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Gil P. Klein
Loyola Marymount University, gil.klein@lmu.edu

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Torah in *Triclinia*: The Rabbinic Banquet and the Significance of Architecture

GIL P. KLEIN

In a satirical moment in Plato’s *Symposium* (175a), Socrates, who is expected at the banquet, disappears, only to be found lost in thought on the porch of a neighboring house. Similarly, in the Palestinian Talmud (yBer 5.1, 9a), Resh Lakish appears so immersed in thought about the Torah that he unintentionally crosses the city’s Sabbath boundary. This shared trope of the wise man whose introspection leads to spatial disorientation is not surprising. Different as the Platonic philosopher may be from the talmudic rabbi, the ultimate place of engagement with truth is the academy or the study house. In Plato’s case, a wise man who operates outside the site of academic dialectic (here the banquet hall) behaves like a confused sophist. In the talmudic case Resh Lakish, a wise man who explores Torah alone, not with fellow scholars, ends up transgressing the community’s bounds, literally and figuratively. Hence, for Plato, to be

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4. And see mHag 2.1 and its parallels.

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lost in the city, or, for the Talmud, to be lost at its margins, marks a condition of being, literally, out of place in regard to truth and those who share in it. This sense that place, architecturally framed, defines a cultural institution and is, at the same time, used to define it in action and text is at the heart of my inquiry. The direct object of this inquiry is the institution of the rabbinic symposium (or more broadly, the banquet) and its architecture.

THEORY, METHOD, AND STRUCTURE OF THIS ESSAY

In the study of early Judaism, spatiality has recently reemerged as a significant area of interest. The groundbreaking works that inform this new “spatial turn” continue to redefine the way to engage with the sources. One of the challenges facing such scholarship relates to the growing sense that, as far as the study of the built environment is concerned, disciplinary boundaries and their clearly differentiated methodologies often limit our ability to see the entire picture. Archaeology provides us with a valuable understanding of buildings’ chronology and style; history and anthropology penetrate the meaningful social and cultural dimensions of communal space; and the study of religious literature uncovers the legal and literary articulation of places in texts. However, scholarship that integrates these three perspectives is rare. Laura Nasrallah has recently made a similar argument in the context of early Christianity, writing: “Disciplinary boundaries, however, have impoverished the study of early Christianity and the study of classics, ancient history, and art and archaeology: we have not been able to recognize how themes


6. The difference between the categories of place and space represents, in itself, a significant theoretical and disciplinary divide in spatial studies. For a bibliography and summary of this problem in the context of Jewish history, see Barbara E. Mann, A Place in History: Modernism, Tel Aviv, and the Creation of Jewish Urban Space (Stanford, Calif., 2006), 1–25. For the limitations of the category of space in the context of architecture, see Peter Carl, “Architectural Design and Situational History,” in Architectural History and the Studio, ed. A. Hardy and N. Teymur (London, 1996), 74–89.
such as power, justice, piety, and culture are part of far-ranging ancient conversations that are manifest not only in literature but also in archaeological remains.”

The study of the rabbinic banquet is a case in point. Scholars from various disciplines have already demonstrated that the *symposion*, or its Roman parallel, the *convivium*, which frequently appears in rabbinic literature as an occasion for the sages’ socializing and study, had significant impact on rabbinic collegiate structures, dining procedures, ritual practices, and literary devices. Archaeologists have also brought to light a wide array of banquet halls (*triclinia*) from places of Jewish settlement in Late Antiquity. A comprehensive investigation of the rabbinic banquet, which takes into consideration all of these concerns, remains, however, a desideratum and would require an approach that accounted for their interdependence.

In this essay, I wish to argue that architecture is significant for any full

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understanding of rabbinic culture. Moreover, I am not merely suggesting that we find analytical ways of incorporating it into the literary or social studies of the rabbis. Instead, I posit that architecture’s all-encapsulating nature—the fact that it is everywhere, so to speak—makes it a unique framework through which to examine precisely the relationships between the various modes of human expression and experience that the different disciplines investigate. In this regard, architecture can be understood as a medium through which humans operate in the world, and a means through which they assign it meaning. It is well established in architectural history and theory that architecture is not limited to physical buildings but rather extends to the social and religious orders they help to constitute, and to their articulation in art, speech, and literature. It functions, therefore, as a mediator between an institutions’ various dimensions, often facilitating the transmission of meaning from one medium to another and from one inhabitant to the next.

For example, the typical classical Greek house (oikos) used the spatial elements of walls and openings to set up a well-defined enclosure wherein a central courtyard served to both connect and separate the various domestic quarters. Apart from providing air, light, and access, the courtyard opened a distance between such rooms as the men’s hall (andron) and the rest of the house, as well as the city street. This layout instituted the seclusion of the group of male participants in the andron-based symposium and reflected the intimate bonds of friendship and love which this practice celebrated. The concentric arrangement of the couches for reclining in the men’s hall further enhanced the sense of unity and exchange, reenacting the domestic courtyard outside and establishing a unique theatrical setting. In turn, this concentric layout of furniture figured in sympotic scenes in Greek art and contributed to the common

2004). For further works on banquet halls and dining rooms from the Second Temple period, see below.


11. For the role of the andron in the Greek house, see Lisa C. Nevett, House and Society in the Ancient Greek World (Cambridge, 1999), 18–19, 124–27.

artistic convention for depicting the drinking party. In the realm of literature, this hall and its architectural features appeared in numerous sympotic texts, which were either recited in the symposium or written about it. In the play *The Wasps*, for instance, Aristophanes considers the architecture by detailing the instructions given to Philokleon, who wishes to learn the correct way of reclining in the symposium:

**BDELYKLEON**: Come and lie down, and learn how to be a symposiast and a socialite.

**PHILOKLEON**: How do I lie then? Come on, tell me.

**BDELYKLEON**: Elegantly.

**PHILOKLEON**: You want me to lie like this?

**BDELYKLEON**: Oh no.

**PHILOKLEON**: How then?

**BDELYKLEON**: Straighten you knees and pour yourself over the cushions, limply and athletically. Then praise one of the bronzes, inspect the ceiling, admire the hangings in the hall. (*The Wasps*, 1208–15).

For Philokleon, gaining access into the group requires the understanding of the symposium’s aristocratic etiquette and the appropriate way of arranging one’s body in space; achieving the correct posture in the men’s hall entails, furthermore, the ability to observe and articulate the new panoramic view of the room, which opens up by reclining. The verbal and visual engagement with the architecture is, therefore, a way to take one’s place in the event, literally and metaphorically. It explicitly transmits social knowledge and becomes the means of initiation.

As it is formulated in literature about the symposium, this link between decor, decorum, and declamation accurately captures the way architecture operates within the framework of a cultural institution. The building, the room, and its furniture frame such an institution and consequently come to represent it, thus participating in the process of its understanding. This mechanism informs my analysis of the rabbinic banquet hall, in the course of which I focus, in particular, on the way in which furniture, rooms, and buildings move from being a silent background for the sages’ activity to appearing at the foreground of their discussion and ritual. Moments like this, when architecture becomes a conscious preoccupation

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for the sages, are crucial precisely because they reveal the rabbinic recognition of architecture’s significance and expose the effort to reorient it and harness it to the project of Torah.

The problems of using material evidence in order to establish the historicity of textual accounts, and vice versa (such as establishing a clear link between a certain rabbi and a specific building or inscription) have already been charted;\(^1\) I do not intend to use these two forms of evidence in this manner, nor is historical reconstruction, as such, my concern. In this regard, the fact that Palestinian rabbinic sources speak about Roman banquet halls extensively, and that *triclinia* were found in the cities of Palestine, make it safe to assume a general rabbinic familiarity with such rooms. For the present study, this familiarity is sufficient, and I therefore limit my discussion to tannaitic and amoraic texts produced in Palestine. More broadly speaking, the premise of my discussion is precisely that the ties between architecture and other modes of expression are complex and often tacit. Working within the limits of a specific place and time, with its given architectural vocabulary and its shared symbolic language, provides me, therefore, with a well-defined framework in which to examine these ties.

In the first section of this essay, I introduce the interior structure of the banquet hall in its Graeco-Roman context, focusing primarily on the role of furniture and the postures it dictates in the political, ritual, and discursive mechanisms of the banquet. This review will lead to the discussion of reclining in banquets in rabbinic accounts. By offering a close reading of rulings from tBer, chapter 5, I show how the decorum of the banquet affects the process of deciding halakhah, illuminating the role of the reclining couches in the sages’ articulation of authority and power. These rulings raise significant questions regarding the nature of the sages’ gatherings and allow me to make some observations about the rabbinic academic session and its spatial setting.

The second section expands the scope of inquiry from the furniture to the banquet hall itself. At the outset of this section, I examine this hall as a distinct entity in both material and textual evidence, exploring the various architectural manifestations of the room and its rabbinic perception. Through two domestic *triclinia* excavated in Sepphoris, I investigate the

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meeting points between the banquet hall’s architectural features and its legal and social understanding, as reflected in halakhic discussions in the Mishnah and Tosefta. My main concern here is the relationships between the banquet hall and the city street, as well as the ways in which the rabbis use these relationships to think through their position within the wider urban community. Moving from the sphere of halakhah to that of aggadah, I treat this theme further through the story of R. Yannai’s triclinium as it appears in Leviticus Rabbah (16.2). Yannai’s story reveals additional layers of meaning associated with Graeco-Roman banqueting culture, which revolve around the dialectics of life and death, study and social obligation. Finally, I offer an analysis of the iconography in the Sepphorian triclinia, illuminating the intersections between its representational mechanisms and those apparent in rabbinic text. This analysis allows me to conclude with more general observations regarding the relationships between image, action, and architecture in the convivial context of late antique Palestine.

A. THE TRICLINIUM BETWEEN THREE COUCHES

The Performance of Hierarchy in the Roman Convivium

The symposium was very much a performance, one which, like Greek theater, generated a tension between the states of observation and participation, political play and mythical reenactment, sobriety and revelry.16 The central role of architecture in this performance is evident in the layout and furniture of the Greek banquet hall—the aforementioned andron (men’s hall). This paved square room contained seven or eleven couches (sing. kline, pl. klinai) placed head to toe against the walls on a continuous masonry ledge, with a small table in front of each couch.17 The symposi-
asts reclined by leaning on their left elbow, usually one or two per couch, and held the food or wine (or their neighbor) in their right hand. Such arrangement formed an arena-like structure with a defined empty space at the center; in it the evening’s performances took place, and through it the participants could see each other, as well as submit their reclining bodies to their friends’ gazes from across the room. Through its mediation, and similarly to the theatrical generation of catharsis, the same place that created distance between the symposiasts allowed the group to represent itself for itself as a privileged egalitarian unity. In this manner, architecture regulated, and at the same time reflected, the drama of social identity and the reaffirmation of cultural values.

The significance of the architectural structure in the Greek symposium is apparent also in the highly Romanized incarnation of this institution, albeit in a very different setting. The Etruscans, and later the Romans, adopted a sympotic setting that was based on a Pi-shaped (II) arrangement of three wide couches, positioned at right angles to one another. The term for the Roman banquet hall—triclinium—originates, therefore, in the Greek designation of this layout: three (tri) couches (klinai). The participants in the convivium reclined diagonally, three per couch, with their heads toward the center of the room. Reclining was a central marker of Roman privilege, representing the ultimate condition of leisure and separating those who recline from those perceived as socially inferior.

