



Parents and Sages as Agents of Culture in the Babylonian Talmud

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PARENTS AND SAGES AS AGENTS OF CULTURE
IN THE BABYLONIAN TALMUD

A dissertation presented

by

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to

The Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations

in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the subject of
Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations

Harvard University
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PARENTS AND SAGES AS AGENTS OF CULTURE IN THE BABYLONIAN TALMUD

Abstract

This dissertation explores how the rabbis of the Babylonian Talmud (Bavli) portray parents as involved in cultural transmission. Earlier scholarship has claimed that the rabbis sought to replace parents and the home as the primary locus of education. Through source criticism and close literary analysis, however, I show the situation to be far more complex. The rabbis address parental cultural transmission using the phrases *talmud torah* and *hinukh*. They use the term *talmud torah* to describe the act of studying and teaching Torah—scripture and rabbinic law and lore, while *hinukh* is ritual initiation and instruction. The Bavli limits the content that parents are required to transmit to their children and instructs them to bring their children to a schoolteacher to study. The Bavli, however, expands the realm of *hinukh*, portraying it as an obligation of parents to teach their children how to perform Jewish ritual until they become the age of majority and enter into their own full obligation. The shifting of *talmud torah* outside the home therefore reframed rather than eliminated the parental role in cultural transmission.

The Bavli addresses parental cultural transmission in less explicit ways as well. Moving beyond what the rabbis would have identified as cultural transmission, I select passages that portray dyadic encounters between parents and children. Attending to what parents transmit in these encounters expands our understanding of how the rabbis portray cultural transmission by addressing the parental role in transmitting an unwritten curriculum of rabbinic culture.

One example of this unwritten curriculum is the value the sages placed on Torah study. In a story about Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai (Rashbi) and his son retreating to a cave, the Bavli transforms a pre-existing tale about Rashbi into a tale of a father who attempts to transmit to his son the value of unadulterated Torah study—a practice of Torah study uninterrupted by other pursuits. I look to a separate set of tales in Bavli Bava Metzia to explore the ways in which the son enacts and transforms the values his father has taught. This analysis unearths a rabbinic cognizance of the complexities inherent in the parental transmission of a worldview—in contrast to transmission of a set of content or a set of skills, transmission of a worldview is a much more subtle and uncertain process. This internal rabbinic reflection defies attempts at placing it within a narrative of the shift in the locus of authority from father to sage; the same tensions and complexities highlighted by looking at these stories in tandem could surface equally if the sage were the central transmitter of this cultural worldview. My dissertation thus complicates simple narratives suggesting that the Bavli portrays the sage as completely taking over the role of cultural transmission from the father.

Finally, this dissertation brings together a variety of texts in which mothers transmit cultural knowledge and cultural objects to their sons and argues that the Bavli is more comfortable portraying knowledgeable women when these women use their knowledge in service of their maternal role. The most expansive example of this phenomenon is the mother of Abaye, whose teachings her son transmits two dozen times in the Bavli. Her presence and the presence of other mothers demonstrates that the walls between the home and the *beit midrash* were porous. The study of parents as agents of rabbinic culture thus expands our understanding of rabbinic culture and refines our knowledge of the parental role in education.

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לכבוד אבי מורי ואמי מורתִי

INTRODUCTION

Rabbinic Jews in both Roman Palestine and Sasanian Babylonia were subjects of an empire not of their own making. As a minority community living alongside an imperial majority, they had to negotiate their relationship with the culture of the majority. Were they to participate in the imperial culture, accommodate it, or resist it? In *Rabbis as Romans*, Hayim Lapin states that in response to this situation, the rabbis in Roman Palestine “articulated a culture of ‘Jewishness.’”¹ Lapin’s framing, situated as it is at the early stages of the rabbinic movement, conjures a picture of adult independent men who gathered together and actively constructed their culture as a response to Romanization. Alexei Sivertsev, on the other hand, focuses his account of the origins of the rabbinic movement on a *paterfamilias* model, in which it is the heads of households who banded together, bringing their families along, and in that way formed loose rabbinic networks.² While not mutually exclusive, these two models for the rabbinic movement’s origins provide two different loci for cultural authority, that of the rabbi in the house of study, and that of the father at home.

Early rabbinic prescriptions posit an obligation, specifically upon the father, to educate his sons.³ *Tosefta Qiddushin* 1:11 includes an obligation for the father to teach his son Torah in addition to other paternal obligations. Alongside this portrayal of the father’s educational role, however, some early rabbinic texts depict rabbis and fathers in a conflict with one another over

¹ Hayim Lapin, *Rabbis as Romans: The Rabbinic Movement in Palestine, 100-400 CE* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 6.

² See Alexei Sivertsev, *Households, Sects, and the Origins of Rabbinic Judaism*, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism, v. 102 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2005), 194.

³ I use “father” and “sons” here deliberately, to express the fact that explicit rabbinic prescriptions dealing with questions of cultural transmission explicitly address men and are about sons, not daughters. I will, however, devote a portion of the dissertation to addressing what can be gleaned by exploring maternal transmission.

cultural authority, a conflict in which the rabbi prevails. Mishnah Bava Metzia 2:11, for example, ignores the father's role as teacher when it states that: "Although his father brought him into this world, it is his rabbi who taught him wisdom who brings him to the life of the world to come."⁴ In my dissertation, I trace this dynamic into the world of the Babylonian Talmud (Bavli), compiled between the fifth and seventh centuries. I ask to what extent the Babylonian rabbis see parents as partners in the project of cultural transmission. Rather than focusing my attention on the origins of the rabbinic movement, I ask how the rabbis depict the role of parents in perpetuating a rabbinic culture that has existed for several centuries.⁵ While I say parents, the Bavli had distinct answers to these questions for fathers and for mothers. This dissertation will thus discuss mothers and fathers separately.

Many years after the start of the rabbinic movement, the rabbis of the Babylonian Talmud continued to engage in a monumental project of cultural framing. Understanding the role that they saw parents playing in this project can help us understand the tensions inherent in a scholastic culture that continues to value the home.⁶ Homing in on moments of transmission and viewing them from the perspective of rabbis, mothers, and fathers shows us can help shed new light on how the rabbinic project played out in all of its messiness.

⁴ The *Mishnah* is a tannaitic collection of prescriptions, the editing of which is attributed to R. Judah the Patriarch c. 200 CE. See Hermann Leberecht Strack and Gunther Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 109.

⁵ See below for a summary of scholarly debate about the mode and date of the Bavli's composition.

⁶ For more on the scholastic culture of the rabbis, see Adam Becker, "The Comparative Study of "Scholasticism" in Late Antique Mesopotamia: Rabbis and East Syrians" *AJS Review* 34:1 (April 2010), 91–113, doi:10.1017/S0364009410000243.

Culture

In order to explore the dynamics of cultural transmission, we must first clarify what we mean by culture.⁷ Originally, culture was a verb meaning to grow or cultivate a living plant or, eventually, a human. Over time, it came to refer to an object. This object was first used to refer to a “general state or habit of the mind” and then to the “state of intellectual development” of a society. In the 19th century, one meaning of culture took precedence over others, and that was the idea of “high culture.” This usage sees culture as an artistic representation of human perfection. In this sense culture can, in some contexts, substitute for “religion,” or might at times be synonymous with it in that its perceived goal is helping humanity attain said perfection.⁸ Tomoko Masuzawa relates this idea to the burgeoning of national identities. These earlier uses of the culture concept were hegemonic and elitist. However, by the end of the 19th century another idea of culture developed, partially in protest against these definitions of culture, through the fields of anthropology and ethnography. These scholars saw culture as representing a complex whole.

This new view of culture was more holistic, and its tools were descriptive rather than evaluative. E.B. Tylor, for example, classically described culture as including “knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”⁹ As Masuzawa points out, in this model, the term culture becomes

⁷ The topic has received much scholarly discussion; as such, my consideration here is representative, rather than exhaustive.

⁸ For this definition of high culture, see Tomoko Masuzawa, “Culture” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 74.

⁹ “The Science of Culture,” in Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art and Custom* (New York: Henry Holt, 1889). <https://doi-org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/10.1037/12987-001>

something of a catch-all, “naming the totality of social facts and deeds” for all of humanity.¹⁰

Later, Tylor’s view of culture was refined such that anthropologists sought to define the culture of a given society. Clifford Geertz is the most famous articulator of this approach. He believed that culture is a set of symbols shared by a group of people.¹¹

The assumption behind this anthropological view of culture is that each society has an essential truth that can be perceived by interpreting the totality of a given society’s culture. Ruth Benedict, for example, writes: “If we are interested in cultural processes, the only way in which we can know the significance of the selected detail of behavior is against the background of the morals and emotions and values that are institutionalized in that culture.”¹² It is important to note here that Benedict excludes “behavior” from culture, instead citing culture as the “institutionalized” explanatory force behind that behavior.

Ann Swidler refines Benedict’s notion that a person’s behavior can be explained against the background of their society’s culture.¹³ She cautions that the assumption that people’s behavior is culturally determined is not accurate. Rather, Swidler proposes that one’s culture provides a toolkit of possible actions for a person to take. Swidler also distinguishes between what she calls “settled cultures” and what she calls “unsettled cultures.”¹⁴ In a settled culture, the link between culture and action will be weak. The culture becomes rather ossified and therefore

¹⁰ Masuzawa, “Culture,” 78.

¹¹ In *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), Clifford Geertz states: “As interworked systems of construable signs (what, ignoring provincial usages, I would call symbols), culture is not a power, something to which social event, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly—that is thickly described” (14).

¹² Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (Houghton Mifflin, 1934, reprinted in 2013), 49.

¹³ Ann Swidler, “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies,” *American Sociological Review* 51 (April, 1986) 273-86.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 278.

will become less determinant of action. Unsettled cultures, on the other hand, are cultures in formation. In these cultures, the link between culture and action is tighter because the society is attempting to develop a culture and align its adherents/members' actions with that new culture. That unsettled culture comes to be in opposition to another culture and therefore has a stake in its members aligning their actions with the values, morals, and worldviews of that culture.

Swidler's definition of culture does not seem to include the literary and artistic production that some of the earlier definitions of culture cited above. In fact, she distinguishes her sociological model of culture from those of anthropologists who advocate for thick description or cultural interpretation. Her discussion of settled and unsettled cultures can provide a useful lens for exploring the formation of rabbinic culture. Scholars of Jewish late antiquity use the term "culture" extensively when speaking about the rabbis, but, perhaps because it is not a term internal to the rabbis, these scholars do not operate with a shared definition of rabbinic culture. Some scholars avoid defining it. Others treat rabbinic culture as only an institutional culture to be left at work, while still others define rabbinic culture as a counter-culture—a minority trying to shape their life in contra-distinction to a dominant culture. In his article "Middle Persian Culture and Babylonian Sages," for example, Yaakov Elman describes and defines many elements of Sasanian culture at the time of the Babylonian rabbis, but he does not define rabbinic culture, choosing instead to articulate how individual rabbis interacted with Middle Persian culture.¹⁵ Perhaps because he feels it impossible to do so, Elman does not present the rabbis as a coherent group with a culture that would affect how an individual rabbi might respond to elements generating outside that culture.

¹⁵ Yaakov Elman, "Middle Persian Culture and Babylonian Sages: Accommodation and Resistance in the Shaping of Rabbinic Legal Tradition," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, edited by Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, Martin S Jaffee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 165-97.

In *Carnal Israel*, by contrast, Daniel Boyarin uses the term culture to describe an attitude—for example, a “culture of the body.”¹⁶ Boyarin uses culture not to describe a whole way of life, but to refer to one part of a broader worldview. At the same time, he also describes rabbinic Judaism as a “cultural formation,” which he contrasts with other “Jewish formations” such as early Christianity.¹⁷ This usage implies that he views the rabbis as a group who share a culture—which, for Boyarin, means a set of beliefs and attitudes—that distinguish the rabbis from other Jewish “subcultures.” Boyarin reads legal and narrative texts in order to locate and flesh out the culture of the body that he has identified.

In his article, “Rabbinic Culture and Roman Culture,” Seth Schwartz posits that rather than seeing culture as a set of beliefs and attitudes as Boyarin does, culture ought instead to be defined as human behavior.¹⁸ He cautions, however, that when discussing rabbinic culture, it is crucial to define what sort of culture the rabbis might have. At its largest scale, a culture is used to refer to the way of life of a whole society. Given that the group we call “the rabbis” consisted of no more than a couple of hundred people at the same time, they cannot have a totalizing culture at a societal level. This observation may help explain Elman’s lack of definition of a rabbinic culture. Schwartz does identify, however, two ways in which a group may have a culture that does not require that group to converge at a large-scale societal level. The first is that the rabbis may have had a professional culture. By “professional culture,” Schwartz means that members of a certain profession share behaviors and norms, but these behaviors and norms are

¹⁶ Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture*, (Berkeley, CA : University of California Press), 3.

¹⁷ Ibid, 5.

¹⁸ Seth Schwartz, “Rabbinic Culture and Roman Culture,” in *Rabbinic Texts and the History of Late-Roman Palestine*, edited by Martin Goodman and Philip Alexander (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 283, DOI:10.5871/bacad/9780197264744.003.0017.

only present when they are in the work context. When Jeffrey Rubenstein discusses the culture of the Babylonian Talmud, this is the type of culture he often refers to--the culture of the study hall: “When we study the culture of the Bavli, we study the culture of the stammaitic academy.”¹⁹

This definition, however, does not account for the myriad of narratives and laws that refer to situations that are outside of the *beit midrash*; do these not reflect rabbinic culture? Discussing the rabbis of the Yerushalmi, Schwartz suggests that the rabbis lie somewhere between a subculture and a counterculture of the Roman empire.²⁰ For Schwartz, a counterculture is “...a small, highly integrated and rigorously bounded group who set themselves up in self-conscious opposition to broader social norms (both Jewish and Roman)— not a society, then, but a group possessing a ‘culture’ which may be quite as distinctive and totalizing as that of a larger-scale society.”²¹ The idea that the rabbis are a counterculture explains why rabbinic literature covers many more realms of life than would be expected from a document reflecting institutional or professional culture.

Schwartz’s discussion of the rabbis as a counterculture is reminiscent of Swidler’s definition of an “unsettled culture.”²² The rabbis were invested, at least initially, in crafting an all-encompassing culture in contradistinction to the dominant Roman one. Schwartz points out that even once a counterculture ends its creative period and becomes routinized, it does not lose its self-consciousness as long as its members keep living “non-normative lives in normative

¹⁹ Jeffrey Rubenstein, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud* (Baltimore, MD.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 5.

²⁰ Schwartz, “Rabbinic Culture,” 285.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Swidler, “Culture in Action,” 278.

society.”²³ Even though later, in Babylonia, at least some of the rabbis were integrated into Babylonian society and did not have a strictly antagonistic relationship with the ruling majority, they nonetheless continued to self-consciously fashion their cultural identities.

Rabbinic Cultural Transmission

Living “non-normative lives in a normative society” requires a conscious attention to the perpetuation of the non-normative way of life. Since the rabbis never did live as the cultural majority, they would actively have needed to find ways to ensure that rabbinic culture was carried on by the next generation. Scholars of cultural transmission have classified different methods by which culture is generally transmitted. Culture can be transmitted vertically, from parents to children; horizontally, from a peer group to one of its members; and obliquely—from teachers or other elders.²⁴ The Bavli, as we have it, presents the rabbis as valuing this oblique mode with the sage as the primary engine of cultural transmission.²⁵ This oblique mode, however, was not always the primary mode. Catherine Hezser and Alexei Sivertsev have each discussed the role of the father as the initial transmitter of Torah in rabbinic Judaism in the tannaitic period. They point to a shift from the home to the *beit midrash* that begins in the tannaitic period, but which is not fully realized until the amoraic period.²⁶

²³ Schwartz, “Rabbinic Culture,” 285.

²⁴ Taylor M.J. and C.A. Thoth, “Cultural Transmission,” in *Encyclopedia of Child Behavior and Development*, edited by S. Goldstein, J.A. Naglieri (Boston, MA: Springer, 2011), https://doi-org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/10.1007/978-0-387-79061-9_755.

²⁵ Martin Jaffee discusses transmission from sage to disciple in his book *Torah in the Mouth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), <https://doi.org/10.1093/0195140672.001.0001>. See also Shaye J.D. Cohen, “Patriarchs and Scholarachs,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, 48 (1981), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3622433>, who discusses transmission from sage to disciple in the early rabbinic period, especially on pages 58-59.

²⁶ Catherine Hezser, *The Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement in Roman Palestine*, Texte Und Studien Zum Antiken Judentum 66 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 94.

The transition from home to *beit midrash* is reflected in the ways rabbis portray themselves. Martin Jaffee argues that the rabbis consciously portray the master-disciple relationship in father-son terms. The master-disciple relationship, for the rabbis, “supplanted and superseded even those of the patriarchal family.”²⁷ Jaffee points to Mishnah Bava Metzia 2:11, which states that one must return a lost object of a rabbinic master prior to that of a parent because “his father brought him into this world, while his master who taught him wisdom brings him to coming world (i.e. the afterlife).” Despite the fact that the father was the primary locus of transmission in mishnaic times, this Mishnah portrays the rabbi as conveying to the student the Torah content essential for entering the “world-to-come”—the positive rabbinic image of the afterlife.

Charlotte Fonrobert likewise points to Mishnah and Tosefta Eduyot, which call Hillel and Shammai “אבות העולם” (the “fathers of the world”). She claims that designating the “mythical originators” of the rabbinic movement as fathers constructs “halakhic-mishnaic knowledge as paternal.”²⁸ In this case, rather than reflecting a notion that an individual rabbi has replaced an individual father (as in the Bava Metzia source), Fonrobert is pointing to the rabbinic appropriation of paternal language in the description of their own project.²⁹ This rhetorical replacement also takes place on the plane of biblical exegesis. Daniel Boyarin notes that Sifre Deuteronomy rereads the “father” and “son” of the biblical text as “master” and “disciple.”³⁰ These scholars describe this rhetorical trend as a manifestation of the rabbis’ constructing their

²⁷ Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth*, 148.

²⁸ Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, “When Women Walk in the Way of Their Fathers: On Gendering the Rabbinic Claim for Authority,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10.3 (2001), 411, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sex.2001.0059>.

²⁹ This rhetorical appropriation occurs, to a lesser degree, about mothers as well. Rabbinic sources such as Pesahim 87a talk about the sages as being breasts who exude the milk of Torah.

³⁰ Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, 211 note 22, where he discusses Sifre Devarim 34:4.

own authority.³¹ Applying this rhetoric to cultural transmission, one might assume that the rabbis presented themselves as being the sole transmitters of rabbinic culture, and that such transmission takes place only in the context of the master-disciple relationship.

The picture becomes more complicated, however, when we contemplate the fact that many rabbis were themselves fathers. This realization raises the question of how they might have understood their role as transmitters of rabbinic culture when they were not situated in the study house, but rather in the home. What role do they present the home as playing in inculcating rabbinic practice and values in the next generation? Bavli portrayals of rabbinic parents reveals anxiety about the attempt to shift cultural transmission from fathers to sages, making clear that, though a shift in means of transmission may well have taken place, it was far from neat or complete.

Interventions

My dissertation contributes to the field of rabbinic cultural studies in a number of ways. A history of cultural transmission is inevitably a history of the culture that is being transmitted as well. Because it decenters the *beit midrash* and expands our lens beyond that of a professional culture, the lens of parental engagement in cultural transmission supplements the picture of stammatitic culture Rubenstein describes in *Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*. This study shows that culture was also transmitted in the home, and that at times the lines between the domestic home and study house were blurry. The culture transmitted in the home is no less “rabbinic culture” than that transmitted in the *beit midrash*. Second, this study distinguishes between how

³¹ The shift in authority from father to rabbi did not come without its tensions. Daniel Boyarin and Howard Eilberg-Schwartz discuss rabbinic anxieties related to physical and spiritual reproduction in *Carnal Israel* chapter 7 and *God’s Phallus: And Other Problems for Men and Monotheism* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995), chapter 8 respectively.

the Bavli represents the roles of mothers and fathers respectively in the transmission of this culture. It thereby contributes to the study of gender in rabbinic literature. Finally, I build on those of scholars discussed above who discuss the transition from father to scholar as the locus of cultural authority. Earlier scholars demonstrated that the rabbis used language that implied the replacement of fathers by sages. In this study, I show that that picture reflects only a partial story about how rabbis saw parents as involved in passing along mores, rituals, beliefs, and knowledge to their children.

I selected my sources primarily because I saw in them moments of dyadic encounter between parent and child in which a parent “hands over” or transmits something, be it a belief, an object, or an idea to their child.³² Shifting the focus from preconceived notions of what comprises parental education can help us expand our understanding of the many roles parents play as agents of culture.

Methodology

Interrogating rabbinic literature, and the Bavli in particular, for its ideas about culture and cultural transmission surfaces a foundational question that has dogged scholars of Jewish late antiquity: (How) can rabbinic texts, and specifically the Bavli, be responsibly used for understanding cultural history? One feature of the Bavli that makes it difficult, but enticing, to interpret historically is that it contains teaching originating in multiple historical periods, woven together by editors, authors, and/redactors who lived in the fifth-seventh centuries CE. This fact leads necessarily to a historical hermeneutic of suspicion. When the Bavli claims to portray

³² See Ute Schönplüg, “Introduction to Cultural Transmission: Psychological, Developmental, Social, and Methodological Aspects,” in *Cultural Transmission: Psychological, Developmental, Social, and Methodological Aspects*, ed. Ute Schönplüg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

history is when it is often at its most fanciful or even tendentious. Scholars are correct in pointing out that when the Bavli tells the history of an earlier period, such accounts ought not to be read as reflecting the history of those times.³³ This suspicion extends to early rabbinic as well as amoraic traditions. Knowledge that many such traditions are edited and altered as they enter the Bavli leads to great difficulty in using the Bavli as a historical source for rabbinic history and culture of any period before the editorial one. There is scant historical record external to the Bavli and what there is has little bearing on large swaths of material contained in the Bavli.

Some scholars, however, led by Shamma Friedman and David Weiss Halivni, and continued, in different ways, by Jeffrey Rubenstein and Richard Kalmin, claim that careful attention to the Bavli's literary semantic markings can yield data about when a source contained in the Bavli originated and how it was molded by its editors. David Weiss Halivni posits that schools of editors, whom he calls *stammaim*, edited the document can be recognized in their editing.³⁴

In his introduction to the edited volume *Creativity and Composition*, Jeffrey Rubenstein provides a snapshot into the activity of these editors. He says:

They did not act as passive conduits, merely recording the traditions they received for posterity, nor did they limit themselves to succinct glosses designed to provide minimal requisite explanations. On the contrary, they added extensive discussions and commentary to the terse Amoraic traditions³⁵ they received, juxtaposed them with related

³³ See, for example: Shamma Friedman, "La'agadah hahistorit batal mud habavli," in Sefer hazikaron lerabbi Shaul Lieberman, ed. Shamma Friedman (New York: JTS Press, 1993), 119–164; Cohen, "Patriarchs and Scholarchs," 28–29; Richard Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia Between Persia and Roman Palestine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

³⁴ David Weiss Halivni, *Formation of the Babylonian Talmud*, translated by Jeffrey Rubenstein, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), especially chapter one, doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199739882.001.0001.

³⁵ And, I would add, early rabbinic traditions.

traditions, contextualized them in a larger discursive framework, and created the elaborate sugyot (literary units) that comprise the Bavli text.”³⁶

The result of the activity of the editors is a complex and variegated work that is a far cry from the linear works authored by individual philosophers and theologians of the ancient world. This dissertation follows this school of thought--that the Bavli is a heavily edited collection of discussions, narratives, and laws.³⁷ The editors were greatly interested in preserving earlier source material, but they did not simply quote that material. Rather, they embedded earlier sources into legal discussions and narrative compositions that show an artistry and discourse all their own. Thus, while the Bavli cannot tell us much about the early rabbinic period, these scholars demonstrate that it is possible to make historical claims about the layer of the Bavli most visible to us—the layer of the *stammaim*—the anonymous editorial narrators of the Bavli. These scholars’ work shows that the Bavli can yield useful historically informed insights into rabbinic culture. Though we often lack the ability to speak decisively about the historical reality “on the ground,” what we have is a record of how the late antique Babylonian rabbis constructed their world. Discourse analysis asserts that “Everyone (more or less consciously) selects what is to be included or excluded from their picture of reality...”³⁸ Even when texts do not present an accurate picture of historical reality, they do convey the author’s representation of that reality.

³⁶ Rubenstein, Jefferey, ed, *Creation and Composition: The Contribution of the Bavli Redactors (Stammaim) to the Aggada*, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 1. Rubenstein here builds upon the work of others such as Halivni and Friedman.

³⁷ This consensus is not universal. See Peter Schaefer, “Research into Rabbinic Literature. An Attempt to Define the Status Quaestionis”, *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 37 (1986), especially 146-152, where he argues that rabbinic texts are not stable enough to pinpoint their historical timing at any stage before their final redaction. See however, Chaim Milikowsky’s rejoinder, “The Status Quaestionis of Research in Rabbinic Literature,” *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 39 (1988): 201-211 and Schaefer’s response to Milikowsky’s rejoinder, “Once Again the Status Quaestionis of Research in Rabbinic Literature: An Answer to Chaim Milikowsky” *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 40 (1989): 89-94.

³⁸ Eileen Barker, “The Cult as a Social Problem,” in *Religion and Social Problems*, ed. Titus Hjelm, Routledge Advances in Sociology (New York: Routledge, 2010), 200.

For the study of the Bavli, this means that while the Bavli does not provide a window into how men and women, rabbis and non-rabbis lived, our study of the Bavli can clarify how the rabbis *represented* these lived relationships. For the purposes of this project, we can with authority speak about how the rabbis represented their own culture and how they discussed and represented the ways that cultural transmission works (or ought to work).

There are a number of analytical tools at the disposal of a scholar doing discourse analysis of the Bavli: Literary analysis, source criticism, and examination of literary parallels can point to what is significant about the discourse of the Bavli in particular.

Literary Analysis

Discourse analysis uses tools of literary analysis such as close reading and trigger words. Since it is interested in the effects of words on constructing reality, any discussion of literary forms is conducted for the purpose of articulating more precisely how the words on the page construct ideas, beliefs, and social relations. Literary tools allow us to explore the use of certain terms and key phrases across *sugyot* and even across tractates. This means that we can view texts in different tractates as being in conversation with one another or at least in the same cultural universe as one another.

The idea that literary tools can help inform not only how we read an individual sugya or narrative but also how we read the Bavli as a whole has been discussed at length by Tzvi Septimus. Septimus argues against Yona Fraenkel's attempt to impose artificial boundaries on rabbinic narrative. He says instead that these boundaries can be expanded to encompass the whole Bavli:

I also seek to expand Fraenkel's notion of *segirut* (autonomy) to the entire Bavli rather than any one story within it. In doing so, I demonstrate that if, as Friedman argues, there is creative "reworking" in the Bavli, then it is an activity that extends beyond the

parameters of the story unit, or even the sugya. The Bavli as a whole is shaped and defined by this activity.³⁹

Septimus's work shows us that the examination of creative reworking in one literary unit can be brought together with examination of creative reworking in another literary unit in the service of a discourse analysis that extends beyond a pericope to a tractate or even to the Bavli as a whole.⁴⁰

Source Criticism

The idea that the editors of the Bavli interact creatively with the earlier source material they incorporate into their work provides another entry point for scholars attempting to isolate and understand the discourse of the Bavli's editors. Shamma Friedman has laid out clear methodological tools for identifying the hand of the Bavli editor.⁴¹ Redactional layers can be teased out with careful attention to parallel sources and internal markers in the talmudic discussions. This is the hinge connecting redaction and representation. Pulling apart the layers shows you more clearly how the latest layer differs in its representation from earlier ones.

The purpose of teasing out the layers is not to determine how the editors tampered with earlier sources, but rather to appreciate the nuanced ways in which the discourse of the editors differed from that of the source material they are working with. At times, reconstructing the

³⁹Zvi Septimus, "Trigger Words and Simultexts: The Experience of Reading the Bavli," in *Wisdom of Bat Sheva: In Memory of Beth Samuels*, ed. Barry S. Wimpfheimer (Jersey City, N.J. : KTAV, 2009), 164. See also Zvi Septimus, "The Poetic Superstructure of the Babylonian Talmud and the Reader It Fashions," PhD diss. (University of California, Berkeley; 2011).

⁴⁰ See Mira Wasserman, *Jews, Gentiles and Other Animals: Talmud after the Humanities* (Philadelphia : University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), for an example of how to do discourse analysis of a single tractate. My work differs from hers in that I have posed a question regarding parents and cultural transmission and I seek answers to that question across the corpus of the Bavli. Wasserman, in contrast, reads a single tractate in order in an attempt to unearth its discourse in a systematic way.

⁴¹ See Shamma Friedman, "Pereq Ha-Isha Rabba in the Babylonian Talmud: A Critical Study of Yevamot X with a Methodological Introduction," (Hebrew) in *Texts and Studies, Analecta Judaica*, Vol. 1, edited by Hayyim Zalman Dimitrovsky, (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1977), especially 301-308.

discourse of the earlier material is impossible. Instead, examining how a source is incorporated into the discourse can show paths not taken by the editors. Discourse analysis suggests that the editorial act of incorporating an earlier source into the pericope in a specific way can have discursive effects that may have been unintended by the authors. For example, the way that the editors incorporate traditions about mothers into their discourse raises possibilities for the relationship between women and Torah study that explicit discussions of that question are closed to.

Examination of Literary Parallels

An important part of source criticism is the examination of literary parallels. Collections of early rabbinic material such as the Mishnah, Tosefta, halakhic and aggadic midrashim, and the Yerushalmi often provide parallels to the source material that the Bavli incorporates. Comparing the versions of those sources in the Bavli to those in earlier collections of rabbinic material can uncover significant differences between their respective contexts and formulations. These differences have implications for understanding the discourse of the Bavli. In the case of the parental role in cultural transmission, looking at the role of the parent in earlier collections can also show us how those collections present the role of the parent. Comparing the Bavli's texts to those that came before can highlight the differences between the Bavli's perspectives on this question and the perspectives of those earlier collections.

The Passover seder, discussed in chapter 1, illustrates this point clearly. Despite the fact that the Bavli, a later source than the Mishnah, ignores the Mishnah's focus on the evening as a story-telling event, this conception had staying power and is currently, in many households, the primary function of the evening's rituals. This point demonstrates that the Bavli provides set of

perspectives about the parental role in cultural transmission that differs from other rabbinic perspectives.

Yet there are certain questions the Bavli cannot answer. It is important to recognize that discourse analysis, especially one that is constructionist rather than critical, cannot explain *why* the rabbis represented themselves the way they did or the effect of their discourse on the lives of the men and women about and to whom they spoke. In his handbook on discourse analysis, Titus Hjelm points out that for many scholars, "...the main problem with a discourse-analytical (and more broadly, constructionist) approach is the lack of strictly causal explanatory power..." This is because, "...the discourse itself cannot fully tell us how it is discussed, reinterpreted and resisted in practice."⁴² In order to get to these questions, we would need historical records external to the Bavli, records which are difficult to come by.⁴³ Future studies, however, could explore the reception of the Bavli's ideas, charting how later interpreters navigated these questions in relation to the Bavli's discourse. Other studies could look to the early rabbis and analyze their discourse(s) around the role of parents in cultural transmission, thereby charting a diachronic view of ideas around the parental role in cultural transmission. While I have laid the groundwork in this dissertation, more work would be needed to systematically chart the early rabbis' representation of parental transmission of rabbinic culture.

⁴² Titus Hjelm, "Discourse Analysis," in the *Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, edited by Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler, Routledge Handbooks, (London ; New York: Routledge, 2011), 145.

⁴³ Some attempts have been made to read history using rabbinic texts using methods that do not assume a positivist link between events described in the book and events on the ground. In *Carnal Israel*, for example, Daniel Boyarin proposes that: "there is a connection between the genres of rabbinic textuality and also between them and a society..." (11). He claims that: "We can use both halakhah and aggadah together to write a history of discursive processes and social sites, of communal mechanisms and institutions" (12).

Structure of the Dissertation

Each chapter of my dissertation will look at the parental role in cultural transmission from a different aspect of defining culture. Chapter one, “Transmitting the Book: *Talmud Torah* and *Hinukh*,” deals with the internal categories of cultural transmission that the rabbis themselves provide.⁴⁴ It explores the explicit discussions of rabbinic prescriptions regarding cultural transmission of textual and ritual knowledge. It examines two facets of cultural transmission: *talmud torah* (Torah study) and *hinukh* (transmission of ritual knowledge). I argue that while the rabbis do move textual transmission out of the home, they keep the transmission of ritual in the home, expanding parental responsibility in this area. Fathers who are not rabbis are portrayed as ancillary to a central project of the rabbinic movement, that of Torah study. This distinction helps explain the Bavli’s lack of attention to the role of the child in the narrative retelling portion of the Passover seder.

My second chapter, “Beyond the Book: Rashbi and his Son,” moves beyond internal definitions of rabbinic cultural transmission into an exploration of the transmission of rabbinic values. It expands the lens of cultural transmission from the transmission of texts and rituals to include the transmission of a worldview, a set of values, and a way of life. Its starting point is a narrative that describes a father’s attempt at being the sole transmitter of culture to his son while the two sojourn in a secluded cave for thirteen years. It then looks at what Alan Tindall terms “intra-psychic transmission” and asks how the son receives the transmission.⁴⁵ I argue that the rabbis portray the son as receiving his father’s transmission of values but enacting those values in a warped way. Read together, these stories show the rabbis wrestling with the choice between

⁴⁴ I am using the term “book” here to imply the types of knowledge we usually associate with rabbinic culture—textual and ritual knowledge.

⁴⁵ Allan Tindall, “Theory in the Study of Cultural Transmission” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 5 (1976), 198.

participating in marriage and family life and eschewing such structures in favor of a monastic culture.

My third chapter, “Rabbinic Mothers” homes in on the role of mothers in cultural transmission. The culture it explores includes the ritual and textual knowledge of chapter one as well as the values and beliefs of chapter two and explores the roles the Bavli portrays mothers as having in transmitting both of these types of culture. This chapter highlights the myriad ways in which the rabbis imagine mothers to facilitate cultural transmission. These mothers are portrayed as morally preparing their sons to receive Torah, as supplying their sons with enhanced ritual objects, and even, in rare texts, as teaching their sons Torah. These mothers embody different models of maternal cultural transmission which belie the simple prescription excluding mothers from this role.

Finally, my fourth chapter entitled “Expanding the Book: The Teachings of Abaye’s Mother” discusses the mother of the fourth-generation sage Abaye. Abaye quotes his mother using the phrase *אמר לי אם* over two dozen times in a variety of contexts. Her presence in the Bavli shows that robust transmission of rabbinic culture is happening in Abaye’s home. Despite the fact that the type of knowledge she transmits might have, without examination, been classified as external to the rabbinic project, I demonstrate that the Bavli incorporates it organically into its discourse. The wisdom she transmits can thus expand our ideas of what rabbinic culture encompasses.

Note: Use of manuscripts

Over the course of my research, I have consulted the Lieberman database through the Hathi Garsinan website as well as the manuscript that the Ma’agarim website identifies as the “best” manuscript. In the body of the dissertation, I indicate whether I have used the Vilna or one of the manuscripts as my base text. Where there are differences that go beyond orthography I have

noted them, especially when they are significant in shaping the meaning of a passage. I have not noted differences in orthography that do not change the meaning of the text. In passages without manuscript notations, there were no differences worth noting.

CHAPTER 1

TEACHING THE BOOK: *TALMUD TORAH* AND *HINUKH*

שְׁמַע בְּנִי מוֹסֵר אָבִיךָ
וְאַל-תִּטֹּשׁ תּוֹרַת אִמֶּךָ:
משלי א: ח

This chapter addresses the internal terms the rabbis had for parental cultural transmission—*talmud torah* (Torah study) and *hinukh*. I begin by looking at the role the Hebrew Bible, as exemplified by the book of Deuteronomy, expects parents (both fathers and mothers) to play in the promulgating of Torah to their children. I then show the ways in which the early rabbis actively read mothers and daughters out of this commandment. I argue that it is the Bavli that splits the parental role in educating children into two distinct obligations—*talmud torah* and *hinukh*. *Hinukh* is initiation into Jewish ritual practice. It entails the mimetic transmission of cultural practices which in turn enable children to see themselves as connected to the broader community of practitioners. Examples of this include details about how to observe the Sabbath and dietary laws, as well as obligations such as the donning of ritual garments. While *talmud torah*, the study or teaching of Torah, loosely corresponds to what we would call “education,” it means much more to the rabbis than a straightforward intellectual pursuit of knowledge and goes beyond giving children the reasons for performing any given ritual. A father tasked with *talmud torah* would induct his son into the pursuit of scriptural study for its own sake, a pursuit that transcended any individual ritual obligation, becoming a cultural practice in its own right.

I show an opposite dynamic with each of these obligations. Later Babylonian rabbis rhetorically limit the paternal role in *talmud torah*, while maintaining, or even expanding the parental role in *hinukh*--the initiation of the child into religious life. The Bavli employs two discursive strategies to minimize the paternal role in *talmud torah*, leaving this obligation

ultimately in the hands of teachers. By creating and even expanding the obligation of *hinukh*, however, the Bavli creates a robust rabbinic-level obligation for parents (potentially fathers and mothers, see the discussion below) to initiate their children into religious practice. Ultimately, the Bavli understands both parents as playing a key role in teaching their children how to practice *mitzvot* (commandments) but not in teaching their children Torah.

The trend to limit the paternal role in *talmud torah* aligns with an increasing reconceptualization of *talmud torah* as a theologically charged practice best engaged with in the context of the master-disciple relationship. The shift reflects a transition from the father as being the central agent of cultural transmission in its broadest sense, to an imagined reality in which parental transmission is confined to the ritual realm, while the practice of scriptural study which knit the rabbinic community together was placed in the hands of teachers and sages.

Cultural Transmission in Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy is a central locus for instructions regarding how to perpetuate the covenant between Israel and God.⁴⁶ I will discuss its approach by reading closely a few verses of Deuteronomy 6, which provides a programmatic statement regarding the parent's role in cultural transmission.⁴⁷ Moses begins by telling the people that he is instructing them in "the commandments, the laws, and the ordinances" that God commanded them to perform in the land that they will soon inhabit. Verse 2 expresses the desire that, through studying these commandments, not only will the assembled fear God and keep God's commandments, their children and grandchildren will do so as well.

⁴⁶ For more on children's role in the book of Deuteronomy as a whole see Patrick Miller, "That the Children May Know": Children in Deuteronomy, in *The Child in the Bible*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 45-62.

⁴⁷ I will use "parents" and "children" in my discussion of the passages from Deuteronomy.

But how are parents to fulfill this obligation if their children did not experience the miraculous events of the exodus, did not hear God's words from the mouth of Moses? The last section of Deuteronomy 6 provides an answer to this question:

כִּי־יִשְׁאַלְךָ בְנֶךָ מָחָר לֵאמֹר מָה הָעֲדוֹת וְהַחֻקִּים וְהַמִּשְׁפָּטִים אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֲתָכֶם:
וְאָמַרְתָּ לְבְנֶךָ עֲבָדִים הָיִינוּ לְפָרְעָה בְּמִצְרָיִם וַיֹּצִיאֵנוּ ה' מִמִּצְרָיִם בְּיָד חֲזָקָה:
וַיֹּתֶן ה' אוֹתוֹת וּמִפְתֹּתִים גְּדֹלִים וָרָעִים בְּמִצְרָיִם בְּפָרְעָה וּבְכָל־בֵּיתוֹ לְעֵינֵינוּ:
וְאוֹתָנוּ הוֹצִיא מִשָּׁם לְמַעַן הַבִּיא אֹתָנוּ לָתֵת לָנוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לְאַבְרָהָם:
וַיִּצְוֵנוּ י' ה' לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת־כָּל־הַחֻקִּים הָאֵלֶּה לְיִרְאָה אֶת־ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ לְטוֹב לָנוּ כָּל־הַיָּמִים לְחַיֵּינוּ כִּהְיוֹם הַזֶּה:
וְצִדְקָה תְהִי־לָנוּ כִּי־נִשְׁמֹר אֶת־כָּל־הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּנוּ: {ס}

²⁰ When your children ask you in time to come, “What are the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the LORD our God has commanded you?”

