impact on the field since the 1990s, placed great emphasis on the body as an object of inquiry, and even more specifically on the "deviant" body as what needs to be surveilled, monitored and controlled.[5] However, elderly bodies are rarely addressed

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[2]   Needless to say that older women, in this regard, are doubly marginalized.

[3]   See, for instance, surveys such as Georges Minois, *History of Old Age from Antiquity to the Renaissance*, trans. Sarah H. Tenision (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Paul Johnson and Pat Thane, eds., *Old Age from Antiquity to Post-Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1998); David G. Troyanski, *Aging in World History* (New York: Routledge, 2016), in addition to numerous monographs. For studies focused on aging in antiquity (especially in the Greek and Roman world), see most notably Thomas M. Falkner, *Poetics of Old Age in Greek Epic, Lyric, and Tragedy* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995); Karen Cokayne, *Experiencing Old Age in Ancient Rome* (London: Routledge, 2003); Tim G. Parkin, *Old Age in the Roman World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Christian Krötzl and Katariina Mustaklio, eds., *On Old Age* (Tournhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2011).

[4]   See mainly Jonathan Wyn Schofer, *Confronting Vulnerability* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). Ivan Marcus dedicates less than two pages to the subject of aging in Ivan G. Marcus, *Jewish Life Cycle* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004) 196–197 ("Aging, Dying, Remembering"). Other monographs that explore notions of death and dying in rabbinic literature do not address the issue of aging at all, despite the obvious connection between the two: see Nisan Rubin, *End of Life* (Hebrew; Tel-Aviv: Ha-kibbutz ha-meu'had, 1997); David C. Kraemer, *Meanings of Death In Rabbinic Judaism* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000).

[5]   See Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, "On *Carnal Israel* and the Consequences," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 95 (2005) 462–69.

in studies of rabbinic culture, perhaps because they were perceived (mistakenly) as asexual and therefore as culturally unthreatening.

Generally speaking, elderly people (primarily elderly men)[6] feature in rabbinic texts either as seasoned and authoritative sagacious figures, embodying knowledge and wisdom, or as the objects of normative injunctions regarding the appropriate ways to treat, respect and care for them.[7] To a great extent, this dichotomy reflects the rabbis' own two-tiered religious model, which posits excellence in Torah study as the highest virtue and idealizes those who study Torah as a cultural and social elite. For those who study Torah, old age is marker of honor and promises one bliss and reverence: in fact, in the context of inner-rabbinic circles "elder" (*zaken*) denotes intellectual authority even more than it denotes age.[8] By contrast, in contexts outside the perimeter of Torah, old age mostly stands for physical and mental fragility and meager financial means, which cast the old person as the target of others' piety and pity.[9] Either way, rabbinic texts – on the surface – allocate elderly people an ordered and ostensibly uncomplicated place within the social hierarchy: either at the center, as intellectual leaders (if they are rabbis), or at the margins, as sorrowful creatures.

Yet a closer look at rabbinic texts reveals that this dichotomous picture, in which elders and old age seem to be molded based on rigid stereotypes and didactic principles, emerges from rabbinic literature only if one seeks to find out what these texts have to say *about* old age – that is, if one approaches statements or anecdotes in which old age is an overt theme. If one turns to examine what the rabbis do *with* old age – that is, how they use aged persons as literary tropes and plot catalysts within more complex narrative edifices – one discovers a more complicated and nuanced picture.

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6 On the legal and social definitions of "old age" in antiquity, see Parkin, *Old Age*, 15–35; Walter Scheidel, "Roman Age Structure," *Journal of Roman Studies* 91 (2001) 1–26. The age of 60, which is generally recognized in Roman literature as marking old age, is also regarded this way in the Mishnah (Avot 5:21) and the Talmud (PT Bikkurim 2:1, 64c, BT Mo'ed Qatan 28a).

7 Indeed, the few studies that focus on old age in rabbinic literature discuss these two aspects exclusively. See Dayle Friedman, "The Crown of Glory," in *Celebration and Renewal*, ed. Rela Mintz Geffen (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1993) 202–25; J. Gordon Harris, "Rabbinic Responses to Aging," *Hebrew Studies* 48 (2007) 187–94.

8 A rabbinic tradition explains the word *zaqen* (elder) as "one who acquired wisdom" (*ze qana hokhma*), thereby explicitly dissociating the honorary term from biological age; see Sifra Qedoshim 3. 7. 12 (ed. Weiss 91a); BT Qiddushin 32b. In rabbinic literature, the members of the court are also referred to as "elders" (not unlike the Roman senate, whose name indicates the presence of "elders" despite the fact that the members could actually be quite young).

9 See esp. BT Shabbat 151a–152a, Leviticus Rabbah 18 (ed. Margulies 2.389–400).

Moreover, we argue that rabbinic narratives in which elderly characters play key roles actively subvert the abovementioned dichotomy, by placing the elder in a liminal space between the center and the margins. In the narratives we examine here, old persons are not located either "inside" (as part of the rabbinic elite) or "outside," but rather go back and forth between the normative and the deviant, the familiar and the strange, the respectable and the grotesque. Thus, old age is constructed in rabbinic narratives not as a stable social category, but as a locus of profound uncertainty and cultural tensions.

We wish to bring old age to the fore as a fascinating and fruitful topic of cultural and social inquiry in the study of late ancient texts, as well as to utilize old age as a literary trope in order to glean broader insights on the multifaceted and rich dynamics of rabbinic narratives – in this case, specifically Babylonian Talmudic narratives. We argue that in the Bavli the introduction of elderly persons into narrative settings is more often than not a literary device, meant to move the plot forward in particular ways. Here we focus specifically on the narrative role of elderly people as antinomian figures who, through their aberrant behavior or speech, subvert and destabilize rabbinic norms or modes of conduct. In this respect, our article joins several recent studies that productively analyzed the dialogical relations of law and narrative in rabbinic texts.[10] However, we do not examine the intersection of legal and narrative textual units, but rather trace the collapse of the "nomos" within a given narrative itself. Finally, we seek to make a methodological contribution by stressing the importance of moving away from explicit and generalizing statements "about" a given topic when tackling cultural and social issues in classical texts. When we wish to find out "what the rabbis thought of X," it is our common practice as scholars to search for statements that address X directly. However, explicit statements tend to offer us very controlled and limited views, often moralistically and didactically colored, and to present difficult and conflicted issues as though they are simple and one-dimensional. This article seeks to demonstrate that when we venture beyond explicit statements and see how a theme (in this case, old age) features as a trope in rabbinic texts that are ostensibly not "about" this theme at all, we are able to expose the greater richness and complexity of the topic.

