LIBRARY COPYRIGHT NOTICE

www.huc.edu/libraries

Regulated Warning

See Code of Federal Regulations, Title 37, Volume 1, Section 201.14:

The copyright law of the United States (title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material.

Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specific conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be “used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research.” If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excess of “fair use,” that user may be liable for copyright infringement.

This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law.

Powerful Words:

Early Jewish Magic as History, Mysticism, and Art

Daniel Reichenbach

Senior Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Rabbinical Ordination

Hebrew Union College- Jewish Institute of Religion
New York Campus
Spring 2024

Supervised by Dr. Sharon Koren Ph.D

Content:

Introduction

Jewish magic in its many forms has seen a resurgence in interest in recent centuries both scholarly and popular. Gershom Scholem, the father of the academic study of Jewish mysticism first began to peel back the veil on Jewish magic in his extensive studies of the material from the Cairo Geniza. Since then, scholars have investigated the origins of these various practices amongst medieval Jews in the hopes of better understanding magic's place within Jewish society in past millenia. Scholars such as Harari, Trachtenberg, Naveh, Bohak, Schiffman, Swartz, and Idel have published a litany of academic works related to various different elements of Jewish magic. Little consensus has emerged as to the origins and indeed the relative popularity of magic amongst Jewish lay people in the past, though the evidence suggests it was ubiquitous.

I chose to write about Jewish magic and mysticism as it relates to amulets and other magical objects because I have always been enchanted with the mystical aspects of Judaism. I see magic everywhere in Judaism. From the phylacteries Jews put on in the morning, to the ritual of Havdalah at the conclusion of Shabbat. Judaism is teeming with moments and actions that seem irrational, unless understood through the lens of ritual to procure positive effect i.e magic.

Magical amulets and talismans continue to be important to Jews around the world, although often they are not identified as such today. The Mezuzah is the perfect example of a Jewish amulet, which is ubiquitous amongst Jews today. A Mezuzah is a parchment scroll upon which biblical verses are inscribed.. The observance of the ritual of placing a Mezuzah upon a Jewish home is in keeping with the commandment in Deuteronomy chapter six verse nine. From this commandment evolved the practice of affixing a Mezuzah to one’s door. However, as Joshua Tractenberg notes in his book *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion*, the Mezuzah is obviously an amulet originally designed to protect the home from evil spirits.

The element of the Mezuzah which is believed to be protective is the words themselves inscribed upon the parchment. While over time this rationale for the practice faded, there exist innumerable references to the Mezuzah being employed for just such reasons.

Even today, there are those who believe that if a home is met with a series of misfortunes, all the home's Mezuzahs should be checked to ensure they are intact, as an improper Mezuzah could be casting a shadow on the fortunes of the home. This is where the conversation begins to become complicated. How can we differentiate within Judaism that which is magic, and that which is dogmatic ritual or simple religious tradition?

Before we can begin to discuss Jewish magic and mysticism and the many scholarly opinions on these subjects, it is important that we address the elephant in the room. Namely, that it would appear from several places in Tanakh that practicing magic is strictly forbidden to the Jewish people. Texts such as Deuteronomy 18 seem clear in prohibiting Jews from counseling various magical practitioners, although the exact nature of these individuals is obscure and scholars disagree as to even the correct translations of these terms and texts. The lines are not always clearly drawn even in modern English. What is the difference between a sorcerer and a magician, a soothsayer and a diviner? Likewise, various terms and titles appear in the biblical texts which are hard for us to distinguish.

Deuteronomy 18 9- 12 states:

> "When you enter the land that your God יהוה is giving you, you shall not learn to imitate the abhorrent practices of those nations. Let no one be found among you who consigns a son or daughter to the fire, or who is an augur, a soothsayer, a diviner, a sorcerer, one who casts spells, or one who consults ghosts or familiar spirits, or one who inquires of the dead. For anyone who does such things is abhorrent to יהוה, and it is because of these abhorrent things that your God יהוה is dispossessing them before you."

These lines seem to explicitly forbid the children of Israel from becoming and or consulting individuals involved in magical practices. If this is the case, then one would expect there to be

little or no magical activity happening amongst Jews in antiquity. However, as we shall see, that is far from the truth.

Another example from Tanakh of a clear prohibition against magical practitioners can be found in Exodus 22:18 where we read: “You shall not tolerate a sorceress.” meaning, all witches are to be put to death. Later, in the book of Samuel we learn that one of the decrees of king Saul is to put to death all the witches in his kingdom. What is so telling is that even after effecting this decree, in a moment of dire need, Saul himself seeks out a magical figure to consult a dead spirit, something clearly forbidden in Deuteronomy 18.

Gideon Bohok, in his book *Ancient Jewish Magic* discusses these various probationary texts and relates that until more recent scholarly research brought to light the ubiquity of Jewish magic amongst large swaths of the Jewish population since late antiquity, many scholars assumed that Jewish magic was only practiced by Jewish “deviants and heretics.” However, as we shall see this could not be further from the truth. Bohok goes on to explain that far from being the territory of a deviant minority, Jewish magic was common Jewish practice.

To this end Harari states:

> We have no reason to doubt the orthodoxy of the amulets’ creators and users, and we have no justification for pushing them to the margins of Judaism or seeing them as members of lower classes. Their involvement in magic is a typical Jewish expression of a worldview common to all in the ancient world. Naveh and Shaked later expanded this claim to the adjuration literature in general and reinforced it when they pointed to the strong links of adjurations to Jewish liturgy and Hekhakot literature and to the medicine of the ancient world. (Harari Kindle).

The simple truth is that magical practices, in particular the use of magical amulets, was not limited to a small portion of Jewish society. Indeed “we have no reason to doubt the orthodoxy of the amulets creators and users.” (Harari: Kindle) On the contrary, magical amulets and other forms of adjuration were commonplace for Jews in the ancient near east.

We have seen from these biblical texts that magic, and those who practiced it, were not a rare phenomenon. It is because of this fact that the rabbis of the talmud spilled much ink trying to designate and legislate the practice of, and belief in magic during the rabbinic period. Joshua Trachtenberg in his book *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion* describes the Talmudic attitudes towards magic. Trachtenberg relates that while the Torah strictly forbade sorcery in its many forms, the rabbis of the Talmud, in their legalistic investigation of these prohibitions sought to classify various different actions and thereby create a hierarchy of forbiddenness. Trachtenberg says:

> "Two main types of forbidden magic were distinguished: that which produces a discernible, material effect, by means of "the performance of an act," and that which only creates the illusion of such and act of its effect (*ahizat 'ainayim*, "capturing the eyesight"); or, as further observation defined them, the one operates without the aid of demons, the other requires their assistance. The practitioner of the first type merits the Biblical penalty of death; the second is forbidden but not so punishable. Still a third kind of magic, "permitted from the start," involved the use of "the Laws of Creation," a term which later was interpreted to signify the mystical names of God and the angels.`` (Trachtenberg: 19).

The fact that the rabbis of the Talmud sought to identify and quantify the culpability of the practitioners of these various magical acts goes to show that there was a wide range of magical practices common in late antiquity, some seemingly more punishable than others, and indeed a third category which was viewed as totally acceptable.

