

A “GREAT MAN” SAID THAT? THE REPRESENTATION AND SIGNIFICANCE OF SCHOLASTIC FAILURE IN THE BABYLONIAN TALMUD

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Abstract: *Academic achievement was prized in Babylonian rabbinic culture (fourth to sixth centuries CE). Yet alongside examples of scholarly ingenuity, the Babylonian Talmud records intellectual setbacks. How academic failure is constituted and the reactions to it within the talmudic text are key to understanding dynamics between sages and the cultural values of Babylonian rabbinic Judaism. Academic failure depends more on the social rank of the man than on the nature of his mistake. The modes of failure for sages in teaching positions differ from those for sages in lower-ranked social positions. Higher-status sages are treated more sympathetically, while lower-rank sages encounter derision within brief narratives and critique from the later editors. These exchanges demonstrate the high degree of expertise expected of participants in the scholastic culture, while normalizing scholastic failure (to a certain extent) as part of academic innovation. Analyzing brief narratives depicting scholastic failure in talmudic legal dialectic necessitates literary analysis of legal passages as a whole, emphasizing the continued importance of literary theory in the study of rabbinics.*

INTRODUCTION

Members of scholarly communities can feel keenly the narrow boundary between success and failure, the approbation of their peers and collegial disparagement. As members of such a community, Babylonian Amoraim and the anonymous editors of their traditions faced dramatic success and failure in the judgment of their colleagues. While some recognized wisdom as beneficence from above, failure was firmly planted in the human domain.¹ Babylonian rabbinic texts describe sages falling short in a culture that valorized intellectual virtuosity and success, as well as a variety of responses to failure presented by sages' actions and the narratorial² choices of the text.

I am grateful to Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, Daniel Fleming, Yonatan Feintuch, Moshe Halbertal, Hannah Kosstrin, Ila Nagar, and the journal's anonymous reader for their helpful comments and suggestions.

1. B. Bava Batra 12a suggests that two “great men” could have the same idea because they are born under the same star, and B. Shabbat 156b notes that one who is born on Wednesday will be wise, because the sun and moon and stars were created on that day. In the same context, Rabbi Ḥanina states that *mazal* governs wisdom, but this is resisted in the succeeding passage that asserts that Jews are not subject to *mazal*. Rabbi Ḥanina is also cited in B. Berakhot 33b, B. Megillah 25a, and B. Niddah 16b saying “everything is in the hands of Heaven except fear of Heaven.”

2. Meaning “related to the narrator,” a term from the field of narratology.

The social significance of scholastic achievement and failure comes to the fore in a story of Rav Papa in B. Niddah 27a. This short exchange shows that the sages themselves recognized the hazards of staying silent in academic settings or speaking up and risking disparagement. Rav Papa forcefully articulates the need to risk scholastic failure and withstand its social consequences. He rebukes those who laugh at his error.

B. Niddah 27a:

יתיב רב פפי אחורי דרב ביבי קמי' דרב (ה)מנוני ויתיב וקא' מאי טע' דר' [שמעון] קסבר כל שטומאתו נתערב' ממין אחר בטל' א' להו רב פפי ר' יהוד' ור' יוסי נמי היינו טעמיהו ואחיכו עלי' מאי שני' [פשיטא] או' רב פפי' כל האי מילת' נימי איניש קמי' רביה ולא גישתוק משו' שני' אם נבלת בהתנש' ואם זמות יד לפה³

Rav Papa sat behind Rav Bibi before Rav Hamnuna, who was sitting and saying, “What is the reason behind Rabbi Shimon’s opinion? He thinks any impurity into which another impurity is mixed is annulled.” Rav Papa said to them, “That is likewise the reasoning of Rabbi Yehudah and Rabbi Yose,” and they laughed at him. [They said,] “What’s the difference? This is obvious!” Rav Papa said, “Even about a matter like this a person should speak before his master and not be silent, because it says, ‘If you have done foolishly in lifting yourself up and if you have plotted, hand to mouth’ (Proverbs 30:32).”

Rav Papa’s failure was an ill-received comment, resulting in ridicule. His response was to argue. Avoiding intellectual risks to maintain one’s colleagues’ high opinions limits a scholar’s ability to become wise. The verse from Proverbs associates acquiring high status (“lifting yourself up”) with foolishness. Rav Papa says it is better to contribute an observation and risk being ridiculed.⁴ However, not all such narratives of scholastic blunders display such defiance. The social consequences of academic defeat could be painful. Babylonian rabbinic culture was characterized by an increasingly violent idiom, emphasizing the personal costs of failure:

3. Unless otherwise noted, talmudic quotations are from MS Munich 95, from the Sol and Evelyn Henkind Talmud Text Database of the Saul Lieberman Institute (<http://www.lieberman-institute.com>). Translations are my own. There are very few relevant variations among the witnesses to this particular passage. Munich 95 has Rabbi Ishmael instead of Shimon, but Vatican 111, 113, and the Soncino print edition have Shimon, and I have amended the Hebrew text accordingly. The conjugation of גישתוק is אישתוק in Vatican 111 and 113. Soncino adds the word פשיטא (it is obvious) after the question “what is the difference?”; Vatican 111 and 113 do not have anything there; Munich 95 has what appears to be an error, פנימי, for which I have substituted פשיטא.

4. This verse in Proverbs is applied elsewhere to the behavior of Torah scholars, and it reinforces his argument. It is cited in Y. Yevamot 12:7 (13a) to mean that a person “makes himself foolish” with words of Torah by trying to raise himself on a pedestal with them: מי גרם לך להתגבל בדברי תורה על שנישאת'. עצמך בהן. This verse is also cited in B. Berakhot 63b, where Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahmani interprets the verse to mean “one who makes himself foolish for words of Torah, he will end up exalted, and if he plotted, [he will end up] hand to mouth” (המנבל עצמו על דברי תורה-סופו להתנשא, ואם זמם-יד לפה). This is more like Rav Papa’s teaching above.

shame and loss of status.⁵ The rabbinic prayer upon entering the study hall includes the wishes that “I not err in a matter of law and may my colleagues rejoice in me.”⁶ Rather than read these as independent desires, Rashi, the eleventh-century commentator, connects the two clauses. The prayer expresses fear that colleagues will delight in one’s error.⁷ Peppering legal dialectic with stories of sages’ distress at their own failures reinforces the stakes of entering debate.

This paper examines various types of scholastic missteps, how missteps become failures, and the varying social and editorial responses to them, from sympathetic to antagonistic. It shows that failure hurt lower-status sages more than higher-status sages. Failures may have helped to advance intellectual discovery, but not the failing sages themselves. Finally, the narrative construction of failure includes plot events as well as the way such events are portrayed by the talmudic narrators. While Jeffrey Rubenstein has highlighted the fear of shame as a distinct part of the Babylonian talmudic (Bavli) culture, there has yet to be an analysis of the kinds of failures that are stigmatized versus those that are acceptable, as well as a consideration of how the editors use such vignettes to promote their cultural values.

LITERARY ANALYSIS FOR CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

The Babylonian Talmud contains some spectacular stories of the individual and communal costs of sages’ engaging in scholarship as blood sport.⁸ Scholars analyzing these lengthy narratives have produced important insights about the fear of shame and prevalence of competition within Babylonian talmudic culture.⁹ However, there is another category of narratives describing scholastic

5. Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 54–79. Rubenstein based his argument for the distinctively Babylonian rabbinic quality of these concerns on comparisons between parallel narrative sources in Palestinian and Babylonian rabbinic literature. The ways that Babylonian versions of narratives diverge from parallel Palestinian sources highlights certain priorities of Babylonian sages.

6. B. Berakhot 28b (Munich 95):

תנו רבנן בכניסתו מהו אוי' יהי רצון מלפניך יי אלהי שלא אכשל בדבר הלכה ולא אומר על טמא טהור ולא על טהור טמא ולא על מותר אסור ולא על אסור מותר [ולא על זכאי חייב ולא על חייב זכאי] ואל יכשלו חבריי בדבר הלכה והם ישמחו בי ואני אשמה עמהם

The reciprocal version in Florence II-I-7 lends itself more clearly to Rashi’s interpretation:

ושלא אכשל בדבר הלכה וישמחו בי חבריי ולא יכשלו חבריי בדבר הלכה ואשמה בהם

MS Oxford Opp. Add. fol. 23 includes only the second clause in the above sentence (underlined) about the speaker rejoicing.

7. Rashi, ad loc.

8. As the talmudic adage (B. Bava Mezi’a 58b), “It was taught before Rav Nahman bar Yizḥak, ‘One who shames his fellow in public is like a murderer’ [lit. a ‘shedder of blood’]. ‘You spoke well,’ he said to him, ‘for I see that [one looks] red and then goes white.’”

9. For example B. Horayot 13b–14a, which has been discussed by Devora Steinmetz, “Must the Patriarch Know ‘Uqtzin? The Nasi as Scholar in Babylonian Aggada,” *AJS Review* 23, no. 2 (1998): 163–89; Jeffrey Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 176–211, and Richard Hidary, *Dispute for the Sake of Heaven: Legal Pluralism in the Talmud* (Providence: Brown University Judaic Studies, 2010), 269–72.

failures that has received less attention. These are brief dialogues and narration interspersed within legal dialectic, which describe the social contexts of the opinions presented in a pericope (sugya). The longer narratives are concerned with the notable, unusual circumstances surrounding challenges to and changes of the central authority of a scholarly community. The inclusion of these shorter interstitial narratives within the flow of legal debate provides different insights into the psychology and social place of failure within the ordinary life of rabbinic scholasticism.¹⁰

Analysis of these interstitial narratives necessitates literary analysis of the sugya.¹¹ Literary analysis of legal passages is appropriate to talmudic literature, since the legal dialectical passages are carefully structured and the narratives have normative weight. As Jonah Fraenkel observed, “the editors of the Talmudim did not make a full differentiation between *aggadah* (narrative) and *halakhah* (law) even though they distinguished clearly between “*halakhot*” (rules) and “*haggadot*” (stories/exegesis).”¹² Such a literary approach entails analyzing legal dialectic like a narrative,¹³ emphasizing the role of the editor as narrator, and highlighting the effects of a passage’s narrative techniques. Granted, these sugyot focus on multiplying interpretive possibilities and crystallizing conceptual

10. Reference will be made throughout this article to relevant sources in Palestinian rabbinic literature. However, the short narrative exchanges discussed in this article do not, to my knowledge, have direct parallels in Palestinian rabbinic literature that can be thought of as building blocks or points of direct comparison for the Bavli versions of the same stories. This appears to be true even for exchanges that are described between Palestinian sages. Therefore, this article builds on Rubenstein’s demonstrated Bavli phenomenon of scholarly criticism and resultant shame by focusing on shorter narratives and the effects of editorial presentation of sources, highlighting inter-sage dynamics and the relevance of literary criticism. Palestinian rabbinic literature includes reports of sages’ concerns about how they measure up to one another and comments about speaking in the presence of “lions,” a term often used in the Palestinian Talmud for “great men” of Torah. There are some brief accounts of disparagement, though not placed as prevalently in study or legal debate contexts. Presenting the language and portrayals of scholarly missteps in Palestinian rabbinic literature will be undertaken in a separate essay, and a fuller comparison to the Babylonian narratives will be presented there.

11. A fruitful approach exemplified in the past few years by scholars such as Chaya Halberstam, *Law and Truth in Biblical and Rabbinic Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), Moshe Simon-Shoshan, *Stories of the Law: Narrative Discourse and the Construction of Authority in the Mishnah* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), and Barry Wimpfheimer, *Narrating the Law: A Poetics of Talmudic Legal Stories* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), builds on the work of scholars such as Jonah Fraenkel, *‘Iyyunim be-‘olamo ha-ruhani shel sippur ha-aggadah* (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz Ha-me’uhad, 1981), who was among the first to produce literary readings of rabbinic stories, as well as the subsequent work of Daniel Boyarin, Galit Hasan-Rokem, Richard Kalmin, Joshua Levinson, Ofra Meir, Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, and David Stern, who produced literary-critical analyses of rabbinic stories in the Talmuds and midrashic compilations.

