

THE SENSE OF SIGHT IN RABBINIC CULTURE

This book studies the significance of sight in rabbinic cultures across Palestine and Mesopotamia (approximately first to seventh centuries). It tracks the extent and effect to which the rabbis living in the Greco-Roman and Persian worlds sought to appropriate, recast, and discipline contemporaneous understandings of sight. Sight had a crucial role to play in the realms of divinity, sexuality and gender, idolatry, and, ultimately, rabbinic subjectivity. The rabbis lived in a world in which the eyes were at once potent and vulnerable: eyes were thought to touch objects of vision, while also acting as an entryway into the viewer. Rabbis, Romans, Zoroastrians, Christians, and others were all concerned with the protection and exploitation of vision. Employing many different sources, Rachel Neis considers how the rabbis engaged varieties of late antique visualities, along with rabbinic narrative, exegetical, and legal strategies, as part of an effort to cultivate and mark a “rabbinic eye.”

RACHEL NEIS is an assistant professor in the History Department and in the Program for Judaic Studies at the University of Michigan. Her interests include rabbinic literature and culture, the history of the senses, and comparative ancient and contemporary law and legal theory.

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THE SENSE OF SIGHT IN
RABBINIC CULTURE

Jewish Ways of Seeing in Late Antiquity

RACHEL NEIS



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*To my grandparents, Ruchella and Pinchas Friedwald, and
Marta and Alex Neischiler, zikhronam li-verakhah*

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Acknowledgments

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Rabbinic Viewing Practices in Late Antiquity,” *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 102/4 (2012), 533–60 are reprinted in Chapter 5. Permission to print is gratefully acknowledged. My appreciation to the Ghetto Fighters’ Museum Archive for permission to print the image of Sam Herciger’s relief sculpture, *The Rabbis*. I thank Hannah Roussel and Julia Schapiro for their research assistance. David Lobenstine’s editorial brilliance and enthusiastic engagement helped make this book more intelligible. Adam Parker, a wonderful interlocutor and scholar, contributed invaluable research assistance, copy-editing, and bibliographic work, along with the index.

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Note on the cover image

I was drawn to the sculpture, “The Rabbis,” not only for its subject and the curious representation of eyes, but also for its “primitivist” and folk-art inspired style, in which I saw echoes of late antique funerary reliefs, particularly the bearded, large-eyed, funerary mask in Bet Shearim (the “mask” sarcophagus, Sarcophagus 84, Room XVI, Catacomb 20). While ancient sculpture may now seem to stare at us vacantly, in its time, eyes were usually filled in with color (for a marvellous example, see the painted pair of eyes on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gallery 156). The wide-open and unmarked eyes of Herciger’s *The Rabbis* draw in our gaze, but we remain uncertain as to how to register their blank stare. Are these rabbis sightless, or do they possess a vision that we cannot possibly hope to share?

Note on rabbinic sources and translations

In all citations of rabbinic sources, I have tried to use the best available edition or manuscript. I generally follow the editions and manuscripts listed below; where I depart from these texts, I have noted which manuscript or edition I follow and my reasons for doing so. All translations of biblical and rabbinic sources are my own, unless noted otherwise. All Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek phrases in the text are transliterated for the benefit of the non-specialist. For names, places, and words that have entered the English vernacular, I use the common English spelling.

Citations from rabbinic texts are according to SBL style guidelines: *m.* precedes names of Mishnaic tractates; *t.* for Tosefta; *y.* for the Palestinian Talmud (Yerushalmi); and *b.* for the Bavli. Midrashic collections and other rabbinic works are nearly always cited by their full name.

Mishnah

Albeck, Hanokh (ed.), *Shishah Sidre Mishnah*, 6 vols. (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1957–1959)
 Ms. Kaufmann A 50 (Budapest, Akademia), available online via the National Library of Israel at <http://jnul.huji.ac.il/dl/talmud/>

Tosefta

Lieberman, Saul (ed.), *The Tosefta*, 4 vols. (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1955–1973)
 Zuckerman, M. S. (ed.), *Tosefta, Based on the Erfurt and Vienna Codices* (repr. Jerusalem: Wahrman Books, 1970)

Palestinian Talmud

Sussmann, Yaakov (ed.), *Talmud Yerushalmi* (Jerusalem: Academy of the Hebrew Language, 2001)

Babylonian Talmud

Vilna edition: *The Babylonian Talmud* (Vilna: The Widow and Brothers Romm, 1880–1886)

Though I use the Vilna edition as the base text, I have also consulted available manuscripts and early printed editions. I have indicated in the notes where variant readings have informed my translation or analysis.

Midrash Halakhah

- Horowitz, H. S. and Israel A. Rabin (eds.), *Mekhilta Derabbi Yishma'el* (Frankfurt, 1928–1931; repr. Jerusalem: Bamberger and Wahrmann, 1970)
 Epstein, J. N. and Ezra Z. Melamed (eds.), *Mekhilta Derabbi Shim'on b. Yoḥai* (Jerusalem: Mekitse Nirdamim, 1956)
 Weiss, Isaac Hirsch (ed.), *Sifra deve Rav: hu' Sefer Torat Kohanim [to Leviticus]* (Vienna, 1862; repr. New York: Om Publishing Company, 1946)
 Horowitz, H. S. (ed.), *Sifre deve Rav [to Numbers]* (Leipzig, 1917; repr. Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1966)
 Finkelstein, Louis (ed.), *Sifre on Deuteronomy* (Berlin: Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Wissenschaft des Judentums, 1939; repr. New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1969)

Midrash Aggadah

- Midrash Rabbah is cited from the Vilna edition, 2 vols. (Vilna, 1879; repr. New York: E. Grossman, 1953), except for the following:
Genesis Rabbah: Theodor, Judah and Hanokh Albeck (eds.), *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah*, 3 vols. (Berlin, 1912–1927; repr. Jerusalem: Shalem Books, 1996)
Lamentations Rabbah: Buber, Salomon (ed.), *Midrash Ekhah Rabbah* (Vilna: Romm, 1899)
Leviticus Rabbah: Margalioṭ, M. (ed.), *Midrash Vayiqra Rabbah*, 2 vols. (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1993)
 Mandelbaum, Bernard (ed.), *Pesiqta Derav Kahana*, 2 vols. (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1987)
 Friedmann, Meir (Ish Shalom) (ed.), *Pesiqta Rabbati* (Vienna, 1880)