

SHE UNNAMES THEM!

AFTER URSULA LE GUIN

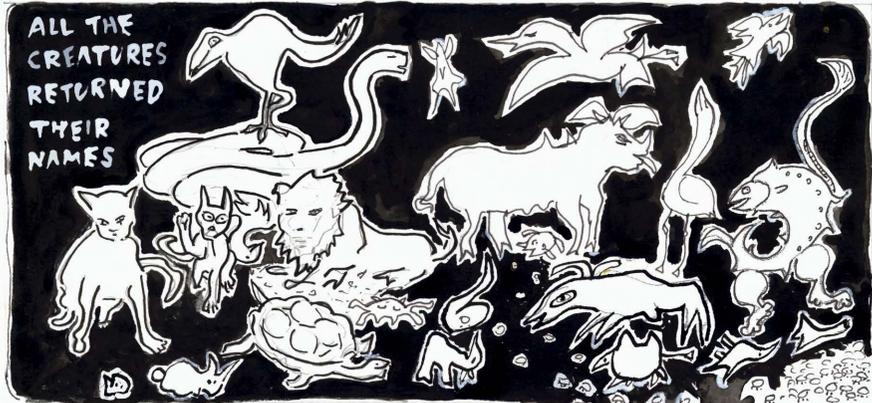


FIGURE 7. Rafael Rachel Neis, *She Unnames Them* (After Ursula K. LeGuin). Mixed media, 2022.

Multiplicity

A manatee in Sarasota, a crocodile basking along the Amazon River, a bacterium lining the gut of a feline who lives in a penthouse in Kyoto. The fiction of consciousness that stops some beings called human from seeing the threads that bind everyone and everything. Is this called knowing?

OTTERS, PIGEONS, ANTS, COWS. We are struck by the plenitude of life-forms that surround us. Eagles, kittens, mice, crabs. We imagine that it falls to us to distinguish between life's multiplicity by naming and sorting the creatures. Monkeys, elephants, unicorns, sirens. This impulse seems to surface for the Priestly and Yahwist authors. In Genesis 1, the Priestly authors sort the creatures into classes, according to origin and habitat, in the form of a staggered creation narrative. Creatures of various stripes are formed in the waters, the land, and the air, "according to their kinds." This drama is staged over a succession of days—thereby slowing while accounting for the swell of life—climaxing with the emergence of the human. In Leviticus 11 these authors resume their project of sorting through the binary classifications of pure/impure and permitted/forbidden. But, as we saw in the previous chapter, they also divided the groups that populate the largely generic schema of Genesis 1 into more particular kinds and even subdivided some of those "according to their kinds." Elsewhere in Leviticus, the Priestly authors scrutinized various kinds of domesticated cattle for cultic and sacrificial purposes and prohibited the mating of *different* species. The Yahwist writers in Genesis 2 have God engineer animals because "it is not good for Adam to be alone" (Gen 2:17). In their telling, God then brings each creature to Adam who, without hesitation, promptly names "every animal and bird of the heavens and to every living creature of the field" (Gen 2:20). Whether they ascribe this activity to divinity or to humanity, both sets of authors narrate the sorting and classification of animals and their kinds.

Each iteration offers a bit more detail—the creaturely realm conceived in Leviticus 11 is more elaborate than the one given in Genesis 1—and yet this will to know and name is still elegantly compact. Our focus in this chapter is on how the tannaim unrolled the relatively brief beastly bevy of Leviticus 11 and created a

more crowded creaturely coterie. I will pursue this by examining the Sifra, the tannaitic commentary on Leviticus. Focusing on its interpretations of Leviticus 11, I will make three interrelated arguments. First, I will argue that the Sifra's exegetical encounter with scripture is *itself* generative, licensing the multiplication of species and classificatory groupings. Second, I will show how the tannaitic commentators invoke the *language* of multiplication—*reviya*—as a key hermeneutic device for their propagation of classifications and species identifications. Third, I will show that the tannaim demonstrate awareness of the relationship of interpretative multiplication (*reviya*) to generative propagation (as in *peru u-revu*, reproduce and multiply), as demonstrated in the classificatory groups they create as well as in their accounts of spontaneous generation. It is difficult to find a precise analog to this layered enterprise of proliferation, exegetical, scriptural, and taxonomical. It is a very different effort than the relentlessly empirical gaze of Aristotle's natural history writings. Neither does it resemble Pliny's breathless collation and concatenation of peoples and animals and lands as a paeon to the Roman Empire and beyond.¹ Nor is it quite the moralizing scriptural bestiary of *Physiologus* (some time between the second and fourth centuries CE). Instead, the tannaim virtually join hands with God in filling out creation itself.

THE SIFRA

The Sifra is a running commentary on Leviticus, edited sometime in third-century Palestine, roughly around the same time as other tannaitic works.² Tannaitic writings are comprised of two rather different genres: midrashim, or run-along commentary on the Bible (of which the Sifra is but one instance), on the one hand, and topically organized, freestanding compendia exemplified by the Mishnah, on the other. As we follow key movements of the Sifra as it combs through Leviticus 11, we will observe an adamant adherence to the particles, words, and phrases of scripture.³ Yet I will argue that the Sifra is a compound product of its authors' interface with the Bible, those authors' ideas of scripture and reading, their larger frameworks of knowledge making, and the topics at hand—in this case, creaturely life-forms.

In keeping with the commentarial genre, the Sifra is at pains to render its workings transparent, whereas the Mishnah is organized in a relatively freestanding fashion.⁴ The Sifra is ostensibly and ostentatiously transparent about its methods for the proliferation of species and animals out of the relatively compact bestiary of Leviticus. It is seemingly constrained by the order, words, and groupings of the verses and phrases it tracks and follows. Yet some of its logics do not necessarily match contemporary ideas of what constitutes interpretation and may seem to our eyes to be patently "eisegetical"—reading into the text—rather than exegetical.⁵

The kind of run-along commentary evinced in the Sifra is referred to as *midrash halakhah*—which some might translate as "halakhic (or legal) exegesis." By this

usage, where *midrash* refers to the exegesis of scripture, scholars differentiate this kind of exegesis from post-tannaitic *midrash aggadah* or “homiletic or exegetical interpretation”—in other words, expositions on the Bible (e.g., *Leviticus Rabbah* versus *Genesis Rabbah*, respectively). There are significant stylistic and substantive differences between these types of biblical commentary: for instance, the Sifra tends to be more interested in the ritual implications and elaborations of scripture (sharing a fair amount of “halakhic” material found in the Mishnah and Tosefta). However, these characteristics of the Sifra fail to explain all of its substance. Specifically, the Sifra’s positioning as scriptural commentary, coupled with its significant interest in ritual rubrics (or halakhah), surely makes its discussions of nonhuman creatures different from, say, Aristotle’s motivations in discussing animals in the *Generation of Animals*, or Pliny’s in his *Natural History*. Yet the desire to extract and support ritual schemes from scripture cannot on its own explain the Sifra’s impulse to elaborate, specify, and identify animals in the ways that it does.

I often refer to the Sifra as if it were an agent—e.g., “the Sifra expounds”—particularly when the text of the Sifra states something *without* attributing it to a particular rabbinic sage. Such material represents the anonymous stratum of the Sifra. Occasionally, I will refer to particular tannaim (sages who lived between the first and early third centuries): this is when the Sifra attributes a particular homily or exegesis to a named rabbi.⁶ When relevant, I will also touch on the Sifre—a tannaitic exegetical commentary on Deuteronomy—for its insights into the rather brief recitation of the animal purity rules in Deuteronomy 14, which happen to be correspondingly far more concise than those of the Sifra on Leviticus. In reading the evidence of the Sifra, I ask about what creaturely world is conjured when rabbinic exegesis of a proliferative bent meets Leviticus 11.

FRAMING KNOWLEDGE ITSELF

The Sifra’s commentary on Leviticus 11 begins and ends in the same, revealing, way: by framing the enterprise of knowledge making itself. The biblical chapter begins with a pointed statement of its theme:

And God spoke unto Moses and to Aaron, saying to them, “Speak to the children of Israel, saying: ‘This (*zot*) is the living being that you may eat among all the animals that are on the earth.’” (Leviticus 11:1–2)

Focusing on parts of speech—such as the demonstrative pronoun “this”—the Sifra opens by conjuring the conditions in which the scriptural knowledge in question is transmitted. As is often the case in midrashic exegesis, “this” is understood literally as deixis involving fingers and hands. We thus learn that Moses declared that “*this* is the living creature that you may eat” (Lev 11:2), while “grasping” each and every permitted and prohibited creature in question and “displaying it” to the Israelites.⁷ This is a flamboyant, hands-on display of animal knowledge. This rabbinic

vision of Moses is akin to the way that Galen staged his vivisections of animals as performative, public spectacles.⁸ It also subtly conveys the kind of expertise that the tannaim are claiming for their own expansion of the Levitical bestiary.

