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Talmudic Tales of Enchantment:

The Fairy Tale in the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds

Anne Persin

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Ordination

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Abstract

Tales of the fantastic can be found in every genre of Jewish literature. Our earliest texts are saturated with divine marvels and enchantments—throughout the Bible and the Talmud the Heavens cause wombs to opens, plagues to befall, trees to uproot, walls to cave in, and rains to begin at the drawing of a circle. Later literature continued to be rich in magic and wonder, as the folktale became a fixture in Jewish communities throughout the world. The fairy tale is one such type of fantastical tale that twists its way throughout our texts. It weaves well into the fabric of Jewish literary history for it follows closely the Jewish view of the human condition; in the fairy tale, just as in classic Rabbinic thought, the struggle between good and evil is constantly knocking at our door but through the power of divine intervention, earned through our faith in God, good triumphs in the end.

Both the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds have proven themselves to be great treasuries of Jewish folklore including tales of the fantastic. Nevertheless, the fairy tale is scarcely found in either—outside of a handful of complete stories and a handful of semi-tales, fragments of stories. What distinguishes the fairy tale from the many forms of folk literature is not only the involvement of magic or the struggle between good and evil but the personification of evil through the use of a villain—a character who actively challenges the hero or heroine of the story. It is this villain who is rare in the Talmudic narratives.

This work is a collection and examination of the eight complete fairy tales I found in the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds. The fairy tale offers an insight into human nature, culture, and theology. It exposes a particular community's most basic fears and highest hopes. At the same time, however, the fairy tale's heroes and fiends as well as its morals and lessons are timeless and exist beyond the confines of the community that created it.

The Jewish Fairy Tale

Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend offers the following definition for folklore: "Folklore, or popular knowledge, is the accumulated store of what mankind has experienced, learned, and practiced across the ages as popular and traditional knowledge as distinguished from so-called scientific knowledge."[1] The lore that is passed down from generation to generation contains all of the cumulative knowledge that the Jews' ancestors could carry in their minds and in their hearts. From the Israel Folklore Archives we learn:

> Traditional ways of behaving, the social standards of a group, religious beliefs, social obligations, owe much of their power to their folkloristic background. The fact that many of these traditions have been taught in the form of tales, fables and animal stories, is part of the reason why we remember them so well. For these folktales have the power and simplicity of art. Within the framework of an amusing and interesting story, they aim to teach and transfer lasting values.[2]

The most lasting of the tales are those that grab us, stir our imaginations, thus planting themselves in our subconscious. They do not achieve such immortality by recounting the details of our everyday lives; rather, they use fantasy and enchantment, humor and magic to imprint themselves upon our communities. As Shenhar points out, "Folk society loves to hear and tell matters beyond the grasp of reason. This is why precisely those stories

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[1] Aurelio Espinosa, "Folklore," in *Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend, Vol. 1: A-K* (ed. Maria Leach; New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1950), 399.

[2] "Research Projects of the Israel Folklore Archives," *The Hebrew University of Jerusalem: The Institute of Jewish Studies* (April 1970): 1.

which contain supernatural motifs are most readily accepted by society and thus remain alive, while realistic parallels are rejected and fail to be transmitted."[3]

In particular, then, the fairy tale—which by its very definition is rich in the magic and other facets of the supernatural—would easily capture a community's attention. However, to fit the technical definition of a fairy tale—in the universal sense—the story must have more to offer than simple magic. Classically, the fairy tale takes place in a "never-never land where all kinds of supernatural events occur."[4] The characters are left unnamed or have very stock names and the intention of the story is that it be fabulous beyond reality. Yassif agrees: "The original definition of the magic fairy tale is a tale that takes place out of time and in no specific location, is dense with magic motifs, and is not meant to be believed."[5]

Within the Jewish community, folklore and fairy tales have had a slightly different history because of some of the more unique realities that the community has faced. For example, as Patai explains:

> The Jews were throughout their long history a literate people who developed at an early date the habit of committing to writing whatever they regarded as important in their oral traditions. As a result, the history of Jewish folklore is characterized, in each epoch, by a continuous process of lifting out considerable bodies of folklore from the stream of oral tradition and freezing them in written form.[6]

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[3] Aliza Shenhar, *Jewish and Israeli Folklore* (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 1987), 15.

[4] Stith Thompson, "Fairy Tale," in *Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend, Vol. 1: A-K* (ed. Maria Leach; New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1950), 365-6.

[5] Eli Yassif, *The Hebrew Folktale: History, Genre, Meaning* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 65.

[6] Raphael Patai, "Jewish Folklore and Jewish Tradition," *Studies in Biblical and Jewish Folklore* (eds. Raphael Patai, Francis Lee Utley, and Dov Noy; New York: Haskell House Publishers Ltd., 1973), 15.

The first logical conclusion from this is that the corpus of Jewish folklore is more expansive than one might think from a community so small. Plus, Jewish folklore found its way to written form very early on. In time, the output of written folklore rose with the onset of the printing press; nevertheless the mass of recorded Jewish folklore that predated that revolutionizing event is astounding. It is, therefore, jarring to find in Funk and Wagnalls the following statement: "Modern Semitic folklore, including especially that of the Arabs and Jews, has been excluded [from this periodical], on the grounds that so much of it is due to direct borrowings from other peoples and can therefore not be described as distinctive."[7] This is thoroughly unwarranted of Gaster. All communities borrow folk customs and lore. What makes Jewish folklore distinctive is that despite the amount of borrowing, there remains to this day a consistent set of elements that set it apart as Jewish—and this, despite difference in geography, socio-economic status, or, even, language. Part of the reality of Jewish folklore is that although the Jewish community would throughout history absorb ingredients from non-Jewish sources, as soon as the community had accepted a particular trait or story or practice, it would be transmuted until it was Jewish.[8] Perhaps a transformation might begin with minor changes that cluster "around 'Judaized' realia which replace the original ones,"[9] as Shenhar proposes; perhaps the transformation would change the very heart of the story or practice. Soon enough, the non-Jewish beginnings would be forgotten and it would be

[7] Theodor Gaster, "Semitic Folklore," in *Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend, Vol. 2:J-Z* (ed. Maria Leach; New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1950), 981.
[8] Patai, "Folklore," 21-22.
[9] Shenhar, *Folklore*, 9.

written into the recipe of Jewish life.[10] Noy delineates these four elements that "characterize the uniquely Jewish aspects of the Jewish folktale."[11]

The Time

Jewish folklore connects to the Jewish year cycle the Jewish life cycle, or both. This connection may be very direct (the story might take place on Yom Kippur or at a wedding) or it may be more subtle. (The story might connect to a season because of a biblical verse that is associated with that season.) Nahmad adds historical time to this element, suggesting that Jewish stories, "are set against a historical background reflecting the traditions of the Jews."[12] We might therefore expect to find folklore specifically connected to distinctly Jewish eras (such as during the united monarchy, the exile, or the birth of Hassidism). Often times, the connection between story and time is thematic. Around Ḥanukah, Jews would tell stories about light, and during Passover stories about freedom abound. For the fairy tales in the Talmud, time holds real relevance; for example, in the story of "R. Joshua and the Witch," all of the action is leading to the birth of R. Judah b. Batera. The historical background is vital to the story of "King Solomon and the King of the Demons," since the focal point of the story is the building of the Temple.

The Place

Because Jewish stories were told in the synagogue, at home and in class, they picked up the themes common to these places: rabbis, prayer, family, Shabbat, study, and

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[10] Patai, "Folklore," 21-22.
[11] Dov Noy, foreword to *Miriam's Tambourine: Jewish Folktales from Around the World*, by Howard Schwartz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), xv.
[12] H. M. Nahmad, ed., *A Portion in Paradise: And Other Jewish Folktales* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), 15.

learning. These venues were also the primary settings for the tales that were told. If a character was going on a long journey, he either began or ended up at home; furthermore, the time away from the home or the academy or the synagogue highlights the character's lack of safety or assurance or direction. And so we find, in "David and the Giant Yishbi B'nov," a hero who has lost his way. David is dreadfully far from home and in danger. In the "The Demon in the Study Hall" the setting indicates to the listener the wisdom and piety that will follow in the story.

The Acting Characters

As Nahmad puts it, "What makes [Jewish folklore] Jewish is their cast of characters."[13] There are two points to consider with regard to the characters. First of all, the heroes of Jewish folktales are Jews. Whether they are biblical characters, talmudic sages or *ploni ben ploni*, they are always endowed with a Jewish identity. Second of all, the characters in Jewish folklore, for the most part, behave like Jews. Even when a character has specifically been labeled a non-Jew for the sake of the story, the character behaves within the cultural milieu of the Jewish community. In "Solomon, the Beggar King," not only do we find the popular character of King Solomon at the center of the tale but we find a Judaized demon, Ashmedai. In "Shimon ben Shetaḥ and the Witches of Ashkelon," the hero is a well-known mishnaic rabbi, R. Shimon ben Shetaḥ; furthermore, there is an ongoing debate as to whether the witches of Ashkelon were gentiles or possibly disenfranchised Jewish women.

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[13] Nahmad, *Paradise*, 15.

The Message

Not common in universal fairy tales, "possibly the most characteristically Jewish element of the folktale is the introduction of a moral or lesson," [14] Noy explains. Nahmad agrees that at the center of Jewish folklore is "strong ethical emphasis and content... Used to point to a lesson or give moral instruction, example and inspiration."[15] This is not to say that one could not derive lessons from universal fairytales; only that the main focus of the fairytale is not the lesson or the moral or the ethical imperative—it is the entertainment and the enchantment. Still, because of the magical component inherent in the genre of fairytale, the stage is set for a battle between good and evil. As Schwartz points out, this "is fully compatible with the Jewish view of the essential condition of this world, where faith in God can defeat the evil impulse."[16] It is not surprising, then, that Jewish storytellers throughout the ages have taken story forms from their neighbors and simply by making them, as Nahmad illustrates, "to conform to the spirit of Judaism, to the idea of monotheism and the omnipotence of the Creator"[17] and have made the stories as well as the forms their own. Noy sums it up well:

> Whereas the universal folktale appeals to the present psychological state of the listener, delighting him with a pat resolution in a formulistic happy ending, the Jewish folktale is future-oriented, urging the listener to adopt an ideal or goal as yet unrealized, to improve his ways and change his attitudes.[18]

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[14] Noy, *Miriam's Tambourine*, xv-xviii.
[15] Nahmad, *Paradise*, 15.
[16] Howard Schwartz, *Reimagining the Bible: The Storytelling of the Rabbis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 43.
[17] Nahmad, *Paradise*, 16.
[18] Noy, *Miriam's Tambourine*, xviii.

In "Yannai and the Innkeeper," the hope is that every listener understands the humiliation that comes with playing with magic. "This Too, is for Good" has a more positive lesson that hope and absolute faith in the divine choreography will bring about blessings in abundance.

Ultimately, the Jewish fairy tale is based on the universal fairy tale. It is rooted in enchantment and facets of the supernatural—in its own way, it is both timeless and placeless—and, although sometimes it is based on true events, the version that is woven for the audience always carries with it an element of the fantastic. Yassif adds that the hero triumphs over tasks meant to end in his failure, faces an enemy (preferably demonic), prevails, and is honored in the end.[19] But for many Jewish fairy tales, timelessness and placelessness are relative, for the story must have some clear connection to tradition (whether that be through the time, place, or characters) and it must be edifying. More often than not, Shenhar notes, "The main plot is linked with a biblical verse and its traditional homiletic interpretations."[20]

This is especially true in the folklore and fairy tales of the Talmud and Mishnah. Explains Jason, "Folk tales are here used as exempla in sermons and in discussions on legal or theological matters."[21] According to Schwartz, the stories found here "remain a unique form, functioning as legendary tales and tales of the fantastic at the same time.... The fusion of the uniquely Jewish aggadic tale and the universal fairy tale can be seen to take place."[22] He continues to explain that this fusion between the Jewish sacred legend and the universal fairy tale is "conditioned by the biblical and postbiblical tradition in

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[19] Yassif, *Folktale*, 64-65.
[20] Shenhar, *Folklore*, 10.
[21] Heda Jason, "Study of Israelite and Jewish Oral and Folk Literature: Problems and Issues," *Asian Folklore Studies*, 49 (1990): 89.
[22] Schwartz, *Reimagining*, 46.

which Divine Providence takes the place of magical devices and resolutions and the moral element is preeminent."[23] And so we end up with a fusion genre—part sacred legend but mostly fairy tale, part magical but very moral, and, throughout it al,: interdependent on God.

[23] Schwartz, *Reimagining*, 55.

The Rabbis and Magic

> There must not be found among you anyone that makes his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that practices divination, soothsaying, augury, enchantment, witchery, sorcery, spirit-rapping, wizardry, or necromancy. For all that do these things are an abomination to the Lord.[1]

The Bible is very clear as to just how grievous it would be for an Israelite to practice magic. Magic is equated with the idolatry of the Canaanite nations and would be an affront to God. At no point does the Bible suggest that these practices would not or could not be efficacious; simply, it suggests that they are unacceptable rituals. This leads the Rabbis to wonder: why?

According to *Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend* magic is defined as, "The art of compulsion of the supernatural."[2] It is precisely this idea that lies at the heart of the Rabbis' discomfort with the use of magic. Again, at no point do they deride magic for being ineffectual; on the contrary, they offer a plethora of examples in which magic is successfully practiced. They question the appropriateness of compelling the deity. When R. Yoḥanan is asked the question, "Why are they called magicians (מכשפים)?" he explains that magic coerces the family on high (שמכחישין פמליה של מעלה).[3]

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[1] Deut. 18:10-12.
[2] "Magic," in *Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend, Vol. 2: JZ* (ed. Maria Leach; New York: Funk and Wagnells Company, 1950), 660.
[3] *b. San. 67b.*

Many have argued that the concept behind Jewish prayer is an audacious attempt to compel God to make peace, or bring health, or remember us in our times of need. Others have argued that to ask for a miracle is, in some way, trying to control God. However, Jewish tradition makes clear distinctions between both of these concepts—as well as between these concepts and magic. Basser explains:

> A prayer asks God to perform some act out of grace. A miracle is a completely free divine act subserving the intelligible purpose of the divine will. But magic assumes that gods and demons are subject to some mysterious natural necessity, charms being used to imitate a desired result to induce, as a matter of course, the wanted effect.[4]

We find in the Talmud, however, that many of these charms are acceptable for use while others could incur the death penalty. Although this may seem, at first, arbitrary, the Rabbis' definition of magic stems from a need to excuse those in the mainstream—more precisely, those in the intellectual elite—and criminalizing those on the fringe of society.[5] Yet, they are not unreasonable in this need, for, as Swartz puts it, at the turn of the era, magic carried an "anti-normative status," and therefore, "It is not merely that magic is by definition subversive, but that subversive religious practices are by definition magic."[6]

Nevertheless, Basser points out that, "Magic fulfills the psychological need of an individual to control his destiny. The less control the Jews had of their destiny under foreign governments, the more magic crept into Judaism."[7] This being true, it should not surprise us that the Babylonian Talmud is seemingly much more tolerant of magical

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[4] Herbert Basser, "Superstitious Interpretations of Jewish Laws," JSJ 8:2 (Oct. 1977): 9.
[5] Jonathan Seidel, "Charming Criminals: Classification of Magic in the Babylonian Talmud," in *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power* (eds. Marvin Meyer and Paul Mirecki; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), 148-9.
[6] Michael Swartz, "Magical Piety in Ancient and Medieval Judaism," in *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power* (eds. Marvin Meyer and Paul Mirecki; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), 168.
[7] Basser, "Superstitious," 9.

practice than the Palestinian Talmud. Throughout the talmudic period—although neither community had complete independence from foreign rule—the Babylonian community had a much larger watchdog looming over its shoulders. Thus, we find a vast array of incantations and amulets referred to and explained in the Babylonian Talmud compared to very few in the Palestinian Talmud.[8] Yet, the Rabbis of the Palestinian Talmud get away with more magical practice than their counterparts in Babylonia.[9] Kern-Ulmer writes that, ultimately in both communities, "The rabbis sensed the danger inherent in magic because they recognized the potential religious nature of magic." She continues to explain that, "Since this threatened the religious mindset of the rabbis they often labeled magic as idolatrous."[10]

Illusion vs. Reality

Throughout the talmudic literature, there are four discussions that get played out more than any others with regard to magic. The primary argument revolves around what sort of magic is permissible on any level. As far as folklore is concerned, any incantation or spell must be witnessed for it to be validated as an act of magic. Therefore, Shenhar describes a magical act as when, "Some change takes place before the eyes of the listener who is able to actually witness the transformation from a normal to an abnormal state."[11] This folkloric definition corresponds with the talmudic definition of magic:

> The *m'chashef* (magician) if he actually performs an act is liable to punishment while the one who merely creates illusions is not liable. Rabbi

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[8] Samuel Kottek, "Demons and Diseases in the Bible and Talmud," *Illness and Healing in Ancient Times* (Haifa: University of Haifa, 1996), 33.
[9] See "Yannai and the Innkeeper," 30-39, versus "R. Joshua and the Witch," 40-49.
[10] Brigitte Kern-Ulmer, The Depiction of Magic in Rabbinic Texts: The Rabbinic and the Greek Concept of Magic," Journal for the Study of Judaism 27 (1996): 293.
[11] Aliza Shenhar, *Jewish and Israeli Folklore* (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 1987), 14.

> Akiva in the name of Rabbi Yehoshuah says, "If two were gathering cucumbers, one gatherer may not be culpable and the other may be culpable. He that performed the act is culpable, but he that deceived the eyes is not culpable."[12]

Although both acts may be in plain sight, it is the one who actually creates—before witnesses—*actual* change that is culpable as magician. Even in front of witnesses, if the transformation is not real, then the person is not culpable. The reasoning behind this is simple, according to Seidel: "Magicians are considered guilty not because of trickery but because of transformation of that which should not be tampered with. Magical action utilizes natural laws in unnatural ways. *Kishuf* implies an abuse of divine/human boundaries; the rabbis felt that only rabbis, and only a select few, could tamper with divine forces."[13] Throughout the Talmuds the Rabbis entertain us—and are entertained themselves—with tales of illusion and trickery.[14] But to actually manipulate the fabric of the physical world and the deity through magic was punishable by death:

> Abaye said, "The laws of magicians are similar to those of Shabbat. Certain activities are punished by stoning, some are not liable to punishment, yet forbidden *a priori*, and others are entirely permitted. Therefore if one actually performs magic he is stoned; if he creates an illusion, he is exempt but the action is still forbidden; and what is entirely permitted? Such deeds as were performed by R. Ḥanina and R. Oshia, who spent every Shabbat evening studying the laws of creation by means of which they created a one-third size calf and ate it."[15]

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[12] *m. San. 7:11.*
[13] Seidel, "Criminals," 150.
[14] For a few fanciful examples in which the Rabbis push the boundary between illusion and real see R. Joshua's exploits both before and after his encounter with the witch in *y. San. 25d.*
[15] *b. San. 67a.*

What made R. Ḥanina and R. Oshia's deeds different than any other's? Nothing but the mere fact that they are learned Rabbis. This leads to the next popular discussion of magic in the Talmud.

Who Engages in Magic?

Throughout both Talmuds, one finds an ongoing debate over the use of the feminine in the biblical verse, "You shall not suffer a witch to live."[16] Given that the neutral, in an engendered language such as Hebrew, is the masculine, this verse could lead one to believe that either only women are witches or that only women should be executed for the crime of witchcraft. The Rabbis argue, quite definitively, that both men and women practice witchcraft. However, they also maintain that, "Most women engage in witchcraft."[17] They even tell the story of R. Naḥman's daughters, who could stir a boiling pot with their bare hands.[18] Although the Rabbis make an exception for these daughters of a very prominent Rabbi, they still serve to prove that most women—even the pious—engage in witchcraft. This is not to say that men do not engage in witchcraft; there are a number of stories about marketplace vendors, heretics and average men on the streets dabbling with magic in every form.

