

КУЛЬТУРА И ПИСЬМЕННОСТЬ

DOI: 10.31857/S086919080018371-5

CONTRADICTIONS BETWEEN FAITH AND REALITY
IN THE RABBINIC LITERATURE

© 2022

Rina V. LAPIDUS ^a^a – Faculty of Humanities, Bar-Ilan University, Tel-Aviv, Israel

ORCID: 0000-0002-0213-7225; rlapidus2011@gmail.com

Abstract: *In the following study, I examine the attitude of the Rabbis to reality on the basis of the parables told in the Rabbinic literature. I would like to answer the following question: how did the Rabbis react to attempts by gentiles to introduce substantial changes to the basic spiritual principles in Judaism in wake of the Destruction of the Second Temple? The paper reveals that the Rabbis ignored reality in order to preserve the fundamental concepts in of Judaism and rejected any attempt to introduce changes therein in light of changes in actual reality. They accepted positively only those ideas that strengthened the traditional principles of Judaism.*

Thus, when pagan sages called the Rabbis' attention to aspects of reality that contradicted their traditional approach, the Rabbis ignored the pagans' provocative questions. The Rabbis rebuked any attempts by gentiles to engage them in a dispute intended to prove that the Jewish God is wrong or has decided to forego His covenant with the Jewish people. However, when the Rabbis they feel that the pagans are truly asking how to fulfill Judaism in the best possible way, the Rabbis respond to them gladly, with focused and substantive answers.

The Rabbis are unwilling to forego Judaism under any circumstances, even in wake of the catastrophe which befell the people of Israel upon the Destruction of the Second Temple which was the most terrible catastrophe in the Jewish history in that period.

Keywords: Destruction of the Second Temple, faith, God, Rabbis.

For citation: Lapidus R. Contradictions between Faith and Reality in the Rabbinic Literature. *Vostok (Oriens)*. 2022. No. 1. Pp. 206–216. DOI: 10.31857/S086919080018371-5

“Know what to answer a heretic” *Mishna, Avot* 1.14

INTRODUCTION

In the following study, I shall examine, on the basis of the parables told in the Rabbinic literature, how Judaism responded to the transformations that occurred in wake of the Destruction of the Second Temple, and how it related to attempts to introduce substantial changes to its basic principles. This paper reveals that Judaism of the Rabbinic period ignored reality in order to preserve its foundation and related in a hostile and rejecting way to any attempt to introduce changes therein in light of changes in actual reality. Moreover, even in light of changing reality, Judaism accepted positively only those ideas that strengthen its own ancient, traditional principles.

This article is concerned with analyzing the following phenomenon in the Talmudical literature: the Rabbis frequently use linguistic devices and rhetorical techniques for creation

of an illusory solution of theological problems that have no solution in reality. That is how the Rabbis distance themselves from theological issues that have no solution. This phenomenon was especially pronounced after the destruction of the Second Temple, when the historical reality of the destruction of Judaism in the Land of Israel raised insoluble theological questions.

To illustrate this phenomenon, I present a few selected episodes in this article. These episodes describe how the Rabbis in the Talmud converse with great Roman politicians and philosophers and conduct theological discussions with them on Jewish issues. Obviously, in the historical reality of that period, these dialogues and discussions are unlikely to have taken place. Here, the Roman politicians and philosophers are only imaginary figures who allow the Rabbis of the Talmud to express their views and opinions with the use of various rhetorical devices. In such a case, the Roman politicians and philosophers play the role of “friends” of the protagonist in works of literature, existing only in order to allow him to voice his opinions.

The article deals exclusively with the study of rhetoric in the language of the Rabbis of the Talmud. It is not concerned with the study of the historical reality of that period or the cultural context of these theological dialogues and discussions. Nor is it concerned with the cultural background of the Roman politicians and philosophers, or with any issues except the linguistic devices and rhetorical techniques of the Rabbis of the Talmud.

HOW TO INTERPRET REALITY, ESPECIALLY AFTER THE DESTRUCTION OF THE TEMPLE

Contradictions between reality and the fundamentals of religion are part of every belief system. In the case of Rabbinic Judaism, contradictions between reality and the Sages’ worldview were exacerbated in wake of the Destruction of the Temple. On the one hand, whatever happened in reality was understood as a manifestation of God’s will; on the other hand, such an interpretation was itself problematic, implying that God had seemingly violated His covenant with the Jewish people.

Moreover, the identity of the terrible sin in punishment for which the Temple was destroyed was not entirely clear. Unlike the case of the First Temple, whose destruction befell the people of Israel as a result of the sin of idolatry, it was not at all clear why the Second Temple was destroyed. The sin of groundless hatred, which the Sages offered in explanation of that disaster, was not as serious a sin as idolatry; indeed, it was not even enumerated among the Ten Commandments. In light of all these factors, the Rabbis found the post-Destruction reality to be incomprehensible.

