

When Teachings Fly Away

The rabbis' self-proclaimed function as memory experts was not restricted to their ability to predict and assess scenarios of memory omissions in everyday practice. First and foremost, the rabbis' expertise was based on their own proficiency in memorizing enormous amounts of texts. Accordingly, concern with the shortcomings of human memory, and preoccupation with forgetting as an ever-present danger, are prominent themes not only in rabbinic depictions of ordinary halakhic practice, but also and indeed much more pervasively in depictions of rabbinic textual training and performance. Moreover, at least on the surface it seems that whereas forgetting in the realm of halakhic practice is normalized in Tannaitic texts, forgetting of one's textual teachings is catastrophized.

The prospect of forgetting one's teachings looms large in rabbinic texts, from the earliest to the latest compilations, and it is unequivocally described as one of the worst things that could happen to a Torah learner. Forgetting can take place as a result of illness or old age,¹ or as punishment for vices or misdeeds;² it can be the result of consuming certain foods (apparently olives are deleterious for memory) or engaging in ill-advised behaviors (like looking at the face of a dead person, or passing between two women);³ but most commonly it is described as the inevitable result of letting go, even briefly, of the incessant regime of recitation

1. As indicated, for example, by the phrase "beware of an elder who has forgotten his teachings against his will" (BT Berakhot 8b, BT Sanhedrin 96a; PT Mo'ed Qatan 3.1, 81d). On this expression, and on the theme of mental changes in old age more broadly, see Balberg and Weiss, *When Near Becomes Far*, 107–11. For an example of memory loss as a result of illness, see BT Nedarim 41a.

2. Forgetfulness of teachings is mentioned, among other things, as a consequence of anger (BT Nedarim 22b); evil deeds (BT Sanhedrin 106b); shaming a colleague (BT Baba Batra 9b); and falsely claiming mastery of Torah (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 5.1). For a discussion of causes and cures for forgetfulness, see Kiperwasser, "The Cure of Amnesia."

3. See especially BT Horayot 13b. T. Shabbat 6.7 (ed. Lieberman 23) also refers to common beliefs regarding memory-inducing foods.

and repetition that a disciple of the Sages must undertake.⁴ In the words of Birger Gerhardsson, “The Rabbis waged a conscious and energetic war against forgetfulness,”⁵ and this war was never-ending and could never be declared as won. The moment in which a disciple gets comfortable thinking that he has mastered his teachings is the moment in which he begins to lose them. Rabbinic texts offer some advice on facilitating memorization, from tips on memory-inducing foods to mnemonic techniques and exercises,⁶ but mostly they offer a host of imageries and anecdotes to convey how difficult it is to acquire the knowledge of Torah and how easy it is to lose it.⁷ The following cluster of homilies from the Midrash Sifre on Deuteronomy, which is part of a lengthy section concerned almost entirely with memory and forgetfulness in Torah study,⁸ demonstrates this trope well:

If you will surely keep this entire commandment that I am commanding you (Deut. 11:22). Why was this said? Since it was said [earlier], *If you will heed every commandment that I am commanding you today* (Deut. 11:13), am I to understand that once a person heard the words of the Torah he may sit and not repeat them?⁹ Scripture says, *If you will surely keep*—this tells you that in the same way that a person must be careful with his *sela* (i.e., a coin worth 4 denarii) lest it be lost, so one should be careful with his teaching, lest it be lost.

Scripture also says, *If you seek it [= wisdom] like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures* (Prov. 2:4)—in the same way that silver is difficult to acquire, the words of the Torah are difficult to acquire.

Or is it possible that in the same way that silver is difficult to lose (i.e., to destroy), so the words of the Torah are difficult to lose?

4. In addition to the examples discussed in this chapter and many others across different rabbinic corpora, see especially Avot deRabbi Nathan version A, chapters 23–24 (ed. Schechter 75–78), in which this theme is prominent.

5. Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998), 168.

6. See Michael D. Swartz, *Scholastic Magic: Ritual and Revelation in Early Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 33–50. Swartz discusses the ample evidence for use of magic for improvement of memory, which is also documented in medieval and early modern sources. See also Gerrit Bos, “Jewish Traditions on Strengthening Memory and Leone Modena’s Evaluation,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 1 (1995): 39–58. On learning techniques for securing memory, see Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript*, 122–70; Marc Hirshman, *The Stabilization of Rabbinic Culture, 100 C.E.–350 C.E.: Texts on Education and Their Late Antique Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 65–82; Kiperwasser, “The Cure of Amnesia.”

7. Steven Fraade dedicated an extensive study to the development of this trope in Sifre on Deuteronomy. See Steven D. Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and Its Interpretation in the Midrash Sifre to Deuteronomy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), esp. 69–121. As this chapter demonstrates, this trope can be identified in other Tannaitic texts as well.

8. I am referring to section 48 of Sifre on Deuteronomy (ed. Finkelstein 107–14). For elaborate discussions of this section, see Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary*, 105–19; Hirshman, *Stabilization*, 31–47.

9. This line is missing from MSS Oxford 151 and Vatican 32.

Scripture says, *Gold and glass cannot equal it* [= wisdom], *nor can it be exchanged for jewels of fine gold* (Job 28:17)—[the words of the Torah] are as difficult to acquire as gold and as easy to lose (i.e., to destroy) as glass vessels.

*Nor vessels of fine gold can be exchanged for it.*¹⁰ R. Ishmael¹¹ used to say: *But take care and watch yourself* (lit. “your soul”) *closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life* (Deut. 4:9)—this can be compared to a king of flesh and blood who snared a bird and gave it to his slave. He said to him, be careful with this bird, [which is] for my son. If you lose it, do not assume that you have merely lost a bird [that costs] one *assarion*, but rather that you lost your own soul. Likewise, it says, *This is no empty matter for you, but rather your very life* (Deut. 32:47). That of which you may say “it is empty”—this is your life.¹²

The scriptural engine that pulls this homiletic train is the emphasis that the Israelites must not only hear (*shamo’a*) what God commands them but also keep (*shamor*) it. The verb *sh-m-r* is commonly used to denote safeguarding an object, as well as adhering to a commandment. The notion that God’s teachings, once heard (that is, learned), must also be actively “kept” leads to a series of similes in which teachings are compared to valuable objects that must be guarded, starting with a high-value coin and continuing with precious metals, to which Wisdom and Understanding (here as placeholders for Torah) are often compared.¹³ The Torah, says the homilist using Job 28:17, is at one and the same time like gold and like glass: difficult to come by and obtain like gold, easily destroyed (that is, eradicated from one’s memory) like glass.¹⁴ R. Ishmael offers an additional image of a captured bird to convey the precarity of the Torah in one’s memory: unless watched and guarded, it will fly away as soon as it can.¹⁵ This bird, however, is no ordinary bird, because letting this bird get away means giving away one’s very life. Forgetting the Torah is akin to losing not silver or gold, but one’s own soul.

10. “Nor vessels of fine gold can be exchanged for it” is the second half of Job 28:17, which does not seem to be addressed directly in the homily but nonetheless appears in all the manuscripts. See Finkelstein’s comments ad loc.

11. In MSS Oxford 151 and Vatican 32: R. Shimon.

12. Sifre on Deuteronomy 48 (ed. Finkelstein 107–8); cf. Midrash Tannaim on Deuteronomy 11:22 (ed. Hoffmann 41). See Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary*, 106–7.

13. On the use of rhetoric and imagery from wisdom literature in rabbinic discussions of Torah learning, see Amram Tropper, *Wisdom, Politics, and Historiography: Tractate Avot in the Context of the Graeco-Roman Near East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 51–87.

14. In both the Palestinian Talmud (PT Hagigah 2.1, 77b) and the Babylonian Talmud (BT Hagigah 15a) the homily on the Torah as “gold and glass” receives an interesting twist in the story of the dissident sage Elisha ben Abuyah. The point is made that in the same way that glass vessels, once broken, can be used to make new vessels, so disciples who have gone astray can go back and start anew.

15. See also BT Menahot 99b. As several scholars noted, the image of a bird (or birds) in a cage is commonly used in ancient literature to depict the retention and retrieval of memories (most famously, in Plato’s *Theaetetus* 197–99). See Hirshman, *Stabilization*, 76–80.

The centrality of memory and the struggle with the prospect of forgetfulness in the rabbinic ethos and practice of Torah learning received substantial scholarly attention. For the most part, scholars were interested in the mechanisms, habits, and exercises that the rabbis utilized in order to maximize memorization and to prevent forgetfulness.¹⁶ This interest was often guided by a comparative orientation, seeking to identify correspondences between ancient and medieval treatises of *ars memoria* and rabbinic reflections on memory techniques. Indeed, rabbinic texts allow us to reconstruct a variety of methods that the rabbis used to facilitate memorization of large amounts of texts. Some methods are evident through principles of organization and structuring in the texts themselves, such as use of numerical formulae, recurring stylistic patterns, mnemonic devices like acronyms and biblical verses, use of rhythm and meter, and so on. Other methods are mentioned in passing descriptions of rabbinic institutional culture and disciples' everyday lives, such as cantillation (singing one's teachings to a melody), using private written notes, and above all, unremitting repetition. Of special note is Shlomo Naeh's study on techniques of text visualization alluded to in rabbinic literature, which were used not only to retain large amounts of texts but also to organize units of texts internally such that they could be easily and effectively retrieved.¹⁷

Nevertheless, a consideration of the rabbinic concern with memorization and forgetfulness strictly in terms of the "how" of memory—namely, through what techniques texts were retained and retrieved—tends to overlook the question of what memory and forgetfulness of the Torah *meant* in early rabbinic culture. For the rabbis, I argue, memorization was not only a means but also an end in itself.¹⁸ It was not just a necessity stemming from life in a mostly or exclusively orality-based society, but a required practice and a manifestation of virtue and piety in its own right.¹⁹ Likewise, forgetfulness was construed by the rabbis not only as a lamentable

16. For a few notable studies, see Dov Zlotnick, "Memory and the Integrity of Oral Tradition," *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 16–17 (1984–85): 229–41; Jacob Neusner, *The Memorized Torah: The Mnemonic System of the Mishnah* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985); Martin Jaffe, "Writing and Rabbinic Oral Tradition: On Mishnaic Narrative, Lists, and Mnemonics," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 4 (1994): 125–46; Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript*; Swartz, *Scholastic Magic*; Stephen Hazan Arnoff, "Memory, Rhetoric, and Oral Performance in Leviticus Rabbah" (PhD diss., Jewish Theological Seminary, 2011). From a different angle, Moulie Vidas examined the debate on memorization versus creative interpretation in Babylonian study culture; see Moulie Vidas, *Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 115–49.

17. Naeh, "The Craft of Memory."

18. It is of course widely recognized that Torah *study* was considered an end in itself—indeed the ultimate end—in rabbinic culture. For a useful survey of primary and secondary sources on this topic, see David Levine, "Extra-Intellectual Aspects of Torah Study" (in Hebrew), *Da'at* 86 (2018): 441–58. My argument here is that *memorization* was construed by the rabbis as both a precondition for and a manifestation of devotion to the Torah, and thus that forgetfulness acquired the meaning of devotional failure.

19. In this respect, rabbinic culture was no different from late ancient and medieval Christian and Muslim cultures that cherished memorization as a form of piety and as a precondition for virtue,

annoyance but also as an existential threat. R. Ishmael's Midrashic comparison of losing the "bird" of one's memorized teachings to losing one's own soul is clearly a rhetorical flourish, but it corresponds with a broader trope in Tannaitic texts according to which remembering and forgetting Torah teachings is a matter of life and death. This chapter sets out to explore some of the meanings of memorization and forgetfulness of Torah teachings in Tannaitic texts, and to discern the ways in which the rhetoric built around forgetfulness of Torah plays a role in the rabbis' greater social and religious vision.

The shift of focus from halakhic forgetfulness to forgetfulness of teachings necessitates a shift of focus within the Tannaitic corpus. Whereas the previous chapters engaged primarily with the legislative practice-oriented materials of the Mishnah and Tosefta, this chapter and the next focus on homiletic and exhortatory materials, located primarily (albeit not exclusively) in the Tannaitic Midrashim. The Midrashim were evidently compiled somewhat later than the Mishnah, and the question of whether the relations between these corpora are best understood as synchronic—namely, as two mutually constitutive forms of engagement with tradition—or as diachronic, in which one mode of engagement (i.e., Midrash) replaces the other—is open to interpretation.²⁰ The disparate textual histories, purposes, and possibly audiences of these two kinds of corpora notwithstanding, Mishnah/Tosefta and Tannaitic Midrashim are parts of one conceptual and ideational world. The concern with forgetfulness in practice and the concern with forgetfulness of learned Torah are both integral to the Tannaitic legacy that has shaped the contours of rabbinic Judaism for centuries to come, and as such these issues can and should be put in conversation with each other.

My purpose in this chapter is not to cover the entire gamut of Tannaitic passages that deal with memory and forgetfulness in the realm of Torah, which are numerous. Rather, I aim to relate the theme of forgetfulness of teachings to the broader issue that interests me in this book: the function and meaning of forgetfulness within Jewish practice as the early rabbis envision it, and the rabbis' utilization of forgetfulness in constructing their own identity and authority. To that end, I focus not so much on the memory culture of the rabbis themselves as on the memory ethos they create, according to which memorization of Torah texts is an imperative practice for any person of "Israel." Tannaitic texts were, in all likelihood, directed at an audience of Torah learners and rabbis in the making, and so their implorations regarding memory and forgetfulness probably pertain especially, or exclusively, to those circles. I will argue, however, that the rhetoric of such implorations often suggests that forgetfulness is an impediment not only to rabbinic excellence but to the observance and piety of any Jew. In other words, the

despite having no dearth of written books. See Carruthers, *The Art of Memory*, 69; Swartz, *Scholastic Magic*, 34.

