This brief tractate is rich and dense in exegetical problems. Its legal principles are complex and difficult. In the space of five chapters, of which Chapters Three and Four really form one unit, Rabbi manages to cover extraordinarily subtle and deep conceptions. With his predecessors and coworkers, Rabbi never runs out of ideas. Indeed, here he gives us not one but three small tractates, a kind of miniature along the lines of the large construction of tractate Tohorot: (1) a proem, (2) a set of miscellanies (Chapter Two) leading into the shank of the tractate, Chapters Three and Four, then (3) an essay of surpassing formal beauty and conceptual sophistication, Chapter Five, which manages to encompass three distinct and very complicated problems and shape them into a single coherent unit. In all, Zabim is a fine example of Mishnah at its best, in no way second to the splendid and more imposing tractates which come before. Not only so, but our tractate carries forward established themes, e.g., the difference between one's uncleanness when in touch with a source of uncleanness and the uncleanness left after one no longer is in touch with a source of uncleanness, familiar from M. Toh. 1:5-9, not to mention M. Kelim Chapters Eighteen, Nineteen, Twenty-Six, Twenty-Seven; and problems of doubt in connection with the Zabah, now applied to the Zab, M. Nid. 10:8 continued—explicitly—at M. 1:1-2, which form a single unit with M. Nid. 10:8. Accordingly, the tractate is carefully woven into the fabric of the order as a whole, and could as well follow Niddah or tractate Tohorot.

Our tractate is devoted to the Zab, the man who has a discharge from his body (Lev. 15:1-15). Its specific interest in the matter is in three parts, as I said. First comes discussion of the status of one who has not had the requisite discharge, along with the definition of the discharge, or flux, which confirms the man as unclean as a Zab (Chapter One). Second is the elaboration of the way in which the Zab's pressure imparts uncleanness (Chapters Three and Four). This matter is based upon the Scriptural conception, Lev. 15:4: Every bed on which he who has the discharge lies shall be unclean; and every thing on which he sits shall be unclean. The rule is elaborated into the notion that any object normally used for sitting or lying on which the Zab exerts pressure, or any person on whom he presses down,
is unclean and furthermore imparts uncleanness to utensils, along the lines of Lev. 15:5-6: *And any one who touches his bed shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening. And whoever sits on anything on which he who has the discharge has sat shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening.*

The point understood in our tractate is that if the man has to wash his clothes, it is because he has made his clothes unclean. He therefore not only has become unclean himself, because of his being subject to the pressure of the Zab or touching that which has been made unclean thereby, but he also transmits uncleanness to his clothing (utensils). The third major interest (Chapter Five) is in the diverse modes and degrees by which the Zab imparts uncleanness, not only by exerting pressure, but also by contact, carrying, and shifting. Like Niddah, therefore, our tractate constitutes a vast elaboration of Scriptural rules. What sets it apart is its remarkably acute investigation of the language and implications of Scripture. Whether or not that means the tractate essentially is little more than an elaboration of Scripture remains to be discussed in the light of the hypothetical-logical exegesis undertaken here as in Niddah.

It remains to express my abiding gratitude to Brown University for paying the costs of typing and other research expenses; to my dear colleagues at Brown, who bear up under my peculiar interests in the status of an apple above, or a glass of beer below, a man exhibiting traits associated with gonorrhea (or some such venereal disease, though, given the definitions of our tractate, no known disease can be under discussion); and to my students and former students. My colleague Professor Richard S. Sarason kindly read and criticized the manuscript.

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kabäer, in the English translation of Professor Horst R. Moehring. Thus still another generation will enjoy the results of his extraordinary intellect. I am thankful, also, for Bickerman’s personal advice to me, given over a period of years, and glad to enjoy his counsel and encouragement. Bickerman exemplifies all that is of human worth in humanistic learning. He is a model for us all.

J. N.