DIFFERENT PRINCIPLES OF FAITH AND THEIR RELATION TO REALITY IN THE STUDY OF RELIGIONS

The study of religion enumerates differing kinds of faith, based upon different underlying sources of knowledge:

Rational faith: i.e., religious faith based upon evidence from reality. This faith is based upon the idea that the existence of the universe implies some sort of rational planning. Reality undergoes various changes and transformations, which require some ultimate cause [Geisler, Corduan, 1988, p. 79ff]. Rational faith of this kind can exist as long as there is no evidence from reality to contravene this belief [Swinburne, 1983, p. 33–34]. Most of the pagans mentioned in the Rabbinic legends adhered to such a kind of faith; hence, as the situation of reality changed, they were prepared to abandon their own earlier belief.

Faith based upon human understanding. Considering that man is an rational being, there must be some even more intelligent being that imbued part of his own wisdom and comprehension

upon human beings. The very presence within human consciousness of the idea that a God must exist; that there is a supreme, perfect being possessing all those qualities that are generally attributed to God; in itself implies that it must have some sort of basis. Otherwise, it would be unable to exist [Geisler, Weinfried, 1988, p. 780ff]. This line of reasoning, known in philosophy as the ontological argument, was widespread during the Middle Ages – that is, much later than the period of classical Rabbinic literature.

Faith based upon personal mystical experience. Such faith is based upon the personal, subjective experiential world of the believer. Its source lies in such things as personal epiphanies experienced as being from God, subjective moods and states of mind, hypnosis, etc. This is the faith of the individual who portrays for himself his own personal image of the Divine [Swinburne, 1983, p. 34 ff]. Such faith is essentially voluntary and does not require any proof or, to be more precise, one who believes in it is prone to interpret various phenomena in reality as proof of its validity [Swinburne, 1999, p. 373–376; Marty, 1964, p. 209]. This approach is individualistic and includes mysticism by its nature. However, elements of mysticism also exist within the framework of institutional religions, and each religion tends to have its own specific patterns and forms of mysticism.

Faith based upon tradition. This refers to a faith based upon the inherited traditions and the authority of the founders of the religion – that is a fixed body of knowledge and practice passed down from generation to generation without change. Such a faith is based upon a hierarchical system of teaching that claims objectivity, omniscience, the possibility of providing its believers with happiness, justice, eternal life, etc. [Cupitt, 1999, p. 302–303]. Judaism is generally considered as belonging to this category of faith.

Alongside these principles of faith, one should also note the atheistic approach, whose underlying assumption is the rejection of belief in the existence of deities. Atheism is denial of beliefs in God. As such, it is usually distinguished from theism, which affirms the reality of at least one deity and often seeks to demonstrate its existence. Rationales for not believing in any deity include the problem of evil, the argument from inconsistent revelations, other arguments for atheism range from the philosophical to the social to the historical.

Atheism also claims that man can also believe in faiths or doctrines that are not true. The various religions that have been believed in over the course of generations are so diverse and their beliefs, illusions, dreams, prophecies, and their revelations are so numerous that it is impossible for all of them to be true. Atheism is also distinguished from agnosticism, which leaves open the question whether there is a god or not, professing to find the question unanswerable [Schumaker, 1995, p. 18–19; *The Social Construction of Reality*, 1966, p. 65; Flew, 1976, p. 14 ff.; *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, 2007, p. 56].

Moreover, the design of the world is not perfect, and therefore must have been created by a factor or being who is likewise imperfect. Suggesting that there were mistakes in the design of the universe means that its designer may be inferior to his own creation¹. If the existence of the world implies a planner, than that planner must in turn have had a planner of his own – and so on in an infinite regression; if everything has a cause, then there cannot have been a first cause [Geisler, Corduan, 1988, p. 105–107].

¹ Compare to the Jewish legend about the *Golem* who rose against its creator. In Jewish folklore, a *golem* is an animated anthropomorphic being, created from mud. *Golem* was a creation of those who were very holy and close to God. A very holy person was one who strove to approach God, and in that pursuit would gain some of God's powers. One of these powers was the creation of life. The most famous *golem* narrative involves the 16th century chief rabbi of Prague, also known as the Maharal. Under the rule of Rudolf II, the Jews in Prague were to be either expelled or killed. To protect the Jewish community, the rabbi constructed the Golem, and brought it to life through Jewish rituals. As this Golem grew, it became increasingly violent. The Golem eventually turned on its creator. The Rabbi deactivated the Golem. See: [Idel, 1990; Weiner, 2011, p. 50–72].

