

CHAPTER 1

BREASTFEEDING AND RELIGIOUS TRANSMISSION IN RABBINIC LITERATURE

Sarah stood and uncovered herself, and her two breasts were pouring milk like two spouts of water. As it is written: "And she said, Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would suckle children?" (Genesis 21:7).

—Pesikta Rabbati 43:4

Introduction

This chapter explores rabbinic texts that use breastfeeding as a metaphor for spiritual transmission. While these works do not identify God as a nursing mother, they contain two themes that are central to the breastfeeding divine's development in later medieval mystical literature. The first theme presents nursing as a metaphor for transmitting spiritual orientation and is found in stories of prominent Biblical figures such as Sarah, Moses, and Esther. Although these texts address different ideological concerns, they are linked by the concept that suckling a mother's (or, as shall be seen, a father's) milk transmits a life-long spiritual disposition. The preferred disposition in these texts is an orientation toward Judaism, holiness, and performing good deeds. The second theme presents suckling mother's milk as a metaphor for learning and experiencing the Torah. This theme is related to the first, since Judaism understands Torah study as an important way to achieve positive and desirable spirituality. The second theme also incorporates descriptions

of the Torah as a nursing mother. These feminine Torah associations anticipate the two themes' convergence in kabbalistic literature, where Torah becomes one of *Shekhinah's* many signifiers.

In developing their suckling imagery, the rabbis present a metaphor comparing two complex actions: the physical act of breastfeeding and the psychological experience of spiritual transmission. Comparing these very different actions allows the rabbis to understand a mysterious interior experience by appealing to an observable, external one. Breastfeeding's characteristics and associations, as understood by the rabbis, provide structure for the inchoate, personalized experience of spirituality, bringing the abstract into relationship with the concrete.¹ The physical and emotional connections between a nursing mother and her child become tools for understanding how religiosity is passed from one person to another, and suckling's intimate, nourishing connotations are read onto spiritual transmission to provide structure for an experience whose motives and sensations would otherwise remain obscure.²

Each narrative that presents the suckling metaphor engages breastfeeding's basic associations with nurture and tenderness, while offering text-specific details that further texture the reader's understanding of spirituality.³ These details begin, but do not end, with choices about who is suckling from whom, and why. A mother who suckles her own children evokes different associations than a wet nurse who suckles for money (or other reasons). A nursing mother has different connotations than a nursing father. A nameless baby directs a reader's attention differently than a young culture hero like Moses or Esther. In this way, both breastfeeding and spiritual transmission accommodate an almost unlimited number of variations on their central themes, fueling individual religious speculation as the reader interprets these variations for himself. Each permutation adds further nuance to the central idea of suckling as spiritual transmission, laying a firm foundation for the nursing mother image's incorporation into later kabbalistic theology.

The following textual excerpts represent a broad time period, ranging from the fifth century *Genesis Rabbah* through the twelfth century *Exodus Rabbah*. Several of the stories exist in variations that cover five hundred years or more. Although these selections are arranged thematically, their dates demonstrate an ongoing fascination with the metaphor of suckling as spiritual transmission and a living cultural interest in its related imagery. The texts included in this chapter do not represent

all rabbinic works containing the suckling theme. Instead, they are restricted to works identified as “principal sources” for the Zohar’s authors, connecting them to later kabbalistic suckling imagery.⁴ All are fully integrated into the rabbinic canon of study and learning, demonstrating that the suckling metaphor is thoroughly embedded in Judaism’s foundational literature.

Suckling as Spiritual Transmission of Jewish Identity

In the following texts, the rabbis explore the topic of conversion to Judaism by crafting a story that links converts to Judaism’s founding couple, Abraham and Sarah. This story, repeated in several variations, uses the nursing-as-spiritual-transmission metaphor in three ways. It explores the motivations underlying conversion, suggests a “historical” cause for conversion and promotes a positive attitude toward converts. The first version presented, *Pesikta Rabbati* 43:4, is best dated to the sixth or seventh century CE and is the most expansive version of a story found in several parallel texts.⁵ These include *Genesis Rabbah* 53:9 from the first half of the fifth century, Babylonian Talmud *Bava Metzia* 87a from the fifth or sixth century, *Pesikta de Rav Kahana* 22:1 (a fifth century text) and *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* 52, which dates from the eighth to the ninth centuries.⁶ Of these texts, the *Genesis Rabbah* and Talmudic versions seem to provide the main source materials for *Pesikta Rabbati*, which combines and expands the two earlier narratives’ themes.

