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'The Few Contained the Many': Rabbinic Perspectives on the Miraculous and the Impossible

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> *The philosophers say similarly that to bring into being a square whose diagonal is equal to one of its sides or a corporeal angle encompassed by four plane right angles and other similar things belong all of them to the class of the impossible; and some of those who are ignorant of mathematics and, concerning these matters, know only the words by themselves and do not conceive their notion, think that they are possible . . .*
>
> *According to every opinion and school, there are impossible things whose existence cannot be admitted. Power to bring them about cannot be ascribed to the deity.*
>
> Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 3:15[1]

Among the miracles ascribed to the ancient Jerusalem Temple, the Mishnah (*mAvot* 5:5) relates that the worshippers 'would be constricted when standing but had adequate space to prostrate themselves'.[2]

The most straightforward explanation of the passage is that of Rashi, who strove to embellish the supernatural wonder of the account. As he read it, two separate miracles actually occurred: (1) as the people stood they would float[3] above the ground owing to the confined space; and (2) when they bowed down, the area would become expansive enough to allow a generous distance between the worshippers, in order to prevent them from hearing each other's confessions or prayers.[4] The latter part of the explanation, which seems quite

[1] Yosef Kafah, ed., *Rabbeinu Moshe ben Maimon, Moreh Ha-Nevukhim [Dalalat al-Ḥa'irin: Maqor Ve-Targum]* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1972), 3:500–502; Salomon Pines, ed., *Maimonides, Moses, The Guide of the Perplexed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 459–61.

[2] See J. N. Epstein, *Mavo' le-Nosaḥ ha-Mishnah*, 2 vols (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1948), 964–65; R. Travers Herford, ed., *Pirke Aboth* (New York: Jewish Institute of Religion Press and Bloch, 1930), 128–29; Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine: Studies in the Literary Transmission, Beliefs and Manners of Palestine in the 1st Century B.C.E.–4th Century C.E.* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1962), 176–77; E. E. Hallevy, *Parshiyyot ba-'aggadah* (Tel Aviv: Armoni and Haifa University, 1973), 448 and n. 1.

[3] Rashi is commenting on the citation of the Mishnah in *bYoma* 21a. His interpretation equates the two distinct roots **צפף** (crowd) and **צוף** (float). On his general tendencies towards double etymologies and ones based on partial similarities of roots, see Jonah Fraenkel, *Rashi's Methodology in his Exegesis of the Babylonian Talmud* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1975), 96–104, 106–13 (in Hebrew). See also Isaac Avinery, *Thesaurus Linguae Hebraicae auctore RASHI (Rabbi Solomon Izhaki)*, vol. 2 (Tel Aviv: by author, 1949), 2:29 (in Hebrew).

[4] This last detail was added from *bYom.* 21a, and is mentioned in the midrashic lists of cases where 'the few contained the many' that will be discussed below. A similar explanation is found

clearly to express the plain sense of the mishnah, implies some peculiar notions about the measurement of space and the mathematical relationship between the dimensions of the whole (in the present instance: the area of the sanctuary) and its parts (the individual human bodies).

While Rashi's explanation is faithful to the mishnah's classification of the situation as a 'miracle', his apparent recourse to flexible notions of space invites some intriguing questions about how the rabbis understood fundamental mathematical concepts of space and distance.[5] In the following pages, I wish to approach these issues from a broader perspective by examining several related passages from rabbinic literature, as well as some of the philosophical and theological discussions that were taking place at that time in the Greco-Roman environment.

To begin with, the ancient treatise *Baraita di-M'lekhet Hammishkan* states that 'the ark was placed inside the Inner Sanctuary [*devir*] and divided the house ten cubits by ten cubits'.[6] In several places in the Talmuds[7] it says that 'the ark was not included in the measurement'. Evidently, the original intent of the comment was merely to explain the convention that was being employed by the *Baraita di-M'lekhet Hammishkan* and its parallel traditions, to the effect that 'the ark that was fashioned by Moses had ten cubits on each of its sides' or 'the ark stands in the middle and divides the house into ten cubits in each direction'.[8] The simple sense is that the area contained by the ark was not included in the calculation of the ten cubits separating each of its sides

