Special permissions granted to the patriarchal family due to their need to interact effectively with Roman authorities

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Category: Jewish

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Title of work: Jerusalem Talmud
Reference: Shabbat 6:1, 7d

Commentary: The context for this passage from the Jerusalem Talmud is a discussion of prohibitions against performing certain activities on Shabbat. The Talmud discusses Mishnah Shabbat 6:1, which is concerned with women's jewelry and ornaments and, in particular, whether a woman may wear them outside of her home on Shabbat. In that framework, the Talmud mentions special permissions granted to the patriarchal family – which is called here “the household of Rabbi” (Yehudah the Patriarch) – due to their need to interact effectively with Roman authorities.

Section A presents a disagreement regarding whether it is permissible to look in a mirror that is mounted on a wall on Shabbat. While the sages prohibit it, Rabbi Yehudah the Patriarch, who was active in the late second- and early third century, voices his approval. In a parallel in Tosefta Shabbat 13:16, Rabbi's opinion appears in an anonymous voice: “It is not allowed to look at a mirror on Shabbat. If [the mirror] is fastened to the wall it is permitted.” Even though this opening sentence does not refer to women, the fact that this sugya focuses on women's ornamentation may suggest that women are a primary concern here. Thus, at that point, the Talmud brings words attributed to Rabbi Abba, a third-generation amora who was active in the late third- and early fourth century, and transmitted by Rabbi 'A?a, a fourth-generation amora who was active in the first half of the fourth century. Rabbi Abba explains the view of those who prohibit looking at a mirror on Shabbat (the sages' opinion). According to this reasoning, a woman might notice a white hair and remove it, and thereby mistakenly transgress Shabbat's laws. The Talmud continues by stating that the prohibition against men looking in a mirror is constantly in effect (not only on Shabbat), for it is not seen as honorable behavior. The Talmud does not explain why using a mirror diminishes a man's honor.

Section B presents three practices for which the household of Rabbi Yehudah the Patriarch received special dispensation on account of their connections with Roman authorities. The inclusion of “looking in a mirror” in this list prompted the Talmud's editor(s) to place this passage here.

1) Looking in a mirror: As stated above, the Talmud presents this as a dishonorable activity for men. Yet, the patriarchal family receives permission on the basis of their connections with the government, probably to ensure that they maintain an acceptable appearance.

2) A qomi hair style: In the Greco-Roman world, kom? refers to hair on one's head and often means long hair. According to Saul Lieberman, this term is associated with a style where one's hair is cut short at the front and sides of the head but remains long in the back (“Ektoreios kom?”, Tosefta Ki-Feshutah, vol. 3, p. 80; for more information about hair styles in rabbinic texts and the Greco-Roman world, see Beth A. Berkowitz, Defining Jewish Differences, p. 100-106). Sifra, A?arey Mot 8:3 (86a) and Tosefta Shabbat 6:1 prohibit Jews from having this haircut because it was regarded as one of the ways of the Amorite, based on Leviticus 18:3: “You shall not follow their statutes” (NRSV). As Giuseppe Veltri explains, “According to biblical sources, the Amorites are among the former inhabitants of Canaan (cf. Gen 10:16 and Ex 8:17), whose 'abominable' practices the Israelites were not allowed to adopt (cf. Deut 20:17f. and Ezek 21:29ff.). In Rabbinic discussions, the 'ways of the Amorite' became an halakhic category which included most kinds of forbidden foreign customs” (“On the Influence of Greek Wisdom,” p. 309). Despite its rejection of the qomi, the Talmud permits members of the patriarchal family to have their hair styled according to that fashion. This exception also seems concerned with maintaining an appropriate appearance for encounters with Roman officials.

3) Teaching Greek to sons: The rabbinic ban on teaching Greek to one's sons appears in Mishnah Sotah 9:14 and Tosefta Sotah 15:8 in the context of rebellious confrontations between Jews and Romans (for more detail, see the commentaries on these texts). In the Tosefta, explicit permission is granted to the patriarchal family (here referred to as: “the household of Rabban Gamliel”) is mentioned:
“[They decreed that] a man should not teach his son Greek; [however,] they permitted the household of Rabban Gamliel to teach their sons Greek because they are close to the government (malkhut)."

Both the Tosefta and the Talmud assume that the patriarchal family and members of his household – whose precise status during this period is debated – required knowledge of Greek to interact with Roman government officials (who often relied on Greek for communicating with the provincials in the eastern region of the empire). As Azzan Yadin points out “The fourth-century letters of Libanius to the Jewish patriarch provide a fascinating picture of the extent to which the patriarch was engaged in the cultural and intellectual dialogue of the Greek East” (“Rabban Gamliel,” p. 167). While the patriarchal family receives permission to teach Greek, the passage from the Jerusalem Talmud that discusses this prohibition (Sotah 9:14, 24c) states that this ban aimed to stop people from becoming informants for the Roman government. Thus, in the Talmud, teaching Greek to sons is associated with Jews who established or maintained connections with Roman authorities, whether to support or undermine the Jewish community. Clearly, the Jerusalem Talmud viewed these three activities as essential for achieving successful interactions with the Roman authorities: knowledge of Greek language and maintaining a presentable appearance according to Roman norms.

Section C proceeds by discussing whether to teach Greek to daughters. Since one opinion states that knowledge of Greek is like a jewel that adorns one’s daughter, this passage fits well in a sugya that considers women’s ornaments. First, the Talmud cites a teaching that is attributed to Rabbi Yo?anan, a second-generation amora who was active in the third century (died c. 280), by one of his disciples, Rabbi Abbahu, a third-generation amora who resided in Caesarea toward the end of the third century. According to this passage, a father is permitted to teach his daughter Greek since it is like providing an ornament or jewel for her. At least in Caesarea, Greek was considered an asset for young women. However, at that point, the Talmud cites another disciple of Rabbi Yo?anan, Shimon bar [A]bbha, a third-generation amora from Babylonia who was also active in the land of Israel in the late third century. In response to Rabbi Abbahu’s citation from Rabbi Yo?anan that encouraged teaching Greek to daughters, Shimon bar [A]bbha claims that Rabbi Abbahu wanted to teach his daughters and, therefore, attributed that saying to his prestigious teacher. In response, Rabbi Abbahu says: “May [a curse] befall me if I did not hear it from Rabbi Yo?anan.” Thus, this section concludes with a favorable assessment of teaching Greek to daughters as well as to the patriarchal family.

Keywords in the original language:

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Thematic keywords in English:

- foreign customs
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- Rabbi Abbahu
- Rabbi Yehuda the patriarch
• Rabbi Yohanan
• Roman authorities
• Roman government
• Roman rule
• sabbath
• Shimon bar Abba
• ways of the Amorite


Other sources connected with this document:  Text

**Jerusalem Talmud Sotah 9:14, 24c (= Pe‘ah 1:1, 15c)**

The rabbinic ban on teaching Greek to sons

• Read more about Jerusalem Talmud Sotah 9:14, 24c (= Pe‘ah 1:1, 15c)

Text

**Tosefta Sotah 15:6, 8-9**

Decrees following wars against Rome

• Read more about Tosefta Sotah 15:6, 8-9

Text

**Mishnah Sotah 9:14**

Decrees following wars against Rome

• Read more about Mishnah Sotah 9:14

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