



[Jerusalem Talmud Avodah Zarah 3:4, 42d](#)

Rabban Gamliel at the Bath of Aphrodite in Acre (Akko; Ptolemais)

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Reference:

Avodah Zarah 3:4, 42d

Commentary:

This section of the Jerusalem Talmud discusses [Mishnah Avodah Zarah 3:4](#), which presents an encounter between a gentile (“Peraqlos son of Pelaslos” in MS Kaufmann, though some scholars suggest “philosophos”) and Rabban Gamliel II at the Bath of Aphrodite in Acre (Akko; Ptolemais). Readers are advised to see the commentary on that mishnah to contextualize the discussion presented here.

[Mishnah Avodah Zarah 3:4](#) has attracted considerable scholarly attention and has been the subject of numerous studies on rabbinic approaches to the Greco-Roman world and its cults. Yet the Jerusalem Talmud seems to be interested in two topics: First, whether the question posed by Peraqlos may be answered in the bathhouse (A) and, a difficulty that emerges from Rabban Gamliel’s reply, which the Talmud seeks to resolve. The Talmud apparently accepts the presence of sages in a Roman bathhouse as a given.

In Section A, the Talmud assumes that it is permissible to discuss Jewish laws (*halakhot*) which are related to the bathhouse in that setting; therefore, the Talmud tries to determine whether Peraqlos’s question belongs to that category. Without addressing the question at hand, in a four-stage process, the Talmud establishes that his query may be answered in a bathhouse:

1. A teaching from Rabbi Yaakov bar Idi in the name of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi – both amoraim who were active in the third century CE – affirms its appropriateness according to the principle that, although Torah may not be discussed in an unclean setting, *halakhot* that pertain such a place can be addressed *in situ*: “They [are allowed to] ask [about] the laws (*halakhot*) of the bathhouse in the bathhouse [and about] the laws (*halakhot*) of the latrine in the latrine.”
2. A story about Rabbi Shimon ben Eleazar and Rabbi Meir – both tannaim who were active in the second century CE, especially after the Bar Kokhba revolt – indicates that halakhic questions can be answered in a bathhouse:

“As [when] Rabbi Shimon ben Eleazar entered to bathe with Rabbi Meir [on the Sabbath]. He asked him: “Can we wash [something] off?” He (Rabbi Meir) answered him: “[It is] forbidden.” “Can we wipe [something] off?” He answered him: “[It is] forbidden.”

3. This view is challenged by a story of Rav and Shmuel, first-generation Babylonian amoraim who were active in the third century CE:

“But didn’t Shmuel ask Rav: ‘Is it permissible to respond: “Amen,” in a filthy place?’ He (Rav) answered him: ‘[It is] forbidden. But [the response]: “[It is] forbidden,” that I gave (lit. said to) you is (also) prohibited.’

Not only does Shmuel prohibit the liturgical act of saying “Amen,” but he also acknowledges that he should not have answered this *halakhic* question since it was asked in a filthy location.



4. An early tannaitic tradition, identical to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi's teaching (1), is then quoted to further uphold this position and thereby augment its authority:

"There is a tannaitic tradition (lit. a tannaitic tradition is found): 'They [may] ask [about] the laws (*halakhot*) of the bathhouse in the bathhouse [and about] the laws (*halakhot*) of the latrine in the latrine.'"

This talmudic section is designed to affirm the permissibility of posing and responding to halakhic questions in a bathhouse. The Talmud first presents an amoraic law that approves of discussing relevant legal questions whether in Roman bathhouses or even in public Roman latrines (*forica*) (1), followed by a narrative which indicates that this practice was normative during the tannaitic period (2). The challenge (3), which discusses whether the liturgical response "Amen" may be recited in a filthy place, is not explicitly related to bathhouses. Notably, this story speaks of Babylonian sages, who live in an environment without public Roman baths (on the contrasting rabbinic approaches to Roman public latrines in Babylonia versus the land of Israel, see Wilfand, "Did the Rabbis Reject the Roman Public Latrine?"). In the Mishnah, Rabban Gamliel tells Peraqlos: "It is not [permissible] to answer in a bathhouse"; however, for the Jerusalem Talmud, sages demonstrate – with textual evidence and through their behavior – that questions pertaining to the bathhouse (or the latrine) may be discussed in that setting.

