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RESPONDING TOGETHER: DEVOTION AND SOLIDARITY IN B. TA'ANIT 10A–11A

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Opening Remarks

The interface of communal and individual responsibility in times of crisis rests at the heart of the *sugya* in Bavli Ta'anit 10a–11a. This tractate, as a whole, grapples with the ritual procedures and theological underpinnings of fast days, especially as decreed in response to drought or other circumstantial factors (famine, plague, and so forth).[1] These rabbinic traditions outline a set of physical practices and responses to widespread suffering in which, as Julia Watts Belser has argued, "The fasting body becomes a physical site for expressing the physical and spiritual dangers of rain's absence."[2] For this reason, the *sugyot* of Ta'anit can serve as a useful prompt for our contemporary reflections on human agency—and fragility—in the wake of environmental calamity.[3] They provide us with a possible moral vocabulary, and ritual grammar, for considering social connectivity, communal response, and individual choice in the wake of ecological catastrophe. The text of Bavli 10a–11a, in my estimation, offers a particularly repercussive opportunity for reconsidering our assumptions about the nature of solidarity, empathy, and obligation.

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[1] See David Levin, *Communal Fasts and Rabbinic Sermons: Theory and Practice in the Talmudic Period* (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz ha-Me'uhad, 2001), esp. 136–140 and 157 (Hebrew); Daniel Sperber, "Drought, Famine, and Pestilence in Amoraic Palestine," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 17.3 (1973): 272–298; and Natan Oliff, "Halakha as Process: Hazal's Approach to Fasting in Masekhet Ta'anit," *Tradition* 52.1 (2020): 146–151.

[2] Julia Watts Belser, *Power, Ethics, and Ecology in Jewish Late Antiquity: Rabbinic Responses to Drought and Disaster* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 123. See also ibid., 130–131; Louis Jacobs, "The Body in Jewish Worship: Three Rituals Examined," *Religion and the*

This turn to the Bavli reflects my belief that, while global climate change is the greatest moral and existential crisis of our day, our philosophical, social, and economic systems are woefully unequipped to address the social and ecological implications of these enormous environmental shifts. "In that global warming poses a powerful challenge to the idea that the free pursuit of individual interests always leads to the general good," writes Amitav Ghosh, "it also challenges a set of beliefs that underlies a deeply rooted cultural identity, one that has enjoyed unparalleled success over the last two centuries."[4] Responses grounded in starting points of liberal and market individualism have failed to generate the collective action needed to address the extreme weather events, loss of biodiversity, depletion of fisheries, pollution of air, water, and soil, prolonged droughts, and mass extinction of species. This is, however, precisely the context in which we might return to Robert Cover's theory of Jewish jurisprudence as founded in obligation rather than individual rights.[5] Providing a correction to the post-Enlightenment West's centering

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Body, ed. Sarah Coakley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 71–89; Naftali S. Cohn, "The Complex Ritual Dynamics of Individual and Group Experience in the Temple, as Imagined in the Mishnah," *AJS Review* 43.2 (2019): 293–318; Eliezer Diamond, *Holy Men and Hunger Artists: Fasting and Asceticism in Rabbinic Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 118–120.

[3] See b. Ta'anit 7a–8a; and cf. b. Ta'anit 2a; and Isabelle Stengers, "Autonomy and the Intrusion of Gaia," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116.2 (2017): 381–400.

[4] See Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 134.

[5] See Robert M. Cover, "Obligation: A Jewish Jurisprudence of the Social Order," *Journal of Law and Religion* 5 (1987): 65–74.

of the "individual moral adventure"[6] and the allure of choice-based market solutions, the pre-modern roots of rabbinic sources enable them to challenge such paradigms. The Bavli is of value as an ethical thought-partner precisely because it predates both modern liberalism (and attendant conceptions of the individual) and the extractive mentality of our industrialized carbon economy. While Jewish legal literatures cannot provide a wholesale transferrable solution to environmental problems, I aim to show that Ta'anit offers a robust accounting of socially embedded duties and commitment to other human parties and the non-human world.

Pedagogy and Ethics

Let me formulate the aims of this project with greater precision. Exploring rabbinic texts as "ethical prompts," an activity that requires care, attention, and diligence, should be distinguished from examining these sources to apply their specific modes of legal or moral reasoning to our present day. As noted in the introduction to this special issue, as both a scholar and a theologian I am particularly drawn to what Charles Altieri has called "reading through," a practice of reading through which "we can gain a rich grammar for interpreting particular experiences or projecting self-images that have significant resonance in how we make decisions in the present."[7] In this encounter with the "words, images, exemplars, and prose and poetic forms" of texts quite far from our own experience, claims Francis X. Clooney, "we learn also to reread our own daily lives so as to make room for new choices."[8] This work of expanding our ethical horizons, of extending the range of reasoning that populates our moral imagination, demands precise understanding of any given text.

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[6] Cover, "Obligation," 127.

[7] Charles Altieri, *Canons and Consequences: Reflections on the Ethical Force of Imaginative Ideals* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1990), 17.

[8] Francis X. Clooney, *Beyond Compare: St. Francis de Sales and Śrī Vedanta Desika on Loving Surrender to God* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2008), 134.

In the case of studying Talmud, it means paying attention to a *sugya*'s twists and turns, noting the marbled construction of its layers while considering how they are combined into a coherent whole. I generally ask students to read the *sugya* in its entirety before our classroom study, charting its contours and getting a good sense of its conceptual ebb and flow. (I advise the reader of this essay to follow the same procedure.)[9] We can then ask: Which themes guide its overall development? Where are the conceptual inflection points—and when do the editors (the so-called *stamma'im*) cleverly turn the discussion on its head? Where are the literary or ideological seams, loose threads at which we might begin to tug?

This practice of careful reading paves the way for comparing one *sugya* to other relevant discussions or thematic units within the same tractate, as well as those in the other seas of Talmudic literature. How do elements of this particular discussion complement and challenge the overall thrust of this section of the Talmud? In the case of this *sugya*, students ought to ponder the fact that much of Bavli Ta'anit focuses on the interface of calendar, space, and ritual; the tractate grapples with resilience and the expansion of the moral imagination in the face of chaos and collapse.[10] Yet the various discussions of these themes offer very different answers or, perhaps better, ethical prompts to spur our thinking as we consider the problems. All of these are preserved within the textual tapestry for a single tractate. To draw upon the frame of the noted legal scholar Karl Llewellyn, we might ask how the canon of sources "parries and thrusts"—presenting its readers with different values and ethical frameworks that complement and challenge one another.[11] Then, looking beyond the pages of Bavli Ta'anit, we should consider how the theories of community and territory advanced in this tractate compare to those elsewhere in the Talmud. The search for broader ethical horizons demands attentive reading of relevant texts across the rabbinic corpus. Furthermore, the *sugya*'s key textual "moments" can serve as prompts for thinking outside the *daf*—beyond the "folio" of Talmud—as we deliberate of foundational questions of ethics, philosophy, political thought, and theological reflection by drawing upon works across different religious and theoretical canons.

