A chain of seven stories in tractate Ketubot in the Babylonian Talmud centers on a narrative construct spanning two ostensibly contradictory locations: the study house (beth midrash) and the family. The beth midrash—a place for study, discussion, learning, and thought, devoted to spiritual development and to the fulfillment of intellectual yearnings—is contrasted with the family home—a place for chores, sustenance, procreation, and child-rearing. In these stories the scholar or “the sage” abandons his home, his wife, and his family and goes away to the study house for long periods lasting between a few weeks and many years. The stories revolve around moments of separation and return—dramatic moments marking the climax of the tensions between the locations representing two sides of the sage’s life: his life as a scholar yearning for Torah and his life as a family man who is not actively and continuously present in the lives of the family members he left behind.

Numerous readings of this chain of stories feature in the research and interpretation of rabbinic literature. Yona Fraenkel,
Daniel Boyarin, Tal Ilan, Shulamit Valler, and Jeffrey Rubenstein have repeatedly read these stories as illustrations of the conflict between opposite values—between the value of learning, which requires a prolonged stay in the study house, and the duty to realize the value of marital life. As the cycle of stories is read as thematizing the struggle between these two values, it is also read as representing a conflict between opposite desires—the desire for the woman as opposed to the desire for the Torah.

Our reason for entering this crowded scholarly area was the limited concern of these readings with the standing and function of the father. The father is a recurring character in these stories, although his shape changes from story to story and his locations vary: At times he is the actual scholar missing from the life of his children, who remained behind with their mother; at times he is the father of a groom demanding that his son go away to study Torah before consummating his marriage, and at times he is the father of the bride who functions as a kind of “third wheel”—blocking or supporting his daughter’s marriage to a scholar. In our view, a slight change of focus, shifting from the tension between learning and conjugal life to the tension between fatherly presence and fatherly absence, could shed light on additional aspects that have not yet received sufficient attention: the very tension between Torah study and family life (not only conjugal intimacy), the female characters (wives and daughters) populating these stories, and the father’s character in rabbinic stories in general. For us, the title *The Return of the Absent Father* touches not only on the character of the scholar who returns home to meet his children but also, and mainly, on our will to bring back the father—who is missing from the discourse that was created around this chain of stories—to the center of the discussion.
The various locations of the father in the chain of stories attest that the father’s figure should be interpreted along an absence-presence axis. At one end of it is a father who is missing from his children’s lives and had no part in their education and upbringing, and at the other, a father who closely supervises the lives of his sons and daughters, perhaps even vicariously living through them the life of study or of conjugal sexuality that is denied to him.

The absence-presence axis highlights the main tension that has long been related to the father figure. In some senses the father is the “most present” as well as the “most absent,” both regarding his cultural function and the place assigned to him in the psyche. In Sigmund Freud’s theory—in the aspect touching on psychic development and in the one dealing with the development of civilization—the father is the prominent figure, the most influential, and the most present. His threatening presence, evoking castration anxiety in the son, becomes a powerful drive in the son’s mental development, which leads to the Oedipal complex solution and to fitting social integration. (Alternatively, it is the same presence that, according to Freud’s Oedipal model, evokes penis envy in the daughter, leading to her limited function in the social sphere and to her restriction to the home and family space.) At the same time, the father is also the most absent. In this classic view, the mother is the physical, continuous, and sensory presence in the child’s life, while the father remains a vague and intangible form, in a way that encourages his elevation to the rank of a symbol. Following Freud, Jacques Lacan sets the “symbolic father” at the center of his theory as a figure that prevails far beyond its physical manifestation and is embodied in all aspects of the patriarchal system. The father comes to signify entry into the gates of culture, conveyed in the acquisition of language and in compliance with social laws—in Lacan’s
terms, “the Law of the Father.” As such, “the Law of the Father”
depends not at all on the presence of an actual father but on the
way the father’s function is symbolized within the language and
the discourse.

