

How Many Languages Does a Jew Need to Know?

“Ay, he spoke Greek.”

—SHAKESPEARE, *Julius Caesar*, Act 1, Scene 2

As a fifteen-year-old, I made my first visit to Israel. I wandered the streets, carefully sounding out the letters on store signs, proud of my ability to read the alphabet and, often enough, translate the words. One sign read in Hebrew, *sefarim*, and I knew that meant “books.” Another sign read, *falafel*, which no longer needs translating, although it was a mystery back then. Yet another read, *bank*, which actually meant “bank.” *Kafe* meant “café.” And *televisia* meant “television!” That last sign was a hard nut to crack, for it had so many letters and required pronunciation out loud to reveal its meaning.

I invoke the ascendancy of English vocabulary in Israel and, while we’re at it, elsewhere around the world as an example by which I can highlight the dominance of Greek in Roman Palestine. The preponderance of English usage points to the outsized influence American culture has today. Given the state of television and Hollywood, this is a decidedly mixed blessing, and I suppose the ancient rabbis might have felt the same way about the Greco-Roman influences, such as theaters and gladiator spectacles. That said, the rabbis were not shy about deploying Greek for the *mot juste* or using Latin terms when speaking of the military or court system. They achieved a certain *je ne sais quoi* when they trotted out Greek, much like we do when using French or, perhaps still, even Latin. As a lawyer might say, *res ipsa loquitur*; it speaks for itself.

But just how loudly did Greek and Latin speak within the ancient Jewish communities? Did every Jew know Greek? Or perhaps most rabbis lamented, like Shakespeare’s Casca, “but, for mine own part, it was Greek to me.” All told, we are talking about *thousands* of Greek words entering the rabbinic lexicon—enough to make it clear that every rabbi must have known at least some Greek, even those who were not fluent. Still other rabbis and Jews of Roman Palestine, we shall see, most probably spoke Greek as their primary language. Roman Palestine was a trilingual society in the first two centuries CE, with more Hebrew in the south, more Aramaic in the villages, and more Greek in the big cities. Over time, Hebrew usage diminished and became more academic, so that the concentration of Jews in the Galilee during the third through sixth centuries CE spoke primarily Aramaic and Greek, depending on where they lived and to whom they were speaking.

The synagogues of Roman Palestine were not exactly like the ones we attend today, even though I might argue that in our own sanctuaries there is a similar mixture of Hebrew and English, with the mix

shifting in ratio from Orthodox to Reform synagogues. Not so very long ago, Yiddish was a third language in the American synagogue linguistic mix. But, as I move away from this inexact analogy, I will argue that the rabbis of the Talmud and Midrash—that is, the Jewish literature that still exists from the ancient period—had far less to do with synagogue life than do rabbis now. There is a growing consensus that the rabbis named in ancient Jewish literature were primarily academics, confined to their disciple circles. Synagogue leadership depended on others: some who were laity (like today’s synagogue board members) and others who were perhaps some kind of clergy (but we do not know much more about them). These synagogue leaders spoke Aramaic and Greek. In the previous chapter alone we saw the use of Greek words like *ho kalos* (the Good); *augustali* (most august); *ho lamprotatos* (most illustrious), and this last example came from a synagogue floor in Tiberias, a large population and rabbinic center in the Galilee.

In nearby Caesarea, the Talmud (p. Sota 7:1, 21b) reports that a congregation not only had Greek inscriptions but recited the *Shema* in Greek! This is worth notice not only because recitation of the *Shema* is central to Jewish liturgy, but also because it is made up of passages from the Torah itself, so we might have expected the synagogue members in Caesarea to know the prayer in the Hebrew original. When Rabbi Levi sought to put a stop to the practice, Rabbi Yosé rebuked him and said, “Just because they cannot read Hebrew letters you wish them to not recite at all? Rather, they should recite it in whatever language they know.”

