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Personal and Social Emotions in Rabbinic Literature

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Personal and Social Emotions in Rabbinic Literature: Methods and Approaches

Expert workshop in the University of Groningen 25-26 May 2018

Organized by Ronit Nikolsky

Report

The original mission statement ('event rationale')

The rationale behind the initiative is to upgrade the study of rabbinic literature to the evolving field of 'history of emotions'. This field of research can be perceived as part of the cognitive revolution in the humanities, but contrary to some directions such as cognitive linguistics or some forms of the cognitive study of religion, the history of emotions is very much culture focused, both by its data as well as by its results: the objects studied are cultural, such as texts or artifacts and not human brain, as in the cognitive studies; further, the result are always about cultures and not about the brain.

Emotions are part of human cognition both in modern neurology as well as in the field of culture-and-cognition. Within cognition they have a special status, being the bridge between cognitive abilities and the sphere of meaning: things are meaningful when they have an emotional impact and are subject to emotional engagement. Therefore, emotions are an important tool for culture change: they enable engagement with the new, especially if it is well connected to the familiar.

Rabbinic literature is an especially fertile ground for the study of cultural change, because on the one hand it is a locus of change and innovation, but on the other hand, it is traditional and dependent on an ancient text, the Bible. Adaptation of the biblical text to the rabbinic culture had to take place in, and engagement with an old (and not so familiar) text had to be established, in order for rabbinic culture to be a defined group with a glorious past.

In rabbinic literature we find emotionally based engagement created with the new culture, with halakha (for example in midrashim which are stressing the costliness of it, and its divine origin), with the Bible as a divine revelation, and with the protagonist of the biblical stories and their emotions as models of behaviour (for example when biblical character are said to act out of halakhic considerations).

We therefore seek to established the typification of emotions in rabbinic literature, by following how the rabbis suggest emotional connection with their emerging culture.

Technical information about the workshop

The workshop aimed at establishing the research of emotions in Rabbinic literature. Much research is conducted about emotions in other literatures and cultures of Late Antiquity, including emotions in the Bible, in Qumran and Hellenistic cultures and Hellenistic Jewish

culture. We were looking for methods to study emotions that fits the specifics of Jewish Rabbinic culture.

Participants were of various stages of their career, some very established scholars, such as Prof. Boyarin and Prof. Ilan, and early career scholars like Dr. Constanza Cordoni and Mrs. Orit Malka, the rest being in between.

The participants were free to choose their method of presentation, either studying of texts, or giving a frontal lecture of twenty minutes. In all cases discussion was active and productive, and in all presentations the question of methodology came to the fore very intensively.

Attendance

All advanced students in Jewish Studies were invited to attend the lectures, some of them attended some of the presentation. The PhD candidates of the project “Parables and the Partings of the Ways” in the University of Utrecht were also invited, and their travel costs were covered; three of them attended one day of the workshop. The PhD candidate from Berlin, Judith von Bersinsky expressed interest and was invited as well.

Keynote Lecture

Prof. Daniel Boyarin gave a keynote lecture titled “The Power of a Tear: The Feelings of ‘Others’”; he was introduced by Prof. Tal Ilan. The lecture took place in a beautiful hall in the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, which was full, and the lecture was also streamed live. The hall has 45 seats, and the stream video was watched by 79 viewers. Prof.

Daniel Boyarin was introduced by Prof. Tal Ilan.

Here is a link to the video recording of Prof. Boyarin’s keynote lecture:
<https://www.facebook.com/ronit.nikolsky/videos/10155878451548978/>

2) A discussion of the sections and papers, including a reflection on the Q&A's. Please do include names and, if possible, affiliation of contributors. This is the heart of the report, and should include a reflection on all papers and discussions in each section of the event.

Some presentations focused on what we consider as bodily expression of emotions such as laughing or tears (Ottenheim, Kiperwasser, ; some on ‘basic emotions’ such as anger (Teugels. Some presentations (Teugels, Ottenheim) talked about the differentiation in emotionality between God and people, where God was ‘allowed’ to have his emotions, while people were expected to withhold them.

In spite of the ‘cognitive nature’ of the mission statement, most of the presentations did not pursue a cognitive approach, but more a ‘history of emotions’ approach, a cultural studies or anthropological approach (Ottenheim and the keynote lecture of Boyarin), gender studies (Ilan, Malka), and only Biro and Nikolsky presented cognitive approaches (a linguistic and a culture and cognition approaches respectively).

