

*Dear Seminar Members,*

*In the process of working through my ideas, a very different paper emerged than I had intended. When trying to explain why I was so skeptical about the tannaitic evidence relating to women and dining posture, I realized that I needed to study how the Hebrew verb for reclining – sbb – is deployed in dining scenes (in both the tannaitic and amoraic corpora). Are women the object of this verb? As a result, I spent a significant amount of time exploring this subject. I believe that this study enhances my overall argument (namely, that we can learn very little about women – and women’s bodies – from these texts). In order to complete this paper, I conclude with a section that surveys the evidence for women’s presence (absence?) at the tannaitic table. Although a very different paper resulted than even I expected, I hope that it still provides ample “meat” for discussion.*

***As this work is still quite inchoate, I ask that you please not cite it.***

*I look forward to our conversation!*

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Inclined to Decline Reclining?:  
Women, Corporeality, and Dining Posture in Early Rabbinic Literature\*\*

Imagine it is the year 209 C.E. You are a disciple in a rabbinic circle located in a city in Palestine. Your rabbinic mentor invites you to a banquet that he is hosting in celebration of his son's wedding. Do you bring your wife?

In essence, this is the question that I seek to answer in this paper. Were women present at such commensal encounters? And, if so, were they reclining? In the process, we learn about early rabbinic (or tannaitic)<sup>1</sup> concepts of corporeality because, as is also the case in ancient discussions of dining posture in the larger Greek and Roman milieu, to talk about women at the table is to talk about the issues associated with female bodies: sex, power, procreation, etc. Throughout, I continually ask the question: with regard to women at the table, were the Tannaim inclined to decline reclining?

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***\*\*This paper is a working draft. Please do not cite without consent from the author.\*\****

<sup>1</sup> The Tannaim (singular: Tanna) lived from 70 CE to roughly 250 CE in Roman Palestine. Following the Tannaim are a group of rabbis known as the Amoraim (singular: Amora), who lived from roughly 250 CE to 500 CE in both Palestine and Babylonia.

### *The Verb “To Recline” in the Tannaitic Corpus*

The Hebrew verb *sbb* can mean “to recline (on a dining couch)” in both *piel* and *hifil* conjugations.<sup>2</sup> This verb is used to describe the act of reclining while eating several times in the tannaitic corpus. For example, rabbis are often depicted as reclining at a meal (usually on festivals), discussing various facets of *halakhah* (rabbinic law).<sup>3</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, several of these reclining scenes feature food blessings as the topic of conversation.<sup>4</sup> However, while the verb *sbb* refers to the commensal practice of reclining in a variety of contexts – from the *halakhah* of purity<sup>5</sup> to funeral banquets<sup>6</sup> – only once is a woman present.<sup>7</sup> This text deserves our attention.

<sup>2</sup> See Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (New York: Judaica Press, 1996 [1903]), 948-949. The usual meaning of verbs derived from the root *sbb* is “to go around,” “surround,” or “turn.”

<sup>3</sup> E.g., *t. Berakhot* 4:15 (= *b. Berakhot* 37a), 16; 5:2 (= *y. Pesahim* 10:1 [37b]; *b. Pesahim* 100a); *t. Pisha* 10:12; *t. Yom Tov* 2:12, 16; *t. Sukkah* 1:9; *Mekilta d’Rabbi Shimon b. Yohai* at Exodus 18:12 (cp. *Sifre Deuteronomy* 38; *b. Qiddushin* 32b); *Midrash Tannaim* 11:10, 13 (cp. *b. Qiddushin* 40b); *baraitot* on *b. Sanhedrin* 11a (= *b. Sotah* 48b). A *baraita* (plural: *baraitot*) is a reputed tannaitic statement that appears in a later rabbinic document. It may, or may not, appear in the tannaitic corpus and it may, or may not, be tannaitic in origin.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., *m. Berakhot* 6:6; *t. Berakhot* 4:8, 15 (= *b. Berakhot* 37a), 16, 20; 5:3, 5 (= *y. Ta’anit* 4:2 (68a); *b. Berakhot* 46b); *baraitot* on *b. Berakhot* 51b; *b. Pesahim* 102a-b.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., *m. Nega’im* 13:9 (= *b. Berakhot* 41a; *b. Erubin* 4a; *b. Sukkah* 6a; *b. Hullin* 71b; *t. Nega’im* 7:10; *t. Terumot* 10:9; *Sifra Mesora’ pereq* 7:5.

<sup>6</sup> E.g., *m. Sanhedrin* 2:1 (= *y. Mo’ed Qatan* 3:5 [83a]; *y. Sanhedrin* 2:2 [19d]; *b. Sanhedrin* 18a), 3 (= *b. Mo’ed Qatan* 27a; *b. Nedarim* 56a; *b. Sanhedrin* 20a.).

<sup>7</sup> Rather than bog down the text in details, I will simply note here the other instances in which the verb *sbb*, meaning “to recline (on a dining couch)” appears (and women, at least explicitly, do not): *m. Pesahim* 10:1 (= *t. Pisha* 10:1; even the poor recline on Passover); *m. Nedarim* 4:4 (vows and sharing a dining couch); *m. Sanhedrin* 2:4 (= *Sifre Deuteronomy* 161; king reads Torah scroll while reclining); *t. Demai* 3:7-8 (cp. *y. Demai* 2:2 [22d]; tithing issues in regard to fellows and associates eating together); 5:7 (tithes and left-over food); *Sifre Deuteronomy* 53 (a banquet parable about Israel being happy with its divinely-ordained inheritance); a *baraita* on *b. Berakhot* 11a (= *Midrash Tannaim* 6:7; rules for reciting the *shema*’); a *baraita* on *b. Sanhedrin* 23a (some cautious [?] Jerusalemites would not engage in commensality unless they knew their fellow recliners). A reputed *baraita* on *b. Berakhot* 43b states that it is unbecoming of a scholar to recline with “peoples of the land.” However, as Shaye Cohen has argued, this reflects a later development in rabbinic literature; as such, it is most likely amoraic – and not tannaitic – in origin. For a discussion, see Shaye J. D. Cohen, “The Place of the Rabbi in Jewish Society of the Second Century,” In *The Galilee in Late Antiquity*, Edited by Lee I. Levine, 157-173 (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1992), 165-168, especially pp. 166-167.

According to *t. Yevamot* 13:1:<sup>8</sup>

At first, they would write writs of protest:<sup>9</sup> “she is not suitable for him; she does not desire him; and she does not want to be married to him.”<sup>10</sup> The House of Hillel says: “‘In a court or not in a court’ – but on the condition that there should be three [witnesses].”<sup>11</sup> R. Yose b. R. Yehudah and R. Lazar<sup>12</sup> b. R. Shimon say: “Even before two [witnesses].” How is the duty of protest [effected]?<sup>13</sup> She testified: “I do not want So-and-So, my husband. I do not want the betrothal that my mother or brothers made on my behalf.” Even if she is sitting in a litter<sup>14</sup> and went to the one who betrothed her to him, and she said to him: “I do not want So-and-So, my husband, this [man]” – there is no protest greater than this. R. Yehudah says: “Even if she went to buy something from a storekeeper,<sup>15</sup> and she said to him [i.e., the storekeeper]: “I do not want So-and-So, my husband, this [man]” – there is no protest greater than this. [Even] more than this, R. Yehudah said: “*Even if there are guests reclining [in her husband’s house, and she is standing and giving drink to them]*,<sup>16</sup> and she said to

<sup>8</sup> ed. Lieberman 3:45-46.