12. Jonah Fraenkel, “Ha-aggadah she-ba-mishnah,” in *Mehkere Talmud*, vol. 3, *Studies in Memory of Professor Efraim E. Urbach*, ed. Yaakov Sussman and David Rosenthal (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2005), 656.

13. The method is to analyze a text that is not a story, but which, like a story, has a sequence that produces certain effects, in which word choice and other compositional features merit examination, and in which the narrator’s voice or perspective is differentiated from the presumed authors as well as from the characters portrayed.

distinctions. However, literary analysis of the legal debates together with the (spare) narrative details provides new insights into rabbinic Babylonian society.

Narrator sympathy, use of dialogue, interior discourse, and narrative post-scripts, as well as choices made about where a tale begins and ends, reveal the role of social status in whether a scholarly lapse is deemed a failure or not, and the ways that sages and talmudic editors judge the quality of argumentation. Of particular interest is what happens after a sage fails, what resources he might have had to regain dignity, the role of colleagues in this rehabilitation, and the apparent role of the editors in deciding what remains a story of failure and what becomes a story of resilience. Studying these elements illuminates inter-sage relationships and exposes how preserving stories of failure contributes to propagating talmudic scholastic culture.

Stories of how an academically competitive environment heightens the risks of collegial criticism as well as the value of solidarity have resonance in academic communities through time. Furthermore, studying the responses to academic failures in this context may offer a point of comparison for other contemporary scholarly communities, such as Zoroastrian sages and Eastern Christian scholastics.¹⁴

IDENTIFYING SCHOLASTIC FAILURE AND VARIABLES IN FAILURE SCENARIOS

Responses to failure (by both characters and narrators) in academic exchanges can be categorized by dividing the narrative action into two stages. The first stage is the failure. This has two aspects: the sage’s scholastic lapse and his or others’ reactions that confirm that he has indeed failed. For example, a legal discussion may include a sage’s answer to a question, followed by his colleagues teasing him for the weakness of his answer. These two aspects taken together constitute the failure. The response to failure may be the sage’s own reaction to his failure, for example, his subsequent reluctance to teach publically. Responses also include other sages defending him or suggesting a possible answer to the confounding question. Sometimes the most interesting responses to failure are displayed in the editorial choices that depict the failure, specifically, changing the subject immediately following the description of a sage’s failure.

When using peer or narratorial reactions to gauge whether an academic blunder is a failure, it would seem important to control for the type and severity of mistake. However, sages of different social positions do not have many overlapping categories of mistakes (for instance: silence, poor question, poor answer), since they play different roles in legal discussions. The more important variable in how failure unfolds is the person’s social status (whether he is a teacher, student, or respected elder sage), not the mistake he made. If he has

14. The exciting new research about the comparative intellectual contexts of Babylonian rabbis, Manicheans, Zoroastrians, and Eastern Christians in Mesopotamia suggests such potential parallels. See for example, Adam Becker, “The Comparative Study of ‘Scholasticism’ in Late Antique Mesopotamia: Rabbis and East Syrians,” *AJS Review* 34, no. 1 (2010): 91–113, and publications by Michal Bar-Asher Siegal, Daniel Boyarin, David Brodsky, Yaakov Elman, Geoffrey Herman, Richard Hidary, Richard Kalmin, Yishai Kiel, Maria Macuch, Jason Mokhtarian, Jeffrey Rubenstein, and Shai Secunda, whose recent works have highlighted the overlapping Hellenistic, Zoroastrian, Christian, Manichean, and Jewish cultures in Sasanian Babylonia.

achieved a certain reputation, a sage may be cushioned from the social stigma of a mistake, while another, less well-regarded sage might lose the respect of his colleagues. Lastly, personality is an important variable in these stories. One sage might withdraw from teaching after a failure, while another might reprimand his colleagues for disparaging him.

Failure is articulated in these stories on several narrative levels,¹⁵ or layers of action within a story. Narratology distinguishes, for example, between a first narrative level in which characters participate in plot action, and a different level at which the narrator presents plot action. All the stories have a first narrative level, the plot action (e.g. a sage speaks and others laugh). Some have a second narrative level, in which a character comments on the events at a temporal/geographical remove. (Rav said, “they were right to laugh.”) Finally, all have a third narrative level, in which the narrator either comments or conveys perspective through his presentation of the events.

These narrative levels may correlate with distinct strata of the Babylonian Talmud, since the third narrative level is always the editorial contribution. However, distinguishing the first and second narrative levels is a necessary tool to supplement source-critical analysis, because there can be different perspectives within a single stratum of the talmudic text. Since plot action and character commentary can be amoraic sources, literary analysis provides the descriptive language to delineate multiple perspectives within a single source.

This article begins with descriptions of the types of failures experienced by lower-ranking sages, and reactions to them by characters and narrators. There follows a discussion of mistakes made by higher-ranking sages and the reactions of characters and narrators, as well as modes of social rehabilitation deployed by sages, their colleagues, and the talmudic editors. Finally, conclusions are presented about the importance of social hierarchy for whether a sage’s mistakes become failures, as well as a consideration of the importance of failure for understanding the editors’ culture of scholastic achievement.

FAILURES OF SAGES WITH UNKNOWN OR LOWER SOCIAL RANK

Failures of sages who are not yet authorities or “great men” are colorful tales. These exchanges include insults, jeering, “the silent treatment,” narratorial descriptions of inner fears, and occasionally, snappy retorts. Sages of lower or unknown rank fail when they participate actively in the scholarly exchange, either by posing a question, or offering a rebuttal or an answer that is deemed unacceptable to a group of peers or the teaching authority in the story. By contrast,

15. Gérard Genette’s “diegetic levels.” Narratology, as explained by Gérard Genette and Mieke Bal, among others, distinguishes narrative levels and the temporality of these different levels, using these distinctions to analyze how elements like perspective are constructed within narration. See Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1972; repr., Oxford: Blackwell, 1980) and Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (1985; repr., Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997). While these theories are no longer at the center of contemporary literary criticism, the notion of narrative levels is helpful in describing the complexity of where failure resides in talmudic narratives. The concepts are simplified and the terminology developed by Genette, such as “heterodiegetic” and “homodiegetic,” is omitted to maximize its efficacy in this context.

higher-rank sages’ failures tend to be an inability to answer, as will be examined in the second part of the article.

EXAMPLES OF FAILURES BY LOWER-RANK SAGES

i. Comments or Questions Met with Laughter: Peer Response and the Sage’s Possible Reactions

A sage who is not the recognized teacher is in a precarious position. Not having an answer is a weakness, but offering a half-baked argument is also negative; both his colleagues and his teacher are ready to disparage a flawed idea. In several exchanges, a sage’s comment or question is met with laughter. Such a response comes not from a teacher to a student, but rather from colleagues within the study context who are relatively close to that sage in rank. Laughter is a clear gesture that the performance of the sage does not pass muster. It implies that one’s contribution has been judged and found lacking, so much so that it does not merit a substantive reply.¹⁶ In the following examples, sages who are students in a scholarly discussion are derided for their failed ideas.¹⁷

A story is told about the pain of being a newcomer to an established academic context. Rabbi Abba travels to Palestine, attempts to participate in the halakhic discussion, and is jeered twice.

B. Bezaḥ 38a–b:

כי סליק ר' אבא אמ' יהא רעוא דאמי' מילתא ותיקביל מיני¹⁸ כי סליק להת' אשכחיה לר' אבהו ולר' חנינא בר פפי ולר' יצחק נפחא ואמרי לה לר' אבהו ולר' חניני' בר פפי ולר' זירא ואמרי לה לר' אבהו ולר' שמעון בן פזי ולר' יצחק נפחא דיתבי וקאמרי תיבטל מים ומלה לגבי עיסה אמ'

16. Scholarship in psychology and sociology have identified laughter or ridicule as a means of social control. See Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humor* (London: Sage, 2005), Nancy Bell’s review of Billig, *Discourse Society* 18, no. 4 (July 2007): 508–10, and Neal R. Norrick, *Conversational Joking: Humor in Everyday Talk* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1993), 78, who states that “joking and laughter help enforce group norms.” Thomas E. Ford and Mark A. Ferguson, “Social Consequences of Disparagement Humor: A Prejudiced Norm Theory,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 8, no. 1 (2004): 79, argue that not only does disparaging humor reflect social norms, it helps to construct them. In late antique Jewish literature, Philo of Alexandria describes how a Jewish legation to the Roman emperor was ridiculed with laughter. Gaius asks the Jews why they do not eat pork and “a violent laughter was raised by our adversaries, partly because they were really delighted, and partly as they wished to court the emperor out of flattery, and therefore wished to make it appear that this question was dictated by wit and uttered with grace . . .” Philo, *On the Embassy to Gaius* 361 (C. D. Yonge, trans., *The Works of Philo Complete and Unabridged* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993], 789). This emphasizes the use of laughter in public contexts to denigrate people in a politically weaker position while simultaneously raising the laughers’ own social standing. My thanks to the anonymous reviewer of this article for this reference.

17. In these legal discussions, both the sage who offers the failing idea and his hecklers are “sitting before” a particular sage, indicating that sage’s authority.

18. The extant textual witnesses are split between those that have some form of “that will be accepted from me” and those that simply have “that will be accepted.” Goettingen 3, Oxford Opp Add. fol 23, Vatican 109, Soncino print edition (1484), have “that will be accepted,” while London - BL Harl. 5508 (400), Munich 95, Vatican 134, Oxford - Bodl. heb. e. 52 (2678) have “from me.”

להו ר' אבא הרי שנתערב לו קב חיטין בעשרת קבין חיטין של חבירו יאכל הלה והדי אחיכו עליה
אמ' להו גולתיכו שקל הדור אחיכו עליה אמ' רב הושע'י שפיר עבידו דאחיכו עליה¹⁹

When Rabbi Abba went up [to Palestine] he said, “May it be the will [of God] that I say something and it be accepted from me.”²⁰ When he went up he found Rabbi Abbahu, Rabbi Ḥanina bar Papi, and Rabbi Yizḥak Naḥa, but some say Rabbi Abbahu, Rabbi Ḥanina bar Papi, and Rabbi Zeira, but some say Rabbi Abbahu, Rabbi Shimon ben Pazi, and Rabbi Yizḥak Naḥa, who were sitting and saying, “But why? Let the water and salt be negated by the dough.” Rabbi Abba said to them, “If a *kab* of wheat of his were mixed up on ten *kabs* of wheat belonging to his neighbor, should [the neighbor] consume it all [including the single *kab*] and rejoice?” They laughed at him. He said to them, “Did I take your coats?” They laughed at him again. Rav Hoshayah said, “They did well to laugh at him.”