This third school of magic which the Talmudic sages permitted is the focus of this thesis, and is the key to understanding Jewish magic as a whole. Harari states in his book *Jewish Magic before the Rise of Kabbalah* "Certain linguistic utterances performed in the context of a compelling ritual have a performative power that acts on reality and changes it."(Harari: Kindle). Harari calls these utterances adjuration literature, and he unveils the long history of such types of

writings in Judaism's past. Harari considers adjuration literature and the use of incantations to be the central thrust of accepted Jewish magic in general. He says:

> In almost all the rituals described in ancient Jewish magic, the incantation is the core of the ritual and all the other components are organized around it. Stored in this core is the power of magic action and, without it, the accompanying acts will be useless. In the magic rite, words are the operative element that generates a new reality. (Harari: Kindle)

But how is an incantation any different from a prayer? Does it serve a different purpose that the 100 blessings Jews have been saying every day for the last two thousand years? Harari notes Naveh to this end: "religion is the institutionalized faith and ritual, whereas the direct address to God and his angels, which is not included in institutionalized worship, belongs to magic. Harari: 199)

This personal, direct address to God and angels makes magic a deeply personal and individual practice, separate from the ritualized liturgy Jews use for institutionalized worship, and have since it was codified in the rabbinic period and following. I believe this personal, direct aspect of Jewish magic can be utilized today to help enrich the lives of Jews, and their connection to spirituality.

The rabbis of the Talmud forbade many magical practices. However the adjuration of God and his angels was not one of them. Indeed they considered this, as Trachtenberg says "permitted from the start." When considering the history of Jewish magic and possible ways it might be used today to enhance our own spiritual practices and lives this distinction is paramount. While we make use of various names of God in our liturgy in institutionalized worship, the direct adjuration of God and angels is not something that falls within the scope of typical Jewish religious life. This is indeed the territory of magic.

Adjuration literature, making use of the names of God and angels can be seen in a great number of different magical practices, from protective and prophylactic amulets, as well as magical bowls, which were used to trap demons and protect homes, as well as other later Jewish mystical traditions. What they all hold in common is the belief in the inherent power contained within the names of God and angels themselves, and the conviction that invoking these names in the proper way, coupled with the proper rituals and procedures could produce desired effects. Perhaps the best example of adjuration literature can be found within the realm of magical amulets.

Part I

Jewish magical amulets,"*qame'ot*" as they are known in Hebrew are objects inscribed to different degrees with elements such as various "magical" symbols, scriptural verses, holy names, or liturgical elements from the Jewish tradition. Yuval Harari, in his book *Jewish Magic before the Rise of Kabbalah* elaborates on this definition. Harari states:

> An amulet (qameʿa), in the broad sense of the word, is an artifact possessing a performative power meant to serve the one who uses it. In general, and most distinctly in the context of the sources discussed here, an amulet draws its power from the words of the adjuration and other signs written on it."(Harari: Kindle).

While amulets were and can be created using a wide range of mediums, from animal skin parchment, paper, thin metal plates, gemstones and others, the essential element of the amulet itself is not the material used to create it, but rather the words, signs and adjurations placed upon it. These words and symbols are imbued with their own energy and power, the act of writing them down and pronouncing them is what activates their inherent vitality.

These magical words do not exist within a vacuum. The people creating these amulets did not simply choose the words at random. On the contrary, amulets exist within a genera of Jewish literature best described as adjuration literature. Harari says: "adjuration is the central rhetorical motif in them."(Harari: Kindle)

Harari outlines in his book eight elements that can help identify and classify Jewish magical artifacts, specifically amulets. These elements are as follows:

1.The self-definition of the text or of the artifact on which it is written as an adjuration (hashbaʿah), writ (ketav), seal (ḥotam), amulet (qameʿa), ban (shamta'), incantation (laḥash), or countermagic (qibla').

2.An appeal to supernatural powers, usually angels (mal'akhim), princes (sarim), names (shemot), letters (otiyot), or demons (shedim), to operate according to the supplicant's will.
3. An address to these powers in the first-person singular.
4.Using verbs derived from the roots šb‘, zqq, gzr, or qym, or using expressions of restriction and expulsion generally derived from the roots 'sr, kbš, qm‘, ḥtm, gdr, g‘r, or btl, in the formulation of the appeal to supernatural powers.
5.Use of the language "in the name of" (be-shem) followed by the names of God, names of angels, or other holy names made up of combinations of letters, divine attributes, or biblical verses that describe God's actions (and that generally attest to his power).
6. Use of hastening and threatening formulations toward the supernatural powers.
7.Absence of formulations of request, as in formulations derived from the roots bqš, ḥnn, and pll, or the words meaning "please" ('ana', na') from the address to these powers.
8.Indicating the name of the party interested in this appeal as well as that of his or her mother or, in the instructional literature, with the label NN (so-and-so, the son/daughter of so-and-so; pbp, peloni ben/bat pelonit).

— Jewish Magic before the Rise of Kabbalah by Yuval Harari

Scholars have used this outline to identify a wide range of magical amulets and artifacts. Not all amulets contain every element outlined above, however most follow a similar rubric. While there were many different traditions spanning over a thousand years, the general formula holds true.

Amulets were an important part of Jewish culture from late antiquity until the enlightenment when their use became suspect to criticism as being superstition or worse, especially in the Ashkenazi world. Amulets can still be found in the Sefardi world until today.. One prime example of the importance placed on amulets and those who wrote them can be found in the figure of the Baal Shem Tov, who was the key figure in the founding of the Hasidic movement in the late 1700s. The title "Baal Shem Tov" means "the master of the good name."

The Baal Shem Tov held a prominent position in his community, he was respected as a holy man, but more importantly, his title comes from his profession, namely as an amulet writer who knew how to utilize the many names of God and angels to produce mystical effects such as healing and protection.

Amulets serve a great number of purposes, and the archeological record attests to their varying degrees of significance and widespread use throughout the history of Jewish civilization. In fact, most of what we know about Jewish magic as a practice or as a facet in the corpus of Jewish literature is preserved through the archeological remains of such amulets. Harari elaborates on this and states that almost all of what we know about Jewish magic in late antiquity and the middle ages comes to us through surviving examples of such magical texts.

The prevalence of amulets and other magical items inscribed with words of power is attested to by a large number of scholars such as Shaked, Naveh, Idel and others.. Harari draws on the earlier work of Shaked and Naveh to elaborate on the elements prevalent in magical amulets in early Judaism. Here we see a number of different realms and instances in which these amulets were used. Not only that, but Shaked and Naveh's work, as Harari states, attests to their ubiquitous nature within Jewish historical context.

Amulets were used by large swaths of the Jewish population to help them cope with the daily uncertainty inherent in the ancient and medieval world. Jews sought comfort in amulets as a means of protecting themselves, their livelihoods, and those that they cared for. Likewise, there were those in the Jewish community who used amulets for more mundane or even profane purposes such as one amulet found in the Cairo Geniza which was written for someone seeking to enhance their chances of winning at horse racing. The belief in the efficacy of such amulets seems widespread, and not limited to religious life.

