

ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE INTERPRETATION OF RABBINIC LITERATURE: SOME THOUGHTS¹

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Archaeological discoveries in Palestine and throughout the Roman world have provided new ways of looking at the ancient Rabbis. The impact of this material has been characterized as “revolutionary,” as indeed it has been.² Who now could imagine the world of the Rabbis without considering ceramics, numismatics, epigraphic discoveries, transportation systems, domestic architecture, the Dura Europos synagogue paintings, the Beth Alpha mosaic, the monumental façade of the Baram synagogue, the Beth She‘arim catacombs, and on and on? Throughout the twentieth century academic talmudists demonstrated important relationships between the archaeological record and rabbinic sources. Samuel Krauss called this approach “talmudische Archäologie.”³ The effects of archaeology are still wider, however. Archaeology has provided new “glasses” through which to view the Rabbis and their place in Jewish culture during the late Roman and Byzantine periods, a time frame that is also known as “Late Antiquity” and “the period of the Mishnah and Talmud.” While at times social-historical issues have

¹ This essay is dedicated in memory of Joseph Heinemann ז”ל, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of his death, 26 Tevet 5738. Many thanks to Lieve Teugels for her comments on my manuscript.

² L. I. Levine, “The Revolutionary Effects of Archaeology on the Study of Jewish History: The Case of the Ancient Synagogue,” *The Archaeology of Israel: Constructing the Past, Interpreting the Present*, eds. N. A. Silberman and D. Small (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 166-189.

³ S. Krauss, *Talmudische Archäologie* (Leipzig: G. Fock, 1910-12).

been overwrought by historians of this period (and by text scholars too positivistic in their interpretation of archaeological remains),⁴ there is no doubt that archaeology has provided a new and exciting perspective on the Rabbis, their texts, and general Jewish and Roman/Byzantine culture at this formative period in Western civilization.

The creative interaction of rabbinic texts with archaeology is fraught with both promise and danger. Building bridges between silent artifacts and the “Oral Torah” requires great care that neither type of evidence dominates the other. On the one side, the urge to find rabbinic parallels to archaeological sources can lead to a kind of “parallelomania”. On the other, a scholarly nihilism has developed that minimalizes the significance of rabbinics for understanding the archaeological record—and vice versa. I will explore just a few of the ways that archaeology can be used to better understand rabbinic literature. My focus will be on non-legal material. I begin by illustrating ways that archaeology can inform the interpretation of rabbinic texts. I then turn to the use of archaeology in the discovery of previously unknown *midrashim*, describing some of the more significant discoveries of midrash “in stone.” My focus will be on discoveries in the Land of Israel.

ARCHAEOLOGY AS COMMENTARY ON RABBINIC SOURCES

Twentieth-century scholars made extensive use of archaeology as a kind of commentary on rabbinic sources. This practice has roots that go back as far as the Gaonic period, particularly regarding numismatics. It is still of interest even in “ultra-Orthodox” “Haredi” contexts (where modern archaeological practice is usually suspect).⁵

⁴ See my discussion in *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman Period: Toward a New Jewish Archaeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 5-52.

⁵ Some of these sources are discussed in S. Z. Reich, *Mesoras Hasbekel: Tracing the Tradition of the Torah Money/Weight System from the Ancient Era as it Affects Contemporary Halachic Issues* (Toronto: Kolel Publications; Spring Valley and Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1989), Hebrew. See also, Moses son of Isaac Alashqar, *She'elot Utshuvot Maharam Al Ashkear* (Jerusalem: Stizberg and Sons, 1959), no. 74, pp. 230-231; Azariah de Rossi, *Meor Enayim* (Mantua, 1574), ch. 56. A thorough study of medieval rabbinic discussion of Jewish archaeological remains is a desideratum.

The interpretation of archaeology entered the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* thanks to the visually-conscious Budapest scholar David Kaufmann and two of his students.⁶ Krauss's famous first attempt at *Talmudic Archaeology* is still a classic. His more historiographically attuned colleague, Ludwig Blau,⁷ as well as "Palestinian" E. L. Sukenik referred to this study more broadly as "Jewish Archaeology."⁸ The "talmudic archaeology" approach is today called "talmudic realia," and is practiced mainly in the Talmud departments of Israeli universities.⁹ The "talmudic realia" approach has made impressive accomplishments over the last century. Perhaps the finest product of this approach is Jacob Sussman's monograph-length study of the twenty-line inscription from the synagogue narthex at Rehov. This inscription cites known rabbinic sources, and applies them to the local context.¹⁰ Archaeological artifacts often present concrete illustrations ("realia") of literary traditions. This is true of both specifically Jewish content, such as symbols and language, and of artifacts that were not specifically "Jewish," but were part of the general material culture of late antiquity.

For more than a century, scholars have recognized a close relationship between the languages of Jewish inscriptions from Eretz Israel and the Hebrew and Aramaic of Palestinian rabbinic literature. Indicative of this proximity is the fact that Michael Sokoloff integrated Palestinian epigraphic materials seamlessly into his *A Dictionary of Palestinian Jewish Aramaic*.¹¹ The vocabulary and syntax of inscriptions are used regularly to interpret difficult words in rabbinic literature and particularly to resolve scribal difficulties in our received manuscripts. This relationship holds despite the fact that

⁶ On Kaufmann, see: M. Olin, *The Nation Without Art: Examining Modern Discourses on Jewish Art* (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press), 73-98.

