Does the Torah Prohibit Male Masturbation?

Onan son of Judah “would let [his seed] go to waste on the ground, so as not to provide offspring for his brother. This was wicked in the eyes of YHWH, who killed him” (Genesis 38:9–10). What was Onan’s sin?

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In his halakhic compendium *Kitzur Shulchan Arukh*, R. Shlomo Ganzfried (1804–1886) describes the terrible sin of wasting male seed:

קיצור שלחן ערוך קנא אָסוּר לְהוֹצִיא זֶרַע לְבַטָלָה. וְעָוֹן זֶה חָמוּר מִכָּל עֲבֵרוֹת שֶׁבַּתּוֹרָה.

Kitzur Shulchan Arukh 151 It is prohibited [for men] to spill their seed in vain. And this is a graver sin than any other transgression in the Torah.[1]

וְאֵלּוּ שֶׁמְּנָאֲפִים בַּיָּד וּמוֹצִיאִים זֶרַע לְבַטָּלָה, לֹא דַי לָהֶם שֶׁאִסּוּר גָּדוֹל הוּא, אֶלָּא שֶהָעוֹשֶׂה זֹאת, הוּא בְנִדּוּי, וַעֲלֵיהֶם נֶאֱמַר, יְדֵיכֶם דָּמִים מָלֵאוּ, וּכְאִילּוּ הוֹרֵג אֶת הַנֶּפֶשׁ.

Those who masturbate (lit. “fornicate with the hand”) and spill their seed in vain, not only do they violate a serious transgression, but also one who does this is placed under a ban. Regarding such people, it is said (Isa 1:15), “Your hands are full of blood,” and it is akin to killing a person.[2]

Ganzfried then connects this sin with the biblical story of Er and Onan, in which Onan spills his seed:

וּרְאֵה מַה שֶּכָּתַב רַֹשִ"י בְּפָרָשַת וַיֵֹשֶב בְּעֵר וְאוֹנָן שֶׁמֵּתוּ בְּחֵטְא זֶה.

See what Rashi wrote in *Parashat Vayeshev*[3] concerning Er and Onan, who died because of committing this sin.[4]

וְלִפְעָמִים בְּעֹנֶשׁ זֶה, חַס וְשָׁלוֹם, בָּנָיו מֵתִים כְּשֶׁהֵם קְטַנִים, אוֹ שֶׁיִהְיוּ רְשָׁעִים, וְהוּא בָא לִידֵי עֲנִיוּת.

Sometimes, as a punishment—God forbid—one’s children die when they are young, or grow up to be wicked, while the sinner ends up living in poverty.

Onanism

Jewish sources are not unique in connecting the story of Onan with masturbation. Indeed, in 1716, a new term “onanism” was coined to describe the sinful act in a pamphlet with the title: *Onania, or the Heinous Sin of Self-Pollution, and All Its Frightful Consequences, in Both Sexes, Considered. With Spiritual and Physical Advice for Those Who Have Already Injur’d Themselves by This Abominable Practice.* The pamphlet was republished multiple times and led to several spin-off books.[5]

And yet, while Jewish and Christian sources connect the biblical story of Onan with the sin of spilling seed, this has little to do with the simple meaning of the biblical account.

The Death of Er and Onan

Judah’s eldest son Er dies shortly after his marriage (Gen 38:6–7), without an heir. The ancient Israelite practice of levirate marriage (*yibbum*) required his brother, Onan, to marry his widow and to have a child that would carry on Er’s name.[6]

בראשית לח:ח וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה לְאוֹנָן בֹּא אֶל אֵשֶׁת אָחִיךָ וְיַבֵּם אֹתָהּ וְהָקֵם זֶרַע לְאָחִיךָ.

Gen 38:8 Then Judah said to Onan, “Join with your brother’s wife and do your duty by her as a brother-in-law, and provide offspring for your brother.”

Onan, however, objects to performing this service for his deceased brother, and thus engages in *coitus interruptus*:

בראשית לח:ט וַיֵּדַע אוֹנָן כִּי לֹּא לוֹ יִהְיֶה הַזָּרַע וְהָיָה אִם בָּא אֶל אֵשֶׁת אָחִיו וְשִׁחֵת אַרְצָה לְבִלְתִּי נְתָן זֶרַע לְאָחִיו. לח:י וַיֵּרַע בְּעֵינֵי יְ־הוָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וַיָּמֶת גַּם אֹתוֹ.

