SEXUAL IMAGERY IN THREE RABBINIC PASSAGES

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Explicit references to sexual activity are relatively commonplace in rabbinic literature. The rabbis were neither prudish nor reticent about using sexual imagery in their discussions or in their public teachings. In this they continued in the tradition of their forebears who authored the biblical books, some of whom employ rather vivid sexual language\(^1\). Many medieval and modern commentators on the Bible have misinterpreted passages because they did not recognize some sexual imagery which it contains or because they sought a more discrete explication of the text. The same can be said of commentators on the Talmud and Midrash who have not recognized sexual allusions or have chosen to pass over them in silence.

The use of sexual language in the Talmud and the Midrash runs the gamut from the boldly realistic to polite euphemism. Occasionally some sages were carried away by their creative imagination and produced interpretations considered by some to be ribald because of their use of explicit detail. A case in point is Rav’s expansion of the brief mention of David and Abishag the Shunamite in I Kings 1.3-4. He describes in realistic detail the sexual prowess of the ageing king\(^2\). Towards the other end of spectrum of rabbinc expression in this area one finds sexual imagery which

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\(^1\) Sexual imagery is widespread throughout the Bible but nowhere more evident than in the Song of Songs. Because of religious tradition the commentators have generally treated the material allegorically and have ignored the literal meaning of the text. Modern commentators have broken away from this restraint and are treating the text openly, pointing out the vividness of the sexual imagery. With this approach the most comprehensive treatment of the Song of Songs is that of Marvin Pope, *Song of Songs*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1977).

\(^2\) Sanh. 22a.
has either been overlooked or misunderstood. The following are three examples of this type of oversight.

In describing Esther’s appearance before the king on behalf of her people R. Johanan commented: “Three Ministering Angels were appointed [to help] her at that moment. One to raise her head (lit. her neck), one to endow her with charm (lit. to draw a thread of grace upon her) and one to stretch the sceptre. How much [was it stretched]? R. Jeremiah said: It was two cubits long and he extended it (lit. made it stand) to twelve cubits. Some say, sixteen; others say, twenty four. In a baraita it is stated, sixty. Similarly you find with the arm of the daughter of Pharaoh, and similarly you find with the teeth of the wicked, as it is written, and You have broken the teeth of the wicked (Ps. 3.9) And Resh Lakish said: Do not read שחריה, You have broken, but שחריה, You have lengthened [the teeth of the wicked]. Raba b. Ophron said in the name of R. Eleazar who had it from his teacher and his teacher had it from his teacher, [that the sceptre was stretched] two hundred [cubits]3).

The commentators for the most part have passed over this passage in silence. Those who have commented on it have sought only to explain the various measurements. They do not, however, address the basic question: What is the significance in stating that the king’s sceptre was increased in size? The answer should reasonably be found in the interrelationship among the acts of the three Ministering Angels. The first angel straightened Esther’s posture (lit. he raised her neck). Presumably this was done because she was bent over because of weakness from her three day fast (cf. Esther 4.16). The second angel gave her face an attractive appearance and made her alluring and appealing to the king. According to one tradition Esther was not particularly beautiful for she had a sallow complexion (Meg. 13a). The task of the third angel was to lengthen the king’s sceptre. Understood as the royal sceptre, the symbol of his authority, would make no sense in the context. “Sceptre” here is a euphemism for the membrum virile. Gazing on Esther’s alluring appearance he was sexually aroused and this is

3) Meg. 15b. The Soncino translation of the passage reads “golden sceptre” which is misleading and highly interpretive since the text simply reads “sceptre.” The “arm of the daughter of the Pharaoh” is a play on Ex 2:5: הרגשה לא און הלשון. The “lengthening of the teeth of the wicked,” a play on Ps. 3:8 is illustrated in a story involving Og king of Bashan and the Children of Israel. See Ber. 54b.