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[9] The complete *sugya*, available on *Sefaria*, may be found here: www.sefaria.org/sheets/552539.

[10] See Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

[11] Karl N. Llewellyn, "Remarks on the Theory of Appellate Decision and the Rules or Canons about How Statutes are to be Construed," *Vanderbilt Law Review* 3 (1950): 401–402.

I teach rabbinic texts primarily, but not exclusively, within a secular university in the United States. Certain lines of inquiry cannot be undertaken there in the way that they might in, say, a rabbinical seminary or *yeshivah* (where I taught previously). Both the university and the *beit-midrash* are vital and activating educational environments, and they each have their constraints and limitations. Studying and teaching Talmud at the university (particularly at a research institution without a divinity school) allows me to approach the sources as a humanist, as an intellectual historian who uses the Bavli's *sugyot* to spark the types of moral, existential, and philosophical exploration that are the heart of liberal education.[12] My students often find the Talmud—with its fusion of abstruse legal reasoning, alluring narrative, and close attention to the quotidian details of everyday life—to be alluring, exciting, and enigmatic in equal measures. Perhaps because it feels both so familiar and so alien, the Talmud stimulates their thinking and sustained personal development. Following the model outlined by Emily Style and expanded by Rudine Sims Bishop, the Bavli contains endless "mirrors, windows, and doors."[13] These textual prompts are powerful precisely because they enable at least three different modes of situated reading: they prompt thinking by reflecting our own life experiences, but the Bavli can also open our eyes to different intellectual and cultural worlds while providing us with the expansive portals—ethical possibilities—with which to construct a different future.

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[12] See Ilana Blumberg, *Open Your Hand: Teaching as a Jew, Teaching as an American* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018).

[13] See Rudine Sims Bishop, "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors," *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom* 6.3 (1990).

Individual Beginnings

The *sugya*'s point of departure is a mishnah explaining that a set of persons known as "the *yehidim*," a group enigmatically defined by their status as "individuals," must observe three fasts if rain does not arrive in the land of Israel by the seventeenth of Heshvan.[14] These fasts last from sunrise to sunset, and the individuals may continue to work, bathe, anoint themselves, wear comfortable leather shoes, and even engage in sexual intercourse—other than denying themselves food and drink, life proceeds very much as normal. This fuller array of activities is indeed prohibited on Yom Kippur, and on days associated with mourning, suggesting the initial fasts of the *yehidim* are less severe even as they may foreshadow suffering and devastation if the drought endures.[15] Should the *yehidim* fail to summon the rains, the mishnah prescribes thirteen additional fasts for the whole community, and, if these also ineffective, the *yehidim* must fast again until the beginning of Nissan.[16]

The Bavli's first question, the opening gambit of our *sugya*, is unsurprising: Who are the *yehidim*? While this term is not common in tannaitic sources, it is recalled already in the mishnah with a definite article and these people appear to be a well-known class of individuals.[17] But who? Rav Huna claims they are "the rabbis" (*rabbanan*), locating the practice of preemptory individual fasting within the nexus of rabbinic power and responsibility.[18] We should not accept this identification uncritically.[19] Syriac Christian literatures use a cognate word (*ihidaya*) in reference to certain non-monastic individuals of particular spiritual and social status.[20] The *yehidim* invoked in our mishnah may well be persons renowned for efficacious prayer or charismatic power who are not part of the rabbinic class.[21] Mention of these curious individuals thus anticipates the reader's encounter with the Nazirite at the very end of our *sugya*, another category of pietistic individuals who threaten rabbinic norms and claims to religious power.[22] This fissure should come as no surprise; as Julia Watts Belser has argued, Bavli Ta'anit "evinces a striking propensity to recognize and critique rabbinic ethical failings."[23] This tendency is particularly clear in the tractate's third chapter, which is filled with voices of dissent from strange non-rabbinic character and thus manifests the tensions that characterize the work as a whole.[24]

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[14] m. Ta'anit 1:4.

[15] See m. Yoma 8:1, and Jonathan Wyn Schofer, *Confronting Vulnerability: The Body and the Divine in Rabbinic Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 116.

[16] m. Ta'anit 1:7.

[17] Cf. *Sifrei Devarim, ha-azinu, piska*, no. 315.

[18] See Richard Kalmin, *The Sage in Jewish Society of Late Antiquity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 76–77.

[19] On the neglect of Torah study as a reason for drought, see b. Ta'anit 7b.

This initial stage of response to drought, and the identity of its participants, raises another set of questions: Are the *yehidim* asked to fast because they are held to a higher standard? Are they conscripted because of their piety or scholarly acumen? Are they compelled to fast because of their social prominence, or are they simply talented spiritual experts who know how to avert disaster? Do their efforts represent a ritualized communal expression or gesture of fear?[25]Or does their suffering work as a kind of expiation, sparking divine compassion in inverse proportion to their physical pain and discomfort?[26] Might the author of this mishnah wish to minimize the economic, psychological, and social disturbance of a looming but as-yet-unrealized crisis, restricting the active measures to a small group of individuals rather than calling for massive collective movement all at once? Perhaps this is how the editors of the *sugya* understood the situation, for Rav Huna's next statement highlights the potential financial implications of these fasts: starting on a Thursday would cause prices to spike (because of the proximity of the Sabbath), and therefore *yehidim* must mitigate the economic complications by fasting first on a Monday (followed by Thursday, and Monday once again).[27]

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[20] See Jonathan Wyn Schofer, "Theology and Cosmology in Rabbinic Ethics: The Pedagogical Signifiance of Rainmaking Narratives," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 12.3 (2005): 256 n67; Sidney Griffith, "Asceticism and the Church of Syria: The Hermeneutics of Early Syrian Monasticism," *Asceticism*, ed. R. Wimbush and R. Valantasis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 223–229; and Naomi Koltun-Fromm, "Yokes of the Holy-Ones: The Embodiment of a Christian Vocation," *Harvard Theological Review* 94.2 (2001): 207–220.

[21] Schofer, "Theology and Cosmology," 253–254, notes that y. Ta'anit identifies the *yehidim* with *parnasim*, individuals whose effective prayer reflects their communal standing. The parallel also refers to the prayers of several rabbis being answered because of acts of interpersonal piety that seem counterintuitive or are invisible to the community.

