TRAVEL, THE INN, AND IDENTITY IN RABBINIC STORYTELLING

John Mandsager
Department of Religious Studies
Stanford University
mandsagr@stanford.edu

Introduction

In its most basic form, a journey involves a traveller leaving home, progressing to a destination, and returning home. Alternate routes, unexpected adventures, and myriad stops may interrupt the journey, but we may assume that the traveller expects to return home. In classical rabbinic literature, as will be discussed below, such travel can reveal the instability of rabbinic identity and of the spaces rabbinic characters inhabit. This study will explore a variety of instabilities as found in two short rabbinic narratives, which take place in the fraught space of the inn. In each of these stories, a male protagonist enters an inn and is served refreshments by an innkeeper or barmaid. It is clear to the reader that these female innkeepers have malicious intentions and hold access to supernatural powers. In one case, the protagonist is physically harmed by a supernatural attack, while in the other case the protagonist is able to turn the tables on his assailant, such that she bears the brunt of the attack. In between home and its dialectical opposite, not-home, we find rabbinic characters entering a contested space, the inn, which has characteristics of home (one settles in the inn for the night) and characteristics of not-home (it is populated by danger, strangers, and unknown women). It is the central claim of this study that the space of the inn, as an interstitial, liminal place between home and the traveller’s destination, is portrayed as a dangerous space, and this danger, this liminality, reveals the danger and instability of the traveller’s home and his own identity.

1 I wish to thank Professors Charlotte E. Fonrobert, Naomi Seidman and Rebecca Lyman for their criticisms and insights to earlier versions of this study. This study is adapted from my Master’s thesis: “Do Not Disturb: Identity, Autonomy and the Inn in Rabbinic Storytelling” (MA thesis, The Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA, 2005).


3 I consider the inn a “liminal” space not strictly in the Turnerian sense of a place for transformative rituals (rites de passage) but in the sense of a space which has the opportunity for transformation, and moreover, the danger of threatening the stability of one’s identity. Victor Turner, “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage,” Betwixt and Between: Patterns of Masculine and Feminine Initiation, eds. Louise Carus Mahdi, Steven Foster and Meredith Little (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court,
The home of any traveller is not as secure as he or she might imagine, and the home of the rabbinic male traveller is all the more so susceptible to the revelation of such instability, since the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE and subsequent loss of the homeland of Palestine, the diasporic rabbinic Jew might be seen as one without a stable home to begin with. For instance, two of the terms used in rabbinic literature to refer to the home (mikdash and bayit) are resonant with their association as also terms for the now-lost temple in Jerusalem and thereby signal some of the instability of the diasporic condition. The uprootedness of the diasporic condition does permeate rabbinic narratives about home and travel, but at the same time certain idealized, stable notions of home are to be found in these texts. And notably for this study, these idealized visions of home are often gendered. Cynthia Baker demonstrates that the term bayit (home/house) is rhetorically linked to women:

If we wish to undertake an inquiry into rabbinic traditions linking gender practices and housing and dwelling practices, we would be well served by going straight to the semiotic core of such rabbinic discourse, where we encounter a peculiar and singular image…namely, the woman-as-house.  

The rhetorically constructed space of the home is gendered in rabbinic literature: the original dwelling is equated with the body and person of the woman who “makes the home.” Thus, in rabbinic literature, the “home” at times means one’s wife. This domestication of both women and space is critical to the travels of the men in the stories discussed below: while they are out exploring the world, women (their wives) embody the singular place these men have left behind, the bayit.

The two rabbinic narratives under consideration in this study will be considered from three directions to reveal the varieties of danger and instability engendered by travel to the inn: first, Heidegger and Freud’s presentation of the unheimlich feeling, the uncanny, as an ontological category will help reveal the instability inherent even in the purportedly defined and normative notions of masculine Jewish identity and the home itself. From the discussion of the uncanny, as I analyze these two rabbinic anecdotes, I will consider them within the complex web of rhetoric,

---


Baker’s analysis on this point is revealing: “The taking of a wife is the building of a house. The domicile or residence itself – although prepared first – is nothing more than that: preparation. A man prepares, a man builds, and then a man takes and enters. The result of his acts is the transformation of raw materials – woman and edifice – into his ‘house’” (*Ibid.*., 59).
gender and magic in Late Antiquity to show the explicit presentation of the danger that the inn (and its female innkeeper) pose to the male rabbinic traveler. My discussion of these two rabbinic examples in particular will then allow me to consider the intertextuality of one of the themes of these narratives to further contextualize the rhetorical space of the inn in rabbinic literature within Late Antique literatures more broadly. It is my intention to show that travel narratives provided rabbinic authors in Late Antiquity an opportunity to present the perception of danger inherent in women within the liminal space of the inn, but that these travels also reveal a multiplicity of additional instabilities for the male traveller himself, including the instability of self, body, and home.

**The Inn and the Unheimlich Feeling**

As a starting point for this study, the idea of travel presents us with an idealized dialectical opposition: the home and the destination. How does the space of the inn fit into this opposition? This question is important for the purposes of this study, for the inn can be seen as a destination in and of itself, as a waypoint on the journey, and perhaps as a temporary form of “home.” In the terms of the dialectic between home and not-home, the home is idealized as that which is known and secure,⁷ while the very nature of travel is the drive for the unknown: a journey into an indescribable space that is neither known nor secure. Regardless, we see here two models: the home and its counterpart, the not-home; the known and its counterpart, the not-known. The inn may well fit between these two extremes. On the one hand, the inn is construed as an approximation of home; while on the other, it fits equally into the category of the unknowable. This dialectical opposition does not hold, however, since the home itself is a fraught space: it is idealized as safe, secure, and identity-confirming, but may be susceptible to the same instabilities found in the unknown.