<sup>9</sup> A writ of protest is written when a woman wishes to protest a marriage contracted while she is still a minor.

<sup>10</sup> The wording of the writ of protest is written in Aramaic.

<sup>11</sup> The first part of this quote (in quotation marks) appears in *m. Yevamot* 13:1.

<sup>12</sup> Some manuscripts read: “Elazar.”

<sup>13</sup> The rest of this text appears, albeit in a slightly different order and with some slight variations, in a *baraita* on *b. Yevamot* 108a. For a technical discussion of the differences between these two sources, see Saul Lieberman, *Tosefta Ki-fshutah: A Comprehensive Commentary on the Tosefta*, 10 vols., Second Edition (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1995 [1967] [Hebrew]), 6:151-153.

<sup>14</sup> Frequently, the term for litter (*'apiryon*) signifies the litter that carries a bride in a wedding procession. For example, see *t. Sotah* 15:9. On the wedding procession in rabbinic literature, see Michael L. Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 170-173 (the *'apiryon* is discussed on p. 172).

<sup>15</sup> In the *baraita* on *b. Yevamot* 108a, the woman’s husband explicitly sends her to the store to buy something for him. Perhaps this better explains why the person to whom the woman disavows her marriage is a storekeeper?

<sup>16</sup> Emphasis added. The words in square brackets appear only in the *baraita* on *b. Yevamot* 108a. I discuss the differences between these two versions, below. In both versions, however, the commensal setting is most likely a wedding banquet. There are two types of wedding-related meals mentioned in tannaitic literature: betrothal meals and wedding banquets. On betrothal meals, see *m. Pesahim* 3:7 (= *t. Pisha* 3:12); *m. Ketubbot* 1:5; *m. Bava Batra* 9:5; *t. Megillah* 3:14-15. The betrothal meal apparently involved the recitation of a “groom’s blessing.” On this blessing (the text of which actually appears for the first time on *b. Ketubbot* 7b-8a), see Satlow, *Jewish Marriage*, 63-65, 164. On the wedding banquet (often called a *mishteh*), see *m. Hallah* 2:7 (= *Sifre Numbers* 110); *m. Nega'im* 3:2 (= *Sifra Tazria pereq* 5; *Mesora parasha* 5); *Sifra Behuqotai pereq* 5; *t. Shabbat* 7:9; *t. Baba Metzi'a* 8:28. For additional references, see Satlow, *Jewish Marriage*, 339-340 n. 107. An inscription from the synagogue at Horbat Susiya (southern Palestine) mentions a rabbi making a donation vow at the wedding feast (*mishteh*) of his son. This mosaic inscription, which is roughly contemporary to the Tannaitic period, provides extra-rabbinic evidence for both this event and this terminology. On this inscription, see Joseph Naveh, *On Stone and Mosaic: The Aramaic and Hebrew Inscriptions from Ancient Synagogues* (Jerusalem: Karta, 1978 [Hebrew]), no. 75 (pp. 115-116); Satlow, *Jewish Marriage*, 179-180. For non-rabbinic evidence for the wedding banquet, see John 2:1-5; Tobit 7-10; *Joseph and Aseneth*, 21:6; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 5:289.

them: “I do not want So-and-So, my husband” – there is no protest greater than this.

In the midst of an *halakhic* discussion about a woman protesting a betrothal made on her behalf while she was a minor, the dining couch and the verb *sbb* make an appearance.

However, is the woman reclining while protesting her marriage?

In *t. Yevamot* 13:1, the woman talks to reclining guests. Yet, she is not explicitly depicted as reclining. The contrast of postures is even starker in the parallel *baraita* on *b. Yevamot* 108a, which unambiguously describes the woman as *standing* (*‘omedet*) and serving the guests. She is not reclining and eating; she is standing and serving.

Therefore, the one instance in which a woman appears in a tannaitic text in which the verb *sbb* means “to recline (on a dining couch)” does not depict the woman as participating in the commensal practice of reclining.

Of course, this brief examination of the verb *sbb* in the tannaitic corpus does not definitively prove that woman did not recline at tannaitic meals. All it does show is that woman are not explicitly described as doing so in extant literary contexts. However, other anecdotal evidence does call woman’s participation in tannaitic reclining into further question. I will examine this evidence in a section later in this paper. Before proceeding, I would like to survey the evidence of women and dining posture in the amoraic corpus.

### *The Verb “To Recline” in the Amoraic Corpus*

While I had initially intended to confine my analysis to the tannaitic corpus, I have decided to briefly survey the occurrences of *sbb* in amoraic texts.<sup>17</sup> My primary reason for doing so is to explore the possibility of change over time: namely, do women appear in a reclining posture in later rabbinic texts? For the most part, the amoraic data accords with the tannaitic data.<sup>18</sup> However, there are three texts in which women recline. These texts deserve our attention, as neither case provides unambiguous evidence for the presence of respectable women (or women in general) on the dining couch.

In the midst of a (most likely) scholastic<sup>19</sup> discussion about the status of wine on a table shared between Jews and idolaters, *b. Avodah Zarah* 69b-70a states:

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<sup>17</sup> On rare occasions, the verb *rba* ‘ can also mean “to recline (on a dining couch).” For example, see *y. Berakhot* 8:5 (12b), which discusses the rules of blessings and dining etiquette by recounting an interaction between three reclining rabbis. In this paper, I have decided to focus on the verb *sbb* because it is by far the most common technical term for rabbinic dining posture. Perhaps a future, more expanded, version of this paper would (should?) include a fuller treatment of the term *rba* ‘. In the meantime, it should be noted that, in the one instance in which I have encountered *rba* ‘ as having this meaning, the dining experience depicted therein simply buttresses my argument vis-à-vis *sbb*, in that we once again observe a commensal interaction between reclining, male rabbis.