[22] See Aharon Shemesh, "Did the Rabbis Consider Nazirhood an Ascetic Practice," *Talmudic Transgressions: Engaging the Work of Daniel Boyarin*, ed. Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, Ishay Rosen-Zvi, Aharon Shemesh, Moulie Vidas, in collaboration with James Adam Redfield (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 109–122.

[23] Watts Belser, *Power, Ethics, and Ecology*, 4.

[24] Schofer, "Theology and Cosmology," 256; William Scott Green, "Palestinian Holy Men: Charismatic Leadership and Rabbinic Tradition," in *Band 19/2. Halbband Religion (Judentum: Palästinisches Judentum [Forts.])*, ed. Wolfgang Haase (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 619–648; Baruch M. Bokser, "Wonder Working and the Rabbinic Tradition: The Case of Hanina ben Dosa," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 16 (1985): 42–92.

We might ask, how does one join the ranks of the *yehidim*? The *sugya* addresses this question in its next move, citing a relevant passage from the Tosefta: "One should not say 'I am a student (*talmid*) and not worthy to be a *yahid*.' All scholars of Torah are *yehidim*."[28] According to this early tannaitic source, now deployed by the Bavli, protestations of humility should not prevent one from becoming a *yahid*—all scholars devoted to Torah fit the bill. The baraita continues, tentatively defining a *yahid* as one who is worthy of being elected leader (*parnas*), whereas the *talmid* is someone in full command of their studies.[29] The Gemara, however, now introduces us to a contradictory baraita: "Not all those who wish to become a *yahid* may do so—a student may do so." This elliptical statement, the opinion of Rabbi Meir, can be interpreted in different ways. It may imply that a person may only become a *talmid*, not a *yahid*, or it might suggest that only sages can join the *yehidim*.[30] Rabbi Yose is cited as having offered a different position: taking on a higher level of ritual obligation and fasting is always "considered for the good, since it entails pain rather than pleasure."[31]

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[25] *Sifrei Zuta*, ch. 19.

[26] See Daniel Boyarin. *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

[27] m. Ta'anit 2:9; b. Ta'anit 15b.

[28] t. Ta'anit 1:7.

[29] Cf. *Tosafot*, ad loc, citing b. Shabbat 141.

The editors of this *sugya* seem quite concerned with understanding who can, or cannot, take part in these fasts as one of the *yehidim*, seeking to determine the relationship between this social or religious category and that of the rabbis, students, or scholars. The Bavli, in other words, presents a search for who is responsible as the community's first line of defense, while grappling with (and possibly reasserting) its spiritual hierarchy. Some elements define the *yahid* by communal standing, whereas the *talmid* is so designated by scholarship and erudition. Rav Huna's declaration that *yehidim* are the rabbis consolidates their while raising the possibility that these sages know the craft of theurgy.[32] Rabbi Yose, on the other hand, offers a more flexible vision in which all those who wish to fast may do so. Suffering (*tsa'ar*) presents a limiting condition preventing individuals from looking an easy ticket to a different class,[33] but Rabbi Yose's opinion may also reflect a belief that persons motivated by personal interest cannot do the theological work of averting tragedy.

This opening unit prompts us to consider a probing philosophical question : Who must take responsibility when suffering appears on the horizon? Enormous social changes and intellectual transformations can, as we shall see, begin with individual acts of dissidence and unrest public. This is true even in the time of anthropogenic climate change, as global shifts emerge from the coordinated efforts of small groups of motivated people.[34] At the same time, it would be foolhardy to focus exclusively on individual subjects when confronted by problems that demand collective action. So, too, with the questions of human welfare and issues that are inherently social, including distributive justice, equity, and solidarity as well as common response to environmental calamity. Such challenges and crises impact both the community and the social order, and they cannot be solved through personal choice or market individualism. These are matters to which the editors of the *sugya* now draw the reader's eyes.

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[30] See *Mishneh Torah, hilkhot ta'aniyot* 3:1; *Arba'ah Turim, orah hayyim* no. 575; *Shulhan 'Arukh, orah hayyim*, no. 575:1.

[31] The editors of the Bavli map this disagreement between Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar and Rabban Shim'on ben Gamliel, also preserved in t. Ta'anit 1:7.

[32] Linking two teachings in of our *sugya*, RaSHI sees the category of *talmid* as a necessary prerequisite for joining the *yehidim*.

[33] See RaSHI's comments, ad loc.

Changing Terms and Shared Experience

The Bavli's discussion now advances to what happens when the precipitating cause of a fast has been resolved. If the crisis has been averted, must the fast be completed? We read:

> The Sages taught: One fasting on account of trouble that passed, or for a sick person who is healed, should complete the fast.
>
> A traveler from a place where they are not fasting to a place where they are fasting [ought to] fast with them.
>
> One who travels from a place where they are fasting to a place where they are not fasting ought to complete the fast.

According to this baraita, a person must indeed finish their fast even if the impetuous or triggering circumstance has changed. Why? Completing the fast might be construed as an expression of gratitude—God has answered the prayers of those afflicting their bodies, and, in reciprocity, they carry through to the end of their fast. RaSHI, however, notes that one must keep fasting even if the person has died; the issue at hand is the need to fulfill a vow irrespective of its success or failure.[35]

These considerations are still largely matters of individual practice. But the case of a person moving between communities, included in this same baraita, explicitly foregrounds questions of solidarity and social coherence. One who arrives in a fasting community ought to share their abstention from food and drink, perhaps an example of the rabbinic principle that one must adopt local practices (including stringencies).[36] Alternatively, this person may be obligated to fast because the physical move has brought them into the zone of hazard or impending calamity and hence under the umbrella of communal responsibility. It is noteworthy, then, that the rule seems incongruent for a person who departs from a fasting village or town. They must complete the ritual even if they are no longer in any type of personal danger, either because the fast is a vow (following RaSHI) or due to the fact that one's community of origin remains under threat.

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[34] See Avram Hiller, "Climate Change and Individual Responsibility," *The Monist* 94.3 (2011): 349–368.

[35] See also She'elot u-Teshuvot, *Or Zarua'*, vol. 2, 401:1.

The themes of sociality continue in the next stage of the Bavli's discussion. We learn that one who accidentally interrupts their fast should not consider themselves entirely free; they cannot eat or drink in front of others, nor can they enjoy special foods or gastronomic delights. In fact, RaSHI compares a person who gratifies themselves with such fancy as acting like "a bridegroom among mourners." Later scholars extend this prohibition of indulgence in times of communal suffering, even if one has fallen short of the mark and is no longer fasting, to one's behavior in private.[37] This suggests a moral concern that extends beyond compliance or admonitions of social coherence to highlight the ethical flaccidity of one who makes merry while surrounded by suffering.

