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Dear Seminar Members,

What I'm posting for you now is clearly a work in progress. It's a little on the short side, but I think there's enough here for you to see what I'm trying to get at, a new way of looking at relatively familiar rabbinic material – meal blessings and the Passover seder. The crucial question for me here is: how do early rabbinic meal rituals, especially prescribed table talk, shape the meaning of the meal experience for their participants? How are rabbinic myths deployed at meals to cultivate and reinforce a distinctively “rabbinic” worldview? Looking forward to your comments and feedback.

Performing Myth, Performing Midrash at Rabbinic Meals

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A major achievement of our seminar has been the recognition that all formal banquets of the Greco-Roman period more or less assume and draw from the same set of conventions of the Greco-Roman symposia. They differ in the different selection, emphasis, and combination of these conventions by the groups who perform the meals, and in the different meanings those groups attribute to their particular performances of them. In light of this, it seems increasingly clear that we need to focus more attention to *myths*, to the numinous “back stories” put into play at the Greco-Roman banquets we study, especially early Jewish and Christian meals. Through various ritual strategies, communal myths of identity and aspiration are evoked to encourage participants to experience their “ordinary meal” as somehow “enhanced,” as part of a broader, deeper social, historical, cosmic drama. We saw particularly striking examples of this in Philo’s account of the Therapeutai and Therapeutrides’ ritual re-enactment of the crossing of the Red Sea through their antiphonal choral singing and dance.¹ Whether or not real

¹ See “2004: Deciphering and Ancient Meal: The Therapeutae as a Test Case” in Harland, Philip A., ed. "Meals in the Greco-Roman World: A Seminar of the Society of Biblical Literature."

Therapeutae ever did this or were a product of Philo's fantasy, Philo was not alone among Greco-Roman Jews in recommending that certain specific passages from the Torah be recited, sung, taught, or explained over the dinner table. In particular, the early rabbinic meals prescribed and described in the Tannaitic sources adopt the sympotic convention of appropriate table talk about meal topics – as they put it, *divre torah al ha-shulhan* (“words of Torah” both about and literally “over the table”) - to bring their communal myths of identity and aspiration to bear on the participants' experience of performing the meals. These words of Torah recited, sung, and explained at the table do not stand alone, but are integral parts of a ritual process. They are what Jane Harrison would call the “things said” (*legomena*) component of her tripartite model of ritual based on ancient Greek mysteries: “things said,” “things done” [*dromena*] and “things shown” (*deiknymena*). The thesis of this paper is that the strategic placement of “words said” at rabbinic meals are kind of *midrash* on the things done and shown at the meal (and vice versa), that is, a distinctively early rabbinic way of deploying Jewish myths at their meals. As the modern Jewish foodie movement puts it in the words of the neo-Hasidic Rebbe Shlomo Carlebach, “The Torah is a commentary on the world, and the world is a commentary on the Torah.”²

In other words, to say “Blessed are You YHWH our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth”³ with the bread right in front of you, or “Because

<http://www.philipharland.com/meals/GrecoRomanMealsSeminar.htm> - Seminar Papers Online (for 2005) 11/5/08.

² Nigel Savage and Anna Stevenson, *Food for Thought: Hazon's Curriculum on Jews, Food, and Contemporary Life* (New York, NY: Hazon, 2007).

³ From Ps. 104:14

God ‘passed over’ [*pasah*] over our fathers’ homes in Egypt”⁴ and “Because the Egyptians embittered [*marreru*] our fathers lives in Egypt”⁵ right before one does not eat a *pesah* lamb sacrifice but does eat the bitter herb, *maror* at the Passover seder are actually rather complex interpretations of Torah in which Jewish myth, ritual, and doctrine are fused into single psychosomatic experiences.