⁷ L. Blau, "Early Christian Archaeology from a Jewish Point of View," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 3 (1926).

⁸ See my discussion of Sukenik's method: *Art and Judaism*, 27-34.

⁹ The most recent statement of this approach is: D. Sperber, *Material Culture in Eretz-Israel during the Talmudic Period* (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1993), Hebrew.

¹⁰ J. Sussman, "A Halakhic Inscription from the Beth-Shean Valley" *Tarbiz* 43 (1973-1974): 88-158, 44 (1974-1975):193-195, Hebrew.

¹¹ Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1991. On Hebrew: M. Bar-Asher, "Mishnaic Hebrew: An Introductory Survey," *Hebrew Studies* 40 (1999) 115-151.

inscriptions are often two or more centuries later than received traditions and texts. Inscriptions show an amazing stability over time. It is often impossible to judge whether a dedicatory inscription dates from, say, the fourth or the eighth centuries based upon paleographic or literary criteria. I will suggest just one example that illustrates ways that inscriptions are used by philologists in the interpretation of ancient texts.

A fine example of the interrelationship between epigraphic evidence and rabbinic sources was presented by Sokoloff to resolve a difficulty in *y. Berakhot* 5:3, 9c,¹² רבי אחא ורבי יודא בן פזי יתבין בהד כנישתא. אתי עבד חד קומי תיבותא. Through the study of manuscripts and inscriptions, Sokoloff came to the conclusion that this text contains a scribal error and a gloss. The original text described two rabbis who “were sitting in a place (אתר).” אתי was originally אתר, a simple orthographic error. Sokoloff postulates that a later scribe added a gloss, כנישתא. Support for this interpretation is widespread in extant inscriptions, where אתרה קדישה, אתרה, and כנישתא (כנישתה) are well attested.¹³ To complicate matters, I would add that in an inscription from the Ḥammāt Gader synagogue, as throughout rabbinic literature, אתר may refer to either the synagogue or the general place. A similar problem appears at Alma (with a parallel at Baram), where we find a blessing for peace במקום הזה ובכל מקומות ישראל. Finally, it is quite likely that the term אתרה קדישה in a second inscription from the Beth Shean “study house” may refer to a study

¹²M. Sokoloff, “Epigraphical Notes on the Palestinian Talmud” *Bar Ilan* 18-19 (1980): 218-219 (Hebrew); idem, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1990), 82.

¹³*Knisha*: appears in inscriptions from Ḥammāt Gader and Beth Guvrin (Naveh, *On Stone and Mosaic*, 60-61, 109-111); *atar*: Ḥammāt Gader, probably in reference to the synagogue (Naveh, op. cit., 154, 156); *atra*: Naaran (100-101); *maqom*: Baram (small synagogue) and Alma (19-20, 22-23). It is unclear, however, whether these inscriptions refer to the synagogue upon which it is inscribed, to the village that it faced out toward, or to both. *Atra qadisha*: Kefar Ḥananyah (Naveh, op. cit., 34-36); Ḥammāt Tiberias B (pp. 48-49), Beth Shean B (pp. 77-78), Naaran (4 times, pp. 95-96, 99-102).

house (which, along with study, were always places of prayer), and not to a synagogue.¹⁴

Conversely, in a footnote to the same article, Sokoloff uses scribal method in order to interpret an inscription at Ḥorvat Am-mudim.¹⁵ This very lightly incised inscription had originally been interpreted by archaeologist N. Avigad and by philologist Y. Kutscher to read תרא דמרי שומיא, “gate of the master of heaven.”¹⁶ In the tumult of 1948 the inscription was misplaced, and only recently located by the staff of the Hebrew University’s Institute of Archaeology.¹⁷ Based upon photographs, epigrapher Joseph Naveh reinterpreted the *resh* as a *qof*, though he was aware that this letter is unclear. According to Naveh, in consultation with Jonas Greenfield, the inscription reads תקא דמרי שומיא, “receptacle of the Master of Heaven,” referring to the Torah shrine.¹⁸ תיק is a common word in rabbinic Hebrew and תיקה appears in Targumic literature.¹⁹ Both are loan words from the Greek *théke*. An inscription from Dalton supports this reading. There the Torah shrine is called תיקה רחמנה “Receptacle of the Merciful (One).”²⁰ In 1978, F. G. Hüttenmeister tentatively argued, based upon Avigad’s reading, that תרא is a variant of אתרא.²¹ The inscription would then

¹⁴ Naveh, *On Stone and Mosaic*, 77-78; Fine, *This Holy Place*, 67-72, 100-101.

¹⁵ Sokoloff, “Epigraphical Notes,” 218, n. 2.

