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Constant Creation: (Pro)creation in Palestinian Rabbinic Midrashim

GWYNN KESSLER

Just as you do not know how the life-breath gets into the fetus in the womb of a pregnant woman, so you cannot know the work of God who makes everything (Eccl 11:5).¹

Rabbinic admonitions against delving too deeply into the works of creation, *ma'aseh bereshit*, are fairly well known. For example, *m. Hag. 2:1* somewhat famously states, “One should not expound the works of creation in the presence of two” – meaning these are private, secret matters. The *mishnah* continues to caution strongly against any cosmological speculation, now apparently in either public or private, asserting, much more generally, “Any who inquire after these four things, it is better for him that he not have come into the world: what is above, what is below, what is before, and what is behind/after.”²

Mishnah Hagigah's warning that it is better for the one who inquires after these matters not to have come into the world – i.e., that he should not have been born – inadvertently alludes to another area of rabbinic speculation, that of birth and procreation, or the process of coming-into-being. In what follows, I explore connections between rabbinic speculation about the creation of the cosmos and the creation of an embryo – between creation and procreation – asking what might be learned about each topic when considered in light of the other. As can be seen from the passage from Ecclesiastes above, the rabbinic traditions that I discuss throughout this chap-

¹ Translation follows Robert Gordis, *Koheleth: The Man and His World* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1951), 184, 321–22; and Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 18C; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 336–37.

² It remains unclear whether the word rendered as “behind/after” (*ahor*) connotes space, time, or both. Cf. Ps 139:5, “You have beset me behind (*ahor*) and before (*va-qedem*),” which is midrashically interpreted as, “You have *created* me behind and before.” Cf. *Gen. Rab.* 8:1 and *Lev. Rab.* 14:1, the latter of which I discuss below. See also Diana Lipton, “God’s Back! What Did Moses See on Sinai?” in *The Significance of Sinai: Traditions about Divine Revelation in Judaism and Christianity* (ed. George J. Brooke, Hindy Najman and Loren T. Stuckenbruck; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 288–89.

ter are not the earliest record of a link between creation and procreation, rather they build on strong biblical precedents.³

Although I frame this piece by invoking *m. Hag. 2:1* and discuss some Palestinian midrashic parallels to this *mishnah*, my primary goals in this chapter are, first, to substantiate the link I observed above between creation and procreation – i.e. creation of the cosmos and creation of embryos – and second, to demonstrate that such a connection highlights another way rabbinic traditions have conceived of cosmogony. The traditions about the creation of the embryo that I will discuss offer another corpus of texts through which the question of how “the rabbis” imagined the creation of the cosmos may fruitfully be explored. Considering rabbinic views on cosmogony from these texts, then, supplements the frequently discussed, and indeed important, texts that attempt to curtail or prohibit the very speculation of *ma’aseh bereshit*. Instead of setting the creation of the world in the past and circumscribing the investigation into that deep past, the traditions set forth here give voice to a rabbinic view of cosmogony that is both constant and ultimately apparent almost everywhere, making its exploration impossible to contain, limit, or control.

A parallel to *m. Hag. 2:1* appears in *Genesis Rabbah*, a fifth century exegetical midrashic compilation of Palestinian provenance.⁴ Ostensibly commenting on the first part of Gen 1:1, “In the beginning God created,” but failing to move beyond even the first letter of that somewhat vexing Hebrew phrase *bereshit bara elohim*, *Gen. Rab. 1:10* states: “R. Yona in the name of R. Levi asks, ‘Why was the world created with the letter *bet*?’ Just as the letter *bet* is closed on each side but open at the front, so too you do not have permission to seek out (*lidrosh*) what is above and what is below, what is before and what is behind/after.” Offering further scriptural support, Bar Kappara cites Deut 4:32, “For ask now of the days that are past, which were before you, *since the day* [that God created *adam* upon the earth].” The text continues, “From *the day* that the days were created you may seek out (*doresh*), but you cannot seek out before that.”⁵ Based on

³ For further discussion and relevant bibliography, see Gwynn Kessler, *Conceiving Israel: The Fetus in Rabbinic Narratives* (Divinations; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

⁴ On the relationship between *m. Hag. 2:1* and *Gen. Rab. 1:10*, see Philip Alexander, “Pre-Emptive Exegesis: Genesis Rabba’s Reading of the Story of Creation,” *JJS* 43.2 (1992): 232–36, 242–45.