I would have expected Hebrew from the Jews at least in their prayers and their public reading of what is, after all, Hebrew Scriptures. Yet in a synagogue in the Land of Israel, in a major center of rabbinic learning, there was a congregation of Jews who prayed in Greek because they could not, in fact, read Hebrew. Nor, apparently, could the Jews of Caesarea even recite in Hebrew by memory, like a bar mitzvah boy today might, as they did not speak the language sufficiently to do so.

The same passage of the Talmud makes clear that some rabbis thought one should pray in synagogues in Greek or in whatever language they “could make known their hearts’ desires.” I assume that the rabbis thought God could understand Greek as well as Hebrew. But still, I find it somewhat surprising that in the heart of the Land of Israel there was such ignorance of Hebrew. While I am used to such a lament here in America, I did not expect to hear rabbis kvetching about lack of Hebrew back in the fourth century CE in the Galilee. Further, the Talmud says that Jews should recite the blessings after eating food “in whatever language they employed to acknowledge the One Whom they were blessing.” If the Jews did not use Hebrew in synagogues, there was little chance they would do so when praying at home. But this rabbinic concession to Greek usage in prayers indicates just how much Greek outweighed Hebrew in the Land of Israel.

The case for using Greek during prayer goes further. As in water-parched California, the Jews of the Land of Israel were somewhat obsessive about rain. In their Hebrew prayers they prayed for “rain in its season” or for vivifying “dew” during the hot summer months, as Jews still do today in drought-stricken areas. But the mid-third century Galilean rabbi Resh Lakish noted (p. Shevuot 3:10, 34d),

“One who sees it is beginning to rain and says *kyrie poly brekson*, is taking an oath in vain. . . .” You may infer from the word *kyrie* at the beginning of that short prayer that this entreaty was uttered in Greek. Resh Lakish declares it “an oath in vain” not because it is in Greek, but because once the rain has begun, the die has been cast. To pray for the nature of the rain to change from light rain, say, to abundant rain would be to take God’s name in vain. Indeed, the Greek of the too-eager petitioner means: “God [*kyrie*] let much [*poly*] rain fall.” You can almost hear The Band sing it: “rainmaker . . . let these crops grow tall.”

In the Land of Israel in the Roman era, then, the language of prayer was often the primary spoken language of the one who was praying. This was recognized by the rabbis, who, while they preferred to pray in Hebrew—what they called The Holy Tongue—accepted that prayers should be uttered in the language of “one’s heart’s desire.” Practically, this meant Greek for the larger urban centers.

Oddly enough, a Greek word or two has even snuck into the Hebrew prayer books that traditional Jews use to this day, whether here in America or in the modern State of Israel. When the standard prayers were being formulated, the emperor was the central figure in the Roman world. So there are many instances of the rabbis employing the vocabulary of imperial etiquette. When the emperor visited a town, the citizens came out to greet him, shouting, *Ho Kalos!* Whether it was true or not, they were proclaiming of their ruler that he was “the Good.” This same proclamation, *Ho Kalos*, has made its way into rabbinic Hebrew and appears in Greek, conjugated as though it were a Hebrew verb; it appears in Jewish prayer books as *ulekaleis*, part of a string of verbs with which Jews declare the desire to praise, extol, glorify, and proclaim the Goodness of God.

I was taught many years ago that this strangely Hebraized loanword from Greek is one of but two in the formal Hebrew liturgy. The other loanword from Greek found in the Jewish prayer book is invoked only on certain fast days. On those occasions when some historical tragedy is recalled and mourned, Jews bemoan that they were overrun by *legionot*, the Roman legions. It is an irony that even when the rabbis recall Rome as the ancient enemy, the Greek language of the majority society seeps into the otherwise Hebrew liturgy.