This link between reclining and hierarchy was manifested also in the Latin designation of the three couches: “highest couch” (lectus summus), “middle couch” (lectus medius), and “lowest couch” (lectus imus) (figure 1). These terms do not represent a physical difference in height but rather a complex power structure. According to the strict Roman rules of precedence in banquets, position 1 on the imus was reserved for the host, while the guest of honor occupied the adjacent position 3 on the medius. Spatial terms were also used to indicate the relationship between those who occupied the same couch: the one reclining in the middle of the couch was
Figure 1. Layout of a typical Roman *triclinium*. Position 3 on the *lectus medius* was reserved for the guest of honor, and position 1 on the *lectus imus* was reserved for the host.

described as being above (*supra*) the one reclining on his right, and below (*infra*) the one reclining on his left.\(^{21}\) A low table (*mensa*) serving all nine participants was placed between the couches. Often, this space was decorated with elaborate mosaic pavements. The reclining area was normally located at the back of the room, while the area at the front of the *triclinium*, frequently decorated with mosaic pavements as well, was left empty for service and entertainment.\(^{22}\)

In comparison to the Greek *andron*, the *triclinium* instituted a clearer separation between the banqueters and the evening’s entertainers. While the *andron* facilitated participation in the performance and generated a sense of unity and equality through the concentric arrangement of couches, the *triclinium* established a different form of presentation and representation. In this divided room, the spectacular entertainment and lavish service at the front was not the heart of the event but rather its back-


\(^{22}\) Toward the period of the late empire, reclining habits began to change and the *stibadium* or *sigma* couch (half-circular in form) became more popular. This, in turn, changed the architecture of *triclinia*. For a discussion of this phenomenon with examples, see Simon P. Ellis, “Late-Antique Dining: Architecture, Furnishings and Behaviour,” in *Domestic Space in the Roman World: Pompeii and Beyond*, ed. R. Laurence and A. Wallace-Hadrill, *Journal of Roman Archaeology — Supplementary Series* (Portsmouth, R.I., 1997), 45–46. Dunbabin, *The Roman Banquet*, 175–202. And see below for a representation of a *convivium* on a sigma couch.
ground; it was fundamentally an expression of the host’s wealth, status, and hospitality. Thus, in this “home theater,” the real drama took place on the couches, where the participants displayed themselves—the presentation of hierarchy rather than the engagement in dialogue and ritual was the main concern of the convivium’s spectacle.23

Rabbinic Reclining, Tannaitic Halakhah, and the Negotiation of Honor

The meaning of reclining and the play of authority and power at the Roman convivium figure as central themes in a variety of rabbinic Palestinian texts that deal with this practice. As noted above, many such references to sages reclining (mesubin)24 at banquets describe these banquets as taking place in private houses, and as involving academic discussions or ritual procedures.25 One of the texts that is rich in sympotic details is tBer, chapter 5, which has been identified as an important source for the understanding of rabbinic engagement with the convivium.26 tBer 5.5 is particularly relevant for my discussion of the banquet’s spatial setting,


25. See tBets 2.12 and tBer 4.15, where R. Akiva and Rabban Gamaliel clash over halakhah while reclining together with other sages in Rome and Jericho, respectively; SifreDt 38, in which rabbis recline in “the hall of the (wedding) feast” (bet mishteh) of Rabban Gamaliel’s son. The fact that Rabban Gamaliel, the Patriarch, is serving wine to his hierarchically inferior colleagues in this account generates a tense debate about authority and etiquette (parallels: Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai 18.12; MidTan on Dt 11.10; bKid 32b. See also tPes 10.12). In LamR 4.3, R. Zechariah ben Evkolas supposedly reclines at the banquet whose consequences bring about the Second Temple’s destruction. In Avot de-Rabbi Natan B 13, distinguished Jerusalemites recline at R. Yohanan ben Zakkai’s banquet. In yBets 5.2, 63a, R. Judah the Patriarch, who is reclining at his son’s house, quarrels with R. Meir, who is walking outside, over Sabbath practices. The fact that many of these narratives are associated with the Patriarch may suggest that the convivium’s struggle of authority is very much tied to the unique figure of the Nasi, with the tension he represents between politics and scholarship and his clear embodiment of the Roman character.

pointing specifically to the significance assigned to the furniture in the proceedings of such an event:27

What is the order of reclining (bešev)? When there are two couches (mitot), the greatest [in importance] (ba-gadol)28 reclines at the head (be-rov) of the first [couch],29 the one second to him [in importance] (obeni lo) reclines below him (le-matah mimeno) [etc.]. When there are three couches, the greatest reclines at the head of the middle [couch], the one second to him reclines above him (le-ma’alab mimeno) and the third reclines below him, and they continue to order [the reclining] in this manner. (tBer 5.5)

The first case noted in this passage describes a biclinium—the setting of two adjacent or parallel reclining couches, while the second case refers to a triclinium, the typical Roman Pi-shaped setting. As noted by Daniel Sperber, this rabbinic use of “upper,” “middle,” and “lower” couches, as well as the reference to reclining “above” and “below,” follows the Latin terminology mentioned above: summus, medius, andimus, and supra and infra.30 The fact that this halakhah appears within a longer set of rules pertaining to the drinking of mixed wine, the washing of hands at banquets, and the eating procedures further indicates that tBer 5.5 is dealing with the Roman convivium. As noted by Seth Schwartz, the Tosefta here is regulating the convivium as law and not as advice or description. Schwartz rightly rejects Saul Lieberman’s claim that this set of rules was not pre-

27. See parallel in yTa’an 4.2, 68a.

28. A term that probably refers to the convivium’s guest of honor. Schwartz translates gadol once as “leader” and once as “greatest.” Schwartz, “No Dialogue at the Symposium,” 208. Sperber, on Derech Eretz Zuta, 67, translates it as “the elder person.”

29. Instead of “the first” (ba-riobonah), the parallel in yTa’an 4.2, 68a has “the upper one” (ba-’cyonah). See also bBer 45a, 46b.

30. Sperber, on Derech Eretz Zuta, 67–70; Lieberman, Tosefta Kifshuta, Zer. part 1, 62. For an earlier acknowledgment of this link between Roman and rabbinic sympotic practices, see the reference to the triclinium in the translation of tBer 5.5 in Marcus Jastrow, A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature (London, 1903), 766 (s.v. matah). For the Roman reclining couch in the talmudic context, see also Daniel Sperber, Material Culture in Eretz Israel in the Time of the Mibnah and the Talmud (Hebrew; Jerusalem and Ramat Gan, 1993), 2:140–45. For another mention of reclining “below” at a banquet, see yShek 5.5, 49b.
scriptive but instead descriptive/nostalgic. Nevertheless, the reason he gives for the Tosefta’s motivation in this legal effort does not seem to go beyond the idea that any meal set in this format “had to be conducted as a proper *convivium*, as a matter of Jewish Law.” Why, then, is the Tosefta concerned with making the *convivium* a matter of Jewish law?

As I show below, the answer to this question is significant to the understanding of the rabbinic institution of the banquet and the role played by architecture in its structuring. This answer, I believe, resides not in the laws but rather in the aggadic passage at the beginning of the chapter.

[1] “A man should not eat on the eve of the Sabbath from the afternoon onwards, so that he should be hungry at the start of the Sabbath,” the words of R. Judah. R. Yose says: “He may continue to eat until it grows dark.”

[2] It happened (ma’aseh be-) that Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel and R. Judah and R. Yose were reclining [and eating] in Akko and the Sabbath began. Said Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel to R. Yose berabbi:33 “If you wish, we shall stop [eating and recite a blessing] on account of the [beginning of the] Sabbath.” He [Yose] said to him: “Every day you cherish (mehavev) my opinion over that of Judah, and now you cherish Judah’s opinion over mine? ‘Does he mean, cried the king, to ravish the queen in my own palace?’ (Esther 7.8)”35 He [Simeon] said to him: “Then let us not stop [eating], lest the law be established permanently [on the basis of our actions].” They said [concerning this incident]: “They did not move from there until the law was established according to [the opinion of] R. Yose.” (tBer 5.1–2)36

The initial halakhah quoted here deals with a case in which a banquet is held on the eve of the Sabbath. A convivial feast on this day raises the

33. In his translation, Tzvi Zahavy (in Jacob Neusner’s English edition of the Tosefta) understands “berabbi” here to mean “Rabbi”; by using this title for Yose, Simeon could therefore be seen as giving his colleague much respect. However, Lieberman shows that “berabbi” was often used for R. Yose, as well as for other sages, and Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel II calls him in this manner in other places. Lieberman, *Tosefta Kifshuta, Zer*. part 1, 73.
34. Or “in the presence of Judah.”
35. NJPS translation. All biblical quotes in this essay are based on this translation.
36. Compare with the parallel account in yPes 10.1, 37b.
question of whether one should change the convivium’s customs of dining because of the onset of this holy day. Unlike the Greek symposium, the Roman convivium did not entail a formal separation between the dining and drinking stages of the evening; it would have been impossible, therefore, to time dinner so as to correspond with the start of the Sabbath. R. Judah, the stricter of the two ruling authorities here, believes that, in order to be hungry when the Sabbath begins, it is necessary to stop eating in the afternoon. R. Yose, the more lenient of the two, believes that the dining of the convivium should not be interrupted because of this special occasion, and that the eating could continue past the beginning of the Sabbath, and until nightfall. This halakhah appears, therefore, to be primarily interested in reconciling the ritual system of the convivium with that of a Jewish sacred day.

The account then brought by the Tosefta dramatizes the event discussed in the first halakhah by placing Judah and Yose at a dinner, which takes place on the eve of the Sabbath. The word “reclining” used here indicates that the event mentioned is a convivium-style banquet. Also present at this convivium, perhaps as the guest of honor, is Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel II, who represents a high level of political and religious rabbinic leadership. The fact that the banqueters in the convivium are engaged in eating when the Sabbath begins implies that Judah’s ruling from the preceding halakhah is not accepted, and that Simeon (and maybe other sages in this gathering) follows Yose’s opinion. However, it appears that Judah and Yose disagree about another issue, which sets the flow of the convivium over and against the marking of the Sabbath. This disagreement has to do with taking a break from dinner at the moment the Sabbath begins in order to recite the blessing on the sanctity of the day. Unlike R. Judah, R. Yose believes that dinner should not be interrupted at this point, and that the necessary blessings should be

38. Compare with the similar injunction in mPes 10.1, in which a person preparing to recline at the Passover Seder is required to refrain from eating until nightfall. And see Bokser, Origins of the Seder, 62.
39. Although, in this story, the Tosefta does not explicitly assign Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel II the title Patriarch (Nasi), we may assume that it is indeed this important sage whom the Tosefta has in mind. For the contestation of the authority of Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel II as a product of Babylonian narratives, see David M. Goodblatt, “The Story of the Plot against Rabban Simeon Ben Gamaliel the 2nd” (Hebrew), Zion 49 (1984): 349–47.
40. I base this interpretation of this story on Lieberman, Tosefta Kifshuta, Zer, part 1, 72–74, who relies on the context of the story, as well as on the parallel discussions in y and b. See yBer 6.5, 10c; bPes 102a; bBer 42a–b.
recited after the guests have finished eating, supposedly at nightfall.\footnote{According to Lieberman, Judah’s opinion is that eating should stop once the Sabbath begins in order to allow for the appropriate blessing of sanctification to be recited, and then resumed until the culminating blessing for the food. It should be noted that this disagreement about blessings is not explicit in the text; in fact, the placement of our story immediately after the first halakhah, which revolves around the issue of hunger, gives the impression, at first, that the \textit{convivium} account continues this discussion. However, since Judah’s opinion in this account is not the one expressed in the preceding halakhah (there, he would have liked the eating to stop before the Sabbath rather than when the Sabbath begins), the object of this discussion is clearly different, as Lieberman suggests.}

This is consistent with what we already know of Yose: he gives great importance to the rules of the \textit{convivium} and wants to preserve its structure as much as possible. Simeon, who has apparently followed Yose’s ruling up until that point, now sides with Judah and asks Yose whether he wishes the group to stop eating for the purpose of blessing. The question is directed at Yose, probably because he is understood to be the host of this \textit{convivium} and so the one who determines the procedures; nevertheless, this gesture of convivial respect reveals the fact that Simeon rejects his host’s halakhic view in favor of his rival’s.