in the commentary to Avot in the Maḥzor Vitry; see S. Hurwitz, ed., *Machsor Vitry nach der Handschrift im British Museum (Cod. Add. No. 27200 u. 27201)* (Nürnberg: J. Bulka, 1923), 539. See also *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* [=ARN] A Ch. 35; Solomon Schechter, ed., *Aboth de Rabi Nathan*, newly corrected ed. (New York: Feldheim, 1967), 106; transl. Judah Goldin, *Avoth de-Rabbi Nathan*, ed. Julian Obermann, Yale Judaica Series (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 143–47. In the Mishnah and the two versions of ARN, the various wonders that occurred in Jerusalem and in the Temple have been preserved in diverse and confused lists (most of which do not add up to the required total of ten).

[5] A reluctance to accept the full implications of Rashi's interpretation is evident in the paraphrase of Rabbi Menaḥem Me'iri of Perpignan who omitted the detail about the worshippers hovering in the air; see Joseph Klein, ed., *Beit Habbeḥirah 'al Massekhet Yoma* (Jerusalem: Makhon Ha-Talmud Ha-Yisre'eli Ha-Shalem, 1970), 42. Cf. the discussion about Maimonides and Duran below.

[6] Robert Kirshner, ed., *Baraita de-Melekhet ha-Mishkan: A Critical Edition with Introduction and Translation*, Monographs of the Hebrew Union College (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1992), 182, and English translation on 233. The text continues: 'Two cherubim of gold stood with their feet on the ground. From the wall to [each] cherub [the distance] was five cubits. From [each] cherub to the ark [the distance] was five cubits'. Note carefully Kirshner's observations on 233, n. 46, where he interprets the passage according to *bMeg*. That the inner sanctuary was a twenty-cubit square is stated in 1 Kings 6:20.

[7] *BMeg*. 10b; *bYom.* 21a; *bBB.* 98b–99a; and see below. For all these passages see R. N. N. Rabbinowicz, *Diqduqé Soferim, Variæ Lectiones in Mishnam et in Talmud Babylonicum*, reprint ed., 2 vols (New York: M.P. Press, 1976) (in Hebrew). See also: Shraga Abramson, ed., *Masekhet Bava Batra*, ed. J. N. Epstein, Talmud Bavli 'im Targum 'Ivri U-Ferush Ḥadash (Jerusalem: Dvir and Massada, 1958), 121.

[8] As formulated by Rabbi Levi in *yBB.* 6:2 (15c). See E. S. Rosenthal and S. Lieberman, eds., *Yerushalmi Neziqin* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, The Hebrew University Institute for Advanced Studies, the American Academy for Jewish Research, 1983), 96–97, and Lieberman's notes on 208 (in Hebrew).

from the wall of the Inner Sanctuary.[9] However, in the Babylonian Talmud the statement was construed as proof that 'it was standing by means of a miracle'. Rashi explained this to mean: '[The ark] does not occupy any space at all that would diminish from the dimensions of the space of the room'! [10]

This conclusion follows logically from the comparison that the Talmud draws with a similar phenomenon involving the measurements of the cherubs in the First Temple: in one passage they deduced, with reference to the cherubs, that 'the space above them corresponds to the space below—just as above it does not contain anything at all, so too below, it does not contain anything at all.' The third-century Babylonian sage Samuel argued that it is impossible to fit the two cherubs into the twenty cubits of the *devir*'s length, since the length of each of their wings was five cubits,[11] so that there would not remain any room for the parts of cherubs' bodies that were not coextensive with the wings, unless we accept the premise that 'they were standing by means of a miracle'; that is, that they did not occupy any physical space.[12] Even though Samuel's inference was refuted by several subsequent rabbis in the *bBB* pericope,[13] the Talmud's editors clearly viewed his position as a valid one.[14] The fact that the redactors of the respective pericopes equated the cases of the ark and of the cherubs strongly suggests that, in their opinion, the essence of the miracle lay in the fact that neither object occupied space in the sanctuary.