The point of law is whether borrowed objects are considered to be associated with the owner or the borrower for the purposes of Sabbath transport.²¹ The particular mishnaic clause relates to dough made by one woman with her own flour and borrowed salt, water, or spices. The mishnah says that dough is subject to the Sabbath travel restrictions of both women, that is, the dough may only be transported as far as both women are allowed to travel. Rabbi Abba suggests that even though salt and water are a minority of the dough’s volume, they still belong to the woman from whom they were borrowed. His analogy is not accepted, despite his prayer. Starting the story with Rabbi Abba’s wish to say something acceptable directs the reader’s²² attention to his performance and reception as much as to the point of law. In fact, as Yonatan Feintuch observed, Rabbi Abba’s final word, “and rejoice” is directly followed by his colleagues’ laughter as they apparently rejoice in his shame, which may be irony or humor on the part of the redactors.²³

The storytelling invites the reader’s sympathy with Rabbi Abba, since we are privy to a private moment, and particularly one that demonstrates the character’s vulnerability. Moreover, while the identity of protagonist, Rabbi Abba, is clear, the identities of those who make fun of him are uncertain (with three different versions of who was there that day). This further distances the reader from their perspective. Theirs is a collective identity of the scholastic antagonist. Therefore, when Rabbi Abba’s analogy is met with laughter, he has the reader’s sympathy, allowing the reader to identify with the feelings that might be associated with failure and exclusion from a scholar circle.²⁴

19. The most notable textual variants are alternative lists of sages. This has implications for the reliability of attributions, but not the talmudic editors’ presentation of inter-sage dynamics and derision.

20. Reminiscent of the prayer cited in B. Berakhot 28b.

21. M. Bezaḥ 5:4.

22. Since these texts were orally transmitted, “reader” in this context means listener/reader, but “listener/reader” is clumsy, and contemporary reception of this text is through reading.

23. Personal communication.

24. Following David Goodblatt, *Rabbinic Instruction in Sasanian Babylonia* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), and Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, “The Rise of the Babylonian Rabbinic Academy: A Reexamination

Unusual among stories of sages being jeered, Rabbi Abba consciously and directly responds to the laughter of his peers.²⁵ Asking “Did I take your coats?,” Rabbi Abba refuses to silently accept the disparagement of his new colleagues. The meaning of “Did I take your coats?” could possibly be, “Did I cause an affront to your dignity, that you should tease me?”²⁶ Such a reading heightens the injury of Rabbi Abba, since he is not simply querying the laughter but is actually protesting unjust treatment. This interpretation is indicated by the removal of a coat as a literary motif for lowering of status in both the Mishnah and the Hebrew Bible. In M. Bava Kamma 8:6, העביר טליתו ממנו “he removed his garment from him” is an example of a tort in the category of shame. The tearing of King Saul’s cloak in I Samuel 15:27–29, as well as the removal of Joseph’s special garment in Genesis 37:23, indicates a loss of status. Whether Rabbi Abba’s protest was general or specifically related to the shame involved, he does not shrink from their taunts, but instead demands they explain their reaction.

Ironically, Rabbi Abba’s protest may compound the narrative portrayal of his denigration, since it fails to stop the laughter. Moreover, while the scene ends with the sages’ laughter, the legal discussion continues with Rav Hoshayah confirming the sages’ mockery of Rabbi Abba. Based on the existence of other stories in which sages’ contributions are jeered, it seems laughter was an accepted form of intimidation, and that Rabbi Hoshayah approves its use in this case. After Rabbi Hoshayah’s statement, the Talmud’s anonymous editorial layer discusses the merits of Rabbi Abba’s analogy, dignifying his contribution (to some extent). From sympathy in the narrative portrayal of Rabbi Abba’s fears, to criticism of Rabbi Abba at the second narrative level (direct discourse by a character outside of the plot), to seriously addressing Rabbi Abba’s suggestion at the editorial (third narrative) level, the passage’s multifaceted response reflects the Bavli’s variegated portrayals of scholastic failure. However, in all cases of a sage being mocked, the laughter takes place within the plot action, and it comes from a sage’s colleagues of comparable rank, as opposed to from a teacher.

of the Talmudic Evidence,” *Jewish Studies, an Internet Journal* 1 (2002): 55–68, which argues that the Babylonian amoraic study context was scholar circles, while later editors may have studied in larger “academies.” The narrative’s Aramaic suggests it should be treated as a Babylonian source, despite its narrative context in Palestine. Y. Bezaḥ 5:4 (63b) records a comment by Rabbi Abba on this same mishnah, but not this story.

25. For contrast see Rav Shizvi in B. Gittin 55b and Rav Papa in B. Niddah 27a.

26. This is the only occurrence of this phrase in the Bavli. The word גולתא, cloak, occurs a handful of times in the Bavli (B. Shabbat 77b, B. Bava Batra 111a, B. Bava Mezi’a 85a, and here) as well as in the Yerushalmi (e.g. Y. Ta’anit 1:3 [64b]). There are Yerushalmi instances of cloaks “slipping off” but the concern does not seem to be lost dignity, cf. Y. Berakhot 5:1 (9a). See Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2002), 269, for the Babylonian instances of the term. There is no etymological connection between the word גולתא and טלית used in the Mishnah, nor with the words for cloak or coats used in the Hebrew Bible. Therefore, the interpretive suggestion remains provisional.

ii. *Gestures and Facial Expressions in Response to Comments: Teacher Rebukes and Sages' Reactions*

There are also nonverbal social reactions that confirm scholastic failure of a lower-ranking sage. Sages in a higher-ranking social position use this technique and not outright laughter. For example, Rav Sheshet demonstrates his disapproval of Rav Ḥisda with a gesture—

B. Berakhot 49a:

א"ל ר זירא²⁷ לרב חסדא [תא] נית²⁸ מר וליתני א"ל ברכת מזונא [לא] גמירנא תנניי קא מתנינא א"ל מאי כולי האי א"ל דאי קל... <לבי ריש גלותא וכרוכי ריפתא ובריכי ברכת מזונא ומתחיה²⁹ רב ששת לצוארי עליה כחוייא מאי טעמי [דלא אמרי לא ברית ולא תורה ולא מלכות

Rabbi [Zeira] said to Rav Ḥisda, "Let the master come and teach!" He replied to him, "I have not learned the grace after meals, yet I should teach a tradition?" He said, "What do you mean?" He replied, "When I was at the home of the exilarch, [I ate a meal]³⁰ and I performed the grace after meals, and Rav Sheshet stretched out his neck at me like a snake." And why? Because he mentioned neither the covenant nor Torah nor kingship.

According to the editorial comment, Rav Sheshet disapproved of Rav Ḥisda's faulty liturgy. While this story does not take place in the context of legal dialectic, ritual performances like Rav Ḥisda's indicate practitioners' scholarly opinions. Rav Ḥisda's experience is presented as a story within a story, as he recounts Rav Sheshet's reaction to explain his own unwillingness to teach.

This passage demonstrates the power of disapproval conveyed without words. Rav Sheshet may have chosen not to verbalize his disapproval if he thought it improper to speak in the presence of the exilarch.³¹ In the wake of

27. All extant textual witnesses except for Munich 95 have Rabbi Zeira, and Rabbi Zeira was a student of Rav Ḥisda. Munich 95 has Ze'iri.

28. MS Munich 95 has נרב but other texts have נית, a standard word for "come."

29. The most variation among the manuscripts / early editions is in the description of Rav Sheshet's gesture. First, the majority of the witnesses have a form of the above verb (מתהל, מתחיה, מתהל): in that order: Oxford Opp. Add. fol. 23, Munich 95, and the last both Florence II-1-7 and Paris 671), which means to extend or stretch; in Genesis Rabbah it is used in connection with rendering judgment, like stretching an arrow in a bow (cf. Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi and the Midrashic Literature* [New York: Judaica Press, 1992], 861), but the Soncino print edition (1484) has another verb for standing upright, זקפיה. Paris 671 adds a few other descriptors of Rav Sheshet's behavior that do not appear elsewhere, וקפיה בחוטמי וכמס עלי, "and he struck my nose and was angry(?) at me." The root כמס (to wither, used for fruit) does not make sense here, and is never used with the preposition על, while כעס is used with על and is contextually appropriate. While the report of Rav Sheshet's "anger" would be notable, because this appears in only one manuscript and the reading of that word is questionable, it is omitted.

30. Munich 95 is the only source that has this extra phrase, and it is possible that as a stock phrase it crept in.

31. For the history and social dynamics between the exilarch and rabbis in Sasanian and Islamic Mesopotamia see Geoffrey Herman, *A Prince without a Kingdom: The Exilarch in the Sasanian Era*

this judgment by Rav Sheshet, Rav Ḥisda hesitated to teach (and it is not clear how long ago this happened to him). The sage’s failure is reflected in judgment by his superior. However, Rav Sheshet’s “neck stretching” is an unusual example, so it is difficult to generalize broadly from this story.

The editors present the story in the midst of a discussion about the proper procedure for reciting grace. While this immediate context implies that Rav Ḥisda felt unable to teach about grace after meals, independent of its immediate legal context the story is not explicit about the topic upon which Rav Ḥisda was invited to teach. In other words, independent of its context, the story raises the possibility of a sage who lost his confidence to expound on any scholarly matter, not just the topic in which he previously failed. The narrator of the story might have envisioned greater consequences for Rav Ḥisda than the editors who placed the story in its current context. The personal stakes of participating in talmudic debate are dramatized in the ways the sages’ failures are portrayed to affect them. The story of Rav Ḥisda’s reaction might suggest to a subsequent sage that academic failure will result in pain that persists long after the event. This story highlights the personal emotional consequences of a sage being publically critiqued by a higher-status sage.

HIGHER-RANK SAGES’ FAILURES

When the sage who fails is one who is respected as a teacher, the rabbis surrounding him within the plot action (first narrative level), the sages depicted hearing the story (at the second narrative level), as well as the editorial layer of the Talmud (third narrative level) tend to treat the matter differently from the examples of failures by lesser-status sages. The first difference, though, is the type of ineptitude that constitutes a failure. When the sage is a teacher, his silence may indicate that he has no substantive contribution, which is an academic failure.³² A teacher-scholar’s silence is also sometimes understood as an indicator of disapproval of a lesser sage’s input. The Talmud’s editorial layer will sometimes query

(Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012) as well as Catherine Hezser, “The Slave of a Scholar Is Like a Scholar”: Stories about Rabbis and Their Slaves in the Babylonian Talmud,” in *Creation and Composition: The Contribution of the Bavli Redactors (Stammam) to the Aggada*, ed. Jeffrey L. Rubenstein (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 181–200, which focuses on talmudic narratives.

32. While there are traditions in earlier rabbinic texts that silence is a sign of wisdom (e.g. M. Avot 3:13), this does not hold true within talmudic dialectic. Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, 276, gives examples of scholars’ shame when they are unable to answer. As he later notes in *Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*, 75, “On the one hand, to propound questions and objections is the goal of academic life and an important measure of status. On the other, questions and objections should be propounded with great caution, even avoided in certain circumstances, because they may embarrass a scholar who cannot provide the requisite answer.” David Goodblatt, *Rabbinic Instruction*, 161–62, cites a mid-tenth-century source about rabbinical instruction, which emphasizes that a teacher would listen in silence while students offered explanations, and then the teacher would read and expound. This seems to resonate with the talmudic portrayals of students “sitting” before a teacher and debating, while the teacher has an opportunity to interject. The passage also reports that if a student’s “learning is deficient, he is harsh towards him, diminishes his stipend and rebukes him.” *Ibid.*, 162.

the meaning of a silence: does the teacher not know the answer, disapprove of a question, or perhaps he silently agrees?³³ The following stories present teachers' silences that constitute scholarly failure. On the whole, the reactions of characters within the story as well as the editors of the Talmud are more sympathetic to higher-ranking sages who falter than they are to lower-ranking sages.

