

# Wealth and Poverty in Jewish Tradition

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# The Violence of Poverty

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“Just as virtue is its own reward, poverty is at least its own penalty.”<sup>1</sup>

“Extreme poverty is violence.”<sup>2</sup>

Poverty and violence are usually discussed as separate things. Often a causal relationship is drawn between them, usually in that that poverty is a cause of crime and violence. Sometimes, when discussing global issues and civil wars, the relationship is drawn in the opposite direction, to wit, that violence is the cause of poverty. There is, however, a growing body of research that delineates the ways in which poverty itself is violence.<sup>3</sup>

In this essay I argue, based on materials from rabbinic literature (mainly the Palestinian and the Babylonian Talmuds), that poverty was itself recognized as a form of violence. I also argue that although this was recognized as such, the responses were not necessarily as sweeping as one might have expected. That is, given the rhetorical understanding of the violence of extreme poverty, one might have assumed that there would be some equally extreme response. This is not the case. To be sure, there were institutional responses that were very effective over the long run. However, whereas the discourse of poverty is emotional and even, perhaps, hyperbolic, the response was measured and bureaucratic. There may be no other way. It will be for further research to determine whether that was the case.

The first text is a legal narrative from Mishnah *Nedarim* 9:10. The context of this mishnah is the legal abrogation of vows. The juridic mechanism for the abrogation involves going to a court and being interrogated as to one's state of mind or intention at the time of the vow. Reuven, the ubiquitous John Doe of rabbinic legal example, vowed that he would derive no benefit from a certain Shimon—Reuven's exemplary partner. This would result in Reuven's inability to conduct most forms of social or commercial intercourse with Shimon. If, in the course of time, Reuven regretted his perhaps hasty decision to cut Shimon out of his life by way of a vow, Reuven might go to court and get the vow annulled, or in rabbinic terms “allowed” or “undone” [מותר].<sup>4</sup>

The court might ask Reuven, as *m. Nedarim* 9:2 suggests: “If you knew then that Shimon would become a scribe, as he has actually become, would you have taken this vow?” Or they might ask: “If you knew that Shimon would

be marrying off his son in the near future, would you have taken this vow?" If Reuven answers in the negative to these or similar inquiries, the court "allows" the vow, and Reuven and Shimon can resume their hastily ended relationship.

The specific context of the legal narrative quoted above is the case of a man who took an oath that he would not marry a certain woman because she was ugly—or a list of other reasons—and it turns out that she is actually beautiful. Not entering into the social and cultural pressures that might have been brought to bear in order to make the woman consent to marry that man now, the vow itself is considered a mistaken vow and is null. It is at this point that the mishnah introduces our narrative:

נדרים ט:י

ומעשה באחד שנדר מבת אחותו הנזירה.

והכניסוה לבית ר' ישמעאל ויפנה.

אמר לו ר' ישמעאל: "בני מזו נדרת?"

אמר לו: "לאו."

והתירה ר' ישמעאל.

באותה שעה בכה ר' ישמעאל ואמר: "בנות ישראל נאות הן אלא שהעניות מנוולתן."

A [legal] narrative, One foreswore [sexual] pleasure from his niece.

She was brought to Rabbi Ishmael's house, and made pretty.

Rabbi Ishmael said to him: "My son, is this the one from whom you foreswore?"

He said: "No."

Rabbi Ishmael permitted the vow.

At that moment Rabbi Ishmael cried and said: "The daughters of Israel are pretty but poverty disfigures them."

In our tale, the man swore that he would never have pleasure or benefit from this woman. The fact of her being his niece is a marker of special intimacy in the rabbinic context. The implication is that he thought her ugly and therefore did not want to marry her. Someone then brought her to Rabbi Ishmael's house, and she was given a makeover, and voilà, she was beautiful. It is not apparent from the story who brought her to the house or who did the making over. It is not evident from the story whether the husband regretted his vow and now wanted to marry his niece or whether someone else rose to her defense lest she remain in her spinsterhood. This and much more remains unanswered. There are also interesting questions about coercion and commodification that I will not pursue. The drama continues with Rabbi Ishmael

revealing the newly beautiful woman to the man and demanding: "Is this the person from whom you forswore?" The man quickly says "no," and, it is implied, the vow is abrogated and happy endings are on their way.

It is the coda to the tale that concerns us. Rabbi Ishmael reacts to this scene by crying and stating: "The daughters of Israel are pretty but poverty disfigures them." It is upon the assertion in the latter part of Rabbi Ishmael's statement that I wish to tarry: עניית [poverty] is an actor in this statement. To poverty is ascribed the action of disfiguring. Since that action is remediated by Rabbi Ishmael in the real world of this narrative, one cannot say that the reification of poverty is merely metaphorical. Poverty is acting in the world in such a manner as to cause harm, or disfigurement, to a woman. Actually, according to Rabbi Ishmael, to many women. This action is a violent action.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines violence as the exercise of physical force so as to inflict injury on, or cause damage to, persons or property. It is almost in this exact sense that poverty, according to Rabbi Ishmael, is violent. While we cannot expect to see the specific blow, we can apprehend its impact—the injury upon, or the damage to, the women so afflicted. The injury is real, and the actor is named: poverty.<sup>6</sup>

The reason that I have gone on at length about this is to get to something in the rabbinic discourse that is not mystified in the way that it is in contemporary discourse. The rabbis readily acknowledge that poverty is violent. Whether in and of itself violent or as wielded in direct action (refusing someone hunger relief, for example, or cursing someone with impoverishment), the rabbis have no illusion about the insidious and violent impacts of poverty.