20. See Ishay Rosen-Zvi, *Between Mishna and Midrash: The Birth of Rabbinic Literature* (in Hebrew) (Ra'anana: The Open University of Israel Press, 2020), 385.

rabbis tied together halakhic practice and textual mastery in ways that obfuscated the intellectual and elitist nature of the latter and turned it into a basic tenet of life in accordance with God's commandments.

In the first part of the chapter, I argue that Tannaitic literature presents a strong tendency toward textualization of practice—that is, calibrating both pious devotion and observance of the commandments to mean memorization of texts. Incessant repetition of textual passages is advocated not only for the sake of the product, that is, having command of a certain body of knowledge, but also for the sake of the process: to be mentally and physically preoccupied with memorization of texts is to present the unrelenting dedication and servitude that the scriptural God expects of the Israelites. The text of the Torah, moreover, is not simply words that must be remembered; the text is one and the same as the normative instructions it entails, and therefore failure to retain textual teachings inevitably leads to failure to observe the law. Accordingly, forgetfulness of teachings is a form of disobedience of the divine law, whether in and of itself or as precursor to actual transgressions that are sure to follow. These two rhetorical moves in conjunction—recitation as requisite practice and identification of observance with the retention of the texts that mandate it—serve to endow memorization and forgetfulness of texts with profound religious meanings that pertain to Jewish subjects in general, not only to the rabbis and their disciples.

In the second part of the chapter I turn to examine several anecdotes in which rabbis are said to have forgotten certain elements of their knowledge, and I argue that those moments of rabbinic forgetfulness are used as opportunities to bolster the rabbinic claim to textual expertise rather than to undermine it. First, these anecdotes tend to downplay firsthand experiences of halakhic practice as unreliable and as subject to the faults of memory, thus discounting, to some extent, the value of extratextual knowledge. While a particular rabbi may forget something he witnessed or even did himself, there exists stable textual memory among the Torah learners as a community. Second, a couple of anecdotes highlight the rabbinic expertise in textual interpretation, or *midrash*, which allows the rabbis to recover and reconstruct forgotten knowledge. Through these anecdotes, the rabbis both acknowledge the fallibility of their memories as individuals and ascertain the infallibility of “the Sages” as an institution.

TEXTUALIZED PRACTICE

The rabbinic preoccupation with memorization and potential forgetfulness of texts is often interpreted as a direct outcome of the strictly oral nature of the rabbis' literature. Because the rabbis were ostensibly committed to oral transmission of rabbinic teachings and avoided writing any of them down (except, perhaps, for private and informal purposes), they were—so the argument goes—perpetually apprehensive about the possibility that this massive body of teachings be lost

forever.²¹ In his article on the resolute orality of rabbinic literature, Ya'akov Sussmann made this point forcefully:

The sense of danger “lest the Torah be forgotten from Israel” and the existential concern for the preservation of the Torah—on account of which the heaven and the earth persist—runs like a thread throughout all of rabbinic literature. This danger is not the concern of the individual learner alone, but is a general, national, and cosmic concern. It has happened before that entire blocks of teachings have been forgotten in times of crisis—from the ancient days to the days of the Sages themselves—and it is only thanks to Providence that this danger did not materialize. The very emergence—the beginning of the organization and redaction of the Oral Torah—is explained by a fear such as this. . . . The anxiety of forgetfulness was part of the rabbis’ lives throughout all of their days, and in all periods up to the last Amoraim.²²

Sussmann bundles together three separate tropes in rabbinic literature: commitment to exclusively oral transmission of the “Oral Torah”; concern with memorization and mastery of texts by dedicated learners; and the looming threat that “the Torah [will] be forgotten from Israel” on a collective level. At the outset, I contend that while there is a loose thread connecting these three tropes, they are for the most part distinct from one another in rabbinic texts. Proper distinction between oral composition and transmission, individual mastery, and collective preservation is necessary before we delve more deeply into this chapter, which will focus specifically on the second of these three issues. The issue of collective forgetfulness will be explored in detail in the next chapter; the issue of oral transmission and dissemination will not be dealt with in this book.

Whether or not we accept Sussmann’s insistence that the rabbinic world of study was entirely devoid of books,²³ it is evident that rabbinic texts were produced and

21. See, for example, Zlotnick, “Memory and the Integrity of Oral Tradition”; Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript*. Recently, Alyssa Gray argued that “orality anxiety” is characteristic primarily of the Babylonian Talmud, which presents an overall ethos of oral preservation that cannot be detected in Palestinian sources. See Alyssa M. Gray, “The Motif of the Forgetting and Restoration of Law: An Inter-Talmudic Difference about the Divine Role in Rabbinic Law,” in *Land and Spirituality in Rabbinic Literature: A Memorial Volume for Yaakov Elman* י'אקוב אֵלמָן, ed. Shana Strauch Schick (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 194–98. It is possible that the strong association between orality and the fear of forgetfulness derives from the heavy emphasis on this issue in Rav Sherira Gaon’s tenth-century epistle to the Jewish community of Qayrawan, which was traditionally seen as the most authoritative source on the history of the Tannaitic and Amoraic academies. See Talya Fishman, *Becoming the People of the Talmud: Oral Torah as Written Tradition in Medieval Jewish Cultures* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 20–64.

22. Sussmann, “Oral Torah, Plain and Simple,” 257–58 (my translation).

23. See the debate in Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 190–209; Martin Jaffe, *Torah in the Mouth: Writing and Oral Tradition in Palestinian Judaism, 200 BCE–400 CE* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Ishay Rosen-Zvi, “Orality, Narrative, Rhetoric: New Directions in Mishnah Research,” *AJS Review* 32, no. 2 (2008): 235–49. For important evidence on the use of written materials in rabbinic settings, see Shlomo Naeh, “The Structure and Division of Torat Kohanim (A): Scrolls” (in Hebrew), *Tarbitz* 66, no. 4 (1997): 483–515.

preserved primarily orally, and that the rabbis' study culture relied on spoken recitation of texts and not on written copies. However, this is by no means unique to the rabbis. In most ancient civilizations texts were authored, edited, and remembered orally even when written copies were ultimately used for their preservation and dissemination. This was the case in Mesopotamia, in Egypt, in India, and in Iran, as well as in Greek and Roman cultures.²⁴ In a world in which writing materials were expensive and writing itself laborious, authors did not produce draft after draft of their work in writing until they were pleased with it. Books were composed orally (albeit probably with the occasional help of written notes), fully memorized and then edited and corrected—again orally—until a final version would be written or dictated, from memory, to a scribe or multiple scribes. Certainly speeches, sermons, or poetry meant for public performance had to be fully memorized, even if written notes were used in initial stages. It may very well be that in the rabbinic world, as Saul Lieberman proposed, professional reciters functioned as authoritative “living” copies of spoken books and filled the dissemination function that written copies usually fill,²⁵ but memorization of copious amounts of texts was required of textual producers in the ancient world regardless of whether they used written or “human” books. I do not think, then, that the rabbinic concern with forgetfulness derived directly from the rabbis' refusal to commit texts to writing, the exact nature of this refusal notwithstanding.²⁶ Forgetfulness of texts was a prospect that every educated person in antiquity had to reckon with if textual mastery was professionally or socially expected of them.

Memorization of texts, however, was not required only of specialized individuals—scribes, performers, authors, orators—but was also an indispensable part of literacy education in the ancient world, and remained so well into the early modern period.²⁷ As David Carr showed, the expectation that students who are initiated into the culture would have a host of texts memorized was first and foremost an expectation that they *internalize* the tradition and make it part of their inner constitution. Memorization was not only a tool for storing texts; it was a process through which one digested the host of values, ideals, images, and beliefs that one's culture associated with these texts, and thereby became a member of this culture. Hence the prevalent image of memorization as “writing on one's heart,” which can

24. The literature on this topic is vast. For two comprehensive studies especially relevant for the ancient Jewish context, see Small, *Wax Tablets of the Mind*, and David M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

25. Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine*, 83–99.

26. For a reexamination of the rabbinic approach toward writing of oral teachings, see Yair Furstenberg, “The Invention of the Ban against Writing Oral Torah in the Babylonian Talmud,” *AJS Review* 46, no. 1 (2022): 131–50.

27. For seminal studies on this issue, see Henri Irene Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, trans. George Lamb (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1956); William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

be found in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Israel alike.²⁸ This was evidently the case in the world of the rabbis as well, as we can infer from the fact that school-children were expected to memorize biblical verses and passages.²⁹ This practice clearly did not stem from fierce commitment to orality—the Hebrew Bible was a firmly written text as far as the rabbis were concerned—but from a notion that one should hold the biblical text within oneself.

We must distinguish, then, between different functions of memorization of Torah texts as it is described in rabbinic literature. One function, which we may call “preservation,” is accurate transmission and dissemination of rabbinic teachings and traditions for posterity. Another function of memorization is internalization: etching Torah texts—whether biblical or rabbinic—in (or on) one’s mind and heart so that they become part of one’s constitution. We may call this function “initiation,” since it serves to inculcate individuals into the tradition. A third function of memorization is the cultivation of the virtuosity and prestige of the rabbis as a learned elite. Holding a host of texts (again, biblical and rabbinic alike) in one’s mind, and being able to retrieve them quickly and expertly, enable one to use these texts creatively and to display one’s command of the teachings in public.³⁰ In this respect, the rabbis were similar to Greek and Roman rhetoricians (and indeed, rabbinic study circles displayed many features of the Hellenistic and Roman rhetorical schools), whose facility with textual materials and ability to memorize and manipulate large amounts of texts were their markers of excellence.³¹ We may call this third function “professionalization,” although the rabbis, unlike Greek and Roman rhetoricians and orators, presumably never received a fee for their homiletic or juridical services.³²

These three functions are not unrelated, and one could say that there is a progressive connection between them. Memorization for the sake of internalization was required already at the earliest stages of one’s education, and it was the path through which one crossed the threshold into the world of Torah learning. Those who showed themselves to be especially astute, efficient, and thorough in their ability to memorize—and more important, to organize and select memorized

28. David Carr, “Torah on the Heart: Literary Jewish Textuality within Its Ancient Near Eastern Context,” *Oral Tradition* 25, no. 1 (2010): 17–40. On the “writing on the heart” imagery specifically in rabbinic literature, see Naeh, “The Craft of Memory,” 554–63.

29. On Jewish literacy education and the prominent role of memorization therein, see Towa Perlow, *L’éducation et l’enseignement chez les juifs à l’époque talmudique* (Paris: Leroux, 1931); Shmuel Safrai, “Education and the Study of Torah,” in *The Jewish People in the First Century*, vol. 2, ed. Shmuel Safrai and M. Stern (Assen and Amsterdam: Van Gorcom, 1976), 945–70; Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript*, 56–66; Hezser, *Jewish Literacy*, 39–94.

30. As discussed in Naeh, “The Craft of Memory.”

31. For an extensive survey of scholarship on rabbinic education as rhetorical education, see Hiday, *Rabbis and Classical Rhetoric*, 1–40.

32. On memorization as a profitable skill associated with paid professional services, see Joseph Farrell, “The Phenomenology of Memory in Roman Culture,” *Classical Journal* 92, no. 4 (1997): 373–83.

knowledge—were then able to rise in the ranks (informal as these ranks probably were) and to utilize textual traditions independently for teaching, adjudicating, and preaching purposes. These professional Torah learners then shaped the traditions that themselves continued to be transmitted, replicated, edited, and studied in later generations. But while these functions are related, the concerns associated with forgetfulness vis-à-vis each of them are different. In the realm of transmission and preservation, the concern would pertain to errors or omissions on account of which texts might become corrupt or lacking. Such concern was probably real, but it is hardly spoken of as such in Tannaitic texts (as I will argue in the next chapter, the fear lest “the Torah be forgotten from Israel” has nothing to do with inaccurate or lax memorization of texts).³³ In the professional context, in which memorization is a tool of rabbinic expertise and a marker of excellence, forgetfulness is associated primarily with shame and with a personal sense of failure.³⁴ And in the context of initiation and internalization, forgetfulness is regarded as perilous because it casts a question mark on the degree to which one has actually internalized the Torah, and by extension, on the depth of one’s religious commitment.³⁵ It is specifically on the latter context that I wish to focus in this chapter, since the rabbis construct the notion of memorization as internalization as relevant to all members of “Israel” and not exclusively to the rabbinic elite. This notion, as I will

33. The only exception of which I am aware is M. Oholot 15.1, in which R. Tarfon complains that a certain teaching is “damaged” because “the hearer heard and erred.” Even so, his statement does not suggest that the transmitter failed to memorize the teaching correctly, but rather that he misheard or misunderstood the teaching in the first place. I thank Moulie Vidas for drawing my attention to this passage. Another text that possibly points in this direction is the statement that since the disciples of Hillel and Shammai did not attend to their masters properly, “the Torah has become like two Torahs” (T. Hagigah 2.9 [ed. Lieberman 383] and parallel in T. Sanhedrin 7.1 [ed. Zuckermandel 425]). However, this statement is best understood as referring not to forgetfulness of teachings, but rather to divergent interpretations of teachings. Finally, as I will argue in the next chapter, Tannaitic references to difficulty in “finding the words of the Torah” (e.g., T. Eduyot 1.1) refer to disorganization, not to loss as a result of forgetfulness. Even in Amoraic texts, it could be argued that the rabbis are less invested in accurate transmission of their predecessors’ sayings than in creative recollection/reinvention of these sayings; see Dolgopolsky, *The Open Past*.

