**RUPTURE, REFLECTION, AND RENEWAL: MIMESIS AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF MEANING IN LEVITICUS *RABBAH***

**Presented to the Jewish Studies Workshop**

**University of Chicago Divinity School**

**October 22, 2012**

**DRAFT FOR DISCUSSION ONLY**

In *parashat* *Tzav* of *Vayikrah* (Leviticus) *Rabbah,* the word *ke’ilu* appears four times. This is but a small sample of the uses of word *ke’ilu,* which appears in midrashic text a total of 377 times[[1]](#footnote-1), often in the context of the reframing of ritual practices[[2]](#footnote-2); nonetheless, the cluster of usages in *Tzav* reveals a key exegetical technique in the service of the rabbinic effort to restore and recenter Israelite society through a radical reinterpretation of biblical text. In *Vayikrah Rabbah, ke’ilu* helps rabbis establish a system of ritual substitution as a means of rebuilding covenantal culture. Here, the building and maintenance of the Temple and its altar, and the detailed descriptions and prescriptions of ritual sacrifice, are replaced with interiorized equivalents which, as Fishbane says, “connect the performative benefits of study with the transformative effects of sacrifices”.[[3]](#footnote-3) Taken together, the four uses of *ke’ilu* represent an example of what I will call *transformative mimetic exegesis:* a form of continuous, performative meaning-making that recalibrates the relationship between orality and textuality, and between sacred text and lived experience. The key transformation effected through transformative mimetic exegesis is the shift from what Paul Ricoeur termed “archaism” to “hermeticism,” or from fixed reference to a defining text or event, to development of a hermeneutic that continually reencounters and reinterprets that text or event. Through a literary analysis of these four uses of ke’ilu, and a hermeneutic-sociological approach to the layered text surrounding these uses, we can better appreciate how the shift from orality to textuality, and from archaism to hermeticism, helped valorize study as a primary and portable form of meaning-making for a society recovering from near-total annihilation.

Our admittedly narrow example of ritual substitution demonstrates just one of the ways in which rabbinic discourse is mimetic in its appropriation and reorientation of biblical text – in part because its very composition and redaction is a mimetic process with its own particular “structure, repetition, and . . . artful use of language.”[[4]](#footnote-4) The heart of transformative mimetic exegesis is the Ricoeurian threefold mimetic process, in which the temporal sequence of events is emplotted and made sense of via narrative, then looped back into the flow of experience via reading and interpretation. Ricoeur’s threefold mimetic theory will be defined, with help from William Schweiker, as the “prefiguration, configuration [and] refiguration of the world of action through [text].”[[5]](#footnote-5) This process “brings together life and narrative, thereby refiguring experience and rendering productive narrative emplotment.”[[6]](#footnote-6) It is, furthermore, “a dynamic activity [in which] texts are webs of signs activated in interpretation. They are performances in which we are the participants.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Michael Taussig fleshes out this definition by calling mimesis “the nature that culture uses to produce second nature, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore differences, yield into and become Other. The wonder of mimesis lies in the copy drawing on the character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and that power.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

The performative aspect of the rabbinic hermeneutic is illuminated particularly clearly through the mimetic theory of Gadamer, who sees mimesis in part as a reparative response to *Fremdheit* (strangeness or alienation), centered “around forms of social praxis through which Being comes to presentation.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Gadamer emphasizes the performative and improvisatory aspects of mimesis – that is, there is an element of *Spiel* or what Susan Handelman calls “serious play”[[10]](#footnote-10)in aggadic discourse. This discourse, I contend, is *serious* because it confronts great spiritual, theological and societal dislocation; and *play* because its performative, dialogic, and improvisatory qualities often dominate its formalism. We will rely on Schweiker’s scholarship on Gadamer and Ricoeur to guide us toward an understanding of how the rabbis, through transformative mimetic exegesis, in essence move Jewish praxis from archaism to hermeticism, and so practice what Peter Berger calls “world maintenance.”[[11]](#footnote-11) This is an urgent refiguration of text designed for world maintenance, which Berger’s sociological lens helps us perceive more clearly.

A consideration of mimesis in this context must rely on the mimetic theory of both Gadamer and Ricoeur. Gadamer’s mimetic theory, while applied primarily to the visual and performing arts, is nonetheless an essential building block for Ricoeur’s work: “Gadamer’s mimetic strategy explores the relation of Being and meaning in language. Being is self-presentative. Etched into the way things exist is a mimetic character: to bring to presentation.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Gadamer’s view of mimesis contains not only a presentative and re-presentative but a performative element *(Spiel)* which “breaks the universe of mirrors”[[13]](#footnote-13) that had previously confined mimesis to its imitative qualities. Understanding as a means of overcoming *Fremdheit* is a mimetic act – one that the rabbis pursue through the act of reading text and subjecting it to interpretive, performative dialogue. Overcoming *Fremdheit* through active engagement with text is a way to fashion meaning out of the aporias of temporality[[14]](#footnote-14), and this is the literary locus at which Ricoeur’s three-fold mimetic theory meets the rabbis’ use of *ke’ilu,* a transformative exegetical device.