But methodology was not the most challenging aspect in the study of rabbinic emotions; more complicated was the nature of the material itself. Rabbinic culture does not have elaborated discussions on what emotions are, as Greek culture does, and no listing of emotions or systematic assessment of them. On the other hand, this literature is full of emotions both as part of halakhah, emotions of the rabbis themselves, and emotion of midrashic narratives. But these emotions were not always allocated a word, and when they were, the word was not always clear (such as 'halash daat' discussed in the keynote lecture); further, even when the word was obviously an emotion-word, it was not clear what the emotion behind it was, and what the rabbis meant in their narrative. It was therefore challenging to even identify what an emotion in rabbinic culture was. Both Boyarin in the keynote lecture as well as Nikolsky in her theoretical lecture stressed the need to do away with assuming that our emotions, or any 'universal' emotions are to be searched in the text. The scholar studying emotions in rabbinic literature should be attentive to what the rabbis present as emotions, and should be careful not to reduce these emotions to our emotional lexicon, or as Boyarin put it, our emotional palette. This failure, in a way, marked the task ahead: to study rabbinic emotions without resorting to our presuppositions, and to find the rabbinic palette of emotions as they portray it.

About half of the participant expressed the will to pursue this time of work. We have established a steering committee (Ronit Nikolsky, Elisabetta Abate, Tamas Biro and Constanza Cordoni) which will organize a following workshop which will use what we have learned in the current one to further study more systematically; the papers of this second workshop is intended to appear in a publication.

3) A summary of the papers

Summaries of the presentations (the keynote lecture is at the end)

Eric Ottenheim (Utrecht University), Anger and Laughter in Parables; or: why certain emotions simply do not fit a Rabbinic Genre

Using the example of a parable in ExR, Eric Ottenheim addressed the issues of anger and of laughing in rabbinic literature, and latter having both a sexual and a non-sexual meaning. In this parable the daughter of the king is *laughing* with the eunuch, and the king is angry with her. When asked by an anonymous voice why he was angry, since after all what harm can a eunuch cause.

The king answered that he was angry because the daughter accustoms herself to a lowly behaviour of frivolity and immorality. The angry was not because she transgresses the biblical commandments, but the because she transgressed the rabbinic ones. We can see that when what is quoted is rabbinic moral instruction from Pirke Avot. The king's voice is, then, that of the rabbinic hegemony, and the anonymous one is the voice which challenges

rabbinic hegemony.

Through this and other examples, Ottenheim showed that in rabbinic literature Laughing was a social emotion legitimate for god, legitimate within the realm of torah, legitimate for rabbinic heros, only in their finest hour. Outside of these domains laughter only causes trouble. The rabbis encoded laughter with association with idolatry to fit an emotional regime of self constraint and seriousness. The discussion focused on the nature of the sources (*Exodus Rabba* and *Pirke Avot*), and on the theorizing 'emotional regime'; Ottenheim explained that he uses the concept in a notion similar to habitus of Bourdieu.

Lieve Teugels (Protestantse Theologische Universiteit), God's Anger in Tannaitic Meshalim

Lieve Teugels (Protestantse Theologische Universiteit) presented two parables about Moses from the Mekhilta of Rabbi Shimon bar-Yochai which talk about emotions both in the midrash as well as in the parables about it, the one - the interaction of God and Moses at the Burning Bush, and the other - Moses' intervention on behalf of the Israelites, an intervention which is rejected by God. The discussion, which was navigated by Teugels' questions, led to the recognition that the one having the emotions is God. This is similar to what Ottenheim (Utrecht University) concluded about his material. In the first parable the emotions presented are God's toward Moses, turning from positive (love) to negative (anger), to the extent that the punishment Moses suffers, of not being allowed to enter the land, is said to result from the interaction in the Bush. In the second parable Moses' intervention is doomed unnecessary, because the King's (i.e. God's) anger with his son (Israel) has already subsided.

Reuven Kiperwasser (Freie Universität Berlin), Laughter and Tears: Representations of the Mocked Body in Rabbinic Narrative

Reuven Kiperwasser presentation sought to understand the meaning of two laughing incidents in rabbinic literature, both relating to the man's hybrid body. As is known from the literature, laughter could be a manifestation of a variety of emotions. Kiperwasser is looking into laughter situations in rabbinic literature. Two narratives were studied. The first is GenR (30:8, 275) about Mordechai suckling Esther himself when he could not find a wet nurse. This deep and theological thought, the result of the beit-midrashic consideration, met with laughter when presented to the common public. Laughter, says Kiperwasser, shakes the system. It is like a flash of light, after which, while things are still the same, new knowledge arrives and the things are perceived differently.

