devaluation of women and attribution of essential defilement—do not prominently obtain for the rabbinic culture, the third category—"social-structural arrangements that exclude women from participation in or contact with some realm in which the highest powers of the society are felt to reside"—does so with a vengeance.

In summation, then, rabbinic culture is gender-asymmetric. Women are imagined as enablers of men by providing for their sexual and procreative needs (which is not to deny women's independent subjectivity or rights as persons in many areas, including the right to pleasure). Such androcentric (and indeed egocentric) constructions of gender roles, however, do not imply demonization or a view of women as impure and contaminating, as I hope to have shown here. Marriage and sexuality accordingly are seen in this formation as wholly positive, as they were not, of course, in either Philo or the patristic and medieval church. The Rabbis continue a biblical sense of the essential good of sex and procreation, while the negative valence given to sexuality, the body, and in particular the woman's body, in Hellenistic Judaism and its Christian successors, continues and transforms the classical Greek ambivalence about sexuality and procreation. The rabbinic tradition rejects the characteristic ontological move of western gender discourse by which "the masculine pose[s] as a disembodied universality and the feminine get[s] constructed as a disavowed corporeality" (Butler 1990, 12). Because the Rabbis do not disavow their corporeality, they do not construct it as feminine. In the next chapter, I shall attempt to analyze something of the discourse of sexual desire and interaction in marriage, particularly as it affects the differential power of men and women in the culture.

4

Engendering Desire

Husbands, Wives, and Sexual Intercourse

> The object, in short, is to define the regime of power-knowledge-pleasure that sustains the discourse on human sexuality . . . to account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said. What is at issue, briefly, is the over-all "discursive fact," the way in which sex is "put into discourse." Hence, too, my main concern will be to locate the forms of power, the channels it takes, and the discourses it permeates in order to reach the most tenuous and individual modes of behavior, the paths that give it access to the rare or scarcely perceivable forms of desire, how it penetrates and controls everyday pleasure—all this entailing effects that may be those of refusal, blockage, and invalidation, but also incitement and intensification: in short, the "polymorphous techniques of power."
>
> (Foucault 1980, 11)

My purpose in this chapter is to begin the charting of the operations of power over and within the forms of pleasure and desire in the talmudic culture, the power of the rabbinic class over the sexual practices of married couples, and the power of men over women in sexual life. The Foucauldian critique of the "repressive hypothesis" will serve us well here in looking at the complex modalities of power and production within which rabbinic texts on sexuality function. I will be looking at texts that have been read until now as the very origin and sites of a repressive discourse, but my aim will be to show that their actual function is quite different from what has usually been portrayed. The text often cited as the marker of a controlling force that the Rabbis claimed over the conduct of married sexual practice can be read precisely as a renunciation of such control. In several ways, through several textual practices, the Rabbis removed from the Torah's purview the actual practices of married couples in the bedroom, and their extreme codification of the necessity for privacy during sexual activity makes actual sexual practice invisible and thus

uncontrollable. The area over which the Rabbis do wish to retain control is paradoxically the emotional, affective state of relations between the husband and wife at the time of sexual contact, which they codify as requiring intimacy, harmony of desires, and mutual arousal and pleasure. This point will raise serious questions regarding a commonly held view that woman is a sexual object and not subject in rabbinic culture. While the only voices heard in the talmudic and midrashic texts are male ones, among those male voices many are earnestly empathic of female need and desire.

Indeed, this ironic double stance of both genuine empathy for women and rigid hierarchical domination of women is endemic in the talmudic discourse. Perhaps its most sardonic moment comes in a text that I will analyze in the next chapter, where a husband who has spent more than a decade away from home to study Torah refers to his wife as "that poor woman," *because he has been away for more than a decade studying Torah!* In general, however, women are held to be in the category of virtually powerless people who need to be dealt with in a solicitous fashion. Thus, in a talmudic passage dealing with the ineluctable moral power that wronged people have when they pray to God, most of the examples deal with the treatment of wives by husbands:

> Said Rav: A man should always be careful not to grieve his wife, for since her tears are nigh, [the punishment for] her grief is nigh.
>
> Rabbi El'azar said: From the day that the Temple was destroyed, the gates of prayer have been shut, as it says: *Even though I call out and shout, he shut out my prayer* [Lamentations 3:8]. But even though the gates of prayer were locked, the gates of tears were not locked, as it says: *Hear my prayer, O God; listen to my supplication. Do not be silent [in the face of] my tears* [Psalms 39:13].
>
> (Baba Metsia 59a)

Wives are represented as virtually powerless creatures, whose only weapon is tears—tears which, to be sure, guarantee an automatic divine response. It is nevertheless the case, however, that the force of this discourse, far from authorizing men to mistreat women as their property, is rather to encourage men to be very solicitous (even patronizing) of women. The text goes on:

> And Rav [also] said: He who follows the advice of his wife, will fall into Hell, for it says: *But there was none like Ahab, who gave himself over to do what was evil in the sight of the Lord, as Jezebel his wife had incited him* [1 Kings 21:25].

> But, said Rav Pappa to Abayye: Don't the people say, "If your wife is short, bend down and whisper with her"?!
>
> There is no difficulty; one case refers to worldly matters and the other to domestic matters, or some say, one case refers to heavenly matters and the other to worldly matters.

The same Rav who just above produced a strong statement and a strong incentive for husbands not to cause their wives tears, now equally as strongly counsels them to ignore their wives' advice. Here is an almost perfect emblem of a benignly patronizing formation. On the other hand, this latter statement is challenged by Rav Pappa, and, interestingly, the challenge comes from a popular proverb that indicates that a man should pay very great attention to what his wife is saying. The two resolutions that the Talmud provides for the apparent contradiction are themselves instructive, as one gives the wife voice only in domestic matters, while the other gives her voice in all secular issues, only constricting her from having anything to say about religious issues. Although we will see some breaks in this pattern in following chapters, this structure is emblematic of rabbinic gender discourse. Women are rendered nearly powerless, and then the Rabbis, the very same ones who (as Rav here) produced the discourse of male domination, ameliorate its effects somewhat by inducing men not to take advantage of their wives' powerlessness and, indeed, to be highly solicitous of them. The same pattern obtains with regard to sexual practice as well.

MALE DESIRE

In the Babylonian Talmud Nedarim 20a–b, we find the following very famous text in which the question of "how sex is put into discourse" is thematized directly. What is usually claimed to be the site par excellence of rabbinic repression of sexual practice even within marriage will be read as its exact opposite:

> It has been taught: *In order that His fear shall be upon you* [Exod. 20:20] —This is modesty. *In order that you not sin* [ibid.]—teaches that modesty conduces to the fear of sin. From hence they said: It is a good sign about a person that he [or she] is modest. Others say: Anyone who is modest does not quickly sin, and as for one who does not have modesty of demeanor, this is a sign that his ancestors did not stand at Mt. Sinai.
>
> Rabbi Yohanan the son of Dabai said—The Ministering Angels told me:

Why are there lame children? Because they [their fathers] turn over the tables.[1]

Why are there dumb children? Because they kiss that place.

Why are there deaf children? Because they talk during intercourse.

Why are there blind children? Because they look at that place.