As we have seen, amulets have played a role in Jewish daily life for the majority of Jewish history. We have examples of amulets dating to the first century CE. Written on silver, and other metals. These amulets were found in Jewish graves and contain the words of the priestly blessing. Presumably these amulets were grave goods intended to ease the transition of the dead person to the afterlife. Amulets would continue to play an important role in Jewish society, and there exist discussions of them in the Babylonian Talmud. These discussions range from the efficacy of these amulets, if one can carry them on shabbat, or not, and from who one is allowed to purchase said amulets. This goes to show just how ubiquitous their existence in Jewish society was, at least to the babylonian communities where the babylonian Talmud was compiled. Another similar magical artifact common in Babylonia was the magical bowls which contained many of the same elements of amulets. We will discuss magical bowls in the next section.

We also find myriad examples of Amulets in medieval contexts. With the rise of Kabbalah their significance only seems to have grown. Indeed there remain sectors of jewish society today who still make use of amulets, though this is primarily in Sephardic, Hasidic, and Mizrachi communities.

For this thesis I chose to select a number of magical objects from history in order to more deeply acquaint myself with their provenance and place within Jewish society. For this section I chose to select a magical amulet. I chose this particular amulet because it represents a good example of a typical medicinal amulet. The text of the incantation inscribed on the amulet is straightforward and contains several different sections, each with its own purpose and influences. I was also drawn to this amulet because it does not contain mention of demons. While demonology without a doubt played a major role in the development and understanding of

Jewish magic, I personally feel more connected to amulets and texts which adjure God and angels, as opposed to trying to exert influence over demonic entities.

The Amulet is identified as Cambridge University Library, item T-S KI. 137. This Amulet is a generic, or typical form of magical amulets. In terms of its size, form, and scriptural components it fits in well within the scope of other amulets recovered from the Cairo Genizah. This Amulet can be dated between the tenth and thirteenth centuries C.E. The text is in Hebrew and Aramaic, written upon parchment with ink.

The text of the amulet contains several elements. It opens "For the bearer of this writing." The text of the amulet follows with holy names and magical symbols, and the text ends in several biblical quotations. First: Deuteronomy 32:39 " See, then, that I, I am the One; There is no god beside Me. I deal death and give life; I wounded and I will heal: None can deliver from My hand." And also, Exodus 15:26 " God said, "If you will heed your God יהוה diligently, doing what is upright in God's sight, giving ear to God's commandments and keeping all God's laws, then I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians, for I יהוה am your healer."

We see the writer of the text included two verses which refer to God as a healer. This coupled with the magical symbols and holy names was seen to imbue the amulet with the power to protect, and even heal the recipient in the minds of those who created this amulet. Here too, just as in the case of the Mezuzah, the biblical text itself is seen to be imbued with protective powers. Hanging these versus around one's neck, or carrying them on one's body was believed to offer protection to the wearer. Swartz, in *Scribal Magic and Its Rhetoric: Formal Patterns in Medieval Hebrew and Aramaic Incantation Texts from the Cairo Genizah* says: "The magic of these amulets is manifestly textual. The amulets, which usually refer to themselves as *ketav*,

"writing," are themselves instruments of power. Some amulets state that they can protect "the bearer of this writing" (nose' ha-ketav ha-zeh); that is, by wearing or carrying the amulet anyone can receive its benefits." (Swartz: 165). Here we see the inherent power of the writing itself. The words are imbued with power, writing them down, and pronouncing them outloud is what activates their vitality.

Because the text of the amulet includes biblical verses which refer to God as a healer, it is safe to assume that the recipient of this amulet was someone looking to be healed from, or prevent a medical condition. The text is written in Hebrew and Aramaic, and was found in the Cairo Genizah therefore the owner of this amulet was most likely a Jew.

Michael D Swartz in his article: *Ritual Procedures in Magical Texts from the Cairo Genizah*, points to what he calls "the healing event" (Swartz: 308). This "healing event" is when the amulet would have been read aloud, and then either rolled up or otherwise hidden or worn by the person who requested the amulet. Swartz recognizes the central importance of the language and the writing itself, saying "the most important aspect of the event is the charm or utterance." (Swartz 308). Furthermore, on the importance of the oral dimension over the written, Swartz says: "The oral dimension of Jewish incantation texts is also demonstrated by the use of poetic forms such as rhythm, assonance, and liturgical allusions as well as the use of vowel letters and sibilants in series to produce a dramatic intoning, popping, or hissing effect." (Swartz: 309)

This brings us back to the central thrust of this thesis, that is that magical utterances, better understood as adjurations fall well within the accepted scope of magical practice amongst Jews in the ancient world. I believe that utilizing amulets and "healing events" in a modern context, could enhance a modern Jew's spiritual experience of sickness and healing, just as it did for our ancestors.

But who wrote this amulet? Did we not learn from Deuteronomy 18 that magical practitioners were not to be consulted? It is impossible to be sure who wrote this amulet, as there is no signature, and there rarely are. What is for sure is that whoever composed this amulet was well versed in both biblical quotations, as well as magical symbols and holy names. It is possible that the scribe who wrote this amulet was a full time magician who sold these and other types of amulets. On Magicians at the time Swartz says:

> "A magician's reputation rests on his or her authority and skill. This skill consists not only in knowing specific techniques and names, but in the demonstrated ability to employ complex semiotic systems." (Swartz :318)

Swartz goes on to describe these magicians saying that they were presumably pious jews who were familiar with classical rabbinic law and lore as well as having extensive knowledge of biblical quotations. They most likely would have held station in society, as Swartz points out, their reputation hinged on the perceived efficacy of their products.

Now that we have seen some of the history of amulets within Jewish society, and since we have already identified the modern use of amulets, such as the mezuzah, even if they are not recognized as such, we can begin to discuss where in today's Jewish life these amulets could make a positive spiritual impact today.

I think the structure of this amulet is perfect for a modern adaptation. The amulet does not contain an adjuration of an angel or demon. I believe this sort of amulet would more readily speak to a modern person than some others. The structure of this amulet, including the opening, and the biblical verses could be reproduced and worn as an amulet, or hung like a mezuzah in the home.

The physicality of an amulet is a tangible link to spirituality. While we may say the Mi Shebeirach prayer for a loved one who is ill, I think that creating an amulet for a loved one in need of healing could be a significant act of spirituality for many. Linking the words of our prayers and holy texts to the physical action of inscribing them on paper or parchment can create a more tangible link that might serve as a meaningful avenue of expression for those seeking divine intervention for a loved one, or merely seeking comfort.

Part II

Another major trend in Jewish magic similar to amulets in antiquity were magic bowls. I chose this topic both because magic bowls are so ubiquitous when discussing Jewish magic in Mesopotamia in late antiquity, particularly in Babylonia. In *Ancient Jewish Magic,* Idel explains: "First discovered in the middle of the nineteenth century, the bowls in question are limited to one geographic location, roughly that of present day Iraq and Western Iran, and to one chronological period, probably from the fifth to sixth century CE." (Idel: 184). Artistically the bowls are often enigmatic, showing images of fanciful demons and spirits. Magic bowls also give us a view of the cross cultural essence of magic in the ancient world with elements borrowed from the broader society. The Bowls are found in several different languages and show an array as to the level of professionalism amongst the scribes who created them.