<sup>18</sup> While I will not discuss these texts in detail, I provide here the amoraic references to *sbb* (meaning “to recline [on a dining couch]”) that I do not examine in this paper: *y. Berakhot* 2:8 (5c); 6:1 (10a); 7:5 (11d); *y. ‘Erubin* 6:8 (24a); *y. Pesahim* 10:1 (37b); *y. Baba Batra* 9:3 (16d); *b. Berakhot* 16a, 17b-18a (= *b. Mo’ed Qatan* 23b; cp. *y. Berakhot* 3:1 [6a]; *y. Mo’ed Qatan* 3:5 [82b]), 42b-43a (discussed in Susan Marks, “Rabbinic Grace After Meals and Social Formation,” 2008 SBL Meals in the Greco-Roman World Seminar, pp. 22-25), 46b; *b. ‘Erubin* 73b (= *b. ‘Erubin* 85b); *b. Pesahim* 101b, 108a, 113b; *b. Hagigah* 14b; *b. Nedarim* 41b; *b. Baba Batra* 98b; *b. Sanhedrin* 59b (wherein Adam is depicted reclining – served by ministering angels and observed by the serpent – but Eve is noticeably absent); *Song of Songs Rabbah* 1:12; *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 9 (= *Ecclesiastes Zuta* 9); *Lamentations Zuta* 1 (while Rabban’s mother prepares an elaborate feast in this text – even slaughtering a lamb herself[!] – the verb for reclining is in the masculine singular and the text clearly supplies the subject of the verb: Rabban); *Pesiqta de Rab Kahana* 6:3 (= *Pesiqta Rabbati* 16); 20:2 (= *Ruth Rabbah* 7); *Pesiqta Rabbati* 10, 30.

<sup>19</sup> On the term “scholastic,” see Shaye J. D. Cohen, who states: “The Mishnah constructs legal categories, which often appear to be theoretical and abstruse, and then discusses, usually in great detail, the precise definitions and limits of those categories. It creates lists of analogous legal phenomena, and then proceeds to define and analyze every item on the list. It posits legal principles, and devotes much attention to those objects, cases, or times, which seem to be subject to more than one principle at once, or perhaps to none of the principles at all. These modes of thinking and writing, which can be characterized as *scholastic*, are endemic to the Mishnah, from one end to the other, and are not found in any pre-mishnaic Jewish document. Here we have come not to a source of mishnaic law but to the distinctive contribution of its

Raba said: “[If] an idolatrous whore [*zonah ‘ovedet kokhavim*] and a Jewish man [*yisra’el*] were reclining beside each other,<sup>20</sup> the wine is permitted because, [while] the desire for transgression<sup>21</sup> would be strong in them, the desire for libated wine [*yayn nesekh*] would not be strong in them. [If] a Jewish whore [*zonah yisra’elit*] and an idolater were reclining, the wine [belonging to her] is prohibited. Why? Because she would be held in contempt by them and [be influenced] to follow after them.

Several assumptions pervade this text: men have one thing on their mind when sharing a table with women (and it most certainly is not pouring wine as a libation!); women are more influenced by men than men are by women;<sup>22</sup> and the desire to libate wine is so strong that one can never trust a non-Jew around wine unless the non-Jew is heavily supervised.

What, if anything, do we learn about women and men reclining together from this text? Unfortunately, the answer is not very much. In each scenario, the woman involved is quite explicitly a whore (*zonah*). This is not a coincidence; it is clearly meant to convey the association with idolatry and a violation of the covenant with Yhwh that exists already in biblical texts. Thus, women function as literary foils here. Further, even if real women are the subject at hand, these are by no means ‘respectable’ women.<sup>23</sup> For

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creators” (“The Judean Legal Tradition and the *Halakhah* of the Mishnah,” In *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, Edited by Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee, 121-143 [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007], 134-135, original emphasis). While Cohen comments here on the beginning of this trend in the Mishnah, the scholastic approach permeates the subsequent rabbinic corpus.

<sup>20</sup> The translation of this line is actually a bit tricky. The verb for “reclining” (*mesubin*) is in the plural, but the preposition for “beside” (*‘etzlah*) is singular with a feminine pronominal suffix (literally: “beside her”). As such, one could render this line in a variety of ways, including some combination of the following: “If idolatrous whores and Jewish men were reclining besides one another”; “If an idolatrous whore was reclining beside a Jewish man”; etc.

<sup>21</sup> Obviously, the “transgression” of which they speak is sexual in nature. On the connection between commensality and sexual relations with non-Jewish women, see Jordan D. Rosenblum, “From Their Bread to Their Bed: Commensality, Intermarriage, and Idolatry in Tannaitic Literature” *JJS* (forthcoming).

<sup>22</sup> On the notion of self-restraint as a masculine attribute in rabbinic literature in general, see Michael L. Satlow, “‘Try to be a Man’: The Rabbinic Construction of Masculinity,” *HTR* 89/1 (1996): 19-40.

<sup>23</sup> I need not remind this audience that women of ill-repute often make appearances in Greek and Roman banquet scenes (although this subject has been much discussed and nuanced, especially to allow for change

these reasons, the extent to which these reclining scenes can be utilized to make larger comments about women, corporality, and dining posture is limited.

The second and third appearances of women reclining on the dining couch occur in the midst of discussions concerning the proper observance of commensal practices relating to Passover.

y. Pesahim 10:1 (37b)

R. Simon [said] in the name of R. Yehoshua b. Levi: “That [i.e., Matzah] olive-sized portion<sup>24</sup> with which a man<sup>25</sup> fulfills his obligation on Passover must be eaten while reclining.” R. Yose came before R. Simon [and asked]: “Even a slave before his master? Even a wife before her husband?” He [= R. Simon] said to him: “Great man, until here I have heard.”<sup>26</sup>

b. Pesahim 108a

A woman in her husband’s house need not [*lo’ be’a’*] recline; but if she is an important woman she must [*tzrikha*] recline.

The question being answered (or, possibly, avoided) in these texts is whether or not women are obligated to recline on the Passover.<sup>27</sup> In both texts, it seems that women

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over time with regard to the presence of respectable women in later Roman texts). For a discussion, see e.g., Kathleen E. Corley, *Private Women, Public Meals: Social Conflict in the Synoptic Tradition* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 24-66; Matthew B. Roller, *Dining Posture in Ancient Rome: Bodies, Values, and Status* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 96-156; Dennis E. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 42-44.

<sup>24</sup> This phrase is difficult to render. In this translation, I have done my best to be faithful to the original Hebrew. A more loose translation, but which better conveys the meaning of the words, would be: “Matzah [unleavened bread] that is equivalent to an olive’s amount of food...” or “An olive-sized portion of matzah...” An olive is a standard measure for the minimum amount of food needed to be consumed/prepared for certain things to take effect/be fulfilled in rabbinic literature. This yardstick measurement (*kazayit*) is encountered beginning in the tannaitic corpus (e.g., *t. Berakhot* 5:28; *Sifra Emor pereg* 4; *Mekilta d’Rabbi Shimon b. Yohai* at Exodus 12:4).

<sup>25</sup> I render *’adam* here as “man” because, as we shall see, the assumption in this text is that free men are being referred to, and that slaves and women are deviations from the norm that must be explained on a case-by-case basis.

<sup>26</sup> The meaning of this final phrase in Hebrew (*’ad ca’an shama’ti*) is ambiguous, in that it can be understood to either acknowledge or dismiss the problem detected by R. Yose. See Marjorie Lehman, “Women and Passover Observance: Reconsidering Gender in the Study of Rabbinic Texts,” In *Women and Judaism: Studies in Jewish Civilization 14*, Edited by Leonard J. Greenspoon, Ronald A. Simkins, and Jean Axelrad Cahan, 45-66 (Omaha, NE: Creighton University Press, 2003), 65 n. 54.