¹⁶ Reading תרא as a variant of תרע. N. Avigad, “An Aramaic Inscription from the Synagogue at Umm El-’Amed in Galilee,” *Louis M. Rabinowitz Fund for the Exploration of Ancient Synagogues Bulletin* 3 (1960), 62-64; E. Y. Kutscher, “Jewish Palestinian Aramaic,” in F. Rosenthal, *An Aramaic Handbook* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1967), I/1: 70.

¹⁷ See Naveh, *On Stone and Mosaic*, 41, “האבן צריכה להימצות באוסף המכון”, *idem*, “The Aramaic and Hebrew Inscriptions from Ancient Synagogues,” *Eretz-Israel* 20 (1989), 307. It was examined by the author in 2001.

¹⁸ Naveh, *On Stone and Mosaic*, 40-41.

¹⁹ Naveh, ad. loc., Sokoloff, *Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic*, 581.

²⁰ Naveh, *On Stone and Mosaic*, 144-145; S. Krauss, *Griechische und lateinische Lehnwörter im Talmud, Midrasch und Targum* (Berlin: S. Calvary and Co., 1898-1899), 588. Cf. Sokoloff, *Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic*, 581, who translates “sheath.” Rahmana: “The Merciful One,” following Sokoloff, op. cit., 522. See also Naveh, op. cit., nos. 70-72, 106-109.

that תרא is a variant of אתרא.²¹ The inscription would then translate “place of the master of Heaven.” In 1980 Sokoloff strengthened Hüttenmeister’s position, based upon orthographic parallels in Palestinian Jewish Aramaic. In a marginal gloss to Targum Neofiti to Num. 21:8, for example, אתר is written תר.²² Naveh revisited the inscription in an article published in 1989, some time after it was rediscovered. In this article, he accepted Avigad’s original reading, תרא, as well as the Hüttenmeister-Sokoloff interpretation. I cite these examples in order to exemplify the amazingly close linguistic relationship between extant inscriptions and rabbinic literature. This relationship is not to be taken lightly. The proximity of these two bodies of related texts is a necessary precondition for the kinds of interpretation suggested in the example cited, and sets a firm foundation for higher level interpretation of the interconnectedness of Palestinian rabbinic texts and archaeological sources.

Ever since the Middle Ages, scholars have been aware that archaeology can be useful for the interpretation of artifacts described in rabbinic sources. Individual artifacts, and even cityscapes, provide important information for interpreting specific rabbinic texts. Numerous parallels have been adduced, and exhibitions highlighting the relationships have been organized (two curated by the present author).²³ This approach has been popularized in Adin Steinsaltz’s Hebrew edition of the Babylonian Talmud, where archaeological artifacts are used as illustrations of the talmudic discussion, and even the title page is modeled upon late antique synagogue discoveries.²⁴ I will cite just two. The first is drawn from the realm of Roman period jewelry, the second from the lighting of late antique Jewish public spaces.

²¹ F. Hüttenmeister, “The Aramaic Inscription from the Synagogue at H. ‘Ammudim,” *IEJ* 18 (1978), 111-112.

²² See Sokoloff, *Dictionary*, 81-82.

²³ U. Zevulun and Y. Olenik. *Form and Function in the Talmudic Period* (Tel Aviv: Haaretz Museum, 1979); Fine, *The Tangible Talmud: Text and Artifact in the Greco-Roman Period* (Los Angeles, U. S. C. Archaeological Research Collection and Fullerton, California State University, 1987); Fine, ed., *Sacred Realm: The Emergence of the Synagogue in the Ancient World* (Oxford University Press and Yeshiva University Museum, 1996).

²⁴ *Talmud Bavli*, punctuated, interpreted and tr. A. Steinsaltz (Jerusalem: ha-Makhon ha-Yisraeli le-Firsumim Talmudiyim, 1980-).

Mishnah Shabbat 6:1 instructs that “A woman may not go out (on the Sabbath ... wearing) a city of gold.” Similarly, Mishnah Kelim 11:8 explains that “All women’s ornaments are susceptible to defilement, for example, a city of gold ...” Nowhere does Tannaitic literature attempt to define or identify this artifact, which apparently was obvious to all. Y. Shabbat 6:1, 7d, however, goes into some detail:²⁵

“and not (wearing) a city of gold” (m. Shabbat 6:1).
 Rav Judah said: For example, a Jerusalem of gold
 (ירושלים דדהב).
 Our Rabbis of Caesarea say: פרוס טוק טקלין



Esther with ‘City of Gold’ in Dura Europos

The Caesarean rabbis explain the “city of gold” through a Greek loan word, with Samuel Krauss identifies as: *chruskastellon*, a

²⁵ Cf. y. Sot. 9:16, 24c, b. Shab. 59b.

golden castle.²⁶ This correspondence translation suggests that an artifact known from the general context stands behind the “city of gold,” which is little more than a translation of the Greek. In 1967 Shalom Paul correctly associated the “city of gold” with tiaras in the shape of cities that appear in Roman art, particularly in sculptures of Tyche (Fortuna).²⁷ Significantly Paul shows that this type of tiara is also worn by the goddess Tyche and by Esther in the Dura Europos synagogue paintings. The comment of Rav Judah, a second generation Babylonian Amora cited in our Yerushalmi text finds important parallels in b. Shabbat 59a and b. Sotah 49b. These texts ask: “‘What is a city of gold?’: Said Rabba bar bar Hanna said Rabbi Johanan (a Palestinian amora of the second generation): a Jerusalem of Gold” (ירושלים דדהבא). In this way a typical Roman artifact (which, to the best of my knowledge was unknown in Sasanian Persia) was judaized in amoraic literature through association with the holy city of Jerusalem.

