Sacred Time and Rabbinic Literature: New Directions for an Old Question

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This article questions the utility of the term "sacred time." In other words, it cautions against allowing sacred time to obscure how scholars study the dynamic relations between temporalities and sanctity in classical rabbinic texts (c. 200–550 CE). The achievement of recent Biblical and Jewish studies scholars who rejected characterizations of Hebrew or Jewish time as monolithic was their decoupling of the patterning or shape of events from what it means for time to be holy or for there to be a time for holiness. In the wake of such corrective efforts, scholars can now examine how rabbinic texts engage the quality of holiness as it pertains to durations, human activities, embodied temporal awareness, the time of exegesis, or to God's time. This article distinguishes God's time and human moments of recurrence and connection from eternity and sacred time through analysis of late antique Palestinian midrashim and presents directions for future study of holiness and time in classical rabbinic literature.

THIS ARTICLE cautions against allowing sacred time to obscure how scholars study the dynamic relations between temporalities and sanctity in classical rabbinic texts (c. 200–550 CE) alongside other late antique religious traditions. Although the intersection of holiness and time, timing,

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or temporality is significant for conceptualizing holiness in rabbinic texts, it is important to dispense with etic, inherited notions of sacred time (see Schwartz 2005) and rebuild a picture of time and sanctity using the emic language found in rabbinic sources. Now is the moment to explore the impact of recent scholarship emphasizing multiple temporalities in rabbinic literature (Rudavsky 2000; Goldberg 2000b, 2004, 2016; Gribetz 2013, 2016a, 2017; Kaye 2018) and the absence of a time "concept" (Stern 2003) on sacred time.

At the outset, it must be noted that rabbinic sources recognize certain times as "holy" using the root q.d.š, particularly in descriptions of the Sabbath. There are long discussions in midrashim (late antique Palestinian biblical exegeses) about the meaning of God sanctifying the seventh day in the book of Genesis (e.g., Genesis Rabbah, chapter 11). Moreover, the Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael as well as the Babylonian Talmud include comparisons between the sanctification of the Sabbath and that of holidays, remarking that although God sanctified the Sabbath, the rabbinic court decides which days will be holy gatherings by setting the calendar and sanctifies the jubilee year (e.g., Mekhilta Shabbata, BT Pesahim 117b, BT Betzah 17a, BT Rosh Hashanah 8b). The notion of subtracting hours from ordinary days and adding them to holy days also attracts attention in the Talmud (BT Yoma 81b, BT Rosh Hashanah 9a).

Although certain times may be designated "holy" in rabbinic literature, this does not mean that an idea of sacred time from the field of religious studies applies to them. For example, the time of performing commandments and re-enacting key biblical events are each times with distinctive characters, but rabbinic sources do not describe them as "holy times." Therefore, these and other examples ought to be carefully analyzed from a dual perspective: informed by scholarship on the significance of holiness and processes of sanctification in rabbinic literature (Berkovitz 2002; Harrington 2001; Brodsky 2006, 87–99; Labovitz 2013, 97–131; Koltun-Fromm 2010; Novick 2018; Miller 2018; Mittleman 2018; also Kadushin 1952; Urbach 1969) and a renewed understanding of how temporality manifests in rabbinic texts.

Before doing so, however, it is crucial to reconsider the ways that Jewish studies has incorporated an existing, relatively broad category of sacred time into its conception of time in Jewish texts so that, moving forward, notions of sacred time do not unnecessarily interfere with in-depth consideration of how rabbis understand sanctification as it pertains to temporality.

This article therefore begins by defining "sacred time" in religious studies, with particular focus on Mircea Eliade's influential but problematic

concept of sacred time, and the sense in which sacred time is used in this article. There follows a description of the ways in which Jewish studies and Hebrew biblical scholarship corrected mischaracterizations of Jewish or Hebrew biblical time. The second section describes the current state of research, which recognizes multiple Jewish temporalities, and an articulation of what remains to be done to advance our understanding of temporality and sanctity in rabbinic texts. The third section presents analysis of a small group of late antique Palestinian midrashim to demonstrate the problems of looking for sacred time by presumed characteristics rather than the texts' own identifications. The central midrashic text in this section contrasts human and divine perceptions of the temporality of redemption. Instead of finding a bifurcation between divine time and human time that must be bridged, or a unification of human and divine in the moment of redemption, the texts describe God engaging with the same kind of time as people, but God acting differently in the familiar temporal span of night. Sacred time, if understood as a time of otherworldliness and divinity, does not capture what the rabbinic sources themselves attempt to convey about such times. Moreover, these texts do not themselves use any words for "holy" or "sacred" in relation to the time of redemption, even as the nighttime redemptive moment is portrayed as a temporal portal that links past and future generations, from Abraham to subsequent generations of Israelites and Jews. The article then turns, in the penultimate section, to brief examples from Zoroastrian and Syriac studies to suggest that caution in using the term sacred time ought to apply to the study of other late antique corpora as well unless the texts themselves invoke an intersection of time and sanctity. Finally, the article concludes with suggested directions for future research into the intersection of time and holiness in rabbinic literature.