We should not be surprised, therefore, that Yose flies into a rage. His objection is twofold: first, he evokes rabbinic hierarchy and alliance, attacking Simeon’s break with what has, so far, been a consistent Patriarchal sanctioning of Yose’s halakhic stands and standing. Nevertheless, this argument is obviously not enough and, presumably, would not have been sufficient to alter Simeon’s view had the debate taken place elsewhere. Yose, therefore, proceeds to his second argument. He evokes the \textit{convivium}’s rules of hospitality and honor, blaming Simeon for disrespecting him in his own house. For this purpose, he turns to the most convivial of biblical books, Esther, in which he finds a proof-text for the proper etiquette of hospitality at a banquet, and the relevant language of sympotic accusation. The verse he quotes comes from the scene wherein Esther herself manipulates the rules of honor and hierarchy of the banquet.\footnote{For banquets in the Mesopotamian context, see Walter Burkert, “Oriental Symposia: Contrasts and Parallels,” in \textit{Dining in a Classical Context}, 7–24.}

By inviting Haman and Ahasuerus to a banquet of her devising, she succeeds in depicting the former’s plot against the Jews as directed at her personally and thus puts him in a position of effectively disrespecting her husband—the king and host—in his own house.\footnote{In the comic pantomime of Esther’s feast (Est 7), the king first leaves the room in anger, only to find, upon his return to the banquet hall, Haman prostrating himself before the reclining Esther in a plea for mercy. Ahasuerus interprets this as an attempt to seduce the queen, which enhances the impression of disre-}
Toseftan mise-en-abîme, where a banquet scene appears within a banquet scene, Yose in the role of host and king (whose halakhah is perhaps the assaulted queen) defeats Simeon in the role of Haman. In fact, Simeon seems so convinced or, alternatively, distressed by this accusation that he promises not only to embrace his host’s opinion but also to consciously perform what is required according to this opinion so as to make it an official legal precedent.

I would like to argue that this convivial performance of a halakhic hierarchical debate holds the answer to the question with which I began, regarding the reasons for legally regulating the convivium. In this account, Simeon went so far as to alter his initial view and subject it to the rules of the convivium. The basis of his halakhic decision was not the religious reason of blessings and Sabbath observance but rather the etiquette of honor at the banquet. The boldness of this move is striking. While most of tBer 5 is interested in halakhically determining the structure of the convivium, our story demonstrates that the reverse can also apply—the convivium may at times determine the structure of halakhah. In this sense, Schwartz’s convincing claim that the rabbis tended to use the conventions of the symposium or convivium to subvert the Roman code of honor and replace it with the honor of the Torah and its sages could, however, be restricted to cases in which rabbis are at a banquet with others. Whereas the accounts of sages banqueting with members of other social groups in the Palestinian Talmud may reveal that “the rabbis saw themselves as outsiders in the larger social world and saw Torah-based honor as directly competitive with standard honor,” in the strictly rabbinic banquet in the Tosefta, for instance, the “standard honor” of the convivium decides the way Torah is to be practiced. This interdependence between the convivium and its laws begins to explain what is at stake here, and why the rabbis are so eager to legislate this seemingly civic institution. For the authors and editors of the Tosefta, the convivium is not merely a social gathering

spect and seals Haman’s fate. Queen Vashti is another character in Esther who loses all she has because of the banquet’s rules of honor.

44. The erotic overtones of Yose’s diatribe, which are reflected in his use of the affectionate verb mehaber to describe Gamaliel’s favoring of his opinion, as well as the reenactment of Esther’s erotically charged banquet, suggest another correspondence with Graeco-Roman sympotic literature.

45. By ending with a decision to set a precedent, this account links back to its beginning, in which it is described as a ma‘aseh. The three rabbis here are depicted as consciously performing the tale they are in, so as to make it exemplary and binding.

47. Ibid., 215.
or even a ritual meal but rather an assembly akin to that of the study house (*bet midrash*), whose procedures bear profound implications on the academic discussions it fosters.

The question as to exactly what was the rabbinic study house in Palestine, and whether it had distinct architectural and institutional features, has been discussed extensively in the last few decades. Although, and perhaps because, this question has no single and simple answer, most scholars today seem to agree that, at least during the tannaitic and early amoraic periods, the Palestinian *bet midrash* with its related terms and permutations was a flexible and multifaceted framework for rabbinic engagement with Torah. With the possible exception of the Patriarchal court cum academy, and maybe one or two defined places of rabbinic gathering in Sepphoris and Tiberias (whose exact nature is itself unclear), study, instruction, public expounding, and delivery of sermons, court sessions, and prayer appear to have taken place in a variety of sites and formats. Moreover, the study house is at times understood as a session and at times as the disciple circle of a specific rabbi. In view of the scarcity of material evidence which can be identified as pertaining to a *bet midrash* with certainty, this idea implies that the rooms, houses, streets, synagogues, city squares, and other places mentioned in the literature as hosting rabbinic gatherings and discussions could have all been settings for the study house.

Hence, if the rabbinic academic gathering was indeed an open-ended framework, which often manifested itself in spatial and temporal sites

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such as the *convivium* and its room, the laws of reclining on the three couches in tBer 5.2 are not surprising.\(^5\) The Tosefta’s regulation of the *convivium* may be understood in this case as motivated by the same concern with the proceedings and spatial arrangements of Torah study or adjudication found throughout rabbinic literature.\(^5\) In this chapter of tBer, the architecture receives as much attention as the ritual procedures precisely because it participates in setting up the fundamental conditions of a decisive rabbinic form of gathering. Its ability to establish and display the power structure of a rabbinic session through the performance of the *convivium* makes the *triclinium*’s furniture, in particular, a type of ritual object through which the truth of Torah is made manifest.

**B. THE TRICLINIUM BETWEEN HOUSE AND STREET**

*Sepphorean Triclinia and the Rabbinic Traklin*

In order to fully understand the *triclinium* and its role in rabbinic culture, it becomes necessary, at this point, to go beyond the furniture and place this room within the larger context of the city. Overall, the sense one receives from a wide range of texts dealing with rabbinic activity is that its geography, the “where” of Torah culture, is as broad and rich as the urban civic topography in which it is embedded. In view of the recent work on the place of rabbinic academic sessions, which I reviewed above, and following my own study of rabbinic topography in Palestinian sources and cities, I found that the literature’s study *house* is as much a study *city* (*ir midrash*). In what follows, I examine the way in which the rabbis perceived and defined the banquet hall in relation to the extended framework of the house and the city street, pointing to the role it played

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51. The possibility that the rabbinic *convivium* and its hall were seen as such an academic setting is implied by two references in the Palestinian Talmud, both of which mention reclining as specifically taking place in urban study houses associated with Palestinian amoraim of the fourth and fifth generations; this is indicated by the use of the term *revu’a* or *riv’a* used in the Palestinian Talmud to designate occasions of reclining in an assembly. yShab 4.2, 7a and 20.1. 17c. See also tBer 5.3, which describes a case wherein the sages reclining in the banquet depart for the study house at nightfall, only to return to the banquet later on. This case appears to assume a certain degree of proximity and continuity between the banquet hall and the place of study. On *revu’a/riv’a*, see Sokoloff, Palestinian Aramaic, 514; Lee I. Levine et al., eds., *From Dura to Sepphoris: Studies in Jewish Art and Society in Late Antiquity* (Portsmouth, R.I., 2000), 368–69, 590; Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years*, 394, and see, ibid., 140–42 for historical sources attesting to ritual meals and banqueting in synagogues.

52. See for example, mAvot, as well as tractates *Horayot* and *Sanhedrin* and their various talmudic interpretations.
in the formation and articulation of rabbinic boundaries. I show how these boundaries operated on multiple social and religious levels, taking part in the negotiation of both the inner structure of rabbinic associations and their relationships with nonrabbinic others.

This analysis begins with the spatial vocabulary of the banquet hall in rabbinic sources and its correspondence with the architecture of *triclinia* in late antique Palestine. A common supposition in archaeological and historical studies of this hall is that the term *triclinium* is generic, and that the rabbis use the loanword *traklin* (also *triklin* and *triklina*) indiscriminately to refer to any reception/dining hall. The fact that reception/dining halls excavated in Palestine are diverse in their layout and scale appears to contribute to this supposition. While I accept that the rabbis were most likely aware of the variety of banquet hall models available in their environment, I would like to suggest that the term *triclinium* had, for them, much more specific connotations.

One type of such a local hall, which is often designated *triclinium*, is widespread particularly in wealthy houses and palaces from the Second Temple period. This type is designed as a wide rectangular room that can accommodate a large group of diners in a variety of sitting arrangements. Three prominent examples of this type are the halls in Herod’s palace in Jericho (ca. mid-first century B.C.E.); the elongated rooms in “Hilkiya’s Palace” at Khirbet el-Muraq (ca. first century C.E.); and the broad hall in a wealthy house excavated in Jerusalem (ca. first century C.E.). The notion of a royal *triclinium* is found also in rabbinic literature, where it is rendered “a king’s *triclinium*” (*traklino shel melekh*) and appears mostly as a literary trope of kingship in legendary accounts. It is important to note, however, that in the Graeco-Roman world, the term *triclinium* had, for them, much more specific connotations.


56. Hirschfeld, *Palestinian Dwelling*, 88–91. Note the masonry *triclinium* at the center of this structure’s courtyard, which exhibits the typical arrangement of three reclining couches in the Pi-shape layout.

57. Nahman Avigad, *The Upper City of Jerusalem* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1980), 95–120. This house also contained a marble table commonly used in banquets.

