

## Suffering and Sacrifice

### *The Hermeneutics of Yisurin in the Babylonian Talmud*

---

**ABSTRACT** This article offers the argument that suffering (*yisurin*) in the Babylonian Talmud functions as a locus for the relationship between God and rabbinic Jews. Scholars of rabbinic martyrdom and asceticism have tended to claim that the Talmud's positive portrayal of suffering is a theodical apology for unexplained evil in the world. However, the article argues that the Talmud—in contrast to earlier rabbinic texts—presents suffering as spiritually relevant not primarily to justify preexisting suffering, but rather to develop a site at which to interpret information about an individual's spiritual status.

The article draws on theories of sacrifice's structure and function, in conjunction with close analysis of rabbinic texts that relate suffering to sacrifice. The pericope at the core of the article's argument demonstrates a strikingly technical approach to the human experience of suffering, describing four examples of *yisurin* in which no real physical suffering occurs; in each instance the "victim" experiences extremely mild discomfort at most, and at the least barely registers an experience of inconvenience. Nonetheless, these experiences all qualify as "suffering," and are thus still understood to bear indisputable soteriological import. Physical suffering in the Talmud is thus open for interpretation, yielding information about the status of the sufferer's spiritual self.

Human suffering is viewed as religiously desirable in both late rabbinic and early Christian literatures. By developing an understanding of its hermeneutical function for the rabbis, this article helps to elucidate the value of suffering for rabbinic literature as a subset of late antique religious discourse. **KEYWORDS** Theodicy, late antiquity, rabbinic literature, suffering, sacrifice, midrash, Babylonian Talmud

---

Human suffering was one of the central currencies of religious meaning in Late Antiquity, and the Babylonian Talmud uses several distinct terms for suffering experienced in different contexts. *Onesh* and *pur'anut* both refer to punishment, either human or divine.<sup>1</sup> *Tza'ar* (pain) and *boshet* (shame) are legal terms for

---

1. On *pur'anut*, which often has the sense of a divine punishment, see Eliezer Diamond, *Holy Men and Hunger Artists: Fasting and Asceticism in Rabbinic Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press,

personal damages incurred in a tort; *tza'ar* can also be used to refer to the pain of grief.<sup>2</sup> The use of the term *yisurin*, however, is distinct from all of these. *Yisurin*, a term I will translate here simply as “suffering,” refers specifically to physical suffering that does not come about as a direct result of a person’s specific actions or nature (as for example a punishment), nor from the direct action of another human being. *Yisurin* are described as being sent by God, and they can have the power to effect atonement for the sufferer’s sins.

As I demonstrate below, the portrayal of this kind of suffering in the Talmud has been understood by a number of scholars as reflecting either a theodic or an anti-theodic response to the classic problem of bad things happening to good people.<sup>3</sup> I argue that such a framing of *yisurin* does not do justice to the concept’s more sophisticated function within rabbinic literature. Rather than analyzing the discourse of *yisurin* in the Talmud as one in which the rabbis consider the “problem of suffering,” I claim that it is more fruitfully understood as one in which the Biblical model of sacrifice is transformed and reimagined. I show that when *yisurin* are understood according to this model, it becomes clear that the rabbis who discuss them are partaking in a broader late antique religious trend of conceptualizing suffering not as a punishment but rather as a valuable, even desirable site for the creation of religious meaning.

I begin with a brief discussion of the concept of theodicy, its applicability to pre-modern texts, and whether or not it is a pertinent category for the portrayal of *yisurin* in the Talmud. I then proceed with an analysis of the *locus classicus* of rabbinic treatment of *yisurin*, a lengthy discussion in Tractate Berakhot 5a-5b. Although it is clear that there exist theodic elements in the text, I argue that the language, metaphors and Biblical allusions also strongly point to a broader and more complex framework of sacrifice and atonement within which the rabbis understand the phenomenon of unexplained suffering. I explain how this sacrificial mode of thinking fits with general tendencies in rabbinic literature, and draw a more precise analogy between *yisurin* and the Biblical model of the

---

2004), 67. On *onesh*, see for example Aharon Shemesh, *Punishments and Sins: From Scripture to the Rabbis* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2003).

2. On *tza'ar*, see Shulamit Valler, *Sorrow and Distress in Talmudic Stories* (in Hebrew) (Bene Beraq : Sifriyat Hilel Ben-Hayim: ha-Kibuts ha-me'uḥad, 2012); on *tza'ar* as well as *boshet*, see also Mira Balberg, “The Clever Among them say. . . : Pain, Gender, and the Law in the Talmudic Law of Restitution” (in Hebrew), in *Pain, Flesh and Blood: Representations of the Body in Illness, Suffering, and Pleasure*, eds. O. Meital, & S. Stav (Ben Gurion University Press, 2013).

3. I will use “Talmud” in this article to refer to the Babylonian Talmud (BT). The word *yisurin* does appear in the Palestinian Talmud (PT) as well; a comparison of its usage in the two Talmuds deserves further investigation.

*battat* (sin-offering) sacrifice. I then proceed to an analysis of a Talmudic passage that attempts to maximize the category of *yisurin*, demonstrating that the rabbis used this category to bestow religious significance on everyday human experience, and not merely to justify a pre-existing phenomenon of random suffering. Finally, I conclude with a brief reflection on the relationship between rabbinic and early Christian attitudes towards suffering. I suggest that although the hermeneutics of *yisurin* possess distinctively rabbinic characteristics, both rabbis and Christians were ultimately engaged in a similar project of reinterpreting suffering in a way that both provided a sense of theological certainty and supported community formation.

### ARE YISURIN THEODICAL?

In an article on theodicy in the Book of Lamentations, Elizabeth Boase presents a range of scholarly opinions on what constitutes theodicy. Is theodicy a “divinely articulated explanation of suffering,” requiring a self-justifying deity who is able to provide a satisfying theological answer for why suffering exists?<sup>4</sup> Or is it a broader category, as in Weber’s use of the term to mean “any attempt to render suffering and evil intelligible”?<sup>5</sup> Boase attempts to extricate the definition of theodicy from the former, which requires a rational theology in which God must be able to explain God’s own behavior. Such a definition posits theodicy as a fundamentally post-Enlightenment construct and would seem to preclude its relevance in earlier texts.<sup>6</sup> Boase, who argues that theodicy is a relevant concept in the Bible, pushes for a more expansive use of the term that detaches it from a modern desire for rational justification.