Gen 38:9 But Onan, knowing that the offspring would not count as his, whenever he lay with his brother’s wife, he would let [his seed] go to waste on the ground, so as not to provide offspring for his brother. 38:10 This was wicked in the eyes of YHWH, who took his life also.[7]

This is the only text in the Bible to discuss spilling seed, and even here, Onan’s sin is not the spilling of his seed per se, but his selfish unwillingness to have a child that “would not count as his.” This crime against his deceased brother, and against his family, leads YHWH to take his life.[8]

Second Temple Sources

The few Second Temple sources that speak about this story do not understand Onan’s sin as spilling seed either, but follow the simple meaning of the text, that he violated his familial obligation to produce an heir for his deceased brother.

Jubilees: Er and Onan Never Had Sex with Tamar

The 2nd century B.C.E. book of Jubilees retells the story of Er and Onan, describing Tamar as an Aramean woman—the Torah never gives her ethnic origin—and claims that Er hated her so much that he never slept with her:

Jub 41:1 In the forty-fifth jubilee, the second week during the second year [2165], Judah took as a wife for his first-born Er one of the Aramean women whose name was Tamar. 41:2 He hated (her) and did not lie with her because his mother was a Canaanite woman and he wanted to marry someone from his mother’s tribe. But his father Judah did not allow him. 41:3 That Er, Judah’s first-born, was evil and the Lord killed him.[9]

Jubilees continues with the account of Onan’s sin and punishment, changing his act from *coitus interruptus* to masturbation by saying that Onan entered “Tamar’s house” as opposed to Tamar:

Jub 41:4 Then Judah said to his brother Onan: “Go in to your brother’s wife, perform the levirate duty for her, and produce descendants for your brother.” 41:5 Onan knew that the descendants would not be his but his brother’s, so **he entered the house of** his brother’s wife and poured out the semen on the ground. In the Lord’s estimation, it was an evil act, and he killed him.[10]

Recasting Onan’s act as masturbation is not about making his behavior more sinful but—as Cana Werman of Ben Gurion University notes in her commentary (*ad loc*.)—to avoid the possibility that Judah would have sex with a woman that his sons had slept with, which is forbidden in the Torah.[11] Indeed, Werman notes, this is why Jubilees also adds the detail that Er hated Tamar and never slept with her.

Philo: Onan the Selfish

In his *On the Posterity of Cain and His Exile* (*De Posteritate Caini*) Philo, the Jewish philosopher in Alexandria (ca. 25 B.C.E.–ca. 50 C.E.) uses Onan as a paradigmatic example of someone who pursues only his one pleasure:

The chief representative of this doctrine is Onan, kinsman of the “leathery”[12] Er. For it says that this man “knowing that the offspring would not count as his, let [his seed] go to waste whenever he joined with his brother’s wife, so as not to provide offspring for his brother” (Gen 38:9), going beyond all bounds in love of self and love of pleasure.[13]

Philo continues by envisioning a lecture he would love to deliver to Onan if he could:

I should therefore address him thus: “Will you not”—so I would say to him—“by providing only your individual profit, be doing away with all the best things in the world, unless you are to get some advantage from them, honor paid to parents, loving care of a wife, bringing up of children, happy and blameless relations with domestic servants, management of a house, leadership in a city, maintaining of laws, guardianship of usages, reverence towards elders, respect for the memory of the departed, fellowship with the living, piety in words and actions towards the Deity?

For you are overturning and wasting all these, **by breeding and nursing for yourself pleasure,** the glutton and libertine, in whom all evil things have their origin.”

Philo does not condemn Onan for the non-procreative (or “wasteful”) emission of semen. Instead, it is the fact that Onan allows himself to enjoy being with his brother’s widow while spurning the familiar requirement to produce an heir for his deceased brother that Philo deems selfish.