58. See, for example, Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai 14.27; SifreDt 43; MidTan on Dt 11.17; GenR 5.9, 52.3.
ium is tied to the setting of the three couches, and grand rooms that are not specifically reserved for convivial reclining are frequently termed oecus. Nevertheless, as is evident in Vitruvius’s architectural treatise, grand rooms of this sort were regularly used to accommodate one or more sets of couches arranged in the typical Pi-shape layout. My suggestion, then, is that the rabbinic use of the term triclinium primarily reflects the arrangement of the furniture, which could be set up in rooms of varying statures, scales and shapes, and consequently endows them with this name.

Another type of dining/reception hall in Palestine is easier to identify as a triclinium. The excavation of two elaborate 3rd century C.E. houses and their banquet halls in Sepphoris—a Galilean city that figures in the literature as a major rabbinic center—exposed finely executed mosaic pavements which clearly delineate the typical Pi-shaped arrangement of the three couches. One of these houses was called by the excavators “The House of Dionysos” due to its triclinium, whose central mosaic carpet depicts the life of the god and his cult (figures 2, 4, 6). The second house was called “The House of Orpheus” on account of the image of

59. See Roller, Dining Posture, 67, n. 103, who argues that aside from their shape, such Hellenistic halls have little in common with Roman triclinia.

60. Rabbinic literature, similarly, has other terms for banquet halls such as bet mishteh. See, for example, SifreDt 38. This term seems to be tied to wedding feasts, but its use of the root sh–t–h specifically links it to drinking. See also Krauss, Talmudische Archa¨ologie, 2:40.


62. Another Sepphorean mosaic, which decorates a public dining room and exhibits a clear delineation of the place for couches, was excavated by James Strange of the University of South Florida. A final report on this building has not yet been published; however, a preliminary analysis of its mosaic was offered by Lucille Alice Roussin, “The Birds and Fishes Mosaic,” in Sepphoris in Galilee: Crosscurrents of Culture, ed. R. M. Nagy et al. (Raleigh, N.C., 1996), 125–25. For a review of other triclinia mosaics from Palestine, which attest to their spatial setting, see Talgam and Weiss, House of Dionysos, 1–16. Another relevant find from Sepphoris is a rython—a vessel commonly used in banquets for drinking wine, which, in the Sepphorean case, was shaped as a griffin-like creature with a protruding horn at the back for holding the wine. This Sepphorean rython is dated to the fourth century B.C.E. See Emmanuel Eisenberg, “A Greek Rython from Sepphoris” (Hebrew), Kadmoniot 18 (1985): 31–33; Michal Dayagi-Mendels, “Rython,” in Sepphoris in Galilee, 163.

Figure 2. The House of Dionysos in Sepphoris, plan. Courtesy of the Sepphoris archaeological expedition, the Hebrew University.

this Greek mythical musician, found at the center of the triclinium’s mosaic\textsuperscript{64} (figures 3, 5, 7). Apart from attesting to the setting of the furniture in their triclinia, these two houses are unique in their overall plan.

The houses of Dionysos and Orpheus resemble the typical Roman domus, with shops facing the street and a peristyle garden at the center; however, their triclinia have atypical proportions, location, and visibility. Unlike the majority of triclinia found throughout the territory of the Roman Empire, the two Sepphorian banquet halls take up the entire central space of the house. They are closely surrounded by secondary rooms, which would have been dominated by the presence and the gaze of the guests reclining at the core of the house. These rooms form a defined layer around the banquet halls, further buffering them from the bustling outer urban life and regulating the entry into the triclinia from the streets, porticoes, and courtyards. Although this anomalous layout has yet to be fully explained, it implies that the triclinia of Dionysos and Orpheus in Sepphoris bore great importance for their owners and functioned as pivotal spaces in their domestic life. While archaeologists still debate the possibility that either or both of these Sepphorian houses belonged to a Jew, or indeed, a rabbi, their mere location and date are clearly sufficient to place them

65. The triclinium in the House of Dionysos is also surrounded by corridors and hallways on three sides, which establish an intermediary space between the banquet hall and the adjacent rooms.
Figure 4. The *triclinium* mosaic from the House of Orpheus in Sepphoris, an overall view with marked space for couches on right. Courtesy of the Sepphoris archaeological expedition, the Hebrew University. Photography: Zev Radovan.

Figure 5. The House of Dionysos in Sepphoris, an overall view toward the *cardo*. Courtesy of the Sepphoris archaeological expedition, the Hebrew University. Photography: Gabi Laron.
well within the cultural orbit of the rabbis and make them highly relevant for the present discussion.66

It is, therefore, particularly noteworthy that, when discussing triclinia in several sources, the rabbis appear to imagine a spatial layout similar to that of the Sepphorean halls. The notion of a central banquet hall, into which smaller chambers open, figures in rabbinic sources in connection with celebrations such as wedding feasts and Sabbath gatherings.67 In yBB 9.3, 16d, for example, we encounter the idea that a son’s wedding gives him entitlement to his father’s house if the wedding ceremony was held therein.68 The rabbis then discuss whether the son gains ownership only over the chamber in which the ceremony was performed or also over the parts of the triclinium in which the banquet took place.69 Although

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67. For sources mentioning the relationships between small chambers and a triclinium, see also Mezuzah 2.3; mMid 1.6; Sifre Dt 29.

68. See also yKet 4.7, 28d. The term for this kind of domestic chamber here is kiton—from the Greek koitòn—which is parallel to the Latin cubiculum. See
this account may reflect an actual practice relating to real estate ownership, the language employed here and its resemblance to other theoretical articulations of the *triclinium* in rabbinic literature suggest that this hall functioned as a model of shared domestic space in halakhic discussions. As such, the *triclinium* and its adjacent rooms serve, in the case of the son’s wedding, as a framework through which the familial economy is regulated and boundaries of kinship and commitment are considered.

The legal discussions in the context of the Sabbath are even more revealing of the *triclinium*’s role in rabbinic gathering. An important example is found in two parallel tannaitic rulings:

1) [In the case of] five associations (*ḥavurah*) who observed the Sabbath (*ḥabrutah*) in one *triclinium* (*traklin*), [those of] the House of Shammasi say: “an *ʿeruv*⁷² [is required] for each and every association.” And the House of Hillel say: “one *ʿeruv* serves all of them.” But they concur that, when part of them are in private rooms or upper chambers, they require an *ʿeruv* for each and every association. (mEruv 6.6)

2) [In the case of] five associations [who observed the Sabbath in one house], and part of them was in private rooms and part of them was in upper chambers, their *triclinium* [functions] as a courtyard in relation to [its surrounding] houses [for the purpose of *ʿeruv*]. (tEruv 5.8)

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⁷⁰. For legal discussions of *triclinia*, see, for example, storage in *triclinia*, tTer 7.16; heating up the *triclinium* for use on the Sabbath, tShab 16.18; purity of dining tables in *triclinia*, tKel BM 5.5; *nazir* and purities in a *triclinium*, yNaz 7.3, 56c. In mBB 6.4 R. Ishmael prescribes exact measurements for a *triclinium*: 10 square cubits at the floor and 10 cubits high (approximately 5 X 5 X 5 meters) – measurements which are based on the dimensions of the sanctuary (*hekhal*) as listed in 1 Kgs 6.17.


⁷². A ritual food item. See below for further explanation.

⁷³. Instead of “thier *traklin*” (*traklin shelaben*), the parallel version of this statement found in a beraita in yEruv 6.5, 23c has “*the triclinium in front of them*” (*traklin lifneben*).
Figure 7. The Orpheus *triclinium* mosaic pavement from the House of Orpheus in Sepphoris. Courtesy of the Sepphoris archaeological expedition, the Hebrew University. Photography: Gabi Laron.
These rulings describe a situation in which several groups, most certainly rabbinic associations, gather in a *triclinium*, as well as in other rooms of the same house, during the Sabbath.\(^74\) Overall, as in other rabbinic rulings, it is hard to tell how much of this discussion is theoretical and how much of it reflects an actual practice. It is also somewhat unclear what the Mishnah and Tosefta see this gathering in the *triclinium* to have entailed. Are the different *h. avurot* imagined as studying together, organized according to their leading sage or their rabbinic rank? Are they perceived as also dining and reclining in a banquet, similar to that which we saw in the Sabbath *convivium* of rabbis Yose, Judah, and Simeon?\(^75\)

What is perhaps easier to determine is that our rulings, and particularly that of the Tosefta, portray an architectural arrangement comparable to that of the Sepphorean houses of Dionysos and Orpheus, whereby secondary rooms surround a central *triclinium*. Even before delving into the legal subtleties of these rulings, it is noticeable that the Mishnah and Tosefta use the architectural structure of *‘triclinium versus rooms’* as a model for discussing center and periphery, common and private. Hence, as in cases discussed previously, these rulings reveal the process by which architecture is an underlying structuring mechanism manifested in ritual, law, and literature.

The role given to architecture in these passages is, however, more far-reaching than that of an organizational model; understanding this role requires a brief review of the halakhic concern with the system of *’eruv ha’atserot’.\(^76\) The explicit purpose of this system was to circumvent the biblically prohibited act of carrying objects outside one’s place during the Sabbath. The rabbis facilitated such carrying by allowing an individual or household to symbolically extend their private domain and unify it with that of their neighbors.\(^77\) Such extension is achieved primarily through the positioning in a common place of a food item (itself frequently referred to as *’eruv’), to which all neighbors who subscribe to this system contribute. If the house and its household is the fundamental

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\(^{74}\) Many halakhot in the Mishnah and Tosefta use the number 5 in the sense of “several” (e.g., mEruv 6.8; tEruv 5.6, 7). For another discussion of 5 *havurot* dining in a house, see Mekhila de-Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai 12.7.

\(^{75}\) tBer 5.2. See Krauss, *Kadmoniyot ha-Talmud*, 1.2, 438, who thinks that this account indeed depicts a banquet.

\(^{76}\) Lit. “the merging of courtyards.” See also the related practice of “incorporation of alleyways” (*shituf mevo’ot*).

\(^{77}\) The rabbinic private domain is not based on absolute ownership but rather on the rights one has in a place, as well as on spatial definitions such as the level of this place’s permeability.
framework of the private domain in ‘eruv ha’tserot, the courtyard, which such houses are regarded as enclosing, is the paradigmatic common place wherein the shared food item is positioned.\textsuperscript{78} The residents of several adjacent courtyards can then place the food item in their connecting alleyway, so as to achieve an even wider unification and carrying range, and the procedure may be repeated on larger urban scales. This fractal-like urban structure, in which each segment is analogous to and continuous with the larger segment that contains it, is evident in many cities of late antique Palestine, including Sepphoris.\textsuperscript{79}

By discussing whether each association in the triclinium should make its own contribution to a shared food item (supposedly positioned in this hall), the Mishnah and Tosefta, quite strikingly, treat the rabbinic associations gathering therein on the Sabbath as houses and households in an urban neighborhood. The Tosefta makes this even more explicit by stating that the triclinium functions as a courtyard and the rooms as its surrounding houses. The Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds already noticed the oddity of treating groups of people in a single domicile, and even in a single room, as distinct households in terms of the ‘eruv system. In its elaboration of this case, the Palestinian Talmud, for example, invents a new element that was purportedly at the basis of the tannaitic rulings and would explain the associations’ separateness and status; it claims that, around each association in the triclinium, there were provisional partitions in the form of curtains (papilyonot), which made the associations comparable to “houses” (batim).\textsuperscript{80} The interpretation of the Palestinian Talmud, however, does not follow from the tannaitic sources, and it complicates rather than explicates the problem. Overall, the halakhically unusual and unclear positioning of multiple rabbinic collegiate gatherings in the triclinium in the context of ‘eruv ha’tserot suggests that the motivation of our rulings goes beyond the technical issues of carrying on the Sabbath.