Pesikta Rabbati 43:4:

And what does it mean, “the happy mother of children” (Psalms 113:9). Rather, at the time that Sarah bore Isaac, the nations of the world were saying, He is the son of a maid-servant and she pretends as if she suckles (*meniqah*) him. At that time he [Abraham] said to her, Sarah, why are you [just] standing [there]?⁷ This is not the time for modesty. Rather, stand and uncover (*hifri’ah*) yourself for the sake of sanctification of the name. Sarah stood and uncovered herself, and her two breasts were pouring (*moriqim*) milk like two spouts of water (*zINUqim shel mayim*). As it is written: “And she said, Who would have said (*millel*) to Abraham that Sarah would suckle (*heniqah*) children?” (Genesis 21:7). Rabbi Pinḥas

ha-Cohen ben Hama said in the name of Rabbi Hilkiah: The stalk of Abraham was dried up, and it was made as a stalk of standing corn (*melilot*)—"Who would have said to Abraham." And the nations of the world were bringing their children to Sarah so that she would suckle them. To fulfill what is said [in scripture]: "Sarah would suckle children." And there were some who were bringing their children in truth so that she would suckle them, and there were some who were bringing their children to investigate. Neither these nor those suffered loss. Rabbi Levi said: Those that came in truth became proselytes (*nitgayeru*).⁸ This is as it is said: "Sarah would suckle children." What is "suckle children"? That they were adopted (*she-nitbanu*) into Israel. And those that came to investigate her? Our rabbis said: They were made great in this world by promotion. And all the proselytes in the world, and all the fearers of heaven that are in the world, are from those who suckled from the milk of Sarah. Therefore, "The happy mother of children"—this is Sarah.

Genesis Rabbah 53:9:

"And she said, Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would suckle children?" (Genesis 21:7). *Would* suckle a child is not written here. Our mother Sarah was extremely modest. Our father Abraham said to her, This is not the time for modesty. Rather, reveal (*gali*) your breasts so that all will know that the Holy One, blessed be He, has begun to do miracles. She revealed her breasts, and they were flowing (*nov'ot*) milk like two springs (*ma'yanot*). And matrons were coming, and they were suckling (*menikot*) their children from her, and they were saying, We are not worthy to suckle our children from the milk of the righteous woman. The rabbis and Rabbi Aḥa [comment on this matter]. The rabbis said: All who came for the sake of heaven were made fearers of heaven. Rabbi Aḥa said: Even those who did not come for the sake of heaven were given power in this world. When they withdrew themselves at Sinai and did not receive the Torah, that power was removed from them.

Babylonian Talmud Bava Metzia 87a:

“And she said, Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would suckle children?” (Genesis 21:7). How many children did Sarah suckle? Rabbi Levi said: That day that Abraham weaned his son Isaac, he made a great feast, and all the nations of the world were muttering and saying, Do you see the old man and old woman that brought a foundling from the market and are saying, He is our son? And not only that, but they have made a great feast to uphold their words! What did our father Abraham do? He went and invited all the great people of the generation, and our mother Sarah invited their wives, and each and every one brought her child with her, but did not bring her wet nurse. And a miracle was done for our mother Sarah, and her breasts were opened (*niftehu*) like two springs (*ma'ayanot*) and she suckled (*heniqah*) all of them. And still they were muttering and saying, If Sarah, who is ninety years old, can bear, can Abraham, who is one hundred years old, beget a child? Immediately the countenance of Isaac was changed and he was made to resemble Abraham. They all opened (*pathu*) and said, Abraham begat Isaac.⁹

These stories are most obviously concerned with establishing the newborn Isaac's lineage as a direct descendant of Abraham and Sarah, and each makes its case with a story about miraculous breastfeeding. All three narratives respond to an unusual word choice in Genesis 21:7: “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would suckle children?” The word *children* seems inconsistent with Sarah's single son, and the rabbinic interpreters address this scriptural detail by placing her in a broader mothering role that allows her to nurse many children.¹⁰ Although each narrative contains the same miracle, the three works assign different results to Sarah's superabundant milk. The oldest text, *Genesis Rabbah* 53:9, uses the suckling miracle to explain the origins of “fearers of heaven” and those with worldly power. The children Sarah breastfeeds build up fear of heaven in the world by becoming God-fearing people. The matriarch reveals her breasts, the physical miracle is revealed, and an interior miracle (the infants' orientation toward God) takes place. In BT *Bava Metzia* 87a, doubt about Isaac's real parents

inspires the miracle, and Sarah's abundant milk resolves her status as a mother. Abraham's paternity is established by a second miraculous occurrence in which Isaac's face changes to resemble his father's more closely. The onlookers' spiritual transformation is reflected by the term *open*, used to describe both the manifestation of Sarah's milk and the former doubters' final, enlightened statement.

Pesikta Rabbati 43:4, the story's latest version, combines the earlier narratives' themes to construct a coherent myth about the origin of converts to Judaism. In this myth, the nations of the world (meaning non-Jews) express doubt about Isaac's lineage and God performs a milk-based miracle for Sarah, proving her fertility. The nations participate in this miracle, and the children of those who come to witness it are transformed into the ancestors of all future proselytes and God fearers, receiving Jewish religiosity through the medium of the matriarch's milk.¹¹ Not only does Sarah bear a child, she also becomes mother to a large adoptive family, a theme emphasized by Rabbi Levi's assertion that "suckling children" means adopting them into Israel.¹² This miraculous response to doubt engenders generations of belief in God, and spiritual orientation imparted through Sarah's milk does not end with the recipients' lifetimes, but continues for all time. It is as though the nursing children's ancestors bear within them the seeds of Jewish spirituality, which may emerge in their distant descendants.