There are several ways scholars have characterized the ways that myths are deployed in rabbinic meal rituals. Joseph Tabory, in his research the Passover Haggadah, distinguishes two different ways the words of the Passover *seder* are connected to the other ritual actions: “remembrance” vs. “re-enactment.” Thus, when one mentions the bitter herb in the haggadah, “telling” of the Passover story “because the Egyptians embittered our fathers’ lives, that’s a remembrance. But when one postpones the singing of triumphant Psalm 114 of Hallel “*betzeyt yisrael mi-mitzrayim...*” to after the meal (according to the school of Shammai,) one is “re-enacting” the Exodus from Egypt. The Hallel psalms are like the song at the sea that the Israelites sang having miraculously crossed the Red Sea, *after* they had sacrificed and ate the Pesah lamb. Hence to re-enact the Exodus at the seder, one doesn’t sing this “song at the sea” until after eating the Passover meal.⁶ Tabory seems to imply that re-enacting is somehow a “more mythic” experience than remembering, as if singing and re-enacting dissolves more thoroughly the “what they did then/ what we’re doing now” awareness, than if one merely spoke words about the Exodus as a sort of self-conscious mnemonic. Without drawing the same distinction between *shirah* and *haggadah* (singing vs. telling the story), Ruth

⁴ From Ex 12:27

⁵ From Ex 1:14

⁶ Joseph Tabory, *Pesah Dorot: Perakim be-Toldot Lel Ha-Seder* (Tel Aviv: ha-Kibuts ha-meuhad, 1996), 314.

Fredman similarly suggests that the mythic dimension of the Passover ritual resides in its timeless quality,

The Seder works with time on many levels, presenting the Exodus as a historical event as well as paradigmatic sequence explaining the experience of the Jews for all times. The Exodus is both history, a sequence of events, and myth, a timeless explanatory model for the society's existence, and this 'mythical history' is made objective and palpable through the objects and actions of the rituals.⁷

Baruch Bokser takes Fredman a step further to say that the style of the Mishnah itself which prescribes the rabbinic seder has a "timeless quality [especially] suited to the specific mythic nature of the Passover rite."⁸

In describing the order of Passover eve and in setting out the rules of etiquette in chronological sequence, the Mishnah creates a single narrative in which attributed comments and the occasional disputes are integrated. It formulates much of the narrative with a participle construction used for the present tense and therefore suggests a timeless procedure that ostensibly remains unaffected by history.⁹

Here, even words of Torah about the table in the Mishnah that are not literally over the table (they were probably originally uttered in a Bet Midrash) nevertheless still contribute to the mythic nature of the Passover rite when it is performed over the table.

⁷ Ruth Fredman Cernea, *The Passover Seder: Afikoman in Exile* (Philadelphia : University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 95.

⁸ Baruch M. Bokser, *The Origins of the Seder : The Passover Rite and Early Rabbinic Judaism* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1984), 85.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 84

Mythic language is also usually highly metaphorical. Metaphor has been said to be way of simultaneously saying that one thing both *is* and *is not* another thing.¹⁰ In tannaitic tradition we have metaphorical words of Torah about the table in Bet Midrash discussions of the table (but not necessarily at the table), and in words specifically prescribed to be said over the table, like the scripture passages at the Passover seder that we just mentioned, and in most of the blessings to be recited at the table. Perhaps the most well-known example of the first sort of metaphorical saying is the one from m.Avot 3:3:

R. Simeon said, ‘Three who have eaten at one table and have not said words of Torah over it, it is as if they have eaten from sacrifices of the dead [*mi-zivkhey metim*], as it is said, ‘All the tables are full of vomit and filth without room for anything else [*bli makom*].’ (Is. 28:8) But if three have eaten at one table and have spoken over it words of Torah, it as if they have eaten from the table of God, as it is written (Ezek. 41:22) , ‘And he told me: This is the table that stands before the Lord.’

Here tables over which three or more have eaten and said no words of Torah are compared to idolatrous sacrifices, revolting to the senses and clearly not to God (playing on a rabbinic term for God, “*ha-Makom*,” lit. “the Place”). In contrast, the table over which three of more have eaten and said words of Torah, is like the sacrificial altar of the Temple in Jerusalem (to which the verse from Ezekiel refers) – “the table of God.” Eating plus Torah table talk *is* and *is not* the same as performing the sacrifices in God’s Temple in Jerusalem, an awareness that the emphatic repetition of “as if” (*ke-ilu*) shows.

