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Every place is accompanied by its own set of etiologies, origin-stories, local histories, urban myths, folklore, rumors, and gossip. A story about a journey is also about transitioning between different narratives and modes of being. In this essay I discuss one such story, about a lonely disciple from Ashkelon, a rabbinic figure named Shim'on b. Shatah, and forty witches. It is a strange story, found only in the Palestinian Talmud. Its textual tradition is complex, it contains a host of obscure characters, and for rabbinic literature it is uncharacteristically long.¹

The story is significantly comprised of both a one-way journey and round-trip one, each drawing on a different travel narrative in the Hebrew scriptures.² This essay will explore the nexus of the rabbinic journey narrative with the scriptural one, and discuss the ways in which the rabbinic story uses and re-shapes the scriptural accounts to tell the story of the patriarchy of one of the founding fathers of the rabbinic movement.

The authors of this rabbinic story, I claim, used biblical motifs and characters as models for tales about their own, and drew on a large repository of traditions relating to their characters, which can and should be reconstructed from else-

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¹ The Bavli likely alludes to a version of this story in b. San. 44b, calling it מעשה דבעיא מוכסא. Both Rashi ad loc. and R. Paltoi Gaon (Roth 1955–1956) have versions of the story clearly based on the Yerushalmi version but simplified and condensed.

² The story also bears interesting similarities to the narrative flow of Vergil’s Aeneid book 6. Both stories feature a calamity and descent to the underworld, after which the protagonist is equipped with knowledge and conviction for battle against women. Both give legitimacy and context to the current order by casting a mythical forbearer at their center (I intend to expand on this parallel in an extended version of this paper).
where in rabbinic literature. To read this story with both its biblical and its rabbinic intertexts in mind is to not only provide a richer reading of it but also to remain more faithful to the intentions of its creators who thus portrayed themselves and their own as heirs of Moses, the “elders,” and the “prophets” (m. Avot 1:1) not only in name but in deed. 3 I begin with a translation of the story in full:

Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 6:4

[a] There are those who recite [in the Mishnah, m. Hag. 2:2]: “Judah b. Tabai was patriarch.” There are those who recite “Shim'on b. Shataḥ was patriarch.” […] He who says Shim'on b. Shataḥ was patriarch is aided by the story of Ashkelon:

[b] There were two students [b: pious men] in Ashkelon, they ate together, and drank together, and labored in Torah together. One of them died and no respects were paid to him. The fat tax-collector died, and the entire city ceased work to pay their respects.

[c] The student cried and said: woe, perhaps there is nothing for the haters of Israel [i.e. for Israel]. 5 A vision was shown in his dream, and said: son, do not slander your Master. This one performed one righteous act (lit: credit) and “went” by it, and this one performed one sin (lit: debt) and “went” by it.

And what was his debt? God forbid, he performed no sins in his life, but one time he put on the head-phylactery before the hand-phylactery.

And what was the credit of the fat tax-collector? God forbid, he performed no commandments in his life. But one time he hosted ariston for the bouleutai [i.e. breakfast for the council] and they did not come. He said: let the poor come and eat it, so it does not spoil [b: so it does not go to waste]. There are those who say: he was walking along the way and there was a loaf of dried figs under his arm. It fell and a poor man took it, but he said nothing — so as not to redden his face [i.e. to shame him].

[d] And he saw the other student in gardens, and orchards, and springs of water. And he saw the fat tax-collector standing on the riverbank, trying to bring in water but not succeeding.

[e] And he saw Miriam of the onion leaves hanging by the nipples of her breasts, and some say the [b adds: hinges of] the gate of hell placed in her ear. He said [b adds: why is this so?] They said to him: because she would fast and tell her neighbors. And some say she would fast one day and deduct two from her vow. He said], 6 until when will she be like this?

[f] They said to him: until Shim'on b. Shataḥ will come, and they will lift it from her ear and put it in his ear. He said to them: and what is his sin? They said to him: for he

3 In this I follow in the footsteps of contemporary scholars of Aggadah. For a survey of scholarship and discussion see Rubenstein 1999, 8–15; Rubenstein 2009.

4 With variants from Yerushalmi Hagigah 2:2, marked b and italicized, both from MS Leiden, Scaliger 3. The end of the story in b diverges widely from the Sanhedrin version and I presented both versions side by side in two columns. The beginning of the story also appears in a fragmented copy of Yerushalmi Sanhedrin, published by Assis 1976. For a short discussion of the textual tradition of this story see Moscovitz 1991, 535–38. The beginning of the sugiya is a discussion of the text of m. Hag. 2:2, and it ends by pointing out that the story is an etiology for the law in m. San. 6:4.