In proposing a wider range of discourses which could fall under the rubric of “theodicy,” Boase cites Laato and de Moor’s proposal of six “typical/universal theodicy responses”: retribution theodicy (suffering is just punishment for human deeds); educative theodicy (suffering serves a pedagogic purpose); eschatological theodicy (suffering now will lead to ultimate redemption); the mystery of theodicy (suffering is caused by God’s absence in a way that human beings

4. Elizabeth Boase, “Constructing Meaning in the Face of Suffering: Theodicy in Lamentations,” *Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. 58, Fasc. 4/5 (2008): 449–468, doi: 10.1163/156853308X325029.

5. *Ibid.*, 453.

6. Boase explains that proponents of this definition of theodicy see it as a distinctively modern concept because “although evil has occasioned religious response throughout all ages, it is only within the modern period that the question of evil becomes a reason for questioning faith itself, thus giving rise to the field of theodicy” (*ibid.*, 453). She notes that the term “theodicy” was itself coined by Leibniz in 1701.

cannot understand); communion theodicy (suffering is useful as a vehicle for connection with God); and human determinism (suffering is preordained and inescapable). Boase notes that these responses appear in the Book of Lamentations along with moments of anti-theodicy, which she defines as the refusal “to justify, explain, or accept as somehow meaningful the relationship between God and suffering.”<sup>7</sup> Anti-theodicy can also take the form of blaming God for acting unfairly or calling God’s actions into question.

Given this broader definition of theodicy, as well as the possibility of anti-theodicy as a potential response to the need to reconcile a benevolent God with human suffering, how are we to understand the Babylonian Talmud’s treatment of *yisurin*? Some scholars have understood all treatment of suffering in the rabbinic literature as responding to theodical questions; for instance, in his description of the role of religious systems in general and rabbinic Judaism within that framework, David Kraemer claims that rabbinic texts about suffering are united in their attempts to acknowledge and reframe a ubiquitous human experience in a way that enables that suffering to be borne.<sup>8</sup> Yaakov Elman likewise takes for granted that the Talmud, like all rabbinic texts, “manifests an approach to the problem of theodicy.”<sup>9</sup> Kraemer and Elman do both acknowledge that the Babylonian Talmud is distinct from earlier rabbinic literature in its treatment of suffering, pointing out that the portrayal of *yisurin* in the Babylonian Talmud seems to at least partially reject an earlier Palestinian notion of proportional, retributive punishment that is divinely administered in accordance with human misdeeds.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, they both still describe the Talmud’s treatment of *yisurin* within the framework of the rabbis’ responses to the so-called

7. *Ibid.*, 451.

8. David Kraemer, *Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 4.

9. Yaakov Elman, “Righteousness as Its Own Reward: An Inquiry into the Theologies of the Stam,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 57 (1990–1991): 35; see also Yaakov Elman, “The Suffering of the Righteous in Palestinian and Babylonian Sources,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 80, no. 3/4 (Jan. – Apr. 1990): 315–339.

10. The PT mentions *yisurin* being visited upon the righteous in several locations: see, for example, PT Berakhot 9:5 (also paralleled at PT Sotah 5:5) on the *yisurin* of Rabbi Akiva, and PT Bikkurim 3:3 on the *yisurin* of the righteous more generally. The PT portrays *yisurin* as ultimately bringing about positive consequences, such as PT Ta’anit 3:3, which claims that rain falls because of the merit of *yisurin*, and Kiddushin 1:9, which portrays *yisurin* as a substitute for other, worse punishments. Other sources in the PT portray *yisurin* as a deserved punishment for wrongdoers, such as PT Berakhot 2:5, which mentions *yisurin* as a consequence of levity.

“problem of suffering”—in other words, they see it as replacing a kind of retribution theodicy with a more “rebellious,” even anti-theodical stance.

However, such an understanding of *yisurin* in the Talmud presupposes that in raising questions about God and suffering, the rabbis saw suffering as a confusing and disturbing fact of life that must be made intelligible. It is not at all clear, however, that the rabbinic discussions of *yisurin* are always a response to their noticing suffering in the world and consequently attempting either to justify it or rail against it. In fact, a closer analysis of relevant passages demonstrates that the Talmud often presents *yisurin* not as an unfortunate phenomenon to be made sense of, but rather as a valuable hermeneutic category, even to the point of attaching that category to phenomena that barely even qualify as unpleasant. For the Babylonian rabbis, *yisurin* are not simply experienced passively, but are actively defined and interpreted in a form of intellectual religious practice that, I argue, follows the conceptual model of expiatory sacrifices.

In the remainder of this article, I attempt to reconsider the Talmud’s treatment of *yisurin* in two main passages in light of a general rabbinic tendency to think with sacrificial logic about personal practices, even long after the Second Temple was destroyed. I demonstrate that the rabbis saw suffering as a genuinely religiously valuable experience by framing it as a parallel process to the expiatory (*battat* and *asham*) sacrifices described in the Bible and offered in the Temple. As I will show, by reconceptualizing *yisurin* in this way, the rabbis were partaking of a broader trend in late antique religious thinking about the meaning of suffering, albeit in their own distinctive way.

### THE RABBINIC TRANSFORMATION OF *YISURIN*

The root *y-s-r* appears throughout the Hebrew Bible to convey discipline, instruction, or admonition, a semantic range approximating the English word “chastisement.”<sup>11</sup> In some instances God is the one who administers this chastisement; in other contexts, the chastiser is a human being. The chastisement can be physical or verbal, individual or in the form of collective national punishment. Nonetheless, throughout its varied usage in the Torah, Prophets and Writings, the term always carries the connotation of a pedagogical and/or

11. Lev 26:18, Lev 26:23, Lev 26:28, Deut 4:36, Deut 8:5, Deut 21:18, Deut 22:18, 1 Kings 12:11, 1 Kings 12:14, Isaiah 8:11, Isaiah 28:26, Jeremiah 2:19, Jeremiah 6:8, Jeremiah 10:24, Jeremiah 30:11, Jeremiah 31:18, Jeremiah 46:28, Ezekiel 23:48, Hosea 7:12, Hosea 7:15, Hosea 10:10, 1 Chronicles 15:22, 2 Chronicles 10:11, 2 Chronicles 10:14, Psalms 2:10, Psalms 6:1, Psalms 16:7, Psalms 38:1, Psalms 39:11, Psalms 94:10, Psalms 94:12, Psalms 118:18, Job 4:3, Prov 9:7, Prov 19:18, Prov 29:17, Prov 29:19, Prov 31:1.