How is Divine Providence expressed in the world?

In cultures based upon either a Judaeo-Christian approach or a Hindo-Buddhist one, we may identify five ways of arriving at faith [Swinburne, 1979, p. 249–252; Peterson et al., 1999, p. 14–18]. These are: Divine revelation through an omnipotent God by means of a natural agent of revelation, which can be confirmed by means of the senses. Also, revelation of the omnipotent God by means of an agent of revelation that may be felt through senses but is not natural, realistic, or objective, such as by means of a miracle. Another revelation is of the omnipotent God by means of a subjective factor which may be felt and described by means of regular language, such as revelation to prophets. One more revelation is of the omnipotent God by a specific factor, not by means of regular language, but through intuitive, trans-sensual means. And the last revelation is of the omnipotent God by means of a specific agent that is impossible to feel and cannot be described by means of regular language, such as revelation of God in a state of hypnosis.

What are the relations between God and man? Every faith or religion has a different answer.

One view holds that God is complete unto Himself and does not need anything, not even the creation as such. God has no relationship to the creation; he does not listen to his creatures or to their sufferings. Another approach holds the opposite: that the Creator God brought into existence something that did not exist previously. His creatures love Him because He loved them initially. God is responsive to the world, he listens to the prayers of his creatures, and rewards them in accordance with their good and bad deeds.

These two approaches are mutually exclusive, for if God is perfect and complete unto Himself, why should He love his creatures? If God is apathetic to the suffering of his creatures, why should he relate to the wicked or the righteous in accordance with their actions [Smith, 1965, p. 61 ff.]?

In addition to these two approaches, there is also the biblical approach, as the image of God emerges from the Bible. God is close to man and man relates to Him as a human being. Though God is superior to man, man is able to influence God, His acts and opinions. Close personal relationships exist between a man and God, but there is also uncertainty in this relationship, as God can command, while man can choose either to obey or not. God threatens, and man may either be overwhelmed or ignore it. God can change his nature: the merciful God may be revealed as angry, and the loving God may act in a vengeful way – or vice versa [Thillich, 1955, p. 29 ff.].

The range of possibilities involved in principles of faith as well as the relationship between God and man manifest the gaps between those who adhere to different types of faith, as a result of which mutual understanding is often impossible.

LANGUAGE AND REALITY IN THE RABBINICAL LITERATURE

One of the distinguishing signs of any society is a well-ordered social structure based upon linguistic communication [Wilken, 1983, p. 96 ff.; Charlesworth, 1972, p. 148 ff.]. It is by means of language that we come to know the world; we rely on language to present us with a trustworthy picture of reality.

On occasion, language may alter one's understanding of reality. When our eyes see a given reality, language may interpret it or explain a given phenomenon one way or another – all in accordance with the wishes and persuasive power of the speaker. Indeed, there are cases in which we believe in language more than we do in our own senses. For example, when some negative event befalls a person, language can interpret it as a trial or test. That is, in a situation of contradiction between reality as we perceive it and the explanation given it by language, the person often tends to believe in language and to ignore what is observed by his own eyes.

Language, with all its rhetorical techniques, can serve as a tool for convincing listeners to believe a given argument or accept a certain interpretation of a problematic reality. By means

of rhetoric, the speaker may alter the opinion of his listeners when reality is, on the face of it, inconsistent with his wishes. Thus, for example, the Jerusalem Talmud (*Tractate Ta'anit* 3.4) offers:

“Rabbi Eliezer made a fast day and the rain did not fall. Rabbi Akiva fasted and the rain fell. He [R. Akiva] went up and said before him: I will tell you a parable to what this may be compared. It is like a king who had two daughters: one was arrogant and one was proper. When the arrogant one wanted something, she came before him and he said: I will give you what you want – and she went away. When the one who was proper came before him, he would delay matters, because it was pleasing to him to hear her imprecations” [*Jerusalem Talmud*, 1966].

Rabbi Akiva used this parable because he felt uncomfortable that his own prayers for rain were answered while those of his master, Rabbi Eliezer, had been rejected. The parable helped free him of his difficulty; by its means, Rabbi Akiva explained that, not only was the situation not as it appeared on the surface, but it was in fact the exact opposite of what one might think. The persuasive power of this parable relies upon rhetorical means, such as allegory, paradox, and dramatization. At times rhetorical language may also make use of additional techniques, such as analogy, metaphor, metonymy, or of tools such as formal logic, all of which serve to add to its persuasive power. Figurative language of this type speaks in “half-truths,” thereby creating the impression desired by the speaker².

