Ascetic Fasting and the Dangers of Piety

To meet Yofiel, the angel of Torah, to ward off the devil, or to pronounce God's name are some reasons for ascetic fasting. But beware: Publicizing your fast not only negates your act of piety but can bring down divine wrath. Just ask Miriam daughter of Onion Leaf.

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Jesus Tempted in the Wilderness, James Tissot, 1886-1894 Brooklynmuseum.org

Fasting is a ubiquitous human practice, part of the cultural matrix of most (perhaps all) societies. Presocratic Greeks like Pythagoras (6th cent. B.C.E.) ordained fasts as a matter of course for medical, philosophic, and mystical reasons like many other societies.

Jewish tradition mandates fasting on Yom Kippur and for the destruction of the Temple,[1] as well as fasting for rain, as laid out in Tractate Taanit.[2] Less well known is the early mystical practice of fasting as a spiritual cleansing. For example, *Sefer HaHekhalot*, a Geonic period mystical work, tells a story of how Rabbi Ishmael[3] meets Yofiel, the angel of Torah, who instructs him to fast for forty days in order to merit a visitation from him:[4]

אמר ר' ישמעאל: כשהייתי בן י"ג שנה הרחיש לבי בדבר זה, וחזרתי אצל רבי נחוניה בן הקנה רבי, נומתי (לי) [לו]: "שרה של תורה מה שמו?" ונאם לי יופיאל שמו. מיד עמדתי וצערתי לעצמי ארבעים יום ואמרתי שם גדול עד שהורדתי אותו.

Rabbi Ishmael said: When I was 13 years old, my heart was moved by this matter, and I returned to the presence of R. Nehuniah ben HaQanah, my master. I declared to him: “The Prince of Torah—what is his name?” And he declared to me: “Yofiel is his name.” At once, I arose and denied myself for forty days. Then I recited the great name [of God] until I made him descend.

וירד בשלהבת אש ופניו כמראה בזק. כיון שראיתי אותו נבהלתי ונזדעזעתי וירדתי לאחורי. ונם לי: "בן אדם, מה טיבך שהרעשת את פמלייא גדולה?" ונומיתי לו: "גלוי וידוע לפני מי שאמר והיה העולם שלא הורדתי אותך לכבוד(ך)[י] אלא לעשות רצון קונך."

And he descended in a flame of fire, and his face was like the appearance of a lightning flash (cf. Ezek 1:14). As soon as I saw him, I was confounded and shrank back and fell backward. And he declared to me: “Mortal,[5] who do you think you are that you have shaken the great entourage?” And I declared to him: “It is manifest and well known before the One who said and the world was, that I didn’t bring you down for (your) [my own] glory, but rather to do the will of your Owner.”

ונם לי: "בן אדם, טפה סרוחה רמה ותולעה, מאן דבעי דנתגלי עלוי **ישב בתענית ארבעים יום**, ויטבול עשרים וארבע טבילות בכל יום, ואל יטעום דבר מזוהם, ואל יסתכל באשה וישב בבית אפל שלום[6]."

He said to me: “Mortal, putrid drop, maggot and worm! Whoever seeks to have him/it revealed to him, **must sit in fasting state for 40 days**, and must immerse in ritual waters twenty-four times every day. He must not taste anything filthy, nor gaze at a woman, and he must sit in a dark peaceful house.”

Thus, fasting can serve as a spiritual cleansing, to enable the mystic to safely enter divine precincts and encounter angelic beings.

Fasting for Forty Days to Pronounce God’s Name

Similarly, in the Geonic *Maaseh Merkavah*, Rabbi Akiva tells the initiate to fast for 40 days, like Moses who fasted 40-days on Mount Sinai, according to rabbinic interpretation. Otherwise, the initiate may incur divine wrath in pronouncing explicit divine names: [7]

א[מר] ר[בי] עקיבא: כל מי שמבקש לשנות משנה זו ולפרש השם הזה בפירושו ישב בתענית ארבעים יום ויניח ראשו בין ברכיו עד שהתעני[ת] שולטת בו וילחש [או "ויחלוש"][8] לארץ ולא לשמים, ותשמע ארץ ולא שמים. [9] ואם נער הוא יאמרו עד שלא יוציא זרע, ואם בעל אשה הוא יהיה נכון לשלשת ימים שנ[אמר] (שמות יט:טו): והיו נכונים לשלשת ימים [אל תגשו אל אשה]....

