

Guarding Our Doorposts:

How Jews Relate to God, Demons, and Amulets
in the Biblical, Rabbinic, and Modern Eras

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Digest

Amulets can tell us much about how the Jewish world perceived, and still perceives, demons and the presence of evil forces in the world. The sources referenced in this thesis are those that could shed some light on the dark and mysterious side of Jewish belief. Through an examination of biblical sources, rabbinic texts, and modern responses to demonology and the use of amulets, we can better understand the balance within our own theologies and practices.

My goal, then, is for us to consider our personal practices and beliefs based on a comparison between the ideas we currently hold to be true and those new ideas that emerge from the research presented in this thesis. Many stories and practices from the ancient and rabbinic periods remain an instrumental part of certain Jewish belief and ritual systems. As such, there are a great number of objects and symbols within Jewish culture that are left unexplained or inaccessible to contemporary Jews. Indeed, language barriers and a lack of accessibility to resources may be great inhibitors to the Jews who want to know more. Even those who have some exposure to these materials may also find some benefit in the collected resources within. Thus it is my hope that, through this work, I am able to facilitate an introduction that speaks to both the curious layperson and the engaged academic.

The scope and depth of Jewish demonology and the use of amulets is much too large to be covered definitively in a rabbinic thesis. Therefore, I have chosen to discuss selected elements that are among the most well-known and prevalent in Jewish tradition. Chapter One begins with a story about the demon Lilith, to set the stage for exploring all of the various components that comprise a modern perspective on ancient themes. The

remainder of the chapter serves to explain the theories, rites, stories, and human reaction regarding Lilith throughout the biblical, rabbinic, and modern eras.

The second chapter begins with an introduction to stories from the Bible containing features that are difficult to explain because of indeterminacies or because they are borrowed from a cultural repertoire of the period in which the text was composed. While the latter notion was touched on in the first chapter, it becomes much more explicit in the second. The majority of the chapter seeks to explain the legends and reaction to Lilith via rabbinic sources, archaeological artifacts, and amulets. The chapter concludes with an investigation into the modern reaction to Lilith and how certain practices have continued to be utilized for hundreds of years.

Chapter Three focuses on different types of modern amulets that can be found in many Jewish communities. The chapter begins by calling attention to common symbols and objects within the Jewish tradition that may not be regarded as anything more than a part of Jewish tradition. The latter half of the chapter focuses on the theological impact and import of amulets and Jewish demonology in the modern era.

Many of the questions raised by my investigation are left unanswered because the end result is either subject to interpretation or indeterminate. However, the point of this investigation is to frame ideas, evidence, and scholarly opinion in a way that allows readers to consider their surroundings, practices, and beliefs in new ways. The focus on Lilith in the first two chapters is due both to her undeniable familiarity among Jews and the universal fear of dangers surrounding childbirth despite our medical advances.

The third chapter then shifts the conversation to a more general discussion of amulets so that the reader might begin to consider the breadth of theosophical and

theological conundrums we are faced with every day in the Jewish world. Thus, we can start to contemplate what it means to wear a Star of David, hang a *khamisa* from our rearview mirrors, affix a *mezuzah* to our doorposts, etc.; and, in the process, we may learn a little more about the evolution of Jewish practice and maybe a great deal more about ourselves.

**Note: All renderings of texts from the rabbinic period are from the Soncino Babylonian Talmud Translation unless otherwise noted.*

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I promise to never argue about Kosher for Passover butter again.

I love you.

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Chapter 1: The Demon, Lilith: Then and Now

*Lilith: Leader of the Night Demons*¹

When God created living things, he decided to create them in twos. One would be male, and one would be female, for each type of animal. So it was with the fish, the birds, the snakes, the sheep, and the cattle. And, so it was with man.

God created Adam from dust, then God created the first woman from the same dust. And God named the first woman Lilith, because God created her near the night time. And Lilith comes from *lilah*, meaning “night.”

“How beautiful she is,” said one of the angels. “She is much too beautiful to be like Adam,” said another. “She should be more like an angel.” And so the angels decided to give Lilith wings with which to fly so she would be more like them.

But Adam had no such wings. Since Adam had been created before Lilith, he felt that he was older and wiser, and he also felt that Lilith should always obey him. “Lilith,” he would say, “bring me some fruit and water. I am hungry and thirsty now.” Lilith would look at him with blazing eyes; “I do not feel like fetching fruit or water for you.”

Adam would stand over her as she lay on the ground. “Lilith, I was created first.

Therefore you must obey me. Do as I say!” But Lilith refused. Later, Adam called Lilith again. “We must have children, Lilith. You were created to bear my children, and to bring more people into the world.”

“Your children!” repeated Lilith.

“Yes, you must bear my children!” Adam said again.

Lilith stared at Adam. She didn’t say another word. Then, she stood up, turned, and quickly walked away. Adam followed her. He kept repeating his words to Lilith. “Lilith, you must obey me!” he yelled.

She turned to face Adam. “For the last time, Adam, I say that I do not have to do as you tell me. I will not bear your children! I would hate your children. I will never bring more people into the world!” Lilith then spread her wings and flew off into the skies.

Adam could not follow her so he cried out to God. “She has left me, Lord. I have no companion. What shall I do? Who shall keep me company? Bring her back, Lord!”

God heard Adam’s cries and felt sorry for him. He sent three angels to bring Lilith back to Adam. The angels raced across the skies after Lilith and caught her in the air over the Red Sea. And the first angel said, “Lilith, you must return to Adam, he is very lonely.”

“I don’t care,” said Lilith. “I don’t care if he is lonely!”

The second angel said, “But Lilith, you are supposed to bear Man’s children. You are supposed to increase and multiply!”

“I will not,” said Lilith.

“If you do not,” said the third angel, “then we will take away your wings, and you will be bound to the earth where Adam will find you anyhow.”

Lilith paused for a moment and then said, “Don’t you know? I wasn’t created to bear Man’s children, but to kill them; that is why I was created.”

¹ Robert Rubenstein, *Lilith: Leader of the Night Demons* (Eugene: Robert Rubenstein Productions, 1984) track 1.

The angels looked horrified. “Surely,” one of them said, “this cannot be so. God has created so many wondrous things in the world, how can he create someone to kill Man’s children?”

“But that is what God did!” said Lilith. But then Lilith used guile. She spoke to the angels in a sweet voice and said, “Don’t you know? If the names of you three angels appear where there is a mother giving birth to a child, I will not harm mother or child.”

The angels loosened their grip on Lilith, filled with pride that they would protect both mother and child, and Lilith slipped from their grasp and fled.

Now, Lilith could not stay in the skies or the heavens because the angels would soon find her and bring her back to Adam. Nor could she go to the earth for there was Adam to also take her.

So Lilith dove deep, deep into the underworld where she wed the Demon King. And from there she went forth at night, leading the Night Demons into the world. Many people told of Lilith and the Night Demons, and how they were tormented by her and by the nightmare they had. For that is what a nightmare is: *mara* means “monster.” And when people had nightmares, they were being attacked by Lilith and her Night Monsters. And many women died in childbirth or shortly thereafter. This too was blamed on Lilith and her Night Demons.

But Lilith was true to her word. If she came to a room where there was a coin inscribed with the names of the three angels, she did not harm mother or child.

And so the people would inscribe the names of the three angels on coins and hang them around the room where a mother was to give birth, or had just given birth, to protect both mother and child from Lilith and her Night Demons.

And on the back of these coins they wrote the words: “Lilith be gone!” And, over the years, these words changed to “Lilith bye,” and finally to the word, “lullaby.”

For what is a lullaby, but a song that is sung by the parent to the child, so the child will sleep in peace and not be tormented by Lilith and her Night Demons.

People in the ancient world imagined a multitude of demons and each one was assigned to any number of tasks: There were demons that were sent to kill specific people,² demons that caused plagues, river demons waiting for the traveler who dared to journey to its banks at night,³ etc. In biblical literature, references to demons are often vague. It is believed that, over the course of time in the diaspora, the blending of Israelite ideas with those in Babylon began to shift many interpretations of the biblical text.

² See Exodus 12:23 in which the destroyer (Heb. *Mash 'chit*) is commissioned by YHWH to exterminate the first born of the Egyptians. K. van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter Willem van der Horst. *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*. (2nd extensively rev. ed.) (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 241. Also note that there is no mention of the ‘*malach hamavet*’ as a replacement title for this entity until the rabbinic period.

³ See Gen 32:22-32 “Fords are threatened by demons” as described in the account of Jacob and the River Demon. *Ibid.*, 708.

Especially during the rabbinic period,⁴ many new ideas emerged not only from the Israelite tradition but also amongst the Jews living in foreign lands, among new traditions and various gods.

Borrowing ideas and cultural norms from the peoples living in the vicinity was nothing new for the Jewish people. However, with increased literacy rates and a shifting trend towards record keeping, some of these new and shifting ideas were preserved from Babylon. In excursions of the Bible, “old meanings and associations with the terms *daimon* and *daimonion* survived alongside the post exilic revaluation.”⁵ Thus, in the Bible there appears to be two major types of demons: those that are independent of the control of a deity and those who are charged by the deity to carry out his will. Among these demons, Lilith is one of the few who survives in multiple forms through many cultures, and makes a transition from subservient consort to independent entity.

Hebrew literature recognizes Lilith (Heb. *Lilit*) as an independent demon and seductress who serves many different evil roles. Lilith fills a void for the inexplicable as she is blamed for infant mortality, the death of a mother in childbirth, killing single men, and causing men to become impure via the nocturnal emissions she causes by sleeping with them. Thus, there is a need to understand how the Israelites and, later, the Jews, coped with infant mortality and defilement; though my primary focus will be on the textual evidence for Lilith in the biblical, rabbinic and modern eras.

⁴ Generally between the second and sixth centuries CE: the formative period of rabbinic literature and culture.

⁵ The original meaning of “demon” was a reference to any of the lower order of gods who could bestow blessings or curses. In more ancient contexts, the *daimones* (Greek) were deployed by the gods to carry out their will. It was only with the post-exilic rise of “dualism” that we have the notion of the purely evil and independently acting demon. Ibid., 236

In the Hebrew Bible there is very little textual evidence to support any claim that Lilith was regarded as a demonic force among the Israelites. The name Lilith only appears in Isaiah 34:14 and the reference is obscure and indeterminate.

Isaiah 34:14 וּפְגָשׁוּ צִיִּים אֶת־אֲיִים וְשָׁעִיר עַל־רֵעֵהוּ יִקְרָא אֶדְ-שֵׁם הַרְגִיעָה לִילִית וּמִצָּאָה לָהּ מְנוּחָה⁶

Isaiah 34:14 Wild beasts shall meet hyenas, Goat-demons shall call to each other; there too Lilith will relax and find herself a resting place⁷.

What we are able to glean from this reference, in its context, is that Lilith was associated with certain orders of demons and other unexplainable phenomena. The text also indicates that Lilith had been constantly on the move but, finally, found a resting place. The biblical description of Lilith, though meager, provides little evidence but may suggest that this demon is the amalgamation of other demonic functions found within the cultural repertoire of the period⁸.