In these texts, suckling milk serves as a powerful metaphor for transmitting Jewish spiritual lineage. This lineage includes an associative physicality, since all Jews are understood to be Abraham and Sarah's descendants. The conceptual claim underlying the metaphor is that proselytes are linked both spiritually *and* physically to the people of Israel through the medium of Sarah's milk. Rather than being strangers, they become adopted children, naturalized into the community. The term used for this process, *nitbanu*, is related to the verb *banah* (to build), a term included in the *Genesis Rabbah* variant recorded in Theodor and Albeck's critical edition.¹³ There, the rabbis are inspired by the similarity between the word "children" (*banim*) and the word "builders" (*banai*), saying of Sarah, "she suckles children, she suckles builders." This theme is also found in Babylonian Talmud *Berakhot* 64a, where the sages' students are considered both children and builders of peace through their Torah.¹⁴ Effectively, the children Sarah suckles are built up as her own children, causing them in turn to build up the people Israel. Through a mother's milk, interior religiosity is

conveyed, and this religiosity is powerful enough to pass through innumerable generations of proselytes.

The suckling-as-spiritual-transmission metaphor found in these texts is not a purely rabbinic innovation. It can be traced to conceptual precedents in the Hebrew Bible, which contains its own group of metaphors linking life-giving liquid to faith and knowledge. The Bible's tales take place in an environment that is largely desert. In such a setting, water is a life-giving resource necessary to human survival, much as milk is necessary to an infant. Water imagery appears frequently in the Hebrew Bible, where it is often associated with divinity, salvation, and wisdom. Michael Fishbane notes, "open wells repeatedly serve in biblical texts as a metonymy for sustenance and life." His examples include Proverbs 18:4, "The words of a man's mouth are deep water, a flowing (*nove'a*) river, a fount (*meqor*) of wisdom," and Isaiah 12:3, which associates eschatological hope with drawing water "from the springs of salvation," (*mi-ma'aynei ha-yeshu'ah*). He also calls attention to Jeremiah 17:13, in which God is titled the "Hope (*miqueh*) of Israel," and the "Fount of Living Water (*meqor mayim-hayyim*)" pointing out that "The use of the epithet *miqueh* 'hope' adds a rich theological resonance . . . since the word can also mean 'pool of water.'"¹⁵

The language that Proverbs, Isaiah, and Jeremiah associate with the water-as-wisdom metaphor is strongly reflected in the Sarah story's multiple versions. *Genesis Rabbah* 53:9 explains that Sarah's breasts were flowing (*nov'ot*) milk like two springs (*ma'yanot*), and BT *Bava Metzia* 87a similarly states that Sarah's breasts were opened like two springs (*ma'ayanot*). Although the *Pesikta Rabbati* version employs different terms (spouts of water: *zinquim shel mayim*), it is a later text, and the earlier linguistic connections are already clear. While none of the Biblical verses linking water with hope and wisdom appear quoted in the context of the Sarah story, linguistic clues and metaphoric similarities indicate an intellectual connection between the ideas. In both cases, spiritual orientation is transmitted through a liquid medium. The rabbinic texts about Sarah's miraculous suckling add definition and nuance to this basic metaphor by changing its medium from water to breast milk and restricting the type of spirituality being transmitted from generalized faith to motivation toward conversion.

In these miracle tales, Sarah represents a human well of living water as she literally flows with milk, her body becoming the locus of a divine event framed within the Biblical genre of the spring. The

water-as-wisdom-and-salvation metaphor's expansion into the milk-as-spiritual-transmission metaphor demonstrates how religious imagery mediates the boundary between tradition and innovation, naturalizing new concepts by associating them with previously existing ones. In this case the associations surrounding the Bible's water-as-salvific-wisdom metaphor inspire a milk-as-spiritual-transmission metaphor that partakes of its antecedent while venturing forth in new directions. As water quenches thirst and sustains physical life, so does spiritual hope sustain interior life, an inchoate experience difficult to grasp without metaphor. In the Sarah stories, the psychological event of spiritual transmission is associated with the physical event of breastfeeding. The qualities associated with a mother suckling her child, such as emotional intimacy and physical sustenance, combine with other qualities of motherhood (such as the intimate life processes and early social lessons that a mother teaches her child) and become abstracted.¹⁶ This experience is accessible not only to the mother and her child, but also to those who witness the intimacy and nurture of the suckling act (such as the male rabbis and later kabbalists).

The Sarah story represents a beautiful literary mode for conveying the passage of faith from mother to child, but clearly there are other concerns underlying the text. Clues about these texts' ideological purposes can be found by exploring the narratives' broad historical and cultural contexts. It is possible to suggest at least two motivations for Sarah's miraculous suckling and the proselytes' addition to the Israelite family. One motivation relates to the rabbis' legal innovation of matrilineal religious transmission, which asserts that when parents of differing religions produce offspring, Jewish religious and ethnic identity is transmitted from the mother. The other engages difficulties surrounding the conversion process. The Sarah stories reflect halakhic developments (and presumably social practices) surrounding Judaism's transmission by both birth and conversion, indicating a rabbinic concern with these topics and a concerted long-term effort to naturalize legal innovations about Jewish identity within the rabbinic community.¹⁷ Presenting stories whose images provided holistic understanding of legal decisions was a valuable tool for encouraging the rabbinic community to accept and understand new laws.

