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Religious Competition in the Third Century CE: Jews, Christians, and the Greco-Roman World

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Spatial Struggle
Intercity Relations and the Topography of Intra-Rabbinic Competition

The Greek and Roman notion of *agon* (contest, struggle), often personified as a young male athlete, was profoundly urban in its nature. The residents of the Greco-Roman city, from classical times to the late Empire, competed in every possible field, be it sports, music, theatre, rhetoric, or philosophy. Winning an intercity competition was prestigious, bringing the victor and the urban community instant fame and recognition. The scope of *agon* stretched, therefore, from the farthest extents of the urban territory and intercity roads, through the city squares and the porticoes of the courts, via the gymnasium and theatre and all the way to the academy. In third century CE Palestine, this all-permeating notion of *agon* was no less profound, playing a role also in the life of Jews who lived in its highly Romanised cities. Through the consideration of urban *agon* and its spatial dimension, I explore in this article the late antique rabbinic understanding of internal conflict, focusing on the two main centres of rabbinic activity in Roman Galilee – the cities of Sepphoris and Tiberias.

Much has been written about rabbinic pluralism, polysemy, and indeterminacy in the context of the sages’ disagreement and consensus. In recent years, scholars studying this question have begun turning their attention to the urban dimension of rabbinic conflict, following the identification of a rapid urbanisation process in third century CE Palestine and its impact on the

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rabbinc movement. Insights concerning the rabbis have emerged through this enterprise, such as the processes of rabbinic institutionalisation, the establishment of religious authority, the relations between the rabbis and the broader Jewish community, as well as their engagement with various Roman civic practices, which were marked by the negotiation of agnon.

The study of the sages' urban locations and the way in which these locations determined the set of academic and jurisdictional relations between competing rabbinic authorities has also been informative. After looking at the historical, social, and halakhic implications of the sages' places of residence, a geographical and temporal map has emerged. Although such a map should be taken as tentative due to the complexity of our evidence (particularly in regard to the "generations" of sages and their historical dating), rabbinic text suggests that the third century CE marked the move of rabbis to central Palestinian cities such as Caesarea, Lod, Sephoris, and Tiberias. The consequent urban bias of the sages, evident in both Palestinian and Babylonian sources, was also expressed in the realm of textual speculation, in which cities became mythical embodiments of the rabbinic movement's past. In this respect, rabbinic urban space provided the sages, and particularly the editors of their corpora, a kind of topographical scaffold for historiography.

Richard Hiday has recently reexamined the question of rabbinic conflict in regard to legal pluralism, focusing in particular on halakhic practice. As part of this reevaluation, he explores the problem of rabbinic jurisdiction as it is formulated in the context of the sages' geographical locations in the various urban centres of late antique Palestine and Sasanian Babylonia. He concludes that, while the Babylonian Talmud tolerates diversity of practice, allowing the leading rabbis in different cities to maintain their halakhic prerogatives and thus defuse conflict, Palestinian sources, and especially the Palestinian Talmud, do not. The latter appears to accept differences of opinions, but tends to reject multiple legal practices. For Hiday, this difference has to do with the fact that in Babylonia of the Amoraic and post-Amoraic periods, the rabbi had significant halakhic authority over the community, living great distances from other established rabbis and operating within a well-defined administrative boundary. Conversely, in Palestine, a much smaller territory, the geographical proximity of urban centres where rabbis lived and the less rigid administrative boundaries between them generated more competition, especially in a Jewish society wherein rabbis had comparatively less influence. Notwithstanding the scholarly disagreement regarding the level of centralisation and institutionalisation of the rabbinic movement in Palestine, Hiday's argument that the Palestinian Talmud as a distinct work deals with this competitive reality by attempting to harmonise the various practices, is convincing.

Hiday points to the cities of Sephoris and Tiberias as central sites of rabbinic activity, whose geographical proximity and substantial Jewish communities make them exemplary of the tight physical and social spaces that had to be shared by Palestinian sages. Catherine Hezser has already noted that the two cities were associated in Palestinian sources with more than one rabbi in both tannaic and amoraic times and that there were no particular rabbis who were seen as the highest local authorities in Galilean towns or, for that matter, in other urban centres in Palestine. Stuart Miller also points to the rabbis' lay interlocutors in these two Galilean cities, often referred to as 'Sephoreans' (Zipporâ'ei) and 'Tiberians' (Tiberâ'ei). He identifies these groups (as they appear in most instances) as followers of the rabbis, who preserved and represented their rabbi's traditions in discussions with other sages or groups, thus adding even more players to the rabbinic urban arena.