As the matters have been set out thus far, the miracles in question were characterised by violations of the laws of mathematics (especially geometry). Translated into mathematical notation they can be expressed as follows:[15]

In the case of the ark:[16] $10 + 2.5 + 10 = 20$

In the case of the cherubs: $5 + 5 + 5 + 5 + [2 * (c > 0)] = 20$

(where c represents the portions of the cherub's bodies that were not overlapped by the wings).

It is difficult to surmise exactly how the talmudic sages envisioned the situation. As a conjecture, I would propose something like the following case. If a priest should enter carrying a measuring-rod, and if he measured each individual item and space in the room, they would add up to a total of more than twenty cubits. However, if he were to afterwards measure the distance between the opposite walls, he would discover that it was precisely twenty

[9] Eliezer Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrash: A Critical Commentary*, 3 vols, Brown Judaic Studies (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 1:55–61.

[10] I have cited him here according to his commentary to *bMeg.* 10b. The explanation appears with only minor differences in his commentaries to *bYom.* 21a–b and *bBB.* 99a–b.

[11] 1 Kings 6:24–25.

[12] In *bShab.* 104a and *bMeg.* 3a the same expression is used to denote carved letters in Moses' tablets that miraculously hovered in the air. Clearly, that was a different kind of miracle from the one ascribed here to the ark and cherubs.

[13] Six rabbis propose alternative ways of positioning the cherubs in the designated space of the sanctuary.

[14] In *bMeg.*, the refutations are not mentioned at all.

[15] The units are cubits.

[16] According to Ex. 25:10 the ark was 2.5 cubits long.

cubits.[17]

How did such a picture fit into the scientific and philosophical thought of the ancient world? Beneath these talmudic discussions lie some problematic theological assumptions about divine omnipotence and the nature of miracles. In the philosophical schools that were contemporary with the talmudic rabbis, there were several authors who took care to set limits to the power of the omnipotent creator, and to declare that some actions are inherently impossible even for the Almighty.

Such declarations were often formulated as criticisms of Stoicism. We find, for example, that in Cicero's philosophical dialogues, representatives of the Stoa were challenged to justify certain of their doctrines that were regarded as implausible, such as their beliefs in the possibility of divining the future,[18] and in God's unrestricted ability to alter the form of matter.[19] The usual Stoic response was that nothing is impossible for God. This approach invited still more attacks from their opponents.

In a similar vein, the pagan philosophers argued that some central Jewish beliefs defied logic. The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* was seen as a violation of the axiom *nihil ex nihil fit*. For analogous reasons, antagonism was expressed by figures like Celsus (2nd century) to the possibility of restoring a soul to a physical body that had decomposed after death.[20] For the philosopher, such a prospect was utterly abhorrent, and therefore ought not be ascribed to a perfect God. Celsus criticised the Jews who persisted in this distasteful belief in defiance of his own refutations:

> They escape to a most outrageous refuge by saying that 'anything is possible for God.' But indeed, neither can God do what is shameful nor does He desire what is contrary to nature. If you were to desire something abominable in your wickedness, not even God would be able to do this . . .[21]

[17] An interpretation along these lines is suggested by the wording of Me'iri to Yoma.

[18] *De Diviniatione* 2:41:86; see William Armistead Falconer, ed., *Cicero*, ed. E. H. Warmington, 28 vols, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 22 (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press and William Heineman, 1971), 468–69.

[19] *De Natura Deorum* 3:38:92; see H. Rackham, ed., ibid., vol. 19 (1972), 387–89.

[20] Menahem Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, Publications of the Israel Academy of Sciences: Section of Humanities (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1980), 2:224–27, provides a brief biography and survey of Celsus' statements on Judaism. See also Arthur Darby Nock, *Conversion: The Old and New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 427–28. David Rokeah, *Jews, Pagans and Christians in Conflict*, Studia post-Biblica (Jerusalem and Leiden: Magnes Press and Brill, 1982), 16, 19–20, notes that Celsus' basic objection to Christianity (and to a lesser extent, Judaism) was politically motivated, owing to his commitment to traditional Roman paganism as a force of social cohesion. Although Origen branded him an Epicurean, it is clear that his eclectic philosophical positions were more strongly influenced by (Middle) Platonism (see also Rokeah, 18–19; Stern, 2:225, etc.).