Contrast this picture with that presented in the Sifre, the tannaitic run-along commentary on Deuteronomy. A shorter version of the animal purity rubrics, as mentioned above, appears in Deuteronomy 14. In its commentary there the Sifre includes a teaching by Rabbi Akiva, who trades on the implausibility of Moses having this kind of knowledge. “Was Moses a hunter or an archer?” he asks rhetorically. He argues that the knowledge in Deuteronomy 14 must have been of divine origin.⁹ The Sifra uses the impossibility of Moses having what is clearly a very particular kind of expertise, attributed (exclusively) to professionals, to assert the heavenly origins of the Bible.¹⁰ We might wonder whether this is meant to also apply to the zoological expansions of the rabbis.

The Sifra’s closing commentary on Leviticus 11, like its opening, takes its cue from the content of scripture, which itself approaches something of a summative and even explanatory framing. The Bible reminds Israelites of the departure from Egypt. It enjoins them to be holy the way that God is holy and to refrain from becoming impure through impure creatures (Leviticus 11:44–45) and then finishes as follows:

and this is the teaching of (*torat*) the animal, the fowl, and every living creature that swarms in the water and that creeps on the earth: to separate between impure and pure, and between the living thing that can be eaten and the living thing that cannot be eaten. (Leviticus 11:46–47)

From scripture the Sifra deduces that God’s very purpose in extracting the Israelites from Egypt was so that they would accept the “burden of commandments,” such that to undertake or refuse this obligation is tantamount to affirming or denying the Exodus. It glosses the injunction to be holy the way God is holy in the following way: “just as I (God) am *parush*, so too, you should be *perushim*.”¹¹ The term *parush* means abstemious, but it can also mean separate or distinct. The Sifra makes this doubled sense of separating or distinguishing oneself from others *by* distinguishing and separating among species (especially those that enter or come in contact with human bodies) explicit in an exegesis on a virtually identical phrase elsewhere in Leviticus.¹²

The closing words to the Sifra’s commentary on Leviticus 11 are even more indicative of its understanding of knowledge making or *torah* (teaching, instruction) about animals:

And what does “to separate [between the pure and the impure]” (Lev 11:47) come to indicate? It is not only to study but also to *know* which is impure and which is pure.¹³

Here the Sifra points to the added value of the words “separate” in verse 47 after the previous verse’s “teaching of (*torat*) the animal, the fowl” (verse 46) and so on. It

distinguishes knowing from mere study or repetition. Knowledge goes beyond: it allows for “separation” or the discerning capacity to create distinctions. In fact, it is this kind of “knowing” that arguably sponsors the very project of the Sifra and its proclivity for the enumeration and expansion that is classification itself.¹⁴ By this reckoning, knowledge is not only a grasping; it is a kind of *making*. Taking in the way the Sifra bookends its commentary on Leviticus 11, we are oriented in a rabbinic-onto-epistemic (being-knowing) enterprise founded in the tactile grasp of the animals, “what is known” (*be-yadu'ah*)—in other words, the objects of knowledge themselves—and in closing, we are inducted into a kind of discerning knowledge that goes beyond mere theoretical repetition.

EXPANDING THE LEVITICAL BESTIARY

In between this framing at the beginning and the end, the Sifra uses established exegetical techniques to elaborate the biblical text in multiple ways: with expansion (*ribbuy*), exclusion (*mi'ut*), and specifications. The dietary rules begin in Leviticus 11:2 with instructions to Israel about “the living being (*hayah*) that you may eat among all the animals (*behemah*) that are on the earth.” The verse that follows then details the criteria for such edible creatures: split hooves and chewing the cud. The Sifra explains that Leviticus 11:2 comes to narrow the import of Genesis 9:3: “Every swarming thing that lives (*hay*) is for you to eat; like the green vegetation, I have given you all.”¹⁵ Indeed, in Genesis 29:30, God offered land creatures, animals, and humans “all green vegetation to eat.” For the Sifra, Leviticus 11:2 refines the earlier permission to eat animals that was given to Noah to “this”—the specifics of “the living being (*hahayah*) that you may eat.” After clarifying that there are parts even within permitted animals that are forbidden for consumption, the Sifra inquires whether those criteria for pure animals only apply to nonhybrids. It concludes that the elements “*hayah*” (wild animal, in rabbinic Hebrew) and “*mi*” (from) and “*behemah*” come to include hybrids include hybrids (*le-rabot 'et ha-kilayim*).¹⁶ But the hybrid that is the product of a land animal and a sea creature is excluded—even if it bears the signs of purity—because of the verse’s words “that are on the earth.” Likewise, those sea creatures that have the requisite characteristics (*simanim*, or signs, i.e., split hooves and that chew the cud) are not permitted, again because of the stipulation “on the earth.”¹⁷ Even as it fortifies distinctions between land animals (and implicitly, quadrupeds) and sea creatures, the Sifra conjures a variety of sea/animal creature combinations that blur them, morphologically and reproductively.

The Sifra goes on to clarify that when pure animals birth offspring that look like impure kinds (spontaneously occurring rather than products of hybridization), despite lacking the requisite “signs,” these deliveries are nonetheless pure and edible. This it infers from “*hayah*” (living creature) in Leviticus 11:2, which also stands as a generic open signifier (to include such a case). Conversely, the Sifra rules that

a delivery of a seeming “pure” animal that “chews the cud and has split hooves” is in fact not permitted if it is “born to the impure.” The Sifra gives the example of “the cow born of the camel.”¹⁸ While we encountered this case in tBekhorot 1:9, it surfaces here as part of the Sifra’s teasing out of scenarios of species variation and it enters the expanding rabbinic coterie of creatures—one, as we’ll see, of many additions to what is explicit in Leviticus 11. Later, the Sifra refers back to these cases, given that it does permit the consumption of “pure [fish] that is inside the impure” but prohibits “the impure [fish] inside the pure.”¹⁹ It asks: “why did you see fit to say that with animals—that which is in the innards (*she-be-me’ey*) of the impure is impure, that which is in the innards (*she-be-me’ey*) of the pure is pure—but with fish, that is not so?”²⁰ The explanation is “because it is not of its products (*giddu-lav*.)” Whether this is because the host fish has ingested the fish within (tBekh 1:7) or because it is some other external entity the Sifra does not say.²¹ But we do know that when one finds one kind of fish inside another it was not gestated.²²

Key to all these extensions is the reliance on some scriptural element. One might add that most of these permutations that supplement the biblical text are not echoed in the parallel Mishnah and Tosefta sources. This is not to say that the Mishnah and Tosefta do not also expand the Levitical bestiary in their own ways—indeed, we see some parallels to these cases in chapters 1 and 5. But the Sifra’s efforts in this regard surpass them. The Sifra’s interpretive tactics toward the opening verses of Leviticus 11 showcase a robust set of preexisting *rabbinic* categories of animals (wild versus domesticated quadrupeds, pure versus impure, land animals versus sea animals, and combinations thereof) and generative possibilities (hybridization and spontaneously occurring species variation). Through its commentary, the Sifra introduces, deploys, and extends classificatory nomenclature, some of which is partially licensed by Leviticus. For instance, while there is no sense that Leviticus distinguishes vertebrates from invertebrates or creatures that reproduce sexually from those that do not, the Sifra does so, and it describes these categories using the classificatory nomenclature of *min* (kind) that originates in scripture.²³ It also formalizes the classificatory enterprise by which creatures are banded together according to morphological criteria, using the term *simanim* (signs) to designate the traits, characteristics, marks—like fins and scales, or chewing the cud and split hooves—by which one can identify creatures. The term itself, a calque of the Greek (*semeion*, *semeia*), is another example of a latter-day rabbinic imposition on the scriptural text.