A composite character, Lilith seems to have developed from earlier examples of similar demons found in Sumerian and Akkadian texts. The earliest example of a supernatural force that resembles the Israelite version of Lilith comes from Sumerian texts in which we have the word “lil,” meaning “spirit.”⁹

“The Mesopotamian evidence for this demon reaches back to the 3rd millennium BCE as we can see from the Sumerian epic ‘Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld’. Here we find Inanna (later Ishtar) who plants a tree later hoping to cut from its wood a throne and a bed for herself. But as the tree grows, a snake makes its nest at its roots, Anzu settled in the top and in the trunk the demon **ki-sikil-lil-la** makes her lair.

⁶ Isaiah 34:14 from *BibleWorks 9*, BibleWorks, LLC

⁷ My own translation.

⁸ Cultural repertoire includes the available pool of literature at the time in which a piece is composed

⁹ Filip Vukosavovic, *Angels and Demons: Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem* (Jerusalem: Keterpress Enterprises, 2010), 89. Also meaning wind. In Hebrew, the word *ruach* carries the same connotation.

Gilgamesh has to slay the snake. Anzu and the demon flee so that he can cut down the tree and give the timber to Inanna.”¹⁰

In Akkadian texts, “the male demon, Lilu” is distinguished “from his consort and female counterpart, Lilith, and from an even more dangerous female ghost, the Ardat Lili, the ‘maiden of Lilu’¹¹.” The Ardat Lili was known as a spirit who died young and without ever knowing a lover or bearing children. As a result, Ardat Lili would seek to have intercourse with sleeping men as a means of expressing her grief and frustration. All three ancient vestiges of Lilith are part of the order of wind entities as their root *lil’* indicates. “From the term *lil’* we can see that these demons are related to stormy winds. In Akkadian texts *lilu*, *lilitu* and *ardat lili* often occur together as three closely related demons whose dominion is the stormy winds. Thus, *lilu* can also be seen as the southwest wind; *lilitu* can flee from a house through the window like the wind or people imagine that she is able to fly like a bird.”¹²

Another Mesopotamian demon worth mentioning is Lamashtu, who “was known to be most lethal to women in childbirth and especially to their newborn infants, whom she strangled.”¹³ Like her counterpart Lilith, Lamashtu was known as a demon that produced “no milk but only poison when she gives her breast as a deceitful wet-nurse to the baby”¹⁴. This example will be discussed in greater detail when I speak about the Lilith demon of the rabbinic period.

¹⁰ Hutter, Toorn, Becking, Horst, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (2nd extensively rev. ed.), 520.

¹¹ Filip Vukosavovic, *Angels and Demons*: Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem, 89.

¹² Hutter, Toorn, Becking, Horst, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (2nd extensively rev. ed.), 520.

¹³ Vukosavovic, *Angels and Demons*: Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem, 89.

¹⁴ Hutter, Toorn, Becking, Horst, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (2nd extensively rev. ed.), 520.

In ancient figurines from the Neo-Babylonian and Neo-Assyrian periods, there are depictions of a “naked female who (wears) a horned cap and is often winged.”¹⁵ Though many scholars have agreed that this is a depiction of *Ishtar*,¹⁶ some believe that it may be “the demoness *Lilitu*.”¹⁷ Ishtar was also known as a figure “who stands at the window looking for a man in order to seduce him, love him, and kill him.”¹⁸ The figurines and reliefs depicting these images were likely created to be used in rituals to curse others or to stave off the demoness.

The reference to Lilith in biblical Hebrew literature vaguely likens her appearance and manner to that of a vulture. It is only much later, in rabbinic literature, that Lilith is associated with the other qualities of her Mesopotamian predecessors – murdering infants and mothers and sexually assaulting sleeping men and women. The name, Lilith, finds its Hebrew root in the word *lilah*, meaning night, but “it is certainly to be considered a loan word from Akkadian (*lilitu*), which is ultimately derived from the Sumerian (*lil*).”¹⁹ Thus, we can say with a great degree of certainty that Lilith is a demon that was inherited by the Israelite/Jewish tradition.

“Since the Middle Babylonian period (1500-1000 BCE) Lilith and Lamashtu have been assimilated to each other. This also led to the spreading of Lilith from the Mesopotamian to the Syrian area.”²⁰ The legends surrounding Lilith and her various

¹⁵ Jeremy A. Black, Anthony Green, and Tessa Rickards. *Gods, Demons, and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Illustrated Dictionary* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 144.

¹⁶ “The major Mesopotamian goddess of love, war, and the planet Venus is known primarily by the Sumerian name Inanna and the Akkadian name Ishtar.” Abusch and Toorn, Becking, Horst, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (2nd extensively rev. ed.), 452.

¹⁷ Jeremy A. Black, Anthony Green, and Tessa Rickards. *Gods, Demons, and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Illustrated Dictionary*, 144.

¹⁸ Hutter, Toorn, Becking, Horst, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (2nd extensively rev. ed.), 520.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., pg. 520-521

permutations were widespread and are further evidenced by protective amulets. These texts are found in multiple languages, cultures, and media; they will be discussed in the following chapter on amulets specifically crafted to protect newborn children and women in childbirth. The Hebrew amulets are all from the Common Era and are crafted in a manner that presents a Lilith who has taken on many of the qualities found in similar demons from other cultures. This pattern fits the trend of Aramaic texts, like the Babylonian Talmud, in which Lilith reappears as a demon that has taken on the characteristics of other supernatural beings that preceded her.

In the Babylonian Talmud, there are only a few instances in which Lilith is mentioned; however, each of these reveals more about how she has evolved in Jewish culture since the biblical period. At *b. Niddah* 24b, we are presented with a scene that helps us to better understand how the Rabbis and the Jewish communities were interpreting issues surrounding childbirth. This instance deals with the question of aborting a deformed fetus. The text remains indeterminate as to whether or not abortions of deformed children – those with wings – were performed without a need to save the mother’s life (*pikuach nefesh*):

“Rab Judah citing Samuel ruled: If an abortion had the likeness of Lilith its mother is unclean by reason of the birth, for it is a child, but it has wings. So it was also taught: R. Jose stated: It once happened at Simoni that a woman aborted the likeness of Lilith, and when the case came up for a decision before the Sages they ruled that it was a child but that it also had wings.”²¹

Lilith was also said to have created demonic children as a result of her sexual conquests of men who were alone in their homes. A result of such a union is mentioned at *b. Baba Batra* 73a: “Rabbah said: I saw how Hormin the son of Lilith was running on the parapet of the wall of Mahuza, and a rider, galloping below on horseback could not

²¹ *b. Niddah* 24b, The Soncino Talmud translation.

overtake him.” This “assault” by Lilith, which was the excuse given during the rabbinic period for nocturnal emissions, was believed to lead to Lilith’s pregnancy and the subsequent birth of demons. “Since the sexual act was a form of marriage, Lilith could thereby be divorced on grounds of promiscuity and unfaithfulness...The divorce writ against Lilith follows Babylonian prototype rituals against the Ardat Lili-demon, who was kept at bay by performing a ritual marriage between the demoness and her male counterpart demon, using figurines dressed in wedding clothes.”²²

Other descriptors of Lilith are found at *b. Eruvin* 100b which provides a depiction of Lilith that serves as evidence for the Lilith-Lamashtu connection. As previously mentioned, Mesopotamian figurines of Lamashtu depict a female demon with beastly attributes and long hair. “In a Baraitha it was taught: She grows long hair like Lilith, sits when making water like a beast, and serves as a bolster for her husband²³.” Thus it would seem that the image of a long-haired, beast-like, female demon was well known to the redactors of the Talmud. Additionally, in *b. Shabbat* 151b we are provided with a connection between Lilith and Ishtar. Legends about Ishtar include those that warned of single men who would meet their demise at the hands of a female demon who would peer through an open window, strike down her male victims, and escape like the wind. “R. Hanina said: One may not sleep in a house alone, and whoever sleeps in a house alone is seized by Lilith²⁴.”

These talmudic examples provide a collage of qualities that have come to be associated with Lilith after hundreds of years of transmission, acculturation, and assimilation. Thus, the Lilith of the rabbinic period later became known as both a class of

²² Geller and Filip Vukosavovic, *Angels and Demons: Jewish magic throughout the ages*, 88.

²³ *b. Eruvin* 100b, The Soncino Babylonian Talmud translation.

²⁴ *b. Shabbat* 151b, The Soncino Babylonian Talmud translation.

demons and as the demoness with long hair, wings, and a penchant for sexually assaulting men and women.

Throughout the Medieval Period, *midrashim* about Lilith grew more numerous and gained popularity within the kabbalistic Jewish tradition. According to Scholem, this started with *midrashim* concerning “the legend that Adam, having parted from his wife after it had been ordained that they should die, begat demons from spirits that had attached themselves to him. It is said that ‘he was encountered by a Lilith named Piznai who, taken by his beauty, lay with him and bore male and female demons.’”²⁵ Among these aggadic works, the Alphabet of Ben Sira became especially popular and influential.

The Midrash of Ben Sira, written during the geonic period²⁶, is one that completely transforms all of the known earlier vestiges of Lilith. In this late Midrash, “which sets out to explain the already widespread custom of writing amulets against Lilith...she is identified with the ‘first Eve,’ who was created from the earth at the same time as Adam, and who, unwilling to forgo her equality, disputed with him the manner of their intercourse.”²⁷ It is important to note that this text’s version of the Lilith story became so influential among Jews and Christians that it is still upheld in some circles as the definitive truth about Lilith.

In our modern context, many have paid tribute to the legend of Lilith through publications, religious practices, movements, music, etc. The name, Lilith, has now taken on a positive connotation in feminist circles and has been used to justify civil liberties. I have researched, for the purpose of this study, modern examples of how this new image

²⁵ Gershom Scholem. "Lilith." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007) Vol. 13.

²⁶ Ibid. ca. 600-1000 CE

²⁷ Ibid.

of Lilith has been employed, and one of the most influential examples bears the name of the demoness herself.

Lilith magazine was established in 1976 by a movement now known as “second-wave” feminism. The movement “peaked in the 1960s and ’70s and touched on every area of women’s experience—including family, sexuality, and work²⁸.” *Lilith* was seen by this movement as the strong, rebellious female who demands equality. The Midrash of Ben Sira had completely shifted the paradigm of what *Lilith* previously represented. The figure chosen to represent “second-wave” feminism could not be the biblical figures of Deborah or Yael because they were already upheld as strong female figures. The stories of their achievements depict them as noble, strong, and courageous but the movement needed a more rebellious figure. The movement needed a symbol that would echo the plight of the modern woman. The following, which goes into further detail about the election of *Lilith* as a symbol for “second-wave feminism”, is a selection from a piece on the *Lilith* magazine website called “The *Lilith* Question”:

“The most ancient Biblical account of the Creation relates that God created the first man and the first woman at the same time. Jewish legends tell us that this woman was *Lilith*. *Lilith*, we learn, felt herself to be Adam’s equal (“We are both from the earth”) but Adam refused to accept her equality. *Lilith*, determined to retain her independence and dignity, and choosing loneliness over subservience, flew away from Adam and the Garden of Eden. Jewish tradition characterized *Lilith* after her escape from Adam as a demon and embellished this reputation with legend upon legend of her vengeful activities to harm children and women who give birth in rooms without industrial-strength amulets to ward her off...*Lilith* is a powerful female. She radiates strength, assertiveness; she refuses to cooperate in her own victimization. By acknowledging *Lilith*’s revolt and even in telling of her vengeful activities, myth-makers also acknowledge *Lilith*’s power... With so few materials about women, particularly of this nature, it would be unthinkable for us to let *Lilith* be forgotten simply because of the male biases grafted onto the story of her revolt...What is particularly intriguing about the *Lilith* myth is that most of the legends about her developed in Exile, either after the

²⁸ Elinor Burkett. "The second wave of feminism." *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. Encyclopedia Britannica, <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/724633/feminism/216008/The-second-wave-of-feminism>>.