And life in the Eastern Empire in late antiquity was harsh. As Gilda Hamel has written: "In spite of all his hard work, the Palestinian farmer could not break what appears to us as a vicious cycle and which to him was the unmediated reality of long days of work, exhaustion, and anguish over diseases and catastrophes."<sup>7</sup> Poverty was a constant companion, lurking right outside the frame, waiting for the one day when there was no work, or work and no pay, or drought.

In the textual world of the rabbis, poverty is violent. A poor person is considered as a prisoner, a poor person is in danger of dying, a poor person is considered as dead.<sup>8</sup> Poverty imprisons, endangers, and kills. A destitute person [an אביון] is beyond shame. Commenting on the distinction between an עני and an אביון, Rashi says: "אביון: One who is oppressed by poverty. The term אביון means one who desires [אוה] and does not get any good that his heart desires. . . . the עני [poor person] is embarrassed to demand [his wages] even

though he needs them. The אביון is used to humiliation and is not embarrassed to demand his wages." This same spectrum of poverty is found in Augustine's sermons, as Richard Finn writes: "Pauper, as we know, can stretch from the relative poverty of a smallholder [in classical Greek usage, the *penes*] to the near-total destitution of the beggar."<sup>9</sup>

All this is not surprising, considering the historical context in Late Antiquity. As Peter Brown writes, "In its ecology, in its demographic patterns, in its epidemiology, and in its structures of political and economic power, the ancient Mediterranean had long been an unforgiving place. There was little to protect individuals, communities, and indeed, entire regions, from periodic hunger, from phases of acute economic and political oppression, and from the constant necessity, for many, to wander in search of a better life."<sup>10</sup>

In *b. Bava Batra* 10a, Rabbi Akiva is challenged by "the evil Turnus Rufus": "If your God loves the poor why does he not support them?" Akiva initially answers: "So that we will be saved through them from gehenna." In other words, the poor are there so that those who are not impoverished might support them and acquire merit or be saved from punishment.<sup>11</sup> Turnus Rufus does not accept this answer. He claims that if people are poor, it is God's will that they are poor and therefore supporting them is actually contravening God's will, "and this will actually condemn you to gehenna."

The interesting part of Turnus Rufus's challenge comes next. He uses a parable to illustrate his point: "It is comparable to a mortal king who became angry at his servant/subject and imprisoned him in jail and ordered that he not be given food or drink. A person then went and fed him and gave him drink. Would the king not be angry at that person?" A poor person within this metaphorical world is one who is imprisoned without food or drink. While Akiva answers Turnus Rufus's challenge, he does not change the parameters of the debate.

Akiva says that the situation is actually comparable to a mortal king who, out of his anger, condemns his son to prison and orders that he be given neither food nor drink. In this situation, he asks, would not the king actually be happy if a person went against his will and fed his son and brought him drink? While Akiva makes his point that God would want us to support the poor, he does not challenge the basic premise of Turnus Rufus's metaphorical world: a poor person is like someone imprisoned without food or drink.<sup>12</sup>

This first metaphor is a striking acknowledgement of the violence inflicted by poverty on the poor. If we read the metaphor in relation to other Akiva stories, it is even more powerful. Rabbi Akiva is associated with the phrase

האסורים / imprisoned in a jail.<sup>13</sup> In an aggadah in *b. Berakhot* 61b in which he is imprisoned by the Romans, he is ultimately martyred. In our aggadah, it is the nominally Roman nemesis who names the poor as imprisoned, and by analogy, the angry king is perhaps the Romans (or Turnus Rufus himself?). The deployment of the metaphor by the Roman interlocutor heightens the violence in the mind of the listener as Akiva's association with prison leads to death.

At the end of this long excursus on poverty and poverty relief in *b. Bava Batra* 11a, there is another story which tells of the lethal dangers of poverty:

It is taught: They said about Binyamin the righteous that he was in charge of the charity fund. Once a woman came before him in a year of drought. She said to him: "Rabbi, support me!" He said to her: "I swear that there is nothing left in the charity fund!" She said to him: "Rabbi, if you do not support me, behold a woman and her seven children are going to die!" He stood and supported her from his own money. After a time, he fell ill and was dying. The angels said before the Holy One of Blessing: "Master of the World, You said: 'One who saves an Israelite's life, it is as if he saved the whole world.' Meanwhile Binyamin the righteous who saved a woman and her seven children will die at such a young age?!" Immediately they tore up the decree. It is taught, they added twenty two years to his years.

This story comes at the end of the excursus on poverty and poverty relief that starts on 7a. The excursus is divided unevenly in two. The Akiva story just cited is more or less the transitional point at the end of the first part, whose theme is poverty relief—that is, the mechanisms and obligations of poverty relief—which includes discussion of assessments and collections and the like. The second part may be titled "in praise of *tzedakah*"; its purpose is to raise up poverty relief by speaking of the individual and communal benefits and rewards of giving charity. The point of the story of Binyamin the righteous is obviously in line with this agenda. After providing financial resources to this poor woman and her children, Binyamin is saved from dying young.

However, the narrative has as a given that the woman is telling the truth when she says that if she cannot get money from the charity fund, she will die. This is the hinge of the story and must be believable to the audience in order that the favorable outcome for Binyamin the righteous will have the desired effect on the reader.

That poverty leads to death, and also is like a prison without food or drink, are further explicated in two other texts, one a legal narrative and one a midrash halachah—both in the Bavli.

