HEBREW UNION COLLEGE - JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION
NEW YORK SCHOOL

INSTRUCTIONS FROM AUTHOR TO LIBRARY FOR THESIS

AUTHOR: Valerie Cohen

TITLE: An Analysis of Demonology and Magic in Sefer Hasidim

TYPE OF THESIS:

RABBINIC ✓ SSM ( ) D.H.L. ( )

D.MIN. ( ) M.A.R.E. ( ) M.A.J.S. ( )

1. (✓) May be used without my written permission.

2. ( ) My written permission is required for use during the next ___ years.

Note: The Library shall respect restrictions placed on theses for a period of no more than ten years.

I understand that the Library may make a photocopy of my thesis for security purposes.

3. The Library may sell photocopies of my thesis. ✓ yes ___ no

2-11-99 Valerie Cohen
Date Signature of Author

THE KLAU LIBRARY
HEBREW UNION COLLEGE
JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION
BROOKDALE CENTER
ONE WEST FOURTH STREET
NEW YORK, NY 10012

***LIBRARY RECORD***

***Microfilmed:*** ___
***Date***

***Signature of Library Staff Member***

March 19, 1996

# AN ANALYSIS OF DEMONOLOGY AND MAGIC IN SEFER HASIDIM

by

VALERIE COHEN

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
Graduate Rabbinic Program
New York, New York

1999

Dr. Stanley S. Nash

THE KLAU LIBRARY
HEBREW UNION COLLEGE-
JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION
BROOKDALE CENTER
ONE WEST FOURTH STREET
NEW YORK, NY 10012

Pc. 1045

**An Analysis of Demonology and Magic in Sefer Hasidim**

**Summary**

The goal of this thesis was to identify and analyze demonological and magical stories in Sefer Hasidim within the context of the Middle Ages and Jewish tradition. Sefer Hasidim is known more for its guidance on ethical issues than for its demonology and magic, even though demons and magic are a prominent characteristic of the work. This thesis analyzes the role of these stories in Sefer Hasidim as well as in the lives of medieval German Jews. Two contributions of this thesis are the knowledge ascertained about medieval German Jews from their demonological and magical stories, and the recognition that demons and magic are major contributors to the history of Judaism.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter gives basic background information on Ashkenazi Hasidism and Sefer Hasidim, and also summarizes previous scholarship on the literature of the movement. The second chapter gives a short introduction on demons in Jewish tradition, and then identifies and analyzes the demonological passages in Sefer Hasidim. The third chapter gives some possible definitions for magic, and Sefer Hasidim's magical stories within that context and within the context of Jewish tradition.

The material for this thesis came from the text of Sefer Hasidim, which was compiled in two editions, Bologna and Parma. Although the two editions are somewhat similar, there are some passages that are only included in one and not the other. Therefore, both editions were used.

**Table of Contents**

## Acknowledgements

Over three years ago in Cincinnati, my friend (and now Rabbi) Mira Wasserman and I realized that we would never see each other unless we took a class together. But in the spring of 1996, we disagreed over which class we should take. Since Mira won, we both enrolled in Dr. Susan Einbinder's class on a weird medieval Hebrew text that I had never heard of: Sefer Hasidim. Not only do I need to thank Mira for prevailing over the choice of which class to take, but I also have to thank Dr. Einbinder. Dr. Einbinder's own interest in Sefer Hasidim, and its stories about demons in particular, was contagious. As a teacher, she was brilliant and inspiring, as well as very dedicated to her students. I began working with her to develop a thesis proposal, and when I transferred to the New York campus, Dr. Einbinder recommended that I continue my work with Dr. Stanley Nash, who was her own thesis advisor when she was in rabbinical school.

One of the most striking characteristics of Sefer Hasidim is its blatant disregard for Hebrew grammar and clear, concise sentences. Considering the large amount of material on demonology and magic to be translated and analyzed, I felt somewhat inadequate with my decent, but definitely not fluent grasp of the Hebrew language. I could not have understood most of those passages without the help of Dr. Nash, who spent an inordinate amount of time helping me to understand strange medieval Hebrew. Even with his expertise, I was only able to piece together paraphrases of the text and not precise

translations. I am very grateful to Dr. Nash for his time, as well as his patience, as we worked on this thesis together. Because of his love for the Hebrew language, I always left our study sessions feeling inspired and invigorated.

Next, I would like to thank my husband, who took care of almost every detail of our household during this process, including taking care me. He was willing to proofread my work and give me editorial suggestions in the midst of preparing a NFTY convention for 1,500 teenagers. I would also like to thank my family for their encouragement and support, even if it sometimes came in the form of nagging. My acknowledgements would not be complete without mention of Rabbi Mark Kaiserman, who has been a great friend and advisor during my time at Hebrew Union College.

Lastly, I must recognize my cat, Xena Warrior Kitty, who so diligently sat by my side, as well as on my books and on me, as I studied text and typed on the computer. If she had not been so involved in my work, I might have finished two weeks earlier. I know it's a little odd to thank my cat, but I do not have any children. Maybe I've been bewitched (see chapter three)

## Introduction

Sefer Hasidim, the "Book of the Pious," was compiled in the late twelfth and early thirteenth century in Germany. This Hebrew text is best known for its ethical lessons, but it also contains the specific ideology of the Ashkenazi Hasidim (German Pietists) who believed in a three-fold revelation on Mt. Sinai: the Written Torah, the Oral Torah, and a hidden tradition. This tradition was passed down to the leaders of the Hasidim and became the basis for the lessons in Sefer Hasidim.

Gershom Scholem, the most notable scholar on Jewish mysticism, describes Sefer Hasidim as "the most important literary document of the movement [of Ashkenazi Hasidism] which gives the fullest insight into its origins and its originality."[1] In light of Scholem's statement, it is interesting to note that Sefer Hasidim is unique in comparison to the rest of the movement's literature, which is comprised of esoteric texts. In contrast, Sefer Hasidim is concerned primarily with the problems of practical life. Yitzhak Baer, a professor of history at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, even went so far as to say "Sefer Hasidim is the first, and perhaps the only, Hebrew book to deal in a fundamental manner with the problems of economic and social life."[2] For example, Sefer Hasidim has specific rules for the *hasid* to follow when he makes economic transactions.[3] Sefer Hasidim deals with these economic and social problems by creating a

---

[1] Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Shocken Books 1974): 83. (Hereafter, Scholem, *Major Trends.*)
[2] Yitzhak Baer, "The Socioreligious Orientation of 'Sefer Hasidim.'" *Binah* 2. Ed. Joseph Dan (1989): 72. (Hereafter, Baer, "Socioreligious Orientation.")

formula for the ideal life, supplying a whole series of value judgements for the conduct of both individual and communal living.[4] This formula is arranged in a collection of brief homilies, ethical parables and stories, whose primary purpose is to help the *hasid* achieve eternal salvation.[5]

There is some debate on the precise authorship of Sefer Hasidim, which I will deal with in greater detail later. But it is clear that the book came from the school of Ashkenazi Hasidism, a new and innovative movement for medieval Jews, which developed in the areas of Northern France and the Rhineland communities of Western Germany. Their most notable leaders, all descendants of the Italian aristocratic Kalonymus family, are R. Samuel ben Kalonymus Hehasid (the Pious) of Speyer (twelfth century), his son R. Judah Hehasid (ca. 1150-1217), and R. Eleazar ben Judah of Worms (ca. 1165-1230).[6] These leaders came from the aristocratic center of the Jewish community, while their followers were likely from its periphery.[7]

The goal of this thesis is to identify and analyze the passages in Sefer Hasidim that deal with magic and demonology. The literature of Ashkenazi Hasidism, especially Sefer Hasidim, is filled with stories and discussions on demonic powers, magic, witchcraft, incantations, vampires, werewolves, spirits of the dead, and other supernatural phenomena. In a book that teaches one how to be pious and be perfect in loving God, it seemed odd to me that these items of

---

[3] Baer, "Socioreligious Orientation," 77.
[4] Monford Harris, "The Concept of Love in Sepher Hassidim," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 50 (1959):13.
[5] Baer, "Socioreligious Orientation," 61-62.
[6] Ibid, 61.

the occult would occupy so much space. My curiosity about the role of these stories in Sefer Hasidim led me to this thesis topic.

Since many of the stories relating to magic and demonology do not "sound" Jewish, it is important to determine where they came from. Scholem indicates the difficulty of tracing their sources, and can only attribute them to a mixture of traditions of what he calls "the most extraordinary combinations of Hellenistic occultism, early Jewish magic, and ancient German beliefs in demons and witches."[8]

Unsure of where the stories of magic and demons originated, the next question to ask is why the Hasidim chose to write about them so extensively. Joseph Dan, the most recent and prolific scholar on Ashkenazi Hasidism, recognized the peculiarity of the existence of this literature, but he explains it through theology. "The unusual interest in this field, unparalleled in its scope in Hebrew Medieval literature and unusual in European literature of the time, is a direct result of R. Judah's attitude toward miracles."[9] According to Dan, R. Judah believed that learning about these supernatural phenomena or miracles led to understanding God's goodness. Therefore, one should collect stories and details about demonic powers, magic, etc. and examine them.

Even with their absolute belief in the existence of powers of evil and in the existence of the powers of amulets and incantations, the Ashkenazi Hasidim did

---

[7] Haym Soloveitchik, "Three Themes in Sefer Hasidim," *Association of Jewish Studies Review 1* (1976): 350. (Hereafter, Soloveitchik, "Three Themes.")
[8] Scholem, *Major Trend*, 86.
[9] Joseph Dan, "Mysticism and Ethics in the Ashkenazi Hasidic Movement," *Jewish Mysticism and Jewish Ethics* (Seattle 1986): 53. (Hereafter, Dan, "Mysticism and Ethics.")

not develop a Gnostic view of God that attributes these powers to an evil deity or source such as Satan. They were miracles and defied the laws of nature, but they were still part of this world and ruled by the one God.[10]

The attitude of Sefer Hasidim toward magic and demonology is predominantly negative, although it does identify some permissible activities. But the text is inconsistent, and what may be permissible in one story is forbidden in another. Judah may have been fully convinced of the reality and effectiveness of the occult, but he was sharply opposed to its practice. Still, as Scholem points out, "Judah's perception of the danger did not prevent the magical elements in his heritage from gaining the upper hand over his moral ideal ... nowhere else in Judaism has man the magical creator been surrounded by such a halo."[11]

As mentioned above, Dan believes that the Ashkenazi Hasidim collected stories about magic and demonology in order to understand God's goodness. If we agree with Dan's theory, it would follow that R. Judah was interested in such stories mainly for theological reasons. Although theology could have been the impetus for Judah to compile magical and demonological stories in Sefer Hasidim, their function becomes more practical – as I will demonstrate throughout this thesis. The stories also give the historian hints and insights about Ashkenazi Hasidism, about Judaism, and about Christianity in medieval Germany.

---

[10] Dan, "Mysticism and Ethics," 53.
[11] Scholem, *Major Trends*, 99.

## Chapter One: Background

### The First Major Scholarship on Ashkenazi Hasidism

The scholarship written about Sefer Hasidim and Ashkenazi Hasidism can be divided into three major periods. Although a few articles were written about Ashkenazi Hasidism, the first major work on this form of Judaism was by Moritz Güdemann, the first social historian of German Jewry. Güdemann catalogued the Hasidim and their beliefs in a three-volume work that he worked on for eight years, from 1880 – 1888.[1] He focused on the historical significance of Sefer Hasidim as a major source for the study of religion and folklore in both Christianity and Judaism in the high Middle Ages.[2]

The next scholar of note is Abraham Epstein, who wrote on Hasidic speculative texts in his study, "*Le-qorot ha-Qabbalah ha-Ashkenazit*" ["The History of Ashkenazic Kabbalah"] (1894). He was also an important contributor to the biographical literature of the Kalonymus family and its disciples, especially concerning the life of R. Samuel Kalonymus. Through his work, he was able to distinguish between the thought of Judah the Pious and his disciples.[3]

The last major scholar of this period was Y.N. Simhoni, who helped define the unique features of German Hasidism in his long essay "*HaHasidut HaAshkenazit Biyemei-Habeinayim*," which was published in 1917. Gershom Scholem later

---

[1] Moritz Güdemann, *Geschichte des Erziehungswesens und der Cultur des abendländischen Juden* 3 vols (1880-8, reprinted: Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1988).

[2] Ivan Marcus, *Piety and Society: The Jewish Pietists of Medieval Germany* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981): 3. (Hereafter, Ivan, *Piety and Society*.)

described Simhoni as "one of the few writers on the subject who... tried to go below the surface." Simhoni identified the qualifications of a *hasid* and elucidated the extreme behavior of the Hasidim in general. Simhoni did not consider the Hasidim to be a popular movement. He called them an elitist circle, based on the evidence in Sefer Hasidim which tells stories of the Hasidim being ridiculed by and separated from their fellow Jews.[4]

**The Middle Period of Major Scholarship**

The next group of significant scholars are best represented by Yitzhak Baer and Gershom Scholem; they were proponents of the "Romantic Conception," which, unlike the premise set forth by Simhoni, claimed that Ashkenazi Hasidism was a popular religious and social movement. Baer, who was born in Germany in 1888, founded the Department of History at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and was the teacher of most of today's historians in Israel. His major contribution to the research of Ashkenazi Hasidism is his essay, "The Socioreligious Orientation of Sefer Hasidim," which first appeared in Hebrew in 1938.[5]

In his essay, Baer asserts that the literature of the Hasidim had a broad audience, and that the text of Sefer Hasidim represented all Medieval German Jews. He described the purpose of Sefer Hasidim as a social and religious program which worked toward personal perfection and instructed Jews on how to

---

[3] Marcus, *Piety and Society*, 3.
[4] Ibid, 4-5.
[5] Baer, "Socioreligious Orientation," 57.

avoid sin in order to receive eternal salvation. Unfortunately, we can never know the extent to which this program succeeded.[6]

Baer was also the first scholar to point out the similarities between Jews and Christians who lived in the same period and geographical region. Baer concluded that Christian sources and practices influenced Ashkenazi Hasidism.[7] Sefer Hasidim exhibits significant Christian influences in that it resembles a collection of exempla or sermons preached among circles of Christian monks from the 13th century onward.[8] The new ethical and religious message conveyed in Sefer Hasidim is parallel to the doctrine of the society that was founded by the Italian monk St. Francis of Assisi. Both groups expected stricter standards of piety from the broader society,[9] and the extreme self-affliction and self-debasement in Sefer Hasidim reflects this Christian influence.

One divergence from the literature of the Christian monks was the lack of miraculous deeds found in Sefer Hasidim.[10] Stories of miracles were widespread among the monks,[11] while Hasidic modesty prevented the recounting of such stories. Ashkenazi Hasidism also differs from its Christian contemporaries in that the *hasid* did not accept the Christian doctrines of holy poverty or chastity.[12] In explicit contrast to Christian sexual asceticism, Sefer Hasidim assigned great importance to the establishment and maintenance of a normal and reasonable

---

[6] Baer, "Socioreligious Orientation," 92-93.
[7] Marcus, *Piety and Society*, 5-7.
[8] Eli Yassif, "*Hasippur Haexemplari BeSefer Hasidim*" *Tarbits* 57 (1987-88) 224.
[9] Baer, "Socioreligious Orientation," 61-62.
[10] Ibid, 64.
[11] Caesarius of Heisterbach, *The Dialogue on Miracles*. Translated by H. von E. Scott and C.C. Swinton Bland (New York, 1929), 2 vols.

married life. Even in regard to the harsh penances required of a sinner, the Hasidim were never forced to abstain from marital relations.[13] Baer concluded that, like the Christians, Ashkenazi Hasidism had a broad audience.

Gershom Scholem, who was the first to lay a solid foundation for the study of mysticism, left Berlin in 1923 to become a professor of Jewish Mysticism and Kabbalah at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Although his views on Ashkenazi Hasidism fall into the same camp as Baer's, he differed with Baer in that he thought of the Hasidim as religious and mystical thinkers.[14] Because of Scholem's view of Hasidim as mystics, he included a chapter about Ashkenazi Hasidism in his groundbreaking book on Jewish Mysticism, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*.[15] But, even considering this chapter, Scholem did not regard Ashkenazi Hasidism as a full-fledged "trend" in Jewish mysticism. He described their esoteric writings as a "haphazard collection of half-baked ideas" that could not form a cohesive theology. Scholem, like Baer and Epstein, did not differentiate between schools and periods of the Hasidism; he claimed that all the people in the movement shared the ideas found in their literature.[16]

---

[12] Baer, "Socioreligious Orientation," 64.
[13] Scholem, *Major Trends*, 106.
[14] Marcus, *Piety and Society*, 7.
[15] Scholem, *Major Trends*, 80-118.
[16] Joseph Dan, "Ashkenazi Hasidism, 1941-1991: Was there Really a Hasidic Movement in Medieval Germany?" *Gershom Scholem's Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism 50 Years After: Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference on the History of Jewish Mysticism*. Ed. Peter Shäfer and Joseph Dan (Tübingen: Mohr, 1993): 88-90. (Hereafter, Dan, "Movement.")