And we challenged [that tradition with the following tradition]: They asked Imma Shalom [Mother Peace], the wife of Rabbi Eliezer, "Why do you have such beautiful children?" She said to them, "He does not have intercourse with me at the beginning of the night, nor at the end of the night, but at midnight, and when he has intercourse with me, he unveils an inch and veils it again, and appears as if he was driven by a demon." I asked him, "What is the reason [for this strange behavior]?" And he said to me, "In order that I not imagine another woman, and the children will come to be bastards."[2]

There is no contradiction. One refers to matters of sex, and the other to non-sexual matters.

Rabbi Yohanan [a later one—not the same as Yohanan the son of Dabai] said: These are the words of Rabbi Yohanan the son of Dabai, but the sages say, "Anything that a man wishes to do with his wife, he may do, analogously to meat that comes from the shop. If he wishes to eat it with salt, he may; roasted, he may; boiled, he may; braised, he may. And similarly fish from the store of the fisherman."

Amemar said: Who are the Ministering Angels? The Rabbis, for if you say literally: Ministering Angels, then why did Rabbi Yohanan say that the law is not like Rabbi Yohanan the son of Dabai? After all, they certainly know embryology! And why does he call them "Ministering Angels"? Because they are excellent like the Ministering Angels.

A certain woman came before Rabbi [an honorific title of Rabbi Yehudah the Prince], and said to him: Rabbi: I set him a table, and he turned it over. He said to her: My daughter, The Torah has permitted you, and I, what can I do for you?

A certain woman came before Rabbi. She said to him: Rabbi, I set him the table, and he turned it over. He said: How is the case different from fish?

And you shall not wander after your hearts [Num. 16:39]—From hence Rabbi said: Let not a man drink from this cup and have his mind on another cup.

1. "Turning the tables" may refer to anal intercourse, or to vaginal intercourse from behind, or even just to vaginal intercourse with the woman on top. The male, understood in any case as the active partner, is the one "held responsible." The next sentences make clear that the male partner is the subject here, because "that place" always refers to the female genitals.

2. This latter part of the text is quoted in Chapter 1 above. Rabbi Eliezer's behavior, which is not my theme here, is interpreted there.

Ravina said: It was not necessary [to say this], except for even when both of them are his wives [i.e., when the women are not both his wives it is obvious that he must not think of another woman while he sleeps with his wife, but this comes to teach us that even when he is married to both of them, he is forbidden to have his mind on one while he has sex with the other].

And I will remove from you the rebellious ones and the criminals [Ezek. 20:39]—Said Rabbi Levi: These are nine categories:

Children of fright; children of rape; children of a despised woman; children of excommunication; children of exchange; children of strife; children of drunkenness; children of one whom he has divorced in his heart; children of mixture; children of a brazen woman.

Indeed? But did not Shmuel the son of Nahmani say that Rabbi Yohanan[3] said: Any man whose wife approaches him sexually will have children such as were unknown even in the generation of Moses. . . .

That refers to a case where she arouses him [but does not explicitly and verbally request sex].

This is, perhaps, the single most extended and important text on the techniques of married sex in the talmudic literature. It is an excellent demonstration, moreover, of the dangers of quoting a talmudic citation out of the dialectic context in which it is embedded. The text has to be read in two modes. At one level, it has to be read for the ideology of the redactor[s], but at the same time, the contrary ideologies of the sources cited and problematized by those redactors have to be taken into account.

The Talmud here thematizes two kinds of control over sexual behavior in the conjugal bed. One has to do with the actual practices engaged in and the other with the affective state of the couple. The first type of control is renounced by the text, while the second is strongly supported. In addition, as we will see below, the two types of control are actually thematized as mutually oppositional to each other. After a general statement of the requirement of modesty for Jewish people, both men and women, the Talmud cites a source that is ostensibly a prescription for the enactment of modest behavior. This text has one strikingly unusual feature, namely, that it is a report of a conversation with the Ministering Angels. In all of the Talmud, there is no other report of an attempt by the Ministering Angels to impose their halakhic or moral ideas on human beings. Indeed, in the only places in the Talmud where knowing the speech of angels is referred to as part of the knowledge of an outstanding sage, this

3. Variant: Yonathan.

knowledge is placed way down on the list, something on the order of knowing the speech of demons, as opposed to the various branches of Torah-knowledge proper, including knowledge of the Oral Torah and the aggadah, which are placed very high on the list.[4] The citation, by placing its statements in the mouths of angels, is not codifying them as Torah-knowledge, that is, as normative statements, but as "scientific" or practical knowledge. The form of the assertions themselves implies this pragmatic orientation, for instead of saying that it is forbidden to engage in such activities and relating that the punishment will be such and such, the assertions merely claim that these sexual practices give rise to certain undesirable procreative results. The type of control attempted here fits Foucault's descriptions of the modern discourses of medical control of sexuality better than it does the way that the medieval church exercised its control (Foucault 1980, 37–38) through canon law and the system of penances.

Rabbi Yohanan rejects, however, both the content of Rabbi Yohanan the son of Dabai's statement and, implicitly, its claims to scientific status. He promotes it from the category of "good advice" from a knowledgeable source to the level of Torah discourse, that is, to the discourse of the forbidden and permitted according to religion, but he does so in order to *reject* its religious validity. While Amemar's explanation seems far-fetched, in a sense it is necessitated by Rabbi Yohanan's intervention, because the latter had introduced a discontinuity into the discursive frame by saying, "The halakha is not like Rabbi Yohanan the son of Dabai," as the latter had ostensibly not made a halakhic statement at all. In any case, the upshot of Rabbi Yohanan's pronouncement is to disqualify Rabbi Yohanan the son of Dabai's statement twice, as lacking both the scientific status of angelic knowledge and any correctness as Torah-knowledge. The Torah disqualifies itself from any interference in the private sexual practices of married couples, who may behave sexually as they please with each other. Moreover, as if Rabbi Yohanan were not authority enough, the Talmud backs up this judgment with an authority even greater than his, that of Rabbi—the author of the Mishna itself, who, in actual practical situations advises two women that they have no recourse or complaint to the rabbis against their husbands' desire for an "unusual" form of intercourse—either woman on top or, somewhat less likely, anal penetration (see below)—because the Torah has permitted it. Note

4. See Sukkah 28a and Baba Bathra 134a.

that according to Rabbi Yohanan, not even non-procreative acts are condemned by the Torah. In other talmudic texts we learn, moreover, that anal intercourse is permitted as well. According to this view, at any rate, "wasting of seed" takes place only in masturbation, not in sexual intercourse of even non-procreative varieties.

FEMALE DESIRE

Until this point, I have purposely evaded an issue that must now be directly addressed. In interpreting that both Rabbi Yohanan and Rabbi permit *couples* to engage in whatever sexual practices *they* wish, I have tacitly been ignoring the obvious fact of gender asymmetry in this text. These rabbinic voices—i.e., those attributed to Rabbi and Rabbi Yohanan—only specify and relate to the will of the man and not to that of the woman. The "reciprocal" interpretation given thus far tends, therefore, to mystify the effects of gender inequality in sexuality as in most areas of the culture. One could even imagine, in fact, that what is encoded here is permission to the male to exercise his will upon the body of the woman without reference to her desire. This misogynistic interpretation seems well warranted by the text: we have here a metaphor that apparently compares the woman to a piece of meat or fish, seemingly an object for the satisfaction of the man, and we also have Rabbi's explicit declaration that he can do nothing for the women who come to him expressing their wish that their husbands be censured, since the Torah has permitted such sexual practice. This view of Rabbi and of his student Rabbi Yohanan stands in sharp contrast, however—in fact, in direct contradiction—to the rest of the talmudic discourse on this topic, which unambiguously forbids all sexual coercion, including verbal, of a wife by her husband and raises a joining of wills and desires to a very high value in its hygiene of sexual intercourse.