Rabbi Akiva said: Whoever wishes to recite this teaching (=the *Maaseh Merkavah*) and to explicate the name with its explication, must sit in fasting for forty days; and he must place his head between his knees until the fasting overcomes him. He must recite an incantation (or “must become weak”) to earth but not to heaven. And if he is a youth (i.e., unmarried), he may recite it so long as he does not have an ejaculation (i.e., he is not impure from emitting seed); If he is a married man, he should prepare (by not having sex) for three days, as it is said (Exod 19:15): “Be ready by the third day; [you shall not touch a woman]”[10]…

ויהיה רגיל בו מחודש לחודש ומשנה לשנה שלשים יום קודם ראש השנה מראש חודש אילול עד יום הכפורי[ם] כדי שלא יסטין עליו סטן ופגע רע השנה כולה.

And he must make a habit of it from month to month and from year to year thirty days before Rosh Hashanah, from the beginning of the month of Elul to the day of Atonement [the tenth of Tishrei], lest Satan and Evil Stroke accuse him all year long.

Forty days is not symbolic here, but represents the period of the High Holidays, including the previous month of Elul that prepares for these holy days.

Jesus Fasts for 40 Days to Overcome Satan

In the New Testament, Jesus also fasts for forty days to defeat the devil:

Luke 4:1 Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, 4:2 where for forty days he was tested by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished.[11]

Like Rabbi Akiva advises in the (much later) *Maaseh Merkavah*, the fast allows Jesus to maintain his connection to the Holy Spirit and to succeed in avoiding the devil’s snares.

Ascetic Fasting: A Practice for Philosophers

Centuries before the *Hekhalot* texts, Philo, the Hellenistic Jewish philosopher, describes the practice of a Jewish philosophical society near Alexandria to practice extensive, ascetic fasting:

*On the Contemplative Life*4:34They lay self-control to be as it were the foundation of their soul and on it build the other virtues. None of them would put food or drink to his lips before sunset. [12]

Philo then explains the symbolism of this practice:

[T]hey hold that philosophy finds its right place in the light, the needs of the body in the darkness, and therefore they assign the day to the one and some small part of the night to the other.

They keep this up for multiple days at a time, three or six, depending on how attached they are to fasting.[13] It is only on the seventh day, presumably a reference to Shabbat, that they all break their fast:

4:36 But to the seventh day as they consider it to be sacred and festal in the highest degree they have awarded special privileges as its due, and on it after providing for the soul refresh the body also, which they do as a matter of course with the cattle too by releasing them from their continuous labour.

And yet, even on Shabbat, they do not gorge themselves, but eat in a sufficient but minimal way:

4:37 Still they eat nothing costly, only common bread with salt for a relish flavoured further by the daintier with hyssop, and their drink is spring water. For as nature has set hunger and thirst as mistresses over mortal kind they propitiate them without using anything to curry favour but only such things as are actually needed and without which life cannot be maintained. Therefore they eat enough to keep from hunger and drink enough to keep from thirst but abhor surfeiting as a malignant enemy both to soul and body.

While similar in theme to the mystical tradition, Philo is not concerned about dangerous unearthly forces. Rather, the goal is to disassociate the contemplative person from material pleasures such as food.[14]

The Story of the Woman Who Boasted about Fasting

The Talmud also knows of and respects ascetic fasting, but at the same time, expresses concern about haughtiness that could arise as a result of such practices. The Talmud tells the story of a certain pious man, whose friend dies, and no one attends his funeral, while the son of a local politician dies, and the whole city stops. The man cries, and an angel grants him a vision into the world to come to give him insight into reward and punishment. There he meets several people, including a woman undergoing a grotesque punishment for a sin:

ירושלמי חגיגה ב:ב(≅ ירושלמי סנהדרין ו:ו) וַחֲמָא לְמִרְיָם בְּרַת עֲלֵי בְצָלִים. רִבִּי לָעְזָר בַּר יוֹסֵה אָמַר: תַּלְייָא בְחִיטֵּי בִיזַייָא. רִבִּי יוֹסֵי בֶּן חֲנִינָה אָמַר: צִירָא דְּתִרְעַא דִגְהִינָּם קְבִיעָא בְּאוּדְנָהּ.

j. Hagigah 2:2 (≅ j. Sanhedrin 6:6) He also saw Miriam, the daughter of Eli Betzalim (lit. “Onion Leaves”). Rabbi [E]leazar ben Yossi[16] says, she was hanging by the nipples of her breasts.[17] Rabbi Yossi ben Hanina says: The hinge of the gate of *Gehenna* was fixed in her ear.[18]

The angelic guides then explains why the woman is being punished:

אֲמַר לוֹן. לָמָּה דָא כֵן. אָמְרִין לֵיהּ. דַּהֲוָת צַייְמָה וּמְפַרְסְִמָה. וְאִית דְּאָמְרֵי. דַּהֲווָת צַייְמָא חַד יוֹם וּמְקַזָּה לֵיהּ תְּרֵיי.[19]

He said to them (=the angelic guides): “Why is this happening to her?” They said to him: “Because she would fast and make it public.” And there are those who say: “Because she would fast a single day, and follow this with two days (of sinning or indulgence) as a counterbalance.”[20]

Rabbi Eliezer ben Yossi’s version of the punishment alludes to how the woman exposed matters meant to be private, i.e., her fasting, so now her private body parts are being exposed.[21] (For more on Rabbi Yossi ben Hanina’s version of this punishment, about the gate of hell, see addendum.) Fasting, then, is an act of piety, and yet, it carries serious risk, since the person engaging in this laudable behavior might be tempted to show off one’s piety to others.

Hubris Destroys Piety

The rabbis’ fear of pious acts leading to sinful hubris appears in other contexts. For instance, according to the Mishnah, while the nervous groom need not recite the Shema at night, Rabban Gamaliel recited it on his wedding night anyway:

משנה ברכות ב:ה מַעֲשֶׂה בְּרַבָּן גַּמְלִיאֵל שֶׁקָּרָא בַלַּיְלָה הָרִאשׁוֹן שֶׁנָּשָׂא. אָמְרוּ לוֹ תַּלְמִידָיו, לֹא לִמַּדְתָּנוּ, רַבֵּנוּ, שֶׁחָתָן פָּטוּר מִקְּרִיאַת שְׁמַע בַּלַּיְלָה הָרִאשׁוֹן. אָמַר לָהֶם, אֵינִי שׁוֹמֵעַ לָכֶם לְבַטֵּל מִמֶּנִּי מַלְכוּת שָׁמַיִם אֲפִלּוּ שָׁעָה אֶחָת.

m. Berakhot 2:5 Did you not instruct us, our teacher, that a groom is exempt from reciting Shema on the first night [of his marriage]? He (=Rabban Gamaliel II) said to them: “I will not heed you, to deprive myself of the [act of accepting the] kingdom of heaven for even one minute.”[22]

Rabban Gamaliel’s son, however, limits this act of piety to the select few:

משנה ברכות ב:ח חָתָן אִם רָצָה לִקְרוֹת קְרִיאַת שְׁמַע לַיְלָה הָרִאשׁוֹן, קוֹרֵא. רַבָּן שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן גַּמְלִיאֵל אוֹמֵר, לֹא כָל הָרוֹצֶה לִטֹּל אֶת הַשֵּׁם יִטֹּל.

m. Berakhot 2:8If a groom wants to recite Shema on the first night, he may recite [it]. Rabbi Shimon ben Gamaliel says: “Not everyone who wants to take the honorific[23]upon himself may take it on.”

