Chapter Four

Internalization, Externalization, and Marginalization of Threatening Social Forces

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The Mourner, the Excommunicated Person, and the Metzora

> What is the meaning of *shamta*? Rav said: "A name of death"; and Shmuel said: "Desolation shall come."
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> Babylonian Talmud, Moed Katan 17a

Translator's note: Shamta is an Aramaic term for a rabbinic form of excommunication. Rav and Shmuel's explanations play on its sound, associating it with death and desolation.

Distancing

The mourner, the person under *niddui* (rabbinic excommunication), and the *metzora* (a person subject to biblical *tzara'at*, which is not equivalent to modern leprosy) are the three figures mentioned together in the only Talmudic discussion that systematically enumerates Jewish mourning practices (Moed Katan 14b–16a). Why are the three discussed together? Why must all three observe mourning practices? In what context does each of them observe these practices? These are the questions addressed in this chapter. The discussion follows a recurring pattern: it establishes a mourning practice for the mourner and cites a textual basis for it, and then asks whether the same practice applies to the excommunicated person and the metzora. It lists the practices observed by the mourner and raises questions about the excommunicated person and the metzora in a fixed order: first the excommunicated person, then the metzora. Rav Yosef is a central figure in the discussion and was probably responsible for its original core. The opening passage, concerning mourning during a festival (one of the three pilgrimage festivals—Passover, Shavuot, or Sukkot), is also longer than the others and is connected to Tractate Moed Katan as a whole; it may therefore be older than the rest of the discussion. Yet these observations, important though they are, are not the focus of my inquiry. I want to understand the problem confronting the editor, and the aim to which his editorial work responds.

The discussion compares the laws of mourning observed by the mourner, the excommunicated person, and the metzora. As I have shown, it proceeds in an unusual way: each mourning practice is considered in relation to all three. This literary structure recurs fourteen times, once for each of the mourning practices listed. We can discern three parallel processes that the structure sets in motion for the reader. First, it presents the mourning practices as the basis of the connection between the three figures. These

practices form the axis around which the discussion turns; they link the mourner, the excommunicated person, and the metzora. Even when the discussion finds that it cannot determine whether the excommunicated person or the metzora is bound by a particular practice, the practice itself remains the link between them.

The second process is a shift of attention toward the excommunicated person and the metzora as the discussion's center—or, more precisely, toward the excommunicated person. Let me elaborate. First, the statements about the mourner occupy only a very small part of the discussion; most of it concerns the excommunicated person and the metzora. The editor takes it for granted that the mourner observes these practices. The only incidental product of this treatment is the scriptural supports for the mourning practices, which, as I will show, do little in themselves to establish those practices' force. Second, as in any literary work, the important part of the work—its content and subject—lies at its center. The beginning and end support the central argument or drama at the work's heart. The excommunicated person's position at the center of the triad (mourner–excommunicated person–metzora) indicates his relative importance. Third, this discussion adjoins two other discussions of excommunication: one describes the procedure of excommunication (which I discussed at length), while the other describes the circles of distancing that surround the excommunicated person and the extent of that distancing. The third process produced by reading this structure is precisely the distance created by each mourning practice between the person who observes it and society. This movement takes place, as I have said, through the fourteen mourning practices applied to the three figures—the practices that emphasize the element of distancing in mourning. The mourner, the excommunicated person, and the metzora are classic examples of figures who are kept at a distance from society, or keep themselves at a distance from it. Their inclusion in a single discussion, and the listing of each one's mourning practices, brings out the logic of distancing between the excommunicated person and the metzora and the sphere of the mourner. Thus the weight shifts from the theological significance of mourning practices to their sociological significance for the relations between the individual and society. The therapeutic dimension of mourning practices thus fades, while their disciplinary dimension comes to the fore. Here is an abridged account of the discussion (Babylonian Talmud, Moed Katan 14b):

> A mourner does not observe his mourning during the festival, for it is said: “You shall rejoice in your festival” (Deuteronomy 16:14). ... What of an excommunicated person: does his excommunication remain in force during the festival? ... What of a metzora: does he observe his tzara'at during the festival? ...
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> A mourner may not cut his hair, as the Merciful One said to the sons of Aaron [as support for the prohibition on cutting hair in mourning, one may cite God's command to Aaron's sons after the death of Nadav and Avihu], “Do not let the hair of your heads grow unkempt” (Leviticus 10:6)—from this it follows that everyone else may not cut their hair while in mourning. What of an excommunicated person: may he cut his hair? Come and hear the earlier source: “The excommunicated and the metzora may not cut their hair or wash their clothes” ...

A mourner must cover his head, for the Merciful One said to Ezekiel [as support for the mourner's duty to cover his head, one may cite God's command to Ezekiel], “Do not cover your upper lip” (Ezekiel 24:17); after the death of his wife God commanded Ezekiel not to observe mourning practices—implying that everyone else must cover the head. What of an excommunicated person: must he cover his head? Rav Yosef said: Come and hear: “They wrapped themselves and sat apart as excommunicated persons and mourners until mercy was shown them from Heaven.” Abaye said to him: Perhaps excommunication by Heaven is different, for it is more severe. What of the metzora: must he cover his head? Come and hear: “He shall cover his upper lip” (Leviticus 13:45) —implying that he must cover his head.

A mourner may not put on phylacteries, for the Merciful One said to Ezekiel [as support for the prohibition on a mourner's wearing phylacteries, one may cite God's command to Ezekiel], “Bind your turban upon yourself” (Ezekiel 24:17); after the death of his wife Ezekiel was commanded not to observe mourning practices, including the wearing of phylacteries—from this it follows that everyone else is forbidden to put them on. What of an excommunicated person: may he put on phylacteries? The question remains unresolved. And the question stands likewise regarding the metzora: may he put on phylacteries? ...

A mourner may not exchange greetings, for the Merciful One said to Ezekiel, “Be silent” (Ezekiel 24:17). What of an excommunicated person: may he exchange greetings? Rav Yosef said: Come and hear: “As to exchanging greetings between one person and another, they are like people rebuked by Heaven.” Abaye said to him: Perhaps excommunication by Heaven is different, for it is more severe. What of the metzora: may he exchange greetings? ...

A mourner may not engage in the words of the Torah, for the Merciful One said to Ezekiel, “Be silent” (Ezekiel 24:17). What of an excommunicated person: may he engage in the words of the Torah? Rav Yosef said: Come and hear: “An excommunicated person may study, and others may study with him; he may be hired, and he may hire others. A person under *ḥerem* (the more severe ban) may not study, and others may not study with him; he may not be hired, nor may he hire others. But he may study by himself, so as not to interrupt his studies, and may set up a small shop to provide for his livelihood.” ... What of a metzora: may he engage in the words of the Torah?

A mourner may not launder his clothes, for it is written: “Then Joab sent to Tekoa and brought a wise woman from there, and said to her: ‘Pretend to be a mourner, I pray you, and put on mourning clothes, and do not anoint yourself with oil, but be as a woman who has mourned for the dead for many days’” (2 Samuel 14:2). This teaches that a mourner may not launder his clothes, as Joab's instruction to the woman of Tekoa implies that she should behave like a mourner and wear mourning clothes, apparently unclean and unwashed garments]. What of the excommunicated person and the metzora: may they launder their clothes? Come and hear: “The excommunicated and the metzora may not cut their hair or launder their clothes.”

A mourner must tear his clothes, for the Merciful One said to the sons of Aaron, “Do not tear your garments” (Leviticus 10:6)—implying that everyone else must do so. What of an excommunicated person: must he tear his clothes? The question remains

unresolved. What of a metzora: must he tear his clothes? Come and hear: “His clothes shall be torn” (Leviticus 13:45)—thus, he is obliged to tear them.

A mourner must overturn his bed, as the scholars taught and Bar Kappara repeated: “I placed my likeness in them, and through their transgressions overturned it; let them overturn their beds on its account” [A human being was created in God's image; when he died because of his sins, the divine image within him was overturned; you too must overturn your beds]. What of an excommunicated person and a metzora: must they overturn their beds? The questions remain unresolved.

A mourner may not work, for it is written, “I will turn your festivals into mourning” (Amos 8:10). Just as work is forbidden on a festival, so it is forbidden to a mourner. What of an excommunicated person: may he work? Rav Yosef said: Come and hear: “When they said work is forbidden, they meant only by day; at night it is permitted. The same applies to an excommunicated person and a mourner.” ... What of a metzora: may he work? The question remains unresolved.

A mourner may not bathe, for it is written, “Do not anoint yourself with oil” (2 Samuel 14:2); bathing is included in anointing. What of an excommunicated person: may he bathe? Rav Yosef said: Come and hear: “When they said bathing is forbidden, they meant washing the whole body; washing the face, hands, and feet is permitted. The same applies to an excommunicated person and a mourner.” ... What of a metzora: may he bathe? The question remains unresolved.

A mourner may not wear sandals, for the Merciful One said to Ezekiel, “Put your shoes on your feet” (Ezekiel 24:17)—implying that everyone else is forbidden. What of an excommunicated person: may he wear sandals? Rav Yosef said: Come and hear: “When they said wearing sandals is forbidden, they meant only in town; on the road it is permitted. How, then, should he conduct himself? When he sets out on the road, he puts them on; when he enters town, he removes them. The same applies to an excommunicated person and a mourner.” What of a metzora: may he wear sandals? The question remains unresolved.