⁵ Cited from Julius Theodor and Chanock Albeck, *Midrash Bereshit Rabba: Critical Edition with Notes and Commentary* (2nd ed.; Jerusalem: Wahrman, 1965), 8. I have followed that critical text, which explicitly states “from the day the days were created.” It is possible that the midrash instead seeks to stress “from the day that *adam* was created” from Deut 4:32, raising the question of whether one cannot inquire into what happens

the juxtaposition of Deut 4:32, and its mention of “the day,” the text extrapolates that investigation into things prior to the first day of creation is not permitted. *Genesis Rabbah* then interprets the last part of Deut 4:32: “‘from one end of the heavens until the other end of the heavens’ you may investigate, but you cannot investigate what is before [or beyond] this.”⁶ The message of this passage in *Gen. Rab.* 1:10 is thus relatively clear: one cannot speculate about a time prior to the first day, when both the days and the heavens were created (or perhaps prior to the sixth day when *adam* was created),⁷ and further, one cannot speculate about a place beyond the heavens. Moreover, this lesson is learned by an interpretation of the first letter of the Torah (the letter *bet*) – as if to say this is the first lesson the Torah teaches.

Irrespective of the intricacies involved in determining the precise point of creation from which the rabbis permit cosmological speculation, *m. Hag.* 2:1 and *Gen. Rab.* 1:10⁸ succeed in shrouding cosmogony in mystery.⁹ Certainly these traditions give voice to a rabbinic self-consciousness about delving too far into the mysteries of God’s work in creation; these traditions admonish those who seek out “what is above and what is below,

before the sixth day of creation instead of the first day of creation. See *Gen. Rab.* 8:2 and *b. Hag.* 11b.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ According to other mss., see Theodor and Albeck, *Midrash Bereshit Rabba*, 8.

⁸ In “Pre-Emptive Exegesis,” Alexander writes, “If our understanding of the role of Mishnah Hagigah 2:1 is correct, then we have here a very interesting case of intertextuality. *Genesis Rabba* cannot be correctly read, if it is treated as an autonomous text. It must be read alongside of, and in dialogue with, Mishnah Hagigah 2:1” (243 n. 16). He further observes, “I have tried to show that the compiler of *Genesis Rabba* would probably have denied the charge that he was ignoring the prescription of Mishnah Hagigah 2:1. On the contrary, the Mishnaic prescription is the invisible, dark star round which his reading orbits” (243). However, although Alexander briefly mentions *Gen. Rab.* 1:10, he does not discuss it (233). He forefronts *Gen. Rab.* 8:2, and writes, “It is surely rather late in the day for the redactor to tell us, after so many pages of detailed exposition, that one should not expound these things!” (236). However, *Gen. Rab.* 1:10 raises the same issue well before *Gen. Rab.* 8:2 does, and with a much closer parallel to *m. Hag.* 2:1. I am not suggesting that we read *Gen. Rab.* 1:10 or 8:2, or other passages, as autonomous. I concur that the intertextuality of these passages should be acknowledged and that the passages should be read “alongside of, and in dialogue with, Mishnah Hagigah 2:1.” However, if we take into consideration the fact that *Gen. Rab.* 1:10 raises the paradox of expounding the first chapter of *Genesis* and then *Genesis Rabbah* continues to do so long before *Gen. Rab.* 8:2, the type of dialogue occurring between *m. Hag.* 2:1 and *Genesis Rabbah* might be more fraught than congruent, as Alexander ultimately concludes. His conclusions, however, could also be upheld even if he focused on *Gen. Rab.* 1:10, a fact that further testifies to his fine scholarship.

⁹ Such intricacies are taken up and debated in *Gen. Rab.* 8:2 and 9:1. See also *y. Hag.* 77a and *b. Hag.* 11b–12b. Cf. Alexander, “Pre-Emptive Exegesis,” 233–36.

what is before and what is after.” However, rabbinic speculation into procreation, as the traditions discussed throughout this chapter demonstrate, ultimately infringes upon and comes close to being an investigation precisely into certain aspects of “what is above, what is below, what is before, and what is after.”

Genesis Rabbah 1:10 and *m. Hag.* 2:1 explicitly present a “hands off,” distant approach to rabbinic speculation about the creation of the world and its creator.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the strong remonstrations within the passage implicitly reveal a rabbinic inability to resist thinking about the creation of the world and the mysteries of God’s work in it. Moreover, the rabbinic persistence in thinking about cosmogony, in thinking about how the world came – or comes – to be, further surfaces within rabbinic traditions that juxtapose God’s creation of the world with God’s creation of each embryo. These traditions present a less restrictive approach to cosmogony with no *explicit* cautions about or warnings against such investigations; they provide a different angle from which to explore rabbinic investigations into the works of creation.