Babylonian Exile (586 B.C.E.) and certainly after the Roman deportations of Jews into captivity (70 C.E.)... we must ask ourselves: which Lilith is closer to the spirit of the first account in Genesis, the account that tells us how God first created human beings — the female who accepts the idea of equality and fights for it, or the female who has lost sight of the original struggle and persists in seeking revenge? There is no doubt that the Lilith who claimed her equal birthright with Adam is closer in spirit to both the original Biblical account and to Jewish women of today²⁹.”

There are circles of Jews and non-Jews who believe that Lilith is unquestionably the first woman created in Genesis. This case of mistaken identity is all based on The Alphabet of Ben Sira which is, at best, tenuously related to every other known medieval and more ancient tradition about Lilith. The author and co-editor of Lilith Magazine have taken an ancient female demon and reframed her into an empowered warrior for the cause of civil rights and social equality. Though this is certainly a noble cause, I believe that a different approach would have made a far stronger case for feminism than taking a stance on the basis of a very late and loosely grounded story from the geonic period. That is, instead of presenting Lilith as a product of the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*, the author could have demonstrated the evolution of female demons throughout history and how these figures eventually coalesced into the demon we know as Lilith. Thus, the intended audience for *Lilith* magazine would be supplied with a more anthropologically accurate notion of how Lilith came to exist and how the *Alphabet of Ben Sira* helped to repurposed Lilith into a figure that could become a rebellious feminist icon.

The accounts of Lilith and her various vestiges over hundreds of years speak of “a female demon who...moves about the world at night, visiting women in childbirth and endeavoring to strangle their newborn babes³⁰.” It can be argued that Lilith’s primary function, outside of her demonic duties, was to explain away troubling situations. Even

²⁹ Aviva Zuckoff. "The Lilith Question." *Lilith Magazine*. <<http://lilith.org/articles/the-lilith-question/>>.

³⁰ Gershom Scholem. "Lilith." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. 2nd ed. Vol. 13.

with today's modern technology, women still die in childbirth and infants die on the birthing table. While today, we are able to scientifically explain nocturnal emissions, these were inexplicable in the ancient world. It is expected that a "hateful woman" would become the figure representing so much discomfort, pain, and death as history has long been shaped, molded, and recorded by men. Thus, it makes perfect sense for the feminist movement to adopt and reframe the demon, Lilith. However, Lilith's utilization and implementation as a feminist icon would be greatly enhanced with a more accurate account of her origins. Despite the efforts to reframe her character, Lilith or evil forces associated with the mortality of a mother in childbirth or the death of an infant, will still be feared among some Jews as long as these losses continue to occur. Thus, we can expect that the legend of Lilith will continue to thrive and cause Jews to seek out various means of protection.

Chapter 2: Warding Off Evil

Despite current biblical exegesis and the modern reimagining of Lilith, many Jews still retain and display the protective charms and amulets of their ancestors. Additionally, many modern Jews have not rejected the idea that there are evils in the world that require our attention and suspicion. As has been the case for centuries, the Israelites and, later, the Jews, have long adopted practices of warding off evil through the use of amulets, bowls, spells, and other means.

A plethora of artifacts specifically constructed for protection have survived from the ancient Israelite, rabbinic, and modern eras. Among these amulets, those written and made for the purpose of protecting a newborn child and the mother in childbirth are among the more intricate and complex in their origins. As in most instances of cultural phenomena, there is strong evidence to suggest that the content of the protective artifacts used by the ancient Israelites demonstrates a blending of traditions found throughout the ancient Near East.

In the Bible, there are many examples in which protective charms or objects are utilized by major characters in a variety of circumstances: In Genesis 31:19-31, Rachel, and Leah bicker over whether or not to discard their *terafim*; in Deuteronomy, chapter 6:8, objects referred to as *totafot* are referenced in a now familiar passage from the Jewish liturgical tradition; in Exodus 4:24-26, 12:23 and Ezekiel 45:19, blood is used as a means of protection from YHWH. These are just a few examples among many others that speak to a visceral need for protection.

It is understandable that protection from harm would rank among the major concerns in the ancient world. At a time when there were no bright street lamps and

generally a lot more uncertainty about survival, one did not go out at night except out of absolute necessity. Travel was also a very dangerous and arduous undertaking as bandits could attack at any moment and there was no forensic science or security within earshot to prevent or apprehend would-be culprits. Thus, when one travelled, it was likely a common practice to bring along some charms for protection.

These charms took many forms but most were small enough to attach to clothing or transport in one's belongings. Genesis 31 mentions gods that were highly valued by Laban and Rachel:

¹⁹Meanwhile Laban had gone to shear his sheep, and Rachel stole her father's household idols. ²⁰Jacob kept Laban the Aramean in the dark, not telling him that he was fleeing, ²¹and fled with all that he had. Soon he was across the Euphrates and heading toward the hill country of Gilead. ²²On the third day, Laban was told that Jacob had fled. ²³So he took his kinsmen with him and pursued him a distance of seven days, catching up with him in the hill country of Gilead. ²⁴But God appeared to Laban the Aramean in a dream by night and said to him, "Beware of attempting anything with Jacob, good or bad." ²⁵Laban overtook Jacob. Jacob had pitched his tent on the Height, and Laban with his kinsmen encamped in the hill country of Gilead. ²⁶And Laban said to Jacob, "What did you mean by keeping me in the dark and carrying off my daughters like captives of the sword? ²⁷Why did you flee in secrecy and mislead me and not tell me? I would have sent you off with festive music, with timbrel and lyre. ²⁸You did not even let me kiss my sons and daughters good-by! It was a foolish thing for you to do. ²⁹I have it in my power to do you harm; but the God of your father said to me last night, 'Beware of attempting anything with Jacob, good or bad.' ³⁰Very well, you had to leave because you were longing for your father's house; but why did you steal my gods? ³¹Jacob answered Laban, saying, "I was afraid because I thought you would take your daughters from me by force. ³²But anyone with whom you find your gods shall not remain alive! In the presence of our kinsmen, point out what I have of yours and take it." Jacob, of course, did not know that Rachel had stolen them. ³³So Laban went into Jacob's tent and Leah's tent and the tents of the two maidservants; but he did not find them. Leaving Leah's tent, he entered Rachel's tent. ³⁴Rachel, meanwhile, had taken the idols and placed them in the camel cushion and sat on them; and Laban rummaged through the tent without finding them. ³⁵For she said to her father, "Let not my lord take it amiss that I cannot rise before you, for the period of women is upon me." Thus he searched, but could not find the household idols. ³¹

³¹ Gen 31:19-26 from *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures*, Jewish Publication Society.

The reference to these household idols, or *terafim* in the Hebrew, is vague because we are not provided with specific examples of what these “gods” look like. Sarna indicates that the word, *terafim*, is translated as “idols” by “ancient versions of the text such as the Aramaic Targums and the Greek Septuagint³².” The word, *terafim*, was likely not the name of the actual objects; but, rather it is a “contemptuous substitution word such as is frequently used in the Bible in connection with idolatry. Thus, pagan gods may be variously characterized as ‘*elilim*, “worthless things”; *boshet*, “shame”; *gillulim*, “pellets of dung”; *havalim*, “futilities”; and *shikkutsim*, “detestable things.”³³

Lending additional credence to this theory is the repetition of the word *terafim* alongside *gillulim*, and *shikkutsim* in a list of banned items.³⁴ Scholars cannot yet agree on what these figures may have looked like other than their small size and portability. Sarna suggests that the *terafim* may have been related to “Roman *penates* (“household gods”) who were thought to protect the food supply and assure the general well-being of the family.”³⁵ The biblical examples certainly indicate that *terafim* are cultic objects, and it is also a possibility that they were used for purposes of divination. Thus, as Sarna indicates, it could be that Rachel took the gods “to deprive her father of the ability to detect Jacob’s escape.”³⁶ Based on references to *terafim* external to Genesis,³⁷ it is plausible that divination would also fit the purpose of informing Jacob of an impending attack from Laban and thus allowing him to escape unharmed.

³² Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 216.

³³ *Ibid.*, 216

³⁴ See 2 Kings 23:24

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 216

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 216

³⁷ See Zechariah 10:2, Ezekiel 21:26, and 1 Samuel 15:23 which present *terafim* as instruments of divination. See also 1 Samuel 19:13 and 1 Samuel 19:16 in which *terafim* are described as a much larger singular object – the size of a man – in contrast to the smaller figurines from Laban’s house.

There were also other means of protection in the biblical period, ones that could produce a ward so powerful that it could fend off demons and deities alike. In a few instances throughout the biblical text, we are granted a glimpse into ancient rituals involving blood that have long been forgotten or eschewed by Jewish tradition as pagan practice. The apotropaic³⁸ blood rituals that have been preserved in a few sections of the Bible may have been pagan but also seems to have been part of Israelite practice. Among these passages are two examples that are of the utmost significance in this regard: the Israelite use of blood to ward off the tenth plague (HaMashchit) in Egypt and Tzipora's use of blood to prevent YHWH from killing Moses.

In regard to the Passover story, many will say that the tenth plague was the angel of death. In fact, the biblical text makes no mention of the angel of death; rather, it speaks to the joint effort of YHWH and an entity called the *Mashchit* who jointly carry out the death sentence. The *malach hamavet* (angel of death) title attributed to the *Mashchit* was not coined until the rabbinic period. The root of this word (*shin, chaf, tav*) is the same as those used for ritual slaughter. Thus, modern scholarship commonly translates *Mashchit* as “destroyer.”

Modern scholars are still divided as to how the *Mashchit* should be categorized because of the ambiguity of the following verse in Exodus:

Exodus 12:23 For when the LORD goes through to smite the Egyptians, He will see the blood on the lintel and the two doorposts, and the LORD will pass over the door and not let the Destroyer enter and smite your home.³⁹

וְעָבַר יְהוָה לְנֹגֵף אֶת־מִצְרַיִם וְרָאָה אֶת־הַדָּם עַל־הַמַּשְׁקֹוף וְעַל שְׁתֵּי הַמְּזוּזֹת וּפָסַח יְהוָה
עַל־הַפֶּתַח וְלֹא יִתֵּן הַמַּשְׁחִית לְבָא אֶל־בֵּיתְכֶם לְנֹגֵף:

³⁸ Something that has the power to ward off evil.

³⁹ Exodus 12:23 from *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures*, Jewish Publication Society.

It is evident in this passage that YHWH is present at the scene. However, it is also clear that some other entity, called the *Mashchit*, is there to slay those in its path. Additionally, it seems that the blood of a sacrifice was used as a means of signaling God to protect Israelite homes from the “destroyer.” What is unclear is whether or not this creature is an independent entity, an agent of YHWH, an angel, or a demon. “The relationship between Yahweh and the Destroyer in this passage is hardly extraordinary in the context of the ancient Near East. One is to picture Yahweh, accompanied by a retinue of assistants, going against his enemies in judgment (Miller 1973). Both Yahweh and his entourage can be depicted in the same conflict, and if Yahweh decides to restrain his weapons, he must also give orders to desist to the super-natural warriors that accompany him.”⁴⁰

Though the Israelite literature remains ambiguous as to whether or not *Mashchit* functions independently of YHWH, some scholars are more definitive in their opinions. Sarna likens the “Destroyer” to a personified plague that is “not an independent being”⁴¹ who can “only operate within the limits fixed by God.”⁴² This view is more consistent with examples from ancient Near Eastern accounts, but is still indeterminate.