In contrast to the more usual situation, then, where I identify a counter-voice that I choose to animate and mobilize for a future of gender politics, in this case it is the counter-voice that I wish to leave as inactive. The dominant—in terms of both the text itself and the "reception" of this text—unambiguously militates against the notion of the wife as object in sexual relations. Thus, in distinction to the *rejected* angelic proscriptions on various sexual practices, as leading to physical defects in the children, the Talmud *accepts* the statement of Rabbi Levi that affective disorder in the sexual relation leads to moral faults in the offspring. The

affective disturbances listed, moreover, are ones that take very seriously indeed the desire of the wife. The first two on the list are children of fear and children of rape—that is, offspring of situations in which the husband coerces his wife into having sex with him by being aggressive to the point that she is too frightened to say no or, even worse, is actually raped. This note is strengthened dramatically by a parallel passage in the Talmud Eruvin 100b, where the following pronouncement occurs:

> Rami bar Hama said that Rav Asi said: It is forbidden for a man to force his wife in a holy deed,[5] for it says *One who presses the legs is a sinner* [Prov. 19:2]. And Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: One who forces his wife in a holy deed will have dishonest children.
>
> Said Rav Ika the son of Hinnena: What is its verse? *Also without will, the soul is not good* [ibid.]. And so we have learnt in a tannaitic tradition as well: What is the meaning of *Also without will, the soul is not good?* This is the one who forces his wife in a holy deed. *And one who presses the legs is a sinner?* This is one who has intercourse twice in a row.
>
> Can that be? But did not Rava say: If one wants all of his children to be male, he should have intercourse twice in a row.
>
> There is no difficulty: One refers to a case where she does not agree, and one to a case where she does agree.

Because the Talmud both here and in the parallel passage strongly condemns one who has intercourse with his wife against her will, and indeed codifies such behavior as "forbidden" even when it is procreative, then the proscription against force should be all the stronger in a nonprocreative situation, such as oral or anal intercourse. This opinion that one may not force one's wife is not at all an isolated or minority view; it is the generally held and authoritative position both of the Talmud and of later Jewish law. Indeed, far from treating a wife as a piece of property or mere object for the satisfaction of the husband's sexual desire, talmudic law may be the first legal or moral system that recognizes that when a husband forces his wife the act is rape, pure and simple, and as condemnable and contemnable as any other rape![6] Another attempt to enact

5. The literal translation is "in the matter of a commandment." There is no doubt, however, that the reference is to sexual intercourse, as Rashi points out. It is indeed interesting that the talmudic discourse uses *commandment* without further definition to refer to sexual intercourse and *transgression* without further definition to refer to sexual sin.

6. For the *present* situation of American law, see Chamberlain (1991, 122). I remember reading somewhere (but unfortunately not where) that an American court had cited the Talmud as a legal precedent for treating wife-rape as rape. In this

a control over the act of sexual intercourse itself—namely that it should not be repeated immediately, presumably because the second act would not be procreative—is transmuted by the Talmud into yet another and stronger prohibition of wife-rape. Even if she has agreed to a first act of intercourse, he may not presume her agreement to a repeated act on the same occasion but must know explicitly that she wishes it.

Furthermore, several of the other elements of Rabbi Levi's list also regard the affective relation between husband and wife as of primary importance in the propriety of sexual relations. If the husband hates his wife, has decided to divorce her, is drunk and "cannot pay attention to his wife's needs" [Rashi], or even if the pair have had a quarrel and not properly made up after it, then sexual relations are forbidden between them, and the fruit of such improper unions will be rebellious and wicked children. Indeed, even if he believes that he is sleeping with one of his wives and is actually with another, that alone is enough to produce such undesirable offspring, because the intimate emotional relations required for appropriate sexual joining are absent. This is marked even more explicitly in a parallel text, which adds "the children of a sleeping woman" to the list. All this is totally irreconcilable with a notion that a wife is a sexual object and not a subject in talmudic culture.

The most obvious way to read Rabbi Yohanan and Rabbi's utterances is that these passages, at least, explicitly treat a wife as instrument and object of the husband's sexuality. Their statements are, then, in this regard, the counter-voice within the talmudic text, and, as such, *may* represent a minority ideology that did objectify wives. The method of reading employed in this book often involves the identification of a point of tension or conflict between the voices of the texts that the Talmud quotes and the ideological interests of the redactors. If we accept this reading, that which I have just identified as the most obvious one, then we have such a point of sharp conflict here. While all the rest of the text here and other textual resources in the Talmud insist that sexual practice be only in accord with the wife's will and desire, these statements seem to represent a different position, one that encodes a wife not so much as a human

context, I would like to note that Wegner's repeated insistence that a wife's sexuality is the property of her husband in talmudic law is extremely misleading (Wegner 1988, 19 and passim), particularly in the legal context of her discussion. Virtually none of the legal definitions of ownership apply. A husband may not make use of her sexuality without her consent; he may not alienate it; he may not dispose of it. The definition seems to me, therefore, entirely invalid.

subject but as meat or fish. Just as I have often identified contesting voices in the Talmud that I find attractive, I would recognize here the presence of a contesting voice that I find simply appalling. We may have here evidence even of a development in talmudic ideology from an earlier position that did not recognize the relevance of female desire to a later one that made it central. The Talmud's citation of these voices, as on the one hand a refutation of Rabbi Yohanan the son of Dabai's repressive views, and on the other hand just before the strong prohibition of rape in Rabbi Levi's statement, would be understood along this line of interpretation as the Talmud's attempt to neutralize the implication that wives are sexual objects but preserve the point that sexual practice itself is not controlled by the Torah.

On the other hand, we must reckon as well with the possibility that just as "apologetic" readings may be playing false with the text for our purposes, so also a reading that makes these rabbinic voices so unpalatable may also be an anachronism that grows out of our own cultural presuppositions. Is it possible to read Rabbi Yohanan's and Rabbi's statements otherwise? Perhaps yes. Rabbi Yohanan simply says nothing at all about the wife's desire, because that is not at issue for him here. His project is rejecting the attempt of Rabbi Yohanan the son of Dabai to promulgate a rigid code of sexual behaviors between husband and wife with everything forbidden but the "missionary position." The issue of her consent is simply not raised here, but that does not mean that it is irrelevant. Only a few lines later the Talmud makes its strong statement against wife-rape. To be sure, his statement is addressed to men and about men—"whatever a man wishes"—but this is a reflection of the overweening androcentrism of the discourse as a whole, not *necessarily* a statement that husbands do not need to take account of their wives' needs. In other words, this may simply be an androcentric way of saying that husbands and wives are free to do in the bedroom whatever *they* wish, since sex is kosher between them, just as one is permitted to cook kosher meat in whatever way one wishes. Nonetheless, the force of the metaphor and the implied equation of the woman's body to food cannot be denied. But even this extremely offensive utterance does not translate into a statement that a woman is a pure sexual object, a mere "piece of meat" for the satisfaction of her husband's desire, but only that the Torah does not get involved in the bedroom. The eating metaphor here must be read within the context of the rich field of metaphors in which sex and eating are

