

## *Introduction*

*Time in the Babylonian Talmud* explores how rabbinic jurists' language, reasoning, and storytelling reveal their assumptions about what we call time. By "time," I do not mean measurements of duration such as hours, minutes, or days. There are more elastic and capacious approaches to time in the Babylonian Talmud (Bavli). As Virginia Woolf wrote, "An hour, once it lodges in the queer element of the human spirit, may be stretched to fifty or a hundred times its clock length; on the other hand, an hour may be accurately represented on the timepiece of the mind by one second."<sup>1</sup> Considering imaginative writing by modernist writers like Woolf, as well as modern philosophical writings, allows us to break away from familiar presuppositions about time and to see temporal phenomena anew even in ancient cultural artifacts. This book turns to an ancient text, the Bavli, which remains a foundational text of Jewish law and culture, and uses it to think carefully about ancient and contemporary concepts of time. As we will see, temporality permeates the most intriguing legal concepts in the Bavli and it is equally central to the Bavli's storytelling. With this book, then, I hope to move a common debate about time in classical Judaism beyond the question of whether there was or was not a concept of time in rabbinic sources. Instead, I argue for examining in detail "time-like" phenomena in rabbinic texts. This approach sheds light on rabbinic thought in its late antique intellectual contexts and reveals what Bavli temporal thinking can contribute to contemporary theories of time.

This book argues that the Bavli produces sophisticated and innovative portrayals of temporality, and that its legal and narrative reasoning is based on its authors' temporal premises. This approach contrasts with the view that the Jews of late antiquity had no concept of what we currently understand as "time," and instead used only physical and social processes to

<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1928), 98.

coordinate their activities. The key is not to try to define “time” but, with a phenomenological approach, to “identify something timelike,” i.e. temporal or related to time.<sup>2</sup> There are at least two temporal modes reflected in Bavli thinking: the irreversible temporal processes reflected in the material world, which can be called natural time, and flexible temporal modes of the imagination, which are products of storytelling and legal reasoning.<sup>3</sup>

An example of how the Talmud constructs flexible modes of time to suit legal needs is the “retrospective determination” of events (legal retroactivity). An illustrative case, which will be examined in more detail later in this book, involves a Jew who wishes to establish a legal residence at a distance from his or her home in order to travel further than ordinarily permitted on the Sabbath. By way of background, rabbinic law allows a Sabbath observer to travel only 2,000 cubits from his or her home in any direction. Such restrictions, together with obligatory practices, shape the character of the rabbinic day of rest as home-based. However, not everyone wishes to stay that close to their home on a Sabbath. Thus rabbinic law also creates a way to reassign one’s home to a location closer to where the person wants to be during the day of rest, say to hear a visiting teacher who is staying beyond the bounds for Sabbath travel.

The Mishnah (a rabbinic legal text from third-century CE Palestine), mandates that a change of legal residence for the Sabbath must be complete as the sun sets on Friday evening – the beginning of the day of rest. The Mishnah allows one to stipulate, however, that if by the deadline on Friday one does not know in which direction he would like to travel the extra distance, his decision on Saturday morning will retrospectively

<sup>2</sup> Peter Manchester, *The Syntax of Time: The Phenomenology of Time in Greek Physics and Speculative Logic from Iamblichus to Anaximander* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2005), 89.

<sup>3</sup> From a modern perspective, all time may be a projection of the mind or the imagination, but in the Bavli there is a distinction between natural time and other temporal phenomena that emerge from legal and narrative creativity. There are analogous differentiations made by Sylvie Anne Goldberg, who distinguished between imagined or experienced time and measured time, noting that these two modes of time are woven together in biblical, rabbinic, and even later sources. Paul Ricoeur differentiated psychological time from cosmic time, arguing that in narrative it was possible to bridge them. And Ariel Furstenberg posits legal and natural “schemes” or “compartments” to which Tannaim and Amoraim address themselves, but that are not treated the same way. Citations of similar but slightly different categories in theoretical literature are kept to a minimum, in order to maintain focus on the phenomena themselves. Sylvie Anne Goldberg, *La Clepsydre. Essai sur la pluralité des temps dans le judaïsme* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2000), 70–71; Goldberg, *Clepsydra: Essay on the Plurality of Time in Judaism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 4–10, 43–44, though throughout the book Goldberg negotiates varieties of temporal ideas that arise from Judaism as practiced in different time periods, and coincidence of multiple measures of historical time, Jewish and otherwise, as well as temporalities that emerge from reading the Bible, and varieties of Jewish practices; Ariel Furstenberg, *The Languages of Talmudic Discourse* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2017), 117–18. [Hebrew].