Our second example sets rabbinic sources within the context of rabbinic study houses and within synagogues.²⁸ Happily, a large

²⁶ S. Krauss, *Griechische und lateinische Lehnwörter im Talmud, Midrasch und Targum* (Berlin: S. Calvary and Co., 1898-1899). See also S. Lieberman, *Hayerushalmi Kipshuto* (New York and Jerusalem, 1995), pt. 1, vol. 1, 102.

²⁷ See S. M. Paul, “Jerusalem—City of Gold.” *Israel Exploration Journal* 17 (1967): 257-263; *idem*, “Jerusalem of Gold—A Song and an Ancient Crown.” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 3, no. 4 (1977): 38-40. On the use of Roman jewelry fashions in rabbinic culture, see U. Zevulun and Y. Olenik, *Form and Function in the Talmudic Period* (Tel Aviv: Haaretz Museum, 1979), 100-101, in Hebrew.

²⁸ On the synagogue setting, see: J. Heinemann and J. J. Petuchowski, *The Literature of the Synagogue*, (New York: Behrman House, 1975). On the study house setting: S. D. Fraade, “Interpreting Midrash 1: Midrash and the History of Judaism,” *Prooftexts* 7, no. 2 (1987), 179-194; *idem*, “Sifre Deuteronomy 26 (ad Deuteronomy 3:23): How Conscious the Composition?” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 54 (1988), 245-301; *idem*, *From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and Its Interpretation in the Midrash Sifre to Deuteronomy* (Albany: State University of New York Press 1991); Yonah Fraenkel is extreme in his virtual negation of the significance of the synagogue in the construction of rabbinic homilies. For Fraenkel, the *Sitz-im-Leben* of these homilies is essentially the study house. See: Y. Fraenkel, *The Ways of Aggadab and Midrasb* (Israel: Yad la-Talmud, 1991), 17-43, Hebrew. More recently, see Fine, “‘Their Faces Shine with the Brightness of the Firmament.’ Study Houses and Synagogues in the *Targumim* to the Pentateuch,”

number of synagogues (and one or more study houses)²⁹ have been uncovered in the Land of Israel that can help in the process of imagining the physical context in which the images painted on walls, set on floors and carved on stones interacted with communities that were thoroughly infused with midrashic themes and ways of thinking. What of these “sets” upon which rabbinic literature was performed? Rabbinic texts describe synagogues as having podia (*bimot*), Torah shrines generally on the Jerusalem-oriented walls, and other appurtenances. Archaeology gives us a sense of the sizes, proportions, colors and textures of some of the places where midrash thrived during the late Roman and Byzantine periods. It is my sense that the floors, lamps, painted walls and human actors functioned together to define and give meaning to the synagogue or study house space. This three-dimensional way of reading both texts and artifacts, and most importantly, the flesh and blood communities who “lived” the texts and artifacts, often facilitates new ways of looking at both sorts of evidence.³⁰ To cite just one example: Genesis Rabbah 4:2³¹ describes a Rabbi using the lamps of a synagogue or a study house to explain a complicated issue of Biblical physics:

Said Rabbi Tanḥuma:

I will explain. If it said (in Genesis 1:7): “And God made the firmament and He separated between the wa-

in *Biblical Translation in Context*, ed. F. W. Knobloch (Bethesda, Md.: University Press of Maryland, 2002), 63-92.

²⁹ On the Dabbura inscription, “This is the study house of Rabbi Eliezer ha-Qappar,” see Naveh, *On Stone and Mosaic*, 25-26. On a possible study house in Beth Shean: D. Bahat, “A Synagogue at Beth-Shean,” in *Ancient Synagogues Revealed*, ed. L. I. Levine (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1981), 82-85; Fine, *This Holy Place*, 100-101. See also D. Urman, “The House of Assembly and the House of Study: Are They One and the Same?” in *Ancient Synagogues: Historical Analysis and Archaeological Discovery*, ed. D. Urman and P. V. M. Flesher (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 1: 232-255.

³⁰ See my extensive discussions of this phenomenon in *Art and Judaism*, 172-204, and “A Liturgical Interpretation of Synagogue Remains in Late Antique Palestine,” in *Continuity and Renewal: Jews and Judaism in Byzantine-Christian Palestine*, ed. L. I. Levine, Jerusalem: Dinur Center and Ben Zvi Institute, 2004, 402-429.

³¹ J. Theodor and Ch. Albeck, eds., *Midrasch Bereschit Rabba*, 3 vols. (Jerusalem: Shalem Books, 1996) p. 27.

ter” which is **on** (על) the firmament, I would say that the water is placed on the body of the firmament (על גופו של ריקיע).

