

Demons and Scatology: Cursed Toilets and Haunted Baths in Late Antique Judaism

Ilaria Briata

In the 1863 edition of Jacques Albin Simon Collin de Plancy's *Dictionnaire infernal*, under the entry "Belphegor," we find a curious and bizarre portrait of a demon that will become one of the preeminent infernal figures of occult and popular culture (figure 1). The etching by M. Jarrault shows an anthropomorphic creature sitting—while holding its tail with a suffering or focused grin—on a nineteenth-century *chaise percée*, a portable toilet.

Accompanying this illustration, the entry describes Belphegor with the following words:

Belphegor, demon of discoveries and ingenious inventions. He usually takes the form of a young woman. He brings riches. The Moabites, who called him Baalphégor [*sic*], worshipped him on mount Phégor. Some rabbis say that people paid homage to him on the commode and that they offered him the foul by-product of digestion. This seemed appropriate for him. It is for this reason that some scholars saw in him the god Fart, or *Crepitus*; other scholars maintain that he is *Priapus*.¹

"Some rabbis say" is not simply an orientalist reference. Tractate Sanhedrin of the Babylonian Talmud (64a) recounts in fact the story of a certain Jew, Sabta of Eles, who hires out his donkey to a gentile woman. When she chooses to stop by a temple dedicated to Baal Peor, he entered, reached the altar, defecated, and wiped his rear on the nose of the idol. "No one had ever seen such devotion," said the acolytes! Not a demon (yet), in this cultural phase Baal Peor is still a false god—and the carnivalesque narrative can be understood in the perspective of a theological shitstorm. But far from trying to explore the rich and enthralling history of the figure of Belphegor, who fascinated humanists such

1 Jacques Albin Simon Collin de Plancy, *Dictionnaire infernal*, 6th ed. (Paris: Henri Plon, 1863), 89. The translation of this text and of the other primary sources is my own.



FIGURE 1

as Niccolò Machiavelli and John Selden,² I would like to reflect on an essential principle embodied by this character: namely, the connection between demonology and scatology. In particular, this ontological nexus will be examined in reference to late antique Jewish literature.

Demonology and scatology form an unlikely, but common, union in late antique Judaism. Rabbinic literature even attests to the existence of a *shed shel bet ha-kise*, a “demon of the toilet”. We find three occurrences in the Babylonian Talmud: b. Ber. 62a–b provides apotropaic techniques to avoid the attack of

² Niccolò Machiavelli, *Favola di Belfagor arcidiavolo* (1518–1527) and John Selden, *De dis siris* (1617) respectively. See also John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (6.447).

such an entity; b. Šabb. 67a expresses a spell against a demon named Bar Shiriqa Panda; and finally, b. Giṭ. 70a associate the toilet demon with epilepsy. Works edited in Palestine do not hint at the danger of a demon of the privy, but refer to an entity haunting a similarly dangerous and potentially impure location: the bathhouse (Gen. Rab. 63:8 and y. Ter. 8 [46b–c]). The presence of *daemones balneares* is a common trait of Graeco-Roman culture that has been treated by both pagan and Christian sources (such as Eunapius's *Vitae sophistarum* [4.457], *Acta Ioannis* and Gregory of Nyssa's *De vita Gregorii Thaumaturgi*).³

Drawing on these textual corpora, this paper explores the interrelations between demonology, impurity, and liminality in the Jewish traditions on toilet routines collected in the Babylonian Talmud, and in the Palestinian Jewish narratives on supernatural incidents that occur in the social space of the bathhouse. We must add a historical-critical *caveat* concerning these sources. Bringing together in one paper rabbinic texts from Babylonia and Palestine does not imply that these literary corpora are interchangeable. The cultural contexts in which they originated, became relevant, and were compiled, differ in significant ways, so that is almost impossible to speak of a uniform rabbinic culture. Furthermore, this heterogeneity does not take a clear-cut binary shape: rabbinic traditions did travel across geo-cultural boundaries, so that, for instance, we can easily encounter textual nuclei, which possibly originated in Palestine but which ending up embedded in a literary collection redacted in Babylonia (and this will be the case of several passages analysed in 1. Cursed Toilets).⁴ For ease, I will simply refer to Palestine or Babylonia as the setting where the overall redaction of a given rabbinic corpus has taken place.