Prayer is a natural outpouring of the heart. I had a friend who, before he died, surprised me by admitting that he, a hard-boiled Madison Avenue executive, prayed every morning. He characterized it with the panache of a lifelong ad man, saying, “Some days it’s more ‘Please,’ and some days it’s more ‘Thank You.’” I am certain that my late friend made his daily prayers in English—spontaneous Hebrew was not part of his linguistic repertoire. This captures, I think, what happens when folks just speak their hearts to God. Even in the ancient world, Jews prayed in the tongue most comfortable to them—as I suppose should be the case for all sincere prayer.

This also can be seen in a folk prayer, which in this case one might equally characterize as folk magic. The prayer I am about to show you was found half a century ago, when a scholar was researching among Hebrew fragments preserved in an ancient Jewish book depository discovered in Fustat, or Old Cairo, Egypt. Among the thousands upon thousands of personal documents uncovered

in what is called the Cairo Geniza—its manuscripts and fragments are now preserved in libraries around the world—he found an incantation that begins in good rabbinic Hebrew and shares many formulae with standard rabbinic prayers. But then it veers wildly off course. This prayer is part of a work from the third or fourth century, appropriately called *Sefer HaRazim*—the Book of Mysteries. The particular prayer is recorded in Greek and carefully transcribed into Hebrew letters, but to ice the cake, the prayer is addressed to Helios! We have already seen that the Greek god Helios appears in zodiac mosaics of synagogue floors in the Galilee and elsewhere in the Holy Land. In beautiful rabbinic Hebrew, *Sefer HaRazim* offers prayers to God and to the angels. In the section of the work titled “The Fourth Heaven,” it instructs the would-be mystic:

If you wish to see the sun at night, travel north. Purify yourself for three weeks of all food and drink and everything unclean. At the third hour of the night stand watch, wrapped in white garments, and pronounce twenty-one times the name of the sun and the names of the angels that accompany it at night. And say: “I adjure you O angels who fly in the air of the firmament . . . in the name of the Holy King who travels on the wings of the wind, by the letters of the explicit divine name that were revealed to Adam in the Garden of Eden, Who reigns over all the constellations, and to Whom bow the sun and the moon like slaves to their master . . . I adjure you to make known to me this great miracle that I request, to show me the sun in its might upon its wheeled chariot . . . and tell me the deep secrets and make known to me all devices, but may he not harm me by any evil.” And when you have finished speaking you will hear the sound of thunder from the north and see something like lightning illuminate the earth before you. After he has shown you thus, bow and fall on your face to the earth, and pray this prayer.

Did you catch that? The person uttering this prayer has just requested to see “the sun in its might upon its wheeled chariot,” and at night, no less. What follows is the prescribed prayer for seeing the sun, or Helios. It is twenty-two words of Greek, transcribed in Hebrew letters. Professor Daniel Sperber deciphered the Hebrew script into Greek. I follow his translation into English from the decoded Greek:

I revere you HELIOS, who rises in the east, the good sailor who keeps faith, the heavenly leader who turns the great celestial wheel, who orders the holiness [of the planets], who rules over the poles, Lord, radiant ruler, who fixes the stars.

Now that’s a lot of Greek! I promise to return to this bizarre example of a Jewish prayer from fourth-century Roman Palestine. The Greek language so carefully transcribed teaches us that Jews offered their prayers in a language they hoped would be effective—Greek—and perhaps prayed to a Greek god who they thought could be effective: Helios.

Even among the thousands of works found in the old Cairo Geniza, the existence of books such as

Sefer HaRazim was very rare. Indeed, the existence of any book was rare, given how difficult it was to actually produce a book. The wealthy hired specialists who had to know a great deal in order to manufacture a book: writing in one or more languages, the production of papyrus or parchment. If the former, you needed to know how to work the reeds. If the latter, you needed to start with an animal, strip and preserve its skin, remove the hair, whiten the hide's surface, score it with guidelines, prepare an ink that would not run, etc. This was a hugely time-consuming and extremely expensive venture. The rabbis did promote the manufacture of Torah scrolls, but the rabbis' own teachings were transmitted orally, by memory. To some very real extent this was true for Greek books, too. Homer was said to be a blind poet whose works were recited or sung. In a form of reverse snobbery, *reading* the works of Homer (or of the rabbis, I suppose) was considered a kind of cheating.