**The Most Recent Scholarship**

Ivan Marcus, who in his article, "The Devotional Ideals of Ashkenazic Pietism" published in 1986, claims his work to be the most extensive treatment of pietism, wrote the major work in English on Ashkenazi Hasidim. His book, *Piety and Society*, points out the vast differences in thought among Samuel the Pious, his son Judah the Pious, and Judah's disciple, Eleazar of Worms. He also develops a theory on Sefer Hasidim, which describes it as Judah's "sectarian program."[17]

From the social program found in Sefer Hasidim, Marcus illustrates how Judah especially stands out from Eleazar in his political goals of creating a perfect society of Jews. According to Marcus, Judah was a radical social and religious innovator who promoted social responsibility and personal religious salvation. He was concerned with a community of Hasidim who were separate and very critical of non-Hasidic Jewish society. In contrast, Eleazar is more conservative and moderate than his teacher, emphasizing that piety is a personal issue, not a societal matter.[18]

Over the past 35 years, Joseph Dan has become the most prolific author on Ashkenazi Hasidism – as evidenced by his three books and over 50 essays, the majority of which are written in Hebrew. He first became interested in this subject when he took a class on Sefer Hasidim with Isaiah Tishbi, which

[17] Ivan Marcus, "The Devotional Ideals of Ashkenazic Pietism," *Jewish Spirituality from the Bible through the Middle Ages*. Ed. A. Green (New York 1986): 365. (Hereafter, Marcus, "Devotional Ideals."
[18] Marcus, *Piety and Society*, 15.

convinced him to write his thesis and dissertation on Ashkenazi Hasidism.[19] Dan, who is interested primarily in the esoteric theology of Ashkenazi Hasidism, disagreed with Scholem's conclusion that their speculative theology was eclectic, inconsistent and filled with bad writing. Although Dan acknowledged the imprecise use of language in the text, he claims that the texts represent several different, but related, theological schools of thought. He agrees with Marcus that the three major leaders of Ashkenazi Hasidism had different views, but, unlike Marcus, Dan views the Hasidim as theological writers, not social religious innovators.[20]

**Basic Concepts of Ashkenazi Hasidism**

To better understand Sefer Hasidim, we must first look at the environment in which it was conceived. The worldview of Ashkenazi Hasidism is based on their new understanding of revelation at Sinai. Not only did God reveal the Written Torah and the Oral Torah, but He also transmitted a secret and hidden tradition which would lead to understanding the Will of the Creator.[21] God encoded these secrets in laws and prohibitions within the Torah; it is the *Hasid's* task to decipher these secrets in order to perceive the Will of the Creator in its fullness.[22] The Kalonymus family believed that they had received this secret tradition, and they brought it with them when they emigrated from southern Italy to Mainz in the 9th century. R. Eleazar, in his commentary on the prayers,

[19] Dan, "Movement," 92-95.
[20] Marcus, *Piety and Society*, 10.
[21] Ibid, 2.
[22] Ibid, 26.

explained that the esoteric tradition reached the Kalonymus family in Italy in the eighth century. R. Aharon ben Shmuel of Baghdad, who was a scholar and a magician, brought this tradition with him to Italy, and he taught the rabbis the esoteric tradition hidden in Scripture, which included the mystical meanings of the prayers.[23]

The *hasid* was obligated to search out the hidden Will of the Creator, an infinite process facilitated by finding new prohibitions to follow and by creating fences, or safeguards, around the laws which already existed.[24] They were to mold their lives according to this Will, which led to a policy of systematic stringency.[25] In this way, the Hasidim were constantly striving for the perfection that would show their love for God. According to Hasidism, love for and devotion to God was identical to the pure fear of Him.[26] This fear should not be based on the fear of divine punishment or the fear that God will not grant one what he has asked of Him; instead, one should be afraid of sinning because he is afraid that he will not be perfect in his love for God. This is the highest level of fear.[27]

The Hasidim viewed their lives as a continuous series of trials. They believed that God put obstacles in front of them every day in order to test their level of righteousness. The Hasidim considered these tests as divinely arranged opportunities to exhibit their piety and perfect love for God. Because of this mindset, the Hasidim saw only one purpose to the religious and ethical laws: to test the human spirit when it has to choose between the spiritual and the

[23] Dan, "Mysticism and Ethics," 46.
[24] Marcus, *Piety and Society*, 12.
[25] Soloveitchik, "Three Themes," 318.
[26] Scholem, *Major Trends*, 95.

material, between the body and the soul.[28] The reward for making the correct choice was otherworldly salvation, which was the motivation for all acts, because the Hasidim viewed their entire lives as a preparation for the afterlife.[29]

Since the *hasid* was faced with a never-ending series of trials, he had plenty of opportunity to fail and therefore to sin. Ashkenazi Hasidism set up a complicated system of atonement and penances in order to punish the *hasid* for his sin, based on the theory that sin causes pleasure, so righteousness should cause pain. Basically, a sinner's punishment included a voluntary acceptance of suffering and self-torture based on this system, which I will describe in more detail later in this chapter.

Lastly, there is a detail about the Hasidic view of miracles in relation to their theology, which helps with our understanding of magic and demonology in Ashkenazi Hasidism. The Hasidim believed in a multi-leveled deity, which included the hidden God and the revealed God. The hidden, supreme Godhead is called *borei*, or Creator. The Creator is eternal, unchanged and unchanging, and not only is He hidden, but also His goodness is completely hidden.[30] Although the Creator is not subject to direct sense perception, His existence is testified to by the laws of nature.[31] But the laws of nature do not reflect the Creator's goodness, because then creation would be perfect, with no difficulties, and righteousness would lose its meaning because man would be able to achieve it with no effort. Instead, God's goodness is perceived through the

[27] Marcus, *Piety and Society*, 29.
[28] Dan, "Mysticism and Ethics," 59-61.
[29] Marcus, "Devotional Ideals," 358.
[30] Dan, "Mysticism and Ethics," 68.

revealed God, *kavod*, or Divine Glory. The Divine Glory is neither eternal nor unchanging, and because it is revealed it can assume a form. Therefore, God's goodness (i.e. the goodness of the Divine Glory) is perceived not in the laws of nature but in the suspension of those laws, called supernatural phenomena or miracles. For the Hasidim, the most obvious miracles were demons and magic, and they believed that, through the knowledge of such supernatural phenomena, they could discover God's goodness.[32]

"Where is the Kalonymus family after the 1220's?" asks Haym Soloveitchik in his essay, "Three Themes in Sefer Hasidim." Although the Ashkenazi Hasidim produced a plethora of literature, the Hasidic movement itself lived a very short life. Soloveitchik explains that "what the early decades of the thirteenth century witnessed was not simply the displacement of an elite, but the passing of an entire culture." We can only assume that Judah and Eleazar were unable to find students worthy of transmitting to them the esoteric traditions of Ashkenazi Hasidim in order to prolong their ideology.[33] To truly understand the Hasidic worldview, we have been left a story hidden within theological and ethical texts.

**Sefer Hasidim**

R. Judah was unique among Jewish scholars in medieval Germany, even including his father Samuel and his disciple Eleazar, because of his interest in stories. He believed that stories were the manifestations or revelations of divine

[31] Soloveitchik, "Three Themes," 315.
[32] Dan, "Mysticism and Ethics," 68-70.

truth, which therefore gave them theological credibility.[34] Judah recorded many of his stories in Sefer Hasidim, and he speaks as if he was an authentic prophet, who believed in the truthfulness and legitimacy of those stories.[35] Since he thought the ultimate source of the stories was Divine, he did not invent, edit or change a single one. He wrote them as he heard them, even if they did not agree theologically with the argument into which they were incorporated.[36] Although Judah believed that stories were divinely revealed, nowhere did the Ashkenazi Hasidim describe an ancient, traditional source for their ethical teachings (mostly made up of stories), which was passed down to the Kalonymus family, as they did with their esoteric traditions.

Through its stories and homilies, Sefer Hasidim also gives detailed information that provides historical insights into the Ashkenazi community and the practical conditions of their life.[37] Although the historical benefit of Sefer Hasidim is not argued, scholars question whether or not the Hasidic community described in the text really existed. The scholars of the "Romantic Conception" described above, such as Baer and Scholem, said that works like Sefer Hasidim reflected a popular religious and social movement.[38] Recently, scholars like Joseph Dan and Ivan Marcus have disagreed with this theory, and instead view Sefer Hasidim as an unrealized sectarian program. Dan calls the text, "a

---

[33] Soloveitchik, "Three Themes," 351-352.
[34] Joseph Dan, "Rabbi Judah the Pious and Caesarius of Heisterbach: Common Motifs in their Stories." *Studies in Aggadah and Folk-Literature* 22 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press 1971):19. (Hereafter, Dan, "Caesarius.")
[35] Baer, "Socioreligious Orientation," 66.
[36] Dan, "Caesarius," 19-20.
[37] Baer, "Socioreligious Orientation," 92.
[38] Marcus, *Piety and Society*, 5.

blueprint for a structure that was never built,"[39] and explains that there is no external proof that the Hasidic communities in Sefer Hasidim actually existed; R. Judah's works are the only sources for a description of this sect as a historical reality. Even though there are several vivid passages in Sefer Hasidim which describe, as factual, a vibrant Hasidic community, no other Ashkenazi literature does this. Eleazer in particular never writes about a Hasidic community; he is primarily concerned with an individual's level of piety.[40]

Ivan Marcus addresses the issue of historicity in greater depth in his article, "The Historical Meaning of *Hasidei Ashkenaz*: Fact, Fiction, or Cultural Self-Image?" Although he does not believe that the communities suggested by the literature actually existed, he does assign value to the description of the German Jewish communities that Sefer Hasidim provides. He explains his thesis on Sefer Hasidim as a "cultural self-image" or a collective memory – which is to say that Sefer Hasidim has a historical aspect to it in the sense that the stories preserve a true cultural stance, a collective memory, of the Ashkenazi society.[41]

Marcus' argument centers on the passages in Sefer Hasidim that describe the tension between the Hasidic and the non-Hasidic communities. "The stories in Sefer Hasidim illustrate that the Ashkenazi society was divided by groups in conflict, often in the synagogue as well as the rest of the community, in which

---

[39] Dan, "Movement", 100.
[40] Ibid, 96-97.
[41] Ivan Marcus, "The Historical Meaning of *Hasidei Ashkenaz*: Fact, Fiction, or Cultural Self-Image?" *Gershom Scholem's Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism 50 Years After: Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference on the History of Jewish Mysticism.* Ed. Peter Shäfer and Joseph Dan (Tübingen: Mohr, 1993) 108-109. (Hereafter, Marcus, "Historical Meaning.")

honor and leadership of the community were being fought over.[42] Sefer Hasidim promotes separation between the Hasidim and the "Wicked," who were defined simply as those who denied the new revelation of Ashkenazi Hasidism.[43] The widespread presence of the "Wicked" evident in the text can only mean either the political and spiritual leadership of the Jewish community in the thirteenth century was frequently in the hands of evil men, or that Sefer Hasidim uses this term for its own purposes.[44] Marcus believes that the overly harsh and severe tone of Sefer Hasidim cannot reflect historical reality. Rather, these stories are a "refraction, if not a reflection, of the social conflicts and tensions that actually existed among different groups of Jews in medieval Germany in the eleventh through thirteenth centuries."[45] In other words, the stories do not reflect actual history, but through them, one can see a distorted image of Ashkenazi Judaism that still gives insight into its society.

As I mentioned earlier, R. Judah is the only leader of Ashkenazi Hasidim who writes specifically about a Hasidic community. Considering that the stories of Sefer Hasidim fit into R. Judah's image of a perfect Hasidic society, one could easily conclude that R. Judah is the author of Sefer Hasidim. Although all scholars have credited R. Judah with at least partial authorship, early scholarship did not support him as the only author. Scholem describes Sefer Hasidim as "an edition of the literary testaments of the three founders [of Ashkenazi Hasidism]."[46] In one article, Dan recounts his disagreement with his teacher Isaiah Tishby on

[42] Marcus, "Historical Meaning," 113.
[43] Dan, "Movement," 98.
[44] Soloveitchik, "Three Themes," 330-331.
[45] Marcus, "Historical Meaning," 113.

the subject of authorship. According to Dan, the main point of Tishby's lectures on Sefer Hasidim (which were never printed) was "his insistence, following M. Güdemann (and supported, to some extent by Baer and Scholem) that Sefer Hasidim was an enormous anthology, reflecting the work of generations of Ashkenazi Hasidic leaders."[47]

More recently, Sefer Hasidim has been attributed to one major author. Dan, Marcus, Soloveichik and Israel Ta-Shema[48] all agree that Sefer Hasidim was essentially a work written by Judah the Pious alone, with a few selections by Samuel and Eleazer.[49] Since one of the major virtues of Hasidism was humility, there is no way to prove his or anyone else's authorship of Sefer Hasidim; the author insists that all authors should remain anonymous, so no biographical information is included. But modern scholarship concludes that Judah was most probably the author of the majority of the Sefer Hasidim, with Samuel as the contributor of the first section of the book, called *Sefer Hayir'ah* (Parma 1-16).[50]

**Basic Concepts in Sefer Hasidim**

Sefer Hasidim is filled with advice on how to become perfectly righteous; this seems to be the major goal of the book. Righteousness is not easily attained, especially considering the temptation of the evil impulse that God

---

[46] Scholem, *Major Trends*, 83.
[47] Dan, "Movement," 95.
[48] I. Ta-Shema, "*Be'erah shel Miryam – Gilgulai Minhag Tsarfat Bise'udah Shlishit shel Shabbat.*" *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 4 (1985): 151-270 and "*She'elot u'Tsuvot min Hashamayim Hakovets V'tosafotav.*" *Tarbits* 57 (1988): 51-66.
[49] Dan, "Movement," 96.

created with man.[51] God puts obstacles in the path of the *hasid* so that he can overcome them, and through his success reach the status of righteousness. Since the number of obstacles a *hasid* must face in his life is infinite, perfect righteousness comes to mean the achievement of the impossible.[52]

To be a *hasid* one must develop to the utmost the law that had been revealed (Written and Oral Law), and to seek out the prohibitions of the divine will that were hidden elsewhere.[53] Sefer Hasidim warns that there are things permitted in the Torah for which man is still punished.[54] Although the Hasidim deeply respected talmudic tradition, the laws of the Mishnah and Talmud were not enough.[55] Once a *hasid* attained a deeper understanding of the Divine Will through dialectic study, he would be able to detect the new demands made upon him by God, and thus increase his religious observance.[56] Still, one could be a *hasid* without the intellectual background in Talmud and Mishnah; even though scholarship was important in Hasidism, morals were a higher priority. One could even become a *hasid* with only basic knowledge of the Bible.[57]

Following Jewish law was an all-consuming task for the *hasid* but for Sefer Hasidim the *hasid's* desire and his intent governing his observance of the commandment was more significant than the act itself. This focus on internal religious spirituality was an original concept created by R. Judah, and worked

[50] Marcus, *Piety and Society*, 136.
[51] Ibid, 31.
[52] Dan, "Mysticism and Ethics," 64.
[53] Soloveitchik, "Three Themes," 91.
[54] Baer, "Socioreligious Orientation," 66.
[55] Ibid, 62-63.
[56] Soloveitchik, "Three Themes," 344.
[57] Scholem, *Major Trends*, 91.

well for those who had little understanding of the law.[58] To help the ordinary Jew, Sefer Hasidim introduced the idea of the sage as the spiritual and legal advisor to the community. Anyone who was doubtful of the proper mode of behavior in a given situation was required to consult with the sage.[59] The sage must be a paragon of piety and a charismatic leader who knows the Will of the Creator. His role in the community required him to interpret the divine demands and help the Hasidim follow them;[60] for those who did not follow the Hasidic interpretation of the commandments, the sage also administered penances. Sefer Hasidim also includes a plan of atonement for those who want to become part of the community of Hasidim.[61]

The complicated system of penances and the requirement for a sinner to make an oral confession to another Jew was one of the boldest innovations of Sefer Hasidim.[62] Although Sefer Hasidim is linguistically ambiguous in the terms it uses for repentance, Marcus is able to identify the four major points of its penitential system. The first is "*ba'ah* repentance": when the sinner is faced with the identical situation in which he sinned, he is able to resist temptation. The second, "*gader* repentance," requires avoiding or making safeguards around actions which might lead to a repetition of the sin already committed. (The Hebrew word *gader* means fence.) "*Gader* repentance" can be illustrated by the example of a person who commits adultery. In order to avoid repeating his sin,

---

[58] Soloveitchik, "Three Themes," 324.
[59] Ibid, 326.
[60] Marcus, *Piety and Society*, 71-72.
[61] Marcus, "Historical Meaning," 104-105.
[62] Marcus, *Piety and Society*, 82.

he does not even look at women. This interpretation of "*gader* repentance" originates in Sefer Hasidim.

The next two penances are what Eleazar will later call *mishqal* and *katuv*. These two words are not found in Sefer Hasidim, with one exception that may be an interpolation from Eleazar's writing. "*Mishqal*," the penance for illicit pleasure, requires the sinner to undergo the amount of suffering that was equal to the pleasure experienced in the sin. "*Katuv* repentance" refers to the Biblical penalty for the sin. In Samuel's *Sefer Hayir'ah*, we find an example: "if a (sin earns) forty (biblical) lashes and shame, he must undergo a penance equivalent to forty lashes of pain and shame."[63] The Hasidim believed that these penances might cancel out the divine punishment one would receive in the world-to-come.[64]

Yitzhak Baer, in his discussion of Christian parallels in Sefer Hasidim, says that the concept of penances was introduced to the Jews by Christian influences. The system of penances described in Sefer Hasidim are guided by the principle of "measure for measure," which is absent from both ancient Christianity and Talmudic Judaism. Baer explains that this system resembles the primitive system of criminal justice among the "barbaric German peoples," and was appropriated first by the Christians and later by the Ashkenazi Hasidim.[65]

Earlier I wrote about the negative attitudes of the Hasidim toward their non-Hasidic fellow Jews. The Hasidim also had direct and frequent contact with their Christian neighbors, as evidenced by Sefer Hasidim. Jews and Christians shared mutual concerns, such as commercial matters, the defense of their cities,

---

[63] Marcus, *Piety and Society*, 48-50.
[64] Ibid, 14.

and basic human feelings. As a result, Sefer Hasidim was cautious when giving advice concerning relationships with Christians. Although the advice was strict about everything pertaining to the Christian idol worship, like mentioning the name of the Christian deity or entering a church, other issues were treated with leniency because of the potentially dangerous consequences of certain acts.[66] For example, in some situations concerning repayment of loans, it is preferable for a Jew to repay a non-Jew before he would repay another Jew in the fear of what the gentiles might say and the harm they might cause.[67]

Another aspect of ideology in Sefer Hasidim influenced by Christianity was the concept of predestination. All the details of life, political, social and economic, are consequences of a divine decree. Everything a man will do or think is decided before he is born, and God wrote these decrees in the stars and constellations. Every person has a spiritual or astral double, sometimes called *memunneh*, who directs that individual's acts. The root of the Hebrew word *memunneh* means, "appointed one," and so *memunneh* is often translated as the appointed or deputy angel. There is a *memunneh* in charge of every species, every place, every person, and every animal – one for each element in nature.[68] The deputy angel plays a major role in the superstitions and beliefs found in Sefer Hasidim, and this topic is dealt with extensively in a chapter of Joseph

[65] Baer, "Socioreligious Orientation," 71.
[66] Ibid, 85.
[67] Parma 1425.
[68] Baer, "Socioreligious Orientation," 75-76.