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10   See mainly Barry Wimpheimer, *Narrating the Law* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011). Also Daniel Boyarin, *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Steven Fraade, *Legal Fictions* (Leiden: Brill, 2011); Moshe Simon-Shoshan, *Stories of the Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

We begin by providing a brief survey of the paradigmatic roles played by elderly people in rabbinic narratives – that is, the most common functions that the introduction of an old person into a narrative fills in moving the plot forward. In parts 2 and 3, we offer close readings of two narrative units in which an elderly person acts in an aberrant, confusing or divisive way and thus casts a shadow of doubt and uncertainty on the normative stance that governs the narrative or its greater context. In both units, the old person appears as a riddle: the other characters in the story, as well as the readers, oscillate between competing interpretations of his behavior as pious/deviant, conformist/rebellious, benevolent/malevolent, etc. This oscillation, which derives from the liminal position of the elderly as insiders and outsiders at the same time, exposes inherent tensions and uncertainties in the rabbis' own self-perceptions – as legislators, as able-bodied males, as masters and disciples, and as shapers of communal norms.[11]

1. The Paradigmatic Role of Old Persons in Rabbinic Narratives

While the word "elder" or "old man" (Hebrew *zaqen*, Aramaic *sab/saba*) occasionally appears in rabbinic texts as an epithet added to the given name of a particular rabbinic figure,[12] in more than 150 narratives across the classical rabbinic corpus this word is used to introduce an anonymous character whose only attribute is its age. In most of these narratives, the character denoted as "one elder" (*zaqen ehad*, *had sab/saba*) or as "that old man" (*ha-hu saba*), fills a single function: he offers a piece of knowledge that was not available to the other characters in the story otherwise. This piece of knowledge can be distinctly rabbinic (for example, information on a ruling or on an interpretive tradition),[13] or pertaining to local customs,[14] but can also be of practical nature (medical, agricultural, etc.),[15] of historical nature (relating events that took place in the past)[16] or simply of generic wisdom.[17]

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11 Here we focus specifically on old persons (and specifically old men) in intra-rabbinic contexts. The role and function of aged men and women in familial settings merit a study onto itself, which we hope to pursue in the future.

12 Such as Shammai ha-zaqen, Gamaliel ha-zaqen, Hinana saba, Hamnuna saba, ʿEina saba and others.

13 For example, BT Berakhot 8b, Shabbat 141b, Taʾanit 21a, BT Makkot 11a.

14 For example, T. Eruvin 4.16, BT Sukkah 20b.

15 For example, Sifre Deuteronomy 354 (ed. Finkelstein 416–417); T. Ketubot 7.11, T. Niddah 8.7; Genesis Rabbah 13 (ed. Theodor-Albeck 1.125).

16 For example, BT Gittin 57b, BT Bava Metziʾa 105b, BT Bava Batra 75b.

17 For example, BT Shabbat 119a, BT Sukkah 52a.

In their narrative function as anonymous conveyors of necessary knowledge – or, more accurately, as embodiments of knowledge, since they have no other attributes besides the knowledge they hold – old men in rabbinic texts can be seen as personifications of collective consciousness. Although they sometimes operate in contexts that seem distinctly rabbinic, in most narratives they present a mode of authority that is different from (albeit complementary of) the rabbis'. One passage in the Tosefta specifically mentions that a decision regarding the impurity of a particular field can only be made if there is either "an old man" or "a disciple of the sages" about, making clear that these are two disparate kinds of authoritative figures.[18] The old man's knowledge is grounded in memory, experience and folk wisdom (rather than in discipleship and rabbinic lineage), and thus the elder, as a literary figure, perhaps manifests an idealized view of "the people" as a whole.[19] Nevertheless, the very use of an anonymous and generic "old man," as opposed to named and identifiable rabbis, as a source of authoritative knowledge reveals the underlying view that old people dwell, at least to some extent, outside institutional order.

The impression that the rabbis' paradigmatic old man resides outside ordered cultural spaces is enhanced by several rabbinic narratives (from different corpora), that describe an encounter with an old person on the road, or during transition from one point to the other. In these stories, while a rabbi purposefully moves from point A to point B, he meets an old man who conveys to him a valuable tradition or teaches him a lesson. The encounter between the two is often related by saying that the old person "found" the rabbi (*matza/ashkah*),[20] thereby bestowing upon the old man the quality of a messenger who has been ordained from above. These narratives cast the old man as a quintessential liminal figure, one located between spaces rather than in them, and it is specifically in this liminal capacity that he proves to be culturally valuable. This liminality pertains not only to spaces within the inhabited world, but also to the elder's position between the world of the dead and the world of the living: in many of these anecdotes the narrative role of old men is comparable to that of ghosts or apparitions that emerge briefly from the underworld to instruct the living, which in

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18 T. Ahilot 17.12.

19 A notable example of an old man functioning as an idealized embodiment of Jewish virtues can be found in Leviticus Rabbah 25 (ed. Margulies 3.576–579); on this story, see Galit Hasan-Rokem, *Tales of the Neighborhood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) 86–137.

20 See, for example, T. Yoma 2.7, T. Hagigah 3.33, T. Ketubot 7.11; BT Hullin 6a, Sukkah 20b, Yebamot 115a, Me'ilah 7a.

turn suggests that old people were seen as "living dead" of sorts.[21] The literary figure of the old man thus serves in rabbinic narratives in a distinct way: it is an external figure, without clear attributes or affiliations, making its way momentarily into the world of the rabbis to deliver a message, and then receding back. At the moment when the message is delivered, the old person can seem and sound internal to the group, but the internality is a quality of the message, not of the medium.

The old man's liminal position is manifested not only spatially – in his location in intermediate spaces and in his appearances "out of nowhere" in narrative settings – but also on a discursive level. On several occasions, old persons are presented as speaking extremely boldly and as defying norms of polite, tactful or reverent address. For example, "an old man" does not hesitate to turn to the highly respected R. Tarfon and clobber him, without any introduction, with the question "for what reason do people gossip about you?"[22] In one of the most famous rabbinic stories, it is an old person who asks R. Aqiba's wife, whose husband has been absent for many years, "how long will you be in a state of living widowhood?"[23] In another story, an old man blatantly rebukes a group of rabbis for their tithing practices.[24] This lack of regard for norms of speech or decorum clearly situates the old man as an outsider, but also helps enhance his literary function as a messenger figure who fulfills his role by calling it as he sees it. In this respect, old men in rabbinic literature fill the same role as children often do in folk stories – the role of the unbridled voice of truth (as in "the emperor has no clothes").[25] The correspondence between old people and children is, of course, unsurprising, considering the fact that old age is widely considered to be a reversion to childhood.[26] At the same time, in his literary function as

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[21] This is most evident in cases in which the prophet Elijah appears as an old man. While there seems to be only one narrative in the classical rabbinic corpus that presents this motif explicitly (Pesiqta deRav Kahana 11:22, ed. Mandelbaum 1.196–198), the idea has become wildly common in Jewish folk tradition.

[22] T. Hagigah 3.33.

[23] BT Ketubot 63b. The speaker is introduced as "a certain old man" (*ha-hu saba*) in the printed editions, in Genizah fragment Cambridge T-S F1(2)-110, and in MS Vatican 130, but as "a certain man" (*ha-hu gabra*) in MS Vatican 113, and simply as "that one" (*ha-hu*) in MS Munich 95. MS St. Petersburg-RNL Evr. I 187 has, remarkably, "a certain old woman" (*ha-hi sabta*). In the parallel version of the story in BT Nedarim 50a, the speaker is introduced, in all manuscripts, as "one wicked man" (*had reshi'a*).

[24] PT Ma'asrot 3:1, 50c.

[25] For example, BT Eruvin 53a and Lamentations Rabbah 1:19.