A mourner may not have marital intercourse, for it is written: “Then David comforted Bathsheba his wife and went in to her” (2 Samuel 12:24)—implying that it is forbidden in the main period of mourning. [David sent Uriah to his death in battle; David and Bathsheba's son died, as the prophet Nathan had prophesied. David lay with Bathsheba after the death of their child, which teaches that intercourse is forbidden during mourning.] What of an excommunicated person: may he have marital intercourse? Rav Yosef said: Come and hear: “All those years when Israel was in the wilderness they were excommunicated, yet they had marital intercourse.” Abaye said to him: Perhaps excommunication by Heaven is different, for it is more lenient. ... What of a metzora: may he have marital intercourse? Come and hear, for it was taught: “He shall live outside his tent” (Leviticus 14:8)—that is, like an excommunicated person (and a mourner), and he may not have intercourse. And “his tent” means his wife, as it is said, “Go, say to them: Return to your tents” (Deuteronomy 5:27).

A mourner may not send his offerings [to the Temple], as it was taught: “Rabbi Shimon says: ‘Peace offerings’—when he is at peace, and not when he is an onen [one whose dead has not yet been buried].” What of an excommunicated person: may he send his

> offerings? Rav Yosef said: Come and hear: “All those years when Israel was in the wilderness they were excommunicated, yet they sent their offerings.” Abaye said to him: Perhaps excommunication by Heaven is different, for it is more lenient. ... What of a metzora: may he send his offerings?

Reading the Talmudic Text

At this point a short methodological observation is needed. As I will show below, I believe that this Talmudic discussion deals with modes of disciplining. It proposes three ways to cope with three different social threats represented by the mourner, the excommunicated person, and the metzora. An obvious methodological question arises here, since the discussion itself is not ostensibly concerned with this issue. In other words, what is the relation between my interpretation and the Talmudic text itself?

The meaning of a text does not reside solely in the text itself; it also depends on its reader (Riffaterre 1980: 26). This position assumes that meaning is not located in the chronological and grammatical development of the work, and that most readers are unfamiliar with its grammatical assumptions; these assumptions therefore have no effect on them. This view focuses on features that stand out even to readers who are not experts in the field, and gives primary importance to the passage in which the work's language affects different readers in a similar way. Wolfgang Iser argued that reading a text not only reveals its meanings but participates in creating them. He also argued that the reader is the author of the text in the sense of producing the part that is not written but merely implied (Iser AM 5766 [2005–06], introduction, p. ix). This claim does not establish that the text is a work of subjective creation altogether; rather, the gaps in it are filled by each individual reader's imagination. Literature has a number of meanings embedded in it, and each meaning can be traced through the work. The way in which a meaning is represented in the text matters. On the one hand, Iser sets the artistic pole and, on the other, the aesthetic pole. The artistic pole is the author's work; the aesthetic pole is the reader's concretization of it. The literary work is, on one side, more than the author's text and, on the other, more than the reader's concretization of the text. Literary creation, according to Iser, is located between the two poles. Iser traces reading as a process: the reader's image-making movements within the text produce a continuity of expectations, yet the reader also plunges into the gaps in the text and then raises them into consciousness. This creates links between the expectations and what has emerged in actual reading. The text's potential is realized by the reader's anticipation and retrospective apprehension, embodied in the course of reading. The reader seeks continuity in the work and therefore joins its missing parts together and creates lines of continuity. Readers' expectations dissolve and then come alive again as they bring their own world into the text (a reading of the text is possible only because the text itself contains gaps). Iser speaks of “the implied reader”: this figure embodies all the prior dispositions a literary work needs in order to produce its effects, dispositions not generated by an external empirical reality but by the text itself (Iser AM 5766 [2005–06], 32). Iser sees in reading a reciprocal process in which the reader experiences the text and learns from it about his own consciousness and experience. Yet as the reader interprets

the text, he enters a world that is not his own. He must come to believe in an experience that does not arise from his own world. While reading, the reader encounters components that do not correspond to his expectations; as he sees the work and its characters, he must reconsider everything he thought he had understood. Iser does not see an objective text and a subjective reader; instead, he argues that the two occur together in the reader—the reading of the author's thoughts always takes place while the reader is immersed in the background, and it is this background that makes reading possible in the first place.

Reading a Talmudic discussion, even one that is largely structured, as Riffaterre and Iser theorize, means that I seek the poetic meaning of the discussion as it inheres in its structure and in the way its arguments are set out. My act of reading is located in the text, precisely in what is missing from it. Reading the Talmudic text that discusses modes of disciplining and the three social archetypes is not “outside the text”; it arises from the text itself, from the way it is structured, from the expectations that the discussion itself builds on a given path and fails to fulfill one after another, and from the search for another continuity within the reader's world, which is constrained by the text. I think this must be distinguished from the approach that holds that the act of reading is central and that it is wholly identical with the text (Fish 1980: 21). Fish, too, draws attention to the importance of reading processes—how every sentence, every decision, every word affects the reader. Fish’s method puts reading into slow motion. According to Fish, literature is not an exposure of something that was there from the outset; it is an experience the reader undergoes while reading. For Fish, the reader need not fill the missing parts of the work as Iser argued; the reader is the source of all possible meaning. Reading is bounded by the assumptions of the interpretive community to which the reader belongs. These assumptions include the rules of language, literary conventions, and the reader's experience of reading within the interpretive community (ibid., 164).

By contrast, my analysis below places the Talmudic text at its center. Ultimately, the methodological choice of reader-response criticism expresses the thought that every reading of a literary text reflects, to some extent, the reader's world, but is also constrained by the text itself. This is all the more true of a canonical text, one that makes room for a wide horizon of interpretation.

At the outset of the book I argued that the organization of the discussion of the mourner, the excommunicated person, and the metzora concerns the extent of the physical distance imposed on the person who follows the mourning practices listed in it. I have now introduced the dimension of the camera lens: the discussion zooms out from the person following the practices and then moves closer to that person. First, the practices that allow him to be seen from afar are mentioned: the ban on cutting one's hair, the obligation to cover one's head, and the prohibition on putting on phylacteries. Next come prohibitions that operate at conversational distance—the prohibition on exchanging greetings and on studying Torah. Then the lens comes closer to the person's mourning practices and mentions prohibitions whose effect is felt at close range: not laundering clothes, not bathing, and not wearing sandals. The obligation to tear one’s clothes also

entails physical proximity: one sees both the tear in the garment and the distanced person's unwashed skin exposed beneath it. Overturning the bed brings the discussion closer to the person, requiring entry into the distanced person's sleeping space. So too the prohibition on work: it requires physical proximity to the person. Finally, what is at issue is sexual intercourse—its prohibition—which involves actual penetration of the intimate space of the person at a distance. The practices are ordered by the way they act: mourning practices affect the one who is "distanced," while the prohibitions affect how far others stay from a person who practices mourning, at a distance that can be far, intermediate, or near.

The Opening of the Discussion

The opening passage asks whether mourning, excommunication, and tzara'at remain in force during the festival. Its opening words are: "A mourner does not observe his mourning during the festival, for it is said, 'You shall rejoice in your festival.' [...] What of an excommunicated person: does his excommunication remain in force during the festival? [...] What of a metzora: does he observe his tzara'at during the festival? [...]" This passage is four times as long as any of the other passages dealing with mourning practices in the discussion. Its language is also different. While the other passages address whether the mourner, the excommunicated person, and the metzora observe one mourning practice or another (for example, the prohibition on bathing or on cutting one's hair), the first passage asks about the very existence of mourning, excommunication, and tzara'at. Its two questions are: "What of an excommunicated person: does his excommunication remain in force during the festival?" and "What of a metzora: does he observe his tzara'at during the festival?" The overarching subject is the juxtaposition of mourning, excommunication, and tzara'at with the joy of the pilgrimage festival.

"A mourner does not observe his mourning during the festival" is a statement about the priority of the public interest over the mourner's private interest. "What of an excommunicated person: does his excommunication remain in force during the festival?" lets us reconsider every mourning practice detailed later as an aspect of the relationship between the individual and the public that ascends to the festival, a public event in the fullest sense. We saw above that mourning is canceled at Passover, Shavuot, or Sukkot because these festivals require one to "rejoice." The lack of clarity about the public character of the rejoicing led to the Talmudic clarification—"If mourning began before the festival, the positive commandment of the many [the festival] comes and overrides the positive commandment of the individual [mourning]. But if mourning begins after the festival has started, the positive commandment of the individual does not come and override the positive commandment of the many." The move from the scriptural support ("For it is said: 'You shall rejoice in your festival'") to the legal argument ("A public positive commandment overrides an individual's positive commandment") is far from trivial. The scriptural support assumes that the command to rejoice on the festival cancels the mourner's mourning. It does not draw on verses about the rejoicing of the many, "You shall rejoice before the Lord," but precisely on a verse about the rejoicing of

an individual. According to this support, festival joy cancels mourning because it has greater substance and stands higher in the hierarchy. The shift to the legal rule, “A public positive commandment overrides an individual's positive commandment,” emphasizes that the commandment of joy is not a private matter but a public one, and that its public character displaces mourning, which concerns the individual. This legal rule gives the discussion its heading and allows us to treat the question of whether excommunication or tzara'at continues during the festival, and whether mourning does not continue during the festival, as questions of the public sphere rather than the personal sphere. At the opening of the discussion a subject different from its ostensible one is therefore defined: it asks not merely whether a particular practice applies, but whether the relationship between the individual and society has here become conflictual. The scriptural support, written from the individual's point of view—“A mourner does not observe mourning on the festival because it is said, ‘You shall rejoice in your festival’” (and not “You shall rejoice before the Lord your God”)—and the legal rule, expressed from the point of view of the many, offer different emphases. In the positive formulation of the many's “commandment” (it comes and overrides) and in the negative formulation of the individual's “commandment” (it does not come and override), the opposing emphases become clearer.

Moreover, the phrase “mourning now,” meaning mourning arising during the festival, shows that the temporal concepts, too, are those of public time (now, that is, during the festival) rather than the individual's time. The time of going up for the festival is “public” time—the time when the people as a whole, those in Jerusalem and those elsewhere, share a single interval. The fact that mourning is not observed on the festival brings the mourner into this public time.