Having established that queries regarding the bathhouse may be addressed there, it must be determined whether Peraqlos's question pertains to the laws of the bathhouse; if it is, Rabban Gamliel's refusal to answer must be explained. So, the Talmud provides two opinions on the relevance of Peraqlos's inquiry: First, Rabbi Yudan father of Rabbi Matanya, who was active in the fourth century, affirms that his question pertains to "the *halakhot* of the bathhouse," but Rabban Gamliel did not answer since "it is not customary to answer in the bathhouse." Perhaps Rabban Gamliel refrained because a lengthy reply was required (by comparison with the terse responses attributed to Rabbi Meir in the prior anecdote). Second, Rabbi Shmuel bar Abedimi, who was active in the fourth century CE, concurs that Peraqlos's question is relevant to the "the *halakhot* of the bathhouse," though he mentions that the bathhouse's vapors could damage the teeth; therefore, Rabban Gamliel did not want to engage this issue in that location.

Section B challenges Rabban Gamliel's response, particularly his statement that: "[Even] if they gave you much mammon, would you enter a (lit. your) [shrine of] idolatry (lit. foreign cult; *avodah zarah*) [when you are] naked, having just ejaculated or to urinate, in front of her? Yet this [image] stands over the opening of the sewer and all people urinate in front of her" (Mishnah Avodah Zarah 3:4). According to the *haveria* – a cohort of fellow scholars, Rabbi ?amma bar Yosi in the name of Rabbi Hoshaya, and Rabbi Ze'ira in the name of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi – all amoraim who were active in the third century CE – assert that Rabban Gamliel provides an inadequate response that was aimed to divert Peraqlos's attention, since he may offer a counter argument from: "The case of Baal Peor, whose worship is none other than uncovering (one's self before the idol)."

Thus, these third-century rabbis seem to be unimpressed by this portion of Rabban Gamliel's answer, probably because they were aware that pagan worship could take place in bathhouses, in some cases including the behaviors that he details in the mishnah (entering a sanctuary while naked, upon having ejaculated or to urinate before an idol). The Talmud then acknowledges that this is a challenge that may be addressed by the final element of Rabban Gamliel's reply: "The one which is treated as a god is prohibited, but one that is not treated as a god is permitted." Whereas the Mishnah depicts Peraqlos asking a question that Rabban Gamliel then answers, the Talmud speculates on a retort that Peraqlos might have provided, indicating that (at least) certain rabbis considered Rabban Gamliel's response insufficient.

These passages from the Jerusalem Talmud indicate that, for its rabbinic authors, the Roman bathhouse was an integral feature of their world, in which halakhic issues relevant to that institution could be discussed. This material also confirms the legitimacy of Peraqlos's question within "the *halakhot* of the bathhouse" and, furthermore, that part of Rabban Gamliel's reply represents a diversionary strategy rather than cogent argumentation. The Talmud and Mishnah Avodah Zarah 3:4 both conclude that objects are considered idolatrous and, therefore, prohibited only if they are worshiped as deities. Whereas modern scholars have analyzed this mishnah to further their understanding of rabbinic attitudes toward Greco-Roman cults and their institutions, the Jerusalem Talmud's discussion of this mishnah is quite limited in scope.



Keywords in the original language:

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Thematic keywords in English:

- [Acre](#)
- [Ake-Ptolemais](#)
- [Akko](#)
- [Aphrodite](#)
- [Baal Peor](#)
- [bath house](#)
- [idolatry](#)
- [ornament](#)
- [philosopher](#)
- [public latrine](#)
- [Rabban Gamliel](#)
- [statue](#)
- [Venus](#)

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