5 This is a euphemistic substitution, common in rabbinic literature.

6 This omission is likely due to homoioteleuton. It is found in the fragment published by Assis 1976.
took a vow and said: “If I become patriarch, I will kill all the witches. And now he has become patriarch and has not killed them, and there are eighty women in the cave of Ashkelon destroying the world.” Go and tell him.

[g] He said: he is a great man [b: a patriarch] and will not believe me. They said to him: he is very humble and will believe you. But if he does not believe you, take your eye out and put it in your hand. He took his eye out and put it in his hand. They said: it returned and was equal to the other eye.

[h] He went and told him. He wanted to perform the sign before him. [But] he said to him: you do not need to. I know you are a pious man. However, I thought it in my heart, but did not say it with my mouth.

[i] [b adds: immediately Shim' on b. Shatah stood] and it was a cloudy day. He took eighty young men wearing clean clothes, and took with them eighty new pots. He said: when I whistle, wear your clothes. And when I whistle again, enter. [b adds: and when you enter each one of you will push one and lift her from the ground. For the deeds of these witches when you lift them off the ground can do nothing].

[j] When he came to the cave of Ashkelon, he said: Ave, ave (i.e. Hail, hail), open up for me, I am one of you. [b adds: they said to him: how did you come here on a day like this? He said: I walked between the raindrops. They said to him: And what have you come to do here? He said: learn and teach. Each one of us will do what they know.] When he came in, one said what she said and brought bread. One said what she said and brought wine. One said what she said and brought a stew. One said what she said and brought wine.

[k] They said to him: what can you do? He said: I can whistle two times and bring here eighty choice men wearing clean clothes, they will be happy and make you happy. They said to him: We want them.

[l] When he whistled, they wore clean clothes. When he whistled again, they all entered at once.

b: he said: each one who comes in will recognize his partner, and they raised them up and went and crucified them.

[m] And he said to the one who brought bread: bring bread! But she did not. And he said: take her to be hung. And he said to the one who brought stew: bring stew! But she did not. And he said: take her to be hung. And he said to the one who brought wine: bring wine! But she did not. And he said: take her to be hung. This is what he did to all of them.

[n] And this is what we recite [in the Mishnah, m. San. 6:4]: “Shim'on b. Shatah hung eighty witches in Ashkelon, although we do not judge two on one day, but the hour required it.”

The story begins in Ashkelon, with two pious students. One of them dies but is not paid proper funereal honors, and those are paid instead to a “fat tax-collector.” This seems unfair to the surviving student, whose complaints are quelled first by a theodicizing explanation of the nature of divine rewards and punish-

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7 This is Lieberman’s reading of the obscure בר מועין מוכסא. It is definitely not a proper name (Lieberman 1974). A plausible speculation might be to read the “death of the tax collector” as a figurative allusion to a civic festival of some kind, perhaps commemorating a remission of taxes for Roman Ashkelon. (A. H. M. Jones states that Ascalon was made a colony with Gaza, in the late third century [1971, 464 n. 73]. Fergus Millar contends that Ascalon was likely never made a colony because no colonial coins have been found [1993, vol. 3, pp. 218–19, n. 211]).
ments in this world, and then by a vision of the resting-place of the souls in which the student is happy and the tax collector is not.8

However, in this resting-place, the student sees another character, Miriam of the Onion Leaves. There are diverging traditions on the exact torturous position she was found in and the reasons she was placed where she was. According to one opinion, she was standing at the gate of Hell. The student inquires as to the length of her stay, and the authorities tell him that she is waiting for Shimʿon b. Shataḥ who promised, if appointed patriarch, to kill all the witches – yet failed to do so. There are, in fact, eighty witches in a cave in Ashkelon “destroying the world.” The student is instructed to reach out to Shimʿon. To enhance his trustworthiness, he is given a sign to perform in front of Shimʿon as a token of his veracity. He is given the ability to extract his eyeball and hold it in his hand – and then to return it, fully functioning, to its socket.