A similar limitation applies to the spatial references in this analysis, i.e., the toilet and the bathhouse. These two locations are obviously not the same place, as in our modern world. However, toilets and bathhouses evoke an instinctive sense of physical vulnerability and potential contamination that qualifies them as *limina* between the sphere of human civilization and the demonic realm. Behind the private or semi-public walls of a toilet and a bathhouse, the individual is confronted with unprotected nakedness—an interim yet necessary state reminding human beings of their own animality and, consequently,

3 *Acta Johannis*, in *Acta Iohannis: Textus alii—Commentarius—Indices*, ed. Éric Junod and Jean-Daniel Kaestli, CCSA 2 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1983); Gregory of Nyssa, *De vita Gregorii Thaumaturgi*, ed. Günther Heil, *Gregorii Nysseni Opera* x, 1: *Gregorii Nysseni Sermones* (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 51.

4 I would like to thank Reuven Kiperwasser for his support in managing these philological matters.

of the risks of a non-anthropoc nature.⁵ Angst and disgust might well be the common feelings underlying the daily ritual of bodily cleansing, either excreting the filth on the inside or washing the dirt on the outside.

But why a demon of the toilet or bathhouse? The liminal nature of these space explains, in part, why they were connected with demons. Liminality itself can be defined as the locus where human control fails to be active. In addition to nudity and waste interfering with an effective domination on the natural kingdom, humans are at the mercy of the topographical and structural hazards of the place itself. While squatting in a remote privy, one could be bitten by a snake crawling from the ground;⁶ while enjoying a thermal bath with one's rabbinic fellows, one could feel the floor collapse under his feet from excessive heat.⁷ In this sense, toilets and bathhouses are liminal spaces by virtue of their border-line location in the urban conglomerate and their architectural precariousness. At the same time, liminality transcends the spatial dimension, crossing the porous boundaries of human physicality, contaminating the bodily with the social and vice versa.⁸ Not by chance, demons and *limina* were closely connected not only in late antique Judaism but also in classical literature.⁹ By means of these reflections, it will be possible to shed (more) light on this peculiar aspect of demonology—the correlation between superhuman forces and the more-than-human lowness of corporeality.

A final disclaimer concerning methodology is necessary: the present contribution only examines 'literary' materials, which are representative of rabbinic Judaism. Nevertheless, it must be noted that a fundamental source for studies in demonology in late antiquity is constituted by the copious cluster of Aramaic incantations bowls, amulets, and spells from the Cairo Genizah. In order to attain a wider view on demonological lore, a comparison between these textual witnesses and the classic ones is a desideratum that will be hopefully treated on another occasion.

5 See Jonathan W. Schofer, *Confronting vulnerability: the body and the divine in rabbinic ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 53–54.

6 b. Ber. 62a.

7 b. Ber. 60a; b. Ketub. 62a.

8 See Gideon Bohak, "Conceptualizing Demons in Late Antiquity Judaism," in *Demons and Illness from Antiquity to the Early Modern Period*, ed. Siam Bhayro and Catherine Rider (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 111–133.

9 See Julia Doroszewska, "The Liminal Space: Suburbs as a Demonic Domain in Classical Literature," *Preternature* 6, no.1 (2017): 1–30. For a conceptualization of liminality see Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: aspects of Ndembu ritual*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967) and Turner, *The Ritual Process: structure and anti-structure*, (Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1969).

1 Cursed Toilets

The first literary corpus we will examine is the *magnum opus* of rabbinic culture, i.e., the Babylonian Talmud (Bavli), a text whose final redaction is dated to the seventh century according to academic consensus. In the Bavli we encounter the very expression *shed* [*shel*] *bet ha-kise*, meaning a “demon of the privy.” The phrase appears in two cases, b. Šabb. 67a and b. Giṭ. 70a, both in contexts of transmission of magical / medical teachings.

