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Moshe Simon-Shoshan. *Stories of the Law: Narrative Discourse and the Construction of Authority in the Mishnah.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. xv + 287 pp. $74.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-977373-2.

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Telling Tales and Making Law

In recent years, scholars have begun to question the traditional binary between *halakhah* and *aggadah*, that is, between texts that investigate legal matters (halakhah) and everything else, especially stories (aggadah). This reassessment has done more than just remove aggadah from the bookshelf, where it traditionally sat due to the relative importance of halakhah in traditional Judaism (one is reminded of the many *yeshivot* where rabbis would instruct their students to skip a Talmud page since it is "just" aggadah). Beyond raising the status of the academic study of aggadah, this trend has also resulted in the blurring of the lines between these categories. For example, though the famous story of the Oven of Akhnai (*b. Bava Metzi'ah* 59a-b) begins with a matter of halakhah regarding the purity of an oven, it quickly transitions to a fascinating and complex story of rabbinic authority and proper decorum.

Moshe Simon-Shoshan's *Stories of the Law* adds to and nuances this discussion of the boundaries between law and narrative. Utilizing a variety of theoretical approaches, predominantly narrative theory, Simon-Shoshan explains how the complex interplay between law and narrative establishes and reifies rabbinic authority in the Mishnah. In doing so, Simon-Shoshan asserts his place in a burgeoning field of rabbinic scholarship, which includes recent books by Barry Wimpfheimer and Naftali Cohn.[1]

Simon-Shoshan divides his book into two parts. In part 1 ("Narrativity in the Mishnah"), he provides an overview and intellectual justification of his methodology. Scholars who are familiar with modern literary approaches to the study of texts and also to rabbinic literature can skim most of this section. However, if one is either unfamiliar with these methods/texts or is looking for a review, then Simon-Shoshan offers a relatively concise and readable introduction. In part 2 ("The Mishnaic Story"), he applies his methods to specific stories in the Mishnah (almost all of which come from *Seder Mo'ed*, the Mishnaic Order concerned with holidays). Throughout, he often returns to the same Mishnaic stories. While this occasionally seems repetitive, it has the advantage of showing how each new concept allows one to better understand a familiar text.

After introducing his general agenda, chapter 2 ("Stories, Narratives, and Narrativity") defines key terms, especially those promised in the chapter's title. Chapter 3 ("A Typology of Mishnaic Forms"), "by far the most technical" chapter (p. 23), charts the various literary forms and suggests a general typology of Mishnaic narrative. For those familiar with reading rabbinic texts, it is best to follow Simon-Shoshan's advice and skim this chapter. Chapter 4 ("Mishnaic Typography") charts the "textual typography" of the Mishnah (p. 59). By comparing Mishnah to a typographical map, Simon-Shoshan uses Mikhail Bakhtin to chart the textual contours of rabbinic narrative. In this reading, "the Mishnah needs to be viewed as a 'dialogic' text whose meaning emerges from the tensions between its various forms and viewpoints" (p. 10).[2] Since his focus is on the intersection between law and narrative, Simon-Shoshan explores how these tensions reflect the different viewpoints of being "an authority" versus being "in authority."[3] He returns to these tensions throughout the book. Chapter 5 ("The Mishnah in Comparative Context") compares narrative in the Mishnah to that of other ancient legal texts, including Cuneiform, Torah, Dead Sea Scrolls, and Roman legal compilations. Simon-Shoshan argues that the primary difference between these corpora is the Mishnah's lack of a "'framing story,' an introductory narrative which establishes the origins and history of the laws presented" (pp. 83-84). Chapter 6 ("Transmission, Redaction, and Rhetoric"), which begins part 2 of the book, introduces the reader to a variety of methodological issues associated with academic study of the Mishnah. Per-

haps the most significant point of this chapter is the introduction of counternarratives. In discussing such narratives, Simon-Shoshan finally addresses a notable absence in his discussion thus far: the historicity of the text's claims. Though introducing this methodological concern earlier in the book would have helped to clarify Simon-Shoshan's approach in previous chapters, he effectively explains the various concerns about historiography and veracity for the remainder of the book. Chapters 7-9 address the three genres of Mishnaic stories identified by Simon-Shoshan: exempla ("Exempla: Who is a Rabbi?"); case stories ("Case Stories: Repetition and Renewal"); and etiologies ("Etiological Stories: Original Nightmares"). His argument throughout these chapters is "that these stories do not simply transmit individual rulings but also participate in a larger dialog regarding the nature and extent of rabbinic authority" (pp. 10-11). It is in these chapters that the utility of Simon-Shohan's method is best realized. Each genre shows the tension between the rabbis's desire to present their own hegemony and the reality of dissenting voices within their own community (p. 204). Using examples from famous stories like Honi the Circle-drawer, Simon-Shoshan explains how his methodological tools help to lay bare the text's seams, and therefore to reveal the tensions hidden within the narrative itself.

Simon-Shoshan summarizes his overall argument well in the concluding chapter, when he states, "Underlying much of this book is the argument that the stories of the Mishnah serve to both establish and investigate the authority of the rabbis" (p. 130). While this thesis might not be completely novel, Simon-Shoshan's careful parsing of the genres of rabbinic stories, as well as the tensions found in the Mishnah's narrative, add much to this flourishing conversation. Both readers in search of narrative approaches to law and scholars of rabbinic literature will find much to learn in this book.

Notes

[1]. Barry Scott Wimpfheimer, *Narrating the Law: A Poetics of Talmudic Legal Stories* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); and Naftali Cohn, *The Memory of the Temple and the Making of the Rabbis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012). Simon-Shoshan acknowledges the similarity between his own approach and Wimpfheimer's on p. 237, n. 30. This similarity is also reflected in their titles.

[2]. Bakhtin has become popular amongst theory-savvy rabbinicists, most notably Daniel Boyarin. For a recent example, see Boyarin, *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

[3]. In applying these terms to rabbinic texts, Simon-Shoshan acknowledges the work of Michael S. Berger, *Rabbinic Authority* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). See, for example, p. 243, n. 19.

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