Towards an Erotics of Martyrdom

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What does it mean to sacrifice one's life for God? Is it an act of suicide? An act of ultimate love of God? An act of political resistance? To some extent the answers to these questions depend on which side of the line the questioner stands. For the believer of a specific religion, there is one answer; for the non-believer, or the opponent, there is another. Tertullian, for example, brags that an exasperated Roman proconsul exclaimed to a group of Christians clamoring to testify to their Christianity and then be killed: "You wretches, if you want to die, you have cliffs to leap from, and ropes to hang by."¹ For Tertullian this was a story of a glorious martyrdom. For the Roman proconsul in the story it was irrational mass suicide. There is no possibility of communication between the two views.

In the sources of another major non-pagan culture of Late Antiquity, Rabbinic Judaism, as is well known, there is no term that is similar to the testimony of the Greek martus. The term used in Rabbinic literature is kiddush hashem, the sanctification of the name of God. The question remains, though, whether in this cultural formation martyrdom was a desideratum or not. That is, was dying in the name of the religion, something to be actively sought out, or something to be done if thrust upon one? Should one actively seek out the opportunity for kiddush hashem, or is it wrong to put oneself in that situation?

In his monumental work *The Sages*, E.E. Urbach characterizes Akiba's martyrdom as a nationalist victory. Akiba was a warrior who died to ensure the continuity of the ideals of the community. More recently Daniel Boyarin has traced the development of *kiddush hashem* to the point where it is considered a desideratum. He follows the phenomenon from Akiba's midrashic activity in Tannaitic midrash to the representation of his death in the stories in the Bavli. Is this, however, the only construction of martyrdom in the Rabbinic corpus? Or even in the Bavli?

In this paper I set aside any notion of *kiddush hashem* as a stable concept, and interrogate its functions within one sugya or Talmudic unit of discussion. I will examine the ways that b Sanhedrin 74a–75a – one of the central halakhic or legal discussions of *kiddush hashem* in the Bavli – thematizes desire, power, pleasure, love and sex. This will move my discussion towards an erotics of *kiddush hashem*. That is, I will claim that the constructed meaning of the act of submitting to death, rather than worshipped idols, is embedded in a symbolic economy of fidelity, love, rape and adultery. The relationship of the “sanctifier of God’s name” to God is understood along a spectrum of love and sex, licit and illicit pleasure.

At stake in this reading is an understanding of the part martyrdom played in the complex interaction between Rabbinic Judaism and the surrounding cultures. In recent work Virginia Burrus has shown that one cannot talk about Christianity without placing it in the context of the surrounding Roman culture of Late Antiquity. Following Burrus, Daniel Boyarin has argued a similar case for Rabbinic Judaism. In the complex strategies of resistance to and accommodation with the dominant culture that were available to the Rabbis, martyrdom was potentially a very powerful weapon.

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2 [Heb] 391–392.
5 "Increasingly we become aware of how misleading it is to study late antiquity as if there were a fire-wall between the Jewish, Christian, and polytheistic versions of its culture." Daniel Boyarin, "Virgin Rabbis: A study in Fourth Century Cultural Affinity and Difference," (forthcoming).