mutually mapped onto each other in the talmudic culture with eating the quintessential signifier of that which is both pleasurable and necessary for health and well-being. Within this field, the notion of consuming or devouring does not seem dominant, and here the primary metaphorical comparison is with the fact that while there are many categories of foods which are forbidden, those that are permitted may be enjoyed in any manner. Similarly, while there are sexual connections that are forbidden, those that are permitted may be enjoyed in any fashion. The overtone of male dominance is here and cannot be gainsaid or whitewashed, but it does not, on this reading, constitute the primary thrust of the metaphor, nor is the point of the statement that men can do whatever they want *to* their wives. The food metaphor in itself does not turn women into food. The Talmud also uses the metaphor of eating to refer to the woman's sexual experience. Thus the Mishna at Ketubbot 5:9 reads that a wife has the right to eat with her husband every Friday night, and in both Talmuds this is understood to mean to have sexual intercourse with him.[7] There are even places in the talmudic text, moreover, where children are referred to with food metaphors as well, and children are certainly not objectified as "consumables." This complex usage of the metaphorical field militates against the notion that its function is to define woman as "sex object."[8]

The stories about Rabbi and the wives are much more resistant to reinterpretation, because they *do* relate to the wife's desire and do so in a negative way. Rabbi certainly seems to indicate that the Torah has nothing to say about proscribing certain sexual practices, even when the activities involved are distasteful to the wives. But, strangely enough, the redactor of the Talmud did not seem to feel that there was any tension between Rabbi's stories and the emphatic prohibition of wife-rape which comes just after them. Although the redactorial level of the Talmud often "harmonizes," tacitly reducing tensions that I wish to emphasize, in cases of direct (and felt) contradiction it *explicitly* attempts to reduce the contradiction. In this case, given the enormous rhetorical force of the prohibitions on wife-rape that this redactor encodes, it seems then that he, at any rate, did not consider these stories as being cases of rape. In both

7. I am grateful to Mordechai Friedman for reminding me of this reference.

8. My colleague Chana Kronfeld reminded me of this usage. Note that wives and children are in some sense figured as "property" of the patriarch for his enjoyment, but for his enjoyment as human beings in his world, not as objects to be used.

situations the wife indicates that she was interested in having sex, and her only objection was to the position. It seems to me that much turns on the exact meaning of the term "turning over the tables," which as a sexual practice is unfortunately obscure. The most plausible interpretation on philological grounds is intercourse with the woman on top, in which case Rabbi's response is a relatively innocuous: The Torah allows that practice, so negotiate it with him. In support of this reading—at least as the one that the Talmud's redactors fostered—stands the absence of anything in the text's rhetoric or structure that would indicate that they understood Rabbi's position to be antithetical or adversative to their own unequivocal stand against wife-rape. If one is forbidden to have intercourse with one's wife a second time without her explicit consent, and to do so is considered wife-rape by the Talmud, it hardly seems possible that it would be normative that forcing her to have, e.g., anal intercourse is permitted.[9] Rabbi may simply have understood, therefore, that the women's concern was somehow related to the propriety of sexual intercourse with the woman on top—and there might indeed have been some reason for anxiety, since according to some traditions, Lilith's sin was her desire for such sex. Note the irony: The men are demanding a sexual practice which is otherwise taken as a signifier for female insubordination, as it were; their wives are objecting, and the Rabbi indicates that it is permitted.

9. A reader of the manuscript suggested that my reasoning was faulty here, and that the reason that the Rabbis do not proscribe these acts against the will of the wife is precisely because they are non-procreative and therefore of no concern for the Rabbis. This reading makes the following assumptions: (1) that the Rabbis' only concern about sexuality was the quality of progeny; and (2) that they believed that what is wrong with rape is that it is not conducive to the conception of proper children, and not what seems to me to be the obvious interpretation, namely, that *since* rape is ethically wrong, *therefore* the punishment will be immoral children. Although neither of these assumptions is impossible, neither is suggested by anything in the talmudic text, and the question is why one would want to begin with premises that ascribe the worst possible motives to *any* group of people, thus violating the hermeneutic principle of charity. Two further arguments can be brought to bear against this interpretation. First: it violates Ockham's razor as well. Given my interpretation, we understand why rape would produce undesirable children, namely, as a punishment for the rape, but if we assume that rape is only forbidden because it produces undesirable children, then from whence comes the notion itself that rape leads to bad progeny? We would have to assume this as a further, otherwise unattested and uncontextualized notion of the culture, thus violating the principle that the simplest explanation is to be preferred. Finally, the notion that bad action leads to bad results is firmly anchored in the almost ubiquitous topos of rabbinic culture, namely: measure for measure. Unless we are prepared to posit that in general these structures of crime and punishment are a smokescreen, why would we do so here?

Rabbi is, in effect, assuring them that such sex is permitted, and they need fear no repercussions from God. Alternatively, we might read him somewhat less charitably and assume that he (and the talmudic redactors) might have understood that once a woman has consented to sex, then her lack of consent to a particular position does not constitute rape. Note that according to this reading, "permitted you" is to be interpreted as the Torah has permitted you to engage in this practice. If, on the other hand, the practice referred to is indeed anal intercourse, then, it would seem, engaging in it without the express desire of the wife does constitute a rape—not, I hasten to add, because of the "unnaturalness" of anal intercourse but simply because penetration of a different orifice seems much greater a violation of the woman's will than the arrangement of the bodies. According to this reading, "permitted you" would mean the Torah has permitted you to him—the Hebrew supports either construction. According to this latter reading, then, Rabbi's position is once more sharply antithetical to the rest of the text.

If we adopt the first reading, namely, that the wife desired sex—as she indicates herself—and that all the husband proposed was to have her on top, then it is clear why Rabbi is not represented as referring to the very halakha which forbids a husband to have any coercive sex with his wife. If the other view is adopted, then it seems perhaps that there is a relic here of a position that did not recognize wife-rape as forbidden. I cannot claim that the more generous interpretation is a "better" or more truthful one than the first.[10] There very probably was dissent within the rabbinic culture, here as in so many other situations. In any case the Talmud cites the emphatic halakha against wife-rape to its implied male audience, so that those readers, at any rate, cannot misunderstand and derive from here permission to treat their wives as objects. What can be said to be established, therefore, is that whatever the view of Rabbi or Rabbi

10. For an excellent account of decision criteria for interpretations in a feminist-critical context, see Bal (1987, 11–15). My second, more generous, interpretation observes the convention of unity, a convention that I am otherwise opposed to throughout, so this cannot serve as a criterion in its favor. On the other hand, it may also serve to render the text more useful in the sense that Bal articulates: "One modest and legitimate goal has always been a fuller understanding of the text, one that is sophisticated, reproducible, and accessible to a larger audience. As long as by 'a fuller understanding' one means having found a more satisfying way of integrating the reading experience into one's life, more possibilities of doing something with this experience, such an approach is a justifiable critical practice. . . . These criteria are basically pragmatic. Far from having anything to do with standards of 'scientificity', they deal with what readers can find of use" (12–13).