One chief belief within the Mesopotamian and Near Eastern zeitgeist was the belief in the ever present and real danger of demons. These otherworldly beings, hell bent on causing harm to humans, appeared everywhere in popular imagination. Someone falling on bad luck was often seen to have been beset upon by demons. Sickness, financial instability, familial death, childbirth, all these areas of life were seen to be teeming with the influence of demons and other spirits.

The Babylonian Talmud, tractate Berachot 6a recounts:

תַּנְיָא, אַבָּא בִּנְיָמִין אוֹמֵר: אִלְמָלֵי נִתְּנָה רְשׁוּת לָעַיִן לִרְאוֹת — אֵין כָּל בְּרִיָּה יְכוֹלָה לַעֲמוֹד מִפְּנֵי הַמַּזִּיקִין.

It was taught that Abba Binyamin says: If the eye was given permission to see, no creature would be able to withstand the abundance and ubiquity of the demons and continue to live unaffected by them.

This is just one of numerous accounts of demons throughout the Babylonian Talmud. Elsewhere we find Rabbis and Sages facing demons heads on, and other tales of the very real and palpable effect demons had on the everyday lives of the Jews of antiquity and the middle ages. We even find stories of Rabbis dealing with demons by means of magic incantations and amulets. Such as in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Pesachim, 11b where it takes two rabbis and two amulets to expel a group of 60 demons from some reeds.

Magic bowls and amulets were not only used by Jews. Indeed while many of these bowls were made by and for Jews, there exist many examples of bowls made for non Jewish persons. In particular we have several later bowls written in arabic. The fact that the same scriptural elements across cultural examples goes to show just how intertwined magical beliefs were between different peoples and cultures.

For this thesis I chose to investigate one bowl in particular. This is a magic bowl made of earthenware pottery, written in Hebrew and Aramaic dating from between the 5th and 7th centuries from Mesopotamia. The Bowl is identified by scholars as JBA 30 (Ms 1928/47). The Bowl measures 180 x 50 mm and is inscribed with seven lines of script in the middle, surrounded by writing spiraling outward.

The text of the bowl is as follows:

1	Healing from
2	heaven
3	That seals.
4	Amen,
5	Amen,
6	(A) men, S(elah),

7	Selah
8	Elisur Bagdana, the king of devs and the great ruler of liliths. I adjure you, the lilith Hablas,
9	Granddaughter of the lilith Zarnay, who resides upon the threshold of the house of Farrokh son of Resewandukh, and strikes and beats
10	Boys and girls. I beswear you in order that you should be struck in your pericardium and by the lance of the mighty Qitaros,
11	Who is ruler over demons and over devs and over liliths. I write you your deed of divorce and divorce you from Farrokh son of Reseweandukh, just as demons
12	Write deeds of divorce to their wives and [th]ey do not come back again unto them. Take your deed of divorce and accept your adjuration and go out and flee and go away and take flight from the house of Farrokh son of Resewandukh
13	And of Maskoy his wife. By the name of -- *nomina barbara [---] nomina barbara* you are bound and sealed by his signet ring on which the ineffable name is drawn (and) carved, the arrangement of the world,
14	From the six days of creatio[n. A]men, Amen, [Selah].

(Shaked, Ford, Bhayro: 166-167)

The Clients for whom this magic bowl was created are identified as Farrokh son of Rasewandukh and his wife, Maskoy. Presumably Jews living in mesopotamia. There were several ways in which these magic bowls could have been used by Farokh son of Resewandulh and his wife Maskoy. Most often we find them buried in or near the remains of homes. These bowls would have been inscribed by a magician and then placed upside down and buried as a "trap" for the demons and spirits which were believed to be tormenting the home and its owners.

It is impossible to identify who wrote this bowl because there is no identified scribe. The writer of this bowl was clearly a professional following a prescribed formula. Shaul Shaked, James Nathan Ford and Siam Bhayro outline the typical scriptural elements one finds in these Magic Bowls in their book *Aramaic Bowl Spells Jewish Babylonian Aramaic Bowls; Volume One.* Shaked, Ford, and Bhayro lay out the following outline. Single spell incantations begin with an opening invocation, then there are "requests asking for protection to the client and her offspring," then the text states "By the name of" and lists authorities, before beginning the spell itself where the demon or demons are commanded to leave, or are struck down. The Text concludes with *nomina barbara* (foreign looking words or phrases) and invocations of power and authority.

We find this outline expressed well in this bowl. The author of the bowl was clearly aware of this typical structure and went about creating a bowl that followed that outline. The bowl begins with seals and nomina barbara, which are magical symbols. Then the bowl invokes for the protection of the client and his wife. Finally the text enacts a divorce between a demon and the owner of the home. It is interesting to note the legalistic aspect of this bowl. This could indicate proximity to the teachings of the rabbis who were overwhelmingly concerned with legality.Through this we see the bleed over of talmudic sensibilities into the magical realm. Here we see Demons receiving writes of divorce, just as human women would.

There are other literary features present in many bowls while absent in this one. One such feature is what is called *Historiolae***.** Historiolae are short narratives which the author of the text uses to present the purpose of the spell, and acts as an example of the desired effect of the incantation/amulet.

An often quoted *Historiolae* concerns Rabbi Hanina Ben Dosa, a famous Tanna (first century CE), who encountered a female demon, identified simply as "an evil spirit." He recites a biblical verse (Ps 104:20) and thereby vanquishes her. This lays the ground for the request to banish evil spirits and other maleficent beings from the house and body of the bowl owner. (Shaked, Ford, Bhayro: 13)**.**

I chose this magic bowl because, like the amulet I chose, this bowl was intended as a medicinal remedy. I find the intersection of magic and medicine fascinating. In the ancient world, when someone had an ailment the person called to tend to them would not have distinguished between magic and medical knowhow. What is so interesting to me is that modern science has proven that belief, and intention has a serious placebo effect. By engaging in these rituals and beliefs, people were attempting to gain some control in a very dangerous and intimidating world. While many of these systems and beliefs seem absurd to us today, the fact that people adhered to them suggests that they derived some benefit from them, or at least believed they did. These kinds of placebo effects can continue to be of use to us today.

Today, instead of magical bowls, many jews hang "*birkhot ha Bayit*" (blessings for the home) somewhere in their home. These blessings are often artistic and occupy prized spaces on the walls of Jewish homes. I would argue that these blessings are another common modern form of amulets or magic bowls, and that experimenting with different forms of these expressions could be beneficial to modern day Jews.

Part III

As we have seen, the language written upon amulets and magical bowls coupled with the utterance of these words is what was seen to activate the inherent powers within the texts. The intrinsic power of the text, and indeed the Hebrew language is the central element to Jewish magic. This language, coupled with rituals and practices to adjure power is Jewish magic at its core. Language mysticism, or the belief that the language of Hebrew itself is imbued with inherent power and secrets can help us come to understand the Jewish mystical movements. One figure stands out amongst the various language mystics, and his understanding and utilization of holy names and texts can help us better understand how we might make use of this to enhance our own spiritual lives today.