The Sifra is occasionally ingeniously—if misleadingly—explicit about the contradictions between its classifications and the conspicuous absence thereof in the Bible. For instance, noting that the Bible’s usages of *hayah* (literally, living being) and *behemah* (animal or cattle) are incongruent with the ways the rabbis treat these as terms of art for the binary categories of wild animal and domesticated animal, respectively, the Sifra inventively (or incredibly) reads Leviticus’s inconsistent usage to infer that the domesticated animal is in the broader category of the

wild animal and vice versa.²⁴ But it doesn't supply us with a biblical justification for the wild/domesticated animal binary in the first place, thereby naturalizing the latter.

What follows are several additional instances in which the Sifra imports various preexisting categories into the biblical text. The exegetical hooks for these are sometimes explicitly justified; at other times, particular classes of creatures are more tenuously posed (e.g., as part of the Sifra's hypotheticals designed to fine-tune inclusions or exclusions intended by words or particles of scripture). The kinds and classes innovated by the rabbis include grouping creatures by their modes of generation, the presence or absence of bones, the number of feet involved in their locomotion, and the elemental substances from which they are generated. As we investigate these rabbinic kinds, we will also continue to reflect on the exegetical methodology itself (deduction, multiplication, analogy, similarity, a fortiori, and so on), capping our analysis with an exegesis by Rabbi Akiva that, I'll argue, reflects on the exegetical project of expanding the Levitical bestiary.

Generative Modes and In/Vertebrate Creatures

On four occasions in its commentary on Leviticus 11, the Sifra introduces a distinction among animals by virtue of their reproductive modes, specifically between those that reproduce sexually and those that do not.²⁵ These occur in the Sifra's commentary on Leviticus 11:10–11 (fish), Leviticus 11:29–31 (creeping creatures, *sheratsim*), Leviticus 11:29 (mice), and Leviticus 11:41–43 (crawling creatures, *remasim*). In two of these cases (fish and creepers), the further distinction—and permutation—in/vertebrate is also introduced. The two remaining cases (mice and crawlers) consider sexual reproduction alone.

In each of these examples, the Sifra uses the terminology of *periyah u-revivyah* (reproduction and multiplication) and describes creatures as either *pareh ve-raveh* (reproduces and multiplies), or not, language clearly drawing from the blessings to “reproduce and multiply” (*peru u-revu*) directed at human and nonhuman creatures in Genesis 1:22 and 26. In one such instance, the Sifra wonders whether a repeated word (“in the waters,” Lev 11:10 and 12) means that “the same kind that I permitted is the kind that I forbade.”²⁶ It then specifies that this permitted kind refers to sea creatures who are “vertebrate (*ba'al 'atsamot*) and that reproduce and multiply (*pareh ve-raveh*).”²⁷ Of course, it goes on to negate this proposition, denying that the prohibition against sea creatures without fins and scales are limited *only* of those who are “vertebrate (*ba'al 'atsamot*) and that reproduce and multiply (*pareh ve-raveh*).” The Sifra claims that the phrase, “and all that do not have fins and scales in the waters” (Lev 11:10), references additional forbidden kinds—namely, “vertebrates that do not reproduce and multiply; invertebrates that do reproduce and multiply; and even *galim* and *tsfarde'im* that grow in the sea and that grow on the land.”²⁸ How exactly the scriptural phrase in question supports these particular criteria—both reproductively and anatomically-morphologically

informed—and concomitant classes is not explicated.²⁹ Rather than being a binary classification consisting in a single criterion (reproduces sexually versus doesn't), the Sifra presents two criteria based on reproduction and the presence/absence of vertebrae. This makes for three permutations or groups. Those groups are layered onto the pre-existing biblical criteria of fish with/out fins and scales which had already divided them into pure and impure kinds.

Aristotle similarly divides creatures into two major groupings: blooded and bloodless. Those with blood have spines and are vertebrates—analogueous to the Sifra's *ba'alei atsamot* (those with bones).³⁰ Aristotle further distinguishes between those that generate through copulation (by male and female creatures) and those that generate spontaneously (and through copulation, “but out of putrescent soil and out of residues”). He observes that blooded animals mostly but not exclusively make up those who reproduce sexually, though some do not, and among bloodless animals there are those that reproduce sexually and those that are generated spontaneously.³¹ The Sifra's three classes—made up of permutations of the two criteria for reproduction and morphology—therefore echo Aristotle's primary divisions of animals, albeit, as noted, superimposed onto biblical distinctions via scriptural hooks that link Leviticus 11 to Genesis 1.

As for its nonsexual reproducers, the Sifra considers several specific examples of animals that proliferate without sexual reproduction. For example, the words, “these you may eat of *all* that are *in* the waters” (Lev 11:9), permit the incidental consumption of tiny creatures (insects) living in water from “cisterns, ditches, or caverns.”³² In tTerumot 7:11 Rabbi Judah declares that it is heretical to filter out such creatures from wine and vinegar. Compare this with Matthew's Jesus who rebukes those who strain a gnat while swallowing a camel (Matt. 23:24). While it permits eating small creatures while they are mixed with liquid, the Sifra later explicitly prohibits eating *yavhushim* once they've been filtered apart from water.³³ These are the creatures we encountered in chapter 1—namely, those in whose form certain uterine emissions were shaped (though recall that the latter were parsed as either menstrual material, or the products of same-species sexual reproduction, or neither, rather than as spontaneously generated entities). Such creatures were generally seen as generated by the liquid itself rather than of like progenitors.³⁴ Similarly, the Sifra refers to the “*yitushin* (mosquitoes or gnats) that are in figs and the flies (*zizin*) that are in lentils and the worms (*tolaim*) that are in dates and dried figs,” excluding them from the prohibition against consuming creatures that swarm “on the earth” (Lev 11:41).³⁵

The Sifra applies a restrictive hermeneutic to Leviticus 11:31, which describes the impurity caused by contact with dead creeping creatures—“all that swarms (*ha-sharets*).” Leviticus names several creatures (Lev 11:29–30), including “the *huldah* (weasel) and the mouse, and the *tsav* (lizard) according to its kinds (*lemin-eihu*).”³⁶ The Sifra reads the verb “swarm” in the term above in its generative sense of “proliferate.” An example of a biblical deployment of this meaning can be seen

in the postdiluvian instruction to Noah and company to “reproduce and multiply (*peru urevu*), swarm (*shirtsu*) in the earth, and multiply therein” (Gen 9:7). The Sifra here raises the possibility that “swarms” (*sharets*) in Leviticus 11:31 is meant to exclude creatures that do not sexually reproduce. It thus asks whether spontaneously generated creatures such as “the mouse that is half flesh and half earth, that does not swarm (*she-eino shorets*), do not convey impurity.” Building on this suggestion, the Sifra offers the following reasoning:

And it is logical (*ve-din hu*): it (scripture) made the *huldah* (weasel) impure and it made the mouse impure. Just as “*huldah*” is as it sounds (*kishmu’á*), so “mouse” is as it sounds (*kishmu’ó*). Or perhaps just as the *huldah* is that which reproduces and multiplies (*pareh ve-raveh*), so [must] the mouse be that which reproduces and multiplies. This excludes (*lehotsi*) [from impurity] the mouse that is half flesh and half earth, which does not reproduce and multiply.³⁷

Ultimately, however, the Sifra argues against this hypothetical, based on different logic, one that purports to partially *include* the half flesh and half earth mouse among those creatures that impurify:

[Rather] it (scripture) comes to teach you, “within the *sherets* (*ba-sherets*)” (Leviticus 11:29), to include (*lehavi*) the mouse that is half flesh and half earth. One who touches its flesh [part] will become impure; the earth [part]—will remain pure.³⁸

What we have is a creature that does not reproduce sexually, but that is a composite—part earth, part flesh. The Sifra reads such a creature into Leviticus 11:29: “these are those which shall be impure for you among the swarming creatures (*ba-sherets*) that swarm upon the earth, the *huldah*, the mouse.” On its face, *ba-sherets* consists of the preposition *be* (here translated as “among”) attached to *ha-sherets*, a collective noun meaning “the swarmer.” The Sifra focuses on the preposition *be* and the substantive noun *sherets*, to read something like this: “these are those which shall be impure for you *within* the swarming creature (*ba-sherets*).”³⁹ Thus, in the case of a composite mouse that is part flesh and part earth, if a human touches the fleshly part *within* the mouse’s body causes them to contract impurity (but not if they touch the earthy part). We encounter this earthy-fleshy spontaneously generated mouse in the Mishnah.⁴⁰ These mice also surface in the writings of both Pliny and the first-century BCE Greek historian Diodorus Siculus. Curiously, Pliny describes how, after the Nile floods, water and earth collaborate to generate these creatures, but incompletely, so that, “they are already alive in a part of their body, but the most recently formed part of their structure is still of earth.”⁴¹ The signature characteristic of spontaneously generated creatures is that they are not the products of same-species, dual, heterosexual, sexual coupling. In this sense, they are among the breakers of the rule that like begets like. Earth, silt, water, oil, and wine variously beget mice, flies, mosquitoes and so on. Similarly, rotting flesh or produce generate flies, maggots, and worms.⁴²