Classical rabbinic literature was composed during the upheaval Judaism suffered after the Temple's destruction in 70 CE. In the wake

of this loss and of failed rebellions against Rome, the rabbis worked to develop a Judaism that differed in many ways from the version that had dominated the Jewish world while the Temple stood. One of the rabbis' key concerns was self-definition, as they attempted to assert their theology and cultural messages within a particular community. Several scholars have observed that this formative period of Jewish development was spurred by the encounter with Hellenistic culture in the Roman world.¹⁸ Hellenistic culture's broad appeal raised rabbinic concerns both about assimilation and about understanding the developing Jewish community's theological and cultural boundaries.¹⁹ At the same time, emerging Roman legislation made it vitally important to understand who was Jewish and who was not. For example, the *fiscus Judaicus*, a Roman tax on Jews levied in the seventies CE and lasting until approximately the fourth century, made Jewish identity a financial concern, as well as an ideological one.²⁰

Judaism's matrilineal transmission seems to have developed during this formative period, and it is an issue clearly addressed in the narratives that ground Isaac's and proselytes' religious identities in their contact with the matriarch Sarah. Shaye Cohen and Martin Goodman both date matrilineal transmission to the middle of the second century CE, while the principle appears for the first time in the *Mishna*, tractate *Qiddushin* 3:12.²¹ (Before that time, women were naturalized into their husbands' families, and children followed the male's status.)²² The reasons behind this development remain unclear.²³ Goodman suggests that it was spurred by the *fiscus Judaicus* requiring more rigorous forms of Jewish self-definition, while Cohen suggests it may have involved the dynamics of rabbinic logic or the developing idea that women could convert to Judaism officially.²⁴ In any case, the matrilineal principle was eventually embraced by the rabbinic community and is still applied by many Jewish groups today.

The Sarah story, particularly in the *Pesikta Rabbati* version, functions as a narrative explanation of how this matrilineal principle operates on physical and spiritual levels. Judaism is passed from mother to child in cases of mixed marriages, and the medium (at least in this rabbinic tale) is mother's milk. Although the story does not deal with a mixed marriage, it artificially creates a situation in which children have gentile fathers and a Jewish mother figure. The rabbis highlight the idea that spiritual stance is inherited from the mother by employing

the metaphor of mother's milk as a medium of spiritual transmission. In *Genesis Rabbah* and *Pesikta Rabbati*, birth mothers' religious beliefs also affect their children, influencing the ultimate outcome of Sarah's spiritual contribution. The children of those women who come in truth become God fearers and proselytes, while the offspring of those who come to investigate receive only worldly good. By metaphorically becoming their spiritual mother through the physical act of nursing, Sarah enables these children to partake of the Israelite lineage, and the suckling metaphor provides a mythic prototype that promotes a recent halakhic ruling.²⁵

The other issue addressed in the Sarah texts, and particularly in *Pesikta Rabbati*, is the status of proselytes. By providing an origin myth for converts to Judaism, the text asserts a particular ideological stance in relation to these ambiguous figures. Scholars maintain several different viewpoints about proselytes in the rabbinic period, with key debates centered on the rabbinic attitude toward converts' status and the extent to which an active proselytizing movement existed during the Hellenistic period. For example, Louis Feldman believes that the rabbinic attitude toward converts and proselytism was generally favorable, while incorporating some ambivalence.²⁶ He cites contrasting texts such as *Tanhuma Lekh Lekha* 6, which states that the proselyte is superior in status to the born Jew because he accepts the Torah without witnessing the revelation at Sinai—and BT *Qiddushin* 70b, in which Rabbi Helbo states that proselytes cause as much injury to the people of Israel as scabs.²⁷ Shaye Cohen concurs with this perspective, citing synagogue inscriptions that add "the proselyte" to people's names as evidence.²⁸ The topic's importance to the Jewish community is confirmed by evidence that converts' legal status remained problematic through the Middle Ages.²⁹

Further complicating the conversion issue, some scholars believe that a substantial Jewish effort at proselytizing existed under Roman rule, peaking before the third century and continuing under later Christian dominion, while others argue that Jews accepted converts but did not make an active effort to gain them, except in a few cases influenced by contact with early Christian proselytizing.³⁰ Conversion rituals appear for the first time in rabbinic literature with BT *Yevamot* 47a-b, which gives the framework for a ceremony that was expanded in the post-Talmudic tractate *Gerim* 1:1.³¹ Cohen dates this innovation

to the second century CE, suggesting that before this turning point conversion was a private, personal, and unstructured matter—rather than a public, formal ritualized one.³² Assessing an ancient conversion effort's existence is further complicated by a substantial body of Roman legislation against Jewish proselytizing passed during this period.³³ Interpreting this information with regard to rabbinic culture is clearly a difficult process. Yet these studies demonstrate that defining conversion and encouraging appropriate attitudes toward converts were topics of interest to both the Jewish and Roman communities during the Talmudic period—the formative period for the Sarah stories.

