

CHAPTER 1

Decline of the Generations

In traditionalist Jewish circles the idea that the “generations” are diminishing has become something of a dogma, assumed and only rarely examined. Byron Sherwin expressed the idea very well:

“If the earlier scholars were like angels, then we [later scholars] are like human beings. However, if the earlier scholars were like human beings, then we are like asses.” This Talmudic adage articulates the notion of progressive decline, which is assumed as a dogma of faith by much of classical Jewish literature. From this perspective, the further we move away from the revelation at Mt. Sinai chronologically, the weaker our spiritual and intellectual abilities become.¹

This view is so pervasive in the Jewish tradition that even a scholar as sophisticated as Michael S. Berger can be led to write that “while the basic equality of all intellects is a tenet of the Enlightenment, a theological assumption of continually declining generations is a tenet of Judaism.”²

The most restrained version of the doctrine holds that those who live in each successive historical epoch (however these may be defined) are inferior in spiritual and/or intellectual terms to those who live in preceding epochs. Here and there exceptions to the rule may appear—individuals whose abilities are such that they “should have been born” in an earlier period (R. Elijah Kramer, the Gaon of Vilna [1720–1797], is often cited as an instance of this phenomenon)—but by and large the rule obtains. The most extreme version of the doctrine holds that the decline is a persistent fact of human (or at least Jewish) experience and that each and every generation is literally inferior to its predecessors. On some views, as we will see below, this decline is qualitative, not just quantitative: according to the Maharal, for example, the Rabbis *as individuals* were essentially different from and vastly superior to later generations.³

This notion of the decline, or dimunition, of the generations is often used to explain the fact of halakhic history that Amoraim do not dispute Tannaim, Gaonim do not dispute Amoraim, Rishonim do not dispute Gaonim, and Aharonim do not dispute Rishonim.⁴ While the connection between the two issues is often assumed to be rabbinic doctrine, it turns out to have been formulated explicitly for the first time only in the tenth century. But even that formulation is not self-conscious, systematic, or even particularly clear. Indeed, one of the points I wish to illustrate in this chapter is that the notion of the decline of the generations is not a doctrine susceptible of clear and precise statement. Indeed, it is hard to call it a doctrine at all, in the sense of a self-consciously articulated, systematic set of ideas.

I. Talmudic Statements which Appear to Affirm the Doctrine of the Decline of the Generations

There are several passages in the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds which give expression to variants of the idea that later scholars were inferior to earlier scholars. As we shall see, these texts are not clear and certainly not consistent on the *nature* of the inferiority posited. Thus, in BT Shabbat 112b we read:

R. Zera said in Raba b. Zimuna's name: If the earlier scholars [*rishonim*] were sons of angels, we are sons of men; and if the earlier scholars were sons of men, we are like the asses, and not even like asses of R. Hanina b. Dosa and P. Phinehas b. Jair, but like ordinary asses.⁵

In this passage, the earlier scholars remain unnamed and we are not told how many generations separate the earlier and later scholars. We are also not told in what the superiority of the earlier generations consists.

Such is not the case with respect to other passages, which are clearer on both questions. Thus, we find the following in JT Gittin 6.7:

When Rabbi [Judah the Prince] wanted to raise a question about an opinion of R. Yose, he said, "Should we inferior folk raise questions about the opinion of R. Yose? For just as is the difference between most holy things and unconsecrated food, so is the difference between our generation and the generation of R. Yose." Said R. Ishmael the son of R. Yose, "Just as is the difference between gold and dirt, so is the difference between our generation and father's."⁶

R. Yose ben Halafta flourished in the middle of the second century (CE) and was active two generations before R. Judah the Prince; in several passages the

latter expresses great respect for the former.⁷ A number of issues come up in this passage: R. Judah feels inferior to R. Yose, apparently with respect to matters of halakhah; R. Judah generalizes his sense of inferiority and claims that his entire generation is inferior to that of R. Yose; this decline took place in a matter of two generations (according to R. Judah) or in a matter of a single generation (according to R. Ishmael).

The sense that later generations are intellectually inferior to earlier generations comes out clearly in another passage in the Yerushalmi, this one from Shekalim 5.1:

Rabbi Haggai said in the name of R. Samuel ben Nahman: “The earlier ones plowed, sowed, weeded, scythed, hoed, harvested, sheaved, threshed, squeezed, separated, ground, sifted, kneaded, smoothed and baked while we have nothing to eat.” R. Abba bar Yonah Zemina in the name of R. Ze’eira: “If the early ones [*rishonim*] were like angels, we are like humans; if they were like humans, then we are like asses.” R. Mana said: “At that time [i.e., in connection with this] they said, we are not even like the asses of R. Phineas ben Yair.”

R. Haggai’s statement apparently means that despite all the preparatory work done by earlier scholars, we are incapable of taking advantage of what they have done. Our understanding of Torah is essentially inferior to theirs.

BT Eruvin 53a records a whole series of statements echoing this idea of intellectual decline:

R. Johanan further stated: “The hearts [i.e., intellectual powers] of the earlier scholars [*rishonim*] were like the [twenty cubit wide] door of the *Ulam*, that of recent scholars like the [ten cubit wide] door of the *Heikhal*, while ours is like that of the eye of a fine needle.” [By] earlier scholars [is meant the like of] R. Akiva; [by] later scholars [is meant the like of R. Akiva’s student] R. Eleazar b. Shammua. Others say, [By] earlier scholars [is meant the like of] R. Eleazar b. Shammua; [by] later scholars [is meant the like of] R. Oshaia Beribi.⁸ “While ours is like that of the eye of a fine needle.”⁹ “And we,” said Abbaye, “are like a peg in a wall in respect to Gemara.”¹⁰ “And we,” said Rava, “are like a finger in wax as regards logical argument.”¹¹ “We,” said R. Ashi, “are like a finger in a pit as regards forgetfulness.”¹²

The difference between the earlier and later scholars in the first half of this passage is a matter of one or two generations; the quality of the difference clearly relates to the ability to master Talmudic texts and arguments.