<sup>27</sup> However, it must be stated that both texts speak only about *wives*. The extent to which women who are single, divorced, or widowed could recline at Passover is not discussed. One could assume that these women are allowed to recline (e.g., Lehman, “Women and Passover Observance,” 54) or that these women

(and slaves) are a curious case because, while the head of the household – the husband – must recline, there is an ambiguity vis-à-vis women (and slaves, both of which must tend to the needs of the head of the household): must they also recline or do they stand and serve him?<sup>28</sup>

While women are included in amoraic literature in other Passover practices that involve preparation and consumption of food, they are not required to perform these acts in public while reclining.<sup>29</sup> This is not the case for men – whether free or slave.<sup>30</sup> Marjorie Lehman has offered a compelling argument for why women are not obligated to recline on Passover. In sum, dining posture is used to maintain a desired social hierarchy. Since I could not state it any better, I quote here Lehman at length:

This exemption attests to the fact that legal decisions can concretize sociocultural anxieties. In other words, by exempting wives and daughters from the ritual of reclining, the rabbis may be exhibiting their discomfort with wives who perform the same rituals as they do. Reclining symbolizes the freedom of the Israelites from slavery; to abstain from reclining signifies that “freedom” does not mean the same thing for everyone. Wives who do not recline willfully acknowledge their secondary status in relation to those who are required to participate fully in Passover rites (i.e. men). Indeed, it seems that the Amoraim are encouraging wives to adhere to a particular familial-social pecking order rather than choose to embrace rituals designed to commemorate biblical events that also have meaning for them. Hence, the active participation of

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are somehow included in the discussion at hand. Either way, this is unclear in these texts and, for this reason, I do not believe that one can extrapolate much information about women and reclining from them.

<sup>28</sup> Similarly, see Judith Hauptman, “From the Kitchen to the Dining Room: Women and Ritual Activities in Tractate *Pesahim*,” In *A Feminist Commentary on the Babylonian Talmud: Introduction and Studies*, Edited by Tal Ilan, Tamara Or, Dorothea M. Salzer, Christiane Steuer, and Irina Wandrey, 109-126 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 111-112; Catherine Hezser, “Passover and Social Equality: Women, Slaves and Minors in *Bavli Pesahim*,” In *A Feminist Commentary on the Babylonian Talmud: Introduction and Studies*, Edited by Tal Ilan, Tamara Or, Dorothea M. Salzer, Christiane Steuer, and Irina Wandrey, 91-107 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 103-104.

<sup>29</sup> For references and discussion, see Lehman, “Women and Passover Observance,” 53-55. On women in tractate *Pesahim* in general (although not in regard to reclining), see Judith Hauptman, “Women in Tractate *Pesahim*,” In *Atara L’Haim: Studies in the Talmud and Medieval Rabbinic Literature in Honor of Professor Haim Zalman Dimitrovsky*, Edited by Daniel Boyarin, Shamma Friedman, Marc Hirshman, Menahem Schmelzer, and Israel M. Tashma, 63-78 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2000 [Hebrew]).

<sup>30</sup> The obligation of a male slave to recline is discussed later on on *b. Pesahim* 108a. For a discussion, see Hauptman, “From the Kitchen,” 111-112; Hezser, “Passover and Social Equality,” 103-104.

wives in Passover ritual can be tempered by their refusal to recline at the table of their husbands. Indeed, this legal position maintains the male-topped familial hierarchy and highlights the fact that husband/wife and father/daughter relationships are central to sustaining this social structure.<sup>31</sup>

Lehman admits that there are two potential complicating factors for her argument. First, an “important woman” is required to recline. However, an “important woman” is clearly a different case than an average woman. The precise meaning of this phrase is unclear. Many scholars understand the issue to be that an “important woman” is able to afford slaves who can serve her, thus freeing her from that duty and allowing her to recline.<sup>32</sup> In addition, an “important woman” could be an independently wealthy woman who is single, divorced, or widowed. Outside of the patrilineal family structure, this woman would represent a different case and, in Lehman’s opinion, would “pose far less of a threat” to the (desired) status quo.<sup>33</sup> In either case, an “important woman” is not the average woman and, as such, should not be used to extrapolate about women, dining posture, and corporality at the Passover table.

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<sup>31</sup> Lehman, “Women and Passover Observance,” 54.

<sup>32</sup> E.g., see Hauptman, “From the Kitchen,” 111-112; Hezser, “Passover and Social Equality,” 103-104. However, Hauptman and Hezser appear to differ on whether this indicates that an average woman could (Hauptman) or could not (Hezser) recline. As I will discuss further below, I am in agreement with Hezser on this matter. The difference between women of means and average women is not a concern in *y. Pesahim* 10:1 (37b). There is precedent elsewhere in rabbinic literature for treating women of means differently than less wealthy women. For example, see *m. Ketubbot* 5:5, which discusses the effect of personal wealth on a wife’s required duties. This text is often mentioned in discussions of gender in rabbinic literature. For example, see Miriam B. Peskowitz, *Spinning Fantasies: Rabbis, Gender, and History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 97-101; Judith Romney Wegner, *Chattel or Person?: The Status of Women in the Mishnah* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 76-77; Susan Weingarten, “‘Magiros’, ‘Nahtom’ and Women at Home: Cooks in the Talmud,” *JJS* 59/2 (2005): 285-297, 291-292.

<sup>33</sup> Lehman, “Women and Passover Observance,” 54. Here, I combine two of Lehman’s points. She suggests that non-wives (single, divorced, or widowed women) are allowed to recline because they are less of a threat when discussing *b. Pesahim* 108a in general (and not in her discussion of the “important woman”). While this may be correct – since both texts only talk wives, as I discussed above – I believe that this observation can be further applied to the exceptional case of the “important woman.”

Second, Lehman reminds us that women are exempt – *not prohibited* – from reclining.<sup>34</sup> The differences between exemption and prohibition have been hotly debated, especially given their ramifications for the place of women in modern Jewish law (*halakhah*).<sup>35</sup> However, I believe that Lehman is correct to point out that the rabbinic language of exemption is one of tentativeness. The early rabbis are attempting to configure the world as they wish it to be, and women’s place in that world is still being negotiated. What roles should women play? Where in the hierarchy should they be placed? Etc. These issues sometimes result in tentative language in much the same way that inchoate ideas in this paper are bracketed with semantic strategies (e.g., passive voice, modifiers). Nevertheless, while these texts do not explicitly prohibit women from reclining, they neither obligate women (*writ large*) to do so, nor do they seem to assume that the average woman appears reclining on the dining couch.<sup>36</sup>

Once again, when talking about the act of reclining on a dining couch, women are noticeably absent. None of the three exceptions to this broad statement provide much information in support of woman’s ability to function as active subjects of the verb *sbb*. In *b. Avodah Zarah* 69b-70a, if the women present were not literary foils, then they certainly were not ‘good Jewish girls.’ And in *y. Pesahim* 10:1 (37b) and *b. Pesahim*

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<sup>34</sup> Lehman, “Women and Passover Observance,” 54-55.

