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**A Short History of the People Israel from the Patriarchs to the Messiah:
Constructions of Jewish Difference in Leviticus Rabbah 23**

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**A SHORT HISTORY OF THE PEOPLE ISRAEL FROM THE
PATRIARCHS TO THE MESSIAH:
CONSTRUCTIONS OF JEWISH DIFFERENCE IN LEVITICUS RABBAH 23**

By Beth A. Berkowitz*

Abstract

“Did Judaism exist in antiquity?” is a question that on the face of it seems absurd, but it has recently been argued that Judaism as an abstract system – as a “religion” rather than an ethnicity – did not come into being until later. This paper proposes that a pericope in Leviticus Rabbah is preoccupied with this very question. Leviticus Rabbah 23, whose anchoring verse is Leviticus 18:3’s instruction to Israel to separate from surrounding peoples, explores the nature of Jewish difference and, in so doing, the nature of Jewishness itself. This midrash produces a variety of paradigms of Jewish identity that include moral probity, physical appearance, relationship to God, ritual life, political status, economics, demographics, and sexual practice, demonstrating that classical rabbinic notions of Jewish identity go well beyond the categories of religion and ethnicity that scholars typically apply.

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The Question of Jewishness

“Did Judaism exist in antiquity?” is a question that on the face of it seems absurd, but it has recently been argued that Judaism did not come into being until modernity. This argument is, on one level, a rather narrow one about terminology, dealing with the semiotic spectrum of *Ioudaismos* (Judaism) and *Ioudaioi* (Judeans? Jews?) and their equivalence to the modern versions of these terms. On another level, however, the terms are merely a convenient point of access for exploring the nature of Jewish identity in the ancient Mediterranean. The sharper our sense of the terms ancient Jews used to describe themselves, the sharper is our sense of the conceptual framework through which ancient Jews defined themselves.

These recent discussions about ancient Judaism have in common a tendency to characterize Second Temple period Jewishness in primarily ethnic terms and to push forward the date, in some cases by centuries and even millennia, by which Jewishness began to be understood as an abstract system or religion – thus the claim that “Judaism” as an –ism did not develop until relatively late. Martin Goodman points to Nerva’s alteration of the Jewish tax in the late first century C.E. as a possible catalyst for the “treatment of Jews in late antiquity more as a religion than as a nation.”¹ Like Goodman, Shaye Cohen sees a gradual “progression from ethnicity to religion,” though he sees its beginnings already in the Hasmonean dynasty and its culmination in the classical Rabbis.² For Seth Schwartz, Christianization has a profound impact on the gradual reconfiguration of Judaism as a “disembedded” religion, which he attributes primarily to a later period than do Goodman and Cohen.³ This is the case also for Steve Mason, who argues that the category of Judaism as a religion occurs for the first time only with Tertullian. Mason claims that Jews consistently represent themselves, by contrast, as a robust social entity replete with ancient traditions, laws, customs, priesthood, etc., throughout late antiquity.⁴ Daniel Boyarin also emphasizes the role of Christian authors in creating Judaism as

¹ Martin Goodman, “Nerva, the Fiscus Judaicus and Jewish Identity,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 79 (1989): 40-44 (p. 40). See critique in Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 B.C.E to 640 C.E.*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001, pp. 187-88.

² Shaye Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001, p. 3.

³ See Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society*, p. 179.

⁴ Steve Mason, “Jews, Judaeans, Judaizing, Judaism: Problems of Categorization in Ancient History” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 38:4-5 (2007): 457-512.

an autonomous entity extractable from the particular people who produced it.⁵ At the core of all this discussion is the category of religion and the question of when and how it came to be that belief was disembedded from the full social matrix of ancient Mediterranean life.

In this essay I will inject the underused collections of Midrash Aggadah into the conversation about ancient Jewish identity to propose that a pericope in Leviticus Rabbah, whose redaction is usually dated to late fifth-century Palestine, is preoccupied with this very theme. Leviticus Rabbah 23, whose lemmatic verse is Leviticus 18:3's instruction to the Israelites to separate from surrounding peoples, explores the nature of Jewish difference and, in so doing, the nature of Jewishness itself. I work under the assumption that to define how Jews are different from other people entails defining what a Jew is (though self-definition is not always or necessarily a negotiation of difference). I will show that this parashah produces a variety of paradigms of Jewish identity that include moral probity, physical appearance, relationship to God, ritual life, political status, economics, demographics, and sexual practice. The parashah, as I will read it, tries to naturalize these types of Jewish difference at the same time that the parashah also problematizes and undermines them, particularly through a theme of doubleness and twinning threaded through the second half of the parashah. This parashah, I will propose, helpfully complicates our sense of how ancient Jews represented their own Jewishness to themselves and possibly to others.

I will especially emphasize the intertextual strategies employed by the parashah's editors to produce these paradigms of difference. The most prominent of these strategies is a counterpoint the parashah creates between Lev. 18:3 and Song of Songs 2:2. The parashah thus participates in the larger pattern of Jews and Christians grappling with the overt eroticism of the Song of Songs as well as arguing with each other over whose romance with God it truly represents. The intertextual play between Lev. 18:3 and Song 2:2 involves a particular irony, since Leviticus 18 (and its partner chapter, Leviticus 20) are perhaps the most sustained set of sexual prohibitions in all of biblical law. Where one biblical text celebrates sexual desire, the other tries to control it. But I will point to another intertextual concern driving this parashah, and that is a fundamental ambiguity within Leviticus 18 itself over the scope and nature of its separatist instruction. Leviticus Rabbah's treatment pursues a variety of possibilities; my study

⁵ See Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006, and "Rethinking Jewish Christianity: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 99/1 (2009): 7-36.

will address how various cultural, moral, sexual, and other identities get linked in the course of the parashah and how earlier rabbinic traditions are drafted into these efforts.⁶ Finally, I will explore how these constructions of Jewish identity, rooted in canonical biblical and rabbinic teachings, may be reflecting and responding to social historical shifts in Amoraic Palestine, especially the rise of local Jewish and Christian communities organized around synagogues and churches. Of special interest here is the way that the compilers of this parashah represent the Rabbi's role in the production of Jewish identity. One part of the parashah can be read as a myth of origins for the Rabbi as Jewish ideal.

Goodman, Cohen, and others have crystallized the question of ancient Jewish identity's character, and now it remains to nuance the narrative. The passage of Leviticus Rabbah I discuss below furnishes the materials to do so, offering a rich menu of models of Jewish identity going far beyond the dichotomy of ethnicity versus religion referred to in the shorthand of scholarly discussion.⁷ Though the thematic unity of the individual parashot of Leviticus Rabbah has been long debated, I will argue that parashah 23 can be read as a virtual manifesto on the theme of Jewish difference even while it falls well short of making any clear and coherent claim about the nature of Jewish identity and even while its focus remains exegetical throughout.⁸ As David Stern has recommended, these parashot are best read as an anthologizing of culturally available approaches to the target verse rather than as unified thematic compositions.⁹ The passage also allows us to move beyond the frequently asked question, in treating the theme of Israel and the nations, of whether rabbinic authors advocated quietism or military action.¹⁰ The framing of this question, I would suggest, is a product of post-Holocaust and Zionist ideologies. In the discussion below I will ask not how the rabbinic composers view what actions should or should not be taken as a consequence of Jewish difference but how they view the very nature of that difference.

⁶ On LevR's character as a miscellany of earlier rabbinic traditions, see Burton L. Visotzky, *Golden Bells and Pomegranates: Studies in Midrash Leviticus Rabbah*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003, pp. 31-40.

⁷ Observing the caveat offered by Megan Hale Williams that the model of religion's production not be overly schematic – see her “No More Clever Titles : Observations on Some Recent Studies of Jewish-Christian Relations in the Roman World,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 99/1 (2009): 37-55.

⁸ For a relatively up to date discussion of the question of thematic unity in LevR, see Visotzky, *Golden Bells and Pomegranates*, pp. 10-22.

⁹ David Stern, “Anthology and Polysemy in Classical Midrash,” in *The Anthology in Jewish Literature*, edited by David Stern, New York: Oxford UP, 2004, pp. 108-39; and see Visotzky's somewhat similar conclusions, *ibid.*

¹⁰ This is the approach in Joseph Heinemann, “Profile of a Midrash: The Art of Composition in Leviticus Rabba,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39/2 (1971): 141-50 (pp. 148-49).

Scriptural Background and Overview of the Structure of LevR 23

Leviticus 18:3, the scriptural anchor of Leviticus Rabbah 23, issues what appears to be a global prohibition on Israelite assimilation:

Like the practice of the land of Egypt which you dwelled in, you should not practice, and like the practice of the land of Canaan to which I am bringing you, you should not practice, and in their laws you should not go.

Part One of the verse prohibits the Israelites from the practice of Egypt; Part Two prohibits them from the practice of Canaan; Part Three seems to summarize and to reinforce the first two parts. Leviticus 18:3, which stands perched at a pivotal moment in the Pentateuchal narrative between slavery in Egypt and entry into the promised land, proposes that Israel's struggle for national autonomy can be achieved only by rejection of other nations — but it does not clarify what exactly Israel must reject. The remainder of Leviticus 18 supplies one possibility: sexual sin. Chapter 18, like verse 3 in microcosm, is composed of three sections.¹¹ The first section, verses 1-5, demands adherence to the laws of God and rejection of the laws of Israel's neighbors. The second section, verses 6-23, sets forth a series of taboos, mostly against incest but also against intercourse between a man and a menstruating woman, between a man and another man's wife, between a man and another man, and between a man or a woman and an animal; the section also prohibits giving one's "seed" to Molekh.¹² The third section, verses 24-30, offers an exhortatory conclusion that returns to the themes of the first section and expands on them. Section 3, by synthesizing the themes and language of the previous two parts and referring explicitly to them, specifies the content of Lev 18:3's prohibitions and, with its fire-and-brimstone vision of expulsion, provides a great deal of incentive for obeying them. Nevertheless, Part 1's literary autonomy does suggest alternative interpretive possibilities that do not necessarily indicate sexual sin or the same ideological orientation found in the rest of the chapter.

