

LEHRHAUS

Over Shabbat

Vayechi

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Amidst the war unfolding in Israel, we have decided to go forward and continue publishing a variety of articles to provide meaningful opportunities for our readership to engage in Torah during these difficult times.

Lehrhaus Over Shabbat for the month of Tevet is sponsored by Lauren & David Lunzer to commemorate the 80th Yahrzeit of USAAF Pilot 1LT Frank B. Solomon, killed in action when his heavy bomber was shot down over Berlin on 6 Tevet, 1944. Mistakenly buried under a Latin Cross in an American Military Cemetery, Operation Benjamin reconsecrated LT Solomon's grave under a Star of David in 2019, representing a true Kiddush Hashem.

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PERIPHERY AND CENTER: READING NATALIE ZEMON DAVIS AT STERN COLLEGE FOR WOMEN

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West Africa Catalan Atlas by Abraham Cresques

Natalie Zemon Davis passed away on October 21

of this year. She died during a painful moment of upheaval and violence, not unlike the times she wrote about with deep compassion and sensitivity to the human dimension of the past. She was a path-breaking historian, a wonderful teacher, a generous mentor, and an intellectual hero to me and many others. Her scholarship pushed boundaries and took the reader on a journey. She taught me to read with care and humanity. I am grateful that I had a chance to meet her a few times in person and to hear her teach face to face, and of course I am thankful for the treasure of analysis and lucid, psychologically insightful scholarship she produced throughout her long and varied career.

I always love teaching her work, but I found a particular resonance between her writing and my students at Stern College for Women at Yeshiva University, an Orthodox Jewish liberal arts college that combines traditional Torah study—Bible, Talmud, and religious thought—with the arts and sciences.

A few years back, I taught a new course, called *Wanderers, Exiles and Merchants: Jewish Travel Writing, Medieval and Early Modern*. We start with the Radhanite merchants and their global trade-network as described by a contemporary Muslim geographer, and then move on to Eldad the Danite's tale of the lost tribes, strong and free, in the Indies. Benjamin of Tudela's Itinerary gives us a picture of Jewish life throughout the Mediterranean world and beyond, but tells us very little about the famous traveler (much to our regret); Yehudah Ha-Levi's poems imagine his journey to Zion and stand as a rich counterpoint to his poems written from tempest-tossed ships or while admiring the beauty of the Nile Delta—described as *ke-gan Hashem* [like God's garden]! We read these Jewish writers in light of Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta. We explore the world of the Cairo Geniza and its intrepid merchants; European Jews on pilgrimage to the Holy Land; and David Reuveni, the messianic messenger from beyond the legendary Sambatyon River who comes to Rome with a message from his brother, the King of the Lost Tribes. We then see how, a century later, the Portuguese converso merchant Antonio de Montezinos arrives in Amsterdam telling of his journey to the kingdom of the

Reubenites hiding in the heart of the Andes. It's a wild ride!

During one of my first classes, I was looking out at the room filled with bright and curious students, all women, and the reality hit me: there are no women in this entire syllabus! Not only are there no women authors, but the vast sea of texts we will read almost consistently elide any mention of women in their travels with just a few scattered exceptions. I reached out to a friend and colleague, Sarah Pearce, who has thought about this tangible absence both in her scholarship and her teaching. She suggested I think about the Geniza as a resource, because so many of the letters between husbands and wives refer to the spouses' travels. My students and I read a great article by Joel Kraemer, in which he weaves together a rich "itinerary" of letters and other personal documents in the Geniza that opened up the world of Middle Eastern Jewish women and pointed to the frenetic movement of people and goods throughout the Mediterranean.¹ The students were energized by this reading, and it inspired some excellent essays.