Dan's book, *Torat Hasod shel Hasidei Ashkenaz.* (*The Esoteric Ideology of German Piety*)[69]

As mentioned earlier, one of the unique features of Sefer Hasidim in comparison to the writings of both Samuel and Eleazar is its focus on the community. Consideration for the common good was one of the three themes Soloveitchik identified in Sefer Hasidim. For example, the failure to take a public stand against wrongdoing was considered a major sin. The sense of responsibility the Hasidim felt for the outcome of their deeds led to the recommendation of performing minor sins to prevent the public from making even greater transgressions.[70] Of course, the "public" usually referred to the Hasidic community, excluding non-Hasidim.

R. Judah knew the community he describes in Sefer Hasidim well. He was realistic in his approach to practical life and sensitive to the daily troubles and worries of his people.[71] Sefer Hasidim was probably the "most authentic, variegated and sincere Jewish document revealing the life of Jews (and non-Jews) in the Rhineland in the High Middle Ages."[72]

[69] Jerusalem: the Bialik Institute (1968): 215-229
[70] Soloveitchik, "Three Themes," 325-327.
[71] Baer, "Socioreligious Orientation," 93.
[72] Dan, "Movement," 100.

## Chapter Two: Demons

### Demons in Judaism

In the numerous passages about magical practices and supernatural phenomena in Sefer Hasidim, stories about demons make up the bulk of the material. This large quantity of text and its contents lead one to the conclusion that Judah the Pious had an absolute belief in the existence of the powers of evil and demons. His stories show that his world was filled with demons, werewolves, vampires and other kinds of monsters.[1] Judah was steeped in Rabbinic literature, as exhibited by the frequent references to Talmud and Midrash in Sefer Hasidim, and many of his descriptions of demons are rooted in the Rabbinic understanding of demonic powers. To better understand the demons in Sefer Hasidim, we must first look at the Biblical and Rabbinic material on the specific demons at which we will be looking in this chapter.

For the most part, the Israelite religion tried to destroy any kind of relationship between humans and demons. This was a radical stance when compared to the other religions in the Ancient Near East. Although there are some small traces of what might be considered demons, they have almost no role in the Bible.[2]

It is unclear in the Bible whether the words commonly associated with demons have that connotation. The word used most often in Sefer Hasidim to

---

[1] Dan, "Caesarius," 20.
[2] Gershom Scholem, "Demons, Demonology" *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 5 (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House Limited, 1972):1522-3. (Hereafter, *Encyclopaedia Judaica* will be referred to as *EJ.*)

refer to demons is *shed* or *shedim* (plural). In the Bible, *shedim* appear twice, in Deuteronomy 32:17 and Psalms 106:37, and in context alone might be identified with foreign gods or idols who were rivals of Yahwah.[3] But other Ancient Near Eastern cultures use similar words to refer to demons. For example, the Akkadian word *šēdu*, literally means "demon."[4] In Babylonian and Assyrian religions, *shedim* is a general term for spirits, and Chaldean mythology uses *shedim* to refer to seven evil deities, who were sometimes associated with storms. Lastly, *shedim* has a possible etymological link with the Hebrew root *sh-d-d*, which means to devastate, ruin, or deal violently with.

The other word in the Bible most commonly used in context of demonology is *sa'ir, se'inm*. *Sa'ir*, in its most simple meaning, is a goat (Leviticus 17:7). But elsewhere in the Bible, *se'inm* are said to inhabit ruins together with some kind of night creature (Isaiah 34:14), and were thought of as hairy creatures who haunted ruins. Another possible translation for *sa'ir* is satyr, but the Bible does not give us enough information to definitively identify *se'inm* as demons.[5]

The night creature referred to above who is said to run with the *seinm*, wild beasts, and unclean birds is called *lilit*, and she only appears once in the Bible (Isaiah 34:14). The word *lilit* is the feminine form of the Sumerian *lil*, "wind spirit." The Biblical *Lilit* is the Mesopotamian demon, *Lilitu*, who assumed female

---

[3] Jeffrey Perry-Marx, *Demonology in Rabbinic Literature*, Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for ordination at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (New York 1983): 8. (Hereafter, Perry-Marx, *Demonology*.)
[4] Gershom Scholem, "Demons, Demonology," *EJ* 5:1523.

form to have sex with men while they were sleeping.[6] By the eighth century, she becomes identified with a child-stealing demon.[7]

Another Biblical word that becomes significant in later demonology is *ketev*, which usually appears with *dever*, meaning pestilence or destruction (Psalms 91:5-6). The Hebrew word *ketev* comes from the root meaning "cut off." It may be the personification of a storm wind, or more likely, the noon-day heat. *Ketev* becomes a distinct demon for the rabbis as *Ketev Meriri*, which appears in one phrase only in Deuteronomy 32:24.[8]

The last Biblical word significant for this thesis is *reshef*. *Reshef* was the god of the plague in Canaanite religion, and the word with the meaning "plague" appears in Deuteronomy 33:29 and Psalms 78:48. In Habakkuk 3:5, *reshef* is said to follow Yahweh on the warpath, with *dever* in front. *Reshef* can also mean "fiery darts of the bow," found in Psalms 76:4 and Song of Songs 8:6.

The rabbis of the Talmud took the existence of demons for granted and never expressed disapproval for the belief in demons or for methods of protection against them. Demons were blamed for all the negative random events of the world like accidents, disease, and some death, and the rabbi, who was often regarded as a master of demons, could use or banish them according to his needs.[9]

---

[5] Perry-Marx, *Demonology*, 9. The word *se'irim* also appears in II Chronicles 11:15.
[6] Gershom Scholem, "Demons, Demonology," *EJ* 5:1522-3.
[7] Perry-Marx, *Demonology*, 10.
[8] Ibid, 12. Other Biblical references for *ketev* are Isaiah 28:2 and Hosea 13:14.
[9] Ibid, 56-57.

*Mazikin*, the general word used for all harmful spirits,[10] is first mentioned in the Mishnah, and it explains that these harmful spirits were created on the eve of the first Sabbath (Avot 5:6). This is the only reference to demons in the Mishnah, and the Jerusalem Talmud also rarely mentions them, but the Babylonian Talmud is overflowing with demonic activity.[11] In connection with their time of creation, demons are said to be linked with transitional times – midnight, noon, and dawn – and often dwell between the sunlight and the shade. In all cases, the rabbis affirm that the origin of demons is connected to God or one of God's creations.[12]

The rabbis use the Biblical words mentioned above when speaking of demons, adding certain features to some of the demons. Next to the word *mazikin*, *shedim* make up the majority of the demons in Rabbinic Literature. *Seirim* are satyr-like demons identified with *shedim*, and they are blamed for causing sickness. Israel was said to have sacrificed to this *seirim* in Egypt. *Lilit* is a demoness with long hair and wings, and the *b'nei reshef* (children of the *reshef*), are demons who flew, haunted rooftops, and carried out witchcraft.[13] *Ketev Meriri* becomes an ugly demon who wanted to hurt man. Playing on the word "*meriri*," which means "bitterness," this demon was said to embitter the lives of all it met. One who sees this demon will collapse and fall to the ground in an epileptic seizure. *Ketev Meriri* is most known for harming children; it would

[10] Witton T. Davies, *Magic, Divination, and Demonology among the Hebrews and their Neighbors* (New York: Ktav Publishing House 1969): 111.
[11] Gershom Scholem, "Demons, Demonology," *EJ* 5:1525, 1527.
[12] Perry-Marx, *Demonology*, 19.
[13] Ibid, 29.

interrupt children studying at school during the noon hours.[14] Lastly, we find the term *malachei habalah* in rabbinic literature, which means literally "angels of destruction." They are just another kind of demon.

Demons in general are described as "unclean spirits" who dwell in places of human waste, like privies and sewers.[15] One author describes them as half angel and half human, bound by the three basic laws of human existence: sustenance, sex, and death. Since they both belong and do not belong to the material world, they live in places considered uninhabitable and are active mostly at night. Lastly, all of the harm and trouble demons cause to humans is the result of their desire to attain that which they lack: a physical body.[16]

**Demons in Sefer Hasidim**

Demonic forces in Ashkenazi Hasidic literature receive an entire chapter in Joseph Dan's book, *Torat Hasod Shel Hasidut Ashkenaz*, (*The Esoteric Ideology of German Piety*),[17] and he also wrote an article on the demonological stories in Judah's writings in particular.[18] He expands on his theory that Judah saw supernatural phenomena as the mechanism for knowing God's goodness, and that this theological concept is the primary reason for Judah's interest in

[14] Perry-Marx, *Demonology*, 35-37.
[15] Gershom Scholem, "Demons, Demonology," *EJ* 5:1526.
[16] Tamar Alexander, "Theme and Genre: Relationships between Man and Demon in Jewish Folklore." *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review* 14 (1992): 56.
[17] Jerusalem: the Bialik Institute (1968): 184-202. (Hereafter, Dan, *Torat Hasod*.)
[18] Dan, Joseph, "*Sippurim Demonologiyyim Mikitvei R. Yehuda HeHasid*" (Demonological Studies in the Writings of R. Judah the Pious). *Tarbitz* 30 (1961): 273-289.

demonological stories.[19] Although I do agree with Dan that Judah's interest was probably related to his desire to understand God's goodness, I disagree with Dan's emphasis of theology as the lesson of these stories in Sefer Hasidim. While Judah's intention of including these stories in Sefer Hasidim may have been theological, the resulting document comes across as instructional, given its intended audience and the medieval society in which it was presented.

Dan bases his analysis on the whole body of Ashkenazi Hasidic literature in general, thus accounting for the fact that he finds so much theological content. I do not. Dan's concepts do not necessarily apply to Sefer Hasidim – which is only one small part of Haisidic literature. Sefer Hasidim, in contrast to the rest of Hasidic literature, is primarily concerned with the problems of practical life.[20] It is probably for this very reason that Sefer Hasidim became an ethical guide for future generations, while the Hasidim's esoteric and theosophical speculations were "displaced almost immediately by the powerful mythology of Kabbalah."[21]

But Dan's chapter on demonic forces is still instructive in analyzing some of the theology that underlies the stories in Sefer Hasidim. The primary theology Dan finds is the role of supernatural phenomena mentioned above, and this concept leads to an understanding of demons as created and controlled by God. With the belief in demons and evil powers rampant in medieval society, a Jew could easily conclude that there were two deities: our God who is good, and an evil power who is the leader of the demons. Dan shows that this kind of Gnostic theology did not exist for the Ashkenazi Hasidim, and that their writings illustrate

[19] Dan, *Torat Hasod*, 188.
[20] Baer, "Socioreligious Orientation," 72.

God's complete power over all of creation. The following paraphrased sections from Sefer Hasidim will demonstrate Dan's theological findings, but they comprise only a small part of the total number of demonological stories.

**Stories with a Theological Emphasis**

The first story illustrates how God uses demons to punish man for his sins. As is common for many of these stories, this one tells of what seems to be an extraordinary occurrence, followed by the moral of the story.

> There once was a man who was walking and got lost in a forest. At night, by the light of the moon, the ghost of this man's friend appeared. The man wanted to escape. The ghost said to him, "Don't run, for I won't hurt you. I am so-and-so."
>
> "But you died years ago."
>
> "Since I stole someone's field, I'm not allowed to rest, and I am constantly chased around the forest."
>
> There is a similar story about a Christian who died, and after a few days, at night, his servant found him. The ghost told the servant that he had to remain in the forest because he stole someone else's inheritance.
>
> He said to the servant, "Tell my wife to return the inheritance." The servant replied, "The townspeople won't believe that I saw your ghost."

[21] Marcus, *Piety and Society*, 2.

"Tell them to go tomorrow to a certain place, and they will see me there."

The servant went and told everything to the townspeople. They asked if he had gotten some kind of sign from this ghost as proof. He replied that they would be able to see the ghost tomorrow in the tree, and then they would believe him. All the townspeople went to this man's grave and looked for him, but he was not there. When they went to the tree, they saw his ghost. The servant told them that the ghost would be able to rest when the inheritance was returned to its rightful owner.

This is the story about the Christian. But is it the truth or a lie? In any case, this is a rule for Israel, which describes what will help those in the world to come who do not do a particular righteous act during their lives. But when a person's sons do it for him, it can go either way for him. If a man is not worthy, all the righteousness in the world cannot help him. But if a meritorious man sins, he is expelled from the Garden of Eden or is punished in Gehinnom, or is chased on a road with thorns, or is tortured by angels of destruction. But he can still benefit from other people's prayers and good deeds done in his name. For the one who is not worthy, nothing will help him.[22]

In this story, *malachei habalah* (angels of destruction) are used by God to punish a sinner. God controls and orders demons just as God does for any non-

earthly beings (i.e. good and bad angels). There is no separate power or autonomous realm of evil.

We can infer God's power over demons from the following selection, which is mostly concerned with protecting oneself against demons. When a person believes himself to be threatened by demons, appealing to God will keep him safe.[23] This particular passage begins by saying that a person should bow in front of the demon and act submissive in order to be protected from it. But one should not run away from a demon; instead, he should ask the demon, in the name of God, not to hurt him. And when the person does bow to the demon, he should ask God not to let the demon hurt him.[24] In this story, the author acknowledges that God can prevent a demon from hurting a person. One could conclude that even the demon is aware of God's omnipotence, because this story insinuates that if you ask the demon not to hurt you and invoke God's name, he will not hurt you.

Since God is omnipotent, he is able to decide the fate of every soul – when he will live and when he will die. All the details of life are determined by divine decrees,[25] and even demons can not change God's rulings. Sefer Hasidim tells us that when the Lord makes a judgement that so-and-so will live the announcement informs the demons not to harm this particular person, because if they did, God's decree would not be true, and demons do not have the power to make God a liar. The following story illustrates how God's

---

[22] Parma 35.
[23] Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition; a Study in Folk Religion* (New York: Atheneum 1939): 155. (Hereafter, Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic*.)
[24] Parma 327.

declaration of a life-and-death judgement is discerned, and how it prevents the demon from causing harm:

> The moment that it is decreed that a man should die, on that very night or day, his appointed angel gets dark in its face and its mouth and eyes close up. Once the verdict is made it is as if he is already dead, and then the declaration goes out that he has died. That is why it is written, "And Moses died." Likewise, when someone's life is ordained for goodness, a brilliant radiance shines upon him before God. Ten times it is written, "the light of the face of the Holy One," in the book of Psalms. These ten verses correspond to the ten days between Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur. When one lights a candle in a place where there is no wind, if the light is not extinguished, the person will live for that year, and it is written, "The Lord will let them live." The declaration goes out that so-and-so will live so that no demon will harm him until his time is ordained.[26]

Another example of God using a demon to punish a person deals with a woman who did not completely fast on Yom Kippur:

> There was once a woman who got sick on Yom Kippur and wanted to drink some water. She did not ask a sage if this was permissible, and went and drank a lot. One night, almost three years later, she was thirsty and she went and drank by herself. A

[25] Baer, "Socioreligious Orientation," 76.
[26] Parma 1516.

> *malach habalah* caught her and started to strangle her. She said to her husband that she could not live anymore because they [the demons] caught her throat and started to strangle her. After two days, she died. We learn in Scripture, "To give to every one according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings" (Jeremiah 32:19).[27]

Again, we see that God used demons as messengers to punish those who do not follow the commandments. In this story, it is also possible that the woman was punished for not consulting a sage, which is considered a sin for the Hasidim.[28]

As I have demonstrated so far, in Ashkenazi Hasidism, God was in control of the demons, not some kind of prince or chief of demons like Mastema, who appears frequently in post-biblical literature.[29] According to Dan's understanding of Hasidic literature, since God created demons, it would follow that they must be holy, because all of God's creations are holy.[30] Dan also claims that demons are not necessarily bad or good, but neutral. For the most part, Sefer Hasidim sees demons as evil, but there are some cases where their inherent nature is unclear. For example, Sefer Hasidim refers to both angels and demons as "the ones who accompany man" (*Hamelavvinin l'adam*.[31] Demons, as holy creatures, also have the ability to say blessings and bless others. One story tells of a scribe who read out loud every word before he wrote it down. When asked why he did this, he

---

[27] Parma 239.
[28] Soloveitchik, 326.
[29] Gershom Scholem, "Demons, Demonology," *EJ* 5:1525.
[30] Dan, *Torat Hasod*," 188.
[31] Parma 1648.

said that he had received a tradition that when a man says things out loud, the demons hear and bless the words.[32]

Even considering demons' holy status, they are still forbidden to say God's name, and, like all creatures, are submissive to God. Although demons, who are completely spiritual beings, have greater merit than corporeal man,[33] they are still bound by some of the same rules as man. The next story makes this point explicitly:

> There was a pious man who would sit in the wedding hall and listen to one of the singers at the dance. The singer would mention God's name in his song. So the pious man excommunicated the singer. Even demons do not mention the Name of Heaven in vain, as we are told in tractate Megillah (3a) We do know by way of tradition that they do not invoke the Name in vain.[34]

The previous illustrations demonstrate the small amount of formal theology found in demon stories from Sefer Hasidim. God is in control of the demons; there is no autonomous evil power in control of the evil spirits in the world. The concepts found in the above stories correspond with the theology Dan found in the larger body of German Pietist literature.

**Explaining Suffering Through Demons**

Even in light of the previous material, the majority of material on demons in Sefer Hasidim does not focus on teaching the theological concept of knowing

---

[32] Parma 733.
[33] Dan, *Torat Hasod*, 188.

