Kinship and Qiddushin: Genealogy and Geography in b. Qiddushin IV

Jonathan Boyarin

Introduction

The scene is a guest house on the Oregon coast, in April 2012.1 I am on an academic speaking tour, and through every leg of this trip I have lugged a volume of the full-size edition of the ArtScroll Talmud. I no longer recollect which one, but it is one of the three volumes of the tractate Ye’vamos, which deals in extensive detail with the mind-boggling problems attendant upon the biblical law of Levirate marriage,2 especially when it potentially conflicts with equally biblical categories of forbidden (“incestuous”) unions. To help the reader, ArtScroll provides charts explaining the various scenarios examined by the rabbinic text. I turned that page and found myself thinking, “That’s a kinship chart! Lévi-Strauss would have loved this! Why didn’t they show it to him?” By this last, I meant: What a shame that Claude Lévi-Strauss apparently never had the chance to consider the structural riddles of kinship produced, debated and examined by the Talmudic rabbis themselves.

This led to thinking of the rabbis as anthropologists and—not so much vice versa of anthropologists as rabbis—but to thinking about the combined intellectual and power interests of both discursive formations. One significant difference in our stance vis-à-vis the rabbis on one hand, and the anthropologists on the other, is that while both rabbis and anthropologists are named, we take the anthropologists as real, identifiable historical personages identical with their names, whereas the rabbis (as Professor Dolgopolsky and others have taught us)3 are for many purposes better taken as nodes in a rhetorical web of disagreement. Following Dolgopolsky’s deployment of the term “virtual” to mean that which neither exists nor does not exist, I will try to maintain here this understanding of the rabbis as neither historical nor ahistorical, but rather

1 I am grateful to James Redfield and Zvi Septimus for important comments on an earlier draft.
2 The requirement for a surviving brother to marry the widow of a brother who has died childless.
virtual (which, again, need not mean they never existed outside the text). Thus when I write below, for example, “the rabbis debate x,” I am simply not entering the question of whether such a debate ever took place in the given form—much as we would, I confess, dearly like to have answers to that sort of question.

This paper consists of:

1) A summary of the project I conceived that weekend.
2) Some key points from a recent text on the status of kinship theory in anthropology today, since that is a key area that at least two and possibly three of my five projected chapters will deal with.
3) A very brief discussion of the links between anthropology and geography in late 19th-century and early 20th-century social science.
4) Extended discussion of aspects of a chapter of one tractate of the Babylonian Talmud that deals in rich, unexpected and fascinating ways with the intersections among kinship (marriage, genealogy) and geography (sacred and profane, Jewish and “gentile,” homeland and diaspora).

1 The Larger Project

I reproduce below, only slightly elaborated, the summary of the Rabbinic Anthropologies project as I imagined it that weekend on the Oregon coast. Those familiar with the sequence of tractates in the Babylonian Talmud will recognize that if I was studying Yevamos at the time I imagined juxtaposing anthropological discourses to those of the rabbis, I hadn’t yet gotten to the tractate Qiddushin—the center of this paper, and a later addition to the summary.

Rabbinic Anthropology

This project comprises a series of studies, each of which juxtaposes anthropological and rabbinic discourses on specified key topics in culture and difference. Each is anchored in a given selection of text from the Babylonian Talmud.

Introduction: Parallels Intersect/Undoing Jewish Ethnography. The introduction will articulate the conception of placing rabbinic Talmudic discourse and ethnographic theory in juxtaposition with one another. (They cannot be placed in “dialogue” merely by setting one beside the other). It will set forth my intention of maintaining, rigorously and tenuously, the discipline by which neither is considered epistemologically prior to or superior to the other. No Enlightenment triumphalism is accorded to the academic ethnographic discourse, nor is any triumphalism of authenticity or tradition accorded to the