[26] On the prevalent notion that old age is a second childhood see Herbert C. Covey, "A Return to Infancy," *International Journal of Aging and Human Development* 36 (1992) 81–90; Parkin, *Old Age*, 83–88.

the blunt and shameless vessel of reproof, the rabbinic old man aligns with prophetic figures in classical literatures whose marginalized and ridiculed positions as mindless, senile or mad allows them to speak the truth that no one is willing to hear.[27]

Because old people reside at the outskirts of the social order, and do not necessarily subscribe to communal norms or forms of identity, their function in rabbinic narratives can be both benevolent and malevolent. For the most part, when elderly figures appear they tap into internal rabbinic conversations in useful ways, which allows them to maintain (however briefly) positive communal value. But at other times, and in the same kinds of settings in which "good" old persons emerge, there appear adversarial old persons who present insults, derisive attacks on rabbinic traditions or norms, or knowledge that is meant to sabotage rather than assist. This pertains not only to elderly people who are clearly associated with a hostile group (for example, an Egyptian old man,[28] or an old man from among the Sadducees[29]), but also to unmarked old persons who do not seem to have any reason to speak bluntly and hurtfully. Such adversarial function of old men in rabbinic narratives can be traced, as far as we were able to identify, only in the Babylonian Talmud and not in other corpora.

The following story serves well to demonstrate how the rabbis use the messenger figure of an old man to move a plot forward, situating the old man as both insider and outsider and thereby as harboring harmful potential:

> Our Rabbis taught: when the two Hasmonean kings were besieging each other, Hyrcanus was stationed outside [Jerusalem] and Aristobulus was inside.[30] Each day they [the camp of Aristobulus, inside the walls] would place denarii in a basket [which was then raised over the wall] and they [the camp of Hyrcanus, outside the walls] would send up lambs for the daily sacrifice for them.
>
> There was one old person there who was familiar with Greek wisdom. He spoke to them [to the camp of Hyrcanus] in Greek wisdom, and told them: "For as long as they maintain the Temple worship, they shall not be delivered into your hands." On the next day, they [the camp of Aristobulus] placed denarii in the basket, and

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27 See Nicole Loraux, *Experiences of Tiresias*, trans. Paula Wissing (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995) 211–248.

28 BT Sanhedrin 11a.

29 BT Bava Batra 156b, Menahot 65a.

30 The story refers to the inheritance battle between the two sons of King Alexander Jannaeus and Alexandra Salome, which took place between 67 and 63 BCE. It resonates with the account of Josephus in *Antiquities of the Jews* 14.2.2. On the relation between Josephus' account and the talmudic story, see Roman Wilk, "When Hyrcanus was Besieging Aristobulus in Jerusalem," in *Dor le-dor*, ed Aryeh Kasher and Aharon Oppenheimer (Tel-Aviv: Bialik Institute, 1995) 99–104.

they raised up a pig for them. As the pig reached half the height of the wall, it stuck its fingernails in the wall and the earth was shaken for a distance of four hundred *parsangs*.[31] At that time they said: "Cursed be a person who grows pigs, and cursed be a person who teaches his son Greek wisdom." (BT Sotah 49b[32])

The narrative describes a continuous state of war between two claimants of the Hasmonean throne, during which a status quo is maintained due to both sides' commitment to the regularity of worship in the temple: those besieged inside the city, in proximity to the temple, keep sending out money, so that those outside – their enemies – will keep providing sacrificial lambs. This status quo is then interrupted when an old man reveals to the camp of Hyrcanus that the opposing camp will not be defeated so long as they continue to engage in sacrificial worship. As a result, the camp of Hyrcanus sends up a pig instead of a lamb, which causes an earthquake-like disaster.

The old man in this story is defined by his liminality, and by a notable lack of any clear loyalty or affiliation. He is characterized as one who knows "Greek wisdom," which positions him as a Jew who also dabbles in Greekness – as a hybrid figure who belongs neither here nor there. The term "Greek wisdom" is confounding, and scholars debated its exact meaning: it has been suggested that this phrase denotes proficiency in rhetoric and the art of persuasion, familiarity with Hellenistic cultural and cultic norms, or simply command of Greek language.[33] For our purposes, the exact meaning of the term is less important than the literary choice to situate an old man as one who, first, is uniquely endowed with knowledge that catalyzes the plot and hastens its end, and second, does not seem to belong to any of the camps. His comment suggests that he recognizes sacrificial worship as a key to the wellbeing of the people and land, but also that he is careless about the possibility of its cessation. The old man's hybrid cultural stance as a Jew who knows "Greek wisdom" corresponds with his lack of clear affiliation and his overall neither-us-nor-them position in the story. Like many other old men in rabbinic literature, he appears out of nowhere, delivers a short (albeit crucial) message and disappears again.

Perhaps the most important dimension of the old man's function in the story is that it is not at all clear why he says what he says. He seems to make this interference simply because he can, playing the archetypal role of

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31 In some versions, "400 *parsangs* by 400 *parsangs*."

32 The story also appears in BT Bava Qamma 82b and BT Menahot 64b. All translations of rabbinic texts in the article are ours.

33 For a thorough survey of the different scholarly understandings of this phrase, see Moulie Vidas, "Greek Wisdom in Babylonia," in *Envisioning Judaism,* ed. Raʾanan S. Boustan et al. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013) 1.287–305.

a trickster whose interferences collapse or reverse an existing social order.[34] Interestingly, while the same story appears in the Palestinian Talmud with relatively minor differences, an old man is nowhere mentioned in the Palestinian version: rather, the decision to send up a pig instead of lambs seems to be reached independently.[35] The fact that the Babylonian adapters of this story chose to introduce the character of an old man to the plot indicates that the literary convention of the old man as a liminal figure who escapes social conventions and communal affiliations was well-established in their time and place, and that they saw it as a useful narrative tool. In this case, perhaps this tool was utilized in order to avoid laying the blame directly on either of the Hasmonean parties: by suggesting that the delicate balance between the kings was broken by a disinterested and self-standing factor that was not operating in the service of either king, the authors were able to maintain equal distance from both sides in this historical narrative.

In Part 2, we will see how this literary Babylonian convention, in which old men reside outside communal and discursive boundaries and can use their knowledge in either malevolent or benevolent ways – without apparent motivation – directly serves to undermine rabbinic norms and modes of conduct. The old man's elusive character, which allows him to shift quickly between constructive and destructive behavior, turns him into a riddle for both the other characters and the readers: they are left wondering about the old man's motivations and loyalties, and thereby are also led to wonder about the normative world that the old man undermines.

Very few rabbinic texts explicitly refer to old women as literary characters: for the most part, "old woman" (*zeqenah*) serves in rabbinic literature to denote the legal category of post-menopausal women, that is, women who are ostensibly non-sexual and are therefore excluded from various ordinances and rules pertaining to women's bodies.[36] However, several passages suggest, implicitly or explicitly, that not only are old women still interested in sex, but they are actually particularly lascivious[37] (which is also a common trope in Roman literature[38]). The few stories in which old women actively participate are usually legal narratives, in which old women feature as owners of property under dispute, and their age does not seem otherwise

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34 See Keith Cunningham, "Trickster," in *Folklore*, ed. Thomas A. Greene (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1997) 811–814.