34. See, for example, the following prayer (attributed to King David) in Sifre on Numbers 119 (ed. Kahana 4:366–67): “*Hold me up, that I may be safe, and have regard for your statutes continually* (Ps. 119:117)—that I will not study Torah and forget it, that I will not be studying and the Evil Desire does not allow me to recite, or lest I render the pure impure and the impure pure and I shall be found ashamed in the World to Come, or lest any of the nations of the land and the clans of the earth will ask me [a question] and I will not know how to respond to them, and I shall be found ashamed before their eyes, and likewise he says, *I will also speak of your decrees before kings, and shall not be put to shame* (Ps. 119:46).” Cf. Mekhilta deRabbi Ishmael Yitro 2 (ed. Horowitz–Rabin 201).

35. Michael Swartz rightly observed that in rabbinic culture failure to recall a teaching was interpreted as a result of “inadequate effort to impress the proper information on the mind” rather than as failure to retrieve something that is already there; see Swartz, *Scholastic Magic*, 40. I argue further that such inadequate effort was construed by the rabbis as a marker of laxity in devotional practice more broadly.

show, is closely connected to the idea that the *words* that make up Torah teachings—the text qua text—are the medium through which piety and observance are attained and maintained.

Relentless Recitation

The third chapter of tractate Avot of the Mishnah presents a cluster of statements, carefully redacted to maintain both thematic and structural coherence, which promote and advocate engagement with the Torah at any given opportunity.³⁶ The first pair of statements presents a contrastive picture of the merits and benefits afforded by Torah study and the detriment and disgrace brought about by its absence:

R. Hanina ben Tradion says, “Two who sit together and there are no words of Torah between them—that is the seat of scoffers . . . but two who sit together and there are words of Torah between them—the Heavenly Presence is between them . . . and even one [person] who sits and engages with Torah, the Holy One, Blessed be He, assigns a reward for him. . . .”

R. Shimon says, “If three people ate at one table and did not speak words of Torah at it, it is as if they have eaten offerings sacrificed to the dead . . . but three who ate at one table and spoke words of Torah at it, it is as if they have eaten at the table of the Holy One, blessed be He.”³⁷

These two statements make the point that even the most casual daily interactions, such as a friendly gathering or a meal, should be used for the study of Torah, and that if this is not the case, these interactions have something sinister about them: they are likened to a gathering of “scoffers” (presumably, scoffers of God), and to an idolatrous, morbid sacrificial feast. The statement that follows pushes this point further, asserting that even when a person is alone, if he is capable of engaging with the Torah and does not do so, he is condemning his own soul:

R. Hanina ben Hakhinai says, “If one wakes up at night or walks alone on the road and turns his heart to idleness—he is liable of his soul.”³⁸

Nighttime is a time of danger and fear in the rabbinic world, but it is also a time of quiet and lack of distractions. Likewise, one who is on the road on one’s own is vulnerable to various perils but is also free to recite uninterruptedly. This statement

36. On this Mishnaic unit (M. Avot 3.2–8), see Tropper, *Wisdom, Politics, and Historiosophy*, 42–45.

37. M. Avot 3.2–3 (3.3–4 in the Mishnah’s manuscripts).

38. M. Avot 3.4 (3.5 in the manuscripts). I am following the version in MSS Kaufman and Cambridge (Lowe), which reads: “*and turns his heart to idleness*” (*u-mafneh libo le-batalah*). In this version, “turns his heart to idleness” describes what one does when one wakes up or walks alone. MS Parma de Rossi 138 and the printed edition read: “*and one who turns his heart to idleness*” (*ve-ha-mafne libo le-batalah*). According to this version waking up at night, walking alone, and idleness of the heart are three different and unrelated risky behaviors, and one is liable for each of them. This version makes little sense (can one really be held blameworthy for waking up at night?); see the discussion in Albeck, *Six Orders: Neziqin*, 4:496.

can be read in two ways. According to one reading, one who finds oneself with an opportunity to engage in matters of Torah but does not do so (and instead turns his heart to “idleness,” that is, anything other than Torah) is being negligent in his devotion to the Torah and is therefore “liable of his soul”—that is, condemns himself to spiritual death. An alternative reading is that the only thing that can protect one from the dangers of the night or of the road is the study of Torah, and therefore one who does not study Torah on these treacherous occasions subjects himself to mortal dangers. Either way, this statement powerfully evokes an imagery that turns the expectation that one engage with the Torah at all times into a matter of life and death. The ambiguity as to whether physical death or spiritual death is at stake is in all likelihood intended.

After a few more statements on the merits of preoccupation with Torah, the Mishnaic unit concludes with two statements, stylistically and substantively echoing the ones we just saw, on the importance of unremitting recitation of one’s teachings. The second of the two statements addresses forgetfulness and will therefore be my main focus here, but I contend that this statement must be read in context—of the Mishnaic chapter in general and of the preceding statement in particular—to be fully understood:

R. Ya’akov says, “If one walks along the road while reciting, and he stops his recitation (*mishnato*) and says, ‘How fine is this tree,’ ‘How fine is this field’—he is considered as though³⁹ he is liable of his soul.”

R. Doustai b. R. Yannai said in the name of R. Meir, “If one forgets one element of his teachings (*mishnato*, i.e., his recitation),⁴⁰ he is considered as though he is liable of his soul, for it was said, *But take care and watch yourself* (lit. your soul) *closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen* (Deut. 4:9). Could this refer even [to a case in which] his teaching weighed him down? Scripture says, *nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life* (Deut. 4:9)—behold, he does not become liable until he sits and removes them from his heart.”⁴¹

Both these statements pertain to one’s engagement with one’s *mishnah*, that is, a body of teachings that one repeatedly recites audibly (the word *mishnah* literally means “that which is said again”).⁴² R. Ya’akov speaks of recitation of teachings as an activity that should consume the one performing it entirely. When one is

39. Lit. “they regard him as though” (*ma’alin ‘alav*). In the printed edition: Scripture regards him (*ma’aleh ‘alav ha-katuv*).

40. In MS Cambridge (Lowe): “If a disciple of a sage (*talmid hakham*) sits and recites and forgets one element of his teachings.”

41. M. Avot 3.7–8 (3.9–10 in the manuscripts).

42. In all likelihood this term does not refer to “our” Mishnah, i.e., the codified compilation thought to have been edited by R. Yehuda the Patriarch, but to any portion of rabbinic teachings that one commits to memory. However, Tropper does propose that the editors of tractate Avot were concerned with the promotion of the Mishnah as a redacted work; see Tropper, *Wisdom, Politics, and Historiography*, 102–7.

reciting one must not think of anything else or do anything else, not even stop for a minute to admire the beauty of creation. Any distraction from one's recitation makes one not quite liable of death, but comparable to one who is liable of death.⁴³ This sentiment is doubtlessly extreme, but it coheres entirely with the idea we saw earlier in this Mishnaic chapter, according to which every opportunity for engagement with Torah during the day or the night must be seized fully. R. Doustai's statement, on the other hand, addresses the desired outcome of one's unceasing repetition, which is retention of one's teachings in memory. Forgetfulness of even one element (*davar*, meaning both "thing" and "word") of one's recited teachings suffices to condemn one's soul—again, not to make him quite liable of death but to make him like one who is liable of death. This harsh statement is immediately qualified, either by R. Doustai himself or by a compassionate editor, to suggest that this does not apply to accidental forgetfulness that a struggling student may experience,⁴⁴ but rather to deliberate forgetting—which in this context is best interpreted as a conscious or semiconscious decision to neglect a particular teaching and to stop memorizing it.⁴⁵

The conjunction of these two functions of repetition of one's teachings—retention in memory and preoccupation for preoccupation's sake—reveals the deep cultural meanings of memorization in the Tannaitic world. Memorization is both a means and an end: it is the process through which one transforms one's "heart" by internalizing God's words (which include both the Written Torah and the Oral Torah), but it is also an activity that requires tremendous mental resources in and

43. This idea corresponds, to some extent, with the Talmudic trope of a sage whom the Angel of Death cannot touch as long as he is reciting, but as soon as the sage is distracted and briefly stops reciting, the Angel of Death claims him. See BT Shabbat 30a–b, BT Mo'ed Qatan 28a, BT Baba Metzi'a 86a.

44. The Hebrew phrase is *taqfah 'alav mishnato*, most accurately translated as "his recitation became stronger than him."

45. Naeh interpreted this sentence as referring to what cognitive psychologists call "directed forgetting," that is, intentional deletion of material deemed irrelevant from the memorized text retained in one's mind. See Naeh, "The Craft of Memory," 553. For other possible examples of intended forgetting in rabbinic texts, see Reuven Kiperwasser, "The Art of Forgetting in Rabbinic Narrative," in *Rabbinic Study Circles: Aspects of Jewish Learning in Its Late Antique Context*, ed. Marc Hirshman and David Satran with the assistance of Anita Reisler (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 67–85. We also know of intentional practices of erasure from memory in late antique Christianity: see Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought*, 88–99. On directed forgetting (which is still a controversial notion in memory studies), see Gesine Dreisbach and Karl-Heinz T. Bäuml, "Don't Do It Again! Directed Forgetting of Habits," *Psychological Science* 25, no. 6 (2014): 1242–48; Lili Sahakyan and Nathaniel L. Foster, "The Need for Meta-forgetting: Insights from Directed Forgetting," in *The Oxford Handbook of Metamemory*, ed. John Dunlosky and Sarah (Uma) K. Tauber (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 341–56. However, I do not think that directed forgetting is intended in this text. Removal of certain teachings from one's memory because one finds them mistaken or unsuitable was an entirely legitimate practice in rabbinic circles, and there is no reason why it would be condemned here. Rather, I propose that "removal from the heart" should be understood as lack of interest or inattentiveness. It is an active decision to stop memorizing, which inevitably leads to forgetfulness.

of itself, *and that is exactly its point*. The passages we have seen do not simply implore their audience to allocate undisturbed time for the study of Torah; they convey that any moment in which one is not studying Torah is not only wasted but also detrimental. Recitation and repetition, in this framework, are the instruments through which one's everyday moments are reliably filled with Torah. Since relentless repetition is a form of devotion, forgetfulness of one's teachings is construed not as a cognitive failure but as a marker of irreverence toward God's words. The audience is assured that occasional difficulty in retaining one's teachings is normal (or at least forgivable), but that lack of commitment to the *practice of memorization*—here presented as removal of one's teachings from one's heart—makes one worthy of death.

It seems evident that this highly demanding regime of constant engagement with the Torah was designated specifically for aspiring disciples of the Sages—that is, for individuals set on immersing themselves in higher levels of Torah learning, who are, by definition, a self-selecting elite. While historically the main audience of these sayings is likely to have been only rabbinic or rabbinically inclined individuals,⁴⁶ it is important to note that the biblical verse quoted in R. Doustai's statement is taken from a speech by Moses, emphatically addressed to all the people of Israel:

So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that YHWH, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. . . . But take care and watch yourself closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children—how you once stood before YHWH your God at Horeb.⁴⁷

What the Israelites must never forget, according to this speech, is their covenant with God, and specifically, what they saw at Mount Horeb when God descended on the mountain and revealed himself to them. "Israel" is addressed here as one corporate entity: it does not matter whether each individual that Moses is addressing was present at the mountain or not (most of them were not, according to the story line of Deuteronomy), because the covenant established there includes all future generations of the Israelites. In its rabbinic configuration—both in this Mishnaic passage and in the Sifre's homily presented at the beginning of this chapter—the ordinance given to Israel not to forget the things (*devarim*) they saw turns into an ordinance not to forget the words they learned. The rhetorical power of this verse lies in the fact that it delineates the very tenets of the covenantal relationship between God and his people as a whole. To invoke this verse in the context of recitation of the Torah, then, is to equate neglect of one's teachings with neglect of the covenant and of God himself. Put differently, while the expectation of recitation and unceasing preoccupation with Torah may be relevant only to a

46. As argued by Tropper, *Wisdom, Politics, and Historiography*, 136–88.

47. Deut. 4:1–10.

small elite group of Torah learners who have the resources to pursue it, this expectation is homiletically mapped—here and elsewhere, as we will see—onto “Israel” as a collective.

The following homily from the Midrash Sifre on Deuteronomy similarly portrays preoccupation with Torah and repetition of teachings both as a means to prevent forgetfulness and as an end in itself. Here, however, the committed learner protects not his own life by engaging with the Torah, but the Torah itself:

May my teaching drop like the rain, may my speech condense like the dew, like showers on grass, like raindrops on new growth (Deut. 32:2).

“Like showers on grass”—in the same way that those showers descend upon grasses and move them around (*mefashpeshin*, lit. “rummage through them”) so they do not become infested with worms, so you should rummage through the words of Torah, so you do not forget them. And thus said R. Ya’akov ben R. Hanilai⁴⁸ to Rabbi [Yehuda the Patriarch], “Come, let us rummage through teachings (*halakhot*) so they do not become rusty.”

