

# THOSE RABBIS!

Yerushalmi  
Niddah 3:2, 50c





FIGURE 14. Rafael Rachel Neis, *Those Rabbis*. Ink on paper, published in *The Huckleberry Notice*, Winter 2022.



## Epilogue

*There was a case of a woman from Sidon who three times expelled a likeness  
of a raven.*

—TnIDDAH 4:6

*I think by now it's pretty clear  
Most animals are somehow queer,  
But Gluttons, Grunts, the Wanderoo  
Are beasts we haven't time to do,  
And though you'd like the Pangolin  
There isn't room to put him in.  
The Dugong, too, is queer. And then  
The queerest things of all are Men!  
They'd need two books, or even three  
To show how odd they like to be.*

—CHARLES MORTIMER, "TAIL PIECE," *SOME QUEER ANIMALS AND WHY*

A panoply of creatures populates late ancient rabbinic literature. There are too many "beings we haven't had time to do," and places and sources we have yet to visit. A perverse premise and effort instigated and sustained this project: to read the rabbis specifically for their "science" (less anachronistically perhaps, "natural history.") This was partly motivated by my wish to upset the overly simplistic association between "antiquity" and Greece or Rome and to unseat Christianity as the naturalized unmarked "late antiquity" from which everything else deviates. Together these two still dominant—though increasingly challenged—moves in ancient studies serve to foreground an "antiquity" that too easily becomes both foil and progenitor of a European "modernity" and a Euro-American present.

To decenter Greek and Roman sources in conversations about antiquity is also to collaborate in more recent work in decolonizing knowledge making inside and outside the academy. This means not simply "adding" rabbinics to the mix in a liberal project of "inclusion." Rather, I hope that this romp through a sliver of

rabbinic sources, alongside various others, can allow us to loosen our grip on what we think of *as* knowledge, *as* science, *as* species, *as* sexgender, *as* “reproduction,” and *as* sources of authority (ancient and present). Opening up these frameworks of *our* own knowledge making and centering resources that do not appear to be *as* obviously concerned with creaturely life as Pliny’s *Natural History*, or *as* focused on generation as Aristotle’s *Generation of Animals*, also attunes us to the ways queer creatures escaped the rabbis’ (and, dare we say, Aristotle’s and Pliny’s?) grasp. And ours. If, as we saw in the Sifre, to know the creatures means grasping or possessing (Sifra Sheratsim 2:1), epistemic justice can entail letting go.

. . .

As I have approached late antiquity through this book, we have spent a lot of time with sources that may seem patently “absurd” or “unrealistic” from “*our*” perspective and that could be dismissed as exercises in scholastic casuistry, legalistic hypotheticals, or thought experiments. Instead, I have suggested that we take these scenarios and debates as constitutive of ancient world making. By demonstrating that the details of these texts make a difference, I have sought to show that they open up a much more complex and surprising world than is usually ascribed to the rabbis.

I have centered sources that at first glance seem marginal to the great histories of science. Their oddness and illegibility as knowledge, given their idiomatic and ritual constraints, do not conform to our expectations about what we have been conditioned to expect of “expertise” about these topics. But rather than anachronistically dismissing or rationalizing their salience, I have lingered in the thick texture of their particularity. By giving these peripheral perspectives their due, I hope I have convinced you that that these people took the life-forms that they encountered in scripture, at home, in the markets, and in the fields of Palestine (and Mesopotamia) seriously, too. Thus, the uterine materials and species variation in Niddah and Bekhorot, the generative multiplicity of the Sifra’s species, the unruly menageries of Mishnah and Tosefta Kilayim, the diverse dimensions and specific saliences of the hybrid, and the potentialities of queer and nonbinary generation all defy truisms commonly ascribed to the rabbis. Certainly, the worlds encountered here have very little to do with what has subsequently been appropriated and reified into an invented “Judeo-Christian tradition.”

Instead, we listen in on a conversation, inflected by peculiar rabbinic scriptural and ritual idioms, about the multiple and entangled forms of life itself. I have sought to demonstrate that the rabbis themselves took these matters to heart. The texts we have discussed reflect a profound investment in the differences that difference made across kinds, in the humbling yet uncanny reverberations generated by likeness, and in the many mechanisms by which multiplicity came to be. As we have seen, parsing the plenitude of kinds and their ways of coming into being entailed a challenge to human exceptionalism in a number of ways. I have sought to grapple with the visceral, painful, rich, and joyous unpredictability with

which life and its emergence were suffused in the late ancient world. That the proliferation of life could occur through mechanisms that were nonlinear, nonreproductive, or nonmimetic was a phenomenon we have sought to register across this book. While there is surely some hubris in ascribing God's constant input in the generation of humans—hubris not unrelated to the scriptural legacy of the image of God—it was also the case that this recognition of more than two partners in human generation was of a piece with the larger fabric of varied generative mechanisms. That it also opened the door for yet more parties, as well as different ones—human and nonhuman, divine and demonic—was yet another reminder of the rich challenges that multiplicity and its adjacent unpredictability entailed.

I suggest that the “trouble” the rabbis and other ancient actors had with the variability of generative outcomes and the multiplicity of kinds was genuine and, at the same time, generated by a multitude of causes and agents. Some of this trouble involved the pressures of what the rabbis construed as biblical claims and legacies, as well as their own efforts to claim specialist knowledge of Torah (broadly construed). These efforts themselves were shaped by the rabbis' and others' varying positionalities, some of which impacted the mix of necessity and arbitrariness of historical processes that bring sources of the past to us. Some of the trouble with and troubling of “species” and “generation” in antiquity related to the material exigencies of living under imperial regimes: whether in the early Roman Empire, or in the generations of its eventual complex intertwining with Christianity, or amid the various communities of Persian Mesopotamia. Perhaps most crucially, to take rabbinic words and worlds in earnest, means to attend to the women, the human and nonhuman parturients, the demons, the diversely bodied fetuses and infants, the people and beings whose species and sexgender embodiments were named and unnamed, the cows, goats, sheep, mules, chickens, and ravens whose lives are registered in these sources. They mattered.