Rabbinic Literature: The Sin of Er and Onan

In rabbinic texts, Onan’s sin is still understood as a refusal to produce an heir for his brother. Thus, Genesis Rabbah[14] (§85) glosses the verse with:

יהודה התחיל ביבום.... וידע אונן וגו' דש מבפנים וזורה מבחוץ וימת גם אותו.

Judah established the practice of levirate marriage… “and Onan knew etc.”, so he threshed inside and spread his seed on the outside, “and [God] killed him as well.”

Nevertheless, the rabbis extend the problem of “spilling seed” to birth control in general, by claiming that Er, Onan’s older brother, also refused to get Tamar pregnant.[15] The Torah never explains why YHWH finds Er to be bad and kills him:

בראשית לח:ו וַיִּקַּח יְהוּדָה אִשָּׁה לְעֵר בְּכוֹרוֹ וּשְׁמָהּ תָּמָר. לח:ז וַיְהִי עֵר בְּכוֹר יְהוּדָה רַע בְּעֵינֵי יְ־הוָה וַיְמִתֵהוּ יְ־הוָה.

Gen 38:6 Judah got a wife for Er his first-born; her name was Tamar. 38:7 But Er, Judah’s first-born, was displeasing to YHWH, and YHWH took his life.[16]

Genesis Rabbah (§85), however, explains that Er avoided having vaginal sex with Tamar, using the euphemism שהיה חורש בגגות “he would plow on the roofs.”

*Midrash HaGadol*, a 14th century collection of older midrashim, put together by the Yemenite sage, Rabbi David Adani, explains that Er did not want to get Tamar pregnant because she was beautiful (gloss on Gen 38:6):

אמרו תמר בת שם בן נח היתה והיתה נאה ביותר וכיון שנטלה ער אמר עכשו היא יולדת והיא מתכערת. מה עשה, היה מניח השדה וחורש בגגות. לשון נקי.

They said that Tamar was the daughter of Shem son of Noah,[17] and that she was exceedingly beautiful. Once Er married her, he said (to himself): “Now she will give birth and become unattractive.” What did he do? He abandoned the field and plowed on the roof—this is a euphemism.[18]

ועליו הוא אומר ואץ ברגלים חוטא (משלי יט, ב).

Regarding him it is said (Prov 19:2): “One who makes haste in the legs is a sinner.”[19]

The sin here is not the act spilling his seed in acts of non-penetrative sex, but refusing to get her pregnant.

Jerusalem Talmud: Filling Up and Pouring into Trash

Mishnah Ketubot 7:5 states that if a man forces his wife שֶׁתְּהֵא מְמַלְּאָה וּמְעָרָה לָאַשְׁפָּה “to fill up and pour into the trash,” she can demand a divorce and collect her ketubah payment. The Jerusalem Talmud (*ad loc*.) glosses this phrase:

תמן אמרין כגון מעשה ער ורבנין דהכא אמרין דברים של בטלה

There (in Babylonia) they say: “akin to the act of Er,” while the rabbis here (Palestine) say [he forces her to perform] “frivolous activities.”

In his *Korban HaEdah* commentary (ad loc.), Rabbi David Fränkel (1704–1762) explains the position of the Babylonian sages:

אף זה אומר לה לאחר שתשמש וימלא רחמה שכבת זרע תרוץ ברגליה ותנפצנו כדי שלא תקלוט הזרע ותתעבר

Similarly, her husband tells her after sex, when her womb is filled with semen, she should run around with her legs and scatter it, so that the semen does not take hold and she does not become pregnant.[20]

Again, the problem is Er is refusing to get his wife pregnant.

The Babylonian Talmud: Is Coitus Interruptus a Sin Per Se?

The Babylonian Talmud (Yebamot 34a–b) has a sustained discussion of the sin of Er and Onan, in a passage about whether a woman can become pregnant by her first act of intercourse.[21] Rav Nachman believes it is impossible, leading his student, Rava, to use Tamar as an example of such a woman, to prove that it is possible:

בבלי יבמות לד.–לד: אמר] ל[יה] רבא לרב נחמן: "והא תמר בביאה ראשונה איעבר?!"

b. Yeb 34a–34b Rava said to Rav Nachman: “But didn’t Tamar get pregnant from her first act of sex?”[22]

The Talmud predictably challenges the assertion that this was Tamar’s first time, she had been married to Er and then Onan:

והא הוו ער ואונן?