Since it says (in Genesis 1:7): “[And God made the firmament and He separated] between the water which is **above** (מעל) the firmament,” I say that the upper waters are held in place by [divine] command.

Said Rabbi Aḥa: “Like this lamp” (כהדין קנדילא).

This midrash is part of an extended discussion by Amoraim regarding the nature of the biblical firmament. It is set as a conversation between Rabbis, presumably within a study house setting. Responding to Rabbi Tanḥuma, Rabbi Aḥa apparently pointed toward a lamp in the room where they were studying to explain Rabbi Tanḥuma’s position. His comment, “*this* lamp,” is meant to explain the biblical verse. Late antique synagogues, churches and study houses were illuminated with both clay and translucent glass lamps. Clay lamps were uncovered in the Gush Ḥalav synagogue, and fragments of glass lamps and their holders were found at a number of sites.³² Glass lamps are illustrated in numerous synagogue mosaics. While seven-branched menorahs may have had all kinds of associations, their primary purpose was to illuminate an otherwise dark building. The lights of a synagogue bema, like those of churches, served as spot lights, highlighting the more holy section of the synagogue. In synagogues, lamps facilitated the public reading of Scripture. The way that such glass lamps were (and are) used provides ample context for Rabbi Aḥa’s analogy. Krauss and Theodor both had considerable difficulty imagining the realia be-

³² Gush Ḥalav, see E. M. Meyers, C. Meyers and J. Strange, *Excavations at the Ancient Synagogue of Gush Halav* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 128-129, 158-165. The authors suggest that oil lamps were discovered in this synagogue that are “unique to Gush Ḥalav and found nowhere outside the synagogue site.” They argue that “it seems reasonable to suggest that they were manufactured solely for use within this building.” On Meroth, see Z. Ilan and E. Damati, *Meroth: The Ancient Jewish Village* (Tel Aviv: Society for the Preservation of Nature in Israel, 1987), 144; At Ḥammath Tiberias B, level 2, M. Dothan, *Ḥammath Tiberias: Early Synagogues* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1983), 62, notes, “Almost all of the lamp fragments were found on the floor of Locus 52, which was probably the treasury of the synagogue.”

hind this description, though the *Mabarzu*, Ze'ev Wolf Einhorn, got it right in his commentary on *Midrash Rabbah*.³³ The text imagines a glass lamp containing water and oil. In fact, glass lamps are always filled partially with water, so that the glass does not overheat and shatter. Owing to the differing relative gravities of water and oil, the oil floats above the water. The wick floats in the oil. Rabbi Aḥa refers to the apparent miracle of the separation of the water from the oil. By analogy, the heavenly firmament also separates “the waters above from the waters below.”³⁴ This midrashic interpretation, set in the material culture of late antique Jewish life, also teaches much about modes of learning and the ways that analogies were drawn by the Rabbis from their material environment.³⁵

ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE DISCOVERY OF LOST MIDRASHIM

Through the entire twentieth century scholars of rabbinic literature were engaged in a sustained search for “lost *midrashim*.” Roman sources, the writings of the Church Fathers, early Christian art, Karaite and Islamic literatures were carefully combed in an attempt to “redeem” lost Jewish traditions. Louis Ginzberg was the master

³³ Krauss, *Talmudische Archäologie*, 522. See the commentary of Theodor-Albeck, and parallels cited there. Z. W. Einhorn, *Commentary of the Maharzu*, published in the Vilna Romm edition of *Midrash Rabbah*. Rpt. Jerusalem, ad. loc. See also S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, 2 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), 2: 150 who notes that “In 1075 the synagogue of the Palestinians (in Fustat) was illuminated by fifty-one large and small chandeliers, called *buqandalt* i.e., *abu qandalat*), a term not found thus far elsewhere...”; idem, “The Synagogue Building and Its Furnishings According to the Record of the Cairo Geniza,” in *Religion in a Secular Age*, ed. S. D. Goitein (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1964), 170*. M. L. Trowbridge, *Philological Studies in Ancient Glass* (Urbana, Ill., 1930), 190, notes that, “The first reference I find to glass lamps is in the fourth century where many large candelae are described as hanging in a church.” See L. Bouras, “Byzantine Lighting Devices,” *XVI Internationaler Byzantinistenkongress Akten* (= *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 32, no. 3) 2, no. 3 (1982), 479; Sokoloff, *Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic*, 1991: 496.

³⁴ For other examples, see M. Bregman, “The Darshan: Preacher and Teacher of Talmudic Times,” *The Melton Journal* 14 (1982), 3, 19, 26.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 47-48.

of this process, beginning with his doctoral dissertation, *Die Haggada bei den Kirchenvätern und in der apokryphischen Litteratur* (1900)³⁶ and continuing through *Legends of the Jews* (1909)³⁷ and the *Genzei Schechter* series (1928/29).³⁸ With the frequent discovery of Jewish artifacts after World War I, archaeology too came to be seen as a source of *midrashim*. E. L. Sukenik is a good example. His first survey article on synagogue archaeology, published in 1923 in *Rimon: A Hebrew Magazine of Art and Letters*, reflects a real attempt to attract generally image-shy *Wissenschaft* scholars. He describes the recently-discovered Hammath Tiberias stone menorah. Sukenik notes that the branches of the menorah are decorated in pomegranate pattern, reminiscent of the *כפתור ופרה* of Exodus 25 (and parallels). He writes with obvious pleading that: “Every interpreter of Holy Scripture will need to take into account the image of this menorah that was buried in the past, certainly during a period of danger, and revealed to us in the first Hebrew excavations in the Land of Israel.”³⁹