SACRED TIME IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Time and sanctity mean many different things in world cultures and among different religious studies orientations so it is better to offer several definitions of sacred time than just one. Hillel Schwartz, for instance, offers twelve different and conflicting definitions of sacred time: time itself is sacred; the sacred must be timeless; sacred time is the experience of the transcendent; sacred time is ritual time (note the multiple possible meanings of ritual time in Grimes 2013, 262); sacred time is epiphanous (i.e., offering surprising discoveries); time becomes sacred through neural patterning; sacred time is sacred because it is unique and inexplicable; sacred time is divine time; sacred time is cosmic; sacred time is time out;

sacred time is spiritually receptive time; and, finally, experiencing the sacred, time is discovered to be an illusion (Schwartz 2005, 7987–88). This list indicates the ubiquity of the term in the field of religious studies.

The intersection of holiness and time in rabbinic literature should be sought only where the texts themselves use the notion of "holy." However, prior scholarship has applied the idea of sacred time and its absence to Hebrew and Jewish texts in several ways, including in reference to God's time, the time of God's encounter with people, or a different quality of time that is experienced because of God's contact (for a survey, see Gribetz and Kaye 2019). This article seeks to disentangle associations between sacred time and divine time in the context of rabbinic literature and to make explicit the variety of meanings of sanctified time that are possible within rabbinic literature.

Eliade's Contribution and Correctives from Biblical and Jewish Studies

Despite the preponderance of studies of sacred time, if one were to name a single religious studies thinker most associated with sacred time, they would likely mention Mircea Eliade. Notwithstanding the critiques of Eliade's notion of "sacred time," his influence persists in religious studies (Smith 1972; Smith 1978; Rennie 2008, 227–36). Sacred time for Eliade is the time of origins, that is, the time in which all existence is created. It is opposed to "profane" and "historical" time, whose main attribute is its irreversibility. Despite its distance, the time of origins is not detached from and inaccessible to people who exist long after creation. Rather, the time of origins, which Eliade also calls "that time" ("illud tempus" in Latin), continues to be available to religious practitioners through periodic holidays in which they recreate foundational mythic events. This has the effect of renewing, healing, and bringing contact with the divine into the ordinary lives of practitioners and turning them into agents of divine power and creativity (Eliade 1957, 99–104).

Eliade's construction of sacred time poses two challenges for scholars of time and religion. First, his characterization of sacred time in the Hebrew Bible and Judaism is a broad generalization. Second and related, since Eliade, "sacred time" has been applied to so many different traditions and cultures within religious studies that it threatens to become less effective as a clarifying concept. Steven Wasserstrom captures the tendency to "belittle difference" that is central to Eliade's approach and remains a warning for today's scholarship: "The problem with a gnostic History of Religions is that it imposes patterns on the past that were never (demonstrably) there in order to draw lessons for the present that isn't

(demonstrably) here… [it seeks] to close the gap of contradictions" (1999, 241, 243).

Although the second point is clear, the first bears a more detailed argument. Eliade claimed that Judaism abandoned sacred recurring time and infused sacredness into history. The Hebrew Bible depicts God revealing himself and acting in relation to Israelites in particular historical contexts (Eliade 1954, 104; 1957, 110). Eliade acknowledges that moments of divine-human contact in biblical history become "examples," but he rejects the idea that this constitutes sacred time in what he considered to be its more original, cyclic model. "Of course, here too archetypes are involved, in the sense that these events, raised to the rank of examples, will be repeated; but they will not be repeated until the times are accomplished, that is, in a new *illud tempus*" (Eliade 1954, 105). In this passage, reading Hebrew biblical texts as stand-ins for "Judaism," Eliade flattens the qualities of temporality in various parts of the Hebrew Bible so that they constitute a sharp contrast with his articulation of cyclical sacred time. His generalizations condemn Judaism as well as Christianity for inferior, if novel, forms of time in religion. This is emblematic of a mid-century attitude that sees time in Judaism and the Bible as teleological, historical, and linear (Brettler 2004, 111).

For Eliade, Judaism is the progenitor of a modern secular approach to time that lost something essential to human experience: the possibility of cyclic regeneration. Such generalizations prompted scholars of the Hebrew Bible and Judaism (in history, rabbinics, kabbala, and other subfields) to critique the way Eliade and others construed Judaism's sacred time and myth. First, temporality in Biblical and post-biblical Jewish texts includes cyclical and linear elements as well as combinations of the two and alternatives that depart from both (Barr 1969; Rudavsky 2000, 3–4; Brettler 2004).

Second, the association of sacredness with cyclical time, and linearity with ordinary, historical, or profane time does not hold. The historian Arnaldo Momigliano argued this over fifty years ago (Momigliano 1966). He showed that prior attempts to distinguish and oppose Hebrew Biblical time and Greek or Christian concepts of time were misplaced because there is no single static Hebrew or Jewish view of time as linear or otherwise, and the same is true for Greek authors' views of time. Characterizing "Jewish" time as different in essence from time in other cultures or religions obscures the variations of temporal phenomena across Jewish history in its local cultures. Whereas Momigliano's criticisms were aimed at Christian scholars' reductive characterizations of Jewish or Biblical time, Jonathan Z. Smith noticed that an opposing orientation in Ancient Near

Eastern studies sought to distinguish biblical literature from the other cultures of the Ancient Near East with a similar approach, describing essential concepts of time based on cyclical versus linear time, but in this case to the advantage of Israelite "historical thought," once again diminishing all other cultures' time concepts (Smith 1991). Paul Ricoeur also argued against Jewish/Greek, linear/cyclical, historical/mythic dichotomies (Ricoeur 1985, 13–30).