Yohanan, the Talmud makes crystal clear the point that a man may not force his wife to have sex with him and that to do so is rape. The reason that the Talmud cites their views here is not to permit sexual objectification of a wife, as the context makes abundantly clear, but to indicate that the Torah does not interfere in the details of sexual practices, of positions and pleasures between husband and wife, any more than it prescribes whether to boil or fry (kosher) foods. Nevertheless, the decision *not* to interfere when a situation is potentially repressive implicitly supports the status quo. While banning rape, the text still implies that male dominance in sexual matters is protected by the law, because the law will not interfere to put checks on it or provide the woman with protection or with a procedure to attain her own desires and exercise her own free will. The prescriptions repeatedly provided by the Talmud for the creation of conditions for mutual arousal, intimacy, and mutual satisfaction exclude the interpretation that the purpose of the citation of the Rabbi stories is to permit wife-rape, since that very practice is condemned so severely only a few lines later, but they still leave the husband firmly in control. It is worth noting, moreover, that this interpretation of the text is the one that came to be codified in medieval and later Jewish law; wife-rape was absolutely forbidden and recognized as sin, and all that was learned from Rabbi Yohanan and Rabbi was that the Torah does not prescribe nor proscribe any particular sexual practices between husbands and wives.

The theme of the necessity for intimacy between the husband and wife at the time of sexual intercourse is expressed throughout the passage in different ways.[11] Thus, even with regard to the ambivalent story of Rabbi Eliezer's sexual practice that Imma Shalom tells,[12] while we must concede a great deal of ambivalence in association with the Rabbi's behavior we must also not ignore the explicit statement that the purpose of his behavior

11. My interpretations here are much influenced by the doctoral dissertation of my student Dalia Hoshen (Hoshen 1990), from whom I have learned a great deal. She is not, of course, responsible for the exact nuances of my interpretations, which are sometimes in open conflict with her positions.

12. It should be emphasized that I am not denying ideological conflict and ambivalence about sexuality among the Rabbis. My position is somewhat between that of the "apologists," who have blithely characterized rabbinic Judaism as pro-sex, this-worldly, and non-ascetic and those of the "revisionists," which seek to characterize it as very similar in its sexual anxieties to the late-antique pagan and Christian world around and among the Jews. In Chapter 1 above, I have detailed this in-between point of view.

was to prevent him from thinking of another woman. That is to say, whatever the "true" meaning of Rabbi Eliezer's sexual behavior, the narrator, through the speech of Imma Shalom, inscribes it in the intimacy code. Moreover, it is consistent with at least three other moments in the text. First, the function for which the story of Rabbi Eliezer and Imma Shalom is cited is explicitly as an objection to the statement by Rabbi Yohanan the son of Dabai that a couple may not converse during intercourse.[13] The Rabbis who cited this source here understood that the conversation between Rabbi Eliezer and Imma Shalom took place during sexual intercourse. Moreover, the resolution of the apparent conflict between the texts is also highly significant. What the angels intended to forbid, according to the talmudic resolution, was speaking of other and distracting matters during the sexual act. Even the angels permit couples to speak of sexual matters, which is what Rabbi Eliezer and Imma Shalom did. According to the redactorial level of the talmudic text, then, one is permitted to speak of sex during sexual activity, as it is considered conducive to the creation of intimacy and warmth between the partners. This is, then, consistent with the stated reason for the Rabbi's behavior.

Let us read this story a bit more closely. It is important to know at the start that the word that Imma Shalom uses for "intercourse" is "talking." Literally, what she says to the Rabbis is, "When he talks to me, he does not talk to me at the beginning of the night, nor at the end of the night, but at midnight." I think that the linguistic echo is significant, because the story, like the entire talmudic passage, is about the *discourse* of sex, that is, at least in this case, about *talking* about sex.[14] Rabbi Yohanan ben Dabai's angelic communication has been cited as illustration of the principle that modesty is vitally important. Accordingly, the conversation that takes place between husband and wife during intercourse (which in English, too, means conversation!) is an example of immodesty according to that tradition. It is that notion that the text of Imma Shalom is motivated here to counter.

However, at first glance, one would think that far from countering or opposing Rabbi Yohanan ben Dabai's tradition, the story of how Rabbi Eliezer conducted his sexual life would seem to support that tradition. If

13. That is, *mirabile dictu*, the text is cited as a permissive one!

14. I do not agree with David Biale (1989) who sees here a misunderstanding of the word and claims that the Talmud cites this as an objection on the basis of a literal understanding here of "talking."

he did not undress her or himself, uncovering only the bare necessary minimum, then he certainly did not "look at that place," let alone kiss it. Nor, seemingly, could he have taken the time to talk to her at all, since he was conducting himself as if driven by a demon. What does the Talmud mean, then, by citing the story as an objection to Rabbi Yohanan ben Dabai? The Talmud understands that she asked him to explain his strange behavior (and note that by this it is marked as strange) during the act itself, and, moreover, that he answered her at the same time. They spoke to each other during sex, which is what constitutes the apparent refutation of Rabbi Yohanan ben Dabai. In any case, according to the Talmud's refutation and resolution of the apparent contradiction, this problem disappears: the only sort of speech that is forbidden is speech that distracts from the intercourse, not speech that enhances it, and even that restriction is rejected in the end with the total rejection of Rabbi Yohanan ben Dabai. According to the talmudic passage, in fine, the Torah seeks control not over the physical aspects of married sex but only over the emotional side of it.

The Contradiction of Discourses

As the Talmud explicitly argues, in fact, the two attempts at control of married sex contradict each other, for repression of visual, tactile, and conversational intimacy would have a chilling effect on that very closeness of the partners' desires and wills that the other voice wishes to promote. We have two contradictory discourses—the discourse of control in the conjugal bed and the discourse of free intimacy. By citing the Rabbi Eliezer and Imma Shalom story dialectically, the Talmud makes sure that we realize this point, for indeed, otherwise this citation is irrelevant, nothing but a local objection and modification of an utterance by Rabbi Yohanan ben Dabai that the Talmud intends to reject entirely. But it makes this very point—that such control and intimacy are in opposition to each other.

In another place, the Talmud cites one more story that supports the contradictory nature of these two discourses, as well as giving us a "real-life" vignette of the sexual practice of a Rabbi who was one of the most authoritative figures of the entire culture:

> Rav Kahana entered and lay down beneath the bed of Rav. He heard that he was talking and laughing and having sexual intercourse. He said, "The mouth of Abba [Rav's name] appears as if he has never tasted this dish."[15] He [Rav] said to him, "Kahana, get out; this is not proper behavior!" He [Kahana] said to him, "It is Torah, and I must learn it."

This is a fascinating, complex, and rich text. It almost explicitly raises the issue of the "panopticon," the surveillance of private sexual behavior on the part of a culture. Although it does so in a surprising direction—from below to above, from student to teacher—this fact does not materially change its operations, for if the teacher is to be observed having sex by the student, then sex is being controlled, just as effectively as if the students were to be observed by their teachers. The surveillance is, however, vigorously rejected. There is no evidence whatsoever that Rav or the Talmud itself accepted Rav Kahana's declaration here that "it" is Torah that he must learn, but in the meantime the text has managed to reveal precisely that which it ostensibly seeks to conceal, namely, that Rav "was talking and laughing" intimately with his wife as they had intercourse, thus further supporting the thought presented by the Nedarim text that such verbal behavior as enhances the intimacy and pleasure of sex is permitted and praiseworthy.