But wasn’t there Er and Onan?

שלא כדרכה שימשו.

They had non-vaginal (or anal) sex with her.[23]

This leads to a discussion of what makes this a sin.

The Talmud quotes a *baraita*[24] that while a man’s wife is nursing, he should only have non-procreative sex with her to ensure that she not get pregnant and thus cut off the milk supply to the nursing baby:

מתיבי: "כל עשרים וארבעה חדש דש מבפנים וזורה מבחוץ"—דברי ר' אליעזר. אמרו לו: "הללו אינן אלא כמעשה ער ואונן."

They brought this contradictory passage: “All 24 months [of nursing], he should thresh inside and spill outside”—these are the words of Rabbi Eliezer. [The Sages] said to him: “But this is the act of Er and Onan.”

Clearly, Rabbi Eliezer does not see the story of Onan as a precedent forbidding coitus interruptus, but the Sages do.[25] Yet, the final line of the *sugyah* implies that the real sin is not spilling seed but a man refusing to impregnate his wife:

בשלמ[א] א[ו]נן משום לא לו יהיה הזרע, אלא ער מאי טעמ[א] עבד הכי?

It makes sense that Onan did this, since he knew that the child would not be his, but Er, for what reason did he did it?

סבר שמא תתעבר ויכחיש יפיה.

He was worried lest she get pregnant and ruin her beauty.

Thus, even here, we do not yet a clear argument for the sinfulness of spilling seed per se, though by forbidding coitus interruptus even with nursing mothers it comes very close.

Masturbation: Onan and the Cause of the Flood

Kallah Rabbati (4th cent. Babylonia)[26] makes a literary connection between Onan’s sin and the sin of the flood generation:

כלה רבתי ב:ז תאנא: דור המבול כלן מוציאין שכבת זרע לבטלה היו.

Kallah Rabbati 2:7It was taught: The generation of flood would all spill their seed in vain.

The reason given for this behavior is based on their desire to avoid having children:

הוו בהו אצטגניני, אמרי עלמא לא פחות משיתא אלפי שנין, לא נוליד, ואנן נחיה לעלמא כוליה, אמר להם הקדוש ברוך הוא, שמתם עצמכם עיקר, הריני עוקר שמיכם שלא תעלו בחשבון עולם.

They had astrologers among them who said “The world will last no less than 6,000 years. If we do not procreate, we will live for the entire span of the universe.” The Holy One, blessed be He said to them: “You imagine yourselves as the main (*ʿiqar*) thing. I will uproot (*ʿoqer*) your heavens so you will not be able to tell the age of the world.”

The text then offers the midrashic proof:

מנא הני מילי, דכתיב באונן (בראשית לח:ט) "והיה אם בא אל אשת אחיו **ושחת ארצה**", שהיה מחמם את עצמו ומוציא שכבת זרע לבטלה, וכתיב בדור המבול (בראשית ו:יב) "כי **השחית** כל בשר את דרכו **על הארץ**."

From where do we know this? For it says regarding Onan (Gen 38:9) whenever he lay with his brother’s wife, he would let [the semen] go to waste on the ground,” meaning he would arouse himself and spill his seed on the ground. And it says regarding the flood generation (Gen 6:12) “for all flesh wasted his way upon the ground.”

The midrash here builds on the similar expressions (in bold), and sees this sin as the cause of the flood.[27] This literary connection may also be behind Rabbi Eliezer’s (2nd cent. C.E.) enigmatic statement, recorded in the Babylonian Talmud:

בבלי נדה יג. רבי אליעזר אומר: "כל האוחז באמה ומשתין כאילו מביא מבול לעולם."

b. Niddah 13a Rabbi Eliezer says: “Anyone who holds his penis when he urinates, it is as if he brings a flood to the world.”

