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Catherine Hezser. *Rabbinic Body Language: Non-Verbal Communication in Palestinian Rabbinic Literature of Late Antiquity.* Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2017. 300 pp. $152.00, cloth, ISBN 978-90-04-33905-7.

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Catherine Hezser is a well-known researcher and author of many books devoted to the cultural history of Jews of late antiquity. Hezser's present work is an additional piece of the mosaic that is the portrait of rabbinic culture. It seems that in her recent work the popular trend of studying corporeality has been taken up, but here, too, Hezser is true to herself—she is interested in the nonverbal language of the rabbinic community as an expression of the social interaction among rabbis.

The aim of the monograph is purely historical, with a sociological emphasis: "to analyze references to the kind of body language that forms part of rabbis' communication among themselves and with others" (p. 20). Nevertheless, Hezser acknowledges the literary and artistic nature of this literature, and that it is therefore not an objective reflection of reality; however, as in-group literature, composed by rabbinic scholars for rabbinic scholars, it reflects the culture.

The book consists of four chapters structurally juxtaposed with the model of the human body, as it appears to the eye: from appearance and other externalities to position in space, to gestures, and finally to face and physiognomy. There is also a thematic distribution between chapters. The first chapter discusses how appearance conveys identity; the second chapter centers on how the use of space indicates social class and hierarchy; chapter 3 turns to how the gesture becomes an act of communication in itself; and the fourth chapter concludes by detailing how the human face becomes a main form of nonverbal expression.

Before I summaries the content of the four chapters I wish to insert a methodological note. As Hezser defined it: "This study shall investigate the forms and functions of body language in mostly Palestinian rabbinic texts" (p. 18). This ostensibly indicates that the study is exclusively devoted to Palestinian rabbinic traditions and not the Babylonian Talmud. However, throughout the monograph one sees occasional references from the Bavli to advance the discourse of the book with some very important observations regarding the differences between Babylonian nonverbal elements vis-a-vis Palestinian body language. The Babylonian Talmud is an important source of information, which, along with the literary traditions on the Jews of Mesopotamia, includes Palestinian literary traditions, whose evaluation, because of their possible processing, is complex. This apparently explains the author's decision to use the Bavli minimally, although it seems to me that additional Babylonian traditions not integrated in the book could have enriched it.

The first chapter of the book deals with appearance and demeanor. Hezser proposes that late antique writers, and the authors of rabbinic literature among them, referred to aspects of nonverbal communication much more often than writers of the first centuries CE. Thus, rabbis are interested in body language in general, in appearance and demeanor. However, due to the nature of the literature, texts do not allow us to reconstruct the actual body language of the rabbis in real life. Scholars of rabbinic literature must collect references to nonverbal communication in which rabbis and disciples of sages sit or stand, maintain a distance, hide, walk ahead of or behind other rabbis, blush, weep, and remain silent in order to reconstruct their cultural context. Throughout this chapter Hezser is in dialogue with her main source, namely a text from Sifre Devarim 343 that states: "Just as whoever uses fire makes a mark on his body, whoever uses the words of the Torah makes a mark on his body. Just as those who work with fire are recognizable among people, so disciples of sages are recognizable in the market by the way they walk, talk, and wrap themselves [in their cloaks]" (quoted, p. 24).

Following this remarkable text, Hezser devotes the first two parts of chapter 1 to appearance and attire. Apparently, the sages, like Roman intellectuals, believed that a wise man should be dressed in a dignified manner, but unlike them, the rabbis did not insist on luxury. Devoting the discussion to ways of walking and learning while moving in the public sphere, Hezser represents the rabbis, outwardly at least, as something intermediate between the peripatetic school and the Stoics, but closer to the first. In general, she sees in the rabbinic culture the same trend as in Roman culture: the so-called cult of learning that began in the second century necessitated the construction of the intellectual's outward appearance to distinguish him from an ordinary person. Therefore, the Jewish intellectual strolling through the streets of their cities dragged scrolls of biblical books, and due to their heaviness and clumsiness, he invested in ***tefillin*** and ***tzitzit***. She writes that the tefillin served to separate men from women and of course was intended to distinguish rabbis from both the common people and non-Jews. However, this demarcation sign does not go beyond the framework of the late Roman attempts to separate the religious leader from lay people. Thus, she suggests a very interesting comparison with the medieval Byzantine Christian practice of wearing phylacteries during prayer.