The latter idea is brought home in a well-known legal narrative<sup>14</sup> in *b. Bava Metzi'a* 83a. Two porters are hired by Rabbah bar bar Hanna to carry a jug of wine. They end up accidentally smashing the jug. (While the smashing of the jug was not intended, it is debated among the medievals whether it was a result of negligence or purely accidental [i.e., אונס].) Rabbah bar bar Hanna takes their cloaks—either as payment or to force them to go to court.<sup>15</sup> They go to Rav, and he forces Rabbah bar bar Hanna to return the garments.

The two porters say, “We are poor and we worked a whole day and we are hungry and we have nothing.”<sup>16</sup> Rav then decides that Rabbah bar bar Hanna should pay them their wages. Rav bases both of his decisions on a verse in Proverbs 2:20: “So follow the way of the good and keep to the paths of the just.” In both cases Rabbah bar bar Hanna questions Rav’s decision and challenges him to say whether he is making a legal decision or demanding that he act beyond the letter of the law. In both cases Rav claims that he is making a legal decision.

For our purposes here, however, the interesting part is that Rabbah bar bar Hanna does not challenge the assertion of the two porters that they are actually without means to sate their hunger. “We are poor,” they say, “and we are hungry and have no means.” They are imprisoned in hunger, and one accidentally or incidentally broken jug can keep them there.

Later in the same tractate the discussion turns to wage theft.<sup>17</sup> The text focuses on the midrashic reading of the various phrases in Deuteronomy 24:15. Finally the question is asked: what will be read out of the phrase ואליו נפשו, usually translated as “he [or his heart] counts on it” but literally meaning “his life [or his very self] lifts toward it”?<sup>18</sup> A midrash halachah is cited: “Why does this one go up on a ramp, hang on to a tree and give himself over to death? Is it not for his wages? Another explanation: One who withholds a laborers’ wages it is as if he has killed him.”<sup>19</sup> The picture that emerges is of a laborer so desperate that he is willing to endanger himself for wages. This conclusion is backed up by the “other explanation” offered in the midrash: “One who withholds a laborer’s wages it is as if he has killed him.” One cannot be more explicit.

But it is not only employers who inflict poverty and/as death upon people. Poverty is cited as a violent punishment that rabbis also inflict on people in *b. Nedarim* 7b:

Rav Hanin says in the name of Rav: One who hears one’s fellow utter the name of God [for naught] has to banish him. If he does not, then he himself is banished, for every place that mentioning the

name of God [for naught] occurs, poverty occurs, and poverty is like death. As it says: "For all the people have died" (Exod 4).<sup>20</sup> And it is taught [in a *baraita*]: "Every place that Sages set their eyes upon, [the result was]<sup>21</sup> either death or poverty."

The context of Rav Hanin's statement is a discussion of banishment or excommunication. When is a person culpable of being excommunicated and when is a sage obligated to excommunicate another? The first half of this short piece discusses the obligation that one has to excommunicate a person who utters the name of God in vain. The justification for this seems to be that if one does not ban the person who so uttered the name of God, bad things will happen; specifically, there will be poverty, which is like death. Therefore somebody has to be banned—if not the utterer, then the hearer who did not ban the utterer.

This last statement is supported by a midrash and then a *baraita*. The midrash is based on the verse in Exodus 4 in which Moses tells his father-in-law Jethro that he is returning to Egypt. Probably to assuage Jethro's concerns, Moses relates that God had told him all the people who had wanted to kill Moses are now dead. The assumed midrash, which is made explicit in *b. Nedarim* 64b, is: "Who are these [people who died]? Dathan and Aviram. And did they really die? Rather they were impoverished." Hence, the equivalence is made between death and poverty.

Interestingly, Ms Vatican 487.1 cites a different verse: "If they should die as all people die" (Num 16:29). This is part of the story of Korach and his rebellion and places the impoverishment (or literally, the death) in the context of punishment. This reinforces more strongly the idea of poverty as a punishment and serves as a smoother lead into the next part of the text.

The *baraita* that is cited immediately following the midrash seems to be a statement of the destructive power of the sages: "Every place that Sages set their eyes, [the result was] either death or poverty." This statement as a whole (that is, the introduction of the statement as a *baraita* and the statement itself) appears in a number of different settings. In most of the settings, the statement is actually attributed to Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel. While the settings are different, the common thread is the sages punishing a person or people by killing or impoverishing them.

It is a given that the sages have the power to kill or impoverish, which here is understood as the same thing. The sages' power to kill with a gaze as a punishment [נתן עיניו בו ונעשה גל של עצמות / he set his eyes upon him and he became a hillock of bones] is ascribed in the Bavli both to Tannaim (Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai in *Shabbat* 32b; Rabbi Yohanan in *Bava Batra* 75a and



*Sanhedrin* 100a) and Amoraim (Rav Sheshet in *Berakhot* 58a); in the Palestinian Talmud to one Tanna, Shimon ben Yohai (p. *Shevi'it*).<sup>22</sup> Here this very power is expanded to include the power of impoverishment. Poverty is depicted as a violent punishment akin to being killed.<sup>23</sup>