Against the demon of the privy [*la-sheda shel bet ha-kise*], one should say: “On the head of a lion and on the snout of a lioness I found the demon Bar Shiriqa Panda. With a bed of leeks I thrashed him down, with the jawbone of an ass I smote him.”

b. Šabb. 67a¹⁰

Our Rabbis taught:¹¹ “Who comes from the privy should not be sleeping with a woman until he had waited the span of half a mile, because the demon of the privy [*shed shel bet ha-kise*] follows him. And if he sleeps with a woman, he will have epileptic [*nikhpin*, seized] children.”

b. Giṭ. 70a¹²

Moreover, in b. Ber. 62a,¹³ we find the reference to the *maziqin*, the ‘harmers,’ a common name for demons in rabbinic literature, who lurk in the *bet ha-kise*:

Rabbi Tanhum bar Hanilai¹⁴ said: “Whoever behaves modestly in the privy is delivered from three things: from snakes, from scorpions, and from demons [*maziqin*].” Some say also that dreams will be settled.

¹⁰ Text from MS Oxford, Bodleian Library, Opp. Add. fol. 23 (Neubauer 366).

¹¹ The idiom introducing the statement (transmitted in Hebrew), *tanu rabbanan*, marks a textual tradition attributed collectively to rabbinic masters from Tannaitic (1st–2nd century) Palestine.

¹² Text from MS Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica ebr. 130.

¹³ Text from MS Oxford, Bodleian Library, Opp. Add. fol. 23 (Neubauer 366).

¹⁴ A Palestinian *amora* (3rd century) appearing both in the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmud. It should be noted that attributions to tannaitic personalities (and, similarly, to a tannaitic collective, such as in the expression *tanu rabbanan* discussed in note 11) might not be a direct indication that a given tradition had historically originated in Palestine during the first centuries CE. Rather, these references to the ‘golden age’ of rabbinic culture could have been interpolated as a guarantee of antiquity and, therefore, authority.

There were certain privies in Nehardea¹⁵ where, if two people entered together, even during daytime, they would be attacked [by demons]. Rabbi Ammi and Rabbi Assi used to enter there one by one, separately, even during night time, and they would not be attacked [by demons]. The Rabbis asked them: “Are you not afraid?” They answered: “We have learned charms. The charm [*qibla*] [against the dangers] of the privy [consists of] silence and modesty....

The mother of Abbaye trained a lamb to enter into the privy with him. Should she have trained a goat instead of a lamb? [No,] because a goat and a goat-demon can interchange [both being called *sair*].

Whenever Raba entered the privy, the daughter of Rav Ḥisda [his wife] used to rattle a nut in a brass dish. When he became head of the academy, she made a window through which she put her hand on his head....

It has been taught, in name of Ben Azzai:¹⁶ “Rise early and go, so you do not have to walk a long way. Grope yourself before sitting, but do not grope yourself after sitting, because anyone who sits and then feels himself can become the victim of spells coming from [as far away as] Ispamia.”¹⁷

And if he forgets and feel himself [after sitting], what is the remedy? When he rises, he should say: *Hus hus lo tihtum we-lo li we-lo li. hus hus lo tihtum lo mehane we-lo mehane. Lo harshe de- harshe we-lo de-harshate de-harshita* [roughly: Spare, spare! Do not seal and not to me nor to me. Spare, spare! Do not seal and not from these nor from these. Not sorceries of a sorcerer nor sorceries of a sorceress].

b. Ber. 62a

What can be inferred from such textual testimonies? The first passage, b. Šabb. 67a, provides a name for the demon of the privy: Bar Shiriqa Panda. The second excerpt, b. Giṭ. 70a, suggests an etiological association between the demon of the toilet and an illness that appears to correspond to epilepsy (seizure, as

15 The Textus Receptus and other manuscripts, however, read “Tiberias.” This *lectio* is more coherent with the background of the rabbinic protagonist in the story. The reading “Nehardea” may have arisen as a result of the Babylonian context of other traditions here transmitted.