Other sorts of decline seem to figure in our next two texts. BT Yoma 9b compares the reasons why the first and second temple were destroyed. It then says,

R. Johanan and R. Eleazar both say: "The former ones [*rishonim*] whose iniquity was revealed [by the prophets], had their end revealed [by the prophets, that they would return after an exile of 70 years], the latter ones [i.e., those who live after the destruction of the second temple] whose iniquity was not revealed have their end still unrevealed." R. Johanan said: "The fingernail of the earlier generations [*rishonim*] is better than the belly of the later generations." Said Resh Lakish to him: "On the contrary, the later generations are better, although they are oppressed by the governments, they occupy themselves with Torah." He [R. Johanan] replied: "The sanctuary will prove [my point] for it came back to the former generations, but not to the latter ones." The question was put to R. Eleazar: "Were the earlier generations better, or the later ones?" He answered: "Look upon the sanctuary!" Some say he answered: "The sanctuary is your witness [in this matter]."¹³

In this passage, the time differential is great: the roughly six hundred years that passed between the destructions of the two temples. The quality of the decline seems to be with respect to devotion to Torah, not the ability to study and understand it.

We find an apparently similar understanding of the decline of the generations in BT Ta'anit 24a–b:

Rabbah once decreed a fast. He prayed but no rain came. Thereupon the people remarked to him: "When R. Judah ordained a fast, rain *did* fall." He replied: "What can I do? Is it because of studies? We are superior to him, because in the time of R. Judah all studies were concentrated on Nezikin, whereas we study all the six sections."

The text continues, describing how R. Judah found certain topics difficult, topics which were better understood in Rabbah's day. But despite the superiority of Rabbah's generation in matters of study,

when R. Judah removed one shoe [as a sign of humiliation, preparatory to praying for rain], rain [immediately] fell; but when we cry out, no one pays heed to us. Is it because of some failing? If so, let any one know of it, declare it. What, however, can the great men of a generation do when their generation [does not appear good enough to find favor in the eyes of God]?¹⁴

Here, the decline is explicitly *not* intellectual: in terms of rabbinic studies, the generation of Rabbah was superior to that of R. Judah. The decline appears to have been moral or spiritual, and, it should be noted, this decline characterized the masses of the generation, not its leadership who, apparently, felt themselves to be in no way inferior to R. Judah. The period of transition is apparently short: Rabbah's interlocutors seem to have been personally familiar with R. Judah's exploits. Moreover, if the Rabbah in question is Rabbah bar

Huna, and if the R. Judah in question is R. Judah bar Yehezkel (as seems to be the case), then they were more or less contemporaries, both of them having studied under Rav and Samuel.

A parallel to this text appears in Berakhot (20a), and there the decline is connected explicitly to matters of spiritual or religious significance. The story there is told about Abbaye; he was asked by R. Pappa, “Why is it that miracles were performed for those of former generations [*rishonim*], but no miracles are performed for us?” R. Pappa continues his question, arguing that the difference could not be that the former generations were superior in scholarship, proving his point with the same discussion found in Ta’anit 24a–b. The passage concludes with Abbaye’s answer: “The former generations stood ready to martyr themselves for the sanctification of the divine name, we are not ready to martyr ourselves for the sanctification of the divine name.”

A further passage in BT Berakhot (35b) sheds more light on rabbinic ideas concerning the decline of the generations:

Rabbah b. Bar Hanah said in the name of R. Johanan, reporting R. Judah b. Ila’i: See what a difference there is between the earlier and the later generations. The earlier generations made the study of the Torah their main concern and their ordinary work subsidiary to it, and both prospered in their hands. The later generations made their ordinary work their main concern and their study of the Torah subsidiary, and neither prospered in their hands. Rabbah b. Bar Hanah further said in the name of R. Johanan, reporting R. Judah b. Ila’i: See what a difference there is between the earlier and the later generations. The earlier generations used to bring in their produce . . . [in such a way as to make it] liable to tithe whereas the later generations bring in their produce . . . [in such a way as to make it] exempt from tithe.

Rabbi Judah seems to be emphasizing the spiritual, religious superiority of the earlier generations (and the rewards of such spirituality).

The last passage I have found relevant to the notion that earlier generations are superior to later generations is from BT Yevamot 39b:

We learned elsewhere: At first, when the object was the fulfillment of the commandment, the precept of levirate marriage was preferable to that of *halizah*; now, however, when the object is not the fulfillment of the commandment, the precept of *halizah*, it was laid down, is preferable to that of levirate marriage.

According to Biblical law, when a married man dies without children, his brother is expected to marry the widow; issue of that union are considered as descendants of the deceased. This is the meaning of levirate marriage. If the

widow refuses to marry her brother-in-law a ceremony called "halizah" is performed. In earlier times, our text teaches, men took their brother's widows as wives solely in order to fulfill the commandment; in such circumstances levirate marriage ought to be performed. In later times, when men took their brother's widows as wives out of less honorable motives, *halizah* takes precedence over levirate marriage. Here again, the emphasis is on spiritual elevation: early generations fulfilled God's commandments disinterestedly, later generations for their own satisfaction.