disciplinary function. When the performer of the verb is not God to the Israelites, it is frequently a father to his son or in one instance a master to his servant.<sup>12</sup>

The connotation of this word shifts as it appears in tannaitic literature. Whereas in the Bible the primary sense of *y-s-r* is that of a pedagogical or punitive act generated by a disciplinary agent, in tannaitic literature the root sometimes appears in nominative form to signify negative life events. For example, in Mishnah Kiddushin 4:14, *yisurin* are mentioned alongside sickness and old age in a list of factors that could make a person unable to work. *Yisurin* are also contrasted with “good things” (הטובה), seemingly in the sense of positive experiences, as in Mekhilta de-rabbi Ishmael: “And further, one should rejoice more in *yisurin* than in good things. . .”<sup>13</sup> Neither of these sources refer to *yisurin* as having an agent, nor do they explicitly describe *yisurin* as possessing disciplinary force.

Despite this new usage, the use of this root in tannaitic literature does also maintain some of its Biblical features. Since the Bible is explicit about God’s subjecting people to *y-s-r* acts, it is perhaps unsurprising that tannaitic midrash continues to portray God as the cause of *yisurin* (though not so other agents such as fathers or sovereigns, except insofar as the midrash quotes directly from the Bible). Furthermore, *yisurin* in tannaitic literature, as in the Bible, are portrayed as temporarily unpleasant events that ultimately lead to a worthwhile goal. Yet there is a new dynamic of these divinely induced negative means towards positive ends in tannaitic literature.

Throughout the Bible, God sends either verbal or experiential *yisurin* to convince the people to return to a morally and spiritually correct path.<sup>14</sup> The possibility of verbal *yisurin* has disappeared by the tannaitic period, along with the expectation of direct divine revelation in the form of prophecy. The notion of *yisurin* in the form of collective national punishment is likewise no longer to be

12. “If a man have a stubborn and rebellious son, that will not hearken to the voice of his father, or the voice of his mother, and though they chasten him, will not hearken unto them. . .” (Deut 21:18); “Correct your son, and he will give your rest; yea, he will give delight unto your soul” (Prov 29:17); “A servant will not be corrected by words. . .” (Prov 29:19).

13. Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Yitro Debachodesh 10 (ed. Horowitz-Rabin 239–240).

14. For just a few examples: “And if in spite of these things you will not be corrected unto Me, but will walk contrary unto Me,” (Lev 26:23); “For the Lord spoke thus to me with a strong hand, admonishing me that I should not walk in the way of this people” (Isaiah 8:11); “Be corrected, O Jerusalem, lest My soul be alienated from you, lest I make you desolate, a land not inhabited” (Jeremiah 6:8); “Happy is the person whom God disciplines and whom You teach from Your Torah” (Psalms 94:12).

found. Instead, *yisurin* in tannaitic literature take the form of individual experiences. They may be physical ailments or simply the broad category of negative life experiences, as noted earlier.

Furthermore, *yisurin* are effective not because they compel their recipient to abandon immoral conduct or more closely follow God's directions as they do in the Bible, but instead because they are able to immediately effect atonement. For example, the rest of the statement quoted above from Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael reads as follows: "And further, one should rejoice more in *yisurin* than in good things, for even if one experiences good things all one's days, one is not forgiven for the sins one has committed, and who forgives [הטובה] one's sins? One would say: *yisurin*." Here *yisurin* are not portrayed as causing the sinner to choose a more righteous path, but rather as directly causing forgiveness for those sins.

This major difference between Biblical and tannaitic *y-s-r* can be summarized as follows: whereas Biblical *y-s-r* is meant—though presumably does not always manage—to cause repentance and behavior change on the part of the recipient, tannaitic *yisurin* bypass the need for emotional or ritual rectification by the sinner and proceed immediately to the forgiveness stage.

As an effective vehicle for repentance, *yisurin* are compared in tannaitic literature to sacrifice, which can have a similar function:

R. Nehemiah says: precious are *yisurin*, for just as sacrifices please [מרצין], so *yisurin* please.<sup>15</sup> What does it say about sacrifices? "And it shall be accepted for him [ונרצה לו] to make atonement for him" (Lev 1:4). What does it say about *yisurin*? "And they shall atone for [ירצו] their iniquity" (Lev 26:43). And not only that, but *yisurin* please more than sacrifices. Why? Because sacrifice are with money but *yisurin* are with the body.<sup>16</sup>

This passage is consistent with the general tendency in both tannaitic and post-tannaitic rabbinic literature to "sacrificialize"—that is, to portray many different practices as partaking in sacrificial discourse. It is not only *yisurin* that are compared to sacrifice; as Michael Fishbane has pointed out, eating practices, ritual purity, prayer and charity are all described in rabbinic literature as in some way modeling and even reenacting characteristics of sacrifice.<sup>17</sup> Fishbane also

15. This midrash uses the root *r-tz-h* in the double sense of "accept," as in biblical sacrificial contexts, and "delight" or "please," as in "For the one whom the Lord loves He rebukes, even as a father the son in whom he delights [ירצה]" (Prov. 3:12).

16. Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Yitro Debachodesh 10 (ed. Horowitz-Rabin 240)

17. For a more detailed discussion of these substitutions and their further transformation in the Middle Ages, see Michael Fishbane, "Substitutes for Sacrifice," in *The Exegetical Imagination*

notes that one of the defining features of these new sacrificial practices is that the practitioner assumes multiple roles: “. . .his whole concern is to be simultaneously the officiant, the offering, and the beneficiary of his bodily sacrifice.”<sup>18</sup> As we shall see, this multiplicity is the case for *yisurin* as well.

However, though these practices are all clearly intentionally framed within a sacrificial paradigm, they should not necessarily be viewed as “substitutes,” as Fishbane calls them. In fact, these sacrificialized actions and sacrifice itself were not mutually exclusive, but each could function together as part of a broader framework, as evidenced in the following passage:

One who transgresses a positive commandment and repents [does *teshuvah*] does not move from there until he is forgiven. And about this it is written, “Return (*shuvu*), rebellious children” (Jeremiah 3:14).