God through supernatural phenomena. We might conceivably grant that there are other "theological concerns" with which Sefer Hasidim deals, if one defines "theology" as helping people deal with fears and problems relating to their day-to-day lives. Demons, then, become responsible for many of those fears and problems – as I will show in this section. For example, demons have always been blamed for causing illness, and some demons even have the name of the specific disease they bring.[35] Considering our modern knowledge of hygiene and its relationship to disease, it is interesting to note that demons inhabited places which we would consider very unsanitary: privies, sewers, deserted houses, dirty alleys, and fetid atmospheres.[36]

One of the most serious of the many fears in the middle ages was the area of childbirth and its possible complications. Many amulets, incantations, and other "magical cures" were developed to ease the pain of childbirth.[37] A passage in Sefer Hasidim advises midwives to say certain incantations or carry certain amulets to ward off the demons when they deliver the children.[38]

As mentioned above, not only was sickness attributed to demons, but sometimes an entire plague could be blamed on them. One story tells of some people who came to repair some houses in a forest. (Perhaps these houses had

---

[34] Bologna 4.
[35] Gershom Scholem, "Demons, Demonology," *EJ* 5:1522.
[36] Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic*, 198.
[37] Ibid, 137, 188.
[38] Parma 1463. This text was very difficult to understand because of its poor Hebrew grammar and references to some German words. From what I was able to ascertain, the content had something to do with protection during childbirth.

been deserted.) A plague came and killed the people because, as the story explains, this was the home of demons.[39]

Another tragedy which people in any time period often have to deal with and explain is the death of children. For a parent, losing a child may be the biggest threat to their faith, because how could a merciful and compassionate God cause this kind of pain? The solution provided in Sefer Hasidim is that demons are responsible for the death of children. In one story, a group of little children were walking home from school when they saw the demon *Ketev Meriri*. All the children died except for two, who fainted and became sick, and their skin and hair started falling out. But these two did survive.[40]

Not only are demons responsible for death and sickness, but they also cause lightning and thunder. This concept is not original to Sefer Hasidim; it is almost a universal belief that a special connection exists between evil spirits and storms.[41] A complicated passage in Sefer Hasidim describes this connection, and relates it to the words *reshef* and *hitsim* by applying the connotation that they are some kind of demon to their biblical meanings of "fiery darts of the bow" and "arrows" respectively.[42] The passage begins by using the biblical quotes that contain the word *reshef*.

---

[39] Parma 371.
[40] Parma 1512.
[41] Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic*, 34.
[42] In the beginning of this chapter, I explained how *reshef* was the name of a demon possibly in biblical literature, and definitely in rabbinic literature. The word *Hets, hitsim* in plural, which appears in Job 6:5, 34:6 and Psalms 91:5, could also be the name of a demon. In folklore, disease and misfortune are often linked to the arrows of demons, though whether *hets* is a demon cannot be clearly demonstrated (Perry-Marx, p. 12).

It is written in the Bible, "He gave their beasts over to hail, their cattle to lightning bolts (*reshef*). He inflicted His burning anger upon them, wrath, indignation, trouble, and a band of deadly angels." (Psalms 78:48-49) And directly after, it is written, "He cleared a path for His anger. He did not stop short of slaying them, but gave them over to pestilence." (Psalms 78:50) In the case of *reshef*, it is also written, "For man is born to mischief, just as sparks (*b'nei reshef*) fly upward." (Job 5:7) And that is what they say about demons, and about the arrows (*hizim*) it is written, "There He broke the fiery arrows of the bow (*nshpei keshet*), the shield and the sword of war" (Psalms 76:4).

Hail is also called arrows (*hizim*), as it is written, "As Your arrows (*hizim*) fly in brightness, and Your flashing spear in brilliance," (Habakkuk 3:7) and "fire flashing in the midst of hail" (Exodus 9:24). When there is thunder or hail, the demons shoot arrows at each other like two bands in a war.

In this passage, the biblical references are supposed to demonstrate the connection between demons and bad weather. Although the text is very convoluted, I will attempt to decipher it by giving my own interpretation. First, the quotes from Psalms connect *reshef* to a band of deadly angels, i.e. demons. Then, from the Psalms, Job, and Habakkuk references, we can infer that God's anger somehow represents storms. In all three, the context has something to do with bad weather and God's anger, except for the book of Job which says that

rain is one of God's wonders. So, if *reshef* and possibly *hitsim* are, in fact, demons, the proof is moderately successful, because the two words are used in the context of hail (Psalms and Exodus quotes), lightning (Habakkuk and Exodus quotes), and storms in general (Psalms and Habakkuk quotes).

The belief that storms are really demons shooting arrows at each other most likely came to the Jews from German folklore. According to Trachtenberg, "Thor, the Teutonic god of thunder and storms, was believed to fling wedge-shaped stones down from the heavens, a belief parallel to the classical and Oriental conceptions of the gods who rain shafts and bolts upon the earth during storms."[43] Demons based on ancient gods often retained some of their characteristics and attributes in Sefer Hasidim.

**Warnings and Punishments**

Despite the many stories and details about demons, Sefer Hasidim does not disregard the danger and inappropriateness of interacting with these creatures. Demons are mentioned alongside of magic, incantations with God's holy name, conjuring angels, or using amulets in warnings against such activities no less than eight times. Although Judah was convinced of the effectiveness of these activities to meet a person's needs, he still perceived them as dangerous.[44] Because of Judah's need to warn people, we can assume that they were indulging in these magical and demonological practices. For example,

[43] Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic*, 276-277, n. 28.
[44] Scholem, *Major Trends*, 99.

when prayers to God did not seem to help improve a person's life, he might employ another method, one involving demons. For a misguided person such as this, Sefer Hasidim explains the negative repercussions of participating in the occult, and reminds the reader that he could only trust God to help him.

One excerpt is especially outspoken in its warnings:

> Anyone who conjures angels or demons or whispers magical incantations will come to a bad end. He and his children will have misfortune during their lives. Therefore, a person should distance himself from these things, as well as from dream divination. "You shall be perfect (faithful) with the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 18:13) and not with anything else. In the end, there will be no remedy [for the misfortune you and your children receive as a punishment].
>
> Many people engaged in these things and they or their children were impoverished or converted, or died from some illness. You might think that it is good to use dream divination to determine which woman you will marry, but you will not succeed. A person should pray only to God. If you travel, do not try to conjure angels to protect you; you should just pray to God. Many prophets were killed and did not use God's holy name for incantations; they prayed that God would be with them. They reasoned that if God did not

hear their prayers, they were not worthy enough to be saved. All they did was pray."[45]

The practice of using magic was so bad that the prophets did not even use incantations to save their lives. So much the more so for the average person whose life is not in danger – he, like the prophets, should refrain from using magic.

As we see in the text above, conversion was considered a punishment, and sometimes magic was the crime. This rule is reinforced by another passage which says that if you see a Jew who has converted either because of harlotry (he wanted to marry a non-Jewish woman) or gluttony (he wanted to eat non-kosher food), know that he or his parents engaged in conjuring spirits and demons.[46]

As a warning, Sefer Hasidim often tells us that demons only attack those who provoke them. One passage explains that a person can provoke demons by practicing sorcery, incantations, and dream divination, and therefore should not do them. The text continues to say that even if a person wanted to use magic to save someone's life, it is not allowed, because the magician or his descendants would die before their time. And one soul does not cancel out another, meaning the life of the person saved by magic is not worth more than the lives of the magician and his children. So, instead of using magic, Sefer Hasidim says to

[45] Parma 211.
[46] Parma 210.

only say prayers and laments, and God will guard us and our children from all evil, now and forever.[47]

Apparently, demons were so dangerous that one should not even write about them. So, Sefer Hasidim gives a special warning to scribes or wise men concerning what they wrote:

> "He who guards his mouth and tongue guards himself from trouble" (Proverbs 21:23). "Tongue" is specifically written so that a person will not learn to lie with his tongue. When a wise man starts to write, he should not write things that might cause trouble for others, things about demons, and he should not get involved with demons or sorcery or incantations. The fault will be found with the one who wrote these things and copied them, as well as the one who participated in them.[48]

Sometimes the punishments for conjuring demons were so severe that even if one was punished during his lifetime, he might still meet with grief after his death. Those whom he harmed through conjuring will avenge his soul even after his death.[49] But involvement with demons does not harm just the person who does the conjuring, as we have already seen. His children and many generations afterward could be punished for his actions.[50] One could even

---

[47] Bologna 1172. This is the last paragraph of the Bologna addition, and it ends with "amen and amen."
[48] Parma 738.
[49] Parma 1455.
[50] Parma 210, 211.

cause shame to fall upon the entire world, if he uses demons to predict the coming of the Messiah.[51]

Many of the previous passages give the warnings and punishments outright instead of through a story, which is unusual considering the prominence of stories in Sefer Hasidim. But there is one story which illustrates what happened to a particular man when he employed a sorceress to call up demons for his own selfish purposes:

> There was once a man whose mother hated him. At the time of her death, he was not near her (i.e. at her deathbed), and she had not prepared a will that said where her money was hidden. The son sought out a sorceress to divine the hiding place of the money. At night, the sorceress did something with a knife and went to sleep. (We do not know exactly what she did.) While she was dreaming, a demon came to her with the knife thrust in his heart.
>
> The son of the demon went to the sorceress and said, "Why did you thrust a knife into my father's heart?"
>
> She said, "Because Mr. So-and-so wants you to tell him where his mother's money was hidden."
>
> The demon called up the man's mother and said, "Don't you see that this knife is in my heart until you tell me where your money is hidden?"
>
> She replied to the demon, "While I was alive, you ruled over my home, but now that I am dead, you do not rule over me. I will not

[51] Parma 212.

tell you where the money is. Had it been my desire to inform my son, I would have done so while I was alive; but it is not my desire."

She told the demon the same thing for two more nights. The demon then begged her, "I cannot stand having this knife in my heart."

She replied, "Even though it is not the law nor my desire to tell, I will tell you where my money is on account of your suffering. It is locked up well in a box."

Her son looked in lots of boxes. He eventually found the money in a box between two other boxes, but while he was looking, his mother came to him in a dream. She said, "It has caused me so much suffering to give you this information, and that's how much misery will come to you because you used magic to conjure me up to tell you where my money was hidden."[52]

By consulting a sorceress, he provoked the demons and his mother, whose spirit was raised after she was dead, so she put a curse on him. Sefer Hasidim uses this story to say to the reader: look what happened to this guy. If you use magic or provoke demons, you will be punished just like him.

**Protection, Healing and Expulsion**

The number of selections in Sefer Hasidim which talk about protection illustrate that Jews were in constant fear of demons and wanted to learn how to protect themselves. As Trachtenberg writes, "The most compelling evidence...

that no place, no time, and no man was exempt from the fear and the danger of spirit attack... is in the countless devices that were employed to ward off this danger."[53] Certain devices or techniques were used to drive demons away, render them powerless, or prevent any possible future damage that the demons might cause.[54]

Some possible methods of protection are

1. One should not tell anyone if he sees a demon.[55]
2. If a person is harmed by a demon, and he tells someone about it within nine days, he will be harmed even worse.[56]
3. After a person sees a demon, he should bend his thumb inside his other fingers and touch burning coals before he speaks.[57]
4. The method of putting one's thumb inside his other fingers will also prevent a demon from harming him in his sleep. (Sometimes, a demon will appear in a dream in the form of a man or an animal, like a cat,[58] who wants to bite or somehow harm the person who is sleeping.) In this situation, the person should also quote scripture

[52] Parma 1456.
[53] Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic*, 44.
[54] Ibid 153.
[55] Parma 325.
[56] Bologna 1146.
[57] Parma 327.
[58] Angels and demons can take the form of a human or any kind of animal (Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic*, 31). A *striya* once appeared to a man as a cat (Bologna 465), and another demon appeared to a queen in the image of her husband, wearing a crown, in order to trick her to have sex with him (Parma 379).

and say, "The [angel of the] Lord said to Satan, the Lord rebuke you, Satan... this is a brand plucked from the fire." (Zachariah 3:2)[59]

5. One should bow before demons.[60]
6. If a demon kisses a person, the person should not kiss him back.[61]
7. A person should be careful if he is cutting down a tree, because certain female demons, called *Liliot* (plural of *Lilit*), convene in trees,[62] especially ones that have drops that look like wax or candle drippings.[63]
8. As with other demons, one should not provoke *Liliot*. An example of something that would probably anger them is a person who leaves excrement by the demons' tree.[64]
9. Do not sleep under a nut tree, especially one that has nine leaves on its branches, because demons congregate around these trees.[65]
10. A person who is harmed by demons can hang nine bits of wood around his neck that are called *stilleti* or *navim* in German.[66] The wood should be collected from nine bridges at nine city gates.[67]
11. Another cure for someone who is harmed by demons is to eat from the bread and salt of the demon.[68]

---

[59] Parma 327.
[60] Parma 327.
[61] Parma 327.
[62] The belief that demons congregate or inhabit trees was strongly held among the Germans (Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic*, 276, n. 25).
[63] Parma 1462.
[64] Parma 1462.
[65] Bologna 1153.
[66] See Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic*, 120 for the word "*stilleti*."
[67] Bologna 1153.

12. Anyone who is seized by fear that he might enter a place which demons frequent should move four cubits away.[69]

To expel a demon, the most popular method is to spit on him and say, "*Tsei tamei mikan uv'rach l'cha*" (Get out of here, profane one, and escape).[70] Some people will spit on the demon a second time. This formula also works if a person is not sure whether it is a demon or someone who has died that appears in front of him. In this situation, he should also say, "I make an oath upon you, demon, so you will not harm me or any of my loved ones."[71]

The following text describes a more complicated method to expel multiple demons from a certain place. A sage explains the process:

> You should choose a plot of land, measure out a square, and put rope around its perimeter. Take a *sefer Torah* and ten men,

---

[68] Bologna 464, 465, 466; a demon who is harmed by a human can also be cured by eating the bread and salt of the human who hurt it. The reason for this cure is better understood by looking at the role of bread and salt in Jewish tradition. Bread was considered man's "staff of life," the basic staple food. It symbolized an entire meal or one's livelihood. It was used extensively as an accompaniment to various types of sacrifices and offerings. Salt was used in biblical times in the sacrificial ritual, in medicine, and as a preservative for food. Every sacrifice was sprinkled with salt. Newborn infants were rubbed with salt, apparently as a health measure. The lasting effect of salt probably accounts for its use by the prophet Elisha as a means for purifying the waters of Jericho. Jewish law requires that a little salt be sprinkled on the bread eaten at the beginning of a meal before a benediction is recited over it. This is explained as a symbolic act, because a person's table in post-Temple times served as a substitute for the alter where sacrifices were salted. (Geoffrey Wigoder, ed. *The Encyclopedia of Judaism*. Jerusalem: The Jerusalem Publishing House Ltd. 1989): 135, 619.) Another explanation comes from Genesis 3.19, which says, "By the sweat of your brow, shall you get bread to eat." Salt is representative of sweat. Lastly, bread and salt are regarded as a natural pair because the Hebrew words *lechem* and *melach* are both spelled with the same three letters. (Source: From a question asked on the mailing list "HUCALUM" on the internet.)

[69] Bologna 1146.

[70] Parma 327.

and stretch a rope along the length of the square on the ground. The *sefer Torah* should lead on the rope in a straight path with the ten men following. This is how you begin. After you finish walking along that line, take the rope and arrange it directly along the footprints from the first line and follow this second line. Do this until you have covered the entire ground of the plot of land with the *sefer Torah* always leading the way.

While you are walking, recite the Priestly Blessing, the psalms against evil spirits, and certain Biblical verses. This is what you should say while walking along each line, and you should not rest until you have covered the entire area. And in the end, it will be said that by the consent of God and Torah, Israel and those who observe the Torah, it is forbidden for any demon to come to this place from this day forward. And then the demons will leave that place."[72]

Some people are just born lucky and are protected by evil spirits from birth. Those who are born with a caul – the inner fetal membrane that covers the head at birth – are advised to keep it on their person as a protection from the demons who battle during a storm.[73] Various people observe this custom of

[71] Parma 326.
[72] Parma 371.
[73] Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic*, 134.

preserving the caul, because the child who is born with it is considered lucky.[74] Sefer Hasidim describes the caul as a kind of armor that protects the person.[75]

Incantations are also used to protect one from demons. Although many incantations are prohibited, incantations that are used to protect one from demons are allowed. For instance, an incantation can be used to control demons in some situations. This incantation prevents a demon from leaving a particular place. But if the person falls asleep, he might release the demon in his dreams and leave himself vulnerable to danger.[76]

An incantation can also be said to release someone who is possessed by a demon,[77] and saying an incantation nine times is especially helpful to those who have been harmed by demons. Sefer Hasidim tells us that this method came from the Germans (presumably non-Jews).[78] Another passage explains that an incantation can be said which will help determine whether an apparition is the spirit of a dead person or a demon. What makes this passage special is that it specifically states that this is an acceptable use of an incantation.[79]

**Stories as Exempla**

Two of the stories already mentioned in this chapter are examples of stories about demons that are used for instruction. Since the "sinners" in the stories are punished by demons, the reader is warned that he too could be

[74] Patai, Raphael, *On Jewish Folklore* (Michigan: Wayne State University Press 1983): 393.
[75] Parma 1463.
[76] Parma 327.
[77] Bologna 467.
[78] Bologna 1153.

harmed by demons if he sins in these ways. The woman who drank water on Yom Kippur was killed by a demon,[80] and the man who stole someone's field was chased and tortured by destructive angels even after his death.[81] The stories illustrate that stealing and breaking the laws of fasting on Yom Kippur are sins with severe penalties.

The other stories that are used to teach lessons are mainly concerned with ethics. One story explains that even demons deserve compassion in certain situations. A *striya*, which is either a female demon or a kind of witch[82], harmed another woman. But the *striya* allowed the woman to eat from her bread and salt, which is the cure for harm caused by a striya. In this case, we are told, we can have mercy for the *striya*.[83] Even though she harmed someone, she compensated for her act by healing the woman. If this story is used as an analogy for everyday life, it teaches that even the worst people in the community deserve mercy. We can infer from this story that a person who does many bad deeds and only a few good deeds should still receive mercy from others.