The rabbis lived in a world where books were nonetheless well known. Each synagogue shared communal books, such as a Torah scroll. Actual prayer books were less common, as Jews recited their prayers by memory or the prayer leader did so while others simply responded, "Amen." But there were other kinds of books in the Jewish community; we have read evidence of Greek books. Despite this, or perhaps in an effort to promote use of Hebrew, the rabbis only reluctantly acknowledged the existence of books written in Greek, and did so in very few instances. In the Mishnah (m. Yadaim 4:6), the rabbis refer to "the books of Homer." In a wickedly clever pun, the rabbis compare the books of Homer at first to Jewish sacred texts, and then analogize them to the bones of an ass. The Hebrew phrase for "bones of an ass," *atsamot hamor*; sounds an awful lot like the Greek phrase for the "songs of Homer," *asimat homerou*. It is a clever put-down of the sacred text of the Greeks. The bilingual pun was noted by Daniel Sperber, the same smart fellow who translated that Greek prayer to Helios.

This kind of disrespect for Homer is, alas, not uncommon among the rabbis, especially in the locker-room atmosphere of the rabbinic academy. I refer to what began as small groups of young men who attended a master, their rabbi. Like the Greek philosophers, these small disciple circles took pride in their cleverness and set themselves apart from others. Over time, as the rabbis grew in strength, the groups of rabbis' disciples formed schools. In addition to the Torah and wisdom they learned, they behaved like the boys they often were—poking fun at outsiders with juvenile wit. Scattered throughout the rabbinic literature that remains, we can find barbs directed at Gentiles, Christians, non-rabbinic Jews, and at women, too. Sigh. Would that all the rabbis were a tad more, well, rabbinic. Truly this was a case of boys being boys.

Another example of this kind of disrespect is seen in a similar Greek-to-Hebrew bilingual pun found in manuscripts of the Babylonian Talmud (Shabbat 116a—it has been removed from most printed editions by Christian censors). There, the New Testament—in Greek: *evangelium*—is punned in Hebrew as *avon gilayon*, the scroll of sin. While both of these puns are unfortunate, painful, puerile, and impertinent, they do demonstrate a command of Greek among the rabbis sufficient for bilingual wordplay—no small feat.

Given this linguistic aptitude, we are not surprised to find entire phrases, sentences, and idioms from Greek carefully preserved in Hebrew letters in rabbinic texts. This use of Greek is somewhat hard to decipher, all in all. Were the rabbis native Greek speakers who spoke Hebrew only in the rabbinic academy? To be sure, Hebrew was quite uncommon as a spoken language in the Galilee. More likely the language competition was between Greek and Aramaic. I've already noted that Greek was more urban, while Aramaic was more rural. Still, both languages were widespread, with Hebrew running a distant third as a kind of formal, scholastic language. Greek was used in rabbinic circles for a variety of purposes. At times, the Greek was exactly the right term for what was being discussed. Or Greek was trotted out for effect—displaying the cultural pretensions of the speaker. Finally, we must consider the possibility that Greek was just easier for certain speakers than were Aramaic or Hebrew, so they lapsed into Greek for a bit of linguistic relief. That's what the prayer for rain we saw above feels like to me.