RHETORICAL LANGUAGE AS A TOOL USED BY THE SAGES IN POLEMICS WITH THE NON-JEWS³

Rabbinic literature contains a considerable number of polemics initiated by non-Jews with the aim of proving to the Sages that Judaism is incorrect and that they should cease believing in it. When pagans and heretics challenged the Sages by invoking the harsh events that followed the Destruction of the Temple, the Sages did not have any clear-cut answers and hence resorted to rhetorical language, which often consisted of empty words intended to dull the power of their opponents' arguments. Given that matters of faith were of supreme value, transcending any possible challenge, the Sages did not relate to the arguments of the pagans in a serious manner.

In a discussion found in the Babylonian Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 90a), Rabbi Abahu quotes the words of Rabbi Johanan that concretize this approach: “In all matters, if a prophet says to you, ‘Violate the words of Torah,’ you should listen to him, apart from idolatry where, even if he makes the sun stand still in the middle of the sky, do not hearken to him” [*Babylonian Talmud*, 1968].

Confrontations with Gentiles regarding matters of faith were seen by the Sages as a rhetorical and social matter. Thus, in tractate *b. Berakhot* 61b, we find the famous debate between Rabbi Akiva and Pappus ben Yehudah involving the parable of the fox and the fish:

“Once the wicked kingdom made an edict that Israel should not engage in Torah. Pappus ben Yehudah came and found Rabbi Akiva gathering groups of people and engaging in Torah. He said to him: Akiva, are you not afraid of the government? He said to him: I will say a parable to what this is comparable. It is like a fox who was walking on the bank of the river, and he saw the fish jumping from one place to another. He said to them: Why are you fleeing? They said to him: Because of the nets that the fishermen are bringing upon us. He said to them: Come to the shore, and you and I will dwell together as our forefathers dwelt with your forefathers. They said to him:

² See: [Blanshard, 1974, p. 42–53; Hume, 1974, p. 126–137; Swinburne, 1974, p. 230–247]. David Stern mentions additional researches concerned with this parable: [Stern, 1991, p. 295, no. 56].

³ On the use of language as a means of persuasion to believe in a religious faith, see: [Urbach, 1971, p. 20], who bases his words there on *b. Avodah Zarah* 55a, as an interpretation of Deut 4:19: “This teaches us that He [God] misled [the pagans] by means of words”.

Do they say of you that you are the cleverest of all beasts? You are not clever at all, but foolish! If, in the place where we have our life, we are afraid, in the place of death for us, how much more so! So too is this true of ourselves: If now, when we are sitting and engaging in Torah, of which it is written, “for it your life and the length of your days” (Deut 30:20) [we are in danger] – were we to go and refrain from it, how much more so!”.

The parable told by Rabbi Akiva is not consonant with the reality of the concrete situation upon which it is meant to shed light. The parable speaks of the possible death of the fish in the water as opposed to their certain death on the dry land, whereas the Roman government had decreed death upon those Jews who held fast to the Torah and promised their welfare if they would abandon it. By means of this parable, Rabbi Akiva turns reality on its head, arguing that what is dangerous is specifically fulfillment of the demands of the government. Thus, the parable merely serves Rabbi Akiva as a verbal ploy with which to rebuff Pappus. The function of the parable is to say half-truths and thereby lead the listener astray, to turn his attention from the objective significance of the actual events⁴.

In polemics of this type, the non-Jew draws attention to the contradiction between the biblical verses that speak of God’s power and the miserable reality in which the symbols of His rule are trampled underfoot. The Sages were forced to enter into serpentine argumentations and to answer by means of rhetorical figures. In *b. Avodah Zarah* 55a, the following questions asked by a Gentile philosopher – evidently King Agrippa – of Rabban Gamaliel are brought:

“A certain philosopher⁵ asked Rabban Gamaliel: it is written in your Torah, ‘For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God’ (Deut 4:24)⁶. Does that not imply that it [i.e., idolatry] has reality?! He answered him: And what did you see? He [the philosopher] replied: One time a fire broke out in our city, and the entire city was consumed and the pagan temple was not consumed. He [Rabban Gamaliel] answered: Let me tell you a parable to which this may be compared. It might be compared to a king of flesh and blood against whom a certain state rebelled. When he makes war, does he make war against the living or against the dead? Surely, one would say: Against the living he makes war⁷. He said to him: If you call them dead, then He should cause them to disappear from the world. He replied: If they [the pagans] were to worship a thing that the world does not need, He would nullify it; but they worship the sun and the moon, the stars and the constellations, the valleys and the plains. Should He destroy His world because of fools?...⁸ And because the evil ones err therein should they [these things] be removed from the world? [And indeed,] do they not worship a man? ‘And I shall cut man off from the face of the earth’ (Zephaniah 1:3)?”⁹

Rabban Gamaliel answers Agrippa by means of a parable based upon an allegory and a paradox, while asking a rhetorical question and using hyperbole: that God takes compassion upon idolatry precisely because it is null and void. The parable serves Rabban Gamaliel as an excuse to avoid entering into a true discussion of matters of faith.