The next story addresses the issue of how people should treat each other, especially people who are in a position of power over others. The story of Balaam[84] and his donkey is used as a metaphor for a relationship with an imbalance of power.

---

[79] Parma 324.
[80] Parma 239.
[81] Parma 35.
[82] It is unclear to which category this creature belongs. See Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic*, 38. I will discuss the matter in more detail later in this chapter.
[83] Bologna 466.
[84] Sefer Hasidim uses the story of Balaam often in its texts about demons. Balaam was a prophet called by an evil king to make a curse on the Israelites

"And the angel of the Lord said to him, Why did you strike your donkey these three times?" (Numbers 22:32, from the story of Balaam.) You might think that a person can hit a pack animal when his burden is light and he will not move forward, for it says, "these three times." But even in this case, you are punished for hitting it. Since the animal usually follows orders to walk, and it did not this time, you should have been worried that the animal might be sick, and it is a sin to cause a sick animal to labor. Similarly, at night, when the animal starts snorting, know that it has seen a spirit or demon, and it does not want to move forward. Do not hit it in this situation; it is afraid of the spirit or demon, and also afraid on behalf of its rider. Do not be ungrateful and beat it.

This is even truer concerning a wife. A person should think how he would want to be treated if he were under someone's control, and that is how he should behave toward those who are under his control.[85]

Another issue concerning people's relationships with each other is gossip. In a few places in Sefer Hasidim, as mentioned elsewhere in this chapter, we are told not to tell anyone if we have had an experience with demons. Perhaps this warning is symbolic for discouraging people to tell stories which could lead to

---

(Numbers, chapter 22). On the way to the king, Balaam's donkey is stopped by an angel, but Sefer Hasidim explains that, in fact, a demon stands in the way of Balaam's donkey, not necessarily an angel. With this interpretation, the story of Balaam's donkey proves that animals can see spirits and demons (Parma 140, Bologna 1146).

[85] Parma 140.

gossip. Another passage that tells about animals that can see angels and demons proves this connection even better: If a person chases cows away from a fire and they run back to it, know that they are afraid that *malachei habalah* (angels of destruction) are coming to the city. The passage then gives the moral of the story, which says that if only people did not talk about everything they see they would be able to see more things, just like animals, who see things but cannot talk about them.[86]

If these previous stories have not taught the reader to strive to be a moral person, there is one more statement that may work. We learn that the spirits of wicked people become demons when they die, like the generations of Cain, who became demons when they died. This passage is also the only place in Sefer Hasidim where we learn a little about the origin of demons.

This next story also teaches a lesson, and it may have the tone of tongue-in-cheek humor. The story begins by telling the readers "Do not be overly righteous" (Ecclesiastes 7:16). This biblical quotation in used in reference to an incident where a *striya* appeared to a Jew as a cat, and the Jew hit the cat. The hurt *striya* asked the Jew to heal her, and he wanted to. But an old man said to him, "Do not be overly righteous." The old man told the Jew that when one is obligated to others, he is unable to exhibit extreme piety. If the Jew healed the *striya*, she would live and be able to hurt other humans.[87] The Jew was so concerned about being pious that he lost all perspective. He was willing to sacrifice the safety of his community to increase his own level of piety.

[86] Bologna 1146.
[87] Bologna 465.

The final story in this section warns the readers about the dangers of obsession. A man was so obsessed with his son's death that he continued his routine as if his son was still alive. A demon paid him a visit and jolted him out of his obsession:

> There was a case with a scholar who had a son, and he would teach his son Torah. The son died without any children, and the father would cry desperately, "My son, R. Joseph, come and study." When it was time for the father to eat, he would cry, "My son, R. Joseph, come and eat." One time, the father rose early in the morning and cried, "My son, R. Joseph, come and study," as he used to do when his son was living. This time, a demon came in the image of the son and stood in front of the father. Immediately, the father knew that this was not his son but a demon instead. He spit upon the demon and said, "Get out of here, profane one, and flee," and the demon fled. Therefore, a person should only mourn as much as is the standard.[88]

**Demons, Witches or Monsters?**

Some creatures described in Sefer Hasidim are not clearly identified as demons. Sometimes they have characteristics associated with demons; other times they are described as witches or some kind of monster. For example, one story describes demons who look like soldiers:

---

[88] Parma 327.

> Once, a prayer leader left his place and met a great solider. He saw the leader of the soldiers riding on a lion, with its bridle in its mouth, and the bridle was really a long snake. Immediately, the wise man knew that these soldiers were demons.[89]

Sefer Hasidim introduces us to a variety of witches and monsters. There are a number of stories about a *striya*, which is often identified as a witch. In some non-Jewish thirteenth century stories, witches with disheveled hair fly around at night, feed on the blood and flesh of infants and adults, and are accompanied and aided by evil spirits.[90] In some sources, the *striya* is described as a demon and as a witch, but most commonly she appears as a flesh-and-blood woman or an evil spirit that takes a woman's form.[91] Trachtenberg translates *striya* as an *estrie*, while other authors call her *striga*.[92] Joseph Dan explains that the *striya* is the Hebrew equivalent of the Latin *striga*, which is the name of a cannibalistic witch who eats babies and sucks blood.[93]

One particular story in Sefer Hasidim gives us the most information about this creature, the *striya*.

> There are some women who are *striyas*, mares and *werewolves* (these are different names for witches). They were created on the

---

[89] Parma 1871.
[90] Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic*, 13.
[91] Ibid, 38.
[92] Flint, *The Rise of Magic*, p. 124.
[93] Joseph Dan, "*Sippurim Demonologiyyim.*" *Hasippur Ha'ivri Biyemei-Habeinayim*. Jerusalem: Keter, 1974. 170. (Hereafter, Dan, "*Sippurim.*")

eve of the first Sabbath[94] and they can transform themselves into different creatures.

Once, a woman who was a *striya* was very sick. Two women stayed with her, and one slept while the other stayed awake. During the night, the *striya* stood up before the woman who was awake and flung her hair wildly about her head.[95] The *striya* wanted to escape and suck the blood of the sleeping woman.[96] So the one woman woke up the other, and they caught the *striya*.

Afterwards, one woman went back to sleep and the other remained awake. This happened twice. If the *striya* had been able to kill one of the women, she would have lived. But she was not able to kill the woman, and so she died, because *striyas* need to eat the blood and flesh of humans. *Werewolves*, *mares* and *striyas* need to fling their hair wildly about their heads before they can escape. Therefore, one should chant an incantation that catches these creatures while they are flinging their hair, and then they will not be allowed to leave except by permission of the chanter.[97]

The *mare*, which is transliterated in Hebrew as *maras* or *marash*, receives its only mention in Sefer Hasidim in the passage above, along with *werewolves*

---

[94] In Avot, 5:6, we learn: "Ten things were created on the eve of Sabbath in the twilight...some say also the destructive spirits (*mazikin*)" were created then. This reference leads us to believe that these creatures might be demons, because *mazikin* is a general term for demons.
[95] The Hebrew *menatsefet* is unclear in meaning; this translation comes from Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic*, 38-39.
[96] This is usually associated with vampires.
[97] Bologna 464.

(transliterated as *vervulsh*). Sefer Hasidim tells us that these are three names of different kinds of witches (the *werewolf* being a male witch), but the story is only about a *striya*.[98] A different source says that *mares* are creatures that hang out in forests in groups of nine, but they do not harm humans. The most accepted understanding is that the *mare* is a being that rests upon man while he sleeps and deprives him of the power of speech by grasping his tongue and lips and choking off his breath, so that he cries out.[99] It is the *mare* that is responsible for nightmares.[100]

The next monster listed in the list is a *werewolf*, usually described as a sorcerer or demon who inhabits the earth in man's form, but will sometimes take the shape of a wolf and attack and eat men. However, in Sefer Hasidim, *werewolves* are identified as male witches.[101]

The other Hebrew word used to refer to a witch is *michasefah*, which has another, very different meaning in medieval literature. The former refers to a certain abnormal creature, while the latter is a person who possesses a secret knowledge in magic which he uses for his own profit or to help others. He is

---

[98] Bologna 464. The Hebrew root most commonly used for magic, with the root *kshf*, is used in its feminine noun as both witch or sorceress with no consistency. In the following chapter on magic, I most commonly translate it as "sorceress."

[99] A similar monster appeared in an episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a drama series on the Warner Brothers television network. The monster, called *Der Kindestod* – German for "child death," feeds on children by sucking out all their breath, making them thrash around as if in a nightmare, and he eventually kills them. ("Killed by Death" was first aired on March 3, 1998.)

[100] Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic*, 39.

[101] Bologna 464; Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic*, 39.

considered a professional, and is paid for his services.[102] The only way to identify which meaning *michashefah* has is through the context of the story.

For example, one story talks about *michashefot* in a context that clearly identifies them as witches:

> A few scholars say that women who are suspected of eating children are analogous to the case of the wild and rebellious son (*ben sorer u'moreh*) (Sanhedrin 70a) He was killed because he might have killed someone in the future. A wise man said to them "Israel is not in her own land." [Jews do not have control over capital punishment outside of the land of Israel.] There are some women who do this against their will, and there are some who are witches.
>
> Concerning the witches, an announcement is made when they are present in the synagogue that if any of the children were harmed, the teeth of these women would be ground into the stones surrounding the well, and the guilty ones would die within the hour.[103]

One of the most prominent differences between Jewish witches and Christian witches is that, from a religious perspective, Jewish witches are not connected to Satan or evil forces. Despite the supernatural character of these creatures, they are merely realistic and natural phenomena, and their danger is

[102] Joseph Dan, "Magic," *EJ* 11:707-708.
[103] Parma 172.

given strength by this and nothing else.[104] This connection is found in the following story:

> A child was born with teeth and a tail. People said that since one day he would eat humans, they should kill him. The sage said to them, "Someone needs to take out his teeth and cut off his tail until his body is like everyone else's, and then he will not be able to cause demonic harm."[105]

The last unusual creature mentioned in Sefer Hasidim is the *dragon*. The *dragon* is included in only one story, where he is a demon with unusual attributes. The *dragon* is viewed as two possible creatures in medieval folklore: the more familiar fire-spitting serpent (which is afraid of thunder) and as a demon who may enter a horse in the shape of a man.[106] The story about this *dragon* is so unusual that the story is retold here in its entirety.

> There was once a certain kind of demon called *dragon* in Greek. If one were to strike him with a sword, he would not be harmed. Once, the *dragon* had sex with a princess,[107] and she gave birth to a son, who was also a demon. The father *dragon* was afraid of his son, because only his son could kill him.
>
> Once, when the father had sex with the queen, the king freed the *dragon's* son, who happened to be in jail, so that the son would

---

[104] Dan, "*Sippurim*," 170-171.
[105] Parma 171.
[106] Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic*, 280, n. 47.
[107] The Hebrew "*bat melech*" means princess in English, but *Bat Melech* is also the name of a demoness who caused diseases of the eye (Perry-Marx, *Demonology*, 38). In this context, *bat melech* probably means princess.

kill his father. When the son left the jail, he took his father's sword, and hid under the queen's bed. Immediately, the father *dragon* smelled something. He said, "I smell something that frightens me. Nevertheless, I'm not going to stop having sex." So he went and had sex with the queen.

Then the son got out from under the bed in order to kill his father. When the father fell off the bed, the son wounded him. The demon said, "Strike me a second time. If I am only wounded once, I will die, but the second time will keep me alive." The son said, "My mother gave birth to me only once, so I will not strike you another time." The king's wife got up and saw the demon whom she had had sex with. The demon was dead, and his flesh had puffed up so that he filled the entire room. No one could get to the door. So the king had the roof destroyed in order to get into the house. Then the demon was cut up piece by piece, the pieces of his flesh were loaded into many carriages until they were full, and he was taken away.

The queen did not say that she had sex with the *dragon*, because then the king would have died. She would have become impoverished, and would not have had success at anything in her life. Instead, she said that a demon appeared in the image of a king, wearing the crown on his head. This is the general way that

demons behave – when they first appear to a woman, it is in the image of her husband.

When a *dragon* is inside a house, he does not cause harm. But the moment he leaves the house, the house will catch fire and burn down.[108]

These kinds of creatures were usually thought to be non-Jews.[109] But Sefer Hasidim gives proof that Jews, too, could be such monsters. For example, if a cantor prays for the health of witches, no one should say "amen" after him.[110] Also, concerning the witches accused of cannibalism in a previous story, since the verdict of their guilt or innocence is given in the synagogue, we can infer that the witches were Jewish – for they went to synagogue.[111]

**Some Final Details**

Sefer Hasidim tells us about many of the details and attributes of demons in stories that seem to have no other purpose. For example, one story explains why sheep are used for the Passover offering, and in the process, it also teaches us where the word *se'irim* as a name for demons came from; that *se'irim* are dancing demons; and that male demons have hair, but female demons do not.

The Egyptians used to say incantations into the ear of a sheep, so that a demon would come out of the ear and predict the future. Because of this, God commanded the Israelites to take sheep as

[108] Parma 379.
[109] Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic*, 14.
[110] Bologna 467.
[111] Parma 172.

the Passover offering to atone for the sheep's degradation. The Egyptians would also plant one tree at a specific time, which they knew through sorcery. After a year, they would chop it down in a particular way, which they also knew by sorcery, until the demons would come and sit on top of the tree and leap and dance upon it like *seirim* and predict the future.

Why call demons *seirim*? So that one will remember that demons have hair on their heads.[112] But female demons do not have hair on their heads. That is why Boaz put his hand on Ruth's head. When he saw that she had hair, then he asked, "Who are you."[113] (He did not want to meet her until he determined that she was not a demon.)

Another story explains to us the path of demons, and how they can go to certain places. This is one of the stories that uses Balaam's donkey as a basis for their extrapolation about the characteristics of demons in general. The story begins by telling us that animals can see spirits because they, unlike humans, will not (or cannot) tell anyone about what they saw. This is a perfect segue for Balaam:

> ... Just as Balaam's donkey saw what Balaam could not see (the angel/demon). Why didn't the angel turn to the right or left or fly away in the air (instead of standing in front of the donkey)? Because, as Scripture says, "the path was blocked from me"

[112] The Hebrew word *se'irim* has the same root as the word *se'ar*, which means hair.

(Numbers 22:32). But from this we learn that it is dangerous to shut doors and windows because maybe it has been decreed for the demons to go through that very same pathway which we have just blocked. You cause them trouble by making them go a different way. That's why, "[the angel] crushed Balaam's foot against the wall," (Numbers 22:25), in order to go the way that was prescribed.

And how do we know that demons cannot go anywhere except the place that is prescribed to them? Because we are told in the Talmudic tractate *Hulin* that the demon would stand under the gutter and break barrels because he could not leave. It also says in tractate *Pesachim* that the only path on which a demon can go is on the side of the public domain.

... And you should know that when a dog sees the Angel of Death blocking its way, it cannot go that way and must turn around until he walks out of the path of the Angel of Death. If someone pushes the dog into the path of the Angel of Death, the dog will die, or sometimes even the man who pushed him will die. My cousin Ya'akov tried to push a dog and the dog died immediately[114]

From this very complicated and confusing passage we learn that demons can go to only certain places, and we had better not block their way.

Three last random details about demons are:

---

[113] Bologna 1155.
[114] Bologna 1146.

1. Demons come out at night.[115]
2. Many demons have the letter *pey* in their names, and therefore you cannot find the letter *pey* in the names of prayers, except musaf.[116]
3. The number nine is somehow related to demons.

The last detail deserves some explanation, although we have already seen that demons congregate in trees with branches that have nine leaves on them, and they congregate in groups of nine.[117] Also, to heal someone who was harmed by demons, one "must recite the exorcism nine times, as they do in Germany, where they count nine knots or they heal him with nine bits of wood called *stilleti*..."[118] The importance of the number nine comes from the surrounding German culture. "[The phrase] 'as they do in Germany' is the key to this novel Jewish enthusiasm for nine, for native Teutonic magic was characterized by the doctrine of nines, and in medieval German magic nine occurs very frequently. Along with other German folk-beliefs, the potent nine wormed its way into Jewish superstition."[119]

**Conclusions**

The demonological stories in Sefer Hasidim help us learn about the lives of the Ashkenazi Hasidim. Although the stories may hint at concepts that could be considered "theological," theology is not the main purpose of the stories. In

[115] Parma 939.
[116] Bologna 1154.
[117] Bologna 1153.
[118] This translation of a section of Bologna 1153 is by Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic*, 120.
[119] Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic*, 120.

some ways, we learn "theology" only as a by-product of the stories, which talk about everyday life for German Jews in the Middle Ages. Judaism was their way of life, so thoughts about God and the meaning of life were common.

In general, most of the literature of Ashkenazi Hasidism takes piety to the extreme. But this is not true for most of the stories about demons. In fact, in many cases certain levels of magical formula and demonology interactions are permitted – practices which contradict our standard notions of "piety." Even considering the importance place upon atonement and penances in Sefer Hasidim, none are mentioned in these stories. Instead of giving specific, detailed penances for interacting with demons, the reader only receives a general warning that he or his descendants will somehow be punished in the future. Also omitted is any mention of how demons could be placed before a *hasid* as a test. If the Hasidim believe that life is made up of continuous trials to test a person's level of righteousness, Sefer Hasidim could have illustrated this concept through stories about the temptation of interacting with demons. Those who avoided contact with demons would have passed this particular test, leading to possible salvation, and those who did not avoid contact would fail. These two concepts, penances and life as a series of trials, are major concepts in the ideology of Sefer Hasidim. Yet, the demonological stories do not directly refer to either of these ideas.

Ultimately, the main purpose of the demonological stories in Sefer Hasidim is to give instruction to the Hasidim to help them live their lives with as much piety as possible. Since demons were part of their everyday lives, and it is

clear that the author accepts demons as a reality, the Ashkenazi Hasidim needed instruction on how to deal with and interact with demons. This instruction comes in the form of stories, which not only describe the danger of demons and how to protect oneself from them, but they also teach lessons, and help the average Jew to understand why evil exists, and why bad things happen to good people.