The ubiquity of these images of the violence of poverty might cause one to think that the rabbinic response to poverty would be equally dramatic and sweeping. This is not necessarily true. Side by side with the dramatic images of the impoverished, the obligations of poverty relief are laid out in a manner that is reasoned and moderate. There is no demand à la Peter Singer or Matthew's Jesus<sup>24</sup> that one sell everything beyond the necessities of survival and give them to the poor. The opposite is true. The obligations of poverty relief are bureaucratized and normalized. There are standards for giving and there are minimums that are to be received. The mishnah in *Pe'ah* sets the amount for a poor person who enters the city at "a loaf of bread worth a pundyon when four se'ahs can be purchased with a sela." If the person is staying overnight, they are to be supplied with the necessities of sleeping (a bed roll and the like). If they are staying for Shabbat, they are to be given three meals. The same mishnah also sets the threshold for receiving assistance. If a person has resources for two meals, they should not draw from the community.<sup>25</sup>

Regulations are in place for tax collection and distribution (two people to collect, three to distribute). The collection and distribution must be done in such a way that there could be no doubt about the integrity of the process. The two collectors should always accompany one another. There should be an obvious and designated bag for the collection, which should be used for nothing else, and so on. The excursus on poverty relief in Bavli *Bava Batra* even contains a warning that the tax collectors not become oppressive (8b).

The regulation and bureaucratization of poverty relief solved a problem in the biblically mandated schemes of charity and poverty relief, which were all (or mostly) agriculturally based. This was all well and good if one lived in a rural area. However, the urban poor would be seriously disadvantaged under this scheme. The new rabbinic program was more efficient as it was institutionalized. Poverty relief was no longer dependent on the presence of an agricultural area in the geographical proximity of the poor. It was also no longer dependent on the good will of a person of means toward any specific poor person. It was the city that was under obligation to assure that poor people were supported and did not go hungry.

It seems then that the problem would be solved. The obligation toward the poor was to be fulfilled through the mechanisms of the city, and all would

be well. Obviously that is not the case, as we have seen in the texts cited above. What is interesting is that not only is it not the case, it is not clear that rabbinic opinion favored some more universal effort at poverty relief.

The commentary in the Palestinian Talmud to these innovative mishnaic poverty relief laws contains a series of legal narratives which are connected by the literary device of a meeting<sup>26</sup> [פגע ביה]. The drama flows out of this meeting. These four stories, taken together, speak to the ambivalence of the rabbinic reaction to poverty relief on the one hand and to the complete reification of poverty as malevolent figure on the other:

דלמא. <sup>28</sup> ר' יוחנן ורש לקיש עלון מיסחין בהדין דימוסין<sup>27</sup> דטבריא.  
 פגע בון חד מסכן.  
 אמר לון: "זכין בי."  
 אמרו ליה: מי חזרון.  
 מי חזרון, אשכחניה מית.  
 אמרו: "הואיל ולא זכינן ביה בחייו, ניטפל ביה במיתותיה."  
 כי מיטפלון ביה, אשכחון כיס דינרי' תלוי ביה.  
 אמרו: "הדא דאמ' ר' אבהו אמ' ר' אלעזר 'צריכין אנו להחזיק טובה לרמאי שבהן. שאילולא הרמאין שבהן היה אחד תובע צדקה מן האדם, ולא נותן לו, מיד נענש."  
 "מיד נענש."

A story. R. Yohanan and Resh Laqish went to bathe in the public baths of Tiberias.

A poor person met them.

He said to them: "Give me charity."

They said to him: "When we return."

When they returned they found that he had died.

They said: "Since we did not give him charity when he was alive, we should deal with him in death."

While dealing with him, they found a bag of dinars hanging on him.

They said: "This is what R. Abahu said in the name of R. Elazar: 'We must be grateful to the deceivers among them. For if not for the deceivers among them, if one would demand charity from a person, and [that person] would not give him, immediately he would be punished.'"

In this first tale, the tragic turn that results from the sages' meeting with the poor person has an O'Henry like ending. The poor person was not really poor, the sages' piety therefore was preserved. However, the obligation

to the poor is also reinforced in the ambiguous final statement. "If not for the deceivers among them, if one would demand charity from a person, and [that person] would not give him, immediately he would be punished." That is, the obligation to give charity is absolute and the punishment for not being charitable would be meted out immediately, if not for the presence of some legitimate skepticism about the poverty of the poor.

In the next narrative, a Sage is out battling poverty at night, and he meets poverty himself:

רבי חנינא בר פפא הוה מפליג מצוה בליליא.  
 חד זמן פגע ביה רבהון דרוחיא.  
 א"ל: "לא כך אולפן רבינו: אל תסיג גבול רעיה."  
 א"ל: "ולא כן כתיב מתן בסתר יכפה אף."  
 והיה מתכפי מיניה וערק מן קמוי.

Rabbi Hinena bar Papa dispersed charity [*mitzvah*] at night.

One time, the Master of the demons met him.

He said to him: "Did our master not teach us: 'You shall not transgress your fellow's boundary?'" (Deut 19:9)

[Rabbi Hanina bar Pappa] said to him: "Does it not also say 'A gift in secret averts anger?'"

He was rebuffed from him and fled from him.

The third generation Babylonian Amora Hinena bar Papa is "met" during his outing by the master of demons or spirits [רבהון דרוחיא]. The master of demons challenges Rabbi Hinena bar Papa with a verse from Deuteronomy, which grounds the idea that one person is not allowed to overstep his or her boundaries and encroach upon the boundaries of another. This is applied rabbinically to matters ranging from actually moving boundary stakes of a piece of land to intellectual property. The master of demons challenges the sage, since, first, the night is presumably the domain of the demons (this idea is prevalent in rabbinics and is how the rabbis understand, for example, Lilith's name as the demon of the night). This master of demons is not named here.<sup>29</sup> However, I suggest that in the context of these stories, the master demon is also protesting Hinena bar Papa's effrontery in relieving poverty while trespassing on poverty's domain. That is, the master demon in this narrative is poverty.