But the most discussed practitioners of magic in the Talmud are the Rabbis themselves. In fact, according to the Talmud, "We do not seat any one on the Sanhedrin unless they are wise men, men of vision, men of stature, elders, masters of magic, and knowledgeable in seventy languages."[19] The idea was to make magic one of the many

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[16] Exod. 22:16.
[17] *b. San. 67a.*
[18] *b. Giṭ. 45a.*
[19] *b. Menaḥ. 65a.*

academic endeavors—something to know in order to teach, not in order to do. As teaching and study were at the pinnacle of rabbinic ideals, magic—as merely theoretical—became presentable as one component of a well-rounded education.[20] At the end of the day, a rabbi needed to know magic; he was expected by his community to be able to do all of those things magicians were fabled to do and the Rabbis did, "issue blessings and curses, create men and animals. They were masters of witchcraft, incantations, and amulets."[21]

Demons

Although demons are not described as practitioners of magic, as such, conversations about magic consistently turn to the problem of demons. Demons were thought to be three parts angel (they have wings, could fly, and are privy to the future) and three parts human (they eat and drink, are fruitful and multiply, and die);[22] they therefore held a supernatural place in the cosmic hierarchy. Although the Rabbis considered them subservient to God and to God's will, they had a penchant for causing damage and illness wherever they were to be found. And so we find in the Talmud Ruaḥ Palga, who caused migraines;[23] Ruaḥ Tsarda, who might overwhelm a person who gets infuriated while eating;[24] and Ruaḥ Katsera, who was credited with being the cause of asthma and epilepsy.[25] The Talmud is quick to advise against consuming too much new wine—or the person may find himself victim of the demon Kordiakos, who causes a

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[20] Peter Schafer, "Magic and Religion in Ancient Judaism," *Envisioning Magic: A Princeton Seminar and Symposium* (eds. Peter Schafer and Hans G. Kippenberg; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 37.
[21] Seidel, "Criminals," 150 n#14.
[22] *b. Ḥag. 16a.*
[23] *b. Giṭ. 68b.*
[24] *b. Ḥul. 105b.*
[25] *b. Bek. 44b.*

disorder of the mind[26]—or handling food without having first washed, especially in the morning—or one runs the risk of being attacked by Shibbeta.[27] Women should pay special heed to Kuda, for this demon tends to attack women in childbirth.[28] All of these demons (and many more) have no mention in the Talmud save for their destructive nature.

Nevertheless, there are some demons with whom the Rabbis have had civilized conversations. For example, there are at least three recorded conversations with the demon Joseph.[29] Of Ashmedai, the King of the Demons, there are documented many lengthy stories filled with sophisticated dialogue. Agrat, Ashmedai's daughter, was even reasoned with by one account:

> She once met Rabbi Ḥanina ben Dosa and said to him, "If you were not highly regarded in heaven, I would have harmed you." Ḥanina answered, "Well, if I enjoy such consideration, then I forbid you to harm anybody again!" After some discussion, it was decided that she would restrict her assaults to Saturday and Wednesday nights. Sometime later, Agrat met another sage, Abaye. There was a discussion similar to the other. The result was that Agrat agreed to assail people only on narrow sidewalks.[30]

Generally, demons were said not to practice magic outside of their own supernatural sphere. However, many forms of magic included calling them into our world, therefore causing grave danger. So the Rabbis make yet another distinction: "*Belatehem* refers to magic through the agency of demons. *Belehatehem* refers to magic

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[26] *b. Giṭ. 67b.*
[27] *b. Yoma 77b.*
[28] *b. AZ. 29a.*
[29] Two can be found in *b. Pesaḥ. 110a.* and one can be found in *b. 'Eruv. 43a.*
[30] *b. Pesaḥ. 112b.*

without outside help"[31]—to which Abaye adds, "He who insists on exact paraphernalia is practicing demonic ritual while he who does not insist is simply engaging in (non-demonic) magical practices."[32] The latter, according to the Talmud, is *a priori* permissible whereas the former is punishable by death.

Magical Healing

Finally, in an age of imperfect medicine, healing practices were an important issue even outside of magic. The question of magic, however, added a new dimension to the conversation. Therefore, the Mishnah is very clear that, "One who utters an incantation over an injury has no place in the world to come."[33] Later Rabbis of both talmudic communities take issue with this hard-nose stance; "Abaye and Rabba both claim that whatever is used for healing cannot be forbidden as an Amorite practice."[34] In fact, Abaye learned—and presumably approved of—the following remedy against the demon Ishta from his mother:

> Buy some salt for a brand new dinar and hang it from the neck of the sick person. If this is not successful, go and sit at a crossroads. Take a big ant, which carries a burden, and place it within a pipe which you stop with lead. Then put on this tube 60 seals and shake it while saying, "My burden on you and your burden on me."[35]

From the Palestinian Talmud, we learn that there were a number of items one could carry, even on Shabbat, for the sake of one's health: "They go out with a locust's

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[31] *b. San. 67b.*
[32] *b. San. 67b.*
[33] *m. San. 10:1.*
[34] *b. Sabb. 67a* and in *y. Sabb. 8c* where the statement is attributed to R. Samuel, R. Abbahu and R. Yoḥanan.
[35] *b. Sabb. 66b.*

egg: it is good for the ear. With a fox's tooth: it is good for the tooth. With a nail of an impaled convict: it is good against a spider's bite."[36] For women, the Babylonian Talmud even recommends a safeguard against miscarriages: "A woman may go out [on Shabbat] with a preserving stone for fear of aborting even if she never suffered an abortion before, even if she is not pregnant but might be."[37] In fact, the Talmud permitted a number of different amulets that could be worn to ward off a number of different ailments. There was only one requirement—permitted amulets must have been tested first by at least three patients and they should be procured from tested amulet practitioners.[38] In the end, all of these allowances made for good politics. The Rabbis could not force the abrogation of all medical amulets, incantations and spells. Therefore, they negotiated the mishnaic injunction into a plan that the community could follow.

Ultimately, the underlying theme in all of the talmudic discussions regarding magic is God. Worried about the manipulation of the Godhead, the Rabbis declared only illusory magic acceptable. In addition, the Rabbis permitted only to themselves the practice of magic. The denouncing of subversives was a way to protect God from those who would attempt to coerce the divine. Through their world view, the Rabbis lessened the impact of the demonic forces by incorporating them into the hierarchy on high. And, through the legitimization of magical remedies, they kept the masses from turning their backs on a system in which God had nothing to do with healing as the people understood it.

But the Rabbis did not merely water down Judaism as they knew it in order to strike a balance between the folk practice of magic and the religious needs of the

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[36] *y. Sabb. 8c.*
[37] *b. Sabb. 66b.*
[38] Kottek, "Demons," 36-7.

tradition. They permeated magical practice with ideas that would shift the focus back to Sinai. First, there had already been a tradition regarding the power of the Name. The Rabbis expanded the possibilities of the Name so that as Trachtenberg explains, "During Talmudic times the number of 'Ineffable' names grew; we hear of 12- and 42- and 72-letter names, which might be taught only to a select company of ultra-worthies."[39] Besides expanding the scope of Name magic, the Rabbis dampened the possible results of using such forms of magic. According to Fishbane, "The use of the divine Name is thus a powerful instrument, even a vehicle of approach to divine power, but such use is not intrinsically capable of bringing about certain results."[40]

The second normative Jewish belief that the Rabbis worked into talmudic discussions as much as possible is miracle. There are a number of stories (some represented in this examination) throughout the Talmud that declare acts as miraculous that would have previously been assumed to be magical. Through their declaration of miracle, the Rabbis successfully co-opt a number of well-known folk stories for God. Following Shenhar's definition of miracle—"An isolated act of change of the order of nature brought about by the sacred power; though its results may be permanent, this act has no consequences for the order of nature and society in the future,"[41]—the only difference between miracle and magic is the will of the sacred power.

Finally, the Rabbis fear, as Veltri puts it, that "there is no power except for the divine power. If the sorcerer operates, he must operate on behalf of his power. That is

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[39] Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion* (New York: Behrman House, 1939), 90.

[40] Michael Fishbane, "Aspects of Jewish Magic in the Ancient Rabbinic Period," *The Solomon Goldman Lectures: Perspectives in Jewish Learning, Vol. 2* (ed. Nathaniel Stampfer; Chicago: The Spertus College of Judaica Press, 1979), 34.

[41] Shenhar, *Folklore*, 22-23.

why the magician lessens the power of God. In this theological view, the power of God can act without his explicit will."[42] And so the Rabbis stress, as often as possible, the effectiveness of prayer, faith and adherence to the *halacha*.

[42] Giuseppi Veltri, "Magic in Ancient Judaism: The Key to Understanding Medicine, Science and the Arts?" *Judaism Today* (Autumn 1998), 14.

The Demon in the Study Hall[1]

It is told of Rav Yaakov son of Rav Acha bar Yaakov that his father sent him to study under the guidance of Abaye. When he returned home, his father saw that he was not well studied in regard to the traditions. His father said to him, "It would be more preferable that I go to study than you. You stay here—I will go."

Abaye heard that Rav Acha bar Yaakov was coming.

There was a particular demon at Abaye's study hall that was so menacing that people would only walk up to the hall in pairs. Even during the day they would be met with injury. Abaye, therefore, said to his students, "Do not invite Rav Acha to stay with you. Perhaps a miracle will occur if he stays in the study hall."

And so it was that Rav Acha stayed in this particular study hall. The demon appeared to him as a seven-headed sea monster. But with every bow that he bowed while praying, one of the [monster's] heads would fall off. The next day Rav Acha said to Abaye and his students, "If a miracle had not occurred, you would have put me in grave danger!"

The Text

As with many stories found throughout the Talmud, the main players in this story are the Rabbis. Both Abaye and Rav Acha date back to the Amoraic period (ca. 300 C.E.) in Babylonia. They did not, however, share the same prominence during their

[1] b. *Qidd.* 29b.

lifetime. Whereas Abaye is often mentioned as following R. Joseph as the head of the academy in Pumbeditha for five years, Rav Acha bar Yaakov is often glossed over in the lists of Amoraim[2] and at times he is ignored altogether.[3] Abaye is a central character in many stories in which we learn about his upbringing, his gift for academia, and his experience with incantations and magical healing remedies. He is even witness to the magical growing and harvesting of a cucumber patch. Rav Acha, on the other hand, is seldom anything more than a one-liner. His opinion is offered on many occasions, but we know little of his life or his experience. This contradistinction between these two characters in this story begs a question: why is Rav Acha the hero? If this story had followed the normal course of events, we might have expected to see Abaye, with his vast understanding of the magical, as the hero rather than Rav Acha. But, in fact, it is the lesser-known character who takes center stage for this duel to the death with the seven-headed sea monster.

The story sets up a scenario where Rav Acha is the elder of the two Rabbis. Perhaps it is his maturity into which Abaye puts his own faith. Perhaps Abaye had already applied all of his knowledge regarding ridding one's space of demons, but to no avail. Having run out of options, Rav Acha's fresh mind could, hopefully, find a solution to this troubling situation. Perhaps Abaye's insight into the mystical powers of the universe gave him a glimpse into the abilities of the well-learned Rav Acha. Aliza Shenhar has suggested that, "The true hero is the religious protagonist—the righteous man who inevitably emerges victorious at the end of the story."[4] If this is true, then no

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[2] H. L. Strack and Gunter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 95.
[3] Moses Mielziner, *Introduction to the Talmud* (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1968).
[4] Aliza Shenhar, *Jewish and Israeli Folklore* (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1987), 3.

matter their backgrounds, both Rav Acha and Abaye emerge as heroes of this story: Rav Acha for his faith in prayer, Abaye for his faith in Rav Acha. Nevertheless, the tradition suggests that it was, in fact, Rav Acha's piety alone that allowed him to prevail.[5] It would be fair to presume that a man whose piety is such that he could destroy a demon by praying would be preceded by his reputation. Thus, Abaye's faith does not seem nearly as haphazard and questionably placed. Assuming Abaye was aware of Rav Acha's piety, it was perfectly appropriate for him to assume that Rav Acha could rid his study hall of the demon.

Although the Rabbis are the central characters in the vast majority of rabbinic tales, in the fairy tale the monster shares importance. The demon in the study hall with which Abaye and Rav Acha must contend is vital to the story. The particular demon character in this story is truly unique. The term used for the demon terrorizing Abaye and his students, *mazik*, is used in this context only once. All other occasions of *mazik* refer to one "who causes damage." On occasion the plural form, *mazikin*, is used in the Talmud to denote demons in a more general sense.[6] But only here do we find a singular demon thus designated *mazik*, or "damager." This term, however, may shed some insight into the more puzzling aspect of the demon character in this story: his appearance. The concept of the sea monster is far from unusual for the Rabbis. In this particular tale, though, we are given the impression not that this demon was truly a sea monster, but rather a shape shifter—as he is said to have *appeared* before Rav Acha *as* a seven-headed sea monster. Conceivably, this is an aspect of *mazik*. As one whose main purpose is to cause damage and terror, shape shifting is more than simply an asset, it is a necessity.

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[5] Rashi on *b. Qidd.* 29b.
[6] For an example see *b. Ḥul.* 105b.

If the goal of the *mazik* is to strike terror and cause damage, then the task for Rav Acha is to remain calm and protected before this demon. As he is an unwilling participant in this battle against the *mazik*, he is forced to take the only action he knows: prayer. This proves to be efficacious and the demon is destroyed. For with every blessing for which Rav Acha bows, another head falls off the demon. Some might suggest that there is clearly something magical about his prayers—could they be incantations? Or maybe it is his stance that is enchanted—could his bowing be a form of sorcerous ritual? The Talmud, however, refutes the idea that any magic is involved at all. According to the text, this was a miracle, not an act of magic, and in the eyes of the Rabbis the difference is vast. As Herbert Basser defines the miraculous in his article, "Superstitious Interpretations of Jewish Laws," "A miracle is a completely free divine act subserving the intelligible purpose of the divine will. But magic assumes that gods and demons are subject to some mysterious natural necessity, charms being used to imitate a desired result to induce, as a matter of course, the wanted effect."[7] Rav Acha is not using prayer as a means to coerce God into helping him. Rather, we return to the notion that it was through Rav Acha's absolute faith in God—through his piety—that he was granted this extraordinary miracle.

Shenhar, however, suggests that although Rav Acha is not coercing God to do anything, he may be taking advantage of the relationship he has with God. "That is why the heroes of the story are mostly renowned rabbis and luminaries of Israel," she writes. "It is they who are charged with the task of standing in the breach and exploiting their closeness to the Divine spirit to alleviate the lot of their brethren who are threatened by

[7] Herbert Basser, "Superstitious Interpretations of Jewish Law," *JSJ* 8, no. 2 (October 1977): 9.

total extinction."[8] Although it could be argued that Abaye was, in fact, exploiting Rav Acha's relationship with God, from his reaction the following day, it is reasonable to suggest that Rav Acha himself was surprised by his own survival. Therefore, the Rabbis, in retelling this tale, have reason to accept as true that God destroyed the demon for Rav Acha's sake, not because God was so compelled or exploited by Rav Acha.

The Context

The vast majority of the Talmud transitions from idea to idea through train of thought. At times the stories are the bridges from one conversation to the next; at other times, the stories seem to go off in a direction wildly divergent from the original point written in the Talmud. This story would be an example of the latter type. When this story appears, for nearly a paragraph, the Talmud had been in a conversation regarding Torah study. The discussion had been focused on who was required to study. Ultimately, the Rabbis decide that only men are obligated to study because the Torah says one must teach his sons rather than his daughters. Once the text had a conclusive statement regarding who is obligated to learn and whom to teach, the Talmud was ready for more particular concerns. This is where "The Demon in the Study Hall" is presented. "The Rabbis taught in a Baraita...." Immediately before the story, we learned that unless the son is particularly gifted, the father's education takes precedence over the son's education. Here we have the setup for "The Demon in the Study Hall." Rav Acha only ends up at Abaye's academy because his son is not one of the sharpest students in the class. We already know that Rav Acha, although minor in comparison to the other Rabbis, is considered to knowledgeable in the tradition and that his opinion is given

[8] Shenhar, *Folklore*, 2.

weight in talmudic discussions. If his son was unable to grasp the traditions as well as Rav Acha was able, then, in keeping with the discussion above, the father would have to assume his son's place at Pumbeditha.

Although the story unfolds into a tale of prayer and piety, as soon as it is over, the text of the Talmud returns to the mitzvah of Torah study. Now that it is clear who is obligated to study and how to choose—within a family—who has the more pressing obligation, the Talmud turns to the task of finding a wife when one's life is dedicated to study. Without a doubt, this is an interesting discussion and pressing for those whose lives are so closely intertwined with Torah study, but it leaves the Rav Acha story somewhat floating. Without further discussion of Rav Acha's story, we are compelled to look to other places in the Talmud that offer insight into the peculiar details found in this tale.

In this specific story, there is one such peculiar detail that is mentioned in at least two other places in the Talmud: walking in pairs. There seems to be a difference of opinion as to whether walking in pairs is such a good idea. In *Berachot* 7a, we learn, quite clearly, of the measure of protection that is added when people walk together. Nevertheless, the idea of walking in pairs exclusively is strongly discouraged in *Pesaḥim* 109b-110a. In fact, according to the passage in *Pesaḥim*, doing anything in pairs is a recipe for attracting demons. Oddly enough, it is Abaye himself who opposes both eating and drinking in pairs, lest one or both people be weakened by the experience and therefore vulnerable to demonic influence and attack. Why, then, would he encourage his students to walk in pairs? As can be the case in the Talmud, a point made in one section of the text is easily refuted by a point elsewhere in the text. This refutation does not

make the point in the story any less clear—not only were they all being terrorized by this demon, but the monster was brazen about doing damage.

The Subtext

Apart from the lessons that the Talmud set up for the reader to glean from the story—that the father should fulfill his obligation to himself to study if his son is unable to fulfill his own obligation—there are two commanding lessons that can be drawn from this story. First of all, from this story we learn of the awesome power of piety and prayer. There are a slew of stories throughout the Talmud that attest to this power, but few are in the face of such odds. Again, it is astounding that such an act of piety is attributed to someone who is so far removed from the upper echelon of Rabbis. But perhaps this is exactly the point: if the hero had been a Hillel, we might read the story and question whether our faith could ever be as strong. Making Rav Acha the hero, though, suggests a sort of "everyman" scenario—just as his faith was strong enough, so could anyone's faith be strong enough.

The second lesson in the story is very important for the Rabbis of the Talmud—the power of God can slay all demons. The Talmud was written during an era when so much of the world was monstrous for the Jews. The Rabbis read demons into every detail of their lives. In *Ḥagigah*, R. Huna described our lives as being surrounded by demons: "Each and every one among us has a thousand [demons] at his left and ten thousand at his right."[9] In a world such as this, understanding God's power to protect is

[9] b. *Ḥag.* 16a.

vital to leading a life without fear. Simple stories, such as "The Demon in the Study Hall," were accessible to all and a comfort to anyone who believed.

Although there are quite a few lessons to be learned and points to be made from this story, there is also an element of entertainment. As stated above, this story is accessible to a wide audience; this is, in no small part, due to its engaging and almost comical quality. The violence of the story may seem a bit extreme. However, as Shenhar points out, the audience tends to "enjoy" a hero's tribulations:

> ...the dramatic excitement is a barbaric throwback to our cruel, blood-thirsty forebears, in whose days persecution and murder provided the popular entertainment of 'primitive minds.' ...It is very likely that, up to a point, the audience actually enjoyed the cruelty, the actual level of their enjoyment shifting in accordance with contemporary norms. Yet it is the sympathy for the victim which determines the feeling for the story—evidence of the audience's sense of fair play.[10]

Accordingly, the reader, although concerned for Rav Acha's well-being, takes pleasure in the possibility that the demon just might prevail. The question—"Will he or won't he survive?"—gives the reader a surge of energy and makes the story entertaining. If the Rabbis needed only to teach that a father must make a decision based on aptitude between the schooling of his son and his own education, there would never have been a need to mention the demon. But the demon draws an audience—by its very existence, as well as by Rav Acha's ability to prevail over it with the help of God. Ultimately, this story is about the audience as much as it is about the Rabbis.

