Jews, Witchcraft, and Magic

Jews have always had a complex relation to magic. The Hebrew Bible condemns witchcraft and magic. Yet in asserting that precise ritual behavior sustains the world, the Bible and later classical Jewish texts express what might easily be construed as magical world-views. Moreover, Jewish authorities frequently ruled leniently when called upon to assess the legality of a wide range of practices, giving potential workers of magic much latitude. Many of the most revered figures in Jewish history were established wonder-workers and magical savants. Even those who were not were often remembered as such in Jewish hagiography, indicating the esteem of magical prowess in Jewish society. The frequent association between Jews and magic in non-Jewish literature thus was not invented out of whole cloth: If there was “the legend of Jewish sorcery” there was also “the truth behind the legend.” (Trachtenberg 1939, 1943) However, the magic imputed to the Jews was often viewed as pernicious, and its purpose to cause Christians harm. (See Ginzburg 1991; Idel 2001)

The Bible rejects magic and witchcraft unequivocally, as evinced by the terse dictate of Exodus 22, 17: “You shall not suffer a witch to live.” The prescriptive core of the anti-magical legislation of the Hebrew bible, however, is Deuteronomy 18, 9-14. Here we find a litany of religious practices condemned as the “abominations of those nations” who live in the soon-to-be-conquered Land of Canaan. The Israelites may not practice child-sacrifice, nor are they to have among them soothsayers, enchanters, witches, charmers, mediums, wizards, or necromancers. These practices, representing the biblical view of local pre-Israelite religion, are forbidden as abhorrent religious gestures; most of them are forms of divination. (For the ancient Near East context, see Jeffers 1996) The ancient rabbinic metonym for forbidden magical practices and beliefs would, in a similar spirit, come to be “the ways of the Amorites” (darkei ha-emori). (See Veltri 1998-1999; most of the rabbinic material is in Tosefta Shabbat (6-7), a collection of rabbinic teachings redacted in the third century.)
Yet divination need not have been pursued in a manner that contravened cultic statutes. Licit methods of divination are prescribed in verses 15-22 of Deuteronomy 18, which immediately follow the prohibitions of verses 9-14. A good example of a biblically approved divinatory device is the “Breastplate of Judgment” or “Urim and Thummim” worn by the High Priest. It was only after the divinatory channels provided by the Jewish cult, including this breastplate failed, that King Saul made his famously forbidden visit to the necromancer (I Samuel 28). On a more quotidian basis, every Jew received biblical assurance that proper enactment of the Torah would assure the flow of sustenance, expressed primarily as rain (Deut. 11, 13). The assumption that by enactment of the Torah the Jewish people could—among other things—reveal God’s will, gain access to the divine realm, effect the remission of their sins, and secure rainfall, is indicative of basic structural characteristics of Jewish religiosity. It is “performative” and predicated upon the belief that if one carries out certain actions properly, the desired results will surely follow. As Moshe Idel has suggested, the ease with which Judaism assimilated foreign magical traditions throughout its history may be ascribed to this basic structural parallel. (Idel 1997)

If the normative observance of all Jews was charged with magical efficacy, revered talmudic sages were also described as engaging in magical activity alongside their legal, exegetical, and homiletical pursuits. R. Hanina and R. Oshaya, Palestinian rabbis of the third century, are portrayed admiringly as having employed the “Laws of Creation” to create mouth-watering calves Friday afternoon just in time for Sabbath dinner. Rava, a fourth-century Babylonian sage, is reported to have created a Golem-style anthropoid, but his colleague R. Zera returned it to dust upon realizing that it could not speak, and was thus surely “a creature of the magicians.” (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 65b, 67b) Honi ha-Me’aggel [“drawer of circles”] was famous as a rain-maker, though his powerful magic was attributed to his close relationship with the Almighty. While the rabbinic leader of first-century BCE Jewry in the Land of Israel, Shimon ben Shetah, objected in principle to Honi’s standing in his magic circle demanding rain, his hands were tied. “What can I do,” the Talmud relates Shimon ben
Shetah saying in exasperation to Honi, “seeing that you ingratiate yourself with the Omnipresent and He performs your desires! And you are like a son who ingratiates himself with his father, and he performs his desires.” (Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 19a) Elsewhere in the Talmud, however, this same Shimon ben Shetah is recalled—perhaps apocryphally—as having ordered the hanging of 80 witches on a single day. (Ibid., Sanhedrin 45b)