While many of the parashot of Leviticus Rabbah stray literarily and thematically from their Leviticus lemma, parashah 23 stays close to Lev. 18:3's literary structure – its three parts and narrative arc – as well as its thematic concern – Israelite distinctiveness. The rabbinic

¹¹ On the criteria of division into three parts, see Baruch J. Schwartz, *The Holiness Legislation: Studies in the Priestly Code* (Hebrew), Jerusalem: Magnes, 1999, pp. 131–32.

¹² See Schwartz, *Holiness Legislation*, pp. 155–221, and Christophe Nihan, *From Priestly Torah to Pentateuch: A Study in the Composition of the Book of Leviticus*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007, pp. 431–44, on the order and language of the prohibitions.

composers of this parashah do not have to work too hard to find the relevance in their scriptural starting point, which deals not with the exotic priestly rituals typical of Leviticus but with the perennially compelling themes of Jewish difference and sexual intercourse.¹³ The parashah, which consists of thirteen units, can be divided roughly into two halves, with a pivot point at the beginning of the seventh unit, where Lev. 18:3 appears for the first time. (In divying it up this way I diverge from the typical division of a Leviticus Rabbah parashah into *petihta*, *gufa*, and closing messianic peroration, though the first half of the parashah is framed as an elaborate *petihta* for Lev. 18:3.) The first half of the parashah offers a series of readings of the simile from Song 2:2: “like a rose among the thorns” (this material appears almost verbatim in Song of Songs Rabbah on the verse). Echoing the narrative movement of the Leviticus lemma, the readings of Song 2:2 are narrativized into a chronological history of the people Israel, from the patriarchs to future redemption, with each reading situated in a subsequent historical period. While the rhetoric of the Song of Songs verse is worlds away from that of the Leviticus passage, the rabbinic transformation of the Song of Songs verse into a record of Israel’s distinctiveness among the nations (the “rose” figured as Israel, the “thorns” as the nations) pulls it conceptually closer to Leviticus and prepares the audience for the weaving together of the two verses that takes place in the center of the parashah in Unit Seven. From this point on, the parashah, which becomes more diffuse in structure, takes up the theme of sexual ethics and explores it from a variety of perspectives and literary approaches until the close of the parashah.

With the parashah’s turn to sexual ethics we run up against the much discussed question of the unity of the parashot of Leviticus Rabbah, which deserves some brief discussion. Joseph Heinemann’s strong stand on the thematic unity of Leviticus Rabbah’s parashot can be seen at least in part as a reaction to the centuries-old maligning of midrash by a host of Jewish and Christian attackers and, as David Stern has observed, an attempt to assimilate midrash to normative notions of authored literature.¹⁴ As Stern points out, Heinemann had no choice but to acknowledge the sometimes haphazard and even internally contradictory composition of the work, a problem he ingeniously resolved through the romanticist notion of paradox. But parashah 23 poses few problems in this regard – he categorizes it as among fifteen of the most

¹³ Scholarship on Leviticus exegesis tends to emphasize the problem of Leviticus’s archaic cultic concerns in the post-Temple period; see David Stern, “Anthology,” p. 113; Scott Swanson, “Fifth Century Patristic and Rabbinic Ethical Interpretation of Cult and Ritual in Leviticus,” Dissertation, Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, 2004; Visotzky, *Golden Bells and Pomegranates*, pp. 1-4.

¹⁴ David Stern, “Vayikra Rabbah and My Life in Midrash,” *Prooftexts* 21/1 (2001): 23-38 (p. 30).

tightly unified or integrated parashot within the corpus.¹⁵ But in order to do so, Heinemann elides the first half of the parashah's theme of Israelite distinctiveness and identifies its theme as that of the second half of the parashah, that is, sexual propriety.

Heinemann's exclusive attention to the second half of the parashah may be a product of the manuscript variations, which Margulies in his critical edition of *Leviticus Rabbah* discusses at some length. What I have called the first half of the parashah, Units One through Six and the beginning of Unit Seven, is absent in the best manuscripts, the British Museum manuscript that Margulies uses as a base text and the Vatican manuscript, which is related to it. Units Two through Five are absent in the related Paris manuscript. But as Margulies explains in his description of these manuscripts, such elisions are typical; the scribe would omit a passage that appears in other midrashic collections and instead, in effect, footnote the other collections, as is the case here with our deleted unit, whose parallel appearance in *Song of Songs Rabbah* is duly noted by the scribe. So while the first and second halves of our parashah seem to be autonomous units that were mixed and matched relatively early on, it is still plausible that the earliest versions of *Leviticus Rabbah* patched together these sections into the parashah as we more or less have it today in Margulies, despite the fact that Margulies had to supply material from other manuscripts into his own base text in order to produce it. Moreover, we can observe that a geniza fragment of this section, which may be earlier, does include the first seven units (though in a very broken text). But we may not go so far as to say, along with Heinemann, that the parashah thus represents a tightly unified and formally structured exploration of a theme. Rather, I will try to show, following Visotzky's suggestion that the parashot often have a common theme even while they do not have thematic unity, that the composer of this parashah collected and sculpted materials about a common theme – Jewish difference – in highly suggestive, deliberate ways.¹⁶

¹⁵ Joseph Heinemann, "The Art of Composition in *Leviticus Rabba*" (Hebrew), *Hasifrut* 2/4 (1971): 808-834 (p. 820).

¹⁶ *Golden Bells and Pomegranates*, e.g., pp. 15-20

Unit 1: Difference as Moral Rectitude

Like the practice of the land of Egypt” (Lev. 18:3).¹⁷ Rabbi Isaac opened “Like a rose among the thorns” (Song 2:2). Rabbi Isaac interpreted the verse as referring to Rebecca. “Isaac was forty years old when he took to wife Rebecca, daughter of Betuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean” (Gen. 25:20). Why does Scripture state “sister of Laban the Aramean”? And did it not already state “daughter of Betuel the Aramean”? And why does Scripture state “daughter of Betuel the Aramean”? And did it not already state “sister of Laban the Aramean”? Rather, the Holy One Blessed Be He said, “Her father is a deceiver (*ramay*) and her brother is a deceiver and the people of her place are deceivers and this righteous women emerged from among them and appears from among them like a rose among the thorns.”

The parashah begins by setting forth a mysterious “petihta” link between Lev. 18:3 and Song 2:2 that it does not decode until Unit Seven.¹⁸ Leaving its audience in suspense until then, the parashah gives its immediate attention to Song 2:2, whose hidden referent it pursues. The first period of Israelite history to which the parashah applies Song 2:2 is that of the patriarchs. Rabbi Isaac, a late third-/early fourth-century amora, reads the “rose” of Song of Songs as a reference to Rebecca, and the “thorns” of the verse as her father, brother, and townsfolk: Rebecca the righteous stands out among her corrupt countrymen as does the rose among the thorns. The reading hinges on the repetition of the descriptor “Aramean” for both Betuel, Rebecca’s father, and Laban, Rebecca’s brother. The descriptor repeats, in Rabbi Yitzhak’s word play on *arami* (Aramean) and *ramai* (deceiver), not only in order to describe the ethnic background of the characters but in order to describe their moral character as well, and not just of her father and brother, but of everyone around her. The analogy between Rebecca and the rose – “this righteous women emerged from among them and appears from among them like a rose

¹⁷ Translation of the parashah is mine, based on text in Mordecai Margulies, *Midrash Wayyikra Rabbah*, 2 parts, New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1993, pp. 526-48, with *JPS* translation used as basis for biblical quotations (with some modifications). For a synoptic chart of textual variants of Leviticus Rabbah online, see <http://www.biu.ac.il/JS/midrash/VR/outfiles/OUT23-05.htm>, and for a discussion of the text project, see Chaim Milikowsky and Margarete Schlüter, “Vayyikra Rabba through History: A Project to Study Its Textual Transmission,” in *Jewish Studies at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, Vol. 1, edited by Judit Targarona Borrás and Angel Sáenz-Badillos, Leiden: Brill, 1999, pp. 311-21.

¹⁸ On the petihta in LevR, see Visotzky, *Golden Bells and Pomegranates*, pp. 23-30. See Margulies’s note, p. 526, on the attribution of this petihta, which in all the manuscripts is to Rabbi Isaac but in the printed editions is anonymous; in Margulies’s view the attribution to Isaac is the product of a final redactor. It should be stated at the outset that a substantial degree of variation can be found regarding many of the attributed rabbinic names throughout the parashah; since the precise attribution is not crucial for the purposes of my discussion, I will not cite all the divergences from the body of Margulies’s text.

among the thorns” -- will be literarily borrowed later by Units Four and Seven to make comparable claims about Israelite distinctiveness.

