

## **Jewish Majick, Class Two**

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*During the Chmielnicki pogroms of 1648-1649 a young Jewish girl of the city of Nemirov was carried off by a Cossack. Preferring a fate of her own choosing, she offered him an amulet that promised to protect against all harm.*

*“If you have no faith in me,’ she assured him, ‘test it by shooting at me. You cannot harm me.”*

*Her credulous captor, not doubting her word, fired straight at her and she fell dead, for the sanctification of the Holy Name...*

**Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition* [edited]**

The above dark tale, clever and tragic, features a woman on the verge of being a victim of anti-semitic sexual violence turning the mythos of her attacker against him and dying as a martyr. There is a lot of information packed into its few lines, but for our purposes it shows the link between anti-semitism and belief in Jewish magick in the Medieval period. The violent anti-semitism of Medieval Europe cannot be properly understood without an understand of the widespread dread of Jewish magic. As Joshua Trachtenberg points out in his classic *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study In Folk Religion*, “Sorcery was a very real and terrifying

phenomenon in those days, and many medieval Christians looked upon the Jew and the magician *par excellence*. ” Many Christian writers asserted that magic was under the dominion of Satan, and so Jews were servants of the Dark One. The non-Jewish masses widely accepted this belief, and European history has many examples of the irrational perception of Jewish practices and behaviors as being diabolical in nature.

There was a widespread view not just of particular Jews as sorcerers, but of all Jews *en masse* as sorcerers. Among the non-Jewish masses, this could easily lead to hysterical violence.

In 1189, for one example, a group of Jewish delegates presented offerings to the newly coronated Richard I in London. Someone publicly accused the group of bringing occult materials to cast enchantments and the group was set upon, beginning a wave of anti-Jewish violence throughout England which took six months to settle down. The Middle Ages record many instances of Rabbis forbidding the public practice of mitzvot or minhagim which might be misconstrued as witchcraft.

This association led not just to pogroms and stonings, of course, but also to Jews being sought out for magical help. R’ Isaac Ben Moses, in the 13th century, tells of a sick nobleman who demanded that a bottle of Jewish wine be brought to him to heal him. The Rabbi gave permission, though it was a holiday, and the wine was sent out of fear of violence. Mezuzahs were seen as magical amulets and were sometimes desired by Christians, and at other times vandalized in order to disempower Jewish sorcery. Jews were also sought out as physicians, both because of their actual high level of knowledge of medicine and their association with magic.

Jews were feared as masters of the poison arts, and also suspected of the most bizarre attacks on Christians, such as by magical desecration of the wafers of communion. One widespread belief which lasted for centuries and was repeatedly the cause of violence, was the belief that Jews murdered Christians, particularly children, to use their blood in magical rituals. This included drinking the blood and baking it into matzos, the purpose of which were magical and ritual in nature for the sake of healing and the prolongation of life. It has been remarked by many scholars that Jews and women were both diabolized as sorcerers in European society as a means of consolidation of male, Christian power. It is also true that the story of European anti-semitism, with its interweaving of fear of the Jewish Other and fear of the Magickal Other, demonstrates both the history of attempts to demonize and disempower Jews and the history of attempts to demonize and disempower folk traditions and magical practices in general.

Ironically much of the Christian perception of dark Jewish sorcery is based on projecting the features of non-Jewish sorcery onto Jews. The gentile warlock or witch, at least in imagination, was a shapeshifting familiar of demons and a Satanist who engaged in ritual subversions of Catholic rituals. Although Jews had a rich and complex magical literature and practice, it includes none of these elements. Satan was a weak or non-existent factor in most Jewish thought and folklore, and Jews cannot have been expected to gain much sacrilegious power from subverting rituals and symbols they did not believe in. Some Jewish texts do deal with what should be done if there is a suspected witch amongst the community (warn them to desist, and if they are dead stop up their mouth with earth so they cannot engage in vampirism after death) but Jewish magic generally stayed within the bounds of Jewish law and belief.

As Trachtenberg writes, however, "If Jews were not the malefic sorcerers that Christian animosity made them out to be, they still possessed an ancient and honorable tradition of magic which had been solicitously nurtured until in the Middle Ages it reached its highest level of development."

