Talmudic Animosity towards Roman Public Entertainment in Ancient Judea: Against Acculturation, Mimesis, and Catharsis

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Abstract

The main concern of theatre scholars discussing the talmudic attitude towards Roman spectacles has been whether the Talmud rejects theatricality and mimesis altogether or only the Roman institutions of mass entertainment. Rabbis in the first and second centuries CE (Tannaim) and those in the third to early fifth century CE (Amoraim) based their objections to Roman public entertainment on moral and religious grounds, although a careful reading of the sources indicates a shift in their stance over the course of time: the Tannaim expressed an unequivocal disdain for Roman public spectacles, prohibiting any association with them whatsoever. The tone of the Amoraim was different. They refrained from harsh condemnation and tried to persuade their communities in a non-confrontational way. The shift in the strategy of the Amoraim reflects the reality they faced. The fact was that Jews in the second to fifth centuries frequented the games, both as viewers and participants, and the rabbis realized that if they did not change their tactics, they would lose their audience. I would like to explore rabbinic animosity towards Roman spectacles and argue that it was in the end not on theological grounds, but mainly due to pragmatic, sociocultural considerations and nationalist aspirations.

Introduction

> *In urban areas under Roman rule, theatres made manifest the inter-connectedness between religion, society, and politics. These venues were vital to the spreading of Imperial thought and culture, were considered fundamental to any proud city in the empire, and unlike other entertainment facilities, theatres were erected in nearly every sizeable Roman settlement including Palestine. To what degree the local population accepted this theatre building, however, is still a cause for much speculation. (Kammer 2010, 7)*

Theatre historians are well acquainted with Tertullian's *De Spectaculis* (On the Spectacles), a surviving moral and ascetic treatise written somewhere between 197 and 202 CE in Carthage, in the Roman Province of Africa. The work looks at the moral legitimacy and consequences of Christians attending

the Roman circus, theatre, or amphitheatre. Tertullian argues that human enjoyment can be an offence to God (Barish, 1985).

This same sentiment is seen in St .Augustine's view of the theatre, as expressed in his book *De Civitate Dei* (The City of God), written in the early 5th century CE. Augustine in fact devotes a whole chapter to criticising the Romans for lifting up the Greek gods, while condemning the theatre productions which portrayed their alleged acts (Barish, 1985).

Yet the first religious leaders to condemn Roman theatre on religious grounds were rabbis who lived in the second century CE in Judea, the sages (*Hazal*). Their scholarly output in the Talmud condemns attendance of public spectacles as a sin, in a very similar vein to that of Tertullian's and St. Augustine's.

The main concern of contemporary theatre scholars discussing the talmudic appraisal of theatre has been whether the Sages rejected theatricality and mimesis (imitation, representation) on theological grounds, or only the imperial Roman institutions of mass entertainment. In other words, most theatre scholars have distinguished between Jewish concerns attached to the second commandment ("Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image nor any manner of likeness, of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth" (Exodus 20, 3-4), and resistance to Roman colonisation. Yet most discussions have been based on merely cursory examination of what the Talmud had to say. A careful reading of the rabbinic sources indicates that Hazal stressed an additional different concern, corresponding to the Aristotelian notion of catharsis (purification): they viewed catharsis as a means of political control. In this essay I would like to take a critical approach grounding their attitudes in sociocultural and socio-political factors rather than a strictly theological interpretation. I will explore the sages' response towards Roman theatre and argue that they worried that theatre would partially replace religious catharsis. As it turns out, Hazal were being quite pragmatic.

Jews and Roman spectacles in Herodian Judea

Alexander the Great conquered the region in the 330s BCE. The Hellenistic Empire ruled for two centuries and profoundly influenced the local culture; theatre, however, did not reach the area. The Greeks built theatres in Alexandria and Damascus, not in Jerusalem (Schwartz 2014)

Between 73–63 BCE, the Roman Republic extended its influence into the region, conquering Judea in 63 BCE. The Romans ruled until 313 CE, the year of Byzantine conquest. Under Roman control, they used local leaders to govern, and the Hellenistic influence continued for a while (such as the names they took). The most famous local king was a ruthless military commander named Herod the Great, who ruled between 37-4 BCE. Herod's support from what became the Roman Empire was a major factor in allowing him to maintain authority over Judea (ibid.).

Known as the "builder king," Herod endowed his realm with massive fortresses and splendid cities, such as the fortress of Massada, and a winter palace in Jericho. In Jerusalem he built the fortress of Antonia, portions of which may still be seen beneath the convents on the Via Dolorosa, and a magnificent palace. His most grandiose creation, though, was the Temple in Jerusalem which he rebuilt splendidly on the Temple Mount for Jewish worship. Herod took pride also in the new walls of Jerusalem and the citadel which guarded the Temple (Weiss 2014).

