Rachel Neis, *The Sense of Sight in Rabbinic Culture: Jewish Ways of Seeing in Late Antiquity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. 328 pp., $102.00 (hardcover).

Rachel Neis's rich study of visuality in rabbinic literature is not only filled with acute and creative readings of rabbinic texts, but also offers a bold new paradigm for approaching the sense of sight in ancient cultures more broadly. In taking up the theme of visuality, Neis has set her sights on some of the problems currently most central to the study of ancient Judaism: How did Jews participate in their wider Mediterranean and Near Eastern cultural contexts while also marking their difference? And how did the rabbis in particular succeed, gradually over the course of late antiquity, in establishing a discursive framework within which rabbinic (or rabbinized) Jews might cultivate a distinctively Jewish subjectivity?

Neis argues that at the center of the rabbinic project was the training of the Jewish sensorium, especially the sense of sight. The book is structured thematically around four key "nodes" in the rabbinic discourse of visuality, namely: God, the erotic, idols, and the rabbinic sage. In her account, the rabbinic discourse of visuality involved an array of strategies ranging from prohibitions against looking at proscribed objects to the imperative to gaze upon images or manifestations of the holy. The rabbis, like contemporary Christian writers such as Augustine, well understood that repression was as powerful a tool for the formation of the pious self as was the cultivation of a properly directed ocular desire. In the process, the male rabbi would emerge not only as the ultimate arbiter of legitimate Jewish practice, but also as a primary object of religious veneration. Neis thus analyzes with great care the micro-dynamics of power and authority through which the rabbinic authors defined the always-contested boundary between idolatry and apt worship. In a nutshell, the book argues that in the post-Temple Judaism of late antiquity, where limitations exist on access to God and where the Jew must learn to navigate the idolatrous dangers of the "pagan" or Christian urban landscape, the figure of the rabbi emerges as the only legitimate object of visual piety.

In the book's introductory chapter, Neis effectively establishes the grounds for her project. She notes that it is a common *topos* in Western culture as well as in modern scholarship that Jews are a-visual. This impression derives in no small measure from a tendentious reading of the Second Commandment as a ban on practices of representation and by extension as the basis for a Jewish drive toward theological blindness or abstraction (depending on the inclination of the interpreter). Neis rightly insists that we distinguish between the biblical prohibition against making graven images—that is, idolatry—and a supposed Jewish suspicion of or even antipathy toward the power of sight. The introduction is capped by a brief presentation regarding the socio-political contexts in which the rabbinic movement developed and which shaped the literary products of the rabbis. Especially important are the formal and ideological differences between the Palestinian and the Babylonian Talmud. One, the product of Roman Palestine in the third and especially fourth centuries, and the other, produced in the rabbinic academies of Sasanian Iraq, reflect the significant geo-cultural differences between the main Jewish population centers of the late antique Near East and constitute a primary point of comparison throughout the book.

In Chapter 2, Neis defines visuality as the way in which people within a given socio-cultural context understand both what they are seeing and the nature of sight itself. The book is concerned not so much with Jewish images and image-making in late antiquity, as with the conception and function of seeing in rabbinic culture. Neis persuasively argues that rabbinic visuality can only be understood in light of the culturally specific discourse of seeing that prevailed in late antiquity. The rabbis shared with other intellectuals from the Mediterranean to Iran and beyond a common "science of vision" in which the faculties of vision and touch were profoundly intertwined. The act of looking was thought to entangle the human subject quite literally with the objects of sight. The destabilization of the boundary between interior and exterior conferred upon the sense of sight a transformative capacity that could both imperil and empower the seeing subject. Many of Neis's most insightful readings of rabbinic texts later in the book are informed by her deep grasp of these highly particular—and, to us moderns, rather peculiar—theories of vision.

The subsequent four chapters work their way through the four different modes or types of seeing that Neis has isolated. She organizes these elegantly into something of a circular trajectory, beginning with an idealized form of reciprocal viewing, which she terms "homovisuality." This is a type of viewing in which the

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IMAGES
DOI: 10.1163/18718000-12340069

eye is both the visual subject and the visual object. This mode of seeing is modeled on the face-to-face encounter with God; crucially, the person seeing the perfect God must himself be physically perfect, that is, not deformed, and male. Through a close reading of a series of rabbinic expansions on and interpretations of earlier biblical and Second Temple traditions about the Jerusalem Temple, Neis comes to the conclusion that "without the physical presence of the Temple, the rabbis chiefly relegated divine visibility to the past of the Temple era or postponed it to the messianic future of the 'world to come'" (43). Yet Neis also shows that this ideal of homovisuality is present in the Babylonian Talmud, but absent in Palestinian sources. Still, both of them stress that the post-Temple condition does not permit direct visual access to God. This profound deficit necessitates other types of seeing.