### **Majick High and Low**

In Medieval Europe there was a mythology of the witch which combined age-old elements of the Shaman, cunning man, witch, wizard, sorcerer, warlock, medicine woman, and wise woman with anti-Christian elements (whether real or projected). As well as partaking in Satanic "black masses" that desecrated or subverted Christian ritual, sorcerers flew, shapeshifted, had animal familiars, cursed and killed, engaged in murder, cannibalism and blood-drinking, and could make amulets, talismans, and other magical objects, as well as commanding demons and spirits and visiting other planes of reality. Jewish sources sometimes reflect these beliefs. Menahem Ziyuni, a 15th century Torah commentator, wrote that "There are men and women who possess demonic attributes; they smear their bodies with a secret oil . . . and instantly fly off like the eagle over seas and rivers and forests and brooks, but they must return home before sunrise; their flight follows a predefined course from which they cannot deviate. Anyone who trespasses upon their meeting place is likely to suffer grave harm. . . . They transform themselves into various animals, and into cats." Menasseh b. Israel wrote that "it is well known that all sorcerers and witches make a compact with the demons and deliver their souls over to them."

These statements are about non-Jewish sorcery, however, not Jewish Majick, and those few Jews who might take up its methods. What of Jewish Majick?

In Western Esotericism there is a distinction between *high* and *low magick*. High Magick concerns interaction with the celestial and angelic realms, healing, divine enlightenment and mediation between heaven and earth. It is influenced by Pythagorean and neo-Platonist ideas, and sees the magician as a wise person and servant of the Divine. Low Magick (and this term and distinction is contested by many actual practitioners) concerns healing, manifesting desires, and averting harm. It may shade into grey forms which include warding, banishment, or commanding spirit entities, or black forms which involve cursing and magickal combat, or making deals with demonic entities.

The same distinction applies in Majick, with a Jewish spin. High Majick was the province of Torah sages who were masters of Kabbalah. This was so much the case that masters of Torah were often thought to have magical powers- Rashi, for example- even when they were not Kabbalists. This was logical since Kabbalah was, after all, simply an expression of Torah.

High Majick itself consisted mostly in the knowledge and use of sacred names and letter combinations, as well as interactions with angels. The Kabbalah scheme of sefirot, planets, elements, letters, directions, and times governed its activities, and verses of Torah were often used majickally. Although there are instances of invoking angels to do harm and of commanding demons, these are rare. There were men who focused on Low Majick as well, which mostly

consisted of the creation of charms, amulets, and talismans, or the use of holy names to heal, bless, attract, curse, or repel. What about women?

Jewish sources, at one with their gentile counterparts, claim that women are inordinately drawn to the magickal arts. In Jewish circles, though, High Majick was mostly associated with men for the reason that the in-depth training in Torah and Kabbalah, and the mastery of Hebrew and Aramaic texts and linguistics, that Jewish majick required was generally not offered to women. There is abundant evidence that Jewish women acted as medicine women and wise women, and transmitted herbal and folk magic traditions. On a day to day basis, it was common for Jewish women to use talismans, charms, chants and customs to protect the home, avert demonic attack and curse, bring fertility and wealth, and keep their children safe, but high sorcery, majick, and miracle making was more often considered the province of men. We will revisit the issue of women's majick more in depth in class 5 when we discuss the rebirth of mainstream Jewish women's Majickal and Priestess movements.

Some might be wondering, if Jewish Majick was so pervasive (and evidence suggests it was) then how was this regarded in Halacha (the Jewish laws that mandated what was forbidden or permitted to each Jew)?

### **Majick In Jewish Law**

The Talmud discusses forbidden Majick, speaking of "acts of power" and "acts of illusion" (both forbidden). If done with the aid of demons they are worthy of the death penalty, if not they are

forbidden but not capital crimes. There is also another type of magic which is permissible and involves “the laws of Creation”, i.e. it is majick as a science based on understanding the metaphysical structure of nature. This was later understood to involve the use of mystical names and angels, i.e. Jewish High Majick, and is allowed.