“And like raindrops on new growth”—in the same way that those raindrops descend upon new growths and clean them and nourish them (*mefatmin*, lit. “fatten up”), so you should nourish the words of the Torah and repeat them a second and a third and a fourth time.⁴⁹

In this pair of homilies the words of the Torah are compared to vulnerable young grasses or weeds, whereas the learner’s preoccupation with the words of the Torah is compared to the vital nourishment of rain and dew. The reader/listener is encouraged to “rummage” through the words of Torah—that is, to think about them, look into them, recite them, or in some other way be actively engaged with them—so that he does not forget them. The imagery of the words of the Torah being eaten by worms or becoming rusty illustrates the decay of memorized Torah within one’s own mind (or mouth), which is bound to take place if this memorized knowledge is neglected, but the implication of this image is that the obligation to preoccupy oneself with Torah teachings is also an obligation to the Torah itself. If, when left unattended, the words of the Torah become unsightly and ultimately unusable, then to allow them to get to this condition is to trespass against the Torah (and by extension, against God its giver) and not only against oneself. The second homily makes this implication explicit by comparing repeated recitation of one’s teachings to nourishing, or “fattening up,” the words of the Torah. When one repeats the same teachings over and over again, the content and form of those teachings may not change, but what does change is the magnitude of the words of the Torah within oneself and thereby, supposedly, in the world.

Memorization of Torah teachings, then, emerges not only as a matter of individual self-preservation but also as a devotional imperative. On the one hand, as

48. In the manuscripts: R. Ya’akov ben R. Hanina.

49. Sifre on Deuteronomy 306 (ed. Finkelstein 336–37); cf. Midrash Tannaim on Deuteronomy 32:2 (ed. Hoffmann 184). See also Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary*, 250–51n144.

we saw in Mishnah Avot, engagement with the words of the Torah or absence thereof is so powerful that it makes the difference between an idolatrous sacrificial feast and divine presence. The same sentiment is forcefully echoed in another assertion in the Sifre on Deuteronomy: “The words of the Torah, for as long as one engages with them, they are life for him; once he departs from them, they cause him to die.”⁵⁰ On the other hand, the words of the Torah are themselves fragile, easily destructible and require constant tending to. When one neglects one’s teachings, one is actively wronging those teachings.⁵¹

Demanding and all-consuming, and commanding every moment of one’s attention, the words of the Torah in these rabbinic texts replicate the traits of the jealous God of the Hebrew Bible, who cannot bear to be forgotten or neglected.⁵² The rabbis utilize and enhance a paradigm that appears in a nascent form already in late biblical texts (most prominently in Psalm 119), in which God’s relations with his people are mapped onto the individual learner’s relations with the Torah.⁵³ Like God, the Torah requires absolute devotion and constant preoccupation, and it is benevolent when attended to and destructive when abandoned even briefly. But for the rabbis, the Torah and God are not merely analogous: devotion to the Torah and devotion to God are one and the same. This idea is expressed especially clearly in a short homily in Mekhilta deRabbi Ishmael:

If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be for me a treasured possession out of all the peoples, for the whole earth is mine (Ex. 19:5).

“You shall be for me”—that you will be available (*penuyim*) to me and preoccupied with the Torah, and you shall not be preoccupied with other things.⁵⁴

50. Sifre on Deuteronomy 343 (ed. Finkelstein 399–400). This sentence is part of a series of comparisons of the Torah to fire, although here the comparison is quite nonsensical (fire is lethal for those who approach it, not for those that step away from it); cf. Mekhilta deRabbi Ishmael Yitro 4 (ed. Horovitz-Rabin 215). For an elaborate discussion of this homily in its context, see Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary*, 46–47.

51. Consider also the prevalent phrase “abrogation of the Torah” (*bitul Torah*) in rabbinic literature, which refers to any time in which one can engage with the Torah but does not do so. When one does not actively study Torah, one effectively annihilates it.

52. In an incisive article, Yehuda Liebes argued that the formative myth of monotheistic Judaism is God’s “obsessive and possessive love” toward his people, love that takes the form of searing jealousy whenever God does not feel that he is loved back to the same extent. According to Liebes, “From this [myth], primarily, stems also the quintessential halakhic nature of the Jewish religion: the loving god cannot bear any distraction from him. Hence the multiplicity of commandments that circumscribe humans at every step and throughout all their days.” See Yehuda Liebes, “Of God’s Love and His Jealousy” (in Hebrew), *Dimui* 7 (1994): 34 (my translation).

53. See Yehoshua Amir, “The Place of Psalm 119 in the History of the Religion of Israel” (in Hebrew), *Te’udah* 2 (1982): 57–81. I thank Ishay Rozen-Zvi for this reference.

54. Mekhilta deRabbi Ishmael Yitro 2 (ed. Horovitz-Rabin 208). Cf. Mekhilta deRabbi Shimon 19:5 (ed. Epstein-Melamed 139): “And you shall be for me—designated for me (*meyuhadin li*), preoccupied with my Torah, preoccupied with my commandments.”

The homilist brackets the words “you shall be for me” (*ve-hayitem li*), originally part of the sentence “You shall be for me a treasured possession” that conveys God’s future commitment to Israel, and thereby turns these words into an independent injunction regarding Israel’s commitment to God. The people of Israel have to be “for” God, which means that they must have complete mental availability for God at all times. The shape that this mental availability takes is that of engagement with the Torah. In other words, being God’s people means reciting Torah teachings at any given moment, and failure to preoccupy oneself with the Torah is by and by failure to preoccupy oneself with God—and thus, a breach of the covenant.⁵⁵ Again, while the intended audience of this homily may have been the exclusive community of Torah learners, the presentation of unremitting engagement with the Torah as a fundamental term of God’s covenant with Israel makes the point that such engagement is not optional.

The configuration of devotion to God in terms of recitation and repetition is firmly grounded in the biblical texts themselves. The book of Deuteronomy in particular presents the uncompromising love for God required of Israel, and the complete immersion in God’s laws and instructions, as two sides of the same coin. The imploration “You shall love YHWH your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” is immediately followed by the ordinance to make God’s words a part of every aspect of one’s life: “Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”⁵⁶ What the rabbis added to this biblical trope, I propose, is a level of concretization that made memorization of texts a religious practice unto itself. The rabbis mapped the exhortation to internalize God’s words onto a demanding regime of recitation and memorization of textual teachings, and thereby created a setting in which forgetfulness of texts is at least suspected as failure of devotion.

55. This sentiment is voiced especially clearly in a saying attributed to R. Shimon ben Yohai in the Palestinian Talmud (PT Berakhot 1.2, 3b): “If I had stood on Mount Sinai at the time in which the Torah was given to Israel, I would have asked before the Merciful One that two mouths would be created for human beings, one that would labor in the Torah and one to do all other needed things.” The desire to have a designated mouth for Torah purposes alone powerfully conveys the view that any moment in which one is forced to do something other than Torah study is a concession. It should be noted that R. Shimon ben Yohai is consistently identified in rabbinic texts as one who rejects any preoccupation with worldly things at the expense of the Torah; see Jeffrey Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 105–38.

56. Deut. 6:6–8; cf. Deut. 11:18–20. Similar exhortations can be found across biblical texts, such as Jos. 1:8; Prov. 3:1–3, 6:20–23, 7:1–4.

Text and Transgression

Much has been written about the transformation of practice, particularly ritual practice, into text in rabbinic literature. This includes not only the creation of elaborate play-by-play textual descriptions of rituals, whose recitation is sometimes their only form of performance, but also engagement with texts as a substitute for actual practice.⁵⁷ Here I would like to look more closely into a related but distinct form of textualization of practice in Tannaitic literature: the notion that internalization of laws means memorizing the *words* through which the laws are conveyed, and accordingly that forgetfulness of textual teachings inevitably leads to actual transgression.

The equation of internalization of a law with the ability to recite the exact words through which the law is communicated is evident in the rabbinic practice that was alluded to at the end of the previous subsection—namely, the recitation of the Shem'a. The rabbis famously turned the imploration of Deuteronomy 6:4–8 to love God totally and to contemplate God's words at all times into a commandment to recite the very words of Deuteronomy 6:4–8 in the morning and in the evening. The spoken performance of the text *as* text is the manner through which the ideational injunction of this text is being obeyed.⁵⁸ That is, to be sure, a unique and extreme instance of textualization of practice, in which the content and the form of the text are rendered completely identical, but we do see other places in Tannaitic literature in which performance of the practice described in a text is construed as performance of the text itself. One example of this is the description of the high priest's preparations for the Day of Atonement in Mishnah Yoma. The Mishnah relates how the high priest is taken from his home seven days before the Day of Atonement and undergoes extensive initiation in the basics of sacrificial practice.⁵⁹ As part of this initiation process, the high priest must demonstrate acquaintance with the textual "order of the day"—probably the biblical account of the purification rituals described in Leviticus 16:

57. For a survey of studies on Mishnaic textual rituals, see Balberg, "Ritual Studies and the Study of Rabbinic Literature," 78–85. The notion of study or recitation as substitute for practice has been discussed primarily in regard to sacrifices: see Sagit Mor, "The Laws of Sacrifice or Telling the Story of the Exodus?" (in Hebrew), *Zion* 68, no. 3 (2003): 297–311; Michael D. Swartz, "Liturgy, Poetry, and the Persistence of Sacrifice," in *Was 70 CE a Watershed in Jewish History? On Jews and Judaism before and after the Destruction of the Second Temple*, ed. Daniel R. Schwartz, Zeev Weiss, and Ruth A. Clements (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 393–412.

58. Adiel Kadari aptly defined the mode of operation of the Shem'a recitation (and of similar liturgical passages) as "reflexive circularity"; see Adiel Kadari, "Liturgical Recitation as Ritual of Study" (in Hebrew), in *Study and Knowledge in Jewish Thought*, ed. Howard Kreisel (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, 2006), 21–35. See also Ron Naiweld, "Au commencement était la pratique: Les commandements comme exercices spirituels—la subjectivation pratique rabbinique," *Yod—Revue des Études Hébraïques et Juives* 15 (2010): 13–41.

59. On the rabbinic "initiation" of the high priest in tractate Yoma, see Balberg, *Blood for Thought*, 211–16.

They provided [the high priest] with elders from the Elders of the Court, and they would read before him the order of the day, and they would tell him, “My Master the High Priest, you [should] read with your own mouth, in case you have forgotten or in case you have not learned.”⁶⁰

While it is evident that this scene was designed to emphasize the high priest’s complete dependence on the Sages, it is also noteworthy that the rabbis present the Sages’ superiority over the high priest in terms of textual mastery. The Sages—here in the role of the Elders of the Court—first read the instructions regarding the day’s services to the high priest, and then require him to read it audibly back to them. This suggests that this reading is not merely ceremonial: if the high priest does not internalize the text that describes the service, he will not be fit to perform it. The somewhat demeaning comment “In case you have forgotten or in case you have not learned” suggests that a fully qualified high priest would be required to have learned *and* to have memorized the text.⁶¹ The audible reading is presented as a way to rectify potential insufficient facility with the text on the high priest’s end, and he is specifically required to read “with his mouth” so as to ensure that the text is properly internalized. Whether the high priest had performed the Day of Atonement service before or not is immaterial in this context: practical experience and textual mastery are separate matters (as we will also see toward the end of this chapter), and the latter clearly supersedes the former.

Subordination of practice to textual mastery appears as a recurring homiletic trope in the Tannaitic Midrashim. The following passage from the Midrash Sifra on Leviticus ties together study, memorization, and observance as interlocking requirements for each individual in Israel:

If you follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them (Lev. 26:3).

“If you follow my statutes”—could this refer to the commandments? When [Scripture] says, “and keep my commandments and observe them”—behold, [here is a reference to] the commandments. So how do I maintain “if you follow my statutes?”—that you be laboring in the Torah.⁶²

Responding to the apparent redundancy of the phrases “follow my statutes” and “keep my commandments” in the biblical verse, the homilist explains these verses as entailing two different injunctions: following God’s statutes specifically means the study of Torah, whereas “keeping the commandments” entails all other

60. M. Yoma 1.3.

61. Both the Palestinian Talmud (PT Yoma 1.3, 39a) and the Babylonian Talmud (BT Yoma 18a) express bewilderment over the possibility that an uneducated high priest could be appointed in the first place. They explain that this pertains specifically to the end of the Second Temple period, in which priests allegedly bought their appointments. It is interesting to note that in the Babylonian Talmud a forgetful high priest is considered acceptable, but one who has not studied in the first place is not.

62. Sifra Be-huqqotai, opening of Parasha 1 (ed. Weiss 110c). In MS London (LON BL 341): “that Israel should be doing the Torah” (*osim et ha-torah*).

required practices. The following section in this homily explains the “keeping” part of the commandments not as active performance of the commandments, but as retention of *teachings* regarding the commandments:

[A] Likewise, [Scripture] says, *Remember the Sabbath day in its holiness* (Ex. 20:8). When [Scripture] says, “keep” [the Sabbath day in its holiness, Deut. 5:12], behold, this refers to keeping [it] in one’s heart (*shemirat lev*). How do I maintain “remember”? that you will recite (*tehe shone*) [it] with your mouth.

[B] Likewise, [Scripture says], *Remember and do not forget how you provoked YHWH your God to wrath in the wilderness* (Deut. 9:7). Could this mean [remembering] in one’s heart? When [Scripture] says, “Do not forget,” forgetfulness of the heart (*shikhehat lev*) is intended. So how do I maintain “remember”? that you will recite [it] with your mouth.

[C] Likewise, [Scripture says], [*Guard against an outbreak of a skin disease by keeping and observing whatever the Levitical priests instruct you . . .*] *Remember what YHWH your God did to Miriam on your journey out of Egypt* (Deut. 24:8–9). Could this mean [remembering] in one’s heart? When [Scripture] says, “Guard against an outbreak of a skin disease by keeping and observing,” keeping in one’s heart is intended.⁶³ So how do I maintain “remember”? that you will recite [it] with your mouth.