Most of the information regarding Herod's establishment of mass entertainment comes from the writings of Titus Flavius Josephus who was a first-century Jewish scholar and hagiographer. Born Yosef ben Matityahu, Flavius Josephus writes that the establishment of buildings dedicated to leisure in Jerusalem was a total innovation: permanent leisure buildings built in stone were erected for the first time. The games organized by Herod in honour of Augustus, combined the best of Greek and Roman traditions. Herod even brought professional gladiators from the Roman West, and his gladiatorial games not only introduced this Roman tradition to Judea, but probably to the entire Greek East as well. Flavius Josephus reports that various types of competitions, races, performances, and shows for the entertainment of the masses were held, for the first time, in a festival Herod founded in Jerusalem in honour of the emperor Augustus in 28 BCE. The quinquennial games, held every fifth year, or every four years by our reckoning, combined the best of Greek and Roman traditions. They were conducted in the theatre and large amphitheatre in Jerusalem (ibid.).

As Flavius Josephus reports, in 10 BCE, the king also inaugurated games in the city of Caesarea. Dedicated to Augustus Caesar, the theatre was built on the Mediterranean seashore. The games and competitions held there were organized in a format similar to the one in Jerusalem, however, in Caesarea there were also gladiatorial combats and, as Josephus notes, prizes awarded not only to the winners but also to those who finished in second and third places. In addition to building projects for mass entertainment in Jerusalem, Caesarea, and Jericho, Herod erected similar edifices in Samaria and Herodium (his palace-fortress and ultimate burial place, not far from Jerusalem).

According to Flavius Josephus, Herod had not foreseen the fierce resistance public spectacles would cause in the Jewish population, an important demographic group in ancient Judea, constituting around half of the population. The Jews in the Herodian times expressed reservations regarding public entertainment, yet most of their main concern was not over the erection of leisure buildings or the institution of the games. Although these buildings were completely foreign to Jewish tradition, most of the Jewish population objected mainly to the possible presence of cultic images on the buildings, and less to the bloody games held there:

> *Inscriptions also of the great actions of Caesar, and trophies of those nations which he had conquered in his wars, and all made of the purest gold and silver, encompassed the theater itself; nor was there any thing that could be subservient to his design, whether it were precious garments, or precious stones set in order, which was not also exposed to sight in these games. (Flavius Josephus, Antiquities n.d. Book 15 ch. 8)*

In addition, Herod encouraged bloody spectacles of killing men and wild animals in the arena:

> *He had also made a great preparation of wild beasts, and of lions themselves in great abundance, and of such other beasts as were either of uncommon strength, or of such a sort as were rarely seen. […] It appeared also no better than an instance of barefaced impiety, to throw men to wild beasts, for the affording delight to the spectators; and it appeared an instance of no less impiety, to change their own laws for such foreign exercises… (Flavius Josephus, Antiquities n.d. Book 15 ch. 8.)*

The Jews therefore rejected bloody enjoyment and the Roman project of acculturation. As a result, there were a number of attempts to assassinate Herod. Flavius Josephus describes how a small group of Jews conspired against Herod to defend 'the customs of the countryland' (Flavius Josephus, *Wars* n.d., ch. 33). The conspirators were caught and executed.

In addition, Herod summoned Jewish officials to Jericho and had them shut up in the hippodrome with the intention to kill them all. Josephus describes that Herod delivered a demonstrative address from the stage:

> *He [Herod] got together the most illustrious men of the whole Jewish nation, out of every village, into a place called the Hippodrome, and there shut them in. He then called for his sister and her husband, and made this speech to them: "I know well enough that the Jews will keep a festival upon my death however, it is in my power to be mourned for on other accounts, and to have a splendid funeral, if you will but be subservient to my commands. Do you but take care to send soldiers to encompass these men that are now in custody, and slay them immediately upon my death, and then all Judea, and every family of them, will*

> *weep at it, whether they will or no." (Flavius Josephus, Wars n.d., Ch. 33)*

Josephus's description of the events in Jerusalem explains the resistance to the public entertainment on three different levels: throwing humans to beasts for the enjoyment of others was reprehensible; replacing the ancestral laws with foreign customs was considered an explicit transgression; and, more than anything, the Jews objected vehemently to the trophies Herod placed in the theatre, which they believed to be statues and thus considered a blatant violation of the Second Commandment. The theatrical performances, they believed, were arenas of rowdiness, vulgarity, lewdness, and pornography, and were not a proper setting for Jews. In other words, Josephus describes not only defiance of Roman colonisation, but also defiance of mimesis ('statues') and of catharsis ('enjoyment of others'). I will analyse these features in my final paragraph.