Abulafian mysticism can be understood as meditative techniques, utilizing the Hebrew letters of divine names, to attain mystical, ecstatic, or as Abulafia deemed it "prophetic" experiences. I chose this topic because I consider the Abulafian school of mysticism to be the most "practical" example of Jewish magic. By practical I mean that elements of this school of thought can easily be utilized by mystically inclined people to enhance their spiritual experience even today. Indeed, Abulafia created a system through which he believed any person could attain a mystical experience.

We modern Jews can benefit greatly from some of the mystical teachings of Abulafia. I believe that some of his techniques can elevate one's personal sense of connection with the divine, strengthen one's prayer practice, as well as nourish a deeper sense of spirituality. In addition to this, as an art form, the practice of writing the various names of God in all their various combinations of letters and pronunciation is both beautiful to behold, and extremely

meditative to participate in. Practicing Abulafian mysticism can inspire modern jews to connect with spirituality and religion from a different, perhaps more magical lens and perspective.

In Joshua Tracktenberg's book *Jewish Magic and Superstition: a Study of Folk Religion,* he explains a common misconception concerning what magic consists of. He says:

> The common idea that the essence of magic lies in a mysterious and mystifying activity is a product more of our theatrical pseudo-magic with its waving hands and hocus-pocus, than of knowledge of the facts. Medieval Jewish magic depended for its effects mainly upon the spoken word. But incantations were frequently accompanied by incidental actions whose significance lay in their symbolic or connotative values, some of which, in the course of millennia, have come to be recognized as of distinctively magical import. (Tracktenberg: 120.)

Abulafian mysticism is Jewish magic at its core. It consists of many techniques including the spoken word as Tracktenberg mentions. But chief amongst the techniques Abulafia pioneered was the writing and recitation of divine names of God, as a means of meditation and communion with the divine.

Moshe Idel, a prominent scholar of jewish magic and mysticism and a specialist on Abulafia provides a succinct account of Abulafia's life in his book: *The Mystical Experience in Abulafia.* Idel relates: Abulafia was born in 1240 C.E. in Saragossa Aragon. His fathers name was Samuel. Later, the family moved to Tudela, where Abulafia studied with his father until his death. Moshe Idel goes on to detail Abulafias movements to and from the land of Israel where he was in search of a fabled, and mythic river called the Sambatyon. Abulafia's search was interrupted by warring between the Mamelukes and the Tartars. Making his way back to Europe, Abulafia was married in Greece and continued his migration to Italy, where he settled in Capua, where he studied Maimonides' *Guide to the perplexed* under R. Hillel of Verona.

Idel describes how after a period of years Abulafia returned to Catalonia, where in 1270 he had a prophetic vision, "in which he was commanded to meet with the pope."(Idel: 2/3). It

was during this period that Abulafia began to study Kabbalah. Idel suggests that his primary focus was on the esoteric work *Sefer Yezirah.* A work that suggests that reality itself was created through and with the Hebrew language. This work would have a profound effect on Abulafia. It was at this point that Abulafia began attracting attention, both positive and negative. "At the end of the Hebrew year 5040 (i.e. , Fall 1280), he attempted to meet with Pope Nicholas III, who rejected these overtures. While the pope was still in his vacation palace in Soriano, near Rome, Abulafia made a daring attempt defying the pope's threats to burn him at the stake, and arrived at the castle. However, soon after his arrival the pope suddenly died, thus saving Abulafia from certain death." (Idel:: 3).

This amazing turn of events probably contributed to Abulafias rise in influence. Idel describes how Abulafia gathered a group of "students and admirers who "moved at his command,""(Idel: 3). However he also became subject to intense scrutiny and dispute, leading to members of the Italian Jewish community reaching out to R. Solomon ben Abraham ibn Adret (ca. 1235- ca. 1310) also known as *Rashba.* Idel says that Ibn Adret ``began an all out war" on Abulafia which culminated in the latter being exiled to an Island off of Sicily where he most likely died around the year 1291.

Abulafia dedicated a significant portion of his life to the study and teaching of *The Guide for the perplexed,* Maimonides seminal work of religious thought. In this guide, Maimonides explained that God could better be understood as the "active intellect." *The Guide for the perplexed* was as much a philosophical work as it was a manual for bewildered students of the sage.

It was this active intellect that Abulafia sought to unite with through his mystical/meditative techniques. However, Maimonides was not the only source from which

Abulafia drew his inspiration. Moshe Idel says: “Analysis of Abulafia’s mysticism demands reference to an entire Kabbalistic school, spreading over many years and requires careful study of the writings of many different Kabbalists.” (Idel: 5). An exhaustive investigation of the various influences on Abulafia’s mysticism goes beyond the scope of this thesis. However, the awareness that Abulafia did not invent much of what he taught, rather he synthesized techniques and beliefs that were already circulating in Ashkenazic circles such as the Hassidei Ashkinaz and other Sages of the time, is important to note.

Moshe Idel explains in *The Mystical Experience in Abulafia* the many different types of writings Abulafia left us. These include: handbooks for mystical experience, interpretations of classical Jewish texts, his prophetic works, as well as what Idel calls “occasional works,” such as poems and epistles. In this work I will focus on Abulafia’s handbooks for mystical experience. About them Moshe Idel has this to say:

> The most significant and fully developed genre is that of handbooks for the acquisition of prophecy (i.e ecstasy) and cleaving to God (*devequt)*- i.e., what is in contemporary language called mystical experience. These books detail various techniques…The most important of these works are *Hayye ha- Olam ha-ba, Or ha-Sekel, Imre Sefer, Ozar Ganuz,* and *Sefer ha-Heseq. (*Idel:4).

These handbooks, which survive in various manuscripts from the era, provide the reader with practical, applicable techniques for achieving prophecy (i.e ecstasy) through means of cleaving to God, or as Maimonides suggests the “active intellect.”

Throughout his works Abulafia describes myriad techniques for attaining ecstasy. Indeed Abulafia was convinced that the prophets of the *Tanakh* used these various techniques themselves to achieve their exalted levels of prophecy i.e ecstasy. These techniques chiefly involve such things as self isolation, purification of one's body and mind through fasting and immersion in ritual baths, and above all else deep penetrating concentration on the names of God

and of God's nature. These actions and ruminations combined, Abulafia believed, led to an ecstatic state within which prophecy, and indeed mystical powers were attainable.

Idel brings a quote from R. Moses b. Simeon of Burgos, who is identified as a student of Abulafia to illuminate what Abulafia taught about these prophets of old.

> It is truly know that those prophets who concentrated intensely in deed and in thought, more so than other peoples of their species, and whose pure thoughts cleaved to the Rock of the world with purity and great cleanliness-- that the supernal Divine will intended to show miracles and wonders through them, to sanctify his great Name, and that they received an influx of the supernal inner emanation by virtue of Divine names, to perform miraculous actions in physical things, working changes in nature. (Perus Sem-ben M"B Otiyot, printed by Sholem in Tarbiz vol.5 (1934)) (Idel:24)

The importance placed on cleanliness, and purity before one attempts these techniques is significant. One can not simply pick up a pen and paper, begin writing divine names and hope to attain some heightened spiritual state. On the contrary, a purification of self has to take place before one can begin climbing the ladders of mystical experience within the Abulafian frame.

