A Proposed Reading of Tractate Shabbat

Closing the Door of the Home

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"There are 154 folios in tractate Shabbat and 105 in tractate Eruvin, and the aggadah in them amounts to almost nothing. Most contain dry discussions and minute rulings on the thirty-nine categories of labor and their derivatives, and on establishing Sabbath boundaries: with what may one light the candle; wearing what may one go out; how may one join domains within those boundaries? How much labor of the spirit! How much sharpness lavished on every thorn and tip! And when I pass among those pages and see companies upon companies of Tannaim and Amoraim at their work, I say: Indeed, I see before me artists of life! Artists of life in the workshop and at the potter's wheel! So immense a labor of the spirit, antlike and gigantic at once, work for its own sake and out of love and faith without bounds, is impossible without the holy spirit... Surely a single exalted idea, a single supreme form of the Sabbath, hovered before the eyes of these scattered men, and it was its spirit that gathered them here from all the generations and made them partners in its creation and perfection".

H. N. Bialik, "Halakhah and Aggadah"

In concluding this book, I would like to offer an initial proposal for reading tractate Shabbat. It is an initial proposal because Shabbat is one of the largest, longest, and most complex tractates in the six orders of the Mishnah. I thought it appropriate to try to apply the two approaches to reading that I used in the preceding chapters. The first is to bring out strategic junctures in the tractate, such as its opening and conclusion. In certain cases, as with Makkot, the particular subject presented at the beginning of a tractate points to its larger concern. The tractate's conclusion, too, can signal its subject by the way it ends. The second approach involves attending to the sequence of subjects within the tractate and to what that sequence suggests about its meaning, as in Ta'anit and Evel Rabbati. Both approaches can help us with Shabbat: its opening and conclusion are distinctive, and its sequence of subjects surprises the reader familiar with the Sabbath laws.

Such a reader would expect to find the prohibitions on Sabbath labor at the beginning of the tractate, and especially the thirty-nine principal categories of labor. Instead, the tractate opens with the prohibition on transferring objects between domains (chapter 1) and a discussion of the Sabbath candle (chapter 2).

The biblical commandment concerning the Sabbath appears in the Ten Commandments: "But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall do no work, *you, your son, your daughter*,

your male servant, your female servant, your cattle, and the stranger within your gates" (Exodus 20:10). Its formulation in Deuteronomy is: "You shall do no work, *you, your son, your daughter, your male servant, your female servant, your ox, your donkey, any of your cattle, and the stranger within your gates, so that your male servant and your female servant may rest as you do"* (Deuteronomy 5:14). A striking feature of both formulations, which has received insufficient attention, is that these verses point to the home as the central space in which the Sabbath's holiness is realized. Even if we assume that the stranger in question lives within the gates of the city rather than those of the house, we still have a relatively detailed formulation imposing the prohibition on labor on every member of the household, including male and female servants and all the animals. A straightforward reading makes it clear that the household must rest together, and that rest is closely bound up with being part of a single household, not necessarily with being in a village or city.

In his book *Perakim be-hishtalshelut ha-halakhah* [Chapters in the Development of Halakhah], Yitzhak Gilat observes that "in the earliest times, two fundamental conceptions of the nature of the Sabbath existed side by side."[1] One conception regarded the Sabbath as a day of spiritual elevation and holiness, of the soul's purification, of abstinence, and even of fasting. Another, opposed conception identified the Sabbath with pleasure and joy, including bodily enjoyments. These conceptions may be said to appear together in the Sabbath from its very beginnings. One sees the Sabbath's core in the prohibition on labor. This prohibition can have two central meanings. In one, it points to human subordination to God, the creator of the world: a person ceases working because human beings are not the true owners of creation. In the other, it expresses the wish to resemble God: just as God ceased working on the seventh day, so human beings, created in God's image, cease working. In general, this is the conception that leads us to sanctify the Sabbath. The second conception sees the Sabbath's center in closing off the family home: a day on which the household rests together, gathers within the home, and makes it a separate unit, where the members of the household and all who share in its life live together, and therefore enjoy bodily pleasure, within an enclosed physical space. This conception centers specifically on the biblical words "and rested on the seventh day." Rest is its central concern. Whereas the first conception centers on holiness and ownership of the world, its central verse is: "But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall do no work."