<sup>35</sup> For brief but informative discussions (with additional references), see Lehman, “Women and Passover Observance,” especially pp. 47-49, 54-55; Marjorie Lehman, “The Gendered Rhetoric of Sukkah Observance,” *JQR* 96/3 (2006): 309-335, especially pp. 333-335. In the 1970’s and 1980’s, the Conservative movement in America justified counting women in prayer quorums and ordaining female rabbis based on this passage and others, which exempt – but not prohibit – women from these obligations. For a brief discussion, see Michael L. Satlow, *Creating Judaism: History, Tradition, Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 48-49.

<sup>36</sup> For my approach towards gender issues in the tannaitic corpus in general, please see Jordan D. Rosenblum, “*They Sit Apart at Meals*”: *Early Rabbinic Commensality Restrictions and Identity Construction* (Ph.D. diss., Brown University, 2008), especially pp. 123-162.

108a, the presence of reclining women on the Passover dining couch is, at best, ambiguous.

It would seem that the dining couch in classic rabbinic literature is gendered as male. Lehman's contention that the Passover dining couch becomes a locus of power and that the commensal practice of reclining is used to maintain a desired social (and gender) hierarchy therefore accords with the evidence of the rabbinic dining couch in general.<sup>37</sup>

While I could end the discussion here, it is worth our time to briefly survey other evidence about women and commensality in the tannaitic corpus. Elsewhere, the subject of women at the tannaitic table does come up (usually in a rather oblique manner). However, this anecdotal evidence offers no real argument in favor of woman's participation in tannaitic reclining. It is to this evidence that we now turn.

### ***Women at the Tannaitic Table?***<sup>38</sup>

Except for discussions of cooking,<sup>39</sup> women are almost nowhere to be found in tannaitic discussions of commensality (whether reclining, sitting, or standing). Does this absence of evidence indicate an evidence of absence of women from the tannaitic table?<sup>40</sup>

I will argue in this section that the Tannaim make no explicit statements concerning the

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<sup>37</sup> This observation also applies to the Stammaim, the "anonymous" group of rabbis who follow the Amoraim and redact (and provide anonymous comments on) the Talmud. See Lehman, "Women and Passover Observance," 55-56.

<sup>38</sup> This section is an updated and abridged section from my dissertation. See Rosenblum, "*Sit Apart at Meals*," 145-160. I am currently completing final revisions of the manuscript for publication, under the title *Food and Identity in Early Rabbinic Judaism* (Cambridge University Press). Unfortunately, this version does not reflect my most recent revisions.

<sup>39</sup> Women in the tannaitic kitchen is a separate, and fascinating, topic. For a discussion, see Rosenblum, "*Sit Apart at Meals*," 124-145.

<sup>40</sup> To clarify, I use the phrase "tannaitic table" throughout to refer to the discursive, rhetorical table at which the Tannaim depict commensality as occurring; it is a literary construction – perhaps with some basis in reality.

presence or absence of women in their contemporary mealtime reality because women are not of direct interest to the Tannaim, whose literature is primarily concerned with the commensal practices of other men.

While the data are slender, a few texts possibly suggest that, if women were present at these (real and imagined) tannaitic meals at all, their ability to participate in any meaningful way is seriously called into question. The important point to remember for the present study is that women are either ignored, exempt, or excluded from commensal encounters in tannaitic literature. In these prescriptive and descriptive texts, the ‘normative’ identity constructed via commensality practices is that of a male Jew.

As is the case in other Greek and Roman banqueting traditions, in literary representations the tannaitic banquet begins by guests entering and being seated.

According to *Sifre Deuteronomy* 249,<sup>41</sup> the role of greeter at a tannaitic banquet is gendered as masculine:

“An Ammonite or a Moabite shall not enter into the assembly of Yhwh” [Deuteronomy 23:4]. Concerning men Scripture is speaking, but not women<sup>42</sup> – a male Ammonite but not a female Ammonite; a male Moabite but not a female Moabite, the words of R. Yehudah. The Sages<sup>43</sup> say: “‘Because they did not meet you with bread and water’ [Deuteronomy 23:5]. *Who goes out to meet [guests]? Men and not women.*”

In the middle of a discussion about the applicability of the prohibition against Ammonites and Moabites entering into the congregation of Yhwh, a small piece (a crumb?) of banquet ideology is revealed. Limiting the applicability of Deuteronomy’s injunction to men (based on the masculine forms of the terms that appear in the Hebrew Bible), the Sages provide a social explanation for this grammar: men greet guests, not women.

<sup>41</sup> ed. Finkelstein 277, emphasis added.

<sup>42</sup> This line is in smaller print in Finkelstein’s edition because it appears in the margin and is repetitive in light of its preceding sentence (R. Yehudah’s statement).

<sup>43</sup> *b. Yevamot* 77a attributes this saying to R. Shimon.

While this does not prove the absence of women throughout the banquet, it certainly argues against a woman's ability to host such an event. Further, this passage highlights the fact that, from the very start, tannaitic commensal practices are about male identity.

Another mention in passing about women's presence (or lack thereof) at banquets comes from *t. Yom Tov* 4:10:<sup>44</sup>

His minor son and daughter he brings with him to a house of mourning, a house of banqueting, or a house of rejoicing, in a place in which it is customary [to do so]. A man should not give [a portion] from his present [of food, provided by the host] to the son or daughter of the host, because of enmity.<sup>45</sup>

According to this text, only some places have the custom of allowing minor children (both male and female) to attend banquets.<sup>46</sup> It is most likely in these locales that a Tanna would have the opportunity to interact with, and give extra food to, the host's children. However, it is telling that the guest is told not to feed the children, perhaps assuming that they have not eaten the over-abundance of food (after all, there are left-overs!) enjoyed by the guest. Either way, this text only speaks of minors; it tells us nothing about adults. While we know that adult men can attend such events, this text does not indicate whether or not, once mature, women may do so as well. The failure to address this matter is part of a larger tannaitic trend of primary concern for male practice and male identity.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> ed. Lieberman 2:303.

<sup>45</sup> I understand this text as assuming a male as normative and hence render *'adam* "man" instead of the more common translation, "person." Lieberman suggests that this enmity refers to the host, who becomes angry due to embarrassment over his guest's diminished gift.

<sup>46</sup> *t. Demai* 3:7 mentions the presence of the son – but not the daughter – of a *haber* at a banquet of an *'am ha-'aretz*. However, this text neither specifies the age of the son nor, most likely, offers a generalizable example, as this is a unique situation.