Flavius Josephus does not state explicitly who in Jerusalem objected to public spectacles and competitions in Herod's day, but the reasons he mentions for their objection resemble some of those expressed later on by the sages who forbade attending the theatres and circuses—not only because of idolatry (risk of mimesis and acculturation), but also because these activities were immoral (implying a dimension of catharsis). It is noteworthy that no written evidence from the Herodian period has been found regarding the Jewish leaders' defiance of theatre and games. Apparently, Rabbi Hillel (president of the Sanhedrin at the time) and Rabbi Shammai (his vice-president) did not address that issue, for the simple reason that it was not necessary when the Jewish population was against Roman spectacles:

> *First-century CE religious leaders did not take a stand either for or against the effects of the budding new culture that was gaining ground throughout the country. Even if some Jews in Jerusalem, Caesarea, and Tiberias attended performances at this time, this was not the widespread social phenomenon of the ensuing centuries. (Weiss 2014, 54)*

Indeed, in the subsequent centuries the circumstances changed drastically, and so did the sages' attitude.

Herod's theatrical legacy - first to fifth century

In the centuries to come, public spectacles in theatres, hippodromes, and amphitheatres became immensely popular in ex-ancient Judea (by then Syria-Palestina), as elsewhere in the Roman East, under the slogan *panem et circenses (*'Bread and Circuses' metonymic for a superficial means of appeasement). The archaeologist Zeev Weiss offers a historical inquiry epitomizing this cultural phenomenon that affected the lifestyle of many

generations, until its decline and complete disappearance centuries later (Weiss 2014).

Jews became more and more involved, both as participants and as spectators. In *Against Apion*, Josephus wrote that ‘it is no new thing for our captives, many of them in number, and frequently in time, to be seen to endure racks and deaths of all kinds upon the theatres, that they may not be obliged to say one word against our laws and the records that contain them’ (1.8). During the reign of Caligula (12-41 CE), thirty-eight members of the Jewish Council in Alexandria were forced to appear in an intermission between theatrical bills of music and dance. Philo records that they were marched onto the stage, and flogged before the crowds while captured Jewish women were made to eat pork (x-xi). In addition, Jews were ridiculed and offended in the Roman theatre:

> *During the Roman rule of Judea, Rabbi Abbahu of Caesaria, the foremost Amora of his time (279-320), complained of the insults to which the Jews were exposed not merely by the dramatists and actors, but also by the theatre attendants, who took their que from the plays. (Landa 1968, 15)*

Indeed, throughout the Roman and Byzantine eras, the region was home and host to various indigenous Near Eastern groups, Christians, and Greco-Roman pagans. Jews were seen as superstitious and peculiar, and their traditions were objectionable and unmatched by other cults: ‘Romans, all in all, tended to look down upon most eastern nations as "soft," "effeminate" and "unwarlike" peoples’ (ibid., 61) and to ridicule them in their theatres.

On the other hand, the religious leader Simon, known for his stringent observance of the commandments, asked King Agrippa I (r. 41-44 CE), Herod the Great's grandson, not to enter the Temple since it was his custom to go to the theatre in Caesarea. Agrippa invited Simon to the theatre, sat him down beside him, and asked, ‘What is contrary to the law in what is going on here? Simon, who had nothing to say against the activities held in the theatre, "begged his pardon"’ (Weiss 2014, 53).

Yet Weiss indicates that as the Roman influence became more dominant, Jews definitely attended public spectacles. René Bloch (2017) writes that certain groups in the Jewish population continued to express reservations regarding Roman public entertainment, but it is possible that some affluent previously Hellenized Jews, who also may have been members of a municipal leadership in their hometowns, were involved in the initiation of public performances or the construction of buildings for mass entertainment. There is no direct evidence to support such an assumption, yet in reading the Talmudic sources, says Weiss, it becomes clear that many Jews frequented the buildings for public entertainment and were fully aware of the

nature of the shows held in the theatres, hippodromes, and amphitheaters. Only a few such buildings were constructed in the Jewish realm—in Jerusalem, Jericho, Tiberias, and Sepphoris; most of this cultural activity took place in Graeco-Roman cities whose civic leaders built a variety of structures that provided mass entertainment for their citizens, including the ethnic minority of Jews residing there.

Kathrine Free states that some Jews acted and still more wrote plays during the Hellenistic and early Roman eras, and that evidence 'increasingly supports the view' that 'significant proportions of the Jewish communities' attended theatre performances in the last few centuries BCE (156). Inscriptional evidence suggests that the city of Berencia in today's Libya may have had a 'Jewish amphitheatre' in the last decade BCE, and an inscription from the early Imperial period in the theatre of Miletos in Turkey, 'reserves one of the best seating areas for the pious Jews' (Free 1999, 149). The idea that Jews of this era had the best seats in the house let alone their own theatre space is staggering, and suggests that instead of a nation of outsiders, Jews may have been much more integrated members of their communities.