\textsuperscript{78} For a discussion of ‘eruv in a case of an association which reclines in the courtyard of a house during the Sabbath, see yEruv 6.8, 24a.


\textsuperscript{80} yEruv 6.5, 25c and parallel bEruv 72a–b. Lieberman, \textit{Tosefta Kifshuta, Moed}, III, 394 reviews several later explanations for the private quality of the rooms-based associations, such as that these rooms were in fact independent residential units and thus required their own ‘eruv, or that they opened onto separate courtyards and thus were obliged to set up an ‘eruv with residents other than the groups in the triclinium. None of these explanations, however, can be directly supported by the sources themselves.
I propose, that mEruv 6.6 and tEruv 5.8 employ the spatial symbolism of the ‘eruv’s system for an additional and more fundamental reason. As demonstrated by Charlotte Fonrobert, this system is motivated by the wish to establish a sense of a rabbinic community within cities of diverse national and religious populations and complex architectural features.\textsuperscript{81} Through voluntary ritual acts, the ‘eruv weaves lines of affiliation wherein all kind of Jews and non-Jews live side-by-side in a dense, conflict-ridden, and spatially ambiguous maze of streets, alleyways, and courtyards. For the rabbis, remapping the urban topography in this manner is a crucial mechanism for inserting their social and religious order of Torah into the reality of the community. In this respect, the tannaitic rulings I am discussing here insert rabbinic order into this reality in yet another way. By comparing the house/triclinium assembly of associations, a bet midrash of sorts, to an urban quarter, while at the same time placing it within one, the Mishnah and Tosefta mark this assembly as a paradigmatic rabbinic community, and so as an ideal neighborhood. Like other urban neighborhood communities, the rabbinic assembly is not monolithic but instead comprises subgroups defined by various identities, loyalties, and locations. Nevertheless, as in the case of the city and its diverse society, architecture can, when oriented by ritual, make a place for consensus and unity. It may be said, therefore, that the rabbinic community, which is positioned in the city through the framework of the triclinium, is ideal precisely because it represents the negotiation and reconciliation of difference both within this community and in regard to its outside world.

The Triclinium of Rabbi Yannai

The use of the triclinium and its relation to the street or road as a framework for the negotiation of difference within the rabbinic community and outside it appears in aggadic texts as well.\textsuperscript{82} One such text is Leviticus Rabbah (ca. fifth century c.e.). A famous story in this midrash specifically sets Torah study in a triclinium. The protagonist of the story is the first-generation Palestinian Amora, R. Yannai, who is mentioned in rabbinic literature as having lived in Sepphoris for a time:\textsuperscript{83}

\textsuperscript{81} Fonrobert, “Symbolism of the Eruv,” 9–35.
\textsuperscript{82} For the spatial continuity between street and road in the context of late antique Palestine, see Baker, Rebuilding the House of Israel, 78.
\textsuperscript{83} This passage has many variations in the different manuscripts. I rely here on their reconciliation in the critical edition of Mordecai Margulies, Midrash Wayyikra Rabbah (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1954; reprint, 1999), 349–52. On this story, see Avigdor Shinan, “Rabbi Yannai, the Peddler and the Profuse Man: A Study of the Structure of Two Stories from Leviticus Rabbah” (Hebrew), Bikoret
There was the case (ma‘aseh be-) of a peddler who was making his rounds in the towns near Sepphoris, proclaiming: “He who wishes to buy an elixir of life (‘am ḥayim) will come and gather round [or: recline] (yesev)!” He entered the [town of] Akhbara and passed near the house of R. Yannai, who was sitting and expounding (pashat) in his triclinium. He [Yannai] heard him proclaiming “He who wishes to buy an elixir of life.” R. Yannai looked out at him and said to him: “Come up here and sell to me.” He [the peddler] said to him: “You do not need it, neither you nor people like you.” R. Yannai pressed him, and the peddler went up to him and brought out the book of Psalms and showed him the verse “Who is the man who is eager for life, who desires years of good fortune?” [Ps 34.13]. “What is written immediately after that verse?” (ma ktiv batre) [asked the peddler] “Guard your tongue from evil, your lips from deceitful speech. Shun evil and do good, seek amity and pursue it” [ibid. 14–15]. Rabbi Yannai said: “For my whole life I have been reading this verse of Scripture, but I did not know how it was to be expounded (pashut), until this peddler came and informed [me].” “Who is the man who is eager for life?” (LevR 16.2).

u-farshanut 30 (1994):15–23. For the later parallels of this story, see Tanhuma Buber, Metsor’a 5; MidPs 52.2. And see bAZ 19b.
84. The verb yesev appears only in the two Oxford MSS.
85. It is not clear whether this reference to Akhbara as the location of the story is original or whether it was inserted later in a few MSS. In reality, the distance between Akhbara and Sepphoris is substantial. Yannai is described in the literature as living in both these places, and it may be that the rendering of Akhbara as one of the ‘towns near Sepphoris’ in our story is informed by this duality. See Ben-Zion Rosenfeld and Joseph Menirav, Markets and Marketing in Roman Palestine, trans. C. Cassel (Leiden, 2005), 122, where the authors suggest that the peddler in our story is seen as living in Sepphoris and traveling to neighboring towns. For a different opinion regarding Yannai’s place in this story, see Shinar, “Rabbi Yannai, the Peddler and the Profuse Man,” 17, n. 12.
86. The use of the root p-ḥ-b (expound) indicates a session dedicated to the interpretation of Torah. See Margulies, Wayikra Rabbab, 349–50, for MSS in which pashat is replaced with the comparable term darash/daresh.
87. The Oxford MS fragment 2654/8 has: “nor your friends need it” and a Geniza fragment has: “nor your association needs it.” Margulies, Wayikra Rabbah, 350.
88. For an alternative rendering, see the Geniza fragment discussed in Jacob Mann, “Some Midrashic Genizah Fragments,” Hebrew Union College Annual 14 (1939): 327, n. 170.
89. The word bōlī’ō could also be translated “instructed.” Sokoloff, Palestinian Aramaic, 235. And see LevR 18.1, Margulies, Wayikra Rabbah, 394.
Interestingly, the story begins not with the expected focus on a rabbi but with the perspective of a traveling peddler. This initial reversal of roles appears to set the tone for the story’s play of similarity and difference, which is soon to unfold through the tale of mistaken identities. The view of Sepphoris’s rural landscape, with which the narrator opens, pans in on the figure of the peddler, who approaches the rabbi’s house from outside the town, as if to emphasize his foreignness and otherness. Nevertheless, when he finally stops right outside Yannai’s residence, he sets up shop in a manner that stresses the similarity rather than the difference between the two figures. At least according to the two Oxford MSS, the peddler invites people to assemble or, perhaps, to recline around him in a suspiciously convivial setting. At the very same time, R. Yannai is expounding Torah in his own assembly, whose convivial connotations come from the fact that it is taking place in a triclinium.

This narrative mirroring between triclinium and street is made even more explicit by the peddler’s response to Yannai’s interest in his merchandise. At first, it appears that the peddler’s refusal to sell the elixir to the rabbi, saying that neither he nor people like him need it, sets him and his assembly of clients apart from the community of rabbis. In this sense, he can be understood as saying: you have a different way of gaining longevity, or perhaps immortality, from the one I am offering. However, by presenting himself as selling something the rabbis already have, the peddler could also be seen as equating himself with them, claiming to have acquired the means for prolonging life (or avoiding death) to the point of being able to transmit it to others. Either way, the peddler is clearly established, so far, as a worthy counterpart to the sage.

The turning point in the plot occurs when the distance between the two collapses—as the peddler ascends from street to triclinium. It is at this moment that the peddler reveals his true nature as a teacher versed in Scripture. His merchandise turns out to be not an elixir, and not even the book with its Psalms, but, rather, a homily. The nature of this peddler’s character, as understood by the midrash, is difficult to determine.

90. This sage’s circle is often called in rabbinic literature “the House of Rabbi Yannai” (be rabi Yanai). See Miller, Sages and Commoners, 343–93.
91. Cat. A. Neubauer, no. 147 and 2335.
92. It should be noted that although Yannai is described as “sitting and expounding,” sitting in the context of a rabbinic academic session most commonly denotes sitting in office rather than necessarily in the literal posture of sitting.
93. Note Yannai’s call “come up here,” which establishes a spatial difference in height as well as, perhaps, in status. Shinan, “Rabbi Yannai, the Peddler and the Profuse Man,” 18, n. 17. See also my reference below to the Roman formula of inviting guests to a convivium by the vocator.
There is some possibility that LevR is imagining one of the common rivals of the rabbis, such as an uneducated commoner (‘am ha-arets), a Christian, or another Bible-reading Jew. Nevertheless, it is tempting to think of our peddler as a character who would be known to the rabbis—not necessarily from the roads of Palestine but from Greek folklore, literature, and philosophy. In Plato, for instance, we find two characters who could fit the peddler’s description. The one is the itinerant initiation priest of the Orphic mystery cults, who would go to the doors of the rich, offering purification and magical formulas that would supposedly save the initiate from suffering after death.

Another character with a compelling resemblance to our peddler is the sophist. This itinerant teacher and rhetorician’s typical concern with the polis and its morality brings to mind the peddler’s lecture on the moral injunctions formulated in Psalms. As mentioned earlier, for Plato, the sophist stands in direct opposition to the philosophy of the academy, figured in the Symposium by the symposium. In the midrash, the peddler is specifically linked to the city through his travels around “the towns near Sepphoris,” a phrase which appears several times in rabbinic literature and carries the associations of this city’s economic-agricultural territory, as well as of its political and administrative domination. Additionally, the fact that this secret preacher offers to sell his “wares” suggests a monetary exchange in regard to education. This exchange is often a focus of philosophical attacks on sophism. When describing the greed of sophists, Philo, for instance, uses the trope of trade, saying that they “sell their tenets and arguments like any bit of merchandise in the market.”

96. Boyarin, Socrates and the Fat Rabbi, 284–89. For a discussion of the Roman convivium as an institution in which the social order of civic life is relaxed or even subverted, see John D’Arms, “The Roman Convivium and the Idea of Equality,” in Symposium, 308–20.
97. See, for instance, yGit 1.2, 45c. And see also yKil 9.3, 52b; yKet 12.3, 35a.
98. See, for example, Plato, Protagoras, 313c–d. For other sources, see Bruce W. Winter, Philo and Paul among the Sophists (Cambridge, 1997), 95–97. Interestingly, in later versions of our story, Yannai actually pays the peddler for his services. Shinan, “Rabbi Yannai, the Peddler and the Profuse Man,” 21.
In spite of these parallels and possibilities, our story appears to resist a clear identification of the peddler’s character, constantly returning to the uncanny sense of simultaneous familiarity and strangeness embodied in this figure. Like the peddler, rabbis give sermons in which they expound Torah and sometimes even traverse long distances for this purpose. Furthermore, in LevR itself we find praise for the Tanna R. Eli’ezer, son of R. Simeon, which applies to him the verse from the Song of Songs 3.6 that ends with the phrase “of all the powders of the peddler.”