Of course, proselytes are not the only ambiguous characters in these stories. Fearers of heaven, known more commonly as God fearers, also bear a direct relationship to the Jewish community through their connection with Sarah.³⁴ Louis Feldman writes, “The term G-d fearers or sympathizers apparently refers to an ‘umbrella group,’ embracing many different levels of interest in and commitment to Judaism, ranging from people who supported synagogues financially . . . to people who accepted the Jewish view of G-d in pure or modified form to people who observed certain distinctively Jewish practices, notably the Sabbath.”³⁵ Inscriptions that mention God fearers from Rome, Aphrodisias, Rhodes, Miletus, and Sardis show that the movement probably peaked in the third century CE.³⁶ This chronology coincides with the conversion ceremony's development and implies a period during which the rabbis were especially eager to distinguish Jews (and Jewish sympathizers) from gentiles.³⁷

All of these cultural terms are evident in the *Pesikta Rabbati* text. Both proselytes and God fearers suckle religiosity from Sarah the matriarch, tying them to the Jewish people and integrating the conversion process with the matrilineal principle. This text shows the rabbis addressing cultural concerns by constructing narratives with metaphors that psychologically reinforce their ideologies, representing an attempt to affirm the ambiguous proselytes' and God fearers' religious validity by allowing them to participate in a divine event. The miracle's particular nature binds them to the wellspring of Jewish identity, creating a fictive lineage that allows them access to the Israelite group through adoptive naturalization, which Rabbi Levi describes as suckling's true definition.³⁸ In essence, this scriptural interpretation of Genesis 21:7 creates a mythological justification for those who otherwise inexplicably

choose to become Jews, as well as advocating a particular attitude toward them. In explaining these converts' religious choice through a powerful, culturally relevant metaphor, the rabbis are strongly suggesting that "native" Jews treat proselytes as family.³⁹

It is true that these cultural polemics are veiled in the text, and that it is not possible to draw concrete links between the rabbinic matrilineal ruling, the conversion process, and the miracle stories about Sarah. However, the Sarah texts do deal explicitly with issues of motherhood, Jewish lineage, God fearers, and the origin of proselytes in innovative ways, and it seems likely that contemporary cultural concerns helped to inspire the metaphor of mother's milk as a fountain of Jewish spirituality. These texts deal with identity issues that were being revised, defined, and explicated during the rabbinic period, particularly around the time of the second and third centuries CE, but extending to the fifth century and beyond. Such identity issues remained topics of comment and controversy through the Middle Ages, and continue to be debated topics within the Jewish community today. Although the *Pesikta Rabbati* text can be dated safely only to the sixth or seventh centuries, the *Genesis Rabbah* version from the fifth century and the Babylonian Talmud version from the fifth or sixth century indicate that this issue was being addressed at the height of the classical rabbinic period and suggests these texts likely had an earlier lineage. For example, the Rabbi Levi cited in the *Pesikta Rabbati* story was a Palestinian *Amora* from the third century CE, placing him squarely within these cultural concerns' most relevant time frame.⁴⁰

Pesikta Rabbati 43:4 contains two further points of interest that strengthen the text's association with conversion issues. First, the ancient rabbis considered Abraham and Sarah to be prototypic proselytizers, bearing a special relationship to converts because of their own original "conversions" to Judaism. *Genesis Rabbah* 39:14, *Song of Songs Rabbah* 1:22, and *Numbers Rabbah* 14:11 all contain texts that describe the couple making proselytes. These texts are based on Genesis 12:5, in which Abraham and Sarah are said to have "made souls in Haran." The rabbis understand the term *souls* to mean "proselytes," perceiving the converts as somehow ensouled by the event.⁴¹ Second, the text reflects the theory that women, more than men, were attracted to Judaism as converts and God fearers during the Roman period.⁴² This cultural factor may be represented in the *Pesikta Rabbati* story, which features

women acknowledging the Jewish God's holiness through a deferred relationship with Sarah.

Suckling as Spiritual Transmission of Holiness, Commandments, and Good Deeds

The following texts continue to develop the suckling-as-spiritual-transmission motif. While the Sarah stories present breastfeeding as a way to transmit spiritual identity at the community level, these works suggest that nursing shapes individual character, placing emphasis on breastfeeding's relationship to personal religious identity. Here, receiving physical nourishment from an appropriate source predisposes a child to be holy and to perform the commandments and good deeds. The identity of those who give and receive suckling becomes critically important, as a mother's social role in shaping her child's character is equated with the nursing act. These texts provide cultural context for the Sarah stories, since they imply a perceived rabbinic connection between a mother's physically nurturing role and her role as a child's earliest educator in spiritual behavior.