1 Yitzhak Gilat, *Perakim be-hishtalshelut ha-halakhah* [Chapters in the Development of Halakhah] (5752 [1992]), p. 117 (Hebrew).

The prohibition on labor became more pronounced among the Pharisees, and an extensive body of rulings developed around it, especially under the heading of the "thirty-nine principal categories of labor." The Mishnah itself noted how few biblical sources support the multiplicity of Sabbath rulings: "The laws of the Sabbath... are like mountains hanging by a hair, for they have little Scripture and many rulings" (Mishnah Hagigah 1:8). Only three categories of labor are expressly mentioned in Scripture: plowing and reaping, in the verse "In plowing and in reaping you shall rest" (Exodus 34:21), and kindling, in "You shall not kindle fire" (Exodus 35:3). Ultimately, the prohibition on labor as expressed in the Sabbath laws, the work of the sages, is a human creation. This state of affairs obscures the tension between revelation and innovation embodied in the sages' work: precisely the prohibition on labor, which represents the acceptance of the yoke of heaven in Sabbath observance, is an unmistakably human creation. The complex relationship between the prohibition on labor and the home on the Sabbath finds expression precisely in the connection between the thirty-nine principal categories of labor and the work done to build the Mishkan, the Tabernacle, God's dwelling place. In the classic introduction to his commentary on tractate Shabbat, Abraham Goldberg writes:

> "The connection with the work of the Tabernacle stands out most clearly in the discussions of the Amoraim, but already among Rabbi Akiva's disciples we hear of the connection between each principal category of labor and work performed in the Tabernacle... From a literary perspective, the connection with the work of the Tabernacle is perfectly natural, since the Torah places the subject of the Sabbath alongside that of the Tabernacle: both at the end of the instructions for its construction (Exodus 31:12–17) and before the account of the work of erecting it" (ibid., 35:1–3).

According to Goldberg, then, the connection between the thirty-nine kinds of work performed for the Tabernacle stems from the sages' wish to find a biblical basis for the categories of labor. Yet, as Arthur Green has shown, rabbinic sources contain a very strong connection between the Tabernacle and the Sabbath. The idea running through them is that, just as the Tabernacle was a central locus of God's presence and of connection with God, so, with the destruction of the Temple, the Sabbath takes the place of the sanctuary. "Sabbath as Temple" is the title of Green's article.[2] Thus, instead of performing one of the thirty-nine categories of labor, thereby creating the Tabernacle as a sacred place, on the Sabbath the *refraining* from all those kinds of work creates *sacred time*.

2 Arthur Green, "Sabbath as Temple: Some Thoughts on Space and Time in Judaism," in Raphael Jospe and Samuel Z. Fishman, eds., *Go and Study: Essays and Studies in Honor of Alfred Jospe* (1980), p. 287.

As I have shown, the home as a foundational element of the Sabbath, as it already appears in Scripture, serves to create not only sacred time but also an enclosed physical space in which the members of a family rest together. The physical space is not necessarily connected with the Tabernacle, nor is the holiness of time necessarily connected with the destruction of the Temple. The wish to create a separate space and sacred time already appears in the biblical verses. The sages' wish to connect the work of the Tabernacle with the thirty-nine principal categories of labor may have stemmed from their evident unease at the fact that these categories serve to sanctify time while neglecting the foundation of closing off the space of the home, which is explicitly present in Scripture.