BIBLICAL AND JEWISH TEMPORALITIES

It is preferable to describe the temporalities of Hebrew Biblical or Jewish culture and traditions on their own terms, whether sacred or not, rather than limit such an exploration to whether Eliade was correct about his characterization of such texts and traditions. Jewish studies scholarship has shown the variety and complexity of temporal concepts in Hebrew and Jewish texts, arguing against the reduction of Jewish time and in particular Jewish sacred times to either cyclical or linear, mythic or historic. Marc Zvi Brettler in the field of Hebrew Bible (Brettler 2004); Jeffrey Rubenstein, Rachel Adelman, and Sergey Dolgopolski in rabbinics; Elliot Wolfson and Moshe Idel in kabbala; and Sylvie Anne Goldberg in history (Goldberg 2000a, 2000b), to name a few, have brought forward textual examples of the coexistence of cyclical and linear Jewish descriptions of temporality, which warn against defining Jewish sacred time as either mythic, cyclical, historical, or linear. Rubenstein, for example, argued that holidays in rabbinic texts do not exclusively entail historical commemoration but also incorporate re-experiencing, which disrupts Eliade's poles of dead history and live mythic renewal (Rubenstein 1997). Dolgopolski applied the genre of film montage as a helpful image for conceptualizing Talmudic amalgamation of sources, avoiding altogether problematic categories such as linear or cyclical time, while Adelman notes the interweaving of time with significant spaces in midrash, another departure from the dichotomy of linearity and cyclicity (Dolgopolski 2013, 221–44; Adelman 2009). I have argued that in the Babylonian Talmud, temporal structures link events in many coexisting organizations of time. An event can both take place at a certain time on a certain day, after one event and before another, and also link to distant events in legal or narrative forms of time (Kaye 2018).

Furthermore, scholars have pointed to the many overlapping cycles of both personal and cosmic times in kabbalistic literature as well as to the idea that historical events can recur as paradigms (Idel 1998; Neusner 1996, 1997). Historian Yosef Haim Yerushalmi also recognized the Jewish

use of biblical paradigms to understand contemporary events, which he labeled Jewish memory, distinct from the modern practice of Jewish history (Yerushalmi 1982). Finally, circles and lines are not the only possible temporal shapes, as Elliot Wolfson showed when he used combinations of linearity and cyclicity to describe dream time and interpretive time in kabbalistic as well as some rabbinic texts (Wolfson 2005, 2006, 2011, 2015). Shapes that defy these two shapes, like a wave, or a swerve, not only describe modalities of time in the texts Wolfson describes but unseat historical time (meaning asymmetrical irreversible social processes) as the primary vector of influence between texts.

The questions of whether time or time-like phenomena are called "holy" in rabbinic texts, or what the properties of holy time-like phenomena might be, are secondary in most of this scholarship. They focus on demonstrating the variety of Jewish temporalities by reference to classical texts, disconnecting Israelite and Jewish time from prior characterizations as rigidly unimaginative and doggedly historic. Smith wrote that, whereas religions deal with time in many varied and complex ways, "the study of religion...has tended to represent the work of religion with respect to time in a simple geometry" (1991, 67). The achievement of the work of the Biblical and Jewish studies scholars mentioned above is to decouple the patterning or shape of events from what it means for time to be holy or for there to be a time for holiness. In light of the corrective efforts of these scholars who examined whether Jewish texts manifest linearity, cyclicity, recurrence, and history, we can now turn to the question of how rabbinic texts engage the quality of holiness as it pertains to duration, to distraction and focus, to human activities, to embodied temporal awareness, to the time of exegesis, or to God's time.

Jewish Sacred Time: Engagement with Divine Eternality?

Ideas of Jewish sacred time today are not only indebted to Eliade's concept of sacred time. They are also influenced by the work of modern Jewish thinkers such as Abraham Joshua Heschel and Franz Rosenzweig, who each define something that others might call sacred time (the Sabbath and prayer time, respectively) as eternity and implicitly, communion with an eternal God. Heschel says the Sabbath is a taste of "the world to come" (Heschel 1951, 74–76). An early formulation of this tradition is found in the third-century Palestinian midrash *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Yishmael*, Tractate *Shabbata* 1, concerning Exodus 31:12.

> 'For I am the Lord who sanctifies you' in the future world, which is characterized by the kind of holiness possessed by the Sabbath of this world.

> We thus learn that the Sabbath possesses a holiness like that of the future world and thus it says, 'A Psalm, a song of the Sabbath day' (Ps. 92.1) referring to the world in which there is Sabbath all the time. (Lauterbach 2004, 2:495)[1]

Heschel portrays the Sabbath, a sanctified day according to biblical and rabbinic literature, as "the presence of eternity in a single moment" (1951, 30). Since the Sabbath is called holy, with the Hebrew root q.d.š., in the Bible and in rabbinic literature, it is foundational to any study of the intersection of sanctity and times in Jewish literature. The study of holy times in rabbinic literature, however, should not be limited to the Sabbath, as will be discussed later on. In *The Star of Redemption*, Rosenzweig describes prayer time as eternity that can be glimpsed in ordinary time: "The cycles of the cultic prayer are repeated every day, every week, every year and in this repetition, faith turns the moment into an 'hour' as it prepares time to accept eternity" (Rosenzweig [1921] 1985; see also Breiterman 2002; Batnitzky 2009, 137–38; and Honig 2019 for a recent comparison of Heschel, Rosenzweig, and Agamben's views on the Sabbath).