Another example of an apotropaic blood rite in which it seems that YHWH himself is the aggressor, can be found in an earlier section of Exodus.

Exodus 4:24 At a night encampment on the way, the LORD encountered him and sought to kill him.²⁵ So Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched his legs with it, saying, "You are truly a bridegroom of blood to me!"²⁶ And when He let him alone, she added, "A bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision"⁴³.

⁴⁰ Meier, Toorn, Becking, Horst, *Dictionary of deities and demons in the Bible* 2nd extensively rev. ed., 241.

⁴¹ Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, 60.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 60.

⁴³ Exodus 4:24-26 from *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures*, Jewish Publication Society.

Exodus 4:24 וַיְהִי בַדֶּרֶךְ בַּמֶּלֶן וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ יְהוָה וַיִּבְקֹשׁ הֵמִיתוֹ: ²⁵ וַתִּקַּח צִפּוֹרָה צֶרַח וַתִּכְרֹת אֶת־עֶרְלַת בְּנָהּ וַתִּזְנַע לְרַגְלָיו וַתֹּאמֶר כִּי חֲתָן־דָּמִים אַתָּה לִּי: ²⁶ וַיֵּרָךְ מִמֶּנּוּ אֲזַ אָמְרָה חֲתָן דָּמִים לְמוֹלֶת: פ

It is not entirely clear who is being sought by YHWH; though verses prior to these are addressed solely to Moses, he may not be the target of YHWH's wrath. This unusual episode has left scholars baffled as to its purpose and, as a result, there are numerous speculative insights. The main scholarly divide is between those who think the verse is directed at Moses and those who believe that Gershom is the one YHWH pursued. Those who believe that Moses is the character in question argue that the sequence of events and dialogue clearly point to him; whereas other scholars use the same argument to state that it is his son, Gershom.

It is odd that YHWH would attempt to kill Moses immediately following a conversation in which Moses is told of his holy mission. Therefore, some scholars believe that YHWH sought to kill Gershom because he had not yet been circumcised. Some argue that Moses, who has hidden by his mother Yocheved for thirty days after his birth, was likely already circumcised. Circumcision, according to Genesis 17:14 and Leviticus 12:3, must occur on the eighth day so there would be no reason for YHWH to pursue Moses. However, this theory infers that the Israelites knew of YHWH's commandments before Moses received them on Mt. Sinai and that the entire Exodus saga is anything more than a fiction or a metaphor for Israelite experiences during the Babylonian exile.

Many scholars agree that this three-verse episode is likely an abridged version of a more complete account that has been lost.⁴⁴ Thus, another major issue that has been questioned is whether or not YHWH was really the one doing the seeking. “In the Hebrew text of Exodus 4:24-25 where it is Yahweh who tries to kill Moses, the Palestinian Targums⁴⁵ preserve traditions to the effect that it is the ‘Destroying Angel’ or the ‘Angel of Death.’”⁴⁶ The *Mashchit* and the *Malach HaMavet* are, therefore, placed in the position of YHWH by the rabbis in an attempt to “soften the anthropomorphism.”⁴⁷ While the rabbinic emendation certainly addresses the issue of YHWH acting much like an ancient Near Eastern demon, it cannot deny the apotropaic blood rite that occurs during the scene.

When Tzipora circumcises Gershom with the flint knife, she takes the blood-soaked foreskin and touches Moses’ – or Gershom’s – legs⁴⁸ and recites an incantation. The tradition and meaning behind the title, “bridegroom of blood,” is lost but there are some parallels that can be drawn concerning the rite itself. “In southern Mesopotamia, especially at Isin and Girsu, a Sumerian deity **da.mu** has been worshipped up to the Old Babylonian period. **da.mu** is mainly a healing deity with the capacity to drive away demons (Black and Green 1992).”⁴⁹ In its verbal form the Hebrew word for blood, *dam*, takes on a connotation of protection and watchfulness. As we have no evidence to

⁴⁴ Jeffrey H. Tigay. *The Jewish Study Bible: Jewish Publication Society Tanakh translation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 113.

⁴⁵ “The Targum... is not merely a translation, but also an explanation and often expansion of the Bible by means of Haggadah (anecdote)” Strack, Stemberger. *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 236

⁴⁶ Meier, Toorn, Becking, Horst, *Dictionary of deities and demons in the Bible* (2nd extensively rev. ed.), 244.

⁴⁷ Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, 25 – Here as well, Sarna claims that “Israelite monotheism admits of no independent forces other than the one God.”

⁴⁸ Legs, here, is likely a euphemism for his genitals. “Cf. Judg 3:24; 1Sam 24:3; 2 Kings 18:27 = Isa. 36:12; 7:20; cf. Deut 28:5; Ezek. 16:25; Ruth 3:4,7.” Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, 242.

⁴⁹ Toorn, Becking, Horst, *Dictionary of deities and demons in the Bible* 2nd extensively rev. ed., 175.

support such a connection, there cannot be a definitive link between the Sumerian deity and the “bridegroom of blood” incantation. However, the presence of a deity in the ancient Near East whose name was constructed from the same root as that of the word for blood in Hebrew – and whose protective aims were similar to that of ancient Israelite apotropaic rites – cannot be overlooked.

In both biblical examples, blood was not only used for the sake of protection, but was also a means of control. When the Israelites smeared sheep’s blood on the doorposts of their houses, we read that the blood will cause YHWH to pass over the doorway of the Israelite homes and prevent the “Destroyer” from entering. In the account concerning YHWH’s pursuit of Moses – or Gershom – the blood prevents YHWH from killing him. It seems from these examples that the cutting and subsequent spilling of blood in the sacral acts of sacrifice and circumcision were accepted apotropaic rites in the biblical period. Thus, after the Temple was destroyed along with the Temple sacrifices, the Israelites would have to find alternative means of protection from evil.

In the ancient Near East, when a temple or shrine to a god was destroyed, it could mean the loss of the god’s power or the total destruction of the god. After the Israelite Temple was destroyed in 586 BCE, those living in exile needed to reimagine their deity as one who could exist anywhere. Thus, when the second Temple was destroyed and the sacrificial cult ended, the Jews needed to find a replacement for sacral blood as a means of protection. This led to the heightened importance of many different types of amulets throughout the rabbinic period, middle ages, and the modern era.

Among the more prevalent and popular amulets were those that protected the newborn and the mother after childbirth. As previously stated, Lilith was the primary

figure in Jewish culture associated with infant mortality. Therefore, the vast majority of amulets for the protection of mother and child are used to fend off Lilith. Many of the earlier examples were metal lamellae,⁵⁰ incantation bowls, pendants, or gems. In the medieval period, and into the modern period, paper amulets and khamsas became far more prevalent.

The earlier examples that have been found thus far are predominantly from the Byzantine period.⁵¹ These Rabbinic Period examples are especially interesting as some of the text we have seem to parallel the archaeological evidence that has been unearthed. In the portion of Tosefta Shabbat in which the “ways of the Amorites” are enumerated, there is a specific paragraph that relates a practice that was likely occurring among the Jews at the time.

תוספתא מסכת שבת (ליברמן) פרק ו

הלכה ד

הפוקק את החלון בסירה והקושר ברזל בכרעי המטה של חיה והעורך לפניה שלחן הרי זה מדרכי האמורי אבל פוקקין את החלון בגלופקריין או בעמיר ונותנין לפניה ספל של מים וקושרין לה תרנגולת שתהא לה לצית ולא מדרכי האמרי :

Translation: Tosefta Tractate Shabbat Chapter 6

Paragraph 4

The one who stops up the window with a thorn bush and the one who ties iron to the leg of the bed of recovery and the one who sets a table before her (the birthing mother); this is among the ways of the Amorites. But when they stop up a window with bed sheets or with an ear of grain, and they place before her a bowl of water, and they tie

⁵⁰ Latin for “thin plate” <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/lamella>

⁵¹ Approx. 324-638 CE. Vukosavovic, Angels and Demons: Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem, 94

a hen for her so that it will keep her company, these are not among the ways of the Amorites.⁵²

Although the redactors of the *Tosefta* would have us believe that the prohibited fertility practices were those of the Amorites, archaeological evidence tells a very different story. As such, one can assume that these rabbinic polemics against Amorite practices were included and preserved because Jews were also taking part in these actions. Thus, “tying iron to the leg of the bed of recovery” may be a reference to ancient metal amulets like the one pictured below that is dated between the fourth and seventh centuries CE.⁵³



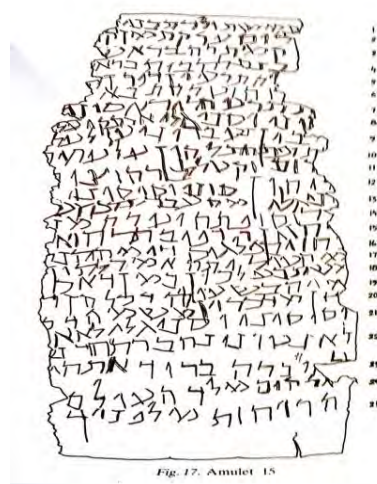
⁵² Tosefta: tractate Shabbat chapter 6, paragraph 4 (My own translation)

⁵³ Vukosavovic, *Angels and Demons: Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem*, 76.

This lamella, covered from top to bottom in a form of Aramaic script, “contains a version of a popular folk tale about Smamit (a lizard or spider) whose children are killed by the demon Sideros. To her rescue come Suni, Susuni, and Snigli...who catch Sideros. The result is that Sideros swears he will not kill children (or other family members) of the amulet owner, whenever the names of Suni, Susuni, and Snigli are mentioned⁵⁴.” During the medieval period, Jewish magical lore would adopt a corrupted version of this story wherein three angels named Sanoi, Sansanoi, and Samangalaf would avenge the death of a woman’s child by chasing the fleeing Lilith. Once again, the story would end with the same agreement.

Several examples of lamellae have been unearthed and another example, very similar to the piece above, has been translated and examined. Known only as “Amulet 15,”⁵⁵ its provenance is not known but it certainly reflects the style and story of other known pieces. Also of note is that the story on the amulet has “many parallels in medieval Christian literature, in Greek, Coptic, Ethiopian, Armenian, Rumanian, Slavonic and late Syriac, as well as in Arabic and Hebrew.”⁵⁶

Fig. 17, Amulet 15⁵⁷



⁵⁴ Ibid., 76.

⁵⁵ Joseph Naveh, Shaul Shaked: *Amulets and Magic Bowls* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1998) 104. “*Israel Museum, No. 69.3.146 Plate 13; figure 17*”

⁵⁶ Ibid., 111-112.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 109.