The Talmud brings an additional answer to Agrippa’s questions: God allows the world to follow its natural course, and does not intervene to destroy idolatry; rather, its worshippers will be punished in the future. Rabbi Judah Loeb of Prague (Maharal) explains this story as follows:

⁴ See also: [Stern, 1991, p. 46].

⁵ i.e., a Gentile sage.

⁶ Maharsha, in his interpretation on this passage in the Talmud, explains the answer given by Rabban Gamaliel. The word זָאֵן (“zeal”) does not mean jealousy, in the sense of one who is lacking something for himself, but rather anger or zeal. God is not jealous of the pagan gods or the worshippers, but is angry and even enraged by them.

⁷ Against idolatry.

⁸ See the original text according to the scientific edition or Rabinowitz’s *Sefer Dikduqei Sofrim* [Rabinowitz, 1960].

⁹ See: [Stern, 1991, p. 338, no. 33; 1996, p. 73–93], and concerning anthropomorphic images of God see: [Stern, 1996, p. 76–77].

God creates a situation of free choice, whereas if He were to punish pagan worshipers in this world in front of everyone, he would limit their free choice¹⁰.

Further along in this Talmudic discussion, consistent with the explanation given by the Maharal, the answers given to these questions by Resh Lakish and Rav are also cited. These answers state, that God creates situations which seem to imply that the objects of pagan worship have reality — but this is no more than a test which God poses for man, within the framework of the principle of free choice. The large number of different, unrelated answers on the part of the Sages suggests that they did not have one true and decisive answer.

There are other cases in which the Sages perceive the questions posed by the Gentiles as a deliberate act of provocation, as in the following (*Leviticus Rabbah* 4.6):

“A certain Gentile asked Rabbi Joshua ben Korhah: It is written in your Torah, ‘You shall follow after the majority’ (Exod 23:2) – and we are more numerous than you. For what reason do you not behave as us¹¹ regarding idolatry? He answered him: You have reminded me of my troubles. He answered him: Why? He said to him: When they are sitting at my table, this one blesses this god, and the other one blesses that god, and they do not get up from the table until they have bashed one another’s brains out¹². He said to him: And are you together with them?¹³ He answered him: No. So, he said to him: Before you tell me to make myself like you, go and make yourself like your sons. He was pushed away¹⁴ and left. His disciples said to him: This one you rebuffed with a hollow reed; to us, what do you answer? He replied to them: I will not send you away empty-handed. It is written regarding Esau, six souls, and it is written concerning him many souls, as is written: ‘And Esau took his wives and his sons and his daughters and all the souls [*nefashot*] of his house’ (Gen 36:6). Jacob was seventy souls¹⁵, and it is written concerning him one soul, as is written, ‘with seventy souls [*nefesh*; i.e., in the singular form] our forefathers descended to Egypt’ (Deut 10:22). Rather, concerning Esau, because he served many gods¹⁶, it is written many souls. Concerning Jacob, who did not worship many gods, it is written of him one soul, as is written, ‘and all the souls of those who came out of Jacob’s thigh were seventy souls [*nefesh*]’” (Exod 1:5).

In this story the Gentile asked Rabbi Joshua ben Korhah why the Jews do not join the pagans as they ought to have done according to the literal meaning of the Torah. Rabbi Joshua does not relate to the substance of the question, but hurts the Gentile emotionally and personally by reminding him of his own family problems. He then rebukes him, turning the subject from that of Judaism to that of quarrels in the family. Both Rabbi Joshua ben Korhah’s disciples and the traditional commentators felt that he had no substantive answer to the Gentile’s questions. Thus, offhand, the impression was created that the latter had a certain degree of justice on his side. The Gentiles’ question is explained as follows by the *Matnot Kehunah* (a traditional commentary on the *Midrash Rabbah*): “Therefore, the majority of them [the pagans] do not constitute a majority, as among their majority there are many [different] gods” – because each of the Gentiles worships his own god, they do not constitute a majority, but are merely a collection of isolated worshipers, each one worshipping his own god.

¹⁰ See *b. Avodah Zarah* 55a.

¹¹ i.e., contradict us, meaning, accept our idolatrous faith.

¹² They beat one another with harsh blows.