35 PT Berakhot 4:1, 7b.

36 For example, M. Yevamot 11.4, M. Niddah 1.5; T. Ketubot 7.3, T. Sotah 5.2; BT Shabbat 64b; BT Eruvin 47a.

37 BT Yoma 83b, BT Mo'ed Qatan 9b, BT Qiddushin 39a.

38 See Parkin, *Old Age*, 86–87; Cokayne, *Experiencing*, 134–43.

consequential (except in the sense that old women, who were often widows, were more likely than other women to be the sole owners of property).[39] Two narratives, however, present old women as filling roles somewhat similar to the paradigmatic role of old men described above. In one narrative, an old woman personally testifies to a rabbinic ruling that was made in her case, thus helping to resolve a dispute[40]; in another story, an old woman welcomes a rabbi who arrives in town and blesses him that he will achieve greatness as the local rabbi.[41] These old women, like their men counterparts, roam outside (in the streets or on the road) or otherwise seem to appear out of nowhere, embodying collective consciousness and usefully serving the rabbis. Two other texts clearly present old women as liminal figures by placing them, literally, on the *limen* – the threshold or doorstep – as "trickster" figures who actively entice others to sin.[42] We may conclude, then, that while old women are of less literary interest and utility to the rabbis (which can be easily explained by their double marginality), they were nonetheless generally seen as sharing certain attributes with old men.

2. The Old Man and His Double (BT Shabbat 33b–34a)

The story of R. Shimon ben Yohai's 13-year-long stay in a cave, together with his son Eleazar, and of his subsequent actions after coming out of the cave, is one of the lengthiest and richest narratives in the Babylonian Talmud, and certainly one of the most famous and analyzed ones.[43] The Babylonian narrative, which appears in BT Shabbat 33b–34a, consists of three separate

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39   BT Sukkah 31a, Gittin 52b, Bava Metziʾa 36a, Bava Metziʾa 39b, Bava Batra 125a.

40   BT Ketubot 60b.

41   BT Niddah 33b.

42   Sifre Numbers 131 (ed. Horovitz 170–71, and cf. BT Sanhedrin 106a and PT Sanhedrin 10:2, 28d) describes how the Moabites, in their attempt to entice the Israelites to sin, would place old women outside houses to engage young men in seemingly innocuous conversation. In Avot deRabbi Nathan Version B, chapter 1 (ed. Schechter 4a), the serpent in the Garden of Eden is compared to "an old woman" who came to borrow vinegar and while at the door led the woman inside the house to question her husband's orders.

43   See, for example, Ofra Meir, *Poetics of Rabbinic Stories* (Hebrew; Tel-Aviv: Sifriat Poʾalim, 1993) 11–34; Jeffrey Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) 105–38; Haim Weiss, "Worthless Son of Worthy Father?" (Hebrew) in *Peace and War in Jewish Culture*, ed. Avriel Bar-Levav)Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2006) 67–83; Ronit Shoshani, "Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai in the Cave and Elijah in the Wilderness" (Hebrew), *Jewish Studies Internet Journal 6* (2007) 13–36; Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, "Plato in Rabbi Shimeon bar Yohai's Cave (B. Shabbat 33b–34a)," *AJS Review* 31 (2007) 277–296; Michal Bar-Asher Siegal, *Early Christian Monastic Literature and the Babylonian Talmud* (New York: Cambridge University

episodes that were artfully woven together through recurring thematic and linguistic motifs.[44] The first episode relates how Shimon spoke disdainfully of the Roman Empire, which led to a warrant for his execution. The second episode describes how he and his son eventually decided to hide in a cave, in which they spent 12 years[45] and then, after a short but destructive exit, one additional year; it also describes their eventual return to the outside world and Shimon's renewed encounter with his son-in-law, R. Phineas ben Yair. The third episode describes how Shimon, in an act of gratitude, purified an area that was held to be ritually impure because it was suspected as a burial ground.

While a story of Shimon ben Yohai hiding in a cave also appears in several Palestinian compilations,[46] the Palestinian version is significantly different, insofar as the first episode is missing altogether, the second episode (the longest one in the Babylonian narrative) is summarized in three short sentences, and only the third episode is related in some length.[47] For the purposes of this article we wish to focus on a relatively minor aspect of the Babylonian narrative: the fact that in three key moments the plot is catalyzed by the appearance of an old man. None of those three appearances is paralleled in the Palestinian versions, which corroborates our previous observation that it is primarily in the Babylonian Talmud that the literary figure of the old man develops as a narrative tool and as a distinct trope.

The second episode of the story in the Bavli describes the entry of Shimon and his son into the cave and the 12 years they spent there, subsisting on carobs and water and spending their days studying Torah and praying. When Elijah the prophet is revealed to them with the announcement that the emperor has died and Shimon is no longer in danger of execution, they leave the cave. The first sight they see is people plowing and sowing, which makes Shimon irate: these people, he proclaims, are concerned with the here-and-now (livelihood) instead of "eternal life" (Torah study).[48] His angry response has destructive consequences: every place on which Shimon

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Press, 2013) 133–69; Yishai Kiel, "Study versus Sustenance," *AJS Review* 38 no.2 (2014) 275–302.

44 See the elaborate analysis in Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, 106–18.

45 MS Munich reads 13 (*tlesar*) instead of 12 (*tresar*).

46 See PT Shevi'it 9:1 38d; Genesis Rabbah 79 (ed. Theodor-Albeck 2.941–45); Pesiqta deRav Kahana 11 (ed. Mandelbaum 1.191–93).

47 On the differences between the Palestinian versions and the Babylonian version, see Lee Levine, "R. Simeon b. Yohai and the Purification of Tiberias," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 49 (1978)143–85.

48 As mentioned by Meir (*Poetics*, 31) and Rubenstein (*Talmudic Stories*, 130), this scene resonates, and possibly builds on a tradition attributed to R. Shimon ben Yohai in

and his son "lay their eyes" burns down.[49] As a result, the two are con-demned by a heavenly voice to 12 more months in the cave. When they exit the cave for the second time, they see the following:

> On the turn of the day, at the eve of the Sabbath, they saw a certain old man (*ha-hu saba*) who was holding two branches of myrtle and was running at dusk time. They asked him: "Why do you need those two?" He said: "In honor of the Sabbath." [They asked]: "And is one not enough for you?" [He answered]: "One corresponds with *remember* [*the Sabbath*, Exod 20:7], and the other corresponds with *observe* [*the Sabbath*, Deut 5:11]." [Shimon] told his son: "See how beloved the commandments are to Israel!" And their mind was settled.[50]

The old man appears in this story as a riddle that has to be solved: his body and behavior are aberrant in a way that calls for attention, both because he is running (an activity that defies common rabbinic norms of comportment and respectability) and because he is holding two branches of myrtle.[51] When he is questioned about the two myrtle branches, he explains them as expressing reverence toward the Sabbath.[52] While his running is not overtly addressed, the context of the story suggests that it also derives from the old man's eagerness to prepare for the Sabbath.[53]

In truth, the old man's behavior is not a particularly complicated riddle, but Shimon and his son are not capable of solving it on their own. This incident casts a derisive light on their glorified ascetic learnedness: they have been isolated in the cave for so long, perfecting their self-sufficient devotion, that they are no longer able to understand simple gestures of genuine piety. When the old man finally solves the riddle for them, however, and explains his strange actions as expressions of his devoutness to the Sabbath, Shimon and his son make the decision to dwell in this world rather than to continue their isolation in the cave. The appearance of the old man at the end of the 13th year serves as a counterpoint to the sight of the people plowing and sowing at the end of the preceding 12 years, which Shimon resented so

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   BT Berakhot 35b: "if a person plows at the time of plowing and sows at the time of sowing … what shall become of the Torah?"