As part of this scholarship, the role of space in the dynamics of intercity relations as they were perceived by the rabbis has, however, received relatively little attention. In what follows, I propose that the spatial dimension is particularly relevant for the consideration of the somewhat fluid boundaries between cities. Due to the geographical proximity of Sephoris and Tiberias and their importance in the Palestinian context, the area between these cities

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6 S.S. Miller, Sages and Commons in Late Antique Erez Israel (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 448–9. And see my conclusion below.

7 Hiday, Dispute for the Sake of Heaven, 1–41.
and the territory they constituted provides a unique opportunity for such a spatial examination. Stuart Miller has offered a thorough and convincing evaluation of the relations between the two cities, bracketing, however, many of the rabbinic accounts pertaining to the Sepphoris/Tiberias intercity space as mere literary loci. As I will argue below, these spatial accounts are, in fact, highly revealing, shedding light on intra-rabbinic competition. By focusing on the rabbinic framing of the area of Sepphoris and Tiberias I will suggest that it constituted for the rabbis a legal as well as symbolic territory through which the Palestinian Talmud, in particular, grappled with geographical proximity and rabbinic conflict.

The Administrative Boundaries of Roman Galilee and The Duopolis of Sepphoris and Tiberias

In order to understand the complex and somewhat fluid urban territorial relations that formed the background for rabbinic negotiations of authority and power in Palestine according to Hidary, it is necessary, first, to briefly review the administrative reality of Roman Galilee in the third century CE. Ze'ev Safrai and others have shown that second and third centuries CE Syria-Palestina was organised into several regions (rendered in rabbinic literature ḫegemoniot) including Galilee, Samaria, and Judea, which were sub-divided into toparchies (medinot). Tiberias seems to have had its own toparchy, as did Sepphoris. Nevertheless, as noted by Hayim Lapin, the evidence pertaining to the exact structure and governance of such toparchies is "far from full." The Hebrew term most commonly used in rabbinic literature to denote these cities’ area of influence is teḥum, which had a variety of meanings ranging from a boundary to an area, or to an entire dominion. The parallel term in Greek is chōra, which means place, enclosure, position, land, or territory; this was also the term applied to regions in Palestine by Eusebius in his fourth century CE Onomasticon. Eusebius mentions the region of Sepphoris (under its pagan name Dioceasarea) as a chōra, oftentimes referring to the city’s distance from other notable locations and indicating its position in relation to major roads according to milestones.

This form of marking a city’s region is important in that it points to the understanding of boundaries in terms of pathways and landmarks rather than as products of linear demarcation. In this sense, a chōra was not the land enclosed by an abstract geometrical outline, but rather a rich set of spatial situations that was capable of being recognised by its residents on the ground. This is best exemplified in the famous sixth century CE mosaic inscription from Rehov, a satellite settlement of Scythopolis. In order to determine the area which is subject to the laws of tithe and fallow years, the authors of the inscription, following rabbinic traditions, defined the boundary of the land and in particular the boundary of their immediate surroundings by using identifiable places such as city gates, specific fields, villages, and tomb structures. The inscription points to the complex perception of territory and to the existence of alternative means of demarcation, which do not necessarily follow the Imperial division of land.

To go back to Sepphoris and Tiberias, although the area between these two cities may have been administratively divided into two separate territories with distinct urban scopes of influence, the reality on the ground appears to have been much more fluid. The relative density of rural settlements, agricultural land, and roads traversing the continuous area between the two cities, would have made it difficult for residents to discern any administrative boundary lines. As I suggest below, this is precisely the background for the