One who transgresses a negative commandment and repents, [her] repentance does not have power to atone. Rather, repentance suspends [judgment] and the Day of Atonement atones. And about this it is written, “For on this day you will be atoned for of all of your sins” (Leviticus 16:30).

One who transgresses [commandments for which one is punished by] excision or death by the court and repents, [his] repentance does not have power to suspend [judgment] and the Day of Atonement does not have power to atone. Rather, repentance and the Day of Atonement atone for half, and *yisurin* cleanse and atone for half. And about this it is written, “I will punish their transgressions with the rod and their sins with plagues” (Psalms 89:33).

One who desecrates God’s name and repents, [her] repentance does not have power to suspend [judgment], the Day of Atonement does not have power to atone, and *yisurin* alone do not cleanse. Rather repentance and the Day of Atonement suspend [judgment], and *yisurin* and death cleanse. And about this it is written, “Surely this iniquity shall not be atone for by you till you die” (Isaiah 22:14), and it says, “The iniquity of Eli’s house shall not be atoned for with sacrifice nor offering” (I Samuel 3:14). It is not atoned for with sacrifice or offering, but it is atoned for with death.<sup>19</sup>

---

(Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1998), 123–135. Fishbane explores how various rabbinic activities are conceptualized in terms of sacrificial logic, including fasting, prayer, and good deeds, but does not discuss *yisurin*.

18. Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination*, 126

19. Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Yitro Debachodesh 7 (ed. Horowitz-Rabin 228). Variations on this passage also appear in Tosefta Kippurim 4:6–9, PT Yoma 8:7, PT Sanhedrin 10:1, PT Shavuot 1:6, and

Neither repentance nor *yisurin* nor the Day of Atonement can be said to be “replacements” for sacrifice. None of the three would suffice on its own, and furthermore none of them can be said to be post-Temple “innovations”; the Day of Atonement is discussed in the Bible and the idea of repentance is certainly not a rabbinic invention. However, all of these can, in the right context and combination, achieve the same process of personal atonement as the expiatory sacrifice.

Jonathan Klawans argues that the “sacrificialized” elements of rabbinic life were not viewed as replacements for the destroyed Second Temple both because the rabbis hoped (if not believed) that the temple would soon be rebuilt, and because such practices also existed while the temple still stood. Instead, these practices evidenced a nostalgic approach to the temple, one in which other practices that had once been coexistent with sacrifices continue to be encouraged and emphasized, “even when compared to the sacrificial ritual that they could no longer perform, but still wished to.”<sup>20</sup> For example, the Talmud attributes a prayer to R. Sheshet in which he compares the effect of fasting on his body to the act of offering an animal sacrifice on an altar:

R. Sheshet, when he was fasting, would say the following after his prayers: “Master of the Universe, it is known before You that at the time the Temple stood, a man would sin and bring an offering, and nothing but the fat and blood would be offered from it, and it would atone for him. And now I have fasted and my fat and blood have been diminished. May it be Your will that my diminished fat and blood be [considered] as though I offered them before You on the altar, and may they find me favor.”<sup>21</sup>

This prayer portrays the act of fasting—a practice which surely was not new to post-Temple Judaism—as another mode of sacrifice, comparing the loss of his own fat and blood to the equivalent parts of the animal that would have been offered in Temple times. The prayer thus presents the Biblically commanded animal sacrifice as the idealized model while also encouraging the practice of a different practice as very nearly equivalent.

---

BT Yoma 86a. Some of the themes in this passage also appear in Mishnah Yoma 8 and its parallel in Sifra Aharei Mot, but sacrifices and not *yisurin* are mentioned there along with repentance, the Day of Atonement, and death.

20. Jonathan Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice and the Temple: Symbolism and Supersessionism in the Study of Ancient Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 209.

21. BT Berakhot 17a.

In his formulation of a general theory of the rhetoric of sacrifice, James W. Watts writes: “It is. . . narrative tradition, rather than ritual practices, that determines how and when the word *sacrifice* is applied.”<sup>22</sup> Sacrifice, he argues, is a term that refers to two separate phenomena: on the one hand, sacrifice is a ritual act, generally involving the slaughter of an animal; on the other, it is an explanatory narrative that has to do with the mortality of humans. Watts notes that these narratives look backwards to ritual in an attempt to understand its significance after the fact:

. . . Traditions for interpreting the *meaning* of sacrifice derive from similar historical settings: they all reflect on ritual slaughter as a practice of the past *no longer* enacted, or which *should* no longer be enacted, or which should *only* be enacted in a very different way. Sacrifice must then be interpreted because of the discontinuity between past and present practice. . . The quest to understand the meaning of sacrifice arose in each case out of the consciousness of sacrifice as a thing of the past that needs to be replaced with ritual and/or interpretation.<sup>23</sup>

Rabbinic literature likewise looks backwards to sacrifices, both linking rabbinic ritual practices with the ritual of the Temple and generating narratives about the meaning of sacrifice that, unlike the ritual act itself, could remain constant over time and changing historical circumstances. By conceiving of everyday rituals and non-ritual personal experiences like *yisurin* as sacrificial, the rabbis are able to see themselves as part of an unbroken tradition of sacrificial acts that was not disrupted by the destruction of the Second Temple.

In both the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds, the term *yisurin* retains the earlier, tannaitic meaning of unpleasant life experiences such as sickness, as well as the connotation of a sacrifice-like process by which atonement can be achieved.<sup>24</sup> However, as I will demonstrate, the logic of *yisurin*-as-sacrifice in the

22. James W. Watts, “The Rhetoric of Sacrifice,” in *Ritual and Metaphor: Sacrifice in the Bible*, ed. Christian A. Eberhart (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 12.

23. *Ibid.*, 9.