Stone menorah in Hammath Tiberias

The discovery of the Beth Alpha synagogue in 1928/29 and particularly of the Dura Europos synagogue in 1932, with their significant arrays of biblical imagery, solidified the significance of archaeology in the search for lost *midrashim*. It is not insignificant that a major advisor to Carl Kraeling in his publication of the final report of the Dura synagogue was none other than Louis Ginzberg. Inscriptions too yield texts that closely parallel the rabbinic corpus. The most spectacular example is the halakhic inscription from

³⁶ L. Ginzberg, *Die Haggada bei den Kirchenvätern und in der apokryphischen Litteratur*, (Berlin: S. Calvary), 1900.

³⁷ L. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1909).

³⁸ L. Ginzberg, *Genizah Studies in Memory of Solomon Schechter* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1928/29), 3 vols, Hebrew. Reprinted with an introduction by Burton Visotzky by Gorgias Press, Piscataway, 2003.

³⁹ E. L. Sukenik, “Ancient Synagogues in Palestine,” *Rimon: A Hebrew Magazine of Art and Letters*, 5 (1923), 19 (Hebrew), my translation.

Rehov, though other examples exist that bear liturgical, aggadic and midrashic import. Scraps of biblical interpretation, “midrash,” are imbedded in a number of inscriptions.⁴⁰ In addition, images discovered within ancient Jewish contexts provide important parallels to midrashic texts, and on occasion even reveal otherwise unknown *midrashim*.

While numerous visual representations of biblical themes have been uncovered, no sustained discussion of midrashic and other rabbinic themes in ancient Jewish art has been prepared. We are still in the “show and tell” mode. In a 1983 article entitled “The Illustrated Midrash in the Dura Synagogue Paintings: A New Dimension for the Study of Judaism,” art historian Joseph Gutmann attempted to summarize and convince the audience of the *Proceedings of the American Academy of Jewish Research* to take the relationship between ancient art and midrash seriously.⁴¹ Gutmann describes the most important examples from Dura, and sets them within the contexts of rabbinic *midrashim*. I refer the reader to Gutmann’s discussion. Taken together with C. Kraeling’s final report of the Dura synagogue and Sukenik’s 1947 monograph *Beit ha-Keneset shel Dura-Europos ve-Tsiyurav*,⁴² this article highlights in a sophisticated manner the many midrashic parallels discovered there. Archaeology from the Land of Israel provides few examples as stirring as those at Dura. Still, numerous parallels between archaeology and midrash are presented visually—and occasionally new discoveries are possible. I will suggest just a few, focusing upon details that have generally been overlooked.

Sukenik was right that the Hammath Tiberias synagogue mosaic would be important for biblical interpretation. The artisan who carved this lampstand interpreted כפתור ופרה as recurring pome-

⁴⁰ These texts have yet to be studied as a group. See in the meantime G. Foerster, “Synagogue Inscriptions and Their Relation to Liturgical Versions.” *Cathedra* 17 (1981), 12–40, Hebrew; A. Shinan, *The World of the Aggadab*, tr. J. Glucker (Tel Aviv: MOD Books, 1990), 81–91; J. Yahalom, “Synagogue Inscriptions in Palestine—A Stylistic Classification,” *Immanuel* 10 (1980), 47–57.

⁴¹ J. Gutmann, “The Illustrated Midrash in the Dura Synagogue Paintings: A New Dimension for the Study of Judaism,” *PAAJR* 50 (1983): 91–104.

⁴² E. L. Sukenik, *Beit ha-Keneset shel Dura-Europos ve-Tsiyurav* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik), 1947.

granates. This interpretation appears in numerous depictions found more recently, most prominently in the mosaic of the synagogue of Severos, also at Ḥammath Tiberias.⁴³ I have not found any rabbinic text that makes this connection. This connection was made, however, by Josephus. He writes that the menorah was "... was made up of globules and lilies, along with pomegranates and little bowls."⁴⁴ Our menorah depictions thus stand in a long tradition of interpretations of the menorah. Only through archaeology do we now know of the presence of this interpretive tradition among Jews in late antique Palestine.

The mosaic depictions of menorahs at Ḥammath Tiberias provide other "midrashic" details. As in many images, the bases of the menorahs are in the form of tripods. This too is a kind of midrash, as the biblical text provides no information on the existence of a base. Targumic tradition resolves this textual lacuna, translating Exodus 25:31 *יִרְכֵה* as *בְּסִיט דִּידָה*.⁴⁵ The choice of a three-legged base was far from a foregone conclusion. One could imagine a base, for example, like that of the Arch of Titus menorah. It is my sense that the tripod bases of this and many other depictions relate to a practical consideration: bronze lampstands in this period generally had three-legged bases.⁴⁶ It is likely that genuine bronze menorahs actually stood in synagogues during this period. Once constructed and then depicted, the three-legged base was de facto integrated into the ways that Jews imagined the menorah.