A relatively late tradition recorded in *Midrash Tanhumah* (circa eighth century CE) makes an explicit connection between the creation of the cosmos and the creation of the embryo – creation and procreation. *Midrash Tanhumah Pekudei* 3 states that “the creation of the embryo is like the creation of the world.” Although this tradition does not specify how the creation of the world and the creation of the embryo resemble each other, earlier rabbinic traditions flesh out the process whereby God creates both the heavens and the embryo.¹¹ As we will see, *Gen. Rab.* 4:7 describes how God creates the heavens (*shamayim*) in the same way that contemporaneous rabbinic texts describe how God creates the embryo. Thus even rabbinic traditions prior to *Midrash Tanhumah* illustrate the connections between rabbinic speculation about the creation of the cosmos and the creation of the embryo.

Commenting on Gen 1:8, “And God called the firmament heavens,” *Gen. Rab.* 4:7 inquires after what *shamayim* means, and further, of what it is made.¹² The text offers a number of interpretations. One states, “[It is called *shamayim*] because people wonder about them (*mishtomemim*

¹⁰ See also *t. Hag.* 2:1 and 2:3; *y. Hag.* 77a; *Gen. Rab.* 8:2; and *b. Hag.* 11b–12b.

¹¹ I discuss the continuation of *Tanh. Pekudei* 3 below.

¹² Although the verse comments on Gen 1:8, “And God called the firmament heaven (*shamayim*),” the same word *shamayim* appears in Gen 1:1 at the very beginning of God’s creation of the world, “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” Thus to relate this to *Gen. Rab.* 1:10 above, it remains unclear whether this text bespeaks the creation before “the days were created” or after, concerning the second day, as the verse in context attests.

alayhen) saying, ‘of what is this made? of fire? of water?’ They wonder at the mystery (*itmaha*).¹³ Then *Gen. Rab.* 4:7 continues:

R. Isaac says: *shamayim – sa-mayim*. It is laden with water. This may be compared to milk that was placed in a bowl. Before one drop of resin (*tipah ahat shel meso*) is placed in it, it quivers but after a drop of resin is placed in it, it immediately curdles (*kofe*) and stands still.¹⁴

So too, “The pillars of heaven quiver” (Job 26:11). When the drop of resin was put into it, “There was evening and there was morning the second day” (Gen 1:8). As Rav said, “[God’s work] was liquid on the first day and on the second day it solidified.”¹⁵

By way of a *marshal* (comparison/parable) this text imagines that God creates the heavens – which are conceived here as moving, quivering liquid – by placing a drop of resin into them, whereby they solidify.¹⁶ The process of creation is likened to the process of milk curdling in a bowl – perhaps invoking Job 10:10–12 (though it remains un-cited in this tradition), one of the two biblical passages that describe the process of human generation: “Have you not poured me out like milk, and curdled me (*takpiyani*) like cheese? You have clothed me with skin and flesh, and knit me together with bones and sinews. You have granted me life and favor, and your providence has preserved my spirit.”¹⁷

Genesis Rabbah 14:5 and *Lev. Rab.* 14:9 (a fifth century Palestinian midrashic compilation contemporaneous with *Genesis Rabbah*), which present partial parallels to *Gen. Rab.* 4:7, make the link to Job 10:10 explicit. More significantly, bringing *Gen. Rab.* 4:7 together with these partial parallels illuminates the connection between the creation of the heavens and the creation of the embryo in rabbinic traditions prior to the explicit statement found in the eighth-century *Midrash Tanhumah* cited above. *Leviticus Rabbah* 14:9 states:

The womb of the woman is always full of blood and from there menstrual blood goes forth from its source. And by the will of the Holy Blessed One, a drop [*tipah*] of white falls into it [the womb] and immediately, the embryo is created. [This may be compared] to milk that was put in a bowl. If one puts a curdling agent in it, it coagulates and stands. And if not, it moves and shakes.¹⁸

¹³ Theodor and Albeck, *Midrash Bereshit Rabba*, 31. Cf. *b. Hag.* 12a.

¹⁴ Cf. Job 26:11, discussed below.

¹⁵ Theodor and Albeck, *Midrash Bereshit Rabba*, 31.

¹⁶ On the parable in rabbinic literature, see David Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

¹⁷ See also Ps 139.