These talmudic discussions largely defined the parameters of magical activity in subsequent rabbinic discourse. Just as the precise definition of the labors prohibited on the Sabbath clarified those labors permissible on the Sabbath, the rabbinic insistence that biblical terms be precisely defined made it possible to distinguish prohibited from permissible magic activity. Thus rather than be taken as a blanket condemnation of any activity that might be considered magical, Deuteronomy 18 came to be seen as a list of specific techniques (and contexts) that were to be avoided amid a wide range of other permissible techniques—such as the magical creation of calves and anthropoids. According to rabbinic sources, even forbidden magical techniques could be studied and practiced by rabbis if the goal was to understand the practices academically and to acquaint the rabbis with material they might encounter in a judicial context.

Although the parameters of acceptable magical activity were subject to rabbinic debate over the centuries, “word-magic” was widely accepted as permissible. Medieval rabbis accepted all forms of name-based incantations and adjurations to angels; many regarded adjurations to demons as no less acceptable. R. Eliezer of Metz (12th c. France) ruled that “invoking the demons to do one’s will is permitted from the outset, for what difference is there between invoking demons or angels?” On the other hand, R. Eliezer ruled that manipulating objects or other ritual performances were forbidden magic, for “an action may not be characterized as ‘magic’ unless it consists of taking hold of a thing and manipulating it, that is, if it is the performance of a deed…but invoking demons is permitted ab initio” (Cited in Trachtenberg 1939, 20). The condemnation of ritual magic—the inverted reflection of Jewish religious behavior—may well reflect the classical Jewish
construction of forbidden magic as a form of ‘avodah zarah (lit., alien worship; idolatry).

If Jewish legal sources enable us to frame an emic description of licit Jewish magic, it would be misleading to suggest that even Jewish authorities kept scrupulously to imposed limits. In the event, it was common for Jewish magical treatises to prescribe ritual performances, manipulations of objects, the concoction of foul preparations, and whatever else magical tradition suggested might be efficacious. Jews availed themselves of much of the arsenal of the magician’s trove of formulae, from blood, saliva, feces, and hair, to herbs, gemstones, and salt; their deployment was akin to usages found among their non-Jewish neighbors. Even these could be sanctioned by the rabbis, who often stressed their secondary relationship to the word-magic construed as the primary dimension of the ceremonies. In this manner, the only truly forbidden magic remained silent voodoo-like rituals.

Language, and the use of names in particular, formed the quintessential core of Jewish magic. Adjurations, incantations, amulets, and magical bowls from antiquity to the present attest to this. This forte of Jewish magic was recognized since antiquity, with figures the likes of Origen commenting on the special strength of Jewish invocations. “Their names are so powerful when linked with the name of God,” wrote Origen, “that the formula ‘the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’ is used not only by members of the Jewish nation in their prayers to God and when they exorcise daemons, but also by almost all those who deal in magic and spells.” (Origen 1965, IV 33, p. 209)

