Disciplining the Dissident Body: Disability, Gender, and State Violence in Rabbinic Literature

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In late antiquity as in late modernity, the Jewish body is a potent site for contesting and condensing notions of identity, difference, and deviance (Gilman 1991; Boyarin 1993; Konner 2003). “Consider Israel according to the flesh,” Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10:18, forging an association between carnality and the Jew that has served both as invective and instruction for centuries. Yet what has less frequently been observed, at least by scholars of Jewish late antiquity, is the way Jewish flesh is often bound up with the rhetoric and material condition of disability. Rabbinic texts engage disability as a legal subject, focusing especially on the degree to which physical, sensory, and mental impairments represent grounds for excluding an individual from the performance of religious rituals and commandments (Abrams, 1998). Disability also figures prominently in rabbinic narrative: in traditions that speculate about the etiology of different disabilities, in texts that use disability as a symbol or metaphor, and in stories that feature characters with disabilities.

In this essay, I argue that disability studies offers a robust set of critical tools that can help illuminate critical contours of late antique Jewish culture, probing key practices of power and constellations of meaning within rabbinic literature and theology. I begin by probing the way disability is deployed in rabbinic discourses of idolatry and martyrdom, examining a Palestinian midrash in which a faithful Jew defends the power and physical capacity of his God against the murderous Roman state. While the first rabbinic narrative embellishes a familiar biblical contrast between Israel’s God and blindness, deafness, and physical incapacity of the deities of the nations, the second passage I examine centers around a startling rabbinic evocation of divine disability, a text from the Babylonian Talmud that imagines God as a “lame shepherd.” While these two narratives use disability in strikingly different ways, I argue that both ultimately use disability discourse to defend
the notion of divine justice, thereby buttressing the divine body at the expense of more vulnerable human flesh.

The final section of this essay reads rabbinic narrative through the insights articulated by scholars and activists working at the intersections of feminist disability studies, critical race studies, and racial justice organizing to probe the nexus of Roman state violence and rabbinic body sovereignty in a well-known story from the Babylonian Talmud, in which Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai and his son escape Roman persecution by hiding for thirteen years in a cave.1 My reading centers the vulnerability and risk borne by the rabbinic body, arguing that the story functions as a site of narrative resistance to Roman corporeal violence. Even as the story of Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai seeks to reconcile the rabbinic fantasy of single-minded spiritual devotion with the demands of the temporal world, I argue that Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai’s entry into the cave should not be understood as a flight from the flesh. Instead, a disability studies reading of this tale reveals how the rabbinic hero aims to deny corporeal power to the Roman state, to wrest control of the rabbinic body from Roman imperium. While Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai exercises successful agency over the meaning of his impaired body, the portrayal of his wife reveals how the rabbinic storytellers construct women’s “lightmindedness” and vulnerability to Roman violence in stark contrast to the rabbinic man’s capacity to weather bodily distress and transmute it into mental prowess, the quintessential currency of rabbinic prestige.

### Idolatry, Disability and the Divine Body

Disability imagery occupies a potent rhetorical place within early Jewish idolatry discourse. Biblical literature makes frequent appeal to disability in order to buttress its claims regarding the superiority and sovereignty of Israel’s God (Avalos 2007; Raphael 2011; Olyan 2011). Psalm 115, to take one prominent example, ascribes physical and sensory impairment to the gods of the nations in order to highlight their impotence and

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1 I acknowledge a profound debt to Leroy Moore, Lydia Brown, Kerima Cevik, and other disability justice activists who have been doing critical work documenting and resisting the brutal intersections of ableism and white supremacy, especially police violence against disabled people of color. I also thank Corbett O’Toole (2017), for continued emphasis on the importance of community scholars in disability studies. In writing this essay, I have occasionally adapted materials from my earlier work on disability in rabbinic literature, particularly Belser 2017 and Belser and Lehmhaus 2017.
inability to save. After praising the faithfulness of Israel’s God, Psalm 115:5-8 castigates the images of the nations:

They have mouths, but cannot speak;
eyes, but cannot see;

They have ears, but cannot hear,
noses, but cannot smell;

They have hands, but cannot touch;
feet, but cannot walk;
they can make no sound in their throat.

Those who believe them,
all who trust in them,
shall become like them.

As Saul Olyan has shown, the psalmist uses disability as a stigmatizing strategy that denies the gods of the nations “knowledge, independent agency, and the ability to communicate” (Olyan 2011, 94). The Psalmist claims a dissonance between the physical form of the image—which is endowed with visible sensory organs and limbs—and its inability to perform as a normative body. The psalm calls its listeners to probe beyond the apparent surface of the body, to challenge the testimony of their own eyes. While the hands and feet of the fashioned god might seem a reassurance of divine power, the Psalmist asserts that these limbs are faulty; they are but simulacra, fashioned by a human hand. Not only does the impairment of the idols devalue their own power, it threatens to unmake the physical capacity of those who worship them. Averring that “those who believe in them . . . shall become like them,” Psalm 115:8 asserts that putting one’s faith in a disabled god will leave humans vulnerable to disability themselves. Fear acquiring impairment thus serves as the final arrow in the Psalmist’s polemical quiver, as the psalm proclaims disability to be the fate of those who trust in gods who cannot protect, cannot respond, and cannot save.