Quadrupeds versus Bipeds and Lactation

A striking species that the Sifra introduces to Leviticus's bestiary is that of the human; it is introduced through the frame of bipedalism. Additionally, it considers lactation as something that, while failing to bind *all* humans—presumably, though it is not explicit, as a gendered distinction—is something humans have in common with quadrupeds. Leviticus 11:4 discusses those animals that do not conform to the criteria of chewing the cud and having split hooves (Leviticus 11:3). The verse lists the camel as its first instance (chews the cud but doesn't have split hooves). Observing the repetition of "camel" in both Leviticus 11:4 and Deuteronomy 14:7, the Sifra reads this construed redundancy to be supplying additional information: the milk of an impure animal is forbidden in addition to its forbidden flesh. This discussion triggers the consideration of bipeds—those who walk on two (*mehalkhei shtayim*)—as part of the Sifra's commentary on Leviticus 11:3–4's pure and impure animals. Yet why the human is interpolated and marked as bipedal is unclear: perhaps the prior discussion of forbidden/impure flesh and milk brings to mind permitted milk, of which the human is an example.⁴³ It is important to recall that the zoological category of the mammal—creatures that nurse animals with milk secreted from their mammary glands—did not obtain in antiquity. The human is of course also significant as, in this case, it is not just subject to dietary rules but is potentially an object of them.

Here is how the human enters the conversation:⁴⁴

I might think that even the consumption of the flesh of bipeds and the milk of bipeds would be encompassed in the negative commandment [of "do not eat"]. This would be a matter of logic (*ve-din hu*): if with an [impure] animal (*behemah*) it was lenient with respect to touch (i.e., it is permitted to touch its body) but was stringent about its milk (which is forbidden for eating), surely with bipeds, where it was stringent with touch [when impure], it would be stringent regarding milk! Scripture comes to teach you, "*this* [you shall not eat," (Leviticus 11:4), excluding bipedal milk, which *is* permitted].

[Do] I exclude [from the prohibition] milk, which does not apply to all (since not all bipeds produce milk), but do I not exclude flesh that does apply to all? Scripture comes to teach you, "this [you shall not eat] . . . it is impure" (11:4): "this" (only the quadruped) is subject to a negative commandment against consumption, but the flesh of bipeds and the milk of bipeds are *not* subject to a negative commandment against their consumption.⁴⁵

The human/biped is linked, contrasted, and then joined again with the animal in this sequence. First it is juxtaposed via an a fortiori argument with the animal (*behemah*) as part of an argument for why human milk should also be forbidden. The claim is that surely human milk ought to be forbidden in the same way that milk of an impure animal is forbidden because the rules regarding contact with impure humans are stricter than those pertaining to animals. To be consistent,

the rules regarding consumption of human milk should be at least as strict. No, rejoins the Sifra, milk is in fact excluded from prohibition by reading the “this” in Leviticus 11:4 restrictively. But then, questions the Sifra, how is it that milk—which is not even something that all bipeds produce—is permitted, whereas flesh, which is something that all bipeds have, is prohibited? In its conclusion, the Sifra cites the verse’s “this” restrictively, to mean that the prohibition is limited to the consumption of animal meat and milk but not human flesh or milk.

The outcome of this seeming digression may seem surprising. It yokes the argument for the permissibility of consuming human milk to that of eating human flesh. This is a consequence of a highly formalist logic, one that seeks a kind of consistency and that is retrospectively hung on a slight biblical hook: the hard-working “this.” It is also worth emphasizing that the combination of permitting the consumption of human milk and flesh (or meat) while referring to the human as “those who walk on two” (alongside those who walk on four) has an animalizing effect. It becomes a way of highlighting the human species as part of a classificatory grouping—multilegged walkers—alongside certain other milk-producing nonhuman animals. This is one of the three occasions in tannaitic literature in which humans are called bipeds and in each of these they are compared to other animals. The other cases consider the im/purity of a different bodily substance: blood. In one, the Sifra asks whether the blood of “those who walk on two,” together with that of creeping creatures, eggs, fish, and locusts are included in the prohibition against consuming blood alongside the verse’s named “bird and animal (*behemah*)” (Lev 7:26).⁴⁶ In the third instance, mBikkurim 2:7 compares the blood of “those who walk on two” as “like” (*shaveh*), in different ways, that of the domesticated animal and that of the creeping creature.⁴⁷

Plato, Aristotle, and Galen also considered humans in terms of their bipedalism.⁴⁸ It is suggested in Plato’s *Statesman* that the human is a featherless bipedal land dweller.⁴⁹ The third-century CE Diogenes Laertius narrates how Diogenes of Sinope challenged this characterization by plucking a chicken and presenting it to the academy.⁵⁰ In response, “broad nails” was added to the definition. Aristotle grouped humans together with birds as “two-legged animals.”⁵¹ This attention to locomotion and leg number as a way of classifying animals appears in a variety of Greek and Roman philosophical and natural history texts.⁵² The Sifra speaks of “those who *walk* on two” rather than the “two-legged.” Perhaps it was inspired by the biblical chapter’s references to creatures by both the number of legs and their manner of locomotion. Leviticus 11 references the creature “that walks on four” (*haholekh ‘al ‘arba*), the flying creeper (*sherets* in Lev 11:20, 21, 23), the animal (Lev 11:27), and earth swarmers (Lev 11:42). In the last case, Leviticus specifies not only “those who walk on four,” but also “those who move on their belly” and “those that have multiple legs.” These phrasings refer to morphology and motion.

Regardless of these potential inspirations, the Sifra offers no scriptural justification for introducing this terminology and, perhaps more significantly, Leviticus 11 makes no reference to humans as a species (and, more broadly, scripture as a whole does not do so through the lens of morphology or motion).⁵³ As with many hierarchical schemas, it is an unmarked “normate” that is presumed and, which goes without saying, that reveals the scales of value behind the schema.⁵⁴ At this point in the narrative that is the Priestly layer of scripture, the authors need not highlight what they rendered so explicitly in the denouement of Genesis 1.1–2:4—the human vis-à-vis the remainder of creatures.⁵⁵ For them nonhumans are according to “their kind” or “their kinds” (in Gen 1 and Lev 11); the human, in its mimetic replication of the divine is not. The seemingly innocuous rabbinic variation on a term, to describe humans functionally and morphologically, which was both a staple in Greek and Roman natural history texts and which was also derived from descriptions of nonhuman beings in Leviticus 11, represents a significant intervention in and shift from the Priestly hierarchy of being. Here, as elsewhere, this name for humans appears in an ostensibly zoological context (in the sense of knowledge making about nonhuman animals), and allows for the comparison of human (pedalism and locomotion) to that of other animals. Not only this: here, as well as in the other instances, the human qua biped surfaces as food (meat) and drink (the latter as milk or blood). By querying whether the human can effectively consume itself, the tannaim close the circle—by rendering the human both subject and object of the Levitical classes.