Thus, piety is commendable, but at the same time, it is dangerous, and the average person is warned not to try this act of piety themselves, lest it come off as arrogance.[24]

The Story of Judah ben Pappos Walking through Mud to Avoid Private Property

The pros and cons of acts of piety appear in the context of a story about Judah ben Pappos avoiding private property, even when the public thoroughfare is muddy:

ירושלמי ברכות ב:ט אמר ר' אבהו: מעשה בר[בן] ג[מליאל] ור' יהושע שהיו בדרך והיו מסתלקין לצדדין מפני יתידות דרכים וראו את ר' יהודה בן פפוס שהיה משתקע ובא כנגדן.

j. Berakhot 2:9Rabbi Abbahu related: It once happened that Rabbi Gamaliel and Rabbi Joshua were traveling on a public road when they veered away to the privately owned paths along the private sides on account of the obstructing road pegs [i.e., a section of muddy construction or even the hardened impassable clay on the road].[25] Then they saw Rabbi Judah son of Pappus who was progressively sinking [into the mud] opposite them.

אמר ר[בן] ג[מליאל] לר' יהושע: מי הוא זה שמראה עצמו באצבע? אמר לו: יהודה בן פפוס הוא שכל מעשיו לשום שמים.

Rabbi Gamaliel said to Rabbi Joshua, “Who is this fellow who attracts attention to his piety [by refraining to walk on the privately owned side paths].[26] He (R. Joshua) replied, “He is Judah ben Pappus whose every [excessive] deed is for the sake of [obeying] Heaven.”

Rabbi Joshua sees Judah bar Pappos’ behavior as a simple expression of piety from a person known for this behavior. Rabban Gamaliel, however, who trusted his own piety earlier, is suspicious of Judah’s piety, since he is not a rabbi:

א[מר] ל[יה]: ולא כן תני: כל דבר שהוא של שבח לא כל הרוצה לעשות עצמו יחיד עושה תלמיד חכם עושה אלא א"כ מינו אותו פרנס על הצבור?!

He (Gamaliel) said to him, “But was it not taught: Any [excessive] deed which could prompt acclaim, not everyone seeking to follow ascetic practices may do so, or the practices of a scholar may do so,[27]unlesshe had been appointed as a [trusted] public official!”

Judah is neither a scholar nor a public official, so he should not be performing public acts of piety, even if they are morally correct. To this, Rabbi Joshua responds, with an alternative tradition about the importance of suffering:

אמר ליה והתני כל דבר של צער כל הרוצה לעשות עצמו יחיד עושה ת"ח עושה ותבוא עליו ברכה.

He replied, “Thus we have been taught [in respect to your objection]: In any case involving suffering, whoever would seek to follow the practices of an ascetic may do so, or the practices of a scholar may do so, and may a blessing come upon him.”

Ostensibly, the willingness to actually suffer demonstrates that the person is sincere. The 4th generation amora, Rabbi Zeira, who moved from Babylon to Israel, comments on this story:

א"ר זעירא: ובלחוד דלא יבזה חורנין.

Rabbi Ze’ira explained, “Such is the case only where others would not feel shamed.”

Rabbi Ze’ira appears to be saying that such odd behavior can only be condoned if it is done without fanfare or others even knowing. Judah ben Pappos, therefore, is guilty of a form of *yohara*, obnoxious boasting.[28]

Entering Halakhic Discourse

The prohibition to share publicly that one has taken upon oneself an ascetic fast enters Jewish legal discourse in the *Tashbetz* by Rabbi Shimshon ben Tzadok (1312 C.E.), a student of Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg, who is mostly reporting on his teacher’s halakhic positions:

תשב"ץ (קטן) קיב אסור לומר לאחרים אני מתענה.

Tashbetz §112 [Cremona] It is forbidden to tell others I am fasting.[29]

Rabbi Shimshon continues with a prooftext from the story of the woman’s punishment:

וראיה מירושלמי ההיא איתתא דהות מתה כבר הוה נפיק לה אור של גיהנם מאודנא לאודנא. חד אמר משום דהות משתעי בשעת תענית עשיתי ב' תעניות או ג'. וחד אמר משום דהות משתעי לאחרים התענית:

The proof is from the *Yerushalmi* where it mentions a woman who having died [as a result of such boasting and so] the fire of *Gehenna* would go out from one of her ears to the other. One (rabbi) said it was because she told others when she was fasting that she had been doing it for 2 or 3 days. Another said she would tell others that she was fasting.