While Rebecca is obviously ethnically linked to her father and brother, the midrashist proposes that her moral character sets her apart from them. The word play on *Arami* creates a conceptual connection between her ethnic affiliation and her moral orientation, however, so that the two seem to reflect each other. As a consequence, Rebecca almost comes to seem ethnically differentiated as well – because she is not a *ramai*, she seems not be an *arami* as well. Aramean is an ethnic label with a complicated biblical history since it is used in at least one case within the Pentateuch to describe Israel’s own ethnic origins (Deut. 26:5). The midrashist here seems both to acknowledge the closeness of the Aramean identity to the Israelite one and to distance the two when it represents Rebecca as being among them but not of them (“this righteous woman emerged from among them”). What defines Jewishness here is not the family one is born into but the moral traits one is born with, yet in an implicit circular logic these moral traits come to characterize one’s ethnicity. This first unit thus represents Israelite identity as clearly and inherently distinct from its degenerate surroundings, creating an ideal type of static Jewish difference constituted mainly by moral superiority that not only trumps ethnic affiliation but even seems to determine it. In concert with the gender dynamics of the Song of Songs verse, whose male speaker describes a female lover, a female progenitor plays the role of Jewish prototype, while the antithesis to it is represented by the surrounding men.

Unit 2: Physical Difference

Rabbi Elazar interpreted the verse as referring to those who departed from Egypt. “Like a rose among thorns” – Just as this rose is difficult to pick, so too when Israel was in Egypt, they were difficult to redeem. Thus it is written, “Or has any god ventured to go and take for himself one nation from the midst of another nation” (Deut. 4:34).

Rabbi Joshua son of Rabbi Nehemiah in the name of Rabbi Samuel ben Pazi: “One nation from the midst of another people” is not written here, or “one people from the midst of another nation,” but “one nation from the midst of another nation” – these are uncircumcised and those are uncircumcised; these are growers of blorits and those are growers of blorits; these are wearers of kilayim and those are wearers of kilayim. Therefore the [divine] attribute of justice would not have allowed Israel to be redeemed from Egypt.

In this unit, the third-century Rabbi Elazar applies Song 2:2 to a subsequent episode in Israelite history, the exodus from Egypt. While in the previous unit, the imagery of the Song of Songs remains static – like a rose among thorns, so Rebecca among her countrymen – here the imagery is more active, with an unnamed agent intending to pick the rose from amidst the thorns. In the analogy, just as the one who wishes to pick the rose encounters the thorns as an obstacle, so too God, wishing to redeem Israel from Egypt, is discouraged by Israel’s assimilation. Israel’s Egyptianizing habit is represented by three cases: not being circumcised, growing the blorit, and wearing kilayim or mixed materials. The story has shifted from the patriarchs to the nation, and the locus of distinctiveness has also shifted from moral qualities to physical appearance. The success of Israel’s separateness is also now reversed – in this unit, Israel fails to distinguish itself from those who surround them, unlike Rebecca whose distinction seems to be given.¹⁹ The intertextual frame for these claims is the rhetoric of Deuteronomy 43:4. In Rabbi Samuel ben Pazi’s midrash, the reuse of the same term *goy* to describe both the Israelites and the Egyptians is intended to teach that the two peoples had become alike. The repetitive rhetoric of the examples (it is hard to say whether they are meant to be exhaustive rather than illustrative) echoes the rhetoric found in the verse itself (“these are uncircumcised and these are uncircumcised, these are growers of the blorit and these are growers of the blorit...” echoes “a nation from amidst a nation”).

The likeness between Israelite and gentile could have been imagined, as in the previous unit, in moral terms but instead is imagined in this unit as something tangible, physical, related to the body. The first marker of Jewish difference mentioned, circumcision, is predictable, since it had been viewed since the Hasmonean period as *the* major distinguishing feature of Jews, as Shaye Cohen has discussed, with very strong roots in the Pentateuch and Prophets.²⁰ Jews are people who are circumcised, Greeks are people who are not, and a Jew’s attempt to hide his

¹⁹ In LevR 32, however, the Israelites are redeemed precisely because they do not assimilate! This parashah, which borrows and expands the tannaitic claim (found in the Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishma’el) that the Israelites changed neither their name nor language, nor practiced sexual perversity nor evil speech, deserves separate discussion.

²⁰ On circumcision in classical sources from biblical to rabbinic, see Shaye J. D. Cohen, *Why Aren’t Jewish Women Circumcised? Gender and Covenant in Judaism*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005, pp. 3-28. On the recognition in the Hebrew Bible that other peoples practice circumcision but that Israel’s circumcision alone has covenantal value, see Cohen, *Beginnings of Jewishness*, pp. 123-24.

circumcision or a Greek's attempt to get one means crossing to the other side.²¹ The Roman state under Domitian would eventually come to define Jews in precisely this way for the purposes of taxing them (that there was a Hadrianic ban on circumcision that functioned as an assault on Jewish identity has been questioned, however).²² The symbolic valence of circumcision for Paul, and the very practical question of who must, need not, or must not get one, have been the subject of extensive interrogation.²³ Early rabbinic texts, in commenting on Exodus 12:43-49's requirement that a resident alien be circumcised before he can eat the Passover sacrifice, conclude that circumcision is the very vehicle of conversion.²⁴ Mishnah Nedarim 3:11 goes so far as to claim that the term *arel* when commonly used refers even to circumcised gentiles and not even to uncircumcised Jews (relying on a host of scriptural sources, especially Jeremiah 9:25's "for all the nations are uncircumcised, but all the house of Israel are uncircumcised of heart"), such that uncircumcision comes to mean "non-Jew" even when that non-Jew is circumcised! Palestinian amoraic texts participate in this assumption about the centrality of circumcision to Jewishness.²⁵ In GenR 93:8, Joseph proves his identity to his brothers by showing his circumcision.²⁶ While circumcision thus has a long, powerful history as a marker of Jewish identity, we should also observe its obvious drawbacks as such -- first, that it is relatively hidden to the public, and, second, that its transgression remains passive.²⁷

This is not the case for growing the blorit, which is an act of commission rather than omission and has definite and continuous public visibility. It does not, however, have a long history of defining Jewishness. Mishnah Avodah Zarah 1:3 describes the day upon which a pagan shaves his beard or blorit as an idolatrous festival, and Tosefta Shabbat 6:1 includes "the one who makes a blorit" under the rubric of the "ways of the Amorites." With similar presuppositions, Tosefta Avodah Zarah 3:6 prohibits a Jew who cuts a gentile's hair from

²¹ *Beginnings of Jewishness*, pp. 39-40.

²² *Beginnings of Jewishness*, p. 42 (and see Goodman articles); on the Hadrianic persecution, see Ra'anan Abusch, "Negotiating Difference: Genital Mutilation in Roman Slave Law and the History of the Bar Kokhba Revolt," in *The Bar Kokhba War Reconsidered: New Perspectives on the Second Jewish Revolt against Rome*, edited by Peter Schäfer, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003, pp. 71-91.

²³ The scholarship on Paul's approach to circumcision is too extensive to list, even partially, but some recent scholarship includes James D. G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007, pp. 313-338. Todd A. Wilson, *The Curse of the Law and the Crisis in Galatia*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007, pp. 47-68.

²⁴ See *Beginnings of Jewishness*, pp. 125, 219.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 48. Parallel in GenR 93:10.

²⁷ See Cohen's discussion of its public visibility, pp. 47-48.

touching the blorit. These tannaitic texts point to a pagan haircutting practice with strong cultural resonances. When amoraic authors refer to the practice, have they renewed its meaning in light of haircutting practices of their own time, or do they view it as appropriately antiquated for the purposes of retrojecting it into biblical Egypt? Other amoraic midrashim also associate uncircumcision and blorit with each other and, in one case, identify them (along with a prohibition on sexual intercourse) as the substance of Pharaoh's harsh decrees against the Israelites, suggesting that uncircumcision and growing the blorit circulated as a motif describing the antithesis of Jewishness and representing a fundamental threat to it.²⁸ The two bodily practices, uncircumcision and blorit, are indeed isomorphic – each refers to an undesired excess of the body's growth (too much body) – and point to a trespassing of boundaries (perhaps echoing the initial imagery of the tangle of thorns that overwhelms the rose). They complement each other as markers of identity, since one is deeply grounded in Jewish history but neither public nor active, and the other is both public and active but lacks drama because of its relative newness.

The coupling of these two practices elsewhere and their conceptual similarity may explain why the parallel to this section in *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* does not include the third practice specified in *Leviticus Rabbah* 23, wearing kilayim or mixed species in the fabric of one's clothes. The problem of mixing, however, is conceptually related to the problem of excess, in that boundaries are blurred with both. Unlike the blorit but like circumcision, the source of kilayim is explicit in the Torah (Lev. 19:19; Deut. 22:9-11), though like the blorit but unlike circumcision, wearing kilayim is an act of commission rather than omission. An outstanding question is whether wearing kilayim would be more like the blorit or more like uncircumcision regarding its visibility – could one easily detect a garment made out of mixed species? Tannaitic materials suggest yes, since they deal at a couple points specifically with a garment whose mixed species cannot be detected.²⁹ Either way, the wearing of kilayim might seem to be a violation born more out of indifference than the desire to assimilate, but tannaitic materials associate it with trickery and defiance of God.³⁰ The prohibition seems to have been considered particularly incomprehensible and embarrassing – the *Sifra* (or, rather, a textual insertion into it called the *Mekhilta de-Arayot*) numbers the wearing of kilayim, along with the

²⁸ *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 9:4; *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* 28:11.

²⁹ *Tosefta Kilayim* 5:19, 24.