Parahumans and Other Exotica

One effect of flattening the human to a term of art that focuses on anatomy and locomotion, and that considers it as a potential source of provisioning along with other animals, is to undo human distinctiveness. The Sifra on Leviticus makes this move—dulling human uniqueness—several times. In some of these cases it accomplishes this while simultaneously introducing exoticized parahuman, or human-adjacent, beings to the Levitical bestiary.⁵⁶ The Sifra does this with the following case of the siren, in an expansive reading (“to bring, *lehavi*”) of the word “*nefesh*” (being, also translatable as animate being, throat, breath, or soul) in Leviticus 11:10.⁵⁷

When discussing sea creatures, Leviticus 11:10 dubs “all that do not have fins and scales in the seas and in the rivers . . . of all the living creatures (*nefesh hayah*) that are in the waters . . .” as “prohibited.”⁵⁸ Leviticus further stipulates that not only may one not eat the flesh of such creatures, but also that their corpses (*nivlatam*) are forbidden (Lev 11:11). The Sifra glosses the word *hayah* (lit., “living being”) in the verse as the rabbinic term for wild animals (as opposed to domesticated animals, or the biblical *behemah*), and hence it discerns that *hayah* (in the phrase “living creatures, *nefesh hayah*”) refers to a “sea animal”

(*hayat hayam*). What ensues is a construed redundancy of the word *nefesh*, which it reads—pointing to the inclusion of the siren (*sirene*) among prohibited sea creatures—as follows:

["And all that do not have fins and scales in the seas and in the rivers, of every creeping creature of the waters, and of every living being (*nefesh hahayah*) of the waters that is in the waters—they (plural) are *sheqets* to you."]

"*hayah*"—this is the wild animal of the sea (*hayat hayam*).

"*nefesh*"—to include (*lehavi*) the siren (*sirene*). I might think that she causes tent impurity per Rabbi Hahinai. It therefore comes to teach you "this [is the instruction (*torah*): when a human (*adam*) dies in a tent, whoever enters the tent and whoever is in the tent shall be impure for seven days. Numbers 19:4]."⁵⁹

The potential inclusion of a siren is accomplished by an expansive exegesis.⁶⁰ As we see, the Sifra goes on to raise the possibility that the siren is, for all intents and purposes, a human when filtered through the frame of ritual purity.⁶¹ We learn that Rabbi Hahinai considers a siren's corpse to convey impurity in a manner uniquely associated with human bodies ("tent" impurity). The anonymous editorial voice of the Sifra promptly rejects this notion, reading the verse that governs human corpse impurity as excluding such humanlike sea creatures, "this [is the instruction: when a human dies in a tent]" (Num 19:14), restrictively (*mi'ut*).

What we have is a being who is recognizably human (*adam*) yet also a wild sea animal (*hayah, hayat hayam*) appended to Leviticus's list of sea beings that are impure for Israelite consumption.⁶² Classification comes into relief over her dead body: is it a "carcass" (*nevelah*) or is it a corpse (*met*) subject to that most severe impurity of the dead human body? It is therefore through a combination of questions regarding contact, consumption, and death that the Sifra classifies the siren; as it does for many other creatures in the chapter. We may contrast the apparent prohibition of Jewish contact with and consumption of the siren (and the particularities of its impurity) by the anonymous voice of the Sifra and the Sifra's allowance of the consumption of the milk and even, implicitly, the flesh, of humans. The introduction of the human and its look-alikes—those residing in the sea, and, as we'll see in the next chapter in more detail, also those on land—subjects the very species that is to uphold the classificatory enterprise of Leviticus to the same rubrics. Rather than enacting a sharp cleavage between the human and the animal, the tannaim splice and dice animals into an abundance of groupings—entertaining several additional means of doing so beyond those already present in Leviticus's polythetic im/pure classes. But unlike Leviticus, it even does something similar with the class of the human. To be sure, the Sifra is no *Systema naturae*—the comprehensive taxonomy of creatures penned by Linnaeus—but, as we will see in chapter 3, a similar debate testing the limits of the parahuman through its corpse impurity governs a wild humanlike creature, the field human. In the Sifra, the latter also surfaces as a member of a bevy of impure creatures whose dead bodies both convey impurity and are read into Leviticus 11:27.⁶³ In that little

menagerie, we find, alongside the field human, exoticized animals, such as the monkey, the sea dog, and the elephant, as well as more prosaic (but, as we'll see, multivalent) kinds like the marten (*huldat hasna'im*) and the hedgehog (*kipod*).⁶⁴ In chapter 3, we will revisit some of these tannaitic insertions into the Levitical bestiary, and consider how they find their way into the Mishnah and Tosefta in the company of other animals—that is, in the form of menageries.

While creatures like the parahuman, the monkey, and the elephant, were doubtless exoticized by the tannaim, spontaneously generated flies, mosquitoes, midges, and even earth mice—considered Egyptian phenomena by Aristotle and Pliny—were ubiquitous and rather more prosaic. The Sifra reads additional exotica into Leviticus, notably the Leviathan and the salamander, casting the former as a pure sea creature based on Job 41:7 and 22.⁶⁵ Leviathan is a creature who surfaces several times in the Bible (e.g., Job 40–41. A fearsome being, fire and smoke breathing (Job 41:11–13) from its mouth, Leviathan has multiple heads (Ps. 74:14), or just one (Job 40:31), and is in the company of another “mythical” creature—Behemoth (Job 40:29). God alternately crushes Leviathan and dispenses him as food (Ps. 74:14), punishes him (Isaiah 27:1), or plays with him (Ps. 104:26). In later rabbinic sources, Leviathan's placement among pure kinds means that its body will be consumed and its skin made into a tabernacle for the righteous.⁶⁶ While we cannot attribute these later ideas about the fate of Leviathan to the tannaim, it is not unreasonable to assume that the creature assumed larger-than-life proportions for them, being colored by biblical descriptions.

The salamander is inserted among the three kinds that the Sifra derives from Leviticus 11:29 (“the *holed*, the mouse, and the *tsav*, according to its kinds”). The Sifra takes “according to its kind (*le-minehu*)” to moderate the *tsav* and “to include kinds (*min*) of *tsav*,” including the *havarvar*, the *ben haneflim*, and the salamander (*salamandra*).⁶⁷ We will revisit the salamander in particular at the end of this chapter, but for now I ask us to consider both parahumans and other exotica as additional and salient examples of the Sifra's additive tendency—saturating the sparse Levitical lists with supplementary members. I will add that my reference to certain creatures as “exotica” is not to imply our contemporary evaluations, but to convey that the sense of uniqueness or attached wonder that the rabbis actively attached to certain beings. At the same time, however, the rabbis' and others' exoticization of certain creatures does not necessarily mean that they made any distinction between creatures that were “mythical” and “fantastical” and those that were “real.”

IDENTITY AND RESEMBLANCE

So far, we have encountered several instances of the Sifra reading classes and kinds into Leviticus 11, organizing them according to their modes of reproduction (sexual and spontaneous generation) or their anatomical and functional morphologies (in/vertebrate; poly/quadru/bipedalism) and introducing hybrids and spontaneously variant offspring, as well as exoticized creatures, including aquatic and

terrestrial parahumans. In addition to teasing out such kinds by way of restrictive or expansive readings of phrases, prepositions, and the like, the Sifra employs other techniques—such as construed redundancies—whether in the same verse and passage, or even with reference to verses elsewhere in scripture. This is done to *enumerate* species that are added to those named in Leviticus and to *identify* particular kinds in contemporary (tannaitic) terms. Now we will examine how the tannaim enumerated some of the groupings and classes in Leviticus 11 by means of identification and resemblance.

One example of such expansiveness comes in the guise of restriction (to exclude, *lehotsi*). In reading 11:29's list of forbidden (versus permitted) creeping creatures (*sheratsim*), the Sifra wonders if the sea mouse is included, making various arguments as to why it might be.⁶⁸ These arguments are refuted by pointing to the term “on the earth,” which is taken to exclude (*lehotsi*) the sea mouse. Even as it ultimately rejects the sea mouse as under discussion by the biblical verse, the Sifra has nonetheless expanded our bestiary. It is by such hermeneutic tricks, such as raising hypothetical inclusions or exclusions, that the Sifra draws more creatures into our purview.

The Sifra occasionally glosses particular terms for animals by identifying them as kinds known to contemporaries or by providing specific examples. Thus, it glosses the creeping creature the *tsav* as the *tsav*: in other words, it affirms that the biblical Hebrew term stands for the same creature as the term known by *tsav* in tannaitic Hebrew, demonstrating that there could be uncertainty about such terminological consistency.⁶⁹ Contrast this affirmation with the Sifra's identification of various permitted flying insects with different terms: the biblical *arbeh* is the *govay*; the biblical *sulam* is the *rashum*; the *hargol* is the *nafol*; and the *hagav* is the *nudayan*.⁷⁰ The Sifra defines the creature that “goes on its belly” (Lev 11:42) as the snake (*nahash*),⁷¹ bringing the *kifonit* as an example (*kegon*) of a fish with multiple fins and scales (in a literalized reading of Leviticus 11:9's plurals).⁷² The naming of the *kifonit* as an example serves to inspire and legitimate the reader in their own efforts to supply additional examples.