Though all discourse and texts involve metaphor and narrative, they are best understood as mimetic: figurative presentations of the intersection of human temporality and being that call for interpretation.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The rabbis’ mimetic exegesis is transformative not only of the text but of the society that reinterprets and reinvents itself through textual reinterpretation. The re-centering of praxis in study and prayer must itself be considered as a mimetic transformation of the communion, gift-giving, and expiation previously achieved through sacrifice. The meaning-making possibilities found in text preserve sacrifice’s “ethos and drive”[[16]](#footnote-16) in internalized form. By pairing Peter Berger’s “dialectical process of society” (externalization, objectivation, internalization) with Ricoeur’s threefold mimetic theory, we can apprehend transformative mimetic exegesis as *world maintenance through refiguration and re-presentation* *of society by means of reinterpretation of canonical text*. *Ke’ilu* is a single and singular lever of exegetical activity as world-maintenance (perhaps even *universe-maintenance*[[17]](#footnote-17)). Berger’s theory of nomization through externalization, objectivization and internalization parallels Ricoeur’s hermeneutic ontology. Berger delineates a

fundamental dialectic process of society [that] consists of three moments, or steps. These are externalization, objectivation, and internalization . . . Externalization is the ongoing outpouring of human being into the world, both in the physical and the mental activity of men. Objectivation is the attainment by the products of this activity (again both physical and mental) of a reality that confronts its original producers as a facticity external to and other than themselves. Internalization is the reappropriation by [human beings] of this same reality, transforming it once again from the structures of the objective world into the structures of subjective consciousness.[[18]](#footnote-18)

This is mimesis described in sociological terms: the rabbis’ use of *ke’ilu* is the nomizationthrough language of the dissonance between text and experience – a nomization previously achieved through the kinetic effort and cultic choreography of sacrifice. The rabbinic “discovery” of hidden hermeneutical passageways in the interstices of canonical text is, in Ricoeur’s words, “narrative consonance imposed on temporal dissonance.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

I will conclude with thoughts about how transformative mimetic exegesis in midrash can facilitate reengagement with canonical text through multiple scholarly disciplines, including literary theory, sociology (notably hermeneutic sociology and sociology of religion) philosophy, and theology. Here, it is primarily Boyarin’s three definitions of intertextuality that will help clarify the sociological underpinnings of rabbinic discourse. Those definitions -- “that the text is always made up of a mosaic of conscious and unconscious citation of earlier discourse,” that texts may be “dialogic in nature,” and there are “cultural codes which both constrain and allow the production (not creation) of new texts within the culture”[[20]](#footnote-20) – each point to a mimetic exegetical interplay between individuals, texts, and cultural codes that transforms all three components. Therefore, although we are bound to consider their historical context, as Boyarin urges us to do, we also must heed the admonitions of Neusner and Fraenkel to avoid considering rabbinic text as purely (or merely) historical document. Indeed, our subdisciplinary cubicles tend to fracture rather than assemble a clear view of rabbinic discourse, and although a clear view may not be a comprehensive one, it is nonetheless a way in. I choose to focus on a narrow corpus of text through the lenses of hermeneutic philosophy, sociology, and literary criticism because I maintain that the rabbinic exegetical enterprise was one of *world maintenance through interpretation.* To the extent the above-referenced disciplines can aid us in understanding the relationship between and utility of mimesis and ritual substitution in this one *parsha* of aggadic midrash,to just such an extent will we more thoroughly appreciate the role of characters, narrators, writers and redactors in the mimetic shift to a hermetic culture.