³⁰ *Mishnah Kilayim* 9:2, 9:8; *Tosefta Kilayim* 5:21; *Tosefta Horayot* 1:5.

eating of pork and the ceremonies for dissolving a levirate bond, purifying a leper, and sending out the scapegoat on the day of atonement, among God's laws that must not be challenged in the face of criticisms leveled against it by the evil inclination and by gentiles.³¹ The Sifra's defensive posture when it comes to wearing kilayim suggests a cultural politics surrounding it that made its observance a litmus test for obedience to God and resistance to gentile pressures, lending logic to its appearance here in this passage about assimilation. Important to note is that while kilayim is formulated in the Torah as a prohibition on mixing animals, plants, and fabrics, this passage speaks only of the last element, pointing to its concern for the presentation of a Jewish body.³² We should also notice that the kilayim is the only one of the three instances of assimilation mentioned that potentially describes a female Jewish body, since uncircumcision and the blorit as they are understood here involve physical features exclusive to men.

This unit thus articulates the public appearance of the male Jewish body as the locus of Jewish identity. The focus has shifted from moral to physical difference, though it may well be that the intention of the midrash is to moralize physicality so that choices about the cutting and clothing of the body come to take on a moral charge. This is explicit in the midrashist's conclusion that the wrong choices regarding cutting and clothing nearly robbed Israel of their redemption from Egypt. Nevertheless, the second unit's moralizing of physical appearance still contrasts with the first unit's concern for moral character per se. Redemption here is made reliant specifically on Jewish physical differentiation from gentiles, yet the message of this unit seems to be that despite Israel's failure to differentiate, redemption was still granted. We are left with an ideal of Jewish physical difference but with reluctant tolerance of its erasure. While in the previous unit, Song 2:2's imagery articulated Israel's moral superiority, here the verse underscores Israelite sameness. The rose as Rebecca stood out proudly among the thorns, while the rose as Israel in Egypt has gotten stuck among them. But a rose is still a rose, and God affirms Israel's uniqueness even when they themselves do not.

³¹ Sifra Aharei Mot 9, Perek 13:10.

³² Tosefta Avodah Zarah 8:8 (parallel in PT Kilayim 1:7 [27b]) distinguishes among the different kinds of kilayim, permitting Noahides to wear mixed fabrics and sow mixed seeds but not to mix animals or graft trees.

Unit 3: Difference as Obedience to God

Rabbi Judah son of Rabbi Simon in the name of Rabbi Azariah interpreted the verse as referring to Israel before Mount Sinai. “Like a rose among the thorns” – [this is similar] to a king who had an orchard. He planted in it rows and rows of figs, a row of vines, and a row of pomegranates. After some days the king descended to see his vineyard; he found it full of thorns and thistles. He appointed for it trimmers to trim it, and he found in it one rose born from a rose bush. He took it and smelled it and his soul was comforted by it, and he said, “This rose is worthy of having the whole orchard saved on its merit.” Thus the entire world was created only for the Torah. For twenty-six generations the Holy One Blessed Be He caused things to grow in his world but he found it full of thorns and thistles, for example, the generation of Enosh and generation of the flood and the Sodomites, and he sought to destroy it and to decimate it, as it is said, “The Lord sat enthroned at the flood” (Ps. 29:10). And he found in it one rose born from a rose bush, and this was Israel, who were in the future to stand before Mount Sinai and to say before the Holy One Blessed Be He “All that the Lord has spoken we will do and obey” (Ex. 24:7). The Holy One Blessed Be He said, “Israel is worthy of having the whole world saved on their merit.”

The next unit telescopes forward to Israel standing at Sinai, with Song 2:2 once again furnishing the core image of one who seeks to pick a rose from amidst the thorns. This unit conjures up a king *mashal* to complicate the core image.³³ A king who has planted rows and rows of fruits descends to his orchard only to find it overgrown with thorns and thistles, just as God, we discover in the unpacking of the *mashal*, surveys the world he created only to find it full of villains and sinners over the course of many generations. But just as the king, in a stroke of good fortune, clears away the thorns to find one beautiful rose to comfort his soul, so too does God encounter Israel at Sinai prepared to pledge their loyalty to him. God, like the king, decides to save the whole out of love for the one.

In synchronizing and condensing the narratives of early Genesis (Enosh, the flood, Sodom -- the midrash describes twenty-six generations), this unit plays with space and time. The *mashal* is infused with some tension, since the king plants a variety of fruits but no flowers, making the appearance of the rose somewhat startling. The mystery of the rose’s origins transfers to Israel’s emergence from among the many generations of evildoers and dramatizes Israel’s difference from them. The *mashal* trades in doubles – the *kotzin ve-dardarin* (thorns and

³³ For recent discussion of king *mashals*, see Alan Appelbaum, “I Clothed You in Purple: The Rabbinic King-Parables of the Third-Century Roman Empire,” Dissertation, Yale University, Program in Judaic Studies, 2007.

thistles) appear as a double twice, provoking God's wish *le-harimo u-le-harivo* (to decimate and destroy), which is averted by Israel's double declaration of obedience from Ex. 24:7, *na'aseh ve-nishma* (we will do and we will hear).³⁴ What the literary patterns point towards as the mark of Israel's distinction is their submission to God and the covenantal relationship that comes from it. The Israel found here, on whose merit the entire world was rescued from God's destruction, is a much superior people to the one of the previous unit, who just barely earned their exodus from Egypt. The contradiction between the two units seems to suggest that whether Israel is deserving in its distinctiveness or undeserving in its sameness, God will redeem them. But whereas in the previous unit, that redemption hinged on Israel's physical difference, here it depends on Israel's distinctive obedience to God.

Unit 4: Difference as Ritual Competence

Rabbi Hanan of Tzipori interpreted the verse as referring to *gemilut hasadim*. Ten who entered a synagogue to pray and they did not know to recite the prayers for the Shema (*pores al shema*) and to pass before the ark (to recite the *amidah*), and there was among them one person who knew how to recite the prayers for the Shema and to pass before the ark – he appears among them like a rose among the thorns. [It compares] to ten who entered to bring in the bride and they did not know how to bless the blessing of grooms, and there was among them one person who knew how to bless the blessing of grooms – he appears among them like a rose among the thorns. [It compares] to ten who entered the house of mourning and they did not know how to bless the blessing of mourners, and there was among them one who knew how to bless the blessing of mourners – he appears among them like a rose among the thorns.

Rabbi Elazar Hisma went to a certain place. They said to him, "Does Rabbi know how to recite the prayers for the Shema?" He said to them, "No." "Does Rabbi know how to draw near [to the ark]?" He said to them, "No." They said to him, "For nothing do they call you Rabbi." His face paled. He went to Rabbi Akiva and his face looked sick. He (Rabbi Akiva) said to him, "Why does your face look sick?" He (Rabbi Elazar) repeated to him the matter. He (Rabbi Akiva) said to him, "Does Rabbi wish to learn?" He (Rabbi Elazar) said to him, "Yes." Once he had learned he went [back] there. They said to him, "Does Rabbi know how to recite the prayers for the Shema?" He said to them, "Yes." "Does Rabbi know how to draw near [to the ark]?" He said to

³⁴ *Dardar* echoes the *dor* that it is meant to metaphorize.

them, “Yes.” They said, “Behold Elazar has received a steel edge (*hasim*).”³⁵ And they called him Rabbi Elazar the steel-edged (*hisma*).

Rabbi Jonah would teach his students even the blessing of grooms and even the blessing of mourners, to say, “Be strong in all things.”

This unit disrupts the chronological scheme and applies Song 2:2 not to a period of Israel’s history but to one of its attributes – *gemilut hasadim*, translatable here as service to communal ritual needs.³⁶ The unit also disrupts the theme of Israel’s difference from other nations and instead explores internal Jewish difference. The unit gives three illustrations of a “rose” who serves communal needs and then recounts a related story about a particular rabbi who learns to do so. Each illustration features ten people (the quorum defined by Mishnah Megillah 4:3 for the rituals mentioned here as well as others) who embark upon some important communal ritual – in the first case, prayer in the synagogue; in the second case, marrying off a bride; and in the third case, mourning the dead. In each case, the ten people, who we learn are the “thorns” of Song 2:2, do not have the skills to accomplish the ritual task at hand. Yet in each case there emerges one from among the ten, the “rose,” who has mastery of the ritual. The cases do not feature the ritual expert actually performing the ritual, suggesting that the emphasis is less on the doing than on the knowing. The cases conform to each other through their repeating language (*asarah she-nikhnesu le- . . . ve-lo hayu yodin . . . ve-hayah ba-hen ehad she-haya yode’a*), some of it repeating from the first unit (*domeh benehem ka-shoshanah ben ha-hohim*). Like that of the first unit, the imagery from Song 2:2 remains static and simple, describing an ontological difference between a single individual and those who surround him. That difference is defined here in terms of Jewish ritual and liturgical practice (what today we might call life cycle rituals and synagogue skills).³⁷

The story of Rabbi Elazar Hisma that follows is set squarely in the high tannaitic period and as such serves as a myth of origins for the role of rabbi in the amoraic period. It is the only

³⁵ See Jastrow, s.v. *h-s-m* (Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006).

³⁶ In Margulies’s explanation (p. 530): One is kind to people by allowing them to fulfill their obligations in blessings and prayer.