Martin Heidegger tackles the fear inherent in the instability of idealized notions of “home” and considers it to be an essential part of existence.⁸ Heidegger’s philosophy hinges upon the notion of *Dasein*, his unique answer to the age-old philosophical inquiry into the foundation of “Being,” while avoiding the connotations of earlier terms (such as “humanity,” “soul,” “spirit,” and the like).⁹ Heidegger’s assertion

---

⁷ It might be argued that knowledge and security are but two sides of the same coin: those with access to knowledge are certainly safe in their position of power regarding the exercise of that knowledge. But that is another argument altogether. Contra my position here, Baker might contend that the house in rabbinic texts cannot be fully “known,” and that in fact, these homes are notable for their ability to produce “invisibility,” that is, the ability to hide its occupants from each other and the prying world (*Ibid.*, 45).

⁸ The use of Heidegger here is presented advisedly, since many scholars have taken Heidegger to task for his seemingly unremorseful National Socialism. The work of a Nazi sympathizer, whose philosophy, it might be argued, supports fascism, is not unproblematic. While not ignoring or subduing Heidegger’s National Socialism, Josef Chytry is one example of a scholar who seeks the redeeming moments in Heidegger’s philosophy. For example, Chytry claims Heideggerian analysis to further his political goal: the valorization of poetic thought. “Heidegger’s contribution to the thought of the polis resides, then, in this subtle attunement to advent, presencing, manifesting. For the political sphere, advent entails beginnings: the possible foundings, sitings, and creations of polis as the true concretion of poetic thinking.” Josef Chytry, “The Timeliness of Martin Heidegger’s National Socialism,” *New German Critique* (vol. 58, Winter 1993), 95. The use of Heidegger in this study will likewise recognize the harm inherent in his thought, but also attempt to show it to be not bounded by his unfortunate and devastatingly harmful political leanings.

⁹ “Being-there.” “Heidegger would address the question of what...being, *seiend*, on, *ens*, *existens*, means by turning to human being or human existence, namely, *Dasein* or being ‘there,’ as an
of the ontic-ontological priority of Da-sein means that the question of “Being” is grounded in “Da-sein”: being-there. Thus, Heidegger begins by situating Da-sein as being-in, as “everydayness.” This is not the entire story, however, and the next step of Heidegger’s analysis is of utmost importance for this study. What happens to Da-sein when that “everydayness” is disrupted? For Heidegger, it is the concept of Angst which accomplishes this “disruption”:

[Angst] brings Da-sein in an extreme sense precisely before its world as world, and thus itself before itself as being-in-the-world. Again, everyday discourse and the everyday interpretation of Da-sein furnish the most unbiased evidence that Angst [anxiety, fear] as a basic attunement is disclosive in this way. We said earlier that attunement reveals ‘how one is.’ In Angst one has an ‘uncanny [unheimlich]’ feeling. Here the peculiar indefiniteness of that which Da-sein finds itself involved in with Angst initially finds expression: the nothing and the nowhere. But uncanniness [Unheimlichkeit] means at the same time not-being-at-home [Nichtzuhause-sein].

Rejecting abstracted notions of consciousness or the self, Heidegger argues that being is not some abstract or existential concept, but rather is situated – situated in space and in the interactions with others which occur in space. After contending that being is linked to space, Heidegger can then make the philosophical argument that the notion of Angst (anxiety or fear, often found when the everyday is not as it seems) produces an unheimlich feeling, a feeling that de-centers Da-sein, and repositions it as “not-being-at-home” (which is again not an existential concept, but is still situated in “being-in-the-world”), whereas before Da-sein was characterized by “being-at-home,” everydayness. While avoiding contradiction, Heidegger contends that Da-sein is fundamentally constituted by “being-at-home” and “not-being-at-home,” not one before the other, but rather as showing different facets of these states at different times.

We have moved quite a distance from the dialectic of home versus destination proposed above. Since, following Heidegger, home itself can produce this unheimlich feeling, the home may not be as dialectically opposed to that which is not-home. Sigmund Freud, in his psychoanalytic reading of the uncanny (unheimlich), notes that in German the distance between “heimlich” (which notably means both “homelike” and “secretive”) and “unheimlich” is a matter of degrees. Thus,

instance and exemplification of being in time.”
Christopher P. Smith, The Hermeneutics of Original Argument: Demonstration, Dialectic, Rhetoric, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 341 n. 4. Heidegger states that “Da-sein accordingly takes priority in several ways over all other beings. The first priority is an ontic one: this being is defined in its being by existence. The second priority is an ontological one: on the basis of its determination as existence Da-sein is in itself ‘ontological.’” Martin Heidegger, Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), 11.


following Freud, in order to reach that which is “not-home,” one must travel through gradually more ambiguous forms of “home” and vice versa. In contrast to Freud’s notation of the similarity between home and not-home, the home in rabbinic literature (that is, the home in its rhetorically constructed form, without a trace of the unheimlich feeling) is an ideal space, a space for creating idealized “Jews,” and that this space needs its dialectical opposite for the idealization to work. The inn operates as a problematic space in the midst of this dialectical opposition: it is portrayed as inherently unsafe and unheimlich, and at the same time is treated as containing some of the characteristics of safety and home. The inn thus becomes a remarkable site for the redactors of these tales to confront this Unheimlichkeit, since the inn can be figured as a temporary form of “home” and as that which is distinctively “not-home.” The power of the dialectical opposition of home versus not-home (and the ambiguous space between these two poles, the inn) comes of course from the very tension and instability inherent within the categories themselves.