When the student reaches Shimʿon and tells him all of this, Shimʿon says he does not need the sign, and that although he did not take a real oath – he thought about it but did not say it out loud – he is willing to kill the witches. He then goes to the aforementioned cave, where he defeats the witches by tricking them into thinking he is one of them: when they conjure up food and wine for a party, he summons eighty young men whom he had planted outside of the cave in clay pots. These men, whom the witches explicitly ask for, are their demise: they pick up the witches, severing them from their chthonic source of power, and take them away to be hanged.

The Talmud connects this story with the tradition in the Mishnah (m. San. 6:4) that Shimʿon b. Shataḥ “hanged women in Ashkelon ... he hung eighty women, although we do not hang two on one day, but the hour required it.” The last four words, italicized, are not found in the Mishnah, but are added to it, in various permutations, in some traditions, the earliest of which is the Tannaitic Sifre Deuteronomy.9

Shimʿon b. Shataḥ is a rabbi associated with several decrees that the rabbinic movement chose to situate in a not-too-distant past: the impurity of metalware or glassware, for example, or the deferred payment of the dowry.10 Elsewhere in the Talmudic tradition Shimʿon is cast as a representative of the rabbinic norma-

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8 For the death of a Ḥasid see Micha 7:1–2: “The good man (חסיד) is perished out of the earth: and there is none upright (ישר) among men.” The image of summer as a time of death in that verse might be contrasted with the rainy day on which Shimʿon took the witches to task. This verse is also cited in m. Sot. 9:9, in connection with the death of two rabbis roughly contemporaneous with Shimʿon.

9 The addition is found in Sifre Deut. 121, ed. Finkestein, 255, y. Hag. 2:2 (but not in the base text of MS Leiden, Scaliger 3), and the “hybrid” text of Meg. Taan., ed. Noam, 93. It is also alluded to in b. San. 56a.

tive tradition, standing up to figures who wield power in other spheres, like the Hasmonean King Yannai in the political realm, and Ḥoni the Roofer, a holy man who demands that God bring rain. In the rabbinic memory, Shim'on is a founding figure, and reading our story in light of this aspect of his character suggests that it, too, could be read as an origin narrative. The successful battle of Shim'on against practitioners of magic and Miriam of the Onion Leaves are a foundational moment of his patriarchy. In claiming this I follow Dina Stein in a recent article (2014) on this story.

The context of the story is also significant in reading it as an origin story. The tale is presented as a comment on the Mishnah (m. Hag. 2:1), which lists pairs of early Tannaim who disputed the question of laying hands on sacrifices on festivals. This rather obscure dispute is an opportunity for the Talmuds to aggregate traditions about the founding fathers of the rabbinic movement. The story is about the first moments of Shim'on’s tenure as patriarch (nasi’) which, the story tells us, might have been very short. The success of his patriarchy hinges on the outcome of this story.

Gideon Bohak quoted this story in his Jewish Magic in Antiquity simply to show how different it was from all other rabbinic stories on encounters between Rabbis and practitioners of magic (2008: 394–95). Stein also strongly distinguishes this story from the other agonistic stories of Rabbis and magicians in rabbinic literature. In that corpus, studied by Joshua Levinson (2010), Rabbis are simply good magicians, besting the evil magicians at their own game. But in our story, Shim'on eschews magic, opting, instead, for trickery.

Most readers of this story assumed that its two parts were originally separate stories, and that they were artificially connected. They were thus content in discussing only one story or the other. The first story – a moralistic tale explaining that things in this world are only illusions compared to the truth of the next world – was included in many collections of Jewish moral tales in the middle ages. It was also intensively discussed in the context of retribution, the afterlife, and theodicy, compared with works such as The Apocalypse of Peter, the Lukan parable of Dives and Lazarus, and an Egyptian parable of Setme and Si-Osiris.


And a successful patriarchy it was, at least in the rabbinic memory. See e.g. Sifra, behukotai 1:2, ed. Weiss, 110b.

For the story of Setme and Si-Osiris, ostensibly the oldest version of these stories, see Lichtheim 2006, vol. III, 138–51. The earliest comparative treatment of our story is Gressmann 1918. For the Lukan parable of Lazarus and the rich man see Hock 1987; Bauckham 1991; Genz 2015. For the apocalypse of Peter see Lieberman 1974; Himmelfarb 1985; Brem-
The second story, which presents itself as a historical narrative with a touch of fantasy, has been discussed by historians and scholars of Jewish magic. Few have attempted to read the story as one literary artifact. Dina Stein convincingly shows that two parts of the story – before and after the appearance of Miriam of the Onion Leaves – are paralleled in reverse: the student and the tax collector go into the earth, but Shim’on brings the witches out of the earth and suspends them above it. Divine justice is muddled at the beginning of the story, but everything is set straight at the end.