¹⁰ James C. Livingston, *Anatomy of the Sacred: An Introduction to Religion*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998), 87.

But what if one were to recite the verse from Ezekiel 41:22: “*This* is the table that stands before the Lord,” while one was sitting at the dinner table? This is in fact exactly what R. Bahya suggests much later in the 14th century, at the beginning of his book *Shulhan Shel Arba*, which he expects his readers to have at their side at the table.¹¹

Contextualizing the demonstrative *this* of the scriptural passage at a dinner table seems to put more emphasis on the “is” rather than the “is not” dimension of the metaphor.

Something similar occurs in rabbinic blessings over food, drink, and other activities at the table. In a sense, the formulation of the most basic rabbinic blessings over food and drink at the table are fundamentally metaphorical. The participants at the rabbinic table who recite “Blessed are you God... who brings forth bread from the earth” know very well that the bread in front of them was not exactly put there in its present form directly by God. As ben Zoma is said to have said,

Blessed be the Discerner of Secrets and Blessed be Who created all these to serve me. How many labors labored Adam until he found his bread to eat: he ploughed and sowed and harvested and sheaved and threshed and winnowed and assorted (the ears) and ground and sifted (the flour) and kneaded and baked and only after all this he ate. But I rise and find all these prepared before me.¹²

This blessing is ostensibly an expression of gratitude to God for the progress and complexity of civilization and division of labor when one sees a big crowd of people, and may or may not have been uttered in the setting of a meal. Its reference to bread, and that

¹¹ Bahya ben Asher ben Hlava, "Shulhan Shel Arba" In *Kitve Rabenu Bahya*, ed. Charles Ber Chavel, 1969), 457.

¹² T. Ber. 6:5 and parallels in b. Ber 58a and y. Ber 13c, IX.2, cited by Henry A. Fischel, *Rabbinic Literature and Greco-Roman Philosophy. A Study of Epicurea and Rhetorica in Early Midrashic Writings* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 52.

immediately following it is another saying of ben Zoma about what good and bad guests say to their hosts, suggest a meal setting as a possibility.¹³ In any case, it certainly shows that sages at a rabbinic table were quite aware that God both did and did not “bring forth the bread” on the table in front of them directly “from the earth.”

I don’t mean to imply here that all “God talk” at the table is metaphorical and therefore mythic, because supernatural beings don’t really exist (at least, not in the minds of critical outside observers of religious phenomena). Rather, there is also something to be said for the Eliade’s understanding of myth as stories where the actors are supernatural beings, especially stories about the creation of how things now originally came to be *ab illo tempore*.¹⁴ That’s certainly applicable to the language of early rabbinic blessings, which as we’ve just seen, specifically refer to God’s presence and involvement with what’s served and who’s being fed at the table. So to say the words “Blessed are you YHWH God who brings forth bread from the earth” and “who creates the fruit of the vine,” “Blessed is YHWH our God from whose [table] we have eaten” (from *birkat ha-zimmun*, the “blessing of invitation to the grace after meals), or

Blessed are you YHWH our God who has sanctified us by his
commandments and commanded us and taken pleasure in us, and made his holy
Sabbath our possession out of love and favor, a remembrance of the work of
creation...[and] the Exodus from Egypt...