The Sabbath's two foundations, the prohibition on labor and the rest of the household through the shared repose of the family under one roof, appear intertwined in the biblical verses. In the biblical model, the divine commandment to sanctify the Sabbath and refrain from work appears alongside the framework of family and clan. It is therefore striking that the development of the Sabbath laws and of the prohibition on labor gradually acquired a rather masculine cast, as a human law in the strict sense, created by the sages, while its organization produced a dichotomy between the prohibition on Sabbath labor and the home as a foundation of the Sabbath. The classic text that sets these two foundations—law (such as the prohibition on Sabbath labor) and home—against one another is, of course, Sophocles' *Antigone* (442 BCE). *Antigone* pits human law against the laws of nature, which arise from family kinship. Antigone places the family first, disregarding the king and human law. When Creon asks her whether she knew of his decree forbidding the burial of her brother Polyneices, she answers:

> For it was not Zeus who proclaimed this to me,
> nor did Justice, dwelling with the gods beneath the earth,
> establish such laws for humankind.
> Nor did I think your edicts had such force
> as to allow a mortal to trample
> the gods' unwritten, unshakable laws.

As Hegel showed in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, under the heading “Ethical Action,” this dichotomy sets not only human law against unwritten divine law, but also the law of the state against the law of the family and the home. Hegel believed that a community can sustain itself only by suppressing the individual or familial element and subordinating it to the community, with woman placing man at the community's service. Antigone's submission to Creon's will, despite the gods'

agreement with her, symbolizes for Hegel the (healthy) transition from the familial to the political sphere. Antigone is a woman who represents the home and the family; Creon, a man, represents the state and human law. Scholars have pointed out that Hegel's dichotomy fails to do justice to the complexities presented by the play itself. Tiresias, the prophet, foretells near the play's end that Haemon, Creon's son, will die, measure for measure: “For one you have cast from above to below, / lodging a living soul in a tomb [the imprisonment of Antigone in a burial chamber], / while here you keep above ground one who belongs to the gods below, / an unburied corpse, dishonored and profaned” (lines 1068–1071). Antigone, in other words, has the gods' explicit support against human law, and ultimately the members of Creon's own household support her actions too.

A feminist reading of the play, such as Luce Irigaray's in her earlier writings, criticizes Antigone for participating in masculine discourse and subjecting herself to it, since she answers Creon in his own language, the language of authority and law. Judith Butler, by contrast, argues that speaking in the language of the (male) sovereign entails neither guilt nor compromise on Antigone's part. Butler argues that public discourse accommodates Antigone's claim, despite Hegel's argument about the separation of the political and the familial. In any case, Antigone is, in a sense, Greek classical literature's version of the rabbinic story of the Oven of Akhnai. In that story, a heavenly voice supports Rabbi Eliezer in a dispute over the ritual status of an oven, but the other sages refuse to accept it as decisive, invoking the principle that the Torah is “not in heaven” (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 59b). The story affirms the authority of human legal interpretation even in the face of divine intervention. The play represents the primacy of human law over the law of the gods, the family, and tradition, and makes clear the complexity and cost of such a resolution. On the face of it, the Sabbath, too, because of the multiplicity of rabbinic rulings concerning the prohibition on labor, underwent a similar movement that pushed aside the foundational place of home, family, and tradition and raised the standing of human law. For the Sabbath laws and their stringency, as expressed in the thirty-nine principal categories of labor, the sages' handiwork, obscure the Sabbath's foundation of pleasure and rest and reinforce specifically its spiritual and ascetic dimension.

The Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 49b, discusses two approaches to the thirty-nine principal categories of labor:

“They sat down again and asked: What do the forty less one principal categories of labor that we have learned correspond to? Rabbi Hanina bar Hama said to them: To the work of the Tabernacle. Rabbi Jonathan, son of Rabbi Eleazar, said to them: Thus said Rabbi Simeon, son of Rabbi Yose ben Lakonya: They correspond to

the forty less one occurrences in the Torah of “melakhah,” “melakhto,” and “melekhet” [forms of the word for work]. Rav Yosef asked: Is “he came into the house to do his work” included in the count or not? Abaye said to him: Let us bring a Torah scroll and count. Did not Rabbah bar bar Hanah say in Rabbi Yohanan's name: They did not move from there until they brought a Torah scroll and counted them? He said to him: My uncertainty is this: it is written, “And the work was sufficient for them.” If that is included in the count, then this must follow the view that he entered to attend to his needs. But if “he came into the house to do his work” is included in the count, then does “And the work was sufficient for them” mean that their work was complete? The question remains unresolved”.