Dr. Pearce also referred me to an interview with Natalie Zemon Davis, in which she discusses her methodology and the challenges and opportunities at stake in capturing the voices of those who left no clear testimony behind for historians to unravel. In the 2015 interview, the groundbreaking historian of the early modern period talks about the challenge of reading about the lives of people who left behind a scant paper

¹ Joel L. Kraemer, "Spanish Ladies from the Cairo Geniza," *Mediterranean Historical Review* 6 (1991): 237.

trail with two other historians, Jessica Roitman and Karwan Fatah-Black. Zemon Davis reflects on her own approach to listening in on the past and filling in the empty space around marginal figures who would otherwise be forgotten: women, the enslaved, Muslims, Jews, peasants, etc.²

I paired this theoretical piece with a short essay Zemon Davis wrote about the Surinamese Sephardi man of letters, David Nassy, his daughter, and his (eventually freed) slave Mattheus. The article follows Nassy from Suriname to his three-year furlough in Philadelphia in the 1790s. Zemon Davis weaves archival documents with what we can know about the places that Nassy and his household traveled, the members of Congregation Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia that he befriended, the rich intellectual culture of Philadelphia that Nassy enjoyed and participated in, and the abolitionists and vibrant community of freed blacks that his manumitted but still indentured slave Mattheus would have encountered on the streets. Without any scrap of autobiographical material about Mattheus, she tries to recreate the world he inhabited and chart out the contours of his intellectual and social orbit. In the absence of reading his own words, Zemon Davis paints the details and texture of the possible interactions and experiences he would have had. She discovers that Nassy and his servant held the ropes when the visiting French aviator Jean Pierre

Blanchard launched himself into the sky in a hot air balloon on January 9, 1793; we can only imagine what a strange and wondrous sight this might have been for both Mattheus and Nassy and how this extraordinary event, and so many other things particular to Philadelphia, might have influenced master and slave as they returned to the Caribbean.³

One student found the project something of a swindle: Zemon Davis presents conjecture as fact! Most women in the class rejected this view. They were drawn into her storytelling and appreciated her caution and careful erudition. I believe that they were also inspired by her indefatigable curiosity. We discussed her long career and her interest in the marginal as a way for better understanding the center. I mentioned hearing her give a talk at NYU last spring. At 88, she was clear, focused, and energizing. She was a great listener and mediated a very feisty group of professors and graduate students with elegance. She seemed to feed off her discoveries and the connections she found. My students and I fed off that same energy! One was taken by Zemon Davis' excitement at finding a Creole dictionary. Another found magical the way she tied disparate pieces together, with care and self-awareness of the pitfalls and possibilities of this reconstruction. The original nay-sayer was not persuaded, but I thanked her for providing a spark to our discussion of the essay.

² Jessica Roitman and Karwan Fatah-Black, " 'Being speculative is better than to not do it at all': an interview with Natalie Zemon Davis," *Itinerario* 39 (2015): 3, available at http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0165115315000108doi:10.1017/S0165115315000108.

³ Natalie Zemon Davis, "David Nassy's 'Furlough' and the Slave Mattheus," *New Essays in American Jewish History* (2010): 79.

I teach at a university where Jewish studies is not marginal; it is at the center. However, to a great extent, it is through my students' exploration of Jewish history that they discover world history. Starting with themselves, they move outwards. They encounter Christianity and Islam as they trace the development of Jewish culture and society from the late classical into the modern age. They encounter the harsh realities of the slave trade by meeting a New World Sephardi who owns slaves and who wrestles with the economic realities that make slave-owning so tempting, while at the same time moved by the ideals of abolition. We also read the grand narratives against their grain to find the stories of the marginalized and forgotten, the poor, women, heretics, and misfits. So center and periphery shift, and the particular and the universal are ineluctably tied. Reading the other is no simple matter because, inevitably, it brings us to see ourselves in a new light. History should return us to this imbalance, this frenetic and generative dissonance between our comfortable assumptions and the yet unknown and strange which can lead us to new knowledge and a deepening awareness of our ever-changing place in the world. Natalie Zemon Davis is a great guide to this hermeneutical dance.



Jodensavanne by Pierre Jacques Benoit. Jodensavanne, the “Jews’ Savannah” was where Jews had large farms cultivated by slaves. The synagogue was the tallest building in the center of the town. It can be made out in this image, drawn from across the river.

קינה לשלום המדינה

(יום כיפור קטן - ערב ראש חודש כסלו תשפ"ד)

Shoshanah Haberman is a Landscape Designer with a love of Torah

הרסו ולא חמלו
בשבת השחורה,
"שמחת" תורה.
רקדנו בגולה באבל
וחרדה,
ולא ידענו עד כדי כך.
מחוץ שפלה־חרב, בבית כמוות;
הלכו שבי עולליה
לפני־צַר.