16 Third-generation *tanna* (Palestine, 1st–2nd century).

17 I.e., *Hispania* or *Apamaea* (name of towns in Bythinia, Mesopotamia, and Syria) according to Marcus Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi and Midrashic Literature* (New York: Shalom, 1967), 96.

the root *k.p.y.* implies).¹⁸ Avigail Manekin Bamberger has taken the name, Bar Širīqa Panda, the connection with seizures and strokes, the appearance of a lion (see b. Šabb. 67a) and, most importantly, the dwelling in the privy, as basis for identifying this demon from the Babylonian Talmud with the Akkadian demon Shulak, a dangerous creature haunting lavatories.¹⁹ A reference to Shulak can be traced back to an Akkadian *Diagnostic Handbook* (composed around 1000 BCE but in use in later times).²⁰ The lines 9–13 of the tablet number 27 read:

If the right side of his body is in its entirety let down: stroke [inflicted by] a Lurker; he has been hit in the rear. If his left side is let down: Hand of Shulak. If the left side of his body is let down in its entirety: he has been hit at the front; Hand of Shulak, Lurker of the Bathroom. A conjurer shall not make a prognosis for his recovery.²¹

As one of the places where one exposes his body, both on front and rear, the restroom becomes home *par excellence* for malevolent spirits ready to ambush the human being in all his naked vulnerability.

But this is not the only possible rationalization for the supernatural danger of privies. Together with corporeal exposure, we should take into consideration the very nature of toilets as the ultimate realm of filth, even and especially in (more or less) urbanized civilizations.²² In Jewish tradition, excreta *per se* are

¹⁸ On the ancient connection between demons and illness see, for instance, Ida Frölich, “Demons and Illness in Second Temple Judaism: Theory and Practice,” in *Demons and Illness from Antiquity to the Early Modern Period*, ed. Siam Bhayro and Catherine Rider (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 81–96; David Hamidović, “Illness and Healing through Spell and Incantation in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in *Demons and Illness from Antiquity to the Early Modern Period*, ed. Siam Bhayro and Catherine Rider (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 97–110.

¹⁹ Avigail Manekin Bamberger, “An Akkadian Demon in the Talmud: Between Šulak and Bar-Širīqa,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 44 (2013): 282–7.

²⁰ Marten Stol, *Epilepsy in Babylonia* (Groningen: Styx, 1993), 55. See Manekin Bamberger, “An Akkadian,” 284–5. Cf. also Irving L. Finkel and Markham J. Geller, eds., *Disease in Babylonia* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), esp. 88; 92; 121, and Andrew R. George, “On Babylonian Lavatories and Sewers,” *IRAQ* 77 (2015): 75–106, esp. 86–90.

²¹ Trans. Stol, *Epilepsy in Babylonia*, 76.

²² See George, “On Babylonian Lavatories” and Augusta McMahon, “Waste Management in Early Urban Southern Mesopotamia,” in *Sanitation, Latrines and Intestinal Parasites in Past Populations*, ed. P. D. Mitchell (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 19–39. On Judaism and the Roman institution of *latrinae* see Yael Wilfand, “Did the Rabbis Reject the Roman Public Latrine?” *Babesch* 84 (2009): 183–196 and Estee Dvorjetski, “Public Health in Ancient Palestine: Historical and Archaeological Aspects of Lavatories,” in *Viewing*

not subject to ritual impurity.²³ In rabbinic literature, m. Makš. (6,7) lists excrement (*roi*) among the corporal fluids that do not conduct ritual impurity.²⁴ An exegetical reason for this exempting resolution might be deduced from the fact that no Pentateuchal proof-text could corroborate the opposite view, namely deeming stools to be impure.²⁵ Nonetheless, rabbis attempted extensively to regulate the management of daily physiological functions. For instance, b. Ber. 61b–62b,²⁶ registers a whole treatise on toilet etiquette, intermixing prescriptions and narratives. As we have seen from the passage from b. Ber. 62a, traditions of magical nature are included, implying the widespread belief in supernatural beings harming those who attend a privy. In order to better understand this connection between filth and demons, we may turn to the Sassanian context in which these texts were compiled. Zoroastrianism developed a peculiar and strict association between excreta and evil spirits via the ritual construct of impurity. On the one hand, pollution has a demonic aetiology: it is the demons who cause impurity. On the other hand, the circumstance in which pollution arises is death: when someone or something dies, it

Ancient Jewish Art and Archaeology; VeHinnei Rachel—Essays in Honor of Rachel Hachlili, ed. Ann E. Killebrew and Gabriele Fassbeck (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 48–100.