The prohibition on sending offerings is the prohibition that closes the discussion. The opening, as we have just seen, sets out the subject of relations between public and individual in a concrete setting: mourning during the festival, excommunication during the festival, and tzara'at during the festival. All these involve physical participation—going up to the Temple and entering it—as distinct from exclusion from the public sphere. The end of the discussion addresses a similar question, but here the physical place of the public is replaced by a metaphorical, conceptual one. Sending offerings exemplifies participation with the public in a public event without necessarily being physically present. The discussion thus ends with a possible way to participate without physical presence. The question of participation without physical presence is central for anyone who cannot be part of the public event, such as the three figures in this discussion.

The particular wording of the question “What of an excommunicated person: does his excommunication continue during the festival?” allows us to distinguish between excommunication and the metzora's condition. The question is not whether the excommunicated person or metzora or mourner performs a mourning practice or another, but whether they are, as a whole, mourners, excommunicated people, or people afflicted with tzara'at. This question enables us to think of each of the three figures as

someone possessing a condition. Thus, for example, one may “observe mourning during the festival,” “observe excommunication during the festival,” and “observe one's condition as a metzora during the festival.” That is, excommunication, mourning, and tzara'at are not wholly separate characteristics of a person; they are social conditions whose operation depends on several changing factors. Each of these social conditions, according to the discussion, is attained through practices of mourning in particular contexts. The opening makes explicit the mourner's context: that context is known to us—the mourner's practices are given in the discussion. When the Gemara determines that “a mourner does not observe his mourning during the festival,” it determines the context in which we must read the mourning practices observed by the mourner: the overall social arrangement, since when the public gathers for the festival his presence is required. The context in which the mourner observes these practices is that of social contact with the community. The metzora's condition and excommunication are less familiar to us. The discussion must therefore clarify their context, which in turn determines their “condition.” The end of the discussion, the sending of offerings, makes clear the context of the mourner and the metzora—both are forbidden to send their offerings, so neither is a social agent in this respect. The excommunicated person, by contrast, remains in an intermediate position: according to Rav Yosef, he is allowed to send his offerings, while Abaye's challenge leaves the matter in question.

Scriptural Supports for Mourning Practices

The supports brought for mourning practices are drawn from four central biblical narratives: the account of the deaths of Aaron's sons; the account of the death of Ezekiel's wife and the prophecy entrusted to him; the account of the relationship between Absalom and David; and the deed of David and Bathsheba. Apparently, none of these supports speaks of mourning itself; instead, they derive the laws of mourning from someone who is not a mourner, or from someone who ought to observe mourning practices but does not. This fact reinforces the sense that the discussion is concerned not with mourning practices as means of expressing the mourner's pain or locating him again on the social map. These supports, all of which address mourners who do not mourn or mourners who are different, direct us instead to think of mourning practices as a social instrument: a mechanism that can be used in various contexts, not only in the specific context of mourning. In one way or another, the supports concern models that challenge social responsibility, existing institutions, and prevailing morality.

The account of the deaths of Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, expresses a challenge to the manner in which God is to be served—that is, a challenge to the institutions of mediation between God and humanity. In the same way, the story also challenges the very ways of mourning through Aaron the priest, who asks: “If I ate the sin offering today?” (Leviticus 10:19). The account of the death of Ezekiel's wife is connected, of course, with the destruction of Jerusalem and with mourning for it. As Aaron is not allowed to mourn his sons, Ezekiel too is commanded not to mourn his wife after her death, in order to provoke a response of surprise that will open the way for the prophecy he delivers. The story of the mourner that Joab puts into the mouth of the woman of Tekoa is one in

which Joab challenges authority: he asks David to forgive Absalom for killing Amnon. Ultimately Absalom rebels against David. The death of David's first child with Bathsheba, and the death of Uriah too, concern a challenge to authority arising from its misuse.

The scriptural support brought for the prohibition on work also involves distortion and its reversal: the prophet's words in Amos, “I will turn your festivals into mourning,” invite the Gemara to infer that just as work is forbidden during a festival, it is also forbidden during mourning. Yet the prophet speaks of turning the festival into mourning —therefore, if work must be forbidden on the festival, it must be permitted during mourning. That is not the inference the discussion draws. The scriptural supports for mourning practices thus lead to stories in which the protagonists challenge the conventional or the institutional: a challenge involving death and practices of mourning that, as supports, are an indirect or even an inverted way of expressing mourning.

The opening of the discussion, then, frames the general subject: the relation between society and the individual in its problematic form. It also establishes the framework for discussing this general subject—the varying degrees of distance that mourning practices impose, through the apprehension of excommunication, tzara'at, and mourning as “conditions,” rather than as traits that define the persons concerned.

The Mourner, the Excommunicated Person, and the Metzora as Figures of Social Threat

The sugya invites us to read the mourning practices observed in it as a means of distancing those who observe them. The question before us is what kind of threat each of the figures appearing in the sugya—the mourner, the excommunicated person, and the metzora—embodies, and how the mourning practices neutralize the threat inherent in them. Moreover, I have shown above how the sugya directs us to read the mourning practices of the mourner, the excommunicated person, and the metzora in a particular context. The question is what precise context underlies the mourning practices observed by each of them, and how this context serves the social threat they embody.

Again, the central claim is not that mourning practices concern the distancing of the mourner from society, but that the sugya before us concerns the aspect of distancing in the laws of mourning and describes three mechanisms—the mourner, the excommunicated person, and the metzora—three different states from one another, and yet all three are represented through the mourning practices. The thirteen mourning practices that the sugya addresses are relevant to the mourner, the excommunicated person, and the metzora, each of whom is accorded a different degree of distance in each of the matters mentioned, because of the context in which the sugya asks us to read them.

The Mourner—Present and Absent: Internalizing the Threat

What is the social threat that emanates from the mourner? In the context of the prohibition on work, the sugya dealt briefly with the social threat that emanates from the mourner. I now wish to expand the discussion somewhat by surveying psychological

approaches to mourning. According to what we shall see, in all the approaches, at the beginning of mourning the mourner's state is unsettled: he is filled with anger, bewilderment, guilt, and shame that must be examined, lest he threaten the community in which he lives. In general terms, one may point to three principal approaches to mourning practices in psychology. The first is the psychoanalytic approach. Freud, in his essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” first formulated the concept of “grief work.” The detachment of the beloved object from the libido, by means of bringing the unconscious thoughts about that object into consciousness, is “grief work.” When the detachment is successfully accomplished, the ego is free again. In other words, the energy invested by the person in the beloved must be returned to the mourner so that he can invest it anew in another person and create a new, sound system of relationships. Otto Fenichel observes that every process of mourning also involves a degree of guilt (Fenichel 1946: 395). Guilt also appears when the mourner did not wish, at some time, for the death of the person close to him. Guilt is expressed, as a rule, thus: “I should have died in his place.” Lindemann developed Freud's basic concepts in the essay “Symptomatology and the Management of Acute Grief” (Lindemann 1944: 141). He identified five components of mourning—somatic disturbances, preoccupation with the image of the dead person, guilt, hostility, and disordered behavior. In Lindemann's view, the heart of the matter is bodily disturbances (exhaustion, weakness, loss of appetite), but also, and especially, the loss of behavioral patterns that were already established in the mourner. A mourner who does not express himself normally, according to Lindemann's research, responds belatedly to the loss, and also experiences *distorted grief*. This response causes avoidance of other people's company, the development of hypochondriacal symptoms of death (if death was caused by illness), psychosomatic illnesses, and a mania of excessive activity. According to Lindemann, the release of the ill person from the relationship with the dead person finds expression in a renewed habituation to the surroundings and in the capacity to form new connections. Analytic “grief work” is required to achieve such release through coming to terms with hostility and fear, a relinquishing of the loss, and discussion of feelings of guilt.

These two approaches—Freud's and Lindemann's psychodynamic approach—identify the mourner's fundamental motivations in mental and internal processes. The second approach to the mourner and to loss is the cognitivist approach. This approach was first formulated by Bowlby (1961: 317). According to his descriptions of the child's attachment to his mother, it is because she is needed by him that he is attached to her. He needs her as a basis for security that will protect him and watch over him. Thus, for example, a child smiles when his mother wishes to communicate with him, and cries or shouts when he wants attention. In relationships of attachment, a person feels secure—the purpose is attachment, and attachment has a role in survival and is a normal part of the life of a mature person. Grief over loss and mourning, according to Bowlby, are in essence a kind of anxiety and abandonment—just as children and animals do not wish to part from their mothers, so too mourning and grief over loss have their place among adults. This is an involuntary parting that gives rise to behaviors expressing anxiety and abandonment. Bowlby described four stages in loss: numbing of the senses, longing and searching,

despair and lack of organization, and renewed organization. In other words, at first there is a time of shock and surprise; then a longer period of searching. After a time, as the lack of effectiveness of these behaviors becomes apparent, they cease, and a period of depression arrives. The fourth and last stage is that of “renewed organization.” During this period the mourner reorganizes, cognitively, his situation. “Grief work” is the transition between these four stages. Bowlby too regards mourning as a kind of illness, and he too identifies childhood as the model for later relationships.