We have, indeed, explicit evidence that it was Rav's behavior here that was considered normative. In the Babylonian Talmud Hagiga 5b, we read:

> Rabbi Ila was going up the staircase of the house of Rabba the son of Shila and he heard a child reciting: For behold, He creates the mountains and creates the wind, and tells a man about his conversation [Amos 4:13]. He said: A slave whose master tells him about his conversations, has he any remedy?
>
> *What does "about his conversation" mean?* Rav said: Even the superfluous speech between husband and wife is reported to the man at the time of his death.
>
> *Can that be? But Rav Kahana was lying under the bed of Rav, and he heard him conversing and laughing and having intercourse. He said, "The mouth of Rav appears as if he has never tasted this dish." He [Rav] said to him, "Kahana, get out; this is not proper behavior!"*
>
> There is no difficulty. This is a case where he has to arouse her, and this is a case where he does not have to arouse her.

15. This also serves as an argument for the conclusion reached above, namely, that in the figurative usage of eating for sexual intercourse, the food is the sex and not the wife. Certainly, Rav Kahana was referring to Rav's ebullience and enthusiasm for sex and not implying that he was behaving as if this were the first time with her.

I have quoted the entire story again, because I think it is significant that Rav Kahana's defense that "It is Torah, and I must learn it" is omitted from this version (or was added in the other version). What is quoted as normative is Rav's behavior with his wife, and this is raised as an objection to his declaration that all superfluous speech, including intimate speech between husband and wife, will be answerable for at death. The Talmud's response is that when he needs to arouse his wife, when she is not "in the mood for love," then it is entirely appropriate and indeed required that he do so with words of intimacy and play. This, then, fits perfectly the picture that I have drawn on the basis of the Nedarim passage alone, that the requirement to arouse the desire of the wife and the intimacy and harmony of the couple are what become codified as the purview of Torah, according to the Talmud, and not the details of the physical act itself, which are left to their desires.

However, in accord with the method of reading in this book in general, we cannot ignore the fact that the text also incorporates Rav Kahana's voice claiming that this *is* Torah, and that he has the right (duty, obligation) to observe it. This voice correlates with the voice of Rabbi Yohanan ben Dabai and his angelic interlocutors, who also wish to place the details of the sexual practices between lawful husband and wife under scrutiny and control.[16] Moreover, within the text itself it is thematized as directly contradictory to Rav's desire for intimacy and spontaneity in the sexual relations with his wife. Indeed, possibly we could detect a tension between the two citations of the story within the Talmud itself. As I have noted above, Rav Kahana's response—"It is Torah and I must learn it"—does not occur in the version cited in Hagiga, in which Rav's behavior is being cited as definitive. An argument can be constructed, in fact, that this phrase has been added in the Berakhot version. Immediately before this story there, two tannaitic stories are presented about pupils who follow their masters into the toilet and, upon being reprimanded for not having the proper respect, reply, "It is Torah and I must learn it." In both of those stories, the pupil is not rebuked after this reply. It is not implausible, therefore, to assume that the editor who incorporated the Rav Kahana story here and added (according to this hypothesis) the student's reply in imitation of the earlier tannaitic traditions, did so in order to give weight to the act of Rav Kahana, thus providing in this context a sort of censure of Rav's behavior, for as we have seen, the two are in a conflictual articulation with each other. Be that as it may, we see that there were two opposed notions of the discourse of sexuality within the cultural formation of, at least, the Babylonian Talmud, with the weight of hegemony going, however, to the one that renounced vision and thus control over the sexual practices of the couple but insisted on mutual desire and intimacy in the conduct of relations. Rav Kahana's attempt to institute a panopticon for sex is rejected.

16. To be sure, we are not told what aspect of sexual behavior Rav Kahana desired to learn about, nor what he considered to be Torah. My argument is not, then, that Rav Kahana literally held the view of Rabbi Yohanan ben Dabai but that the very fact that he wished to observe the sexual behavior implied the existence of a right way and a wrong way to do "it." One could argue that the right way is precisely the one that I am identifying as what the Rabbis wish to maintain, namely the affective, intimate aspect of sexual intercourse, but precisely that, of course, would be made impossible by observation! We have a kind of Heisenberg uncertainty principle with a vengeance. Hence, it is this aspect of the sexual behavior of the teacher that the student comments upon negatively. In order to ensure intimacy, the Rabbis have to be prepared to leave intimate behavior as intimate. Sometimes power can only function by withdrawing itself. The continuation of my argument will bear out this reading.

Sex in the Dark

Continuing the theme of the passage that throws the Rabbi out of his teacher's bedroom, the most insistent group of controls over sexual practice within marriage are those that encode extreme privacy for the sexual act.[17] Even these regulations, which at first glance appear to be repressive, hold some surprises for us. The Babylonian Talmud in Niddah 16b–17a produces the following discourse:

> Said Rabbi Shim'on the son of Yohai: There are four things that the Holy, Blessed One hates, and I do not like them either: one who enters his house suddenly—and it is unnecessary to say "the house of his fellow"—, one who holds his penis while urinating, one who urinates naked in front of his bed,[18] and one who has intercourse while any living creature is watching.
>
> Rav Yehuda said to Shmuel: Even in front of mice.
>
> He said to him: Wise-guy,[19] No, it refers to those like the household of John Doe who have intercourse in front of their male and female slaves.

17. David Biale reminded me of the importance of this material in this context.

18. The first of these regulations is apparently intended to prevent a man from catching the women of his house nude; the second is aimed at avoiding a possible temptation to masturbate; the purpose of the third is mysterious to me.

19. This is apparently a somewhat pejorative endearment that Shmuel used with this sometimes overly clever student of his. Literally, it means "toothy," which may be a reference to overly sharp scholastic teeth.

> And as for them, how did they justify their practice biblically? *Sit here with the donkey* [Gen. 22:5]—with the people that is like a donkey.
>
> Rabbah the son of Rav Huna used to ring the bells around the bed [*another reading:* drive away the horse flies]. Abbaye drove the flies away. Rava drove away the mosquitoes.

Rabbi Shim'on the Palestinian holy man established an extreme rule for privacy during sex. No living creature should be present. While Shmuel (an early Babylonian authority) seemingly attempted to ameliorate this rule, the later Babylonian Rabbis endorsed it unequivocally. Shmuel regards it simply as an attack on the Roman practice of having intercourse in the presence of slaves, a practice that indeed involved the assumption that slaves are not somehow human (Veyne 1987, 72–73). However, his successors understood "living creature" quite literally and vied with each other to drive away smaller and smaller living creatures before having intercourse with their wives. The first view, that of Rabbah the son of Rav Huna, is ambiguous, because of a difference of reading between different talmudic manuscripts. According to our received text, endorsed and interpreted by Rashi, he drove away the human beings by ringing a bell indicating that he was going to sleep with his wife, showing that his view was like that of Shmuel, but according to Eastern manuscript traditions, he drove away horse-flies, manifesting support for Rav Yehuda's position. In any case, two of his fellows vied with each other: Abbaye drove the flies away and Rava even the much smaller mosquitoes. We cannot know, of course, precisely what Rabbi Shim'on's position was (or indeed what he said), but it is certainly possible that the statement was made in reaction to prevailing Roman practices of treating slaves as virtual non-persons, who were often privy to their masters' sexual behavior. The interpretations of the other Rabbis would then represent a much more extreme version of that reaction.[20] Now, there may be no doubting that these regulations were understood as promoting that rabbinic ideal of "modesty"; however, the very extremes of privacy that were encoded in the practice also promoted the notions of intimacy and freedom in sexual behavior. Veyne points out that the Roman practice amounted to constant surveillance (ibid). In sharp contrast, the rabbinic reaction to that

20. It could be, however, that the Babylonian Rabbis, for whom the custom of Romans having sex with their servants present was unknown, simply misunderstood Rabbi Shim'on's dictum and took it literally to mean "any creature."

practice produced (willy-nilly?) an extreme renunciation, once more, of surveillance of the conduct of the marriage bed. Rav Kahana's practice of "It is Torah" is also totally excluded by this principle.