Rabbi Hanina bar Hama, a first-generation Palestinian Amora, argues that the kinds of work forbidden on the Sabbath correspond to those performed for the Tabernacle. Rabbi Jonathan, also a first-generation Palestinian Amora, argues that they correspond to the Torah's occurrences of the words “melakhah,” “melakhto,” or “melekhet.” Against this position, Rav Yosef, a third-generation Babylonian Amora, asks whether the statement in the Torah concerning Joseph and Potiphar's wife, that “he came into the house to do his work,” is included. Is the word “his work” there included in the count or not? The question is pointed and deliberate, since one interpretation of “he came into the house to do his work” (Genesis 39:11) casts Joseph in a negative light: he deliberately came to have sexual relations with Potiphar's wife (“he entered to attend to his needs”—a dispute between Rav and Samuel in the Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 36b). After his disciple Abaye proposes bringing a Torah scroll and counting the occurrences one by one, Rav Yosef tells him that counting will not help him, because he also has a doubt about another biblical word. Concerning the work of the Tabernacle, it is said that the people ceased bringing contributions because they were no longer needed: “And the work was sufficient for them to do all the work, and more” (Exodus 36:7). Here, too, a verse mentioning the word “work” does not concern the work itself but rather the materials gathered for building the Tabernacle. For Rav Yosef's generation, an equation between the Torah's occurrences of the word *melakhah* and the categories of labor is already a position that he finds deeply unsatisfactory.

A closer look at the two sources Rav Yosef cites reveals that, consciously or unconsciously, he connects the verses with the Sabbath's basic foundations. Here, the first foundation of the Sabbath, the prohibition on labor, and the second, the rest of the household, appear set against one another. The story of Joseph is an archetype of the home, even if it is not necessarily a home in the traditional sense. Not for nothing does the word *house*, in its various forms, recur no fewer than eleven times in chapter 39 of Genesis. The story focuses Joseph's blessings on his house. God blesses the

"Egyptian's house" and everything "that he had in the house and in the field." When Potiphar's wife tries to sleep with Joseph, he tells her: "My master has no concern, with me here, about what is *in the house*, and he has put everything he has into my hands. No one is greater *in this house* than I, and he has withheld nothing from me but you, because you are his wife." Joseph does not yield to Potiphar's wife's entreaties until she resolves to act: "And it happened one such day, that he came into *the house* to do his work, and none of the men of *the house* was there *in the house*." Potiphar's wife seizes Joseph and demands that he sleep with her, and he leaves his garment with her and flees. She summons the "men of *her house*" and lays his garment beside her until "his master came into *his house*." The home is central to the story. Joseph becomes an integral part of Potiphar's household, but his presence undermines its foundations. The story teaches us, in effect, that one cannot allow an outside presence to enter the home without far-reaching effects on the home itself.

The second source Rav Yosef cites is an archetype of work. Chapter 35 of Exodus describes the appointment of Bezalel and Oholiab and other craftsmen to carry out the plan for the Tabernacle. The Israelites take the materials brought as a contribution to the Tabernacle, weigh them, examine them, and correlate them with the plans, until they no longer need further contributions. In the first seven verses of chapter 36, the word *melakhah* appears ten times. Bezalel and Oholiab are appointed "to do all the work of the sanctuary." The contribution "for the work of the service of the sanctuary" is brought before them, and each of the craftsmen is described as one of those "doing all the work of the sanctuary," "each from the work that they were doing." Work here, then, also means the future work to be performed in the sanctuary, while also denoting the very making of the sacred vessels by the craftsmen. Too much has been contributed toward building the Tabernacle, so Moses commands: "Let neither man nor woman do any more work for the contribution to the sanctuary." Here, the word *melakhah* describes the very act of bringing a freewill offering for the Tabernacle.