A famous rabbinic narrative embellishes Psalm 115’s disability polemic against the gods of the nations, lifting these verses into a theological debate between a Jewish martyr

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2 Reading Deuteronomy’s idol polemics through the lens of sensory criticism, Hector Avalos (2007) argues that the Deuteronomist figures sight as an untrustworthy sense, revealing a stronger trust in hearing, an orientation that Avalos terms “audiocentricity.”
boy and the emperor of Rome. Lamentations Rabbah 1:16 recounts the death of Miriam bat Tanḥum, whose seven sons were taken captive and slain by the Roman emperor when they refuse to forsake their God and bow before him. As the full tale is lengthy and complex, I focus here particularly on the way that disability rhetoric is used to delegitimize the power and authority of the sovereign and the state, even as the midrash raises critical questions that threaten to unravel the Jew’s confident claim that Israel’s God is an able body, a body endowed with sensory sensitivity and the physical capacity to save. In the midrash, six brothers are brought in turn before Caesar and told to bow before an idol. When each refuses, he recites a biblical verse to declare his fidelity to Israel’s God and is immediately taken away and slain. While the seventh son’s trial begins as did his brothers, the midrash uses the encounter between the Roman emperor and Miriam’s youngest child to stage an extended theological debate about power, capacity and disability. The Jewish boy draws a sharp contrast between Caesar and his own God, asking whether he should fear “a king of flesh and blood,” rather than “the king of kings . . . who is God of all the world?” The boy thus reaffirms his loyalty to the Eternal, disdaining Caesar’s power as transient and ephemeral. For all his temporal might, he too is a mortal man, subject to the vicissitudes of time and death.

Where the Jewish boy imagines Caesar’s fleshy body as a source of vulnerability, a limit upon the reach of imperial power, the ensuing dialogue remains fixated on the body as a means of assessing and contesting the nature of divine power and capacity. Consider this excerpt from their dialogue:

[Caesar] said to him, “But does your God have a mouth?”
He said to him,
“Of your idolatry, it is written,
‘They have mouths, but do not speak’ (Psalm 115: 5)
But of our God, it is written,
‘By the word of God, the heavens were made.’” (Psalm 33:6)

He said to him, “But does your God have eyes?”
He said to him,
“Of your idolatry, it is written,
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3 An important study of this midrash appears in Galit Hasan-Rokem (2000, 114-125); I have also discussed this midrash in a different context, comparing it with the Bavli’s version of the mother of seven sons (Belser 2017).
‘They have eyes, but do not see’ (Psalm 115:5)
But of our God, it is written,
‘The eyes of the Lord your God are always upon it.’” (Deut. 11:12) . . .

He said to him, “But does your God have hands?”
He said to him,
“Of your idolatry, it is written,
“They have hands, but do not feel” (Psalm 115:7)
But of our God, it is written,
‘My hand has founded the earth.’” (Isaiah 48:13)

He said to him, “But does your God have feet?”
He said to him,
“Of your idolatry, it is written,
“They have feet, but do not walk’ (Psalm 115:7)
But of our God, it is written,
‘He will stand with his feet, on that day’ (Zechariah 14:4)
and ‘He will stand and tread upon the high places of the earth.’” (Micah 1:3) . . .

This passage, which goes on at considerable length, proceeds at length through a veritable catalogue of senses and body parts: mouths, eyes, ears, nose, hands, feet, and throat. Each time, the Jews uses Psalm 115 to castigate idolatry, while citing another biblical verse to affirm his own God’s power. While readers steeped in the expectations of medieval Maimonidean philosophy might expect a sharp denial of such anthropomorphic accounts of the divine presence, our midrash revels in recounting the corporeality of Israel’s God. The distinction the midrash crafts between God and idolatry is not between form and formlessness, but between agency and incapacity. Disability serves as a rhetorical tool to illustrate the powerlessness of idols. Their inability to see, hear, walk, talk, and save stands in sharp contrast to the ultimate capacity of Israel’s God, who speaks the heavens into being, whose eyes survey the entire world, whose hands have laid the foundation of the earth, and whose feet stand firm. While Psalm 115 focuses on enumerating the incapacities of the idol, our midrash builds up the body of God. It imagines God’s agency through vivid appeal to God’s exquisitely capacious senses, and reveals God’s power as a force that arises from the physicality of divine flesh.

It is a masterful theological display—or, at least, it would be, were it not situated in the execution chamber of the Roman state. The disability discourse that operates within the rarefied realm of theology is contested viscerally through the flesh. Drawn into the
dialogue in the wake of the death of the six elder brothers, the reader enters into this story already attuned to Caesar’s power, the way that Roman violence claims mastery over the actual body of the Jew. We are thus left to ask, as Caesar does, “If your God has all of these qualities, why does he not save you from my hand?” With this question, Caesar attempts to reaffirm the visceral strength of the murderer over God and Jew alike. His words put the boy’s claim to the test: Can this God rescue its passionate defender from the imperial grip? Or will God’s powerlessness be revealed, the slack divine hand broadcast through the death of this child? Ultimately, the midrash refuses Caesar’s question. It is not God’s power to save that is in question, the boy avers. It is his own righteousness that stands suspect. But even though he and his brothers were not worthy to be saved, God will ultimately use his death to punish Caesar, “to exact our blood from your hand.” Lamentations Rabbah thus defuses the question of divine disability by having the captive boy affirm the justice of his own death. It defends divine power, at the altar of Jewish sacrifice. It rescues divine capability, at the cost of Jewish blood.

Is the reader meant to believe the child, when he declares his faith in Israel’s God? When he professes himself guilty, and submits to death at Caesar’s hand? While the midrash valorizes the piety of the martyr, this narrative also excoriates the violence of empire—and raises haunting questions about divine justice. Just before her child is slain, Miriam bat Tanḥum begs the right to embrace her son. When the Romans give the boy to her, the midrash recounts, “she uncovered her breast and let him suckle milk.” It is a startling scene of physical intimacy between mother and son, a moment that centers the female body as a source of nurture and care. While God’s body remains eclipsed from the scene, while the divine hand refuses to rescue this child from the emperor’s grasp, the mother thrusts her own body center stage. For all its pathos, the gesture underscores the futility of bodily resistance, the limits of the mother’s capacity to save. Miriam begs Caesar to kill her together with the last child, but Caesar refuses, citing Leviticus 22:28, a verse that forbids a person from killing both mother and offspring on the same day.4 But her