The statement is glossed by a 3rd century C.E. Galilean Amora later in the same passage:

בבלי נדה יג וכל כך למה? מפני שמוציא שכבת זרע לבטלה, דאמר רבי יוחנן: "כל המוציא שכבת זרע לבטלה חייב מיתה, שנ[אמר]: 'וירע בעיני ה' אשר עשה וימת גם אותו'".

b. Niddah 13a Why so severe? Because he will spill his seed in vain, as Rabbi Yohanan said: “Whoever spills his seed in vain deserves to die, as it says (Gen 38:10) ‘What he (Onan) did was wicked in the eyes of God, and He killed him as well.’”

Here we have a clear condemnation of seed spilling per se, including masturbation.[28]

Zoroastrian Influence?

The Babylonian Talmud and (the Babylonian) *Kallah Rabbati*’s emphasis reflects an *a priori* strong aversion to the waste of semen that makes sense in the cultural context of Zoroastrian Persia, which imputed demonic powers to semen, seeing it as a dangerous fluid that must be controlled (as echoed in b. Eruvin 18b).[29] For example, in the Vendidad, a Zoroastrian text from the rabbinic period, we read:

Vendidad 8:27 O Maker of the material world, though Holy One! If a man voluntarily emits his seed, what is the penalty for it? What is the atonement for it? What is the cleansing from it? Ahura Mazda answered: “For that deed, there is nothing that can pay, nothing that can atone, nothing that can cleanse from it; it is a trespass for which there is no atonement, for ever and ever.”

To be clear, the sources quoted in Kallah Rabbati and the Babylonian Talmud are said to be from sages in Roman Palestine. It is possible, of course, that the attribution is in error or fictive, but even if the attribution is accurate, it is significant that these readings survived only in Babylonian texts, not Palestinian texts, implying that they struck a chord in the former context as opposed to the latter.

Not a Biblical Problem

The concern over spilling seed become codified in medieval halakhic literature, and are expanded upon in kabbalistic literature, which, as quoted above in the *Kitzur Shulchan* *Arukh* sees the spilling of seed as the gravest of sins. And yet, this claim has no basis in the biblical story of Onan or any other biblical account.

In the Bible, Er’s sin is never mentioned, and Onan’s sin is his refusal to produce an heir for his deceased brother. Given that, a more accurate definition of “onanism” would be “marrying your brother’s widow but refusing to procreate with her,” but this would likely have less cachet than the 18th century attempt to connect the biblical story with the “heinous sin of self-pollution, and all its frightful consequences.”[30]

[View Footnotes](https://www.thetorah.com/article/does-the-torah-prohibit-male-masturbation)

1. The term “spilling seed” refers to multiple acts of non-procreative sex, not just masturbation (which Ganzfried will take up next). The point is clearer in the Shulchan Arukh, which separates spilling seed and masturbation into two different *seʿifim* (paragraphs), and offers a very different set of examples for the first:

שלחן ערוך אבן העזר כג:א אסור להוציא שכבת זרע לבטלה ועון זה חמור מכל עבירות שבתורה. לפיכך לא יהיה אדם דש מבפנים וזורה מבחוץ, ולא ישא קטנה שאינה ראויה לילד.

Shulchan Arukh EH 23:1 It is prohibited [for men] to spill their seed in vain. And this is a graver sin than any other transgression in the Torah. Therefore, a man may not thresh inside and sow outside (i.e., perform *coitus interruptus*), nor may he marry a prepubescent girl who cannot yet have children.

1. This too is directly from the *Shulchan Arukh*:

שלחן ערוך אבן העזר כג:ב אלו שמנאפים ביד ומוציאים שכבת זרע, לא די להם שאיסור גדול הוא, אלא שהעושה זה בנידוי הוא יושב ועליהם נאמר (ישעיה א:טו): "ידיכם דמים מלאו" וכאלו הרג הנפש.

Shulchan Arukh EH 23:2 Those who masturbate (lit. “fornicate with their hand”) and spill their seed, not only do they violate a serious transgression, but also one who does this is placed under a ban. Regarding such people, it is said (Isa 1:15), “Your hands are full of blood,” it is akin to killing a person.