The *sugya*'s editors then presents us with number of loosely connected statements about study practices and ethical conduct while one is "on the way"—continuing the theme of how one ought to act in different circumstances when moving from one location to another.[38] These odd travel narratives are followed by a series of teachings that comprise the conceptual and ethical heart of the *sugya*:

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[36] See m. Pesahim 4, and the comments of RaSHI and Tosafot. See also *Shulhan Arukh*, *orah hayyim*, no. 574.

[37] See the ReMA's gloss on *Shulhan Arukh*, *orah hayyim*, no. 574, citing the writings of Mordecai ben Hillel.

[38] This material, which does not appear in Yitshak Alfasi's legal digest, seems to break with the key themes of the *sugya*. On travel narratives and exegesis, however, see Dina Stein, *Textual Mirrors: Reflexivity, Midrash, and the Rabbinic Self* (Philadelphia: University of

> Rabbi Yehudah said in the name of Rav: "One who starves themself during years of famine is saved from an unusual death,[39] as it says, 'In famine, He will redeem you from death'" (Job 5:2).

Rabbi Yehudah has reinterpreted *be-ra'av* as "with" or "by means of famine" rather than "from famine," suggesting that voluntary acts of supererogatory piety prevent starvation from reaching one's doorstep. Refraining from food or drink is a gesture meant to incite divine compassion, a type of self-preservation amid the communal strife. The next statement cited in the Gemara, however, is even bolder:

> Resh Lakish said: "It is forbidden for one to engage in sexual relations during a time of famine, as it says, 'and two sons were born to Joseph before the year of famine came'" (Gen. 41:50).

The experience of hardship and privation should, claims Resh Lakish, should lead to abstinence and self-denial. We might initially construe the opinions of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish construed as referring only to famine in one's immediate community, but the scriptural prooftexts suggest otherwise; the years of shortage and scarcity they describe are not necessarily local. Why then should an individual fast or refrain from sex without an urgent threat to their own family? The practical, pragmatic considerations of personal interest do not apply in such cases. RaSHI, perhaps sensing this, suggests that they are meant to prompt us to consider a fundamental ethical principle: one must include oneself in the community's suffering (*tsa'ar*), even taking the proactive steps of self-denial that build empathy and forge connections both social and theological.

Commentators both medieval and modern have struggled to make sense of these two statements and to understand their reach as well as

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Pennsylvania Press, 2012), esp. 58–83, and, more broadly, Catherine Hezser, Jewish Travel in Antiquity (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).

[39] The Hebrew term *mitah meshunah* carries connotations of a death that is gruesome, sudden, and violent.

their limitations. Rabbi Yom Tov ben Avraham Asevilli (RiTVA, ca. 1260–1320) argued that abstinence is not required if only non-Jews are suffering; his reading both curtails the boundaries of abstinence and draws clear of horizons of solidarity with one's own community. On the other hand, Rabbi Yosef Hayyim of Baghdad (1835–1909) links the interdiction of sexuality with loss of natural libido during a famine, suggesting that even one who is not directly affected must heed the ethical call to join with—and mirror—the experience of those who are suffering. He also highlights the erotic descriptions of the relationship between rain and earth found throughout Bavli Ta'anit, arguing that by refraining from sex the human community emulates the breach between God's gift of life-giving water and the ground that is fertile and receptive yet painfully parched.[40] Beyond homiletics, we should note that many later jurists took Resh Lakish's statement of ethics as a point of law.[41]

Do Rabbi Yehudah and Resh Lakish imagine that volitional suffering somehow solicits God's mercy? If so, this position seems to be challenged by the logic of the Bavli itself, since voices within the conclusion of this same *sugya* claim that abstemious vows are problematic. The point here may be that the suffering that has been willingly accepted expresses solidarity, compassion, and empathy. This is the implication of the next series of statements, which shift the threshold of distress to one's immediate community:

> If one separates from Israel when they are suffering, two ministering angels accompany that person home. They put their hands on his head and say, "This individual, who has withdrawn from the community, will not see its consolation."

That an individual who disconnects from the Jewish community in times of travail will not share in their comfort or redemption is confirmed by another strident baraita:

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[40] Watts Belser, *Power, Ethics, and Ecology*, 49–50. See also t. Ta'anit 1:4.

[41] *She'elot u-Teshuvot Shevut Ya'akov* (2011), vol. 3, no. 30, discussing a plague in eighteenth-century Prague. Cf. *Beit Yosef, orah hayyim*, 573.

> When the community is suffering, one may not say: "I will go home and eat and drink, saying 'peace be upon you, my soul.'" The verse says the following about one who acts in this way: "Behold joy and gladness, slaying oxen and killing sheep, eating flesh and drinking wine; let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we shall die" (Isa. 22:13). What is written next? "And the Lord of hosts revealed Himself in my ears: Surely this iniquity shall not be expiated by you until you die" (Isa. 22:14).

This is a searing indictment of self-interest in the face of the suffering of others. Like the feckless aristocrats in Edgar Allen Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" or the morally bankrupt protagonists in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, it is tempting to hide oneself from plagues or droughts and the distress they bring. For the Bavli, however, such hedonistic abdication of responsibility must be fiercely condemned. Isolation and ethical shortcoming is the harvest of those who cut themselves off from communal hardship and the hurt it entails.

The baraita continues by explaining that there are, in fact, three types or grades of individuals with differing levels of solidarity and social responsibility. The quality of intermediate persons (*middat beinonim*) refers to people who simply disregard the suffering of others; their callousness is lamentable, but unexceptional. Persons who possess wicked attributes (*middat resha'im*) actually consume *more* in times of travail, either in celebration of their own luck or because they are aware that they, too, will be ensconced in crisis. The author of the baraita does not explicitly tell us about the quality of righteous individuals, but the clear implication is that such people proactively—and perhaps even voluntarily—embrace the community's suffering by taking part in their pain.

How are such measures of partnership or solidarity evaluated and enforced? In fact, the *sugya* places raises this challenging question by placing it in the mouth of one who runs from communal pain and declares, "Who will testify against me?" How, in other words, will the community know what happens behind closed doors? Can avarice and greed been seen by God if not displayed in public? Many protentional witnesses to the vices of hidden covetousness and rapacity are suggested: the stones or beams of one's house, the ministering angels, and even one's own body and soul. Insatiable desire or self-indulgence, what might have been called *pleonexia* in the ancient Mediterranean world, are decried by the structures of the world, by the cosmic beings, and by the very physical and spiritual dimensions of the self.