**The Four Uses of *Ke’ilu* in *Tzav***

*Vayikrah Rabbah* is thought to be composed of older texts whose redaction was completed around the 5th century CE. The rabbis featured in it are from the late Tannaitic and early Amoraic periods (3rd – 5th century), a period of “remarkable flowering of exegesis which developed in various contexts and was sponsored by a variety of circles of tradition and study.”[[21]](#footnote-21) It is in this context that the kind of transformative exegesis that Fishbane points out in the canon is applied homiletically. We must remember throughout that much recent scholarship on the composition of aggadic text posits an intertextual and intergenerational compositional and redactional process. Though we cannot pause to consider this in detail, we must keep in mind that the layered literary process and the broad cultural context of these stories involves some retrojection of Stammaitic concerns and values into the earlier period represented in text, prime among them study as a mode of worship.[[22]](#footnote-22) The texts we read, then, contain a weave of voices, perspectives, and interpretive challenges, articulating or emphasizing the values and concerns of generations at various temporal removes from the caesural events that motivated the recorded dialogue. The move from a sacrificial to an exegetical culture arises in a mimetic interplay of responses to interlocking cultural concerns and contexts. This affirms Berger’s contention that “culture must be continuously produced and reproduced . . . Its structures are, therefore, inherently precarious and predestined to change. The cultural imperative of stability and the inherent character of culture as *un*stable together posit the fundamental problem of man’s world-building activity.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

1. (From ב צו, פר' ז, ס'): *The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken spirit and contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise (Ps. 51:19) . . .* Whence do we know that if a man repents it is accounted unto him as if *(ke’ilu)* he had gone up to Jerusalem and built the Temple and the altar, and offered thereon all the sacrifices ordained in the Torah? – From these verses: *‘The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit,* etc.’[[24]](#footnote-24)

The use of the intersecting verse here is itself significant. The verse with which the rabbis have opened *perek zayin* is Lev. 6:1: “[And the Lord spoke unto Moses, saying]: Command Aaron and his sons . . .” The rabbis focus their concern on the fact that God does not address Aaron directly, instead giving certain levitical duties to his sons rather than to Aaron himself. The rabbis exegetical conclusion – “Love covers all transgressions” – is meant to address their previous observation that the “hatred which Aaron caused between Israel and their Father who is in heaven stirred up against them punishments upon punishments”. And yet, according to the rabbis, “Said Moses to the Holy One, blessed be He: ‘Can it be that the well is hated while its water is beloved?’” Moses then quotes Mishnah to God, who relents in his punishment of Aaron.

The question, ‘Can it be that the well is hated while its water is beloved?’, is a textual turning point that leads into ס'ב, where we find the first use of *ke’ilu.* The rabbis are considering how a sacred container (in the text, Aaron) can be spurned while its contents (the promulgation and performance of cultic ritual) continue to merit sacred status. This leads to the basic question the rabbis face in their midrashic approach to Leviticus: can the Temple, the “cistern” of ritual obligation, be destroyed and discarded, even as the “water” of the covenantal relationship is still revered as the sustaining force of Israelite identity? Interestingly, Moses poses this question to God and reinforces it by quoting Mishnah, thereby elevating both rabbinic hermeneutical strategy and rabbinic discourse to the realm of the canonical, thereby investing it with the divine authority and therefore, presumably, the power to constrain and direct divine action. Furthermore, the embedding of interexts is here explicitly recognized and legitimated. The rabbis in essence quote themselves to support the contention that the state of broken-heartedness is *itself* a sacrifice – a sacrifice of the *self.* “The subject who offers part of himself is bringing the broken self before God, in contrast to the sacrificial animal’s innocence and wholeness.”[[25]](#footnote-25) In this way,the act of sacrifice, in being hermeneutically transformed, is *elevated:*

R. Abba bar Yudan said: What God regards as unfit for sacrifice in an animal, He holds fit in a human being. In an animal, He regards as unfit one that is blind, or broken, or maimed or having a wen [Lev. 22:22]; but in a human being he holds a broken and contrite heart [Ps. 51:19] to be a fit offering for Him.[[26]](#footnote-26)

While we will consider the socio-historical context of the four uses of *ke’ilu* in *Tzav* in subsequent pages, we should pause here to consider the momentousness and meaning of this exegetical turn. The effort to make sense of the distance God places between Himself and Aaron begins the mimetic approach to making sense of the destruction of the Temple and the abrupt end of ritual sacrifice. Broken-heartedness here becomes *the sacrificial act that sustains covenantal connection.* It does so not primarily through the community, but through the individual; not through the sacrifice of an unblemished animal, but the suffering of a blemished human being. This “establishes atonement for the whole spectrum of sins without either the presence of the temple or functioning courts able to deliver punishment.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Ps. 51:19 is brought to suggest that, unlike an offering at the Temple, the individual’s broken-heartedness and contrition *cannot* be rejected by God: its very occurrence is both an offering up and a guarantee of that offering’s acceptance. By making this claim in the first part of *Tzav,* the rabbis take the *prefigured* sense of sacrifice; *configure* it in the context of God’s forgiveness of Aaron through Moses; and *refigure* it through a verse that shows that God accepts both human suffering as a legitimate transformation of sacrifice, *and* rabbinic discourse as a legitimate means of world-building through exegesis. The mimetic foundations of ritual substitution have thus been established.