1. The weekly Torah portion, which covers Genesis 37–40.
2. I discuss below how Er is connected to this.
3. Important examples are as Edmund Curll’s *Onanism Display’d*, and most famously, the Swiss Physician Samuel Tissot’s, *Onanisme, dissertation sur les maladies produites par la masturbatio* (*Onanism: A Dissertation on the Diseases Produced by Masturbation*).
4. Editor’s note: For discussion of this story in the context of the yibbum law, see Pamela Barmash, [“Tamar’s Extraordinary Risk: A Narrative—not a Law—of Yibbum,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/tamars-extraordinary-risk-a-narrative-not-a-law-of-yibbum) *TheTorah* (2016).
5. The practice of levirate marriage (or a mangled version thereof) appears as well in the book of Ruth (1:15; 3:13; 4:5, 10) and it is codified as law in Deuteronomy 25. While the latter includes a right of refusal for the brother, it is accompanied by a humiliation ritual called *ḥalitzah*:

דברים כה:ט וְנִגְּשָׁה יְבִמְתּוֹ אֵלָיו לְעֵינֵי הַזְּקֵנִים וְחָלְצָה נַעֲלוֹ מֵעַל רַגְלוֹ וְיָרְקָה בְּפָנָיו וְעָנְתָה וְאָמְרָה כָּכָה יֵעָשֶׂה לָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִבְנֶה אֶת בֵּית אָחִיו. ט:י וְנִקְרָא שְׁמוֹ בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל בֵּית חֲלוּץ הַנָּעַל.

Deut 25:9 His brother’s widow shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, pull the sandal off his foot, spit in his face, and make this declaration: “Thus shall be done to the man\* who will not build up his brother’s house!” 25:10 And he shall go in Israel by the name of “the family of the unsandaled one.”

Clearly, the text is unsympathetic to the brother who refuses to do his duty by his family and produce an heir for his deceased brother. This does not mean there were never good reasons for refusal: the brother might already have a wife or two whom he struggled to support, for example, or he may already be married to the widow’s sister or mother. Later, as Israel became more urbanized and the ramifications of refusal were lessened, and the *ḥalitzah* ritual become more common than levirate marriage. By the time of the rabbis, *ḥalitzah* had become the standard, as it remains until today in religious circles. For a discussion of this shift, see Dvora E. Weisberg, *Levirate Marriage and the Family in Ancient Judaism* (Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press / University Press of New England, 2009).

1. The biblical text does not seem especially concerned with Onan’s sin. Indeed, his death, like that of his older brother Er, is merely a plot device in the more extensive and important story of Judah’s relationship with his daughter-in-law Tamar. After their deaths, the two characters disappear from view, though perhaps the reader is meant to think of them again when Judah produces twin sons with Tamar, each replacing one of their half-brothers whose deaths brought about their conception. Second Temple literature is also not especially interested in Onan and his sin. Neither the Greek translation of the account in the Septuagint nor the Aramaic translations (*targumim*) embellish the biblical account. Josephus completely ignores the story in *Antiquities*.
2. Translation from James C. Vanderkam, *The Book of Jubilees*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalum 511; Scriptore Aethiopici 88 (Leuven: Peeters, 1989), 267.
3. A similar interpretation can be found in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, in the Testimony of Judah, except that here, the author ends up with Onan doing both things, first abstinence and then *coitus interruptus*:

Testament of Judah 10:1 After these things my son Er married Tamar from Mesopotamia, the daughter of Aram. 10:2 But Er was wicked, and he was displeased with Tamar, since she was not from the land of Canaan. And an Angel of the Lord killed him on the third night [after their marriage]. 10:3 He never had had relations with her, because of his unscrupulous mother, since [s]he did not want [him] to have any children from her. 10:4 During the days of the wedding feast, I gave her to Onan in levirate marriage. But he purposefully did not have relations with her for a [whole] year. 10:5 And when I reproved him, he did lie with her, but he destroyed the seed on the ground, in keeping with his mother’s command; and he likewise died because of his wickedness.

Translation from James L. Kugel, “Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs,” in *Outside the Bible: Ancient Jewish Writings Related to Scripture*, ed. Louis H. Feldman, James L. Kugel, and Lawrence H. Schiffman (Philadelphia: JPS, 2013), 2.1697–1855 [1755–1756].