¹⁸ Mordecai Margulies, *Midrash Wayyikra Rabbah: A Critical Edition Based on Manuscripts and Geniza Fragments with Variants and Notes* (repr. New York; Jerusalem: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1993), 216–17.

Thus the same parable is told, and the same image is used for the creation of the world and the creation of the embryo. That God creates both, a point already implied when *Lev. Rab.* 14:9 states “by the will of the Holy Blessed One,” is further illustrated when the larger context of the tradition in *Lev. Rab.* 14:9 (and *Gen. Rab.* 14:5) is considered. The statement that a “white drop”¹⁹ – one of the most common rabbinic terms for male “seed” – acts as a curdling agent is made after the text records a debate between the schools of Hillel and Shammai considering whether or not formation of the embryo in this world is like formation in the world to come. According to Bet Hillel, it is indeed: Job 10:10–12 is read not only as “You have poured me out as milk and curdled me like cheese,” but is also read as (well within the rules of biblical grammar), “You will pour me out as milk and curdle me as cheese. You will clothe me with skin and flesh and you will cover me with bones and sinews. You will grant me life and favor.” Thus, You have granted me life and favor and You *will* grant me life and favor – in this world *and* in the future. The tradition links creation of the cosmos, creation of the embryo, and creation in the future or resurrection of the dead (the text seems to conflate the two) by virtue of God’s primary role in each process of creation.

A previous passage in *Lev. Rab.* 14 also juxtaposes the formation of the embryo with God’s creation – here with God’s creation of the sea as recounted in Job 38:8–11, “Who shut up the sea with doors, when it broke forth and issued out of the womb? When I made the cloud its garment and darkness its swaddling band and I prescribed bounds for it and set bars and doors and said thus far shall you come but no farther.” Ostensibly spurred on by the mention of the word “womb” in Job 38:8, *Lev. Rab.* 14:4 atomizes the Job passage, reading each phrase in such a way as to connect God’s creation and “birth” of the sea with the protection and birth of an embryo.²⁰ The text begins by equating the rising up of the sea to a fetus rising up to go forth:

¹⁹ *Gen. Rab.* 1:6 suggests that the earth is made by snow – white drops? – invoking another verse from Job: “‘For he says to the snow, ‘Fall on the earth’; likewise to the small rain, and to the great rain of his strength’ (Job 37:6). It is written, ‘In the beginning God created the heaven’ (Gen 1:1) but it is not explained. Where is it explained? Further on [in scripture]: ‘That stretches out the heavens as a curtain’ (Is 40:22). ‘And the earth’ (Gen 1:1), and it is not explained. Where is it explained? Further on [in scripture]: ‘For he says to the snow, fall on the earth’ (Job 37:6).” See also *b. Hag.* 12b for a connection between heavens and snow.

²⁰ I suggest that according to the rabbis, God not only “births” the sea, but also creates it from the primordial waters of Gen 1:6–7. For a discussion of *creatio ex nihilo*, see Mar-
 en Niehoff, “*Creatio ex Nihilo* Theology in *Genesis Rabbah* in Light of Christian Exe-
 gesis,” *HTR* 99.1 (2005): 37–64.

“When it (the sea) broke forth (*begiho*) and issued out of the womb” (Job 38:8) – it (the embryo) proudly raised itself (*mitgaah*) to go forth [out of the womb]. “When I made the cloud its garment” (38:9) – this is the amniotic sac [which covers the fetus like a garment]. “And darkness its swaddling band” (38:9) – this is the placenta. “And prescribed bounds for it” (38:10) – these are the nine months [of pregnancy]. “And set bars” (38:10) – these are the first three months. “And doors” (38:10) – these are the three middle months. “And said, ‘Thus far shall you come, but no farther’” (38:11) – these are the last three months [of pregnancy].

By juxtaposing God’s act of birthing and hemming in the sea with the act of hemming in and protecting the embryo until the moment of birth, this passage extends God’s work from the mere creation of the embryo (as seen throughout *Lev. Rab.* 14) to the entire nine months of gestation. Through the application of Job 38:8–11, *Lev. Rab.* 14 again juxtaposes God’s work in the cosmos, here specifically the sea, with God’s work in protecting and sustaining the fetus.