Amulet 15

Provenance unknown
Israel Museum, No. 69.3.146
Plate 13; Figure 17

Amulet 15

Translation

Amulet 15 Aramaic and Translation⁵⁸

1	[סממית ילִידִית בְּנִין ... קְטֻלָּהוּן]	1	Smamit gave birth to sons. [They were killed by]
2	[סַדְרוֹס עֲרָקַת מִן קְדוּמוּי]	2	[Side]ros. She fled from h[im].
3	[קִמַּת (ל)ה בְּרָא(ש)]	3	...She stood in...
4	[בְּנִת לֵה בֵּית בְּרָא]	4	...She built a house for herself in...
5	[לְהַ תְּרַעִין דְּפִרוֹ(ל)ה]	5	[She provided it with] gates of iron...
6	[הַ וְטֻרְדַּת בָּא]	6	...and she locked...
7	[יִתְרַעַה לִידָא סוּנִי וְסוּר]	7	...the gate...swny and
8	[וְסוּנִי וְסוּנִיגְלִי אֲרַחֲקוּ עַל]	8	swny and snygly knocked on...
9	[בִּין נַעֲבֵר וְנִיעַל לַע(ל)]	9	... We shall pass and get in...
10	[קִמַּת וּפְתַחַת לְהוֹן עַל עַמַּה(ה)וֹן]	10	[She stood] up and opened (the door) for them. There came in with [them.]
11	[סַדְרוֹס וְקֻטַּל לְבָרָה וְצוּחַ(ח)]	11	[Side]ros and killed her son. She cried
12	[עַ(ל)יְהוֹן סוּנִי וְסוּסוּנִי]	12	[at] swny and swswny
13	[וְסוּנִיגְלִי מַה עֲבַד (הַכִּין) שְׁ(מַע)]	13	and snygly: Why did (he) do (so)? [Side]ros
14	[סַדְרוֹס וּפְתַחַת וְעִרְקַת (מַג)וֹן]	14	[heard], opened (the door) and fled from [them.]
15	[מִן חִזִּין רִדְפוּ בְּחֵרָה וְאַ(ש)]	15	[Having] seen (him), they chased him and found
16	[כַּחֲוִי בְּפִלְגוֹס דִּימָה (וְהַג)]	16	him in pelagos of the sea ...
17	[לְמַקְטוּל יִתְהָ אֲמַר לְהוֹן (אֲנָה)]	17	to kill him. He said to them: [I]
18	[(מ)שְׁחַבַּע לְכוֹן בְּמִן דַּאֲכִיל]	18	swear to you in (the name) of He "who has measured
19	[(מ)יָהּ בְּשַׁעוּלָה דְּכָל הָן דְּ]	19	the water in the hollow of his hand" (Is. 40:12), that wherever
20	[אֲמַרְיִן {ש} שְׁמָה דְּסוּנִי]	20	[people] mention the name of swny
21	[וְסוּסוּנִי וְסוּנִיגְלִי לֹא אֲקֻטֹּל]	21	and swswny and snygly, I shall not [kill]
22	[לֹאֲנִטוּנִינָה בְּרַחַה דְּ(ג)]	22	Antonina, daughter of...
23	[(וּב)רָה בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יִי]	23	... and her son. Blessed art Thou y[yyy]
24	[(אֵל) קִים מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם יִגְעֹר]	24	the living God, King of the world. [May He exorcise]
25	[הָרוּחֹת מִלְּפָנֶיךָ]	25	the spirits from your presence.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 104-107.

In each account of this tale, it is only arbitrary things like numbers and character names that change. In most instances the character names have very similar phonetic patterns and the story remains the same: a woman and her children are set upon by a demon that is pursued by a man (or men/angels) until it is cornered and a deal is brokered between them. Thus, the demon lives another day but can no longer kill or injure anyone in possession of an amulet with the names of the pursuers upon it.

This motif has long been the source of many retellings, across multiple cultures and textual traditions. The Coptic account of this story is slightly different, but the imagery associated with its telling relates an important shift in the demonology of the period.

He returned to Antioch where he found a sister of his who had given birth to a hideous-looking son. Before him she had given birth to a daughter whom she had killed and whose blood she had sucked. Satan dwelled in her, and she assumed by witchcraft the shapes of birds and snakes. Whenever a child was born to the inhabitants of the town she would descend on it, kill it, suck its blood. When the holy man saw this, he took a lance in his hand and killed his sister and her son, for he was Satan's son, as well as her husband and his father for they were sorcerers.⁵⁹

Rider impaling "Satan"⁶⁰



Fig. 18. 'Abd-Iso and "the accursed Satan", who wears the "likeness of a hateful woman of dark appearance". From a Syriac book of magic (Gollancz 1912)

⁵⁹ Ibid., 117. Cf. Basset 1922, pp. 336 ff., particularly p. 337. Quoted in Winkler 1931, pp. 129 f., where further references are given for the Ethiopian version based on the Coptic.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 117. This scene is repeated on amulets that have been found across many different cultures. On Jewish amulets, the rider is often identified as King Solomon.

Some examples that have survived, and continue to be utilized in Jewish magical lore, place the prophet Elijah in the role of the hero and Lilith in the role of the hateful woman:

Elijah, walking on the road, met Lilith and her companions and said to her: ‘You and your companions are impure, where are you going?’ She said: ‘I am going to the house of X daughter of Y, the woman in childbirth, to kill her and take away her son, to drink his blood, to suck the marrow of his bones and to eat his flesh.’ Elijah put a ban on Lilith, but she asked him to release her and in exchange she promised not to harm that woman and her son wherever the names of Lilith which are enumerated are mentioned.⁶¹

Among the amulets produced in the Byzantine Period, incantation bowls seem to have been a very popular style. Small and typically made of clay, the bowls often combined writing and images of a bound demon that may have been plaguing a household. It is a clever design, since the demon in the middle is not bound by chains or rope, but by the incantation itself. It is through the power of words that demons would be excised or banished from a residence.

The bowls were inscribed with ink and the languages attested on many bowls range from Jewish Babylonian Aramaic⁶² to Mandaic,⁶³ Syriac,⁶⁴ and even Pahlavi.⁶⁵ The bowls were always addressed to some sort of supernatural power that would be subsequently supplicated for protection or leniency. “The beings addressed in this way are angels, evil demons, monsters of various kinds, and sometimes God or a lesser divine being.”⁶⁶ Scholars also believe that the location of the bowl was of some importance.

“What was most often aimed at in the placing of the bowls, as of amulets in general, were

⁶¹ Ibid., 119.

⁶² Vukosavovic, *Angels and Demons: Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem*, 61.

⁶³ Ibid., 61. “This is a variety of the Aramaic language, spoken by a small religious community on the border between modern Iraq and Iran.”

⁶⁴ Ibid., 61. “Another variety of Aramaic...it was the language of Christians...pagans...(and) Manicheans, an important world-wide religion during the fourth to the eighth centuries CE.”

⁶⁵ Ibid., 61. “Pahlavi is a script which represents the Middle Persian language, an earlier phase of Classical Persian.”

⁶⁶ Ibid., 61.

sites considered to be pivotal contact points between the regular everyday world and the world beyond, which is also shared by the dead.”⁶⁷ Thus, it was critical that bowl be positioned correctly for the spell to take its proper effect.



(Left) Incantation bowl in Judeo-Aramaic
Mesopotamia 5th-8th centuries⁶⁸



(Right) Incantation bowl in Judeo-Aramaic
Mesopotamia 5th-8th centuries⁶⁹

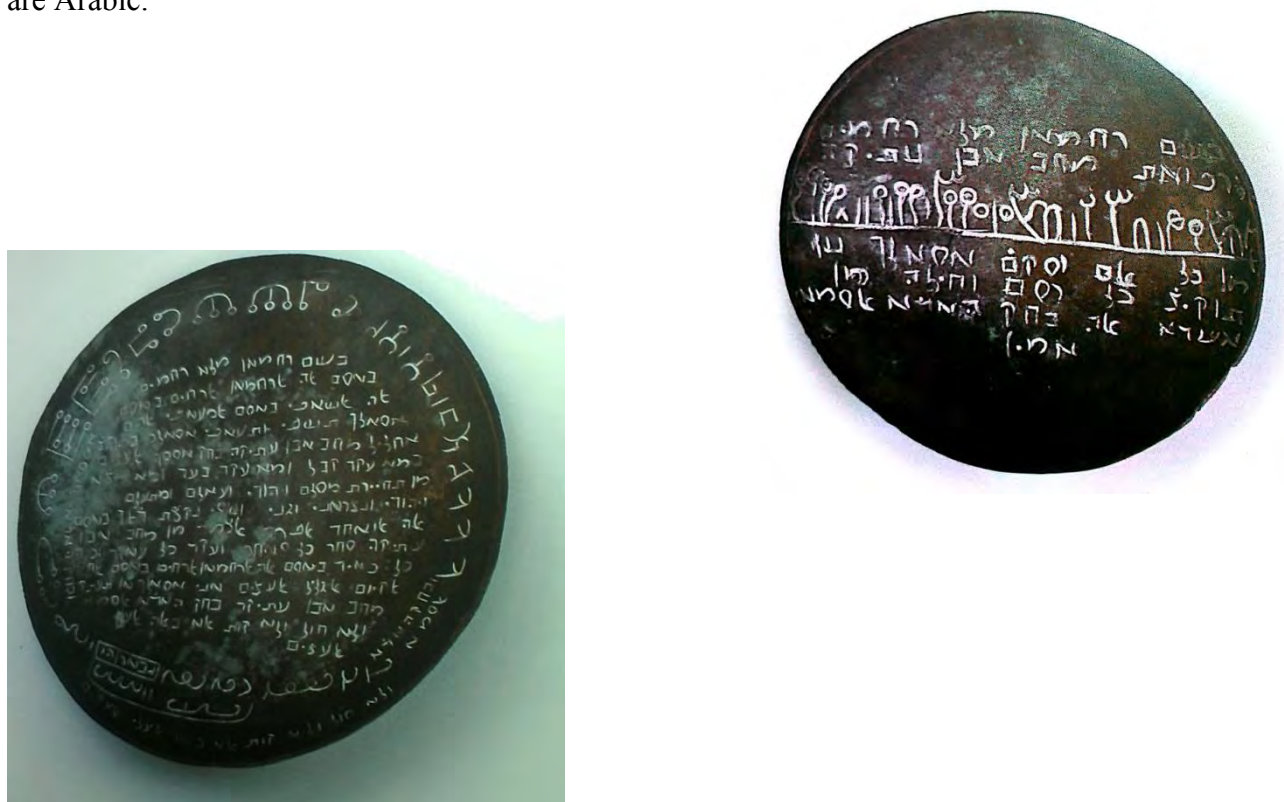
Lest we think that these amulets are antiquated and obsolete, there are examples of incantation bowls that date to the 20th century. Typically used for all sorts of ailments, bowls were also used as a means of supplicating for healing and fertility. In two late

⁶⁷ Ibid., 61.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 66.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 66.

examples⁷⁰, one man pleads for an end to his impotence while another commissioned a bowl on which a spell is written that can cure any pain or illness. Both examples come from Syria and, though they are inscribed with Hebrew letters, the words on the bowls are Arabic.



Along with incantation bowls and lamellae, pendants for personal protection were also very popular. Among these, pendants of protection from Lilith depicting a rider spearing the female demon were especially popular and several examples have survived. In the Byzantine period, Lilith was widely known among Jews as a demon who could kill men, women, and children at will. Much like the *mezzuzot*, *khamzas*, and Stars of David Jews wear today, these pendants could have been carried around, worn as jewelry, or kept in the home.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 67.