In these verses, then, *melakhah* has three meanings: the bringing of a freewill offering, the future service of the Tabernacle, and the craftsman's making of the Tabernacle's vessels and of the Tabernacle itself. Citing these verses in connection with the thirty-nine principal categories of labor places the prohibition on labor at the center. The Sabbath's holiness derives from ceasing to create on the Sabbath and from ceasing work altogether. Here, *melakhah* is any act that produces a creative result, even in the loosest sense, such as bringing a freewill offering. On the surface, Rav Yosef seeks to rule out grounding the thirty-nine principal categories of labor in one word or another. At a deeper level, Rav Yosef challenges the very dichotomy that has arisen among the sages between the home as a foundation of the Sabbath and human law, the thirty-nine principal categories of labor.

He cites two biblical sources that undermine the assumption that the Sabbath laws can be derived from Scripture. The thirty-nine principal categories of labor cannot be derived from the story of Joseph, nor can they be derived from the story of the Tabernacle. Rav Yosef is the first to set the home as a foundation, in Joseph's story, against the prohibition on labor as a foundation, in the building of the Tabernacle, and to separate the two. Yet, in the same breath, Rav Yosef shows that the thirty-nine principal categories of labor cannot be "grounded" in either foundation. Joseph himself undermines Potiphar's household, penetrating it and unsettling its intimacy; the foundation of creation and holiness associated with the prohibition on labor is undermined in the story of the Tabernacle by attributing the widest possible meaning to the word *melakhah*: *melakhah* can also be a freewill offering that creates nothing at all.

An examination of tractate Shabbat, the tannaitic work that arranges the Sabbath laws and provides the basis on which the talmudic tractate Shabbat was written, reveals a striking fact that scholars of the Mishnah have overlooked: the Mishnah's organizing principle is the home, not the prohibitions on labor. The thirty-nine principal categories of labor are woven into the text, but they are secondary to the home as its organizing principle. One of the Mishnah's most surprising editorial decisions is directly connected with this: only in chapter 7, mishnah 2, does the Mishnah begin to list the thirty-nine principal categories of labor, those supposedly regarded as the core of the Sabbath and its laws. The tractate opens and closes with matters specifically concerning the inward workings of the home as a closed or open space. Its first mishnah deals with the prohibition on carrying objects from the private domain into the public domain on the Sabbath. The Mishnah's commentators, Maimonides foremost among them, wondered why the Mishnah begins with this prohibition rather than with the thirty-nine principal categories of labor:

"The reason they needed to begin with the laws of carrying out from one domain to another, although he lists this at the end of the principal categories of labor, that is, one who carries out from domain to domain, is that this kind of labor occurs very frequently and most people stumble over it, because it requires no implement. Second, to teach us that it is labor, although it appears not to be labor".

(Maimonides, Commentary on the Mishnah, Shabbat, chapter 1.)

As noted, the Mishnah asks about situations involving the transfer of an object from the private domain to the public domain, and explains: "How so? The poor man stands outside and the householder inside. If the poor man reaches his hand inside and places something in the householder's hand, or takes something from it and brings it outside, the poor man is liable and the

householder exempt...” The tractate's opening is significant, embedding a declaration about the subject that concerns its editor. The opening addresses how far the home's interior is an enclosed space, and when that enclosure may be breached on the Sabbath. The poetic use of the poor man as someone who threatens the home, and as someone whom there is a real difficulty in shutting out, shows the sages' sensitivity and their understanding that this is no metaphorical question: it has a social meaning too.