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4 For rabbinic audiences, the verse has a barbed edge; it frequently serves as a means of critiquing divine justice. The use of the mother bird motif to pose the question of theodicy and divine justice appears prominently in the Palestinian Talmud’s account of Elisha ben Abuya, which appears in yḤagigah 77b-c. See Jeffrey Rubenstein, Talmudic Stories, 91; Alon Goshen-Gottstein, The Sinner and the Amnesiac: The Rabbinic Invention of Elisha Ben Abuya and Eleazar ben Arach (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).
bodily stratagems prove incapable of blunting Roman brutality. The emperor refuses to allow her to interpose her own flesh between her child and the executioner's blade. The maternal Jewish body cannot protect her child, nor even claim the right to die beside him; it can only nourish him one last time, en route to the grave. The midrash ends by narrating Miriam's own death. “After several days,” Lamentations Rabbah recounts, “that woman climbed up to the roof and threw herself down and died.” It is not a passive death, but an active one: she climbs, she throws, she dies. Through these final deeds, Miriam claims sovereignty over her own body—if not in life, then at least in death. For all Caesar's capacity to marshal the murderous architecture of the Roman state, he cannot neutralize her protest.

But at what cost? Even as I recognize the way death affords Miriam a final exercise of agency over her own body, I am leery of championing this move, of celebrating the martyr's death as a triumph over the brutal logics of imperium. Reading this tale through the lens of feminist disability studies, I train my interpretive eye on the gulf that separates Miriam's fleshy female body, which rushes to interpose itself between her son and the emperor's sword, and the body of God. For all that the midrash explicitly affirms the power and capacity of the divine body, the cultural logics of martyrdom imagine that divine body as a body in need, a body propped up the seven sons who affirm God's physical strength, even as their own limbs falter. The discourse of martyrdom builds the divine body out of the remains of human sacrifice. It demands the human body bear the cost of fidelity to a God whose body remains absent, beyond the field of death or pain.

**Is God a Clever Crip?: Divine Disability and the Limits of Justice**

Biblical and rabbinic texts commonly imagine divine power as incommensurate with disability, instead associating the divine body with physical strength, splendor, and sensory capacity. Rebecca Raphael has argued that biblical narrative does not hold God entirely distant from the field of disability. Calling attention to the Psalmist's frequent plea that God “not be deaf” to his plea, she argues such rhetoric claims for God “the power to exercise deafness as an option” (2008, 117). Yet asserting that God might *choose* deafness, Raphael emphasizes, is a far cry from imagining God as Deaf. This divine deafness remains the intentional choice of an otherwise hearing body; the Psalmist assumes that God might,
at any time, turn and hear. I wish to examine a very different manifestation of divine disability, one that emerges in the Babylonian Talmud, hereafter known as the Bavli, in a tradition attributed to Mar ʿUqva. To be clear, I make no claim that Mar ʿUqva’s tradition is a representative rabbinic conception of God. Quite the contrary, rabbinic sources are much more likely to use the lexicon of impairment to disparage idolatry and to minimize the power and agency of the deities of other nations, as we saw in Lamentations Rabbah 1:16. Nonetheless, I find Mar ʿUqva’s statement fascinating precisely because it offers a suggestive and startling counterpoint to these motifs, one in which a theological problem related to sin and punishment is solved by appeal to divine disability.

The motif of divine disability appears in Bavli Shabbat 32a, in a text that discusses why women die in childbirth. While the entire sugya is ripe for a disability studies analysis, I focus here on the way disability imagery is used to neutralize a problem posed by the Mishnah’s claim that maternal mortality is linked with specific transgressions. Mishnah Shabbat 2:6 reads as follows:

For three transgressions, women die at the hour they give birth:
   for not being careful with niddah, [the ritual practices of menstruation]
   for hallah, [not tithing a portion of dough when baking]
   for kindling the lights [on Shabbat].

The Mishnah proposes a clear and straightforward relationship between women’s death in childbirth and three specific sins, all related to the improper fulfillment of commandments that rabbinic law figures as women’s responsibility. The Bavli’s discussion first focuses on identifying a clear correspondence between a woman’s transgression and her physical distress. Rabbi Yitzhaq explains the link between niddah and maternal death as a matter of straightforward corporeal correspondence, averring that “she corrupted (qalqalah) the chambers of her womb, so she is punished through the womb” (Bavli Shabbat 32a). Yet as the discussion unfolds, the neat correspondence Rabbi Yitzhaq finds between sin and punishment with regard to the womb falters in the face of less immediately corporeal practices. For failures to tithe hallah or to kindle the Shabbat lights, the correspondence between sin and punishment becomes more textual, less corporeal. The body is not, it appears, always a transparent surface for revealing divine justice.
But if the nature of the specific sins troubles the Bavli’s rabbis, the next question that occupies our sugya is why the Mishnah specifies that women die in childbirth. Surely, our rabbinic interlocutors presume, if God desires to mete out corporeal punishment on those who sin, God could exercise retributive justice at any moment. The Bavli engages this question through a series of aphorisms, one of which mobilizes the notion of divine disability:

Mar ʿUqva said:
The shepherd is lame (ḥigra)
and the lambs run quick.
At the gate of the pen: words.
Within the barn: the settled account.