The rabbis employed Greek, transcribed into Hebrew letters, in their own Hebrew and Aramaic literature. I will try to demonstrate the breadth of their range of uses. As an example, e.g. (I can't resist citing instances in which we English speakers trot out Greek or Latin, even now), we find the phrase—transliterated here into Latin characters—*para basileus ho nomos agrophos*. The Greek translates as, "For the king the law is unwritten," which the rabbis (Lev. Rabbah 35:3) correctly understand to mean that the king does not feel constrained to follow the law. The rabbis offer their contrast: God, the King of the king of kings, follows the laws of the Torah scrupulously. The phrase used is in Greek, for surely that's how they heard it in response to their protests about this or that. The reply they heard: *para basileus ho nomos agrophos*—get over it, the world isn't fair and the law is not observed by everyone. The rabbis use the Greek phrase here as a sharp rejoinder to the lack of respect for law they observed among Roman authorities.

In the Palestinian Talmud (Berakhot 9:1), we are treated to a barrage of Greek terminology about the emperor and the imperial government. It is not surprising, upon reflection, to find Greek employed in discussion of the court, where Greek was the language of discourse. The emperor is referred to as *basileus*, *kaisar*, *augustus*, with all three Greek imperial titles—king (e.g., basilica), general (Caesar), augustus (as in the adjective *august*)—written in Hebrew characters. The emperor is also repeatedly referred to as *patron*, as though he were a Mafia don or a politician who took care of his precinct workers. Elsewhere in rabbinic literature, the emperor is grandiosely styled as *kosmocrator*, ruler of the cosmos. This is said tongue in cheek in the Talmud, as not only is the emperor compared to God—Who in the rabbis' eyes is the One and Only ruler of the universe—but it is dryly noted that this term is employed much as the term *hyparch*, a local governor, is used. The emperor may think he's hot stuff, but compared to God he's a *schlepper*.

Many rabbinic sources tell a story about the Roman Caesar Vespasian and Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai. When Vespasian was a general besieging Jerusalem, the great rabbi escaped the city in a coffin and made his way to him. The tale was popular as mythic history, an account of how the

rabbinic circle first was established in the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple. In the Talmudic version of this legend (Gittin 56a–b), Rabbi Yohanan greets Vespasian in Aramaic. In another rabbinic version, the rabbi greets the emperor in Hebrew, saying, “Long live my lord the Emperor!” But in the manuscripts of Lamentations Rabbah, which probably reflect the earliest and most authentic telling of the tale, the rabbi says the same thing in good military Latin: *Vive Domini Imperator!*

And then there is the story of the Emperor Hadrian, related back in chapter four. When Hadrian encountered the old man who was planting a fig tree, he asked him to bring him the fruit, should the elderly farmer live long enough to see the harvest. The old codger brought a cartful (Greek: *kartella*) of figs, and Hadrian declared, “I command [Greek: *keleumin*] to bring forth a golden divan [Greek: *sellion*] to seat him. I further command that you empty the wheelbarrow of figs and replace it with dinars [Greek: *denari*].” The narrative not only presents a sympathetic emperor, it displays correct knowledge of the emperor’s household: the language of imperial command (*keleumin*) and the furniture appropriate for someone of senior magistrate status, the *sella curulis*.

The educated rabbinic class clearly possessed a keen awareness of Greek that reflected either the high literary culture of the Roman world (Homer) or that of the imperial court. But they were not the only Jews who were fluent in Greek. Thirty years ago a group of scholars published a papyrus from Egypt written in Hebrew characters. It included the Greek word *lamprotatos* (most illustrious), which we have seen in Greek letters on a synagogue floor and which is represented in Hebrew characters in a fifth-century rabbinic commentary on the book of Genesis. The Egyptian papyrus in which *lamprotatos* is written dates to 1,600 years ago—the year 417 CE, to be precise. It is a marriage contract between two Egyptian Jews: Samuel son of Sampati and Metra daughter of Lazar. Mazal tov!