[21] Stern, 2:254, 284; R. Walzer, *Galen on Jews and Christians*, ed. E. A. Barber et al., Oxford Classical and Philosophical Monographs (Oxford and London: Oxford University Press and Geoffrey Cumberlege, 1949), 31 (and see the many sources assembled on 26–31); Henry Chadwick, ed., *Origen: Contra Celsum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965). E. E. Hallevy, '*Olamah Shel Ha-'Aggadah* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1972), 166–72, adduces Greek texts from Homer onwards that testify to their distaste for resurrection, 'since the Greeks generally perceived resurrection . . . as a crime, since it is forbidden to violate a decree that has been ordained upon

The doctrine of resurrection—that the dead will one day be restored to physical bodies—was central to both Judaism and Christianity. Celsus' rejection of such a possibility was motivated less by scientific and logical objections than by its gross materialism. The Greek philosophical climate was generally dualistic, abhorring the material body and aspiring to an afterlife that will be purely spiritual. Nevertheless, one of Celsus' strongest arguments against resurrection stemmed from the fact that the ingredients constituting the human body are continually being replaced, and are assimilated after death into different organisms. Looked at in this manner, there is something approaching a logical contradiction in the claim that a soul can be restored to its 'original' dwelling-place.[22]

Even Origen (185–232), Celsus' most famous critic, accepted the premise that God cannot do things that run counter to his exalted nature.[23] However most other Church Fathers insisted on justifying the irrational aspects of the resurrection doctrine on the grounds that God is all-powerful.[24]

The illustrious physician and philosopher Galen (129–*c.* 200)[25] also severely criticised the Jewish Torah because its author Moses

> believes everything to be possible with God, even should He wish to make a bull or horse out of ashes. We however do not hold this; we say that certain things are impossible by nature and that God does not even attempt such things at all but that He chooses the best out of the possibilities of becoming.[26]

This issue was raised by some other Greek thinkers. The Neoplatonist philosopher Porphyry (233–309),[27] the disciple and successor to Plotinus, in the course of his assault on belief in resurrection, made it clear that God's omnipotence does not extend to actions that contradict his nature or to things that are inherently impossible. Even God cannot make it so that Homer was

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a person.' He also brings abundant examples of rabbinic sources that express discomfort with exaggerated changes in the natural order. A large collection of arguments defending resurrection was assembled by Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 22; see William M. Green, ed., *Saint Augustine*, ed. E. H. Warmington, 7 vols, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 7 (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press and William Heineman, 1972), especially chapters 11–12, pp. 256–71. See also Walzer, 32.

[22] *Contra Celsum* 5:14; Stern, 2:248, 302–3; see Henry Chadwick, 'Origen, Celsus, and the Resurrection of the Body', *Harvard Theological Review* 41 (1948).

[23] 5.23; Chadwick, 'Origen, Celsus', 88–91. A modern formulation of the argument against resurrection, expressed as logical contradiction and not merely as a suspension of the natural order, appears in Antony Flew, *An Introduction to Western Philosophy* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1971), 172.

[24] Chadwick, 'Origen, Celsus', 84, provides ample references to patristic statements.

[25] Walzer; Stern, 2:306–10 (and references on 306 n. 1).

[26] *πάντα γὰρ εἶναι νομίζει τῷ θεῷ δυνατα*; Walzer, 101–02; Stern, 2:311–13; Jacob I. Dienstag, 'Introduction: The Relationship of Maimonides to his Non-Jewish Predecessors; an Alphabetical Survey', in *Studies in Maimonides and St Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Jacob I. Dienstag, Bibliotheca Maimonidica ([New York]: Ktav, 1975), xxxvii–xxxix (includes bibliography). The occasion for this diatribe was a discussion about the physiology of the eyelashes wherein Galen argued that God could not have created them on substances that could not naturally support them.