Why does God punish a woman’s transgressions during childbirth? Because, as the rabbis often assert, divine judgment is often exacted when a person is in danger (Rubenstein 2010, 54). While the notion that physical danger enhances a person’s risk of facing a divine accounting appears in many rabbinic tales, Mar ʿUqva’s proverb purports to explain why. God is like a disabled shepherd, running after spry and sure-footed sheep. God can’t catch them in the open field; they scatter too quickly. But times of danger bring a person to the threshold. Those lambs are constrained at the gate of the pen, and when God brings them into the divine domain, then “the shepherd” settles the accounts.⁵

In Mar ʿUqva’s proverb, the shepherd’s lameness becomes a way of explaining why divine punishment is so poorly calibrated, why the wicked often appear to elude justice. The theological solution—that God will settle accounts in the next world—is familiar. But the explanatory metaphor is startling unique. In Mar ʿUqva’s imagining, God’s lameness explains why God does not simply hunt down evil doers, why transgressors so often run free. The image of God as a lame shepherd revalues conventional notions of divine power, offering a rare glimpse of rabbinic admission of divine limitation. But Mar ʿUqva’s notion of the disabled God does not ultimately inscribe divine incapacity. Instead, it recognizes divine constraint and celebrates divine resourcefulness. It is not physical limberness that wins the day, but cleverness: the shepherd has designed for disability, fashioning pen, gate, and barn in order to avoid having to chase down the lambs in the open field. By imagining

⁵ On the use of accounting metaphors in rabbinic discourse of divine punishment, see Schofer 2005.
the gate as a kind of adaptation, a way of taking divine disability into account, Mar 'Uqva’s tradition offers a striking image of what I call “the clever crip,” a figure whose creative embrace of disability yields ingenuity and innovation, forging solutions through adaptation and the adroit use of a disabled body or mind, rather than the amelioration or erasure of disability.

But much as I might like to close this essay with an image of divine disability as a mode of rabbinic theological resistance, the Bavli’s notion of God as the lame shepherd is no late antique liberation theology. The idea of God as the lame shepherd rebounds to the detriment of actual embodied women. Mar 'Uqva deploys the disabled God to justify the idea that women die in childbirth as recompense for sin, for failure to rigorously uphold the commandments. Read in the context of the broader sugya, the lame shepherd confirms the Bavli’s initial claim that a woman’s body testifies against her in a time of danger. The image of a disabled God upholds maternal mortality as a marker of personal transgression, inscribing sin onto and through the female body at risk. While it portrays the divine body in a strikingly different way than the Lamentations Rabbah tradition that ascribes disability to the gods of Rome, both these texts buttress theological claims about divine justice, at the expense of actual human bodies. At the same time, both narratives also reveal the cracks and fissures in rabbinic theological claims. The full passage in which this tradition appears goes on to complicating the notion that maternal death and other fatal illnesses should, indeed, be understood through the prism of sin and punishment. Likewise, Lamentations Rabbah 1:16 raises critical questions about the limits of divine power amidst the brutality of empire, opening up a narrative space to imagine the martyrdom of Miriam and her seven sons not as a moment of heroic theological conviction, but as an occasion for divine lament.

Beyond the Diagnosable Body: Reconceptualizing Disability in Rabbinic Narrative

Thus far, I have examined texts that offer fairly recognizable images of disability, analyzing types of physical and sensory impairment that fit neatly within conventional modern notions of the disabled body. Disability studies is rightly concerned with the particularly of the disabled body and should keep questions of the material experience of disability central to its thinking. Yet, I assert, if we limit the scope of disability studies analysis solely to texts that make explicit mention of disability narrowly understood, then
we blunt the critical potential of disability studies. Disability studies must not be equated with the history of medicine or the investigation of specific physical and mental states within law, literature, or practice. Julie Avril Minich (2017) argues that disability studies is not a subject-oriented field that “scrutinizes specific bodily and mental impairments,” but rather a critical, analytical methodology that uncovers the “social norms that define particular attributes as impairments, as well as the social conditions that concentrate stigmatized attributes in particular populations.” Disability studies is a theoretical framework that probes the contours of stigma, deviance, and social power, not merely the study of disabled people (Schalk 2017). Rather than focusing solely on identities that “can currently be recognized as disability,” Jina Kim argues, disability studies analysis should strive to illuminate “the systemic de-valuation (and oftentimes, subsequent disablement) of non-normative bodies and minds” (2017).

With this theoretical intervention in mind, let us turn to the story of Shimon bar Yoḥai. On its face, this tale is a surprising candidate for disability studies analysis. Readers familiar with the tale might be forgiven for wondering whether disability features in this story at all. Disability is a notoriously slippery concept, one that refuses neat boundaries and clear definitions. In the modern moment, prevailing conceptions of disability are inextricably bound up with medical cultures of diagnosis and treatment, as well as with the apparatus of state and nongovernmental agencies that provide services to individuals determined “disabled enough” to be eligible for benefits or legal protections. Ellen Samuels (2014) documents the rise of what she terms “fantasies of identification,” the intense effort to render embodied social identities like disability, race, and gender as fixed, verifiable, and visible through modern science. Yet such categories fail to capture the complexities of human experience. A core theoretical intervention of disability studies is to destabilize conventional notions of disability. Building on Lennard Davis’ distinction between biophysical “impairment” and the social experience of “disability” (1995), disability studies analyzes and unravels the ways a particular culture turns physical or mental difference into a stigmatized identity. Disability, theorists claim, is not a straightforward fact of the body. Like gender, race, and other identities that masquerade as “natural,” disability is produced as much by society as by biology. Observers stare at and single out bodies that deviate from society’s expectations (Garland-Thompson 2002). Architectural and design choices
privilege certain kinds of moving and being in the world (Titchkosky 2011). Conventional frameworks of mental health stigmatize mental difference (Nakamura 2013; Price 2015), while the privileging of neurotypical modes of cognition do profound violence toward other ways of knowing, feeling, and perceiving the world (Yergeau 2017). Such work has helped to anchor one of the signal contributions of disability studies: namely, that disability is not a stable and easily recognizable category dictated solely by biophysical difference, but rather a profoundly contingent identity that is shaped by the complex interplay of body, mind, and culture.