This vision of accounting for injustice, even if concealed from the communal eye, leads us to the final twist in the logic of our *sugya*. We learn that God will exact retribution from the righteous for even seemingly inconsequential sins, granting reward to the wicked even for minor good deeds, and yet, the moment of death is a kind of revelation and truthful awakening:

> When an individual departs for the next world, all his deeds are recounted and say: "You did such and such, in such and such a place, on such and such a day." The person says, "Yes." They say to him: "Sign." He signs, as it says: "He makes the hand of every person sign" (Job 37:7). Not only that, the person justifies the judgment, saying to them, "You have judged me well." This fulfills what is written, "That You may be justified when You speak and be right when You judge" (Ps. 51:6).

God's verdict is inscribed as one passes from this world. The soul's imminent departure is often described in rabbinic sources as an opportunity for repentance, but, as when Mozart's Don Giovanni is finally forced to confront his misdeeds and suffer for them, this *sugya* presents death as a time in which actions otherwise hidden from the community are signed and sealed upon the divine record. Those who have failed the ethical test of solidarity and communal connection are forced to affirms and carry out their own judgment.[42]

Here the *sugya* pivots once more, and, as traditionally demarcated, it concludes by discussing the Nazirite. Three opinions are offered as to the status of such people: one who voluntarily fasts is alternatively called a "sinner" (*hote*), a "holy person" (*kadosh*), or a "pious individual" (*hasid*). Shmuel claims that one who voluntarily chooses to fast has committed a grave transgression; like the Nazirite who must bring a sin-offering (*hatat*), they have abstained from this-worldly pleasures. Rabbi Elazar, by contrast, maintains an individual who seeks to fast can mirror, or emulate, the powerful holiness of the Nazirite. Finally, Resh Lakish maintains that such an individual is described as valorously pious—indeed, going beyond the letter of the law.[43] These remarkably divergent positions split over the nature of elective fasting as a religious praxis, pulling together our *sugya* and its themes of fasting as voluntary acts of self-denial. All three of them highlight the merits—or demerits—of elite individuals withdrawing from otherwise permitted facets of life, thus returning to the mishnah's discussion of the *yehidim* and the point of departure for the entire *sugya*.

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[42] See also Chaya Halberstam, "Justice without Judgment: Pure Procedural Justice and the Divine Courtroom in *Sifre Deuteronomy*," *The Divine Courtroom in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Ari Mermelstein and Shalom E. Holtz (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 49–68.

We conclude, however, on a strange note with two seemingly unconnected statements by Rabbi Yirmiyah bar Abba: "there are no communal fasts in Babylon," and "a sage (*talmid hakham*) is not permitted to fast because it reduces the work of heaven." The Tosafists posit a pragmatic explanation of the first teaching: Babylon enjoys plentiful rain and, therefore, its citizens never experience the dire need of those who live with the constant fear of drought. But RaSHI reads Rabbi Yirmiyah bar Abba's dicta together, arguing that mourning practices—which serve as the template for communal fasts—interfere with critical religious work of study and worship.[44] These two teachings that mitigate against personal and communal fasting seem to undercut the thrust of our *sugya*, and indeed the tractate as a whole. This final literary shift leaves the reader with two interrelated questions: does fasting remain a continuously relevant mode of religious praxis even in the Diaspora? And, should rabbis and sages be considered the spiritual vanguard who must fast before all other individuals, or should we to cast our eyes to a wider cast of dramatis personae for orchestrating rituals in times of crisis.

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[43] See Gersholm Scholem, "Three Types of Jewish Piety," *Eranos Jahrbuch* 1969 (1972): 330–348.

[44] See Watts Belser, *Power, Ethics, and Ecology*, 119.

Thinking "Outside the *Daf*"

Our *sugya* prompts careful consideration of the nature of empathy, solidarity, and the complicated interface of individual and communal action. Such issues have, of course, long been the stuff of philosophical and theoretical reflection and engaging with these wider intellectual discourses is key to my project of "thinking with" the Bavli as an ethical prompt, and I am particularly interested in the implications of these critical issues for our reconsideration of contemporary environmental ethics in a time of cataclysmic breakdown of natural systems.

Rather than coming at these questions from an abstract vantage point, they are addressed somewhat obliquely by the Bavli and are discussed in a manner that stay close to the cases in the Mishnah. The medieval philosopher and jurist Maimonides, however, spotlights these ethical concerns in his opening summation of the laws of fasting:

> [Fasting] is one of the paths of repentance. As the community cries out in prayer and sounds an alarm when overtaken by trouble, everyone realizes that misfortune has come upon them because of their misdeeds . . . If, on the other hand, people do not cry out in prayer and do not sound an alarm, but merely say that it is the way of the world for such a thing to happen to them, and that their trouble is a matter of pure chance, they have chosen a cruel path which will cause them to persevere in their evil deeds and thus bring additional troubles upon them.[45]

Cataclysm must invite response along with reflection. Maimonides demands a full accounting for one's actions, collective and personal, as the only ethical response to tragedy. To say that hurtful things just happen, is a total evacuation of moral responsibility. Some versions of this theology might presume a naïve cause and effect—my car was crushed under a tree, so I must be a sinner—but, on the other hand, Maimonides is calling his readers to remember that the world around us is very much shaped by our actions, and that non-attention can lead to devastating consequences.

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[45] *Mishneh Torah, hilkhot ta'aniyot* 1:2–3; based on Isadore Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader* (Springfield, NJ: Berhman House, 1972), 114.

At the same time, the mindset of crisis does not spur individuals or societies to reevaluate their moral, economic, and legal frameworks. In fact, paradigms of emergency or catastrophe may lead to fearful conservatism and the utter rejection of change on one hand, or bewildered paralysis and indecision on the other. Here our reading of the Bavli might be enriched by thinking with the work of Kyle Whyte, an Indigenous philosopher and scholar of Environmental Studies who has demonstrated the inadequacy of "epistemologies of crisis"[46] for confronting radical environmental change. When faced with seismic environmental shifts that threaten our way of life, societies and their laws all too often fall back on the very tools and structures that brought them to that point. Whyte presents an alternative in what he describes as "epistemologies of coordination"—namely, "ways of knowing the world that emphasize the importance of moral bonds—or kinship relationships—for generating the (responsible) capacity to respond to constant change in the world."[47] Coordination, in other words, enables us to search for answers and response rather than seek to abate or sequester the symptoms.