24. The word *yisurei/yisurin*, by itself or with various prefixes and suffixes, appears in the following places in the Babylonian Talmud: Berakhot 5a-b; Berakhot 10a; Berakhot 17a; Berakhot 56b; Berakhot 60a; Berakhot 62b; Shabbat 55a-55b; Shabbat 88b; Yoma 23a (paralleled at Shabbat 88b); Yoma 86a (parallel text to the Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishma’el Yitro Debachodesh 7 passage treated above); Yoma 87b; Beitza 32b; Ta’anit 8a; Yevamot 47a and 48b; Nedarim 40a; Sotah 11a; Gittin 36b (paralleled at Shabbat 88b and Yoma 23a); Kiddushin 40b; Kiddushin 82a; Bava Metzi’a 58b; Bava Metzi’a 84b-85a; Bava Batra 15b; Sanhedrin 39a; Sanhedrin 92a; Sanhedrin 93b; Sanhedrin 101a-b; Sanhedrin 106a; Sanhedrin 107a; Avodah Zarah 4a; Avodah Zarah 18b; Avodah Zarah 55a; Menachot 53b; Arakhin 16b; and Keritot 26b. The majority of these citations use *yisurin* to refer to sickness or other

Babylonian Talmud changes subtly but significantly from the tannaitic model: *yisurin* are conceptualized as a sort of reverse-sacrifice. Like sacrifice, the Talmud's *yisurin* are gifts that effect atonement—but whereas sacrifices are offered by the sinner to God, *yisurin* are offered as a gift by God to the sinner, whose responsibility it becomes to identify and accept them as such.

### YISURIN OF LOVE

Perhaps the most well-known treatment of *yisurin* in the Talmud appears just five folios into its first tractate. The passage begins with a meditation on the benefits and rewards of prayer and Torah study, including the potential avoidance—or not—of *yisurin*, and segues into a meditation on *yisurin* themselves. I will present a significant section from this passage in full before proceeding to a discussion of its use of Biblical allusions in discussing the concept of *yisurin*, the phenomenon of apparently random physical suffering.

- A. Rava said R. Sakhora said R. Huna said: Everyone whom the Holy-One-Blessed-Be-He favors, He afflicts with *yisurin*, as it is written: “Yet it pleased God to afflict him with disease” (Isaiah 53:10).<sup>25</sup>  
[Is this so] even if he does not accept them out of love?<sup>26</sup>  
[No;] therefore scripture states: “If his soul would offer itself in restitution (*asham*)” (ibid.). Just as an *asham* [sacrifice must be offered] with [the] knowledge [of the animals’ owners], so too *yisurin* [must be] known [i.e. acknowledged].<sup>27</sup>

---

types of negative experiences, sometimes experienced by the righteous (e.g. Berakhot 17a, Kiddushin 40b, Avodah Zarah 4a) and sometimes explicitly mentioned as a form of punishment or atonement (e.g. Yoma 86a, Sanhedrin 39a, Avodah Zarah 18b). Notable exceptions to these general trends include Arakhin 16b, treated at length in this article; Avodah Zarah 55a, in which *yisurin* are personified and made to take an oath delimiting the time of their appearance and departure; Bava Metsi'a 84b-85a, in which rabbis decide to bring *yisurin* upon themselves and experience terrible physical sufferings (see the important treatment of this passage by Daniel Boyarin in *Carnal Israel* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993], 197–225); and finally Shabbat 55a–b, which contains a discussion of whether or not people experience *yisurin* and die without having committed sins and concludes that they do, and is perhaps the best support for the position that the BT contains anti-theodical views.

25. The verse is being parsed here as “And God was pleased and afflicted him with disease.”

26. This is probably the best translation of the phrase, but it could also be read (especially in light of the following pericope) as “[Are they still *yisurin*] of love even if he does not accept them?”

27. R' Nisim Gaon, the late 10<sup>th</sup>-early 11<sup>th</sup>-century Babylonian rabbi, comments on this line: “For sacrifices are not permitted to be brought unless it is with the consent of the [animals'] owners and not against their will, as it is taught in a *baraita*, ‘He will offer it’ (Lev. 1:3)—this teaches us that we [must] force him [to]. Even against his will? [No;] therefore scripture states: ‘as he pleases’ (*lirtzono*—the literal sense of this word in context seems to be ‘to make

And if he accepts them, what is his reward? “That he might see his seed increase his days” (ibid.). Not only that, but furthermore, that his studies will remain with him [lit. in his hands], as it is written: “The desire of God will succeed by his hand” (ibid.).

- B. R. Ya’akov b. Idi and R. Aha b. Hanina disagreed about this. One said: What are *yisurin* of love? Those that do not cause the forsaking of Torah study, as it is written, “Happy is the person whom God disciplines [תִּסְרֶנּוּ] and whom You teach from Your Torah” (Psalms 94:12). The other said: What are *yisurin* of love? Those that do not cause the forsaking of prayer, as it is written: “Blessed is God who has not turned away my prayer or his kindness from me” (Psalms 66:20). R. Abba the son of R. Hiyya b. Abba said to him: R. Hiyya b. Abba said that R. Yohanan said thus: Both these and these are *yisurin* of love, as it is written: “For the one whom God loves, He rebukes” (Proverbs 3:12). Then why does scripture state “whom You teach from Your Torah”? Read not “whom You teach” but “teach us.”<sup>28</sup>
- C. An *a fortiori* argument can be made from a tooth or an eye. Just as a tooth or an eye, which are parts of the human body, are vehicles through which a slave can go free [if the master damages those parts of the slave], all the more so *yisurin*, which cleanse a person’s entire body/self! This is the same as the position of R. Shimon b. Lakish, as R. Shimon b. Lakish said: Scripture refers to a “covenant” by way of salt and it refers to a “covenant” by way of *yisurin*. It refers to a “covenant” by way of salt as it is written, “You shall not omit the salt of the covenant” (Leviticus 2:13); it refers to a “covenant” by way of *yisurin* as it is written, “These are the terms of the covenant” (Deuteronomy 28:69) [following the long list of plagues that God will afflict on the Israelites if they do not observe the commandments]. Just as [in the case of the] “covenant” referred to by way of salt, the salt sweetens the meat, so too [in the case of the] “covenant” referred to by way of *yisurin*, *yisurin* cleanse all of a person’s sins.
- D. It is taught in a *baraita* that R’ Shimon b. Yochai said: Three great gifts were given by God to Israel, and all of them were given only by means of *yisurin*, and these are they: Torah, the Land of Israel, and the world to come. From where [do we know that this is true of] Torah? As it is

---

him pleasing before God,’ but is here read otherwise). How does this work? We force him until he says, ‘Yes, yes, I want to.’” (BT Arakhin 21a).