²¹ then you shall say to your children, “We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. ²² The LORD displayed before our eyes great and awesome signs and wonders against Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household. ²³ He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land that he promised on oath to our ancestors. ²⁴ Then the LORD commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our lasting good, so as to keep us alive, as is now the case. ²⁵ If we diligently observe this entire commandment before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us, we will be in the right.” (Deut. 6:20-25, NRSV)

These verses depict an exchange between parent and child. The child asks the parent about the practices Moses has been teaching the Israelites. The parent does not list a series of covenantal obligations, but rather responds by transmitting to the child the memory of divine intervention in the exodus from Egypt, what Robert Cover calls a “master narrative.”⁴⁸ Cover states that, “The intelligibility of normative behavior inheres in the communal character of the narratives that provide the context of that behavior.”⁴⁹ The parent has responded to a child’s expression of disconnect (“that God has commanded you”) by embedding the practices in question into a

⁴⁸ See Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Text and Texture: A Literary Reading of Selected Texts*, (Oxford: Oneworld, 1998), 79-83, for a claim that these verses ask the father to enmesh the son in the legacy of the “living past.”

⁴⁹ Robert M. Cover, "The Supreme Court, 1982 Term -- Foreword: Nomos and Narrative," *Harvard Law Review* 97:4 (1983-84), 10. Also appears in the *Faculty Scholarship Series of Yale Law School, Paper 2705*, http://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/fss_papers/2705.

master narrative of redemption. God has brought “us” out of Egypt so that we might follow God’s commandments in the land that God has promised “us.”

Deuteronomy 6 thus asks parent to engage deliberately in cultural transmission. Parents are asked to teach the rituals that set the Israelites apart from other cultures. While doing so, they must also transmit another piece of culture—the national story that provides the context for the rituals. They must contextualize the rituals in the master narrative of the Israelites—the miraculous divine intervention in the life of the nation that led to the circumstances in which these teachings might be enacted. This second element of cultural transmission, embedding the “*nomos*” in the “narrative,” ideally enables their children to transition from an outsider stance of “your commandments” to that of an insider “us.”

While the verbs in Deuteronomy 6 are all in the masculine form, scholars of the book of Deuteronomy concur that the book imagines mothers as part of the commandment to teach children. Moshe Weinfeld argues that in contrast to Exodus, Deuteronomy includes women in its covenantal ceremonies and includes daughters in the description of festival rituals.⁵⁰ He claims that this shows that when the Deuteronomist addresses the nation with the “you plural,” this address applies equally to husbands and wives.⁵¹ This would mean that mothers and not just fathers are charged by the book in inculcating in their children an adherence to the words of Torah and the observance of God’s commandments. Sandra Jacobs strongly disagrees with Weinfeld’s views on the attitudes of Deuteronomy towards women’s role. She points to passages that treat women as sexual objects, for example, as evidence for Deuteronomy’s portrayal of

⁵⁰ See Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 291, where he contrasts the fact that men had to separate from their wives in Exodus (19:10) before the revelation of the decalogue with the fact that women are explicitly mentioned as participants in covenantal ceremonies of Deuteronomy 29 and 30.

⁵¹ Ibid.

women as second class citizens.⁵² And yet, she too sees women as sharing the parental educative role. Thus, the picture we are left with is that regardless of the scholarly disagreement regarding the place of women in the Deuteronomic covenant, both scholars see mothers and fathers alike as central in teaching children the “*nomos*” and the “narrative” of the Israelite covenant with God.⁵³

Talmud Torah: The Early Rabbis

Early rabbis, like Deuteronomy, articulate a parental obligation to teach Torah to one’s children.

Unlike Deuteronomy, however, the early rabbis explicitly read mothers out of this obligation.

Early rabbinic sources list *talmud torah* as a commandment central to rabbinic fatherhood.

Tosefta Qiddushin, for example, lists it alongside four other obligations as the obligations a father has to his son, stating:

⁵⁴אי זו היא מצות האב על הבן למולו ולפדותו וללמדו תורה וללמדו אומנות ולהשיאו אשה

What is the commandment of the father on [behalf of] the son? To circumcise him, to redeem him, to teach him Torah, to teach him a craft, and to marry him off.⁵⁵

⁵² Sandra Jacobs, “Women in Deuteronomy,” in the *Oxford Handbook of Deuteronomy*, edited by Don C. Benjamin, (Oxford: January 2021), doi: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190273552.013.13. Jacobs concludes her article by saying, “For Deuteronomy, with its obsessive preoccupation on the binding nature of the covenant, there was little choice but to acknowledge the presence of women to ensure the continuity of the nation and to disseminate its message effectively to the next generation. Far more than ‘the priority of men and the irrelevance of women’ (Brueggemann 2001, 243) was the need to control sexual access to, and the actions of, the female body in the future promised land. And in answer to the question, “Are Women Addressees” in Deuteronomy? Only inasmuch as they support and inculcate its message to their children—but never as members of the “congregation of the Lord” in their own right.” Despite her pessimism about the Deuteronomic view of women, she acknowledges their role in teaching their children.

⁵³ See Steven D. Fraade, “*Nomos* and Narrative Before ‘*Nomos* and Narrative,’” in *Legal Fictions: Studies of Law and Narrative in the Discursive Worlds of Ancient Jewish Sectarians and Sages* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2011), 17-34, for a different take on how Cover’s frameworks relate to rabbinic texts.

⁵⁴ Tosefta Qiddushin 1. Vienna and Erfurt Manuscripts do not differ from the printed edition here.

⁵⁵ Some tannaitic sources focus on the obligation to teach the son a craft. Mishnah Qiddushin 4 and Tosefta Qiddushin 5 describe the types of crafts that would be acceptable trades for a father to teach. At the close of these discussions, both report that R. Nehorai used to say that he would only teach his son Torah and not a craft because regardless of whether or not you get ill or weak, Torah will stand by you. “It guards a person from all evil in his youth and gives him surety and hope and hope in his old age.” (Mishnah Qiddushin 4:14; Tosefta Qiddushin 5, Vienna)

Mishnah Qiddushin 1:7 clarifies that all of these obligations are incumbent only on fathers and not mothers: *כל מצוות הבן על האב, ואנשים חייבין ונשים פטורות*. “All the commandments of a son upon a father—men are obligated and women are exempt.”⁵⁶ While exempt need not mean excluded, obligation is a tool the rabbis used frequently to define identity. Elizabeth Shanks Alexander argues that for the rabbis, *talmud torah* was equivalent to Cover’s “narrative” in that it “reaffirmed their covenantal relationship with God and forged them into a community.”⁵⁷ By excluding mothers from this commandment, the rabbis exclude them from the covenantal community of those engaged in the study and teaching of God’s Torah. Another early rabbinic source, Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael lays out an even starker distinction between fathers and mothers with regards to the teaching of Torah:

ר' או' גלוי היה לפני מי שא' והיה העו' שאדם מכבד את אמו יותר מאביו מפני שהיא משדלתו בדברים לפיכך הקדים את האב לאם בכיבוד וגלוי היה לפ' מי ש' ו' העו' שהבן מתיירא מן אביו יותר מאמו מפני שהוא מלמדו תורה לפיכך הקדים את האם לאב במורא

Rebbi states: It was revealed before the-one-who-spoke-and-the-world-became, that a man honors his mother more than his father, because she persuades him with words. Therefore God prioritized the father before the mother in [the realm of] honor. And it was revealed before the-one-who-spoke-and-the-world-became, that a man fears his father more than his mother, because he teaches him Torah—therefore he prioritized the mother over the father in [the realm of] awe.⁵⁸

This midrash presents a static view of the roles mothers and fathers play in childrearing. The father teaches his son Torah and this instruction, says Rebbi, inherently leads to awe or fear. The mother, in contrast, uses persuasive language, language less likely to incite fear in the son and

⁵⁶ It is worth noting that the “Commandments of a child upon the parent” are obligatory for both men and women in this same source: This highlights the fact that for the rabbis, the words *אב* and *בן* were not exclusively masculine terms. Because of this, the rabbis had to clarify when they chose to exclude women from these umbrella categories.

⁵⁷ Elizabeth Shanks Alexander, *Gender and Timebound Commandments in Judaism* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 178.

⁵⁸ Mekhilta Bahodesh 8 (Vatican manuscript).

more likely to lead to honor. Framed as a description of reality, this source shapes the respective gendered roles the early rabbis saw for parents—fathers are to teach Torah, while mothers engage in conciliatory speech. The Torah that the father teaches leads his son to fear him.

Since the early rabbis exclude mothers from the obligation to teach Torah, it should come as no surprise that they also exclude daughters from being the recipients of Torah instruction.

Above, I spoke about how the second person plural can often be understood to include women such that the early rabbis must explicitly exclude them rather than assuming their exclusion. A similar ambiguity exists around the word בן—son/child. When scripture uses the term בניכם are the “children” referred to exclusively male progeny or are daughters included as well? Sifre Devarim picks up this ambiguity. R. Yosi clarifies: למדנתם את' א' בני' לדב' במ את בניכם ולא את “ ‘And you shall teach your children (masc.) to speak about them...’ (Deuteronomy 11:19)—your sons and not your daughters. These are the words of R. Yosi son of Aqiva.”⁵⁹ R. Yosi’s statement highlights the fact that the biblical text leaves open the possibility that sons and daughters might both have been included in the biblical prescription to study Torah. The above discussion demonstrates that like the biblical scholars discussed above, the early rabbis, too, saw ambiguity in the biblical text regarding whether the plural verbs around instruction refer to both genders or to fathers and sons to the exclusion of mothers and daughters. The early rabbis make their reading explicit—only fathers and sons are included.

Early Rabbinic Curriculum of Paternal Instruction

While Tosefta Qiddushin lists *talmud torah* as a central paternal obligation, it does not indicate what it entails. Two early rabbinic sources, Sifre Devarim and Tosefta Hagiga provide a

⁵⁹ Sifre Devarim 46 (Vatican).

greater indication of the curriculum the rabbis imagined fathers should teach their sons. In line with the early rabbinic trend to highlight the paternal role in cultural transmission, Sifre Devarim employs Deuteronomy 11:19 in presenting fathers as the conduits of rabbinic culture. The full context in Deuteronomy reads:

וְלַמְדַתֶּם אֹתָם אֶת־בְּנֵיכֶם לְדַבֵּר בָּם בְּשִׁבְתְּכֶם בְּבֵיתְכֶם וּבְלֶכְתְּכֶם בַּדֶּרֶךְ וּבְשֹׁכְבְּכֶם וּבְקוּמְכֶם:
 וְכַתַּבְתֶּם עַל־מְזוּזוֹת בֵּיתְכֶם וּבְשַׁעְרֵיכֶם:
 לִמְעַן יִרְבוּ יְמֵיכֶם וְיְמֵי בְנֵיכֶם עַל הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע יְהוָה לְאֲבֹתֵיכֶם לֵאמֹר לָהֶם כִּי־אֵם הַשָּׁמַיִם עַל־הָאָרֶץ:

¹⁹Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ²⁰Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates, ²¹so that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land that the Lord swore to your ancestors to give them, as long as the heavens are above the earth.

The Sifre interprets these verses as indicating an obligation that starts as soon as the child is able to speak:⁶⁰

וְלַמְדַתֶּם אֹתָם אֶת־בְּנֵי לִדְב' בָּם ...
 מִיִּכְנ אִם כְּשֶׁהֲתִינֹק מִתְחִיל לִדְבֵר אֲבִיו מְדַבֵּר עִמּוֹ בְּלִשׁוֹן הַקֹּדֶשׁ (וּמִלְמַדוֹ תּוֹרָה
 אִם אֵין מְדַבֵּר עִמּוֹ בְּלִשׁוֹן הַקֹּדֶשׁ וּמִלְמַדוֹ תּוֹרָה רָאוּי לוֹ כְּאִילוּ קוֹבְרוּ
 שֵׁנ' וְלַמְדַתֶּם אֹתָם בְּנֵי אִם לַמְדַתֶּם אֹתָם אֶת בְּנֵיכֶם לִמְעַן יִרְבוּ יְמֵיכֶם וְיְמֵי בְנֵיכֶם
 וְאִם לֹא לִמְעַן יִתְקַצְרוּ יְמֵי וְיְמֵי בְנֵי ...

“And you shall teach them”...From here they say that when a child begins to speak, his father speaks with him in the holy tongue and teaches him Torah. And if he does not speak with him in the holy tongue and each him Torah, it is as if he buries him. As it says, ‘and you shall teach your children.’ If you teach your children: ‘...²¹so that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied.’ But if not: ...so that your days will be shortened and the days of your children”...

This source gives a description of paternal instruction. From the moment children can speak, fathers are charged with speaking to them in “the holy tongue” and teaching them Torah. Picking up on the promises verse 21 makes that God will lengthen the life of those who study and teach Torah, the Sifre suggests that this is an obligation whose fulfillment has life and death

⁶⁰ Sifre Devarim 46 (Vatican ms)

consequences: Fathers who fail at this responsibility, says Sifre Devarim, have essentially buried their child! In line with other tannaitic material, Sifre Devarim posits that fathers are the ones who initiate their children into rabbinic culture—a culture that this source defines as including “holy tongue” (knowledge of Hebrew) and study of Torah.

Tosefta Hagiga 1:3 echoes the language of Sifre Devarim, but this time in the context of the son’s ritual obligations:

יודע לדבר אביו מלמדו שמע ותורה ולשון קודש ואם לאו ראוי לו שלא בא לעולם

[When] he knows [how] to speak, his father teaches him the *shema*, Torah, and the holy tongue. And if he does not, he should not have come to the world. (i.e. it is better for him not to have been born.)⁶¹

According to the Tosefta, when a child can speak, his father is obligated to teach him to recite the covenantal declaration of Deuteronomy 6. He also is to teach him Torah (the precise parameters of which are significantly undefined) and the holy tongue (echoing Sifre Devarim). A father is obligated to teach his son the foundational prayer, the contents of the Hebrew Bible, and the Hebrew language. Both Sifre Devarim and Tosefta Hagiga see this obligation as so central to cultural continuity that it curses any father who does not comply.⁶² Tannaitic sources, therefore, directly command fathers to teach Torah to their sons. In these texts, the obligation includes speaking to their sons in Hebrew, reciting the *shema* with them, and teaching them Torah more

⁶¹ The context of this source will be analyzed in the *hinukh* section of this chapter.

⁶² As Catherine Hezser points out, the hyperbolic nature of this consequence suggests that fathers were not actually fulfilling this obligation in the way the rabbis would have liked; see Hezser, *Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement in Roman Palestine* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 94. Stating the obligation in this way nonetheless puts fathers at the center of the project of cultural transmission.

broadly.⁶³ There is no limit or further specificity on what type of Torah the father should teach his son, leaving the impression that the obligation is broad and expansive.

The Bavli Limits Paternal Instruction

In two locations, Bavli Sukkah and Bavli Qiddushin, the Bavli takes an expansive curriculum of *talmud torah* and narrows it. The result of this narrowing is a limitation of the paternal role in *talmud torah*. It is not that the Bavli thinks sons should not learn the rest of the Torah that the fathers are not tasked with teaching, but rather that it is no longer the father's role to do this teaching. Limiting the paternal curriculum is one way that the Bavli writes fathers out of the project of *talmud torah*.

Bavli Sukkah

Bavli Sukkah 42a limits the scope of the tannaitic curriculum:

תנו רבנן: ... יודע לדבר - אביו מלמדו תורה וקריית שמע.
תורה: א"ר המנונא: תורה צוה לנו משה מורשה וגו'. קריית שמע: אמ' רב חסדא פסוק ראשון.⁶⁴

Our rabbis taught: ... If he knows how to speak—his father teaches him Torah and the recitation of the *shema*.

Torah: Rav Hamnuna said: “Moses commanded us the Torah, an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob.” (Deuteronomy 33:4) Recitation of the *shema*: Rav Hisda said: The first verse.

The discussion in Bavli Sukkah begins by quoting a parallel to Tosefta Hagigah with minor variations—a father is required to teach his son Torah. Rav Hamnuna limits the obligation of *talmud torah* radically to a single verse: “Moses commanded us the Torah, an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob.” Rav Hamnuna thus limits the requirements of parental instruction in

⁶³ I have left the word Torah untranslated. It could mean scripture narrowly but there was a rabbinic concept of “Oral Torah” which includes rabbinic explanations and expansions of scripture as well as additional legal rulings. It is unclear which definition of Torah fits better here.

⁶⁴ This version is Oxford 2677. British Library 400 has פרק ראשון. All the other manuscripts have פסוק.

Torah to teaching a verse about being part of a community of those who receive Torah.⁶⁵ Rather than teaching any specific content, paternal transmission here becomes a simple ritual involving the recitation of a single verse.

The second question-and-answer pair is even more striking—the Bavli asks: “What is *shema*?” This question seems less warranted than the question of what constitutes *talmud torah*; the obligation to recite the *shema* prayer is laid out concretely in Mishnah Berakhot 2:2 and already includes saying all three paragraphs.⁶⁶ Rav Hisda’s answer “the first verse” introduces a more minimal obligation than what Mishnah Berakhot lays out. It underscores the fact that the Bavli has limited any paternal obligation to teach children Torah almost to the point of oblivion.⁶⁷ Both in the case of *talmud torah* and the *shema*, I am not contending that the rabbis would frown upon a father who chose to teach more. Rather, I am claiming that limiting the paternal obligation of teaching Torah to one or two verses demonstrates that these rabbis no longer see fathers as integral to the project of Torah transmission.

Bavli Qiddushin

Bavli Qiddushin 30a is the only other sugya to explicitly engage the question of what, specifically, fathers are obligated to teach their sons. The discussion opens by inquiring about how to define the limit of the paternal obligation to teach one’s son Torah: עד היכן חייב אדם ללמוד? “What is the limit on a person’s obligation to teach his son Torah?”

⁶⁵ There are two other possible explanations for this limitation. The Rav Hamnuna may be instructing fathers what to teach their sons first, as soon as they can speak. Alternatively, this question may stem from a tendency of the Bavli to concretize obligations that seem too abstract or broad. Nonetheless, its effect is to limit the scope of the paternal educative role.

⁶⁶ Mishnah Berakhot 2:2 lists the opening phrases of each of the paragraphs of the *shema*, showing that the tannaim already had the three paragraphs as a fixed liturgical unit.

⁶⁷ An alternative way of reading this limitation is that Rav Hamnuna and Rav Hisda wish to provide a minimal obligation that the father could teach a very young child. If this were the case, however, I would have liked the Bavli to make a distinction based on age.

This question is striking because a similar question is raised regarding the limits on filial piety on Bavli Qiddushin 31a and 32a. There, the answer implies that filial piety has no limits.⁶⁸

Similarly, here Shmuel initially offers an answer that covers the entirety of rabbinic literature:⁶⁹

אמר רב יהוד' אמ' רב⁷⁰
כגון זבולון בן דן⁷¹ שלימדו אבי אביו תורה⁷² מקרא ומשנה תלמוד הלכות והגדות
⁷³מיתבי: לימדו מקרא אין מלמדו משנה וא"ר אבא⁷⁵ מקרא זו תורה
כזבולון בן דן ולא זבולון בן דן. כזבולון בן דן שלימדו אבי אביו ולא כזבול' בן דן דאילו התם מקרא ומשנה ותלמוד
הלכות והגדות ואילו הכא מקרא בלבד

Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav (Shmuel in most mss): Like Zebulun son of Dan whose grandfather taught him scripture, Mishnah, Talmud, laws, and *hagadot*. They object (from a baraita): If he taught him scripture, he need not teach him Mishnah. And R' Abba said: Scripture—this is Torah. Like Zebulun son of Dan and not like Zebulun son of Dan. Like Zebulun son of Dan in that his grandfather taught him. And not like Zebulun son of Dan—here scripture alone.

Shmuel suggests that fathers have a broad, all-encompassing obligation to teach: “scripture, and Mishnah, and Talmud, laws, and *hagadot*.” Shmuel contends that the obligation to teach one’s son Torah encompasses the entirety of a rabbinic educational program. Contrast Shmuel’s

⁶⁸ “They asked R. Eliezer what the limit is on honoring one’s father and mother? He answered: Such that he takes a purse and throws it into the sea in his face and he does not shame him.” This is an extreme ask to make of a child, implying that the obligation to honor (or at least not shame) a parent has no limits.

⁶⁹ This and all of the quotations of this sugya come from the Vatican 110-111 version.

⁷⁰ The Vilna printing and all of the other manuscripts have Shmuel here so I will refer to him as Shmuel in my discussion.

⁷¹ I have not located any other instances of this name in rabbinic literature and Kosovsky cites only this sugya as where Zebulun ben Dan appears. There do not seem to be resonances with the midrashic traditions regarding Zebulun and Dan. In Sifre Devarim (354:2-8), Zebulun is contrasted with his brother Yissachar. Yissachar stays in the tent and studies Torah, while Zebulun is the businessman. Dan is portrayed as a warrior who guards the borders. It is difficult, however, to connect these significations to this discussion.

⁷² Lacking in the other versions. It makes sense to leave it out, since it seems to be an umbrella term encompassing all of what follows.

⁷³ Oxford Heb b. 1/8-9 adds “ומי מחייב לאגמוריה כוליה האי” CUL: T-S NS 329.1015 has אמר רב ומי מחייב לאג...

⁷⁴ Oxford Heb b. 1/8-9 and CUL: T-S NS 329.1015 have והתניא

⁷⁵ Vilna has אמר רבא; Oxford 367 has אמר רב; Munich 95 has אמר רבב

answer with that of Rav Hamnuna in the previous section. Rather than reading fathers out of instruction as Rav Hamnuna does, Shmuel imagines a broad and wide-ranging obligation. To accomplish it, the father must be a well-educated rabbi.

The anonymous voice (or Rav in one manuscript—see note), however, challenges Shmuel’s statement from an allegedly early rabbinic source, albeit one unattested in compilations of early rabbinic teachings.⁷⁶ “If he taught him scripture, he need not / does not teach him Mishnah.” Here, once again, we have a limitation of the paternal role. A father is obligated to teach his son only scripture but not the rest of the rabbinic curriculum. This obligation, while more expansive than the one suggested by Rav Hamnuna in Bavli Sukkah, is still more limited than the rabbinic curriculum Shmuel suggested.⁷⁷ The narrator resolves the challenge to Shmuel by suggesting that the precedent Shmuel drew on was not related to the content of transmission (though this is precisely the question the precedent was meant to answer). Rather, the Bavli picks up on the fact that in Shmuel’s statement, Zebulun ben Dan does not learn this comprehensive rabbinic curriculum from his father, but rather from his grandfather. It suggests that the true force of his teaching is to implicate grandfathers in the paternal obligation to teach Torah.⁷⁸ This resolution neutralizes the force of Shmuel’s daunting educational program.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ At times, the Bavli does invent early rabbinic sources. See for example Louis Jacobs, “Are There Fictitious Baraitot in the Babylonian Talmud?” *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 42 (1971), 185-96. If they did so in this case, perhaps they did so in order to limit Rav’s prescription.

⁷⁷ This source serves as a challenge to Shmuel’s position because of the Bavli’s stance that earlier sources hold more weight than later ones.

⁷⁸ The slipperiness between paternal and grandpaternal obligations continues for the rest of this Talmudic discussion.

⁷⁹ It is worth noting that the next section of the discussion, not analyzed here, also rejects the idea that the grandfather is obligated to teach his grandson Torah.

The source thus is in line with the source in Bavli Sukkah in limiting the scope of what textual content fathers are actually responsible for teaching their sons. Whereas Shmuel proposes that fathers teach their sons the central documents of rabbinic literature, the Bavli claims that fathers teach only scripture. The Bavli rejects Shmuel's idea that the obligation might extend further into "Mishnah, Talmud, laws, and *hagadot*." This Oral Torah education, the Bavli implies, is best discharged by someone else. Shmuel's proposal that a father might be responsible for teaching his son the rabbinic curriculum in its entirety does not stand.

The Bavli Reframes the Paternal Obligation

A second way the Bavli limits the paternal obligation in *talmud torah* is by reframing it. Bavli Qiddushin and Bavli Bava Batra do this in different ways. Bavli Qiddushin reframes teaching one's son Torah as a pietistic supererogatory practice, while Bavli Bava Batra denigrates the paternal role entirely, reinterpreting the obligation to teach Torah as an obligation to take one's child to a qualified professional.

Talmud Torah: A Pietistic Practice

Bavli Qiddushin 30a continues the discussion of paternal obligation in *talmud torah*. While the opening section of the discussion limited this obligation, this section modulates the exclusion of fathers from *talmud torah* by suggesting that teaching one's son oneself is a pietistic practice that some rabbis engaged in, a worthy though optional practice.⁸⁰ This section of the discussion begins by recounting a tradition connected with the 3rd century scholar Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi:

א"ר יהושע בן לוי כל המלמד את בנו תורה מעלה עליו הכת' כאילו קבל' מהר סיני
שנ' והודעתם לבניך וסמך ליה יום אשר עמדת לפני ה' אלהיך בחורב

⁸⁰ We know that it is optional because of the rejection of Shmuel's position that fathers ought to teach their sons a broad swath of content discussed above.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: Anyone who teaches his son⁸¹ Torah, scripture considers [the son] to have received it from Mount Sinai.

As it says, “and you shall make known to your sons and to the sons of your sons” and it juxtaposes to it, “the day on which you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb.”

In this statement, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi encourages fathers to study Torah with their sons, saying that if they do, it is as though the son received revelation straight from Sinai. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi’s statement does not imply an obligation; rather, it is a homiletical reading of the verses, stating that teaching one’s own child is a moment of Sinaitic revelation. While a beautiful statement, the phrase “Scripture considers him...” implies that this teaching is somehow supererogatory—a going above and beyond that is not a binding obligation.

The supererogatory nature of this statement becomes even more clear when comparing this statement to a story about R. Yehoshua ben Levi in the Yerushalmi.⁸² There, R. Yehoshua ben Levi teaches his student about the same verses but this time in the context of a broader instructional tale about hearing Torah from grandchildren:

רבי יהושע בן לוי הוה יליף שמע פרשתה מן בר בריה בכל ערובת שובא
חד זמן אינשי ועאל מיסחי בההן דימוסין דטיבריא והוה מסתמיך על כתפתיה דרבי חייא בר בא
אינהר דלא שמע פרשתיה מן בר בריה וחזר ונפק ליה

...
אמר ליה רבי חייא בר אבא ולא כן אלפן רבי אם התחילו אין מפסיקין
אמר ליה חייא בני קלה היא בעיניך שכל השומע פרשה מן בן בנו כאלו הוא שומעה מהר סיני
ומה טעמא “והודעתם לבניך ולבני בניך” “יום אשר עמדת לפני ה' אלהיך בחורב

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi was wont to hear the [Torah] portion from his grandson every Friday. One time he forgot and he entered to bathe in the bathhouses of Tiberias and he was leaning on the shoulder of Rabbi Hiyya son of Abba. He remembered that he had not heard the portion from his grandson and he left.

⁸¹ This is the version of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi’s statement in the Munich 95, Vatican 110, Genizah fragments (Image CJ114278), and Oxford (Heb. b. 1/8–9) manuscripts. It is also paralleled on Berakhot 21b, where the Vilna and the manuscripts contain the word “son” rather than grandson. The Vilna and other printed versions of the statement in Qiddushin, however, reads “son of his son.”

⁸² Yerushalmi Shabbat 1:1 page 3a Venice printing 6b in the Vilna.

Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba said to him: But did you not teach us, my teacher, if they started [bathing on Friday afternoon] they do not stop?⁸³

He said to him: Hiyya my son—is it insignificant in your eyes that anyone who hears a portion from his grandson is as if he hears it from Sinai?

And what is the reason? “and you shall teach them to your children and your grandchildren” “the day that you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb.” (Deuteronomy 4:9-10)

In this source, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi demonstrates his personal commitment to hearing Torah from his grandson. He is accustomed to doing so every Friday, and when he forgets, he goes to great lengths to rectify the situation, interrupting his own social bathing ritual to hear it. It is in this context that he teaches his student that anyone who hears Torah from his grandson it is as though he heard it from the mouth of God at Sinai.

The Yerushalmi does not propose an official “on the books” obligation to listen to one’s grandson recite scripture. When R. Yehoshua ben Levi states, “Is it insignificant in your eyes that anyone who hears a portion from his grandson is as if he hears it from Sinai,” he does so to explain his own action to his colleague. The story demonstrates how seriously he takes his own personal commitment to studying with his grandson but does not spell out a universally applicable obligation to study with grandchildren.

The story is almost certainly the source for the teaching in Bavli Qiddushin. The shared protagonist and his statement that studying Torah with one’s offspring is like hearing it from Sinai mark the two passages as related. The Bavli, however, changes a discussion about grandchildren to one about children. This change has a startling effect. In the Yerushalmi, R. Yehoshua b. Levi goes to great effort to hear *his grandson’s* Torah—an action that he presents as beautiful and highly encouraged but not mandatory. If we map this same ethos onto the Bavli

⁸³ R. Hiyya seems to understand his leaving as a fear of his potential violation of the Sabbath.

tale, the activity that the Bavli sees as beautiful and encouraged but not mandatory is educating one's own children.

The discussion in Bavli Qiddushin closes with a series of tales about rabbis who enabled the Torah study of their sons. These tales continue the force of the Bavli's interpretation of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi's statement, expressing the piety of rabbis who prioritize the learning of their sons:

רבי חייא בר אבא אשכחיה לרבי"ל דשדי ויסנא⁸⁴ על רישיה וקממטי ליה לינוקא לבי מדרשא⁸⁵
א"ל מאי⁸⁶ כולי האי א"ל מי זזטר מאי דכת' והודעתם לבניך וסמך ל' יום אשר עמדת לפני ה' אלהיך בחורב
⁸⁷מיכן ואילך לא הוה ר' חייא⁸⁸ טעים אומצא עד דמקרי⁸⁹ ל' לינוקא⁹⁰ בי מדרש⁹¹
רבה בר רב הונא לא טעים אומצא עד דמקרי⁹² ל' לינוקא⁹³ מוספא [*פי' תוספת מעט על של אתמול*]⁹⁴

Rabbi Hiyya b. Abba found Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi who put a cloth on his head and brought his child to the house of study. He said to him: What's all this? He responded: Is it small in your eyes that which is written, "and you shall teach your children" and it juxtaposes to it, "the day that you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb?" From here on out, Rabbi Hiyya b. Abba did not eat [even a bite of] meat before bringing the child to the house of study. Rabbah bar Rav Huna did not taste anything before reading to the child and adding [a little more text than the day before].⁹⁵

⁸⁴ Vilna and Munich 95 have דיסנא. Oxford 367 and CUL: T-S NS 329.1015 have רישנא.

⁸⁵ Vilna has בנישתא; CUL: T-S NS 329.1015 has בי רב

⁸⁶ Oxford Heb. b. 1/8-9 has למה לך

⁸⁷ The Vilna has the order of the two stories flipped: רבי חייא בר אבא לא טעים אומצא עד דמקרי לינוקא ומוספיה רבה בר רב הונא לא טעים אומצא עד דמייתי לינוקא לבית מדרשא

⁸⁸ Munich 95 has ר' חייא בר אבין

⁸⁹ Munich 95 has דיתבי

⁹⁰ CUL: T-S NS 329.1015 has לבריה

⁹¹ CUL: T-S NS 329.1015 has בי רב; Oxford Heb. b. 1/8-9 has בנישתא

⁹² CUL: T-S NS 329.1015 has דאגמריה

⁹³ CUL: T-S NS 329.1015 has לבריה פ [ס]וקיה

⁹⁴ This addition is only in the Vatican version.

⁹⁵ See note 47.

By reporting tales of fathers who bring their children to school first thing in the morning or teach their children themselves, they demonstrate that the most pious make sacrifices to transmit Torah to the next generation. The actual act of teaching, however, is not assumed to be done by the father. Whereas in the Yerushalmi version Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi listens to his grandson's Torah portion himself, in the Bavli version he rushes to take his son to the *beit midrash* to study. This story imagines the act of teaching one's son Torah to be not only a supererogatory one, but one that can be equally discharged by leaving this teaching in the hands of the teacher in the synagogue or house of study.

Moving *Talmud Torah* out of the Home

This latter sentiment, that a father's obligation in *talmud torah* has shifted to be an obligation to facilitate the son's study with a qualified teacher, is reflected in Bavli Bava Batra. Bava Batra 21a contains an account of the founding of the elementary school system and highlights the shift away from paternal *talmud torah*. While this source has been much examined within the context of histories of Jewish education, scholars have largely glossed over the rabbis' treatment of fathers in this foundational narrative. The source reads as follows:⁹⁶

אמר רב יהודה אמר רב:
זכור⁹⁷ אותו האיש לטוב ויהוש' בן גמלא שמו
שאלמלא הוא נשתכחה תורה מישראל
שבתחלה מי שיש לו אב מלמדו תורה
ומי שאין לו אב לא היה למד תורה
מאי דרוש
"ולמדתם אותם" "ולמדתם אתם"⁹⁸
התקינו שיהו מושיבין מלמדי תינוקות בירושלם
מאי דרוש "כי מציון תצא תורה" וג'.
ועדיין מי שיש לו אב מעלו ומלמדו ומי שאין לו אב לא היה עולה ולמד
התקינו שיהו מושיבין אותן בכל פלך ופלך

⁹⁶ Base text is Hamburg.

⁹⁷ Florence 8/9 has זכור ברם

⁹⁸ Florence 8/9 has את בניכם.

ומכניסין אותן כבן שש-עשרה כבן שבע-עשרה
 וכשהיה רבו כועס עליו היה מבעט בו ויוצא
 עד שבא יהושע בן גמלא ותקן שיהיו מושיבין אותן בכל מדינה⁹⁹ ובכל עיר ועיר
 ומכניסין אותן כבן שש כבן שבע

1. Rav Yehuda said [in the name of] Rav:
2. That man is remembered positively, and his name is Yehoshua ben Gamla.
3. For were it not for him, Torah would have been forgotten from Israel.
4. For at first, [one] who had a father, he would teach him Torah.
5. [One] who had no father would not learn Torah.
6. What was expounded?
7. “And you shall teach them (*otam*) [to your children]...” (Deut. 11:19) (*this gets reread as*) “and **you** (*atem*) shall teach [your children]”
8. They decreed that they would place teachers of children in Jerusalem.
9. What was expounded?
10. “For the Torah will go out from Zion [and the word of God from Jerusalem]...”
11. But still, [one] who had a father, he would bring him up [to Jerusalem] and he would teach him,
12. [one] who did not have a father would not go up and learn.
13. They decreed that they would place [teachers] in each and every county
14. And they would bring them in around sixteen or seventeen
15. And [one] whose master got angry at him would rebel against him and leave
16. Until Yehoshua ben Gamla came and decreed that they would place teachers of children in each and every province and city and that they should bring them in around six or seven years of age. (Bava Batra 20b-21a, ms. Hamburg 165)

The source begins with an epitaph regarding Yehoshua ben Gamla, a high priest who served at the end of the second temple period.¹⁰⁰ Rav, an early third century Babylonian sage, praises Yehoshua ben Gamla, stating that without him Torah would have been forgotten from Israel. A list of three educational challenges that Yehoshua ben Gamla purportedly solved follows. These challenges all derive from the perceived paternal inability to educate sons. Originally, the tale says, it was the father’s job to teach a son Torah. Under that system, however,

⁹⁹ Missing from Oxford 369.

¹⁰⁰ See Richard Gottheil and Samuel Krauss who use references to Yehoshua ben Gamla in Josephus to arrive at the approximate date of 64CE for his tenure. “Joshua (Jesus) ben Gamla” in *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1905), 7:289-90. <https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/8912-joshua-jesus-ben-gamla>

sons without fathers received no education (lines 4-10). This spurs the establishment of a school in Jerusalem for fatherless boys. Until this point, the paternal obligation is upheld; the school system is needed for sons whose fathers have passed away. The sugya goes on, however, to state that children with living fathers would go to school in Jerusalem, while the fatherless had no one to bring them there (lines 11-13). This challenge leads to the establishment of schools in every town, to which adolescent boys would be brought to study. Without explicitly saying so, this second problem reframes the paternal obligation in *talmud torah* as an obligation to bring offspring to school, at least once they turn sixteen or seventeen. Finally, the sugya states a third problem, unrelated to fathers. Since adolescents were not used to being in school, they would leave if they rebelled. To combat this truancy, Yehoshua ben Gamla created a system of elementary school age education, saving Torah from being forgotten from Israel (lines 14-16). The consequence of creating an elementary school system is to suggest that father's role is limited to bringing to their children to school.

Superficially, the story presents a straightforward (if anachronistic)¹⁰¹ account of the transition from home-based learning to school-based learning. In an attempt to universalize access to learning, schools are established first in the most major city and ultimately everywhere. However, attending closely to the crafting of this narrative reveals seams that suggest a programmatic statement about fathers. First, the language of "Torah would have been forgotten

¹⁰¹ In his article "The Talmudic Sources on the Origins of Organized Jewish Education" *Studies in the History of the Jewish People and the Land of Israel* 5 (1980): 83–103 [Heb.], David Goodblatt discusses the historicity of this account. He quotes at length from external sources from the second temple period such as Philo, Josephus, and the Gospels and concludes that none of these sources attest to an institutionalization of Jewish education during the second temple period. Goodblatt states that the lack of external evidence demonstrates that this source is fabricated. If anything, says Goodblatt, the external sources attest to the fact that while there was, perhaps, some education happening in synagogues and the Temple (see especially Luke 2:41-49, 4:31-32), there was no established elementary school system. Thus, the source from *Bava Batra* is idealized and anachronistic. What Goodblatt does not deal with is the reason for or function of this idealized portrayal.

from Israel” is catastrophizing.¹⁰² This hyperbolic language is the first indicator that there is an intentional painting of the paternal model of education as the problem in that it depicts ignorance or a lack of education as a failure of a paternal model of education.

The anonymous narrator interjects in the middle of this tale, providing a hypothesis as to why communities might have thought that education was solely a parental responsibility (lines 6-7).¹⁰³ The narrator quotes Deuteronomy 11:19: “Teach them (*'otam*) to (*'et*) your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise” (NRSV). The narrator suggests that fathers read the word “them” (אֹתָם), which in the biblical text is written without the vowel letter ו, as “you (pl.)” (אַתָּם). This reading elegantly removes a textual anomaly, which is that the “to” in “to your children” is signaled not by the usual ל (to, for), but instead by אֹתָם, which usually signals a direct object. The conclusion reached by this reading is that you (i.e. fathers) must teach your children. This reading, according to the narrator, implies that if no father is alive, no one assumes that responsibility. This errant reading of the text, implies the narrator, is what caused Torah to be forgotten. Startlingly, this intervention subverts the original sense of Deuteronomy 11:19, which is, in fact, that fathers ought to teach their children. By painting this assumption as a misreading, however, the narrator crafts a reality in which the educational ideal is a school-based rather than a home-based setting. In examining the role of fathers in cultural transmission, this source becomes significant on a rhetorical plane: It states that what endangered Torah, what caused it to be almost forgotten, was

¹⁰² The Maharsha (Samuel Edels), a 16th century commentator on the Bavli, notes this incongruity, saying: “It should say that Torah would be forgotten from anyone without a father!”

¹⁰³ In Shamma Friedman’s list of criteria for isolating editorial intervention, he notes that the shift of language and the explanation of an amoraic teaching are such signs. Shamma Friedman, “Perek Ha-Isha Rabba in the Babylonian Talmud: A Critical Study of Yevamot X with a Methodological Introduction,” in *Texts and Studies, Analecta Judaica*, ed. Hayyim Zalman Dimitrovsky, vol. 1 (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1977), 301-2 [Heb.]

not merely the fathers' incompetence. It was nothing less than a mistaken assumption that fathers should educate their children.