The Egyptian marriage contract shares many affinities with rabbinic marriage contracts, and where rabbinic-sounding technical language is used in the document, it is written in Aramaic. Given that to this day traditional Jewish marriage contracts are written in Aramaic using Hebrew characters, this is not surprising. But mixed in higgledy-piggledy with the Aramaic is Greek, also in Hebrew characters. The standard formula header for contracts, giving the date according to Roman rule, is recorded in Greek; later, when the items in the bride’s modest trousseau are listed, they are described in both Greek and Aramaic, all recorded on papyrus in the Hebrew alphabet. There is no mistaking the ease with which these average Egyptian Jews spoke both languages.

Thus far, I have focused on legal and more technical documents that reflect Greek as it was used in the daily lives of the ancient Jewish community. But Greek was also used by the rabbis in fifth-century Galilee when they discussed “natural science” (Gen. Rabba 14:2). Rabbi Huna explains that some children are born after seven months of gestation, others after eight. For reasons unexplained, the “seven-month” children thrive, while the eight-month children perish. Obviously, this is not empirical obstetrics and gynecology—note my use of Greek. Huna’s colleague Rabbi Abbahu offers

an explanation by way of a Greek pun. Here, the entire linguistic transaction takes place in Greek. Abbahu relies on something we observed earlier: Greek letters each have numerical value. He says “*zeta hepta, eita okto*.” This could be depicted as a simple listing of the numerical value of the Greek letters, with *zeta* equaling seven and *eita* equaling eight:

zeta=ζ=7

eita=η=8

But it can also be read as: *ze ta hepta, ei ta okto*—a Greek sentence that translates as, “The seventh lives [longer] than the eighth.” Clever Rabbi Abbahu displays his thorough facility with Greek language.

Rabbi Abbahu’s good Greek notwithstanding, many rabbis were content to display their knowledge of Greek culture by quoting in Aramaic or Hebrew translation rather than the Greek original. We have heard the story of the foolish woman who baked bread and took a vow on her sons’ lives. The moral to that story was, “Righteous or not, flee the oath,” which was reported in Aramaic in the rabbinic narrative. It is a precise translation of the Greek adage, much as we today might quote Lao Tzu’s “Even the thousand mile journey begins with the first step.” Very few people quote this in the original language. But most who quote it know it comes from Chinese culture. In other words, you can display cultural awareness even if you do not master the original tongue.

Of course, there is culture and then there is what we might call “low culture.” Think about the export of American television and movies, adored by fans worldwide—so long as the dialogue is dubbed or subtitled in the receiving culture’s language. Hollywood movies often gross as much in foreign-language versions as they do in the English originals. But for the most part, people around the world are more likely to be viewing *Rambo* than a Handel opera. The same was true to some extent even in the ancient world. The trick when reading ancient Jewish literature is to recognize the Roman original behind the Hebrew or Aramaic dubbing, as it were. Here are two examples of popular culture from the world of Roman gaming: playing dice and horse racing.

It is true that Jews played dice and probably would have done so whether or not there ever was a Rome. But the idiom for the dice throws was distinctly Roman in the case at hand. The second-century Rabbi Shimeon ben Azzai critiqued the Jewish legal system by suggesting, “A Jewish dog’s ear is better than Jewish judges” (Deut. Rabbah, ed. Lieberman, p. 13). This otherwise opaque statement can be understood only if we know that when Romans threw dice, a three was called a “dog’s ear” (*kumotes*). Throwing a dog’s ear was a winner, and so a better bet than the Jewish courts of ben Azzai’s time.

Another rabbinic statement comes from the Roman racetrack: the hippodrome. Here we are in truly Roman territory, as archeological remains of these tracks abound in sites throughout the ancient Roman world. We already had occasion to refer to the races in Antioch. The circus races were incredibly popular. Charioteers were the rock stars of their day, with high earnings, and there are

extant posters and graffiti supporting favorite drivers. The races were divided into four factions: red, white, blue, and green; and as with today's sports, everyone had "their" team. In the fifth-century commentary *Leviticus Rabbah*, the Midrash twice (13:4 and 35:6) states in Aramaic: "Poverty is as becoming to the Jews as red reins on a white horse." This sentiment is repeated in other rabbinic collections, and the comment is often interpreted in praise of poverty. Quite the contrary, however; throughout the Byzantine era, the "red" racing teams consistently lost. This rabbinic adage was an exercise in irony, disdaining poverty as a certain loser. The last thing to bet on was a red bridle.