FAILURES OF HIGHER-RANK SAGES: MISTAKES AND REACTIONS

The phrase, "he was silent and did not answer him anything" occurs seven times in the Bavli.³⁴ In the six examples where silence indicates an inability to answer, the narrative describes no social reaction. Instead, possible answers are offered or explanations given for the sage's behavior. The seventh occurrence is not a part of a lively scholarly debate context, but is rather a conversation between a sage and the Persian king Shapur, and this context contributes to the difference in reception, to be discussed below. A sage's inability to answer is perceived by later sages and the editors as having the potential to become a scholarly failure and a source of shame, but he can recover from it, as the narratives will show.

i. Editorial Covering of Failure

One editorial response to a teaching sage's inability to respond is to offer no further comment on his lapse and to continue the legal discussion. These silences are at least potential failures, because in other contexts being stumped is a source of shame. When the editorial layer focuses on the legal matter and not the sage's silence, it protects the dignity of the sage. Talmudic editors significantly reworked inherited narrative and rule-based materials, while producing some of their own compositions.³⁵ Part of their editorial discretion were decisions about which

33. As in the legal principle, "silence is like agreement." Tosafot, B. Bava Batra 62a, s.v. *u-modeh rav* lists types of silence in halakhic dialogues. B. Nedarim 77a–b even asks whether a sage was silent because he was drinking.

34. B. Berakhot 27a, B. Shabbat 37b–38a, B. Eruvin 37b, B. Sanhedrin 36b, B. Temurah 34a, B. Yevamot 57a, and B. Shabbat 95b. אִשְׁתִּיק itself, "he was silent" occurs sixty-nine times (six times without the first *yod*) in the Bavli, and include silences that indicate assent, ignorance, displeasure, or which are indeterminate. In five of these cases, silence demonstrates that the sage cannot provide a response. In the remaining two examples, the silence is (initially) interpreted as an expression of anger or a snub, though B. Yevamot 57a eventually decides that Rabbi Oshaiah was silent because he was asked a question with no answer.

35. The talmudic editors' contributions to legal passages has become an accepted fact in talmudic scholarship, see David Weiss Halivni, *The Formation of the Babylonian Talmud*, ed. and trans. Jeffrey L. Rubenstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Shamma Y. Friedman, *Perek ha-'isha' rabbah ba-bavli, be-zeruf mavo' kelali 'al derekh heker ha-sugva*," in *Mehkarim u-mesorot: Ma'asafle-mada'e ha-yehadut*, vol. 1, ed. Haim Z. Dimitrovsky (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1978), 275–442; and Moulie Vidas, *Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014). The contributions of the editors to the narrative passages have been established more recently, see Louis Jacobs, *Structure and Form in the Babylonian Talmud* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 105, and the overview of scholarship in Jeffrey L. Rubenstein's introduction to *Creation and Composition*, 1–20.

narratives to omit and to include.³⁶ Moreover, many of the stories analyzed here display form-critical indications of being stammitic compositions, especially in language.³⁷ While the editors do not appear to have enjoyed total freedom to revise the materials they inherited,³⁸ juxtaposition, inclusion, and presentation of scholastic failure narratives within the heavily edited legal sugyot reflect editorial decisions as much, or perhaps more than earlier amoraic choices about which material to transmit. Preserving stories of failure conveys social stigma to later generations, and this is avoided by changing the subject.³⁹ Since an inability to answer is generally a failure by a higher-status sage in a teaching position, this narrative strategy protects sages who rank higher in the scholarly ladder. For example, in B. Eruvin 74a, Shmuel is shown to have promulgated two contradictory statements, and when asked about it, he is silent.

B. Eruvin 74a:

יְתִיב רַב בְּרוּנָא וְקָאמֵי לְהָאֵי שְׁמַעְתָּא אֲלֵךְ רַ' אֲלֵעִזְ אִמֵּי שְׁמוּאֵל הֲכִי אֲלֵךְ אֵין אַחֵי לִי אוֹשְׁפִיזִיה אַחֵי לִי אַתָּא לְקַמִּיה דְּשְׁמוּאֵל אֲלֵךְ אִמֵּי מַר הֲכִי אֲלֵךְ אֵין וְהָאֵמֵר הוּא דְאִמֵּי אֵין לָנוּ בְעִירוּבִין אֲלֵךְ אֲלֵךְ כְּלָשׁוֹן מִשְׁנַתֵּנוּ שֶׁהִמְבִּי לְחִצְרוֹת כְּחִצְרֵי לְבַתִּים אִישְׁתִּיק קְבֵלָה מִיְנֵיהּ אוּ לֹא קְבֵלָה מִיְנֵיהּ.⁴⁰

Rav Bruna sat and recited this tradition, and Rabbi Elazar said to him, “Did Shmuel say that?” He said, “Yes.” “Show me his dwelling,” and he showed him. He came before Shmuel and asked him, “Did the master say this?” He said, “Yes.” “But the master is he who said, ‘We only hold what the language of our Mishnah says in regards to joining domains, which is that an alleyway to a courtyard is treated like the courtyard to houses.’” He was silent. Did he [Shmuel] accept this from him or not?⁴¹

The Talmud’s editors then ask whether Shmuel might have agreed that one of his statements was incorrect, offering proofs and counterproofs. The editors fill Shmuel’s role where he could not. The addition of a substantive question about Shmuel’s view at the end of the narrative reflects the editors’ interest in the legal point, as well as the likely paucity of other connected amoraic materials. However, it is also the case that the editorial question directs the discussion away

36. Yaakov Elman, “Righteousness as Its Own Reward: An Inquiry into the Theologies of the Stam,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 57 (1990–91): 38 and Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, “Criteria of Stammitic Intervention in Aggada,” in Rubenstein, *Creation and Composition*, 417–18.

37. For a list of such indicators in Bavli narratives, based on Shamma Friedman’s criteria for recognizing editorial interventions in legal discussions, see Rubenstein, “Criteria,” 419–20 and for language specifically, 424–27.

38. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, 244.

39. This stammitic protection of the dignity of an earlier sage could be seen as the continuation of a phenomenon noted by Richard Kalmin, that later generations look more kindly on sages’ statements than their contemporaries; see Kalmin, “Talmudic Portrayals of Relationships between Rabbis: Amoraic or Pseudepigraphic?,” *AJS Review* 17, no. 2 (1992): 175, 179–80, and 193–94.

40. This text is quoted from MS Oxford Opp. Add. fol. 23 because Munich 95 is incomplete in this passage.

41. This question is not part of the narrative, but rather an editorial reaction to it.

from querying Shmuel's scholarly status. Similarly, a dialogue in B. Rosh Ha-shanah 15b, in which a higher-status sage fails to answer, is immediately followed by editorial expansions on the problem at hand.⁴² While this reflects the Bavli's interest in exploring all possible perspectives and potential solutions, it has the effect of minimizing a sage's lapse by focusing on the difficulty of the question. It also may reflect a difference between amoraic and editorial interests, where Amoraim found the silence's meaning unimportant, while editors considered it worthy of study.

ii. A Senior Scholar's Failure That Wasn't: Revising Mistaken Teachings without Social Repercussions

Not every scholarly mistake or lapse amounts to a failure. Some mistakes are generally not treated as a failure by the sages in the narratives, nor by the narrator. For example, when a sage who is treated as an authority is shown by a student or colleague that his tradition is contradicted or mistaken, stories portray sages revising their teachings publically and promulgating a new version. The phrase, דברים שאמרתי לפניכם טעות הם בידי ברם כך אמרו, "the words I said before you were a mistake in my hands, in fact, thus they said" signals this type of lapse, which is not treated as a failure.⁴³ Amoraim declare themselves to have been mistaken in their teaching when they are presented with a contradictory or preferable tannaitic or amoraic tradition, or in one case, a report of a practice contrary to their stated tradition.⁴⁴ The tradition requiring revision may be the sage's own, a tannaitic statement, or a statement from an earlier Amora.⁴⁵ Such a mistake and retraction is never portrayed as

42. Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish apparently stumps his mentor, Rabbi Yoḥanan, in a dialogue about Sabbatical year observances and when to leave uncultivated a plant with an atypical growing cycle. The passage appends a short amoraic comment suggesting an answer to the question, which is itself followed by two anonymous suggestions of possible answers that Rabbi Yoḥanan could have given and reasons why they would have been flawed. The editorial voice questions whether Rabbi Yoḥanan's silence was a way of conveying that the question was so obvious so as not to require an answer. The discussion then emphasizes the difficulty of the problem, justifying Rabbi Yoḥanan's silence, and eventually presents an interpretation of Rabbi Yoḥanan's behavior that affirms his superior status.

43. Forms of the phrase occurs seven times in the Bavli: B. Shabbat 63b, B. Erubin 16b, B. Erubin 104a, B. Bava Batra 127a, B. Zevaḥim 94b, B. Ḥullin 56a, and B. Niddah 68a. Rava is credited with this statement four times and the other Amoraim are Rav Dimi, Zeiri, and Rav Naḥman. In five of these cases, the revised statement is introduced with the verb דרש, "expounded": B. Erubin 16b (Rav Naḥman), B. Erubin 104a, B. Bava Batra 127a, B. Zevaḥim 94b, and B. Niddah 68a (all Rava), and the other two (B. Shabbat 63b and B. Ḥullin 56a) are conventional apodictic amoraic statements that are introduced simply with the verb "he said," אמר (memrot).

44. It is a tannaitic tradition in B. Erubin 104a and in B. Bava Batra 127a, while in B. Erubin 16b, B. Zevaḥim 94b, B. Ḥullin 56a, and B. Niddah 68a the objection is raised from a competing amoraic tradition. A differing practice (from the temple worship) is observed in B. Shabbat 63b. In three cases the new tradition is a citation of a sage who is not present at the debate (B. Shabbat 63b, B. Bava Batra 127a, B. Ḥullin 56a), while in four cases a sage who is present raises the objection (B. Erubin 16b and 104a, B. Zevaḥim 94b, B. Niddah 68a).

45. B. Zevaḥim 94b and B. Ḥullin 56a are revisions of the Amora's own statement, and in B. Niddah 68a, the Amora replaces his own statement with that of another Amora. B. Erubin 104a and B.

a scholastic failure. For instance, in B. Shabbat 63b, Rav Dimi revises his teaching in light of a tradition previously unknown to him.

B. Shabbat 63b:

כי אתא רב דימי א"ר יוחנן מניין לאריג כל שהו שהוא טמא מצין [ץ] א"ל אביי וציין אריג הוא והתניא ציין דומה כמין טס של זהב ורחב שתי אצבעות ומוקף מאזן לאזן וכתוב עליו בשני שיטין יו"ד ה"א מלמעלה וקדש למ"ד מלמטה ואמ"ר אלעזר ב"ר יוסי אני ראיתיו ברומי וכתוב עליו קדש ליי' בשטה אחת כי סליק לנהרדעא שלח להו דברים שאמרתי לפניכם טעות הוא בידי [ברם] כך אמרו משום ר' [יוחנן] מניין לתכשיט כל שהוא טמא מצין כי אתא רבין א"ר יוחנן מניין לאריג כל שהו שהוא טמא מאו בגד

When Rav Dimi came, he said in Rabbi Yoḥanan's name: “Whence that woven matter of any size is susceptible to impurity? From the [high priest's] head plate.” Abaye said to him, “And is the head plate woven? Behold it is taught, ‘The head plate is like a sort of golden foil, two fingers wide, encircling from ear to ear, and in two rows is written upon it *yod heh* [i.e. the tetragrammaton] above and *kodesh lamed* below.” And Rabbi Elazer son of Rabbi Yose said, “I saw it in the city of Rome and *qodesh lyh* ... was written in one row.” When he went up to Nehardea, he sent to them, “The things I said to you were a mistake in my hands. In fact, thus they said in the name of Rabbi Yoḥanan: ‘Whence that an adornment of any size is susceptible to impurity? From the head plate.’” When Ravin came, he said in Rabbi Yoḥanan's name, “Whence that something woven of any size is susceptible to impurity? From ‘or garment.’”