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[10] Shenhar, *Folklore*, 49.

Yannai and the Innkeeper[1]

Once, Yannai came to a particular inn. There, he told the innkeepers to give him a drink of water. They brought him *shatita*—a drink made of barley flour and water. But he had seen that the waitress's lips moved in a whisper. Suspicious, Yannai poured out a portion of the *shatita* from his cup and it turned into scorpions.

He said to them, "I drank from yours, now you, too, drink from mine."

He gave the waitress a drink and she turned into a donkey. He rode upon her and went up to the marketplace. There, a friend of hers saw her and tore her loose from his spell. And so it was that all saw Yannai riding upon a woman in the marketplace.

The Text

More so than with any of the other seven stories discussed throughout this paper, "Yannai and the Innkeeper" begs the question, "What makes this story a fairy tale?" Jonathan Seidel has categorized this particular story as one in a series of "tall tales" rather than as a fairy tale.[2] The tall tale, however, has a clear structure that is not evident in this story and, as Dan Ben-Amos explains, the supernatural is not a likely theme for a tale of exaggeration.[3] Dispelling the notion that this story is a tall tale does not, however, prove

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[1] b. *San.* 67b.

[2] Jonathan Seidel, "'Release Us and We Will Release You!' Rabbinic Encounters with Witches and Witchcraft," JAGNES 3, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 51.

[3] Dan Ben-Amos, "Talmudic Tall Tales," in *Folklore Today: a Festschrift for Richard M. Dorson* (Bloomington: Indiana University, Research Center for Language and Semitic Studies, 1976), 35-36. Ben-Amos points out that the common themes for tall tales are sensual, not supernatural, because when telling a tall tale the storyteller depends on the audience having an idea of an average; there is no average within the supernatural.

that it is a fairy tale; although there are a clear protagonist, a clear antagonist, and well-defined magical dabbling, this story seems to be missing a goal—the task that our hero must overcome in order to triumph. In fact, there is a goal in this brief narrative. For unlike the many stories that serve merely as examples of witchcraft and sorcery, this story goes beyond the demonstration of magic to a battle of magic. Once the battle is underway, the protagonist has a clear goal: best the witch and prevail.

Whether this story classifies as a fairy tale is not the only controversy raised by the text. The Talmud is very unclear as to exactly who is Yannai. Amongst the first generation of Amoraim in Palestine (ca. 200 - 250 C.E.), there lived a Rabbi in Sepphoris by the name of Yannai who was often referred to as "the Elder."[4] "Yannai and the Innkeeper" deliberately leaves the reader guessing as to whether this story is about this R. Yannai or perhaps it is about a random man who happened to be named Yannai. Simcha Fishbane does not believe that this could have been R. Yannai, as he points out: "Although it may be argued that Jannai is R. Jannai the Amora, it seems unlikely that the Talmud's editors would deviate from their literary patters and place the Rabbi in such a negative and embarrassing situation."[5] Nevertheless, Seidel disagrees, contending that the editors purposefully expunged R. Yannai's title from the text out of fear that a Rabbi would be associated with the practice of witchcraft; he explains:

> In several manuscripts, Yannai is mentioned without the title "Rabbi" (*Dikduke Soferim ad. loc.*). Rashi prefers the reading and Soncino apologetically comments that "a scholar would not practice witchcraft." Even the medieval manuscript traditions reflect the

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[4] H. L. Strack and Gunter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 83.

[5] Simcha Fishbane, "'Most Women Engage in Sorcery': An Analysis of Sorceresses in the Babylonian Talmud," *Jewish History* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 40 n#42.

> tendentious revisionistic (self-conscious) attitude that the Amoraim could not possibly have practiced magic. This embarrassment with Rabbinic magical activity may reflect Christian charges that Jews are involved with witchcraft.[6]

Unfortunately for Rashi and Fishbane, Yannai is not a common enough name in the Talmud to suggest that the character is an "any-man" character. Furthermore, although it is by no means absolute, more often than not, when the Talmud is referring to a random person, there is a clear indication of such (often by the phrase, "There was a certain man who..."). We may, therefore, follow Seidel's charge and assume that this story is about R. Yannai, the Elder.

There is further controversy regarding the antagonist of the story. Although the tale follows directly out of a conversation on the rabbinic belief that most witches are women, "Yannai and the Innkeeper" says nothing of a witch. Rather, the story relies on the point made in the previous discussion—that most women engage in witchery—providing only a description of the antagonist as female and allowing the reader to make the assumption that she is, therefore, a witch. Clearly, in the story, Yannai makes this assumption; when he catches her whispering over his drink, he immediately jumps to the conclusion that there is witchcraft involved.

Even though "Yannai and the Innkeeper" is a relatively short story, it incorporates rich imagery. First of all, the drink that the innkeepers serve to Yannai—the *shatita*, a drink of barley flour mixed into water (served possibly with honey)—was, by no means, a common drink. On the contrary, *shatita* is mentioned a mere seven times in the entire

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[6] Seidel, "Witches," 51 n#26.

Babylonian Talmud, of which only one gives a description of the drink.[7] Thus, Yannai, asking simply for water, is immediately offered something foreign and suspect. The fact that the liquid turns into scorpions when spilled on the floor does not help to alleviate his suspicions. It is interesting to note that, although of a much later tradition, Numbers Rabbah compares drinking to a scorpion because just as the tail of the scorpion injures a person, so, too, does drinking injure a person in the end.[8] This is precisely the intention here: this drink would have been injurious to Yannai had he drunk it. Lest there be any doubt of that, it turned into scorpions. According to Howard Schwartz, the *shatita* was supposed to turn Yannai into a donkey and, actually, Yannai was able to turn her into a donkey by serving her some of her own drink.[9] Regardless, if this is the case, being transformed into a donkey carries significant images. Naturally, the Rabbis viewed the donkey as a beast of burden as well as a symbol of foolishness.[10] Moreover, in "Yannai and the Innkeeper," there is an added dimension of humiliation as Yannai rides the transformed woman into town. As Seidel notes, "One is struck at the degrading posture of the defeated woman, humorous to the listener that is assumed in the tale, but quite clear in its ideological message: if you tangle with the Rabbis you risk making an ass out of yourself."[11] Furthermore, as Yassif indicates:

> ...the reversal is fashioned in an unquestionable comical manner; the symbolic imagery is not easily ignored: Yannai rides to market on the witch's back. The reversal by which the rival goes from rider to ridden is

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[7] b. *'Avod. Zar.* 38b.
[8] Num. Rab. 10:8.
[9] Howard Schwartz, *Lilith's Cave: Jewish Tales of the Supernatural* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 62.
[10] For further discussion regarding the donkey in folklore see "ass," *Funk and Wagnall's Standard Dictionary of Folklore Mythology and Legend.* 1:83-84.
[11] Seidel, "Witches," 51.

> the comic mechanism which creates the feeling of social strength and unity for the Jewish listeners of this anecdote.[12]

Finally, it is difficult to ignore the sexual implications of the story; hence, Seidel continues, "The language and imagery ('riding;' woman-as-donkey) which bolsters this lesson depicts a sexually dominant male. The male Rabbi must "mount" the female witch to reassert his power."[13]

Throughout the ancient world there are stories depicting the transformation of a human into a donkey. Greek legend tells of a contest between two gods in which King Midas was the judge. Choosing one as winner, Midas angered the other and was graced with the ears of a donkey—signifying his foolishness in choosing poorly. A myth originally from Egypt but made famous by Apuleius, a Roman satirist of the second century, tells of a man who was turned into a golden ass and then restored to human form after eating roses. Also important to note is that throughout the talmudic era, both Greek and Roman writers charged the Jews with worshipping the donkey; this was most likely due to a mistaken belief that the Jews belonged to the cult of Dionysus—a sect that held the donkey sacred and, in fact, did worship it.[14]

The Context

The story of "Yannai and the Innkeeper" follows a lengthy discussion regarding sorcery beginning with the Mishnah on the preceding page.[15] The conversation within

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[12] Eli Yassif, *The Hebrew Folktale: History, Genre, Meaning* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 179.
[13] Yassif, *Folktale*, 179.
[14] "Ass," *Funk and Wagnall's*, 1:83.
[15] m. *San.* 7:11. "'the sorcerer'—he that performs an act is culpable, and not he that [only] deceives the eyes...."

the Gemara jumps right into the question of whether or not witches can be men or women. Although the Mishnah only offers "sorcerer" in the masculine, the Talmud concludes that, indeed, it should be in the feminine, just as the Torah states: "You shall not permit a sorceress to live."[16] According to the Talmud, the Torah stresses female witchery over and above male witchery because the way of the world is that, "Most women engage in sorcery."[17] This early discussion then sets up the story; only by understanding the Rabbis' suspicion of all women do we truly understand how it is that Yannai knows that his drink is enchanted and that the "woman" is actually a witch. In fact, as Seidel points out, "...it might be disconcerting to discover that, in those tales, female spell-casting opponents are rarely labeled as 'witches.' In most of the tales the female opponent is simply a 'woman.'"[18]

This setup is particularly important in comparison to all of the other examples afforded throughout the talmudic passage. "Yannai and the Innkeeper" is the last of a three-part story cycle, each relating incidents of illusion. Yassif explains, "All three propose a method of distinguishing between true magic and slight of hand according to the principle determined in the legal discussion preceding the tales."[19] "Yannai and the Innkeeper," however, reaches a climax that the other two tales never even approach. The first story tells of a merchant who appeared to dismember a camel but at the sound of a bell the camel rose to its feet unscathed. The second involved a farmer who buys a donkey only to have it turn into a plank of wood when he tried to give it water. Even though the farmer complains to the merchant who sold him the donkey and gets his

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[16] Exod. 22:17.
[17] y. *San.* 25d & b. *San.* 67a.
[18] Seidel, "Witches," 50.
[19] Yassif, *Folktale*, 215.

money back in the end, this does not compare to the actions that Yannai takes against the witch. In neither of these stories is there a protagonist who, when faced with sorcery and deceit, then engages in a battle of magic.

The Subtext

Throughout this discussion of "Yannai and the Innkeeper," one talmudic concept has been the recurring theme: "Most women engage in sorcery!"[20] To some extent, the Rabbis are simply playing off the use of the feminine in the verse in Exodus; the discussion, however, could have ended once it was clear that the use of the feminine for witch/sorcery signified a preponderance of women involved. Nevertheless, the conversation did not stop there. Rather, it continued and offered a glimpse into the fears that the male-dominated rabbinic world held toward women. It would not have been surprising had the Rabbis, more often than not, cast foreign women in the role of witch, but this is not the case. The majority of named witches in the Talmud are never designated as Jew or non-Jew; the majority of comments made regarding women and witchcraft, though, are squarely about Jewish women. For example, in a discussion regarding whether one should recite a blessing over the smell of incense coming from an unknown origin, originally the answer had been yes, one should recite a blessing, but that is no longer the case, "R. Yose says, 'Even if the majority are Israelites he does not say a blessing, because the daughters of Israel use incense for sorcery.'"[21] Elsewhere in the Talmud, the Rabbis draw a similar conclusion regarding food found on the road. Is it permissible to partake of the food? Again, originally the answer had been yes, but:

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[20] b. *San.* 67a.
[21] b. *Ber.* 53a.

> Rabbi Johanan said, in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai, this was not taught except about the earlier generations, when the daughters of Israel did not indulge freely in sorcery, but in the latter generation, now that the daughters of Israel indulge freely in sorcery, we should pass by.[22]

The Rabbis were so confident that women would be seduced by magic that they suspected nearly any way in which women might have positioned their bodies. For example, according to the Talmud, "If two women sit at a crossroads, facing one another, they must be engaged in magic."[23] In addition, if one woman was dangerous then two women—as we find in "Yannai and the Innkeeper"—were an outright menace to society. The Rabbis viewed witchcraft as a social experience. Fishbane explains how the Rabbis' fear of women gathering is evident in the Talmud: "The illustrations cited by the Talmud, all Amoraic, also imply the existence of a sorority of female sorceresses, a phenomenon which seemingly existed in other cultures of Antiquity. The Talmud reference to a 'chief of women who exercise sorcery'...suggest some form of association."[24] The fear of women gathering only enhanced the Rabbis' fear that women would be seduced into witchery. The Talmud goes so far as to associate seduction of a sexual nature to witchcraft:

> A daughter is a vain treasure to her father; through anxiety on her account, he cannot sleep at night. When she is a child—lest she be seduced; when she is a young woman—lest she be guilty of sexual immorality; when she is grown—lest she not marry; when she is married—lest she will not have children; when she is old—lest she will be involved in witchcraft.[25]

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[22] b. *'Eruv.* 64b.
[23] b. *Pesaḥ.* 111a.
[24] Fishbane, "Sorcery," 35 (b. *Pesaḥ.* 110a.)
[25] b. *San.* 100b regarding the verse from Ben Sira 42:11.

According to the Talmud, in every stage of a woman's life, she is expected to succumb to a seduction of some sort. Ultimately, the Talmud is relatively straightforward with regard to its opinion of women and witchcraft: "The more women the more witchcraft."[26] Before we assume, however, that this opinion is only held in the Babylonian Talmud, the Palestinian Talmud offers an opinion as well: "R. Shimon bar Yoḥai learned: the best of heathens—kill him; the best of snakes—smash its skull; the best of women—is filled with witchcraft."[27]

With regard to men engaging in sorcery, the Talmud is quick to excuse them, explaining that it is permitted to learn sorcery as long as it is merely for the sake of wisdom: "It is taught, the one who does the deed [of sorcery] is liable, but in order to learn is different, for the masters said, 'do not learn in order to do'; do not learn in order to do, but to understand and to teach."[28] In fact, men of the highest standing were encouraged to have some knowledge and understanding of sorcery. As Rebecca Leeses points out: "...men skilled in sorcery should be members of the Sanhedrin, not in order to do sorcery but to be able to judge cases dealing with sorcery."[29]

Nevertheless, Yannai is not lauded for his dabbling in sorcery or even excused. On the contrary, he is humiliated. As Fishbane notes, "In the few cases, as in our instance, that a male sorcerer is mentioned in the Talmud he is presented as of lower status than the woman."[30] In his book, *Religion, Science and Magic: In Concert and in Conflict*, Jacob Neusner argues that the story of Yannai and the witch is a good example

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[26] m. *'Avot* 2:7.
[27] y. *Qidd.* 66c.
[28] b. *San.* 68a.
[29] Rebecca Lesses, "Exe(o)rcising Power: Women as Sorceresses, Exorcists, and Demonesses in Babylonian Jewish Society of Late Antiquity," JAAR 69, no.2 (June 2001): 353.
[30] Fishbane, "Sorcery," 40 n#40.

of the Rabbis' ultimate stance on magic—namely, magic is wrong when practiced by others but permissible when they are the practitioners.[31] Yet, this argument only stands if Yannai is, indeed, not a Rabbi. If Yannai is, in fact, R. Yannai, the Elder, then how can he be humiliated in the end? Schwartz explains, "This tale perfectly mirrors the ambivalent rabbinic attitude toward magic. Rabbi Jannai...demonstrates the defensive approach of the Rabbis to magic, using it only to protect themselves when they are forced to do so."[32] Yannai was forced to resort to magic in the story and, for that, the Talmud does not castigate him outright. On the other hand, even though forced, Yannai did turn to magic. Therefore, he had to be taught a lesson, as Schwartz explains:

> Thus is Rabbi Jannai humiliated in public, where he is seen riding on a woman. This implies that because of his involvement in magic and his flaunting of his victory, he requires humiliation in order to be punished. Thus the story demonstrates both mastery of the supernatural and repugnance toward it at the same time.[33]

In the end, the Talmud teaches that the practice of magic could never bring a person complete victory over his or her situation. Therefore, we are taught not to dabble in sorcery—even to beat a witch at her own game.

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[31] Jacob Neusner, *Religion, Science and Magic: In Concert and in Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 74.
[32] Schwartz, *Supernatural*, 229.
[33] Schwartz, *Supernatural*, 229.

R. Joshua and the Witch[1]

Once, R Eliezer, R. Joshua, and Rabban Gamliel went up to Rome. They arrived at a certain town where they found children making small piles and saying, "Thus the children of the land of Israel make and say: 'this is a donation and this is a tithe.'" The Rabbis said to themselves, "It is likely that there are Jews here!"

They came into one home and were received there. When they sat down to eat, they noticed that each dish that [their hosts] brought in to them would first be brought into a small room, and then would be brought to them. They worried that perhaps they themselves were eating sacrifices offered to the dead. They said to their host, "What engages you that every dish you bring before us, if you do not bring it first into a small room, then you do not bring it to us?"

The host replied to them, "I have a very old father, and he has decreed upon himself that he will not come out from that small room until he would be able to meet the sages of Israel."

They said to him, "Go and tell him: 'come out here to them, for they are here.'" He came out to them.

They asked him, "What troubles you?"

He answered them, "Pray for my son for he has not brought forth a child."

R. Eliezer said to R. Joshua, "Well, Joshua ben Ḥananiah, let us see what you do."

[1] y. *San.* 25d.

R. Joshua said to them, "Bring me flax seeds," and they brought him flax seeds. He appeared to sow the seeds upon the table. He appeared to sprinkle water upon them. He appeared to raise them. He appeared to uproot them until he drew up a woman by the twists of her hair.

He said to her, "Disengage whatever magic you have done."

She replied to him, "I will not disengage it."

He said to her, "If you do not, I will publicize your secrets."

She said to him, "I cannot, for the magical charms have been cast into the sea." R. Joshua ordered the Prince of the Sea and he threw out the magical charms. The Rabbis prayed for their host and he had the merit to bring forth a son, R. Judah b. Batera.

They said, "If we came here only for the purpose of bringing forth that righteous man, it would have been enough for us."

The Text

As many good talmudic tales, this story begins by introducing us to the Rabbis who will be the heroes in the end: Rabban Gamliel II, R. Eliezer ben Hyrkanos, and R. Joshua ben Ḥananiah. Of these particular Rabbis, not one is an unlikely leading man. Each of them is noted throughout rabbinic literature not only for his experiences and insights into the tradition but for his prominence and great esteem within his communities. In fact, each presided over a renowned academy during the turn of the second century.[2] Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that, although Rabban Gamliel is arguably the most prestigious of the three and R. Eliezer clearly holds a senior position

[2] Meilziner, *Talmud*, 25-27.

over R. Joshua,[3] they both turn to R. Joshua to tackle the situation at hand. Why, then, does R. Eliezer throw down the gauntlet before R. Joshua? As Eli Yassif points out in his discourse on Hebrew folktales, "R. Joshua ben Ḥananiah was known as a staunch opponent of witches—particularly non-Jewish ones."[4]

Throughout the rabbinic literature, R. Joshua is at the center of opinions regarding witches as well as events involving magic. By his resourcefulness and intellect, he was said to have triumphed over the sages of Athens;[5] and, in at least a dozen accounts, he was said to have matched wits with Caesar in Rome. Immediately preceding "R. Joshua and the Witch," the Talmud tells of a run-in R. Eliezer, R. Akiva, and R. Joshua have with a heretic in Tiberius; here, too, does R. Eliezer turn to R. Joshua to handle the situation and here, too, does R. Joshua successfully combine magic and a mastery over the Prince of the Sea in order to prevail.[6] Between this event with the heretic, the confrontation with the witch, and his ability to turn vegetables into animals that are real enough to give birth,[7] R. Joshua's experience with magic could be suspect. Do his actions maintain the general rabbinic opinion that, "he who does a deed is liable, but he who merely creates an illusion is exempt"?[8] In regard to the story of the witch of Rome, Howard Schwartz ultimately defends R. Joshua's use of magic as within the rabbinic parameters:

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[3] Not only was R. Eliezer referred to as "the Elder" but R. Joshua is often associated not only with R. Eliezer and the second generation of Tanaim but also with R. Akiva and the third generation of Tanaim (see b. San. 101a-b and 68a.)

[4] Eli Yassif, *The Hebrew Folktale: History, Genre, Meaning* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 159.

[5] b. *Bek.* 8b-9a.