The tractate's conclusion likewise offers a kind of summation of the subject of the home and the possibility of closing it off. The tractate ends with an incident concerning two adjoining houses, one of which contains a dead person. In the wall joining the houses is a window stopped up by a cracked tub. Does the impurity in one house pass into the other? If the hole in the tub is as large as a handbreadth, the impurity can pass through the opening into the adjoining house, and so they permitted an earthenware vessel to be tied and used to measure the size of the opening. The mishnah relates: “It happened in the days of Rabbi Zadok's father and in the days of Abba Shaul ben Botnit that they stopped up the window with a small earthenware jar and tied the earthenware vessel with reed grass to determine whether the tub had an opening of a handbreadth or not. From their words we learned that one may stop up, measure, and tie on the Sabbath” (Mishnah Shabbat 24:5). The story is a fitting metaphorical conclusion to the tractate, whose concern is precisely the foundational matter of closing off the home as a physical space on the Sabbath.

The tractate's first four chapters deal with preparations for the Sabbath: “The first four chapters explain the things that are done and the things that may not be done on the Sabbath eve close to nightfall” (Hanoch Albeck's introduction to tractate Shabbat). Yet chronological time does not suffice to explain the arrangement, since these chapters contain much more than an advance introduction to the work that is to be done. They also contain the experience associated with closing off the home, binding together the elements that make the physical space in which the family lives the heart of Jewish culture. The tractate's second chapter deals with the Sabbath candle. The light kindled in the home is one of its basic experiential elements: a person sees from a distance the light breaking out from it. No human figures need be described; a burning candle or stove is enough, and it is clear that people are sitting there. These things express the essence of the home, the sense of security and intimacy, the making of warmth and a source of heat in the center of the room. The Sabbath candle, unlike the Hanukkah candle, is meant to illuminate the inside of the house and the people in it and to create Sabbath pleasure. The candle represents the center of the home and the wish to create the feeling of a closed home that allows its inhabitants to daydream and rest, trusting

that bad weather, robbers, or passersby cannot burst into their lives without warning. The Babylonian Talmud is right to set the Hanukkah candle against the Sabbath candle. Whereas the Sabbath candle represents the home itself, the Hanukkah candle represents the community. Whereas the Sabbath candle represents the inside of the home, the Hanukkah candle represents the doorway and the courtyard.

In chapters 3 and 4, the tractate continues its treatment of preparations for the Sabbath, matters concerning the kitchen and especially insulating cooked food to keep it warm. The stew kept warm in the oven, giving off warmth and aroma, is another of the signs of a home as a place of security, where one can eat at ease and leave food in the oven for a long time without concern.[3] Albeck writes in his introduction to tractate Shabbat: "From chapter 5 onward, the kinds of labor forbidden on the Sabbath are discussed. More than any other, the prohibition on carrying a burden from one domain to another is discussed." Chapters 5 and 6 are devoted to the rules for going out of the home, and to the clothing and adornments of animals and human beings on the Sabbath. These chapters do more than address how to leave the home. They also assume something fundamental: within one's own home, human beings and animals are free of ornament and outer clothing, and on the Sabbath it is both desirable and necessary to remain in the home, which allows exposure and intimacy.

As noted, only in chapter 7 does the list of the thirty-nine principal categories of labor begin. Even here, in chapters 7–9, substantial portions are devoted to a different matter altogether: the minimum quantity for which carrying an object from one domain to another incurs liability. Only chapters 12–15 discuss the prohibitions on Sabbath labor at length. From there to its end, the tractate's chapters are devoted to the prohibition of *muktzeh*, restrictions on moving certain objects on the Sabbath, and other matters, such as fire and circumcision on the Sabbath. Even at a glance, it is hard to miss the dominant editorial decision: a concern with closing off the home and the physical space of the family, expressed through the prohibition on carrying objects between domains and through the relegation of the labor prohibitions themselves. The root *y-tz-a*, "to go out," appears no fewer than eighty times in tractate Shabbat, in all its inflections.