“He was seen riding on a woman in the market”

We find two stories in which a female innkeeper performs a powerful, supernatural act, in tractate Sanhedrin of the Babylonian Talmud. As the narratives describe these women, their unsanctioned actions heighten the danger of the inn, the potentially illicit power of women, and threaten the stability of male rabbinic dominance and identity.

---

it finally coincides with its opposite, unheimlich. Unheimlich is in some way or other a sub-species of heimlich” (Ibid.). Freud does not explicitly link the Unheimlichkeit to the physical space of the home; rather, he considers the feeling to have its origins in many places, including “the castration complex,” and even in neurotic men’s imagination of that original home, the vagina (Ibid., 233, 245).

See Tziona Grossmark, “The Inn as a Place of Violence and Danger in Rabbinic Literature,” Violence in Late Antiquity: Perceptions and Practices, ed. H. A. Drake (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2006), 57-84. For an example in rabbinic narrative of the uneasy distance between a heimlich feeling and an unheimlich one in the space of the inn, where assumptions of safety are met with conditions of danger, see a story preserved in Mishnah Yevamot 16:7:

There once was a relevant case in which the sons of Levi who went to Tsoar, the city of Palms, and one of them became ill along the way, and they left him to rest in an inn. And when they returned, they said to the inn-maid: “Where is our friend?” She told them: “He died and I buried him.” And they permitted the dead man’s wife to remarry [on the basis of the inn-maid’s testimony]. They said to him [Rabbi Aqiba]: And shall not a woman of priestly lineage be believed as much as an inn-maid?? He said to them: When she will be the inn-maid, she will be believed; the inn-maid brought forth for them his staff [and his shoe, Ms. Parma] and his bag and the book of Torah that was in his hand. Here, the rabbinic character is left to recuperate in the presumed safety of the inn but instead dies. See below for discussion of the danger and untrustworthiness of the female innkeeper in rabbinic literature.

For short discussion of these two stories, see Grossmark, “Danger,” 66-7. For a detailed discussion of the first story, see Joshua Levinson, “Enchanting Rabbis: Contest Narratives between Rabbis and Magicians in Late Antiquity,” Jewish Quarterly Review (vol. 100, issue 1, 2010): 54-94, pp. 82-7. (An earlier version of this article may be found in Joshua Levinson, “Enchanting Rabbis: Contest Narratives between Rabbis and Magicians in Rabbinic Literature of Late Antiquity” [Heb.], Tarbits: A Quarterly for Jewish Studies (vol. 75, issue 3-4, 2006), 295-328. Levinson’s insightful conclusions about rhetorical transformation of the (magical) powers of the “Other” into the rabbinic system of knowledge do not detract from my argument here about the importance of these spaces for rabbinic self-fashioning.

As we shall see, these illicit actions might be read as “magical” and the innkeepers as “magicians.” I use these terms with some trepidation, since Sir James Frazer’s argument that throughout human history, culture has followed an “evolutionary” progression
Their actions might well be described as “unsanctioned religious activities,” following Phillips’ formulation, and have the rhetorical force of denoting the distinction between the dangerous woman and her body and the intellect of the rabbinic man, as we shall see below. In both cases, from magic to religion to science has been held in contention. Modern anthropologists and students of religion have attempted to clarify the distinctions between “magic” and “religion” without the negative connotations of Frazer’s presentation. An example of Frazer’s hypothesis: “Thus the keener minds, still pressing forward to a deeper solution of the mysteries of the universe, come to reject the religious theory of nature as inadequate, and to revert in a measure to the older standpoint of magic by postulating explicitly, what in magic had only been implicitly assumed, to wit, an inflexible regularity in the order of natural events, which, if carefully observed, enables us to foresee their course with certainty and to act accordingly. In short, religion, regarded as an explanation of nature, is displaced by science.” Sir James George Frazer, The Golden Bough: A Study of Magic and Religion, ed. 3. “Balder the Beautiful: The Fire Festivals of Europe and the Doctrine of the External Soul,” vol. II (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1911-15, 1963), 305.


17 This rhetorical distinction is often emphasized in the diverse matrix of Late Antiquity, as individual authors and groups used the terms “magic,” “magician,” and “magical” as negative epithets to describe individuals deemed outside their idealized notions of acceptable behavior. Alan F. Segal contends that in Hellenistic societies “the charge of ‘magic’ helps distinguish between various groups of people from the perspective of the speaker but does not necessarily imply any essential difference in the actions of the participants.” Alan F. Segal, “Hellenistic Magic: Some Questions of Definition,” Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions: the stories come in the context of sugyot which consider various powerful actions: some of these are permitted and some are prohibited. The first story is part of a sugya concerning a mishnah which makes a legal distinction between “real” sorcerers and charlatans.

Mishnah

The madiaḥ is he who says, “Let us go and let us do idol worship.” The sorcerer is the one who does an act and thus is liable, but the captor of the eyes is not liable. Rabbi Akiva says in the name of R. Joshua, “Two gather cucumbers: one gathers and thus is exempt, and the other gathers and thus is liable; the captor of the eyes is the one who is exempt” (B. Talmud Sanhedrin 67a). In this mishnah, two very distinct groups are represented: those who actually do an illicit act (by using magic to draw together all of the cucumbers), and those who merely


18 “Sugya [pl. sugyot] (from Aramaic segi, ‘to go,’ hence ‘course’ (cf. halakhah), the course of a discussion, the decision in a controversy) designates a self-contained basic unit of Talmudic discussion…and may discuss a M[ishnah] or be independent from M[ishnah].” Strack and Stemberger, Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash, trans. and ed. Markus Bockmuehl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 203. Also see Judith Hauptman, Development of the Talmudic Sugya: Relationship between Tannaitic and Amoraic Sources (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988); and Aryeh Cohen, Rereading Talmud: Gender, Law, and the Poetics of Sugyot (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998).