“The story of Shim’on ben Shatah situates its protorabbinic protagonist in proximity to a biblical forefather,” writes Stein (435). But who are Shim’on’s biblical forefathers? I suggest that two biblical parallels can illuminate this baffling story, and also strengthen the arguments for the essential unity of this entire narrative. Both these intertexts are journey narratives, and they highlight the importance of the journey as a literary device in the story. They will make the case for reading it as an origin story focused on the intersection of two journeys.

In order to explain the relevance of these biblical parallels, however, I must first make some sense of the geography of the story. It begins, clearly, in Ashkelon. The people of this city care little for accompanying sages or pious men to their graves, but are highly respectful of the tax collectors. It ends in Ashkelon as well: the witches are in a cave or burial chamber “of Ashkelon.” The figure of Miriam of the Onion Leaves, situated in the netherworld, is puzzling. The fact that the student/pious man recognizes her, and that the audience is meant to as well, indicates that this was a name with some significance. Miriam is not, however, found anywhere else in rabbinic literature and her identity is a quandary.

Unravelling the meaning of this name begins with the onion leaves. Ashkelon was famous for its onions from classical times. But they were not just any onions. As Theophrastus notes, Cepa Ascalonium – “the Ashkelon onion” or scallion, is the only kind of onion which does not grow from its bulb, but merely grows leaves and is harvested quickly. Miriam of the Onion Leaves, i.e. “of the

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16 Stein notes two other studies which discuss the story as a whole: Amir 1992; Folder 2007. See Stein 2014, 415, n. 8.
17 Stein, following Efron, offers Phineas as a possible parallel. I think the links to Phineas are weak and uncharacteristic of Shim’on’s character as a judge.
18 For an introduction on the geography and history of ancient Ashkelon, and a collection of the inscriptions found there, see Ameling et al. 2014, 237–52.
19 Theophrastus Historia Plantarum 7.4.6–8. See also Strabo 16.2.29.
20 See Theophrastus ibid, and Löw 1967, s.v. BSL; Löw 1973, s.v. BSL. Thanks to Prof.
scallions,” is an allusion to a woman intimately associated with Ashkelon. I suggest that the name Miriam may well be a pun on or corruption of the name of one illustrious woman said to have been born in Ashkelon, the mythical figure Semiramis, daughter of the goddess Derceto. Ashkelon was a cultic center for a composite female deity, Derceto-Atargatis-Aphrodite-Isis, identified as the mother of Semiramis. The Tyche of the city, depicted on many coins minted in Ashkelon, might also be a portrayal of Semiramis: she is often accompanied by a dove, a bird associated with the mythical figure. “Miriam of the Onion Leaves” is, I contend, a typological character representative of Ashkelon, “Semiramis of Ashkelon.”

For this reason, we should not be thinking of a bulbous onion with many layers, perhaps indicating hypocrisy – as Saul Lieberman (1974) did when trying to make sense of this name – but rather of a leafy plant with a very local look, flavor, and even smell, like the palm-trees of Judaea, or the cedar of Lebanon. It is a geographic marker, situating Miriam in Ashkelon, and the netherworld as “Ashkelon” as well.

Ashkelon is a border-zone, on the road from Egypt to Judaea. Joshua Ephron focused on the liminal status of Ashkelon already in the 1960s when comparing Shim'on to modern Israeli commandos, leading bands of merry men into highly populated areas of nearby enemy territory to do away with evildoers. A second-century rabbinic text known as baraita di-tehumin, which describes the area of “the land of Israel,” where the agricultural commandments of the Torah apply, marks the border quite carefully around Ashkelon. This baraita is embedded in three rabbinic works, and was also found in a large mosaic on the floor of a synagogue in Tel Rehov in the Jordan Valley, near Beth-Shean.

At one point in this document the border is marked by a גנייא דאשקלון, usually translated “gardens of Ashkelon.” But as Mordechai Akiva Friedman pointed out, genayy’a d’ashgelon, is not the Palestinian Aramaic cognate of Hebrew ginab, “garden,” but rather the Aramaic form of Greek gynē, “woman.”