- 23 With the exception of Lev 23:13–15, where the act of defecation within the sacred space of the military camp is deemed *erwat davar* (“improper thing”) but not *tame* (“impure”) per se. However, in Qumran the question becomes more complicated: see Edmondo Lupieri, “La purità impura: Giuseppe Flavio e le purificazioni degli Esseni,” *Hen* 7 (1985): 15–43; Albert I. Baumgarten, “The Temple Scroll, Toilet Practices, and the Essenes,” *Jewish History* 10, no.1 (1996): 9–20; Stephanie Harter-Lailheugue et al., “Toilet Practices among Members of the Dead Sea Scrolls Sect at Qumran (100 BCE–68 CE),” *RevQ* 21 (2004): 579–584; Joseph E. Zias, James D. Tabor and Stephanie Harter-Lailheugue, “Toilets at Qumran, the Essenes, and the Scrolls: New Anthropological Data and Old Theories,” *RevQ* 22 (2006): 631–640; Jodi Magness, “Toilet Practices at Qumran: A Response,” *RevQ* 22 (2005): 277–278; cf. the practice recorded by Josephus, *J.W.* 2.148–149.
- 24 “The following [substances] are not impure nor susceptible [to impurity]: sweat, foul secretion, excrement, blood dripping with any of these, liquid of a child born on the eighth month” (m. Makš. 6,7).
- 25 Jodi Magness, “What’s the Poop on Ancient Toilets and Toilet Habits?” *Near Eastern Archaeology* 75, no. 2 (2012): 80–87, esp. 85. Late antique Jewish sources do not discuss explicitly any rationale for such rulings. Therefore, posthumous explanations of the unexpected exclusion of urine and faeces from *tame* matters would involve anthropological—if not philosophical—outlooks that fall outside the scope of this paper. For a theological reflection on the ambiguity of “the Jewish laws that enshrine the poo-taboo,” see Samuel Lebens, “On Where God Isn’t: Excrement and the Philosophy of Religion; Two Jewish Perspectives,” *Religious Studies*, 2020: 1–15, esp. 9.
- 26 Cf. also y. Ber. 9:5 (14b–c) and the later compilations ‘Abot. R. Nat. A 40 (64b) and Der. Er. Rab. 7:6. On these practices see Rachel Neis, “Their Backs toward the Temple, and Their Faces toward the East: The Temple and Toilet Practices in Rabbinic Palestine and Babylonia,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 43 (2012): 328–68.

becomes immediately contaminated by Druz I Nasush, the Corpse Demoness. In this system, however, we find two kinds of dead matters: carrion and excrement. All the substances issued by the human body—including skin, saliva, breath, cut nails and hair, blood, semen, menstrual blood, urine, and faeces—are considered dead, and thus contaminated, when they become separated from the body.²⁷ In the Zoroastrian world, thus, even toilet practices were interwoven with rituality. This is the reason why Jews and Romans viewed the Persians as particularly decent and modest in those aspects of life.²⁸ In such a cultural milieu, the danger associated with the space of toilets becomes more understandable, even given the fact that rabbinic Judaism and Zoroastrianism differed in their perceptions and constructions of ritual purity. Whether they were explicitly the subject of religious regulation or not, demons were a real threat even when it came to biological needs.

2 Haunted Baths

Nudity and residual bodily uncleanness are common associations with both toilets and bathhouses. These elements, which are intrinsic to the function of the place, turn privies and baths into spaces where otherwise commendable activities, such as praying and studying Torah, might become problematic. On halakic study, for instance, the Palestinian Talmud states: “At the bathhouse, one can ask [halakhic] questions only concerning the bathhouse; at the privy, one can ask [halakhic] questions only concerning the privy” (y. Šabb. 3:1 [42d]).²⁹

27 Jamsheed K. Choksy, *Purity and Pollution in Zoroastrianism: Triumph over Evil* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1989), xvii; 16–18; 78.

28 See b. Ber. 8b; cf. Neis, “Their Backs,” 356–357 and Choksy, *Purity*, 87–88. For Graeco-Roman sources on Persian modesty see Xenophon, *Cyr.* 1.2.16; Herodotus, *Hist.* 1.133.3; Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res gestae* 23.6.79.