Psychoanalysis shows that, despite the dominant role assigned
to the father as the founder of law, social order, language, and
meaning—mainly in the constitutive theories of Freud and Lacan—
his importance remains fundamentally symbolic. His place as a
living and active figure within the family structure—as a person
attached to his children by blood bonds as well as by psychic and
emotional ties, as responsible for their sustenance, education, and
growth—remains abstract and hardly a subject of theoretical con-
cern. Psychoanalysis has undergone fundamental changes, evident
in the transition from Freudian approaches to theories of object
relations, beginning with Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott
and up to the intersubjective approaches of contemporary psy-
choanalysis that have focused on the mother and the mother-child
bond, further intensifying the lacuna pertinent to the father. The
ascribed existence of the father as a symbol, as the central signifier
of authoritative power—all the way to the representation of God as a
father, “Our Father in Heaven”—has indeed strengthened and rein-
forced the tendency to blur him and detract from his importance
as an actual figure in family life that represents not only authority,
prohibitions, and control. As we look at the father as a flesh-and-
blood human figure, a body with a defined outline, a character with
his own longings and his own set of identifications, one who can be
weak or generous, supportive or uncaring, violent or abused, noble
or wicked, the father’s other visage is exposed, together with his con-
crete potential significance—not only the symbolic or “archetypal”
one, in Carl Jung’s terms—for the lives of his sons and daughters.
Although rabbinic literature, including the chain of stories we will examine, does not ignore the symbolic-theological layer, it does present a broader spectrum of father figures in various functions—distant and involved fathers, present and absent, leaving the domestic space and the concrete relationships with family members and returning to them. These diverse representations enable us to examine the father in a way that transcends the traditional ways of reading him, thereby enriching the discussion about the chain of stories, expanding it beyond the concern with the characteristic tension between the desire for learning and the desire for a partner.2

We see the chain of stories we will be discussing as a complete textual-talmudic set that attests, as we will try to show, to the precision and sensitivity of the editing and to the rich and complex inner dialogue that emerges between its various units.3 Nevertheless, in Dina Stein’s wake, we seek to draw a distinction between the intention of the (actual or imagined) editor and the final edited product. The question of the editor’s (or the narrator’s) intention when choosing these seven stories for the halakhic explication of the sages’ absence from their homes is not at the center of our attention. Indeed, as Stein noted, any attempt to give real answers to this question is doomed to fail: “Subordinating the meaning of a text to its author’s or editors presumed (or even professed) intention falls into the category of ‘intentional fallacy.’ The meaning of a text cannot be confined to the intention one attributes to the speaker/writer; the Bavli is no exception.”4 Our discussion will focus on the way the final narrative setting, including the explicit and implicit associations between its units, exposes a full assortment of metaphors, hopes, anxieties, and fears touching on the tension between the “home” and the absent “father” found at the study house, and to the influence of this absence on the complexity of the relationships
between fathers and their wives, daughters, and sons. And yet the complexity of the editor’s role vis-à-vis these texts cannot be ignored. The lack of clarity as to the considerations that guided the editorial choices in some sense resonates in other absences that have a bearing on this chain of stories. Like the Deus absconditus, and like the absent father, the editor’s power lies precisely in the hidden stance he adopts and in his seeming concealment, which invite and awaken the interpretive impulse.

We ascribe to this chain of stories, using a term coined by Itay Marienberg-Milikowsky, a kind of “dynamic closure,” referring to a possibility of looking at a text, so he claims, as “a maximalist reading of the story per se alongside a maximalist reading of its context and, mainly, playing both readings, as it were, against one another.” Despite the difference between his topic (repeated stories in the Babylonian Talmud) and ours (one defined and closed chain of stories), his basic assumption about the context of the individual story appears to be valid for our reading of the current chain of stories as well. On the one hand, we propose an approach that seeks to convey the power and coherence of each separate story as well as the editorial complexity of the entire group of stories. On the other hand, we propose a reading that, rather than confining the group of stories within its own limits, seeks to acknowledge the importance of the dialogue created with its close and distant contexts—that is, its ties to both the halakhic issue it is embedded in and to other literary and halakhic rabbinic units. Following Galit Hasan-Rokem, whose work on rabbinic literature rests on a claim about the heterogeneous and multivocal sources of this literature, we will also emphasize the multilayered quality of the chain of stories before us. Hence, we will conduct our reading in light of literary, cultural, psychological, and folkloristic theories that emphasize the explicit and
implicit dialogical quality of every text with its immediate and faraway surroundings.

This book is the product of an encounter and a dialogue between two researchers specializing in different fields of Hebrew literature. Haim Weiss is a scholar of rabbinic literature who deals with the charged sphere created through the encounter of history, literature, and folk culture and its place in modern Hebrew literature. Shira Stav studies modern Hebrew literature from a feminist and psychoanalytic perspective, with a critical emphasis on Oedipal and family structures. We wrote the book together in the belief that our combined perspectives on the texts, which rest on our different fields of research and interest, can offer new interpretations of this interesting narrative sequence and shed light on aspects that have not yet been studied.

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