The dialogue with God is a kind of *Spiel* (play), the element that Gadamer identifies at the presentative and performative heart of mimesis.[[28]](#footnote-28) It opens to exploration the aporias of time and narrative that will become crucial in the three subsequent uses of *ke’ilu* in *Tzav.* The rabbis retroject or “cite” a dialogue between Moses and God, as both precedent for and affirmation of their own mimetic exegetical ingenuity: if Moses can quote Mishnah to God, then study, unlike sacrifice, must be able to overcome temporal constraint in the struggle against *Fremdheit.* The linguistic mimesis of the sacrificial act helps the rabbis construct a virtual altar whereon the broken spirit is offered up in a way that is pleasing to God.

The rabbis then move from considering sinful deed to sinful thought, and from the question of engagement in sacrifice to contemplation of its particulars. Study of sacrifice is in fact deemed a mimetic performance of the sacrificial act, with the act’s same purifying and properties and legal significance.

1. (From צו, פר' ז, ס'ג): When Scripture says, *For Job said: It may be that my sons have sinned, and blasphemed God in their hearts* [Job 1:6], it proves that the burnt-offering is due to be brought for sinful meditation of the heart. R. Aḥa said in the name of R. Ḥanina b. Papa: In order that Israel might not say: ‘In the past we used to offer up sacrifices, and engage in the study of them; now that there are no sacrifices, is it necessary to engage in the study of them?’ the Holy One, blessed be He said, to Israel: ‘If you engage in the study of them, I account it unto you as if (*ke’ilu*) you had offered them up.’

We should recall that in the first use of *ke’ilu*, repentance is a mimetic transformation of sacrifice as an institution – it encapsulates and transforms all sacrifices, and even the building of the proper vessels for their execution, in one individualized action, centered in prayer. Here, the *study* of sacrifice becomes a mimetic appropriation of the sacrificial act, and is endowed with the expiatory properties and effects of *all* the commanded forms of sacrifice. If we had been left with only the first use of *ke’ilu,* we might have concluded that sacrifice had lost all relevance – in which case, why bring the technique of transformative mimetic exegesis to bear on Leviticus at all? Here, *ke’ilu* erects an interpretive frame around the concept of sacrifice while “officially” acknowledging the end of the act itself: we move from archaism, or repetition of prescribed ritual, to hermeticism, or continuous *reinterpretation* of the *laws* of that ritual. The intersecting verse from Job indicates that, whereas sacrifice had previously made expiation for sinful meditation, the *study* of the burnt-offering now stands in. In fact, interpretation is now *essential* to the process of expiation, and embeds narrativity in the unfolding meanings and reharmonizations of sacrifice. As Ithamar Gruenwald notes, “[a] scriptural text calls for interpretative attention when it appears to have lost its significative function among a certain group of people. From this perspective, interpretative attention helps the text regain its meaning, relevance, and applicability. Such moments are indicative of historical or intellectual crisis; . . . interpretation not only helps resolve such crises but enables the scriptural text to maintain its meaningfulness until the next cognitive ‘break.’”[[29]](#footnote-29) Bernard Levinson goes further, asserting that because Torah “models critique and embeds theory”[[30]](#footnote-30), it both contains and implicitly condones the interpretive act. This resonates with Ricoeur’s assertion that “the historic community that names itself the Jewish people has drawn its identity from the reception of those texts they produced.”[[31]](#footnote-31) This form of mimesis regenerates meaning through the continuous interpretation of the original text, and in so doing, diminishes the *Fremdheit* that threatens the basis and bearing of communal identity.