The midrash explains that the word “powders” symbolizes Eli’ezer’s multiple skills as a “teacher of Scripture and Mishnah, a poet (paytan) and a dars-han.” Hence, between elixirs and powders, for LevR, rabbis and peddlers have much more in common than it might seem.

More strikingly, like the peddler in our story, rabbis use hermeneutical devices such as textual context. The peddler’s question regarding Ps 34.13 “what is written immediately after that verse?” is, in fact, a common rabbinic interpretive device found throughout talmudic and midrashic literature. Moreover, Yannai’s comment at the end of the story speaks about the peddler as coming and informing his exegetical innovation (ba ve-hodi’o), a phrase which is typically used in Palestinian sources in connection with established rabbis who clarify the position of other established rabbis. Hence, the peddler both applies rabbinic hermeneutics and is treated as an authority.

The key arena in which the play of similarity and difference between the peddler and the rabbi unfolds is the scriptural homily itself and the use it makes of the phrase “elixir of life.” This phrase is found already in tannaitic traditions, where it is a metaphor for Torah and not, as our morality-motivated peddler would have it, a reward for seeking good and amity or avoiding evil and deceitful speech. Interestingly, in the Babylonian Talmud we find several references to the Torah as an elixir of life, most of which are attributed to sages of Yannai’s generation. The peddler, the Platonic notion of philosophy and the rabbinic project of exegesis, which would have been considered sophistry by Plato.

100. LevR 3.1. The biblical word rokhel, which appears in Yannai’s story and which I have translated “peddler,” is rendered “merchant” in the NJPS translation of the Song of Songs.
101. See, for example, yBer 1.1, 2d; yYom 6.6, 45d. In our own Midrash, see LevR 5.4, 23.5, 23.13.
102. Miller, Sages and Commoners, 56–37.
103. See, for instance, SifreDt 35, 41.
104. bTa’an 7a; bKid 30b; bYom 72b; bAZ 19b; bEruv 54a. See Levine, Rabbinic Class of Roman Palestine in Late Antiquity, 45, n. 13.
dler, then, introduces a new understanding of this verse, which appears different from what is found elsewhere in rabbinic literature. He may be understood as saying that the source of life is not the Torah (or Scripture) itself but rather its message of proper conduct. Nevertheless, here too the gap between the rabbi and his guest is not as wide as it first appears. By using Torah to disclose and promote a secret of longevity or immortality, the peddler reaffirms the trope of Torah as elixir of life. Yannai, on his part, shows amity by inviting the peddler into his Torah session and giving him the credit and honor of a colleague.

This is not to say that all difference between the rabbi and the outsider has been erased. In one sense, LevR could be seen as acknowledging and thinking through, in this story, the process by which external narratives and notions cross the boundary of the association into the heart of rabbinic discourse. Rabbinic literature is full of such accounts of others, women for instance, who teach the rabbis something that comes from a different perspective or tradition. As noted earlier, our story certainly stresses the exegetical contribution of the peddler, an out-of-towner who exposed a meaning that was supposedly hidden in plain sight. In addition, the fact that the story is framed as a ma’aseh signals that this contribution has now become authoritative.

Useful to the understanding of such mechanisms of inclusion is Stuart Miller’s recent treatment of the nature of Palestinian rabbinic circles such as that of Yannai. Miller’s argument (which emerges from the growing scholarly consensus regarding the flexible and open-ended nature of Palestinian rabbinic institutions) is that the practices, laws, and ideas of these circles were the result of a unique set of negotiations. These negotiations involved a variety of players, including the rabbi’s colleagues and students, but also his household members, clients, employees, and other figures in his economic and political environment (whom Miller calls “commoners”). Yannai’s transaction with the peddler in LevR may thus be viewed as hinting (though perhaps metaphorically) at this overlap between scholastic and

105. For discursive boundary-crossing in rabbinic literature and the relationships with others as articulated through the notion of neighborly relationships, see Hasan-Rokem, *Tales of the Neighborhood*, 7–9, 31.


economic networks. Most important for my discussion is the notion that the spatial framework of the *triclinium*, whose architecture participates in constructing the boundaries of typical Roman houses, is utilized here as the agent of rabbinic boundary-crossing and discursive exchange. To put it differently, according to this reading of our story, the *triclinium* is the tacit structure through which the rabbinic Torah session both colonizes the message coming from the road and is colonized by it.

However, in view of the consistent disruption of the difference between the sage and the peddler, and their persistent reflection in one another’s character, I wish to suggest that Yannai’s story is very much an internal rabbinic drama. The reason that the peddler walks like a rabbi and talks like a rabbi is not only that he is a character in a rabbinic midrash but also that he appears to stand for a fundamental rabbinic idea: proper moral conduct (*derekh erets*). Jonathan Schofer has recently noted that, in rabbinic sources, *derekh erets* “appears with a number of quite divergent senses, including worldly or business matters, sexual activity, etiquette, and supererogatory activity (actions beyond what is required by basic legal or ethical guidelines).”

This principle seems, therefore, to resonate with the perspective of the sophist that I mentioned above, which is concerned with the polis, its education, productivity, and political order. Significantly, *derekh erets* is described in rabbinic literature as different from, and sometimes conflicting with, Torah and its study. The rabbis frequently struggle with the question of their reconciliation, suggesting, for example, that Torah itself contains and even promotes various aspects of *derekh erets*.

One text that deals with the tension between these two sets of values is found slightly before our story, in LevR 9.3, which also has Yannai as its protagonist. In this case, Yannai mistakes a person he meets on the road for a rabbi, or a rabbinic Jew, and invites him to his house. At dinner, the rabbi wishes to honor his guest by giving him the privilege of reciting the blessing for the food. The fact that, according to some rabb-


109. David Flusser, “Which Is the Right Way That a Man Should Choose for Himself? (Sayings of the Fathers, 2:1)” (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 60.2 (1991): 169. See, for instance, mAvot 2.2, 3.17; mKid 1.10; tKid 1.17; Avot de-Rabbi Natan A 8, 28; Avot de-Rabbi Natan B 54. For a discussion of setting up a *triclinium* so as to comply with the principle of *derekh erets*, in the context of Noah’s Ark, see GenR 31.16.

110. Shinan, “Rabbi Yannai, the Peddler and the Profuse Man,” 20–22.
binic rulings, one person says the blessing for all who are present only in the context of reclining suggests that this is, in fact, a convivial event.\footnote{111. mBer 6.6 and parallels in yBer 6.6, 10c; bBer 42a. The fact that Yannai is said to have examined the man’s knowledge of Scripture, Mishnah, and Talmud implies that some time has passed, and that Yannai is expecting his guest to engage in the discussion of Torah during dinner.}

In any case, the man is unable to recite the blessing because he is not the rabbinic Jew he was initially believed to be. When Yannai realizes this, he offends his guest, only to discover that the man is in fact a model of \textit{derekh erets}.\footnote{112. The story appears to imply that Yannai mistook the man for a rabbi partly because he looked wealthy, but also because the honorable and proper conduct associated with \textit{derekh erets} is a marker of rabbinic public behavior and presentation. In view of parallel Graeco-Roman perceptions of aristocracy and \textit{paideia}, this could also imply, therefore, that \textit{derekh erets} was perceived as a marker of class.} The rabbi consequently acknowledges the merit of \textit{derekh erets} and regrets treating his guest with disrespect.\footnote{113. See Ephraim E. Urbach, \textit{The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs}, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem, 1987), 639–41; Safrai, “\textit{Derekh Erets},” 156; Uri Ehrlich, “Giving and Taking Permission to Leave: A Case in the Matters of \textit{Derekh Erets}” (Hebrew), in \textit{Shefa Tal—Festschrift for Bracha Sack}, ed. Z. Gries et al. (Hebrew; Beer Sheva, 2004), 13–26. For manners, etiquette, hierarchy, and various social procedures in the Roman context, see Lateiner, “See and Be Scene,” 618–34.} The story ends with a saying of R. Ishmael\footnote{114. By which is probably meant Samuel.} bar Nahmani: “\textit{derekh erets} preceded the Torah for twenty-six generations [from Adam to Moses], as it is written: \textit{to guard the way (derekh) to the tree of life} (Gn 3.24). \textit{Way}—which is the \textit{way of the land (derekh erets)}, and then the \textit{tree of life}—which is Torah.”\footnote{115. Samuel bar Nahmani claims that before the Torah became available to humans as a code of behavior, they followed the more universal code of moral conduct. See LevR 35.6 for the same statement by a different rabbi. For the relationships between Torah and \textit{derekh erets} here, see Kadushin, \textit{A Conceptual Commentary on Midrash Leviticus Rabbah}, 63, n. 2.} Note the parallels in these two Yannai stories, linking \textit{derekh erets} to the mythical tree, and the allusion to the elixir of life above in the other story of Yannai.\footnote{116. See Flusser, “Which Is the Right Way,” 163–78. Flusser shows that the term “the way of the land” originates from Jewish texts of the Second Temple period, in which we find the trope of two ways, one of life/light and one of death/darkness. According to Flusser, this trope, as it appears, for instance, in Christian and Qumran sources, has evolved in rabbinic texts to represent the tension between \textit{derekh erets} and Torah. See also Peter Schäfer, \textit{The Origins of Jewish Mysticism} (Tübingen, 2009), 206–7.}

At this point, it is possible to return to the account with which we
started—which can, perhaps, be seen now as a variation upon the theme of Yannai and the mistaken identity of derekh erets on the road.117 As in the case of the dinner guest, whose derekh erets finally gains the respect and approval of the rabbi, at the instance of exchange between the peddler and Yannai in the triclinium, Torah scholarship and proper moral conduct are ultimately reconciled. As noted above, the peddler, who practices derekh erets also in the business sense of practicing a profession, shows this principle to be included in Torah. In turn, Yannai, the master of Torah, behaves according to the code of derekh erets by being hospitable and by accepting the peddler’s ethical exegesis of Torah. It may be said, therefore, that the real protagonists of this tale are the two principles of commitment to society and dedication to the study of Scripture. In this play, Yannai and the peddler exchange ideologies and roles and, as characters, seem to function as the faces of competing rabbinic principles.118

Architectural and Midrashic Dialectics in Yannai’s Story and Sepphorean Houses

In this context, we may once again understand the triclinium and its counterpart, the road or street, as the stage set of this play. Although rabbinic literature’s articulations of this theme do not always appear in connection with convivial settings, it is noteworthy that both stories about Yannai, Torah, and derekh erets in LevR do imply such a setting. The one takes place at dinner and perhaps a convivium at the rabbi’s house, the other occurs in his banquet hall.