We may suppose that the decision to arrange Shabbat around the organizing idea of the Sabbath as a home is both double and dialectical. First, it offers an apologetic directed against the other sects of the Second Temple period, which were especially strict about carrying objects from one domain to another and going beyond the Sabbath boundary. The Mishnah establishes the circumstances in

3 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, pp. 31, 36.

which carrying objects between domains is permitted. At the same time, the Mishnah may focus on the home in response to the destruction of the Temple and the wish to realize a physical sanctuary in miniature, as well as one in time, a kind of substitute for the Temple in Jerusalem. In the absence of a political entity, human law, the thirty-nine principal categories of labor, is subordinated to establishing the standing of the home and its closure. Such a reading runs counter to the Hegelian reading of *Antigone* and brings the tension between family and community to the surface anew.

The opening and conclusion of the Sabbath laws in Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* address the prohibition on labor and are altogether different from the opening and conclusion of the Mishnah's tractate Shabbat. Maimonides opens: “Resting from labor on the seventh day is a positive commandment, as it is said: ‘And on the seventh day you shall rest.’” His first chapter is devoted entirely to what constitutes labor and to the mental disposition required to transgress the prohibition on performing it. Maimonides concludes: “The Sabbath and idolatry are each equivalent to all the other commandments of the Torah, and the Sabbath is the sign between the Holy One, blessed be He, and us.” At first glance, it appears that Maimonides preserves the Mishnah's arrangement across the thirty chapters of the Sabbath laws in the *Mishneh Torah*. In fact, however, he reverses it. The rulings concerning the closing of the home, and all the rules for carrying objects out of and into it, which had been scattered throughout the Sabbath laws, whose subject is the thirty-nine principal categories of labor, are gathered at the tractate's center. The tractate's concluding chapters concern other matters secondary to labor, or labor permitted because of danger to life.

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A tractate is like a novella: it presents an initial, primary state of affairs that leads to a dilemma or problem, or it presents a dilemma or problem requiring a solution. The tractate's name is in no way the subject of the tractate. It merely points to a larger group of matters with which the tractate deals. Its subject is the problem it seeks to confront. As we have seen, the tractates' subjects are existential. How can one justify the sages' revolution in substituting flogging for the punishment of *karet*, divine excision? This revolution was required by reality if a stable social and religious order was to be maintained, but it called for uprooting the words of the Torah. The final three chapters of Sanhedrin were arranged together to respond to this difficult dilemma, and were then separated from it to become a tractate in their own right.

Ta'anit expresses the dual meaning of the failure of rain to fall in the experience of the community of believers. This community experiences the situation not only as a punishment but also as God's

rejection of it and silence toward its deeds. This sense of rejection undermines the community's vital, existential needs, and it confronts that rejection by reflecting it back and restoring a sense of control over its life. As I have tried to show, this is the meaning of the mourning practices observed during a communal fast.

The redaction of Sotah teaches us that the laws of the suspected adulteress contained in it are merely the seed used to address a quite different dilemma: messianism and its destructive consequences. The tractate calls for reestablishing the principles of institutional mediation in the fundamental public rituals and rejecting a messianic conception that abolishes them.

And how should one relate to death? Is it a threatening event that must be silenced and repressed, or an event that the community must accommodate and give expression to? Evel Rabbati in fact contains two tractates, each offering a different way of confronting death and a different attitude toward the mourner. Looking at the tractate's chapters and subjects from above allows us to see that we are dealing with two different texts.

Through its arrangement, tractate Shabbat emphasizes the foundational principle of closing off the shared home and the shared rest of those who live in it, while moving the Sabbath laws and prohibitions to the margins. The tractate makes the home into a sanctuary in miniature. In a somewhat surprising way, contrary to the tendency prevalent in the Middle Ages and the modern period, it places shared rest on the Sabbath at the center and sets the thirty-nine principal categories of labor aside.

This book thus offers several examples of a large-scale analysis of tractates. The analysis reveals that, in terms of the subjects that concern their editors, their relevance has not faded even today: confronting death, messianism, the commutation of punishment, Sabbath rest, and God's silence. The other tractates of the Mishnah, with their rich Hebrew, inexhaustible metaphors, and the insight their arrangement offers, await their attentive readers.