The point is made even clearer in the sequel. Against the background of the point made in the text, Rami b. Hama said in the name of R. Isaac: "It was re-enacted that the precept of the levirate marriage is preferable to that of *halizah*." R. Nahman b. Isaac replied to him, "Have the generations become more fit?" and goes on to explain the reenactment of the precept of levirate marriage in terms of a particular halakhic debate, and not in terms of an improvement of the moral character of later generations.¹⁵ Important for our purposes is the unarticulated assumption behind R. Nahman's question, that it is absurd to suggest that the generations have become more fit.

We have before us nine passages (a few of which appear more than once in the Talmudic corpus), reflecting the views of roughly a dozen rabbis.¹⁶ With one exception, all the passages reflect a view of decline from generation to generation, not from period to period. The decline itself is manifested in both intellectual and moral/spiritual terms. What we do *not* have is a settled doctrine proclaiming that every generation is necessarily inferior to its predecessors, or even a settled doctrine proclaiming that the scholars of any given historical period are necessarily inferior to the scholars of an earlier historical period. Nor do we have proof that some notion of decline informed the historical sense of all or most of the Rabbis.

II. Talmudic Statements Which Appear to Oppose the Doctrine of the Decline of the Generations

Systematic thinking and formulation, of course, are foreign to rabbinic thinking, and it would be surprising were we to find "settled doctrines" about anything.¹⁷ My point here is that later generations of Jews have looked back into the Talmudic texts and found there the idea of the decline of the generations, an idea which they thought was explicitly accepted by all or at least the vast majority of rabbinic sages. What actually appears to have happened, however, is that scattered and apparently unconnected passages were understood by later interpreters as expressing a widely accepted and normative Tannaitic and Amoraic teaching. That is not to say that later interpreters read this teaching *into* the Talmud; that is clearly not the case, since the texts we

have described here do in fact exist. What these later interpreters seem to have done was read a systematic and consistent doctrine *out of* the Talmudic texts. But, as we shall see, as easily as one could derive the doctrine of the decline of the generations out of Talmudic texts, one can also derive an opposed doctrine from other passages.

It is, of course, established rabbinic practice that by and large Amoraim do not contradict Tannaim.¹⁸ There does not appear to be any textual connection, however, between that *practice* and the idea that generations must necessarily decline. Given that there are other ways of explaining the periodization of Halakhah and the accepted practice that authorities in later periods do not contradict the positions of authorities in earlier periods (as will be discussed below), there is no necessary connection between the *idea* of the decline of the generations and the *fact* that later authorities hold themselves to be formally incompetent to contradict earlier authorities.

It is, indeed, entirely possible that the texts I have adduced here reflect nothing other than expressions of modesty, a quality very highly prized by rabbinic Judaism. They do not necessarily support the claim that the “decline of the generations” is a notion accepted by all or even a large proportion of the Rabbis. On the contrary, as I have stated, one can adduce texts which indicate the very opposite.

Two of these texts have already been cited: Rabbah’s claim that his generation was superior to that of R. Judah in the study of Torah (BT Ta’anit 24a–b; BT Berakhot 20a, there attributed to R. Pappah), and Resh Lakish’s argument with R. Yohanan (BT Yoma 9b). Other texts which lead to the conclusion that later generations can be as good as or even greater than earlier ones include Mishnah Eduyot I:5, “. . . no court may set aside the decision of another court unless it is greater than [the first] in number and wisdom . . .”¹⁹ This text would make no sense were it impossible for a later court to be greater than an earlier court in *wisdom* and not just in number.²⁰

BT Sukkah 28b tells the following:

Our rabbis taught: Hillel the Elder had eighty disciples. Thirty of them were worthy enough for the divine presence to have rested upon them as upon Moses; thirty of them were worthy enough for the sun to have stood still for them as it did for Joshua son of Nun; and twenty of them were intermediate. The greatest of them was Jonathan ben Uzziel, the least of them, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai. They said of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai that he did not leave [unstudied] Scripture and Mishnah, Talmud, halakhot and aggadot, details of the Torah, details of the Scribes, *a fortiori* [arguments] and analogies, calendrical calculations and *gematriot*, the speech of the ministering angels, the speech of demons, and the speech of palm trees, fuller’s fables, fables of foxes, a great matter and a little matter. A great matter—the account of the chariot; a little matter—the discussions of Abbaye

and Rava. [All this,] in fulfillment of the verse, *that I may cause those that love me to inherit substance, and that I may fill their treasuries* (Prov. 8:21). If the least of them was like this, how much more so the greatest of them! They said of Jonathan ben Uzziel that when he sat and occupied himself with Torah, every bird flying above him burst into flame.

The point for our purposes here is that Hillel the Elder had thirty students as great as Moses and eighty students as great as Joshua. Clearly, the authors of this passage did not accept the idea of the decline of the generations!

Not surprisingly, if Hillel's students were compared to Moses, Hillel himself was also (BT Sanhedrin 11a):

Once when the Rabbis were met in the upper chamber of Gurya's house in Jericho, a *bat-kol* was heard from heaven, saying: "There is one among you who is worthy that the Shekhinah should rest on him as it did on Moses, but his generation does not merit it." The Sages present set their eyes upon Hillel the Elder.

Hillel the Elder himself was as great as Moses; his generation was such, however, that his true greatness could not find full expression. From this text one can derive two contradictory claims: that the generations are in decline, since the generation of Hillel could not "support" his greatness; or, that the generations are not in decline, since Hillel the Elder had the same personal greatness as did Moses. Our next text, however, is much less ambivalent.