(Above) 132-638 CE
Holy Rider spearing demon,
with angel in front of horse. Israel?⁷¹



(Above) 5th-7th centuries CE
Holy Rider spearing female demon.
Eastern Mediterranean.⁷²

(Right) 3rd Century CE
Gem depicting Solomon as
Holy Rider spearing demon. Kfar Yasif, Israel.⁷³



⁷¹ Ibid., 97.

⁷² Ibid., 97.

⁷³ Ibid., 89.

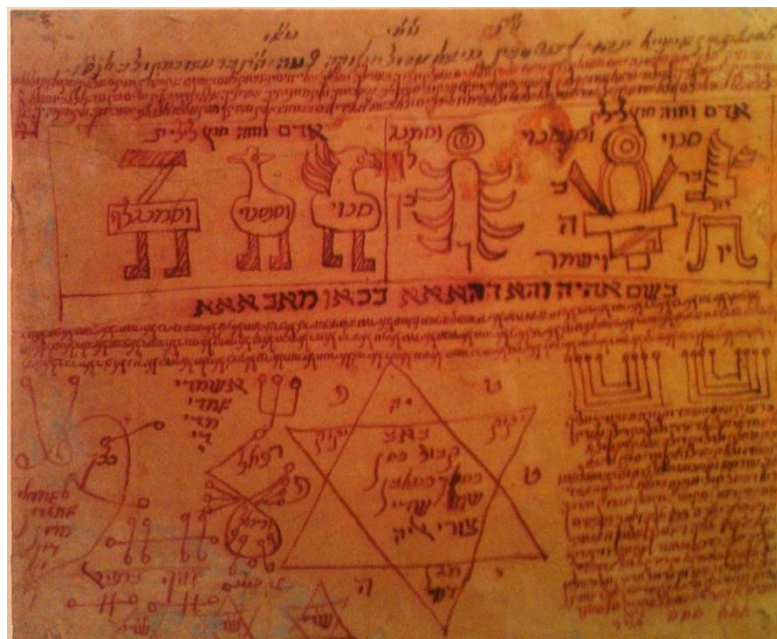
After the medieval period, and with the invention of the printing press and expanded commercialism, paper and metal came to be commonly used for the making of amulets. Once printing and regular access to paper became available, there was no limit to the creativity and detail in these amulets. The range of intricacy spanned from amulets with crude writing and drawings to beautiful works of art surrounded by printed spells and stories. How these stories were arranged on the paper or modern pendants also speaks to the tradition of bind the demon with words. In the examples pictured below, the name of the Lilith is always surrounded by the words of the document. In some, the shape of the bowl is the prominent feature of the amulet as the demon is trapped at its core.

Amulet depicting an angel in the form of a bird and two swords against Lilith. Israel or Kurdistan, ca. 1900⁷⁴



⁷⁴ Ibid., 84.

Amulet depicting the protective angels Sanoi, Sansanoi and Samangalaf Algeria(?), ca. 1900⁷⁵



Birth amulet depicting Adam and Eve. Earliest known printed Hebrew amulet. Amsterdam, Holland, ca. 1700⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Ibid., 83.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 80.

The modern metal pendants for protection against Lilith reflect many of the ideas found in paper amulets and incantation bowls serving the same purpose. Amulets for protection from Lilith were not always commissioned for specific people who are named in the amulet. Sometimes, general amulets against Lilith for the new mother, a newborn child, or a pregnant woman were commercially produced.

Birth amulet in shape of sword against Lilith,
Inscribed with protective angels' names
Sanoi, Sansanoi and Samangalaf.
Kurdistan, Iraq, ca.1900⁷⁷



Others, like the one pictured below, served the purpose of capturing and preventing Lilith from killing a newborn child. This is reminiscent of the incantation bowl scenes as the image of the demon, Lilith, is surrounded by magical texts – typically psalms – and the names of important figures as a means of sealing the spell. Many also featured the names of the three angels Sanoi, Sansanoi, and Samangalaf.

Pendant for the protection of
newborn baby showing Lilith bound.
Iran, ca. 1890⁷⁸



⁷⁷ Ibid., 91.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 90.

Though much has changed over the past 100 years, modern Jews all over the world are doing their part to maintain the traditions and superstitions of our Jewish ancestors. Indeed, the argument can be made that amulets and superstitions are still of great importance to the modern Jew. If anything, the varying types of amulets seem just as diverse as they were in the ancient Near East. Today, Jews can still purchase amulets against Lilith or for general protection. These may include: paper amulets, cloth amulets, necklaces, key chains, *Khamsas*, etc. The list goes on but the traditions remain the same.

Only one hundred years ago, at least one shawl was made for the protection of a pregnant woman with embroidered names of the protective angels Sanoi, Sansanoi and Samangalaf⁷⁹ (pictured here).

Shawl for protection of pregnant woman, with embroidered names of protective angels.
Turkey, ca. 1900



⁷⁹ Ibid., 90.

Today, one can even order t-shirts⁸⁰ with the same sorts of symbols, drawings, and messages as we have seen from ancient and modern examples of amulets. (pictured below)



In each generation of amulet production and utilization there comes the notion that for the amulet to work properly humans must possess the ability to influence a supernatural power. What are we saying about ourselves and our literature when we claim that our words can cause a divine power to stop another supernatural force on our behalves? This certainly reflects the ideas behind Jewish amulets and incantations, but it likely does not hold true for most Jews today. In fact, most Jews likely know very little about the long history and tradition of amulets within Judaism. There is a much greater chance that modern Jews' obsession⁸¹ with amulets is all for good luck.

⁸⁰ <http://www.spreadshirt.com/baby-amulet-lilith-blue-women-s-t-shirts-C3376A6909557#/detail/6909557T377A1PC24371879PA569>

<http://www.spreadshirt.com/baby-amulett-heart-gold-women-s-t-shirts-C3376A6909639#/detail/6909639T377A2PC24372013PA569>

⁸¹ explained further in chapter 3.

used to prevent the onset of demonic forces or that we can influence a divine power to keep us from harm.

I do not mean to imply that this is the case for all modern Jews. Indeed, many modern Jews utilize the *chai*, *mezuzah*, etc. as decorative items or as a means of identifying with the Jewish people. Either way, the continued existence of amulets seems to indicate that the ancient traditions of warding off evil still mean a great deal to those Jews who seek to prevent potentially unfortunate circumstances.

Chapter Three: The Modern Response to Magic, Demons, and Amulets

In the Jewish tradition there are a great number of charms and talismans to choose from for various means of protection. In the modern era, one might adorn oneself with a hexagram⁸⁴ or mezuzah necklace. More common still is the ubiquitous doorpost mezuzah and khamasa which can be found in nearly every Jewish home. All of these inanimate items and symbols are granted a high level of esteem and are often positioned in a prominent place. Indeed, many Jewish people continue to attribute power and authority to these objects as if they truly hold some sort of influence or power.

However presumptuous it may be to assume that mere humans can influence or control divine entities, it is a practice that has been ongoing for thousands of years. Some may say that it is not presumption but a sense of obligation that spawns these notions. They may point to Genesis 18:23 where Abraham pleads with God for the lives of the innocent in Sodom.

וַיֵּשׁ אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הֲאֵף תִּסְּפָה צְדִיק עִם־רָשָׁע

Then Abraham stepped forward and said, “Will you even sweep away the righteous with the wicked?”

The argument may also be made that Abraham’s relationship with God is one that we, as Jews, seek to emulate in our religious practice. While this model exists in Judaism via biblical examples of influence and interference, there are some major issues with such a comparison. There is also a great difference between a relationship with God, and influencing God to perform an action on our behalf.

⁸⁴ A “Star of David” necklace also known as a *Magen David*.

The least of these issues is claiming that the everyday Jew can have a relationship with God that is akin to any of the matriarchs, patriarchs, or prophets. Secondly, it is nothing short of hubris to assume that we could control a divine entity. The source of “power” within an amulet is not merely within the symbol itself, but the letters inscribed upon it. It is believed by some that these letters, in various combinations, will somehow communicate to a greater power that we deserve direct intervention and protection from the divine entity. A divine entity is labeled as such because it is beyond the ability and comprehension of humankind. Thus, if theophany or divine intervention occurs, it is at the discretion of the divine being and not at the will of the human supplicant.

Other arguments could be made that amulets are not meant to control supernatural entities; rather, they are meant to be supplicatory prayers for the divine being to whom they addresses. While the words are certainly supplicatory in nature, they also carry an imperative tone. If this were not the case, it would negate the need for constructing and paying for the amulet in the first place. Many amulets are created using expensive metals and jewels. Amulets made from parchment were commissioned at great expense before paper became readily accessible to the masses; even then, the rabbi or spiritual leader would require compensation. If Jews and non-Jews did not need amulets to feel more assured about having control of their lives, the prayer could be simply stated and we could forego the need for amulets.

Jews continue to wear, write, mount, paint, carve, and construct many types of amulets despite the distinct possibility that our theology does not match the intent of the object. That is, there are some Jews who own amulets, make amulets, wear amulets, etc. that do not believe according to the original intent of the amulet.

The two main categories of amulets are those that we wear and those that are affixed to a residence. All modern-day amulets can fall into both categories and many retain their ancient meaning and symbolism. The one amulet that is fairly modern in comparison to the others is the “Jewish Star.” It is a symbol that has come to be recognized as the defining mark of the Jew while its provenance is shrouded in mystery. The *Magen David*, which takes the shape of a hexagram, “has no direct connection with Judaism.”⁸⁵ A symbol widely used by several world cultures and religions, it was well known in Jewish circles but was never widely utilized as a symbol for Judaism. “They are to be found often in Jewish circles at an early time; they are to be found often in early post-talmudic incantations, and occur fairly often in medieval amulets and *mezuzot*. Names of God and Biblical texts were frequently inscribed within the triangles of the magical hexagram.”⁸⁶

The phrase, *Magen David*, translates to “Shield of David” which is a direct reference to King David and the God who protected him from harm time and again. The word, shield, is enough to clue anyone into the idea that the symbol is used for protection; what is less obvious is the application of deity names and biblical phrases to the symbol. Invoking the name of the ancient King David for protection has long been a practice among Jews. One source of evidence comes from the Cairo Geniza in “a book of magic recipes: formulae against forgetting, for love and for other purposes.”⁸⁷ Starting in column 2 verse 2:13 it says, “The seal of Solomon son of David. Suspend it from (2:14) your arm and you need not fear anything. (magic words and letters). (2:16) In the name of

⁸⁵ Joshua Trachtenberg. *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion* (New York: Behrman’s Jewish Book House, 1939), 141.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁸⁷ Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked. *Magic Spells and Formulae: Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity*, 220.

Sabaoth, Sabaoth, mmsk. Amen, Selah.”⁸⁸ This incredible discovery provides a precedent for hanging an object associated with David around one’s body and for including divine names. It is unclear how and when the hexagram became associated with King David but it is evident that the symbol and the tradition of invoking King David through an amulet were known. Though replete with meaning, the symbol is not enough to ward off evil; it needs to be accompanied by deity names and biblical verses to lend it the extra power it requires. As the symbol was and remains fairly ubiquitous it stands to reason that adding divine Jewish names and Jewish text was a means of internalizing, domesticating and Judaizing the symbol.