¹³ Make peace between them?

¹⁴ *Matnot Kehunah* (a traditional commentary on the *Midrash Rabbah*) explains: “He was pushed away by this response.”

¹⁵ *Matnot Kehunah* explains: “To say that they will remain permanently united and will not follow the majority of the other nations”.

¹⁶ *Matnot Kehunah*, *ibid*.

While being asked these questions, the Gentile attempts to clarify various matters of faith both for himself and to his interlocutor, according to his principles. Nevertheless, the Jew answers him in an evasive manner, simply to push him away, to mock him and to present both himself and his faith in a ludicrous manner.

AN UNSUCCESSFUL ATTEMPT TO BRING PROOF FOR THE TRUTH OF JUDAISM FROM REALITY

The following polemic is also concerned with matters of faith, taking the form of a dialogue between Rabbi Akiva and Turnus Rufus as to the reasons for observing the Sabbath¹⁷:

“Turnus Rufus the evil one asked Rabbi Akiva, saying to him: Why is today different from any other day? He replied: What makes one man different [from another]? He said to him: What did I say to you, and what did you say to me? He said to him: You asked me, how is the Sabbath different from all other days? And I replied, how is Rufus different from any other man? He said to him: Because the king wanted to honor him [i.e., myself]. [Rabbi Akiva answered:] So too did God wish to honor this one [the Sabbath] above all other days. From whence do you make this known to me?¹⁸ He said: from the River Sambatyon, which draws stones along all week long and on the Sabbath day rests... He returned to Rabbi Akiva and said to him: If it is as you say, that God honors the Sabbath, he should not cause the winds to blow and not cause the rain to fall [and no plant should blossom thereon]¹⁹. He said to him: May the spirit of that man be cursed! It is like one who carries [an object] four ells. [Let me tell you a parable: It is like two people who lived in the same courtyard. If the one does not place therein an *eruv*, and the other one does place an *eruv*, might one think that both are permitted to carry in the courtyard?! [No!] But if one lived in the courtyard, he is allowed [to carry] in the entire courtyard. So too, since God has no other domain and the entire world is his, he is allowed [to move about] in the entire world²⁰”.

Turnus Rufus finds contradictions between the approach of Judaism and the reality as presented by nature. Rabbi Akiva has no convincing answer to the arguments of Turnus Rufus. His principles of faith are different, and his faith is not supported by reality. His exclamation, “May the spirit of that man be cursed!” is indicative of Rabbi Akiva’s frustration at his failure to answer Turnus Rufus in terms of concepts compatible to the religious faith of the Gentile. He turns to an anachronistic rhetorical figure: the application of contemporary halakhic concepts and innovations to an earlier period, as at the time of the Creation there was obviously no concept of *eruv* on Shabbat. It would appear that Rabbi Akiva merely wanted to push him aside, while Turnus Rufus wishes to clarify the truth, as he sees it.

According to Turnus Rufus, the uniqueness of the Sabbath should be evident from reality and from the laws of nature. Yet there is no proof in nature of the sanctity of the Shabbat, except for the fact that the manna fell all days of the week except Shabbat, as witnessed by the people in the wilderness. However, even the proof from the manna is not inherent in nature, which might

¹⁷ The text of the story is based on the edition of Hanokh Albeck, *Genesis Rabbah* 11:5 [*Genesis Rabbah*, 1996]; the version of the story according to *Genesis Rabbah*, ed. Re’em, is brought in square brackets.

¹⁸ *Matnot Kehunah* interprets: “From whence do you answer to me by demonstration [i.e., by rational wisdom] that God wished to honor the Sabbath?”.

¹⁹ This approach of Turnus Rufus corresponds to the watchmaker analogy of William Paley (1743–1905), according to which even a watch requires deep rational planning, all the more so an enormous and complex universe that requires planning beyond human understanding and intellectual ability of God. See on this [Paley, 1974, p. 112–126].

²⁰ The Commentary of Maharsha adds, that is, even though Rabbi Akiva answers that God carries, as it were, all of his labor is done by means of speech and therefore “There is no labor before Him, but all by analogy to a carrying.” That is, the idea that God carries on Shabbat is not to be understood in a literal sense, as all of his labor is in any event performed by means of speech.

have convinced the Gentile, but is only known through Jewish tradition. That is, the sources of this proof are to be found in the texts of the Jewish tradition, which the Gentile does not accept. The uniqueness of the Sabbath thus derives from the authority of the Torah²¹, which Turnus Rufus does not accept or believe in. Rabbi Akiva and Turnus Rufus are thus unable to understand one another. For Rabbi Akiva, the truth of the Torah precedes all proofs from reality, whereas for Turnus Rufus reality precedes faith. Turnus Rufus believes in what his eyes see, whereas Rabbi Akiva believes in the tradition received from his ancestors, even when contradicted by proofs from reality. Thus, the Torah and reality are incompatible.