For historians, this means that notions of disability cannot be taken as a given; they are a subject of historical inquiry in their own right, a way to understand how a particular society conceptualizes and demarcates difference. Early Jewish culture, for example, has no single term that encompasses the modern concept of disability. Perhaps the closest concept is *mum* (blemish), which biblical and rabbinic authors use to categorize a variety of physical and sensory impairments. In its biblical context, however, the term *mum* includes certain physical characteristics (such as a broken arm) that most moderns do not consider a disability, while excluding others (such as deafness) that are often included in modern definitions (Olyan 2008). Given these differences, I suggest, the term disability is not particularly useful as a historical diagnostic category. Rather, it serves best as an analytical framework to probe the cultural implications of corporeal difference (Belser 2017a).

Rabbinic legal sources fashion certain forms of body-mind difference into identity categories, most notably singling out individuals who are blind (ʿ*ivver*), lame (*piseah*), deaf-mute (*heresh*), and mentally-disabled (*shoteh*); they also use a common triad of “the deaf-mute, the mentally disabled, and the young person” to identify individuals who are exempt from the performance of certain religious obligation (Abrams 1988). This legal framework, I argue, suggests an implicit category of “disabled persons” within rabbinic culture, a set of stigmatized identities constructed through real or perceived impairments—and classified, along with children, as individuals who are considered unable to exercise reason or understanding (Belser and Lehmhaus 2017).

Disability studies scholarship in biblical studies and rabbinic literature has often focused on the “diagnosable” body, examining texts and characters who register as disabled according to ancient or modern schemas of disablement (Abrahms 1998; Schipper 2006;
Raphael 2008). Alongside this important scholarly work, however, we must also push beyond the boundaries of the conventionally disabled body, to probe the ways in which disablement is bound up with broader practices of power in late antiquity. Disability studies offers a critical lens through which to probe rabbinic narratives of Roman conquest, illuminating both the visceral body costs of imperial conquest and the way disability functions in a symbolic register to express and contest Roman power. Even as subjugated bodies bear the material costs of opposition to the imperial project, rabbinic literature often functions the disabled body into a potent site of resistance, a site through which communities can critique Roman dominance—and also articulate the subversive potency of dissident Jewish flesh (Belser 2017a). Sentenced to death after insulting Rome, Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai spends thirteen years in hiding, studying Torah in an isolated cave. His flesh becomes pitted and painful; his body bears the marks of his ordeal, while his mind is sharpened through the intensity of his studies. I take Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai’s story as a narrative of acquired disability, and I probe the political significations and cultural implications that rabbinic narrative grants to his flesh. While a surface reading of Rabbi Shimon’s changed body advances a familiar rabbinic trope that valorizes intellectual capacity over physical strength, a disability studies reading of this tale complicates that trope—revealing the way imperial power is refracted and contested through the matrix of the body. In this tale, disabled flesh becomes a potent locus of rabbinic subversion, as well as a mode of survival.

**State Violence and the Brutalized Body: Race, Disability Studies, and Rabbinic Flesh**

In the opening essay that begins his critically acclaimed collection *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates asserts that the experience of racism in contemporary America is bound up with the unmaking of black and brown bodies. Though scholars and policymakers wrap violence in complex language that distances us from the physicality of the flesh, Coates writes:

* Racism is a visceral experience . . . it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth. You must never look away from this. You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the
graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body. (2015, 10)

Let me be clear: I draw no facile analogies here between race and disability, nor do I intend to parlay the particularity of racist violence in contemporary America into a condemnation of the Roman state. I begin with Coates because he names with such precision the cost that state violence exacts upon the bodies of minoritized communities, because he illuminates the way that systemic power is bound up with corporeal risk, what Jasbir Puar (2017) has termed “the right to maim.”6 If we recognize that state dominance operates, in part, through the capacity to exercise control over the bodies of its subjects; if we acknowledge that systemic power is made manifest, in part, through the ability to break the teeth and the bones of those it considers dissident; if we internalize the notion that the state deploys this power not only through the actual practice of violence, but also through terror and threat, then we must always ask how and where the body lodges in American accounts of race, as in rabbinic accounts of Rome.

The threat of violence propels the Bavli’s tale of Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai, as the sage is marked by Rome for death after his sharp critique of the state. Because this narrative has been much discussed in the scholarly literature, most recently in incisive treatments by Jeffery Rubenstein (1999) and Michal Bar-Asher Siegal (2013), I focus particularly on elements of the narrative that reveal the rabbinic body at risk. Focusing on bodily risk in rabbinic narrative is a difficult enterprise, for these stories are told and retold at great temporal and geographic remove from the physical acts of Roman persecution.7 Rabbinic

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6 Puar distinguishes between disablement and debility, arguing that debility “foregrounds the slow wearing down of populations instead of the event of becoming disabled. While the latter concept creates and hinges on a narrative of before and after for individuals who will eventually be identified as disabled, the former comprehends those bodies that are sustained in a perpetual state of debilitation precisely through foreclosing the social, cultural, and political translation to disability.” While I find Puar’s distinction illuminating in the modern moment, given the salience of disability as a cultural-identity category, I am less sure that these distinctions are applicable to ancient sources. Thus, somewhat against her own terms, I find myself thinking rabbinic disability studies with Puar in mind, for the way her approach illuminates the collision between the ancient body under imperial regimes.