If the above seems blurry to you (what is a forbidden act of power, and how does that differ from the use of divine names to make something happen or create something?) it also seemed blurry to medieval lawmakers, who came to many different interpretations, some of them startling, as in the following. Trachtenberg reports that Jero am b. Meshullam wrote: "The codifiers differ with regard to demon-invocation. The Ramah wrote that it should be categorized as forbidden 'magic' and some of the other jurists agree with him but still others consider it permissible as in nowise belonging to the category of 'magic' acts. [or “acts of power”]." R. Eliezer of Metz held that "invoking the demons to do one's will is permitted from the outset, for what difference is there between invoking demons or angels? . . . An action may not be characterized as [forbidden] 'magic' unless it consists of taking hold of a thing and manipulating it, that is, if it is the performance of a deed, or an incantation that does not include an invocation of spirits, but invoking demons is permitted." The assumption here seems to be that it is alright to summon demons if it is based in an authentic understanding of the laws of creation, and presumably is being done for a good reason. In a way this is a very scientific view, something akin to saying that a chemist can work with dangerous materials if for a good reason. Of course other sources warn against working with demons, and some Rabbis ruled that it was in fact never permissible.

Trachtenberg notes, though, that in general Medieval codifiers, in effect, “succeeded in effectively excluding from the proscribed magic all the forms current among Jews.”

Moses Isserles (the Rema, 1530-1572) wrote "The roots of the [magical] arts are three: God, science, and nature. . . . From God comes . . . the power to invoke the heavenly princes by means of the holy names; the scientific root may be illustrated by astrology, by which a man can foretell the future, make talismans, and subdue the spirits and the powers of the stars and the like; on natural elements depends the effectiveness of the various types of magic, all of which consist in bringing out the inner nature of things, whereby an expert may perform deeds strange in appearance. . . ."

The "inner nature of things" writes Trachtenberg, “is one way of describing the most primitive and widespread subject of magical activity. It is universally believed that all things are endowed with occult virtues and powers, that they possess mutually sympathetic or antipathetic qualities, and that it is possible to "step up" magical currents from the particular to the general, and down again from the general to the particular, by the simple manipulation of natural objects, which is the commonest form that magic takes.” What is being referred to here is working with natural objects according to their resonances, inner associations, and things like their elementary and planetary values, symbolic meanings, etc.

The classical Jewish worldview saw the universe as a nested strata of worlds with gehenna below and celestial worlds above, ruled by planetary and angelic influences. The whole cosmos was of course emanated by the Ein Sof, the Limitless Divine Ground, by way of the four levels of



emanation (atzilut, beriyah, yetzirah and assiyah). Within this cosmos, reality teems with angels, demons, and other liminal and mysterious creatures.

## **Demons**

To pre-modern Jews the world teemed with spirits and demons. The belief in demons was axiomatic, and hardly questioned. Maimonides and Ibn Ezra objected to their reality, but their voices were rare. Rashi, for instance, noted that the animals saved on the ark included demons. The most common Hebrew names for types of demon are mazzik (destructive spirit), sheyd (demon), lilit (night-spirit), and ruach ra'ah (evil spirit). The more specific names and titles of demons were not Hebrew due to a hesitancy about creating Hebrew neologisms. Most demon's names were therefore Yiddish.

A tour of the complexities of Jewish demonology would be quite beyond us here, but we'll note a few features. Demons were said to have been created on the 6th day near Twilight. After fashioning their souls, however, YHVH ran out of time as Shabbat approached and so they did not receive bodies. Ever since they have been unembodied intelligences, although some say that at least some demons eat, drink, procreate and die. Demons could shapeshift endlessly and appear as humans, animals, or even objects- as in the demon who appeared as a strand of hair that a pious Rabbi would swallow, in order to attack him. Aside from such created demons, new recruits would also come from the wicked dead. There were also vampire-cannibals and werewolves to contend with.

Despite their evil character, demons still lived under the rule of God, whose power they recognized and respected. They were still subject to his will and subservient to the angels. Some of the beliefs around demons are interesting, for instance that they resented houses with no windows (impeded their movement) or new houses or constructions (impinging on the territory in uncivilized places) especially if those buildings were stone, expressing a human arrogance in permanence (then what of concrete?). Once having attracted the attention of demons they are hard to shake off; name changes and symbolic death/rebirth rituals were employed. It was believed that demons could possess people (including cases of dybbuks) and that some sought out sexual intercourse with humans. This last led to some recorded cases of problems in Jewish law, as in questions over whether women who had sex with demons were guilty of adultery (they were not, it was decided) and at least one case of poltergeist activity stemming from demons who claimed a child born from one of theirs and a human woman was the rightful owner of a house. A trial of the issue was held in a Bet Din and the disembodied voices of the demons testified before the Rabbis; they were found to have no claim over human property and banished back to the wilderness with the help of a local Baal Shem (Jewish magician).