### Introduction

3

“reveal” his intention on Friday, rendering his change of residence complete on Friday. The trouble is that his actions on Friday made explicit that he had no idea which location would be his chosen Sabbath residence on Friday. How, then, can one assert that a later action erases and replaces an earlier legally significant behavior? Despite the logical challenges, the Talmud develops a construction of time that allows a later action to *actually have taken place earlier*, replacing the ambivalence with certainty. This case illustrates the book’s methodological contribution by showing how the analysis of legal texts can reveal their underlying temporal concepts and demonstrating how these concepts illuminate what was possible in the rabbinic legal imagination.

This introduction will provide historical context for the book’s explorations of time in the Bavli. It surveys pre-rabbinic Jewish ideas of time from the second-temple period as well as the state of scholarship of late antique Christian and Zoroastrian depictions of time from the period of the Bavli. This chapter also addresses the methodological challenges involved in constructing theories of time based on the Talmud. For instance, a Talmudic legal discussion does not aim to develop a theory of time, but rather to examine legal problems and conflicts of values through debate, storytelling, and the application of relevant cases and principles. Nonetheless, a thorough literary and theoretical analysis of relevant legal debates and narrative texts makes it possible to recognize what is “time-like” in these texts and to tease out the implications of how these phenomena are portrayed. Descriptions of temporal phenomena like fixity, simultaneity, and retroactivity reveal the conceptual tools that helped rabbis from different periods to grapple with temporal matters.

### Articulating the Timelike

In the legal, narrative, or exegetical contexts of the Bavli, time describes what sits between and binds conceptual or legal items together.<sup>4</sup> The important items are the events, actions, or intentions. Time is neither a substance nor a concept, nor, in general, the focus of discussion. The notion of time as that which connects events is a hard idea to conceive. It may also be difficult to understand how it differs from other proposed structures of time. Wassily Kandinsky’s painting *Several Circles* (cover image and Figure 0.1) provides a way to visualize this function of Talmudic temporality.

<sup>4</sup> I think time as what is in between also underlies the Bavli’s understanding of natural time, but this approach is more apparent in unusual temporal modes on the imaginative plane.

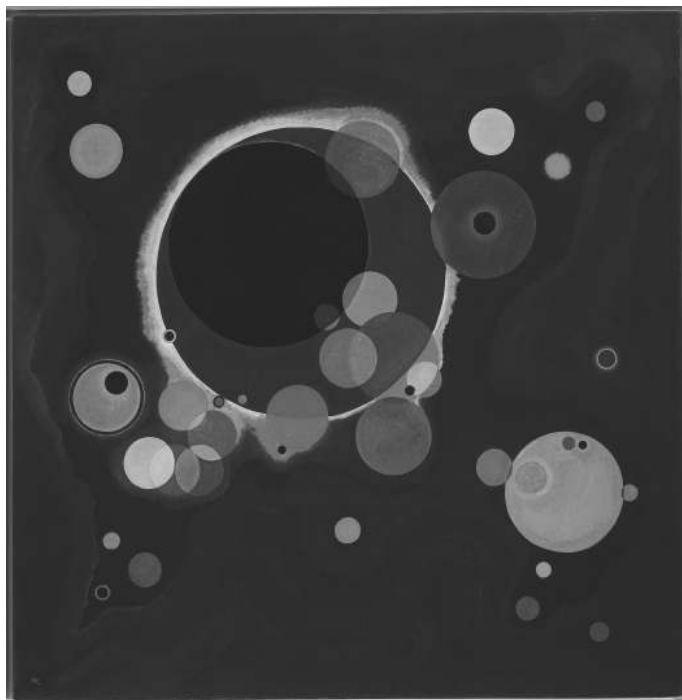


Figure 0.1 Wassily Kandinsky, *Several Circles* (1926).

