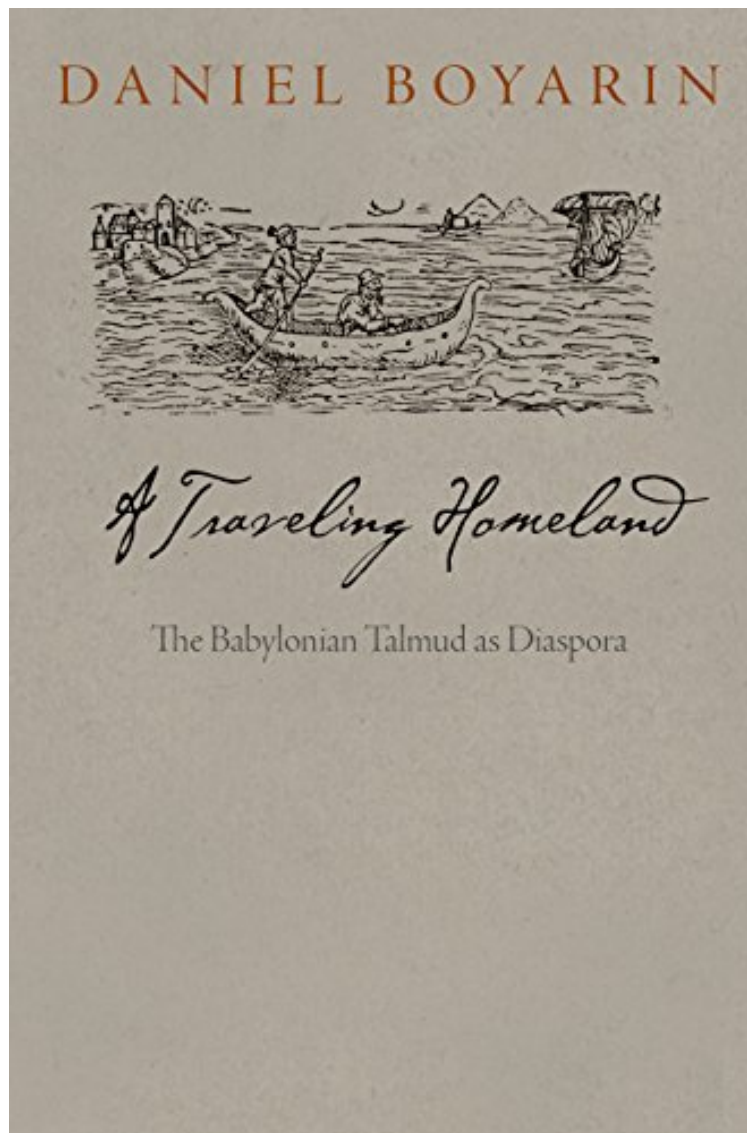


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A Traveling Homeland: The Babylonian Talmud as Diaspora (Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion)

Daniel Boyarin

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A word conventionally imbued with melancholy meanings, "diaspora" has been used variously to describe the cataclysmic historical event of displacement, the subsequent geographical scattering of peoples, or the conditions of alienation abroad and yearning for an ancestral home. But as Daniel Boyarin writes, diaspora may be more constructively construed as a form of cultural hybridity or a mode of analysis. In *A Traveling Homeland*, he makes the case that a shared homeland or past and traumatic dissociation are not necessary conditions for diaspora and that Jews carry their homeland with them in diaspora, in the form of textual, interpretive communities built around talmudic study. For Boyarin, the Babylonian Talmud is a diasporist manifesto, a text that produces and defines the practices that constitute Jewish diasporic identity. Boyarin examines the ways the Babylonian Talmud imagines its own community and sense of homeland, and he shows how talmudic commentaries from the medieval and early modern periods also produce a doubled cultural identity. He links the ongoing productivity of this bifocal cultural vision to the nature of the book: as the physical text moved between different times and places, the methods of its study developed through contact with surrounding cultures. Ultimately, *A Traveling Homeland* envisions talmudic study as the center of a shared Jewish identity and a distinctive feature of the Jewish diaspora that defines it as a thing apart from other cultural migrations.