15 Z. Safrai, Boundaries and Administration in the Buret-Israel in the Mishnah and the Talmud Periods [Hebrew] (Tel-Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meuhad, 1980), 26 – 8; Lapin, Geography of Provinces and Provincialis, 155 – 62. The Galilee became part of Palestine Secunda at the end of the forth or beginning of the fifth century CE.
17 Lapin, Geography of Provinces and Provincialis, 160.
18 For teḥum as toparchy in rabbinic literature see Safrai, Boundaries and Administration, 139. For the mention of the teḥum of Sepphoris see y. Git. 1, 43c; Gen. Rab. 90:36. See also y. Git. 1:3 and b. Git. 6b. For the term “the towns of Sepphoris,” which pertains to the rural settlements in the city’s vicinity, see Lev. Rab. 16:2; y. Kil. 9, 32b; y. Ketub. 12, 35a. And see U. Leibner, Settlement and History in Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine Galilee: An Archaeological Survey of the Eastern Galilee (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 1–17.
20 For the chōra of Tiberias see Josephus, J.W. 2.13, 2, 252. For the Roman milestones and roads in the Onomasticon see Safrai, Boundaries and Administration, 217 – 18. For the milestones mentioning Sepphoris on the Roman road from Ptolemais to Tiberias see Y. Ne’eman, Sepphoris in the Period of the Second Temple, the Mishnah and the Talmud [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Shem, 1999), 78 – 82, and see pp. 55 – 70 for a survey of the settlements that may have belonged to the teḥum of Sepphoris.
rabbincic definition, articulation, and regulation of the area between the two cities.23

When reviewing the wealth of rabbincic materials in which Sepphoris and Tiberias are mentioned side by side, Miller argues that the rabbis simply “referred to these two cities because they were, particularly in the amoraic period, the two leading centres of Jewish life in Galilee, in which many of them also happened to live or study.”24 While he may be right about the lack of specific political and civic tension between these cities, I would like to suggest that the sages’ engagement with this urban pair is more than a mere outcome of their geographical location. In revisiting some of the rabbincic sources pertaining to Sepphoris and Tiberias, I hope to show that the rabbis had a more profound concern with the civic and religious meanings of these cities and the area between them. This concern, I propose, has further implications for the question of rabbincic competition over authority and jurisdiction in the third century.25

On the economic and civic levels, rabbincic literature indicates that the area of Sepphoris and Tiberias was understood as a distinct trade zone. The Palestinian Talmud, for instance, describes a hypothetical situation in which “someone gave his fellow eight Dinars to buy him wheat in Tiberias, and he bought wheat from Sepphoris.”26 The ensuing discussion, which elaborates on the differences between the economies of the two cities, illuminates an attempt to create a form of ‘exchange table’ that would regulate interstate trade. This attempt is evident, for example, in texts comparing Sepphoris and Tiberias’ measurements (y. B. Qam. 9, 6d – 7a), coins (b. Ber. 53b), and weights (b. Sota. 10b), as well as other agricultural issues (m. Šeb. 5:1). As part of a midrashic reflection, the rabbis comment on the limited extent of agricultural production in the teḥum of both Sepphoris and Tiberias (Gen. Rab. 90:48). The rabbis also compare certain guilds in Tiberias and Sepphoris, attesting to their

23 As the two major Jewish cities of the Galilee, Sepphoris and Tiberias shared many common features. See their association with Herod Antipas; their control over the Galilean archive and bank at various times (Josephus Life 38); their Hellenistic civic institutions (such as city councils and mints); their connection to the Roman road leading to the city of Akko/Poolemais, and their link to a particular priestly order. Miller, “Intercity Relations in Roman Palestine”, 1 – 2. In addition, the architecture of these two cities is fundamentally Roman. See Y. Hirschfeld, A Guide to Antiquity Sites in Tiberias (Jerusalem: Israel Department of Antiquities and Museums, 1992), 11 – 24; Z. Weiss, “Tiberias and Sepphoris in the First Century CE: Urban Topography and the Building Projects of Herod Antipas in the Galilee”, [Hebrew] Cathedra 120 (2006) 11 – 32. Josephus describes an urban competition over supremacy (προσελίθεν), following the rise of Sepphoris to the status of the Galilee capital at the time of Nero on account of Tiberias, in part due to the former’s loyalty to Rome during the Great Revolt (Josephus Life 37 – 8). Miller shows that such rivalry over supremacy was common in the Roman East, but concludes that there is no clear historical evidence for rivalry between Sepphoris and Tiberias after the first century CE. Miller, “Intercity Relations in Roman Palestine”, 20 – 4.
24 Ibid., 13.
25 See, however, Miller, Sages and Commoners, 449.
26 y. B. Qam. 9, 6d–7a.

observed by Jewish holidays and their specific customs of abstaining from work at such times (y. Mo’ed Qat. 2, 81b and y. Pesah. 4, 30d).