7 Babylonian rabbinic Jewish culture emerges in a complex and contested borderland between the Sasanian and Roman empires. Rather than imagining a distinct boundary between these cultural regions, my own thinking is indebted to approaches that recognize the porous, fluid nature of cultural exchange. Richard Kalmin (2006) and Daniel Boyarin (2007; 2009) both situate rabbinic Babylonia within a shared cultural world that draws upon the intellectual currents of Roman Hellenism, Syriac Christianity, and Sasanian Zoroastrianism, and contend that Rome remains a significant interest for the Babylonian rabbis, even though they are not subjects of the Roman empire.
literature is a notoriously poor source for history and, as Richard Kalmin concludes, rabbinic sources tell us very little in raw historical terms about Roman persecution against the Jews (2003). But stories about Roman violence were profoundly important to rabbinic storytellers, not only in Palestine where the Roman Empire remained the ascendant political force, but also in the Babylonian Talmud, where, as Kalmin has shown, tales of Roman persecution focus particularly on the empire as a threat to the study of Torah (2003). In grappling with the way this story imagines the Roman Empire as a threat to the rabbinic body, I turn first to the narrative’s depiction of violence, noting the way in which violence originally directed at Shimon bar Yoḥai “spills out” onto the community at large. Shabbat 33b begins:

Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Yosi and Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai were sitting; Yehuda ben Gerim was sitting beside them. 
Rabbi Yehuda began:
“How fine are the acts of this nation!
They established markets.
They established bathhouses.
They established bridges.”
Rabbi Yosi kept silent.
Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai answered:
“Everything they established, they established for their own needs.
They established markets to house prostitutes.
Bathhouses to pamper themselves.
Bridges to collect tolls.”
Yehuda ben Gerim went and retold their words, and it became known to the government.
They said:
“Yehuda, who extolled, shall be exalted.
Yosi, who kept silent, shall be exiled to Sepphoris.
Shimon, who disparaged, shall be killed.”
Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai and his son hid in the house of study.
Every day, his wife would bring them bread8 and they ate.
When the decree (gizarta) became more severe, he said to his son:
“Women’s minds are light.9
Perhaps they will cause her pain, and she will reveal us.”10

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8 The Vilna edition and the Soncino printing add, “and a jug of water.”
9 Oxford Opp. Add. fol. 23 reads, “I know that women’s minds are light.”
10 “Perhaps” is missing in Munich 95. That she will reveal “us” is stated explicitly in Oxford Opp. Add. fol 23, the Vilna edition, and the Soncino printing; Munich 95 and Vatican 127 do not include “us.”
Our story opens as three Palestinian rabbis evaluate the Roman Empire. Rabbi Yehuda praises Roman markets, bathhouses, and bridges, imagining Roman infrastructure as a boon to the Jewish population, Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai derides these innovations as nothing more than expressions of Roman self-interest, and Rabbi Yosi remains silent. Unfortunately for Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai, the bystander Yehudah ben Gerim fails to keep this sensitive information in confidence and the words of the sages become known to the Roman authorities. At this juncture, the narrative frames the threat as an assault upon a single dissident. Had Shimon more judiciously weighed his own words, a reader might imagine, he could well have escaped attracting the attention of the empire.

A few lines later, however, the nature of the violence shifts. “The decree,” our narrator reports, becomes more severe. While this might, of course, be a “personal” decree, a Roman manhunt for a scoffing sage, the language invites other possibilities. In rabbinic literature, reference to a Roman decree (gizarta) frequently signals state policies that target the entire Jewish community. While our narrative offers little explicit exploration of the way in which the Roman decree might imperil the corporate body of the Jews, we might wonder: Does our rabbinic storyteller take for granted that Roman anger will not remain bound to its original target? Does Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai’s body become a metonymy for the larger community, so that risk to one is felt as risk to all? Such questions align with emerging theoretical interests in disability studies, as scholars recognize the ways that interest in the disabled individual—imagined as an unusual figure or an unconventional case—can veil the way disability is often imposed upon entire populations (Erevelles 2011; Puar 2017). Disability, Jasbir Puar argues, is “endemic to disenfranchised communities” (2012, 154). But precisely when it is so pervasive, disability often becomes less visible. Disability becomes normalized, rendered routine by structural violence and systematic oppression. In probing the contours of disability in late antique rabbinic culture, I find myself looking for the damage that empire does to its subordinate others. Among those who occupy the underside of imperial expansion, disability is rarely an exceptional condition. It is a pervasive experience of subjugated bodies.

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11 My interest here is not in the actual historicity of such decrees, but in the way they register rabbinic perceptions of Roman incursion and state violence. As Richard Kalmin has observed (2003), while rabbinic texts are poor sources for documenting actual Roman conduct against Jewish communities, the mention of Roman decrees offers important insight into rabbinic values and anxieties vis-a-vis Rome.
“Women are Lightminded”: Gender and the Production of Impairment

In the Bavli’s tale, Roman violence is a threat not only to the body of Rabbi Shimon, but also to his wife. When Shimon and his son take refuge in the rabbinic study house, Shimon’s wife brings them bread each day. As the decree becomes more severe, Shimon fears their refuge will not hold. He identifies his wife as the security risk, arguing that because of her “light-mindedness” (*qalut rosh*), she might betray them to the authorities. The term *qalut rosh* is often associated with frivolity and moral lapse; in many rabbinic sources, Michael Satlow has argued, it denotes women’s sexual unreliability (1995, 158). In this tale, the claim that women are light-minded uses mental difference to imbue gender with moral meaning. But here, we must be careful. It is not a straightforward ascription of cognitive impairment. In this story, the notion of *qalut rosh* does not imply that Rabbi Shimon’s wife has a diminished intellect. It marks, instead, her inability to withstand pain, to hold firm in the face of abuse, to keep silent under Roman torture.