In this second use of *ke’ilu,* text, sacrifice, and study are brought into relationship through discourse, and narrative becomes part of the experience it is meant to interpret. The discourse is both monological and dialogical: Job’s “interior monologue” about offering a sacrifice on behalf of his children is read into rabbinic dialogue by R. Judan b. Ḥilfai as a performative example of the ritual efficacy of the study of sacrifice. This is the interpretive act that Ricoeur places at the culmination of the mimetic cycle: “[t]he act of reading is thus the operator that joins mimesis3,” or “the intersection of the world of the text and that of the listener or reader” [[32]](#footnote-32),to mimesis2 (the configuration of the narrative). Within the tripartite hermeneutical structure outlined by Ricoeur, two sources of meaning – the rabbis in discourse and the Torah in text – in essence read and respond to *each other*. The harmonizing of the relationship between God and Israel occurs through a harmonization of Torah with the exigencies of the rabbinic *Sitz im Leben,* and the revalorization of a cultic practice occurs through a *replacement* of that practice with an interiorized mimetic iteration thereof. This “mimeticized” version of sacrifice brings the efficacy of the practice into “the hermeneutical circle of narrative and time [that] never stops being reborn from the circle that the stages of mimesis form.”[[33]](#footnote-33) This is the means by which “mimesis becomes basic to the religious imagination; vicarious forms function ‘as’ the real thing.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Just as Job’s sacrifice is meant to make expiation for the unknown sins of his family members, so God affirms, through the rabbis of the midrash, the *study* of such sacrifices can facilitate the same expiatory effect. Whether in contemplation, in community, or in crisis, “the old sacrificial rites are reactualized through new acts of sacral efficacy – performed by laymen acting voluntarily in the world.” The result is that “[i]n the new spiritual order of this post-destruction teaching, the sage is the new priest, and the scriptural exposition a sacral gift of the highest and most favorable sort.”[[35]](#footnote-35)

1. *For from the rising of the sun even to the going down of the same My name is great among the nations; and in every place offerings are presented to My name, even pure oblations* (Mal. 1:11). Now are there pure oblations and the taking off of a handful [of flour] and the letting [offerings] go up in smoke in Babylon? What then is this [that is referred to in the text]? It is the Mishnah. The Holy One, blessed be He, said: ‘Seeing that you are engaged in the study of Mishnah, it is as if *(ke’ilu)* you were offering up sacrifices.’

In the text immediately prior to the selection above, Rav Huna had said that “All the exiles will be gathered in only through the merit of the study of Mishnah,” and we are thus given to understand that the study of “Oral Learning”[[36]](#footnote-36) is a locus (מקום) or position from which the human-divine relationship is recalibrated and renewed. The act of oral/aural learning is itself deeply mimetic, and this use of *ke’ilu* serves to remind us that the dialogical and deeply mimetic form of rabbinic discourse was *itself* a kind of offering, through which Israel could attend to its covenantal commitments. The mimetic transformation of sacrifice into oral learning is a form of ritual substitution: through mimetic refinement and transmission, oral learning (and then Oral Law) attains ritual status, endorsed by God *within* and *through* the properties of transformative mimetic exegesis that study itself endorses and perpetuates. And, crucially, it does so in Babylon: exile is the birthplace of the inward-turning move to interpretation.[[37]](#footnote-37)

Mishnah (here meaning ‘oral learning’, not *the* Mishnah), which had been mentioned immediately prior to the first usage of *ke’ilu* in *Tzav,* in this passage has moved into the *ke’ilu* equation,signifying the transformational mimetic exegetical capacities granted to oral learning itself. That is,the rabbis have moved their *own* text into a canonical position. It has been drawn into the mimetic exegetical cycle of text, interpretation and lived experience. What is important here is the rabbinic consciousness of the existence of text *prior to text.* In other words, rabbinic text begins in performative orality, is subsequently committed to memory, then reduced to writing, redacted and subject to exegetical scrutiny. Ironically, this chain of transmission is part of what creates and confirms the canonical status of aggadic discourse. Aggadic Midrash is performative and spontaneous: there is an audience that both precedes and anticipates our reading witnessing, participating, transforming and being transformed by text. We become embedded in the mimetic network of transmission. We are intertexts.

Our primary focus to this point has been on the hermeneutical-philosophical aspects of mimesis, but the sociological conditions under which mimesis is deployed as a form of world-maintenance now demand our consideration as well. We can see in transformative mimetic exegesis how what Berger calls “the terrors of anomy”[[38]](#footnote-38) are nearly synonymous with Gadamer’s *Fremdheit.* The theological perspective tends to understand society as the result of objectivated expressions of the human that *derive* or *descend* from the divine. The sociological perspective, however, sees such formations as part of an objective reality, a “coercive facticity”, in which the individual experiencing that reality is also co-constructing it. Seen in this light, the mimetic refiguration of sacrifice through study is the rebuilding of the Temple without walls. It is rendering experience as meaningful in the wake of rupture. It is rebuilding from within what has been destroyed from without. This was the best and perhaps the only way the rabbis could build a bridge between covenant and history, and from rupture to renewal.

1. Samuel said: [God said], *And if they* [i.e. Israel] *be ashamed of all that they have done, make known unto them the form of the house, and the fashion thereof and all forms thereof, and all the laws thereof, and write it in their sight; that they may keep the whole form thereof, and all the ordinances thereof, and do them. This is the law of the house,* etc. (Ezekiel 43:11ff). Was the form of the house in existence at that time [viz. of Ezekiel]? [Certainly not], but the Holy One, blessed be He, said: ‘As long as you engage in the study thereof, it is as if *(ke’ilu)* you were building it.’