³⁷ The precise ritual content and context of all these phrases are disputed: for *porsin al shema* and *over lifnei ha-tevah*, see Mishnah Berakhot 5:3-4; for *birkat hatanim* and *birkat avelim*, see Tosefta Megillah 3:14; BT Megillah 23b; BT Ketubbot 7b, 8b.

major section of the parashah to be related in Aramaic, lending a verisimilitude to the tale.³⁸ The implicit question addressed by the story is to what extent the authority of the rabbi is constituted by or even includes the communal ritual competence featured above. In the narrative, the authority of Rabbi Elazar Hisma is undermined when he fails to show ritual competence (in this instance, with respect to the prayers of Shema and the Amidah) within the community that he visits.³⁹ The members of the community challenge his right to the title of rabbi – “For nothing do they call you Rabbi!” – making it clear that in their view the office of rabbi is constituted precisely by the ritual expertise that Rabbi Elazar lacks. We would assume that Rabbi Elazar Hisma, at least before this excursion, had not viewed his own rabbinic duties in the same way, nor must have the rabbinic masters who trained him. But rather than counter-challenge the community’s perception of the role of rabbi, Rabbi Elazar feels ashamed before them (“he turned pale”) and seeks the guidance of the great Rabbi Akiva, who corrects Rabbi Elazar’s ritual deficiencies and allows him to return triumphant to the community who had dismissed him. His triumph is so decisive that it earns him a new name, Hisma, or “steel-edged”, though its biblical meaning – “muzzle” – also derisively points to his former silence (which is ironically mimicked in his one-word answers to the community’s questions both before and after he has gained his ritual proficiency).⁴⁰ The story of Rabbi Elazar’s reinvention as a ritual expert under communal pressure seems to self-consciously mark a new moment in the handling of the role of rabbi. The story is not interested in what it changed from, only what it changed to, and that is the local ritual expert. In an addendum to the story describing a particular amora’s rigor in teaching “even the blessing of grooms and the blessing of mourners,” the office of rabbi has been successfully transformed. Nevertheless, the midrash’s rhetoric – “even” these blessings – and its conclusion that rabbis should be “strong in all things” suggest a continuing sense of the marginality of such rituals to rabbinic training on the part of the rabbis who preside over it.

This story’s theme – the rabbis’ decision to reinvent themselves as ritual experts and an ongoing ambivalence about that decision – is corroborated by recent historiographical work that attributes to the amoraic period the rise of the local synagogue and the rise of local Jewish

³⁸ For description and explanation of the patterns of Aramaic use in LevR, see Visotzky, *Golden Bells and Pomegranates*, pp. 41-47.

³⁹ The language here is *le-mikrav* instead of *la'avor lifnei ha-tevah*, but the phrases are probably intended to be equivalent; see Margulies’s note on *le-mikrav*.

⁴⁰ The nature of the word-play on *h-s-m* here has been debated; Margulies understands it to mean that Elazar has strengthened and developed – see his note for other references.

communities as foci of loyalty and identity. The archaeology of the period shows synagogues or churches at the center of most villages of Palestine, though the dating of these buildings has been greatly debated.⁴¹ Two interesting and related questions for our purposes is, one, how do rabbis recognize and evaluate this shift in Jewish communal life and their own role within it and, two, what role does the shift play in the rabbinic construction of Jewish difference, if any.⁴² The contextualization of Rabbi Elazar Hisma's story here may be entirely fortuitous and not the product of any real thematic connection between internal Jewish difference and difference between Jews and gentiles. On the other hand, if we wish to read the editor's anthological choices more strongly, two possibilities present themselves: first, that Jewish difference can be defined by competence in Jewish communal rituals, and, second, that the rabbi should play a central role in presiding over that difference. This story speaks of a Jewish community ignorant in inherited Jewish ritual administered by a rabbi whose authority is grounded in his relative ritual expertise and who consequently plays the part of paradigmatic "Jew" (resonating quite eerily with modern Jewish life). The threat posed and resolved within the story is that the rabbi initially appears to be just as ritually ignorant as the community he serves. The problem of sameness and difference is therefore formulated primarily in terms of the rabbi and other Jews but might map onto the dilemmas of difference between Jews and gentiles, with the ritually expert rabbi equivalent to "Jew" and the ritually ignorant community equivalent to "gentile."

Unit 5a: Difference in Politics and Economics

Rabbi Hanina son of Rabbi Idi interpreted the verse as referring to these generations. "Like a rose among the thorns" – Just as this rose at the time when the north wind blows it, it bends it southward and the thorn pricks it, and at the time when the south wind blows it, it bends it northward and the thorn pricks it, and still its heart is directed (*mekhaven*) up, so too even though Israel is subjugated among the nations of the world with taxes (*pissin, gulgl'a'ot, dimasot*), still their heart is directed (*mekhaven*) towards their father in heaven. And thus David said, "My heart is firm (*nakhon*), O God; my heart is firm; I will sin, I will chant a hymn" (Ps. 57:8). What is written after it? "My eyes are ever towards the Lord, etc." (Ps. 25:15).

⁴¹ See Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society*, pp. 203-39.

⁴² On the rabbis' relationship to the synagogue, see Seth Schwartz's conclusions, *ibid*, pp. 238-39.

The chronological scheme resumes with the fifth unit, which applies Song 2:2 to “these generations,” transporting its relevance from the mythological biblical past to the lived present. Once again the imagery of the rose among thorns is dynamic, though this time the action is supplied not by the person wishing to pick the rose but by the wind buffeting it about. The rose as Israel and the thorns as the gentile nations remain the same, but the shift in spotlight from the one who picks the rose to the thorns that prick it moves attention away from Israel’s relationship to God and towards Israel’s relationship to the gentiles. The thorns represent not the gentiles themselves but the multiple taxes that they levy upon the Jews, like so many painful pricks to the delicate rose. Nevertheless, the imagery argues for ultimate stasis – while the rose may bend left and right, it always remains essentially upright, just as Israel, oppressed by the gentile nations, always remains faithful to God. Word plays criss-cross through the analogy – the midrashist draws on the double-meaning of *lev* (“heart”) to describe the interior of both a human being and a plant, and he uses the same root as the Psalms verse, *kh-v-n*, to describe the heart’s loyalty.

As we found in the third unit, the loyalty of Israel to God distinguishes them, but here in this fifth unit that loyalty is tested with heavy taxes. The unit uses three different words for taxes, one biblical, one borrowed from Greek, and one borrowed from Latin.⁴³ The linguistic three-pack emphasizes the transhistorical quality of the burden though at the same time historicizes each set of taxes. That these taxes may have been tailored to Jews at least early on in imperial history, levied on an individual specifically because he or she could be identified as a Jew, may help to explain the important role taxes play in this unit’s definition of Jewish difference.⁴⁴ There does not seem to have been a unique Jewish tax by the time of this midrash’s redaction, so one has to wonder how these discrimination complaints would have played to fifth-

⁴³ Variants also include *arnoniyot* (the *annona*, or *militaris*, a military tax; see Michael Avi-Yonah, *The Jews under Roman and Byzantine Rule: A Political History of Palestine from the Bar Kokhba War to the Arab Conquest*, Jerusalem, Magnes, 1984, pp. 96-97). Parallel texts mentioning similar groupings of taxes include: GenR 1:14; LevR 33:6 (Margulies, p. 769); PT Peah 1:1 (15b); PT Shevi’it 4:3 (35b) // PT Avodah Zarah 4:10 (44b). The language of *gulgulta* comes from the biblical *gulgolet*, poll tax: Ex. 38:26, Num. 3:47. *Dimasot* comes from the Greek *dēmosia*, state-tax (or land tax, *tributum solis*, see Avi-Yonah, *Jews under Roman and Byzantine Rule*, p. 95). *Pissin* is the Latin *pissim/pissin*, described by Jastrow as “a Roman tax laid on the community and distributed by the latter according to assessments.” For further discussion of these terms, see Samuel Krauss, *Persia and Rome in the Talmud and Midrashim* (Hebrew), Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-Rav Kook, 1947, pp. 261, 263, 265.

⁴⁴ When the *fiscus judaicus* or Jewish tax was finally lifted remains unclear; see Goodman, “Nerva,” who mentions the fourth century as a possible terminus ad quem. Joshua Schwartz speculates that Jews would have been burdened with more taxes in towns where they were the majority, which could have been perceived as discrimination against Jews; see *Jewish Settlement in Judaea after the Bar-Kochba War and until the Arab Conquest* (Hebrew), Jerusalem: Magnes, 1986, p. 62.

century rabbinic audiences (though grumbling about taxes is universally beloved).⁴⁵ Still, even though Jews were not taxed as Jews in the late Roman empire, they would have been targeted as provincial residents of relatively low status. Averil Cameron explains that the essential principle of Roman taxes throughout all periods of the Empire is that the higher one's status, the lower should be one's tax burden.⁴⁶ Ironically, the complaint about taxes we find in this midrash was one of the least uniquely Jewish activities a rabbi might engage in, as A. H. M. Jones writes: "Rarely in recorded history has there been a louder and more persistent chorus of complaint against the taxes than under the later Roman Empire."⁴⁷

Whether a uniquely Jewish tax burden would have resonated for the parashah's audience or not, one has to imagine that the affirmation of Jewish loyalty to God would have. But the metaphor of loyalty, the weathered but still upright rose, may betray some insecurity. Does the rose blown back and forth by the winds in fact keep its "heart" directed upward? The fragility of the image resonates for the nimshal – do individuals within a social group experiencing economic hardship in fact maintain their allegiance to that group if the opportunity arises to leave it? Historiography of an earlier period suggests that there were some Jews content to hide their Jewishness in order to evade the tax burden associated with it.⁴⁸ Jewish difference is configured here, through the vehicle of the Psalms verses, as an interior posture of faithfulness in the face of oppressive political and economic conditions.