These literary traditions of a common economy, of which there are more, have their parallel in rabbincic legal discussions of the area between Sepphoris and Tiberias, which define it as a political and religious domain of its own. In the Palestinian Talmud, for instance, we find a discussion about the probable identity of a corpse found between the two cities. Rabbi Yohanan rules that the dead person found there must have been a Jew due to the nature of the populations in both Sepphoris and Tiberias. Other rulings throughout rabbincic literature convey similar ideas in the context of food found between the two cities, which is automatically rendered kosher because of the assumed Jewish origin of the food’s original owners. In this regard, the Sepphoris-Tiberias area, with its substantial Jewish population and significant rabbincic presence, was not merely a fact of life in late antique Galilee. By giving it the status of a Jewish territorial ‘corridor’ in Roman Palestine, the rabbis consciously instituted it as a legal entity. In other words, rabbincic literature does not only reflect a demographic situation, but also takes an active part in culturally constituting it.

I would like to call this extended urban territory between Sepphoris and Tiberias, as experienced and constituted by the rabbis, a ‘Duopolis,’ as a play on the term Decapolis – the network of ten Greco-Roman cities in the Syria, trans-Jordan, and the northeastern parts of Palestine (among which were Scythopolis, Gerasa, Philadelphia, and Damascus).27 These ten cities made up an administrative region at times, but were mostly linked by their common Hellenistic cultural affinity.28 Hence, in view of the cultural, economic and ethnic bonds between Sepphoris and Tiberias, such a unifying term may be useful in discussing the unique zone they constituted. As in the case of the Decapolis, this term emphasizes the cities’ entanglement rather than their existence as separate urban nodal points.

One of the unique aspects of this Duopolis in regard to its religious understanding is its rabbincic formulation as a spatial paradigm. The fact that the topography of this distinct area stretched between two urban locations seems to have made it a common topos of distance and proximity in rabbincic literature.29 In a discussion regarding the prohibition against writing during


28 T. Parker, “The Decapolis”, 129.
29 Miller, Sages and Commoners, 448 notes the important fact that the references to Sepphoris and Tiberias as halakhic and aggadic loci are preserved in the Babylonian Talmud more than in other traditions pertaining to the two cities. He correctly attributes this phenomenon to the para-
the Sabbath, for example, Rabbi 'Ami says: "If one wrote a single letter in Tiberias and another in Sepphoris [during the Sabbath], one is liable, since it is an act of writing, which lacks only being brought into proximity."30 Ami's view is that writing two letters, which are part of the same word, constitutes an act of writing even if the letters are physically distant from one another.31 His choice of Sepphoris and Tiberias as the locations of such two letters demonstrates the understanding of this dual urban area as a single yet broad spatial framework.32

The topos of the distance between Sepphoris and Tiberias appears also in aggadic contexts. For example, as part of a discussion in the Palestinian Talmud regarding the importance of dedicating oneself to the study of Torah every single hour of the day, Reish Lakish quotes Megillat Hasidim: "Should you abandon Me for one day, I will abandon you for [many] days."33 This verse is explained through a story about two individuals, one of whom left Sepphoris and the other Tiberias, who eventually met in Maskhana, located approximately halfway between these cities.34 The two finally take leave of one another, and Reish Lakish seems to understand them as being truly separate only when they are two miles apart, or when each of them has walked a single mile in opposite directions, showing that one does not have to travel far to distance himself from the divine. Hence, the area between Sepphoris and Tiberias, which is represented by the intercity road, is here a space through which to explain the relationship of a Torah scholar with the divine.35

Another religious dimension on which this double-centred area operates in rabbinic literature has to do with the sacred space of the Sabbath. In the Tosefta, Rabbi Shim'on b. Yohai discusses the notion of the Sabbath Boundary (tehum shabbat) of the two cities, saying: "I can make it possible for people to go up from Tiberias to Sepphoris and from Tyre to Sidon [during the Sabbath], on account of the caves and towers which are between those cities."36 Although Shim'on does not refer solely to Sepphoris and Tiberias, he is clearly concerned in this passage with the relationship between neighbouring cities in which there are significant Jewish communities. Shim'on claims that he can demonstrate how the towers and caves connecting Sepphoris and Tiberias extend their respective Sabbath boundaries so as to overlap and thus allow people to walk back and forth between the cities without violating the laws of the Sabbath. By imagining the area between Sepphoris and Tiberias as a semi-urban collection of architectural and topographical enclosures, this halakhic maneuver effectively merges the two cities within one single sacred boundary.37