[D] Likewise, [Scripture says], *Remember what Amalek did to you [on your journey out of Egypt . . . you shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; do not forget]* (Deut. 25:17–19). Could this mean [remembering] in one’s heart? When it says, “Do not forget,” forgetfulness of the heart is intended. So how do I maintain “remember”? that you will recite [it] with your mouth.⁶⁴

This set of homilies is not immediately related to the biblical verse under discussion, and it may have originated as an independent unit. The trigger for its incorporation here is the appearance of the verb “keep” in the topical verse “If you follow my statutes and keep my commandments,” a verb that two of the four homilies respond to as well. The essential idea of the four homilies is that whenever the edict “remember” appears in the biblical text, what is intended is *audible recitation and repetition* of the edict in question “with one’s mouth.” In two of the scriptural examples provided (A and C), this conclusion is reached by contrasting the word “remember” (*zakhor*) in the verse with the word “keep” (*shamor*) that appears in an almost identical verse or in the same verse. One could think, the homilist suggests, that the instruction to remember (the Sabbath in A, or the agonies of skin disease in C) means to have an internalized memory of these matters, but the

63. In the printed edition: forgetfulness of the heart (*shikhehat lev*). This is clearly an error, and I corrected it to *shmirat lev*, in accordance with all the other manuscripts.

64. Sifra Be-huqqotai, opening of Parasha 1 (ed. Weiss 110c). MS London includes only homilies A and D (Sabbath and Amalek). Homilies C and D appear also in Midrash Tannaim to Deuteronomy 24:9 and 25:17, respectively (ed. Hoffmann 157, 169); a shortened version of homily D appears in the Sifre on Deuteronomy (ed. Finkelstein 314).

requirement for internalized understanding “in one’s heart” is already conveyed through the verb “keep.” Therefore, the verb “remember” must be understood as active memorization through repetition “with one’s mouth.”⁶⁵ In the other two examples (B and D) the same conclusion is reached by contrasting the imploration “remember” with its counterpart “do not forget” in the same verse: forgetfulness is understood as erasure of the instruction from one’s heart, whereas remembrance is interpreted as active memorization using one’s mouth.

What is striking about these homilies is that “keeping” (*shamor*) in its biblical context clearly means observance of practice: to “keep” the Sabbath means to refrain from labor, and to “keep” the laws pertaining to skin disease is to examine, quarantine, and purify those suffering from skin disease according to the Levitical protocol. The homilist, however, turns “keeping” into an *internalized* memory of the instruction itself, so that he can present its counterpart, “remembering,” as an externalized recitation of the instruction. What is kept in the heart and what is repeated with one’s mouth are the same thing—namely, a *text* that conveys an instruction. The same can be said for example D, concerning the blotting of Amalek (example B, unlike the other three, does not entail any component of practice). The biblical ordinance entails both a call to remember what Amalek did to the Israelites and an instruction to physically blot out all of Amalek’s descendants, which the Israelites are warned never to forget. For the homilist, the forgetfulness part and the remembrance part are two sides of the same coin: “Do not forget” pertains to internalized knowledge of the text, and “Remember” pertains to audible repetition and recitation of the text. When this reading is projected onto the Sifra’s topical verse from Leviticus, “keeping” the commandments does not mean performing the commandments; it means committing them to memory. The aspect of actual performance of commandments is adduced only at the end of this unit in the Sifra, which concludes as follows:

*If you follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them—one must study so as to observe (lit. “to do,” la’asot), not study not so as to observe. For one who studies not so as to observe is better off not to have been created.*⁶⁶

While this concluding homily forcefully ascertains that mere study of Torah without actual doing, that is, without performance of the commandments, is not only

65. Heart and mouth are often presented as two complementary elements of devotional practice, e.g., “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable” (Ps. 19:14); “My mouth shall speak wisdom, the meditation of my heart shall be understanding” (Ps. 49:4); “My heart has been secretly enticed, and my mouth has kissed my hand” (Job 31:27). As scholars explained, in the Hebrew Bible the heart was viewed as the place in which speech is both produced and stored; see Thomas Krüger, “Das ‘Herz’ in der alttestamentlichen Anthropologie,” in *Anthropologische Aufbrüche: Alttestamentliche und interdisziplinäre Zugänge zur historischen Anthropologie*, ed. Andreas Wagner (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 103–18.

66. Sifra Be-huqqotai, opening of Parasha 1 (ed. Weiss 110c).

worthless but also reprehensible,⁶⁷ it also affirms the readings proposed above by putting an emphasis on the words “observe them” (*va-‘asitem ‘otam*) in the biblical verse. This homily posits that it is specifically the reference to *observing* that points to the “doing” aspect of the commandments, whereas both “following God’s statutes” and “keeping his commandments” are a form of *learning*. If it were not for the clause “and observe them” at the end of the sentence, one could mistakenly conclude that learning in and of itself suffices. Once again, it is important to note that the Sifra maps the requirement to learn and memorize texts onto scriptural passages that define the covenant between God and Israel as a whole, thus presenting this requirement as applicable to all of Israel, not only to an elite squad of Torah learners.

Learning without doing, according to this unit in the Sifra, is without merit; but according to a homily that appears shortly thereafter in the Sifra, doing without learning is downright impossible. Addressing the verse “But if you will not listen to me, and do not observe all these commandments,” which appears later in the same biblical chapter, the Sifra issues some stark warnings:

“But if you do not listen to me”—why does Scripture say, “and do not observe”? Is it possible that there is a person who does not learn (*lamed*), but does observe (*‘oseh*)? Scripture says, *But if you will not listen to me, and do not observe [all these commandments]* (Lev. 26:14)—behold, whoever does not learn does not observe.

Is it possible that there is a person who does not learn and does not observe, but does not spurn others? Scripture says, *if you spurn my statutes* (Lev. 26:15)—behold, whoever does not learn and does not observe ends up spurning others . . .⁶⁸

At the core of this homily in the Sifra is an interpretation of the verb “listen” (*tishme‘u*) as referring to internalization of learned material. To “listen” here means to absorb and retain what one was taught. The juxtaposition of “listen” and “observe” (*ta‘asu*) in the verse leads the homilist to conclude that without learning, no observing is possible, but he does not stop there. Parsing out the biblical verse that follows, “If you spurn my statutes, and abhor my ordinances, so that you will not observe all my commandments, and you break my covenant” (Lev. 26:15), the homilist presents a cascade of inevitable consequences resulting from the initial failure to learn and retain Torah teachings (which for the sake of brevity I only summarize here): one who does not learn not only fails to perform the commandments but also necessarily disdains others who do attempt to observe them, detests the Sages, prevents others from observing the commandments, rejects the notion that the commandments were given at Sinai, and eventually rejects the “essence”

67. The topic of primacy of study over performance of commandments (or vice versa) is a controversial one in rabbinic literature, and the opinion presented in this homily is by no means the only one. See the discussion in Urbach, *The Sages*, 603–20; Shmuel Safrai, “Teaching of Pietists in Mishnaic Literature,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 16, nos. 1–2 (1965): 15–33; Hirshman, *Stabilization*, 32–39.

68. Sifra Be-huqqotai 2.3.3 (ed. Weiss 111b–c).

(*iqqar*)—namely, the recognition of YHWH as the one God. Needless to say that this homily is an exercise in exhortative overstatement, intended mainly to steer its audience toward diligent study of Torah, yet the unequivocal positioning of study as precondition to practice reveals that at least some rabbinic authors strove to equate internalization of *texts* with the fundamentals of participation in the Jewish community.

In the orality-based learning culture of the rabbis, in which one learns by listening and repeating, the verb *sh-m-ʿa* (to listen or hear) bears a strong connotation of retention in memory.⁶⁹ “Hearing” or “listening” is equated with learning in the Sifra’s homily because it is understood as absorption and internalization of content. In the following homily from the Mekhilta deRabbi Ishmael (which appears, in variations, in other Midrashic compilations as well) listening is unequivocally interpreted as retention in memory, whereas “forgetting” is the direct opposite of “listening”:

He said, If you will surely listen to the voice of YHWH your God, and do what is right in his sight, and give heed to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians; for I am YHWH who heals you (Ex. 15:26).

[A] “He said, if you will surely listen (*shamoʿa tishmʿa*).” From here they said, “If a person listened (*shamʿa*) to one commandment, they cause him to listen to (*mashmiʿin lo*) many commandments, for it was said, ‘If you will surely listen.’ If a person forgot one commandment, they cause him to forget (*meshakhin ʿoto*) many commandments, for it was said, ‘If you will surely forget (*shakhoah tishkah*) [YHWH your God and follow other gods to serve and worship them]” (Deut. 8:19). . . .⁷⁰

[B] Shimon ben Azzai says, “If you will surely listen”—from here [one infers] that if a person wanted to listen, they cause him to listen, and if [a person wanted] to forget, they cause him to forget. Could this be after some time? Scripture says, “If you will surely listen,” “If you will surely forget”—immediately. . . .

He [ben Azzai] used to say, “If a person wanted to listen of his own accord, they cause him to listen not of his own accord; [if a person wanted] to forget of his own accord, they cause him to forget not of his own accord. Permission is afforded: *Toward the scorners he is scornful, but to the humble he shows favor* (Prov. 3:34).⁷¹

For the first, anonymous homilist (A), “listening” stands for internalization of the commandments rather than mere auditory exposure to them, and one is rewarded

69. The root *sh-m-ʿa* in Tannaitic texts most often refers to teachings received from a master. To have “heard” a tradition means to have memorized a statement or ruling made by one’s teacher.

70. Mekhilta deRabbi Ishmael Be-shalah 1 (ed. Horovitz-Rabin 157), as well as Mekhilta deRabbi Ishmael Yitro 2 (ed. Horovitz-Rabin 208) and Mekhilta deRabbi Shimon 15:26 (ed. Epstein-Melamed 105). Cf. Sifre on Deuteronomy 79 (ed. Finkelstein 145); BT Berakhot 40a.

71. Mekhilta deRabbi Ishmael Be-shalah 1 (ed. Horovitz-Rabin 158); cf. Midrash Tannaïm on Deuteronomy 11:13 (ed. Hoffmann 34).

for such internalization with facilitation of further internalization. The oppositional counterpart of listening is forgetting, which is analogously punished by further forgetting. This homilist uses the intensified grammatical forms *shamó'a tishmá* ("you will surely listen") and *shakhoah tishkah* ("you will surely forget") to suggest that both listening and forgetting in the realm of Torah are self-perpetuating: retaining little leads to retaining much, and the same goes for forgetfulness. Ben Azzai's two homilies (B) integrate the element of will into the antonymic pair listening/forgetting: in the same way that one chooses to listen, that is, to absorb and retain, one chooses to forget—presumably, through neglect or carelessness in his recitation. The conscious decision either to retain or to forget has immediate consequences, and moreover, it leads to further retention or forgetfulness: one who decides to internalize will come to internalize even without making a conscious decision to do so, and one who decides to forget will come to forget further teachings whether he wants to or not. It is important to register the scriptural contexts of the verses used in these homilies: "If you will surely listen" (Ex. 15:26) pertains to obedience and observance of commandments, whereas "If you will surely forget" (Deut. 8:19) pertains to following God and staying away from idolatry. The homilists in the Mekhilta, similar to the homilist in the Sifra, reinterpret both observance of practices and exclusive devotion to God as subordinate to the internalization of learned teachings. Through these interpretive moves, the boundaries of the Jewish community are defined along the lines of memorization and forgetfulness of texts.

A few final examples from the Midrash Sifre on Deuteronomy—by far the Midrashic compilation most concerned with memory and forgetfulness—will further demonstrate the ideas we have seen so far. Like the Sifra, the Sifre systematically interprets the verb "to keep" (*lishmor*) as referring to recitation and repetition of one's teachings, while assigning the sense of active performance of the commandments strictly to the verb "to observe" or "to do" (*la'asot*). This is most plainly evident in the Sifre's homilies on the adjacent verses "You must keep to observe (*u-shmartem la'asot*) all the statutes and ordinances that I am setting before you today" (Deut. 11:32) and "These are the statutes and ordinances that you must keep to observe (*tishmerun la'asot*)" (Deut. 12:1). The Sifre breaks the construct "keep to observe" (which simply means "observe diligently") into its constitutive elements: it interprets the verb "keep" in these two verses as referring to recitation or repetition (*mishnah*), and the verb "observe" as referring to action (*ma'ase*).⁷² In another passage, the Sifre ascertains the superiority of the former over the latter and declares, like the Sifra, that memorizing teachings is a precondition for observance of practice: "Whoever does not partake in recitation (*'eino*

72. Sifre on Deuteronomy 58–59 (ed. Finkelstein 124–25). cf. Midrash Tannaim to Deuteronomy 12:1 (ed. Hoffmann 47). "Mishnah" should probably be understood here as referring to any of the rabbis' oral teachings, as opposed to scriptural texts; see Hanoah Albeck, *Introduction to the Mishnah* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1959), 1–2; Epstein, *Introduction to the Text of the Mishnah*, 804–5.

bi-khlal mishnah), does not partake in action (*'eino bi-khlal ma'ase*).⁷³ In other words, whoever is not part of the world of textual learning, which takes the form of audible repetition, is not part of the community of practice.

The notion that memorization of teachings is the only way to truly “listen” to God’s commandments, and that forgetting is the oppositional counterpart of “listening,” can be traced in the Sifre as well, in a homily regarding the self-perpetuating nature of both retention and forgetting that is quite similar to the one we saw in the Mekhilta. Whereas in the Mekhilta “listening” evidently means both initial learning and retention thereafter, the Sifre distinguishes between initial learning and active retention, and puts emphasis on the latter:

If you will surely keep this entire commandment that I am commanding you (Deut. 11:22).