Many folks charms were applied to protect from demons. One should not walk alone at night or in the wilderness; if travelling alone one should take an object from one's hometown with them to symbolically carry the power of community. Many protective verses were chanted; amulets and talismans carried. Before moving on to talk more of Jewish Majick proper, whose province is mostly the world of angels and sacred names, we should pause to note that as well as demons medieval Jewish culture accepted the existence of faerie folk, who were set to be the descendents of spirits Adam had taken as lovers during a period he was in exile from Eve. Adam fasted for

130 years to mourn the murder of Abel by Cain; during this time he was seduced by a female spirit and from their union came faeries, elves, and in some traditions djinns.

Lilith, or night-demons, were said to attack children at night, or to act as succubi feeding on the sexuality of humans. This class of demon, common all over the world, was later given a Jewish origin story as the minions of Lilith, the rebellious first wife of Adam. This story was controversial among the Rabbis, usually tolerant of midrash but finding the Lilith story repellant. Lilith would eventually resurface as a symbol of demonized women's sexuality and be reclaimed, in the 20th century, as a heroine of women's liberation as well as a revered figure in several non-Jewish Occult traditions.

## **Angels**

Every single thing on earth, animate or inanimate, has its angel, and thus the world is filled with angelic forces. This is the heart of the angel-lore. Houses and cities, winds and seasons, months and hours and days, each star above, each speck of dust underfoot, no thing in nature exists without its *memuneh* ("appointed one"). The memuneh are the agents through whom the universe operates—in fact, the activities that go on in the world are nothing more than reflections of their acts. Far from the world of spirits and angels being an insubstantial, or derivative, world, it is in fact the opposite: this world is a dim echo or shadow, an emanation, of the worlds of angels and divine energies.

This idea constitutes the main theoretical basis of medieval Jewish magic. The long lists in such a work as *Sefer Raziel* are proof of the arduous training that the novice in magic must undergo if he would learn how to direct all the *memunim* of air, wind, date, time, place, etc., which control a situation at a given moment. The entire repertoire of magic devices were consummated through the intermediacy of the angels, or "deputies," who were subjected to the sorcerer's will by his magic art.

The views on angels differed in different geographical regions, and among different magicians, Rabbis, and Kabbalists. Maimonides viewed them as entirely abstract entities, mere metaphors for the energies or acts of YHVH. Among others, angels possess the power to assume human (and animal) forms, and to appear in the society of humans as completely physical beings.

### **Angelic Language, Angelic Will**

What language do angels speak? It was a common medieval view that they only knew Hebrew, the language of the heavenly court. This was one reason why it was important for every Jew to have a Hebrew name. For this reason some counselled that Jews should not pray in Aramaic, or Yiddish. "They can understand the intimate thoughts of every heart," noted one medieval Rabbi, "and yet Aramaic escapes them?" Such sarcasm aside, the folk belief was that angels spoke Hebrew.

"The angels are the messengers of God; He impresses His will upon them and sends them forth to do His bidding," wrote Eleazar of Worms. They can do nothing of their own will, he said, but act only upon God's command. Much closer to the prevailing opinion was the statement found in a Geonic responsum: "There are many acts which angels can perform of their own accord, without a special order from above. Therefore amulets are written and names spoken, to aid the angels in these matters."

Viewed in this light the angels were the mechanism through which God maintained a close contact with His universe. But these angelic intermediaries could carry messages both ways, and the ancient practice of calling upon the angels rather than God directly in prayer became very widespread. The position of the angels in heaven made accessible to them the founts of mystic lore; they were the source of that secret wisdom to which the mystic aspired.

Angelic names sometimes have a recognizable meaning, sometimes not. There is Shamriel, a guardian angel (from shomer); Mefatiel, the "opener" of doors (the thieves' favorite); Hasdiel, Haniel, and Rachmiel, angels of "benevolence," "grace" and "mercy"; Zachriel, who rules over "memory" (zichron); Morael, the angel of "awe" or "fear" who rules the month of Elul, and Nahaliel, who presides over rivers (nahalot).