It may be said, therefore, that, for rabbinic literature, the Duopolis of Sepphoris and Tiberias, with the intercity road as its main axis, operated as an arena for the political and legal negotiations of Jewish identity in Roman Palestine, as a distinct economic zone, as a literary and religious paradigm of spatial relations, and, finally, as a topographical embodiment of sacred time. Being residents of Sepphoris and Tiberias, the sages' initial concern was on the level of daily life; they attempted to account for and regulate this political and economic territory, whose bifurcated structure is nevertheless continuous and highly homogenous. On the level of religious thought and practice, the Duopolis provided the rabbis with a dialectical framework through which to think about work and travel on the Sabbath and about their relationships with God. It is against the multi-faceted background of this area that we can now examine its articulation as a locus of internal rabbinic competition, with its protagonists and antagonists.

A Tale of Two Cities and Their Jurisdiction

The Palestinian Talmud contains an illuminating account that explicitly confronts the problem of jurisdiction in the area of Sepphoris and Tiberias. This account explores a theoretical situation in which two litigants disagree on which of the two cities' rabbinic courts they should turn to in order to decide their case:

30 b. Šabb. 104b.
31 For writing on the Sabbath see, for example, m. Šabb. 12:3.
32 For other similar references in the Bavli to the distance between the two cities as part of halakhic discussion see b. Sanh. 31b; b. Sukkah 27a; b. Git. 77b.
33 y. Ber. 9, 14d.
34 Miller, "Intercity Relations in Roman Palestine", 19. n. 95, cites the work on the identification of this place. It is accepted today that Maskhana is identical with Khirbat Meskene, which is located between Sepphoris and Tiberias, slightly closer to the latter.
35 See also the rabbinic reference to the vineyard of the Emperor Hadrian, which was surrounded, according to the Palestinian Talmud, with the corpse of the Bar Kokhba revolt. y. Ta'an. 4, 69a. The Talmud describes this vineyard as equal in measure to the area between Sepphoris and Tiberias. Thus, its articulation as a paradigmatic distance, also serves to infuse this area with the religious meaning of martyrdom. For the mention of Hadrian on a Sephoran milestone standing on the road between Legio (where the Roman sixth legion was stationed) and Sephoris see Ne'eman, Sepphoris, 80.
36 t. 'Erub. 4:11.
37 The idea of merging the Shabbat boundaries of adjacent cities is discussed in rabbinic literature also in relation to other cities. See for instance y. 'Erub. 5, 22c–22d. And see the statement of Rabbi Yose, (who is traditionally associated with Sepphoris) from b. Šabb. 118b: "May it be my lot to be among those who welcome the Sabbath in Tiberias and among those who dismiss the Sabbath in Sepphoris."
Rabbi Eli’ezr [b. Pedat] said: “If one [litigant] says [that the case be decided in] Tiberias, and the other says [that it be decided in] Sephoris, they listen to the one who says Tiberias.”

Rabbi Ila [Ila] said: “And that which Rabbi Eli’ezr said ‘one says Tiberias and the other says Sephoris’ concerns those [litigants] who were sitting in Maskanah; from here [Maskanah] to there [Tiberias] is seven miles, from here [Maskanah] to there [Sephoris] is nine miles.”

Rabbi Yose said: “And you derive from it that if two people are involved in a case in Tiberias, and one says [that the case should be decided] in the lesser court [bet din ha-qatan], they listen to the one who says [that it should be decided] in the greater court [bet din ha-gadol].” (y. Sanh. 3, 21a)

The discussion of this disagreement about jurisdiction begins with a statement by Rabbi Eli’ezr, who appears to prefer the Tiberian court to its Sephorean counterpart. As noted by Miller, debates between cities regarding legal supremacy were common in the Roman world. Rabbi Ila’s response to Eli’ezr reveals dissatisfaction with his unexplained statement. For Ila, the Tiberian court is preferred not necessarily because of its inherent supremacy, but rather because the litigants who are debating the proper court to choose are supposedly located in Maskanah, which is apparently closer to Tiberias than to Sephoris (at least as Ila’s view is transmitted in the Leiden manuscript).