Unit 5b: Difference as Demography

Rabbi Avihu interpreted the verse as referring to the redemption of future days. "Like a rose among the thorns" – Just as this rose, any time that its owner wishes to pick it, he burns around it and picks it, "The Lord has summoned against Jacob his enemies all

⁴⁵ Especially since the tax burden in Palestine may have been significantly lighter after the Empire's split at the end of the fourth century and the East's subsequent liberation from the heavy tax load associated with the expensive military campaigns in the West; see Uzi Leibner, *Settlement and History in Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine Galilee*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009, p. 370.

⁴⁶ Averil Cameron, *The Later Roman Empire: AD 284-430*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1993, p. 37.

⁴⁷ A. H. M. Jones, *The Roman Economy: Studies in Ancient Economic and Administrative History*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974, p. 82 (originally printed as "Over-Taxation and the Decline of the Roman Empire," *Antiquity* 33 (1959): 39-43).

⁴⁸ The locus classicus is Suetonius, *Domitian* 12.2 "... those were prosecuted who without publicly acknowledging that faith yet lived as Jews, as well as those who concealed their origins and did not pay the tribute levied upon their people..." (*Suetonius*, translated by J. C. Rolfe, Loeb Classical Library, New York: Putnam, 1920, pp. 365, 67). See discussion in Martin Goodman, "The Fiscus Judaicus and Gentile Attitudes to Judaism in Flavian Rome," in *Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome*, edited by Jonathan Edmondson, Steve Mason, and James Rives, New York: Oxford UP, 2005, and Goodman, "Nerva."

about him (*sevivav*)” (Lam. 1:17), for example, Halamo to Nava, and Susita to Tiberias, and Castra to Haifa, and Jericho to Na’aran, and Lod to Ono. Thus it is written, “I set this Jerusalem in the midst of nations, with countries round about her (*u-sevivoteha*)” (Ezek. 5:5). In the future when redemption will come to Israel, what will the Holy One Blessed Be He do for them? He will bring the fire and burn what is around her. Thus it is written, “People shall be burnings of lime, thorns cut down that are set on fire” (Isa. 33:12).

The second half of this unit sets Song 2:2 in the only period of history left to the parashah, the future. To the rose imagery is restored the figure of the owner who wishes to pick the rose but must somehow evade the thorns. While the king of the earlier *mashal* hires gardeners to cut them, this owner takes fire to the thorns and burns everything surrounding the rose. The *nimshal* presents a future conflagration in which God destroys all the nations and plucks out Israel from among them.

But the holocaust imagined here is in fact a surgical strike. Five sets of neighboring towns are presented as examples (and here it is clear that they are illustrative and not exhaustive), in which one partner is understood to be Jewish and the other gentile.⁴⁹ The couplets cover a relatively wide swath of the geography of northern and central Palestine.⁵⁰ The intertexts from Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Isaiah (all working in concert with the base intertext from Song of Songs) allow the midrashist to visualize, like the Israelite houses passed over in Egypt, the Jewish towns of Palestine preserved as the gentile – presumably Christian – ones go

⁴⁹ Apparently the Christian town is listed first, then the Jewish one, though the case of Lod, as Joshua Schwartz points out, is surprising, since Lod had been a major Jewish town for centuries. See the chapter on Lod and Ono in *Jewish Settlement*, pp. 69-80, and, on this text, p. 77; see also *Lod (Lydda), Israel: From its Origins through the Byzantine Period*, Oxford: Tempus Reparatum, British Archaeological Reports International Series 571, 1991. See historical discussion of this text also in Hagith Sivan, *Palestine in Late Antiquity*, New York: Oxford UP, 2008, pp. 60, 98.

The contiguity of this unit about municipal identity with the previous one about taxes may not be coincidental, since city budgets were the source of heavy tax burdens; see Joshua Schwartz, *Jewish Settlement*, p. 62. And on the municipal focus of Roman taxes, see Walter Goffart, *Caput and Colonate: Towards a History of Late Roman Taxation*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974, p. 93-94; Goffart argues that the challenge to the imperial administration by the growth in power of local governments is in fact what drove the new tax schemes developed in the fourth and fifth centuries.

⁵⁰ Parallel in Lamentations Rabbah 1:17, 52. On the identification and location of these towns, see notes in Margulies and Sivan (p. 98, n. 190); and see Michael Avi-Yonah (with assistance of Shmuel Safrai), *Carta's Atlas of the Period of the Second Temple, the Mishnah, and the Talmud*, Jerusalem: Carta, 1966, p. 95, map 147; and Yoram Tsafrir, Leah Di Segni, and Judith Green, *Tabula Imperii Romani: Iudaea Palaestina: Eretz Israel in the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine Periods: Maps and Gazetteer*, Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1994 (for entries on the towns listed here with thorough description of location, archaeological remains, and literary evidence, see pp. 101, 141-44, 147, 171, 197-98, 249-50).

up in smoke. The metaphor of Lam. 1:17 has a single figure, Jacob, representing all of Israel, surrounded by enemies. The midrashist, perhaps playing with the plural of *sevivav* in the verse, atomizes and normalizes the language of Lamentations to refer to everyday living conditions in a host of Jewish towns in amoraic Palestine. Ezekiel 5:5 uses the same language of *saviv* (surrounding), pointing to this unit's concern with Jewish space, in contrast to the previous unit's emphasis on Jewish uniqueness in time. Both the Lamentations and Ezekiel passages emphasize Jerusalem as the paradigmatic Israelite space, while the midrashist has adapted his reading to contemporaneous patterns of settlement. The previous verse in Ezekiel speaks of a fiery destruction, and the subsequent verse, in language it shares with Lev. 18:1-5, speaks of the *huqim* and *mishpatim* that Israel has disobeyed, making Ezek. 5:5 particularly apt here. In fact, its appearance feels ironic, since in the Ezekiel passage Israel has surpassed the surrounding gentiles in wickedness, while in the LevR parashah Israel stands superior among them. Isaiah 33:12, with which the midrashist concludes the unit, pulls the various textual and thematic strands together. While in fact the subject of Isaiah's fiery vision is ambiguous (Is it the sinful Judaeans? Is it their enemies? Is it both?), for the midrashist it is clear that the "peoples" to whom Isaiah refers are the gentile nations that surround Israel.⁵¹ In the midrashist's intertextual play, Isaiah's thorn simile, mimicking that of Song 2:2, describes the divine incineration of non-Jews.⁵² The web of intertexts thus seems to lead inexorably forward to the fiery end of the five Christian towns and satisfyingly back to the rose amidst the thorns from Song 2:2.

The tension that runs throughout the passage derives from the proximity of the towns in each couplet – is it really possible for God to preserve one town and to decimate another when the two sit next to each other? Can the fires of destruction be so carefully controlled? The tension in the image speaks to the tension of Jewish life in amoraic Palestine, which was closely intertwined with Christian yet, like in the fiery redemption imagined here, definitively separate. While the passage's attribution is to a relatively early amora (the identity of "Rabbi Avihu" is in fact unknown, if the text is correct), the midrashist seems to be accurately reflecting the shift mentioned above in fifth-century Palestine towards small municipal Jewish communities as the locus of Jewish loyalty and identity and the concurrent rise of comparably differentiated

⁵¹ See Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible, New York: Doubleday, 2000, pp. 439-41.

⁵² The root *k-s-h*, to cut down or trim, in the Isaiah verse echoes the earlier use of the same root in the king parable of Unit Three.

Christian communities.⁵³ Christian writers represent a similar Jewish/Christian tension among the very same towns of Palestine – a sixth-century biography of a fourth-century monastic figure describes the “insults borne (Jericho’s Christian community) at the hand of the Hebrews of Noeron.”⁵⁴ All signs, including our midrashic passage, point to the growing tendency among Jews and Christians in late antiquity to envision themselves in geographic, demographic, or territorial terms, with the most striking and well-known examples being Eusebius’s *Onomasticon*, the Rehov inscription, and the Madaba mosaic map. In such texts, Jews and Christians, in sometimes explicit competition with each other, laid claim to the land on which they lived.

At the same time, the midrashist may also be creating something of a construct of “Jewish towns” and “Christian towns.” Lod, for instance, which in the list here functions as a quintessential Christian town, was for a long stretch of time in fact one of the most Jewish towns in the region and probably still had some Jewish settlement at the time of this midrash’s redaction.⁵⁵ Yet the midrashist would happily wipe out Lod! The midrashist conveniently ignores any Jewish population that might persist in Lod and any Christian or otherwise gentile population that might have infiltrated Ono, in what Seth Schwartz has called an “ideology of self-enclosure.”⁵⁶ The archaeological record, which points to the flipping of buildings between synagogue and church (not to mention sometimes close proximity between synagogue and church within the same city, such as at Capernaum, Rama, and Nazareth) and flipping of burial grounds between Jewish and Christian, suggests not necessarily that Christian and Jewish identities were fluid, though they may have been, but at least that they were geographically

⁵³ Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society*, p. 207: “Most villages came to be either Jewish or Christian, or perhaps pagan,” and see conclusions about the Galilee in Mordechai Aviam, “Distribution Maps of Archaeological Data from the Galilee: An Attempt to Establish Zones Indicative of Ethnicity and Religious Affiliation,” in *Religion, Ethnicity, and Identity in Ancient Galilee: A Region in Transition*, edited by Jürgen Zangenberg, Harold W. Attridge, and Dale B. Martin, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007, pp. 115-32.

The attribution is in some manuscripts the more familiar (and therefore the easier reading) late third-, early fourth-century Rabbi Abahu.

⁵⁴ See Sivan, *Palestine*, p. 60.

⁵⁵ See *Jewish Settlement*, pp. 77-79, where Joshua Schwartz observes that despite Lod’s transformation into a Christian city, its lack of prominence as a center for churches and monasteries was probably due to ongoing Jewish presence there, which is supported also by literary evidence.