מעיי חמרמרו
על שבר בת עמי,
והיא יושבת בדד – כמעט
סוערה ולא נוחמה.

חגרה מותניה
ויצאה לקראת אויב,
עת מלחמה
לא עת שלום;
אין עוד פיתרון.

לשבת וסתם לסבול בשקט
בעת הטבח –
לא לזה הוקמה מדינה.

אבל הכאב משתיק את המצפון.

תרים קולה,
ותתחנן מה' שיבין,
שאחרי אלפיים שנה
כעם הנבחר מכל העמים
לסבל,
נמאס לה כבר לסבול בסבלנות.

בזעם אפה הרגה,
הרסה ולא תמיד חמלה.
בעוטף עולל ויונק ברחובות קריה –
שם בעזה.

ועכרה את שמה בעמים,
כשמעון ולוי – אחים.
הכזונה יעשה את־אחותנו?
וליעקב אין תשובה.

אבל,
לאותו האלוקים
גם ילדי עזה מתפללים.
לליבם הנשבר והנדכה
אלוקים לא יבזה,
כי חנון הוא.

אי אפשר, תאמרי.
אין בך כח
כעת, להפריד
בין ההרס ההכרחי
והמיותר,
בין מידת הצדק ומידת הדין,

בין שיקול שיעקור את הרע,
ובין שיקול המקלקל עולמות –
שאינ מי שיתקן אחריו.

הסירי את־אלהי הנכר אשר בתוכך.
את אלוהי הנקמה ואלוהי הלאומניות,
כלי חמס
וכלי חמאס,
לא ראויים לך.
הם יביאו רק קללה,
אפך כי עז ועברתך כי קשתה.

הסירי את נביאי השקר,
את אלו שאומרים לך
שבעקבות המשיח
בא הזמן לגרש יתום ואלמנה,
לנתוץ עצי זיתים,
להרוס בתים.

חזו לך שוא ותפל,
חזו לך משאות שוא ומדוחים.
כי בשקר הם מתנבאים לכם בשם אלו־קִיךָ,
שלא ביקש שתמותי, או שתמיתי,
בעד ארצו.

"מלכך" ושריך, סוררים וחברי גנבים,
אוהבי שחד, ורודפי שלמונים,
אומרים לך שעל חרבך תחיי –

ידיהם דמים מלאו.

אל תלכי שולל
אחרי ברכת עשיו,
ואל תזלזלי במידת יעקב
של שלום, ולשבת בטח.

לך מדינה לא הקים אלוקים
שתפלי כפרא אדם במדבר –
ידך בכל ויד כל בך.

וכשחרבות הברזל ידמו,
וקברת את מתוך,
והם קברו את שלהם,
עמדי דום.
את המעוות לא תוכלי לתקן.

אולי אלוקים יסלח,
כי העמיד אותך בניסיונות
שמי יעמוד בהם?

אם ה' לא ישמור עיר, שוא שקד שומר.
שובי
שתשקוט הארץ,
ולא תקיא אותך
שוב.

עת לשנות כיוון,
להתאבק –
אבל לעלות מהאבק.

שרית עם אלוהים ועם אנשים
ותוכלי,
למרות הכל,
להיות
עיר הצדק – קריה נאמנה.

BETWEEN ANGELS AND (WO)MEN: THE TALMUDIC APPROACH TO SEXUALITY

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Talmudic literature contains a range of views when addressing sexual pleasure. These range from the positive to the negative.¹ The negative views evidently praise an ethic of asceticism with regard to sexual pleasure. In the words of Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, sexual intimacy is an area “which, historically, has been the subject of animated controversy within the world of religious thought: the symbol of unbridled lust, to some, and of quasi-mystical ecstasy, to others...its attendant denudation eradicating the line between the human and the bestial, on the one hand, while enabling maximal bonding, on the other...The topic has generated much discourse and elicited polar responses as well as an intermediate spectrum; and indeed it does not rest easily.”²

¹ Aryeh Dienstag and Penina Dienstag, “[The Dialectic Nature of Sexual Intimacy in Talmudic Literature](#),” *Sexuality & Culture* 27 (2023): 1646-1660.