The rabbis' staunch attitude towards Roman theatre is conveyed by words such as 'forbidden,' 'not' and 'no' which leave no room doubt regarding their intention. R. Meir and other rabbis, for instance, agreed that the Roman buildings for public spectacles should not be attended, and even if each rabbi provided a different reason, their position was clear:

> *He who goes into the theatres of non-Jews is prohibited because of idolatry, says R. Meir. And the sages say: [if one goes into the theatre] when they offer sacrifices, it is forbidden because of idolatry. But if not, it is forbidden merely because one would be sitting in the seat of scoffers." (Weiss 2014, 201)*

The sages forbade all cooperation: 'None may sell them bears or lions… none may help them build a basilica, scaffold, stadium or judges' tribunal' (*Talmud*, Tractate *Avoda Zara* 1 7). These and similar statements clearly demonstrate the rabbis' objections to attending Roman public spectacles, while offering reasons to justify their attitudes.

At the same time, the rabbis reflect the reality that members of the Jewish population, just like their non-Jewish neighbours, frequented these institutions on a regular basis. Several sources in Talmudic literature, mainly traditions of first and second centuries, refer to the gladiatorial combats and animal baiting. In the early second century, R. Nathan permitted attending gladiatorial combats in the stadium that involved Jews who were condemned to death, only because Jewish spectators "cry out in order to save the life [of the defeated] and because they may testify on behalf of a woman [whose

husband was killed in the struggle] so that she may remarry" (Weiss 2014, 28).

One rabbi was a gladiator himself prior to becoming a scholar. Many stories are told of Shimon Resh Lakish's (200-275 CE) gigantic strength and of his corpulence. He was accustomed to lie on the hard ground, saying: ‘My fat is my cushion’ (*Talmud*, Tractate "Gitin" 46b-47a). Under the stress of unfavorable circumstances he gave up religious study and sought to support himself by a worldly calling. He sold himself to the managers of a circus, where he could make use of his great bodily strength. He worked as a gladiator, where he was compelled to risk his life continually in combats with wild beasts. According to other sources Resh Lakish lived for a time in the wilderness where he made his livelihood as a bandit. From this low estate he was brought back to his studies.

It is usually accepted that most Jews followed the rabbis' prohibitions, condemning and avoiding games and spectacles. However, the gap between the preaching of the religious leadership and the behaviour of the population was characteristic not only of the Jewish community. It was also prevalent in the Christian community during the third to fifth centuries CE. Both the rabbis and the church fathers presented games and spectacles as reprehensible, but this did not change the life style of their people. These strategies allowed rabbis to live in an environment infused by Hellenistic and Roman cultural values and practices and, at the same time, maintain a specifically rabbinic Jewish identity.

Mimesis, catharsis, and Talmud in theatre historiography

Theatre research into the ancient hostility of Jewish dogma towards Roman spectacles is surprisingly scarce; no theatre scholar has investigated the issue in depth, nor elaborated on it. What we do have — archaeological finds, talmudic analysis, references by the first century CE Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, and some contemporaneous speculations — all lack performative vistas and any attempt to analyse the character of rabbinic intolerance towards Roman theatre.

As we have seen, Josephus enumerated three main reasons for Jewish repugnance towards Roman theatre in its early days: political (fear of colonisation / acculturation), theological (transgressing the second commandment) and ethic (immoral pleasure). Later rabbinical writings reinforced Josephus's categorisation.

However, most explanations offered by contemporary theatre historians take into consideration only the first two reasons and disregard the rabbis' animosity towards pleasure-based catharsis. Such is Miriam Kammer's summary in her “Romanization, Rebellion and the Theatre of Ancient Palestine:”

> *Broadly speaking, there appear to be two principle motives behind an ancient Jewish, anti-theatrical worldview: 1) an*

> *aversion to the political (i.e. colonial) events that took place within theatre buildings (which may or may not have spilled into a disdain for performativity in general), and 2) an aversion to theatricality, due to either Biblical restrictions against mimesis and representation and /or the close ties between theatre and pagan ritual in the Greek and Roman worlds. (Kammer 2010, 13)*

Let us look briefly into the concept of mimesis, that used to be translated as imitation until a few decades ago, and it is now mostly rendered as representation. At the core of this change lies "the entire history of Western attempts to make sense of representational art and its values" (Halliwell 2002, vii). Introduced by Plato in *Politeia* (The Republic), where he generously offered the rulers the counsel of kicking artists out of the state, mimesis is seen as the very act of conceiving a representational piece of art. That means primarily visual arts, since they imitate (or rather represent) nature, that is, human reality, which in its turn imitates the world of ideas. Plato's position, then, is that the representative arts are a reproduction or imitation, an artistic distortion of ideas, and thus immoral (Halliwell 2002). To Plato, philosophy is superior to the arts, and it is philosophers who should lead a society. On the other hand, Aristotle's notion of mimesis advocated for poetry (not visual arts), precisely on the grounds of it being mimetic in nature. Poetry as imitation of action and a tool of enquiry is neither philosophical nor moral: "[Aristotle] examines poetry as a piece of art and not as a book of preaching or teaching" (Ford 2015).