Aphrodite and the Rabbis

The rabbis were monotheists living in a polytheistic environment. Everywhere they looked, they saw evidence of the pagan gods; especially idols. Jews did not entirely know what to make of this ubiquity of images, and there is a great deal of discussion among the rabbis about how to navigate their way through such an idolatrous world. The earliest document of the rabbis, the Mishnah, discusses the laws prohibiting idol worship (*Avodah Zarah* 3:4). The following story is offered there to explicate a shift in rabbinic legal attitudes toward pictorial art:

Proculus son of Philosophus inquired of Rabbi Gamaliel, who was bathing in the bathhouse of Aphrodite in Acco, "It is written in your Torah, 'Let nothing that has been condemned stick to your hand' (Deut. 13:18). So what are you doing in the bathhouse of Aphrodite?"

He replied, "One may not reply [to a question of Jewish law] in the bathhouse."

When they exited, he said, "I did not come on to her territory, rather she came on to mine. It was not the case that they said, 'Let us make a bathhouse as an adornment to Aphrodite.' Rather they said, 'Let us make an Aphrodite [statue] as an adornment for the bathhouse.' Another thing, even if they said to you, 'We will give you much wealth,' you still would not enter your pagan temple naked or polluted, nor would you urinate in it. Yet this [statue of Aphrodite] stands before the gutter and everyone pees right in front of her!"

"The prohibition is only regarding images of the gods that are venerated as gods. That which is not venerated as a god is permissible to enjoy."

Rabbi Gamaliel makes his point sharply. First, he displays his Jewish piety by refusing to engage in "Torah talk" while naked in the Roman bathhouse. Next, he disparages the behavior of those pagans in the baths toward the statue there. He demeans the questioner's own religious piety, even as the oddly named Proculus son of Philosophus, presumably meant to represent a knowledgeable pagan, invokes a verse of Jewish Scripture. Finally, Gamaliel pronounces a general principle that became the norm for accepting pictorial art in Jewish settings, despite the so-called prohibitions of the Second Commandment:

“You shall not make a sculptured image or any likeness of what is in the heavens above or on the earth below . . . you shall not bow down to them or worship them.” (Ex. 20: 4–5)

As Rabbi Gamaliel interprets it, only those images that are actually designed as objects of worship are forbidden. Sometimes a statue is just a statue.



MOSAIC APHRODITE IN SEPPHORIS/DIOCAESAREA

The rabbis also loved telling tales of the Roman demimonde. These stories caricatured the Romans by focusing on their seamy side. In the earliest rabbinic commentary to the biblical book of Numbers (Sifre, Shelah, #115), the rabbis gleefully narrate a heartwarming story about a happy hooker. Not

surprisingly, the love goddess Aphrodite again appears.

Numbers 15:37–41 serves as the final section of the daily *Shema* prayer, and so the paragraph commanding Jews to wear fringes, *tsitsit*, on the corners of their garments was very well known. The last verse of the paragraph begins and ends with the phrase, “I am the Lord your God.” This is just enough information for you to follow the story and get the punch line of this rabbinic joke.

Rabbi Nathan said, “Each and every commandment in the Torah has its reward. We can learn this from the commandment of *tsitsit*. It once happened that there was a man who was very careful regarding the commandment of *tsitsit*. He heard there was a prostitute in a harbor town who charged four hundred gold pieces as her price. He sent her four hundred gold pieces and made his appointment for her services. When the day came, he went and sat in her antechamber. Her maid came and told her that the man who had the appointment had arrived. She said, ‘Let him enter.’