[27] On his place in the third-century religious controversies, see Rokeah, 27–29; Stern, 2:423–28. On 323, n. 1, Stern cites sources for the Christian tradition that Porphyry's wife Marcella was Jewish.

retroactively not a poet, that Troy was not conquered,[28] or that two times two equals five.[29] Most of the ancient Greek authors who dealt with this question did not distinguish between the supernatural suspension of natural laws and the violation of rules of mathematics or logic. Both were dismissed as 'impossible' even for the deity.[30]

A survey of rabbinic texts would seem to bear out the allegations that were directed by Galen and Celsus against the uncritical Jewish acceptance of impossible miracles.[31]

[28] The question of God's ability to undo the past lies beyond the scope of this study. At any rate, as Daniel Boyarin has pointed out to me, the impossibility of such a prospect lies at the root of the legal ruling in the Mishnah (*mBer.* 9:3) against praying to alter what has already happened. Cf. the Church Father Arnobius in his *Adversus Nationes* 5:38; see Arnobius, 'Opera Omnia', in *Patrologia Latina*, ed. P.-J. Migne, Patrologiae Cursus Completae (Paris: Siros, 1844), 1154; Arnobius, 'Adversus Nationes', in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdman, 1978), 504; Rokeah, 106. Among Christian scholastics the question was taken up by figures like Peter Damian (1007–72) in his *The Omnipotence of God*; see André Cantin, ed., *Pierre Damiel, Lettre sur la Toute-Puissance Divine*, Sources Chrétiennes (Paris: Cerf, 1972). Favourite questions included whether God can restore virginity or undo the foundation of Rome. See David Luscombe, *Medieval Thought*, ed. Christopher Butler et al., A History of Western Philosophy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 41–42.

[29] Adof von Harnack, ed., *Porphyrius 'Gegen die Christen', 15 Bücher* (Berlin: Verlag der Königl. Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1916), fragment # 94; Chadwick, 'Origen, Celsus', 90.

[30] However, this distinction was fundamental to the discussions of medieval philosophers. See Flew, 172: 'For the central distinction between what would now be called factual and logical impossibilities is indeed fundamental.' Cf. Richard Swinburn, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 149. This principle was well established in later Jewish philosophical literature. See Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza: Unfolding the Latent Processes of His Reasoning* (New York: Schocken, 1969), 198. Thus, Sa'adia asserted that there is no virtue in praising God 'for being able to cause five to be more than ten without adding anything to the former, nor for being able to put the world through the hollow of a signet ring without making the one narrower and the other wider, etc.' (*Book of Doctrines and Opinions* 2:13; see Joseph Kafah, ed., *Sefer ha-Nivḥar be-Emunot uve-De'ot [al-Amanat wa-al-i'tiqadat] le-Rabbenu Sa'adiyyah Ga'on* (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1970), 114; Samuel Rosenblatt, *Saadia Gaon: The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, ed. Julian Obermann et al., Yale Judaica Series (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), 134). Among the Christian scholastics the definitive discussion of the topic was that of Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Theologica*, IQ 25A3; see Anton C. Pegis, ed., *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Random House, 1944), 1:262–63; Flew 171–72; in the chapter 'Is God Omnipotent?': 'what does imply a contradiction is not subsumed under the divine omnipotence; because these things are not in principle possible. So it is better to say that they are not possible than that God cannot do them.'

[31] An instructive contrast to the ancient rabbinic texts we are examining here is provided in Maimonides' responses to Galen's charges. In his medical work Pirqei Mosheh (see J. Schacht and M. Meyerhof, 'Maimonides against Galen, on Philosophy and Cosmogeny', Bulletin of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Cairo 5, no. 1 (1939); Sussman Muntner, ed., *Pirke Mosheh (bi-refu'ah) be-targumo shel Natan ha-Me'ati*, ed. S. Muntner, Rabbeinu Moshe ben Maimon Ketavim Refu'iyyim (Jerusalm: Mosad Harav Kook, 1961), 2:376:80), as well as in the *Guide* 3:15 (see Kafah, ed., *Rabbeinu Moshe ben Maimon, Moreh Ha-Nevukhim [Dalalat al-Ḥa'irin: Maqor Ve-Targum]*, 3:500–502; Pines, ed., 459–61), Maimonides rejects Galen's accusations and states that the rabbis were fully aware that God cannot do the impossible. All that he is willing to concede is that there is some room for legitimate dispute over whether a given act, particularly *creatio ex nihilo*, should be classified as impossible. Characteristically, Maimonides interpreted that the description of the prostrations in the Temple in *mAvot* 5:5 was not referring to a supernatural phenomenon, but only describing the subjective feelings of the worshippers, 'because of their intense reverence for that place'; see Joseph Kafih, ed., *Mishnah 'im Perush Rabbeinu Moshen ben Maimon*, vol. 4 (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1965), 455–56. As noted by Rabbi Simeon ben

Further examples of the ancient rabbis' readiness to accept violations of logical thinking may be discerned in several midrashic passages that contain lists of biblical instances in which 'the few contained the many'.[32] An examination of these texts suggests that some of the examples adduced by the rabbis also involved violations of mathematical and logical laws.