BT Sanhedrin 21b–22a compares Ezra to Moses:

It has been taught: R. Jose said: Had Moses not preceded him, Ezra would have been worthy of receiving the Torah for Israel. Of Moses it is written, *And Moses went up unto God* (Exodus 19:3) and of Ezra it is written, *He, Ezra, went up from Babylon* (Ezra 7:6). As the going up of the former refers to the receiving of the Torah, so does the going up of the latter.²¹

Not only was Ezra as great as Moses (as indeed, was Hillel), but the fact that he did not bring the Torah was not "explained away" in terms of the inferiority of his generation. Since the Torah had already been brought, it could not be brought a second time. That is the entire reason that Ezra did not bring the Torah. There was no problem with this personal qualities and, apparently, no problem with those of his generation. The Talmud continues here, maintaining that Ezra prepared himself to bring the Torah as Moses had, and that even though he himself did not bring the Torah, he changed its script. There is certainly no notion of the decline of the generations here!

The same point can be inferred from another passage (BT Menahot 29b):

Rav Judah said in the name of Rav, When Moses ascended on high he found the Holy One, blessed be He, engaged in affixing coronets to the letters [of the Torah]. Said Moses, "Lord of the Universe, who stays Thy hand [i.e., who forces you to do this]?" He answered, "There will arise a man, at the end of many generations, Akiva b. Joseph by name, who will expound upon each tittle heaps and heaps of laws." "Lord of the Universe," said Moses, "permit me to see him." He replied, "Turn thee round." Moses went and sat down behind eight rows [of students and listened to R. Akiva teach]. Not being able to follow their discussion, he felt weakened, but when they came to a certain subject and the disciples said to the master, "Whence do you know it?" and the latter replied, "It is a law given to Moses at Sinai," he was comforted. Thereupon he returned to the Holy One, blessed be He, and said, "Lord of the Universe, Thou hast such a man and Thou hast given the Torah by me!" He replied, "Be silent, for such is my decree." Then said Moses, "Lord of the Universe, Thou has shown me his Torah, show me his reward." "Turn thee round," said He; and Moses turned round and saw them weighing out [R. Akiva's] flesh at the market-stalls. "Lord of the Universe," cried Moses, "such Torah, and such a reward!" He replied, "Be silent, for such is My decree."

This dramatic passage, of course, teaches many things, and can be used to derive insight into rabbinic attitudes towards diverse matters. One such issue stares us straight in the face: the passage has Moses saying that Akiva was superior to him!²² On the face of it, then, Moses, at least, did not accept the conception of the decline of the generations.

R. Akiva's greatness is also the subject of a passage in BT Sanhedrin 38b:

... What is the meaning of the verse, *This is the book of the generations of Adam* (Genesis 5:1)? It is to intimate that the Holy One, blessed be He, showed him [Adam] every generation and its expounders [of Torah], every generation and its Sages. When he came to the generation of R. Akiva, he [Adam] rejoiced at his learning, but was grieved at his death.²³

Apparently, R. Akiva and his generation were in no way inferior to those who had gone before them; on the contrary, they appear to have been superior!

The exact nature of R. Akiva's superiority is not made explicit in these passages. In another passage (BT Gittin 5b) the superiority of later generations seems to be a matter of technical halakhic abilities: "The earlier generations were not expert in [preparing a divorce] *lishmah*, but the later generations are expert in *lishmah*." The term *lishmah* here means the

ability to prepare a divorce document (*get*) with the proper intention of executing it for this specific man and woman.

Our issue comes up indirectly in a passage in BT Sanhedrin 64a:

Then they said, "Since the time is propitious, let us pray that the evil inclination [may likewise be delivered into our hands]." So they prayed, and it was delivered into their hands. They imprisoned it for three days; after that they sought a new laid egg for an invalid in the whole land of Palestine and could not find one. Then they said, "What shall we do? Shall we pray that his power be but partially destroyed? Heaven will not grant it." So they blinded it with rouge. This was so far effective that one does not lust for forbidden relations.

The Rabbis imprisoned the evil inclination; in consequence, the sexual urge was so diminished that even hens ceased laying eggs. The Rabbis had no choice but to release the evil inclination, but they first weakened it. "This was so far effective that one does not lust for forbidden relations." The point for our purposes is that later generations may be construed as morally superior to earlier generations in that they no longer lust for forbidden relations.

This text, of course, may be read in another way: despite the fact that earlier generations had strong sexual desires they still withstood temptation, thus proving their superiority. The reading of the passage offered here, however, is supported by another text from Sanhedrin (20a), another text written, it would seem, by individuals who did not accept the notion of the decline of the generations. The passage deals with individuals who had succeeded in withstanding female seductiveness:

R. Samuel b. Nahmani said in R. Jonathan's name: What is meant by the verse, *Grace is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised* (Proverbs 31:30)? *grace is deceitful* refers to [the trial of Joseph];²⁴ *beauty is vain*, to Boaz;²⁵ while *a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised* [refers] to the case of Palti, son of Layish.²⁶ Another interpretation is: *grace is deceitful*, refers to the generation of Moses;²⁷ *beauty is vain*, to that of Joshua; *a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised*, to that of Hezekiah.²⁸ Others say: *grace is deceitful*, refers to the generation of Moses and Joshua; *beauty is vain*, to the generation of Hezekiah; *a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised*, refers to the generation of R. Judah b. R. Ilai, of whose time it was said that [though the poverty was so great] that six of his disciples had to cover themselves with one garment between them, yet they studied the Torah.

The point of the first part of this passage is that sexual restraint *increased* through history from Joseph through Boaz to Palti. The point of the second is that devotion to Torah study *increased* through history from the gen-

eration of Moses through the generations of Joshua and Hezekiah, to that of R. Judah b. Ilai. The generation of Moses witnessed the miracles of the Exodus and theophany at Sinai; their devotion to Torah is not remarkable. Similarly with the generation of Joshua, which witnessed the conquest of the land. The generation of Hezekiah, on the other hand, despite suffering from foreign conquest, remained devoted to Torah study, but even they are inferior to the generation of R. Judah b. Ilai, who, during and after the Hadrianic persecutions, and in conditions of direst poverty, continued their devotion to Torah.