In all uses of this phrase, the narrative presents the reaction of the mistaken sage directly after the presentation of the problem, giving a quick resolution.⁴⁶ This may be due to the fact that the mistake is revealed not by scholastic interrogation, but by comparison with another recited statement. In the eyes of some talmudic editors, shameful scholastic failure might be reserved for collapsed argumentation and reasoning, not mistakes due to ignorance of recited rabbinic traditions.⁴⁷ Oral traditions from one sage or location are frequently put forward in another location to the interest of the presiding sage. Perhaps ignorance of an oral tradition was seen as unfortunate but remediable. In several of these narratives the sage appoints a speaker to expound, to make clear that the new version is official. From a narrative perspective, the power to appoint a speaker highlights the sage's authoritative status.

Bava Batra 127a revise tannaitic traditions and B. Shabbat 63b and B. Eruvin 16b are revisions of another Amora's memra (statement formulated for transmission).

46. See likewise B. Zevahim 94b, where Rava's teaching is challenged by a report of Rav's Sabbath practice, combined with a logical deduction from this report. He accepts that his statement was too broad, and revises it. And see B. Niddah 68a, where Rava revises his statement in light of an opposing opinion in Ravin's letter.

47. See Vidas, *Tradition*, 115–49.

iii. Students' Reactions to High-Ranking Sages When They Fail

When a higher-ranking sage fails, the narratives stress that students ought not react and augment his discomfort. The following story exemplifies the acceptable social reactions to teachers' failures by sages of lower rank. If a student jeers a teacher, there are serious repercussions for the student. In B. Bava Batra 9a, for instance, a student's smirk leads to divine punishment.

B. Bava Batra 9b:⁴⁸

(A) דבע' מיני רב אחדבוי מרב שש' מניין למצור' שמטמ' אד' בימי ספירו א"ל הואיל ומטמ' בגדי מטמ' אד' [...]
 (B) הוה קמהד' 49 לי בכדיחות' חלש דעתי, 50 אשתתק (רב אחדבוי ואיעקר תלמודיה מיניה) 51
 (C) אתאי אימי' צווח' ולא אשג' בה 52 אמר' לי חזי להני חדיי 53 דמצי' מיניהו בע' רחמי עלי' ואיתסי 54

48. The Munich 95 version is spare in its description of the interaction between Rav Sheshet and Rav Aḥadboi. Quotations are taken from MS Munich 95 and additions from MS Hamburg 165 are added in parentheses. Many of the textual variations differ between most manuscripts and Vatican 115, which often has something different. Escorial G-I-3 and Munich 95 overlap and both differ from the other manuscripts within the larger group. Yair Barkai's critical version of the parts of this narrative ("La-mahutah shel shetikah," *Mayim mi-dalyo* 1 [1990]: 211) opts to use shorter manuscript versions of this narrative, in which, for example, the "distressed" person is not named and additional lines about the interaction between Rav Sheshet and Rav Aḥadboi are omitted. Shraga Abramson, *Masekhet bava batra. Talmud bavli 'im targum 'ivri u-ferush ḥadash*, ed. Jacob N. Epstein (Jerusalem: Dvir, 1958), 14, includes more narrative details in his critical version.

49. So five other witnesses (Escorial G-I-3, Florence II-I-9, Hamburg 165, Paris 1337, and Pesaro print edition [1511]), all of which have a variation of the verb הדר, "to come back" or "respond," but Vatican 115 alone has צווח ביה, "he looked at him" with a smirk.

50. Hamburg 165, Paris 1337, and the Pesaro print edition (1511) name Rav Sheshet as "distressed" while Escorial G-I-3, Florence II-I-9, Vatican 115, and the above Munich 95 do not specify who was distressed. Contextually it makes sense for it to be Rav Sheshet, but that does not mean it is required in the text; I added "Rav Sheshet" in parentheses in the translation as an explanation, not a textual emendation.

51. Escorial and Munich do not name Rav Aḥadboi, but the other witnesses all say Rav Aḥadboi became silent, and some add some version of מיניה ואיעקר תלמודיה (Paris 1337, see also Vatican 115, Hamburg 165, Florence II-I-9 and Pesaro print edition [1511]). Munich and Escorial do not have it.

52. There is some variation in the description of his mother; the most common reading among the versions is צווח צווח ולא אשג בה (Escorial G-I-3, Florence II-I-9 [though only one אשג], Hamburg 165, Munich 95, Paris 1337, Pesaro print edition [1511] [adds בדיא לקמיה]), while Vatican 115 again has something different from the others, וקבלת ליה, in place of this entire phrase.

53. Escorial G-I-3, Hamburg 165, and Paris 1337 all have דדי for breasts, while Munich 95, Florence II-I-9, Pesaro print edition (1511) and probably Vatican 115 (which has הריי) have the plural of the word חדיא for breast.

54. Some manuscripts add ואהדר תלמודיה, "and his learning returned" (Florence II-I-9, Paris 1337, Vatican 115) while Escorial G-I-3, Hamburg 165, and Munich 95 (above) do not have it. Generally, the versions that have "and his learning was uprooted from him" add this extra phrase in the end, but Hamburg 165 and the Pesaro print edition (1511) have the earlier phrase "his learning was

A) As Rav Aḥadboi bar Ami asked Rav Sheshet, “Whence do we know that a leper contaminates another person in the days counted before immersion?” He said to him, “Since he contaminates clothing, he contaminates a person.”

[...]

B) He responded in a jocular manner⁵⁵ and he [Rav Sheshet] became distressed.⁵⁶

[Rav Aḥadboi] was quiet [and his learning was uprooted from him].

C) His mother came and screamed and screamed and he did not pay attention to her. She said to him, “Look at these breasts from which you suckled!” He [Rav Sheshet] asked for mercy for him and he was healed.

In this story, Rav Aḥadboi bar Ami refutes Rav Sheshet, and the narrative includes two further answers and rebuttals. Then Rav Aḥadboi, apparently pleased with his own performance, “responded to [Rav Sheshet] in a jocular fashion.”⁵⁷ This distresses Rav Sheshet, rendering Rav Aḥadboi mute, an apparent cosmic response to Rav Sheshet’s discomfort. The student’s impudence is punished, reaffirming the academic hierarchy. Taunting peers is acceptable study-hall behavior, but a student does not gain by showing his teacher to be incapable.

A single narrative can present several responses to scholastic failure. The narrative itself may side with one character, but present other competing ideas through narrating emotional states or using a character’s direct speech. The story of Rav Aḥadboi and Rav Sheshet describes a character’s reaction to his own failure. It also presents two different editorial responses: disapproval of a lower-status sage whose behavior contributed to a teacher experiencing shame, and an implicit criticism of the social hierarchy that produces such distress. These three responses will now be examined.

First, the character’s response to his own failure: הלש דעתיא “He was distressed” occurs twenty times in the Babylonian Talmud, all in narrative contexts. In roughly three-quarters of those stories, it is a reaction to not measuring up to someone with whom the man compares himself, or a response to demotion in

uprooted,” but not this postscript, “his learning returned.” Abramson does not include this postscript in his text.

55. The word *הדר* is often a verbal response, and while there is no verbal content, perhaps this jocularity was audible, like a laugh. Either way, the editors chose not to fill in any verbal content of this “response” and the effect is to focus on its mode of expression, as “jocular.” The alternative word *הזא* in Vatican 115 leaves the response as a gesture or facial expression. Even if the response was inaudible, M. Bava Kamma 8:1 rules that one is liable for damages if he shames a blind person, indicating that shame exists even if the ashamed cannot see it, and Rav Sheshet was blind.

56. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, 276, notes that הלש דעתיא includes aspects of shame, embarrassment, and distress.

57. Barkai translates “he looked at him with a smirk” responding to the use of *הזא* (Vatican 115). There are further examples of the seriousness with which the Bavli treats facial disparagement, including B. Bava Kamma 117a–b, where Rabbi Yoḥanan thought Rav Kahana was smirking at him because he had a cleft lip. Jeffrey Rubenstein discusses that narrative and its relation to the Bavli’s culture of shame in *Talmudic Stories*, 276.

social position within a study context.⁵⁸ Sometimes, this distress is externalized and projected onto the perceived instigator as physical symptoms.⁵⁹ The narrative's displacement of the experience of failure onto the sage's opponent shifts responsibility away from the failing scholar. The student or colleague who asked too many questions or provided too many refutations did not abide by expected conventions and therefore brought this suffering on himself. Here the narrative sympathizes with the experience of the high-status scholar who fails.

Next is the editorial perspective that is critical of the student's disruption of scholarly hierarchy. The story lays out the perils of treating the master lightly. Likewise, in B. Ta'anit 9b, Rav Papa addresses God in the midst of a debate as an indirect way to tell a sage to stop objecting. He says "may Heaven save me from the shame of Shim'i." Where a person of higher status feels wronged by one of lower status, explicit appeals to heaven and implicit divine intervention direct the reader away from the teacher's failings. Being justified by heaven

58. The six remaining cases are not unrelated to this theme but do not match it entirely. These fourteen cases (three-quarters of the total besides B. Bava Batra 9b) are: B. Shabbat 51a, when Rabbah bar Huna is distressed because another sage's donkey went before his; B. Ta'anit 9a, when Rav Papa is upset following Rava's death because while Rava's students attended his lesson, they gestured to one another when they disagreed with him; B. Ta'anit 23a, when a folk figure/rabbi goes to a study house but is not treated with the respect he expected; B. Ḥagigah 5b, which tells of a rabbi who would attend the study house once every three months and was teased for it by the other students, and was distressed; B. Ketubbot 67b, which describes when Mar Ukba discovered that his wife was more righteous in the sight of heaven than he; B. Sotah 40a, when Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Abba is distressed because all the students studied with his rival (the story continues with his rival trying to show him honor and compensate him); B. Bava Kamma 117a, when a sage thought he was being smirked at in the study house, was distressed and died; B. Bava Mezi'a 33a, when a misunderstanding between Rav Ḥisda and Rav Huna resulted in Rav Huna thinking he had been insulted; B. Bava Mezi'a 84a, which describes a fight between Reish Lakish and Rabbi Yoḥanan, in which insults are traded, and which results in Rabbi Yoḥanan being distressed and Reish Lakish becoming "weak" or ill (שָׁלַח, the first word of the term "he became distressed"); two instances in the same story in B. Bava Mezi'a 84b in which two students showing promise are elevated from sitting on the ground to sitting on a bench, only to be demoted; B. Bava Mezi'a 85b, in which Reish Lakish compares himself to sages whose graves he visits, and is distressed to find out that he does not equal one particular sage; B. Sanhedrin 93b, which is an exegetical midrash in which the biblical king Saul listens to a description of David, his usurper, and is distressed at the mention of a quality that neither he nor his heir possess. The remaining six cases are: two cases in B. Ta'anit 24a and one on the following page (24b), in which a stock narrative set-up leaves a sage distressed that he could not bring rain. These three instances may relate to the previous category, because the sages are distressed at being ineffective or not "measuring up"; B. Bava Batra 16b, in which Rabbi Shimon son of Rabbi is distressed for having a daughter not a son; B. Mo'ed Katan 25b, when Rav Ashi is distressed and presumably disappointed with what two potential eulogizers offered him (his distress translated into physical punishment for the eulogizers, much like this story of Rav Sheshet and Rav Aḥadboi); and B. Ketubbot 62b, in which a sage is distressed when he sees a bright young student and thinks about his missed chances to educate his son the same way. These final three examples are all related to posterity, which is somewhat associated with concerns about reputation and status.

59. Supernatural reactions to the shame and distress of sages is a well-known motif in Bavli stories. Jeffrey Rubenstein, *Culture*, 73–78, notes other examples of "punishments" that could be seen as projected experiences of internal disquiet.

reestablishes the social hierarchy. In Rav Aḥadboi’s case, the cosmos punishes him for not abiding by expected rules of scholarly engagement and upsetting Rav Sheshet.