The hexagram, along with many divine names and biblical texts can be found on a plethora of other amulets. Among them, *mezuzot* are among the more popular destination areas for the symbols. Throughout Jewish and Israelite history, the mezuzah has existed in the forms of a necklace, a doorpost ornament, or the doorpost itself. The literal meaning of *mezuzah* is *doorpost*, as in Deuteronomy 6:9:

וּכְתַבְתֶּם עַל־מְזוֹזֹת בֵּיתְךָ וּבִשְׁעָרֶיךָ: ס

“Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates”

Of course, in the biblical text, we find the Israelites applying blood to the doorposts of their homes to ward off the *mashchit*.⁸⁹ It seems that in the several instances of apotropaic rites⁹⁰ throughout the Bible, including this one involving the blood of a sacrifice, the purpose is to appease the powers of evil. The animals, lambs in this case, were slaughtered as an offering to the evil force in exchange for the life of the firstborn

⁸⁸ Ibid., 220-221. T-S Arabic 44.44 *From a Book of Magic Recipes: formulae against forgetting, for love, and for other purposes* Plates 68-69.

⁸⁹ “The destroyer,” who would become known as the *malach hamavet* or Angel of Death in the rabbinic period.

⁹⁰ Any ritual one enacts to repel evil forces.

child in every Israelite household.⁹¹ Just as Jewish practice has evolved over many centuries, so too have many of our amulet traditions. The *mezuzah* no longer exclusively carries a connotation of “doorpost,” as much as it refers to items that are fixed to doorposts or worn around the neck.

The scroll contained within the amulets includes the aforementioned verse concerning the *mezuzot* and much more. In place of the traditional slaughtering of a lamb and painting the doorposts, our Jewish ancestors opted to reframe the ritual without compromising its power or effects. It is also important to recognize that blood was ritually manipulated by the priestly class which lent them great influence and power as they performed the daily ritual observances within Jewish culture.

Once the Temple cult was abandoned and Rabbinic Judaism emerged as an alternative to it, text became the tool for sacred ritual. “Descended from a primitive charm, affixed to the door-post to keep demons out of the house, the rabbinic leaders gave it literally a religious context in the shape of a strip of parchment inscribed with the Biblical verses, Deut. 6:4-19, 11:13-20,⁹² in the hope that it might develop into a constant reminder of the principle of monotheism – a wise attempt to re-interpret instead of an unavailing prohibition.”⁹³ Thus, the rabbis had in the *mezuzah* an article with incredible power that could only be produced, procured, and approved by them.

At first, rabbinic law was very stringent concerning what could be on the *mezuzah* – yet another means of control – and there was an insistence that any “addition or

⁹¹ Exodus 12:3, 12:7

⁹² According to the Leningrad Codex, the *mezuzah* scroll actually continues through verse 21. It is likely that a mistake was made or that the source used by Trachtenberg was simply numbered differently than those used today – nearly one hundred years later.

⁹³ Joshua Trachtenberg. *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion*, 146.

omission, even of a single letter, invalidated the whole.”⁹⁴ It was only later, in the geonic period⁹⁵ that changes began to appear on *mezuzot*. Ornamentations started with small-scale groupings of words on the back of the *mezuzah*. The use of the deity’s name was an especially powerful means of repelling evil, and thus, the words “*Kozu Bemoch Kozu*, a surrogate for the words *YHWH Eloheinu YHWH*”⁹⁶ were among the first words to appear on the outside of *mezuzot*.

The embellishments on the outside of mezzuzot became increasingly prevalent and were likely seen, at first, as extra precaution against demonic forces. By the Middle Ages, the false pretenses about the *mezuzah* not being an amulet were dropped entirely. There were some influential figures like Maimonides “who came out very strongly against the ‘folly of amulet writers’ (Guide for the Perplexed, 1:61; Mishneh Torah, Tefillin 5:4).”⁹⁷ The *mezuzah* was certainly regarded by the vast majority of Jews as a protective amulet during this time. Indeed, “Christian prelates”⁹⁸ in the Middle Ages were eager to place their castles, too, under the protection of the humble *mezuzah*.⁹⁹

Today the *mezuzah* can be found on the doorposts of nearly every Jewish home and it is regarded as the mark of a Jewish home. In some Jewish homes, *mezuzot* are not only found on the exterior entrances to the home but also on every interior entrance to a room. Additionally, a common practice in structures with *mezuzot* is to kiss one’s hand and touch the *mezuzah* as you enter and exit. Thus, it would seem that the *mezuzah* takes on a function much more aligned to that of an amulet than a mere residence marker.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 148

⁹⁵ Ibid., 148.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 148

⁹⁷ Raphael Posner, et al. "Amulet." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. 2nd ed. Vol. 2., 121.

⁹⁸ A high-ranking Christian clergyman

⁹⁹ Joshua Trachtenberg. *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion*, 147. See, also, Rashi, b. Yoma 11a.

Further evidence to this claim can be found in the beautiful ornamentation found on many modern *mezuzot*. Below is a modern example which shows how far Judaism has come since the initial prohibitions against any adornments on the *mezuzah* were enacted.

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In plain sight are images of the hexagram, a *shin* to represent *Shadai*¹⁰¹, an embracing couple, and other ornamentations. These symbols may be a representation of Jewish culture, a means of intertwining old Jewish culture with the new, or an amulet “wish-list” for God to take note of while guarding the home from evil. While it is likely that this ornate *mezuzah* would not be found on the doorposts of an Orthodox Jewish home, many efforts have been made by progressive Jews who seek to reframe old traditions into something more personally meaningful. The *mezuzot* found on the homes of Orthodox Jews would still likely include the *shin* on the front, more subtle ornamentation, and an inscription involving the Tetragrammaton on the back.

¹⁰⁰ http://shop.thejewishmuseum.org/jmuseum/assets/product_images/PAAAAAFDBLBNPEEK.jpg

¹⁰¹ One of many names for God

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Also falling into the category of amulet are *tefillin* which have long been associated with *mezuzot* by virtue of association and proximity in the *V'ahavtah*:

וְקָשַׁרְתֶּם לְאָזְנוֹתְכֶם עַל-יָדְכֶם וְהָיוּ לְטֹטְפוֹת בֵּין עֵינֵיכֶם: וְכָתַבְתֶּם עַל-מְזוֹזֹת בֵּיתְכֶם וּבִשְׁעָרֵיכֶם: ס

Deuteronomy 6:8 - “Bind them as a sign upon your hand and it will be as *totafof* between your eyes.

Deuteronomy 6:9 - “Write them on the doorposts (*mezuzot*) of your house and on your gates.

Tefillin, as they are known today, consist of decorated boxes attached to leather straps that contain four scrolls. Each of the four scrolls contains a scriptural passage in which the aforementioned *totafof* appear. One box is to be bound around the individual's head while the other is to be bound to the left hand. The decoration on the box, like the mezuzah, is typically a *shin* to represent the deity name *shaddai*. “The head phylactery is

¹⁰² Personal Collection.

imprinted twice with the Hebrew letter, *šin*: once on the side which is to the left of the wearer, and once on the opposite side. The *šin* on the right has four rather than the usual three prongs, as a reminder of the four scriptural passages contained in the phylacteries (*b. Menahot* 35a-b).”¹⁰³

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An excerpt from *b. Menahot* 35b helps to further contextualize the deeper meaning and tradition of *tefillin* according to the redactors of the Babylonian Talmud:

R. Judah the son of R. Samuel b. Shilath said in the name of Rab, The knot of the *tefillin* is a law given to Moses at Sinai. R. Nahman said, Their ornamentation should be on the outside. Once as R. Ashi was sitting before Mar Zutra the strap of his *tefillin* twisted round, whereupon Mar Zutra said to him, Is not the Master of the opinion that their ornamentation should be on the outside? He replied, [Yes, but] I did not notice it. It is written, And all the peoples of the earth shall see that the name of the Lord is called upon thee; and they shall be afraid of thee. It was taught: R. Eliezer the Great says, This refers to the *tefillah* of the head. And I will take away My hand, and thou shalt see My back. Said R. Hana b. Bizna in the name of R. Simeon the Pious, This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, showed Moses the knot of the *tefillin*. Rab Judah said, The knot

¹⁰³Ruth Satinover Fagen. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary O-Sh* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 368.

¹⁰⁴<http://www.mezuzadepot.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/001-3.JPG>

of the *tefillin* should be placed high up, so that Israel be high up and not low down. Moreover, it should face the front, so that Israel be in front and not behind.¹⁰⁵

It would seem that from this passage we can begin to understand that the Rabbis, try as they might, seemingly could not dispel the notion that *tefillin* are a vestige of *totafot* amulets used to ward off evil. Thus the name *Shaddai*, as represented by the letter *shin*, serves two purposes: a representation of the deity and a means of instilling fear in those around the wearer.

Most potent among the protective names was *Shaddai*, ‘almighty.’ It was inscribed on the outside of the *mezuzah*; the phylactery straps were so knotted that in combination with the letter *shin* on the head-box they spelled it out; it was uttered prior to departure on a journey; *Kohanim* (descendants of the priestly caste), while offering the Priestly Benediction, spelled it out with their fingers; one did the same to fend off an anticipated assault by a thug; even the dead were afforded its protection, for in some places the fingers of a corpse were bound in such a way as to form the three letters of this name.¹⁰⁶

While the effect is certainly muted in comparison to other amulets, the origins of *tefillin* speak to a period in which *totafot* were far more potent in their utilization as amulets.

According to Fagen, it seems that there was “a widespread custom among ANE religions of tattooing and branding various parts of the body with the name of a deity, particularly the forehead and hands as a prophylactic (protective) measure.”¹⁰⁷ Textual allusions to these rites can be found in a few places within the Torah text. One example is “the sign (‘*ô*t), on Cain’s forehead (Gen. 4:15) which placed him under divine protection.”¹⁰⁸ Another example can be found in Ezek. 9:4¹⁰⁹ when God commands a

¹⁰⁵ *The Soncino Talmud*. Prod. Institute for Computers in Jewish Life and Davka Corporation, b. *Menahot* 35b.

¹⁰⁶ Joshua Trachtenberg. *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion*, 158. See also: Joseph Omez, 466, p. 96; Rashi, Men. 35b; Sha’are Zion, 120b; Bruck, 63; Low, *Die Finger*, p. xiv.

¹⁰⁷ Ruth Satinover Fagen. *The Anchor Bible dictionary O-Sh*, 369.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 369.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 369.

scribe to mark the foreheads of those He wishes to protect. It is impossible to determine whether or not these verses are proof of a similar practice that predates *tefillin* and *totafot*. However, the very existence of such material within the Torah text lends credence to the notion that a more ancient tradition may have influenced the creation and implementation of these artifacts.

Among the amulets we use in the modern era, it is likely that the one with the longest history is the *khamisa*. This amulet, which takes the shape of a hand, is one that has been found to exist in almost every form: as necklace, wall-hanging, metal amulet, paper amulet, etc. It is nearly as versatile as it is ubiquitous, and it is recognizable to many world religions.

“The Jewish tradition had three different meanings for the visual representation of the hands: the image of the “wisdom of the hand”, the spread, outstretched hands of the priestly blessing of the Cohen (the priestly class), and the *khamisa*. In many cases, particularly from the 19th century onwards, these began to blend together so that it was not always possible to ascribe particular meaning to particular images. It is also likely that one image was intended to convey multiple messages.”¹¹⁰

Known depictions of the hand as a protective force have started appearing on cave walls as early as the Stone Age.¹¹¹ Though evidence suggests that the hand has been a popular symbol of protection for thousands of years, it is unclear how it came to be part of the Jewish tradition. Some scholars theorize that the “hand motif”¹¹² had already been

¹¹⁰ William L. Gross, and Germany Gm nd. *Living Khamisa: Die Hand zum l c usstellu g u d Katalog*. Schw b isch Gm nd (Museum im Prediger, 2004), 76.