We have before us, then, ten passages from the Mishnah and Babylonian Talmud each of which can be reasonably interpreted as denying the claim that each generation or historical period is necessarily inferior to its predecessors.²⁹ Now I do not for a moment think that that was the explicit intent of those passages, but they would not have been written as they were had their authors accepted as settled doctrine the idea of the decline of the generations, or were the notion of decline a conception which underlay rabbinic approaches to the world.

I am fully aware of the fact that each of the passages here adduced as denying the notion of the decline of the generations could be interpreted so as to make it consistent with that idea. My point is that there is no reason to do that in the absence of evidence that the “doctrine” of the decline of the generations was widely accepted as settled rabbinic teaching. And that, as we have seen, is simply not the case.

There is a methodological issue which ought to be noted. I am not here interested in the question whether the authorities cited in the passages adduced above actually said the things attributed to them; nor am I interested in the question of whether the positions attributed to these authorities were actually held by them, or held by the later scholars who edited the texts of the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds. The point that concerns us here is, what options were presented to a twelfth-century student of the Talmud like Maimonides? Did he have any reason to think that failure to adopt some variant of the doctrine of the decline of the generations would place him outside of the mainstream of rabbinic Judaism as it had developed to his day? My claim here is that Maimonides could (and, as shall be shown, did) accept the Talmud as authoritative without feeling constrained to accept as fact the decline of the generations. It is an issue on which the Talmud can be reasonably construed as presenting various options. To the extent that the Talmud has widely held doctrines, the idea of the decline of the generations need not be seen as one of them.

There is a second methodological issue which must be addressed as well, a propos of the notion of widely held rabbinic doctrines. As noted above, the Rabbis were not systematic thinkers. One could argue that the various texts

which I have cited as showing that some of the Rabbis, at least, did not hold the doctrine of the decline of the generations, were actually each written for a specific purpose, and ought not to be used to derive any lessons concerning the position of the Rabbis as a whole or of individual rabbis on issues like the decline of the generations. Resh Lakish, for example, in the text from Yoma 9b analyzed above, could be interpreted as trying to encourage his listeners in hard times, praising them for their dedication to Torah. The story about Moses listening to the lectures of R. Akiva is clearly designed to teach a lesson concerning rewards in this world; to that end, R. Akiva's greatness must be emphasized.

This is, of course, true, but it cuts both ways: the texts cited above, which are used to prove that the Rabbis held the doctrine of the decline of the generations, are no more evidence that the Rabbis held that position systematically than are the other texts proof that they did not. That is precisely my point: it is only by reading the Talmud from the vantage point of medieval and contemporary perspectives that we are led to assume that the Rabbis held the doctrine of the decline of the generations, even if only inchoately and unsystematically. To rephrase my position: no serious student of rabbinic literature would "accuse" the Rabbis of being systematic thinkers. Were I here seeking to refute the claim that the Rabbis held a clearly formulated doctrine of decline and applied it systematically, I would be arguing against a straw man. My argument is aimed at a more sophisticated but equally incorrect position, that the notion of decline informed the Rabbis' conception of their world, a world distinguished by its inferiority from that of the *rishonim*, the "earlier ones," of every and all preceding generations. I have argued here that to the extent that there is evidence which supports this claim, there is evidence of equal weight supporting the opposite claim, that the Rabbis' conception of their own world was not informed by any overall sense of decline.

III. Rav Sherira Gaon

Indeed, the first text in which the doctrine of the decline of the generations is presented as a fleshed-out ideology is the *Iggeret* of Rav Sherira Gaon (c. 906–1006). It is also the first text in which the decline of the generations is used as an explanation for the fact that Amoraim did not dispute Tannaim and that Gaonim do not dispute Amoraim.³⁰

Let us examine the passages in which Rav Sherira expressly cites the notion of the decline of the generations.³¹ In the first of these, he writes: "Rabbi Akiva sacrificed his life after the death of Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma. Rabbi Hananiah ben Teradion was executed and wisdom decreased [*venitma'atah hokhmah*]." ³² In the next passage, R. Sherira explicitly connects

the decline of the generations to Rabbi Judah the Prince's decision to compile the Mishnah:

When Rabbi [Judah the Prince] saw such diversity in the teachings of the Sages, even though they all shared the same underlying principles, he feared that the teachings would not endure and would be lost. He saw that understanding [*lev*] was diminishing, the well springs of wisdom were being blocked up, and the prince [or angel] or Torah was disappearing. It is as they say, "If the earlier scholars were sons of angels, we are sons of men; and if the earlier scholars were sons of men, we are like asses"; and, as R. Johanan said, "The hearts [i.e., intellectual powers] of the earlier scholars were like the [twenty cubit wide] door of the *Ulam*, that of recent scholars like the [ten cubit wide] door of the *Heikhal* . . . [By] earlier scholars [is meant the like of] R. Akiva; [by] later scholars [is meant the like of R. Akiva's student] R. Elazar b. Shammua.³³

Here R. Sherira connects two of the Talmudic passages cited above to justify his claim that Rabbi Judah the Prince noted an intellectual decline in his generation that prompted him, in part, to compile the Mishnah.