Lastly comes the implicit editorial criticism of the social hierarchy that produces painful experiences of failure. It is significant that a mother figure disrupts this dynamic of shame and retaliation. Medieval interpreters were divided about whose mother intervenes, but as a woman and a mother she is not a part of the scholastic hierarchy and power relationships.⁶⁰ This story dramatizes what may have been a familiar dictum, since in several Palestinian amoraic midrashim, men are insulted or praised with, “Blessed/cursed are the breasts from which you suckled.”⁶¹ Perhaps the mother calls forth the man’s vulnerability of having been a child to replace Rav Sheshet’s shame at being slighted in order to stop Rav Sheshet’s self-righteous anger and Rav Aḥadboi bar Ami’s impairment.⁶² Alternatively, her plea for mercy invokes the commonplace of maternal kindness as a model for Rav Sheshet to follow, and thereupon relent. Admiel Kosman cites parallels in Greek tragedy where women try to stop men from going to war by baring breasts and crying, demonstrating the reach of this dynamic beyond rabbinic literature.⁶³ In this talmudic narrative, the mother character intervenes in a feud using her emotion, body, and voice to disrupt the retributive attention of Rav Sheshet. Including her suggests editorial criticism of destructive social dynamics.⁶⁴

60. Rabbenu Gershom thought it was Rav Aḥadboi’s mother who cried before Rav Sheshet for mercy, though Rashi thought it was Rav Sheshet’s mother. Tosafot, B. Bava Batra 9b, s.v. ‘*atia*’ gives a possible explanation: One could easily understand the intervention of Rav Aḥadboi’s own mother to save him from Rav Sheshet’s wrath, though her pleas would seem to be a more powerful motivator if she was Rav Sheshet’s mother. The above translation does not decide this ambiguity. Admiel Kosman “The Female Breast and the Male Mouth Opened in Prayer in a Talmudic Vignette (BT Bava Batra 9a–b),” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 11, no. 4 (2004): 297 n. 15–16, reads it as Rav Aḥadboi’s mother. See also Shulamit Valler, *Nashim ve-nashiyut be-sipure ha-talmud* (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz Ha-me’uhad, 1993), 106–7. This narrative is reminiscent of other female rabbinic family members’ interventions in scholarly disputes involving shame, for instance, B. Bava Mezi’a 84a. Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, 45–48, discusses Imma Shalom’s efforts in B. Bava Mezi’a 59a–b and Jennifer Nadler, “Mar Ukba in the Fiery Furnace: A Meditation on the Tragedy of the Norm,” *Law and Literature* 19, no. 1 (2007): 1–13, discusses B. Ketubbot 67b.

61. For instance, Bereshit Rabbah, *Va-yehi*, par. 98:25 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, 3:1270).

62. The entire discussion is an etiology of the term a “confuser of the way of his mother,” or as Jastrow has it, “caused the deterioration of the way” of his mother. Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 1523. Michael Sokoloff, *Dictionary*, 1109, cites a Syriac saying “deviating from the road,” which seems to make sense here.

63. Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories* (New York: Schocken, 2002), 19, describes how in some ancient literatures, including the Hebrew Bible, women wielded different forms of power from male characters. For example, women and other socially subordinate characters in the Hebrew Bible use trickery as opposed to aggression to gain advantage. The phenomenon of crying and breast baring could be part of this.

64. Dina Stein, *Textual Mirrors: Reflexivity, Midrash and the Rabbinic Self* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 117, argues that women and other “others” serve as mirrors for the rabbis’ construction of their own identity in storytelling.

The narrative responses to failure in this story are complex. However, Kosman's characterization of the competition between the two sages as "an intrusion of the external world into what should have remained beyond the bounds of the realm of the holy" (i.e. competition in the study hall) idealizes rabbinic scholarly interchange.⁶⁵ In light of Rubenstein's description of power play, violent language, and dynamics of shame characterizing the Babylonian study hall and the talmudic editors' culture, such stories reflect what it means to be a part of the scholastic culture, not a social aberration.

iv. A Scholar's Silence as Failure outside the Study Hall

Academic failures are disruptive to both students and teachers within a study context. But the following narrative in which a sage cannot provide a satisfactory answer takes place outside the study hall.

B. Sanhedrin 46b:

א"ר יוחנן משו' ר' שמע' בן יוחי מניין למלין את מתו שעוב' בלא תעש' שני' כי קבר תקבר' א"ל שבו' מלכ' לרב חמ' קבור' מן התור' מני' לכו אשתיק ולא א"ל ולא מידי א' רב אחי' בר יעק' אימס' עלמ' ביד' דטפשא' איבעי למימ' כי קבר⁶⁶

Rabbi Yoḥanan said in Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai's name, "Whence that leaving a dead body unburied is a biblical transgression? As it says, 'You shall surely bury him' (Deuteronomy 21:23)." King Shapur said to Rav Ḥama, "From where in the Torah do you derive that you should bury the dead?" He was silent and did not answer him at all. Rav Aḥa bar Yaakov said, "The world is given into the hands of idiots. For he could have said, 'You shall bury' (Deuteronomy 21:23)."

Rav Ḥama participates in a debate with King Shapur, defending Jewish burial practices from Zoroastrian criticism. Zoroastrians did not bury dead bodies, to avoid ritual contamination of the earth, while rabbinic texts, though sensitive to death impurity, required burial for corpses.⁶⁷ Appended to this exchange is a comment by Rav Aḥa bar Yaakov (at a remove from the plot dialogue, in the "second narrative level"), who disparages Rav Ḥama's inability to answer. The editorial layer also assists in implicit criticism of Rav Ḥama by recording the discussion in the middle of two sources giving an answer to the question.

65. Kosman, "Female Breast," 299.

66. There is some variation in the presentation of the first tradition of Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai by way of Rabbi Yoḥanan, though none affects interpretation. In the four other witnesses (Florence II-1-9, Jerusalem - Yad Harav Herzog 1, Karlsruhe - Reuchlin 2, and Barko print edition [1498]) there is some form of "there are those who say" and a second version is introduced. Sometimes the difference is the use of the word רמז "hint" in the question, and in some the midrash has two stages, emphasizing the use of the infinitive absolute form as the source of the biblical liability for not burying a body. MS Munich 95 allows closer focus on the failure at the end of the story. The form of the question, מנא לכו, is the same in Munich 95, and all other witnesses except the Barko edition, which has מניין.

67. For Zoroastrian care of corpses in the Sasanian period, see James R. Russell, "Burial iii. In Zoroastrianism," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, vol. 4, fasc. 6, pp. 561–63, accessed June 14, 2015, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/burial-iii>.

Rav Aḥa bar Yaakov’s criticism of another sage’s silence is unusual. The other narratives describing reactions to silent sages do not include insults, though they may have questions such as “why did he not say x?” This unusual critique may have arisen because the narrative is partly archetypal, with King Shapur standing in for a Zoroastrian perspective.⁶⁸ The fact that this silence takes place outside of a rabbinic social context appears to make Rav Ḥama more subject to criticism, or perhaps it lowers the costs of secondary characters, and implicitly, the editors, criticizing him openly. Rav Ḥama’s inability to cite a biblical source is compounded because the story directly follows a Palestinian tradition that provides his missing answer. This juxtaposition heightens the seriousness of Rav Ḥama’s lapse, since the reader knows the answer that Rav Ḥama does not. Despite the *stam*’s subsequent suggestions about why Rav Ḥama did not offer Rav Aḥa bar Yaakov’s answer, Rav Aḥa bar Yaakov’s word “idiot” rings in the reader’s ears.

In B. Gittin 55b, as part of a lengthy narrative describing the Roman siege and destruction of Jerusalem, there is a brief exchange between Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Zakkai and Vespasian, in which Yoḥanan ben Zakkai does not know how to respond to the Roman general.⁶⁹ The Babylonian Talmud interrupts the narrative at that juncture to report that Rav Yosef (or possibly Rabbi Akiva) applied to Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Zakkai the verse, “he makes wise men turn backward and their wisdom foolish” (Isaiah 44:25). Rav Yosef then suggests a rebuttal to Vespasian that Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Zakkai had failed to give. Jeffrey Rubenstein compares this Bavli narrative with its Palestinian parallels and comments that “the Babylonian Talmud criticizes the sage whereas the Palestinian stories . . . do not.”⁷⁰ There may be greater willingness in Bavli sources to overtly criticize the performance of higher-status rabbis when they are described outside of the context of a study hall and in dialogue with imperial figures.

SAGES RECOVERING FROM FAILURE

As important as the descriptions of sages missing the mark are descriptions of how sages recover their standing afterwards. This differs between lower- and higher-ranking sages. Sages who are students or whose status is unknown in narratives are occasionally portrayed rebutting their critical colleagues. Rav Papa (B.

68. Shai Secunda, *The Iranian Talmud: Reading the Bavli in Its Sasanian Context* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 104–6, discusses the Bavli’s portrayal of King Shapur as a legal interlocutor with rabbis. He highlights passages in which the talmudic editors and later commentators such as Rashi display awareness that these stories were not necessarily about the actual King Shapur I (who reigned 240–270 CE). For a discussion of narratives portraying sages in conversation with Persian kings, see also Jason Sion Mokhtarian, *Rabbis, Sorcerers, Kings, and Priests: The Culture of the Talmud in Ancient Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 74–93 and Alyssa Gray, “The Power Conferred by Distance from Power: Redaction and Meaning In B. AZ 10a–11a,” in Rubenstein, *Creation and Composition*, 23–69.

69. The Munich 95 text of this story includes the word “he was silent,” referring to Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, while the other manuscripts and editions simply report no response in the dialogue.

70. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, 172.

Niddah 27a) quotes a verse underscoring the importance of taking risks to gain wisdom, and Rabbi Abba (B. Beṣah 38a–b) interrogates his antagonists. However, high-rank sages have more frequent, successful social recoveries, meaning that the impression of the sage at the end of the narrative is favorable. Higher-rank sages can recover from silence by affirming another sage’s answer to an initially confounding question, or by offering their own answer after an initial silence. In the following passages, sages accept a colleague’s help or use their own ingenuity to resolve an academic challenge.

In B. Shabbat 72a, Rav Dimi presents a tradition, to which Abaye offers an objection, followed by a possible solution for Rav Dimi’s approval.⁷¹

B. Shabbat 72a:

כי אתא רב דימי אמ' למאן דאמי' אשם ודאי בעי ידיעה בתחלה בעל חמש בעילות בשפחה חרופה
חייב על כל אחת ואחת א"ל אביי והרי חטאת דקא בעינן ידיעה בתחילה ופליגי ר' יוחנן וריש
לקיש [אשתיק אמ' ליה] דילמא במעשה דלאחר הפרשה קאמי' וכדרב המנוא א"ל אין

When Rav Dimi came he said, “One who claims that a guilt offering brought on account of the certainty [of having committed a particular sin] requires foreknowledge, if someone who had forbidden intercourse five times with a betrothed slave, he is liable on each and every act.” Abaye said to him, “Consider the sin offering, for which we require foreknowledge, and Rabbi Yohanan and Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish disagree!” [He was silent. He said to him,] “Perhaps you were referring to the act after he designates [the sacrifice] and you were [teaching] according to Rav Hamnuna?” He said to him, “Yes.”

Recording Abaye’s suggestion furthers the Talmud’s agenda to examine problems thoroughly. Yet from a narrative perspective, it helps Rav Dimi regain authority by judging the merits of another’s idea. In two of the early textual witnesses, the narrative also includes Rav Dimi “being silent,” and Abaye’s possible solution as a response to that. Even in the texts that do not have “he was silent,” the narrative presumes Rav Dimi’s silence or inability to answer, since he could have refuted Abaye but did not. Because Abaye’s detailed suggestion is met with a monosyllabic answer, “Yes” (*in*), Abaye appears to be a more adept sage than Rav Dimi. He is erudite in his rebuttal as well as attuned to Rav Dimi needing help to regain his intellectual footing in the discussion. From a narrative perspective, it is beneficial to be a helpful colleague.