19 In the Babylonian Talmud’s comments on this Mishnah, we find an explanation that the “madiaḥ” is the seducer of the seduced city (which, of course, is not a very explicit definition, but connotes an individual who has morally degraded his compatriots).
“capture the eyes,” that is, produce an illusion. In this formulation, one may only be labeled a “sorcerer,” and thereby be liable to punishment if he produced a verifiable magical action and not if the act was only an illusion. Speaking specifically of this mishnah, Yassif contends that “one reasonable explanation for the dual approach to magic [“actual” magic is banned, while “illusions” are not] is that the sages, like others of their time, believed in the possibility of sorcery, yet feared lest society confuse it with the central orientation of the Jewish faith.”

To begin this sugya, we have a mishnaic ruling which narrowly defines sorcery as an unsanctioned act which can be verified as actually occurring and must be placed outside of the purview of “correct” Jewish behavior.

The sugya continues with a discussion of which actions might constitute “sorcery,” as well as exegesis of the verse from Exodus just quoted, which condemns a “female sorcerer” to death. It is of note for the purposes of this study that this sugya contains this exchange: “Our Rabbis taught, ‘female sorcerer’ [from Ex. 22:17] is both the man and the woman. If so, why does Scripture teach ‘female sorcerer’? Because that the majority are women.” As will be discussed below, this stereotype of women as practitioners of magic was not uncommon in Late Antiquity and manifests itself both in the story contained in the present sugya as well as the other story analyzed below.

In this story, Jannai goes to an inn for refreshment, unaware that the inn may present danger. He is apparently prepared for the possibility of witchcraft, however, and correctly interprets the woman’s lips moving as a sign that the shattitha was unfit for him to drink. He then proves this interpretation by producing scorpions when he spills some of the drink. Jannai takes control of the situation by convincing the innkeeper to drink out of his own, enchanted glass. We see that the antagonistic innkeeper gets her just desserts, as it were, since Jannai tricks the woman into drinking her own spell. Jannai not only takes control of the magical circumstances of the encounter, but he physically takes control of the witch.

---

20 The punishment for such sorcery is death, following the Biblical commandment in Exodus 22:17, “You shall not let a female sorcerer live.”
21 Eli Yassif, Hebrew Folktales: History, Genre, Meaning (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 162.
22 בּוֹשָׂמָה – the noun as found in the Biblical text has the feminine Hebrew suffix, unlike the case of this mishnah, where the noun is masculine.
23 Rashi (a 11th century exegete of the Bible and the Babylonian Talmud) contends that the “Jannai” found in this story is not referred to as “Rabbi Jannai” because no sage would be party to any form of witchcraft, even inadvertently, and thus Rashi does not want us to confuse the “Jannai” of this story with the “Rabbi Jannai” found elsewhere in rabbinic literature.
24 Rashi informs us that “shattitha” (שתיתא) is “flour mixed in water.”

---
using her as transport into the marketplace. As he leaves the problematic space of the inn and enters the more public area of the market, the story takes on a comedic and sexually charged tone. When he and his witch-mount pass by a friend of the innkeeper, the second witch understands the innkeeper’s predicament and reverses the spell. After the counter-spell is performed, Jannai finds himself in a compromising situation: “he was seen riding on a woman in the market.” Here, in public, his dominance over the woman is no longer “appropriate,” as he can be seen in a sexual position atop a strange woman from the inn. Of course, the question remains, which character is more humiliated in this story – the man or the woman?

It is perhaps difficult to know the “moral” of this story, but it is clear that there are several elements of “warning” to be found within it. First, the story reminds us, vividly, of the perceived dangers of entering unknown places and interacting with unknown women. Second, the story explicitly describes the hazards of facing a magical attack and by describing the witch moving her lips suggests how one might recognize such an attack. And third, the story describes in a humorous fashion the perils of meddling with magic in public, as Jannai’s (sexual) conquest of the witch becomes evident to the public at large. Beyond these warnings, we find that at least in the inn, Jannai’s knowledge and cunning overcomes that of his female opponent. Faced with the potential loss of his (male) self and control of his (male) body, Jannai avoids being transformed into an ass and instead rides the woman. The role of the innkeeper’s friend to undo the magic, however, reasserts the unheimlich feeling permeating the story: Jannai’s power over the woman is unmasked and his dalliance with the innkeeper is revealed. The differences and instabilities between male and female knowledge, public and not-quite-public spaces, and between male and female bodies are all made manifest in this story.

“The Blast of Ḥamath”

Later in tractate Sanhedrin, we find another example of the perceived dangers inherent in the travel to an inn. A short anecdote where R. Isaac b. Samuel b. Marta goes to an inn follows an extremely lengthy discussion of the following mishnah:

All Israel has a share of the world to come, as it is said [in Scripture], “And all your people who are righteous, they will inherit the land forever: a branch of My planting, a work of My hand, to glorify” [Isaiah 60:21]. And these do not have a portion of the world to come: the one who says, “The dead will not live” from the Torah,27 and [that] the Torah28 is not from heaven, and the Epicurean.29

26 Ibid., 93.
Rabbi Akiva says, “Even the one who reads in the separate books, and the one who whispers over the wound and says, ‘All the disease that I brought in Egypt I will not bring on you because I am the Lord who heals you’ [Exodus 15:26].” Abba Saul says, “Even the one who pronounces the Name as it is spelled” (B. Talmud Sanhedrin 90a).