A comparison of the Platonic view of mimesis and the second commandment of the decalogue seems imperative: both Hellenism and Hebraism warned against the inherent falsity of visual images representing transcendent invisible truth, albeit for different reasons. For Plato, the imitative arts should be subordinated to politics, given the harmful effect that can be exercised by works of art. In Judaism, the imitative arts jeopardize the very idea of monotheism:

> The text [second commandment] does not refer to specific images, i.e. cult-images of other gods, but to images of whatsoever. Every image that represents something counts as another god that rouses God's jealousy. Images are not made for aesthetic pleasure, for decoration and embellishment, but for worship. Worship is the only *raison d'etre* for the production of images. image. The "graven image" is the paramount and symbol of wrong religion (Assmann 2009, 17)

Clearly, Jews under Roman rule identified objects of idolatry and fought against the endevour of acculturation by means of theatre. As Miriam Kammer would have it, theatres "were vital to the spreading of Imperial thought and culture" (7).

Before proceeding to discuss the concept of catharsis, I would like to survey theatre historiography which has striven to elucidate the lack of theatre in Jewish culture, attributing it to rabbinic condemnation of Roman theatre.

Eli Rozick's most comprehensive *Jewish Drama and Theatre: From Rabbinical Intolerance to Secular Liberalism* (2013) states that the initial intolerance, shared by the Church, was rooted in pagan connotations of theatre, demonstrating that only after almost two thousand years did secularism and modernity facilitate Jewish participation in this art. Rozik thus stresses the Talmud's prohibition of mimesis. Linda Ben-Zvi's *Theater in Israel* opens with the declaration that "[r]elations between theater and Jewish tradition throughout the ages have not been particularly cordial" (Ben-Zvi 1996: 8). Dan Urian in *The Judaic Nature of Israeli Theatre* (2000) and Nurith Yaari in *Between Jerusalem and Athens: Israeli Theatre and the Classical Tradition* (2018) make a similar claim. While Yaari surveys the spectrum of views brought into this discourse by various scholars, none of them have made the attempt to analyse the actual utterances of the Talmud.

Gershon Shaked proposed both a theological and sociological explication to the absence of theatre in Jewish culture, not necessarily related to the Talmud's prohibition:

> *[Theatre] was rejected by the Jewish people because it ran counter the very spirit of Judaism: monotheism does not tolerate dramatic polarity that is founded in myth. Others have preferred a socio-historical explanation: drama cannot develop in a people with no homeland or theatre. (Shaked 1970, 9)*

Shaked thus maintains that apart from the fact that Jews lacked a proper infrastructure for theatre, dramatic writing is by definition opposed to Jewish faith: the conflict of ideas and powers as encountered in Greek ancient theatre is impossible in the Jewish world view. Perhaps this is the case, but the explication is not based on the Talmud; even if any of the sages had attended public spectacles, they wouldn't have seen performances of Roman tragedy nor comedy, but rather circuses, gladiators and mime, as Martin Jacobs indicates:

> *The missing reference to classic comedies or tragedies is not to be ascribed to the ignorance of the Rabbis, but corresponds, to a large degree, with theatre practice in the Later Roman Empire. Whereas in the Republican period [ending in 27 BCE] the literary comedy flowered again in two forms, the palliata the comedy in Greek dress, and the togata, the comedy in Roman dress, it was later replaced*

> *by a folkloristic comedy, which has its roots in the Atellan fables. (Jacobs 1998, 337)*

René Bloch too writes that the critique of the rabbis 'referred not so much to theatre in the classical sense (tragedies, comedies) as to gladiatorial combats and performances of mimesis and pantomimes' (2017, 152).

If so, Hazal could not have experienced the dramatic polarity, supposedly unbearable to monotheism, as Shaked (and also Baruch Kurzweil, 1966) saw it.