From where do you say that if a person hears (*sham'a*) the first word from the words of the Torah and sustains it (*meqaymo*), in the same way that the first [teachings] are sustained in his hand, so the latter will be sustained in his hand? For it was said, “If you will surely keep.”

And from where that if one hears the first word and causes it to be forgotten (*meshakho*), in the same way that the first [teachings] are not sustained in his hand, so the latter will not be sustained in his hand? Scripture says, “If you will surely forget” (Deut. 8:19)—you will not have a chance to remove your eyes from it before it departs, for it was said, *When your eyes light upon it, it is gone* (Prov. 23:5), and it says in the Scroll of the Pious,⁷⁴ “If you leave me for one day, I will leave you for two.”⁷⁵

In the Sifre the topical verse of the homily is not “If you will surely listen,” as it is in the Mekhilta, but rather “If you will surely keep.” Thus, the homilist in the Sifre shifts the focus from listening, which he construes only as the preliminary stage of learning, to the active practice of *keeping* what one learned—in his words, “sustaining” it (*meqaymo*)—in order to allow it to persist. Sustaining one’s teaching is the willful act of repetition and attendance to what one learned, whereas absence of “sustaining” is presented, through the causative *pi'el* form of the root *sh-kh-h*, as *causing* teachings to be forgotten.⁷⁶ This homily makes it clear that memorized

73. Sifre on Deuteronomy 79 (ed. Finkelstein 145); cf. Midrash Tannaim to Deuteronomy 12:28 (ed. Hoffmann 55). The same homily appears also in Sifra Emor 8.9.3 (ed. Weiss 99c): “*And you shall keep my commandments*—this is recitation, *and you shall observe them*—this is action, and whoever does not partake in recitation does not partake in action.”

74. On “the scroll of the pious” (*megillat hadisim*), see Safrai, “Teaching of Pietists,” 25–27, and see also Hirshman, *Stabilization*, 44–45. Finkelstein, following Hoffmann, preferred the version *megillat harisim*, but the correct version seems to be *megillat hadisim*, as it is in all the manuscripts, whereas *harisim* seems like a typographical error.

75. Sifre on Deuteronomy 48 (ed. Finkelstein 111–12) and Midrash Tannaim to Deuteronomy 11:22 (ed. Hoffmann 42); cf. PT Berakhot 9.5, 14d.

76. On the *pi'el* form of *sh-kh-h* and its usages in rabbinic literature, see Eljakim Wajsborg, “The Root שֶׁח in Babylonian Aramaic” (in Hebrew), *Leshonenu* 68, nos. 3–4 (2006): 365–71.

teachings tend to be fleeting, and therefore forgetfulness is highly predictable, but it also asserts that forgetting is an active rather than passive process. It is not a cognitive failure but a form of abandonment of the Torah, and by implication, of God. Lack of sufficient diligence in memorization is akin, at least rhetorically, to willful deletion of one's teachings.

Finally, the "slippery slope" rhetoric that we saw in the Sifra, according to which failure to learn inevitably leads to a dramatic exit from the bounds of the community, is utilized in the Sifre as well. In the Sifre, however, the subject of the diatribe is explicitly one who fails to retain his teachings because he neglects to repeat them diligently. As part of an extended homily on learning practices, the Sifre contrasts one who studies a little bit at a time but repeats and secures his teachings with one who studies something once and then immediately moves on to something new, not taking the time to reinforce his memory. The former will eventually accrue a wealth of well-memorized knowledge, whereas the latter will eventually lose everything he has learned and be left empty-handed.⁷⁷ This advice is followed by an extended allegorical homily on a passage from the book of Proverbs: "I passed by the field of one who was lazy, by the vineyard of a heartless person; and see, it was all overgrown with thorns; the ground was covered with nettles, and its stone fence was broken down" (Prov. 24:30–31). The man in the verse, the homilist explains, is called "lazy and heartless" because he acquired a field or a vineyard but did not take any trouble to care for it and cultivate it, and thus it became derelict and rundown. By way of allegory, these verses pertain to a Torah learner who does not actively repeat what he learned. Inevitably, the homilist asserts, this neglectful disciple will first abandon the teachings he cannot remember, then forget the correct interpretation of an entire section, and finally let "the fence" break down altogether: "Once he realizes that [his teachings] have not been sustained, he sits down and declares the pure impure, and the impure pure, and he breaks the fence [erected] by the Sages."⁷⁸ While this homily pertains primarily to specialized learners, it clearly adopts the fundamental notion that we saw in other homilies, according to which failure to remember one's teachings is, first, self-perpetuating and ever-intensifying, and second, leads to much more severe omissions and ultimately to complete rejection of religious norms.

These recurring rhetorical tropes allow us to see that in Tannaitic literature the memorization and repetition of Torah teachings became a stand-alone form of practice, and a requisite practice at that. While I doubt that the rabbis realistically expected members of all walks of Jewish society to constantly recite

77. Sifre on Deuteronomy 48 (ed. Finkelstein 108). I am following the cogent interpretation proposed by Fraade, from *Tradition to Commentary*, 108–9.

78. Sifre on Deuteronomy 48 (ed. Finkelstein 109).

texts and engage with the Torah, they did utilize biblical exhortations concerning the obedience, faithfulness, and commitment to the covenant required of Israel as a whole to propagate the importance of memorizing Torah. Thus, they positioned active memorization of Torah teachings as definitive of one's membership in the community, and likewise presented failure at such memorization as excluding one from the community. Moreover, while forgetfulness in the realm of practice, as we saw in the previous chapters, is for the most part normalized and even serves as a marker of overall piety, forgetfulness in the realm of Torah learning is presented as a result of active abandonment or careless neglect.

How to account for the rabbis' harsh and castigating approach toward forgetfulness in the realm of Torah, as opposed to their calm and accepting approach toward halakhic forgetfulness? Obviously, the difference in genre plays a key part here. Forgetfulness in the realm of halakhah is addressed primarily in terse legalistic texts that are generally devoid of affect or moralizing, whereas forgetfulness of Torah is addressed primarily in homiletic texts that are filled with oratory flourish. Relatedly, we could argue that the rabbis attempted to make rabbinic Jewish practice feasible for as many people as possible, whereas their tirades regarding Torah learning pertained, despite their seeming inclusive rhetoric, only to an elite group that was held to a higher standard. Yet this difference, I propose, should also be understood along the lines of the difference between *remembering* and *memorizing*. The correct performance of commandments requires one to remember—in the sense of being aware of—various facts and tasks, whereas internalization of the Torah requires one to engage in *memorizing* as a practice unto itself. In the halakhic context, the rabbis mostly view forgetfulness as an unintentional slip of the mind, sometimes as a result of cognitive overload that actually demonstrates overall commitment to halakhah. In the learning context, in contrast, forgetfulness is viewed as indicative of flawed memorization, that is, of insufficient effort in the requisite practice of review and repetition, and thus not as an accident but as a result of a semiconscious decision. Put differently, in the realm of halakhah, memory enables correct practice, and forgetfulness impedes it; in the realm of the Torah, memorization *is* the practice, and forgetfulness is equated with willful relinquishment of practice.

The distinction between *remembering* and *memorizing*, and accordingly between forgetting in the realm of practice and forgetting in the realm of Torah learning, plays out in a particularly interesting way in a cluster of Tannaitic texts that feature rabbinic forgetfulness. In these texts, memory based on personal or practical experience proves inferior to memory based on recited teachings, and by extension the memory of individual rabbis proves inferior to the memory of the Sages as a collective entity. As we will see next, it is the transformation of practice into text that makes the Sages as an idealized corporate entity immune to forgetfulness, even while individual sages are vulnerable to it.

FAULTY MEMORY AND TEXTUAL CREATIVITY

Whereas Amoraic literature, particularly the Babylonian Talmud, is replete with stories of rabbis (as well as prophets, kings, and ancestors) forgetting some or all of their teachings, in Tannaitic literature this is a very uncommon trope.⁷⁹ In the few places in which a Tannaitic sage is explicitly said to have forgotten something, the forgotten item is not a textual teaching, but rather knowledge acquired through an eyewitness experience. In other words, rabbis in the Tannaitic corpora forget (if they forget at all) what they *saw*, not what they learned.⁸⁰ This forgotten knowledge, however, is not lost, but is rather recovered or rediscovered through rabbinic textual expertise. Forgetfulness of individuals is thus used, I argue, to affirm the Sages' command of the Torah rather than to question it.

Of the seven instances in the Tannaitic corpora in which a rabbinic sage is said to have forgotten something (four of which are different versions of the same story), six pertain specifically to the Jerusalem temple. Two nearly identical admissions of forgetfulness appear in tractate Middot of the Mishnah, which describes in painstaking detail how the temple and its courts were structured and furnished. M. Middot 2.5 enumerates the four chambers that were placed in the four corners of the Court of Women in the temple, and explains what each was used for: in the southeastern corner was the chamber of Nazarites, in the northeastern the chamber of firewood, in the northwestern the chamber of those with skin disease, and when the Mishnah gets to the southwestern corner the narration is interrupted with a comment: "R. Eliezer ben Ya'akov said, 'I forget what it was used for.'"⁸¹ Another sage then immediately offers the missing information: "Abba Shaul says, 'This is where they would place wine and oil.'"⁸² Similarly, M. Middot 5.3–4 lists the six chambers that were located in the Court of Israel, three on its north side and three on its south side. The anonymous Mishnah names each of the northern chambers and explains their functions, but when it gets to the first of the southern chambers the narration is again interrupted by R. Eliezer ben Ya'akov's

79. Amoraic stories of forgetful rabbis are too numerous to list here, but it is worth mentioning the most iconic and intriguing rabbinic figure associated with forgetting—namely, R. Eleazar ben Arakh (BT Shabbat 147b, Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7.2). See Alon Goshen Gottstein, *The Sinner and the Amnesiac: The Rabbinic Invention of Elisha ben Abuja and Eleazar ben Arach* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 233–66; Itay Marienberg-Milikowsky, "Wander Afar to a Place of the Torah? Independence, Marginality, and the Study of Torah in the Literary Image of Rabbi Elazar ben Arach" (in Hebrew), *Jewish Studies Internet Journal* 13 (2015): 1–25.

80. In addition to the anecdotes discussed in this section, see also Sifre zutta on Numbers 8:4 (ed. Horowitz 256), in which Moses forgets what the temple's lamp is supposed to look like. I will discuss the trope of Moses's forgetfulness in the conclusion.

81. The words "R. Eliezer ben Ya'akov says" are missing in MSS Firenze II.1.7 and Munich 95 of the Babylonian Talmud. My guess is that these words were purposefully omitted to reflect the notion that the speaker throughout the text is R. Eliezer ben Ya'akov, who would be unlikely to narrate his own name. See also Epstein, *Introduction to the Text of the Mishnah*, 1162.

82. M. Middot 2.5 (2.7 in the manuscripts).

admission: “I forget what it was used for.”⁸³ Here, too, Abba Shaul fills the gap: “It was the chamber of the high priest.” Based on these interruptions, Rav Huna in the Babylonian Talmud inferred that tractate Middot in its entirety was narrated by R. Eliezer ben Ya’akov.⁸⁴ Those two sporadic moments of forgetfulness remove the fourth wall, as it were, and reveal that the systematic description of the temple related anonymously is actually an *anamnesis*, a recollection of one person who walks the readers/listeners through the temple as it was preserved in his memory.⁸⁵

One might wonder why the compilers of the Mishnah decided to include these interruptions in the continuous narrative rather than simply offer a neat list of all the chambers and their functions. A traditionalist explanation would be that those compilers made a point of preserving the words of the Sages exactly as they were said and did not alter or edit them in any way, and while I consider such an explanation to be somewhat naïve I concede that this is possible. I do wish to point out, however, what the Mishnah gains by leaving in place—or purposefully incorporating—these two admissions of forgetfulness. First, these admissions serve as a certificate of authenticity: they convey to the readers/listeners that the Mishnaic tractate is otherwise a completely reliable and comprehensive description of the temple.⁸⁶ By being the exception (the only two minor details that were forgotten), these memory lapses actually prove the rule (that everything else described in the tractate is remembered impeccably). Second, and more important for our purposes, by relating that one sage forgot those details and another sage immediately filled in the missing information, the Mishnah provides assurance that the rabbinic enterprise does not depend on the memory of a single individual but on a group of people, and that whatever one forgets, another will remember. Correct memory, in other words, is placed not within each sage individually, but among the Sages as a collective. It is also worth noting that some of the named rabbis who offer authoritative knowledge on the temple’s specifics in the tractate are much later rabbis who could not have possibly seen the temple with their own eyes (such as R. Meir, R. Yehuda, and R. Yose). Thus, while tractate Middot certainly draws its rhetorical power from the appearance of accurate eyewitness recollection, it also ascertains that intimate knowledge of the temple’s operations is not the exclusive

83. The words “R. Eliezer ben Ya’akov says” are missing in MS Kaufman. In MS Firenze II.1.7: “R. Eliezer says.”

84. BT Yoma 16a. Cf. PT Yoma 2.2, 39b, in which tractate Middot is attributed (in part) to R. Eliezer ben Ya’akov but no explanation is given for this attribution.

85. It should be noted that the name of R. Eliezer ben Ya’akov is associated both with an early sage from the Second Temple period and with a later sage, who was a disciple of R. Akiva. To maintain that R. Eliezer ben Ya’akov in tractate Middot reports what he actually saw, we would have to assume that he is the earlier of the two sages; see Epstein, *Introductions to Tannaitic Literature*, 31–32.