The *yehidim* embody the suffering of the collective, and perhaps of the earth itself, setting the tone for a *sugya* that constantly reminds its readers that those who withdraw or seal themselves off from the community will be estranged from its renaissance or renewal. This gesture of fasting is, in certain respects, a ritual of coordination that is rooted in social power; on some level these actions work by establishing communal bonds, acknowledging the nature of collective destiny, and performing the shared pathos of suffering and calamity.

The communal and ethical importance of empathy, as well as its limitations, have been explored by moral philosophers of all stripes. "Without empathy," notes Jeremy Rifkin, "it would be impossible to even imagine a social life and the organization of society."[48] The capacity to share the feelings of others is essential for any functional form of social contract. This same quality can, however, paralyze individuals and stun them into inaction rather than granting them the power to respond to interpersonal obligations. Furthermore, empathy is also expressed non-isometrically; even within given social or political groups, it is often applied selectively and with an unconscious bias. "The more one identifies with another person or is similar to that person," suggests Julinna Oxley, "the more likely she is to empathize with her and be altruistically motivated through her."[49] Empathy effects interpersonal bonds and forges connections, but any rosy-tinted dimensions of this picture become more cloudy if we consider the possibility of becoming linked to dissimilar peoples or social groups. Our *sugya*, as I understand it, prompts us to think about this difficult issue: how to cultivate empathy that stretches across difference.

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[46] Kyle Whyte, "Against Crisis Epistemology," in *Handbook of Critical Indigenous Studies*, ed. Brendan Hokowhitu, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Linda Tuhiwai-Smith, Chris Anderson, and Steve Larkin (London: Routledge: 2021), 52–53.

[47] Ibid.

The significance, contours, and even the very definition of solidarity have been contested by sociologists, philosophers, historians, activists, theologians, and statisticians.[50] The concept has meant very different things in different historical contexts—from ancient Roman law to the modern nation-state—and it is all the more complicated and fraught in our time of globalization, digital interconnectivity, and intersectionality.[51] Though often highlighted as a popular value in the struggle against all types of oppression, solidarity can be mobilized to serve the aims of imperialist or colonialist regimes. It is used as a tool to efface distinctions and to steamroll over local or personal interests in favor of the collective;

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[48] Jeremy Rifkin, *The Empathetic Civilization*: *The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2009), 42.

[49] Julinna Oxley, *The Moral Dimensions of Empathy: Limits and Applications in Ethical Theory and Practice* (New York: Palgrave, 2011), 3.

[50] See Graham Crow, *Social Solidarities: Theories, Identities, and Social Change* (Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University, 2002).

[51] Kurt Bayertz, "Four Uses of 'Solidarity'," *Solidarity*, ed. Kurt Bayertz (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999), 3–28.

such appeals are often little more than an attempt by the elites to paper-over dissent.[52] But can true solidarity be achieved in the face of shared exploitation without destroying the individual? Can a variety of different actors reach agreement of purpose and action? Can local communities emulate those fasting individuals in Late Antiquity, banding together to reach for the common good?

Some scholars have indeed argued that solidarity often splits upon intersectional lines, and that it may necessarily be so. This point is well-taken, and we do well to probe the limits and motivations, but solidarity can remain a decisive concept in our own day and age. "The fact of diversity need not entail moving beyond solidarity as if solidarity and diversity were entirely oppositional," writes Mark Cladis, "or as if 'justice for all' could be accomplished by leaving solidarity behind." [53] Recent scholarship has emphasized that diversity actually offers an important opportunity for working together toward shared interests: "the opportunities for solidarity lie in what is incommensurable rather than what is common across those efforts."[54] Here we might should note also the recently popular notion of "alliance" or "allyship," an emergent framework of social action that offers support for the work of others without extinguishing difference or monopolizing and hijacking their efforts. The timeworn concept of solidarity is useful for describing the overall ethos of collective fasting as a model for bringing together an immensely wide variety of local stakeholders , whereas alliance may describe a visitor who joins the fast of a community in response to suffering that is not their own.

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[52] Mark S. Cladis, "Beyond Solidarity? Durkheim and Twenty-First Century Democracy in a Global Age," in *The Cambridge Companion to Durkheim*, ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander and Philip Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 386–387, noted that Emile Durkheim's foundational work on solidarity, for example, "was placed in a conservative canon of sociologists who, motivated by a nostalgic sense of by-gone days of community and uniformity, advanced solidarity for the sake of social control and order."

[53] Cladis, "Beyond Solidarity," 388; and Eugen Schoenfeld and Stjepan G. Meštrović, "Durkheim's Concept of Justice and its Relationship to Social Solidarity," *Sociological Analysis* 50.2 (1989): 111–127.

[54] Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* 1.1 (2012), 28. See Merlin Schaeffer, *Ethnic Diversity and Social Cohesion: Immigration, Ethnic Fractionalization, and Potentials for Civic Action* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), and Tom Van der Meer and Jochem Tolsma, "Ethnic Diversity and Its Supposed Detrimental Effects on Social Cohesion," *Annual Review of Sociology* 40 (2014), 459–478.

The recent work of Charles Lesch has highlighted an array of political and economic forces that endanger and undermine solidarity, two of which are particularly relevant to our *sugya*.[55] Grounding his insightful analysis in the writings of Emmanuel Levinas, Lesch argues that modern capitalism promotes "a profound moral indifference" rather than the totalizing—and often violent—solidarity once feared by Émile Durkheim. "We turn into moral spectators," claims Lesch, "losing our sense of personal accountability to our neighbors. … Societies that arise out of such moral spectatorship are characterized by brittle social bonds. They harbor individuals who are consumed with their own interests and unwilling to sacrifice for others' needs."[56] Returning this insight to Bavli Ta'anit, we can consider the manner in which the editors of our *sugya* grapple with rituals orchestrating solidarity founded in collective empathy and considerations of shared and communal destiny. Such values are represented in the fasting of the *yehidim* (as well as in their election), but they undergird those many subsequent exhortations that individuals must not remove themselves from their community. Failure to do so is, as we have seen, an ethical breach and a spiritual fault that can bring about divine retribution.