R. Joseph Karo codified this law, based on this passage, in his 16th century code of Jewish Law, the *Shulḥan Arukh*:

שלחן ערוך אורח חיים תקסו:ו הַמִּתְעַנֶּה וּמְפַרְסֵם עַצְמוֹ לַאֲחֵרִים לְהִשְׁתַּבֵּחַ שֶׁהוּא מִתְעַנֶּה, הוּא נֶעֱנָשׁ עַל כָּךְ.

*Shulḥan Arukh*OḤ565:6One who fasts and publicizes himself so others will praise him for his fasting will be punished for doing so.[30]

Thus normative halakha allows ascetic fasting but warns against using such practices to gain honor by letting other people know about it.

Gospel of Matthew Parallel

The rabbis were not the only ones worried about how a public display of piety could reflect hubris. Indeed, Jesus as quoted in the Gospel of Matthew makes this same point about fasting:

Matthew 6: 16-18When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces **to show others they are fasting**. Truly, I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, **so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting**,[31] but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.[32]

It is unlikely that the sages are borrowing directly from the New Testament. As we saw, the Yerushalmi passage is part of a wider Talmudic discussion of showing off and hypocrisy, and at the same time, it is in line with the advice in Matthew. Instead, these texts reflect a common concern in antique Judaism.[33]

**Addendum**

The Gate of Hell: The Second Tale of Setne Khamwas and the Yerushalmi

The story in the Yerushalmi seems to be built on a motif found also in The Second Tale of Setne Khamwas, an Egyptian myth from the Roman period, written in Demotic, and set in the period of Ramesses II. Setne Khamwas was the fourth son of Ramesses II, and Egyptian mythology envisions him as a powerful magician.[34]

In this story, Setne Khamwas and his wife have been praying to the gods for a son, and they are granted a spiritual genius of a child they name Si-Osire. One day, Setne Khamwas sees two funerals, one of a rich person treated with great honors, and one of a poor person with no one accompanying him—a scene similar to the Yerushalmi. When Setne exclaims how much better it is to be the rich person, his son tells him that if he could see into the next world, he would know it was better to be the poor person. Si-Osire then takes his father for a tour of the next world, after which he explains some of the visions.

First, the wealthy man standing next to Osiris, whom his father saw, is actually the poor man, whom Thoth rewarded will all the rich man’s belongings because of his righteousness. As for the rich man himself, Si-Osire explains:

That rich man whom you saw: They took him to the netherworld. They weighed his misdeeds against his good deeds.[35] They found his misdeeds more numerous than the good deeds he had one on earth. It was ordered to imprison him in the netherworld. He is [the man whom you saw] with the pivot of the door of the netherworld fixed in his right eye, so that it opens and shuts on his eye, and his mouth is open in great lamentation.[36]

The imagery of the door to the door to the netherworld fixed in the eye is very reminiscent of Rabbi Yossi ben Hanina’s imagery of the door to Gehenna fixed in the woman’s ear. In the Egyptian text, the basic message is that respect on earth does not necessarily reflect how the gods see matters, thus the inversion of the future lives of the poor and rich men. The Yerushalmi offers different lessons, but clearly it is familiar with the imagery for this motif.[37]