<sup>47</sup> The presence of women, as well as children, may be glossed amidst a discussion about determining the portions of food that various diners receive at the Sabbath table. *m. Shabbat* 23:2 refers to a host casting his lot (to determine who receives which portion) "with his children and with the members of his household at the table." This text clearly suggests the presence of children at the table, an occurrence that we have previously seen. However, does the phrase "members of his household" (*benei beto*) imply that women are present at the tannaitic table? This seems to be Albeck's understanding of this passage in his commentary. Yet, the phrase could refer to servants and slaves, and perhaps other kin. While this is a possibility, the

Evidence for women's presence at a house of mourning and of feasting, mentioned in passing in *m. Ketubbot* 7:5,<sup>48</sup> does not specify whether, if at all, they are participating in mixed or separate gender meals, simply stating: "He who makes his wife vow not to go to a house of mourning or a house of feasting – he sends her out [i.e., divorces her] and gives her her *ketubbah* [i.e., her marriage settlement], because he locks [the door] before her."<sup>49</sup> Rather, this text focuses on the effect that a husband's prohibitory vow has on the state of their marriage. As such, it does not necessarily provide evidence for the presence of females at the tannaitic table. Could this text refer to separate all-female meals?<sup>50</sup> Or mixed gender commensality? While the paucity of evidence allows only for speculation, the fact remains that this text implies that a husband who makes his wife vow not to attend either of these commensal events is making an unreasonable request. It therefore seems a logical conjecture that women at least attended such events. Once again, however, this text reflects more of an interest in reporting how women's actions affect men, rather than in women's practice in and of itself.

Women do not even appear in tannaitic discussions of the commensal encounter in which we usually expect to find them: the wedding banquet. The presence of women at the wedding banquet would not be a tannaitic innovation, as Greek and Roman texts

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extant evidence is ambiguous and perhaps prescriptive. Similarly, Ben Zoma's statement about the bad guest – who claims that all of the food offered at the banquet by its host is "prepared to provide for the needs of his wife and children!" (*t. Berakhot* 6:2 [ed. Lieberman 1:34]) – tells us only that a host (literally, "home-owner" or "master of the household") provides food for his dependants; we do not learn whether or not they are present at this meal.

<sup>48</sup> ed. Albeck 3:111-112.

<sup>49</sup> On the broader history of the *ketubbah* payment, see Michael L. Satlow, "Reconsidering the Rabbinic *ketubbah* Payment," In *The Jewish Family in Antiquity*, Edited by Shaye J. D. Cohen, 133-151, BJS 289 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993).

<sup>50</sup> There is at least one Roman tradition of an all-female banquet: the festival of the "Good Goddess" (*Bona Dea*).

attest to a similar phenomenon.<sup>51</sup> Further, John 2:1-5 mentions a wedding feast at which both Jesus and his mother are present.<sup>52</sup> While women's presence at a wedding banquet is nowhere explicitly mentioned in tannaitic literature,<sup>53</sup> it would not be odd, given the extra-rabbinic evidence for this phenomenon in both Jewish and non-Jewish sources. Despite the common tannaitic parlance of a man making "a wedding banquet [*mishteh*] for his son,"<sup>54</sup> I am uncertain here whether the absence of evidence is necessarily evidence of absence.<sup>55</sup> Rather, this seems in line with a trend in tannaitic literature of ignoring the presence (or absence?) of women at a meal and focusing instead on how commensal practices construct a specifically male identity.

The remaining evidence for the presence of women at meals is, at best, ambiguous. For example, *m. Ketubbot* 5:9 mentions that a wife may eat with her husband on the night of the Sabbath. However, this passage refers only to one day of the week and only to a peculiar case, in which a husband maintains his wife via a third party.<sup>56</sup> The extent to which one can generalize from this terse comment is uncertain. It is unclear whether this text implies that all husbands and wives eat together only on the Sabbath or if this is simply a sexual innuendo, referring to conjugal relations<sup>57</sup> and not to commensality.

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<sup>51</sup> For a discussion, including references, see Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 39-40.

<sup>52</sup> Women do not explicitly appear in other ancient, non-rabbinic texts that mention wedding banquets (e.g., Tobit 7-10; *Joseph and Aseneth*, 21:6; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 5:289).

<sup>53</sup> It is possibly implied in *t. Berakhot* 4:19, which discusses rules about grace after meals for men who leave (presumably) a wedding banquet to escort the bride (presumably) to the banquet. See also the enigmatic reference on *m. Pesahim* 7:13, in which a bride is described as turning her face away while she eats at Passover.

<sup>54</sup> See above, n. 16.

<sup>55</sup> For a cautious consideration of the evidence for women at wedding banquets in the ancient Mediterranean, see Marks, "Present and Absent."

<sup>56</sup> See *m. Ketubbot* 5:8. For a discussion, see Wegner, *Chattel or Person?*, 74-75.

<sup>57</sup> See Wegner, *Chattel or Person?*, 75. For more references about the innuendo of the Sabbath meal and conjugal relations, see Ross Shepard Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings: Women's Religions Among*

Another ambiguous datum is provided by texts that exclude women from certain commensality regulations. For example, are women assumed to be present at a meal based on the fact that a text speaks of their inability to count towards the prayer quorum necessary for reciting grace after meals?<sup>58</sup> And, does the fact that women (as well as slaves and minors) cannot constitute a table-fellowship association (*haburah*) for the Passover necessarily dismiss them entirely from the table?<sup>59</sup> The context of the first passage, at least, suggests that women were likely present at such meals. However, the Tannaim are concerned with establishing how their commensal practices construct male Jewish identity, and so the pertinent data (from our perspective) on women are not necessarily provided.

Further evidence for exclusion of women from the Passover *haburah* is found in *t. Pisha* 8:6, which states: “*They do not make an association [consisting] of women, slaves, and/or minors, so as not to increase indecency.*”<sup>60</sup> Discussing the meaning of this deceptively simple passage, Wegner notes:

The Babylonian rabbis (B. Pes. 91a) and Maimonides (*Mishneh Torah: Laws of Passover Sacrifice*) interprets the Mishnah [*m. Pesachim* 8:7; = *t. Pisha* 8:6] to forbid a fellowship of women and slaves combined or of children and slaves combined (for fear of various kinds of licentious conduct) but to permit a fellowship consisting of women alone. But the mishnaic text is distinctly ambiguous, and we must be circumspect in relying on later interpretations of the original meaning of an earlier text.<sup>61</sup>

While Wegner is correct to point out the ambiguity of this passage, the fact remains that women, slaves, and minors are, in some fashion, excluded from participating in Passover

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*Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Greco-Roman World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 227 n. 47.

<sup>58</sup> *m. Berakhot* 7:2.

<sup>59</sup> *m. Pesachim* 8:7.

<sup>60</sup> ed. Lieberman 2:185. The words in italics also appear in *m. Pesachim* 8:7 (ed. Albeck 2:171).

<sup>61</sup> *Chattel or Person?*, 239 n. 217.

associations. Whether this meant that women could join a Passover fellowship comprised of men, only women, or none of the above, women (as well as slaves and minors) are still somehow categorically excluded. Men, on the other hand, are not subject to an analogous proscription. Although I prefer the reading that these three classes of people are generally excluded from participation, the other possible reading – that this refers to combinations of these categories – still indicates a social exclusion from tannaitic commensal practice. Further, the above-cited texts often group women with minors and slaves. Male minors grow up and become men and male slaves can, potentially, become free men. Women (and female minors and slaves), however, have no chance to cross that boundary. Therefore, women are particularly excluded from the Passover table, the physical location where the Tannaim reenact the Exodus from Egypt.