Joshua Klein of the Volcani Center – Agricultural Research Organization for his help on the subject of onions.

21 See also Stein 2014, 426.
22 For Semiramis, see the description in the anonymous Tractatis de mulieribus and the discussion in Gera 1997, 65–83. See also Strabo 2.1.26; 31; 15.1.5f.; 16.1.2; Pliny, Historia Naturalis 6.49; 7.207; 19.49; Juvenal, 2.108; Lucian, De Syria dea 14.
23 See the very early testimony of Herodotus, Histories 1.105 with Teixidor 2015, 96; Fuks 2000; Friedheim 2003.
25 This is the “Philistine road” or “way of the land of the Philistines,” of Exodus 13:17.
26 Efron 1970.
27 Tosefta Shevi’i t 4, Sifre Deuteronomy 51, and Yerushalmi Shevi’i t 6:1.
28 For a recent English survey of scholarship, see Ben David 2011. On the Ashkelon border see Fredkin 1981; Baruchi 2003; Dvorjetski 1993.
29 Friedman, “GYNYY GYNYYH.”
We could speculate that the “Lady of Ashkelon,” a geographic marker in this context, is a reference to a statue of Tyche standing at the city gates, used by this source to mark the borders of the city. This might explain why this figure had a derogatory rabbinic nickname – and also why, in the netherworld, she stands at the gates of Hell.

The netherworld, then, is Ashkelon through the looking glass: the dead student and tax-collector are both there, and so is Miriam, who represents the city. In that world, with its springs, streams and gardens, Miriam is naked and humiliated, powerless and tortured. The reason cited in the story for her punishment is cryptic and does not accord with any other detail in the story. But perhaps it is connected with the participation of women in the cult of Isis, a deity associated by this time with Aphrodite. This would explain why, according to one opinion, Miriam was strung up by her nipples: in Tosefta Avodah Zara (6:1) a “nursing figure” is mentioned as an example of an idol which must be destroyed. Ashkelon’s specifically pagan identity in rabbinic literature and Miriam’s portrayal as Isis mark this story as a battle against paganism in a pre-Christian era, in which a leader of the Jews emerges victorious.

The student is taken into the netherworld and back but, as we see, he never really leaves Ashkelon. Instead, he sees it as it should be. This accords with an understanding of the netherworld found in the Babylonian Talmud: “an upside-down world, the higher ones are below and those below are above.”

Ashkelon, on the margins of the Jewish area of settlement in the first centuries before and during the common era (and clearly afterwards, when the Jews mostly moved north to Galilee), was a city which – in the rabbinic imagination – was a locus of pagan worship well into the third century of the common era. It is a perfect setting for a story about a rabbi who receives a sign from heaven to battle women who practice sacred rites, or in his words, “witches.”

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31 Friedheim 2003. Friedheim disputes the identification of this figure with Isis lactans, very common in Egypt but not in Palestine, and chooses an identification with Nysa, the nursemaid of Dionysus. On the other hand, in this story, “Egyptian” motifs might have been deliberately employed. I am also not convinced that in the rabbinic imagination the precise identity of the nursing image mattered. See also Hagan 2013.
32 Cf. Stein 2014, 435, n. 83. While Jews did consider Christianity “idolatry,” rabbinic narratives and nomenclature for the two groups are different. See e.g. Schremer 2013 and 2014.
33 B. Pes. 50a, b. Bab. Bat. 10b. Notice that there are not different realms of existence for the righteous and the wicked, but one realm only. Also notice that the world represented in our story is a refrigerium in that it is a pleasant place, but one in which judgement already occurs and in which people suffer the consequences of their deeds in this life. Cf. Brown 2015, 29–31. The existence of a separate area called gebynom indicates that it is not the only site of judgment after death. (The situation in that world could be called “punishment,” but it might simply be the rectification of the wrongs in this world, with no atonement promised for the suffering party). On rabbinic ideas of the afterlife see Milikowsky 1986.
35 Cf. the journey of the rabbis to Rome in y. San. 7:13, 25d, and the discussion of Levinson
The two parts of the story each feature a different protagonist who goes on a
different transformative and redemptive journey. In the first part, it is the pious
man who is taken to the underworld. There he understands that God is just and
that the world is in order. In the second, it is Shim'on b. Shataḥ, the rabbi, who
goes to Ashkelon on his own initiative, to fulfill what amounts to a campaign
promise.