Exodus Rabbah 1:25:

“And his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, [Shall I go and call for you a wet-nurse woman of the Hebrews, and she will suckle the child for you?”] (Exodus 2:7). Why did Miriam say “of the Hebrews?” Is it [because] it was forbidden for Moses to suckle (*linoq*) from the milk of a gentile? Not so, for we have learned, “A daughter of Israel shall not suckle (*taniq*) the child of a gentile woman, but a gentile woman may suckle a child of Israel in her domain.”⁴³ So, why did she say thusly? Because she took Moses around to all the Egyptian women to suckle him, and he rejected (*u-fasal*) all of them. And why did he reject them? The Holy One, blessed be He, said, The mouth that in the future shall speak with me, shall it suckle an unclean (*tame*) thing? It corresponds to what is written: “To whom shall he teach knowledge, [and who shall he make understand tradition? Those who are weaned from milk, removed from the breasts”] (Isaiah 28:9). To whom shall one teach knowledge?

To “those who are weaned from milk,” etc. Another thing: Why did he reject their breasts? The Holy One, blessed be He, said, This one, who in the future shall speak with me, shall the Egyptian women be saying in the future, This one who speaks with the *Shekhinah*—I suckled him!⁴⁴

This text tells a story in which a wet nurse is sought for the infant Moses after Pharaoh's daughter rescues him from the river. The tale intervenes in the Biblical narrative found in Exodus 2:6–9, which tells how Moses received his own Hebrew mother as a wet nurse. Although the Biblical text seems straightforward, the rabbinic interpreters assign additional significance to Moses' nursing from his own mother, depicting the infant actively rejecting Egyptian women available for the task. While *Exodus Rabbah* 1:25 is a medieval text that can be dated to the tenth or twelfth century, the story also exists in an earlier version. Babylonian Talmud *Sotah* 12b, a product of the late fifth or early sixth century, contains another presentation of the same narrative. The two texts are extremely similar, with most differences falling into the later text's elaboration on the former.⁴⁵ The story's presence in the Talmud locates it in close chronological proximity to the Sarah story's first written appearances, a connection that suggests the nursing-as-spiritual-transmission theme either remained compelling from the fifth century through the Middle Ages or reemerged into relevance during the time of the earliest kabbalists. While all the texts cited in this chapter provide source material for the Zohar, this work bears an especially close link to the kabbalists, since the first known quotations of *Exodus Rabbah* occur in writings by Azriel of Gerona and Nahmanides, influential thirteenth-century kabbalists who preceded the Zohar's composition.⁴⁶

Exodus Rabbah 1:25's terminology deserves some explanation. The term *u-fasal*, although translated as “and he rejected” for narrative integrity, connotes a declaration that something is ritually unfit. The infant Moses does not simply reject the Egyptians' breasts as an unknowing child. Instead, he makes a ritual judgment about these women that actually runs counter to an established halakhic ruling. As the passage notes, gentiles *are* allowed to nurse Israelite children under some circumstances. The passage's end discloses the source of young Moses' rejection. It seems that God has inspired the infant to reject the Egyptians' breasts because they threaten special ritual uncleanness for a special prophet. God Himself provides an explanation, asserting that

a mouth that suckled from an unclean source should not speak with Him. God also curtails any opportunities for arrogance on the Egyptian women's part, reinforcing Moses' Israelite identity.

The implication here, as in the Sarah story, is that the milk an infant suckles transmits spiritual influence. In this case, milk metaphorically carries personal spiritual status and an individual orientation toward holiness. Suckling from an Egyptian woman would transmit uncleanness to the young prophet, rendering him unfit for his intimate future relationship with the divine. The text also emphasizes young Moses' relationship to his mother's personal spirituality, in which he participates through her milk. In doing so, it engages the matrilineal principle, because it accentuates the significance of Moses suckling his own Jewish mother's milk rather than that of non-Jewish women. Departing from the Sarah stories' halakhic connections, this work presents suckling appropriate spiritual transmission as a desirable end in itself, rather than as a narrative underpinning for a legal concept. While the Sarah story reinforces halakhic rulings on matrilineal Jewish transmission, the Moses narrative overrides a Mishnaic legal principle in its zeal for a suitable milk source. The next text makes a similar point.

Genesis Rabbah 30:8:

It is curious, that Mordekhai fed and sustained (*zan u-mefarnes*)! Rabbi Yudan said: Once he went around to all of the wet nurses and did not find one for Esther. Forthwith, he suckled her [himself] (*meniqaḥ ve-haya meniqaḥ hu*). Rabbi Berekhya and Rabbi Abbahu [said] in the name of Rabbi Eliezer: Milk came to him and he suckled her.⁴⁷

In this text, the rabbis interpret the verb *haya* (literally, "he was") in Genesis 6:9 as an act of feeding and sustaining, extending this interpretation to several characters whose narratives include the verb. After discussing Noah, Joseph, and Job,—all of whose feeding and sustaining involve solid food—the text turns to Mordekhai and expresses surprise at his inclusion in the list. Rather than serving food, Mordekhai produces milk and breastfeeds the infant Esther after he fails to find an appropriate wet nurse. Although the narrative implies that women are available for this feminine task, none of them seem adequate for the young heroine. The story's masculine nursing is unusual, and in its continuation, the congregation ridicules Rabbi Abbahu for teaching this

interpretation in public. He defends himself with BT *Shabbat* 53b, in which Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar rules, "The milk of a male is clean."⁴⁸