The third approach to mourning is the behaviorist approach. This approach stresses the mourner's normal aspect, which can be suppressed or stimulated through external and environmental stimuli. Of course, speaking of stages in relation to mourning is somewhat artificial, since there is considerable overlap between one stage and the next. Nevertheless, one may say that most empirical research suggests a link between the element of time and the symptoms of mourning—as time passes, generally, the symptoms of grief following loss diminish. In other words, the most difficult feelings of the mourner generally appear in the first stage of mourning. This is the stage of shock: the mourner loses his bearings, is confused, and feels a lack of calm accompanied by helplessness. In terms of physical symptoms—the mourner's face and throat dry up; he feels the need to sigh, to weep, has difficulty sleeping, and loses his appetite. At this stage the mourner is antagonistic, withdrawn, and full of thoughts about the person who has died. The second stage is that of awareness of the loss, and is marked by anxiety of abandonment, conflicts, deviation from expected behavior, and intense tension. At this stage the mourner is like a deceased person: he weeps, is full of anger and guilt, is frustrated and ashamed, has difficulty sleeping, and experiences fear of death. The psychological phenomena associated with this stage are sensitivity, searching, and denial (Sanders 1999: 36). Guilt, as noted, appears in most mourning processes and is associated with *survivor's guilt*—that is, the feeling that the mourner should have died rather than the person close to him who died. As noted, guilt also appears when the mourner had wished for the death of the deceased, but also when the mourner felt that the deceased had been his responsibility (parents toward their children, children toward their parents).

There is an important difference between guilt and shame in relation to mourning. Shame stems from the internalization of social values learned from society and parents concerning death and the interpretation of death. Conduct consistent with social values and myths brings a sense of security and comfort; by contrast, a departure from social values—death, for example, insofar as it threatens the social order—leads to a decline in self-worth. Guilt, arising from the specific relationship between the deceased and the mourner, can undergo rationalization through confession and discussion of the feelings that arise toward the deceased. Shame, by contrast, demands the strengthening of the ego and the restoration of a sense of control over life, which will make it possible to fend off the specter of death as punishment (Sanders 1999: 71).

In sum, it appears that the first stage of mourning is, generally, the most difficult stage in terms of the intensity of the feelings that overwhelm the mourner; his mental condition is generally most difficult at the outset. Beyond the feelings that characterize the mourner's

mental condition, there are anger directed toward society, but also toward the mourner himself; feelings of guilt and frustration over the loss of control in life. The mourner loses the social companions and familiar patterns of social behavior in the early stages of his mourning, and consequently feels guilt and shame arising from the fact that he remains alive in the presence of the death of a person close to him.

These points make clear the challenge that the mourner poses to society as a whole and to social and institutional structures: the mourner, by virtue of his condition, is liable to undermine his social surroundings. Admittedly, some researchers write about aspects of supervision and internalization associated with mourning practices, such as the blessing of mourners, or, for example, they view mourning rites as part of a mechanism of social supervision that separates people who were normative from those who were not, and imposes sanctions on people who were not normative (Rubin 1997: 43). Yet, in the main, those researchers too did not regard the mourning practices themselves as practices meant to neutralize the threat posed by the mourner. The process as a whole directs the mourner's problems toward positive channels, but it should be observed, in my view, that the mourning practices, as they appear in this part of the tractate Moed Katan, contain stages of detachment, liminality, and reintegration.

Psychological research into mourning and its stages not only sharpens our understanding of the mourner as someone who poses a threat to society and the community, but also shows that mourning itself provides fertile ground for the exercise of authority over the mourner. Mourning contains a potential seed of depression that poses an existential threat to the person who observes its practices, and it has a firm hold on feelings of guilt and shame, which can themselves easily become extensions of discipline.

Internalizing the Threat from the Mourner

As I have shown at the beginning of the chapter, the mourner's difficult feelings focus principally on the first period of his mourning; as a rule, the intensity of the feelings declines as time passes. The mourner, especially at the beginning of the process, is angry and frustrated. From the point of view that examines his status as a threat, one can understand the gradual and diminishing effect of the mourning practices (mourning before burial, seven days, thirty days, a year). Immediately after the death of the person close to him, the mourner is at his greatest risk to society—if his voice is heard, he can call into question social values, for example, the faith embedded in a system of reward and punishment. Moreover, the mourner can call into question God's existence and hence potentially challenge the legitimacy of all the institutions that claim to represent him within the social system. The treatment of the mourner and of the threat that emanates from him takes place through a combination of two components: distancing through mourning practices observed by the mourner, and his conduct during his time in society, a kind of bear hug. The distancing of the mourner should be read in the context of his maintaining ties with society and being part of the social body. The mourner observes all the mourning practices, yet maintains constant contact with society. Thus all

the mourner's social contact is colored in the colors of distance. This is “distance into society”: the mourner is swallowed up and silenced through mourning practices.

The mourner, according to the sugya, is forbidden many activities: he may not have his hair cut, launder, wash, wear sandals, put on tefillin, have sexual intercourse, or send offerings; and he must tear his garment, overturn the bed, and cover his head. In fact, the most severe prohibitions and obligations in the sugya are imposed on the mourner. Professor Moshe Halbertal believes that the prohibitions and obligations described above express the fact that the mourner loses his social face, and thus his capacity as a social agent (Halbertal, Laws of Mourning in Moed Katan). That is to say, the mourner has no social face, coming to the point of a minimal and cleanly ordered appearance, and he has no capacity for social or legal action, because he is not a social agent. Yet we must remember that the prohibitions and obligations described above are observed in the context of mourning: the loss of the social face and loss of social agency occur when the mourner is within the social organization. He communicates, but his voice is not heard because no one can fully engage with someone who is not a social agent and has no social face. He can indeed speak with those who comfort him and set out his arguments before them, but his special condition neutralizes the weight of his arguments and enables them to be swallowed up. The great problem the mourner poses, as noted, is his unsettled condition following the death of a person close to him. The mourner is in a state in which he can challenge belief in a system of reward and punishment in the world. The treatment of the mourner's problem is effected through internalizing the problem he poses within society and silencing it. This move is made by severing the mourner's ordinary means of communication from one side, while maintaining constant contact with him from the other.

As I have shown, most sociologists and anthropologists see the mourning practices observed according to Jewish law as social mechanisms designed to reintegrate the mourner into social life. The mourner's social separation from the rest of society, visible in their view (the prohibition on haircuts and washing) and in communication (the prohibition on offering greetings), is absent from Christian mourning practices, in which the mourner is not separated from society. There is no doubt that psychological and sociological aspects of therapy exist in the Jewish mourning practices, aspects that rest on known anthropological models. Yet the sugya in Moed Katan clarifies that internalization also contains the mourner's potential threat. The mourner directly threatens the fundamental principles of Jewish society, belief in God, the understanding that God's ways are just and good, and the added force that the sages give to these principles. In the face of his loss, a profound doubt about these three axioms arises in the mourner, and he endangers all those around him. It is this potential that threatens the sugya in Moed Katan. In this sense Jewish mourning involves not only confrontation with the mourner's personal grief, but also the problems he poses to social cohesion and the authority of the sages. One can see the denial of the mourner's social face and the denial of his social agency as an expression of alienation and of the gap the mourner feels toward the world, and a reflection of his loss of interest in the world (Halbertal, Laws of Mourning in Moed

Katan). The explanation is that the mourning practices aim to return the mourner to the world gradually. In contrast to the excommunicated person, who has a stake in the world and wishes to return to society, society pushes the mourner away when he no longer has a stake in the world. Therefore the excommunicated person is permitted the same creative activities that the mourner is forbidden. These activities reflect the desire to continue to be a social agent (ibid.).

According to the explanation offered by the sugya, the mourning practices, in view of the mourner's inward condition, bring about its representation. If so, we must suppose that the mourning practices are not an act imposed on the excommunicated person or on the mourner, but an act that expresses their inner world. Again, this is a plausible general explanation of the practices of mourning or excommunication, but it overlooks the context of the sugya before us. The literary structure of the sugya emphasizes precisely the threat posed by the mourner and the excommunicated person and the social context in which they observe the mourning practices. In the context of the sugya, the matters in which the mourner is forbidden, in contrast to the excommunicated person, activate a different mechanism of distancing, because the social threat that emanates from each is different, and the treatment of each is different. For the mourner, the purpose is the internalization of the threat he poses. This internalization would not have been achieved if the mourner's voice could have been heard as that of a social agent. The mourner is not a social agent, according to the sugya, not because of the absence of creative aspects associated with being a social agent, but because being a social agent is the basis on which social communication rests: the ability of a person to participate in discourse, in the sense that participants in the conversation listen and respond to what he has to say, constitutes his being a social agent. From the point of view of communication, all the obligations connected with the social face of the mourner also mean that his arguments will be swallowed up, forgotten, and left without reference.

The excommunicated person's mechanism of distancing works differently. While the mourner is internalized in a kind of “bear hug,” the excommunicated person is brought into the liminal or marginal condition. Entrance into this condition is expressed precisely in the combination of the excommunicated person's continuing to be a social agent with his observance of mourning practices, so that the silencing of the excommunicated person is intensified. He experiences the cessation of human communication with him whenever he engages in a social act. For the excommunicated person, as noted above, a process of melancholia takes place, originating in longing for the beloved object (society) and the inability to realize that longing and speak of it. For the mourner, by contrast, there is no such mechanism: his silencing is achieved without setting a melancholic process in motion, because the threat he poses is considered a different kind of threat. The response to the threat posed by the mourner takes place through two parallel processes—on one side, the denial of his ability to participate, and on the other, the continuation of human communication with him.

Mourning Practices as Practices of Distancing

In the discussion above I classified the mourning practices observed by the excommunicated person into three kinds. The first kind comprises mourning practices that depict the excommunicated person as distant. I discussed the importance of the signs that make it possible to identify the excommunicated person from afar and to mark him as excommunicated. The external appearance has the power to determine the social attitude toward us, and it is also a central component of our identity. The second kind of distancing is distance from the interpersonal sphere—in the broad sense of the term. I discussed the importance of social interaction in constructing a person's self. Interaction enables recognition, and thus an independent sense of self. A prohibition on greeting and a prohibition on Torah study, both of which also restrict interaction with the excommunicated person, also restrict communication with his essence, and therefore gravely impair his sense of self. The third kind of distancing imposed on him is relevant at close range. These distances concern the physical aspect that prevents intimate closeness, but also make the excommunicated person repellent and thereby intensify his sense of being a dead man walking. The prohibition on washing, laundering, and wearing a sandal—these prohibitions cause the excommunicated person to give off an unpleasant smell and drive people away from him.