As the longest discursive record of traditions about the embryo’s creation and care of the fetus in all of Palestinian (and possibly Babylonian)²¹ rabbinic literature, *Lev. Rab.* 14 consistently and creatively illustrates that the creation of the embryo and the care of the fetus are *God’s work*, just as it consistently juxtaposes God’s work in procreation with God’s work in creation. As we have seen, the image of a drop solidifying liquid, which *Lev. Rab.* 14:9 uses to describe the formation of an embryo, is the same image used elsewhere to describe the creation of the heavens. While *Lev. Rab.* 14:4 juxtaposes God’s creation and birth of the sea with the development and protection of the embryo, *Lev. Rab.* 14:1 similarly juxtaposes the creation of the embryo with another of God’s creations – the first human (*adam harishon*) – in ways that equate the two. As the later *Midrash Tanhuma* succinctly states, “a person – *adam* – is a small world” (*Pekudei* 3).

Yet how does *Lev. Rab.* 14 interpret Lev 12:2 (“When a woman ‘conceives’ and gives birth to a male child [*isha ki tazria veyalda zakhar*]”) in a way that establishes the divine roles in, and the cosmological significance of, (pro)creation? Biblically, Lev 12:2 (“When a woman *tazria*...”) points to the very human, indeed female realm of and role in procreation. The rabbinic interpretations of this verse in *Lev. Rab.* 14, however, shift the reader’s attention away from the human realm and towards the divine realm. *Leviticus Rabbah* 14:1–7 contains proems (*petihtaot*),²² a rabbinic

²¹ See *b. Nid.* 31 for the only other extensive compilation of traditions on the creation and care of the fetus. Because of this sugya’s anthological character, *Lev. Rab.* 14 seems to me more deliberate and intricate in its treatment of the topic.

²² See Joseph Heinemann, “The Proem in the Aggadic Midrashim – A Form-Critical Study,” *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 22 (1971): 100–22; Richard S. Sarason, “The Petihtot in Leviticus Rabbah: ‘Oral Homilies’ or Redactional Constructions?” *JJS* 33 (1982): 557–67. See also Burton L. Visotzky, “The Misnomers ‘Petiha’ and ‘Homiletic Midrash’ as

literary genre that aims to expound a “target verse” by using a “verse from afar” in a way that illuminates both verses. Leviticus 12:2 (“When a woman *tazria*...”) provides the base verse, while the textual question – the grammatical irritant – motivating the exegesis is the question of what scripture means when it states “When a woman *tazria*...” etc. Since the question itself operates on multiple levels, so too do the answers.

The first question has to do with the potentially, and presumably exceptional, active verb *tazria*, “she seeds” or “she emits seed.”²³ The verse opens the door to constructing an active female role in procreation. This biblical opening, however, is firmly closed through both the consistent rabbinic construction of the female role in procreation as passive, and the consistent rendering of *tazria* as “conceives,” i.e. she receives seed, by the traditions throughout *Lev. Rab.* 14.²⁴ According to *Lev. Rab.* 14, and almost all of rabbinic literature, the answer to the question of what *tazria* means is that she conceives *passively*.²⁵

The other, more fundamental question spurred on by the rabbinic investigation into Lev 12:2 (“When a woman *tazria*...”) is asked with some rhetorical surprise: are women – or men for that matter – responsible for (pro)creation? Is an act of such creativity, an act of such power and significance, to be located solely, or even primarily, in the human realm? Although *Lev. Rab.* 14 consistently reiterates female passivity in procreation, its answer (and the primary teaching of the entire chapter) is that (pro)creation, like the creation of the heavens, the creation of the seas, and the

Descriptions for Leviticus Rabbah and Pesikta De-Rav Kahana,” *JSQ* 18.1 (2011): 19–31. Visotzky argues against the long-standing characterization of *Leviticus Rabbah* as homiletical and the use of the term *petihta* with regard to them and other rabbinic documents (including *Pesikta De-Rav Kahana*). I treat these proems as literary devices, and agree that we err in relating them to actual sermons or homilies that took place in ancient synagogues, an idea that has long been considered dubious.

²³ Contrast with Num 5:28, *nizra zera*, “she will conceive seed.” For additional mention of women and seed (*zera*) in the Hebrew Bible, see Gen 3:15, 4:25, 16:10, and 24:60. The biblical phrase *tahar vateled*, which is used often to record pregnancy and birth, is also grammatically active. See also Heb 11:11, on which see Pieter Willem van der Horst, “Sarah’s Seminal Emission: Hebrews 11:1 in the Light of Ancient Embryology,” in *Greeks, Romans, and Christians: Essays in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe* (ed. David L. Balch, Everett Ferguson, and Wayne A. Meeks; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

²⁴ To say that the midrash answers the question of whether women actively contribute to procreation might be somewhat of an overstatement. It is quite possible that the rabbis simply assume that the female role in procreation is passive – despite potential biblical evidence and conflicting Greco-Roman procreation theories to the contrary. Thus the question would not even enter into their minds on any conscious level.