In productive tension with Heschel's and Rosenzweig's descriptions of transcendent moments as encounters with eternity, portrayals of God's time in rabbinic texts do not uniformly present divine time as eternality or timelessness. For example, some Palestinian rabbinic exegeses of God's redeeming the Israelites from Egypt portray God engaging with the same kind of time as people while performing acts with exquisite punctuality compared to people's rude time perception.

BIBLICAL AND RABBINIC DESCRIPTIONS OF THE TIMING OF REDEMPTION

In order to demonstrate the problem with using sacred time or mythic time to describe rabbinic depictions of the Exodus from Egypt, I turn to a late antique Palestinian midrash from roughly 200 CE. This biblical interpretation dwells on the differences between divine and human time perceptions, focusing on a crucial moment in the middle of the night: God's entry into Egypt to strike their firstborns, which began the Israelites' redemption from slavery in Egypt. Midrashic and later Talmudic authors construed that particular time (midnight) as a moment of resonance, linking midnight in the lives of Israelites' forefathers with the midnight of God's strike against Egypt. This exegetical move connected earlier biblical

[1] See the text and notes of the Horovitz and Rabin edition (1970) and in the following references to *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Ishmael*.

history from Abraham to Moses with later generations of Jews who were required to reenact the Exodus story each year on Passover eve. Yet despite the preoccupation with divine and human timing as well as the conjunction of past and future on that particular night, none of these midrashim portray divine time as different from human time, nor do the midrashim discuss the moment of redemption as "holy."

This midrash uses a biblical textual incongruity to expose two issues related to time. The first is the fairness of divine judgment, which the midrash described in relation to timing. The second relates to how humans experience waiting. A close reading of the biblical passages is necessary before examining the midrash. The biblical texts each predict how God would strike Egypt with the final plague, but each passage uses a different manner of speech: God's direct speech, Moses quoting God in direct speech, and a third-person narrator. It is the distinction between direct speech and narration that animates this midrash.

The following excerpt comes from Exodus 11. Following God's explanation to Moses about the final plague he plans to bring on Egypt, Moses announces to Pharaoh that the tenth plague will happen at midnight.

1) Exodus 11:1, 4–7

> And the LORD said to Moses, "I will bring but one more plague upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt; after that he shall let you go from here; indeed, when he lets you go, he will drive you out of here one and all. . . .
>
> Moses said [to Pharaoh], "Thus says the LORD: At midnight I will go forth among the Egyptians, and every first-born in the land of Egypt shall die, from the first-born of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the first-born of the [enslaved woman] who is behind the millstones; and all the first-born of the cattle. And there shall be a loud cry in all the land of Egypt, such as has never been or will ever be again; but not a dog shall snarl at any of the Israelites, at man or beast—in order that you may know that the LORD makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel. (Jewish Publication Society 1985)

The next passage is part of a speech by God to Moses and Aaron, directed at Israel. God instructs Moses and Aaron to tell Israel that they are to eat their final meal "that night" before leaving Egypt. In addition to guidance on how to eat the Passover sacrifice, Moses and Aaron repeat the fact that while the Israelites eat their meal, God will punish the Egyptians.

2) Exodus 12:1–3, 11–12

> The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt . . . Speak to the whole community of Israel, . . . "This is how you shall eat it: your loins

> girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly: it is a Passover offering to the LORD. For that night I will go through the land of Egypt and strike down every first-born in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and I will mete out punishments to all the gods of Egypt, I the LORD." (Jewish Publication Society 1985)

In these two passages, God describes when he will pass through Egypt in slightly different terms. The first is directed towards Egypt. In that case, God is very precise about the time when he will punish the Egyptians ("at midnight"). The midrash explains that God uses the phrase "midnight" so that there could be no mistake that the suffering the Egyptians experience is due directly to the Israelite's God. In the second passage, directed at Israel, God uses vaguer language ("that night") to describe the time when God will punish Egypt. Both of these passages present the timing of God's tenth plague as God's direct speech, quoted by Moses.

Finally, in the second half of Exodus 11, Moses speaks to the elders of Israel, telling them how to slaughter and eat the sacrificial Passover lamb. Moses's speech concludes with an imagined future dialogue between Israelite children and their parents sparked by this practice. In this section, the timing of the plague is given as "the middle of the night," using a term that is etymologically close but not identical to "at midnight" in the first passage above (*hatsot halayla* and *hatsi halayla*). This third passage echoes the second passage, including instructions about the Israelite's last meal in Egypt as well as a description of God's journey through Egypt that was predicted in the second passage.

3) Exodus 12:28–29

> And the Israelites went and did so; just as the LORD had commanded Moses and Aaron, so they did.
>
> In the middle of the night the LORD struck down all the first-born in the land of Egypt, from the first-born of Pharaoh who sat on the throne to the first-born of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the first-born of the cattle. (Jewish Publication Society 1985)

In summary, the three verses to be compared are:

1) God to Pharaoh (through Moses) in Exodus 11:4

> Thus said the Lord: At midnight (*kehatsot halayla*) I will go forth among the Egyptians . . .