Comparing this passage to another Talmudic use of Deuteronomy 11:19 highlights the intentionality of this move. A source in Yerushalmi and Bavli Qiddushin uses the same verse as *support* for the idea that fathers are obligated to teach their children: תלמוד תורה מגלן? דכתיב: “The (דברים יא, יט) ולמדתם אותם את בניכם והיכא דלא אגמריה אבוה מיחייב איהו למיגמר נפשיה דכתיב ולמדתם study of Torah: Whence? ‘And you shall teach them to your children’ (Deut. 11:19). And where his father did not teach him, he is obligated to teach himself, as it is written, “And you shall study”.¹⁰⁴ This text reads the verse straightforwardly, as telegraphing a parental obligation to instruct one's children. Both here and in Bavli Bava Batra, the Rabbinic interpretation of the verse addresses the same problem—in both texts, a father has neglected to teach his son Torah. But whereas Bavli Bava Batra presents this problem as the impetus for a complete overhaul of the educational system, an overhaul that writes fathers out of the system almost entirely, Bavli Qiddushin simply states that in such a case it is the task of the son to make sure that he is educated. Here, no one replaces the father, rhetorically or in practice.¹⁰⁵

What might we make of this disparity between Bavli Bava Batra and Bavli Qiddushin regarding the exegesis of Deuteronomy 11:19? Perhaps Bavli Qiddushin preserves a tradition from the Yerushalmi while Bavli Bava Batra reflects the later Babylonian approach. It is possible that the Yerushalmi upholds the parental obligation to teach Torah to one's offspring and that the

¹⁰⁴ Yerushalmi Qiddushin 1:7 and Bavli Qiddushin 29b. The rabbis revocalize the word ולמדתם in Deuteronomy 11:19 to mean “and you shall study” rather than “and you shall teach.”

¹⁰⁵ Similarly, Bavli Qiddushin 30a rereads the commandment to recite Torah to one's son “ושננתם” as referring to an obligation one has to divide one's life into certain types of study:
אמ' רב ספרא משום ר' יהוש' בן חנניה מאי דכת' ושננתם לבניך אל תיקרי ושננת' אלא ושלשתם לעולם ישלש אד' שנות' שלישי במקרא שלישי במש' של' בתלמוד (Vatican 110-111)

Bavli Qiddushin passage preserves this strand of tradition.¹⁰⁶ One indication that the Yerushalmi does not attempt to remove this obligation from fathers is its parallel account of the founding of the school system, in which Shimon ben Shetah, a figure from the Hasmonean period, decrees that children must go to school. The Yerushalmi's story is flat—one simple decree—and includes no mention of fathers let alone their insufficiencies as teachers.¹⁰⁷ In contrast to the Yerushalmi Ketubbot and Qiddushin, therefore, Bavli Bava Batra subverts the plain meaning of Deuteronomy 11:19 in order to read fathers overtly out of the project of cultural transmission, instead placing this project in the hands of the elementary school teacher.

In the three Talmudic discussions we explored above, we see that when explicitly addressing the role fathers play in teaching their sons scripture, the Bavli minimizes the obligation fathers have in this realm. The rabbis might have read the obligation in *talmud torah* broadly—as including the words of scripture as well as rabbinic legal rulings and interpretations. The Bavli takes another path—limiting the obligation to, at its most minimal level, the statement that Torah was commanded by God and at its most maximal level the words of scripture itself (rather than rabbinic tradition). The effect this has is to make fathers marginal to the transmission of a central component of rabbinic culture—that of Torah study. Remarkably, this puts mothers and fathers on more or less the same level of obligation regarding *talmud torah*. While the father

¹⁰⁶ The discussion of parental obligations in Bavli Qiddushin often incorporates the Yerushalmi into its discussion with little commentary. Alyssa Gray speaks about a similar phenomenon in her book, *A Talmud in Exile: The Influence of Yerushalmi Avodah Zarah on the Formation of Bavli Avodah Zarah*, (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2005).

¹⁰⁷ והוא התקין שמעון בן שטח שלשה דברים שיהא אדם נושא ונותן בכתובת אשתו ושיהו התינוקות הולכין לבית הספר והוא התקין טומאה לכלי זכוכית “Shimon ben Shetah decreed three matters—that a man may negotiate using the *ketubbah* of his wife, that children would go to school, and he decreed glass vessels to be impure.” (Yerushalmi Ketubbot 8:11, page 33 column 3).

has some limited obligations with regard to teaching his son Torah, both parents are tasked with bringing their sons to a qualified teacher when they are old enough to study.

Hinukh: Ritual Initiation

Although the rabbis of the Bavli minimize the paternal obligation to transmit the words of scripture to their children, they leave parents (and not just fathers this time) in charge of a separate area of religious instruction—that of initiation into ritual practice. Emblematic of this shift is the difference between the Tosefta Qiddushin and Midrash Tanhuma regarding the obligations of a father towards his son. As we saw above, Tosefta Qiddushin presents a list of five obligations incumbent on a father towards his son:

אי זו היא מצות האב על הבן למולו ולפדותו וללמדו תורה וללמדו אומנות ולהשיאו אשה ויש אומ' אף להשיטו בנהר

What are the commandments of a father towards his son: to circumcise him, and to redeem him, to teach him Torah, to teach him a trade, and to marry him off. There are those who say: also to float him in the river [i.e. to teach him how to swim.]

This source is paralleled in Midrash Tanhuma with a significant variation:¹⁰⁸

ילמדנו רבינו כמה דברים האב חייב לעשות לבן, כך שנו רבותינו חמשה דברים האב חייב לעשות לבן, למולו, וללמדו תורה, ולפדותו מפדיון הבן, וללמדו מצות, ולהשיאו אשה

May our master teach us how many duties a father is obligated to perform for his son. Thus taught our teachers: A father is obligated to perform five duties for his son: to circumcise him, to teach him Torah, to redeem him from the redemption of the firstborn, to teach him commandments, and to marry him off.

This later source, while nearly identical in substance to that of Tosefta Qiddushin, differs in one major respect. The author has replaced “to teach him a trade” with “to teach him

¹⁰⁸ While the date of midrashic compilations is contested, some scholars suggest that Midrash Tanhuma dates from the late 4th century. For more information on Tanhuma midrashim, see H.L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. Markus Bockmuehl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 302–6.

commandments.”¹⁰⁹ In the eyes of the author of this tradition, teaching Torah and teaching ritual obligations are two independent obligations. This replacement points to a side of cultural transmission absent in the initial tannaitic list. If “to teach him Torah” is the paternal obligation to teach a son the words of scripture (*talmud torah*), “to teach him commandments” is *hinukh*, the mimetic transmission of the intricacies of ritual practice.¹¹⁰

What shifted in the legal-cultural landscape to account for the difference between the tradition as it appears in the Tosefta and its Tanhuma parallel? The absence in the Tosefta of instruction in ritual performance as a parental obligation might seem to imply that early rabbis did not obligate parents in mimetic transmission of ritual practice. Indeed, Yisrael Gilat argues that the tannaim saw parental obligation in this realm as no different from the obligation that any Jew had towards another.¹¹¹ In Gilat’s view, the early rabbis do not see fathers as uniquely charged with instructing their children in ritual practice; this was a central difference between tannaim and amoraim who did see fathers as obligated in ritual instruction.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ It is not clear why the obligation to teach a trade is absent. Perhaps the author wished to keep the number of obligations constant when adding the obligation to teach commandments or perhaps the author wanted to focus on obligations that were specifically related to inducting the son into the rabbinic community. See Elizabeth Shanks Alexander’s understanding of the paternal obligations listed in the Tosefta. Her claim about Tosefta Qiddushin that “Torah study is one among several rituals through which the father initiates his son into the covenantal community” works even better in the Tanhuma version of the source (*Gender and Timebound Commandments in Judaism*, 187).

¹¹⁰ See Haym Soloveitchik, “Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy,” *Tradition* 28:4 (1994): 64-130, esp. 65-66, for an account of the modern relationship between book knowledge and mimetic transmission. The dynamic he reports is that books about ritual obligations have influenced the way such practices are performed in the home. Children influenced by the books ended up going home and telling their parents they were “doing it wrong.” A similar dynamic can be seen in chapter 4, in a story that recounts that Abaye tells his mother not to prepare mustard on the Sabbath.

¹¹¹ Israel Zvi Gilat, “Halakhic Changes in the Interpretation of the Commandment to Educate a Child to Observe Commandments,” *The Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 18:1 (March 5, 2015): 75–101, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700704-12341278>. It is worth noting that the sources that Israel Gilat relies upon to demonstrate that all Jews have the obligation to ensure one another’s observance of commandments are all post-Talmudic. (See page 83 note 40).

¹¹² *Ibid*, 84.

Such an impression of the tannaim is incorrect, however. We will see that the early rabbis did, in fact, see parents as the primary facilitators of their children's ritual practice.¹¹³ Unlike their later counterparts, however, they have yet to conceptualize this role as a formal obligation, leading to the impression that they do not think such an obligation exists. In this section I will demonstrate that the early rabbis presented parents as obligated to initiate their children into rabbinically mandated rituals—another central component of rabbinic culture. The Bavli expands this obligation and formalizes it.

Early Rabbis and *Hinukh*

Tannaitic sources portray different ways parents facilitate the ritual practice of their children depending on the commandment in question. Early generations of tannaitic rabbis, especially those in the school of Shammai the Elder, understood children to have ritual obligations equal in standing to those of their parents.¹¹⁴ One extreme example of this is Mishnah Sukkah 2:8 in which Shammai makes a hole in the roof above his grandson's cradle so that he could observe the commandment of sleeping in the *sukkah*.¹¹⁵ In the view of Shammai and other early rabbis, children began performing each obligation as soon as they were

¹¹³ As we will see below, mothers are, at times, included in this obligation, unlike *talmud torah* from which they are consistently exempted or excluded. Therefore, in this section I shift to the inclusive "parents" and "children."

¹¹⁴ See Itzhak D. Gilat, *Perakim be-hishtalshelut ha-halakhah* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1992), 19-31, who demonstrates that the first generations of early rabbis did not have a singular view for when children were to begin observing ritual commandments. Rather, as soon as children were physically and mentally fit to perform them they were to do so. Only later did the ages of twelve and thirteen for girls and boys respectively become relevant for ritual observance.

¹¹⁵ This source highlights the exclusion of women from the mitzvah of *sukkah*—the hole was to cover just the baby and not the mother in whose room he slept.

physically or mentally capable of doing so. Tosefta Hagiga 1:1, discussed above, describes a much fuller role for both parents than simply the paternal obligation in *talmud torah*:¹¹⁶

קטן יוצא בעירוב אמו וחייב בסוכה ומערבין עליו מזון שתי סעודות בעירובי תחומין יודע לנענע חייב בלולב
יודע להתעטף חייב בציצית יודע לדבר אביו מלמדו שמע ותורה ולשון קודש ואם לאו ראוי לו שלא בא לעולם
יודע לשמר תפלין אביו לוקח תפלין אליו

A minor may fulfill his obligation through the *eruv* of his mother and is obligated [to dwell] in the *sukkah* and one must set aside two meals worth of food on his account when one merges two areas [into one domain for the Sabbath]. If he knows how to shake [the palm frond] he is obligated in *lulav*. If he knows how to wrap himself he is obligated to wear fringes. If he knows how to speak, his father teaches him the *shema*, Torah, and the holy tongue. If he [the father] does not [teach him], it would have been better for [the son] not to have come into the world. If [the son] knows [how] to guard *tefillin*, his father buys him *tefillin*.

This source expresses the notion that children are obligated in commandments as much as their parents. For most of the obligations listed here, the identity of the ritual facilitator is immaterial—the verbs are all in the anonymous plural form. For some obligations, such as *eruv*, parents (in this case mothers) perform the ritual on their child's behalf. For other rituals, children become obligated as soon as they are able to perform them. Another role parents played, then, was to determine the readiness of their children for each ritual. This source implies that once parents determined that their child was ready to perform a given ritual (such as a son donning *tefillin*), parents were to procure the necessary supplies and presumably supervise their child, teaching them what they needed to know in order to perform the ritual correctly. The third type of obligation in this Tosefta is that of reciting the *shema* and studying Torah, discussed above. In the Tosefta's view, it is the father's job to instruct the son so that he can fulfill these obligations from the moment he is able to speak. For Tosefta Hagiga, therefore, parents are responsible for

¹¹⁶ See Hagith Sivan, *Jewish Childhood in the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), who brings rabbinic sources in conversation with theories of childhood. She analyzes this Tosefta on pages 112-120.

ensuring that their children perform ritual activities as soon as they are physically or mentally capable of doing so but the real obligation to perform the obligation rests with the child.

A source in Tosefta Bava Batra strengthens this point. In discussing the role of an *apotropos*, a legal guardian, it says:

אפטרופין תורמין ומעשרין מנכסי יתומין מוכרין בתים שדות וכרמים בהמה עבדים ושפחות להאכיל יתומים לעשות להם סוכה לולב וציצית וכל מצות האמורות בתורה ולקנות להם ספר תורה ונביאים

Legal guardians offer tithes from the property of the orphans and sell houses, fields, vineyards, animals, and slaves to feed orphans [and] to make them a *sukkah*, *lulav*, *tzitzit* (fringes), and all the commandments mentioned in the Torah, and to purchase for them scrolls of Torah and Prophets... (Tosefta Bava Batra 8:14)

In this source, a court has appointed a legal guardian for orphaned children. It is this guardian's role to take the place of the parents, a replacement that includes facilitating the fulfillment of commandments. While certain specific commandments are mentioned, the list is expanded to include "all the commandments mentioned in the Torah." If the child's legal guardian is responsible for facilitating the fulfillment of commandments, it stands to reason that early rabbis viewed this as a parental role.

But what about rituals that children would not be ready to perform until they are older? In these cases, the early rabbis ask parents to include their children in some way so as to teach them about the full range of ritual commandments. Tosefta Eruvin 2:8, for example, records a view of R. Meir that mothers would send bread for the *eruv* with their children "in order to initiate them into [the fulfillment of] commandments" (כדי להנכין במצות).¹¹⁷ This is a case in which the children are not yet obligated to send their own *eruv* bread, since this was a household obligation, but the mothers take the opportunity to have them send the family portion so that they understand how to

¹¹⁷ א"ר מאיר לא נמנעו [בנות] ישראל מלשלח עירוביהן ביד [בניהן וביד בנותיהן] הקטנים כדי להנכין במצות

R. Meir said: The daughters of Israel did not refrain from sending their [contribution to] the *eruv*s in the hands of their minor sons and daughters in order to initiate them into [the performance of] commandments.

do it when the time comes. A similar phrase is used in Tosefta Yoma regarding fasting on Yom Kippur:

תינוקות סמוך לפרקן מחנכין אותן בפני שנה ובפני שתיים בשביל שיהו רגילין במצות

Children approaching puberty are initiated [into fasting] a year or two early so that they will become accustomed in [fulfilling] commandments.

Here, too, the Tosefta states that, despite the fact that children are not obligated to fast until puberty, they are initiated into the practice of fasting earlier, perhaps fasting for a few hours and then eating.¹¹⁸ The reason for this initiation goes beyond the ritual of fasting; parents are to inculcate in their children a regularity in the performance ritual commandments.

Despite not having a formal obligation of ritual instruction, the early rabbis imagine parents involved in transmitting Jewish ritual to their children in two ways. The first way, seen in Tosefta Hagiga, is to ensure that children fulfill ritual commandments that they are capable of fulfilling. The formal obligation is the child's; a son is obligated, for example, to recite the *shema* prayer as soon as he can speak, but parents are involved every step of the way, from determining physical or cognitive readiness to procuring ritual objects.

The second, more limited category for the early rabbis, does have a specific verb associated with it. This verb, "*hnh*" (to initiate), means initiating children into the performance of commandments. It implies a broader goal than facilitating the observance of an individual commandment. For the early rabbis, this role begins when the child is not ready to perform a ritual fully. It would be dangerous, for example, for young children to fast for the entire day on Yom Kippur, and yet parents are to initiate them into the practice of fasting, thereby initiating

¹¹⁸ Israel Zvi Gilat claims that the anonymous plural form "they initiate them," which scholars often translate in the passive "they are initiated," indicate that the obligation to do this initiation is not parental ("Halakhic Changes," 79). While this may be true in an explicit sense, the next clause of the Tosefta describes fathers as being the ones who feed their children on Yom Kippur: It states "Rabbi Aqiba would take a break in the house of study for children so that their fathers would feed them."

them into the community of fasters and into the community of those who practice Jewish rituals. Mothers and fathers are responsible for more generally inducting their children into a life of commandments by facilitating their partial performance of commandments they are not mature enough to fulfill fully. This ritual initiation is thus an important facet of rabbinic cultural transmission, a facet the early rabbis asked parents (or in those loco parentis) to take on.

The Bavli, however, sees the nature of childhood obligation in ritual differently; it rejects the idea that children are obligated to fulfill any ritual commandments before they hit puberty. No longer comfortable with the subjective measures of maturity legislated by the early rabbis, later rabbis set the ages of twelve for a girl and thirteen for a boy as the ages at which children become obligated in all of Jewish ritual.¹¹⁹ According to this later rabbinic understanding, at these ages, and not before, children become biblically obligated to perform all commandments. Parents no longer need to help their young children perform their own ritual obligations, so one might imagine a scenario in which the role of parents in the mimetic transmission of Jewish ritual vastly decreases. The editors of the Bavli, however, were left with many tannaitic sources which explicitly hold children accountable for the performance of ritual. How, then, should they explain the early rabbinic sources that point to a more variable, subjective, age of maturity, earlier than twelve or thirteen? The Bavli finds a solution in that second, more limited, category of parental involvement introduced by the early rabbis. Any time an early rabbinic source posits a ritual commandment for a child, the Bavli states that this is really the age at which fathers (and sometimes mothers) are obligated to educate their children about that commandment. Later

¹¹⁹ See I.D. Gilat, *Perakim*, who shows that the late tannaim begin to universalize this age as a standard. He points to Mishnah Niddah 6:11, which identifies puberty (“two hairs”) as the time at which a child becomes obligated in all commandments as an example of this (19). By the amoraic period, the rabbis seem to have lost recollection of an earlier method of determining obligation for children.

amoraim and editors of the Talmud use the phrase הגיע לחינוך “reached the age of initiation” to explain these apparent obligations.¹²⁰ Rather than signaling an obligation in the performance of a given commandment, the age listed in the tannaitic source indicates the age at which parents are to begin facilitating the partial fulfilment of this commandment in order to initiate their children into the community ritual observers.¹²¹ Eventually, this idea becomes so widespread that the anonymous layer of the Bavli can simply deploy parental obligation in *hinukh* as an accepted fact with explanatory power to resolve contradictions.

While the Bavli makes clear that fathers are obligated in *hinukh*, the question of maternal obligation in this regard remains unresolved, with some Talmudic discussions claiming that mothers are required to initiate their children into the observance of ritual commandments, while others say that mothers are not. Bavli Nazir 28a, for example, states:

Why may a father declare his son a Nazirite but not a mother?...Resh Lakish: In order to initiate him in mitzvot. [Challenge:] If it is about initiating in mitzvot, women should be able to as well! [Resolution:] Resh Lakish reasoned that a man is *obligated* to initiate (hnhk) his son to fulfill commandments but a woman is not. (Therefore she may not declare him a Nazirite.)

The implication of this source is that, in the view of Resh Lakish, a woman is not obligated to initiate her son into ritual practice. This lack of obligation decreases her ability to make ritual decisions on his behalf. In the Bavli’s understanding of Resh Lakish’s opinion, therefore, exempt means excluded from. In contrast, Bavli Sukkah 2b suggests that mothers are obligated to initiate

¹²⁰ The noun חינוך does not have the same valence in the Yerushalmi, which uses it only to describe setting up a grave.

¹²¹ I.Z. Gilat, “Halakhic Changes,” also makes this point on pages 80 and 86. The application of the category of *hinukh* as a means of resolving cognitive dissonance seems to occur beginning with the generation of Abaye and is made more universal by the Talmudic editorial voice. Some examples of the phrase “הגיע לחינוך”—reached the age of initiation—as a means of explaining what seems to be a statement of obligation for a young child include Bavli Hagigah 4a and Bavli Berakhot 15b.

their sons into the obligation of dwelling in the *sukkah*.¹²² The maternal obligation in *hinukh* is used to explain Queen Helene's *sukkah*.¹²³

The development of *hinukh* as a formal category explains the later tradition in the Tanhuma midrash with which I began this section. The articulation of parental initiation of children into a life of fulfilling commandments filters into Midrash Tanhuma, which then adds “teaching commandments” to the list of paternal obligations. The fact that Midrash Tanhuma adds this role separately highlights the fact that later rabbis do not at all read parents out of the process of mimetic transmission of ritual practice; instead, they elaborate upon and expand this parental role. This is significant because it shows the rabbis developing an understanding of how children get socialized into ritual observance. Rather than seeing this socialization as happening in the schools or synagogues, the rabbis see the home as its locus. The rabbis thus leave space for fathers and potentially mothers to play a key role in transmitting rabbinic culture.

Pesach Evening Rituals

Now that we have identified how the Bavli sees the role of fathers in the explicit transmission of rabbinic culture, we can explain what happens in the Bavli's discussion of the Passover seder ritual.¹²⁴ The Bavli barely alludes to the Mishnah's injunction that the father teach his sons on seder night. This section will lay out why we would have expected the father to be addressed by describing the role of the child in the seder in the bible and early rabbinic literature. It will then

¹²² See Rashi, Bavli Sukkah 2b, “קטן שאינו צריך לאמר” and “מדרבנן.”

¹²³ See chapter 3 for a fuller discussion of this source.

¹²⁴ I am using the terminology of Passover seder as a shorthand for the rituals of the Pesach evening even though the term would not have been recognizable to the rabbis of the Bavli. For a discussion of how old the rituals of seder night are see Judith Hauptman, “How Old is the Haggadah?” *Judaism* (Winter 2002), 5-18.

analyze the Bavli texts and show the ways the Bavli shapes the role of the father, downplaying the father's role in retelling the Exodus narrative.

The Hebrew Bible presents the ritual of the slaughter of the paschal lamb and the feast of unleavened bread quintessential moments of paternal cultural transmission that bring together the *nomos* (ritual laws and practice) and the narrative.¹²⁵ The father engages in a dialogue with his son. The son asks why the father performs the ritual and father responds by situating this ritual in the context of the national deliverance from slavery.

Rabbinic sources develop the ritual of the paschal lamb into a new ritual—the Passover Seder.¹²⁶ While the seder ultimately developed into what we know as the Haggadah, in the rabbinic period the liturgy of the Haggadah was very much in formation. So much so that each rabbinic corpus presents its own vision for what the Passover night looks like. Significantly for our purposes, while sharing a common ritual kernel, the Mishnah, Tosefta, and Bavli each portray a different discussion as forming the core of the ritual telling. Relatedly, they imagine different roles for the child in this discussion and in the evening's ritual as a whole.

The Role of the Child in the Mishnah's Seder

Like the Hebrew Bible, the Mishnah, presents Passover Eve as night of paternal cultural transmission:¹²⁷

¹²⁵ See Exodus 12:26-27 and Exodus 13:8.

¹²⁶ Most scholars agree that the seder rituals developed after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. See Joshua Kulp, "The Origins of the Seder and Haggadah," *Currents in Biblical Research* 4.1 (2005), 110, doi:10.1177/1476993X05055642.

¹²⁷ Jay Rovner points out that the presence of children here detracts from the conception of the Mishnah presenting Passover Eve as a Greek symposium as children were not allowed to attend those. See his *Studies in the Evolution and Formation of the Passover Haggadah in the Geonic Period* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2022), 11 n. 24.

128 מזגו לו כוס שני, וכאן הבן שואל אביו.¹²⁹
 ואם אין דעת בבן, אביו מלמדו, מה נשתנה הלילה הזה מכל הלילות,¹³⁰ שבכל הלילות אנו אוכלין חמץ ומצה, הלילה הזה כולו מצה.
¹³¹שבכל הלילות אנו אוכלין שאר ירקות, הלילה הזה מרור.
 שבכל הלילות אנו אוכלין בשר צלי, שלוק, ומבושל, הלילה הזה כולו צלי.
 שבכל הלילות אנו מטבילין פעם אחת, הלילה הזה שתי פעמים.
 ולפי דעתו של בן, אביו מלמדו.
 מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח, ודורש מארמי אובד אבי, עד שיגמור כל הפרשה כולה.

The Mishnah states that after the second cup is poured, the son asks the father questions. The “Mah Nishtanah” questions or observations are provided as examples for a father to prompt a child who has difficulty noticing the uniqueness of the night’s proceedings. After listing the questions, the Mishnah reintroduces the idea that the father should teach his son “according to his דעת.” The notion that children might have different capacities that require different content or modes of instruction is uniquely suited to the task that follows—extrapolating the verses in Deuteronomy 26. Jay Rovner states that the Mishnah is a ritualized interpretation of the biblical model:

It seems that he intended the *maggid* section to encode, at the very beginning, a ritualized enactment of several scriptural passages that dramatize a child’s questioning of a ritual act together with a parental response that links the observance to the enslavement and redemption of their ancestors (Exodus 12:26-27, and 13:8 & 14; Deuteronomy 6:21). In all but Exodus 13:8, the child *yish’al* (asks) or *yomeru* (say, ask), and the father speaks, replies with an explanation (*ve-amarta [le...]*).¹³²

¹²⁸ This is the printed version of the Mishnah. See manuscript variations in the notes below.

¹²⁹ Missing in Maimonides’ version of the Mishnah.

¹³⁰ Maimonides’ Mishnah as well as MSS Kaufmann, and Parma have the line about dipping first followed by the verse about matzah and ending with the line about roasted meat.

¹³¹ This line is missing from the manuscripts.

¹³² Rovner, *Studies in the Evolution*, 16. For another discussion of this Mishnah see David Halivni, “Be’urim bi-she’elot ‘Mah nishtannah’” [Explanations of the Mah Nishtannah Questions], in *Studies in Aggadah, Targum and Jewish Liturgy in Memory of Joseph Heinemann*, ed. Jakob J. Petuchowski, Ezra Fleischer (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1981), 67-74, esp. 67-68. According to Rovner, *Studies in the Evolution* (15 n. 38), Halivni sees each clause of this Mishnah as providing a different pedagogical option available to the father. See also David Henshke, *Mah nishtannah”: The Passover Night in the Sages’ Discourse* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2016).

For Rovner, the Mishnah reenacts the biblical verses, scripting a pedagogical dialogue for father and son. Rabban Gamaliel's statement in the following Mishnah (Pesachim 10:5) that there is an obligation to discuss the significance of Pesach, Matzah, and Maror on seder night aligns with this overarching pedagogical model—that of linking the night's rituals to their significance in the national narrative, the *nomos* to the narrative, if you will. Judith Hauptman, too, suggests that the Mishnah provides a storytelling model for the evening's festivities.¹³³ The Mishnah therefore tasks the father with an intricate act of cultural transmission—discussing a series of rituals with his son and linking these rituals to the narrative rationale for these rituals.

Role of the Child in the Tosefta's Seder

As Hauptman has discussed, the Tosefta's curriculum for the evening is markedly different from that of the Mishnah. Where the Mishnah prescribes a storytelling event in which the father and son discuss the Passover narrative, the Tosefta focuses on the discussion of ritual law and the recitation of Hallel. It states, “חייב אדם לעסוק בהלכות הפסח כל הלילה.” “A person is obligated to occupy themselves with the laws of the Paschal [offering] for the whole night.” This difference has implications for the role the Tosefta imagines for the child. Where the Mishnah imagines that a central component of the seder is the father's instruction of the child, the Tosefta understands children to be active participants in the evening's rituals. Children, in the Tosefta's version of the seder, are participants in a family ritual. Fathers are to keep them awake for the night's events, which include the eating of special foods, the study of ritual laws related to Passover, and the recitation of Hallel.¹³⁴ The fact that paternal instruction is not ritualized is highlighted by the

¹³³Hauptman, “How Old,” 7.

¹³⁴ See Tosefta Pesachim 10:6.

Tosefta's conclusion. The Tosefta concludes that there is an obligation for a person to study the laws of Passover the whole night. It says that ideally this study would be a social activity, and includes one's sons as possible study partners: "לעסוק בהלכות הפסח כל הלילה אפלו בינו לבין חייב אדם" ¹³⁵ "A person is obligated to engage with the laws of the paschal [offering] all night—even with his son, even on his own, even with his student." This curriculum roughly corresponds to this chapter's definition of *hinukh*. Fathers are not charged with conveying to their sons the significance of the night's rituals in a narrative context but only with teaching their sons the evenings rituals, reciting praise with them, and perhaps studying with them the laws pertaining to the holiday. The Tosefta lacks any instruction that would place these rituals in a narrative or scriptural context.¹³⁶

Role of the Child in the Bavli's Seder

The Bavli sees for children a role similar to the one presented by the Tosefta. The child is to stay awake and point out the anomalies in the evening's rituals. On Pesahim 108b-109a, the Bavli quotes the Tosefta: "אמר רבי יהודה: וכי מה תועלת יש לתינוקות בדין? אלא מסלקין להן קליזות ואגוזין" ¹³⁵ "Rabbi Yehudah comments on the anonymous view that children, too, are obligated in the four cups of wine. He states: 'What use is wine to children? Rather, we hand out roasted grain and nuts on Pesah Eve so that they will not sleep but will ask.'" The anonymous voice of the Tosefta seems to accord with the prior concept in early rabbinic literature discussed above, that children were obligated in mitzvot they could physically or

¹³⁵ It is worth noting that the Erfurt MS has בינו לבין ביתו instead of בנו לבין.

¹³⁶ See also Jay Rovner, "The All-Night Seder in Bene Beraq: A Literary and Cultural History," in *Studies in Rabbinic Narratives*, vol. 1, edited by Jeffrey L. Rubenstein (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2011), ###PP?###.

mentally perform. Rabbi Yehuda's challenge reflects a challenge to the idea that the four cups of wine constitute a commandment that falls into this category.

This idea that the role of children is to point out anomalies at the seder is present in two additional places. On Bavli Pesahim 114b, the Bavli discusses the idea that there are two dippings on seder night. It proposes that the reason we do this is to stimulate the curiosity of children: *וְהָאֵי דְבָעִינָן תָּרִי טִיבּוּלִי כִּי הֵיכִי דְתִיגְהִי הֵיכִיכָא לְתִינוּקוֹת*. “The fact that we require two dippings is so that there will be a sign for children.” Shamma Friedman proposes that this dipping was a remnant of Greco-Roman custom and that the identification of the children as the purpose of this dipping was not a substantive identification but rather was a device to explain parts of the seder that the rabbis of the Bavli no longer understood.¹³⁷ Second, on Bavli Pesahim 115b, the Bavli reports a story about Abaye in the house of Rabbah, his adoptive father (and notably his teacher). Rabbah has the table taken away and Abaye exclaims about this. Rabbah says that Abaye has exempted the assembled from reciting the Mah Nishtanah through his observation. As in the Tosefta, the role of the child here is to point out anomalies that make the rituals of the evening different from what happens the rest of the year.

This anecdote highlights a central difference between the Talmud's attitude toward the role of children at the seder and that of Mishnah. In contrast to the Mishnah, where the children's questions are meant to spur a pedagogical moment of storytelling, the Bavli downplays or even ignores the dialogue between father and child around the telling of the exodus story. This absence of dialogue accords with the findings in the rest of this chapter, in that here, too, the father is not held responsible for teaching scripture to his son. Bavli Pesahim 116a is particularly striking in this regard. It briefly discusses Mishnah Pesahim 10:4 and raises the question of who

¹³⁷ Shamma Friedman, *Tosefta 'Atiqta: Masekhet Pesah Rishon* (Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2003), 445.

should ask the questions referenced in the Mishnah. While the Mishnah imagines that children are the ones who ask the questions, the Bavli transforms the questions into a universal obligation: תנו רבנן: חכם — בנו שואלו. ואם אינו חכם — אשתו שואלתו, ואם לאו — הוא שואל לעצמו, ואפילו שני תלמידי חכמים שיודעין בהלכות הפסח — שואלין זה לזה. This source is labeled as a *baraita*, and it is parallel to the law from the Tosefta quoted above: חייב אדם לעסוק בהלכות הפסח כל הלילה אפלו בינו לבין בנו אפלו בינו לבין עצמו אפלו בינו לבין תלמידו. What is striking about the Bavli's use of this source is that it applies the obligation to discuss the laws of Pesah to the questions of the Mah Nishtanah. This is telling because in the Tosefta, the children are not the central actors in the discussion—they are one of a menu of options for who an interlocuter might be with whom the head of the household should discuss the laws of Pesah. In the Mishnah, however, the child is the central actor. By applying the same menu of options for who should ask the questions at the seder, the Bavli decenters the child. No longer the focus of a pedagogical ritual, the child is one of a number of options for who should ask the questions of the Mah Nishtanah. This decentering of the pedagogical ritual is highlighted by the words “בנו שואלו.” “If [the son] is wise—his son asks him.” Rather than the father teaching every son to ask these questions the way the Mishnah mandates, the person most equipped to ask the questions asks them—if no child wise enough to ask the questions is present, other people take the child's place.¹³⁸

A second consequence of this application is a reinterpretation of the purpose of the Mah Nishtanah questions. In the Mishnah, the questions set up a paternal retelling of the Exodus story. By applying the Tosefta's rule to the Mishnah's questions, the Bavli turns the focus away from the retelling and to the discussion of the laws of Pesach. When the Bavli says, “, ואפילו שני

¹³⁸ The Rambam in the Mishneh Torah states, “ואם היה הבן גדול ויחכם מודיעו מה שארע לנו במצרים ונסים שנעשו לנו על ידי משה רבנו הכל לפי דעתו של בן משנה תורה, הלכות חמץ ומצה ז:ב.” A statement like this is what we might have expected the Bavli to make if it valued the pedagogical ritual of teaching the child the Exodus narrative.

שואלין זה לזה — “תלמידי תכמים שיודעין בהלכות הפסח” “Even sages who know the laws of Pesach ask each other,” it presents the Mishnah’s questions as designed to set up a discussion of the laws of Pesach rather than to set up a retelling of the Exodus story.¹³⁹ The Bavli’s sugya on מתחיל בגנות highlights the shift away from having a father teach his son the story of the exodus. It brings an anecdote about Rav Nahman and his slave discussing the Passover narrative rather than choosing to bring an anecdote involving a child discussing the narrative with his father. The Bavli had at its disposal sources it could have brought to discuss this, some of which make it into our version of the Haggadah. I am arguing that it was an editorial choice not to discuss this material. While children are not absent from the Bavli’s account, their presence a) is not essential and b) remains firmly in the *hinukh* model of parental education—children ask questions to set up a discussion of the laws of the holiday rather than an exegetical treatment of the Exodus narrative.

We have thus seen that the Bavli aligns itself primarily with the Tosefta’s view of what the goal of seder night is. For the Bavli, seder night is primarily a night on which to discuss the laws of Passover, rather than a night on which to expound the biblical narrative and retell the Exodus story. The Bavli thus deemphasizes the mishnah’s pedagogical storytelling ritual and ignores the instruction to the father to relate to each child according their capacities. This downplaying of the pedagogical purpose of the seder aligns with what we have seen regarding the Bavli’s attitudes towards fathers teaching their sons scripture. We have seen that the Bavli’s trend is to reduce the paternal obligation in this regard. Relatedly, the role of children at this Bavli seder is to point out

¹³⁹ This final point, that sages ask each other, highlights a potential shift of the seder out of the home and into a more symposium-style event where students would gather at a master’s house for the Passover evening event. This shift is alluded to on Bavli Pesachim 108a “בן אצל אביו בעי הסיבה. איבעיא להו: תלמיד אצל רבו מאי?” This source states that a son must recline at his father’s house, the logic being that he is not subject to his father on Passover night and embodies his freedom by reclining. However, the Bavli wonders if a student ought to recline in his master’s house. This question highlights the idea that one may be spending Passover at the home of one’s master. It also raises the possibility, discussed more fully in Bavli Qiddushin, that a master is accorded more honor than a father.

anomalies that highlight how unique seder night rituals are. For the Bavli, the father's role at the seder is to encourage children to ask questions, not about the Passover story but rather about the ritual anomalies they see. This reinterpretation of the paternal role aligns with the Bavli's view that the father's primary educative role is to teach his sons or children how to perform rituals (the *nomos*) rather than spending time on the narrative.

Conclusion

This chapter has chronicled key shifts in the role of parents in cultural transmission. It has argued that the Hebrew Bible, and especially the book of Deuteronomy, assign a key role for fathers and potentially also mothers in teaching their children the foundational narratives of the Israelite nation and instructing them on how to fulfill God's commandments. Early rabbinic sources then explicitly exclude mothers and daughters from this picture, both by resolving the ambiguities inherent in the biblical text and by explicitly stating that mothers are exempt from obligations of childrearing.¹⁴⁰ Some early rabbinic sources describe rabbis in paternal terms, suggesting a rhetorical replacement of father with rabbi. Nonetheless, early rabbinic sources portray the father as the central actor in teaching Torah to his sons. The Bavli, however, minimizes the paternal role in teaching Torah to his sons (*talmud torah*), by limiting the scope of the Torah the father is obligated to teach and by suggesting that the real obligation is not to teach Torah to his sons himself, but rather to take his son to a qualified professional who will instruct his son.

The exclusion of fathers from *talmud torah* aligns with the increasing scholasticism of both Jews and Christians during the centuries of the *stammaim*.¹⁴¹ Adam Becker discusses this

¹⁴⁰ While Mishnah Ketubbot 5:5 articulates obligations that a wife has in a rabbinic marriage, these obligations are framed as obligations towards her husband and do not include activities involved in raising a child.

¹⁴¹ See Adam Becker, "The Comparative Study of "Scholasticism" in Late Antique Mesopotamia: Rabbis and East Syrians," *AJS Review* 34:1 (April 2010), 107. doi:10.1017/S0364009410000243

trend in his article “The Comparative Study of Scholasticism,” and argues that Syriac schools and rabbinic yeshivot sprung up around the same time (early sixth century for the Syriac schools and late-fifth early sixth century for the rabbis).¹⁴² In the Syriac world at least, these institutions were not just schools of higher learning but also village schools that provided elementary instruction.¹⁴³ Whether or not these institutions were housed in independent buildings, there is an increasing sense that schools were where one sent a child to be taught.¹⁴⁴

This increasing institutionalization also carried with it an increasingly charged valence for the practice of scriptural study. Rather than being a means through which to attain knowledge that would lead to practice, scriptural study came to be presented as an end in itself, a practice undertaken with fellow disciples under the tutelage of a master.¹⁴⁵ Perhaps this ideal accounts for the move of scriptural instruction out of the home in the rabbinic imagination, except for the most pious of rabbis, who might continue to engage in Torah study with their sons. In the next chapter we will see that the rabbis question even this idea, that the most pious of rabbis should study with their sons. Perhaps the father’s ability to instruct his own son works only when both are also studying with other masters and disciples in the *beit midrash*.

Talmud torah, however, is not the only internal category the rabbis of the Bavli name to describe cultural transmission. Tannaim portray parents as key actors in facilitating their children’s ritual participation. They are to procure ritual implements such as *tefillin* to enable

¹⁴² Ibid, 94 and 97.

¹⁴³ Ibid, 94.

¹⁴⁴ I am not sure how to square Becker (and Rubenstein’s) accounts with the Bava Batra source described above. There, the tradition describing the set-up of the school system is attributed to Rav, a 3rd century amora who long predates the institutionalization Becker and Rubenstein chronicle.

¹⁴⁵ See for example Michael Satlow, “ ‘And on the Earth You Shall Sleep’: ‘Talmud Torah’ and Rabbinic Asceticism” *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 83, No. 2 (Apr., 2003), 204-225. Stable url: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1206873>.

children to participate in ritual practice as soon as they are physically and mentally capable of doing so. Parents are also to initiate children more broadly into the community of ritual practitioners, transmitting to children the details of rituals they cannot yet observe and helping them prepare for being fully obligated once they reach puberty. The Bavli reframes and expands this parental role, ultimately naming a second type of cultural transmission, *hinukh*, centered in the home. The creation of this category highlights an important point: focusing solely on the shift of *talmud torah* out of the home obscures the fact that the Bavli still values the parental role in cultural transmission.