In the mosaic depictions of menorahs in the "Synagogue of Severos" at Ḥammath Tiberias the flames of each lamp are inclined toward the central stalk of the menorah. This image nicely parallels a tradition in *Sifre Zuta*, *Beha'alotekha* to Numbers 8:2:⁴⁷

... And whence do I know that each lamp was pointed
toward the middle lamp?

⁴³ R. Hachlili, *Ancient Jewish Art and Archaeology in the Land of Israel* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988), 241-249.

⁴⁴ Ant. 3: 144-146.

⁴⁵ *Neofiti, Fragment Targum, Pseudo-Jonathan*.

⁴⁶ J. Brand, *Ceramics in Talmudic Literature* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1953), 296-314 (Hebrew).

⁴⁷ *Sifre ad Numeros adjecto Sifre Zutta*. Ed. H. S. Horovitz (Jerusalem: Wahrman, 1976); *Midrash ha-Gadol*, ed. Z. M. Rabinowitz (Jerusalem: Rav Kook Institute, 1967), ad. loc.

Scripture says: “toward the lampstand (menorah)”
(Num. 8:2).

And thus it says: “and he dwells turned toward me”
(*memuli*, Num. 22:5).

Said Rabbi Simeon: When I went to Rome there I saw
the menorah. All of the lamps were pointed toward the
middle lamp.

In fact, among the numerous images of menorahs discovered in the Roman catacombs, quite a few show lamps inclined toward the center.⁴⁸ Is this based upon a Palestinian or even local interpretation of Numbers 8:2, or is this imagery drawn from actual observation of the Temple menorah? In addition to this midrash, Josephus relates that the menorah of the Second Temple was displayed in Vespasian’s Temple of Peace on the Roman Forum during this period,⁴⁹ and the once colorful Arch of Titus bas relief was in far better condition for viewing than it is now. Interestingly, the shape of most menorah depictions from Rome is different from Palestinian depictions. In these depictions, the ratio of the height of the branches to the width of the branches approximates the depiction on the arch of Titus. Significantly, the base of the Arch of Titus menorah is nowhere to be found, and the menorah is depicted as a tripod (as in Palestinian synagogue images). Interpretations of biblical themes from these communities are exceedingly rare, and give voice to ways that Jews in the Roman diaspora interpreted visually the biblical menorah. The great similarity of these depictions, and particularly the midrashic elements, to art from the Land of Israel is worthy of note. It is suggestive of a “Jewish koine” that stretched beyond the frontiers of Jewish Palestine.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ The illustrations are most conveniently arranged by Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols During the Greco-Roman Period* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1953), 3: nos. 769, 808, 810, 817, 973. Images of menorahs from Rome and other diaspora centers interpret the bulbs and calyxes as floral in form, though not as pomegranates.

⁴⁹ *War* 7, 158. For a full discussion, see my “‘When I went to Rome, I Saw the Menorah...’: The Jerusalem Temple Implements between 70 C.E. and the Fall of Rome,” *Festschrift for Eric Meyers*, ed. D. Edwards, forthcoming.

⁵⁰ Fine, *This Holy Place*, 125-157.

Interpretations of biblical narrative scenes have also been discovered in the Land of Israel. The visit of the angels to Abraham was found at Sepphoris; the Binding of Isaac was found at Beth Alpha and Sepphoris; Daniel in the Lion's Den was found at Naaran (near Jericho), Ein Samsam (in the Golan) and in a very poor state of preservation at Susiya (in the Hebron Hills). David playing his harp was discovered in Gaza; Noah's Ark at Gerasa; and fragments of Aaron before the Tabernacle in Sepphoris.⁵¹ Scholars have found numerous parallels to rabbinic literature in these artifacts. More importantly, parallels in Byzantine period liturgical texts and Targumim, which are roughly equivalent in date to the artifacts, have been very important. This form of interpretation invites caution. Biblical iconography and themes were generally drawn directly from Christian models. I would nevertheless suggest that once they crossed the threshold into the synagogue, interpretations that might be obvious to art historians and even perhaps to ancient mosaic craftsmen (who worked on commission for Jews, Christians and Samaritans) would not necessarily have been common knowledge to local Jewish viewers.

The Binding of Isaac at Beth Alpha is a fascinating example of a specifically Jewish presentation of a theme that is ubiquitous in Christian art.⁵² This panel is unusual in late antique art specifically because Abraham "the father of faith" in Christian contexts, is not the focal point of this composition. Rather, at the focal center of the panel is the Hand of God reaching down from the heavens, the ram caught in the thicket immediately below. The focal point is the redemptive moment, when God cries out, "don't do it!" (in biblical verse) and the ram is revealed ready to serve as Isaac's substitute.

⁵¹ See Hachlili, *Ancient Jewish Art and Archaeology in the Land of Israel*, 287-300; Weiss and Netzer, *Promise and Redemption*.