49 On the motif of the destructive power of rabbinic gaze, see Tamas (Sinai) Turan, "Wherever the Sages Set Their Eyes, There is Either Death or Poverty" (Hebrew), *Sidra* 23 (2008) 137–205.

50 The words "and their mind was settled" are missing from most manuscripts (Genizah fragment, Cambridge T-S F2 (1) 171 has "his mind was settled").

51 The myrtle is probably carried home to be used as a source of fragrance; see BT Berakhot 43b, BT Sukkah 37b.

52 The use of myrtle, a plant closely associated with wedding celebrations (e. g. BT Berakhot 56b, BT Shabbat 110a, BT Shabbat 150a, BT Ketubot 17a, BT Qiddushin 21b), during the Sabbath implicitly invokes the notion of the Sabbath as a bride.

53 See T. Bava Qamma 2:11; PT Bava Qamma 3:7, 3d; BT Bava Qamma 32a.

much: it allows him to see that while "the little people" are occupied with mundane matters of livelihood, they also manifest love and adherence to the commandments in their actions. Thus he is able to overcome his contempt to the world of here-and-now, make it again his place of residence, and even actively work to improve it, as he does in the third episode.

Shimon's proclamation "see how beloved the commandments are to Israel!" suggests that the old man functions in this story as an embodiment of the people of Israel as a whole. His behavior is seen as a testament to the collective piety of the people, rather than his piety as an individual. Here we see clearly how the literary figure of the old man serves to portray lay as opposed to rabbinic virtue, and how the old man is positioned in a liminal setting (in motion, "running" without indication of the destination) in a way that allows him to appear at just the right moment. He serves as a messenger, delivering a "truth" to the rabbinic protagonists, and their acceptance of the message brings the story to a point of (temporary) resolution.

But this is not the last appearance of an old man (perhaps the very same old man) in this story. In the third episode, Shimon, who is grateful for his good fortune, decides to act for the greater good of the community. He arrives in a city[54] and asks if there is anything there that requires "repairing" (*tiqqun*). He is then told that there is an area that is suspected to be impure, since it may have served as a burial ground, and thus the priests, who must avoid corpse impurity, have to take a circuitous route so as to avoid it. Shimon then decides to inquire whether at least part of the area can be certified as free of corpse impurity:

> He said: "Is there anyone here who knows whether purity was ever held in this place [i. e., any part of it was treated as pure]?" A certain old man (*ha-hu saba*) told him: "In this place Ben Zakkai[55] cut[56] lupines for a heave-offering (*terumah*)." [Shimon] did the same. Any place [where the soil] was hard, he declared pure, and any place [where it] was loose, he marked [as potentially impure].[57]

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54   The name is not mentioned in the Babylonian version, but the city is identified as Tiberias in the Palestinian version.

55   In MS Munich the version is "Ben Azzai." Levine prefers this version, both because of Ben Azzai's association with the city of Tiberias and because of Ben Azzai's presumed proximity in time to R. Shimon (Levine, "R. Simeon b. Yohai," 166 n. 78). However, Tiberias is not mentioned in the Babylonian version, and since Babylonian authors tend to prefer "big names" to historical accuracy, there is not sufficient reason to reject the more prevalent version "Ben Zakkai" in this case.

56   "Cut" (*qitzetz/qatzatz*) is the version in most manuscripts (Genizah fragment Cambridge T-S F2 (1) 171 has *ritzetz*, to crush). MS Toronto Friedberg 9–002 and Genizah fragment Cambridge T-S F1 (1) 20, however, read *na'atz* (stuck in, planted).

57   MS Toronto Friedberg 9–002 skips the entire examination of soft/hard soil, stating only "he marked every impure place."

Once again an old man appears out of nowhere at a key point in the story. The demonstrative pronoun *ha-hu* (that) could be read as indicating that this old man is the same as the one in the second episode, but could also be read as denoting only "a certain old man," as it is often used in rabbinic texts. For the narrators, "old man" is clearly a generic entity – or, more accurately, a narrative function – rather than a particular individual.[58] In this episode, the old man, again in the role of a messenger, offers a crucial piece of information that allows Shimon to perform his great benevolent act of declaring part of the area free of corpse impurity.

It is not entirely clear what the old man is actually relating. The way the story is set up in the Babylonian Talmud, it seems that the old man is testifying that a particular spot in the ground can be securely declared as pure, because the respected sage Ben Zakkai used plants that grew there for heave offering, which requires particularly high standards of ritual purity. This testimony allows Shimon to assume that at least part of the area is free of corpse impurity, and to begin the process of distinguishing certifiably pure spots, where the ground is hard, suggesting that it was not overturned for burial, from places where corpses could potentially be buried. In the Palestinian versions of the story, there is no old man, and Shimon does something quite different in order to discern where people might be buried: he cuts lupines into pieces and throws them on the ground, which causes buried corpses to "float" to the surface, so that they can be removed and the area can be declared pure.[59] The fact that the Babylonian version mentions that Ben Zakkai "cut" lupines, as well as the obscure statement that R. Shimon "did the same" as Ben Zakkai,[60] suggests that underneath the Babylonian version lies something similar to the Palestinian version, and that the Babylonian text as it stands is a hybrid of an old Palestinian tradition (of purification through "magic" lupines) with a new Babylonian tradition (of purification through knowledge about ritually pure lupines).[61]

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58 Rubenstein (*Talmudic Stories*, 339 n. 52) sees the recurrence of an old man as a stylistic feature that lends coherence to the different parts of the story.

59 For an attempt to provide a logical-naturalistic explanation for Shimon's actions, see Yehudah Feliks, *Talmud Yerushalmi Tractate Shevi'it* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 1987) 2:232–33.

60 In Genizah fragment Cambridge T-S F2 (1) 171, as well as the 12th-century compendium *ha-Arukh*, the words "he did the same" are followed by the comment that Shimon also cut down lupines and threw the pieces on the ground (presumably to assess the hardness of the soil). This also seems to be the version in MS Oxford Opp. Add. Fol.23, although there are some lacunae in the text.

61 See also Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, 119–20 and 339 n. 47. Levine ("R. Simeon b. Yohai," 166–73) contends that the Babylonian account is the earlier one and the

The old man in the Babylonian story actively enables R. Shimon to purify the area by serving as collective consciousness, or here more as collective memory: he has access to things that have happened decades ago, and his knowledge of the past provides the key toward "repairing" the future. The old man, then, seems again like a quintessential positive figure, who appears at the right place and the right time so as to allow the story to come to a successful resolution.

Or so we think, until we reach the next scene of the narrative:

> A certain old man (or, that old man) then said: "Ben Yohai purified the cemetery!" [Shimon] said to him: "Were you not with us [when we did this], or even if you were with us but did not count yourself among us, [I would say] you have spoken well. Now, since you were with us and were counted among us, shall they say, 'Even prostitutes adorn each other; should not the Disciples of the Sages [adorn each other] all the more so'?" [Shimon] fixed his eye on [the old man], and his soul went to rest.