1. For more on the traditional reasons for Jewish fasting, see Malka Z. Simkovich and Zev Farber, “[Why Jews Fast,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/why-jews-fast) *TheTorah* (2015). This article does much of the heavy lifting, but as my colleague Baruch Halpern once pointed out to me, the incomparable philosopher, Charlie Chan, once remarked: no barber shaves so close as to not leave room for another.
2. The Geonic and medieval tradition also has the Fast of Esther. Editor’s note: See discussion in Mitchel First, [“The Fast of Esther’s 8th Cent. C.E. Origins,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-fast-of-esthers-8th-cent-ce-origins) *TheTorah* (2023).
3. In general, Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Akiva appear as literary characters in these works; these references do not preserve ancient traditions in their names.
4. The Hebrew here is from MS Vatican 228, and follows the transcription found in Peter Schäfer, סינופסוס לספרות ההיכלות [*Synopse zur Hekhalot Literatur*] Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum 2 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1981), §313–314. For a more accessible version, see ספר ילקוט הרועים הגדול(Jerusalem: Nezer Shraga, 2016), 122 [col. 2]. The emendations follow Michael Swartz, *Scholastic Magic: Ritual and Revelation in Early Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 69–70. The English follows James R. Davila, *Hekhalot Literature in Translation: Major Texts of Merkavah Mysticism*, Supplements to the Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy 20 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 350–351, with slight adjustments.
5. The language here channels that of Ezekiel, whose opening vision is the source of the Maaseh Merkavah (the vision of the divine chariot).
6. The final word *shalom* here is difficult to translate. I have followed Davila’s suggestion, but there are many other possibilities, including scribal error. Swartz renders the phrase “a totally dark house.”
7. The Hebrew here follows MS N8128 as transcribed in Schäfer, *Synopse zur Hekhalot Literatur*, §424. For a more accessible version, see ספר ילקוט הרועים הגדול, 72. The English follows Davila, *Hekhalot Literature in Translation*, 241–242 with some adjustments.
8. This is the text in MS M40 and the printed edition.
9. The text is playing off the contrast in the poetic opening of Moses’ song:

דברים לב:א הַאֲזִינוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם וַאֲדַבֵּרָה וְתִשְׁמַע הָאָרֶץ אִמְרֵי פִי.

Deut 32:1 Give ear, O heavens, let me speak; Let the earth hear the words I utter!

Compare the treatment in Midrash Tannaim on Deuteronomy (Hoffmann ed.):

"האזינו השמ[ים] ואד[ברה]"—לפי שהיה משה קרוב לשמים היה אומ[ר] האזי[נו] השמ[ים].

“Give ear, O heavens, let me speak”—since Moses was close to the heavens [on the mountain], he said “give hear o heavens.”

"ותשמע הארץ"—לפי שהיה רחוק מן הארץ היה אומ[ר] ותש[מע] הא[רץ] אמרי פי.

“Let the earth hear”—since he was far from the ground, he said “let the earth hear the words I utter.”

בא ישעיה וסמך לדבר (ישעיה א ב) "שמעו שמים"—שהיה רחוק מן השמים, "והאזיני ארץ"—שהיה קרוב לארץ:

Isaiah came and followed this approach “Let the heavens hear” for he was far from the heavens, “and give ear O land”—since he was close to the ground.

1. Editor’s note: For some discussion of how Jewish tradition understood this verse, see Karen Winslow, [“Moses Separated from His Wife: Between Greek Philosophy and Rabbinic Exegesis,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/moses-separated-from-his-wife-between-greek-philosophy-and-rabbinic-exegesis) *TheTorah* (2023).

Kατά Λουκάς 4:1 Ἰησοῦς δὲ πλήρης πνεύματος ἁγίου ὑπέστρεψεν ἀπὸ τοῦ Ἰορδάνου καὶ ἤγετο ἐν τῷ πνεύματι ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ 4:2 ἡμέρας τεσσεράκοντα πειραζόμενος ὑπὸ τοῦ διαβόλου. Καὶ οὐκ ἔφαγεν οὐδὲν ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐκείναις καὶ συντελεσθεισῶν αὐτῶν ἐπείνασεν.

1. Translation from LCL 9, p. 133.

Some in whom the desire for studying wisdom is more deeply implanted even only after three days remember to take food. 4:35 Others so luxuriate and delight in the banquet of truths which wisdom richly and lavishly supplies that they hold out for twice that time and only after six days do they bring themselves to taste such sustenance as is absolutely necessary. They have become habituated to abstinence like the grasshoppers who are said to live on air because, I suppose, their singing makes their lack of food a light matter.