We observe a multitude of such moves at play as the Sifra tackles the list of prohibited birds in Leviticus 11:14–19. It begins with a teaching of Rabbi Akiva that rests on repetition (*heqesh*), albeit with slight variation, in Leviticus 11:14 and Deuteronomy 14:13, concluding that the *ra'ah* bird is in fact the same species (*min*) as the *ayah* kind.⁷³ It then parses the phrase, “every ‘*orev* according to its kinds” (Lev 11:15), extracting more kinds as it goes. First, it glosses the word ‘*orev* (commonly translated as raven) as the ‘*orev*: this seemingly innocuous interpretation affirms that the biblical language designates the same referent as tannaitic terminology and makes explicit the exegetical methodology licensing further extrapolations. Delving deeper, the Sifra reads “every ‘*orev*” to include (*lehavi*) the “‘*orev* of the valley” and the “‘*orev* that flies at the head of the doves (*yonim*).” These approximate what we might call “varieties”—that is, subdivisions of “species” in the Linnaean classificatory scheme. The Sifra reads the additional term, “according to its kind

(*lemino*),” as including (*lehavi*) *zarzirim* (starlings) and the *snunit* (swallow). Continuing to the *nets* in 11:16, the Sifra informs us, “this is the offspring of the *nets* (hawk).” It then reads “according to its kinds (*lemineihu*),” which follows *nets* in 11:16 to include (*lehavi*) another kind (the falcon). Finally, the Sifra stands back and, surveying the bird list in 11:14–19, asks why the Bible deploys the expression, “according to its kind (*min*),” four times. Its response is instructive:

For I might think that these [kinds alone] are forbidden and these (everything else) is permitted. Therefore, scripture comes to teach you “according to its kind,” “according to its kind”—it expanded (*ribah*). How so? Learn from what is explicit. Just as the *nesher* which is explicitly mentioned, has no additional claw, does not have crop, does not have a claw that peels easily, and grasps [its prey] and eats: so, all like it (*kesheyotseh bo*) are forbidden.⁷⁴ Just as turtledoves and pigeons are particular in having an additional claw, a crop, a claw that peels easily and do not grasp and eat, so, all like it (*kesheyotseh bo*) are permitted.⁷⁵

The Sifra claims that without the authorization of the repeated “according to its kind(s),” the Bible’s list of forbidden fowl would have been exhaustive. With it—and here the Sifra ostensibly lays its own reading method bare—scripture invites the proliferation (*ribbuy*) of additional species. The Sifra isolates particular features of those named “explicitly” to deduce four common traits—mostly morphological—and to extrapolate to others like it (*kesheyotseh bo*). And “according to its kind(s)” further authorizes the Sifra to deduce the converse: those fowl that do *not* possess these four traits are then understood as permitted and pure birds (it gives turtledoves and pigeons as examples).⁷⁶ What the Sifra has essentially done here is to find significant traits or, in keeping with tannaitic language, signs (*simanim*), to parse the differences between the listed forbidden birds and the unnamed permitted ones. In a sense this relates to what the zoologists mentioned in this book’s introduction sought to argue about the inclusion of yet another species of Barbet. The gaze that selects such features of distinction or similarity is the one that creates the grounds for inclusion and exclusion, as we showed in that (once) disputed case.

Arguably, all this exegetical labor is necessary with birds because, as the Mishnah admits, “the signs (*simanim*) of [pure] domesticated animals and of [pure] wild animals are stated in the Torah (i.e., split hooves and chews cud). The characteristics of [pure] birds are not stated.”⁷⁷ In other words, unlike quadrupeds and fish, for instance, no particular criteria or characteristics for inclusion or exclusion are given. Leviticus simply lists twenty kinds that are forbidden without further comment on the list’s logic and with no indication of what is permitted (though we may infer that birds that can be sacrificed are among them). This likely] accounts for why the tannaim recommend that one consult those in possession of the transmitted tradition (*masoret*) about the identification of bird species and rely on hunters’ expertise about pure kinds (tBekhorot 1:12). Such comments testify that the usual rabbinic exegetical tools or traditions used to supplement or “uncover” scripture’s lacunae are insufficient and that this requires extrarabbinic sources of knowledge. Given the absence of specific “signs,” the Sifra asks whether we can infer

that any and all birds unmentioned in the list of prohibited birds are permitted: “I might think that these [kinds alone] are forbidden and these (everything else) is permitted.” In working out its negative response to this question, the Sifra then generates its criteria for forbidden and permitted birds.

The Sifra stages similar sequences—identification, enumeration, and elaboration—in the subsequent exegetical unit on flying creepers (Lev 11:20–25) at some length.⁷⁸ This time, the Sifra relies on another four-time repetition of “according to its kind (*lemineihu*)” in these verses to sponsor two separate expansions and inclusions. The first looks for morphological traits, much as in the bird case, to generation inclusion beyond the creepers listed in the biblical verse and to thereby “expand (*lerabot*) to other species (*minim*)” by deducing from what is explicitly mentioned (*meforash*). The second expands to include (*lehavi*) specific, named creatures.

The third time the Sifra performs this kind of inductive and expansive enumeration of the Levitical bestiary pertains to earth crawlers (*sheratsim*, 11:29–31) and it follows a slightly different pattern. It is even more explicit about method, pointing to the search for likeness or resemblance (*dimyon*), as it searches for shared traits among the named creatures. The verse in question reads: “all that go on their belly, and all that go upon four, including all that have many feet; all swarming things that swarm upon the earth, you shall not eat them, for they are forbidden (*sheqets*)” (Leviticus 11:42). The Sifra reads the biblical text for characteristics rather than as an exhaustive list of prohibited species. It proceeds to break up the phrases “all that go upon the belly,” “all that go upon four,” and “all that have many feet” where the mode of locomotion or feature is taken to refer to a particular species (the snake, the scorpion, and the centipede, respectively), whereas the words for “all” or “including” refer to a particular similar creature (e.g., the snail and the beetle) and to “those that resemble the like (*hadomeh ladomeh*).”

Here is the Sifra at work:

“go on its belly,” this is the snake; “all that go [on their belly],” comes to include (*lehavi*) the worms (*shalshulin*)⁷⁹ and those that resemble the like (*hadomeh ladomeh*).

“[all that] go upon four,” this is the scorpion (*akrav*); “all that go,” comes to include (*lehavi*) the beetle (*hipushit*)⁸⁰ and those that resemble the like (*hadomeh ladomeh*).

“[all that have] many feet,” this is the centipede (*nidal*);⁸¹ “and all,” comes to include those that look alike (*hadomeh*) and those that resemble the like (*hadomeh ladomeh*).⁸²

These three sequences are structured as a simple identification (snake, scorpion, centipede), followed by an inclusive enumeration based on the word “all” (snails, beetle, the like), and capped by a method for attenuated expansion (those that resemble the like). The third sequence differs somewhat from the preceding two in not offering a specific content to the inclusive enumeration; instead, it simply declares that “all” includes that which is like (*ha-domeh*), leaving it for the auditor to figure out what creatures these might be. Rather than outlining specific traits (aside from those already in the biblical verse), this exegesis provides



FIGURE 8. Rafael Rachel Neis, *Birds, Birds, Birds*. Mixed media, 2020.

a method: a morphological gaze that scans for resemblance, and that is attenuated to the prior enumeration—whether snail or beetle or a *nidal*-like creature. The third sequence’s ostensibly vague enumeration of “that which is like (the *nidal*)” is actually instructive. We infer that the relationship between resemblance-based expansion and identification—that is, between “that which is like” the *nidal* and the *nidal*, between the *shilshulin* and the snake, and between the *hipushit* and the scorpion—is founded on likeness. Then, the expansion (derived from “all”) is built on something of a second remove of similitude. These first and second degrees of resemblance—or what we might think of as resemblance proliferating resemblances—testify to some of the difficulties we have already alluded to in clustering kinds. In particular, the phrasing of examples followed by a second-degree resemblance, is a way to promise that others—besides the authors of the Sifra—will continue to supply additional creatures to this ever-growing bestiary. As readers, we know that it is illustrative rather than exhaustive.