Mourning practices have many faces and their semiotics is complex. They have therapeutic aspects, and they also function as rites of passage intended to ease the sharp change in the mourner's social status. As noted, the Talmudic sugya we are dealing with directs us to see one aspect of the mourning practices: their being a means of distancing and silencing the mourner. I wish to dwell on those dimensions of distancing and silencing inherent in the mourning practices with regard to the mourner specifically. In order to prevent confusion in the discussion, when a mourning practice is identical to one observed by the excommunicated person, I shall not repeat the discussion, but shall only briefly turn to the discussion above. The focus here will be the comparison between the therapeutic and anthropological approaches to mourning practices and the approach that sees in them a means of silencing the mourner. In doing so, I shall be able to connect these things to the specific context of the Talmudic sugya.

Haircutting—Rubin's assumption is that “not treating the hair serves as an outlet for anger and defiance toward the world as it is” (Rubin 1997: 176). I discussed above how letting hair grow is a central component of a person's identity and affects people's appearance, how they are perceived, and their attitude toward themselves. The mourner's failure to have his hair cut identifies him from a distance, and there is an element of a warning to communicate with him. The *asmachta* brought in the sugya for the prohibition on haircuts is, as noted, from the sons of Aaron: “Do not let your hair be unkempt and do not tear your clothes.” The root *p-r-ʿ* is used in Hebrew to denote abandonment, wildness, or exposure (especially of the hair of the head). That is to say, *periah* is not merely the loosening of hair, but also its exposure. The use of this root teaches us about the intention of tending to the hair: already from a great distance, it reveals a person's disposition toward communication and his ability to communicate

himself. As noted, the prohibition on cutting one's hair is not a decree but an obligation to neglect one's hair and its care. This neglect leads to the identification from afar of the person from whom one must refrain from ordinary and accepted communication. The matter of the identity connected with hair is well expressed in the *asmachta*: the sons of Aaron are supposed to represent the holiness, and therefore it is forbidden for them to let their hair grow unkempt—to the point of prohibition on the sons of Aaron behaving as the prohibition on haircuts does. The hair of the sons of Aaron is identified with their service of God, and therefore it is kept away from them.

Covering the head—I discussed above how covering the head means covering the face. The obligation to cover the head is conceived as an expression of the mourner's feeling of isolation, as a "sense that among human beings he hangs down his head" (Rubin 1997: 172). This determination relies on the established rule in Tractate Avel Rabbati: "When his dead lies before him, he covers his head. If he comes to stand in a row, he uncovers his head, and the others take their leave; when he goes outside the row, he covers his head. He enters his house, and others come to comfort him; he uncovers his head, and they take their leave" (Avel Rabbati, chapter 10, halakhah 9). Yet this halakhah does not establish that the mourner covers his head in the company of other people, but only when he is at the moment of *nihum avelim*, the comforting of mourners. And in every other situation, the mourner covers his head. It is indeed true that, as a rule, the mourner stays at home for the whole of the seven days (and there is a dispute whether he may wrap his head on the Sabbath), but in the context before us covering the head at the outset, and in the first instance, is recognizable as a sign that distinguishes a person as a mourner. As noted, one can see covering the head as a therapeutic aspect that enables people to identify him and comfort him. But in the context of their being practices of distancing, covering the face marks the mourner from afar as someone who poses a social threat. There is also, in covering the face, a sign of the mourner's silence.

Tefillin—On the first day, the mourner does not put on tefillin: "On the first day he does not put on tefillin. On the second he puts on tefillin. On the third [he removes them, and even if] others come to comfort him, he removes them for all seven days"—these are the words of Rabbi Eliezer. Rabbi Joshua says: "On the first and second days he does not put on tefillin. On the third day he puts on tefillin. If others come to comfort him, he takes them off for all seven days" (Avel Rabbati, chapter 6, halakhah 3; the interpretation follows Zlotnick 1966, ad loc.). The prohibition on putting on tefillin applies on the first day of mourning. Thereafter the prohibition is connected with the presence of comforters—he must take off the tefillin when they arrive. The accepted explanation is that tefillin are a source of joy and that one needs to direct one's heart when putting them on—neither is possible during mourning. The prohibition on putting on tefillin is situated in the sugya at a considerable distance, a distancing that depends on the sense of sight and on the appearance of a person. Tefillin are a visual object—one source of the name *pe'er* for tefillin is the sugya in Moed Katan. The name points to the visual effect of tefillin. The root *p-ʾ-r* is used to describe "glory or splendor and great beauty" (according to the Even-Shoshan dictionary). A hat or head covering worn for adornment is called *pe'er* by

extension from the word's original meaning. The visual effect of tefillin is also expressed in the verse about them: "All the peoples of the earth shall see that the name of the Lord is called upon you, and they shall be afraid of you." Jonathan's translation of the verse "Your headdress bound upon you" reads: "Your tefillin shall be upon you." Turning to tefillin emphasizes the importance of their visibility: the prohibition chiefly concerns the tefillin on the head, which can be seen from afar. The symbolic meaning of tefillin as a "garment" concerns belonging to the community. Tefillin identify a person from afar and point to his belonging to the community. Entry into the social world of obligations and rights takes place at age thirteen—the age at which a person becomes a "man" is also the age at which he begins to put on tefillin. The tefillin themselves are the adorned object consonant with visual power, and the symbol issuing from it—the letter *shin* that appears on one of the tefillin, the wrapping of the straps around the hand, and the importance of the place where the tefillin rest—on the head and near the heart. Yet, from the point of view that regards the mourner as threatening, the prohibition on putting on tefillin acquires meaning through its ability to mark the mourner as someone barred from ordinary social interaction. The prohibition on putting on tefillin on the first day is meant to deny the mourner's social agency—the first day, as noted, is the most difficult day for the mourner, and the intensity of his feelings is greatest. The prohibition on putting on tefillin reflects the mourner's inability to participate in the everyday acts intended to fend off death. The tannaim's claim that it is permissible for the mourner to put on tefillin only on the third day reflects the feeling that the mourner's anger and confusion are still great on the third day too. Denying the mourner social agency secures his isolation and ensures that his communication will have no effect on those around him. The prohibition on putting on tefillin identifies the mourner from a distance and prevents his participation in the communal discourse. Identifying the mourner from afar shapes the entirety of conversation with him and threatens the person who comes close to him. The prohibition on putting on tefillin (like the prohibition on haircuts), which marks the mourner from afar, denies the possibility that he will threaten social stability in the first sentences he says to someone who comes into contact with him—the identification from afar prepares in advance anyone who comes into contact with the mourner to take his words with caution, and thereby limits the mourner's ability to exert a substantive influence on those around him.

Greeting—In Tractate Avel Rabbati, chapter 10, limits are prescribed for the greeting: "If they greet him, he says to them: I am a mourner. On the first and second days he says to them: I am a mourner. On the third day he responds in a subdued voice, but does not ask after their well-being" (halakhah 2). Why is the mourner forbidden to greet others? Rubin sees in the prohibition on greeting one of the "rituals of isolation" (Rubin 1997: 181). The mourner does not respond to a greeting in the first three days of mourning, and only from the seventh day does he "ask as usual" (Moed Katan, 21a, column 2). The claim is that the mourner, during the seven days, is not an object of social contact but "society forms contact with him, albeit without the ritual opening ordinarily used for greeting." If a ritual as everyday as greeting becomes charged with ritual meaning, then the social contact with the mourner receives ritual meaning, unlike "ordinary contact" (ibid.). Yet

what is the meaning of prohibiting greetings during the first days of mourning within the context of distancing from death and of the mourner as a threatening figure? I have discussed above, in relation to the excommunicated person, the importance of greeting in constructing social relationships and directing a person's personality. The prohibition on greeting gravely impairs the ability to conduct a normal conversation and the ability to receive recognition from the surroundings. Thus the mourner, who is in social interaction and is comforted by society, is also quieted on the verbal level.

Words of Torah—The prohibition on Torah study is explained by the joy accompanying study. But what is the significance of a prohibition whose essence is to distance and silence the mourner? We are speaking of identity-forming communication, as well as the ability to pass on messages and even to build communal solidarity—these components are denied to the mourner. In this sense, the prohibition on engaging in Torah study is meant to prevent the transmission of the mourner's frame of mind and problematic spirit through Torah study. Every Torah study session includes within it interpretive elements —the prevention of Torah study by the mourner seeks to prevent all the hermeneutic moves whose basis is a challenge to God's ways in the world.

Laundering—“The garment symbolizes a person's status, which those around him assign to him [...] When clothes are not laundered, they contribute to the blurring of status and to the expression of symbolic nakedness” (Rubin 1997: 178). In the discussion above of the excommunicated person I dwelt on the difficulty marked by this explanation: not laundering clothes need not symbolize symbolic nakedness but may be precisely a sign of hierarchy: the one whose clothes are laundered rises above the one whose clothes are not. The prohibition on laundering, from the point of view of its being a means of distancing, causes people to keep away from the mourner whose clothes have not been laundered.