Source: Wassily Kandinsky, *Several Circles*, 1926. Oil on canvas, 140 x 140 cm, courtesy of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Kandinsky wrote that of the three primary shapes (triangle, circle, and square), the circle “points most clearly to the fourth dimension,” i.e., time.<sup>5</sup> As the circles in this painting float on their own, crowd toward the larger central circles, or overlap, their spatial placement can help represent temporal relationships between events. As a modern artist, Kandinsky’s points of reference are closer to the intellectual frameworks of a modern reader than those of the Talmudic rabbis. But, like many of the Talmudic examples I explain throughout this book, *Several Circles* suggests temporal relations through representations of space and material relationships between

<sup>5</sup> Wassily Kandinsky to Will Grohmann, October 12, 1930, quoted in Angelica Zander Rudenstine, *The Guggenheim Museum: Paintings 1880–1945*, vol. 1 (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1976), 310, cited at [www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/artwork/1992](http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/artwork/1992). Kandinsky and composer Arthur Schoenberg fell out over Kandinsky’s comments about Jews. Joseph Henry Auner, *A Schoenberg Reader: Documents of a Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 168–69.

*Introduction*

5

objects. I use the temporal concerns of this painting as an aid to help visualize a different, Talmud-based approach of time that I can then relate to more contemporary conceptions of time implied by Kandinsky.

The circles in the painting can be imagined as events, actions, or intentions, i.e., things that are legally significant or significant for the plot of a story. Rather than being strung like beads on a cord in a two-dimensional sequence, events can be visualized as the circles in Kandinsky's painting, grouped in sometimes overlapping three-dimensional clusters. In the Talmud, time would not be represented by the circles (Kandinsky's allusion), but rather time is what links the circles together, allowing them to assume different configurations in relation to one another. In the Talmud, time is not necessarily a concern in itself, but it provides structure to events that are significant.

The rabbis had a variety of images for describing varying temporal functions. Their imagery is drawn from many different semantic fields (for example, from agriculture, travel, or the home) and cannot necessarily be combined into a harmonious picture. Examples of temporal metaphors include two men entering a gate together, one man running ahead of another, a hammer being raised and lowered onto an anvil, and a single strand of hair. Some of these images are similes suggested by a rabbi in order to explicate a problem. Other images come from the phrasing of legal principles. Still other images are concrete details from legal cases that Amoraim (rabbis from 200–550 CE) cite and compare. The diversity of temporal thinking in the Talmud will emerge by drawing connections between different elements, without reducing the texts' ideas to a flat definition of time.

The approach of Ephrem of Nisibis (fourth century CE) offers a partial model for comparing and connecting temporal features without reducing them to a single definition. Ephrem had what Sebastian Brock describes as a theology of paradox, where knowledge of God is approached not through definitions, but by identifying "a series of paradoxical pairs of opposites, placing them at opposite points, the central point is left undefined, but something of its nature and its whereabouts can be inferred by honing the various opposite points."<sup>6</sup> The texts brought together in this book suggest which temporal ideas function as givens. Describing them and what appear to be common elements among them, such as time connecting events but not being a substance or an existence in itself, provides something concrete for further research to test and respond to. However,

<sup>6</sup> Sebastian P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem*, Cistercian Studies Series (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 138.

the evidence pushes beyond this shared aspect. Beth Berkowitz's approach to the category "animal" in rabbinic thought is also helpful. She "seek[s] not coherent conceptualizations – 'the attitude toward' – but rather sets of problems and interests associated with each category."<sup>7</sup> This book tries to resist reduction while highlighting commonalities in Talmudic temporal assumptions.

This book's hermeneutic approach is to begin with the legal interpretation of a Talmudic passage, gaining clarity about each part of a passage's legal maneuvers and conceptualization. The second stage of its interpretative process relies on literary analysis to discern what a passage's structure, language, and conclusions indicate about rabbinic temporal assumptions. If the text is a Talmudic narrative, the focus is on what a particular narrative device indicates about rabbinic assumptions regarding an aspect of temporality. Questions like this are not commonly asked because answering them is not necessary in order to understand the legal conclusions of a text or the significance of a narrative. However, answering questions like this about time (or other phenomena) provides insights into the rabbis' patterns of thinking and their prioritization of differing intellectual values. The third stage of this book's hermeneutical approach is to consider the legal, social, or communal function served by ordering events in temporally unusual ways. Reading the Talmud in this fashion expands the significance of the text.