[6] y. *San.* 25d.

[7] y. *San.* 25d.

[8] m. *San.* 7:11.

> The Rabbis demonstrate a mastery of the supernatural that permits them to overcome the adversary—but on their own terms. Whether this meets Abaye's distinction between magic and illusion is unclear, although it is true that the flax seeds in this tale of R. Joshua which appear to grow magically, afterwards return to their original state, suggesting that all that occurred was, in fact, illusion.[9]

The key word in this story is *appeared*; R. Joshua does not actually grow flax upon the table and draw out a woman by her hair from within it, he only appears to do these things—they are, in fact, illusions. Therefore, in battle with the witch in this story, R. Joshua does indeed uphold the rabbinic injunction against the performance of tangible deeds. Nevertheless, many of his other experiences suggest that this injunction was not always at the forefront of his mind.

Although R. Joshua's magic could be construed as illusion in this story, the witch's magic is clearly not illusory. She had been charged with causing the master and mistress of the house to be sterile—a great offense in the eyes of the Rabbis. Yassif suggests that her spell on the couple was meant to be an act of vengeance, presumably for a sexual offense committed against her by the master of the house.[10] Yassif continues to explain that rather than being some sort of enchanted, demonic character, "Witches, according to these tales, are respected women in society, perhaps even members of the elite, who secretly practice witchcraft, and as such are dangerous."[11] The Rabbis viewed secrecy as so central to witchcraft that R. Joshua, merely by threatening to publicize her practices, was able to compel her into revealing where the charms were that held the

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[9] Howard Schwartz, *Miriam's Tambourine: Jewish Folktales from Around the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 356.
[10] Yassif, *Folktale*, 159.
[11] Yassif, *Folktale*, 159.

curse. This fear of publicity was realistic. Not only would exposure be damaging to her reputation, but also, as Brigitte Kern-Ulmer indicates, "Such a threat should be considered in the context of Roman Law which usually deemed magic to be an illegal activity."[12] Ultimately, a threat of exposure could equal a threat to her life.

By whatever means necessary—including threatening another's life—once R. Eliezer turned to R. Joshua and challenged him, we know that R. Joshua would not rest until the host and hostess were with child. This is his task: to best the witch and allow the conception of R. Judah b. Batera. As the sages declared in the end, "If we came here only for the purpose of bringing forth that righteous man (R. Judah), it would have been enough for us."

R. Joshua's technique in prevailing over his task, although illusory, does suggest a form of sympathetic magic. As Yassif explains:

> Noteworthy, too, are the stages of R. Joshua bar Ḥananiah's magic, which stimulate the process of conception, gestation, and childbirth: sowing, watering, growth, and emergence. This suggests the technique of sympathetic magic, that is enabling procreation by means of mimicking it magically.[13]

This is well within the realm of what is permissible according to the Rabbis. Sympathetic magic does not compel the deity to behave in any particular manner; rather, it encourages an outcome or process by modeling it. Actually, it is R. Joshua's relationship with Raḥab,[14] the Prince of the Sea, which falls outside the realm of traditional rabbinics.

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[12] Brigitte Kern-Ulmer, "The Depiction of Magic in Rabbinic Texts," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 27, no. 3 (August 1996): 292.

[13] Yassif, *Folktale*, 159.

[14] Raḥab: the Rager. Although not a dominant character in this story, Raḥab is one of the more mythic characters in ancient Hebrew texts. As another name for Leviathan, Tannin and the serpent, Raḥab represents one of the only dragons to be mentioned in the Bible. By talmudic times, Raḥab had softened

Rather than a more mainstream approach, Schwartz notes that, "The conjuring up of Rahab, the Prince of the Sea, in order to recover the amulet on which the spell was written, is a further demonstration of the mythic elements in Judaism and of their attraction even to the talmudic sages."[15] The Rabbis are often unwilling to sanction the mythic; nevertheless, certain talmudic sages are given permission to demonstrate the fantastical—R. Joshua is one of these sages. Plus, for the sake of the story, he must reclaim the magical charms that had been cast into the sea. Only with the witch's paraphernalia could he break the curse put on his host under the realm of "*similia similibus curantur*, that something could be cured by the same substance that caused the harm."[16]

The Context

The story of "R. Joshua and the Witch" flows very naturally within the text of tractate *Sanhedrin*. Even in the Mishnah, chapter seven of *Sanhedrin* is focused on the death penalty and who shall be punishable by stoning, burning, beheading or strangling. Since the sorcerer and witch are culpable for their tangible deeds and thereby subject to capital punishment, a discussion regarding sorcery and witchcraft ensues within the Gemara on chapter seven of the Mishnah. In both the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds, the discussion is quite straightforward; the Mishnah is very clear that sorcery is a punishable crime[17] and the legal definition for sorcery, according to the Mishnah, is the

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as a character; no longer was he referred to as a dragon or even as destructive, but rather as the angel of the sea or as the Prince of the Sea (as he is referred to here). See "Rahab," *Funk and Wagnall's Standard Dictionary of Folklore Mythology and Legend* 2:920.

[15] Schwartz, *Miriam*, 356.

[16] Kern-Ulmer, "Magic," 291.

[17] m. *San.* 7:4.

tangible performance of an act rather then a mere illusion.[18] The Gemara on chapter seven progresses relatively smoothly, discussing all of the particulars regarding who exactly is culpable for which capital crimes. At a certain point in the discussion, the mishnaic meandering over witchcraft and sorcery become the primary topic.[19] After confirming the necessity of putting a sorceress to death, the Palestinian Talmud offers an example in which R. Joshua has a sorcerous heretic swallowed up by the sea, thereby killing him. The story of R. Joshua and the witch is a natural progression as they were already talking about R. Joshua and his encounters with people wielding magic. "R. Joshua and the Witch," however, does not prove the point that the Rabbis had been making: as far as we know, the witch was not put to death in the end. More grievous than the lack of capital punishment, though, is the fact that after lengthy discussion regarding the necessity of ridding the world of magicians, R. Joshua is lauded for his use of magic.

Throughout the Talmud, there is a constant tension between the biblical ruling—"You shall not permit a sorceress to live"[20]—and the Rabbis' counter-magic. As Jonathan Seidel points out, "The Rabbis continue to work magic against spells which threaten the implementation of 'their' Torah. Counter-magic is legitimized in fighting the unseen, secret forces which threaten who they are and what they do."[21] As long as the rabbinic act is for good—such as bringing forth R. Judah b. Batera—they do not have to label their actions as magic or sorcery. Even if the term "magic" is bandied about or magical acts hinted at within a story, the Rabbis could claim that their actions were only

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[18] m. *San.* 7:11.
[19] y. *San.* 25d (at the very top of the column) and b. *San.* 67a.
[20] Ex. 22:18.
[21] Jonathan Seidel, "'Release Us and We Will Release You!' Rabbinic Encounters with Witches and Witchcraft," *JAGNES* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 55.

illusions: it only appeared as if the flax seed grew before their very eyes and that a woman was pulled out from it.

So what are we to make of R. Joshua's statement immediately following our story that he could "take cucumbers and melons and turn them into sheep and hosts of sheep, and they will produce still more"?[22] The Rabbis distinguished between real magic and illusion by whether they could sink their teeth into the object. If someone claimed to be able to turn a rock into a calf, the test was in the eating of the beef. If these sheep were real enough to procreate, we can assume that they would have been real enough to be consumed. Ultimately, what redeems R. Joshua is that no one ate of these sheep that he could have produced; in fact, it is unclear as to whether he actually produced them at all—perhaps he was only boasting about what he could do.

Before "R. Joshua and the Witch," there was little discussion among the rabbis of the Talmud as to the nuances of how one defined magic. The Talmud had simply stated that to practice witchcraft was to bring upon oneself a death sentence. The story helped to blur the lines and brought up important questions regarding appearances of magic. After the story, the Rabbis were able to consider just how blurry the lines could get as well as their own inclinations. Finally, R. Derosa explains that only one in three examples of magic use were actually punishable by death.[23]

The Subtext

Clearly, the Rabbis had intended R. Joshua's encounter with the witch to explain the marvelous beginnings of R. Batera as well as to spur further discussion of the

[22] Jacob Neusner, *The Talmud of the Land of Israel: A Preliminary Translation and Explanation* Vol. 31 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984).
[23] y. *San.* 25d.

definition of witchcraft. Nevertheless, this story was not written purely as a jumping off point or as a pre-natal legend. The ultimate point for the Rabbis remains consistent, even within such a mythical and magical tale: when evil forces challenge the guardians of Torah, Torah always wins.[24] No matter how much fun the Rabbis might have with the challenge, the end result must be the same; R. Joshua has to prevail because he has Torah on his side. At a time when Jews were in persistent conflict with the gentile world, confidence in Torah and in the sages was encouraged throughout the literature. Stories depicting the vanquishing of witches and sorcerers by Rabbis rich in the wisdom of Jewish tradition and law stood as proof that, although alluring, witchcraft, sorcery, augury, divination, and the like were no match for God and God's agents.

The Rabbis intended for tales such as "R. Joshua and the Witch" to be a confirmation of the power of the sages, as the inheritors of Torah; they did not necessarily intend for the story to be about the sexual mishaps that men and women tend to get themselves into. Nevertheless, the entire tale revolves around the conflict between appropriate and inappropriate sexual expression. As I have already discussed, R. Joshua's task began with the challenge of uncovering the cause of the host and hostess's sterility. Accordingly, Yassif points out that a curse of sterility would have been the appropriate act of vengeance taken against those who have been sexually inappropriate.[25] As the story continued, R. Joshua prevailed over the witch by taking control over the sexual conflict in three ways. First, he "magically" reenacted procreation—the goal of appropriate sexual conduct. Next, he draws her out by her hair; in fact, it is by her hair

[24] Yassif, *Folktale*, 159.
[25] Yassif, *Folktale*, 159.

that R. Joshua first takes control over her. This is by no small coincidence, as Seidel explains:

> One might note the sexual allure and power of hair in Rabbinic culture—hair has a remote control effect on men through vision and smell, let alone touch. The out-of-control woman has long, uncontrolled hair—whether she is young and beautiful or old and ugly is irrelevant.[26]

Finally, R. Joshua threatened to tell all of her sorcerous ways. This was not merely a means to intimidate her, as Seidel argues, rather, "the language (publicizing 'secrets') suggests domination and sexual humiliation of a threatening witch."[27] The resolution of the story was harmonious not only because the witch was bested but also because it returned the household to a state of sexual propriety.

[26] Seidel, "Witches," 55 n#51.
[27] Seidel, "Witches," 55.

Shimon ben Shetaḥ and the Witches of Ashkelon

This man saw, in a dream, his friend (who had recently died) in the gardens, in the orchards, in the fountains of water. And he saw Bar Ma'ayan, the village tax collector, standing on the shore of the river. He wanted to reach the water but he could not reach it.

And he saw Miriam, the daughter of "leaves and onions," hanging by the nipples of her breasts. But there are those who say, "The Gate of Hell was affixed to her ear."

After a few days a certain righteous man saw, in a dream, his friend (who had recently died) walking through the gardens, through the orchards, through the fountains of water. And he saw Bar Ma'ayan, the village tax collector, with his tongue hanging out by the river. He wanted to reach the water but he could not reach it.

And he saw Miriam, the daughter of "leaves and onions." R. Eliezer bar Yose said she was hanging by the nipples of her breasts. Rabbi Yose ben Ḥaninah said, "The pivot of the Gate of Hell was affixed to her ear."

The righteous man asked them, "Why is it like this?"

They said to him, "Because she fasted and made it well known."

[1] y. *San.* 23c.

The man asked them, "Until when will it be like this?"

They replied to him, "Until Shimon ben Shetaḥ comes and then we will remove it from her ear and place it in his ear."

He asked them, "But what is his crime?"

They answered him, "Because he vowed on his life and said, 'If I become *Nasi*, I will punish all witchcraft with death.' And this very thing happened to him: he was made *Nasi* but he has not punished with death. Rather, on the contrary, behold, there are eighty women in a cave of Ashkelon destroying the world. Go and tell him."

He said to them, "He is a great man and he will not believe me."

But there are some who say that she fasted on one day and had blood drawn the day after.

He said to them, "Until when will she be like this?"

They replied to him, "Until Shimon ben Shetaḥ comes and then we will remove it from her ear and stick it in his ear."

He asked them, "But why?"

They answered him, "Because he said, 'If I become *Nasi*, I will punish witchcraft with death.' But behold, he has become *Nasi* but he has not punished witchcraft with death. Rather, there are eighty witches situated in a cave of Ashkelon destroying the world. So go tell him."

He said to them, "I am afraid for he is the *Nasi* and he will not believe me."

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[2] y. *Ḥag.* 77d-78a.

They said to him, "He is very modest and will believe you. But if he does not believe you take out your eye and put it in your hand."

He took his eye out and put it in his hand.

They said, "Return it."

And so his eye returned and it became like the other one.

The man went and told Shimon ben Shetaḥ. He wanted to do the sign before him, but Shimon ben Shetaḥ said to him, "You do not need to. I know that you are a pious man. Even so, in my heart I thought it, in public it was not spoken."

It was a rainy day. Shimon ben Shetaḥ took with him eighty select men wearing clean garments. And they took with them eighty new pots. He said to them, "When I whistle, wear the garment

They said to him, "If he believes you, well and good. If not, do this as a sign before him: put your hand on your eye and take it out. Then return it."

(And so he took his eye out) and returned it.

The man went and told the incident to Shimon ben Shetaḥ. He wanted to do the sign before him, but he would not permit it. Shimon ben Shetaḥ said to him, "I know that you are a pious man more than this you can do. Plus, it was not in public that I spoke, rather it was in my heart that I thought it." And with that, Shimon ben Shetaḥ arose.

On a rainy day, Shimon ben Shetaḥ took with him eighty select men and placed in their hands eighty clean garments. And they took with them new pots with lids upon them. He said to

from within your pot and when I whistle a second time, come out."

When Shimon ben Shetaḥ came to the cave of Ashkelon he said, "Hello, hello! Open up for me. I am one of yours."

When he entered one of them said what she said and produced bread. And one said what she said and produced

them, "When I whistle one time, put on your clean garments and when I whistle a second time, come out, all of you, as one. And when you come out, each of you embrace one and lift her off the ground, for the nature of the sorcerer is that when one lifts her from the ground, she cannot do anything."

Shimon ben Shetaḥ went and came to the entrance of the cave. He said to the witches, "Hello, hello! Open up for me. I am one of yours."

They said to him, "How did you come on such a rainy day?"

He replied to them, "I was walking between the drops."

They asked him, "And what did you come here to do?"

He said, "To learn and to teach. Let each of us do what will make one wise."

And it happened that one of them said what she said and produced bread. And one said what she said and

cooked food. Yet another said what she said and produced wine. They then asked him, "What can you do?"

He told them, "I can whistle two times and bring about for here eighty choice men wearing clean garments who will rejoice and make you happy."

They said to him, "We want them!"

When Shimon ben Shetaḥ whistled they dressed in their clean garments. When he whistled a second time they all came out as one. He signaled to each one of the men to take one of the women and to lift her off the ground. So that their magic would not be successful.

So he ordered the one who had produced bread, "Bring forth bread." But she could not produce it. So he said, "Bring the pole for crucifixion!"

He ordered another, "Bring forth

produced meat. Yet another said what she said and produced cooked food. Still another said what she said and produced wine. They then asked him, "What can you do?"

He told them, "I can whistle two whistles and produce for you eighty choice men who will be with you, who will rejoice, and make you happy."

They said to him, "Yes! We want them!"

Shimon ben Shetaḥ whistled once and they dressed in their clean garments. He whistled a second time and they all came out as one. He said to all who arrived, "Get to know a partner."

cooked food." But she could not produce it. So he said, "Bring the pole for crucifixion!"

He ordered yet another, "Bring forth wine." But she could not produce it. So he said, "Bring the pole for crucifixion!"

And so he did with all of them.

Thus we have learned: eighty women were hanged by Shimon ben Shetaḥ in Ashkelon. We do not judge even two capital cases in one day but the hour required it.[1]

They lifted the women up and took them and crucified them.

This is the event that we have learned: Shimon ben Shetaḥ hanged women in Ashkelon. There are those who say eighty women were hung. We do not judge even two capital cases in one day but the hour required it.[2]

The Text

"Shimon ben Shetaḥ and the Witches of Ashkelon" is one of the oldest of all of the fairy tales to be found in the Talmud, as it dates back to the period of the *zuggot*—meaning the pairs of Rabbinic leadership from 200 B.C.E. to 20 C.E. Shimon ben Shetaḥ, in particular, and his counterpart, Yehuda ben Tabbai, lived during the reign of Alexander Yannai and Queen Salome (103-76 B.C.E.). As a matter of fact, as Strack and

Stemberger point out, Shimon ben Shetaḥ "is reputed to have successfully supported the Pharisaic party under Alexander Jannaeus."[3]

Determining the years of the hero of this story is relatively easy. However, simply to say that Shimon ben Shetaḥ lived during the turn of the first century B.C.E. does not prove that this story in particular must also date back to such an early era. Among modern commentators, there is much dispute as to how factual this story might be. Although Schwartz states outright that, "There is little doubt that 'The Witches of Ashkelon' is, in fact, based on a historical event: the hanging of eighty witches in the city of Ashkelon,"[4] many have questioned the historicity not only of the story as it appears in the Talmud, but even of this initial event that prompted this fairy tale version.[5] If eighty witches were hanged in Ashkelon by Shimon ben Shetaḥ, then this story finds its origin as early as 100 B.C.E. If not, then there is no reason to assume that the story must be any older than R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanos (ca. 120 C.E.)—the Rabbi who, in the Mishnah, tells the tale of Shimon ben Shetaḥ and these eighty witches. Whether we can date it back to the *zuggot* historically, this story remains "the most ancient evidence of witches in the talmudic literature"[6]

Shimon ben Shetaḥ is an interesting hero for an event such as this. As mentioned above, he was credited with promoting the Pharisees successfully through unfavorable rule; furthermore, he was distinguished for establishing boys' schools (in order to ease

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[3] H. L. Strack and Gunter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 83.
[4] Howard Schwartz, *Elijah's Violin & Other Jewish Fairy Tales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 4.
[5] Jonathan Seidel, "'Release Us and We Will Release You!' Rabbinic Encounters with Witches and Witchcraft," JAGNES 3, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 57.
[6] Meir Bar-Ilan, "Witches in The Bible and in the Talmud," *Approaches to Ancient Judaism V* (ed. H. Basser and S. Fishbane; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 11.

the financial burden involved in hiring private tutors).[7] When these credits are considered together with those narratives where he proudly stands alone in his zealous pursuit of justice,[8] it is not surprising in the least that Shimon ben Shetaḥ became one of the first Rabbis to be the hero of a fairy tale. It is interesting to note that between the two Talmuds there is a difference of opinion regarding Shimon ben Shetaḥ's relationship to Queen Salome—according to the Babylonian Talmud, he is Queen Salome's brother, whereas this is not specified in the Palestinian Talmud where he has no named familial ties.[9]

Just as Shimon ben Shetaḥ is a likely hero for his time, the witches are equally as likely villains for their time. The fear of the power of witchcraft was rampant throughout the ancient world. In response to this fear, the Torah forbids all forms of witchcraft as an abomination before God: pyromancy, augury, soothsaying, divination, sorcery, thaumaturgy, or necromancy.[10] The assumption made by the biblical authors was that witchery and sorcery were everywhere, enticing us to stray from the true worship of God. As time went on, this belief did not die or even dissipate in any way. Rather, the Mishnah continued this fear of witchery and, by the time the Talmud is codified in the 6th century, the fear of witchcraft had been compounded by vast amounts of superstition. Therefore, it is not surprising just how important Shimon ben Shetaḥ's mission is to the heavenly court (that is ready to send him to *Gehenna* for not fulfilling his vow and ridding Ashkelon of its witches).