Tannaitic discussions about the festival of Sukkot (Tabernacles) provide yet another possible example of the exclusion of women from commensality practices. The Tannaim understand the biblical commandment in Leviticus 23:42 to “dwell” in booths for Sukkot as referring to the manner in which one dwells in a house, which specifically includes eating therein.<sup>62</sup> However, according to *m. Sukkah* 2:8:<sup>63</sup>

Women, slaves, and minors are exempt from [the religious obligation to dwell in] the *sukkah*. A minor who does not need his mother [to take care of him] is obligated with regard to [dwelling in] the *sukkah*. It once happened that the daughter-in-law of Shammai the Elder gave birth and he broke away some of the plaster [covering the ceiling] and covered [the hole] with *sukkah* -roofing over [its] bed on account of the infant.

Exempting women, slaves, and minors from the commandment to dwell in the *sukkah* logically also exempts them from participation in Sukkot meals; if dwelling means

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<sup>62</sup> *Sifra Emor* 17:5. On the history of Sukkot in biblical and rabbinic sources, see Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *The History of Sukkot in the Second Temple Period and Rabbinic Periods*, BJS 302 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995).

<sup>63</sup> ed. Albeck 2:265.

eating, then an exemption from one is also an exemption from the other. Although an exemption does not necessarily equate to an exclusion, as discussed earlier in this paper, it seems significant to me that the Tannaim exempt women, slaves, and minors from the very obligation that is central to their reinterpretation of the festival of Sukkot itself.<sup>64</sup> While the story about Shammai the Elder's actions provides some contradiction about the application of this statement to minors,<sup>65</sup> the status of women and slaves is never questioned. Women, unable to switch status as male slaves (under certain circumstances) can, are therefore seemingly excluded by exemption from commensal practice by tannaitic prescription. Though they literally  *dwell*  in the house for the duration of the year, they do not “dwell” in the house for the purposes of fulfilling the Sukkot commandment, as interpreted by the Tannaim.<sup>66</sup> As we saw previously with regard to Passover, the Tannaim use a ritual remembrance of an imagined collective past in order to negotiate and order their contemporary world via commensal practices.<sup>67</sup>

Finally, tannaitic table talk revolves around “words of Torah” – an activity gendered as male.<sup>68</sup> Adding to this identification between masculinity and Torah study is the fact that rabbinically-ordained Torah study replaces biblically-ordained animal sacrifice. This association further removes women from the picture, as tannaitic literature depicts both the sacrificial (following most, if not all, texts from the Hebrew Bible) and the pedagogical table as the domain of men. Nancy Jay's gender critique of sacrifice

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<sup>64</sup> See Marjorie Lehman, “Gendered Rhetoric,” especially pp. 333-335.

<sup>65</sup> Rubenstein believes that Shammai the Elder's actions – which directly contradict the previous statement in the Mishnah – are historically reliable, “since no motive for fabrication exists” (*History of Sukkot*, 206 n. 92).

<sup>66</sup> For amoraic interpretations of “dwelling” in the *sukkah*, see Lehman, “Gendered Rhetoric.”

<sup>67</sup> Or, in the words of Lehman: “...the experience of *sukkah* may not only be about remembering an uncertain past. It is also an expression of the rabbis' present-day struggles” (“Gendered Rhetoric,” 334).

<sup>68</sup> In general, see Satlow, ““Try to be a Man.””

sheds light on this translation from a biblical to a rabbinic context.<sup>69</sup> Women rarely, if ever, sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible, therefore – so it would seem – they are not depicted as participating in Torah study at the tannaitic table.

The difficulty in locating women at the tannaitic table results from the fact that this corpus reflects an interest primarily in how commensal practices construct a Jewish, male identity. Even when women do appear at the table, their ability to participate in the same manner as a Jewish man comes into question. The table serves as a locus for identity negotiation, an arena in which tannaitic commensal practices demarcate an ‘Us’ and a ‘Them.’ As further proof of this claim, I turn now to a specific case: the regulation about male and female *zabim* eating together.

*“It Leads to Transgression”: Commensality Amongst Zabim*

The term *zabim* (singular: *zab* [m], *zabah* [f]) refers to “[g]enital discharges unconnected to seminal emission, menstruation, and parturition.”<sup>70</sup> According to several texts in the Hebrew Bible, those suffering from this medical condition are impure and must be separated, to a greater or lesser degree, from the community.<sup>71</sup> Tannaitic literature imagines – perhaps purely scholastically – the possibility of male and female *zabim*,<sup>72</sup> almost certainly in social isolation from others, eating a meal together:

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<sup>69</sup> See Nancy Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992). Jay points to a cross-cultural trend in which women are excluded from sacrifice so as to allow men to create an all-male fictive kinship.

<sup>70</sup> Saul M. Olyan, *Rites and Rank: Hierarchy in the Biblical Representations of Cult* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 42. In general, see David P. Wright and Richard N. Jones, “Discharge,” In *ABD*, Edited by David Noel Freedman, 2:204-207, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 205-206.

<sup>71</sup> E.g., Leviticus 15; Numbers 5:2-3.

<sup>72</sup> I follow the Hebrew grammatical convention of referring to men and women together by using the masculine form of a noun. The feminine plural is *zabot*.

Said R. Shimon b. Lazar:<sup>73</sup> “Come and see how far [the keeping of cultic] purity has spread. For the ancients did not decree, saying ‘a pure man should not eat with a menstruating woman’; for the ancients did not eat with menstruating women. But they did say: ‘A zab *should not eat with a zabah because it leads to transgression.*’”<sup>74</sup>

A pure man and an impure woman cannot eat together due to purity regulations.<sup>75</sup> Hence, there is no need for an additional regulation specifically prohibiting such an occurrence. *Zabim*, on the other hand, present a difficulty. Since both are already impure, one could imagine them breaking bread together. Therefore, the Mishnah must explicitly prohibit such a commensal encounter.

The reason given for this prohibition – “because it leads to transgression” – is suggestive. The context implies that the type of “transgression” that this meal leads to is a sexual one. While the very nature of the category of *zab/zabah* is sexual, in that it involves discharge from the sexual organs, one could read a bit more into this tannaitic rationale. In line with a cross-cultural trend, commensality between the opposite sexes is often imagined as an erotic event.<sup>76</sup> A commensal encounter between two people – already sexualized due to their medical condition – is thus envisioned as one step too many down the slippery slope that leads to sexual transgression.

Further, it is interesting to find a text that understands men and women eating together as a social practice that results in sexual transgression. Perhaps this logic

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<sup>73</sup> Several manuscripts attest the name “Elazar,” which also appears in a *baraita* of this tradition (*b. Shabbat* 13a).

<sup>74</sup> *t. Shabbat* 1:14 (ed. Lieberman 2:3-4). The words in italics also appear in *m. Shabbat* 1:3 (ed. Albeck 2:18).