Rabbi Hinena bar Papa's response is a direct rebuff. The Hebrew *יכפה אף* can be translated literally as "bending his nose." Hinena bar Papa's scriptural retort is a virtual punch in the face, in which he runs poverty, the master demon, off his property.

The next narrative, as the first one, ends in tragedy.

נחמיה איש שיחין פגע ביה ירושלמי אחד.  
 א"ל: "זכה עמי חדא תרנגולתא."  
 א"ל: "הילך טימיתיה וזיל זבון קופד."  
 ואכיל, ומית.  
 אמר: "בראו וספדו להרוגו של נחמיה."

Nemiah of Sichin met a Jerusalemite.

He said to him: "Give me a turkey [as charity]."

He replied: "Here is its value, now go buy meat."

He ate and died.

[Nehemiah] said: "Come eulogize Nehemiah's victim."

Nehemiah of Sichin for some reason did not want to give the Jerusalemite enough money to splurge on turkey and only gave him enough for meat. For some reason the meat disagreed with him and he died. (There are a number of stories about the aesthete tastes of some previously wealthy poor people in this extended text, so that it is plausible that this is what happened here.) After the Jerusalemite dies, Nehemiah takes responsibility for having killed him.

The final narrative of this type, in which a meeting produces a drama, is the most extensive:

נחום איש גם זו היה מוליך דורון לבית חמוי.  
 פגע ביה מוכה שחין א'.  
 א"ל: "זכה עמי ממה דאית גבך."  
 א"ל: "מי חזר."  
 חזר ואשכחוגיה ומית.  
 והוה אמר לקיבליה: "עיינוהי דחמונך ולא יהבון לך יסתמיין. ידיים דלא פשטן  
 למיתן לך יתקטעון. רגליי דלא רהטן מית' לך יתברון."  
 ומטתי כן.  
 סליק לגבי ר"ע.  
 א"ל: "אי לי שאני רואה אותך כך."  
 א"ל: "אי לי שאני אין רואה אותך בכך."  
 א"ל: "מה את מקללני?"  
 א"ל: "ומה את מבעט ביסורין."

Nahum of Gamzu was bringing a present to his inlaws.

He was met by a person afflicted with boils.

He said to him: "Give me charity from what you have with you."

He replied: "When I return."

He returned and found him dead.

He said in front of him: "The eyes that saw you and did not give to you, should be blinded. The hands that did not reach out to give you should be cut off. The legs that did not run to give you should break."

And thus it happened.

Rabbi Akiva once came to him.

He said: "Woe is me that I see you in such a state!"

He replied: "Woe is me that I don't see you in such a state!"

He said: "Why do you curse me?"

He replied: "And why are you dismissive of suffering?"

As opposed to the earlier tale of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Laqish, wherein it was revealed after the fact that the "poor person" was not actually poor at all, in this final tale no doubt is cast upon the veracity of the claim of poverty. The unmoving gaze of the narrative is focused upon Nahum's missed opportunity—he could have saved this poor person from death. He did not, and therefore he brings upon himself a life of suffering, which he considers meet compensation for ignoring, or deferring attention to, the suffering of the poor wretch.

In these stories, as in the others we have seen, the one constant is the violence of poverty, the necessity for people to act, and the tragic results of inaction. We also met here poverty himself, who is driven out only by the efforts of Hinena bar Papa's poverty relief.

Finally we return to the Bavli's excursus on poverty relief mentioned above. At the beginning of that text there is a story that is at best ambivalent about the worthiness of supporting all the poor:

Rabbi [Yehudah the Prince<sup>30</sup>] opened the grain stores in the years of drought.

He said: "Masters of Scripture, Masters of Mishnah, Masters of the Study should enter.<sup>31</sup> *Amei Ha'aretz* cannot enter."

Rabbi Yonatan ben Amram forced his way and entered.

He said: "Rabbi, feed me."<sup>32</sup>

He said: "Have you studied Scripture?"

He said: "No."

He said: "Have you read Mishnah?"

He said: "No."

—"If so, with what shall I feed you?"<sup>33</sup>

He said: "Feed me as the dog and the raven."

He gave him food.

After he left, Rabbi sat and worried.<sup>34</sup>

He said: "Woe is me for I have given my bread to an *am ha'aretz*."

R. Shimon bar Rabbi said to him: "Perhaps it was Yonatan ben Amram your student, for he does not want to profit from the honor of Torah."

They checked and found that it was as he said.

Said Rabbi: "All should enter."

Our tale starts with an act of magnanimity and concern. In a year of drought Rabbi opened the grain stores to feed the hungry. From most of the textual witnesses, it is not clear whose grain stores these were. There are many stories in the Babylonian Talmud that speak of Rabbi's great wealth.<sup>35</sup> However, we can also surmise that as the patriarch, Rabbi was responsible for the communal grain stores and it was these that he opened. One manuscript does have the reading "his grain stores,"<sup>36</sup> which adds a larger degree of generosity (and, perhaps, control) to this opening.

This act of generosity is immediately circumscribed in the second line. The grain is only for members of the rabbinic guild, those who are marked by having studied the rabbinic curriculum—Torah, Mishnah, and the investigations and inquiries into Mishnah.<sup>37</sup> Those who are not proficient in these disciplines should not enter. (Those who are not proficient are named עמי הארץ.)<sup>38</sup> The difference between inside and outside here could not be more stark—guild members eat while nonmembers potentially starve.