²⁵ The traditions that assert that there are “three partners in the creation of a person” are the possible exception, but this statement is made in the context of inherited traits. See Kessler, *Conceiving*, 106–11.

creation of *adam*, is to be located in the divine realm, beyond human ability (and I think ultimately, like the creation of the cosmos, beyond human comprehension).

The first verse *Lev. Rab.* 14 brings to bear on Lev 12:2 (“When a woman *tazria*...”) is Ps 139:5, “You have beset me (*tsartani*) behind and before,” midrashically read as “You have created me behind and before.” The midrash connects the word *tsartani* (beset) in the Psalm with *vayyitser* (created) in Gen 2:7, “And the Lord God created (*vayyitser*) the *adam*.” In so doing, the text juxtaposes and further equates the creation of the first human with the creation of each embryo. The first interpretive move of *Lev. Rab.* 14 redirects the reader’s attention away from the female/human role in procreation toward God’s roles in (pro)creation. By expounding Lev 12:2 (When a woman *tazria*...) with Ps 139:5 (“You have created me behind and before”) read as a reference to the creation of *adam harishon*, the first *petihta* of *Lev. Rab.* 14 sets the stage for the chapter’s primary lesson: that God creates each embryo no less than God created *adam*. Rabbinic inquiries into procreation throughout *Lev. Rab.* 14 ultimately reach back to God, and here, to God’s work in the creation of *adam* during the six days of creation – be it the sixth day according to Gen 1 or the first day according to Gen 2.

Leviticus Rabbah 14 repeatedly appeals to Job 10 and Ps 139,²⁶ the Hebrew Bible’s two fullest accounts of the process of human generation:

Have you not poured me out like milk, and curdled me like cheese? You have clothed me with skin and flesh, and knit me together with bones and sinews. You have granted me life and favor, and your providence has preserved my spirit (Job 10:10–12).

For you have formed my insides; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I will praise you; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Marvelous are your works! And my soul knows that right well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was made in secret, and finely wrought in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; and in your book all things were written; also the days in which they are to be fashioned, and for it too there was one of them (Ps 139:13–16).

These two biblical passages, as well as the other “verses from afar” interpreted in the proems, serve as a corrective to Lev 12:2 and its apparent emphasis on the female/human realm in procreation. The proems, both cumulatively and individually, illustrate time and again that God creates the embryo – just as God created the heavens, the sea, and *adam*. Indeed, as *Tanh. Pekudei* 3 states, “The creation of the embryo is like the creation of the world.”

Finally, the midrashic uses of Job 10 and Ps 139 touch upon aspects concerning that which is above, below, before, and after. As already men-

²⁶ Ps 139 appears in *Lev. Rab.* 14:1; 14:6; 14:8 and Job 10 appears in *Lev. Rab.* 14:3 and 14:9.

tioned, Ps 139 is midrashically read to refer to the creation of *adam* and thus perhaps creation in general.²⁷ Further, the Psalm itself states, “If I ascend up to the heavens, You are there; If I lie down in *sheol*, you are there” (Ps 139:8), and it ends with the words “Lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps 139:24). As mentioned above, Job 10:10–12 is midrashically read as proof for resurrection of the dead and/or the world to come, despite – or perhaps precisely because – the end of Job 10 states, “Are not my days few? Cease then, and let me alone, that I may take comfort a little, before I go whence I shall not return, even to the land of darkness and of the shadow of death; a land of thick darkness, as darkness itself; a land of the shadow of death, without any order, and where the light is as darkness” (Job 10:20–22). Thus rabbinic inquiries into procreation, while almost always leading back to God, also carry within them, and indeed are pregnant with, intertextual links to creation (what is before), resurrection (what is after), and the heavens (what is above).²⁸

When read together, the expansive traditions in *Lev. Rab.* 14 and *Midrash Tanhuma*’s far more concise statement that “the creation of the embryo is like the creation of the world” present a perspective on cosmogony and cosmology counter to that found in *m. Hag.* 2:1 and *Gen. Rab.* 1:10. By likening the creation of the embryo to the creation of the cosmos, *Leviticus Rabbah* and *Midrash Tanhuma* may suggest that the creation of the cosmos is searchable, understandable, as self-evident, and perhaps even as mundane as the very human process of generation. Instead of shrouding cosmogony in uncertain mystery, the texts invite not only speculation but also the promise of comprehension. “How did God create the cosmos?” asks *Midrash Tanhuma*. “When the Holy Blessed One created his world, He created it like the offspring (*yelud*) of a woman” (*Pekudei* 3). The Hebrew word *yelud* is related to the verb *yalad*, to give birth, and thus, like a woman gives birth to a child, God gives birth to the cosmos.

