



Piety and Fanaticism: Rabbinic Criticism of Religious Stringency

Sara Epstein Weinstein

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Within traditional Judaism, religious piety and intensity, representing the earnest and passionate desire to serve God, is often expressed in both the strictest observance of halakhah, Jewish law, and in practices above and beyond the demands of the law. The second such behavior is termed "super-erogatory," meaning "going beyond what is commanded or required." While it is discussed often in the Talmud, there is little attention given in the secondary literature to the rabbis' critique of self-imposed religious stringency. *Piety and Fanaticism: Rabbinic Criticism of Religious Stringency* opens a discussion of the Talmudic rabbis' views. *Piety and Fanaticism* focuses its discussion on self-imposed stringency, which goes beyond the recommendations of a specific halakhic ruling, and evaluates the rabbis' decisions as to when super-erogation by an individual was generally permitted and when it was criticized. Also addressed is to what extent the rabbis' considered kavvana, or why an individual chose to take on a specific stringency, in their criticism of such behavior. Weinstein considers the political and economic differences in Palestine and Babylon to explain differences in the rabbinic opinions of the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds. The historical development of Talmudic passages has been analyzed to discover the various layers of text and place them in proper historical context. The author also examines the relationship between Judaism and other religions of the Talmudic period specifically early Christianity, which venerated practices that were regarded as super-erogatory by Judaism.

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