1. See Cana Werman, ספר היובלים: מבוא, תרגום, ופרוש [*The Book of Jubilees: Introduction, Translation, and Interpretation*], בין מקרא למשנה [Between Bible and Mishnah] (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi, 2015) 492.
2. This is a play on his name, ער, which Philo is associating with Hebrew עור, “skin” or “leather.” The etymology appears in his *Allegories*(3:69) as well, and is meant to connect the correct allegorically with the material world. See commentary of Yehoshua Amir in, כתבי פילון האלכסנדרוני [*The Writings of Philo of Alexandria*], ed. Susan Daniel-Nataf, volume 4, ed. Yehoshua Amir (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1997), 318 [n. 204].
3. Translation (with adjustments) from Francis H. Colson and George H. Whitaker, trans., *Philo II*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1929), 2.435, 437.
4. It was composed in Roman Palestine in the early to mid-1st millennium C.E.
5. The Babylonian Talmud gives a midrashic prooftext for this:

בבלי יבמות לד: בשלמ[א] אונן כתי[ב] "ושחת ארצה", ער מנלן?

b. Yeb 34b It makes sense to mention Onan, for it says, “he spilled [his seed] on the ground.” From where do we know that Er did so?

אמ[ר] רב נחמן בר יצחק: "אמ[ר] קרא: 'וימת **גם** אותו'—גם הוא באותה מיתה מת."

Rav Nachman bar Isaac said: “Scripture states ‘and [God] killed him **also**.’—He also died the same death (i.e., for the same reason).”

1. The name ער Er is the Hebrew word רע “bad” backwards. If anything, his character merely sets up the next part of the story, since Onan needs a deceased brother to refuse to perform levirate marriage.
2. Tamar’s lineage is never stated in the Torah, and the suggestion that she is the daughter of Shem goes back to Genesis Rabbah (§85):

אפרים מקשאה תלמיד ר' מאיר מש' ר' מאיר: תמר בת שם היית דכת' (ויקרא כא:ט) וּבַת אִישׁ כֹּהֵן כִּי תֵחֵל לִזְנוֹת [אֶת אָבִיהָ הִיא מְחַלֶּלֶת בָּאֵשׁ תִּשָּׂרֵף], (בראשית לח:כד) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה הוֹצִיאוּהָ וְתִשָּׂרֵף.

Ephraim Maksha’ah, a student of Rabbi Meir, said in the name of Rabbi Meir: “Tamar was the daughter of Shem, as it says (Lev 21:9) ‘When the daughter of a priest defiles herself through harlotry, [it is her father whom she defiles; she shall be put to the fire]. (Gen 38:24) ‘And Judah said: “Bring her out; she should be burned!”’”

Rabbi Meir’s reading is based on two midrashic connections: 1. Judah wishes to have Tamar burned, which is the punishment for a daughter of a priest who fornicates (Lev 21:9). 2. The rabbis understand that Melchizedek, King of Shalem, who was “the priest of the Most High God” (Gen 14:18) was himself Shem.

1. This phrase, explaining that the midrashic term is a euphemism, is ostensibly not from the original midrash but is R. Adani’s gloss.
2. The simple meaning of the verse is “He who moves hurriedly blunders” (NJPS). Yet, the rabbis understand this phrase as referring to all sorts of sins or inappropriate behaviors: stepping on grass on Shabbat (b. Eruvin 100b); raping one’s wife (*ibid*.); having sex twice in a row (*ibid*.); having sex when his wife generally gets her period (Lev Rab 4:3); buying meat from the non-kosher butcher, next door to the kosher one (*ibid*.); walking on a bumpy road on Shabbat when one could walk on a nice one (*ibid*.); a general description of purposeful sins (*ibid*.).
3. This is more or less a word for word quoting of Rashi, in his gloss on a similar passage in the Babylonian Talmud (b. Ketubot 72a).
4. The claim is that the hymen would block the passage of the sperm.
5. Rav Nachman accepts that it was her first sex act, and answers Rava based on a technicality:

בבלי יבמות לד: א[מר] ל[יה]: "תמר באצבעה מיעיכה, דא"ר יצחק: 'כל מעוכות של בית ר' תמר שמן. למה נקר[א] שמן תמר? על שם תמר שמיעיכה באצבעה.'"

b. Yeb 34b [Rav Nachman] said to him: “Tamar broke [her hymen] with her finger, for Rav Isaac said: ‘All the girls in Rabbi’s household who broke their hymens were nicknamed Tamar. And why were they called “Tamars”? Because of Tamar who broke [her hymen] with her finger.