29 On the prohibition of liturgical acts in a “place where people are dressed/naked/partly dressed and partly naked” see t. Ber. 2:20 // y. Ber. 2:3 (4c) // b. Šabb. 10a–b. On the question of nudity vs. divinity see Michael L. Satlow, “Jewish Constructions of Nakedness in Late Antiquity,” *JBL* 116, no. 3 (1997): 429–54. On Jewish reception of the Roman institution of *thermae* see Yaron Z. Eliav, “The Roman Bath as a Jewish Institution: Another Look at the Encounter between Judaism and Greco-Roman Culture,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 31, no. 4 (2000): 416–54; Yaron Z. Eliav, “Bathhouses as Places of Social and Cultural Interaction,” in *Oxford Handbook of Jewish Daily Life in Roman Palestine*, ed. Catherine Hezser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 605–22; Estee Dvorjetski, *Leisure, Pleasure and Healing. Spa Culture and Medicine in Ancient Eastern Mediterranean* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 403–4.

In terms of liminality and danger, bathhouses could compete with toilets. The possibility of fires and / or collapses were intrinsic to the architectural structure of the *thermae*, which, with their dark and steamy atmosphere, represented a *locus magicum* in both in Jewish and Graeco-Roman cultures, as Yaron Z. Eliav has noted.³⁰ Inscriptions wishing a safe bath (*bene lava* or *salvum lavisce*) and other apotropaic devices were frequent at the entrance of Roman *thermae*. Latin and Greek literature, both pagan and Christian, attests to the belief in *daemones balneares*, lurking in the warm and foggy obscurity of *calidaria*.³¹ An episode from the *De vita Gregorii Thaumaturgi* by Gregory of Nyssa (335–395) may be interesting for its colourful depiction of a haunted bathhouse. Arriving into town at night after a long journey, Gregory wanted to refresh with a bath. The bathhouse, however, was not at service during night time because it was infested by a *daimōn tis anthrōpoktonos* (a homicidal demon). When the deacon sent by Gregory finally makes his way into the bathhouse, he is instantly inflicted

[W]ith multiple horrific assaults. Through smoke and fire, various phantoms revealed their mixed nature in the form of both human beings and beasts, striking his eyes and resounding in his ears while [the demon] blew its breath against him and circled his body.³²

With the sign of the cross these terrible visions dissolve. But when entering the bath for a second time, the deacon has to face even more frightening apparitions, together with an earthquake and flames emanating from the water. Once again, the sign of the cross saves the protagonist.

How does this compare to Jewish beliefs concerning the presence of demons in bathhouses? We find a curious story in the midrashic compilation from the fifth century, *Genesis Rabbah*:

King Diocletian used to be a swineherd in Tiberias. When he arrived at Rabbi's school, children would come out and beat him. After some time, however, he became king. He went down and settled in Panias.³³ From there he sent letters to Tiberias before Friday evening. He stated:

30 Yaron Z. Eliav, "A Scary Place: Jewish Magic in the Roman Bathhouse," in *Man near a Roman Arch: Studies Presented to Prof. Yoram Tzafrir*, ed. L. Di Segni et al. (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2009), 88–97.

31 See Katherine M. D. Dunbabin, "Baiaurum grata voluptas: Pleasures and dangers of the Baths," *Papers of the British School at Rome* 57 (1989): 6–46, esp. 35–36.

32 Gregory of Nyssa, *De vita Gregorii Thaumaturgi*, 51.

33 Caesarea Philippi, located at the southwestern base of Mount Hermon.

"I command that the representatives of the Jews appear to my presence on Sunday", ordering the messenger not to deliver the messages before the end of the day of Friday.

While Rabbi Shemuel bar Nahman was going to bathe, he saw Rabbi in front of his school with a pale face. He asked: "Why are you so pale?" Rabbi answered: "So and so, I have received some letters from the court." He replied to him: "Come to bathe, maybe the Creator will make a miracle!". So, they went to the bathhouse, where they were welcomed by Arginat[an] laughing and dancing around them. Rabbi wanted to rebuke him, [but] Rabbi Shemuel said: "Leave him alone, sometimes he makes miracles appear." They told him: "Your master is in pain, and you're standing [here] laughing and dancing!" He answered: "Come! Eat, drink and have a good rest. I myself will make you appear before [the king] on Sunday morning."