¹¹¹ Filip Vukosavovic. *Angels and Demons: Jewish Magic Throughout the Ages*, 106.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 106.

spreading in the styles that we still use today in the pre-Islamic era.¹¹³ When it reached Islamic lands, “it was known by the popular Arabic expression of ‘*khamisa*’ meaning ‘five.’”¹¹⁴ As such, it is also known in Jewish circles as the *hamesh*, meaning “five” in Hebrew.

“Another name for the motif is “the hand of Fatima” after the beloved daughter of the Prophet Mohammed, Fatima e-Zahraa (early 7th c. CE), reflecting belief in the supernatural powers of Fatima’s hand. It was probably through Islamic influence that this motif reached medieval Spain, where all three monotheistic religions had cultural ties.”¹¹⁵ Thus, it was through the *Sephardim* that the *khamisa* gained popularity. The Ashkenazim, who were more influenced by Christian culture, did not maintain the *khamisa* tradition. In Israel, it was not until the 1970s and the election of Prime Minister Menachem Begin that the *Mizrahim*¹¹⁶ and *Sephardic* culture was allowed to blossom in Israel; it was only then that the *Sephardic* amulet tradition caught on among the *Ashkenazim*.¹¹⁷ Since that time, the symbol remains a fairly common household fixture in many Jewish homes.

The earliest known *khamisa* pendant (pictured below) does not bear much resemblance to what we know today. It is not an expensive pendant by any means and there are none of the additional ornamentations we might expect. In later amulets there were many additions to the hand symbol that added a depth of meaning far removed from those from the pre-Islamic era. These embellishments could range from the type of precious metal used to make the *khamisa*, to a multitude of symbols, incantations, and charms for added protection. “Depictions of animals on both Jewish and Muslim *khamisas*

¹¹³ Ibid., 106.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 106.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 106.

¹¹⁶ Jews of Asian descent

¹¹⁷ Filip Vukosavovic. *Angels and Demons: Jewish Magic Throughout the Ages*, 108.

are related to symbols of fertility or everlasting existence – such as the fish and the salamander.”¹¹⁸



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(Left)

Amulet showing earliest known depiction of hand (khamsa) on pendant

Lead

Eastern Mediterranean (?)

Late Roman-Byzantine period

132-638

Diameter: 1.6 cm

(Right)

Khamsa pendant inscribed with biblical verse “Josef is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a spring, its branches run over the wall” (Genesis 49:22) and Priestly blessing (Numbers 6:24-26)

Silver

Iran, 1925

120



¹¹⁸ Ibid., 106.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 106.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 109.

The popularity of the *khamisa* among Jews who were influenced by Islamic culture, led the rabbis of the Middle Ages to draw connections and parallels in ways that showed how the symbol could be rooted in Jewish tradition as well. Drawing on rabbinic sources, “the rabbis primarily noted the connection between the monogrammaton *Heh* (the abbreviated written form of God’s name) and the numerical value ‘five’ of the Hebrew letter *Heh*. Furthermore, they noted that the hand’s shape produced by the *cohanim* during the priestly blessing resembled the shape of the *khamisa*.”¹²¹

Other renderings and justifications for the symbol include that the number “five” also represents the five books of the Torah. Additionally, the *khamisa* is known in some Jewish communities as the hand of Miriam. It is unclear where this tradition originated but it certainly fits with the themes of Torah, Moses, priestly blessing, and Aaron. Though the *khamisa* has been used for many different types of protection, its use as a deflector of the “evil eye” has superseded them all.

On many *khamisas*, one will find a central jewel or the depiction of an eye in the palm of the hand. This is the symbol within the symbol that represents the deflection of the evil eye. It is not always so explicit in design, but that is certainly the intention. Indeed, the rabbis of the Middle Ages often referenced rabbinic texts to draw parallels between the *khamisa*, the evil eye, and Jewish tradition. One such text can be found in the Babylonian Talmud Berachot 20a¹²²:

Said the Rabbis to him: Is not the Master afraid of the evil eye? He replied: I come from the seed of Joseph, over whom the evil eye has no power, as it is written, Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine above the eye, and R. Abbahu said with regard to this, do not read *alei ayin*, but *olei ayin*. R. Judah son of R. Hanina derived it from this text: And let them multiply like fishes [*we-yidgu*] in the midst of the earth. Just as the

¹²¹ Ibid., 108.

¹²² Ibid., 108.

fishes [*dagim*] in the sea are covered by water and the evil eye has no power over them, so the evil eye has no power over the seed of Joseph.

It is from these verses that so many of the traditions associated with *khamasa* derive. Thematically, the “seed of Joseph” bears special meaning in the deflection of evil in that it is involved in so many aspects of Jewish practice and tradition. The priestly blessing, for instance, invokes the names of Ephraim and Manasseh (Joseph’s sons/seed), so that we might bless our sons by them. Even the formula for dispelling evil is one that only works if we recite aloud our link to the line of Joseph,¹²³ as in the following passage from *b. Berakhot* 55b:

The second commenced and said: If a man on going into a town is afraid of the Evil Eye, let him take the thumb of his right hand in his left hand and the thumb of his left hand in his right hand, and say: I, so-and-so, am of the seed of Joseph over which the evil eye has no power

This gesture is known among many Ashkenazi communities as a “feig” (pronounced *fyē-g*). It was “universally used to avert the evil eye by putting it to shame (this original meaning was probably unknown to sages who prescribed it) – and took on a Jewish character by the pronouncement of the aggadic sentence that the descendants of Joseph are immune from the evil eye (Ber. 20a).”¹²⁴ This practice is still used today and it is one that I still use to this day; although, the practice has since evolved a great deal from its rabbinic roots.

The version of the “feig” that has been passed down to me from my Grandmother is one in which my thumb is rooted between my index and middle fingers on both hands, and in a closed fist. In addition to the hand gesture, I was told to bite my tongue lest my

¹²³Dov Noy, “Evil Eye.” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. 2nd ed. Vol. 6., 585.

¹²⁴Dov Noy, “Evil Eye.” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. 2nd ed. Vol. 6., 585.

lips should speak evil about the one – or the object – casting evil upon me. Like an incredibly long game of “operator” or “whisper down the lane,” this tradition has been passed down to me over hundreds of years; and, while the idea of the gesture remains the same, the marks of its evolution and embellishment are apparent. Likewise, the evolutionary marks of style, and ornamentation concerning the *khamisa* and other amulets are also evident. Thus, an object that may seem traditional may only contain vestiges of the actual tradition to which it is attributed.

Conclusion

What are these objects to which we attribute so much this power? To this point, I have mentioned many different types of amulets but I have yet to provide a definition for the word. By now, you have begun to form your own opinions about what constitutes an amulet and what it means to have them, believe in them, carry them, and display them. Scholars have struggled to define this word because its definition is subject to the discretion of the one who possesses it.

The argument can be made to label many different things as amulets. I would contend that an amulet can be many things, but that it must be tangible, made up of relevant symbols or words, and its usage must be generally accepted by the group from which it derives. In regard to its usage, I would argue that its myriad purposes must be rooted in the tradition from which it derives and that these purposes evolve over time. That is, according to the ideology of the Reform movement, Reform Jews will continue to attribute whatever Jewish meanings they so desire to these symbols of our tradition.

Among the more classical interpretations of these amulets is the notion of protection that is granted to those who wear or display the object. Due to the prevalence of this idea throughout Jewish history, I chose to approach the examples I provided in this manner. I did not, however, broach the subject of the theological implications regarding what it means to own, display, or use a protective amulet.

At the beginning of Chapter Three, I mentioned that a certain level of hubris comes with the notion that amulets will protect us. Though this comment is editorial, it also bears some truth in that the belief implies a level of control over a divine power. If,

by definition, a divine power is one that is greater than us and beyond our understanding, how can we presume to summon such a power to protect us?

This question must have been posed many times, and yet there was an unwavering belief that a divine power would come to protect the Jew – or the home of a Jew – who possessed an amulet. Then there were questions about levels of protection based on how many charms, symbols, names, and texts from the Bible were needed for a specific amulet. It seems that over time the amulets for the protection of a mother in childbirth became increasingly ornate and full of symbols. By the modern era, paper amulets were filled with drawings of angels, biblical texts, drawings of other amulets, countless biblical names, etc. The corpus of amulet literature and the many styles of amulets available to Jews meant that one could accumulate multiple layers of protection within a single amulet.

The creation and utilization of amulets seems to indicate a desire for greater control of one's destiny. If this is the case, we are left with the question of "determinism vs. free will."¹²⁵ Is the sequence of events in our lives preordained by a greater power or are we in control of our destiny? The Rabbis try to remain somewhat ambiguous in this regard and would say that a predetermined path does not imply that it is unknowable. Whether this view was believed to the letter by the greater Jewish population is debatable, but there is certainly a notion here that everything is "fixed."

If that is the case then the implication is that lower deities, like angels and demons, are also under the direct control of God. It is also the case that the trajectory of their existence, as creations of God, is also predetermined. As such, we are left with a

¹²⁵ Joshua Trachtenberg. *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion*, 208.

conundrum that places those who hold determinism to be true, in an adversarial position with God.

The pattern of logic is thus: All things are created by God, everything that God creates has a predetermined path, we are God's creations, angels and demons are God's creations, demons have a predetermined path according to God's will, Jews adorn themselves and their structures with amulets for protection, Jews are protecting themselves from demons created and sent by the very same God from whom they seek protection, Jews are protecting themselves from God.

Though this idea may seem radical, consider the biblical history and pattern of punishment between God and the Israelites. When the Israelites strayed from the path of proper worship, God slaughtered the Israelites by the thousands. Even in the Exodus story, God did not automatically grant that the Israelites would go unharmed. God brokered a deal through Moses to make sure that a sacrificial sheep would take the place of every first born Israelite child. Then, only if the blood of the sacrifice was placed on the *mezuzot*, would there be a barrier to prevent God's demon servant, the *mashchit*¹²⁶, from entering.

Jewish practice, belief, and history is rife with indeterminacies. It is a very ancient religion that holds oral tradition, *minhagim* (customs), and innovation in high esteem. Even among the most "traditional" Jews, an argument about a specific passage from the Talmud can spark a fire within a movement that can create lasting change for several generations. It is also much easier for "traditional" Jews to accept belief and question practice whereas the Reform Jew seeks to question both.

¹²⁶ Ex. 12:23

In an adult education class I led at the Valley Temple in Cincinnati, I found that there was a divide among the group between those who accepted the idea that their amulets protected them and those who only had the symbols as a means of connecting to the greater Jewish community. The goal of this thesis had a very similar aim to those who composed the Talmud. I went in looking for answers and came out with explanations for why practices evolved in certain ways and how Jewish demonology has shifted over time. I found no answers.

I wanted to present various scholarly opinions on subjects related to these questions as a means of starting the conversation about what we truly believe regarding the presence of evil in the world. It is my hope that this anthropological investigation will serve as a starting point for some, and a marker of validation for others. May we all find the explanations we seek and practice according to our most honest, and informed, selves.

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