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[7] Strack and Stemberger, *Talmud*, 9.
[8] See b. *San.* 19b and Deut. Rab. 3:3.
[9] Shmuel Safrai, "Tales of the Sages in the Palestinian Tradition and the Babylonian Talmud," in *Studies in Aggadah and Folk-Literature* (ed. J. Heinemann and D. Noy; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1971), 229-30.
[10] Deut. 18:10-12

The witches themselves are everything that the Rabbis are fighting against. According to Bar-Ilan, "It may be that Simeon ben Shetaḥ's action was linked to the attempt to expunge idolatry from the country. In any event, these witches were evidently not Jewish."[11] Nevertheless, whether or not these women had begun their lives as Jews is ultimately a moot point for the Rabbis, for now they could not be regarded as members of the Jewish community. Women living communally at the edge of town would be suspect to begin with, but to be associated with idolatry as well? The Rabbis could not associate these women with the Jewish community. Therefore, by calling them witches, the Rabbis achieve two goals: they effectively disassociate the women from the community and they mark the women as corrupt and perverted, underhanded deceivers, life-suckers and fiery destroyers.[12]

In time, "Shimon ben Shetaḥ and the Witches of Ashkelon" proves to be a paradigm for how the Rabbis differ from the magical villains that they might face. Throughout the Talmud, actual transformative magic (that cannot be explained away) is considered to be an affront to God. The Rabbis may dabble in illusion—but only sparingly—otherwise, their only acceptable defense against those who would insult God through the use of magic was their cunning. In this tale, Shimon ben Shetaḥ proves to be a master of cunning, especially considering the magical prowess he was up against. The women were clearly skilled in their craft; they needed only to speak a few words and their wills would be done. As Sperber points out, the phrase "said what she said" could be more accurately translated as "muttered a spell" or "said a magic formula."[13] Shimon

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[11] Bar-Ilan, "Witches," 11.
[12] Seidel, "Witches," 58.
[13] Daniel Sperber, *Magic and Folklore in Rabbinic Literature* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1994), 63-4.

ben Shetaḥ, on the other hand, does not use any sort of magical incantation or device. Rather, his "tactics include deception and disguise: Shimon ben Shetaḥ shows no ethical hesitancy in lying as he takes on the costume and mode of the enemy in order to penetrate their abode."[14] Of course, why should he hesitate? As long as he has not crossed the line into practicing magic himself, why should he consider lying as an unethical tactic? According to the Rabbis, there was no need for him to hesitate at that point—he was doing exactly what he was called upon to do: rid Ashkelon of the witches. Moreover, he succeeded in his task by merely outwitting them—he did not turn to the use of magic. Nevertheless, one could argue that he did not emerge from the event morally unscathed.

Throughout the rabbinic literature, "Prostitution and witchcraft have always been perceived as two sides of a single coin."[15] It should not be surprising, therefore, that these women are assumed to be prostituting themselves in the cave. Yassif notes how "the erotic element of the tale is blurred, although it does not vanish completely. Eighty witches together in one cave certainly do not stay there solely for purposes of sorcery—they probably made their living by ritual prostitution."[16] Consequently, it is not surprising that Shimon ben Shetaḥ entices the women with "eighty choice men who will be with you, who will rejoice, and make you happy." Nor should we be surprised when, as the climax of the story draws near and the men are signaled to come into the cave that they might each find a partner amongst the women and disarm her, Shimon ben Shetaḥ directs each man to "Get to *know* a partner." This is not merely an indication that each man should introduce himself, learn his partner's name, and perhaps find out where she

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[14] Seidel, "Witches," 57.
[15] Eli Yassif, *The Hebrew Folktale: History, Genre, Meaning* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 157.
[16] Yassif, *Folktale*, 157.

came from. No, this is clearly a directive to the men that they should engage the women sexually. It is unclear as to whether the intention of the story was that the men actually had sexual intercourse with the women. All the same, "R. Simeon ben Shetaḥ's selection of eighty tall young men, his suggestion to the witches that they have a good time with them, and their choice of a partner each, all indicate the sage's exploitation of their licentious ways."[17] If following through with intercourse was implicit in the plan, then perhaps this tale indicates the sage's licentious ways as well.

The sexual agendas that are carried throughout "Shimon ben Shetaḥ and the Witches of Ashkelon" are paralleled only by Shimon ben Shetaḥ's militancy in vividness. As Seidel colorfully relates, "In his use of shock troop methods (surprise, whistling, quick immobilization) to overwhelm the enemy, Shimon ben Shetaḥ serves as a proto guerrilla-fighter against lethal enemies."[18] Yassif agrees that this is a war story but credits Shimon ben Shetaḥ with more forethought as he describes the attack:

> This tale of war against magic is built as a military operation in every detail: the intelligence report, the selection of the day of battle for its weather, the logistic preparations (the vessels and ritual shawls), formation outside of the cave, the deception, the set of orders with emphasis on two points: the enemy's weak spot and the means of communication between the vanguard (R. Simeon ben Shetaḥ) and the main camp. All of these indicate a story carefully planned according to the conventions of the war tale.[19]

It is interesting to note that although Shimon ben Shetaḥ and his crew do not engage in magic themselves, they do respect the rules surrounding magical practices as

[17] Yassif, *Folktale*, 157.
[18] Seidel, "Witches," 57.
[19] Yassif, *Folktale*, 157.

they understand them. The military operation might have been sufficient had Shimon ben Shetaḥ merely enlisted the eighty men to take the women by surprise. Tradition throughout the ancient world, however, recognized that with regard to witches, "Their power remains with them only so long as their feet are in contact with the ground.... Indeed, one Jewish author suggested without a smile that for this reason the only way to deal with sorcerers is to 'suspend them between heaven and earth'!"[20] The prevailing theory is that this tradition was born out of the notion that "these women were connected in one fashion or another to the ritual of 'Mother Earth,' and therefore removing them from the earth prevented it from defending its priestesses."[21] Whether these women were in any way connected to a Mother Earth cult, by the telling of this tale, witches were already so closely linked with the ground that even Shimon ben Shetaḥ appreciated the connection.

The Context

The story of "Shimon ben Shetaḥ and the Witches of Ashkelon" begins modestly in the Mishnah:

> The sages say, "A man is hanged but a woman is not hanged." Rabbi Eliezer said to them, "Did not Shimon ben Shetaḥ hang women in Ashkelon?!" They said to him, "Eighty women he hanged, whereas we do not judge two cases on the same day."[22]

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[20] Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion* (New York: Behrman House, 1939), 13.
[21] Bar-Ilan, "Witches," 27 n#13.
[22] m. *San.* 6:4.

Throughout tractate Sanhedrin the Rabbis continued to debate the details of capital punishment. In the Mishnah immediately before this story of Shimon ben Shetaḥ, for example, the Rabbis were engaged in a debate regarding how naked should a man be when stoned to death versus how naked should a woman not be when stoned to death. Continuing with this idea that men and women do not face capital punishment equally, our Mishnah moves on to the question of hanging: should women be hanged? Shimon ben Shetaḥ's story provides an obvious proof text for R. Eliezer—a proponent of capital punishment for women—that, yes, women are subject to execution by hanging. Although the Mishnah does not go into tremendous detail regarding the story of Shimon ben Shetaḥ and these eighty women, it is presumed to be well known and is picked up in great detail by the Palestinian Talmud.

Since the original reference to the tale is found in Mishnah Sanhedrin, we might assume that the first full version of the story is that which can be found within tractate Sanhedrin of the Palestinian Talmud. Just as in the Mishnah, the discussion begins around the issue of hanging but, unlike the earlier text, the Talmud suddenly seems to sidetrack to a debate regarding who was *Nasi* (the patriarch or president of the court): Shimon ben Shetaḥ or Yehuda ben Tabbai? Although some argue that Tabbai was *Nasi* and Shetaḥ was head of the court, the Talmud relates our tale seemingly as proof that, indeed, Shetaḥ was *Nasi*. In actuality, however, this was not the point of the story. Rather, it is in the final line of the story that the purpose of the tale is realized: "Thus we have learned: eighty women were hanged by Shimon ben Shetaḥ in Ashkelon. We do not judge even two capital cases in one day but the hour required it." The moral of the story

is that although all of the Rabbis were aware of this tale in which capital punishment is exercised strictly, it must be recognized as an extreme example.

Although the earliest reference is found in Mishnah Sanhedrin, an argument could be made that, in fact, the version found within tractate Ḥagigah of the Palestinian Talmud is actually the original story. Clearly, the introduction—that seemed so abrupt in tractate Sanhedrin—flows much more nicely within tractate Ḥagigah. The mishnah in Ḥagigah that prompts our talmudic passage delineates the opinions of the *zuggot* regarding the laying of hands in the ordination of communal leaders. As the Talmud picks up the discussion regarding *zuggot*, the Rabbis attempt to answer another question: the debate regarding who was *Nasi*, Shimon ben Shetaḥ or Yehuda ben Tabbai? Whereas this debate seemed inappropriate in tractate Sanhedrin, in Ḥagigah it flows organically from a text outlining the *zuggot*. Another argument that could be made for the primacy of the Ḥagigah text is that it is a more complete text (excluding the detail in the end regarding how Shimon ben Shetaḥ tested each woman before hanging her). Ultimately, however, the length of the text does not determine the authenticity of the text.

With regard to this particular story, it is most probable that the two versions sprang forth from an earlier version lost to us today. As such, they reflect a common tradition that evolved independently from one another and then later was edited to reflect each other. First of all, this was a well-known tale long before the Rabbis of the Talmud related it; therefore, it is very reasonable that two writers, independent of one another, would access this story in particular in order to prove their points. Second of all, throughout much of the two texts there is a subtle yet glaring difference between the Hebrew and Aramaic usages: often times, sentences are reversed from one text to

another. Furthermore, whereas the Sanhedrin text tends to use much more Hebrew, the Ḥagigah text relies more heavily on Aramaic, and vice versa. Finally, whereas the Sanhedrin text focuses in on the capital punishment portion of the story (providing more detail of that part of the exposition), Ḥagigah is more daring in its account (providing more detail regarding the sexual innuendoes and being more explicit regarding their sorcery).

The story of "Shimon ben Shetaḥ and the Witches of Ashkelon" was legendary enough to be noticed when not included in the Talmud. Although we can find quite a few stories on Shimon ben Shetaḥ in the Babylonian Talmud, this story is conspicuously absent—or at least Rashi seemed to think so. In tractate Sanhedrin of the Babylonian Talmud, the text alludes to the story of Bar Ma'ayan, the village tax collector.[23] As the Talmud does not continue the story, Rashi picks up the thread and tells not only of how Bar Ma'ayan was ultimately punished for being a less than righteous man, but Rashi also continues to tell his own version of "Shimon ben Shetaḥ and the Witches of Ashkelon." Although his version is considerably more succinct than either of the versions found in the Palestinian Talmud, he adds a new tradition regarding what befell Shimon ben Shetaḥ's son at the hands of the women's families:

> The kinsmen of the eighty women were thereby provoked to anger. Two of them came and bore witness against R. Simeon ben Shetaḥ's son, which made him liable to the death penalty, and he was sentenced to be put to death. On his way to be stoned, he said, "If I am guilty of this iniquity, let not my death be my expiation; but if I am not guilty, may my death be expiation for all my iniquitous deeds and may the collar [of perjury] encircle the necks of the witnesses."

[23] b. *San.* 44b.

When the witnesses heard what he had said, they retracted and confessed, "We are false witnesses." The father wished to bring his son back [from the place where he was to be stoned]. But the son said, "If you really wish to bring deliverance during your regime, regard me as though I were not your son [and let the Sanhedrin decide my fate].[24]

The Subtext

Despite the fact that "Shimon ben Shetaḥ and the Witches of Ashkelon" really entails the zealous pursuit of eighty women to a death sentence without a trial, the talmudic Rabbis transform it into an cautionary tale about the fact that we should not be too hasty in meting out capital punishment. Ultimately, it is not the licentiousness of the women or the wickedness of their witchcraft that we are asked to remember, but rather that never again has capital punishment been or should capital punishment be executed so single-handedly or so cavalierly. If truth be told, by the time the Rabbis were following up this discussion in the *Gemara*, they no longer had any real authority to hang anyone—witch or otherwise. Some might suggest that the Rabbis were simply exercising their minds—that their discussion was merely academic. Others might argue that the discussion was preparatory—just in case, once again, the Sanhedrin had the authority to hang someone. I would argue that this discussion was purely moralistic; the Rabbis of the Talmud, although prepared to execute for the sake of justice, had no interest in the shedding of blood out of zealotry.

"Shimon ben Shetaḥ and the Witches of Ashkelon" is an old legend that has permeated the hearts and minds of Jews throughout the generations. It is interesting to

[24] Hayim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky, eds. *Book of Legends: Legends from the Talmud and Midrash* (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), 202.

note that the introduction to the story—which seems to correspond the least to the rest of the tale—is Rashi's main purpose for relating the story. Furthermore, in adding the fate of Shimon ben Shetaḥ's son to the legend, this tale takes on a new focus. Originally, the focus had been the battle between Good (the Rabbis) and Evil (the witches). Through the final words of Shimon ben Shetaḥ's son, we are directed to the resolution that had been offered to us in the introduction but overshadowed as the drama unraveled before us: no matter how we may perceive our rewards and punishments in this life, all will be judged righteously in the world to come.

This Too, is for Good

Once upon a time the Jews wanted to send a gift to Caesar's house. They deliberated over who should go.

"Naḥum Ish Gam Zu should go for he is accustomed to having miracles done for him."

They sent with him bags filled with precious stones and pearls.

He went and spent the night at a certain inn.

During the night, the innkeepers arose, emptied his bags and filled them with dirt.

When he arrived there [at Caesar's house], they untied his bags and saw that they were filled with dirt.

One day [the Jews] wanted to send a gift to Caesar's house. They deliberated, "With whom should it be sent?"

"It should be sent with Naḥum Ish Gam Zu for he is accustomed to having miracles done for him."

When he arrived at a certain inn, he requested to spend the night. They said to him, "What do you have with you?"

He replied to them, "I bring tribute to Caesar."

They arose during the night, opened his bag, emptied it of all that was inside, and filled it with dirt.

When he arrived there [at Caesar's house, the bag] was found to be filled with dirt.

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[1] *b. Ta'an. 21a.*

The king wanted to kill all of them. He said, "The Jews are mocking me!"

Naḥum said, "This too, is for good."

Elijah came and appeared to the King as one of the courtiers and said to him, "Perhaps this is the dirt from the dirt of Abraham their father, that when he would throw dirt it would become swords. And when he would cast away straw it would become arrows. As it is written, 'He rendered his sword like dirt, his bow like wind-blown straw.'"

There was this one land that Caesar had been unable to conquer. So they tested some of the dirt on this land and conquered it.

They went up to the king's vault and filled Naḥum's bags with precious stones and pearls and they sent him off to home with great honor.

When they came, they spent the night

Caesar said, "The Jews are mocking me!" They took him out to kill him.

Naḥum said, "This too, is for good."

Elijah came and appeared to the King as one of the courtiers and said to him, "Perhaps this is the dirt from the dirt of Abraham our father, that when he threw dirt it would become swords. And when he would cast away straw it would become arrows."

They tested [some of the dirt] and found it was as such. There was a district that they had been unable to conquer. They sent some of this dirt upon it and they conquered it.

They went up to the king's vault. They said, "Take that which pleases you." He filled his bag with gold.

When he returned and came [to that

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[2] *b. San. 108b-109a.*

in that same inn. The innkeepers asked him, "What did you bring with you that they have shown you such great honor?"

Naḥum replied, "Whatever I took away from here is what I brought there."

The innkeepers tore down their inn and brought it to the house of the king. They told the king, "The dirt that [Naḥum] brought here was from our inn." They tested it but they did not find it [to have the same properties that Naḥum's dirt had had]. So, they executed the innkeepers.[1]

same inn], the innkeepers asked him, "What did you bring to the king's palace?"

Naḥum replied, "Whatever I took away from here is what I brought there."

They took [some of the dirt] and brought it there [to the house of the king]. They executed the innkeepers.[2]

The Text

"This Too, is for Good" is a fairy tale in the most traditional notion of the genre. Like the other talmudic fairy tales, it possesses the obvious qualities that have been at the center of all of these stories: a hero (Naḥum), some villains (the innkeepers), a challenge facing the hero (making a good impression on Caesar) and magic (the dust turning into swords and arrows). In one of the tellings, this tale even begins with the classic, "Once upon a time..." Nevertheless, "This Too, is for Good" stands apart from the other fairy tales found in the Talmud. First of all, the villainous characters in this story are relatively mundane in comparison to those in most of the other tales. They are not demons,

sorcerers, witches, or even giants; they are simply scheming innkeepers. Second of all, unlike any of the other stories, here we find a gentile ruler who is ultimately magnanimous toward the Jews. In all of the other tales, the gentiles are either villains or, at the very least, an obstacle for the hero to overcome. Caesar is portrayed as neither a bad guy nor an obstacle—merely a goal. Both of these factors cause "This Too, is for Good" to stand out as a unique story for the era in which it is being recorded.

The most important variant to be found in this fairy tale, however, is Elijah. According to Howard Schwartz, this tale in particular "is one of the earliest prototypical Elijah tales, in which the prophet appears to save the Jews in a time of distress."[3] In time, Elijah's interceding ways will become commonplace amongst Jewish folklore. At this point in rabbinic history, though, Elijah stories are still sparse and sorely lacking in the fabulous. The stories of Elijah that pepper the Talmud and other rabbinic sources from this time period tend to focus either on biblical exposition regarding the life of Elijah—recounted in the books of I and II Kings—or on conversations that different Rabbis were to have had with Elijah.[4] However, Dan Ben-Amos explains that in "This Too, is for Good" that "Elijah himself assumes a completely different role. In his appearance upon earth he has changed from a mediator to an agent of the divine world."[5] As an agent of the divine, Elijah is able to propel the story forward in achieving one of the basic

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[3] Howard Schwartz, *Miriam's Tambourine: Jewish Folktales from Around the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 354.

[4] According to the Rabbis, because Elijah never actually died in the biblical account, he is available as a teacher for the greatest among them.

[5] Dan Ben-Amos, "Generic Distinctions in the Aggadah," (paper presented at a Regional Conference of the Association for Jewish Studies held at the Spertus College of Judaica, Chicago, Illinois, May 1-3, 1977), 59-60.

purposes of the *aggadic* legend: "The abolition of boundaries between the two domains of supernatural and the natural worlds through the intrusion of one reality into another."[6]

In later tradition, he will often intercede on behalf of Jews in trouble, but in the Talmud there is only one other story in which Elijah plays the crucial role of divine agent—to save the life of R. Eleazar from martyrdom at the hands of the Romans.[7] But even this marks a departure from the character of Elijah found in the Bible. As H. M. Nahmad underscores, "The Elijah of the Biblical narrative stands out as an upright, fearless, uncompromising figure, zealous in the pursuit of righteousness and the service of God."[8] Although these qualities may be present in the Elijah of the rabbinical tradition, they no longer define him. Rather, as Nahmad points out:

> The other Elijah, the popular figure of Jewish tradition and the hero of rabbinic literature, bears a different character. This Elijah is bound by neither time nor space. He wanders over the face of the earth in many and varied guises, but usually as a Bedouin or Arab of the desert. He acts as a celestial messenger, a warner, and an advisor. He appears in times of distress and danger and befriends mystics and scholars. He brings consolation to the afflicted and chides the arrogant and the proud. Expectation and hope are associated with the prophet, for Elijah is regarded as the precursor of the Messiah.[9]

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[6] Ben-Amos, "Aggadah," 53.

[7] b. AZ. 17b-18a: Throughout rabbinic literature, the martyrdom of the ten Rabbis is recounted. The Talmud tells the story, however, of one Rabbi who was saved from martyrdom—R. Eleazar ben Perata. Rather than submit him to death at the hands of the Romans, Elijah, disguised as one of Caesar's advisers, intercedes on the Rabbi's behalf and saves his life. According to the literature, R. Eleazar's life was spared because not only was he a diligent student of Torah, but he was also benevolent in his deeds.

[8] H. M. Nahmad, ed., *A Portion in Paradise: And Other Jewish Folktales* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), 23.

[9] Nahmad, *Paradise*, 24.