The comparison between the Amoraim and the Tannaim is made explicitly in the following passage:

The hearts [of the earlier scholars] were wide,³⁴ and they only needed [to write down for themselves] the essential matters. However, when the Mishnah was completed and Rabbi [Judah the Prince] died, the heart diminished . . . they [the later scholars] included in the Talmud things which had not been necessary for the earlier scholars.³⁵

This same comparison is extended in the last place in the *Iggeret* where Rav Sherira explicitly mentions our subject:

"Along came the next generation and the heart became diminished, and matters which had been simple to the earlier [Sages] and which had been explained to their students, without the need to recite them and establish their exact wording in the Gemara became subject to doubt and they had to establish them in the Gemara with an exact wording . . . In each succeeding generation the heart became diminished as R. Johanan said in [Tractate] Eruvin, "while ours is like that of the eye of a fine needle"; Abbaye said, "We are like a peg in a wall in respect to Gemara"; Rava said, "we are like a finger in wax as regards logical argument." R. Ashi said, "we are like a finger in a pit as regards forgetfulness." As the heart diminished and doubts arose the explanations of the earlier [sages] which had not been established in their days were established and were studied."³⁶

The Gemara was written because what had been simple to grasp on the part of the Tannaim was difficult for the Amoraim; the former had been able to teach their students without a text, the latter could not study without such a text.

Rav Sherira takes it as a matter of fact that earlier generations of Talmudic scholars had deeper understanding and greater wisdom than later generations. This decline is used to explain R. Judah the Prince's decision to compile the Mishnah and, by implication, the greater authority of Tannaim over Amoraim. Note should be made of the fact that Rav Sherira wrote his essay at the height of the Rabbanite-Karaite debate and may very likely have been influenced by that debate.³⁷ The polemical aspect of his work, defending the truth and authority of the rabbinic tradition, is thus seen more clearly. If this is true, it is significant for two reasons: (a) it supports my claim that Rav Sherira was the first to present the decline of the generations as a systematic ideology (doing so in response to the Karaite threat, not because the doctrine was clearly and explicitly held by his predecessors); and (b) it throws Maimonides' failure to adopt the doctrine into sharper contrast. Maimonides was well aware of the Karaite challenge and responded to it in a variety of ways.³⁸ The notion of the decline of the generations is a useful weapon in the armory of anyone fighting Karaism. That Maimonides failed to use it (as will be seen below) is significant.

The focus of our study is, of course, Maimonides. It is my contention that he rejects, or, more accurately, ignores the doctrine of the decline of the generations. Indeed, I will argue below that he cannot possibly accept it. This claim might surprise individuals familiar with the centrality of the doctrine for much of the halakhic world since Maimonides' day. I am trying to show here that the doctrine was less well established than is usually thought. The Talmudic evidence is ambivalent. Rav Sherira's letter may or may not have been known to Maimonides, but even if it was, there is no reason for him to have felt that its ideology bound him.³⁹ In brief, Maimonides was at most presented with the *option* of adopting some variant of the doctrine of the decline of the generations; it was an option which he chose not to adopt.

IV. Other Medieval Statements

We could end our survey of texts expressing the doctrine of the decline of the generations here, and turn to Maimonides. It will be useful, however, briefly to see how the idea developed in Jewish literature contemporary and subsequent to Maimonides before examining his treatment (or, actually, non-

treatment) of the idea. Doing this will put Maimonides' ideas in greater relief. I cite the following texts as examples only; they could easily be multiplied, but to no great advantage for our purposes.⁴⁰

Rashi (1040–1105) seems to accept the idea of the decline of the generations as standard Jewish teaching in a number of his commentaries on the Babylonian Talmud. This comes out in his commentary on a well-known text in Makkot (23b–24a) which reads (in part):

R. Simlai expounded: "Six hundred and thirteen precepts were communicated to Moses, three hundred and sixty-five negative ones, corresponding to the days of the solar year, and two hundred forty-eight positive ones, corresponding to the number of members of a human's body."

R. Simlai here tells us that the Torah contains precisely 613 commandments. We can skip the discussion which ensues, in which he proves his point. R. Simlai then continues his exposition, saying, "David came and reduced them [the six hundred thirteen commandments] to eleven." Here R. Simlai cites Psalms 15, in which he finds eleven characteristics of the person who seeks "to sojourn in the Lord's tabernacle and dwell in the holy mountain." The exposition continues; Isaiah is cited as having reduced the 613 to six, Micah to three, and Isaiah, again, to two. The passage ends as follows:

Amos came and reduced them to one, as it is said: "For thus saith the Lord unto the house of Israel, Seek ye Me and live." To this R. Nahman ben Isaac demurred, saying [Might it not be taken as meaning,] Seek Me by observing the whole Torah and live? But it is Habakkuk who came and based them all on one, as it is said, "But the righteous shall live by his faith."

Rashi writes, s.v., *ve-he'emidan al ahat-esreh* (i.e., [David came] and reduced them to eleven): "In the beginning they [i.e., the Jews] were righteous [*zaddikim*] and could accept the yoke of many commandments, but the later generations were not so righteous and if they had to observe them all, you would find no meritorious man among them, and thus 'David came and . . . ' so that they would be considered meritorious if they fulfilled these eleven commandments [only]; similarly, in every period [*zeman*] the generations proceed downward and reduce it [i.e., the yoke of the commandments]." Here the decline is clearly presented in religious or spiritual terms.