In two other narratives, when a sage in a teaching position “is silent” because he cannot answer a question, he asks the questioner if he has “heard anything [about this].” In both cases, the sage receives an answer, continuing the discussion. This appears to mitigate the negative reception of the teacher’s lapse. In B. Temurah 34a, for example, Rav Naḥman cannot provide an answer to Tavi’s

71. In MS Oxford Opp. Add. fol. 23 and in the Soncino print family edition (1480), the text includes “he was silent. He [Abaye] said to him ...” These phrases are absent in MS Munich 95 and Vatican 108. In all textual witnesses, the passage concludes with Rav Dimi confirming Abaye’s correctness, “he said to him: ‘Yes.’”

question, but invites Tavi to share what he has heard. The narrative treats this as an acceptable solution, and there is no commentary on Rav Naḥman’s inability to answer, such as comments by later sages.⁷² In another passage, Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Avin cannot answer a question, but the following day he returns with a solution.

B. Shabbat 37b–38a:

בעו מיניה מר' חייא בר אבין⁷³ שכח קדירה על גבי כירה ובשלה בשבת מהו אשתיק⁷⁴ למחר נפק ודרש להו המבשל בשבת בשוגג יאכל במזיד לא יאכל ולא שנה מאי ולא שנה רבה ורב יוסף דאמר תרוייהו להתירא

They asked Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Avin, “If someone forgot a pot on top of the stove and it cooked on Shabbat, what is the law?” He was silent. The next day he went out and taught them: “One who cooks on Shabbat accidentally, may eat it, but on purpose, may not eat it, and there is no difference.” What does “there is no difference” mean? Rabbah and Rav Yosef said it means it is permitted.

Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Avin appears to have come to this answer without the guidance of fellow sages, and the narrative does not dwell on his delay. The narrative concludes only after Rabbi Ḥiyya has a chance to answer the question.

All of these passages depict sages who initially fail to provide an answer, but are subsequently successful through finding or affirming an answer. The sugyot cite no negative judgment of the sages who are silent, indicating that silence becomes failure only if it is not remedied. The sages in these stories all act as teachers, a higher-status position where the risk of shame is significant. However, students and fellow sages, as well as the editors of the talmudic passages, seek to portray these sages in a positive light while furthering knowledge of a legal point. By contrast, sages who are in student positions or in the middle or

72. Similarly, in B. Shabbat 80b, the question, “have you heard anything about this?” prompts the citation of a tradition from Rav Sheshet defining a confusing term. While in B. Temurah 34a the higher-status sage asks for a tradition from the questioner and receives it, the exchange in B. Shabbat 80b, perhaps because of transmission problems, appears to present either a son as silent before the father (socially unlikely), or two successive responses by the same sage (also indicating textual problems). The early textual witnesses all present this difficulty. It seems an interesting coincidence that in both of these passages, the similar formula of *שמיע לך ברה* provokes the response “thus said Rav Sheshet.”

73. While Munich 95 has Ḥiyya bar Avin, Oxford Opp. Add. fol. 23 and the Soncino print family edition (1490) both have Ḥiyya Bar Abba, as does the Vilna edition. Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Avin is the well-known Rabbi Ḥiyya, who lived in Palestine in the early third century at the transitional time from tannaic to amoraic identities for sages. Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Abba was a third-generation Palestinian Amora. Rabbah and Rav Yosef (both third-generation Babylonian Amoraim) are depicted reacting to hearing this oral tradition, and it seems possible for either of the sages named Rabbi Ḥiyya to have responded to this question and for the answer to have filtered to the Babylonian sages.

74. Oxford Opp. Add. fol. 23 does not have the word “he was silent,” but Munich 95, the Soncino print family edition (1490) and the Vilna edition do. The Soncino edition has a fuller phrase, commonly associated with *אשתיק*, which is: *אשתיק ולא אמר ליה ולא שנה מאי*. I think it is more likely that that may have been added by rote, as opposed to it being accidentally omitted.

lower rungs in scholastic hierarchies tend to appear in stories where their colleagues or teachers highlight their scholastic failures, and the editorial layer preserves and even magnifies their failings.

HIGHER-RANKING SAGES' PROBLEMATIC TRADITIONS AND PROTECTION BY PEERS

While the previous group of examples portray failing sages actively participating in their own social rehabilitation, the following narratives depict third parties burnishing a sage's reputation. This occurs mainly as characters at the second narrative level comment on received traditions, as opposed to within the immediate plot context (the first narrative level). Asserting that the sage is a [רבא], a גברא רבה, a "great man," is a way that sages can shield their senior colleagues from the consequences of a specific scholastic failure in articulating a problematic tradition.⁷⁵ Eight times in the Bavli, an Amora (either Babylonian or Palestinian) who is called a "great man" appears to have stated (or in one case behaved in accordance with) a flawed teaching.⁷⁶ This occurs both within the plot action, in a subsequent discussion of the tradition by a sage who is removed from the plot action, and also in the editorial layer. In three cases, another sage responds by showing the potential strength of the statement, twice in the presence of this sage himself, and once during a discussion of his tradition.⁷⁷ In a further three passages that discuss a memra in the Amora's absence, the editorial layer provides possible explanations that cast the sage's comment in a positive light.⁷⁸

In the following example Rava insists that the form of Rav Yosef's objection must be incorrect, since Rava Yosef is a "great man," and his objection was easily deflected by Rabba bar Ulla.

B. Ketubbot 43a:

אמ' רבא גברא רבה כרב יוסף לא ידע דאיכא העדפה דקמותיב תיובתאי אלי'
אמ' רבא רב יוסף מתניתין גופא⁷⁹ קא קשיא ליה

75. The term גברא רבה "great man," occurs fifty times in the Bavli (five spelled רבא), the majority (28 times) used simply as an honorific, or in discussions of whether a particular person is a "great man." The second largest plurality (10 times) uses the term as an anonymous type in a story, either an exegetical midrash or a sage narrative.

76. These are: B. Berakhot 19b, B. Mo'ed Katan 11b, B. Eruvin 66a, B. Ketubbot 43a, B. Zevahim 44a, B. Zevahim 100b, B. Niddah 50b, and B. Niddah 70a.

77. B. Niddah 50b, B. Berakhot 19b, and B. Ketubbot 43a.

78. B. Mo'ed Katan 11b, B. Eruvin 66a, and B. Niddah 70a. In the remaining two examples, B. Zevahim 44a–b and B. Zevahim 100b, it the same Amora who remarks that he is surprised that such a "great man" would say or do such a thing, the criticism stands, and neither the *stam* nor another Amora rebuts the criticism.

79. Munich 95 and St. Petersburg - RNL Evr. I 187 have this, while Vatican 113 and Vatican 130 have a slight variation that does not refer explicitly to the mishnah posing a problem for Rav Yosef, and uses the demonstrative הני or האי "this is what was challenging for him." Vatican 130 also has what may be a mistaken preposition ל: it reads ... אמר רבא לרב יוסף הא.

Rava said, “A great man like Rav Yosef did not know that there can be surplus and offered this rebuttal?”⁸⁰ Rather, Rava said, “Rav Yosef found the mishnah itself difficult ...”

According to Rava, the objection attributed to Rav Yosef is not worthy of him. The editorial layer continues Rava’s point, recontextualizing Rav Yosef’s comment. The legal question is whether a woman who is supported by her brothers following the death of their father retains ownership over the proceeds of her labor, or whether the brothers have claim to that money. Rava argues that Rav Yosef must have believed that the sister would keep any proceeds of her work above what her brothers paid to support her, and offers an alternative context for Rav Yosef’s objection, saving it from easy dismissal. Positions are refuted frequently in talmudic debate, but the problem was that Rav Yosef did not anticipate that his rebuttal, which was his intellectual contribution, would be ineffective. In order to avoid casting aspersions on Rav Yosef’s scholastic ability, the Talmud, citing Rava, reinterprets Rav Yosef’s comment to indicate that he was occupied with a more fundamental textual problem, reflecting a higher degree of intellectual ability.

Rava’s intervention on behalf of a “great man” occurs outside the presence of Rav Yosef, in reaction to a recited tradition (the second narrative level). This shows that the reception of a sage’s official dicta leaves the sage open to possible failure in successive generations, but also potential defense by later sages. Rava’s reaction indicates the importance apparently attached to maintaining the scholarly reputation of great sages by giving sympathetic interpretations to their apparently erroneous ideas.⁸¹ Being a “great man” is also part of Rav Kahana’s defense of Rav bar Sheva in B. Berakhot 19b. B. Berakhot 19b:⁸²

ת' ש' גדול כבוד הבריות שדוחה את לא תעשה שבתורה⁸³ תירגמא רב בר שבא קמיה דרב כהנא בלאו דלא תסור⁸⁴ אחיכו עליה⁸⁵ לא תסור דאורייתא היא א' להו רב כהנא גברא רבה אמ' מלתא לא תחי[כ]ן עליה כל אסמכתא דרב' על לאו דלא תסור אסמיניהו ומשום כבודו שרו רבנן⁸⁶

80. Rashi explains that the mishnah teaches that the sister keeps any surplus beyond what the brothers pay to support her.

81. The story of Rav Ḥama and King Shapur (B. Sanhedrin 46b) is a reported dialogue to which a *critical* comment by an Amora who was not present in the original context is appended. Rava’s sympathetic reception of Rav Yosef’s tradition contrasts with Rav Aḥa bar Yaakov’s treatment of Rav Ḥama’s silence. Perhaps offering an erroneous tradition is seen as a more worthy sort of mistake than silence, or perhaps articulating a tradition, even if it is mistaken, gives subsequent sages more material with which to justify it, but there are fewer ways to justify an inability to answer a question.

82. MS Florence II-I-7. In this passage there is some variation in how the story is told, and this version has all the elements that allow the story to make sense.

83. Munich 95 and the Soncino print edition (1484) add “Why? Say, ‘There is no wisdom and no understanding and no counsel before the Lord!’ (Proverbs 21:30).”

84. Paris 671 explains, אלמא מרבנן הוא, “therefore it is a rabbinic commandment.”

85. Paris 671 adds the phrase מאי שנא מכולהו דלאו “how is it different from the other negative commandments?” before לאו דלא תסור דאורייתא הוא, and Oxford Opp. Add. fol. 23 adds טעמא מאי טעמא “why did they laugh?” before לאו דאורייתא הוא.

86. Paris 671 again has a fuller explanatory version of the final sentence: לאו דלא תסור (ז) דאורייתא הוא וכל אסמכתא דרבנן אלאו דלא תסור אסמיניהו והכא. משום כבוד הבריות לא גזר רבנן.

Come and learn: Human dignity is so great that it can override a biblical prohibition. Rav bar Sheva explained it before Rav Kahana at the prohibition of “Do not stray” (Deuteronomy 17:11). They laughed at him. “The prohibition of ‘do not stray’ is a biblical prohibition!” [If he thinks that the principle of human dignity overriding commandments itself comes from a biblical commandment of “Do not stray” why should it override others?] Rav Kahana said to them, “A great man has said something, do not laugh at him.” All of the rabbinic prohibitions are based on “Do not stray” and because of his [that is, human] dignity they permitted [contravening biblical prohibitions].