(from the Sabbath eve *Kiddush*) is not only to talk about God’s ongoing and past activity in general, but refer it to the *specific* things, places, and times that right now occasion their utterance. Even though these specific words of blessing were not necessarily fixed

¹³ Ibid., 52

¹⁴ Livingston, *Anatomy of the Sacred: An Introduction to Religion*, 87

(as Tannaitic disputes over wording suggest), they were orally composed improvisations of certain basic syntactical formulae employed by the early rabbinic sages.¹⁵ And as later medieval commentators pointed out, even the syntax of the blessings teach something important about the way human beings experience God. In particular, the typical shift from the 2nd person singular “You” of the first part of blessings over performing a commandment (e.g., the Sabbath Kiddush, washing hands before a meal, eating matzah or maror at the Passover seder), to the third person singular in the second part, “Barukh atah Adonai...asher kidshanu be-mitzvotav...” reminds us how God is both visible and invisible. God is visible through His actions and their effects in the world – “Blessed are You”, but who He is in and of Himself (the “Face of God” denied to Moses in Ex. 33:20-22) we cannot see or know – “who [no actual subject except the one implied in the verb] commanded us...”.¹⁶ So in a sense, even the syntactical formulation of rabbinic blessings themselves is metaphorical, stating that God is both visibly present and not present at one’s table as one eats what, when, and how God commanded one to eat.

It seems that this “is/is not” awareness is quite important to the Tannaitic rabbis’ own conceptualization of how their sacred myths of the Torah are to be deployed at meals. I would label this the “*ke-ilu* (as if) experience,” after the expression used in two of the most well-known early rabbinic statements on how one is to experience “words of Torah” at a meal:

In every generation a person should view himself as if (*ke-ilu*) he himself went out of Egypt (m. Pesah 10:4)

¹⁵ J. Heineman, *Hatefilah be Tekufat Ha-Tannaim ve-Ha-Amoraim* Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1978.

¹⁶ Bahya ben Asher ben Hlava, *Shulhan Shel Arba'*, 467

and

if three have eaten at one table and have spoken over it words of the Torah, it is as if (*ke-ilu*) they had eaten from the table of the Omnipresent, for it is written (Ezekiel 41.22) “He said to me, 'This is the table which is before the LORD.’” (m. Avot 3:3)

In this way, whether one sings or says these words of Torah, it is not *either* a “re-enactment” *or* a “recollection” of rabbinic myths – it is *both/and*. The separate awareness of the “past-ness” and “present-ness” are fused into single experience, prompted especially by specific visual cues provided by the food, drink, activities, and company at the table. It’s the early rabbinic performance of the sympotic convention of the *fait divers*, the self-conscious use of a notable thing or event at the table to provoke an appropriate table conversation.

Demonstrative pronouns in what one actually says play a particularly crucial role connecting the past-ness of the story to the present-ness of the meal being experienced by the participants, though sometimes non-verbal cues can have the same effect. In “the four questions” immediately preceding R. Gamaliel’s “answer,” that is, his instructions to say pesah, matzah, and maror at the Passover seder, a father provides a script of questions that accentuate the demonstrative. “Why is *this* night different from all other nights?...on *this* night it’s all *matzah*, ...on *this* night *maror*, ...on *this this* night it’s all roasted meat [i.e., the *pesah* lamb],...on *this* night [we dip] twice.” (m. Pesah. 10:4). Likewise, Rabban Gamaliel’s talking points: “Whoever has not said *these* words/things [*devarim*] on Passover...*These are them* [*ve-aylu hen*]: *Pesah, matzah, maror.*” To each of these

things immediately present at the table in word or in fact one is to attach verbally a scriptural verse or allusion to the past Passover story.

Pesah - because the Omnipresent “skipped over [*pasah*] the houses” of our fathers (Ex 12:27); *matzah* – because our fathers were redeemed in Egypt (Deut 16:3);¹⁷ *maror* – because the Egyptians “embittered [*mereru*] the lives” of our fathers in Egypt...as it is said, “you shall tell your child on *that* day, saying, because of *this* that YHWH did for *me* when *I* went out of Egypt.”(m. Pesah 10:5)

The paronomasia of words in the scriptural allusions with names of the items at the table “pesah [the verb]/pesah [the noun], “*yatzah* mi-mitzraim/*matzah*,” and “mereru/maror” even further bridges the conceptual gap between the past and present Passovers. I hear and see them as the *same* things even though I am also aware on some level they are not.