In Rosh ha-Shanah 25b, the text of the Talmud reads, comparing 1 Sam. 12:6–11 (verse 11: *and the Lord sent Jerubaal, and Bedan, and Jeftah, and Samuel, and delivered you out of the hand of your enemies on every side*) and Psalms 99:6 (*Moses and Aaron among his priests and Samuel among them that call on His name*):

[We see therefore that] Scripture places three of the most questionable characters [Gideon, Samson, and Jephthah] on the same level as three of the most estimable characters [Moses, Aaron, Samuel], to show that Jerubaal [Gideon] in his generation is like Moses in his generation . . . to teach you that the most worthless, once he has been appointed a leader of the community, is to be accounted like the mightiest of the mighty. Scripture says also: *And thou shalt come unto the priests and the Levites and to the judge that shalt be in those days* (Deut. 17:9). Can we then imagine that a man should go to a judge who is not in his days? This shows that you must be content to go the judge who is in your days. It also says, *Say not, How was it that the former days were better than these* [i.e., that the judges in former days were better than those today] (Eccles. 7:10).

On this passage Rashi, *s.v.*, *al tomar . . .*, comments "*For it is not out of wisdom that thou inquirest this* (Eccles. 7:10, continuation) since the [earlier] generations were better and more righteous than the latter, therefore were the former days better than these, since it is impossible for the latter to be like [i.e., as good as] the former." Here, again, the decline is spiritual, not necessarily intellectual.⁴¹

But Rashi also accepts the idea of intellectual decline: in Bava Mezia 33a, *s.v.*, *ve-einah middah*, Rashi explains that the later Amoraim began writing down the Gemara because "hearts were diminished."⁴²

Zohar III, 2a assumes the truth of the doctrine, applying it to the decline of Kabbalistic teachers, generation after generation.

Rabbenu Nissim ben Reuben Gerondi, in his *Derashot*, affirms that both wisdom and prophecy are emanated from God through the separate intellects to the soul. In both cases if an inferior individual associates with a superior individual, the former will acquire a greater level of emanations than he could otherwise:

This I take as a strong reason for the diminition of prophecy and wisdom generation after generation, as is well known. . . . I take the reason for this to be that from Moses, peace upon him, to our day, all the prophets and sages, one after the other, are like a chain of causes and effects, which, as they continue to distance themselves from the first cause diminish in their degree, so is the matter equally [exactly?] with sages and prophets. For Moses, peace upon him, was caused in his wisdom and prophecy from the First Cause . . . and for this reason received these two emanations perfectly. Joshua received these emanations through Moses. . . . And so the prophets who follow Joshua.⁴³

R. Moses b. Isaac Alashkar (1466–1542), Responsum number 53, strongly affirms the doctrine of the "diminishment of hearts," as he puts it, maintaining that the relation of his contemporaries to earlier generations is like

that of apes to human beings. Given the halakhic context of his discussion, and the discussion itself, the issue seems to be primarily intellectual: subsequent generations are inferior in their ability to understand the thinking of earlier generations.⁴⁴

R. Joseph Karo, in the Introduction to *Bet Yosef*, his commentary on the *Arba'ah Turim*, complains that in the course of time “we have been poured from vessel to vessel, dispersed and we have been subjected to continual and repeated tribulations.” This sense of being at the end of a chain of transmission in which something is clearly lost (as happens when things are “poured from vessel to vessel”) is reflected, it would seem, in R. Karo’s halakhic decision-making.⁴⁵ In the *Shulhan Arukh*, Karo writes (“Laws of the Recitation of the Sh’ma,” LXX.3):

he who marries a virgin is released of the obligation of reciting Sh’ma for three days if he has not consummated the marriage [lit. “performed an act”] since he is pre-occupied with the performance of a commandment. This applied during the time of the early ones but nowadays, when other people [i.e., not newly married men] do not concentrate their intention [on the performance of commandments as they ought to], even he who marries a virgin recites [the Sh’ma].

This should be compared with the view of Maimonides, “Laws of the Recitation of the Sh’ma,” IV.2:

. . . One whose mind is preoccupied and in an agitated state because of any religious duty which he has to perform is freed from the obligation of reciting the Sh’ma.⁴⁶ Hence a bridegroom who has married a virgin is exempted from reciting the Sh’ma till he has consummated the marriage since his mind is not at rest, lest he not find her to be a virgin. If, however, consummation has been deferred till the night after the Sabbath subsequent to the marriage, it is his obligation to recite from the night after the Sabbath onward, for his mind has calmed down [*nitkararah da’ato*], and he is familiar with her, even though he has not had intercourse with her.⁴⁷

This law as presented by Maimonides derives from BT Berakhot 11a; he is followed in his decision by the *Sefer Mizvot Gadol*, positive commandment 18, and by the *Arba'ah Turim, Orach Hayyim*, LXX.3. Maimonides in this case is the one following the tradition; R. Karo is the one changing the law because of the decline of the generations.⁴⁸ It should be noted, by the way, that for R. Joseph Karo the decline of the generations seems to involve spiritual, not necessarily intellectual decline: we no longer observe the commandments with the same level of intention and concentration achieved by our predecessors.⁴⁹ It should be further noted that the question debated between

Maimonides and R. Karo is one of *kavanah*, intention. On this more general question, Maimonides, unlike "his predecessors and contemporaries, recognizes no difference in the halakhic reality (and perhaps also not in human-psychological reality) between his period and that of the Talmud."⁵⁰

The most extreme expression of the doctrine of the decline of the generations that I have found in a premodern text is in the Maharal of Prague's Introduction to his *Be'er ha-Golah*.⁵¹ Maharal says that it is very difficult for individuals properly to assess their worth. Proof of this is the fact that some people compare themselves to earlier generations with respect to wisdom and understanding. They justify this comparison on the grounds that all human individuals belong to the same species. The Rabbis, however, knew their own worth; Maharal quotes the passage from Eruvin to prove his point. Later scholars understood that the earlier scholars were

entirely intellect; inasmuch as man [is composed] of body and intellect, in the earlier generations the intellectual faculty overpowered that of the body and had the upper hand, so much so that they had a heart wide enough [after Prov. 21:4] to receive wisdom, and they had no impediment from the body . . . the degree of contemporary men, [however,] is that of body, for [today] the body overpowers the intellect and the measure of the intellect[‘s ability to] receive is the measure of the eye of a fine needle.