28. The midrash here suggests an alternate vocalization of the word תִּסְרֶנּוּ.

written, “Happy is the person whom God disciplines and whom You teach from Your Torah” (Psalms 94:12). [And] the Land of Israel? As it is written, “As a man disciplines [יִסֵּר] his child, so the Lord your God will discipline you” (Deuteronomy 8:5); and it is written afterwards, “For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land” (Deuteronomy 8:6). [And] the world to come? As it is written, “For the commandment is a lamp and the Torah a light, and the path of life is the rebuke of discipline [מִוֶּסֶר]” (Proverbs 6:23).<sup>29</sup>

Two themes emerge from the verses that are used in this passage to describe *yisurin*: divine instruction in the form of both Torah and discipline, and sacrifice. The first pericope emphasizes the similarity between *yisurin* and sacrifice, claiming that just like expiatory sacrifices, *yisurin* are effective only if they are accompanied by the recognition of the subject. The analogy based on salt in Section C, though less explicit, claims that *yisurin* “cleanse” not only a person’s physical body but achieve atonement for one’s sins as well, which is one possible function of sacrifice (though not of all sacrifices, and not of the one referred to at Leviticus 2:13; this will be discussed further below).

Besides being two of the central concepts in rabbinic Judaism, these themes of Torah and sacrifice also share another important feature—namely, they are both gifts. Torah (as explicitly stated by Shimon b. Yochai in Section D) is a gift, perhaps the ultimate gift, given by God to Israel, whereas sacrifice is a form of gift that must be given by people to God.<sup>30</sup> Granted, the fourth pericope does not analogize *yisurin* to Torah in the way the first and third pericopes analogize *yisurin* to sacrifice, but rather states that *yisurin* are the vehicle through which Torah is given. However, it is nonetheless significant that the Talmud includes the gift-language of this midrashic *baraita* in this passage, which begins with the necessity of “accepting” *yisurin* “out of love.” By using both Torah and sacrifice as analogies for *yisurin*, this Talmud implies that *yisurin* are gifts as well. Like Torah, they are given (taught or afflicted) by God; but like sacrifices, their efficacy is contingent upon individual intent and can “cleanse all of a person’s sins.”

Whereas God can decide whether to accept or reject a sacrifice, however, *yisurin* are a gift from God whose acceptance is contingent on the human recipient. The emphasis upon the human being’s ability to accept or reject God’s gift

29. BT Berachot 5a, section division mine. This passage is paralleled at Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Yitro Debachodesh 10 (ed. Horowitz-Rabin 240).

30. The contradiction inherent in a mandatory gift is apparent in the description of a forced “voluntary” offering as cited in R. Nissim’s commentary; see note 6 above.

is apparent in the rhetorical midrashic question posed in Section A of the Berakhot passage cited above: “. . . Even if he does not accept them out of love? [No;] therefore scripture states: “If his soul would offer itself in restitution (*asham*).” Just as an *asham* [sacrifice must be offered] with [the] knowledge [of the animals’ owners], so too *yisurin* [must be] known [i.e. acknowledged].” *Yisurin* cannot be efficacious without the acceptance of the recipient.

The power of human agency in receiving (or not) *yisurin* is further highlighted by a well-known series of three short narratives that appear immediately after the passage at Berakhot 5b. In each of these narratives, a rabbi falls ill and his colleague comes to visit him. The visitor asks the invalid, “Are your *yisurin* dear to you?” The invalid rabbi replies, “Neither they nor their rewards.” The visitor says, “Give me your hand;” the invalid does, and his friend heals him. The invalid in these stories, with the help of his fellow, is able to effect a miraculous act of self-healing by acknowledging that *yisurin* have been given to him but rejecting them as an unwanted gift. In a similar vein, the Talmud mentions a habitual prayer of Rava’s in which he requests that his sins be wiped clean in God’s great mercy, but not by means of *yisurin* and terrible illnesses.<sup>31</sup>

In their treatments of suffering in rabbinic literature, both Yaakov Elman and David Kraemer argue that these passages exemplify a later Babylonian ambivalence or even rejection of the idea that suffering is justifiable—in other words, they characterize these passages as typifying a particularly Babylonian atheodicy. However, I argue that *yisurin* function much more like an offering, specifically the Biblical *hattat* offering, whose efficacy depends on its acceptance. Instead of God deciding whether or not to receive a sacrifice, however, it is now the human being who has the agency to accept or reject a gift of *yisurin*.

In the Biblical description of a *hattat* sacrifice, the still-living animal is brought to the altar and hands are laid upon its head, at which point a verbal confession might be made. According to Noam Zohar’s analysis of the *hattat* ritual, the laying of hands effects a transfer of the donor’s sin onto the animal, where it then resides in the animal’s blood.<sup>32</sup> The atonement is achieved “by God’s forgiving response to the disowned impurity brought before him”; the part of the ritual in which the animal’s blood is applied to the altar is not in

31. BT Berakhot 17a.

32. Noam Zohar, “Repentance and Purification: The Significance and Semantics of תָּשַׁח in the Pentateuch,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 7, no. 4 (Dec. 1988): 616. Zohar even understands the root *h-t-t* to essentially mean “replace/displace/transfer.”

itself a purification rite but presupposes that repentance has already occurred.<sup>33</sup>

Built into the structure of both *hattat* and *yisurin* is the fact that there is no precise moment at which the atonement occurs, but rather a point at which the atonement *must have already happened*. For the *hattat*, this is the blood rite during which the victim's blood is applied to the altar, presupposing that God has already accepted the sacrifice. For the recipient of *yisurin*, on the other hand, the knowledge of atonement happens even earlier: it comes at the moment of acknowledging the *yisurin* as such, of agreeing to receive them as an atonement-inducing gift of love. The logic of *yisurin* thus creates a model in which the human participant not only atones for his or her sins, but is demonstrated to have already been atoned for and thus exist in good standing with God. The fact of suffering is proof that the "sacrifice" is already both happening and approved by the Divine. The person, as both sacrificer and sacrificial victim, must therefore be seen as already innocent and already forgiven by God; after all, as the Talmud states, God makes suffer those God (already) loves.<sup>34</sup>

*Yisurin's* ideal function—atonement—is the same as that of the *hattat* offering. However, the form of the event is significantly different. Whereas in the case of the *hattat* the sin of the donor is transferred to the animal, who serves as the locus of the gift, the gift-work in *yisurin* of transforming sin to pain to forgiveness takes place in the sinner's body itself. As Zohar describes the *hattat*, "Experientially, what we have here is a process of *dissociation*: the sinner, regretting his sin and wishing to be rid of its residual impurity, casts it away from his person and objectifies it in a receptacle of blood."<sup>35</sup> In the case of *yisurin*, however, the sins and their expiation are objectified in the person's own body. The individual atoner's role has become central, while the roles of the animal and the priest have disappeared entirely. The object of *yisurin* becomes simultaneously the atoner, the sacrificer, and the sacrificial victim. But rather than the human being initiating the process, it is instead initiated by God, and the human takes over the role of acceptance that had belonged to God in the biblical model.