The shift of *talmud torah* out of the home and the emphasis on *hinukh* have explanatory power. The discussions in the Bavli of Pesach seder show that the Bavli is uninterested in the storytelling component of the Mishna's articulation of the evening's rituals. The Bavli understands *talmud torah* to be the provenance of the sage. For this reason, it tends to discuss Pesach according to the Tosefta's model of a night focused on discussing the laws of Pesach rather than according to the mishnah's model which has a greater focus on biblical exegesis. Highlighting the emphasis the Bavli places on the parental role in *hinukh* explains this choice on the part of the Bavli.

CHAPTER 2

BEYOND THE BOOK: RASHBI AND HIS SON

Focusing on internal rabbinic categories that fall under the rubric of cultural transmission, the previous chapter focused on the explicit requirements the rabbis lay out regarding the transmission of textual and ritual knowledge. This chapter turns to the theme of the transmission not of cultural knowledge, but rather of cultural values. The *Encyclopedia of Child Behavior and Development* defines cultural transmission as “the process through which cultural elements, in the form of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behavioral scripts, are passed onto and taught to individuals and groups.”¹⁴⁶ It is this form of cultural transmission that this chapter will explore. I will illustrate this theme by exploring two sets of stories in the Babylonian Talmud surrounding the figure of R. Elazar, the son of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai (Rashbi).¹⁴⁷ In the first, found in Bavli Shabbat, Rashbi brings his son (unnamed in this story) along for a thirteen-year sojourn in a secluded cave. There, the father conducts a controlled experiment. Away from any other influences, Rashbi transmits to his son an ascetic worldview in which all pursuits are directed towards the practice of Torah study. Unlike stories where the father abandons his family to go study, here the father brings his son with him.¹⁴⁸ They enter their own secluded house of study where he attempts to transmit to him that a life devoted to Torah study takes precedence over all material and social concerns. But does the son receive and enact these values?

¹⁴⁶ Taylor M.J., Thoth C.A. “Cultural Transmission” In: *Encyclopedia of Child Behavior and Development*, ed. S. Goldstein, J.A. Naglieri (Boston, MA: Springer, 2011), doi:10.1007/978-0-387-79061-9_755.

¹⁴⁷ I am, of course, not intending to provide any sort of historical reconstruction of the life of R. Elazar. This would be impossible given the nature of the sources which were redacted and likely composed centuries after he lived.

¹⁴⁸ Such as those found in the story cycle of Bavli Ketubot 62b-63a and Bavli Qiddushin 29b.

A second set of loosely connected tales, in Bavli Bava Metzia, chronicles the life of R. Elazar as an adult, after his father has died. One theme in this series of bizarre tales concerns R. Elazar's ascetic lifestyle. The stories in Bava Metzia suggest that while Rashbi does succeed in transmitting his ascetic practices to his son, the way that the son enacts that asceticism was substantively different from that of his father, to the point where the son's ascetic lifestyle no longer supports the value of Torah study but becomes an end in itself. Thus, although (or perhaps because) of the hermetically-sealed environment, the father does not successfully transmit his cultural values to the next generation.

Rabbinic Biography

I begin with a discussion of the scholarship regarding reading narratives in the Bavli in conversation with one another. Yona Frankel pioneered the application of the tools of literary theory to rabbinic tales. He claimed that each rabbinic story was a bounded unit and while literary motifs might be explored through their use in other parts of rabbinic literature, the characterization of each rabbi was limited to the pericope under discussion.¹⁴⁹ Drawing upon post-modern theories of intertextuality, however, Devora Steinmetz argues that rabbinic literature ought not to be read in this way. Rather, each rabbinic text exists in a network of relationships with all other rabbinic texts.¹⁵⁰ There is enough evidence that the Bavli references itself to warrant reading stories about the same characters as sharing a story universe. Zvi Septimus, too, makes this argument, albeit from a different angle. He claims that while each

¹⁴⁹ See Yonah Frenkel, *Sippur ha-aggadah—ahdut shel tokhen ve-tsurah* [The aggadic story: unity of content and form] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 2001), 32-34.

¹⁵⁰ Devora Steinmetz, "Agada Unbound: Inter-Agadic Characterization of Sages in the Bavli and Implications for Reading Agada," in *Creation and Composition: The Contribution of the Bavli Redactors (Stammaim) to the Aggada*, edited by Jeffrey L. Rubenstein (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 310.

sugya may have been composed independently, the Bavli as a whole, as we have it, is intended to be read as a literary whole. *Sugyot* reference one another linguistically and this leads to a rich web of narratives.¹⁵¹ This means that whether or not the author or editor of one story about a rabbinic figure was familiar with the final form of another story about that same figure, the two stories can nonetheless be read in light of one another. This reading together adds layers of significance to each story. Reading the Bavli Bava Metzia narratives in light of the Bavli Shabbat narrative allows us to explore the theme of transmission of cultural values and how difficult such transmission is for a parent to accomplish.¹⁵²

Asceticism as a Cultural Expression

Before delving into the stories, it is necessary to consider the cultural work of asceticism and how transmitting ascetic ideals serves to transmit culture more broadly. In his work *Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism*, Geoffrey Harpham posits that asceticism is the foundation of cultural expression.¹⁵³ In its most basic form, asceticism is the curbing of human impulse. In order to make this category less capacious and more meaningful, Patrick Olivelle expands upon Harpham's approach and identifies three forms asceticism takes, with each form increasing in severity.¹⁵⁴ He begins with root asceticism, which is the universal human phenomenon of

¹⁵¹ See Zvi Septimus, "Revisiting the Fat Rabbis," in *Talmudic Transgressions: Engaging the Work of Daniel Boyarin*, Edited by Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 418-56, especially page 442, "the Bavli therefore, by virtue of its narrative structure, assumes a reader that has already read the book and, more importantly, a reader who reads the book with a heightened awareness of its self-referentiality" as well as pages 443 and 456.

¹⁵² To be clear, it is impossible to know whether or not the editors and authors of the Bava Metzia tales knew the Rashbi cave tale as it appears in Bavli Shabbat. Nonetheless, comparing the father and son's approaches to asceticism can still provide insight into dynamics of transmission.

¹⁵³ Geoffrey Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), xi.

¹⁵⁴ Patrick Olivelle, "The Ascetic and the Domestic in Brahmanical Religiosity," in *Asceticism and its Critics: Historical Accounts and Comparative Perspectives*, edited by Oliver Freiberger (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 27-31.

limiting one's drives and urges in some way.¹⁵⁵ The form that this root asceticism takes, however, may differ depending on cultural context. This leads to a second form of asceticism, overlaid upon the first, which he calls "cultural asceticism." This asceticism describes the additional ways that individual cultures curb the impulses of their citizen or adherents. For example, Hindu food laws differ from Jewish dietary restrictions, but both limit the types of foods that adherents may consume. The third form Olivelle terms "elite asceticism," and it is this form that most scholars associate with the term asceticism. Elite ascetics take a given culture's cultural asceticism to its extreme. They push the curbing of impulses to an extreme, controlling their own food, sex, and pain in ways that most adherents to that culture's norms would find untenable. The purpose of these practices is to reach some sort of spiritual goal, directing one's attention away from the physical and towards a loftier ideal. Thus, elite asceticism can shed light on the whole culture because it is an extreme expression of the ideals of that culture. The specific ideal that an "elite" ascetic aspires to is indicative of the ideal espoused by the society of which they are a part even if society would reject the extreme practices that the elite ascetic engages in in order to fully live out that ideal. It is because of this dynamic that studying the stories of Rashbi and his son are so instructive.¹⁵⁶

Transmission of Asceticism in the Cave

The Bavli contains a well-known tale about Rashbi and his son retreating to a cave for thirteen years in response to a threat on Rashbi's life from the Roman authorities. Four literary

¹⁵⁵ An example he gives of this type of impulse-curbing is toilet-training, wherein parents teach their children to relieve themselves in specific locations, rather than wherever they feel the urge. Ibid, 30.

¹⁵⁶ For more on asceticism in rabbinic literature more generally see Steven Fraade, "Ascetical Aspects of Ancient Judaism," in *Jewish Spirituality: From the Bible through the Middle Ages*, edited by Arthur Green (New York: Crossroads, 1986), 253-288 and Michael Satlow, "'And on the Earth You Shall Sleep': 'Talmud Torah' and Rabbinic Asceticism," *Journal of Religion*, 83: 2 (April 2003), 204-25.

collections from the land of Israel (Yerushalmi, Pesikta de-Rav Kahana, Genesis Rabbah, and Ecclesiastes Rabbah) include a parallel to this story.¹⁵⁷ The Bavli's version of the tale differs in significant ways from the versions from the land of Israel. Significantly for our purposes, the Bavli animates Rashbi's son as a central character in the story, where he is largely missing or passive in those from the other collections.

For the purposes of our analysis, we will use the Yerushalmi version of the narrative from the land of Israel. This version begins by portraying Rashbi as a consummate ascetic who dwells in a cave for thirteen years:

הוות ליה רבי שמעון בן יוחי עבד טמיר במערתא תלת עשר שנין במערת חרובין דתרומה עד שהעלה גופו חלודה
“Rashbi hid in a cave for thirteen years—a cave of terumah carobs—until his body broke out in sores.” Then, at the end of thirteen years, the Yerushalmi reports that he says, “לינה נפק חמי מה” “קלא עלמא.” “Let me go see what is happening in the world (lit. what voice goes out in the world.)” He goes out and sits at the mouth of the cave where he sees a hunter hunting birds. When the hunter lays out his trap, Rashbi hears a divine voice קלה ברת saying “דימוס! Pardon!” and the bird escapes. In response to witnessing this, Rashbi says, “כל¹⁵⁸ יבדא לא יבדא” “ציפור מבלעדי שמיא לא יבדא” “If a bird is not lost without [the will of] Heaven, all the more so a person.” While a bit cryptic, he seems to glean that he can leave the cave and God will look after him. He does so and proceeds to engage in some civil works by purifying the city of Tiberias from corpse impurity. The story concludes with an altercation he has with a Samaritan who disapproves of this endeavor which results in him turning the Samaritan into a pile of bones (גל של עצמות).

¹⁵⁷ Yerushalmi Shevi'it 9:1, 38d; Genesis Rabbah 79:6; Pesikta deRav Kahana 11:16; Ecclesiastes Rabbah 10:11.

¹⁵⁸ Sokoloff translates this phrase, “not even a bird perishes without the will of heaven.” Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine Period* (Tel Aviv: Bar Ilan University Press, 2002), 233.

Bavli Shabbat's version of this tale contains a few of the core elements of this story. These elements, however, are embellished and placed in an expanded narrative context. In Bavli Shabbat (33b-34a), Rashbi flees from the Romans after a colleague reports to the authorities that he has spoken negatively about them. Rashbi first flees to the house of study, taking his son with him. When he begins to fear that the authorities will torture his wife into betraying their location, Rashbi and his son abandon the study house for a cave, where they are nourished by a carob tree and a spring. There, they spend their days in study, naked but buried up to their necks in sand. The story reports that they clothe themselves only to pray.

After twelve years of this ascetic and secluded life, Elijah comes to them and reports that the edict against Rashbi has been rescinded. As the pair leave the cave, they see people working the fields. Upset that these workers are engaged in manual labor rather than study, the pair burn everything they see with their eyes. A heavenly voice commands them to return to the cave. A year later they emerge. While the son continues to burn things, Rashbi now restores them.¹⁵⁹ The pair then come across an elderly man who is running with some myrtles before the Sabbath. They ask him what he is doing, and he responds that one of the myrtles represents the commandment to remember the Sabbath (Exodus 20:8), while the other represents the commandment to safeguard the Sabbath (Deuteronomy 5:12). The narrator reports that the minds of the father and son are settled. At this point, the son disappears from the narrative. Rashbi goes to Tiberias where he finds himself in a bathhouse where he is visited by his son-in-law who laments the sores on his body. Rashbi explains to his son-in-law that these sores enabled him to become a greater Torah scholar. The story closes in a similar manner to the ending of the tale in

¹⁵⁹ While the tale continues to report two more episodes, the son drops out as a character so our analysis will focus on this first section of the story.

the Yerushalmi version. Rashbi gets into an altercation about the purification of Tiberias with an elderly gentleman whom he turns into a pile of bones.

We see that in both the Bavli and the Yerushalmi, Rashbi escapes to the cave out of fear. In both, he is the consummate ascetic, retreating to a cave to be minimally sustained by a carob tree, and in both there is a turning point when he exits the cave. Both also contain his civil act of purifying Tiberius and turning someone into a pile of bones. It is evident, therefore, that these traditions share a common kernel. However, as is its wont, the Bavli greatly embellishes the tale and shifts its narrative focus.

In her work *Early Christian Monastic Literature and the Babylonian Talmud*, Michal Bar Asher Siegal compares the two versions of the tale. She argues that most of the elements added by the Bavli contain thematic parallels with Syriac monastic literature. The rabbis of the Bavli thus build on earlier depictions of Rashbi and paint him in an idiom of their own time, that of an ascetic monk.¹⁶⁰

Two narrative elements unique to the Bavli cannot be explained by the incorporation of Syriac monastic themes—The robust presence of the son and the centrality of Torah study to the narrative.¹⁶¹ While he is referenced in many of the Eretz Yisraeli versions, the son is an integral part of the narrative only in the Bavli version, where Rashbi speaks to and/or with him four times. Hayim Weiss points out that bringing the son along makes little narrative sense—only Rashbi is being pursued by the Romans. Bringing the son along increases the danger to the son

¹⁶⁰ Michal Bar-Asher Siegal, *Early Christian Monastic Literature and the Babylonian Talmud* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 133-69.

¹⁶¹ Siegal notes this and identifies the son as a uniquely Bavli element despite the fact that all the versions besides the Yerushalmi do mention him. (Siegal, *Early Christian Monastic Literature*, 140-41). I concur that the son is animated in the Bavli narrative in a way that he is not in the other narratives.

rather than decreasing it.¹⁶² Weiss therefore attributes to Rashbi the desire to bring his son into a sealed educational laboratory: “Rashbi is aware of the fact that extended absence from his son will prevent him from raising the child the way he wants to, and he is not willing to allow this. Therefore, he prefers to expose his son to existential threat rather than allow him to be exposed to foreign influences.”¹⁶³ The son’s presence adds a concern absent from the narratives—what does the father transmit to his son in the cave? What does the son receive of that transmission? His presence invites the reader to wonder whether or not the Bavli imagines that Rashbi succeeds in transmitting his ascetic values to his son.

Torah study, too, plays a central role in the Bavli tale in a way that it does not in the Yerushalmi and other EY versions. We first see this with the addition of the *beit midrash* as the location to which the father and son flee first. By having them flee first to the house of study, the narrator suggests that the retreat to the cave will be like the house of study only more extreme in its isolation. This impression is solidified by the account of what the pair spend their time doing in the cave, a set of details also absent from the EY versions. The Bavli reports that the pair spend their days studying Torah (כּוֹלֵי יוֹמָא גָּרְסִי). This detail serves to link the asceticism that the father and son practice in the cave to Torah study. In his book *Holy Men and Hunger Artists: Fasting and Asceticism in Rabbinic Culture*, Eliezer Diamond draws the distinction between essential asceticism and instrumental asceticism. Someone who practices essential asceticism sees an intrinsic value in ascetic practices, while someone who practices instrumental asceticism performs ascetic practices in service of another goal. This distinction maps nicely onto this

¹⁶² Hayim Weiss, “Homets ben-yayin: ma’avakim politiyim, limmud Torah, ve-zehut be-mishpaḥat rabbi Shim’on bar Yoḥai” [Wine, Son of Vinegar: Political Struggles, Torah Study and Identity in the family of Rabbi Simeon bar Yoḥai], in *Peace and War in Jewish Culture*, edited by Avriel bar-Levav (Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar, 2006), 67-83.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 74, my translation.

difference between the two renditions of the cave story. In the EY version, Rashbi practices essential asceticism in the cave. The salient detail for the narrator is that his body broke out in sores. In the Bavli version, however, the study is the key—the sores are a byproduct of his all-encompassing devotion to it.¹⁶⁴ Rather being a desideratum in and of its own right, the asceticism Rashbi and his son practice in the cave are in service of Torah study.¹⁶⁵ These two sets of values—ascetic beliefs and practices and Torah study therefore constitute the “unwritten curriculum” that Rashbi transmits to his son in the cave.

In the life of most children, there might be many who transmit culture—parents, teachers, other relatives. According to the Bavli Shabbat cave story, Rashbi’s son is shielded from the influence of everyone except his father. In this story, Rashbi retreats from society into a cave where he relinquishes all but the most essential physical sustenance and engages in physical mortification. By bringing his son along, he transmits to his son the value of such self-denial and self-flagellation. To be clear, I am calling the act of bringing his son to the cave an act of transmission because he is trying to pass along a value through his behavior (the value of asceticism) even as he is also engaging in transmitting content by engaging with his son in through textual study. Transmission can take the form both of words as well as of actions and structures that the father puts in place. In this story, Rashbi is his son’s father and teacher. He transmits his culture and worldview independent from other influences on his child’s life. The disconnection from the world allows Rashbi to convey his worldview with a clarity and purity that he could not have achieved otherwise, but it also prevents his son from learning about other avenues to enact the value of Torah study. The hermetically sealed conditions of his experiment

¹⁶⁴ (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 12.

¹⁶⁵ The portrayal of Rashbi as an instrumental ascetic predates the EY versions of this tale. *Sifre Devarim* describes Rashbi as holding the view that those who engage in Torah study will not need to worry about material pursuits.

in cultural transmission allow the narrators of this story to reflect on the effectiveness of paternal transmission of cultural values.

The Son's Reception of Asceticism within the Cave Story

In the cave, the son receives his father's transmission passively. He imitates his father by studying, praying, and burying himself in sand alongside his father. The story uses a series of plural verbs to convey this fact:

וְהָיוּ מְשַׁלְחִי¹⁶⁶ מְנִיָּהּ וְהָיוּ יֹתְבֵי עַד צְוֹאֲרֵיהֶוּ בְּחֻלָּא. כּוּלֵי יוֹמָא¹⁶⁷ גָּרְסִי¹⁶⁸. בְּעֵידָן צְלוּיִי¹⁶⁹ לְבָשִׁי מִיכְסֹו¹⁷⁰ וּמַצְלֹו, וְהָדָר מְשַׁלְחִי מְנִיָּהּ כִּי הִכִּי דְלָא לִיבְלוּ.

They would cast off their clothes and would sit up to their necks in sand. They studied all day. At the time of prayer they donned their clothing and prayed and then they would again cast off their garments so that they would not wear out.

Then, when father and son leave the cave for the first time, the son destroys the physical world alongside his father:

נִפְקֹו, חָזוּ אִינְשֵׁי דְקָא פְּרָבִי וְרָעִי, אָמְרִין:¹⁷¹ מִנְחִין חַי עוֹלָם וְעוֹסְקִין בְּחַיִּי שְׁעָה. כָּל מְקוֹם שְׁנוּתָנִין עֵינֵיהֶן מִיָּד נִשְׂרָף. “[When] they left, they saw people plowing and sowing seeds. They said: ‘they relinquish eternal life in favor of temporary existence.’ Anywhere they set their eyes was immediately scorched.” Father and son act as a pair, criticizing the farmers for engaging in physical labor. They destroy the fruits of the farmers’ labors with their fiery eyes. A divine voice castigates them for their action and tells the pair to return to their cave. They spend another year in the cave before a

¹⁶⁶ Missing from the manuscripts.

¹⁶⁷ Munich 95 adds ו יתבי .

¹⁶⁸ Munich 95 adds והן משלחין מנייהו

¹⁶⁹ Munich 95 adds נפקי.

¹⁷⁰ Munich 95 adds ונפקי

¹⁷¹ Vilna and Vatican 127 have אמר here. In that version, Rashbi explicitly transmits to his son the idea that that eternal life does not allow for engaging in pursuits that are not directly in service of God.

divine voice tells them to leave again and reenter the world. After their second exit, the son finally breaks with his father:

יֵצְתָה בֵּית קוֹל וְאָמְרָה: צֵאוּ מִמְעַרְתְּכֶם! נִפְקוּ. כָּל הֵיכָא דְהוּה מְחֵי רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר, הוּה מְסִי רַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן.

“A heavenly voice went out and said: Leave your cave! They left. Everywhere that R. Elazar harmed, Rashbi healed.” The son’s only independent action in the narrative is to continue to harm the world after this second exit. The narrative in Bavli Shabbat thus portrays Rashbi’s son as being in lock step with his father, participating fully in his ascetic experiment. Rashbi’s transmission of the values undergirding ascetic practice has been so successful, it seems, that his son is unequipped to change his response to the physical world during the year they spend back in the cave. By the end of the Bavli Shabbat narrative, we begin to form the impression that Rashbi’s son, unnamed in this tale, has begun to develop an inflexible ascetic mindset. We are, however, left with the question of how effective Rashbi’s transmission of his unwritten curriculum is in the long run. What has the son learned from his father’s intense experiment in cultural transmission?

The Son as an Adult

Bavli Bava Metzia 83b-85a presents a complex series of narratives about R. Elazar, Rashbi’s no-longer-anonymous son. The series contains a potpourri of bizarre tales beginning with R. Elazar’s appointment to the job of Roman thief-catcher and closing with his death and ultimate burial in a crypt guarded by a serpent.

This story cycle in Bavli Bava Metzia contains many themes which have been dealt with by a number of scholars. Ronit Shoshany, for example, discusses the cycle as a reflection on sin

and repentance.¹⁷² David Stern and Yariv ben Aharon discuss them more symbolically, as a reflection on the relationship between Eretz Yisrael and Bavel.¹⁷³ Daniel Boyarin sees in these stories reflections on rabbinic masculinity as well as on sexuality and reproduction.¹⁷⁴ While all of these themes are present in the story cycle, I suggest that reading it in conversation with the cave story in Bavli Shabbat highlights an additional thread in these rich and laden vignettes—that of the parental transmission of a worldview. While likely not told by the same story-tellers, the Bava Metzia tales do reference the cave story, inviting us to explore to what extent the Bavli Bava Metzia stories portray R. Elazar as living out this father’s ascetic worldview. In the cave, Rashbi has transmitted to his son the technologies of asceticism and bodily discomfort in service of the study of Torah. In this section I look at a variety of themes related to asceticism that emerge in the two sets of stories. I argue that in the Bava Metzia cycle, the son turns to ascetic practices in his hour of need, but he decouples these practices from Torah study. The stories thus present the father’s transmission as only partially efficacious.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷² Ronit Shoshany, “Rabbi Elazar b. Rabbi Shimon and the Thieves: A Story about Sin and Atonement, (Heb)” *Jewish Studies: An Internet Journal* 4 (2005), 1–21.

¹⁷³ Stern, “Imperial Fiction;” Yariv Ben-Aharon, *Agadat Pumbedita: shi’ur be-Talmud: Agadat Pereḥ "ha-Šokher et ha-po ‘alim”* [The aggadah of Pumbedita: a lesson in the Talmud: the Aggadah of the chapter “One who hires workers”]. (Kiryat Tivon: Ha-Midrashah Oranim, 2000), cited in Shoshany, “Rabbi Elazar b. Rabbi Shimon and the Thieves,” 2. According to Shoshany, Ben Aharon claims that the story cycle is an attempt to claim the ascension of Babylonia over the Land of Israel. Stern claims the reverse—that the Bavli here expresses some anxiety about being less than their EY counterparts (see especially pages 28-29). These scholars attempt a sustained reading of the story cycle (or at least large swaths of it). I am not trying to provide a sustained reading as they do. Rather, I am lifting up a theme that I hope can be generative in terms of thinking through the question of transmitting a worldview.

¹⁷⁴ Daniel Boyarin examines this story cycle in different ways in three different works: *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993) 196-225, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 81-126, and *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis*: (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 167-87.

¹⁷⁵ Ultimately the narrator does not evaluate this failure of transmission negatively. R. Elazar is depicted as a holy person precisely because of the extreme bodily mortification he subjects himself to. In David Stern’s words, “So whatever he does, REBRS seems to triumph—whether his own self-destructiveness, the opposition of other rabbis, and even death itself. He’s like a bad boy who can’t do wrong. His closest parallel is Falstaff” (19). I do not disagree with this assessment but am raising a separate axis on which to consider this set of narratives.

Inverse Relationships to Empire

Our introduction to the adult R. Elazar b. R. Shimon (henceforth R. Elazar) draws a clear contrast between the values of the son and the values of his father. The very first episode of the Bava Metzia story cycle portrays R. Elazar as flouting a core value of Rashbi's, his disdain for the Roman empire, which had been the narrative catalyst for the pair's retreat to the cave in the Bavli's telling. In the Bavli Shabbat tale, Rashbi criticizes the empire, saying:

כל מה שתקנו לא¹⁷⁶ תקנו אלא לצורך עצמן¹⁷⁷ תקנו שווקין להושיב בהן זונות מרחצאות לעדן בהן עצמן גשרים ליתול מהן מכס

“Everything they [the Romans] established they established only for their own needs. They established markets in order to place prostitutes there, bathhouses to beautify themselves, and bridges in order to collect tax.”¹⁷⁸ On a narrative level, this statement triggers his need to flee; his cynical view of Roman governance makes its way to the Roman authorities, who sentence him to death. However, Charlotte Fonrobert points out that Rashbi's statement is a critique of Roman urban design. It is impossible to live in a Roman city without interacting with its design, so perhaps even without the existential threat Rashbi would have had to leave for the cave and sever his ties to the Roman city.¹⁷⁹

Whereas the father rejects Roman societal structures, his son embraces them. Bavli Bava Metzia (83b) introduces the adult R. Elazar in an episode that shows him to have a markedly different attitude towards the Romans from that of his father. In an almost comical fashion, R.

¹⁷⁶ Munich 95 has לצרכן.

¹⁷⁷ Lacking in Munich 95.

¹⁷⁸ Bavli Shabbat 33b.

¹⁷⁹ Charlotte Fonrobert, “Plato in Rabbi Shimeon bar Yohai's Cave (B. Shabbat 33B-34A): The Talmudic Inversion of Plato's Politics of Philosophy,” *AJS Review* 31:2 (November, 2007), 277-96, www.jstor.org/stable/27564292.

Elazar instructs a thief-catcher for the Romans on the intricacies of how to do his job well. His advice reaches the emperor who appoints him a thief-catcher in the other's stead. As Shoshany points out, his well-developed advice shows how intentional he was about giving it.¹⁸⁰ His conscription is fully voluntary. R. Elazar wholeheartedly accepts Roman rule—catching Jewish thieves for the Romans is a laudatory pursuit in his eyes when done properly. R. Elazar embraces his new role, a role that supports the functioning of the empire his father so despised.

This contrast has implications for understanding the effects of the paternal transmission of culture that happened in the cave story. According to Weiss, Rashbi's motivation for bringing his son into the cave with him includes the wish to impart an anti-imperial political ideology:

The description of the pair in the cave, and in the sand of the cave, is a description of an experiment in lab conditions in which the father tries to realize, through the help of a sort of masculine-intellectual womb, his fantasy to create a spiritual-political clone of himself in his son.¹⁸¹

By opening with a story of the son catching thieves for the Romans, Bavli Bava Metzia (83b) introduces R. Elazar as thwarting this attempted transmission. Perhaps this is at least a partial explanation for the insult that R. Yehoshua ben Qorha hurls his way—he calls him “Vinegar son of wine,” suggesting that R. Elazar has soured his father's legacy.¹⁸²

In the next episode, however, R. Elazar has a change of heart. A launderer insults him using the same epithet as R. Yehoshua b. Qorha. R. Elazar is so incensed that he turns him over to the Romans for thievery. The Romans hang him, despite the fact that R. Elazar has a change of heart and attempts to save him. While the story does not explicitly say so, it seems that R.

¹⁸⁰ Shoshany, “Rabbi Elazar b. Rabbi Shimon and the Thieves,” 7.

¹⁸¹ Weiss, “Homets ben yayin,” 76; my translation.

¹⁸² Much has been written about this expression. In addition to those scholars cited above who also address this expression at length, see Ofra Meir, “On the Hebrew Expression ‘Homets ben yayin’,” *Dappim: Research in Literature* 4 (1988), 9-18.

Elazar gives up his thief-catching profession and embraces an ascetic existence as a result of being unable to save the launderer.

The rest of this chapter will explore the ways in which R. Elazar embraces certain facets of the worldview that his father attempted to impart in the cave while ignoring or actively rejecting other elements. While these stories are fantastical, they do reflect a real picture of what might happen when a parent attempts to transmit a set of cultural values in a vacuum—the child receives some of these values but they get muddled and distorted in that reception. In the case of Rashbi and R. Elazar, the son enacts the ascetic practices of retreat from society and bodily self-mortification. He fails, however, to connect these practices with Torah study and the valuing of life beyond the physical world—values that his father saw as undergirding his ascetic practices. I will develop the contrast between Rashbi's asceticism and that of his son by comparing a) the ways each retreat from society, b) the ways they each relate to physical suffering, and c) the value they each place on physical, worldly existence. I will show that Rashbi's mono-focus on Torah study as a symbol of or perhaps portal to eternal life loses this significance in R. Elazar's asceticism. Thus, while the father succeeds in transmitting ascetic practices and the practice of Torah study, the son does not maintain the tight link between the two that the father espoused.

Retreat from Society

In the Bavli cave story, as we have seen, Rashbi retreats from society in two stages:

אזל הוא ובריה טשו בי מדרשא כל יומא הוה מייתי להו דביתהו¹⁸³ ריפתא¹⁸⁴ וכוזא דמיא וכרכי
כי תקיף גזירתא אי"ל לבריה¹⁸⁵ נשים דעתן קלה עליהן דילמא¹⁸⁶ מצערי לה¹⁸⁷ ומגליא לן

¹⁸³ Munich 95 has דביתהו.

¹⁸⁴ Munich 95 adds וכרכי here instead of after the next phrase.

¹⁸⁵ Oxford 366 adds ידענא.

¹⁸⁶ Missing from Munich 95.

¹⁸⁷ Oxford 366 has לן.

אזלו טשו במערתא¹⁸⁸ איתרחיש¹⁸⁹ ניסא איברי להו חרובא ועינא דמיא

He and his son went and hid in the house of study. Every day his wife brought him bread and a jug of water, and they would dine. When the verdict increased in strength, he said to his son “Women’s will is light upon them. Perhaps they will torture her and she will reveal us.” They went and hid in a cave. A miracle occurred and a carob tree and a stream were created for them.

In the first stage of retreat, Rashbi takes his son to live with him in the house of study. This first retreat distances the pair from the Roman civic institutions Rashbi disparaged but keeps him in relationship with other rabbis and with his wife, who supports them through her nourishment.

As Jeffrey Rubenstein points out: “In the academy RSBY withdraws from profane, gentile culture to holy, rabbinic society, but he remains connected to the outside world through the visits of his wife, who brings him basic necessities, bread and a jug of water.”¹⁹⁰ While Rashbi does not explicitly teach his son in this stage, by bringing him to live in the study hall, he imparts the idea that retreat from Roman society is a desideratum.

In the second phase, Rashbi decides that living in the house of study is too risky, so he brings his son even farther away from society into a cave, an act that severs even this small contact with the outside world. For Rubenstein, this second retreat signals a rejection of human society. In the cave, says Rubenstein:

The scene portrays an existence wholly devoted to Torah. Perforce it is very close to nature; with all time and effort invested in study, there is no way to produce food, build shelter or weave clothes. RSBY’s rejection of cultural institutions—markets, bathhouses, and bridge—has been pushed to its logical extreme: separation from all human culture.

¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁸ Munich 95 adds [[דמשה ואליהו]].

¹⁸⁹ Most of the manuscripts (except Vatican 127) add להו.

¹⁹⁰ Jeffrey Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 111.

¹⁹¹ Ibid, 119. This attitude may have been a rejection of his own father’s attitude to the Romans. Bavli Pesahim 112a states that Rashbi’s father Yohai was a prison guard for the Romans.

By bringing his son along into this solitary confinement, Rashbi conveys the message that other humans are not an essential component of a religious life. Later in the tale, Rashbi makes this message explicit, saying to his son, “די לעולם אני ואתה” — “You and I are enough for the world.”¹⁹² This statement rejects the necessity for others with whom to study and serve God. Indeed, the devotion of Rashbi and his son is enough to sustain the world.

Despite the fact that R. Elazar does not retreat to a physical cave, he too retreats from society in two ways. The most explicit retreat occurs after he fails to save a launderer he has wrongfully handed over to the Romans. He ceases his activities as a thief-catcher and instead engages in a penitential cycle of physical suffering followed by Torah study. Each morning, his wife prepares food for him which he eats and becomes well:

למחר¹⁹³ עבדה ליה דביתהו¹⁹⁴ שיתין מיני¹⁹⁵ לפדא¹⁹⁶ ואכיל להו וברי¹⁹⁷
ולא הות שבקא ליה דביתהו למיפק¹⁹⁸ לבי מדרשא כי היכי דלא לדחקהו רבנן
באורתא אמר להו אחיי ורעיי בואו בצפרא אמר להו זילו מפני ביטול תורה¹⁹⁹

The next day his wife made for him sixty types of victuals and he ate them and healed. And his wife would not allow him to leave for the house of study so that the rabbis would not trouble him. In the evening, he said to them (ie his sufferings) “Come, my brothers and my friends!) In the morning, he said to them “Go away because of the nullification of Torah study.”²⁰⁰

¹⁹² Beth Berkowitz suggests that Rashbi’s statement signals that he has difficulty separating from his son.

¹⁹³ Florence 8-9 has וכל יומא.

¹⁹⁴ Missing from Munich 95.

¹⁹⁵ Vatican 117 has אצי.

¹⁹⁶ Oxford has קידרא.

¹⁹⁷ Missing from all the manuscripts except Escorial. This is a significant lacuna because it leaves open the question of whether and how he healed daily.

¹⁹⁸ Escorial has למיזל. Oxford has גיעול.

¹⁹⁹ Vatican 117 has בית המדרש.

²⁰⁰ This story on 84b is a doublet of a story on 83b where he removes basketfuls of flesh in order to ascertain whether his innards are trustworthy:

ואפי' הכי לא מייטבא דעתיה

It is self-evident that R. Elazar has retreated from Roman society. He would not be able to continue his thief-catching activities while engaging in such an extreme regimen of physical suffering. But the story also highlights his retreat from rabbinic society by reporting that when he is ill, his wife prevents him from returning to the study hall lest his fellow scholars aggravate his illness. His sufferings have become his friends.

The idea that the other rabbis would aggravate his illnesses is linked to the distance R. Elazar has from the rabbis throughout most of the tales in the Bava Metzia story cycle. When R. Yehoshua b. Qorcha insults him for turning in fellow Jews to the Romans in the first episode of the cycle (explored in detail above in the “Politics” section), the language used is “שלח ליה.” This sending implies distance. The narrator implies that R. Yehoshua has to send a message to R. Elazar because R. Elazar is not present in the house of study. R. Elazar retreats from society through his anti-social tendencies, which form an undercurrent in the Bava Metzia stories.

In addition to the episode above, the idea of the other rabbis troubling R. Elazar appears twice more. R. Elazar returns to the study house after his wife’s departure (discussed in the next section). Upon his return to the study house, the rabbis show him samples of vaginal blood which they have apparently been saving for his return:

אייתו לקמיה שתין מיני דמא טהרינהו
הוה קא מרגני רבנן²⁰¹ ואמרי סלקא דעתך לית בהו חד ספק
אמר להו אם כמותי הוא יהיו כולם זכרים ואם לאו תהא נקבה אחת ביניהם
היו כולם זכרים ואסיקו להו ר' אלעזר על שמיה

They brought before him sixty samples of blood. He declared them pure.²⁰²

אשקוהו סמא דשינתא ועיילוהו לביתא דשישא וקרעו לכריסיה
הו מפקן מיניה דיקולי דיקולי דתרבא

“And even so, his mind was not settled. They had him drink a sleeping draught and they brought him into a room of marble and they tore his belly. They removed from him baskets and baskets of flesh” (Bavli Bava Metzia 83b).

²⁰¹ Hamburg adds עליה. Besides that there are no notable mss variants in this section.

²⁰² As Daniel Boyarin points out, this is clearly a hyperbolic number which echoes the sixty buckets of blood that were removed from his body on 83b (*Carnal Israel*, 206). There is a generative literary parallel in that both the

The rabbis complained and said: Could it possibly be that there is not a single doubtful case among them?!

He said to them: If I am right, let them (ie all the babies born from the sexual relations) all be male, but if not, let there be one female among them. They were all male. And they named them “R. Elazar” after him. (Bava Metzia 84b)

In this episode, we see the double-edged relationship between R. Elazar and the rabbis. On the one hand, he is respected as a Torah scholar—so respected that the rabbis save their trickiest menstrual blood cases for him. On the other hand, the rabbis complain about his halakhic rulings.²⁰³ His response to their complaint signals that he is an outsider—rather than marshalling rabbinic arguments in his own defense, he resorts to supernatural means (i.e. the future birth of sixty boys).²⁰⁴ Despite his return to the study house, he does not play by its rules. The outcome, the birth of sixty boys, implies divine intervention in his favor and solidifies the image of R. Elazar as a miracle-working ascetic.²⁰⁵

The next episode continues to accentuate his self-perception of being at odds with the other rabbis. On his death bed, he tells his wife not to bury him after his death.²⁰⁶ He says to her:

buckets of blood there and the menstrual blood samples are deemed pure. See Shoshany, “Rabbi Elazar b. Rabbi Shimon and the Thieves,” 16. More generally, sixty is a typological number in the Bavli. See for example Bavli Nedarim 39b which prescribes a remedy of sixty people visiting an ill person to restore their health. Caspar Levias suggests that the reference to sixty is a remnant of the sexagesimal system of which sixty was the largest number. Sixty is thus symbolic of an indefinitely large number. (See Caspar Levias, “Numbers and Numerals,” in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, edited by Cyrus Adler et. al, (1905), www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/11619-numbers-and-numerals).

²⁰³ In fact, the root רננ suggestively appears in Bavli Berakhot (29b) and Bavli Bekhorot (36b) in the story of the deposition of Rabban Gamliel. There, the discontent that the assembled express at the treatment of R. Yehoshua is expressed with the root רננ.

²⁰⁴ There are similarities to the famous story of R. Eliezer and the oven of Achnai. There, too, R. Eliezer resorts to supernatural means to demonstrate the purity or impurity of an object.

²⁰⁵ In a way, however, this return to the study house parallels Rashbi’s return to society. When Rashbi returns, he purifies Tiberias using miraculous means. Here, his son also engages in an act of purification, deeming these niddah clothes pure. It is worth noting that the purification Rashbi engages in is from corpse impurity, while R. Elazar’s leads to the birth of many boys. This parallel is worth further investigation.

²⁰⁶ This likely reflects a stitching together of disparate literary traditions. In the episode above, R. Elazar’s wife leaves him. In this episode, she has somehow returned. However, this episode and the ones following it bear close resemblance to parallels in PDRK 11, while the other episode about R. Elazar’s wife has no parallel there.

כי הוה קא נפשיה אמר לה לדביתהו²⁰⁷ ידענא בדרבנן דרתיח²⁰⁸ עלי ולא מיעסקי²⁰⁹ בי שפיר²¹⁰
אוגנין בעליתאי ולא תידחלין מינאי

I know about the rabbis that they are boiling (very angry) at me and they will not deal well with me. Lay me to rest in the attic and fear me not.

The idea that the rabbis would not deal appropriately with his body is an extreme claim about his separateness from them. Not only is he at odds with them in the study house, but even in death he fears their wrath. It is not clear why he thinks they are angry at him. Reading the story cycle as one unit, Rashi suggests that the rabbis are still stewing about his profession as a thief-catcher. Alternatively, their ire may not be as bad as R. Elazar thinks it is; he picks up on their resistance to his iconoclastic halakhic methods and interprets it (perhaps incorrectly) as implying that they will even mistreat his dead body.