Why, then, does LevR associate the banquet and its triclinium with the dialectic of Torah versus derekh erets? The answer, I would like to suggest, lies in some of the inherent cultural meanings of convivial institutions and their architecture in the Graeco-Roman and rabbinic contexts. The institution of the banquet embodied a set of dialectical notions such as participation and observation, carnivalesque drunkenness and self-control, friendship of equals and hierarchy of social rank. The architecture of banquet halls staged these cultural dialectics. Through reclining, for instance, in which the body rests halfway between lying down and sitting up, the furniture of the banquet hall established the tension between leisure (otium) and civic/economic obligations (negotium).119 As the privilege of the elite, the freedom of dining while reclining, in most cases, did not extend to low-ranking men, women, or slaves, who dined

117. Shinan, “Rabbi Yannai, the Peddler and the Profuse Man,” 22–23.
119. On otium/negotium in the convivium, see Roller, Dining Posture, 15–22.
sitting or standing. The fact that these “others” were nevertheless present in *triclinia* and were often allowed to dine during the *convivium* in their respective postures affirmed the superiority of elite male citizens. In this manner, architecture shaped the stage set of another one of the banquet’s plays of opposites.120

Rabbinic literature establishes a similar dialectic when discussing the convivial framework of the Passover Seder. In yPes 10.1, 37b, for example, R. Levi is quoted as saying: “And since it is the way of slaves to eat standing up, here [at the Seder, everyone] eats reclining, to proclaim that they have gone out of slavery and into freedom.”121 Hence, although the hierarchy of aristocratic reclining is subverted in the case of Passover to promote social equality, this gesture and its furniture remain markers of the relationships between freedom and obligation.

The dialectic of *otium* and *negotium*, as manifested in the architecture of reclining, was deeply linked to the tension mentioned earlier between the academy’s life of philosophy and the city’s life of political involvement. Plato’s *Symposium* is one treatment of this tension.122 Aristotle framed it differently through the terms *bios theorétikos* and *bios politikos*, which became crucial for the late antique and medieval Christian dialectic of *vita contemplativa* (the spiritual life of contemplation) and *vita activa* (the life of involvement in worldly matters).123 This question of withdrawal from and participation in the city’s political life has recently been shown

120. See LamR 4.3, in which Bar Kamtsa, who was mistakenly invited to the banquet of his sworn enemy in Second Temple Jerusalem, offers to sit instead of recline if the host would agree not to humiliate him further by throwing him out of the banquet altogether.

121. See also mPes 10.1.

122. Boyarin, *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis*, 305, has summarized the competing elements in Plato’s *Symposium*: “By staging the opposition between Aspasia and Diotima, Plato is enacting precisely the opposition between the lover of bodies/time and the lover of souls/epistémē: Aspasia versus Diotima equals Pericles versus Socrates, a binary opposition . . . Aspasia = rhetoric, civic life, bodily enacted *eros*, childbirth—all the markers of the lesser mysteries (at best)—while Diotima is Dialectic, distance from the polis, the birth of ideas, and the very personification of discourse alone.”

123. One of the classic discussions of these notions and their development is Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, 1958), 12–17. Arendt notes that the Christian *vita activa* is closer to the Greek notion of *askhólia*—unquiet, which meant for Aristotle all activity, than to the notion of *bios politikos*, which referred specifically to public-political activity. See, for instance, Aristotle, *Eth. Nic.* 1.5, and *Eth. Eud.*, 1215a35. For Augustine’s term *vita negotiosa* or *actuosa*, see *De Civ. Dei*. 19.2, 19.
by Charlotte Fonrobert to underlie rabbinic texts such as bShab 33b–34a, which appear to engage directly with Platonic narratives.124

The rabbis, whom I have shown to debate the relationship between Torah and derekh erets, also posed this question through the more specific terms “study” (talmud) and “action” (ma’aseh). As evident in a famous tannaitic dialogue, in which the rabbis debate which of these two principles is superior, talmud pertains to engagement with Torah, while the meaning of ma’aseh, similarly to derekh erets, is diverse. It ranges from commitment to the community (charity, political leadership, etc.) to work, and even ritual activity.125 It is perhaps not a coincidence, therefore, that this specific debate is staged as a sympotic dialogue between three rabbis who recline in a house in the city of Lydda.126 As mentioned above, Seth Schwartz’s analysis of convivium stories in the Palestinian Talmud also demonstrates that the banquet and its hall frequently frame the tension between commitment to etiquette or codes of honor (a central component of derekh erets) in their Roman manifestation and the honor of Torah or Torah scholars.127 It may thus be said that in rabbinic literature the convivium often functions as a literary topos of inclusion in the political life of the city or seclusion from it.

Here, too, I wish to take the notion of topos back to its Greek sense of “place” and point to the importance of architecture in the formation and articulation of the dialectic at hand. What is significant in the two stories of Yannai from LevR is the fact that the tension between derekh erets and Torah is set up not only through the spatial framework of the triclinium but also through this hall’s relationship with the road. This pair represents the divide separating inside and outside, private and public, academy and city, but also functions as a contact zone where insiders and outsiders, household members and guests, sages and commoners may meet.

Cynthia Baker has demonstrated that the boundaries between inside and outside, domestic and commercial, were fluid in the urban neighborhoods of the Galilee.128 Such neighborhoods figure as the predominant

125. MidTan on Dt 1.13.
urban pattern in rabbinic discussions of the ‘eruv system129 and are evident, for instance, on the northwestern and northeastern slopes of Sepphoris’s hill.130 Nevertheless, the urban landscape of the Galilee in general, and of Sepphoris in particular, also contains a somewhat different residential pattern. Lower Sepphoris and some elements of upper Sepphoris are, in fact, planned according to the common Roman grid, in which the city is divided into equal rectangular blocks that are traversed by an orthogonal street system.131 The House of Orpheus in Sepphoris stands at the center of this part of the city, and the House of Dionysos has a rectangular plan that is typical of such an orthogonal urban pattern. For my discussion of these houses in the context of rabbinic accounts of banquet halls, the relationship between the triclinium and the street that characterized this pattern is, therefore, the more relevant. It suggests a much more regulated and carefully designed procession between street and triclinium.

In the elite Roman domiciles of Italy, the process of entry into the heart of the house was a significant organizing principle, which had political and symbolic implications. A guest coming from the bustling street would normally be received in the atrium, a wide hall whose columns and decoration mimicked an urban colonnade or enclosure. Here, the various rituals of the familia were held. At the far end of the atrium was the tablinum, where the owner of the house would receive his clients in the daily reception of the salutatio.132 The owner’s wealth and status in the salutatio were reinforced by the vista that opened onto the peristyle garden at the back, a garden to which the guests would be visually exposed, but into which they would not necessarily be allowed. The triclinium, which hosted the most distinguished guests and allies, was normally located at the far end of the garden, marking the innermost region of the house both spatially and socially.133 Thus, the architectural sequence of street, atrium, tablinum,
garden, and *triclinium* instituted a dialectical continuum between the life of obligation and its apparent opposite.\(^{134}\)

The Sepphorean houses of Dionysos and Orpheus establish a similar continuum, which is manifested, nevertheless, on a different scale and through a different layout. These houses did not have an *atrium*, so their small courtyards did not function as they did in their Italian counterparts.\(^{135}\) In both houses, guests would enter from the street into a small antechamber that led directly onto the peristyle courtyard (figures 2, 3). As noted above, in the typical Roman *domus*, the columns of the courtyard would institute a spatial and symbolic continuity between the porticos of the urban street and the realm of the house.\(^{136}\) In Sepphoris, this lingering presence of the street in the house was brief—after taking a few steps among the columns, guests would already be on the threshold of the *triclinium*. Nevertheless, the filtering of the entry process that is characteristic of grand Roman domiciles occurred here as well, albeit through other means. In the House of Dionysos, the first boundary was a wall permeated by three openings. Those coming in through one of these openings would stumble upon the second boundary—the borderline of the room’s mosaic. This mosaic pavement, which frames the center of the *triclinium*, depicts in the margins facing the entrance a procession of people in contemporary Roman attire who are preparing a Dionysian celebration\(^{137}\) (figure 4). Accompanying the guests on their way into the *triclinium*, this

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\(^{134}\) Roller, *Dining Posture*, 84, writes: “Elites defined their essential social being through *negotia*—their advocacy on behalf of clients, their office holding and the like. For them, *otium* and its associated activities, including dining, was what they did precisely when they were not inhabiting and constructing their essential social identity by pursuing *negotia*.“ It should be noted, however, that in reality both activities were of course deeply political.

\(^{135}\) In recent studies of Roman Italian domestic architecture, small- to medium-scale houses that contained spaces for reception are seen as belonging mostly to the social class of subelites (such as free men). They are compared and contrasted with the grand houses of the elites (i.e., members of the decurial class); Roller, *Dining Posture*, 76–84. The Sepphorean houses discussed here are modest in comparison to such grand domiciles, but they are nevertheless the largest excavated in the city so far. Determining their social classification would require further analysis.


\(^{137}\) The frame of this processional panel, which included also the typical Dionysian theater masks, gives a three-dimensional illusion of depth, thus forming an apparent ledge on the floor.
iconographic procession led to the area of the couches at the back. The room’s central mosaic, which depicts mythical scenes from the life of Dionysos with a banquet scene at the core (figure 6), marks, therefore, the culmination of our guests’ procession. Through the sequence of street, antechamber, courtyard, openings, and, finally, the iconography of the human ritual procession and a mythical banquet, the guests reclining on the couches ultimately became participants in a divine *convivium*.

This sequence entails an ontological transformation from an actual to a transcendent reality, as well as a social transformation from the daily life of the city to the realm of ritualized leisure and conviviality.

In the Sepphorean House of Orpheus, this transformation was no less nuanced. The house stood at the intersection of the two main thoroughfares, the *cardo* and *decumanus*, which marked the commercial, civic, and religious heart of the city. Entering from the public portico into the colonnaded courtyard of the House of Orpheus through a narrow passage and an antechamber would, on the one hand, maintain the continuity of the columns’ urban order. On the other hand, this process of entry would filter the street’s sounds and sights, presenting the newly arrived visitor with a place of silence and shade (figure 5). Once in the courtyard, this visitor would be directed either to the left, toward the small and modest *triclinium*, or to the right, toward the elaborate *triclinium* of Orpheus. This positioning of two different *triclinia* over and against each other in the same house is extremely rare in Graeco-Roman architecture; a final archaeological report on the House of Orpheus may shed light on this anomaly. One possible explanation is that the small *triclinium* was used for formal or business receptions, while the Orpheus *triclinium* was reserved for lavish banquets of distinguished guests. If this was the case, we may regard the House of Orpheus as a unique manifestation of the

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139. Note the suggestion of Talgam and Weiss, *House of Dionysos*, 125, that we view this mosaic as reflecting the idea of initiation into the Dionysian mysteries.

140. In Roman practices of establishing new cities, this intersection was determined through unique rites of augural divination, marking the intersection of the four quarters of heaven. Land surveyors would use this intersection as the point of departure for the planning of the entire city. See the discussion of this intersection in Sephoris in Klein, “Topography of Symbol,” 19–22.

dialectic of obligation and leisure characterizing typical Roman domiciles and the institution of the convivium.