² Aharon Lichtenstein, “[Of Marriage: Relationship and Relations](#),” *Tradition* 39, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 14.

³ R. Shalom Noah Berezovsky, *Netivot Shalom*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Yeshivat Beit Avraham Slonim, 1982), 107; Benjamin Brown, “[Kedushah: The Sexual Abstinence of](#)

The concept of asceticism is a recurring theme in various contexts within Masoretic literature. However, it’s notable that the notion of sexual asceticism is especially intertwined with the realm of angels.³ Angels are depicted as imparting guidance to rabbinic figures regarding the significance of sexual asceticism (for example, [Nedarim 20a-b](#), [Masekhet Kallah 9](#), and [Kallah Rabbati 1:13-14](#)). We suggest that *sugyot* about sexuality that include an angelic trope endorse sexual pleasure as the recommended approach to marital intimacy, while also acknowledging that sexual asceticism may hold some value for certain individuals.

Angel Motifs in the Talmud

Angelic motifs are prevalent throughout Talmudic literature.⁴ Angels often serve as foils to eventually accepted rabbinic positions, exemplified especially by [Shabbat 88b-89a](#). Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi relates that when Moshe Rabbeinu went to receive the Torah, the angels questioned why it was being given to humans. Moses humorously responds by highlighting the distinctions between humans and angels. He points out that *Bnei Yisrael* were in Egypt and not angels; angels, by nature, do not require rest on

[Married Men in Gur, Slonim, and Toledot Aharon](#),” *Jew History* 27 (2013): 475–522; Benjamin Brown, “[The Kedushah Crisis](#),” *Tablet*, February 14, 2019.

⁴ Hagai Dagan, *Jewish Mythology* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: MAP - Mapping and Publishing, 2003), 53-56; Mika Ahuvia, “[Israel Among the Angels: A Study of Angels in Jewish Texts from the Fourth to Eighth Century CE](#)” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2014).

Shabbat, nor do they have parents. His rhetorical questions effectively illustrate that humans should be the recipients of the Torah.

It is of no coincidence that this *midrash* is attributed to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi is known for his interactions with angels and Eliyahu Ha-Navi ([Sanhedrin 98a](#), [Midrash Tehillim, chapter 8](#)) and is even described as stealing the knife of the angel of death ([Ketubot 77b](#)). However, when he is confronted with the life-or-death situation in which he had to decide whether to turn over specific Jews to gentile authorities, likely leading to their deaths, or allow the entire Jewish quarter of Lod to be annihilated, he chose to turn over the specific Jews, a decision strongly disapproved of by Eliyahu Ha-Navi ([y. Terumot 8:4](#)).⁵ Despite the angelic objection, the accepted Halakhah aligns with Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi. During the Holocaust, Rav Ephraim Oshry extensively used the *shitah* of Rav Yehoshua ben Levi to guide community leaders in saving Jews during the Holocaust, even if it meant sacrificing others.⁶ This stands in stark contrast to an angelic approach that would have saved fewer lives to avoid such difficult decisions.

Professor Yonah Fraenkel explains these and similar phenomena by highlighting that angels in the Talmud often prioritize the most apparent

and focal value while overlooking or ignoring other important values, necessitating correction by humans or God. Consequently, Talmudic stories portray angels as requiring correction from either humans or God in order to consider broader perspectives and values. Fraenkel cites [y. Sanhedrin 10:2](#) as one example: initially, the angels reject King Menasheh's prayer due to his idolatrous past, but God intervenes to accept his repentance so as not to discourage repentant sinners.⁷

The remainder of this essay will build on Fraenkel's thesis about the literary role of angels and apply it to *sugyot* centered on sexual intimacy. As we will show, angels represent one value—perhaps the most obvious one—while overlooking other important values, necessitating correction by the *sugya* and endorsement of sexual pleasure over asceticism.

Angels and Sexual Pleasure in Talmudic Literature

The landmark discussions of intimacy in the Talmud are found in [Nedarim 20](#).⁸ The piece is divided into two basic sections representing the two different approaches toward sexual intimacy in rabbinic literature. The first section records the opinion of Rabbi Yohanan ben Dahavai and the behavior of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus and his

⁵ In this story Eliyahu acts as an angel; see R. Samuel M. Segal, [Elijah: A Study in Jewish Folklore](#) (New York: Behrman's Jewish Book House, 1935), 12, 162-167.