Hezser continues with the subject of clothing, and here too her main source is the text from Sifrei Devarim 343, which suggests that the sage's clothing should be different from that of the common people, without indicating how. Hezser takes an extremely fascinating excursion through Quintilian and Tertullian, mobilizing references to rabbinic aspirations in the Jerusalem Talmud and Bereshit Rabbah, and concludes that the sages, like the philosophers, used ***talit*** and ***palium*** in a similar manner. The exact manner of how the rabbi must wrap himself in his cloak is not disclosed by the literature because at the time of its editing this was well known: "The intended reader of the Midrash would therefore have understood its meaning automatically. From hindsight we can only hypothesize: perhaps the rabbinic way of wearing the tallit/pallium was traditional, using a fibula, or more formal, using a belt, even when worn over an undergarment; perhaps the rabbis covered with it both their shoulders while others covered only one.... In any case, what matters is the text's claim of a specifically rabbinic dress code, irrespective of historical reality and actual practice" (p. 51). However, she could have been more secure had she considered the tradition from bBaba Bathra 57b, in which two Palestinian sages discuss these matters: "R. Johanan asked R. Bena'ah how [long] the under-garment (haluq) of a student of the sages [should be]. He replied: So long that his flesh should not be visible beneath it. How [long should] the cloak (talith) of a talmid hakam [be]?—So long that not more than a handbreadth of his under-garment should be

visible underneath." It is not surprising that the lighter and more open the dress is, the less it fits an intellectual. A skeptical reader may be tempted to assign the late text from Sassanid Babylonia to that context. But the attribution is undoubtedly Palestinian, and, following Hezser, it is possible that the text, which is remote in time and space from the Palestinian academies, is trying to identify what style seemed to be obvious for the Palestinians.

The second chapter is dedicated to how body language expresses real or assumed power relationships and hierarchies: the sitting position generally expresses power and standing position expresses inferiority. Forms of verbal and nonverbal greetings and their order and form are also reflections of accepted hierarchies. However, as thoughtfully mentioned by the author, some of the rabbinic narratives' references to body movements may support or contradict verbal communication: "an entire text can hinge on a tension between body language and the word" (p. 71).

Hezser moves to standing and sitting positions, showing how the standing positions of the students are expressions of honoring their masters, high officials and the elderly, who presumably are the main recipients of such expressions. She then recounts a narrative from y. Bik. 3:3, 65c detailing how Yehuda, son of Rabbi Hiyya the Great, visited his father-in-law, Rabbi Yannai, every Sabbath eve. Thus, following traditional commentaries, Hezser understands the account as describing the young man honoring the elder master by waiting for him on the road. However, it is distinctly possible that it was rather the old man who waited for the young sage on the road; because he anticipated the weekly arrival of his son-in-law, whom he called "my son," he waited for him. When he did not arrive, R. Yannai (rightly) suspected that Yehuda had suddenly died. The story is thus not a simple illustration of the youth honoring his elder, but thoughtful meditation on whom and how it is appropriate to honor.

From the learning assemblies Hezser's discussion continues to triclinia and to symposia: "In all of the rabbinic traditions mentioned above, the rabbis are imagined as having followed the Roman custom of reclining at *convivia*, albeit by changing those aspects that were unsuitable and adding others that turned socializing into a particularly rabbinic occasion. Such rabbinic *convivia* also seem to have been imagined in Avot de Rabbi Nathan, which cites traditions about 'two or three rabbis sitting together' in the marketplace or at a table (cf. Avot de R. Nathan version B 34). What transforms such meetings into rabbinic *convivia* is the discussion of Torah: 'R. Eleazar b. R. Zadoq says: Whenever two or three sit and eat at one table and do not speak words of Torah it is as though they had eaten of the sacrifices of the dead...' (ibid.). If the Torah is not discussed, the meetings are considered Roman banquets, where it was customary to eat sacrificial meat" (pp. 119-20).

The rabbis did not simply imitate Hellenistic and Roman models but changed and adapted them to fit their own circumstances, ideals, and purposes. As in the case of appearance and demeanor, rabbinic thought suggests that the rabbis fashioned themselves as a particularly Jewish type of intellectual, who would be recognizable as such by their contemporaries. Nevertheless, although they borrowed from Romans cloth and habitués, they did not accept typical Roman hierarchies. The hierarchy expressed in rabbinic spatial relations was based on Torah knowledge rather than on public office, rhetorical skill, or philosophical acumen.