Jurisdiction according to Ila is, therefore, decided on the basis of geographical proximity and not judicial hierarchy. In offering his own interpretation of Eli’ezr’s statement, Yose explicitly turns to the notion of hierarchy. He derives from the former’s statement the principle that the higher court is to be preferred in cases when there is jurisdictional disagreement, even in the context of the same city. As a resident of Tiberias, he too seems to understand the Tiberian court as superior to the Sephorean one.

In his analysis of this sugya, Miller acknowledges a “Tiberian Tendenz”, but claims that it does not reveal a clear jurisdictional rivalry between Sephoris and Tiberias and that this debate “is purely of academic interest, with the two cities serving as loci.” I would like to suggest, however, that the concern with these particular cities is not merely theoretical. As I have argued above, the relationship between Sephoris and Tiberias is unique and their articulation as a literary, legal, and religious locus of an urban pair in not coincidental; it emerges out of an explicit attempt to account for and regulate the broader and somewhat ambiguous area they constitute. This sugya indicates a serious concern with jurisdictional boundaries in an area that cannot easily be divided. Ila points to the difficulty in determining the exact line where one urban territory ends and the other begins. The parallel that Yose draws between the courts of the two cities and the courts of a single city further implies that the Duopolis is perceived as belonging to the same urban framework. Hence, this discussion may be seen in the context of the Palestinian Talmud’s attempt to harmonise conflicting rabbinic claims for authority and establish the conditions under which law is decided in the complex spatial and administrative reality of Roman Palestine.

Hanina and Yohanan on the Road

In what follows, I would like to examine this tendency of the Yerushalmi in a set of stories pertaining to rabbinic travel in and between Sephoris and Tiberias. The two major players in the drama of the two cities, as it unfolds in this set of stories, are the early Palestinian amora’im Rabbi Hanina bar Hama and Rabbi Yohanan bar Napoli. The first amoraic generations of the third century CE, as they are described in the literature, enjoyed the growth and stability achieved by Rabbi Yehudah the Patriarch, whose circle of students and colleagues studying Torah in Sephoris would soon expand to other locations. As part of this process, Tiberias would gain the academic prominence that would make it, by the end of this century, the leading rabbinic centre in Galilee. Hanina, who, according to the Palestinian Talmud, became a prominent Sephorean authority after the death of Rabbi Yehudah the Patriarch, belonged to the generation of Yohanan’s teachers, which also included figures such as Rabbi Yannai. Yohanan himself would eventually become the principal rabbinic authority in Tiberias.

The stories involving Hanina and Yohanan, found throughout the Palestinian Talmud and a few Midrashim, are characterised by an engagement with questions of hierarchy, student-teacher relations, and academic status. Some traces of tension between Hanina and Yohanan are apparent in an account from the Palestinian Talmud regarding a rabbinic session in Sephoris:

Rabbi Hanina was living in Sephoris. Cases came before him and he made decisions twice. And Rabbi Yohanan and Rabbi Shim'on b. Lakish were living there, but he

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38 MS Leiden.
39 Miller, "Intercity Relations in Roman Palestine", 18 – 19.
40 Maskanah is most probably Khirbat Maskene, which is mentioned above in the story of the two who separated from one another for a day (y. Ber. 9, 14d). For the evaluation of the distance between Maskanah and the two cities, see Miller, "Intercity Relations in Roman Palestine", 19, n. 95.
41 Ibid., 20.
42 For Hanina’s conflict with his own teacher, Yehudah the Patriarch, see y. Ta`an. 4, 68a. For the Yerushalmi’s discussion of teacher-student relations in the context of jurisdiction see y. Sheb. 6, 36c. And see Miller, Sages and Commoners, 417.
43 y. Nid. 2, 50b. For the analysis of this passage see Miller, Sages and Commoners, 419 – 20; Hidary, Dispute for the Sake of Heaven, 147 – 8.
would still not invite them to join him [in ruling]. They said: “This elder is wise and his tools are sharp.” Once, he invited them to join him. They said: “Why did the master see fit to consider us today?” He said to them: “May [affliction] befall me, if it is not so that every single case I sent forth I have [already] heard from Rabbi [Yehudah the Patriarch] theoretically applied [as many times] as the [number of] hairs on my head, and in actual practice – three times. And this particular case came before Rabbi only twice. This is why I invited you to join me.” (y. Nid. 2, 50b)

Hanina appears to consistently exclude Yoḥanan and his associate Reish Lakish from participating in court sessions. The two consequently claim that he rarely consults with them on legal matters, commenting, perhaps sardonically, that he is still sharp in spite of his old age. When Hanina finally invites them to join him at court and is asked why he had not done so earlier, he claims that all cases he dealt with so far were based on at least three of his teacher Yehuda’s precedents, while this case was only based on two. The master, therefore, excludes his disciples from a position of authority as long as his own master’s traditions make him, in his view, self-sufficient.