Raymond Firth notes that offerings are distinguished from everyday gifts by an asymmetrical status relationship, which brings with it the notion of

33. *Ibid.*, 615.

34. This theological formulation bears a striking resemblance to some Christological doctrines. However, since it is difficult to know to what extent the Babylonian rabbis were familiar with early Christian thought, I choose not to speculate here on any possible relationship.

35. *Ibid.*, 614.

uncertainty—the giver, who is the inferior, does not know whether her gift will be accepted or rejected.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, in the sacrificial paradigm proposed by Moshe Halbertal, the superior (God) acknowledges the inferior (person) by accepting the gift, in which case atonement is granted. But the acknowledgement need not happen—the offering can be rejected.<sup>37</sup> The treatment of *yisurin* in Berakhot thus revolutionizes the sacrificial model of *hattat* by reversing the direction of the gift and granting the human recipient agency to accept or reject it.

### MUNDANE SUFFERING

The Talmud presents *yisurin* as a kind of sacrificial gift, one that the human recipient has the power to accept or reject. The notion that *yisurin* are only religiously valuable pending their subject's agreement is somewhat difficult to reconcile with either a theodical or an anti-theodical agenda. The Talmud not only images the recipient as having agency to accept or reject the *yisurin*, however; he also has the power (within some limits) to define what counts as *yisurin* at all. The Talmud detaches its definition from the significance or degree of the suffering, allowing (almost) anything to count as *yisurin* and thus enabling the "victim" to reap its rewards. By nearly dissociating it from physical reality, the rabbis maximize the meaning of "*yisurin*" and turn it into a remarkably mundane legal category. "*Yisurin*" as a category is not significant because of what it points out in the world, but because of the theological significance attached to it, as exemplified in the following passage:

Until what point have *yisurin* [still] achieved their purpose? R' Elazar said: Anyone who had a garment woven for him to wear and it does not fit him.

Rav[a] Zeira and some say R' Shmuel b. Nahmani objected to this: Even more than that they said! Even if he intended to mix [his wine] with hot water and it was mixed for him with cold, or with cold and it was mixed for him with hot.

And you say [even] all this?! Mar the son of Ravina said: Even if his shirt was turned backwards.

Rava, or some say R' Hisda, or some say R' Yitzchak, or it was taught in a *baraita*: Even one who put his hand in his pouch to take out three [coins] and his hand came up with two.

36. Raymond Firth, "Offering and Sacrifice: Problems of Organization," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 93, no. 1 (Jan - Jun, 1963): 12.

37. Moshe Halbertal, *On Sacrifice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 3ff.

[The *baraita*] specifies [that he intended to take out] three and came up with two – but not [if he intended to take out] two and came up with three, because it is no trouble to him to put one back.

But why all this?

As it is taught in a *baraita* of the school of R' Yishmael: Anyone for whom forty days passes without *yisurin* has received his world [i.e., has preemptively redeemed his reward for the world to come].

In the West it is said, “Punishment is appointed for him.”<sup>38</sup>

This passage lists a series of suggestions for the minimum threshold at which unpleasantness can be legitimately considered “suffering” and the end or goal (*takblit*) of *yisurin* has still been achieved.<sup>39</sup> Each possibility put forth is individual, highly specific, and apparently devoid of any physical pain; in the end, the only criterion seems to be required is that any discomfort whatsoever has been experienced.<sup>40</sup>

As Moshe Halbertal points out, one paradox of a gift is that in order to be a gift and not a payment, there can be no significance to the (economic) value of the thing itself.<sup>41</sup> In fact, such an attitude towards sacrifice is evidenced already in the Mishnah:

Scripture states in reference to the burnt offering of an animal, “By fire, a pleasing odor” (Leviticus 1:9); and it states in reference to the burnt offering of a bird, “By fire, a pleasing odor” (Leviticus 1:17); and in reference to the grain offering, “By fire, a pleasing odor.” [This is] to teach you that [the sacrifice] of one who increases and one who decreases is [considered] the same—as long as he directs his intention to Heaven.<sup>42</sup>

Similarly, for the rabbis, the degree of pain experienced in *yisurin* is made completely irrelevant. The gift of *yisurin* is—indeed must be—empty, valueless,

38. BT Arakhin 16b.

39. I would argue that the counterintuitively maximalist language throughout this passage—“Even more than this was said”; “and you say all this”; “but why all this”—refers to the increasing conceptual audacity of the rabbinic definitions of suffering. The use of the word *ad*, which usually indicates the search for an uppermost limit but appears here in the context of the definition of a minimum, adds yet another element to the maximalist connotations of this passage’s wording.

40. The case in which someone means to remove two coins from his wallet but accidentally removes three is not construed as suffering merely because reality did not correspond to his intentions, since taking out an extra coin is annoying but not disappointing. The phrase “it is no trouble for him to put it back” emphasizes the subtle emotional difference between two experiences of discrepancy between expectation and reality, the first of which entails a minutely negative surprise and the second of which entails a minutely positive one.

41. Halbertal, *On Sacrifice*, 26.

42. m. Menakhot 13:11.

because the point is not the contents of the gift itself, but rather the acceptance of the gift *through its interpretation as such*. The sacrificial model of atonement has here been transformed into an almost entirely hermeneutic process.

Chaya Halberstam has argued that an important interpretative and legislative strategy for the rabbis was the transformation of both internal experience and objective sensory data into legal categories, which she sees as a response to the frustratingly elusive nature of ultimate truth. The conceptualization of *yisurin* is a prime instance of the rabbinic tendency to see knowledge as derived through (often counter-intuitive, or at least heavily conceptual) categories of their own formation.<sup>43</sup> Halberstam writes, “As the rabbis banished divine decision making from human courts, they also relegated God’s involvement with humans and the world—divine reward and punishment—to a sphere beyond the law in which God could be encountered personally and individually.”<sup>44</sup> Halberstam links the increased legal and hermeneutic activity of the rabbis to an increased emphasis on an individual relationship (as opposed, perhaps, to a legally mediated one) with the divine. The interpretation of *yisurin* exemplifies the rabbis’ portrayal of the categorization of one’s individual experience in the world as constitutive of ultimate truth—here, the status of an individual’s relationship with God.