Rabbi Yonatan ben Amram is a member of the rabbinic guild who for some reason does not want to identify himself as such. Interestingly, some of the manuscripts have him as Yonatan ben Amram without the title Rabbi<sup>39</sup>—colluding with him, as it were, in his subterfuge. From the end of the story we find out that Rabbi Yonatan ben Amram is actually a student of Rabbi. One is led to wonder how he disguised himself. Perhaps in the surprising answers to the rote questions, his actual identity was veiled. Perhaps in just this act of denying his knowledge his identity actually changed.

In any event, Rabbi did not recognize him and did not want to feed him. Yonatan ben Amram's answer to Rabbi's challenge: "If so with what

shall I feed you?" is very interesting. The specific reference, especially to the dog, is unclear.<sup>40</sup> There is a reference in I Kings 17:4 to Elijah being fed by the ravens when he is in hiding. However, the general rhetorical move has resonance with sayings of Jesus in the synoptic gospels: "Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them";<sup>41</sup> "Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these."<sup>42</sup> This rhetorical flourish on the part of Yonatan ben Amram was perhaps intended to both reinforce his status as outsider, and yet, at the same time argue for his inclusion as one who deserves to be fed.<sup>43</sup>

The argument seems to work, as Rabbi gives him food.

However, all is not well.

Rabbi, it seems, had not changed his mind. He had been swayed by Yonatan ben Amram's rhetoric, but minutes later he regrets it. He is convinced that Yonatan is an עַם הָאָרֶץ and also that it is a bad thing to sustain those who are not part of the rabbinic guild. At this point in the narrative, Rabbi is still firmly of the opinion that "the poor" are not a class that is deserving of support. Specific poor people who are members of the rabbinic class are worthy of support. Moreover, Rabbi's experience of giving Yonatan food has apparently intensified his feelings about those who are not members of the guild.

Rabbi's son intervenes at that moment, raising the possibility (which the reader knows is correct) that the anonymous pauper was actually a member of the guild all along and not actually an עַם הָאָרֶץ. Moreover, Rabbi Shimon suggests that the mystery guest was actually a student of Rabbi who did not want to benefit from his status as a sage. There is a short investigation and this is found to be true.

This last bit of evidence seems to cause Rabbi's resistance to collapse. After it is presented to him in irrefutable terms that the person seeking sustenance was his student Yonatan ben Amram, Rabbi completely reverses himself and allows everybody to enter. Why is that?

The turning point in the story is when Yonatan ben Amram emerges from anonymity. Until that moment, Rabbi, though swayed by Yonatan's argument, is not moved to change the policy. In fact he regrets what he did, and it seems that he is worried that he will in some way pay for it.<sup>44</sup> The interesting point here is that the anonymity itself is not simple. If in fact Yonatan ben Amram is Rabbi's student and not just a member of the rabbinic guild,<sup>45</sup> how could Rabbi not recognize him? This must have been an intentional avoidance

of recognition. Rabbi might have refused to look Yonatan in the face until he proved his bona fides, until it was obvious that Yonatan was an insider. If this is true, it follows that once Rabbi is forced to recognize Yonatan, to see him, to encounter him face to face, as it were, Rabbi is unable to hide behind the policy. It is only at this moment—the moment that Rabbi recognizes that there could be many people who are being denied food, who are also people, that is sages—that the doors swing wide.<sup>46</sup>

To paraphrase Amartya Sen, this aggadah is a perfect example of the deployment of the violence of poverty by means of identitarian boundaries.<sup>47</sup> It is Rabbi's privileging of his identity as a sage over his identity as a Jew, let's say, or as a person, that leads him to deny food to Yonatan ben Amram (and all others who are not sages). In the end it is only the possibility that he cannot reliably distinguish those in the rabbinic guild from others that convinces him to desist from this exclusive policy.

I want to raise up one final fragment of a well-known legend. This is the story, as told in *b. Berakhot* 28a, of the deposing of Rabban Gamliel from the patriarchate as a result of his denigration of Rabbi Joshua. At the end of the lengthy story, after many twists and turns, Rabban Gamliel, now the expatriarch, decides he must apologize to Rabbi Joshua. He goes to Rabbi Joshua's house and the following exchange occurs:

Rabban Gamliel said: . . . I will go and appease Rabbi Joshua.

When [Rabban Gamliel] came to his house, he saw that the walls of his house were blackened.

He said to him: From the walls of your house it is obvious that you are a smith.

[Rabbi Joshua] said to him: Woe to the generation whose leader you are, for you do not know the troubles of scholars, with what they earn a living and with what they eat.

In some senses the whole story subtly turns on class differences.<sup>48</sup> However, the ending highlights the fact that the rich do not know about the poor. Rabban Gamliel is surprised that Rabbi Joshua is so poor, and Rabbi Joshua upbraids him: "for you do not know the troubles of scholars, with what they earn a living and with what they eat."<sup>49</sup>

This ending is virtually the same in the shorter and earlier version of the story in the Palestinian Talmud. This might suggest that Rabban Gamliel's obliviousness to Rabbi Joshua's poverty no longer resonated with the audience of the Bavli's version. However, the Bavli's version, as many scholars have commented, differs from the Palestinian version. Some of the most pronounced



differences have to do with wealth or the lack thereof. Among other things, in the Bavli, Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah is qualified to be the patriarch because he is “smart and *wealthy* and a tenth generation descendant of Ezra.” “Wealthy” is not in the Palestinian Talmud. I would suggest that this ending remains in the Bavli because it is still a live issue in the rabbinic imaginary.