In sum, while R. Elazar does not retreat to a cave as he and his father did in his youth, he too practices social isolation. He perceives himself at odds with the rabbis of the study house. Unlike his father, whose first step outside of society is into the study house, for R. Elazar the study house provides no haven. Until his death R. Elazar remains an anti-social ascetic. The fact that the study house is not a home for R. Elazar showcases that for him asceticism (in this case social isolation) is an end of itself. It has not led him to feel at home in the one place that has Torah study at its core. While pursuit of Torah study remains a value to him, his asceticism is decoupled from that pursuit. His father did not succeed in transmitting the connection that he so clearly practiced.

²⁰⁷ Florence 8-9 adds מידע.

²⁰⁸ Florence 8-9 has בקטי בדעתיהו.

²⁰⁹ Florence 8-9 has נהגי.

²¹⁰ Florence 8-9 has יקרא כדמבעי להו אסקין.

Physical Suffering and Torah Study

We see this decoupling even more clearly with regards to the relationship father and son perceive between physical suffering and Torah study. Rashbi and his son both subject themselves to physical deprivation and bodily mortification. He and his father differ, however, in their understanding of the relationship between Torah study and suffering. Where Rashbi thinks that physical suffering supports the pursuit of Torah, R. Elazar sees the suffering as its own end.

The physical suffering in the cave is tied both to the subsistence-level nourishment as well as to the sores that arose on the bodies of the father and son due to spending years covered in sand in place of clothing. Bavli Shabbat succinctly describes the life of the father-son pair in the cave:

אזלו טשו במערתא²¹¹ איתרחיש²¹² ניסא איברי להו חרובא ועינא דמא
והו משלח²¹³ מנייהו והו יתבי עד צנאריהו בקלא. כולי יומא²¹⁴ גרסי²¹⁵. בעידן צלוי²¹⁶ לבשי מיכסו²¹⁷ ומצלגו,
והדר משלחי מנייהו כי היכי דלא ליבלו.

They went and hid in a cave. A miracle occurred and a carob tree and a stream were created for them. They would cast off their clothes and sit up to their necks in sand. They would study all day. At the time of prayer, they got dressed, covered themselves, and prayed, and then they would cast their clothes off again so that they would not wear out. (Shabbat 33b)

The story describes a life devoid of all but the most essential of physical nourishment. Thirteen years on a diet of water and carobs would have left the pair's bodies emaciated. The text also reports that they shed their clothes and buried themselves up to their necks in sand while

²¹¹ Munich 95 adds [[דמשה ואליהו]].

²¹² Most of the manuscripts (except Vatican 127) add להו.

²¹³ Missing from the manuscripts.

²¹⁴ Munich 95 adds ו יתבי .

²¹⁵ Munich 95 adds והן משלחין מנייהו

²¹⁶ Munich 95 adds נפקי.

²¹⁷ Munich 95 adds ונפקי

studying Torah, donning their clothes only to pray. Naturally, this regimen leads to physical suffering. This bodily mortification, a hallmark of the “elite” ascetic existence, highlights the extreme withdrawal the pair make from the physical world. By bringing his son along to engage in this taxing regimen, Rashbi conveys to him his view that there is little to no place for physical nourishment let alone pleasure in the life of the true servant of God.

An episode that occurs after Rashbi and his son exit the cave for the last time highlights the relationship that Rashbi perceives between Torah study and the physical suffering he put himself through:

שמע ר' פנחס בן יאיר חתניה ונפק לאפיה עייליה לבי בניה²¹⁸ הוה קא אריך ליה לבישריה חזי דהוה ביה פילי בגופיה²¹⁹ הוה קא בכי וקא נתרו דמעת עיניה וקמצוחא²²⁰ ליה²²¹ א"ל אוי לי שראיתך בכך א"ל אשריך שראיתני בכך שאילמלא לא ראיתני בכך לא מצאת בי כך דמעיקרא כי הוה מקשי ר"ש בן יוחי קושיא הוה מפרק ליה ר' פנחס בן יאיר תריסר פירוקי לסוף כי הוה מקשי ר"פ בן יאיר קושיא הוה מפרק ליה רשב"י עשרין וארבעה פירוקי

R. Pinhas b. Yair heard and he went out towards him. He brought him into a bathhouse and massaged his flesh. He saw that there were sores on his body. He cried and the tears of his eye fell and hurt him. He said to him, “Woe to me that I have seen you thus.” He said to him, “Happy are you who has seen me this way, for had you not seen me this way you would not have found in me thus.” For at first, when Rashbi had posed a challenge, R. Pinhas b. Yair would respond with twelve resolutions. Ultimately, when R. Pinhas b. Yair would pose a challenge, Rashbi would respond with twenty-four resolutions. (Shabbat 33b)

The story reports that Rashbi’s son-in-law pays him a visit in the bathhouse and massages his flesh. He sees that he has sores on his body, and he cries, causing Rashbi pain with the saltiness of his tears. He expresses sadness at Rashbi’s condition, saying “Woe to me that I have seen you like this.” Rashbi responds, “Happy are you that you have seen me like this, for had you not seen

²¹⁸ Oxford 366 adds ואסחיה.

²¹⁹ Munich 95 has בבשר((א))יה; other manuscripts have variations on בגביה.

²²⁰ Munich 95 has ומצערן.

²²¹ Oxford 366 adds משום דחריכן בגו פילי.

me like this, you would not have found in me this.” The narrator goes on to explain that the “this” is a newfound proficiency in rabbinic argumentation. Prior to Rashbi’s stay in the cave, Rashbi would challenge his son-in-law who would respond with twelve resolutions to the problem he had raised. After his sojourn, Rashbi is now able to respond to a challenge of his son-in-law with twenty-four resolutions.

The narrator thus has Rashbi voice an explicit causal connection between physical mortification and mental prowess. He continues to value asceticism even after leaving the cave and attributes to it a strengthening of his skills in dialectical argumentation (a quintessentially Bavli priority).²²² His physical wounds are indicators of the suffering that has enabled him to achieve greatness in the realm of Torah study.

Bavli Bava Metzia connects R. Elazar’s suffering to that of his father. When R. Elazar’s son R. Yosi dies, a snake guarding the tomb of Rashbi does not allow him to be buried with his father and grandfather:

כי נח נפשיה אמטוהו למערתא דאבוה הוה הדרא לה עכנא למערתא²²³
 אמר ליה עכנא עכנא פתח פיך ויכנס בן אצל אביו
 לא פתחא להו כסבורים העם לומר שזה גדול מזה²²⁴ יצתה בת קול ואמרה לא מפני שזה גדול מזה אלא זה היה בצער
 מערה וזה לא היה בצער מערה

When he died, they brought him to the cave of his father. A serpent had surrounded the cave. He said to it: Serpent, serpent, open your mouth so that the son may enter [and be buried] with his father! It did not open [its mouth] for them. People thought that this one [R. Elazar] was greater than that one [his son]. A divine voice came out and said: It’s not because this one is greater than that one, rather this one [experienced] the suffering of the cave and that one did not. (Bava Metzia 85a)

²²² See Jeffrey Rubenstein, “The Themmatization of Dialectics in Bavli Aggadah” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 54, no. 1 (Spring, 2003): 72-73.

²²³ Hamburg 165 adds דאבוה.

²²⁴ Florence 8-9 has הוה קא מררנני רבנן דיל' חס ושלום לא הדר ביה.

When the serpent guarding his ancestral tomb does not allow Rashbi's grandson to be buried in his ancestral crypt, the assembled assume that he is lesser than his ancestors. A divine voice sets the record straight: R. Yosi's shortcoming was only that he did not suffer with his father and grandfather in the cave. There is something foundational about the suffering that Rashbi and his son experience in the cave that sets them apart from everyone else.

In the stories about R. Elazar, physical suffering forms the central component of his asceticism. After his death, R. Elazar's wife rejects the advances of Rabbi. She declares that R. Elazar was more holy than Rabbi because of the suffering that he took upon himself:²²⁵

שלח לה נהי דבתורה גדול ממני אבל²²⁶ במעשים טובים²²⁷ מי גדול ממני
שלחה ליה בתורה מיהא גדול ממך לא ידענא במעשים ידענא דהא²²⁸ קביל עליה יסורי...

Rebbi sent to her: Granted, that he was greater than me in Torah, but in good deeds was he really greater than me? She sent back to him: While I do not know if he was greater than you in Torah, I know that he was greater in deeds, because he accepted suffering upon himself' (Bavli Bava Metzia 85a).

This exchange highlights the disparity between R. Elazar and his father. His deeds, his suffering, is a value he practices alongside rather than in service of Torah study.

Bava Metzia 84b, discussed above, highlights the fact that suffering does not support his Torah study. R. Elazar's suffering remedy is presented as penance for his inability to save the launderer and he presents his suffering as conflicting with his Torah study:

ואפילו הכי לא סמך רבי אלעזר ברבי שמעון אדעתיה²²⁹

²²⁵ Escorial has a different reason for his מעשים being preferable to those of Rabbi. His wife says: דכי הוה פסיק פומיה מדברי תורה לא הוה משתעי בסיחת חולין.

²²⁶ Missing from the manuscripts.

²²⁷ Missing from all but Florence 8-9.

²²⁸ Florence 8-9 has דהוא עדיף ד.

²²⁹ The use of the word דעת is strikingly reminiscent of the critique that Rashbi levels against women in the cave story "נשים דעתן קלה". He does not rely on his wife's דעת and R. Elazar does not rely on his own דעת here. However, Hamburg 165 and Escorial have אנפשיה instead. Hamburg 165, Munich 95 and Vatican manuscripts all add דילמא הם.

קביל עליה יסורי²³⁰ באורתא²³¹ הו מייכי²³² ליה שיתין נמטי לצפרא²³³ נגדי²³⁴ מתותיה שיתין משיכלי דמא וכיבא
... באורתא אמר להו אחיי ורעיי בואו בצפרא אמר להו זילו מפני ביטול תורה²³⁵

And even so R. Elazar did not rely on his mind. He accepted physical suffering upon himself. In the evening, they used to spread out sixty felt garments for him. In the morning, they would draw from under him sixty basins of blood and pus... In the evening he said to them (i.e. to his suffering) “My brothers and friends come.” In the morning he said to them, “Go away because of the nullification of Torah.”

Striking about this vignette is the relationship R. Elazar sees between Torah study and physical suffering. At night, R. Elazar invites his suffering in, using a personal invitation “My brothers and friends.” In the morning, he sends his suffering away because he sees his suffering as distracting him from Torah study. Rashbi and R. Elazar therefore have opposite views about the relationship between Torah study and physical suffering. Both value suffering and Torah study. But whereas his father sees suffering as in service of Torah, R. Elazar sees physical suffering as an end in and of itself—an end that conflicts with Torah study.

Thus, while both father and son engage in physical mortification and suffering voluntarily, they relate to that suffering very differently. For the father, the suffering is a performance of his belief that the physical world is important only insofar as it can be used to serve the divine through Torah study. He is grateful for his suffering because it has fueled his growth as a Torah scholar. R. Elazar, in contrast, takes on physical suffering as a penance. His

הואיל ומטא ההוא מעשה לידאי איקביל עליה איסורי. Escorial adds: ושלום מטא כי האי מעשה לידיה. This version stresses that the reason for his bodily affliction is penance for the deed he did.

²³⁰ Hamburg 165 adds כל יומא ש.

²³¹ Escorial adds כל ליליא.

²³² Hamburg 165, Escorial, and Vatican manuscripts have some variation on מיתין—they bring.

²³³ Missing from Hamburg 165, Escorial, and Vatican 115.

²³⁴ Escorial and the Vatican manuscripts have ונגרי.

²³⁵ Vatican 117 has בית המדרש.

flesh becomes a locus of penance rather than a means to accessing the eternal life of Torah.²³⁶

The father has succeeded in transmitting to his son the idea that physical suffering has value; he has not, however, successfully transmitted the purpose of that suffering. Suffering and Torah study, tightly linked in the father's ascetic worldview, have become decoupled in the asceticism of the son.

The Search for Eternal Life

R. Elazar's view that suffering is valuable in itself connects to another key difference between the messages Rashbi transmits in the cave and what R. Elazar enacts. For Rashbi, Torah study is crucial because it symbolizes or is perhaps a gateway to חיי עולם—eternal life. R. Elazar in Bavli Bava Metzia rejects this focus on eternal life, instead valuing this-worldly existence.

A central ideological underpinning for Rashbi's ascetic practice is the valuation of eternal life over temporal, this-worldly, physical existence. For Rashbi, Torah study is linked to חיי עולם (eternal life), while a preoccupation (or even occupation) with food is emblematic of חיי שעה (temporary life). We see this linkage in the cave story, where Rashbi and his son eat the minimal amount of food needed to survive. At the climax of the cave story, the narrator provides a conceptual frame for this approach to subsistence. When the pair leave the cave for the first time and encounter people who are plowing and sowing, they say: ²³⁷מְנִיחִין חַיֵּי עוֹלָם וְעוֹסְקִין בְּחַיֵּי שָׁעָה. “They forsake eternal life and engage in temporal/transitory life/existence!” This observation is the reason given for the destruction they bring about with their eyes. Father and son burn up the crops they see because the farmers are engaged in “temporal living” rather than “eternal living.” The idea that חיי עולם refers to Torah and חיי שעה refers to food appears elsewhere in the Bavli.

²³⁶ Another contrast between the father and the son's suffering is that the father's suffering is skin-deep, while the son's affects his innards.

²³⁷ Bavli Shabbat 33b.

Bavli Berakhot 48b, for example, discusses the relationship between the blessings over food and over Torah study using the terms חיי עולם and חיי שעה.

אין לי אלא ברכת המזון. ברכת התורה²³⁸ מניין? אומר רבי ישמעאל: קל וחומר, על חיי שעה מברך, על חיי עולם הבא לא כל שכן.

I have only the blessing of food (ie. the grace after meals). From where is the blessing over Torah study [derived]? R. Yishmael said: It follows logically—if one blesses over temporal existence is it not obvious that one ought to make a blessing over eternal existence?

In this source, the phrase חיי שעה is used to refer to food, perhaps a symbol for physical subsistence, while חיי עולם refers to Torah study as a pursuit. While this source does not ridicule food's temporal nature, Bavli Beitzah 15b uses the phrase חיי שעה in a pejorative way. There, R. Eliezer scorns students who leave his class early on Yom Tov by accusing them of doing so in order to drink fancy wine, thereby relinquishing eternal existence in favor of temporal life (שמניחים חיי עולם ועוסקים בחיי שעה). Thus, Rashbi (and perhaps his son) here present the engagement with food as directly coming into conflict with Torah study. The “temporal living” that they criticize is the source of the food that others eat. Within the Bavli Shabbat cave story, R. Elazar maintains this ideology whole-heartedly. So much so in fact that when the pair leave the cave the second time, he continues to burn crops with his eyes and his father has to repair the harm he has caused. While Bavli Shabbat portrays R. Elazar as being in lockstep with his father in his visceral reaction to the pursuit of sustenance, Bavli Bava Metzia portrays R. Elazar as having the opposite attitude towards food. In contrast to the negative valence on food and sustenance portrayed by the Shabbat cave story, part of R. Elazar's persona is his love for food and his resultant girth.²³⁹

²³⁸ Florence 7 has הארץ.

²³⁹ This characterization does predate the Bavli. Pesiqa DeRav Kahana 11 contains two episodes that highlight his large appetite. For a full discussion of this pericope, see Jeffrey Rubenstein, “Hero, Saint, and Sage: The Life of R. Eleazar b. R. Shimon in Pesiqa deRav Kahana 11,” in *The Faces of Torah: Studies in the Texts and Contexts of*

In Bavli Bava Metzia, after RE has taken on physical affliction, his wife prepares for him sixty dishes: "למחר עבדה ליה דביתהו שיתין מיני לפדא ואכיל להו וברי" "His wife prepared for him sixty types of prepared dishes²⁴⁰ and he ate them and he healed" (84b). The contrast between sixty types of dishes and the carobs upon which he and his father subsisted in the cave could not be more stark. And the Bavli continues with this theme—once his wife leaves him, his food does not decrease. Rather, in one of the more baffling moments of the narrative, he mysteriously receives assistance from some travelling sailors:

סליקו ואתו הנך [שיתין]²⁴¹ ספונאי
 עיילו ליה שיתין עבדי כי נקיטי שיתין ארנקי ועבדו ליה שיתין מיני לפדא ואכיל להו
 יומא חד אמרה לה לברתה זילי בקי באבוך מאי קא עביד האינדא²⁴²
 אתיא אמר לה זילי אמרי לאמך²⁴³ שלנו גדול משלהם²⁴⁴
 קרי אנפשיה (משלי לא, יד) "היתה כאניות סוחר ממרחק תביא לחמה"
 אכל ושתי וברי²⁴⁵ נפק לבי מדרשא

Sixty sailors came to him. They brought him sixty servants who took sixty purses and made him sixty types of prepared foods and he ate them. One day, she said to her daughter: Go and check on your father [to see] what he is doing now. She came. He said to her: "Go tell your mother 'Ours is greater than theirs/yours.' He recited about himself "She was like the ships of a merchant, bringing food from far away." He ate and he drank and healed. He went to the house of study (Bava Metzia 84b).

In the cave episode, Rashbi rejects even the loaf of bread and water that his wife sends to the study house. He prefers to survive the cave fully relying on God's sustenance of a simple carob

Ancient Judaism in Honor of Steven Fraade, edited by Michal Bar Asher Siegal, Tzvi Novick, Christine Hayes, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 509-28.

²⁴⁰ So Sokoloff, *Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic*, 631. Jastrow has "pap"—soft food for a sick person. Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic literature* (Brooklyn: Traditional Press; London: Luzac, 1903), 715.

²⁴¹ Missing from all but Florence 8-9.

²⁴² Hamburg: חזי מאי הויה עליה; Florence: חזי מאי קאביד אבוך

²⁴³ Missing from Florence 8-9 and Hamburg.

²⁴⁴ Hamburg: שלכם

²⁴⁵ Hamburg and Escorial: הווא יומא; Munich 95 and Vatican 117: יומא חד

tree. In contrast, R. Elazar accepts his wife's offering of fancy food. When she departs, he inexplicably finds another source of fancy food in the farfetched form of sailors who magically produce sixty purses with which to purchase and prepare an equivalent bounty for him.²⁴⁶ Whereas in the cave story God provides the minimal sustenance needed to support the pair's ascetic existence, in Bavli Bava Metzia, R. Elazar lauds himself for "bringing food from far away." For Rashbi, a subsistence level of food was necessary to keep the pair alive enough for their study. Food is not an end but rather a begrudged necessity—an excess of food distracts the consumer from what really matters—the study of Torah and eternal life. Rashbi has not successfully inculcated this ascetic attitude toward food. The Bavli rather portrays R. Elazar as loving food and even as viewing his access to fancy food as a marker of his success.²⁴⁷ Avoidance of fine food, which symbolizes this-worldly existence, is not part of his asceticism.

While the Bavli generally identifies חיי שעה with food, its broad name "temporal life" invites us to explore other manifestations of the distinction between temporal and eternal life in the two stories. Rubenstein argues that:

This dictum [מניחין חיי עולם ועוסקין בחיי שעה] explicitly articulates the opposition between Torah (=eternal life) and all outside pursuits toward which the story has been moving. At the outset RSBY condemns sophisticated commercial markets because they serve decadent purposes, while here he rejects basic subsistence agriculture and its proper purpose, the production of food. ...

²⁴⁶ Perhaps the sailors are present as a literary device to link with the verse at the end of the episode in which the wife is "like the ships of the merchant." Here, the merchant ships have replaced the wife. Shoshany, "Rabbi Elazar b. Rabbi Shimon and the Thieves," 17, unconvincingly claims that the narrator paints the sailors as assisting both Rabbi Elazar and his wife, whereas I read it as a rejection of wifely sustenance.

²⁴⁷ Another explanation for the disparity between the father and son's approaches to food comes from the psychological trauma that must have resulted from spending one's formative years in a cave with no sustenance besides a carob tree and a spring of water. The stories in Bava Metzia do not make this trauma explicit, but it is certainly a plausible explanation for the relationship R. Elazar has with food. It is easy to imagine the response to living with a father who ignores the body would be to fixate on the body.

For Rubenstein, therefore, rejecting food is the most extreme rejection of חיי שעה but Rashbi's rejection of the Roman markets, bridges, and bathhouses also aligns with his rejection of חיי שעה. As discussed above, R. Elazar actively embraces the Roman empire, seeing them as instantiating God's will.

The Body in the Attic

Another episode that highlights R. Elazar's focus on the temporal, physical world is the resistance he has to his body being buried:

כי הוה קא ניהא נפשיה אמר לה לדביתהו²⁴⁸ ידענא בדרבנן דרתיחי²⁴⁹ עלי ולא מיעסקי²⁵⁰ בי שפיר²⁵¹ אונגין בעיליתאי ולא תידחלין מינאי א"ר שמואל בר נחמני אישתעיא לי אימיה דרבי יונתן דאישתעיא לה דביתהו דרבי אלעזר ברבי שמעון לא פחות²⁵² מתמני סרי ולא טפי מעשרין ותרין²⁵³ שנין אונגיתיה²⁵⁴ בעיליתא כי הוה²⁵⁵ סליקנא מעיננא ליה במזייה²⁵⁶ כי הוה משתמטא ביניתא מיניה הוה אתי דמא²⁵⁷

When his soul was resting, he said to his wife:

I know that the rabbis are upset at me and will not deal with me well.

Lay me to rest in the attic and do not fear me.

R. Shmuel b. Nahmani said: The mother of R. Yonatan told me that the wife of R. Elazar told her that she laid him to rest in the attic no fewer than eighteen and no more than twenty years. [She said:] "Every day I would go up and look at his hair. When a hair fell out, there was blood" (Bava Metzia 84b).

In this conversation, R. Elazar asks his wife not to bury him when he dies, saying that he fears that the other rabbis will not treat him well. However, the fact that his body does not decompose

²⁴⁸ Florence 8-9 adds מידע.

²⁴⁹ Florence 8-9 has נקטי בדעתיהו.

²⁵⁰ Florence 8-9 has נהגי.

²⁵¹ Florence 8-9 has יקרא כדמבעי להו אסקין.

²⁵² Hamburg has בציר.

²⁵³ Florence 8-9 has ארבעה.

²⁵⁴ Hamburg has דהוה גני.

²⁵⁵ Hamburg has כל יומא.

²⁵⁶ Florence 8-9 has ברישיה.

²⁵⁷ Florence 8-9 has והוה מיתעקר' שעריה מלא דוכתא דמא.

goes beyond the desire for the rabbis not to interact with the body. The desire for his dead body to stay unburied in the attic attests to his confidence in his body's unique incorruptibility (a confidence supported by the narrative).²⁵⁸ This focus on the incorruptibility of the body is the ultimate concretizing of R. Elazar's focus on *חיי שעה*. He wishes his body to stay in this world as long as possible. Even in death, R. Elazar displays a preoccupation with his body and along with it a longing to live his temporal, physical "life" to its fullest. In the cave, Rashbi stressed to his son the superior importance of *חיי עולם*. R. Elazar's approach to asceticism, on the other hand, keeps him very much in the physical world, valuing *חיי שעה*. His exercise of bodily mortification is not in service of Torah or eternal life but keeps him very much in the physical world.

Conclusion: Implications for Transmission

When we look at the Rashbi tale, we see his attempt at transmitting to his son an asceticism that is in service of a lifetime devotion to Torah study, which Rashbi sees as "eternal life." The ideal of devotion to Torah, however, is not unique to Rashbi. While Rashbi takes his devotion to Torah study to an extreme in the cave story, this ideal is a core part of the rabbinic movement. When the Bavli infuses the cave story with this element, it invites the reader to reflect not only on the effectiveness of transmitting ascetic practices, which may be more foreign, but also on the effectiveness of transmitting to one's child the devotion to Torah study which the rabbis held dear.

²⁵⁸ I am not claiming that this is the only possible implication of his desire to remain in the attic. In his article "Rabbinic Translation of Relics," in *Crossing Boundaries in Early Judaism and Christianity: Ambiguities, Complexities, and Half-forgotten Adversaries: Essays in Honor of Alan F. Segal*, edited by Kimberley Stratton and Andrea Lieber (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 314-32, Jeffrey Rubenstein explores the similarities between this tale and those about holy relics and shows that his body functions in the same way.

Bava Metziah presents the son as continuing some practices he picked up in the cave but as rejecting their ideological underpinnings. Looking at the Bava Metziah stories through the lens of cultural transmission allows to see a rabbinic reflection about how successful Rashbi's controlled experiment was. The Bava Metziah stories suggest that Rashbi was effective in inculcating the skills necessary to be a great Torah scholar.²⁵⁹ He also successfully transmitted the practices of retreating from society and bodily mortification in response to personal life circumstances. But transmission is not the same as reproduction. Ultimately, whereas Rashbi stresses the value of the "eternal world," R. Elazar values the temporal world. His asceticism is devoid of its instrumental nature; he practices it for its own sake and not for the sake of Torah or eternal life as his father did.

This disparity demonstrates the complexities inherent in the transmission of a worldview—in contrast to transmission of a set of content or a set of skills, transmission of a worldview is a much more subtle and uncertain process. A parent can work to transmit values to their children, but the choice to accept and continue the worldview or not ultimately rests with the child. Rashbi attempts to attenuate this choice by removing all external influences and alternative worldviews from his son's life during his formative years. Viewed in tandem, the Shabbat cave story and the Bava Metziah story cycle thus constitute a sustained reflection on the impossibility of unadulterated transmission of a worldview. While Rashbi has succeeded in inculcating in his son an affinity for ascetic practices, his son practices asceticism for reasons that would have been foreign to his father. The hermetically sealed educational setting of the cave able to facilitate the successful transmission of the father's worldview to the son.

²⁵⁹ In the context of the study house, Rabbi Elazar is called ארי בן ארי "lion son of a lion." This implies that his father transmitted his text study abilities (either genetically or by teaching him).

CHAPTER 3

RABBINIC MOTHERS

It is no secret that the rabbis of the Babylonian Talmud (or Bavli) explicitly marginalized women from the world of Torah study. Daniel Boyarin, for example, demonstrates that “both in the Palestinian and Babylonian text the dominant discourse suppressed women’s voices in the House of Study.”²⁶⁰ As we saw in chapter 1, this exclusion extends to the parental role: the rabbis include fathers in, but exclude mothers from, the obligations of cultural transmission, including the obligation to teach Torah, the centerpiece of the rabbinic curriculum. Bavli Qiddushin 29a-b, for example, contains a *baraita* which lists the obligations of a father towards his son:

האב חייב בבנו למולו, ולפדותו, וללמדו תורה, ולהשיאו אשה, וללמדו אומנות...

The father is obligated towards his son to circumcise him, to redeem him, to teach him Torah, to marry him a wife, and to teach him a craft...²⁶¹

This source instructs fathers and not mothers to perform five ritual obligations, at least three of which are directly related to cultural transmission. Elizabeth Shanks Alexander claims that the first three (circumcision, redemption of the firstborn, and Torah study) induct sons into the covenantal community, while the latter two set up familial infrastructure to ensure that the sons in turn have their own sons to induct into this community as well.²⁶² Despite (or perhaps because of) the explicit exclusion of women from the study house, it is worth asking how women might

²⁶⁰ Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, 169.

²⁶¹ The *baraita* has a parallel in Tosefta Qiddushin chapter 1.

²⁶² Elizabeth Shanks Alexander, *Gender and Timebound Commandments in Judaism* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013). In her chapter, “Women and Torah Study,” Alexander argues that the *tannaim* are uninterested in women’s participation in the ritual world of Torah study. She makes a compelling case for the discounting of the few instances in tannaitic literature that seem to allow for the possibility of women studying Torah.

have participated in and even helped perpetuate rabbinic culture. By “rabbinic culture,” I mean both the knowledge of rabbinic texts and rituals as well as what Bourdieu terms “habitus”— “the deeply ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that we possess due to our life experiences.”²⁶³ Rabbinic cultural transmission, therefore, cannot be reduced to the list in the *baraita* above.

This chapter explores the variety of maternal relationships to cultural transmission that emerge from the scattered depictions of mothers in the Bavli. I will argue that the rabbis variously depict mothers as: 1) external facilitators of their sons and husband’s acquisition of Torah 2) as the transmitters of moral and ethical values, 3) as internal enablers of cultural participation, and 4) as transmitters of rabbinic culture in their own right. I will also show that the role of mother as transmitter of rabbinic culture at times provides the rabbis with a “safe space” within which to depict female knowledge.²⁶⁴ The Bavli unselfconsciously portrays some mothers as possessing knowledge; perhaps the rabbis are less threatened by maternal knowledge when it helps her son in his acquisition of or participation in rabbinic culture rather than being in service of her own participation.

Mother as External Facilitator

Explicit statements of exclusion have led, whether consciously or unconsciously, to the stereotype of Jewish mother as the consummate enabler.²⁶⁵ See, for example, Adrienne Baker,

²⁶³ "Habitus," in *Social Theory Rewired* (Routledge, 2016). <http://routledgesoc.com/category/profile-tags/habitus>

²⁶⁴ Susan Marks states that: “As rabbinic authors struggle to maintain the literary vision of an ideal male rabbinic world, texts will rarely, if ever reveal the historic women who taught. They do, however, appear unable to erase all traces of teaching done by mothers.” “Bayit versus Beit Midrash: Jewish Mother as Teacher,” in *Most Reliable Witness: Essays in Honor of Ross Shepard Kraemer*, ed. Susan Harvey et. al. (Providence: Brown University Press, 2015), 195.

²⁶⁵ I am not the first to reframe and explore other visions of Jewish motherhood. See for example, *Mothers in the Jewish Cultural Imagination*, edited by Marjorie Lehman, Jane L. Kanarek and Simon J. Bronner (Liverpool: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2017).

who writes: “The Jewish woman has traditionally acquired merit through her men. In the world of Orthodoxy, her place in heaven was assured if she facilitated Torah study for her husband and sons.”²⁶⁶ Baker presents a picture of a mother entirely outside of the life of traditional Torah study; the community lauded mothers who put supports in place for the men in her family to study Torah. In this superficial picture, there is no reason for a woman to study herself—not only is she exempt from the ritual obligation of Torah study, she also has no part in transmitting Torah to the next generation. The mother’s enabling is therefore external to the cultural enterprise.

Shaye J.D. Cohen expresses a similar sentiment in his article, “Are Women in the Covenant?” Discussing rabbinic sources about women and Torah study, he writes:

Women’s piety is facilitative and enabling. By facilitating the Torah study of her sons and husband, a woman attains merit even though she herself is exempt from the obligation to study Torah. Only men partake fully of the delights of the Torah; by aiding the men in their sacred tasks a woman attains her reward. Hers is a vicarious Judaism; she is fulfilled through her menfolk.²⁶⁷

For Cohen and Baker, a mother’s enabling means that her endeavors are externally oriented. Her role is to help her male family members fulfill their religious obligations rather than to be a central actor in the religious community herself.

Cohen’s assessment aligns with a sentiment expressed on Bavli Berakhot 17a, which reads:

²⁶⁶ Baker, Adrienne, *The Jewish Woman in Contemporary Society: Transitions and Traditions* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 132-133. Also see Sylvia Barack Fishman and Daniel Parmer, *Matrilineal Ascent/Patrilineal Descent* (Boston, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2008), 14 who quote Aviva Cantor’s discussion of the construction of the Jewish mother as enabler in the medieval period, when maternal enabling meant being the family breadwinner. Aviva Cantor, *Jewish Women, Jewish Men: The Legacy of Patriarchy in Jewish Life* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1994), 5.

²⁶⁷ Shaye J.D. Cohen, “Are Women in the Covenant,” in *A Feminist Commentary on the Babylonian Talmud: Introduction and Studies*, edited by Tal Ilan et al. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2007), 33.

גדולה²⁶⁸ הבטחה שהבטיחון הקדוש ברוך הוא לנשים יותר מן האנשים, שנאמר: "נשים שאננות קמנה שמענה קולי בנות בטחות האזנה אמרתי". אמר ליה רב לרבי חייה: ²⁶⁹נשים במאי זכיין? באקרויין בנייהו לבי כנישתא²⁷⁰ ובאתנוי גברייהו בי רבנן²⁷¹, ונטרין לגברייהו עד דאתו מבי רבנן

Greater is the promise that the Holy Blessed One promised to women than [the one promised to] men, as it says: "You carefree women, Attend, hear my words! You confident ladies, Give ear to my speech!" (Isaiah 32:9) Rav said to Rabbi Hiyya: How do women merit [reward?] By [bringing] their sons to the synagogue to recite [Scripture] by causing their husbands to study in the study house, and [by] waiting for their husbands until they came from the study house.

While a mother may pick up rabbinic knowledge as she goes about her daily life in service of her sons and husbands' learning and piety, for this source such tangential acquisition is not a desideratum; a mother performs her role on the margins of the rabbinic enterprise by enabling her male family members to fulfill their obligations. While this external enabling is often portrayed as the primary role that the rabbis envisioned for mothers in the realm of cultural transmission, the rest of this chapter will lay out depictions of other modes of participation in the act of transmission.

Mothers and the Transmission of Cultural Values

Moral Preparation

The rabbis at times portray mothers as responsible for raising their sons to be fit to receive Torah. These sources inherently entrust mothers with the responsibility for the

²⁶⁸ All of the manuscripts introduce this with תנו רבנן, signaling that the editors saw this to be an early rabbinic source.

²⁶⁹ Rav's statement is uncharacteristically presented in Aramaic. The language is less stable than what precedes it.

²⁷⁰ Florence 7: בדיל דאמטיין בנייהו לבי כנישתא 'א'ל; Paris 671: בדיל דמקריין בנייהו לכנישתא

²⁷¹ Munich 95: ואגמורי בנייהו בי רבנן; Paris 671: ומייתן מבי רב; Florence 7: וממטיין בנייהו לבי רב. This difference is significant because it shows that for these manuscripts, the mothers are also bringing their sons to the *beit midrash* (rather than causing their husbands to study as it says in the printed edition).

achievements and dispositions of their sons, part of the habitus component of rabbinic culture.²⁷²

Mothers transmit a slice of rabbinic culture by inculcating the moral ideals and characteristics that the rabbis see as essential for a life of Torah scholarship.

Bleaching the Cloth

Bavli Hagigah, for example, portrays mothers as the ones who prepare their sons to receive Torah. It discusses Elisha ben Abuya, a failed rabbinic sage who spent many years as a Torah scholar before turning to Greek philosophy. In the context of this discussion, the Bavli reports that Nimos (or Oenomaus) the Gaderite asks Rabbi Meir whether all wool placed in a vat emerges properly dyed:²⁷³

שאל נימוס²⁷⁴ הגרדי את ר"מ כל עמר דנחית ליורה סליק
א"ל כל מאן דהוה נקי אגב²⁷⁵ אימיה סליק כל דלא הוה נקי אגב אימיה לא סליק

Nimos the Gaderite asked Rabbi Meir: Does all wool placed in a cauldron emerge [well dyed?] He said to him: Anyone who was clean because of his mother emerges; anyone who was not clean because of his mother does not. (Bavli Hagigah 15b)

The medieval commentator Rashi picks up on the context of the question. He understands the “vat” as a metaphor for the rabbinic study house and the wool as a metaphor for the student:

רשי: כל צמר שניתן ליורה של סממנין לצבוע עולה לו צבעו או אינו עולה כלומר כל הלומדים לפני חכמים
עולה להן תורתן להגין עליהן מן החטא

²⁷² For more on habitus, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), 169-180.

²⁷³ Nimos the Gardi was likely the Greek cynic Oenomaus. He likely was not a weaver, but rather a minor Greek philosopher. Gardi seems to be a metathesis of Gadri—the philosopher was based in Gadera. See Menahem Luz “Oenomaus and Talmudic Anecdote,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Period*, 23:1 (1992): 42-80. On 75-79, Luz addresses our anecdote. He notes a parallel to Lucian’s *Double Indictment* 8 for the idea that natural morality determines how “well-dyed” a person ends up (79).

²⁷⁴ Vatican 171 has אבנימוס; CUL #1 has אנומיס, which is very similar to the name Oenomaus. CUL #2 has אבנמוס.

²⁷⁵ Munich 6 and Vatican 134 and 171 have על גב, a Hebrew version of the Aramaic אגב.

Rashi: Any wool that is placed in a vat of dye to be dyed, does its dye stick or not? This is to say, does the Torah of all those who study in the presence of the sages “stick to them” to protect them from sin?

In other words, does the Torah of the study house (the vat) “stick” to any scholar (cloth in the metaphor) who immerses in it?²⁷⁶ When Rabbi Meir responds, “Anyone who was clean because of his mother emerges [dyed properly]; anyone who was not clean because of his mother does not,” he means that a Torah scholar needs to be prepared by his mother to receive Torah. This “bleaching” provides language for the maternal role in the formative period of early childhood. In this metaphor, the mother’s job is to prepare a child for a life of Torah study, not by teaching him Torah herself but by metaphorically bleaching him, preparing his cloth to receive the beautiful dye that is Torah.²⁷⁷ R. Meir does not make clear how she does this, but we might infer that he imagines the mother teaching her son moral behavior and the basics of piety such that his Torah study in the future builds upon that foundation. This source can broaden our definition of cultural transmission. Despite their unarticulated nature, the activities involved in “bleaching” the student of Torah at a young age are also acts of cultural transmission; they impart the values that rabbinic culture holds dear.

Bathsheba’s Investment

The most developed example of the trope of mother as embodying the role of moral preparer appears in Bavli Sanhedrin 70b. There, the rabbis tell a story in which they imagine the perspective of King Solomon’s mother (not named here but Bathsheba in the biblical narrative) about what it means to be a mother. This imagined perspective, while not shedding light on how

²⁷⁶ Luz suggests that Rashi’s interpretation is based on the fact that עמר in Syriac can also mean “people” in addition to “wool” (Ibid, 77).

²⁷⁷ It is likely not an accident that textile imagery is used to describe the maternal role as women were often associated with textile work in the ancient world. See for example Miriam Peskowitz, *Spinning Fantasies: Rabbis, Gender, and History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).

the biblical mother experienced her role, does provide a picture of an idealized rabbinic motherhood. Bavli Sanhedrin presents Bathsheba as sharing the understanding that the mother is responsible for the son's moral character--"bleaching the cloth" (in the words of R. Meir in Bavli Hagigah) so that he is ready to receive Torah. The rabbis present this view through an expansion of the words of the mother of King Lemuel, whom the rabbis understand to be Solomon.²⁷⁸

In Proverbs, the mother of King Lemuel castigates him for his overuse of wine. Invoking the fact that she birthed him, she admonishes him, saying that kings who get inebriated forget the law and infringe on the rights of the poor.²⁷⁹ She invokes the mother-son relationship as an instrument of moral suasion. Proverbs 31:1-5 reads:

1 לְמַלְכֵי לְמוֹאֵל מִלֶּךְ מִשָּׂא אֲשֶׁר־יִסְרְתוּ אִמּוֹ: 2 מִה־בָּרִי וּמִה־בֶּרֶכְיָא וּמִה־בְּרִי: 3 אֶל־תִּתֵּן לְנָשִׁים חֵילָךְ וְדִרְכֶּיךָ לְמַחֲוֹת מַלְכִּין: 4 אֶל לְמַלְכִּים לְמוֹאֵל אֶל לְמַלְכִּים שְׁתוּ־יַיִן וְלִרְוֹנִים אוֹ [אֵי] שֹׁכֵר: 5 פֶּן־יִשְׁתָּה וְיִשְׁכַּח מִחֻקֶּךָ וְיִשָּׁה דִין כָּל־בְּנֵי־עָנִי:

The words of Lemuel, king of Massa, with which his mother admonished him:
No, my son! No, O son of my womb! No, O son of my vows! Do not give your strength to women, Your vigor, to those who destroy kings.
Wine is not for kings, O Lemuel; Not for kings to drink, Nor any strong drink for princes, Lest they drink and forget what has been ordained, And infringe on the rights of the poor.