⁶ *Shu"t Mima'amakim*, [1:20](#), [5:1](#).

⁷ Yonah Fraenkel, "[Ma'aseh Merkavah U-Malakhim](#)," in *The Aggadic Narrative: Harmony of Form and Content* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2001).

⁸ Yaakov Shapiro, [Halachic Positions: What Judaism Really Says about Passion in the Marital Bed \(Sexuality and Jewish Law: In Search of a Balanced Approach in Torah\)](#) (self-pub., 2018), 32; Aryeh Dienstag and Penina Dienstag, "[The Dialectic Nature of Sexual Intimacy in Talmudic Literature](#)," *Sexuality & Culture* 27 (2023).

wife Imma Shalom, who promote a restrictive approach to sexual behavior between husband and wife.

Rabbi Yohanan ben Dahavai is informed by the “ministering angels” that engaging in variant forms of sexual behavior between husband and wife leads to congenital malformations in the offspring resulting from the union. For example, the angels state that “the reason lame people come into existence” is because their fathers “overturn their tables.”⁹ Similarly, Imma Shalom explains the reason that they have “beautiful children” is because her husband took efforts to minimize sexual pleasure while engaging in intercourse.

Subsequently, [Nedarim 20b](#) quotes multiple sages who promote a more permissive approach to physical intimacy between husband and wife, followed by the opinion of Rabbi Yonatan who actually celebrates marital sexual pleasure. At

⁹ [Rashi \(Nedarim 20a\)](#) understands the opinion of Rabbi Yohanan ben Dahavai as prohibiting both anal and vaginal intercourse that is not in the missionary position. The medical literature describes that many if not most women are unable to achieve orgasm via the classic missionary position (Helen Singer Kaplan, “The New Sex Therapy,” in [The Interface between the Psychodynamic and Behavioral Therapies](#), eds. Judd Marmor and Sherwyn M. Woods [Boston: Springer, 1978], 378; Gajanan S. Bhat and Anuradha Shastry, “[Time to Orgasm in Women in a Monogamous Stable Heterosexual Relationship](#),” *The Journal of Sexual Medicine* 17, no. 4 [April 2020]: 749-760). This detail was not missed by the *baraita* in [Eruvin 100b](#), which states that a woman “serves as a pillow for her husband” [during sexual relations] as a punishment for Eve’s role in the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge.

¹⁰ [Nedarim 20a](#); [Haqiqah 2a](#); [Haqiqah 4b](#); [Masekhet Kallah 1:9](#); [Kallah Rabbati 1:13-14](#) ; [Avot de-Rabbi Natan 27:3](#); [Sanhedrin 4b](#); [y. Haqiqah 1:1](#); [Menahot 42b](#); [Arakhin 2b](#); [y. Yevamot 8:1](#); [y. Shabbat 19:3](#).

first, [Nedarim 20b](#) quotes the opinion of the sages who rule against the opinion of R. Yohanan ben Dahavai, stating: “Whatever a man wishes to do with his wife he may do.” This is followed by two anecdotes in which women come before both R. Yehudah Ha-Nasi and Rav to ask them questions regarding intercourse apparently deviating from the missionary position: “I set a table for him and he turned it over.” Both Rabbis respond that sexual intercourse between husband and wife in any position is permitted.

Of note, Rabbi Yohanan ben Dahavai is quoted relatively infrequently in Talmudic literature,¹⁰ and he is best known for transmitting information he heard from angels.¹¹ Similarly, Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus (the husband of Imma Shalom) had a history of utilizing a heavenly voice to rule in Jewish Law.¹² Figures who act miraculously and are conversant with angels are often characterized negatively in the Talmud, and rarely is their opinion accepted as Halakhah.¹³

¹¹ [Nedarim 20a](#); [Masekhet Kallah 9](#); [Kallah Rabbati 1:13-14](#).

¹² [Bava Metzia 59b](#).