So where does all this leave us?

For the sages, poverty was a violent actor in their daily lives. While there was a radically innovative move to create a system of poverty relief that had no basis in biblical law, poverty itself obviously remained a point of anxiety. The rabbis both confronted poverty head on as a violent actor, whose actions brought real damage to the lives and persons of real people, and deployed poverty as a weapon that could result in horrible consequences.

## NOTES

1. Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (Issues of Our Time; 1st ed.; New York: Norton, 2006), 142.
2. Anne-Claire Brand Barón and Beatriz Monje, *Extreme Poverty Is Violence: Breaking the Silence, Searching for Peace* (Vauréal, France: International Movement ATD Fourth World, 2013), 33.
3. See the research cited in Barón and Monje, 71.
4. See, e.g., *m. Uqatzin* 2:6, where להתייר is opposed to חבור.
5. MS Parma has והתייר which changes the object of the permitting from the vow to the man (i.e., being permitted to marry the woman).
6. The impacts of poverty and hunger on the bodies of people are also seen in Christian writings. See, for example, Basil of Caesarea's homilies about the famine in Cappadocia in 368. Hunger, Basil writes, is “the supreme human calamity, a more miserable end than all other deaths. . . . Famine is a slow evil, always approaching, always holding off like a beast in its den. The heat of the body cools. The form shrivels. Little by little strength diminishes. Flesh stretches across the bones like a spider web. The skin loses its bloom, as the rosy appearance fades and blood melts away. Nor is the skin white, but rather it withers into black. . . . The knees no longer support the body but drag themselves by force, the voice is powerless. . . . The eyes are sunken as if in a casket, like dried up nuts in their shells; the empty belly collapses, conforming itself to the shape of the backbone without any natural elasticity of the bowels.” Basil, Homily 6.6., cited in Susan R. Holman, *The Hungry Are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 77.
7. *Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine, First Three Centuries C.E.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 112.
8. *b. Nedarim* 7b.

9. Richard Finn, "Portraying the Poor: Descriptions of Poverty in Christian Texts from the Late Roman Empire," in *Poverty in the Roman World* (ed. Margaret Atkins and Robin Osborne; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 135.

10. Peter Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire* (Hanover: University Press of New England: 2002), 16. Walter Scheidel, "Stratification, Deprivation and Quality of Life," in *Poverty in the Roman World* (ed. Margaret Atkins and Robin Osborne; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 40–59, has a more skeptical view of the possibility of currently being able to assess levels of "deprivation" or "poverty," since much more has to be taken into account than merely income or resources.

11. This argument is also made by Augustine in the *Ennarationes*, in his attempt to convince his wealthy listeners to support the poor. "Give alms, atone for your sins, let the needy person rejoice in your gift, so that you may rejoice in God's gift. That man is in want; you, too, are in want; he is wanting something of you, and you are wanting something of God. When you despise the person who wants something of yours, will not God despise you for wanting something of his? Supply, then, what the needy person lacks, so that God may fill your inner being." Augustine, *Ennarationes* in Ps 37:24, cited in Finn, "Portraying the Poor," 134.

12. The polemic with Turnus Rufus goes on, but the rest is not relevant to our point here.

13. In addition to the following aggadah, see too *b. Sanhedrin* 12a. This aggadah, wherein Akiva teaches or decides law while he is בביית האסורים חבוש, appears in various sources with differing scenarios (see also *b. Pesahim* 112a and Midrash Mishlei 8:3). See Zvi Septimus, "The Poetic Superstructure of the Babylonian Talmud and the Reader It Fashions" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2011), 281: "As previously mentioned, the Bavli's implied reader—the GB reader—is familiar with the entire book to the extent that all obscure references sprinkled throughout the Bavli are already known to this reader."

14. All the debates amongst the medieval commentaries concerning how to embed this narrative in the given halachic traditions support Barry Wimpfheimer's point that "Jewish legal discourse is not unlike other legal discourse of other cultural languages in presuming its own authority monologically. This is one of the reasons why that discourse—sometimes in the Talmud itself and sometimes in post-talmudic literature—struggles with talmudic legal narrative. The more dialogical such a narrative is—framing the normative in the context of conflicting semiotic characterizations—the more palpable the sense that the narrative resists the authoritarian single consciousness of a uniform legal discourse." Compare his comment from another narrative context: "Because of the way its own poetics intentionally play with the expectations of law in order to establish authority beyond the law, the story does not fit easily with legal precedent. It is this ill fit that is palpable within all of the talmudic interpretations." Barry Wimpfheimer, *Narrating the Law: A Poetics of Talmudic Legal Stories* (Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion; 1st ed.; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 22, 57.

15. See also Rashi and Meiri *ad locum*.

16. This line, arguably the climactic line in the narrative, appears in many different versions in the various manuscripts. The version that I cited is translated from the Vilna printing and is supported with very slight variations by the Hamburg, Oxford, and Escorial manuscripts. The fullest sample of the alternative version of this line is found in the Florence manuscripts: "They cried and said to him: 'We are poor people, we labored for a whole day and we have nothing to eat.'" This version is close to the version in MS Vatican 115, which ends "shall we go away empty?" Vatican 117 has the shortest version: "They stayed and cried out/shouted 'what shall we go and eat?'" The narrative is found in *p. Bava Metzi'a* 9:6 (11a) with significant changes. First, the characters are different. It is not a sage who hires the porters but a potter, and the sage they go to is R. Yosi bar Hanina. In the Palestinian version, the laborers don't act independently, they merely do what R. Yosi bar Hanina tells them to. Finally, this climactic statement is absent in the Palestinian version. One could make a credible argument for a development of the narrative from the Palestinian skeletal version to the Babylonian version. However, the narrative has changed significantly during the journey, highlighting the fact that the Bavli's version is most interested in the fate of the laborers—that at the end of the day they have no food.