1. Other examples are sex and fancy clothing. For more on ascetic fasting in Judaism, see Eliezer Diamond, *Holy Men and Hunger Artists: Fasting and Asceticism in Rabbinic Culture*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford and New York), 2004.
2. The fuller *Yerushalmi* passage (in a section I omit for brevity) contains a near parallel to the tragedy of Tantalus, son of Zeus, who was damned to stand in a lake with fruits and was unable to satisfy his thirst or his hunger. (Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, London: Penguin Books, 1960, 25ff.) Compare *Works of Lucian of Samosata*: *Dialogues of the Dead*, chapter 17 (The University of Adelaide Library University of Adelaide. South Australia 5005). Also see Rashi’s gloss to b.Sanhedrin44b whose shortened account makes no mention of the ostentatiously fasting woman. While this Hebrew source seems remotely dependent on the Aramaic y.Sanhedrin6:6 (with glaring omissions), the commentator makes no mention of the source of his information. The Yerushalmi passage drew the attention of Saul Lieberman, “On Sins and Their Punishment,” in Saul Lieberman, *Texts and Studies*. (New York: Ktav, 1974), 33–35.
3. If the son of Yossi Ha-Galilee is meant then the proper reading is Eliezer (and perhaps so) and he is a *tanna* (c. 140 C.E.) but I suspect this text is referring to an Eretz-Yisrael *amora*. He and Yossi ben Hanina (c. 260 C.E.) appear in j. Kiddushin (end 1:9) in a discussion of how sins are weighed to enter the World to Come.
4. *Qorban Edah* commentary to j.Sanhedrin 6:6 renders “by the lines of her hairs.”
5. Rabbi Shimshon, author of Tashbetz, seems to have a fuller textual reading here “the fire of Gehenna would go out from one of her ears to the other.” Instead of her private fast purifying her from misdeeds, the sins of the general public, who now enter hell, are now contributing to her sufferings. She herself opened this door by making her fast public.
6. For consideration that the reading of the Hagigah text primary, see Saul Lieberman, “On the New fragments of the Palestinian Talmud,” *Tarbits* 46 (1977): 91–96. Of course, here too like in the Yerushalmi text (Hagigah 2:2/Sanhedrin 6:6) the point is that one is fasting voluntarily when others are not.
7. Jastrow (*s.v. QZZ,* strike a balance/ mark down) thinks it means she would count one day’s fasting as two.
8. One is tempted, by association, to draw a line connecting Miriam to the pharisaic-ascetic woman of m. Sotah 3:4.
9. Here *sha’ah* does not mean an hour but a fraction of an hour.
10. לִטֹּל אֶת הַשֵּׁם—that is, the reputation of the extremely devout.
11. See b.Ta’anit 10b and j.Ta’anit which 2:9 cite tannaitic statements concerning those who would make themselves as the “Worthies” (*Yeḥidim*), in an attempt at garnering praise. Rabbenu Hannanel and Rabbi Menahem Meiri phrase this as*yohara* (obnoxious boasting) and Rashi, using a term that is shade worse, *gas ruaḥ*, “haughty in spirit.”
12. Such trespass was ruled legal by the rabbis although it did infringe on the owner’s property.
13. Literally: who points out himself by a finger.
14. Here both the ascetic and the scholar are specified.
15. This is noted by R. Moses Margolies in his commentary (*Pnei Moshe*) on this story.
16. The work is often referred to as the Tashbetz Qattan, “The Small Tashbetz” to distinguish it from the more famous and larger Tashbetz by Shimon bar Tzemah (1361–1444), even though this work post-dates the smaller and more obscure text by over a century. The Tashbetz Qattan has many textual versions, and not all of them include this story. For a discussion of why the Tashbetz has such a complex textual history, see Shmuel Menachem Mendel Schneerson’s introduction to his new (quasi-critical) edition to the text ספר תשב"ץ קטן published by Machon Torah she-be-khtav. Schneerson’s edition, based on MS London 130/20 [National Library 46420] does not contain this passage, but it appears in the first printing, Cremona, which is the basis for the quote above.
17. Here again the wording (“one who fasts”) and context suggests voluntary rather than statutory fasting.
18. Text here must intend just private, voluntary fast days which require only not eating, unlike public ones (see Lieberman’s edition of *Tosefta Taʿanit*2:4) kept in Second Temple times by Pharisees and some others (Mt 15:14) which could involve not washing and not anointing (even to this day like 9 Ab 5th month and 10 Tishrei 7th month both given in Zech 18:19 and explained in b.Rosh Hashanah 18b) where all fasted.