2) God to Israel (through Moses and Aaron) in Exodus 12:12

> For this night (*balayla hazeh*) I will go through the land of Egypt . . .

3) The third-person biblical narrator in Exodus 12:29

> In the middle of the night (*behatsi halayla*) the LORD struck down . . .

When God speaks to Israel through Moses, God predicts his arrival on "that night," but God does not specify when precisely during that night. When God speaks to Pharaoh and Egypt, God's arrival is pegged precisely "at midnight." Similarly, when the third-person narrator describes the tenth plague on Egypt, it also names the time specifically "at midnight." These subtle literary differences undergird the midrash's description of divine time/timing and human perceptions of it.

The *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Shimon Bar Yokhai* (hereafter *Mekhilta De-Rashbi*) is a collection of classical Palestinian rabbinic legal and exegetical commentaries on the book of Exodus (Nelson 1999/2000, 2006). Responding to Exodus 12:29 (no. 3 above), the *Mekhilta De-Rashbi* compares the biblical narrator's account of events with Moses's speech in direct address to Israel (no. 2) and to Pharaoh (no. 1).

> *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Shimon Bar Yokhai* (Exodus 12:29)
>
> "In the middle of the night" (Exod. 12:29)
>
> Moses said to the Israelites, "For that night I will go through the Land of Egypt" (Exod. 12:12)
>
> He did not set them a specific time, so they would not be sitting and stewing on distressing speculations (*yoshevim umeharherin hirhurim ra'im*) saying, "The time has come and we are not redeemed."[2]
>
> But when Moses spoke to Pharaoh, what did he say? "[Thus said the Lord:] At midnight I will go forth [among the Egyptians…] (Exodus 11:4).[3]
>
> Rabbi Levi said, "He said to him, 'The matter is weighed/balanced at the mid-point of the night [and not] (as Nelson 2006, 47) a hairsbreadth and before, [and not] a hairsbreadth and after. He sits on a sundial and marks the time precisely as a hairsbreadth. For a sovereign does not strike (as Nelson 2006, 47) its fellow [kingdom] even the width of a hairsbreadth. [Meaning God will not strike Egypt even a moment too soon]. Rather, when the time comes for the sovereign to fall in the day, it falls in the day, (if at night), it falls at night.[4]

[2]Nelson has "entertain evil notions," a closer translation, but the above emphasizes the Hebrew alliteration (2006, 47).

[3]I would like to correct a reference in previous work that dealt with this midrash. Kaye 2018 (79) should say Exodus 11:4 after this biblical quotation, not Exodus 12:29.

[4]My base text is MS St. Petersburg Antonin B, 236 from Ma'agarim.org, The Historical Dictionary of the Hebrew Language, accessed July 12, 2018. Nelson (2006) translates a different manuscript, one he finds problematic: Firkovich II A 268, the basis of the critical edition (Epstein and Melamed 1955, 27–28).

This midrash notes the difference between precise timing of God's punishment of Egypt, "at midnight," delivered by Moses to Pharaoh, and the vagueness of Moses's communication of the same information to the Israelites ("that night," with no mention of midnight). The midrash hangs on the third-person narrator, whose account conforms to what Pharaoh was told and is understood as dispassionate and accurate. The midrash explains that Israelites needed gentle protection from knowing the exact time when God would strike the Egyptians and redeem them. By being vague about when at night God would arrive, God and Moses protected the Israelites from worrying that perhaps God had not shown up as promised.

The midrash suggests that Moses and God take care in the temporal language that they use when they predict what will happen to the Israelites and the Egyptians. To the Egyptians, God uses an exact time, midnight, so as to frighten the Egyptians and highlight God's power through the punctuality of God's actions. To the Israelites, in contrast, God and Moses use less precise temporal language so as to put the Israelites at ease. In both of these cases, however, God's ability to be temporally precise—in contrast to humans—is highlighted. With regard to the Egyptians, God's actions precisely at midnight highlight God's divinity. With regard to the Isrelites, God does not want them to think that redemption did not transpire if they miscalculate the precise time of midnight, again because God is absolutely punctual but humans do not have such precise temporal abilities.

The midrash uses alliteration in rabbinic Hebrew to evoke the swirling of thoughts and the difficulty of waiting (*yoshevim umeharherin hirhurim raim*), which I attempted to render alliteratively in English. The Hebrew alliteration flows with h, r, and m sounds, and it repeats the sound combination, *h-r*. The midrash dramatizes how human perception of timing is a source for doubt and worry, cycling unceasingly. The repetition of sounds shows how worries create a circular pattern, which might feel endless and lead people to give up hope. Human perception of hours of the night is imprecise and God overcomes the problem in this midrash by speaking in general terms to the Israelites about when to expect him.