The importance of public rituals in creating community and establishing coherence or solidarity has also long been noted.[57] Our *sugya*, along with many others in Bavli Ta'anit, asks us to consider rituals of solidarity that are executed both in private and in public. The original fasts of the *yehidim* are, presumably, witnessed by the community (hence the fear of economic disruption), but many of the other acts like refraining from sexual intercourse or abstaining food happen outside of the public eye. The repugnant ethical question of an individual reveling in their own good fortune at the expense of those less fortunate ("who will testify against me?") reminds us that the actions of immoral actors and villains cannot necessarily be witnessed or discerned by external viewers. Here, too, the work of Levinas is quite helpful: "The permanence of the human is ensured by the solidarity constituted around a communal work; by the same task being accomplished without the collaborators knowing or meeting one another. Much more wondrous is the brotherhood of men where the brothers are not even acquainted!"[58] Solidarity is forged by shared ethical projects, argued Levinas, even when participating persons cannot see or encounter one another directly.[59] In many instances, collective action or working toward common moral goal emerge from individual expressions of dissent.

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[55] Charles Lesch, "What Undermines Solidarity? Four Approaches and their Implications for Contemporary Political Theory," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 21.5 (2018): 601–615. See also *Solidarity in a Secular Age: From Political Theology to Jewish Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

[56] Lesch, "What Undermines Solidarity," 609.

[57] See Randall Collins and Robert Hanneman, "Modelling the Interaction Ritual theory of Solidary," in Patrick Doreian and Thomas J. Fararo, eds. *The Problem of Solidarity: Theories and Models* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 214. See also Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual* (New York: Anchor, 1967), and Harvey Whitehouse and Jonathan A. Lanman, "The

The rabbinic rituals and practices in our *sugya* invite us to consider the nature of empathy and the crafts of solidarity, but the Bavli's discussion investigates such questions primarily from the perspective of individuals (it begins with the elites, then moves to other types of private actors). This focus has its shortcomings, but it also allows us to think more deeply about the place of the individual, whose participation—or non-participation—in systems can have an enormous impact. Solidarity can be a force of oppression, ensuring that, as the Japanese saying has it, "a nail that sticks out must be hammered back into place." The rhetoric of solidarity played a prominent role in the discourse of Soviet propaganda

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Ties That Bind Us: Ritual, Fusion, and Identification," *Current Anthropology* 55.6 (2014): 674–695.

[58] Emmanuel Levinas, *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 23.

[59] This point evokes Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2006).

and in political actions aimed at squashing opposition and enforcing repression, but it also served as a means and a vocabulary of resistance. In the words of Vaclav Havel, the famed Czech writer, statesman and dissident, we read:

> A new experience of being, a renewed rootedness in the universe, a newly grasped sense of higher responsibility, a newfound inner relationship to other people and to the human community—these factors clearly indicate the direction in which we must go…. In other words, the issue is the rehabilitation of values like trust, openness, responsibility, solidarity, love.[60]

Solidarity can wielded be those with power to crush protest and nonconformity, but it can also serve to unite isolated expressions of non-compliance into a deeper matrix of resistance. The dissent from dominant moral, social, and political structures accomplished by individuals can, in fact, be decisive in dismantling the machinery of oppression. Over time these participating actors work together to grow the resistance and to develop it into multifactorial social change. Perhaps this is the mode of change imagined by the authors of our *sugya*, a communal push toward repentance in which each individual—starting with the singular *yehidim* but encompassing all others as well—has a critical role to play.

We should remember that the struggle to comprehend and address the root causes of climate change stems, in part, from a combination of the trans-jurisdictional nature of the global challenge and the legal and social default toward market individualism where collective action on a grand scale is required. Solidarity is needed, however, to deal with the dramatic consequences for human life that are already becoming obvious and which will intensify in the coming decades. This is also true of the current COVID-19 pandemic, a travesty of human life that has triggered a vastly disproportionate economic and financial crisis.[61] Individuals and communities who are in less privileged positions—women, people of color, and those in the Global South—have been severely impacted by the pandemic in ways that will carry on for decades. The aftermath of these events have further revealed the systemic racism that pervades the United States' socio-political infrastructure. In our university classrooms, discussions of solidarity and suffering in this *sugya* can serve as ethical prompts that help students consider the problems of non-action, passivity, and self-centered complicity in the face of others' hardship.

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[60] Václav Havel, *Open Letters: Selected Writings: 1965–1990*, ed. Paul Wilson (New York: Knopf, 1991), 210.

[61] Don Bambino Geno Tai, Aditya Shah, Chyke A. Doubeni, Irene G. Sia, and Mark L. Wieland, "The Disproportionate Impact of COVID-19 on Racial and Ethnic Minorities in the

What about solidarity and unity of purpose that encompasses individuals who are not part of one's immediate community? The primary thrust of our *sugya* emphasizes that one ought to become party to the suffering of others, and, when it comes to the vicious inequalities of Covid-19, this leads us to an uncomfortable proposition. So, too, the enormously unequal impact of climate change upon at-risk communities and already fragile ecosystems. A moral response to such crises founded in cross-communal solidarity demands that we dramatically rethink our social circles. Abraham Joshua Heschel, known for his role as a social prophet and critic as well as a theologian, often gave a counterintuitive reason for the biblical interdiction against creating graven images. We are prohibited from making a physical image of God, claimed Heschel, because "*The symbol of God is man*, every man . . . [who] must be treated with the honor due to a likeness representing the King of kings."[62] The only fitting representation of God is the sum totality of a human life, a being whose worth and capacity for growth are indeed immeasurable. Though it does not appear in our Talmudic discussion of inter-personal obligations, this spiritual ethos must be allowed to drive forward our

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United States," *Clinical Infectious Diseases* 72.4 (2021): 703–706; Tony Kirby, "Evidence Mounts on the Disproportionate Effect of COVID-19 on Ethnic Minorities," *The Lancet Respiratory Medicine* 8.6 (2020): 547–548.

[62] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966), 95. Italics in the original. See also Yair Lorberbaum, *In God's Image: Myth, Theology, and Law in Classical Judaism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); and Arthur Green, *Radical Judaism: Rethinking God and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

reading of these texts and thus challenge our contemporary patterns of life as potentially immoral and complicit in desecrating God's sacred name.