1. In in rabbinic literature, לא כדרכה sometimes seems to be a general reference to non-vaginal sex, literally “not the usual way.” Other times, however, it is a technical term for anal sex (which the rabbis counted as “real” sex), and is distinguished from non-penetrative (presumably including oral) sex, which is covered by the term דרך אברים (and is not “real” sex in rabbinic thinking). In medieval halakhic literature, לא כדרכה is always anal sex. For discussion of this term, see Michael L. Satlow, *Tasting the Dish: Rabbinic Rhetorics of Sexuality*, Brown Judaica Studies 303 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 2020; repr. of 1995), 238–239.
2. A Tannaitic source outside the Mishnah
3. The Talmud then reinterprets their position:

כמעשה ער ואונן ולא כמעשה ער ואונן, כמעשה ער ואונן דכתי' "ושחת ארצה" ולא כמעשה ער ואונן דאילו התם שלא כדרכה הכא כדרכה.

“This is like the act of Er and Onan” but it is not identical to the act of Er and Onan. It is like the action of Er and Onan, since it says “he spilled [his seed] on the ground,” but it is not like the act of Er and Onan, since they had non-vaginal sex, but here [Rabbi Eliezer] is talking about having vaginal sex [with withdrawalas the birth control remedy].

We see from here that this Talmudic passage equates all forms of seed-spilling, which, according to the Sages, is sinful.

1. The first two chapters of this work date to the Amoraic period, and are distinct from the last seven chapters, which are hundreds of years later, from the Geonic Period. See discussion in “Chapter 6: KR 1–2: An Introduction,” in David Brodsky, *A Bride without a Blessing A Study in the Redaction and Content of Massekhet Kallah and Its Gemara*, Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 118 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 179–225.
2. I discuss this text because it connects the spilling seed with Onan. That said, it is only one of many such texts in Kallah Rabbati that excoriate this “sin” with all kinds of terrible things, with very similar rhetoric as we find in the Babylonian Talmud, as they share a cultural context.
3. This is different in emphasis to the Mishnah’s curse on men who practice self-arousal:

משנה נדה ב:א כָּל הַיָּד הַמַּרְבָּה לִבְדוֹק, בַּנָּשִׁים, מְשֻׁבַּחַת, וּבָאֲנָשִׁים, תִּקָּצֵץ.

b. Niddah 2:1 Any hand that checks (for genital emissions): If it is a woman checking herself (for blood), it is blessed, if it is a man’s (checking his penis for emissions), it should be chopped off.

The Mishnah’s condemnation of men who overly handle their penis is clear, but the reason is not. As self-arousal was often condemned in the Greco-Roman world as demonstrating a lack of self-control—one of the defining characteristics of masculinity in antiquity—this may well be the concern here. Self-arousal and excessive masturbation – or more generally, excessive interest in sex – were signs of a “soft” nature. (In contrast to the frequent rabbinic portrayal of non-Jews as sexual profligates, the Roman elite in fact were rather prudish and conservative. (Musonius Rufus 12; Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1988], 132–136.) This condemnation, however, is not connected to Onan or the Bible per se, but is a self-standing condemnation that likely made intuitive sense to the audience at the time. Later, the Talmud will offer all sorts of midrashic support for this condemnation from verses all over the Bible in varying contexts. The connection to Onan is only made by those sages who explain the problem as that of wasted seed.

1. To be clear, the sources quoted in Kallah Rabbati and the Babylonian Talmud are said to be from sages in Roman Palestine. It is possible, of course, that the attribution is in error or fictive, but even if the attribution is accurate, it is significant that these readings survived only in Babylonian texts, not Palestinian texts, implying that they struck a chord in the former context as opposed to the latter.
2. Much of this piece is based on, Michael L. Satlow, “‘Wasted Seed,’ The History of a Rabbinic Idea,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 65 (1994): 137–175.