In what follows in the talmudic passage, once more a law that seems to encode a "puritanical" sexual hygiene and attitude is reinterpreted by the Babylonian Talmud to encode instead the ideal of intimacy that I have explored here. My point is not, of course, to deny the presence of the ascetic voice in the text but only to show how it is systematically opposed to another voice from within the culture, indeed to a voice with at least as much claim to hegemony as the prudish one. The same text continues:

> Rav Hisda said: A man may not have intercourse during the day, for it says *And you shall love your friend as yourself* [Lev. 19:18]. Said Abbaye: What is the meaning of this? Perhaps he will see in her something which is ugly, and she will become unattractive to him.
>
> Rav Huna said: Israelites are holy and they do not have intercourse by day.
>
> Said Rava: But if it was a dark room, it is permitted, and a scholar may darken the room with his garment and have intercourse. . . .
>
> But come and hear [a contradictory position]: "The household of Munbaz the King used to do three things, for which they were praised: They used to have intercourse during the day. . . ."
>
> We see that it is taught that they had intercourse during the day [and that it was considered praiseworthy]!
>
> I will emend it that they would examine their beds during the day, and I have proof for this. For if you think that the text reads "had intercourse," why would they be praiseworthy for this? [i.e., at best, it is neutral behavior].
>
> Indeed, because of the force of sleep, she would become unpleasant to him.

This is indeed a remarkable text, once more for the way that it encodes explicit and extreme cultural struggle in the hegemonic culture-text itself. Once again, it is nearly obvious that there was a tradition that encoded a rather extreme and restricting notion of modesty requiring that intercourse take place only at night. This was countered on the halakhic level by Rava, however, who limits the condition to any darkened room, including (for Torah-scholars!) one darkened merely by curtains. However, it is on the interpretative level that the ideological opposition is expressed even more clearly. Rav Hisda implicitly and Abbaye explicitly turn this apparently inhibiting sexual rule into yet another prescription

for enhancing intimacy between married lovers. Should they make love in full daylight, perhaps he would see some blemish on her body and she would not be attractive to him any more. Of course, here as always, the androcentric perspective is unquestioned, but nevertheless, one also finds clearly encoded again and again that the telos and enabling condition of proper sexual intercourse between married couples is harmony, desire, pleasure, and intimacy. We find the same theme repeated in another place in the Babylonian Talmud, where we are told that it is forbidden for a man to marry a woman until he has seen her to assure that she is attractive to him, for otherwise he will be violating the command to "love his friend as himself" (Kiddushin 41a).[21] The emphasis on intimacy is, moreover, continued in the text with the analysis of the tradition regarding the rabbinic approval of the practice of the household of Munbaz. One of the interlocutors cannot believe that the Rabbis actually considered it praiseworthy to have intercourse by day, so he argues that they must have said [or meant] something else, to which the reply comes that it is indeed praiseworthy to have intercourse by day, for then he is not sleepy. If he has intercourse while sleepy, she may be unpleasant to him, i.e., he may do it out of duty and *not for pleasure*, and then the intimacy of the married lovers is destroyed. As Rashi remarks, "Since he is overcome with sleep, he does not desire her so much, and he has intercourse only to perform the commandment of regular intercourse or to please her, and then he is repelled by her, *and this is one of the nine categories mentioned in Nedarim*." Rashi's interpretation seems well justified here by the entire context and particularly by the cited topos of loving one's friend as oneself. Male sexual desire and pleasure are as crucial as female sexual desire and pleasure in the conduct of conjugal relations, for sex is only proper when it is the product and producer of intimacy. Over and over in these texts, the discourse of surveillance and control is placed into opposition with a discourse of intimacy and sexual pleasure and mutual desire, and surveillance is renounced in favor of desire—to be sure, only the legitimated desire of husband and wife. Given the androcentric nature of the texts and the culture, we still need to ask further questions about the status of female desire.

21. This is, incidentally, the reversal of a misogynistic topos repeated over and over in the Roman and Christian anti-marriage discourse that one should not marry, because one examines any purchase but that of a wife (Bloch 1991a, 20)

Speech and Female Desire: Patriarchal Concern for Female Well-being

The permission that the husband has to speak in order to "arouse" his wife is indicated by precisely the same verb the Talmud used with reference to what a wife may do to ask for sex without speaking directly and "brazenly." The Talmud had objected to the notion that a "brazen woman," by which they understood one who openly asks for intercourse, will have improper children: "Indeed? But did not Shmuel the son of Nahmani say that Rabbi Yohanan said: Any man whose wife approaches him sexually will have children such as were unknown even in the generation of Moses." And they answer: "That refers to a case where she arouses him." She is not called a brazen woman if she stimulates and invites her husband by signs and signals that arouse his desire, but only—according to this text—if she openly asks for sex. Female desire itself is not stigmatized, only open, explicit use of language to express that desire. He, on the other hand, is enjoined to use speech precisely for the purpose of arousing her. He is required to use his speech to arouse her desire, for without that arousal he must not have intercourse with her. The gender asymmetry is not so much, then, in rights to sex, as in the rights to speech, who has control over the situation and who is "being taken care of."

It is generally taken to be an absolute that female desire in talmudic culture must be silent. Indeed, this is usually taken as the "curse of Eve" in rabbinic writings. It is startling to find, therefore, that not only was it not a monolithic notion among the Rabbis that female desire may not be spoken, but that there was at least one voice that held that its utterance was of the highest value. We have already seen an allusion to that voice at the end of the Nedarim passage. The very text condemning wife-rape that I have cited above continues by thematizing this issue directly:

> Rav Shmuel the son of Nahmani said in the name of Rabbi Yohanan:[22] Any man whose wife asks for sex will have children such as were unknown even in the generation of Moses, for in the generation of Moses it is written, *Get yourself intelligent, wise and renowned men* [Deut. 1:14], and then it is written, *And I took as the heads of the tribes renowned and intelligent men* [Deut. 1:16], but he could not find "wise men," but with regard to Leah it says, *And Leah went out to him, and said 'You shall sleep with me tonight, for I have hired you'* [Gen. 30:16]

22. Variant: Yonathan.

> and it says, *The children of Yissachar were acquainted with wisdom* [1 Chron. 12:34]. . . .

Rav Shmuel's tradition praises the woman who requests sex openly in as vivid and strong terms as the rabbinic tradition knows by claiming that such a woman would have children better than even the children of that paragon generation, the generation of Moses. This principle is derived from a typically clever midrashic reading. Moses is sent by God to search for a certain kind of person to be the tribal leaders, but when the results of that search are reported, one of the qualifications is absent. The midrash, with its usual literalness, assumes this to mean that he could not find people who had that quality: wisdom. On the other hand, the Bible tells us explicitly that Leah requested sex openly of Jacob, when she had paid her sister for the right to have him that night, and with regard to her children we are informed in another place in the Bible that they possessed exactly that characteristic found lacking in the generation of Moses. The inference is drawn that it was the open expression of their mother's desire to their father that produced that wisdom.