86. On the effort to create an impression of accurate eyewitness account in descriptions of the temple and its rituals, see also Naftali S. Cohn, *The Memory of the Temple and the Making of the Rabbinic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 57–72; Balberg, *Blood for Thought*, 85–87.

domain of those who saw it with their own eyes, but of “the Sages” as the guardians of legal and ritual knowledge.

The anecdote I turn to next similarly presents rabbinic collective knowledge as superior to individual knowledge, even (or especially) when the individual knowledge is based on firsthand experiences. This anecdote appears, in variations, in four different places in the rabbinic corpus: twice in the Tosefta, in relation to two different halakhic matters; in the Midrash Sifre on Numbers; and in the Midrash Sifre zutta on Numbers. Let us start with the Tosefta.

T. Ahilot 16.8 (following M. Oholot 16.4) discusses the restrictions placed on a priest dealing with potential corpse impurity. It rules that a priest who is examining a certain area to discern whether there are any corpse parts in it is allowed to consume the sacred heave-offering, and he does not need to undergo purification in order to do so. In contrast, a priest who is clearing rubble after a landslide and is almost certain to come into contact with corpses in the process must purify himself before he can consume heave-offering. The Tosefta then continues:

[A] The disciples of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai asked him, “A priest who examines [a potential burial ground], is he [permitted] to eat [heave-offering without purifying himself]?”

He said to them, “He may not eat.”

They said to him, “But you taught us that he may eat!”

He said to them, “You have spoken well. If I have forgotten what my hands have done and what my eyes have seen, all the more so [that I would forget] what my ears have heard.”

[B] Not that [Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai] did not know [what the ruling was]; rather, his purpose was to urge (*lezarez*) the disciples.⁸⁷

[C] Some say that it was Hillel the Elder whom they asked, and not that he did not know; rather, his purpose was to urge the disciples.

[D] For R. Yehoshua used to say, “One who recites and does not labor [to retain his teachings] is like one who sows and does not reap, and one who learns Torah and forgets [his teachings] is like a woman who gives birth and then buries [her children].”

[E] R. Akiva says, “Sing it to me constantly, sing it!”⁸⁸

87. Presumably, Rabban Yohanan uses his (genuine or feigned) error to “urge” (*lezarez*) the students by testing their knowledge and thus pushing them to recall it, or by pushing them to memorize their teachings in general; see also Hirshman, *Stabilization*, 27. In the parallel version in Sifre on Numbers 123 (ed. Kahana 4:385) the expression used is “to strengthen (*lehazeq*) the students”—which I interpret as making the students feel good about their ability to remember what their master forgot. In the printed edition of the Sifre the version is “to sharpen” (*lehaded*), probably influenced by the common use of this verb in the Babylonian Talmud, as noted by Kahana, *Sifre on Numbers*, 4:979.

88. T. Ahilot 16.8 (ed. Zuckerman 614); cf. BT Sanhedrin 99b. Lieberman proposes a somewhat different reading of the last sentence, which does not fundamentally change its meaning; see Lieberman, *Tosefet Rishonim: Tohorot*, 3:146.

The exact same passage appears in tractate Parah of the Tosefta, and it is identical in every respect except for the halakhic discussion at hand. T. Parah 4.7 asserts that the priest dealing with the red heifer whose ashes are used for purification must perform all the necessary ritual actions while wearing plain white linen garments. If this is not the case, that is, if the priest wears either the ceremonial golden garments of the high priest or non-priestly everyday garments, the heifer is disqualified and cannot be used for purification. The ruling is followed by this passage:

The disciples of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai asked him, "In what [garments] is the heifer done?"

He told them, "In golden garments."

They told him, "But you taught us [that it is done] in white garments!"

He told them, "You have spoken well. If I have forgotten what my hands have done and what my eyes have seen, all the more so [that I would forget] what my ears have heard . . ." (From here on the text is identical to T. Ahilot 16.8)⁸⁹

This Tosefta passage, in both its versions, consists of one stand-alone narrative and four auxiliary comments. In the narrative (A), Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai's disciples ask him a halakhic question, and he gives them the wrong answer. The disciples then remind him that he taught them differently, and they offer the right answer (the intended reader of the Tosefta, at this point, knows the right answer from the start, since the right answer is the preceding teaching of the Tosefta itself). Rabban Yohanan immediately concedes his mistake and says that if he has forgotten something that he himself saw and did (presumably, he was a priest who partook in the said activities himself),⁹⁰ he (or anyone else) is all the more likely to forget things that he has only heard. This last sentence turns the incident into a "teaching moment" about the precarity of one's teachings and the ever-present perils of forgetfulness. In the comment that immediately follows (B), a revisionist interpretation is offered for the narrative: the great master Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai did not really forget anything, we are told, but rather he *pretended* to forget either in order to test his students or so as to produce a lesson on the precarity of Torah teachings and to urge his disciples to be diligent. After a brief acknowledgment of an alternative version in which Hillel the Elder, rather than Rabban Yohanan, is the not-truly-forgetful master (C),⁹¹ the Tosefta

89. T. Parah 4.7 (ed. Zuckerman 633).

90. See Shmuel Safrai, "Further Observations on the Problem of the Status and Activities of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai after the Destruction" (in Hebrew), in *Essays in Jewish History and Philology in Memory of Gedaliahu Alon*, ed. Menahem Dorman, Shmuel Safrai, and Menahem Stern (Tel-Aviv: Ha-kibbutz ha-me'uhad, 1970), 203–26; Daniel R. Schwartz, "Was Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai a Priest?" (in Hebrew), *Sinai* 88 (1981): 32–39.

91. As the parallel passage in the Sifre on Numbers points out, Hillel could not have legitimately said "what my hands did," since he was not a priest. Indeed, in the Sifre zutta version, Hillel only speaks of things he saw, not things he did.

adds two statements of R. Yehoshua, warning that insufficient effort to memorize one's teachings can be disastrous, indeed morbid (D). The passage concludes on a somewhat more cheerful note (E)—with R. Akiva's suggestion that one memorize one's teachings by singing them (and perhaps, by implication, with the suggestion that Torah learning should be associated with expressions of happiness and not with burial and death).⁹²

Set in the greater context of this multipart passage, the narrative of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai and his disciples looks deceptively like a simple cautionary tale on the fragility of memory: if even the great master can forget what he actually *did*, obviously a mere disciple can all too easily forget what he *heard* (and therefore one should be diligent to repeat one's teachings, etc.). Upon a closer look, however, one detail in the story seems peculiar. If the disciples already know the answer, and they have learned it from none other than Rabban Yohanan himself, why do they ask him the question? It looks like the disciples are either seeking an opportunity to display their exquisite memory, or they are deliberately trying to test (or maybe shame?) Rabban Yohanan. Although the revisionist interpreter of this story (in comment B) suggests that the master was urging his disciples to be diligent in study by showing that "even he" can sometimes forget, what the story in fact shows is exactly the opposite: the disciples remember their teachings just fine, and it is the master's memory that is questionable. Moreover, in his response Rabban Yohanan presents auditory memory of teachings as inferior to experiential knowledge of things one saw and did (and empirically speaking, he is not wrong about that), but that is *not* what the story demonstrates. In the story, the disciples, who have only heard the teachings, remember them well, whereas Rabban Yohanan, who personally experienced and saw the rituals under discussion, does not remember them as accurately.⁹³

The story of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, then, appears to be a cautionary tale on the fragility of teachings retained in memory. But in truth, it is a story about the fragility of memory of lived experiences, which makes the point that teachings acquired *as texts*—through the well-established institution of master-disciple relationship—are retained better than memories of firsthand experiences. It is significant that this dialogue does not take place between Rabban Yohanan and a single named disciple, but rather between the master and his disciples as a corporate entity. As a community, the "disciples"—the Torah learners as an idealized whole—can reliably retain knowledge even when it is lost from an individual sage, and so authority in matters of Torah derives from skilled acquisition

92. A similar reading was proposed by Hirshman, *Stabilization*, 28.

93. In his short analysis of this story, Jaffe finds the fact that Rabban Yohanan forgot his own actions confounding: "I cannot explain why it would seem plausible that Rabban Yohanan forgot what his own hands did and what his own eyes saw." See Jaffe, *Torah in the Mouth*, 72. I propose that the forgetfulness of actions is utilized here specifically to highlight, by way of contrast, the stability of memorized teachings.

of memorized traditions on a collective level. This construction of the relation between the individual rabbi and the collectivized disciples is reminiscent of the story of R. Ishmael's tilting of the lamp in chapter 2. There, too, R. Ishmael's forgetfulness as an individual affirms the greatness of the "words of the Sages" and of the Sages' authority rather than undermining it, because it shows that "the Sages" as a collective are perceptive and wise in ways that no single rabbi can be.

The conversation between Rabban Yohanan and his disciples regarding the garments worn during the red heifer ritual appears also in the Midrash Sifre on the book of Numbers.⁹⁴ The Sifre's version is very similar to the Tosefta's version, except that it does not include parts D and E (R. Yehoshua and R. Akiva's comments), so I do not find it necessary to discuss it further here.⁹⁵ But the Midrash Sifre zutta on Numbers, a unique compilation that presents intriguing alternative versions of many passages found in other compilations, includes a different account of this conversation that deserves a closer look.

In the Sifre zutta, the homiletical context into which the story is incorporated is a discussion of Numbers 19:3, "You shall give [the red heifer] to the priest Eleazar and it shall be taken outside the camp and slaughtered in his presence." Eleazar is not the high priest at that point in time in the biblical narrative (his father Aaron is the high priest), which leads the homilists to discuss whether Eleazar's case is the exception or the rule: Should the red heifer ritual normally be performed by the high priest, or by a junior priest? The conclusion proposed, based on the redundancy of the epithet "Eleazar *the* priest" is that normally the red heifer would be dealt with by the only person who could legitimately be called *the* priest, and that is "the one who performs [services] in garments" (*ha-mekhahen bi-begadim*). This phrase refers to the high priest, who is the only one who can wear the designated priestly golden garments. Note that this homily does not explicitly state that the high priest is to wear his golden garments *while* burning the heifer, which would contradict the ruling we have seen in the Tosefta. Rather, the homily only states that the high priest would normally be the one who burns the heifer. What follows next is the dialogue we are familiar with, but with significant variations:

94. Sifre on Numbers 123 (ed. Kahana 4:384–85).

95. The key differences between the Tosefta and the Sifre are in the line that relates Rabban Yohanan's response to the disciples, and in the editorial comment that follows. In the Sifre, Rabban Yohanan responds by saying: "If I have forgotten what my eyes saw and what my hands served, all the more so what I have taught (*limadti*)." Some of the textual witnesses read "what I have learned" (*lamadti*), but the version "taught" seems much more apt here. According to this version, Rabban Yohanan is not making a comment about the precarity of memory in general, but rather simply says, "If I was able to forget that I saw the priest wearing white, it is not surprising at all that I forgot that I taught you this." The editorial voice of the Sifre follows by saying, "And why so? To strengthen his disciples." As Kahana noted, the editorial voice does not say that Rabban Yohanan deliberately answered wrongly, but rather leaves open the possibility that he genuinely forgot and was willing to concede this openly so as to encourage his disciples; see Kahana, *Sifre on Numbers*, 4:980. Accordingly, Kahana maintains that the Sifre's version is more original, whereas the Tosefta's version is a later and more rambling adaptation.

They once asked Hillel, “In what [priestly] garment is the heifer burned?”

He said to them, “In the high [garment] (*ba-gadol*, i.e., in the golden garments of the high priest).”

They said to him, “It can only be burned in a white [garment].”

He said to them, “I saw Yehoshua ben Perahiah,⁹⁶ and he burned it in the high [garment].”

They said to him, “We saw that he burned it in a white [garment].”

He said to them, “You say from his name (i.e., you rely on him), and I say from his name. Who is to provide proof?”

They said to him, “Go to the Torah. Who burned the first heifer?”

He said to them, “Eleazar.”

They said to him, “Is it possible that Eleazar wore the high [priest’s] garment in the days of this father (i.e., when Aaron was still alive)?!”

He said to them, “Do not disdain a person for his forgetfulness, for [even] if I have forgotten what my eyes have seen, I will not forget what my ears have heard (*ma she-ra’u ‘einai shakhaḥti ma she-sham’u ‘oznai lo ‘eshkah*).”

Why does Scripture say, “The priest”?—because he performs [services] in the [priestly] garments.⁹⁷

The protagonist of the Sifre zutta’s story is not Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai but Hillel (as we recall, the Tosefta and the Sifre acknowledged that such an alternative version exists), but more importantly, the interlocutors here are not his disciples but some other unspecified “they” who seem to be Hillel’s equals. Moreover, here we do not have memory of a firsthand experience versus memory of a learned tradition, but rather two competing accounts of eyewitness experience: Hillel believes he saw a priest burning the heifer while wearing the high priest’s golden garments, whereas his rivals say they remember seeing the same priest wearing white garments while burning a heifer. Clearly, the matter cannot be determined based on what each party says they saw, and therefore Hillel’s unnamed rivals present—in a Socratic and somewhat condescending manner—a way of deducing the halakhah from Scripture: Eleazar was the first priest to have ever burned a red heifer, and since he was not the high priest at the time and only the high priest can wear the golden garments, it can only be deduced that Eleazar did not wear the golden garments when he burned the heifer but rather he wore plain white garments, as every priest after him does.