¹³ Two examples of negative characterization include the rebuke that Shimon ben Shatah gives Honi Ha-me’agel for miraculously ending a drought—“If you were not Honi, I would have decreed ostracism upon you ... [you are] like a son who nags his father” ([Ta’anit 23a](#))—as well as R. Yohanan ben Zakkai’s statement about R. Hanina bar Dosa’s miraculous abilities: R. Hanina “is like a slave before the King... I [R. Yohanan] am a minister before the King” ([Berakhot 34b](#)).

On their opinion not being accepted in Halakhah, see Binyamin Lau, [The Sages - Volume I: The Second Temple Period \[in Hebrew\]](#) (Jerusalem: The Jewish Agency for Israel - Eliner Library and Beit Morasha of Jerusalem, 2006), 84; see also Binyamin Lau, [The Sages - Volume V: The Beginning of Yeshivot in Babylonia and Israel \[in Hebrew\]](#) (Rishon Le-Tzion: Miskal Publishing, 2017), 94-103. One example of this

Ultimately, [Nedarim 20b](#) closes the discussion with a controversial statement from Rabbi Levi. Rabbi Levi labels a woman who demands sex from her husband as a “shameless woman” [*hatzufah*]. Rabbi Yonatan, presumably, disagrees and states, “Any man whose wife demands” he engage in sexual intercourse with her “will have children the likes of whom did not exist even in the generation of Moses our teacher.” A support is brought from none other than the matriarch Leah. The *Gemara* asserts that Leah’s demand from Jacob to have intercourse with her led to their progeny becoming *talmidei hakhamim*. The *sugya* offers a compromising solution: Rabbi Yonatan is not referring to a woman who demands intercourse verbally but rather one who entices her husband, so that he understands that she wants to engage in sexual intercourse with him. This solution, however, appears to directly contradict the simple reading of Rabbi Yonatan’s approach. Notably, in the proof text for Rabbi Yonatan’s opinion, Leah explicitly requests that Ya’akov engage in sexual intercourse with her ([Genesis 30:17](#)).¹⁴

phenomenon is R. Shimon bar Yohai, for despite having learned much of his Torah in a cave in a miraculous environment where he was spoken to by Elijah the Prophet and a heavenly voice ([Shabbat 33b](#)), the Halakhah almost universally rules against his opinions ([Hullin 49a](#)); see Binyamin Lau, [The Sages – Volume III: The Galilean Period \[in Hebrew\]](#) (Tel Aviv: Miskal Publishing, 2008), 146-148.

¹⁴ Although [Nedarim 20a-b](#) appears to leave the restrictive recommendations of Imma Shalom as a possible ideal sexual ethic, [Niddah 31a-b](#) seems to explicitly disagree with this approach. [Niddah 31](#) quotes the opinion of R. Ami who states, “If the woman emits seed first, she gives birth to a male, and if the man emits seed first, she gives birth to a female, as it is stated: ‘If a woman bears seed and gives birth to a male ([Leviticus 12:2](#)).’” Similarly, Rav states that the way to ensure “all his children [are] males” is to “engage in intercourse and repeat [the act].” While [Ramban on](#)

The narrative in [Nedarim 20a-b](#) adheres to the conventional structure found in other *gemarot* that reference angels. It commences with a robust angelic proclamation advocating sexual asceticism, which is followed by statements from one of the sages renowned for communicating with angels, further promoting this concept. Subsequently, the *Gemara* presents opposing viewpoints to the angelic approach, ultimately culminating in a narrative that deviates from the angelic stance. On a superficial level, the Talmud appears to engage in a discussion of conflicting opinions. However, when we apply Fraenkel’s analysis of the angelic motif in aggadic literature, we discern that the angelic trope in [Nedarim 20a-b](#) underscores how sexual asceticism neglects significant values. Consequently, the incorporation of the angelic trope introduces values that will ultimately be rejected—and the *sugya* as a whole emerges as an endorsement of the pursuit of sexual pleasure within the confines of marriage.¹⁵

[Leviticus 12:2](#) sees this passage as simply giving a technical explanation for gender assignment, Ra’avad in *Ba’alei Ha-Nefesh*, [Sha’ar Ha-Kedushah](#) and R. Simeon ben Tzemah Duran ([Magen Avot, part 3, chapter 4](#)) explain “emits seed” to be a euphemism or a proxy for female satisfaction from sexual relations. Similarly Tur, in [Even Ha-Ezer 25](#), states that the birth of a son is the reward a man receives for prolonging the sexual act to satisfy his wife. The latter approach is supported by the fact that the term female ejaculation was used by multiple cultures in antiquity to refer to female orgasm.