By contrast, God's own timing, and therefore God's justice in punishing Egypt, is impeccable and exact.[5] God sits above or on a sundial,

[5]Though God's timing may not be impeccable in every midrash. Genesis Rabba 7:5 (Theodor and Albeck 1965, 1:18), for example, implies God ran out of time when creating all the animals of the earth in Genesis 1:25.

noting increments of the smallest possible width: a hairsbreadth (though the term hairsbreadth is offered as a reconstruction in the critical edition of this text; Epstein and Melamed 1955, 27). The meaning of "sitting on a sundial" is difficult to understand, and the term sundial is also a reconstruction in the critical edition.[6] For those scholars who suggested "sundial" in this text, there are some challenges. First, the narrative takes place at night, from the perspective of people in Egypt. However, it is possible to use a sundial at night, providing there is enough light from the moon.[7] Exodus 12:6–13 describes God redeeming the Israelites in the middle of the first month, which would mean a full moon. So, the narrative might imagine God using a sundial, illuminated by the moon's light, to decide when to come to plague the Egyptians and bring the Israelites out of slavery. On the other hand, the authors of this passage may not have intended a sundial and may not have been concerned about night and day in their image of God watching the hours closely as he sits in judgment. The commentary on this section of Exodus in the *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Ishmael* contrasts human and divine time-telling but does not dramatize the Israelites' waiting and thinking (Lauterbach 2004, 1:67), making the *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Shimon Bar Yokhai* preferred here.

The midrash depicts the weighing of Egypt's merits and demerits on a scale of the night. The mid-point of the night is the fair and proper time for Egypt to receive its punishment, a consequence of its harm of Israel. This alludes, perhaps, to the passage in Genesis 15:16, when God promises the land of Canaan to Abram but says he will not take it immediately, because "the sin of the Amorites is not yet full" (see Fleming 2016 and the biblical book of Joshua 24:18). God does not tip Egypt over into the second half of the night nor put a figurative thumb on Egypt's scale of sin. At the mid-point of the night, everything changes; then it will be time for God to strike Egypt, and not a hairsbreadth before.

It should be noted that a different midrash of the same period, *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Ishmael* Pisḥa 13, *vayehi behatsi* (Lauterbach 2004, 2:495), distinguishes between the prepositions in passage 1 (Ex. 11:4) and 3 (Ex. 12:29). Rather than seeing them as both referring to a divine, precise delineation of midnight, the midrash characterizes the first as imprecise whereas the third is the completely accurate divine perspective. That midrash distinguishes Moses's speech in passage 1 because he uses the preposition *ke*, which in some contexts can mean "like," and the narrator's speech in passage 3, which the midrash attributes to God and which uses

[6] My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this.

[7] My thanks to David Zvi Kalman who made this observation at the Association of Jewish Studies Conference in December 2018.

the preposition *be*, which can mean "in" or "at." The authors of this midrash ascribe greater precision to the third passage than the first, because Moses is "flesh and blood" and "it is impossible for flesh and blood to discern the middle of the night, but here its creator divided it."

The notion of who "divides" the night develops in interesting ways in later midrashim from Palestine as well. The homiletical *Pesiqta De-Rav Kahana*, in *Pisqa 7 vayehi behatsi halayla* (Mandelbaum 1962, 1:125–26; Braude and Kapstein 1975, 143–44), whose core may date from the fourth century CE (Strack and Stemberger 1991, 295–96), echoes the idea that it was Moses who was not sure about when God would come and strike the Egyptians. Even more intriguing is its development of the question of who divides the night. In the *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Ishmael*, it is the "night's creator," God, who divides the night, but in *Pesiqta De-Rav Kahana* there is a dispute. "Rabbi Binyamin bar Yafet said in the name of Rabbi Yohanan: The night divided on its own. Our rabbis said: Its creator divided it" (though Braude and Kapstein 1975, 144 translate differently). In this midrash, the night is animate and there are three characters whose temporal precision is considered: God, a human (Moses), and the animate night. God and the night are precise, but the human is not.

Finally, in a different context in *Mekhilta De-Rashbi*, the midnight when God strikes the Egyptians is a very significant time, not only to future commemorations of the Exodus but as a portal time that links the redemption with God's promise of redemption to Abraham and a key intermediate event that linked the promise to its fulfillment. The midrash cites three biblical episodes: the covenant God makes with Abraham in Genesis 15, Isaac's birth in Genesis 21, and God's striking the Egyptians in Exodus 12. In Genesis 15, as Abraham despairs of having a even single child, God promises Abraham he will have numerous descendants. Abraham sacrifices animals and divides their carcasses. Genesis 15:12 describes a vision Abraham saw as the sun went down and a "darkness" descended on him. Although there is no mention of midnight, it is night and there is a great darkness. The birth of Isaac in Genesis 21:2 similarly does not mention "midnight," but the midrashic author makes clever use of the sentence nonetheless: "And [Sarah] conceived and gave birth to a son for Abraham in his old age, at the time that God told him (*le-moʿed asher dibber lo elohim*). "At the time that God told him" signifies to this midrashic author that the time of Isaac's birth was itself significant and connected to God's promise in Genesis 15 because it took place at the same time (midnight) that God promised a son to Abraham. Finally, Exodus 12:29 says that "at midnight" (*bahatsi halayla*) God passed through Egypt, in the beginning of redemption.

> At midnight (*bahatsi halayla*) it was spoken with Abraham our father between the pieces [of animal carcass] (Genesis 15:1–16) and at midnight (*bahatsi halayla*) Isaac was born and at midnight (*bahatsi halayla*) the firstborns of Egypt were smitten, as it says, "and it was after (*mikkets*). One time/end (*kets*) for all of them: four hundred and thirty years. What were the thirty years? From the day it was spoken with our father Abraham between the pieces until Isaac was born: thirty years. And from when Isaac was born until Israel went out of Egypt: four hundred years.