The Talmud goes on to raise a challenge to this proposition, however:

> Can that be so? But didn't Rav Avdimi say that Eve was cursed with ten curses, for it says, *And to the woman He said: Greatly I will multiply* [Gen. 3:16]: These are the two flows of blood, the blood of menstruation and the blood of virginity. *your pain:* This is the effort of rearing children. *and your conception:* this the effort of pregnancy. *in pain shall you bear children:* as it sounds. *and to your man will be your desire:* teaches that the wife desires her husband when he goes on a journey. *and he will rule over you:* that the woman bids [for sex] in her heart, while the man with his mouth.
>
> That which we said is [praiseworthy] is when she arouses him.

Once again, as in the passage from Nedarim, the view of Rav Shmuel is attenuated by the Talmud. He had boldly stated that the ideal is a woman who openly asks for sex. The Talmud has some problem with this view in both passages and dilutes it by interpreting it to mean that she may by verbal and other signals arouse her husband's interest and hint to him that she wants sex, but she may not speak openly of her desire. We are not bound, however, by the Talmud's desire to harmonize all views whenever it can, so from our perspective we can see that even on this point the culture was not monolithic. There were views that denied to women the speaking of their desire, but also another view that not only "granted" them their speech but even exuberantly praised the speaking of female desire. Still, the dominant tradition remained, to be sure, the one that suppressed the open speaking of desire by women.

But emblematic of the ideology of gender in the rabbinic culture is the fact that this interdiction on speaking her desire on the part of women was *not* supposed to create conditions of suffering and deprivation for her, but rather to impose a special obligation on her husband to be attentive and sensitive to her subtle signals. The fact that she desired him especially when he was about to go on a journey, *which is one of the curses with which she was cursed,* does *not* mean that therefore she must suffer frustration but that he must sleep with her before he leaves:

> Rabbi Yehoshua the son of Levi said, "A man is required to sleep with his wife when he is about to go on a journey, for it says *And you shall know that your tent is peace and you shall pay attention to your dwelling, and thus you will not sin*" [Job 5:25].
>
> Does it in fact derive from that verse? Doesn't it derive from *And unto the man is her desire* [Gen. 3:16], which teaches that the woman desires her husband when he goes on a journey.
>
> Rav Yosef said, "It was not necessary [to cite the other verse] except for the situation in which she is close to her period [when normally sex is forbidden, but this prohibition is lifted when he is going to go on a journey]" [Yevamot 62b].

The "curses" are women's state, not their estate. Not only is the curse not a justification for causing her to suffer, it is that very curse that creates the obligation for the husband to "take care of her." Once again it is clearly the case, however, that the gender relations are asymmetrical, that the position of women in sexuality is subordinate, and the position of men is dominant. The very consideration that *he* is supposed to show *her* is the marker of this magnanimous but confining patriarchy. As the Talmud says explicitly in the continuation, "She is a mattress for her husband."

TRUTH AND DESIRE

At the bottom of this (inter)textual complex, I read, then, an intricate strategy for "putting sex into discourse," and at the same time for limiting the discourse of sexual control. Foucault has contrasted two relations of sexuality to truth as characteristic of two cultural formations, that of the ancient Greeks and "ours":

> In Greece, truth and sex were linked, in the form of pedagogy, by the transmission of a precious knowledge from one body to another; sex served as a medium for initiations into learning. For us, it is in the confession that truth and sex are joined, through the obligatory and exhaustive expression of an individual secret. But this time it is truth that serves as a medium for sex and its manifestations.
>
> (Foucault 1980, 61)

What, then, is the link between truth and sex in the textual complex that we have been reading here? That is, how shall we describe the talmudic culture on the scale of Foucault's taxonomy? Certainly, neither of the alternatives that he proposes to describe the two formations with which he deals are adequate for describing this culture, for sex is not the medium of a *paideia*, and confession is not a mode of producing truth in this culture. It would seem, indeed, that what the Talmud is telling us is that the truth of sex (that is, the Torah of sex) is concerned with two aspects of sexuality only: that the objects of sexual interaction be appropriate, and that the connection between wife and husband be marked by warmth, intimacy, exclusiveness (even in polygyny!), and respect for the desire and pleasure of the subordinate female partner. The actual deployment of bodies and pleasures lies outside of the purview of Torah.

The rabbinic culture thus occupies a position somewhere "between" Foucault's Greek and Christian cultures. On the one hand, there is a near-explicit rejection of the model of the panoptical surveillance of sexual behavior between husbands and wives; on the other hand, sexuality itself is not seen as an area entirely out of the realm of socio-cultural legislation. The Talmud achieves diverse (and not always compatible) discursive objectives through this complicated strategy. The "repressive" discourse is made available—and indeed, later cultural forces will mobilize it—but it is rendered counter-normative and marginalized. The net effect of such textual tactics is that out of the ashes of a rejected *scientia sexualis* a very embryonic *ars erotica* is produced.[23] The (male) reader of the text now knows that it is possible to derive pleasure from looking at his wife's genitals, from kissing them, from "turning the tables," and most of all, from conversing with her, laughing and playing while making love.

23. The terms are, of course, those of Michel Foucault, whose influence pervades this chapter (Foucault 1980, 67). To be sure, they are only partially appropriate in the present context, but Foucault himself allows that the binary opposition between the two may be deconstructible.

This is a perfect illustration of Foucault's point that power/knowledge "penetrates and controls everyday pleasure—all this entailing effects that may be those of refusal, blockage, and invalidation, but also incitement and intensification" (Foucault 1980, 11). The husband has certainly been taught, moreover, that respect and honor for his wife's desire and pleasure are integral to an appropriate conduct of sexual life, and that he will be rewarded for such consideration with the type of children that he desires. This discourse, however, and my reading of it, should not be misunderstood as a celebration of the gender relations that it presupposes and enforces.

In studying the complex of texts around the subject of the speaking of female desire, we see a continuation of the cultural pattern of gender politics that we observe throughout this book. On the one hand, there is an enormous respect for women's rights to physical well-being, to an absence of male violence toward them, to satisfaction of their physical needs, including especially the need for sex, but on the other hand, they are always in an absolutely subordinated position vis-à-vis the dominant, if normatively considerate, male. A quintessential representation of this situation is the halakhic requirement (analyzed in the next chapter) that is addressed to men as to how frequently they must sleep with their wives—only if, of course, the wife desires sex, the implication being, once more, that the man is in control and that the wife needs to be patronistically cared for. As patronistic as this is, however, it is in contrast with another mode of relating to women, which would propose simply that their needs are irrelevant. In the next chapter, a complex of texts will be read in which the concern for the fulfillment of female desire, and indeed for its legitimacy, is significantly weakened in one part of the rabbinic world, as it is seen to conflict with other values within the culture, namely, the complete devotion to the study of Torah. At the same time, we discover a vivid oppositional voice to that weakening of empathy for the needs, desires, indeed the subject-hood of rabbinic wives.

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Dedicated to Chava,
with honor and gratitude
for twenty-five years of intimate friendship