The queen mother's speech begins with three parallel phrases, each beginning with the word מה—"No." Each מה is followed by a different synonym for the mother-son relationship: "my son", "son of my womb," and "son of my vows." This repetition implies that, despite the fact that her son is a king, the maternal relationship gives her the right to provide him with the sharply worded admonition that follows. Verses 3-5 detail the queen mother's grievances. She

²⁷⁸ The rabbis consistently identify Lemuel with Solomon. Avot DeRabbi Natan 39:4 states this succinctly: "ששה שמות נקרא שלמה. ידדיה. קהלת. בן יקה. אגור. שמואל. ידדיה. קהלת. בן יקה. אגור. שמואל. נקרא שלמה." "Solomon is called by six names: Lemuel, Yedidya, Kohelet, Ben Yakeh, Agur." See also Bemidbar Rabbah 10:4, which explicitly connects the identification of Solomon as Lemuel to our story.

²⁷⁹ For a full analysis of the Proverbs passage see Johanna Stiebert, "The Peoples' Bible, Imbokodo and the King's Mother's Teaching of Proverbs 3" *Biblical Interpretation* 20 (2012) 244-79.

accuses him of giving away his power to women (maybe sex) and to wine.²⁸⁰ These pleasure-seeking activities cloud his judgment, detracting from his ability to perform his royal duties. In this speech, a royal mother witnesses her son engaged in immoral behavior that is detrimental to his embodying the values she desires for him. She invokes the mother-son relationship as an instrument of moral suasion, using her maternal relationship with her son as leverage to induce him to change his behavior. Drawing the connection between the mother-son relationship and the behaviors and values she desires him to embody highlights the stance that the mother is, at least in part, responsible for instilling these values in her son. It is this responsibility that gives her the right to intervene in her son's affairs.

The Bavli expounds upon these verses in the context of a lengthy discussion regarding the negative effects of wine. Where in the biblical text, the mother of Lemuel expresses this responsibility implicitly—simply by highlighting and emphasizing the maternal relationship, the Bavli expands the queen mother's speech. In doing so, it expresses a rabbinic ideal of motherhood—one in which the mother is responsible for the moral fabric of her child.

Although not mentioned in the Bavli, other rabbinic sources imagine a dramatic context to this conversation. Vayikra Rabbah states that King Solomon misses the appointed time of dedication of the Temple because he stayed up too late partying. His mother wakes him up by hitting him with her sandal and then admonishes him for ruining this critical event.²⁸¹ The Bavli,

²⁸⁰ In verse 3, the biblical text pits Lemuel's mother against other women who might have influence over him. From a feminist perspective, her admonition to avoid the influence of women paints her as what Marianne Hester calls a "moral gatekeeper" perpetuating negative attitudes towards women while invoking her own maternal status. Hester is quoted by Rebecca Lesses in "Exe(o)rcising Power: Women as Sorceresses, Exorcists, and Demonesses in Babylonian Jewish Society of Late Antiquity," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 69, no.2 (June 2001) 363. Beth Berkowitz suggests that this might be a reflection of internalized misogyny. (private correspondence)

²⁸¹ In Vayikra Rabbah 12:5, the rabbis imagine that one of Solomon's wives—the daughter of Pharaoh—has bamboozled him into sleeping in by hanging a tapestry above his bed with a pattern of the night sky. In Solomon's

omits this dramatic context, but still opens the tale by imagining that Bathsheba uses physical means to get the attention of her wayward son:

”דברי למואל מלך משא אשר יסרתו אמו” אמר ר’ יוחנן משום ר”ש בן יוחי מלמד שכפאתו²⁸² אמו על העמוד ואמרה לו ”מה ברי ומה בר בטני ומה בר נדרי”

“The words of Lemuel, king of Massa, with which his mother admonished him” (Proverbs 31:1, NJPS): Rabbi Yoḥanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai: This teaches that his mother tied him to a pillar and said to him: No, my son! No, O son of my womb! No, O son of my vows! (Proverbs 31:2).

In this rabbinic retelling of the Proverbs verses, the interaction between King Solomon and his mother begins with her tying him to a post. The biblical hook for this detail lies in the word יסרתו. While the contextual meaning is that she admonished or instructed him, R. Shimon b. Yoḥai adopts another meaning of the root יסר, which can also mean “to bind.”²⁸³ The violence of this image implies that despite the fact that Solomon is a grown man, his mother has the means of getting his attention; she can still physically chastise him as if he were a young boy.

Bavli Sanhedrin expands Lemuel’s mother’s three-fold repetition in Proverbs 31:2 into a speech about the effort that Bathsheba invested to make Solomon fit for a relationship with the divine. For each of the phrases, “No, my son,” “No, son of my womb,” and “No, son of my vows” the Bavli imagines a narrative context in which Bathsheba embodies this facet of maternal intervention in her son’s character:

”מה ברי” הכל יודעים שאביך ירא שמים הוה --עכשיו²⁸⁴ יאמרו אמו גרמה לו

drunken state, it still appears to be night time, when in fact he must wake up to dedicate the temple. (See Vayikra Rabbah 12:5 and Midrash Mishlei 31.) This is likely a fanciful interpretation of Proverbs 31:3.

²⁸² Florence 8-9 and Karlsruhe Reuchlin (KR) 2 have כפפתו; Yad Harav Herzog and Munich 95 have כפתתו.

²⁸³ This physically violent action perpetrated by a mother does not render her sympathetic in the eyes of modern readers. However, it is possible to understand her action in the context of a monarchy that is upheld by violence. In such a context, violence may be the only language a king can understand. Alternatively, it may be an instance of parental corporal punishment. Thank you to Beth Berkowitz for this suggestion. See below note 34.

²⁸⁴ Yad Harav Herzog adds אם יהיה בך דופי. “If you will be an abnormal son.”

"ומה בר בטני" כל הנשים של בית אביך כיון שמתעברות שוב אינן רואות פני המלך ואני דחקתי ונכנסתי כדי שיהא לי בן מזורז ומלובן²⁸⁵

"ומה בר נדרי" כל נשים של בית אביך היו נודרות יהא לי בן הגון למלכות ואני נדרתי ואמרתי יהא לי בן זריז וממולא בתורה והגון לנביאות

"No, my son:" Everyone knows that your father feared heaven, so now they will say that his mother caused him [to drink].

"And no, O son of my womb:" All the women of your father's house never see the king after they conceive, but I forced myself in and entered [the king's chamber] so that I would have a son who was vigorous and fair-skinned.

"And no, O son of my vow:" All the women in your father's house would vow: "Let me have a son who is ready for kingship" but I vowed and said: "Let me have a son who is vigorous and filled with Torah and ready for prophecy."

In the expansion of the phrase "No, my son," Bathsheba points to the way society perceives this maternal responsibility. First, she argues that society perceives King David as a God-fearing father, and thus any character flaws in their son will be attributed to her, the mother. Bathsheba's fear that she alone will be blamed for her son's going astray expresses the belief that mothers are at least partially responsible for the moral development of their children.²⁸⁶ The blanket statement of "my son" suggests that his mother has this responsibility.

Expanding the phrase "No, son of my womb," the Bavli imagines Bathsheba using her womb to ensure that her son has the desired moral qualities she seeks. Bathsheba describes a harem culture in which King David's concubines did not have sexual relations with him after they conceived. She had to go to extra lengths to "push herself in" to have relations with the king while pregnant, in the belief that doing so would strengthen the fetus.²⁸⁷ Her action reflects the

²⁸⁵ Florence 8-9, KR 2, and Munich 95 have: מלובן ומזורז בתורה והגון לנביאות

²⁸⁶ In *Wild Child: Intensive Parenting and Posthumanist Ethics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 102, Naomi Morgenstern draws a distinction between "responsible for" and "responsible to" in mothering. Bringing the example of Toni Morrison's Eva Peace who kills her son because he has lost himself to addiction, Morgenstern suggests that what enables this killing is Eva's belief that she is responsible for the trajectory of her son's life.

²⁸⁷ This is Rashi's understanding of what is happening here. His understanding is based on Bavli Niddah 30a which suggests that sexual relations in the third trimester were positive for fetal development based on the idea that increased semen provides the fetus with increased "whitening." See note 27.

idea, found elsewhere in the Bavli, that sexual relations during the third trimester are positive for the fetus: “For through this the infant is found to be polished and vigorous (שמתוך כך נמצא הולד (מלובן ומזורז”²⁸⁸ (Niddah 31a). Solomon’s mother thus tells her son that she forced King David into sexual relations during the third trimester so that Solomon could be the most polished and vigorous son possible.²⁸⁹

While these adjectives seem to relate to physical fitness rather than cultural transmission of particular values or practices, the root זרז also appears in the Bavli’s expansion of the third clause, “No son of my vows.” There, Bathsheba proclaims: “All the women in your father’s house would vow: ‘Let me have a son who is ready for kingship,’ but I vowed and said: ‘Let me have a son who is vigorous (*mezuraz*), filled with Torah, and ready for prophecy.’” Bathsheba here draws a distinction between preparation for ruling and preparation for divine connection, for both Torah and prophecy, implying that these qualities would give her son an edge over the sons of the other wives. The reason her son was selected over the others is because of her focus on the correct values.

²⁸⁸ The word *meluban*, “polished,” or “whitened,” seems related to a statement of the paternal role in the creation of a human just a few lines later in the Niddah source. “His father inseminates the whiteness, from which [grow] bones, sinews, finger nails, the brain in his head, and the white of his eyes.” Sexual relations “whiten” the child further, upping the semen quotient in his body. The idea that male semen is responsible for brain development can also be found in Leviticus Rabbah 14:8. For discussions comparing Bavli Niddah to parallel texts (Rabbinic, Mesopotamian, and Zoroastrian), see Shana Strauch Schick “From Dungeon to Haven: Competing Theories of Gestation in Leviticus Rabbah and the Bavli” *AJS Review* 43:1 (April 2018), 1–26. and Reuven Kiperwasser, “‘Three Partners in a Person’ The Genesis and Development of Embryological Theory in Biblical and Rabbinic Judaism,” *lectio difficilior* (2009/2), 1–37. <http://www.lectio.unibe.ch>. See also Paolo Delaini “Understanding the Role and Seat of Semen in Sasanian Iran during Late Antiquity,” in *Pregnancy and Childbirth: History, Medicine and Anthropology*, edited by Costanza Gislon Dopfel, (Moraga, CA: St. Mary’s College of California, 2018), 85–94.

²⁸⁹ Bathsheba’s “pushing her way in” recalls the risk taken by Queen Esther when she enters King Ahasuerus’s chamber unbidden. The rabbis’ imagining that Bathsheba forces herself upon King David is especially striking given the biblical context in which King David essentially coerces her into have sexual relations with him (2 Samuel 11–12). The rabbinic image of feminine power is complicated, however, by the fact that her reason for doing this is that she has a particular maternal outcome that she desires for her son.

The language of vowing heightens the expression of Bathsheba's commitment; in rabbinic parlance, the *neder* form of a vow implies giving something to God. In this case, Bathsheba's use of this term raises the notion of divine dedication. Like the biblical Hannah (I Samuel 1-2), Bathsheba's diction may demonstrate her dedicating her son to divine service in the rabbis' eyes, claiming that Solomon merited to receive the throne because she vowed that she would do everything in her power to ensure that he would be full of Torah and ready for prophecy. Her vow turns her aspiration into a commitment to prepare him for these vocations, a commitment she adheres to when she chastises him.

The root זרז (*zaraz*) is significant because it also appears in Bavli Qiddushin in a description of the ideal Torah scholar:

Our rabbis taught: If he is to learn and his son is to learn, he takes precedence over his son. Rabbi Yehudah says: If his son is vigorous (*zariz*) and *memulah*²⁹⁰ and his learning is upheld in his hand, his son takes precedence over him.²⁹¹

In this text, the ideal rabbinic son is vigorous in his scholarly capabilities. When he is זרז and filled with Torah, his learning takes precedence over that of his father. Reading intertextually, Bathsheba wants her son to be a sage-prophet who will surpass even his father in study and connection to the divine. She tells her son that he is letting her down by failing to be the Torah-informed, diligent, leader that she had prepared him to be. Like in the Bavli Hagiga source, we do not know from this speech how the rabbis imagined Bathsheba inculcated these traits in her son. Nonetheless, her speech expresses the idea that it is her role as mother to ensure that her son embodies the traits of being vigorous in his learning and full of prophecy. It was her job to

²⁹⁰ The Vilna printing has *memulah* “salted,” rather than *memula* “filled.” The latter is attested in the Vatican manuscript and one early printing of the Talmud (the Wad Al-Hajara printing). Our story may suggest that we read *memula* in Bavli Qiddushin as “filled with Torah.”

²⁹¹ Bavli Qiddushin 29b.

“bleach his cloth” by inculcating in him the traits that the rabbi saw as a prerequisite to being a Torah scholar and connecting with the divine. In the rabbinic imagination, she confronts her son at this juncture because she feels, perhaps, that by becoming inebriated he has sullied the cloth that she so carefully prepared.

This Bavli portrayal of the unnamed queen mother (known to us as Bathsheba) who goads her son into proper behavior presents an idealized image of a mother who goes to great lengths to ensure that her son has the proper character to receive Torah. She emphasizes her own role as “cloth-preparer”—influencing her son to embody the ideal character of a Torah scholar. His reliance on alcohol undermines and undoes all of the labor she invested in ensuring he would live up to her ideals. She physically chastises her son and uses logic and guilt to exhort him to behave differently, perhaps seeing her own work as undermined by the life choices he has made. Ultimately, through this imagined speech, the Bavli expresses the idea that it is the mother’s maternal responsibility to instill in her son the traits that would make a king worthy of receiving Torah and prophecy, the moral traits required for a life devoted to rabbinic pursuits.²⁹² Instilling these moral traits is an act of cultural transmission.²⁹³ While this story is about a king, the ideals expressed therein apply to any (male) child.

²⁹² It is worth noting, however, that the moral enabling described by Bathsheba does not occur through childhood instruction. The fact that Bathsheba engages in instruction at this point in their relationship may be connected to the fact that King David is no longer alive. Like other mothers in this chapter such as Ravina’s mother below, it is possible that Bathsheba’s status as a widow affords her the opportunity to engage in instruction. See Ibn Ezra on Proverbs 31:1. Thank you to Moshe Simon-Shoshan for raising this possibility.

²⁹³ Bavli Shabbat 156b contains another example of the rabbis seeing the maternal role this way. Rav Nahman bar Yitzhak’s mother tells him not to walk more than four cubits without a head covering so that he would always have a fear of heaven upon him. This advice, according to the Bavli, saves him from becoming a thief as long as he follows it. It is noteworthy that this mother’s advice is one source of the custom of men to wear head coverings. See Eric Zimmer, “New Perspectives on Head Covering for Men” (Heb) *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies*, 1989, 225-230 who discusses the Bavli origin of the practice.

Transmission of Ritual Objects

The passages above present mothers as preparing their sons to be Torah scholars. In doing so, they also portray mothers as marginal to the heart of rabbinic ritual and study by implying that the primary role of a mother is to set her son up to engage in an enterprise in which she plays no part. In this section, however, we turn to texts which present mothers who enable their sons' ritual practice by providing them with ritual objects.²⁹⁴ In each of the cases we will see below, the objects the Bavli presents mothers as providing are not objects that would be ritually required if the mothers were familiar with only a superficial understanding of ritual law. Rather, they are (except for the *sukkah*) objects that only someone on the inside of rabbinic culture would know to provide. While transmitting or providing a ritual object is not the same act as the transmission of textual knowledge, it is nonetheless an act of cultural transmission as it enables the sons' participation in rabbinic culture. Through these narratives, the Bavli presents some women as possessing insider knowledge of rabbinic debates about ritual law. While the possibility that women in rabbinic families possessed such insider knowledge ought not be surprising considering the fact that the "house of study" was often the home of a well-respected rabbi, most scholars have yet to attend to the possible implications of these brief anecdotes.²⁹⁵ "Excavating," as it were, the Bavli's discussions of these ritual objects enables us to locate portrayals of maternal transmission that would have remained otherwise hidden from scrutiny.

²⁹⁴ For an additional example not discussed here, see Marjorie Lehman's article "Dressing and Undressing the High Priest: A View of Talmudic Mothers," *Nashim* 26 (2014): 52-74. Lehman discusses the way that the rabbis present the mothers in these tales as vicariously participating in their sons' ritual activities by providing them with their ritual garb.

²⁹⁵ Judith Hauptman is an exception. She discusses the trough and the strigil in "A New View of Women and Torah Study in the Talmudic Period," *JSIJ* 9 (2010).

A Strigil and a Trough

Two brief anecdotes describe the mothers of Babylonian rabbis providing their sons with objects that enhance their ability to perform a ritual. I will argue that the way the Bavli embeds these anecdotes in its discussion opens up interpretive possibilities regarding the role these mothers played in the ritual life of their sons. Bavli Shabbat presents one such anecdote:

תנו רבנן אין גוררין במגררת בשבת רבן שמעון בן גמליאל אומר אם היו רגליו מלוכלכות בטיט ובצואה
גורר כדרך ואינו חושש רב שמואל בר יהודה עבדא ליה אימיה מגררתא דכסף²⁹⁶ —

Our Rabbis taught [in a *baraita*]: One may not scrape with a strigil on the Sabbath. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says: If his feet are dirty with pitch and excrement--he may scrape as usual and not be concerned. Rav Shmuel son of Yehuda's mother made him a silver strigil. (Bavli Shabbat 147b)

An early rabbinic source reports a dispute between an anonymous voice and Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel (Rashbag) about whether one may scrape one's skin with a strigil – a type of scraper – on Shabbat. Rashbag says that a person may do so if their feet are very dirty. The Bavli then adds that Rav Shmuel b. Yehuda's mother made a silver strigil for him. In context, it becomes clear that this silver strigil is special for Shabbat.

From a source-critical perspective, it is possible that the original report is that Rav Shmuel's mother made her son a gift (full stop). In that case, it would not have signaled any esoteric ritual knowledge on the part of the mother. The editors of the Bavli may have embedded her gift in the context of a dispute about a particular rule—the rule that one may not scrape one's shoes on Shabbat. Had the Bavli closed the discussion by stating that Rav Shmuel used her strigil, the emphasis would have been on his use as a precedent reinforcing the validity of Rashbag's opinion. Her gift, however, is the discussion's last word about this question, and leads to the adoption of the minority view of Rashbag over the majority view of the anonymous

²⁹⁶ No significant manuscript variants.

opinion.²⁹⁷ By reporting her gift in this way, the Bavli allows its readers to imagine a mother who understands the debate about skin-scraping and provides her son with the means to follow his chosen opinion in a special, Shabbat-appropriate way. In this case, her gift reinforces his opinion and gives it, through a material object, the weight of application, moving the debate out of the theoretical realm and into practice.

The Bavli betrays no discomfort with the mother's knowledge. On the contrary, later interpreters understand the Bavli's statement about her to be halakhically determinative. For example, the Rosh states that the ruling follows Rashbag.²⁹⁸ Because the Bavli imagines the silver strigil as enabling Shmuel bar Yehuda's practice, his mother's gift becomes a form of internal cultural enabling. Her gift enables her son to practice Shabbat in an enhanced way.

Bavli Pesahim 40b records another example of maternal involvement in ritual:

...אמר להו להנהו דמהפכי כיפי: כי מהפכיתו הפיכו לשום מצוה²⁹⁹
אלמא קסבר שימור מעיקרא מתחלתו ועד סופו בעינן³⁰⁰
מר בריה דרבינא מנקטא ליה אימיה בארבי³⁰¹

...[Rava] said to those who were overturning the sheaves: When you turn them over, do so for the purpose of *matzah*. From here [we can deduce that] he reasoned that originally we require guarding [of the grain from contact with water] from the beginning [of the process] until the end. The mother of Mar son of Ravina placed it for him in a trough.

²⁹⁷ Judith Hauptman raises this possibility, wondering whether the later halakhic ruling permitting one to scrape mud and excrement on Shabbat but not other things might have been based on her view. While this is certainly not the only way one might read the text, her reading demonstrates how generative it can be to read a text without prior assumptions regarding a woman's participation in the cultural enterprise. Ibid, 269 note 63.

²⁹⁸ Rosh Shabbat 22:15. אבל לא מתגררין. ת"ר אין גוררין בשבת רשב"ג אומר אם היו רגליו מלוכלכות בטיט וצואה גורר כדרכו ואינו חושש. והלכתא כוותיה.

²⁹⁹ Most manuscripts have מצוה instead of מצוה.

³⁰⁰ Columbia 294-295 and JTS manuscripts have כי היכי דנהוי שימור in place of the underlined words.

³⁰¹ Columbia 294-295 and JTS manuscripts add the following explanation for the mother's actions:

* פיר היתה זהירה הרבה בעיקריהן והיתה משמרת אותן לשם * מצוה *
"She was very careful regarding their principles and would guard them for the purpose of *matzah*."

The fact that the mother of Mar bar Ravina put grain into a trough shows that she was aware of the idea that the grain needs to be guarded from the time of harvest. In fact, one manuscript explains this guarding as resulting from the care the mother took regarding the principles of baking *matzah*.³⁰² Hauptman sees in Mar bar Ravina's mother an example of maternal knowledge of rabbinic ritual law:

... it seems clear that Mar's mother was familiar with the halakhah that grain must be guarded from the outset. It is likely that she learned this rule by overhearing her husband's or son's study sessions which took place, it would seem, in her own home. Alternatively, she may have learned it from her own mother, since the rule emerged a number of years earlier. To help her son fulfill this difficult requirement, Mar's mother herself put the grain in a trough and kept it dry from the time of harvest and until the time of baking.³⁰³

Hauptman views this anecdote as evidence for social history. As part a rabbinic family, Mar bar Ravina's mother, being Ravina's wife, was present for many halakhic discussions at the family table. She thereby gleaned a deep understanding of ritual law and was able to act on it to help her son fulfil the ritual of eating *matzah* on Passover to the very highest of rabbinic standards. Of course, as in all anecdotes in the Bavli, these historical claims cannot be fully substantiated. Hauptman herself gives two alternatives for how she might have gleaned this knowledge, the second being that she gleaned it from her mother.³⁰⁴ Regardless, however, by placing the anecdote about her in the context of its discussion of these laws, the Bavli assumes that wherever

³⁰² See note 41.

³⁰³ Hauptman, "New View," 170.

³⁰⁴ A third possibility, that Hauptman does not raise is that her son or husband taught her the specific details about this law. In this case, she would join the ranks of the other women and servants or slaves discussed in Hauptman's article "'The Matter is Turned over to Women' (Yerushalmi Pesahim 1:4) — Women and Domestic Religious Ritual," *Sidra* (2010), 83-109 [Heb.], who possess knowledge of ritual law related to the kitchen—a realm in which they were responsible for adhering to rabbinic norms despite not being immersed in other realms of rabbinic law.

she gleaned it, Mar bar Ravina's mother possessed knowledge of Passover law that could be gleaned only through knowledge of rabbinic law.

Queen Helene's *Sukkah*

Another figure whom the Bavli presents as engaging in the transmission of a material object is a pre-rabbinic one—Queen Helene of Adiabene (d. c. 50-56 CE), a Second Temple-era queen depicted in Josephus, rabbinic literature, and Patristic sources.³⁰⁵ The Bavli modifies and discusses an early rabbinic source in a way that presents Queen Helene building a *sukkah* for her sons as an act of cultural transmission. Because Queen Helene was a pre-rabbinic figure, we cannot learn about the lived experience of mothers from this story, but the way that the Bavli portrays her can teach us about rabbinic culture. The Bavli's reinterpretation of the Tosefta's source about Queen Helene's *sukkah* shows that the Bavli can imagine mothers engaging in cultural transmission by providing her sons with a ritual object.

The Tosefta invokes Queen Helena's *sukkah* in an attempt to resolve a dispute between R. Yehudah and the sages regarding the maximum height of a *sukkah*:³⁰⁶

סוכה שהיא גבוהה למעלה מעשרים אמה פסולה ור' יהודה מכשיר
אמ' ר' יהודה מעשה בסוכת הילני שהיתה גבוהה
מעשרים אמה והיו זקנים נכנסין ויוצאין אצלה ולא אמר אחד מהן דבר
אמרו לו מפני שהיא אשה ואשה אין חייבת בסוכה
אמ' להם והלא שבעה בנים תלמידי חכמים וכולן שרויין בתוכה

A *sukkah* that is taller than twenty cubits is disqualified, but R. Yehuda says that it is valid. R. Yehuda said: It happened regarding Queen Helene that her *sukkah* was taller than twenty cubits and the elders would come and go there without saying anything to her. They said to [R. Yehuda]: Is this evidence? She is a woman and a woman is exempt

³⁰⁵ See Michal Marciak, *Izates, Helena, and Monobazos of Adiabene: A Study on Literary Traditions and History* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2014).

³⁰⁶ I have recorded manuscript differences below in the discussion of the Bavli parallel.

from the [obligation of] *sukkah*!³⁰⁷ He said to them: But she had seven sons who were sages and they all dwelled in [her *sukkah*!] (Tosefta Sukkah 1:1; Vienna mss.)

The Tosefta discusses a dispute between R. Yehudah and the Sages occurring at least a century after Queen Helene's life. In this source, the Sages state that a *sukkah* which is higher than twenty *amot* is too high, while R. Yehudah claims that it is acceptable. In this source, R. Yehudah marshals Queen Helene's *sukkah* as support for his view. He reports that, despite the fact that Queen Helene's *sukkah* was taller than the Sages' guidelines allowed, community elders would visit her and not criticize her. R. Yehudah thus uses Queen Helene's *sukkah* as a precedent to support his own view that a *sukkah* could be taller than twenty cubits. The Sages counter this evidence by invoking the idea that women were not obligated in the commandment.³⁰⁸ Since women are not obligated in the commandment of dwelling in the *sukkah*, the elders did not need to protest against her *sukkah*'s overly large dimensions. The Sages of her time did not object, according to the Sages, because her booth did not legally matter.³⁰⁹ R. Yehudah, not wishing his precedent to be dismissed so easily, reminds the Sages that she had seven sons who were themselves sages. As such, their obligation was legally meaningful. The fact that the elders nonetheless did not protest, demonstrates in R. Yehudah's eyes, that her *sukkah* fulfilled the legal obligation of her sons, demonstrating that a *sukkah* taller than twenty *amot* was indeed

³⁰⁷ And therefore the sages would not have been concerned if her *sukkah* was an incorrect size.

³⁰⁸ Cynthia Baker states, "It [T. Sukkah] assigns women places and roles, but also tells of women occupying spaces where they are deemed exempt or excluded, and of women creating their own places, roles, and identities—within and outside the frameworks assigned them. The limits and boundaries it proposes are real, the exclusions and displacements undeniable." ("The Queen, the Apostate and the Women Between," in *A Feminist Commentary on the Babylonian Talmud: Introduction and Studies*, edited by Tal Ilan, et al. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 180.

³⁰⁹ Shulamit Valler claims that the *baraita* demonstrates that the exemption of women from *sukkah* occurred later than the time of Queen Helene. "In earlier times, it is implied, women dwell in sukkot as a matter of course. Both of these rabbinically contrived sukkot in which women dwell, however, turn out to be rather extraordinary" ("Women and Dwelling in the *Sukkah* in the *Bavli*," in *A Feminist Commentary on the Babylonian Talmud: Introduction and Studies*, edited by Tal Ilan, et al. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 172.

acceptable. In the Tosefta, the maternal relationship has little significance. The only purpose it serves to allow for the possibility that males legally obligated in the mitzvah of *sukkah* also dwelled in it, and not just Queen Helene.

The version of this source that appears in the Bavli, however, opens up the possibility that the *sukkah* was more than a place where both mother and sons happened to dwell. It sets the stage for the suggestion of the Bavli that Queen Helene's *sukkah* is a ritual object through which Queen Helene instructs her sons about the holiday of sukkot and its attendant obligations:³¹⁰

מותיבי³¹¹
 סוכה שגבוהה מעשרים אמה פסולה ור' יהודה מכשיר עד ארבעים וחמשים אמה³¹²
 אמ' ר' יהודה מעשה בהלני המלכה וסוכתה בלוד³¹³ שהיתה גבוהה מעשרים אמה
 והיו חכמים³¹⁴ נכנסין ויוצאין שם³¹⁵ ולא אמרו לה³¹⁶ דבר
 אמרו לו: משם ראייה?³¹⁷ אשה היא³¹⁸ ואשה פטורה מן הסוכה³¹⁹
 אמ' להן והלא שבעה בנים³²⁰ היו לה
 ועוד כל מעשיה לא עשת אלא על פי חכמי³²¹

³¹⁰ Again, I am not suggesting anything historical about the second temple period and Queen Helene's actual *sukkah*. I am arguing that there is significance to the rhetoric the Bavli uses when discussing it that sheds light on the Bavli's own attitudes towards mothers and cultural transmission.

³¹¹ The *baraita* that follows has a close parallel in Tosefta Sukkah 1:1 as well as in Yerushalmi Sukkah 1:1 (51d). The version here is Oxford 2267. There are no significant variants between the different manuscripts of the Bavli.

³¹² The phrase *עד ארבעים וחמשים אמה* is absent from the Tosefta and the Yerushalmi.

³¹³ Lod is absent from the London and Erfurt versions of the Tosefta.

³¹⁴ The Tosefta has *זקנים* rather than *חכמים*.

³¹⁵ Erfurt and Vienna have *אצל*, London has nothing, and the Yerushalmi has *בה*. In the Bavli manuscripts, BL: Harley 5508 and Vatican 134 have *אצל*.

³¹⁶ The Yerushalmi has *לא אמר אדם*; London and Vienna have *לא אמר אחד מהן*.

³¹⁷ *משם ראייה* is absent from the other versions.

³¹⁸ The rest of the versions have *מפני שהיא אשה*.

³¹⁹ The Yerushalmi has: *ואין אשה מצוה על המצות*. Leiden similarly has *אשה חייבת במצות*.

³²⁰ All the other versions have *בנים תלמידי חכמים* following or describing.

³²¹ This entire line starting from *ועוד* is absent from all other versions.

They teach [in a *baraita*]: A *sukkah* that is taller than twenty cubits is disqualified, but R. Yehuda says that it is valid until forty or fifty cubits. R. Yehuda said: It happened regarding Queen Helene and her *sukkah* in Lod that it was taller than twenty cubits and the Sages³²² would come and go there without saying anything to her. They [the Sages] said to R. Yehuda: Is this evidence? She is a woman and a woman is exempt from the [obligation of] *sukkah*!³²³ He said to them: But did she not have seven sons? And furthermore, she did nothing without rabbinic approval. (Bavli Sukkah 2b, Oxford 2677)

Much of the Bavli's version of this early rabbinic source is the same as the version in the Tosefta. However, there are two key differences that lay the groundwork for the discussion that follows. The first is that, in the Bavli version of the source, her sons are not identified as Sages. Second, the Bavli's version adds that she herself did nothing without rabbinic approval. The absence of the title "sage" from the description of the sons opens up space for the Bavli discussion that follows to paint Queen Helene's *sukkah* as an act of *hinukh*, or ritual instruction—an integral part of cultural transmission. The discussion centers on the last line of the *baraita*:

למה לי למיתני "ועוד כל מעשיה לא עשתה אלא על פי חכמים?"
הכי קאמר להו כי תאמרו בנים קטנים היו וקטנים פטורין מן הסוכה
כיון דשבעה הוו³²⁴ אי אפשר דלא הוי בהו חד שאינו צריך לאמו
וכי תימרו קטן שאינו צריך לאמו מדרבנן הוא דמיחייב ואיהי בדרבנן לא משגחה
ת"ש ועוד כל מעשיה לא עשתה אלא ע"פ חכמים

Why do I need to teach "and furthermore, she did no deeds except at the word of the Sages?" This is what he said to them: When you say that they were minor sons and minors are exempt from *sukkah*, since there were seven of them it is impossible that there isn't one of them who no longer needs his mother.³²⁵ And if you say that a minor who doesn't need his mother is obligated only by the sages [and not scripturally], and she did

³²² Regardless of whether or not Helene did build a *sukkah*, this designation is an anachronism.

³²³ And therefore the sages would not have been concerned if her *sukkah* was an incorrect size.

³²⁴ The underlined words are missing from Oxford 2677.

³²⁵ And therefore he would be obligated in his own right. Bavli Sukkah 28a states that once a boy no longer needs his mother, he is to be educated in the observance of the commandment of *sukkah*. It is important for R. Yehudah's argument that someone be legally obligated to sit in Queen Helene's *sukkah* so that her *sukkah* can serve as a legal precedent for permitting *sukkot* taller than twenty cubits.

not follow the sages, it comes to teach “and furthermore, she acted only at the word of the Sages” (Vilna version).

The Bavli asks why it was necessary for R. Yehuda’s argument to inform the reader that Queen Helene adhered to rabbinic rulings. It answers that without this statement, the sages might have responded that all of her sons were minors and therefore were not obligated in the commandment of *sukkah*. This would undermine the force of the precedent for R. Yehudah because no one in the large *sukkah* was rabbinically obligated to dwell in it. However, says the Bavli, it is impossible that all seven sons were so young that they had not reached the age of *hinukh*—ritual instruction or initiation. Even if they were minors such that they were not yet obligated in the commandment to dwell in the *sukkah*, someone still needed to educate them regarding the intricacies of Jewish ritual.³²⁶ According to this line of reasoning, R. Yehudah stresses that Queen Helene followed the rabbis in all her deeds because otherwise she might have been unfamiliar with the rabbinic requirement to initiate one’s children into the practice of a ritual as soon as the child is able to perform it. In that case, once again, R. Yehudah would be left without a precedent. Therefore, explains the Bavli, the *baraita* stresses that she did follow the sages in all matters.

These argumentative gymnastics raise two ways the queen goes against gender norms (although it does so as it distances her from the religious impulse to build herself a *sukkah*). According to Mishnah Sukkah 2:8, a minor is only obligated in the commandment of *sukkah* once he no longer requires his mother (אינו צריך לאמו). In this tale, however, the seven sons of Queen Helene very much require their mother to build them their *sukkah* (or to have it built for

³²⁶ See chapter 1 for a fuller description of חינוך.

them) despite the fact that they no longer need her to feed them or soothe them back to sleep.³²⁷ As well, the Bavli ends up attributing deep rabbinic knowledge to the queen. By imagining how R. Yehudah would use the story of Queen Helene to support his position, the Bavli (likely unintentionally) presents a mother who is invested in rabbinic culture and actively transmits it to her sons.³²⁸ Casting her *sukkah*-building as “merely” an act of transmission neutralizes the force of the gender-bending booth because it reframes her building of a *sukkah* as being for the sake of her sons. The Bavli has recast the queen. No longer is she a devout Jew seeking to dwell in a *sukkah* on the holiday of *sukkot* herself. That picture would be too threatening. Rather, she has become a devout rabbinic mother initiating her seven sons into the intricacies of rabbinic ritual culture by providing them with a *sukkah* in which to dwell despite the fact they may not have been explicitly obligated to dwell in one.³²⁹ The frame of *hinukh* provides an opening for imagining the interactions between mother and sons during this initiation as an act of explicit cultural transmission even if the Bavli does not paint it as one explicitly.

The Bavli thus portrays Queen Helene and the mothers of Shmuel bar Yehudah and Mar bar Ravina as all possessing knowledge of rabbinic details of Jewish ritual, knowledge which

³²⁷ Bavli Sukkah 28b explains that a child who no longer needs his mother is one who “defecates and his mother does not wipe him” or “one who awakens and does not call “Mother! Mother!”

³²⁸ The Penei Yehoshua picks up on this implication and neutralizes it. He states that when the Bavli says, “and she did not attend to the rabbinic ordinances,” this was referring to the idea that a mother is not obligated to educate her son—only the father is obligated to do so. Because of this, he says, the *baraita* had to clarify that she acted only in accordance with the rabbis and it was the court’s job to educate her sons (assuming their father was not in the picture). **ויותר נראה דהא דקאמר רב ת איהי בדרבנן לא משגחה היינו לפי שאין האם מצווה לחנך בנה אלא האב מש”ה קאמר כל מעשיה לא עשתה אלא ע”פ חכמים וא”כ על הב”ד מוטל לחנכן ומדלא אמרו דבר מייתי שפיר ראייה כן נ”ל**

³²⁹ As Baker observes, seven is a typological number. According to Josephus, the queen had but two sons. Baker states, “The number seven and the maleness of the progeny combine, in this, as in other folk traditions, to certify the righteousness of the woman to whom they are assigned (see, for example, traditions about Qimhit in Bavli Yoma 47a and parallels, and the mother of seven in II Maccabees 7 etc), “The Queen, the Apostate and the Women Between,” 170.

they use to enable their sons to fulfill specific commandments in enhanced ways. This enabling is a form of cultural transmission, reflecting the fact that transmission does not end once a child has grown up. The Bavli portrays these mothers (whether or not this reflects historical reality) as possessing the ritual knowledge necessary to understand the significance of their material transmission. The Bavli may be comfortable portraying these women as knowledgeable because they use their knowledge to enable their sons' ritual observance. The maternal act of transmission through material objects allows for a portrayal of feminine knowledge that was not threatening to rabbinic gender norms.

Mothers as Teachers: Transmission of Torah

Bavli Sotah

Finally, we turn to sources regarding mothers teaching rabbinic knowledge to their sons. Mishnah Sotah 3:4 is the locus classicus for early rabbinic discussion of female participation in the study of Scripture. The Mishnah discusses the Temple ritual for discerning whether a woman has committed adultery. The woman is to drink special waters, and if she is guilty, the Mishnah says, her stomach will distend. However, "If she had merit, her merit will delay [the effects]."³³⁰ Bavli Sotah asks what actions the woman might have done to earn this merit:

זכות דמאי אילימא זכות דתורה הא אינה מצווה ועושה היא
רבינא אמר לעולם זכות תורה
ודקאמרת אינה מצווה ועושה נהי דפקודי לא מפקדא
באגרא דמקרין ומתניין בנייהו³³¹ וגטרן להו לגבריהו עד דאתו מבי מדרשא מי לא פלגאן בהדייהו

What sort of merit? Perhaps we will say, the merit of Torah study, but she is not commanded to do so!...

³³⁰ In the Mishnah, Ben Azzai puts this forward as a reason for teaching one's daughter Torah—so that she might be protected from the punishment of the bitter waters at least temporarily.

³³¹ Lacking from Munich 95.

Ravina replies: Indeed it is the merit of Torah, and regarding what you said [about] her not being commanded to do so, granted she is not commanded. But **by the merit of causing her sons to study Torah and Mishnah** and waiting for her husband to come home from the study house [she is protected].

Ravina's statement is by no means proto-feminist. It does not contradict the Mishnah's exclusion of women from the enterprise of Torah study. And yet, the phrase "causing her sons to study Torah and Mishnah" bears scrutiny. Most scholars and translations assume that a mother causes her sons to study by taking them to a qualified teacher (as in Berakhot 17a discussed above).³³² In this understanding, the mother has no independent Torah knowledge; her merit accrues because she enables her sons to learn elsewhere. Soncino goes so far as to translate this phrase "when they have their sons taught Scripture and Mishnah..." to clarify the mother's role as merely enabling study. But what if Ravina in fact imagines a mother who taught her sons to read Torah and Mishnah herself? The language of "causing her sons" can be read in both ways, one of which attributes a far more literal transmission from mother to sons. Such a mother would have to know at least enough Hebrew to step into the paternal role articulated by early rabbinic sources: "When a boy begins to speak, his father speaks with him in the holy tongue and teaches him Torah..." If so, Ravina's statement can be read as praising maternal Torah knowledge as "merit," at least when she transmits this knowledge to her sons.

The Sotah source portrays the mother's action as an enabling role. Her Torah study merit comes from the ways that she enables her male relatives to study.³³³ The mother who "causes her son to read and recite" is portrayed as enabling her sons to study. She "shares in their merit"

³³² See for example Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, 175. On page 194, however, he suggests an alternative translation in line with what I suggest below: "from *teaching* her sons Torah and Mishnah."

³³³ While the purpose of maternal engagement in this source is similar to that of Berakhot 17a, its wording allows for the possibility that Ravina imagined mothers teaching their sons themselves—a possibility that the Berakhot source does not countenance.

because the commandment is not hers to perform. And yet, this type of enabling requires literacy and fluency in the realm of Torah and thus places mothers into role of enabling from within.³³⁴

As Jane Kanarek points out:

It is also possible that our assumptions about Torah and rabbinic culture have led us to overlook instances where women not only receive but also transmit Written and Oral Torah. That is to say, while I assume that mothers were essential to teaching in a culture that was as much mimetic as textual, it is possible that they participated in the transmission and creation of rabbinic culture to their sons not only through mimesis but also through text, even if that text was at least partially oral.³³⁵

By extolling this this particular form of enabling, the Bavli once again approves of feminine knowledge of Torah when such knowledge is coupled with the maternal role.

