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A brief examination of amoraic literature, the texts composed by Jewish scholars we often identify as "rabbis" during the third to sixth centuries, reveals the broad scope of stories in this corpus. Tales and narratives of all sorts frequently rub shoulders with the legal and hermeneutical discussions of the Talmuds (i.e., both the Palestinian Talmud known as the Yerushalmi and its later, more elaborated, Persian counterpart, the Bavli) and to an even larger extent they saturate the so-called Haggadic Midrashim, literary compilations that were usually arranged according to the biblical sequence. In their generic variety, ranging from succinct anecdotes and parables to fully developed plots, and from the seemingly realistic to the overwhelmingly fantastic, rabbinic stories are not an easy nut to crack and indeed have attracted scholarly attention from the beginning of Judaic studies in the nineteenth century. Over the course of a century and a half they were studied through a wide array of methods—whether textually, historically, or socially oriented—and the fruits of this endeavor have highlighted different facets of their function, context, and content.

By adding the folkloristic dimension to the scholarly discourse associated with amoraic stories, Hasan-Rokem’s book addresses a long-felt need. Although the writer, a professor of folklore at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and a published poet in Hebrew, is not alone in utilizing this discipline for the study of Talmudic texts, she is the first to present a comprehensive discussion associating folklore with rabbinics, attempting to adumbrate both the prospects and procedures of the “folkloristic school” for deciphering rabbinic accounts.

The opening chapter (pp. 1–15) spans a variety of preparatory issues. It spells out the book’s objective both generally (to discuss “the presence of folk literature and folk culture in Palestinian aggadic literature”—p. 1) and more specifically (“to create and substantiate methods for analyzing and interpreting folk-literary material in aggadic Midrash”—p. 10). It deals with the history of research (pp. 2–7), characterizes the folkloristic material (p. 7), and presents the rabbinic text that will stand at the core of the discussion—the Midrash named Lamentation Rabbah—in both chronological (pp. 8–9) and conceptual (pp. 12–15) terms. Underlying this introductory discussion is the anticipation that a folkloristic perspective on the material will facilitate the reconstruction of peripheral voices, such as those of “women, children, uneducated people, and strangers of all kinds” (p. 8), and
consequently will shed light on "their contribution to the polysystemic character of rabbinic culture."

The next seven chapters are arranged in a similar pattern. In each, the writer focuses on a particular context—literary, genre, comparative, folkloristic, social, religious, or historical—and the ways it affected the re-creation and structure of folk-tales. After discussing some theoretical aspects of a specific "milieu," she applies her observations to various test-case story passages in the Midrash. Hasan-Rokem's analyses combine "conventional" literary and cultural criticisms with a strong inclination toward anthropological, feminist, and psychoanalytic approaches. She generally strives to isolate and elucidate the folkloristic motives in the narrative, then examines them through a broad comparative spectrum, only to redirect her findings back to the world of the rabbis in order to shed new light on the dynamics that shaped their civilization and literary project. In the process, the reader is introduced to a variety of literary topoi, such as riddles, parables, tales, and historical legends, and is taken on a rather exciting tour in the realm of folklore, from Arabian Nights to the Grimm brothers and from India and the Arabian peninsula through Renaissance Italy all the way up to Finland.

After completing this sweeping voyage, however, this reader is left ambivalent, if not frustrated. On the one hand, when it comes to specific passages, Hasan-Rokem's readings are often stimulating, even if at times perplexingly startling, and they convey a sense of invigorating innovation characteristic of the implementation of a relatively new research tool. This is the case, for example, in her provocative examination of the story about the priestly brother and sister, who were captured, sold as slaves to different owners, only to be involuntarily, and with their identities concealed from each another, united for copulation (pp. 20–34). Hasan-Rokem establishes the folkloristic context of this story within the traditions of the "Eastern Mediterranean" (p. 29) and persuasively reaches back hundreds of years to substantiate her claim with parallels from the works of the second century B.C.E. Roman playwright Plautus and even earlier from the plays of fifth century B.C.E. Aeschylus, to cite two strong cases. These insights, accompanied by more than a touch of literary analytical skill, allow Hasan-Rokem to unveil the ideological statement of the narrative as well as its internal tensions and complexities. She presents the plot as a sort of "Marionette theater" (p. 27) and alternatively as belonging to the folk narrative genre of the "novella of fate" (p. 30). She clarifies the tragic nature of the tale and pinpoints the opposing poles of purity and defilement as the biblical thread around which the rabbis have spun this tale (pp. 25–26). This is scholarship at its best, and the book is endowed with many such gems.