The proliferation of angelic names in medieval Jewish magic, and the increasing focus on the name itself tended to obscure the angelic personality, so that in the end the name itself became the prime consideration. As Trachtenberg wrote, "The Name has swallowed up the Angel." In practice much of the time the use of Names and letter permutations of angelic and divine names

came to be more important than the interaction with angelic persons, though interactions with angels, sometimes called “princes” continued in the circle of the Arizal and even into Hasidic times.

## **Names**

*So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, “Let me go, for it is daybreak.” But Jacob replied, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” The man asked him, “What is your name?”*

*“Jacob,” he answered.*

*Then the man said, “Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.”*

*Jacob said, “Please tell me your name.”*

*But he replied, “Why do you ask my name?” Then he blessed him there.*

In Jewish tradition the name expresses the inner essence, and can even invoke it. This is the reason Ashkenazi Jews don’t name a child after a dead relative; it might draw the soul down into reincarnation. In the divine realm Names were capable both of invoking angels and their fields of influence (elemental, planetary, etc) and of invoking aspects or energies of YHVH through invocation of permutations of names of YHVH. This last could sometimes makes Jewish theologians queasy- was a human manipulating or commanding YHVH? The solution was that

YHVH graciously infused the Names with power and allowed such magic as part of the empowerment of human beings.

The amora Rav (c. 200 CE) said that Bezalel “knew how to combine the letters by which heaven and earth were created.” The use of names required preparation in purity and virtue, fasting, periods of celibacy, and other disciplines were advised. Yehudah HaHasid, an early Ashkenazi Kabbalist, was said to have used names to close a window on an intruder, imprisoning him; to have imparted his knowledge to a disciple by writing names on sand that the student licked, and even to have brought people to *teshuvah* with the invocation of names.

Human beings (and also demons) could rearrange primordial matter, but not create ex nihilo. The Talmud recognized that by means of Sefer Yetzirah, "if the righteous so desired they could create a universe. Raba created a man and sent him to R. Zeira, who conversed with him but he could not answer; so he exclaimed, 'You are created by magic, return to your dust!'

Rashi wrote, "They used to combine the letters of the Name by which the universe was created; this is not to be considered forbidden magic, for the works of God were brought into being through His holy Name."

The ability to create is associated most strongly with regards to the story of the Golem- even before this legend was connected to the Maharal of Prague, the ability to create golems was

ascribed to Ashkenazi Kabbalists, and as we've seen the origin is in the Talmud, written in 4th-7th century Baghdad.

Jewish mystics and magicians gloried in permutations of the divine name such as the 12 permutations of YHVH, the 42 and 72 letter name, and other divine names such as Yah, Elohi, El, El Shaddai, and others. These sacred names began to make their way into Christian circles as early as the 7th century and are still popular in Christian and Occult circles as sacred names and names of power.

Having discussed perceptions of the Jewish Magician in premodern Europe and the realities within the Jewish community, we looked at a basic overview of the Jewish magical cosmos. Next week we will look at Jewish magical techniques themselves, a sampling both of Kabbalistic Majick and Folk Majick.

### **Kosher Magic Exercise #2**

An exercise in magical mussar (transformation of character) based on the Sefer Yetzirah. Based on a meditation by esotericist David Rankine.





“The three mothers are Aleph, Mem, Shin, their foundation is a pan (kaf, palm of a hand) of merit, a pan of guilt, and Aleph, and the tongue (lashon, language) of decree deciding between them. Mem hums, shin hisses, and Aleph is the breath of air deciding between them.”

Facing east, stand straight with your arms outstretched and straight to the sides. Your right hand represents the pan of merit, your left the pan of guilt, your body is the fulcrum. Think of a quality you want to increase in yourself and hum Mem as a mantra while visualizing the letter Mem in white in your right hand. Let your right arm slowly lower and your left arm raise. Now let your right arm raise back to normal while you visualize an Aleph in your heart and focus on your breathing. The mem now dissolves into the Aleph.

Now think of a quality you want to decrease, and visualize shin in black in your left hand. Hiss “shin” and slowly raise your left hand, signifying that quality becoming lighter. Now let your arm position normalize and focus on the Aleph in the heart and your breath. The shin dissolves in the Aleph.

### **Further Reading**

Joshua Trachtenberg. *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study In Folk Religion*.

David Rankine. *Sepher Yetzirah Magic: Magic and Meditation derived from the first and greatest Qabalistic Work*.