Mother of Ravina

It is possible that the Ravina of the Sotah source was not making a theoretical claim about maternal transmission; Bavli Berakhot and Menahot report two teachings that Ravina reports in his mother's name. After his father's death, Ravina looks to his mother for information about his family's practice. The Bavli portrays her not only as providing him with the information he seeks, but also as contextualizing his father's practice in the context of rabbinic disputes in Bavli Berakhot and Menahot. Bavli Berakhot 39b discusses a dispute between Rabbi Hiyya and Rava

³³⁴ In his interpretation of this source, R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson ups the ante and suggests that through teaching their sons Torah, women's own Torah knowledge might increase. He encourages women to study Torah with their children using this source, stating: "Through the fact that women study with their sons, the Torah study that the women themselves do is increased." Schneerson also differentiates between how mothers and fathers educate their children, suggesting that a mother's greater warmth in comparison to the father's more evaluative instructional style might be beneficial for the education of their children. While this statement upholds gendered norms of conduct, it also invites women to participate in the enterprise of cultural transmission and lauds the fact that this will increase the women's own learnedness. *Likkutei Sichot, Parshat Emor, Erev Lag ba'Omer, 5750* (1990), "On the Obligation of Jewish Women in Education and Study of Torah," accessed at <https://www.hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=15957&st=&pgnum=188> on April 14, 2021. See also Susan Handelman's analysis of this passage, "Women and Torah Study in the Thought of the Lubavitcher Rebbe," in *Jewish Legal Writings by Women*, edited by Micah Halperin and Chana Safrai, (Jerusalem: Urim Press, 1998), 142-177.

³³⁵ Jane Kanarek, "Fathers, Mothers, Daughters, Sons, and the Transmission of Torah," (Paper presented at the Association of Jewish Studies conference, Dec 2020), 11.

about the blessing before eating bread. Should one cut the bread before or after reciting the blessing? Ravina says:³³⁶

”אמרה לי אם, אבויך עבדי כרבי חייא ורבנן עבדי כרביא. והלכתא כרביא, דאמר מברך ואחר כך בוצע”

“Mother said to me: Your father followed Rabbi Hiyya, but the other rabbis followed Rava. And the rule follows Rava who said: One blesses and then breaks afterwards.”³³⁷ In this case, the absent father necessitates that the mother becomes the transmitter of family ritual practice. She is well aware of the debate, as demonstrated by her knowledge not only of her husband’s practices but of the other rabbis’ practices as well, and she is able to guide Ravina in his own navigating of these options.

Similarly, in Bavli Menahot (68b), there is a discussion about when one may eat the crop of the new year during the month of Nisan. Ravina reports:

אמרה לי אם: אבויך לא הוה אכיל חדש אלא באורתא דשבסר נהגי תמניסר
קסבר לה כר' יהוד' וחייש לספיקה³³⁸

“Mother said to me: Your father only ate the new grain in the evening of the seventeenth day just before the eighteenth day. He reasoned like Rabbi Yehuda and was concerned about the doubtful situation.” In both Berakhot and Menahot, the Bavli portrays Ravina’s mother as understanding intricate, even minute details about ritual practice as well as how they relate to rabbinic disputes. Of course, this does not mean that she actually did have this knowledge, but her portrayal invites us to imagine the multiplicity of ways rabbinic culture might have been transmitted in the home.

³³⁶ Ms. Salzburg U: Cod M. III 126 has here “Abaye,” an error resulting from the common appearance of the phrase “Mother said to me” in Abaye’s mouth.

³³⁷ This is the version present in all of the manuscripts. The Vilna edition reads:

נהרדעי עבדי כר' חייא ורבנן עבדי כרבא אמר רבינא אמרה לי אם אבויך עבדי כר' חייא דאמר ר' חייא צריך שתכלה ברכה עם הפת ורבנן עבדי כרבא

³³⁸ No significant manuscript variants.

While some rabbis were imagined to have left home for years on end to engage in study, forging a stark separation between the home and the study hall, the situation may in fact have been far more fluid. Following Hezser, for example, Hauptman imagines many rabbinic “study hall” discussions occurring at the tables of rabbinic households.³³⁹ The Bavli describes the wives of rabbis being present at the table and at times involved in such discussion. These stories show that it was conceivable to the authors of the Bavli that Ravina’s mother was not wholly outside of study house culture. The Bavli imagines her as knowing not only what her husband did but what others did and how these practices fit into study hall debates. The maternal role once again proves a safe space for the rabbis to gesture towards feminine knowledge of rabbinic culture.

Conclusion

Teasing out the multi-faceted ways that mothers might enable their sons to participate in rabbinic culture demonstrates that the Bavli does not present mothers as playing one singular role in rabbinic families. And although the Bavli excludes women from the world of the *beit midrash*, it does present some mothers as taking part, in various ways, in the transmission of rabbinic culture. Its stories involving mothers who participate in the transmission of rabbinic culture provide a far more nuanced picture of female knowledge than simply in or out, knowledgeable or ignorant. The rabbis did see mothers as involved in cultural transmission in their own right.

While this transmission is often framed as enabling sons to participate in what the rabbis see as

³³⁹ See Hauptman, “A New View of Women and Torah Study,” 250 and Catherine Hezser *The Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement in Roman Palestine* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck 1997), 196. While Hezser discusses the situation in Roman Palestine rather than in Babylonia, Jeffrey Rubenstein writes that in amoraic Babylonia the picture was similar—rabbis studied in disciple circles in a rabbinic master’s home. (“Social and Institutional Settings of Rabbinic Literature,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, edited by Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007], 66). Rubenstein says that the picture changes with the anonymous layer of the Bavli, at which point the rabbis moved in more institutionalized study houses (70-73).

the core of the rabbinic project, it often presents mothers as possessing a familiarity with and awareness of rabbinic knowledge that the Bavli does not usually present women as having. To be clear, I am not making a social-historical claim about how much of this knowledge these mothers actually possessed. Rather, I have highlighted the ways in which the Bavli embeds maternal actions or speech into its discussions. It is this embedding that shapes how we, as readers, understand their significance. I have shown that the Rabbis allow authentic maternal knowledge to seep in when it is used to further the investment of their sons in the rabbinic project. At other times, the Bavli amplifies or perhaps even invents maternal knowledge as a byproduct of other arguments.

While it is not surprising that the rabbis are comfortable depicting women as enabling the study of men, what I have shown here is that, in doing so, they depict mothers as possessing more knowledge and agency than we might have imagined given only prescriptive statements about women and Torah study. By embedding these mothers' actions and statements into rabbinic discussions of ritual law, the mothers themselves become part and parcel of the formation of rabbinic culture.

CHAPTER 4

EXPANDING THE BOOK: THE TEACHINGS OF ABAYE'S MOTHER

In the previous chapter, I discussed mothers who enabled the transmission of rabbinic culture in a variety of ways. At the end of that chapter, I presented an example of a mother who transmits a teaching to her son by reporting a practice of her late husband, thus serving as a necessary intermediary in the transmission of family ritual practice. In this chapter, I will delve into an anomalous figure, the mother of Abaye, whose son reports teachings in her name over two dozen times. These maternal teachings show that, despite the increasing scholasticism discussed in chapter 1, at the time of Abaye the home remained a central locus of rabbinic study. Despite the prescriptive statements excluding mothers from the heart of cultural transmission, Abaye nonetheless quotes his mother extensively. The teachings of Abaye's mother provide us with a snapshot in time. Within this frozen frame, the boundaries between the home and *beit midrash* are fluid; a son studies at home, and a mother contributes to rabbinic culture through her wisdom.

In order to demonstrate that Abaye's mother engages in robust cultural transmission, I will first show that, contrary to the views of some contemporary scholars, the attribution of "Mother" is plausible since the Bavli discusses Abaye's mother in pithy narratives outside of the teachings she transmits. Because this attribution is plausible, her role as mother cannot be separated from her role as teacher. When Abaye says *אמר לי אמ*, he is quoting someone he presents as both his teacher and his mother—her two roles are intertwined. As well, he has spent significant time at home with her even as an adult—enough time for him to absorb her wisdom and incorporate it into his teaching. Second, despite her physical absence from the locales in which the conversations about her teachings are taking place, the Bavli treats her teachings as authoritative, allowing them to become part of the rabbinic canon. I will close by exploring one

teaching that seems to break this mold. I will argue that it may do so because it concerns circumcision, a ritual from which the Bavli is particularly concerned to exclude women.

There are two key implications of this material. First, Abaye, in his own self-presentation, spends much of his sage life in the home—he studies there and discusses matters that come up with the members of his household. For Abaye, there is no strict bifurcation between *beit midrash* and home. When he discusses rabbinic law and lore, these discussions may just as plausibly be occurring in his home as in some other separate house of study. Second, and perhaps because of this blending of home and study house, Abaye’s mother comes to contribute to rabbinic discourse organically. In this chapter, I will demonstrate both sides of this equation—that Abaye’s mother transmits her wisdom to him in the home, perhaps even in the context of Abaye’s own quintessentially rabbinic study of Torah and that she thereby contributes in a real way to rabbinic discourse.

The Relationship between Abaye and his Mother

According to the Bavli, the fourth century CE Babylonian sage Abaye was an orphan; his father died upon his conception, and his mother died in childbirth.³⁴⁰ And yet, over two dozen times in the Bavli, Abaye unselfconsciously quotes someone he calls “mother.”³⁴¹ Cognizant of this

³⁴⁰ Bavli Qiddushin 31b.

³⁴¹ For scholarly treatments of Abaye’s adoptive mother, see Charlotte E. Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000) 151-59; Shulamit Valler, *Women in Jewish Society in the Talmudic Period* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2000), 161-172 [Heb.]; Orit Segal, “Kolot nashiyim ba-tekst ha-talmudi: ‘iyyun be-mishpetei “amrah li em” ba-Talmud ha-bavli: magyah, refu’ah ve-kolot nashiyim” . [Women’s voices in the talmudic text: a study of the “a mother said to me” statements in the Babylonian Talmud: magic, medicine and women’s voices] (M.A. thesis, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, July 2000); Rebecca Lesses, “Exe(o)rcising Power: Women as Sorceresses, Exorcists, and Demonesses in Babylonian Jewish Society of Late Antiquity,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 69, no. 2 (June 2001), 343-375. Michele Murray, “Female Corporeality, Magic, and Gender in the Babylonian Talmud,” *Religion & Theology* 15 (2008) 218-19.

contradiction, Bavli Qiddushin 31b suggests that the woman he quotes is in fact his מרבינתא—literally his “raising woman.”

רבי יוחנן כי עברתו אמו מת אביו ילדתו מתה אמו וכן אביי
איני והאמר אביי אמרה לי אם ההיא מרבינתיה³⁴² הוא

When R. Yohanan’s mother conceived him, his father died. When she birthed him, his mother died. And so too Abaye. Really?! But Abaye said ‘Mother said to me!’ She was his *marbinta*.³⁴³

This term is generally understood to refer to a foster mother, though that designation may be misleading, given the differences in family structures between ancient and modern times.

Some scholars use this source as a means through which to downplay the mother-child relationship between Abaye and the woman he quotes. Markham Geller, for example, claims that this source points to a “problem with the credibility” of the tradition that Abaye received knowledge from his mother. Because many of the teachings Abaye’s mother transmits concern magico-medical remedies, Geller states, “It is unlikely that a woman would have had access to technical medical knowledge with the possible exception of midwifery.”³⁴⁴ His assumption that women in the ancient world had no access to technical knowledge is unsubstantiated.³⁴⁵ Geller’s

³⁴² Mss differ on the orthography of this word. The various spellings are: מרבינתיה (Vilna), מרבניתיה (Qushta, Munich 95), מרבנתיה (Wad al-Haraja), מרבייתיה (Oxford 367, Vatican 110-111, Modena), מרבניתא (CUL), מרבייניתיה (Oxford Heb b. 1/8-9).

³⁴³ In my assessment, מרבינתא is a contraction of the present participle of the pa’el form of the verb רבי=to raise with the noun אנתא meaning woman. See also Sokoloff, *Babylonian*, 703 for this noun, 705 for a similar word meaning “nursemaid”, and 1056 for the root רבי. The idea that this word is a contraction of the participle of the afel of the verb רבי (to raise) with the noun אנתא (woman) is my own.

³⁴⁴ Geller, “Akkadian Healing Therapies in the Babylonian Talmud,” (Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, 2004), 8. <https://www.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/Preprints/P259.PDF>

³⁴⁵ In fact, in her article “Women, Writing and Medicine in the Classical World,” (*Classical Quarterly* 57, no.1 (2007): 257–79, doi:10.1017/S0009838807000225), Rebecca Fleming presents epigraphical and archaeological evidence for the participation of women in the medical field in the Greco-Roman world. While her work does not cover the period of the Bavli, it demonstrates that a blanket assumption of women’s ignorance of technical healing knowledge is unwarranted. OMEN, WRITING AND MEDICINE IN THREE CBLEACSCSAIC FALLE MWOMRINLDG

aim is to demonstrate that Abaye is acquainted with and extensively quotes a male Akkadian healer. *Em*, according to Geller, is a corruption of *ummānu*—the Akkadian word for healer.³⁴⁶ Geller’s desire to read mothers (and women more generally) out of this series of traditions has far less to do with careful historical research than it does with misplaced assumptions about the way gender worked in the ancient world. Perhaps because the Bavli rhetorically excludes women from Torah study, he assumes that this reflects a reality of complete absence of women from the endeavor. As we will see, it is more reasonable to see Abaye’s mother as providing a counter-example to this assumption.

Unfortunately, feminist scholars are also not immune from being influenced by desires and assumptions. When discussing Abaye’s “*em*” for an encyclopedia entry for the Jewish Women’s archive, Tal Ilan celebrates the presence of *amrah li em* statements as evidence for the presence of a female expert to whom many rabbis looked for guidance.³⁴⁷ Like Geller, Ilan claims that Bavli Qiddushin is evidence for the fact that *Em* is not Abaye’s mother. Rather, she is a female medical practitioner and friend of Abaye greatly respected by the rabbis in Babylonia.³⁴⁸ Ilan’s insistence on erasing the maternal relationship here is perplexing. It suggests that, for her, finding a female expert who was not the mother of a rabbi would be a

³⁴⁶ Geller, “Akkadian Healing Therapies,” 8.

³⁴⁷ This version of Ilan’s argument can be found in “Female Personalities in the Babylonian Talmud” on the Jewish Women’s Archive in an entry tellingly named “Em.” <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/female-personalities-in-babylonian-talmud>.

³⁴⁸ “The editors of the Talmud, however, knew that this woman could not have been Abaye’s mother, since according to another tradition, his mother had died while giving birth to him. They solved the contradiction by assuming that the woman in question was his adoptive mother. ... This suggests that Em was perhaps a famous, authoritative woman known to the rabbis of Babylonia” (Ibid). In *Silencing the Queen: The Literary Histories of Shelamzion and Other Jewish Women* Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 115 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), Ilan writes, “Yet a Jewish female physician is not an unheard-of phenomenon. The Bavli repeatedly mentions “Em,” a friend of the Babylonian rabbi Abaye, whose many recipes are listed in this composition and suggest that she was the author of a medical handbook” (27). In note 76, Ilan implausibly suggests that Ravina’s “em,” discussed in chapter 3 of this dissertation, was the same female doctor.

greater feminist desideratum than finding one who was. Perhaps this is because identifying a mother who is an expert shows that her knowledge is mediated by her son rather than attesting to her presence where the rabbinic discussions were taking place. Her knowledge cannot penetrate the walls of the house of study without her son's facilitation.

But Bavli Qiddushin is not the only Bavli discussion of Abaye's mother. There are, in fact, four brief narrative reports that highlight the relationship between Abaye and his mother. Bavli Berakhot 62a reports that Abaye's mother raised a lamb for him to protect him from demons in the bathroom: אמרא למיעל בהדיה לבית הכסא ³⁴⁹[אמיה] ליה. "Abaye's mother raised a lamb for him to accompany him to the bathroom."³⁵⁰ The assumption in this text seems to be that demons frequent bathrooms. Abaye's mother provided him with a live lamb to protect him against the bathroom demons.³⁵¹ In another story of warding off demons, Bavli Pesahim 110a reports that as soon as Abaye would finish drinking out of one cup, his mother would place two more in his hands so that he would not come to drink pairs of cups—an action which would have attracted demons:³⁵² מְנַקִּיט לִיה אִמְיָה תְּרִי כְּסִי בְּתֵרֵי יָדֶיהָ ³⁵³וְאַבְיָי כִּי שְׁתֵּי חֶד פִּסְא. ("And Abaye, when he drank from a goblet, his mother would give him two cups in his two hands.") In these two cases, Abaye seems to accept his mother's assistance without comment. This anecdote

³⁴⁹ The word אמיה is in brackets in the Vilna because it is missing from the Venice printing. It is, however, present in the Munich 95, Paris 671, and Oxford 366 manuscripts.

³⁵⁰ It is striking that the word מְרִבִּיא describing the fact that his mother would raise a goat for his shares the root רבי with the word מְרִבִּינָתָא.

³⁵¹ The *stam* suggests that she did not raise him a goat so as to avoid the problem of a goat demon exchanging itself for the real goat and being indistinguishable from it.

³⁵² The idea here seems to be that the dangerous "drinking in pairs" was sequential. Abaye's mother would put two additional cups in his hand so that he would remember how many he needed to still drink. For more on this sugya, see Jordan Rosenblum, *Rabbinic Drinking: What Beverages Teach Us About Rabbinic Literature* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020), 141-44.

³⁵³ Phrase missing from two manuscripts (Columbia 294/5 and Onlau 271.)

demonstrates that these mundane household interactions with his adoptive mother were part and parcel of Abaye's everyday life.

The final two narratives show moments where Abaye and his mother do not see eye to eye. The first appears in the context of a discussion regarding preparing mustard on Shabbat. There, Abaye refuses to eat mustard that his mother has prepared for him on Shabbat because he follows a more stringent view regarding the permissibility of such preparation.³⁵⁴ In the second story, rabbis are complaining to each other about distractions that detract from their study. Abaye reports to his colleagues what it is like to study at home: “Abaye said: If my mother said to me ‘bring [me] the fish sauce’ I do not study.”³⁵⁵

אמר אבאי: אי אמרה לי אם קריב כותחא — לא תנאי.

This final anecdote is especially expressive as it calls to mind an image of Abaye studying Torah at the dining room table. His mother asks him to go retrieve something for her and it breaks his focus, leading him to complain to his colleagues that studying at home does not enable the intense concentration that he needs to learn.

There are two noteworthy facts about these stories. First, they attest to the mother-son relationship between Abaye and his mother. Whether she is his foster mother, adoptive mother, or aunt, Abaye presents her as his mother, and this is how the Bavli relates to her. Second, it paints a picture of how embedded Abaye is in his home life. Despite the fact that he views this

³⁵⁴ Bavli Shabbat 140a. “אימיה דאבאי עבדה ליה, ולא אכל.” It is worth noting that the Bavli presents Abaye as adopting a more stringent view than other contemporary rabbis on this matter.

³⁵⁵ Bavli Eruvin 65a. לא — לא. אמר אבאי: אי אמרה לי אם קריב כותחא — לא. אמר רב נחמן בר יצחק: הלכתא בעני צילותא פיומא דאסתנא. אמר אבאי: אי אמרה לי אם קריב כותחא — לא. אמר רבא: אי קרעת פניה לא תנאי. מר בריה דרבנא עבדה ליה אמיה שבעה מגי לשבעה יומי [The study of] halakhah requires clearness [of mind] like a day of the cold wind. Abaye said: If my mother said ‘bring the fish sauce’ I cannot study. Rava said: If a louse bites me, I cannot study. The mother of Mar the son of Ravina made him seven garments for the seven days of the week (presumably so that they would not be louse-ridden).

embeddedness at times an inconvenience, Abaye engages in Torah study well into adulthood not in a far-off yeshiva (as thematized in Bavli Ketubot) but within the space of his home.³⁵⁶

Furthermore, his mother is present while he is studying. The type of embeddedness attested here allows us to imagine how the robust transmission that Abaye reports might have taken place.

Abaye and his mother are closely involved in one another's lives—when he has a question he thinks she might know something about, he asks her.³⁵⁷

Because of these stories, I claim that there is no reason not to take the text at its word. If the woman Abaye quotes is the woman who raised him, she is his mother, whether adoptive or foster. Mother is not a pejorative designation. The robust presence of a woman identified as the mother of Abaye shows that the home could be the locus of cultural transmission even as the general thrust of rabbinic tradition is to shift that transmission to hands of sages or masters in the house of study. As Fonrobert says, “Abaye declares the source of his knowledge on midwifery. His is a derivative knowledge that does not conceal its maternal origin. This maternal knowledge finds its place as such in Talmudic literature.”³⁵⁸ Abaye's mother provides another example, in addition to those discussed in the previous chapter, of the Bavli admitting male knowledge when that knowledge comes from a mother.

Content and Reception of her Teachings

A key question in understanding the significance of Abaye's mother's teachings for questions of cultural transmission is how the Bavli perceives the knowledge she teaches. Does

³⁵⁶ Bavli Ketubot 62b-63a contains a story cycle in which a number of rabbis leave home to study in the rabbinic academy with various consequences for each.

³⁵⁷ I am not claiming that the text lauds this embeddedness, only that that these narratives lend plausibility to the moniker “mother.”

³⁵⁸ Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity*, 155.

the Bavli see the teachings of Abaye's mother as "rabbinic" or rather as knowledge gleaned from an outside expert?³⁵⁹ For Abaye's mother to truly be a counterexample to the exclusion of women from cultural production, it must become clear that the Bavli presents her as an insider. I will demonstrate this fact from two directions. First, although it is tempting to view the knowledge Abaye's mother teaches as specifically feminine knowledge, evidence suggests that Abaye did not perceive the subject matter she addresses in this way. Second, the Bavli lexically marks her teachings as internal.

The twenty-five statements that Abaye transmits in the name of his mother cover a variety of topics.³⁶⁰ Eleven of the twenty-five statements report magico-medical remedies for fevers, insect-bites, and other maladies.³⁶¹ Eight are instructions regarding how to properly care for a newly born infant.³⁶² In the remaining statements, she teaches Abaye about child development,³⁶³ rumors,³⁶⁴ the pain of virginal sexual intercourse³⁶⁵ the relative worth of sealed and unsealed barrels,³⁶⁶ and finally, the appropriate age for children to learn various texts in the

³⁵⁹ For a comprehensive discussion of stories in which rabbis glean knowledge from outsiders see Jenny Labenz, *Socratic Torah: Non-Jews in Rabbinic Intellectual Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

³⁶⁰ See the appendix for full quotations of her statements, organized by category.

³⁶¹ Bavli Shabbat 66b (three statements pertaining to general magical procedures and one about healing a light fever), Ketubot 10b (digestion), Bavli Ketubot 50a (scorpion bites), Gittin 67b (remedies for different types of fevers), Gittin 70a (remedy for the *ahilu* fever), Avodah Zarah 28b (remedy for ear pain), Eruvin 29b (remedies for worrisome thoughts and heart weakness).

³⁶² Bavli Shabbat 133b-134a.

³⁶³ Bavli Yoma 78b.

³⁶⁴ Bavli Yevamot 25a. This and the previous statement share characteristics of the folk saying. Both are laconic and assonant.

³⁶⁵ Bavli Ketubot 39b.

³⁶⁶ Bavli Moed Katan 12a.

rabbinic curriculum.³⁶⁷ A key question that emerges from this catalogue is whether or not something unites this list of teachings in terms of their content.

In the conclusion to her exhaustive study of these statements, Orit Segal identifies the knowledge Abaye's mother transmits as coming from the "feminine realm" and thus as border-crossing knowledge:

The *amrah li em* statements represent an integration between intergenerational transmission—Abaye transmits knowledge he received further on the chain of transmission—and inter-group transmission, which creates a fruitful dialogue between the study house and the outside, in this case with the words of the nursemaid which exist in the *feminine world* of the home. The mother represents, to a great extent, a bridge between these *two types of knowledge*.³⁶⁸ (translation and emphasis my own)

While it is undeniable that Abaye's mother is situated outside the study house, Segal's classification of the teachings as representing a separate "type of knowledge" from that of the rabbis that exists in the "feminine world of the home" bears scrutiny. Was there something about these teachings in their content that separate them from the "type of knowledge" of the study house?

Magic, Medicine, and Gender

Magic and medicine have been raised as being externally imposed categories that cloud our understanding of healing in the ancient world.³⁶⁹ The general problem of imposing modern names for ancient concepts is amplified by the pejorative connotation often assigned to the term "magic." The rabbis do have separate terms for magic and medicine;³⁷⁰ they did not, however,

³⁶⁷ Bavli Ketubot 50a. See below for a full discussion of this source.

³⁶⁸ Orit Segal, "Kolot nashiyim," 67.

³⁶⁹ For more on defining magic in relation to religion and science see Randall Styers, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) and Pamela Moro and James E. Myers, eds. *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010).

³⁷⁰ The term רפואה refers to medicine or healing, while כישוף refers to negative forms of magic.

categorize activities the way we might expect them to. Remedies we might view as supernatural in origin or as “folk remedies,” might be seen by the rabbis as medicine, for example.³⁷¹ The very idea that magic was negative was not universally held by the rabbis. Kimberley Stratton draws a distinction between the rabbis of the Bavli and the Yerushalmi, saying that those in the Bavli viewed magic much more positively.³⁷² Abaye himself, for example, distinguished between positive and negative forms of magic.³⁷³

The slipperiness of the category of magic extends to whether or not this category was gendered in rabbinic texts. Rabbinic texts at times identify כישוף (magic or witch/wizardcraft) as a female pursuit.³⁷⁴ Oft-quoted statements in the name of rabbis from the land of Israel include Bavli Berakhot 53a in which R. Yosi states that the daughters of Israel burn incense for magical purposes, Bavli Eruvin 64b in which Rashbi states that the daughters of Israel engage in magical pursuits and that doing so is problematic, and Mishnah Avot 2:7 “מְרַבֵּה נָשִׁים, מְרַבֵּה כְּשָׁפִים” (to increase women/ wives is to increase sorcery). Rebecca Lesses suggests that “Early Palestinian sages established the idea of women’s ubiquity in magical enterprises on a firm foundation, and

³⁷¹ For scholarship unpacking categories of magic and its related disciplines in ancient Judaism see Peter Schaefer, “Magic and Religion in Ancient Judaism,” in Peter Schafer and H.G. Kippenberg, eds., *Envisioning Magic: A Princeton Seminar and Symposium* (New York: E. J. Brill, 1997), 19-43; Gideon Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), and Giuseppe Veltri, “Defining Forbidden Foreign Customs: Some Remarks on the Rabbinic Halakha of Magic,” in D. Assaf, ed., *Proceedings of the 11th World Congress of Jewish Studies, Div. C Thought and Literature*, Vol 1. (1994), 25-32. For discussions of medicine see Lennart Lehmhaus, ed, *Defining Jewish Medicine: Transfer of Medical Knowledge in Premodern Jewish Cultures and Traditions* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2021).

³⁷² For differing attitudes to magic between the Bavli and the Yerushalmi, see Kimberley Stratton, “Caution in the Kosher Kitchen: Magic, Identity, and Authority in Rabbinic Literature,” in *Naming the Witch: Magic, Ideology and Stereotype in the Ancient World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 143-176.

³⁷³ See Bavli Sanhedrin 67b.

³⁷⁴ This phenomenon was not unique to rabbinic texts, and yet see Kimberly B. Stratton “Interrogating the Magic–Gender Connection” in *Daughters of Hecate: Women and Magic in the Ancient World*, edited by Kimberly B. Stratton and Dayna S. Kalleres (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195342703.001.0001

later Babylonian sages took up this theme and developed it.”³⁷⁵ Lesses claims that Abaye’s mother is an outlier in rabbinic discussions of magic because of her connections to the sages. While the rabbis generally denigrate women who pursue magic, she says, they accept Abaye’s mother’s teachings, portraying her as a “respectable woman” who engages in magic.³⁷⁶ In a similar vein, Michele Murray maps rabbinic attitudes towards magic on a gendered continuum. According to Murray, The more “rabbinic” the person practicing magic, the more masculine they are perceived to be. For Murray, Abaye’s mother is a “masculine woman” due to her close relationships with Rabbah her husband and Abaye her adopted son.³⁷⁷

Kimberley Stratton, however, suggests another explanation for the rabbis’ acceptance of Abaye’s mother in contrast to their dismissal of other women engaged in magic. She traces statements denigrating female use of magic and highlights their geographical provenance, stating that magic was viewed negatively by rabbis from the land of Israel but positively in rabbis from Babylonia.³⁷⁸ In this case, Abaye’s mother’s expertise does not reflect a shift in attitudes about

³⁷⁵ Lesses, “Exe(o)rcising,” 352. Segal also devotes a section of her thesis to this question (“*Kolot nashiyim*,” 10-21). See also Simcha Fishbane, “‘Most Women Engage in Sorcery’: An Analysis of Sorceresses in the Babylonian Talmud,” *Jewish History* 7, no. 1 (Spring, 1993): 27-42 for an additional discussion of women and magic in the Bavli.

³⁷⁶ Especially important to Lesses’s analysis is the teaching on Bavli Shabbat 66b regarding the number of knots of the madder plant that can be used to avoid sorcery. Lesses claims that the sorcery being avoided is specifically female sorcery and thus Abaye’s mother is a respectable woman teaching her male son how to avoid the havoc other women wreak (“Exe(o)rcising,” 363). While this reading is possible, it is also possible, given the rest of Lesses analysis, that both men and women engaged in sorcery and thus this teaching might not play into the dynamic that Lesses proposes.

³⁷⁷ Murray cites Jacob Neusner, *History of Jews in Babylonia* (University of South Florida, 2000), 348 for this attribution of Abaye’s mother’s identity. See Michele Murray, “Female Corporeality, Magic, and Gender in the Babylonian Talmud,” *Religion and Theology* 15 (2008), 219 note 82. The Bavli does not explicitly identify Rabbah as Abaye’s adoptive father, but Abaye does spend time as a young boy in Rabbah’s home (see for example Bavli Pesahim 115b; Bavli Berakhot 48a). In contrast to Murray, Galit Hasan-Rokem points out that the rabbis often look to women as authorities about healing in both Palestinian and Babylonian rabbinic texts. See *Tales of the Neighborhood: Jewish Narrative Dialogues in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 76, <http://muse.jhu.edu/book/25805>.

³⁷⁸ Stratton, “Caution,” 376.

participation of women in the rabbinic enterprise, but rather reflects the Babylonian sages' valuation of magical expertise. Abaye's mother's knowledge is accepted because it is useful.³⁷⁹ Abaye himself is especially interested in discussing the use of magic in general and in magico-medical remedies in particular.³⁸⁰ In addition to reporting teachings of his mother in these areas, he also quotes other authorities in these realms. Bavli Hullin 105b, for example, reports Abaye teaching in the name of his teacher: *אמר אביי: מריש הוה אמינא האי דלא משו מיא בתראי על ארעא משום* "Abaye said: At first, I thought that the fact that they did not do the after-meal handwashing on the earth was because of filth. Master said to me that an evil spirit rested upon them." Moments such as these demonstrate that, at least for Abaye, the knowledge of magic that he reports in the name of his mother is not coded as feminine by dint of its subject matter.

We thus see that, although the knowledge that Abaye's mother taught might have been seen as primarily feminine in nature at some points in rabbinic history, Abaye himself does not seem to have perceived it in this way. His unselfconscious transmission of her statements in the study house accords with the broader acceptance of at least some forms of magic as a legitimate pursuit in the eyes of the later generations of Babylonian rabbis. It is therefore unwarranted to see magic and healing disciplines as separate from rabbinic culture or as uniquely feminine enterprises at the time of Abaye. The content of her teachings does not disqualify them from being deemed rabbinic culture. As the examples above demonstrate, the fact that some of

³⁷⁹ In fact, the rest of Lesses's analysis supports Stratton's assessment. She states that incantation bowls in Babylonia seem to have been produced and used both by men and women ("Exe(o)rcising," 362). In this case, the attitudes of the rabbis of Babylonia towards magic reflect those of their surroundings. Magic has lost both its specifically gendered association as well as its negative association.

³⁸⁰ For example, on Bavli Sanhedrin 67b he teaches about permitted and forbidden types of magic and on Bavli Avodah Zarah 28a, he discusses remedies for various ailments.

Abaye's mother's teachings deal with subjects we or the rabbis might label as "magic" does not automatically disqualify them from being included in a broad definition of rabbinic culture.

Nonetheless, it does not mean that they were automatically included either. The Bavli incorporates statements from groups labeled as external such as: Chaldeans, Arab merchants, Roman matrons etc.³⁸¹ The next section will demonstrate that the Bavli marks the knowledge transmitted by Abaye's mother as internal knowledge rather than as external knowledge, which we might have expected if she were treated as a wise woman.

Reception by the Bavli

The previous section took an etic approach to discussing the knowledge that Abaye's mother teaches him. This section will take an emic approach, examining how the Bavli marks Abaye's mother's teachings as internal to rabbinic culture semantically and structurally. Taking this emic approach, we can tease out how the Bavli related to her statements. In addition to the fact that the subjects Abaye's mother discusses are plausibly rabbinic, they are semantically marked by the Bavli as rabbinic culture. Abaye's mother thus moves beyond the enabling maternal role into that of a teacher who transmits rabbinic culture in a robust way (whether or not she would have self-identified as doing so). This perspective allows us to illuminate a stratum of rabbinic culture that is often hidden under the weight of later interpretation.

In order to demonstrate these claims, this section will first look at the formula the Bavli uses to introduce Abaye's mother's statements. Such a formula gives an indication of how the editors of the Bavli imagine readers relating to the teaching that follows. Second, since the Bavli

³⁸¹ Gregg Gardner discusses how the Bavli interfaces with Chaldean astrology in his article, "Astrology in the Talmud: An Analysis of Bavli Shabbat 156," in *Heresy and Identity in Late Antiquity*, edited by Eduard Iricinschi and Holger Zellentin (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 314-38. He concludes that the Bavli portrays Chaldean astrology as inefficacious on Jews fulfilling God's commandments but as efficacious with regards to non-Jews or even potentially non-Rabbinic Jews or at least on Jews not engaged in *mitzvot*. (338)

is a redacted document, I do not assume that it presents her words verbatim. Examining the forms her statements take can show us if the Bavli sees her statements more as folk wisdom coming from the outside or more as insider talk. I build on the work of Orit Segal, who shows that, with a few exceptions, the form of Abaye's mother's statements hews more closely to the form of statements by those inside the rabbinic community than to those the rabbis label as folk wisdom. Finally, I explore the roles her statements play in the flow of the Talmudic discussions in which they are found. I show that the Bavli receives her statements as authoritative and folds them into rabbinic discourse without regard for their gendered origins.

The Introductory Formula

Without exception, the Bavli transmits Abaye's mother's statements in the form “אמר אמר לי אם” “Abaye said: Mother said to me.” The form of this introductory tag is similar to the form in which most rabbinic statements are presented: “... אמר רב(י) ... אמר רב(י)” “Said rabbi x said rabbi y,” which means that one rabbi taught in the name of another. The difference is the pronoun “לי”—“to me.” Two feminist scholars debate what the tag attached to her statements teaches. Since she wishes to see in Abaye's mother an expert named Em, Tal Ilan claims that this is not how the Bavli would invoke the teaching of a mother. She states: “However, one tradition in the Babylonian Talmud suggests that when a sage quotes his mother he does not say ‘(a) mother said to me’ but rather ‘my mother said to me’ (Bavli Pesahim 112a).”³⁸² To support her claim, we would expect the Bavli Pesahim source she cites to address statements in a legal context. The source, however, refers to mothers in the context of an anti-demonic incantation:

תנו רבנן לא ישתה אדם מים לא מן הנהרות ולא מן האגמים בלילה... מאי סכנה סכנת שברירי ואי צחי מאי תקנתיה אי איכא איניש בהדיה לימא ליה פלניא בר פלנא³⁸³ צחינא מיא ואי לא (נימא) איהו לנפשיה פלניא אמרה לי אימי איזדהר משברירי שברירי ברירי רירי רי צחינא מיא בכסי חיורי:

³⁸² Ilan, “Female Personalities,” Jewish Women's Archive.

³⁸³ Munich 95: פלניא

Our rabbis taught in a baraita: A person/man may not drink water from rivers or lakes at night... [The Bavli asks:] What is the danger? The danger of *shabriri* (demon of blindness). And if he thirsts, how should he fix this? If there is someone with him, let him say to him, “so-and-so [masc.] son of so-and-so [fem] , I thirst for water.” If not, he should say to himself, “So-and-so, my mother said to me, ‘Beware of *shabriri*, *shabriri*, *briri*, *riri*, *yry*, *ri*, I thirst for water in white cups.

This source records an incantation against a demon thought to strike at someone who drinks water outdoors at night, causing blindness. The Bavli reports that a precaution against this demon is to invoke one’s mother in an incantation against it.³⁸⁴ Contrary to Ilan’s assertion, this source does not discuss how a sage would quote his mother in a legal context. So while there may have been a special relationship between mothers and incantation formulae into which this text fits, the example does not prove anything about how a mother might have been quoted by her son in other contexts.

Fonrobert examines the formula from another angle. Picking up on the addition of “לִי”—the “to me” pronoun, she suggests that it highlights the mediated nature of Abaye’s mother’s wisdom. Fonrobert says that generally, “A tradition of a specific interpretation of a biblical or Mishnaic text is passed on from teacher to student and again to the student of the subsequent generation. This chain of tradition, therefore, establishes the collective community of interpretation.”³⁸⁵ She contrasts this with אָמַר אֲבִי אֶמְרָה לִי אִם, saying that it “interrupts the collective form” by personalizing it: “The text may attempt to circumscribe the authority of Abaye’s mother to a more personalized ‘family’ tradition.”³⁸⁶ Fonrobert’s analysis highlights an important tension. On the one hand, Abaye treats his mother as an authority; otherwise, he might

³⁸⁴ It also happens to align with a statement by Abaye’s mother that in incantations one uses the name of the mother (Shabbat 66b).

³⁸⁵ Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity*, 152.

³⁸⁶ Ibid.

have transmitted her statements as his own. However, when he does so, he frames each one as a private transmission. She herself does engage in the discussions in which she is quoted. Her knowledge will always be mediated.³⁸⁷ Fonrobert, however, misses an important datum in this instance. On Hullin 105b quoted above, Abaye himself uses “לִי” to report a teaching from a male teacher. Abaye states “אמר לי מר”—a formulation strikingly parallel to “אמרה לי אם.”³⁸⁸ It is worth noting, as well, that the Bavli does not commonly mark teachings that sons bring in the name of their fathers either. Therefore, while Abaye’s mother’s knowledge is presented as a personal rather than communal teaching, this fact does not circumscribe her authority.

Language of the Statements

In addition to the way in which statements are introduced, the language used in the statements provides clues regarding whether that statement is considered insider knowledge or outsider knowledge. In the Bavli, outsider knowledge is often presented in the form of a folk saying. Segal addresses the relationship between folk sayings and the teachings of Abaye’s mother, pointing out that folk sayings in the Bavli are generally introduced by two formulae: הֵינּוּ דְאִמְרֵי —“So people say” and “הוּא קֹאמֵר וְאִזִּיל” —“He would often say.”³⁸⁹

In addition to their introductory formula, the language of folk sayings has a particular lilt. Galit Hasan-Rokem states: that “a proverb is a short unit of text whose characteristics are: laconic phrasing in poetic language, summary of a collective trial, a logical structure which includes a conditional statement, and repeated use and apt to be memorized within an ethnic or

³⁸⁷ It is not only female or maternal teachings that are mediated in the Bavli, however. Male rabbinic teachings wind up being mediated as well. They are turned into pithy statements by editors or students and transmitted that way. I do not assume that the rabbi quoted said his statement the way that it was written.