Each of these characters is modelled on a different biblical character. The pi-
ouis man is a Moses of sorts. Like Moses, he is given a glimpse into a world be-
yond, from which he returns with divine knowledge (Exodus 20). Like Moses,
he is one of two individuals privileged to journey into the beyond. The most
significant parallel between our story and the Moses narrative is Exodus 3–4.
God tells Moses that He has come to take the children of Israel out of Egypt,
and he sends Moses to assemble the elders of Israel, take them to Pharaoh, and
demand the release of the Israelites. Moses is less than enthusiastic (4:1), and
says: “But they will not believe me or listen to me, but say, ‘The Lord did not
appear to you.’” God replies with three signs by which Moses can prove his
trustworthiness to the Elders of Israel: his staff will turn into a snake, his hand
will contract leprosy at will, and he will be able to turn water into blood. These
signs will prove that Moses is in fact an emissary of God, and that God will
make good on his word to take the Israelites out of Egypt. This, in fact, did
happen (Ex 4:29–31). “Aaron spoke all the words that the Lord had spoken to
Moses, and performed the signs in the sight of the people. The people believed.”

The student, like Moses, is given a sign to take to Shim'on, an “elder of Israel.”
He is able to remove his eye from its socket, hold it in his hands, and place it
back unscathed. This sign is almost identical to the sign of leprosy. Rabbinic
tradition equates both lepers and blind people with the dead, considering them
as similar to each other. The ability to remove and return an eye is a sign for
the veracity of a tradition found elsewhere in rabbinic literature. In the follow-
ing story – featured in the Babylonian Talmud but marked as an early tradition
– a rabbi uses the sign to demonstrate that a law that the other rabbis had voted
on was in fact a tradition handed down “to Moses from Sinai”:

It is taught in a Mishnah: a story of R. Jose the Damascene who went to greet R.
Eleazar in Lod. He said: what new thing was there at the study house today? He said:
they voted and decided that Ammon and Moab give the poor-tithe on the seventh year.

2010, 64–69. This journey involves many magical techniques, for which see Bohak 2008, 396–
97. Thanks to Dina Stein for this connection.

36 Hen in NRSV is translated (like the Aramaic ben) as a conditional. Similar translations
are found in LXX and Neophyti. But in Targum Onqelos and Ps. Jonathan, ben is a demon-
strative, translated by Aramaic ba'.


38 This is the reading of MS Munich 6. The Mishnah in question is m. Yad. 4:3, on which
see Kahana 2004.

39 There is no tithing within the borders of the Land of Israel on the seventh year, when
He said: Jose, put out your hand and take your eye. He put out his hand and took his eye.

*R. Eleazar cried and said:* “the secret of the Lord is for those who fear him, and he makes his covenant known to them.” Thus I have it from Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai, who heard from his master and his master from his master, a teaching to Moses at Sinai: Ammon and Moab give the poor tithe on the seventh year. (b. Hag. 3b)

With the exception of the sign, this tradition is found in the Mishnah (*m. Yad.* 4:3). The sign, however, is found in the version of the story quoted above, and in the late Palestinian Midrash on Psalms (25:13). R. Eleazar’s use of the sign bolsters his tradition, “from Moses at Sinai,” and gives it the strength of prophecy. Deuteronomy explicitly says that prophets use signs (13:2), and the greatest signs were those used by Moses. So, too, in our story, the literary motif of the sign can be read as marking a connection between the student and Moses: both have knowledge from the beyond to convey to Elders, a sign with which to bolster their claim, and a promise of deliverance. Importantly, like Moses, part of the student’s mission is to go “back” to the elders and transmit the knowledge.

For Moses, the performance of the signs constitutes the critical moment of the mission, but for the student the signs are not necessary. Shim'on replies: “I know that you are a pious man, you can do [even] more than that.” The student’s doubts about being believed are dispelled without recourse to the sign. Shim’on acknowledges that there are individuals who can exercise numinous powers, but he does not use these powers himself. Instead, he chooses to battle the witches who are “destroying the world” by using trickery and deception.

Shim’on hides eighty men in new clay pots outside of “the cave of Ashkelon” on a rainy day, and clothes them in new garments. He tells them to take off the pots when he signals once, and then to enter the cave when he signals again. (The pots are new, thus unfired, so perhaps they do not make noise when they hit the ground). Shim’on tells the witches in the cave that he is performing magic, when he is in fact doing nothing of the sort. In this part of the story, centered

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agriculture is forbidden. However, outside these borders, but in the environs of the Land, tithing continues, and the rabbis at the study house decided the tithe for that year would be the poor tithe and not the “second tithe.” On the poor tithe, see Wilfand 2015.