Κατά Μαθθαίον 6:16Ὅταν δὲ νηστεύητε, μὴ γίνεσθε ὡς οἱ ὑποκριταὶ σκυθρωποί, ἀφανίζουσιν γὰρ τὰ πρόσωπα αὐτῶν ὅπως φανῶσιν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις νηστεύοντες· ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, ἀπέχουσιν τὸν μισθὸν αὐτῶν. 6:17σὺ δὲ νηστεύων ἄλειψαί σου τὴν κεφαλὴν καὶ τὸ πρόσωπόν σου νίψαι, 6:18ὅπως μὴ φανῇς τοῖς ἀνθρώποις νηστεύων ἀλλὰ τῷ πατρί σου τῷ ἐν τῷ κρυφαίῳ· καὶ ὁ πατήρ σου ὁ βλέπων ἐν τῷ κρυφαίῳ ἀποδώσει σοι.

The rhetoric follows a set form established in Mt 5: vv. 2–4, 5–6), namely, “Do X privately and do not do it for publicity.”

1. Holger Zellentin, “Rabbi Lazarus and the Rich Man: A Talmudic Parody of the Christian Hell (j. Hagigah 2.2, 77d and j. Sanhedrin 6.9, 23c)” in *Knowledge of Religion as Profanation*, ed., Asaph Ben-Tov and Martin Mulsow (New York, London: Springer Publishing Company, 2019), 24, has already noted this affinity of Matthew to the Yerushalmi. Indeed, it is well established that New Testament insistence on privacy in Charity (Matt. 6: 3-4), Prayer (Matt. 6: 5-6), Fasting (Matt. 6: 16-18) shares much in common with Talmudic sources recorded much later than the Christian document. See discussion in, Herbert Basser, *The Mind Behind the Gospels: A Commentary to Mathew, ch. 1–14* (Brighton: Academic Studies Press, 2009), 169–182.
2. Editor’s note: See discussion in Flora Brooke Anthony, [“The Magicians Khamwaset and Meryra,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-magicians-khamwaset-and-meryra) *TheTorah* (2017).
3. The idea of weighing positive and negative deeds is common to Egyptian and Jewish texts (*Test. Of Abraham*). The idea of a huge portal is also found here. Weighing souls was also common in Greek sources (i.e. *psychostasia*).
4. English from Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature 3: The Late Period* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980), 140–141. See Yalkut Shim‘oni (Torah: *Vayelekh*) 940 for a parallel to this image of a pivot in the eye. Note the discussions of our Yerushalmi passage as based on its approximate Demotic antecedent in Hugo Gressmann, *Vom reichen Mann und armen Lazarus. Eine literargeschichtliche Studie* (Abhandlungen der Königlich preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften: Philosophisch-historische Klasse, 1918), 3-89, and the proposed Hellenistic antecedents (contrary to Gressman) in Martha Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell*: *An Apocalyptic Form in Jewish and Christian* Literature, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1983), 81. For proposed parallels in tales by “Christian Desert Fathers,” see Jean-Claude Guy, *Les Apophtegmes des pères*: *collection systématique* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2005), 96-105 (18.45). Holger M. Zellenten [“Rabbi Lazarus and the rich man”, above n. 12] argues the Talmudic details derive from the works of Christian Desert Fathers.
5. Such stories must have been passed on by word of mouth in antiquity and eventually were told in Jewish pietistic circles in Judea and Galilee as part of their “tales of afterlife” lore. That Greco-Egyptian magic was part of a Western mystical complex including late-antique Jewish Palestine see for example, Gideon Bohak, “The Jewish Magical Tradition from Late Antique Palestine to the Cairo Genizah,” in *From Hellenism to Islam: Cultural and Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East,*eds., Hannah M. Cotton, Robert G. Hoyland, Jonathan J. Price and David J. Wasserstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 324-339.

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