In terms of preparation for the act of contemplating the Divine Name Abulafia has this to say:

> Be prepared for thy God, o Israelite! Make thyself ready to direct thy heart to God alone. Cleanse the body and choose a lonely house where none shall hear thy voice. Sit there in thy closet and do not reveal thy secret to any man. If thou canst, do it by day in the house, but it is best if thou completest it during the night. In the hour when thou preparest thyself to speak with the Creator and thou wishest Him to reveal His might to thee, then be careful to abstract all thy thoughts from the vanities of the world. (*Hayye ha-Olam ha-Ba*, MS. Oxford 1582, fol. 51b; Scholem, *Major Trends,* pp. 136-137)

The need for total isolation, clarity and purity of mind are key to the Abulafian mystical tradition.

In *The Mystical Experience in Abulafia* Moshe Idel outlines how an adherent to the Abulafian system makes use of the Divine names. What is particularly striking about the Abulafian school of mysticism is its insistence on pronouncing the ineffable name of god (the

tetragrammaton) *YHWH*. As Idel explains, this practice directly contradicts an edict in the mishnah, "One who pronounces the Name in its letters [i.e., as it is written] has no share in the world to come." (Sanhedrin, fol. 90b.) Idel says, "Abulafia claims the exact opposite: that the way to attain the World to Come is precisely, and only, by pronouncing the Ineffable Name." (Idel:41). Regardless of the halachic view of this practice, Abulafia and other Kabbalists never mention this as an issue. We are led to believe that somehow this action was not seen as a transgression. Perhaps because as Abulafia insists, the practice of this technique should be done in isolation. Perhaps others hearing you pronounce the name is what the mishnah intended to avoid.

Idel explains that there are three levels one must traverse in sequence in order to attain prophecy. After one has sufficiently isolated themselves and purified both their body and mind, one begins by writing, then speaking, and finally contemplating. These three levels correspond to the different means of interacting with letters and words in general. Idel writes:

> "Just as the letters themselves generally appear on three levels- writing, speech and thought- so do the Names of God; one must 'recite' the Names first in writing, then verbally, and finally mentally. The act of writing the combination of the letters of the Divine Names is mentioned in several places in the writings of Abulafia and his followers, only two of which we shall cite here: "Take the pen and parchment and the ink, and write and combine names"(Ozar 'Eden Ganuz, MS. Oxford 1580, fol. 161a.) and in *Saare Zedeq, "*when midnight passed [over] me and the quill is in my hand and the paper on my knees." (MS. Jerusalem 8-148, fol 63b).

Writing the letters is the first step along the path to inscribing them upon your heart. Once the adherent has written the names in all of their various possible combinations, one can then move on to pronouncing them verbally and finally contemplating them mentally as Abulafia puts it, "like a turning wheel."

Idel quotes Abulafia's *Hayye ha-Nefesh* to describe the process of attaining wisdom:

> And begin by combining this name, namely, *YHWH,* at the beginning alone, and examine all its combinations and move it and turn it about like a wheel returning around, front and back, like a scroll, and do not let it rest, but when you see its matter strengthened because of great motion, because of fear of confusion of your imagination and the rolling about of your thoughts, and when you let it rest, return to it and ask [it] until there shall come to your hand a word of wisdom from it, do not abandon it. Afterwards go on to the second on from it, *Adonay,* and ask of it its foundation [*yesodo*] and it will reveal to you its secret [*sodo*]. And then you will apprehend its matter in the truth of its language. Then combine the two of them [*YHWH and Adonay**],*** and study them and ask them, and they will reveal to you the secrets of wisdom, and afterwards combine this which is, namely, *El Sadday,* which is tantamount to the Name [*El Sadday* = 345= *ha'Shem*], and it will also grant you wisdom, and then combine the four of them, and find the miracles of the Perfect one [i.e, God], which are miracles of wisdom. (MS. Munchen 408, fold. 65a-65b).

This process is highly involved and takes immense amounts of patience and concentration. What is so remarkable is Abulafia's insistence that this technique can and will impart wisdom to the practitioner. What is most interesting is how Abulafia explains the miracles one experiences as "miracles of wisdom."

Idel describes the second level of the Abulafian path, the path of verbal articulation. He goes on to say that there is a four fold system one must apply. First the mystic should "sing the letters and their vocalization" (Idel:20) While doing this one should have a consistent pattern of breathing. Also, one should move one's head following the vocalization of the letter and its corresponding vowel. Finally "He must contemplate the internal structure of the human being." (Idel: 20).

The attention paid to one's breath while undergoing this process is paramount. In fact, Abulafia offers a technique for breathing that is broken into three parts. Idel describes the practice which can be found in Abulafia's work *Mafteah ha-Shemot:* "The technical aspect includes three different elements, comprising one unit: 1) the intake of air, namely breathing; 2) the emission of air while pronouncing the letter and its vowel; 3) the pause between one breath and the next." (Idel: 25). This breathing process, as Idel notes, shares remarkable similarity to Yogic breathing practices.

As part of my work for this thesis I ventured to attempt a version of the above outlined technique. As an amateur scribe I was excited to become more intimate with the letters. I did not expect to have an ecstatic or mystical experience. On the contrary, I thought this process would be tedious and mind numbing. How surprised I was when I found myself in a deep trance-like state, breathing in, holding my breath, writing a letter, and then breathing out while pronouncing that letter.

As a Jewish educator I couldn't help but think that this technique could be used in Hebrew schools as a means of teaching students the Alef Bet. If a child has the patience to follow this procedure, I believe it can have a profound impact on their retention of the Hebrew letters and their pronunciations. Indeed it has helped me become more comfortable in pronouncing Hebrew, and I have been studying Hebrew for a very long time at this point.

At the end of my attempt at utilizing Abulafian letterwork meditation I was left with a sheet of paper covered in Hebrew letters, all of which make up the name of God. I was stuck by how ordered the page looked and just how beautiful it was on its own. Through this I gained a deeper understanding of how visualization, both physical and mental, play major roles in the magical process for Jews. Visualizing the complexity inherent in just God's ineffable name interested me in what other forms of visualization were used in Jewish magical and mystical practice. This interest led me to Kabbalistic trees, i.e *ilanot.*

Part V

Kabbalistic trees or *Ilanot* as they are called in Hebrew, come in a variety of forms and have served a variety of different functions since they were first conceived of by Kabbalists, as early as the 14th century. At their very core, Kabbalistic trees are tools used by kabbalists to visualize aspects of God, realized through the study of kabbalistic texts. These artistic renderings constitute a representation of how God's infinite being can be understood on some level by mortal souls. They come to show the influxes and outfluxes of divine energy and substance. They attempt to answer questions like: How does God create a physical realm within God's infinite metaphysical state? How can we as mortal beings understand God's interaction with us, knowing full well we can not comprehend God in God's totality of existence? And more practically, How can we understand ourselves, and the stories of the Tanakh from the deepest, most secretive of levels?