The third chapter is very interesting, because scholarship on rabbinic literature generally tends to overlook literary references to physical gesture, despite it being an essential component in rabbinic narratives and often closely linked to the representation of speech. Unlike in real life, in literature, references to gestures are conscious and meaningful within the respective context of the

narrative. Some gestures are universal while others are specific, but even in cases of the former, if they occur in different societies or subgroups, the contexts and meanings may vary. Several of the gestures represented in rabbinic sources may have analogies in Greco-Roman and/or early Christian culture but their meaning might not be the same.

Thus, Hezser begins the examination of gestures from prostration, which was a Roman gesture of reverence before higher-status individuals and gods, which appears especially often in connection with court protocol and in pagan religious rituals. Showing a few instances of this Roman imperial court gesture in midrashic texts, Hezser is particularly interested in demonstrating how the gesture of prostration (and genuflection as a part of it) in rabbinic narratives is used to express status differences within Palestinian rabbinic society. Observing that prostration already appears in some biblical texts, she assumes that, compared with the biblical evidence, Palestinian rabbis used the gesture of prostration in a much more circumscribed way, mostly in conjunction with prayer and occasionally also with reverence toward the patriarch and eminent sages. Another important gesture in human culture is a kiss. Thoughtfully analyzing Gen. Rab. 70:12, Hezser concludes that the rabbis considered the gesture of kissing legitimate and meaningful only in the contexts of kingship rituals, in connection with departures and reunions, and among relatives. Kisses in other contexts are dismissed as insignificant if not obscene. Early Christian church leaders tried to limit "religious" kissing to the "holy kiss," the kissing of equal-status fellow Christians in liturgical contexts, to welcome and acknowledge them as "brethren." This Christian kiss was a mouth kiss in which, as is evident from Augustine, the lips of one approach the lips of his brother, in order to infuse the recipient with the Holy Spirit. Hezser supposes that late antique rabbis were probably familiar with both pagan and Christian kissing practices and rejected them, because a kiss lacked any religious or spiritual meaning in their culture. While it is correct that no such explanation to kissing practices was offered among the rabbis, as Hezser immediately provides a list of kissing incidents among the rabbis, apparently the kiss was nonetheless a frequent and probably meaningful communicative gesture among them, though not a religious one. She suggests that it is rather "a kiss of friendship and approval among equals, which the Talmud Yerushalmi associates with collegial interaction among sages" (p. 161). One could argue with this statement by pointing to an passage in the Yerushalmi that reports Hanan b. Abba telling his colleagues that Shmuel kissed him on his mouth when Hanan informed him of a teaching of Rav (y. Ber. 1:8, 3d par. y. Ber. 4:1, 7a). This could be interpreted not only as a sign of appreciation of halakhic information that supported his opinion but also as a purely ritualistic act of initiation of the sage into the rabbinic community, demonstrated by other cases in which a young sage is kissed by an elder after a successful public appearance.

The final chapter is devoted to an extremely interesting topic, and, as far as I know, even less studied than the previous three, which is the theme of facial expressions. One of Hezser's important findings is that facial expressions described in Greco-Roman texts and those mentioned in Talmudic texts have very little correlation with each other. After a careful comparative study, Hezser concludes that some of the facial expressions that are mentioned in Palestinian rabbinic texts do not have equivalents in Greco-Roman literature, while certain Greco-Roman facial expressions are rarely mentioned in rabbinic texts. This can be explained only partly by reference to the different languages of the sources, for Hebrew does have equivalents for some of the Roman terminology. Still, Hezser argues that one must allow for the possibility that facial expressions, their meanings, and the contexts in which they occurred were different in Palestinian Jewish society. Thus, Talmudic literature often speaks of

a lightening of the face or of a change in the facial color to rather unexpected shades (such as green), whereas Roman texts usually speak of the physiological reddening of the face as a reflection of internal processes. The author suggests the possible correlation between these Roman and rabbinic facial transformations, although these differences could very well result from the metaphorical language of the rabbis as opposed to the descriptive language of the Roman authors.

The reader cannot disagree with the author, who concludes the book with the statement that this study has shown that body language constituted an important part of the shaping of rabbinic identity. Some references to nonverbal communication were used to indicate status differences, hierarchies, and internal competition among scholars. Body language appears as a potent weapon for dividing and distinguishing junior from senior scholar, Palestinian from Babylonian, rabbi from non-rabbi, Jew from non-Jew. I warmly recommend the book to all students of rabbinic culture and to all students of late antiquity, especially in its eastern Roman domain.