At the end of *shabbat*, after the prayers, Akimaton (= Arginatan) took them and brought them in front of the gates of Panias. They went and said to [Diocletian], "Look! They're standing at the gates!" He ordered: "Close the gates!" So [Arginatan] took them and brought them in the center of the city. They went and said to [Diocletian, who] said: "I command that they go for a bath [whose water] have been heated for three days. Only then shall they see me." They heated the water for three days, but Arginati (= Arginatan) came and mixed [in cold water before the Rabbis entered]. Thus, they went, bathed and appeared before [Diocletian].

He told them: "Is it because you know that your god performs miracles for you that you despised a king?" They answered: "We despised [Diocletian] the swineherd, but we serve Diocletian the king."

Gen. Rab. 63:8³⁴

The narrative, whose focal point is the social space of *thermae*, introduces a character, endowed with supernatural powers, as we will see during the episode, presenting him by the name of Arginatan (or Antigris in the Talmud Yerushalmi). According to Moshe Simon-Shoshan, the etymology of Arginatan can be traced back to the Greek names *agréus* and *agróta* (*hunter*), two epithets of the god Pan, after whose name the second location of the story, Panias,

34 Text from MS Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica ebr. 30. See also *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah*, ed. Hanoch Albeck, (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 1967) 688–690. On the parallel text in y. Ter. 8 [46b–c], see Eliav, "A Scary Place," 93.

is named.³⁵ In contrast, Yaron Eliav suggests that this name could be associated with the Latin word *ignis*, coherently with the fact that this demon seems to be charged with supervision over the danger of fires and overheating.³⁶ Moreover, in *Sefer ha-Razim*, a Jewish book of magic spells, a couple of angels named Agra and Gentes are mentioned together in the context of magical instructions against excessive heat in the bath.³⁷ Even though the identity of this demon—who did not need any other presentation than his name—remains a mystery to us, we must nonetheless acknowledge that this entity is not inherently malevolent in this case.³⁸ On the contrary, Arginatan is the one who saves the day, by rescuing the rabbis's lives three consecutive times. As an attendant of the bathhouse, he is well acquainted with the perils of his habitat. It is interesting to note that, however, magic and heroism associated with *thermae* seldom involve demons in rabbinic literature. The objective—and maybe obsessive—risks of fire and collapse entailed supernatural measures that did not implicate a demonic presence as dominant as that of Aginatan, even in more demonically-inclined sources such as the Bavli. In b. Ber. 60a we find a hyperbolic narrative taking place in the *be bane* (*balnea*) and exalting the superhuman valor of Abbahu:

Rabbi Abbahu went to the bathhouse and the building collapsed beneath him. However, a miracle happened to him: he was able to stand on a pillar,³⁹ saving a hundred and one men with one arm and a hundred and one men with the other.⁴⁰

Preventive action could be taken by means of magic—as specific incantations in the aforementioned *Sefer ha-Razim* testify—but also thanks to ritual benedictions commended in halakhic corpora.⁴¹ In the Talmud Yerushalmi, for instance, the prayer to be uttered “when entering a bathhouse” mentions three main reasons of concern: “burning from fire, scorching from hot water, and collapse” (y. Ber. 9,4 [14b]). In addition, the blessing closes by invoking salvation

35 Moshe Simon-Shoshan, “Did the Rabbis Believe in Agreus Pan? Rabbinic Relationships with Roman Power, Culture, and Religion in Genesis Rabbah 63,” *Harvard Theological Review* 111 (2018): 425–450, esp. 445–446.

36 Eliav, “A Scary Place,” 93.

37 Eliav, “A Scary Place,” 94.

38 See Bohak, “Conceptualizing Demons,” 121.

39 As in Roman *thermae*, the floor of the bathhouse was supported by columns conducting the heat issued by the fire underneath.