Ps 25:14. This entire psalm is a fitting quote for the figure of R. Eliezer ben Hycanrus (Schremer 2015, 289–95, and the literature on 291, n. 15) but 25:15 is especially poignant: “*My eyes are ever toward the Lord,* for he will pluck my feet out of the net.”

The translation is my own, from the version in MS Munich 6. On this story and its parallels, both Tannaitic and in later midrash see Kahana 2004, 62, n. 48. Kahana prefers to interpret the sign as a kind of punishment, but the parallel with our story is striking. The parallel in Mid. Psalms 25:13 might attest to the Palestinian provenance of this tradition.

In *t. Yad.* 2:16, R. Eliezer adds Amos 3:7 to his quote: “Surely the Lord God does nothing, without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets.”

Ex 7:3, Deut 4:34, 6:22, 7:19, 26:8, 29:2 34:11. See also John 2:18; 1 Cor 1:20.

The precise meaning of the rare Aramaic verb šfar is unknown. See Sokoloff 1990, 496b and the literature cited there.

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on Shim'on, the story draws on the figure of Gideon (Judg 6–7). Gideon is charged with fighting the Midianites, who harassed Israel’s southern areas as a punishment for worshipping false gods. God tells him to release the large army that flocked to his call, and says “I will deliver you ... through the three hundred ‘lappers,’” the men who did not stoop to their knees to drink water (Judg 7:7). God sends Gideon to the Midianite camp “to hear what they are talking,” and tells him that “then [his] hands will grow strong” (7:11). Gideon hears a Midianite speaking of a dream foretelling his victory (7:13), but the Judge does not rely on God. He plans a diversionary strategy that will drive fear into the hearts of the Midianites. He divides the three hundred men into three companies and places trumpets and empty jars with torches inside in the hands of all of them (7:15–16). At the sound of a trumpet the men should all begin the attack (7:18).45

Shim'on and Gideon both make use of auditory signals and empty jars to reveal at once what must remain hidden throughout (men outside the cave; torches in the jars). This leads to commotion and to a resounding defeat for the enemy. Deliverance is assured – with no miracles involved. Additionally, both Gideon and Shim'on are notified of their predicament by a sign from beyond: a Midianite with a dream and a pious man from Ashkelon, respectively. The messages come from heaven, beyond the boundaries of the human world, but also from behind enemy lines. Both figures are instructed by an emissary: Gideon by a “prophet man” (‘yš nabi’, Judg 6:8) and Shim'on by a “pious man” (gebar hasid). Both fight polytheism: Gideon is told that the Midianites were unleashed against the Israelites because they worshipped the gods of the Amorites; the image of Miriam, caricature of a syncretic Goddess Cult in Ashkelon, symbolizes Shim'on’s sin: letting the “witches” live. Gideon must save Israel; Shim'on, on the other hand, merely needs to save himself.46

That Shim'on chooses to eschew the model of Moses presented by the pious man and adopt the Gideon one instead is telling. The Gideon story is alluded to in an early rabbinic source, when coming to terms with the absence of divine action in their world: Ishay Rosen-Zvi reads chapter 9 of Mishnah Berakhot, which discusses liturgical responses to occurrences in the world, as the rabbis’ way of bringing the divine into a world where it is less manifest.47 Great miracles, to be commemorated in their geographic locations, belong to the past, and in the present God deserves praise for quotidian actions like thunder, the building of a new house, and both good and bad events. The chapter ends with the proper way to invoke God in everyday conversations:

45 Judg 7:13–18.
46 Cf. Moses who is also in danger “on the way” (Ex 4:24–26).
And the [Rabbis] decreed that a man salute his fellow with the Name. As it says Presently Boaz arrived from Bethlehem. He greeted the reapers: the Lord be with you. And they responded: the Lord bless you (Ruth 2:4). And it says The Lord is with you, you mighty warrior. (Judg 6:12)\(^\text{48}\)

In these two examples, we see the name of God invoked in biblical conversation, indicating that this is the proper way to use it. But as Rosen-Zvi notes, Gideon is highly doubtful that the Lord is in fact with him:

But sir, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our ancestors recounted to us, saying, ‘Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?’ But now the Lord has cast us off, and given us into the hand of Midian (Judg 6:13).