³⁸⁸ See also Bavli Avodah Zarah 16b, where Abaye uses לִי as well: אִמֵּר אֲבִי אִמֵּר לִי מִרְיָהּ הוּדָה

³⁸⁹ See Segal, “Kolot nashiyim,” 39. Segal does a detailed analysis of the differences between Abaye’s mother’s statements and proverbs on pages 39-50.

cultural group.”³⁹⁰ While a few of Abaye’s mother’s statements fit these criteria, most of them are significantly longer and more detailed than Talmudic proverbs. As well, folk statements often have repeating consonants and assonance so that they are pleasing to the ear and memorable. Few of Abaye’s mother’s statements share these characteristics. Thus, Abaye’s mother’s teachings are generally presented in the genre of rabbinic teachings rather than in that of folk wisdom or proverbs.

Discursive Authority

The Bavli incorporates Abaye’s mother in a variety of ways into Talmudic discourse in the same way that it incorporates the statements of *amoraim*. Some of her statements are presented in units of four (Bavli Shabbat 66b) or seven (Bavli Shabbat 133b-134a). This form is a common way for the Talmud to preserve traditions associated with the same person.³⁹¹ Other times, she is cited as an authority about a matter integral to a rabbinic discussion. Bavli Gittin 70a, for example, quotes a *baraita* which includes a word “*ahilu*,” a word with which later Babylonian rabbis are unfamiliar. The Bavli then discusses this word:

מאי אחילו א"ר אלעזר אש של עצמות. מאי אש של עצמות? אמר אבבי אש גרמי.
מאי אסותיה אמר אבבי אמרה לי אם כולהו שקייני תלתא ושבעא ותריסר³⁹² ³⁹³והאי עד דמתסי

What is *ahilu*? R. Elazar said: A fire of the bones. What is a fire of the bones (Hebrew)? Abaye said: A fire of the bones (Aramaic). What is its cure? Abaye said: Mother said to

³⁹⁰ Galit Hasan-Rokem, “Toward the Study of the Jewish Proverb: A Study of the Proverb ‘One cannot trust a Gentile even after forty years in the grave,’ ” *Tarbiz* 51, no. 2 (1982): 281. [Heb.]

³⁹¹ For more on these literary structures, see Shamma Friedman, “Some Structural Patterns of Talmudic ‘Sugiot’” *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies*, vol. 1 (1973): 389-402 (esp. p. 400).

³⁹² Vatican 130 adds the following explanatory note: [*לפעמי' ג' לפעמי' ז' לפעמי' יב' פעמי*]

³⁹³ Vatican 130 and Munich 95 have בר מהאי.

me: All medicines³⁹⁴ [are to be taken] for three, seven, or twelve [days]—but this until it is healed.³⁹⁵

The narrator asks: “What is *ahilu*?” R. Elazar says that it is a fire of the bones, which Abaye translates into Aramaic. Then the narrator asks, “And what is its cure?” Abaye quotes a lengthy description in the name of his mother in which she distinguishes between *ahilu* and other illnesses with regards to their treatment methods. In this case, Abaye’s mother transmits medical knowledge without which the narrator’s question would have gone unanswered.

A more involved example is found in Bavli Ketubbot (50a), which incorporates a teaching of Abaye’s mother to help resolve a Talmudic debate regarding the age at which to start educating one’s son:

אמר רב יצחק באושא התקינו כדי שיהא אדם מגלגל עם בנו עד שתיים עשרה שנה.³⁹⁶ מכאן ואילך יורד עמו לחייו. איני?! והאמ' ליה רב³⁹⁷ לרב שמואל בר שילת בציר מבר שית לא תקבל. בר שית³⁹⁸ קביל ואספי³⁹⁹ ליה כיתורא. (ואינו יורד לחייו אלא לאחר יב שנה) לא קשיא הא למקרא הא למיתנא. דאמ' אביי. אמרה לי אם. בר שית למקרא. בר עשר למשנה. בן שנים-עשר לתעניתא מעת לעת⁴⁰⁰
(St. Petersburg, Russian National Library Evr. I 187)

Rabbi Yitzhak said: They decreed in Usha that a man should follow the lead of (lit. roll with) his son until twelve years old. From here on out, he gives him a hard time (lit. goes down with him for his life) [if he does not study].

Really?! But Rav said to Rav Shmuel b. Shelat (a school teacher quoted in Bava Batra 21a): Do not accept him below the age of six, but from six years, accept him and stuff him like an ox. (And he does not give him a hard time until after twelve years.)

There is no difficulty. This [statement] refers to Scripture, while that [statement] refers to Mishnah. For Abaye said: Mother said to me: Six years old for Scripture, ten years old for Mishnah. Twelve years old for fasting for a full day...

³⁹⁴ Sokoloff, *Babylonian*, has liquids or potions for שקיני (1174).

³⁹⁵ Translation adapted from Julius Preuss *Biblical and Talmudic Medicine*, trans. Fred Rosner (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 163.

³⁹⁶ Firkowitz 187: חודש

³⁹⁷ Vatican 113: מר

³⁹⁸ Vatican 113, 130: מכאן ואילך

³⁹⁹ Munich 95: ואוסף

⁴⁰⁰ Vatican 130 adds: [כל היום]

Discussing the age at which children should begin formal education, Rabbi Yitzhak reports an early rabbinic statement that a father should “roll with” i.e. put up with or tolerate, a child until the age of twelve, after which, if the child does not begin studying, the father should make his son’s life difficult until he does. The Bavli objects that Rav states elsewhere that formal schooling should start at age six.

The Bavli resolves the contradiction through a statement of Abaye’s mother. Abaye says, “Mother said to me: Six years old for Scripture, ten years old for Mishnah. Twelve years old for fasting for a full day.”⁴⁰¹ Tosafot explain that her statement resolves the contradiction because six is the age for beginning scriptural instruction, ten is the age to begin teaching Mishnah and “roll with” his learning preferences, while twelve is the age to begin laying down the law.

In this case, the knowledge of Abaye’s mother has not only practical significance for the education of children but is authoritative enough to be adopted into rabbinic discourse. Abaye’s quoting of his mother in the context of the appropriate age to educate children in different areas of the rabbinic curriculum is also significant in light of the rabbinic exemption of mothers from the obligation to teach Torah to one’s children.⁴⁰² Rather than being an enabler of her sons in their pursuit of Torah study, Abaye’s mother speaks with authority about the rabbinic curriculum for children.

⁴⁰¹ Abaye quotes his mother rather than the Mishnah Pirkei Avot 5:21 treatment of this question: הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, בֶּן חָמֵשׁ עָשָׂר לְמִשְׁנָה, בֶּן שְׁלֹשׁ עָשָׂר לְתוֹרָה לְמַצּוֹת, בֶּן חָמֵשׁ עָשָׂר לְתַלְמוּד. “He [R. Judah ben Teima] used to say: Five years old for [the study of] Scripture, ten years old for [the study of] Mishnah, thirteen years old for commandments, fifteen years old for [the study of] Talmud...” It would be interesting to explore her statement in the context of other lists of ages for studying specific matters in the ancient world.

⁴⁰² Tosefta Qiddushin 1:11 and Bavli Qiddushin 29b.

Circumcision Case Study

One text, however, deserves particular attention as it may break the mold of the Bavli's whole-heartedly accepting Abaye's mother's expertise. Bavli Shabbat 134a contains what Fonrobert terms Abaye's mother's "Manual of Infant Care"—seven statements in her name about how to care for infants after their birth. The last two of these statements concern determinations of whether an infant is ready to be circumcised:

ואמר אביי אמרה לי אם האי ינוקא דסומק דאכתי לא איבלע ביה דמא ליתרחו ליה⁴⁰³ עד דאיבלע ביה דמא⁴⁰⁴ ולימהלוה⁴⁰⁵ דירוק ואכתי⁴⁰⁶ לא נפל ביה דמיה ליתרחו עד דנפל ביה דמיה ולימהלוה

And Abaye said: Mother told me: That baby that is red, for until now blood has not been absorbed in him, they should wait for him until his blood is absorbed and then circumcise him. [A baby] that is green and until now his blood has not fallen in him, they should wait until his blood falls in him and then circumcise him. (Bavli Shabbat 134a)

The editor immediately connects these statements to stories about an early rabbi, Nathan the

Babylonian:

דמנא, אמר רבי נתן: פעם אחת הלכתי לכרכי הים, ובאת אשה אחת לפני שפלה בנה ראשון ומת, שני ומת, שלישי, הביאתו לפני, ראיתיו שהוא אדום.⁴⁰⁷ אמרתי לה: ⁴⁰⁸המתיני לו עד שיבלע בו דמו, והמתינה לו עד שנבלע בו דמו⁴⁰⁹, ומלה אותו וקנה, והיו קורין אותו "נתן הבבלי" על שמי.

שוב פעם אחת הלכתי למדינת קפוטקא, ובאת אשה אחת לפני שפלה בנה ראשון ומת, שני ומת, שלישי הביאתו לפני, ראיתיו שהוא ירוק. הצצתי בו ולא ראיתי בו דם ברית. אמרתי לה: המתיני לו עד שיפול בו דמו, והמתינה לו ומלה אותו וקנה, והיו קורין שמו "נתן הבבלי" על שמי.⁴¹⁰

⁴⁰³ Munich 95: לישתהי

⁴⁰⁴ Oxford 366: ובתר הכי

⁴⁰⁵ Oxford 366 adds: והאי

⁴⁰⁶ Oxford 366: משום דאכתי

⁴⁰⁷ All the versions add: דהצצתי בו ולא ראיתי בו דם ברית

⁴⁰⁸ Oxford 366 and Vatican 108 add: בתי

⁴⁰⁹ Missing from mss.

⁴¹⁰ These baraitot are also quoted as a unit on Bavli Hullin 47a, where they are brought to demonstrate that red and yellow animal lungs may heal.

As it is taught in a Baraita: Rabbi Natan said: One time I went to the seaside town, and one woman came before me who had circumcised her first son and he died, a second one and he died. She brought the third one before me. I saw that he was red. I said to her: Wait for him until his blood is absorbed. She waited for him until his blood was absorbed and he lived. They named him “Natan the Babylonian” after me.

Again one time I went to the city/province of Cappadocia, and a woman came before me who circumcised her first son and he died, her second one and he died. She brought the third one before me. I saw that he was yellow. I looked at him and did not see circumcision blood in him. I said to her: Wait for him until his blood falls into him. She waited for him and circumcised him and he lived. They named him “Natan the Babylonian” after me.

In these colorful stories, the tannaitic rabbi Rabbi Nathan the Babylonian instructs women to wait until after the eighth day to circumcise their sons when he sees that they are not physically able, a fact which he sees by the color of their skin (red or yellow). There are two noteworthy points in these stories. First, they are presented in a parallel structure. In both, Rabbi Natan visits a faraway place. In both, a woman comes to see him whose first two sons have died after their circumcision. In both, he gives the woman the lifesaving advice to wait a few more days before circumcising her third son. Finally, he brags in both that when his advice bears fruit, the grateful families name the boys after him.⁴¹¹ The nearly identical structure suggests that one story was modeled after the other. Indeed, there is a parallel to the second story in Tosefta Shabbat but no parallel of the first. It is therefore likely that the Bavli creates the first story so that the two tales together echo both of Abaye’s mother’s teachings on the matter.⁴¹²

According to Fonrobert, juxtaposing Abaye’s mother’s teachings with the teachings of the much earlier Natan the Babylonian diminishes the authority of Abaye’s mother. “The woman’s voice would then merely announce and formulate as a general rule that which the

⁴¹¹ The idea that the children were named after him is reminiscent of R. Elazar discussed in chapter 2.

⁴¹² It is noteworthy that there are fewer manuscript variants in the second story. This strengthens the assessment that the first story is a Bavli invention.

tannaitic rabbi has already performed authoritatively.”⁴¹³ Instead of teaching knowledge herself, she ends up introducing the more authoritative voice of an earlier male rabbi.⁴¹⁴

The juxtaposition of these stories, however, also lends itself to another interpretation. It is possible that the Bavli is doing some anthologizing here, as is its wont. It has a narrative source to complement the prescriptive statements of Abaye’s mother and so the editors place the narrative here because of its related content. Once the two sources are next to each other, they notice that the narrative covers only one of the cases Abaye’s mother addresses and so the editors craft another story so that the pieces fit together.

Fonrobert’s reading could be correct, however, without undermining the authority the Bavli accords Abaye’s mother in other cases. The Bavli’s desire to denigrate Abaye’s mother’s teachings in this case may lie in the rabbinic discomfort with the idea of mothers circumcising their sons. Both legal discussions and rabbinic narratives object to maternal involvement in the circumcision ritual. Bavli Qiddushin 29b, for example, discusses the obligations of a father to circumcise his son and explores what happens should a father neglect to do so:

למולו מנלן דכתיב וימל אברהם את יצחק בנו⁴¹⁵ והיכא דלא מהליה אבוא מיחייבי בי דינא למימהליה...
והיכא דלא מהליה בי דינא מיחייב איהו למימהל נפשיה

From where is the obligation to circumcise him? As it is written, “And Abraham circumcised Isaac his son. And where his father has not circumcised him, the court is obligated to circumcise him...and where the court has not circumcised him, he is obligated to have himself circumcised.

⁴¹³ Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity*, 156-157.

⁴¹⁴ In the unwritten rules of Talmudic discourse, statements by earlier rabbinic authorities carry more authoritative weight than those of later authorities. As well, the last statement in a sugya is generally received as most authoritative. Nonetheless, Segal argues the inverse, saying, “This narrative ending to the sequence of advice of the mother, there is in my opinion a strengthening of the knowledge of the mother, even though it seemingly tries to praise and extol R. Natan. (Segal, 59-60)

⁴¹⁵ The Guadalajara printing (1480) adds בן שמונת ימים כאשר צוה אותו אלהים אותו ולא אותה

This passage states that if for some reason the father has not circumcised his son, the responsibility falls on the rabbinic court. If they do not succeed in this mission, it is the son's own responsibility when he matures. The mother is not mentioned at all as a possible actor.⁴¹⁶ Gwynn Kessler discusses the implications of this omission: "This hierarchy, then, utterly erases the mother, suggesting that she is not only exempt but also prohibited from circumcising her son."⁴¹⁷ Bavli Avodah Zarah 27a takes this erasure further, ultimately attempting to reread the only biblical data we have for a mother circumcising her son.⁴¹⁸ Exodus 4:24 reports that Zipporah circumcised her and Moses' son. While this is ostensibly biblical evidence for the mother's fitness for circumcision, the Bavli reads it differently:

ומי איכא למאן דאמר אשה לא⁴¹⁹
והכתיב (שמות ד, כה) ותקח צפורה צר
קרי ביה ותקח
והכתיב ותכרות
קרי ביה ותכרת דאמרה לאיניש אחרינא ועבד
ואיבעית אימא אתיא איהי ואתחלה ואתא משה ואגמרה:

And is there anyone who says that a woman is not [permitted to circumcise]?!
But it is written "and Zipporah took a flint [and cut off the foreskin of her son]!
Read into it, "and she caused [him] to take"—that she told someone else and he did it.
And if you wish, say [that] she came and began [the circumcision] and Moses came and finished it.

⁴¹⁶ In fact the next line asks, "אידי מנלן דלא מיחייבא?" "Why is she [i.e. the mother] not obligated?" It answers that the verse describing Isaac's circumcision says, "כאשר צוה אותו אלהים" "as God commanded him"—it reads this "him" as exclusive--אותו ולא אותה-- "him and not her." This line is missing from the Guadalajara printing, likely because it has it earlier. (See previous note.)

⁴¹⁷ Gwynn Kessler, "Let's Cross That Body When We Get to It: Gender and Ethnicity in Rabbinic Literature," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73, No. 2 (June, 2005): 338.

⁴¹⁸ This discussion closes a discussion regarding various types of people's ability to circumcise. The last group under scrutiny is women. According to the Bavli, R. Yohanan may have permitted women to circumcise, while Rav did not permit them to do so. See Shaye J.D. Cohen, *Why Aren't Women Circumcised*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 98-99.

⁴¹⁹ Munich 95 adds בת מיל' היא

The discussion of Zipporah's circumcision begins by expressing incredulity at anyone thinking that mothers would not be permitted to circumcise their sons, considering the fact that Zipporah does so in the Torah. It closes, however, by re-vocalizing the verses, stating that Zipporah merely enabled her son to be circumcised rather than circumcising him herself. This rereading of the verses attests to a reluctance on the part of the Bavli to allow the precedent of a mother circumcising her son to stand. In addition to this discussion, Kessler and others note narrative evidence for the Bavli's discomfort with maternal circumcision. In most, if not all, of the cases where mothers circumcise their sons, the Bavli reports that the infant dies.⁴²⁰

This discomfort with the mother's role in circumcision generally may explain why the Bavli may subtly denigrate Abaye's mother's expertise in the realm of circumcision. There was something uniquely threatening about a woman teaching circumcision-related remedies.⁴²¹ Perhaps the Bavli re-attributes her knowledge to an earlier, male, authority to once again reread evidence of women circumcisers.⁴²² Therefore, although Abaye's mother's authority may be diminished by the Bavli in the case of her teachings regarding the fitness of an infant to be circumcised, this diminishment does not reflect how the Bavli receives her teachings in other areas.⁴²³

⁴²⁰ Kessler, "Gender and Ethnicity," 240. Bavli Yevamot 64b, for example, records an early rabbinic source in which three sisters circumcise their sons who then die.

⁴²¹ This discomfort may of course have had to do with the maleness of the body involved in this ritual.

⁴²² It is, however, worth noting that in the first statement in the "Manual of Infant Care" Abaye's mother discusses treatment of the circumcision wound.

אמר אבאי, אמרה לי אם: האי חלוק דגנוקא, לפניה לסיטריה לעילאי, דילמא מידביק גרדא מיניה, ואמי לידי כרות שפכה. אימיה דאבאי עבדא כיסתא לפלגא.

Abaye said: Mother said to me: This bandage of the infant, flip over its upper side, lest a thread from it gets stuck and his urethra becomes disconnected. The mother of Abaye made a pouch for half [of the penis]. (the manuscripts have some variants here—not essential for my purposes but would change the translation some)

⁴²³ Monika Amsler has recently argued that three of the statements in the manual are more appropriate remedies for animal young than for human babies. Monika Amsler, "Babies or Goats?! A Critical Evaluation of bShab 134b and

Conclusion

In his *Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*, Jeffrey Rubenstein describes the stammaitic academy as follows: “The rabbinic academy is an insular space. Sages leave their wives and homes for many years, take up residence at the academy, and spend all disposable time in passionate study of the beloved Torah.”⁴²⁴ The stammaitic culture Rubenstein described is often seen as one that stayed static throughout the rabbinic period, but Rubenstein notes that this culture is different from that which preceded it. Seeing the relationship between Abaye and his mother shows how differently he saw his role as rabbi from that of the culture that Rubenstein describes.

It is crucial to uncover and bring texture to these earlier layers of rabbinic culture. As Tomoko Masuzawa wonders:

What if ‘being historical’ is not a matter of recovering and reconstructing a richly nuanced narrative truth, full of ‘thick descriptions,’ of a certain wholeness of a past, but instead is a matter of more or less outwitting such a compelling narrative truth and letting some forgotten moments and contours of the past ‘flare up,’ as Walter Benjamin used to say, in order to illumine and decompose the compulsive narrativity of history that dictates the ideology of the present?⁴²⁵

According to Talmudic evidence, Abaye’s mother (or her literary construction) was a medical expert, midwife, and expert in child development; she was also a mother or foster mother passing on knowledge to her son. Her maternal relationship to Abaye does not diminish

the Question of the Relationship Between Veterinary and Human Medicine in the Talmud,” in *Female Bodies and Female Practitioners in the Medical Traditions of the Late Antique Mediterranean World*, eds. Lennart Lehmhaus and Christine Salazar (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck [forthcoming]). Amsler suggests that the Bavli has drawn here from a veterinary treatise with stereotyped language, introduced by “This infant who...” When the Bavli folds it into the discussion of the Mishnah regarding circumcision, it adds teachings about circumcision, matching them to the form of the other statements it includes.

⁴²⁴ Rubenstein, *Culture of the Babylonian Talmud* (Baltimore, MD.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 1-2.

⁴²⁵ Tomoko Masuzawa, “Culture” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 91.

the importance of her presence in the Talmud; on the contrary—it demonstrates the potential significance of knowledge transmitted by a mother in the home, and it is the maternal relationship between Abaye and his mother that enables the inclusion of feminine knowledge in the first place.

APPENDIX

A CATALOGUE OF ABAYE'S MOTHER'S TEACHINGS⁴²⁶

Healing Remedies

שבת סו ע"ב

מאי קשרים – אמר אדא מרי אמר רב נחמן בר ברוך... - קישורי פואה אמר אביי, אמרה לי אם: תלתא - מוקמי, חמשה - מסו, שבעה – אפילו לכשפים מעלי...
אמר אביי, אמרה לי אם: כל מנייני, בשמא דאימא, וכל קטרי, בשמאלא.
ואמר אביי, אמרה לי אם: כל מנייני דמפרשי, כדמפרשי, ודלא מפרשי, ארבעין וחד זימני.

כתובות י ע"ב

דאמר אביי, אמרה לי אם: תמרי מקמי נהמא כי נרגא לדיקולא בתר נהמא כי עברא לדשא

גיטין ע ע"א

אמר אביי, אמרה לי אם: כולהו שקייני תלתא ושבעא ותריסר והאי עד דמתסי כולהו שקייני אליבא ריקנא, (והאי בתר דאכל ושתי ועייל לבית הכסא ונפיק ומשי ידיה ומייתו ליה בונא דשתיתא דטלפחי ובונא דחמרא עתיקא וניגבלינהו בהדי הדדי וניכול וניכרוך בסדיניה וניגניה וליכא דנוקמיה עד דקאי מנפשיה וכי קאי לישקליה לסדיניה מיניה ואי לא הדר עילויה).

שבת סו ע"ב ואמר אביי, אמרה לי אם: לאשתא בת יומא, לישקול זוזא חיוורא וליזיל למלחתא וליתקול מתקליה מילחא ולצייריה בחללא דבי צואר בנירא ברקא. ואי לא, ליתוב אפרשת דרכים, וכי חזי שומשמנא גמלא דדרי מדי, לישקליה ולישדייה בגובתא דנחשא, וליסתמיה באברא, וליחתמי בשיתין גושפנקי, ולברזוליה ולידריא, ולימא ליה: טעונך עלי וטעונאי עלך.

גיטין סז ע"ב

אמר אביי, אמרה לי אם: לשימשא בת יומא, כוזא דמיא. בת תרי יומי, סיכורי, בת תלתא יומי, בשרא סומקא אגומרי וחמרא מרקא. לשימשא עתיקא, ליתי תרנגולתא אוכמתי וליקרעה שתי וערב וליגלחיה למציעתא דרישיה ולותביה עילויה וננחיה עילויה עד דמיסרך ולינחות וליקום במיא עד צואריה עד דחליש עלמא עילויה, ולימוד ולסליק וליתיב. ואי לא, ליכול כרתי ולינחות וליקום במיא עד צואריה עד דחליש עלמא עילויה ולימוד ולסליק וליתיב. לשימשא, בישרא סומקא אגומרי וחמרא מרקא. לתלגא, בישרא שמינא אגומרי וחמרא חייא.

עבודה זרה כח ע"ב

דאמר אביי, אמרה לי אם: לא איברי כולייתא אלא לאדונא

עירובין כט ע"ב

אמר אביי, אמרה לי אם: הני כיסאני מעלו לליבא, ומבטלי מחשבתא.
ואמר אביי, אמרה לי אם: האי מאן דאית ליה חולשא דליבא לייתי בישרא דאטמא ימינא דדיכרא, ולייתי כבויי דרעיתא דניסן. ואי ליכא כבויי דרעיתא, לייתי סוגייני דערבתא וניכבביה וניכול ונשתי בתריה חמרא מרקא.

⁴²⁶ Thank you to Orit Segal for including this list at the end of her thesis ("Kolot nashiyim," 64-65). I have organized her list into categories and in some cases added additional context.

כתובות נ"א

אמר אביי, אמרה לי אם: האי בר שית דטרקא ליה עקרבא ביומא דמישלם שית – לא חיי (מאי אסותיה מררתה דדיה חזרתא בשיכרא נשפייה ונשקיה. האי בר שתא דטריק ליה זיבורא ביומא דמישלם שתא – לא חיי מאי אסותיה אצותא דדיקלא במיא נשפייה ונשקיה)

Manual of Infant Care

שבת קלג, ע"ב – שבת קלד ע"א

ונותנין עליה איספלנית: אמר אביי אמרה לי אם איספלניתא דכולהון כיבי שב מינאי תרבא וחדא קירא רבא אמר קירא וקלבא רישנא דרשה רבא במחוזא קרעינהו בני מניומי אסיא למנייהו אמר להו שבקי לכו חדא דאמר שמואל האי מאן דמשי אפיה ולא נגיב טובא נקטרו ליה חספניתא מאי תקנתיה לימשי טובא במיא דסילקא: ...
אין עושין לה חלוק כו': אמר אביי אמרה לי אם האי חלוק דינוקא לפניה לסיטרא לעילאי דילמא מידביק גרדא מיניה ואתי לידאי כרות שפכה
אימיה דאביי עבדא כיסתתא לפלגא אמר אביי האי ינוקא דלית ליה חלוק לייתי בליתא דאית ליה שיפתא וליכרכיה לשיפתא לתתאי ועייף ליה לעילאי
ואמר אביי אמרה לי אם האי ינוקא דלא ידיע מפקתיה לשייפיה מישחא ולוקמיה להדי יומא והיכא דזיג ליקרעיה בשערתא שתי וערב אבל בכלי מתכות לא משום דזריף
ואמר אביי אמרה לי אם האי ינוקא דלא מייץ מיקר דקר פומיה מאי תקנתיה ליתו כסא גומרי ולינקטיה ליה להדי פומיה דחיים פומיה ומייץ
ואמר אביי אמרה לי אם האי ינוקא דלא מנשתיה לינפפיה בנפוחתא ומנשתיה
ואמר אביי אמרה לי אם האי ינוקא דלא מעוי ליתו סליתא דאימיה ולישרקיה עילויה ומעוי
ואמר אביי אמרה לי אם האי ינוקא דקטין לייתו לסילתא דאימיה ולישרקיה עילויה מקוטנא לאולמא ואי אלים מאולמא לקוטנא
ואמר אביי אמרה לי אם האי ינוקא דסומק דאכתי לא איבלע ביה דמא ליתרחו ליה עד דאיבלע ביה דמא ולימהלוה דירוק ואכתי לא נפל ביה דמיה ליתרחו עד דנפל ביה דמיה ולימהלוה
דתניא א"ר נתן פעם אחת הלכתי לכרכי הים ובאת אשה לפני שמלה בנה ראשון ומת שני ומת שלישי הביאתו לפני ראיתי שהוא אדום אמרתי לה המתניני לו עד שיבלע בו דמו המתנה לו עד שנבלע בו דמו ומלה אותו וחיה והיו קורין אותו נתן הבבלי על שמי
שוב פעם אחת הלכתי למדינת קפוטקיא ובאת אשה אחת לפני שמלה בנה ראשון ומת שני ומת שלישי הביאתו לפני ראיתי שהוא ירוק הצצתי בו ולא ראיתי בו דם ברית אמרתי לה המתניני לו עד שיפול בו דמו והמתנה לו ומלה אותו וחיה והיו קורין שמו נתן הבבלי על שמי:

Child Development

יומא עח, ע"ב

דאמר אביי, אמרה לי אם: רביתיה דינוקא , מיא חמימי ומשחא. גדל פורתא, ביעתא בכותחא, גדל פורתא, תבורי מאני.

Rumors

יבמות כה ע"א

אמר אביי, אמרה לי אם: דומי דמתא יומא ופלגא

Pain of Virginal Sexual Intercourse

כתובות לט ע"ב

אמר אביי, אמרה לי אם: כמיה חמימי על ראשיה דקרחא

Relative Worth of Sealed and Unsealed Barrels

מועד קטן יב ע"א

דאמר אביי, אמרה לי אם: בר שית סאוי ושייע מבר תמני ולא שייע

The Appropriate Ages for Children to Learn Rabbinic Texts

כתובות נ ע"א

דאמר אביי, אמרה לי אם: בר שית למקרא, בר עשר למשנה, בר תליסר לתעניתא מעת לעת ובתינוקת בת תריסר

CONCLUSIONS

Earlier scholarship has claimed that the rabbis sought to present themselves as replacing parents, and the *beit midrash* (study house) as superseding the home as the primary locus of education. In particular, the Babylonian Talmud seems to focus our attention on institutional (or, at least, pedagogical), rather than domestic, contexts for the teaching of Torah. This phenomenon lines up with a general trend toward scholasticism in late antique Babylonia.⁴²⁷

My research has shown that the Bavli does indeed sideline parents from its central project of Torah study (*talmud torah*). It does so by minimizing the biblical obligation to teach one's children Torah and by telling parents to bring their children to a school teacher to study. This does not, however, tell the full story of how the rabbis imagined their culture would be transmitted to the next generation. The Bavli creates and amplifies a separate category of religious education called *hinukh*. Assigned to parents and not sages, *hinukh* is the obligation to initiate children into ritual practice. Parents are obligated to instruct children in the intricacies of caring for ritual objects, abstaining from prohibited activities, and performing ritual acts. While scholars often describe this type of instruction as mimetic transmission, such a portrayal is insufficient. In order to carry out this role, parents must do more than simply model for their children their own performance of ritual acts. They must determine the child's readiness to take on a particular practice, provide them with the means to do so, and explain to them the how (and perhaps why) of the ritual.

⁴²⁷ See, for example, Adam Becker, "The Comparative Study of "Scholasticism" in Late Antique Mesopotamia: Rabbis and East Syrians," *AJS Review* 34:1 (April 2010): 91-113 and Noah Bickart, " 'Tistayem': An Investigation into the Scholastic Culture of the Bavli" (PhD diss., Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2015; Proquest: 3738081).

Identifying this category of religious instruction allows us to see that the home, too, was a locus of cultural transmission. To be sure, stories about rabbis going to study with rabbinic masters far from home signals an eschewing of the home as a meaningful source of transmission.⁴²⁸ My work, however, shows that the Bavli does not have a unified perspective on this question. While some work was being done to shift away from the home to the house of study, the home remains central at least to some rabbis and should also be seen as a place of Torah study and transmission of rabbinic culture.

Noticing the presence of *hinukh* also invites us to seek out other forms of cultural transmission that were occurring outside the confines of the master-disciple relationship.⁴²⁹ It allows us to open up for investigation rabbinic culture that lives outside the house of study. Identifying such transmission is tricky, because such forms of transmission typically are not semantically marked as such. I therefore argue that we can locate moments of cultural transmission by attending to interactions that involve inculcating values, beliefs, and practices in the next generation. This requires seeking out descriptions of the activity of transmission rather than discussions that stem from the transmission of a specific set of content. These descriptions usually involve an encounter between parent and child in which the parent teaches the child or provides their child with an object of cultural significance. This was the criterion by which I identified moments of cultural transmission that the rabbis themselves may not have seen as teaching.

⁴²⁸ See Haim Weiss and Shira Stav, *The Return of the Absent Father: A New Reading of a Chain of Stories from the Babylonian Talmud*, trans. Batya Stein, Divinations (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022).

⁴²⁹ Other scholars have shown that the rabbis learn from non-rabbis. See for example, Jenny R. Labendz, *Socratic Torah: Non-Jews in Rabbinic Intellectual Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). My study adds to those by focusing not on other sources of cultural production but rather on other agents of intergenerational cultural transmission.

Choosing to identify moments such as these as moments of cultural transmission expands our lens and allows us to notice the transmission (and, at times, even production) of culture that more marginal figures may be engaged in. Along these lines, I delineate a variety of maternal roles that the Bavli portrays. Mothers give ritual objects to their sons, an action that provides a concrete manifestation of cultural transmission. Mothers also teach their sons in specific contexts, such as relaying an opinion of a deceased father. An anomalous mother, the “*em*” of Abaye, even teaches him Torah in the more conventional sense. He relays her teachings and the anonymous voice incorporates them into the discourse of the Bavli. I show that the role of mother allows portrayals of knowledgeable women who are embedded in rabbinic culture to “slip past” the editors of the Bavli who generally explicitly excluded women from the realm of Torah study.

Transmission is one thing; reception is quite another. My juxtaposition of the stories of Rashbi and his son invites us to ask how the rabbis evaluated the success of their cultural transmission. To what extent did they reflect upon the degree to which their transmission had been successful? Beneath the surface of the stories about Rashbi’s son lies a tale of cultural transmission. A father has transmitted to his son the value of ascetic existence. The son takes this value and transforms it, expressing it in new ways, with different practices and for different purposes than those of his father. My study thus unearths a rabbinic cognizance of and grappling with the complexities inherent in the parental transmission of a worldview; in contrast to transmission of specific content or of a set of skills, transmission of a worldview is a much more subtle and uncertain process. This is important because it shows an awareness that no matter how much control they may exercise on the content and process of transmission, rabbinic culture is bound to change as it is transmitted.

My research opens up several lines of inquiry both internal to the study of rabbinic culture and for the broader field of religious studies. First, my work has focused on the parental roles in inculcating rabbinic culture in the next generation. It would be interesting to explore what other characters, both inside and outside the family, play a role in intergenerational cultural transmission in the Bavli. Marc Hirshman's book *Stabilization of Rabbinic Culture* analyzes key Talmudic discussions of education, in part exploring how elementary education became institutionalized.⁴³⁰ His work and that of Steven Fraade on rabbinic approaches to Targum can open up avenues for exploring how the rabbis portray the hierarchy between the sage and the elementary school instructor.⁴³¹ For example, do the rabbis view the schoolteacher as furthering their cultural project or as in competition with it? How did they portray the role of the schoolteacher in relation to the role of the parent?

Second, my work joins scholarship that examines rabbinic texts with an attention to constructions of gender. Marjorie Lehman's treatment of Bavli Yoma, for example, interrogates constructions of gender within this tractate through an examination of the domestic sphere.⁴³² Earlier scholarly schema described the rabbis as replacing the temple with the domestic home. Lehman shows how attention to family relationships highlights that the rabbis are not merely replacing the temple, but are reimagining how both the temple and home should run. I complement this picture with texts from beyond Bavli Yoma. Looking at narratives of parental

⁴³⁰ Marc Hirshman, *The Stabilization of Rabbinic Culture, 100 C.E.–350 C.E.: Texts on Education and Their Late Antique Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁴³¹ Steven D. Fraade, "Rabbinic Views on the Practice of Targum, and Multilingualism in the Jewish Galilee of the Third-Sixth Centuries," in *Galilee in Late Antiquity*, edited by Lee L. Levine (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992), 253-86, especially p. 263.

⁴³² Marjorie Lehman, *Bringing Down the Temple House: Engendering Tractate Yoma*, (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2022), muse.jhu.edu/book/98769.

cultural transmission within the Bavli and the Yerushalmi with feminist lenses helps us arrive at a more robust picture of how the rabbis of each community constructed fatherhood and motherhood.

While this work was not one of social history, it can provide data relevant to discussing the makeup of the rabbinic family in Sassanian Babylonia. The texts I analyze portray a cast of characters—a widow, a foster mother, grandfathers, legal guardians—as all being engaged in intergenerational cultural transmission. Whether or not the stories they inhabit can be taken at face value as historic occurrences, Elisheva Baumgarten points out that “...one who tells a story must strike what Elliot Goring calls ‘a rhetoric of truth.’”⁴³³ So what might we learn from these texts about the lived experiences of rabbinic families? About rabbinic childhood?⁴³⁴ About education throughout the lifecycle?⁴³⁵ On a related note, the Bavli’s reports concerning the transmission of ritual objects invites us to explore the role of objects in the lived religious lives of rabbinic Jews.⁴³⁶ Such an investigation might lead us outside the Bavli to seek out attestations of transmission of ritual objects in material culture in the sparse archaeological record. Incantation bowls, for example, are ritual objects that form a part of Jewish culture at the time of the Bavli.

⁴³³ Elisheva Baumgarten, “Mothers and Ma’asim: Maternal Roles in Medieval Hebrew Tales.” in *Mothers in the Jewish Cultural Imagination* edited by, Marjorie Lehman, Jane L. Kanarek, and Simon J. Bronner (Liverpool: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2017), 354.

⁴³⁴ My work provides greater nuance for the work of Hagith Sivan, *Jewish Childhood in the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), who brings an encyclopedic collection of rabbinic texts related to childhood and applies strong theoretical lenses to them but does not sufficiently attend to the differences in perspectives between different source collections.

⁴³⁵ For scholars doing this work in other corners of the late antique world see Kristina Sessa, *Daily Life in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018) and *Children in Antiquity: Perspectives and Experiences of Childhood in the Ancient Mediterranean*, ed. Lesley A. Beaumont, et al. (London: Routledge, 2020), doi: <https://doi-org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/10.4324/9781315542812>

⁴³⁶ For a theoretical formulation of the role of material objects in lived religion see David Morgan, “The Material Culture of Lived Religion: Visuality and Embodiment,” in *Mind and Matter: Selected Papers of NORDIK 2009, Conference for Art Historians, Jyväskylä, September 17.-19. 2009*, ed. Joanna Vakkari, Studies in Art History, vol. 41. (Helsinki: Society of Art History, 2010), 14-31.

What might they have to teach us about cultural transmission in the family? In what ways might incantation bowls, as objects, also participate in intergenerational forms of cultural transmission?⁴³⁷ How might such non-textual witnesses link up with, challenge, or subvert the picture of parental cultural transmission in the Bavli?

Finally, my work opens up the question of what role the home played in the cultures surrounding and adjacent to the rabbis of the Bavli. Scholars have, for example, documented increased scholasticism in the late antique Christian world.⁴³⁸ My work joins that of scholars such as Jan Stenger who interrogate the frames through which we look at education within scholastically-driven cultures and texts. Stenger reexamines Byzantine Christian educational philosophy in his book, *Education in Late Antiquity: Challenges, Dynamism, and Reinterpretation, 300-550 CE*.⁴³⁹ He speaks to the ways in which we can look at scholastically-driven texts and discover within them reports of education happening in non-institutional settings. His work opens up the question of whether and how scholastic writers reference the home as a locus of transmission. Do they attempt to sideline the home or otherwise express conflict with the values of the home? Do scholastic writers address the mother as a figure engaged in cultural transmission or education? Looking to the home can help decentralize our view of where education was taking place and what was being learned.⁴⁴⁰

⁴³⁷ Thank you to Sarit Kattan Gribetz for helping me formulate this question.

⁴³⁸ See Becker, “The Comparative Study of ‘Scholasticism,’” and Catherine Hezser, “Rabbis as Intellectuals in the Context of Graeco-Roman and Byzantine Christian Scholasticism,” in *Scholastic Culture in the Hellenistic and Roman Eras: Greek, Latin, and Jewish*, edited by Sean A. Adams (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2019), 169-86.

⁴³⁹ (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

⁴⁴⁰ Katharina Greschat fruitfully engages in this inquiry in her article, “Early Impressions are Hard to Eradicate from the Mind: The Lasting Influence of Domestic Education in Western Late Antiquity,” in *Teachers in Late Antique Christianity*, edited by Maria Munkholt Christensen et al. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 165-83. See also Ville Vuolanto, *Children and Asceticism in Late Antiquity: Continuity, Family Dynamics and the Rise of Christianity* (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2015) and Cornelia B. Horn, “Raising Martyrs and Ascetics: A Diachronic

From these examples, one can see that the study of parents as agents of rabbinic culture is fruitful for expanding our understanding of rabbinic culture and for refining our knowledge of the parental role in education. It also stands at the nexus of burgeoning fields of study in the ancient world more broadly such as childhood studies, studies of materiality and lived religion, and expanded understandings of the variety of social relationships at play in education in the ancient world more broadly.

Comparison of Educational Role-Models for Early Christian Children,” in *Children in Late Ancient Christianity*, edited by Cornelia B. Horn and Robert R. Phenix (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2009).

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