It is precisely this Elijah who we begin to see in our story; transcending time and space, our Elijah takes on the guise of an adviser to Caesar at a time of possible distress for the Jewish community and imminent distress for Naḥum. This new Elijah—"the popular figure of Jewish tradition and the hero of rabbinic literature"—arrives none too soon. Halfway through this story, we find the Jewish community in "an emergency condition which only an intrusion through direct intervention can effectively change."[10] Human action is no longer sufficient; the Jewish people need an agent from God.

Nevertheless, the Jewish community is not concerned with the possibility that their situation could become dire—could become "an emergency condition"—because the community sent R. Naḥum Ish Gam Zu to carry out their mission of tribute. R. Naḥum Ish Gam Zu was a teacher and halachist from around the end of the 1st century to the beginning of the 2nd century. Halachically, he is best know for his development of "the hermeneutic rule of extension and limitation which was later further developed by his great disciple R. Akiba."[11] However, it was—and still is—his name that preceded him. Ish Gam Zu is traditionally interpreted to mean one of two things: the first possibility is that Naḥum is a man from the town of Gamzu, in Judea, which is referred to in 2 Chronicles (28:18). But, for the Rabbis, his name is more of an epithet as it is written in the Talmud: "Why was he called Naḥum Ish Gam Zu? Because whatever happened to him, he would say, 'this too, is for good.'" [12] Highlighting the nickname possibility for Naḥum Ish Gam Zu, the Rabbis added to the end of it "*l'tovah*" (is for

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[10] Ben-Amos, "Aggadah," 57.
[11] Moses Mielziner, *Introduction to the Talmud* (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1968), 27. For more information on the rules of inclusion and exclusion see: H. L. Strack and Gunter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 69.
[12] *b. Ta'an. 21a.*

good). This epithet—this too, is for good—then serves as the backdrop for the Naḥum story, underscoring his faith that all will turn out as it should in the end.

Schwartz describes Naḥum Ish Gam Zu as "unique, combining naïve innocence with an optimism which is based on an unshakable faith in God, that is inevitably justified."[13] In light of this story, he could not have described Naḥum better, but Schwartz leaves out an important aspect of Naḥum's character evident from another major story about him: his piety, which justifies his faith. Before this story appears in *Ta'anit*, the Rabbis recall an incident in which Naḥum Ish Gam Zu was blinded in both eyes, stumped in both hands, crippled in both legs, and covered in boils. His students questioned him as to how such terrible things could befall him, a righteous man. He responded, "My children, I invoked it on myself."[14] He had once taken too long to help someone in need and the person died. Stricken with guilt, Naḥum cried out for all of his parts to be wounded, for they had not had enough pity for the dying man. In the eyes of the Rabbis, piety, such as displayed in this story, is clearly miracle-worthy. As we see in "This, Too, is for Good," miracles do happen for Naḥum Ish Gam Zu; the community was depending on it. Nevertheless, Talmud is lacking in an excess of stories that have been passed down substantiating the claim made in both versions of this tale: Naḥum was famous for having miracles occur for him. Therefore, although we do not have the evidence at our fingertips, his reputation as a pious and faithful Rabbi makes him an ideal candidate for one of Elijah's first attempts at intercession.

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[13] Schwartz, *Tambourine*. 354.
[14] *b. Ta'an. 21a.*

The Context

Whenever there are two versions of the same story to be found within the Talmud, a number of questions arise. What makes the versions different? Are the differences striking? Why would the Rabbis repeat the same story? And which version came first? What makes these two accounts different is not a complex linguistic system or vastly separate tradition. Rather, when comparing the two stories side-by-side, it is the editing that stands out. Even though little of either version can be matched up word for word, they are so similar in internal intent—they tell the exact same story without even showing evidence of varying agendas. Granted, the story in *Ta'anit* is longer and, generally, more complete; nevertheless, both accounts offer a complete and compelling story of Naḥum Ish Gam Zu. What is striking about these two accounts is that although they do not deviate in content or intent, there is no real evidence of a cut and paste job either. The Hebrew reads as if one Rabbi had this great story, called his friend on the phone, told the friend the story, and then the friend wrote it down as well—the vast majority of the language is either the same or comparable, and only the phrasing itself differs. This is to say that although I would argue that one of these versions was the basis for the other, I would also argue that both were personalized by their particular storyteller.

This leads to the question: which account did come first? To answer this question fully, we should first consider why the redactors place "This Too, is for Good" in two different places. The context for the *Sanhedrin* version of the tale is the reference to "the dirt of Abraham our father, that when he threw dirt it would become swords. And when

he would cast away straw it would become arrows."[15] Only lines before this story began the Talmud had been discussing Isaiah 41:2, which reads, "Who raised up one from the East whom righteousness met wherever he set his foot, gave the nations before him, and made him rule over his kings; his sword makes them as dust, his bow as driven straw." The Rabbis had been playing with the interpretation of this verse and the story of Naḥum Ish Gam Zu fit as an appropriate example of how dirt can act like a sword and how straw can act like bows and arrows. Ultimately, their use of the story is fanciful—they are having fun with biblical exegesis.

In *Ta'anit*, however, "This Too, is for Good" follows a story of a dilapidated building that prompted another story regarding Naḥum Ish Gam Zu.

> They related about Naḥum Ish Gam Zu that he was blind in both eyes, both of his hands were cut off, both of his legs were amputated, and his entire body was full of boils. And he was lying in a dilapidated house, and the legs of his bed were placed in bowls of water so that ants would not climb on him. Once, his disciples wished to remove his bed and afterwards remove the utensils. He said to them: "My sons, remove the utensils and afterwards remove my bed, for it is assured that as long as I am in the house, the house will not fall."[16]

Seeing their teacher in such misery, the disciples asked Naḥum Ish Gam Zu what could he possibly have done to warrant this kind of suffering, a section of the story mentioned above.[17] He explained to them that he had called the suffering upon himself after a man stopped him on his way asking for sustenance. Naḥum Ish Gam Zu was happy to comply but wanted to unload the donkeys first. The man was dead before he could finish

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[15] *b. San. 109a.*
[16] *b. Ta'an. 21a.*
[17] Intra, p. 73.

unloading the donkeys. In order to assuage the tremendous amount of guilt that he felt, Naḥum Ish Gam Zu asked that all of this suffering come upon him. At the very end of the story, the disciples respond, "Alas for us that we have seen you like this," to which Naḥum Ish Gam Zu retorted, "Alas for me, if you had not seen me like this."[18] While they are on the subject of Naḥum Ish Gam Zu, the Rabbis naturally offer an explanation for his unusual name. As Steinsaltz explains, "He remained permanently convinced that, no matter how bleak the situation, there is a favorable aspect to all that God does in this world which will eventually reveal itself. The Gemara illustrates this custom of Naḥum's..."[19] with our tale. As in *Sanhedrin*, the story is not built up to teach us a particular lesson other than informing us of the life and faith of one of the early Rabbis.

Since there is no definitive cut-and-paste job happening between the two accounts, it is not absolutely clear which one really came first. As is often the case, each story may derive from an unknown source that is no longer available to us. Nevertheless, the version in *Ta'anit* is more compelling as an origin for the text. Not only is it the more complete telling, but it also has the only full explanation for Naḥum Ish Gam Zu's epithet.

The Subtext

Traditionally, a fairy tale must be timeless and placeless. Yet the earliest of the Jewish fairy tales, such as those found in the Talmud, tend to be well grounded in both time and location. "This Too, is for Good" is the exception to the rule. Although,

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[18] *b. Ta'an. 21a.*

[19] Adin Steinsaltz, *The Talmud: The Steinsaltz Edition, Vol. XXI Tractate Sanhedrin Part VII* (Random House: New York), 93.

technically, Naḥum Ish Gam Zu can be dated, the story at hand is really about Ploni Ish Gam Zu (the "any-man" of Jewish tradition with the epithet for which Naḥum is famous tacked on). Otherwise, the text is purposefully vague as to where or when the story takes place. All we know for sure is that this tale takes place at a time when the Jews are under the control of a non-Jewish ruler with whom they want or need to curry favor. After the codification of the Talmud, this more classic version of the fairy tale became much more commonplace throughout Jewish literature. Perhaps the longer the Jews found themselves in exile—both adopting the literary styles of the non-Jews around them and feeling less in control of their own fate—the more relevant the fairy tale became. As Schwartz writes, "Underlying the tale is the sense of impotence in the face of a mighty power such as that of Rome, and the Jewish dependence on the miraculous in order to protect themselves."[20] This would also explain the shift in the role of Elijah from teacher to agent of the divine. As Jewish communities everywhere began to feel more and more powerless, they had a greater need for someone—sent by God—to intercede on their behalf.

Tales such as "This Too, is for Good" remind the community that not only is God still watching over its inhabitants—and even sending them help—but the gentiles who are scheming against the community will be reckoned with by God. Schwartz stresses that, "Elijah, of course, derives his powers from God. That is why the miraculous transformation of the dust into invincible weapons takes place for him, but utterly fails for the evil innkeepers."[21] It is precisely through stories such as this that the Rabbis could console themselves with the knowledge that God was working for the Jewish

[20] Schwartz, *Tambourine*, 354.
[21] Schwartz, *Tambourine*, 354.

community. Though much of the time it seemed as if all of the odds were against them, throughout everything, the Rabbis as well as entire Jewish community could remember: this too, is for good.

King Solomon and the King of the Demons[1]

"I provided for myself *sharim* and *sharot* and the delights of mankind of *shidah* and *shidot*" (Eccl. 2:8). "*Sharim* and *sharot*:" these are a variety of musical instruments. "The delights of mankind:" these are pools and baths. "*Shidah* and *shidot*:" here they are interpreted as male and female demons. In the West, they said it was chariots.

R. Yoḥanan said, "There were three hundred varieties of demons in *Shiḥin* but what a *shidah* is I do not know."

The Master said, "Here they are interpreted as male and female demons."

For what reason [did King Solomon] require male and female demons? For it is written, "and the Temple, while being built, was built of whole, quarried stone, so that there was neither hammer nor axe nor any tool of iron heard in the Temple while it was being built" (I Kings 6:7).

[Solomon] said to them, the Rabbis, "How am I to make this [without iron tools]?"

They replied to him, "There is a *shamir* which Moses brought for the stones of the ephod."

He said to them, "Where is it to be found?"

They answered him, "Bring a male and a female demon and squeeze them against each other. It is possible that they know and will reveal it to you."

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[1] *b. Git. 68a-b.*

[Solomon] brought a male and female demon and squeezed them against each other.

They said, "We do not know, but perhaps Ashmedai, the King of the Demons, knows."

He said to them, "Where is he?"

They replied to him, "He is in such-and-such mountain. He has dug for himself a pit, filled it with water, covered it up with a stone, and sealed it with his signet. Then every day he goes up to heaven and learns by heart in the Academy of the heavens. He then comes down to earth and learns by heart in the Academy of the earth. Then he goes and examines his seal, and uncovers it and he drinks. He then covers it, seals it, and leaves."

[Solomon] sent Benayahu the son of Yehoyada. He gave [Benayahu] a chain that had engraved on it the Name [of God] and a ring that had engraved on it the Name [of God] and balls of clipped wool and skins of wine. [Benayahu] went out and dug a pit below [Ashmedai's pit] and inclined the water (in Ashmedai's pit to the newly dug pit) and then plugged up [Ashmedai's pit] with the balls of clipped wool. He then dug a pit above [Ashmedai's pit] and poured the wine into it (that it might fill up Ashmedai's pit.) He then filled in the pits. [Benayahu] went up and sat in a tree. When [Ashmedai] arrived, he examined the signet seal, uncovered it, and found the wine.

He said, "It is written, 'Wine is a mocker, strong drink is riotous, and whoever is misled by it thereby is not wise' (Prov. 20:1). And it is written, 'Harlotry and wine and new wine take away the heart'" (Hos. 4:11). So he did not drink. When he became thirsty, he could not resist. He drank till he became drunk and fell asleep. [Benayahu]

then came down and threw on him the chain and closed it. When [Ashmedai] awoke, he thrashed about.

[Benayahu] said to him, "The Name of your Master is upon you! The Name of your Master is upon you!"

When [Benayahu] was bringing [Ashmedai] along, he came to a palm. [Ashmedai] rubbed against it knocking it down. He came to a house. [Ashmedai] knocked it down. He came by the hut of a certain widow. She came out pleading to him. So [Ashmedai] bent his body away from it, thereby breaking a bone.

[Ashmedai] said, "Thus it is written, 'And a soft tongue breaks the bone'" (Prov. 25:15).

He saw a blind man who erred on the way and guided him to his path. He saw a drunkard who was straying from his way and raised him to his path. He saw a wedding party that was being celebrated joyously. He cried. He heard this particular man that was saying to a shoemaker, "Make for me shoes that will be for seven years." He laughed. He saw a particular sorcerer that was doing sorcery. He laughed. When he arrived [in Jerusalem], they did not bring him up to be with Solomon until the third day.

On the first day he said to them, "Why does the king not want for me [to come] to him?"

They replied to him, "He has over-drunk himself."

[Ashmedai] took a brick, placing it upon another brick. They came and told Solomon. He said to them, "This is what [Ashmedai] was saying to you: 'Give him more to drink.'"

The next day [Ashmedai] said to them, "And why does the king not want for me [to come] to him?"

They replied to him, "He has overeaten."

[Ashmedai] took a brick from the other brick, placing it on the ground. They came and told Solomon. He said to them, "This is what [Ashmedai] was saying to you: 'Keep from him his food.'"

At the end of the three days, he went up before [Solomon]. [Ashmedai] took a reed and measured out four cubits and cast it before [Solomon]. He said to [Solomon], "When a particular man dies, he will not have in this world but four cubits. Now, however, you have conquered the entire world yet you are not satisfied until you have conquered me as well."

[Solomon] replied to him, "I do not want anything from you. I want only to build the Temple and I need the *shamir*."

[Ashmedai] said to him, "It is not in my possession. It is in the possession of the Prince of the Sea and he does not give it to anyone other than the wild rooster of whom he trusts on oath. And what does [the wild rooster] do with it? He takes it to mountains that do not have upon them vegetation and places it upon the edge of the mountain so that the mountain splits. Then, it collects the seeds from trees and throws them into the opening so that there will be vegetation." So this was what we interpreted as "mountain cleaver."

They searched the nest of a wild rooster that had its young and covered its nest with clear glass so that, when [the wild rooster] wanted to get in, he could not. It went and brought the *shamir* and placed it on the glass. [Benayahu] then shouted at it, it

dropped [the *shamir*] and he took it. [The wild rooster] went and strangled its own life on account of its oath.

The Text

Unlike many of the stories found in the Talmud, "King Solomon and the King of the Demons" stands out with its classic fairy tale theme—spelled out by Yassif as, "the hero of the tale (in this case, Benaiah) triumphs over the monster and succeeds in bringing home the wondrous herb."[2] What raises this story to greater heights, however, is the relationship established here between Solomon and Ashmedai. There are very few biblical figures that are expounded upon in the rabbinic tradition to the extent that Solomon is. Plus, of these other biblical superstars (Moses, David, Elijah), none of them shares a relationship with a demon—let alone the King of the Demons. The rapport that is created between Solomon and Ashmedai begins here, with this story. Furthermore, as Schwartz points out, "It is this tale, more than any other, that establishes the folk characterization of both King Solomon and Asmodeus, king of demons."[3] Yassif agrees, noting that this tale is both the beginning of Solomon's folk tradition and "one of the longest, most encompassing, and complete stories found in the aggadic literature."[4] Although Solomon is already an established character before this episode, Shenhar notes how deftly "his image is totally divorced from his actual time and place."[5] The story can take on the full mantle of the traditional timeless and placeless fairy tale since, as she

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[2] Eli Yassif, *The Hebrew Folktale: History, Genre, Meaning* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 89.
[3] Howard Schwartz, *Elijah's Violin and Other Jewish Fairy Tales* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 297.
[4] Yassif, *Folktale*, 87.
[5] Aliza Shenhar, *Jewish and Israeli Folklore* (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1987), 4.

explains, Solomon "is shifted from the Biblical story framework and given a general universal background."[6]

This shift from a particular biblical character to one who lives outside of time and space creates, as Nahmad suggests, two separate Solomon characters: "The one is the King Solomon of the Biblical account, an historical figure, and the other is the Solomon of myth and legend in rabbinic and other literatures."[7] This mythical Solomon can converse with the Rabbis and "reigned over the upper beings as well as the lower beings, as it is written, 'And Solomon sat on the throne of God as king.'"[8] Yassif brings up a pressing question, though—what makes Solomon so compelling a character?

> King Solomon is one of the most popular Jewish folk heroes. The Bible does not tell us why Solomon became so accepted a figure in traditional Jewish literature, more so than any other biblical hero with the exception of Elijah the Prophet. Perhaps the answer lies in the biographical detail supplied by Scripture, which ascribes to Solomon wisdom, wealth and the love of women, all traits with great narrative potential. The sayings and stories in the Bible which emphasize his extraordinary wisdom and mastery over *shidot*, interpreted as demonic forces, can explain some of the glory which clung to him for generations after the biblical period.[9]

In the eyes of the audience, King Solomon lives a dream life; he has wisdom, wealth, and romance beyond the wildest of imaginations and, when he does get into trouble, it is more adventurous than daunting. He is well respected within the tradition, yet he gets away with dabbling in areas in which we are not allowed to dabble; in fact, as

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[6] Shenhar, *Folklore*, 3-4.
[7] H. M. Nahmad, ed., *A Portion in Paradise: And Other Jewish Folktales* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), 41.
[8] *b. Meg. 11b.*
[9] Yassif, *Folktale*, 87.

Schwartz explains, "It is King Solomon, not Moses, who is the primary model for the Jewish sorcerer."[10] He lives the good life, and to top it all off, Solomon consorts with the King of Demons.

We learn that Ashmedai is the king of the Demons through a discussion with the demon Joseph in the Babylonian Talmud.[11] In other accounts, Schwartz explains, "Asmodeus also reveals that his father was an angel and his mother human, suggesting that he is one of the offspring of the Sons of God and daughters of men recounted in Genesis 6."[12] Seidel traces Ashmedai back to Iranian/Persian demonology: "Ashmedai/Smodeus clearly develops from the figure mentioned in the Gathas, aesma-daeuua, a demon of rushing fury who has bloody attributes."[13] Perhaps this would also explain Seidel's supposition that this legend is Palestinian in origin and merely revitalized by the Babylonian community.[14] Nevertheless, as Schwartz points out:

> The earliest recorded confrontation between King Solomon and Asmodeus is found in *The Testament of Solomon* 5, dated between the first and third centuries C. E. Here too Asmodeus is brought bound before Solomon and behaves in a surly manner, prophesying that Solomon's kingdom will one day be divided. When questioned by Solomon, Asmodeus describes himself solely in evil terms, taking credit for "causing the wickedness of men to spread throughout the world."[15]

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[10] Howard Schwartz, *Lilith's Cave: Jewish Tales of the Supernatural* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 15.
[11] *b. Pesaḥ. 110a*
[12] Schwartz, *Elijah's Violin*, 297.
[13] Jonathan Seidel, "Charming Criminals: Classification of Magic in the Babylonian Talmud," in *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power* (eds. Marvin Meyer and Paul Mirecki; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), 155.
[14] Seidel, Magic, 155.
[15] Schwartz, *Elijah's Violin*, 297.