In his landmark work, the first of its kind, J.H Chajes gives an exhaustive overview of Kabbalistic trees and their history and utility. That work, titled: *The Kabbalistic Tree* provides the reader with example after example of the most beautiful, and puzzling of Kabbalitic trees, diagrams and schema. Chajes opens his discussion on Kabbalistic trees with this:

> In the beginning - and ever since - kabbalists drew diagrams. Most were epistemic images intended to clarify texts besides which they appeared. For all the importance of the medium in the constitution of the ilanot genre, this genre would not exist were it not for the older ongoing tradition of visual thinking and diagrammatic drawing among kabbalists. (Chajes:9)

Here Chajes connects Kabbalistic trees back to a rich tradition amongst kabbalists of drawing and diagramming different concepts. Indeed, the world of kabbalah is filled with various types of visual representations and learning tools. In an earlier chapter I discussed Rabbi Abraham

Abulafia and his extensive diagrams showing his meditative techniques utilizing the names of God. This type of visualization was common amongst kabbalists, as Chajes suggests.

It is impossible to describe Kabbalistic trees and other related diagrams without first describing their main subject, that is, sefirot. Kabbalistic trees are at their core visualizations of the interactions between different sefirot. These sefirot make their first appearance in one of the earliest kabbalistic works, *Sefer Yetzirah,* but they would reach their apex in the later work of the Zohar, the primary work of Kabbalism. *Sefer Yetzirah* describes the process through which God created the universe. It is in this work that we learn about the "sefirot" which are understood as emanations of cosmic depth. God created the sefirot out of God's infinite being in order to give form and substance to reality. Likewise, each sefirah is likened to an attribute of God's infinite being.

Often, in kabbalistic manuscripts we find the sefirot represented as circles, or spheres, and in the earliest manuscripts we find them layered one upon the other. Chajes suggests that early kabbalists adapted astronomical visualizations for their own means. He says: "The kabbalists were fond of the metaphor they picked up from astronomers that likened the structure of the cosmos to the skins of an onion. This is the oldest graphical visualization of that kabbalistic appropriation, and it went on to become one of the most widely reproduced in the history of kabbalah." (Chajes:13). Like an onion, these sefirot were seen to be layered one upon another. Peeling back one layer reveals the next.

The names of the *sefirot* in order from highest to lowest are *ein sof* ("infinite"), *keter ʿelyon* ("supreme crown"), *hokhmah* ("wisdom"), *binah* ("intelligence"), *ḥesed* ("love"), *gevurah* ("might"), *tifʾeret* ("beauty"), *netzah* ("eternity"), *hod* ("majesty"), *yesod* ("foundation"), and *malkhut* ("kingship"). These ten aspects, or emanations of God's being, make up the foundation

of the sefirotic system. Each one flows into the next and infuses it with vitality. One *sefirah* can not exist without the others, and yet each one is distinct. But where did this idea that God has different individual and distinct attributes come from? It is possible to trace back this belief to the Tanakh itself. In Exodus 34: 6 we read, "יהוה passed before him and proclaimed: "יהוה! יהוה! a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness." Here we can see a number of attributes that God identifies with God's self. They are compassion, graciousness, slowness to anger, kindness and faithfulness. In the next line, Exodus 34:7 we read: "extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin—yet not remitting all punishment, but visiting the iniquity of parents upon children and children's children, upon the third and fourth generations." Here we see different qualities of God expressed. God is kind and forgiving, yet God can also be full of judgment. These lines provided kabbalists with a scaffolding upon which to build an outline of God's personality. The *sefirot* were created to show how God can be both kind and forgiving, and yet full of judgment as well. The sefirot show that instead of representing a paradox, these diametrically opposed elements can be understood as part of a system.

It is also from the Tanakh that we get the general kabbalistic interest in cosmological mysteries. How can it be that God is often anthropomorphised in the scripture when we know God is formless? There are also places in Tanakh where people are said to see "God's back" or the *merkavah (*God's throne or chariot). The Kabbalists, making use of Sefer Yetzirah, sought to delve into these questions and to answer them from a mystical perspective. Indeed there were mystics who sought to gain understanding of the world by visualizing and investigating the image of God seated upon a throne. These mystics known as *Yordei Merkavah* created entire systems through which they could understand an anthropomorphised God sitting upon a throne

from a more mystical perspective. They even go so far as to measure the length of God's "fingers and toes."

Visualizing God in the physical sense is only one of the ways Jewish mystics utilized visualization to aid in their spiritual assent. Mystics also visualized the ethereal temple described in the book of Ezekiel. In fact some of the earliest mystical texts that survive deal with the images presented in the book of Exekiel. From the very beginning of the Jewish mystical tradition, visualization and contemplation of God has been a central motif.

Chajes brings forth the words of Isaac of Acre, one of the early kabbalists to explain how these visualizations were understood, and meant to be used by the kabbalists. Chajes says:

> From Isaacs perspective, given the profound implication of sefirotic visualization in the act of prayer, this was a critical point. Kabbalistic prayer did not address God in the plain sense of the liturgical texts. Prayer was intentionally "aimed" at particular sefirot and designed to advance the cause of cosmic amelioration through intra-divine interventions. (Chajes:24).

Kabbalistic prayer understood from this perspective can better be explained as focusing visualizations and adjurations towards specific sefirot, which are themselves individual aspects of God's cosmic being. The visual and artistic aspect of *ilanot* relate it directly to the other objects we have discussed, amulets and magic bowls. Meanwhile, as ilanot are based in the teachings of *Sefer Yetzirah* the connection with Abulafia is straightforward. Abulafia drew from *Sefer Yetzirah* to inform the system which he created to attain an ecstatic connection with the divine. The creators of Kabbalistic trees drew upon *Sefer Yetzirah* in order to visualize the sefirot. However, the ways in which Abulafia made use of Sefer Yetzirah differs from later kabbalists. Abulafia was concerned with attaining ecstatic, or mystical experience through deep

contemplation of the letters and names of God and the sefirot. Later kabbalists, including those who created *illanot* were more concerned with the intellectual aspect of the sefirot. They wanted to understand how these different elements of God's being interact with each other and the ramifications that can have for us in our daily lives.

For this project I have chosen to investigate one of the earliest kabbalistic trees. Chajes identifies this Ilan as: *Ilan ha-hochmah (*Tree of wisdom/science) MS Parma 2784 94a.

In many ways *Ilan ha-hochmah* represents a visualization of the text of *Sefer Yetzirah.* To that end Chajes says this:

> *Sefer Yetzirah* divides the Hebrew alphabet into three groups: three "mother" letters, seven "doubled" letters, and twelve "simple" letters. Each finds indexical expression in the diagram. The group of three corresponds to the three labeled elements of air, water, and fire. The seven "doubles" seem to be the primary referent of the seven-branched tree with its doubled nodes. The twelve "simples" correspond to the edges of the cube. The seven-branched tree growing out of the cube displays precisely sixty-eight nodes. The importance of this detail was clear to the copyists, who reproduced it with uncanny accuracy. Furthermore, five nodes play no role in the establishment of the cube: two have been added beside those at the end of the lower horizontal line, a third at its center, and a fourth on the "air from spirit" line, and the fifth at the center of the lower sphere. The sum of sixty-eight plus five is thus encoded in "*Ilan ha-hochma."* The gematria (numerical value) of *hokhmah* is, in turn, seventy three. (Chajes: 15).