⁵² On the binding of Isaac in Christian art, see A. M. Smith, "The Iconography of the Sacrifice of Isaac in Early Christian Art," *American Journal of Archaeology* 26 (1922); I. S. Van Woerden, "The Iconography of the Sacrifice of Isaac," *Vigiliae Christianae* 15 (1961); R. Jensen, "The Offering of Isaac in Jewish and Christian Tradition: Image and Text," *Biblical Interpretation* 11, no. 1 (1994); J. Gutmann, "The Sacrifice of Isaac: Variations on a Theme in Early Jewish and Christian Art," in *Sacred Images: Studies in Jewish Art from Antiquity to the Middle Ages* (Northampton, Variorum Reprints 1989); "Revisiting the Binding of Isaac Mosaic at Beth Alpha," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 6 (1992).

This focus fits well with Jewish reflection on the Binding of Isaac, where Abraham's faith is subsumed to God's eternal pledge to redeem the children of Israel.⁵³ The horn of the ram is much more bright than the rest of the creature, and draws attention. My sense is that this is quite intentional. The ram's horn is emphasized, I would suggest, specifically because of its enduring liturgical significance. Its blowing on Rosh ha-Shanah was considered to be a reminder of the Covenant, the Binding of Isaac being the fullest statement of *zekhut avot*, the protective and enduring "merit of the fathers."⁵⁴ The Beth Alpha mosaic does not present a "new" midrash. It does present, I would suggest, a Jewish transformation of a theme that is well-known in Christian art and its "Judaization."⁵⁵

"Archaeological *midrashim*" have indeed added to the corpus of rabbinic sources discovered from "unconventional" sources during the twentieth century. These are both textual and visual. Having suggested what I see as examples of archaeological *midrashim*, and my interpretation of these images, I hasten to add the proviso that visual sources are not so specific in their associations as written texts, even when the imagery is labeled. Scholars have spent inordinate energy asserting that specific images represent one biblical theme to the exclusion of every other possibility. Gutmann has catalogued multiple interpretations of every detail of the Dura paintings that have been suggested by scholars.⁵⁶ Some are based upon biblical texts, other rabbinic texts, and others on spurious

⁵³ A. Shinan has surveyed the ways that the Binding of Isaac (Genesis 22) is presented in midrash, liturgy and targum. See his "Synagogues in the Land of Israel: The Literature of the Ancient Synagogue and Synagogue Archaeology," in Fine, *Sacred Realm*, 130-152.

⁵⁴ S. Schechter, *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* (New York: Macmillan, 1909), 170-198; G. F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Common Era* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1927-30), 1: 538-546.

⁵⁵ On this process in later Jewish art, see S. S. Kayser, "Defining Jewish Art," *Mordecai M. Kaplan Jubilee Volume* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1953), 457-467.

⁵⁶ "Early Synagogue and Jewish Catacomb Art and Its Relation to Christian Art." In *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römische Welt*. Berlin and New York: Walther de Gruyter. 2.21.2:1313-1342. For a similar analysis, see A. J. Wharton, *Refiguring the Post Classical City: Dura Europos, Jerash, Jerusalem, and Ravenna* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 43-45.

assertions of the influences of neo-platonism, a Jewish mystical religion, structuralism, class struggle, and overstated notions of Christian influence. Scholars have asserted strongly deterministic programmatic narratives of ancient Jewish art, first at Dura and more recently regarding the Sepphoris synagogue mosaic.⁵⁷ Unfortunately, the images cannot speak back for themselves in the ways that literary sources can. My own sense is that contemporaneous Jewish texts, used judiciously can set the general context for archaeological discoveries. Such an interpretation must not be monistic or exclusive of other possibilities, but should learn from the Rabbis (as well as from contemporary literary studies) to accept and even celebrate a multiplicity of meanings. **יש אומרים** is the order of the day—interpretations depending upon the liturgical, pedagogic or aesthetic context in which the art “lived.”

CONCLUSION

The impact of archaeology upon the study of rabbinic literature, including midrash, is indeed huge. Interpretation of specific texts in terms of archaeological sources, philological use of epigraphic sources to interpret the languages of rabbinic literature, and the discovery (or, “recovery”) of otherwise unknown *midrashim* and other rabbinic traditions were important factors in the development of rabbinics as an academic discipline during the twentieth century. I have provided a number of specific examples of ways that archeology has been integrated in order to illustrate specific aspects of this approach. I have also suggested that archaeology provides the “set” upon which many forms of rabbinic literature were performed in antiquity, both the text and the context being essentially linked. More than any particular literary hermeneutic, archaeology has “revolutionized” the study of rabbinic literature and of the world in which it was composed. For the first time since talmudic times it is possible not only to “read” rabbinic sources, but to “see” and “touch” them as well. The essential project, then, is building the hermeneutical bridges between archaeology and rabbinic texts that allow for their creative interaction without allowing either type of source to dominate the other. This requires depth knowledge of rabbinic literature and archaeology, of the problems

⁵⁷ Eg. Weiss and Netzer, *Promise and Redemption*.

inherent in the study of each separately, and of the even greater issues involved in discussing the two together.