The intellectual rabbi realized that the deep thought would be ridiculed. In the Bavli parallel (bShab 43b), the hybrid body is presented only in the rabbinic context and not to the common crowd, and causes no laughter, only a theological debate. There is a difference in emotionality between the Palestinian and the Babylonian cultures. The second example (bSan 38a) is about talks at the creation of the first man from dust of all parts of the earth. The body from Babylonia, the head from the Land of Israel, the buttocks - from Akra de Agama (a small city not far from Pumbedita). Behind this text there is a hierarchical view about the structure of the human body, and of various lands. The fact that this hierarchy is amusing is recognized only when it comes to the buttocks. Palestinian midrash has parallels (*Tanhuma* Piqudei 3, *GenR* 17:6, 157) where no laughter is involved.

The discussion brought up methodological issues - if one has certain assumptions about laughter before starting the analysis, this understanding can be skewed (Abate, Nikolsky).

The theme of breasted men is known about Late Antique Christian saints (Boyarin).

Tal Ilan, "Murderous Fathers; Mourning Mothers: something about rabbinic emotion gender stereotyping"

Tal Ilan presented a story from the tractate Hulin (bHul 94a) which tells about a man who gave his last three eggs to three guests who visited him in a period of drought. They gave the eggs to the householder's son. When the householder saw his son with the eggs, he killed him. Upon seeing this, the mother killed herself by jumping off the roof. Upon seeing this, the husband killed himself as well.

Ilan showed that in talmudic literature men are quite often merciless toward their sons, unable, at times, to even mourn them when they die. Women, on the other hand, are often crying, and at times end up dying because of their excessive crying. Our story combines these two motives into one story. This is the only case where such a combination happens.

In all cases, these excessive emotions are presented as very negative.

Orit Malka, "Fear, Temptation, and Tannaitic Law of Disqualified Witnesses"

Orit Malka studied the halakhic rule regarding people who are ineligible to give testimony in the courtroom. While the ruling regarding deaf-mute, an imbecile, or a minor are disqualified because of their inability to deliver the testimony, for other categories of people this is less clear, such as the dice player, the usurer, pigeon flyers and traders in Seventh Year produce (*mSan* 3:3, and others are added in other texts).

The Stoic philosophy sees emotions a dangerous power which inhibits free action; it therefore require overcoming emotions in order to achieve self control.

Malka asked, to what extent were the rabbis influenced by this philosophy with regard to emotions? She studies how the ideal of self control is found in rabbinic halakhah by looking into the testcase of ineligibility for testimony. She suggested that the ethics of self control is at the root of the halakhah in the Tosefta (*tKet* 3:3) which states that women and minors are suspected suspected of being seduced or threatened to give false testimony, and therefore cannot do so in court.

Learning from the case of women, and from the writings of Plutarch (*De Audiendis Poetis*), Malka suggested that the cases added to the list of ineligible is based the ideal of controlled emotions. Regardless of what the emotions were, the ability to control them became an ideal in rabbinic culture as well.

Elisabetta Abate, "A Weeping Rabbi, a Weeping King: How to Read the Representations of (Perhaps) Affective Phenomena in the Mishnah?"

Elisabetta Abate pointed to the lack of an encompassing category for emotional and affective phenomena in Rabbinic Literature, and of a widespread agreement on their nature and features in both the Humanities and the Neurosciences. Hence the epistemic problem:

how to define "Rabbinic emotions"? How to construct our object of study? She then proposed a reading of *mYad* 4:3 (and the partial parallel *tYad* 2:15-16), featuring a weeping Rabbi Eliezer, as a case-study useful to identify relevant research questions regarding emotions mentioned or represented in narrative texts in the Mishnah:

1) if weeping is a feature diagnostic of emotion, is it possible to determine which emotion the text implies?

2) Which rhetoric function does the reference to emotion have in the narrative on the textual level?

3) Which functions does it have towards the intended audience (on the extratextual level)? Is it meant, for example, to convey a teaching about proper emotional behaviour, or about accepted/acceptable vs. rejected emotions (with B.H. Rosenwein's notion of "emotional community" in mind)?

Among other things, the discussion revolved around the specific emotion expressed by R. Eliezer's weeping, with interpretations ranging from sadness, to frustration or anger, to joy - which emphasizes the need to refine our methodological tools and questions.