Gideon explicitly contrasts his own time with the mythical past of the Exodus. In the biblical narrative, Gideon is given the same answer as Moses: “for I will be with you” (Ex 3:12). But no “wonderful deeds” ensue. Rather, Gideon saves Israel “in this strength of yours.” Moses is a model and a counterpoint for Gideon, much as both Moses and Gideon are models and counterpoints for our story. For the rabbis of the Mishnah, Gideon’s question itself was mistaken: God is everywhere his name is invoked. God is felt to be absent not because God’s self is scarce but rather because people are not invoking his name.

The story uses Gideon as a model for Shim’on, adding him and his deeds to this succession. God is not absent from the narrative, but Shim’on does not want to use his miracles (unlike Moses) or even see the signs (unlike Gideon; Judg 17:17–18). There is no “angel of God” sent to Shim’on, but only a “pious man.” Shimon knows that the message is true and asks for no sign. He fights “clean,” using no magic, even though pious people can perform magic in many forms (and so can later rabbis, as Joshua Levinson (2010) has shown).

The Mishnah ends with a citation of Ps 119:126, commonly read in rabbinic literature as a license to bend or break the law when necessary: “at a time to act for the Lord, break your law.” The Tannaitic tradition about Simon hanging witches in Ashkelon is that it was in contravention of the law, but “that the hour required it,” bringing the same verse to mind. For the rabbis Gideon, too, breaks the law by erecting an altar outside of the Jerusalem temple and sacrificing on it.\(^\text{49}\)

Our story casts Shim’on as an heir to two biblical forefathers: Moses and Gideon. It ushers in the last stage of the fight against pagan worship, in which God is not active at all. God’s work is done by Shim’on, playing the role of Gideon, compelled by his own “Moses” to make good on his promise to do away with the witches. In that syncretistic age envisioned by the Yerushalmi story as characteristic of Shim’on’s world, all the female deities of the area are

\(^{48}\) M. Ber. 9:9, my translation; italics indicate biblical quotations.

joined together in Ashkelon. There, female practitioners of “sorcery” are defeated by a rabbi, heir to Gideon (“the judge”; Shim’on traditions, too, are mainly about his role as a judge). Though information still comes from the beyond, it is not in prophecy but in visions, and nothing more than that comes through. Significantly, this information cannot provide salvation for the entire nation, but only for individuals: the pious man is made to understand the fate of his comrade and of the fat tax collector, and is charged with a message for Shim’on. While the witches “destroy the world,” they are each judged individually (although all on the same day), and Shim’on avoids the fate worse than death that awaited him alone.

This personal focus also affects the way journeys are employed in this story. People in the story travel alone, conveying messages from faraway cities and worlds beyond which are relevant for only one person, after which they can return to their lives. This is a far cry from the monumental journeys of Gideon towards battle, or the travels of Moses who goes back to Egypt to take on a completely new role in life. The changes that the journeys effect in the lives of the protagonists are mild and minor compared to changes of their scriptural models. The ease of travel in the Eastern Roman Empire, and the ability to convey messages across great distances in a relatively smooth manner perhaps had an impact not only on the lives but also on the imaginations of the inhabitants of this part of the world. In this case, these new technologies eased and abetted their focus on the individual, his person and his fate, at the expense of the communal and the national. Thus, a cosmic struggle against witchcraft and idolatry ends with a whimper. Aided by quick travel and a cosmic postal system, a judicial process saves one person from being forever tethered to the gates of hell, leaving the Goddess there alone.

50 Shim’on is also the last rabbi to have lived during the reign of a Jewish king, recalling the statement of Judges: “in those days, there was no king in Israel.” (Judg 17:6; 18:1, 21:25). For judicial Shim’on traditions see e.g. m. Taan. 3:8 (Shim’on threatens to ban Ḥoni), m. Hag. 2:2 (Shim’on is identified as ṣevav bet din), m. Avot 1:9 (Shim’on offers advice on examining witnesses). Mek. RI kaspas 20, ed. Horowitz-Rabin 327 (Shim’on kills a contriving witness). T. Ket. 12:1 (Shim’on makes a decree regarding a legal document). T. San. 8:3 (Shim’on refrains from judging a murderer). B. San. 19a (Shim’on presides over the trial of the slave of king Jannaeus).
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