Human beings⁵² today, the Maharal continues, have the minimum level of intellect necessary to distinguish them from animals, but no more. The Maharal explains that Abbaye's comment about himself and his contemporaries, that they "are like a peg in a wall in respect to Gemara," refers to the deep intelligibles and sciences which can only be understood when taught by a teacher. "We, he says, "can only understand a very small bit of them; these deep intelligibles enter our hearts only in the way in which a peg enters hard wood, namely, that it enters it only very little." Rava's comment, that "we are like a finger in wax as regards logical argument," is taken by the Maharal to mean that our ability to reason is fuzzy. What little we learn he continues, explaining R. Ashi's comment that we "are like a finger in a pit as regards forgetfulness," we quickly and easily forget. The words of the earlier scholars, Maharal affirms, are like a "sealed book" to us, we do not and cannot really understand what they teach. The most we can hope to apprehend is how little we truly understand. If we appreciate that, then "we approach the degree of intellect." In sum, our generation is lacking in wisdom and empty of intellect. Here the emphasis is clearly on intellectual decline.⁵³

R. Moses Hayyim Luzzatto derives a moral lesson from the fact of the decline of the generations:

We see then that a man should not take credit to himself for the good that he does, least of all display vanity or pride on account of it. All this applies to men of the type of Abraham, Moses, Aaron, or David, or the other saints of whom we have made mention. But it hardly applies to us who are totally destitute of merit. Our faults are so numerous that we do not need much thinking to become aware of how unworthy we are. All our learning counts for naught. The most learned among us is no greater than the most insignificant disciple of former generations. We ought to realize this fully, so that we may not become unwarrantably proud. Let us recognize that our mind is unstable, that our intellect is extremely weak, that our ignorance is great, that error is rife among us, and that what we know amounts to very little. Pride hardly becomes us. Rather should we feel abashed and humbled.⁵⁴

We, who are so dramatically inferior to Abraham, Moses, Aaron, and David, in both intellectual and moral terms, have no reason for pride; we ought to comport ourselves with appropriate humility.

The last text I wish to cite here was written near the end of the Jewish Middle Ages by Hakham David Nieto (1654–1728). In many ways, it is the most interesting. On the one hand Nieto expressly (and, I will try to prove, correctly) maintains that Maimonides does *not* accept the doctrine of the decline of the generations. On the other hand, he accepts it himself. For Maimonides as presented by Nieto, the Amoraim did not dispute with Tannaim only because the latter received uncontroverted traditions from their teachers. The failure of the Amoraim to dispute the Tannaim has nothing to do with the claim that the former were greater in number and wisdom. Nieto's own view is that

it is more correct to say that the Amoraim did not dispute the Tannaim because they [the Amoraim] recognized that they [the Tannaim] were greater than they in all respects, and not [only] because they had accepted upon themselves not to dispute, as the *Kesef Mishnah* wrote [explaining Maimonides, not expressing his own view].⁵⁵

Nieto goes on to compare Abbaye in Berakhot 20a with Abbaye in Eruvin 103. In the former place, Abbaye, a fifth generation Amora, expresses the superiority of himself and his colleagues over R. Judah, a second generation Amora. In the latter text, Abbaye clearly expresses the inferiority of his generation when compared with earlier generations. Nieto solves the problem by positing that Abbaye's basic doctrine is the decline of the generations as expressed in Eruvin; the other passage is to be explained in terms of the fact that a dwarf sitting on the shoulders of a giant can see further than the giant.⁵⁶

Before continuing with my discussion of Hakham Nieto, I should like to digress to say a few words about the notion of "dwarves sitting on the

shoulders of giants." An indication of the diffusion of the idea of the "decline of the generations" is the wide-spread use of the parable of "dwarves on the shoulders of giants." Variants⁵⁷ of this expression are often used by later authorities to justify their divergences from the views of earlier figures. The earlier figures may have been giants, but we, even though we are dwarves, can, if perched on the shoulders of the giants, see further than they.⁵⁸

Returning to Nieto, we find that he not only posits the decline of the generations, he also essays an explanation of the phenomenon:

The diminishment of the heart which later generations attributed to themselves is not a function of diminishing intellect, but because of the abundance of troubles, [evil] decrees, and tribulations. The Kabbalists explain this in the reverse, but I do not concern myself here with secret teachings.⁵⁹

Here Nieto, as we shall see, allies himself with what we shall see to be Maimonides' position: intellectual decline is a consequence of historical tribulations; it is not an unavoidable facet of human existence.⁶⁰

In the present chapter, we have seen that the Talmud both supports and opposes the idea of the decline of the generations, that Rav Sherira Gaon turned it into a systematic doctrine which explains both the promulgation of the Mishnah and the superior authority of Tannaim over Amoraim, and that the doctrine became after Rav Sherira a standard aspect of Jewish self-understanding. It should be further noted that Rav Sherira, the Maharal, and Hakham Nieto all appear to have posited their claims concerning the decline of the generations in an attempt to "protect" the authority of the rabbinic tradition against contemporary attacks.⁶¹ It is noteworthy that Maimonides, who faced the same Karaite assault on the rabbinic tradition as did Rav Sherira, as we shall see, did not use that tactic.

Against this background we can begin to attempt to understand Maimonides' attitude towards the decline of the generations, and through it, his attitude towards the nature and authority of the Tannaim and Amoraim.