17. There are two types of wage theft, עושק and שכיר הלנת. While the Talmud initially attempts to distinguish between the two, ultimately the reason given for having both prohibitions is to hold the transgressor liable for two sins rather than one.

18. The former is Robert Alter's translation, and the latter is his suggestion for a more literal translation. Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2004).

19. This midrash is found in a slightly different version in *Sifri* Deuteronomy 379. Louis Finkelstein, על ספר ספרי (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1969), 297. In the *Sifri* version, the idea of withholding wages as killing is not as explicit.

20. Ms Vatican 487.1 cites rather the verse from the Korach story, כל האנשים ימותון אלו, אם כמות.

21. Ms Vatican 487.1 has אומרים instead of או. The translation would then be "they say death or poverty [strikes]" or something to that effect.

22. Sages also kill in other ways. See *b. Gittin* 7a, *b. Yoma* 87a.

23. See also *b. Sotah* 48b, where the Talmud recalls Elisha's killing of the children and supports the miraculous nature of it by citing the baraita that we quoted above (every place that sage set their eyes).

24. Jesus told him, "If you want to be perfect, go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me" (Matt 19:21).

25. *m. Pe'ah* 8:7.

26. *p. Bava Batra* 8:9, 21b.

27. From the Greek δρᾶμα.

28. Following the Leiden MS. The printed editions have גימוסין.

29. He is named in another context (ed. Margalioyot) 101:1. There the Master of Demons is called Ashmedi. See Leviticus Rabba.

30. All the manuscripts have only the letter ר, which is an abbreviation for Rabbi as signifying Rabbi Judah the Patriarch, or simply signifying any rabbi. From the continuation of the narrative in which Rabbi Judah's son takes part speaking to Rabbi Judah, it seems likely that the reference is to Rabbi Judah the Patriarch.

31. תלמוד, which obviously does not refer to the Talmud, but probably rather to the study of the discussions of mishnah. See also Rashi *b. Sukkah* 28a s.v. תלמוד.

32. The Hebrew is פרנסני which means "support me," or, perhaps more accurately, "sustain me." However, from the context (the year of drought and Rabbi opening his grain stores) and the continuation of the story (Rabbi bemoaning that he gave of his "bread" פת to an עם הארץ, it is clear that "feed me" is the preferred translation.

33. "With what," as in "on what basis."

34. The printed editions have מצטער, "pained." However, the manuscripts either don't have anything (i.e., they read "Rabbi sat and said"), or they have דאג, "worried." This latter version seems proper as דאג in the Bavli usually means "worried about some consequence." See also *b. Berakhot* 40a, 57b, *b. Shabbat* 106a, *b. Yoma* 88a.

35. For example, *b. Bava Metzi'a* 85a.

36. Paris: Bibliotheque Nationale, Suppl. Heb. 1337; ארצרות rather than ארצרות.

37. MS Vatican adds, בעלי הלכות בעלי אגדות [masters of law and masters of lore]. This just extends the curriculum.

38. I do not translate this term, since it is more textured than simply "the ignorant" or "rabbinically illiterate" in the way its meaning has evolved. The term עם הארץ is rather benign in its early biblical career (Abraham bought a burial ground for Sarah from Efron, who was called an עם הארץ), where it probably meant "native"—as its literal meaning suggests. By the time of the Bavli there are vociferous denunciations of the עם הארץ (*b. Pesah.* 49b), which suggest to me that something else was going on. I would suggest that the עם הארץ were non-rabbinic Jews who did not accept rabbinic authority.

39. Paris, Vatican.

40. And compare Rashi *ad locum*.

41. Matthew 6:26.

42. Luke 12:27.

43. It is also possible that this story is partaking of another rhetorical tradition, similar to that of the King Katzya and Alexander story (*y. B. Met.* 8c) in which the point is that one's wealth is not as a result of his or her own efforts. One's wealth is due to God, and therefore there is no justification in withholding food from anyone. This tradition in rabbinic sources grounds itself on Psalms 36:7: "Man and beast You deliver, O LORD." See Lenn Goodman, *On Justice: An Essay in Jewish Philosophy* (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2008), 8.

44. Going with the reading  $\lambda\alpha\tau$ , which suggests worry that something bad will occur.
45. The manuscripts are divided on this.
46. One could read this point in a more minimalist way; i.e., that Rabbi is afraid that there are more Yonatan ben Amrams out there and, if that is the case, Rabbi would not be supporting the sages. This reading seems unlikely, since in Rabbi Shimon's description of Yonatan it sounds as if he is the one who does this, this is an indentifying mark of his—not that he is part of a group that does this.
47. Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence* (New York: Norton, 2007)
48. Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah is qualified to be the patriarch because he is “smart and wealthy and a tenth generation descendant of Ezra.” Further, Rabban Gamliel had turned away those whose outside (their clothes) did not match their inside. That is, they had to be able to afford the uniform or be of the class of the sages.
49. There is a version of this story in the Palestinian Talmud. This part of the story is remarkably similar, except that Rabbi Joshua is making needles.