Grammatically speaking, it is possible to put a question mark at the end of Hillel’s response to his rivals and to read it as a rhetorical interrogative, as it stands in the Tosefta and the Sifre: “If I have forgotten what my eyes have seen, *would I*

96. Horovitz (in his edition ad loc.) suggested that the name Yehoshua ben Perahiah is based on error, and the correct version should be Ishmael ben Phabi, a high priest of the first century CE who is specifically said to have prepared two red heifers (T. Parah 3.6 [ed. Zuckerman 632]). See the discussion in Lieberman, *Toseft Rishonim: Tohorot*, 3:226; Kahana, *Sifre on Numbers*, 4:98on29.

97. Sifre zutta on Numbers 19:3 (ed. Horovitz 302). See also Ya’akov N. Epstein, “Sifre zutta parashat Parah” (in Hebrew), *Tarbitz* 1 (1930): 55.

not forget what my ears have heard?” However, this reading makes little sense in the Sifre zutta’s context. The setting in the Sifre zutta is not one of master-disciple interaction but of scholarly competition between seeming equals, so it is not clear why Hillel would take the opportunity to muse on how much more likely one is to forget what one heard than what one saw. Rather, it appears that in the Sifre zutta’s version this sentence should be read as a declarative: “[Even] if I have forgotten what my eyes have seen, *I will* not forget what my ears have heard.”⁹⁸ If this is correct, then Hillel’s statement actually says exactly *the opposite* of what Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai says in the other versions: he says that knowledge acquired by hearing is superior to knowledge acquired by seeing, and that while he may forget what he saw, he is not likely to forget what he heard. Above I argued that while Rabban Yohanan in the Tosefta’s version explicitly says that hearing is inferior to seeing, the story as a whole implicitly points to the contrary; in the Sifre zutta’s version, this implicit message becomes the explicit message.

What does Hillel mean, exactly, when he says, “[Even] if I have forgotten what my eyes have seen, I will not forget what my ears have heard?” Menahem Kahana took the following line, “Why does Scripture say, ‘*The* priest?’—because he performs [services] in the [priestly] garments,” as part of Hillel’s response, and concluded that Hillel presented a scriptural counterargument to his rivals’ scriptural argument, according to which the phrase “*the* priest” points specifically to the priestly golden garments. This means that Hillel stuck to his guns and continued to uphold his position that the priest wears golden garments while burning the heifer. Hillel concedes that he may misremember what he saw, but he insists that he cannot possibly have forgotten what he learned, and since he learned that the heifer is burned by a priest wearing golden garments, nothing will convince him otherwise.⁹⁹ The problem with this reading is that it renders the apology “Do not disdain a person for his forgetfulness” rather odd: Why would Hillel acknowledge his faulty memory if he insists that he remembers his teaching correctly? In addition, the future tense in the sentence “I will not forget (*lo ’eshkah*) what my ears have heard” is unsuitable for this reading: if Hillel were asserting that he had heard a tradition on this matter and is certain of it, he would be more likely to say, “What my ears have heard I *did* not forget (*lo shakhahti*).” I therefore propose an alternative reading, according to which Hillel is actually convinced by his rivals’ reasoning, humbly admits his forgetfulness, and says “I will not forget what my ears have heard” to affirm that he will not forget what he *just* learned from his rivals. His knowledge was faulty because it was based on misremembrance of what he saw, but now that he has learned the law through scriptural derivation, he will not forget it. According to my reading, the concluding sentence (“Why does Scripture

98. This is also the reading proposed by Kahana, *Sifre on Numbers*, 4:981, albeit for a different reason.

99. Kahana, *Sifre on Numbers*, 4:981.

say, . . .”) is not part of Hillel’s response, but simply a misplaced repetition of the last sentence from the preceding homily that appeared right before the story.¹⁰⁰

The Sifre zutta’s version is different from the other versions of this story in one additional crucial detail: what wins the day in this version is reasoning from scripture, otherwise known as *midrash*. Whether according to my reading, which suggests that Hillel concedes to his rivals’ scriptural argument and abandons his previous position, or according to Kahana’s reading, which suggests that Hillel presents an alternative scriptural reading and adheres to it, being able to show an interpretive path through the biblical text that leads one to a halakhic conclusion is key in this story. Scriptural reasoning does not seem to stand here (as it perhaps does in other places) in opposition to received or memorized knowledge.¹⁰¹ It appears that a Midrashic explanation, at least in this story, can become part of one’s “heard” tradition (*shemu’ah*) and become authoritative as such. It is clear, however, that in the Sifre zutta’s version what ultimately guarantees the verity and quality of Torah teachings is the rabbis’ interpretive skills. Human memory may be faulty, but the ability to read scripture creatively and cogently ensures the stability of Torah knowledge. To be sure, whether interpretive skills are used to support existing teachings or to derive new teachings is not the issue here, but rather the presentation of *midrash* as the stronghold against forgetfulness.¹⁰²

The power of creative scriptural interpretation to counteract individual forgetfulness is also the theme of the last Tannaitic source I will discuss in this chapter. The story appears in the Sifre on Numbers, and the context is the instruction given to Moses to make silver trumpets to be used on various occasions. According to Numbers 10:8, “the sons of Aaron, the priests,” are charged with blowing the trumpets. The question then arises whether priests have to be without blemish (i.e.,

100. Indeed, Horovitz in his edition (302, line 10) suggested deleting this sentence.

101. The competition between received traditions and scriptural reasoning as alternative forms of learning and transmission was discussed especially in regard to the story of Hillel and the Passover that took place on the Sabbath (T. Pisha 4.13 [ed. Lieberman 165]; PT Pesahim 6.1, 33a; BT Pesahim 66a). Both Daniel Schwartz and Paul Mandel showed that as the story evolved, Hillel was transformed from a transmitter of received traditions to an expounder of scripture, and that particularly in the Babylonian version scriptural interpretation is presented as what wins the day (and specifically overcomes forgetfulness). See Daniel R. Schwartz, “Hillel and Scripture: From Authority to Exegesis,” in *Hillel and Jesus: Comparative Studies of Two Major Religious Leaders*, ed. James H. Charlesworth and Loren L. Johns (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 335–62; Paul D. Mandel, “Between Tannaim and Amoraim: Changes in Hermeneutic Awareness during the Talmudic Period” (in Hebrew), *Da’at* 86 (2018): 117–36. Whereas Schwartz and Mandel both consider the championing of scriptural reasoning to be a late development, Sara Tzfatman argued that in Babylonia, from which Hillel came, scriptural reasoning had traditionally been the preferred mode of study, dating all the way back to the time of Ezra. See Sara Tzfatman, *From Talmudic Times to the Middle Ages: The Establishment of Leadership in Jewish Literature* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2010), 227–309.

102. Tzfatman discusses scriptural interpretation as a counterbalance to forgetfulness at length, but she focuses exclusively on forgetfulness of received (“heard”) traditions; see Tzfatman, *From Talmudic Times to the Middle Ages*, 268–385.

physical imperfections) in order to blow the trumpets, or whether both unblemished and blemished priests may perform this service. R. Tarfon asserts that blemished priests may blow the trumpets, whereas R. Akiva contends that only unblemished priests may do so. To support his position, R. Akiva uses a common Midrashic method, and claims that since in other scriptural contexts the word “priests” means unblemished priests, this is the case here as well. In response, R. Tarfon loses his temper:

R. Tarfon said to [R. Akiva], “How long will you pile up [verses] upon us, Akiva?! I cannot tolerate this. May I destroy my sons if I had not seen Shimon, my mother’s brother, who was lame in one leg, as he was standing and blowing the trumpets!”

[R. Akiva] said to him, “Yes, Master. Perhaps you saw this during the *hakhel* (i.e., the gathering of the entire community that takes place once every seven years)? For blemished [priests] are fit [for service] during the *hakhel*, and on the Day of Atonement of the Jubilee year.”

[R. Tarfon] said to him, “By the [Temple’s] Worship! You did not speak falsely. Happy are you, our Father Abraham, that Akiva has come out of your loins. Tarfon saw and forgot,¹⁰³ Akiva expounds (*doresh*) of his own accord and corresponds with established law (*halakhah*). Whoever departs from you, departs from his own life.”¹⁰⁴

Much can be said about this dramatic story, but here I wish only to point out that as in the *Sifre zutta*, in this story a firsthand visual experience is put in opposition to scriptural reasoning, and scriptural reasoning prevails. R. Akiva never saw a priest blowing the trumpets, and yet he knows better than R. Tarfon, who did see this and was himself a descendant of priests, the rules pertaining to this issue—based on application of hermeneutical methods. In this case R. Tarfon does not misremember what he saw, but rather *misinterprets* what he saw: because he saw his disabled uncle blowing the trumpet on a special occasion in which such dispensation is made for blemished priests, he assumed that it is always acceptable for blemished priests to blow the trumpets.¹⁰⁵ Eyewitness account, then, is rendered flawed in this story not because it is unreliable as such, but because it is insufficient without appropriate knowledge to contextualize it.¹⁰⁶ Scriptural reasoning, on the

103. In PT Megillah 1.10, 72b: “I am the one who saw the event and forgot.” In PT Yoma 1.1, 38d: “I am the one who saw the event and forgot and was not able to interpret.” In PT Horayot 3.2, 47d: “I am the one who heard it and was not able to interpret it.” Whereas the Horayot version clearly borrows the phrasing from a similar story in the *Sifra* (see note 106 below), the Yoma version seems like a hybrid of the two versions; but see the alternative explanation of Kahana, *Sifre on Numbers*, 3:512–14.

104. *Sifre on Numbers* 75 (ed. Kahana 2:178–79), and see the Talmudic parallels mentioned in the previous note.

105. T. Sotah 7.16 (ed. Lieberman 196) specifically identifies the *hakhel* gathering in question as having taken place during the time of King Agrippa: “On that same day R. Tarfon saw a lame man standing and blowing the trumpets, from there R. Tarfon saw (i.e., deduced) that a lame man may blow [the trumpets] in the temple.”

106. This is not the only Tannaitic passage in which R. Tarfon first flagrantly attacks R. Akiva for his plodding methods of scriptural interpretation and then, after R. Akiva gently provides a possible

other hand, allows established law to remain robust and firm despite the inherent limitations of human perception and memory—although it should be noted that this scriptural reasoning is combined here with other forms of halakhic knowledge and does not stand alone.¹⁰⁷ While the hero of this story is the inimitable R. Akiva, who is famously admired for his interpretive skills, we should keep in mind that as far as the rabbis who put together the Tannaitic compilations were concerned, *they were all R. Akiva*.¹⁰⁸ I mean this not in the historical sense, to suggest that they were all his direct or indirect disciples (although this is a fairly common view),¹⁰⁹ but in the sense that the hermeneutical methods so closely identified with R. Akiva became the trademark of “the Sages” as a collective, even if some rabbis tended to apply them more than others.

My analysis in this chapter offers, I hope, a more nuanced and complex account of the all-encompassing rabbinic “anxiety” regarding forgetfulness of Torah teachings. I argue that when it comes to memorization of teachings as a practice of internalization and devotion, the rhetoric is indeed laden with anxiety, and failure to maintain one’s teachings is construed as akin to or leading to abandonment of God. But the underlying concern here is not that the Torah may be lost from Israel as a collective, but that forgetfulness of teachings by an individual learner is a sign of insufficient commitment to the set of values put forth by the rabbis. The few Tannaitic anecdotes that describe rabbis forgetting things specifically highlight forgetfulness of eyewitness experiences, not forgetfulness of teachings. In fact, these anecdotes put forth the notion that knowledge acquired textually—whether

explanation for R. Tarfon’s blunder, exuberantly praises his inimitable interpretive skills. A very similar exchange appears in the Sifra on Leviticus (Sifra Nedavah 4.4.4–5 [ed. Finkelstein 37–38]; cf. T. Zevachim 1.8 [ed. Zuckerman 480]). In the Sifra, R. Akiva uses scriptural reasoning to claim that the same rules apply when the blood of sacrificial animals is received in a vessel and when it is tossed on the altar. R. Tarfon accuses R. Akiva of “piling” verses, and he insists that he heard that receiving the blood and tossing the blood are subject to different rules. In response, R. Akiva suggests that R. Tarfon may actually be thinking about a different teaching. R. Tarfon excitedly agrees and says, “I heard it and could not interpret it, and you expound and correspond with established law.” In both cases, R. Akiva’s expert scriptural reasoning in combination with his vast halakhic knowledge allow the correct memory of halakhah—of what took place, in the trumpet story, and of what was said, in the blood ritual story—to remain intact.

107. As Azzan Yadin-Israel rightly noted, in Tannaitic sources R. Akiva does not emerge as a radical maverick of scriptural exploration, but as a rather mainstream interpreter who combines scriptural readings with established knowledge. See Azzan Yadin-Israel, *Scripture and Tradition: Rabbi Akiva and the Triumph of Midrash* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 103–18.

108. In the words of Barry Holtz, “In many ways Akiva is the apotheosis of the deepest values of ‘rabbinic Judaism,’ the essential manifestation of Jewish religion that first evolved in the first and second centuries of the Common Era and came to define the nature of Judaism for hundreds of years.” See Barry W. Holtz, *Rabbi Akiva: Sage of the Talmud* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 2.

109. See, for example, Avraham Goldberg, “All Base Themselves upon the Teachings of Rabbi Akiva” (in Hebrew), *Tarbitz* 38, no. 3 (1969): 231–54.

by hearing a master's teachings or by scriptural reasoning—is robust and stable among the rabbis as a community, even if it is fragile within the individual learner. In the next and final chapter, we will explore the trope of collective forgetfulness of the Torah, and see that in this regard, too, Tannaitic texts present an intriguing combination of anxiety and nonchalance.