Having diagnosed the impossibility of a truly reciprocal gaze, Neis turns in Chapter 3 to a type of seeing that the rabbis *can* experience—the heterovisual gaze. Certain ritual objects found in the Jerusalem Temple, such as the showbread table and the cherubim, provide an alternative means of seeing the Divine. Unlike homovisuality, this heterovisual mode does not require reciprocation. With the heterovisual gaze, we are first introduced to the erotic and profoundly gendered nature of looking.

Once Neis has established the interrelationship between gendered seeing and the power of sight, she moves in Chapter 4 to the regulation of sight based on gender. Her main concern here is "the gendering of vision in the realm of desire" (115). She explores the panoply of regulations and prohibitions put in place by the rabbis to ensure that the act of gazing is properly disciplined. The goal of disciplining the wayward male gaze is combined with concern regarding the physical and indeed physiological dangers of looking. Thus, the prohibition against looking at a female is justified because such sights lead to negative consequences, most poignantly blindness itself. Moreover, undesirable traits can be passed on to children through a "visual eugenics," whereby offspring are affected by what their parents see during conception or pregnancy. Yet rabbinic sources are not only concerned with women as objects of sight, but also address instances of Jewish male beauty. In the Babylonian Talmud, in particular, we find the feminization of certain Jewish men, both under the gaze of other Jews and under the dominating "masculine" gaze of the ruling imperial system.

The dangers of gendered sight, with their problematic differentials of power, represent only one area in which the gaze must be regulated. Chapter 5 takes up what would seem to be the most acute prohibition on the gaze within rabbinic discourse, the viewing of idols. Of course, idolatry proves to be a slippery concept. The rabbis must first establish what counts as "idolatry" before they can regulate how one is to avoid entering into "idolatrous" visual relations. Neis identifies three primary strategies that the rabbis developed for managing the pervasive presence of idols in their environment: "looking away," "looking awry," and, finally, a type of "liturgical looking" that nullifies the power of the idol. Averting the gaze is important because the power of idols comes from the face-to-face reciprocal gaze that they share with their worshippers. "Looking awry," by contrast, is a disrespectful gaze that subjects the idol to misprision. Finally, "liturgical looking" entails the recitation of certain religious formulae about idols that narrate a time when the idols will be destroyed. This deeply subversive practice goes well beyond "looking awry," as it looks forward to the day when God himself will nullify, once and for all, the power of the idol. These acts enable rabbinic Jews to imagine that they have power over an urban and imperial landscape that they do not actually control. It is significant that this nexus of strategies is primarily found in Palestinian sources from the Roman Empire, whereas the Bavli presents few such encounters with idols. Neis admits, however, that too little is known about visual culture in the Sasanian Empire to determine whether or not the same concerns would be at play there.

The impossibility of homovisual gazing in the post-destruction period, coupled with prohibitions on various forms of viewing, take us to the question that informs the book's final chapter: what is it, then, that the rabbis thought one *should* look at? Given the extreme power of vision within rabbinic thought, the rabbis considered it a fundamental responsibility to see correctly and to see the correct things. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it turns out that the correct object of vision for a rabbi is another rabbi. In the title of Chapter 6, "Seeing Sages," the rabbis are thus both the object and the subject of the verb. Moreover, in a fundamental sense, the rabbinic sage serves as a stand-in for God, who himself cannot be seen. The sages are the repository of Torah, which was given in a dramatic act of revelation on Mount Sinai. The seeing of a rabbi evokes and even compensates for the lost vision of that primordial encounter with God. Moreover, in a wide variety of narratives and parables, the act of viewing a rabbi is linked to the transmission of knowledge from generation to generation. As the rabbis are the repository

of the Law, seeing them is crucial to understanding the Law. Finally, sight is a powerful tool for determining who is a "true" rabbi and thus who is deserving of this efficacious gaze. The rabbis were wont to tell stories concerning how certain imperial figures recognized a given rabbi as a true sage, lending that figure the external authentication of the Roman Empire. In the end, we have returned to a homovisual viewing of the sort that is imagined to have taken place in the Jerusalem Temple. Except that in a world without a Temple, this act of seeing mediates the power and knowledge of the rabbi both to other rabbis and to other Jews who might look to them as paragons of religious authority.

The book's conclusion offers some broader reflections concerning the differences between Palestinian and Babylonian sources, although Neis herself concedes that the specific effects of the Roman and Sasanian contexts on the regional variants of rabbinic culture prove largely elusive. Still, Neis has succeeded in drawing far-reaching conclusions about the enduring structures of rabbinic culture, while also pointing to diachronic and geographic variation in her materials. The book thus captures the dialectic processes of participation in, and alienation from, the dominant imperial cultures, both Roman and Sasanian, through which the Jews emerged from antiquity as a distinctive ethno-religious group.

Raʿanan Boustan
University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)