Since the beginning of the academic study of Judaism in nineteenth-century Europe, rabbinic studies have included examinations of time in Jewish legal, calendrical, eschatological, historical, and exegetical contexts.<sup>8</sup> Sacha Stern's *Time and Process in Ancient Judaism* was the first book-length study devoted exclusively to time in pre-medieval Judaism.<sup>9</sup> Stern argued that there was no concept of time among Jews before the medieval period. According to him, rabbis and other pre-medieval Jews (with the exception of Greek-speaking Jews such as Philo) did not understand time as a category in itself, or as an abstract concept similar to the modern uses of the English word "time." Words and phrases that other

<sup>7</sup> Beth Berkowitz, "Animal," in *Late Ancient Knowing: Explorations in Intellectual History*, ed. Catherine M. Chin and Moulie Vidas (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 41.

<sup>8</sup> Among the earliest examples are Benedict Zuckermann, *Materialien zur Entwicklung der altjüdischen Zeitrechnung im Talmud* (Breslau: Schottlaender, 1882) and Benedict Zuckermann, *A Treatise of the Sabbatical Cycle and the Jubilee: A Contribution to the Archaeology and Chronology of the Time Anterior and Subsequent to the Captivity: Accompanied by a Table of Sabbatical Years* (New York: Hermon Press, 1974).

<sup>9</sup> Sacha Stern, *Time and Process in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford and Portland, OR: Oxford University Press, 2003).

interpreters had taken to refer, in Stern's analysis, to a concept of time actually refer to "processes," including activities or natural cycles, things more concrete than what Stern associated with the term "time." He concluded that time as an abstract concept should be avoided in rabbinic studies in favor of marking the "processes" with which ritual activities and commandments are coordinated. Stern's definition of an abstract concept of time is indebted to classical Greek conceptions of time and eternity. However, as I will shortly discuss, within Hellenistic philosophical, Christian, Zoroastrian, and Jewish cultures of the late antique period, there were many diverse ways to think about time and time-related matters. This book offers a new approach. By examining time-like phenomena that emerge from texts that are not directly occupied with "time" as such, temporality emerges as multiple, diverse human productions, not only as a given within natural processes. Articulating how the rabbis of the Bavli conceived time adds an important dimension to understanding ancient Jewish and, more broadly, ancient conceptions of time.

Not all writers and thinkers (Jewish or otherwise) explicitly ask the question "what is time?" let alone set out to answer such a question. A phenomenological approach provides a way to investigate temporality in the absence of explicit reflections on the nature of time. The phenomenology of time, exemplified by the work of Edmund Husserl (d. 1938) asked, "what is the experience of time?" This is a more productive direction to take to conceptualize time in a legal or literary text such as the Talmud. According to Husserl, every human experience includes an aspect of time, which is to say that all experience is temporal.<sup>10</sup> In his writings, Husserl explained how consciousness makes it possible to experience time. An important metaphor is listening to music. While each musical note is understood discretely, the mind retains all of the notes and pauses, and configures them to create the impression of music. This suggests that consciousness involves and employs time in its understanding of the world and there is time in every human production.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Immanuel Kant (d. 1804) introduced an important shift in the philosophical approach to time, which affected subsequent temporal philosophy. Time was one of Kant's "transcendental ideals," which means it is through time and space that human beings perceive everything, but time is not a thing in itself. See Michael Rohlf, "Immanuel Kant," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/kant/>, section 3.1 "Transcendental idealism" (accessed March 23, 2017) and Andrew Janiak, "Kant's Views on Space and Time," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/kant-spacetime/> (accessed March 23, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Edmund Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1893–1917)* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2008). Recent psychological studies invite comparison with Husserl's insights,



The phenomenological approach to time has been extremely fruitful in the analysis of time in the modern novel. It is similarly useful in the analysis of time in the Talmud. In relation to literature, including the Talmud, this approach stimulates questions such as, “what is the impression of time that arises from this work?” To ask this question, it is not necessary for a text or culture to have a developed theory of time, or even a concept of time at all. There can be temporality (i.e., time-related phenomena) even if the authors of a text do not focus on time or human experience as a subject of inquiry. The key is to identify aspects of time and the language used to describe them, and then analyze the impression of time in those passages. The kinds of time that diverge from social and material processes are intellectual projections of the rabbinic legal and narrative imagination, and therefore provide insights into rabbinic intellectual priorities and values.