GENERATIVE READING, PROLIFERATING SPECIES

Our tour through the Sifra on Leviticus 11 highlights its creative and generative reading practices in identifying and elaborating the Bible’s bestiary. The Sifra will neutrally present nonscriptural technical terms for species and classifications, but it also often strains to derive creatures from scripture. For obvious reasons, the exegetical technique of *ribbuy* (multiplication, expansion) is heavily enlisted. In this final portion of our chapter, I focus on the Sifra’s closing exegesis of scripture’s land crawlers (*sheratsim*), and on a telling intervention by Rabbi Akiva that comes on the tails of the exoticized salamander.

Let us first briefly outline the literary context in which Rabbi Akiva’s homily is incorporated. The verse under scrutiny is 11:29: “and these will be impure for you among the land crawler (*sherets*) that swarms on the earth: the *hoted*, the mouse, and the *tsav* according to its kinds.” The mouse—as we saw—generates a consideration of the spontaneously generated earth-flesh mouse. This directly follows it:

“The *tsav*”—this is the *tsav*.

“According to its kinds (*le-mineihu*)” to multiply (*lerabot*) the kinds of (*minav*) *tsav*: the *havarvar*, the *ben haneflim*, and the *salamandra*.⁸³

This identification and then expansive multiplication (*le-rabot*, *ribbuy*) of kinds precedes the following:

When Rabbi Akiva would encounter this verse he would declare, “how multiple are your works, O God (Ps. 104:24). You have creatures (*beriyot*) that grow (*gedelot*) in the sea and those that grow on the dry land. Those that grow in the sea, if they

transferred to the dry land, they would die. Those that grow on the land, if they spread to the sea, they would die. [You have] those that grow in fire and those that grow in air. Those that grow in fire, if they relocate to the air, they would die. Those that grow in air, if they relocate to the fire, they would die. The place of life for this one is death for that one; the place of life for that one is death for this one.” And he would say, “how multiple are your works, O God!” (Ps. 104:24).⁸⁴

A compound of concepts suffuses this homily, some of which derive from the text of Leviticus 11 and the cited verse from Psalms. Rabbi Akiva also subtly references Genesis. The latter, specifically, seeds the notion of creatures originating in specific material elements:

And God said, “Let the waters swarm with the swarm of living creatures (*sherets nefesh hayah*) and let fowl fly over the earth in the open firmament of heaven” (Gen 1:20).

And God said, “Let the earth bring forth the living creature after its kind, cattle, and creeping thing, and beast of the earth after its kind.” And it was so. (Gen 1:24)

Genesis 2 is even more explicit about God creating both Adam “from the dust of earth” (2:7) and “all the living creatures of the field (*hayat ha-sadeh*) and all the birds of the heavens from the earth” (Gen 2:19). But this scriptural legacy is not explicitly signaled in Rabbi Akiva’s midrash. His explication seems to draw on the notion that distinct creatures derive from the four elements: air, water, earth, and fire.⁸⁵ Variations of this idea reverberate across the writings of Plato and Aristotle in the fourth century BCE through to Philo and Aelian in late antiquity. Aristotle describes how “certain creatures, slightly larger than flies, and winged” are “generated (*gignetai*) in fire”—specifically, the fire of Cypriot smiths. In fact, he puts it thus:

these jump and crawl through the fire. And they die when kept away from fire, just as the larvae previously mentioned die when kept away from snow. The fact that certain animal structures exist which really cannot be burnt is evident from the salamander, which, so they say, puts the fire out by crawling through it.⁸⁶

Here we find not only a version of Rabbi Akiva’s observation that creatures that move from their originating substance will die, but also the association of this idea with the salamander being at home in the fire.⁸⁷ It is clear that Rabbi Akiva’s homily is deliberately placed not only as his response to the verse in Leviticus (as narrated by the Sifra) but, more specifically, also as a response to the—just mentioned—wondrous *salamandra*, which is thereby naturalized into the very fabric of the verse. In other words, Rabbi Akiva’s acclamation only *makes sense* if we have read or already know the previous exegesis regarding the salamander. This hides in plain view the ways that the Sifra folds its *own* expansive readings into an “encounter” with “this verse.”

The association of the fire-born with one of the four elements is evident in Philo's incorporation of the "fire-born (*purigona*)" into a four-part schema:

For the universe must be filled through and through with life (*epsuchōsthai*), and each of its primary elementary divisions contains the forms of life which are akin and suited to it. The earth has the creatures of the land, the sea and the rivers those that live in water, fire the fire-born, which are said to be found especially in Macedonia, and heaven has the stars.⁸⁸

As with Aristotle, and various other versions of this idea, Philo grounds the general principle of four elements generating and sustaining particular creatures in a geographically specific example of the fire-born—Macedonia rather than Cyprus—even though he does not mention the salamander by name. Philo's observations here ground a preceding assertion that invisible angels (commonly known as demons) populate the air and are generated by it. For Philo this principle of the universe's totally generative properties means that all elements are animated (*epsuchōsthai*).

The second- and third-century CE Roman naturalist Aelian more closely echoes Aristotle. He cites the four-element principle not just in its affirmative (creatures are sustained in their respective elements) but also in its negative (they cannot survive if relocated):

That living creatures should be born upon the mountains, in the air, and in the sea, is no great marvel (*thauma*), since matter, food, and nature are the cause. But that there should spring from fire winged creatures which men call "Fire-born," and that these should live and flourish in it, flying to and fro about it, is a startling (*ekplēktikon*) fact. And what is more extraordinary (*thauma*), when these creatures stray outside the range of the heat to which they are accustomed and take in cold air, they at once perish. And why they should be born in the fire and die in the air others must explain.⁸⁹

Aelian's explicit inability to give an explanation buttresses the expressions of wonder—*thauma* (twice) and *ekplēktikon*—that punctuate his description of the fire-born creature. This juxtaposition of marvel with the fire-born finds its counterpart in Rabbi Akiva's liturgical acclamation "how multiple (or great) are your works!" (Ps. 104:24), which opens and closes his homily.

Let us further scrutinize Psalm 104:24, which sandwiches Rabbi Akiva's citation of the elements generating and sustaining specific creatures:

How multiple (*rabu*) are your makings, O God,
(or: How your works have multiplied, O God)
all of them you wrought in wisdom;
the earth has filled (*mal'ah ha'arets*) with your creations (*kinyanekha*).

This verse is nestled in Psalm 104, a chapter studded with an evocative praise of God's earthly creation and its sustenance. God channels the waters into springs, which flow into valleys and onward to nourish the beasts of the field and wild donkeys, while birds erupt in song. Immediately following our verse (104:24), we

TABLE 1

Psalm 104:24	Genesis 1:28
How they are multiple (<i>rabu</i>)* your makings, O God, (or how your works have multiplied, O God,) all of them you made in wisdom; the earth has filled (<i>mal'ah ha'arets</i>) with your creations (<i>kinyanekha</i>).	And God blessed them; and God said unto them: "Be fruitful, and multiply (<i>u-revu</i>), and fill the earth (<i>u-mil'u et ha'arets</i>) and subdue it; and dominate over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that creeps upon the earth."

*Or "how they have multiplied."

hear of the "countless swarming creatures (*remes ve-ein mispar*)" as well as the "great and small living beings (*hayot*)" that populate the "vast sea" (104:25), and we encounter God frolicking with the Leviathan (104:26). The chapter as a whole speaks to the plenitude, magnitude, and variety of creation. Robert Alter notes how the word *remes* (swarming creature) invokes the "vocabulary of the Priestly creation story," describing the Psalm as "a poetic free improvisation on themes from the creation story at the beginning of Genesis."⁹⁰

Just as verse 24 is not the only verse of praise in Psalm 104, so is the entire chapter not the only one in the book of Psalms that celebrates God's creation. I believe that the homilist in the Sifra selected Psalm 104:24 for its pointed allusion to Genesis 1:28. Setting the verses side by side helps us see this.