The motivation for this story, which is not explicitly stated in the text, seems to be that Esther 2:7 reads, "And he [Mordekhai] was a nursing father (*omen*) to Hadassah." The curious term *omen* is also applied to Moses in Numbers 11:12, where the prophet complains to God about the Israelites' childish, petulant behavior, "Did I conceive all of this people, did I bear it, that you should say to me, carry it in your bosom as the nursing father (*ha'-omen*) carries the suckling child (*ha-yoneq*)?" To the rabbis, the term *omen* (nursing father) implies that Mordekhai actually did feed and sustain Esther from his own body. However, it is worth noting that not all midrashic texts make this gender-defying interpretive leap. *Midrash on Psalms* 22:23, a text of uncertain dating containing both early and late materials, interprets Esther 2:7 differently. In this work, Mordekhai's wife suckles Esther, allowing him the role of nursing father in a metonymic sense that reads his wife as an extension of himself.⁴⁹

The rabbis in this text are making a point other than the congregational humor inspired by their unusual teaching.⁵⁰ Their reasoning runs roughly parallel to that of *Exodus Rabbah* 1:25 and chronologically parallels the version of that story found in BT *Sotah* 12b. Although the wet nurses to whom Mordekhai takes Esther are not specifically described as unclean, clearly they are unsuitable in some way. Mordekhai, an eminently righteous individual, is the only one whose spirituality is pure enough for the young Esther (a future religious heroine, as Moses is a future prophet), and so the only one whose milk is an acceptable source of nourishment for her. The matrilineal message is diverted to explain a confusing Biblical verse, but the principal metaphor of spiritual transmission via suckling remains securely in place. In fact, the strength of the underlying suckling-as-spiritual-transmission metaphor is maintained even in a case where the metaphor overrides normative rabbinic gender roles by positing a nursing father. This male suckling theme is also found in certain Zoharic passages and so is more significant than the bizarre aside it may seem at first glance.

Genesis Rabbah 39:3

"And the Lord said to Abram, [Go forth from your land, and from your kindred, and from the house of your father to the

land that I will show you”] (Genesis 12:1). Rabbi Berekhya opened: “We have a little sister and she has no breasts. [What will we do for our sister on the day that she is spoken for?”] (Song 8:8). “We have a little sister,”—this is Abraham, who united all who came into the world.⁵¹ Bar Kappara said: Like one who sews the tear. “Little,”—who while he was little was saving up commandments and good deeds. “And she has no breasts,”—no breasts suckled him in commandments or good deeds (*lo’ heniquhu lo’ l-mitzvot u-ma’asim tovim*).

This textual excerpt is embedded in a series of rabbinic interpretations that use Song of Songs 8 to enumerate Abraham’s good deeds. The quoted portion comments on Abraham’s greatness by explaining that even without suckling righteousness from a suitable source, he nonetheless achieved it. This interpretation alters Song 8:8’s literal meaning; instead of a prepubescent girl who has not yet developed breasts, Abraham is compared to a girl-child with no righteous person to nurse her. Here, the suckling-as-spiritual-transmission metaphor is so deeply implicit that it is used as a counterexample, representing a benefit the young Abraham did not possess. The text is rooted in the idea that a mother transmits religious observance to her child by breastfeeding, implying an underlying cultural assumption about the close relationship between a mother’s nurturing and teaching roles. This work is contemporary with one of the Sarah story’s earliest versions, *Genesis Rabbah* 53:9, and seems to provide a cultural underpinning for the miraculous mothering in that story. If a mother regularly suckles her child in commandments and good deeds, it is not extravagant to assume that she suckles her child in Jewish status as well. The text does not say that Abraham lacked nourishment as a child, nor does it provide a story of his miraculous milk-free survival. Instead, it explains that he lacked a mother with proper spiritual orientation. As the first Jew (in the rabbis’ understanding) it was impossible for him to receive the beneficial care of a Jewish mother.⁵² This tale underscores his uniquely righteous character.

The expression “suckled in commandments and good deeds” is found in at least one other rabbinic passage from a relatively early source. *Song of Songs Rabbah* (mid-sixth century) also uses this terminology to explicate Song 8:8. In this work, Rabbi Yoḥanan associates

Song 8:8's little sister with the city of Sodom by connecting the verse with Ezekiel 16:46: "And your little sister who dwells at your right hand is Sodom and her daughters."

Song of Songs Rabbah on Song 8:8:

Rabbi Yoḥanan interpreted the verse as [referring to] Sodom and Israel: "We have a little sister" (Song 8:8). As it is written: "And your big sister is Samaria [. . . and your little sister who dwells at your right hand is Sodom and her daughters]" (Ezekiel 16:46). "And she has no breasts" (Song 8:8). For she did not suckle commandments or good deeds (*she-lo' heniqah mitzvot u-ma'asim tovim*).