¹⁵ In [Nedarim 20b](#), Ameimar explains that “the ministering angels” actually refer to “the Sages.” This contrasts with [Masekhet Kallah 1:9](#), which quotes the opinion of Rabbi Yohanan ben Dahavai without any qualification, and [Kallah Rabbati 1:14](#), which explicitly states that the statement of R. Yohanan ben Dahavai is angelic in origin. The fact that the

Rabbi Akiva and the Sages: A Tension

[Ketubot 61-62](#) discusses the required frequency of conjugal relations. Although angels are not explicitly mentioned in this passage, the *Gemara* in *Ketubot* highlights that success in practicing marital abstinence is attributed exclusively to scholars who are associated with angels, as we will show. Although [m. Ketubot 5:6](#) lists concrete guidelines regarding the frequency of conjugal obligations, the *Gemara* elucidates the obligation of Torah scholars via the use of aggadic anecdotes. As with [Nedarim 20a-b](#), various literary motifs are used to subtly promote and approach encouraging sexual intimacy within the context of marriage.

The Talmudic discussion commences with a dispute between Rava and Abaye regarding whether a married Torah scholar who lives at home is obligated in conjugal relations on a nightly basis or whether the intensity of their Torah studies preclude such a high frequency. The implication is that men in general, and Torah scholars in particular, should have daily conjugal obligations if not for the possible intensity of Torah study, which may lessen their responsibility.¹⁶

After discussing the conjugal obligations of a Torah scholar who lives at home, [Ketubot 61b](#) proceeds to discuss dissenting opinions on the amount of time a Torah scholar may leave his wife to study Torah without her permission. This is followed by a series of stories of Torah scholars

who spent years away from their wives to study Torah, with most of the stories concluding in some form of tragedy. Rav Rehumi dies when he does not come home on time for his yearly conjugal visit to his wife. Yehudah the son of Rav Hiyya is accompanied by miraculous fire when he returns home for his weekly visits with his wife; however, he too dies when he misses a conjugal visit. Rabbi's son is compared to God when he expresses a desire to marry prior to engaging in uninterrupted Torah study. However, when he returns home after 12 years of Torah study, his wife has become sterile and requires his prayers to miraculously restore her fertility. In a similar vein, on Rabbi Hananyah ben Hakhinai's return home from extended Torah study, his wife dies from shock, forcing him to miraculously revive her.

A break from the consecutive tragic consequences of sexual asceticism is seen in the account of Rabbi Hama bar Bisa. Although not tragic, the tone is unclear, painted in an opaque light. Rabbi Hama bar Bisa left his family to learn in yeshiva for 12 years. On his return home, he met his son Rabbi Oshaya. He did not recognize his son but was awestruck by his knowledge of Halakhah. Initially, Rabbi Hama "was distressed" and felt that had he taught his own son, "I would have had a child like this." However, he is comforted when he realizes that the budding Torah scholar is indeed his own son. Although no tragedy struck Rabbi Hama, he lost the chance to raise his son. Moreover, his son has been able to

Rabbis are specifically referred to as "Angels" implies that the *Gemara* is purposefully incorporating the common literary device of angelic symbolism and, perhaps out of discomfort, feels the need to reinterpret the statement's angelic origin.

¹⁶ Yehudah Brandes, [Applied Aggadah: Studies on Family, Society, and Worship](#) [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Beit Morasha, 2005), 165.

develop into a formidable Torah scholar without forsaking his family for 12 years.