From this selection of literature, it is clear that demons were a large part of the culture of Ashkenazi Hasidism. "Hardly a murmur of doubt do we hear of the existence and reality of the evil spirits."[120] Demons existed and were a part of everyday life. This reality created the fascinating and revealing demonological stories found in Sefer Hasidim.

[120] Ibid, 26.

## Chapter Three: Magic

### Background

For centuries, people have had a fascination with magic. Belief or wonder about the plausibility of magic is pervasive because fear and desire are permanent: fear of sickness, of an enemy, of the dangers of childbirth, of death in battle, etc. and the desire to know the future, to win the favor of a woman or of kings, to consult stars or ghosts or spirits, to know the meaning of dreams, and more.[1] Even for Jews, magic has been an ancient and honorable tradition.[2] But the word "magic" is inherently ambiguous. In classical antiquity, the word "magic" applied to the arts of Zoroastrian priests, called the Magi. What the Magi did was by definition "the arts of the Magi" or "the magical arts" or simply "magic." Over time, the definition of magic lost any direct connection to the Magi, and became an art or craft connected to all religions, not just Zoroastrianism.[3]

In order to have any kind of discussion on magic, we need to discuss some of its definitions. Encyclopedia Judaica approaches magic from an anthropological perspective, defining it as actions taken in order to influence the mysterious forces of the world.[4] Another author defines magic as "the attempt on man's part to have intercourse with spiritual and supernatural beings, and to

---

[1] Judah Goldin, "The Magic of Magic and Superstition," *Aspects of Religious Propaganda in Judaism and Early Christianity* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press 1976): 117. (Hereafter, Goldin, "The Magic of Magic.")
[2] Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic*, 11.
[3] Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (University of Cambridge 1989) 10. (Hereafter, Kieckhefer, *Magic*.)
[4] Joseph Dan, "Magic," *EJ* 11:703.

influence them for his benefit."[5] Specifically concerning magic in the Middle Ages, another scholar defines magic as "the exercise of a preternatural control over nature by human beings with the assistance of forces more powerful than they."[6] These three definitions all share the idea that humans use magic to influence something, but only the last two acknowledge that the humans need help from or interaction with some kind of spirit or force.

The distinction between an act by a human alone and an act with the help of higher power is important. The former indicates that the magician has a special power himself, and the later acknowledges that magic is a skill, not a power, because he needs supernatural help. Richard Kieckhefer, a leader in the field of study on magic in the Middle Ages, claims that medieval intellectuals recognized these definitions as two separate and different kinds of magic. Natural magic was a branch of medieval science that dealt with the occult – hidden powers – within nature. Demonic magic was a perversion of religion; it was a religion that turned away from God and toward demons for their help in human affairs.[7]

The occult power comes from either an internal source, meaning from the physical form of an object, or from an external source, like the emanations that come from stars and planets.[8] According to this view of magic, all things are endowed with occult virtues and power, and they possess "mutually sympathetic

[5] Davies, *Magic, Divination and Demonology*, 1.
[6] Valerie Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (New Jersey: University of Princeton Press 1991): 3. (Hereafter, Flint, *Rise of Magic*.)
[7] Kieckhefer, *Magic*, 9.
[8] Kieckhefer, *Magic*, 12-13.

or antipathetic qualities." One could manipulate natural objects in order to harness the magical currents within for a specific purpose.[9]

For many writers in medieval Europe, all magic was by definition demonic. They believed that magical effect of even a natural object came from demons. This notion rests on "animistic" principles, namely that things throughout nature have spirits or personalities dwelling within, and the magician works to influence these spirits.[10] Sefer Hasidim could probably be included in the group that views all magic as "demonic magic" because of its belief in appointed angels. As mentioned in chapter one, every person has a spiritual or astral double, called *memunneh*, who directs that individual's acts. There is a *memunneh* in charge of every species, every place, every person, and every animal – one for each element in nature.[11] The magician tries to manipulate these angels in order to do his will. The appointed angel concept probably originated from a non-Jewish source, which has an appointed demon over every plot of land, and the demon knows everything that is done in that plot of land.[12]

Kieckhefer identifies another definition for magic, which relies on intended force of action rather than on the type of power invoked. In this definition, magic coerces spiritual beings or forces, while religion focuses on the supplication of God. From this perspective, the borders between religion and magic become even more difficult to discern. But this definition does not always work, because there were those who thought they could coerce demons – but only because they

[9] Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic*, 21.
[10] Kieckhefer, *Magic*, 10, 13.
[11] Baer, "Socioreligious Orientation," 75-76.
[12] Dan, "*Sippurim*," 172.

had previously supplicated God and thus obtained divine power over the demons. Kieckhefer ends his discussion with a most basic definition of magic: an attempt to coerce.[13]

In the Bible, the most common term for magic is the root *kaf-shin-pey*, which comes from Akkadian. In the Akkadian, this root always indicates black magic, but it is not so clear in the Bible. Black magic is mischievous, illegal magic, while white magic is beneficent and legal magic. The blurring of the distinction between black and white magic in the Bible may be due to the Bible's opposition to all magic.[14] The most comprehensive list of various kinds of practitioners of magic appears in Deuteronomy 18:10, which is a complete condemnation of these practices. There are three types of practitioners:

1. One who predicts the future, including the soothsayer (*me'onen*), the augurer (*kosem kesamim*) and the diviner (*menachesh*)
2. Those who engage in actual magic, specifically the sorcerer (*mechashef*) and one who casts spells (*hover hever*)
3. Those who engage in both prediction and in actual magic by raising the spirits of the dead.[15]

Still, Deuteronomy is conscious of the needs that cause the Israelites to turn to divination, and therefore adds that the prophet will furnish in a legitimate manner the guidance which others seek by augury.

---

[13] Kieckhefer, *Magic*, pp. 14-16.
[14] Joseph Dan, "Magic," *EJ* 11:703.
[15] I was unable to address selections in Sefer Hasidim that deal with this type of practitioner.

In its condemnation of magic, the Bible regards the various magical acts as equivalent to idolatry and false prophecy (Isaiah 3:2-3 and Jeremiah 27:9). To further emphasize the connection between magic and idolatry, the Bible derides the non-Israelites, especially the Babylonians, who rely on magic (Isaiah 43:9). Overall, the citations in the Bible about magic are opposed to it, and the Bible strives to eradicate the tendency of the Israelites to resort to various magical practices.[16]

The strict prohibition against magic in the Bible is reinforced in the Talmud, and especially in the Mishnah, which also equates magic with idolatry (Sanhedrin 7:7). For example, the Biblical command to exterminate witches is broadened to include male sorcerers (Sanhedrin 67a). Magical remedies were denounced as being Amorite customs, and magic was punishable by death when a magical act was performed (Shabbat 6:10, Sanhedrin 67a).[17] In spite of all this, the rabbis of the Talmud are considerably preoccupied with magic; they rabbis of the Talmud considered the knowledge of magic to be vital, not just for its refutation, but also to understand its praxis. One passage in the Talmud states that in order to sit as a judge on the Sanhedrin, one needs to be a person of stature, wisdom, and a master of magic (*ba'al keshafim*).[18]

---

[16] Joseph Dan, "Magic," *EJ* 11:704-705.
[17] Ibid, 706.
[18] Jonathan Seidel, "Charming Criminals: Classification of Magic in the Babylonian Talmud." *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*. Ed. Marvin Meyer and Paul Mirecki (Leiden: E.J. Brill 1995): 145. (Hereafter, Seidel, "Magic in the Talmud.)

As with demons, the Talmud dissects magic and tries to put it into neat categories of forbidden and permitted magical acts.[19] The authorities of a community determine what is magic and what is not, what is forbidden and what is legitimate, based on what has come down as commanded or approved from the past.[20] The rabbis in Talmud did exactly this by breaking up the all-inclusive category of sorcery into several divisions and describing the varying degrees of guilt. Two types of forbidden magic are that which produces a material effect by the performance of an act, and that which only creates the illusion of such an act or its effect. One type of magic which is permitted involves the use of the mystical names of God and the angels.[21]

In general, Hebrew literature on magic draws extensively on non-Jewish sources. Medieval magical terms and formula come from Arabic, German, French, Slavic and other languages. Even though the basic terminology and methods of magic are similar to those found in non-Jewish sources, Jewish magic is distinguishable because the spirits and demons are never seen as autonomous deities.[22] Also, most magical texts will authenticate themselves through the "chain of tradition." Even if the magic resembles that of another society, the authors of these texts often claim that the magical practice, book, or

[19] For a longer discussion of this, see Seidel, "Magic in the Talmud," 148-154
[20] Goldin, "The Magic of Magic," 122
[21] Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic*, 19.
[22] Joseph Dan, "Magic," *EJ* 11:709; Goldin, "Magic of Magic," 135.

secret name had been transmitted from Biblical heroes through a succession of historical figures.[23]

**Magic in Sefer Hasidim**

At first, Sefer Hasidim seems to forbid all kinds of magic in general, with sweeping statements that try to cover every aspect of both occult and demonic activities:

> With acts of sorcery, one will eventually meet with grief. The same is true for acts involving demons or the use of Holy names (incantations). If someone were to say, "I will write an amulet for you," he should not carry it with him on Shabbat or the weekday, because he should not believe in nonsensical things.[24]
>
> Demons only bother those who provoke them, like someone who who himself or whose ancestor made amulets, or practiced sorcery, incantations or dream divination. Therefore, a person should not do these things.[25]
>
> A wise man should not write things (like things about demons) that might cause trouble for others and cause them to get involved with demons or magic or incantations.[26]

---

[23] Michael D. Swartz, "Magical Piety in Ancient and Medieval Judaism." *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*. Ed. Marvin Meyer and Paul Mirecki (Leiden: E.J. Brill 1995): 172.
[24] Parma 1455.
[25] Bologna 1172, Parma 379.
[26] Parma 738.

Know that a man will get severe punishment for participating in magic or demonic activities.[27]

Anyone who conjures angels or demons or whispers magical incantations will come to a bad end.[28]

According to these statements, any kind of magical activity is forbidden. Yet, in some of the passages about magic, Sefer Hasidim does permit its use. (We have already seen in the previous chapter where incantations were used as protection against demons.) Gershom Scholem points out that all the literature of the Ashkenazi Hasidim is inconsistent, not just Sefer Hasidim and not just the passages concerning magic. He accuses the Hasidic authors of a "failure to establish doctrinal unity or rather the lack of any serious attempt to bring it about ... [because of] all their manifold contradictions and inconsistencies."[29]

Overall, the majority of the selections identified here do portray a negative attitude about magic. In fact, in many situations, Sefer Hasidim even forbids the use of magic for good purposes. A person is not allowed to make amulets or say incantations even to save someone else's life. Considering that almost anything is allowed to save a person's life, even profaning Shabbat, Sefer Hasidim needed to explain this prohibition. The logic depends upon the belief that if a person makes amulets or says incantations, he is risking his life and the lives of his descendants, and "one soul does not cancel out another." In other words, a

---

[27] Parma 1456.
[28] Parma 211.
[29] Scholem, *Major Trends*, 87.

person should not do magic to save someone's life, for in doing so he is risking his own.[30]

Most often, a person asks a sage if it is permitted to use different forms of magic in order to make people God-fearing or turn the wicked into righteous.[31] The sages respond that even the prophets, who were knowledgeable in the arts of magic, did not use it for any purpose; they depended on prayer.[32] In one case, a sage brings examples of two Biblical figures who could have used magic for good purposes, but did not. Abshalom, King David's son, could have prevented himself from sinning by using magic, but he did not.[33] Abishai, who was one of King David's bodyguards, helped crush Abshalom's rebellion against David. Even though Abishai knew the arts of magic, he did not use it to change the heart of Abshalom and the other Israelite rebels toward goodness and loyalty to David.[34]

Another passage[35] describes a case where a man not only wants to make people God-fearing by doing magic with God's name, he also wants to use it to kill his enemies. The sage tells him that as long as the magician knows that no righteous person would be a descendant of the man killed, he could use magic and kill his enemies, just as Moses did. Here, Sefer Hasidim refers to a well-known midrash on the verse, "And he [Moses] turned this way and that, and saw no man..." (Exodus 2:21). The context of this verse is the incident where Moses

---

[30] Bologna 1172.
[31] Parma 1444, 1448, 1449.
[32] Parma 1448, Parma 1449.
[33] Sefer Hasidim does not specify which sin Abshalom could have prevented, and Abshalom committed many sins. See II Samuel, chapter 13ff.
[34] Parma 1449.

killed the Egyptian guard who was beating a Hebrew slave. The Sages explain that Moses saw that there was no hope that righteous people would arise from the guard or from the guard's offspring. (Moses could predict the future.) When Moses saw this, he took counsel with the angels and said to them, "This man deserves death." They agreed; hence, it says, "And when he saw there was no man" to say a good word for him, "he smote the Egyptian." (Exodus 2:12)[36]

As mentioned earlier, even the prophets did not participate in magic, although they had knowledge of the skill, especially of divination. Sefer Hasidim explains that the prophets were given to the people in order to prevent the people from sinning by practicing divination. Instead of consulting stars, the sun's shadow and different sorcerers, and instead of studying man's blood, liver and bones to predict the future, the people should consult with the prophets.[37] Astrologers, sorcerers and demons cannot measure up to the skill of the prophets.[38] Even though, in our times, there are no prophets, all of these things are still forbidden, which is similar to the case of the priest (*kohen*). Even though today *kohanim* do not serve a function in the temple (because there is no temple), they are still forbidden from being near dead bodies or marrying widows.[39]

Yet, the prophets themselves were still forbidden from doing certain activities. Even the prophets were not allowed to make a new interpretation or commandment, because a false prophet might come, change a commandment,

---

[35] Parma 1444.
[36] Shemot Rabah 1:29.
[37] Parma 1450.
[38] Parma 1983.

and do miracles and make omens with sorcery.[40] To avoid doing magic, the prophets even allowed themselves to be killed when they could have saved their lives by using God's name in incantations. All they did was pray, because[41] the prophets reasoned that if God did not hear their prayers, then they were not worthy enough to be saved.

One of the main reasons for the prohibition of magic was its connection to idolatry and false prophecy, as explained in the section about magic in the Bible. Many of the selections reinforce this connection, and claim that magic is the way of those "other nations." One selection bases this idea on a verse in Exodus. "For how shall it be known that Your people have gained Your favor unless You go with us, so that we may be distinguished, Your people and I, from every people on the face of the earth?" (Exodus 33:16).

> "I and Your people" (Exodus 33:16). If God's people go to war, they should ask the prophets, and the prophets will tell them when to fight, or they should consult the *urim* and *turim*.[42] "He issued His commands to Jacob, His statutes and rules to Israel" (Psalms 147:19). "So that we may be distinguished" (Exodus 33:16).

---

[39] Parma 1450.
[40] Parma 1983.
[41] Parma 211.
[42] A priestly device for obtaining oracles. By means of the *urim*, the priest inquired of YHWH on behalf of the ruler (Num. 27:21; cf. Yoma 7:5, "only for the king, the high court, or someone serving a need of the community"). They were one of the three legitimate means of obtaining oracles in early Israel (*Urim*, dreams, prophets; I Sam. 28:6) "Divination," *EJ* 6:113.

> Most nations depend on their soldiers and officers, or the carriages and horses, and do not depend on anything else. A few depend on astrologers, and some depend on sorcery and demons, and in opposition to all of them, it says, "so that we may be distinguished." None of them measure up against the prophets and the *urim* and *tunm*. Thus, it is written, "For the *teraphim*[43] spoke delusions, the diviners predicted falsely, and dreamers speak lies and consult with illusions" (Zachariah 10:2). But God said, "I will also do this thing that you have asked . . " (Exodus 33:17).[44]

One passage in Sefer Hasidim shows how non-Israelites combined the use of magic and idolatry to cause Israel to sin.

> The prophets of *Ba'al* would create for Israel an idol and bewitch Israel, and they would fashion the idol in the image of the Israelites in the way that one forms wax. And they would punish Israel with agony, and when Israel would come to magicians to get healed, the magicians would say, "If you worship such-and-such idol, you will be healed." So, when the Israelites would bow to the idol, they would cause the form that had been fashioned from them to break.

---

[43] Although *teraphim* can refer to household gods or idols (see Genesis 31:34, I Samuel 19:13), in this context they refer to something employed in divination in the period of Judges (see Judges 17:15, 18:17). In addition to the above quote from Zachariah, the use of *teraphim* was also condemned in I Samuel 15:23 and II Kings 23:24.

[44] Parma 1983.

> And if you were to say, why was Israel punished? Thus, if it was decreed above for man to commit idolatry, why are they exacting punishment from them, as it is written, "Your wife shall play the harlot in town" (Amos 7:17).[45] Similar is the case of Abshalom with his father's concubines. But this is the way it is: the guilt is according to the one who deserves it. [God decrees a sinful outcome for someone who is inherently sinful.] But anyone whose heart is pure, there will be no decree upon them, because God does not bring an obstacle even through the cattle of the righteous.[46]

Sefer Hasidim also refers to magical practices as "the ways of the Amorites,"[47] and tells stories about magic related to the Egyptians. For instance we are told that the Egyptians used to say incantations into the ear of a sheep in order to conjure a demon to predict the future. Also, Sefer Hasidim tells a story which takes place in a neighborhood of sorcerers, found in Egypt.[48] The connection between magic and the "other nations" translates to the Middle Ages through Christians. Most medieval Jewish writers made it clear that for the most part, Jews are not the ones who participate in magic: "There are men and women" who do these things, but not Jews specifically.[49]

---

[45] Idolatry is often compared to harlotry, because Israel is "seduced" by other gods.
[46] Parma 1159. The way that the prophets of *Ba'al* (a Canaanite god) created an image of the Israelites sounds like voodoo.
[47] Bologna 59.
[48] Parma 1515.
[49] Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic*, 14.