A more explicit description of the conflict between Hanina and Yoḥanan is found in the Palestinian Talmud, where the former is described as instructing the Sepphorans in halakhic matters on the basis of Yehuda’s traditions.

Rabbi Hanina instructed the Sepphorans with regard to the [purchase of] after-growth of mustard [seeds in the Seventh Year] and the egg in accordance with [the view of] Rabbi Yehuda. Rabbi Yoḥanan entered and expounded to them in accordance with the sages [ke-rabbanan] here [in the case of the mustard seeds] and in accordance with the sages there [in the case of the egg].

Rabbi Abba bar Zamin [said] in the name of Rabbi Yoḥedek: “Because of these two things Rabbi Yoḥanan went down from Sepphoris to Tiberias.” He [Yoḥanan] said: “Why do you bring me this elder [i.e., Hanina]? For [what] I permit he prohibits, and [what] I prohibit he permits.” (y. Beḥah 1, 60a)

Hanina continues his adherence to the traditions of Yehudah when ruling for the Sepphorans. Yoḥanan, who later enters a place of gathering, perhaps a synagogue or bei midrash, expounds to the Sepphorans differently on the basis of the sages’ ruling. As we are told, this clash of halakhic views brings Yoḥanan to express his discontent with Hanina. The loyalty of Sepphoris’ residents to the teachings of his teacher clarifies to Yoḥanan that there is no room in town for both of them and he consequently leaves the city on the hill for the city by the sea. Competition could no longer be contained in a single urban centre, and the two opposing traditions now align with the two focal points of the Duopolis, whose continuous space, however, may not have allowed for a complete elimination of this conflict.

In addition to the accounts of Yoḥanan’s tension with Hanina and his angry move to Tiberias, which was arguably the turning point for the Tiberian academy wherein the Palestinian Talmud itself would later be edited, we find very different portrayals of the relations between the two sages. Tractate Horayot contains a story, which, although potentially imagined as taking place before the sages’ fall out, puts the two on more favourable grounds.

Rabbi Hanina was leaning upon Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba in Sepphoris. He saw all the people running. He said to him [Hanina to Hiyya]: “Why are all the people running?” He said to him: “Rabbi Yoḥanan is sitting and expounding in the Study House of Rabbi Benaiyah and all the people are running to hear him.” He said: “Blessed is the All-Merciful who showed me the fruits [of my labour] during my lifetime! And I taught him all matters of aggadah except for Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.” (y. Hor. 3, 38b)

Hanina is walking in the streets of Sepphoris, where he becomes aware of a great commotion. When he asks the colleague who supports him for the cause of the people’s excitement, he is told that the cause is Yoḥanan, who is expounding in the Sepphoran academy of Rabbi Benaiyah. Hanina blesses God for showing him the fruits of his labour and notes with appreciation all the things he has taught his successful student, Yoḥanan.

The positive, if hierarchical, bond between the two is reinforced by a mirror account in the Palestinian Talmud, told from the perspective of Yoḥanan on the main road of the Duopolis. Here, Yoḥanan is portrayed as traveling from his new place of residence, Tiberias, to Sepphoris, when he learns about a different kind of commotion in the city:

Rabbi Yoḥanan was going up from Tiberias to Sepphoris. He saw someone coming down from there. He said to him: “What is the news [lit. voice] in town?” He said to him: “A certain Rabbi has died and all the people are running to tend to him [i.e., his funeral].” Rabbi Yoḥanan knew that it was Rabbi Hanina. He sent and brought his best Sabbath clothes and tore them [as a sign of mourning].

But has it not been taught: an act of tearing that is not done at the moment of shock is not a valid act of tearing? Rabbi Yoḥanan wanted to do it because he had been his master and he honoured him. [However], we do not know whether [he did it] because he had been his master or because of the sad news.