The three previous uses of *ke’ilu* in ס'ג find equivalent sacral value in the collective preoccupation (מתעסקים) with the study of text and the performance of sacrificial rites. This sacred preoccupation transforms both the rite and the study thereof, both the Torah text and its commentary: study becomes a whole-hearted focus (though that heart be broken) on the transformative effects of interiorizing cultic choreography. So it remains with this last in the cluster of the uses of *ke’ilu* in *Tzav.* The cumulative effect is a sharpening focus and increasing emphasis on study as the means by which the new social reality will be constructed.

Here, with the fourth use of *ke’ilu,* a transformative mimetic cycle is completed: the ‘laws of the house’ become the enduring structure that replaces the house itself. Physical reality is re-revealed as a mimetic shadow of its *conception.* The geographically and structurally specific site of cultic worship is absorbed and transformed into the geographically dispersed and exegetically diverse practice of preoccupation and engagement with the concept of Temple. The transformative mimetic exegetical approach taken by the rabbis is a means of moving the Temple “from actuality *(esse)* to possibility *(posse)*”[[39]](#footnote-39), and of creating meaning and understanding by means of a refashioned narrative. Such a refashioning is a recognizable sociological process: it “is not telling lies about the past, but bringing it in line with the truth that, necessarily, embraces both present and past.” That is, “the past is reinterpreted to conform to present reality, with the tendency to retroject into the past various elements that were subjectively unavailable at the time.” [[40]](#footnote-40) The movement of the Temple from actuality to thought and then to language is a mimetic reappropriation of its being, and a fashioning of understanding through thought and language. Ezekiel’s prophecy, too, is itself mimetically transformed: it cites a kind of broken-heartedness (as in Ps. 51:19) as a proper prerequisite for study, but is interpreted by the rabbis as *anticipating its own transformation* through the unending upward spiral of reinterpretation. This is consistent with Ricoeur’s view of mimetic discourse as “an endless spiral that would carry the meditation past the same point a number of times, but at different altitudes.”[[41]](#footnote-41)

It would appear, then, that the uses of *ke’ilu* in *Tzav* are neither random nor discrete, but are in fact both coordinated and cumulative. Each appearance of *ke’ilu* builds on the previous usage, and each usage specifies an aspect of exegetical inquiry that must harmonize law and exegesis, ritual and reading. To be sure, the hundreds of other uses of *ke’ilu* in rabbinic midrash are marked with these and other interpretive patternings. Here, however, the cluster of usages is evidence of the rabbis’ concern for excavating narrative consonance from the rubble of temporal dissonance. Having traced the trajectory of *ke’ilu* in these passages, we can now move to an application of Ricoeur’s theory of mimesis to rabbinic thought more broadly, and to ruminations on how this hermeneutical theory, when ‘thought together with’ Berger’s theory of nomization, illuminates the rabbinic move from “archaism” to “hermeticism” – a harmonization of textuality and orality, divine timelessness and human temporality, and so a harmonization of death and eternity.[[42]](#footnote-42) This means that *ke’ilu*  in *Tzav* a triadic process of interiorizing cultic activity and using its ‘death’ as the means of its own resurrection. (The Christological echoes are likely not incidental, but pursuit of this idea would hurl us into another discussion altogether.)

**On Mimesis and Meaning in Jewish Thought**

The challenge inherent in the concept of transformative mimetic exegesis is that its origins are hard to trace. Te rabbis are inheritors of mimetic exegesis, not its creators: aggadic midrash is *mimetic* in part because so much of biblical text is *midrashic.*[[43]](#footnote-43) Put another way, the world-maintaining strategies evident in biblical text are appropriated by the rabbis, so that aggadic midrash, rather than being merely whimsical or wildly improvisatory, is a deliberate mimetic refiguration of world and text as read and responded to, each by the other. We have explored a cluster of uses of the word *ke’ilu* as such examples of this mimetic activity. The rabbis use *ke’ilu* to transfer the ritual and even ontological structure of sacrifice from the communal/exterior to the individual/interior plane of experience. This is mimesis not as mere imitation but, as Ricoeur notes, the process by which “a tradition is constituted by the interplay of innovation and sedimentation.”[[44]](#footnote-44) Here, text and exegetical strategy are tightly interwoven and co-emergent.