Admittedly, as long as the sources speak merely of compressing objects into spaces that should not normally have contained them, the miracle can be characterised as a transformation in its substance or physical structure.[33] In this manner, for example, we may understand the midrashic interpretation of Genesis 1:9: 'Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place': 'Can one empty a full vessel into a full vessel?! The world was completely filled of water in water, and yet you say "*Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together*" [implying that God gathered the waters into a space that was already filled to capacity with water]!' The same can be said about Exodus 9:8, which relates: 'the Lord said unto Moses and unto Aaron, Take to you handfuls of ashes of the furnace, and let Moses throw it toward the heaven.' As interpreted by the Midrash, this implies that Moses held in one fist the equivalent of four handfuls, which are the equivalent of eight normal fistfuls—much more than the capacity of a normal human hand.[34]

The matter becomes more problematic when we examine the passages that speak of large crowds being squeezed into limited spaces, as at the consecration of the priests in Leviticus 8:3: 'And gather thou all the congregation together unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation';[35] or the assembly of six hundred thousand Israelites into the Tabernacle courtyard that measured one hundred cubits by fifty cubits (Exodus 27:18). Similarly, according to the Midrash, when Moses and Aaron summoned the people to produce water from the rock in Numbers 20:10, they 'gathered the congregation to-

Zemah Duran, Maimonides' commitment to naturalistic exegesis seems to contradict the Mishnah's assertion that the phenomenon was miraculous; see R. Simon ben Zemach Duran, *Magen Abot* (Leipzig: Leopold Schnauss, 1855), 80b–81a.

[32] See *Gen. Rabbah* 5:7 (J. Theodor and Ch. Albeck, eds., *Midrasch Bereschit Rabbah*, 3 vols (Berlin: 1903–36), 36); *Ex. Rabbah* 11:4 (Avigdor Shinan, ed., *Midrash Shemot Rabbah Chapters I–XIV* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1984), 241, in Hebrew); *Leviticus Rabbah* (Mordecai Margulies, ed., *Midrash Wayyikra Rabbah*, 4 vols (Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1972), 215, in Hebrew); D. Hoffmann, ed., *Midrasch TannaŢm zum Deuteronomium*, 2 vols (Berlin: Itzkowski, 1909), 56 (in Hebrew); *Tanḥuma Va'era* #14; *Mishnat Rabbi Eli'ezer* (H. G. Enelow, ed., |it The Mishnah of R. Eliezer; or the Midrash of Thirty-Two Hermeneutical Rules (New York: Bloch, 1933), 207).

[33] The Stoic spokesman in Cicero's *De Natura Deorum* 3:38:9 believed in the fundamental flexibility of matter. Origen, in denying that Jesus' resurrection can be adduced as a precedent for a belief in the resurrection of mortals, noted that Jesus' body was fashioned out of a unique material that was not subject to the physical limitations of other bodies. For this reason he was able to walk through walls and vanish, as well as to assume different appearances for different people according to their respective spiritual levels. See Chadwick, 'Origen, Celsus', 100 and nn. 28–29.

[34] See Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, trans. H. Szold, 7 vols (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1967), 1:354, 5:431 n. 191. According to the commentators, it is assumed that both Moses and Aaron were ordered to fill their hands with ashes, though in the end it was only Moses who threw entire amount, presumably with only one fist.

[35] Ibid., 3:180, 6:73 n. 373.

gether onto[36] the rock'—the rabbis took this to mean that the entire populace was able to stand on top of a single rock the size of a sieve.

The midrash provides a similar reading of Joshua 3:8–9: 'And thou shalt command the priests that bear the ark of the covenant, … And Joshua said unto the children of Israel, Come hither, and hear the words of the Lord your God.'