Immediately after the purification process is complete, an old man makes a third appearance. Again, this old man can be the same as the one mentioned before or a different one, although in this case Shimon's comment that the old man was "with us" makes it more plausible that it is the same old man who provided the anecdote about Ben Zakkai. Here, however, the old man's function in the story is reversed: from an ally who helps Shimon with the purification, he turns to condemn him, saying that he "purified a cemetery" – a place that by definition cannot be purified. Shimon had previously purified the place only because the old man indicated it was *not* a cemetery. Shimon reacts harshly to this proclamation, and eventually causes the old man's death.

The scene in which the old man expresses ridicule or disdain toward Shimon's actions most likely builds on a scene in the Palestinian version,[62] in which Shimon hears a certain teacher (*safra*) saying, "Bar Yohai purified Tiberias," and asks him angrily, "Did you not support us?" after which he turns him into "a heap of bones" by the power of his gaze. The Babylonian version replaced the random teacher with an old man: this was done, perhaps, to give the story greater coherence by establishing continuity between the decision to purify the city and the reaction thereafter. In the Palestinian version, there is no indication that anyone else was present when R. Shimon

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Palestinian one developed from it, but his view rests on the problematic assumption that the absence of miracles or supernatural elements is a testament of historicity and originality, and does not properly account for the incongruities in the Babylonian narrative.

62   The majority of scholars see the Babylonian version as an adaptation of the Palestinian one.

performed his miraculous purification, and certainly no indication that a vote was taken to ratify the decision.[63] In the Babylonian version, the old man's appearance right before the purification suggests that he indeed supported the decision – or at least that Shimon believed the old man supported the decision.

But why would a person who at first appeared to support the purification now criticize it? In the Palestinian Talmud, the question remains open, and one can only guess that the teacher changed his mind or was persuaded by opposing factions.[64] We propose that the Babylonian Talmud subtly smooths away this question by casting an old man for the role of the supporter-and-then-dissenter. As we have shown, in the Babylonian Talmud old men can sometimes serve as tricksters who are characterized by lack of clear affiliation and loyalty: their liminal social and cultural role allows them to move swiftly between camps, and to defy expectations of discernible motives for action. The reader is left to ponder whether to attribute the reversal to the old man's mental frailty, to conclude that when the old man related the tradition he did this on purpose to set Shimon up for criticism, or perhaps to interpret his words not as a critique at all, but as candid praise for Shimon, conveyed through poorly chosen words. These three interpretive possibilities construe the old man, respectively, as senile, a villain or a gregarious fool – all commensurate with the cultural stereotypes surrounding old men[65] – and thereby do away with the need to explain his motivation.

Nevertheless, the reader cannot help but wonder. The quintessential role of old men is to speak the truth, to serve as reliable witnesses of tradition and wisdom, and it is exactly because of this presumed role that Shimon, and the reader with him, trusted the old man when he related the tradition about Ben Zakkai. If so, is there not also truth in his words when he says that Shimon did what is ritually impossible and purified a cemetery? At least for a moment, the legitimacy of Shimon's actions is put in question, and we view him not as a cautious adherer to rabbinic law, but as one who, relying only on a combination of questionable testimony and intuition, boldly defied a basic tenet of Torah. The reader can choose, of course, to dismiss those accusations and to say that Shimon acted in complete accordance with legal

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63 See also Levine, "R. Simeon b. Yohai," 148.

64 In Genesis Rabbah the teacher opposes the ruling specifically because he heard that "one dead person" was found in Tiberias after the purification (referring to an event related earlier in the story). However, this comment does not appear in the other Palestinian versions, which do not provide an explanation of the teacher's dissent.

65 See Parkin, *Old Age*, 79–89.

protocol, but this would require giving full credence to the old man's first statement (which gave legitimacy to the purification), while rejecting his second statement as either malicious, misguided or senseless. If the old man is to be believed the first time he speaks, why not the second time? If he is to be disregarded the second time, why not the first time? The incongruence between the old man's first statement and second statement opens a crack through which the legal foundations of Shimon's actions are briefly exposed as shaky.

This problem does not go away even if one maintains that the old man who provides the anecdote on Ben Zakkai and the old man who criticizes Shimon are two different people. The very fact that both are identified in the exact same way, as "old man" without any further attributes, indicates that there is no reason to trust one more than the other: they are both devoid of clear affiliations or motivations, and they both represent some kind of collective consciousness rather than a distinct individual. The 'good' old man in the beginning is followed by a double, a 'bad' old man, and since the reader does not know which one of them speaks truthfully and which one lies (or maybe they both speak truthfully?), the normative system in which the story is ostensibly grounded is exposed as chaotic. Like the old man running with branches of myrtle in the second episode, the double old man in the third episode is a riddle that needs to be solved, but neither Shimon nor the reader can be sure they have reached the right solution.

When the old man proclaims, "Ben Yohai purified the cemetery," Shimon never tells him that he is wrong or attempts to defend his actions: he does not even confront him about his change of heart or hypocrisy, as he does in the Palestinian version. Rather, Shimon actually admits that there is merit to the old man's claim: "Were you not with us, [I would say] you have spoken well." The problem is not in the content of the old man's words, but in the fact that his words could be interpreted as revealing discord and factions among the rabbis, which in turn will lead others to see them as worse than prostitutes ("even prostitutes adorn each other; should not the Disciples of the Sages all the more so?"). Put differently, the old man functions in the story not only as one who exposes the faultiness of Shimon's actions, but as one who potentially exposes the ugly side of the rabbis as a group more broadly. It is for this reason that he must die: not because he spoke falsely or irreverently, but because he is revealing an unbearable truth.

Thus the old man, who in the second episode features as a benevolent figure that convinces Shimon to leave the cave and abandon his destructive enterprises, serves here as the force that drives the rabbi back to using his destructive forces – and in a sense undoes the entire spiritual and personal

development Shimon went through during the second episode. Further-more, by killing the old man, Shimon brings about corpse impurity imme-diately after declaring the place free of such impurity, thereby undoing his own purification effort. In this story, the old man serves as a chaotic force that creates disorder where one thought there was order and reveals dis-cord where one thought there was harmony. His anarchic and destabilizing function applies not only to others but also to himself: the triple appearance of an old man in the story, operating very differently each time, does not allow the reader to attribute any stable role or characteristic to the old man as such. He is used here as an elusive figure, who, in its position outside the social order, questions the very basis of this order.

3. The Old Man's Dance (PT Pe'ah 1:1, 15d, BT Ketubot 17a)

We turn now to another narrative in which an old man is discursively used to confound both the protagonists' and the readers' notions of piety and normative behavior. This narrative is quite short; however, as in many other cases in rabbinic literature, the narrative's greater context infuses it with meanings and depth that are not fully discernible when it is examined in isolation. The story appears both in the Palestinian Talmud and in the Bab-ylonian Talmud, with minor but meaningful differences.

The Palestinian version is simpler and in all likelihood earlier than the Babylonian one. The context is a discussion of acts of "lovingkindness" (*gemilut hasadim*) – that is, benevolent behavior in various social settings, such as visiting the sick, burying the dead and also making brides and grooms "rejoice."[66] The following story allegedly sets out to demonstrate the merit of such acts, which are said to yield rewards for those who preform them in this life as well as the next life:

> *Whoever pursues righteousness and love finds life, prosperity and honor* (Prov 21:21) – he will find honor in this world, and life in the world to come. R. Shmuel bar Rav Yitzhaq used to take branches and sing praise (*meqales*)[67] before brides, and R. Zeira would see him and hide from him. He said: "Look at that old man, how he shames us!" When [Shmuel] died, there were three hours of thunder and lightning in the world, and a heavenly voice came out and said that R. Shmuel bar Rav Yitzhaq, the bestower of acts of lovingkindness, had died. When they went out to bestow an act

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66 See Tzvi Novick, "Charity and Reciprocity," *Harvard Theological Review* 105 (2012) 33–52.