A disability studies analysis of the wife's lightmindedness thus reveals a suggestive dimension of rabbinic gender discourse: the notion that women’s minds are insufficiently hardened, a condition that renders them unable to withstand pain. Consider again the precise logic of Shimon's claim: Because her mind is light, Shimon reasons, when they cause her harm, she will reveal us. Parsing this tale, I find myself arrested by the spectacular failure of empathy that this story displays for the rabbinic wife, the way Rabbi Shimon is concerned for her bodily risk only insofar as it threatens his own exposure. The problem is that the wife might reveal her husband’s location, not that she will come to harm. To be clear, this is my own feminist concern, one that does not seem to trouble the rabbinic redactor of this story in the slightest. As soon as Shimon retreats to the cave, the wife moves off-stage; she is dismissed from concern. I am haunted by her absence at the conclusion of this tale. I want to tarry with her story, to stare into the margins of this tale. I want to ask about collateral damage, about the way Roman frustration bears into Jewish

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12 Disability studies has analyzed the way in which charges of disability are frequently used to construct and naturalize racial, gender, or class difference, deploying supposed physical or mental inferiority to buttress social inequality. Medicalized notions of hysteria, irrationality, and physical weakness have often been used to challenge women’s equality, while arguments for racial inequality and restrictions on immigration have often rested on notions of physical difference and mental incapacity (Baynton 2001).
flesh: the bodies brutalized in the Roman quest to find their quarry, the bones that snap when the agents of empire seek out the sage who has managed to elude their grasp. Those stories all lie beyond the Bavli’s frame.

But while it is easy to castigate the character of Rabbi Shimon for self-absorption and blithe disregard for his wife’s pain, let us consider how this tale illuminates broader social dynamics of power, risk, and violence. In rabbinic culture, the notion of women’s lightmindedness has been used as a rhetorical strategy to limit women’s Torah learning and to bar women from the rabbinic studyhouse, thus foreclosing their access to one of the principle avenues to cultural prestige in the rabbinic milieu (Boyarin 1993). The Shimon bar Yoḥai narrative points toward a different consequence of this exclusion: the way in which the gendered marginality of the rabbinic woman might leave her particularly vulnerable to Roman violence. Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai’s wife faces Roman brutality without the dubious shelter of the study house or the pristine isolation of the cave. She lives in double-jeopardy: at risk both because of her proximity to the targeted man and because the gender strictures of rabbinic culture leave her unable to find (relative) safety within the rabbinic fold. Elsewhere, I have argued for the urgency of complicating our notions of rabbinic power and powerlessness, recognizing that the rabbis were simultaneously marginal subjects in Roman and Sassanian empires as well as agents of authority in their own right, who exercised power over Jewish women, enslaved persons, and unlettered men (Belser 2017b). Reading the Shimon bar Yoḥai narrative with that recognition in mind, I am struck by the way in which this tale reveals an important dynamic of the practice of power under constraint: the way more privileged actors within repressive regimes often leverage the bodies of lower-status subordinates to shield themselves from bodily risk, leaving more marginalized bodies to bear the most direct impacts of violence.

“Alas That I See You So”: Contesting the Narrative of the Tragic Disabled Body

While our narrative showcases the stratagems that allow Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai to elude Roman violence, reading this tale with attention to the body reveals that Shimon does not escape his ordeal unscathed. Rabbi Shimon does not evade bodily pain, he controls its terms and channels it into cultural prestige, using physical privation to sharpen his mind and deepen his knowledge of Torah. Bavli Shabbat 33b continues:
They went and hid in a cave.
A miracle happened for them:
   a carob tree and a spring of water were created for them.
They would take off their garments\(^{13}\)
   and sit up to their necks in sand the whole day and study.
When it was time to pray, they dressed and covered themselves\(^{14}\)
   and went out to pray.
When they returned, they took off their garments
   so they would not wear out.\(^{15}\)
They sat in the cave for thirteen years...

[After the decree was annulled]
Rabbi Pinḥas ben Yair, his son in law, heard and went to greet him.
Pinḥas took him to the bathhouse and tended to his flesh.
He saw that Shimon had fissures in his flesh.\(^{16}\)
He wept, and as his tears fell, they caused Shimon pain.
Pinḥas said to him, “Alas, that I see you so!”
Shimon said to him, “Happy (ashrekha) that you see me so!
For if you did not see me so, you would not find me so.”
At first, when Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai raised one difficulty,
   Rabbi Pinḥas ben Yair responded with twelve solutions.
But after, when Rabbi Pinḥas ben Yair raised a difficulty,
   Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai responded with twenty-four solutions.

Readers familiar with this tale will note that I have cut a substantial section from the center
of this tale, which recounts Rabbi Shimon’s first failed exit from the cave and subsequent
return. When the decree is annulled and our rabbinic protagonists return to the world,
they see Jews laboring in the fields and react with outrage that these men “forsake eternal
life and occupy themselves with the demands of this world.” Their eyes blaze with rage;
everything they see, they set on fire. A heavenly voice rebukes them and returns them to
the cave. After another year, they come out chastened and ready to return to the ordinary
world. In Jeffrey Rubenstein’s insightful reading, this episode brings out a critical tension
in rabbinic culture, as the rabbis grapple with the question of how to balance the ideal of

\(^{13}\) This phrase is missing in Oxford Opp. Add. fol. 23 and Vatican 127. In Munich 95, “They would take off their
clothes” appears after the description of them sitting up to their necks in sand. In this case, I have translated
according to the Vilna edition and the Soncino printing for clarity.
\(^{14}\) Munich 95 reads, “They went out and dressed and covered themselves and went out to pray.”
\(^{15}\) This sentence is missing in Vatican 127.
\(^{16}\) Munich 95 uses basar (flesh); Oxford Opp. Add. fol. 23 and the Vilna use guf (body), and the Vatican 127
uses gav (back).
single-minded devotion to Torah with the mundane activities necessary for sustaining the world. Rubenstein offers a convincing and nuanced discussion of the way in which this story ultimately “rejects the extreme view that Torah study is the only legitimate occupation, that this world and its activities are worthless” (1999, 137).