By the time of the writing of the Talmud, however, Ashmedai is simply not painted as the same wicked character. Yassif reveals that, in reality, "there are stories wherein the demons are not unequivocally malevolent: after some sort of pressure is exerted upon them, they become cooperative and even emulate human behavior."[16] Ashmedai is even characterized as studying on high in the Academy in heaven. Trachtenberg suggests that the Rabbis made a distinction between "Jewish" demons and "foreign" demons.[17] It was permitted to inquire of Jewish "demons" and they were less likely to be wildly destructive. "King Solomon and the King of the Demons" is the first time we meet Ashmedai as a truly civilized demon. Furthermore, as Schwartz explains, "The odd characterization of Asmodeus as a devout demon is retained in almost all subsequent tales about him, and likely gave birth to the concept of a kingdom of demons, whose devotional life was identical to that of devout Jews."[18]

One of the most interesting characters in the story might not actually be a living-breathing creature. Soncino points out that, "None of the old Talmudic sources states explicitly whether the *Shamir* was a living creature or a mineral."[19] Furthermore, as Koppel explains, "The word itself means 'thistle,' but that is not the sense of the word as it is used in Rabbinic Literature. According to the rabbis, the *shamir* is a small, worm-like creature which is able to cut through the hardest of substances."[20] By the talmudic period, the *shamir* as a worm-like creature was hardly disputed and the Rabbis began to further elucidate its origins. They taught that the *shamir* was to have been created

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[16] Yassif, *Folktale*, 154.
[17] Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion* (New York: Behrman House, 1939), 34-37.
[18] Schwartz, *Elijah's Violin*, 297.
[19] *Talmud Bavli: Gittin* (London: Soncino), 68a
[20] Elisa Koppel, "At the Twilight: An Examination of the Items Created Bein Hashmashot" (Rabbinic thesis, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, 2001), 25.

between the sixth day of creation and the beginning of the first Shabbat.[21] They claimed it could eat through the hardest of materials yet could be kept wrapped merely in wool.[22] The *shamir* came in handy as Solomon was told that, in building the Temple, he would be precluded from using any iron implements. Therefore, it was the only creature that could serve Solomon in cutting the stones for the building of the Temple.

Yassif highlights the fact that, "the story of the quest for the *shamir* is apparently a Jewish application of the tale type of acquiring a therapeutic herb or wondrous flower."[23] He continues to explain that "the hero of this type is usually the youngest son of a king sent to perform the difficult task of bringing the healing herb to the aged king. In the talmudic story, the task is assigned to David's trusted attendant, Benaiah."[24] Although Yassif is absolutely correct on both accounts, if we were to stop there we would be missing the grander scheme of things. There is not one, but two tasks in this story. The first task is to find the *shamir* and, although we might perceive this task to be on Benayahu's[25] head, truly it falls on Solomon's to-do list. The second task, however, is the all-important one in the eyes of the Rabbis—the building of the Temple. What keeps Yassif's tale type from being the primary thrust of this pericope is the fact that Benayahu receives no reward that we know of and remains a secondary character throughout. Solomon, on the other hand, is a focal point from the opening verse through to the next

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[21] *b. Pesaḥ. 54a.*
[22] *b. Soṭah. 48b.*
[23] Yassif, *Folktale*, 88.
[24] Yassif, *Folktale*, 88.
[25] I Kings 2:35 depicts Benayahu as the commander of Solomon's army. According to *b. Ber. 3b-4a* he was at the head of the Sanhedrin during the reign of both David and Solomon.

story.[26] He is able to build the Temple and he is lauded for his skill and cunning by the Rabbis.

Solomon was not only recognized for his skill and cunning but also for his aptitude for magic. He especially understood the sway of the Name; throughout the ancient world, names were considered to hold great power but none so much as the Divine Name. As Trachtenberg explains, "To know the name of a man is to exercise power over him alone; to know the name of a higher, supernatural being is to dominate the entire province over which that being presides."[27] Therefore, as tradition maintains the God of Israel's supremacy over all the world, the Name of the God of Israel would also have power over all the world. The fact that Solomon has two items inscribed with the Name of God is vital to our story. Unlike David and Avishai,[28] it is simply not enough for Benayahu—or, for that matter, even Solomon—to utter the Name of God when facing off with the likes of Ashmedai, the King of Demons. Rather, they need amulets that can wield powerful magic. Trachtenberg explains, "The Hebrew word for amulet, *kame'a*, has the root meaning 'to bind.'"[29] If Solomon wants Ashmedai bound to his service, he would have to employ the use of tangible articles imbued with powerful magic. What made these particular amulets powerful enough to bind the King of the Demons was the Name; surrounded by the Name of God, the chain would contain Ashmedai but it was the ring that would bind him to Solomon. Nahmad highlights this point: "With the aid of his ring, on which was inscribed the Ineffable Name, he could bend all to his will. Even Asmodeus, Prince of the Demons, was not immune and was

[26] See chapter, "Solomon, the Beggar King," 92-99.
[27] Trachtenberg, *Magic*, 79.
[28] See chapter, "David and Yishbi B'nov," 100-110.
[29] Trachtenberg, *Magic*, 132.

forced to assist, as were other demons, in the construction of the Temple."[30] Lest there be any confusion, however, at no time would the Rabbis suggest that the power of these amulets came from any magical source outside of God. Schwartz makes it very clear that what made Solomon's mastery over the supernatural complete was his ability to draw "on the power of his magic ring, on which God's name was engraved, and ultimately on the power of God."[31] One might wonder what effect could the Name of God have on a creature that came out of the demonic world. Jewish tradition is unmistakable on this account: "the demons, evil as they were, remained the creatures of God, subject to His will and respectful of His divinity."[32]

The Context

The stories of Solomon and Ashmedai flow naturally out of the talmudic text. In the Mishnah of chapter seven of *Gittin*, the Rabbis raise the issue of demonic possession. Ultimately, this discussion leads them to the opening verse of our story, "I provided for myself *sharim* and *sharot* and the delights of mankind of *shidah* and *shidot*" (Eccl. 2:8). It is expected that the Rabbis would be curious as to why Solomon would get himself "*shidah*" and "*shidot*." What use could a king of Israel have with the demon world? In light of the tradition surrounding the *shamir*, and as long as Solomon maintains a mastery over the demons, the Rabbis could remain unflustered by his antics.

Possibly the most striking yet subtle aspect of this story is Ashmedai's use of biblical verse. As mentioned above, this episode establishes Ashmedai as not only a

[30] H. M. Nahmad, ed., *A Portion in Paradise: And Other Jewish Folktales* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), 42.
[31] Schwartz, *Lilith's Cave*, 15.
[32] Trachtenberg, *Magic*, 30.

"Jewish" demon but as a devout, "Jewish" demon. When he sees the wine, Ashmedai does not pause from drinking because of a suspicion of foul play; rather, his concern is for the propriety of drinking and thus he quotes, "It is written, 'Wine is a mocker, strong drink is riotous, and whoever is misled by it thereby is not wise' (Prov. 20:1). And it is written, 'Harlotry and wine and new wine take away the heart'" (Hos. 4:11). In fact, before he relents and takes a drink, "Some versions of the text include the following: He said [to himself]: It is written (Psalms 104:15), *and wine gladdens man's heart*, i.e. there is some virtue to wine drinking."[33] Ashmedai behaves as the Rabbis would have behaved if they had been demons.

Immediately after this story had come to its conclusion, there is a wonderful dialogue between Benayahu and Ashmedai regarding Ashmedai's strange behavior on their way to Jerusalem:

> Benayahu said to Ashmedai, "Why when you saw that blind man going out of his way did you put him right? He replied, "It has been proclaimed of him in heaven that he is a wholly righteous man, and that whoever does him a kindness will be worthy of the future world." "And why when you saw the drunken man going out of his way did you put him right?" He replied, "They have proclaimed concerning him in heaven that he is wholly wicked, and I conferred a boon on him in order that he may consume [here] his share [in the future]." "Why when you saw the wedding procession did you weep?" He said, "the husband will die within thirty days and she will have to wait thirteen years for the brother-in-law who is still a child." "why, when you heard a man say to the shoemaker make me shoes to last seven years, did you laugh?" He replied, "That man has not seven days to live and he wants shoes for seven years!" "Why

[33] *Talmud Bavli: Gitṭin* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1992), 68a[3] n#35.

> when you saw that diviner divining did you laugh?" He said, "He was sitting on a royal treasure; he should have divined what was beneath him."[34]

There are at least three distinct stories about Ashmedai that the Rabbis wove together to create the long passage in *Giṭṭin*. This particular pericope had begun in the middle of our story and then became the bridge to the next story, "Solomon, the Beggar King." It is evidence of Ashmedai's ability to see into the future and into the edicts of the Heavenly Court. Moreover, it shows that no matter how much he might like to cause damage, Ashmedai still finds it in his best interest to be in good stead with heaven. Putting aside what this passage says about Ashmedai, the Rabbis, no doubt, appreciated Ashmedai's last comment—how effectual is divination if the diviner cannot even see the treasure underneath his very feet!

The Subtext

Just as there are two tasks to this story, there are also two lessons to this story. The first lesson is in regards to the building of the Temple. "King Solomon and the King of Demons" drives home the point that no weapons of war—therefore, no iron—could be used in the making of the House of God. This had been a longstanding tradition from as early as I Kings. The Rabbis rightly debate whether the sound of iron was not heard because all work was done outside of the Temple or because there simply was no working with iron. Either way, this idea of keeping war away from the Temple creates an intriguing setting for God's abode here on earth. Both Israelite and rabbinic theology had assumed God to be a mighty commander in chief, ready and able to lead the people into

[34] *b. Giṭ. 68b.*

war, through to victory. Nevertheless, the Temple would be a place of peace, perhaps because the Israelite and rabbinic thought was that God might want a respite from battle or perhaps because the Israelites and the Rabbis themselves wanted a respite from battle.

The second and more obvious lesson is in regards to demonology and magic. As usual, the message is plain: only those with the wisdom of Solomon could handle such doings. Standing alone, this story leads us to the belief that magic could be successfully wielded and demons could be tamed. I suppose this is why the Rabbis paired this story with the following story, "Solomon, the Beggar King."

Solomon, the Beggar King[1]

One day [Solomon] was alone with [Ashmedai, the King of the Demons]. He said to him, "It is written, 'He has *to'afot* and *re'em*' (Num. 24:8). And we say of '*to'afot*,' these are the ministering angels; '*re'em*,'[2] these are the demons. How are you [demons] superior to us?"

[Ashmedai] replied to him, "Take the chain (upon which is engraved the Name of God and within which I am bound) off of me and give me your ring (also upon which is engraved the Name of God) and I will show you my superiority."

He took the chain off [Ashmedai] and gave him his ring and [Ashmedai] swallowed him and placing one of his wings in heaven and one of his wings on earth he hurled [Solomon] four hundred *parsahs*. It was regarding that incident that Solomon said, "What profit does a man have for all his labor that he labors under the sun?" (Eccl. 1:3)

"And this was my portion from all my labor" (Eccl. 2:10). What is the meaning of "and this"? Rav and Shmuel—one said it is his staff and the one said it is his cloak.

[Solomon] used to go around from door-to-door. At each place that he would come to he would say, "I, Kohelet, was king over Israel in Jerusalem" (Eccl. 1:12). When he came before the Sanhedrin the Rabbis said, "Now, does a madman stick to one statement? What is this?"

They said to Benayahu, "Has the king requested that you come before him?"

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[1] *b. Git. 68b.*

[2] The literal translation of "ראם" is "wild ox" but the Rabbis found this interpretation of the verse to be incongruous with the rest of the sentence.

He replied to them, "No."

They sent [a message] to the queens, "Has the king been before you?"

[The queens] sent back to them, "Yes, he visits."

[The Rabbis] sent to them, "Examine his feet."

[The queens] sent back to them, "He comes in stockings and inquires of [the queens] during the time of their menstrual infirmity and he even inquires of Bat Sheva, his mother!"

They brought Solomon and gave him a ring and a chain that had engraved on it the Name [of God]. When Solomon entered [Ashmedai] saw him and flew away. Nevertheless, [Solomon] was in fear of him and so it was that it was written, "Behold Solomon's bed! Sixty mighty warriors encircle it of the mighty warriors of Israel. They all handle the sword and are expert in warfare. Each man has his sword upon his thigh because of fear in the night" (Cant. 3:7-8).

Rav and Shmuel—one said [Solomon] was a king and then a commoner and one said that he was a king and then a commoner and then a king.

The Text[3]

"Solomon, the Beggar King" marks a new form for the talmudic fairy tale, common in folklore all throughout the world: the fall and subsequent rise back to power of a major character. It is interesting to note that the Rabbis could consider a fall from grace or power even amongst the greatest of Jewish figures. Very seldom, though, would these stories be so clearly defined as a fairy tale as in this story. Solomon, as the hero of

[3] For a more complete discussion of both Solomon and Ashmedai, please see the preceding chapter, "King Solomon and the King of the Demons" 78-91.

the story, must vanquish Ashmedai, the King of the Demons, and regain his throne. He succeeds by using the signet ring the Sanhedrin makes for him, bearing the Name of God. It is only by the power (i.e. magic) of the Name that Solomon causes Ashmedai to skulk away and Solomon can then return to the throne. The characterization of Solomon differs slightly in this episode from the preceding story. While the King Solomon who first encounters Ashmedai is found to be nothing but heroic and wise, the Solomon in "Solomon, the Beggar King" is, as Yassif explains, "characterized by a different message: pride is laid low. This tale type generally deals with a hero whose pride causes his transformation into a pauper or leads to another punishment so that he who was high and mighty is brought to the lowest depths."[4] Goodman points out that much of the vision of Solomon had grown from the biblical era, making Solomon a more complete character through vignettes such as this:

> In the Bible, Solomon was a symbol of wealth, wisdom and power. In the midrash, he became a symbol of extravagance, folly and humiliation as well. He was humble, he was arrogant. He built the Temple, he worshipped idols. In the hands of the Rabbis, then, Solomon came to reflect both the best and the worst possibilities in the complex human personality.[5]

This pericope begins with a depiction of the downfall of the tragic hero. According to Shenhar, there would have to be a reason why Solomon would be forced to face such a downfall. She writes, "The downfall of the hero is caused by reasons lying

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[4] Eli Yassif, *The Hebrew Folktale: History, Genre, Meaning* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 89.

[5] Stephen Goodman, "The Image of Solomon in the Rabbinic Literature." (Rabbinic thesis, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, 1978), 288.

within himself, some inherent fault or weakness."[6] The Rabbis agree with this assessment; according to them, Solomon had three sins that were at the heart of his downfall: he had too many horses, too many wives, and too much wealth.[7] To make matters worse, he tended to be full of pride, as evidenced by his question to Ashmedai in the story: "How are you [demons] superior to us?" It is Solomon's pride that gives Ashmedai the opportunity to take the throne and turn Solomon into a beggar. Shenhar is quick to point out, however, that "tragic fault does not imply tragic guilt.... Were the fault exclusively his own there would be no room for pity but, on the contrary, we would rejoice at his downfall."[8] But we do not rejoice because we understand Solomon is inherently guilty—he has simply erred. Tractate *Sanhedrin* depicts, in detail, exactly how Solomon descended from power: at first he had been king over the demons as well as over all of humankind until he lost power over the demons and then over all but Israel and then over all but Jerusalem. In the end, he ruled only over his own life, his staff and his cloak.[9] "The episode cited here actually reflects the final step of Solomon's descent from power."[10]

Goodman observes, "As king of the demons, Ashmedai was Solomon's greatest ally when under Solomon's control, and his greatest adversary once freed from that control."[11] Once Ashmedai was free from the chain of the Name, he could, once again, tap into all of his demonic powers. The Talmud explains that demons are a type of crossbreed between men and angels: "Demons have three attributes similar to the angels

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[6] Aliza Shenhar, *Jewish and Israeli Folklore* (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1987), 52.
[7] Shir HaShirim Rabbah 1:10.
[8] Shenhar, *Folklore*, 52.
[9] *b. San. 20b.*
[10] *Talmud Bavli: Gittin* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1992), 28b[3] n#36.
[11] Goodman, "Solomon," 97.

and three attributes similar to men; like the angels they have wings, they can fly from one end of the world to the other, and they can see what the future will be. Like men they eat and drink, are fruitful and multiply, and they die."[12] As long as Ashmedai was bound up in the Name of God, he was unable to spread his wings and fly. Once freed, his most logical step was to fly Solomon to the end of the world and leave him there. In possession of Solomon's sacred, powerful signet ring, Ashmedai could then disguise himself as King Solomon and reign over all of Israel.

Although the Talmud offers a relatively sparse version of this story,[13] the Rabbis still maintain their penchant for whimsy, especially when Solomon comes to the Sanhedrin. I am amazed at how adroitly they reasoned that he is not mad with the rhetorical question, "Now, does a madman stick to one statement?" Upon taking his claim seriously—that he is King Solomon—they begin inquiring of the royal household if anyone has noticed anything strange lately. Why do they ask the queens about the king's feet? Because the Talmud teaches that the feet of a demon resemble those of a rooster.[14] We may assume, then, that no matter how well Ashmedai may be able to disguise himself as Solomon, there is nothing to be done for demon feet. The Rabbis are confident of the switch when the queens reply back that not only does the king always keep his socks on but he is completely disregarding the rules of family purity. (He is willing to have relations with the queens during their menstrual infirmity.) As if that were not enough, it most certainly cannot be Solomon on the throne—Solomon would never request sexual relations with his own mother!

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[12] *b. Ḥag. 16a.*
[13] See page 97 of the Context section for more on the many variations of this story.
[14] *b. Ber. 6a.*

Again, the agents of magical power that restore Solomon to the throne are the amulets inscribed with the Name of God. Only out of the fear that he may again be imprisoned—bound by the Name—does Ashmedai flee and leave Solomon to reign once again.

The Context

There have been a number of versions of this story that have been recorded throughout Jewish history. More often than not, the primary variation between the tales is what happens to Solomon as he wanders around as a beggar.[15] For example, in one version, he meets a rich man who feeds him well but reminds him of all of his hardships and a poor man who has little to offer him by way of food but offers him solace from his painful situation.[16] In another version, Solomon became the head chef for King Ammon.[17] And in yet another version, Solomon becomes "a wandering preacher, who discovers that people pay no heed to his wisdom, but reward him for trite and superficial maxims. Thus he returns to Jerusalem a wealthy and acclaimed man."[18]

In all of the versions, Ashmedai is there to cast Solomon out and take his place as king. But different accounts offer different reasons for how Ashmedai tricks Solomon to free him and for why Solomon would be cast down. We therefore find, in Schwartz's amalgamated version of the story, Solomon asking Ashmedai to enlighten him on the secrets behind illusion. Ashmedai explains that as long as he is restrained, he cannot

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[15] Howard Schwartz, *Elijah's Violin and Other Jewish Fairy Tales* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 297.
[16] *Yalkut*, Prov. 953.
[17] Schwartz, *Elijah's Violin*, 61.
[18] Schwartz, *Elijah's Violin*, 298.

reveal the secret. In response to this logic, Solomon releases him.[19] The *Maharal* offers a different explanation as well for why he was cast down:

> Solomon's power over Ashmedai was rooted in his devotion to God (possessing a "chain" with God's name engraved on it) and in his unique intellect which elevated him above earthly matters, thus demonstrating that he was created in the image of God (a personal signet "ring" with God's name engraved on it). When Solomon desired to see the greatness of demonic power, Ashmedai told him: I am powerless against you unless your devotion to God wavers and your intellectual prowess falters ("Take the chain off of me and give me your ring"). When Solomon did falter he relinquished his sovereignty over the demonic forces of evil (he gave up the "chain and ring"). This in turn brought about an even greater diminution of his spiritual stature until he was reduced to a shadow of his former loftiness.[20]

Rather than Solomon's three sins being the cause of his downfall, his downfall was the consequence of devotional wavering.

This story is only one of three in this long passage of tractate *Giṭṭin*. "King Solomon and the King of the Demons" and Benayahu's discussion with Ashmedai make up the other two pericopes. Yassif looks at these three as both separate entities and as a unit. He explains, "These three distinct messages, or ideological directions are not co-reconciled during the course of the story, rather they exist side by side. The sole unifying factor is the figure of King Solomon. This strengthens the hypothesis that these episodes were originally individual tales."[21] Nevertheless, the redactor saw fit to blend these three

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[19] Schwartz, *Elijah's Violin*, 59-60.
[20] *Talmud Bavli: Giṭṭin* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1992), 28b[4] n#47.
[21] Yassif, *Folktale*, 89.

together—perhaps to give us a more complete view of Solomon, perhaps to give us a more complete view of Ashmedai, the devout, Jewish King of the Demons.