Constanza Cordoni (University of Utrecht), "Individual and Collective Emotions in

Midrashim on Esther”

Constanza Cordoni chose to have a text-study session, where she introduced a midrash from Esther Rabbah (5-11 cent). The text talks about a (diasporic) rabbinic tradition which says that every time the word *vayehi* appears in the biblical text, it is associated with trouble (*tsara*); one rabbi, Shmuel, renders that every time the word *vehaya* appears, it is associated with happiness (*simha*). A third passage from EsthR talks about the word *tithalhel* (Est. 4:4), being explained in the Bavli as relating to Esther’s menstruation, and in Palestinian sources as her having a miscarriage.

With regard to these passages, Constanza raised the following questions about emotionality:

How can we identify an emotional word in Rabbinic Literature? Is the word *tsara* (1) and emotional word?

Can we recognize a difference in emotion words between the various rabbinic (2) corpora?

Many of the rabbinic narratives are of collective nature, do such texts help us in any (3) way to learn about rabbinic emotionality?

With regard to the word *tithalhel*, the last question asked about hapax legomena: (4) what do we do with a word that might carry emotional semantics but only appear once in the text.

Some discussion arose about these questions. **Abate** pointed out that the passage also talks about the word *vayehi*, in which the onomatopoeic component is very strong, so we can also ask about ‘emotional sounds’, not only words. Further, the word happiness (*simha*) was introduced, and **Abate** suggested that it is difficult to differentiate between an event and an emotion with regard to this word. **Kiperwasser** made the connection between *tithalhel* and the verse from Isaiah 21:3 where the root *hlhl* is associated with birth-pains. **Ottenheim** suggested that the question is not about the emotion words in the text, but the impact on the listener or reader.

Tamás Biró, “Whoever Did not See the Rejoicing of the House of Drawing Never Saw Rejoicing in His Life’ (*mSukkah* 5:1): The Role of High-Arousal Memories in Post-Destruction Judaism”

Tamas Biro’s presentation was more theoretical than all previous ones. He was relying on theories and methodologies developed in the Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR) and especially on McCauley and Lawson’s ritual theory, which incorporates emotions, as described by Damasio, in their analysis of ritual, but also on Harvey Whitehouse’s ‘modes of religiosity’ and Fieldwork by Dimitris Xygalatas on high arousal rituals. McCauley and Lawson argue for rituals to fall into two categories: low emotion (high frequency) and high emotions (and low frequency), which call for a culturally postulated Super Agent (such as God). Religion as a dynamic, complex system needs both types.

But Judaism does not have rituals involving God, so how does it keep its stability?

Daniel Boyarin (keynote lecture). If That's not Love, What is it? An unknown Emotion in the Talmud

Prof. Boyarin introduced a new title for his lecture: "If That's not Love, What is it? An unknown Emotion in the Talmud"

The text which was the focus of the lecture was from the Babylonian Talmud, bKet 62b:

"Rav Rahumei would frequent Rava, his teacher, in the count of Mahoza.

He was accustomed to come home every Yom Kippur eve. One day the passage of the , *meshachte shmata*). His wife was awaiting, משכתייה שמעתא Talmud, the *sugiya*, drew him in ('now he is coming! Now he is coming!' she thought. He did not come. She became upset , *ahit*) from her eye. At that moment, rav אהית , *hechlish daatah*), she let a tear fall (החליש דעתה) Rahumi was sitting on a roof. The roof collapsed (*ifhit*) underneath him and he fell to his death"

Earlier commentators and scholars understood this story as telling how heartless rav Rahumi was, and that his death was a punishment for abandoning his wife. This type of interpretation, according to Boyarin, is seeing the story with our emotional lexicon, not being attentive to the text.

Emotions are not hard wired into us, and we should therefore not make assumption about the emotions of the people in the past.

The two emotions found in the story have no match in our palette of emotions: what is (*hechlish daatah*, החליש דעתה, (*meshachte shmata*), and what is משכתייה שמעתא from משכתייה literally in the talmud 'her mind became weak', or 'sick')?

The latter, in the Talmud, seems to cover both our 'Depressed' as 'angry', the territory of both depressed and angry, **without any distinction** (and there is no English terms that covers this concept).

The affection of the sage, the husband, are more challenging, since we do not know what happens in his heart, mind, or spirit, as he continues his engagement with the study of Torah and does not go home.