67 While the literal meaning of the word is simply "praise," in this context it has a clear connotation of singing and dancing.

of lovingkindness upon him (i. e., bury him), fire came down from the sky and was formed into the likeness of a branch of fire between the bier and the congregation, and the people were saying: "Look at that old man, whose branch stood up for him (*qam leh*, i. e., generated a reward for him)."[68] (PT Peʾah 1:1, 15d)

At first glance, this is a simple didactic story that exemplifies the great rewards of selfless acts of kindness during one's life: thanks to his habit of making brides rejoice, R. Shmuel bar Rav Yitzhaq received both divine and human recognition after his death, and the pillar of heavenly flame that accompanied his death bed indicates that he has won eternal life in heaven. At second glance, we observe that the relation between the preceding homily on Prov 21:21 and the story is not straightforward, but rather quite ironic: whereas the homily promises the bestower of acts of kindness "honor in this world and life in the world to come," the story suggests that in "this world" what one is likely to receive for such acts is the opposite of honor. The crux of the story lies in the contrast between the way Shmuel is perceived when he is alive – as a silly old man embarrassing himself and others – and the way he is perceived after he dies.

As in the story of Shimon and his son, in this story too the old man is a riddle that needs to be solved: why does he act the way he does; what does it say about him; and what does it say about "us," those around him? Is his behavior shameful or meritorious? Does he know what he is doing, or are his mental faculties compromised? The story appears to contrast Zeira's interpretation of Shmuel's behavior as shameful and demented, with the heavenly judgement of Shmuel as a righteous and even saintly man. Nevertheless, even after we receive the authoritative message that Shmuel was worthy of reward, we are left with an unresolved riddle: did Shmuel act the way he did because he knew that his acts were meritorious and was willing to sacrifice his honor for the cause,[69] or did he act the way he did

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68 An alternative Palestinian version of this story appears in PT Avodah Zarah 3.1 42c and Genesis Rabbah 59 (ed. Theodor-Albeck 2.632–633). The relationship between those parallel versions, and between the different manuscript traditions of each version, are too intricate to be discussed here, but see Leib Moscovitz, "Sugyot Muhlafot in the Talmud Yerushalmi," *Tarbiz* 60 (1991) 56–59; Hans-Jürgen Becker, *Die großen rabbinischen Sammelwerke Palästinas* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999) 134–48. For our purposes, suffice it to note only the most substantial difference between the two versions: whereas in PT Peʾah, Zeira is embarrassed by Shmuel's behavior and hides so as not to be seen by him or be associated with him, in PT Avodah Zarah and Genesis Rabbah, the other "rabbis" (*rabanin*) question Shmuel's behavior, and Zeira is the one who defends him.

69 This is the reading proposed by Seth Schwartz, who sees Shmuel's behavior as willful and conscious self-humiliation for noble purposes. See Seth Schwartz, *Were the Jews a Mediterranean Society*? (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010) 142–44.

because he was, in fact, a somewhat demented and eccentric old man, but his acts are regarded as praiseworthy nonetheless?

What is it that is so problematic or disgraceful about Shmuel's singing and dancing with branches before brides, and why does his behavior "shame us?" On one level, the disconcerted response to his behavior can be understood as stemming from a general rabbinic disdain toward light-heartedness or frivolity, and from an expectation that members of the rabbinic elite carry themselves with dignity. In this respect, this narrative echoes the biblical story of 2 Samuel 6, in which Michal, King David's wife, despises him when she sees him dancing before the Ark of the Lord: when she disdainfully accuses him of conducting himself in a vulgar way unfit for a king, he asserts that he is glad to debase himself for the sake of God, and that it is this vulgar behavior that makes him honorable to his people (2 Sam 6:20–22). The creators of the rabbinic narrative seem to allude to this bib-lical story, and to use it to establish a reverse hierarchy of honor and shame. Furthermore, in positioning Zeira in the place of the bitter and uncharitable Michal, this story serves as an indirect attack on rabbinic tendencies to self-importance and haughtiness.

On another level, Shmuel's singing and dancing before brides is par-ticularly outrageous because it acutely defies gender roles. The image of a man singing and dancing before women in order to praise them runs con-trary to a custom that was prevalent in the Bible and familiar across the ancient world, of women dancing and singing before men in order to praise them for victory or achievement, while implicitly (or explicitly) offering themselves sexually as prize for the illustrious heroes.[70] When Shmuel sings and dances before brides, he not only emasculates himself by reversing this custom, but also turns himself into a sexual object – and because he is an old man (rather than a virile young man like King David), his appearance as a sexual object has a grotesque quality. While old men are already con-sidered somewhat effeminate because of their loss of strength and prowess, Shmuel offers his effeminate and decrepit body as eye candy for women, thus overthrowing established notions of gender hierarchy, sexual decorum and bodily integrity. Accordingly, the riddle that Shmuel's behavior and body present to those around him pertains not only to social and religious norms (is this old person behaving outrageously or meritoriously?) but also

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[70] For example, Exod 15:20; Jud 11:34; 1 Sam 18:6–7; Jer 31:4; see also M. Ta'anit 4.8. See M. A. Murray, "Ancient and Modern Ritual Dances in the Near East," *Folklore* 66 (1955) 401–409; Carol L. Meyers, "Of Drums and Damsels," *Biblical Archeologist* 54 (1991) 16–27.

to gender and sex categories (is this old person still a man?). The concluding line of the story, which uses the blatant phallic imagery "his branch stood up for him" to proclaim Shmuel's reward, assures us that Heaven regards him not only as righteous, but also as a masculine man. This concluding line, however, only serves to highlight that in human as opposed to divine eyes, the old man's body and conduct are disconcerting, aberrant and frightening – as far as they give the onlookers a glimpse of their own future.

The Palestinian versions of the story do not provide any information that actively legitimizes Shmuel's actions, and they present his custom of dancing and singing before brides as idiosyncratic and at least to some extent socially deviant. In contrast, in the Babylonian Talmud this story is set in a context that makes Shmuel's behavior seem quite normative. The story appears in a section on wedding customs and commences with a controversy between the two foundational rabbinic schools, the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai, on the question "how is one to dance before the bride" – that is, what words of praise are to be sung to brides in wedding celebrations. The Hillelites maintain that a bride always ought to be praised for good looks and chastity, whereas the Shammaities maintain that she should only be praised for her actual qualities. Both houses concur, however, that dancing and singing before brides on their wedding day is an appropriate and desirable custom. What follows is a series of seven anecdotes, of which the story of Shmuel and Zeira is sixth.