Tearing the garment—Symbolically, the rite of tearing is not merely a rite of passage, and it marks not only the process that turns one from a “parent” into a “bereaved parent,” or the feelings of anger harbored by the mourner; rather, it simply symbolizes the mourner's being torn apart by the death of someone close to him (Rubin 1997: 163–167). I have argued above that loss is like the severing of a limb for the mourner, and this is apparently also what the baring of the shoulder symbolizes. The exposure of skin is a site for producing a moral order. Tearing brings the mourner under the sway of his social surroundings and embodies a declaration of nonbelonging to the social body, whose members cover their skin with clothes. The scriptural support for the mourner's obligation to tear his garment is derived from the command to Aaron's sons, “Do not rend your garments”—which implies that everyone else is obliged to do so. From the special command to Aaron's sons not to tear their clothes, one learns that everyone else must tear theirs. The root *p-r-m* denotes “undoing a seam in a garment” (Even-Shoshan dictionary). Unseaming clarifies that what matters is the undoing of something already joined—the unseaming of garments. It points to a return to an earlier condition, to exposure: garments that cover the skin must be undone; the skin must be exposed. Thus

unseaming teaches us that the symbolic act does not necessarily consist in tearing; the symbolic act lies in undoing the bonds between a person and society.

Overturning the bed and doing work—Overturning the bed and tearing the garment both involve considerable physical closeness, which makes it possible to see the stains on the clothes and smell them, and also to see the exposed skin and smell it. The sugya now turns to more complex interactions: overturning the bed represents a shared sitting in the intimate space of the distanced person, and doing work concerns entry into the distanced person's sphere of work. These two examples involve closed spaces in which sight and smell have great intensity. Entry into the distanced person's enclosed space, to the place where his bed is overturned or to his workplace, sharpens the factors that distance others. The explanations for overturning the bed are these: turning the dead person away from the image of God, in whom there is life, toward death, or a symbol of the loss of life in the place where life takes place, or a reversal of the mourner's world order. The *asmachta* brought in the Gemara to support overturning the bed for mourners is a saying of Bar Kappara: “I placed my likeness in them, and through their transgressions overturned it; let them overturn their beds on its account” (Moed Katan, 15b). The metaphor of “overturning”—the image of God that has life—stands at the basis of overturning the bed. The logic is that the sins of the dead person caused his death, and the mourner too is found in the category of sin, so that the overturning has an effect on him. Bar Kappara's saying, in which the mourner's being worthy of punishment is an expression of sin, reveals, precisely, how the sages discipline him—the question is why the sages have an interest in defining him as a sinner, and what stands behind the theological system that sees sin in him. As noted, the mourner threatens the theological value system according to which God is a just God and acts according to rules of reward and punishment. Sleeping on an overturned bed is also connected to the effect of disgust. Overturning the bed makes it so that, instead of a bed turned upward as usual, the bed is placed upside down and the dirt beneath it is revealed. Sleeping on the dirty side of the bed, in soiled clothes and with unclean, disheveled hair, makes the mourner repellent to those around him, marks him as a walking corpse, and neutralizes the influence of his theological arguments. In my view, one should expand on the reasons that were offered for the prohibition on work. This prohibition, in terms of its effect, causes distancing and silencing and allows control of contact with the mourner. It prevents the mourner from entering the public sphere, restricts his presence in society's space of visibility, and denies him the legitimacy that anyone belonging to the social labor force has.

Washing—We saw above that there are different opinions concerning washing that does not give the mourner pleasure, such as washing in cold water. Some believe such washing is possible, and others believe that such washing is contrary to the essence of mourning. The prohibition on washing is conceived as an expression of the mourner's symbolic condition and of his invisibility during the transitional stage. The prohibition on washing, despite the relative flexibility regarding washing in cold water, contains a very basic distancing of the mourner: first, distancing from the public bathhouse; second,

marking the mourner as someone whose standing is lower; and third, making him repellent to those around him.

Wearing the sandal—Rubin explains the prohibition on wearing a sandal as representing the mourner's symbolic nakedness and explains the permission to wear shoes outside the city “because of the difficulty of walking a long time without shoes” (Rubin 1997: 177). There is a close connection between wearing shoes and social status, marking as a social outcast one who does not wear a sandal. Thus not wearing a sandal has a disgusting and distancing effect.

Sexual intercourse—The prohibition on sexual intercourse symbolizes the height of the process of drawing close to the one who has been distanced. Sexual relations are the most intimate form of closeness to the distanced person. The prohibition on sexual relations prevents contact from being achieved, as it were, in which the body of the distanced person touches another body. Rubin sees the prohibition on sexual relations as including the suspension of sexual status in rites of passage (Rubin 1997: 176). What is the meaning of this prohibition as a means of distancing the mourner? Perhaps the mourner is prohibited from sexual intercourse because the sexual act is also a time and a place for human communication. The influence of a bereaved man on his wife, or of a bereaved woman on her husband, receives exceptional force in the context of intimate relations. The emotional closeness formed during such relations is a source of threat from the mourner, and from it arises the concern that he will transmit his subversive ideas: “A mourner is forbidden sexual intercourse, as it is written: ‘And David comforted Bathsheba his wife and went in to her’ (2 Samuel 12:24)—from this it follows that before that it was forbidden” (Babylonian Talmud, Moed Katan 15b). After the death of the son of David and Bathsheba, it says that David engaged in sexual relations with her in order to comfort her. From this emphasis we learn that the mourner is forbidden sexual intercourse. The *asmachta* focuses on the emotional effect of the mourning practices —“and comforted her.” The *asmachta* precisely rejects the therapeutic effect that is bound up with sexual relations, and establishes that such consolation is forbidden. From the point of view of distancing, the prohibition on sexual intercourse clarifies the danger arising from the creation of intimacy with the mourner—intimacy leads to understanding, and understanding in turn may lead to the circulation of problematic ideas.

The Excommunicated Person—Present and Harmed: Distancing toward the Margins

The Excommunicated Person Mourns His Death

The excommunicated person, like the mourner, is forbidden haircuts, laundering, washing, and wearing shoes (his situation is unclear regarding tefillin, greeting, tearing his garment, and overturning the bed). The excommunicated person is permitted, in a limited fashion, to work and to study Torah, whereas the person placed under the more severe ban of *ḥerem* is forbidden these. Both are permitted sexual intercourse and

sending offerings. How is this system to be “translated”? What does this unclear context mean? The mourning practices observed by the excommunicated person are connected with the excommunicated person's being “a dead man walking” and set in motion in him a process of melancholia, which ought to threaten his desire to continue living. The excommunicated person's self-negation is also part of the system of mourning practices he observes: the excommunicated person feels a kind of need to depart. The mourning practices the mourner observes deny his ability to participate socially, while at the same time the community preserves contact with him. Thus, as I have argued above, the mourner's claims and his anger are internalized by the community. By contrast, the excommunicated person observes the mourning practices amid limited social contact and in the context of restricted social communication. In this state the mourning practices amplify his painful feelings following society's repudiation of him and cause him to experience the excommunication continuously. As noted, the excommunicated person continues to be a social agent—he is considered a member of the social body; he is permitted sexual intercourse and sending offerings. The excommunicated person is not outside the social sphere, and he can return to it if he decides to accept the sages' authority. This state is more serious than separation from the community, and it also serves to complete the punishment, for essentially the excommunicated person belongs to the community, and they to him. The excommunicating society feels a certain discomfort whenever it encounters the excommunicated person, who still is present in the community's visual space. The excommunicated person experiences solitude and human estrangement, and feels guilt and shame again and again, making his mourning for himself ever more tangible.

Excommunication and Basic Human Needs

The communicative restrictions imposed on the excommunicated person resemble the communicative surroundings of someone treated with silence (*silent treatment*). Like the excommunicated person, someone subjected to silent treatment remains in a situation in which he is still a social agent and still present in physical space, yet loses his social face. Ostracizing silence still allows the communication required by necessity among people living in the same house or occupying the same physical space, but every other kind of communication ceases. The excommunicated person inhabits a similar communicative environment: only the most basic communication needed for him to get by is permitted, while communication that would offer recognition of his sense of self is denied. The basic metaphor of excommunication that arises in Rav Yosef's words is a metaphor of silence. Rav Yosef draws on Tractate Ta'anit to compare the mourner and the excommunicated person with a public fast—it is possible to explain the mourning practices in Tractate Ta'anit as a response to God’s ostracizing silence and as an attempt by the public to bring back control over its life and to display a symbolic presentation of excommunication. Silent treatment causes damage to basic human needs (Williams 2001: 43). The recurring component in all kinds of silent treatment is an element of vagueness. Unlike physical or verbal aggression, silent treatment can begin without any warning to the excommunicated person or interaction that he recognizes as excommunication. This

condition has two faces: on one side, it can cause internal suffering and injury to the "I," because the excommunicated person begins to think of all possible reasons for the excommunication. On the other side, it can bring a feeling that "everything is in order," because the confrontational issue has not yet risen to the surface. Social excommunication, like silent treatment, involves ignoring a person while both parties remain in a shared physical space. Physical distancing, by contrast, allows a person to leave that space—from going into another room and closing the door to actual exile. Leaving suggests that the presence of the person being ignored is so difficult for the one who ignores him that the latter must leave the room. In silent treatment, however, the message is: "What I have just done to you, I could have done if you did not exist." Physical removal from the community is thus less harsh than social excommunication, which forces the excommunicated person to relive his social death again and again.