The Talmudic passage also raises the question of the purpose for this entire discussion. What is the use of defining the minimal standard of suffering—and of going to such lengths to claim that it is very minimal indeed? The end of the passage explains that, according to a *baraita* attributed to the school of R. Yishma’el, anyone who experiences a forty-day *yisurin*-free period has prematurely received the reward designated for him in the world to come. Suffering is thus portrayed as a sought-after sign of one’s worthiness of eternal reward.<sup>45</sup> As Eliezer Diamond writes, “The better one’s life is from a material perspective, the more reason one has for concern lest one’s good fortune is the prospering of the evildoer, while the more straitened one’s circumstances, the greater the likelihood that one is among the suffering righteous.”<sup>46</sup> The minimal standard for

43. For an extremely detailed analysis of the development and types of rabbinic categorization, see Leib Moscovitz’s *Talmudic Reasoning* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002).

44. Chaya Halberstam, *Law and Truth in Biblical and Rabbinic Literature* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012), 145.

45. *Yisurin* are likewise portrayed as providing assurance of one’s place in the world to come at BT Avodah Zarah 4a and BT Kiddushin 40b.

46. Eliezer Diamond, *Holy Men and Hunger Artists: Fasting and Asceticism in Rabbinic Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 64.

suffering is therefore made smaller so that status among the “suffering righteous” becomes that much easier to achieve. By diminishing the significance of the so-called suffering itself and emphasizing the importance of the subsequent reward, this passage transforms *yisurin* into an almost entirely conceptual religious legal category—one that denotes important theological consequences but nothing significant in the physical world. At the same time, the potential to gain *yisurin*’s rewards is democratized, as this passage allows anyone to whom anything mildly irritating has occurred during the course of daily life to feel that his or her spiritual standing has been affirmed. The community of the “suffering righteous” is expanded to include practically anyone who learns about and internalizes this new definition of suffering—in effect, any member of the rabbinic textual community.

*Yisurin* thus constitute a dual gift for the rabbis. God, in bestowing sufferings upon the human, notices the human being and initiates the gift exchange.<sup>47</sup> The human being returns the gift through acknowledging the gift as such, as sufferings of love (or sufferings received with love). The end result of this gift exchange, as in the gift of an expiatory sacrifice, is the availability of the knowledge that God has forgiven the one who [was] sacrificed. We should thus reread the rabbinic treatment of suffering *not* as theodicy, an attempt to respond after the fact or justify suffering in the world, but as a site for interpreting God’s forgiveness of human beings through real, physical events.

By reconceptualizing *yisurin* in this way, the rabbis are to some extent partaking in broader late antique religious trends in thinking about human experiences. Both Christian and rabbinic discourses about suffering do not simply respond to suffering as a phenomenon in the world, but transform it into a religiously significant category. Judith Perkins has argued that early Christian literature made a discursive choice to focus on and reinterpret the suffering body, both representing the suffering self as in need of concern and attention and also, somewhat paradoxically, portraying the experience of suffering as an indication of power.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, in his discussion of the portrayal of illness in late ancient monastic sources, Andrew T. Crislip argues that disease is constructed in those texts as a religiously effective practice, whether it is as a vehicle for restoring

47. In contrast to Halbertal’s formulation of the sacrificial gift: “The one who is offering a sacrifice wishes to appear before God, to be made visible and join the gift cycle” (Halbertal, *On Sacrifice*, 15). Here, instead, it is God who gives the gift of noticing, making visible, opening the cycle.

48. Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

prelapsarian health or as a way to emulate Christ on the cross. Like *yisurin* in the texts we have seen, illness is at times framed in these early Christian sources as a choice, thus transforming it into a mode of asceticism and a “spiritual exercise.”<sup>49</sup>

However, while both early Christians and rabbis constitute suffering as a new kind of site for the generation of religious meaning, the rabbinic passage about mundane suffering does so in a distinctively rabbinic way: through the legalization of subjectivity and the creation of a new hermeneutic category. This is a particularly rabbinic mode of thinking that also yields a distinctive result in its democratization of religiously meaningful experience. Early Christian texts often tended to focus both on exceptional people and exceptional types of suffering. They portrayed holy men and women who either experienced martyrdom at the hands of the Romans, such as Perpetua or Polycarp, or else led religiously exemplary lives in which ascetic suffering played a central role, such as Simeon the Stylite or Syncletica. Such lives could then be learned from, admired, and emulated. In contrast, for the rabbis, when *yisurin* are transformed into a conceptual category that can include both extreme and mundane forms of negative experiences, *yisurin* can, and do, occur to most people.

Yet despite these differences, this redefinition of *yisurin* as a technical legal category, one which can no longer be justifiably translated as “suffering,” may ultimately yield the same result as the early Christian interpretation of suffering. Perkins argues that the new Christian emphasis and redefinition of suffering is part of what helps constitute Christianity as a compelling community by “helping to construct a subject that would be present for its call.”<sup>50</sup> By connecting with texts about exemplary sufferers, “individuals began to think of themselves as bodies liable to pain and suffering.” Perkins writes, “As sufferers, categories of people came to be viewed as ‘us,’ and were afforded a cultural attention and community concern that they had not had in the traditional Greco-Roman world.”<sup>51</sup> The rabbinic treatment of suffering likewise contributes to their broader project of creating of a community of people with a new subjectivity, a sense of their own everyday physical and emotional experiences as belonging

49. Andrew Crislip, *Thorns in the Flesh: Illness and Sanctity in Late Ancient Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 108. I focus here on comparing rabbinic and Christian approaches to suffering, but for a take on rabbinic and Christian approaches to sin in Late Antiquity, see also Burton Visotzky, “Mortal Sins,” in *Fathers of the World* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1995).

50. Perkins, *Suffering*, 3.

51. *Ibid.*, 12.

to a specific set of legal categories. As suffering itself becomes a desirable indicator that atonement has already been achieved, as in the biblical *hattat* model, the rabbis seek to maximize this category, creating the possibility of a larger community of righteous who can point to evidence—however small—that they are among God’s favored ones. ■