So how do we go about the translation of the emotions of the talmudic culture? Agreeing with Seth Swartz in general, that "our modern western language are necessarily inadequate to describe the reality a radically different culture", and therefore we should 'translate' that different culture, Boyarin argues that even our concept of translation should be revised. Rather than trying to translate into our language, we must seek constantly to learn THEIR language, and find the words, as many as it takes in our language, to describe what we have learned.

Beyond Walter Benjamin, Talal Asad and Jonathan Z. Smith, Boyarin is taking the anthropological way, not as ethnographer, but as seeking to understanding humans in all of their doing. Not the artefact is studied, but the evidence it give about the human collectives.

Following Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, a brazilian anthropologist, Boyarin argues that the problems themselves might be radically different in other cultures, and the anthropologist may not know in advance what these problems might be.

The Talmudic culture is a foreign culture for us, we should not ask the questions which are important in OUR culture, but search for what the questions are in THAT culture.

So what are we talking about when we are talking about Torah?

Remember that the narrative does not predicate rav Rahumi that he chose not to go back to Anonyma, but that he was swept away . This is incomparable with anything we have imagined in our own beliefs.

Boyarin argues that in the Talmud, studying torah IS sex. Not like sex, but sex itself. And it's not sublimation, but a de-sublimation. Of course a different word is needed for it, and the object of this emotion is different in the studying of Torah and sex.

When recognizing this, other instances in the Talmud become clearer too, such as the aphorism "anyone who is greater in the study of torah will have a stronger desire for sex as well" (bSuk 52a). These are not antithetical Emotions for the rabbis, but the same one, but to be sure for different objects. We also recognize that rav Rahumi's name (which roughly translates as love, but it also incorporates the sense of mercy and acceptance, and more) is not to be understood ironically, as scholars suggested.

The connection between the story of rav Rahumi and that of rabbi Yochanan and Resh (*halash daat*), the emotions of דעת חלש Lakish (bBM 81a) is through the expression depression and anger. In our story this is the emotion of the wife, which causes the death of her husband. In the story in *Bava Metzia* it is the emotion of rabbi Yochanan, which causes the death of Resh Lakish. And again here, the emotion regarding the loss is not empathy with the widow, but the loss of the study setup. Again, the emotion missing in our lexicon of emotions.

Boyarin concluded with referring again to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, and the recognition that a foreign society, and rabbinic culture is a foreign culture for us, does not solve the same problems as us, even the problems are an object of our learning.

The keynote lecture made very clear that studying emotions in the rabbinic culture cannot simply follow the use of emotional words. An attentive study of the Talmud reveals a different emotionality than our; we hardly recognize Talmudic emotion-words when we encounter them, let alone understand the emotion behind these words. This keynote lecture thus crystallized what other presentations partially pointed out as well, the discourse about rabbinic emotions should be free from assumption about emotionality that we have in our culture, should not cling to what we think are emotional words, but rather take the time to attend to what the rabbis see as emotions, and take the time to describe these emotions in as many words as needed in our language. This was taken as a starting point for the next stage of the study of rabbinic emotions.

4) A statement about planned outcomes

(projects, future workshops, cooperations) and outputs (publications).

We have established a steering committee (Ronit Nikolsky, Elisabetta Abate, Tamas Biro and Constanza Cordoni) which will organize a following workshop that will use what we have learned in the current one to further study rabbinic emotions; the papers of this second workshop is intended to appear in a publication. About half of the participant expressed the will to pursue this time of work, and Prof. Boyarin kindly offered to oversee the workshop.

5) The actual programme of the event, including changes which may have become necessary

Attached you will find a booklet of the workshop, which includes the program, handouts of the presentations, and information about adjacent events (dinner, lunches, keynote lecture). There were no major changes.

Events other than the papers read

Dinner

All scholars of Jewish Studies in Groningen were invited to the dinner, including the various chairs, and some advanced students. 16 people attended in the dinner, (beside participants of the workshop, the following scholars were there: Prof. Steve Mason, Prof. Wout van Bekkum, Prof. Jacques van Ruiten, Dr. Jason M. Zurawski, ms. Judith von Bresinsky, and Christine van der Veer.

Profs. Mladen Popovic, George Brooke and Annette Merz were also invited but were unable to attend because of previous engagements.

Breakfast with Prof. van Heusden

Prof. Barend van Heusden was the institutional host of the workshop, but he had previous engagements outside the city and could not attend the meetings. We, therefore, organized a breakfast-meeting between him and Prof. Daniel Boyarin on Thursday morning (25.5.2018); Prof. Tal Ilan, Dr. Reuven Kiperwasser and Dr. Ronit Nikolsky also attended.