“When he entered she spread before him seven beds of silver and a bed of gold at the very top. Between each one was a bench [*subsellium*] of silver, and the topmost was gold. But when he came to do the deed, his four *tsitsit* arose like witnesses and slapped him in the face!

“He immediately disengaged and sat down on the ground. She, too, climbed down to the ground and sat next to him. She said, ‘*Agapé* of Rome! I will not allow you to leave unless you tell me what flaw you saw in me!’

“He replied, ‘By the Temple service! There is no one as beautiful as you in the world. But the Lord our God commanded us a simple commandment wherein it is twice written, “I am the Lord your God.” The first time is to teach that God will reward us, and the second time teaches that God will also punish us.’

“She said, ‘By the Temple service! I will not allow you to leave until you write down your name, your city, and the name of the rabbinic academy where you learn Torah.’

“So he wrote what she desired and went on his way. She then arose and dispersed all of her wealth: one third to the government, one third she gave to the poor, and the final third she took with her to the rabbinic academy of Rabbi Hiyya. She asked him, ‘Rabbi, will you convert me?’

“He asked her, ‘Have you set your eye on one of my students?’

“She handed him the note that she was holding. Rabbi Hiyya called his student and said to him, ‘Rise now and take what you contracted for. When you first contracted for her it was forbidden. Now that she is converting, she shall be permitted to you.’

“If this is the reward for the commandment of *tsitsit* in this world, in the World to Come, I cannot even imagine!”

The joke demands some commentary, for even with a clever punch line, it remains a subtle

narrative about the marriage of Judaism and Hellenism, both literally and figuratively. As we have come to expect, there are Greek words dotted through the story. The first, *subsellium*, is a technical term in both Greek and Latin for a small bench or step stool—the means of ascending from one bed to the next. When the beautiful woman is rejected after the bizarre comic incident with the ritual fringes (think Three Stooges slapstick), she uses a vow formula, swearing: “*Agapé* of Rome!” *Agapé* means love, in this case, a nickname for the love goddess Aphrodite. Our pretty prostitute takes her vow on the name of her patroness/goddess, while the hapless rabbinical student takes his vow “by the Temple service.” His is a remarkable vow, given the reality of the Jerusalem Temple lying in ruins. Perhaps it represents the state of his male, er, ego at that moment.

Nevertheless, following their joint witness of what they take to be the mini-miracle of the slapping *tsitsit*, the prostitute herself is moved to switch her allegiance and she, too, vows “by the Temple service.” This is the first step in her conversion process. Next she depletes her great wealth by paying off the government in bribes to allow her to give up her profession—no doubt prostitution was a lucrative form of bribery income for the local officials. She spends one-third of her wealth on the poor—a benefaction common enough in the Jewish community but virtually unheard of among pagans. Finally, she comes to Rabbi Hiyya, who sagely discerns what has happened.

Every time my own rabbinical students read this story in its original Hebrew they stop at this point in the narrative and finally declare it too unbelievable. They simply cannot credit that the student who hired the prostitute would be stupid enough to give her his real name, let alone the name of the seminary where he studied! In our ancient rabbinic fantasy, however, Rabbi Hiyya not only susses out what happened, but then turns the woman over to the young man whose *tsistit* reminded him that the paragraph of Numbers says,

“These shall be your *tsitsit*, that you may look at them and recall all of God’s commandments and observe them, so that you do not go astray after your heart and eyes, lusting after them.”
(Num. 15:39)

The Hebrew word I translate in the biblical verse as “lusting” shares the same Hebrew root as the word for “prostitute” in our story. Although Rabbi Hiyya nowhere actually says his disciple may now marry the new convert, everything we know about rabbinic morality makes it clear that this must be the end of the story. The devotee to Aphrodite will come into God’s house. Greco-Roman Hellenism will enter the rabbinic academy and be permitted. They will happily marry; and in the world to come, who can even imagine?!