The sequence was understood to imply that the people were miraculously able to fit between the rods that bore the ark. The midrash projects a similar scenario for the exiled communities of Israel when they will be gathered to Jerusalem in messianic times.[37]

Ostensibly it is possible to imagine that the enclosing areas were broadened for the sake of the respective assemblies, or that the people were temporarily shrunk; though such explanations sound unreasonably forced.[38] With respect to those verses that deal with structures that have specified dimensions, it is far more reasonable to describe the situations as we did the talmudic passages about the ark and the cherubs in the sanctuary: the dimensions of the objects were not altered, nor were those of the Tabernacle or the other venues. Nevertheless, one who took separate measurements of the space occupied by the individual persons would arrive at a measurement that was far greater than the total area available. The miraculous character of the event is expressed in the fact that the large was contained by the small. It follows that we are dealing with the equivalent of two plus two equalling five.

We have been assuming thus far that a consensus existed within the philosophical schools that God cannot contradict logic.[39] To be precise, at least one interesting dissenter from that consensus maintained, whether explicitly or implicitly, that God transcends the limitations of reason and number. A belief that God is not bound by number or reason, can apparently be extracted from statements by Philo Judaeus of Alexandria. Notwithstanding his usual inclination to explain biblical texts in the spirit of Platonic[40] or Stoic philosophy, in this matter he seems to be expressing a traditional Jewish devotion to a God who transcends all limits. This emerges from his conviction that the *logos*, the totality of the ideas constituting the rational and mathematical substructure of the physical universe, is a creation of God, and is therefore

[36] King James translation: 'before'.

[37] Ginzberg, ibid.; but cf. *Sifré on Deuteronomy* 1:1 (Louis Finkelstein, ed., *Siphre ad Deuteronomium*, Corpus Tannaiticum (Berlin: Abteilung Verlag, 1939), 7–8).

[38] Compare the Stoic belief in *κράσις δι' ὅλων*, the possibility of complete penetration of one body by another. This doctrine explained how God is able to be imminent in matter. See Giovanni Reale, *History of Ancient Philosophy*, trans. John R. Carter, vol. 3: *The Systems of the Hellenistic Age* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1985), 241.

[39] Wolfson, 198 n. 1.

[40] Platonic thinkers were divided on the question of whether God created the ideas, or whether they should be perceived as eternal entities independent of God. According to Wolfson, Philo tends towards the view that the ideas were created, though he is not fully consistent in his statements. From the examples that Wolfson adduces, there emerges a strong impression that Philo is referring to ideas of objects and values, etc., but not necessarily those of logical or mathematical laws (but see below). See: Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, revised ed., 'His Structure and growth of philosophic systems from Plato to Spinoza' (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 200–89.

subject to his control. It follows from this premise that God, who possesses a free will, should in principle be able to alter or manipulate those laws.[41]

We see, then, that in spite of their intimate familiarity with other facets of Hellenistic culture,[42] which influenced their vocabulary, rhetorical conventions, material culture and many other realms of Jewish life in antiquity, the sages of the Talmud and the midrash remained largely unaffected by the philosophical views that were prevalent in their Greek-thinking environment, and preferred to speak in terms of God's unrestrained omnipotence.[43] This is all the more astonishing when we bear in mind that, at about the same time, the question of God's power to violate logical rules was the topic of vehement debates between the philosophical schools and the representatives of revealed religious traditions, and that the uncritical Jewish belief in miracles had provided ammunition for Galen's attack on the intellectual cogency of Judaism.

The reasons for this apparent anomaly are open to diverse interpretations. The explanations that spring most readily to mind include the following:

1. Although the rabbis might have been perfectly capable of dealing with the philosophical implications of their statements, it is unreasonable to expect such intellectual rigour in the literary genres through which these traditions have been preserved. In particular, the genre of aggadic midrash derives largely from popular discourses that were preached in the synagogues to an unsophisticated audience, and whose objectives were inspirational rather than theological. Sermons in that spirit were better served by unbridled hyperbole than by scientific precision.
2. The rabbis (or at least some of them) were aware of the contemporary controversies surrounding the extent of divine omnipotence, but chose (for undisclosed reasons) not to relate to them in their expositions.
3. The rabbis avoided the study of philosophy altogether, and hence were entirely oblivious to the issues raised by their exegesis.

