The universe of rabbinic literature emerged during the first centuries CE in the space between West and East, between Roman Palestine and Sasanian Babylonia. Migrant rabbinic masters and students often became heroes of Babylonian and Palestinian rabbinic narratives. In my project, I examine a number of early Talmudic stories depicting the arrival of students from Babylonia to the new and unfamiliar environment of the Galilee. As a rule, these stories center on a conflict between the stranger and his new surroundings. The Babylonian newcomer is portrayed both as a prestigious figure that the Palestinian Jewish community hopes to retain for itself, and as a stranger struggling for acceptance. By analyzing elements of xenophobia and xenophilia in Palestinian rabbinic culture, we can peer into the self-reflective attitudes of Talmudic culture.

However, here I prefer to talk not about the struggle between xenophobic and xenophilic tendencies, but—to borrow philosopher Jacques Derrida’s terminology about the “interrupted self”—of the Palestinian rabbinic narrator. In his essay Of Hospitality, Derrida describes a model of relationships between guests and hosts, which is essential for my work because it fits the contents of the analyzed stories and helps shape the discussion about the acceptance of the Other in rabbinic culture. In his discussion of the interrupted self, Derrida argues that the admission of a guest should be without conditions or boundaries. Hospitality, when it is unconditional, also allows for the impossibility of hospitality. Absolute hospitality, Derrida writes, “requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner, but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I give place to them....” The Palestinian narrator’s self was prepared to provide absolute hospitality, which could also entail a possibility of violence. Such violence turns the home inside out, turning the host, at least
partially, into a guest, and the guest, at least temporarily, into a host.

Modern Hebrew describes immigration of a Jew to the Holy Land as *aliyah* (ascent), while emigration from that land is called *yeridah* (descent). In Talmudic literature *aliyah* usually appears as a verb, *ala*, or *salak* in Aramaic, which corresponds to the topographic reality: Talmudic Babylonia in the southern parts of Persia is located in the plains, but Palestine is mainly in the highlands. These stable language constructions, apparently, invited a metaphorical interpretation of migration to the Holy Land as superior to a return back home to Babylonia.

Let’s consider the following story from the Jerusalem Talmud, treatise Berakhot, 2:8, 5c:

Kahana was a very young man. When he ascended here he met a certain empty man who said to him: What is being said in heaven? [Kahana] said to him: The verdict of that man [= you] has been signed. And so it was, and he was afflicted. Another one saw [Kahana] and said to him: What is being said in heaven? [Kahana] said to him: The verdict of that man [= you] has been signed. And so it was. [Kahana] said: Have I [not] come in innocence and I am sinning? Have I come to kill the sons of the Land of Israel? I shall go and descend from here. [Before] he left he came to Rabbi Yohanan and asked him: If a person’s mother beats him but the wife of his father respects him, where should he go? [Rabbi Yohanan] said to him: He should go to where he is honored. Kahana descended from here. After he left they came and said to Rabbi Yohanan: Kahana descended to Babylonia. He asked: Would he leave without asking permission? They said to him: That thing that he asked you was from his point of view asking permission.

Kahana, the hero of this story, is a prominent figure of the second generation of the Babylonian Amoraim, but for the Palestinian storyteller he is merely an unimportant young man who, like every Babylonian youth, wishes to reside in the Land of Israel, which for the narrator is the center of the earth. But an encounter of our hero with two ordinary Palestinian natives reveals that they are merely street bullies. The Babylonian’s youth certainly plays a role in this story. This is a standard role-alignment of male groups. A foreign boy in a strange city is an ordinary object of ridicule by common men, apprentices in a tough neighborhood. The bully’s question to the stranger seems at first enigmatic: how can a visiting youngster know what is being said in the higher realms by the heavenly voice?

This question can be read as a prelude to a violent confrontation: the tough guy asks the wimp, “Are they calling for you in heaven?” The latter replies shyly, “How can I know?” The cool guy shoves the wimp in the direction of heaven, as if stating, “Now do you hear it?” However, our Babylonian is not ready to accept the traditional script and responds boldly and courageously: I have indeed been up to heaven and have heard that they have already passed a verdict on you. Kahana’s remark turns out to be prophetic; at the end of the conversation, the other man falls ill and dies. One mishap is not enough, however, and soon a second bully challenges Kahana by the same methods. Again, the young stranger proves his equal and the local guy dies as well.

Now that the offenders are dead, what can Kahana do? He states that he must go back, “descend,” because his presence is dangerous for inhabitants of the Land of Israel and is, indeed, sinful. But from what follows it seems that the true reason for his decision is his disappointment with his Palestinian brethren. He inquires whether he should stay in the Promised Land as a stranger, surrounded by an aura of fear, or whether he should return to
the shores of the Tigris. As a disciple of Rabbi Yohanan, young Kahana can leave only with his master’s permission. Obedient to that tradition, Kahana appears before the doyen of the Galilean sages, perhaps hoping that the rabbi can help him.

In the second act of our drama, Kahana is confronted not by a common man but by a person of his own class, the famous and beloved intellectual, Rabbi Yohanan. Given his negative attitude about the halachic permission needed to leave the Promised Land, Kahana does not dare to speak directly about his decision to leave. He brings before his teacher a fictive halachic casus: a man desires his mother’s love, but the mother, out of cruelty or ignorance, displays no signs of affection. The young man is devoid of maternal love; however, he is beloved by his stepmother. To whom should the poor thing go? Rabbi Yohanan’s answer is almost expected: he is concerned about the boy’s welfare and sends the boy to the place where he is beloved. But let us ponder the hidden meaning of Kahana’s parable. The land in which he was born is as foreign to him as a stepmother, but there he finds love and respect. The Land of Israel, the mother, which he considers his true homeland, is full of idle and aggressive idiots.

An intriguing question arises: where is the father in this parable? Does he reside with the mother or with the stepmother? Or is he absent, leaving the son on his own? Probably the father here is not God but Abraham, who came to Canaan from Mesopotamia, that is, from the same area as the young Kahana. Returning to the country of his stepmother, that is, Babylonia, Kahana will make a journey in the opposite direction, but if he stays in the country of his mother, Land of Israel, he will die from a lack of love. In this parable Kahana presents his predicament to Rabbi Yohanan, perhaps hoping that the wise man will offer a solution. But Rabbi Yohanan can recognize only the parable’s external shell, without understanding the deeper concerns of his Babylonian student.

Rabbi Yohanan is frustrated and surprised when he subsequently learns what happened, leaving the reader with an amazing thought-provoking story about the relationships between a person and his environment. Something very important happened in the interrupted dialogue between Kahana and Rabbi Yohanan. By proposing a riddle that cannot be resolved by his master, a student shows his superiority and can claim the master position, but leaves without even gazing in the face of defeat.

The narrator of the Jerusalem Talmud is a Palestinian insider who tells stories about the attempts by the Babylonian guests to find their home in the land of their Palestinian hosts. We can again come back to Derrida’s claim that “we thus enter from the inside: the master of the house is at home, but nonetheless he comes to enter his home through the guest—who comes from outside.” In welcoming the guest, the self is interrupted. Reading this story, we followed the attempts of the narrator of the Jerusalem Talmud to construct his own, interrupted self as host of the guest who takes over his house.