⁵⁶ Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society*, p. 287. Leibner also discusses a growing Christian presence in Tiberias in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, which according to our passage is a Jewish city (*Settlement and History*, p. 379).

unstable.⁵⁷ The midrashist is therefore not simply reflecting social developments but also reflecting *on* them: Israel's uniqueness is depicted in terms of its multiple municipal identities, which are here consolidated and purified, and the imagined ideal is that these "Jewish" towns stand someday alone without their Christian neighbors.

Units 6-7a: Leviticus 18:3 and Song of Songs 2:2

Rabbi Berekhiah said: The Holy Blessed Be He said to Moses: Say to them, to Israel, my son, when you were in Egypt you were like a rose among thorns; now you are coming to the land of Canaan, you should be like a rose among thorns. Be cautious not to practice like the practice of these and not like the practices of those. Thus Moses cautioned Israel and said to them, "Like the practice of the land of Egypt which you dwelled in, you should not practice, and like the practice of the land of Canaan to which I am bringing you, you should not practice, and in their laws you should not go" (Lev. 18:3).

Rabbi Isaac opened: "O mortal, once there were two women (daughters of one mother)" (Ezek. 23:2). The two of them are from one mother; the two of them are from one embryo. That is according to what it says, "The descendants of Ham: Cush, Mizraim (Egypt), Put, and Canaan" (Gen. 10:6).

Leading up to the pivotal Unit Seven is Unit Six's pastiche or medley of readings of Song 2:2 as a motive of Jewish difference.⁵⁸ While the first part of Unit Seven, as it stands alone, does not seem particularly clever, as a pivot point within the parashah the passage is ingenious. The unit introduces Lev. 18:3 as a natural next step in the unfolding series of readings of Song 2:2 and almost unnoticeably turns the audience's attention from the latter text to the former. In the process, Rabbi Berekhiah's comment provides an inventive reading of the two scriptural texts in light of each other. Song 2:2 is narrativized and historicized but not in the same way that it has

⁵⁷ See Sivan, *Palestine*, p. 32, and Leibner, *Settlement and History*, p. 371, on site transformations, which in the course of Byzantine period Palestine went mostly from Jewish to Christian.

⁵⁸ In Unit Six, the chronological structure of the petihta has been abandoned, and the readings offered here seem duller, less sophisticated, and more haphazard (to be expected after the introductory term *davar aher*). The first four readings ignore the thorns altogether, describing the rose in various domestic settings, which it then applies to such "garden-variety" rabbinic themes as *mitzvot* and good deeds, redemption, and this world and the next. Internal Jewish difference (*tzadikim* vs. all of Israel) and Jewish/gentile difference are jumbled together, and, indeed, the theme of difference is dropped almost completely in the first few readings, though the last reading does stand out for its more sophisticated literary style and for its return to the theme of Jewish difference and, especially, Jewish political subordination.

been throughout the parashah to cover the sweep of Israelite and Jewish history. Here the verse is absorbed into God's speech to Moses at the moment of encounter described by Lev. 18:3. As such, the rose among thorns is a metaphor that God offers to Israel to help them to understand God's will. God relates the metaphor both to Israel's past life in Egypt (you were like a rose among thorns), as a description, and projects it forward to instruct Israel regarding their future life in Canaan (you should be like a rose among thorns), as a prescription (though Lev. 18:3 itself speaks prescriptively with respect to both Egypt and Canaan). In this reading, Song 2:2 becomes a kind of hidden transcript for Lev. 18:3 – God's demand for Israelite difference encodes within it the poetic image of Song 2:2, which in turn takes on a highly social and historical meaning.

Not only Song 2:2 but also Lev. 18:3 is transformed by Rabbi Berekhiah's cross-reading. In providing the backdrop for Leviticus 18, the poetry of Song 2:2 softens and enlivens its legal language. Song of Songs 2:2 also justifies or naturalizes Leviticus 18's demand for Israelite difference – the difference between the gentiles and Israel is as plain as that between thorns and a rose, whose delicate beauty must be painstakingly protected. A conceptual paradox is also produced, however – if Israel's difference from gentiles is as a natural as that of a rose amidst thorns, then why must Israel strive to preserve it? Part of the answer lies in the rhetoric of the passage, which subtly modifies the language of Leviticus to produce a picture of lovely intimacy between Israel and God that serves as its own continuing justification of Israelite uniqueness.⁵⁹ In the midrashist's rewriting of verse 3, God injects not only the Song of Songs imagery but also addresses Israel as "my son," and uses the exhortative "be careful." God's instruction becomes less a legal prohibition than a caution, a homily, a parent's concerned warning to a child.

While the midrashist may be interested in softening the tone of Lev. 18:3, he also succeeds in resolving some of the textual questions it raises. One interpretive crux addressed by many Leviticus interpreters is the equivalence it creates between Egypt and Canaan: If Egypt's behaviors are so despicable as to be proscribed by God, does it not seem a surprising coincidence that Canaan's are too? What is it about both Egypt and Canaan that makes them equally despised before God? The midrashist's answer is to attribute to Israel an inherent and natural specialness akin to that of the rose among thorns, so that Israel must always stand out among

⁵⁹ On the theme of *havivut* or intimacy in midrash, see David Stern, "Midrash and the Language of Exegesis," in *Midrash and Literature*, edited by Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986, pp. 105-126 (esp. pp. 115ff.), and Rachel Anisfeld, *Sustain Me with Raisin-Cakes: Pesikta deRav Kahana and the Popularization of Rabbinic Judaism*, Leiden: Brill, 2009.

whatever peoples who surround them. Rabbi Isaac's subsequent midrash makes this claim even more explicit, invoking Ezek. 23:2 and Gen. 10:6 to argue that Egypt and Canaan are coupled because they are offspring of the same mother. In the course of explaining the parallel between Egypt and Canaan, the midrashist also addresses the more fundamental question of the nature and scope of the prohibition of Lev. 18:3, which in the midrashist's view points to a broad, existential sense of difference rather than a particular set of prohibited practices, such as, for instance, the set of sexual taboos of Leviticus 18. In this, the midrashist diverges from most of the materials in the tannaitic corpora, which read the prohibition with their characteristic halakhic orientation.⁶⁰

Unit 7b-13: Difference in Sexual Practice

Rabbi Hunya said: [It compares to] a king who had an only daughter and he caused her to dwell in a particular alley and they all turned out to be sexual perverts (*ba'alei zenut*). He went and caused her to dwell in another alley and they all turned out to be sexual perverts and magicians (*ba'alei keshafim*). Her father said to her, "My daughter, give it your attention so that you will not practice like the practice of these or like the practice of those." Thus, when Israel was in Egypt, the Egyptians were sexual perverts – ". . . whose members were like those of asses . . ." (Ezek. 23:20). And when they entered the land of Canaan, the Canaanites were sexual perverts and magicians – "Because of the countless harlotries of the harlot (*zenunei zonah*), the winsome mistress of sorcery (*ba'alat keshafim*)" (Nah 3:4). The Holy One Blessed Be He said to them, "My son, be cautious not to practice either like the practice of these or like the practice of those." Thus it is written, "Like the practice of the land of Egypt."

So far the parashah has offered a number of paradigms of Jewish difference – moral rectitude, physical appearance, obedience to God, ritual competence, political marginality, economic hardship, municipal loyalty, and, in Unit Six's pastiche of midrashim, the claim that Jewish difference is just obvious. For the rest of the parashah, sexual difference is the sole paradigm. Sexual practice is explored from a variety of angles until the theme of difference drops out of sight, and the suppression of sexual desire and the consequences of submitting to it

⁶⁰ See my discussion of the Sifra's various readings of Lev. 18:3 in "The Limits of 'Their Laws': Ancient Rabbinic Controversies about Jewishness (and non-Jewishness)," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 99/1 (2009): 121-157.

are front and center. But, I would argue, the associative links suggest that ethnic, religious, and other kinds of difference remain a backdrop throughout.

Rabbi Hunya's midrash is the place where the two concerns explicitly meet. In his mashal, the only daughter of a king (*bat yehidah*, evoking Gen. 22:2's description of Isaac, *et binekha et yehidekha*) provides a parallel to the people Israel. The king's curious decision to strand his daughter not once but twice in alleys filled with perverts and magicians seems to match God's plan for Israel in Egypt and Canaan (and perhaps also to echo the binding of Isaac?). When in Lev. 18:3 God tells Israel to avoid the practices of Egypt and Canaan, what we see in the mashal is the king advising his daughter (very similarly to the scene in Rabbi Berekhiah's midrash and using some of the same language) to be careful not to imitate the behaviors she sees around her. Ezekiel 23:20 (perhaps the most pornographic verse in all of scripture) and Nah. 3:4 provide apparent evidence for the monstrous sexual degradation of Egypt and Canaan.⁶¹ The mashal portrays Jewish difference as a test: Will the king's only daughter be able to resist the harlots and idolaters who surround her? Will Israel be able to do the same? The threat within the mashal is not whether the men will attack the king's daughter, as we might expect, but whether she will be able to resist copying their aggression. The king is worried not about her being violated by the men but about her being coopted by them. The king tells his daughter, *teni da'atikh* (pay attention): The test is of her own mental stolidity.