<sup>75</sup> Further, as I note throughout this paper, the extent to which a pure man and a pure woman, at least in public, could eat together is up for debate.

<sup>76</sup> For example, there is a cross-cultural connection between appropriate meal partners and appropriate marriage partners. As Hasia R. Diner states: “Put bluntly, the person with whom one cannot eat (and whose food cannot be consumed) is often the same person with whom sexual relations must be avoided” (*Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001], 4).

explains the absence of women from depictions of tannaitic commensality in general?

Even if this is an isolated or scholastic event, this connection is an example of a persuasive rhetoric preventing a commensal encounter.<sup>77</sup>

The previous text suggests that, even (or perhaps especially) while one is socially isolated due to his/her status as a *zab/zabah*, the rules of social decorum at the table remain in place. This logic further underlies the immediately adjoining text in Tosefta: “For the House of Shammai says: ‘A *zab* who is a Pharisee shall not eat with a *zab* who is an ‘*am ha-’aretz.*’ But the House of Hillel permits it.”<sup>78</sup> While the House of Hillel is almost always the victor in these debates, this regulation appears to be one of the later additions to a series of laws promulgated at a conclave wherein the rulings of the House of Shammai are preferred to those of the House of Hillel.<sup>79</sup> As such, the context implies that the opinion of the House of Shammai is here preferred. Whether or not this is the majority or minority opinion, however, we encounter an instance where the social status quo of separation at the table is assumed to remain in place even while one is a *zab* or *zabah*.<sup>80</sup>

Commensality amongst *zabim*, although rarely discussed in tannaitic literature, seems to parallel commensality amongst those who are not *zabim*. The extant evidence therefore suggests that at least some of the social mechanisms for group identity formation of permitted and prohibited table-fellowship operate on both sides of the purity

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<sup>77</sup> On the concept of persuasive rhetoric, see Michael L. Satlow, *Tasting the Dish: Rabbinic Rhetorics of Sexuality*, BJS 303 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1995), 8.

<sup>78</sup> *t. Shabbat* 1:15 (ed. Lieberman 2:4).

<sup>79</sup> These rulings, traditionally known as the “Eighteen Decrees,” begin in the immediately following verse in Tosefta (*t. Shabbat* 1:16-23; *m. Shabbat* 1:4-11). For an historical discussion about the Eighteen Decrees, see David Moshe Freidenreich, *Foreign Food: Restrictions on the Food of Members of Other Religions in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Law* (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 2006), 215-223.

<sup>80</sup> *b. Shabbat* 13a also understands this regulation as relating to social separation.

spectrum. Since *zabim* are most likely socially isolated only for a limited extent of time, they must conform to commensal norms in order to maintain their status as ‘proper’ tannaitic Jews. In short, if ‘you’ do not eat together while pure, ‘you’ do not eat together while impure.

### ***Conclusions***

Imagine it is the year 209 C.E. You are a disciple in a rabbinic circle located in a city in Palestine. Your rabbinic mentor invites you to a banquet that he is hosting in celebration of his son’s wedding. Do you bring your wife? The evidence encountered in this paper would suggest that, most likely, your wife would not be on the guest list.<sup>81</sup>

In my opinion, the most convincing evidence is the linguistic data provided in the first two sections of this paper. When the Tannaim and the Amoraim discuss reclining, they almost never depict women on the dining couch; and when they do, as we have seen, these appearances are, at the very least, problematic. This evidence is further buttressed by our survey of other data concerning women’s presence at (or, more likely, absence from) the tannaitic table.

Although a variety of factors may make us want to find women at the table – from the pious (theological convictions) to the academic (Greek, Roman, and Christian evidence certainly provide ample possible analogues) – the tannaitic table seems to resist these modern desires. The Tannaim were imaging an ideal world, one in which women

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<sup>81</sup> Similarly, see the brief (and minimally substantiated) remark by David Noy that, “[w]hen rabbis dined together, their wives were not expected to be present” (“The Sixth Hour is the Mealtime for Scholars: Jewish Meals in the Roman World,” In *Meals in a Social Context: Aspects of the Communal Meal in the Hellenistic and Roman World*, Edited by Inge Nielson and Hanne Sigismund Nielson, 134-144 [Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1998], 138).

shared an uncertain place.<sup>82</sup> While the real might not have matched the ideal, the extant textual evidence provides no reason for arguing that, at least at the ideal tannaitic table, women were present and reclining.<sup>83</sup>

So then, what do we learn about women, corporeality, and dining posture from our survey of tannaitic literature? Very little and a lot. We learn very little since, as has already been discussed in detail, there is very little evidence in general and, in particular, the evidence that does exist is ambiguous at best. We learn a lot because sometimes an absence of evidence can serve as an evidence of absence. Perhaps women are almost never described as reclining because the Tannaim (and, it would seem, the Amoraim as well) preferred to reserve that dining posture exclusively for men, most likely for reasons of maintaining a gendered hierarchy. And perhaps women are often absent from the tannaitic table because these are texts written by men, about men, for men. While we might be reading these texts to uncover data about women, the original producers and consumers of these texts did not share our modern concerns. For them, so it would seem, meals were about men. Women might have produced them, consumed them, and (most

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<sup>82</sup> In addition to Lehman's arguments cited above, one could cite a myriad of secondary sources that attest to this phenomenon in rabbinic literature encountered in extra-commensal evidence. To cite but one of the many examples that I could muster, see Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism: An Anthropology of Israelite Religion and Ancient Judaism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 229-234, in which Eilberg-Schwartz argues that Torah study functions as a non-sexual form of procreation between male rabbi and male rabbinic disciple (cp. Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever*).

<sup>83</sup> Of course, this is in contrast to another contemporary movement that was imagining an ideal world in which women shared an uncertain place: early Christianity, wherein women's presence at the table was "notable but not unique" in comparison to its milieu (Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 208). However, when women appear at banquets in Greek and Roman texts, they are sometimes depicted as sitting (as opposed to reclining, like the men) or characterized as prostitutes. For references and discussion, see Corley, *Private Women*, 26-34; Roller, *Dining Posture*, 96-156; Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 42-44, 208-209. Sexual innuendo perhaps underlies tannaitic texts regulating certain commensal interactions between men and women, as we have already seen (e.g., *m. Ketubbot* 5:9; *t. Shabbat* 1:14). Further, in the book of Judith, when Judith reclines in the presence of Holofernes, the scene is highly sexualized (12, especially 12:15-20).

likely?) partaken of them with men, but this is not the point. For the Tannaim, meals were about men.

The tannaitic table served as a locus of identity negotiation. Who was and was not able to engage in commensality therein defined who was and was not a tannaitic Jew. The borders of the Tannaim, like so many groups, began at the borders of the table. The presence of women in the tannaitic world was inchoate, as these early rabbis debated the role that women would play in the nascent rabbinic movement. Reclining is but one way that the Tannaim used a practice (commensal or otherwise) to establish hierarchy. In this way, the Tannaim were like so many of their Mediterranean contemporaries: more than simply a commensal practice, reclining was an action with enormous social, cultural, and political repercussions.