One example that clearly illustrates the connection between magic and Christians is a warning against debating with all different types of people who might try to convert you:

> If a priest, monk, or wise casuistic heretic, or impious scholar who is looking for glory, wants to debate with an unlearned righteous person, he should not pursue it. Or if a sorcerer wants to debate with a wise man over Torah, he should not join in on the debate, because the sorcerer might divert the wise man's heart [from God and Judaism] with his words.[50]

**"It is an easy thing to cast spells."[51]**

Many of the stories in Sefer Hasidim mention people who have been "bewitched" (*mechushaf*)[52] for one reason or another. Although Sefer Hasidim rarely tells us who cast the spell, how it was done, or why, many people are "bewitched." For instance, a man or woman falls in love because he or she has been "bewitched,"[53] or a couple is unable to conceive because they have been "bewitched."[54] Both love potions and impotence spells were common in the Middle Ages, and it was often convenient to blame lust or impotence on magic rather than on an individual.[55]

---

[50] Parma 811.
[51] Parma 380.
[52] Whenever Sefer Hasidim refers to someone who has been "bewitched" or someone who "casts spells," the Hebrew word used always has the same root: *kaf, shin, pey*.
[53] Parma 43, 1136.
[54] Parma 1162, 1566.
[55] Flint, *The Rise of Magic*, 233.

In one passage, Sefer Hasidim describes through an inventive interpretation the three levels of evil inclinations that cause man to want women. At the end of the passage, Sefer Hasidim acknowledges that sorcery could be responsible for those inclinations:

> There are three evil inclinations that can compel a man concerning women, as it is written, "They are all adulterers, like a heated baker's oven. For they have made ready their heart like an oven, while they lie in wait; their baker sleeps all the night; in the morning it burns as a flaming fire. They are all hot as an oven" (Hosea 7:4,5,6). "Oven" is written three times in this portion, meaning there are three evil inclinations concerning women: the inclination to see and be seen, the inclination of desirous thoughts and passionate lust, and the inclination of a burning heart which cannot be extinguished.
>
> Because of the third inclination, the heart thinks about a particular woman every moment, and goes crazy about her until he is next to her, and this is the most difficult inclination of all. There are times when this level of lust is done to a person by sorcery, even if he has never seen the woman. The sages said, "The inclination of desire, lust and passion only rules over that which the eye can see, but the inclination where the heart burns after a woman does not need to see her." (Sanhedrin 45a)

This is similar to a story about a crazy man, or a pregnant woman who wanted to eat a particular food. Day and night she thought about it, and forgot about everything else but the food. Similarly, all day long, a woman was in the heart of a lusting man. And even if he only heard something about her or saw one of her servants, he was happy. Sorcery is responsible for this. Sometimes, it even happens without sorcery.[56]

If lust is caused by sorcery, as indicated in the above story, there is no remedy.[57]

Concerning women who cannot conceive because of sorcery, Sefer Hasidim tells a story of an entire town of women who have this problem:

There was once a town where only a small number of women got pregnant, while in a different town, all the women were pregnant. They asked a wise man about this problem, and he said, "I have researched this matter. In the town where the women are pregnant, the midwives go with the women to the mikvah and the midwives are happy when the women become pregnant. But in the town where most of the women are not pregnant, those who go with the women to the mikvah are not midwives, and they cast spells on the women so they will not get pregnant. Instead, the women are constantly menstruating and constantly going to the mikvah, and paying a fee [to the supervising women at the mikvah]. Therefore, you need to choose a faithful and traditional woman [to

[56] Parma 43.
[57] Parma 1136.

supervise the mikvah and] to tell the women whether or not they have immersed according to the law. She should be a righteous woman who will not cast spells so the women will become pregnant."[58]

Another passage in Sefer Hasidim tells the story of a couple who could not conceive:

> The husband visited a pious man who was near death, and told him that he and his wife had been "bewitched" and could not conceive. The husband then requested from the pious man that when he went before God (after his death), if he would ask God to let his wife conceive. The pious man agreed, and the year that he died, the spell was lifted and the woman conceived.[59]

Sorcery can also keep a man from having sexual intercourse with his wife.[60] Sefer Hasidim describes a couple who were bewitched and were not able to have sexual intercourse. They tried to solve their problem through sorcery during the course of three years. Because these two people could not have marital relations and thus conceive, it was a sin for them to be together. At the end of this passage, we are told that anyone who is bewitched and cannot have sex with his wife for three years should divorce her and marry someone else.[61]

Casting spells can also cause someone to get sick:

---

[58] Parma 380.
[59] Parma 1566.
[60] Kieckhefer, *Magic*, 50.
[61] Parma 1162.

A baby was crying in the night, and his mother sensed that a Jewish woman had done this to him. The mother of the baby said to a wise man, "Look, my son is crying because a woman put a spell on him I know how to heal him (through magic) so he will not cry anymore, and the sickness will return to the child who had it in the first place (Presumably, the sickness would return to the son of the Jewish woman who had originally cast the spell.) He said to her, "Even though the mother sinned, the child is still innocent."

In other words, do not make the child sick, even though his mother sinned by transferring the sickness to another child, because the child is innocent of sinning.

Many illnesses were cured by transferring the sicknesses to an animal, an inanimate object, or to another person.[62] There is an odd passage about two men who transfer their deaths to someone else by selling their illnesses:

Once, there was a Christian who was slumped over in sadness. His friend said to him, "Why are you so sullen?" The Christian replied that he had had a dream where he was riding a red horse, and the horse was hitched to an unclean animal. His friend told him that the dream meant that he was going to die soon. The friend offered to buy the dream for a drink, and the Christian agreed. The friend died two days later.

There was another case of a man who was mortally ill, and another jokingly said to him, "I'll buy your illness from you for such-

and-such a sum." The invalid promptly responded, "It's a bargain." Immediately, he arose cured, and the other man got sick and died.[63]

**The Danger of Sorcerers**

A common picture of the sorcerer is of a dark, evil creature who shuns the ways of men, haunts the night, pores over disgusting brews, consorts with demons and spirits, and plots mischief and destruction.[64] In Sefer Hasidim, we often see a "professional" sorcerer, who sells his magical and divination services to others.[65] In either case, sorcerers can be dangerous and unpredictable, and one should be very careful in relations with them. Some sorcerers are so powerful that they can control the *memunnim*, the angels appointed to every person and thing, and make these angels do the sorcerers' bidding.[66]

Sefer Hasidim gives some warnings about dealing with sorcerers. As mentioned earlier, one should not get into a debate with a sorcerer, because that sorcerer will twist the words and possibly turn the person against God.[67] Also, if a slave or maidservant threatens someone, he should free the slave, because the slave could be a sorcerer who will cast a spell on his master and put his life in jeopardy.[68] Most of all, one should never pick a fight with a sorcerer; it is as dangerous as walking on thin ice where you might fall and drown, or going into a

[62] Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic*, 204.
[63] Bologna 445.
[64] Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic*, 13.
[65] Parma 1456.
[66] Parma 1453.
[67] Parma 811.

crumbling ruined house, or when a small army fights with a much larger one. These are all cases of suicide.[69]

Lastly, to emphasize the dangerous and wicked nature of sorcerers, Sefer Hasidim tells a story of a man who gets bewitched by an entire neighborhood of sorcerers:

> In Egypt, a rich man was warned by his landlord not to go to the sorcerers' neighborhood. He ignored the warning, and took a bag filled with silver. The sorcerers gave him something to drink, and he thought he was a duke who had married a princess. (The drink confused him and made him hallucinate.) He though he had been detained there for many years, and that he had many sons, and it also seemed to him that he was very old and about to die. The time for his release from the sorcerers came, and the rich man bequeathed an area of land to one son and another to another son. And one of the sorcerers said, "I am your younger son. Everyone has a portion, so give me the bag of silver."
>
> When the friends of the rich man waited for him and he did not come, [because he was in the sorcerer's neighborhood], the landlord went with his friends and found him. The rich man had bequeathed things to sorcerers as if they were his sons, because he thought he was dying. So the landlord asked for the bag of silver from them so that he could return it to his friend and give him

[68] Parma 381.
[69] Parma 163.

back some of the silver. And this is what happened. He had only been gone one hour, but he felt as if he had lived there many years and had many sons.[70]

**Amulets**

From earliest times, people have used holy or magically potent objects to protect themselves against spirits or other dangers. One way of doing this was to keep the object close to his body, often wearing it as an article of clothing or as an ornament, so that the evil spirits would not attack him. The Hebrew word for amulet, *kemi'ah*, means, "that which is bound."[71]

Often, an inscription was written on the amulet to increase its protective power, because it was believed that words were especially powerful. Different combinations of the letters of the different names of God were commonly used in these inscriptions, as well as the names of certain angels. From the time of the Talmud through the Middle Ages, the rabbis were inconsistent in deciding if the use of amulets was forbidden.[72] There was no legal prohibition against their use, but rules were set up to distinguish between proper and improper amulets, which gave them a certain degree of acceptance.[73]

Sefer Hasidim is also inconsistent in its treatment of amulets. In most cases, making amulets is a sin, but sometimes it is permitted. Sefer Hasidim makes a much stronger statement than the Talmud in reference to the making

[70] Parma 1515.
[71] Raphael Posner, "Amulet," *EJ* 2:906.
[72] Ibid, 907.
[73] Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic*, 132.

amulets as a sin. As mentioned earlier, amulets are lumped with sorcery, incantations, conjuring spirits and practicing divination as prohibited activities that provoke demons.[74]

Twice in Sefer Hasidim, we are told that making an amulet is a sin. In both stories, some people asked a certain man to make an amulet for them. He was afraid, either of the people (they may have been Christians) or of the punishment he might receive from making an amulet, so he referred them to another person. In both cases, a sage rebukes the man. One sage said that he should not have done this, because he caused the other person to sin. The other sage made his point indirectly through two sayings: "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor." (Shabbat 31a), and "You should love your neighbor like yourself" (Leviticus 19:18).[75] That is to say, if one person did not want to make an amulet, he should not put a colleague in the position of having to make an amulet.

Yet, from the above passages it is clear that certain people knew how to make amulets, which indicates that at some time they might have been permitted, or that certain uses of amulets were permitted. Another selection reinforces this conclusion:

> A wise Jew or a wise non-Jew might say to a person, "I will write an amulet for you for protection, or so that your words will be acceptable to royalty, and I will give you one to carry so that you will become rich." There's no question that this is forbidden on

[74] Bologna 1172, Parma 379.
[75] Bologna 470, Parma 1457.

Shabbat, because carrying something profanes Shabbat. But even if it is a weekday, he should not carry it because he should not believe in nonsensical things.[76]

Like the earlier passages on amulets, this selection assumes that certain people, in this case wise people, know how to make amulets. Also, the prohibition given here does not really deal with amulets: the prohibition says that one cannot carry anything on Shabbat, and this includes an amulet. We are not told here that it is forbidden to make an amulet, or even to have one, only that we should not carry one on Shabbat or weekdays. And calling amulets "nonsensical" seemingly contradicts the first line, where we learn that wise people know how to make amulets. In this passage, however, the person does not "make" amulets; he writes them. This is connected to the practice of writing incantations on amulets, or that an object only becomes an amulet when certain words are engraved on it.

Only two cases in Sefer Hasidim show permitted usages of amulets. One case was mentioned in the previous chapter on demons, where an amulet is used for protection during childbirth.[77] The other case refers to situations when the children die after they are born. If a person gives birth and the child dies in the same town where he was born, then the family should move to a different town. After they move, if the children continue to die, then they need an amulet.[78]

---

[76] Parma 1455.
[77] Parma 1463.

**Optical Illusions**

Two passages in Sefer Hasidim refer to something called *ahizat einayim*, which literally means, "capturing the eyesight," but is understood as an optical illusion. *Ahizat einayim* is one of the two types of magic forbidden by the Talmud.[79] One selection only briefly mentions *ahizat einayim* - a person can do an optical illusion and make water reverse the direction of its flow. The other passage quotes a Talmudic story about an optical illusion that saved a man's life:

> There was one who was overcome by a sickness with chills. They asked a sage, "So-and-so wants to cure the sick man by telling him that his loved one has died, and [the shock will] cure him from the chills. The sage responded, "Keep far from speaking falsely" (Exodus 23:7). One should not respond to an evil action, but you can do this in a case where a life is in danger, like one whose intestines were coming out. This case appears in Hulin 56b – 57a: A gentile once saw a man fall from the roof to the ground so that his belly burst open and his entrails protruded. [The gentile] thereupon brought the son [of the victim] and by an optical illusion made out as if he slaughtered him in the presence of the father. The father became faint, sighed deeply and drew in his entrails, whereupon his belly was immediately stitched up.[80]

[78] Parma 367.
[79] Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic*, 19.
[80] Parma 153.

Although there is no other reference to *ahizat einayim* in Sefer Hasidim, another passage in the Talmud connects magicians to this skill:

> R. Eleazer said, "A magician can not create a creature less than the size of a barley-corn. (This is derived from the plague of lice which the Egyptian magicians could not imitate.) R. Papa said, "He cannot even produce something as large as a camel, but the larger ones he can [magically] collect [and so produce the illusion that he has magically created them] but the others he cannot." Rab said to R. Hiya, "I myself saw an Arabian traveler take a sword and cut up a camel. Then he rang a bell, at which the camel arose, but it was merely an optical illusion."[81]

**Divination**

Those who predict the future do it in many ways: dream divination, raising the spirits of the dead, and interpreting omens. For the most part, divination is forbidden in the Bible, although there are some exceptions, and the rabbis tried to distinguish between forbidden and permitted divination: *nahash*, divination proper, is forbidden, while *simanim*, or interpreting omens, is permitted. But the line between these two types of prediction is unclear. Sefer Hasidim also struggles with this distinction, and has mostly a negative attitude toward any divination. The following passage gives the most detail about how Sefer Hasidim views divination:

---

[81] Sanhedrin 67b.

"There is no divination in Jacob" (Numbers 23:23). Our Creator commanded us, "You shall not practice divination" (Leviticus 19:26). Because of our transgressions, which have become numerous in our day, there are diviners in Israel. One should be very careful concerning transgressions related to divination, like not eating eggs on *motza'e Shabbat* (Saturday night),[82] or not taking fire twice from the hearth when there is someone sick in the house or someone who has given birth within nine days.[83] Furthermore, there is divination and it is plenty, and it occurs between men. They look at fire and burning coals while standing and say, "We will have a guest." If one puts out the fire with water, his guest will fall into the water. And there is not greater divination than this.

True and sure is this thing, many men have tried it. But it is the *Satan* that leads them astray. When the *Satan* sees that someone is divining and says that the guest will fall into water, then *Satan* says, "I will go and push the guest into the water to lead astray the man [who did divination] as a sign that he can divine forever. Woe to them who do this, because they transgress many negative commandments: "Do not do divination," (Leviticus 19:26).

---

[82] Eating eggs was associated in folklore and custom with mourning (Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic*, 213).

[83] The Hebrew here is very unclear, so I used Trachtenberg's translation. This statement relates to the superstition that pairs of things invite demonic attack. Medieval writings contain many warnings against doing two things at one time, or repeating an action (Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic*, 118).

"Let no one be found among you . . who is a diviner," (Deuteronomy 18:10), "Nor shall you follow their laws [Canaanites]" (Leviticus 18:3).

Furthermore, some distort the message of the Torah, "For there is no divination in Jacob" (Numbers 23:23). Those who vow, when they have a headache, to no longer eat from the head of a cow, or when they are sick in their intestines, they vow to no longer eat intestines – they are following the ways of the Amorites. Instead, trust in God and He will heal you. The only time we use divination, it is an omen (*siman*), as in the case where they say that on Rosh Hashana, we should eat the head of a ram so that we will be at the head of things (i.e. prominent). This is also for the case of eating sweets, in order to have a sweet year.

Some people who need to do a mitzvah, like begin to educate the children or to introduce them to a particular mitzvah, say that they should wait for the New Moon.[84] Even though this is not divination, it is not a good way. Because who knows if he will live or die during the month. Do not put off doing a mitzvah.[85]

The previous passage is very outspoken against divination, even divination from omens (*simanim*), which are permitted elsewhere, especially in the Talmud. Although this passage gives two examples of omens which are forbidden, eating eggs and taking fire, it also gives two examples of permitted

[84] Time was very important for practicing magic, and there were superstitions especially about the end of Shabbat (*motza'e* Shabbat) and the New Moon

omens – eating the head of a ram and sweets on Rosh Hashana. Also interesting is the connection to the *Satan*: he is the one who fulfills the prediction and causes people to continue to sin through practicing divination.

Sefer Hasidim brings a couple of examples to illustrate that which is forbidden divination and that which is permitted, i.e. omens. Anything that is done three times is an example of an omen, and not necessarily divination. In the story of Tamar, two brothers die while married to her.[85] Judah, the boys father, is worried that his last son, Shelah, will also die if he marries Tamar. So Judah decides to postpone the marriage until Shelah has grown up "lest he too die like his brothers" (Genesis 38:11).[87]

The second example concerns how many steps a man walks, which seems to be a euphemism for the length of a man's life. We are told that the number of steps is decreed from above, and that one who learns of this decree is not participating in divination, rather, he is only interpreting an omen. Still, it is forbidden to tell others of this omen, because they might progress from interpreting omens to practicing divination.[88]

A more subtle warning against divination is found in a story about a man who predicts that a certain righteous man will marry a beautiful woman:

> A person knew how to whisper incantations (*lechashot*) in order to tell the future. This man approached a righteous person and

---

[85] Bologna 59.
[86] The second and third brothers must marry Tamar according to the law of the Levirite marriage: if a man dies without children, then his brother must marry his wife and raise the resulting children as if they were the sons of the first husband.
[87] Parma 377.
[88] Parma 14.

said to him, "You will be able to bless God concerning that which He ordained for you, because I have seen (through divination) that you will marry a beautiful woman."

The righteous man responded, "Who is she?"

"So-and-so, the daughter of so-and-so."

"But she is a married woman."

"It is clear to me that you will marry her."

"Today is not a day of good tidings. I cannot bless God concerning a man who might die because of me, and who knows if I am better than him."

They said to him, "If so, then how can a man ever marry a widow?"