For the fortunate guests who were invited to the Orpheus triclinium on the right, the threshold between the courtyard and the hall itself marked another significant station in the process of entry. The panel of the mosaic pavement framing the triclinium, which borders on the Orpheus panel and would have faced our guests as they approached the hall, declares the purpose of this room and the significance of what takes place therein (figure 7). On the left of the panel, two men in tunics are depicted holding each other’s arms in what seems like a gesture of friendship and hospitality. At the center, a detailed banquet scene shows four men wearing tunics and adorned with garlands and wreaths, who recline on a semicircular couch (the sigma or stibadium). Three of them appear to hold each other in yet another expression of friendship. One man standing to the left of the couch and pointing to the banqueters perhaps represents the host, while two figures on the right who are mixing the wine with hot water from the miliarium and serving it to the guests are probably servants. Food, perhaps a roasted bird of some kind, is visible on the table in front of the couch. The last scene on the left side of the panel depicts two men in tunics sitting on chairs and playing a board game using dice.142 This sequence, which begins with welcoming embraces, continues with dining and drinking and ends with the entertainment of games, appears to represent, therefore, the various components of a paradigmatic Roman banquet. The crossing of the iconographic boundary of the mosaic into the heart of the triclinium thus signaled the guests’ ultimate inclusion in the privileged group of diners, and their final transition from the life of the street to the state of convivium (lit: “living together”).143

To go back to Yannai’s story and its dialectic of the street and the triclinium, a swella of derekh erets and Torah, the houses reviewed here suggest that Sepphoran convivial architecture and rabbinic accounts of Sepphoran sages have intersections. At the basis of both the architecture and the text lies the notion that the triclinium and the street make up distinct social

142. For a rabbinic account of dice being played at a Shabbat dinner, see mShab 23.2. For bone dice found in Sepphoris, see Rebecca Martin Nagy et al., eds., Sepphoris in Galilee, 255. Elaine Gazda and Elise Friedland, Leroy Waterman and the University of Michigan Excavations at Sepphoris, 1931 (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1997), 14.

143. For a reference to the meaning of convivium (living together), see Cicero, Sen. 13. 45. For a rabbinic mention of the practice of signaling to newcomers that guests are no longer welcome at dinner by hanging towels or sheets above the doorpost, see tBer 4.9.
and symbolic sites, which are nevertheless, deeply interdependent. The House of Orpheus, for example, was able to facilitate the life of ritualized leisure in the triclinium because it set this room apart from the street’s life of obligation, but also because it allowed for a transformative passage between the two. By using as an architectural setting and a narrative device the passage between street and triclinium (a common site of rabbinic gathering), Yannai’s story could speak about the difference of Torah and social codes, while also promoting their reconciliation.144

**Representation in Architecture, Art, and Rabbinic Ritual and Literature**

The unique convivial mosaic of the House of Orpheus points to further links between architecture and rabbinic literature, which go beyond the story of Yannai in LevR. Matthew Roller has recently examined the representation of convivium scenes in the wall paintings of Pompeian dining halls, offering some explanations regarding their possible role in the banqueting culture of Roman subelites.145 According to Roller, apart from displaying the aspired-to leisure and luxury associated with the convivia, depiction of banquets in the places where banquets actually took place “spurred viewers to comprehend and assimilate them through narrative.”146 In other words, such convivial iconography operated as an agent of erudition, through which the banqueters learned, as well as displayed their knowledge of dining practices. This suggestion, to which Roller also adds the observation that convivia were themselves sites for competitive display of knowledge, seems to apply also to narratives of rabbinic banquets.147 The story I analyzed above from tBer 5.2 about the banquet of Yose, Judah, and Simeon, for example, employs the same technique of evoking a banquet scene within a banquet scene in order to learn and teach something about Torah. By drawing on the account of Esther’s banquet, Yose gains the upper hand in the legal debate, but he also demonstrates his biblical erudition and thus reaffirms his authority as both a

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144. As evidenced in the tannaitic texts analyzed earlier, the triclinium already embodied the tension between social principles such as honor and the religious principles of Torah study. The incorporation into the narratives of Yannai of the street or road, which epitomizes the economic and political life of the city, appears to take this dialectic further.


146. Ibid.

master of Torah and a connoisseur of elite banqueting culture. To be sure, using biblical prooftexts in legal debates is a common rabbinic practice. However, the Tosefta’s clear engagement with the etiquette and language of Roman banquets here suggests that the use of this very specific biblical scene corresponds with a wider convivial tradition.

Another possible way in which the iconography of *convivia* scenes in *triclinia* may have functioned, according to Roller, is by providing a means of self-reflection for the subelites banqueting in these rooms. As Roller shows, such images of banquets invite the diners to think themselves into the picture and make the comparison between the depicted scene and their own situation; they present them with a behavioral paradigm to follow or, in some cases, reject. This idea resembles what I have described above regarding the banquet mosaic in the House of Orpheus, which advertises an ideal *convivium* and uses the panel as a visual and spatial boundary marker of the group. For Roller, the domain in which viewers/diners might find meaning in these images is that of “personal conduct and ethics, of what constitutes proper or desirable behavior.”148 This seems to be true as well in the case of our Sepphorean iconography. The Dionysos *triclinium* mosaic, in which the panel of ritual procession frames heroic scenes in the life of the god but also moments of drunkenness and violence, can be seen to present the diners with ideas of moderation, encouraging them to participate in the Dionysian mysteries while maintaining social order and self-control. The Orpheus *triclinium* mosaic is no less didactic and clearly promotes notions of amity and hospitality.

Here, too, there is significant similarity between the ways in which art, architecture, and rabbinic texts operate. The articulation of amity, or avoidance of deceitful speech, in the accounts of Yannai provide one example of convivial narratives that speak about moral conduct and present the receiver of the story with the tensions of proper behavior and religious obligations. But the self-reflective dimension of convivial art is equally echoed in halakhic texts such as tBer 5.5. This legal passage regulates the reclining order on the various couches, as dictated by the proper etiquette of convivial hierarchy and seniority. It is an ideal picture, a diagram even, which prescribes a specific social order and invites the follower of rabbinic law to adopt the behavior it promotes. The more pronounced example of self-reflective rabbinic depictions of banquets is the Passover dinner, in which the rabbis make the description of convivial reclining, drinking, and eating, as well as the display of food, a didactic tool in the ritual’s liturgy.149

149. See the discussion of ritualization in Brumberg-Kraus, “Not by Bread Alone,” 172–77.
With this, it is possible to return to the dialogue from Aristophanes’s *The Wasps*, with which I began. In his symptic education, Philokleon is taught how to recline in effortless elegance by reflecting on his posture and adjusting it. He is furthermore instructed to “praise one of the bronzes, inspect the ceiling, admire the hangings in the hall,” indicating that an active reflection on the room is here a component of proper symptic behavior.\(^{150}\) Finally, the fact that this is a theatrical dialogue conveyed in a text demonstrates that, as in the case of the rabbis, convivial performance and its architecture have ultimately entered the realm of literature.

**CONCLUSION**

In Palestinian rabbinic texts dealing with banquets, architecture is a fundamental factor. It operates, first, as a stage set for the sages’ discourse. Architecture imports the social and symbolic concerns that underlie symptic or convivial spaces into these discussions. The second way in which architecture operates in rabbinic texts is as a direct object of religious regulation and speculation. By determining the manner in which *triclinia* and their furniture are to be used, these texts actively engage with the architecture in order to adjust it and reorient it toward Torah. Last, in light of the Sepphorean *triclinia* and their iconography, I suggest that architecture has an additional role beyond providing a narrative background and being an object of regulation at the foreground. By making a place for cultural institutions and the various media in which they are created and represented (art, ritual, speech, literature), architecture facilitates a correspondence between these media and allows their different mechanisms to migrate to other realms of creativity.

The relationships between such media are complex, multidirectional, and often tacit. Uncovering the exact ways in which they unfold is difficult even in cases where a text and a building, for instance, can be tied together without doubt, let alone in a case such as that of the rabbis, where neither the places of literary production nor the places discussed in the literature can be determined with certainty. However, when they are examined within a cultural, temporal, and geographical framework such as the Graeco-Roman and rabbinic institution of the banquet in late antique Palestine, they reveal clear traces of their intersections and reverberations.

In this regard, understanding the entire scope between the layout of *triclinia* as preserved in archaeological remains, the social and ritual conditions of dining as instituted by the furniture and reflected in text, the symbolic dimensions and representational mechanisms of banquet halls’ art, and the religious articulation of *triclinia* in various genres of rabbinic

literature provides us with a fuller picture of the banquet. This integrative study is significant not only because it offers the methodological merits of contextualizing rabbinic institutions but also because it is attuned to the representational mechanisms afforded by the material itself. What is therefore significant about architecture is that, although it is only one of several components of this material, it gives us substantial clues as to the ways in which all the components interact.

Finally, the profound meanings assigned to the *triclinium* in rabbinic literature and late antique Palestinian architecture may begin to explain why the rabbis perceived this room, in their eschatological speculations, as a place of reward in the afterlife. In mAvot 4.16, for example, R. Jacob states: "This world is like the vestibule of the world to come. Prepare yourself in the vestibule so that you may enter the *triclinium.*" In yHag 2.1, 77a, two rabbis are described as studying the mystical secrets of the Merkavah until a heavenly voice pronounces: "The place is ready for you and the *triclinium* is set up for you. You and your students are invited into the third class." As a paradigmatic space of rabbinic dialogue and dialectic, the *triclinium* therefore finds itself reflected in heaven, ensuring the continuation of the life of Torah in an eternal *convivium* with God.

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151. The Hebrew word *prozdor* is a loanword from the Greek πρόζδορος. Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 1219.
152. For parallels, see Avot de-Rabbi Natan B 33 and tBer 6.21; also Midrash Proverbs 6.
153. See parallels in mHag 2.1; tHag 2.1; bHag 14b. For a discussion of this passage, see David J. Halperin, *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature* (New Haven, Conn., 1980), 128. Schäfer, *Jewish Mysticism*, 190–93. The Hebrew word for "set up" (muts’a) can mean "spread out" or "made" and may refer to the *triclinium*’s couches. The idea of a divine banquet for the righteous can be found elsewhere in rabbinic literature. Schäfer, *Jewish Mysticism*, 192. And see bBB 75a–b. In the Bavli’s parallel of the invitation to the heavenly *triclinium*, the heavenly voice proclaims: "Come up here! Come up here!"—a proclamation which resembles Yannai’s invitation of the peddler in LevR 16.2. This proclamation echoes the Roman formula of invitation to a *convivium* by the vocator. Compare with Luke 14.16–17. And see Willi Braun, *Feasting and Social Rhetoric in Luke 14* (Cambridge, 1995), 100–106. For papyrus invitations found in Hellenistic Egypt, which exemplify this formula, see Chan-Hie Kim, "The Papyrus Invitation," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 94.3 (1975): 391–402. And see the important example of such a practice in the rabbinic description of a banquet in LamR 4.2. For a discussion of heavenly temples and cities, see Gil P. Klein, "Non-Canonical Towns: Representation of Urban Paradigms in Talmudic Understanding of the Jewish City," *Studia Rosenthaliana* 40 (2008): 231–63. For the Qumran context, see Ra’anan S. Boustan, "Angels in the Architecture: Temple Art and the Poetics of Praise in the *Songs of the Shabbat Sacrifice*," in *Heavenly Realms and Earthly Realities in Late Antique Religions*, ed. R. S. Boustan and A. Y. Reed (Cambridge, 2004), 195–212.