SUBSTANTIVE RESPONSES TOWARDS GENTILES' QUESTIONS AS TO HOW TO OBSERVE THE COMMANDMENTS

The Sages' attitude of rejection and ridicule towards those who asked questions on matters of faith changed as soon as those asking the questions seemed to accept the basic axioms of the Sages, based upon an authoritarian approach. When a heretic asked questions regarding the practical observance of the commandments, without any intent of upsetting the substance of Jewish faith, these are treated in a substantive fashion. In such cases the Sages do not respond with empty answers, but relate to the substance of the question. For example, in *b. Avodah Zarah* 44b, the following incident is recounted:

"Proculus son of Proculus²² questioned Rabban Gamaliel in Akko (Acre) while he was bathing in the bathhouse of Aphrodite, as follows: It is written in your Torah, 'And naught of the banned things shall remain in your hand'. For what reason do you bathe in the bathhouse of Aphrodite? He replied to him: I did not enter into her domain, but she came into my domain. One does not say: 'A bathhouse was made to adorn Aphrodite', but rather 'Aphrodite was made as an adornment for the bathhouse'."

This Talmudic *sugya* discusses various kinds of benefit derived from idolatry, the main issue here being: how is one to deal with objects of idolatry that have lost their religious significance? The Mishnah states that one may not derive benefit even from the ashes of objects indirectly related to idolatry, due to the verse "and naught of the banned things shall remain in your hand" (Deut 13:18; and see Rashi ad loc.).

However, Rashi on this Talmudic passage explains that the statue of the goddess Aphrodite merely serves as an incidental decoration for the bathhouse, and that those who visit the bathhouse do so to make use of it and may not even notice the presence there of the statue, and certainly do not see it as an object of idolatrous worship. This being the case, the presence of the statue of the goddess is insufficient reason to prohibit people from bathing there (Rashi, ad loc.).

Rabbenu Hannanel (ibid.) sharpens Rashi's interpretation, arguing that one of the explicit signs of an object of idolatry is that the pagans revere it – but in this case people walk about naked and even urinate in the presence of the statue; hence the statue has lost its religious significance and there is no reason not to derive benefit from it. Moreover: Rabban Gamliel washed in the bathhouse, not for purposes of pleasure, but for medical reasons, thereby reducing even further the weight given to the statue.

In this case, the Gentile asked a question regarding the specific manner of observing the commandments, and not with regard to the fundamentals of Judaism. The Sages attitude towards his question changed accordingly: they now relate to his words seriously and respond in a substantive way, without attempting to rebuff him with empty words.

²¹ In Urbach's words, "also in the Torah, the Sabbath day is not holy by itself, but God blesses and sanctifies it" [Urbach, 1971, p. 323].

²² In the commentary of *Tiferet Yisrael* it is argued that there is a corruption in the name of the interlocutor and that it should be read as "*ben Pulusfus*," meaning "son of a philosopher".

CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding the widely accepted assumption the Judaism is fundamentally an authoritarian religion, scholarly literature dealing with this subject has never claimed that this is so in a comprehensive or all-embracing way. From our readings of the selection of Rabbinic parables examined above, we find that the worldview of the Sages allows for exceptions to this supposed authoritarian approach.

Sometimes the pagan sages called the Sages' attention to aspects of reality that contradicted their authoritarian approach and forced the Sages to deal with these. Nevertheless, the Jewish Rabbis would ignore this reality, rejecting the pagans' provocative questions and their attempts to engage them in a dispute which only purpose is to prove that the Jewish God is wrong, has disappointed or failed to fulfill His promises, or has decided to forego His covenant with Israel. The Jewish Rabbis refuse to enter into any discussion whose aim is to harm the Jewish faith, whose value is seen as greater than that of life itself (see, e.g., above, in the parable of the fish and the fox).

As against to that, when the Jewish Sages are asked regarding the proper and good way to fulfill the commandments of Judaism and thereby to strengthen the Jewish faith, their attitude is completely different. When they feel that the pagans are truly asking how to fulfill Judaism in the best possible way, the Sages respond to them gladly, with focused and substantive answers.

The Sages are unwilling to forego Judaism under any circumstances. Even in wake of the catastrophe which befell the people of Israel upon the Destruction of the Second Temple which was a catastrophe in Jewish history.