1. When Rav Dimi came [from Palestine to Babylonia] he said, "This is how they sing before the bride in the West (i. e., Palestine): 'Neither blue color [for the eyes], nor red color [for the cheeks], nor adornment, and nonetheless a lovely gazelle.'"
2. When the rabbis ordained R. Zeira, they sang to him thus: "Neither blue color [for the eyes], nor red color [for the cheeks], nor adornment, and nonetheless a lovely gazelle."
3. When the rabbis ordained R. Ami and R. Assi, they sang to them thus: "Ordain for us all like this one and all like that one; ordain for us none from among the *sarmisin*, nor from among the *sarmitin*, and some say: none from among the *hamisin*, nor from among the *turmisin*."[71]
4. When R. Abahu would come from the academy to the house of the emperor, the maidservants of the house of the emperor would come out to greet him, and sing to him thus: "Master of his people and leader of his nation, a candle of light, may your arrival be blessed in peace!"
5. They said about R. Yehudah bar ʿIlai that he used to take a branch of myrtle and dance before the bride and say: "A beautiful and chaste bride!"

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71 See also BT Sanhedrin 14a. All these words are of unknown origin and meaning, and there are many conjectures on their exact etymology. It is clear, however, that they all refer to various kinds of partial or flawed learning.

6. R. Shmuel bar Rav Yitzhaq used to dance on three. R. Zeira said: "The old man shames us!" When his soul went to rest, a pillar of fire separated him and the rest of the world, and we learned that a pillar of fire does not separate [this way], except for one in a generation or two in a generation. R. Zeira [then] said: "The old man's branch served him well," and some say: "the old man's foolishness," and some say: "the old man's habit."

7. Rav Aha would place [the bride] on his shoulders and dance. The rabbis told him: "Are we allowed to do so?" He said: "If they resemble a wooden beam in your eyes, go ahead! And if not, no." (BT Ketubot 17a)

The context and sequence of anecdotes here cast a new light on the story about Shmuel and Zeira. The custom of singing and dancing before brides seems completely benign and is legitimized by major rabbinic authorities, and the story of Shmuel is sandwiched between two anecdotes about rabbis who do so without any signs of disapproval or reproach. What, then, makes Shmuel's dance uniquely shameful? Why is Zeira so embarrassed by his behavior? In other words, how can this Palestinian story be understood in its Babylonian setting?

In the Babylonian version, Shmuel is said to be "dancing on three." Because the previous anecdote in the sequence mentioned Yehudah bar ʿIlai dancing with a branch of myrtle, commentators assumed that the "three" in the following anecdote are three branches of myrtle.[72] While this is possible, the preposition "on" (*atlat*) makes this an unlikely interpretation: assuming that one holds myrtle branches in one's hands, why would one be dancing "on" them?' Rather, we find it more likely that the three on which Shmuel is said to dance are three legs – that is, his own two legs and a cane. The riddle of the old man in the Babylonian version thus echoes the most famous riddle in Western culture, the Greek riddle of the Sphinx (What is it that walks on four in the morning, on two by midday, and on three by the evening? A man). Here, the riddle that the old man presents to his surroundings is not whether his dance is legitimate (we know that it is), but how and why he dances when his body is too old for it. In other words, what Shmuel defies in this story are not rabbinic norms of behavior, as much as fundamental assumptions about what a human body should be and do, and it is this defiance that threatens and confounds Zeira.

Shmuel's old age plays a much more significant role in the Babylonian version, not only because of the allusion to his bodily infirmity, but also because of the story's concluding line. Whereas at the end of the Palestinian story, Shmuel is publically recognized as "the bestower of acts of

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72 The printed edition of Genesis Rabbah explicitly says "dancing on three branches," but this is clearly a hybrid version, already influenced by the Babylonian Talmud.

lovingkindness," at the end of the Babylonian story, the Talmud presents three alternative versions of Zeira's statement regarding the thing that won Shmuel his merit: his branch (*shutiteh*), his foolishness (*shtuteh*) or his habit (*shitateh*). While all these words sound very similar in Aramaic, and we can easily assume that the Talmud merely documents existing variants of this line, it is important to note that in presenting all three alternatives the Babylonian story leaves its readers with an unsolved riddle: what was it, really, that benefited Shmuel? Could it actually have been "his foolishness?" Was Shmuel a somewhat laughable old man who behaved in an embarrassing way, or was he a paragon of righteousness? Could he have been both?

In this version of the story, not only is Shmuel, the old man, a riddle, but Zeira (or, more accurately, Zeira's sense of shame) is a riddle as well. The fact that dancing before a bride is described as an established custom makes us wonder what could have made Zeira so upset: could it just be that Shmuel's body was old and grotesque, or was there something else at play? Here we see significance in the sequence of anecdotes as a whole. After the first anecdote mentions the song that was commonly used to praise brides in "the West," we hear in the second anecdote that when R. Zeira was ordained as a rabbi his fellows sang to him that very same song: that is, they sang and danced before him as if he were a bride. If we are to think that such a performance was standard among the rabbis and there is nothing to it, the Talmud immediately follows with an anecdote about two rabbis who, when ordained, were praised for their scholastic skills rather than for their looks. This is then followed by an anecdote about the way the emperor's maidservants would praise R. Abahu. We are thus presented with four paradigms of gender relations in a performance of praise: men praising a woman, men praising a man as if he were a woman, men praising men as men, and women praising a man. The aberration within this paradigm is Zeira: the emasculating praise he receives from his fellows is, by and by, a form of humiliation.

Zeira's repeated presence in this Babylonian unit does not seem incidental. Like Shmuel, he has an imperfect and atypical body (his name literally means "little one"),[73] and like an old man, he is perceived to have effeminate qualities. Shmuel puts Zeira to shame not only because his behavior reflects on Zeira as a rabbi, but also because it reflects on him as an emasculated man. Thus, through the literary figure of the old man, the Babylonian textual unit reveals the fluid and unstable nature of gender hierarchies and

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73 Zeira's name suggests that he was of very short stature, and he is also referred to in two places as "the one with burnt calves" (BT Bava Metzi'a 85a, BT Sanhedrin 37a).

identities in the rabbinic community, brings to the surface the cruelty and brutality that percolate underneath rabbinic pretenses of camaraderie and discipleship, and confounds notions of honor and shame, foolishness and sagacity. Like the story of Shimon and his son, this story too ends with the old man's death, suggesting that the antinomian presence of an old man in the community raises indelible tensions that cannot be reconciled until the old man passes away. Put more bluntly, these narratives present old people as embodiments of normative and interpretive problems, to which only their death is a solution.

Conclusion

Our purpose in this article was not to provide a comprehensive survey of old age as a theme in rabbinic literature, but rather to show the potential that a literary focus on aged protagonists holds for a study of rabbinic culture more broadly. We have seen that, in their capacity as liminal figures who are simultaneously insiders and outsiders in the community, old men serve various functions in rabbinic narratives, ranging from constructive to destructive and from restorative to transformative. While paradigmatically old persons appear in rabbinic narratives as embodiments of collective knowledge and wisdom who perform prophetic-like roles, their socially marginalized position also casts them, at times, as trickster figures who can be malevolent as well as benevolent, sometimes without any clear purpose or motivation. Old men thus function in rabbinic narratives as riddles that both the other protagonists and the reader must solve: their behaviors, their intentions and even their bodies are construed as aberrant and confounding, such that their presence in stories destabilizes established norms, conventions, and sometimes even basic expectations of coherence and consistency within the plot itself. By reading well-known rabbinic narratives through the lens of old age and with the spotlight on old men as characters, we stand to gain new insights not only about the complexity and richness of rabbinic narratives, and not only about rabbinic social history, but about the rabbis' own willingness to challenge their own cultural institutions and to expose their own vulnerabilities.