40 Text from MS Oxford, Bodleian Library, Opp. Add. fol. 23 (Neubauer 366).

41 t. Ber. 6,17; y. Ber. 9,4 (14b); b. Ber. 60a.

from “analogous things in the time to come,” possibly hinting to an afterlife of flames and fire.

The depiction the bathhouse as a *locus magicum* in multiple rabbinic sources communicates a fearsome yet familiar atmosphere close to that permeating Greek accounts of demonic haunting of *thermae*. While representing a rare occurrence in this literature, the active apparition of a bathhouse-creature in Genesis Rabbah suggests an additional—and sophisticated—cross-cultural connection with Greco-Roman imagery of the supernatural. The anecdote of Arginatan is indeed full of irony, as the Mediterranean *topos* of the demon of the bathhouse is adopted and overturned by transmuting the harmful creature into a rabbinic minion. The narrative context appropriately throws in an additional layer of satire: the story addresses in fact the thorny problem of negotiation of power between Jews and pagans.⁴² This time, the allotted arena for the perpetual political conflict is the bathhouse, the urban institution simultaneously at the centre of social life and at the periphery of human jurisdiction for Jews and pagans alike. Notwithstanding the many dangers in this shared *limen*, it is the Jews that turn out to be favoured by its supernatural dweller.

3 Conclusion

In her study on demonology and cultural identity in rabbinic Babylonia, Sara Ronis underlines that:

The rabbis used both stories and legal discourse about demons to produce a rabbinic space that was not simply overlaid onto their Mesopotamian environment but shaped and constructed their encounter with it.... Demons are interwoven into the actual physical spaces that the rabbis inhabited at the same time as they are interwoven into rabbinic discourse.⁴³

This is true especially for Babylonian rabbinic culture, while its Palestinian counterpart seems to react to a milieu for which demonic presence was less omnipresent and technically troublesome. This raises the following questions: What is then the spatial essence of scatologic demons according to rabbinic

⁴² See Simon-Shoshan, “Did the Rabbis Believe in Agreus Pan,” 450.

⁴³ Sara Ronis, “Space, Place, and the Race for Power: Rabbis, Demons, and the Construction of Babylonia,” *HTR* 110, no. 4 (2017): 588–603, cf. 589. See also Sara Ronis, “Intermediary Beings in Late Antique Judaism: A History of Scholarship,” *CurBR* 14, no. 1 (2015): 94–120.

texts? Is there a chasm between Babylonian and Palestinian interpretations of this feature of demonology? On closer inspection, it appears that Babylonian compilations were more concerned with the topic of demonic toilets, whereas Palestinian corpora introduce the subject of demonic bathhouses. Such a distinction can be elaborated in terms of material culture: while in Babylonia haunted places, toilets, stand remote at the very outskirts of the urban fabric, in Palestine the supernatural haunts a liminal space at the heart of the Roman-Byzantine city, in the bathhouse. The dissimilarity in the fulcrum of the liminal space can be related to the fact that in Zoroastrian Babylonia public baths were not in use because of religious hesitance towards unnecessarily contaminating water.⁴⁴

Besides the spatial aspect, another core concept for the understanding of the relation between demonology and scatology is the idea of pollution. Purity is a tricky issue in Judaism, given the detailed and precise ritualization of what contaminates. Faeces and sweat are not *tame*, so toilets and bathhouses entail a form of uncleanness that, though not ritually taboo, elicit disgust and anxiety on the personal, social, and religious level. Conceptual ambiguity and material porousness of all things scatological only serve to make the object of our inquiry more complex. This is true not only for late antique Jewish culture but also for its contemporary milieu, namely the Sassanian world for the Babylonian rabbinic sources and the Graeco-Roman background for the Palestinian ones. Accordingly, it will be a cross-examination considering all these cultural nuances, with their variations and correspondences, that will finally rescue Bar Shiriqa Panda, Arginatan, and their filthy fellows from intellectual disregard.

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44 See Reuven Kiperwasser, "Going West. Migrating Babylonians and the Question of Identity," in *A Question of Identity. Social, Political, and Historical Aspects of Identity Dynamics in Jewish and Other Contexts* (eds. D. R. Katz, et al.; München/Wien: De Gruyter/ Oldenbourg, 2019), 111–130, esp. 115–116.

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