REFERENCES

- תלמוד ירושלמי, ב 10 כרכים, ירושלים: תורה מציון (תדפיס ממהדורת וילנה, ראם), תשכ"ו.
 [Babylonian Talmud. 10 vols. Jerusalem: Torah mi-Tziyon (based upon Vilna: Re'em ed.), 1968 (in Hebrew)].
- Blanshard B. *Reason and Belief*. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1974.
- The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*. Eds.: P. Zuckerman, M.T. Martin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Charlesworth M.J. *Philosophy of Religion: the Historic Approaches*. London; Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1972.
- Cupitt D. Anti-Realist Faith. *Faith and Reason*. Ed. P. Helm. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. Pp. 301–311.
- Flew A. *The Presumption of Atheism, and Other Philosophical Essays on God, Freedom, and Immortality*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1976.
- תלמוד ירושלים, ירושלים: שילוח (תדפיס ממהדורת וילנה, קראטאשין), תשכ"ו.
 [Jerusalem Talmud. Jerusalem: Shiloah (based upon: Vilna: Krotoshin ed.), 1966 (in Hebrew)].
- Geisler N., Corduan W. *Philosophy of Religion*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1988.
- בראשית רבה, מהדורת חנוך אלבק, ירושלים: מוסד ביאליק, תל-אביב: דביר (תדפיס ממהדורת וילנה), תשנ"ו.
 [Genesis Rabbah. Ed. Hanokh Albeck. Jerusalem; Tel-Aviv: Mossad Bialik; Dvir (based on Vilna: Re'em ed.), 1996 (in Hebrew)].
- בראשית רבה, ירושלים: פאר התורה (תדפיס ממהדורת וילנה, ראם), תש"ל.
 [Genesis Rabbah, Jerusalem: Pe'er Ha-Torah (based on Vilna: Re'em ed.), 1970 (in Hebrew)].
- Hume D. Criticisms of the Analogy. *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion: An Analytic Approach*. Ed.: Baruch A. Brody. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1974. Pp. 126–137.
- Idel M. *Golem: Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions on the Artificial Anthropoid*, Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1990.

- שמות רבה, מהדורת ראובן מרגליות, ירושלים: אגודה אמריקאית לחקר היהדות, תשי"ג.
[Leviticus Rabbah. Ed.: Reuven Margalit. Jerusalem: The American Association of Jewish Research, 1953 (in Hebrew)].
- Marty M.E. *Varieties of Unbelief*. New York: Doubleday, 1964.
- Paley W. The Analogy of the Watch. *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion: An Analytic Approach*. Ed.: Baruch A. Brody. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1974. Pp. 112-125.
- Peterson M., Hasker W., Reichenbach B., and Basinger D. *Reason and Religious Belief. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- בבינוביץ', רפאל נתן נטע, ספר דקדוקי סופרים, ירושלים" מעיין חכמה, תש"כ.
[Rabinowitz, Raphael Nathan Neta. *Sefer Dikdukei Sofrim*. Jerusalem: Ma'ayan Hokhmah, 1960 (in Hebrew)].
- Schumaker J.F. *The Corruption of Reality. A Unified Theory of Religion, Hypnosis, and Psychology*. New York: Prometheus Books, 1995.
- Smith J.E. *Philosophy of Religion*. New York: Macmillan Company, 1965.
- The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Eds.: Berger P.L., Luckman T. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1966.
- Stern D. *Midrash and Theory. Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1996.
- Stern D. *Parables in Midrash. Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature*. Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 1991.
- Swinburne R. *Faith and Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983.
- Swinburne R. The Christian Wager. *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion: An Analytic Approach*. Ed.: Baruch A. Brody. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1974. Pp. 230–247.
- Swinburne R. *The Existence of God*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.
- Swinburne R. The Voluntariness of Faith. *Faith and Reason*. Ed. P. Helm. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. Pp. 371–381.
- Tillich P. *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955.
- אורבך, אפרים אלימלך, חז"ל: פרקי אמונות ודעות, ירושלים: מאגנס, תשל"א.
[Urbach, Ephraim Elimelech. *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*. Jerusalem: Magnes, 1971 (in Hebrew)].
- Weiner R.G. Marvel Comics and the Golem Legend. *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 29 (2), 2011. Pp. 50–72.
- Wilken R.L. *John Chrysostom and the Jews. Rhetoric and Reality in the Late 4th Century*. Berkeley, Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1983.

ИНФОРМАЦИЯ ОБ АВТОРЕ / INFORMATION ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ЛАПИДУС Рина Викторовна – доктор гуманитарных наук, полный профессор университета Бар-Илан, Тель-Авив, Израиль.

Rina V. LAPIDUS, PhD (literature), Full Professor, Bar-Ilan University, Tel-Aviv, Israel.