In the Gemara, many pages of discussion follow this mishnah, mostly regarding questions of which groups of people are entitled to enter the world to come. Then, the Gemara probes each of the groups denied a share of the world to come in this mishnah. The story under consideration here is found in a sugya, which follows this fragment of the mishnah: “and the one who whispers over the wound, etc.” In this mishnaic statement, we find here a reference to a specific magical formula: “whispering,” or “chanting,” a verse of the Torah over a wound in order to heal it. Of critical importance to this prohibition is the verse being used for the magical ritual: the verse contains not only a reference to the healing power of God; it also contains the unpronounceable Tetragrammaton, the perfect name of God. Naomi Janowitz states, “The iconic status of the divine name is established and embellished in numerous exegetical texts that recount its unique function and inherent power.” Many examples could be multiplied to show the widespread belief in the power of this divine name, both in texts that do not approve of the misuse of the true name of God (such as this mishnah) and ritual texts (such as the Greek Magical Papyri\(^\text{31}\)) that utilize the letters of the name as a source of power. Thus, the sugya where we find the next story of an innkeeper using supernatural powers comes during the discussion of a mishnah which prohibits one form of such powers.

After we find a contrast between examples of illicit “whispering” with different verses of the Bible used as “magical” formulae and the licit use of oil as medicine, several anecdotes are presented in the sugya regarding the use of oil for its curative powers. And finally, we read a story where oil is used in a non-sanctioned manner, in the space of the inn.

Rav Isaac bar Samuel bar Marta happened to come to a certain inn [אושפיזא]. They gave to him oil in a vessel. He rubbed himself: growths came out to him on his face. He went out to the market. A certain woman saw him; she said, “I observe the blast of Ḥamath [חמת] here.” She made for him a blood-letting and he was cured (B. Sanhedrin 101a).

There are several key elements to this story. First, it is important that the action takes place in the spaces of the inn and the marketplace. Second, we will need to consider whether or not the action taken by the innkeepers constitutes malicious “magic,” and if so, we will need to further consider whether or not the text rates the actions of the innkeepers and the woman R. Isaac meets in the market along the lines

\(^{31}\)To quote just one of many examples, a spell from one of these papyri includes this phrase at the beginning of the incantation: “Greatest god who exceeds / all power, I call on you, IAŌ SABAŌTH ADŌNAI EILOEIN…” “IAŌ” seems here to be a Greek transliteration of the Tetragrammaton. The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation Including the Demotic Spells, ed. Hans Dieter Betz (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986, 1992), 164.

discussed above; the former being proscribed, while the latter being condoned. And third, the construction of gender stereotypes is again at play here.

In this story, we again see the protagonist entering an inn for refreshment, unsuspecting of any potential foul play. This time, however, R. Isaac b. Samuel b. Martha is not personally equipped to fight the magical attack. Instead, he is hit by the full thrust of the attack, receiving blisters on his face. We do not learn that the innkeeper performed a spell, as in the first story, but the oil does appear to be magical, since it produces such damage to his face. At first glance, it is quite difficult to know what exactly this attack is. The statement of the woman R. Isaac meets in the marketplace does little to help us understand what has happened, as she states, “I observe the blast of Ḥamath here.” What is this “blast of Ḥamath”? One of the commentaries on the Babylonian Talmud (Tosofos) from the Middle Ages helpfully concludes that R. Isaac was attacked by the breath of a demon named Ḥamath.32 What is still unclear is how this “blast of Ḥamath” is transferred to the oil R. Isaac uses, causing the damage to his face. What is implied here is that the innkeepers somehow have control over this demon and was thus able to harm R. Isaac. We are not explicitly informed of the genders of those who attack R. Isaac in the inn (“They gave him oil in a vessel.”), but following the parallelism of this story with Jannai’s encounter, as well as the coda to the story does reveal the power some women are perceived to hold over the supernatural, we may be safe to assume that the innkeepers that R. Isaac encounters might be women as well.

In a parallel manner as was described in Jannai’s story, R. Isaac leaves the inn and enters the marketplace. It is in the market that he encounters a woman skilled in unconventional wisdom, just as Jannai did. In contrast to Jannai, however, the woman R. Isaac meets could be seen as a “good witch,” a woman who can recognize magic, but uses her knowledge to help others. She identifies the source of R. Isaac’s predicament (“I observe the blast of Ḥamath here”) and is able to cure him. The woman R. Isaac meets in the marketplace fills an ambiguous middle ground between the categories described above; on the one hand, she seems well versed in what Phillips termed “unsanctioned religious activities,” since she can identify the demonic mark, but on the other, she is equally well versed in an apparently more acceptable activity, the healing of the blisters by means of a medical technique: blood-letting.

This woman’s ability to cure R. Isaac is worth a deeper look. Why does this text present this woman as skilled in the medical arts? The records of “medical science” are few and far between in rabbinic texts; usually they appear in the midst of other stories or discussions, as in the present case. Charlotte Fonrobert has considered the ways in which women in rabbinic literature are portrayed as knowledgeable in matters of women’s health. She suggests that this representation stems from a conflicted rabbinic attitude towards women’s bodies

---

32 Tosofos contends that “the blast (נַפְתָּה)” is equivalent to a נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה נַפְתָּה

33 Julius Preuss notes: “There is…no ‘medicine of the Talmud’ … There is no Jewish medicine in the sense that we speak of an Egyptian or a Greek medical science.” Julius Preuss, Biblical and Talmudic Medicine, trans. F. Rosner (Northvale, NJ: J. Aronson, 1993), 4.
and results in moments where women are given limited autonomy over healthcare. Of course, in this anecdote, the woman is not concerned with another female body, but rather the body of a man. But, this story may be yet another example of what Fonrobert suggests: in rabbinic literature women were at times considered masters of medicine, a representation that is troubled by the stereotype of women as masters of the magical arts, as we have seen in these two stories.