He said, "That is not the same, because the man is already dead. But you tell me this while he is living, and for his sake I will pray for his life. Similarly, a man who hates his wife and she is sick, he should pray for her sake even though in his heart he would be happy about her death."[89]

In this story, the man who does the divination is indirectly rebuked, because the righteous man refuses to act upon the information. He will not be an accomplice to the diviner's activities, which leads us to believe that divination was a sinful practice.

In a final attempt to distinguish between forbidden and permitted divination, Sefer Hasidim compares two cases:

Once, a man asked the elders, "If someone is walking in the desert, and he has forgotten what day it is, whether it is Shabbat or not, and he meets someone who is a wizard, can he ask that non-Jew to make him remember whether it is Shabbat or not?"

So, one elder brought proof that this form of divination was permitted from the case of bringing a [snake-charmer] to take out a loaf of bread from a snake's mouth.[90] And they said, "What kind of proof is that? A magician did it on his own (no one else asked him to do it). After the fact, they gave him a reward, but not in the beginning, because he had broken the following commandment, "Do not put a stumbling block before the blind" (Leviticus 19:14).[91]

The second case does not work as a proof to permit divination in the first case, because in the second case, the divination had happened before the rabbis could make a ruling. Although no one was punished for sinning in the second case, it does not prove that divination is permitted.

Throughout Sefer Hasidim, there are many stories and examples of particular omens and their interpretations. Divination was chosen as a focus instead of omens, because of the amount of material, and also because divination is more "magical" than interpreting omens. This is especially true for dream divination, which is described at length in Sefer Hasidim.[92]

---

[89] Parma 1139.
[90] Pesahim 10b.
[91] Parma 1450.

**Incantations**

As for other forms of magic, incantations are usually forbidden. The word most commonly used in Sefer Hasidim for "incantation" is *hashba'ah* or *hashba'ot* (plural). The difficulty associated with this word is that sometimes it refers to conjuring spirits, and sometimes it refers to incantations – words or phrases in a certain formula which cause a certain act to happen magically. Either way, both conjuring demons and angels and saying incantations are grouped with the forbidden types of magic mentioned earlier in this chapter.[93]

In Sefer Hasidim, one can conjure up angels, demons, and spirits of the dead in order to force them to do one's bidding. For example, in a story found previously in this thesis, a sorceress conjures a demon by thrusting a knife into him so that he will tell her where a certain woman's money is buried.[94] Also previously mentioned is the story of the Egyptians who whisper incantations in a sheep's ear to conjure a demon. Another person, who is chased by a dead spirit, goes to the cemetery and says an incantation over the dead person's grave in order to conjure the spirit to tell it not to chase him.[95]

In order to conjure spirits, especially angels, one needs to know their names. By knowing an angel's name, one can dominate the entire province over which that angel presides. Therefore, the spirits guarded their names carefully.[96] Two passages in Sefer Hasidim illustrate this point: in one story, the angels hid

---

[92] See article by Harris Monford on "Dreams in Sepher Hassidim." *Proceedings of the American Academy of Jewish Research* 31 (1963): 51-80.
[93] Parma 211, 738, 1455, Bologna 1172.
[94] Parma 1456.
[95] Parma 329.

their names, and in other story, the Torah does not reveal their names to Jacob, Joshua, and Manoah, who all interact with them.[97]

Even though the names of the angels and other spirits were kept hidden, medieval Jews inherited a vast mystic lore of names, which they expanded for their own magical purposes. Sefer Hasidim warns those who have a "book of names" not to leave it lying around their houses.

> One who has sons or sons-in-law or students, and he also has a "book of names," he should not leave it lying around his house, lest they do magic with it without his knowledge. He should find a place to hide things and bury them in a place that they do not know about, so that they will not take them and do magic and bring punishment upon themselves and upon him, since he was able to hide them and did not.[98]

Sefer Hasidim also gives a warning to those who own "books of secrets":

> If a man has evil sons, and he has books of secrets, he should not give them to his sons, he should only give them to those who fear God, as it is written, "The secret of the Lord is for those who fear Him" (Psalms 25:14). But if he has good grandchildren, he can give the books to them.[99]

Another passage emphasizes the need to teach the "secrets of the Torah" only to those who are worthy:

---

[96] Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic*, 79-80.
[97] Bologna 192, 1150.
[98] Parma 1819.
[99] Parma 1459.

"If you find honey, eat only what you need, lest, surfeiting yourself, you throw it up" (Proverbs 25:16). If a man finds a teacher who teaches him Torah and the teacher knows the secrets of the Torah, things that should only be revealed to humble Torah scholars (reputable rabbis who are heads of Jewish courts). The student wants [to learn] all of this, but maybe he is not worthy, or maybe he is worthy but he wants to go wild with [the use of] incantations so that he can know more. In the end, this will be an obstacle for him, as the case of Aher (This is the name of Elisha b Abuya after his apostasy).[100]

One permitted use of incantations was for protection from demons, this topic is addressed in the previous chapter. Another permitted use of incantations, at least according to the Talmud, is the use of incantations with the mystical names of God, which was "permitted from the start."[101] Although Sefer Hasidim prohibits almost all incantations, again it is inconsistent. In a complicated passage about magic, we are told not to use God's name in incantations, yet Judah describes in detail which incantation techniques work and how. If we are not allowed to do incantations, then why is he spending so much time discussing them and explaining to the reader how they are done? Sefer

[100] Elisha ben Abuya was the third member of the group of four who penetrated the knowledge of mysteries (*pardes*). Because of his unusual ideas regarding Judaism, which were held to be harmful to the faith, he came to be called "Aher" – the one who is different. It is said that delving into the mysteries of the faith confused him to such a degree that he finally came to oppose it. Some say that he hovered between Judaism and Gnostic sects. (Gershom Bader, *The Jewish Spiritual Heroes*, vol. 1, New York: Pardes Publishing House, 1940, 335.)
[101] Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic*, 19.

Hasidim asks this very question in a different passage, and identifies certain incantations which are allowed:

> If a person can use incantations with God's name to hurt another soul who does not deserve it, or to save someone who does deserve it, or to save himself from Gehinnom, then why does scripture say, "None can save except from My hand" (i.e. only God can save, Deuteronomy 32:39). If a person said incantations with God's name so that he would not die or go to Gehinnom, it will not help him, because it is written, "None can save except from My hand." (Ibid.)
>
> An evil man cannot use these incantations to get him into the world-to-come without good deeds, as it is written, "Such things had never been heard or noted. No eye has seen them, O God, but You, who act for those who trust in You" (Isaiah 64:3). It is also written, "You shall return and see the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between him who has served the Lord him who has not served the Lord" (Malachi 3:18), and "The Lord alone did guide him" (Deuteronomy 32:12).
>
> If this is true for incantations that use the name of God, then it is even truer for conjuring demons and participating in sorcery, which do not help a person. In fact, one said an incantation so that no tree would hold his weight when they hung him. Why did not he say an incantation so that he would not die or so that they would not hang him, or so that

his enemies would fall? Because it does not work, as it is written, "And none shall save her except Me." (Hosea 2:12)

And some would say incantations... but God knew that through these incantations they wanted to cancel heavenly decrees and overthrow their enemies. So God would switch around the appointed angels within the incantation.[102]

The rest of the passage is convoluted and poorly written, but its message is that using God's name does provide a certain amount of force and power. But in the end, one cannot say that it is God's name that causes God to do his will; a person who uses incantations with God's name cannot compel God, because He is the Creator who creates everything.

**Conclusions**

Overall, Sefer Hasidim prohibits magical activities, even if it is for a good purpose. Even the prophets, who understood magic and never would have abused it, avoided using magic. Like the Bible, Sefer Hasidim often compares magic to idolatry, and constantly charges the "other nations" or Christians with participating in these activities.

Yet, Sefer Hasidim is very inconsistent in its disapproval of magic. From the statement "it is easy to cast spells" alone, one could conclude that Sefer Hasidim had a more positive attitude about magic. Stories describe sorcerers and people who take advantage of the magical properties of amulets, optical illusions, omens, and incantations, and who also practice divination. Even

though we are constantly told that we should not depend on these things or use them and that we should only depend on and pray to God, the large quantity of material in Sefer Hasidim on the subject of magic belies those prohibitions. Especially in the case of incantations, where at one moment Judah forbids their use, and at the next moment he explains in detail how to use them.

One passage in Sefer Hasidim might alleviate our difficulty with these inconsistencies. It explains that in the world-to-come, we will finally be taught all the secrets and mysteries (i.e. magic), and therefore be allowed to use them.

> All the secrets that are initiated in the heavens, they keep in reserve for the hereafter for those who are completely righteous. Concerning all the puzzles and problems,[103] Elijah and the Messiah will clarify them, as it is written, "He shall not break even a bruised reed, or snuff out even a dim wick. He shall bring forth the true way. He shall not grow dim nor be discouraged, and the coastlands shall await his teachings" (Isaiah 42:3-4). The Messiah will have to sniff out the secrets and mysteries, and he will solve them.
>
> The people who try to solve mysteries in this world are like infants who have just been recently weaned. It is the Messiah who will sniff out knowledge, and who will be able to smell the difference between one who is righteous and one who is wicked.[104]

---

[102] Parma 1452.
[103] The Hebrew word written here is *tiku* – an acrostic for "*Tishbi yitarets kushiot u'ba'ayot*," which means that only Elijah could solve such puzzles and problems.
[104] Parma 1056.

The above passage explains that those "who try to solve mysteries in this world," i.e. diviners and magicians, have limits; their skills are minor in comparison to the intuitive knowledge of the Messiah. For the Messiah, the knowledge of the mysteries of the world is as natural and instinctual as smelling and breathing.

## Postscript

The only modern English translation of Sefer Hasidim basically ignores the passages on magic and demonology except for a short chapter on angels and demons.[1] Even in that chapter, sections of each passage are omitted, and the stories are not given a full treatment. Magic is probably ignored by this translation because Sefer Hasidim is considered to be a book about ethics, and not a book of stories about demons and magicians.

In the twelfth and thirteen centuries in Europe, the setting in which Sefer Hasidim was written, magic and demonology were an important part of the cultural landscape. People believed in the existence of demons and the efficacy of magic, and they viewed these beliefs as part of their religion and day-to-day lives. Although we cannot discount as another source the ancient tradition of magic in Judaism, this belief system seems to be the reason that such a large amount of material on demons and magic in Sefer Hasidim.

Just as the ethical stories of Sefer Hasidim serve as a guide for life, so, too, do the stories about demons and magic. Although some aspects of theology can be inferred from a small portion of this material, the main function of these stories seems to be the giving of practical advice for dealing with everyday life in the Middle Ages. Along with warnings related to the dangers of demons, witches, sorcerers, and magic in general, Sefer Hasidim also tries (with great inconsistency) to establish which activities in these areas are forbidden and which are permitted. Also, by making evil spirits and occult practices convenient

scapegoats for tragedies such as death, infertility, and plagues, these stories help to explain the great suffering that a Jew experienced every day in medieval Germany.

While the demonological and magical stories in Sefer Hasidim teach us much about the lives of German Jews in the Middle Ages, they also have relevance for today's society. As magic and mysticism come back in popularity, Sefer Hasidim allows us to acknowledge their role in the history of Judaism, not just in the Middle Ages, but even back in Biblical times. And, although most modern Jews do not believe in spirits and the occult, they can, at the very least, be entertained by reading the fascinating and bizarre stories found in Sefer Hasidim.

[1] Avraham Yaakov Finkel, *Sefer Chasidim: The Book of the Pious by Rabbi Yehuda HeChasid*. (New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc. 1997)

## Bibliography

### PRIMARY SOURCES

Judah the Pious. *Sefer Hasidim*, Parma edition. Ed. Jehuda Wistinetzki. Frankfurt: M.A. Wahrmann Verlag, 1924.

_____. *Sefer Hasidim*, Bologna edition. Ed. Reuben Margoliot. Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1957.

### SECONDARY SOURCES

Alexander, Tamar. "Theme and Genre: Relationships between Man and Demon in Jewish Folklore." *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review* 14 (1992): 56-61.

Baer, Yitzhak. "The Socioreligious Orientation of 'Sefer Hasidim'." *Binah* 2. Ed. Joseph Dan (1989): 57-95.

Bader, Gershom. *The Jewish Spiritual Heroes*, vol. 1. New York: Pardes Publishing House, 1940.

Baskin, Judith R. "From Separation to Displacement: The Problem of Women in *Sefer Hasidim*." Association for Jewish Studies Review 19:1 (1994): 1-19.

Caesarius of Heisterbach. *The Dialogue on Miracles*. Translated by H. von E. Scott and C.C. Swinton Bland. New York, 1929.

Cronbach, A. "Social Thinking in the Sefer Hasidim." *Hebrew Union College Annual* 22 (1949): 1-53.

Dan, Joseph. "Ashkenazi Hasidism, 1941-1991: Was there Really a Hasidic Movement in Medieval Germany?" *Gershom Scholem's Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism 50 Years After: Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference on the History of Jewish Mysticism*. Ed. Peter Shäfer and Joseph Dan. Tübingen: Mohr, 1993: 87-102.

_____. "Ashkenazi Hasidism and the Maimonidean Controversy." *Maimonidean Studies* 3. Ed. Arthur Hyman. New York: The Michael Scharf Publication Trust of Yeshiva University Press, 1992-93: 29-47.

_____. "Five Versions of the Story of the Jerusalemite." *Proceedings of the American Academy of Jewish Research* 35 (1967): 99-111.

_____. *Hasidut Ashkenaz Betoldot Hamachshevah Hayehudit* – 4 vols. The Open University, 1990.

_____. "Magic." *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 11. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House Ltd., 1972: 703-716.

_____. "Mysticism and Ethics in the Ashkenazi Hasidic Movement." *Jewish Mysticism and Jewish Ethics*. Seattle, 1986: 45-75.

_____. "Rabbi Judah the Pious and Caesarius of Heisterbach: Common Motifs in their Stories." *Studies in Aggadah and Folk-Literature* 22. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1971:18-27.

_____. "*Sippurim Demonologiyyim*." *Hasippur Ha'ivri Biyemei-Habeinayim*. Jerusalem: Keter, 1974: 170-176.

_____. "*Sippurim Demonologiyyim Mikitvei R. Yehuda HeHasid*." *Tarbitz* 30 (1961): 273-289.

_____. *Torat Hasod shel Hasidei Ashkenaz*. Jerusalem: the Bialik Institute, 1968.

Davies, Witton T. *Magic, Divination, and Demonology among the Hebrews and their Neighbors*. New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1969.

"Divination." *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 6. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House Ltd. 1972: 111-120.

Finkel, Avraham Yaakov. *Sefer Chasidim: The Book of the Pious by Rabbi Yehuda HeChasid*. New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1997.

Flint, Valerie. *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe*. New Jersey: University of Princeton Press, 1991.

Goldin, Judah. "The Magic of Magic and Superstition." *Aspects of Religious Propaganda in Judaism and Early Christianity*. Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976:115-147.

Harris, Monford. "The Concept of Love in Sepher Hassidim." *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 50 (1959): 12-34.

_____. "Dreams in Sepher Hassidim." *Proceedings of the American Academy of Jewish Research* 31 (1963): 51-80.

Marcus, Ivan. "The Devotional Ideals of Ashkenazic Pietism." *Jewish Spirituality from the Bible through the Middle Ages*. Ed. A. Green. New York, 1986. 356-365.

_____. "The Historical Meaning of *Hasidei Ashkenaz*: Fact, Fiction, or Cultural Self-Image?" *Gershom Scholem's Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism 50 Years After: Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference on the History of Jewish Mysticism*. Ed. Peter Shäfer and Joseph Dan. Tübingen: Mohr, 1993. 103-114.

_____. "History, Story and Collective Memory: Narrativity in Early Ashkenazi Culture." *Prooftexts* 10 (1990): 366-383.

_____. *Piety and Society: The Jewish Pietists of Medieval Germany*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981.

_____. "Recessions and Structure of Sefer Hasidim." *Proceedings of the American Academy of Research* 45 (1965): 161-176.

Kieckhefer, Richard. *Magic in the Middle Ages*. University of Cambridge, 1989.

Patai, Raphael. *On Jewish Folklore*. Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 1983.

Perry-Marx, Jeffrey. *Demonology in Rabbinic Literature*. Rabbinical thesis. Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion: New York, 1983.

Posner, Raphael. "Amulet." *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 2. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House Ltd., 1972. 906-915.

Scholem, Gershom. "Demons, Demonology." *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 5. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1972. 1521-1533.

_____. *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. New York: Shocken Books, 1974.

Seidel, Jonathan. "Charming Criminals: Classification of Magic in the Babylonian Talmud." *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*. Ed. Marvin Meyer and Paul Mirecki. Leiden: E.J. Brill 1995.

Shatzmiller, Joseph. "Doctors and Medical Practice in Germany around the Year 1200: The Evidence of Sefer Hasidim." *Journal of Jewish Studies* 33 (1982): 583-593.

Soloveitchik, Haym. "Three Themes in Sefer Hasidim." *Association of Jewish Studies Review 1*. (1976): 311-357.

Swartz, Michael D. "Magical Piety in Ancient and Medieval Judaism." *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*. Ed. Marvin Meyer and Paul Mirecki. Leiden: E.J. Brill 1995. 167-183.

Ta-Shema, I. "*Be'erah shel Miryam – Gilgulai Minhag Tsarfat Bise'udah Shlishit shel Shabbat*," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 4 (1985): 151-270.

_____. "*She'elot u'Tsuvot min Hashamayim Hakovets V'Iosafotav*," *Tarbits* 5 (1988): 51-66.

Trachtenberg, Joshua. *Jewish Magic and Superstition: a Study in Folk Religion*. New York: Atheneum, 1939.

Wigoder, Geoffrey, ed. *The Encyclopedia of Judaism*. Jerusalem: The Jerusalem Publishing House Ltd., 1989.

Yassif, Eli. "*Hasippur Haexemplari BeSefer Hasidim*." *Tarbits* 57 (1987-88): 217-255.

THE KLAU LIBRARY
HEBREW UNION COLLEGE
JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION
BROOKDALE CENTER
ONE WEST FOURTH STREET
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10012