[41] See ibid., 348 ff.; *Legum Allegoria* 2:3; F. H. Colson and George Herbert Whitaker, eds., *Philo: with an English Translation*, ed. E. H. Wormington, 10 vols, The Loeb Classical Library (London and New York: William Heinemann and G. P. Putnam, 1929), 1:226–7: 'As with time, every number is younger than the universe; however God is prior to the universe, and he created it' (*πᾶς γὰρ ἀριθμὸς νεώτερος κόσμου ὡς καὶ χρόνος ὁ δὲ θεὸς πρεσβύτερος κόσμου και δημιουργός*). These statements relate to God himself, and it is not entirely clear that Philo would have applied them to the *logos* as well, though a claim to that effect was ascribed to him by later writers such as Isidore of Pelusium. See the extensive discussion in David T. Runia, 'Philo of Alexandria in Five Letters of Isidore of Pelusium', *The Studia Philonica Annual* 3 (1991): 299, 301, 304.

[42] On the phenomenon in general see Lieberman (n. 2 above). On the linguistic influences see the literature surveyed by Daniel Sperber, 'Greek and Latin Words in Rabbinic Literature: Prolegomena to a New Dictionary of Classical Words in Rabbinic Literature', *Bar-Ilan Annual* 14–15 (1977). On the rabbinic use of classical rhetoric see, for example, Henry A. Fischel, *Rabbinic Literature and Greco-Roman Philosophy: A Study of Epicurea and Rhetorica in Early Midrashic Writings*, Studia Post-Biblica. (Leiden: Brill, 1973); E. E. Hallevy, 'Jewish Thought and Greek Thought', *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 2, no. 4 (1982/3). On material culture see, for example, S. Krauss, *Qadmoniyyot ha-Talmud* (Berlin, Vienna, Tel Aviv: 1924–45).

[43] E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, trans. I. Abrahams (Cambridge, Mass., and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1987), 119, writes that the rabbis 'strenuously rejected' Galen's viewpoint. I see no indication that the rabbis were conscious of the criticisms that had been leveled by Galen or other philosophers.

The first of these considerations, though it must certainly be taken into account in any study of this sort, does not seem to be sufficient by itself to explain the data, or for that matter, the complete absence of systematic philosophical or theological literature among the ancient Jewish sages of Babylonia and the Land of Israel. The second possibility should probably be ruled out as arbitrary and improbable; while the last seems to correspond best with the evidence, and with the general situation in rabbinic literature, including the traditions that speak of a longstanding prohibition against the study of 'Greek wisdom'.[44] This example of the rabbis' unfamiliarity with philosophical discourse is consistent with patterns that have been noted by other scholars.[45]

Our examination of a small detail in the sages' exegesis should therefore be taken as a modest contribution to a more wide-ranging issue in the nature of talmudic thought, on which the last word remains to be said.

Alas, an exhaustive treatment of the relevant questions would require much more discussion than could be squeezed into a single article.

[44] As recorded in *bSoṭ.* 49b, *bBQ.* 82b, *bMen.* 64b and 99b, etc.

[45] See e.g. Judah Goldin, 'A Philosophic Session in a Tannaite Academy', in *Judah Goldin: Studies in Midrash and Related Literature*, ed. Barry L. Eichler and Jeffrey H. Tigay (Philadelphia, New York and Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1988). My evaluation of the material dovetails with the conclusions reached by Warren Zev Harvey, 'Rabbinic Attitudes Towards Philosophy', in *'Open Thou Mine Eyes . . . ': Essays on Aaggadah and Judaica Presented to Rabbi William G. Braude on His Eightieth Birthday and Dedicated to His Memory*, ed. Herman J. Blumberg et al. (Hoboken: KTAV, 1992). Cf. Saul Lieberman, 'How Much Greek in Jewish Palestine?', in *Biblical and Other Studies*, ed. A. Altman, Texts and Studies, Phillip W. Lown Institute of Advanced Jewish Studies (Brandeis University) (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962).