Origen’s comments are especially perceptive in noting that Jews used identical liturgical formulae in “normative” and magical settings. In addition to the liturgical formulae that were to be found in synagogue prayer and exorcism ceremony, sacred scrolls in routine Jewish use, mezzuzot (doorpost scrolls, pl.) tefillin (phylacteries, or head and arm scrolls), and Torah scrolls (the Pentateuch), had prominent magical dimensions (See Bar-Ilan 1985). All had to be written by scribes who followed strict standards of purity,
immersing in the ritual bath regularly, often before each inscription of a
divine name. Moreover, every aspect of the written text was carefully
regulated, from the ingredients of the ink, to the animal skin upon which
the sacred texts were to be written, to the formatting and design of the
text—down to the very shape of the letters. If a mere calligraphic crown of a
letter was missing, the scroll was rendered unfit for use. The magical
significance of the visual dimension of the written text in Judaism should
thus not be overlooked (Wolfson 2001). *Mezzuzot* were scrolls of
Deuteronomy 6, 4-9, fixed upon critical liminal loci—the doorposts of Jewish
houses. Additional magical formulae were added to the *mezuzah* (sg.) in the
course of the Middle Ages to augment its apotropaic powers. To this day, the
standard *mezuzah* retains two such augmentations on its reverse: the name
*SHADDAI* (understood as the acrostic of *Shomer Delatot Israel*, “guardian of
the doors of Israel”) and the ostensible gibberish *KOZU BEMOCHSAZ KOZU.*
The latter was a transposition of the three core words of Deuteronomy 6, 4
(“Hear Israel, *YHVH* (our) *God, YHVH* (is) one), with which the obverse side
begins. By replacing each letter by the one following it in the Hebrew
alphabet (one of many techniques of *temurah* or letter-recombination that
could be used hermeneutically or to produce new divine names) a formula
was created that was at once more mysterious and powerful than the
unmodified, familiar text. Medieval Jewish literature preserves cases of
Gentile interest in acquiring the potent amulets that adorned every Jewish
home, alongside cases of vandalism that expressed the fear and loathing
that accompanied the awe-inspiring image of the Jewish magus. While Jews
could not remove the biblically mandated *mezuzah* to protect themselves
from Gentile misunderstandings, customary practices could be curtailed if
they led to suspicion of maleficia. Jewish legal authorities thus warned Jews
not to search around their homes by candle-light for leavened products the
night before Passover because of the danger of witchcraft accusations. This
concern was codified in the sixteenth century (*Shulhan Arukh, Orakh
Hayyim* Passover §433, 7).

Because Jewish magic was grounded in complex textual traditions, it
remained largely a men’s affair: learned rabbis were the most likely to
engage in a magic of sacred names learned from arcane manuscripts of “Kabbalah Ma’asit” (“Practical Kabbalah”). Rabbis had the ideal background to “make sense” of magical literature consisting largely of names permuted from classical Jewish sources by means of complex exegetical techniques. Licit Jewish magic, moreover, presumed the saintliness of the practitioner. Indeed, magical prowess was construed as an indicator of saintliness: “the righteous man decrees, and the Holy One, blessed be He, obeys.” Strikingly, discussions of magic rarely dwell on its intended uses. In contemporary Christian sources, by contrast, it was usage that determined whether magic was “white” or “black.” Assuming the practitioner to be a saintly rabbi who knew that any harmful action was forbidden, Jewish sources could afford to regard the illegality of maleficia as a moot point. Instead, discussions focused almost exclusively upon the question of technique, as we have noted. (Trachtenberg 1939, p. 22)

Nevertheless, Jewish magic was not practiced only by learned male elites. Sources from responsa to hagiography and autobiography preserve ample evidence of Jewish women’s involvement in magical arts. Women were consulted as healers, diviners, dream-interpreters, and mediums. While some were described as having enjoyed natural gifts of clairvoyance and preternatural senses, many women were clearly expert practitioners of mantic techniques and “folk” medicine. The expertise of these women was such that even leading rabbis turned to them for assistance in cases of illness, loss, or sheer curiosity. Female mediums also enabled rabbis to communicate with the dead and delivered messages of the utmost urgency to communities in danger. (For numerous examples of the above in an early seventeenth-century autobiography, see Faierstein 1999; for analysis, see Chajes 2003)

Alongside such benign views, medieval Jewish sources nevertheless preserve rather more threatening images of the female witch. German-Jewish Pietists shared the pronounced fear of vampiristic witches that was typical of their time and place. The most heinous accusation leveled against these women was that they ate children, and, even in death, continued to
devour the living. *Sefer Hasidim* (The Book of the Pietists), the seminal work of the twelfth/thirteenth-century pietists, relates that at the moment of their vigilante-style executions (not by the pietists themselves!), such cannibalistic witches might be offered the opportunity for atonement in exchange for knowledge of techniques that would render them harmless in the grave. Driving a stake through their mouths clear through to the ground beneath was recommended by one “witch”; another suggested filling the mouths of her dead cohorts with gravel.