"Daniel Boyarin demolishes the long-standing notion that diaspora was born out of despair and sorrow. *A Traveling Homeland* is a highly erudite, suggestive, and provocative study on the concept of diaspora, and the Jewish diaspora in particular." Oded Irshai, *The Hebrew University of Jerusalem* "After two decades of exciting debate, the theory of diaspora studies is now in gridlock and in need of new interventions. This is such an intervention a strong and exhilarating book." Khachig Tillyan, *Wesleyan University* About the Author Daniel Boyarin is Hermann P. and Sophia Taubman Professor of Talmudic Culture, Departments of Near Eastern Studies and Rhetoric, University of California, Berkeley. He is author of many books, including *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*, also available from the University of Pennsylvania Press. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Prelude A Different Diaspora "What is there worth saving and holding on to between the extremes of exile on the one hand, and the often bloody-minded affirmations of nationalism on the other?" Daniel Boyarin answers, of course: Diaspora. "From the Chabad [Hassidic group] Journal, May 7, 2013: Editor's Note: Dear Friend, Jerusalem is never far from our minds. After all, it is there that creation began, and it has been the center of our national devotion for 3,000 years. Three times a day, we face Jerusalem as we pray for the return of Gd's presence to His holy city. Over 150 years ago, there was a pious and devoted Jew who desired to apply himself to Torah study and prayer in the Holy Land. When he shared his plan with his rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch, he was taken aback by the rebbe's response, "Make Israel here." He did not need to go to Israel; rather, he was to bring Israel where he lived. Every time we do another mitzvah, we port a bit of Jerusalem to wherever we are. And when the word is full of such mini-Jeruselems, we will all gather in our homeland for real. Menachem Posner, on behalf of the Chabad.org Editorial Team Khachig Tillyan has written beautifully of what it is that makes a diaspora: The diasporist project, as C. L. R. James understood, is to enhance the articulations between the past and present, homeland and hostland segments of the transnation. . . . Without such connections however sporadic and discontinuous they may be in arduous practice to claim that the individual diasporan is a member of the diaspora and that the diasporic segment is a part of the homeland people (which can consist of the descendants of shared ancestors from three or ten generations ago) risks mere biologism. This pitfall can be juxtaposed with the mere psychologism that regards diaspora to be the figure of boundary-crossing multiplicity and links a specific individual to that diaspora by virtue of the multiplicity they share and again of birth. A diaspora is never merely an accident of birth, a clump of individuals living outside their ancestral homeland, each with a hybrid subjectivity, lacking collective practices that underscore (not just) their difference from others, but also their similarity to each other, and their links to the people on the homeland. Without some such minimum stringency of definition, most of America or Argentina, or New Zealand, or any modern immigrant-nation would just as easily be a diaspora. Perhaps diasporists should and must aspire to teach every nation, especially those created by immigration, to see and honor the diasporas within, to transform their/our self-perception and self-representation. But if we wish to remake the nations of the world in the image of the diaspora, we will not do it by fiat of redefinition, one person at a time. Revisioning "Diaspora" Despite the correct observation just cited from Tillyan, redefining things can sometimes be the beginning of

a new political vision, so let us begin. Generally, the term "diaspora" with respect to Jews is used in one of three acceptations, which are not mutually exclusive. It can appear in a kind of timeless geographical sense: the Jews who do not dwell in Palestine, whatever their historical conditions. So, for instance, all the thriving communities of Jews throughout the Ottoman Empire and beyond would be called the Diaspora, in contrast to a small, if vital, community of refugee Jews from Spain who have landed in Palestine in the sixteenth century, simply owing to geographical location. Second, it can appear in a chronological sense, the Diaspora being understood as a one-time event of scattering from the "homeland." Third, in a lachrymose sense, it can be the condition of being an oppressed minority longing to go "home." Thus, for instance, in discussing the broadening of the usage of "diaspora" to refer to Africans, Armenians, and Irish, Robin Cohen writes: "With the Jews, these peoples conceived their scattering as arising from a cataclysmic event that had traumatized the group as a whole, thereby creating the central historical experience of victimhood at the hands of a cruel oppressor." Cohen, to be sure, complicates this as a controlling definition for diaspora tout court but leaves it essentially in place as an adequate description of the situation of the Jews, and that is precisely where the current intervention takes place. I am proposing a very