The exception to the negative consequences of engaging in sexual asceticism in the pursuit of Torah study is the famous story of Rabbi Akiva and his wife Rachel as well as Rabbi Akiva's daughter and ben Azzi. [Ketubot 62b-63a](#) describes Rabbi Akiva as a simple shepherd. Rachel, daughter of the wealthy ben Kalba Savua, 'discovers' Rabbi Akiva and marries him on the condition that he goes away to yeshiva to study Torah. Eventually, when Rabbi Akiva returns home and Rachel meets him, he utters the legendary statement: "My [Torah knowledge] and yours is hers." The *Gemara* proceeds to describe how Rabbi Akiva's daughter acted similarly to ben Azzai, who was also a simple person, and she caused him to learn Torah by betrothing herself to him and sending him off to study where he also became a great scholar.¹⁷

Rabbi Akiva's life and legacy is too multifaceted to be compartmentalized to a single feature. However, one of his many attributes is his association with angels.¹⁸ Rabbi Akiva is the only human to successfully enter and return from the

pardes without being harmed.¹⁹ In that *sugya*, Elisha ben Abuyah is drawn toward heresy when he sees the Angel Metatron sitting on God's

Throne as well as performing other duties. Rabbi Akiva, presumably, was able to enter and leave the *pardes* with his faith intact because he was able to differentiate the various functions of the Angel Metatron, and he knew that none of them imply that Metatron is himself a deity. Rabbi Akiva is described as knowing intimate details of the worlds of angels.²⁰ He describes *manna* as the food of angels,²¹ and he is explicitly mourned by the angels who see the injustice in his execution.²²

[Ketubot 61-63](#) appears to use the long list of tragedies that befell various sages as a strong implicit criticism of the practice of engaging in sexual asceticism to further Torah study.²³ The story of Rabbi Akiva serves as a counter-story to the other narratives in the *Gemara*. It recounts the possibility of cultivating a harmonious relationship with the Torah that is uniquely associated with Rabbi Akiva's wife. In this context, the Torah is not depicted as a threat to the marriage but rather as a source of its strength and stability. Unlike other accounts of sexual

¹⁷ Of note, the account in [Avot de-Rabbi Natan](#) seems to imply that Rabbi Akiva lived at home at the time he started studying Torah, seemingly opposing the account of *Ketubot*. However, the *gemara* in *Ketubot* takes for granted that Rabbi Akiva had a celibate marriage during the time of his formative Torah study.

¹⁸ Isaiah Gafni, "[Torah from Heaven: Moshe and Rabbi Akiva](#)," *Beit Avi Chai*, May 16, 2022, YouTube video [Hebrew].

¹⁹ [Haqiqah 14b-15a](#).

²⁰ [Berakhot 61b](#), [Haqiqah 14b](#), [Midrash Aqqadah](#), [Genesis 5](#), [Otzar Midrashim](#), [Kedusha](#), [Kedushat Barkhu](#), [Yalkut Shimoni 260](#), [Yalkut Shimoni on Nakh 919](#), [Zohar Pinhas 198](#), [Kallah Rabbati 2](#), [Sifra Shemini 35](#); as per Hagai Dagan, "[The Angels](#)," in *Jewish Mythology* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: MAP – Mapping and Publishing, 2003), 65.

²¹ [Yoma 75b](#).

²² [Berakhot 61b](#).

²³ Nili Ben Ari, [R. Hama Ben Bisa: An Analysis of Aqqadah from Tractate Ketubot 62b](#) [in Hebrew] (2005).

asceticism in the Talmud, Rabbi Akiva's separation from his wife was at his wife's encouragement. This accomplishment remains exclusive to the angelic Rabbi Akiva and remains beyond the reach of other sages.

In this case, the association with angels is used to indicate that the practice of an ascetic marriage may have some worth for some sages. Nevertheless, the overarching message of both the *Nedarim* and *Ketubot sugyot* emerges against the practice of asceticism. Asceticism to the extreme promotes one value while resulting in the neglect of other values, making it an unwise choice for the majority of individuals, and leading to its exclusion in the formation of a Jewish sexual ethic.

We have demonstrated that the Talmud uses angelic imagery in particular association with sexual asceticism. Rather than encouraging sexual asceticism, the use of this motif is meant to illustrate how sexual asceticism in the context of marriage neglects other equally important values. Asceticism in the sexual relationship, while clearly having a place in certain angelic couples, appears to not be the preferred approach in most others. Many Orthodox Jewish children grow up with the story of Rabbi Akiva's marriage; it would be wise for them to be brought up with the stories of Rav Rehumi, Yehudah the son of Rav Hiyya, and Rabbi Hananyah ben Hakhinai as well.

As 2023 comes to a close, we want to thank everyone who contributed a piece during the past year, thank those who sponsored LOS, and thank all of our readers and supporters.

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