While not active participants in the early modern European witch-hunts, contemporary Jewish writers occasionally voiced their opinion on the events of their day. One leading figure, R. Menasseh ben Israel (1604-1657), the rabbi who had served as Spinoza’s childhood teacher, endorsed the entire complex of learned witch beliefs, going so far as to justify the executions of his age. Menasseh was not, however, unaware of the critique of the witch-hunt voiced by men such as Johan Weyer (1515-1588) and Reginald Scot (c. 1538-1599). Against their critiques of the witch-hunt, however, Menasseh emphasized the insurmountable significance of the demonic pact, a feature of witchcraft more significant than maleficia to nearly all learned demonological writers. (See Chajes 2003)

It is also striking to note that after a millennium during which no Hebrew accounts of spirit possession were written (or at least have survived), such accounts proliferate from the early fifteenth century, during the very period that historians have referred to as “the age of the demoniac.” (See Monter 1976, p. 60; Chajes 1997) Jewish accounts have much in common with their Christian counterparts, with one significant difference: early modern Jewish authorities regarded ghosts (called “dybbukim” from the seventeenth century onward) as the most common unwelcome bodily invaders. As a result of this alternate etiology, Jewish exorcists were required to treat the possessor with nearly as much care as the possessed, as exorcism became a treatment for both parties. This augmented responsibility was reflected in the modification of exorcism techniques prescribed by the foremost Jewish mystic of the sixteenth century, R. Isaac
Luria (1534-1572). Regarding the possessing spirit as a soul in limbo, R. Luria instructed exorcists to conduct the expulsion while incorporating techniques to smooth the souls transition to Gehenna and, ultimately, to his next incarnation. It should be noted that Luria and his circle actively practiced grave incubation techniques designed to promote their own possession by benign spirits for pneumatic mystical purposes. Possession by spirits, be they benevolent or malevolent, may thus be regarded as a prominent feature of early modern Jewish religiosity.

During the Renaissance, Jewish intellectual figures in Italy created a sizable body of magical literature akin to well-known works by figures including Marcilio Ficino (1433-1499) and Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494). These rabbinic authors construed Judaism as a system of perfected magical words and hermetic vessels and shared the view of their Renaissance contemporaries that magic was the highest actualization of human potential. The premier Jewish and Christian exponents of this view in fact had close personal contact with one another. Pico’s "tutor" in Kabbalah was Rabbi Johannan Alemanno (1435/8-c.1510), who argued that the study and mastery of magic was to be regarded as the final stage of one’s intellectual and spiritual education. This contact, initiated as a result of Christian interest in probing the ancient wisdom found in Jewish mystical sources, resulted in unprecedented mutual influence between Jewish and Christian Renaissance thought. (See Idel 1983)

Building upon these precedents, the eighteenth-century eastern European Jewish pietistic movement known as Hasidism took the figure of the magus and made him the center of religious society. The founder of Hasidism, Rabbi Israel Ba’al Shem Tov (lit., “master of the good Name), was an accomplished magical healer as well as a profound mystical thinker. He is portrayed in Hasidic hagiography as a shaman par excellence, regularly ascending to heaven, privy to the secrets of universe, and conversant in the languages of all creatures. (Ben-Amos 1984) The subsequent leaders of the movement, referred to as a “zaddikim” or “righteous ones”, were regarded by their communities as conduits for blessing and sustenance. (Idel 1995) The
blessing of a *zaddik* could heal the sick, fructify the barren, free the captive. A master of magical devices—though never depicted as slavishly beholden to technique—the *zaddik* could also travel from place to place through the *axis mundi* short-cut, in a moment crossing great expanses. (On this technique, see Verman and Adler 1993/4) North-African and Middle-Eastern Jewish communities have similar traditions of venerating their rabbis as wonder-working saints. Less exposed to the secularizing trends of European society, the magical practices and beliefs of these communities remain prominent features of their religiosity to this day. (Bilu 2000)

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*See also* Amulets; Angels; Bibliomancy; Demons; Divination; Endor, Witch of; Exodus 22:18; Exorcism; Ghosts; Idolatry; Islam; Magic, demonic; Magic, learned; Names of power; Necromancy; Pico della Mirandola, Giovanni Francesco; Scot, Reginald; Weyer, Johan.

**Bibliography**


**Recommended web-sites for additional bibliography on Jewish magic:**

http://faculty.biu.ac.il/~barilm/bibmagic.html (The web pages of Prof. Meir Bar-Ilan)
http://faculty.washington.edu/snoegel/jmbtoc.htm (Jewish Magic Online Bibliography)