On the other hand, Hasan-Rokem's achievements are undermined by some grave shortcomings. On the most rudimentary level of presentation, the
lack of clarity regarding some of her most fundamental terms, such as folk-narrative, is especially egregious. Nowhere did I find a preliminary discussion of what a folk-narrative actually is, particularly in regard to rabbinic literature. How does one distinguish between folk literature and non-folk literature in this corpus? What are the criteria used to designate an individual passage or a certain term or phrase in a passage as “folk”? Should every story in rabbinic haggada be assigned a folkloristic label, and if not (and it seems from Hasan-Rokem’s own rendering that she does in fact distinguish between the two categories, for example on p. 29 when she speaks of “literary and folk-literary contexts”), how does one determine which stories should be considered folk literature? The writer does mention some characteristics of folk literature, for example, that it is “collective,” “traditional,” “oral,” etc. (for instance on p. 7), but without a precise definition of what such terms refer to, these features remain unintelligible (e.g., is folk literature alone in being “oral” or “traditional”?)

The effect of this kind of vagueness extends beyond the issue of coherence and casts significant doubt on some of the book’s key arguments. Such is the case regarding her claim, mentioned above, that folk-literature grants accessibility to peripheral, usually oppressed, voices of ancient society, such as those of women and minorities (“the other”). The quality and nature of these voices, however, remain in Hasan-Rokem’s discussion somewhat ambiguous. Are these authentic reverberations from the margins of ancient society that were preserved due to the special nature of folk-literature (as Hasan-Rokem seems to imply at the top of p. 8), or are they merely literary constructions? For example, the writer concludes her discussion of the famous legend about R. Eleazar “the modai” and his confrontation with Bar Kokhba with the assertion: “A reading of this story from the folk-narrative perspective highlights the voices of characters considered to be others. These are voices of…strangers such as the Cuthean, Hadrian…” (p. 169). But are these really voices of “others” or rather the voices that the rabbis who created the story assigned to these fictional “historical” characters? Hasan-Rokem is just not clear on this crucial issue.

Another central component of Hasan-Rokem’s venture that deserves more clarification has to do with her parameters for hermeneutics. In contrast to the previous examples, Hasan-Rokem does elaborate on this issue, not only presenting what to her are the two major approaches—either seeing these literary compositions as “set in their own time or as a given in our own reality as contemporary readers” (p. 17)—but also explicitly expressing her inclination toward the latter. But here is the catch: If she indeed believes that the act of interpretation of an ancient text is “a new and unique creative act,” which does not need to be concerned with the original conditions (p. 18; my emphasis), then why does she claim time and again to help us unveil the inner
world of ancient people, be it narrators, groups, or their folklore and civilization? In one definitive statement Hasan-Rokem claims to be presenting her “understanding of the narrators’ world, and of the platform that we share with them as human beings” (p. 20). It is the immanent tension between the two limbs of this statement that Hasan-Rokem does not help us to resolve.

One example of this problematic aspect of Hasan-Rokem’s work is the final phase in her previously mentioned discussion of the story about the capture and mortification of the priestly brother and sister. After meticulously, and rather convincingly, identifying the various folkloristic details in the passage, she moves to the sphere of psychoanalysis and professes to discern “guilt for actual incest” lurking in the past of the two characters (p. 32). She supports this interpretation with her reading of the Aramaic verb hakim in the phrase “they recognized each other” as containing sexual connotations (similar to the biblical verb lada’at, “to know”). The question concerning the goals and limitations of interpretation arises here in its fullest. The reading of “recognize” as sexual intercourse is not supported by the text, if only because the two actions following it are hugging and kissing, which, if “foreplay,” should precede “recognize.” And even more significant, the text, at least at face value, does not allude to incestuous desire and could just as well be aiming to demarcate the line between what the authors conceived of as abomination, that is, the plan of the slaves’ owners, as opposed to the piety of the two, who are acting in accordance with the martyrlogical model of kiddush ha-shem. So what are we getting here in Hasan-Rokem’s interpretation—the inner world of the rabbinic narrators or perhaps the wild, if not lascivious, imagination of the modern poet-scholar?

Nevertheless, the above criticism does not negate the originality and challenging quality of Hasan-Rokem’s enterprise, for which all who are interested in rabbinic literature should be grateful.

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It has long been known that rabbinic stories about biblical heroes are often motivated by exegetical concerns. Few today would argue that rabbinic