The pivotal elements of the plot action are the same in all textual versions: “they laughed at him” and Rav Kahana’s direct speech, “a great man has said a statement, do not laugh at him.” Rav bar Sheva is mentioned only ten times in the Bavli.⁸⁷ While he is not often quoted, this passage suggests he achieved a status of “great,” at least according to Rav Kahana, and was defended accordingly. Rav Kahana insists that the listeners take his comment seriously and showed how it could be interpreted charitably. In a similar social situation (B. Gittin 55b), Rava calls Rav Shizvi a “great man” when scholars laugh at him. Once again, the defense, “a great man has said something, do not laugh at him,” not only defends the man, but also indicates that there is wisdom in the apparently laughable statement. Abaye uses this same phrase, “a great man has made a statement, do not laugh at him” to defend Rabbi Zeira in B. Niddah 50b.

The assertion of “great man” status may be a necessary superlative to rebuild the honor of a man who has been disparaged. Once insulted, a sage’s vulnerability is demonstrated and his status as an authority is unsure. An overcompensation of praise may be required to repair the damage. As Jeffrey Rubenstein writes, “Maintaining one’s position in the academic hierarchy depended, to some extent, on not being shamed. It was not simply that a sage would feel like a fool or lose self-esteem for not knowing the answer, but that he might either officially be demoted or lose his unofficial rank in the eyes of his colleagues.”⁸⁸ Distinctly Babylonian, the phrase “a great man has made a statement,” represents efforts to preserve a sage’s standing among his peers. Unlike the phrase “a great man,” “a great man has made a statement” occurs seven times in five distinct passages, all of them in the Bavli, all in statements attributed to Babylonian Amoraim.⁸⁹ Three instances are in response to laughter and continue “do not laugh at him.”⁹⁰

87. He is mentioned five times in the presence of Rav Kahana, once in discussion with Rav Papa, once appearing before Rav Nahman, and once before Ravina.

88. Rubenstein, *Culture*, 76.

89. Rav Kahana in B. Berakhot 19b; Rav Natan bar Oshia in B. Shabbat 81b; Rava in B. Gittin 55b; Abaye in B. Niddah 50b; and Rava, Abaye, and Rav Ashi in B. Bava Batra 12a.

90. B. Berakhot 19b, B. Gittin 55b (which has some variation between עליה “at him” and עלה “laugh at it”), and B. Niddah 50b. “A great man has made a statement” has a slightly different valence in in B. Bava Batra 12a. There, two Amoraim use the phrase to describe two “great men” who independently made the same pronouncement. This is taken as proof that prophecy was given to the wise. B. Shabbat 81b presents an exchange that lies somewhere in between this usage and the defensive mode. Rav Natan bar Oshia expresses respect for Rabbi Yohanan by trying to explain the

Yet the claim that a sage is a “great man” can also be a social disadvantage in the competitive atmosphere of rabbinic dialectic. Identifying Shmuel as a “great man” turns into a backhanded compliment by Rav Sheshet:⁹¹

B. Niddah 70a:

א' רב שש' גברי רבי כשמו לימי כי האי מילת⁹².

“A great man like Shmuel said that?!”

Rav Sheshet makes another incredulous comment about a question Rabbi Zeira asked (B. Eruvin 66a).⁹³ The editorial voice responds to Rav Sheshet’s criticism, explaining Rabbi Zeira’s question in a favorable light. Similarly, in B. Shabbat 53a, Shmuel comments about a tradition from Rav, “if father said that, he did not know anything about the Sabbath laws.” By starting with the word “if” this comment affirms Rav’s honored position by questioning whether he could have said what was cited. Yet the statement also disparages Rav outside of his presence, since it suggests that he is ignorant.

Mostly, social reactions to a high-ranking sage’s silence within the plot action are supportive, for instance offering a potential answer for the sage’s approval, or absent, where the narrative ends without comment. Confusing statements by “great men” are treated charitably in comments by later or distant sages (in the second narrative level). The editors’ sympathetic handling of higher-ranking sage’s failures includes adding addenda to stories in which a sage redeems himself by finding an answer or revising a tradition, or highlighting the difficulty of the problem within the editorial commentary.

reasoning behind the latter’s ruling. There the full phrase is אמר מילתא נימא בה טעם “a great man has made a statement, let us say its reason.” While there was no reported laughter disparaging Rabbi Yoḥanan, his statement about the Sabbath perplexed the editors. The passage introduces Rabbi Yoḥanan’s statement, adds two anonymous attempts to explain its reasoning, then presents Rav Natan bar Oshia’s speech. Even without laughter, difficult statements motivate sages and editors towards intellectual innovation. Whether there is a secondary motivation to defend Rabbi Yoḥanan’s reputation is difficult to ascertain.

91. Rav Sheshet is not the only Amora to invoke the “great man” status with underlying contempt. There are six cases in the Bavli where a sage expresses incredulity that a “great man” could have said something undeserving of that rank. In all of the cases the sage is responding to a reported saying, as opposed to a sage who is teaching in his presence: B. Eruvin 66a, B. Mo’ed Katan 11b, B. Niddah 70a, B. Zevaḥim 44a–b, B. Zevaḥim 100b, and B. Ketubbot 43a (the only case of these six where an Amora defends the sage who is criticized).

92. There are only Munich 95, Vatican 111, and the Soncino print (1484) edition for this line. In Vatican 111 the word רבא is added in a super-linear note.

93. There is not enough evidence to make an argument about this, but it seems noteworthy that both instances of this sarcastic use of “great man” are attributed to Rav Sheshet, and both have some connection to a tradition emanating from Shmuel.

CUMULATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE BAVLI'S PRESENTATION OF SCHOLARLY
FAILURE

Scholastic failure as described in the Bavli is a combination of missing the mark; the immediate reaction of the sage, his peers, or master; and the narrator's perspective in telling the tale. Overall, sages of lower status respond to failure within the plot events by withdrawing from active participation in scholarly debate, sharp verbal responses, and often, no response at all. Higher-rank sages respond to their failures with explicitly narrated "distress" and by providing a belated answer to a formerly confounding question, thereby redeeming themselves.

It is important to pay attention to the narratorial choices in the portrayal of scholars' failures, since the narrative can be sympathetic or critical. The narrative sometimes "averts its eyes," changing the subject or moving on quickly from a sage's lapse, effectively covering the potential shame of the sage. It sometimes includes exchanges with the failing sage and another sage that occur chronologically later, but are presented directly after the sage's failure, in which they learn a proper response to the question they could not answer. Focusing on the answer rather than the failure advances the intellectual inquiry, but also helps rehabilitate the sage. Inclusion of disparaging reactions to the story by sages who were not present in the plot events may not have been left to the total discretion of the editors. Nonetheless, comments by such sages are not a necessary part of recounting the initial scholarly exchange, indicating interest by previous Amoraim who transmitted these details, and the editors' interest in the continuing shame a mistaken statement can engender.

The treatment of failure in these legal vignettes shows that it is not the mistakes that make the difference in how failure is treated in the Bavli. Rather, it is the social status or role of the sage. Social status determines the kind of mistake that a sage might make, because it dictates how he participates in scholarly debate and therefore how he might miss the mark. Social status further contributes to how a mistake becomes failure. The editors' recording of reactions within the immediate dramatic context, the comments of later or distant sages who hear the story, and other choices in presentation differ depending on the social status of the sage who fails. The aspect that editors do not seem to control is the variable of a character's personality. Where one sage withdraws from teaching, another reprimands his colleagues for their judgment.

Once sages achieve higher status, they are more vulnerable to shame, but they also seem more protected by colleagues and by narrators. Mostly, being considered a "great man" insulates a sage from stigmatization and loss of stature. A "great man" can provide questionable answers, but the social consequences are less grave than for someone of lesser status. Alternatively, a "great man" has sufficiently demonstrated his skill that his mistake is given the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps his audience misunderstood him, or failed to see why his comment constituted a novel approach. This spirit of generosity is echoed in a fellow sage asking why one did not offer a particular answer. However, assertion of "great man" status may also attract competitive "trash talk."

There are two contexts in which a sage and his statement are particularly vulnerable to insult, as opposed to simple rebuttal in the spirit of scholastic

exchange. The first is within a narrative’s plot, when the sage is new to a scholarly context. He is expected to participate to show his worth, but his contributions are scrutinized for quality. The other is when a sage’s statement has been formulated for promulgation and is recited in a secondary study context. This represents a degree of scholastic achievement, but without his physical presence, there may be fewer social constraints on criticism.

THE EFFECTS OF RECORDING NARRATIVES OF SCHOLASTIC FAILURE WITHIN
LEGAL DIALECTIC

The stories analyzed here are not lengthy narratives, but rather brief dialogues with a minimum of narrative supplying pertinent details. Often these short narratives could have been omitted from the legal dialectic without much difference in the flow of legal reasoning. In fact, in cases where a sage could not provide an answer and was silent, omitting this detail might have allowed the legal analysis to proceed more smoothly. It is therefore worth considering the effect of preserving these stories.

First, providing these brief exchanges is part of the tendency to record opinions that have been overruled.⁹⁴ One could argue that recording mistaken or flawed arguments in these brief narratives, and even silences when a sage could not answer, preserves intellectual wrong turns for future generations of scholars, saving them wasted efforts or indicating the difficulty of a subject. However, while potentially useful for the rabbinic intellectual project, scholastic failures do not tend to be productive for the sage.

Second, while in English “failure” can be both a phenomenon and a type of person (i.e. “he was a failure”), none of the sages described here are portrayed as comprehensive “failures” by the Talmud. Including details of scholarly lapses in halakhic debates contributes to the recognition of the inevitability of failure in the pursuit of excellence. The sages portrayed as failing are also quoted elsewhere teaching important lessons. The short form of these narratives ensures that they are tightly knit into the legal debate. Sharing stories of failure while developing legal concepts conveys that it is part of the work of scholarship.

Finally, preserving the social and personal consequences of scholarly failure within legal dialectic reinforces the criteria for being a virtuosic scholar. The stories perpetuate norms of shaming and fear of failure. Retelling these stories warns later generations not to become the subject of such a tale, because the costs of failure do not end in one’s own lifetime. At the same time, incorporating such stories in the legal discourse somewhat normalizes academic failure within the culture. The vignettes serve as a medium to confront ongoing fears about scholastic stumbling.

94. According to T. Eduyot 1:4, minority opinions are preserved so that their discarded status is remembered in case it resurfaces in a later generation, while M. Eduyot 1:6 (Kaufmann numbering) says overruled minority opinions are preserved because one day they may be upheld. Moshe Halbertal, *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning and Authority* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 51–54, analyzes these two sources, identifying different approaches to the flexibility of tradition and the role of a law book.

Repeating the stories and preserving examples of resilience may serve as a mode of coping with the tensions inherent in a competitive scholastic environment.

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Breaking down the phenomenon of scholastic failure into a mistake and the immediate social reaction, then following the portrayal of that mistake and its author in subsequent receptions, can serve as a basis for theorizing academic failure in other late antique scholarly communities. Vying for position, seeking the approval of peers and teachers, or struggling to maintain a position of broad recognition are familiar elements of the scholarly experience. The ways that academic communities confront and integrate failure into their cultures affect the production and dissemination of knowledge, and is therefore a subject worthy of further analysis.

Integrated into legal debates, failures become an undeniable part of scholarly life, bringing color to the sages' pursuit of intellectual innovation. Analyzing narratives that describe the drama and interpersonal contexts of debate reinforces the importance of literary analysis of Bavli legal sugyot. While some characters' reactions reflect individual personalities, the extent of social damage from academic failure largely depends on how the story is told. The narratives indicate that to a great extent, social status determines whether an opinion is initially treated sympathetically or critically. They also dramatize how the senior get more senior, and the obstacles to gaining social rank. The storytellers portray these issues with complexity, giving voice to multiple perspectives on academic hierarchy in their economical yet evocative style.

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