different approach to the question of diaspora: namely, diaspora as a particular kind of cultural hybridity and as a mode of analysis rather than as an essential thing. As shown by the analysis of the narrative of the four captives, with which I begin Chapter 1, diaspora is most usefully mobilized as a synchronic condition by which human groups are related to one another in space; they may, and frequently do, have an origin in an actually shared past but need not and, moreover, need not even have a story of such a shared traumatic past. Cohen allows for such a component, writing that "diasporas often mobilize a collective identity, not only a place of settlement or only in respect of an imagined, putative or real homeland but also in solidarity with coethnic members in other countries. Bonds of language, religion, culture and a sense of a common fate impregnate such a transnational relationship and give to it an affective, intimate quality that formal citizenship or long settlement frequently lack. A useful description of this sentiment is 'coresponsibility.'" I am inclined to agree with Cohen, while taking much more seriously than he does the element of shared culture; but I would promote this from a marginal to an essential aspect of the description of a diaspora. Cohen further writes that "in some limited circumstances the term 'diaspora' can be used to describe transnational bonds of coresponsibility even where historically exclusive territorial claims are not strongly articulated." In the present book, I claim that this is not only a better way of describing the historical experiences of the Jews (of some Jews and not at all marginal ones) but has to be a defining feature of diaspora as a taxon to distinguish that term from others: migration, exile, displacement with which it is frequently conflated. As Cohen notes, there have been various challenges to the notion of diaspora, owing to its putative association with notions of "origin" and "homeland," on the one hand; and on the other, because "in this formulation [diaspora], the primary orientation and attachment of diasporic populations is to their homelands and cultures." The point of the current argument is to displace these notions of diaspora, retaining its value and utility for describing particular kinds of cultural practice and solidarity without disputing the existence of others. Once this is said, a homeland, real or even imagined, is not a necessary or sufficient condition for the existence of a diaspora. In the history of a given collective, there can be multiple diasporas, from Babylonia, Bari and Otranto, Spain, and the Rhineland shifting homelands, and even diaspora in which homeland is entirely absent and replaced by cultural connection. While trauma is frequently a point of origin or concomitant of diasporic existence, trauma is neither necessary nor sufficient to constitute a diaspora. Robin Cohen writes: "While the increased complexity and deterritorialization of identities are valid phenomena and constitutive of a small minority of diasporas (generally those that had been doubly or multiply displaced over time), ideas of home and often the stronger inflection of homeland remain powerful discourses." Not so minor, perhaps, as Cohen imagines; what I want to show is that crucial moments of Jewish historical experience fit this "minority" description much better than traditional ways of conceiving the Jewish diaspora. Introducing the Argument This book begins with an idea that is not new: that in some deep sense, a book has been the portable homeland of the Jewish people. The title of the book recalls Heine, who may have been the first to deploy this topos. More recent writers who have reflected it include George Steiner, Simon Schama, and my own departed teacher, Prof. Hayyim Zalman Dimitrovsky. What I try to do in this book is to work out the particulars and the implications of that powerful notion in greater historical and theoretical detail than anyone has attempted until now, to the best of my knowledge. If, indeed, the Talmud is the/a homeland of the Jews, what does that say about the historical and theoretical description of the Jews as a diaspora? First, the book explores some of the actual textual practices within and around the Talmud that make the topos more than a pretty metaphor; second, it queries (or rather, I query through its agency) what difference that makes for thinking diaspora as a theoretical/historical category for understanding the history of the Jews, as well as contexts broader than that of the Jewish people. On the first of these issues, I will try to show how the Talmud constructs through its own textual practice a diaspora according to a precise definition offered in Chapter 1, and I will argue that those very textual practices subtended a further set of practices around the Talmud until nearly the present (or even beyond it), which further maintained a diasporic existence. In other words, I suggest that the Talmud is a diasporist text that engenders diasporic existence and practice. On the second issue, I will suggest how these specifications might add to a robustly reconfigured notion of "diaspora" and ways that it can usefully be distinguished from some other closely related terms of art. "Diaspora," in its original sense,