Glenda Abramson in *Modern Hebrew Drama* reinforces Shaked's view, yet adds a post-colonial explanation:

> *Certain hypotheses have been offered to explain the lack of dramatic art in Israel's past. First of all the practice of theatrical performances was regarded by the religious leaders as being foreign to the traditional Jewish way of life; secondly, drama is a literary category which is especially linked to independent national and social conditions. […] The third hypothesis relates to the nature of religious practice. In the pagan view the scene of the cosmic drama is the mythological with its clashing divine powers. In Israel, however, it is moral drama, arising out of the tension between the will of the Almighty God and the will of man who is free to rebel and who does so. (Abramson 1979, 11)*

Abramson therefore adheres to Shaked's theological argument and stresses the colonial dimension of Roman mass entertainment, whereas Shimon Levy's *Theatre and Holy Script* offers a different, more poignant theological explanation, adjacent to the notion of mimesis:

> *Following the second commandment "Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image nor any manner of likeness, of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth…" (Ex. 20:3-4), early Jewish tradition rejected theatre because of this medium's inclination towards masks and various other sorts of "as if." (Levy 1990, 2)*

Furthermore, Levy argues in his book that there are deep and complex reasons for the historical Jewish avoidance of 'their' pagan, or, conversely, overly religious shows:

> *I propose that the principally hostile Jewish attitude towards theatre is based on the Rabbis' profound understanding of the performative aspect of theatricality as such, regardless whether any particular production, festivity or show "of the gentiles" is particularly sacrilegious, licentious or straight-out bawdy. […] [T]he initiatory and performative potential of theatricality presents a real religious threat: the power indeed to transform matter into spirit and vice versa, is in traditional Halachic Judaism [Jewish law] the exclusive prerogative of God. (Levy 1990, 2-3)*

Levy's quote takes his previous argument regarding mimesis a step further, to an ontological dimension, arguing that the Rabbis could not accept the endevour of theatre 'to transform spirit into matter' – that being God's prerogative. Again, a very interesting approach, yet lacking reference in the Talmud.

On the other hand, despite the ubiquity of the idea that ancient Judaism was a wholly non-mimetic culture, Levy points out that 'as long as the dramatic and theatrical elements in the Jewish ritual (there is hardly a ritual without them) were contained in their socio-religious contexts, [theatricality] w[as] perfectly "Kosher"' (Levy 1999, 2). This reasoning explains how Jews could use dramatic elements in their own rituals while shunning the theatricality of their oppressors. At the same time, Michal Govrin argues that:

> *[U]nlike other ritual traditions, Jewish worship never underwent the process of theatricalization. Indeed in the very instances in which foreign theatrical effects threatened to penetrate Jewish ritual, the tradition consciously fought them. (Govrin 1983)*

Further, Govrin maintains that Jewish worship, although non-mimetic, constitutes a type of sacred theatre:

> *There are scarcely any forms of imitation in Jewish ritual. Neither in the prohibition of the use of statues or icons, nor in the lack of any mimetic drama, characters, acting techniques, or costume. These means do not constitute any sort of material image, but rather they convey a different type of "sacred theatre." (Govrin 1983)*

Previous studies had primarily stressed the Jewish struggle against Roman acculturation: in a pioneering effort to collect the rabbinic sources pertaining

to public entertainment in ancient Judea, Samuel Krauss (1984) analyzed the various sources in light of what was known in his time about Graeco-Roman culture. Other sociohistorical studies used Jewish literary sources to define the attitudes of Jewish society to Roman public entertainment. The writer and literary critic Gideon Talpaz (1961) and the historian Estee Dvorjetski (1999) focused on the theatre and its performances, while making extensive use of rabbinic literature and discussing mimesis and Roman colonisation. From an archaeological point of view, Zeev Weiss's *Public Spectacles in Roman and Late Antique Palestine* (2014) is the most comprehensive book on the subject. He also examines the change of the sages' approach over time. Obviously, not all Jews were hostile, that was the reason why the sages forbade attending Roman public spectacles. As the examples mentioned in the Talmud demonstrate, in fact the reception of this type of entertainment was rather positive among Jews.

Recent studies, such as Yair Lipshitz in *Theatre & Judaism* (2019) take a more complex stand, arguing that theatre allows for a subtle engagement with religious heritage in a way that does not easily fall into a religious/secular dichotomy. Giuseppe Veltri (2015) argues that at least partially, Hazal's resistance to Roman acculturation resulted from their view of Roman culture as inferior to the Hellenist one which the Jewish population had encountered. Roman theatres and circuses, writes Veltri, were comparable to soccer stadiums and games in the present time. The rabbis despised these public spectacles, while 'the legal and political [Roman] authorities in late antiquity spent substantial funds on constructing such buildings for amusement and used them as an institution for self-presentation, a kind of political staging of power and the regime' (51). For the rabbis, this disparity, as expressed in the Talmud, was not only a matter of securing a Jewish identity free of alien influence and of shunning idolatry, but also the affirmation of a superior morality: Veltri indicates that the rabbis were concerned about "the temptation of the evil inclination" (59), at work in Roman spectacles. This argument touches upon the one factor which has somehow been disregarded by theatre historiography on the Talmud: the cathartic effect.