This book traces how the categories and questions found in late antique texts can be applied to new categories that animate contemporary thought. This complements investigations of intellectual processes in Judaism and other cultures of late antiquity, such as cultural understandings of thinking, knowing, remembering, or intending.<sup>12</sup> Catherine Chin and Moulie Vidas, for instance, described “the ways that late ancient people lived within their imagined world,” with “sympathetic imagination of the imaginations of other people.”<sup>13</sup> The possibilities and limitations of what can be imagined in the Bavli are central to this book. The configurations of events that are conceivable and the types of temporal occurrences that are treated as possible delineate what is temporally imaginable in law and storytelling in the Bavli.<sup>14</sup>

for instance, the fact that one perceives “now” in a duration of about three seconds, after which short-term memory helps the perception of longer duration. Marc Wittman, *Felt Time: The Psychology of How We Perceive Time* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 72–77, 123–37.

<sup>12</sup> For instance, Leib Moscovitz, *Talmudic Reasoning: From Casuistics to Conceptualization* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 27–28 and see n. 39 for further references; Adam H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and Christian Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia*, Divinations (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); Catherine M. Chin and Moulie Vidas, *Late Ancient Knowing: Explorations in Intellectual History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015); Shana Strauch-Schick, “Intention in the Babylonian Talmud: An Intellectual History” (PhD diss., Yeshiva University, 2011); S. B. Dolgopolski, *The Open Past: Subjectivity and Remembering in the Talmud*, 1st edn. (New York: Fordham University Press); Zvi Septimus, “The Poetic Superstructure of the Babylonian Talmud and the Reader It Fashions” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2011); Furstenberg, *Languages*.

<sup>13</sup> Chin and Vidas, *Late Antique Knowing*, 1, 4.

<sup>14</sup> In the Bavli, it is often in the editorial voice that much of the most developed conceptualization occurs. But also important are Amoraic and Tannaitic images and terms and cases that set the terms with which the legal discussion engages.



## Introduction

9

A significant amount of research on time-related matters in early Judaism focuses on calendars and time-reckoning. Much is now known about Jewish calendars in the Hellenistic and rabbinic periods. For instance, there have been catalogues and analyses of technology for telling the time of day from Roman Judea.<sup>15</sup> Scholars have found that setting calendars required the deployment of scientific ingenuity in the service of communal structure and the establishment of group identity. Sacha Stern's *Calendar and Community* used calendrical texts to expose historical tensions over Jewish communal authority.<sup>16</sup> Sarit Kattan Gribetz has described how rabbinic texts incorporated Roman festivals into Jewish timekeeping and how time-related rituals of everyday life constructed different “gendered temporality” for men and women. Metaphors for elements of calendrical time have also received attention. Women's bodies, for example, were a key metaphor for calendrical time in rabbinic texts, as Kattan Gribetz and others have noted.<sup>17</sup> A full lunar month is compared to a pregnant woman's abdomen in rabbinic texts, while the onset of menses is compared to bearing witness to a new moon. The image of a pregnancy, being a visible process that lasts a specified span and results in something new, became a powerful image for eschatological time as well.<sup>18</sup> The metaphors,

<sup>15</sup> Shaul Adam, “Ancient Sundials in Israel Part 1: Sundials Found in Jerusalem,” *British Sundial Society Journal* 14:iii (Sept. 2002): 109–15; Adam, “Ancient Sundials in Israel Part 2: Sundials Found Outside Jerusalem,” *British Sundial Society Journal* 14 (2002): 109–15; Uwe Glessmer and Matthias Albani, “An Astronomical Measuring Instrument from Qumran,” in *The Provo International Conference on the Dead Sea Scrolls: Technological Innovations, New Texts, and Reformulated Issues*, ed. Donald W. Parry and Eugene Ulrich, Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah (Leiden, Boston, Cologne: Brill, 1999), 407–42.