Ilan ha-hochmah is an attempt to make the inconceivable comprehensible. The elaborate system built up in *Sefer Yetzirah* is made palpable by the creator of this *Ilan.* What we know today as a kabbalistic tree looks very different from *Ilan ha-hochmah* and it would take some 200 years before *ilanot* started to look like what we typically associate with kabbalistic trees.

What *Ilan ha hochmah* shares with later *ilanot* is it attempts to represent physically a totally spiritual concept. Chajes says: "Bringing these disparate insights together reveals the "Ilan ha-hockhmah" to be a sophisticated visualization of the cosmology of *Sefer Yezirah.* Neoplatonist geometries are cleverly combined with iconic and indexical signifiers to form a

single integrated image." (Chajes: 16). This sophisticated visualization of *Sefer Yetzirah* would lead later kabbalists to expand upon this art form. *Ilanot* would reach their pinnacle of artistry and influence in the renaissance when illanot such as the Magnificent Parchment were created. This huge, incredibly embellished *ilan* represents the pinnacle of illanot as an art form, and was seen as a sort of encyclopedia of kabbalistic knowledge.

How can we make use of this frame of thinking to help enrich modern connection to Judaism and spirituality? As a student with learning disabilities I know just how difficult it is for a great number of young students to learn Hebrew. They struggle day in and day out in Hebrew school and in the end feel dejected and even further away from the spirituality we hope to inspire in them. I can envision educators utilizing Kabbalistic trees and the sefirot to communicate a more complex imagination of God to our students. Students who can not understand Hebrew can perhaps understand a conception of God that is schematic and which allows them to focus on individual aspects of God, like in the sefirotic system.

So many people today have trouble connecting to the God who is taught about in Hebrew school and preached about on Friday nights by rabbis in synagogues. I believe one of the reasons for this disconnect is because we have been taught that God is unknowable, beyond comprehension, and beyond the normal scope of human intellect. I don't want to argue that God is indeed knowable. However, I am convinced that teaching people more of the ways the kabbalists envisioned God through *Ilanot* and *sefirot* can make a connection to God more palpable to people.

Trying to comprehend and connect to an infinite invisible God can be very difficult for many modern Jews and non jews alike. I know that for me, this kind of God feels deeply impersonal and unreachable. While Kabbalah and the sefirotic system do not claim to teach the

totality of God's existence, they do attempt to make aspects of God's being more palpable to mortal beings. That said, the kabbalists recognized that even with the knowledge of the sefirot, there are elements of God which are unknowable. These elements were called *Ein Sof,* the infinite, unknowable reality of God's being.

Most often, when we pray we direct our prayers to "the king." In the sefirotic system this can be understood as the *sefirah* of *Keter* (Crown). It is the sefirah which is anchored to *Ein Sof,* the unknowable aspect of God, and it is the sefirah from which all the others emanate. I find it very difficult to visualize or connect to a God who is understood mainly as either *Ein Sof* or *Keter.* On the other hand, when I think about God's attributes of wisdom, or of love, or of beauty my prayers become much more tangible. I feel like I can identify my own emotions with aspects of God's being and this brings me closer to feeling in communion with God. I can imagine a Rabbi instructing their congregation to focus on one of the sefirot during tefilot. What would it look like to appeal to the aspect of God that deals with love?

Conclusion

Jewish magic and mysticism has taken on many forms and permutations since the first century CE. Here we have seen a number of different examples of magical items such as amulets, magic bowls, Abulafian meditation tables, and sefirotic trees. Each of these objects and subjects help to shed light on the general ubiquity of magic amongst our Jewish ancestors for generations. For thousands of years, Jews turned to magic to help them cope with the very real anxieties of their everyday lives. They saw their reality as teaming with angels, demons, and an energy that permeates all from God. These anxieties led jews to use magic prophylactically, and in the event of a real need such as sickness, or loss of livelihood. This way of viewing the world, a view in which there are multiple layers to reality, one seen and one unseen is what gave way to the kabbalistic school of thought. That in turn led to the creation of kabbalistic *ilanot*, which purport to show, or schematize this unseen world. Indeed to peek behind the curtain on the inner workings of God's creation.

As modern Jews we have all the benefits of the modern scientific age. We pride ourselves in being rational, non superstitious human beings. So what can a magical worldview offer us today that could in some way enhance or reimagine connection to the divine and spirituality? As we have seen, magic is connected directly to language. The magical act is partnering with God in bringing about some desired ends by means of writing or speaking. Magic is different from prayer in that it does not typically involve a request, rather there is an adjuration made. This difference between prayer and magic is critical to this discussion. I believe that magic gives the practitioner more agency than prayer, as in magic you are taking an active role along with God in order to bring about a desired end, instead of just requesting it of God. Likewise, the practice of

visualizing God's essence through image and language allows people to commune with God on a more intimate level.

There are those who will say that engaging in any magical practice is foolish, or dangerous, or worse, blasphemous. Some will say these things because of traditional viewpoints, superstition, or ignorance. They may ask "do you really believe you have any sort of power?" Or, "Do you really believe what you are doing will somehow manipulate God into providing you with the ends you seek?" To these people I say, "you have missed the point." Jewish magic through adjuration is about joining with God in the act of creation or healing. The magic practitioner has no intrinsic power. Rather, they act as a conduit for the inherent power present in the words of the magic they are performing.

There may be those who still assume that all magic is prohibited to Jews, and therefore they might be inclined to avoid interacting with anything that appears magical in its conception. But, as we have shown in this thesis, the rabbis of the talmud recognized adjuration magic as a kosher expression of Jewish belief. While I wouldn't suggest that a Jew join their local Witches Coven, I do believe many Jews could gain a deeper sense of communion with the divine if they interacted with more accepted magical practices such as the writing and wearing of amulets, or meditating on the divine names of God as seen in Abulafian mysticism. Likewise, illanot and a basic knowledge of the sefirot can help modern Jews contemplate and associate more closely with elements of God's being.

Bibliography:

Chajes, Jeffrey Howard. *The Kabbalistic Tree*. The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2022.

Harari, Yuval, et al. *Jewish Magic: Before the Rise of Kabbalah*. Wayne State University Press, 2017.

Idel, Moshe, and Jonathan Chipman. *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*. State University of New York Press, 1988.

Idel, Mosheh. *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*. State Univ. of New York Pr., 1988.

Scholastic Magic: Ritual and Revelation in Early Jewish Mysticism. Princeton University Press, 2014.

Shaked, Shaul, et al. *Aramaic Bowl Spells*. Brill, 2013.

Swartz, Michael D. "Scribal Magic and Its Rhetoric: Formal Patterns in Medieval Hebrew and Aramaic Incantation Texts from the Cairo Genizah." *The Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 83, no. 2, 1990, pp. 163–80. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1509941.

Swartz, Michael D. "Ritual Procedures in Magical Texts from the Cairo Genizah." Jewish Studies Quarterly, vol. 13, no. 4, 2006, pp. 305–18. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40753413..