while founded on a Greek word meaning "scattering" and thus implying some sort of a point of origin, unlike "exile," frequently focuses more on the creation of new homes and not on not being at home. Indeed, the Septuagint uses a mixture of positive and negative terms, *paroika* (sojourning), *metoikesa* (captivity), *apoika* (colony) for the Hebrew *gola* usually translated "exile" and never "diaspora." As Unnik concludes, the translators of the Septuagint "inscribed their situation not as 'Exile' but as something else." According to Unnik, the "something else" was, nonetheless, generally negatively charged. However, even in Hebrew/Aramaic, this term *gola* is not always negatively charged. Thus the Rabbis can say: "Be a *goleh* to a place of Torah!" As we will see Chapter 1, that is how they frequently understood the move to Babylonia: as a move to a better place, where the Torah could be studied more easily. We cannot think of the Jewish diaspora, therefore, as always and everywhere being understood as a forced and oppressive exile. Of Philo, historian Steve Mason has remarked: "Putting Judaeans on the same level as Romans or early Greek monarchies, he speaks of what we nowadays call 'the Jewish diaspora' a term signifying dislocation and possibly distress rather than a positive colonization: the colonies abroad [*apoikai*] in other prosperous lands preserve the customs of the mother-city." "It is time, once and for all, to dispose of the false etymology that interprets diaspora as the "scattering of male seed," and thus, *eo ipso*, masculinist. The Greek verb *speirein*, from which it is derived, means "to scatter," and it does frequently carry the senses of "to scatter seed" and "to procreate" (for males) (incidentally giving the lie to Stefan Helmreich's claim, repeated by Robin Cohen, that this "scattering of seed" is somehow a uniquely Judaeo-Christian and Islamic metaphor), but this has no bearing on the meaning of *diaspeirein* in the Greek of the Septuagint, which has nary a hint of such interpretations. Helmreich's conclusion from his false etymologizing that "[d]iaspora, in its traditional sense, thus refers us to a system of kinship reckoned through men and suggests the questions of legitimacy in paternity that patriarchy generates" is beyond science fiction and into the realm of fantasy. As Johannes Tromp makes clear, the meaning of the verb is originally simply "to spread," without any further connotations. Nothing in the formation or use of the verb *diaspeirein* (apparently a Septuagintal neologism) implies planting, seeding, sowing, or male ejaculation. Jewish diaspora certainly was masculinist, as we shall see, but there is nothing in the etymology of the term that makes it semantically necessary that it be so. Initially, it would seem, the verb simply referred to the spread-out nature of the people. However, as Tromp makes clear, it carries as well a further and much more sinister connotation: the scattering of the defeated enemy. The god, as defender of his people, causes their enemies to scatter before him and them. When the god is angered, he causes his people to scatter before the enemies. Given this fraught set of meanings *ab origine*, it is no wonder that later, the term "diaspora," derived from this verb, would carry a variety of affective connotations as well. In the chapters that follow, I will explore one particular Jewish diaspora (for, as we can divine, a diaspora is not one): the one produced by the Babylonian Talmud. The Talmud produces diaspora in three ways, corresponding to my three chapters below. In Chapter 2, "At Home in Babylonia: The Talmud as Diasporist Manifesto," I will show how the Talmud imagines its own community, how it projects its being in Babylonia, its *raison d'être*, the status of Palestine, and its own status *vis-à-vis* Palestine as well. I will argue that multiple passages in the Talmud add up to a virtual diasporist manifesto, acknowledging that there are other much less sanguine voices to be found also. This controversy is thematized in the Talmud in the practice and discourse of different Rabbis. In Chapter 3, "In the Land of Talmud: The Textual Making of a Diasporic Folk," several examples of analysis of talmudic texts are undertaken to show how the talmudic *sugya* (sustained dialectical engagement with a particular issue) is constructed seamlessly but highly significantly out of Palestinian and Babylonian materials constructing the two geographically dispersed collectives as dwellers in one place, the Land of Talmud. It is in this chapter, the longest, that the main argument for diaspora as doubled cultural location is pursued. In Chapter 4, "Looking for Our Routes; or, the Talmud and the Making of Diasporas: Sefarad and Ashkenaz," the argument shifts gears, demonstrating the ongoing productivity of the doubled (bifocal) cultural production produced by the Talmud as it traverses different times and climes, the methods of its study ever developing via contact with circumambient culture and moving on to other Jewish collectives in other places where other cultural discourses become incorporated into and affected by talmudic learning. Following my revered teacher to whose memory this volume is dedicated, Prof. Hayyim Zalman Dimitrovsky, I argue that it is the talmudic study itself that has constituted the Jewish people as a diaspora.