There is a kind of “associative thinking” encouraged here, what the medieval Jewish table conversationalist R. Bahya ben Asher describes as both “*mekavnin et mahshevato u-meshotetet*” (“directing one’s thought and having it ramble about”),¹⁸ and what the modern scholar of midrash Marc Bregman would call “midrash as visualization.”¹⁹ Bregman’s remarks here are particularly apt:

¹⁷ "Masekhet Pesahim" In *Shisha Sidre Mishnah*, ed. Chanoch Albeck, 6th ed., Vol. Seder Mo'ed (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1973), 178. so Albeck in n5.

¹⁸ Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus, "The Ritualization of Scripture in Rabbenu Bahya's *Shulhan Shel Arba'*," *World Congress of Jewish Studies* 13 (2001), 4 (accessed July 7, 2005)., referring to what R. Bahya says in *Shulhan Shel Arba*, p. 496:

And thus it is necessary that when one eats, he direct his thought [*mahshevato*] and that it ramble about [*meshotetet*] the Holy One Blessed Be He over each and every bite according to the matter of ‘they envisioned God and they ate and drank.’ [Ex 24:11]

¹⁹ Marc Bregman, "Aqedah: Midrash as Visualization," *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 2, no. 1 (2003), <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/tr/volume2/bregman.html>.

[T]he process of midrashic visualization may be pictured as a kind of double-move, from the scriptural sub-text to the mental image and from that image to the resultant midrashic text. Perhaps for this reason, the relatively ephemeral stage of mental imaging, which connects two more concrete textual expressions, has hitherto received relatively little scholarly attention. The problematic relation of the visual to the verbal might profitably be compared to what Freud described as the primary and secondary processes of the human psyche (what Jung referred to as the distinction between fantasy and directed thinking). The former, which is particularly characteristic of the original content of dreams, is more immediately visual, condensed and symbolic[,] while the latter is more logical, narrative and cognitive. Such directed thinking is employed in the secondary stage of translating the dream images into thoughts that can be expressed verbally.²⁰

While Bregman refers here to midrash taught in the rabbinic Bet Midrash, or to the literary texts in which those midrashim are preserved, what he says applies to midrash over the table as well, and even more so. The scriptural passages spoken at the table not only themselves evoke visual images as Bregman suggests, but also the verbal cues, the demonstratives we have just discussed, tell us to look at what and who is at the table. We have an even larger set of mental images at play, those prompted by the scriptural passages, those prompted by the *sight* of the food, drink, and company, at the table, and those prompted through the *other senses*— the tastes, smells, sounds, the physical feelings of hunger and satisfaction experienced at the table. The single setting of the table provides a dream-like experience of “condensed, symbolic, immediately visual” *and*

²⁰ Ibid..

taste, olfactory, auditory, palpable “images” as well. Perhaps this is the real implication of the description of revelation at Mt. Sinai in Ex 24:11: *ve-yehezu et ha-elohim ve-yokhlu vayishtu* (“they *dreamed* God and they ate and drank”).²¹ Thus I conclude that this sort of “fixing and rambling of the mind’s eye” back and forth between Torah verses said, things done, and things seen at the table, this sort of “associative thinking” is *the* characteristically rabbinic, midrashic way of deploying myth at the dinner table. This kind of performance of midrash at the table is the distinctively *mythic* “mode of paying attention” (to borrow J. Z. Smith’s term) in early rabbinic table rituals.

²¹ See Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus, "Real Eating: A Medieval Spanish Jewish View of Gastronomic Authenticity" In *Authenticity in the Kitchen : Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery*, ed. Richard Hosking (Totnes: Prospect books, 2006), 119-131., where I discuss R. Bahya’s midrash on this verse. He basically equates “words of Torah over the table” with a prophetic visionary experience of God (the *hazon* [“vision”] implied in the verb *ve-yehezu*) that is so palpable you could “eat it and drink it,” an example of *akhilah vada’it* (“real eating”).

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