After reading these two somewhat humorous, and somewhat cautionary, tales, it may be useful to return to Cynthia Baker’s analysis of the built environment found within rabbinic texts, since the journey in each story takes the protagonist into the inn, but then he travels to the shuk, or marketplace. Much of Baker’s analysis of the shuk is a close investigation of the gendering of women’s bodies that occurs in the shuk in rabbinic texts. Baker finds that “‘woman’ and ‘ha-shuk’ appear linked again and again in discussions that interweave conceptions of sexual purity, propriety, and property.” In her estimation, the “woman in the shuk” is a figure of anxiety and ambiguity in the rabbinic sources.

Paralleling this anxiety, we can see anxiety in the two stories analyzed here concerning a space linked to the shuk, the inn. In Jannai’s story, after he leaves the inn, he meets a “woman in the shuk” who is just as problematic as the woman he met in the inn: she is another witch. In this case, both the space of the inn and the shuk are spaces where encounters with women are dangerous and sexualized. In almost direct contrast to the story of Jannai and the stories Baker analyzes, the story of R. Isaac presents R. Isaac’s encounter with a woman in the shuk in a much more positive light than his encounter with unknown forces inside the inn. In R. Isaac’s case, he meets a woman in the ambiguous space of the shuk who, while she has knowledge of dangerous forces, does not harm him and instead heals him. In both stories, the male rabbinic character interacts with dangerous women within the closed space of the inn and then moves into the more open (yet equally laden with sexuality and danger) space of the market. In the market, the man meets another woman, a woman who is skilled in the magical or medical arts who allows the danger presented by these innkeepers to be revealed in the full view of the public. The market becomes the space where the interiority of the inn is exposed to the light of day, via the ministrations of powerful (and potentially dangerous) women.

**Intertextuality and the Folk Tale**

These two stories emphasize the dangers perceived by their authors to be inherent in travel, the inn, and female innkeepers. It is of note that the particular literary representations of these perceived dangers are not unique to rabbinic literature. If we return to the tale of Jannai and the woman who turns into an ass, we find that this narrative bears remarkable similarity to other narratives in circulation during Late Antiquity, notably moments in Apuleius’
Metamorphoses. The story follows several readily accepted folklore motifs which are also present in the Apuleius story, including the motif of transforming a man into an ass. In Apuleius’ Metamorphoses, the protagonist sets out on a voyage of discovery of the supernatural, spurred by youth and wealth. Lucius (Apuleius’ main character) travels to Thessaly in order to acquire knowledge of the unknown, and he specifically seeks knowledge of magic and witchcraft (of the sort described above, powerful yet illicit). Upon arrival at a friend-of-a-friend’s house, with the aid of his young lover, a witch’s slave, he is able to spy upon the witch, and sees her transform into a bird. Lucius, enflamed with curiosity, likewise wishes to fly above the trees, and asks his lover for access to the secret formula for transformation. Unfortunately, things do not go as planned.

She [Fotis, Lucius’ lover] repeated this [the recipe for the magic potion] several times, … But no feathers or wings appeared anywhere, but my hair grew coarse and bristly, my soft skin hardened into hide, at my hands’ tips were fingers five no more but all became fast bound in solitary hoofs, and a long tail began to grow from the extremity of my spine. My face grew huge, my mouth widened, my nostrils began to gape and my lips to droop; my ears also extended to an immoderate length and were crowned with bristles. Lost and desperate, I surveyed my body over and perceived that I was not a bird but an ass…. When she saw what I was, she smote her face fiercely with her hands and cried: “Ah! I am lost! I am lost! In my terror and hurry I took the wrong box, deceived by its likeness to the other…. You have only to nibble some roses and you shall step forth from the ass’s skin and be my own sweet Lucius again” (III. 24-5). 40

For the rest of the novel, the comic timing is such that Lucius is foiled at every chance he gets to eat roses and return to human form. He is finally rescued by the “queen of heaven” at the very end of the tale, after traversing books three to eleven in the wretched form of a donkey, being maltreated by several different owners (some more degraded and degrading than others) along the way. 41 In this story, the reader is granted access to the full range of Lucius’ human emotions, even as he is trapped in the body of a subservient beast. Conversely, in the story we saw in Sanhedrin, the witch is not granted those faculties of reason; all eyes are trained on

38 Apuleius wrote the Metamorphoses as what may be properly termed a novel, in Latin, using source material from a developing Greek tale (the two known traditions of which have been lost), in the latter half of the second century C.E. Alex Scobie, Apuleius and Folklore: Toward a History of ML3045, AaTh567, 449A (London: The Folklore Society, 1983), 155-6.


41 The character of Lucius as an enslaved beast who strives for freedom may reflect Apuleius’ own biography, insofar as Apuleius was a freed-man. Keith Bradley suggests that in the Apuleian case, “The ass, therefore, was the ideal servant, adaptable, hard working, and compliant – a model in fact of what the slave should be.” Keith Bradley, “Animalizing the Slave: The Truth of Fiction,” Journal of Roman Studies (vol. 90, 2000), 118.
Jannai, her master, and his quick-wittedness which allowed him to escape the fate of Lucius. There, the emphasis is on her enslavement, as it provides the tale with its crude humor: without her subservience, could we fully laugh at the sight of Jannai “seen riding on a woman in the market”?  

Apuleius’ novel was certainly widely distributed throughout the Roman world after its publication. Augustine, in *The City of God*, specifically refers to Apuleius and his novel.  