In the terms of the sugya of Moed Katan, the context in which the metzora observes mourning practices is less severe than the context in which the excommunicated person experiences his death again and again. The mourner, who is obligated in the greatest number of mourning practices, is also in a less harmful context insofar as the distance he experiences is interwoven with his feeling that he still belongs to the community. The significant and traumatic effect on the excommunicated person operates precisely because the excommunicated person is not "dead" but finds himself in contact with society and is able to think of himself as a "dead man walking." The difference between the metzora's physical removal from society, the mourner's loss of social agency, and the excommunicated person's marginality may be the reason that the excommunicated person is not obligated to tear his garment, since the Gemara states that the matter of his obligation to tear remains unresolved (teiku). The uncertainty concerning the excommunicated person's obligation to tear may also reflect his marginal status: he has not been entirely torn away from society. This may also explain why he is permitted sexual intercourse and to send offerings: the dramatic effect of excommunication depends on the continuation of his role as a social agent, so that his actions will still be valid—these conditions ensure that the experience of excommunication will be stronger because of the great strain arising from compulsory entry into the social organization and compulsory exit from it. The mourning practices the excommunicated person observes, on one side, set distancing processes in motion and distance him from all social communication, while on the other side they enable him to work because he is part of society.

From Mourner to Excommunicated Person

The mourning practices migrated from the mourner to the excommunicated person. The metaphor of the mourner considered dead passed from the mourner to the excommunicated person. Metaphors, as Susan Sontag has shown concerning the metaphor of disease, tend to take possession of domains that have moral significance (Sontag 1990: 10–37). Why did the mourner's metaphor move to the excommunicated person? As I have shown, the psychological processes that the excommunicated person undergoes awaken in him an anxiety of death and cause him to imagine himself as dead.

But the meaningful aspect of the connection between mourner and excommunicated person helps us further understand the migration of the metaphor: the metaphor migrated because of the similar moral threat that the two pose to society. Both threaten religious authority—the mourner threatens its source (God), and the excommunicated person threatens its institutions and representatives. Precisely the negative moral meaning attributed to the two figures may have brought about the migration of the metaphor of death from the mourner to the excommunicated person.

The Metzora—Absent and Distanced: Externalizing the Threat

"Does He Observe His Tzara'at during the Festival?"—Physical and Moral Aspects of a Social Condition

The question asked at the opening of the sugya is: "Does a metzora observe his tzara'at during the festival?" This formulation shows at once that *tzara'at* is a system of conduct, just as excommunication is a system of social behavior. According to the sugya, *tzara'at* is a social and not a physical condition, and is linked by a basic connection to negative moral disposition. From then onward, the skin is charged with many meanings. The association of the metzora with evil speech was made in the fifth century, in the *Sifra* on Leviticus. The sages tended to attribute skin diseases and diseases in general to all kinds of sins, particularly those arising from a person's defective moral condition, and especially in relation to language use. *Tzara'at* was the external expression of Miriam's act of speaking about Moses (Exodus Rabbah, 3, s.v. "And the Lord said"). The midrash in Numbers Rabbah links "Accursed are you above all cattle" with the mythological punishment of the snake and with *tzara'at*. The snake's tongue is a deed that undermines social trust and the social covenant, because it creates a lack of trust among social agents. The evil tongue has a hidden and particularly difficult quality that makes it hard to regulate; hence here too *tzara'at* is the answer to the technical and legal problem of identifying those guilty of evil speech. The Talmud even expands the social aspect of evil speech and makes it a theological matter, as in a saying from Rabbi Yochanan: "Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Yosi ben Zimra: Whoever speaks evil speech is as though he denied the fundamental principle, as it is said (Psalms 12:5): 'Those who said, "With our tongue we will prevail; our lips are with us—who is lord over us?"'" (Babylonian Talmud, Arakhin 15b).

The speaker of evil speech endangers not only social cohesion and society's moral institution and the degree of trust among its members, but also undermines the theological foundations on which society rests. The mishnah in Tractate Arakhin 3:5 concerns someone who falsely accuses a virgin of lacking signs of virginity; this person must pay a fine of one hundred sela. This fine is twice as large as the fine payable by one who rapes a virgin. The mishnah concludes that speech is more severe than action: "In the case of one who brings a bad name upon another, there are both lenient and stringent aspects [that is, in a case of slander]. How so? Whether he brings a bad name upon a grown woman of priestly descent or upon a minor Israelite girl, he pays one hundred sela. Thus one who speaks with his mouth is treated more severely than one

who commits an act [one who slanders a priest's daughter who has had sexual intercourse pays one hundred sela, while one who rapes or seduces pays only fifty]. So too we find that the decree against our ancestors in the wilderness was sealed only because of evil speech [the slander of the land in the episode of the spies], as it is said (Numbers 14): 'They tested Me these ten times and did not listen to My voice.'" (Mishnah Arakhin 3:5).

These things clarify the social threat emanating from the metzora and his connection to the mourner and the excommunicated person. The metzora has a social threat within him, for he undermines social solidarity by spreading evil speech. The spread of evil speech undermines the trust shared by the members of this community, and this is why the metzora is considered a deviant. Unlike the excommunicated person, who refuses to accept the sages' authority, the metzora acts secretly.

The Metzora and Mourning Practices

Tzara'at, according to the Talmudic sugya before us, is not only a disease but also a condition. *Tzara'at* is the practice of the metzora as a result of his social problems. In the Talmudic sugya, *tzara'at* is not a physical illness but a mental and social state that has physical manifestations. The metzora's moral conception does not say that there was no physical disease to which he was subject, but that this disease was secondary. It is not the reason for the metzora's physical distancing. In this sense, the question asked at the opening of the sugya, "Does a metzora observe his tzara'at during the festival?", is the question: "Can someone who endangers the social organization and the bonds of reciprocity among its members return and participate in communal life for the pilgrimage festival, the public celebration par excellence?" The negative answer given by the sugya to this question shows how profound the fear of the metzora and of the disruption of social structures was. The context in which the metzora observes mourning practices is one of physical distancing—the metzora is kept away from society and from social communication. While the metzora tried to undermine social solidarity in secret, his physical removal from society takes place in public. This distancing does not render him entirely invisible. The metaphor applied to the metzora is that of someone "outside the fence": still socially visible, yet outside the social organization. Hence the metzora observes distances connected with clothing and being recognizable from afar—he is forbidden haircuts and must cover his head—is identified from afar as someone with whom it is forbidden to communicate. Of course, this also affects his ability to return and be part of the social body to which he belonged. Because he is "outside the fence," even intimate communication with him is forbidden, and greeting him is forbidden. The *teiku*—the unresolved question—in the sugya concerning the prohibition on washing, wearing a sandal, doing work, and overturning the bed may stem from the fact that these prohibitions could never refer to the metzora, because their effect depends on a person's actual presence among others. For the physically distanced metzora, mourning practices that engage the sense of smell are less relevant.

His exclusion is complex: on the one hand, the metzora is physically distanced from the public; on the other hand, many of the mourning practices he observes depend on his seeing himself as someone watched, as part of the public. The prohibition on sending offerings imposed on him sharpens the significance of the sense of being watched on the part of the metzora. This sense does not belong to a system that is meant to let him feel part of the community, but arises precisely to speed up the sociological and psychological processes that will silence him. The metzora, as noted, threatens social solidarity, and is therefore placed in a position in which he must imagine himself as part of the community and long to belong to it, the same community whose foundations he earlier sought to undermine. It is therefore possible to find in the *asmachta* brought for the permission given to the metzora to study Torah:

> Come and hear: "Make them known to your children and your children's children" [Deuteronomy 4:9, which commands teaching the children Torah] [...] "The day when you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb" [the following verse says that the children are to be taught about the standing at Mount Sinai]. Just as there [the giving of the Torah] was in dread, fear, trembling, and sweat [the Torah was received at Sinai in a state of awe, and Torah study likewise calls for awe], so too here. From this they said: those with a discharge, those afflicted with tzara'at, and those who have intercourse with menstruating women may read the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings, and study midrash, Talmud, halakhot, and aggadot; but those who have had a seminal emission may not [only they are prohibited from Torah study because they are considered to lack awe; those afflicted with tzara'at may study]. (Babylonian Talmud, Moed Katan 15a)

Apparently, this baraita is very inclusive. The permission for Torah study brought in the baraita arises from the combination of the metzora and the person with a discharge within the community at the same standing at which it was first established—at the giving of the Torah. But the context in which the baraita was cited is the sugya that outlines the metzora's modes of removal from society. The baraita also has a meaningful aspect—the permission for the metzora to study Torah carries with it the reminder to him that he has harmed the unity and solidarity of that community invited to Horeb. Torah study in the context of exile can even lead him to return to the community, for Torah study is the unifying and binding thing among its members.

The Metzora's Exile

The connection between giving meaning and *tzara'at* arises not only from the moral aspects attributed to the disease of *tzara'at*, but also from *tzara'at* as a metaphor for a discourse about meaning. Foucault identifies two modes of disciplining: one effected through physical punishment and the other through surveillance. The distinction Foucault makes is between the model of discipline based on the "plague" (inspection, segmentation, enclosure) and the model of discipline based on the "exile of the leper" (Foucault 1995: 198). The removal of the metzora separates him from the community and purifies the community of his presence. The quarantine imposed during a plague is a tactic of separating every individual through surveillance and control, taking samples,

division, and categorization within a constant gaze. Foucault sees in this model the activation of an ideal power, while the metzora is the model of all the projects of removal outside the social body (*exclusion*). Foucault's distinction helps us assess the literary effort in the sugya of Moed Katan, where an earlier formulation of modes of disciplining is found, among them the metzora.