The repeated deployment of "making" (your makings—*ma'asekha*, you made—*asita*) in Psalms 104:24 tugs at Genesis 1's repeated description of God's acts of creation in these terms (and [they] made, *va-ya'as*: Gen 1:7, 16, 25, 31). More specifically and strikingly, the Psalm alludes to Genesis 1:28: "reproduce and multiply and fill the earth (*peru u-revu u-mil'u et ha'arets*)," as the former describes "how multiple (*rabu*)" and "the earth has filled (*mal'ah ha'arets*)." Rabbi Akiva brings these dimensions of the Psalm—*reviyah* as multiplicity in both its quantitative and reproductive sense, coupled with the proliferative filling (*miluy*) the earth (*ha'arets*)—into conversation with Leviticus 11:29, while threading in Genesis 1. So, too, in describing the wondrous fashioning of "creatures (*beriyot*)," the homily alludes to the iterated verb to describe divine action in Genesis 1: create. Most notably, it summons the words, "in the beginning God created (*bara*) . . ." (Gen 1:1).⁹¹

It is my contention that Rabbi Akiva's midrash is a paean to multiplication itself, on several (even multiple) registers. It obviously praises the wondrous plenitude of divine creation. Crucially, the homily applauds exegetical multiplicity, particularly the proliferative mechanism of *ribbuy*. Additionally, it celebrates the many and multiple ways that different life-forms come to be. Indeed, this midrash trails two exegeses that themselves emphasize different dimensions of multiplication (*ribbuy*): first, reproductive multiplicity, in the discussion of creatures that do or do not sexually reproduce or multiply (*pareh ve-raveh*);⁹² and second, hermeneutic multiplication through the expansive method of *ribbuy* (lit., plurality or

expansion), in which the term *lemineihu* (according to its kinds) alludes to additional species like the salamander. These senses of multiplication are extended to the creatures that are generated (multiplied) in each of the four elements and locations. Taken together, the phrase “how multiple (*rabu*)!” (Ps. 104:24) and the later part of the same verse “your creations fill the earth (*malah ha'arets*)”⁹³ cite Genesis 1:27—“reproduce and multiply and fill the earth (*peru u-revu u-milu et haarets*). By highlighting these key terms of multiplication, filling, and earth, Rabbi Akiva's midrash recalls Philo on how the world is suffused “through and through with life.” Leviticus, when literarily and associatively crossed in this way with both the psalm and Genesis 1, argues not for an originary and finite creation (or “genesis”) but rather for iterative and ongoing *generation*.

Just as the psalm expresses wonder at the “countless” creatures “great and small” that populate the “vast sea” (Ps. 104:25), so does Rabbi Akiva marvel at this surplus. His quadruple elemental theory of generation means that no parts of the earth—even fire!—are devoid of life, and it supplies a sense of delight in response to the catalogs of Leviticus.⁹⁴ Fascinatingly, both the verse in Psalms and Rabbi Akiva's exegesis redirect the objects of the blessing in Genesis 1:28. While Genesis 1:28 in context is ostensibly aimed at humanity and accompanies their domination of other kinds, here it becomes an ode to nonhuman creatures (*beriyot*).⁹⁵

Besides the above resonances of *ribbuy* as content (multiplication and growing) and mode (reproduction), there is a third meaning that the Sifra engenders. Rabbi Akiva's homily is a paeon to *ribbuy* as a hermeneutic method: the ways that *midrash* itself proliferates and expands.⁹⁶ This dimension of *ribbuy* is a pronounced one; its tracks are laid across this passage of the Sifra, and indeed through the entire commentary on this chapter of Leviticus. Rabbi Akiva's salutation of hermeneutic generativity and proliferation fits well not only with the various registers and contents of the Sifra's passage at hand, but also with his characteristic exegetical disposition. This style of exegesis, which finds meaning and which posits surplus and redundancy at every point in order to so, was associated with him and his “school.”

CONCLUSION

This chapter has focused on the Sifra's commentary on Leviticus 11. We began by noting its framings of knowledge as hands-on (“this”) and actively discerning (knowing rather than merely learning). The physicalized grasping of “this” is echoed by the ways that many people in late antiquity were quite literally in touch with a variety of nonhuman animals, in ways that many in the contemporary Global North, are not. If we compare this approach to that of the Sifra's commentary on Deuteronomy 14 which sees zoological knowledge as the province of the hunter or God, we get a sense of how the Sifra seeks to embolden rather than chasten its prospective readers. Indeed, I aver that the

very techniques the Sifra deploys to expand the Levitical bestiary are designed to be taken up and further embellished.

I have sought to show that the Sifra imports multiple categories and kinds (some with analogs in ancient or contemporary Greek and Roman sources) into the biblical text, sometimes explicitly justifying them, at other times simply deploying them as though they were obvious. I have made my case that this extrapolation, often unsubtly populates and extends the Levitical bestiary well beyond its stated contents. The Sifra similarly overtly expands the species of Leviticus through various hermeneutic tools, gleaning from repetition, construed redundancy, resemblance-based extrapolations, and, of course, expansion (*ribbuy*). We gain many more individual species and varieties, including bipeds/quadruped/multipeds, exoticized creatures like the quasi-human siren, the field human, or the salamander, as well as classes of kinds that distinguish among domesticated/wild, sexual/nonsexual reproducers, in/vertebrates, not to mention the material elements from which beings originate (fire, earth, water, air).

The human finds its place among these kinds and expansions. It enters on at least three notable occasions. First, as a bipedal walker: the Sifra summons “commonplace” characterizations of the human in antiquity. It also assimilates the biped conceptually among the quadruped and multiped walkers or belly crawlers of Leviticus. Fascinatingly, and similar to what occurs other ancient contexts, as a biped the human becomes animalized. In the Sifra it is treated as an object whose flesh is potentially edible and whose blood or milk can be imbibed. The human also figures via its seaworthy doppelgänger (the siren) and its “wild” terrestrial version (the *adne ha-sadeh*). In the latter case, it is listed among other “wild” exoticized creatures like the monkey and the elephant. We will investigate this juxtaposition of parahumans among other “exotica” in chapter 3. The Sifra considers the siren over its dead body, presenting a minority view in which it has humanlike corpse impurity. Last but not least, Rabbi Akiva’s homily takes what is often seen as the signal obligation of humans—*periyah u-revayah*—to underpin the divine proliferation of *all* life-forms. We thus observe the following: to the extent that the Sifra introduces the human into the Levitical bestiary, it presents the human as one creature among many other kinds: humans proliferate and die, and potentially have their bodies consumed, in the ways that various other animals can. And, as with other creatures enumerated into Leviticus, the human appears in groups and categories that are rather novel to the Bible and that have little to do with cherished ideas of sacred exceptionalism, including propagation as such.

Having argued that the Sifra expands the Levitical bestiary not only in terms of particular kinds but, more substantively, in terms of multiple classificatory frames and hermeneutic licenses—thereby enlisting the reader to take this method in their own hands—I also claimed that Rabbi Akiva’s exegetical “encounter” with a particular verse serves as a model for this method. Just as augmentation begets augmentation, or—as we saw in the three sets of exegeses, in which “the like and

those that resemble it”—resemblance begets resemblance, so too is there an infectious generative license in the encounter with Leviticus.⁹⁷ Instead of particles of earth or sparks of fire begetting life-forms, Akivan exegesis allows for creative generation in the smallest substance and elements of scripture itself.

Rabbi Akiva's expansive and procreative approach to midrash is emblematic of the general orientation of the Sifra and the Sifre on Deuteronomy. It is in contrast, in conflict even, with the approach characteristic of Rabbi Ishmael (or the Ishmaelian approach), which is more restrained (an example of the latter is the Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael on Exodus). Intriguingly, the Sifra itself narrates something of this interpretive conflict—strikingly, in terms drawing on nonhuman reproductive capacity. Instigated by the question “*u-minayin le-rabot?* (and from where do we expand?),” Rabbi Eliezer extracts four successive extensions from the particle “and” (*ve*) in a particular word (“*and* the garment,” Leviticus 13:47). This elicits the following exchange:

Rabbi Ishmael said to him, “Rabbi, behold you say to scripture, ‘be silent while I interpret you.’” Rabbi Eliezer responded to him: “Ishmael, you are a mountain-palm.”⁹⁸

Ishmael accuses Eliezer—whose approach is patently Akivan—of an exegetical method that is tantamount to suppressing the voice of the scriptural text itself by overlaying it with unseemly impositions. Scripture here is personified, potentially vocal, but wrongly silenced. Eliezer's response is instructive, trading as it does on the same license to multiply and generate readings from tiny scriptural elements. Calling his student-colleague a mountain palm, he points to the latter's generative incapacity, since mountain palms were thought to produce few and low-quality fruits.⁹⁹ Despite including this powerful critique of the dangers of overly creative reading, the Sifra runs from the dangers of sterility. It pursues “procreative” reading to its fullest, inviting future readers to supplement scripture further.