On closer inspection, however, to liken the creation of the embryo to the creation of the cosmos elevates procreation from the mundane, human realm and projects it onto the sphere of the cosmos, imbuing it with cosmological significance and highlighting that it too, like the creation of the cosmos, is beyond human comprehension. How, according to *Midrash*

²⁷ See Alexander, “Pre-Emptive Exegesis,” 235. Discussing *Gen. Rab.* 8:2, he writes that the mention of Job 20:4 (“since man was placed upon the earth”) “expresses the general sense of ‘since creation.’” I suggest that *Lev. Rab.* 14:1’s application of Ps 139:5 to *adam ha-rishon* functions similarly to conflate the creation of *adam* with creation of the cosmos.

²⁸ The mention of *sheol* in Ps 139:8 and Job’s mention of “death” and “darkness” – what is below – drop out, and are replaced by an affirmation of resurrection and the world to come.

Tanhuma, is the creation of the embryo like the creation of the cosmos? Its answer, like *Lev. Rab.* 14, appeals to a verse from Job and expounds:

The creation of the embryo is like the creation of the world. Like the creation of the embryo in its mother's womb. R. Yohanan said, "What is the meaning of 'Who does great things past finding out and wonders without number' (Job 9:10). Know this: That all the souls from *adam harishon* that will be until the end of the world, they were all created during the six days of creation. And they were all in the Garden of Eden and they were all at the giving of the Torah, as it is said, '[For not with you alone will I make this covenant and this oath], but with him who stands here with us this day before the Lord our God, and also with him who is not here with us this day' (Deut 29:13–14). And when [scripture says] 'Who does great things past finding out,' it refers to the great things that the Holy Blessed One does in the creation of the embryo."

According to this text, the creation of the embryo is a great thing surpassing human understanding – like the creation of the cosmos itself. One is not prohibited from searching out how the embryo is created, how God creates embryos like God created the world, but both subjects of inquiry remain beyond human comprehension. Both lines of inquiry lead to God, who created the world, and who continues to do so.

It is in this last point – that God continues to create the cosmos – that rabbinic traditions about procreation lead one to acknowledge the ongoing work of creation. Thus they offer a different perspective on, and a different angle from which to examine, rabbinic views of cosmogony. The *Tanhuma* text just cited begins with a statement locating creation of all souls in the past: "they were created during the six days of creation." Yet the proof-texts from Job and Deuteronomy cited in the passage are present and future oriented. Deuteronomy 29:13–14 projects the covenant into the future, to those who are not standing here today, while the interpretation of the verse from Job is that God continues to do great things beyond human knowledge – here exemplified by God's work in creating embryos. If the creation of embryos is like the creation of the cosmos, in continuing to create embryos, God continues to create the universe. According to this text, both covenant and creation are ongoing events. One cannot help but inquire after the "works of creation" because they are all around, seen in the everyday nature of events.

Leviticus Rabbah 14:2 also illustrates the ongoing nature of creation, and through one last examination of this passage, I shall return to *m. Hag.* 2:1. *Leviticus Rabbah* 14:2 midrashically reads Job 36:3 as "I will lift up (*nasa*) my thoughts to that which is afar."²⁹ The text first states, "R. Hanina bar Papa said, 'We lift up our thoughts to the Holy Blessed One, from

²⁹ In context the verse is translated, "I will fetch my knowledge from afar, and to my Maker I will ascribe righteousness."

whom we were far, but he has brought us near to him.”³⁰ It then goes on to interpret what is “afar” (*lemerahog*): “R. Haggai said things that are as far (*rehoqim*) from us as a journey of five hundred years. While people sleep on their beds, the Holy Blessed One causes winds to blow, raises clouds, brings rain down, and causes plants to grow and dries the rain, and orders a table before each and every one.”³¹ Although *Lev. Rab.* 14:2 does not explain what “a journey of five hundred years” refers to, *Bavli Hagigah* (commenting on *m. Hag.* 2:1) states, “The distance from the earth to the firmament/heavens (*raqiah*)³² is five hundred years.”³³ That which is “afar” – a distance of five hundred years journey – is God, but through the ongoing work God does, God brings Israel near to God. While people sleep, God maintains and continues the work of the cosmos. God does this by continuing to provide rain, which originates in the heavens,³⁴ and by continuing to create embryos, as the rest of *Lev. Rab.* 14:2 makes clear.³⁵ *Leviticus Rabbah* 14:2 moves rather seamlessly between God’s roles in the creation of embryos and the ongoing creation of the cosmos as if they were mutually constitutive, each shedding light on, and intricately connected with, the other.