The Subtext

The downfall of Solomon is rife with meaning for the Rabbis. How could someone who was so wise and so worthy to build the Temple be such a flawed human being? Thus this story—both in its earliest written form as well as in its many variations—teaches the average Jew an important lesson. From the previous story, we had learned that only the wisest of people, such as Solomon, could handle magic and demons. From "Solomon, the Beggar King," we learn that even Solomon could be reduced to nothing if he dabbled in treacherous undertakings. No matter how careful one is—even with the Wisdom of Solomon—the magical realm can turn around and ambush you.

Solomon made matters worse for himself through both the three sins and his haughtiness. He had risen too high—he was too rich, had too many women, too many horses, and too much pride. He needed to be taken down a notch or two. Many of the variant texts ended with Solomon learning to better appreciate what he has, whether in regard to his throne, his lifestyle, or his wisdom. In the account in *Yalkut*,[22] the story ends with Solomon declaring, "'Better is the dinner of greens' (Prov. 15:17) that I ate at the poor man's home 'than the fatted ox' (Prov 15:17) that the rich man fed me only to remind me of my distress."

[22] *Yalkut*, Prov. 953.

David and the Giant Yishbi B'nov[1]

"And Yishbi B'nov, who was of the sons of the giant, and whose spear weighed three hundred shekels of brass, he being girded with a new sword said he would kill David." What is it meant by, "and Yishbi B'nov"? Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav, "a man who came regarding the incident in Nov."

The Holy One, blessed be He, had said to David, "Until when will this transgression be hidden in your hand? By your hand, Nov, the city of priests, was slaughtered. And by your hand, Do'eg the Edomite was banished. And by your hand, Saul and his three sons were killed. Is it your will that your descendants will come to an end or that you will be delivered into the hand of an enemy?"

[David] said before [God], "Master of the Universe, it is better that I should be delivered into the hand of an enemy and that my descendents should not come to an end."

One day, [King David] went out hunting. Satan came and appeared to him as a deer. [David] aimed an arrow at [the deer] but it did not make it. [The deer] drew him in (farther and farther) until it reached the land of the Philistines.

When Yishbi B'nov saw him, he said, "This is the one who killed Goliath, my brother!"

So he turned [David] upside down and tied him up and cast him under an olive press. A miracle was performed for [David] and the ground under him softened for him. It was regarding this that it was written, "You have widened my steps under me, so that my feet did not slip."

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[1] *b. San. 95a.*

That same day was a Friday, toward the evening. Avishai son of Tzuriyah was washing his head with four measures of water when he saw bloodstains. There are some who say that a dove came by and thrashed about before him.

He said, "The Congregation of Israel is likened to a dove. As it is written, 'You shall shine as the wings of a dove, covered in silver.' I can deduce from it that David, King of Israel, is in trouble." He went to [David's] house but did not find him there.

He said, "We have learned in a Mishnah: no one shall ride on [the king's horse] and no one shall sit on his throne and no one shall use his scepter. What if it is a time of danger?" He went and asked in the house of study.

They said to him, "In a time of danger, it is permitted."

[Avishai] mounted [David's] mule and rode off. The ground contracted under him (so that it took less time for him to get to the land of the Philistines). While he was riding, he saw Orpah, [Yishbi B'nov's] mother, that she was spinning thread. When she saw [Avishai], she broke off her spindle and threw it at him. She had thought to kill him (but she missed).

She said to him, "Young man, bring me the spindle."

He threw the spindle at the top of her head and killed her.

When Yishbi B'nov saw [Avishai], he said, "Now there will be two on me and they will kill me! He thrust David upwards and stuck his spear (in the ground). He said, "[David] shall fall on it and will be killed."

Avishai said the Name [of God] and David was suspended between heaven and earth. But, should [David] have said it for himself? A captive cannot release himself from prison.

[Avishai] said to [David], "What are you doing here?"

[David] replied to him, "This the Holy One, blessed be He, said to me and this I replied to him."

[Avishai] said to him, "Reverse your prayer. 'Let your grandson sell wax as long as you should not suffer.'"

[David] replied to him, "If so, assist me with this. As it is written, 'And Avishai son of Tzuriyah helped him.'" R. Yehuda said in the name of Rav, "That [Avishai] helped him with prayer."

Avishai said the Name [of God] and caused him to descend. [Yishbi B'nov] was pursuing the two of them. When they reached Kubei, they said, "Let us rise up against him!" But when they reached Bei-Trei, they said, "Can two whelps kill a lion?"

They said to [Yishbi B'nov], "Go! Look for Orpah, your mother, in a grave."

When they mentioned to him the name of his mother his strength failed him and they killed him. This is why it is written, "Then David's men swore to him saying, 'You must not go out again with us into battle, so that the light of Israel does not go out.'"

The Text

The characters in the fairy tale of "David and the Giant Yishbi B'nov" are eclipsed by the richness of the imagery used at every turn. Nevertheless, an understanding of the characters helps make this story the fanciful anecdote that it is. Therefore, I will begin with the heroes of the tale: David and Avishai. Similar to the story of "King Solomon and the King of the Demons," this tale focuses on David even though it is his second, Avishai, who is the agent of much of the activity. Avishai bears a

close resemblance to Benayahu. Brother of Yo'av, one of David's highest ranking generals, Avishai quickly becomes a trusted supporter of David; he is quick to join David (I Sam. 26:6) and eager to defend his king (II Sam. 16:9 and 19:22). He even advances to become a general of a third of David's army (II Sam 18:2). The Rabbis even say of him, in the Talmud, that he was "as precious as a fourth of the Sanhedrin."[2] Nevertheless, he remains a minor character throughout.

Just as the *shamir* and Ashmedai were Solomon's problems and Benayahu merely the errand boy, so, too, was Yishbi B'nov David's problem and Avishai merely the errand boy. David is a character for which legend was created. Unlike Elijah and Solomon, David was as legendary in the Bible as he is in the hands of the Rabbis. The story of David and Goliath is as close as the Bible ever gets to telling a fairy tale—it lacks merely the magical trappings that are so vital to the genre. This episode indicates a possibility that the story of David and Goliath may have originally been a fairy tale but was cleaned of any magical components before being written into the text. If this story was the magical version of the original, then, as Yassif points out, "This is an outstanding example of the way in which the postbiblical expanded tale was connected to scripture."[3]

Besides the vanquishing of a giant with a slingshot as a young boy, David matured into the greatest King of Israel; he brought the kingdom together and amassed more land in battle than ever before or after in Jewish history. He established Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and hoped to build a centralized house of worship. Beyond his political and military exploits, David was even lauded as an expert musician, singer and poet. The David of the rabbinic period is not far removed from the David of the Bible.

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[2] *b. Ber. 62b.*

[3] Eli Yassif, *The Hebrew Folktale: History, Genre, Meaning* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 85.

The Rabbis are very careful to bear in mind his faults (adultery and murder being the bigger ones), but they also attribute the messiah to the House of David. He is a grand character with many enemies and this story only touches upon the family of one: the aforementioned Goliath.

Goliath left behind a couple of brothers as well as a mother. According to the biblical text, Elḥanan killed one of his brothers,[4] but Yishbi B'nov remained with a vengeance for David. Needless to say, he and his mother, Orpah, greatly appreciated the opportunity to kill the man responsible for the death of their kinsman. Ultimately, though, Yishbi B'nov is not a character in his own right; he is a typical, one-dimensional villain set up only to exact justice on David for causing a great amount of death and destruction. Whether Yishbi B'nov is connected to the city of Nov, which the text had just been discussing, is an interesting question.

The meat of the story can be found in the plethora of motifs. In this small pericope, we find three folk sayings and six major literary devices. I will look at each one and explore how they shape the text:

"A captive cannot release himself from prison."

Why couldn't David say the Name of God himself to save his own life? Folk wisdom explains that one who is imprisoned is in no position to unlock the prison door. David is considered a prisoner of Yishbi B'nov. He, therefore, needs an outsider—enter Avishai—to free him.

"Let your grandson sell wax as long as you should not suffer."

[4] I Chron. 20:5

One might think that David was doing the noble thing by taking responsibility for his own actions. Not according to the folk saying. Rather, he should not sacrifice his life for the sake of his children's lives.

"Can two whelps kill a lion?"

Compared to Yishbi B'nov, David and Avishai are like pups going up against a large, vicious animal. Does it matter that David was able to best Goliath with only a slingshot? They are not willing to take that chance. This metaphor definitely offers the audience a clear vision of what Yishbi B'nov must look like compared to them.

Satan came and appeared to him as a deer.

Throughout early rabbinic literature, Satan is more of a trickster with a mean streak than a truly demonic character. Part of his job is to cause people to stray off course. Here, Satan is actually helping to fulfill God's decree that David be "delivered into the hand of an enemy."

[The deer] drew him in (farther and farther) until it reached the land of the Philistines.

It is a common motif in fairy tales that the hero is drawn away from his land and all of the people who would have helped him. Perhaps he needs to face the trial alone. Perhaps, as in this tale, there needs to be the added miracle of help from home finding him so far away.

So he turned [David] upside down and tied him up and cast him under an olive press.

As Schwartz points out, "Ishbi-benob behaves exactly as do bellicose giants in fairy tales, attempting to crush King David beneath his olive press."[5] As a matter of fact, the ornery giant is a mainstay of fairy tale motifs. Yishbi B'nov behaves exactly as one might expect him to: he acts on his emotions and plays up his brute strength.

Avishai son of Tzuriyah was washing his head with four measures of water when he saw bloodstains. There are some who say that a dove came by and thrashed about before him.

There are two interesting motifs being debated in this part of the story. 1) the bloodstains and 2) the dove. Both are omens for Avishai to interpret. Blood classically means death is stirring while the dove thrashing about could lead someone to the conclusion that there is danger brewing. It is particularly nice how the Rabbis use the quote from Psalms to tie David to the thrashing dove—if Israel as a nation is not in imminent danger then it must be the envoy of Israel that needs help.

The ground contracted under him[6]

Shenhar writes, "Then there is the magic international 'giant leap' motif, presented as a miracle in the Jewish folktale. The hero is awarded the ability of telescoping enormous distances at one jump—a reward for an exceptionally virtuous deed."[7] The ground contraction was especially useful here as we have no reason to believe that Avishai knew where to find David.

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[5] Howard Schwartz, *Reimagining the Bible: The Storytelling of the Rabbis*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 45.

[6] See Max Verman and Shulamit H. Adler's article in *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 1 (1993/94) No. 2: 131-48, "Path Jumping in the Jewish Magical Tradition," for a more complete discussion of this miraculous act.

[7] Aliza Shenhar, *Jewish and Israeli Folklore* (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1987), 5.

Avishai said the Name [of God] and David was suspended between heaven and earth.

Avishai said the Name [of God] and caused him to descend.

The suspension of objects in mid-air and the controlling of their landing back on the ground are both well-loved motifs that could easily promote a simple legend to the genre of fairy tale. As Schwartz points out, "Whereas in the biblical tale it is David's skill and cunning that save him, here it is the supernatural power of the Name of God (known as the Tetragrammaton) that performs the magic of suspending David in the air so that he does not land on the giant's spear, making this much more of a fairy tale than its biblical forerunner."[8]

When they mentioned to him the name of his mothe,r his strength failed him

This is a very common motif in fairy tales. Great sorrow drains villains of their strength and makes them more vulnerable. Clearly, this was David and Avishai's last-ditch effort at besting Yishbi B'nov—whom they had just declared unbeatable by a couple of pups like themselves.

The Context

As is often the case with talmudic text, the Rabbis are musing about the Mishnah and, although it takes them quite a while to arrive at their point, they are discussing the seven men who lost their right to a portion in the world to come. Among those seven is Do'eg the Edomite, who saw David hiding from Saul in the city of Nov and reported his discovery back to Saul. Saul promptly slaughtered the priests of Nov for treason; for his

[8] Schwartz, *Reimagining*, 45.

part in the tragedy, Do'eg was banished from the world to come. Unfortunately for David, the Rabbis felt he bore some of the blame as well and so this story is dropped into the text here. Of course, coming off of a story concerning the city of Nov, it does beg the question of whether the giant could be an *ish b'nov*—a man in Nov.

Although many turn to the David and Goliath story in search of parallels, the real parallel is to be found in II Samuel 21:16, the source of the opening verse. In the biblical account, however, David—together with his army—is in battle with Yishbi B'nov and the Philistines. As Yassif points out, "This expanded tale changes the course of the story even in those particulars which Scripture made explicit."[9] For example, while in the Bible the battle is between Israel and Philistine, in the Talmud the battle is between David and Yishbi B'nov, and it is personal. Furthermore, there is no mention of any familial relationship between Yishbi B'nov and Goliath in the Bible, but that is the premise for the talmudic rendition. Finally, in the biblical account the battle takes place in Israel; in the Talmud, the battle takes place in the land of the Philistines. What does remain constant between the two accounts is the role of Avishai as the one who came to help David and killed the Philistine.

Lastly, it is interesting to note to where the conversation turns, in the Talmud, after this story is through. Picking up on Avishai's path jumping adventure, the Rabbis go into a lengthy discussion regarding the three people for whom the ground contracted: Eliezer, Abraham and Sennacherib. Thus, the Rabbis continue the natural train of thought that follows throughout the Talmud.

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[9] Yassif, *Folktale*, 86.

The Subtext

The primary lesson to be drawn from this story is how potent the power of God (and God's Name) can be. Schwartz explains, "The use of Divine intervention is characteristic of the Jewish fairytale in general, where it replaces the usual devices of enchantment. Thus what other fairytales attribute to magical causes, the Jewish vision interprets as a demonstration of the power and beneficence of God."[10] This is corroborated in "David and the Giant Yishbi B'nov" by the interweaving of God into each of the three truly magical events that occur in this story; namely, as the ground softens beneath David, the text turns to the word "*nisa*," miracle, suggesting not magi, but God was involved. When Avishai suspends David in the air and safely returns him to the ground, there is no thought of magic; rather, the Name of God was the active ingredient. Finally, although Avishai's adventure into path jumping does not immediately seem as if there must be a divine act involved, the Rabbis explain quite clearly in the ensuing talmudic conversation that path jumping, in particular, is always either an award by God or, at the very least, manipulated by God willfully.

Without a doubt, "David and the Giant Yishbi B'nov" is an enjoyable story. It combines accessible historical figures with great legend and adventure. As the audience, we are brought to the edge of our seats as we witness three murder attempts on the heroes. Shenhar explains, "We tremble with fear at the tragic events unrolling before us, sensing the inevitable results. The ensuing terror is mixed with pity and anxiety, and the spectator forgets his personal sufferings, abandoning the narrow sphere of the individual

[10] Schwartz, *Reimagining*, 45.

as he identifies both with the protagonist and with humanity as a whole."[11] Only in the end are we allowed to breathe a sigh of relief when we are absolutely sure that the villains have been vanquished and the heroes are safely on their way home.

[11] Shenhar, *Folklore*, 50.

Conclusion

While reading the introduction to Howard Schwartz's book, *Elijah's Violin and Other Jewish Fairy Tales*, I came across a sentence that confused me and caused me to stop reading: "All in all there are no more than a dozen fairy tales to be found in the Talmud." *That's all?* I thought, *wait, there are fairy tales in the Talmud?!* I was dumbstruck by the idea that the text that I knew and loved—and which I had always considered a legal text—could be filled with heroes and villains embroiled in tales of enchantment. Yet, after quite a bit of searching, I found the eight fairy tales discussed in this thesis. While scouring through these texts for magic and motifs, for implications and importance, the stories have proven to provide a wealth of creativity and morals. Each one stretches the imagination yet brings the thoughts back to all-important lessons that the Rabbis want dearly to impart (and some that they might have never intended to impart but have just the same). Once I compiled all eight stories, there were a couple of trends that jumped out at me.

The first obvious trend was in regard to how women were treated in the talmudic literature. It would be unfair to go as far as to say that the Rabbis were viciously misogynistic. Although they are quick to label a woman a witch and insinuate that she is licentious and idolatrous, they seem to be more wary than malicious in their accusations. Nevertheless, there is a striking absence of any positive female characters in all of these stories. The only tale that comes close to offering the audience a well-known, positive female character—Miriam in "Shimon ben Shetaḥ and the Witches of Ashkelon"—quickly portrays her as strung up by the nipples as punishment for fasting too much.

Every other woman encountered in these stories is indeed a witch. In fact, the only women who are mentioned in any of the conversations regarding magic are practitioners, victims, or demons. In two of these instances, the practitioners were permitted by the Rabbis: the case of R. Naḥman's daughters stirring a boiling pot with their bare hands and the case of Abaye's mother-in-law who would pass her much valued folk knowledge of magic to him. Although I did not expect an overabundance of positive female characters, I had hoped to find at least one.

Another interesting aspect that found its way into every story was the homiletical nature of each piece. Not only did every tale offer a moral or a lesson, but from every tale the Rabbis could spin a sermon. The majority of these tales are directly rooted in Tanakh and those that are not are deeply embedded in some other aspect of tradition. For me, the most invigorating aspect to this homiletical thread, however, is that I can still see each of these stories as jumping off points to a modern sermon. "The Demon in the Study Hall" can still illustrate for the modern listener the efficacy of prayer when facing one's demons. Today, one might see "Yannai and the Witch" as a story about revenge in that, in the end, Yannai's payback only brought humiliation upon himself. "R. Joshua and the Witch" brings the modern listener to a different point. Rather than warning people about the humiliation that they could bring upon themselves, it teaches the modern reader the potential that comes with being rooted in tradition. It is a confirmation of the power that is inherent in tradition. "Shimon ben Shetaḥ and the Witches of Ashkelon" still resonates today as a cautionary tale against zealotry. In a world taken hostage by zealots, the Rabbis remind us, with this story, not to take our religious fervor too far. None of the tales in this series is more timeless than "This Too, is for Good." The

message of hope and acceptance of the world as it is gives even the modern reader permission to look at the world through the eyes of Naḥum Ish Gam Zu, the perpetual optimist, and say, "This too, is for good." In "King Solomon and the King of the Demons," today's listener might relate to the constant uphill battle it seems to be to get the smallest worm—but, as long as one keeps looking and striving, nothing is out of one's reach. Most everyone in today's world has felt at times like King Solomon in "Solomon as the Beggar King." The modern reader occasionally finds himself or herself on the top of the world only to be flung out of reality as he or she knows it. The task, then, is to remember that, although "for my sake was the world created," I am also "but dust and ashes." By the end of the story, King Solomon understood both of those traditions well. Finally, the story of "David and the Giant Ishbi B'nov" has so many lessons that could be drawn from it, but the lesson that is more timeless than any other is regarding the power of friendship.

Looking at all of these stories as one body, there were also a couple of surprises. The Rabbis walked a fine line between "permissible" and "forbidden." To forbid someone the right to do something risked pushing that person away from Judaism, but to allow people to do whatever they wanted compromised the very nature of tradition. This was an even harder line to navigate with regard to the topic of magic. The Rabbis displayed an incessant anxiety concerning magic. At the same time, they were absolutely certain that no good could come of it, but they dabbled in it themselves and had no real way of stopping the masses from practicing magic altogether. One could argue that they let pass much that was idolatry and manipulation of the Godhead and an affront to Judaism. But they assessed what they could ask of the people and what they could not.

They met the people where they were and hoped that in time they would need these practices less and less.

Finally, both Talmuds have a seemingly never-ending supply of precedent tales. Nonetheless, they do not compare to the creativity that went into these fairy tales. Through these stories, one can see the personalities of the Rabbis—not only the ones in the stories, but the ones telling the stories. The appreciation the Rabbis had for a good story even if it was a little gory at times (or perhaps because it was a little gory sometimes) stands as proof of their own humanity. These were not merely stodgy old men cloistered in their academies. They were part of the folk and they collected folk sayings and listened to folklore and valued a good folk motif. They made Jewish tradition richer by incorporating these stories into the Talmud.

"And when all is said and done, good always triumphs over evil,

and the prince and princess live happily ever after."[1]

The End

[1] Howard Schwartz, *Reimagining the Bible: The Storytelling of the Rabbis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 43.

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