The most prominent feature of this midrash is its location of Jewish difference in sexual practice (which it also associates with religious practice in its coupling of sexual perversion with magic). But there are other features that deserve attention, particularly the unit's concern with singles and doubles. The double with which the various midrashim are contending is that of Egypt and Canaan in the verse, a double which is set against the singleness of Israel. An irony produced by the scriptural backdrop, however, is the frequency of twinning in Israel's own narrative of origins. Israel's own doubleness comes to the surface in this very midrash, which draws upon Ezekiel's sister metaphor for Samaria and Jerusalem and instead applies it to Israel's Others. So the rhetoric of the midrashic passage points explicitly to Israel's singleness in contrast to gentile multiplicity and interchangeability, yet hints at Israel's own internal twinned

⁶¹ Ezekiel 23:20 is indeed speaking of Egypt, but Nah. 3:4, as Margulies observes, in fact describes Assyria and not Canaan. The previous verse in the Ezekiel passage, Ezek. 23:19, uses language extremely similar to that of Nah. 3:4 – *va-tarbeh et-taznuteha* (but she whored still more) – and may be the motivation for the midrashist to use both these verses here.

identities. Even the rhetoric of oneness is ironically doubled, with the midrash emphasizing the common mother of Egypt and Canaan and then doubling that singleness in repeating “one mother, one amniotic sac.” Indeed, single/double is itself a binary. The midrashist seems to be playing with the motif of single/double and in so doing both to assert and to challenge the notion of Jewish uniqueness. The alley provides the appropriate spatial imagery, with its liminal status as neither fully private nor fully public and its power within the halakhic realm either to make or to break a symbolic neighborhood.⁶²

The gender identifications swing back and forth too, with Egypt and Canaan first as whoring sisters, then as sexually aggressive men threatening the vulnerable daughter. Gender roles change again when the midrashist reverts to the *nimshal*, where instead of a king speaking to his daughter, God is speaking to “my son.” The remaining units of the *parashah* (too lengthy to discuss in detail here) likewise portray sexual threat posed by both men and women to both men and women in the guise of various figures from scripture – Samson, Amnon, Zimri, Joseph, Yael, Palti, David, Boaz, Ruth (as well as various collective characters such as the generation of the Flood and the people of Sodom). These characters are meant to exemplify people who either indulged their sexual appetite or heroically resisted it. But the alternation between male and female models of sexual indulgence or repression creates some difficulties, since the underlying assumption is that males act as sexual agents while females are recipients of their choices. If so, is it possible for a woman to truly exercise sexual restraint? At most, she can resist a man’s advances. This paradox emerges most poignantly with respect to Yael, who according to the midrashic spin on her story takes an oath that Sisera should not touch her, which, one cannot help wondering, is a somewhat strange subject for an oath considering Sisera’s advances are not entirely under her control. Turning to women as models of sexual restraint thus becomes conceptually problematic. But the midrashist may ignore this tension, first, because he may be interested in speaking to female audiences, and, second, because he may find women’s relative passivity to be a compelling way to dramatize the threat that gentile sexuality poses to Jewish boundaries, whatever drawbacks women may have in serving as sexual role models.⁶³

⁶² See Charlotte Fonrobert’s recent work on the *eruv*’s role in creating a symbolic neighborhood: “The Political Symbolism of the *Eruv*,” *Jewish Social Studies* 11/3 (2005): 9-35; “Neighborhood as Ritual Space: The Case of the Rabbinic ‘*Eruv*,’” *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 10 (2008): 239-258.

⁶³ A narrative in LevR 9:9 describes (with ambivalence) a woman who liked to attend rabbinic sermons; see discussion in Visotzky, *Golden Bells and Pomegranates*, p. 111-12.

Men and women are both implicated in sexual transgression in the concluding section of the parashah, which involves the fanciful proposal that God remolds the face of a fetus to reflect that of a pregnant wife's paramour: ". . . The Holy One Blessed Be He said, 'Behold I form his *kalakterin* (visage) in the image of another in order to expose him.'" ⁶⁴ The odd premise of this scenario is that the true father of the baby is, in fact, the husband, which means that God casts the face of the baby in the image of a man not its father purely in order to expose the illicit sexual relationship conducted by its mother. With this material we enter the realm of standard rabbinic – and Christian – treatments of the *yetzer* and sexual temptation, with particular emphasis on internal states rather than on the sexual acts themselves (" . . . that you should not say that anyone who commits adultery with his body is called an adulterer, but rather one who commits adultery with his eyes should be called an adulterer"). ⁶⁵ At the same time, the themes of identity differentiation peek through, with this unit's concern for concealed/public, inner/outer, and again the moralizing of physical appearance, wherein one's outward appearance betrays one's inner nature. The Greek loan word, *kalakterin* from the Greek *karakterion*, borrowed to describe the face, points to the Otherness that the face can potentially reveal. With this doppelgänger, the parashah implicitly returns to the themes of doubleness with which it previously flirted. The theme of imitation – whose face should the child's reproduce? -- is at the fore. ⁶⁶

Conclusions

One might have expected a midrash dealing with Jewish sexual practice and Jewish difference to discuss intermarriage. But the question raised by much of this material is not about whom a Jew has sex with but whom they are imitating when they do. Sexual self-definition is transformed into a matter of cultural self-definition and becomes one more means, at the end of a

⁶⁴ LevR 23:12.

⁶⁵ Ibid. There is much discussion of sexual desire (and restraint of it) in classical rabbinic and Christian sources; see especially Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, New York: Columbia UP, 1988, and, on the rabbinic side (with a comparative approach), see Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

⁶⁶ Sexual and cultural identities converge in these units in the figure of Joseph. Two trios of sexual role models are pulled from scripture – 1. Joseph, 2. Yael, 3. Palti; 1. Joseph, 2. David, 3. Boaz – with Joseph the sole figure that repeats in both. Joseph receives the most midrashic attention, with a reading of the Joseph story as an elaborate measure-for-measure sequence of rewards for various acts of sexual self-restraint on Joseph's part (not paralleled for any of the other figures, which are in every other way given parallel treatments). According to Levinson's work on midrashic representation of Joseph ("An-other Woman: Joseph and Potiphar's Wife – Staging the Body Politic," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 87/3-4 (1997): 269-301), Joseph becomes a model of both sexual restraint and cultural self-restraint, which become linked to each other.

long list provided by the parashah, for a Jew to perform their Jewishness. This paradigm, like the others, has complicated gender ramifications – if a woman cannot be a sexual agent, can she perform Jewishness? Indeed, certain paradigms may be featured precisely because they either include or exclude Jewish women from the power to define Jewishness. We can only wonder about the paradigms not represented here at all and also about the degree of resistance or indifference that may have existed in late antiquity among Jews themselves to the very project of defining Jewish separateness.

The parashah raises many questions about rabbinic constructions of Jewish difference. To what extent is this exercise in exploring modes of Jewish separateness a reflection of or reaction against social relationships between Jews and gentiles, especially Christians? In other words, do these efforts represent a reaction against an integrated, fluid reality where Jews and gentiles intimately mixed, or do they rather reflect an already well-delineated pair of social groups?⁶⁷ The question may be impossible to answer, both because of lack of evidence and because of variation and gradation in social realities over the course of time. Either way, this parashah may not be making any arguments for or against a set of social conditions but rather be trying to provide for its audience a way to think about them. No doubt the models of difference offered by this parashah are on some level the conceptual result of legal, political, and social changes that marginalized and separated out Jews in the early centuries of the Christian empire. We can also relatedly ask to what extent these explorations are a reflection of or reaction against contemporary modes of Christianness being offered. It is almost unthinkable that they are not at all, particularly given rabbinic and Christian shared interest in the scriptural sources.⁶⁸ Christian interpretation of Song of Songs is particularly suggestive as countertext, since the influential commentary on Song of Songs by Origen emphasizes, as Elizabeth Clark put it, “the union of Jew and Gentile in the Christian Church.”⁶⁹ Union of Jew and gentile, we would have to

⁶⁷ See Seth Schwartz’s formulation of the question and agnostic position, *Imperialism and Jewish Society*, p. 279.

⁶⁸ On the other hand, one does not want to overread the rabbinic texts to find hidden polemics against Christianity at every turn; see caveat in Burton L. Visotzky, “Anti-Christian Polemic In Leviticus Rabbah,” in *Fathers of the World: Essays in Rabbinic and Patristic Literatures*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, pp. 93-105; and *Golden Bells and Pomegranates*, pp. 161-72.

⁶⁹ Elizabeth A. Clark, “The Uses of the Song of Songs: Origen and the Later Latin Fathers,” in *Ascetic Piety and Women’s Faith: Essays on Late Ancient Christianity*, Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986, pp. 386-427 (p. 390). Urbach certainly reads rabbinic interpretation of Song of Songs in this light (and specifically this passage); see “The Homiletical Interpretations of the Sages and the Expositions of Origen on Canticles, and the Jewish-Christian Disputation,” *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 22, *Studies in Aggadah and Folk-Literature*, edited by Joseph Heinemann and Dov Noy, Jerusalem: Magnes, 1971, pp. 247-75 (pp. 267-68); and see Reuven Kimelman, “Rabbi Yokhanan

conclude, would be this parashah's worst nightmare. There is also the ever-present problem of dating when it comes to rabbinic texts: Do we consider the parashah purely from the perspective of the editor, or, if we do break it down according to the attributions it provides, how do we then think about it coherently in historical terms? I have mostly looked at this parashah from the perspective of what is probably a fifth-century editor/s. This editor, collecting and coopting inherited texts, creates a tour de force of exegesis and ideology dealing with Jewishness, suggesting that at least some late ancient Jews were as curious as we are about the question of Judaism's character.

and Origen on the Song of Songs: A Third-Century Jewish-Christian Disputation," *Harvard Theological Review* 73 (1980): 567-595.