Conclusion

Both *m. Hag.* 2:1 and *Gen. Rab.* 1:10 warn against looking back to creation, *ma’aseh bereshit*, inquiring too directly into how the world came to be. Rabbinic traditions about the creation of the embryo recorded in *Lev. Rab.* 14 (and elsewhere), however, repeatedly juxtapose the creation of the embryo with the creation of the cosmos, suggesting that creation is not something in the past that one may or may not choose to investigate, but it

³⁰ Margulies, *Midrash Wayyikra Rabbah*, 300.

³¹ Margulies, *Midrash Wayyikra Rabbah*, 300–1. The statement that God “orders a table before each and every one” is perhaps a reference to God “ordering” procreation. Cf. *b. Ned.* 20a–b.

³² Cf. *Gen.* 1:6–8. Margulies, *Midrash Wayyikra Rabbah*, 300 comments that this passage “interprets ‘that which is afar’ as the rains that come from the heavens.”

³³ A parallel also appears in *y. Ber.* 1:1, 11a.

³⁴ See Margulies, *Midrash Wayyikra Rabbah*, 300.

³⁵ *Lev. Rab.* 14:2 continues: “R. Levi said: ‘Is it customary in this world that when someone deposits an ounce of silver with his friend in secret and the friend returns to him a *litra* of gold in public, will he not praise him? So too men deposit to the Holy Blessed One a white drop in secret and the Holy Blessed One returns to them complete and beautiful living beings in public. And is this not worthy of praise? Thus I will ascribe righteousness to my Maker, [as it is said], ‘and to my Maker I will ascribe righteousness.’”

is something that is constant, in the present, making speculation about it nearly impossible to resist.

To search out the creation of the embryo, no less than that of the cosmos itself, is to search out God; it is to inquire after “what is above, what is below, what is before and what is after.”³⁶ Yet, where direct cosmological speculation is explicitly prohibited, speculation about the creation of the embryo is not; perhaps it is even embraced. The latter teaches something important about the former: God’s creation, of both the cosmos and humanity, is an ongoing process.

Although cosmological speculation about *ma’aseh bereshit* in rabbinic traditions such as *m. Hag. 2:1* and *Gen. Rab. 1:10* may be in tension with cosmological concepts apparent in rabbinic traditions about the creation of the embryo, it is nevertheless a productive tension. By reading creation with (pro)creation, we see rabbinic portrayals of cosmogony as an ongoing, constant process. By mapping *m. Hag. 2:1* and *Gen. Rab. 1:10* onto rabbinic traditions about procreation, we are further confronted not only with the mystery of creation, but also with the mystery, miraculousness, and indeed the holiness of rabbinic concepts of procreation.

Rabbinic traditions about the creation of the embryo, when read for their insights into rabbinic views about cosmogony, may appear to be in some tension with *m. Hag. 2:1* and its admonition against inquiring after “what is above, what is below, what is before and what is after.” However, directly after *m. Hag. 2:1* asserts that it is better for the one who speculates on these matters not to have been born, the *mishnah* continues, “All who have no regard for the honor of his Creator, it is better for him that he not come into the world.” Rabbinic traditions about the creation of the embryo are prime examples of giving honor to God. Speculation into the creation of the embryo, and its very juxtaposition with the creation of the cosmos, produce some of the most potent examples of rabbinic traditions that praise and give honor to God – not only for how God created the cosmos, but how God continues to do so through God’s roles in (pro)creation.

³⁶ Although I mean this in a generalized way, for what is found at nearly all points is God, note that rabbinic traditions about the creation of the embryo explore what is before (the creation of all souls according to *Tanh. Pekudei 3*), what is after (resurrection of the dead in *Lev. Rab. 14:9* and *Gen. Rab. 14:5*), and what is above (the creation of the heavens from a drop of resin in *Lev. Rab. 14:9* and *Gen. Rab. 14:5*).