<sup>16</sup> Sacha Stern, *Calendar and Community: A History of the Jewish Calendar Second Century BCE–Tenth Century CE* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Stern, *Time and Process in Ancient Judaism*, 59ff. For the relationship between chronologies, calendars, and time in premodern Judaism, see Goldberg, *La Clepsydre*, 309–11; Sylvie Anne Goldberg, “Questions of Times: Conflicting Time Scales in Historical Perspective,” *Jewish History* 14 (2000); Sylvie Anne Goldberg, “In the Path of Our Fathers: On Tradition and Time from Jerusalem to Babylonia and Beyond,” in *Jewish Studies at the Crossroads of Anthropology and History: Authority, Diaspora, Tradition*, ed. Ra'anan Boustan, Oren Kosansky and Marina Rustow (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> See references in Sarit Kattan Gribetz, “Conceptions of Time and Rhythms of Daily Life in Rabbinic Literature, 200–600 C.E.” (PhD, Princeton University, 2013), 173–240. Calendars remain useful artifacts for the history of Jewish groups' interactions with non-Jewish populations in which they lived long after the rabbinic period; see Elisheva Carlebach, *Palaces of Time: Jewish Calendar and Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> Sarit Kattan Gribetz, “A Matter of Time: Writing Jewish Memory into Roman History,” *AJS Review* 40, no. 1 (2016): 57–86; Kattan Gribetz, “Conceptions of Time,” 131, 234–41. Kattan Gribetz advances her study of women's bodies as temporal metaphors and embodied and gendered experiences of time in “Pregnant with Meaning: Women's Bodies as Metaphors for Time in Biblical, Second Temple, and Rabbinic Literature,” in *The Construction of Time in Antiquity: Ritual, Art and Identity*, ed. Jonathan Ben-Dov and Lutz Doering (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 173–204.

mechanics, and social implications of timing and time-reckoning are critical to understanding Jewish social history, intergroup relations, and constructions of identity.

Thinking about time in reference to time-measurement is intuitive to many people today. Typically, a contemporary person thinking about time first conjures up the image of a clock. However, this intuition can be an obstacle to thinking about time in different cultural contexts. To grasp temporality in the Talmud, it is important to recognize that time can describe more than time-measurement. Modern thinkers in science and the arts have expressed this insight in helpful ways. There is, in Virginia Woolf's words, an "extraordinary discrepancy between time on the clock and time in the mind."<sup>19</sup> One only has to recall the creeping slowness of waiting for a test result, or how short hours can feel while enjoying an engrossing novel. Albert Einstein's observation, reported by philosopher Rudolf Carnap, that "the experience of the Now means something special for man ... but this important difference does not and cannot occur within physics" similarly emphasizes the gap between what can be theorized and measured mathematically and what is experienced as time.<sup>20</sup> In contrast to what is known about calendrical calculations and time-measurement, relatively little is known about the temporal imagination of the Talmudic rabbis. The focus of this book is on that elusive temporal imagination.

Equally as important as reading sympathetically the "imagination of other people" in late antiquity is being able to describe how ideas about one topic can emerge from texts that are about something different. For example, Mira Balberg acknowledged that while the mishnaic texts she analyzes are "unquestionably *not* a discourse about the self, either manifestly or in disguise, but a discourse about purity and impurity ... [the] Mishnah is effervescent with ideas that resonate well beyond the horizon of the particular legal topic at hand."<sup>21</sup> The halakhic and aggadic passages I analyze do not concern themselves with "time" as a category. However, the texts' arguments, analogies, and vocabulary reveal elements of what could be called "time-like" phenomena.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Woolf, *Orlando*, 98.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Arthur Schilpp, *The Philosophy of Rudolf Carnap*, 1st edn. (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1963), 37–38.

<sup>21</sup> Mira Balberg, *Purity, Body, and Self in Early Rabbinic Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 183–84.

<sup>22</sup> As Moscovitz, *Talmudic Reasoning*, 343–55 notes, Amoraic conceptualization may precede the invention of new language to describe their ideas, so it is possible that in some cases the Amoraim or editors thought in these ways without explicitly articulating it.