I wish to sound a note of caution, not with Rubenstein’s own analysis—he is careful to avoid framing Rabbi Shimon’s sojourn in the cave as an embrace of spirit over flesh—but with the way the cultural tension between Torah and the mundane world risks becoming a shorthand for a sharp dichotomy between mind and body, between corporeal life and the life of the spirit. To do so, I suggest, collapses the complex (and not always consistent) rabbinic discourse on the relationship between body and soul. Rabbinic sources commonly regard the soul as imbricated in the body, recognizing the body as a potent medium of spiritual life (Kimelman 2006). Elsewhere I have argued that rabbinic fasting practice does not flee the body, but rather makes deliberate use of the flesh (Belser 2015). Here too, I suggest, Rabbi Shimon’s body is central to this story. Our tale dwells on the details of the flesh: how the rabbinic body is physically sustained, through miraculous provision of water and carob, how its modesty is preserved, by careful conservation of the frail fabric of the garments it needs when it stands in prayer, and otherwise by submersion in the abundant natural covering of sand. While Torah and prayer occupy our sages’ days, the narrative draws attention to the ways the sages’ bodies navigate the material realities of the cave. The journey between Torah study and prayer is a transition between sand and skin, garment and ground.

Rabbi Shimon’s time in the cave is not without physical cost. Though the sage takes refuge in the cave to avoid the Roman threat to his body, he emerges from its embrace with flesh that has been significantly impaired. When Pinḥas ben Yair takes him into the bathhouse, he discovers that Shimon’s flesh has been damaged by the sand and the privations of the cave. The narrative gives us no further clues about Shimon’s physical state. We might imagine his wounds as temporary, a painful, but ultimately fleeting mark upon the canvas of his body. But the fissures in his flesh might also speak to an enduring change, a permanent impairment to his physical capacity or the body’s aesthetic form. What we know is this: Pinḥas weeps at the change, and when his tears fall into Shimon’s wounds, they cause him pain. Yet the Bavli does not allow Pinḥas’s lament to go
unchallenged. Shimon responds decisively to his son-in-law’s grief, correcting the “alas” of his lament and asserting that Pinḥas should, more properly, look upon him with satisfaction. Why should Pinḥas rejoice in seeing Shimon’s impaired flesh? Because it has vaulted him to new heights in the command of Torah, afforded him “the capacity to propound objections and offer solutions,” a skill the Bavli regards as the “ultimate proficiency in Torah” (Rubenstein 1999, 117). While Shimon’s years in the cave have altered his flesh, they grant him a command of Torah that cannot be matched by the more pampered sages who learn in the study house and luxuriate in Roman baths. Shimon bar Yoḥai parleys his experience of physical impairment into stunning virtuosity, attaining a skill in Torah that fashions his now-disabled body into a pillar of cultural prestige.

This achievement, I contend, goes hand in hand with another kind of self-fashioning: the ability to exercise agency over one’s story, to convert a tale of woe and victimhood into a source of power. Disability studies theory tunes our attention to the power dynamics that shape the interpretation of a visibly disabled body, revealing both the cultural power of scripts that claim disability as an exemplar of the tragic and the strategies disabled people use to challenge the discourse of pity and pathos (Mitchell and Snyder 2000; Garland-Thomson 2000; Belser 2011). This discourse takes center stage in the encounter between Shimon bar Yoḥai and Pinḥas ben Yair. Pinḥas surveys Shimon’s body and sees ruination. His words script woe upon the surface of Shimon’s skin, fashioning the sage into a story of suffering. But Shimon refuses and reconfigures the story that Pinḥas ben Yair tells about his body. He regards his wounds and scars not as a mark of lament, but as the source of his prodigious learning. In rejecting the registrar of the tragic as the appropriate lens through which to read his body, Shimon claims agency over his own story. Where Pinḥas’s “alas” tells a tale of regret, one that mourns the way in which Roman violence and thirteen years of hiding have excoriated the flesh of a great man, Shimon’s “ashrei” tells a tale of self-creation, a story that recounts how rabbinic brilliance has been chiseled from the heroic discipline of mind and flesh.

This capacity is bound up in the Bavli’s imagination with rabbinic manhood. Consider the difference that gender makes. As Rubenstein has observed, our rabbinic storyteller uses identical language to describe the pain (metsaʿari) that Rabbi Pinḥas’s tears cause Rabbi Shimon and the pain that the Romans might cause Rabbi Shimon’s wife (1999,
But rather than forge a kinship between them, the parallel language heightens the contrast between the man and his wife. Pain renders her a danger. She lacks sufficient mental toughness to guard rabbinic secrets from the government. Physical harm threatens to erode her will, making her likely—so Rabbi Shimon believes—to forfeit her knowledge. By contrast, pain strengthens Rabbi Shimon’s mind, sharpening his Torah. Physical suffering is the backdrop against which Shimon gains spectacular mental capacity, the medium through which he becomes a great rabbinic man. While pain makes her mentally weak, privation makes him mentally strong. Is his manhood expressed in part through this capacity to transmute pain into power, to be fashioned through physical distress into greatness, rather than to be unmade by it?

Might such a move be an attempt to imagine a place for the Jewish body amidst the ascendant empires of Rome and Persia, a way to grapple with the material and psychic impact of that war and conquest on Jewish flesh? Of course, such speculation must remain tentative, a gesture of possibility rather than a definitive claim. But consider the charge that disability carries, in the context of ancient warfare. Bodily damage is a powerful way to inscribe physical conquest onto a subject population. Disability often functions as both a symbolic and material marker of corporeal defeat, a way in which imperial ascendancy can be writ large on the bodies of conquered populations. In a world marked by the violence and brutality of empire, amidst myriad corporeal dangers both political and pragmatic, I contend, certain rabbinic stories recognize and celebrate this capacity as a signal art of rabbinic manhood. It is a tenuous power, a subtle one: not the power to render one’s body invulnerable or to shield it from harm, but to encompass pain and corporeal damage, to nonetheless exercise some control over the way its impairment is experienced and understood. It holds open a narrative space in which a damaged body need not speak of capitulation before imperial regimes, in which disabled flesh can be a pillar of cultural strength.

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