Despite the fact that the midrash depicts midnight as a significant time that connects God and Israel both in the past and future, the midrash does not invoke the notion of sacred or holy time. The description of God's engagement with midnight maintains an idea of divine punctuality in two senses: God is punctual in punishing the Egyptians and enacting Israel's redemption from Egypt, and God is reliable in that God acted during a string of midnights to ensure Israel's continued covenant with God; God makes promises (a promise at night), then God creates the conditions to fulfill them (Abraham's progeny), and God actually fulfills them (striking Egypt), all on time, all at the same time: night. Through the portal of midnights, God maintained his promise that descendants of Abraham would be enslaved but would also be freed.[8] The rabbinic connection between Abraham's merit and the exodus goes beyond these midrashim. In both the *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Ishmael* and in *Genesis Rabbah*, Abraham's circumcision and his willingness to sacrifice Isaac are recalled by and precipitate the Exodus and parting of the Red Sea (Himmelfarb 2008, 290, 302–4).

These texts exemplify how rabbinic literature confounds categorizations of divine time as purely timelessness. In the first *Mekhilta De-Rashbi* text, the narrator emphasizes God's punctuality, demonstrating God's justice. In other rabbinic texts, fairness in judicial contexts is associated with equal time in divine courtroom narratives (Hidary 2018, 240–63, but see Halberstam 2014, 64–66 for a different temporality of divine trials), and a similar presumption informs procedures today in the US Supreme Court (Strauss 2015, 514–17). Regarding the question of sacred time in light of rabbinic literature, a timely God is not the eternal divine accessible at a redemptive moment, which is, in turn, commemorated through ritual on holidays. That is not the quality of divine temporality at work in this midrash. An investigation of the relationship between sanctity and temporality in rabbinic literature ought to happen independent of theoretical

[8] See Adelman (2009) for examples of aligning the same place for multiple biblical events across time.

alignment of divine time and eternality, which is often a conceptual first step towards conceiving sacred times.

LATE ANTIQUE MESOPOTAMIAN RELIGIONS AND SCHOLARSHIP OF SACRED TIME

Caution is advisable in using "sacred time" as an explanatory concept in studies of time in other late antique religious traditions as well. Scholarship characterized by sensitive textual analysis to describe specific aspects of the salvific time in the thought of late antique Church Father St. Ephrem sometimes concludes specific temporal descriptions with identifications of those temporal phenomena as sacred time. Likewise descriptions of the limitless and limited time in Middle Persian and other contemporaneous Zoroastrian texts. As a curious reader from an adjacent field, I defer to the authors' analyses of these texts, but while reading for notions of time I am uncertain about the utility of the term "sacred time."

For example, Kianoosh Rezania's examination of time in Zoroastrian Middle Persian texts addresses itself to the scholarly debate in Iranian studies about whether there was a Zoroastrian alternative belief structure "Zurvanism" (Zaehner [1955] 1972; Boyce 1957, 1982, 232–41, 1996; Shaked 1992; Rezania 2010). Rezania's work strongly rejects the theory. Because Zurvan was a minor deity whose name means "time," Rezania examines time concepts more generally in Zoroastrian texts. He concludes that Zurvanism was not, as some earlier scholars had argued, a significant issue in Zoroastrianism. Rezania's descriptions of time in cosmological and eschatological Zoroastrian writings offer an example of how "sacral time" can enter such discussions. His careful analysis of "limited" and "limitless" time in Zoroastrian cosmological works concludes that limitless time is "sacral." Although it may be the case that an accurate definition of sacral time in Zoroastrian literature is "limitless time," this label does not clarify limitless time. Rezania's careful, specific descriptions of the character of limitless time illuminate the concept. Rezania's attention, quite properly, is on the significance of limitless and limited time in the Zoroastrian texts. Those texts do not themselves, it seems, introduce terms of sacrality.

> As we learn from this passage (Mēnōg ī Xrad XII:9), not only is limitless time unchanging, but it is also free from aggression. *Ahreman* finds no way into this sphere. Clearly, this reflects the sacrality of this state. This leads us to think of limitless time as a sacral, static state which is not subject to change. (Rezania 2008, 59)

Incorporating the idea of sanctity into the temporal concepts adds Zoroastrian texts to a textual corpus that religious studies might access when thinking about a potentially cross-cultural concept like sacred time. Yet Rezania's own descriptions of Zoroastrian time concepts stand independently, which raises questions about the explanatory utility of adding sacred or sacral time to the analysis of these texts.