Another point is the understanding of the axis around which the sugya turns. Foucault is concerned with the axis of control and supervision, the observation and division that characterize the prison's closure and modern modes of disciplining. This axis enables him to argue that the “individual” is itself a product of anonymous, functional power exercised over him (ibid., 193). The sugya, by contrast, analyzes modes of disciplining in terms of the relation between society and the individual because of the nature of the social threat: each of the figures discussed in the sugya threatens society in a different way. The mourner threatens the religious order and society's religious values and conceptions—his vulnerable state of mind, and the fact that this disturbance is temporary, make it possible to address the threat he poses while keeping him within the social body, since he receives a “bear hug” that silences his arguments. The metzora undermines social solidarity and hence society tears him from its midst—his removal from society will discipline the metzora and enable society to mend the rifts caused by his conduct. The excommunicated person undermines the legitimacy of the sages' authority. This is the most problematic threat, because silencing him can in fact sharpen the problem on the one hand, by making criticism heard more loudly, and on the other, can draw public attention to it. Therefore the excommunication mechanism is the mechanism with the greatest intensity of the three: it acts both upon society and upon the excommunicated person—the excommunicated person passes to a liminal state, and his social potential is used to activate psychological processes of self-negation. These processes are meant to silence him without causing severe harm to the standing and authority of the sages.

Conclusion

The Mourner, the Excommunicated Person, and the Metzora—Mechanisms of Distancing

Over the past century, the various rites of mourning and their different cultural forms have been accompanied by a great deal of research, beginning with van Gennep's groundbreaking study of rites of passage and extending to research in recent years on children's ability to mourn in Western society. It has been shown that there is a deep connection between the measure of social solidarity and mourning practices. In the United States and Britain, chiefly because of social pragmatism, mourning practices are waning, and with children today, in those countries, mourning is no longer a social matter but a family and personal matter (Homans 2000: 1–40). In the Middle Ages and in antiquity, by contrast, when expected death was discussed, a person was surrounded by family and loved ones, and he retained control of his situation—death was a general social matter, not personal, and so was pain.

I have tried to show that, despite these determinations, death and the mourner remain a threatening matter. This threat arises from the universal fear of death that also characterizes close-knit societies; it also arises from the subversive potential of the mourner, who is in a difficult mental condition, particularly at the beginning of mourning, and he doubts the justice of God's ways. Anthropologists and sociologists have not disregarded the social purposes of mourning practices. Durkheim, for example, sensed their social purpose even more strongly than their personal aim of alleviating the pain of loss (Durkheim 1964: 397). Van Gennep too saw mourning rites as rites of passage that enable a change in the mourner's status and his return to society (Van Gennep 1960: 146). But van Gennep did not expand on the question of the social threat in the case of mourning. What if death itself is not the only threatening thing, but the mourner himself contains a social threat? Van Gennep too did not address the “migration” of mourning practices into other social contexts, and he mentions them only in passing. From this point of view, seeing the mourning practices as forms of distancing is an unusual way of seeing them in anthropological and sociological terms; there are reasons for it to give us insight into the very nature of society's relation to deviance and to managing conflict between the public and the individual. Moreover, whereas social researchers in recent years have considered the decline of mourning practices and the “migration” of mourning from the public sphere to the private, in any event many of the Jewish mourning practices mentioned in the sugya in Moed Katan, which was compiled no later than the sixth century CE, are still practiced in our society today.

The sugya of excommunication in the Talmud offers us an opening for formulating a prior version of mechanisms of distancing. The means of distancing are mourning practices that for the most part still hold force in our own day, such as the prohibition on washing, cutting one's hair, shaving, or laundering clothes. The anthropological analysis of mourning practices does not, in my discussion, give the full picture of the function of these practices, because it does not illuminate the ways these practices distance others. Furthermore, not only does the overall structure of the sugya illuminate Rubin's explanation as inadequate, but also the order in which the mourning practices are counted in it—an order that is not responsive to the anthropological dimensions of detachment, liminality, and incorporation. The distancing aspects of mourning practices are the central subject of the sugya in Moed Katan. According to my reading, mourning practices in the Babylonian Talmud are a means of dealing with the social threat that emanates from the mourner.

The sugya in Moed Katan emerges as a discussion of how to deal with problematic elements in society. It proposes three models for dealing with three problematic types. The three models use mourning practices as instruments of distancing and dealing with threatening social forces. The context in which mourning practices are observed changes the way they distance those who observe them, and society's attitude toward them. All the mourning practices cause the observer's labeling, the prevention of basic communication with him, and the arousal of disgust toward him among his surroundings and himself:

Figure	Externalization	Liminality or marginality	Internalization
Mourner	–	–	+ (the context is one of social communication)
Excommunicated person	–	+ (the context is obscure and liminal; some sources concern the mourner and others the metzora)	–
Metzora	+ (the context is one of physical exile from society)	–	–

The mourner's model comes to deal with factors threatening society from a theological point of view—the mourner is the epitome of a person whose theological world is shaken. The death of someone close to him causes the mourner to reassess the notions of reward and punishment and of God's existence at all. I have shown that the mourning practices observed by the mourner threaten his social face and his agency, leaving him unable to act as a social agent; this allows society to silence his theological arguments in a kind of "bear hug."

The metzora's model comes to deal with social forces that undermine social solidarity and cohesion. Such figures observe mourning practices while standing "outside the fence." They do not participate in social life, and their removal outside society is meant to bring them to long to return to that society whose foundations they had sought to undermine.

The excommunicated person's model comes to deal with social forces that challenge the authority of the sages. This model has the harshest consequences for the person subjected to the mechanism. Whereas the mourner and the metzora do not experience, at every moment, the severing of their social ties with their people, the excommunicated person experiences his social death again and again. The excommunicated person's distinctive state, being distant and without a social face on the one hand, while he continues to participate in social life as a social agent on the other, intensifies the sense of distancing and disgust toward himself and accelerates the melancholic process caused by the mourning practices.

Excommunication as an Interpretive Position

How should one read the sugya of the mourner, the excommunicated person, and the metzora? The act of reading exposes the features of the sugya's composition and also fills them with content where the sugya contains an interpretive gap. The sugya's structure provides a basis for understanding its poetic meaning and the question with which it deals. René Girard thought that, when a natural disaster, flood, plague, political crisis, or

religious conflict causes social institutions to lose their importance and the social hierarchy to collapse, a sense of helplessness prevails. The social collapse that follows the crisis, Girard argues, brings a natural tendency to explain it through social or moral causes. This tendency leads to accusations against society as a whole or against people who appear particularly vulnerable (Girard 1986: 12). The accusations, Girard argues, are always leveled against those whose crimes undermine the foundations of social order—for example, violence against children and the defenseless; crimes of a sexual nature—incest, for instance; and religious crimes. The public is persuaded that "a small group of people, or even one individual, because of their relative weakness, fatally harms society as a whole" (ibid., 15). The persecution of such individuals stems from the desire to purify society and to give a vent to hatred. The choice of the small group, the Jews for example, derives from the distinctive and special difference attributed to them—it seems that they are part of general society and yet are different and separate. Difference is the portion of every minority group in society, but the difference that leads to persecution is one that threatens society's very existence. The difference appearing outside the social system threatens and alerts it, for "it reveals the truth about the system, about its relativity, its fragility, and its being subject to change" (ibid., 21). The accusations directed at minority groups suggest that their members are not different enough to be readily identified. In Girard's account, what frightens people and drives the persecution of minorities is not difference itself, but the fear that difference cannot be identified.

Four components recur in the pattern Girard identifies: the acts of violence are real; the crisis is real; those accused in the crisis are accused because of signs of victimhood, which are taken to indicate their guilt in relation to the crisis, rather than because of their crimes; and the responsibility attributed to those accused compels society to exclude and expel them from its midst. Girard's project is, among other things, to show how mythologies tell the story of persecution from the persecutors' point of view. The mythologies that justify collective murder—even if that justification has been distanced or erased from the original text—are the mechanism by which persecution of the scapegoat is justified. The Passion in the New Testament functions in precisely the opposite way, Girard argues. It unravels the justification for pursuing the scapegoat and shows how persecution is stereotypical and comes only to address the crisis. This reversal in the Passion is achieved by bringing verses from the Hebrew Bible, especially Psalms, back into the account of the Passion. Here the persecutors' point of view is broken: whereas in comparable mythological texts the believers remain united around the victim, who is supposed to repent and "fall into line," here the text teaches us about the great force of persecution and its falsity (ibid., 105). "The mechanisms of the scapegoat become visible, public, and the most widely discussed and familiar news" (ibid., 108). Jesus is the counterpart of the scapegoats mentioned in the Hebrew Bible—Abel, Joseph, Moses, and Jonah—victims of the collective. In the Gospels and the New Testament, the scapegoat is within the text, yet not of it. The text recognizes the scapegoat as a victim and exposes the mechanisms of persecution.

In other words, one of the messages of Girard's books in analyzing the Passion and the Gospels is that a point of view on persecution (or, in our case, on excommunication) is an important component in interpreting canonical texts. This point of view allows us to expose the mechanisms of power operating in the text and the various interests—the excluded and those who exclude them—acting within it. Moreover, not only does the biblical text depart from mythologies that tell the story of persecution from the persecutors' point of view and narrate it from the victims' point of view, but Girard's very reading of the Old and New Testaments and of mythological texts is an interpretive stance in itself. This stance involves sensitivity to forces of power and to the victim, to persecution and the persecutor, to the oppressor and the oppressed in the text. Such sensitivity can form a whole range of sensitivities to the ways in which different social forces act to oppress groups and individuals.

The interpretive stance entails sensitivity to the presence of the victim and the victimizer, the persecuted and the persecutor, the oppressor and the oppressed; it is also a hermeneutic tool in reading canonical texts. I have read the sugya in Moed Katan as one dealing with three mechanisms of distancing, three mechanisms for silencing problematic elements in society. This reading influenced how I understood the act of reading itself, as well as the sugya's structure, opening, and emphases. Yet Girard's reading of the scapegoat also clarifies the role of an interpretive stance of excommunication when reading canonical texts. It is only natural that a sugya dealing with excommunication, whose structure directs us to consider complex mechanisms of distancing, should also invite a reading from the point of view of the excommunicated person himself.

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