The shift from archaism to hermeticism identified by Ricoeur can by found in numerous aggadic sources and traced to the dialogic interplay of figures from different temporal and geographical spheres. The caesura from which this shift originates – the destruction of the Second Temple and the subsequent development of rabbinic exegetical culture – is the wellspring of rabbinic transformative mimetic exegesis. However, this exegetical strategy is neither purely literary nor purely historical. It is born, rather, out of the densely interwoven understanding of text and history that the rabbis brought to the task of world maintenance. The rabbis fill the onto-theological void by reinterpreting canon in ways that find (or retroject) meaning and purpose in the intertextual and dialogical accumulations of nomos. Destruction becomes a mimesis of creation which, through interpretation, can result not only in a culture’s survival but in the “discovery” of new meaning unearthed in the layers (literary, temporal, redactional) of canonical text. This sets the rabbinic course for seeking new dimensions of meaning in caesura, and new levels of purpose in the epistemological, theological and narrative gaps that have opened. This occurs through and in text, because for the rabbis, text is not merely “a social process akin to other social processes,”[[45]](#footnote-45) but the self-regenerating template for *all* social processes. To the extent that Biblical text is a template for social process, then, rabbinic text must be seen as the construction of (a) social reality. To put it in both Bergerian and Ricoeurian terms: what is externalized (mimesis1) in the Bible is mediated and mimetically transformed (mimesis2) through dialogical interpretive play, then internalized (mimesis3) through study and instruction. What begins in imaginative relationship and serious play is, through transformative mimetic exegesis, brought into close and carefully calibrated harmony with that to which it is compared. Lather, rinse, repeat.

“There can hardly be a less promising field for aggadic treatment than Leviticus,” and yet the author(s), here and throughout, succeed in providing “edification, religious insights, and words of hope and encouragement relevant to their own situation of increasing despondency and despair under Roman-Christian rule, which became more oppressive as time went on.”[[46]](#footnote-46) Study interiorized sacrifice, and it interiorized the forms and functions of the center of the sacrificial cult. As in Wolfgang Iser’s reader-response theory[[47]](#footnote-47), the interaction between text and reader cannot be isolated and attributed to only one or the other. The interaction itself is the basis of the mimetic exegetical process through which exegesis becomes a *survival* strategy. As Michael Walzer points out, “Israel in exile was still a community, but it was no longer in control of its own destiny.”[[48]](#footnote-48) In order to regain a modicum of control, text and world had to be reread, reinterpreted and reunited as the foundation of a newly interpretive society.

The reader is an active participant in and co-creator of this society, which recreates itself out of the ashes of the sacrificial cult: “death, time and history . . . can be conquered through a reading strategy which eradicates them by effacing the difference between past, present and future.”[[49]](#footnote-49) Text remains open and responsive to history without being made subservient to it. Revelation remains present in temporality, waiting to be apprehended through the serious play of exegetical creativity. Interpretive innovations become world-maintaining strategies. And yet this does not mean the possibilities are endless or entirely democratic. The use of *ke’ilu,* its appearance in dialogue, its clustering in text on sacrifice and substitution all indicate the presence of an exegetical priesthood in possession of a ring of hermeneutical keys; *ke’ilu* is but one. These keys turn the tumblers of meaning and open onto new pathways of praxis, enabling the Ricoeurian mimetic cycle to spiral toward higher, or more hidden, exegetical treasure. By thinking, reading and acting mimetically, the rabbis sift and gather specific meaning-making and signifying capacities inherent in language, which are at once symbolic and experiential, conscious and unconscious, innovative and world-maintaining.

We, then, are bound to the Stammaim and their predecessors through practice, history, literature and theology, to be sure, but also through the mimesis that cements and binds those institutions: we read and parse experience in order to apprehend the sparks of the noumenal diffused within the phenomenal world, whether we know it or not. Through this mimetic diffusion, the meaning-making possibilities of rabbinic discourse, and the study thereof, make their mimetic way into philosophy, law and literature, and this is why Bernard Levinson’s eloquent plea for canonical text to serve again as the meeting place of the humanities is pertinent and deserves a hearing.

“Contemporary theory has all but divorced itself from the study of Scripture, from thinking in a sophisticated way about religion. The biblical text, in particular, is regarded as a parade example of an unredeemed text that encodes and perpetuates concepts of power, hierarchy, domination, privilege, xenophobia, patriarchy, and colonialism. The truth is much more complex. Unfortunately, many within the broader academic community are woefully uninformed about how to read the Bible critically, historically, and intellectually. [This] has transformed the scriptural text into a golden calf, lacking in intellectual complexity, awaiting theory for its redemption.”[[50]](#footnote-50)