Whereas mimesis engages with the ontological status of the work of art, catharsis explores its epistemological impact on the spectator. In Chapter six of *Poetics* Aristotle provides a definition of tragedy; catharsis figures as a part of this definition, but the concept in itself is not defined: 'Tragedy represents men in action and does not use narrative, and through pity and fear it effects relief [catharsis] to these and similar emotion' (Aristotle, 1972, 7:43). The sense of 'the pity of it' and fear lest such disasters might befall ourselves are not the only emotions which tragedy releases, but Aristotle specifies them as the most characteristic. He not only leaves undefined the term in Chapter six, there is no definition of catharsis to be found in *Poetics* or any other Aristotelian treatise. This is why catharsis is, perhaps, one of the

most debated Aristotelian concepts in academic circles: 'The catharsis leads the whole structure to a safe shore of solution, which includes a powerful but carefully planned emotional vent, alongside the ability to learn and draw conclusions, which is an integral part of the solution' ('Catharsis,' *New World Encyclopedia*). The etymology of the term indeed implies these directions: purifying, cleansing of excess waste. 'Catharsis is a moment of crisis and superior tension on the one hand and a moment of solution and balance, relief and enjoyment on the other hand' (Aristotle 1972 chapter 7:43).

It would be impossible to exhaust the various meanings and use of catharsis (aesthetic, religious, psychoanalytic, medical), so I will keep the discussion to the minimum necessary in order to approach the voice of the rabbis in the Talmud.

Some commentators interpret catharsis as an experience which purges and cleanses the spectators of emotions as they observe the actions of the characters on stage, and leaves them in a calmer and more mental balanced state. Others interpret Aristotle's treatment of catharsis to mean that we leave the theatre feeling emotionally spent -- the pity and terror of our real lives has been released in theatre. There is ample evidence that providing an outlet for previously unaddressed feelings can help people coping with a variety of mental and psychological conditions. Addressing difficult emotions is often a goal of therapy, as well as of religion ('Catharsis,' *New World Encyclopedia*).

Catharsis may occur when one overcomes the temptation of the evil inclination, as Veltri put it. This term, writes Ishay Rosen-Zvi (2010) 'became the focus of the Talmudic philosophy of man.' The *yetzer hara* (evil inclination) is a sophisticated entity that seduces man to sin – any sin, whether it be theft, murder or adultery.

As mentioned above, the rabbis viewed Roman theatre as an arena where yetzer hara was at play: rowdiness, vulgarity, lewdness, and pornography, -- thus an improper setting for Jews, who are supposed to win out over evil. But did the sages view these entertainments also as possible vehicles of catharsis and purification of the evil inclination? Roman spectacles were clearly in great demand among non-Jews, and find more modest parallels in contemporary culture, such as pornographic movies or horror films that are supposedly endowed with cathartic powers:

> *Modern genres such as horror and thriller films depicting major catastrophes, graphic violence, and extreme conflicts could be said to induce catharsis by building up to an almost unbearably stimulating climax, before releasing the audience back into their everyday mundane lives. The emotions portrayed in these genres are not as profound as those of plays and literature, but they reflect*

> *the fear, irreverence, and nervous tension of modern society. ('Catharsis,' New World Encyclopedia)*

Tertullian argued that human enjoyment (aka catharsis) in Roman theatre can be an offence to God. The sages condemned attending gladiatorial combats 'for the affording [of] delight to the spectators' (Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities* n.d. Book 15, ch. 8) and also 'because one would be sitting in the seat of scoffers' (in Weiss 2014, 201). Enjoyment in Roman theatres was thus viewed by Christian and Jewish leaders of the time as problematic and forbidden. Jonas Barish in his *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (1985) argues that 'The Fathers seek to wean Christians away from what they perceive as an irreligious obsession in order to safeguard the very survival of the faith' (43). Although it is beyond the scope of my essay to tackle the cathartic role of religion, it might very well be that ancient religious leaders conceived Roman spectacles as an alternative to the emotional release and purification provided by religion. They evidently preferred to channel human emotions via vehicles such as prayer, fasting, charity, ascetic practices. miracles, and the like. Even if this was only partially the case, they wrote against the cathartic value of enjoyment, the denigration of rabbinic order, and the delight obtained through mass entertainment.

It seems that the immense power of catharsis, as a means of political control, had not gone unnoticed by the church fathers and the Jewish leaders of the era. To be clear, Hazal were pragmatic: catharsis should not be accidental. This should be the last link in a meticulous and deterministic chain of events. It can therefore be said that catharsis is an instrument of mass control: in the Aristotelian scheme it appears as an inevitable and planned link in the representation of reality. The author creates a cognitive schema whose cohesion is so high that it appears as the only possible solution of the conflict, without which catharsis cannot exist. Catharsis, and with it the whole narrative structure, is therefore an instrument of manipulation, part of a conglomerate that dictates the cognitive consent of the narrator. This is the very mass control that the rabbis possibly (or probably) wanted to maintain and preserve. In short, Hazal identified catharsis as the vehicle of an unavoidable collision between spectacles and the control of religious leaders, and they consequently prohibited any contact of Jews with Roman mass entertainment.