The reference in Augustine’s writing is of particular note, because it refers to the transformation of a man into an ass twice: as described by Apuleius and in an additional anecdote where the motif is repeated. And for the purposes of this study, it is worth reviewing the Augustinian text in full, as it falls during his discussion of supernatural transformations (which, incidentally, he cannot fully disprove, just disavow) and involves a transformation at the hands of a female innkeeper.

In fact, when I was in Italy, I myself used to hear of such happenings from one district in that country. It was said that landladies conversant with these evil arts were in the habit of giving drugs in cheese to travelers, when they so wished and the opportunity offered, and by this means their guests were turned into pack-animals on the spot and were used to carry commodities of all kinds. Afterwards, when they finished their jobs, they were restored to their original selves. And yet their minds did not become animal, but were kept rational and human. This is what Apuleius, in the work bearing the title *The Golden Ass*, describes as his experience, that after taking a magic potion he became an ass, while retaining his human mind. But this may be fact or fiction. Stories of this kind are either untrue or at least so extraordinary that we are justified in withholding credence.

Here, it may be hard to separate Augustine’s report about the “landladies” in Italy who would transform people into pack-animals with “drugs in cheese” from his knowledge of Apuleius’ novel. Is he recounting multiple sources of this legend, multiple repetitions of the Apuleian narrative, or another source completely? It is perhaps impossible to say. But, it is clear that at least Augustine is aware of these traditions, and feels justified in repeating them, if only to knock them down as mere illusions compared to the omnipotence of God.

Even if Augustine does not wish his readers to believe fantastic tales of innkeepers turning their patrons into donkeys, he does appear to be well aware of the folklore motif of the man-to-ass transformation. Additionally, his anecdote about the innkeepers who transform patrons with drugged cheese closely parallels some of the thematic elements present in the version we find in the Babylonian Talmud tractate Sanhedrin. First, we see that unlike Apuleius’ rendering, but comparable to the version in the Talmud, the innkeeper attempts to cause the transformation by giving the visiting traveler some form of

---

42 Of course, one of the more disturbing, and perhaps darkly humorous, parts of the Apuleian tale occurs towards the end of book ten, when a wealthy woman pays to have sex with Lucius’ asinine form. Lucius’ final rebellion occurs when he becomes aware that his owner wishes to put this bestial sexual act on display for a paying audience.


44 Augustine, *City of God*, 782.
tainted sustenance. In Jannai’s case, he was offered “shattitha” over which the innkeeper performed an incantation, while in Augustine’s recollection the landladies would drug cheeses and then offer them to the unsuspecting wayfarer. Additionally, the genders of the participants in these tales seem crucial to all of these different replications of the motif. The antagonist is invariably portrayed as a woman, while the luckless individual who is transformed (or almost transformed) is a man. The gender stereotype of women as powerful witches is both unsurprising (since the authors of all of these texts are almost certainly male) and pervasive from Antiquity down to the present.

Speaking of “Greco-Roman culture” broadly, Janowitz states, “While [male] magi were thought to have access to ancient wisdom and a certain prestige, women are presented as isolated figures who threaten both family members (and potential mates) and the general social fabric.” The full comedic thrust of the end of Jannai’s story (“he was seen riding on a woman in the market”) hinges upon this stereotype: here, a woman may be a dangerous witch, and once she turns an individual into a pack-animal, she may ride him as much as she desires. This exercise of power by the female witch over a male body is of course quite shocking, given the standard societal norms of women as more passive to the power exercised by male bodies. In Jannai’s story, as we have seen, the tables are turned, and he rides the witch, thereby restoring the gender power hierarchy. The final aspect of the Augustinian report which is repeated throughout these tales, including the Talmudic one, is the reversibility of the transformation. The ignominy of being transformed into an ass cannot be fully grasped if the person who is transformed does not return to his former body. Without such a return, the spell may as well be termed a form of death: the human no longer exists. But if the person is transformed back into his former shape, then he is forced to live the rest of his life with the recollection of his existence as a degraded animal. And finally, both Augustine and Apuleius take pains to inform their readers that the individuals who are transformed maintain their human faculties of reason, even as they exist in all other respects as donkeys. Given the prevalence of stories which include the transformation of man-into-ass, it may be appropriate, barring further evidence, to consider the prevalence of this folklore motif not in terms of influence but rather of shared interest in a highly humorous narrative: for the purposes of this study, it is important to recall that both the Augustinian and the rabbinic versions are located in inns, and that the danger and liminality of such spaces is foregrounded.

Conclusion

Throughout this study, we have seen how de-centering and de-humanizing the inn and its keeper can be. The actions of these unscrupulous barmaids have brought the uncanny feeling of the inn strikingly to the foreground, and those same actions have

---

45 For further explorations of this motif in Late Antiquity, see Levinson, “Enchanting,” 84-6.
46 Janowitz, Magic in the Roman World, 88.
47 DuBois suggests that in Greek Antique literature (and perhaps in actuality) women were viewed as not only different than but also more degraded than free men. “Women, like slaves and dogs, stand both inside and outside of human space, human community.” Page duBois, Slaves and Other Objects (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 147.
48 Levinson claims that this is indicative of the trend in rabbinic literature to subsume “magic” into the panoply of rabbinic knowledge (“Enchanting,” 2010, 93).
49 See Scobie, Apuleius and Folklore, for an attempt to account for the influence of this motif, even to a ninth century C.E. Chinese version (he does not mention the rabbinic version).
seriously imperiled the rabbinic male identity, in terms of his gender, autonomy and authority. And, we have seen that in both stories, the male protagonist has fled the inn for the more public space of the market. Heidegger, in his argument about the effect of Angst to de-center Being from home, remarks that a typical response to the condition of experiencing the Unheimlichkeit at home is to flee from that site. He claims:

Entangled flight into the being-at-home of publicness is flight from non-being-at-home, that is, from the uncanniness which lies in Da-sein as thrown, as being-in-the world entrusted to itself in its being. This uncanniness constantly pursues Da-sein and threatens its everyday lostness in the they, although not explicitly.50

The inn is certainly not the home Heidegger is thinking of here, but there is certainly a sense of overlap between the dwelling one does at home and the (albeit temporary) dwelling one does in the space of the inn.51

50 Heidegger, Being and Time, 177, emphasis in original.
51 When Heidegger is thinking of “home,” it is a home that is very different than either the Late Antique dwelling patterns: he did considerable thinking and writing in a cabin in the Black Forest of Germany, and his writings reflect his apparent anti-urbanism. Home, for Heidegger, was extremely private and secluded. “A well-known place of retreat for Heidegger was his small rustic cabin in Todtnauberg in the Black Forest, and he is often belittled as some clichéd backwoods hermit. In the face of an alienating modern technology, he seems to retreat to...his provincial sanctuary.” Dieter Thomä, “Making off with an Exile: Heidegger and the Jews,” trans. Stephen Cho and the author, New German Critique (vol. 58, Winter 1993), 82. See also, Martin Heidegger, “Art and Space,” trans. C. H. Seibert, Man and World: An International Philosophical Review (vol. 6, issue 1, 1973), 3-8; and “Why do I Stay in the Provinces?” trans. Thomas J. Sheehan, Heidegger’s insight here seems particularly apt in the context of these stories. Is not the reaction of the protagonists of both stories discussed above to fly “into the being-at-home of publicness”? There is a contradiction inherent in Heidegger’s argument here which reflects the contradictory impulse in both these stories: the men in these stories flee the private, enclosed, yet-still-unheimlich space of the inn for the public, somehow more heimlich space of the market, where they are rescued by strange women, in ways that are not necessarily home-like.

Additionally, one underlying concern exhibited in these stories is a concern about maintaining identity, of maintaining being (a concern that Heidegger seems well acquainted with). The two powerful women that Jannai and R. Isaac b. Samuel b. Marta meet in the marketplace, while providing a return to a sense of normalcy or something more like “being-at-home,” at the same time represent a considerable threat to their male identities. R. Isaac is particularly vulnerable to losing his identity as a man and as a rabbinic authority, since throughout the story he is at the mercy of more powerful women: both the (probable) barmaids and the woman who heals him in the market.52

52 For an intriguing argument that rabbinic men sometimes construct themselves as “women,” see Daniel Boyarin, “Masada or Yavneh? Gender and the Arts of Jewish Resistance,” Jews and Other Differences: The New Jewish Cultural Studies, ed. Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). Speaking of a rabbinic impulse towards survival rather than righteously fighting to the death, Boyarin concludes, “I suggest that in such situations, colonized people may sometimes come to identify themselves with or even as women” (Ibid., 325, emphasis in original). See also Daniel Boyarin’s expanded discussion of these themes in Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997).
The men who enter the inn in these stories are fundamentally threatened. Their health, safety, and freedom all come under attack by threats that are indicative of a more thoroughgoing danger: the diminishment or erasure of personal (male) identity at the hands of more powerful women. In these stories, the space of the inn is intimately tied to the space of the market: a space Baker figures as sexualized and ambiguous in rabbinic storytelling and Buie romanticizes as dynamic and erotic in pre-modern societies.53 The erotic is central to both stories, as the rabbinic men are exposed to extremely intimate interactions with strange women in both the inn and the marketplace. The image of Jannai “riding on a woman in the market” is hilarious: his public, sexual conquest of the witch produces a ridiculous scene. But underlying that hilarity is a definite existential fear: the fear of the weakening of spatial, gender and sexual boundaries, which may in fact weaken Jannai’s identity as a rabbinic man.54

53 Baker provides a nuanced argument about gender, space, sex, and bodies (as described above), particularly in the “market” and “home.” A relevant example: “Just as the sexualized ‘woman in the shuk’ signals the danger of the undomesticated female – specifically, the threat of sexual compromise – she might, at the same time, embody a perceived threat posed to the domestic cultures of the Galilee by the larger Roman imperial culture: the threat that not only economic, but also ethnic, religious, and other cultural categories would be compromised; that the rabbinically imagined boundaries between a ‘well-ordered’ Jewish ‘house’ and household and a non-Jewish marketplace would become permanently blurred” (Baker, Rebuilding the House, 109). An example of Buie’s romanticized view: “Traditional markets vividly express our genuine erotic interdependence” (Buie, “Market as Mandala,” 28).

54 Boyarin would suggest that while rabbinic literature does envision a certain type of “masculine” man, the creation of this man is tempered by another creation, the “feminized [sic]” man, which attempts to subvert the Roman paradigms of masculinity. Boyarin, Unheroic Conduct, 10. “Various symbolic enactments of ‘femaleness,’ as constructed within a particular system of genders – among them asceticism, submissiveness, retiring to private spaces, and interpretation of circumcision in a particular way – were adopted variously by Christians or Jews as acts of resistance against the Roman culture of masculinist power wielding” (Ibid., 6). Does Jannai riding an ass-woman in the marketplace constitute such “feminization”? I would suggest that this story is more concerned with maintaining “maleness” in the face of potential emasculation than the strategic embrace of “femaleness” presented by Boyarin.

rabbinc man attempts to find a safe, identity-confirming space of his own, he is continually confounded by the Unheimlichkeit inherent in each of the places he visits, and by the unheimlich nature of his own diasporic being.

Bibliography