The problem, as Levinson points out, is that contemporary literary theory “locates critique as something external to the canon, thus transforming [it] into a lifeless literary fossil. The contrary premise here is that critical theory is not at odds with the canon but central to the canon and sustained by it”.[[51]](#footnote-51) In its exegetical creativity and narrative daring, midrash, a mimetic descendant of the bible, embeds theory and critique in its discourse. The task of *ke’ilu* within that discourseis not a finalization of the text upon which it comments, but a mimetic reflection and refraction of layers of meaning latent within, a transformation through “masked repetition.”[[52]](#footnote-52)

Ricoeur’s sensitivity and receptivity to biblical text makes him an exception to Levinson’s critique, and his theory of mimesis (and its able elucidation by Schweiker) makes it an important tool in understanding the mimetic aspects of rabbinic discourse. This exploration can be extend to other exegetical keys, such as the use of *ma’aseh* and *mashal* in rabbinic discourse; it can test Foucault’s assertion that statements and acts “exist through one another in an act of reciprocal relationship.”[[53]](#footnote-53) Such an exploration could initiate an assessment of Jewish theology and its mimetic aspects, thus beginning to honor Schweiker’s contention that “a post-modern theology, to be cogent and complete, must rethink mimesis.”[[54]](#footnote-54)

Walter Benjamin noted that “language may be seen as the highest level of mimetic behavior and the most complete archive of nonsensuous similarity.”[[55]](#footnote-55) In *Vayikrah Rabbah,* the rabbis make similarity into a transformative property – which is to say, they mimetically refigure what they revivify and revalorize. Ritual, repentance and study, all still firmly moored to their own mimetic foundations, nonetheless are placed in new relationship to the language that articulates them and the practices that delineate them. Through the use of *ke’ilu,* all law, all narrative and all history – all text and experience – are reintroduced to one another, and refashioned to reassert the temporal and theological multi-dimensionality of Torah.

1. Bar Ilan University Responsa Project Online: <http://www.responsa.co.il/home.en-US.aspx>. Search on *ke’ilu* conducted May 27, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Michael Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination: On Jewish Thought and Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Fishbane, *The Kiss of God: Spiritual and Mystical Death in Judaism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), 89. As Fishbane notes, *ke’ilu* plays a key role in the articulating the functional equivalence of Torah study and Temple service in the rabbinic discourse in *b. Menaḥot* 110*a*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Jeffrery Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition and Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins), 20-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. William Schweiker, *Mimetic Reflections: A Study in Hermeneutics, Theology and Ethics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990), 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 133 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), xiii. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Schweiker, *Mimetic Reflections,* 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Susan Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1982), 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Schweiker, *Mimetic Reflections,* 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See ibid., 120-123. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Moshe Halbertal, *On Sacrifice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories,* 259ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative,* Volume I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Michael Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 273. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories,* 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy,* 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Translations are from Rabbi Dr. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, eds., *The Midrash Rabbah,* Vol. Two: Exodus and Leviticus (New York: Soncino Press, 1977). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Halbertal, *On Sacrifice,* 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *Pesikta de-Rav Kahanah,* Shuva 5; BT, *Sanhedrin* 43b. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Halbertal, *On Sacrifice,* 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Schweiker, *Mimetic Reflections,* 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Gruenwald, “Midrash & The ‘Midrashic Condition’”, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Bernard Levinson, *Legal Revision and Religious Renewal in Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative,* Vol. III, 357. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid., *Time and Narrative,* Vol. I,77. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid., 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination,* 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid., 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. *Leviticus Rabbah,* Soncino ed., 95, 1n. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. See Michael Walzer, *In God’s Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), Chap. 7, especially pp. 121-124. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy,* 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Schweiker, *Mimetic Reflections,* 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality”,* 160, 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative,* Vol. 1, 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Schweiker, *Mimetic Reflections,* 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. See Renée Bloch, *Midrash,* in Louis Pirot, André Robert, and Henri Cazelles, eds., *Supplément au Dictionaire de la Bible,* Book 4, suppl. 5 (Paris: Librairie Letouzey at Ané, 1957), pp. 1263-81. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative,* 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories,* 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Joseph Heinemann, “Profile of a Midrash: The Art of Composition in Leviticus Rabba”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion,* Vol. 39, No. 2 (1971), 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. See Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Walzer, *In God’s Shadow,* 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash,* 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Levinson, *Legal Revision and Religious Renewal in Ancient Israel,* 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Ibid., 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. See Michel Foucault, “The Discourse on Language,” in ibid., *The Archaeology of Knowledge,* A.M. Sheridan Smith, tr. (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 221. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge,* 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Schweiker, *Mimetic Reflections,* 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Walter Benjamin, “On the Mimetic Faculty,” in Ibid., *Reflections,* Peter Demetz, ed. (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 336. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)