These two texts demonstrate a rabbinic cultural assumption that mothers (and wet nurses) impart spiritual orientation to children during breastfeeding. This assumption arises because the rabbis associate breastfeeding with the cultural education a child receives during its formative years, placing great importance on the character of the woman entrusted with this early education. Rabbi Yoḥanan's teaching provides a cautionary statement about the wickedness that can intervene in people's developmental processes when they lack access to a proper caregiver, emphasizing the importance of a child's earliest spiritual influence. Connecting the physical act of suckling with the interior process of religious identity's formation inspires the suckling-as-spiritual-transmission metaphor.

Being suckled in commandments and good deeds may seem like an odd idea, but it is not really an alien concept for English speakers. Consider the expression, "It was mother's milk to me." There, mother's milk refers to an idea or activity that has been part of a person's life from an early age, eventually becoming second nature to that person and an important part of that individual's identity. The English language contains several expressions that associate knowledge and ideas with nourishment, giving rise to a metaphoric genre closely related to the rabbis' suckling image. English speakers refer to "swallowing" claims and "digesting" ideas, while describing puzzling matters as "food for thought."⁵³ These expressions illustrate that the ancient rabbis' suckling metaphor may be closer to modern thinking than it first appears.⁵⁴

Suckling as Spiritual Transmission: Suckling Blessings

Pesikta Rabbati 7:9:

[The verse], “All of you is beautiful, my beloved, [and there is no blemish in you”] (Song 4:7), speaks of the tribes. And if you will say: Behold, their father Jacob blessed the tribes, but chided Reuben and Shimon and Levi, and [so] how can you say [that this verse applies to them]? Rabbi Eleazar said: Although he blessed the latter tribes and chided the first, rather he returned and blessed them. As it is written: “All of these are the twelve tribes of Israel [and this is what their father spoke to them. And he blessed them. Each according to his blessing, he blessed them”] (Genesis 49:28). What is it: “And this is what their father spoke to them. And he blessed them?” Rabbi Eleazar said: He made them suckle one from another.

This interesting text, the final example for the suckling as spiritual transmission theme, exists in two forms. One is found in *Pesikta Rabbati* 7:9, dating to the sixth or seventh century and contemporary with the Sarah story found in that text, and the other occurs in *Numbers Rabbah* 13:8, placing it in the twelfth century.⁵⁵ The two versions are extremely similar, and do not contain variants on any of the story’s core ideas. In both cases, the narrative provides evidence of a suckling-as-spiritual-transmission metaphor that is structured without feminine connotations. No mother figure is present here, and the passage also lacks reference to milk or breasts. Instead, suckling functions as a more generalized mode of spiritual transmission. Although the suckled spirituality transmitted in this text is a father’s blessing, which hints at a connection to parental nurture, the tribal ancestors nurse spiritual inheritance from each other as a closed, organic system. Suckling, which has textual precedents associating it with religious transmission, is presented simply as the means by which spiritual flow is communicated from person to person. Blessings appear as religious forces transmitted via suckling, whether or not there is a mother figure present to provide milk.⁵⁶

This text’s use of suckling is particularly interesting because it anticipates kabbalistic literature’s theology of suckling divine overflow, in

which God's energy and blessings are passed among the divine aspects and between God and humanity in a similarly structured system. Furthermore, *Numbers Rabbah*, in which this narrative also appears, was a foundational source for early Kabbalah. Some of the first works to cite it were composed by mid-thirteenth-century Geronese kabbalists like Rabbi Ezra, whose theology will be further explored in the following chapter.⁵⁷ This passage implies that the Israelite tribal ancestors exist as an organic system in which each can derive blessings from the other. The *sefirot* are described similarly in kabbalistic writings, making this text an exciting link to mystical literature's suckling theology.

Suckling as Torah Transmission

Babylonian Talmud Eruvin 54b:

Rabbi Samuel bar Naḥmani said: Why is it written, "A loving doe and a graceful mountain goat, [her breasts will satisfy you at all times, you will always be infatuated with her love]" (Proverbs 5:19). Why are the words of Torah compared to a doe? To tell you that as a doe has a narrow womb and is loved by her lover each and every time as she was the first time, so the words of Torah are loved by those who study them each and every time as they were the first time. "And a graceful mountain goat?" Because She [the Torah] bestows grace on those who study Her. "Her breasts will satisfy you (*yeravukha*) at all times." Why are the words of Torah compared to a breast? As with this breast, that every time the child touches it he finds milk in it, so it is with the words of Torah. Every time that a man reasons in them, he finds pleasure (*t'am*) in them.

This text is part of a lengthier passage dealing with Torah transmission and interpretation. I would like to pass over this excerpt's very interesting erotic connotations and focus on its latter portion, in which the words of Torah are compared to a female breast. At first glance, the text appears to draw a simple analogy between the pleasurable physical nourishment a nursing infant receives from its mother and the pleasurable spiritual nourishment a person receives from the Torah. However, this analogy becomes more interesting when considering the