Likewise, in Sebastian Brock's explication of St. Ephrem of Nisibus's notions of time in his hymns, Brock carefully describes how different key events in the life of Christ join together in Ephrem's hymns to create a unified, synchronous temporal existence of salvation (Brock [1985] 1992). Brock argues that a different narrative register describes Christ's enacting of events in sacred time, perhaps inspired by the category in Eliade's work.[9] Also, consuming the eucharist or being baptized allows individuals to be both in their own "historical" time that passes away as well as in the eschaton. Brock describes this phenomenon in terms of sacred time: "Jesus' descent into sheol is purely on realms on sacred time and space. It is Christ's entry into both past and future time . . . it affects all historical time and all geographical space" (Brock [1985] 1992, 30). According to Brock, sacred time is the entry into the eschaton, a time of the end of time, and perhaps the absence of time, while also being in a particular historical moment (compare Brock's description of Jesus as bridegroom in Ephrem's hymns and how this is both in eschatological and historical time in Brock [1985] 1992, 116, 125–26). Considering Ephrem's incorporation of Greek philosophy, "predominantly Stoic but also eclectic" (Possekel 1999, 234), might further clarify Ephrem's temporal thought, but that was not Brock's approach. Brock's descriptions of time in the hymns of St. Ephrem expose the unity of key events in the life of Jesus. The events are, in turn, available to Christians through key ritual moments in their lives. Calling such spans sacred time may not illuminate the specific qualities of this form of time as much as Brock's own descriptions of the poetry do.

The scholars I mention, experts in their fields, make significant contributions to understanding temporality and religious traditions of late antique Mesopotamia. It is for them to decide whether a phenomenon or text reflects sacred time. My question is whether marking something as "sacred time" in a late antique work adds to the comprehension of what is happening exegetically, legally, or creatively in the text and whether it advances the comprehension of the kinds of temporality the scholars find in their primary sources. Does concluding that a particular temporal phenomenon is "sacred time" merely add another text, culture, or

[9] I am indebted to Adam Becker for his assistance with interpreting Brock's work in the context of religious studies and Syriac studies, and any mistakes are my own.

phenomenon to a long religious studies list of different kinds of sacred time? If the relationship between time and the sacred is at stake in a primary text, then the material might be presented differently. If a relationship between time and the sacred is not present or is tertiary to the texts themselves, then the detailed descriptions of the forms of time that manifest in these texts seem enriching enough without trying to fit them into a concept of sacred time, itself the creation of religious studies scholars. In rabbinic literature, without interrogating whether the quality of holiness is specifically assigned to time and how that holiness may relate to other holiness and sanctification (and of course, whether time is considered enough of a "something" that it can be sanctified), using the term "sacred time" may confuse distinct phenomena. As a concept, sacred time may be just understandable enough to prematurely end further consideration of the nature of time in certain contexts.

A NEW LOOK AT TIME AND SANCTIFICATION IN RABBINIC LITERATURE

For scholars who are drawn to study concepts of time and religion, the category of "sacred time" can foster illuminating comparative conversations. But discussions of sacred time should not obscure descriptions of qualities of time using the texts' own language and concerns. The category of sacred time should be liberated from defining a shape of events (line, circle, other), from the opposition of recurrence and irreversibility, from an association with "myth" and expected qualities of divine temporality and timelessness. Only then is it possible to examine the relationship between temporality and sanctification in classical rabbinic literature.

That work could take up the following questions, among many others. How do rabbinic texts interpret "sanctification" and de-sanctification of time periods? Previous scholarship has examined various meanings of the root q.d.š. in biblical and rabbinic texts. Two points from that scholarship seem especially worth pursuing in relation to time and sanctification in rabbinic literature: Naomi Koltun-Fromm's distinction between "ascribed holiness" (holiness granted to people by God as a status irrespective of actions) and "achieved holiness," which is dependent on behavior (Koltun-Fromm 2010, 32) and might also apply to time periods; a comparison between Koltun-Fromm's texts and texts about time could illuminate important differences. Second, Tzvi Novick argues that rabbinic literature "decentered" holiness as a primary principle for social organization, giving that role to law (Novick 2018, 36–38). "Legal categories fill the role occupied in extra-rabbinic circles by holiness discourse" (Novick 2018,

42). This observation fits the fact that the time of observing commandments is not described as holy time, even if people can become sanctified through the performance of commandments. Building on this and other prior research about holiness in rabbinic literature, one might ask: How are processes of sanctification and de-sanctification comparable to other characterizations of time spans, such as "adding from holy?" Who is the sanctifier? What verbs, and implicitly processes, accompany or contrast with sanctification? And, crucially, what kind of object is a temporal span regarding its sanctification? This last question has not been sufficiently considered with the exception of Stern (2003, 69), who argued that the sanctification of months in rabbinic literature was actually the sanctification of a material object: the moon. How do rabbis describe consecration of an entity that is not a typical object for consecration, and in what ways are time spans part of a spectrum of unusual consecrated things? To what are holy time and its opposites compared by the rabbis? This work would include rabbinic texts devoted to biblical accounts of God's sanctification of the seventh day in Genesis (as Gribetz 2016b) as well as rabbinic commentaries on other processes of sanctification like the holidays, the concept of adding from holy onto mundane time spans, and the sabbatical year and jubilee.

Altogether, such a study of sacred time in rabbinic Judaism would contribute a more text-and language-focused conceptualization of temporality, sanctification, and de-sanctification in classical Jewish texts. It would move forward debates about time in classical Judaism from concerns about myth and "shapes," which define rabbinic texts in terms of others' categories. And it would enhance religious studies' understanding of the category of sacred times. Texts' own terms and categories allows us more fully to grasp the textures of time in various religious traditions. Sacred time, like any modern scholarly concept, should be critically re-evaluated in light of more productive concepts of time in religion and need not frame the discussion of time in religion.

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