It is usually accepted that most Jews followed the rabbis' prohibitions, condemning and avoiding games and spectacles. However, the gap between the preaching of the religious leadership and the behaviour of the population was characteristic not only of the Jewish community. It was also prevalent in the Christian community. Both the rabbis and the church fathers presented games and spectacles as reprehensible, but this did not change the life style of their people (Bloch 2017).

The relevance of rabbinic literature in drawing an accurate picture of Jewish society in their times has been called into question by various scholars in recent years (Weiss, 2014). They deem that the rabbis were a marginal group, having limited ties with Jewish society at large, and therefore did not play a major role in its communal life; their literature was composed within the confines of bet midrash, which largely represented their circles. This does not mean that rabbinic Judaism was always synonymous with Jewish society.

Moreover: how rabbis perceived contact with and participation in idolatry would have differed from one rabbi to the next. They discuss what kinds of contact with 'idolators' and 'idolatry' were permissible, and which ones were prohibited. They discuss numerous issues such as, for example, a Jewish artisan's collaboration on a pagan building project, contacts with pagan objects, and accidental participation in pagan rituals. What rabbis do not do, however, is to define what they mean by 'idolatry,' other than associating this practice with the Other, from whom they differentiated themselves. The boundaries between rabbinic Judaism and the cultic practices of the Other remained rather undefined and allowed for accommodation and coexistence. These strategies allowed rabbis to live in an environment infused by Hellenistic and Roman cultural values and practices and, at the same time, maintain a specifically rabbinic Jewish identity (Weiss, 2014).

Conclusion

My fundamental question was: according to the Talmud, how does theatricality interfere with Jewish dogma? As put by most theatre scholars, the sages of Jewish tradition rejected Roman spectacles on grounds of mimesis and as institutions of the Roman acculturation. I have argued that the discourse of theatre scholars on this topic has been based on merely cursory examination of what the Talmud had to say about it. A careful reading of the rabbinic sources indicates that the sages stressed an additional, rather different concern, corresponding to the Aristotelian notion of catharsis.

The beginnings of Roman theatre in Judea met fierce opposition. That is to say, the initial encounter between the Jewish population and Roman mass entertainment provoked strong and unequivocal opposition from the Jewish inhabitants, who apparently boycotted Roman theaters and circuses altogether, considering them pagan worship involving statues and masks, mimesis in the Platonic sense. The opposition was all encompassing, based on religious and political resistance. Jewish leaders did not address Roman theatre in what they wrote: it was unnecessary, for Jewish public opinion was identical to theirs. It should be noted that Roman spectacles at that time were already far from their earlier phase which had included tragedy and comedy; in Judea it was almost exclusively bloody violence and/or obscene performances, races and gladiatorial combat.

All this notwithstanding, in the centuries to come, Jews became more and more involved, both as participants and as spectators. At that point Hazal

had to respond with staunch attitude towards Roman spectacles and forbid attendance. The rabbis justified their hostility by warning against mimesis and acculturation. In the late phase of Roman spectacles, around the fifth century, they even compromised and allowed participation under certain circumstances.

Some researchers have taken the risk of interpreting the clash between theatricality and Jewish dogma as an issue of ontological transgression, but no one has explored a third, epistemological concern, clearly voiced by Hazal: that is, the role of immoral catharsis that mass entertainment involved. Although this concern seems on first appraisal theologically oriented, on a second look its political dimension appears to be the fundamental tone. We have seen that the sages do not address the question of whether theatrical performances or mimesis run counter to the Jewish world view. It seems they did not sense, and were unaware of possible contradictions between Jewish thought and theatricality *per se*. The rabbis were mainly worried by potential transgressions in Jewish daily practice, which had to do with acculturation and religious catharsis. They were more worried about the epistemological state of their followers than about pagan mimesis. The power of catharsis, as a means of political control, indeed concerned them. Hazal saw the catharsis offered by mass entertainment as on an inherent collision course with the control of religion.

From a historiographic point of view, although talmudic theatrophobia had a number of sources, it was only partially theologically grounded and there is no talmudic definition of theatricality as being opposed to the spirit of Judaism. So, although the attitude of ancient Jewish religious thinkers towards the Roman spectacles was reverberated down the ages and influenced generations of Jews, we need to carefully reconsider, and map talmudic hostility towards Roman theatre. Their approach allowed the rabbis to live in an environment in which vestiges of paganism were pervasive and to enjoy certain aspects of Roman culture without compromising their own Jewish identity.

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