[We know it from] the account of Rabbi Hiyya bar Aba in Sepphoris: He saw all the people running. He said to him: “Why are all the people running?” He said to him: “Rabbi Yoḥanan is sitting and expounding in the Study House of Rabbi Benaiyah and all the people are running to hear him.” He said: “Blessed is the All-Merciful who showed me the fruits [of my labour] during my lifetime! And I taught him all matters of aggadah except for Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.” (y. B. Meṣi’a 2, 8d)

44 See Miller, Sages and Commoners, 81–6, 266–71.

45 See below for the parallel in y. B. Meṣi’a 2, 8d. And see Miller, Sages and Commoners, 243–4.
When Yohanan hears that an important rabbi has died in the city towards which he is walking, Sepphoris, he realises that the dead rabbi is Ḥanina. Through the guise of halakhic inquiry, the Talmud discusses the sincerity of Yohanan’s mourning; however, it reaffirms the ties between the two sages by citing from y. Bava Meši’a 2, 8d, in which Ḥanina expresses his pride in Yohanan following the excitement generated by the latter’s expounding in Sepphoris.

Why then, would the Palestinian Talmud portray a harmonious picture of master and disciple in spite of their contentious history, which is evident throughout rabbinic literature? Why would it bring to an end Ḥanina’s famously long life in a scene on the road between Sepphoris and Tiberias, and through the eyes of Yohanan?

I would like to suggest that this harmonisation is an expression of the Palestinian Talmud’s tendency, described by Hidary, to harmonise the conflicting practices of competing rabbinic authorities in Palestine. As noted above, Hidary argues that the physical proximity of Palestinian rabbis, and the lack of clear administrative boundaries between the cities they inhabited, created conflict and competition and contributed to the Yerushalmi’s limited tolerance of halakhic autonomy for individual rabbis. In addition, Miller shows that the various competing traditions circulating in Palestine, such as the traditions of Ḥanina and Yohanan as they are transmitted by the Sepphoreans and Tiberians, are constantly negotiated in Palestinian sources.

Hence, what is at stake in the story of Ḥanina’s death is the ultimate resolution of the two sages’ agonistic relations and competing heritage. While Yohanan’s descent to Tiberias may have been seen as an alleviation of the tension, the two sages were perceived as operating within a continuous territory. Through the repetition of Ḥanina’s pride in Yohanan’s success and popularity, the Yerushalmi achieves a significant goal: the final re-grafting of Yohanan onto the tree of Ḥanina’s tradition. How fitting it is, therefore, that this moment occurs on the road between Sepphoris and Tiberias. Yohanan is reconciled with his teacher at the instance of his death, on his way back to where it all started, somewhere in the intermediary space between the two ends of the Duopolis they have shared. Yohanan’s position marks a spatio-temporal point of convergence between two cities, two traditions, and two rabbinic generations.

Conclusion

As I have shown, the area stretching between Sepphoris and Tiberias, with its urban and intercity roads, constituted a unique bifocal urban territory. This distinct space provided the framework through which the sages articulated and reflected on the dialectical tension between two ends of a rabbinic academic commonwealth. For the Palestinian Talmud in particular, this tension was a source of explicit concern, revealing the problem of negotiating competing traditions and regulating conflicting rabbinic claims for authority within a relatively small and spatially continuous area. The stories about the relations of Ḥanina and Yohanan added to this intra-rabbinic agonistic discourse the dimension of inter-generational struggle.

By way of concluding, I would like to propose that this inter-generational dimension positions the competition of the Sepphorean teacher Ḥanina and the Tiberian student Yohanan in the broader context of rabbinic historiography. Rabbinic literature often thinks of the Oral Torah’s chain of tradition in urban terms, describing for example, the move of the Sanhedrin from Jerusalem, to Yavneh, and then to Usha, Shefar’am, Beit She’arim, Sepphoris, and finally Tiberias. The stories of Ḥanina and Yohanan may be understood, therefore, as representing a similar process of transition between the two final stages in this rabbinic urban chain, placing the succession of Sepphoris by Tiberias quite literally on the path between the two cities.

46 Hidary, Dispute for the Sake of Heaven, 158.
47 Miller, Sages and Commoners, 78–84.
48 The Talmudic account I reviewed regarding the superiority of the Tiberian court is one example of the Yerushalmi’s ongoing concern with jurisdiction and authority in this area. y. Sanh. 3, 21a.
49 According to Lev. Rab. 30:1, Yohanan sold property between Sepphoris and Tiberias to fund his studies.