It has become commonplace in certain contexts to quote one of Heschel's biting aphorism: "In a free society, some are guilty. All are responsible." We are indeed guilty parties in the racial and economic injustice that have been further exacerbated by COVID-19 and by global climate change, and that may still be putting it too lightly. The true inverse of goodness and compassion, claim both Heschel and Elie Wiesel, is indifference. So, we ought to ask: Whose divinity do we deny, whether implicitly or explicitly, through a lack of concern? To whose suffering do we remain unmoved, so long as the wondrous supply chains of the grand neoliberal economy remain uninterrupted? When do we, like the figure caricatured in our *sugya*, hide away from our responsibility for dissent and claim, "Peace unto you, my soul"? The rhetoric of division and demonization must be combatted with a commitment to nuances, to patient presence and empathy, and to seeing the position of others through recognizing that a lack of solidarity is often just another form of complicity. This point has been driven home by the educator and entrepreneur Yavilah McCoy:

> During Covid-19, a veil was lifted for my staff and the POC/JOC [People of Color/Jews of Color] community we serve that revealed just how commoditized and expendable women of color's bodies are in a racialized system that consistently devalues our worth and teaches us to only value ourselves in the context of services we can provide for a White majority.... In our work, we are encountering smart, brilliant, high performing Jewish people of color who are describing being exhausted at the prospect of continuing to deliver their labor within systems that erase us.[63]

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[63] Yavilah McCoy, "Dancing between Light and Shadow—Increasing Awareness of the Impact of Covid 19 Disparities on Jews of Color," *eJewish Philanthropy* (May 21, 2020), accessible at: **https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/dancing-between-light-and-shadow-increasing-awareness-of-the-impact-of-covid-19-disparities-on-jews-of-color/**, accessed July 12, 2020.

Some have a more expansive sense of community, while for others it is more exclusive, but we ought to remember that solidarity *must* stretch to include all folks and kin across our variegated social landscape. The model of our *sugya* provides a twofold message that demands this expansive embrace as well: one must voluntarily engage with the suffering of others, but with the understanding that this is not *their* problem alone but *our* problem as well. To be sure, the original rabbinic texts have a much less inclusive conception of community than the one for which I am advocating. I am claiming, however, that as ethical prompts the fundamental philosophical questions and frameworks offered by these sources can sustain a more expansive reading.

This point is constantly surfaced by many of the tales about the strange personalities in Bavli Ta'anit, from mysterious wonder-workers and pious individuals to fools and jesters who point out the shortcomings of rabbis and scholars. We read of Rabbi Eliezer, a scholar whose "head was swollen with pride because he had studied much Torah." This hubris led him to callously insult a misshapen individual,[64] and although he is somewhat shielded by his erudition, Rabbi Eliezer's haughtiness and untrammeled elitist pride is roundly condemned by the very marginalized person whom he sought to ridicule. This causes the chastised, now-educated Rabbi Eliezer, to pronounce: "One must always be as soft as a reed, and not stiff like a cedar."[65] Suppleness and humility rather than rigid hubris allows one to learn from those who have been marginalized and continuously underrepresented, taking part in the good work of highlighting their voices and wisdom.

But can the textured portrait of collective solidarity in these rabbinic texts help us think through the environmental crisis? We are in the midst of a major ecological disaster manifest in extreme weather events, loss of biodiversity, depletion of fisheries, pollution of air, water, and soil, prolonged droughts, and mass extinction of species. These tragic phenomena will dramatically affect everything on this planet, but they will disproportionately impact communities both human and non-human. Our *sugya* can prompt ethical reflection regarding the importance of solidarity and local organizing, and, at the same time, it can help us grapple with theories of solidarity that include the animal and inanimate world. Rabbinic traditions have much to offer us in terms of challenging the set of values bequeathed by the Enlightenment and by capitalist theories of economics and social organization.[66] The Anthropocene has demonstrated the failure of these understandings of modernity as freedom and liberation, as unfettered extractivism, as an intellectual world of human beings as set apart from (and above) nature, and as an ever-accelerating technological capacity.[67] We must find new models of responsibility and obligation grounded in old-new myths that can, as Ludwig Wittgenstein would have it, "show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle."[68] Rather than pitting human beings against nature, an expansive notion of solidarity founded in mutual kinship and responsibility offers a language for evaluating the devastating consequences of human nonaction during a time of unprecedented extinction and planetary destruction.[69]

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[64] See b. Ta'anit 20a–b.

[65] b. Ta'anit 20b.

The series of teachings that one ought not to eat to full satiation or enjoy sexual relations during times of famine, and that one cannot hide out in one's home, offer an insightful critique of the concept of "flourishing"—a troublesome and contested idea if there ever was one.[70] Recent scholarship has taken issue with this lackluster keyword, noting that definitions of flourishing often privilege one group over others or come at their expense. Within current Western economic models (most notably within neoliberalism, but also the fundaments of capitalism and colonialism), the many toil while the few flourish. This situation is becoming increasingly dire as environmental factors exacerbate issues of distributive justice; climate change will impact various bioregions in vastly different ways, at least initially, often striking those who have contributed least to the environmental calamity. Our *sugya* may thus be read as prompting us to consider an alternative: rather than taking flight or ignoring the plight of others, those in positions of privilege must forego some measure of their own material wellbeing in order to make room for others.

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[66] See the comments of Audre Lorde, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* (Penguin Books, 2018).

[67] See Hartmut Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

[68] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2001), 309.

[69] See Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

[70] See Laura M. Hartman, ed., *That All May Flourish: Comparative Religious Environmental Ethics* (Oxford: University Press, 2018).

The writings of Julia Watts Belser have shown that rabbinic praxis maps the travails of the drought-stricken physical world onto the accepted suffering of the human body. This sunders any perception of a hard-and-fast dichotomy between human and nature, thus situating humanity *within* the world rather than apart from it. These same rabbinic statements might also be read as providing a paradigm in which human beings are part of a community of life—whether local or global—whose fate is governed by a shared destiny and relationship to the physical land:

> When all creatures were formed, other than human beings, the blessed One asked each one individually for its consent to be created, as it says in the Talmud, "They were created willingly, with their form."[71] But no creature was asked regarding the others, since they do not have free choice and thus cannot destroy or lay waste [to other species]. They will surely profit from the creation of other beings, and thus implicitly agree to their creation, since "one may be granted merit without explicit knowledge." But when it came to humanity, the blessed One asked all other creatures if they should be formed because they have free will and can destroy all the rest of creation. They agreed, however, and all gave of their power to the formation of humanity.[72]

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[71] b. Rosh Hashanah 11a.

[72] *Beit Yaakov, bereshit* (Jerusalem: 1998), no. 41, 26.

Pushing against the deranged notion that we, as a species (or as nation-state), can hide out and flourish while the rest of the animal world suffers, our *sugya* might demand that we, as a species, become partner to the distress of the vital phenomena around us. What if we, human beings, have become that guilty individual who hides away while others suffer? Have we perhaps descended into being the wicked person who, rather than embracing the suffering of others and taking action grounded in solidarity, calls for additional food and drink to be enjoyed in our very own twilight? Will we continue to fiddle as the world, and its precious biodiversity, are sent up in carbon-induced flames? By looking to the past, we may find the courage to take responsibility and join in this communal suffering so that we may witness, and work actively toward, our world's regeneration and restoration.